

Anguish and Remorse



Carnival in Manchester, John Gernand, 1930s

Have you ever had a “*What have I done?!*” moment? I’m sure we all have many such moments on a minor, domestic scale, preceded by the idiom, “Darn it!” However, sometimes the *What have I done?!* moment can be a profound realisation of wrongful doing and deep remorse.

We sometimes see this in great works of literature or on film. In cinema, in the final scene of the classic movie directed by David Lean, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), a profound moment of remorse occurs to a shellshocked British Colonel in Burma.

In the above war movie, the main character, Colonel Nicholson (Alec Guinness), leads a contingent of British POWs who, in 1943, arrive at a Japanese prison camp in Burma. At the camp,

Nicholson meets fellow prisoner Commander Shears (William Holden) of the US Navy. Shears, before escaping into the jungle, describes to Nicholson the terrible conditions in the camp, where Nicholson is subsequently forced by a Japanese commander to get his soldiers to build a bridge over the River Kwai.

Despite being coerced, a stiff-upper-lip Nicholson takes on the task with gusto and feels quite proud of leading the construction of the bridge, despite working with the enemy and the forced manual labour going against the Geneva Convention.

But in the movie's climactic scene, after Commander Shears returns with some men to blow up the bridge, Nicholson comes face to face with Shears as the Commander lies at the edge of the river dying from gunshot wounds. They both stare at each other:

Shears (grinding his teeth in contempt): "You!"

Nicholson (shocked): "You! ... What have I done?!"

(In a moment of madness, he realises he was collaborating with a cruel tyrant and, staring at his dying comrade, brave Shears, he is overcome with remorse.)

Then, as Nicholson is hit by mortar fire, he collapses onto a detonator that sets off the explosion that blows up the bridge.

Likewise, in the book (1861) by Charles Dickens and subsequent movie (1946) by David Lean, *Great Expectations*, the character Miss Havisham has her moment of remorse. She is a wealthy spinster who was jilted on her wedding day, and she utters these words to Pip (John Mills) when she's overcome with guilt for secretly ruining Pip's chance for love and happiness. Havisham's hatred for all men manifested in her plotting to wreak revenge by teaching Estella, Pip's love interest, to torment and spurn all men, including Pip. When he confronts

the malignant spinster and expresses his feelings, she exclaims, *'What have I done?!'*

In 19th century Russian literature, Leo Tolstoy wrote about the profound regret the murderer Makar Semyonich has when he confesses to a killing in his prison cell. In *God Sees the Truth, But Waits* (1872), Semyonich approaches an innocent fellow inmate (Ivan Dmitrich Aksionov) falsely accused of his crime.

Aksionov sat down on his bed. He peered through the darkness and recognised Makar. "What more do you want of me?" asked Aksionov ... Makar Semyonich bent close over Aksionov, and whispered, "Ivan Dmitrich, forgive me!" "What for?" asked Aksionov. "It was I who killed the merchant and hid the knife among your things ... Forgive me!... For Christ's sake forgive me, wretch that I am!" And he began to sob. When Aksionov heard him sobbing, he, too, began to weep. "God will forgive you!" said he.' [Edited]

A lot of people, including myself, probably thought these words for lesser sins than above, when they found God and felt remorse for past actions and views that, on atheism, seemed innocuous at the time. On finding God, C.S. Lewis once said: "No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good."

In the Bible, Judas Iscariot's reaction after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, whom he betrayed for 30 pieces of silver, is arguably the pinnacle of *What have I done?!* moments when he attempts to return the blood-money and subsequently commits suicide by hanging himself. To quote *Dante's Inferno*, "From what agonies of heart and brain, what exultations trampling on despair, what tenderness, what tears, what hate of wrong, what passionate outcry of a soul in pain ... [did Judas endure?]" Did he mistakenly believe that Jesus would be imprisoned instead of crucified, thus he was overcome with such guilt? Only God knows.

Also in the Bible, prior to his conversion, Saul of Tarsus despised Christians and terrorised them. But one day when he was traveling on the road from Jerusalem to [Damascus](#) on a mission to arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem, he had a vision of the [ascended Jesus](#), who appeared to him in a great bright light that struck Saul blind. However, three days later, his sight was restored by [Ananias of Damascus](#), and Paul (his new name) began to preach that Jesus of Nazareth was the [Jewish messiah](#) and the [Son of God](#). Surely, he must have thought, *What have I done?!* in mature reflection of his anti-Christian past life?

But what is it that causes such remorse, shame and guilt? Without God, *What have I done?!* is meaningless. Why? In a clockwork material universe devoid of objective morality, where the ripples of the Big Bang would determine each action and moment throughout history, such emotional turmoil would never occur in an irrational wet brain evolved from an ape. And animals are not moral agents. And they certainly don't have *What have I done?!* moments, unless it's in the cartoon world of Gary Larson.

In Larson's *The Far Side's* calendar (March 13, 2002), a crocodile is lying on the psychiatrist's chair while confessing his *What have I done?!* moment to the psychoanalyst. He says: 'You know those teeny, tiny little birds that walk around so trustingly inside a crocodile's mouth? Well, I just been eating these little guys like popcorn.'

Jokes aside (breathe deep for the following gloom): Without God, any of the above ostensible shameful moments would be nothing more than chemicals squirting in the brain and belching out monkey screeches from an orifice on a meat-covered skull called the mouth, as the organized motion of the gas turns into disorganized thermal energy, which is nothing more than an aggregate of meaningless molecules governed by the laws of physics and set for decay along with a multitude of finite shadows that will soon disappear from the face of

the earth long before the latter is incinerated by the sun while the rest of the two trillion galaxies spinning in violent chaos would eventually burnout in a pathetic, icy squeak.

In the film *The Third Man* (1949), written by Graham Greene, the cruel racketeer protagonist Harry Lime (Orson Welles), recognises this meaningless, amoral void and the moral autonomy it brings to his evil deeds. Selling watered-down penicillin to children's hospitals on the black market, Lime is the very model of a modern pharma fiendish fraud. On a micro level, he's the embodiment of the darling of the Establishment institutions and the gullible Great Unwashed tiny 'dots' who would blindly enable him and place so much faith and trust in his lies.

In one of the most-famous dialogue scenes in film history, the unspeakable horror that is Lime, chats to his old friend Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten) atop a giant Ferris wheel in post-war-II Vienna. Martins is aghast at the discovery of Lime's crimes. However, Lime looks down on the people below who he says resemble tiny 'dots.' He feels superior to the 'insignificant insects' below and is like a troglodyte Morlock, feeding off Eloi and the financial profits of screaming patients who received the deadly, diluted, penicillin jab.

With a shortage of the antibiotics in Vienna, Lime stole the medicine from the military hospitals, diluting it to make it go further, then selling it to hospitals treating men with gangrene legs; women in child birth, and, worst of all, children with meningitis. (One wonders who were these fictional medics who bought such corrupted pharmaceuticals off the deceiving Lime. Could such characters exist in reality?)

Referring to the fall of Babylon, Revelation 18:23 says "And the light of a candle shall shine no more at all in thee; and the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride shall be heard no

more at all in thee: for thy merchants were the great men of the earth; for by thy sorceries were all nations deceived.” (Sorceries is the Greek word for “pharmakeia” and this word also means the use or administering of drugs; poisoning.)

When Holly starts talking about all the evidence he has found against Lime, who’ll never ask *What have I done?!* (because he is already metaphorically in Hell), Lime replies:

Don’t be so gloomy. After all, it’s not that awful. Like the fella says, in Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love—they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock. So long, Holly.

Monsters like Lime are created by ‘dots’ who relegate God to worship the ‘experts’ in white coats in the obnoxious culture of nice. Pilate was also a ‘great’ man for putting exclusive, human, negative respect before Our Lord. Consider this excerpt below that Fr Ferreol Girardey wrote for a sermon in 1915 (*Human Respect is an Ignoble Apostasy*). To repeat, this refers to a respect that relegates respect for God by putting humans first):

It is the sacred duty of every true Christian to give to God absolute preference over every creature and, for God’s sake, to be ready to sacrifice at once every temporal interest, every human friendship, when these clash with his duty towards his Creator. The Catholic who is swayed by human respect, deliberates between God and a certain individual; he places in the scales God and this individual, and he prefers the individual to God Himself!... He pretends to worship God, and yet he dreads a wicked, unprincipled, contemptible man more than God Himself!

Likewise, Lime lives in the City of Man; the world of flesh

and the Devil. In such an amoral world, Lime, Judas, Colonel Nicholson, Miss Havisham, et al, would also be anatomical cuckoos flying over the proverbial nest of planet of the absurd; nothing more than mechanical unconscious living slabs of blubber constructed of mass and chemistry and governed by the mathematical laws of nature and the anatomical, unthinkable wiring in the brain. On Naturalism, *Bridge on the River Kwai* would be a *fibrous structural tissue on a H₂O territorial strip*, while the cast become robotic, grown-up worms who will one day die and become food for little worms.

In contrast, with God, being remorseful and feeling shame is what sets us apart and makes us human. And exclaiming *What have I done?!* is a noble wakeup realisation call and the first step toward repenting and ultimate redemption. Isn't it far better to wake up in the middle of the night screaming, *What have I done?!*, than to wake up silently and unremorseful on the Other Side of the grave, separated from God for eternity?