

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES  
**“The Quiet American”**

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## AREA 1:

# READING & THE STUDY OF TEXTS: THE QUIET AMERICAN

### *Chapter 1* GENRE

While this text can be broadly classified as a novel, it has a number of other generic threads running through it. It has elements of a moral and philosophical debate about the nature of war and truth. It also can be seen to have romantic and historical threads intertwined.

This novel is well worthy of study in its exploration of the complex clash between cultures and political ideologies interspersed with some fraught and labyrinthine interpersonal relationships, and the murder investigation adds to the potent mixture. The setting of the novel in an exotic tropical hothouse widens students' geographical, historical and cultural knowledge and it provides an appropriate background for the steamy and powerful forces that are at work in the lives of the Vietnamese people and the foreign interlopers as well as the global politics of the era.

### *Chapter 2* STRUCTURE

The flow of the novel to some extent is bound to a 'whodunit' structure. Readers know from the outset that Pyle is dead, and the focus is on the successive filling in of the background to his death and to identify who was responsible. The linking in of the three central characters – Fowler, Pyle and Phuong, forms a rich tapestry of interwoven storylines that answer the question about the murder and along the way show a range of possible motives and how Pyle almost invites his own death for the clumsy way that he mismanaged his role in Vietnam.

The text does not flow as a conventional linear narrative, but rather jumps forward and back in time, tantalising the reader with titbits from the present and the past. At the end the more important plot lines reach varying degrees of resolution. The people involved in the murder have been identified. While it seems that Fowler and Phuong have a future together, readers must wonder if the relationship can survive given the damage that his dishonesty caused, the hostility of her sister and Fowler's poor track record at being able to sustain relationships with women.

## *Chapter 3*

# **HISTORICAL ISSUES**

### **3.1 A troubled area:**

Throughout its history there have been numerous wars and shifts in political power and dominance in what is now known as Vietnam. Being neighbours with other countries that are now known as China, Cambodia and Laos, there have been many conflicts between the varying ethnic groups and the empires that existed in this region have waxed and waned. At different stages in its history the northern part of Vietnam was under Chinese rule and control while at other times parts of the south were under the control of the Khmer empire and the boundaries that exist between the modern day countries are only recent developments, reflecting the current international definitions. For many of the ethnic groups that exist in the remoter regions of Vietnam, the current borders mean little as the people are more influenced by tribal rather than political boundaries. When the modern day Vietnamese talk of the wars in the twentieth century, they talk of the 'war of independence' against the French, while what people in the west call 'the Vietnam War' is known as 'the American War'. At the time that the text is set the 'war of independence' is reaching its final stages, but the country is about to be embroiled in a new conflict that would last until 1975.

### **3.2 Colonialism:**

In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, the map of the world showed that most of Africa, Asia and South America were colonies of the major European powers of the time. These included Great Britain, France, Spain, Holland, Portugal and Germany. Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were part of the French empire. France ruled this area known as Indochina for many years and Vietnam itself was considered to have three major regions: Cochin in the south, Annam in the central and Tonkin in the north. European countries colonised these parts of the world so that they could exploit the natural resources of the colonies and as a source of cheap raw materials for their own industries. Their control of the colonies was maintained though military might and the local people had little say in the way that the country was ruled or how its resources were put to use. The Japanese occupied Vietnam during the Second World War and when they were defeated the French returned. This was a period in history where many colonised people were seeking their independence. Sometimes this was achieved through peaceful means, but in the case of Vietnam the French were not about to relinquish their hold without a struggle. Although they were militarily superior to the Vietnamese who were fighting against them, the determination of the people and their capacity to wage successful guerilla tactics against them led to the defeat of the French, with the decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu being the final blow to French power.