

***The Ministry of Fear* (1943): Suffering, Memory, and Atonement**

"I wish now that the espionage element had been less fantastically handled, though I think Mr. Prentice of the Special Branch is real enough—I knew him under another name in my own organization when I was his pupil. The scenes in the mental clinic are to my mind the best in the novel, and it was surprising to me that Fritz Lang, the old director of *M* and *The Spy*, omitted them altogether from his film version of the book, thus making the whole story meaningless."—*Ways of Escape: An Autobiography*

Graham Greene's novel, *The Ministry of Fear* stands chronological at the center of both his entertainments and his "Catholic" period. It is common among interpreters of Greene's oeuvre to see *The Ministry of Fear* as the third in an unofficial trilogy of spy thrillers that include *A Gun for Sale* and *The Confidential Agent*, and *Ministry's* uses of guilt, forgiveness, atonement, and pity also invoke important themes from Greene's more explicitly religious fiction. While all of Greene's entertainments challenge and morph the generic boundaries of British thriller fiction, *Ministry* in particular merges the tragic and the salvific with the standard espionage and fifth column tropes.

The novel arguably brings into sharp focus the specific tensions of what is often called *Greeneland*. *Greeneland* is a term that Greene himself did not particularly care for. It describes the seedy, dangerous, and politically charged world of Greene's novels, and Greene insisted that the real world could often be far more horrific than his novels' settings. Nevertheless, the term does describe a particular milieu—one that is generic, like film noir, yet charged with significance, with existential and/or religious questions and implications. A world that is stylishly twisted and cinematic is also echoing serious questions about human dignity and spirituality.


Exploratory Questions

- What does it feel like to be haunted by guilt for a past sin?
- How much does suffering or our desire to eliminate suffering shape our lives?
- Can we (or should we) describe our lives in terms of stories, such as detective or adventure stories?
- How important are our memories to our self-understanding?

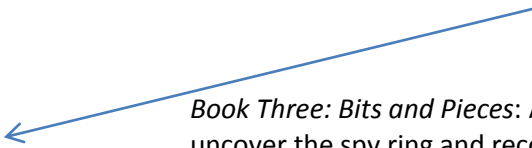
Structure

While Greene was wrong that Lang had made the decision in the movie version to leave out the clinic scenes and therefore the insomnia element of the story, one can take from his statement that Book Two is essentially to the novel's structural development and complication. The individual book titles are a rather obvious clue to the plot's psychological and moral development. We move from Arthur's guilt at his role in the death of his wife to his amnesia and the resulting happiness; the slow process of memory recovery and the process by which he comes to a complete understanding of himself and the burden of his existence.

Book One: The Unhappy Man: Almost one-half of the novel, we discover Arthur's past and why he is haunted by it. We learn how his inability to abide the suffering of other's has shaped his life. We also see the tension between the lost innocence and love of adventure of his youth with that of the more tragic qualities of the adult world.

 *Book Two: The Happy Man:* The unfolding experience of gentle dread at Dr. Forester's rural clinic is uncovered by Arthur as he recovers his true identity. Anna wishes

to protect his new happiness, but Arthur's nobility of spirit propels him forward.



Book Three: Bits and Pieces: Arthur and the detective, Mr. Prentice, begin a quest to uncover the spy ring and recover the stolen plans. Prentice suggests that pity can lead to destructive consequences as well. A subtheme about history and memory also runs through his book.

Book Four: The Whole Man: Arthur and Anna confront Hilfe and recover the plans. Arthur also comes to learn the truth about his past and must seek atonement, perhaps all his life.

The Little Duke

The young adult novel *The Little Duke* (1854) by Charlotte Yonge is subtitled *Richard the Fearless* and is set in medieval Normandy and concerns the young Duke of Normandy who must avenge his father's death while avoiding the King of France absorbing the young Duke's independent dukedom. The plot unfolds as a war breaks out between the two which draws in the Danes and the young Duke's Danish bodyguard. The young Duke eventually learns forgiveness towards his enemies, the French King's sons.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the multiple possible meanings of the word "ministry" in the title?
2. Would you consider the plot of the novel realistic? Why or why not?
3. How important is the notion of an undiscovered plot within the plot?
4. How would you describe Arthur's need for innocence and peace? Is this achieved by the end? Why and/or why not?
5. Why is Arthur drawn to *The Little Duke*? Is there any connection between it and *Ministry's* plot?
6. What is the novel's view of evil? Does it have a consistent view?
7. In the novel, in what ways do dreams and memories share a common vocabulary?
8. Look over pages 74-76 (beginning of book 1, chapter 7). What do these pages suggest about justice and moral standing?
9. How would you describe the beliefs and ethics of the fascist characters in the book?
10. How would you describe Mr. Prentice?
11. What is the novel's point about compassion and pity?
12. Does the novel hold Arthur accountable for his wife's death? Why and/or why not?
13. Why does the novel end with a meditation on atoning for the dead? Is Rowe (and perhaps Greene's) theology orthodox?
14. What does the story finally suggest about love and forgiveness?