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JOSEPH CONRAD'S: THE SECRET AGENT CHARACTERS AND CHARACTER ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale is a novel by Joseph Conrad published in 1907. The story is set in London in 1886 and deals largely with the life of Mr. Verloc and his job as a spy. The Secret Agent is also notable as it is one of Conrad's later political novels, which move away from his typical tales of seafaring. The novel deals broadly with the notions of anarchism, espionage, and terrorism. It portrays anarchist or revolutionary groups before many of the social uprisings of the twentieth century. However, it also deals with exploitation, particularly with regard to Verloc's relationship with his brother-in-law Stevie.

Because of its terrorist theme, The Secret Agent was noted as "one of the three works of literature most cited in the American media" around two weeks after September 11, 2001. The Secret Agent was ranked the 46th best novel of the 20th century by Modern Library.

KEY-WORDS:

The Secret Agent, Characters, Analysis, Novel, Joseph Conrad.

INTRODUCTION

The Secret Agent reminds its readers that Victorian London was a place where terrorism and bombing were feared: the threat of anarchy and revolution was never too far from public consciousness. Despite its serious theme, the book is very funny with almost all the characters failing to cope successfully with the complex situations they have to deal with.

Our hero, Mr Verloc is a shambling, slothful middle-aged man who owns a shop in a dingy part of London which sells a variety of tawdry articles:

The window contained photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls, nondescript packages in wrappers like patent medicines, closed yellow paper envelopes, very flimsy and marked two and six in heavy black figures; a few numbers of ancient French comic publications hung across a string as if to dry; a dingy blue china bowl, a casket of black wood, bottles of marking ink and rubber stamps; a few books with titles hinting at impropriety . . . the customers were either very young men who hung about the window for a time before slipping in suddenly; or men of a more mature age, but looking generally as if they were not in funds.

Mr Verloc lives behind the shop with his wife Winnie and her mother and brother – an unemployable young man who today would have been described as having “learning difficulties”. We soon learn that the shop is a cover for Mr Verloc's real profession as a secret agent. He has been employed by a foreign embassy (possibly Russian) for a number of years, gathering around him an anarchist cell – not because he himself is an anarchist but because he is paid to act as a double-agent with the task of infiltrating

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underground movements in order to pass on information about them.

Characters

Mr. Adolf Verloc —the proprietor of an unsavory stationery shop, and a secret agent.

Winnie Verloc —Mr. Verloc's much-younger wife.

Stevie —Winnie's younger and mentally deficient brother.

Winnie's mother —an older woman whose swollen legs hinder her mobility.

Mr. Vladimir —the First Secretary of the Embassy of an unnamed European country.

Michaelis —a member of Verloc's Future of the Proletariat (F.P.) society; he is supported by a rich patroness.

Karl Yundt —the oldest member of the F.P.; he refers to himself as the terrorist.

Alexander Ossipon —a former medical student and the principal writer of the F.P pamphlets.

The Professor—a bomb-maker who is always ready to commit suicide.

Chief Inspector Heat—the police officer in charge of keeping track of the anarchists.

The Assistant Commissioner—Inspector Heat's superior.

Sir Ethelred —the aged Secretary of State and a great Personage.

Toodles —Sir Ethelred's secretary.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Verloc

His prominent, heavy-lidded eyes rolled sideways amorously and languidly, the bedclothes were pulled up to his chin, and his dark smooth moustache covered his thick lips capable of much honeyed banter. It was unusually early for him; his whole person exhaled the charm of almost dewy freshness; he wore his blue cloth overcoat unbuttoned; his boots were shiny; his cheeks, freshly shaven, had a sort of gloss; and even his heavy-lidded eyes, refreshed by a night of peaceful slumber. Sent out glances of comparative alertness.

His idleness was not hygienic, but it suited him very well. He was in a manner devoted to it with a sort of inert fanaticism, or perhaps rather with a fanatical inertness. Born of industrious parents for a life of toil, he had embraced indolence. . . .He was too lazy even for a mere demagogue, for a workman orator, for a leader of labor. It was too much trouble. He required a more perfect form of ease. . . .Such a form of indolence requires, implies, a certain amount of intelligence. Mr. Verloc was not devoid of intelligence—and at the notion of a menaced social order he would perhaps have winked to himself if there had not been an effort to make in that sign of skepticism. His big, prominent eyes were not well adapted to winking. They were rather of the sort that closes solemnly in slumber with majestic effect .

Winnie Verloc

Winnie Verloc was a young woman with a full bust, in a tight bodice, and with broad hips. Her hair was very tidy. Steady-eyed like her husband, she preserved an air of unfathomable indifference behind the rampart of the counter .

Don't be deceived by Conrad's description of Winnie. Today we might think that she is fat. By the standards of Edwardian England, she would probably be seen as beautiful. Edwardian fashion tended to emphasize the large bust and hip line with a tightly cinched waist. The above photographs are of English actress Lillie Langtry, probably the most photographed women of her era and considered by many to be the most beautiful.

Traces of the French descent which the widow boasted of were apparent in Winnie, too. They were apparent in the extremely neat and artistic arrangement of her glossy dark hair. Winnie had also other charms: her youth; her full, rounded form; her clear complexion; the provocation of her unfathomable reserve. . . .

Stevie (Winnie's idiot brother)

He was delicate and, in a frail way, good-looking, too, except for the vacant droop of his lower lip . The luckless Stevie slept in one of them. By this time a growth of thin fluffy hair had come to blur, like a golden mist, the sharp line of his small lower jaw. He helped his sister with blind love and docility in her household duties. Mr. Verloc thought that some occupation would be good for him. His spare time was

occupied by drawing circles with compass and pencil on a piece of paper. He applied himself to that pastime with great industry, with his elbows spread out and bowed low over the kitchen table.

Mr. Verloc, getting off the sofa...opened the door into the kitchen to get more air, and thus disclosed the innocent Stevie, seated very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable. The artist never turned his head; and in all his soul's application to the task his back quivered, his thin neck, sunk into a deep hollow at the base of the skull, seemed ready to snap.

Ossipon: "Typical of this form of degeneracy—these drawings, I mean."
 "You would call that lad a degenerate, would you?" mumbled Mr. Verloc.
 "That's what he may be called scientifically. Very god type, too, altogether, of that sort of degenerate. It's enough to glance at the lobes of his ears. If you read Lombroso--".

Winnie and Stevie's Mother

Winnie's mother was a stout, wheezy woman, with a large brown face. She wore a black wig under a white cap. Her swollen legs rendered her inactive. She considered herself to be of French descent....

How much he told her as to his occupation it was impossible for Winnie's mother to discover. The married couple took her over with the furniture. The mean aspect of the shop surprised her. The change from the Belgravian Square to the narrow street in Soho affected her legs adversely. They became of an enormous size. On the other hand, she experienced a complete relief from maternal cares.

Note: Has anyone noticed that she is not very maternal? For all practical purposes, Winnie has been Stevie's mother. Even as a child, she combed his hair, dressed him, and, most of all, protected him from their raging victualler father.

Karl Yundt

...Karl Yundt giggled grimly, with a faint black grimace of a toothless mouth. The terrorist, as he called himself, was old and bald, with a narrow, snow white wisp of a goatee hanging limply from his chin. An extraordinary expression of underhand malevolence survived in his extinguished eyes. When he rose painfully the thrusting forward of a skinny groping hand deformed by gouty swellings suggested the effort of a moribund murderer summoning all his remaining strength for a last stab. He leaned on a thick stick, which trembled under his other hand.

His bald head quivered, imparting a comical vibration to the wisp of white goatee. His enunciation would have been almost totally unintelligible to a stranger. His worn-out passion, resembling in its impotent fierceness the excitement of a senile sensualist, was badly served by a dried throat and toothless gums which seemed to catch the tip of his tongue.

The old terrorist turned slowly on his skinny neck from side to side.

"And I could never get as many as three such men together. So much for your rotten pessimism," he snarled at Michaelis....

The old terrorist, raising an uncertain and clawlike hand, gave a swaggering tilt to a black felt sombrero shading the hollows and ridges of his wasted face

Michaelis

Michaelis, who uncrossed his thick legs similar to bolsters, and slid his feet abruptly under his chair in sign of exasperation.

His laborious wheezing stopped, then, after a gasp or two.

The shortness of breath took all fire, all animation out of his voice; his great, pale cheeks hung like filled pouches, motionless, without a quiver; but in his blue eyes, narrowed as if peering, there was a look of confident shrewdness, a little crazy in its fixity, they must have had while the indomitable optimist sat thinking at night in his cell.

Michaelis, the ticket-of-leave apostle, smiled vaguely with his glued lips; his pasty moon face drooped under the weight of melancholy assent. He had been a prisoner himself.

Round like a distended balloon, he opened his short, thick arms, as if in a pathetically hopeless attempt to embrace and hug to his breast a self-generated universe. He gasped with ardor.

Michaelis gave no signs of having heard anything. His lips seemed glued together for good; not a quiver passed over his heavy cheeks. With troubled eyes, he looked for his round, hard hat, and put it on his round head. His round obese body seemed to float low between the chairs under the sharp elbow of Karl Yundt.

Comrade Ossipon

Seated in front of the fireplace, Comrade Ossipon, ex-medical student, the principal writer of the F. P. leaflets, stretched out his robust legs, keeping the soles of his boots turned up to the glow in the grate. A bush of crinkly yellow hair topped his red, freckled face, with a flattened nose and prominent mouth cast in the rough mold of the negro type. His almond-shaped eyes leered languidly over the high cheekbones.

With his big florid face held between his hands.

The Professor

The dingy little man in spectacles.

His flat, large ears departed widely from the sides of his skull, which looked frail enough for Ossipon to crush between thumb and forefinger; the dome of the forehead seemed to rest on the rim of the spectacles; the flat cheeks, of a greasy, unhealthy complexion, were merely smudged by the miserable poverty of a thin dark whisker. The lamentable inferiority of the whole physique was made ludicrous by the supremely self-confident bearing of the individual. His speech was curt, and he had a particularly impressive manner of keeping silent.

The Professor had turned into a street to the left, and walked along, with his head rigidly erect, in a crowd whose every individual almost overtopped his stunted stature.

Lost in the crowd, miserable and undersized, he meditated confidently on his power.

The unwholesome looking little moral agent of destruction exulted silently in the possession of personal prestige, keeping in check this man armed with the defensive mandate of a menaced society. More fortunate than Caligula, who wished that the Roman Senate had only one head for the better satisfaction of his cruel lust, he beheld in that one man all the forces he had set at defiance: the force of law, property, oppression, and injustice.

Caligula! What a comparison!

Quotes:

"Violence is not a catalyst but a diversion."

"The shoulders of Mr. Verloc, without actually moving, suggested a shrug."

"Every trace of huskiness disappeared from Verloc's voice. The nape of his gross neck became crimson above the velvet collar of his overcoat. His lips quivered before they came widely open."

"Mr. Verloc, getting off the sofa with ponderous reluctance, opened the door leading into the kitchen to get more air, and thus disclosed the innocent Stevie, seated very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable."

"They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed, impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror, too perhaps."

"With all his healthy contempt for the spirit dictating such speeches, the atrocious allusiveness of the words had its effect of Chief Inspector Heat."

"Michaelis had been the object of a revulsion of popular sentiment, the same sentiment which years ago had applauded the ferocity of the life sentence passed upon him for complicity in a rather mad attempt to rescue some prisoners from a police van."

"Don't you know what the police are for, Stevie? They are there so that them as have nothing shouldn't take anything away from them who have."

"The Chief Inspector snatched across the counter the cloth out of her hands, and she sat heavily on the chair. He thought: identification's perfect. And in that moment he had a glimpse into the whole amazing truth. Verloc was the 'other man'."

"A prison was a place as safe from certain unlawful vengeance as the grave, with this advantage, that in prison there is room for hope."

"Mrs. Verloc pursued the visions of sever years' security for Stevie loyally paid for on her part; of security

growing into confidence, into a domestic feeling, stagnant and deep like a placid pool, whose guarded surface hardly shuddered on the occasional passage of Comrade Ossipon, the robust anarchist with shamelessly inviting eyes, whose glance had a corrupt clearness sufficient to enlighten any woman no absolutely imbecile."

"He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men."

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