



# The Third Man

By William Eaton

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At the end of the movie *The Third Man*—which some polls have elected the greatest movie of all time—there is a sequence that is so blatant in its symbolism as to be corny. Soldiers, police, good guys and bad guys are all running around in the sewers of Vienna. That is symbolism enough—humanity in the sewer. Along with the police, Holly, the writer of silly fictions, is trying to capture the bad guy, his former best friend, Harry. But Harry has a gun and has already shown that he is ready to kill Holly. In an attempt to save Holly, a young police sergeant rushes forward and exchanges shots with Harry. Both are hit.

So here now is the part that interests me despite its corniness. Holly and the police major have been desperate to capture Harry, whose money-making scheme has involved doing great harm to his fellow citizens, young children among them. But now, just at the moment when the good guys finally have the bad man cornered, they stop their pursuit in order to look after their fallen comrade, the young policeman. Harry, meanwhile, finds a metal stair leading out of the sewer, and, with superhuman effort, despite having been

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wounded, his legs no longer of use, he claws his way toward the light. We feel the life force in the man, the will to survive no matter the cost, physical or moral.

As movie buffs know well, Harry—Orson Welles—manages to get his fingers through the sewer grate, but is unable to dislodge it. The camera, now shooting from above ground, lingers too long on this scene, as if it were possible to overlook the symbolism of Harry's pale, fleshy fingers moving like the legs of an upended spider, sticking up through the black metal grate, helplessly fluttering, grasping at air.

I am not a movie buff, and my movie watching mostly took place before people owned copies of movies and watched them repeatedly on their TV screens. Still, over the past many decades I have watched *The Third Man* at least three times, perhaps half a dozen. I have appreciated many aspects of the film, and certainly did not miss the role and symbolism of the sewer or of Harry's fingers grasping at air (until his old friend, with the dead policeman's revolver, puts him out of his misery).

It was, however, only recently, watching the film at age 60, that I became focused on the particular sequence in the sewer—the good guys attending to their fallen comrade while the bad guy fights for his own individual life. I take my interest to have a corniness of its own. This is one of the lessons that life has taught me. The world is dominated by people—"sociopaths" is a word we have come to use—people who take little notice of the suffering they may or may not be inflicting on others. In the place of companionship they have found things such as ladders to climb on, testing their strength, exercising their wills, attempting to get out of the sewer.

In the movie, as in life, everyone else is in the sewer, too. It may have been a construction of these "sociopaths" and their heedless striving, but the bricks have been laid and the tunnels and pipes continue to be filled with most everyone's help. Each of us imagines that "I"—less driven? less alone? more capable of fellow feeling?—"I," occasionally, pause to let into my heart the struggles or dreams of beings other than me. My pauses or yours may not be long—in the sewer of *The Third Man* the young policeman was quickly dead and left behind. And yet these pauses (or imaginary pauses) may be the pinnacles of our human existence.

One of my mantras used to be "next to nothing"—until I saw that a cosmetics company had started using the slogan to sell products that, the slogan proposed, were wonderfully lightweight. From there we can jump to the old joke about the winning slogan for a "lite" beer—"Like Love in a Canoe" (i.e. fucking close to water). And yet—or therefore!—for a while I was able to maintain a feeling that "next to nothing" could describe my and *Homo sapiens sapiens*' standing in the cosmos and eternity. And the phrase could describe the *Third Man* hack writer's and police major's stooping to observe the passing of their young companion—"next to nothing." But, I would like to say, this is not the same as nothing at all.

Of course human behavior is more complicated than my and the movie's simplistic sketches. For one, very few of us imagine ourselves sociopaths; it is always someone else who lacks fellow feeling, and "my" behavior, even in its most unredeemable moments, usually has something good to be said for it by me (and, sometimes, by friends). I am interested, too, in opportunism. These days—as in ages past, I assume—there are many people whose behaviors seem greatly channeled by such opportunities as present themselves. If they are on the move and encounter two doors, one open and one locked, they hurry through the open door, giving little thought as to whether there is some "good" reason to go through this door, other than the fact that it is open. Thus, for example, we could describe Harry Lime, the evil character of *The Third Man*, as having simply noticed that he could make money selling watered-down penicillin, and so he did this. It was only after the fact, confronted by some former friend during a Ferris-wheel ride, that Harry bothered to come up with rationalizations for his behavior and made his famous speech about the masses of people being little more than black dots and the savagery of the Borgias having produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. (Apparently this line was added to the script by Welles, in the midst of acting, opportunistically.)

In my own corner of the jungle, in the offices and meeting rooms where I have long earned a modest living, I cannot say I have seen much great artistry or out-of-the-box thinking. Rather, I often see, and am often demoralized by, people who hurry through this or that "door" or into this or that betrayal of their comrades. They seem to be possessed by the great hope that their behavior, whatever it may be, will lead to a promotion. Or is it the fact of the door's being open, and other people plunging through it—this must be the right way to go; it's the popular choice. In a world that "I" do not understand, and am afraid that I could not understand even if I tried, I am grateful to have this sense of direction. And my gratefulness for having this sense of direction overwhelms any desire to wonder if my behavior has much of anything to do with producing a good product or offering a good service. Nor would I pause to wonder what such goodness might be, nor to wonder whether my behavior may unjustly harm others who may be a little less opportunistic. (Or who appear to be too dense to see open doors and to walk through them.)

Of course, the matter is more complicated than my brief description, because—no more than Plato's Socrates and his interlocutors, for example—none of us here and now will be able to successfully define what justice or a good product or service is, and who it should be good for and how, etc. We cling, as to a sewer grate, to an idea that, even though we cannot know what the good is (in general or in specific instances), still it exists. Somewhat like Socrates, the more reflective among us cling to the idea that there must be something good at least in trying to know the good or to reflect on it. And this even as we know we must fail and return again to the soil and the sea. (Next to nothing.)

In a 1950 *New York Times* article, the scriptwriter, Graham Greene, wrote that the nascent Cold-War setting of the film was just a convenient backdrop. He and the

director Carol Reed were not playing politics, they were out to entertain moviegoers, “to frighten them a little, to make them laugh.” Indeed, *The Third Man* does not involve much reflection at all. As my teenage son pointed out, were the protagonist not so resolutely naive and unthinking, there would be no story at all. Like Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway and many another, in *The Third Man*, the Holly Martins created by Greene, Reed and the actor Joseph Cotten sees the telltale signs and makes some sense of them, but this sense-making is post facto and in no way keeps him from plunging onward through seemingly open or half-open doors, and thus from one unhappy moment to the next, yet more unhappy one.

I suppose it would be too much to ask of the end of a big-budget movie to have the wounded bad guy—rather than murdered—handcuffed and led to jail to await trial by a jury of his peers. Holly’s actions in the sewer were less his own than his actor’s employer’s. But might Holly have at least noted, prior to pulling the trigger, that the legal and perhaps just course of action would be to arrest his old friend rather than shooting him in the back? And at the end (pictured at right), he cannot even get out of town before he receives further confirmation that the woman he loves finds him of no interest, or worse. (She has let herself be completely enveloped by her love for another man—Harry, of course—as a way of not confronting her ignorance of love?)

Shot in black and white, written in black and white, *The Third Man* found great commercial success in offering shadows in the place of complexity, and basic human drives—what a Freudian would call Eros and Thanatos—in place of reflection. A Platonist could say that, seeing only shadows and allowing ourselves to be guided by our animal and commercial instincts, we will never find our way out of the sewer (or the cave). For this we must train our minds, our rational capacities and our vision. History has yet to suggest that this approach is of much use, or that its light can do more than flicker faintly in some alcove, amid the instinctual, opportunistic rush.

## Links

YouTube *Third Man* clip of the [chase through the sewer](#) (covers the moments described in the text above).

Graham Greene article for the *New York Times*: [‘The Third Man’ as a Story and a Film](#), March 19, 1950.

[Certum est, quia impossibile](#)—built around the movie *Men in Black 3*—notes, inter alia, that the formula for “action thrillers,” James Bond movies hardly least of all, includes the hero (like Holly Martins in *The Third Man*) bowling ahead from one calamitous situation to the next, and in this way bringing himself, and we viewers, to some version of a happy end, and usually in less than two hours. The essay title is from the early Christian theologian

Tertullian: “et sepultus resurrexit, certum est, quia impossibile” — And, buried, He [Jesus] rose again: it is certain, because impossible.