

**INCAPABILITY OF SECRET INTELLIGENCE SERVICE IN GRAHAM
GREENE'S *OUR MAN IN HAVANA***

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Abstract

Graham Greene is a prolific, productive and fruitful writer whose work—*Our Man in Havana* explores the detective issues of the modern world. The thematic analysis of the novel is based on Greene's Secret Intelligence Service which was served directly or indirectly by him throughout his subsequent novelistic career. Indeed, it is a great satire on the British Secret Service as well as on the vacuum-cleaner agencies. Possessing an adequate knowledge of spying, Greene has succeeded in exhibiting the absurdity and incapability of this profession which is usually considered to be heroic and valiant. Moreover, it requires both the great intelligence and professional dexterity. The novel embodies the story of Wormold, a middle-aged man and local representative in Havana (Cuba) of a British vacuum-cleaner-manufacturing plant. Living under debt, he gets himself enrolled as an agent in the Secret Intelligence Service. Then, he is authorized to recruit some sub agents too. Furthermore, he begins to send bogus information about a missile launching site and also names of counterfeit agents. Simultaneously, some of the real models of these fictitious figures exist, and are slaughtered by enemy agents. Wormold worries lest his story of fake agents and fictitious missile launching should be traced. Brooding over the matter, he confesses that he has invented fake agents. Then, he is ordered to leave Havana and reach England by the police chief. As a consequence, he guesses that he would be punished for misleading the secret officers. An enquiry is actually set up against him. But, ironically enough, instead of being punished, he is promoted by the high-ranking officers because they do not want to be called fools deluded by an ordinary man.

Keywords: Incapability, Secret, Intelligence, Service, Cuba, vacuum cleaner and Havana.

Graham Greene is a fecund, fertile and focusable writer whose literary piece of work—*Our Man in Havana* highlights detective and defective issues of the Secret Intelligence Service. Since he worked as an officer in the secret department for some years, he knew very well all the advantages, disadvantages and shortcomings of the service that he elucidated in his investigative and effective novel—*Our Man in Havana*. As a matter of fact, it is a new kind of imagination which is based on his experiences of the Secret Intelligence Service. The dominant theme of the novel revolves around the incapability of the Secret Intelligence Service that could not be able to detect its own shortcomings resulted by the departmental agents.

Indeed, Greene did join SIS in 1941—in July, to be exact—and was officially known as officer 59200, the same code number given to Wormold's immediate superior in *Our Man in Havana*. He held a position in Section V, the unit responsible for counter-espionage. After spending fourteen frustrating months as a station chief in West Africa, he came back to England and worked directly under a future defector to the Soviet Union—Kim Philby—at the Section V office. He resigned his position as an officer of the secret service on 9 May, 1944, but did not cut all his ties with the old firm. He continued to serve SIS informally until the early 1980s. In exchange for expenses he gave his help to the organisation in many places—most notably, Vietnam, Poland, China and Russia. And whether a particular trip was subsidised by SIS or not, he routinely gave its officers information from his foreign visits when he believed it might be useful. The whole truth about Greene's spying can never be known, but the important thing to establish here is its deep influence on the way that he approached the real world and his fictional one.¹

Our Man in Havana has been estimated very well for its thrilling theme by the most of the modern critics. But Harvey Curtis Webster, discarding the three entertainments of the 1950s in a piece of writing, called it "barely consequential."² Everyone who has illustrated about it has commended it. Moreover, most of the admiration is reasonable and brilliant as DeVitis states: "It is a delightful satire with a serious edge, one of the funniest books to appear in many a day."³ Kunkel pays tribute to its expansion and tractability when he speaks of its supernatural inebriant of "mirth and murder, pomposity and poison, satire and suspense."⁴ While Atkins evaluates it as "one of the most professional pieces of writing Greene has given us; it moves with... speed and precision... and it manages to pass comments on life which are central to Greene's thinking." Atkins, further, calls it "the best of the entertainments."⁵

These tributes cannot be challenged because *Our Man in Havana* is suitably evaluated and intelligently carried out. In reality, it is a cordial, colourful and creative production which has all the logical and illogical decorations of the technocratic era. Besides, it preserves the typical balance between contemporary politics and Secret Intelligent Service.

Our Man in Havana is the creation of synthetic thinking that has its route in the melodramatic entertainments and the later comedies. Norman Shrapnel calls it "a melodrama with undertones or a force with overtones."⁶ It has the light-heartedness of *Loser Takes All* in its sarcastic management of the secret service.

An important sidelight of Greene's official holding in the Secret Intelligence Service is the tale of *Garcia* who was a dual operator in Lisbon. He served the Nazis disinformation, pretending to command a chain of operators all over England, while all that he was doing was fabricating armed forces actions and functions from maps, models and standard military references. Garcia was the creative perception for Wormold, a character in *Our Man in Havana*.

The novel has a political positing in Cuba before the Castro rebellion. Despite Greene's fundamental inclinations, it frustrated his anti-Batista friends because, in his own words, 'the object was not to talk about Cuba but to make fun of the Secret Service.'⁷ Jim Wormold, a vacuum cleaner distributor in Havana, is recruited into the British Secret Intelligence Service. He has adopted this job because he was in need of some money for his extravagant and motherless young daughter—Milly.

After becoming fully involved in the detective profession, Wormold displays a remarkable and observable capability for 'discovering' fresh or fake agents in the field of the secret service. In fact, they are no more than inventions of his imagination. He gets very creative because he meditates that the more agents are the sources of the more money. To carry out his deceptive invention, Wormold contrives incidents and conscientiously communicates them to London. The superior officers of London are truly pleased with the diagrams he sends them of a new weapon just like a missile. Undoubtedly, they are inattentive and unperceptive about the matter as the drawings are only extensively expanded versions of his vacuum cleaner design diagrams. Hence, they pore over their treasure and wealth:

'Fiendish, isn't it?' the chief said. 'The ingenuity, the simplicity, the devilish imagination of the thing.' He removed his black monocle... 'See this one here six times the height of a man... what does this remind you of?'

Hawthorne said unhappily, 'A two-way nozzle.'

'What's a two-way nozzle?'

'You sometimes find them with a vacuum cleaner.'

'Vacuum cleaner again. Hawthorne, I believe we may be on to something so big that the H-bomb will become a conventional weapon...'

'What have you in mind, sir?'

'I'm no scientist,' the Chief said, 'but look at this great tank. It must stand nearly as high as the forest-trees. A huge gaping mouth at the top, and this pipe-line—the man's only indicated it. For all we know, it may extend for miles—from the mountains to the sea perhaps. You know the Russians are said to be working on some idea—something to do with the power of the sun, sea-evaporation. I don't know what it's all about, but I do know this thing is Big. Tell our man we must have photographs.'⁸

It is almost incredible and improbable that high-ranking officers in British Intelligence Service wouldn't trace the imposition, or at least suspect that Wormold is befooling them, since the diagrams look like a vacuum cleaner, and after all, he is a vacuum cleaner distributor. Indeed, it is perceptible that Greene is trying to satirize the intelligence province he'd joined during the Second World War, when, undoubtedly, he came across with some eccentric, dull and stupid persons. On the whole, British Intelligence justifiably had an almost unquestionable credit as well as commendation. But the lighter parts of the novel are simply delighted fun, stabbed at the cost of the Secret Intelligence Service.

To make more credulous his fictitious invention, Wormold uses the names of real people with real occupations in Havana who do not have the idea that their identifications have been given to British Secret Intelligence as their well-wishers. These included Raul the pilot, too much fond of alcohol, a dancer called Teresa, and other names collected from a country club membership list which included such persons as Engineer Cifuentes and Professor Luis Sanchez. Nobody could be able to know that their lives were in danger. The situation is mature for humour

as Greene came back in the case of this novel to the term 'an entertainment.' Now it is right to drop into the story at the point when Wormold and his secretary, Beatrice, who have come out from headquarters, go for a walk after dinner. Wormold, anxious to leave the business of secret service, spins a story in which Raul fails, and dies in the clashing collision. But Raul is a real person, a real pilot and Beatrice, who is not fully aware of this thing, is vaguely suspicious about the story her boss is weaving. At first she thinks that Wormold is worried about Raul, appointed to take aerial photographs of the made-up machines. All the same, according to the mythical 'agent Cifuentes' these weapons are being displaced from army headquarters at Bayamo to the edge of the forest, where the ground turns so rough and tough that they must be taken over by the mules.

Wormold refers to London in the style of an adventurous story, creating the action as it takes place into his imagination. Since the equipment doesn't exist, it can't be photographed for London. The pilot must be unsuccessful in his mission of getting pictures, and Wormold concludes on a striking crash. The way in which he elaborates Raul's pretended downfall is no doubt very like the way Greene operated on a plot line. Greene has never been funnier, but later the story becomes satirical, as fact follows fiction.

Onwards, after the death of the agent-Raul, Beatrice asks Wormold they have to save the other assumed agents because there was a murderous attack on Doctor Cifuentes, a spy. Meanwhile, London seeks out that the members of the enemy side want to kill Wormold during a trade association gathering. In fact, they are going to poison him. Wormold succeeds in unmasking Carter, the enemy spy, and spills the whisky that had been poisoned.

Further, the senior officers of the secret service directed Wormold to get the database of the other enemy spies. Captain Segura, who wants to marry Milly, is having it. Wormold makes Segura drink in a pastime of checkers where bottles of Scotch and whisky are the game pieces. The captain falls asleep and Wormold takes his gun and a microphoto of the list. He decides to take revenge on Carter and murders him at night with Segura's weapon. Wormold sends the photo to the senior secret officers of London where it is overexposed. Furthermore, Wormold, like his forerunners in the entertainments, is forced to a distinction:

He stood on the frontier of violence, a strange land he had never visited before; he had his passport in his hand. 'Profession: Spy.' 'Characteristic Features: Friendlessness.' 'Purpose of Visit: Murder.' No visa was required. His papers were in order. (*Our Man in Havana*, 203.)

The act of avengement for Wormold is an affirmation of his individuality: 'If I love or if I hate, let me love or hate as an individual. I will not be 59200/5 in anyone's global war.' It is not Wormold's sense of responsibility to his work but his humanity which makes him seek retaliation or revenge. His emotions are noticeable when he puts forward: 'Vengeance was unnecessary when you believed in a heaven. But he had no such belief. Mercy and forgiveness were scarcely virtues in a Christian—they came too easily.' (*Our Man in Havana*, 206.)

The reward for what Wormold has done is tinged with irony. Deported from Cuba and back in London, he wonders what they will do to him. The Secret Service recognises its mistake, but does not dare to admit it. Wormold is awarded a medal and appointed instructor in the espionage school. He marries Beatrice, his secretary, and lives, one presumes, happily ever after. But despite the farcical plot and the happy ending, *Our Man in Havana* is not a mere spoof. The aftermath, in fact, is similar to that of Greene's earlier entertainments, sad and ironic. It is certainly more funny and amusing but it fails to reach the same heights as a suspense thriller. The

chill of terror round the corner and the breathless pace are not the same as in Greene's earlier entertainments. It is, may be, the ethos of the period (to which Greene has always been sensitive) which has something to do with the gain and loss.⁹

As a matter of fact, Alfred Kazin's statement is quite correct: "With *Our Man in Havana*... we can see that the Khrushchev Dulles age lends itself not to dread but to farce. Our plight is now so universal and at the same time so unreal that the age of anxiety has turned into the age of absurdity."¹⁰

After all, *Our Man in Havana* has something about a view of politics that is supported by the Secret Intelligent Service. Moreover, Greene retains a special passion mixed with affection for people who toil for human rights and exemption against terrific dictatorships such as those of Haiti and pre-Castro Cuba. The point needs to be made in order to grasp that Greene's revulsion from international power politics in *Our Man in Havana* is not the response of an ivory-towered intellectual, but that of a novelist who has frequently been as close to world affairs as a creative writer could hope to be. Consequently, it can be calculated that *Our Man in Havana* is nothing but the politics of personal life and the secret service tinged with satirical substance.

Furthermore, the revolutionary government of Cuba allowed *Our Man in Havana* to be filmed in the Cuban capital, but Castro complained that the novel did not accurately delineate the cruelty and brutality of the Batista reign. Greene commented:

"Alas, the book did me little good with the new rulers in Havana. In poking fun at the British Secret Service, I had minimized the terror of Batista's rule. I had not wanted too black a background for a light-hearted comedy, but those who had suffered during the years of dictatorship could hardly be expected to appreciate that my real subject was the absurdity of the British agent and not the justice of a revolution."¹¹

Finally, it is right to argue that *Our Man in Havana* is a criticism of the American policy in Cuba and the incompetence of the British Secret Service. Moreover, it is an irony screwed on the officers of the Secret Intelligence Service as they could not have the capacity to penetrate the scam or ingenious story generated by Wormold.

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