

The End of the Affair 1951

Graham Greene

OVERVIEW

This novel is set in London during and immediately after WWII. It is told largely in the first-person by Maurice Bendrix, a moderately successful writer. Other sections are narrated through memories and, significantly, a diary. The story concerns Bendrix's love affair with Sarah, who is Henry's wife. Years after their affair is terminated by the war, Bendrix is brought back into contact with Henry and Sarah, and their affair is rekindled. Soon, though, Sarah dies of pneumonia, leaving Bendrix to form a strong friendship with the widowed Henry. The plot features some of Greene's favourite elements, including fidelity (to spouse and god), betrayal and the complex nature of love. Some have called it a romance, others a tragedy. It is certainly a searing examination of love and loss.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Although Greene said that this was his 'I' book, and it is (unusually for him) written in the first person, the protagonist does not resemble his creator in either physical or psychological features. However, one key element in the plot, the diary kept by Sarah, is borrowed from Greene's own life: he and his wife kept a double diary, with each one writing on a facing page. Sarah's funeral in the novel generated controversy because cremation was not permitted by the Catholic church in England until the early 1960s. The novel was first made into a film in 1955, emphasising Sarah's belief that her prayer brought Bendrix back to life. A remake appeared in 1999, which included a resumption of Sarah's love affair with Bendrix, thereby compromising her vow not to indulge in adultery.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Bendrix	Maurice Bendrix, a writer, is the narrator and protagonist.
Sarah	Sarah Miles is his lover.
Henry	Henry Miles is Sarah's husband and Bendrix's friend.
Savage	Mr Savage runs a detective agency.
Parkis	Mr Parkis is an employee of the agency.
Smythe	Mr Smythe is an ardent atheist.
Crompton	Father Crompton is a Catholic priest.

STORY

A chance meeting The story begins on a 'wet black night' in the winter of 1946 when Maurice Bendrix, the first-person narrator, sees Henry Miles walking across Clapham Common in south London. The two are neighbours but have not seen each other for more than a year. Bendrix is a writer, and Henry is a clerk in the Westminster government. We also learn that Bendrix had an affair with Henry's wife, Sarah, though Henry remains ignorant of their betrayal. Now, Henry confesses to Bendrix that he is worried about Sarah, hinting that she might be seeing another man. Henry unburdens himself to Bendrix because, as he says, 'You were always her special friend.' Bendrix replies, 'Of course, you can trust me.' Henry wants to hire a private investigator to watch Sarah's movements but is reluctant to do so. Bendrix agrees to do it for him.

Memory After dreaming and obsessing about Sarah for several days, Bendrix goes to meet the private investigator in his office. Bendrix gives him the details and then, back home, remembers a cocktail party in the summer of 1939, just before the war, when everyone was happy. That is where he first saw Sarah, married to his acquaintance Henry. And he remembers that he glimpsed her kissing another man. It seemed innocent, but now he wonders if that man is her current lover.

Sarah Sarah calls Bendrix and they meet for lunch at their old restaurant. Calmly, she says she's worried about Henry and asks Bendrix to cheer him up. 'I think he's lonely,' she says. 'He hasn't really noticed me for years.' As they walk home, Bendrix kisses her in a fumbling way.

Investigation Afterward, Bendrix finds that he keeps thinking about Sarah, which distracts him from writing his fiction. He has to admit that he is falling back in love with her and that he is jealous of her supposed affair. He also meets with Parkis, the detective tracking Sarah's movements, which takes his mind off writing but plunges him deeper into his obsession with Sarah. As Parkis gives him the details of her meeting with a man, it's obvious that he is reporting on the lunch Bendrix just had with Sarah.

Affair resumed Bendrix pursues Sarah and they renew their affair, with visits to the cinema and hurried kisses on the doorstep of Henry's house. Soon, they are making love on the ground floor in the house, while Henry is ill in bed upstairs. When they declare their undying love for each other, Bendrix remarks that she was telling the truth but he was lying because he doesn't completely trust her.

Letter Parkis shows Bendrix a love letter stolen from Sarah's waste basket, which convinces him that Sarah does have a new lover. Parkis also reports that Sarah makes regular visits to a house in Cedar Road. Now, Bendrix meets up with Henry, who has lost interest in any surveillance of his wife and is angry when Bendrix gives him 'proof' of her infidelity. Henry guesses that he and Sarah were lovers, and Bendrix admits that they were. Instead of an argument, though, Bendrix and Henry accept their mutual love for Sarah.

Affair ended Bendrix then remembers the 'end of the affair.' He and Sarah had been in Bendrix's house when a German bomb half destroyed the building and left him injured and unconscious. When he awoke, Sarah, who was tending to his wounds, says that a 'miracle had happened.' She thought he was dead but prayed and he was saved. Significantly, she doesn't explain this to Bendrix. The following day, though, she tells him that the affair is over. He persists in trying to contact her, but she does not respond and he contemplates suicide. He doesn't kill himself but begins to hate Sarah.

Mr Smythe Back in the present, Bendrix and Parkis devise a way to get access to the house in Cedar Road, where Sarah often goes. Lying his way in, Bendrix discovers that the house belongs to Mr Smythe, an ardent atheist. Parkis then manages to sneak into a party at Henry's house and steal Sarah's diary.

Promise to god Reading her diary, Bendrix discovers that she ended the affair because of a promise made to god: when she thought he had been killed by the bomb that day, she struck a bargain with the Almighty: 'Save him and I will end this sinful adultery.' Bendrix survived and she broke off the affair. The 'miracle' also strengthened her belief in god.

Smythe God's apparent power (Bendrix reads) sends Sarah to Smythe, with whom she had intense discussions about religion. She had hoped that he would dissuade her from believing in a powerful god, but the opposite happened. Bendrix also reads about the 'wet black night' described in the first page of the novel, when Bendrix ran into Henry. When she came home that night and saw Bendrix with Henry, she couldn't stop thinking about him. She resolved to divorce Henry but was unable to carry through with her plan. Smythe then asked her to marry him, but she said no.

Death Back in the present, Bendrix calls Sarah and says he is coming to visit her. She tells him not to come and, though severely ill in bed, runs out into another dark and wet night. Bendrix follows her through the streets and catches up with her in a church, where they (once again) pledge their mutual love and plan to elope. When they part, Sarah promises to call him in the morning, but he doesn't hear from her for eight days. Henry calls and informs him that Sarah died of pneumonia, contracted on that first 'wet black night' only four weeks earlier.

Arrangements Bendrix goes to Henry's house and they reminisce about Sarah. Henry feels no jealousy, only friendship for someone who also loved his wife. Bendrix takes over the funeral (cremation) arrangements and argues with Smythe, who claims that Sarah was converting to

Catholicism and should be buried according to its conventions. Ignoring him, Bendrix arranges for a cremation. Bendrix also finds a letter in which Sarah writes that they will never meet again, and certainly not in heaven.

Cremation Bendrix argues again about the necessity for cremation, this time with a Catholic priest. He takes some satisfaction when he gets to the funeral service late and sees the smoke rising from the crematorium. At the ceremony, he meets Sarah's mother, who later tells him that Sarah was baptised as a Catholic when she was a young child.

Friendship Henry invites Bendrix to live with him in his home, and Bendrix accepts. The two rivals develop a deep friendship based on their memories of Sarah. Bendrix continues to argue with both the Catholic priest and Smythe. Smythe further enrages Bendrix when the atheist claims that the disappearance of his disfiguring facial birthmark can only be explained by supernatural intervention. Bendrix responds by tearing up Sarah's diary. The story ends with Bendrix and Henry going to the pub for a drink together.

THEMES

Love and hate On the first page, Bendrix says to the reader, 'This is a record of hate, far more than love.' Later on, he qualifies this: 'When I began to write I said this was a story of hatred, but I am not convinced. Perhaps my hatred is really as deficient as my love.' Throughout the novel, Bendrix/Greene explores the complex relationship between love and hate, questioning their opposition and suggesting, instead, that they are not just related but two sides of the same emotional coin. But there is more than one kind of love. First, there is romantic love, which is possessive and corrosive, especially in Bendrix. Bendrix's love turns to hate when Sarah leaves him and back to love again when they renew their affair. The intensity of the two emotional states is explicitly recognised by Bendrix when he comments that 'hatred is very like physical love.' At one point, Bendrix muses about his jealousy, which he supposes is what turns love into hate. A second kind of love is selfless and spiritual. Sarah is also caught up in physical love, but through the 'miracle' of Bendrix surviving the bomb blast, she discovers a spiritual love of god. As she writes in her diary, addressing god, 'Did I ever love Maurice [Bendrix] as much before I loved you? Or was it You I really loved all the time?' Sarah's divine love is sacrificial: she vows to renounce her affair with Bendrix if god allows him to live. At the end of the novel, Sarah is dead, and Bendrix blames god for taking her away from him. He says that he 'hates' god and that he is a man of 'hate.' Yet, in the final sentences, he seems to have reached some kind of reconciliation with the woman he both hated and loved. 'I started off saying this was a record of hate. Yet, somehow the hate has got mislaid,' he says. 'All I know is that in spite of her mistakes and her unreliability, she was better than most.' What he didn't add, and what we know, is that Sarah is good because she, unlike Bendrix, was capable of sacrificing her love for Bendrix for a love of god.

Faith and rationalism Related to this theme, but distinct from it, is a debate in the novel about the merits of faith versus rational thought. One of the mysteries of the story is the address in Cedar Avenue, where it is assumed Sarah meets her lover. It turns out, however, that she goes there to discuss religion with Smythe, who is an evangelical atheist. Sarah is a non-believer who has been shocked into belief by the 'fact' that her prayers were answered when Bendrix was 'rescued from death' by god. She goes to Smythe to confirm her atheism, but in the course of their conversations, she begins to doubt her lack of belief. Later, she commences proper religious instruction with a Catholic priest. Bendrix, on the other hand, is too much of a rationalist to see any causal connection between Sarah's prayer and his survival from the bomb blast. It must be, he says, pure coincidence, but doubt nags him throughout the story. Toward end, another 'miracle' appears to happen when Smythe's facial scar disappears the day after Sarah kisses it. Bendrix refuses to believe in this 'supernatural nonsense' and even lies to Henry in saying that the disappearance was the result of a doctor's treatment. In other instances, too, Bendrix clings to his belief in coincidence. Sarah, it is revealed, was baptised in a Catholic church when she was two years old, and reverts to that 'hidden, buried' faith when she is a middle-aged woman. It's all pure coincidence, Bendrix tries to reassure himself. Of course, there is no god. Yet, by the end of the novel, Bendrix has struggled so long with his supernatural enemy that he has conjured him into existence. In resignation, he says, 'Oh god, you've robbed me enough [Sarah]. I'm too old and tired to learn to love.'

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Bendrix Bendrix is a moderately successful writer, who has a jaundiced view of the world. He rarely has anything positive to say about anyone, including himself and Sarah, his lover. He is possessive, at times arrogant and often angry, but his willingness to consider his own flaws makes him sympathetic. And he acts kindly toward Henry.

Acerbic Bendrix has a sarcastic nature, an acerbity that manifests itself in unhappiness, jealousy, selfishness, cynicism and at times arrogance. We are introduced to his sour outlook on the first page, when he sees Henry and comments that Henry has all the comforts of home and a wife. 'To me,' Bendrix says, 'comfort is like the wrong memory at the wrong place or time: if one is lonely, one prefers discomfort.' He is lonely, without Sarah, and so he likes to walk about on cold, rainy nights on Clapham Common, as he does on that first page. He also tells us that he 'lives on the wrong side of the Common, with the relics of other people's furniture.' Next, he realises that he has the 'wrong' umbrella because it springs a leak. Then he meets Henry, the man who has taken Sarah from him, and thinks cynically: 'There are men [such as Henry] whom one has an irresistible desire to tease; one whose virtues one doesn't share.' Bendrix accompanies his rival to a pub and tells us about the obscenities scrawled on the bathroom wall; then he repeats them to Henry, hoping to shock the tepid little man. In these opening pages, we also learn that Bendrix's sardonic outlook stems, in part, from his sense of inferiority. One of his legs is shorter than the other. Conscious of his physical imperfection, he is quick to reject other people before they reject him. And for the same reason, he can't desire beautiful women, especially if they are intelligent, because he's afraid they will dismiss him. To fortify himself against the world, Bendrix learns to hate.

Reflective One character trait that saves Bendrix from our complete loathing is his ability to try, at least, to understand himself, if not others. In fact, the entire novel can be read as a confession, which culminates in a fierce inner debate on the final pages. Sarah is dead and cremated, and Bendrix is railing against her Catholicism, which he blames for her demise. Reading her diary, he knows that she asked god to give him peace, but he now says, 'You failed there, Sarah. I have no peace, and I have no love...I'm a man of hate. But I didn't feel much hatred. I had called other people hysterical, but my own words were overcharged; I could detect their insincerity.' Here, in the depths of his despair, Bendrix is able to turn his sardonic mind against himself and see the humbug in his own words. It is this intense, relentless self-examination that propels the entire novel, probing into motives, interrogating religious faith and questioning marital fidelity.

Compassionate Bendrix also displays an uncharacteristic compassion, especially toward the end and especially toward Henry. As we have seen, he is selfish and arrogant through much of the story, but now that he has lost Sarah, he has the widowed Henry as her replacement. The two bereaved men decide to live together, as two old bachelors, and quickly establish a kind of camaraderie. Bendrix's friendship with Henry is dramatised in a scene, when the latter comes home one evening from work. Bendrix has been working on his novel, without success, and is happy to hear the key in the door and the footsteps in the hall. When Henry doesn't come upstairs to him, Bendrix goes down to him. 'Drink?' he says, expectantly. Henry struggles to untie his shoelaces and wrenches off his shoes. Bendrix bends down, picks up the shoes and untangles the knot. It is a quiet domestic scene, an old married couple wordlessly helping each other.

Sarah Sarah, who is Henry's wife, is as volatile as Bendrix, her lover. She is unhappy in her marriage and passionate in the affair. She begins as an agonistic but later, after a traumatic experience, converts to Catholicism. She has no close friends and is unable to confide her deepest thoughts to either her husband or her lover and so finds that she must express them in a diary and to god. Although emotionally unstable, she is a serious thinker and tries to puzzle out the dilemmas of life.

Passionate Sarah is a passionate person, first in her love for Bendrix and later in her love of god. The two were connected by a specific incident, when Bendrix is knocked out by a bomb and she thinks he is dead. Hysterical and confused, she kneels down and does something she hadn't done since childhood: she prays to god. 'Dear god,' she says, 'make me believe.' She presses her fingernails into the palms of her hands and says, 'Dear god, let him live and I will believe.' But that wasn't enough, she realises, because to believe does not mean pain. So, she makes a promise: 'I'll

give him up forever, if you make him live.' She presses her nails, until there is blood and he lives. Here, Sarah displays her great passion for Bendrix because she knows that god will not allow a miracle unless it is a fair bargain, which means that she must abandon what she most desires.

Unstable Following her vow and Bendrix's recovery, Sarah is bound to celibacy concerning her erstwhile lover. She has made a promise and doesn't want to break it, but at the same time, she cannot stop loving Bendrix. This deadlock undermines her stability and she slowly becomes disturbed. A vivid example, narrated in her diary, occurs during a dinner party that she and Henry host for his government colleagues. As Henry and his guests get lost in a detailed discussion about pensions and statistics, Sarah has a sudden desire to disrupt the gentle atmosphere. 'I suddenly wanted to tell everyone about finding Maurice [Bendrix] knocked out. I was naked of course because I hadn't had time to dress.' Sarah wonders whether her husband and his guests would even hear her outrageous statement as they discussed the cost of living index for 1943. She looks at their smug faces and thinks again: 'I was naked, I wanted to say, because I had been making love with Maurice.' The events of a few weeks ago—the terrible bombing, the near loss of her lover and her desperate vow of celibacy—have unsettled Sarah.

Smythe Richard Smythe is an ardent atheist, who goes to a public park to make speeches about the nonexistence of god. He is sincere and considerate, especially in his conversations with Sarah. Obsessed with disproving the existence of god, he eventually is led (by a minor miracle) to doubt his own atheism.

Rational Smythe is the embodiment of rationalism, which he believes is the basis of his non-belief. His materialist explanation of faith and religion is articulated when Sarah seeks him out one afternoon. After she asks why people love god, he says, 'The desire to find a father or a mother. Underneath, it's the biological urge.' Sarah asks about the love of god, and Smyth continues, 'Man made god in his own image, so it's natural he should love him. It's like a distorting mirror in a fair; the idea of god is a distorted image of what man actually is.' Smythe will not accept any biblical stories, which he calls 'fairy tales,' and he is dogmatic in his rejection of the power of faith.

Spiritualist Anyone, like Smythe, who is so intimately involved with god, even in denying his existence, is likely to become obsessed with divinity. And so it proves with our consummate atheist. His doubts reach a pinnacle when his ugly facial birthmark suddenly disappears. At first, he tells Bendrix that it was the result of some modern medical treatment, but later he admits that he lied and that it 'cleared up suddenly, overnight' after Sarah kissed and blessed it. When Bendrix says he doesn't know how that is possible, Smythe says, 'You and I both know how...There's no getting around it...it was a miracle.' Bendrix can't accept this, but Smythe is now convinced of the power of faith healing. The atheist is only a few steps away from the spiritualist.

