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Journal of
**Humanities &
Social Sciences**

JHSS XXI, No. 3, 2013 (December)

Bendrix, not Sarah: Transfiguration vs. Apotheosis

Shazia Ghulam Mohammad^a, Atteq ur Rahman^b

^a College of Home Economics, University of Peshawar, Pakistan.

^b Islamia College University, Peshawar, Pakistan

Abstract

Though *The End of the Affair* brings Sarah's name to the forefront, it is Bendrix's character that makes her more fascinating for the readers. Sarah's sainthood evolves out of Bendrix's insatiable love for her. For Sarah's journey towards divinity, Bendrix proves the first and last ladder. His radiating and jealous love for Sarah remains alive even after her death. It is he who suffers in Sarah's love before and after her death. He seems to be paying the cost of Sarah's divinity. As his object of love is not around so he has to express his love for Sarah in hate and jealousy against God. There is no hypocrisy in Bendrix since he confesses openly what he feels and why he feels so. This paper presents a deconstruction of Bendrix's character in order to validate our point that Sarah wins divinity at the cost of Bendrix's suffering. His love, jealousy and hatred foreground the sainthood of Sarah.

Keywords: *The End of the Affair*; Sarah; Bendrix; deconstruction; Graham Greene

Introduction

The End of the Affair is regarded at once a "masterpiece" (Kermode, 186) and an "artistic failure" (Wyndham, 22). It is also "the most complex of Greene's major novels" (Land, 72), "structurally . . . most complex" (Miller, 83). But this is not the end of the affair. Critics also have divergent opinions regarding who to consider the protagonist of the novel: Sarah or Bendrix? Some consider Bendrix as the central character (for example, Kermode) while others give importance to Sarah (for

example, Huben). These contradictory reactions and evaluations show that the work in question is indeed intriguing. Perhaps, the question that perplexes the reader's mind about *The End of the Affair* is whether it is a tale of love or hatred! "I hate Sarah because she was a whore, I hate Henry because she stuck to him, and I hate you and your imaginary God because he took her away from all of us" (181).

We hold that Bendrix's love, jealousy and hatred overshadow Sarah's sainthood. By deconstructing the text through close textual analysis, we aim to show how Bendrix's feelings trigger a movement which culminates in Sarah's ultimate resignation and divinity or apotheosis which leads to Bendrix's transfiguration.

Apotheosis vs. Transfiguration

Sarah's journey to sainthood has made her one of the most celebrated characters of this novel, yet it is Bendrix's worldly love that elevates Sarah to the status of a divine and spiritual being. He is the cause behind the sainthood of Sarah. Whether it is Parkis's son or Richard, Bendrix's love is in the foreground in Sarah's road to divinity. He is soaked and drenched in Sarah's love. It is his love for Sarah that makes Sarah respond to it so intensely. She tries to forget his love but fails to do so even by being away from him: "for two years we haven't seen each other or written but it doesn't work" (117). The more she loves Bendrix, the nearer she gets to divinity and spirituality. Thus, divinity in Sarah springs from the mundane, corrupt and worldly love of Bendrix. The first sign of her spirituality manifests itself in giving new life to Bendrix. It is Bendrix's enigmatic love that makes her bow before God for a divine miracle. She owes her interaction with Parkis's son to Bendrix's jealous love. It is to win back Bendrix's love that she visits Richard Smythe. These two prove to be the two other testimonies of her sainthood later on. It seems quite strange that despite Bendrix strong and perpetual presence, Sarah's character fascinates more eyes. Nonetheless, her divinity, however, is indebted to Bendrix's worldly love "Could I have touched You if I hadn't touched [Bendrix] first" (123).

The End of the Affair is the last of Green's four Catholic novels. It has fascinated a huge readership, especially critics who hold diverse opinion regarding the two major characters Bendrix and Sarah. To Bosco, the whole credit goes to Greene who has successfully created two such enriching characters. This is why, he believes, critics have failed to ascertain as whose story it is — Bendrix's or Sarah's. He, however, quotes several critics who consider Bendrix to be the central figure of the novel¹. Some of the critics hold a different opinion. Huben labels this work as women's novel in Christian bookstores implying Sarah's importance in the novel². Gordon, on the other hand, undermines both the characters saying neither of them fighting evil emerges in the novel.

If Sarah is a personification of divine and spiritual love and Henry Miles an emblem of silent and passive love, then Mr Bendrix is the one who bridges the gulf between the two. He is a human being with all human susceptibilities. His hate, jealousy and venomous feelings for Sarah, Henry and father Crompton are purely human. Henry's passive and impotent love for Sarah is a rare commodity. Similarly, Sarah's spiritual love again is commonly uncommon in today's world. But Bendrix's love is real, genuine and it appears quite natural to the readers of today. It is the very normal and natural human love that every human being is prone to. Such a love remains incomplete without an element of hate and jealousy. Bendrix cannot be blamed for his hatred, anger and jealousy as they emerge from his true and real worldly love for Sarah. He believes in complete love, a type of love where no one else can have access to Sarah, no one to love her in any way but only he "There are times when a lover longs to be also a father and a brother; he is jealous of the years he hasn't shared" (172). His radiating and jealous love for Sarah remains alive even after her death. It is he who suffers in Sarah's love before and after her death. He seems to be paying the cost of Sarah's divinity. As his object of love is not around so he has to express his love for Sarah in hate and jealousy against God. There is no hypocrisy in Bendrix since he confesses openly what he feels and why he feels so.

As already mentioned at the outset of the discussion, Bendrix's confession — "this is a record of hate far more than of love" (7) — takes the reader to the beginning of an affair that has had a tragic and suggestive end. The novel seems to be shrouded in the hatred of Bendrix, who uses the word "Hate" eighty seven times in the novel. Despite being shrouded in hatred, Bendrix admires Sarah's sincerity to her husband: "She had an enormous loyalty to Henry (I could not deny that)" (10). Similarly, he praises Henry and does not feel hesitant to point out "[Henry] never took other people's hospitality easily" (13) though it hardly mitigates his envy and bitterness. Bendrix lives in constant dread of losing Sarah. Despite her forgiving nature, he truly speaks out the way he troubles Sarah: "She had forgotten the quarrel, and I found in her forgetfulness a new cause" (11). He confesses these quarrels to be the result of feeling of insecurity of losing Sarah to someone, of moving to the end of their relationship. It is this sense of insecurity that he sincerely confesses "For every lie I would magnify into a betrayal, and even in the most open statement I would read a hidden meaning. Because I couldn't bear the thought of her so much as touching another man, I feared it all the time"(59). It is this insecurity that incites him to bring this relation to an end well before its logical end by plaguing her with his venomous jealousy. He tries to forget her "If I can take her out of my system" (56). He picks a young girl but fails to feel any desire for her "My passion for Sarah had killed simple lust for ever" (58). The extreme hatred that he nurtures for Sarah comes out of his ignorance about Sarah's love for him which he comes to know after reading her diary. How can the readers

blame Bendrix when he does not know the real cause of Sarah's refusal to meet him and her risky and hurried departure soon after the first 'miracle'?

Bendrix presents a juxtaposition of love/happiness with those of hate/jealousy in his person. He seems more like a paradox in himself. His intense hatred seems to nullify his deep love. His jealousy seems to kill his happiness. He laughs with tears in his eyes. Thus, his positive feelings have their death incorporated in themselves. Sarah's love is the cause of his happiness, while her being wife to Henry is the cause of his hatred for her. Similarly, Sarah's body is the cause of his happiness but her relation with other men is the cause of his hatred. Anyone, anything that takes away Sarah from Bendrix becomes a cause of jealousy and hatred for him. He hates Henry as he is an obstacle in their love. He hates Sarah and her divinity which keeps her away from him since June 1944. Catholicism personified by father Crompton becomes an object of his hatred and jealousy after Sarah's death. Bendrix gives the impression of being genuinely in pain, anger and in an intense feeling of jealousy as the story proceeds. This makes him a personification of jealousy and hatred itself. It adds to his intense and bitter expression which grips the reader as Bendrix starts speaking out his venom. He knows the cause: "In misery we seem aware of our own existence" (47). This is fairly evident as Bendrix's words become harsh, bitter, venomous, and penetrating when he expresses his hatred, jealousy and unhappiness. His relation with Sarah is based on an intense love — which none of them denies — much deeper than the love between a husband and wife. His love for Sarah stands at the very foundation of his multifaceted and multidimensional hatred, anger and jealousy. His visit to Cedar road to see Richard Smythe accompanies all his jealousy but, deep in his heart, he wants to dispel his suspicions against Sarah but it turns out to be the other way round. In these circumstances it seems unjustified to blame Bendrix for the way he behaves. In most of the cases, circumstances mould his positive intensions into jealousy and hatred.

Bendrix comes to know about the reality of Sarah's reticent love against his vocal one the moment he finishes reading Sarah's diary. The feeling of being loved so intensely by Sarah further multiplies his love for Sarah: "I had never known her before and I had never loved her so much. The more we know the more we love, I thought" (127). The diary dispels all his mistrust about Sarah. In fact, his trust for Sarah has been renewed with a new vigour. He calls Sarah and despite her adamant reluctance to meet him, he rushes to see her. He is hopeful to get started with their previous way of life. He is so much overwhelmed by winning Sarah back that he seems quite sure to go back to his previous happiness. After "Me too" (129) from Sarah, he feels certain that he has won her back from God: "hadn't I in the end proved stronger?"(130). He is at peace to have won Sarah from Henry as well: 'I couldn't speak to Henry now, for I was the victor" (134).

During their long period of separation, from June 1944 to January 1946, Bendrix has always been looking for an opportunity to see and meet Sarah. When at last he meets Sarah, he falls into the same abyss: “the old disturbance had returned” (19). Both his conscious and unconscious are occupied with Sarah. He dreams of Sarah though he says: “If a woman is in one’s thoughts all the day, one should not have to dream of her at night” (19). With all his intense love for Sarah, he hates Sarah. Despite not being Sarah’s husband, Bendrix, in his unconscious, decides to visit Mr Savage’s office: “until one morning I woke up and knew, as though I had planned it overnight, that day I was going to visit Mr Savage”(20). Again his visit to Smythes also seems more like that of a husband’s visit to confirm the presence of a secret lover. It seems, in his unconscious, he considers Sarah his wife. Mr Savage, in the beginning also mistakes him to be Sarah’s husband. He seems to be carrying Henry’s share of jealousy as well.

It is extremely difficult for a person to be close and distant simultaneously. The passion of love consumes as much as hatred. The co-existence of both passions makes Bendrix a complex character. Bendrix hates his hatred for Sarah: “I looked at hate like an ugly and foolish man whom one did not want to know” (29). But disappointment in intense love normally results in hatred for the person one loves. This is what happens to Bendrix in his love for Sarah. His intense love for Sarah is blended with a deep sense of mistrust for her. He fails to get what he desires for. As a consequence, he is left with extreme disappointment leading to his hatred and mistrust for Sarah. He meets Mr Savage both out of his love and hatred for Sarah, as he mentions: “Hatred seems to operate the same glands as love: it even produces the same actions” (27). It seems very true when Sarah asks him for a lunch, he forgets of his hatred for a while and starts thinking of loving Sarah once again. He feels extremely disappointed when he comes to know that Sarah wants to talk about Henry, whereas he expects Sarah to be interested in reviving their broken relationship. He seems more like a paradox in himself: he loves as well hates Sarah; he pains himself as a masochist and troubles Sarah as a sadist: “I knew that the only way to hurt Sarah is to hurt myself” (57). This is how he grows up as a complex character during his one and half year of separation from Sarah. He expects the same Sarah who loved him ardently till June 1944. But Sarah is no more the same Sarah. Unlike past, she now calls him “Maurice” (33) which seems to be an insult to Bendrix and infuriates him. He hates Sarah for her prayers to bring him back to life as the life given is to be lived without Sarah: “You sacrificed both of us once you bring me back to life.”(182). It is his love for Sarah that even makes him hate himself. He hates himself for his failure to win her at the end. He is so possessive about Sarah that he does not want anyone to talk about her. He can afford only the harmless Henry and no one else to share memories of Sarah: “To save her for ourselves we had to destroy all her features” (190).

Sarah's death renews the intense strain of pain, hatred and jealousy. He knows it is not Henry that has taken Sarah away but this time God seems to be his real enemy "No, I don't hate Henry. I hate You if You exist" (136). He sees God to be the one who has taken away Sarah from his life. He believes God to be the cause of Sarah's death. Her death arouses the same jealousy against God as is caused by her meeting Richard and Dunston. He seems to fight God as he is sure now that Sarah will not come back. He needs something to keep Sarah alive in his memories and it is only his jealousy that can keep Sarah alive in his mind. He knows quite well that the death of Sarah has triggered his own episodic death. But he is all prepared to take it. He wants to live with this soothing pain because he finds the combination of love and hatred lethal.

Bendrix discovers Sarah's real love for him and her divine promise in her diaries, he seems convinced that God has won Sarah away leaving him in the lurch: "You didn't own her all those years: I owned her. You won at the end" (165). The harsh and strong language he uses for God manifests his deep love for Sarah; and not his hate for God. His anger against God is irresistible. He seems to be revengeful at any level. He wants to challenge Him and displease Him for the irreparable loss he suffers. The only feeling that Bendrix wants to own and possess is his love for Sarah "I have no love except for you, you" (190).

Love needs a medium to express itself; it can be hate: "love had not the same conviction of being heard as hate had" (161). Sarah, too, in her frustration expresses her hatred for God as she mentions in her diaries "I begin to believe in you, and if I believe in you I shall hate you" (100). How would one justify a saint's hate for God? Bendrix professes no religion so his hatred for God seems well understood while Sarah, who professes a different love, confesses in her diaries that she feels almost the same jealousy when after six weeks of her promise she calls Bendrix and hears a female voice. She feels as if he has started a new affair with someone else "I had wanted Maurice to be happy, but had I wanted him to find happiness quite so quickly?"(100). If a believer of spiritual love can fall a victim to the feeling of jealousy for a while, then Bendrix shall not be blamed for being susceptible to jealousy and hatred since he confesses to know only worldly and ordinary love.

Bendrix does not want to give a Christian burial to Sarah, the way God would like it to be done. He is quite vocal in expressing his hatred for God. Richard Smythe's pleadings to arrange a Christian burial for Sarah multiplies Bendrix's disgust for God. He is in pain, even his laughter springs out of his pain "The tears ran down my cheek as I laughed" (143). After reading the last letter written by Sarah, he recognizes father Crompton as the one who puts an end to Sarah's hope of marrying him. He strongly opposes a catholic burial for Sarah as suggested by father since Bendrix believes to know Sarah better than anyone else. He feels and

believes that he can only love Sarah and none else “I am incapable of love. Except of you, except of you” (159). It is his very much living love for the dead Sarah that repels him to have a date with Sylvia; and compels him to implore the dead Sarah to play her part in taking him away from the proximity of Sylvia.

Bendrix hates Henry with a soft heart. He gets irritated and feels jealous of Henry who seems to be the main obstacle due to which Sarah cannot meet Bendrix: “Henry. Henry. Henry — that name tolled through our relationship, damping every mood of happiness or fun or exhilaration” (73). Isn’t it his love for Sarah— the ordinary human love, the only love that he knows — that makes him jealous of Henry? His jealousy becomes a scale to measure his love. His jealousy like his love is in a state of flux. Hatred and jealousy hem him as he sees Henry and Sarah’s photograph in Tatler. He hands over Parkis reports about Sarah which burns Henry into anger. It seems he does it deliberately out of his jealousy springing out of his intense love for Sarah. He pains Henry but feels sorrow for him as well “It seemed so strange to me to feel sorry for my enemy” (66). In fact, Bendrix seems to be helping himself out to get out of the affair by telling Henry the truth about Sarah. He seems to consider that bringing Henry in the picture would help him to end his affair with Sarah.

Bendrix’s genuine helplessness to control the flux in his emotions and feelings takes him beyond any blame and dislike. He is not happy rather feels guilty with the way he implants Parkis as a spy on Sarah. He defends Sarah despite his hatred for her (that is paradoxically full of love): “I could feel sorry for her, hemmed in as she was. She had committed nothing but love” (62). He is a human being and he believes his love to be a human love. He is not convinced to believe that there can be some other type of love (divine love) but human love “That’s not our kind of love” (69). Even Sarah’s strong arguments fail to convince him about loving someone in his/her absence. He so strongly loves Sarah that he would love to be killed during their very act of physical love “Death never mattered at those times — in the early days I even used to pray for it” (70).

After the V1’s devastating raid, the ‘end of the affair starts.’ It is the beginning of Sarah’s transformation as she puts life into Bendrix’s dead body of which the latter is oblivious. Sarah’s abrupt departure precedes her continuous absence for which she has her solid reasons but Bendrix has no idea about what has happened to Sarah. He thinks Sarah to be in some one’s else bed. Only in three weeks of separation, he decides to commit suicide as he cannot live in the hell-like tormenting life but does not execute his words into action as he feels it is what Sarah desires for “Then the date came and the date went on and on and I didn’t kill myself. It wasn’t cowardice: it was a memory that stopped me — the memory of the look of disappointment on Sarah’s face when I came into the room after V1 had fallen” (75).

Conclusion

A chain of events that befall Bendrix complicates his situation and makes it difficult for the reader to decide whether he can be classified as an insignificant character as compared to Sarah or not! “Yes” may be a conventional answer. But the intensity of his love for Sarah; his sensitivity as a human being ; his honesty in expressing his feelings; his compassionate attitude towards Henry and later on towards Sarah’s mother; and above all, his helplessness to cope with the fluid circumstances that he comes across are reasons sufficient to say an unconventional “No”.

Notes

¹ For details see, S.J.Mark Bosco *Graham Green's Catholic Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004..pp 170,he quotes Frank Kermode, David Pryce Jones, Herbert Haber, and John Atkins supporting Bendrix as the central character of the novel.

² For details see, Huben, Ellyn Von. *The World on Fire*. Book Club. July 2012. Accessed on 24 December 2012. <http://www.wordonfire.org/WoF-Blog/July-2012/Book-Club-Graham-Greene-The-End-of-the-Affair.aspx>.

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