

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **A Burnt-Out Case** 1960 Graham Greene

### OVERVIEW

Set in a leprosy clinic in the Congo in the early 1960s, this story focuses on Query, a renowned architect who loses interest in his profession and in life and turns up at the clinic. There, he meets a dedicated doctor as well as mutilated patients, a frightened wife, deluded missionaries and arrogant Europeans. Although Query is trying to hide from life, he is recognised and his efforts to help at the clinic are embroidered into a sensational newspaper story of a reluctant saint. Through a series of encounters, principally with a leper named Deo Gratias, Query finds himself cured of his 'sickness of the soul.' However, a misunderstanding leads to his death at the end.

### LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

The catalyst for the novel was Greene's fascination with the real-life Catholic priest Father Damien (1840-1889), who worked with lepers and died of leprosy in Hawaii. In 1959, Greene visited a number of leprosy clinics in the Belgian Congo and the Cameroons in order to gather material for the novel. Critics have noted resemblances between Query (the disaffected protagonist) and Greene (the then-unhappy novelist), although the author claimed that there were none.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Query	Query, the main character, is an architect who flees to Africa.
Doctor Colin	Doctor Colin is a missionary doctor working at the leprosy clinic.
The Superior	The Superior Father is the head of the seminary attached to the leprosy clinic.
Father Thomas	Father Thomas is a priest at the seminary.
Rycker	Rycker is an English factory-owner in a nearby town.
Marie	Marie is his young wife.
Parkinson	Parkinson is an English journalist who comes to the area.

### STORY

*River voyage* The story opens as the 'Bishop's' boat floats down a river in the Congo. Aboard are Query, the captain (who is also the boat-owner and a Catholic priest) and the African crew. After a long journey, and stops at several villages with missionary-run churches, the boat reaches its destination: a leprosy clinic and a religious seminary deep in the jungle.

*New arrival* The medical facility is overseen by the non-believer Doctor Colin, while a Superior (Father) is in charge of the seminary. The Superior greets the Bishop's boat and meets Query, who asks permission to stay at the clinic.

*Deo Gratias* The Superior is puzzled as to Query's reasons but grants him permission and assigns a local man, Deo Gratias, to be his servant. Although Deo Gratias has been cured of leprosy, he lost his identity in the process and is extremely withdrawn. Dr Colin refers to him as a 'burnt-out case.'

*Hope* Query offers to help Dr Colin with his work treating the lepers, but otherwise he remains secretive about who he is and what he wants. Dr Colin works in challenging conditions, without a proper hospital, and can only treat rather than cure the debilitating disease. However, he has hope because plans for a new hospital have been approved by the government in Leopoldville.

*Rycker* Frustrated with his new 'helper,' Dr Colin sends Query on a long trip to a place called Luc, where he is to pick up medical equipment for the clinic. Query, accompanied by Deo Gratias, drives

a long way to a cathedral in Luc, where he is given a wooden crate. He also stops to buy food supplies for the clinic and meets Rycker, the manager of a local palm-oil factory. Rycker insists that Query stay the night in his house, where his wife is ill.

*Revelation* At his house, Rycker reveals that he knows who Query is: a famous architect, who made a name for himself designing churches and cathedrals. Query also meets Marie, Rycker's young wife, and is then subjected to a tedious theological lecture by Rycker, who went to seminary school and is convinced that he is a sincerely religious man.

*Decision* Back at the clinic, the news that Query is a skilled architect spreads and Dr Colin asks him to help with building the new hospital. But Query wants nothing to do with his 'old' life and refuses. That night, after a strange dream in which he finds he is 'too late,' Query makes a decision to help with the new hospital. As the work on the new hospital proceeds, Query and Dr Colin become confidants.

*Rescue* One night, Query realises that his servant, Deo Gratias, is not at home and finds him standing tree-like in a road. The next day, at sunset, Deo Gratias has again not returned and Query searches for him alone. He finds him sunk in a marsh and pulls him out but is unable to drag him home alone. He then spends the whole night with him, reassuring the man, and seeks help in the morning to bring him safely back home.

*Making of a saint* When Rycker hears about Query's act of rescue, he blows it up into the selfless action of a saint and spreads the news around the town of Luc. When he goes home drunk, Rycker forces himself on his wife, Marie. The story of Query, a famous but reclusive architect and now saint, is also encouraged by Father Thomas, a guilt-ridden priest at the clinic. The story is later picked up by Parkinson, an English journalist just arrived in the area. Parkinson goes to the clinic and hounds Query for his story, but Query resists, vociferously declaring that he is not even a Christian. Parkinson, however, will not be denied and sends off his story of the modern-day saint working with lepers in deepest, darkest Africa.

*The media* Parkinson leaves the clinic, and Query is relieved but then horrified when Father Thomas brings newspapers back to the clinic. Parkinson's mawkish tale of the selfless saint has been printed in local, regional and international papers. Query is portrayed in sensationalist terms as the new Albert Schweitzer. When he discovers that Rycker gave Parkinson a lot of half-truths about him, Query is angry and charges out to Rycker's house to confront him.

*Marie* When Query arrives, he finds that Rycker has been taken ill with jungle fever and that Marie, his wife, is worried. It turns out that she is concerned that she might be pregnant, and Query offers to drive her to Luc to see a doctor. Marie agrees but tells Query that he must first get her husband's permission. During their conversation, however, Query is so angry with Rycker for 'spreading rubbish about him' that he forgets to tell her that he is taking Marie to a doctor.

*Fairy tale* Query drives Marie to Luc but arrives too late to see a doctor so they take separate rooms in a hotel. In order to help her go to sleep, Query tells her a fairy tale about a king and a little boy, which is a thinly-disguised version of his own life. In the morning, Marie makes an innocent entry in her diary: 'Spent night with Query.'

*Confrontation* After seeing the doctor, Query and Marie stay in the hotel, waiting to hear the results of her pregnancy test. In the bar, Query runs into Parkinson. Hours pass, with no medical news, and then Rycker turns up, looking for Marie. When he reads her diary entry about 'the night with Query', he is furious and accuses Query of seducing his wife. Query denies it, but Rycker remains convinced.

*Pregnancy and paternity* Query arrives back at the clinic and sees that the hospital is finished. In the midst of a celebration, the clinic receives a telephone call that Marie has fled from Rycker, claiming (falsely) that she is pregnant with Query's child. Query, again, denies this and goes to see her in the company of Father Thomas and a Mother Superior. Questioned by Query, Marie says that

the baby is his because she thought of him when her husband made love to her and because, on the night he told her the fairy story, she fell asleep dreaming of him.

**Murder** Unable to convince anyone of his innocence, Query retreats to the clinic, where Dr Colin believes him. But Rycker soon appears with a gun hidden in his coat pocket. After an angry exchange, in which Rycker thinks Query mocks him, Rycker shoots and kills Query.

**Conclusions** Query is buried in the village, fulfilling his dream to leave his old life behind. Rycker, it is said, will be acquitted because the shooting was a 'crime of passion.' Marie keeps the baby. And Dr Colin treats patients in the newly-completed hospital, knowing now that he can cure them.

## THEMES

**Leprosy as metaphor** The key theme in this unusual story is that leprosy can be seen as a metaphor for the human condition in general, and Query in particular. The epigraph chosen by Greene sets out this idea by arguing that anyone with a physical defect will develop a deeper disgust of himself and that, even when cured, that person will be psychologically scarred for life. We see this in the case of both Query and Deo Gratias, who is his servant and with whom he develops a wordless bond. Both are 'burnt-out' cases. Deo Gratias is explicitly described by Dr Colin as a 'burnt-out case', that is, a patient whose physical suffering has ceased, and is 'cured,' but who has been mutilated beyond self-recognition by the disease. In other words, having lost his limbs, his stumps are numb, and he no longer feels pain, only discomfort. As the doctor says, 'He has lost his identity.' The same is true of Query, a successful architect who has lost all belief in his profession and its ideals, as well as in himself. Query is a 'leper' in that he is 'mutilated' and has contracted the 'sickness of the soul.' He does not want to have anything to do with feelings, such as pride in his buildings or love for a woman. He cannot feel anything but discomfort. And like a leper, he wants to hide away, to remove himself from society. Query is a specific burnt-out case, but the medical metaphor can be extended more widely to embrace all human beings. We are all 'lepers' to the extent that, at some time or other, we feel depressed or confused and lose the ability to feel. Like Deo Gratias and Query, we have to learn to live with our 'mutilations.'

**Suffering and sacrifice** The other theme of the book, which is closely related to the first, is the significance of suffering and sacrifice. What Query learns through the course of the story is that he must undergo a transition from 'discomfort' (the burnt-out condition) to 'suffering.' He must learn to suffer, which means he must be capable of feeling. This theme is articulated explicitly in a conversation between Query and Dr Colin, when the doctor says that suffering is part of the human condition and 'the central theme to the Christian myth.' Christ's suffering on the cross symbolises the suffering of all beings; it is a sacrifice that frees others to become human. This is the journey completed by Query. On the first page, he writes in his journal that he feels 'discomfort.' At the end, he writes, 'I suffer, therefore I am.' This link between suffering and a meaningful life is paradox of the novel, and the Christian myth. Query has regained his faith in himself and therefore has something to lose, which means he can feel and suffer again. He is a whole person. He is free to suffer.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Query** Query is a man filled with despair. Having lost interest in life and his fame as an architect, he seeks oblivion in the heart of Africa. Although a non-believer and a cynic, he is a kind person and an honest one.

**Self-aware** Query is painfully perceptive, especially of his own condition, his state of despair, boredom and uselessness. This searing self-awareness is illustrated in a key conversation with Dr Colin, shortly after Query has arrived at the leprosy clinic. When the doctor asks about his former profession as an architect, Query explains that he was never interested in doing good or being useful. Unlike a doctor, he never cared about individuals. 'I was never interested in the people who occupied my space [of his buildings],' he explains. 'Only in the space, the materials, the proportions.' In other words, he was selfish and emotionally crippled. 'I am one of the mutilated,' he says, using the word the doctor has used to describe his patients. 'Can you cure me?' Query goes on to mention that he has, or 'had', children, but they are estranged because he was too interested in making buildings that expressed himself. 'Self-expression is a hard and selfish thing,' he says. 'It eats everything, even the self.' This conversation reveals a fundamental aspect of Query's character, his honesty

about himself, a self-knowledge that is as painful as it is admirable.

**Cynical** Many of Greene's main characters, especially the men, are cynical, world-weary and burdened with lack of belief in life's platitudes. Query is a good example, and we hear his cynicism in an early scene when he is talking with Rycker, the factory-owner who is the opposite of Query in his self-deluded notion of his own religious piety. Rycker starts by saying that he doesn't respect the fathers at the leprosy clinic because they're more interested in building a hospital than in exploring faith. When Rycker asks what prayers he says, Query answers that he doesn't pray and adds facetiously, 'Oh, sometimes I pray for a teddy bear.' Query goes on to make fun of Catholic notions of 'wifely duties' in marriage, of the supposed existence of god and of the Bible. At the end, as Query walks home, he hears the frogs croaking in the dark and imagines that they are 'repeating Rycker's hollow phrases of duty, sacrament, grace and love, always love.' This is the burnt-out Query, who no longer cares about anything, especially the claptrap of the church.

**Compassionate** Query's transformation from a burnt-out case to a compassionate human being begins with a key incident when he rescues Deo Gratias, his servant. Deo Gratias is a 'cured' patient, who has only numb stumps for limbs. Query has grown used to him and only realises he is 'missing as one might become aware of some hitherto unnoticed object missing from a mantlepiece.' Despite this, Query goes out to look for the man in the middle of the night, while others dismiss the African man's absence as unimportant. Eventually, he finds him, fallen into a river, half in the water and half out. Without fingers or toes, he has been unable to crawl back on to the ground. Query stays with him for hours, until he is able to get help and drag the man back to the clinic in the morning. As he tells Dr Colin, 'It was a night of a beginning...I had an odd feeling that he needed me...I've often needed people...but to be needed is a different sensation.' This is the key moment in the book, when Query edges away from despair because he feels the love of gratitude, which awakens his compassion.

**Dr Colin** Dr Colin is dedicated to his task of curing leprosy patients, while working in a poorly-resourced hospital in the African bush. Although he is an atheist, he is not immune to some elements of the Christian myth, especially the power of suffering. He argues with both medical and church staff, but he always keeps an equilibrium, with his mind focused on his patients.

**Committed** Dr Colin is unstinting in his commitment to cure leprosy. When the story opens, he has already spent fifteen years working in a clinic in the bush. His dedication is revealed in the second chapter, when we hear him talking with a patient. The man is 'cured.' That is, tests have shown that there have been no leprosy bacilli in his blood for six months. But he has lost all his toes and fingers. Now, the man must go back to his village, but he is reluctant to return and the doctor understands why. He looks at his mutilated stumps and says, 'It will be hard to find work outside. I'll see what I can do here.' The stumps seemed useless, but the doctor knows that they can be taught to weave and sew and carve. He has dreamed for fifteen years for a hospital with sufficient funds to provide work for all his cured patients. For the moment, he doesn't even have money for a hospital with clean mattresses. He dismisses the patient and calls for the next one. Dr Colin cannot let his disappointment impede the progress of his work. He is a man committed to a cause.

**Materialist** Dr Colin is also a materialist. He does not believe in god, only in scientific tests and medicines. His atheism is expressed in an intense conversation with Query, as they listen, without believing, to a sermon by the Father Superior. Query asks the doctor if he is a Christian, and Colin replies, 'I'm not interested. I only wish Christianity could bring down the cost of cortisone.' The doctor also says that it is hard for the Father Superior to work with him since he is an atheist. He then adds, 'My life is easier than his. I know when a man is cured by his skin tests.' Dr Colin believes in his tests, in numbers and in the causal relationship between medicines and health. He cannot afford to spend time worrying about the existence of a god.

**Accommodating** Despite his atheism, Dr Colin is not an evangelist of non-belief. Quite the opposite, he has learned to synthesise his atheism with a certain amount of Christian thinking, if not belief. This accommodation is revealed in a conversation he has with Query toward the end of the book. The two men are relaxing with a glass of whisky when Query comments that neither of them has religious faith but that the doctor seems to accept the myth of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. 'Is that enough for you?' he asks. Dr Colin gives a long answer, in which he says that he 'wants to be on the side of change,' the evolution of mankind, aided by science, that will eventually find a cure for

leprosy. He finds he can reconcile the figure of the dying Christ with his scientific outlook. 'Evolution can produce a Hitler, of course,' he says, 'but I have a hope that Christ was the fertile element that planted the right seed. I think of Christ as an amoeba that took the right turning.' Query says that the doctor's views are as superstitious as those of the priests. 'Who cares?' the doctor says in return. 'It's the superstition I live by.' Dr Colin reminds Query of Copernicus, who was also accused of having a superstition—that the earth went around the sun.

**Rycker** Rycker, a European factory-owner, is a thoroughly unlikable character. He bullies his wife, he boasts about his religious faith and his ludicrously high self-esteem leads to Query's death at the end.

**Bullying** Rycker's bullying arrogance is on display from the first scene in which he appears, insisting that Query spend the night at his house. Once there, he further shows this quality when he introduces his quest to his wife, Marie. 'Marie will now fix us drinks,' he says, 'You see, I've trained her to know what a man wants.' Marie is much younger than he, so Rycker explains that he didn't want a woman his own age because in twenty years, when they would be fifty, she wouldn't look good. 'Women don't age well in the tropics,' he says. Marie serves the drinks, and Rycker says to her, 'Now change into a proper dress, that's a good girl.' Later, at dinner, when Marie begins to make conversation with their guest, Rycker shuts her up like 'turning off a radio.' And, at the end, to top it all off, Rycker complains to Query that his wife doesn't always honour her marital duties, referring to her obligation, ordained by the Church, to 'lay with her husband.'

**Pompous** Rycker is a believer in the truths of the Catholic church, which is nothing remarkable, except that he pronounces them as if he were giving a sermon, like the Pope himself. The best illustration of this tendency to ostentation comes when he seizes on Query as a modern-day saint and promotes the story through a visiting journalist. Query is furious and confronts Ryker about the inflated myth of his saintliness. Rycker apologises for the 'low-brow' publication but adds that the story has appeared in the Italian press and that the local Bishop has had an enquiry from Rome. Query continues to point out that he is a non-believer, but Rycker won't hear it because he is so enamoured of his own image of the saint who went into the forest and saved a leper (Deo Gratias). No matter what Query says, Rycker repeats his belief that the man is selfless, a true paragon of Christian sacrifice. 'Saints used to be made by popular acclaim,' he announces at the end of the scene. 'I'm not sure that it wasn't a better method than [the present-day] trial in Rome. I've taken you up, Query. You don't belong to yourself anymore.' This is Rycker in a nutshell, speaking in grandiose terms, glazed over with theological references, but always designed to shine the spotlight on himself.



(Graham Greene at a leprosy clinic in the Belgian Congo, 1959)