

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE FALLEN IDOL 1948

Carol Reed

OVERVIEW

Taking place over a weekend, mostly inside the French embassy in London, this is the story of a young boy (the ambassador's son) and his idol (the embassy butler). Told from the boy's perspective, it is shot as a tale of misunderstandings, shared secrets, deceptions, outright lies and misplaced loyalties. It is a mystery in which only the audience knows all the facts. A death occurs, but it is not a murder. A gun features, but it is not fired. The only violence is psychological. There are, however, plenty of emotional fireworks, especially a tragic love affair.

HISTORICAL/LITERARY NOTES

The film is adapted from a short story by Graham Greene. 'The Basement Room' was written by Greene, in part to relieve the boredom of a long sea journey from Africa to London in 1935. However, Carol Reed and Greene (who wrote the screenplay) made significant changes in the plot. In the short story, the boy sees his idol murder someone and tries to protect him but ends up telling lies that convict him. In the film, by contrast, there is no murder, only the boy's belief that there was one, a change that shifts the film to the boy's point of view. Greene and Reed worked together easily. They booked three interconnecting rooms in a hotel in Brighton and passed revisions back and forth through a secretary in the middle room. Released in 1948, the film won instant critical acclaim, including Best Screenplay at the Venice Film Festival. Unsurprisingly, it is Greene's favourite among the screenplays he wrote, his only criticism being the title, which he thought was meaningless and should have been changed to 'Lost Illusion.'

MAIN CHARACTERS

Baines	Baines is the butler in the French embassy in London.
Mrs Baines	Mrs Baines is his wife, who runs the housekeeping.
Phillipe	Phillipe is the ambassador's only child.
Julie	Julie, a typist at the embassy, is Baine's lover.

STORY

Phillipe's snake The story begins in the French embassy in London, late on a Friday afternoon, when all the staff are going home and the building is being closed for the weekend. The ambassador goes back home to collect his wife from hospital, who has been suffering from a long-term illness. Their son Phillipe stays behind, under the supervision of Baines, the very English butler, and his wife. Freed from fatherly attention, little Phillipe retrieves McGregor, his pet snake, whom he is hiding behind a loose brick on the balcony outside his bedroom. The little creature, it appears, is his only friend in the big, echoing house.

Mrs Baines Phillipe is then confronted by Mrs Baines, who is said by the cleaning ladies 'to be on the warpath.' She knows that the boy has been hiding the snake and asks if he has thrown it away, as ordered. Phillipe lies, while concealing the snake in his pocket.

Confidences in the basement Phillipe then slips down into the basement, where he openly shows his snake to Baines, who finds a little box to hide the snake in. When Phillipe asks Baines, his confidant, to take him for a walk that afternoon, the butler replies with mock severity, 'Might do. If you do a spot of work for me down here.' Phil, as Baines calls the boy, is curious about Baines' earlier life in Africa, with 'elephants and...' Showing off to the cleaning ladies, he produces Baines' gun from a drawer.

Hatred Mrs Baines appears at that moment, and the gun is put back.

When the three of them sit down to eat, Phillippe says that Baines is taking him out for a walk, but Mrs Baines forbids it. Phillippe asks why, and she says 'because I say so.' Phillippe glares at her before whispering, 'I hate you.'

Discovery Later that day, Phillippe sees Baines leave the house and follows him to a teashop, where he meets a pretty girl named Julie, who works at the embassy. They are clearly in love and embarrassed when Phillippe discovers them. Baines manages to salvage the situation by introducing her as his niece and then talking about their dilemma as if were someone else's. With that shield, Baines tries to convince Julie not to leave him and promises to seek a divorce. When they leave and return to the embassy, Baines asks Phillippe not to mention the teashop to Mrs Baines.

Danger In the embassy, Phillippe wanders out onto a window sill, with a long drop to the ground floor. Frightened, Mrs Baines drags him away from the dangerous perch, but knocks over a potted plant in the process. She looks at the spilled soil and decides to let it stay, as evidence of Phillippe's mischief to show his mother when she returns.

Intrigue Later she observes Phillippe when he returns McGregor to its hiding place. She waits until the boy has gone before grabbing it with a handkerchief and throwing it in the furnace.

Conspiracy When she notices crumbs on his jumper (from the bun he ate with Baines and Julie in the teashop), she is angry with him for eating between meals and again lying to her. Phillippe protests, saying, 'They gave it to me.' Now the cat is out of the bag. Phillippe tries to retrieve his words and says, 'Baines, I mean. He gave it to me.' But Mrs Baines knows what she heard. 'They,' she repeats. 'So that's how it is.' With a conspiratorial smile, she tells Phillippe that they now share a secret: he knows that she knows about her husband's affair.

Fake departure Baines tries to speak to his wife about their failed marriage, but she deflects him and nothing is said. Then she informs Baines she is going away for a day to visit her aunt, but we see that she slips back into the house.

Zoo The following day, thinking his wife is away, Baines takes Phillippe to the zoo, where he has arranged to meet Julie. Baines entertains the boy with tall tales about his life in Africa, including having to shoot a man. They meet Julie and, while Phillippe is visiting the reptile house, he explains to her that he hasn't been able to speak to his wife about a divorce. She says that she is packed and ready to leave for Europe the following day. They return to the embassy, where Baines intends to cook a dinner for them all, in the supposed absence of his wife.

Telegram When they enter, there is a telegram from Mrs Baines, informing her husband that she will stay on with her aunt for a day or two more. 'Do you think it's true?' Phillippe asks, and Baines dismisses his doubts.

Hide and seek Phillippe takes Julie to see McGregor, only to find that he's missing. Later, after supper, they play a game of hide and seek, which allows Baines and Julie to kiss and declare their love. 'I'm only going,' she says, 'because it won't work.'

Death That night, Mrs Baines wakes up Phillippe and demands to know where Julie and her husband are. Wildly out of control, he strikes the boy and then confronts her husband, screaming that she knows all about his sordid affair. Watched by Phillippe, the two of them struggle, and she claims that she will find Julie and take care of 'that little thing.' When Baines leaves her, she spies on him, standing on the dangerous ledge, from where earlier she had rescued Phillippe. Now, however, a large swinging window opens and she falls down the stairs to her death.

Misunderstanding Although he has not seen what happened, Phillippe assumes that Baines pushed her down the stairs. Phillippe flees in horror, leaves the house in his pyjamas and runs into a policeman, who takes him to the station, where he is comforted by a prostitute. Phillippe is taken back home, where the police and an inspector have already arrived. Mrs Baines is pronounced dead and her body taken away. Questioned by the police, Phillippe admits that Baines and Mrs Baines quarrelled at the top of the stairs but he tries to avoid evidence pointing toward Baines.

Investigation The family doctor arrives and learns that the police are not entirely convinced that the death was an accident. The inspector summons a police doctor to examine the body and the death scene. When Baines puts Phillipe to bed that night, he asks him not to mention the telegram from Mrs Baines because he has told the police that she was with them at the zoo. Phillipe thinks he is trying to cover up his guilt as a murderer and agrees. The police doctor says that the injuries might have been caused by a fall, but possibly by something more violent

Deception When Baines is questioned, he tries to keep Julie out of the story by lying about their meeting at the zoo and their supper in the house. His story becomes more and more inconsistent, and more suspicion is created when Mrs Baines' telegram is discovered. The position of the body is also inconsistent with it having fallen down the stairs, as Baines claims.

Truth The following day, the police again question Phillipe and Baines, separately. Julie arrives and tells Phillipe, in French, to tell the truth. Baines now admits that Julie was in the house and that he quarrelled with Mrs Baines. He tells the police what he knows, but he, too, did not actually see Mrs Baines fall and so cannot provide a convincing account for the 'accident.' When questioned, Julie admits to their illicit affair. Later, she tells Phillipe that he must tell the truth from now on. 'Only the truth will help Baines,' she says.

Confession Then Phillipe bursts into the room and says, 'Baines didn't murder her. I did.' The police are now convinced of Baines' guilt and prepare to take him to the station to be charged with murder. Baines also confesses to Phillipe that the stories about Africa were a 'game.' Phillipe says that he must never tell another lie, and Baines goes down to the basement, where he looks at the gun in a drawer.

Footprints Just as he is contemplating suicide, the police find Mrs Baines' footprints in the dirt from the overturned flower pot on the ledge. That makes sense of Baines' story and he is set free. In the penultimate scene, Phillipe implores the police to listen to him, that he knows something important. 'All right, boy,' the inspector says, wearily, 'what is it.' Phillipe says that the footprints are his, which he thinks is the truth. 'You see,' he says, 'I did it. It's my fault.' The inspector laughs this off.

Finale The film closes with the arrival of Phillipe's mother. She holds out her arms to receive him, but he walks uncertainly toward her.

THEMES

Secret dangers The theme running through this wonderful film is the danger lurking within secrecy. Every main character has a secret, which at one point or another requires them to lie, which exposes someone to danger. Not only that, the main characters have shared secrets, which imposes loyalty, which requires further lies and risks. Phillipe's big secret, revealed at the beginning of the story, is McGregor, the pet snake that he hides away in a secret place. Phillipe shares his secret with Baines, but not with Mrs Baines, which places the young boy and older man in what appears to be an innocent conspiracy. Soon, Phillipe discovers Baines' secret—his love affair with Julie. Baines pledges him to secrecy about that intrigues, but he inadvertently reveals it to Mrs Baines. Mrs Baines now tells Phillipe that they share a secret: she will protect Phillipe by not telling Baines that he told her about Julie, and Phillipe, in return, will not tell Baines that she knows. The danger inherent in this entanglement of secrets regarding the love affair is then surpassed by the web of deceit woven around Mrs Baines' death. The key fact here is that Phillipe thinks he knows what happened. He saw Baines and his wife struggling at the top of the stairs; and he later sees her dead body at the bottom of those stairs. In order to protect Baines, who he 'knows' murdered his wife, Phillipe lies to the police. They are unconvincing, boyish lies, and the police see through them, which only makes them more suspicious of Baines. For his part, Baines is also ignorant of how his wife died. Having not actually seen the accident, he assumes she fell down the stairs, when in fact, she fell from another place altogether. The police think he is lying, when he is merely uninformed. He does, however, lie about Julie, claiming that she was not in the house. This deception is motivated by a desire to protect her, just as Phillipe's lies are designed to shield Baines. None of this fools the police, who ferret out the truth. That is the danger hidden in secrets: they generate loyalties that require lies. But more dangerous of all is telling the truth when what you believe to be true is inaccurate or partial. The problem of truth-telling reaches a farcical end when, in the final scenes, Phillipe implores the police to

listen to him. 'Please, I've got to tell you something,' he begs them. 'It's the truth.' The inspector sighs and says, 'All right, boy. What do you want to say?' 'Baines wasn't up there among the flower pots. It was me. They're my footprints. It's my fault. I did it.' Phillippe was up there—that much is true—but they're not his footprints. He is again trying to protect his idol, Baines. The inspector smiles indulgently and says. 'I've told fibs in my time, too. Shall I tell you a secret?' Phillippe looks horrified and screams, 'No.' He has learned that secrets are dangerous.

Child and adult worlds The other theme, already apparent in the first, is the misunderstanding inherent in the interaction between a child's world and the world of the adults around him. The film is largely viewed through Phillippe's eyes. The opening scene shows him on the first floor, watching the comings and goings of adults in the large foyer of his embassy home. He crouches down and peers through the wrought-iron railings while his father, Baines, Julie and others scamper here and there. He sees, but what does he comprehend? Baines is his hero, his confidant and protector who can do no wrong. Baines is kind toward the young boy, plays pretend games and tells him stories of deepest darkest Africa. All very warm and wholesome, except that the gap between the two worlds contains the potential for misunderstanding, disappointment and disillusion. The film brilliantly dramatises this risk in three key events.

First, in the teashop, when Phillippe looks through the shop window and sees Baines with Julie, he doesn't understand what they are doing. Baines rescues the situation by speaking of their love affair as if it were the affair of another couple. Phillippe looks on, listening and trying to make sense of their adult talk. On the way home, Baines tells Phillippe not to tell Mrs Baines about the teashop. Later, Phillippe asks him, 'Is it very important to keep secrets?' 'It certainly is,' Baines assures him. Baines is thinking of his love affair, but Phillippe is thinking of his secret shared with Mrs Baines. The second event in which the child's perception proves crucial is Mrs Baines' death. Again, the film follows Phillippe's view of the action, as he races down an outside staircase, looking through the windows and seeing only some of what happened: the argument, the struggle and the fall. Crucially, he did not see the place from which she fell, and that leads him to the false assumption that Baines is a murderer. A third event is the meeting between Baines and Julie in the zoo. Phillippe is thrilled by the exhibits, running from cage to cage to watch the animals, while, from the corner of his eye, he sees Baines talking to Julie. He suspects that they are talking about something serious, but he is too absorbed with the lions and parrots to wonder what it might be. Still at the zoo, Baines tells Phillippe about the time he had to kill a man in Africa, explaining that 'it was a case of self-defence.' Phillippe later asks Baines if Mrs Baines' death was also 'self-defence.' The police overhear this and become more suspicious of Baines. Here, the close interaction between a child and an adult—Baines telling Phillippe a tall tale about Africa—nearly proves fatal to the adult. By the end of the film, Phillippe has had to reassess his view of Baines—his hero is, in his mind, also a murderer. Overall, the story of the fallen idol recalls the proverbial saying that 'no man is a hero to his butler.' After watching this film, we can also say that 'no butler is a hero to his young charge.'

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Phillippe

Character Phillippe is a lively and likable young boy, but he is lonely. The only child of a father who is busy and a mother who is in hospital, he longs for company. He is also, perhaps for the same reason, observant. Most important, he idolises Baines, who is kind to him and shares in his fantasies.

Illustrative moments

Impressionable Young Phillippe is in awe of Baines, a man who runs the house, keeps his secret about his snake and shields him from the ire of Mrs Baines. Phillippe listens to Baines' stories with rapt attention, fascinated by the places he has visited (or pretends he has) and imaginatively going there himself. The most explicit example of his susceptibility to Baines's storytelling powers occurs during their visit to the zoo. As they wait for Julie, Baines' make-believe niece, they sit down on benches opposite the lion cages. 'Did you shoot lions in Africa?' Phillippe asks with wide eyes. Baines dismisses this, but Phillippe is now completely transported into this fantasy world. 'You shot a man, though,' Phillippe says. When Baines asks who told him that, Phillippe reminds him that he did. Now, Baines sets off on a long story of his brave defence of a group of men against local Africans, killing the king in order to save his friends. All through this scene, it is Phillippe's desire to hear about adventures that goads Baines into embroidering his tale with more exciting and fanciful details. At the end, the bright-eyed young boy declares, 'I wish I could go away with you one day to Africa.'

Loyal Phillippe is also loyal to his idol, even when some of the gloss begins to wear off. As police suspicions grow around Baines, aided ironically by his own bungled attempts to protect him, Phillippe is determined to help his hero, even if he is a killer. The most cinematically dramatic example of his loyalty comes when the police are questioning Baines in the foyer, and Phillip has crept out of bed to listen on the first-floor landing. As he watches and listens, he sees the telegram sent by Mrs Baines, which he had made into a paper airplane and then lost. He knows the telegram is potentially damaging to Baines (exposing him as a liar), but that valuable document is now lodged among the leaves of a fern plant. As the men below interrogate Baines, Phillippe quietly edges himself toward the plant and retrieves the folded telegram. He acts surreptitiously, like a thief or a spy, crawling out on a ledge, but nothing is too dangerous if it will help Baines evade prison.

Perceptive Phillippe is young but sharp-eyed. Although he doesn't always understand what he sees going on in the adult world, he has a sensitivity, a sort of emotional radar, that picks up important signals. The best illustration of this side of his character comes in the key scene in the teashop, where Phillippe has stumbled upon Baines and Julie (supposedly his niece). Baines covers up their love story by making it sound as if it is about someone else, but Phillippe is moved, nonetheless. 'It's awfully sad,' he says about the doomed love affair that Baines and Julie are discussing. 'What kind of a man is he?' Phillippe asks Julie, when she says that the fictitious man (Baines) doesn't want to hurt the fictitious woman (herself). Julie says he's a good man, and Baines says he's a fool. Phillippe nods sagely at Baines' assessment and says, 'That's what I think, too.' He is only parroting his idol's opinion, but he is right in that Baines lacks the courage to confront his wife about a divorce. And then, at the end of the scene, after Baines and Julie have parted, and Baines is taking Phillippe back home, the little boy stops in the middle of the street and points. 'Look,' he says, 'there's your niece.' That observation leads to Baines having a final talk with Julie and declaring that he will talk to his wife that night. Little 'Phil' misinterprets things he sees and hears, but sometimes, as in this moment, his powers of perception prove valuable to Baines.

Baines

Character Baines is a fascinating character. Warm and genial and playful, he doesn't have an evil bone in his body. But he does like to put on a show, to dissemble and tell stories, a proclivity that leads him into deep waters.

Illustrative moments

Kind-hearted Baines is the lonely boy's best friend. Their tender friendship is illustrated in an early scene, after Phillippe's father has left the embassy and the boy wanders down into the basement, the underground world where Baines is in charge. Seeing the boy, Baines feigns exasperation and says, 'Can't you bother someone else? Can't you see I'm busy.' Then, he relents, 'Well, since you're already here, might as do a little work.' Phillippe runs up to him, petting his snake. Baines notices the reptile, strokes it and says, 'Looking good this morning, isn't he?' That gesture and those words are worth a fortune to Phillippe, who has already had to hide his snake from Mrs Baines. It is the kindest thing anyone could have said to the only child of parents who are rarely at home. The next minute, Baines is looking for a box in which Phillippe can put McGregor. No wonder Phillippe loves Baines, the man with a soft heart for him and his pet.

Performer Baines, though, is not without his flaws. One is his tendency to perform, to tell tall tales and avoid reality. We see this aspect of him on display when he indulges in his story about dangerous exploits in Africa, but a more subtle illustration occurs in the very first sequence of scenes. Baines is directing the traffic in the foyer of the embassy as Phillippe's father is leaving and others are arriving. He beckons to a maid, speaks to a servant, addresses the chauffeur and says goodbye to the ambassador. All the time, though, he has one eye on the first-floor balcony, where Phillip is watching his performance. Baines catches the fascinated eye of the young boy for a second and then executes a quick dance step while emptying out ashtrays into the fireplace. It is a momentary gesture, lost on everyone except the adoring Phillippe, but it shows us that Baines likes to act a part and take on fantasy roles. Harmless and entertaining though it seems, this trait has a dark underside, as well.

Deceptive The negative side of Baines' little fantasies is that they can build up into dangerous deceptions. However kind and gentle he is, Baines is cheating on his wife, telling lies to her and to Phillippe about his love affair with Julie. The most poignant and revealing example is, again, the key scene in the teashop. When Phillippe discovers the illicit lovers, Baines employs his storytelling

proress to rescue the situation by inventing another troubled set of lovers and telling their story as his own. In effect, he engages in a double deception, telling an untrue story about a man who deceives his wife. It is a revealing scene because we realise that Baines is imaginative, that he can pretend and make things up, which is all fun and games for Phillipe, but which enmeshes him and Julie in a tragic case of doomed love.

Mrs Baines

Character Mrs Baines is the opposite of her soft-hearted and fantasist husband. She is a childless wife and a disciplinarian, who is often 'on the warpath,' as one of the maids comments. No fool, either, she is cunning when she wants to exact revenge.

Illustrative moments

Harsh Mrs Baines runs her housekeeping regime with the discipline of a dictator. She has no time for indulgence, or weakness or human frailty. In fact, we first see her as a shadow, rising from basement, suggesting a monster emerging from the subconscious. A moment later, we know that she is cruel when she orders Phillipe to flush his snake down the toilet, which one critic suggested had obvious Freudian symbolism. Whatever the that symbolism might be, we are left in no doubt about her menace a moment later when she is eating breakfast with Baines and Phillipe in the basement. Phillipe says happily that Baines is going to take him out for a walk, but Mrs Baines squashes that by saying there's too much work. 'Work first and pleasure afterwards,' she adds. Phillipe still wants to know why he cannot leave the house. Mrs Baines puts down her fork, glares at him and says the words that every child hates to hear: 'Because I say so.'

Cunning Mrs Baines is, like all the main characters (except Julie), cunning. Not only is she cruel, she can deceive with the best of them. This characteristic is illustrated when she learns, accidentally from Phillip, that her husband is carrying on a love affair. She makes this deduction on the basis of a single word spoken by the boy: 'they.' Now, she puts in place her own plan of deception, announcing that she is going off to stay with her aunt for the rest of the weekend. While the cat's away, the mice will play. She packs her case, says goodbye and walks out onto the street from the servants' entrance. Five steps ahead, she ducks behind a pillar and sneaks back into the house, without Baines knowing. She has deceived Baines, hiding away like a dangerous secret that will burst out and set in train the events that lead to her death.



(Phillipe and Baines)