

## ***The Fallen Idol* (1948) and “The Basement Room” (1935)**

“Well, I have been exceptionally lucky with Carol Reed and recently with Peter Glanvill [who at the time was directing Greene’s play, “The Living Room”]. I like film work, even the impersonality of it. I have managed to retain a certain amount of control over my own stories so I have not suffered as badly as some people seem to have; all the same, film-making can be a distressing business for, when all is said and done, a writer’s part in making a film is relatively small.”—Interview with Martin Shuttleworth and Simon Raven, 1953

Carol Reed and Graham Greene’s first of three films together, *The Fallen Idol* (London Films 1948 UK) lingers in the shadow of *The Third Man*, but continues to be one of the landmarks of British cinema. Greene liked it even above *The Third Man* because he called it “more a writer’s film than a director’s.” This perhaps tells us something about the importance of character development, dialogue, and setting to Greene, even if he was intentionally a “cinematic” writer. Greene was initially skeptical about adapting the story—the idea had been suggested by Alexander Korda to Reed, but soon warmed to it as they worked on it together. What the film does is make Baines a more sympathetic, if deeply flawed, character. However, it is Reed’s careful direction for the young Bobby Henrey that makes Philippe the center of the film, as well.

Director: Carol Reed

Script: Graham Greene with Carol Reed

Cinematography: Georges Périnal

Score: William Alwyn

### Chief Cast

Ralph Richardson as Baines

Michèle Morgan as Julie

Sonia Dresdel as Mrs. Baines

Bobby Henrey as Philippe

Denis O’Dea as Chief Inspector Crowe

Jack Hawkins as Detective Ames

### Adaptation Qualities

*Fidelity:* Arguably, the film is faithful to one aspect of the short story: the psychological center and trauma of the young boy. It does draw from the dialogue in the story in several places, though they often feel at first less threatening. The ruse of the girl being Baines’ niece is employed, as well as it being a secret.

*Intersection:* The first two-thirds of the film mostly falls here in terms of the spectrum of fidelity. It uses the basic characters and the basic adultery and murder, as well as a number of the scenes. In this sense, the hinge points are the adultery and the murder, and above all the psychological perspective of Philip (Philippe). In particular, the ironic lesson in keeping and not keeping secrets takes on a far more nuanced thematic in the film.

*Borrowing:* The film expands characterization, changes the setting somewhat, and alters some key aspects of the plot. The subplot with the pet snake is added. The enunciating catalyzers are the change of the circumstances of the murder, as well as the character faults of Baines in question. The relationship between Baines and Julie is nearing its break, though they are deeply tied to one another, and it becomes like family as the film progresses. The investigation in the last third surrounding Mrs. Baines’ death also takes on a considerably different development, making the overall story and final outcome for the boy quite different.

The Fiction	The Film
Baines is a crasser figure, but probably telling something of the truth about his time in Africa. Philip admires him for being from a man's world of action.	Baines is far more sympathetic, but also a liar. He was never in Africa. Philippe admires him more as a kind father-figure; his stories rise from his general kindness, and at first, they seem harmless. "Some lies are just kindness."
Baines is (probably) responsible for Mrs. Baines' death and tries to cover it up. Philip reveals the circumstances perhaps out of partial ignorance.	Baines is not responsible for her death, but Phillippe believes he is and tries to cover for him.
The doings in the kitchen are tighter, more generalized in some ways.	The film adds a pet, McGregor the snake, for Phillippe, and subplot involving him and Mrs. Baines increases her petty cruelty.
The doings in the kitchen are tighter, more generalized in some ways.	The events in the kitchen are expanded somewhat. Baines' gun is actually present in the kitchen.
Mrs. Baines is more described than shown to us.	Mrs. Baines is seemingly nicer, but her harsher side begins to come out. We realize Baines is hen-pecked. At the same time, Mrs. Baines is human and obviously wants to protect the boy at first.
Philip's leaving the house is more matter-of-fact and rather quick.	Philippe's escape from the embassy is more involved, and the music makes us feel it is not entirely dangerous.
Baines and Emmy are more openly sexual and low-class. Emmy leaves quickly when Philip arrives.	Baines and Julie's relationship is more tender and sad, and Baines is more hesitant and afraid. And the dialogue between them is far more tragic and touching.
The secret surrounding meeting the "niece" is purposed.	The secret is proposed though now in the context of Baines planning to confront his wife with the truth.
It is Philip who reveals the secret by mistake, though the dialogue is very similar in the film.	The balcony window is introduced and serves more than one function. It is both insight into betrayal and an element that obscures it.
It is Philip who reveals the secret by mistake, though the dialogue is very similar in the film.	Baines actually confronts Mrs. Baines, and she threatens him with her implied suicide. But then Philippe reveals "they" afterwards in a similar confrontation, though he reveals that she is leaving.
Baines and Philip go out for the day, but the meeting with Emmy and the confrontation later at the house happen more unexpectedly and more	The film gives more details about Julie meeting them at the park and about Mrs. Baines overhearing their plan. Various shots will later let

openly sexual and violent.

It isn't clear as to whether Baines may have actually killed others in Africa.

Philip has a dream and then is awakened by Mrs. Baines, distraught and wanting to find them. She is distraught and has our pity.

Philip warns Baines, and the fight breaks out between Baines and his wife, then she ends up over the bannister. Philip is not even sure she is dead, but he wanders about while Emmy leaves. Philip wanders the streets until the policeman finds him and takes him to the station.

The sergeant is uncomfortably trying to handle the boy, and relies upon Rose who works at the station.

Once they find Philip's address and return him home, they arrive, and he mistakenly reveals that the body of Mrs. Baines had been moved. The police confront Baines.

us know she is present in the embassy.

The story of the murder in Africa is expanded upon more clearly as a tall-tale. The time at the zoo is expanded upon with the couple mostly ignoring Philippe. (There is perhaps a connection between the old lion and Baines himself.)

Something of a friendship develops with Julie as Philippe reveals the confrontation of Baines with Mrs. Baines. The consolation Baines shows for the death of the snake shows him in a fatherly role. The games they play after the meal make them seem like a family.

Philip awakens to the bobby pin and the close-up of the desperate Mrs. Baines. She restrains herself somewhat with the boy.

Philippe screams in warning to Baines, and Mrs. Baines attacks the boy. Baines and his wife confront each other, but she doesn't go down the stairs. Major shift here: She goes onto the ledge with the window to spy on Baines and ends up falling. Philippe believes that Baines pushed her down. An extended sequence of shots as Philippe flees through the night streets and is found by a policeman on beat. The scene is more extended again with some sympathy shown by the officer.

The sergeant is unsuccessful in getting the boy and talk and lets Rose, a prostitute brought in, talk to Philippe. The scene is handled more comically. "Oh, I know your daddy."

**At this point, the remainder of the film goes in a direction quite different than the story.** Once they work out where Philippe lives, they bring him home, and we see Baines and the doctor talking, Baines clearly in shock and overcome. The doctor tries to attend to the boy, and surrounding this, things become more complicated. Baines clearly wants to hide his adultery and makes the boy complicit in hiding it. "Yes, I understand," but he doesn't.

The investigation unfolds, and the tension is in hiding the adultery rather than the cause of death,

The last paragraph telescopes ahead 60 years to an old Philip recalling his trauma.

though the boy doesn't know this. His search for the paper airplane ("the dart") made from Mrs. Baines' false telegram becomes important as a window into the boy's trauma and his loyalty to Baines. Rather ironic, the next day having Julie take short-hand of the inspector interview.

Baines as the story unfolds is forced to admit he has told the boy lies about Africa, and Philippe overhearing tries to defend Baines but only makes it worse. He still doesn't quite understand.

Baines has to finally explain to Philippe, and admit that perhaps he helped create Mrs. Baines (Thus, the clock episode). The final irony is that Phillippe tries to tell the truth while no one is listening to him. The very end is even comic.

### Discussion Questions

1. In general, short stories have a tighter arc and focus than novels. What makes the focus of "The Basement Room" tight?
2. In the short story, how does the narrator control what the young boy, Philip, knows?
3. How do we begin to realize that what he is experiencing is traumatic?
4. How do you interpret the very last paragraph of the story?
5. Is the title chosen by the production company, *The Fallen Idol*, a bad title? Why and/or why not?
6. What does the opening music and shots tell us about the Philippe's world and his view of it?
7. How do the circumstances of the boy's private world shape the way we understand him in the film?
8. How does the film use the height of the second story of the embassy in camera shots and in the meaning of the story?
9. How do we feel about Baines as the film progresses? Is this different than our view of him in the story?
10. Is Mrs. Baines different in the film than in the story? Why and/or why not?
11. How is Julie developed as a character in the film?
12. How do Baines, Julie, and Philippe seem like a family?
13. How does the manner of Mrs. Baines' death change the overall story?
14. How does the last third of the film stay connected to the first two-thirds?
15. Though the film is overall quite serious, it does include a number of moments of humor, including the ending. What purpose do these serve?