

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Comedians 1966

Graham Greene

OVERVIEW

Four characters arrive by ship and disembark at Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, which is ruled by a dictator and his secret police. Mr Brown, the narrator, wants to sell his loss-making hotel. Mr and Mrs Smith have come to bring vegetarianism to Haiti. Major Jones' goal in visiting the country remains unclear for some time. Jones is arrested, a body is found floating in a hotel swimming pool and some of the employees are involved in secret Voodoo ceremonies in the hills. The tense atmosphere is leavened by Brown's love affair, the Smiths' innocence and Jones' camaraderie. In the end, Brown does not sell his hotel, the Smiths fail in their dietary mission and Jones is killed. It is a grand comedy played out against the grim tragedy of political oppression and violence.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Greene, who never hid his left-leaning politics, was appalled by the regime of François Duvalier. 'Papa Doc' was elected president of Haiti in 1957 on a populist and black nationalist platform, but he went on to terrorise his opponents and large sections of the population. Greene wrote elsewhere that he wanted the novel to strike a blow against the ruthless dictator, and he seemed to have succeeded to the extent that Duvalier commissioned a glossy, bilingual pamphlet intended to smear him. *Graham Greene Demasque* depicted the writer as 'unbalanced, sadistic, perverted...the shame of proud and noble England.' The publication of the novel in 1966 was followed the next year by a film version that failed miserably to capture the subtle themes of the book.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mr. Brown	Brown, the protagonist and narrator, owns a hotel in Haiti.
Major Jones	Jones comes to Haiti with unclear goals.
Mr. & Mrs. Smith	The Smiths, who are American, want to establish a vegetarianism centre in Haiti.
Martha	Martha Pineda is the wife of a South American ambassador and also Brown's lover.
Henri Philipot	Henri Philipot, who is the nephew of a minister, becomes the leader of the rebel army.

STORY

Passage to Haiti The story, told in retrospect by Mr Brown, opens on a Dutch cargo ship, the *Medea*, sailing from New York to Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. Brown is returning in order to sell a hotel he owns on the island. Onboard, Brown meets Mr and Mrs Smith, an elderly couple from the American Midwest, who plan to set up a centre for vegetarianism in Port-au-Prince. Mr Smith, we are told by his adoring wife, was a candidate for the presidency of the United States in 1948. The cast is then completed by 'Major Jones', who tells mysterious stories about his exploits as a war hero in Burma in the 1940s. The ship's captain informs Brown that the police have asked him to 'keep an eye' on Jones for an unknown reason. Brown, Smith and Jones represent a perfect trio of comedians.

Fear Brown wants to sell his Hotel Trianon, which sits on a hill above the capital, because it is losing money due to a lack of tourists in the wake of the reign of terror carried out, on behalf of the government of 'Papa Doc' Duvalier, by his secret police called the Tonton Macoute. The island is gripped by fear, roadblocks, intimidation and murder. It is not very funny.

Arrest Disembarking at Port-au-Prince, Jones is arrested. Brown is then met by a journalist acquaintance known as Petit Pierre, who was told that a 'presidential Candidate' was aboard the ship and that Smith has a personal invitation from Doctor Philpot, a high-ranking government official.

Martha Brown is driven toward his hillside hotel, passing a statue where he used to meet his mistress, Martha Pineda, the wife of a South American ambassador. When he sees that she is parked there now, in her car, he assumes that she is meeting another lover and is jealous. Speaking to her, though, he realises that she is alone and appears to be nostalgically reliving their relationship.

Hotel Trianon Arriving at the hotel, Brown finds chaos. His bartender, Joseph, has been maimed by the Tonton Macoute. The lights are out, there are no guests and objects are missing. Joseph shows Brown the body of Doctor Philipot, floating dead in the swimming pool. Philipot had fallen out of favour with Papa Doc and fled to the hotel, where the Tonton Macoute hunted him down. Then he dressed in a suit and slit his wrists and throat. Afraid that a corpse would not be good for business, Brown enlists the help of an old friend, Doctor Magiot, to get rid of the corpse. Meanwhile, Mr and Mrs Smith arrive and are shown to their room.

Backstory Brown then tells us his backstory. He was born in Monte Carlo to an unwed mother, who 'might have been French' and claimed a fancy title of Comtesse de Lascot-Villiers. She left him while he was at a Catholic boarding school, from which he was subsequently expelled for his unholy pranks. He made his way to London, worked as a waiter and took up various other jobs before serving in the British Foreign Office in the war. Out of the blue, he received a postcard from his mother, whom he had not seen since 1934, inviting him to visit her at the Hotel Trianon. Once there, he discovered that she owned the hotel. When his mother died, he inherited the business, made it a success and began his affair with Martha. Soon after, though, the Tonton Macoute began to intimidate foreign-owned businesses and he fled to New York

Detention In the present, the day after they reach Haiti, Brown and Smith go to the government to ask about the disappearance of Jones. After days of obfuscation, delay and deception, they finally learn that Jones is in police detention because he had the letter of introduction to Doctor Philipot, who killed himself in the swimming pool. Together, the three Englishmen prepare another letter, this time addressed to an officer in the Tonton Macoute.

Funeral Philipot's funeral is held in secret, although his widow bravely attempts to attend, and Mrs Smith also stand up to the Tonton Macoute by demanding access. During the ceremony, four mysterious men arrive and steal the coffin.

Vegetables and guns Smith and Brown go back to the minister to complain about the incident at the funeral, but Smith is bought off by the offer of land to build his vegetarianism centre (after several dollars have exchanged hands). Philipot's nephew Henri wants to take revenge on the Tonton Macoute and asks Brown about purchasing guns. Brown sends him off to find Jones, who was last seen in a brothel in the city.

Voodoo Brown witnesses a secret Voodoo ceremony in the hills, where Joseph, his bartender, is possessed by a god and strikes an effigy of Papa Doc. Henri Philipot is also present and helps with the ceremony.

Threat After a police station is attacked, the secret police interrogate Brown, suspecting him of being a communist ally of Jones. The police threaten to beat, and possibly kill, him, but Mrs Smith orders them to leave the hotel.

Departure After that confrontation with the police and their failure to acquire land, the Smiths decide to drop their dietary mission and leave Haiti. After they depart, Jones attempts to convince Brown to become his partner in a big business deal he is negotiating. Brown is reluctant, though, because he doesn't trust Jones, who refuses to reveal any details.

Embassy refuge Late one night, Jones turns up at the hotel and tells Brown that he, too, is leaving because his deal collapsed. Together, they decide to seek refuge on the *Medea*, the same ship that brought them to Haiti. They are arranging terms with the ship's captain when the police show up. Brown sneaks away and takes Jones with him to a South American embassy, where Mr Pineda (husband of Martha, Brown's erstwhile lover) is ambassador.

Flight Jones becomes a close friend of Mr Pineda and Martha, triggering a jealous rage in Brown. When the police discover that Pineda is offering refuge to Jones, they arrange for the ambassador to be recalled. Prior to Pineda's dismissal, Brown flees with Jones to the hills, where they hope to find sanctuary with a rebel group led by Henri Philipot. Jones is welcomed because of his supposed military know-how from World War II, but he confesses that his army stories were fiction. It's too late to turn back, so he and Brown join the rebel army.

Safety and death Jones and Brown are led by the rebels through rough mountainous terrain on their way to meeting with Henri Philipot and Joseph. Unable to keep up the pace, they are left behind and are captured by the police. Philipot and Joseph suddenly appear and kill the police, allowing Brown and Jones to flee further into the mountains. Lost and confused, Brown stumbles across the border and into safety in the Dominican Republic, but Jones remains with the rebel army and is killed in a battle with government troops.

THEMES

Comedy The central theme of the novel, announced in its title, is the comic nature of our lives, especially our disguises, delusions and failed ambitions. All the main players—Brown, Smith and Jones—and some of the minor ones, as well, are comedians and are repeatedly identified as such. For example, Brown's mother, who assumes a spurious royal title, is recognised by him as an 'accomplished comedian.' Brown also wonders if he and Jones, who he suspects of being a fraud, are 'comedians.' The South American ambassador replies to this by saying, 'We're all comedians. We mustn't complain too much about being comedians – it's an honourable profession. If only we could be good ones, the world might gain at least a sense of style. We have failed – that's all. We are bad comedians.' Brown, the son of a bogus Comtesse, played many roles before the story begins: he impersonated an art dealer and sold fake paintings. Smith is also playing a role as the 'Presidential Candidate', the term by which he is invariably identified. Of course, this being comedy, he is a failed candidate. He and his wife are now campaigning to make Haiti vegetarian because they believe that the aggression in the world, and on that island, is caused by excessive acidity. Jones, for his part, assumes a dubious identity as a 'Major' with battle-hardened experience in Burma; but it turns out that he was only an entertainer for the troops. Martha, Brown's lover, is the only important character who is not a comedian. She declares that the others talk 'rubbish' and 'pretend' all the time, while she has no time for that because she must look after her young child. In the next paragraph, however, Martha proves to be the 'best comedian of all' when she lies to her son in order to allow her to make love with Brown. Comedy is a combination of pretence (everyone pretends to be something he is not) and failure (the Smiths' vegetarian mission, Jones' mysterious deal with the government and Brown's attempt to sell his hotel). All this comedy is thrown into sharp relief by the very real tragedy that is on the main stage as Papa Doc's secret police murder and maim his opponents. This is made explicit in a scene when Brown and Martha are kissing, and Mrs Smith calls out that 'there's someone asleep in the pool.' Mr Smith suspects that it's just a beggar. But Brown, the narrator, says to the reader: 'Martha laughed and held me still and kissed me. I responded as well as I could, but the corpse in the pool seemed to turn our preoccupations into comedy. The corpse of Dr Philipot belonged to a more tragic theme; we were only a sub-plot affording a little light relief.'

Commitment While the light comedy is playing in the wings, centre stage is occupied by a drama of state oppression and violence, in which occasional acts of individual resistance are celebrated. The novel depicts the brutality of Papa Doc's secret police in considerable detail, and we are left in no doubt about its evil nature. People are terrified into inertia. But now and then someone commits an act of bravery. One example is the dotty Mrs Smith talking down the Tonto Macoute leader who is about to beat up Brown. Mr Smith, the naïve and failed politician, also shows courage in confronting the government when he attempts to rescue Jones from prison. The Smiths may be credulous fanatics, but they are committed, not just vegetarianism, but to a sense of justice. Even the dissembling Jones has a firm political goal of helping the rebels fight against the government. Still others dedicate themselves to a religious faith, such as the priest who leads the funeral mass for Joseph and Jones. He spoke of the need to act upon and not to withdraw from the world's suffering: 'Even violence can be the expression of love, indifference never.' This message of commitment is endorsed by Brown (speaking for the novelist) on the final page of the novel, when he reads a statement written by Doctor Maigot, after the doctor is dead: 'Catholics and communists have committed great crimes, but at least they have not stood aside, like an established society, and been indifferent. I would rather have blood on my hands than water like Pilate.' The ultimate tragedy is that

Brown is not able to commit to anything. In the final paragraph, he says that he learned at school that 'the test of a belief was that you were ready to die for it.' Brown admits that he has no belief and wanders in a flatland of indifference.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Mr Brown Brown is a lapsed Catholic, who never knew his father and loses his mother during the story. Lost, without faith or family, he meanders through life, assuming different roles, some of them fraudulent. Although worldly and affable, he is also cynical and unhappy.

Charlatan Mr Brown began his life as a prankster and developed into a full-blown charlatan in his twenties. The best example of this side, or perhaps this fundamental level, of his character is his flogging of fake art prints to the unsuspecting public. He buys several genuine prints (by famous artists, such as Pollock and Rousseau), which he pastes on the side of a van-trailer, along with the price they were sold for at auction. Then he hires an art school student to whip up a batch of bogus prints and forge the names of unknown (and fictitious) artists. His pitch to the public was clever: 'These early prints of Pollock and Henri Rousseau later sold for millions. Now, you can buy similarly early work of soon-to-be-famous artists for a song and make a fortune when you sell them at auction.' Brown exonerates himself from any charge of wrongdoing. He paid his art student a good rate and was robbing no one. Once he sold a fake Picasso to a man who had Disney dwarfs all over his front garden. 'Did I harm him?' he asks rhetorically. 'He had a complete air of invulnerability. Though god only knows what aberration in his business or sexual life Dopey and the other dwarfs might have compensated.' Brown is the complete charlatan, convinced of his own innocence.

Curious One more admirable aspect of Brown's personality is his curiosity about local Haitian culture. This is illustrated in a memorable scene when he goes to witness a secret Voodoo ceremony. He only heard about it from Joseph, who asked him to take him there in his car. The ceremony is described in detail. Drums are beaten softly by a group of young girls dressed in white robes. A pole stands in the centre, with a whip hanging down, a reminder of slavery, and a photo of Papa Doc, the contemporary enemy. It went on for hours, until a 'priest' came out from a hut, swinging a trussed chicken like a censer. Next, Brown watches in horror as a series of bodies are placed in a fire as part of the initiation rite. It ended with a crazed Joseph dancing around brandishing a sharpened machete. Brown is shaken and has to retreat to his car, where he takes a drink from his emergency flask of whisky. Although Brown says that he has no desire to get involved with the local religion any more than he did with the Jesuits who schooled him, it is clear that he was fascinated by what he saw. This is perhaps the only time that Brown steps outside his cocoon of indifference and engages, even at a distance, with the local culture.

Resigned The dominant element of his character, though, is a resigned apathy to the people and the world around him. Even when he renews his love affair with Martha, he notes that 'everything was just as before. After ten minutes we had made love, and after half an hour we had begun to quarrel.' However, the most telling moment of his resignation comes on the final page. The Smiths have left Haiti, Jones has been killed and he has escaped across the mountains to the Dominican Republic. Now in safety, he recalls that Martha called him a 'prêtre manqué', or a 'failed priest.' He has, he says, 'left involvement behind, like a token in the collection plate. I felt myself not only incapable of love—many people feel that—but even of guilt.' He says that he will have no peaks or troughs in his life, only 'interminable flats.' He foresees this bland future and he feels impotent to change it. 'Once I might have taken a different direction,' he laments, 'but it was too late now.'

Mr Smith Mr Smith is invariably identified as the 'Presidential Candidate,' referring to his failed bid on the Vegetarian Party ticket in 1948. He is an idealist but prefers not to confront others. Earnest, committed and loving toward his wife, he also shows courage when necessary.

Pacific Mr Smith, the (failed) 'Presidential Candidate,' does not like confrontation. He withdraws from any criticism, of friends and foes alike, 'like a horse from water.' This peaceful orientation of his personality is illustrated in an early conversation with Brown, who has just made some sharp observations about their fellow passenger, the mysterious Major Jones. Mr Smith believes that vegetarianism is not 'just about diet...if we eliminated acidity from the human body, we would eliminate passion.' He doesn't mean love but rather the passions that underlie hate and violence. He goes on to make the connection between meat slaughter and human killing. This is Mr Smith's mission, to spread vegetarianism, remove acidity, temper the emotions and promote world peace.

Courageous Mr Smith's vegetarianism does not mean that he lacks backbone or determination; indeed, his intense commitment to his cause demonstrates courage. And he displays that unstinting determination in other ways, too. A good example is an audience he, along with Brown, gains with a minister of the government in order to discover the whereabouts of Major Jones. Mr Smith is a complete stranger in the country, speaks almost no French, yet he demands a personal interview the Secretary of State for Justice. Brown begins the questioning and draws a blank from the minister, who says that 'it is a matter for the Secretary of the Interior. I can't interfere in another department's affairs.' At that point, Smith 'pushed his way into the dialogue with a roughness that had not been seen before.' He leans over the desk and says, 'What is the charge?' The minister waffles, but Smith is dogged and forces the official to admit that Jones is in prison. Smith also discovers that it is a case of mistaken identity and arranges for Jones to be freed on bail by helping the prisoner to write a letter of introduction to a captain in the secret police. When Brown sees the name and exclaims, 'Oh! I wonder if we really ought to get involved,' Smith silences him with the statement that they already are involved. Once on the case, Smith proves courageous in seeing it through to the end.

Major Jones Jones is a mysterious figure, who turns out not to be who he says he is. He is secretive about his past, though he likes to brag about his battle experiences in Burma. He can be entertaining, almost 'charming,' and shows no ire toward anyone. In the end, he proves to be a brave man who sacrifices his life to save others.

Cagey Major Jones is a mystery from the first page to the last, when he dies in the mountains. He talks in an apparently frank manner, but always seems to be holding something back. We see this quality on display in an early scene on board the ship taking the 'comedians' to Haiti. He and Brown start a conversation after Jones has noticed Brown talking with the captain (about him, though he can't know that). Jones explains that he divides the world into the 'toffs' and the 'tarts', and that he is one of the latter. Tarts, he says, have no stake in the world, but 'we keep our ears open and our eyes skinned.' Brown invites him to play Poker, and Jones demurs, saying that he 'always gives away too much...I haven't got the knack of hiding what I feel.' Then, we see him play a very cagey game of gin rummy, observing in which hand his opponent holds his discards, the way he holds the other cards and the length of his hesitations. He himself presents a nervous, uncertain face, hoping to lull his opponent into a false sense of superiority. In other words, Jones is the exact opposite of what he says he is. He can hide the truth very well.

Sham One of the things he conceals from the other characters, until almost the end of the book, is his war record in Burma. From the first encounter on the boat, he falsifies his past, claiming that he fought in the famous Wingate Brigade that suffered badly against the Japanese. 'I had a special knack for being in the jungle,' he says to his fascinated audience. 'I had a reputation, you know, for smelling water like a native.' Later, he claims that he learned hand-to-hand combat in Burma, which he could use to defeat Papa Doc's army. 'Give me fifty well-trained men, and Papa Doc will be on a plane to Kingston [Jamaica]. I wasn't in Burma for nothing.' It turns out, however, that he never even reached Burma, only Imphal on the Indian side of the mountains, where he entertained the troops. Jones really was an actor, a comedian in the literal sense.

Heroic Jones the liar comes good in the end, however. His heroic death is described to Brown by Henri Philipot, who was with Jones when they were attacked by Papa Doc's army. Jones and Philipot were in charge of a rebel brigade when the soldiers hunted them down in the mountains. Philipot told Brown that 'Jones wasn't a good shot but he knew how to lead.' They were ambushed and Jones held off the soldiers, allowing Philipot and the others to reach the safety of the road. Having saved the others, Jones decide he would die there because his feet had 'given out' and he couldn't walk fast enough. All the man had grown to love him, and Philipot surmised that he wanted to die in Haiti because that's where his heart was. Jones was one of the committed. He believed in the rebel cause and died because of his belief.

Mrs Smith Mrs Smith is a soul-mate to her husband, supporting him in his political and dietary campaigns. She is immensely proud of her husband and is robust when it comes to standing up to others.

Loyal Throughout the novel, Mrs Smith is a loyal companion to her husband. A perfect illustration of her loyalty occurs in the opening scene aboard the boat, when the comedians begin to learn about each other. Mrs Smith introduces her husband as 'the Presidential Candidate.' Jerking her chin in his direction, she says, 'He was an idealist. And of course, stood no chance for that reason.' When the humble Mr Smith adds that he is a 'failed' candidate, Mrs Smith interjects with the comment that 'he is

still a Presidential Candidate.' Brown asks what Mr Smith is doing 'on vacation,' and Mrs Smith is quick to answer: 'He is not on vacation. He is always working for peace.' No matter what is said about Mr Smith, it is not good enough for his wife, who corrects, embellishes and proudly declares her husband to be a paragon of virtue.

Brave Mrs Smith is also a brave person, who will stand up to whoever appears to be doing wrong. The most dramatic illustration of this quality occurs in a scene when Doctor Philipot's body is being taken in a hearse to his funeral. The road to the funeral spot has been blocked by the secret police, and Madame Philipot is outraged. 'They [the government] murdered him and now they will not even allow him to be buried in our own plot of land,' she cries. The men stand around, wringing their hands in dismay, and soldiers begin to gather in an intimidating way. Mr Smith suggests that Mrs Smith should retire to the safety of the hotel, but Mrs Smith will not retreat. 'If there's going to be trouble,' she says, 'I want to be here with Mrs Philipot.' Next, a car arrives and four men with dark sunglasses and guns get out and go up to the hearse. They smash the windows and take out the coffin. While the others are transfixed with fear, Mrs Smith rushes forward and grabs the shoulder of the Tonton Macoute officer. 'You can't do that,' she shouts. It made no difference—the men took away the coffin—but her bravery is impressive.

