Summary

The story begins with the news of Alden Pyle’s murder. Pyle, the “quiet American” of the title, is a thirty-two-year-old Harvard-educated idealist and the son of the famous professor Harold C. Pyle, a “world authority on underwater erosion.” The younger Pyle works for the American Economic Aid Mission in Saigon, but he is also involved in espionage and terrorism and seems to be a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative. On the surface, however, Pyle is “quiet,” modest, and apparently decent in comparison to the crude American journalists and bureaucrats known to Thomas Fowler, the British reporter on assignment in Indochina who is the narrator of the novel.

Pyle is found drowned under a bridge in Saigon with a wound in his chest. His death is first presented as a mystery by the narrator, who knows more about the murder than he at first reveals. Pyle is at first defined by his naivete, his romantic idealism, and his political fanaticism. He is a disciple of a political theorist named York Harding, whose books, such as *The Advance of Red China* and *The Role of the West*, have convinced Pyle that a “Third Force” is needed in Southeast Asia, presumably meaning American military interference and aid. The American Economic Attache confides to Fowler that Pyle “had special duties” and died a “soldier’s death in the cause of Democracy.” The motive for Pyle’s murder seems to be clearly political, but Fowler is treated as a suspect by Vigot, the French police investigator, who knows that Pyle had taken Fowler’s Vietnamese mistress, Phuong, away from him and planned to marry her.

Fowler goes on to explain his dealings with Pyle, and the story of a love-hate relationship emerges. Pyle admires and respects Fowler and seeks his advice, but this hopeless romantic cannot help falling in love with Phuong. As an experienced journalist, Fowler has connections that enable him to accompany the French into the war zone in the north. Pyle follows him into the war zone to tell him he has fallen in love with Phuong and intends to ask her to marry him. What does not occur to Fowler is that Pyle may also have him under surveillance in the battle zone.

A showdown between Pyle and Fowler comes a few weeks later. Pyle proposes to Phuong, but she declines. After Pyle leaves, Fowler tells Phuong that he has been ordered back to London. He writes his wife, Helen, from whom he has been separated for five years, requesting a divorce that he knows she will not grant him. Regardless, Phuong is willing to return with Fowler to London.

Later, Fowler and Pyle are stranded in the countryside one night after curfew, narrowly escaping a Viet Minh attack on a sentry tower where they had sought shelter. Fowler’s leg is broken as they make their escape. Pyle saves Fowler’s life.

Fowler’s editor writes from London, giving him permission to stay on for another year in Vietnam, but his wife writes back refusing to grant him the divorce. Fowler lies about this to Phuong, but her sister, who reads
English, sees the letter and tells both Phuong and Pyle. Phuong leaves Fowler as a consequence of this deception and goes to live with Pyle.

Pyle’s “secret mission,” meanwhile, is clarified. He has been providing plastic explosives to General The, an outlaw loyal to neither the French nor the Communists, and therefore aiding a policy of terrorist bombings in Saigon for which the Communists will be held responsible. First, the campaign involves bicycle bombs that cause few injuries, but later, a full-scale campaign of more powerful bombs kills and mutilates innocent civilians.

Fowler learns of Pyle’s terrorist involvement after his Indian assistant, Dominguez, sets up a meeting between Fowler and two Chinese, Mr. Chou and Mr. Heng. The latter has clear connections with the Viet Minh and does not want the Communists blamed for the bombings of civilians.

Horrified after witnessing the victims of one of these bombings, Fowler decides that Pyle is dangerous and must be stopped. He agrees to set Pyle up for a Communist assassination plot suggested by Mr. Heng. Although perhaps confused about Fowler’s motive, Vigot is right to suspect Fowler as an accomplice, but he can prove nothing. Phuong returns to Fowler after Pyle’s murder, and Fowler’s wife finally agrees to the requested divorce, but Fowler’s happiness at the end is tainted by his sense of guilt and betrayal.

Summary

Alden Pyle, an undercover U.S. agent, is found murdered in French Saigon. In the early 1950’s, the French still controlled Vietnam as a colony, but they were beginning to lose control of the country to the communist revolutionaries. Pyle had come to investigate conditions and had befriended an English newspaper correspondent, Thomas Fowler. Vigot, the French police chief, orders Fowler and his former mistress, Phuong, to his office for questioning. Fowler is under suspicion because he is one of the last people to have seen Pyle alive, and Pyle had taken Phuong from Fowler.

Vigot interrogates Fowler, who proclaims not only his innocence but also his ignorance of what happened to Pyle. Phuong, who does not understand English, says nothing. After the interrogation, Fowler tells her that Pyle had been murdered. Her reaction is surprisingly mild, and she reveals almost nothing about her feelings. Fowler then goes over the sequence of events that led to Pyle’s murder and Vigot’s summons to police headquarters.

As the story goes, Pyle befriends Fowler during his first days in Saigon. Fowler is a reluctant companion. He dislikes Americans, especially ones like Pyle who seem on a mission to save the world. Pyle never admits to Fowler that he is a CIA agent—indeed no reference is made to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in the novel, except for Fowler’s suggestion that Pyle might work for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Established in World War II, the OSS was the precursor of the postwar CIA.

To Fowler, Pyle is an innocent who reads books on Vietnam but does not understand the reality of people’s lives. Fowler believes that the Vietnamese should be left alone. He does not believe that their lives could be improved by Westerners. He considers himself a reporter without political commitments or opinions. He is an older man (not saying how much older) who disdains Pyle’s idealism. Pyle wants to save Vietnam from communism. Fowler finds this attitude ridiculous and dangerous because it means Pyle would involve himself with the local Vietnamese anticomunist military, who seem to Fowler no more than gangsters. If the French were to lose Vietnam, it could not be saved by Americans looking for a “third force” (some group other than the communists or the French).
The third force is a theory Pyle had adopted from a book on Vietnam by York Harding. To Fowler, both Harding and Pyle ignored reality to pursue theory. Pyle even condones the terrorist acts of General Thé, an anticommmunist thug. General Thé blew up a café, maiming men, women, and children. To Pyle, this atrocity was a mistake. He plans to straighten it out with the general. To Fowler, the atrocity proves that Pyle is doing great harm in spite of his good intentions.

On the personal level, Pyle takes Fowler’s mistress away from him because Pyle believes that Phuong has to be saved. Pyle earnestly wants to know if Fowler loves Phuong and means to marry her. When Fowler admits he is using Phuong for his selfish pleasure, Pyle offers her marriage and a home in the United States, which she accepts.

In spite of their political and personal conflicts, Fowler finds it hard to reject Pyle. On a mission to observe the war in action, Fowler is injured and Pyle risks his own life to save him. Fowler knows that Pyle means well, and Pyle complicates Fowler’s feelings about him by constantly saying he knows that Fowler is not nearly as cynical and selfish as he says.

Pyle’s dangerous innocence and idealism so outrage Fowler that he decides he must thwart Pyle’s plans to coordinate another terrorist act with General Thé. Fowler informs a communist agent of Pyle’s plot. Thus, it is Fowler’s own intervention in politics that leads to Pyle’s death. Exactly how Pyle died and exactly who was responsible is never made clear. Fowler realizes, however, that Pyle’s death is his doing, even though he had only wanted Pyle stopped, not murdered.

Phuong returns to Fowler after Pyle’s death. Fowler also gets a cable from his wife announcing that she will give him a divorce. A happy Phuong goes to tell her sister that she is to be the “second Mrs. Fowlaire.” Meanwhile, Fowler broods on Pyle’s story. His last words reveal his guilt and his sense of responsibility for Pyle’s murder: “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.”

**Themes: Themes and Meanings**

*The Quiet American* can be read as a political and moral meditation on the beginning stages of the United States’ involvement in Southeast Asia, and the novel therefore becomes a commentary on the pointlessness of the United States’ later investment of men and materiel in a political action that could only end, as it did for the French, in defeat.

The large-scale political thesis (American interference in the internal affairs of another country can only result in suffering, death, and defeat, and is not morally justifiable because of abstract idealism) is not the only meaning of consequence in the novel, and given the course of later events, its importance may be magnified out of proportion. The object lesson, however, is clearly explained by a French aviator with “orders to shoot anything in sight.” Captain Trouin confides to Fowler that he detests napalm bombing: “We all get involved in a moment of emotion, and then we cannot get out,” he explains. Trouin understands that the French cannot win the war in Indochina: “But we are professionals; we have to go on fighting till the politicians tell us to stop,” he says with bitter resignation. “Probably they will get together and agree to the same peace that we could have had at the beginning, making nonsense of all these years.”

Thus Graham Greene summarizes the lesson of Vietnam fully ten years before the American government expanded its military commitment to fill the vacuum left by the defeated French. *The Quiet American* is an astonishing novel of political prophecy. It is also a mystery story, however, and that, perhaps, better defines its interest to the average reader, as Greene’s unreliable narrator gradually provides the details leading up to Pyle’s death. The dramatic focus concerns the conflict between Fowler and Pyle over love and the politics of...
war, the contest between Fowler and Vigot, who knows that Fowler was responsible for Pyle’s death but cannot prove it, and, finally, Fowler’s internal conflict, his credo of noninvolvement transformed by circumstances and emotion to a position of murderous intervention. “Sooner or later,” the Communist Heng tells Fowler, “one has to take sides—if one is to remain human.”

Perhaps Fowler finally “takes sides” because he understands how dangerous Pyle’s blind idealism can be, but his motives are not entirely clear because of his dependence on Phuong. Fowler does not idolize her, as does the more romantic Pyle, who sincerely cares for Phuong but is absolutely unfeeling about the rest of the native population.

Pyle is a sort of cartoon idealist, and in this respect the novel may be flawed. Pyle believes in the political theory of York Harding (a name that links a less-than-stunning American president with a patriotic war hero) and the need for a “Third Force” (American intervention) in Vietnam. Yet Pyle’s naivete is not entirely consistent with his intelligence, his training, and his Harvard degree. He is hopelessly innocent. In one of his strongest metaphors, Greene likens innocence to “a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm,” but obviously bearing contamination and corruption with him.

Themes

Greene’s novel is more than a political statement about whether or not America — or any other country — should become involved in the affairs of another country. Greene, as he so often does, makes the question human and personal. Fowler, from the very opening of the novel, insists that he is not engaged: "I'm not involved. Not involved,' I repeated. It had become an article of my creed." He is the perfect contrast to the American Pyle who is so eager to become engaged, in politics, war, or love. Yet, the novel pushes Fowler without rest: as people tell him, "Sooner or later, one has to take sides. If one is to remain human." He finally does become involved, even to the point of complicity in murder: "I had become as engage as Pyle, and it seemed that no decision would ever be simple again.” Yet, the ending of the book is ambiguous, for Greene’s second theme concerns the ambiguity of human motivation. Fowler finally becomes engaged, but the questions remain of whether he is right to do so, and whether he does so out of political concern and compassion for people or simple lust and sexual jealousy. The novel does not completely answer these questions, but it seems to suggest that in this fallen world, it is impossible not to become involved, but that to become involved, to act, always exposes one's human frailties.

Characters: The Characters

The major focus of The Quiet American is upon the narrator, Thomas Fowler, who introduces and interprets Alden Pyle for the reader. The contrasts between Pyle and Fowler are those between youth and age, innocence and experience, naivete and cynicism. The younger Pyle can be regarded as both Fowler’s friend and rival. As the narrative advances, Pyle begins to emerge as Fowler’s enemy, but the man is such a trusting fool.

As a newsman, Fowler prefers to call himself a reporter rather than a correspondent. He takes professional pride in being “objective,” detached, and disengaged. His alleged detachment is contrasted to Pyle’s idealistic involvement, personally and professionally.

Professionally, Pyle works for the American Economic Aid Mission, but this is merely a cover. Pyle is in fact a CIA agent attempting to build support for the puppet warlord General The. His “mission” is not economic but military and anti-Communistic. Pyle’s cover is gradually disclosed as Fowler explains the events leading to Pyle’s murder.
On the personal level, Pyle becomes Fowler’s rival for the affection of the Vietnamese woman Phuong, who has lived with Fowler for two years. Fowler appears to love Phuong (or at least to desire her as a companion to protect him against the loneliness of old age), but he cannot offer her marriage because his wife, Helen, back in England, will not grant him a divorce. The younger Pyle offers Phuong security, marriage, and a ticket to the United States. Fowler therefore has reason to regard Pyle as a threat to his ease and comfort. His motives are complicated.

Vigot, the French police officer investigating Pyle’s murder, considers Fowler as a suspect with a motive—jealousy. Yet Fowler never admits this motive and rationalizes his actions on moral and political grounds, though the reader cannot be entirely convinced. After witnessing the human suffering of innocent men, women, and children after a bombing at the Place Garnier, Fowler concludes, with some justification, that Pyle must be stopped.

There is reason to consider Pyle as a moral monstrosity, blinded by his fanatical idealism and confused about ends and means. An abstract victory for “Democracy” is more important to him than the lives and suffering of simple peasants who have no understanding of his political ideals. Superficially, Pyle is contrasted with the other “ugly” Americans: the Economic Attache “Joe,” who is so lacking in human definition that he does not even deserve a surname, and Bill Granger, the oafish, philandering American correspondent. Ultimately, however, the “quiet,” apparently decent, Harvard-educated Pyle is far more dangerous than his cruder American counterparts.

The French, representing the old colonialism, are constantly contrasted to the Americans. Captain Trouin, who takes Fowler on a “vertical” dive-bombing mission in north Vietnam, becomes a military spokesman for the military pointlessness of the war in French Indochina. The world-weary security police officer Vigot, who reads Blaise Pascal and has seen too much of death and corruption, also serves as a moral touchstone in the way he questions human motives and behavior.

Fowler’s motives are contradictory. He can justify his betrayal of Pyle and his “involvement” on the basis of his revulsion of the suffering Pyle has caused, but Pyle has also saved his life and sincerely wants to be his friend. Because of Phuong, Fowler has reason to resent Pyle, whose presence has complicated his life.

**Characters: Characters Discussed**

**Thomas Fowler**

Thomas Fowler, the narrator, a British war correspondent based in Saigon during the French-Vietnamese conflict. Middle-aged, jaded, and cynical, he takes pride in his detachment—both from the war and from life—always stressing his role as a reporter, an observer of facts, a man without opinions. Beneath his cool façade, however, he loves Vietnam and its people. Unlike other Western correspondents, he thinks of Saigon as his permanent home. As the story opens, he has lost his Vietnamese mistress of two years, Phuong, to Pyle, the “quiet American.” Ultimately, Fowler’s love for Phuong and his concern for her country lead him, agonizingly, to breach his code of detachment. His involvement forever alters his life and the lives of Phuong and Pyle.

**Alden Pyle**

Alden Pyle, the “quiet American” of the title, ostensibly employed by the American Economic Aid Mission in Saigon but covertly involved in terrorist activities conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency. Thirty-two years old and Harvard-educated, he is painfully earnest, sincere, and inexperienced. His romantic idealism about love and war is the perfect foil for Fowler’s hard-bitten realism. His naïve attempts to establish a
Vietnamese national democracy and his immature devotion to Fowler’s mistress, Phuong, catapult him into circumstances that lead to his assassination.

**Phuong**

Phuong, Fowler’s twenty-year-old Vietnamese mistress, a fragile Asian beauty. Fowler’s faithful, obedient companion, she seems simple and childlike—collecting colored scarves and poring over picture books of Europe and America—yet Fowler sees her as strong and self-possessed, as enigmatic as the Orient itself. At the urging of her sister, she leaves Fowler, a married man, for the younger Pyle, who promises her stability, marriage, and children.

**Vigot**

Vigot (vee-GOH), a police officer at the French Sûreté who questions Fowler about Pyle’s murder. An interesting man who reads Blaise Pascal and is uncommonly devoted to his wife, he suspects that Fowler is involved in Pyle’s death, but he cannot prove it.

**Mr. Heng**

Mr. Heng, a Communist informer who links Pyle to plastic explosives and covert terrorist activities. He informs Fowler of Pyle’s involvement with General Thé, and, after consulting again with Fowler, arranges for Pyle’s assassination.

**General Thé**

General Thé, the leader of a small band of Vietnamese rebel terrorists who are fighting both the French and the Communists. Pyle sees him as a possible leader for the Vietnamese national democracy that the Central Intelligence Agency is trying to establish.

**Miss Hei**

Miss Hei, Phuong’s cultivated, English-speaking older sister, who acts as matchmaker between Phuong and Pyle. Miss Hei has never liked Fowler, because he is too old, his wife will not divorce him, and he can never provide Phuong with a marriage and a family.

**Dominguez**

Dominguez, Fowler’s faithful, hardworking journalistic assistant. Through Dominguez’s political connections, Fowler learns of Pyle’s terrorist activities.

**Bill Granger**

Bill Granger, a crude American journalist in Saigon. His thoughtless, rude treatment of the Vietnamese people is in contrast with Fowler’s caring treatment of them.

**Characters**

Characterization is the key to *The Quiet American*, in that Greene, to develop his political concerns, uses Fowler to represent one set of ideas and Pyle another. However, that technique can be dangerous for a novel, because to develop his theme of personal involvement, the characters must be convincing as real people; the
more flat, character-as-function-of-story characterization of *The Power and the Glory* (1940) would not be
appropriate here. In general, Greene seems to succeed, particularly with Fowler. Although Fowler claims
complete detachment, his love, or at least desire, for his mistress, Phoung, gives him away as a much more
complex, and so believable, character. His rage when he sees innocent Vietnamese civilians killed by Pyle’s
bombs would be out of keeping with his detachment, but it is understandable to the reader because the reader
realizes that Fowler imagines Phoung among the dead.

The characterization of Pyle is more difficult to judge. Those readers who would accuse Greene of
anti-Americanism would argue that he has made Pyle into a caricature of the ugly American. He does seem
exaggeratedly naive and impossibly idealistic, but the book was written in 1955, before Americans had the
experiences of the Vietnam war and Watergate to make them cynical. Greene seems to want to maintain a
balance of sympathy between the two characters — both Pyle’s American idealism and Fowler’s European
cynicism are less than perfect in the end — but the balance seems a little tipped to Fowler. It is not difficult to
feel sympathetic when Pyle is talking about his political idealism or romantically declaring his love for
Phoung, but it seems almost impossible to maintain that sympathy when he kills civilians so readily.

The other danger in using characters to represent political ideas is that the novel can become static, with too
much dialogue and too little action. For the most part, the novel seems to avoid that problem, except, perhaps
for the discussion in the roadside watchtower. The movie adaptation, however, seemed to suffer from this
problem.

**Critical Essays: Critical Context**

Thomas Fowler is, as Graham Greene was, a reporter in Southeast Asia, and Roger Sharrock observes that
“there is more direct reporting in *The Quiet American* than in any of his other novels.” Greene himself
attended press conferences in Hanoi, experienced at first hand a “vertical” bombing mission against the Viet
Minh in the north, and saw the canal filled with dead bodies at Phat Diem that Fowler remembers.

*The Quiet American* is regarded as Greene’s “most carefully constructed novel.” It offers a story of espionage
set against a documentary background of terrorism, political chaos, and moral ambiguity, representing a kind
of formula writing last seen in Greene’s thriller “entertainment,” *The Ministry of Fear* (1943). (Greene is
given to classifying his works as “novels” and “entertainments,” though the latter are marked by much the
same philosophical and religious concerns as the former.)

Greene’s political intent is clearly to ridicule the notion of a “Third Force” in Asian politics, countering the
threat of Communism and replacing the rationale of colonialism as a justification for Western involvement.
Because of Greene’s apparent anti-American bias, the novel was not popular in the United States; Diana
Trilling interpreted Fowler’s neutralism and Greene’s stance as being pro-Communist, although this criticism
was later countered by Anthony Burgess’ warning against identifying Greene with his narrators. It is no
wonder, then, that Greene’s warning about Vietnam was not taken seriously in the United States, even though
later events tended to substantiate the wisdom of his political analysis.

Fowler is an unreliable narrator; he is a liar and not altogether admirable. He lies to both Phuong and Pyle
when his sense of happiness and security is threatened. His hostility toward Americans is motivated partly by
his need to discredit Pyle as his sexual rival and to justify his involvement in the assassination plot. Curiously,
he has blocked out his memory of England, perhaps not wanting to think about the failure of his first
marriage. He frequently escapes reality by smoking opium. Yet his ability to relate to the suffering of others,
such as the victims of war and of Pyle’s bombs, seems to be genuine, as is also, apparently, his affection for
Vietnam.
The philosophical framework of Catholic existentialism upon which much of Greene’s fiction is built is not so apparent in *The Quiet American*, a novel generally stripped of the trappings of Roman Catholicism. Though not entirely beyond a pervading sense of sin and betrayal, Fowler claims to be an atheist. A. A. DeVitis describes Fowler’s attitude as Sartrean existentialism rather than its Catholic counterpart. Vigot, the investigating police officer, is compared to a priest seeking confessions, and elsewhere Fowler’s wife is referred to as a devout Anglican. In general, however, the moral direction of this novel is linked to politics rather than religion. Fowler’s saving grace is that he cannot sever himself from the world in which he lives. On the other hand, Pyle can dismiss the human suffering he causes, and it is exactly that abstract and monstrous detachment that finally convinces Fowler, and perhaps the reader as well, to take sides in this often polemical novel.

**Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation**

*The Quiet American* is considered one of Graham Greene’s major achievements. The story is told with great economy, superb characterization, and sophisticated irony. The plot resembles that of a mystery story. A crime has been committed. Who is the murderer? As in most mystery stories, as much needs to be learned about the victim as about the villain. What is learned, though, takes on political, moral, and religious significance. The story ends in mystery as well. Who exactly killed Pyle is not revealed, but the burden of the crime, like the burden of telling the story, is that of Fowler.

Fowler is a fascinating character and narrator because he simultaneously reveals and conceals so much about himself and his involvement in the story. On the one hand, he is openly contemptuous of Pyle. Like other Americans, Pyle is so obsessed with his mission to save the world that he does not register the reality around him. It is ludicrous for him to think that Phuong is an innocent he must rescue. She has stayed with Fowler because he offers her security. She leaves Fowler for Pyle because he offers her even more wealth and protection. Pyle is shocked because Fowler says he is merely using Phuong for his own pleasure and because of his need to have a woman beside him to stave off loneliness. It never occurs to Pyle that Phuong has acted just as selfishly or that Pyle himself is using people.

On the other hand, Fowler is not entirely honest with himself. He claims to be disengaged, not only from politics but also from the sentiments of love Pyle professes. Yet Fowler’s vehement rejection of Pyle’s worldview and his passionate defense of the Vietnamese (who, he believes, should be allowed to worked out their own destiny, free of the French, the Americans, and any other intruding power) surely reveal anything but cynicism. In this respect, Pyle is right to see good in a person who claims to be without scruples.

Indeed, Pyle loses his life because of Fowler’s moral outrage. Fowler is so revolted by the bombing atrocity at the café that he determines to put a stop to Pyle’s activities. Fowler’s passion is hardly consistent with his affectation of aloofness. Actually, he cares deeply about Phuong and about the Vietnamese. He believes in self-determination, which ironically is the ideology that Americans claim to support. Americans think they are supporting freedom by allying themselves with the anticommunists.

Thus, there are multiple ironies in *The Quiet American*. Fowler says he is a cynic, but he acts like a wounded idealist. Pyle says he is an idealist, but his trafficking with anticomunist thugs involves him in cynical and brutal plots. Phuong looks like a delicate, manipulable, and passive victim, and yet like many other Vietnamese, she is a survivor who plays one side against the other and bends with the political winds. Fowler declares to Vigot that he is not guilty and retells the story of his involvement with Fowler to absolve himself, yet he concludes by realizing that he is guilty.

The novel’s title is ironic. In one sense, Pyle is quiet—even unassuming. He is not aggressive. He patiently questions Fowler about his tie to Phuong and even declares his love for her to Fowler before he courts her.
Pyle is the opposite of loud, vulgar Americans such as his boss Joe, or the noisy American journalist Granger. In another sense, however, Pyle is anything but quiet. He stirs up Saigon with explosions; he turns Fowler’s life into turmoil.

An even greater irony is that for all their differences, Fowler and Pyle are alike in their moral earnestness. Fowler is the sophisticated European who has learned not to wear his heart on his sleeve. He denies any form of selfless behavior. Pyle is a naïve American who is openhearted and believes he acts for the good of others. Yet both men cause great damage because they care about others. They are implicated in the evil that Fowler thinks he can elude and that Pyle thinks he can eliminate.

The political and moral divide between Fowler and Pyle is not as great as Fowler has supposed. His narrative ironically binds him to Pyle—a fate Fowler has consistently tried to avoid. The novel dramatizes Fowler’s fate in the scene where he refuses to call Pyle by his first name. He also refuses to let Pyle call him Tom and insists on being called Thomas. No formalities can really separate the two men, however; Fowler’s own narrative shows them to be twinned souls.

The religious basis of Greene’s fiction has often been noted by his critics. He is a Catholic novelist who believes in the universality of human nature, that human beings cannot separate themselves from one another, and that all souls are alike in their propensity to sin. Although Fowler refers to himself several times as an atheist, Pyle refuses to believe him, saying the world does not make sense without a concept of God. Fowler retorts that the world does not make sense with a concept of God.

At the end of his narrative, however, Fowler is clearly seeking the solace of a higher power. He does not refer to God, but he mentions his good luck since Pyle has died. Phuong has returned to him; his wife has agreed to divorce him after initially indicating she would not. Everything seems to have fallen in place for a man worried about growing old and desiring the companionship of a younger woman. Yet Fowler is nevertheless disturbed. He tells Phuong he is sorry. She does not understand. To her, the telegram from Fowler’s wife means that she will be happy. She does not know that Fowler needs to unburden himself. His story is part of his unburdening, but his last words reveal that he needs “someone else to whom I could say I was sorry.” He has made a kind of confession; he has been unable to absolve himself of sin. His is a religious sentiment, a craving for a being to whom he wants himself to be accountable. He is on the verge of admitting his need for God.

**Analysis: Places Discussed**

*Vietnam*

*Vietnam. Country in Southeast Asia that was colonized by France during the late nineteenth century. The novel is set in Vietnam in the early 1950’s at a time when the Vietnamese people believe they have earned their independence, but the French still refuse to withdraw. From their ostensibly secure base in Saigon, the French rule an uneasy country, one whose countryside and northern districts are controlled by nationalist forces known as the Viet Minh. Into a complex atmosphere of political intrigue and violence, Graham Greene interweaves a psychological study of a murdered American espionage agent and a British journalist.

The novel is a partly autobiographical account of Greene’s own time in Vietnam, where he was a journalist in 1951 to 1952. His narrator, Thomas Fowler, is also a war correspondent stationed in Saigon through whose eyes readers learn of the murky political situation developing with the increasing American presence in Southeast Asia.

*Saigon*
*Saigon (SI-gahn; now Ho Chi Minh City). Capital of colonial Cochin China. A French stronghold, Saigon is the site for much of the action in The Quiet American. The fact that terrorist attacks and bombings occur in the midst of this urbane and sophisticated center of French colonial culture provides strong evidence for the disintegration of French control. The novel depicts Saigon as the center of a culture degraded by colonialism, one in which drug trafficking, opium smoking, and prostitution run rampant.

*Continental Hotel

*Continental Hotel. Large hotel in central Saigon frequented by foreign correspondents that is the site of much of the novel’s dialogue. At this hotel Fowler meets Alden Pyle, the “quiet American” of the title, and Pyle meets Phuong, a beautiful young Vietnamese woman who is living with Fowler. Greene’s descriptions of the Continental are realistic and based in fact. The Continental is a real hotel that served as the base for European and American correspondents until the fall of Saigon in the 1970’s.

*Tanyin

*Tanyin (tan-YIHN). City about fifty miles northwest of Saigon where Fowler goes to attend a celebration of the Caodists, who are attempting to synthesize Roman Catholicism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The novel uses Fowler’s trip to illustrate what is going on in the countryside outside Saigon. At Tanyin, Fowler runs into Pyle, whose car has broken down, and the two men return to Saigon together. Along the way, Fowler’s own car runs out of gas, leaving the men dangerously isolated within disputed territory. Although the French maintain watchtowers every kilometer along the road, the towers often change hands during the night. The episode underscores how the relative peace of Saigon camouflages the instability of the rest of the country.

*Tonkin

*Tonkin (TAHN-kihn). Northernmost district of Vietnam. In both the novel and reality, Tonkin is the location of many battles between the Viet Minh and the French, including the decisive great battle at Dien Bien Phu. Hanoi, the capital, and the important port of Haiphong are located in Tonkin as well.

*Phat Diem

*Phat Diem (fat-dee-ehm). Town about eighty miles south of Hanoi that is the site of an important Catholic cathedral. Phat Diem is also the site of a battle that leads to the most gruesome scene in the novel: a canal filled with human bodies.

Analysis: Literary Techniques

The novel begins with Pyle's death, and then proceeds as a flashback. Beginning with the ending could destroy any chance for suspense, but Greene, a master of suspense and surprise, actually uses the technique to increase suspense. In the opening, Fowler expresses a sense of guilt over Pyle's death, but the reader is encouraged to think this guilt is like that of a person who does nothing to save a drug-addicted friend, and then feels guilty when the friend dies of an overdose. Fowler says, "They killed him because he was too innocent to live. He was young and silly and ignorant and he got involved." It is not until the end of the novel that the reader discovers just how direct Fowler's guilt is.

Analysis: Social Concerns

Like many of Greene's spy, or espionage, novels, The Quiet American is concerned with the effect the superpowers have when they intervene in the politics of the developing nations, in this case, Vietnam during
the last days of French colonial rule. Greene himself is in an interesting position in that England, once a major colonial power, has increasingly surrendered that position to the United States since World War II; as the British character Fowler says to the American Pyle, "We're the old colonials." This weakened position makes Greene, like Fowler, something of an observer of the more active Americans. Fowler observes the "covert actions" of Pyle (almost everyone in the novel seems to have full knowledge of these covert activities), and finds them wrong: He thinks Americans are politically naive, dangerously idealistic, and too willing to hurt other people if they get in the way of their lofty political goals. Greene has been accused of being anti-American (again he claims he is simply being sympathetic to the underdog), but the novel — and Fowler's judgment of Pyle — was obviously very topical, and very popular on college campuses, during the war in Vietnam, when many Americans came to share Fowler's opinions. Although the war and the controversies surrounding it still plague the memories of many Americans, the war and the novel itself are not quite so topical as they were in the 1960s and early 1970s. Still it might be worth stressing that the novel was written well before America became deeply involved in Vietnam, and that America is now involved in other parts of the world where the political concerns of the novel are still applicable. Pyle's idea that Vietnam could be saved if only the United States would support a "Third Force," is remarkably like the thesis of Shirley Christian's *Nicaragua* (1985): Nicaragua could have been saved from the Sandinistas if only President Carter had supported a moderate "third force" between Somoza and the Sandinistas.

**Analysis: Literary Precedents**

The theme of the American innocent abroad is as much a theme of American literature as it is British. It goes back to Mark Twain's novel *Innocents Abroad* (1869), and in Henry James's "Daisy Miller" (1878), Daisy dies because of her innocence. Yet Greene's novel is more sophisticated than a simple condemnation of American naïveté. Even though Pyle is condemned, Fowler is far from exonerated. The story is more related to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Although it would seem at first that it is Kurtz, like Pyle, who has lost his innocence in a strange third world, but in being there, in being forced to act, Marlow, too, like Fowler, becomes implicated in the world around him, a world that does not quite conform to his expectations.

**Analysis: Related Titles**

Greene has written a number of novels of international intrigue since his service with British Secret Intelligence: *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), *The Third Man* (1950), *The Comedians* (1966) and *The Honorary Consul* (1973). In *Our Man in Havana* (1958), he returns to many of the same concerns of *The Quiet American*, but this time from more comic perspective, just as *Monsignor Quixote* (1982) is a comic rewriting of *The Power and the Glory*. Wormold, a British vacuum cleaner salesman living in Havana, allows himself to be recruited into British Intelligence, partially because he does not know how to say no, partially because he needs the extra money to support his seventeen-year-old daughter's expensive taste. He does not know how to be a secret agent, so he simply sends imaginary information back to the home office. Even though the novel is a comedy, it shows Greene at his most cynical: The kinds of attacks made on Americans in *The Quiet American* are now leveled at Greene's own England. The final message of the novel is delivered by Beatrice, Wormold's girlfriend, to British Intelligence: "We don't believe you any more when you say you want peace and justice and freedom. What kind of freedom? You want your careers."

**Analysis: Adaptations**

*The Quiet Man* was adapted to the screen and directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz in 1957. The movie starred, appropriately, Audie Murphy, as the American, and Michael Redgrave as Fowler. The film follows the novel at first, but then departs, making the movie less anti-American: as the *New York Times* review expressed it, "It is evident that Joseph L. Mankiewicz has a better opinion of the title character in Graham Green's *The Quiet
American than the British novelist had." The film also suffers from too much dialogue and too little action; the review in Variety charged that "Joseph L. Mankiewicz has allowed himself the luxury of turning the screen into a debating society." The result, Variety goes on to say, "is intellectually rewarding and dramatically tiresome."

**Bibliography**


Sharrock, Roger. *Saints, Sinners, and Comedians: The Novels of Graham Greene*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984. Compares the novel to Greene’s preceding fiction, compares the novelist’s treatments of real places with that of other great novelists, analyzes Greene’s political opinions, relates them to Fowler’s, and concludes that *The Quiet American* is Greene’s most carefully constructed novel.