Graham Greene's The Quiet American. A Sartrian Existentialist Critique

"Un Américain bien tranquille" de Graham Greene. Une critique existentialiste de type Sartre

Americanul liniştit de Graham Greene. O critică existenţialistă de tip Sartre

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Abstract
The article highlights the influence of the French existentialist philosopher Sartre on Greene. Along with the publication of his late novels, Graham Greene' writing has been tinged with Existentialism which portrays his universe with absurd and comical stances. Therefore, we hold that the typical Greene character from his post-war writings (for example Fowler in The Quiet American) has an existentialist emotional make-up because he rejects established social and religious norms.

Résumé
L'article souligne l'influence du philosophe existentialiste Sartre sur les romans de Graham Greene. Apres la publication des romans de maturité, l'écriture de Graham Greene a été influencée par le courent Existentialiste qui présente son univers avec des coloratures absurdes et comiques. En conséquence, nous avons considéré que le personnage typique de Graham Greene des ses romans d'après guerre (Fowler du Un Américain bien tranquille) a une construction existentialiste parce qu'il rejette les normes sociales et religieuses préétablies.

Rezumat
Articolul subliniază influenţa filosofului existenţialist Sartre asupra lui Graham Greene. Odată cu publicarea romanelor de maturitate, scriitura lui Greene a fost influenţată de existenţialism care o prezintă în lumina unor nuanţe absurde şi comice. În consecinţă, am considerat că personajul tipic din romanele de după război ale lui Graham Greene (de examplu Fowler din The Quiet American) are o construcţie existenţialistă pentru că acesta respinge normele sociale şi religioase prestabilite.

Key words: *Graham Greene, Existentialism, Sartre, The Quiet American, ethical dilemma*
Mots clefs: *Graham Greene, Existentialisme, Sartre, Un Américain bien tranquille, dilemme éthique*
Cuvinte cheie: *Graham Greene, Existenţialism, Sartre, Americanul liniştit, dileme etice*

Graham Greene's Existentialism

Introduction: In the aftermath of the discourse of progress voiced by modern civilization which brought about the disillusionment and the disorder of the First World War, Graham Greene like many of his contemporaries abandoned the materialism of the era in order to adopt a strict faith

in Catholicism. However, his individual beliefs have always challenged the dogmatic formulations of the Church in order to rewrite or enrich them with other beliefs and value systems such as Marxism, Agnosticism, Humanism or Existentialism. Accordingly, the religious dimension in Graham Greene's novels is not limited to the strict Catholic doctrinal view; rather it continues to expand the author's conception of a spiritual vision that transcends the boundaries of any institutional dogma, theology or apologetics. In the same manner, Catholic theology in the early twentieth century moved in the direction of existential thought. The new existentially influenced Catholicism placed a greater emphasis upon the individual's struggle with faith as opposed to the image of the self-assured Christian believer. The doubt inherent to our human condition as Kierkegaard and Sartre expressed it in their writings influenced Graham Greene whose main protagonists such as the Thomas Fowler in *The Quiet American* or Sarah Milles in *The End of the Affair* struggle with their doubts.

The typical Graham Greene character faces life-threatening, extreme situations, which force him to come to terms with his faith. Sin, guilt, death, suffering, murder and war are recurrent motifs in Graham Greene's novels which compel his characters to question the very nature of their existence. Graham Greene's novels mirror such existential themes as alienation, betrayal, the absurdity of existence, infidelity, the instability of love and lack of communication between human beings. Although perhaps Graham Greene was not aware of it, he was dramatizing an existential dialectic and this chapter will consequently try to trace to what extent Graham Greene's writings were influenced by existential thoughts and concepts. Wesley Barnes in his book *The Philosophy and Literature of Existentialism* placed Graham Greene among the major exponents of existential thinking along with other British novelists such as: Iris Murdoch, Lawrence Durrell, C. P. Snow, William Golding, Samuel Beckett and Angus Wilson [1]. Other prominent critics such as Sean O'Faolain or Ian Fraser noted the influence of the French philosophers Camus and Sartre on Greene. Joseph Cunnen in a review of Theodore Fraser's *The Modern Catholic Novel in Europe*, holds that along with the publication of the novel *A Burnt-Out Case*, Graham Greene has been moving in the direction of Existentialist thought which portrays his universe with pathetic, absurd or comical stances. Additionally, Graham Greene's heroes, as much as Sartre or Camus's, are essentially haunted men, in search of themselves, whose interior struggles depict them as alienated characters in an absurd universe. In fact, many of Graham Greene characters are very close to the protagonist of Camus's novel *The Stranger*, especially the fugitive priest in *The Power and the Glory* who is an "outsider" like many of Camus's characters [2]. The specific attitude of hopelessness depicted in *The Stranger* and *The Plague* also runs, according to Grubbs, as a leitmotif through many of Graham Greene's novels.

Existentialism as a movement emerged in the literary circles of the twentieth century. However, the exact definition of the existentialist movement proves to be a rather elusive concept. In her article *Existentialist Motifs of Thought in Graham Greene's work*, the literary critic Sunita Sinha holds existentialism to be not only a philosophy in the traditional sense of the term but rather an attitude or a mode of thinking which gained focus and become very prominent in the academic literary circles after the First World War. John Macquarrie has defined existentialism as a "style of philosophizing" rather than as a philosophy (qtd in Wildman) while other critics' solution to the difficulty of defining the term was to identify the themes common to existentialism. They are: existence and the individual, authentic and inauthentic existence, community and estrangement, alienation and absurdity, social criticism, the importance of personal relations, atheism and religion.

Existentialism basically developed in two distinct directions: secular or atheistic existentialism and theistic existentialism. Secular existentialism began with Nietzsche's writings, and developed in full force in the works of French authors Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, while its theistic counterpart which sprang from Kierkegaard's work gathered together philosophers of various beliefs such as Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Orthodox Christians.

Existentialists take the human being as a starting point for everything as opposed to modern society whose emphasis on technological progress has reduced the individual to the functions of a

"commodity" or a "mass man". Apart from expressing concerns related to man's freedom and predicament, existentialists also criticize engagement in any kind of totalitarian movements or regimes which they perceive as a fall into "inauthentic existence". According to Sartre, the theme of "inauthenticity" or "bad faith" refers to lying to oneself in order to avoid human responsibility. The connection between the different political ideologies offering their false promises of happiness and welfare and simple people's ability to lie to themselves was immediately sensed by existentialists.

Similar concerns over man's predicament faced with different political ideologies are expressed in Graham Greene's political novels particularly in *A Burnt Out Case, The Comedians and The Quiet American.* As the critic Sunita highlights, the major recurring patterns in Greene's writings such as betrayal, sin, estrangement, commitment, detachment and social despair are seen in relation to nowadays' industrialized civilization where the individual does not have a clearly defined place [3]. Moreover, the development of such themes as betrayal, fatalism, the absurdity of life, alienation, suicide and lack of communication between human beings has determined critics to classify Graham Greene's writings as being influenced by existentialism.

Graham Greene's work was influenced by both theistic and secular branches of existentialism. While the latter reject the existence of God as their main tenet is the individual's self determination, theistic existentialists hold that religion is the key issue for defining human beings. The most prominent thinkers whose existentialism has exerted a major influence on Graham Greene's work are Soren Kierkegaard and Jean Paul Sartre.

French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre argues that human beings are governed by free will, however the freedom and responsibility they possesses proves unbearable, hence his views that "man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders." Furthermore, as A.A. De Vitis points out Graham Greene was deeply influenced by Sartrian existentialism at the heart of which lies the doctrine of the individual's freedom of choice [4]. We notice that the typical Greene character from his post-war writings (for example Fowler in *The Quiet American*) has an existentialist emotional make-up because he rejects established social and religious norms. He suffers from a sense of abandonment as much as other existentialist characters do. His relationship with the others is characterized by isolation, estrangement and alienation. In fact, the large majority of Graham Greene novels, as Sunita Sinha points out in her article *Existential Motives of Thought in Graham Greene's Fiction,* can be discussed in terms of the specific existential concept of freedom of choice which can account for the subsequent development of the novel's subject matter.

Almost every major character in Graham Greene's novels is at some point confronted with an extreme situation, being forced to make a choice which is going to radically change his life.

We believe, however, that the existential theme of the importance of choice or the importance of each single act finds its best articulation in the novel *The Quiet American* whose main character, the English war correspondent Thomas Fowler, struggles against the anguish resulted from his choice of indirectly killing his younger American friend Alden Pyle. Fowler's anguish comes from the fact that he is unable to face the truth about himself and about life as he avoids egoistically making any commitment. His suffering resulting from his uninvolved status is all the more dreadful as he cannot confess his part in the crime.

The Quiet American: A Sartrian Existentialist Critique

With the publication of *The Quiet American*, Graham Greene's gradual shift from the religious concerns so explicit in the Catholic tradition started to become visible. Graham Greene's novels were generally assumed to develop political and social concerns after the publication of *The Quiet American.* However, as Valerie Frances Sedlak illustrates in her 1992 thesis *From the religious dimension to the spiritual vision in the novels of Graham Greene*, while it is important to acknowledge the political and social aspects of these novels, reading them as secular novels of only political or social interest is far from being the most appropriate solution as it would ignore the

evolution of Graham Greene's vision and aesthetic strategy. The new vision presented in these novels is based upon the author's shift from narrow doctrinal and theological interpretations in order to approach a new tradition which will enhance or help us to better comprehend the religious dimension in Graham Greene's novels. We find this opinion echoed in many critics' assessments of his novels: Mark Bosko clearly argues that the author represented a "more nuanced Catholic ideological discourse in his late novels" [5], while A. A. DeVitis is of the opinion that "it is Sartrian Existentialism that best defines Greene's approach to Fowler in *The Quiet American*"[6]. Other critics such as David Pryce-Jones similarly argue that the novel engages us on a secular moral level rather than on a religious one. He sees Fowler, the main protagonist of *The Quiet American,* as "Greene's first serious attempt for twenty years to draw a man who is in a moral predicament without religious resources" [7].

This new tradition has been defined by many critics in terms of Existential philosophy characterized by a shift from the limitations of purely Catholic themes to a new context of probing the human condition. The new existentialist frame, unlike Catholicism, sees man as constituted by his own decisions, forced to ask questions about the very nature of his existence, a man who unmasks social conventions and accepts life as absurd and full of contradictions. An existentialist is therefore supposed to take full responsibility for his choices even though he never knows if they are the right ones. Furthermore, Valerie Frances Sedlak argues that many of the existentialist characters in the novels *The Quiet American, A Burnt Out Case* and *The Comedians*, are confronted with ethical dilemmas that the characters from the traditional Catholic cycle never had to consider.

In other words, Graham Greene's protagonists act, as Frances argues, not from "a theological or dogmatic base, but from a personal and existential sense" [8]. All the protagonists of the above mentioned novels do not have a sound Christian education; however, they accept several existential principles as solutions to their human and ethical dilemmas. Through the development of these existentialist themes and patterns Graham Greene intends to create a different context for the exploration of the transcendent, religious dimension.

In examining the existential quest of Thomas Fowler, the main character in *The Quiet American*, we witness how the protagonist slowly changes his creed from non-involvement to commitment and action. Fowler's growth takes place as he is forced to take sides in a war against a man who is also his friend and in the murder of whom he plays a significant part. *The Quiet American,* which came to be regarded as an anti-war, anti-American novel is a controversial work which uses political situations in order to portray moral and ethical dilemmas dramatized in the relationships and differences that exist among human beings. The novel is set in the French Indo-China in the 1950s, during the French colonial war against the Communist Vietminh. Thomas Fowler, a British journalist begins narrating the story by constantly affirming his belief in the beneficial nature of non-involvement:

> It (non-involvement) 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 in a kind of action. [9]

He is an existentialist who fights against human involvement, but then finally gets completely involved both personally and politically. From the very beginning, Fowler proclaims that politics do not interest him, that he is not engaged, however this changes when he meets Alden Pyle, a young American, with anti-communist ideologies.

Pyle is the very opposite of Fowler — he is young, idealistic, innocent and committed. Initially his innocence awakens in Fowler an instinct of protection and affection, but Fowler eventually realizes that idealism can be a dangerous weapon and he decides to take action [10]. He realizes that Pyle's idealism is arising from his arrogance nurtured by his lectures from York Harding's "Democracy and Honor" which shape his pursuit of ideals. Fowler comes to the

realization that Pyle is incapable of "conceiving the pain he might cause others" [11] due to the discrepancies that exist between his good intentions and the actions he performs. It is the massacre produced by a bomb which kills women and children that determines Fowler to feel socially responsible for Pyle's action and thus abandon his credo of uncommitment. Involvement requires action and accordingly he departs for the office of the Communist agent Mr Heng whom he tries to persuade that Pyle has "got to be stopped" [12].

When Fowler is asked by Mr. Heng if he will assist the Vietminh in the assassination of Pyle, he is reminded of Capitain Tourin's words that "one has to take sides – if one is to remain human" [13]. In this respect Fowler can be regarded as an existentialist character who avoids taking action because he fears the moral consequences his actions may later have on his conscience. Fowler's decision is finally taken when he realizes Pyle will refuse to take responsibility for his complicity in the carnage. Fowler does not immediately make up his mind about helping the communist leader Heng. Only later in the day after having a conversation with Pyle, who proves remorseless, Fowler's decision becomes clear.

Taking action, in the form of killing Pyle, also results in him having to accept the existentialist burden of killing his friend, a burden which he is forced to bear alone.

As most of Graham Greene's protagonists do, Fowler experiences doubts concerning his choice and he tries to evade the responsibility entailed by his freedom of choice. No matter how hard he tries to evade it, however, Fowler can never escape his feelings of guilt. The whole novel can be regarded as Fowler's confession as he uses the narrative to explain and alleviate his guilt or to defend his involvement in the murder of a man who trusted him as a friend.

In her 2008 article, *The Quiet American: A Critique on Existentialism,* Nyamagaga Gondwe agrees with the critic Robert Evans who sees Graham Greene's novel as the chronicle of an existentialist struggle. Evans opines that the main character Thomas Fowler cannot "reconcile his existentialist beliefs with the hope of salvation" [14]. In other words, the author suggests that Fowler is alone in bearing the guilt for killing his friend Pyle, as he also experiences the anguish of not being able to confess this guilt. He is not capable to confess his participation in Pyle's murder to the character Vigot, and when he is first called to his office, the words he utters are more than significant: "Not guilty" adding "I told myself it was true" [15]. After his last encounter with Vigot, who plays the role of a priest-like figure in the novel, the French officer's last words are: "I don't suppose I'll trouble you again" [16] but, "at the door he turned as though he were unwilling to abandon hope—his hope for me" [17]. It is quite obvious that the Catholic Vigot tries to determine Fowler to confess his part in the crime, in order to relieve his burden of guilt. Greene provides a number of opportunities for Fowler to confess, and through Fowler's remorseful attitude the author highlights the fact that once a person recognizes the immoral dimensions of his actions, he becomes ready to seek forgiveness for his offense.

Through the suffering Fowler experiences as a result of his difficult internal struggle he becomes more human. His initial creed of empirical atheism, cynicism and non-involvement contrasts with the troubled Fowler we find out at the end of the novel, who is well aware of a spiritual dimension to our existence. Although he still believes that God is an invention of the human mind, meant to alleviate suffering and to compensate for the imperfect love and understanding of one's fellow beings, Fowler's existential anguish has something of a Catholic quest to it: at the end of the novel he expresses his wish that "someone" existed to whom he could confess he was sorry. Fowler's last line in his narrative is*:* "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" [18].

Conclusions

Fowler's lack of religious faith accentuates his anguish as he tries to take decisions based on his own limited understanding of situations. However, the effect of the novel relies specifically on the convincing portrait of the existentialist man caught in the midst of a moral crisis, and on the complex ways in which it dramatizes Fowler's and Pyle's equally narrow views of life.

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