

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Confidential Agent 1939

Graham Greene

OVERVIEW

Barely twelve months after the publication of his first commercial success (*Brighton Rock*), Greene was at it again with this spy thriller set on the cusp of the Second World War. The novel, divided into four parts, tells the story of D, the titular agent of a country embroiled in a civil war. D is sent to England in order to negotiate a deal for coal to be supplied to the army on his side in the war. The novel is narrated almost entirely from D's point of view, as he attempts to evade his enemies. He is hunted, attacked, robbed and deceived, but he also meets Rose, who becomes his lover. In the end, D fails in his mission, but he and Rose are able to sail off into the sunset.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Graham Greene wrote *The Confidential Agent* in a rush, fuelled by Benzedrine. He finished it over the course of only six weeks, writing furiously in the morning and turning to a 'serious' novel (*The Power and the Glory*) in the afternoon. He later said that he began to write it because he was stymied by the other novel; he also stated that he was so ashamed of this 'entertainment' that he wanted to have it published under a pseudonym. When it came out under his real name, though, it was a roaring success. At that point, Greene had had no experience of 'intelligence work' (though he was subsequently a spy in Sierra Leone during WWII), but he somehow got the details accurate enough for Kim Philby (the infamous British double agent) to say that the novel helped him to understand his own confused attitude to the Soviet Union.

MAIN CHARACTERS

D	D, the central character, is an agent sent to England.
Benditch	Lord Benditch is a coalmine owner in England.
Rose	Rose is Benditch's daughter and later D's lover.
Else	Else is a young maid in D's hotel.
L	L, an aristocrat, is an agent on the other side of the civil war.
Mr K	Mr K is supposed to be an agent on D's side.
Mr Forbes	Forbes is a coalmine owner and also Rose's fiancé.

STORY

Part One: The Hunted

Channel crossing D (we are never given his full name) is a professor from a European country in the midst of a civil war. As a speaker of English, he has come to England to negotiate a deal with Lord Benditch to supply coal to his side in the conflict. On the boat crossing the English Channel to Dover, he sees L, who is a wealthy supporter of the other side, which appears to be fascist. Delayed at Customs, D misses the train to London but meets Rose Cullen, who turns out to be Benditch's daughter.

Attacked Rose hires a car and they drive into the fog. The car breaks down and they stop at an inn, where D is attacked in the washroom by a man who attempts to rob him. Afraid, D drives off alone in the mended car, but he is followed by L and his chauffeur. D is forced off the road by L's car, which is also carrying the hotel manager, who accuses him of stealing the hired car. The chauffeur beats up D, but he doesn't find the valuable papers he is carrying. He has escaped, but he is in a hurry: he must meet Benditch and do the deal. If not, his side will lose the war.

Secrets D picks up a ride to London, follows instructions and goes to a small hotel, where he enlists Else, a young maid, to keep people out of his room. His next move is to keep an appointment at a

school that teaches a new international language, where he meets Mr K, who is another agent on his side. During their exchange, D begins to doubt Mr K's credentials and motives.

Documents Back in the hotel, D realises that someone has been searching his room and discovers that it must be the manageress. D persuades Else to hide his documents in her stockings.

Bullet Rose calls him on the telephone and they agree to meet, but on the way he is lured by a beggar into an alley where he dodges a bullet. When he shows Rose the place, she finds the bullet and begins to believe his story. By the end of the night, she has fallen in love with him, and he with her.

Distrust Back at the hotel, D finds Mr K in conversation with the manageress, who we now realise is also an agent on D's side. They are afraid that he has sold the documents for his personal profit, while he loses trust in them. D keeps the papers and becomes paranoid about everyone around him.

Negotiations The next morning, D makes his way to Benditch's house to keep the appointment and negotiate the coal deal. He meets Benditch and his fellow coalmine owners, including Mr Forbes, who is informally engaged to marry Rose. They bargain over details and finally agree a price and terms, but when they ask to see D's credentials, he finds that his papers have been taken from him (by Benditch's doorman). When D leaves Benditch's house, he meets L at the entrance. They exchange few words, but D has the feeling that L's side is stronger than his.

Flight Rose appears and persuades Forbes, one of the coalmine owners, to go with D to his embassy in order to confirm his authenticity as a confidential agent. However, the official at the embassy is on the other side and calls the police to arrest D. The police question D about the death of Else (the hotel maid), who has been thrown from a third-floor window. In a confused confrontation, D punches a policeman, takes his gun and flees into the London fog. Frightened, he breaks into a basement flat and hides.

Part Two: The Hunter

Dismayed at his failure, D goes back to the hotel to confront the manageress about Else's death and finds Mr K. Convinced that Mr K is a double agent, he forces him at gunpoint to go with him to his basement hideout. Inside the hideout, he steels himself to assassinate the man, but he shakes and misses. Rose suddenly appears and they confess their mutual love. While they debate their next move, they realise that Mr K has died of a heart attack. They decide to go to the coal mines and appeal directly to the workers not to dig coal for the fascist side.

Part Three: The Last Shot

D travels up north to the town where Benditch is holding a meeting with his coal miners, reassuring them that the pit will be reopened soon. Standing at the back of the public hall, D watches L smirking in the audience as the workers rejoice that they will be earning money again. Aware that he has failed utterly in his mission, D is spotted by his enemies, who call the police. D runs away and is rescued only by a gang of boys, who strike a bargain: if D gives them his gun, they will blow up the mine for him. That, too, however, is a failure. The explosion knocks D unconscious but does not damage the mine, and the police arrest D.

Part Four: The End

D is escorted back to London by the police, where he is charged and put in jail. When he goes to court, though, a highly paid lawyer, hired by Forbes, gets him off on bail. Forbes then tells him that he will help him escape the country. He drives D into the countryside and leaves him at a modern-looking resort. There, D seems to be arrested by the hotel manager from Dover (where the story began), but this, too, has been arranged by Forbes. D is taken by motorboat to a steamer in the English Channel. Waiting for him aboard the ship is Rose. All's well that ends well.

THEMES

Trust The theme that runs through this dystopian novel is that of trust, or rather distrust and the danger it generates. Fear is present in the very beginning, even in the title, which is ironic since D has little confidence in himself or in those around him. In the opening scene, when D steps off the boat and onto English soil, he felt that 'he had no sense of safety...The only person you trusted was yourself.' Even when he meets Mr K, supposedly an agent on the same side, D is unsure of the man's intentions. He might be genuine, but he doesn't appear to know much about D's mission. D thinks: 'It would be just like the people back home to send him [D] on a confidential mission and to set people whom they didn't trust with a knowledge of his object to watch him.' D is jaded by the deceit and double-dealing that dominates the civil war back home. 'We just have to choose our side,' he explains, 'and neither side will trust us, of course.' When he first arrives in England, he thinks it might be a peaceful haven, unscarred by suspicion, a place where honesty is commonplace. But he is soon disabused of this fantasy by his experiences of ordinary people and their duplicitous lives. As Rose tells him later, 'There's no trust anywhere. Before you, I'd never seen a face that looked medium honest.' She knows that her father, Benditch the coalmine owner, has allegiance only to profit and that her fiancé, Forbes, keeps a mistress. The long catalogue of deceit and doubt that dogs the story is only relieved in the final paragraphs, when D finds Rose waiting for him on the boat that is taking him away from England. 'But I'm an old man,' he says to her, not quite believing that she truly loves him. 'Oh, I know that,' she explains. 'But I also know you're faithful.' D, the man who values truth but meets with a series of deceptions, is rewarded in the end.

War and politics Although Graham Greene favoured left-wing politics, he is too shrewd a writer to show bias in his novels. And so it proves with the *Confidential Agent*. It was written at a furious pace during 1938, when Hitler's Germany annexed the Sudetenland, when fascist Spain was defeating the Republican army and when Mussolini was tightening his grip on Italy. As Greene wrote the novel, trenches were being dug in London, men conscripted and children sent to the safety of the countryside. Rather than offer up simplistic profiles of good guys and bad guys, the novel shows the effects of war and the farce of international politics. D, the nominal hero, has been traumatised by the conflict back home, in which his wife was executed by accident and he was buried alive in a bombing raid. Political solutions to the horrors of war prove inadequate, an element of the plot that might have been inspired by the appeasement of Hitler at Munich in 1938. D is instructed by his masters to meet Mr K at a school that teaches an international language designed to create worldwide peace by bridging borders. Mr K must communicate with D in this make-shift tongue, and their exchange becomes farcical. Solidarity with the poor and working class, the slogans of the left and of D's party, also sound hollow, especially when the miners celebrate the chance to dig coal for the fascists in his country. D is so disturbed by the moral confusion and social disintegration produced by war that he retreats into the Middle Ages and dreams about the heroics in the *Chanson de Roland* (D is a specialist in medieval French literature). There is betrayal and barbarity in the romantic epic, too, but at least it is without the pretence of civilisation.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

D D is an intellectual and a secret agent, though the combination is not harmonious. Having lost his wife in the civil war, he is tormented by memories and doubts everyone, including himself. He is a kind person and as honest as his experiences will allow him to be.

Haunted The first two parts of this four-part novel describe D as 'the hunted' and 'the hunter.' We could also add that he is haunted. From the opening paragraph, when D views the English shore from a boat, he is beset by the torments of the civil war he has just left. As his ship moves slowly through the fog, D recalls a funeral procession (probably that of his wife) with 'a hearse, rolling slowly and discreetly towards the "garden of peace" hysterical women shrieked among the shrouds.' A moment later, he walks up and down on the deck, trying to keep warm, but it reminds him 'of trenches, impossible positions, salients, deaths: bombing planes took flight from between his eyes, and in his brain the mountains shook with shell-bursts.' D is tormented by these memories throughout the story. As Greene later comments: 'His territory was death: he could love the dead and the dying more than living. He had brought the war with him. The infection was working within.'

Free thinking D, like his creator, is a free-thinker, a man too reflective to pin his flag to any particular mast. Certainly, D is committed to the cause of 'the poor', which is why he undertakes his secret

mission to supply coal to the army fighting on their behalf. But he is also beset by doubts, as is illustrated in the scene that occurs midway through the story, when he is talking with Rose. After he tells her that he refused to sell the documents he's carrying, she asks him (with a little contempt) if he is a 'patriot.' He hesitates and says, 'Oh, no. I don't think so. It's they [i.e., the enemies], you know, who are always talking about something called our country.' Again, she asks why he didn't take the money, and he says that it's about 'sticking to your job...It's no good taking a moral line. My people commit atrocities, like the others.' If D has been scarred by the horrors of war, he is also the victim of his own independent mind, which won't allow him the comfort of an unthinking allegiance to an ideology. He is a specialist in the *Chason de Roland*, a medieval French ballad, which provides him with a model of chivalry and heroism that represents a welcome alternative to the depravity he experiences all around him.

Kind D is also a kind person. We see this quality displayed primarily in his relationship with Else, the young maid working at the hotel in London, where he stays. He persuades her to help him hide his documents, which gets her fired by the hotel manageress, who seems to be on the other side. A day later, D is talking with Rose about the man who tried to kill him but missed. Despite this turmoil and danger, D remembers the help that Else gave him and asks Rose to find poor Else a job. 'She's a good little thing,' he says, 'but wild. God knows what might happen to her. Couldn't you find her a job?' Rose doesn't answer and the conversation moves on. D's kindness is then thrown into sharp relief when, a few pages later, we hear that little Else has been thrown out of a third-storey window and died.

Rose Rose is the daughter of a rich man, but she rejects his capitalist life-style and forges her own life. She is not naïve, but neither is she cold-hearted. She has inner strength, which she employs to help her and D escape danger.

Wilful Rose is very far from a wall flower. Like D, she is an independent type of person, which is one reason that they eventually fall in love. Indeed, her wilful character is illustrated in their first encounter when she takes control of the situation. Having been delayed by Customs at Dover, they miss the last train to London and are stranded. Seconds later, she decides that they should hire a car, which she drives toward London in thick fog. As they rumble along, he asks her if she always travels third-class (he saw her in that class on the boat). Her tart reply is: 'Well, I like to choose my own company. My father's friends don't travel there.' As the conversation progresses, she warns him against trying to chat her up (which he isn't) and against being 'melodramatic' when he mentions that he is afraid. All this shows us that Rose is a no-nonsense person with a sharp tongue and a distaste for humbug. She is the perfect companion for the jaded D.

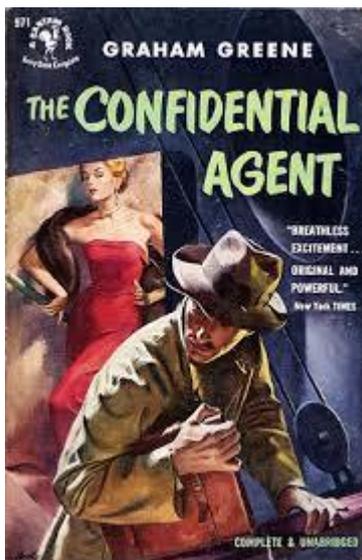
Tender Later, after Rose learns more about the mysterious D and finds the bullet shot by his would-be assassin, she begins to fall in love with him. It isn't a single moment, but it is narrated in a few pages, beginning in a darkened cinema. When she puts her hand on his knee, it doesn't seem 'like a romantic gesture more an automatic reaction to the low lights and deep seats.' They leave and he warns her that someone tried to kill him. She puts her arm through his, and he responds to her encouragement. At the hotel, she asks if she can go up to his room, but he says it isn't possible. Then he kisses her and calls her 'my dear.' Rose sighs and says, 'I've never been in love before. They have a name for it—don't they? Calf love.' As she walks away, she is convinced that their love won't last, that he will be killed, in London or in Spain. Rose, who had earlier shown us that she has a thick skin, has now fallen in love. Tender-hearted, she is drawn to this enigmatic man who is in danger.

Fighter Both wilful and tender, Rose fights for her man against his several shadowy enemies. A good display of her combativeness occurs at a crucial point, when D's credentials have been questioned and he has been taken to his embassy to have his identity confirmed as an agent. However, the First Secretary, whom D was told to trust, is said to be absent and unlikely to return soon. Moreover, the Second Secretary, who receives them, is unwilling to disturb the ambassador and is about to escort them to the door, when Rose speaks up. 'This man,' she says, 'is an important person. He's a professor. Attached to a university. An authority on Romance languages. His name is D.' The official says that his name is completely unfamiliar to him, and Rose retorts, 'Well, I guess it would be, unless you're an expert in Romance languages.' The official prevaricates, makes excuses and tries to get rid of her, but she is resourceful and finally proves D's identity by pointing out his name printed as the author of a book in the embassy library. Tigerish, she does not give up until she has won.

Else Else is said to be only fourteen years old, yet she works as a maid in a hotel in London. Innocent and credulous, she is deeply affected by D's kindness and begins almost to worship him. Her loyalty to him is firm, but it also leads to her death.

Grateful Else does not receive much respect in life. We know little about her family and background except that she is a low-paid 'servant' at the hotel. D, however, is polite and kind to her, behaviour to which she responds with gratitude. We get a glimpse of this aspect of Else's character in the chapter when D checks into the hotel. She asks him if he would like her to wake him up after a nap, and he tells her it's not necessary especially when there are so many stairs to climb. 'It's good working for a gentleman,' she said passionately...she watched him with the beginning of devotion. She was of an age when she could be won over by a single word.' A moment later, when D thanks her for her ministrations, 'she absorbed his thanks passionately. He was a gentleman. Her soft closing of his door seemed to indicate that, in her eyes, one swallow made a whole summer.' Little Else is so undervalued that one man's kindness is enough to turn her sad world into a glorious summer day.

Loyal Later, Else's gratitude grows into rock-solid loyalty toward D. Suspicious that someone has searched his room, D asks Else to do him a favour. He calls her into his room and says, 'I want you to do something for me.' She replies immediately, 'Anything.' He explains that he wants her to keep his documents safe. 'Are you a spy?' she asks innocently. And when he denies it, she says 'I wouldn't mind, really I wouldn't.' When D says that this is a secret just between the two of them, she glows 'as if he had given her a jewel.' He hands her the secret papers and tells her to hide them and not to tell anyone. 'Cross my heart,' she says firmly, 'I won't tell anyone.' Else enjoys the conspiratorial atmosphere of it all and remains true to her word. In the end, though, D's loyal little friend pays for her fidelity with her life.



(an early edition, undated)