

The basement room: graham greene's perspective essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Like many other things in our world, society is comprised of two different aspects: free will and constraints. As Americans, we experience the former daily and seem to take it for granted. We simply live and maintain our daily routines monotonously, completely oblivious to the fact that we are exercising our rights of freedom, doing whatever pleases us. However, if one uses his or her free will corruptly, they will come to experience the latter aspect of society – constraints, or punishments. Laws are the foundation of all constraints in society.

They aid us in maintaining order when people, or groups of people, seem to foray into the world of questionable decision-making. For example, if somebody feels the need to rob a bank or murder another human being, laws are there to reprimand that one sour apple in society and protect the freedom of everyone else collectively. What I have said above pertains only to the real world and everyday situations. What if someone were to create their own world? Imagination is a very powerful thing and should be used with caution.

Graham Greene reflects on this very question in his short story “ The Basement Room. ” Using the character Philip, a young lad who’s being left at an estate while his parents are away, Greene effectively depicts a surreal world through the boy’s eyes. The estate represents an entire new realm of possibilities for Phil. Greene also utilizes Mr. Baines and Mrs. Baines to represent the free will and constraints of this new and foreign society. Philip immediately feels a new sensation as soon as he sets foot into this new, foreign world.

Simply put, he feels “ alive. ” Philip anticipates exploring the large Belgravia house, with all of its empty rooms and corridors. Simultaneously, Philip hopes that he may learn something about the adult world. Philip is quite fond of Mr. Baines. He always seeks the butler out in the basement room. A green baize door separates the family rooms from the servants’ quarters. The color green is almost always associated with life. With that in mind, we can return to Philip’s sensation of liveliness.

The hue of the door that one must pass through to enter the basement room signifies what Philip experiences every time he enters the Belgravia estate – especially the basement room itself. The green baize door through which the boy passes to the basement room serves as a Freudian device to distinguish between the conscious and the subconscious. With Philip being a fan of Mr. Baines, he is also a fan of free will. His love for the man is intensified within the confines of the basement room. His hate of Mrs. Baines is also strongly intensified in the peculiar room.

His fear of the wretched woman is only reaffirmed as he watches Mr. Baines efface himself in her presence. Philip begins to appreciate the conflicting claims of adulthood in a world he yearns for yet fears to enter. He begins to understand fear and coercion and to perceive the meaning of evil. Philip suspects that undiluted joy – his feelings for Mr. Baines – can be threatened by the very presence of those such as Mrs. Baines. In other words, free will is hindered by the constraints of society. This, in turn, hinders true happiness.

After supper, Philip asks Baines to take him for a walk. Mrs. Baines, I what seems to be a reoccurring theme, interferes and will not allow such a thing.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-basement-room-graham-greenes-perspective-essay/>

Feeling both dejected and frustrated by these constraints, Philip escapes into the world beyond the Belgravia estate. While wandering aimlessly, Philip encounters Mr. Baines in a tea shop. Baines is not cowering under Mrs. Baines as he was when Philip last saw him. Contrarily, Baines is now depicted as concerned and affable lover who is enjoying time with his niece, Emily. A new theme is now introduced - secrecy.

Baines asks that Philip keeps Emily a secret from Mrs. Baines. Philip fails to do so, however, when Mrs. Baines bribes him with a Meccano set. The pressure of adulthood invades his sphere of innocence and trust. Mrs. Baines bribes later applies the same technique as before when she offers young Philip another Meccano set in exchange for the whereabouts of her husband and Emily. Let it be noted that he never used the first Mecanno set that he received. His refusal to play with the first set functions as a comment on the nature of existence.

Mrs. Baines will not take silence as an acceptable answer when she is interrogating Philip; she invades his psyche and catalyzes in the boy a fear of life. Insofar as Philip becomes Mrs. Baines's accomplice by failing to tell Baines that he has inadvertently betrayed their secret, he is in complicity with evil. In essence, Philip has betrayed the one thing that he most both figuratively (free will) and literally (Mr. Baines). When Philip screams as Mrs. Baines is interrogating him, Mr. Baines grapples with his wife in what can be seen as a battle between good and evil.

Baines sends her flying over the banister. Philip is again unable to deal with the pressures of adulthood and flees the Belgravia estate to the outside

world; where good and evil seem to coexist in mutual tolerance of one another. Philip will not accept Baines's plea to shield another secret and informs the police of the night's events. He has learned that to love is to accept the burden of trust in and responsibility for another, for which life has not yet prepared him. Philip extricates himself from Baines, from love (good) and life.

The experience of betrayal denies Philip both the sweetness of life and the ability to create, insofar as Philip becomes an accomplice to evil by failing to tell Baines that he has inadvertently betrayed their secret, he is in complicity with evil; later, he suffers the death of the heart when he refuses the responsibilities and consequences of an adulthood that he is unprepared to accept. Dream and nightmare, furthermore, afford a coherent imagery that emphasizes the power of evil. As such, the story serves as an epitome of favorite themes and preoccupations that characterize Graham Greene's fictional universe.

At the end of the story, Philip is an old man facing death sixty years later. His involvement in the questionable events that took place in the Belgravia estate so long ago have come back to haunt him. He dies sixty years later, still asking about the girl, Emmy, who had unwittingly unleashed fear into his innocent world and forced him to choose a life of lonely noninvolvement. Greene is attempting to send a message to his audience via Philip's death. Baines (free will) gave Philip a tremendous amount of leeway. He simply wanted to make the boy happy. Mrs.

Baines (constraints of society) seemed to enjoy ruining the boy's plans. It becomes apparent, however, that she merely had the best intentions when denying Philip of the pleasures he so much desired. The ending of the story implies that having too much freedom in the palm of your hands is not necessarily a positive thing. After all, Baines made Philip's life worse off for the long run, while his wife only affected his life in the short run. Greene is clearly implying that society would be at a complete loss if laws were nonexistent. Free will may be better for the individual at the time, but it is not beneficial to society in the long run.

The action is presented by an omniscient narrator as he presents the events that inhibit the boy from fulfilling himself in the sixty years he lives following the traumatizing experience that constitutes the story's main action. The narrative shifts from an acute and psychologically perceptive account of the boy's refusal to accept Baines's appeal to keep yet another secret, to a view of the dying man who has managed, at best, a life of dilettantism. The contracting and expanding focus allows the reader to appreciate the traumatizing incident and to realize its results on the character of the man that the boy becomes.

As a whole, "The Basement Room" is the dramatization of a traumatizing event that inhibits the individual from achieving human contact in the future. The situation presented deals with the souring of innocence and the consequent fear of life that it occasions. The theme is best expressed in the narrator's statement: "Life fell on him [Philip] with savagery and you couldn't blame him if he never faced it again in sixty years." Philip Lane is

portrayed as an imaginative and sensitive boy who has not yet learned to distinguish good from evil and right from wrong.

The story's central meaning has to do with his sudden awareness that life is a series of compromises, and that adulthood forces one into commitments and allegiances that one does not always understand. Philip learns that good and evil are not as clear-cut as his feelings for Baines, whom he loves, and Mrs. Baines, whom he fears. When he unwittingly betrays Baines, he does not understand that choice has been thrust on him too soon; rather than commit himself in trust and love to another human being in the future, he chooses to remain isolated from human life.

The story focuses on the theme of betrayal, agonizingly complicated to the boy Philip, provocative to the reader. Perhaps the story's greatest accomplishment, however, is the immediacy with which the traumatizing episodes are presented. The reader is convinced of the tale's psychological validity as he appreciates and acknowledges the nature of a betrayal that destroys innocence and dooms the individual to a life of waste and loss.