

“The Quiet American”: Graham Greene’s Narrative Art

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ABSTRACT

This novel is also somewhat like ‘Greenland’. Like so many of Greene’s novels, ‘The Quiet American’ was inspired by his personal experience of a particular part of the world. He has translated into the novel his experiences as the Indo-China correspondent of ‘Life’ and the ‘London Sunday Times’ in the fifties. The book has four parts. The place of the novel is the Vietnamese Surete in Saigon. The predominant impression left by the novel is of violence and suffering. Greene’s obsessive view of the world is unchanged. The French are fighting a hopeless war.

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The narrator, Monsieur Fowler is the principal character in the novel. His Christian name is Thomas but he does not believe in God.

When the novel opens, Fowler returns to his flat at midnight and finds Phuong waiting for his friend Alden Pyle. From Fowler’s narration we become to know that Phuong was his lover and for some reasons, she has taken a new lover. Fowler asks Phuong to come in his flat as it would not be convenient to wait for Pyle because the police might inquire her. She goes with him to his flat as Pyle was to come at his flat. She prepares tea for both of them and makes opium pipe for him because Fowler was fond of smoking opium pipe. She tells him that Pyle. Was going to marry her very soon. After a long wait, Fowler tells her that Pyle would not come. He asks her to stay in his flat for that night. He assumes her that Pyle would certainly come there. Then a policeman knocks at the door. He tells Fowler that he is urgently wanted at the French Surete at once.

Fowler along with Phuong goes to the police station. There he tells the police officer that she lived with Monsieur Pyle. The officer interrogates Fowler about Pyle. Fowler says that Pyle is of thirty two years’ age and is employed in Economics Aid Mission and his nationality is American. He also tells the officer that Pyle is going to marry Phuong. The officer tells him that Pyle was killed by someone near Dakow Bridge. He suspects that Fowler has killed him out of his

jealously. He shows him the dead body of Pyle at the mortuary. At his home, Fowler tells Phuong that Pyle is assassinated but to do his great astonishment. She shows no signs of tears or sadness. She stays at his home that night.

Then the story goes back into the flash back. Fowler thinks about his past life with Pyle. When Fowler meets him first, Pyle with his crewcut and wide campus gaze scenes incapable of harm. “Pyle was quite, he seemed modest sometimes that first day I had to lean forward to catch what he was saying. And he was very, very serious.” Pyle is a ‘starry-eyed’ young man from Boston who comes to Vietnam on a secret mission; full of faith and hope but without much experience of life. Much of his knowledge of men and affairs is derived from books, especially those by a journalist called York-Harding whom Fowler holds responsible for Pyle’s fatal naivete. He gets hold of an idea and then alters every situation to fit the idea. Pyle came out here full of York-Harding’s 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. Greene treats the Pyle as the product of community and a climate of ideas which more or less predetermine his reactions. In Greene’s religious novels, the characters are victims of their religious background. In this novel, Pyle’s narrowness and obduracy in personal and political affairs is a product of psychological conditioning. Alden Pyle is a victim of his national background. It is the heritage of codes and concepts which alienates him from the reality of immediate experience. Therefore, Pyle carries in his own nature the seeds of the disasters which befall him.

We get all the details about Pyle, ‘The Quite American’ by Fowler’s narration. Pyle thinks that, being a middle-aged man, Fowler cannot give happiness and cannot marry her. He is only passing his time with her. So Pyle wants Phuong as her lover and wife and envies Fowler in her respect. Fowler is a highly individualized character, a typical Greene hero, whose nature is compounded of all those trails which signify Greene’s unceasing preoccupation with flawed human beings. He is an excile who has lived in Saigon almost friendless, though he

loves his Vietnamese mistress Phuong and, through her, he has developed an attachment to the life of the East which ministers to his sensual impulses.

“I wanted to keep the sight of those silk-trousered figures moving with grace through the humid noon. I wanted Phuong, and my home has shifted its ground eight thousand miles.”

Fowler has no faith and has never desired one. He is a reporter and his job is to expose and record: ‘I had never in my career discovered the inexplicable. I had no visions or miracles in my repertoire of memory.’ He tells Pyle that he has no reasons to believe in God. Fowler’s only refuge from life, its fears and anxieties, is death which cuts off all relations with the world and other human beings.

The police suspects that Pyle is perhaps murdered by Vietminh or General. The Phuong and Fowler go to Pyle’s flat to get their things. Phuong takes away her clothings while Fowler takes away York Harding’s books.

Again Fowler remembers his days with Pyle. First time, Pyle met Phuong at the continental two months after his arrival. He was introduced with Phuong by Fowler. Other persons as Granger and Economic Attaché were also present. Next day, in the presence of Fowler, Phuong and Pyle dance together. Phuong’s sister Miss Hei is also present there and she asks Fowler about Pyle. Fowler says her that Pyle belongs to the American Economic Mission. Fowler introduces Pyle with Miss Hei. Pyle tells Miss Hei that his father is a professor at Boston in United State and is expert about underwater erosion. She says that Phuong is the most beautiful girl in Saigon. Pyle tells her that his father is sixty-nine years’ old. Fowler says them that he is going to north for reporting of war. Miss Hei invites Pyle to have dinner with her and her sister. After having dinner Pyle again dances with Phuong. Fowler does not fear with death and decides to go to Phat Diem because he is could slip there with the help of his friend, a French naval officer. Death is the only absolute value in his world.

“Lose life and one would lose nothing again for ever. I envied those who could believe in God and I distributed them. I felt they were keeping their courage up with a fable of the changeless I felt they were keeping their courage up with a fable of the changeless and the permanent. Death was for more certain than God, and with death there would be no longer the daily possibility of love dying. The nightmare of future of boredom and indifference would lift.”

Fowler reaches Phat Diem for reporting about war. French are fighting a colonial war against Vietminh. There is possibility that Vietminh agents might have joined the religious procession in order to explode the bombs. There are continuous air raids and the people have to get shelter in cathedrals and churches. Fowler along with a Lieutenant also stays in a church and proceeds forward in the morning. Then he stays with the Lieutenant in a military camp. There Pyle reaches and tells Fowler that he is coming from Hanoi. He has come facing a great risk as he might be killed in the bombing. He says Fowler that he has come only to say him that he love Phuong. He says Fowler that he would call him by his Christian name i.e., ‘Thomas’. He argues with Fowler that he should leave Phuong

because he cannot make her happy. Pyle says that he is young and rich so he can give everything to Phuong. Fowler thinks that Pyle cannot understand Phuong. “Time has its revenges, but revenges seem so often sour. 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 is why men have invented God - a being capable of understanding. Perhaps if he wanted to be understood or to understand I would bamboozle myself into belief, but I am a reporter. God exists only for leader writers.”

Fowler has come to Phat Diem for one week but stays there for nearly three weeks and before returning to Saigon. When he awakes, he does not find Pyle there but finds a letter written by him. In his letter, Pyle said that he wanted only Phuong’s happiness. He further wrote that only Phuong would decide whom she will take as a lover. Pyle is brave and enterprising and has a sense of fairness. He indulges in boyish adventures which Fowler despises. In a kind of school boy dream, he punts down the river to Phat Diem in order to tell Fowler that he has fallen in love with Phuong. Along with Granger, Fowler attends the press conference of army has won the arm with enemy. After this Fowler returns to Hanoi.

At Hanoi, Pyle invites Fowler and Phuong for a drink. Fowler and Phuong reach earlier and later Pyle joins them. Pyle discusses with Fowler about Phuong in presence of her. Pyle says that he is a rich and young person and can make Phuong happy. He proposes his love to Phuong. But Phuong tells him that she is going to leave Fowler. Fowler says to Pyle that American love only dollars. They can’t love anybody else. Pyle says that he was completely healthy person and can show her his medical certificate and blood group. Fowler ironically asks him if American love only for blood group and income. When Phuong rejects his love, Pyle requests Fowler that he should consider him as a friend and would not mind all that affairs. Telling this she goes out.

Fowler receives a telegram from his Editor that he is appointed as assistant editor in their England’s office. Fowler does not intend to go to England on a transfer or promotion because he cannot willingly leave Phuong. He thinks to write to his head office for the reconsideration of their order.

Fowler writes a letter to his wife Helen. Helen lives in native place, England but due to differences they had parted without a divorce. Fowler writes to her:

“Dear Helen, I am coming back to England next April to take the job of foreign editor. You can imagine I am not happy about it. England is to me the scene of my failure. I had invented our marriage to last quite as much as if I had your Christian beliefs.” He writes her that he loves Phuong very deeply and to leave her would be the beginning of his death. He requests her for divorce and to give her consent about their marriage. After writing this, Fowler says to Phuong that he has written to his wife for divorce and perhaps she would become agree for that. Phuong becomes very pleased. She asks him whether she would be able to see the skyscrapers and statue of Liberty. Fowler laughingly

replies her that she could see all these things in America.

A great festival is held at the Holy see in Tanyin by the pope and he invites the members of Government, the Diplomatic corps and the French commander in chief who would detail a two star general from an office job to represent him. Fowler and Pyle go to interview them. Fowler interviews pope's deputy about general The'. He replies that General The' is a rash man. Next day Pyle and Fowler start for Saigon with the procession of car. A commandant says that need not fear about curfew in Caoaist territory. He assures them to send their car safely.

During their journey with car, they run out of petrol because someone in Tanyin have siphoned it out. Somehow the car reaches near a Vietnamese watch tower. On the way Fowlers leg is injured. Then Pyle goes out to find the petrol at the risk of his life. He acts as the hero in a boy's adventure story 'quite unaware of the absurdity and improbability of the adventure.' He goes to find petrol from the French Soldiers. He successfully returns with the petrol. In this way he saves the life of Fowler. Fowler so powerfully appreciate the death that when Pyle saves his life in the Viet-Minh ambush, he feels no gratitude but only irritation: "I had not asked to be saved, or to have death so painfully postponed." Then they return safely to Saigon.

At his flat in the rue Catinat, Fowler finds Phuong. She says him that she missed him very much. She gives him a telegram which read that his head office wanted effect of de-Lattre's departure on military and political situation. The she gives him an unopened letter from his wife. In this letter, his wife Helen wrote him that she was not agree to divorce him because she did not want any other woman deceived by him. But Fowler tells Phuong that his wife would permit to marry her after some time.

Next day, in the evening, Fowler writes a letter to Pyle. He falsely writes him that his wife has permitted him to marry with Phuong and so he (Pyle) need not to worry or care about Phuong. He sends this letter for Pyle in Phuong's hand. Fowler goes to meet an Indian, Dominguez who belonged to Goa. With the help of Indian traders, in Hiphong, Nam Dinh and Hanoi, he runs his own personal intelligence service for Fowler's benefit because Fowler thought he knew more accurately than the French High Command, the location of Vietminh battalions with in Tonkin delta.

"And because we never used our information except when it became news, and never passed away any reports to the French Intelligence, he had the trust and the friendship of several Vietminh agents hidden in Saigon-Cholon. The fact that he was an Asiatic in spite of his name, unquestionably helped."

Fowler also thinks about Hindu God. He thinks that Dominguez worshipped Hindu God. He thinks, "I believe he was a Roman Catholic, but I had no evidence for it beyond his name and the place of his origin – for all I knew from his conversation, he might have worshipped Krishna or gone on annual pilgrimages, picked by a wire frame to the Batu Cave." There was that much of the Hindu in him, he would never have

endangered the life of fly. He tells Fowler about Pyle that he is concerned with the General The's third force to make world free from Communism and the taint of colonialism and he called it national democracy. He adds that he was busy in making plastic bombs. Fowler says him that Pyle does all this due to Yord Harding's effect. Dominguez sends him to M. Chou's house. Fowler returns home to leave a note for Phuong and then goes to Boulevard de la Somme to meet a Chinese, M. Chou. M. Chou introduces him with his family. He is man with one lung and smokes too much. M. Chou sends him to his godown with his manager Mr. Heng. He shows plastic bombs to Fowler and says that Pyle works for General The' Next Pyle comes to Fowler's flat. He accuses Fowler of being a liar who falsely told him that his wife gave her permission to marry with Phuong. He tells that Phuong's sister Miss Hei translated his wife's letter to her and she has known about everything. He further tells that she does not want now Fowler and has taken Pyle as her lover. He tells him that she can't love him after that. Fowler replies him:

"Love's a Western word. ---. We use it for sentimental reasons or to cover up an obsession with one woman. These people don't suffer from obsessions. You're going to be hurt, Pyle if you aren't careful." In this way Fowler warns him against his innocence. Then Phuong reaches there and Pyle tells her that Fowler has cheated her but she tells her that she would like to love Fowler in future also. Irritationally Fowler tells him to go to play with his Third Force and the plastic bombs. Fowler is tortured by uncertainly, by his ability to understand Phuong :

"I had bagged to tell me what she thought and had scared her with my unreasoning anger at her silences. Even my desire had been a weapon, as though when one plunged one's sword towards the victim's womb she would lose control and speak."

In the third part of the book, Fowler stops remembering his pasts and goes to the police office Vigot. Vigot says him that he wants to interrogate him thoroughly about Pyle's murder. He says that he does not suspect Fowler about his murder and only completing his duty. He says that he is doing all this because the American Minister is forcing the police to investigate about Pyle's murder. Fowler returns to his home.

Again Fowler begins to think about his past days with Fowler. After rude behavior of Pyle with him, he began to hate Pyle. He was also troubled with the sense of insecurity. He suspects that Phuong secretly meets Pyle. When Pyle falls in love with fear and anxiety become almost obsessive. He is a poor middle aged man who has so little to offer against Pyle's youth and 'infinite' riches of 'respectability'. He suffers from a sense of inadequacy as a lover and, in anticipation of future loss, turns love into a rage of jealousy and anxiety.

"I made lone to her in those days savagely as though I hated her, but what I hated was the future Loneliness lay in my bed and I took loneliness into my arms of night...I didn't want to question her. I didn't want to make her lie...but suddenly my anxiety would speak for me and I said, "When did you last see Pyle?" Phuong tells that she met Pyle last time when he came to Fowler's flat.

Next day, ten bombs explosions occur in Saigon taking six injuries. These are caused due to bicycle bombs. Fowler goes to see Mr. Heng to know about this incident. He tells him that their purpose of bomb explosion is to make people think that the communists are responsible for these explosions. He also sees plastic and several types of bombs in their go-down. They he comes home and finds Phuong absent there. Phuong takes away her everything from his house leaving note that she is going to live with her sister. Fowler becomes infuriated and goes to the American Legation to talk with Pyle over this matter. But Pyle is not present there and this Economic Attaché Joe and Phuong's sister Miss Hei are present there. He complains them that Pyle has deceived him and sleeps with her lover. Miss Hei works as a typist in Joe's office. Joe tells him that he does not want any innuendoes in presence of a lady. Fowler returns telling Joe to send Pyle in his home.

One morning, Fowler goes in a bombing flight with his friend Captain Trouin who is a squadron leader. They go to bomb near Lai Chau in B.26 bomber. Through the bombing aircraft, Fowler looks the scene of destruction forming below due to heavy bombing. It is a new experience to him. They bomb from 3000 meters height. They bomb over Black River and Red River. We were gone again adding our little quota to the world's dead. Then they return to the airport stopping the operation, 'The wound of murderer ceased to bleed.'

Fowler stops smoking opium since Phuong had left him. He goes to a brothel with his friend Captain Trouin and tries to make love with a girl but he fails to do so because he is troubled mentally.

Then Fowler returns to Saigon and there he was no one to welcome him at his flat. He finds Pyle waiting him at his flat. He says that he has come to meet him because of his message. Surprisingly Fowler behaves him in a well-mannered way and asks him about Phuong whether she was happy with him. He warns Pyle not to play and involve with the plastic bombs. In Pyle's present he reads a letter which came from his editor that his promotion and transfer to England has been postponed for one year on his request and they have appointed a temporary foreign editor. Then Fowler asks Pyle whether he has married with Phuong or not. Pyle replies that he is not married with her till then. He tells that he would like to marry with her in presence of his parents in America. Fowler assures him that he is still his friend and he will not meet Phuong in future. He advises Pyle to forget the Third Force.

Fowler goes to see one apartment for himself in a so-called modern building up at the other end of the rue catinat beyond the continental Hotel. There suddenly a bomb explodes and a lot of people die and many injured. Fowler fears if Phuong also died on that explosion because it was her routine to come there every evening. He forcibly enters the spot of explosion. There he finds Pyle and again accuses him to play a wrong game in General The's direction. He scolds him savagely : "You've got the Third Force and National Democracy all over your heroic deed – there are a few dozen less of her country people to worry about." Fowler thinks about Pyle : "What is the good? 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."

Again Fowler talks about his present incidents after Pyle's death. The police officer Vigot visits Fowler at his flat. Question by Vigot, Fowler sums up about Pyle's character. Asked about York Harding, Fowler says, "He is a superior type of journalist-they call them diplomatic correspondents. He gets hold of an idea and then alters every situation to fit the idea. Pyle came out here full of York Harding's 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." He tells Vigot that Harding has killed Pyle at long range. Vigot questions him where he was at the time of Pyle's murder. He says that he knows he was not present at murder but he can't deny his hand in his murder. But Fowler successfully makes Vigot satisfied that he had no any hand in Pyle's murder. Vigot goes out of his flat telling that he would close the Pyle's murder file and would never interrogate him in future. But Fowler become very disturbed after Vigot's visit. He thinks that he wished he had the courage to call him back and say that he was right. He wanted to tell him that he had seen Pyle the night he died but his rationality stooped him to do so.

Fowler remembers how he had planned for Pyle's murder. He tells M.Chou that he would send Pyle between 09:00 p.m. Later he invites Pyle on a dinner in a hotel. Mr. Phuong says to Fowler that he would have to send Pyle near Dakow Bridge between 09:00 and 09:30 p.m. if he wants Pyle to be restrained from doing more explosion if plastic bombs. Fowler thinks himself of being responsible for Pyle's murder because he had sent him near Dakow Bridge between these hours by inviting him for dinner. The shadow of Pyle will always remain. His copy of York Harding's 'The role of the west' on Fowler's bookshelf is a constant reminder of a young man with a crew cut and a black dog at his heels. Fowler feels wrung out with 'all passions spent' but no 'calm of mind'. He is left with a feeling of sympathy for his own intervention which led to murder. The novel concludes with Fowler's penitential reflection : "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." His attachment to Phuong does not save him from being troubled by a sense of loneliness which causes men to invent God, 'a being capable of understanding' Fowler gets Phuong and his wife consent to marry her.

The conclusion underscores Greene's preoccupation with man's hope of God and the awfulness of man's life without Him.

So, Fowler and Pyle are totally contradictory characters. Maurice Cranston maintains that Pyle is not innocent.

"He is 'dumb', yes; he is a 'sucker'; but 'innocence' means purity of heart or soul of conscience and this Pyle does not have. His fanaticism is wholly brutish---- and he has a highly developed gift of humbugging self-deception." (15)

There are two confrontations between Innocence and Experience in 'The Quiet American', one in love, and the other in politics. Greene, uses the Jamesian theme but with a vital difference. Conor Cruise O'Brien remarks;

“Pyle is that venerable character, the transatlantic innocent, but with the twist that it is his own well-meant activity and his ‘innocence’ itself, not the wickedness of Europeans that brings about his own destruction and that of many others”.16

Underlying the action of ‘The Quiet American’ is the awareness of a partly psychic and partly adventitious force which informs the action in Greene’s earlier books. Although neither of them is evil, there appears in the lives of both Pyle and Fowler an impulsion towards evil. Amid the violence and suffering of the world in which they live, they are entrapped one by the passionate intensity of his conviction and the other by his piety. For Pyle, the Vietnamese are uncomplicated children who suffer and soon forget their suffering. It is then that Fowler, realizing how irredeemable Pyle is, commits himself to destroy this menace to human life. David Pryce – James remarks that a skeptical man like Fowler must rate human life “even more highly than a religious, for he has no hope of an afterlife.” (17)

The dilemma in ‘The Quiet American’ is more or less the same as in the religious novels. It has only been transferred from a religious to an ethical plane. In the world of moral ambiguity that Greene creates, his protagonists are placed in situation where moral choice is imperative, and the final action escape the certainties of moral categories. Greene leaves the

judgement of God, but for Fowler there is no God, no point of light at the end of the dark tunnel.

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