

The Quiet American Study Guide

The Quiet American by Graham Greene

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Plot Summary

Thomas Fowler is a British journalist in his fifties who has been covering the French war in Viet Nam for over two years. He meets a young American idealist named Alden Pyle, who is a student of York Harding. Harding's theory is that neither Communism nor colonialism are the answer in foreign lands like Viet Nam, but rather a "Third Force," usually a combination of traditions, works best. Unlike most Americans, Pyle is thoughtful and soft-spoken. Fowler finds him naïve.

The two men meet accidentally at the Continental, a popular Saigon hotel. Pyle dances with Fowler's live-in lover, Phuong. Only twenty years old, Phuong is considered the most beautiful girl in Saigon. Her sister's goal in life is to marry Phuong off to a rich European; she does not like Fowler because he is married.

Fowler and Pyle meet again at the Continental. Some vulgar Americans and Brits who have been drinking too much go off to the House of Five Hundred Women. Pyle goes with them, but cannot handle himself among the prostitutes because he is too naïve. Fowler rescues him. Later that night Pyle seems protective of Phuong.

Fowler goes to the city of Phat Diem to cover a battle there. Pyle travels there to tell him that he has been in love with Phuong since the first night he saw her, and that he wants to marry her. They make a toast to nothing and Pyle leaves the next day. Fowler gets a letter from Pyle thanking him for being so nice about Phuong. The letter is annoying because of Pyle's complete confidence that Phuong will choose to marry him. Meanwhile, Fowler's editor wants him to transfer back to England.

Pyle comes to Fowler's place and they ask her to choose between them. She chooses Fowler, her lover of two years. She does not know that he is up for a transfer. Fowler writes his wife to ask for a divorce in front of Phuong.

Fowler and Pyle meet again in a war zone. They end up captive in a tower, and spend an extraordinary night talking about everything from sex to God. As they escape, Pyle saves Fowler's life. Fowler goes back to Saigon where he lies to Phuong that his wife will divorce him. Pyle exposes the lie and Phuong moves in with Pyle. Fowler investigates Pyle's activities more closely and finds out that Pyle is importing military supplies into Viet Nam from the United States. Fowler goes into the war zone and does some serious reporting.

When Fowler returns to Saigon, he goes to Pyle's office to confront him but Pyle is out. Pyle comes over later for drinks and they talk about his upcoming marriage to Phuong. Later that week there is a terrible explosion and many innocents are killed. Fowler puts the pieces together and realizes that Pyle is behind the bombing. Fowler decides that Pyle must be eliminated. His naïve theories and interference are causing innocent people to die. Fowler takes part in a murder plot against Pyle. Although the police believe that Fowler is involved, they cannot prove anything. Fowler goes back to Phuong as if nothing had ever happened.



Part 1 Chapter 1

Part 1 Chapter 1 Summary

Thomas Fowler is a British reporter in his late fifties. He is covering the war in Vietnam in 1952, in which the French armies are fighting against the Communist Vietminh. The story opens with Fowler in his rooms over the *rue Catinat* in Saigon. He is with his beautiful young lover Phuong. They have been together for several years, yet mysteriously she is engaged to marry Alden Pyle. Pyle is a thirty-two year old American who works for the Economic Aid Mission.

Phuong is a simple girl who speaks little English or French. She has so little interest in politics that she would not recognize the name "Hitler." However, she loves to read about the Royal Family, especially Princess Margaret. Fowler thinks of her in terms of his comfort and physical needs: "she was a certain hour of the night and the promise of rest."

On the other hand, Pyle is obsessed with politics and York Harding's theory of democracy and public policy. He is very well read, serious, and idealistic. Fowler notes that Pyle wants to reform and redeem "the entire universe" if he could. Yet he is a "quiet American," not the obnoxious pushy kind of person that is often the stereotype of Americans in foreign countries. Both Fowler and Phuong wait for Pyle. It is after midnight, and Pyle was supposed to meet Fowler at nine o'clock.

Phuong prepares an opium pipe for Fowler, who smokes it, and then smokes another. He wants to make love to Phuong, but wonders if she is too worried about Pyle to accept his advances. He knows if he smokes more than four pipes, he will lose his desire for her. Opium takes away all emotions and makes even death seem like a good thing. There is a knock on the door. It is Vigot, a French officer who is a casual social acquaintance of Fowler. Vigot is complex in that he reads Pascal for fun and is "incongruously" in love with his wife who ignores him. Vigot briefly questions Phuong, who tells him that while she has lived with Fowler for two years, for the past month she has been living with Pyle. They will be married soon.

Vigot takes Fowler aside and tells him that Pyle has been murdered. Fowler is a suspect because he is part of a lover's triangle. Fowler does not act surprised when he finds out Pyle is dead, and that adds to Vigot's suspicions. They go to the morgue where Fowler identifies Pyle's body. It was found in the river near the bridge to Datow. Someone stabbed him to death before dumping his body in the water. Vigot says he is not sorry that Pyle is dead because he was causing a lot of harm.

Fowler gives his alibi for the evening-he was at the Continental and then saw a movie and later had dinner. People would remember him at these places. Back in his rooms Fowler tells Phuong that Pyle has been murdered. She takes the news without much



emotion, and instead calmly makes new plans for her life now that her fiancé is dead. Fowler wonders to himself, "Am I the only one who cared for Pyle?"

Part 1 Chapter 1 Analysis

Graham Greene started out as a mystery writer and it shows in this chapter. There is not a lot of description about the exotic land of Viet Nam and the sights of Saigon. Instead, Greene keeps the setting mostly contained in Fowler's rooms. He plunges right into the plot and opens with a murder.

However, we're clearly not in Kansas anymore. A woman with a strange name is in bed with one lover while she waits for her fiancé. She prepares one opium pipe after another for Fowler. Opium and free love both run counter to the standards of Western society in the early 1950s. The novel is set in a foreign place that creates a foreign landscape not only physically but also emotionally.

The three main characters quickly emerge as opposites. Phuong is a simple girl who reads tabloids and does not seem to have any sexual morals by Western standards. Fowler presents himself as a cool observer of life who enjoys opium because it takes away emotions and thus makes him even more passive. Under opium even death becomes a good option. Pyle, on the other hand, is idealistic and is running amok in Viet Nam. Fowler and Vigot both believe that Pyle got himself murdered through his idealistic meddling.

Yet there is ambiguity. The author implies that Fowler was somehow involved in Pyle's murder. Perhaps Fowler killed to keep Phuong for himself, as Vigot suspects. In any event, Fowler has to keep reminding himself of his own innocence while at the same time realizing that he is the only one who is mourning Pyle.



Part 1 Chapter 2

Part 1 Chapter 2 Summary

This chapter is divided into two parts. Part 1 is a flashback to the first time Fowler met Pyle. Part 2 takes the reader back to the night of the murder. Fowler found his American colleagues in the press to be "big, noisy, boyish and middle-aged" types. In contrast the young Alden Pyle is modest, serious, quiet, and soft-spoken. The first time they meet, Pyle notices the Milk Fountain where Vietnamese people buy malted milks and such. It reminds him of soda fountains in America. Fowler wonders if Pyle is homesick.

Fowler muses to himself that after two years in Viet Nam, it is truly more his home than Britain. He has grown to love not just Phuong but also her country. Fowler finds himself in his usual role of explaining the way things are to another newcomer. He tells Pyle at what times of the day what roads and parts of town are safe. Fowler believes that the French can hold Northern Viet Nam if the Chinese don't intervene on the behalf of their enemy, the Vietminh (Vietnamese Communists). Fowler says that General The is actually now fighting both sides. He describes himself as an observer with no real views on the war.

Pyle goes on and on about reading *Democracy* and the *Eastern Cultures*. He is enamored of an author called York Harding who believes in "the Third Force" which, in the case of Viet Nam, is neither the French nor the Communists. Later Fowler regrets that he did not listen more carefully to Pyle's theories the first time they met because he could have saved himself and the country of Viet Nam a lot of trouble later on.

Part 2 finds Fowler back with Vigot, investigating Pyle's murder in Pyle's apartment. Vigot does not seem to care about solving the murder but only about writing up a report that will pass the scrutiny of his superiors. Fowler packs up Phuong's belongings and then looks through Pyle's library. Vigot allows him to take one book written by Harding; Pyle owned the author's entire works.

Outside Pyle's apartment they meet the American Economic Attaché. He is upset about his death because he knew Pyle's father, a prominent professor of erosion. He sent a wire to Pyle's parents saying that their son had died a soldier's death "in the cause of Democracy." Both Vigot and the Attaché allude to Pyle's special duties and what a fine young fellow he was. Fowler can't stand it anymore and makes an outburst that Pyle was killed because he was young and silly and innocent and never understood what was really going on in Viet Nam and then he went and got too involved in things.

Part 1 Chapter 2 Analysis

Fowler is looking back to find clues as to why things happened the way they did. Pyle was a young man with little practical experience but a lot of theories about how to help Viet Nam. Pyle spoke about how a Third Force was needed there, yet he did not have a



clue about the workings of the country. On the other hand, Fowler has fallen in love with not only Phuong but also Viet Nam. He remembers how when he first came there, all he wanted to do was to go home. But now the "gold of the rice fields, the fishers' fragile cranes," and other beautiful aspects of this country have made him adopt it as his own. Fowler understands Viet Nam and loves it; Pyle does not understand Viet Nam and wants to save it.



Part 1 Chapter 3

Part 1 Chapter 3 Summary

This chapter has two parts, but it is basically a description of the night that Pyle met Phuong. Fowler and Phuong are at the Continental where Pyle is dining with the American Economic Attaché known only as Joe. Pyle seems immediately taken up by Phuong's beauty, goes over and introduces himself, and treats her as if she were a fine lady as he asks her and Fowler to dine with them. Later an American journalist named Granger and a drunken Frenchman named Mick join them.

The men talk about the war. Granger says the French are doing well in the northwest, but the Attaché reports that the Vietminh are about to take Phat Diem. Catholics are trading with the Communists; everything is corrupt. Both Pyle and Fowler express interest in going to Phat Diem to access the situation. The conversation becomes bawdier as Joe talks about getting "a piece of tail." He refers to Phuong as Fowler's "piece of tail." Everyone decides to go next door to the House of Five Hundred Girls. Phuong and Fowler will wait in the trishaw, but Fowler suddenly feels protective of Pyle.

As he suspected, Pyle cannot handle himself and is mobbed by prostitutes. Fowler tells him to pick one so that the others will leave him alone. Granger stays there but Fowler and Pyle go back to the Continental with Phuong. That ends Part 1. As Pyle dances with Phuong, Fowler recalls how he and she used to dance at the Grand Monde. Phuong had worked as a dancer there with her sister Hei as her chaperone. Hei does not like Fowler because her goal in life is to marry Phuong off to a rich European, and Fowler is already married.

Hei shows up and takes a big interest in Pyle. She grills Fowler about Pyle's background and prospects. When Pyle and Phuong come back to the table, Hei tells Pyle that Phuong is the most beautiful woman in Saigon and needs care and protection. Phuong wants children, she says. Pyle replies he does too. He offers to help Hei get a job with his Mission. A vulgar floorshow with female impersonators begins. Pyle wants to leave out of respect for Phuong, and tells Fowler that this show "isn't suitable for her."

Part 1 Chapter 3 Analysis

Perhaps Fowler is looking back on this evening to see why events took the course they did later on. He is analyzing things to look for clues. For instance, he never saw Pyle as a threat to his relationship with Phuong, even though it is obvious from that very first evening Hei wants to set her sister up in a marriage with Pyle. Hei sees him as a better match than Fowler because he is younger and single and wants children.

Pyle's innocence is evident in this chapter. He cannot handle himself with prostitutes and Fowler wonders if Pyle is a virgin. Pyle treats Phuong as a lady with delicate sensibilities that would be offended by dirty jokes. Fowler, Joe, and Granger know

better. Fowler's cynicism and laziness about his job is evident in this chapter. For example, he says he does not think it's worth the effort to actually go to the front lines to get his stories.



Part 1 Chapter 4

Part 1 Chapter 4 Summary

Fowler goes by boat to the city of Phat Diem. He meets up with a Lieutenant Peraud, who is devoted to Our Lady of Fatima. Many people from Phat Diem are participating in a celebration of the Virgin at Fatima. The Vietminh join their procession and take them by surprise. Four days later this battle is an obvious defeat for the French; but no journalists, including Fowler, are allowed to report it.

Some of the best writing about war in the book is in this section. Greene describes people taking refuge in the Cathedral. The whole population of the city is cold and hungry, crowded on every stair step up to the tower. He also describes the aftermath of battle, with bodies and body parts floating in canals, some covered with flies, some lying dead on the road. Fowler sees more dead than living people that day. He talks to a priest who offers to give him confession. In his blunt way Fowler tells the priest that the rite seems unmanly and morbid to him.

Fowler marches with others through farmland. Everyone's nerves are taut with fear, but yet it is very boring. He finally falls asleep and dreams of Pyle and Phuong dancing. Then as if by magic Pyle appears and wakes him up. Fowler observes that Pyle mysteriously has very good equipment. This ends Part 1.

Pyle relates how he came to Phat Diem alone and by boat; it was very dangerous but he had to speak to Fowler. He is in love with Phuong but is staying away from her because of Fowler. His love is so strong that he cannot stay away from her much longer. He needs to do the honorable thing, which is to tell Fowler about his feelings for Phuong before he acts on them. He wants to marry Phuong, if she'll have him. In Pyle's mind the honorable thing to do is to allow Phuong to choose between them. Pyle assumes that Phuong will pick him and this annoys Fowler. Fowler offers Pyle a whiskey after he finishes speaking. Mortars shoot off all around them. They drink to nothing.

Part 1 Chapter 4 Analysis

At the beginning of the chapter, Fowler again repeats his desire to die in this chapter, but on his own terms. He would like to have some warning of it, and fears that death may instead come suddenly during this war. By the end of the chapter Fowler does have something to live for: winning Phuong.

Fowler's skepticism about religion is very clear. He notes that believers were killed celebrating Our Lady of Fatima. He refuses confession as a morbid, unmanly ritual. When he finds a dead boy wearing a religious medal, he observes that the medal didn't really protect him after all. When he thinks about Pyle and Phuong, he decides that no person can really understand another person, and that's why people invent God, a being capable of understanding. Pyle, who prides himself on having no views and taking

no sides, clearly takes a side against religion. Again there is something suspicious about Pyle, this time it is his access to military equipment. In Chapter 3 it was the secret nature of his mission.



Part 1 Chapter 5

Part 1 Chapter 5 Summary

Pyle leaves early the next morning. It takes Fowler three weeks to get to Saigon. When Fowler gets to Hanoi, he finds that Pyle left a letter for him. This letter makes him even more bitter, because of the underlying confidence Pyle has in winning Phuong. Pyle writes that although he will be in Saigon before Fowler gets there, he will not see Phuong so that Fowler will not feel later that Pyle had been unfair to him. The letter is annoyingly boyish: "I can't begin to tell you how swell you were ... My heart was in my mouth when I walked into that room to find you ... "

Fowler, with nothing else to do, attends a press conference led by a handsome young French colonel. The colonel says that the French have been victorious on several fronts but refuses to give exact numbers of French casualties, although he says the enemy is losing three times the number the French are. The reporters, including Granger, press him. The colonel opens up a little and remarks that the Americans are not supplying the French with helicopters and other needed equipment. Without helicopters, wounded soldiers have little chance of getting carried to a hospital. They are left to die where they fall.

Fowler realizes he has a good story but knows it will not pass censorship. He picks up a telegram that says he has been promoted to foreign editor. He will be leaving Viet Nam for a desk job in London, and he will be paid for his opinions, not his reporting. The telegram makes him sad: if he leaves, it means Phuong will marry Pyle. He plays a dice game and suddenly tells his opponent that he's going back to England. This ends Part 1.

Part 1 Chapter 5 Analysis

Fowler is always remarking that he wants to die, saying things like he envies "the most homesick officer condemned to death." However, he continues to want to fight for Phuong and can't stand the notion that she might marry Pyle. He hates Pyle's cockiness about the matter. Given the choice between writing a great news story that would further his career or staying in Viet Nam with his lover, he chooses the latter. His personal life is more important than politics and war. He takes pride in his apathy and lack of views. He does not want to be an editor but an observer.



Part 2 Chapter 1

Part 2 Chapter 1 Summary

Fowler waits for Pyle to come to his place for a drink. He has decided not to tell Phuong about his transfer. She tells him that she has been hurt by Pyle's refusal to see her and shares some gossip about him. She says that he is importing drugs and plastics and the rumor is that he is part of a secret service. As he waits for Pyle, Fowler composes a letter to his boss asking to stay in Viet Nam as a reporter. But he knows that there will be a lot of jokes at his expense if he uses phrases like "private reasons." They will assume he has a girl in Nam. He tears the letter up.

Pyle arrives with his big black dog named Duke. That evening the dog appears more aggressive than usual. They have a drink and banter about Pyle's love of dogs and about the war. Fowler confronts him about importing plastic and Pyle minimizes it, saying that the French want everything bought from France, not the USA.

Phuong arrives and things get weirder. Fowler translates for Pyle, telling Phuong that Pyle has been in love with her since the night they danced and now wants to marry her. Fowler tries to keep things light by saying, "Let's roll dice for her." Pyle says that they should look up each other's blood types before they get married to make sure they can have children together. Fowler makes fun of that remark. Pyle says he is not rich, but he has enough to care for Phuong in the United States.

Phuong asks Fowler if he plans to stay in Viet Nam permanently. He does not tell her that he is being transferred but instead says he plans to stay indefinitely. Phuong refuses Pyle's offer, to the surprise of both men. Pyle leaves and Phuong makes an opium pipe for Fowler. Fowler composes another letter, this time to his wife in England. He notes that although divorce is against her religion, he does not see the point of staying married when they are separated. He writes about his love for Phuong.

Fowler goes back to the bedroom with Phuong. They talk about the fact that Pyle is younger and ready to be married. Phuong says her sister does not believe that Fowler really wants to marry her. Fowler counters by saying he just wrote to his wife and asked for a divorce. Then he tells her that he has been transferred to London. She is willing to go there with him even if they are not married. She talks on and on in a childish way about her desire to see skyscrapers and the Statue of Liberty.

Part 2 Chapter 1 Analysis

It took both men by surprise that Phuong is willing to go against her family's and sister's wishes to stay with Fowler. In this chapter Pyle seems naïve and boyish in his direct, honest approach to love and marriage. He is without guile as he puts his plans on the table. Fowler on the other hand is deceptive about his transfer to London. These two very different men have two very different styles. Yet Pyle is apparently hiding

something about his mission in Viet Nam. Everyone is wondering why he is importing plastics.



Part 2 Chapter 2

Part 2 Chapter 2 Summary

This is a very long complex chapter divided into three parts. Fowler is in Tanyin, a place dominated by Caodaists. Caodaism is a religion that blends Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity. He interviews a deputy of the Pope of Caodaism and inwardly believes everything he says is insincere. He believes the deputy is giving him a canned speech. Then he meets Pyle, who is always imposing friendship on Fowler. Pyle is trying to get his Buick repaired.

Fowler goes into a Caodaist temple and finds the statues of Christ, Buddha, and Confucius an annoying mix. He thinks about his wife and convinces himself she will not give him a divorce. Since Pyle's car is still broken, Pyle agrees to ride with Fowler to the next town.

In the second part of this chapter, Pyle and Fowler chat as they ride together. Pyle tells Fowler that he has requested a transfer out of Viet Nam, but he will have to stay there at least another six months. Suddenly they run out of gas. They walk to one of the towers that are built every so many miles along the road. Fowler boldly climbs the rope ladder to the top, but he is seized with fear.

In Part 3 Fowler and Pyle are marooned in the tower because it is past curfew. Two guards with guns frighten them, but Fowler communicates that he and Pyle are friendly and need to spend the night there because they are out of gas. They then have a long and extraordinary conversation about everything from God to the political situation of Viet Nam.

Fowler says he does not believe in any mental concepts, including the one of God. He says that the French and their allies, including Pyle, are trying to make war with the help of people who are not interested in it. They don't want Communism, Pyle agrees. Fowler retorts that they only want rice.

Pyle reiterates the "domino theory" that if Indo-China falls to Communism, so will other countries in the area. Fowler responds sarcastically that next to fall will be London and New York. He says again that he does not believe in "isms," but only facts. He argues that the British made mistakes in India and Burma and the same things will be repeated here. He again insists that he is not partisan in any way but only an observer.

The conversation somehow relaxes both of the two guards and Pyle and Fowler by normalizing a bizarre situation. Fowler goes out to his car to get blankets and there is an explosion. When he gets back to the tower, the guards are holding a gun on Pyle. In between them lays a sten, a kind of submachine gun. Pyle says that the explosion made the guards more fearful. There is a scuffle and Pyle grabs the sten. Neither of them knows how to use it but it makes things more equal between them and the guards.



A patrol car passes and Pyle considers signaling it for a ride. Fowler notes the car is too filled already. They decide to try to sleep although there are explosions in the night air.

They start talking again, this time about Phuong. Pyle reveals that he never has had a real experience with a woman and he can't stop thinking about Phuong. Fowler says he's been with at least forty women. His greatest sexual experience was not with Phuong but when he watched a woman brushing her hair. Fowler says love turns us into fools and that he is afraid of losing Phuong although he knows she does not love him. With other women, he was afraid of losing love. He says that Phuong and other Vietnamese women only love you for what you give them and how secure you make them feel, but this is a good thing for Fowler. It means she will not leave him.

Pyle says he did not mean he was a virgin but rather he did not have experience in love. Fowler says sex and love bore him at his age; he's more concerned with old age and death and being alone in a nursing home. They talk about God but are suddenly interrupted. A car has come to their tower. Fowler says the soldiers below are telling the two guards to hand over Pyle and Fowler.

Pyle picks up the sten even though he's not sure if it's loaded. The guards drop the rifle and Fowler gets it. They decide to climb down the ladder and take their chances outside. Fowler becomes afraid that someone is at the bottom and decides to jump instead of using the ladder. He breaks his leg in the fall. Pyle climbs down. The tower explodes into bits. This ends part 4.

Fowler and Pyle go into the night as the Vietminh search for them. Fowler is in terrible pain but Pyle manages to pull him forward in a three-legged style. Fowler complains Pyle should leave him to die. They press forward and make it to the car despite the gunfire around them.

Fowler says Pyle is a fool to save him. Pyle said he did it for Phuong. Pyle finds a good hiding place for Fowler and presses on along the road alone. This is very dangerous for Pyle. Fowler lies in the mud and rice and listening to the sound of the guard dying in pain.

Part 2 Chapter 2 Analysis

In this chapter Pyle and Fowler are forced to unite and work together against a common enemy. Pyle is heroic and saves Fowler's life, which is another source of annoyance to him. Their long talk about the situation in Viet Nam contains many theories relevant to the American experience there ten years later: the domino theory, the reluctance of the Vietnamese to fight alongside foreigners, the problems of colonialism, and more. Pyle is shown as a person who believes in God and principles. Fowler, on the other hand, presents himself as a person without theory or belief in "mental concepts."

Fowler's discourse on Phuong reads very sexist and racist, especially by standards of fifty years later. Like children "they" love in return for kindness, presents, and security, and they hate for "a blow or an injustice." Apparently he includes Phuong in the "they."

Greene uses coincidences, such as Fowler's running out of gas, which can seem contrived.



Part 2 Chapter 3

Part 2 Chapter 3 Summary

Fowler returns to his rooms in Saigon; Phuong is there. She gives him two pieces of mail: a telegram that she has opened and a letter that she has not opened. The telegram is a work assignment; the letter is from Fowler's wife in England.

His wife's tone is nasty: "You pick up women like a coat picks up dust." She goes over all the other women that Fowler has loved and dropped, and assumes Phuong will just be the next in the series. She refuses to divorce him for the good of "the girl" and also on religious grounds. Fowler lies to Phuong, telling her that his wife is willing to divorce him. He sits down to write Pyle a thank-you note for saving his life. This ends the first of three parts in this chapter.

Dominguez, a man from India, has been helping Fowler gather intelligence in Viet Nam. He has even attended press conferences for him, but now he is sick. Fowler visits his home and there is a lot of description about Dominguez's family and living arrangements. Dominguez tells Fowler about a strange warehouse where supplies are being imported from the United States. He advises him to meet someone called Monsieur Chou.

Chou is a fascinating person whose habit of smoking 150 opium pipes per day has ruined his mental and physical health. He shows Fowler a warehouse with small steel drums marked "Diolacton," an American trade name for an ingredient used to refine plastics. Chou said a man named Phan Van Muoi has called on Pyle. Mr. Muoi's wife is related to General The, who leads the forces that are neither French nor Vietminh: Pyle's "Third Force." Fowler says there is a rumor that Pyle is importing plastics for toys, but now the relationship between Pyle and General The has been established.

In the third part, Fowler's conscience bothers him to take Pyle out to dinner or something in return for saving his life, but in reality he does not want to see him. Fowler's dilemma is resolved when Pyle comes knocking at his door. Pyle tells him that Phuong showed Fowler's wife's letter to her sister, who can read English. They exchange some words about Phuong. Pyle accuses Fowler of not having her best interests in mind; Fowler tells Pyle to go play with his plastics.

Part 2 Chapter 3 Analysis

It would be too much of a coincidence for the connection between Pyle and General The not to mean something, especially considering Pyle's obsession with York Harding's "Third Way."

Some critics have remarked that Pyle and Fowler's battle over Phuong is an out-of-date male dominance fight, yet it is central to the story. Fowler has a personal reason to want to "get the goods" on Pyle, who is ironically the man who saved his life.



Part 3 Chapter 1

Part 3 Chapter 1 Summary

This chapter is divided into five parts. It is somewhat difficult because it jumps around in time. The first part takes place two weeks after Pyle's murder. Vigot again approaches Fowler for information but Fowler plays it cool and says little.

In the second part Fowler punishes himself by becoming very suspicious of Phuong, although they pretend that nothing has changed. Fowler's speech becomes increasingly anti-American. Dominguez leads Fowler to Mr. Heng, who tells him about Operation Bicyclette. Pipe bombs placed in bicycle pumps are all set to go off at a certain hour. Other journalists blame the Communists; Fowler blames General The and his organization. Fowler makes his way into Muoi's garage where he sees mechanical parts and white dust probably used to make the pipe bombs.

Part 3 takes place before Pyle's murder. Phuong is living with Pyle. Fowler goes to Pyle's workplace to confront him but Pyle is out of the office. Fowler ends up in a restroom where he cries over his grief of losing Phuong.

Part 4 takes place after the restroom occurrence. Fowler goes north to visit the war zones. A pilot named Trouin takes Fowler on vertical raids near the Chinese border where they drop some bombs and then watch a sunset. Fowler is forbidden to write about it.

In Part 5 Trouin and Fowler socialize by smoking some opium. Trouin tells Fowler that sooner or later he will have to take sides in the war. Horrible atrocities are taking place and he needs to be involved. Fowler replies the atrocities are part of the reason he will not be involved. Trouin says that his side cannot win and is taking heavy losses. Later Fowler cannot perform sexually with a prostitute because he is thinking too much about Phuong.

Part 3 Chapter 1 Analysis

Away from Phuong and Pyle, Fowler sees the war more as it is. He investigates the bicycle bombings and has the energy to visit the war zone. However, when he is asked to take sides in the war, he continues to wallow in his self-pity and grief about losing Phuong to Pyle.

Trouin's words are often quoted in regard to the later American involvement in Viet Nam: "We have to keep fighting until the politicians tell us to stop. Probably they will get together and agree to the same peace we could have had at the beginning-making nonsense of all these years."



Part 3 Chapter 2

Part 3 Chapter 2 Summary

Fowler returns home from the war zone to find Pyle waiting for him. Pyle knows that Fowler went to his office and says it's better to talk privately. Pyle gives him a telegram from England that says Fowler has been granted his request to stay in Viet Nam rather than be assigned a desk job in England.

Pyle says he plans to take Phuong to America to meet his family and have a proper wedding. Fowler thinks to himself that perhaps Pyle will be better for Phuong than he himself would be. As Pyle leaves, Fowler calls to him and confronts him about the bicycle bombs. He warns Pyle not to trust in Harding's ideas or General The, but rather to listen to the Brits who have a lot of experience with colonialism. Pyle replies, "I thought you didn't take sides."

In Part 2 Fowler looks for a new apartment. Sitting by himself in the Continental, he overhears two young American girls say that they better leave because "Warren" told them not to stay past eleven forty-five. Then Fowler is stung by an explosion so loud and so close that it hurts his ears. Suddenly he is in the midst of rubble and dead bodies but his only thought is for Phuong. She would be at the nearby Milk Fountain. He tries to break through to find her, but comes across Pyle who tells Fowler, "Don't worry. I warned her about it."

Fowler forces Pyle to look at the blood and suffering that he helped to cause among women and children. Pyle says that there was to have been parade; he didn't know it had been cancelled. He insists General The would not have dropped a two-hundred pound bomb if he had known it would kill so many innocents. In the meantime Fowler is thankful that Phuong was spared but he can't get the picture of the dead out of his mind. He realizes that Pyle will forever be innocent and naïve and the only way to deal with Pyle is to eliminate him before he does more harm.

Part 3 Chapter 2 Analysis

This is an important climactic chapter. Pyle sees war for the first time but somehow remains innocent, and Fowler finally realizes the extent of General The's and the American involvement in the war. Pyle looks "white and beaten" but Fowler understands that "Pyle will always be innocent, and you can't blame the innocent."



Part 4 Chapter 1

Part 4 Chapter 1 Summary

This is a very short chapter. Vigot drinks with Fowler, who accuses him of trying to get him loose enough to confess to Pyle's murder. They go over every detail of the night of Pyle's murder. Vigot accepts his defeat, although he has many qualms about Fowler's story. Fowler feels some guilt that he has not told the entire truth because he recognizes Vigot's vocation as a policeman.

Part 4 Chapter 1 Analysis

Vigot is very good at what he does and he is not the kind of policeman to want "open books" on a high-profile murder case. This is why Fowler feels guilty about deceiving him.



Part 4 Chapter 2

Part 4 Chapter 2 Summary

Fowler investigates the bombing by going to visit Monsieurs Chou and Heng. He wants to know whom Pyle is working for. Heng says Pyle is working on his own. Fowler says he wants to stop Pyle but Heng warns the police will never go after an American.

Heng suggests that Fowler invite Pyle to dinner that night at the Vieux Moulin, which is near the bridge at Dakow. This is a private place where Heng and his agents can "talk" with Pyle. If Pyle agrees to the dinner, then Fowler should signal to them by opening a book.

Fowler invites Pyle to meet him at his rooms. He is extremely nervous about the impending events. There is a knock on the door: it is Dominguez. Fowler thinks how gentle Dominguez would never take a life, not even an insect's. Pyle arrives and tells him he saw General The and scolded him for the bomb. Pyle agrees to have dinner with him later that night at the Vieux Moulin. Fowler signals with the book.

The two men have a drink. Pyle is in an uncharacteristically chatty mood. Fowler gives him a choice of canceling their dinner and thinks that Pyle cannot be stupid enough to walk by the bridge in the dark without a gun. Pyle says he does not think Fowler will ever take sides in the war. He suggests two different restaurants but they keep to having dinner at the Vieux Moulin at nine o'clock.

Fowler creates an alibi for himself by making sure he talks to people and by then going to the movies. He goes to the Moulin and asks for a table for one. Granger is there with a loud party of people. Fowler orders dinner and thinks about Phuong. He realizes he is no longer disengaged from the war but now he is taking sides.

A drunken Granger wants to talk to Fowler even though he tells him he hates Englishmen. He is crying over his son's ordeal with polio and has chosen Fowler to talk to because he speaks English. He says he just wants his son to live and does not care if he's crippled. After midnight Fowler figures Pyle is dead and goes to find Phuong.

Part 4 Chapter 2 Analysis

Fowler is on the fence about Pyle's murder. At first he suggests they cancel dinner. However, later in the conversation when Pyle suggests different restaurants, Fowler insists on the Moulin. Finally Fowler gives Pyle a choice of meeting him at the apartment or the Moulin. In Fowler's mind, God could intervene and save Pyle by having him come to the rooms or even by staying overtime at his office (even though Fowler repeats to himself that he does not believe in God).

Fowler tortures himself at the Vieux Moulin because he knows Pyle is being murdered. Granger's grief over his son does not touch him. When he goes to find Phuong, it is a reminder that some of his motive in killing Pyle may have been to get his lover back.



Part 4 Chapter 3

Part 4 Chapter 3 Summary

Phuong comes to Fowler's rooms. She tells him about a sad movie that she and her sister have seen. They agree that Granger's son will live. They chat about this and that. Fowler decides to read a telegram, which turns out to be from his wife. His wife will grant him a divorce after all. Phuong gets very happy and excitedly runs off to tell her sister. Fowler asks her if she misses Pyle and she avoids the question.

Part 4 Chapter 3 Analysis

The implication of this chapter reveals that things between Fowler and Phuong do not change despite everything that happened. The book ends with Fowler saying that although everything has gone well for him since Pyle died, he wishes he could apologize to someone about what happened. It is an ambiguous ending because Fowler's feelings and thoughts are ambiguous. The author does not record Phuong's feelings or thoughts about Pyle's murder. Phuong avoids the subject.



Characters

Alden Pyle

Alden Pyle is the "quiet American" of the title. He is the opposite of a stereotypical American abroad: the loud obnoxious American in a Hawaiian shirt with a camera. Instead Pyle is thoughtful and intellectual, serious and principled. He comes from a fine East Coast background. His father is a renowned professor of underwater erosion who has appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine; his mother is well respected in their community.

Pyle is a brilliant graduate of Harvard University. He has studied theories of government and society, and is particularly devoted to a scholar named York Harding. He has read Harding's numerous books many times and has absorbed Harding's thinking as his own. One of Harding's key ideas is that when Communism is at war with a colonial power in a foreign country like Viet Nam, a "Third Force" emerges to provide a new government. Pyle believes that General The, former chief of the Cao daists, is that third force in Viet Nam.

The paradox is that Pyle is a fraud. Although he seems completely honest and open, in reality he works as a secret agent for an American intelligence agency. His identity as a humanitarian agent with the Economic Mission is only a cover story. Pyle is also smuggling weapons to General The's forces.

Pyle is naïve and innocent about what is really going on. For example, he does not perceive that Phuong is a common dancehall girl but believes her to be a fine lady who could be a chum for his mother. After a terrible bombing kills many civilians, he walks around the blood and devastation but is unaffected. He remains in his theoretical world where everything he does is good and fine because it comes from the highest motives for mankind. His naïve innocence leads to his murder.

Thomas Fowler

The narrator of the book is a British journalist in late middle age who has been in Viet Nam for several years. Two of those years he has been living with Phuong, although he remains married to a woman in London. He prides himself on having no opinions and not taking sides, but instead he believes himself to be a true reporter who only observes. He smokes opium, which enhances his sense of total detachment, even from his own death. Nothing matters to him, or so he thinks.

In many ways, however, Fowler is not a detached observer but a judgmental, depressed cynic. He has an active death wish. He is against all forms of religion. He does not like Americans in general. He has gone through many affairs and does not believe in love; he just likes the physical comfort Phuong provides.



When Alden Pyle enters Fowler's life, everything changes. Pyle wants to marry Phuong, which forces Fowler to ask his own wife for a divorce in order to keep her. Fowler has been lazy about his work; Pyle forces him to investigate things he has been ignoring. After Pyle saves Fowler's life, he dislikes Pyle even more and comes to believe that Pyle is a danger to the Vietnamese people.

When Phuong moves in with Pyle, Fowler is left alone. He actually does some investigative reporting. Soldiers engaged in the war challenge Fowler to take sides: war is a moral issue and you are not a human being unless you take a side in it. Taking sides is emotional, but having emotions is part of being human. Fowler realizes that Pyle and his way of thinking is dangerous to the country Fowler has adopted and come to love, a country that Pyle does not understand at all. This change of heart sets up Fowler to participate in Pyle's murder. His character undergoes a change in the course of the novel.

Phuong

This beautiful young Vietnamese girl is the third main character. Only twenty years old, she worked as a hired dancer at the Grande Monde before moving in with Fowler. She is considered the most beautiful woman in Saigon.

Phuong enjoys reading tabloids about the royal family and takes little interest in politics or the war. She is depicted as a child without any power or opinions of her own. She never has a real conversation with either man. She services Fowler by preparing his opium pipes and providing him with sex any time he wants it. When Pyle shows an interest in her, Phuong abandons Fowler to live with Pyle. She shows little reaction to Pyle's death but readily moves back in with Fowler.

In many ways, the way Graham Greene depicts Phuong says a lot about him. She is only written in terms of what the two men want from her. Pyle wants her to become a typical American housewife with children. Fowler wants her to remain just as she is: his servant. Fowler tells Pyle that Phuong is basically childlike and obedient. He believes all Vietnamese women are tiny and child-like. Phuong is depicted as someone who lives only to please Pyle, Fowler, and her sister. Neither man ever bothers to find out much about her.

Miss Hei

Phuong's older sister, Miss Hei, considers it her mission in life to get Phuong married to a Westerner who can support their family. She does not like Fowler because he is married already. Miss Hei believes that Fowler manipulated Phuong into a live-in relationship behind her back. She is mentally sharper than Phuong and catches Fowler in his lies.



From the moment Miss Hei meets Pyle, she sizes him up as a better marriage prospect for Phuong. Pyle does favors for Miss Hei, such as getting her a job, in order to improve his chances with Phuong.

Vidot

Vidot is an agent of the French surete and the person who investigates Pyle's murder. He is such a gifted, dedicated detective that Fowler feels badly about not telling him the truth. Vidot is under pressure to solve the murder because of Pyle's background as a prominent American.

Granger

This American is a crude, loud man who is a journalist and colleague of Fowler. His son has polio but recovers after almost dying from it. Granger is the stereotypical bad American who drinks too much and uses foreign women as toys, but is devoted to his own family. His character runs counterpoint to Pyle's.

Trouin

Captain Trouin is a French pilot who tries to convince Fowler to take sides in the war. He speaks very articulately about emotion being necessary to human life and making moral judgments, and that one is not human until one takes sides on issues.

General The

The leader of the "Third Force," he has the secret support of Pyle. The former Cao daist Chief of Staff, General The fights against both the Vietminh and the French. He mistakenly drops a two-hundred pound bomb in Saigon because he believes it will hit military targets participating in a parade. He did not know the parade was cancelled. Consequently, most of the people killed by his bomb were innocent civilians.

Dominguez

Dominguez helps Fowler gather news and exposes Pyle's true mission in Viet Nam. A very kind and gentle man, Dominguez is a vegetarian who will not take any life, even an insect. He leads Fowler to discover Pyle's true identity.

Monsieur Muoi

Muoi is a strange man and an opium addict who owns the warehouse and garage where Diloactin is imported and used to make bombs.

Heng

Fowler meets Heng through Dominguez. Heng and his men are the ones who kill Pyle. Heng arranges for Fowler to give a signal so that Heng can recognize Pyle.



Objects/Places

The Milk Fountain

Phuong goes there every day to gossip and have a malted milk except on the day of the bombing.

Rue Catinat

This is the street where Fowler lives with Phuong.

The Continental

Everyone meets everyone else at this popular hotel and restaurant in Saigon.

Diloactin

Pyle is smuggling this ingredient from the United States to be used in explosives.

Opium

Fowler smokes this drug with Phuong. Fowler thinks it makes him more Eastern in his outlook and less emotional.

Duke

Pyle's big black dog is named Duke. He was murdered along with Pyle.

York Harding

This author's books are very important to Pyle. He takes all his ideas and theories from an intellectual named York Harding, who advocates, "a Third Force" in Viet Nam.

Economic Mission

Pyle's supposedly works for the Economic Mission in Viet Nam. In reality he is a secret American agent.



The Third Force

This is Harding's idea that neither Communism nor colonialism will save Viet Nam but rather a "Third Force" is necessary.

The Vietminh

The Vietminh were formed by General Ho Chi Minh to remove foreign domination from Viet Nam after World War II. In this book they are fighting the French.

Trishaw

To get around in Viet Nam you ride a trishaw cab.

Quatre Cent Vingt-et-un

A popular dice game of chance in Viet Nam, it is also a metaphor for Fowler's way of thinking because there is no God, only chance.

Sten gun

Sten gun is a submachine gun that neither Fowler nor Pyle know how to use but nonetheless it saves their lives.

Caodaism

A form of Vietnamese religion that combines the teachings of Christ, Buddha, and Confucius, Caodaism is headquartered in Tanyin.

Phat Diem

A major battle took place with heavy French losses in this city.

Saigon

The largest city and capitol of Viet Nam, Saigon is where Phuong and Fowler live. Most of the action in the book takes place in Saigon.



Operation Bicyclette

The term for a timed assault in which bombs placed on bicycles all go off at the same hour in Saigon.

Vieux Moulin

Pyle is supposed to meet Fowler at this restaurant on the night of his murder. It is chosen because it is near the bridge to Dakow where Pyle's body will be dumped.

Social Sensitivity

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.



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.



Themes

Taking Sides Is Human

When the story begins, Fowler prides himself on being an objective observer without opinions. He even uses opium to achieve a feeling of complete detachment to the point where he can embrace his own death as neither good nor bad. He tries not to place values or judgments on events or other people, but attempts to see things as they are. As a journalist, this point of view is valuable in his work.

However, Fowler has a change of heart by the end of the book. When Captain Trouin takes him up in an airplane and gives him an aerial view of what's really going on, Fowler understands the cost the Vietnamese people are paying for French intervention. Finally, the two-hundred pound bomb used in downtown Saigon particularly affects him. He realizes that Pyle does not understand war and its devastation but is willing to import weapons and intervene. This realization changes Fowler from a passive observer to an active participant. Trouin tells Fowler that you can't really be a human being unless you take sides, that it is not a matter of reason or judgment, but of emotion. This is a major theme of the book.

Good Intentions Cause Problems

Alden Pyle's motives are of the highest order. He genuinely wants to help people in Third World countries and bring them democracy and prosperity. But it is his very purity of motive and intention that makes his worldview overly simplistic. For example, Pyle idealizes everything that York Harding says. When Fowler catches Harding in an error, Pyle overreacts. Throughout the book Pyle is certain that he has all the answers for Viet Nam but, "he had no more of a notion than any of you what the whole affair's about."

Pyle's worldview about love and sex is equally simplistic. He falls madly in love with Phuong and believes her to be the woman of his dreams, and someone he can marry and take back to America. He and his wife will live near his parents and have children. He is not aware of Phuong's background and experience, but just projects his own image of her as his future wife. His innocence protects him from guilt and blame when he causes trouble. How can you blame someone whose motives are so pure and whose heart is so intent on doing good?

Political v. Personal

Fowler is not in love with Phuong but he wants her. He wants things between them to remain the way they are. He does not want her to marry Pyle. In this sense his motive to murder Pyle is partly personal as well as political. He spends a lot of time justifying his involvement with Pyle's murder as the only way of stopping him from doing further damage to the Vietnamese people, yet his true motives are more complex. For this



reason he feels very guilty when Pyle dies. There is some evidence that Fowler does not have this self-awareness.

Later, Fowler does not want to accept a transfer back to England because he wants to stay with Phuong. He tells his boss that he has a job to do in Viet Nam and makes it sound very noble.

Pyle believes his motives are always pure and noble, but the truth is more complex. For example, it would have been to his personal advantage not to save Fowler's life. He saves Fowler for "Phuong's sake." Fowler says that Pyle uses the incident to appear heroic in front of Phuong and to make her love him more. Part of what makes *The Quiet American* such a good book is Greene's depiction of the complexity of human motive.

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 engaged 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.

Style

Points of View

The Quiet American is written solely from Thomas Fowler's point of view and in the first person. It is somewhat unusual that Fowler is both narrator and a strong character in the story. He writes the book as a means of making sense of what happened during this period of his life. In many ways Fowler's character is the strongest in the book and also the only one to really undergo a change. He moves from being a cynical observer to an active participant in Pyle's murder. Fowler justifies his participation in murder by concluding that Pyle had to be eliminated for political reasons. He does not go over the very strong personal reasons he had to want Pyle gone. Because the book is told from his point of view, the reader can readily observe Fowler as a person and can easily see his own blind spots about himself.

Setting

The setting of Viet Nam in the 1950s during the French war is one of the most important aspects of *The Quiet American*. In many ways, the setting is what makes the story occur. Fowler, Pyle, and Granger would have behaved entirely differently if they had been in their own countries with their wives and families. They are in a foreign culture during wartime, and there are not very many rules during wartime. Granger, an average American family man, drinks and buys prostitutes. Fowler takes a simple Vietnamese girl as his lover and continually deceives her. Pyle thinks of Viet Nam as a place to try out his intellectual theories and causes innocent people to die as a result.

Characters are put in drastic war situations, such as when Pyle and Fowler escape the tower together and Pyle saves Fowler's life. The war setting brings out who they are under pressure and emergency situations. Graham does a terrific job of describing Viet Nam not only as a physical place but also as a culture. He gives us detailed descriptions not only of Saigon, but also temples, villages, and battlefields.

Language and Meaning

Fowler is a journalist and this is a murder mystery story. The writing tends to be the "hard-boiled" style of journalism, which is factual and crisp. Fowler takes pride in his lack of opinion and his distance from his subjects. However, some of the writing moves almost into the realm of poetry. When Fowler describes his love of the country of Viet Nam, Phuong's birdlike beauty, and the intricacy of a Caodaist temple, he is at his best. In those passages he abandons the journalistic style and moves into literary conceit. He is very good not only at describing places but also depicting human beings through their mannerisms, dress, and speech. By the end of the book, the reader has a clear picture of Alden Pyle, Vigot, Phuong, and others.

Structure

This book has an unusual structure in that events do not occur in chronological order. Sometimes it is hard to tell where the narrator is in time: before or after Pyle's death or before or after a meeting at the Continental. The author not only jumps around in time, but also jumps around in setting from place to place in Viet Nam. The last few chapters, however, do follow a basic chronological format.

The advantage of starting off with an unsolved murder is that the reader is quickly pulled into the story. It becomes a "whodunit." When you first begin the book, it is hard to understand why the innocent appealing Pyle was murdered in the first place, much less how his friend Fowler participated. Greene started his writing career as a mystery and thriller writer and he uses many of the techniques of that genre in *The Quiet American*. The book is divided into three parts with chapters that vary in length from a few pages to over thirty. Some of the chapters are also divided into parts.



Quotes

"A quiet American." I summed (Pyle) precisely up as I might have said "a blue lizard," "a white elephant." Part 1 Chapter 1, pg. 17

(Pyle) was absorbed already in the Dilemmas of Democracy and the responsibilities of the West; he was determined ... to do good, not to any individual person but to a country, a continent, a world. Well, he was in his element now with the whole universe to improve. Part 1 Chapter 1, pg. 18

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. Part 1 Chapter 2, pg. 28

They killed (Pyle) because he was too innocent to live. He was young and ignorant and silly and he got involved. He had no more of a notion than any of you what the whole affair's about, and you gave him money and York Harding's books on the East and said, "Go ahead. Win the East for Democracy." Part 1 Chapter 2, pg. 32

I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused. Part 1 Chapter 3, pg. 40

The canal was full of bodies: I was reminded of an Irish stew with too much meat. Part 1 Chapter 4, pg. 50

So much of war is sitting around and doing nothing, waiting for somebody else. With no guarantee of the amount of time you have left it doesn't seem worth starting even a train of thought. Part 1 Chapter 4, pg. 53

Once I caught York Harding in a gross error of fact and I had to comfort Pyle, "It's human to make mistakes." He had laughed nervously and said, "You must think me a fool but-well, I almost think him infallible." Part 2 Chapter 1, pg. 74

Pyle's innocent question belonged to a psychological world of great simplicity, where you talked of Democracy and Honor without the u as it's spelt on old tombstones, and you meant what your father meant by these same words. Part 2 Chapter 2, pg. 90

"Can't you explain why, Thomas."

"Surely it's obvious. I wanted to keep her."

"At any cost to her?"

"Of course."

"That's not love."



"Perhaps it's not your way of love, Pyle." Part 2 Chapter 3, pg. 132

"Go to your Third Force and York Harding and the role of Democracy. Go away and play with plastics." Part 2 Chapter 3, pg. 135

The mould I had seen in his warehouse had been shaped like a half section of a bicycle pump. That day all over Saigon innocent bicycle pumps had proved to contain bombs which had gone off at the stroke of eleven. Part 3 Chapter 1, pg. 142

One day something will happen. You will take a side. Part 3 Chapter 1, pg. 150

It is not a matter of reason or justice. We all get involved in a moment of emotion and then we cannot get out. War and Love-they have always been compared. Part 3 Chapter 1, pg. 152

"I warned Phuong not to go."

"Warn?" I said. What do you mean 'warn?'"

The pieces fell together in my mind. Part 3 Chapter 2, pg.161

(Pyle) will 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. Part 3 Chapter 2, pg.163

"Who is York Harding?"

"He is the man you're looking for. He is the one who killed Pyle." (p. 164)

"You know I didn't kill Pyle."

"I know you were not present at his murder." Part 4 Chapter 1, pg. 170

"Sooner or later one has to take sides," Heng said and I was reminded of Captain Trouin at the opium house, "if one is to remain human." Part 4 Chapter 2, pg.174

Take a book to your window as though you want to catch the light. Part 4 Chapter 2, pg. 174

I was suddenly very tired. I wanted Pyle to go away quickly and die so I could start life again. Part 4 Chapter 3, pg. 178

I like happy endings. Part 4 Chapter 4, pg.187

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."



Topics for Discussion

How do Granger and Alden Pyle represent American stereotypes? How is Pyle different than the usual picture of an American?

In what way is Pyle and Fowler's treatment of Phuong a metaphor for how foreign occupying forces treat her native country of Viet Nam?

Discuss Greene's theme that to be human, you have to take a side. Do you believe that's true? Was it true in Fowler's life?

Fowler thinks of himself as a realist interested only in facts and the physical world. Do you think he is a realist or a cynic? Use passages from *The Quiet American* to support your ideas.

How do you think Phuong really feels about Fowler and Pyle? Why doesn't she get a chance to express her desires? How do you think her character could have been better developed, or do you like the depiction the way it is?

Discuss the political and philosophical questions that Green raises in this book regarding foreign involvement in Viet Nam in terms of war, religion, and colonialism.

The Quiet American was written in 1955. In what ways is it relevant today? How does it relate to the American war in Viet Nam between the years 1965 and 1972, and even to the American involvement in Iraq?

Do you think Pyle was a true innocent? What do you think his vision of American and other Western involvement in Viet Nam was? How did he perceive General The? How was his innocence harmful to the Vietnamese people?

Why did Fowler help to arrange Pyle's murder?

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 naivete. 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.

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."

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