



Lesson 7

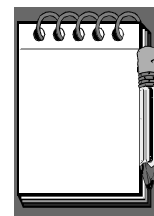
“The Destructors”

Materials Needed:

 journal
 pen or pencil
 highlighter (optional)
 radio and television

Journal Entry

Have you ever belonged to a gang? Have you ever had a special group of friends? In a group, a leader often emerges – someone the others look to for planning and guidance. Write in your journal for about ten minutes about groups or group leadership.



About the Author

Graham Greene was born in London in 1904 and lived there, on and off, throughout his life. He is the author of numerous novels, short stories, and essays. He is best known for his Catholic novels and his “thrillers.” He died in 1991.

Vocabulary

Words to help you understand the story:



Word	Definition
fickleness	instability; wavering
altruistic	unselfish

Some British terms that might be confusing:

Word	Definition
bank holiday	a long holiday weekend
lorry	a motor truck
car park	a parking lot
lav or loo	toilet

Add these words to your vocabulary:

Word	Definition	Example
mockery	ridicule	“There was every reason why T....should have been an object of <i>mockery</i>”
ignoble	a low, humble condition; not noble	“What but an odd quality of danger, of the unpredictable, established him in the gang without any <i>ignoble</i> ceremony of initiation?”
rendezvous	meeting	“He was late at the <i>rendezvous</i> , and the voting for the day’s <i>exploit</i> took place without him.”
exploit	action; deed	
impromptu	without preparation or advanced thought	“The gang had gathered: ...it was as though an <i>impromptu</i> court were about to form and to try some case of <i>deviation</i> .”
deviation	turning aside from a course	
daunted	made afraid	“Blackie gave a single hoot of laughter and then, like Mike, fell quiet, <i>daunted</i> by the serious <i>implacable</i> gaze.”
implacable	cannot be lessened or quieted; cannot be made peaceful	
exhilaration	high spirits	“By the evening an odd <i>exhilaration</i> seized them as they looked down the great hollow of the house.”

Literary Terms

protagonist	the central character in a story or drama
antagonist	Any force in a story or drama that is in conflict with the protagonist. An antagonist may be another person, the environment, or even something within the protagonist himself.

About the Story

Published in 1954, “The Destroyers” is set in London nine years after the end of World War II. During the war, Germany caused great damage to London with repeated bombings. This story takes place in a bombed out section of London.

A group of twelve boys called the “Wormsley Common Gang” meet in a parking lot every day to decide what to do for the day. Usually their activities result in some kind of mischief. There is only one structure still standing in this area, and that is a house belonging to Mr. Thomas, referred to as Old Misery by the gang. His house has miraculously survived the bombing. On both sides of his property, buildings were destroyed. As the story begins, the boys are meeting to plan their day’s exploits.

Some Names to Know

The Wormsley Common Gang

Blackie – leader and might be concerned about T’s rising power

Trevor (known as “T.”) – possible future leader of the gang; once a member of the middle class, but is no longer and is not happy about it; his world is gone

Mike – the newest and youngest member of the gang

Summers – another gang member

Mr. Thomas – known as Old Misery, owner of the only house still standing; an old middle class man

Reading Assignment

Read Parts 1 and 2 of “The Destroyers.” You will be asked to answer questions on the story in your next lesson. Reading those questions before you begin the story may help you understand what you read. You may also want to use your highlighter to mark words, phrases, or ideas which will help you recall important parts of the story.

“The Destructors”

Graham Greene

It was the eve of August Bank Holiday that the latest recruit became the leader of the Wormsley Common Gang. No one was surprised except Mike, but Mike at the age of nine was surprised by everything. “If you don’t shut your mouth,” somebody once said to him, “you’ll get a frog down it.” After that Mike had kept his teeth tightly clamped except when the surprise was too great.

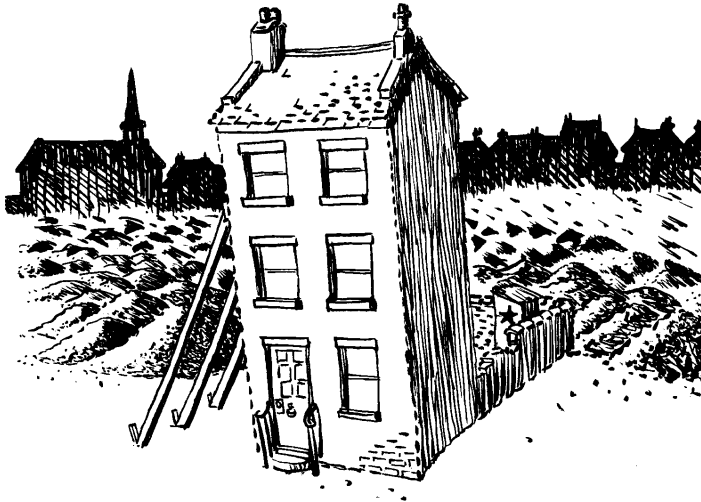
The new recruit had been with the gang since the beginning of the summer holidays, and there were possibilities about his brooding silence

that all recognized. He never wasted a word even to tell his name until that was required of him by the rules. When he said “Trevor” it was a statement of fact, not as it would have been with the others a statement of

shame or defiance. Nor did anyone laugh except Mike, who finding himself without support and meeting the dark gaze of the newcomer opened his mouth and was quiet again. There was every reason why T., as he was afterwards referred to, should have been an object of mockery – there was his name (and they substituted the initial because otherwise they had no excuse not to laugh at it), that his father, a former architect and present clerk, had “come down in the world” and that his mother considered herself better than the neighbors. What but an odd quality of danger, of the unpredictable, established

him in the gang without any ignoble ceremony of initiation?

The gang met every morning in an impromptu car-park, the site of the last bomb of the first blitz. The leader, who was known as Blackie, claimed to have heard it fall, and no one was precise enough in his dates to point out that he would have been one year old and fast asleep on the down platform of Wormsley Common Underground Station. On one side of the car-park leant the first occupied house, No. 3, of the shattered Northwood Terrace—



literally leant, for it had suffered from the blast of the bomb and the side walls were supported on wooden struts. A smaller bomb and some incendiaries had fallen beyond, so that the house stuck up like a jagged tooth and carried on the further wall relics

of its neighbor, a dado, the remains of fireplace. T., whose words were almost confined to voting “Yes” or “No” to the plan of operations proposed each day by Blackie, once startled the whole gang by saying broodingly, “Wren built that house, father says.”

“Who’s Wren?”

5 “The man who built St. Paul’s.”

“Who cares?” Blackie said. “It’s only Old Misery’s.”

Old Misery—whose real name was Thomas—had once been a builder and decorator. He lived alone in the crippled house, doing for himself: once a week you

could see him coming back across the common with bread and vegetables, and once as the boys played in the car-park he put his head over the smashed wall of his garden and looked at them.

“Been to the lav,” one of the boys said, for it was common knowledge that since the bombs fell something had gone wrong with the pipes of the house and Old Misery was too mean to spend money on the property. He could do the redecorating himself at cost price, but he had never learnt plumbing. The lav was a wooden shed at the bottom of the narrow garden with a star-shaped hole in the door: it had escaped the blast which had smashed the house next door and sucked out the window-frames of No. 3.

The next time the gang became aware of Mr. Thomas was more surprising. Blackie, Mike and a thin yellow boy, who for some reason was called by his surname Summers, met him on the common coming back from the market. Mr. Thomas stopped them. He said glumly, “You belong to the lot that play in the car-park?”

10 Mike was about to answer when Blackie stopped him. As the leader he had responsibilities. “Suppose we are?” he said ambiguously.

“I got some chocolates,” Mr. Thomas said. “Don’t like ‘em myself. Here you are. Not enough to go round, I don’t suppose. There never is,” he added with somber conviction. He handed over three packets of Smarties.

The gang were puzzled and perturbed by this action and tried to explain it away. “Bet someone dropped them and he picked ‘em up,” somebody suggested.

“Pinched ‘em and then got in a bleeding funk,” another thought aloud.

“It’s a bribe,” Summers said. “He wants us to stop bouncing balls on his wall.”

“We’ll show him we don’t take

bribes,” Blackie said, and they sacrificed 15 the whole morning to the game of bouncing that only Mike was young enough to enjoy. There was no sign from Mr. Thomas.

The next day T. astonished them all. He was late at the rendezvous, and the voting for the day’s exploit took place without him. At Blackie’s suggestion the gang was to disperse in pairs, take buses at random and see how many free rides could be snatched from unwary conductors (the operation was to be carried out in pairs to avoid cheating). They were drawing lots for their companions when T. arrived.

“Where you been, T.?” Blackie asked. “You can’t vote now. You know the rules.”

“I’ve been *there*,” T. said. He looked at the ground, as though he had thoughts to hide.

“Where?”

20 “At Old Misery’s.” Mike’s mouth opened and then hurriedly closed again with a click. He had remembered the frog.

“At Old Misery’s?” Blackie said. There was nothing in the rules against it, but he had a sensation that T. was treading on dangerous ground. He asked hopefully, “Did you break in?”

“No. I rang the bell.”

“And what did you say?”

“I said I wanted to see his house.”

25 “What did he do?”

“He showed it to me.”

“Pinch anything?”

“No.”

“What did you do it for then?”

The gang had gathered round: it was as though an impromptu court were about to form and to try some case of deviation. T. 30 said, “It’s a beautiful house,” and still watching the ground, meeting no one’s eyes, he licked his lips first one way, then the other.

“What do you mean, a beautiful house?” Blackie asked with scorn.

“It’s got a staircase two hundred years old like a corkscrew. Nothing holds it up.”

“What do you mean, nothing holds it up. Does it float?”

“It’s to do with opposite forces, Old Misery said.”

35 “What else?”

“There’s paneling.”

“Like in the Blue Boar?”

“Two hundred years old.”

“Is Old Misery two hundred years old?”

Mike laughed suddenly and then was quiet again. The meeting was in a serious mood. For the first time since T. had strolled into the car-park on the first day of the holidays his position was in danger. It only needed a single use of his real name and the gang would be at his heels.

“What did you do it for?” Blackie asked. He was just, he had no jealousy, he was anxious to retain T. in the gang if he could. It was the word “beautiful” that worried him—that belonged to a class world that you could still see parodied at the Wormsley Common Empire by a man wearing a top hat and a monocle, with a haw-haw accent. He was tempted to say, “My dear Trevor, old chap,” and unleash his hell hounds. “If you’d broken in,” he said sadly—that indeed would have been an exploit worthy of the gang.

“This was better,” T. said. “I found out things.” He continued to stare at his feet, not meeting anybody’s eye, as though he were absorbed in some dream he was unwilling—or ashamed—to share.

“What things?”

“Old Misery’s going to be away all tomorrow and Bank Holiday.”

Blackie said with relief, “You mean 45 we could break in?”

“And pinch things?” somebody asked.

Blackie said, “Nobody’s going to pinch things. Breaking in—that’s enough, isn’t it? We don’t want any court stuff.”

“I don’t want to pinch anything,” T. said. “I’ve got a better idea.”

“What is it?”

T. raised his eyes, as grey and 50 disturbed as the drab August day. “We’ll pull it down,” he said. “We’ll destroy it.”

Blackie gave a single hoot of laughter and then, like Mike, fell quiet, daunted by the serious implacable gaze. “What’d the police be doing all the time?” he asked.

“They’d never know. We’d do it from inside. I’ve found a way in.” He said with a sort of intensity, “We’d be like worms, don’t you see, in an apple. When we came out again there’d be nothing there, no staircase, no panels, nothing but just walls, and then we’d make the walls fall down somehow.”

“We’d go to jug,” Blackie said.

“Who’s to prove? And anyway we wouldn’t have pinched anything.” He added without the smallest flicker of glee, “There wouldn’t be anything to pinch after we’d finished.”

“I’ve never heard of going to prison for breaking things,” Summers said. 55

“There wouldn’t be time,” Blackie said. “I’ve seen housebreakers at work.”

“There are twelve of us,” T. said.

“We’d organize.”

“None of us know how....”

“I know,” T. said. He looked across at Blackie, “Have you got a better plan?”

“Today,” Mike said tactlessly, “we’re 60 pinching free rides.

“Free rides,” T. said. “You can stand down, Blackie, if you’d rather....”

“The gang’s got to vote.”

“Put it up then.”

Blackie said uneasily, “It’s proposed that tomorrow and Monday we destroy Old Misery’s house.”

65 “Here, here,” said a fat boy called Joe.

“Who’s in favor?”

T. said, “It’s carried.”

“How do we start?” Summers asked.

“He’ll tell you,” Blackie said. It was the end of his leadership. He went away to the back of the car-park and began to kick a stone, dribbling it this way and that. There was only one old Morris in the park, for few cars were left there except lorries: without an attendant there was no safety. He took a flying kick at the car and scraped a little paint off the rear mudguard. Beyond, paying no more attention to him than to a stranger, the gang had gathered round T.; Blackie was dimly aware of the fickleness of favor. He thought of going home, of never returning, of letting them all discover the hollowness of T.’s leadership, but suppose after all what T. proposed was possible—nothing like it had ever been done before. The fame of the Wormsley Common car-park gang would surely reach around London. There would be headlines in the papers. Even the grown-up gangs who ran the betting at the all-in wrestling and the barrow-boys would hear with respect of how Old Misery’s house had been destroyed. Driven by the pure, simple and altruistic ambition of fame for the gang, Blackie came back to where T. stood in the shadow of Misery’s wall.

T. was giving his orders with decision: it was as though this plan had been with him all his life, pondered through the seasons, now in his fifteenth year
70 crystalized with the pain of puberty. “You,” he said to Mike, “bring some big nails, the biggest you can find, and a hammer. Anyone else who can better bring a hammer and a screwdriver. We’ll need plenty of them. Chisels too. We can’t have too many chisels. Can anybody bring a saw?”

“I can,” Mike said.

“Not a child’s saw,” T. said. “A real saw.”

Blackie realized he had raised his hand

like any ordinary member of the gang.

“Right, you bring one, Blackie. But now there’s a difficulty. We want a hacksaw.”

75 “What’s a hacksaw?” someone asked. “You can get ‘em at Woolworth’s,” Summers said.

The fat boy called Joe said gloomily, “I knew it would end in a collection.”

“I’ll get one myself,” T. said. “I don’t want your money. But I can’t buy a sledge-hammer.”

Blackie said, “They are working on No. 15. I know where they’ll leave their stuff for Bank Holiday.”

80 “Then that’s all,” T. said. “We meet here at nine sharp.”

“I’ve got to go to church,” Mike said.

“Come over the wall and whistle. We’ll let you in.”

– 2 –

On Sunday morning all were punctual except Blackie, even Mike. Mike had had a stroke of luck. His mother felt ill, his father was tired after Saturday night, and he was told to go to church alone with many warnings of what would happen if he strayed. Blackie had had difficulty in smuggling out the saw, and then in finding the sledge-hammer at the back of No.15. He approached the house from a lane at the rear of the garden, for fear of the policeman’s beat along the main road. The tired evergreens kept off a stormy sun: another wet Bank Holiday was being prepared over the Atlantic, beginning in swirls of dust under the trees. Blackie climbed the wall into Misery’s garden.

There was no sign of anybody anywhere. The lav stood like a tomb in a neglected graveyard. The curtains were drawn. The house slept. Blackie lumbered nearer with the saw and the sledge-hammer. Perhaps after all nobody had turned up: the

plan had been a wild invention: they had woken wiser. But when he came close to the back door he could hear a confusion of sound hardly louder than a hive in swarm: a clickety-clack, a bang bang, a scraping, a creaking, a sudden painful crack. He thought: it's true, and whistled.

They opened the back door to him and he came in. He had at once the impression of organization, very different from the old happy-go-lucky days under his leadership. For a while he wandered up and down
85 stairs looking for T. Nobody addressed him: he had a sense of great urgency, and already he could begin to see the plan. The interior of the house was being carefully demolished without touching the outer walls. Summers with hammer and chisel was ripping out the skirting-boards in the ground floor dining-room: he had already smashed the panels of the door. In the same room Joe was heaving up the parquet blocks, exposing the soft wood floorboards over the cellar. Coils of wire came out of the damaged skirting and Mike sat happily on the floor clipping the wires.

On the curved stairs two of the gang were working hard with an inadequate child's saw on the banisters—when they saw Blackie's big saw they signaled for it wordlessly. When he next saw them a quarter of the banisters had been dropped into the hall. He found T. at last in the bathroom—he sat moodily in the least cared-for room in the house, listening to the sounds coming up from below.

"You've really done it," Blackie said with awe. "What's going to happen?"

"We've only just begun," T. said. He looked at the sledge-hammer and gave his instructions. "You stay here and break the bath and the washbasin. Don't bother about the pipes. They come later."

Mike appeared at the door. "I've finished the wires, T.," he said. "Good.

You've just got to go wandering round now. The kitchen's in the basement. Smash all the china and glass and bottles you can lay hold of. Don't turn on the taps—we don't want a flood—yet. Then go into all the rooms and turn out drawers. If they are locked get one of the others to break them open. Tear up any papers you find and smash all the ornaments. Better take a carving-knife with you from the kitchen. The bedroom's opposite here. Open the pillows and tear up the sheets. That's enough for the moment. And you, Blackie, when you've finished in here crack the plaster in the passage up with your sledge-hammer."

"What are you going to do?" Blackie
90 asked.

"I'm looking for something special,"
T. said.

It was nearly lunch-time before Blackie had finished and went in search of T. Chaos had advanced. The kitchen was a shambles of broken glass and china. The dining-room was stripped of parquet, the skirting was up, the door had been taken off its hinges, and the destroyers had moved up a floor. Streaks of light came in through the closed shutters where they worked with the seriousness of creators—and destruction after all is a form of creation. A kind of imagination had seen this house as it had now become.

Mike said, "I've got to go home for dinner."

"Who else?" T. asked, but all the others on one excuse or another had brought provisions with them.

They squatted in the ruins of the room and swapped unwanted sandwiches. Half
95 an hour for lunch and they were at work again. By the time Mike returned, they were on the top floor, and by six the superficial damage was completed. The doors were all off, all the skirtings raised,

the furniture pillaged and ripped and smashed—no one could have slept in the house except on a bed of broken plaster. T. gave his orders—eight o’clock next morning, and to escape notice they climbed singly over the garden wall, into the car-park. Only Blackie and T. were left: the light had nearly gone, and when they touched a switch, nothing worked—Mike had done his job thoroughly.

“Did you find anything special?” Blackie asked.

T. nodded. “Come over here,” he said, “and look.” Out of both pockets he drew bundles of pound notes. “Old Misery’s savings,” he said. “Mike ripped out the mattress, but he missed them.”

“What are you going to do? Share them?”

“We aren’t thieves,” T. said. “Nobody’s going to steal anything from this

house. I kept these for you and me—a celebration.” He knelt down on the floor and counted them out—there were seventy in all. “We’ll burn them,” he said, “one by one,” and taking it in turns they held a note upwards and lit the top corner, so that the flame burnt slowly towards their fingers. The grey ash floated above them and fell on their heads like age. “I’d like to see Old Misery’s face when we are through,” T. said.

“You hate him a lot?” Blackie asked.

“Of course I don’t hate him,” T. said. “There’d be no fun if I hated him.” The last burning note illuminated his brooding face. “All this hate and love,” he said, “it’s soft, it’s hooley. There’s only things, Blackie,” and he looked round the room crowded with the unfamiliar shadows of half things, broken things, former things. “I’ll race you home, Blackie,” he said.

(to be continued)

Think about Radio and Television Messages

Take a break from your short story reading to consider what you hear on radio and television.

A. Select one advertisement from either television or radio.

1. Product or service advertised:

2. Was the ad clear or were you left with questions?

3. What reason(s) did the ad give for you to use their product or service?

4. Was the ad honest and fair? If your answer is no, why not?

5. Was the ad persuasive? Do you wish to do as the advertiser suggests? Why or why not?

B. Think about a news story or other informative message on radio or television.

1. List the topic of informative story. _____

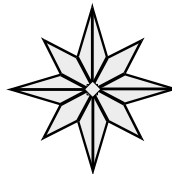
2. Summarize the information given.

3. Was the information complete? Do you have questions? If yes, list them.

4. Was the message honest and fair? If not, how do you think the message was slanted?



Complete Section D (pg. 92) in the Grammar Groomer Appendix.



End of Lesson 7