

The End of the Affair

Richard Logan

Graham Greene published *The End of the Affair* in 1951. He started to write the book in December of 1948 while staying on the isle of Capri in the Mediterranean. The story was to be "... of a man who was to be driven and overwhelmed by the accumulation of natural coincidences, until he broke and began to accept the incredible--the possibility of a God."¹

The narrator, Maurice Bendrix, is a novelist who tells of his affair with a married woman, Sarah Miles, from 1939 to 1944. Bendrix, writing in 1949, jumps back and forth in time, from the beginning of his affair in 1939, then to 1946, back to 1939, then to 1944, when the affair ended, and finally concludes in 1949. This lack of linear narrative makes the story somewhat confusing, but also makes it a kind of mystery story. Critic Henry Donaghy points out another reason for the jumping around in time:

I believe the effect of this time sequence in which past impinges on present and present on past, in which Maurice's account not only switches back and forth in time, but within a given time period alludes to events at another period, is to emphasize the narrator's point that the affair has no real past,

present, or future....Thus, in a sense, the title is contradictory of the theme. The affair never ends. And the structure's blurring of the distinction between past and present really helps the reader experience the timelessness of this love affair.²

MAURICE BENDRIX

Bendrix starts to tell his story with a chance meeting he has with Henry Miles, the husband of the woman with whom Bendrix had had an affair. Miles thinks of Bendrix as a family friend and confides in him his fears that his wife is having an affair, and wonders whether he should hire a private detective to shadow her. Bendrix, who has not seen Sarah, Miles' wife, for nearly two years, assumes that Sarah is having an affair. Sarah had suddenly dropped out of Bendrix's life two years before without an explanation to him. As Miles seems to be embarrassed about hiring a detective, Bendrix offers to take care of the arrangements himself.

Bendrix is himself consumed with jealousy for losing Sarah to some other lover. He goes to a detective agency and puts the case to the proprietor. In the course of his questions, the head of the agency exposes Bendrix's feelings of anger and jealousy about Sarah:

"Ah, that's my job," Mr. Savage said. "You just give me the mood, the atmosphere. I assume we are discussing Mrs. Bendrix?"

"Not exactly."

"But she passes under that name?"

"No, you are getting this quite wrong. She's the wife of a friend of mine."

“And he’s sent you?”

“No.”

“Perhaps you and the lady are--intimate?”

“No. I’ve only seen her once since 1944.”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand. This is a watching case, you said.”

I hadn’t realized till then that he had angered me so much. “Can’t one love or hate,” I broke out at him, “as long as that? Don’t make any mistake. I’m just another of your jealous clients, I don’t claim to be any different from the rest, but there’s been a time-lag in my case.”³

SARAH

Several days after Bendrix hires the services of the detective agency, Sarah calls Bendrix and asks to meet him the next day at lunch. The meeting is stiff and uncomfortable as Sarah does not mention why she broke off the affair and Bendrix is too proud to bring the subject up. Sarah tells Bendrix that her husband seems rather depressed and asks Bendrix to drop in and see him once in a while. During the lunch, Sarah has coughing fits several times but does not allude to her health in her conversation with Bendrix.

A week after Bendrix’s lunch with Sarah, he receives his first report from the detective agency. Mr. Parkis comes in person to Bendrix’s house and reports that the subject under observation was seen at a restaurant having lunch with a man who was not her husband. After lunch, the couple parted and the woman went into a church and sat in a pew crying. Bendrix listens to the man’s report and

then reveals that he was the man at the restaurant:

I felt sorry for him now that I had had my joke...He watched me with his mouth a little open, as though he had receives a sudden hurt and was now waiting paralysed for the next stab. I said, "I expect that sort of mistake often happens, Mr. Parkis. Mr. Savage ought to have introduced us."

"Oh, no, sir," he said miserably, "it was up to me." Then he bent his head and sat there, looking into his hat that lay on his knees.⁴

Bendrix takes a rather nasty pleasure in Parkis' discomiture and fails to question or wonder why Sarah had gone into a church to cry. Bendrix is so wrapped up in his own jealousy and pain that he fails to realize yet that there may be a story behind Sarah's actions.

THE AFFAIR RESUMES

Bendrix calls up Sarah a week later to meet and they end up going to a cheap hotel for an hour. The following day he drops in at her house and Bendrix and Sarah make love on the living room floor while her husband lays sick in bed upstairs. He continues to receive reports from Mr. Parkis who indicates that Sarah has been acting suspiciously in that she goes to strange neighborhoods in which she would normally have no business in. Bendrix recalls that he often had arguments with Sarah about jealousy:

I was jealous even of the past, of which she spoke to me frankly as it came up--the affairs that meant nothing at all....I refused to

believe that love could take any other form than mine: I measured love by the extent of my jealousy, and by that standard of course she could not love me at all.⁵

Even as Bendrix and Sarah seemed to be back in love, Bendrix could not check his cynical and suspicious nature. Jealous of Sarah's old lovers, Bendrix also worried that Sarah would find new lovers in the future. Bendrix realizes he is wracked with insecurity but cannot help tormenting himself and irritating Sarah.

MILES AND THE DETECTIVE'S REPORTS

Bendrix continues to receive reports that Sarah is going to an address in a run-down area of London. At this point the detective has not found out who Sarah is meeting, but the assumption is that she is having an affair with someone. Bendrix takes out his jealousy and frustration by telling Miles about the reports on his wife, but Miles does not want to hear anything about it:

“I think you ought to read the reports.”

“I've no intention...”

“Then I think I shall have to read you the bit about the surreptitious visits...”

I really thought that he was going to hit me. If he had, I would have struck back with pleasure, struck back at this oaf to whom Sarah had remained in her way so stupidly loyal for so many years....⁶

Miles takes the reports from Bendrix and throws them directly into

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the fire. It becomes obvious that Miles does not want to know what his wife is doing. Miles does not want to take any action, whether it be divorce or talking out the problem with his wife.

THE END OF THE AFFAIR

Bendrix now recounts the end of his first affair with Sarah in 1944. Sarah and he were in his room in the evening when a German V-1 bomb came crashing into his house, knocking him out for a few minutes. After coming to, Bendrix found Sarah in a state of shock. She had thought that he was dead. Bendrix asked her what she had been doing, and she replied that she had been praying for a miracle. Sarah then left and with her husband, moved to the country north of London for the duration of the war. Bendrix tried to contact her, but his letters were never answered. Over the following two years his love for Sarah became mixed with a certain measure of hatred and spite.

RICHARD SMYTHE

Bendrix receives word from the detective that Sarah has been going to the home of a man named Richard Smythe. The detective knows no more than this and Bendrix decides to go to Smythe's house and confront him directly. Smythe turns out to be a kind of preacher of atheism--a man with a mission to tell people that God does not exist, that religion is nothing but lies and superstition. Bendrix thinks Smythe is a strange person for Sarah to be attracted to as a lover, but leaves without actually bringing up his suspicions to Smythe.

SARAH'S DIARY

The detective manages to insinuate himself into a party given by

Miles at his home, and while prowling around finds Sarah's diary. He takes it away with him and turns it over to Bendrix. Bendrix starts reading and discovers that he has completely misinterpreted Sarah's actions and her reasons for acting as she had been doing. She remarks on his jealousy:

He is jealous of the past and the present and the future. His love is like a medieval chastity belt: only when he is there, with me, in me, does he feel safe. If only I could make him feel secure, then we could love peacefully, happily, not savagely, inordinately....⁷

Sarah then goes on to write about the end of the affair from her perspective. When she thought that Bendrix had died in the V-1 attack, she had thrown herself on the floor and prayed to God to let Bendrix live:

Let him be alive, and I will believe. Give him a chance. Let him have his happiness. Do this and I'll believe. But that wasn't enough. It doesn't hurt to believe. So I said, I love him and I'll do anything if you'll make him alive. I said very slowly, I'll give him up for ever, only let him be alive...and I said, People can live without seeing each other, can't they, they love You all their lives without seeing You, and then he came in at the door, and he was alive, and I thought now the agony of being without him starts....⁸

Sarah then goes on to fulfil her promise to God to give up Bendrix. Until this point there was no indication that Sarah had any religious convictions. Critic Maria Couto points out Sarah's motivations:

The intensity of Sarah's love and her passionate struggle to protect Bendrix by depriving herself of the comfort of his love evoke the religious sense. It is irrelevant to ask why Sarah should take her vow so seriously when she is not a specifically religious person. The narrative suggests the nature of Sarah's commitment: another's life hangs by her word.⁹

SARAH AND SMYTHE

Sarah relates in her diary how she had heard Richard Smythe preaching on a street corner about how Christianity was all nonsense. Sarah says that if she can somehow convince herself that there is no God, then she can give up her vow to stay away from Bendrix. Sarah receives his namecard and she then proceeds to visit him from time to time for discussions on religion. Sarah notes that Smythe's arguments are all reasonable but points out that reason and logic play no part in love. If we love other people without reason, why not love God without reason. Logical reasoning and historical proofs and evidence mean nothing to her compared with her emotional feelings. Sarah wonders why Smythe should be so exercised about something he does not believe in. Why does Smythe hate something that does not exist? In the end, Smythe's arguments confirm to Sarah that God does exist.

SARAH AND HER HUSBAND

Sarah talks about her husband in her diary. She is put off by his lack of emotion and unwillingness to give of himself to her. She realizes that he is completely wrapped up in his work, but she cannot muster enough enthusiasm to talk about his work with him. She also realizes

that her husband is satisfied with her being no more than a housekeeper to him. She wonders whether she should leave him, but decides that there is no reason for doing so, if she cannot live with the one man she loves, Bendrix. However, after wrestling with her feelings for several more weeks, she decides to give up her vow to God and leave her husband for Bendrix. She writes a letter for her husband and plans to give it to him when he comes home from work.

When Miles comes home from work, he is visibly upset. Sarah asks what the problem is. Miles had had lunch with Bendrix, and now had to face the issue of his wife's unfaithfulness. Miles does not tell Sarah what he knows but pleads with her to not leave him:

"I love you," he said. "Do you know that?"

"Yes," I said. I could have hated him for for saying it: it was like a claim. If you really loved me, I thought, you'd behave like any other injured husband. You'd get angry and your anger would set me free.

"I can't do without you," he said. Oh yes, you can, I wanted to protest. It will be inconvenient, but you can.¹⁰

Miles pleads and pleads and Sarah finally gives her promise that she will stay with her husband. This insuperable obstacle to her love for Bendrix convinces her that she cannot escape her vow to God.

BENDRIX RESPONDS TO THE DIARY

Bendrix reads the foregoing passages in Sarah's diary with great emotional pain. Not only has he cynically and hatefully misinterpreted

all of Sarah's actions but he has even caused some of the problems through his own spiteful actions. He calls Sarah at home and insists on meeting her. Sarah says she is ill with a cold and cannot meet him. Bendrix tells her he will come to her house there and then, but Sarah replies that she will come outside to meet him. Bendrix wants to persuade Sarah to leave her husband and go away with him.

Bendrix and Sarah meet in a cold drafty church. Bendrix tells Sarah how he came into possession of her diary and admits that he had been an insecure and untrusting lover to Sarah. Sarah's responses are interrupted by prolonged attacks of coughing. Bendrix counsels her to go home, get over her cold, and he will come and pick her up at the end of the week. Sarah falls asleep on his shoulder from exhaustion and sleeps for awhile. When she awakes coughing, Bendrix tells her to go home. She insists on staying at the church a while longer, and Bendrix leaves her, having extracted a promise from her that she will go home soon.

SARAH'S DEATH

Bendrix calls Sarah's house and is informed by Miles that Sarah is dead. Bendrix hurries over to the house to find out what happened. Sarah's cold had gotten worse for lack of attention and the evening she went out to meet Bendrix sapped her strength so much that she became feverish. She refused to see a doctor, feeling that she would just leave her fate to God. Miles does not know that Bendrix bears a large responsibility for her death, but Bendrix must bear the shame and guilt of contributing to her death. Bendrix blames Sarah's belief in God for her death. Bendrix therefore comes indirectly toward believing in God,

if only to hate him for taking Sarah away from him.

SARAH'S LETTER

Bendrix comes back to his house to find a letter in the mail that Sarah had written just before she died. In the letter she explains how she came to believe in God:

I believe there's a God--I believe the whole bag of tricks, there's nothing I don't believe, they could subdivide the Trinity into a dozen parts and I'd believe. They could dig up records that proved Christ had been invented by Pilate to get himself promoted and I'd believe just the same. I've caught belief like a disease. I've fallen into belief like I fell in love.¹¹

BENDRIX ACKNOWLEDGES GOD

Bendrix accepts Miles invitation to move in with him. They spend an inordinate amount of their time together talking and thinking about Sarah. Somehow they both feel Sarah's presence in the house with them. Bendrix continues to wrestle with belief as the book ends:

I sat on my bed and said to God: You've taken her, but You haven't got me yet. I know Your cunning. It's You who take us up to a high place and offer us the whole universe. You're a devil, God, tempting us to leap. But I don't want Your peace and I don't want Your love. I wanted something very simple and very easy: I wanted Sarah for a lifetime and You took her away. With Your great schemes You ruin our happiness like a harvester ruins a mouse's nest: I hate You, God, I hate You as though You existed.¹²

CRITICAL REACTION TO THE NOVEL

Greene mentions in *Ways of Escape* that he received some words of praise from William Faulkner and that the book was very popular with the public. He also mentions that the current pope, Pius XII had read the book and suggested to an aide that Greene was a man who needed help!¹³ Indian critic Gangeshwar Rai points out the influence of existentialism on Greene in the novel:

Sarah and Bendrix fulfil the definitions of faith given by the Christian existentialists. They get over doubts, temptations, fears, misery and make movement of faith in fear and trembling. They abandon the lower level of existence and rise to the higher one through a leap, though Bendrix informs ironically he “won’t leap.” His word “leap” is actually [the] French word *Saute* used by the French existentialists to describe the means of rising from one plane of existence to another, the higher one.¹⁴

THE FILM

The End of the Affair was released as a film in 1955. Directed by Edward Dmytryk and starring Deborah Kerr as Sarah and Van Johnson as Bendrix. Dmytryk prepared the film in flashback, following the jumps back and forth in time as they appeared in the novel. However the head of Columbia, which distributed the film, thought it would be too complicated for the audience to follow, so the film was re-edited to run in chronological order. The director and Greene, himself, felt the re-edited picture was not as good as it had been in its first incarnation.¹⁵

Compared to the other films of his novels, *The End of The Affair* was reasonably satisfactory. Greene felt the actor Van Johnson was not equal to the role, a judgement concurred in by film critics of the day. Greene gave his opinion of the film at a lecture at the British National Film Theatre in 1984:

Deborah Kerr gave an extremely good performance in that. The scenes in the blitz were not badly done. It was spoiled by the casting of a young actor named Van Johnson to play the middle-aged writer. I don't know how Deborah Kerr fancied her scenes with him. I went one day to the shooting and they were doing an embrace standing up, they were embracing each other. The camera was first of all doing it from Deborah Kerr's point-of-view, and then Van Johnson's on Deborah Kerr. When the camera was on Deborah Kerr, Van Johnson put some chewing gum in his mouth while embracing her and chewed. When the camera turned the other way he took the chewing gum out and parked it. It didn't seem to me that it would have inspired very good acting from Deborah Kerr.¹⁶

The film was only moderately successful with the public. Showing cinematically the inner thoughts and emotions of people wrestling with religious and philosophical issues has never been an easy job, but Greene's dialog and presentation went a long way towards giving the film what success it did achieve.

NOTES

- 1 Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 107.
- 2 Henry J. Donaghy, *Graham Greene: An Introduction to His Writings* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B. V., 1986), p. 64.
- 3 Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 21-22.
- 4 Ibid., p. 40.
- 5 Ibid., p. 54.
- 6 Ibid., p. 64.
- 7 Ibid., p. 91.
- 8 Ibid., p. 95.
- 9 Maria Couto, *Graham Greene: On the Frontier* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), p. 83.
- 10 *The End of the Affair*, p. 118.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 146-47.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 190-91.
- 13 *Ways of Escape*, pp. 108-109.
- 14 Gangeshwar Rai, *Graham Greene: An Existential Approach* (New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1983), p. 56.
- 15 Quentin Falk, *Travels in Greenland* (London: Quartet Books, 1990), p. 111.
- 16 Guardian Lecture at the National Film Theatre (3 September 1984) in *The Graham Greene Film Reader: Mornings in the Dark*, ed. David Parkinson (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1993) p. 555.