



## The perspectives of innocence and experience in Graham Greene's short story "The Basement Room"

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### Abstract

Graham Greene's fiction, be it the novels or the short stories, mainly leaves the readers with an intrigue either in the form of a spy thriller or in the form of a psychological entangle. The short story "The Basement Room" is of the latter form. This article tries to explore the intricacies of psychology and how innocence and experience play major roles in the interpretations of the world leading to sometimes favourable and sometimes unfavourable circumstances as is evidenced in the short story under discussion.

**Keywords:** Graham Greene, Short Story, Innocence, Experience, Psychological Perspectives

### Introduction

Graham Greene was a major English language author "whose work ranged from stories that mixed theology and melodrama to satirical comedies and tales of espionage and intrigue" (Barnes). He was born in 1904 at Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, England, and died in 1991. He had a troubled childhood and the only love that he inculcated in himself was the love of reading. He converted to Roman Catholicism in 1926 and got married in 1927. Some of his popular works are the novels, *The Heart of the Matter*, *The Power and the Glory*, *Brighton Rock*, *The End of the Affair*, *Our Man in Havana* and short stories like "Destructors", "End of the Party", "Across the Bridge", and "The Basement Room". Bart Barnes in his obituary published in *The Washington Post* writes about Graham Greene: "A master at building and maintaining suspense, Greene had a wide appeal among a large general readership and an enthusiastic following in the academic and literary community." Greene's works still endure.

"The Basement Room" is a short story which was included in the book *Twenty One Stories*, a collection of stories published in 1954 by Graham Greene. This narrative centers around the life of Philip, a young boy of seven, whose encounters at this tender age leave lasting impressions of fear and cruelty, haunting him throughout his lifetime. The story is developed through a psycho-analytical perspective. Philip, even as he nears death sixty years later, he remains tormented by the trauma, evidenced by his bewildering inquiry to his secretary, "Who is she?" The tale traces Philip's journey from hopeful exploration of life to eventual despair, encapsulating the shift from the optimistic perspective of "This is life"—marked by hope, freedom, excitement, and adventure—to the disillusionment of "That was life," characterized by disappointment and despair.

In the story Philip's parents had gone for a fortnight's holiday. He was left alone in the great Belgravia house with the butler Mr. Baines and his wife Mrs. Baines. Eager to explore the Belgravia house, Philip forms a fondness for Mr. Baines, the butler, who regales him with tales of African adventures. Philip found solace in Mr. Baines's affectionate demeanor, cherishing the stories of adventure and the treats, like Dundee cakes, shared even outside of meal times.

Whereas, he dreaded Mrs. Baines, perceiving her as a daunting figure due to her authoritative and stern nature. Mrs. Baines's restrictive and intrusive behavior clashed with Philip's preferences, evoking feelings of discomfort and resentment. Her presence felt oppressive, akin to a recurring nightmare, particularly in her interactions with Mr. Baines, further fueling Philip's aversion towards her.

Initially uneasy, Philip soon revels in his newfound freedom, relishing the absence of parental oversight and embracing a newfound sense of independence. This liberation sparks a curiosity within him, igniting a thirst for understanding the essence of life and a longing for connection beyond his familial sphere. As his parents depart, Philip seeks out Mr. Baines in the basement, crossing the symbolic threshold of the "green baize door" that divides masters from servants. Witnessing Mr. Baines's submissive demeanor around Mrs. Baines deepens Philip's apprehension about the complexities of adulthood and the presence of malevolence in the world. When Philip proposes a walk with Mr. Baines, Mrs. Baines intervenes, prompting Philip to flee the mansion, venturing into the outside world alone.

Philip ventures alone along the road and encounters a confectionery shop where he spots Baines accompanied by an unfamiliar girl. Recalling Baines's mention of his niece in the past, Philip wonders if the girl might be her. Driven by curiosity, Philip yearns to unravel the mystery surrounding the girl's identity. Observing Mr. Baines's contrasting behavior in a tea shop, Philip is confronted with the complexities of human nature. Baines gives him a responsibility of keeping secret of this meeting. Philip reluctantly agrees to keep Baines's secret, but eventually, he unintentionally divulges it to Mrs. Baines. She, in turn, compels him and promises him a Mecanno set if he did not reveal anything to Baines. However, this tainted reward leaves Philip unable to enjoy it again. These perplexing events, beyond Philip's comprehension, linger in his memory, haunting him throughout his life. This period of trauma during his youth molds the adult he eventually becomes. The question "who is she?" remains unresolved throughout his life, haunting him with its unanswered significance.

Mr. Baines informs Philip that Mrs. Baines is away due to her mother's ill health and she won't return until the following day. Observing Mr. Baines's apparent cheerfulness, Philip feels a sense of unease, finding it inappropriate for an adult like Baines to be merry in such circumstances. Conflicted by a mixture of fear and fascination towards life, Philip finds himself thrust into the complexities of the adult world and its hidden realities before he can fully comprehend them, leaving him frustrated. Meanwhile, Mr. Baines, eager to enjoy the day without Mrs. Baines's presence, wishes to spend time with Emmy, the girl he met in the confectionery shop, without knowing the Mrs. Baines was hiding in the house to catch them. Philip feels apprehensive for both himself and Mr. Baines, sensing the looming shadows of uncertainty and potential danger. In the basement room Philip was witness to Mrs. Baines discovering the affair between her husband and Emmy which led to a scuffle between Mr. and Mrs. Baines that led to Mrs. Baines falling down and eventually dying. Philip is terrified and escapes from the house and finds himself lost in the city. The police bring him back but he was afraid to enter the house fearing the body of Mrs. Baines lying in the hall. This fear never leaves him and the whole incident changed his life.

In essence, "The Basement Room" delves into the psychology of a naive child and explores how certain events reshape the child's entire personality. Greene utilizes symbolism throughout the narrative, such as the green baize door, representing a boundary between the conscious and subconscious realms. The once-beloved Meccano set becomes a symbol of Philip's halted creative expression. What seemed enticing at first transformed into a nightmarish reality. It depicts a journey that initially brimmed with anticipation but ultimately led to the child's disillusionment with the world he had once found intriguing. Beyond the mansion lies the city, symbolizing a realm beyond the self where both good and evil coexist, exemplified by Philip's moral dilemma regarding keeping secrets. However, this dichotomy becomes more complex within the confines of Philip's home. Overall, the story illustrates how childhood trauma can hinder one's ability to form meaningful connections later in life. The narrator delicately unravels the complexities of the mind and reflects on Philip's loss of innocence, acknowledging the brutality of life's lessons, suggesting that it's understandable if Philip chooses to avoid facing them again for sixty years. Philip's journey highlights the challenge of navigating life's moral complexities and compromises, emphasizing the theme of betrayal that leaves him shattered.

The question is what does Philip see that is not seen and understood by an adult. It is a matter of perspectives – that of a child and an adult – one of innocence and the other of experience. The same thing from the point of view of an innocent child appears different from what is seen by experienced eyes of the adult. It is nothing new to show a story line from the point of view of a child either as a narrator or otherwise. There are instances of Tom and Maggie as children in George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss*, the perspective of young Paul Morel in D. H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers*, the perspective of the twins Rahel and Estha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and so on. More importantly there are the perspectives of children in works like Andre Gide's *Strait is the Gate* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. In Gide's *Strait is*

*the Gate* it is young Alyssa's interpretation of a sermon in her innocence that leads to her conflicted love for Jerome and both their lives are wasted. The 13-year old Briony Tallis in *Atonement* has an innocence that devastates the lives of Cecilia and Robbie because of her interpretation of things that she sees without knowledge of the adult world. Graham Greene's short story "The Basement Room" is of that order written after the composition of Gide's *Strait is the Gate* and before the composition of McEwan's *Atonement*. But the conflict between the perspectives of innocence and experience that it presents with its psychological dimensions gives a perennial trajectory of transformation from childhood to adulthood and how if the two domains intersect undesirably then it can lead to confusion and trauma. Greene's story is not just a story of growing up but also of the indelible scars of growing up and it invokes the archetypal dimension of psychology.

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