The Destructors Study Guide

The Destructors by Graham Greene

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Introduction

Graham Greene's "The Destructors" was first published in two parts in *Picture Post* on July 24 and 31, 1954. Later that year, the story appeared in a collection entitled *Twenty-One Stories.* Because Greene arranged the stories in reverse chronological order, "The Destructors" was the first story in the collection.

"The Destructors" disturbed its readers, yet it remains one of Greene's most anthologized short stories. Despite its setting in post-World War II England, the story is universal in its reflection of human nature. The story contains many of Greene's hallmarks, most importantly that of placing people who have the capacity for good and evil in situations where they must make a choice between the two. The boys in "The Destructors" are still young enough to be innocent, yet they make cruel and selfish choices. This story is also a link to Greene's earliest fiction in which he often portrayed young people being initiated into the adult world. Commenting on this story and three others ("A Chance for Mr. Lever," "Under the Garden," and "Cheap in August"), Greene declared that he was completely satisfied and had never written anything better.

Author Biography

Graham Greene was born in Hertfordshire, England, on October 2, 1904, to Marion (first cousin of the writer Robert Louis Stevenson) and Charles Henry Greene, a school headmaster. An introverted and sensitive child, his early years were difficult because of his strict father and boarding school bullies. At sixteen, he suffered a psychological breakdown and went to London for treatment by a student of Sigmund Freud.

While in London, Greene became an avid reader and writer. He met Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, who became lifelong literary mentors to him. His other influences were Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Ford Madox Ford. After graduating from high school in 1922, Greene attended Oxford University's Balliol College where he received a degree in history in 1925. While at college, Greene became interested in politics, especially Marxist socialism (but not communism). This sometimes created tension in Greene's friendship with the conservative writer Evelyn Waugh, although the two remained steady friends for many years.

In 1926, Greene converted to Catholicism for his fiancée, Vivien Dayrell Browning, whom he married the following year. The couple eventually had two children. Greene is generally considered a Catholic writer despite his insistence that the conversion was not his greatest literary influence.

During World War II, Greene did intelligence work for the British government in West Africa. His experiences at home and abroad inspired works like "The Destructors" and *The Heart of the Matter.* In addition to his novels of intrigue, peopled with spies, criminals, and other colorful characters, Greene wrote short stories, essays, screenplays, autobiographies, and criticism. He is considered one of the most important English writers of the twentieth century, and his honors include consideration for a Nobel Prize. His works are popular with critics and readers; they have been translated into twenty-seven languages and have sold over twenty million copies.

Greene died of a blood disease in Vevey, Switzerland, on April 3, 1991.

Plot Summary

"The Destructors" is about a group of teenage boys who call themselves the Wormsley Common gang, after the area where they live. They meet every day in a parking lot near a part of town that was bombed during World War II. Almost everything in this area is destroyed although one house stands with minimal damage. This house is owned by Mr. Thomas (whom the boys call Old Misery), an old man who lives alone.

One day, the gang's leader, Blackie, suggests that they spend the day sneaking free bus rides. T. (whose full name is Trevor) has another idea. He has been inside Mr. Thomas's house and suggests that the boys take advantage of the old man's upcoming two-day absence to demolish the house from the inside. T. becomes the gang's new leader.

When the boys meet at the appointed time the next morning, T. has already organized his directions for the boys to demolish the house. By the end of the day, the house is in shambles: the floors are torn up, the fixtures are smashed, the electrical cords are all cut, and doors are destroyed. After everyone but Blackie has left, T. shows him "something special," Mr. Thomas's savings of seventy one-pound notes. T. explains that he and Blackie will burn the notes one at a time to celebrate. After they are finished, they go home.

The next day, the boys meet again at the house to complete the destruction. They take out the staircase, demolish the inner layers of wall, knock down the floors (it is a multi-story house), and flood what is left. Before they are finished, one of the boys runs in and announces that Mr. Thomas is on his way home. Mr. Thomas was not expected until the next morning, so T. locks him in the outhouse until morning. Not wanting to physically hurt the old man, the boys give him a blanket and food.

The next morning, a driver starts up his truck, and as he pulls out of the parking lot adjacent to the house, he hears crashing. At first he is confused, but then he realizes that his truck was tied to a support beam of the gutted house, bringing it down. The driver lets Mr. Thomas out of the outhouse, and although the old man is devastated, the driver cannot stop laughing. He explains that it is not personal, but he thinks it is funny.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

At the start of the two-day August Bank Holiday in post-World War II London a group of boys who call themselves the Wormsley Common Gang accepts a new member without the usual initiation ritual. The acceptance of Trevor, who is fifteen, is unexpected for several reasons. His name, the fact that his father had been an architect before the war and was now a clerk, and that his mother, despite their coming down in the world, still believes that she is better than her neighbors, are all factors that would ordinarily make him an outcast among the streetwise boys. However, they see a dangerous and unpredictable quality in Trevor that makes him acceptable to them. They refer to him as "T." to avoid his upper-class name, and T. ultimately vies with Blackie, the gang's leader, for the top position among the boys.

The gang meets every morning at a site where a bomb fell and exploded during the war.

Blackie tells the gang that he can remember hearing the bomb fall, and no one questions his statement, although they know that he would have been only one year old and sleeping in the shelter of the Wormsley Common Underground station during the bombing.

A parking lot has evolved on the site, but there are very few vehicles parked there because it is not a safe location. Near the lot is a house that survived the bomb as well as a second explosion that destroyed the house next to it. The house is propped up with wooden struts on two sides because it leans dangerously, and on one of its walls it retains a few remaining pieces of its neighbor. T. tells the boys that his father says Christopher Wren who built St. Paul's Cathedral built the surviving house. The boys are not impressed, however, and inform T. that the house now belongs to Old Misery, the name they have given to the owner whose real name is Thomas.

Old Misery had been a builder and decorator before the war. Now he lives alone in his propped-up house, going out once a week to buy bread and vegetables. The boys have little contact with him, though he has looked over his ruined wall at the boys when they gather in the car park, and another time he had tried to give them chocolate candy. They were suspicious of his offering, however, and perceived his effort at friendship as a bribe to keep them from throwing their ball at his wall. To illustrate the fact that the gang wouldn't take such a bribe, Blackie had them spend an entire morning throwing the ball against the wall in spite of the fact that only nine-year-old Mike, the youngest gang member, enjoyed the game.

It is common knowledge that the bombings damaged the plumbing in Old Misery's house. Everyone also knows that Old Misery is too miserly to spend the money to fix his indoor plumbing. He now uses an outdoor lavatory with a star-shaped hole in its door.

The lavatory, which survived the bomb blast that destroyed the neighboring house, is located near the ruined wall facing the car park where the boys meet.

On the day before the Bank Holiday begins, T. comes late to the gang's regular morning meeting. He misses the vote that is taken each day to determine in a democratic way what activity the gang will pursue that day. The boys had already decided to spend the day trying to get free rides on buses around the city, but T. says he has a better plan.

He tells them that he has visited Old Misery and seen the interior of his house. He tells them that it is a beautiful house with a spectacular circular staircase and 200-year-old wood paneling on the walls. As T. speaks, Blackie senses that T.'s position in the gang has been threatened by his use of the word "beautiful." The word emphasizes T.'s former upper-class status. Blackie tells T. that it would have been more in keeping with the gang's reputation if he had broken into the house, but T. says he knows something that will allow the gang to pursue an even greater goal. He tells the boys that Old Misery will be away for the two days of the Bank Holiday. The gang thinks he means that they can go inside the house and steal things, but T. has a much more extravagant plan. He suggests that they destroy the house, from the inside where no one can see them doing it, and then pull the walls down. He downplays their worries about getting caught and facing punishment by saying that no one could prove anything, and besides, they wouldn't be stealing anything. T. tells the boys that he knows how to organize them so they can efficiently and successfully bring down the house.

Blackie doesn't want anything to do with it, but he is required by the rules of the gang to put the matter to a vote. The boys vote to follow T.'s plan and destroy the house. Blackie walks off, telling the gang to look to T. for their instructions. He thinks at first that he will have no part in this, but then he admits to himself that if they could pull it off, the destruction of the house would bring fame and glory to the Wormsley Common Gang. Because of his strong loyalty to the gang, Blackie returns to the group and agrees to follow T.

On Sunday morning, everyone but Blackie comes to the gang meeting on time. They had been instructed to bring hammers, nails, chisels, saws, and other tools to be used in taking down the house. Blackie was late because he had trouble finding the sledgehammer he was told to bring. When he finally arrives, he sees no one around. He thinks that they have had a change of heart, but then hears sounds from the house and knows they are moving ahead with the plan. Going inside, he finds a well-organized and industrious group intent on methodically taking apart the floors, walls, and wiring. Some of the boys are sawing the staircase apart, and Mike is cutting up wiring on the floor. When Blackie finds T., T. tells him to smash the tub and was basin in the bathroom. When Mike finishes cutting up the wires, T. tells him to go around the house and smash all the china and glass, to take a knife and cut up the pillows and sheets in the bedrooms, to tear up any papers he finds, and to pull out all the drawers and empty their contents on the floor. When Blackie asks him what he is going to do, T. says he is looking for something special.

After a day of "superficial damage" most of the boys go home, instructed to return the next morning at eight to continue the destruction. Blackie and T. are left alone in the house, and Blackie asks T. if he found something special to do. T. brings out a stack of pound notes, the savings that Old Misery had hidden in his mattress. He tells Blackie that they are going to burn each of the seventy pound notes, one at a time, until ash is all that remains. While they are burning the money, Blackie asks T. if he hates Old Misery. T. responds that he doesn't hate him at all; it wouldn't be any fun if he hated him. He goes on to tell Blackie that there isn't any love or hate, just things.

The following morning the gang begins its serious destruction. Some of the boys are on the verge of quitting, saying it is too much like work, but T. keeps them motivated, and they saw away at the joists that support the floors. Later, when it gets dark and no one can see them, they turn on all the water taps to flood the place. As they are completing this task, Mike, who has been on lookout, signals that something is wrong: Old Misery is fast approaching the house. T. becomes upset and feels betrayed by Old Misery. T. believes the man lied to him and now threatens to ruin his project. He comes up with a plan to lock Old Misery in his outdoor lavatory while the gang finishes its work.

T. goes outside to meet Old Misery by the back wall. He tells him that one of the boys has gotten stuck in the lavatory and needs help. Old Misery is confused, but he cannot go against T.'s wishes. T. guides him over the wall into the yard. Old Misery's protestations about his rheumatism and comments about a warning against a big crash that he read in his horoscope go unheeded by T., and the man finds himself locked in the lavatory.

As he sits in the lavatory, Old Misery studies his options, but finds they are few. There is only one truck in the parking lot, and the driver most likely will not be back before morning. All the neighbors are away on holiday so there is no one nearby to hear him even if he shouted for help. As he ponders his fate, he thinks he hears the sounds of carpentry coming from inside his house. He has some concern about burglars and wonders why there should be carpentry noises, but then the noises stop, and he takes comfort from the silence.

When they are done with the house, the boys stop by the lavatory and push a blanket and some food through the star-shaped hole in the door, telling Old Misery that they want him to be comfortable during the night. He again tries to tell them about his rheumatism and how he has to "sleep comfortable," but the gang says he wouldn't be comfortable in his house now. Old Misery wonders what they mean.

In the morning, the driver of the truck parked near Old Misery's house comes to begin his work day. He starts the engine and is somewhat aware of a voice yelling something from somewhere but he ignores it, backing the truck into position to drive out of the lot. When he moves the truck forward he feels a slight hesitation, like something is pulling it from behind. As he drives on he sees bricks bouncing in the road ahead of him. Then he hears a big crash behind him. When he gets out of the truck to investigate he sees that the landscape has changed; the leaning house is no longer standing. He finds a piece of rope tied to the back of his truck and part of a wooden strut.

He notices that the lavatory is still standing, however, and is suddenly aware of someone shouting from inside. He unlocks the door and finds Old Misery huddled in a blanket, covered in crumbs. Old Misery cries out when he sees his house is gone and asks the driver what happened. The driver says he doesn't know and begins to laugh. The only recognizable things in the rubble are parts of the bath and a piece of a dresser. Old Misery is angry that the driver can laugh at his misfortune. The driver apologizes, but when he remembers how the truck hesitated as he pulled it forward he starts to laugh all over again. He says that he is sorry, but that Old Misery has to admit it's funny.

Analysis

Graham Greene's story is a commentary on post-World War II society, focusing on its loss of innocence and compassion. The boys' gang represents a transitional society where pre-war attitudes and values have been damaged, but it also suggests that some eternal human values remain. The gang is intent on performing outlaw acts of varying degrees of severity, but it also operates by a strong internal code, or at least some of its members do. Loyalty to the gang and actions decided by majority rule remain strong values for the Wormsley Common Gang.

Their acceptance of the new boy, Trevor, whose family has "come down" in the world since the war, opens them up to committing more serious damage. They recruit him into the gang without the usual initiation ceremony because they know, subconsciously, that he will do this. The war has left destruction everywhere around them, and they are attempting to fit into the new world by becoming destroyers themselves.

Trevor himself appears focused on revenge, partly because he is an adolescent and must rebel against his parents, but partly because he has been damaged by the family's slide down the social ladder. His father had been an architect and is now a clerk; his mother is disliked because she thinks she is better than her neighbors. His very name is subject to ridicule in the new society in which he finds himself. The only thing that saves him is the quality of danger he brings to the group. His name becomes "T." to indicate his new life as an anonymous force in the world. The gang accepts him because they know he will lead them toward ending their miseries.

When Trevor describes Old Misery's house as "beautiful" the word raises alarms to the gang because it belonged to the pre-war class-conscious world that had been smashed by the bombings. It brings up images of the upper classes that are stereotyped and parodied in the neighborhood of Wormsley Common.

Old Misery and Old Misery's house represent the pre-war world of class, of history, of genteel living that values decoration and comfort. The house and these values have been propped up and on the verge of destruction for a long time. Old Misery has "come down" in the world as well; he had been a builder and decorator, but now uses an outdoor lavatory and seldom leaves his house. The metaphor at the end of the story that compares the house to a man in a top hat emphasizes the fact that society has changed and that the upper classes can no longer take their status for granted. In

addition, the destruction of Old Misery's house and Old Misery himself represents the destruction of the "old miseries" imposed by the war. Taking down the house is an act of looking toward the future rather than trying to preserve the past. The teenage boys in the gang don't care about the house's history or about its owner's discomfort. They only want to end their "miseries," and they are willing to perform significant, organized efforts to do so.

The name of the gang – Wormsley Common – foreshadows the way they will destroy the house and indicates that destruction is not an unusual thing to have happen over time. As T. tells them when introducing his plan, "We'd be like worms, don't you see, in an apple. When we came out again there'd be nothing there…" T. is using the boys to repeat, in the physical world, the psychological damage that has been done to him and his family by the war; there is "nothing there" from his previous life. The fact that the house had been identified by his father as built by Wren motivates T. to take action. He can rebel against both his father and history in one blow.

While T. wants to destroy the house for psychological release and as a symbolic repudiation of the importance of "things" that remain in the world, there is a hint that the other boys in the gang dislike Old Misery and are willing to do damage to him because he is homosexual. The ways in which he offered them candy and watches them over the wall on his way to the lavatory suggest his less than pure interest in them. It suggests a reinforcement of the stereotype of homosexuality as known to the boys, just the neighborhood music hall holds up the stereotypical upper class man in a top hat for ridicule. The boys are not interested and take revenge by playing a game they don't even like just to show Old Misery who is in control.

The mention of the "wisdom of age" with which Old Misery contemplates his situation in the locked lavatory and the description of the seventy pound notes burn by T. and Blackie to gray ash that "floated above them and fell on their heads like age" emphasizes the loss of innocence experienced by the boys during the war and its aftermath. Most of them were babies when the war began and have lived their entire lives with the post-war sensibility. Instead of age bringing wisdom to the boys, however, as it arguably has to Old Misery, age only brings the boys closer to the nature of destruction. It is this realization that makes the story so disturbing.

The boys' gang and its destruction of Old Misery's house also represent how an unseen, impersonal force can suddenly change human life. The gang does its damage hidden from view, and when the house finally is pulled down, they are nowhere in sight. They have set up the truck driver to do the actual damage, just as anonymous and impersonal forces had set up common people to perform destructive acts upon one another during the war. The driver laughter at the destruction of the house is a survival technique; what else can he do? He has been the agent of the house's fall, but he was not in control. He suggests that an element of absurdity has entered human life in the post-war world.

Characters

Blackie

Before T. becomes the leader of the Wormsley Common gang, Blackie is its head. He is described as a just leader who is not jealous and wants to keep the group intact. He also distrusts anything having to do with the upper class. As the gang's leader, Blackie suggests such activities as seeing how many free bus rides they can sneak and breaking into Old Misery's house without stealing anything.

When the gang sides with T. instead of Blackie, Blackie initially feels betrayed and privately sulks. He then decides that if the gang is going to succeed in the feat of destroying the house, he wants to be a part of it for the fame. Once he rejoins the group, he is fully committed to T.'s leadership and to contributing to the destruction of the house. In fact, when the gang's confidence in T.'s leadership falters, Blackie pulls the group back together. This demonstrates that the group as a whole is more important to him than the personal glory of being the leader.

Driver

At the end of the story, an unsuspecting driver finally brings down the house. The driver's truck is tied to the gutted house so that when he pulls out of the adjacent parking lot, the entire house crumbles.

At first, the driver is astonished and confused, but once he realizes what has happened, he responds with a fit of laughter. Even when Mr. Thomas faces him and asks him how he can laugh, the driver is unable to control himself.

Joe

Joe is a member of the Wormsley Common gang. He is simply described as a "fat boy," and he is the first to vote in favor of T.'s plan to destroy the house.

Mike

A member of the Wormsley Common gang, Mike is the only one who is surprised when T. becomes the leader. Mike has always been easily surprised and gullible; when he was nine, he believed someone who told him that if he did not keep his mouth shut, he would get a frog in it.

Summers

Summers is the only member of the gang who is called by his last name. He is a thin boy who is a follower. When, on the second day, he complains that the destruction of the house is too much like work, he is easily talked into staying and helping.

T.

Trevor, who goes by T., is the new leader of the Wormsley Common gang. He is fifteen years old and has gray eyes. He is a member of the gang all summer before taking leadership in August, when he suggests a dramatic change in the gang's activities. His father, an architect, has recently lost social ranking, and his mother has an air of snobbery about her. If T. had seemed like an easy target to the boys, they would have teased him for these things in the beginning.

T. initially says very little when the gang meets, but as he positions himself to take leadership, he talks more. He intrigues the gang with his plan to pull down Mr. Thomas' house, a feat unparalleled in the gang's history. The unprecedented plan, coupled with the air of intrigue surrounding T., makes the boys in the gang eager to accept his plan.

Mr. Thomas

Mr. Thomas, who is called Old Misery by the boys in the gang, is an old man who lives in one of the last standing houses in its neighborhood. He was once a builder and decorator but now lives alone, emerging once every week to buy groceries. While he expects his property to be respected by the boys, he is not so disagreeable that he refuses to allow the boys on his land or to use his outdoor bathroom.

Mr. Thomas is naïve about the ways of the boys. He never expects that they will regard his offer of chocolates with suspicion, and he certainly never imagines that when he agrees to show T. around his house, T. will betray him. Mr. Thomas believes that the old ways, in which youth respected their elders, are still alive. By the end of the story, however, he realizes that he was terribly misguided.

Trevor

See T.

Themes

Innocence

The boys in "The Destructors" are in their teens, which is the age at which childish innocence is gradually left behind in favor of worldliness and sophistication. For the boys in the story, however, their innocence is already gone, replaced by cynicism, selfishness, and rebelliousness. When Mr. Thomas arrives home early, T. is surprised because the old man had told him he would be gone longer. Greene writes, "He protested with the fury of the child he had never been." Not only have these boys grown up during the war years, they live in an environment that serves as a constant reminder of that harrowing experience. They meet in a parking lot near an area that was destroyed by bombs during the war, and they are seemingly unaffected by it because it is such a normal part of their life. In reality, the war years have claimed their youthful innocence, leaving them disillusioned and determined to create their own world order, but all they really know is destruction.

Part of innocence is surrender to the imagination. In "The Destructors," however, imagination takes an ugly turn. T. uses his imagination to devise the plan to destroy Mr. Thomas's house. Greene writes that the boys "worked with the seriousness of creators—and destruction after all is a form of creation. A kind of imagination had seen this house as it had now become." The imagination used to plot the demise of the house is the opposite of the imagination used to create it. In innocence, a person's imagination is applied to think of a better world, but the boys have lost their innocence. They can only imagine a worse world.

Power

"The Destructors" is a study of shifting power. Blackie initially holds the power of leadership in the gang, and he is a basically good leader. Although he encourages mischief, it is the kind that does not hurt anyone. In his hands, power is the ability to lead others. When T. takes over leadership, however, the gang changes dramatically. He gets the members to participate in a cruel plan to destroy an innocent man's home, a home that is a treasured piece of England's past. In T.' s hands, power is the ability to destroy. His brand of leadership is different; when Blackie arrives on the first morning of the destruction (the day after T. assumes leadership), "He had at once the impression of organization, very different from the old happy-go-lucky ways under his leadership." When Summers arrives on the second morning, voicing his preference to do something more fun that day, T. will not hear of it. T. knows he is more powerful than Summers is, so he reminds him that the job is not done and that Summers himself voted in favor of the project. He succeeds in pressuring the boy to stay and help finish the destruction.

In the changing social structure of this small community, the balance of power is shifting. The boys forcibly take power in the community, and it is executable power.

They have the ability to make changes in people's lives and to intimidate others. Mr. Thomas, on the other hand, thinks he has power that he no longer possesses. He believes that he has authority based on the social order of the past, in which he, as an elder in the community, would be respected and obeyed. The shift in power seen in "The Destructors" signals the changing social order and does not bode well for the future.

Style

Paradox

Greene demonstrates the instability of postwar England in his presentation of opposing forces throughout "The Destructors." The tension created by these forces reflects a society that has survived trauma but is deeply changed by it. Social dynamics are undergoing change, and the youth no longer feel connected to the past, as previous generations did. Greene's writing often incorporates paradoxes, and in this story, paradoxes are used to communicate the atmosphere of the community in which the Wormsley Common gang functions.

Greene's use of paradox in the story is evident in T.'s attitudes toward Mr. Thomas. On the one hand, he sets about destroying his house, treating him disrespectfully, and regarding him with suspicion. At the same time, however, T. does not hate him. His intention to destroy Mr. Thomas's life is not personal but is rooted in his desire to get rid of the last vestige of traditional beauty in the war-torn landscape. Although his destructive behavior is not personal, the consequences are deeply personal for the old man, but T. is unable to consider such consequences. A related paradox in the story is when T. takes Mr. Thomas's seventy one-pound notes, but not for personal gain. Instead, he takes them only to burn them. In other words, T. takes items that are inherently valuable, but he has no interest in making use of that value. T.'s attitude toward Mr. Thomas's house is paradoxical, too. He knows the house is beautiful, but his feelings about beauty, especially as they relate to social classes (the house is an emblem of the upper class) makes it easy for him to destroy it anyway.

Another example of paradox is in the truck driver who ultimately brings the house to its final destruction. While the reader expects this man to react with feelings of guilt or horror, he laughs. He has no part in planning the destruction, nor does he have any feelings toward the old man or what he represents; yet, his reaction is not what is expected. He lacks sympathy or compassion and bursts into uncontrolled laughter, saying, "You got to admit it's funny."

Allegory

Beneath the surface of "The Destructors" are allegorical elements that enable Greene to comment about postwar England. The various characters in the story represent the older generation and the traditions of the past and the younger generation and its rejection of the empty promises and values of the past. Mr. Thomas stands for the old ways and the past belief in the authority of elders. He initially expects to be able to tell the boys what to do and what not to do simply because he is older than they are. In the determination to destroy Mr. Thomas's house, the work of a respected English architect, Greene demonstrates that the longstanding class struggle, as represented by property, is intensified. The lower class, represented by the gang, is not satisfied to watch the

upper class enjoy valuable property; instead, they succeed in destroying it and somehow achieve a closer balance between the haves and the have-nots.

The story is also an allegory about power. T. joins the group and soon takes the power away from Blackie. Once he has secured the power in the group, he immediately initiates changes by raising the stakes of what kind of mischief they will seek. T. becomes a sort of dictator in the group, giving orders and making unilateral decisions. In the wake of World War II, these are disturbing images of a new generation of power-hungry young people emerging from the wartime experience. Readers may interpret this as a message about the price of war or as a warning of what may come if something is not done to reverse current trends.

Historical Context

Modernist Period in English Literature

The modernist period in English literature began in 1914 with the onset of World War I and extended through 1965. It is a literary period that reflects the nation's wartime experiences (World War I and World War II), the emerging British talent of the 1920s, and the economic depression of the 1930s. Toward the end of the period, literature and art demonstrate the nation's growing uncertainty, which became especially pronounced after World War II; this uncertainty would give way to hostility and protest in the postmodernist period.

During the early years of the modernist period, the foremost fiction writers were E. M. Forster, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Virginia Woolf, and Somerset Maugham. One of the major accomplishments of this period was the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses,* a work that continues to be respected as a masterpiece of twentieth-century literature. In the 1920s and 1930s, the novels of D. H. Lawrence and Evelyn Waugh were harshly critical of modern society, expressing an attitude shared by many English men and women of the day. In the 1930s and 1940s, novelists such as Greene wrote traditional fiction that was well-crafted enough both to stand up to innovative fiction of the day and to gain a wide and loyal audience.

Many writers of this period (Greene included) were born at the turn of the century, near the end of the Victorian Age. These writers were reared in an environment of romanticism, which often meant leading a relatively sheltered childhood that left them ill-prepared for the realities of adult life. This background, combined with events of the first half of the twentieth century, led writers such as Greene to question the values of their past and to reevaluate the world in which they lived as adults. This re-evaluation is seen in Greene's fiction as he explores morality and creates characters who possess the capacity for both good and evil.

Teddy Boys

During the 1950s in England, the reality of organized groups of teenagers set on being disruptive and disrespectful caused public concern. Known as teddy boys, these groups of boys banded together in the name of delinquency and destruction. In many ways, they were the precursors to the modern-day gangs. These groups of boys are regarded as products of the postwar society in which they lived, having been exposed to violence and instability as children.

The teddy boys got their name from their choice of attire; although they were generally working-class boys, they chose to wear Edwardian-style suits traditionally worn by young upper-class men. This suit, commonly known as teddy style, combined with the delinquent behavior of its wearers, caught the attention of the press. The teddy boys

were not just creative in their delinquent behavior; they also made irreverent changes to their suits, such as adding bolo ties, that they had seen in movie westerns.

Critical Overview

Greene is considered one of the most important writers of his generation although most of the criticism of his work focuses on his novels. Still, there are similarities between his novels and his short stories, such as his sympathetic portrayal of flawed characters, the degradation of the individual in the modern world, the need for moral compromise in certain situations, and the harsh realities of violence and cruelty. Greene's writing style is also consistent among his novels and shorter works.

Renowned English writer Evelyn Waugh describes Greene's writing style in *Commonweal* as "not a specifically literary style at all. The words are functional, devoid of sensuous attraction, of ancestry, and of independent life." Perhaps this is why Richard Jones of *Virginia Quarterly Review* concluded that the key to Greene's popularity is "probably his readability," which attends to "the main business of holding the reader's attention." Waugh likens Greene's style to that of the cinema, where the camera moves from one setting to another, settling on a character, surveying his or her surroundings, and so on. As a result, there is no direct connection made between the storyteller and the reader. Jones makes a similar observation: "[Greene] resorts to the tricks of the cinema—swift juxtaposition of scene, character, and tone—and is often, because of this, slick and ambiguous in his effects." These techniques also apply to Greene's short stories and are evident in "The Destructors."

"The Destructors" is regarded as one of Greene's most accomplished and important pieces of short fiction. In *Understanding Graham Greene,* R. H. Miller writes:

'The Destructors' may be Greene's best story and perhaps one of the finest in the language. It has all the qualities that have come to be expected in the short story: focus, compression, pace, and that element of surprise, that epiphany that brings one to recognizing a powerful truth. It works as both parable and allegory, parable in the sense that it is a narrative in a relatively contemporaneous setting that makes a clear moral point, allegorical in the sense that it 'signifies' on several levels.

Critics often comment on the story within the historical context of the postwar era in England. Miller observes that the story reflects conditions in England in the postwar years when the gradual recovery ushered in unexpected shifts in social and political dynamics. Many communities (like the one in the story) lay in ruins, and once Mr. Thomas's house is destroyed, Miller writes, "the landscape of Wormsley Common has rational consistency." In *Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography, Volume Seven: Writers After World War II, 1945-1960,* Richard Hauer Costa observes:

By reversing every assumed value 'The Destructors' flips innocence [represented by the boys] into an unaccustomed controlling position over corruption [represented by society]. Time and place—the World War II blitzkrieg of London—are ripe for it, and Greene makes the most of his opportunity.

Also examining the political landscape of the story, Neil Nehring of *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 162: British Short-Fiction Writers, 1915-1945,* asserts that Greene's admission late in life that he had anarchist tendencies in his work should have been obvious in works like "The Destructors." Nehring comments,

Anarchism is central to 'The Destructors,' for the story's thesis—'destruction after all is a form of creation'—is adapted from anarchist Mikhail Bakunin's famous line that 'the passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!'

On the other hand, Jesse F. McCartney of *Southern Humanities Review* sees the gang as symbolizing democratic socialism struggling against privilege and conservative politics.

Other critics are quick to note that the story resonates with today's audience because what is disturbing in the story continues to be part of daily life. Nehring, for example, remarks that the story "certainly has an air of prophecy, and Greene's prescience [foresight] in this case seems to be intentional." Nehring adds that the actions of the Wormsley Common gang are only the beginning of the changes to come. Looking to the future, Miller notes, "The Destructors' will remain a disturbingly powerful story and take on even more significance as time passes."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey considers whether or not Graham Greene leaves open the possibility of redemption in his short story.

In his novels and short stories, Graham Greene portrays ordinary people who have the capacity for both good and evil. They find themselves in situations in which these opposing impulses conflict, and they must make decisions about the path they will take. Many of Greene's characters choose evil, but Greene often offers the possibility of redemption somewhere within the work. Perhaps this is the result of his conversion to Catholicism in his twenties. In the Catholic Church, there is always grace by which a sinner can receive redemption. By repenting, saying confession, and carrying out the instructions of the priest, a Catholic can receive forgiveness. More generally, by accepting Christ as the Messiah, Catholics believe there is always the possibility of forgiveness and acceptance back into God's family.

In the disturbing short story "The Destructors," a group of teenage boys willingly chooses the path of selfishness, cruelty, and evil when they victimize a helpless old man. Given Greene's propensity to offer his characters the possibility of redemption, the reader may wonder if he has done so here.

In the story, redemption is at stake for two entities: the characters and England. First, there is the main character Trevor, or T., as he is called. He is described as never having really been a child, which suggests that his innocence was sacrificed long ago. He devises a plan that will result in the complete destruction of an innocent man's house, and the reason for this plan is simply that T. wants to destroy the last vestiges of the old social order and the traditions of the past. He knows the house is beautiful, valuable, and the only home to an old man, but he is not the least bit swayed by any of this. As T. takes over leadership of the gang and begins to assign the members their duties, Greene writes, "It was as though this plan had been with him all his life, pondered through the seasons, now in his fifteenth year crystallized with the pain of puberty." T.'s cruelty is part of his nature so there is little reason to believe there is redemption in his future. He is on a path that will only lead to more cruelty against other people, and his lack of remorse suggests that he is unaware that he should even be thinking about redemption.

Except for Blackie, the other members of the gang are followers. They are either incapable of making their own moral decisions or they are unwilling to do so. Blackie, then, is the most promising character in terms of redemption. He is basically a good person who rules the gang with fairness and dedication to keeping the group intact. While he enjoys mischief, he never suggests activities that will hurt another person. When he suggests breaking into Mr. Thomas's house, he is clear that they should just break in and not steal anything. When T. assumes leadership, Blackie ultimately decides to rejoin the group, but he does so, not because he loves the idea of being so

destructive, but because his ambition leads him back into participation. If the group gains notoriety for the deed, he does not want to be left out of the excitement. These characteristics suggest that for Blackie, there is the possibility of redemption because if he joins the right group (a constructive, positive group), he will become an asset to society rather than continuing to be a hooligan.

Because some of the boys seem to be hopeless in terms of the possibility of redemption, while Blackie stands out as a promising figure, it is unclear whether England is likely to be redeemed from this upset in the social balance of power. The characters make choices for themselves, but England is somewhat at the mercy of the decisions made by its citizens. Although England has emerged from World War II on the side of victory, the domestic costs are great: political, economic, and social instability and uncertainty. These are powerful factors that have the ability to destroy the country from the inside out, just as the boys destroy Mr. Thomas's house. There is a fundamental clash between the old generation and the new generation. The old generation is portrayed, in the character of Mr. Thomas, as weak, naïve, and powerless; the new generation is portrayed as selfish, cruel, violent, destructive, disrespectful, and unconcerned with the future. Who, then, will lead the way as England recovers from the war and looks to enter the future with strength, certainty, and promise? Greene offers no answer to this important question, and the future of England looks bleak.

There is, however, another way to view the story that offers the possibility of redemption for England. The story can be viewed as a cautionary tale rather than as a harsh representation of an irreversible course. If the story is viewed in the tradition of Charles Dickens' s Ghost of Christmases Yet to Come in *A Christmas Carol,* then the story portrays only one set of possibilities. It is a warning to a generation of readers who have the power to alter the outcome of England's social challenges. In this light, Greene remains true to his tradition of offering the reader a way to foresee redemption and hope. Greene seems to signal to the reader that it is reasonable to remain hopeful that redemption will come because not every character is hopeless. If the gang is seen as a microcosm of the larger English society, there are many Blackies. This inference means that there is hope within the story, and there is hope beyond the story, for England, if the reader chooses to see its ending as only one of many possible outcomes.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "The Destructors," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Kolin surveys symbolism in "The Destructors."

In "The Destructors," published in 1954, Graham Greene portrays a world in transition, a society moving away from respect for culture toward a delight in chaos. Greene's story has been variously interpreted as a parable on depravity; a political allegory on Churchill's defeat by the Labour Party in 1945; and an expostulation of a Bakunian anarchy. Set in blitzkrieged London after World War II, the story details the exploits of the Wormsley Common Gang as they destroy a magnificent old house built by Christopher Wren and leave its occupant, an old decorator and builder, Mr. Thomas, nothing to live in but his loo. The gang, alternately led by Blackie and Trevor, has been so accustomed to seeing destruction around them that they easily become destructors themselves. Their bleak and at times amoral pranks take place in a world of shadow and half lights; gray and black hues predominate to the exclusion of bright colors. These drab, achromatic descriptions fittingly characterize the gang's indifference to culture, beauty, and sentiment. They live in a gray-world without any clearly defined or firmly held commitments. Not without design, Greene has written one of his least colorful stories.

The barren landscape symbolizes the erosion of aesthetic values in a postwar world. It is a dreary August; dark bomb-sites surround the Common. "The tired evergreens kept off a stormy sun: another wet Bank Holiday was being prepared over the Atlantic, beginning in swirls of dust under the trees." Whatever refreshing color is suggested by trees or sun is dulled by the adjectives "tired" and "stormy." Limp trees and a gray, overcast sky, signs of an impotent nature, match the pale malaise of London's younger generation. A similar reference to an ineffectual sun ironically occurs in the name and description of one of the gang—Summers, a "thin yellow boy." Nor is Blackie, sometime leader of the gang, misnamed, since he helps to complete T.'s plan of destruction. Along with the dust, mud from debris and the new, inelegant buildings covers the streets. The sight is neither pleasant nor notable; it is nondescript and boring. "The gray wet common stretched ahead, and the lamps gleamed in the puddles."

The gloomy street blends with the description of T. His eyes, which he seldom raises, are "as gray and disturbed as the drab August day." When he is not downcast, his gaze is "dark" or "implacable." A spectator of the war's callousness to culture and to sentiment, T. proceeds with scrupulous meanness to erase all vestiges of a society where emotions play a meager part. "All this love and hate [. . .] its soft, its hooey," he claims. Without the fortitude of love or the direction of hate, T. automatically leads the gang to work in shade or darkness. He maps out his plans "in the shadow of Misery's wall." Under, T.' s control, the gang scraps and shatters as " [S]treaks of light came in through the closed shutters." Not only is their plot clandestine, avoiding detection, but they seem to try to duplicate within the grim world outside. They labor on Sunday, the day of light and rest, well into the night. Summers and Mike both remind T. that it is growing dark; yet the gang continues to dismantle the house. When Old Misery is

locked in his loo at night, he "saw a light, not the light of a lamp, but the wavering light that a candle might give." Nothing stops their "stealthy form of carpentry."

If T.'s destruction is an attack on the values of culture and the bonding emotionalism that society fosters, it is also an assault on the colors that emblematize that culture. In order to destroy, T. and the gang have to de-color. Comically, this occurs when Blackie, in a fit of anger, "scraped a little paint off the rear mudguard" of an old Morris in the park. The venerable car is a ready, immobilized target. Most vulnerable to the gang's attacks, though, is the old house with its rich, polished wood. "The dining-room was stripped of parquet, the skirting was up, the door had been taken off its hinges, and the destroyers had moved up a floor." China, glass, ornaments, colorful objets d'art are smashed, reduced to debris.

It is highly significant that T. and Blackie turn Old Misery's cache of pound notes, printed with the colors green and beige, into "gray ash" by burning them. The last burning note illuminates T.'s "brooding face." Of course, the practical plays a role in this symbolism: Ashes are usually gray.

But again, a vivid symbol of cultural identity, here an image of the country's economic health, is transformed into the drab meaninglessness that gray suggests. Eventually, the room is "crowded with the unfamiliar shadows of half things, broken things, former things." T. transforms colorful substances into gray shadows. When the gang finishes, all that exists is a "shattered hollow house with nothing left but the walls." Gray is an appropriate color for emptiness.

What tangibles they do leave Old Misery also typify the gang's values through color. Confined to his privy, Old Misery receives two gifts from the gang, both of them gray. The first is "a long gray sausage [which] was worked through the hold and fell in swatches over Mr. Thomas' head." That such meat in its casing is gray is not terribly shocking; but combined with the gang's other activities, the sausage suggests that even their food, their sustenance, assumes the dull and insignificant color of their bleak surroundings. Their second present is a gray blanket, which, like the sausage, falls over Mr. Thomas's body. When the lorry driver frees him from the loo, "He was wearing a gray blanket to which flakes of pastry adhered." Old Misery emerges wearing a symbolic mantle colored by the gang's senseless energy; even his blanket is dirtied by the crumbs of penny buns they had given him to eat with the sausage. The debris outside is thus matched by the disarray of the old man's new, gray covering.

With design and skill, Graham Greene has carefully employed color in "The Destructors" to depict the cultural destruction in London after World War II. Apart from a passing comment on the convivial Blue Boar, and references to the yellowish Summers and the "tired evergreens," Greene's story is shaded in grays and blacks, hues that symbolize the valueless world of the Wormsley Common Gang. Their demolition takes place in a dismal month, on a gray street, underneath a stormy sun. So overwhelming is Greene's desire to show this gray world that he does not directly describe in color the perishable cultural artifacts that are in Old Misery's house. To do so would be giving them a power that they no longer possess.

Source: Philip C. Kolin, "Greene's 'The Destructors,'" in *Explicator,* Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 2000, pp. 158-60.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Gorecki explores connections between "The Destructors" and Milton's Paradise Lost.

In the course of a study devoted to the historical and spiritual contexts of Graham Greene's short-story masterpiece, "The Destructors," John Ower has pointed out that it recalls the Judeo-Christian story of Satan's rebellion against God. No one, however, seems to have observed that this account of a gang's assault on a beautiful old house possesses numerous and striking similarities to the grand working out of that story in Milton's *Paradise Lost.* Greene has provided no explicit testimony that he thought of the epic in constructing his tale, but his evident preoccupation with evil throughout his works suggests his awareness of Milton's treatment of the theme, or at least of the traditions which lie behind *Paradise Lost.* It may well be that, as Milton enriched his epic through allusions to older literature, so Greene has enhanced his own religious parable by drawing on Milton. But whatever the literary genetics of "The Destructors" may be, the parallels with Milton seem worthy of discussion.

The opening scenes of "The Destructors" vividly conjure up the initial setting of the epic. The boys in the Wormsley Common Gang plan their daily mischief in "an impromptu car-park, the site of the last bomb of the first blitz"; around the carpark lie the remains of houses shattered by other bombs, including "some incendiaries." This bomb crater and its blasted surroundings take the reader back to the volcanic surface of Milton's hell, where the devils devise further mischief against God and where Satan, summoning them to assembly, treads a substance like "the shatter'd side / Of thund'ring Aetna", possessing "a signed bottom all involv'd / With stench and smoke." Amid the postwar wasteland, Trevor succeeds in committing the gang to his cunning scheme to destroy Mr. Thomas' house from within: 'We'd be like worms, don't you see, in an apple.' Amid the archetypal wasteland of hell, Satan commits his crew of demons to a war of "covert guile" directed against the newly created universe; as the bad worm in Eden, he incarnates himself in the serpent. Milton's universe, created by the Son (the Christ of historical times) and standing out from chaos and hell as a beautiful jewel— "hanging in a golden Chain / This pendant World"—attracts the destroyer Satan. Similarly, Mr. Thomas' house, built by *Christopher* Wren and standing up alone from the adjacent car-park and the remains of bombedhouses, draws upon itself the resentment of the alienated "hell hounds" of the modern wasteland. And is it too much to see a further significance for the religious parallel in the fact that Mr. Thomas' house is "No. 3 " on its row? Satan himself, seeking to hurt the triune deity, must take out his spite on the creation of that deity.

The object of the destroyer's rage in both epic and story lies in a garden, the wall around which must be penetrated by the attacker. Greene's Blackie, joining the other boys already at work on the house, approaches it as they have done, "from a lane at the rear of the garden, for fear of the policeman's beat along the main road . . . Blackie climbed the wall into Misery's [their name for Mr. Thomas] garden." After the first day's work, "to escape notice they climbed singly over the garden wall, into the car-park." The

gang's furtive movements back and forth over Mr. Thomas' wall recall Satan's stealth in entering the garden of Eden. On his first entry, avoiding the angels at the gate, Satan vaults proudly over the unguarded wall of Eden:

Due entrance he disdain'd, and in contempt, At one slight bound high overleap'd all bound Of Hill or highest Wall, and sheer within Lights on his feet

Trevor's acrobatics in getting himself and Mr. Thomas over the wall towards the end of the story, "'One foot here, one foot there, and over'", are on a par with Satan's gymnastics. Satan's comparison to a thief on this occasion of his first entry, "So clomb this first grand Thief into God's Fold", helps to provide a larger context for the theft which the boys commit in destroying Mr. Thomas' house. Trevor's disclaimer to Blackie concerning Mr. Thomas' money which they have found, "'We aren't thieves', T. said. 'Nobody's going to steal anything from this house'", only underscores that they are thieves indeed, on a grand scale, like their prototype. The gang's use of the wall at the rear of the garden "for fear of the policeman's beat along the main road" is reminiscent also of Satan's second visit to Eden. For on that occasion, Satan, mingling himself with the waters of the Tigris to escape the notice of the guardians now aware of his first entry, slips under the wall of the garden. That the wall behind Mr. Thomas' garden is already a "smashed wall" may suggest that, Satan having penetrated the walls of Eden, all walls have been weakened: Mr. Thomas' house with its treasure of beauty, epitomized, in Trevor's report to the gang, by the "'staircase two hundred years old like a corkscrew'", lingers on insecurely in a fallen world.

In the intensity of his urge to destroy the home, Trevor the destructor resembles Milton's Satan, who finds pleasure only in destruction. Announcing his plan to the gang Trevor states, "'We'll pull it down,' he said. 'We'll destroy it.'" Assigning the gang their tasks, "Trevor was giving his orders with decision: it was as though this plan had been with him all his life, pondered through the seasons, now in his fifteenth year crystallized with the pain of puberty." Later, well into the destruction, when the boy Summers suggests, "'Haven't we done enough?'" Trevor retorts, "'We are going to *destroy* this house.'" Trevor's relentless rage for ruin recalls Satan's soliloquy as he returns to Eden, "bent / On Man's destruction", to incarnate himself in the snake: "For only in destroying I find ease / To my relentless thoughts; and him [man] destroyed." He would so work upon the world "that destruction wide may range", and announces that he has come "all pleasure to destroy / Save what is in destroying, other joy / To me is lost." Trevor may deny that he feels hatred for Mr. Thomas himself: "'All this hate and love,' he said, 'it's soft, it's hooey. There's only things, Blackie.'" But the rest of this passage, revealing as it does the destructive effects of his activity, testifies to a ferocious hatred for created or formed things: "and he looked round the room crowded with the unfamiliar shadows of half things, broken things, former things." The growing darkness in which this scene is set —"the light had nearly gone, and when they touched a switch, nothing worked—Mike had done his job thoroughly"— helps to carry the reader back to Satan's journey through the realm of Chaos and Night, in the course of which Satan makes a speech to Chaos offering to reduce the newly created world "To her original darkness and your sway." Trevor is doing his bit in his little corner of creation to reduce the formed to the unformed. That he and Blackie are at the time burning Mr. Thomas' savings and that the

word 'destructor' means a kind of incinerator, further identifies Trevor with the tribe of Satan, the first destroyer, in whom a "hot Hell . . . always . . . burns."

Through his method of destroying the house, Trevor, like Satan, is a parody of a creator. As Trevor and his wrecking crew methodically rip out the interior, Greene remarks that "Streaks of light came in through the closed shutters where they worked with the seriousness of creators—and destruction, after all, is a form of creation. A kind of imagination had seen this house as it had now become." In this paradoxical activity Trevor resembles Milton's devil, whose destructive bent is an inversion of the creative powers of God and the Son. As numerous critics have observed, in striving to rival the diety, Satan is forced to parody it. For example, taken together with his offspring Sin and Death, Satan is parody of the Trinity; Pandemonium, the counter-heaven erected in hell, is but a place in which to plot the destruction of the new world; and the causeway that Sin and Death construct in book 10 between hell and the formed universe is only a means to bring all the destructive capacity of the demons to bear on the newly fallen world. Satan's parody of creation extends even to such actions as his circling the earth for seven nights while choosing the proper agent for its corruption, for this week of darkness contrasts with the week of light in which the Son creates the world. While the son rests from his labors on the seventh day, Greene's destructors, on the other hand, begin their work on the Sabbath, thus, like Satan, inverting the Son's program of creation and rest.

Many more similarities between the epic and the short story could be adduced, such as the fact that just as Satan (disguised as a "stripling Cherub" presents himself to the angel Uriel in the sun as one seeking directions so that he might admire the new work of God, so the boy Trevor goes straight to the front door of the house and asks Mr. Thomas to show him its remarkable interiors. Greene thus establishes the full significance of his delinquents by setting them in a pattern of rebellion against the beautiful and good given such memorable form by Milton.

Source: J. Gorecki, "Graham Greene's 'The Destructors' and *Paradise Lost,*" in *Papers on Language and Literature,* Vol. 21, No. 3, Summer 1985, pp. 336-40.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Feldmann explores a Western civilization approach to history in the context of Greene's "The Destructors."

Although Graham Greene considers himself primarily a novelist "who has happened to write short stories," he nevertheless believes that he has "never written anything better than *'The Destructors'."* Written in 1954, the story tells of an exploit by the Wormsley Common Gang, a group of London youths who under the leadership of a fifteen year old boy demolish in two days a house that had been built by Christopher Wren. What is most perplexing about the story is its tone: the omniscient narrator, curiously uninvolved in the tale he is telling, provides the reader with no clue as to how he should respond to the destruction of the house. Carefully planned by Trevor, the story's protagonist, it seems to be neither a wanton nor a malicious act. The last scene of the story is especially baffling. Mr. Thomas, the owner of the house, has been released from the outhouse where he has spent the night while the gang completed the demolition. Standing before the hill of rubble that had once been his home, he is mildly indignant with the lorry driver who had unwittingly pulled away the struts that were the house's last supports. The lorry driver, convulsed with laughter, delivers an apology which concludes the story: "I'm sorry. I can't help it, Mr. Thomas. There's nothing personal, but you got to admit it's funny."

To date, no critic of the story has admitted that the destruction of the house is "funny"; and yet, no critic has successfully handled the ambiguous tone of the story that is undeniably established by the lorry driver's concluding laughter. Greene's sympathy, the critics assume, is with Mr. Thomas, or at least with the Wren-built house. In any case, it is not with the destructors. The assumption is understandable, considering Greene's reputation as a Catholic and conservative thinker, but it is an assumption that is not entirely supportable by the story itself. A careful reading of the text suggests that a large portion of Greene's sympathy is with the boys, and that if the destruction of the house is not wholly a laughing matter, neither is it the diabolical feat of satanic delinquents.

Any effort to make sense out of the story requires that the destruction of the house be understood as a symbolic act. The critics who have commented upon the story have interpreted the destruction in various ways, but none has argued that Greene sanctions the act. Jesse F. McCartney, for example, reads the story as a political statement that has its genesis in Churchill's defeat by Atlee's Labour Government in 1945. The house is "an emblem of the continuity of the human race," and its destruction disconnects the Wormsley Common Gang from "the consecutive and humanistic values of the past." John J. Stinson and John Ower offer religious interpretations of the story. For Stinson, the destruction of the house is "a parable-like comment on man's inborn depravity and the primacy of evil in the world." For Ower, the house represents "an ideal state of culture, in which the predominance of Christianity ensures both refinement and order"; "the destruction of the house indicates that, without the Church as a moral centre, civilization itself will fall."

These critics provide interesting insights into the story, but the ambiguity of the story's tone and denouement remains. This ambiguity can be resolved only if the destruction of the house can in some sense be considered a positive act, a thing to be desired. Such an interpretation is possible if one reads the story as a judgment on the condition of Western civilization, a judgment that reflects an unorthodox view of history. Because Greene is a convert to Catholicism, the natural tendency is to assume his orthodoxy and to judge the destruction of the house by orthodox standards: it is a negative act, satanic and purely destructive—a *final* act. Such negative judgments are consistent with a traditional conservative view of history, a view that conceives of history as the will of God progressing through time in linear fashion from beginning to ending, from Creation to Apocalypse. And Apocalypse is conceived of as that event, or series of events, which will bring time to a stop (whatever that might mean in a post-Einsteinian universe) and human history to an end. Ower, for example, writes that Trevor may be considered as "an agent of divine retribution and redemption, a destroying angel like those who . . . wreck the universe at the Apocalypse," and he goes on to note "the larger pattern of Salvation History" that the story suggests: "This extends from the rebellion of Lucifer, through Creation and the Fall, to Redemption and Apocalypse."

The view of history as the linear movement through time is conventionally Christian and can be traced at least back to St. Augustine. But historians within the Christian tradition have also conceived on non-linear theories of history. Giambattista Vico, whose cyclical theory of history greatly influenced James Joyce, comes immediately to mind. Cyclical theories of history, in fact, seem to dominate the modern Western artistic imagination, perhaps necessarily so, given the course of human events since 1914. Things *are* falling apart; the age *is* apocalyptic. But few writers, if any, now regard apocalypse as the end of human history. Whatever their attitude may be toward the rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem to be born, they understand that the end of Western Christian civilization is the inevitable consequence of historical process. The artist who is conscious of the process is caught between Matthew Arnold's two worlds, "one dead, the other powerless to be born." He is faced with a decision; his allegiance must lean to one world or the other. "The Destructors" is a testament of Greene's integrity as an artist. In spite of his intellectual commitment to Catholicism, he asserts that "destruction after all is a form of creation." In destroying the house, the gang works "with the seriousness of creators." Although Greene knows the house to be beautiful and its tenant to be sympathetic, he clearly accepts the destruction as the creative act of a bold imagination. He accepts, that is, a view of time and history as cyclical process, a process that inevitably involves the demise of Western Christian civilization.

Careful attention to the details with which Greene describes the house, its tenant, and the process of destruction will demonstrate that Greene's allegiance leans toward the world still "to be born." The house clearly represents Western Christian civilization—its institutions, its attitudes, its dogma that excludes non-Christians from "the larger pattern of Salvation History." It was built by Christopher Wren, the man, Trevor explains to the gang, "who built St. Paul's." Greene is careful to establish this point, for St. Paul is himself a chief architect of Christianity. Without the great apostle's proselytizing zeal, the Word may never have been established beyond the boundaries of Christ's limited range. But in the world of Greene's story, the house is obsolete, a grotesque relic on the

verge of collapse in a modern waste land. It stands "jagged and dark between the bomb-sites" that have been paved over into an "impromptu car-park." It is a world without effective civil or spiritual authority: few cars are left in the car-park, for "without an attendant there was no safety"; and Mike, the youngest member of the gang, is freed from going to church on the day the destruction begins because "his mother felt ill [and] his father was tired after Saturday night." Although the house is "beautiful" on the inside, something has gone wrong with the plumbing, and Mr. Thomas, who *once* was a builder and decorator, is "too mean" to repair the internal mechanism. Throughout the story Greene's imagery emphasizes the dominant mood of decrepitude and death. The "loo" stands "like a tomb in a neglected graveyard." The evergreens which line the lane behind the garden are "tired." The color "grey" settles over the story like dust: the plan to destroy the house is conceived on a "grey" and "drab August day," "grey ash" floats above the heads of the boys, the common is wet and grey, the blanket the boys supply Mr. Thomas with is grey, even Trevor's eyes are grey.

Mr. Thomas, or Old Misery as he is called by the boys, is reminiscent of Eliot's Gerontion: he is a spiritually exhausted man who lacks the creative energy to grow and to build. His house is a decayed house, and he is "dithery" and "confused." He is "rheumatic" and "limps" and "stumbles" through the story. Like Madame de Tornquist in Eliot's poem, his faith in spiritual value has been reduced to a superstitious belief in horoscopes. Although generous (he gives the boys candy) and kindly at times, he is peevish and exclusive: he will build his wall up to keep the boys out of his garden. He is most like Gerontion in that he has lost his passion. Lacking any real intensity, he cannot keep his attention focused on what is happening to his house. As he sits locked in his "loo," he becomes progressively less concerned with the noises he hears. He wraps himself in the blanket and eats the buttered penny buns the boys have given him. When he finally emerges from the outhouse to confront the wreck of his home he cuts a comic figure, wrapped in the "blanket to which flakes of pastry adhered." He gives a "sobbing cry," but he acquiesces to the destruction with only mild indignation at the lorry driver's laughter.

The question, of course, is what *is* the appropriate response to the destruction of the house, to the collapse of Western civilization. The horror of twentieth-century history has made Western civilization's weaknesses all too apparent. Its foundation undermined, its superstructure sagging, its internal machinery out of joint, its tenant weary and ineffective and without spiritual intensity, the symbolic house poses the question: What is to be done? Should it be propped up here and there with the hope that it will stand for another century or two? Or should it be torn down to clear the way for a new structure? Greene answers the question by having the boys dismantle the house methodically and without malice. During the process they express concern for its tenant and provide him with buttered penny buns so that he will not "starve." They are concerned, that is, with the continuity of the human race, even though they seek to destroy the system of belief that had sheltered man for a cycle of civilization. The idea of history symbolized by the feat is Hegelian and Viconian. The larger pattern of history is a dialectical process by which man's consciousness of spiritual reality is progressively enlarged through conflict. The systems man creates to manifest his spiritual consciousness ultimately harden with age and become inhibitive. Christian civilization, a system of belief in which a unifying

providential principle has been immanent, is, like all systems, finally a human construct and subject to the debilitating effects of time. No longer reflecting man's deepest aspirations, the Christian system of belief is obsolete; in the dialectical process of history, the role of Christianity is over.

If the system of belief symbolized by the house fails to reflect man's deepest aspirations, what is it that the destructors, especially Trevor, aspire to? Greene's answer is implicit in the central episode of the story, the scene in which Trevor and Blackie burn Old Misery's savings. Blackie wants to steal the money and share it. But "we aren't thieves," Trevor insists. "Nobody's going to steal anything from this house." Instead he holds a "celebration" and burns the pound notes. Blackie thinks Trevor must hate Old Misery, but Trevor denies it: "All this hate and love . . . it's soft, it's hooey. There's only things, Blackie."

Here is the story's major explicit indictment of Western civilization: in contemporary life everything, even human relationships, has been reduced to the cash nexus. Blackie, who thought Old Misery's gift of chocolates "a bribe," never does understand Trevor's motivation for dismantling the house or for burning the money. He does not comprehend the weariness and frustration with a materialistic civilization grown so overburdened with things it cannot be suffered anymore. By dismantling the house, Trevor is aspiring to be free of a civilization that has lost its perception of spiritual value and permits man only a quantitative means of self-definition. Burning the money is his rejection of the one value that is most responsible for the collapse of the spiritual core of Western civilization—profit, cash, the THING itself. The tenant of the house that Wren built had buried his life savings—a paltry sum of seventy pounds—in his mattress. Like the wary servant in the parable of the talents, that which was given him is taken away again, and with it his house. As Trevor and Blackie kneel in the middle "of half things, broken things, former things" and burn the money, "The grey ash floated above them and fell on their heads like age." Ower reads this scene as a "celebration of a 'Black Mass'"; the floating ash, however, seems to fall upon the kneeling boys like a benediction. Burning the money is Trevor's ceremonial act of redemption from the restrictive materialism of "only things."

Such an interpretation of the scene makes it difficult to regard Trevor as a satanic monster. At the worst, he represents that Hegelian principle of antithesis which, opposed to the thesis his civilization has become, will inevitably resolve the tension in a new synthesis of spiritual apprehension. The house, then, symbolizing an obsolete system of belief, inhibits the spiritual growth of the boys and must go; its destruction is a symbolic act freeing mankind from the restrictive past and delivering him to the future. As a Hegelian principle of antithesis, Trevor is both a destructive and a creative force. He destroys the old, but "destruction after all is a form of creation." Even Old Misery, pondering "with the wisdom of age" in his outhouse, hears the boys make noises that sound "more and more like a stealthy form of carpentry." In this final scene, the locus of Greene's sympathies is clear. Peevish Old Misery *is* funny, sitting on his "loo" and eating pastry through the apocalypse. Trevor, on the other hand, working with the "seriousness" of a creator, stealthily builds the possibility of a future for mankind.

Source: Hans Feldmann, "The Idea of History in Graham Greene's 'The Destructors,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 19, No. 3, Summer 1982, pp. 241-45.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, McCartney examines the politics of "blitzed England" and Greene's story, "The Destructors."

Although Graham Greene's fiction has been widely praised and widely circulated, critics have focused rather narrowly on two exclusive features of it. Noting Greene's distinction between novels and "entertainments," they have provided genre studies; or, noting his Catholicism, they have discussed the religious themes in his fiction to the exclusion of other considerations. Such biases have resulted in oversights and distortions in the criticism of his work. For example, despite the genre studies just mentioned, critics have largely ignored Greene's short stories or deemed them unworthy of critical study. Greene himself relegated his short stories to an insignificant place in his canon (maintaining at most that he was a novelist who "happened to write short stories"), and scholars have taken him pretty much at his word.

In addition, their intense interest in Greene's religious theme has distracted them from a careful consideration of the social and political conflicts which are so often the source of the basic conflicts of his plots. As James L. McDonald asserts: "For far too many readers and critics, Greene is a 'Catholic' novelist." McDonald cogently argues that Greene's "deepest, most abiding concerns . . . have always been social and political, and only by recognizing them can we find a true unity and continuity in his career." Yet scholars have consistently failed to notice Greene's persistent concern with social and political issues, and the political substructure of Greene's writing remains largely unexplored.

In sum, then, scholars might have read Greene more closely, and they might have begun with his short story "The Destructors." It is a work rich in political implications, and Greene himself has recently said of it, "I believe I have never written anything better than 'The Destructors'. . ." Nevertheless, many readers of the story are puzzled by it.

Obviously, a plot which involves the paradox of the artistic destruction of a fine work of art is strange, but it is considerably less so if one places the story and the characters in a more precise political and economic context. To do so reveals the story to be essentially a reflection of twentieth-century British politics—particularly the politics of blitzed England as Greene observed it from 1945 until his writing of the story in 1954. The Wormsley Common Gang epitomizes democratic socialism in conflict with privilege and conservatism, and "The Destructors," though certainly no mere political allegory, depicts a blitzed world in which the traditional values of beauty, grace, individualism, and class distinctions are succumbing to the new values of materialism, efficiency, democracy and group activity.

The story can be better understood when one recalls that the period from 1945 to 1951 witnessed the emergence of the Labour Party and sweeping social and economic reforms which represented the culmination of the decline of privilege. The First Reform Act of 1832 seriously called into question the privileged status of the aristocracy. King

Edward's threat to create enough new peers to pass Lloyd George's "People's Budget" of 1909 if the House of Lords rejected it signaled another dramatic shift in the power structure of England. But the *coup de grace* came in 1945. The defeat of Churchill and the Conservatives in that year not only resulted in the formation under Atlee of the first majority Labour government but also marked a triumph for democratic socialism and a stunning blow to privilege. The nationalization of the Bank of England and other industries and the passage of the National Health Service Act of 1948 and other socialist programs marked a point of no return for England which Greene and other observers noted with mixed feelings. Out of this dynamic political situation "The Destructors" grew and developed in Greene's mind.

The "destructors" of the title are the members of the Wormsley Common Gang, a group of adolescent boys who presumably adopt a name for their gang from the geographical area of London where their activities are centered; but, of course, the name suggests both worms and commoners. The image of worms is picked up later in the story as Trevor explains the manner in which the gang would destroy Mr. Thomas's house: '"We'd be like worms, don't you see, in an apple. When we came out again there'd be nothing there, no staircase, no panels, nothing but just walls, and then we'd make the walls fall down—somehow."' That the gang consists of commoners who scorn the upper classes is apparent in the attitude of its members toward the name and background of the newest member, Trevor:

When he said 'Trevor' it was a statement of fact, not as it would have been with the others a statement of shame or defiance . . . There was every reason why T., as he was afterwards referred to, should have been an object of mockery—there was his name (and they substituted the initial because otherwise they had no excuse not to laugh at it), the fact that his father, a former architect and present clerk, had 'come down in the world' and that his mother considered herself better that the neighbours.

Thus, by joining the gang and, like more recent revolutionaries, changing his name, Trevor repudiates the class system.

The gang, however, is no rag-tag band of lawless revolutionaries. Indeed, as they work from the inside destroying Old Misery's house, they also, in many ways, conform to establishment traditions, as did the Labour Party. For example, though Trevor escapes the procedure somehow, the gang apparently sometimes accepts members through an "ignoble ceremony of initiation." Thus they follow establishment traditions of ceremonies and inaugurations, but these "ignoble ceremonies" parody those long-honored by the nobility. Indeed, the gang punctiliously observes its rules and operates in a decidedly democratic fashion. Trevor is required by the "rules to state his name." Though the gang is sceptical of Trevor's reasons for entering Old Misery's house, there is "nothing in the rules against it." Trevor, however, while in Old Misery's house, has missed voting on the day's activities; and Blackie informs him, "'You can't vote now. You know the rules.'" This observance of rules and democratic procedures—particularly of voting—is stressed thus several times in the story.

As always in politics, the question of leadership of the party becomes crucial. Indeed, the entire first section of the story is given over to the characterization of Trevor and Blackie and to their struggle for leadership of the gang. The opening line of the story appears to be an offhand remark that "it was on the eve of August Bank Holiday that the latest recruit became the leader of the Wormsley Common Gang." However, in the context of the story, with its emphasis on the democratic rule of the gang, the remark takes on more significance. It reveals that Blackie's fall and Trevor's rise to power are in accord with the tenet of democracy that there is no inherent or permanent position of rank or privilege and that even a neophyte can rise to leadership by demonstrating skill or charisma.

What qualities characterize Blackie's leadership? Generally, Blackie is serious, responsible, disciplined, but unimaginative. He is essentially the doer, the worker, and is miscast as theorizer. He customarily presided when the gang "met every morning in an impromptu car park, the site of the last bomb of the first blitz" and proposed each day a "plan of operations" on which the gang voted, generally such uninspired plans as snatching free bus rides from unwary conductors. Blackie and the gang show no awareness of the future or the need for long-range planning; similarly, they are ignorant of the past, as is evidenced by their reaction to Trevor's announcement that Mr. Thomas's house was built by Wren. An anonymous and representative voice of the gang responds:

'Who's Wren? "The man who built St. Paul's. "Who cares?' Blackie said. 'It's only Old Misery's.'

Blackie sees the house merely as property belonging to a privileged individual, not as an emblem of the continuity of the human race, not as a creation of artistic significance for the heritage of England. Like the whole gang, he is cut off from consecutive and humanistic values of the past, is temporally isolated in a modern blitzed world to which he responds on a day-to-day, "impromptu" basis in reaction to the conservative values of the past.

Indeed, Blackie wishes to spurn Old Misery and everything associated with him, but he assumes his responsibility as leader when the gang is confronted by the old man. Significantly, this confrontation is full of ambiguities, mistrust, and failures of communication or understanding. Old Misery accosts Mike, Blackie, and Summers as he returns from a trip to the market:

He said glumly, 'You belong to the lot that play in the car-park?'

Mike was about to answer when Blackie stopped him. As the leader he had responsibilities. 'Suppose we are?' he said ambiguously.

'I got some chocolates' Mr. Thomas said. 'Don't like 'em myself. Here you are. Not enough to go round, I don't suppose. There never is,' he added with sombre conviction. He handed over three packets of Smarties.

The gang was puzzled and perturbed by this action and tried in explain it away. 'Bet someone dropped them and he picked 'em up,' somebody suggested.

' Pinched ' em and then got in a bleeding funk,' another thought aloud.

'It's a bribe,' Summers said. 'He wants us to stop bouncing balls on his wall.'

'We'll show him we don't take bribes,' Blackie said, and they sacrificed the whole morning to the game of bouncing that only Mike was young enough to enjoy. There was no sign from Mr. Thomas.

In their responses, the gang members epitomize the cynicism and self-righteousness so often manifested by opponents of political conservatives. Unable to believe that Old Misery is capable of genuine charity or generosity, they suspect him of having round or stolen the candy; but as children of the blitzed world, their understanding of sleazy politics based on the cash nexus leads them to conclude that the candy is a bribe, a conclusion in which Blackie quickly acquiesces and on which he formulates his policy of demonstrating through a juvenile game an unwillingness to compromise.

The gang's suspicion of the upper classes extends to Trevor also, even after he has been accepted as one of the gang. The boys question his motives for visiting Old Misery's house, conceding that the only possible reason one might do so would be to "pinch" something. When he denies having pinched anything, they gather around him: "It was as though an impromptu court were about to form and try some case of deviation." The reference to "deviation" and the formation of a kangaroo court remind the reader of the rhetoric and the show trials of various (though not exclusively) Marxist regimes of this century.

Blackie's plodding steadiness as well as his lack of imagination is reflected in his cool response to this situation. He did not wish to exclude Trevor because of his activities: "He [Blackie] was just, he had no jealousy"; but Trevor is expected to conform to discipline, and any hint of elitism is suspect. It was Trevor's use of the word *beautiful* to describe Old Misery's house that worried Blackie; it was a word "that belonged to a class world that you could still see parodied at the Wormsley Common Empire by a man wearing a top hat and a monocle, with a haw-haw accent."

Blackie's rigidity and isolationism, however, are precisely his limitations in Trevor's mind. As political philosopher, Trevor sees that knowledge is power and defends his consorting with Mr. Thomas by saying, "I found out things." As the only member of the gang who fully understands that Mr. Thomas's beautiful house, with its spiral staircase which is two hundred years old, is the very emblem of privilege and elitism, Trevor alone conceives of the significance of destroying the house. When he explains that Old Misery will be away on the Bank Holiday and that the gang can then break into the house, one of the boys again assumes that, in their customary way of combating the establishment, they will pinch things from the house. It is against such corruption by things that Blackie and Trevor must continually fight. Blackie, ever the pragmatist, objects, saying that they want no trouble with the law. Trevor, the idealist, objects on other grounds: "'I don't want

to pinch anything . . . I' ve got a better idea . . . We'll pull it down . . . We'll destroy it.'" Again, the pragmatic Blackie objects: "'There wouldn't be time . . . I've seen housebreakers at work.'" Trevor responds with the timeless cry of the disestablished or disenfranchised: "'We'd organize.'" He also asserts that he has the knowledge necessary for accomplishing this destruction. Having presented this challenge to Blackie's leadership, Trevor even uses British political terminology in forcing the issue: "'You can stand down, Blackie, if you'd rather . . .'"

In the portion of the story that follows, the *dénouement* of part one, the political implications are made even clearer. Blackie is voted down; he becomes a political cast-off. At first, as the gang pays "no more attention to him than to a stranger," Blackie is angry; but his pragmatism and his fidelity to the party win out over his personal depression. He realizes that the gang just might succeed in wrecking Old Misery's house, in which case "the fame of the Wormsley Common car-park gang would surely reach around London . . . Driven by the pure, simple and altruistic ambition of fame for the gang, Blackie came back to where T. stood in the shadow of Old Misery's wall." Moments later, "Blackie realized he had raised his hand like any ordinary member of the gang." Ultimately, Blackie resumes a position of leadership within the gang, and the democratic process comes full circle in the story as, indeed, it did in Churchill's ouster and subsequent re-election; and surely this important contemporary political event must have lurked in Greene's consciousness as a kind of model for Blackie's career, though Blackie otherwise represents Churchill's antithesis and I would again caution against an allegorical reading in favor of a symbolic one.

This scene not only portrays Blackie as the committed worker, but it also portrays Trevor once more as the political theorist, the Trotsky of the group. In addition, it demonstrates the necessity of collaboration between worker and intellectual for the success of the group's schemes. Trevor conceives of the plan in the abstract and maneuvers politically to bring about its implementation. Moreover, he is at pains to preserve the purity of the concept. He insists later in the story that no one will take anything from the house, but that it will be destroyed absolutely; and when a gang member fears that each member will have to contribute to a collection to buy tools, Trevor reveals both his naïveté and his idealism in his arch reply: "'I don't want your money. But I can't buy a sledge-hammer.'" Significantly, the pragmatic Blackie steps forward and says: "'They are working on No. 15. I know where they'll leave their stuff for Bank Holiday.'"

Section two of the story describes the beginning of the destruction of the house in such a fashion as to stress the commitment and the organization of the gang as they all share the labor of implementing their carefully-laid plan. Blackie, joining the group belatedly, "had at once the impression of organization, very different from the old happy-go-lucky ways under his leadership."

This section again reiterates the image of opposite forces working to sustain the project —i.e., the image of the pragmatic politico balanced against the party theorist. After all the other boys have left, T. discloses to Blackie a bundle of pound notes he has found in Old Misery's mattress. Immediately, Blackie asks, "'What are you going to do? Share them?'" Such a proposal seems practical and in accord with general socialist principles

of sharing the wealth confiscated from the rich and privileged; but Trevor is the artist, the idealist, the theoretician, and here, at least, he thinks in terms of aesthetic rituals rather than pragmatic ends. He responds: "We aren't thieves . . . Nobody's going to steal anything from this house. I kept these for you and me—a celebration . . . We'll burn them . . . one by one.'" However, Blackie cannot comprehend the intellectual theorizing of Trevor except in terms of simple vengeance. As the ash from the burning notes falls on their heads, Trevor says:

'I'd like to see Old Misery's face when we are through . . .'

'You hate him a lot?' Blackie asked.

'Of course I don't hate him,' T. said. 'There'd be no fun if I hated him . . . All this hate and love . . . it's soft, it's hooey. There's only things, Blackie,' and he looked round the room crowded with the unfamiliar shadows of half things, broken things, former things. 'I'll race you home, Blackie,' he said.

These *things,* in Trevor's mind, do not represent material wealth to be redistributed; rather they become material symbols of the established classes and of privilege, objects to be ritually destroyed in preparation for a new era.

This same emphasis on things and the absolute destruction of things as well as an emphasis on democratic procedures arises again in part three of the story when, as the boys convene for the second day of destruction, Summer protests that the activity is too much like work. Trevor responds sharply: "'You voted like the others. We are going to *destroy* this house. There won't be anything left when we've finished.'"

In this section, too, Trevor appears as the dreamer, Blackie as the worker. This characterization develops particularly out of the crisis which occurs when the boys discover that Old Misery is returning early from his holiday. Trevor momentarily panics as he begs for time to consider how to finish the project. As Blackie learned earlier in the story, Trevor now learns that "his authority had gone with his ambiguity. He was [now] only one of the gang."

Blackie—the doer, actor, worker—rescues the intellectual in distress. "T. stood with his back to the rubble like a boxer knocked groggy against the ropes. He had no words as his dreams shook and slid. Then Blackie acted before the gang had time to laugh, pushing Summers backward." Blackie whips the gang into line and then asks Trevor for his plan of action. Blackie "was the leader again," but now he merely implements Trevor's ideas and sees that the commands are executed.

Greene finally makes quite clear that the initial conflict has been fully resolved through collaboration. Caught up in the group enterprise, "the question of leadership no longer concerned the gang." However, Blackie' s practicality remains useful; it is emphasized once again in passing in the concluding section of the story. The boys began to loosen the mortar between the bricks, but "they started too high, and it was Blackie who hit on the damp course and realized the work could be halved if they weakened the joints immediately above." Trevor is not mentioned at all in this last section of the story, his

work—the planning of the destruction and the enactment of the ritualistic burning of the notes— presumably having been completed.

"The Destructors," however, is not merely a story about the struggle between two personality types for leadership of a gang any more than it is merely a story about the destruction of an old house by delinquent boys. That fact is made clear by the introduction of Old Misery as owner of the house that Wren built: "Old Misery—whose real name was Thomas—had once been a builder and decorator. He lived alone in the crippled house, doing for himself." The nickname given Mr. Thomas by the boys suggests not only the personal emotional state of the old man but also the unpleasant aspect of English traditions built on privilege and class distinctions—the old misery inflicted on the masses by the conservative ruling classes. Mr. Thomas's house, like the landed and hereditary houses of England, indeed the House of Lords itself, is "crippled," debilitated, and weakened: "Since the bombs fell something had gone wrong with the pipes of the house and Old Misery was too mean to spend money on the property. He could do the decorating himself at cost price, but he had never learnt plumbing." In like manner, the Conservatives had been builders and decorators; particularly in the midst of war, Churchill and the Conservatives had stood for outer strength, appearances and form, but they failed to understand the inner problems of the nation brought about by the war and could not mend them. A man living in the blitzed world depicted by Greene was no longer capable of "doing for himself '; and the Labour Party's plans for nationalization and government assistance through democratic socialism pulled Churchill's house down around him.

Mr. Thomas, of course, never expects any accommodation with the Wormsley Common Gang. In a passage cited earlier, he approaches the gang "glumly." He voices "with sombre conviction" the conservative view that "there never is . . . enough to go round," the traditional assertion and complaint against Labour policies of providing welfare services such as those provided by the National Insurance Act of 1946 and the National Health Service instituted in 1948.

It is in section three of the story, however, that Old Misery most clearly epitomizes privilege and conservatism. The boys devise a scheme to lure Mr. Thomas to his outhouse and imprison him there so that they can complete the destruction of his house. (Incidentally, in the revised version in *Collected Stories,* Greene deliberately emphasizes the modernity of the boys by having them refer to the outhouse as the "lav" whereas Mr. Thomas consistently, refers to it as the "loo"; in earlier versions, both the boys and Mr. Thomas use only the term "loo.") In leading him to the loo supposedly to rescue a boy who has gotten stuck there, the gang forces Mr. Thomas to climb his own garden wall, thus revealing to him that they have sometimes climbed it. His response is reactionary, possessive but traditionally polite, quaintly displaying the native courtesy of the privileged as well as the crotchety, authoritarian instincts which insist on deference and protocol.

'I'll have the wall built up,' Mr. Thomas said, 'I'll not have you boys coming over here, using my loo.' He stumbled on the path but the boy caught his elbow and supported him. 'Thank you, thank you, my boy,' he murmured automatically . . . 'I'm not

unreasonable. I don't mind you playing round the place Saturday mornings. Sometimes I like company. Only it's got to be regular. One of you asks leave and I say Yes. Sometimes I'll say No. Won't feel like it. And you come in at the front door and out at the back. No garden walls.'

The incongruity of Mr. Thomas's insistence on tradition and regular procedures at the very moment when he is about to become a political prisoner and when the final destruction of his house is going on a few yards away is overwhelming. He shares the naïveté of Churchill and other Conservatives who failed to grasp fully just how far England had come in 1945. Later, after being locked in his own loo, he "felt dithery and confused and old."

In the last scene of the story, Mr. Thomas is pictured as a pathetic old man who is outraged at the abrogation of his personal property rights. Conversely, almost everyone else in the last section views the destruction quite impersonally, including the unnamed representative of the gang who addresses the imprisoned Mr. Thomas:

'There's nothing personal,' the voice said. 'We want you to be comfortable tonight.'

'Tonight,' Mr. Thomas repeated incredulously.

'Catch,' the voice said. 'Penny buns—we've buttered them, and sausage-rolls. We don't want you to starve, Mr. Thomas.'

The impersonal nature of this act is echoed by the lorry driver who unwittingly pulls down the house, not knowing that the boys have attached a line from the house to his lorry. After pulling down the house, the driver rescues Mr. Thomas from the loo, only to be confronted with the indignant and outraged old man who keeps reiterating '"My house"' (italics mine). The lorry driver apologizes for laughing at the incongruous scene of destruction as Mr. Thomas upbraids him:

'I'm sorry,' the driver said, making heroic efforts, but when he remembered the sudden check to his lorry, the crash of bricks falling, he became convulsed again. One moment the house had stood there with such dignity between the bomb-sites like a man in a top hat, and then, bang, crash, there wasn't anything left—not anything. He said, 'I'm sorry. I can't help it, Mr Thomas. There's nothing personal, but you got to admit it's funny.'

Thus Trevor's prophecy that "not anything" would remain is fulfilled. The simile used to compare the dignity of the house to that of a "man in a top hat" is the final identification of the house with the privileged class, and it is, of course, the same image which comes to Blackie's mind when Trevor uses the word *beautiful* earlier in the story to describe Mr. Thomas's house. In addition, the lorry driver's echo of the nameless boy's earlier plea that "there's nothing personal" not only reflects the impersonal nature of modern life but also reinforces Trevor's earlier disdain for human emotions and his insistence that there are only "things." Thus the gang symbolically destroys not only class distinctions and privilege but also dehumanizes "itself' in the process by stressing neither beauty, individuality, love, nor grace but efficiency, democracy, collaboration, and unemotional commitment to group action.

As Mr. Thomas's house falls, the story stands— complete, unified, closely woven. Yet it remains puzzling to many readers; and in conclusion, it seems worthwhile to consider the source of this effect. I should like to suggest tentatively that the source of that puzzlement resides both in Greene's own ambiguity regarding the changing political guard and also in the distance between his own religious conservatism and the general secular liberalism of most of his readers today.

As an artist, Greene certainly must be aware that art and beauty traditionally have been the private province or concern of the aristocratic classes in Europe, and he naturally enough values the grace and elegance preserved through that conservative tradition as in Wren's architecture or other esthetic monuments. Yet as a modern intellectual very much in touch with contemporary politics, he certainly must be equally aware of the social inequities often fostered by that conservative tradition. However, the irony of that paradox is doubled, for the system which purports to correct those inequities—especially as the Labour Party attempted to correct them in England—too frequently substitutes a New Misery for an Old Misery, a blitzed, impersonal world without any esthetic sensibility or any sense of history. Thus, the ambiguous effect of the story lies partly in this double paradox inherent in the spirit of the author.

Secondly, Greene's Catholic bias tends to make him sceptical of any temporal order; and though many contemporary readers may instinctively identify with the democratic procedures and the collaborative efforts of the Wormsley Common Gang, Greene himself is much more ambivalent toward worldly reformers or revolutionaries as is evidenced in many of his works—*The Power and the Glory, Brighton Rock,* and *The Honorary Consul,* to name but three. This distance between the world-view (or other-world view) of Greene and the *Weltanschauung* of the contemporary secular reader is also, then, a source of the puzzlement often produced by "The Destructors."

Finally, however, the story satisfies the close reader by its perfect balance of one political viewpoint against another as the image of the spiral staircase held in suspension by "opposite forces" epitomizes the story, and these political viewpoints are much better understood when seen in the light of English politics of the decade immediately preceding the writing of the story.

Source: Jesse F. McCartney, "Politics in Graham Greene's 'The Destructors,'" in *Southern Humanities Review,* Vol. 12, No. 1, Winter 1978, pp. 31-41.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay, Stinson discusses the conflicts of order/chaos and good/evil in "The Destructors."

"The Destructors," a masterfully controlled and deeply resonant short story, occupies the final position in Graham Greene's collection, *Twenty-One Stories.* Although it is very possibly the best of all the stories save the lead-off story, "The Basement Room," and although it has been collected in several textbook anthologies including the widely used *Story and Structure* by Laurence Perrine, "The Destructors" has as yet provoked no extended comment in print.

The story, which concerns itself with a particularly egregious case of vandalism among London youth, has failed, perhaps, to be fully understood. "The Destructors" attempts not so much to provide a sociological or psychological explanation for the causes of juvenile delinquency (although it does do this to some extent) as it does to provide a parable-like comment on man's inborn depravity and the primacy of evil in the world. Greene's theological view, here as elsewhere, is strongly Augustinian, as is that of two of his British contemporaries who have written dark fables of youthful violence far better known than Greene's short story—William Golding in *Lord of the Flies* and Anthony Burgess in A *Clockwork Orange.* To all three writers, children are far from being Wordsworthian repositories of heavenly innocence; they are used rather as stark but convenient representations of man's almost irresistibly strong pull toward evil. To all three authors, the liberal social ethic (scientism, empiricism, liberal humanism) is largely anathema since it fails, in their view, to take proper account of the extensively dark side of human nature; like so many twentieth-century writers they are opponents of rationalism (thus the frequent grotesques in Golding and Burgess), and are interested not so much in explanations of the causes of individual human behavior as they are in all-embracing comments on human nature.

"The Destructors," however, achieves the success that it does because Greene gives it enough life-infusing blood to save it from becoming simply another pale allegory. After all, there is hardly anything original about the thematic appearance of original sin, especially in modern literature. The boys in the story are individual boys first and foremost; they are symbols of man's innate leaning toward depravity only secondarily. And unlike strict parable or allegory, the story ends in paradox rather than in resolution. But still there is a quite definite theological scaffolding upon which Greene has built an artistically meaningful story and a significant comment on the times in which we live.

Critical Essay #7

Although there are several levels of conflict in the story, all are subsumptions of the Order/Chaos conflict. The underlying theological explanation for this ever-present conflict is suggested almost immediately by the obvious symbolism of the name by which the boys think of themselves: the Wormsley Common Gang. This suggests, of course, that the devil (the worm) is indeed abroad in the world, that he is a common denominator in at least some of the actions of all human beings, and that he lives even in the hearts of these boys who are, to all overt appearances, normal in every way. The story ultimately reveals that the boys, random survivors of the Blitz and dwellers in a decidedly post-Edenic world, are strongly predisposed toward forming the most appallingly thorough of partnerships with Chaos and Old Night.

As a part of the larger Order/Chaos conflict, Greene insistently draws the reader's attention to what might best be called the plan/chance conflict. To modern man generally, as to the boys who are his representatives, chance seems to be the ruling principle in the universe. It is by chance that Old Misery's house, unlike those surrounding it on both sides, has been spared destruction during the Nazi bombings. The bombed-out lot on one side, cleared of its rubble, has become an *"impromptu* car park" (italics mine). The word appears again in the story when it is said that the boys formed an *"impromptu* court." Prior to Trevor's ascendancy to the position of gang leader, the boys' favorite pastime is to "take buses *at random."* Blackie, the old gang leader, is made to feel in a more personal way the element of chance in the world, the "fickleness of favour" as the narrator calls it, when the magnetism of Trevor's plan pulls the boys into regarding him (Trevor) as their leader. It is by chance that Old Misery returns home early before the work of destruction is completed, but it is also by pure chance that he is spotted on the train by Mike who has sufficient time to warn the other boys of the old man's approach. Greene makes some other quite distinct efforts at conveying the feeling that in the modern world especially, some dark force has brought about an abdication of plan, order and control. Chance almost totally prevails.

Paradoxes in the story are tightly wound as is evident in the working out of the plan/chance conflict. We might well suppose that chance is to be equated with chaos, and we might choose, as do theologians and moral philosophers, to define evil as fundamental disorder. But Trevor, the diabolically cool agent of destruction, is the one character who, ironically enough, is possessed of a plan—a finely formed and resolutely wanton one. He is no victim of a devilish but momentary impulse, no real representative of the unleashed Id. Conversely, the boy whose name—Blackie—most directly suggests the devil, acts largely on impulse; it was under his leadership that the gang "took buses at random," and gave only fitful attention to any one activity. Blackie is, however, only a minor diabolist indeed; it is Trevor who is the representative of some deeper Unreason to which the boys give a ready response. Trevor might not seem at first to fit the demonic part which he is to play; he is ordinarily timid, deferential, even somewhat involuted. There is, however, a kind of larger logic to Trevor's actions, a logic which can be explained on the universal human level as well as on the individual psychological one.

Trevor is revealed in the story as a kind of quintessential modern man, an inwardly anguished sufferer given over to a philosophy of radical materialism (or perhaps nihilism) that is born of a sick existential despair. "All this hate and love. It's soft. It's hooey. There's only things, Blackie," says Trevor. The other boys, themselves no believers in absolutes, would seem inclined to agree. It was they who could feel only scornful and embarrassed at Trevor's use of the word *beautiful* apropos of Old Misery's house. All of the boys, then, live in a frighteningly chill and empty world, a world devoid of moral values, decency, trust or beauty. When Old Misery quite benevolently gives them some candy, the boys react in the only way that their honestly cynical natures permit—with suspicion and resentment. Without knowing it, of course, the boys actually do long deeply for the orderly security of absolute values, for a fixed universe in which they can see their place and to some reasonable extent control their destinies. But to them, as to modern man generally, all absolutes are impossible of achievement save one—destruction. Through destruction, the reverse side of creation, man can become a god of sorts, or can at least play at it as Trevor does, or like a more famous and more anguished existential hero, the Caligula of Camus. We learn that the boys "worked with the seriousness of creators—and destruction is after all a form of creation." The boys' "creation" obviously assuages somewhat an impotence that is both existential and social. No astute cultural commentators are needed to draw parallels and analogies to the youth of the world of today and the last few years.

The ironies of the plan/chance conflict seem further revealed in the fact that Old Misery's house was designed by none other than Christopher Wren. It was Wren, who more than any other man, created both order and beauty out of the chaotic shambles that was London after the great fire of 1666. An astronomer and mathematician as well as an architect, Wren serves as a convenient representative for Greene of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rationalist. It is totally significant that it was World War II that disastrously weakened the foundation of Wren's house; that from then on it leaned precipitously and had to be supported by makeshift wooden struts. The rationalistic spirit, thoroughly beset since late Victorian times, seems too to have survived the unchecked horrors of World War II only as a lingering invalid. It is ironic, though, that it is Trevor, the man with a plan, who destroys Wren's plan—and symbolically, the whole preexistent world of apparent human order, form and control.

Trevor, although closely in league with the dark forces of the universe, acts not out of motiveless malignity. He is not the Vice of the medieval morality play, nor is he Iago, nor Satan himself. For one thing, Greene takes some care to outline a psychological basis for Trevor's planned deed of destruction. Keenly conscious of class distinctions, Trevor felt both his social and psychic universe shattered when "his father had 'come down in the world.'" (There are overtones of Judaic-Christian myth in the phrase, too, with its allusion to the Fall.) The fact that Trevor's father had been an architect is not insignificant either. It seems likely that the boy's father was, at least in the world's terms, a failure as an architect. As a hyper-sensitive adolescent, Trevor is unable to accept this fact, but seeks instead, no doubt on a level largely subconscious, to avenge his father's hurt on the world of architecture. Old Misery was himself, we learn, once a "builder and decorator", and his house, designed by Wren, the dean of London architects, is conveniently located in the neighborhood, thus serving as a neat and ready object of

vengeful attack. But underlying all other psychological factors, perhaps, is the trauma likely to have been suffered by most of the boys as a result of the war. Newborn babies at the very beginning of the war, they spent a significantly enough part of their psychologically formative years huddled, as Greene suggests, in parents' arms in the Wormsley Common underground station as Nazi bombs dropped in the streets above. Greene is careful to provide such psychological explanations, but he does so with sufficient subtlety and relative unobtrusiveness. The reader is not at all apt to get the feeling that he is being burdened with a too rigid schema or a series of explanations that are either perfunctory or contrived. Narrative comment in the story is held to a bare minimum; the progression and order of events is direct, economical, and almost wholly unimpeded.

Critical Essay #8

To be sure, though, there is something enigmatic about Trevor, some inscrutably dark center of his being. But Trevor himself is quite definitely not evil incarnate. The student of Greene's fiction knows the strong proclivity of the author for the saint-sinner paradox—his Manichean-like belief that good and evil are the opposed forces in the universe but that they everywhere interpenetrate in this post-lapsarian world in ways which are endlessly confusing. Evil can be found in good men, and often great good in men whom the world calls evil. A recurrent paradox in Greene's fiction (regarded by some as heretical and by others as simply sentimental) involves the notion that the man strongly attracted toward evil, or even wholly given over to it, is more apt to find the path to salvation than the faceless entity who remains forever morally uncommitted. Greene is of course not without some good support in his theological view, despite his sometime trouble with the Roman Curia. We have the example of Christ's association with public sinners and his awful warning that it is the lukewarm that he spits from his mouth. Dante, as is well known, consigns his moral neutrals to a harsh if utterly appropriate punishment in hell's antechamber. In "The Destructors," then, one wonders whether Trevor should better be viewed as saint or sinner, savior or satan, an angel of vengeance with a fiery sword or a corrupt innocent, now become one of Lucifer's chief cohorts.

The paradoxical—even grotesque—interpenetration of good and evil in the world is revealed further in the story by a corresponding mixture of literary modes. The bastardization of the old pure forms is forcefully underscored, for example, in the ending of the story which is both comic and tragic at once. Earlier in the story, the odd conjunction of good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly, could be found adumbrated in the paradoxes of Old Misery's house itself. It's something to do with "opposite forces," Trevor explains to the other boys, that supports the floating staircase in the centuries old house. And the house itself, which serves a complex double duty of representing the state of man after the Fall as well as the state of Western civilization in modern times, is beautiful to the eye, but rotten within—its foundation nearly collapsed and its plumbing no longer functioning. If the boys are, in Trevor's own analogy, "like worms . . . in an apple", the apple is already rotten. The house, representative of decadent modern civilization, is owned and inhabited by a man named Old Misery, and herein lies another meaningful paradox. Mr. Thomas certainly seems a benevolent enough old man, but actually he can be seen as a luciferan figure. What better name might the devil have, after all, than Old Misery? He offers candy as Satan offered the apple, but his gift would not bring knowledge of good and evil, but only forgetfulness. The boys would be narcotized into accepting the world as it is, and thus perpetuating "old misery." One message seems to be that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children (cf. the original sin motif and the social-psychological import of Trevor's father's "fall") and that the only real heritage bequeathed by current "civilization" to its young is misery and anxiety. Seeing beyond false facades and seeing through "bribes" (Old Misery's gift of candy), the younger generation apprehends in an almost visceral way the dry-rot of corruption that is the world of today. Feeling gives rise to action, and those in a state of

psychic disruption sometimes seek to make the world an illustration of some inner vision of chaos. Destruction has its own kind of inner logic and necessity. While it might be said that Trevor and the "gang" are harbingers of some strong dialectical principle that is currently in the process of working itself out within a large but dimly shadowed pattern of historical necessity, it can hardly be thought that they consciously see themselves as instruments of radical social change. Yet in their incongruous blend of thoroughly anarchic tendency and basic human benevolence (remember Trevor's solicitude for Old Misery's comfort when the old man was kept prisoner in his outhouse), they do rather strikingly foreshadow a most visible segment of the young generation of the nineteen-sixties—the young men that these same boys (Trevor and Blackie are fifteen in 1954, it would seem) were to become a few short years later.

Definitive interpretation of "The Destructors" is impossible, but non-definitiveness seems to come close to being the meaning itself. In the post-Edenic, usually seedy world which Greene has made his special province, absolutes are nearly impossible of attainment. Life in the world east of Eden is thoroughly composed of a whole series of paradoxes that are sometimes poignant, sometimes comic, sometimes tragic, sometimes grotesque—sometimes all of these at once. Literature, being a reflection of life, should then not "cheat" by the imposition of false absolutes. The denouement of the story will only be adjudged thoroughly baffling until we understand it as a formal reflection of the author's Manichean vision. Various appropriate responses to the ending of the story are of course possible: satisfaction (the protagonists having accomplished their goal), laughter, disgust, frustration, resentment, puzzlement and disquietude, feelings of tragedy. The ending is precisely right for our complexly troubled modern times: monistically pure or set responses, emotional or intellectual, are woefully inappropriate in the complex and supercharged atmosphere of the modern world. The center cannot hold; the earth caves inward and the poles touch. In such a world tragedy and comedy collide; the sublime begins to slide toward the grotesque. Artistic anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Critical Essay #9

"The Destructors," though, is not an anti-story; it has both form and meaning. Unlike most modern fiction of the kind which comments on the atomization of society and the fragmentation of the self, "The Destructors" is not disintegrative in its technique. It is difficult, in fact, to think of a contemporary story that makes anywhere near as richly meaningful an artistic statement, that is more highly and tightly wrought by means of narratively direct, straightforward, unpretentious technique. And as to meaning, the story is not absurdist, although it is, perhaps, within hailing distance of the Absurd. The story comes far nearer to standing in the tradition of the Christian grotesque, a tradition which sees man staring into the face of a devil immanent and active in the world, not into Nothingness. In this tradition, the dualities of human experience—mind/ body, heaven/hell, permanence/change, innocence/experience—are both motive force and central aspect of technique.

The aesthetic puzzlement the reader might well experience at the conclusion of "The Destructors" should be at least somewhat mitigated when he sees it as falling largely within the grotesque mode. Schlegel sees the grotesque residing in "the unstable mixture of heterogeneous elements, the explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying." The ostensibly sudden collapse of Old Misery's house, both ridiculous and terrifying, gives the greatest explosive force to the intricately wired series of paradoxes so carefully prepared within the story. The grotesque invariably involves the sudden and shocking visitation of the irrational, the dark and demonic, upon the world of apparent human order and form. (A literal worm found in a literal apple is a kind of mild and everyday example of the grotesque.) Traditionally, then, the grotesque, whether Christian or absurdist, has been anti-rational in its thrust. And so it is here too. Old Misery, a man who insists on things being "done regular", is the rationalist who refuses to see the world as it is and who, by his own naivete, his own failure of moral vision, perpetuates "old misery." The demonic elements in the world leap out in still more terrifying attack when their presence has gone undetected. The man who fails to take proper heed of the lessons of World War II by seeing into his own and others' heart of darkness, is morally culpable of giving the green light to further abominations. The Wormsley Common Gang, while representative of fallen man at large, are also representative of a new generation, and one wonders if, with some deeply intuitive understanding, they are not trying to teach the older generation the lessons of the past —and the recent present. If Greene is indeed saying, as he seems to be, that in this late hour, man must come thoroughly to know himself— most especially his dark potentialities—before he can save himself, he is striking exactly the same thematic note as Golding does in *Lord of the Flies.*

"The Destructors," though, defies interpretation as a strict fable, since any view of man which sees him as a paradoxical and ever-mysterious creature can posit no single meaning. It is man's mixed nature that gives rise to both his tragedy and his triumph. East of Eden man's estate is an excruciatingly intermediate one. Typical of many outhouses, the door in Old Misery's has a star, perhaps a symbol of man's illimitable aspirations, his nobility, and the light of his intellect. But the "loo" itself is a place of

excremental function, a constant reminder of the soul's humiliating imprisonment within the body, of the inevitable human progress of decay. It is here that Old Misery sits disconsolately as the Wormsley Common Gang achieves its only possible absolute, that of destruction: "There wasn't anything left anywhere." For the boys this is a moment of triumph, for Old Misery of tragedy, for the lorry driver, of irrepressible laughter. The event itself, defying a fixed and absolute interpretation, is the natural culmination of a story full of the types of paradox that the sons of Adam are heir to. Universal in its import, "The Destructors" is, though, a poignant Song of Experience aimed most directly at our own day and age.

Source: John J. Stinson, "Graham Greene's 'The Destructors ': Fable for a World Far East of Eden," in *American Benedictine Review,* Vol. 24, No. 4, December 1973, pp. 510-18.

Topics for Further Study

Compare the Wormsley Common gang with modern American gangs. Consider factors like membership, recruitment, enemies, activities, and motivations. What similarities did you find? Present your findings in a collage made up of drawings, photos, maps, headlines, text, and anything else that is appropriate.

Choose a European country (not England) and research what its young people were like after World War II. Prepare a lecture to deliver to a group of high school freshmen in which you present your findings and encourage the students to imagine how they would react in similar circumstances.

At the end of World War II, the Allied Powers emerged victorious. The Allies included twenty-eight countries, but the central nations were Great Britain, the United States, France, and Russia. Explore art (paintings, sculptures, photography, etc.) created during this period in these nations to see what themes, feelings, and moods are expressed. Do you find that the art celebrates the Allied victory or that it reflects the devastation of war? Compile reproductions of the works you find most compelling and make an exhibit demonstrating how art reflects the experiences of nations.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Since its election victories of 1945, the Labour Party is working on bringing certain industries under government control. Based on socialist principles, the Labour Party's objectives are to distribute resources evenly among English citizens and to blur the lines of social class. Its influence is on the decline, however, since the Conservative Party reduced the Labour Party's majority in parliament in the 1950 elections.

Today: After two Conservative prime ministers, Margaret Thatcher and John Majors, Labour Party leader Tony Blair is now England's prime minister. English voters seem to vote in cycles, much as American voters tend to alternate over time between Democratic and Republican leadership.

1950s: The emergence of rock and roll music in the United States leads to the style's popularity around the world. Teenagers are drawn to its energy and spirit of rebellion. Having endured the war, many teenagers in England are uncertain and cynical, and rock and roll music appeals to their spirit of defiance and to their drive to create a new identity.

Today: Rock and roll music has evolved into a variety of types, including pop, alternative rock, punk rock, heavy metal, and funk. England's contributions to rock and its descendants are considerable. Besides the many contemporary English bands enjoying worldwide success (including Radiohead, Oasis, Dead Can Dance, and Stereophonics), formative bands such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones continue to influence musicians today. These two British groups consistently top every poll, list, or survey of the best bands and albums of all time.

What Do I Read Next?

William Golding's 1954 *The Lord of the Flies* is about a group of boys stranded on an island who revert to a primitive state as they govern themselves to survive. The book explores themes of innocence, human nature, and the human capacity for cruelty. This book was published the same year as "The Destructors" and is also written by a British author.

Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) is the story of Major Scobie, a high-ranking Catholic police officer whose conscience leads him to marital troubles, religious struggles, and career problems. Based on Greene's experiences while working for the British government during World War II, this novel was very popular with American readers at the time of publication.

Edited by Philip Stratford, *The Portable Graham Greene* (1994) is a valuable resource for both new readers and long-standing admirers of Greene's work. It includes two complete novels, excerpts from ten others, short stories, essays, travel writing selections, and memoir excerpts, in addition to a thorough introduction and bibliography.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, and William Golding, eds., *Graham Greene,* Modern Critical Views series, Chelsea House, 1992.

Noted literary scholars Bloom and Golding explore Greene's life and career in this installment of their Modern Critical Views series. Besides reviewing Greene's biographical information, the editors examine Greene's body of work, commenting on themes, style, and influences.

Cassis, A. F., ed., *Graham Greene: Man of Paradox,* Loyola Press, 1994.

This collection of fifty-seven essays and excerpts includes writings by the author, interviews, and writings about Greene by others, all of which give the reader a sense of what kind of man Greene was personally and professionally. Topics covered include writing, Catholicism, and the writer's role in modern society. Contributors include Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Burgess.

Thomson, David, *England in the Twentieth Century,1914-1979,* Viking Penguin, 1990.

Thomson provides an overview of world events of the twentieth century (including both world wars, the depression, etc.) as they relate to England, in addition to reviewing important domestic issues and events. Thomson's study stops just short of Margaret Thatcher's career as prime minister.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

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A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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