

A Gun for Sale: War, Failure, and Atonement

“It’s humanity’s normal state. Certain epochs create the illusion of being calmer, but they are rare. Man is destined to live in catastrophe.”—Interview with Father Jouve and Marcel Moré, 1949

“Violence comes to us more easily because it was so long expected—not only by the political sense but by the moral sense. The world we lived in could not have ended any other way. The curious waste lands one sometimes sees from trains—the crated ground round Wolverhampton under a cindery sky with a few cottages grouped like stoves among the rubbish; those acres of abandoned cars round Slough; the dingy fortuneteller’s on the first floor above the cheap permanent waves in Brighton back streets: they all demanded violence, like the rooms in a dream where one knows that something will presently happen—a door fly open or a window-catch give and let the end in.”—“At Home”

Characteristics of the 30s Thriller

- Broad genre involving suspense and mystery, includes whodunits, espionage stories, war stories, and medical or scientific threats
- Privileges surprise and cliffhanger turns
- Hope and anxiety are key sustained emotional elements
- Action oriented; plot over characterization
- Plot twists can be fantastic and seemingly forced
- The protagonist tends to be a relatively good figure, often the silent man of action
- The antagonist tends to be the villain of a rather stock evil type
- Women tend to secondary characters, often weak and sexually attractive, though this changes as the genre advances
- The protagonist must undergo some kind of life-threatening problem
- Sustained tension and resolution near or at the end of the story
- Often the problem and solution involves a battle of wits with the antagonist

Greene’s Entertainments

In some ways, Greene’s decision to label novels such as *A Gun for Sale*, *Ministry of Fear*, and *A Confidential Agent* as “entertainments” was simply a matter of sending genre signals to both his publishers and his audiences. The plot and characters owed more to the British thriller and thus inhabited stock generic tropes. They were not “message” books in the same way his more serious novels were. At the same time, the label was in a way also misleading in that Greene’s entertainments tended to expand the genre and offer more complex plots and characters, while his other novels and stories also tended to reflect themes and even concerns that the typical thriller might. Understandably, he eventually jettisoned the term.

Greene as a Cinematic Writer

Judith Adamson in her work, *Graham Green and Cinema*, lists the following cinematic characteristics as the most often remarked upon in Greene:

1. Crosscutting from scene to scene
2. Strong use of visuals to denote character and setting
3. Presentation of action without excessive commentary
4. Dialogue integrated into the action
5. External objects as embodying poetic or interior meaning.

Major Themes

- War (pp. 5, 10, 24, 43-44, 102, 112, 128, 139-140, 146ff., 172)
- Home, Marriage (pp. 23, 45, 58, 69, 98, 119, 184)
- Death/Endings (pp. 112-113, 118, 134, 162-163,
- Confession (pp. 121-127)
- Failure (pp. 60-61, 168, 180)
- Atonement (pp. 180, 183)

Discussion Questions

1. What is the double meaning of the title?
2. How do the opening and closing paragraphs contribute to the novel's meaning?
3. How does Greene employ a "cinematic" style of writing in the novel?
4. How would you characterize the book's prose style?
5. Does Raven grow or change as a character? Does Anne?
6. What role does beauty and ugliness play in the story?
7. Does the Christmas season shape the meaning of the story in any significant manner?
8. How would you describe the characters of Chumley Davis, Sir Marcus, or Jimmy Mather?
9. What role do subplots such as that of the Acky, the defrocked priest, Chief Constable or of Buddy the medical student serve in the novel as a whole?
10. How important are Christian themes such as prayer, Providence, confession, and atonement to the novel's overall purpose and impact? (cf. 50, 60-61, 69, 86-87, 115, 120-121, 124-126, 180)