

The End of the Affair Study Guide

The End of the Affair by Graham Greene

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Contents

The End of the Affair Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Book 1, Chapter 1-2.....	5
Chapter 3-7.....	7
Book 2, Chapters 1-4.....	11
Chapters 5-8.....	14
Book 3, 1-9.....	17
Book 4, Chapters 1-2.....	22
Book 5, Chapters 1-3.....	23
Book 5, Chapters 4-8.....	25
Characters.....	29
Objects/Places.....	31
Themes.....	32
Style.....	34
Quotes.....	36
Topics for Discussion.....	38



Plot Summary

The End of the Affair is narrated by Bendrix, a lame man who is a writer and who has had an affair with a married woman, Sarah Miles. The end of the affair filled him with bitterness, and when he sees his lover's husband by chance, he rekindles the affair and spies on Sarah through a private detective who brings him letters and her journal. The journal reveals Sarah had left Bendrix on account of a budding Catholicism: she was beginning to feel the need to believe in God, even in spite of her lifelong disbelief. When Bendrix reads the real reason for Sarah's termination of the affair, he hurries to her, but she rushes out, and takes refuge in a church. The excursion costs her her life, though: she has had a bad chest cold, and it turns fatal. The novel does not end there however: there is still the question of Sarah's funeral to answer—Bendrix prevails upon Henry to have her cremated instead of buried in a Catholic ceremony—and there is also the question of Bendrix' own faith. Diligently he holds to his faith in a world of coincidences, science and decisions, as everyone around him, Sarah included, wants to see the world as evidence of divine will.

The novel takes place partly in 1944, when Bendrix and Sarah were having their affair, and partly in 1946, when Sarah swings back into Bendrix' life. The affair ended badly for Bendrix: Sarah simply walked out on him after a V1 bomb blew up the front of the house where they were, making love. Sarah prayed Bendrix might survive, and when he appeared in front of her, bloody but living, she felt bound by a vow to God. If Bendrix and Sarah were young, she might have made this leap of faith into marriage, but she is already married, and Bendrix is jealous and somewhat destructive. He wants a love that will go on and on, and she knows she cannot give it to him, on account of her prior marriage vow. So she makes the leap into religion and dies before Bendrix can try to convince her to run away with him.

Bendrix spends much of the novel puzzling out her struggle between faith and doubt. He himself has been lame since a childhood illness, and whether or not this is the ultimate cause, he is also diabolical and experienced and jaded in a way other characters are not. He does not mind hurting people in order to assert his superiority over them, even if he is English and only asserts it to himself. So he has a certain derisive scorn for Henry's complacent civil servant competence, and also for Richard Smythe's anti-religious zeal, and especially for Father Crompton's smug, peaceful acceptance. He even has some contempt for Sarah's own mother, who superstitiously believes in the value of the secret baptism she gave Sarah when Sarah was two years old.

Each of these people has their personal choice for Sarah's funeral, and Bendrix suspects each of their motives. He alone, he believes, loves Sarah for who she is, and he alone, the novel would have the reader believe, was capable of sharing a living, responsive, mutual and fulfilling love with her. Everyone around him wants to believe in miracles and God—except Henry, who is too drab and functional to have any passion or belief—so Henry is isolating himself by writing his story of Sarah. Ultimately the story itself is his company, at the same time as it is his act of devotion to a Sarah who does

not exist—the Sarah he continues to love—as opposed to the others’ acts of devotion to a God they seem to believe does exist.



Book 1, Chapter 1-2

Summary

Book 1, Chapter 1: Across a rainy square, Bendrix sees Henry Miles, and he invites him for a drink at a bar, even though he says he hates Henry and once hated his wife as well. He inquires politely about Henry's wife Sarah, and hopes to hear she is ill, as he still harbors some bitterness about how their affair had ended more than a year earlier, in June 1944.

Bendrix recalls he had met Sarah through his interest in Henry himself: Bendrix was writing a novel with a civil servant main character, and he was researching the life of a civil servant. At first, he merely asked Sarah about Henry, who was Minister of Pensions at the time, but then he and Sarah developed an interest in each other. Bendrix says that Sarah felt enormously loyal to her husband, and this made him resent Henry. He recalls having quarreled interminably with Sarah while they were lovers. Nonetheless he continued to pick her brain about Henry's habits and beliefs.

Remembering Sarah while he sits now with Henry, Bendrix recalls all the details Sarah told him about Henry, but Henry breaks his reverie by expressing concern about Sarah. Henry invites Bendrix home with him to talk, and when they get to Henry's study, Henry confesses he has considered having Sarah followed by a detective. But he could not endure the possibility of passing through the detective's office, sitting in the same seat where other jealous husbands must have sat, telling the same story.

Bendrix volunteers to go in Henry's place, and to tell him what he finds. Henry replies this kind of thing isn't done, but Bendrix answers 'the not done things' are done all the time. Henry burns the slip of paper with the detective's name and address, but Bendrix has memorized it.

There is a footstep outside of the study, and Henry and Bendrix step out to find Sarah in the hall, dripping from the rain. Foreshadowing her death, Bendrix chides her protesting she'll catch her death of cold if she goes out in the rain like that.

Book 1, Chapter 2: Three years after the fact, writing the present novel in the present moment, Bendrix recalls having made a plan to go to the detective's office on Henry's behalf, and also, diabolically, on his own. He says he dreamed of Sarah a lot after his interview with Henry, and of the time he had spent with her during their affair.

Bendrix describes his visit to Mr. Savage, the detective. During the visit, Bendrix says he is afraid Savage will understand everything in advance, but as Bendrix explains, Savage is confused, and Bendrix exclaims about the strength of hate. Nevertheless, Bendrix and Savage arrange to have Sarah followed, with weekly reports and expenses being sent to Bendrix. Bendrix deliberately implies the possibility the reports will be forwarded to Henry, but this is unclear as of now.



Analysis

Book 1, Chapter 1: There is an almost claustrophobic air of intimacy and hatred in the story, almost from the start. Obviously Bendrix is a tortured character, and the opportunity to torture Henry at close range arises early on, so the reader has to wonder what kind of person Bendrix is going to turn out to be. He teases Henry, and he loathes his formality of tone, but he is also surprised by and impressed with Henry's actual suffering, and sees him as an equal partner in suffering for a moment.

Book 1, Chapter 2: Bendrix is disheartened—he feels almost poisoned by his interview with Mr. Savage, although Savage leads him to believe all men must come to this identical interview at one point or another. This sets the stage for a tension between innocence (aren't all lovers innocent? Bendrix asks) and experience. Bendrix seems to resent his earlier innocence for the pain it has caused him, but he is also circumspect in his actions now. His discretion is itself a cause for suspense, because he does not reveal his plans to the reader yet, and the reader has to keep reading to try to figure him out.

Vocabulary

Arbitrarily, inaccurate, bias, civil servant, ignoble, literary, evasive, contempt, cold-blooded, quarrel, misfortune, hospitality, abandoned, patronize, acquaintance, penetrated, conniver, amour propre, disturbance, conventional, dispirited, impasse, voguish.



Chapter 3-7

Summary

Book 1, Chapter 3: Bendrix recalls having met Sarah for the first time, and he describes the Cophetua complex—an attraction to lower-class women—but he says he had not found Sarah sexually attractive when he first met her at a party at Henry's house. When he stepped back inside to the party, he saw figures parting as if after a kiss, and saw Sarah as one of them. This, perhaps, gave him the sense of superiority that made Sarah sexually interesting to him.

Recalling 1939, Bendrix says memory sparks his hate as much as his love, and he says the two emotions are similar, they use the same glands, and produce the same actions. He asks the reader whether Peter or Judas was the one who really loved Christ.

Book 1, Chapter 4: When Bendrix arrives home from Savage's, there is a message that Sarah called, and Bendrix says he hopes his visit had aroused "not love, of course, but a sentiment, a memory which I might work on." (p. 28). He contemplates the idea that this time he might leave her—instead of her leaving him. It is eighteen months since they parted. Bendrix tries Sarah's number, but her number has changed. Fortunately she herself calls him, and they make a date for lunch a few days hence, on a Thursday. After they hang up, Bendrix rings her back, and apologizes. Tomorrow will be fine, he tells her. There was no reason for putting her off. As he looks forward to meeting Sarah, he says this is what hope feels like.

Book 1, Chapter 5: Sarah and Bendrix meet at a café, where Bendrix is waiting for her. Bendrix says he would often try to get her to say more than the truth, but she always disconcerted him by saying just what was true. She would not, for instance, say their affair would one day end, or perhaps they might marry. As they sit together, Bendrix says he attracts the notice of a man with a small child—and this man will turn out to be Parkis, the detective whom Bendrix has hired to follow Sarah. Sarah and Bendrix agree to go to Rules, a restaurant they often frequented during their affair.

When Sarah and Bendrix are finally seated at Rules, the waiter remembers them from almost two years earlier. Sarah tells Bendrix she wants to ask him about Henry—she is concerned he might be lonely, and Bendrix says Henry might be noticing how often she is out of the house, but Sarah says she is not out much these days.

Sarah asks Bendrix if he is working on a new book, and she says she hopes he is not writing one he could write, about their affair. He tells her revenge is harder work than writing, and she tells him he doesn't know how little there was to revenge. Sarah and Bendrix part somewhat amicably—Sarah says they are adults and can meet pleasantly now, and talk about Henry. She bursts into a coughing fit again, and Bendrix tells her to get her cough checked out, but she says it is nothing.



Book 1, Chapter 6: Bendrix says he has always been a regular writer, putting out 500 words a day routinely, breaking off in mid-sentence when his quota was filled. “Not even a love affair would alter my schedule,” he says. (p. 34). Sarah, he says, upset his placid routine.

Bendrix recalls by 1944, he would write in the mornings, for the V1s were generally coming in at night. Bendrix says as soon as he felt love for Sarah, the affair was doomed: it would be a love with a beginning and an end. Tortured by his love, he would whip himself into a fury of feelings, with the result he was pushing her out of his life. “My novel lagged, but my love hurried like inspiration, to the end” (p. 35).

Bendrix' writing is not proceeding well on the day Parkis comes to see him. Bendrix himself is in shadow when Parkis enters, so Parkis does not recognize him as the man who met Sarah at the restaurant.

Parkis submits his expenses for approval, and recounts Sarah's movements while he followed her to her meeting with Bendrix. Parkis says he was touched by the scene, since both parties seemed to be feeling strong emotions. After the meeting, Sarah had gone to a Catholic church, where she sat without praying.

Bendrix reveals himself to Parkis as the man who was with Sarah. This puts Parkis in a difficult position with regard to his son, who will not know what to think. When Parkis tells Bendrix his troubles because of using the boy for surveillance and also keeping him innocent, Bendrix says he is glad to be distracted from Sarah and his jealousy by thoughts of someone else's moral dilemmas.

Book 1, Chapter 7: Reflecting on his jealousy in the present tense, the time of their meeting and the investigation, Bendrix says he was at least in a better position than Henry: Henry still possessed Sarah, whereas he has “the security of possessing nothing” (p. 42).

Bendrix recalls 1939 again, having called on Sarah after having “fumblingly” kissed her on the subway once. He knew Henry did not care for the cinema, so he invited Sarah to see a film of one of his novels. Still ostensibly investigating the private life of a civil servant, Bendrix ‘followed up’ his kiss with the movie date.

Talking about the film afterward, Sarah says she could tell Bendrix had written the scene about the onions. Onions became a shorthand code word for lovemaking between Sarah and Bendrix. It was at the moment a dish of onions was put on the table Bendrix says he became aware of an individual and honest woman. Their unanimous exclamation that the steak was extraordinarily good was simply an immediate oral admission and consummation of their attraction to each other. “There was no pursuit, no seduction” (p. 44).

Bendrix says he and Sarah both proclaimed themselves to be in love, and they took a taxi to a hotel to make love—badly, as it turned out. When Bendrix takes Sarah home afterwards, she takes him inside, and they kiss until they heard Henry's step on the stair that “always squeaked,” Sarah says.



Bendrix says he takes Sarah's 'always' as an indication she knows how to conduct an affair, and she has grown accustomed to the signs by which her husband's presence might be anticipated.

Analysis

Book 1, Chapter 3: Bendrix' recollection of his first meeting with Sarah was unremarkable until he saw what he thought was her kissing another man. This made her interesting to him, and he considered Henry's position as the husband who either did not know, "or he did not care—or else what an unhappy man he must be" (p. 27). Recalling his time with Sarah is clearly painful, although the reader does not know yet why he is pained by the memories.

Book 1, Chapter 4: Bendrix is determined to tease Sarah, and torture her some, when she calls, much the same way he teased her husband, but this time his emotions are involved, and he calls her back to say yes, he can meet earlier than they had arranged. Hope, it would seem, is a new sensation for Bendrix.

Book 1, Chapter 5: Bendrix' reunion with Sarah proceeds smoothly enough, but it turns out Sarah is concerned about Henry—and not about Bendrix, as much. The reader still has to puzzle out how their affair had ended, and what kind of cat and mouse game Greene is playing with the story. Sarah insists there wasn't anything for him to revenge, but that is all the reader gets. Sarah presents the notion adults ought to be able to meet civilly, after an affair, and talk about things, although it seems Bendrix already has less civil plans than a casual platonic meeting.

Book 1, Chapter 6: The interview with Parkis shows us a Bendrix burdened by strong feelings, and Parkis' determination to conduct his investigation ethically, under the eyes of his son, is a benchmark for the novel—the reader is still not sure what Bendrix' aims will be, and whether he will be scrupulous in regard to Sarah. His surprise when he is caught up in another person's trouble would seem to say he is sharply attuned to his own feelings of desire and injury, and appreciates the respite from his own emotional/intellectual processes.

Book 1, Chapter 7: This chapter finally shows the reader at least the consummation of Sarah and Bendrix' affair: they recognized each other and simply began to kiss and went to a hotel to make love. Without seduction or pursuit, their affair was unsullied by inequality. They were simply free to desire each other, and if Bendrix began almost at once to anticipate the end of the affair (which the title has clued us to look for) its beginning was auspicious enough, a profound encounter that brought both Sarah and Bendrix to life.

Vocabulary

Relevant, condemned, detected, superiority, humility, sentiment, dreadful, monosyllable, hope, squabble, overcome, intention, amplitude, assumption, gambits, sherry,



methodically, grammatical article, proximate, proceeded, anxiously, acquaintance, ceremony, resolution.



Book 2, Chapters 1-4

Summary

Book 2, Chapter 1: Bendrix says unhappiness is much easier to convey than happiness. Happiness, he says, “annihilates us: we lose our identity” (p. 47). Bendrix says he felt happy during the phoney war (between Germany’s invasion of the lowlands in 1939 and their invasion of France in 1940), although he says his happiness must have been shot through with anxiety and tension. Bendrix was never sure whether he was Sarah’s only lover—he suspected there were others, and she was only toying with him. Brutally frank, Sarah would only talk about the present moment—never the future—so Bendrix was never sure beyond the sensation of present-tense love. He could never fight off the sensation of his own doubts. Sarah’s effectiveness in arranging meetings with Bendrix delighted him, but it made him crazy with doubt: where did she learn to be so efficient and cold-blooded?

Nonetheless, Bendrix and Sarah were “together in desire” (p. 49), and Bendrix says he had to cover Sarah’s mouth during her orgasms to keep Henry from hearing. Henry, she says, would not know what the sound was, and this gives Bendrix a sorry image of her marriage with Henry. Sarah, though, was “unhaunted by guilt” (p. 50), not because she was Catholic, but because she did not believe in God. She thought herself free, with the modern secular freedom.

Bendrix says he doubts everything he is writing, because he is in strange territory, being in love. To orient himself, he says he feels like a police officer, even in the moment of love: he is always gathering evidence of the crime, the end that has not been committed yet.

Book 2, Chapter 2: This chapter recounts the letter Parkis sends to Bendrix. Parkis says he has made contact with Sarah’s maid, and Sarah’s appointment book is an elaborate sham, as she does not show up for many of the meetings listed there.

Reading Parkis’ report, Bendrix feels like he is Parkis himself, not a lover but a detective. Bendrix reads a note Parkis had salvaged from Sarah’s trash; it reads like a love note. It says she feels like she is just beginning to love. Bendrix resents Sarah’s openness—she was always coded and guarded with him, and love was ‘onions’. But with this lover (who will turn out to be God) she is openly adoring and devoted.

Bendrix says he measured love by the extent of his jealousy, and by his standard, Sarah could not love him at all, since she did not want to merge with him against all logic.

When Bendrix discussed his jealousy with Sarah, she could only say she wanted him to be happy, even if that meant going for another woman—her love was always limited to the present moment. Bendrix, on the other hand, says he would rather be dead than



see her with another man. He would not leave Sarah alone with his doubts and torments, and if he recalls them now, from the vantage point of years later, he is nonetheless still angry about the disparity in their loves.

Bendrix confesses in this chapter that one of his legs is shorter than the other, as a result of a childhood illness—and his lameness must be part of his personality, his debility, his preternatural experience, his scorn for normal and healthy people and their naïve, innocent perspective.

Bendrix recalls walking out and leaving Sarah in his apartment after the argument spoiled their time together. He picked up a prostitute, had a drink in a bar with her, but he did not want her, he only wanted to hurt Sarah. He called Sarah at his home, and she did not answer, but she phoned in the morning and they spoke as if nothing had happened. Nonetheless, Bendrix says he sometimes thinks of Sarah as his personal Devil, as if she were destined to destroy love in him.

Book 2, Chapter 3: Parkis reports Sarah had visited a house at 16 Cedar Road but Parkis could not tell which bell she rang. He would go back to powder the bells so he could tell which one she rang. Bendrix writes to invite Henry to lunch, to discuss Sarah, but when they meet, Henry says he is no longer worried. Bendrix says he had gone to see the detective after all, and he tells Henry he has been deceived by Sarah. Henry is furious with this news, but Bendrix says he feels “drained of poison” (p. 65) and a strange connection develops between the two men.

Book 2, Chapter 4: Bendrix follows Henry out of the club, and finds him in Victoria Gardens. Henry asks him if he and Sarah were lovers, and Bendrix confesses that they were. Henry asks rhetorically ‘Why didn’t she leave me?’ and Bendrix tells him because he had a good income, and could offer security. He tells Henry there were other lovers, and tells him Sarah left him because he himself had become a boor and a fool. Henry tells Bendrix he is well regarded as a writer, but Bendrix responds Henry is known as a first-class civil servant, so “what the hell does our work matter?” “Henry said sadly, “I don’t know anything else that does.” (p. 67).

Bendrix tells Henry one cannot be satisfied with fondness—he wanted a love that would go on and on. “It’s not in human nature,” Henry tells him. “One has to be satisfied.” (p. 68).

Analysis

Book 2, Chapter 1: Greene introduces here the uncertainty and relativity that will become characteristic of postmodern literature. As an uncertain lover, Bendrix is tormented by the shared, living experience from which Sarah excludes him by virtue of her conscientiousness. He wants to merge with her, but it is impossible, they remain separate. Fundamentally torn apart by his desire and his jealousy, Bendrix is the postmodern man, at war with his own nature.



Book 2, Chapter 2: The presence of this other person (who turns out to be God) makes Bendrix furious with jealousy, and keenly aware of the flaws in himself, and in Sarah's love. This turns his love to hate, but it turns his hate into a monument to his strong feelings, even all these months later.

Bendrix speculates in religious terms about God and the Devil, and speculates his love for Sarah might be a diabolical force, insofar as it fills him with such anxiety and agony it makes him hostile to love itself. He says he relishes even the war for how it moved obstacles out of the way for his affair.

Book 2, Chapter 3: Bendrix' jealousy reveals itself in his despair over Sarah's visit to 16 Cedar Road, although this will turn out to be more a religious than an amorous visit. When Bendrix tells Henry, he relieves himself of the suffering—or perhaps he invites another into it, and now he feels companionship in his misery, instead of jealousy of a world that does not provide what he wants.

Book 2, Chapter 4: This chapter is one of the cores of the book, insofar as it defines the positions a person can take in regard to love. It is still too early to have seen Sarah's spiritual devotion—Bendrix still sees her as just a tramp, taking lovers because she cannot control herself—but Henry and Bendrix are describing the options for lovers: to be satisfied with less than passion, or to insist on eternal passion—either way, this chapter says, one is destined to be miserable, as neither stance is ultimately tenable.

Vocabulary

Convey, monstrous, egotism, noche oscura, punctuated, certainty, reassurance, indeterminate, parquet, roused, guilt, confessional, bitterness, engagement, woefully, insecurity, evasions, unbearable, accomplice, disreputable, improbability, boggle, extinguish, complacency.



Chapters 5-8

Summary

Book 2, Chapter 5: Sarah's last words to Bendrix, during their affair, were, "You needn't be so scared. Love doesn't end. Just because we don't see each other..." (p. 69). She likens their love to the love of God, whom people also love without seeing. That was the period when the V1s started coming over from Germany, and that time marked a change in the war, and in how Londoners felt.

She had said these words after an explosion had nearly killed Bendrix. When Bendrix had gone to check whether the passage is clear to descend to the basement, a V1 lands and the explosion partially buries Bendrix in rubble, in addition to knocking two of his teeth out. When Sarah sees him, she is surprised, and she tells Bendrix she has been praying. To what, he asks her. "To anything that might exist" (p. 72). She tells him she thought he was dead, and she gathers her clothes (they had just finished making love) and she leaves. That was the last Bendrix saw of her until he came back to her house with Henry two years later.

Book 2, Chapter 6: Bendrix recalls being tormented by Sarah's absence after the explosion. He recalled her saying "People go on loving God, don't they, all their lives without seeing Him?" (p. 74). But Bendrix is convinced Sarah had left him for another lover, so he says he hated her, and he says he even considered suicide.

In the present, Bendrix says he had found out whose doorbell Sarah had rung at 16 Cedar Road: Richard Smythe's. Bendrix tells Parkis he does not want to go to the courts with anything, but he does want to meet Smythe, and he asks Smythe if he can borrow his boy for the purpose of the investigation: he will say the boy is ill, and gather information from a brief visit.

Book 2, Chapter 7: On the way to visit Smythe, Bendrix gives Lance an ice, and then another, to spite Parkis. At Smythe's apartment, they meet his sister, who invites them in and gives the child an orange squash. After a few minutes, Smythe himself comes in. At first, Bendrix thinks he is gorgeous, but then sees his pockmarked cheek, and is satisfied the man could not be pleased with his image in the mirror.

Smythe and his sister are devoted to the cause of rationalist atheism—and Smythe spends his time in the park, railing against religion as a sham. He wants to offer people the hope that comes from knowing this world is all there is.

Book 2, Chapter 8: Parkis reports to Bendrix about having talked with Sarah and Henry at a cocktail party. He remarks on Sarah's cough, and hands Bendrix Sarah's journal. Parkis asks Bendrix for a good recommendation to Savage, Parkis' boss. Parkis remarks, and Bendrix confirms, that the more successful a detective is, the quicker a



client wants to be rid of him, and now that Bendrix has Sarah's journal on his desk, he urgently wants Parkis to disappear.

Parkis gives Bendrix an ashtray that was beside the bed in the Bolton case, where a Lady was found in bed with her maid and a man. He offers it as a token of friendship, but Bendrix only wants to read Sarah's journal.

Bendrix says he should try to read as a detective, but he finds himself looking for the time in June of 1944 when Sarah distanced herself from him. He has worked himself up into such a pitch of hatred and jealousy that he reads her words as the words of a stranger.

Analysis

Book 2, Chapter 5: We do not know this yet, but Sarah's spirituality made its leap during this scene, when the V1 may have killed Bendrix, but he was merely trapped under a door, with two teeth knocked out. She prayed to anything that might exist—and to her, Bendrix' survival was the sign that a divine power existed, beyond human love and understanding. Her departure is puzzling nonetheless, but she is proving to herself there is in fact a transcendent love beyond the momentary sensation of love. She puts her affection for Bendrix in this category, but proves it to herself by keeping him as an abstraction, not as a lover. It is important to note this is Bendrix' narration of events—the reader will see the same event from Sarah's perspective later.

Book 2, Chapter 6: The book decrescendos from the passion of Bendrix and Sarah's separation to the business in the present, of Parkis' reports and the new information that Sarah had visited Richard Smythe's apartment. Convinced he is her new lover, Bendrix schemes to borrow Parkis' son as a prop to contrive a visit to Smythe. He is relentless in his bitterness, and mocks Parkis for thinking he named his boy, Lance, after the Knight of the Round Table who had discovered the Holy Grail. He tells Parkis Galahad was the one who discovered the Grail—Lancelot was found in bed with Guinevere. Bendrix seems to hate himself—and Parkis—for his mockery.

Book 2, Chapter 7: Bendrix' visit to Smythe is illuminative for the marks on Smythe's cheeks, which counter his perfect figure, from the other side. Bendrix sees a fellow in him, a fellow outcast, but he also believes Smythe is Sarah's lover, so he notices his paltry optimism, offering people hope as a result of the absence of God. Bendrix seems to know the lack of God does not result in hope, but rather in torment.

Book 2, Chapter 8: When Parkis shows up with Sarah's journal, Bendrix wants to be alone with it. This chapter is short because the presence of the journal raises the expectation of a revelation, and when Bendrix opens the book, it strikes him as surreal, as if it were the writing of a stranger, because he had turned Sarah into such a character with his hatred. The reader is about to find out what her perspective was.

Vocabulary

Assignment, V1s, devastated, annihilation, prolongation, successor, possession, plaster, habit, seriously, impotence, jubilant, revived, convenient, snobbery, alert, evidence, certificate, Galahad, Lancelot, capacity, episode, furtive, trespassed, livid.



Book 3, 1-9

Summary

Book 3, Chapter 1: In the first entry Bendrix reads, Sarah addresses a 'you' who is much more obviously God—the Y is capitalized as in religious literature, unlike in the note Parkis had brought Bendrix, where the Y was lower-case. She says she and Bendrix had spent all their love all the time, with each other, and she says it was His love they were spending.

In the second entry, dated 12 February 1946, Sarah says she wants Bendrix again—not the spiritual love expressed by bearing another's pain. She says she has been bearing God's pain, but she wants ordinary corrupt human love. She wants Maurice.

Book 3, Chapter 2: This is the chapter that narrates the moment when Sarah's love for Bendrix was transformed into religious love. Sarah complains Bendrix turns her words of love into evidence against her, and cannot believe in her love. She says she is afraid of losing him in the desert all around them.

Sarah says she and Bendrix both admit they have never loved as they love each other now, but she also says she does not know how to love. She says she and Bendrix have never been happier, or more miserable.

While waiting at the Common for Bendrix, Sarah hears a man with a blotched cheek railing against Christianity. No one is paying attention. Sarah spends the day and the night with Bendrix, and this time is the summit of their intimacy. She says her vow to her husband is not important, because she never really knew him. Sarah says she hates God for putting the vow in her head—but the reader will find out this is her vow to believe—not her vow to her husband. She says the desert is full of churches and public-houses, all of which are unreal to her, because of her love for Bendrix.

Sarah and Bendrix go to his room, and when an air raid begins, Bendrix goes to check to see if anyone was in the basement. While he is in the front of the house, a V1 falls and blows up the front of the house. When Sarah sees his dead hand, she is filled with self-loathing, and sees herself as a bitch and a fake for breaking her vow to her husband, and for failing to give herself utterly to Bendrix. She begs God to keep Bendrix alive on condition she will believe, and she will end the affair, refusing to perpetuate the misery of her love for Bendrix, but devoting herself to a higher love instead. The next day, Sarah goes away with her husband, and says she feels dead.

Book 3, Chapter 3: Continuing her journal, Sarah says she would not be breaking her vow to God if she ran into Bendrix by chance, but she never does. She does run into the man with the spots, though, listening to him as a way of killing time and watching for Bendrix at the Common. She sees Smythe's sister giving people his cards, but people



are dropping them on the ground, and Sarah picks one up, and hopes Smythe sees her put it in her pocket.

At dinner, while her husband is arguing a political point with a colleague, Sarah says she wants to tell them she was naked when she found Bendrix, but of course she does not.

Sarah says when she met Dunstan, Henry's chief, she decided to take him as a lover, since she had only made a vow with regard to Bendrix, not strangers. When she is traveling on an inspection tour with Henry, she puts herself in situations where men want to kiss her, and she says she can't believe her own behavior, she is finding it too hard, she will become a slut, and destroy herself deliberately. She finally breaks down and calls Bendrix' flat, but he has gone away. Caught in the desert without Bendrix, Sarah decides to love God, even if that means hating Him for leading her to sin, but taking from her the fruits of her sin. She meditates on a prayer she heard a King had once uttered: that because God had allowed the King's best loved town to be destroyed, he would rob God of what He loved best in him. Sarah says she cannot remember the Lord's prayer, but she remembers this irreligious prayer. She tempts God to find something to love in her—she says she will only injure herself, because she does not believe yet.

Book 3, Chapter 4: In September of 1944, lunching with her husband, Sarah asks Henry whether he has ever had an affair. He tells her he has not, and Sarah wonders whether it's because no other woman has ever found him attractive. While she loved Bendrix, she says she could also love Henry, but now she loves no one.

Book 3, Chapter 5: Cleaning out her bag, Sarah finds Smythe's card, and goes to his address to see if he can convince her there really is no God to be bound to. She decides not to tell Smythe anything about her reasons, but he turns his ugly cheek to her and she tells him about the bomb and the door and her vow. She and Smythe discuss reasons why she wants to believe, and why this is foolish. In the end, even though she continues to want to offer up some inordinate sacrifice, she is not convinced by Smythe. But she says she will let herself be of use to him.

On another day, Sarah describes going to a church to escape from her house. It is a Catholic church, and she says she hates the icons, but she is trying to escape from the human body. But because of her love for Bendrix' body, she realizes she loves the body after all, and wants its apotheosis in love and then in the further apotheosis, in divine love. She no longer resents the sculptures, but she sees them as a kind of bad poetry, with the familiar body being the only vessel for it.

Sarah recalls traveling with Henry, and seeing gory, painted saints in Spain. Henry dismisses Catholicism as materialistic magic, and predicts a time when people will be free of the glandular disorder of materialism.

Sarah realizes Smythe has set himself up against a fable—he made the mistake of taking the fable of God seriously, when all around him, the longing to experience perfect



love in an imperfect human body is a surging, real desire, and an impossible one to attain.

Book 3, Chapter 6: In a journal entry dated January 1946 (i.e. the night Bendrix had come home with Henry) Sarah says she had prayed for Bendrix to survive, and she had prayed to God for deliverance from physical life, and when she came home to find Bendrix, she had experienced her complete conversion in the rain.

Book 3, Chapter 7: Sarah's journal continues with her uncertainty about her lunch with Bendrix. She describes going to the church to be alone afterwards. In her next entry, Sarah describes following Bendrix through London unobserved. She thinks about starting to see him again. She says she is delighted by the thought, and she goes home to write a note to Henry. She signs the note "God bless you" but scratches it out. She could not sign it "love".

While Sarah is leaving the note in the hall, where Henry would get it, Henry comes in, complaining of a headache, and proclaiming his affection for her. Weary with his work, and exasperated by Bendrix' revelations about her lovers, Henry asks her to stay. Sarah says now that she has seen Henry's misery, she cannot leave him. Like Smythe's pain, she wants to serve people in need, rather than fulfill herself in an imperfect, earthly love. She asks God to stop other people's pain, even if hers goes on and on.

Sarah describes a terrible scene with Smythe, after he asks her to marry him. She says she cannot, because she believes in God, and wants to honor her vows. Smythe offers to give up his doubts for her, to let her raise their children Catholic, but she cannot accept. She cannot want his happiness, she only wants to relieve his pain, so she kisses his pockmarked cheek.

Having failed with Smythe, Sarah's thoughts return to Bendrix, who she says (as she has said a number of times already) she loved like no other. She dreams of Bendrix and wants to find him in the dream fog. She says she is tired of divine love, she wants "ordinary corrupt human love." (p. 124).

Analysis

Book 3, Chapter 1: Finally the reader finds out it was God, not a lover, for whom Sarah might have left Bendrix. She describes her spiritual torment in wanting God's pain, but also wanting human love, and these are set against each other. The presumption being to love God is to accept ordinary corrupt human love is innately limiting, and can only cause pain—whereas the highest level of love—for God—entails bearing the pain of the world, not just the pain of one's own self. So Sarah removes herself from the world, and from Bendrix' life, to experience the suffering the world feels for being the world. She has effectively chastened herself, as if joining a nunnery.

Book 3, Chapter 2: The death Sarah says she suffers when Bendrix is alive and she has to follow her pledge to renounce him is consistent with the Christian conversion story, in which a person dies to the world in order to be born into Christ. Sarah's decision only



makes sense in light of her failure to either honor her marriage vows, or to honor the intimacy she and Bendrix have known together. Being a bitch and a fake, she wants an absolute thing, and when that thing is Bendrix' survival, she is willing to offer up her love in return for being a real thing in the absolute sense of God's vision. Bendrix' survival kills her: now Bendrix can understand her disappearance from his life.

Book 3, Chapter 3: The full weight of Sarah's vow to God begins to be felt: she cannot love God, she cannot love herself, she cannot have Bendrix, so all she can do is to test God's love for her by being abhorrent to herself. Her story of the King who swore to rob God of what He loved best in him becomes a measure of her religious devotion.

Book 3, Chapter 4: Sarah describes the trade she has made—earthly love for spiritual love. Her spiritual love, which encompasses all paradoxes, is not ruptured by the fact that she hates God. She has turned from physical to spiritual things, and after that rite of passage, God is all things spiritual.

Book 3, Chapter 5: This chapter is one of the philosophical hearts of *The End of the Affair*. Sarah visits a chapter and tries to decide why she can refuse to believe. She loathes the sculptures, and thinks of the future in which she will be a vapor after death. She realizes Bendrix will be a vapor as well, and realizes she loves his body, his personality, and returns to the impossibility of achieving a universal love through physical bodies. She complains against Henry's criticism of religion as materialism—he does not see the grace or the desire or the divinity in acts he cannot understand, so he reduces it all to superstition. She knows the vapor is inevitable and real—and the life of the universe beyond her is real—but she loves the bodies in which that love is real, as well. This is the heart of her conversion: the realization that faith has to be embodied and still be faith. God, she sees, is just a fable—the spirituality of things is real and persistent. As long as people live in their bodies, they will be confronted by the impossibility of experiencing transcendent love, but they can still live as if they might.

Book 3, Chapter 6: Now the circle has turned a full turn: Sarah has accepted religion completely. It is notable that this conversion takes place in the rain (a baptism of sorts) and also that it is cold out, setting the stage for her fragile health in the end. Now Sarah is ready to meet Bendrix again, and to make her faith part of her life.

Book 3, Chapter 7: This chapter describes Sarah's contest with faith in more detail. She tends to look back toward Bendrix, and writes a letter to Henry, but Henry's pain (which was itself wrought up by Bendrix' insults and revelations) prevents her going to Bendrix. Similarly Smythe's suffering keeps her from acting on her love—she merely wants to be of use, to approach God through the pain of others. She wants to take their pain on herself, presumably like Christ, although she does not say as much. In the end, though, she says she wants ordinary corrupt human love, as if the imperfection of loving Bendrix would in the end be the best embodiment of God's love, for her.



Vocabulary

Corrupt, pounces, desert, barrister, isolation, hermit, Freud, unexpectedly, vow, merciful, rubbish, muzzle, cluttered, tenderness, hysteria, reinforced, slut, immortal, illusion, mortification, continually, continuously, eliminate, persuade, difficulties.



Book 4, Chapters 1-2

Summary

Book 4, Chapter 1: The novel returns to Bendrix' voice in the present moment. Bendrix cannot read any more of Sarah's journal—he has seen all the evidence he could need, of Sarah's affection for him, and the reason for her departure. He says there is enough divine love in him that he can keep squandering it with her. He calls Sarah, and insists he is coming over. Sarah asks him not to, but he insists, even though she is down with a cold. He goes to her house, and arrives there in time to see her leaving, walking out into the sleet. He follows her—losing her trail but finding her again in the church at Park Street.

Seated beside her, he tells her he knows she loves him, and he says he knows because he has read her journal. She only chides him lightly for this. He tells her he wants to go away with her. She accepts, but she is ill, and she falls asleep on his arm. When she wakes, she pleads she should go home to recuperate.

Book 4, Chapter 2: For the next week, Bendrix waits for news of Sarah, but she is ill, and does not call. Bendrix sees Parkis in the reading room, and Parkis complains about his profession losing respectability after the Bolton case. Eight days after Bendrix' interview with Sarah, his phone finally rings: Henry is calling to say that Sarah is dead, and Henry asks Bendrix to come over.

Analysis

Book 4, Chapter 1: This is a climax of sorts, as Bendrix declares himself to Sarah, and she relents, and accepts him. It is a tragic climax, though, as Sarah's illness and her devotion are both going to keep her from him.

Book 4, Chapter 2: This brief chapter is like a blow—the news of Sarah's death is blunt and painful, after the possibility of a future for her and Bendrix. But the book is still far from over, and it seems the question of her faith and its effect on Bendrix will still have to be resolved.

Vocabulary

Squandered, warden, handkerchief, governess, territory, triumphant, nightmare, assured, hideous, absurd, altar, dangling, imprisoned, assent, loneliness, commissioned, vulgar, extravagant, exhausted, influenced, hypnotically, unconscious, rival, knotty, smudgy.



Book 5, Chapters 1-3

Summary

Book 5, Chapter 1: Bendrix goes to Henry's house and consoles him with whiskey and conversation. Henry tells Bendrix about Sarah's illness, which was too far progressed, by the time a doctor was called. Henry says the nurse told him Sarah called out for a priest before she died, but he believes she was delirious, and did not know what she was saying.

When Bendrix inquires about the funeral, Henry says cremation is the easiest thing, and Bendrix feels cremation will be a challenge to the God she believed in—resurrect this body, if you can. He assures Henry that Sarah did not believe in anything. If Sarah got married at the registry, instead of a church, a cremation should be most fitting.

When Henry brings Bendrix a set of pajamas and takes a sleeping pill, Bendrix studies Sarah's desk, and the little mementoes that connected her to him.

In the morning, Smythe comes to Henry's house, but Henry is still drugged, and Bendrix talks to him. Bendrix is insulting to him. Smythe tells Bendrix Sarah was becoming a Catholic. Smythe tells Bendrix Sarah spoke of him, and Bendrix says Sarah made fools of them both. After Smythe goes to see Sarah's body, he asks Bendrix to let Sarah have a Catholic funeral. He says Sarah wrote to ask him to pray for her, and Bendrix teases him by asking him whether it's fitting to pray to a God he does not believe in.

When he gets home, Bendrix finds a letter has come from Sarah. In it, she tells him she cannot come away with him. She says she had spoken to a priest about him, and the priest said she could not be married to him—she was already married to her husband. Sarah says she was never sure of anything until Bendrix came to life after the bomb, and she says Bendrix taught her to doubt, but in doubting she found she wanted to believe, and this desire was its own evidence.

Reading Sarah's letter, Bendrix says he wishes he weren't as strong as he is, constitutionally, that he should have to keep bearing the pain of her absence.

Book 5, Chapter 2: Bendrix takes a short trip to talk with a reviewer named Waterbury who is writing an article about Bendrix' work. Bendrix is unenthusiastic, but wants a favorable notice, so he goes to meet Waterbury in Tottenham Court Road. Waterbury is there with Sylvia, a student of his and his girlfriend. Bendrix tells them he has to get to a funeral, but Waterbury wants to know Bendrix' literary opinions. Bendrix ends up snubbing Waterbury, and Sylvia ends up coming with Bendrix to Sarah's funeral, leaning against him on the tram.

Book 5, Chapter 3: Bendrix backtracks a bit to describe the interview with Father Crompton, the priest to whom Sarah had inquired about becoming Catholic and marrying Bendrix. Father Crompton wants her to have a Catholic burial, but Bendrix



convinces Henry a cremation is better, and more practical, as it has already been planned.

When the priest turns his back on Bendrix, Bendrix wants to insist Henry is the corrupter, not him. He insists his love for Sarah has more value than the guilt and the pain the priest recognizes and thrives on.

Analysis

Book 5, Chapter 1: This chapter starts to wind the novel down—the last conflicts will be between the priest and Bendrix' sense of Sarah's atheism. Her letter to him makes it clear she has found faith, and her love for Bendrix himself introduced her to it. The only remaining tension will be between Bendrix and his own emotions: how will he continue to live with Sarah's absence, and his love—without finding God. Will he follow in her footsteps, and believe?

Book 5, Chapter 2: Waterbury is an odd foil for Bendrix' musings on Sarah's death and his own writing. Waterbury wants to know Bendrix' literary thoughts, but Bendrix cannot see the value of writing when his lover is dead, and the question of her spirituality hangs over the funeral. (The book makes a non-linear leap ahead in time, skipping over the decision about Sarah's funeral, which comes in the next chapter.) Sylvia's faith in Bendrix' emotions and his suffering puts her at the beginning of the path Sarah herself took, in opposition to the cold and intellectual-literary path down which Waterbury is leading her.

Book 5, Chapter 3: In this short chapter, Bendrix asserts his own philosophy as opposed to the priest's Catholicism. Even though the priest has the authority of a letter from Sarah, Bendrix insists on the value of his own love for Sarah—and her willingness to live in the moment of that love with him—as against the tradition of Catholicism and the confessional. He accuses the priest (in his thoughts, not in person) of failing to recognize the value of love.

Vocabulary

contriving, involuntary, mislaid, minimum, gloomily, missionary, cynical, transferred, bilious, discouraging, penicillin, tidily, delirious, crematorium, resurrect, prayers, postpone, filthy, interpret, miniature, pendulum, boundaries, bleary, stimulated, unreasonable.



Book 5, Chapters 4-8

Summary

Book 5, Chapter 4: Sylvia comes with Bendrix to Sarah's funeral, and Bendrix considers taking Sylvia as a lover, taking her from Waterbury, in revenge for Sarah's death and Waterbury's fatuousness. He offers to dine with her, and asks her to break her date with Waterbury.

Sylvia offers to leave the funeral, but Bendrix likes having her there. He sees Parkis, who comes out of respect for Sarah's religiousness. Parkis points out Dunstan to Bendrix, and Bendrix regrets involving Sylvia in his life. He prays to Sarah to get him out of it.

Sarah's mother seems to answer Bendrix' call, and when she tries to touch Bendrix for money, he offers to dine with her, which allows him to break his date with Sylvia. Drinking Chianti with Sarah's mother, Bendrix finds that everything is crowded with Sarah—the wine has significance because he and Sarah never drank that kind of wine together.

Mrs. Bertram—Sarah's mother—tells Bendrix she was a Catholic at one point. She says she wanted to revenge herself on her husband by making her child Catholic in spite of his opposition. Mrs. Bertram says Catholicism 'never took' with Sarah—or herself—and Bendrix sees this as the reality—that Sarah was not really Catholic.

After the funeral, Bendrix asserts to God she was not deceiving him for Him when they lay together after making love.

Book 5, Chapter 5: Henry stops by Bendrix' apartment to ask him to come share his house. Neither Henry nor Bendrix has much appetite for work, in Sarah's absence. Henry says he dreams of Sarah, that the three of them were happy together, and he says he wishes they had let the priest have his way. Bendrix objects that Sarah was not really Catholic. He offers Henry the example of a fantastical creature he met on the Common. Henry says a man with three legs covered in fish scales couldn't exist, but Bendrix says he cannot prove that he does not.

Henry tells Bendrix his house has not been empty exactly—Sarah's absence has made her a permanent presence there. He confesses it was a great injury he did to Sarah when he married her—he is not the marrying kind.

Book 5, Chapter 6: Bendrix moves into Henry's house on the north side of the Common. When Henry is away, once, he brings a woman there, but he cannot make love to her. Bendrix finds Sarah's children's books in the cupboard, and searches them for some sign of the woman he loved. In a book she was awarded, he finds a note Sarah must have written to another student, "What utter piffle" and this makes him think of Sarah's saying she was a phoney and a fake. This is what she must always have believed of



herself. Bendrix' praise of her 'never took'. In the margin of another book, Bendrix finds a note, "and what comes next, God" and he sees God's presence as an underhanded agent in Sarah's life from childhood.

Book 5, Chapter 7: Henry tells Bendrix that he has invited Father Crompton to dinner. Father Crompton is still saying mass for Sarah, once a month. Bendrix resents him, as the man who kept Sarah from him. Father Crompton is not a conversational guest. Bendrix says he is like a conjurer who bores one with his very skill—he has everything figured out.

A delivery girl shows up with a package from Parkis for Bendrix. He is returning Sarah's children's books. He explains his son has been ill—perhaps from conditions he caught while staking out Sarah—but the boy has been affected by Sarah's death. Parkis says he had prayed to Sarah to make the boy better before he had to go to surgery for his abdomen, and when he woke, the fever was down and his abdomen was better.

In the book, Sarah had written, as a child, that she had been given the book while she was ill. If anyone stole it, they would get sick, but if someone was in bed, they would feel better for reading it. Bendrix shows the letter to Henry and Father Crompton, who see coincidence and religion, respectively.

Bendrix gets angry at Father Crompton, for his calm assurance that he knows everything about pain and forgiveness. Father Crompton condescends to say he can see that Bendrix is in pain. When Bendrix curses Father Crompton and Henry and even Sarah, he leaves, but feels left alone. Alone as a writer is alone. He says he would rather love the men Sarah slept with than the God she loved.

The terms love and hate become interchangeable as Bendrix says he talks to the Sarah he does not believe in, the same way she had spoken to the God she did not believe in. He says that he is "sick with life, rotten with health" (p. 182).

"Loving you," Bendrix says that to Sarah, "I had no appetite for food, I felt no lust for any other woman, but loving him there's be no pleasure in anything at all with him [God] away." (p. 182.) Bendrix confesses to Sarah that he is afraid.

Book 5, Chapter 8: With his novel struggling along badly, Bendrix goes to the Common to hear the speakers, and sees Smythe there. He has been cured of his spots—not by faith healing but by modern methods, electricity.

Bendrix says there is one character in his book who has to be dragged along—nothing this character does surprises Bendrix as the author. He says God must feel this way about people: they need to be dragged along, they cannot be spontaneous and creative in a divine way. Bendrix says he needs to be pushed around—unlike the saints, who are capable of divine creativity.

When Henry comes home, he is upset by having heard from Sarah's mother the story about Sarah being baptized Catholic as a child.



As Bendrix and Henry are about to leave for a drink, Smythe calls to say his face had cleared up, on its own, not through any scientific treatment. Bendrix hangs up before Smythe can say the word 'miracle', and he is irritated by how willing Smythe is to invoke the dead—the woman he, Bendrix, had loved—as the cause of something that could be explained without recourse to spirituality or superstition. Committed to coincidence to the end—and to bearing the pain of his love for Sarah, Bendrix snubs Smythe. Fearing even Sarah's journal will be used as evidence of the miracles in her life, Bendrix ventures to destroy the book. But he reads the line that "You were teaching me to squander, so that one day we might have nothing left except this love of You. But You are too good to me. When I ask you for pain, You give me peace. Give it to him too. Give him my peace—he needs it more" (p. 190) Bendrix feels unconsolated. He still feels pain, and is not consoled by any God.

Bendrix refuses to make the leap into faith, it seems too easy for him, too commonplace. Bendrix says he wants Sarah's body, and being deprived of it, he is furious and refuses to be consoled. He will not leave the earthly plane where he loved, for another plane he cannot see, but which will take everything from him. Rather than believe in a God who does not exist, Bendrix would hate a God who does exist, who would have to be subject to the same human limitations.

Bendrix walks out for a drink with Henry, and Henry tells him these drinks are the only thing he looks forward to. Bendrix concludes the novel by telling God—whom he refuses to love or accept—that he is too tired and old to learn to love. He begs to be left alone forever.

Analysis

Book 5, Chapter 4: After Sarah's ordeal and discovery of faith, the novel becomes Bendrix' again, as he asserts—to himself alone—that he loved Sarah in the human way that was religion incarnate. The rest he dismisses as magic and superstition, even the story Sarah's mother tells, of Sarah having been baptized Catholic as a two-year-old

Book 5, Chapter 5: This newfound intimacy with Henry is puzzling, after the antipathy Bendrix felt for him all along. This turn sets the stage, though, for Bendrix' attempts to keep his love for Sarah alive in a world that cannot comprehend the kind of love they shared together.

Book 5, Chapter 6: Bendrix' decision to move in with Henry is an odd one, perhaps, but it offers closure to the story and it puts him in the position of practicing a devotion to Sarah, by staying close to the scene of her life, even her failed marriage. Even in Sarah's childhood books, Bendrix finds himself competing with God for Sarah's personality.

Book 5, Chapter 7: Bendrix is still struggling with his hatred of things—of Sarah for dying, of Father Crompton for preventing her, of the church for drawing her out in the rain, of Henry for having married her. There is still a struggle to love the world that hurt



him, but his hurt seems to have a certain amount of devotion to it—at least he is keeping his wounds open, and recalling his losses and knowing the world through them. He could be like Henry, merely competent and bland, or like Father Crompton, who has everything wrapped up, but does not feel anything more sharply than his superiority over other people in their suffering. At the same time, it feels like Bendrix is not entirely capable of bearing up under the burden of hatred for everything, as it makes him afraid.

Book 5, Chapter 8: Bendrix' victory over God seems to be a joyless one—but it is a human one. He refuses to believe in Smythe's account of his 'miraculous' cure, and he ultimately decides not to destroy Sarah's journal, because it is an embodiment, it is not spiritual or abstract, it is hers, and even if it testifies to a superstitious love of God, it also testifies to the life of the woman who wrote and loved. Bendrix is not ultimately consoled by this—it is exhausting him—but his principles are at least intact, even if he is swimming against the tide of a humanity that wants its miracles. The loneliness of the writer/outsider is profound, but there are, after all, pleasures known to writers only.

Vocabulary

Gourmet, protested, suburban, embalmed, incongruously, cremation, accomplices, lingered, claret, vacancy, clergyman, integrity, deception, Catholic, grotesque, properly, draught, conceivable, non-existence, coincidence, deceiving, macabre, dithered, destiny, abortion.



Characters

Maurice Bendrix

Bendrix is an acerbic narrator, who wants to hate Sarah and Henry but is drawn to them nonetheless. He is more experienced than they, and he is willing to resort to underhanded methods for gaining knowledge about them, but he loathes his own techniques and seems to envy Sarah and Henry their complacent marriage. He says at one point he sneers at convention, but he could never pry Sarah loose from Henry.

Henry Miles

At one point Bendrix describes Henry as 'one of misery's graduates' (p. 14). Bendrix also describes him as "almost a conniver at his wife's unfaithfulness" (p. 16). Bendrix says Henry has never been in love with Sarah, and he behaves toward her with a false formality.

Sarah Miles

Sarah is married to Henry, a fairly innocent and drab civil servant. She takes Bendrix as a lover, and experiences a mutual love with him. She is extremely frank about the impossibility of the affair, but she is also legitimately in love. She has doubts about a world in which she can want Bendrix' happiness, without giving herself to him. She says she wants his happiness, but can only make him miserable because of his jealousy: she will not leave her husband. When the V1 blows up their building, she prays to anything that might be there to preserve Bendrix—and she says that she will give him up if he survives. She also pledges to believe in God, even though she has not been able to before. She struggles with this faith, but keeps to it in the end, when Bendrix offers to take her away.

Parkis

Parkis is the private detective Bendrix hires to gather information about Sarah. He tails her and reports back to Bendrix about her visits to 16 Cedar Rd. Parkis has some scruples about involving his son in the investigation, and Parkis becomes one of the moral anchors of the book for Bendrix, for his recognition of Sarah's virtues.

Richard Smythe

Smythe spends his days lecturing to the crowds in the Common, haranguing them about the absence of God, and trying to convince them of the hopeful side of this absence. Sarah starts to visit him at his apartment after the V1 bomb that ends her



affair with Bendrix: she does not believe in Smythe's nothingness, but she is willing to let Smythe try to convince her God does not exist, just to be useful to him. When Smythe tries to make love to her, and suggests marriage, Sarah kisses his pockmarked cheek. By kissing Smythe's pain, she feels she can allow God's love for her own pain to enter into her.

Dunstan

Dunstan is Henry's chief, and Sarah says she thought about taking him as a lover, but it never amounted to anything.

Father Crompton

This is the priest to whom Sarah had inquired about becoming Catholic. He shows up at Henry's house and offers to take care of the funeral arrangements, laying out the differences between Catholicism and the rationalist materialism Henry and Bendrix apparently believe in. His smug certainty about how everything works, and about God's love, is infuriating to Bendrix, who cannot convince him to recognizing human love and suffering.

Sylvia

Sylvia is the girlfriend of Waterbury, the reviewer who is writing a piece on Bendrix' books. While Waterbury is an intellectual and a cold-hearted person, Sylvia is compassionate, and Bendrix nearly takes her from Waterbury. Sylvia comes to Sarah's funeral with Bendrix. Bendrix might have taken Sylvia as a lover, but he ends up taking Sarah's mother out for dinner instead.



Objects/Places

Sarah and Henry's House

This is where much of Bendrix and Sarah's relationship takes place, as Bendrix would come to inquire about Henry's habits as a civil servant. It is where they had their first reunion.

Bendrix' Apartment

This is where Bendrix and Sarah met clandestinely, and where Bendrix was nearly killed by the V1 'robot' rocket.

The Common

This is where Bendrix runs into Henry at the beginning of the novel, and it is also where Smythe does his preaching, during the day, trying to take people from faith to a rationalist acceptance of God's absence.

The Church on Park Road

This is where Sarah goes to find refuge from her love for Bendrix and also from her marriage. She initially loathes the sculptures, but realizes that she cannot loathe the physical world when she has love for Bendrix' physical form, and even if she herself is nothing more than a vapor that will die, she wants to embody her love in a person, or in a devotion.

V1 Bomb

This is the 'robot' bomb Hitler had developed to bomb England from the Continent. These supersonic rockets marked a new era in the Blitz of London, since they traveled ahead of their own sound, and could not be anticipated—they just exploded.



Themes

Religious Love versus Ordinary Corrupt Human Love

Bendrix and Sarah are amazed to find that their love is perfect and immediate—there is no imbalance about which of them loves more. Their lovemaking is intense and fulfilling, which is in one sense the summit of human experience, to find the self mirrored in the other who answers the self's desires and hopes.

Perfect as it is, this love is bound by human limitations. It is ordinary and corrupt, in Sarah's religious terminology, complicated by Bendrix' jealousy on one side, and Sarah's marriage on the other. Without the clean slate of a pure beginning, Bendrix and Sarah's love is impossible from the start—it cannot go forward toward marriage, and without that future, it cannot relieve Bendrix of his jealousy.

Against this love, the religious love of God—spirit, the 'anything that is there' Sarah prays to—is the eternalization of the personal physical love that is impossible. Instead of loving the other, Sarah loves the animating spirit in the other, and takes upon herself the suffering associated with the impossibility of the affair. This assumption of pain seems perverse—unless you know that love will always be limited, and that the limits of love will always be agonizing. To see love end—either in a preexisting marriage or in the grave (either way, it has to end somewhere) is to be torn in half, with a spiritual desire to live forever, and a physical terror of death and parting. Living inside of another person, in love, is a pain-filled experience. She still suffers pain for the failure of human love, but in her religious language, pain becomes devotion.

Writing and the Writer's stance Toward Life

When Savage tells Bendrix that “the fact that a man feels the need of our services almost invariably means there is something to report” (p. 23) says as much about writing and human psychology as it does about jealousy, as the feeling of urgency about probing human behavior justifies attention and rational reporting. Bendrix is obviously trapped by strong feelings about Sarah, and the need to account for them—and also to testify to the power of his feelings—is evident in the tortured tone of the narrative.

Writing is more than an occupation for Bendrix, it is a philosophy, and it is destroyed by easy superstitious beliefs in miracles and faith. He wants to account for the actual psychological motives and feelings of his characters, and he is willing to live in a contingent universe of coincidences—even unexplained coincidences—rather than make the leap into faith, which turns the physical world he loves and hates into just a shadow of spiritual realities. He wants the realities, and writing lets him imagine it instead of just accepting it. Even if it exhausts him, it keeps him honest, and alive in the actual world, without shifts or dodges.



Culture, Church and Tradition versus Love, Inspiration and Religious Feeling

Sarah finds religion in her love for Bendrix, but Bendrix himself—whose novel it is, ultimately—finds confirmation of the godless moment-to-moment moral life he has been living, with an almost diabolical freedom to act upon his psychological life. In this opposition, Bendrix is opposed by Henry, who stands for bloodless bureaucratic efficiency—and by Father Crompton, who stands for the weight of Catholic history and tradition. Neither recognizes the blessing of the love Bendrix felt with Sarah, a spontaneous, mutual love that made both of them more alive, and would have continued to, if not for Sarah's failure of courage, and susceptibility to the pain of others. Smythe and Henry are similarly seducers in this sense, for their sufferings turn Sarah away from the real value of the love she feels for Bendrix.



Style

Point of View

Bendrix' point of view is ironic, self-aware to the point of pain. He tells the story of his affair with full conviction of his own suffering, and also of his own misery and his shameful behavior. This self-awareness makes the book modern in style, for it includes the narrator in the tale, almost to the point of using the tale as a technique for leading himself through a rite of passage, or ritual of acceptance, as it were.

The tale also includes Parkis' reports to Bendrix, and long sections of Sarah's journal entries about Bendrix and her love for him and her love for God. Sarah's viewpoint, which is shared by Father Crompton, and by Smythe, in the end, is that human love is impossible, because of innate flaws in human love. Because human love is impossible, and because people can only suffer on account of this impossibility, divine love allows a person to accept the impossibility of ever really consummating a personal human love (because we must all die, if we don't change first). The pain of living a human life is thus transferred to God, and by accepting that suffering, one assumes the divine patience of a God who must watch human drama play out tragically. Bendrix refuses to adopt this point of view, and struggles against a strong tide of superstition and faith to assert his own faith in life and love and particular experiences, even of hatred and rebellion against the divine acceptance. Bendrix would rather hate God as if he existed than believe in him knowing he does not.

Setting

The End of the Affair is set in London in 1939 to 1944, and again in 1946. The war is a turmoil that allows Bendrix and Sarah to have their affair without much danger of detection, so long as they stay out of the bomb shelters. But primarily the setting of the book is on the vertical axis of faith in God above and a physical human life of doubts and contingencies and coincidences below. That landscape—of corrupt human life and divine redemption and the peace into which faith translates pain—is the territory in which Sarah's quest for meaning takes place, and Bendrix enters into that landscape in pursuit of the woman who loved him, but he does not come away with the same conclusions. He resides in the actual world, where coincidences and science explain things, instead of miracles and superstition.

Language and Meaning

Most of The End of the Affair is told in straightforward language, which is not excessively metaphorical or symbolic. There are certain emotional terms that get loaded with significance: love, hate, belief/believe, God, pain, peace. These cannot be defined, exactly, but they approximate the characters' search for some explanations about what to do, and how to feel about their own feelings. The thing that is never described, but



forms the core of Bendrix' worldview, is the sexual intimacy he knows with Sarah. He wants the future that was inherent in that intimacy, and he refuses to see past his loss to the spiritual world in which loss is inevitable. The sex act—like all human experience—cannot be written exactly, because it is lived and present and felt and sublime. But Bendrix keeps that representational gap open in opposition to Father Crompton and Smythe, who are willing to fill it with the word God, a word Bendrix can use without believing what it really means. Much of the book, in that sense, depends on whether characters can believe in the word God when they say it. Sarah comes to, but Bendrix feels betrayed by her ability to believe: it sweeps him into a generalized 'world' that is human and limited and corrupt. All specificity is lost in it, but Bendrix wants to keep the particular world alive by imagining it and describing it in books.

Structure

The novel unfolds in three different time periods: the past in which Sarah and Bendrix have their affair, the period in which they rediscover each other after Bendrix' investigations, and the present moment in which the book is being written after Sarah's death. The book starts in the present, after the affair has ended, and retraces the affair and how it ended, from Bendrix' point of view. It also uses Parkis to sniff out how Sarah is feeling in the moment, and why she would have left Bendrix, which is the question the first half of the book tries to answer.

When Parkis brings Bendrix Sarah's journal, the narrative switches to Sarah's voice, and the questions Bendrix had are answered: she left him not for another lover, but for religion.

Sarah dies shortly after this revelation, and the novel turns toward the debate between religion and writing. The rest of the novel debates the question of whether Sarah should have a Catholic burial, and whether her faith ought to motivate Bendrix to believe in God as well. These ruminations dominate the last quarter of the novel, with new characters—Sylvia and Sarah's mother—entering into the novel to give more definition to the question of Sarah's faith and Bendrix'. The novel leaves Bendrix where it found him—believing in his experience with Sarah, and refusing to believe in the spiritual names that are used for it.



Quotes

Sometimes I see myself reflected too closely in other men for comfort, and then I have enormous wish to believe in the saints, in heroic virtue

If I could write with love, but if I could write with love I would be another man. I would never have lost love.

If one possesses a thing securely, one need never use it

Jealous lovers are more respectable, less ridiculous than jealous husbands. They are supported by the weight of literature. Betrayed lovers are tragic, never comic.

Oh, it's not done, but neither is adultery or theft or running away from the enemy's fire. The not done things are done every day, Henry. It's part of modern life. I've done most of them myself.

A detective must find it as important as a novelist to amass his trivial material before picking out the right clue. But how difficult the picking out is—the release of the real subject.

I found myself treated at once as a human being rather than as an author

I have never understood why people who can swallow the enormous improbability of a personal God boggle at a personal Devil.

I have wondered sometimes whether eternity might not exist after all as the endless prolongation of the moment of death, and that was the moment I would have chosen, that I would still choose if she were alive, the moment of absolute trust and absolute pleasure, the moment when it was impossible to quarrel because it was impossible to think.

People go on loving God, don't they, all their lives without seeing Him?

I want to be drinking with him in a bar. I'm tired and I don't want any more pain. I want Maurice. I want ordinary corrupt human love. Dear God, you know I want to want Your pain, but I don't want it now.

People can love without seeing each other, can't they, they love You all their lives without seeing You, and then he came in at the door, and he was alive, and I thought now the agony of being without him starts, and I wished he was safely back dead again under the door.

It would have been better for both of us if I'd left him years ago, but I can't hit him when he's there, and now he'll always be there because I've seen what his misery looks like.



I've caught belief like a disease. I've fallen into belief like I fell in love. I never loved before as I love you, and I've never believed in anything before as I believe now. I'm sure. I've never been sure before about anything. When you came in at the door with the blood on your face, I became sure.

It was as though to save her for ourselves we had to destroy her features one by one. Even her children's books had proved a danger.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

How does Greene complicate the pattern and flow of a typical story? He says in the beginning that a story has no beginning or end, but he imposes beginnings and endings throughout. How does his resistance to telling a story make part of the story? Does the affair's beginning and ending form natural boundaries in spite of his attempt to see a life beyond beginnings and endings?

Topic 2

Is Bendrix driven by a psychological compulsion to write the story of his love affair with Sarah? Or do you think there is a chance that he is having the love affair as a way of gathering experiences he can write about? Has Greene created a character who is an author first, or a lover first? Using evidence from the text, discuss the tension between art and psychology in Bendrix' writing.

Topic 3

Is faith a feminine sentiment in *The End of the Affair*? Compare and contrast Sarah's discovery of faith and Smythe and Henry and Bendrix' rationalism. Is Sarah able to believe because she is female? What shape does faith take for the men? How are these reconciled, if at all?

Topic 4

Speculate about the relationship that would have taken place between Bendrix and Sarah if Sarah had not died. Would Sarah effectively have become a nun, devoting herself to the poor? Would she have broken with Henry, to live with Bendrix? Would she have come over to Bendrix' philosophy/religion of godless self-reliance? Would she have converted Bendrix to Catholicism? Using evidence from the text as well as your observations of literature and human psychology, how would you continue this story, if Sarah had not died?