

**“A Few Causalities to Open His Eyes”:
Our Man in Havana in Print and Film**

“The funniness comes from the situation rather than the man. He is a sad man intrinsically. One of the failures whom I like.”—Interview with Christopher Burstall, 1968

“The object was not to talk about Cuba but to make fun of the Secret Service. Havana was merely the background, an accident—it had nothing to do with my sympathy for Fidel.”—*The Other Man*

Our Man in Havana (1958) has been called a thriller in which the thriller is no longer serious, but this is not quite right. It is a farce, and as a farce, things are not taken very seriously, yet there are any number of serious moments, in which characters become more human and thus ask of us our sympathies—one might even argue that it is also a melodrama. Greene himself described the novel as both “an entertainment” and “a fairy-tale.” The humor was criticized; the Castro regime that overthrew Fulgencio Batista, the dictatorial President of Cuba, in 1959 disapproved of Greene’s novel because it did not take seriously enough the abuses of power under Batista. (Whether Greene himself was blind to Castro’s own abuse rule is another question.) They also felt that Segura as a character does not do justice to the cruelty of his real-life basis, Ventura Novo, the police butcher known for his torture of prisoners. Yet the novel does deal with the uneasy consequences to many surrounding Wormold, including innocent Cubans whose names he borrowed as his secret agents and his friend, Hasselbacher.

Discussion Questions for Novel

1. What is the meaning of the George Herbert epitaph, “And the sad man is cock of all his jests”?
2. How did Greene’s own spy experience influence the novel’s insights and genre?
3. Why does Greene describe Wormold as “a sad man”? Would you agree? Why and/or why not?
4. How does the novel suggest the dangers of modern warfare and science?
5. How would you describe Milly’s dual character?
6. How important are the cultural differences of the main characters in the story?
7. What seem to be the motivations and philosophy of Hasselbacher?
8. How developed is Beatrice as a character?
9. What is Cuba like in the novel as a setting and atmosphere?
10. Does the novel treat torture too lightly? (cf. 158-159)
11. Trace the theme of fiction and the stories we tell ourselves: 45-46, 75-76, 103, 112-113, 121, 146, 162, 196.
12. Does the novel have a thematic meaning? If so, what is it?

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The 1959 film, *Our Man in Havana* (Columbia UK), was the last of three films by Carol Reed written in cooperation with Greene. It is sometimes treated as a disappointment after their first two films, but living up to *The Fallen idol* and *The Third Man* is an unreasonable requirement. It is a good film, though filming in Cuba under the eye of the new Revolutionary regime had its challenges. The Cuban censors required 39 changes. Reed himself also made changes that he hoped would tie the film’s mixed genres together; not everyone was happy with these, including the lead, Alec Guinness.

Director: Carol Reed

Script: Graham Greene

Cinematography: Oswald Morris

Score: Frank and Laurence Deniz

Chief Cast

Alec Guinness as Jim Wormold
Burl Ives as Dr. Hasselbacher
Maureen O'Hara as Beatrice Severn
Ernie Kovacs as Captain Segura
Noël Coward as Hawthorne
Jo Morrow as Milly Wormold

Discussion Questions for the Film

1. How do the two opening establishing scenes set a certain mood? Does this mood remain?
2. Likewise, how does the music chosen for the film set a certain attitude?
3. How does the larger aspect ratio of Cinemascope (2:35:1) shape the way the film shots are blocked?
4. How does Reed's film try to portray the police brutality and surveillance? How does it compare with the novel?
5. Is Segura a different character in the film? Why and/or why not?
6. One of the acknowledged weak points of the film is the acting of Jo Morrow who plays Milly. Would you agree? Explain.
7. What about the actors who play Hawthorne, Beatrice, and Hasselbacher? Do you fit what you would have imagined?
8. In what ways is this a story about time and aging?
9. Is the film only a comedy? Why and/or why not?



Humor in Print and Film

H.W. Fowler's Typology of Humor, from *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (1937)*, offers a model by which we can examine the kinds of humor present in the print and film versions of *Our Man in Havana*. Fowler's typology is not meant to insist on air-tight categories, but rather on ways of analyzing the humor present. He argues that a certain type of humor has a particular motive or aim which assumes a particular subject area, a typical method with a particular audience in mind.

Which types are present in *Our Man in Havana*?

TYPE	MOTIVE or AIM	PROVINCE	METHOD/MEANS	AUDIENCE
(gentle) humor	discovery	human nature	observation	The sympathetic
wit	throwing light	words & ideas	surprise	The intelligent
satire	amendment	morals & manners	accentuation	The self-satisfied
sarcasm	inflicting pain	faults & foibles	inversion	Victim & bystander
invective	discredit	misconduct	direct statement	The public
irony	exclusiveness	statement of facts	mystification	An inner circle
cynicism	self-justification	morals	exposure of (moral) nakedness	The respectable
the sardonic	self-relief	adversity	pessimism	self
Additions to Fowler's Typology				
joyful	redemptive	possibility of correction	offer of forgiveness	The humble
fantasy	delight	magical & mystical	wonder & whimsy	The child-like
farce	mockery	exaggeration	hyperbole	The normal
the clownish	play	silliness	slapstick	The amused

A Few Notes Towards a Theology of Comedy

What do the following models suggest about the meaning of comedy and humor in the novel and the film? How do creativity, truth-telling, comic debunking, bodily existence, disassociation, and provisional amusement offer us insight to the larger significance of even a farce such as *Our Man in Havana*?

1. *Playfulness and creativity* are character traits and actions which the Christian can affirm that God created us for. God's playful creativity is expressed in the universe, and our human dominion of creation is also playful. Surely, then, we can affirm that we were created in part to enjoy the whimsical and ironic.
2. Good humor *practices the virtue of truth-telling*. Humor reverses our expectations, showing the wise to be foolish and the foolish, wise. This is a good thing, for we should always be about the pursuit of truth and honesty.
3. Peter Berger suggests that *a comic debunking of society actually allows us to love our enemies* because we take them less seriously than they do. We may learn to love the political braggart or the boasting literary type. We may have compassion on the hypocrite.
4. Comedy often stresses the *burly, eccentric bodily world* as a worthwhile emphasis. God's creation of the world and Christ's incarnation remind us that God created the physical, bodily world and called it good, even if it is now also subject to sin and corruption. The Christian is one who exists in this world with its eating, defecating, and procreating. Christian comedy, then, should affirm and laugh at human life.
5. Robert Roberts suggests that comedy's perception of incongruity arises from the "perspectivity" of the perceiver. There must be a vantage point from which something appears incongruous. He goes on to distinguish
 - 1) "having a perspective," which is "to be *capable* of adopting" the perspective since it is "*available or accessible*" to you,
 - from 2) "owning a perspective," which implies a tendency towards regularly adopting the perspective,
 - and from 3) "adopting a perspective," which implies the actual activity of having a perspective present in oneself.

In this sense, one can temporarily experience another perspective through humor without necessarily being convinced by or abiding by it in any habitual way.

6. Roberts also argues that this *disassociation that humor produces makes humility possible*, for the person who finds his or her own behavior funny is able to see its dangers. More specifically, for the Christian, there is always the incongruity between one's sinful, current self which will only be complete in the eschaton, and one's positional, justified self, the self that God sees us as in Christ.
7. Reinhold Niebuhr argues that our "provisional amusement" with the world's *incongruities must either move to faith and joy or bitterness and incredulity*. *Humor has its limits*; if laughter seeks to deal with ultimate issues, it turns bitter because it is overwhelmed. Humor alone cannot find a way to deal with human sin and wickedness.