

## THE THIRD MAN 1949

Carol Reed

### OVERVIEW

The story unfolds in the dark and sinister streets of post-war Vienna, where Holly Martins, an American writer, comes to meet his old friend, Harry Lime. What follows is an atmospheric crime thriller, with a suspicious death, a wrongly identified corpse, fearful witnesses and lying conspirators. There is also grief and horror, plus brilliant touches of humour, all of which are mixed together in a painful story about making difficult moral decisions. There are no bombs, only menace in a nihilistic world of black-market racketeers and political tensions that produced the Cold War a few years later.

### LITERARY/HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Following the critical success of their collaboration with *The Fallen Idol* (1948), Carol Reed again asked Graham Greene to write the screenplay for this, his next, film. *The Third Man* project was, nevertheless, very different because whereas the earlier film was based on his own short story, this time Greene was asked to write a script that co-producer Alexandra Korda wanted for a story set in post-war Vienna. In 1948, Greene went to Vienna for research, where he was shown the city's underground sewer system and learned about the penicillin racket, both of which figure dramatically in the film. Back in London, Greene wrote a 'treatment' in the form of a novella, which was published later, in 1950. In early 1949, he and Reed went back to Vienna and worked closely to produce the script, which differed from the novella. Then both men travelled to California, where co-producer David O. Selznick added his ideas (most of which were ignored) and the final script was agreed. Greene had wanted a happier ending, but Reed prevailed and guaranteed that we would see one of the most memorable final scenes in cinema history. Greene later admitted that he had not given enough credit to Reed's masterly direction.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Holly Martins	Martins is an American pulp fiction writer.
Harry Lime	Harry, who lives in Vienna, is Martins' old friend.
Anna Schmidt	Anna, a Czech actress, is Harry's lover.
Major Calloway	Calloway is the military police chief in the British zone.
Kurtz	Kurtz is an Austrian friend of Harry's.
Popescu	Popescu is a Romanian friend of Harry's.

### STORY

*Death in Vienna* The story opens in Vienna just after the end of World War II, when the city is divided into Russian, French, British and American zones. An American pulp novelist, Holly Martins, arrives, expecting to meet old friend, Harry Lime. When Lime doesn't show up at the train station, Martins goes to his friend's flat, where he is told by the porter that Lime is dead. He's been knocked down and killed in a car accident

*Revelation* Martins rushes to the cemetery for the burial, where he meets Major Calloway, a British policeman. Calloway takes Martins to a bar, where they talk about the deceased man. Martins says that Harry was 'the best friend a man ever had,' but Calloway says his death is good riddance. Harry Lime, the major says, was a black-market racketeer.

*Patron* Calloway gives Martins some money, sends him to a hotel and arranges for him to leave on a flight the next morning. At the hotel, Martins meets Crabbin, who agrees to fund him to stay longer if he gives a lecture on the modern novel at his cultural institute. Martins accepts only because he wants to stay in town and find out what happened to his friend.

*Kurtz* Martins is contacted by Baron Kurtz and they meet at a café, where Kurtz explains that he was a good friend of Harry's. He also says that he was there when Harry died and takes Martins to

the scene of the 'accident', where he explains what happened: Harry stepped across the street to get into a friend's car, when a truck slammed into him. Kurtz and a friend, a Romanian named Popescu, picked up his body and carried over to the pavement. Kurtz says that his dying words were to look out for his friend, Holly Martins. Then an ambulance came and took Harry away.

*Doubts* Martins suspects something is not right and begins to ask questions. He wants to speak to the other man, the friend with the car, but Kurtz says that he has left Vienna. Kurtz does mention Harry's girlfriend, an actress named Anna.

*Anna* Martins goes to the theatre, where he speaks to Anna, who gives him vital information. She says that the man driving the truck was Harry's own driver and that Harry's private doctor, Dr Winkel, was also on the scene. Anna admits that she, too, is not convinced that it was an accident.

*Doubts confirmed* Together they return to Harry's flat, where the porter gives an account of the death that contradicts what Kurtz has said: Harry died instantly and three people (not two) carried his body across the street: Kurtz, Popescu and another man. Martins thinks this 'third man' must be the doctor, but the porter says that the doctor came later.

*Police search* Martins walks Anna back to her flat, where the police are searching her things. As Major Calloway and his men confiscate her papers, she explains to Martins that her papers are forged because if her true national identity were known (she is Czech), she'd be sent to the Russian zone. Before she is taken away by the police, she advises Martins to see Dr Winkel.

*Questions* Answering Martins' questions, the doctor remains non-committal regarding the cause of Harry's death and whether or not he died instantaneously. In the next scene, Calloway interrogates Anna about a man named Joseph Harbin, who was one of Harry's associates. Anna denies any knowledge, but Calloway produces a letter from Harry that asks her to give a message to Harbin at the Casanova Club. The following day, Harbin disappeared. Calloway wants Anna to help the police locate Harbin in return for the police not sending her to the Russian zone. She maintains that she knows nothing, and the police let her go.

*Casanova Club* Martins and Anna meet Popescu, the Romanian at the scene of the incident, who denies that there was a third man. 'Where did you get that idea?' he asks and Martins says the porter told him. Martins also asks about the racket that Harry was supposedly involved with, and again Popescu dismisses that as rumour.

*Murder* Harbin sets up a mysterious meeting with Kurtz, Winkel and an unknown man on a bridge. Soon after, the porter at Harry's building is found murdered. He knew too much about the third man.

*Kidnapped* Martins returns to his hotel, where he is bundled into a car and driven at speed through the streets. Afraid he is about to be killed, he is relieved to find himself delivered to the venue for his speech on the modern novel. Unprepared, he serves up gibberish before evading two thugs sent by Popescu and taking refuge in Calloway's office.

*Racket* Calloway describes the racket in which Harry Lime played a key role. Kurtz, Harbin and Lime were a gang who sold watered-down penicillin to hospitals, resulting in many unnecessary deaths, especially children who were being vaccinated against meningitis.

*Ghost?* Disillusioned about his friend, Martins gets drunk, stumbles into Anna and says he's in love with her. Back on the street, Martins thinks he sees Harry Lime in an upstairs flat and goes to Calloway, who doesn't believe him. Martins takes him to the street where he swears he saw 'this ghost,' and Calloway notices a kiosk that is carefully placed over an entrance to the city's sewer system.

*Not Harry* Calloway orders the buried body to be disinterred and finds that it is not Harry Lime. It is Harbin. Martins passes on this information to Anna, who is again brought in for questioning. Calloway threatens her with extradition to the Russian sector unless she cooperates and tells him where Harry is. Anna is overcome with happiness that Harry is still alive, but she cannot help Calloway because she has no knowledge of Harry's whereabouts.

*Ferris wheel* Martins sends a message to Harry, through Kurtz, telling him to meet him at the Ferris wheel in the city park. When Harry arrives, he admits that he was involved in the penicillin racket and offers to cut Martins in on the profits. Martins is horrified. Harry also admits that he doesn't care about Anna and is worried that the police will find him. As they part, Harry tells Martins he's happy to

meet with him anytime, but alone, no police.

*Second thoughts* Although Martins tells Calloway about the meeting, he refuses to cooperate with the police in capturing Harry. But when a Russian official enters and threatens to arrest Anna, Martins changes his mind: in return for Calloway's help in getting Anna out of the country, he will lead Calloway to Harry. Anna is given new papers and he sees her off at the train station. When she realises that she has been allowed to escape only through a bargain with Calloway, she rips up her papers and refuses to leave.

*Conscience* Martins returns to Calloway and withdraws his cooperation in the plan to catch Harry. Calloway drives him to the airport, but stops on the way to show him the children suffering in a hospital from dementia caused by Harry's bootleg penicillin. Martins changes his mind again and agrees to be a decoy to lure Harry.

*Trap* Martins waits in a café for Harry to show up, with the police surrounding the area, but Anna appears and warns Harry just in time. Harry escapes down into the vast sewer system, with the police and Martins in pursuit. Harry shoots a policeman dead but is wounded by Calloway. Martins comes upon Harry, lying helpless, and shoots him dead.

*Departure* After Harry's burial in the cemetery, Calloway drives him to the airport. They pass Anna who is walking along the same road. Martins gets out and waits for her to catch up with him. She passes him without a word or glance.

## THEMES

*Moral dilemma* The dramatic tension in this story is generated by a moral dilemma facing two of its main characters: Holly Martins and Anna Schmidt. The question they both confront is whether or not to cooperate with the police in the search for Harry Lime. Both Martins and Anna have loved Harry, and Anna still does, but then they find out that Harry is a ruthless, uncaring criminal, who indirectly kills and maims children. Anna surely has had hints of Harry's dark side, but she sticks by him. 'He wasn't just my lover and your friend,' she says. 'He was real. He was Harry.' Even when the full horror of his diluted penicillin racket is exposed, Anna refuses to play ball with Calloway because Anna is afraid of authority and distrustful of the police, including the British. She won't trade her loyalty for Harry in return for a safe passage out of Vienna, where she is at risk of being sent to the Russian zone. And when she realises that her train ticket is the price that Martins paid for agreeing to help Calloway catch Harry, she rips it up. For his part, Martins is initially reluctant to believe what Calloway says about his great friend Harry. Soon, however, he is shown the 'facts', proving that Harry is involved in the penicillin racket. So great is the shock of what seems like Harry's betrayal, that Martins begins to lose his grip on reality. And when he meets Harry face-to-face and discovers his utter lack of morality and callousness towards his victims, Martins still does not agree to work with Calloway. He changes his mind only because Calloway offers to provide Anna with an escape from Vienna in exchange for his assistance. But after Anna rips up her new documents in a spirit of support for Harry, he again changes his mind and reneges on his promise to help Calloway. Then Calloway shows him the dying and deformed children suffering from Harry's racket, and he once again agrees to help the police. The depth of Martin's moral confusion is indicated by the shifts in thinking: refusal, consent, refusal and finally consent. The story is thus perfectly poised, like a moral isosceles triangle, with Martins and Anna at the two ends of the base having to deal with Harry as the evil apex. How should a friend or a lover react when the man they love is revealed as irremediably criminal? The film provides no clear answer. Martins is unhinged by the end and seems out of character when he shoots the helpless Harry dead. Anna, by contrast, never swerves from her loyalty. The final scene holds the promise of a closure, when after Harry's funeral, Martins waits for Anna. But she passes him by without a word.

*Post-war Vienna* The other element of the story is the context of post-war Vienna, a situation in which moral dilemmas find fertile ground to grow. The city is indeed a main character. The opening shot shows the war-weary city with Martins' voice-over. 'I never knew the old Vienna before the war with its Strauss music and glamour. I only got to know it in the classic period of the black market [cue a shot of people exchanging money for shoes, watches and tobacco]—anything was available, if you had the money.' Then the narrator explains the division of the city into American, British, French and Russian zones, plus an international zone in the centre. Into this city of no central control and desperate need comes Holly Martins, a happy-go-lucky American, looking for his friend Harry Lime. From the moment of his arrival, everything suggests trouble. His friend doesn't meet him and

hurrying down a street, he walks under a ladder. The buildings of old Vienna are still magnificent, with delicate wrought-iron railings and sculptured pillars at the entrance. But there are also shots of dark streets, deep shadows and harsh angles. The perfect city for cinema noir. This atmosphere of dangerous streets and near lawlessness begins to swallow up Martins' optimism and cheerfulness. Within a few hours, Martins is warned by four different characters not 'to get mixed up' with things. First, the porter, then Anna, then Popescu and finally Calloway, who says, 'Go home, will you? Be a sensible chap. You don't know what you're mixing in.' Martins doesn't speak the language and has the naiveté of a pulp fiction writer. What chance does he stand of keeping his morality in tact when walking the mean streets of post-war Vienna?

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### ***Holly Martins***

Character Holly Martins is the main character of the story. He is an American fiction writer, who goes to find his friend Harry and ends up killing him. Martins is a kind but sentimental and somewhat confused man, whose good intentions are increasingly undermined by his mixed-up emotions. Part of his problem may be that, as a novelist, he has trouble separating fact from fiction. Once he takes to drink, he never again seems to regain a firm grasp on reality.

### Illustrative moments

*Confused* Martins is never quite sure of his moral footing, especially in a city so foreign to him as Vienna. Although he tries to follow logic in attempting to solve the mystery of Harry's death/disappearance, he only becomes more lost and uncertain. A good illustration of his unravelling is the scene that immediately follows Calloway's revelation to him of the actual nature of Harry's crimes. Disillusioned, he takes refuge in drink and lands up at Anna's flat with a large bouquet of flowers. He should be hiding from the police, who suspect him of murdering the porter, but he shrugs off Anna's questions about why he has come to her flat. He lurches around the flat, plays with a cat and tries to tell Anna that he loves her. But it is clear that he is too shaken to know what to do or what to say.

*Determined* Although Martins is a fiction writer, he is dogged in his pursuit of Harry, questioning witnesses and friend, like a criminal investigator. A good example of his careful examination comes early in the story, when he first meets Kurtz, the man who was on the scene when Harry died. As he talks with Kurtz about what happened to his friend, Martins picks up on minor, but significant, discrepancies in the man's account. Kurtz claims that Harry spoke to him while he was dying on the pavement, telling him to look out for Martins. But just moments before, the porter told Martins that Harry died on the spot. Martins registers the inconsistency but does not push too hard; he is patient and will follow the evidence where it takes him. Martins writes 'westerns' with cowboys and sheriffs, but he is well suited to be a private eye in a murder mystery.

*Betrayed* A key moment, perhaps the central scene of the whole film, occurs when Martins meets Harry in the Ferris wheel. This is the first that either we (the audience) or Martins has seen Harry in the film. Martins has been shown the damning facts of Harry's criminality by Calloway, but somehow he still can't believe what he's seen. Now, he can speak to his old friend in person, and it is a complete betrayal of what he believed Harry to be. Rather than defend himself, Harry simply justifies everything with a nonchalance that shocks Martins. He doesn't care about Anna; he doesn't care about the children in the hospital; he doesn't care about anyone but himself. Listening to this, Martins grows angry and says that Harry can help and should help. He tries to persuade Harry to turn himself in, but Harry is deaf to such silly suggestions. When he realises that Anna is in trouble because Harry told the Russians about her in order to save his own skin, Martins finds he can no longer call Harry a friend. He has been betrayed, not directly, but more insidiously, by a man whom he trusted and loved.

*Deranged* Disillusioned and betrayed, Martins slowly becomes more unhinged and makes wild decisions. The apotheosis of his derangement occurs in the penultimate sequence when Harry attempts to escape through the underground sewer system. He is wounded and crawls up a ladder toward a grate, which leads on to the street and safety. Martins hunts him down with a gun that he has taken from a dead policeman. The two men stare at each other, wordlessly, and Calloway shouts for Martins not to take any chances and to shoot. Harry seems to nod, as if to agree, and Martins shoots him dead. Martins seems to act in a trance, following Calloway's orders and perhaps Harry's nod of the head, but it is entirely out of character. He has killed his best friend, a defenceless man,

whom he could simply have held for arrest. Instead, he shot him in cold blood. At the end, Martins appears to have confused fact and fiction. Earlier, he had described the plot of one of his novels as a 'lone rider' assisting a sheriff in unlawfully killing his best friend. It seems to describe his own story.

### **Harry Lime**

Character Although he only appears in the last third of the film, Harry Lime, as played by Orson Welles, dominates the story. He is venal and charismatic, amoral and charming, arrogant and witty. He might be a moral monster, but he can smile and make you smile. That is the source of his magnificent malevolent power.

#### Illustrative moments

*Immoral* Harry Lime is a man without morals, a perfect kind of man to thrive in the world of post-war Vienna, where there are boundaries but little rule of law. We get a visual demonstration of his utter depravity when Major Calloway shows Martins a slide show of the penicillin racket, but the man is even more shocking in person. Harry meets Martins at a fairground and the two old friends take a ride on a Ferris wheel, a well-chosen symbol of Harry's roulette-style way of life. As the wheel turns, Harry explains to Martins that he has no guilt about he has done. When Martins tells him to give himself up, Harry only smiles. 'You and I aren't heroes,' he says. 'They're aren't any heroes.' Martins wants to know if Harry intends to harm more people, to which Harry replies, 'No one thinks in terms of human beings. Governments talk about the people and the proletariat, and I talk about the suckers and the mugs. Same thing. They have their five-year plans, and so have I.' Martins brings up the topic of his victims in the penicillin racket. 'Victims?' Harry scoffs. 'I don't like that word. Look down there. [points to the ground, hundreds of feet below] Would you care if one of those dots stopped moving forever? If I offered you a thousand pounds, for each dot that stopped, would you really tell me to keep my money? Or would you start to calculate how many dots you could spend?' It is a chilling speech from a man without a shred of conscience.

*Totalitarian* Harry's immorality is particularly nasty because it has a deep streak of authoritarianism. Again, the most explicit articulation of this attitude occurs during the key scene in the Ferris wheel. Just before they separate, Martins makes a last attempt to appeal to Harry's conscience, but Harry gives him a little history lesson, which has become one of the most famous speeches in cinema history: 'In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed,' Harry says. 'But they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, five hundred years of democracy and what did that produce - the cuckoo clock!' It is a cynical assessment of democracy at a time when the West had just defeated fascism and was beginning to gear up for a struggle against Soviet totalitarianism. As Major Calloway says to Martins, 'A racket works very like a totalitarian party, and this racket's führer is Harry Lime.'

### **Anna**

Character Anna is, at first, fragile and full of sorrow, but later shows her iron will and principled character. She is fiercely loyal to Harry and just as harshly critical of his enemies. Even at the end, when she faces an uncertain future, she holds her head up high. She is a woman of quiet determination. She is also an actress.

#### Illustrative moments

*Forlorn* When Anna first appears on screen, she is bereft of hope. She believes, as everyone else does, that Harry is dead and she mourns not only her lover but also her lost future. Martins seeks her out backstage at the theatre, where she talks to him as she removes her make-up and wig. Then, stripped of any façade, she responds to his question about Harry's death. 'I don't know anything anymore,' she says, 'Except that...I want to be dead, too.' She voices her doubt that the death was accidental, which alarms Martins, but she then adds, 'What difference does it make? He's dead, isn't he?' Anna feigns indifference, but we know that, inside, she is grieving. She is not the sort of woman who simply breaks down and cries, especially not in front of a man. This scene is also significant because it sets up the contrast between Anna's old-world resignation and Martins' American optimism, a tension that animates these two main characters through the rest of the film.

*Loyal* Anna is faithful to Harry, right to the end, and not just as a lover in rejecting Martins' bumbling advances, but also as a friend in refusing to turn against him and help the police. She displays her absolute loyalty in a moving scene toward the end of the story, when Martins has, behind her back,

done a deal to betray Harry to the police in return for new identity papers that will allow Anna to cross the border to safety. Martins is seeing Anna off at the train station, when she realises that she has been played like a pawn and that Harry will be the loser. Under Anna's fierce questioning, Martins admits that he has agreed to help take Harry. 'Poor Harry,' Anna says with tears in her eyes. 'Poor Harry?' Martins scoffs. 'He didn't help you.' Anna says softly, 'I know. He doesn't love me. And I don't want to see him or hear him. But he is still part of me. I couldn't do anything to harm him.' The train leaves without her, and Martins says, 'Oh, Anna, why do we always have to quarrel.' Stone-faced, Anna says, 'If you want to sell your services, I'm not going to be the price' and tears up her ticket and identity papers. It is a moment that reveals the crucial difference between the two main characters: spirited Anna and befuddled Martins.

*Censorious* Anna's loyalty leads her to be censorious towards those who seek to harm Harry. Major Calloway is an obvious target of her contempt, but more painful is her punishment of Harry's erstwhile best friend, Martins. Her harsh judgement of Martins is dramatised in a pair of scenes that must be viewed together. First, at the end of the train station scene described above, Anna finishes the conversation by saying, 'I loved Harry. You loved Harry. But look at yourself. They have a name for someone like you.' The unspoken word is 'traitor', or perhaps 'collaborator', a word with sinister connotations in the post-war era. Then, following Harry's burial a few minutes later, comes the final scene of the film. Anna has not spoken to Martins since the train station. They leave the cemetery separately. Martins is ahead of her, stops by the side of the road and waits for her to catch up. He stands as she walks toward him, for a long two minutes, in silence. But she walks right past him. Not a word. Not a glance. She has condemned him for his betrayal of Harry.



(The ending: Anna passes by Martins without a word)