

# Literature depends on character: a close study of an episode in 'the third man'

## Abstract

Film scripts/screenplays are seldom treated as 'literature'. However, there are some screenplays that can very well be read as play texts and judged according to the norms of drama criticism. One such example is Graham Greene and Carol Reed's *The Third Man*. The paper brings out how some characters, such as Harry Lime, Anna Schmidt, Dr Winkel, and more particularly Rollo Martins, have been presented through their words and actions to establish the thumbnail sketches of them given at the beginning of the script.

**Keywords:** character, film script/screenplay, play text, speech, stage direction

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## Introduction

Film scripts (also known as screenplays) are rarely, if at all, treated as 'literature'. Of course, there are scripts and scripts. Some scripts record merely the skeleton of the film to be made, dialogues forming the only point of interest. Some others, however, contain much that is of value and interest not only to the students of film studies, but also the students of literature, particularly of drama.

Carol Reed's script of the film,<sup>1</sup> based on a novel by Graham Greene (who also collaborated in the script), is a case in point. Many of the speeches allotted to the characters were changed in course of shooting the film. It is only to be expected: the same thing happens when a play is staged. Dialogues are mercilessly cut during rehearsals; major changes are made in the production after the first or the second show. Despite all this, a film script, very much like a play text, outlines and offers a plan of how characters and incidents are to be presented on celluloid. Besides scripting dialogues, Reed, like G.B. Shaw, also offers short, terse descriptions of the dramatis personae and the locale of action. This is an added attraction of his script.

Rollo (Holly) Martins, the first character to be introduced in the script, is described as follows:

A Canadian aged about 35. He has been invited to Vienna by his old friend, Harry Lime, to write propaganda for a volunteer medical unit Lime runs. A simple man who likes his drink and his girl, with more courage than discretion.

Unlike Lime he has never made much out of life. He is an unsuccessful writer of Westerns, who has never seen a cowboy, and he has no illusions about his own writing. (p.7)

This is an excellent thumbnail sketch of a non-entity of a human. However, how to bring out in a film, or for the matter of that, in a play the characteristics of such an unsuccessful writer? They must come out of *action*, in what Martins says and does. Reed achieves this by creating a situation in an episode, which would reveal Martins's inner self most appropriately. He is invited to a Cultural Centre where he is expected to deliver a speech-on literature! Captain Carter (Crabbit), who 'has been shifted from regimental duties (for the good of the regiment)' (p.8) to the Cultural Re-education Section of G.H.Q. [General Headquarters], introduces Martins confidently (although he has not read a single book of his):

CARTER: Ladies and Gentlemen, we have with us tonight Mr. Rollo Martins, one of the great writers from the other side. Here he is. We've all of us read his books. Wonderful stuff. Literature depends on character - I've read that somewhere- and Mr. Martins's characters-well, there's nothing quite like them, is there? You know what I mean. We ought to give him a great welcome.

The faces of the listeners watch with avid expectancy; one figure jumps up to ask a question. Dissolve. (p.81)

Since it is a film script, a new shot can always begin immediately after the dissolve suggesting a gap in time. The direction in the script makes it clear:

It is sometime later and MARTINS already looks harried and confused by the questions. CARTER is worried. . . . (p.81)

We are to understand that in the meantime Martins had to face a barrage of questions that he could never answer, for the simple reason that he knew nothing about them. By showing the effect Reed conveys the cause of discomfiture Martins had found himself in. Nevertheless, Reed provides a few instances:

AUSTRIAN WOMAN: Do you believe in the stream of consciousness?

MARTINS to CARTER: Stream of what?

CARTER gives a gesture of despair. (p.81)

The scene shifts from the hall to the staircase. It is a dumb-scene: a bowed figure slowly mounts the stairs towards dark on the stairs and we cannot make out the face. By now we are prepared to see in all strangers, in all mysterious figures, the possible features of the third man.

This is more like a stage direction in a play text, unlike the shorthand expected in a screenplay. The scene again goes back to the reception room. It is now the turn of an Austrian young man 'with rather and effeminate manner' (p.82). He asked Martins: 'Among the great English poets where would you put Oscar Wilde?' Martins as usual, is at a loss. He tries to save his face by asking a counter question: 'What do you mean, put question? I don't want to put anybody anywhere.' (p.82). Tyler (Popescu), an American attached to 'an American Cultural Mission in Vienna, who has been by Lime' (p.9) now comes forward to rescue Martins from further disgrace. He

says, 'Can I ask Mr. Martins if he's engaged on a new book?' The script says:

MARTINS *takes him in for a moment in silence. He recognises the challenge.*

MARTINS: Yes . . . yes . . . it's called 'The Third Man'.

WOMAN: A novel, Mr. Martins?

MARTINS: It's founded on fact. (p.82)

Carter and Tyler exchanged words, all in innuendo. We are then back to Martins and his audience:

A WOMAN wearing a meagre bit of rabbit round her throat, asks the question she has been dying to get out all through the last interchange. (p.83)

AUSTRIAN WOMAN: Mr. Martins, what author has chiefly influenced you?

MARTINS: Gray.

ELDERLY AUSTRIAN: Grey? What Grey? I do not know the name.

MARTINS: Zane Gray - I don't know any other. (p.83)

The difference in spelling *Gray* - *a* and *e* - is significant, for Martins and his interlocutors are apparently talking at cross-purposes. The fun continues:

TOMBS: Don't get above their heads, old chap. (p.83)

Who is getting above whose head is of course a pertinent question. The fun however does not end here:

AUSTRIAN: He is a great writer? (p.83)

Carter intervenes, apparently with a view to saving Martins from further embarrassment:

CARTER: Terrific. Read him myself. (p.83)

But there is another person who would not let Martins off so easily. He comes out with another question:

AUSTRIAN YOUNG MAN: And James Joyce, Mr. Martins? (p.83)

Carter is as much nonplussed as Martins. He asks Tombs in wonder: 'Joyce?' Tombs is no more knowledgeable about the Irish author than Carter. He gives an evasive reply: 'Lord Haw Haw. Don't like the way this is going, old man.' Now it is Martins's turn to reply to the question. He bluntly declares:

MARTINS: I've never heard of him.

TOMBS: Good line, old chap. (p.83)

Capt. Tombs (Crabbit) is a foil to Capt. Carter. Reed sketches his character as follows:

Unlike Carter, Tombs is saturnine. He had little hope that this culture racket will last. Needless to say that meagre man has any idea of how the job should be done, nor in deed of the meaning of the culture.(p.81).

The reaction of the when they hear apparently for the first time in their lives, brings out these traits most effectively.

To resume the story, the Viennese audience, well-informed about 'high culture in English literature, present in the lecture hall does not take all this kindly. The 'stage direction' makes it clear:

There is a lot of ill-suppressed discontent in the audience by this time. A YOUNG WOMAN calls out insultingly:

YOUNG WOMAN: He wrote *Ulysses*.

MARTINS: I don't read Greek. (p.83)

The last confession is enough to prove that Martins is a perfect ignoramus so far as literature is concerned. There are titters among the audience and Martins is left standing without any clue as to why there are titters all around. His character has been presented before the audience of the film, not just the audience in the lecture hall, with undisguised ridicule. He has been introduced as an eminent writer, a leading light of contemporary English fiction. Actually he has hopelessly rendered himself to be a laughing stock of all.

Next follows an exchange between Tyler and Martins; again there are much of innuendo. But the episode does not stop there. When Tyler strolls to make a telephone call, a lady, perhaps the same Austrian Woman who has been dying to get out her question, again moves forward and asks Martins: 'Do you think there's any future, Mr. Martins, for the historical novel?' (p.84). We are not told of Martins's reply or whether he replies at all. The scene shifts from the Reception Room to the ante-room. Very soon, however, we are back to the Reception Room. The 'stage direction' says:

MARTINS is wiping perspiration off his forehead and TOMBS is leaning gloomily back in his chair. Half of the chairs are empty and several others are leaving.

We are back to James Joyce:

MARTINS: I've never heard of him. Desperately . . . I don't read many books.

TOMBS to CARTER: This is disaster, old man.

CARTER: Mr. MARTINS has had a trying time since he came to Vienna. If there are no more questions . . .

The meeting breaks up. Those that have not already left stand up to go. (p.85)

Disgrace unlimited. This is how we might describe the situation that Martins finds himself in. This, however, is not merely comic, for events take a more serious turn when the meeting is over. Yet such a comic exchange between the English knowing Austrian audience and Martins, as ignorant as a new-born babe, is not to be regarded as unnecessary or insignificant. The whole scene besides revealing Martins's shortcomings, thickens the plot. Martins turns out to be an unconscious tool in tracing the whereabouts of Harry.

We have been told by Reed that Martins 'has no illusions about his own writing' (p.7). And yet speaking of Sgt. Paine, Reed says: 'He is the only man in Vienna who knows Martins's books, and he admires them greatly' (p.8). This is, of course, a reflection on Paine's literary taste. At the same time this piece of information also provides Martins with one reader, nay admirer.

Reed turns Greene's novel into a screenplay by altering much of it. He introduces several new characters and additional scenes and speeches. One such speech was contributed by Orson Welles, who

played the role of Harry Lime in the film (See Appendix). All this makes the screenplay more interesting than the original narrative. Nevertheless, Martins's interaction with the Austrian blue stockings and the young would-be intellectuals in Vienna is not just a comic interlude; it satirizes the Viennese connoisseurs of English literature although there is much of the vintage comic in it. We know that the original script underwent many cuts and changes when the film was actually shot. An excellent cinematographer that Reed was, he successfully provides the reader with a film script which can rival any well-made play. Not all films based on such scripts, are successful in the box office and, at the same time, acclaimed by both discerning critiques and enlightened audience.

## Appendix

Orson Welles contributed a wonderful speech which both Greene and Reed approved and accepted.<sup>2,3</sup> In the final version of the script it is reported in a footnote:

In the film, HARRY adds a famous parting speech:

'When you make up your mind, send me a message - I'll meet you any place, any time, and when we do meet, old man, it's you I want to see, not the police . . . and don't be so gloomy . . . after all, it's not

that awful - you know what the fellow said . . . in Italy for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed - they produced Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce . . .? The cuckoo clock. So long, Holly.' (p.114 n78).

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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