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## **Problem of Involvement and Detachment in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American***

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*The Quiet American* (1955) – rightly hailed as “a study of New World hope and innocence set in an old world of violence and evil,”<sup>i</sup> as pointed out by **Miriam Allott**– deals with the French war in Indochina, its subject being Western colonialism. Although war and politics are prominent issues in the novel, they serve to poise the ultimate concern of the deeper issues of involvement and detachment from the world replete with violence and evil. This most controversial work – primarily about human beings involved in a political and ethical dilemma – compresses the political issues, into the differences that exist ineluctably among human beings, through the ideologies of Alden Pyle, the quiet American; of General Thé, the exponent and head of the cult of power mysteriously referred to as the Third Force; of Vigot, the disinterested French administrator of justice who reads Pascal; of Heng, the Communist, who forces Fowler to take side if only to remain human. Here, the treatment of evil is concentrated primarily in the character of Fowler, the protagonist. In the course of the novel, the protagonist’s gradual sinking into the mire of sin, violence, evil and corruption of this world; and ultimately his radical step of involvement into betrayal and murder lead him to abandon the isolationist approach to life at large. Symbolically, Fowler who represents the corrupting effects of experience, and Pyle with his naive good intentions and their disastrous consequences, are so delineated as “to suggest on one level of interpretation a dramatic antagonism between characters of antithetical positions, between realism and romanticism, experience and innocence, and between detachment and commitment.”<sup>ii</sup> Here Greene depicts that the idealism, when uninformed by experience, is a dangerous weapon in a world corrupted by evil. **A. A. DeViti** maintains: “Here Greene has propounded the notion that the limited understanding of good is inadequate in a world corrupted by the experience of evil.”<sup>iii</sup>

In this novel, the political hell of Vietnam serves especially to reflect and dramatize the inner state of Fowler. Vietnam is a land filled with horror, corruption and evil. There is an ever-present danger of sudden death whether in a contested military area or in a public



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square. In *The Heart of the Matter* ubiquitous carrion birds hover over the failure and approaching death of Scobie. Here the birds are planes which do not wait for decay to set in; anything that moves is fair game. The flotsam of victims is everywhere, as omnipresent as the junk of war piling up. Fowler's perspective, characterized by a profound and almost self-conscious egocentricity – what he himself refers to as a knowledge of “the depth of my selfishness”<sup>iv</sup> – is typically one of detachment and skepticism. He yearns desperately for peace and insists that he is not involved:

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 would not be involved. My fellow journalists called themselves correspondents; I preferred the title of reporter. I wrote what I saw: I took no action – even an opinion is a kind of action.<sup>v</sup>

These qualities, to some extent, allow him to maintain an appropriate objectivity or distance. His room above the rue Catinat seems to be the emblem of a withdrawn and defensive selfhood. He is an observer and, in a rather different sense, a professional writer. His predilection for opium and even his relationship with Phuong reflect and indeed underline his need for detachment, a preference for the distant and impersonal viewpoint.

When Fowler originally came to the Orient, he was in search of peace, not of self-discovery. He thought he could find peace by escaping from himself. He had been married, had had affairs, and they each ended in disaster. Because he had been terrified of the end of love, he had rushed towards the finish “just like a coward runs towards the enemy and wins a medal”<sup>vi</sup>; in each case he “wanted to get death over.”<sup>vii</sup> In the East he again begins an affair; but because he believes that Phuong is a creature of loyalty instead of love, he has the illusion of safety. He feels certain that love is no real threat in this affair because of his preconception of Phuong that he describes to Pyle:

It's a cliché to call them children – but there's one thing which is childish. They love you in return for kindness, security, the presents you give them – they hate you for a blow or an injustice. They don't know what it's like – just walking into a room and loving a stranger. For an aging man ... it's very secure.<sup>viii</sup>

Into the “uncommitted” pattern of his life comes Alden Pyle – an American, aged thirty-two, Harvard-nurtured, innocent, and full of intellectual idealism and enthusiasm learned from the texts of York Harding, an American economist. Pyle, with a sense of national righteousness, has come to work with an American economic aid mission in Saigon



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during the Vietnamese struggle for liberation against the French colonialist in the fifties. Fowler and Pyle respect and discover a reciprocal understanding of each other's basic integrity and goodness, but neither can be referred to as sinless. Fowler loves Vietnam but hates the war, and if his sympathies are sometimes with the Vietminh, sometimes with the French army, they are never with the Americans, whom, at best he regards as blundering and foolish idealists. His paradoxical relationship with Vietnam is summarized in an account of his relationship with Phuong:

One never knows another human being; for all I could tell, she was as scared as the rest of us: she didn't have the gift of expression, that was all. And I remembered that first tormenting year when I had tried so passionately to understand her, ... 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.<sup>ix</sup>

Indeed, there is a paradox about Fowler's perspective – his need for distance combined with an unacknowledged longing for involvement.

To Fowler, Pyle is like his country. Fowler says to Pyle, "I wish sometimes you had a few bad motives, you might understand a little more about human beings. And that applies to your country too ...."<sup>x</sup> However, Fowler comments as ironically on his own position as he does on Pyle's. Fowler's repressed idealism is informed by experience; Pyle's abstract idealism by inexperience. The pawn in this game of experience versus innocence is Phuong, whose name means phoenix. She represents both the enigma of the East and the desire of Vietnam for political status. Her allegiance to Fowler is neither romantic nor materialistic; she is not, however, incapable of loyalty. Phuong is the ideal mistress for Fowler: making no serious demands on him, she prepares his opium pipe and seems otherwise passive and unobtrusive, without any real needs of her own. Regarding Fowler's feelings for Phuong, **Miriam Allott** maintains:

Fowler's feelings for Phuong are complex and, if we may judge by the general effect of his novels, they are also fairly typical of Greene's own feelings about humanity. They mingle tenderness, selfishness, compassion, pain, respect for human dignity, and a bitter sense of the limitations of human faith and love.<sup>xi</sup>

A strong ingredient in these complex feelings is pity, an emotion which afflicts Greene's characters like a disease. Fowler's clipped reporting shows the intensity with which this feeling can work in him. It is present when he recalls the vulnerability of Phuong as he saw

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her first, dancing with lightness and precision on her eighteen-year-old feet and living on simple dreams about security and happiness.

Of course, the self-styled neutrality of Fowler does not mean that he is a man without any affective attachments. He loves Vietnam in much the way that he loves Phuong. At his first meeting with Pyle, he muses on the beauty of the Vietnamese women: “Up the street came the lovely flat figures – the white silk trousers, the long tight jackets...: I watched them with the nostalgia I knew I would feel when I had left these regions for ever.”<sup>xii</sup> Later, when Fowler scorns Pyle’s merely theoretical knowledge of those regions, he does so by contrasting it with his own cognizance of the real background; but his intimacy of understanding is characterized more by visual detachment than by any sense of personal engagement:

He would have to learn for himself the real background that held you as a smell does: the gold of the rice-fields...: the fishers’ fragile cranes hovering over the fields like mosquitoes: the cups of tea on an old abbot’s platform, with his bed and his commercial calendars, his buckets and broken cups and the junk of a lifetime...: the mollusc hats of the girls repairing the road where a mine had burst: ... the bright dresses of the south, and in the north the deep browns and the black clothes and the circle of enemy mountains and the drone of planes.<sup>xiii</sup>

The particular hell of this novel becomes a place in which the human body itself is objectified and made hideously anonymous by death, suggesting the annihilation of human identity. In terms of the perspective of Fowler’s involvement, death acquires a figurative as well as a literal meaning. The theme of descent in a world full of evil, sin, corruption and horror, in *The Quiet American*, always culminates in a nightmare vision of the reification of personal identity, a process of symbolic extinction anticipated early in the novel by the nameless “grey heap”<sup>xiv</sup> of a human figure dragged in by Granger to the bar of the Continental Hotel. The vision is anticipated, too, by the swarming mass of female bodies in the “House of Five Hundred Girls”<sup>xv</sup> – a scene which horrifies Alden Pyle, whose reaction to this large-scale sexual objectification of physical beauty becomes the initial source of sympathy between himself and Fowler. Pyle’s virginal innocence has an appealing quality for Fowler, but more important, it seems to represent for Fowler a version of his own preference for detachment over involvement – at least in the area of personal relations – which he sees as



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the basis of a genuine kinship between them. Fowler regards Pyle as someone who shares his own horror at the nullification of human identity.

What Pyle really shares with Fowler is his love for Phuong. In the Chalet, Fowler is both amused and moved by the way Pyle dances with her, holding her formally at arm's length like a nervous schoolboy. When Pyle apologizes "for taking Miss Phuong from you,"<sup>xvi</sup> Fowler responds: "Oh, I'm no dancer but I like watching her dance"<sup>xvii</sup>; and he goes on to reflect on the quality in Phuong that seems to be the essence of her attraction: "One always spoke of her like that in the third person as though she were not there. Sometimes she seemed invisible like peace."<sup>xviii</sup> It is as if Phuong were, at once, simply a beautiful woman's body and, simply, a phantom. Though he feels satisfied in Phuong's company yet he is always afraid of losing her. What he is longing for is permanence. He believes that death is far more certain than anything else in this world:

Why should I want to die when Phuong slept beside me every night? But I knew the answer to that question. From childhood I had never believed in permanence, and yet I had longed for it. Always I was afraid of losing happiness. This month, next year, Phuong would leave 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 a 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.<sup>xix</sup>

The doubleness of Fowler's perspective is vividly exemplified in his account of the battle of Phat Diem. Fowler, here, observes the scene from a high and remote vantage point. From the bell tower of the Cathedral the battle seems only picturesque. An aeroplane is parachuting supplies to an isolated post in the calcaire mountains. Fowler can see that in the market the flames burn palely in the sunlight. The image of Cathedral tower signifies the type of detachment – the perspective of distance – that is Fowler's way of looking at Vietnam. This view from the bell tower becomes another version of Fowler's vision of the world from his room above the rue Catinat, the prospect of an attractive, but somehow essentially alien, objective reality. However, when Fowler leaves the tower and joins a platoon of paratroopers, the silent and static picture of the battle changes radically, suddenly acquiring a dreadful immediacy. Fowler finds himself inside the picture: surrounded by carnage, he is all at once in the midst of a whole world of death and evil, translated abruptly to a kind of hell:



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The canal was full of bodies: I am reminded now of an Irish stew containing too much meat. The bodies overlapped: one head, seal-grey, and anonymous as a convict with a shaven scalp, stuck up out of the water like a buoy. There was no blood: I suppose it had flowed away a long time ago.... I... took my eyes away; we didn't want to be reminded of how little we counted, how quickly, simply and anonymously death came. Even though my reason wanted the state of death, I was afraid like a virgin of the act.<sup>xx</sup>

The horrible picture is now no longer still, no longer merely a static or visually suspended prospect. Another man has found a boat but they run on a shoal of bodies and get stuck there. He attempts to push away with his pole, sinking it into the human clay, and one body is released and floated up beside the boat like "a bather lying in the sun."<sup>xxi</sup> Then they scramble out, with no backward look. The movement from tower to canal is not just a shift from one mode of reportage to another, but also a journey of descent into a hellish world of sin, violence and evil.

Specifically, the last meeting with Vigot reveals the detective's effect upon the mind of Fowler. After Vigot leaves, Fowler is astonished at how much he has been disturbed by failing to verbally express his guilt to him:

It was strange how disturbed I had been by Vigot's visit. It was as though a poet had brought me his work to criticize and through some careless action I had destroyed it. I was a man without a vocation – one cannot seriously consider journalism as a vocation, but I could recognize a vocation in another.<sup>xxii</sup>

Vigot's having a true vocation, which causes him to be embroiled in the mire of humanity, is what gives Fowler "the feeling of some force immobile and profound."<sup>xxiii</sup> Vigot's methods resemble those of a priest: he does not accuse but listens. As Fowler realizes, Vigot "would have made a good priest"<sup>xxiv</sup> because it is so easy to confess to someone who is sympathetically involved instead of shocked by humanity. To quote **George Gaston**:

Moreover, Fowler is drawn to Vigot because of the latter's comprehension of the desires and motives of a confessor – to purge oneself, to rest from deception, and to see oneself clearly. Fowler, of course, feels a need for purgation and truth, and above all for self-knowledge.<sup>xxv</sup>

Fowler lies to Vigot about his implication in Pyle's murder and Vigot is obliged to close his file in an incomplete form. As he goes, he turns and looks at Fowler "with compassion, as he might have looked at some prisoner for whose capture he was responsible undergoing his sentence for life."<sup>xxvi</sup> The whole novel is, in fact, a confession, an answer to Vigot's silent

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and sympathetic appeal, and it is made with all the humility and concern for truth that Fowler can muster.

Indeed, like the priest in *The Power and the Glory*, Fowler is a fugitive not so much from the forces of law as from the terrifying knowledge that has been awaiting him. He is a secular traveller, of course, and thus he will surrender to the immaterial force which pursues him more reluctantly. Nevertheless, like the priest, he is not only a geographical but also a mental itinerant who continually comes upon people who function as haunting images of his various sides and lead to a full self-knowledge.

At the beginning of the book, the quotation from Clough, taken from *Amours de Voyage* (Canto II, stanza XI) is quite relevant. Here the spokesman is a young man, Claude, who suffers from paralysis of the will and the emotions:

I do not like being moved: for the will is excited; and action  
Is a most dangerous thing; I tremble for something factitious,  
Some malpractice of heart and illegitimate process;  
We're so prone to these things, with our terrible notions of duty.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Initially, Fowler does not like being moved either, and he goes out of his way to assert his lack of involvement. However, as it turns out, his wish for a life of radical detachment is futile. He, through an agonizing process of psychological and spiritual regeneration, has realized that he cannot really escape just by deciding to withdraw; events and people behind him will always interfere. Because he has a conscience, it will not allow him to rest when he is surrounded by pain, suffering, sin and evil. And he discovers that his chosen world of isolation is actually a kind of hell in itself which causes a torturous sense of alienation and a profound malaise which are akin to a living death. Fowler feels frustrated at the whole human condition in a world steeped in violence, sin, evil and corruption. The flotsam of victims is everywhere, as omnipresent as the junk of war piling up. Knowing all this, Fowler, after he goes to a romantic movie with a happy ending, remarks that if it had been meant for children, "the sight of Oedipus emerging with his bleeding eyeballs from the palace at Thebes would surely give a better training for life today."<sup>xxviii</sup> It is no wonder that Fowler is filled with cynicism, anxiety, and a terror of life, and that he consequently wishes to withdraw from it into a state of quiescence.



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After the crucial meeting with Granger, Fowler realizes his affinity to Pyle; and he asks, “Must I too have my foot thrust in the mess of life before I saw the pain?”<sup>xxix</sup> He goes into the street, without hope, to find Phuong, who waits vainly for the dead Pyle. Fowler has taken sides to remain human, and the realization of his compassionate spirit overwhelms him. The novel circles back on itself and begins where it ends with Phuong lighting Fowler’s pipe. **John Cassidy** suggests: “From now on life is to be uncomplicated by Pyle’s presence; difficulties disappear, the pieces fall into place. Fowler’s wife agrees to divorce him; he is free to marry Phuong. Yet there is something wrong with the apparent solution .... There is an added complexity. The murder of innocence has not been simple either, and though it has brought comfort it has also left regret.”<sup>xxx</sup> His involvement in Pyle’s murder is an act which shakes him out of a tired complacency and into guilt. Moreover, on a symbolic level, it forces him into the realization that he had been responsible for killing his savior. He feels like a Judas in betraying Pyle. This is why the final words of Fowler’s confession have the quality of genuine torment and ambiguity: “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.”<sup>xxxi</sup> In these words of repentance Fowler’s renewed sense of guilt is conspicuous. To quote **George Gaston**:

It is perhaps possible that the “someone” of Fowler’s last words is God. The critic Pryce-Jones declares that the reference must be to God.... Fowler has been experiencing the fine tension between exile and membership. And as he crosses into various regions of the mind, he suffers the agony of abandonment or alienation. At the end of his journey his anguish is particularly acute because he is entering the territory of faith.... What saves Fowler, after all, is not a supernatural manifestation but the sight of the blood of Pyle’s victims. Grace may or may not be participating in the fate of Fowler. God may or may not be listening to his confession.... In *The Quiet American* Greene’s implicit purpose is to suggest that there are perhaps other forms of salvation.<sup>xxxii</sup>





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## REFERENCES

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<sup>ii</sup> George Gaston, The Pursuit of Salvation: A Critical Guide to the Novels of Graham Greene (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1984) p. 67.

<sup>iii</sup> A. A. DeVitis, Graham Greene (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986) p. 112.

<sup>iv</sup> Graham Greene, The Quiet American (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996) p. 114.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid., p.103.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid., p.103.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid., pp. 133-34.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid., p.133.

<sup>xi</sup> “The Moral Situation in *The Quiet American*,” Graham Greene: Some Critical Considerations, ed. Robert O. Evans, p.196.

<sup>xii</sup> Graham Greene, The Quiet American, p. 18.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., p.25.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., p.34.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid., p.36.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., p.44.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., p.44.



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