

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

The Quiet American 1955

Graham Greene

OVERVIEW

The story follows three key characters, whose lives intersect in Saigon, Vietnam in the 1950s. Fowler, who is the novel's narrator, is an English correspondent covering the war between the French colonial army (and their Vietnamese allies) and the Vietminh, the nationalist army fighting for independence. Phuong is Fowler's Vietnamese lover. Pyle is the soft-spoken American who arrives in town armed with a plan to defeat communism. The drama concerns the conflict between Fowler's cynicism and Pyle's idealism about local politics, and extends to their competition for Phuong. The story begins with Pyle's murder and then fills in the background, including Pyle rescuing Fowler from near-death.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Although Greene drew on his personal experiences for many of his novels, *The Quiet American* is perhaps his most autobiographical, except that it should have had the title 'The Cynical Englishman.' The novelist, like his protagonist, spent years in Vietnam in the 1950s covering the anti-colonial struggle against France. Like Fowler, also, Greene had an unhappy marriage and wife in London. Greene later said that the idea for the novel, specifically the character of Pyle and his theory of the 'Third Force', came to him while listening to an idealistic American in Vietnam. Similarly, the key incident of a bomb killing civilians was, Greene claimed, based on a real-life incident in Saigon. Critics have mentioned that Greene seemed possessed of some uncanny clairvoyance when he wrote this story, which foretold the disastrous consequences of American intervention in Vietnam: in 1955, there were only a few hundred US soldiers in the country; by 1960, there were almost half a million. Had Greene somehow seen the carnage that lay in ahead? The novel was made into a film in 1957 and again in 2002.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Fowler Fowler is a married English reporter posted to Vietnam.
Pyle Pyle is a young American who comes to Vietnam as part of a vague 'Economic Mission.'
Phuong Phuong, a young Vietnamese woman, is Fowler's lover.
Miss Hei Miss Hei is Phuong's older and wiser sister.
Mr Heng Mr Heng is a communist leader in Saigon.

STORY

A dead body The story begins in Saigon in the 1950s. Fowler, an English war correspondent, and Phuong, a young Vietnamese woman, are waiting for the arrival of Pyle, an American aid worker. From their conversation, we learn that Phuong had been Fowler's lover and that now she is engaged to Pyle. Fowler has been in the country a long time, reporting on the war between the French colonial army and the Vietnamese army (the Vietminh) fighting for independence. Pyle, on the other hand, has been in Saigon for only a few months. Phuong prepares an opium pipe for Fowler and they wait. When the knock comes, it is the police, who take them to the morgue. Pyle has been found dead in one of the waterways of Saigon. The police investigation into his death brings Fowler into contact with the American authorities, who admit that although Pyle was officially an economic aid worker, he had a secret mission.

The Third Force Now the novel shifts back in time, where it remains until the end. A few months earlier, Fowler met Pyle for the first time. Compared to the pack of American reporters and officials in Saigon, Pyle seemed 'quiet.' Young and earnest, he tells Fowler about a book by a Harvard

professor that explains the need for a 'Third Force' in Asia, a force allied neither to the communists nor the colonialists. Fowler comments that a faction of the rebel army led by General Thé operates like this mysterious 'Third Force.'

Miss Hei Later, Fowler, Pyle and Phuong are in a bar when a gang of American reporters burst in with a story about 'a big battle up north in Phat Diem.' Fowler and Pyle both protect Phuong from the racist and sexist comments of the reporters. They move on to a nightclub, where they meet Miss Hei, Phuong's older sister and club manageress, who looks after her younger sibling. She wants to marry Phuong to a foreigner and is charmed by Pyle's manners (she has already rejected Fowler as a possible husband for Phuong because he is too old, impoverished and dissolute). When Fowler is out of town on an assignment, Miss Hei arranges for Pyle to meet Phuong at her house and the young couple begin to fancy each other.

Phat Diem Following the reporters' tip, Fowler travels up north to Phat Diem to cover the battle there. He finds the French troops and their Vietnamese allies besieged by the Vietminh, with substantial casualties and little hope of reinforcements.

Marriage plans Pyle also arrives after a few days and informs Fowler that he's in love with Phuong and wants to marry her. Pyle explains that he can offer her a good life, children and security, but Fowler says he won't give her up. Leaving the battle scene, Fowler goes to Hanoi where he receives a letter from Pyle expressing his admiration for Fowler's not getting angry with him, which only makes Fowler realise how imperceptive Pyle is and how vulnerable to danger he is.

Telegram In Hanoi, Fowler attends a press conference, where a French official tries to cover up the losses in Phat Diem, but admits that the French army is in need of supplies (helicopters and guns) promised by the Americans. Fowler also gets a telegram from his editor telling him to return to England.

Smuggling Back in Saigon, Phuong tells Fowler that she heard rumours that Pyle is involved in smuggling plastic into the country. Pyle comes uninvited to Fowler's apartment and asks Phuong to marry him, but she says that she wants to stay with Fowler. Fowler writes a letter to his wife in England, asking for a divorce, and later tells Phuong that he has been recalled to England.

Caodaism Weeks later, Fowler goes to a big celebration of the Caodaists, the 'third force' led by General Thé, who represent a mixture of Buddhist, Taoist and Catholic sympathies. After a perplexing interview with the general, Fowler notices that Pyle is also having an audience with the general.

Saviour Pyle and Fowler leave together, but one of the soldiers has siphoned gas from Fowler's car and they run out of fuel in the middle of a war zone. The two men take refuge in a watchtower, manned by two Vietnamese guards loyal to the French. When the Vietminh attack, Pyle saves Fowler's life, though the latter is badly injured.

Lies Recuperating after a stay in hospital in Saigon, Fowler receives a letter from his wife, refusing to grant him a divorce. Concealing this from Phuong, he writes to Pyle and lies to him, too, saying that he will get a divorce and marry Phuong. Not long after, Pyle learns that Fowler has lied to him and to Phuong: Miss Hei has discovered that Fowler has been recalled to England, and she also read the letter in which Fowler's wife refused to divorce him. Pyle confronts Fowler with these lies, and Fowler says he just wants to keep her. But when Phuong is told of the lies, she leaves Fowler and goes away with Pyle.

Pyle and Thé Following up a tip from his local informant, Fowler goes to a warehouse in Saigon, where Mr Heng, a leader among the communists, shows him evidence that connects Pyle to General Thé. It appears that Pyle has been smuggling plastic, which is used to wrap around explosives. When Fowler confronts Pyle with this evidence, Pyle pretends to know nothing.

Bomb A bomb explodes in a street, killing many civilians. Through enquiries, Fowler discovers that the explosion is part of General Thé's campaign and that Pyle was somehow involved. Convinced

that Thé and Pyle are planning a series of terrorist attacks, Fowler contacts Mr Heng and explains his fears. When Heng asks for Fowler's help in 'neutralising' the threat, Fowler agrees but it is unclear exactly how much he is aware of Heng's plan.

Assassination Now the story catches up to the point where it began, on the night of Pyle's death, which we know was an assassination, in which Fowler willingly or unwillingly colluded. The French police suspect that Fowler had a hand in Pyle's death, but without evidence the crime remains unsolved.

Joy and guilt Phuong returns to Fowler, who receives a telegram from his wife granting him a divorce. Phuong is happy, but Fowler is tormented by guilt for Pyle's death.

THEMES

Innocence What Greene so masterfully explores in the novel is the unexpected danger lurking in the soft bosom of innocence. In speaking about Pyle, Fowler comments, '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.' Pyle, similarly, intends no harm, but his naiveté, combined with his idealism and self-belief, bring disaster to himself and others, including Fowler. Pyle, of course, represents the American intrusion in Southeast Asia, already apparent to Greene in the 1950s. Blinded by 'democratic' ideals and a lack of knowledge of the region, Pyle's American mission results in dangerous explosives finding their way into unprincipled hands and causing dozens of deaths. While that number is a mere fraction of the fatalities in the Vietnam war of the 1960s and 1970s, it demonstrates the menace lurking within innocence. Pyle's laudable intentions are corrupted by his ignorance and arrogance, a point made also in the novel's epigraph written by Lord Byron in the early nineteenth century: 'This is the patent age of new inventions, for killing bodies and for saving souls, all propagated with the best intentions.' Pyle is guilty because he is innocent.

Neutrality As if to illustrate that Fowler is not himself without flaws, the other epigraph to the novel points the finger of guilt at his neutrality. 'I do not like being moved, for the will is excited and action is a most dangerous thing' (A H Clough, an English poet, born some forty years after Byron). As a journalist, Fowler has learned to be objective, to understand both sides, especially in a war. He reports facts, he does not offer opinions. He also prides himself on being dispassionate toward Phuong, believing that she is simply a sexual companion. Both these neutral stands are challenged during the course of the novel, however. Fowler first glimpses the shortcomings of non-involvement when he realises that some of the Catholic churches, supposedly off-limits to both sides, have allied themselves with the French. He also suspects the neutrality of the Caodists (a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism and Catholicism), believing that they use non-alliance as a strategy to gain military advantage. Fowler betrays his own neutrality when he colludes with the Communists in the assassination of Pyle. The communist leader, Heng, says to him, 'Mr Fowler, you are English; you are neutral. You can sympathise with both sides.' But Fowler is afraid of the damage that the innocent Pyle can cause, forcing him to take sides and remove Pyle's threat from the streets. Similarly, the threat of losing Phuong to Pyle wrenches Fowler out of his blasé attitude to his lover and makes him fight to keep her. Even if the dead Pyle has learned nothing, Fowler, at least, has discovered the limits of inaction.

Cultural difference Another theme that threads through the political and romantic strands of the story is the significance of cultural difference. Fowler, who has acclimatised to Saigon, taken a local lover and learned to enjoy his opium, frequently comments on the bull-in-the-china-shop behaviour and attitudes of the outsiders, particularly the Americans. Speaking of the journalists from the US, he says at one point, 'I was tired of the whole pack of them with their stories of Coca Cola...and new guns.' More than once, Fowler likens Vietnam, with its ancient culture and traditions, to medieval Europe, a foreign land for 'Americans who hadn't yet had their country discovered by Columbus then.' Language, too, is important. Fowler speaks excellent French, including the local variety, and can manage Phuong's name. Fowler likes to exploit this linguistic gap when arguing with Pyle. When Pyle claims that Fowler doesn't really love Phuong, Fowler retorts, 'Love is a western word.' Later, Pyle defends the death of Vietnamese soldiers fighting the Communists by claiming that 'they died for

democracy.' Fowler almost laughs and says, 'I wouldn't know how to translate that into Vietnamese.' Pyle has come to Vietnam straight from college, with textbooks about Asia in his head. He is convinced that the 'peasants don't want Communism,' to which Fowler responds, 'They want rice...they don't want to be shot at. They don't want our white skins around telling them what they want.' Pyle has yet to understand the vast differences that separate him, and other Americans, from the people he is trying to help.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Fowler An English journalist in his fifties, Fowler is a cynical man who is still capable of tenderness. He attempts to maintain neutrality but finds that his heart draws him to one side or the other. He is not a happy person, having a failed marriage, a dead daughter and a wife left behind in London. But he has his little pleasures, with opium and with Phuong.

Disengaged Fowler prides himself on being a dispassionate observer of life, of not taking sides and remaining aloof. This aspect of his character is illustrated in an early scene when the French police interview him following Pyle's death (and possible murder). The cagey inspector asks Fowler if he has any 'views,' and Fowler responds by naming four or five different possible assailants, each with a different motive. When the inspector asks about Fowler's own relationship with Pyle, he says, 'You can rule me out [of suspicion]. I'm not involved. Not involved.' Then Fowler says to the reader, 'It had been an article of my creed. The human condition being what it was, let them fight, let them love, let them murder...I wrote what I saw. I took no action. Even an opinion is a kind of action.' His repeated claim of disengagement is so explicit that it appears forced, as if he is trying to convince himself, as well as others. The scene thus provides early evidence of an inner struggle, and later we realise that his detachment is not just a professional but also a personal strategy to combat his fear of loneliness.

Cynical Central to Fowler's disengagement is a well-honed cynicism, born of his experiences in Vietnam. His disinclination to trust anyone, or any idea, is what sets up the sharp contrast between him and Pyle, the naïve American miracle-worker. Fowler's sardonic take on the world is vividly expressed in the dramatic scene when he and Pyle take refuge in a watchtower in a war zone. Trapped, alone together, with two frightened Vietnamese guards, the two foreigners talk about the conflict in the country. Fowler gestures toward the soldiers and says, 'Do you think they know they're fighting for Democracy?' When Pyle asks why he always mocks the books that Pyle takes his ideas from, Fowler answers, 'I laugh at anything that doesn't exist, at mental concepts.' Pyle tries to corner him by saying that he must believe in something, and Fowler says, 'I believe we're sitting here. I believe there's a gun over there.' Pyle makes a little speech about democracy and colonialism, which Fowler cuts short by belittling 'isms and ocracies...they're the real enemy.' Fowler then gives Pyle a mini lecture on the duplicity of colonialism, in India, Burma and Southeast Asia. 'We go in,' he says, 'claiming we will improve lives and end up killing people.' Fowler has seen too much to believe in any 'ism' or 'ocracy.'

Fair-minded Although Fowler is usually critical of his rival, Pyle, he can also be objective (like a reporter). This fair-mindedness is illustrated in a key scene with Pyle, who has just won over Phuong by revealing to her that Fowler has lied to her. Fowler accepts the shift in Phuong's loyalty but is clearly hurt. When Pyle says that he wished it hadn't been Fowler, whom he has hurt, Fowler replies, 'I'm glad it's you, though.' Then Fowler explains (to the reader): 'All the time that his innocence had angered me, some judge within myself had summed up in his favour, had compared his idealism, his half-baked ideas, with my cynicism. Oh, I was right about the facts, but wasn't he right, too, to be young and mistaken? And wasn't he perhaps a better man for a girl to spend her life with?' Here, Fowler is not just objective but tender, as well, for he finally puts Phuong's welfare above his own needs.

Pyle Pyle is still 'wet behind the ears' when he arrives in Saigon, eager to implement a plan to stop communism and improve the lives of local people. His sincerity makes him immune to Fowler's irony and ignorant of the nuances that complicate his black-and-white vision of the world. However, he is quiet and polite, and eventually wins the admiration of both Phuong and Fowler.

Polite One of Pyle's character traits less frequently mentioned by commentators is his politeness. This quality is displayed in the first encounter between him and Phuong, who is sitting with Fowler in a dance club. Pyle notices them and goes to their table. Blushing, he asks Fowler if he and 'his young lady' would like to join him and meet a government official. Later, when some other Americans enter and begin to make crude remarks about Phuong, Pyle shields her from their words and apologises for

any 'inconvenience.' Phuong doesn't understand his American accent, but he continues to address her as 'Miss Phuong' and eventually makes sure that she is taken to another nearby club. Pyle is an ingénue, fresh off the boat from Harvard, but he has good manners. As Fowler remarks, he is a quiet American.

Idealistic Pyle, thirty-two years old, graduate of Harvard University, unmarried and untravelled, arrives in Vietnam to assist the fight for democracy. He's read an important book, *The Advance of Red China*, which he believes explains the underlying forces that drive world history. His idealism is somewhat caricatured but it is also convincing, especially in his first conversation with cynical Fowler. The thesis of the book, Pyle explains to Fowler, is that the East needs a Third Force, something in between communism and colonialism. As he parrots the views expressed in the book, he does so with a gleam in his eye and a genuine enthusiasm. When Fowler bats away Pyle's ideas with sarcastic comments, Pyle doesn't even register the irony. He's too committed to listen. Fowler says that he doesn't believe in god or any idea, and Pyle is flabbergasted. 'No one can go on living without some belief,' he says. Valiant though it is, Pyle's idealism is his downfall.

Phuong Phuong is young, attractive and impressionable. Her knowledge of the world is gained through magazines, but she is capable of understanding human feelings and motives. Although her character is less developed than that of Fowler or Pyle, her loyalty and naiveté play a significant role in the plot.

Loyal Phuong is only eighteen, and she appears to be controlled by a combination of her older sister, Miss Hue, and the much older Fowler. But she has her own ideas, one of which is to stay with Fowler despite Pyle's offer to marry her and give her a better life. Her loyalty to Fowler is demonstrated in a scene, when Pyle comes to Fowler's apartment and formally asks Phuong (through Fowler's translation) to marry him. He makes a good case: security and respect rather than poverty and passion (offered by Fowler). As they two men stand in front of her, trading arguments, Phuong is silent. She doesn't understand English, but through Fowler's translation and her own powers of perception, she realises what is going on. Fowler refuses to ask her, in French, to marry Pyle. Exasperated, Pyle asks her in his poor French. She does not hesitate to say, 'No. No.' We are unsure exactly what her calculations are in making that decision, but there is no doubt that she does not want to hurt Fowler.

Naïve Phuong is too young and too inexperienced to know anything of life outside Vietnam. We learn the extent of her naiveté in a scene when Fowler admits to her that he has been called back home to London. Phuong listens and prepares a pipe of opium for him. When Fowler says he might be able to get a divorce and marry her, Phuong tells him not to worry and to smoke his pipe. 'I would like to come with you,' she says, unaware that mistresses in London would not have the same status as they do in Saigon. She relights his pipe and asks, 'Is the Statue of Liberty in London?' Lying beside him, she begins to think about the clothes she would wear in this fantasied London, and whether they would travel by train or boat and so on. Phuong is filled with dreams, as restless and as useless as the opium-fuelled images in Fowler's mind.

**GRAHAM
GREENE**
**THE QUIET
AMERICAN**

