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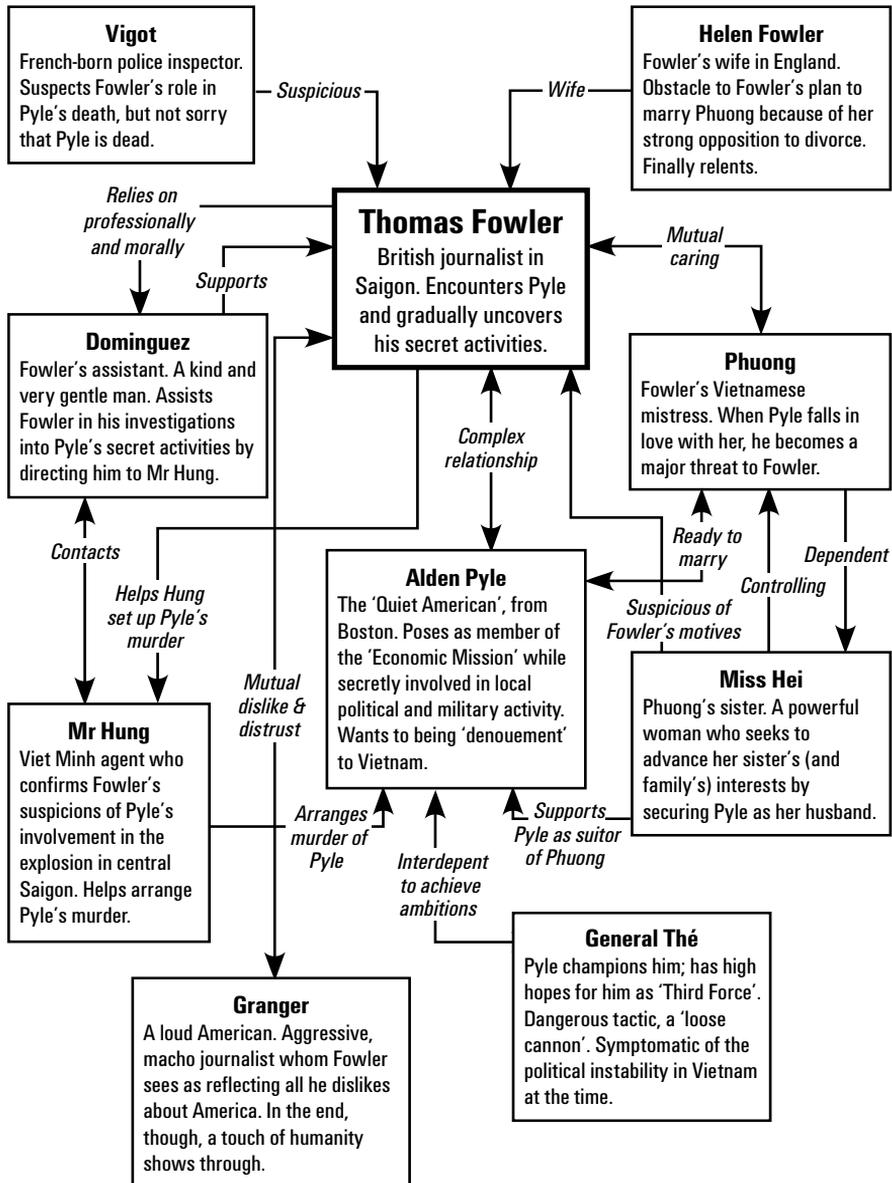
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# CHARACTER MAP



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# INTRODUCTION

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First published in 1955, following the departure of the French from Vietnam (then known as Indo-China) in 1954, *The Quiet American* anticipates with uncanny foresight the growing American involvement in that country. This reached its peak by the late 1960s when more than 500,000 American troops were stationed in South Vietnam. So many of the errors and disasters committed by the French as described in Greene's novel were repeated during the later American war, known as the 'Vietnam War'. In an American cartoon of 8 June, 1954, 'Uncle Sam' stands with a rifle in his hand, facing a dark, barren wasteland labelled 'French Mistakes in Indochina'. The caption of the cartoon asks: 'how would another mistake help?'.<sup>1</sup> *The Quiet American* implicitly asks this question too, doesn't it?

In the first half of the 20th century, the United States successfully intervened in both World Wars after entering them late in both cases. They aided the Allied nations in Europe, Northern Africa and the Middle East. In World War II they joined the nations in the Pacific and Asian regions also, to defeat the Japanese invasions of these countries. In the process, the USA established itself as the pre-eminent world power. In Vietnam, however, the USA faced a most unfamiliar environment, society and way of making war, which it was ill-equipped to understand or to control.

Greene was always keenly interested in international affairs, wars and covert action. His experience of working as a journalist in the Indo-China war is used directly in the creation of his narrator in *The Quiet American*, who is also a journalist. In his memoir, *Ways of Escape*, Greene wrote of how he used his personal observations of Vietnam at war:

Perhaps there is more direct reportage in *The Quiet American* than in any other novel I have written...The Press Conference is not the only example of direct reporting. I was in the dive bomber (the pilot had broken

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<sup>1</sup> Tuchman, Barbara, *The March of Folly*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1984. The cartoon is opposite page 304.

an order of General de Lattre by taking me) which attacked the Viet Minh post and I was on the patrol of the Foreign Legion paras outside Phat Diem. I still retain the sharp image of the dead child couched in the ditch beside his dead mother. The very neatness of their bullet wounds made their death more disturbing than the indiscriminate massacre in the canals around.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Relevance to contemporary readers***

#### **Australia and Vietnam**

Vietnam has played an important part in recent Australian history. Few Australians would have given a thought to events there at the time when *The Quiet American* was first published. Many would not even have been sure where Vietnam was. Only ten years later, however, Australians were confronted with the then government's decision to send troops to fight alongside the United States and South Vietnam in their war against the communists. For the duration of the war, events in Vietnam were closely followed by many Australians. Our involvement in the war sparked protests and strongly influenced domestic politics. The government of the day frequently referred to the 'Domino Theory' which Pyle starts to outline to Fowler. "If Indo-China goes" (p.95), he begins, and he would have gone on to say that if that happened, all the other countries in the region would have 'gone', too, that is, fallen to communism. The 'domino theory' became a favourite notion of nervous Western governments regarding the spread of communism. In the Asian and South-East Asian region, it was feared that if communism were allowed to take over one country, it would start a domino effect, and all others would fall to communism one by one as a result. This theory was whole-heartedly embraced by Australian governments from the 1950s, perhaps from as early as the late 1940s. Australians were told that events in Vietnam had a vital bearing on our national security. The young Australians serving there in the 1960s and early 1970s were victims of mistaken policy just as much as were the young French soldiers in the war that Graham Greene witnessed.

<sup>2</sup> Greene, Graham, *Ways of Escape*, Vintage, London, 1999 (first published 1980), pp.164-165.

In the late 1970s, Australians were confronted with the challenge posed by the arrival of the many Vietnamese 'boat people' who fled Vietnam after the communists took over in 1975. In more recent times, the sporadic arrivals of boatloads of Vietnamese refugees seeking asylum in Australia continue to attract controversy. The relative proximity of Vietnam to Australia continues to make it important to us.

### **The role of the United States in the rest of the world**

Greene's critical portrayal of America and its intervention in the affairs of other countries has aroused considerable debate. When the first version of the film, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, was released in 1958, Greene's anti-American message was altered and the ending of the novel changed to avoid the risk of offending domestic American opinion. The release date of Phillip Noyce's more recent film of the novel was delayed as a result of the events of 11 September, 2001, when terrorists hijacked passenger planes and flew two of them into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and a third into the Pentagon in Washington. About 3000 people were killed on the planes and in the buildings. A film linking the United States with terrorist activity was considered to be too controversial at that time.

However, before the US began its full-scale involvement in Vietnam in the mid-1960s, it had also fought the Korean war to a stalemate, which occurred before *The Quiet American* was written, had overturned the democratically elected government of Guatemala and installed a puppet regime, and was meddling in Africa, playing a significant part in overturning the first democratically elected government of the Congo.

The United States' view of itself as a paragon (model) of democracy, of which Greene is so sceptical, was again apparent when the President argued that an Iraq rid of Saddam Hussein would provide a shining model of freedom and democracy for other countries in the region. We can hear echoes of Pyle's claims that America can bring democracy to Vietnam. *The Quiet American* asks the question: do world powers like the United States have the right to intervene in the affairs of other countries, even if their intentions are good? Is violence ever justified, even if the ends it is designed to achieve are worthwhile?

Can we, like Fowler's assistant Dominguez, live without doing violence and harm to others?

We can see, then, why this novel still holds such an important place in the vast body of literature relating to the history of Vietnam since the Second World War. Later events in Vietnam made it a work of even greater interest than it would have been when it was first published. When we note the many similarities between the French war in Vietnam as described by Greene, and the later war with America, it is difficult to believe that the novel was published as early as 1955, written without the benefit of hindsight.

Apparently Greene sensed at an early stage that America's attempt to succeed in Vietnam was doomed. In *Ways of Escape*, mentioned earlier, he describes the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu, in which the French were defeated and forced to sue for peace. He states that it was 'a defeat for more than the French army...The battle marked virtually the end of any hope the Western Powers might have entertained that they could dominate the East'.<sup>3</sup> He goes on to say: 'that young Americans were still to die in Vietnam only shows that it takes time for the echoes even of a total defeat to encircle the globe'.<sup>4</sup>

### **The role of the war correspondent**

Central to *The Quiet American* is the role of the war correspondent, that enduring figure of the twentieth century, and now of the twenty-first century. The character of Fowler raises the question: should the war correspondent simply report the facts of the war or become more deeply involved? Fowler describes himself as 'the reporter, not the leader-writer' (p.119), yet as time passes he clearly becomes emotionally involved. Is such involvement avoidable for a war correspondent? Is it even desirable? Consider the role of war correspondents in the recent war in Iraq. Such correspondents were deliberately 'embedded' with the troops, an official policy designed to encourage reporting which was more favourable to the American cause.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Greene, Graham, *Ways of Escape*, Vintage, London, 1999 (first published 1980), p.179.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> For an interesting report on this policy, see 'Operation Persuasion', the Four Corners report screened on Channel 2, 24 March, 2003.

War photographers such as Larry Burrows and Henri Huet, both killed in the course of the later Vietnam War, deliberately set out to cause an emotional reaction with their photographs from the combat zone, to show the sorrow of war. Without necessarily implying that journalists should be as deliberately *engagé* as this, Greene clearly respects Fowler's increasing engagement in the harsh reality of the war. And he clearly discredits, by contrast, the armchair cynicism of Granger, who sees no need to venture near the war zone, as "it's only a damned colonial war anyway" (p.36).

Greene asks us to question the accuracy and authenticity of the news we are given. Granger acidly remarks that the French have "recaptured two villages they never told us they'd lost" (p.35). The truth is the first casualty of war when the national interest is considered to be at stake; at such times, 'the papers must carry only victories' (p.48). The reports from the war zone end up as sanitised versions of an horrific reality. Fowler complains of one report which 'bore no relation to the sad and heavy affair in the north, those canals in Phat Diem choked with the grey days-old bodies, the pounding of the mortars, the white glare of napalm' (p.141).

More recently we have been confronted with the question: was the much-televised toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad the spontaneous expression of the Iraqi people it was portrayed to be immediately after the event or, as alleged on the internet and later admitted in some mainstream media, a media event staged by the Americans? A wide shot of the scene showed only a small crowd of Iraqis amid lots of US soldiers and tanks. The toppling took place outside the main media hotel in Baghdad, which had been more or less sealed off from access by Iraqis.

**Q** How much of what is reported to us can we believe? How much of the instant history of modern war is really true?

### ***Greene's passion for Vietnam***

It is interesting to learn that American journalists in Vietnam after the French had left carried a copy of *The Quiet American* in their backpacks. I was interested, too, to observe that the novel was one of the books being peddled by the numerous street vendors of Ho

Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) when I visited Vietnam in 2001. Indeed, it was the only English language novel widely available on the streets, a fact attesting to its reputation outside of the West. People everywhere can appreciate Greene's passion for Vietnam itself. He wrote of falling in love with Indo-China, of drinking 'a magic potion' there.<sup>6</sup> His novel stands as a testament to the beauty and richness of Vietnam, a country which has so often been identified only with violence, war, and misery. In *The Quiet American*, I think that Greene is saying, through Fowler, that it is better to yield to the magic, to let it work on us, rather than to interfere with it or try to improve upon it, as Pyle and the Americans do.

### ***Greene's insight into human beings***

We can appreciate the novel as an exciting and dramatic narrative of the violence and tangled politics of a country at war, written by a man who experienced them at first-hand. And we can also appreciate Greene's acute psychological insight into the complexity of human beings and of their behaviour. For Greene, the world is never black and white, but always grey and morally unclear. Like Fowler at the end of the novel, people do not always understand themselves and their own motives. And, ultimately, we cannot claim to understand each other. 'Wouldn't we all do better', asks Fowler, 'not trying to understand, accepting the fact that no human being will ever understand another, not a wife a husband, a lover a mistress, nor a parent a child?' (p.60).

Greene is implying that people will always surprise us and behave in ways that contradict our pre-conceived views of them. 'The greatest saints have been men with more than normal capacity for evil', he once wrote, 'and the most vicious men have sometimes narrowly evaded sanctity'.<sup>7</sup> *The Quiet American* reminds us that the simplistic notions of good and evil, right and wrong — popular concepts in Western thought — fail to tell us the truth about human beings.<sup>8</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> Greene, Graham, *Ways of Escape*, Vintage, London, 1999 (first published 1980), 154.

<sup>7</sup> Sherry, Norman, *The Life of Graham Greene. Volume Two: 1939-1955*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1994, xxi.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this theme, you might like to read Greene's novels *The Heart of the Matter* and *The Power and the Glory*.

Fowler, Greene has created a character with a complex personality, which is revealed little by little as the narrative develops.

### **Graham Greene himself**

Graham Greene had an insatiable hunger for adventure which took him to many trouble spots in the world, including, of course, Vietnam. His travels provided the background material for a number of his novels. Greene's biographer, Norman Sherry, wrote of Greene's 'obsessive need to escape from the creeping boredom of everyday life'.<sup>9</sup> He was always looking for 'ways of escape'. There is much of Graham Greene in Thomas Fowler's dislike for the banality of domestic life in London. Unhappiness in marriage and guilt over adultery caused Greene much suffering; he confessed that he was a bad husband and an unreliable lover. In *The Quiet American*, Fowler is much the same. Greene was an extremely private person who never revealed his extra-marital affairs in his two autobiographies; he seems to have dealt with his concern over them through the characters in his novels.<sup>10</sup>

Another of Fowler's problems shared by Greene was a sense of personal despair that he had to struggle to contain. From an early age, Greene was troubled by thoughts of suicide. As an adolescent boy, he physically harmed himself. In *The Quiet American*, Fowler claims that he has come to Vietnam because it is a dangerous country where he might be killed. Perhaps similar thoughts, conscious or unconscious, were driving Greene.

In coping with these personal anxieties, Greene found comfort in his Catholic faith. That faith's strong instruction against suicide in any circumstances probably helped Greene keep temptation at bay. As with Fowler, reflections on the question of religion and the search for meaning in life were at the forefront of Greene's mind. Although Fowler is an unbeliever, he often seems to hunger for belief, and thoughts about man's place in the universe are always close to the surface of his mind.

Greene was fascinated by the world of disguise and espionage. During

<sup>9</sup> Sherry, Norman, *The Life of Graham Greene. Volume Two: 1939-1955*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1994, xvii.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this subject, look at *The Heart of the Matter* and *The End of the Affair*.