

The Heart of the Matter 1948

Graham Greene

OVERVIEW

At the centre of this novel is the moral corruption of Henry Scobie, a British colonial officer in West Africa during the Second World War. His marriage to Louise is compromised by his adulterous affair and his work with the intelligence service is jeopardised by his association with a black-market trader. Scobie's torment is increased by the fact that he is Catholic, as is his wife. The novel is an imaginative and convincing depiction of colonial life during the war, with cameos for other British officers, their wives, a priest and local businessmen. In the end, Scobie's moral failures lead him to give up and commit the mortal sin of suicide.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

In writing the novel, Greene drew on his personal experiences as an MI6 officer in Freetown, Sierra Leone, during WWII. Certainly, one or two specific incidents are reprised from those troublesome times. Some critics have also commented that Scobie resembles Green and not only in his role as a colonial intelligence officer. Both also have 'Henry' as their first name, both converted to Catholicism in order to marry and both then cheated on their wives. *The Heart of the Matter* won the James Tait Black Prize for fiction in 1948 and is frequently ranked among the 100 best English-language novels of all times. It was adapted for the screen in 1953. The moderately successful film changed the bleak ending of the novel, where Scobie kills himself after holding himself guilty for the murder of his servant. In the film, Scobie's suicide attempt is interrupted by a scuffle between his servant and another local man. When Scobie intervenes, he is shot and dies in his servant's arms.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Scobie	Major Henry Scobie is the deputy commissioner and protagonist of the novel.
Louise	Louise Scobie is his wife.
Ali	Ali is Scobie's local servant.
Wilson	Wilson is a new man who spies on Scobie and is in love with Louise.
Pemberton	Pemberton is a colonial officer who commits suicide.
Helen	Helen Rolt is a widow who becomes Scobie's mistress.
Yusef	Yusef is a Syrian local black marketeer.
Tallit	Tallit is another Syrian trader, a rival to Yusef.
Rank	Father Rank is the local Catholic priest.

STORY

Scobie The story begins in Freetown, Sierra Leone, a British colony in West Africa during World War II. Wilson, a newly arrived customs inspector, watches the street from the balcony of a seedy hotel. Young African boys approach British seamen coming from the harbour and try to guide them to brothels. Wilson is hot and bored; he wants to return to his room and read poetry. He is joined by Harris, a British officer who has been in the colonial port for a while. When Wilson sees another British officer walking below, Harris identifies him: 'He's Scobie. Loves niggers; sleeps with 'em. You would too if you saw his wife.'

Unhappy marriage One of Scobie's chief tasks is to check on spies and monitor trafficking in contraband. His marriage with Louise is loveless. She is more cerebral than he, loves poetry and is withdrawn. Unable to make friends in the shabby backwater post, she is desperately lonely. Their only child, a daughter, died years earlier. Scobie feels pity for her but not love. Both he and his wife are Catholic, although Scobie is a convert and not as overtly religious as he.

Disappointment When Scobie is passed over for a promotion he deserves, he is philosophical but also upset because Louise will be disappointed. He is right: she asks him to send her to South Africa, which at the time was a British colony of greater sophistication and wealth. Scobie is sympathetic, but he doesn't have the money to pay for her passage.

Yusuf Scobie gives a lift to a man whose car has broken down. He is Yusuf, a local trader and black marketeer, who chats with Scobie about the smuggling of diamonds done by rival Syrian traders. Yusuf also drops hints about a shipment of diamonds on the *Esperanca*, a Portuguese ship due into port the next day.

Suspicious letter Remembering Yusuf's words, Scobie inspects the ship under the nervous eye of the captain. A disgruntled steward leads Scobie to discover a letter hidden in the captain's cabin. Although the captain claims that the letter is written to his own daughter, Scobie confiscates it because it has a Germany address and may contain military intelligence. The captain pleads with Scobie to ignore the letter: if he gives it to the censorship authorities, they will ban the captain from docking in British colonial ports, which would mean he's out of a job.

Letter burnt The captain offers Scobie a hefty bribe, which Scobie declines. When he finds out that the Portuguese man is a Catholic, Scobie suggests that although he will report the letter, no consequences will flow. In his office, he opens the letter, which is against regulations, and finds an innocent message written by a father to a daughter (somehow Scobie is fluent in Portuguese). He burns the letter and says nothing to the censorship authorities.

Money and diamonds At home, Louise becomes more insistent that she must leave, but Scobie is unable to raise the money for her passage. When Louise doubts his sincerity in raising the money, Scobie promises that he will get it, somehow. At the same time, Louise sees more and more of Wilson, who mistakes their literary rapport for some kind of love. Wilson also meets with Tallit, the Syrian trader who is in competition with Yusuf, and they discuss diamond smuggling and how to gain an advantage in the cotton market.

Pemberton Scobie undertakes a long journey into the bush to investigate the suicide of a local British official named Pemberton. The dead man left a note, which implies that he killed himself because he was deep in debt. When Yusuf shows up, Scobie suspects that Yusuf has contributed to Pemberton's despair and later suicide by offering him bribes to stay silent about smuggling diamonds. Yusuf says that there is no proof since he has burned all the IOUs.

Loan He also tells Scobie that Wilson has been sent to spy on Scobie because the authorities suspect he is complicit in the diamond smuggling. Scobie dismisses this, but Yusuf, says he will 'help' Scobie if he 'helps' him. Yusuf offers him a 'loan' at the low rate of four percent. Now, Scobie can book Louise on a ship to South Africa.

Hallucination Suffering from jungle fever, Scobie has a hallucinatory dream, in which he imagines himself as Pemberton, which is closer to reality than he likes since he has been offered a bribe from Yusuf. Awake, he assures himself that he would never commit suicide because it is an unforgivable mortal sin.

Departure Back home, Louise tells him that she has been offered a berth in a friend's cabin on a ship to South Africa and that she has refused because she knows they can't afford the ticket. Suddenly, Scobie tells her that he has, or soon will have, the money. Two weeks later, Louise boards the ship and promises to write.

A parrot Yusuf informs Scobie that his rival Tallit will try to smuggle diamonds concealed in a parrot's throat. The diamonds are found, but Tallit denies any connection with the bird and suggests that Yusuf has tried to frame him.

Helen Survivors of a shipwreck arrive. Scobie comforts one young girl as she is taken off a lifeboat, but she dies in his arms. He also helps Helen Rolt, a nineteen-year-old survivor of the accident at sea. She was just married and is now a young widow. Seeing her malnourished state (they have

been forty days at sea in lifeboats), Scobie takes pity on her and sees that she is cared for in the hospital.

Wilson Louise meets Wilson at a social gathering and they strike up a friendship based on their mutual love of literature. Far from jealous, Scobie is grateful that Wilson makes his wife less unhappy. Wilson visits Scobie and confesses that he is a special agent sent to investigate smuggling. He then admits that he is in love with Louise, which Scobie dismisses as 'the colonial sport.' Wilson also says that he is aware of rumours that Scobie has taken bribes from Yusef in exchange for turning a blind eye to smuggling. Scobie scoffs at this, too.

Adultery Scobie meets Helen Rolt after she is let out of hospital. She is alone and still shaken by her ordeal. They grow close, in part because he is interested in the stamp album she managed to salvage from the shipwreck and in part because she reminds him of his long-dead daughter. Within weeks, he starts to sleep with her, despite his knowledge that adultery is a grave sin. The affair is a short-lived happiness because Helen soon realises that he will not divorce Louise. Scobie wants to write to Louise and explain that he is in love with another woman, but he lacks the courage.

Yusef A high-ranking official comes to town to look into the diamond smuggling and interviews Scobie. Scobie gives an edited version of the truth of his relationship with Yusef and then tells Yusef that he intends to cut off their friendship because it puts him in danger. Yusef is disappointed but believes that one day Scobie will be back to request his help. Scobie tells his superior office that he took a loan from Yusef but that it is entirely a financial transaction, without any *quid pro quo*. When one of Scobie's love letters to Helen comes into Yusef's hands, he uses it to blackmail Scobie into turning a blind eye to the diamonds on a ship passing through the port.

Louise and Helen Louise sends a telegram informing Scobie that she is coming back 'home' and admitting that she made a mistake in leaving him. Scobie promises Helen that he will not abandon her. When Louise does return, Scobie neither confesses his adulterous affair nor renounces Helen. Louise says that she is happy to be back with him, and they appear to be reconciled. Scobie seeks advice from a priest but does not go to confession. He further sins by going to Mass and receiving communion while still not having confessed.

Murder Yusef sends a 'gift' to Scobie, which is refused, but Scobie's servant, Ali, is a witness to the incident. When Scobie upbraids Yusef about his 'gift' and admits that he is suspicious about Ali's loyalty, Yusef takes care of things by ordering Ali's murder. Scobie, however, blames himself for the killing of his servant.

Suicide Having sinned and betrayed everyone, Scobie decides he should commit suicide. He has damned himself anyway, and his death will at least prevent him from causing more suffering. His plan is to fake a heart ailment in order to get a prescription for strong medication. He takes one pill every night to make his eventual death look more natural and to spare Louise the knowledge that he committed suicide. After he dies, though, Louise is told by Wilson that he did kill himself. Meanwhile, Helen drifts in no-man's land. Wilson proposes to Louise and she gives him an uncertain answer.

Conclusion In the short final chapter, Louise meets a confessional priest and attempts to explain away her husband's suicide. The priest is not convinced but does admit that no one can truly know a person's heart or god's mercy. Maybe, the priest suggests, her husband loved god more than anyone else.

THEMES

Moral crisis At the heart of this novel is the moral crisis faced by its protagonist. Scobie is not a particularly scrupulous man either in his capacity as District Commissioner in a west African colony or as a Catholic (he was a convert) or as a husband. At every turn, Scobie confronts a moral dilemma: Is the captain of the ship carrying a secret letter? If so, should he report it? Can and should he trust Yusef, the black-market trader? Can he desist in his adulterous affair? Is Ali, his long-serving servant, a traitor? Can suicide be justified if it relieves others of suffering? Although Scobie cannot be described as immoral, and although he has a sense of responsibility and possesses a conscience,

he is fatally compromised by his love for the pitiful widow, Helen, and by his more unfathomable friendship with the rogue figure of Yusef. These ethical crises eat away at his soul, destroy his career and ultimately lead him to suicide. Feeling guilty, whether it is justified or not, for young Ali's death is the last straw. Scobie thinks that whatever scraps of good had lain in his heart have now been expunged. His corruption, which began with cutting a few corners at work, is now complete. When we finish the book, we understand the French epigram at the beginning, which roughly translates as 'No one knows God better than the sinner, unless it is the saint.' This is echoed in the final words of the novel, spoken by a priest who says, 'I think he [Scobie] really loved God.'

Futility The other theme that runs through this tragic story is the utter futility of life. Greene sets an atmosphere of ennui in the first chapter, describing the torpid weather and the dispirited British officers who 'hate the place and the people.' For the next three hundred pages, we witness failure after failure, not just for Scobie but for others, as well. The inspections for smuggling on boats fail because the officers don't look in the right place. Scobie fails to halt the illegal activities of Yusef and Tillat because of a combination of inertia and incompetence, plus the criminals' skills and loyalties. More spectacular is the failure of his marriage, again more from a vague incompatibility (she's an intellectual and he is not) than any deep character flaws. The gap between husband and wife is not particular to that relationship, however, and Greene suggests that every bond is doomed to fail because 'no human being is understood by another.' Louise, it is said, would understand Scobie only if he 'were a character in a book' that she was reading. Scobie's attempts to discover the truth about Pemberton's death are also unsuccessful, as is Wilson's wooing of Scobie's wife and Scobie's own attempt to end his affair with Helen. Underneath all this, Scobie fails as a Catholic, at least in the overt observance of its rules. And so it continues, right up to the end, when he hopes that taking the fatal dose of pills will quiet his conscience, but it isn't so and he has to struggle against his inner voice telling him to throw away the tablets and resume his 'normal' life.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Scobie Scobie is one of the most complex characters in all of Graham Greene's novels. He is honest and kind, but also weak and shackled by a sense of responsibility that speaks more of his pride than his humanity. Well-intended, he struggles to navigate the moral dilemmas that are inherent in the job of being an officer in a colonial administration, as well as in his unhappy marriage.

Burdened Major Scobie is burdened, not so much by his job or his role as husband, but by a wider, seemingly limitless responsibility for suffering in the world. This brooding pity is expressed in several scenes, including a moving one in the hospital, where the desperate survivors of a shipwreck have been taken. People are dying or close to death from weeks at sea without food. Someone says that nobody is to blame, but Scobie 'felt the weight of all that misery on his shoulders. It was a responsibility he shared with all human beings...but he was the only one who recognised it.' When a woman asks him about the victims, again Scobie reflects on the broader plight of mankind and feels unable to 'describe the restlessness, the haunting images, the terrible impotent feeling of responsibility and pity.' A little later, he tells himself that no matter 'how far away human strife and suffering may be, one still has one's eyes [and] ears.' Then comes the most quoted sentence of the novel: 'If one knew...the facts, would one have to feel pity even for the planets? If one reached what they called the heart of the matter?' Scobie suffers from excessive pity (just as Rowe does in *The Ministry of Fear*), in part inflicted by his Catholic faith but also, and more strangely, by his own sense of pride. That is the genius of Greene's novel: pity, which we would normally consider a virtue, is shown to be a burden.

Conscientious Scobie is a police officer. He does not tell untruths, although he sometimes omits to tell the whole truth in order to achieve some kind of justice. Having served for a long time in colonial Africa, he has learned to appreciate the local method of blunting the white man's legal system by obfuscation and omission. His tortured conscience is displayed, in all its twists and turns, in a central scene involving a potentially dangerous letter found in a ship. Written by the captain and addressed to someone in Germany, Scobie has the responsibility of seizing it and turning it over the authorities, unopened. The captain says he wrote it to his daughter, but it could still ruin his career, and he offers to bribe Scobie in order to ignore the letter. Honest Scobie refuses the bribe and takes the letter to his office, where he debates with himself about whether or not to open it, which is against regulations. 'Exercising his own imperfect judgement,' he decides to open it—'his first crime'. If the letter is innocent, as he believes it is, he can explain that the captain himself opened it. Opening the letter, he sees that is indeed a loving father writing to a daughter. But Scobie knows that every clandestine

letter must be examined for hidden codes and for secret ink. Still, he has committed himself to a belief in the letter's innocence, so he tears it into pieces and burns them. When he writes his report on his inspection of the ship, he omits to mention the letter. He has not lied, but he has not told the truth. Probably he has spared the captain an undeserved punishment. In this way, Greene suggests, good men are corrupted.

Louise 'Literary Louise,' as she is known to some of her compatriots, is lonely and isolated, both within her marriage and the wider colonial society in a small West African seaport. She is indeed a woman with intellectual tastes, who is observant and also very religious.

Unhappy No single word could not cover the full extent of Louise's malaise, but she is certainly very unhappy. Her problems are revealed in the first scene between husband and wife, just after Scobie has been informed that he has been passed over for promotion. At home, he finds Louise feeling ill in bed. She knows that he has been snubbed for a younger man. 'I'll never be able to show my face in the club again,' she says petulantly. He tries to soothe her anxiety, but she is not satisfied and says, 'You'll resign, won't you?' When he explains that that is not possible, she suggests that they go away to South Africa and that she could make money from her writing. 'I can't stand the people here,' she cries in despair. He suggests a drive along the beach, but she can only reply that it would have been a completely different day if he had come home with the news that he had been promoted. So, here, in this brief scene, we have the core of Louise's character. She is lonely in this backwater post, where few people share her literary interests and where she will be seen as the wife of a failed man. She feels trapped.

Perceptive Louise reads Virginia Woolf and observes people with the keen eye of a novelist. Unlike Scobie, she does not delude herself that she is virtuous or that others are villainous. Instead, she sees their foibles and flaws without his dangerous sentimentality. The best example of this dispassionate perceptiveness is her dissection of Wilson, the recently arrived younger man who shares her literary interests. Scobie and Louise meet Wilson just after Scobie has (finally) bought Louise a ticket to sail to South Africa. Wilson is surprised to hear that she is leaving and, even more, that she didn't tell him. 'Oh, I just forgot,' she says, breezily, 'there was so much to do.' They walk on, leaving Wilson alone. Scobie says to her, 'I think he's in love with you.' And she replies, 'He thinks he is.' Scobie says that he'll look after him in her absence, but she says, 'I shouldn't see too much of him. I wouldn't trust him. There's something phony with him.' She goes on to detail her suspicions, which turn out to be accurate. Unbeknownst to him, Wilson is spying on Scobie, who is suspected of collusion in smuggling. Unhappy Louise is sharp as a tack.

Yusef Yusef is a local Syrian trader, who makes his money on the black market. In some ways, he is Scobie's counterpart, and certainly his companion, in the shadowy business of smuggling and custom violations. Unlike Scobie, though, Yusef never disguises his motives from himself. He may break the law, but he doesn't dissemble. While he has charisma and warmth, he is also capable of ruthless elimination of his enemies.

Affectionate Yusef has a special affection for Scobie, the man who should be his enemy. This aspect of his character is revealed in a long conversation between the black-market trader and the policeman. When Scobie discovers that Yusef had entangled Pemberton in debts that contributed to the latter's suicide, he is angry with the man. But Yusef shows only gratitude for Scobie and constantly calls him his 'friend.' Scobie asks why, and Yusef explains that friendship is 'something in the soul; it is not a transaction.' He then reminds Scobie of the time he nearly had him convicted for violating import duty laws: 'You only had to tell your policeman to say something a little different...I was astonished to see a white man stick to the facts...I said to myself that a Daniel has come to the colonial police.' His reference to the biblical figure renowned for a firm adherence to law is the highest praise that one could pay to Scobie.

Devious Yusef is involved in the messy business of trading during war time, of trying to make a living when restrictions are everywhere. One way of gaining an advantage over his rival trader named Tallit is to use Scobie to arrest him. This underhand strategy is cunningly employed in a scene when Yusef visits Scobie and says that he wants 'to talk about diamonds.' He explains that the methods used by the police have proved useless in stopping the smuggling because they have bad intelligence. He then says to Scobie, 'I don't want to offer you a bribe. I thought perhaps you would like some advice, a little information.' When Scobie nods, Yusef reveals that Tallit is planning to smuggle diamonds by concealing them in the gullet of a parrot. Scobie receives the information but says he will not reciprocate by ignoring Yusef's smuggling because that would look bad. 'Quite right,'

Yusef says, touching his sleeve shyly. 'Believe me, I never want to harm you. I shall be careful, and you be careful, too.' Yusef has managed to ensnare Scobie in a conspiracy to do no harm. As Greene puts it: 'Even innocence in Yusef's hands took on a dubious colour.'

Wilson Wilson is the epitome of the callow youth. Naïve and unsure of himself, he is driven further inward by his secret job of spying on his colleagues. After only a few weeks, he adopts the racist vocabulary and behaviours of the older members of the colonial administration. Aside from his love of poetry, he has few redeeming features.

Lonely Wilson, like Louise, is lost in the west African colony. He has a job, an important job, but even that sets him apart from his colleagues: he has been sent to spy on them. Also, like Louise, he loves poetry and finds more solace with a book than with other people. His loneliness is dramatised in the first scene in which he appears, sitting on a balcony watching the street below. A servant brings him a gin and he sips it very slowly 'because he had nothing else to do except return to his hot and squalid room and read a novel or a poem. Wilson liked poetry, but he absorbed it secretly, like a drug.' A page later, when a colleague quotes a poem, Wilson lies and says he doesn't like poetry. Here is a man who is isolated from his compatriots in a foreign country but who is secretly watching them. He is lonely.

Naïve Wilson is also very young. His romantic outlook on life leads him to fantasise that he is in love with Louise simply because they share an interest in poetry. That naiveté is displayed in an early scene. He and Louise have been out walking along a river, talking about books, when they are called back to the bungalow by a servant. Scobie is about to go on a long journey and needs to say goodbye to his wife. Listening to their conversation, Wilson 'realises for the first time...the pain that is inevitable in a relationship. Pain suffered and pain inflicted. How wrong we were to be afraid of loneliness.' Then he watches as Scobie kisses Louise goodbye and remembers that he had kissed her only an hour before. 'He was like a dog. Nobody had yet drawn on his face the lines that make a human being.' Wilson's face, unmarked by experience, is indeed that of a puppy.

