

The reception of THE QUIET AMERICAN

in the late fifties.

by

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The scene of *The Quiet American* is Vietnam during the war against the French. It lays claim to being the most carefully written of all Greene's books. Each chapter is divided into a narrative of the past and the present, until the two unite at the end of the book.

The central theme of *The Quiet American* harks back to Greene's dictum about Henry James, for it deals with a man who is too innocent to live in a world built on "black and merciless things." Innocence in this sense is to be equated with the Greene conceptions of pity and responsibility and love, all, in theory, ways of communicating with other people to mutual advantage. All have the deceptive ring of virtue about them, which Greene has set about demolishing.

In many ways Pyle's innocence is really ignorance. "They killed him (Pyle) because he was too innocent to live. He was young and ignorant and silly and he got involved".⁽¹⁾ Since it acts on other people, it is unforgivable. Fowler too has one illusion. He believes that he can stand aside and report on life. This is as "innocent" as Pyle's view that decisive action will influence the course of events; and if taken by men of good-will, for the better. "Innocence always calls mutely for protection when we would be so much wiser to guard ourselves against it : innocence is like a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm."⁽²⁾ His illusion is dangerous. Pyle falls in love with Phuong, Fowler's Indo - Chinese mistress, and since he intends to marry her, he is sure he is offering her more than Fowler can. Fowler is consistently refused a divorce by his Anglo - Catholic wife. Pyle saves Fowler's life when they are caught in a Vietminh ambush, an action which by acceptable standards of human contact would be considered to his credit. Fowler wrote to Pyle, "You certainly saved me from an uncomfortable end."⁽³⁾ Fowler nearly admits as much, "Even though my reason wanted the state of death, I was afraid like a virgin of the act." Fowler does not want his life saved for the wrong reasons. "Death was far more certain than God, and with death there would be no longer the daily possibilities of the love dying. The nightmare of a future boredom and indifference would lift.To kill a man was surely to grant him an immeasurable benefit."

He sees what the war has done when he goes out with a French patrol which shoots a mother and child in the line of fire, shortly after crossing a canal which is packed with bodies. Because nobody will take a stand but continue blustering about their convictions, there will be more and more dead bodies—as anonymous and futile as those in the Canal. When Fowler finds that Pyle is implicated in a bomb explosion in the centre of the Saigon, he arranges for his murder. Again the site of the mutilated child decides him. It is coincidental that he will regain possession of Phuong. Pyle's beliefs are learnt from a book, not from life. "Sooner" or "later," says the Communist who will kill Pyle, "one has to take sides. If one is to remain human." Before they are ambushed, Flower and Pyle discuss this very question, with Pyle uttering platitudes about the democratic way of life and its inherent truth. In the end it is disgust with his invincible naivete that leads Fowler to arrange for Pyle's death. '.....he'll always be innocent, you can't blame the innocent, they are always guiltless. All you can do is control them or eliminate them. Innocence is a kind of insanity.'

'It's a strange, poor population God has in his kingdom, frightened cold, starving.'" When the finally wins Phuong back, he only feels a stirring of guilt at Pyle's death :

"I thought of the first day and Pyle sitting beside me at the Continental with the eye on the soda - fountain across the way : Everything had gone right with me since he had died, but how I wished there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry."

Fowler is forced to take sides against his neutral convictions and the process makes him assume values beyond his arbitrary and subjective reaction. He is responsible for Pyle's death in the name of higher ends. What can those higher ends be unless posited by God ? There can be no basis for morality, Greene seems to argue, unless it comes from this someone to whom wishes he could apologize. And perhaps it is because Fowler has never needed a God until now that his questions are so one—dimensional. 'You don't believe in Him, do you' ?

'No.'

'.....and prayed to the God I didn't believe in.'

(We don't need to talk about the religious reason, because you've never understood or believed in that.)

Given himself as a unique value, he is right to be selfish, neutral, immoral, afraid of death like a virgin, even though life is so uninspiring. Fowler is a lonely wanderer in the Greene circles of the God - tormented. More originally, he wishes he were God - tormented, for the certainty would ease his conscious of better than the doubt.

The figure of the displaced person can, of course, be taken as a symbol of man's essential situation on this earth. In our time, the leading English novelist of the displaced person in this fundamental sense is Graham Greene and though he sees his characters in what he believes to be the fundamental human situation

they are always given a strictly contemporary setting. He is in almost mediumistic rapport with the temper of the times.

Greene is not by any means the special correspondent as novelist. Rather, the outer violence mirrors, as it were, the violence within the characters, gives a universal situation a local habitation. These representations of contemporary history as the element in which his characters live come as naturally to Greene as the use of the thriller in its simplest and most classical form, that of the hunted man, to express what seems to him the truth about man's fate.

From the beginning he has been obsessed with the plight of fallen man, with the split in man's mind, the insidious attraction of evil, the insidious attraction of good; and has been always obsessed by the meaninglessness, the seediness (perhaps, in its adjectival form, his favourite word), the vulgarity of a society living without a sense of God. The world he describes is very largely the world of rootless, beliefless urban man, and he describes in with compelling vividness and in terms of a fascinated loathing in which there is always an element of love entwined with the hate. He contemplates it and renders it with horror and with pity.

The world crisis is, in Greene's view, really a conflict between Communism and Christianity. As the Catholic Church was the spearhead of Christianity, the conflict was therefore between the Communist Party and the Catholic Church. In Mexico, in Poland and Malaya Greene has seen events in these terms and during the early nineteen - fifties he sent reports on the struggle from another part of the battlefield to the *Sunday Times*. Some might see the fighting and Indo - China as a contest between East and West, Nationalism and Colonialism, Russia and America — but fundamentally the struggle was religious. The Catholic Church tends to align itself with forces of tradition and reaction. Greene has often been a voice in the wilderness, protesting that the Church's true role lay in supporting the poor and the underprivileged. He had the sense to see that only independence could save Vietnam. Despite his admiration of French culture and his hatred of Communism, he knew that the latter must be fought by the people themselves. He did not make the mistake of political innocents in believing that guns can defeat Communism, especially foreign guns. The people must be allowed to take up a position from which Communist will not appear enticing.

The idea of substituting American troops for French was a pipe - dream. It would merely lead to a disastrous temporary peace which would abandon many non - Communists to Vietnam. 'A country one has loved is about to retire behind the curtain,' he wrote sadly. Independence was the last card. But why was it that resistance dead in so many places, continued in the Catholic area? The village militia of Thui - Nhal had beaten off nine attacks in four months. The militia consisted of the whole population, from old men to girls of twelve. 'They

paraded before the Church gay with Vietnamese flags — the small girls carried knives and wore hand - grenades on their belts.' It is impressive, but rather troubling. Is not the militarization of childhood another form of corruption ? Or is the stain removed in the service of Our Lord ?

Greene interviewed Ho Chi Minh. The impressive thing about Greene's political reporting is his refusal to be misled by his personal preferences. There is no doubt where his sympathies lay but he admitted that every Vietnamese welcomed the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. The movement was a nationalist one and only Western clumsiness was compelling it to become Communist, Ho Chi Minh was a man 'pure as Lucifer,' and Greene could not resist his charm. The Communist leader appealed to the buried relic of hero - worship in Greene. The outstanding fact about the situation in Indo - China was that never before had the anonymous peasant been treated as an individual. The West talks glibly about individual rights, and thinks of and acts towards the Eastern peasantry as if it were a vast, undifferentiated mass. The commissar, preaching collectivism, treats the peasant as a person. The only man who can challenge him is the Catholic priest. Greene compared the President of Vietnam with Ho Chi Minh, and shuddered.

'He has some words in common with Ho Chi Minh, as catholicism has some words in common with Communism, but he is separated from the people by cardinals and police cars with wailing sirens and foreign advisers droning of global strategy, when he should be walking in the rice - fields unprotected, learning the hard way how to be loved and obeyed — the two cannot be separated. One pictured him there in the Norodom Palace, sitting with his blank, brown gaze, incorruptible, obstinate ill-advised, going to his weekly confession, bolstered up by his belief that God is always on the Catholic side, waiting for a miracle. The name I would write under his portrait is the Patriot Ruined by the West.'

Out of this experience came the novel, *The Quiet American*. The mind that despaired of the West's ever adopting a realistic policy realized with bitterness the futility of much military action. Fowler, the English press correspondent who is the chief character in the novel, goes out with a French patrol. By the time they return, their total bag of victims is a mother and child who got in the line of fire. That dead child haunted Fowler. After that, whenever he played dice this war came back to him and with it the dead child. One may find it difficult to distinguish between the child dead in a ditch and the children of Thui - Nhai, equipped for action.

From the beginning, Fowler insists he is not involved. Fowler was the educated Englishman, rational and Fabianized, a cynical Hogpit who wished everyone well and refused to take sides when each side was so dirty.

'The human condition being what it was, let them fight, let them love, let them murder, I would not be involved.' (57)

He preferred to call himself a reporter rather than a correspondent. It is a viewpoint repellent to Greene and some of the falsities of this novel probably derive, once again, from his attempt to write from an alien position. Every novelist must put forward ideas with which he lacks sympathy, but his constant identification with them may prove too great a strain. Some of the strain, on both Fowler and Greene, shows in the former's conversation with Captain Trouin, the Air force pilot. Trouin detested napalm bombing, partly because no risk is attached to it. Fowler's insistence that he is not involved begins to wear thin. He actually limps from a wound dealt him by the Vietminh forces. However, repulsive the war became, he would not participate. But it is impossible to stay out, says Trouin. Involvement is an emotional matter. You simply don't decide on such things. They decide for themselves. You simply don't know when he realizes that the logical end of non-involvement, the Third Force, is impracticable. It has nothing to fight for. It is an idea from a book. The

third Force which Alden Pyle, of the American Economic Mission, tried to form came from an idea put forward by a 'diplomatic correspondent' named York Harding. Greene's target is the superior sort of journalist who sets up as an arbiter of the international scene: "he gets hold of an idea and then alters every situation to fit the idea." Pyle tried to avoid both extremes but nevertheless could not avoid getting mixed up — but with a cause that had no substance. The last word belongs to the old Chinese Heng who undertakes to remove Pyle from the scene: "sooner or later one has to take sides. If one is to remain human."

The novel begins with a touch of disillusion. The age of miracles is past. The girl's name is Phuong, which means Phoenix, 'but nothing nowadays is fabulous and nothing rises from its ashes. There is a clear distinction between the Roman Catholic French characters and the agnostic Americans. The French believe in conscience and a sense of guilt, The Americans in economics and the wickedness of poverty. Fowler, the Englishman, is superficially closer to the American ethos but in practice he hates the Yanks. One feels that when he sets down his own views about life and death he is very close to Greene himself, for there is distinctly protestant element about Greene's catholicism. When he was wondering whether to go to Phat Diem or not, he reflected in this manner.

"Always I was afraid of losing happiness, this month, next year, Phuong would have me. If not next year, in three years. Death was the only absolute value in my world. Lose life and one would lose nothing again for ever. I envied those who could believe in God and I distrusted them. I felt they were keeping their courage up with a fable of the changeless and the permanent. Death was far more certain than God, and

with death there would be no longer the daily possibility of love dying." (43 - 44)

Now it would be nonsense to suggest that these are Greene's permanent views. Greene was a Protestant or agnostic until he entered his twenties, and during that period certain views and outlooks must obtain so firm a footing that they can never be driven out altogether. It was another interpretation of the conflict that is apparent in Greene's work, and which must in fact trouble all converts, and it helps explain their occasional struggle when Fowler this time the point of departure is on the religious side of the boundary, i.e., Greene is calling to Fowler, not Fowler to Greene.

'Wouldn't we all do better not trying to understand, accepting the fact that no human being will ever understand another, not a wife a husband, a lover a mistress, nor a parent a child ? Perhaps that's why men have invented God — a being capable of understanding.' (59 - 60)

The background of sexual desire is as strong as ever. It shows itself in many a casual phrase, crops up unbidden at any hour.

'I wanted a day punctuated by those quick reports that might be car exhausts or might be grenades, I wanted to keep the sight of those silk - trousered figures moving with grace through the hurried noon, I wanted Phuong, and my home had shifted its ground eight thousand miles.'

Other matters have caused Greene's powerful sexual drive to be obscured in the discussion of his recent work, but it cannot be over - emphasized. It is given and its influence cannot be ignored nor, much more important, should it be deprecated. Also running true to form is the usual marital difficulty. In England there is a Mrs. Fowler -- but something had gone wrong, he wasn't sure that his attitude towards her is one of mingled patience and disinterest, resignation and sudden stabs of hope. Fowler writes to her, asking to be released, and receives a reply "refusing it." It was like a return to the old routine, they were hurting each other again. There is simply a cry of despair ("If only it were possible to love without injury — fidelity is in enough") and a conclusion ("The hurt is in the act of possession : we are too small in mind and body to possess another without pride or to be possessed without humiliation.") It is a part of the human condition, as fundamental as desire itself.

But the over - riding impression one gets from this novel is Greene's intense irritation with the Americans. America is the symbol of all that has gone wrong : materialism, godlessness, adult innocence, neutrality. Alden Pyle was the 'do - gooder', directing all his energies, all his love even, not to individuals but to a country, a continent, the whole world. It was the Commissar who was getting at the individual. It all comes pat, Fowler, is "age and despair." Pyle is "innocence

and goodness," the French are "conscience and guild" But the "innocence and goodness" are of the wrong kind, they are childlike qualities in an adult mind. Pyle is a "damned Yankee." The French policeman has a volume of Pascal on his desk — and it is open. Pyle's bible is York Harding's. *The Role Of The West*, bloodless clap - trap. Greene cannot restrain his contempt for the college - educated American. "The Minister had great respect for Pyle — Pyle had taken a good degree in — well, one of those subjects Americans can take degrees in perhaps public relations or theatre craft, perhaps even Far Eastern studies (he had read a lot of books)." Fowler's American press colleagues were 'big, noisy, boyish and middle - aged, full of sour cracks against the French.'" There is a contemptuous account of how, after an engagement, they would go to Harir, attend the Commander-in-Chief's conference, stay for a night at a press Camp (where the barman was the best in Indo -China), fly over the late battlefield at 3000 feet and then return like a school treat to Saigon. Fowler lets fly at the Economic Attache at one point; he hates everything about the Yanks, their private stores of Coca - Cola, their portable hospitals, their too wide cars, their not quite latest guns. None of them knew what the trouble was about but they fooled around winning the East for democracy.

This anti - American element represents a great splash of emotion and upsets many readers ; it is not true to say that prejudice, even the rankest prejudice, necessarily spoils a novel. The quality of a novel resides in its vitality, not in its impartiality. Greene hates Pyle because he sees him as the kind of person who has left our civilization naked and defenceless against its enemies. He knows that his hatred tends to become irrational and one occasion, after making a comment on one of Pyle's characteristics, he adds, 'I don't write that as a sneer.' Such emotionalism, however, can lead to caricature is out of place in a realistic novel. Pyle undoubtedly does become a caricature. Pyle is the earnest American that a large section of the British nation has come progressively to loathe. Swilling gallons of milk and bottles of coke, eating tasteless food preparations with hygienic names ; reading digests and going around the world in search of diplomas.

Rex Warner wrote in *The London Magazine* ⁽²⁾ that this was one of Greene's best novel. This suggest it is very good, which it isn't. Perhaps Warner's memory was failing him, or perhaps he rejoiced in the caning of the Yanks. The Americans themselves were puzzled and alarmed. (Incidentally, the pro or anti - Americanism of this book is not a literary quality but it is bound to be the one that arouses most attention). They began to search for Greene's motives, for anything that would explain his attack. They could not accept that Greene might genuinely think American policy towards "the underprivileged" to be mistaken, or that the American way of life was not entirely admirable.

In his New Yorker review, A. J. Liebling discovered that Greene had

contrived to make Pyle a perfect specimen of a French author's idea an Englishman (he speaks bad French, eats tasteless food, is only accidentally and episodically heterosexual, is earnest in an obtuse way and physically brave through lack of imagination). 'Pyle's choice of idiom convinced me that he is a thinly disguised Englishman. But I was impressed by the "toupet" of Mr. Greene, sneering down at Pyle from the gastronomic evidence of a soggy crumpet. A British author noting American food is like the blind twitting the one — eyed"⁽³⁾ — and Liebling takes the opportunity to mention Marmite.....

Warming to the fun, Liebling gives us an imaginary account of Fowler's boyhood in the States, and his subsequent arrival in Bloomsbury. In short, the book is a second-rate American novel.

'Poor old Greene was in the position of the Javanese politician who told a correspondent he hated the Dutch so specially hard because he could think only in Dutch. ⁽⁴⁾

Liebling allowed himself a serious moment when he discovered, by a process of reasoning, that Greene holds the American State Department responsible for a particularly messy bomb explosion that actually occurred in Saigon. There is a difference, after all', he writes. between calling your over - successful offshoot a silly ass and accusing him of murder.

There is a note of cultural snobbery about this novel to which attention has already been drawn. Greene's development tends to be a process of refining, and there is always the danger of its becoming pseudo - refining. At first only Catholic will pass muster, then American Catholics are excluded, and in time we are left with French Catholics alone. Later he will confine himself to French Catholic who have been purified by the pangs of adultery, and it will probably end with a select circle of adulterous French Catholics who know the Devil personally — only they won't live in France, they will cluster in Equatorial Africa. It is possible, in his enthusiasm for French culture, that Greene has forgotten that most Frenchmen are no longer Catholics and that the French nation in general shows considerable indifference to religious alignments.

There have been a few excellent articles on particular aspects of Greene's work, but book - length studies have relied heavily upon generalization. I have attempted, therefore in this paper, to single out the political theme in *The Quiet American*.

"....Yet despite Greene's disclaimer *The Quiet American* is also a political novel." ⁽⁵⁾

In the *New York Times Book Review*, Robert G. Davis declares *The Quiet American* to be "a political novel — or a political parable — about the war in Indo - China."⁽⁶⁾ 'Mr. Davis deplored the anti - American bias displayed by the Englishman Fowler, the first - person narrator. He points out that the book is riddled with political heresy and American foreign policy.

Thomas Fowler, the cynical Englishman, and Alden Pyle, the naive American, seem to be perfect foils for each other. Fowler's story is the tragedy of a man who is unable to involve himself personally in human affairs; Pyle's is the tragedy of a man who gets too involved. Since Fowler's beliefs are always attended by procrastination, he rarely acts; since Pyle's beliefs are instantly translated into action, he is rarely quiet. (The title is obviously ironical). Fowler's experience is his ruin : his experience has taught him to leave everything in the realm of chance and indecision. In doing so, he connives at Pyle's death — reminiscent of Scobie's connivance at the death of Ali. Pyle's innocence is his ruin : his innocence has taught him to leave nothing in the sphere of caprice and vacillation. In doing so, he hastens his own death.

Fowler represents experience in love and Europe in politics ; Pyle represents innocence in love and America in politics — “which, as one commentator points out, is a typical Henry James confrontation.”⁽⁷⁾ Another commentator points out, “Actually what Greene has done is to turn the Jamesian theme of innocence versus experience inside out. Where James sees this innocence as a redemptive quality that will save the Old World, Greene sees it is positively ruinous in the world of today.”⁽⁸⁾

Pyle is nominally a Unitarian, and so the religious and moral sense is not absent in him — just quiescent, but it has the same effect on his conduct. It prevents him from taking a detached view of the world, at the same time exhibiting a humane attachment to it. The most striking example of this flaw is the instance when Pyle looks down at the blood on his shoes, the freshly spattered blood of some women and children just killed by a bomb, and casually remarks, “I must get theme cleaned before I see the Minister.” Pyle is a missionary from what Greene calls “the graceless, sinless, empty chromium world.”⁽⁹⁾

All Greene's books, Woodcock concludes, show “the way in which society warps the natures of men and women and turns them to bitterness and evil. Theoretically, Greene may recognize original sin, but in his writing, the evil in man is always less than the evil without, arising from the collective activities of society.”⁽¹⁰⁾ True, his books often develop a conflict between the individual and some segment of society — Raven and the munitions manufacturers in *This Gun for Hire*, D. and the reactionary conspiracy in *The Confidential Agent*, Rowe and the Nazi spying in *The Ministry of Fear* — showing how the individual is turned to bitterness, hate, and revenge. But those microcosmic struggles between the individual and society are mere symptoms of the microcosmic struggle between good and evil. Greene recognizes maladjustment in the social order, of course, and even launches a ripple of social criticism now and then, but he always uses darker and bolder strokes to paint the evil within man than the evil without. His characters have the major share of his interest, not his theme.

The evil that swells through the pages of Greene does not arise primarily “from the collective activities of society.” Like James, Greene, at bottom, sees the individual, not the social organism, as the agent most responsible for evil. The basic cause of evil, not to be sought in society, is the fact that “the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity.”⁽¹¹⁾

The unspoken question about the hero of *The Quiet American* is whether he is damned. Damnation is often, in Greene, associated with utter failure.

That is how *The Quiet American* was viewed at its reception in the late fifties. Much, however, has been written ever since and eventually it is left open for further discussion.



NOTES

1. All quotations and textual references to THE QUIET AMERICAN relate to the Penguin edition, London, 1955.
2. "A Few Pipes," in *The London Magazine*, I, No. 2, Dec., 1954.
- 3,4. *The New Yorker* (April 1956), (2) I, (3).
5. *The Labyrinthine Ways of Graham Greene*, by Y. L. Kunhel, London 1959, p. 149.
6. *The New York Times*, March 11, 1956; Sec. 7 ; p.1.
7. Donald Barr, Review of *The Quiet American*, in *Saturday Review*, March 10, 1956,p.12.
8. Philip Rahv, "Wicked American Innocence, Commentary," May 1956, p.489.
9. *Another Mexico*, p. 226, London, 1960.
10. *The Writer and Politics* (London Porcupine Press, 1948), p.150.
11. The words are part of the epigraph to *Another Mexico*.