

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE HEART OF THE MATTER 1953

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OVERVIEW

Henry Scobie is a British police officer in Freetown during the Second World War. Unhappily married to Louise, and later taking a young woman as a lover, he also becomes vulnerable to blackmail and is involved in diamond smuggling, the very crime he is supposed to prevent. Later, against his deeply held belief that suicide is the worst sin a man can commit, he prepares to end his life, but it doesn't turn out that way. This story of guilt and torment is leavened by the on-location shooting in west Africa, including lush landscapes and lively music playing. With the lack of a soundtrack, the local colour is all the brighter.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

The film was adapted from the Graham Greene novel of the same name published in 1948, although the novelist played no role in the production of the movie. The screenplay is, nevertheless, largely faithful to the novel, especially in examining the religious drama and in portraying the colonialism of the time. The only important change in the film is the ending, in which Scobie is shot and then cradled in the arms of his black servant, Ali. In the book, the reverse is true: Ali is shot and lies in Scobie's arms. Later, blaming himself for Ali's death, Scobie commits suicide by overdosing on pills. Greene himself disowned the film and said that he tried to get the film company to include Scobie's suicide, but to no avail.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Scobie Henry Scobie, Major Scobie, is a police officer in Freetown.

Louise Louise is his wife.

Yusef Yusef is a Syrian trader and friend of Scobie's.

Wilson Wilson is a young British official sent out to spy on Scobie.

Helen Helen Rott is a young woman, who is shipwrecked, loses her husband and starts a relationship with Scobie.

Father Father Rank is the local Catholic priest.

STORY

Freetown Freetown is the capital of Sierra Leone, a British colony on the west coast of Africa. The year is 1942. Background music of local drumming and singing accompany a panoramic street scene, with British troops and military vehicles. Major Scobie travels through the streets, stopping for a moment to enjoy marimba playing (these scenes were shot on location) before taking a military police launch out to a cargo ship anchored in the harbour.

Letter Smuggling is rife during the war years in the region, and Scobie undertakes a careful inspection of the ship. When he finds a hidden letter addressed to someone in Germany, he confiscates it. The Portuguese captain explains that it is his letter to his daughter, who married a German. Knowing that he will be blacklisted and lose his job, the desperate captain offers a large bribe, but Scobie refuses the money. Sensitive to the other man's plight, though, he hints that he may not report the letter.

'Scobie the Just' Scobie is called to a meeting with his superior, who is retiring. He feels that Scobie should be promoted to his post, but informs him that a younger man is being sent up from another colony. Rather than retire or transfer, Scobie decides to stay on because he 'likes the place. It's pretty in the evenings.' The older man jokes that Scobie's problem is that people dislike him: he's called 'Scobie the Just.'

Rule-breaker In his own office, Scobie takes a telephone call from his wife, who complains about something. Scobie squeezes out a tight smile and says he'll be home as soon as possible. Then, against regulations, he opens the captain's confiscated letter and sees that it is just a father writing to his daughter. Scobie burns the letter.

Louise At home, Scobie scolds his servant Ali, and finds his wife reading in bed. When he confirms the rumour that he has been passed over for promotion, she loses what little joy she has. They bicker about money, the future and his lack of faith. 'You, dear, have enough for both of us,' he says. She also mentions Catherine, their dead daughter.

Vague promise Louise declares that she wants to leave Freetown, that she can't bear living among 'these people.' She is desperate to go to South Africa, a sophisticated English colony. Scobie points out that they can't afford it. She is in tears, and he says, 'Well, maybe I can do something.' He thinks of going to the bank and asking for a loan.

Firm promise Back home, he admits to Louise that he couldn't raise the money to fund her journey to South Africa. The bank refused him a loan. She breaks down in tears, and he mollifies her with another promise to find the money. Louise says she went to the Club but the people were horrible, except the new man, Wilson, who shares her interest in literature. But the thought that her only friend is this low-ranking Wilson throws her into a fit of despair and she begs him to do something. This time, he makes a firm promise to find the money.

Wilson The next day, Louise and Wilson go for a walk in the hills above Freetown. When she asks about his posting to Freetown, Wilson is evasive. He kisses her and she is surprised but not entirely displeased.

Upcountry Scobie goes on a journey, accompanied by his servant Ali, in order to look into a 'case' involving another colonial officer in a small upcountry town. He leaves Louise in Wilson's care, saying 'Please look after Louise, and cheer her up. She doesn't often get a chance to talk to anyone sensible.' During the long journey, Scobie gets a touch of jungle fever and is tended to by Ali.

Suicide Still ill, Scobie discovers that the colonial officer has hanged himself. A suicide note and statements from the local Reverend suggest that the victim had been in debt to a Syrian trader named Yusef.

Yusef Yusef comes to visit Scobie, who is recovering from his hallucinatory fever. Scobie questions him about the man's suicide, but Yusef denies that he had any role in his death but then, cynically, tears up the dead man's IOUs. Yusef warns Scobie about a man sent from London to spy on him and his possible involvement in smuggling. No one is named, but Wilson is the obvious man. Aware of Louise's desire to go to South Africa, Yusef also offers to loan Scobie a large sum of money. As with the ship's captain, Scobie refuses to accept a bribe.

Departure Back in Freetown, he finds Louise is good spirits. Wilson has cheered her up, and she has been offered a berth in a friend's cabin on a boat for Cape Town. She says she is writing to refuse the offer because she knows that he cannot raise the money. With a satisfied smile, Scobie tells her to write and accept the offer. Only days later, Louise departs.

Shipwreck Scobie is sent to another port town, where survivors from a torpedoed ship have been brought to safety. 'They're in pretty bad shape,' he is told. Once there, he finds Wilson, who says he's been looking into the black-market activities of a second Syrian trader called Tarrant. Scobie suspects that Tarrant is smuggling diamonds across the land border into French territory.

Helen While supervising the rescue operation, Scobie shows deep compassion for the survivors, especially a young woman named Helen, who clings to her stamp album. Helen is an Austrian refugee, who lives in England with her English husband, who died in the shipwreck.

Allegations Wilson and Scobie spar over his investigation into the diamond smuggling ring run by Tarrant, and Wilson says that Tarrant claims Scobie himself is involved. Wilson also suggests that Scobie would be reluctant to pursue a conviction against Yusef, who has loaned money to Scobie. Then they argue about Louise, and Wilson confesses that he kissed her, but Scobie dismisses that as 'colonial sport, old boy.'

Rapport During a torrential night rain, Scobie notices a light on during the blackout. It is Helen's house, where she is all alone and afraid; Scobie is protective and reassuring.

Official Suspicion Scobie is summoned to a high-level meeting with officials who suspect that he is in Yusef's pay and is protecting him. Yusef and Tarrant, the rival Syrian traders, have each made accusations that the other is involved in diamond smuggling and the government wants to know the truth.

Yusef Scobie visits Yusef in his private home and finds out that the diamonds in question were smuggled by him. 'Nice fool you've made of me,' Scobie says. He tells Yusef that he will continue to pay the interest on the loan but that their relationship is over.

Adultery Scobie brings new stamps for Helen's album and learns that her husband of only two months died in the shipwreck. They share their grief—hers as a widow and his for his dead daughter. She says she wants to stay on in Freetown, not go home, because she feels safe in the house with Scobie. An unwanted knock of the door, draws her to him and they kiss.

Religious doubt Father Rank, the resident Catholic priest, visits Scobie to ask about Louise. Father Rank talks about his doubts that his ministrations to the living are of any use. When people are in trouble, they go to you not to me,' he says. 'But you, Scobie? Who do you go to when you're in trouble?' 'I'm not the kind of man who gets in trouble, father,' Scobie says with a self-satisfied smile.

Lover's quarrel Scobie and Helen are in a full-blown sexual affair, but he is careful to come and go only at night. He can't afford a scandal. His furtive visits drive Helen mad. 'You never look at me. Never even send a letter. Or a photograph.' Scobie says he's protecting her, but Helen screams, 'Not me. You're protecting your wife.' They quarrel bitterly. Helen accuses him of a double-standard with her and his wife, and Scobie confirms that as a Catholic he can't marry her.

Letter Stricken with guilt, Scobie writes a letter to Helen in which he says he loves her. An African servant watches as he slips it under her door and steals it. Another letter is opened in the censor's office; Louise has written to Scobie to say she is coming home.

Party The small British community hold a party, to which Helen is invited. Amid the banter, Wilson provokes Scobie with questions about his Catholic faith. He admits that he regards suicide as the unforgivable sin. Scobie learns that Helen did not receive his letter, and Wilson tells him that Louise has cabled to say she is coming home.

A small packet Yusef asks Scobie to take a small packet on to the boat arriving from South Africa, with Louise on board. When Scobie refuses, Yusef threatens to expose his affair with Helen through Scobie's love letter, which the African servant has procured for him. Scobie relents and puts the packet in the hands of the same ship captain whom he saved from the Censors at the beginning of the story.

Confession As soon as Louise arrives, Wilson tells her about Scobie's affair with Helen, but she doesn't believe him. Scobie and Louise exchange cryptic words about love and will power. When Father Rank arrives to welcome Louise home, Scobie admits that he is in trouble and ask the Father to hear his confession about his adulterous affair and his collusion with smuggling. The Father urges him to promise not to see the woman again, but Scobie is unable to promise. 'God! Condemn me,' he screams. The following morning, Scobie and Louise go to Mass, which is against the church rule that a sinner should not attend Mass before he has been absolved.

Parting Later, Scobie meets Helen on the road, and she tells him that she has accepted the impossibility of them being together. She will go away to spare him the pain of leaving her. 'I want to stop hurting people,' he says.

Death That night, Scobie loads a pistol in preparation for his suicide. After saying goodnight to Louise, and telling her that he loves her, Scobie leaves the house and drives away in his car. Sitting alone in the parked car, pistol in hand, he hears a gang fight by the docks and goes to break it up. We hear two gunshots off camera. Scobie has been killed.

THEMES

Good and evil This is a film that examines the boundaries between good and evil, those categories by which we judge everyone, including ourselves. Scobie, the protagonist, wants to be a good man, a good Catholic, a good husband and a good administrator. But he falls short in all those respects and wants to kill himself at the end. Throughout the movie, he is tormented by the difficult decisions he makes, decisions that are motivated by kindness but that usually cause harm. The first of

those moral paradoxes is the letter confiscated from the captain's ship. Moved by the captain's situation (he could lose his job) and by his relationship with his daughter (Scobie himself has lost a daughter), Scobie breaks the rules. He opens the letter and, seeing that it is innocent, as he suspected, burns it. The second, and more serious, crisis is his acceptance of a loan from Yusef, which is motivated by his desire to make his wife happy by buying her a ticket to South Africa. Scobie is now caught up in the murky world of black-market racketeers, where he is vulnerable to accusations of corruption made by Yusef's rival trader (a man named Tarrant). Scobie's superiors hear of these accusations and summon him to a high-level meeting, where he is forced to lie. A third instance of blurred boundaries between good and evil is the letter that he writes to Helen to assure her that he does really love her. Again, he does this to avoid causing harm to her, but the ill-advised letter falls into Yusef's hand and enables him to blackmail Scobie into taking an active part in the diamond smuggling business. He has attempted to avoid causing harm to others and only managed to make them unhappy, while also morally compromising himself. The only solution, as he sees it, is to commit suicide ('to stop hurting people').

Suicide Suicide is the ultimate moral conundrum for Scobie and his somewhat foggy Catholicism. It is, as he admits to Wilson at the party, 'the unforgivable sin.' We have already witnessed one suicide, of the upcountry officer whom Scobie went to visit much earlier. The local Catholic father in that bush town is appalled at the thought of someone taking his own life. 'I would not like it to be murder,' he sighs. 'But if it is suicide, there is more to consider.' Scobie reads the suicide note written to the young man's father. 'It's a pity I'm not in the army,' it reads, 'because then I might be killed.' In other words, death by firing squad for desertion is preferable to death by one's own hands. The Father calls it the 'unforgivable sin,' which sends Scobie into a rage. 'Forgive them, father, for they know not what they do.' The Father starts to object, but Scobie interrupts him, saying, 'It's written by a loving son to his own father—he's too young. There's nothing unforgivable there.' This scene informs the final action of the story, when Scobie decides to commit the unforgivable sin of suicide, something he does with full knowledge of life and his own failures. As he slowly loads the bullets in the pistol, the camera angle catches a small statue of the virgin Mary with the baby Jesus. His beady eye seems to snag on the statue as he handles the bullets, but only for a second. Scobie has made up his mind 'to stop harming people.' That is the central paradox of the story: Scobie is forced to commit a terrible sin in order to avoid hurting others.

Fathers and daughters A less prominent, but nevertheless revealing, theme is that of fathers and daughters. That relationship occurs on several levels in the story. First, there is the background fact that Scobie and his wife had a daughter, Catherine, who died. We are not told how or when, presumably because what matters is the awful absence and not the specifics. Second, the captain, whose ship Scobie checks for smuggling, has written a potentially dangerous letter to his daughter. The captain pleads with Scobie, saying, 'My daughter...she loves me so much...Do you not have a daughter?' Scobie frowns and says no, he doesn't (which is the truth, but only the partial truth). Third, Scobie treats the shipwreck survivors as if they were his children, reading to a little boy in hospital and taking pity on a young girl with a stamp album. The girl turns out to be a young woman, Helen, with whom Scobie later has a sexual relationship. But there is no doubt that his initial attraction is as father to surrogate daughter. Finally, there is the 'Father,' the resident Catholic priest, who looks after Louise like a parent would a child. In the end, we can speculate that if Catherine had survived, Scobie and Louise would have been happy—and no story would have been written.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Scobie

Character Scobie is a conscientious man, who tries to do his duty to everyone. Yet that very desire to help them proves to be his downfall. He scoffs at conventional religion but holds a deep belief in god and the afterlife. He has a compassionate nature and wants to take responsibility for others, but that leads him into moral quagmires.

Illustrative moments

Empathetic Scobie is a seasoned, perhaps hardened, colonial officer in Freetown, but he is also empathetic. This fatal flaw, his instinct toward compassion and pity, is illustrated in the first dramatic sequence of the film, when he boards a ship to inspect it for smuggling. We watch as he greets the captain kindly but carries out a thorough search. He is a conscientious man, a stickler for discipline and details. He seems almost disappointed to find a possibly dangerous letter addressed to Dresden

Germany and confiscates it. The captain begs him to open it and see that is written to his daughter. 'Can't do that,' Scobie explains. 'It's against regulations. I've got to take it to the censor unopened.' The captain is desperate because he'll lose his job, his family will suffer and his daughter will be distraught. Hearing that, Scobie purses his lips. 'You may hear not more about this, you know,' he says with a knowing smile. 'Files do get lost.' This scene provides the key to understanding Scobie, a good man moved by pity for others.

Sarcastic With his wife, Louise, though, Scobie seems a different person. The couple are deeply unhappy, largely because Louise doesn't fit into role of a colonial officer's wife in a backwaters post. Scobie is kind but often speaks to her with a self-protective sarcasm. We hear those mocking tones in the first scene they share together, in their bungalow. As they talk, Scobie confirms the rumour that Louise has heard about his failure to secure a promotion, which dashes her hopes for an escape. Angry, she accuses him of loving only himself. 'That's right, dear,' he says with feigned honesty, 'I just love myself. And also Mrs Carsons [an elderly figure of ridicule in the small British community]. But not you, of course.' When the conversation grows more bitter, Louise criticises him for not going to church. 'You haven't much faith, do you?' she says. 'No,' he agrees, 'but you, dear, have enough for both of us.' This painful exchange shows us that Scobie is vulnerable, feels inadequate and must protect himself by adopting a sarcastic tone.

Tormented The trouble brewing within Scobie is whipped up into a frenzy as a result of his affair with Helen. One night, he goes to Helen's house and has to listen to her anger at his 'caution' in meeting her, that is, his failure or inability to be open about his love for her. She rails against her compromised position as a secret lover, and he tries calmly to respond: 'Of course, I can't....I'm protecting you...it's too soon to quarrel.' Slowly, however, Helen's fierce hurt penetrates his protective shield. And when she hits on the crucial point—that being a Catholic prevents him from marrying her but not from making loving to her—he explodes. 'I'd do anything in the world to make you happy!' he yells. He embraces her and says, 'Darling, I'd go away, I'd leave here. Anything to make you happy.' But he is trapped, and he knows it. He can't marry Helen and he won't just 'go away' and desert his wife. It is a powerful scene, in which the experienced man and capable officer is reduced to hysteria.

Louise

Character Louise is a woman with literary interests and personal hopes that are stifled in her marriage to a man posted to colonial Africa. She is deeply religious and capable of perceptive judgments of others. She shares her unhappiness with her husband, but does she love him?

Illustrative moments

Unhappy Louise is frustrated by her situation in Freetown, married to an overworked man who is always 'second-best' and left among people who she considers beneath her in sophistication. That unhappiness gnaws away at her, as we see in the first scene in which she appears. Scobie comes home and finds her resting in bed, whether from the intense heat or a vague malaise we don't know. When she learns that he has been passed over for promotion, her despair deepens. 'I don't think I can show my face in that club again,' she declares. She expects him to resign or retire or transfer, but he can't do any of those things. He makes other suggestions—that she take a drive on the beach, that she look forward to the cool rains—but nothing distracts her from the feeling that she is trapped in a hot provincial town. 'Dickie,' she says, 'I can't bear it her any longer.' Hearing her desperation, he makes noises about buying her a ticket to South Africa. Suddenly, her eyes light up and she gasps with pleasure, 'Oh, Dickie, please.' Her joyous anticipation is a measure of the depth of her unhappiness.

Perceptive Louise is an intelligent person. Despite her deep unhappiness, she has to ability to judge others, including some sharp criticisms of her husband. A more telling illustration, though, is her comments about Wilson, the young man who shows a love interest in her. She is lonely, he is attentive and they share an interest in literature. They take walks in the hills and talk about poetry. But Louise is no fool and understands what is taking place, without sentimentality. Her reading of the situation is illustrated in a late scene, after she has come back from South Africa. Wilson has told her that her husband is having an affair. When Scobie walks into the room, Wilson makes an awkward exit. 'He's in love with you, of course,' Scobie says with an air of resignation. Louise gives a rueful smile and says, 'He thinks he is.' That's the end of it. She has hit the nail on the head. Too bad that her husband doesn't share her powers of perception in dealing with potential younger lovers, like Helen.

Reasonable Although she is deeply unhappy with her situation and with her husband, Louise can also be objective and sensible. This reassuring side of her character is displayed in a scene that follows her hysterical outburst about 'going mad' and not being 'able to bear it here any longer [in Freetown].' Her husband has given her some hope, promising to try to find the money in order to purchase a ticket for her to South Africa. The next morning, she is all smiles. 'Don't worry about me,' she says to him with uncharacteristic cheerfulness. 'This madness of mine, the desire to leave, it comes and goes, like jungle fever. It's gone. I'll be all right. I know you can't raise the money.' Here is sensible Louise, explaining away her earlier burst of hysteria as a touch of 'jungle fever,' a temporary distortion of her otherwise reasonable nature.

Yusef

Character Yusef, a Syrian trader in the black market, is a complex and intriguing character, like Scobie, with whom he forms a strange bond. He is sensitive to kindness and yet capable of ruthlessness. He can be charming and, at the same time, manipulative. Smiling, he holds a knife to your throat.

Illustrative moments

Affectionate Yusef is a man deeply affected by kindness, as illustrated in a conversation he has with Scobie. Yusef visits Scobie as the Englishman lies in bed, recovering from his jungle fever. Yusef tends to the sick man like a nurse. Scobie regards him with scepticism, referring to him as the proverbial devil with whom one has to 'sup with a long spoon.' Yusef then explains why he regards Scobie as his friend. 'You had me in court and could easily have had me convicted...but you told your man to tell the truth...I was astonished to hear the truth from the mouth of a white man. I said to myself, Yusef, a Daniel [honest man] has come to the colonial police.' Yusef recalls this event with misty eyes. He was genuinely touched by the colonial officer's fairness and he will not forget it. Later, he adds that while he may be 'bad,' the only good thing he has is his friendship with Scobie.

Ruthless Friendship extends only so far with Yusef, however. It definitely comes second to profit-making, as we see in a later scene, also with Scobie. Yusef has used his contacts to obtain the love letter written by Scobie to Helen, and now he uses it to force Scobie to do something for him. 'Just take this little packet,' he says with a smarmy smile, 'and give it to the captain.' Scobie pushes it aside and says he cannot do that, but Yusef says that it will hurt no one and it's nothing to do with the Germans. It's diamonds, of course. Scobie again refuses, and that is when Yusef's face hardens into a snarl. He explains that he has the compromising letter and will show it to Louise if Scobie doesn't cooperate. Yusef expects friends to help each other, but if they refuse, he will not hesitate to ruin them. Charming Yusef can also be ruthless.

Helen

Character Helen is a young woman widowed by the shipwreck. She is child-like, clutching her stamp album and speaking about her schoolgirl days. She is lonely, and then petulant and jealous after beginning a doomed love affair with Scobie.

Illustrative moments

Bereft After the shipwreck, Helen is sent to Freetown, where she lives alone. One night, Scobie notices her light is on during a blackout and knocks on her door. As they talk, she reveals that she is afraid, all alone and doesn't know what to do. He fixes her broken window and is ready to leave, when she offers him a drink. 'I'd rather you stayed,' she says shyly. 'I'm a bit rattled, you know.' And then her story emerges. She was married two months before the shipwreck in which her husband died. She also says she couldn't sleep in the hospital. 'It was the breathing, all around me,' she says. 'When the lights went out, it was just like the boat [which was hit by a torpedo].' She is in shock, having lost everything.

Possessive After Helen begins a sexual relationship with Scobie, she becomes possessive of him. This is not surprising given her youth and her tenuous hold on life, but it is extreme. Things reach a tipping point when they learn that Louise is on her way back from South Africa. Now, Scobie will have to choose between the two women, but he prevaricates with Helen, saying he loves her but not promising to divorce his wife. Helen becomes hysterical, as revealed in a late scene. 'You never come to see me, except at night,' she cries. 'I can't write a letter to you. I can't even keep a photograph of you.' She has fallen deeply in love with the man who rescued her from the depths of

despair and she clings to him, like a raft after a shipwreck.

Sensible Although young and vulnerable, Helen eventually finds the strength to be sensible with Scobie. She knows that he will not divorce his wife, even though she also believes that he loves her. She appreciates the impossible situation in which their affair has placed him, as shown in a scene toward the end of the film. 'Don't worry about me,' she says, with tears in her eyes. 'I'll be all right.' She explains that she will leave him, but only to spare him the pain of having to leave her. Scobie objects and makes another promise to stick with her, but she says, 'No. All your promises belong to your wife. Nothing you say to me can be a promise.' She has fought through the loneliness that leaving will bring and realised that she must end the relationship. A brave decision, and also a sensible one.



(Scobie and Louise)