

Ambler and Greene, Literature and Entertainments

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to compare the bodies of work in popular fiction written between 1932 and 1957 of Eric Ambler and those of Graham Greene's entertainments. An attempt will be made to explore the existence of any qualitative and generic qualities that exist between them. Finally there is a word about the factors which may maintain or decay their works' relevance to the contemporary reader. Upon this, some assumptions are made as to their prospective and relative canonical longevities. This bears upon the validity of the differentiation between 'entertainment' and 'literature' and thus between the classification of the two authors' works.

Key words : Ambler, Greene, Literature, Entertainments, Popular Fiction

Introduction

When he wrote the preface to the Penguin Modern Classics 2009 edition of Ambler's *Journey into Fear* Norman Stone felt compelled to draw a parallel between Graham Greene and Ambler; from their tax avoidance practices to their father's careers. Such was Greene's stature at the time. Stone credits them both with authoring "sophisticated political thrillers" though Greene was "given to a moralizing that now seems rather quaint". He describes Ambler and then Greene as being examples of "a very English man of a certain era", with "admirable qualities". These are indicated as being of craftsmanship,

doggedness, efficiency, dedication and "drive". Such characteristics are hard to deny. Ambler consistently isolated himself from seven in the morning until twelve, and Greene almost without fail wrote five hundred words a day in his leather notebook irrespective of where he was. It is hard to disagree with this description, but how the values of a very English man of the twentieth century will appear in the twenty-first, is an open question. There are great similarities between them, but also the differences are what may ultimately decide whether they emerge, like Faulkner, Dickens, or Proust from the trough in popularity that Shelby

Foote describes as a post-death inevitability, remains to be seen. Greene's morals may lack the quaintness Stone ascribes to them.

Profiles

Both Graham Greene and Eric Ambler's lives spanned most of the 20th century. There are many parallels between them. They were both British English writers of fiction. While both had prolific careers over many decades, genres and media including television, film, and criticism as well as their novels; the works and period of most interest to this study are those works of popular fiction they produced between 1930 and 1957, when Greene produced the last work he styled an "entertainment", *Our Man In Havana*. This was also the period when both of them really established their careers as writers of popular fiction. Indeed after two of his more "serious" novels proved to be commercial failures Greene in desperation wrote "Stamboul Train" his biggest popular success to that date. For Ambler, this period included the years when he produced his six most highly regarded works after previously failing to make an impact as a playwright. In effect for both of them again, popular fiction was a form of last resort. While they do not seem to have crossed paths during this time there is no doubt that they were aware of each other and viewed each other as worthy co-practitioners of the novel form. This at least was later acknowledged by Greene when he dubbed Ambler "unquestionably our best thriller writer," and Ambler may have been making a slight acknowledgement when he called his protagonist in *Journey into Fear* "Graham".

With all their many similarities and shared experiences, the biggest difference between them

appears to be one of literary stature. Greene was seen one of the giants of the twentieth century English novel, albeit though now he is in some degree of eclipse (Stone 2009), while Ambler has been almost totally forgotten by the wider public. Only those with a particular interest in popular political fiction will accord him any status. This status while limited in scope is considerable in the field. Ambler is considered to have been the founder or father of the intelligent action novel or "thriller" Many of these terms were disliked by Ambler himself. Perhaps "thoughtful entertainment" might be a better fit. Almost every non-fantastist writer can be said to have some of his DNA in their works. Excluded from this class are works such as those of Ian Fleming's who, in many ways echoes the more fascistic and chauvinistic heroes that Ambler saw it as his mission to displace initially, and which he parodies in *The Dark Frontier*.

"Yet Greene's longevity—as he continued writing for another five decades—has also meant that the works of the 1930s are often seen relative to his subsequent novels. Indeed the chronological approach, common to most critical studies, inevitably imposes a teleology with the author progressing (and improving) from work to work—resulting in the early texts largely being viewed as rehearsals for the later. The critical concentration on later works has to some extent followed Greene's own attempts to ascribe value—notably his dismissal of "poetic prose" in his early texts and his distinctions between "novels" and "entertainments," with all but one of the 1930s works designated as fitting into the latter, subservient, category." (Mellor 2014)

While this teleological framing is difficult to avoid entirely it is better perhaps to concentrate on

their works relative to each other. Greene's "entertainments" of this period are : *Stamboul Train* (1932); *A Gun for Sale* (1936); *The Confidential Agent* (1939); *The Ministry of Fear* (1943); *The Third Man* (1949); *Our Man in Havana* (1958). This classification is based on *The Complete Entertainments [In Six Volumes]* (Editor Forbes Bryan, 1996, Folio Society) Interspersed among these are examples of his more famous "serious" works.

On the other side; during this period, Ambler produced: *The Dark Frontier* (1936); *Background to, Danger* (1937); *Epitaph for a Spy* (1938); *Cause for Alarm* (1938); *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1939); *Journey into Fear* (1940); *Judgement on Deltchev* (1951); *The Schirmer Inheritance* (1953); *State of Siege* (1956); *Passage of Arms* (1959). It is the first six of these which are seen as his most durable and original works. Despite the previous misgivings expressed as to researchers assuming development over time, in this study I intend to treat the works in the order they were published in the hopes of detecting any developmental aspects or other points of comparison that might emerge between the two writers.

The Novels

1932's *Stamboul Train*, later published in the USA as *Orient Express* is Greene's account of a journey by a group of characters from Britain across Europe towards Istanbul. It features several coincidences and melodramatic happenings of the type that Ambler saw as weakening the genre but also included mention of political repression, kangaroo courts and at least an acknowledgement of the everyday and open antisemitism rife in Europe at the time. (Fielding 2020)

It can be said that *Stamboul Train* fits the word

'entertainment' most aptly of all Greene's works because it is hard to categorise it more accurately than that. The main characters', (if they can be called that), problems all revolve around differing situations and motives; very little is made clear. Because of this confusion and ambiguity it seems to capture the confusion and darkness of the early 1930s immediately prior to the accession of the nazis. However in contrast to Ambler, most of this political context is simply observed as part of life by Greene. It is as if the shard of ice in the heart of every author that Greene mentions in his autobiography, *A Sort of Life*, is already present. There is very little explicit condemnation and a faint tinge of contempt for, or superiority to, the values of the common people. Czinner, the politically and idealistically motivated character is left making a speech to an indifferent audience who have already passed sentence on him. The Myatt character endures a series of anti-semitic incidents but is himself drawn in a light that seems to reinforce the stereotypes that lead to them. It certainly has a noirish aspect that is increased by the near absence of a clarifying protagonist. Fielding (2020) draws an interesting contrast with Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* where another group of people have come together on a train but with a single dark purpose which is made perfectly clear in the denouement. *Stamboul Train* presents us with a disjointed blurred vision, and relationships which arise and dissolve according to immediate exigencies.

In 1936 Ambler debuted as a novelist with *The Dark Frontier*. A work with which he intended to signal the demise of the classic superman-type hero. This work is similarly complex in the way in which

it layers view points and characterisations upon each other. On one level it is a simple quest-style adventure but on another it deals with repression of desire, the superficiality of popular fiction as well as the malevolent influence of vested interests on society and science at the national and international levels. The epilogue reinforces this theme by making a point of mentioning how industry would react to widespread disarmament. In contrast to Greene, *Dark Frontier's* more idealistic characters are indisputably on the side of good and are not labouring in vain. Even though they perish in the attempt, as Toumachin did, their sacrifices, are instrumental in achieving their cause's ultimate objectives. This contrasts with Greene's doomed Czinner.

Greene's *A Gun for Sale* appeared in the same year as *Dark Frontier*. It further blurs the boundary between his entertainments and novels because it is said to be the forerunner or basis of one of his more successful "serious" works *Brighton Rock*. It is concerned with a contract killer and the people he involves in his quest for vengeance. It is again a rather melodramatically dark work that translated well to the cinema, and was filmed as *This Gun for Hire* (1942) with Veronica Lake and Alan Ladd in the leading roles. Again there are the stock, uncanny, and ludicrous coincidences that featured heavily in early 20th century popular fiction, such as the randomly encountered chorus girl's boyfriend being in charge of the hunt for the killer, and her equally coincidental meeting with the object of the fugitive's vengeance. However, there is also again the world of business seeking to foment and profit from conflict acting as the apparent trigger of the situation, but there is a slightly tacked-on feeling about this

inclusion. It is not as intrinsic to the story as it was in *Dark Frontier*, where it propels the action from start to finish; from Latimer's first meeting with Groom at the hotel to his appearance in the epilogue still railing against idealist do-gooders.

In *Uncommon Danger* (1937); Ambler changes his villain from the armaments industry to that of oil and petroleum. Both had made a brief appearance in *Dark Frontier* (where loans for weapons development were obtained on grounds "only an international banker could believe"). Also, according to Peter Lewis (1990), he leaves the world of "secret agents" and imaginary Ruritanian type central-European states and shifts the action to the more prosaic and less salubrious parts of Linz in Austria. Nazism forms part of the background of a generally darkening international situation and an array of actual violent organisations from the Iron Guard to the Black and Tans are mentioned (Lewis 1990). Kenton the protagonist is sketched as a real person incorporating a variety of unremarkable, and therefore believable, character flaws. He is without ideological motivation, but does come to see the Soviet Union as allies rather than opponents. In the end victory is achieved, but the reader is left in no doubt that it is temporary and limited, and that multinational conglomerates continue to actively undermine peace in their own interests.

Epitaph for a Spy (1938); Is an interesting meld of Christean and Ambleresque styles. The Christean element lies in the fact that the action is almost totally confined to an hotel where the protagonist must sleuth out the guilty parties from among an international array of characters. Here the protagonist is even farther away from

the empowered professional that populated most other paperbacks, but occupies the opposite end of the spectrum being a powerless, stateless person dependent upon the goodwill of his host country for his survival. In this he shares something with the refugee Poirot. Ambleresquely, several of the characters are victims of the changing political situation, and it is interesting, at a distance of 85 years, to see how much was perceptible to ordinary people about the direction of international affairs and their consequences for the individual.

Cause for Alarm (1938); is set largely in Mussolini's Italy and involves yet another innocent becoming ensnared in the hidden machinations of international intrigue and espionage by both state and commercial actors. In this work Ambler's characters deploy more rhetoric in service of moving ordinary people towards realising that they can not simply accept a system which regarded preparation for war as being part of business, and recognising that totalitarian systems cannot live with intellectual freedom or scientific creativity. It is perhaps Ambler's most obviously political book and later required extensive cuts to make it palatable to his American publishers by removing much of the more direct attacks on fascism that they felt interfered with the narrative pace (Lewis 1990).

The Confidential Agent (1939); Marked the return of Greene to the thriller/ suspense/ spy/ entertainment genre. Described by the critics as a "highbrow thriller" it certainly reflects Greene's brilliance as a writer in his control of atmosphere and emotion. The protagonist, "D" is extremely believable and human. However, as a narrative it once more

depends on an unlikely meeting with someone who is again closely connected to the mission of the protagonist. Politically, the democracies' need for mutual aid while not exactly highlighted is inferred. The parallels with the Spanish civil war are obvious, but Greene refrains from making them directly. Again a character's Jewishness is held to be worthy of mention. It seems that Greene is starting to take sides but without overtly committing himself. The message is more to the British that they should count themselves lucky to be still living in a relatively civilised society and perhaps should think about helping out their less offensive continental neighbours. Greene himself claimed to have attempted to travel to Spain. It may be significant that he had just returned from Mexico where he had been investigating repression of the Church by their left-wing government. This may have caused him to waver before making any full-throated pleas for democratic and left solidarity.

The Mask of Dimitrios (1939); has a slightly lighter touch and is a more self-referential work. Espionage is viewed even more as a trade, and the main character is a member of Ambler's own profession of popular fiction-writing, though throughout the novel he is confronted by events and people that call him out on believing that life is in any way similar to what he purports it to be in his books. The most political element is the progression of a murderer from petty criminal to assassin, to drug dealer, to general factotum and trouble-shooter for an international enterprise's dirtier jobs. Greene admired this work very much. Perhaps because it has a slower pace and dwells more on the characters' thoughts and feeling than

Ambler's other works. According to Jones (2009) Greene borrowed from it for his story *The Third Man*. While Ambler steps back from engaging with the current international situation he does show how today's situation is simply a part of a cycle of state and ethnic violence that passes through and gains momentum from, events such as the Izmir massacres, which he describes in some detail at the outset of the book, and which provides the opportunity for the inscrutable Dimitrios to begin his nefarious career.

Journey into Fear (1940); As if in harmony with the new realities of wartime Ambler made his next protagonist an arms company employee and representative. A man who views the weapons he deals in as simple mechanical devices, that produce a desired result at a desired distance. It is not until he himself becomes the target of sustained violence that he starts to question what he does for a living. Another change is that his enemies are no longer mysterious or concealed. Even though the scene is another circumscribed space, a passenger ship, suitable for a classic Christie whodunnit. There is no need for deduction. The enemy is out in the open and coming to get him. Their only concern being not to make it too obvious and provoke the neutrals such as the Turks, to which this story again assigns a role following on from their appearance in *The Mask of Dimitrios*. There is less proselytising and more practicality. Now that Stalin had proved himself willing to compromise and allies were needed. Ambler sees that what had previously been concealed or uncertain was now laid bare and inevitable.

The Ministry of Fear (1943); Is perhaps the most fantastical of Greene's thrillers. It pits a man deeply racked with guilt against an incredibly powerful, yet strangely amateurish and indecisive nazi spy ring. The world war had already lasted for several years at this stage and its effects on the landscape and daily life provide a the backdrop for much of the action. However, while the quality of Greene's writing again shines through. There is an air of unreality to much of what happens. Its weaknesses are summarised as being once again being "The major problem (is) that the spy plot in *The Ministry of Fear* makes almost no sense at all, relying on coincidences, handwaving and implausibilities. Also, the 'microfilm of secret plans' hidden in the cake is a MacGuffin, and the spy plot resolves ridiculously easily. The psychological plot is more interesting and is the core of an excellent novel, but the two plots just don't quite pull together into a coherent whole. The trouble is, the dark tone of the psychological plot does not sit well with the much lighter spy plot." (Shimmin 2022). Ironically, Greene was working for MI6 in West Africa at the time and was becoming more familiar with the bureaucratic and repetitive nature of espionage.

The Third Man (1949); was one of Greene's more successful forays into the thriller/suspense genre. However from the first it was written with a screenplay in mind. The hero, Rollo Martins, is also a novelist but similarly to Latimer in *The Mask of Dimitrios* makes his living at the less prestigious, cheap paperback end of the scale. In contrast to *Ministry of Fear* the characters are not fleeing a conspiracy, but rather pursuing a mystery. The ruins of Vienna, which Greene had recently visited, provide the background, and plenty of room is left

for the characters to examine their motives and lives, and also firmly grounds the story in a real situation with real constraints. Greene seems to lack the ability to create this for himself. That which is visible in his works; he very much takes from life. The construction of situations beyond the enclosed, such as that in *Stamboul Train*, seem to exceed his capacity. In an interesting scene Greene recounts his protagonist Rollo Martins a writer of “cheap paper covered westerns” feeling “A certain pride, after being referred to as a novelist”.

While Ambler went on to write many more novels over the years such as *Judgement on Deltchev* (1951); *Schirmer Inheritance* (1953); *State of Siege* (1956); it is upon his first six that his reputation is mainly built. It is probable that by that time, the task of keeping ahead of his imitators had made it more difficult to differentiate himself. By the 1950s, his was the standard for the espionage novel.

However, it was not until *Our Man in Havana* (1958) that Greene could be said to have reached his genre-specific peak. Besides bringing his usual strengths to the form, Greene at last transfers it from the European or British context to an exotic-seeming place where his personally isolationist tendencies, powers of observation, and commentary are heightened and sharpened by the unfamiliarity of the locale. Once again we have the personal storyline of a protagonist haunted by his past, puzzled by his present and wondering about the future of those he loves. The interest for the popular reader is in the wave of ridicule he pours over the trade of spy craft, which reflects Greene’s up-close experience with its petty bureaucracy in Sierra Leone. He also provides some commentary on the obliviousness of

the West to the foulness of the regimes they prop up in such locations. This was to be the last work he designated an “entertainment” and from that time on he seemed to feel less constrained by his identity as a “Catholic”, “serious”, or any type of writer. By this time also he had become increasingly aware of the costs of Western policies for the developing world.

Overview

Having surveyed their common genre works it becomes apparent that generally, Greene’s strengths lie in characterisation, description, and examination of the characters’ inner selves, whilst Ambler is stronger on plot, structure and incorporation of political, technical, and scientific trends into the narrative. Greene himself stopped making any distinction between his works after 1957. From that time on they were all referred to as “novels” rather than “entertainments”. He had initially based this distinction on as to whether or not the work contained a message. As he no longer distinguished between them we can only incorporate them into his body of work as “Literature”. In 1967 he was nominated for the Nobel prize and was among the final three on the shortlist. It finally being awarded to Miguel Angel Asturias “for his vivid literary achievement, deep-rooted in the national traits and traditions of Indian peoples of Latin America.” (Nobel Prize 1967)

Literature?

As an author of popular fiction Greene passed the test of commercial success, as did Ambler. The question is now as to whether Ambler can be said to be “Literature”. I will confine my definition

of literature for this paper to that of its being of continued relevance and meaning for current and future readers. This is not to say that literature is a mere function of time. It is just to say whether modern readers would feel it readily accessible or whether it would appear dated or unrelatable.

So what then is the *qualitative* difference between Greene and Ambler? I would postulate that it is the obviousness of the treatment of more serious moral/ethical issues. Ambler inclines more towards the position of social justice. Which seems to have become increasingly an interest of Greene's, though primarily in the American sphere.

Ambler's messages were usually of the time and about the future. He was unusually concerned with pointing out the dangers of fascism, unfettered big business, and science in the wrong hands. He showed much foresight in several of these areas. It is perhaps in his depiction of the commercial imperatives behind much of the conflict that has afflicted modern society that he remains most topically relevant. "The military-industrial complex" and "war for oil" have become uncomfortably familiar terms in our everyday discourse. His other concerns can seem somewhat dated especially with regard to science and fascism. Greene on the other hand, usually has a message for the individual's inner life and his descriptions have a certain timeless quality to them.

It is perhaps in the area of social attitudes and atmosphere that the modern reader might find Greene a less sympathetic read. The second word of the 1970 Viking Press edition of *Our Man in Havana* is unacceptable. The superior tone Greene maintains towards working class and lower middle class

people their patterns of speech and their pleasures is patronising and grates. He is very much of his time and his class. He seems to consistently portray gay people in an unfavourable light. His pre-war depiction of anti-semitism does not seem to contain much censure.

Ambler on the other hand seems to be much more inclusive and brings a decided moral view to his work. Besides his attitude towards his usual villains, he has sympathetic characters from all walks of life and nationalities. In *Mask of Dimitrios* we meet a picturesquely cosmopolitan group who all have a story to tell, and are drawn sympathetically. Even Colonel Haki who is made to seem ridiculous with his *romans policiers* is transformed into a superior being the moment he turns his attention to his work, and it is the protagonist who starts to feel foolish. Haki appears again in *Journey into Fear* and is shown as being incredibly foresightful and pecautionary.

While women do not have very prominent roles, if they do appear, they are shown as active, potent, humorous and acutely perceptive. The figure of the countess in *Dark Frontier*, even though she is on the wrong side, is shown to possess intelligence, ambition, and perception far exceeding that of every one of her cohorts.

Greene on the other hand seems to use women simply as a way to present his heroes with "moral dilemmas". Even when the character of Phuong in *The Quiet American*, whose thought processes are given more examination than is his wont, seems to think and act on only the practical level and respond on the basis of simple material benefit. Greene travelled widely at the tail end of empire and perhaps his greatest contribution will be like

Kipling's, as George Orwell put it, "Kipling's is the only literary picture that we possess of nineteenth-century Anglo-India, and he could only make it because he was just coarse enough to be able to exist and keep his mouth shut in clubs and regimental messes." Greene was a gifted writer and just coarse enough to exploit his position as a famous white writer to sample the seedier sides of life in the colonies, including their brothels and police stations and report on them with flair.

Passage of Arms (1959) While not included in the list of Ambler's most seminal works does provide an opportunity to see how he deals with settings that are outside of his immediate cultural area. What is noticeable is the centrality he gives to the local people in the story. While there is a degree of stereotyping he does paint quite a detailed picture of their personalities, family lives, hopes and dreams. They are shown to possess dogged determination to pursue their dreams as well as foresight and ingenuity in realising them.

In *Our Man in Havana* (1958) and his other more "serious" works Greene gives local people only walk-on parts. The main exception to this being *The Power and the Glory* (1940) which he did not class as an entertainment. However here the protagonist is differentiated from the population by his priestly status and finds them alien and childish and inscrutable.

It seems that Ambler's works contain far less 'problematic' content. Indeed they seem to be on the same level of inclusivity and equality as Hollywood today. Which admittedly is not saying much, but is quite an achievement for an author first published around 90 years ago.

Future Readership and Accessibility

As the world of English language literature widens and deepens to include works, stories and people from beyond the inner circle of the native-speaking countries and the more empowered sections of those societies, we can see an exciting future filled with the voices of the heretofore ignored or excluded who take and play with the language, its literature and its genres as they see fit. But while any idea or designation of a canon can and must be challenged, it does remain that there is a vast array of 'legacy' works that fall outside such classification still on our shelves and servers. Not all will be to all tastes and some will give great pleasure to many. Some will have to feature in debates as to what ethical price is acceptable to pay for their continued enjoyment and what can be done to separate the author and their personal flaws from their works and their different flaws? What is egregious, and what tangential? What salvageable and what given up to the tide of time? What eternal and evergreen and what dated and irrelevant?

Many best-selling 19th and even 20th century authors are now without a readership, out of print and seemingly dependent on the efforts of digitisers to remain accessible even to the scholar. Those lucky enough to be placed into any canon however disputed or disreputable, can rely on a certain number of readers familiar with their works and therefore capable of being assessed in the light of progress and its strictures. However there is no such life-support system for those that remain unread. There is no way of judging whether something is still relevant without actually reading it, unless there is a source to indicate whether it still

says, or has something to say, something about the world, life, or love. A body of opinion or even point of reference is a great help in deciding whether to allot limited leisure time to discovering the qualities of a work. This is becoming an increasingly pressing topic because with the elimination or pay-walling of public libraries and other sources of literature these lesser known works remain among the few sources of free published literature free from digital rights management and property protection algorithms. New free literature is of course emerging, along with new ways of access, evaluation and validation.

But the past has already been written. It is now receding and is in the process of being walled off by fees, conditional access, or physical decay, neglect, or destruction. This is increasingly becoming the case with the works of Eric Ambler and to a lesser extent Graham Greene.

A goal of this paper has been to assess the likelihood of Ambler's works proving as resilient as Green's despite the great gulf in their fame. On the grounds of inclusion and equality, in the area of popular political fiction, Ambler might have the stronger case.

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