Discipline Course in Language
Twentieth Century Novel
Graham Greene: The Quiet American
Study Material: 3

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Contents

Lesson 1. : Graham Greene : The Quiet American
Lesson 2. : Plot of the Quiet American
Lesson 3. : A Critical Perspective

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The novel *The Quiet American*, published in the year 1955, was received with much admiration by all. It became a best seller, but there was much criticism of the novel for portraying Americans as murderers who were supplying raw materials to the Vietnamese to make bombs. Despite the criticisms made against Greene, some personal, some political, the novel achieved immense popularity. It was consequently adapted into films twice – once in 1958 and again in 2002 by Miramax, starring Michael Caine and Brendan Fraser. The fact that the novel was made into a film, almost after half a century after its publication, shows not only the popularity of the novel; but also the significance of the novel in understanding modern existence and the political turmoil of the twentieth century.

Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American* is set in the early 1950’s in Saigon, Vietnam during the First Indo-China War, in which a triangular love story develops between a British journalist in his fifties, a young American idealist and a beautiful teenaged Vietnamese girl. Though the novel merely seems to be a love story, it goes beyond the love triangle to portray one of the greatest political turmoil of the twentieth century, the French war in Vietnam, and the American involvement in it. Greene’s portrayal of the American involvement in Vietnam is often criticized for being anti-American, though the novel justly dramatizes the ways in which United States of America will lead its troops later to the Vietnam War to assert its political supremacy in the world.

Thus, the novel’s twin themes are enmeshed in a contrapuntal way so that the political and the personal themes cannot be separated from each other. Greene deliberately has woven the narrative in such a form that makes the novel an interesting read and yet provides a vivid picture of the first Indo-China War. The idea of the novel came to Greene while he was traveling from the Bentre Province to Saigon, when he met an American aid worker who lectured him about formulating a “third force.” Greene was posted as a reporter on behalf of *The Sunday Times* and *Le Figaro* in Saigon from 1951 to 1954. These four years of his stay in Saigon as a reporter made him experience the first Indo-China war from close quarters which provided him with a vibrant backdrop to his love story, though the backdrop itself becomes a part of the narrative for the major part of the novel.

Many readers find a similarity between America’s involvement in Vietnam and its present engagement in Iraq. Greene’s condemnation of America in the middle of the twentieth century is still very pertinent. The high-handed nature of The United States of America is still one of the concerns of all the left-wing politicians and academicians. Greene, though a self-proclaimed Catholic writer, sympathized later with the left-wing politics and made a strong critique of American Imperialism. The novel to some extent shows the political position of Graham Greene, though critics like Anthony Burgess disagree.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Graham Greene was born in 1904. On coming down from Balliol College, Oxford, he worked for four years as sub-editor at *The Times*. He established his reputation with his fourth novel, *Stamboul Train*. In 1935 he made a journey across Liberia, described in *Journey without
Maps. On his return, he was appointed film critic of the Spectator. In 1926 he was received into the Roman Catholic Church and later visited Mexico in 1938 to report on religious persecution there. As a result he wrote The Lawless Roads and later, his famous novel The Power and the Glory, where Greene explored the doctrine of the Church – “particularly the fundamental doctrine that states that good and evil are not mere relative terms like right and wrong but unchanging absolutes” (Anthony Burgess, 60). These novels established Greene as a Catholic Novelist, though in the post-war novels Greene’s preoccupation with Catholicism declined.

The World Wars had a great impact on the writers of Greene’s generation. The war-torn society led Greene to perceive the evil that lurked all around society. His protagonist Rowe in the novel The Ministry of Fear (1943) reflects on the course of heavy bombing in London – “you used to laugh at books Miss Savage read – about spies, and murders, and violence, and wild motor-car chases, but dear, that’s real life ….” This change in the international political scenario deeply troubled Greene which made him write novels about political turmoil and also choose the popular genre of thrillers, which is a typical product of the Cold War period.

After the end of Second World War, Greene wrote The Heart of the Matter (1948). Against the backdrop of Sierra Leone, this novel portrayed a British intelligence officer trapped in the social and moral decay of the dying empire who is ultimately led to adultery and suicide. The End of the Affair (1951), the second novel after the war, was a theological detective story where the protagonist of the novel, Bendrix suspected his beloved and consequently tried to figure out the lover of his beloved, Sarah, a married women, only to find out that he was God, whom Sarah had taken recourse due to her sexual guilt. The next novel was The Quiet American (1955). He was apparently inspired to write The Quiet American in October 1951 while driving back to Saigon from the Bentre province. He was accompanied by an American aid worker who lectured him about finding a “third force in Vietnam”. Greene spent three years writing it.

In 1958, the next book Our man in Havana was published which is about the Cold-War spying. A Burnt-out Case (1961) dealt with a leprosy colony in Congo and had a religious theme whereas The Comedians (1966) The Honorary Consul (1973) The Human Factor (1978) and Monsignor Quixote (1982) dealt with political themes. Though for eight decades, Graham Greene wrote on various political and religious themes, scholars find it difficult to put him into any particular British tradition. He is sometimes compared to the Catholic novelists like Evelyn Waugh, who was at odds with the post war situation and took a contentious and aggressive stand against the issues that Greene discussed in his political novels. More often he is seen as a contemporary of Malraux, Mauriac and Bernanos, writers of Sartre’s “second generation.”

Sean O’Faolain in his book The Vanishing Hero: Studies in Novelists of the Twenties, noticed the influence of Pascal on many twentieth century novelists. Though they differ in terms of their writing styles ( the ascetically minded Catholic, the natural skeptic, the soured hedonist, the frustrated romantic, the earnest social reformer, the topical satirist ) they all have something in common that makes them part of the same tradition. For Sean O’Faolain, the novelists like, Bernanos, Julian Green, Mauriac, Céline, Marcel Aymé, Camus, Faulkner, Moravia, George Orwell and Graham Greene – belong to the same tradition of being “anti-humanist, anti-heroic, highly skeptical about man’s inherent dignity which the great humanists took as the corner stone of all its beliefs; full of misgivings as to the nature of free-will.” (81)

Greene died in 1992 but scholars still find it difficult to bracket his works into any particular canon of British literary writing which makes his novels difficult to study.
The Background: The Indo-China War

The term Indo-China refers to the contemporary nations of Cambodia, Loas and Vietnam, which were under the French colonial domination. Laos gained independence in 1949 and Cambodia in 1953 and Vietnam witnessed the Indo-China war during 1946 to 1954, which resulted in the withdrawal of the French from Vietnam. A Civil War broke out in Vietnam in 1964 and carried on till 1975, which is popularly known as Vietnam War. The United States of America intervened on the side of South Vietnam. At last in 1973, the US troops withdrew from Vietnam and in 1976, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was formed.

For our present purpose, our discussion will be limited to the first Indo China War (1946 – 1954), which is variously known as the French Indochina War, The Anti-French War, the Franco-Vietnamese War, the Franco-Vietminh War, and the Indochina War. The war was fought in the French Indo-china from December 19, 1946 to August 1, 1954; between the French Union’s French Far East Expeditionary Corps, led by France and supported by Bao Dai’s Vietnamese National Army against the Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Gaip.

This war was fought between French colonial forces and Vietminh forces largely in the Tonkin area of northern Vietnam. The Vietminh began active guerrilla operations during the Japanese occupation during World War II and in September 1945 their leader, Ho Chi Minh, proclaimed a Vietnamese Republic in Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh created the Viet Minh as an umbrella organization for all the nationalist resistance movements, de-emphasizing his communist social revolutionary background. The French opposed independence, and launched a military attack. Ho Chi Minh was forced to flee Hanoi and began a guerrilla war in December 1946. By 1950, foreign communist aid had increased Vietminh strength to the point where the French were forced into defensive lines around the Red River delta, but Vietminh attempts to win the war failed in 1951. Guerrilla operations of the Vietminh continued till an ill-advised French attempt to seek a decisive engagement led to the encirclement and defeat of their forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The war and French rule in Indo-China formally terminated at the Geneva Conference in April-July 1954.

Greene’s Literary Style

Travel and “Greeneland”

Like other modern novelists, Graham Greene concentrated on portraying characters’ internal lives in their mental, emotional and spiritual depth and intensity. Mostly, Greene’s protagonists are caught and troubled by existential struggles in places remote to Europe. The novels are usually set in poor, hot and dusty tropical backwaters in countries like Mexico, West Africa, Vietnam, Cuba, Argentina, Haiti etc. The settings of the novels are a result of his travels to the world’s wild and remote places, as well as his belief that the evil, the dominant theme of his writing, is all pervasive.

Greene first left Europe in 1935, at the age of thirty one, for a trip to Liberia and produced the travel book Journey without Maps. His trip to Mexico in 1938 gave birth to two books – The Lawless Roads and the famous novel The Power and the Glory, which maps the Government’s campaign of forced anti-catholic secularization. His trip to Haiti created the story The Comedians whereas his stay in Indo-China (present Vietnam) gave birth to the intricate murder mystery The Quiet American. Thus Greene’s journey round the world had produced numerous works which center on a single perspective – the perspective of the evil, the
wretchedness of human condition which made it difficult for both the innocent and the evil to exist.

In *The Lawless Roads*, Greene wrote –

“There is so much weariness and disappointment in travel that people have to open up — in railway trains, over a fire, on the decks of steamers, and in the palm courts of hotels on a rainy day. They have to pass the time somehow, and they can pass it only with themselves. Like the characters in Chekhov they have no reserves — you learn the most intimate secrets. You get an impression of a world peopled by eccentrics, of odd professions, almost incredible stupidities, and, to balance them, amazing enduring.”

The settings of his novels are woven into the plots in such intrinsic ways that it led many critics to coin the term “Greeneland.” R. W. B. Lewis in the essay “The Fiction of Graham Greene: Between the Horror and the Glory” says –

“Greene’s world bears a curious but vivid resemblance to fragments of the historical world. He has always sought to embed his analogical nightmares within meticulously described settings – sometimes the dingier sections of English cities, but more usually those portions of the earth which, from the western centre, appear remote, primitive, and fantastic. There is a close relationship for Greene between the dingy and the primitive. His aim, moreover, is not simply to describe surfaces, but rather to evoke the very vitality, the natural activity of a place.” (57)

Greeneland is not merely an inactive backdrop to his novels, but an active ambience which provides the characters of the novel the justification behind their moral ambiguity and metaphysical anguish. Malcolm Bradbury in his book *The Modern British Novel* says about Greene, “A catholic who could sympathize with communism, to the point where he evidently presumed some shared identity between the two, a writer who regarded sinners as capable of sainthood, disloyalty as pointing to some higher loyalty, he finally succeeded in turning his own distinctive and vastly international Greeneland into a close simulacrum of the Cold War world itself.” (289)

Therefore it is important to understand the backdrop of the novel because it justifies the action of the novel to some extent. In case of *The Quiet American*, the Indo China war might merely seem to be the backdrop of an intensely personal battle between Fowler and Pyle, yet the backdrop comes to the forefront when these two characters had enmeshed themselves in the Vietnam issue. Malcolm Bradbury is of the opinion that *The Quiet American* is “very plainly about its author’s own divided loyalties in the age of Cold War ideology. It observes the naivety of western liberalism in the face of Third world resurrections, and remarkably prophesies the disastrous American campaign in Vietnam a decade on.” (291) Thus, the political turmoil of Vietnam became a significant part of the novel as it was this turmoil which is matched with the metaphysical anxiety of the characters.

**Religious Theme**

Graham Greene is often considered as a “Catholic Novelist” because many of his novels have religious theme at its centre. The most famous novel *The Power and The Glory* deals with the cruel repression of the clergy in Mexico. The novel brilliantly portrays the effects of the government’s campaign of forced anti-catholic secularization.
Graham Greene himself converted to Christianity in 1926 and was baptized in the same year. Unlike the other modernists, he argues that a world devoid of spirituality only seems to be dull and superficial. For him, the way out of modernist despair is in the awareness of the struggle of the soul which could lead man to the realization of the metaphysical realities. Therefore, Greene’s novels often portray the Christian drama of the struggle within the soul from the Catholic perspective. Greene once explained that the significance of the religious novel is that it sustained the human factor in fiction – “with the religious sense went the importance of the human act.” (Bradbury, 289)

Though, in his later writings, Greene’s Catholicism is not so dominant. *The Quiet American*, for example, is deeply influenced by the left-wing political critique of the American involvement in Vietnam. Some critics are of the view that the Catholic perspective is replaced by a left-wing and humanistic perspective by Greene in *The Quiet American*. It might be true that *The Quiet American* does not openly talk about religion or Catholicism, but there are enough references in the text to show Greene’s preoccupation with religion. Fowler’s wife is represented as a very religious woman who because of her religious beliefs does not agree to divorce her husband. The French Inspector is represented as a Roman catholic in the novel though he is similar to Fowler in his cynicism.

More importantly the lack of religiosity is also important as the lack of it made the characters in novel loose their humanistic perspective. The pessimism and skepticism of Fowler can be attributed to his atheism. Probably Greene wants to show in *The Quiet American* how the lack of religion leads man to a metaphysical anguish where he suffers and makes other suffer. The evil destitution and the suffering of the novel can easily be related to the religion or to the lack of it.

To wrap up the discussion on Greene as an author and before going on to the novel, *The Quiet American*, it is necessary to understand the standing of Greene in the British Literary canon. As discussed earlier, we know that literary critics find it very difficult to describe him or categorize his writings into any particular genre or canon because Greene, in his writing career experimented with various genres and themes, set in different parts of the world. We can conclude with the statement of Malcolm Bradbury who is of the opinion that Greene’s writing “remained in essence international, reaching into entire foreign continents of modern experience as well as into the dark or more anxious places of the human condition, a journey without maps, or else with imperfect ones. Yet there remained, for all the exiled and deliberately disloyal aspects of it, a distinctive Britishness, awareness of origins; unlike some modern fiction, the writer’s air of exile was never total. His work disputed with contemporary liberalism, though unlike Waugh’s it remained politically progressive; it challenged innocence, confronted evil and acknowledged human disorder.” (292 –293)
**LESSON 2**

**PLOT OF THE QUIET AMERICAN**

*The Quiet American* is a murder mystery thriller with a triangular love story. The narrator, Thomas Fowler, begins at almost the end of the story (Pyle’s death) and then goes on to reveal the details of events that led to his death. Set in the early 1950s in Saigon, Vietnam during the end of the first Indochina War, the novel is also a critique of American involvement in Vietnam. There are two time periods in the novel between which the narrative constantly shifts – the present that is after Pyle’s death and the past in which events in succession led to Pyle’s death. The reason behind choosing two time periods can be ascribed to the fact that there are two stories running parallel in the novel – the story of the assassination of Pyle and the story of detection, done by Inspector Vigot.

The story of detection is not given primary importance by the novelist as it is not a typical detective novel, but there are elements in the text which go on to prove that it is so. Though the criminal is not detected and punished at the end as it happens in a detective story, but the criminal himself provides enough clues for the readers to find out how and why Alden Pyle was murdered. Fowler in a round about way tries to justify his own action of betraying Alden to the group of assassins as he himself is going through an anguish which he needs to share – and he shares it with the readers, as he ends the narrative by saying – “Everything had gone right with me since he dies, but how I wished there existed someone to who I could say sorry.”

The readers get a glimpse of a world where evil is not completely evil, where the wretchedness of the human condition makes people shudder in fear, where life is at odds with betrayal and guilt, where innocents are turned to murderers and where friendship is mere feigning. The absurdities of existence engulf the main characters of the novel as there is no way out of it.

Thomas Fowler, a man in his fifties, is a British journalist covering the French war in Vietnam. He lives in an apartment in Saigon with his girlfriend Phuong, a twenty one year “wonderfully ignorant girl,” and the most beautiful in Saigon. Fowler seems to be objective and indifferent to the situation of war and merely does the job for his news agency without any sense of fulfillment. As a media person he is nonchalant, as he says – “The human condition being what it was, let them fight, let them love, let them murder, I would not be involved. My fellow journalists called themselves correspondents; I preferred the title of reporter. I wrote what I saw; I took no action – even an opinion is a kind of action.”

His otherwise uncluttered life takes a wild turn when he meets a young American idealist Alden Pyle, “age thirty two, employed in the Economic Aid Mission.” Fowler introduces him in the novel by saying that “He’s a good chap in his way. Serious not one of those noisy bastards at the Continental. A quiet American.” Pyle is an American but Fowler finds him unlike others as he is very soft spoken and youthful, which shows Fowler’s hatred for the Americans, though he presents himself to be indifferent.

Pyle reads York Harding, an American foreign policy theorist, and passionately believes in Harding’s theory that it is only a Third Force and not colonialism or communism that can provide answers to the problems of the Third World countries. Pyle’s faith in Harding’s theory
about the Third World makes him believe that the third force can be The United States of America who can help Vietnam come out of the political turmoil. Consequently he sets about in creating a “Third Force” against the Viet Minh by using a Vietnamese splinter group headed by corrupt militia leader General Thé (based on the actual Trinh Minh Thé).

Fowler understands the immaturity of Alden Pyle who reads Harding and thinks that the knowledge he gains from the book can be used in practical life. Fowler says – “He’s (Harding) a superior sort of journalist – they call them diplomatic correspondents. He gets hold of an idea and then alters every situation to fit the idea. Harding had been here once for a week on his way from Bangkok to Tokyo. Pyle made the mistake of putting his idea into practice. Harding wrote about a third force. Pyle formed one – a shoddy little bandit with two thousand men and a couple of tame tigers. He got mixed up.” The immaturity of Pyle makes him believe in the ideas of Harding in totality and he tries to put them to action. He does so in good faith but the context of the post war situation and the harshness of reality made him pay the price of being naïve.

It is at the Hotel Continental, Saigon that Fowler and Pyle meet by chance, where Pyle is also introduced to Phuong, the live-in partner of Fowler. Phuong and Pyle dance in the hotel and Pyle falls in love with her. It is very difficult to say whether Phuong really liked Pyle because for her the men from the west are merely her ticket to get to the western world.

Phuong had dreamt of going to Europe to live like a duchess. Fowler for Phuong is just an instrument that she can use to go to Europe, though Phuong and her sister are apprehensive of the fact that Fowler is a married man, whose wife is separated from him and lives in London. Fowler promises Phuong that he will soon get a divorce and will marry Phuong, though he does not have any intention of doing it.

Again Fowler and Pyle meet at the same hotel on a day when the crude, rude and drunk Americans and Brits make a fuss in the hotel and move to the House of Five Hundred Women. Pyle, the naïve American, finds himself in an awkward situation among the prostitutes and Fowler rescues him. The same night Pyle appears to be very defensive and caring about Phuong.

Fowler, after meeting Pyle at the Continental hotel, goes to the city of Phat Diem to cover a battle there. Pyle travels through the perilous battleground to announce it to Fowler that he has fallen in love with Phuong from the first night he saw her and will love to marry her. They make a toast for nothing and the next day Pyle returns back to Saigon. Fowler later gets a letter from Pyle thanking him for being nice to him and for accepting his decision to marry Phuong. The letter disturbs Fowler but at the same time he does not mind much as he had complete confidence in Phuong that she will never leave him and marry Pyle.

Meanwhile, Fowler also gets a transfer letter from his editor asking him to go back to England, which he somehow manages to block for the moment. Next he plans to get a divorce from his wife and writes a letter to her seeking divorce.

Fowler and Pyle again meet on the battleground and are held captive in a tower where they spend the night amidst terror. They discuss several things through the night. While trying to escape from their captivity Fowler gets hurt badly. Pyle could have run away from there to save his own life, but he saves Fowler risking his own life in the process.
They come back to Saigon. Fowler lies to Phuong that his wife has agreed for the divorce. But soon enough Pyle exposes the lie and Phuong moves in with Pyle. Pyle, consequently, becomes a target for Fowler whose ego is hurt. For Fowler it has become an issue that should be resolved as soon as possible as that can only provides him certain peace of mind. Consequently, he keeps a close watch on Pyle’s activities. He investigates and finds out that Pyle is involved in importing military supplies into Vietnam from United States.

Fowler now goes to Pyle’s large office to confront him, but, incidentally, Pyle is not there. Pyle later comes over for drinks and announces that he is planning to get married to Phuong.

Some days later there is an explosion in which many innocent people are killed. Fowler investigates the matter privately and comes to the conclusion that probably Pyle is behind this bombing. Fowler finds political justification to eliminate Pyle as he is a great threat to the people of Vietnam. Consequently, he betrays Pyle to the local group of assassins and actively participates in the plan to murder Pyle. The police inspector Vigot could unearth the connection, but he could not find enough evidence against Fowler to arrest him. The novel begins and ends in an absurd note when we see Phuong again moving back to Fowler’s apartment and preparing Opium for Fowler, as if nothing had happened – “there was no scene, no tears, just thought – the long private thought of somebody who has to alter a whole course of life.”

**Characterisation**

**Thomas Fowler:**

Thomas Fowler is the narrator as well as the main turner of events in the novel. Fowler is a veteran British journalist in his fifties, who has been covering the war in Vietnam for over two years. He is indifferent to the things happening around him. He says, “the human condition being what it was, let them fight, let them love, let them murder, I would not get involved. My fellow journalists called themselves correspondents; I preferred the title of reporter. I wrote what I saw: I took no action even an opinion is a kind of action.” His views on his profession make it clear that he has lost all conscience living in the modern war-torn world where there is nothing humane about humanity. His cynical and depressing view makes the world of the narrative much darker and desolate because the absence of religion or religiosity (as Fowler is an atheist) makes the world dreadfully comic and gloomy.

Fowler is married legally but he is separated from his wife. They have not divorced each other as yet. Mrs. Fowler thinks that divorce is not a suitable end to a marriage because of her religious views. R. W. B. Lewis is of the opinion that “the novel’s viewpoint is the non-religious consciousness of Fowler, the narrator, whose religious myopia contrasts with the warm, unstable Catholicism shown by his English wife in letters written from home.”(59) They are not merely separated in emotional terms but they are also physically separated by thousands of miles as Mrs. Fowler lives in England.

Fowler, on the other hand, lives in Saigon with a young beautiful Vietnamese girl, Phuong, with whom he shares the bed but does not have any emotional bonding. Phuong has chosen to live with him as she thinks that Fowler is going to marry him and in the process she is going to have a bright future in Europe. But Fowler has no such intentions as he does not care a bit about Phuong’s interest. Fowler is staying in Vietnam as he is in a self-inflicted exile because England for him is the scene of his failures. Though he despises Saigon, yet he lives there
because it is physically distant from London and his wife. He does his reporting for the media and then enjoys his life with opium and Phuong, and is cynical about the ways of the world and about the things happening around him. His pessimism is so depressing that the whole world seems to be very murky. Yet in this gloomy world, Fowler carries on living a life without any apparent materialistic problems – as Phuong is there to take care of his apartment and sexual needs, and opium is enough to make him lead an otherwise easy life.

But the easy flowing life of Fowler is caught in a web when the American, Alden Pyle enters their life, and Phuong finds Pyle to be a better marital prospect and consequently moves in with him. Pyle’s arrival threatens the calm smooth-sailing sexual life of Fowler and he now starts finding ways through which he can beat Pyle in the game of love. Fowler finds out that York Harding’s idea of the Third Force is the ideology that Pyle believes in fervently and works along the lines of those ideologies to create a third force in Vietnam. Fowler figures out that this naïve move of Pyle can be used against him as a weapon to get back the girl.

It is at this juncture that the novel is set when Fowler’s conscience, love and politics of Vietnam are set in a tripartite battle. Pyle’s innocence makes Fowler sympathize with him as he knows that Pyle’s innocence or naivety is the cause of the death of fifty people, including women and children. Although, it is the same innocence which made Pyle risk his own life to save Fowler in the battle field. But in the modern day existence, innocence perishes and so does Pyle, when cynicism of Fowler goes against him.

Alden Pyle:

Alden Pyle is the deceptively “quiet American” of the novel’s title. He is an idealistic naive young man who arrives in Vietnam as a medical aid worker on behalf of the Economic Aid Mission. Under the garb of medical help the American is shown to be trying to build up a force in Vietnam which he terms as The Third Force, based on his reading of York Harding, an American Political Journalist. To Pyle, the idea of Harding that neither communism nor colonialism is a way out for Vietnam and the third world nations, but a national democratic force under the guidance and aid of the Western nations such as United States of America can be the only solution for the politically volatile third world nations like Vietnam, is a workable idea.

Alden Pyle has graduated from Harvard University. He is idealistic in his views about life and reality as he has not seen the real world in its raw form. He is far removed from the pragmatic and practical things of life – he views things from the perspective of the books that he has encountered during his university days. Once Fowler points out to Pyle that it is easier for York Harding to talk about third force as he does not have to live in Vietnam and see the real world from its true perspective. Even when he came to Vietnam he came for a week during his journey from Bangkok to Tokyo. Fowler says that people like York Harding first make a theory and then make everything fall into place by twisting the reality according to the need of the theory – these theories have no basis in reality. Fowler even gives an example – “isms and ocracies. Give me facts. A rubber planter beats his labourer – all right, I’m against him. He hasn’t been instructed to do it by the Minister of Colonies. In France I expect he’d beat his wife.”

Even though Fowler tried to make Pyle understand that idealism is naivety in the modern world, that the bookish knowledge does not hold much truth when faced with the grim reality of modern existence, Pyle does not listen to him because for him Harding is the last word for him where third world politics is concerned. Pyle is not only immature, but he is also very rigid in his
beliefs. He thinks that university education has provided him with just the knowledge to analyze and fight the real world.

Thus, the debate between Fowler and Pyle is about idealism versus grim reality. If Pyle has not experienced war, Fowler is a veteran of war reporting. If Pyle is innocent about things going around him in Vietnam, then Fowler knows things well and knows how to carry on in a war zone. But this ideological fight is of no concern to Fowler as he is indifferent to the context in which he lives. The naivety of Pyle makes him think that Pyle should be provided certain knowledge about the real world so that he does not harm himself and others by putting his naïve theories into practice.

But this ideological battle takes a different turn as another tussle comes up between Fowler and Pyle – a tussle which is personal. The fight between Pyle and Fowler is over the beautiful young Vietnamese girl Phuong. Phuong had been living with Fowler as his sexual partner for about two years, and Phuong thinks that one day Fowler will take her to Europe and she will be able to live like a duchess.

Pyle meets Phuong incidentally in the Hotel Continental in Saigon when Fowler introduces him to Phuong. Their first meeting makes Pyle fall in love with the most beautiful girl of Saigon, Phuong. Phuong choose to live with Pyle as she figures out that with Pyle she has a brighter chance of going to the west. When Fowler goes to the city of Phat Diem to cover news of the battle there, Pyle visits Fowler in the war affected area with great difficulty to give the news to Fowler that he has fallen in love with Phuong. This incident shows the honesty and innocence of Pyle who believes that it is important to inform Fowler about his interest in Phuong.

The humane aspect of Pyle becomes clearer when Pyle saves Fowler putting his own life at risk when he could have left Fowler to die as he is hurt and unable to move. Pyle is shown to be altruist, who cares for his fellow creatures. Fowler is taken aback to some extent by the benevolent act of Pyle, but that does not deter Fowler from planning the assassination of Pyle. As against the “quiet” American we see a diabolical “unquiet” European who takes the revenge, to get Phuong back to his bed. Compared to Fowler, Pyle seems very juvenile, as he still believes in the goodness of man and service towards mankind. Even his act of setting up the third force is an adolescent act which he does without understanding the harmful nature and grim effect of it. Thus throughout the novel the character of Pyle remains flat. He comes to Vietnam with the notion of aiding the people there and dies without realizing the mistake he has made in the process of doing so. His puerile nature evokes readers’ sympathy for him, yet a sense of pessimism is evoked as innocence becomes a drawback in the modernist existence.

**Phuong**

Greene names his heroine after a real life character Phuong who he met during his stay in Indo-China and became friends with. Though the character is named after her, but there is no similarity between Phuong of the novel and her namesake in real life.

Phuong is introduced in the novel as the mistress of the narrator, Fowler, who prepares opium for the narrator and is totally dependent on him for her livelihood. Fowler does not care for her interests at all, as she is just a tool of pleasure for him, as he says to Pyle – “I don’t care that for her interests. You can have her interests. I only want her body. I want her in bed with me.
I’d rather ruin her and sleep with her than … look after her damned interests.” She has the dream of reaching Europe one day so that she can live a good life. With this intention she lives with Fowler as she believes that her dream will be realized one day, though she has certain doubts about it. She carries on staying with Fowler for security, but as soon as she figures out Pyle’s love for her she moves in with Pyle. Moreover, she moves in with Pyle when she finds out that Fowler has told her a lie that his wife has agreed for the divorce. Through out the novel, she remains a silent persona, whose character is not fully developed and realized by Greene. Even the choices that she makes in her life is not her own, they are decided by her elder sister.

After Pyle’s death, Phuong again moves to Fowler’s apartment and presents herself in such a way as if nothing had happened in between. But Fowler could figure out that the girl has suffered in the process, as he says – “there was no scene, no tears, just thought – the long private thought of somebody who has to alter a whole course of life.” Life may not have changed much for Fowler, but for Phuong it is rearranging her whole life once again.

**Vigot**

Vigot may not figure as one of the important characters because not much of the action in the novel is centered on him. He is the French police inspector who is given the charge of investigating the cause and nature of Pyle’s assassination. His importance in the novel lies in the fact that he is a detective who is trying to unearth the mystery of Alden Pyle’s death.

Vigot is caught between his duty to figuring out the culprit who killed Pyle and the pragmatic approach of letting things remain covered for the interest of the country. He knows very well that Fowler can be arrested because there is some evidence against him yet he lets Fowler go because he is skeptical about the whole affair. Moreover, Vigot’s character is important as he is a Roman Catholic in the novel, whose views on the world is in contrast to that of the narrator Fowler, who is an atheist. They discuss Blaise Pascal when they meet, but their way of viewing the world is different because of their difference in faith.
LESSON 3

A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Many literary critics and academicians try to divide Greene’s writings into two broad categories or genres: (i) thrillers, such as The Ministry of Fear, in which mystery and suspense are supposedly the dominating elements and (ii) literary works like The Power and the Glory and their kind which established Greene as a serious writer. But this division between serious and popular writing is not beyond academic politics, as popular texts are usually not taken seriously in academic circles. Leavis and Leavisites believed that popular fiction and mass culture in general provide cheap and easy pleasures for a public which, because of sociological situations of mass city living and the destruction of small scale communities, has a need for vicarious or substitute life satisfactions. (John Docker, 31)

Probably writers like Greene, to some extent, helped in diffusing such binary opposition between Popular literature and Elite literature because he wrote in a mode which was difficult to categorize as either popular or elite. The Quiet American is a good example of one such writing which cannot be classified merely as a murder mystery thriller, though it is one. The novel surpasses its popular classification and assumes remarkable insight into human nature and brings about the metaphysical battle that man fights with himself.

In this sense, Greene’s The Quiet American can be termed as a Modern novel as it deals with the dilemma of a man. Thomas Fowler is caught between his passion for a foreigner girl and his sense of sympathy for a naïve American. The sympathy for the American is often punctured by his passion/desire – the desire which makes him have a revenge motive against Alden Pyle, who unknowingly becomes a victim. Thomas Fowler’s struggle with himself grabs the attention of the readers, as R. W. B. Lewis comments – “Pyle’s ignorant energy causes the death of several dozen natives. Because of that and for more selfish and private reasons, Fowler, the English Newspaper man whose fuzzy confession makes up the story, betrays him to an underground group which assassinates him.” (58) Though the novel is about Alden Pyle, as the name of the novel suggests, yet the novel is more about Thomas Fowler and his confessions and admissions.

It may be that those confessions are misty and shadowy, as no conclusive statement can be drawn from them, but those confessions show the inner battle of the narrator, Fowler. The novel starts with the news of the death of Pyle in a plot of assassination and then Fowler in retrospect gives us the story of Fowler’s first acquaintance with Pyle to his death. The plot of the novel, more than the story of Pyle, provides us with the intricate details of the relationship that develop between Fowler and Pyle along with the native girl Phuong. R. W. B. Lewis is of the opinion that “The Quiet American tends to produce not a clear and unprejudiced impression of life but an intricate plot with very little action: sensational doings wrapped in perfunctory attitudes which point towards a moral …” (57)

The readers confront a dark evil world in Greene’s fiction, particularly in The Quiet American which is typical of a post-war novelist who presents historical chaos, metaphysical anxiety and darkness of his times. Sean O’Faolain comments – “the two most striking things about the novels of Graham Greene are their preoccupation with the evil and their intellectual jusqu’au-boutisme.” Evil is surely the most important aspect of Greene’s novels, but evil does neither arise merely from the instincts of the writer nor is the instinct camouflaged in intellect,
but comes from a deep understanding of the social and historical processes that surround the writer.

Malcolm Bradbury in his book *The Modern British Novel*, commenting on the debased nature of history as represented by many post-war novelists, says about Greene—“his world of seedy landscapes, depressed lives, failed loves, political and sexual faithlessness, divided loyalties, moral and metaphysical guilt, was plainly a Catholic one, but over the course of time it came strangely to match the spirit of the age of existential anguish, and increasingly the ideological and the geographical map of the Cold War world itself.” (288-289) The well known Catholic novelist in *The Quiet American* tries to cope up with the anguish that are historical as well as personal. For Thomas Fowler, the anguish takes such a turn that he finds it difficult to return back to England to his religious wife; and more importantly he tries to live a life as a lifeless reporter in Saigon. His anguish is disturbed by the arrival of the innocent American whose naïve ways make Fowler sympathize with him.

Yet when his personal interests are hurt he does not hesitate to betray the naïve American’s life to the assassins. At one level, the novel explores the anguish with which Fowler spends his everyday life in Saigon; while on the other, he loathes living in Saigon, but he can not return back to England because he considers England as the scene of his failure. Kevin Lewis is of the opinion that “Greene wrote about characters who were trapped emotionally, spiritually and physically in an alien environment.” (478). This anguish of trapped existence and inability to escape from it makes Fowler dependant on opium and Phuong though he cares very little for her and only uses her for his sexual needs.

On a different plane, the novel explores the innocence of Alden Pyle, the quiet American whose lack of knowledge of personal and political evil, makes him participate in the process of building up a third force, without understanding the political ramifications of his acts. He acts in good faith in building up the Third Force without realizing that in certain areas the solution should come from within the Vietnamese society rather than from outside sources. Moreover, when the aid is of such nature which propagates violence then it becomes more disturbing. In the name of medical aid, the United States of America is providing the Vietnamese a kind of American Plastic called Dialacton, which is used for making weapons. This kind of aid not only mars the very purpose of the aid but perpetuates more evil in the society. Pyle innocently participates in this project only to kill innocent people who had nothing to do with the political turmoil of Vietnam. What the Vietnamese people want is not any outside people telling them how to live and how to settle their disputes, but to live their life in a peaceful atmosphere, which can not happen if people like Pyle land up there with the notion of development of the third world.

Greene’s political critique is sharp, but at the same time critics point out that the historical backdrop to the novel is a trope that Greene uses to portray the anxiety that the modern day people live with. The war-affected modern life, devoid of any religiosity, is barren and evil. It is the malevolence and immorality of the modernist life and its consequent despair that Greene portrays in his novels, more in case of the novel *The Quiet American*.

**Anti – Americanism**

Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American* has all the stuff which promised to make a statement against the United States of America. Though Greene does not show any bias, yet he portrays Pyle as a naïve American trying to build up a ‘third force’ in Indo-China. The book never fully analyzes the establishment of such a force, as Greene’s motif probably was not to
show how America involved itself in the politics of Vietnam, but to show a metaphysical battle ground in Saigon which will make the readers grasp the nature of evil that lurks around the world in the post-war era. The American involvement in the third world politics in general and Vietnam in particular cannot be over looked in the novel; as through out the novel Fowler, the narrator of the novel is shown to be critiquing Alden Pyle, the immature American for his idea of building up a third force in Vietnam, as he thinks neither colonialism, nor communism is a way out for the Vietnamese.

The question which potentially disturbs the critics is whether the novel *The Quiet American* is about a literary response to war and the first world involvement in the third world politics or is it about the characters that are physically and emotionally trapped in an alien environment? Gloria Emerson in her account of the interview with Graham Greene calls *The Quiet American* “the first great warning” (Gloria Emerson) against American involvement in Vietnam/Indo-China affairs. Kevin Lewis points out that “much criticism was heaped on Greene by the media in America for what was perceived as a mean-spirited and trivialized look at American involvement in Third World politics.” (478)

Gordon O. Taylor in the essay “American Personal Narrative of the War in Vietnam” writes that “The Quiet American is … an active element of the passage, not a passively acknowledged influence. Pyle’s body washes up here with the same specificity of place and pathological detail as contained in the novel … in Pyle’s end a true image of, if not an actual event in, the beginning of American self-entrapped in Vietnam.” (Gordon O. Taylor, p.299) Though Pyle seems to be an imaginative creation, a fiction without any real counterpart, yet the way in which Greene portrays Pyle’s involvement in the Indo-China politics, it seems apparent that the naïve American is not after all as innocent as it seems to be. Under the cover of helping the natives of Vietnam, the Americans are there to assert their political supremacy.

Fowler in the novel rightly points out –
“You and your like are trying to make a war with the help of people who just aren’t interested … they want enough rice. They don’t want to be shot at. They want one day to be much the same as another. They don’t want our white skins around telling them what they want. …. Do you think the peasant sits and thinks of God and Democracy when he gets inside his mud hut at night?”

Fowler’s question to Pyle is potent as the third world does not need the first world to tell them what they want. The third world may be living under poverty and political turmoil, but that does not necessarily mean that the west will invade these countries according to their whims and wishes. In the novel, The Economic Aid Mission of the USA is trying to help the Vietnamese by supplying them with medicine. Fowler comments – “Medicine’s a kind of weapon?” Medicine is a kind of weapon in the context of the novel. Under the garb of Medicine, weapons are being supplied to the local groups which are detrimental for the third world political scenario.

Another aspect of Anti-Americanism is not directly presented in the text, but there are undertones of it existing in the novel. Fowler presents the Americans as either noisy (The Americans in Hotel Continental, Saigon or in the House of Five Hundred women) or naïve (Alden Pyle). Probably, there is a greater reason behind it. After the end of the Second World War, Britishers have almost lost all their colonies and are being constricted to their little island. This physical constriction led to a constriction of their ego, resulting in an inferiority complex. With the coming up of the new West, the United States of America, their superior status in world political scenario is altogether lost. The loss of the empire affected the Britishers psychologically.
and consequently the representative of the new West are either shown to be very noisy or naïve. The British hatred for the Americans is also shared by the French, as Fowler says—“I became a bore on the subject of America, even with my French friends who were ready enough to share their antipathies.” Thus not only English, but the French people also have similar antagonism towards Americans.

Fowler comments in the novel—“I began—almost unconsciously—to run down everything that was American. My conversation was full of the poverty of American literature, the scandals of American Politics, the beastliness of the American children.” This unconscious admission of Fowler probably is the result of the hatred for the United States of America. When Pyle takes away Fowler’s mistress from him, Fowler says—“it is as though she were being taken away from me by a nation rather than by a man.” These kinds of confessions of Fowler make it clear that the deep rooted detestation for a nation is not a by-product of an act of a single person. There are larger issues related to it. In this sense, the anti-Americanism, if any, that we can figure out in the novel is not without a historical basis.

**Political versus Personal**

The debate of political versus personal takes a serious note in the case of *The Quiet American* as critics are divergent in their opinions about the two aspects of the novel—the American involvement and the triangular love story. These readings or misreadings of the novel, probably beyond the authorial intention, have led Greene to react to adverse comments made against him. According to the author, the novel “is a story and not a piece of history.” The terrain of Vietnam in *The Quiet American* may accurately match historically and cartographically, but that does not make the novel a historical one, nor does it prove that the author’s intention is purely to show the way the foreign forces tried to control the politics of the then Vietnam.

Probably the real terrain of *The Quiet American* “is the moral ground on which Fowler eventually takes sides in order to remain human.”(Gordon O. Taylor, p. 303) If the ‘moral ground’ of the British war journalist seems to be the focal fiber of the novel then it seems obvious that Greene is trying to portray a modernist man with his anguishes and despair. Fowler is trying to deal with his own self, the self which has become laid back when it is not related to his profession; and even when it is a professional matter he indifferently does it without taking sides. He proclaims that the cruelty and grossness of the war does not affect him in any way. He seems to be merely carrying on with his life as he has nothing really to aspire for. The Vietnamese young girl Phuong who lives with him is of significance to him as long as she is there to satisfy his physical needs. He has no emotional bonding with her or with anyone or anything at all. He does journalism as that is provides him enough to sustain himself. About Journalism Fowler comments—“The human condition being what it was, let them fight, let them love, let them murder, I would not be involved. My fellow journalists called themselves correspondents; I preferred the title of reporter. I wrote what I saw: I took no action—even an opinion is a kind of action.”

Fowler, though a war journalist, or as he says, a reporter, is unfettered by the things happening around him. To him it does not matter who dies or who kills. What matters is that at the end of the day he is satisfied to his heart’s content. And therefore he has found out Phuong. To Pyle, Fowler says—“I don’t care that for her interests. You can have her interests. I only want her body. I want her in bed with me. I’d rather ruin her and sleep with her than, than … look after her damned interests.” But his personal interests are jeopardized when Phuong moves along
with Pyle. Fowler then promptly finds reason enough to take some action to get back Phuong to his bed.

To achieve his personal objective he makes use of all his professional contacts that he has made during the course of his stay in Saigon, so that Alden Pyle can be trapped and killed. He figures out that the only way he can do so is to make use of Pyle’s complicity with General Thé. Consequently, Pyle is assassinated. Fowler throughout the novel talked about the “neutrality” of the Britishers and himself in this fight between the French and the Vietminh, but when his personal life is disturbed, he does not hesitate to give up with his neutral position to take recourse to the political groups so that he can kill the man who has taken away his girl. The political and personal are thus juxtaposed in such a way that it becomes very difficult to figure out the thin line that separates the political and personal. Moreover, the binary opposition between the two is blurred by the novelist to assert the dictum that personal is political too.

In the matters of gender relations, as portrayed in the novel, there is nothing personal, as both Pyle and Fowler present a male chauvinist stance in their behaviour towards Phuong. One uses her while the other thinks that she is frail and is being exploited and needs to be saved. In other words, he thinks of saving her, and here the male is presented as a saviour. Thus both the relationships – Phuong’s with Fowler and Phuong’s with Pyle – are very patriarchal in nature. One relationship is that of exploiter and exploited, while the other is of saviour and saved. Greene is portraying Phuong to be such a silent character, probably to make a statement against the very nature of the patriarchy which needs to be questioned. Though, in Mankiewicz adaptation of the novel into a film, Phuong is shown to be publicly rejecting Fowler, after the death of Pyle. This change is interesting, as that makes the movie take a non-patriarchal stand. Probably, Greene thought of making Phuong return to Fowler as he is portraying a dark and grim reality of the world where there is no escape for anyone from evil and suffering.

Some important Critical comments on the author and the novel


- The best that can be said for the novel … is that Greene is demonstrating in it, deliberately if all too shyly, the unimportance of the human act when the religious consciousness is absent to view of it – a demonstration essentially comic (although never very funny) in nature and intent.
- The quiet American … tends to produce not a clear and unprejudiced impression of life but an intricate plot with very little action: sensational doings wrapped in perfunctory attitudes which point towards a moral …”
- Greene’s world bears a curious but vivid resemblance to fragments of the historical world. He has always sought to imbed his analogical nightmares within meticulously described settings – sometimes the dingier sections of English cities, but more usually those portions of the earth which, from the western centre, appear remote, primitive, fantastic; there is a close relation for Greene between the dingy and the primitive. His aim, moreover, is not simply to describe surfaces, but rather to evoke the very vitality, the natural activity of a place.

Of the English Catholic novelists, Graham Greene is by far the most interesting, since he is probably the least orthodox. … The horror of the natural world is one of the most fascinating aspects of Greene’s fiction. Sin is not cool and intellectual matter for theological dissertations; sin is expressed in the joyless sex in *Brighton Rock*, with its broken toenails in the bed; the curious landscape of *The Power and the Glory*; the hell of Haiti in *The Comedians*.

*The Quiet American* is a work of fiction told in first-person narrative, and it was wrong of some commentators to identify the narrator with the author – a most implausible identification, any way. With a first-person narrative there is no obligation on the author’s part to be fair, just, dispassionate; and the anti-Americanism of the book springs from the natural jealousy and vindictiveness of the narrator. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the image of the American campaign in Vietnam accords pretty well with Greene’s own American philosophy: the Americans may mean well but they are naïve, and in any case benevolence is dangerous if it is an expression of a twisted view of the desirable life. Greene, being a writer, hates semantic tyrannies, and he considers that too many Americans respond adversely to the term ‘communism’ without giving themselves a chance to examine the referent of the term. Evidently, some aspects of communism cannot rationally be rejected, but it is the very irrationality of official American policy that earns Greene’s Scorn. Dubbed anti-American, he is assumed by pro-Americans to be anti-democratic and pro-communist, but the issue is not as simple as that. The issue essentially involves religion and, in the endless cold war, matters of spiritual faith seem to have no role.


Greene told his readers, as much as the friends to whom he addressed his prefatory letter in *The Quiet American*, that “this is a story and not a piece of history,” less because that was true than because he wanted the book read within a certain framework of assumed and agreed-upon literary conventions.

The true terrain of *The Quiet American*, beyond the historical and cartographical accuracy of its setting, is the moral ground on which Fowler eventually takes sides in order to remain human. … The continuity of Fowler’s moral nature is spun out by Greene in reflective filaments, periodically retracted into opium dreams, and finally fixed in the ambiguous design of Fowler’s betrayal of Pyle.

Anthony Burgess: *The Novel Now: A Student’s guide to Contemporary Fiction* (Faber and Faber, London 1967)

Greene’s most recent novels – *The Quiet American*, *A Burnt-Out Case* and *The Comedians* – return from the London of *The End of The Affair* to the exotic settings which he loves best – Saigon and Africa and Haiti. They probe, like all Greene’s work, into the problems of good and evil and the wretchedness of the human condition. But *The Quiet American*, with its setting in a cockpit of modern war, with its careful plotting and sufficiency of violent action, stands close to another kind of novel which Greene delights in producing – the adventure story which will admit contrivance, coincidence, the bizarrely thrilling for its own sake, and merely touches the periphery of the great ultimate moral concerns. These novels – *Stamboul Train*, *A Gun for Sale*, *The Confidential Agent*, *The ministry of Fear*, *Our Man in Havana* – he calls ‘entertainments.’ The term seems to
diminish them; in fact, they are superbly written and their engineering is masterly. They make excellent films but remain essentially literature. It is these books, and the equally brilliant adventure-stories of Eric Ambler, that keep the British ‘thriller’ up to scratch. The precedent of the Greene ‘entertainments’ is before such writers of spy novels as John le Carré (The Spy who Came in From the Cold; The Looking-Glass War), and even Ian Fleming, with the popular James Bond books, could hardly fail to learn something from Greene’s technical brilliance in this secondary genre. (pp. 62-63)


- The two most striking things about the novels of Graham Greene are their preoccupation with evil and their intellectual jusqu’au-boutisme. As for the latter one is reminded of Camus’s declaration that it is not sufficient to live, we must have and perceive a destiny that does not wait on death: man, that is, wants to anticipate his own destiny, and every writer wants to express in terms of this world the moral destiny of man. It is a modern attitude among novelists. (p 73)

- His (Greene’s) obsession with the ugly and evil side of life is equally troubling. More than occasionally one feels that he is not merely outraging nature but that he is taking a perverse pleasure in rubbing its face in its own ordure. One feels that in concentrating on a restricted set of themes he has implied that no matter what subject he may choose to paint – childhood innocence, mother-love, a first kiss – he could make it look just as grim. Not, of course, that anybody has the least right to object to grimness, and every writer is entitled to wear whatever spectacles he pleases. But one may, indeed must if necessary, draw attention to the limitations of an artist’s palette, or of his human sympathy, or of his intellectual interests. One may, if necessary, draw a distinction between an intellectual approach and a pathological obsession. I feel that more than a few of Greene’s books justify our apprehension on all these counts; that his attitude to life exists, like the mental world of Pascal, so close to the border-line of the morbid and corrupt as to be saved from both only by the utmost delicacy and restraint; and much of Greene’s work, to my mind, shows small signs that he is sufficiently aware of the importance of these sanitary precautions.

It must be clear that to us all by now – he has made it clear – that his attraction to evil and ugliness was originally instinctive or emotional, and that he has gradually built an intellectual scaffolding around it. It is the natural way of the artist; first feeling, then perception. Evil and ugliness inspire him. They are the compost of his flower-garden. Faith, for him, is not a gift, it is won from Despair. Love relies on the validity of Hate. His hope of heaven depends on the reality of hell. He believes in God because he believes in Satan. (pp. 74-75)

- Why does Greene load the dice so completely against his characters? It is the old Jansenist reason that man, of himself, can do nothing. Only God can do it. He was already groping towards this idea in his early romantic period. There, in Rumour at Nightfall, we come on the frightening observation that “if Judas betrayed God, God betrayed Judas by waiting for his coming.” Sin appears to be coercive. People are so caught in the net that even when they would do good they do harm – it is the theme of The Quiet American … (pp. 87-88)

➢ … The writer from the thirties who had the most pervasive influence on post-war writing was Waugh’s co-religionist Graham Greene. He was a writer of Sartre’s “second generation,” a literary contemporary of Malraux, Mauriac and Bernanos; but his impact, and the larger part of his writing life was to belong to the third, that was partly a matter of longevity and productivity, but also a matter of sheer imaginative vitality and power. Greene was one of the most various of novelists, and by the time he had done he had worked in nearly all the genres – the spy novel and the thriller, the novel noir, the religious romance, the political novel and the social comedy – and converted them into powerful currency for the post-war age of historical chaos and metaphysical darkness. … His world of seedy landscapes, depressed lives, failed loves, political and sexual faithlessness, divided loyalties, moral and metaphysical guilt, was plainly a Catholic one, but over the course of time it came strangely to match the spirit of the age of existential anguish, and increasingly the ideological and the geographical map of the Cold War world itself. His stained and agonized realism moved toward the center of modern writing as the years went by, even as his work shifted to take fascinated account of the new ideological divide, and the chaos of lives everywhere caught up in the great superpower game. A Catholic who could sympathize with communism, to the point where he evidently presumed some shared identity between the two, a writer who regarded sinners as capable of sainthood, disloyalty as pointing to some higher loyalty, he finally succeeded in turning his own distinctive and vastly international Greeneland into a close simulacrum of the Cold War world itself. (pp. 288 – 289)

➢ There is a writer in Greene’s next novel The Quiet American (1955), but he is no elaborate explorer of narratives. He is a reporter, covering the French colonial wars in Indo-China, later Vietnam, recording the imperial withdrawals of the day, and telling the story of Pyle, the quiet American, innocently doing guilty things in the interests of long-term political aims. This book extends Greene’s metaphysical concerns, dealing with his distrust of innocence, which implies lack of knowledge of personal and political evil; it is also very plainly about its author’s own dividing loyalties in the age of Cold War ideology. It observes the naivety of western liberalism in the face of Third World revivals, and remarkably prophesies the disastrous American campaign in Vietnam a decade on. Thus the Quiet American opens a new sequence of books which, in various styles and tones, were to take their subject-matter from Greene’s enquiring journeys to the places of political turmoil, Third World crisis, and ideological confrontation, over which he would then set his own distinctive preoccupations with guilt and innocence, violence and heroism, liberal optimism and obscure religious faith. (pp. 290 – 291)


➢ Much criticism was heaped on Greene by the media in America for what was perceived as a mean-spirited and trivialized look at American involvement in Third World politics. Newsweek even reported that the book was Greene’s revenge on America for denying him a visa to the United States in 1952. (p. 478)
In both the book and film of *The Quiet American*, Fowler agrees with the communist to ambush Pyle/the American ostensibly to stop Pyle/the American’s terrorist bombings. The real motive is jealousy because his mistress Phuong has left Fowler for the American. In the book Phuong returns to Fowler after the American is killed. In the movie she publicly rejects him, a change which horrifies Greene. (p. 479)

Fowler was a burnt-out British Journalist who loathed Vietnam but feared returning to England. England is “the scene of my failures”, he writes to his wife when he pleads for a divorce to marry Phuong in the film. Except for the failure section, the letter was close to one Greene wrote his wife, Vivien. Fowler, a poor descendent of the British white hunters, symbolizes the twilight of the British Empire. He makes his living in a remote part of the world, reporting on revolutionary changes in which he is disinterested, amusing himself with opium and his teenaged native mistress. (p. 480)

Vietnam and Vietnamese appear to be background for the trio’s bourgeois feelings. The Vietnamese soldiers in the guerilla outpost, in one battle sequence, are lifeless mannequins occupying the corner like rubber plants. Sardonically, Fowler tells the Americans, “meet a couple of fellow warriors of democracy.” The Third Force becomes just a Hitchcockian McGuffin in the book and the film, a hook on which to hang an espionage plot.” (p.486)

Mankiewicz actually constructed a stronger feminine character than Greene did. Phuong was fluff in Greene’s book, a teenager who meekly fills Fowler’s opium pipe (no opium in the film though). Phuong by Mankiewicz is introspective, silent and pragmatic, all qualities which an Asian actress would have portrayed superbly. The scene where the American and Fowler discuss the meaning of Phuong’s name, with Phuong listening, is beautifully realized. Phuong means Phoenix, and the American believes Phuong is the phoenix which will rise from its ashes, meaning a self-determining Vietnam.” (pp. 486 – 487)