

The Captain and the Enemy Short Guide

The Captain and the Enemy by Graham Greene

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Characters

Graham Greene presents the themes and concerns in *The Captain and the Enemy* through his characters, and as so often in his novels, Greene displays his ability to make characters seem real and believable even while they are being used to develop his themes.

Greene's ability is even more astonishing when the reader considers how enigmatic his three main characters are, and just how improbable their situation is: the Captain wins Jim from his real father, generally referred to in the novel as "the Devil," in either a backgammon game or chess match (one man is obviously lying); he takes the boy from his "public" (English private) school and gives him to Liza, who cannot bear children because of a botched abortion "the Devil" forced upon her when she was carrying his baby. In a symbolic way, Jim is Liza's dead child restored to her. The Captain, however, is not much of a father; he seldom stays with Liza and Jim for very long at a time.

The relationship between Liza and the Captain is even more perplexing.

They seem to be lovers, although it is never clear whether they are sexually intimate. They are very shy with each other, have no explicit commitment to one another, and are both very uneasy with the word "love." Liza is only able to use it openly, without reservation, when she knows she is dying.

Jim attempts to understand their relationship in a journal, but in it, he reveals himself as a totally lost person who cannot experience love. Although he appears cold, confused, and not altogether likable, Jim is a plausible character. As he points out, he hasn't exactly had the best home life possible, and his role models for love are inhibited at best.



Social Concerns

The novel has the kind of political background that readers of Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955) and, more particularly, *Getting to Know the General: The Story of an Involvement* (1984) would expect. It ends in Panama, with the "Captain" (only one more alias for this character) giving his life for the Sandinista revolution. Mr. Quigly, a CIA agent, and, apparently the "enemy" the title refers to, may or may not have given the order for Somoza's forces to shoot down the Captain's bomb-laden plane before it reached Somoza's bunker, and it is unclear who — the CIA, the Sandinistas, or the Panamanian National Guard — orders the death of the narrator, the Captain's "adopted" son, "Jim" (he was never formally adopted, and his name isn't really Jim; the ambiguities, illusions, and downright lies abound throughout the novel).

Even so, *The Captain and the Enemy* is not as political as its ending would suggest. If *The Quiet American* is a political novel with a subtheme concerning love, *The Captain and the Enemy* is basically a story about love, where politics is a last option, to be pursued only when love can no longer be. Although it is about love, it is not a conventional "love story." Most of the novel is presented as a journal written by Jim as he attempts to understand the unusual but loving relationship between his foster parents. He must also come to terms with his own realization that love is an emotion he cannot feel.



Techniques

As in most of his espionage novels, Greene maintains suspense right to the very end. No one is who he appears to be. Not only does nearly everyone assume an alias, but most of the story is told to us by a narrator who tells the reader that he has been taught to lie from the very beginning of the novel.

By the end, it is not completely clear whether Quigly ordered the Captain's plane shot down, or how deliberately Jim betrayed the Captain, or how directly responsible he is for the Captain's death.

The suspense, however, is not without Greene's grim humor. At the end of the novel, the Panamanian National Guard is trying desperately to determine the identity of "King Kong," which they take to be a CIA code name for an operative. In reality, Jim was only commenting about seeing the movie with the Captain.

Themes

The main themes in the novel concern the nature of love; whether or not to become involved in love or in politics; and, finally, the nature of illusion and the difficulty of distinguishing, as the motto of the book puts it, "the good side from the bad, the Captain from the enemy." These are essentially the same themes Greene raises in *The Quiet American*, but here the emphasis is much more on the personal than the political. By the end of the novel, Jim appears to be a lost soul, not so much because he chooses the CIA instead of the Sandinistas (which, in Greene's mind would be an unwise political choice), but because he chooses to trust Quigly, the enemy, rather than the Captain. His journal has not helped him to understand love — which, for Greene, seems to be a simple, basic response between people who need each other — or how to see behind the illusions. In that sense, the book also suggests that writing itself may be suspect, because it brings Jim no closer to love or to reality.

Literary Precedents

With its suspense, its ambiguities, and its hidden identities, the novel is clearly in the tradition of the spy novel. By using those techniques to question more abstract questions such as the nature of love or human loyalty, Greene is closer to Joseph Conrad than to most espionage novelists. Oddly, however, with its basic plot of a young English boy wishing to run away from the dull existence of everyday life to find a foster father who can show him a life of adventure, and perhaps a fortune, the book is an adult's version of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Greene himself makes that clear by his references to Sir Francis Drake, Captain Morgan, and the English pirates of the Caribbean.



Related Titles

The closest parallel in Greene's earlier work to *The Captain and the Enemy* is *The Quiet American*, although in that novel the political theme is primary. In that story, the narrator tries to remain uninvolved in the turmoil in Viet Nam, but he is finally forced to take a side, partially because of his love for a Vietnamese woman. In this novel, the Captain seems to get involved in politics only for the money and makes his political sacrifice only when the woman he loves is dead.

This greater emphasis on the personal rather than the political is a direction Greene's writing has taken as he has gotten older (Greene himself remains politically active, as *Yours, Etc.: Letters to the Press 1945-1989* makes clear). For example, in his *Monsignor Quixote* (1982), a later novel which reworks many of the themes of *The Power and the Glory* (1940), what once seemed a life-and-death struggle between Communism and the Church is resolved in the deepening friendship between a Communist and an aging priest.



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