

The Secret Agent Study Guide

The Secret Agent by Joseph Conrad

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Plot Summary

The Secret Agent by Joseph Conrad, is a classic novel based on actual events, the attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory in 1894. The fictionalized tale revolves around a beautiful, young wife, her simple-minded brother, and her devoted but tortured husband. The novel is a mixture of love story, espionage, and mystery that continues to entertain many years after its original publication date.

The novel opens as Mr. Verloc, a storeowner, makes his way to an appointment at an Embassy in London. At this meeting, Mr. Verloc is revealed to be a secret agent for the French government and is accused of no longer being productive in this capacity. In the past, the Ambassador was a man who trusted Mr. Verloc completely. However, there is a new man in charge now. He is a man of action, who expects all in his employ to also be men of action. This man, Mr. Vladimir, suggests to Mr. Verloc that he create a situation to excite the emotions of the people of London, by setting off a bomb in some scientific place.

While Mr. Verloc struggles with the perceived threat in Mr. Vladimir's suggestion, his friends excite the emotions of his brother-in-law by discussing social reform in terms that the young man misunderstands. Stevie, Mr. Verloc's brother-in-law, is a simple young man who has had difficulty holding a job and now works exclusively in Mr. Verloc's pornography shop.

When a man blows up in Greenwich Park, a few of Mr. Verloc's friends become convinced that he has blown himself up. The police also are immediately suspicious of Mr. Verloc, because of a blue cloth found among the effects of the dead man. One inspector, Chief Inspector Heat, believes a recently paroled friend of Mr. Verloc's, Michaelis, is involved. He is determined to prove it, in order to continue to grow his well-respected reputation. His supervisor, the Assistant Commissioner, disagrees and decides to get involved in the investigation, himself.

Heat goes to Mr. Verloc, only to find out his supervisor has already been there. Heat learns the true identity of the dead man, and that Mr. Verloc was indeed involved. Heat suggests that Mr. Verloc leave the country immediately. The Assistant Commissioner, however, has already offered Mr. Verloc a deal in exchange for information that not only clears Michaelis, but also ends the tyrannical reign of Mr. Vladimir.

Upon learning of the death of her brother, Mrs. Verloc becomes nearly catatonic, as she listens to her husband explain everything that has happened. Mr. Verloc tells his young wife that the death of her brother is as much her fault as his, because she forced Mr. Verloc to spend time with Stevie. It's also her fault that Mr. Verloc's was caught by the police so quickly, because she didn't tell him about the labels she sewed into her brother's coat. Mrs. Verloc becomes homicidal and stabs her husband with a carving knife.



Mrs. Verloc runs from the shop, deathly afraid of dying by the gallows. Mrs. Verloc runs into a friend of her husband's and begs him for help. However, instead of helping her, Ossipon, her husband's friend, abandons her and steals all her money. Mrs. Verloc eventually commits suicide by jumping anonymously off a steamer. Only Ossipon knows the truth about Mrs. Verloc's death.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Secret Agent by Joseph Conrad, is a classic novel based on actual events, including the attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory in 1894. The fictionalized tale revolves around a beautiful, young wife, her simple-minded brother, and her devoted but tortured husband. The novel is a mixture of love story, espionage, and mystery that continues to entertain many years after its original publication date.

Mr. Verloc leaves his shop in the charge of his brother-in-law. He's unconcerned, because the shop gets little business, and his wife is there to care for his brother-in-law. The shop is in the front of his small, brick house. The windows display different magazines and photographs, clearly marking the place as a pornography store. They also sell inks and papers, which, when a young man came inside for the first time and found Mrs. Verloc working the counter, are the items most often sold.

Mr. Verloc lives not only with his wife, Winnie, and brother-in-law, Stevie, but also with his mother-in-law. Mr. Verloc met his wife and her family, when they ran a boarding house in the Belgravian square, and he was a tenant. When Mr. Verloc married Winnie, the boarding house was closed, and Mr. Verloc assumed responsibility for his new wife's family.

Stevie is a simple-minded young man, who has had a lot of trouble holding down a job. This is not because of Stevie's inability to do the tasks assigned to him, but other people's inability to accept Stevie's limitations. Therefore, it has been a blessing for Stevie that Winnie made such a good marriage, and that Mr. Verloc is willing to give Stevie employ in the store. Winnie is very maternal toward Stevie. Mr. Verloc is aware of this and allows her the indulgence.

Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter is primarily to introduce the main characters. However, by introducing the characters in the fashion that he does, Conrad foreshadows certain events that will take place in later chapters of his novel. The mention of the nature of the shop the Verloc's run suggests that not everything about these people is respectable. This foreshadows the illegal actions that Mr. Verloc will engage in later in the novel. The introduction of Winnie and her brother Stevie suggests conflict later in the book that will revolve around Stevie's special nature.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Mr. Verloc left the house quite early this morning, an unusual thing for him. Mr. Verloc normally enjoys staying up until late at night and sleeping until noon. This morning, however, he has an appointment that he has failed to tell his wife about. Mr. Verloc walks through the streets of London, observing the people around him as he goes. Mr. Verloc feels that he looks like any other tradesman in London. Mr. Verloc could be a mechanic or some other well-to-do tradesman. However, there is an air about him that suggests otherwise, a subtleness about him that speaks of gambling halls.

Mr. Verloc approaches his destination, a well-known address on Porthill Street. A porter ushers Mr. Verloc into an Embassy and escorts him into a small, over furnished room. Soon, Privy Councillor Wurmt, Chacelier d'Ambassade walks in with an armload of papers and a distracted air. The Councillor tells Mr. Verloc that he has some of his reports, and he is not happy with the local police. Mr. Verloc listens without comment. The Councillor then goes on to tell Mr. Verloc that the nature of his reports is no longer satisfactory, that the Embassy requires action on his part rather than simple writing. When it appears that Mr. Verloc does not understand the problem with his reports, the Councillor suggests that he speak with Mr. Vladimir, the First Secretary.

The First Secretary enters with a vulgar remark regarding Mr. Verloc's appearance. Then, Mr. Vladimir begins the interview with continuous unkind words about Mr. Verloc and his work with the Embassy. Mr. Vladimir was told before he took his current position that Mr. Verloc was the most valuable spy an Embassy in London had. However, since taking the job, Mr. Vladimir has been reviewing Mr. Verloc's reports and is not happy with the information that they contain. There is nothing sensational about the reports. They are simply reports, and no action has been taken on Mr. Verloc's part.

Mr. Vladimir then explains to Mr. Verloc exactly what he expects of him. There should be some sort of event to excite the middle class people of London. Mr. Verloc is an agent provocateur. He should provoke people's emotions to encourage change. Then, Mr. Vladimir suggests that Mr. Verloc entice his group of Red Committee friends to plant a bomb somewhere. It must be somewhere that will create fear in the people of London. Art houses would not do it, Embassies are not a good choice either. Perhaps the best place is somewhere where science. That would cause a satisfactory reaction.

Mr. Verloc mentions that it will cost a lot of money to plan and execute this sort of plot. Mr. Vladimir responds that if he does not do something, he will be on his own, without the monthly paycheck the Embassy has provided until now. When Mr. Vladimir learns that Mr. Verloc is married, he is terribly disappointed. Mr. Vladimir says that all good secret agents are not involved in permanent relationships.



Mr. Verloc goes home and finds his wife dishing up dinner. Mr. Verloc is very disturbed by the conversation with Mr. Vladimir. Through his sulking, Mr. Verloc watches his little family at the dinner table and wonders how he came to be the sole support of all these people and what will happen to him if the Embassy stops paying him and stops protecting the secrets he has shared with them. Mr. Verloc knows something must be done, but he does not know what.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Mr. Verloc is called to the Embassy during the day, an unusual time that greatly upsets him. By this reaction, the reader is forewarned that there is something strange about this meeting. When Mr. Verloc arrives at the Embassy and meets with the Councillor, not only does the reader learn that Mr. Verloc is the secret agent of the title, but also that Mr. Verloc's supervisors are not happy with him. This foreshadows a violent act, still waiting to be revealed to the reader.

Mr. Vladimir's insistence on action from Mr. Verloc foreshadows future events involving some sort of bombing of a scientific center. It also touches on one of the themes of this novel, social reform and acts of terror. Mr. Vladimir wants, in essence, for Mr. Verloc to create an act of terrorism by setting of a bomb in a public, scientific center. Mr. Vladimir wants to shake the middle class of this English city, that he obviously dislikes, into the knowledge that no one is ever safe. Mr. Verloc, in turn, feels that his livelihood and his very safety have been threatened, should he fail to act as Mr. Vladimir has asked. This also foreshadows many events, yet to take place in this novel.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Mr. Verloc is in the parlor behind his shop with three of his International Red Committee friends. Michaelis, a ticket of leave apostle (a paroled felon), is talking about the effects of Capitalism on social reform. However, Michaelis was in jail for so long that he is not accustomed to expressing his thoughts to other people any longer. Therefore, his logic tends to be scattered and difficult to follow. Finally, Karl Yundt breaks into Michaelis tirade and tells him how scattered he sounds. Michaelis is annoyed by this, because he feels it is not his fault that his thoughts are so difficult to organize.

Ossipon, another of the group, breaks into the conversation with a comment about Stevie, Mr. Verloc's brother-in-law, who is just then sitting at the kitchen table drawing circles over and over again. Ossipon believes Stevie is a degenerate, capable of one day becoming a criminal. Ossipon, a failed medical student, quotes Lombroso, a criminologist, in his declaration. Yundt tells him that he is wrong.

Michaelis talks of the treatment that prisoners endured at the hands of people like Lombroso, while he was in prison. Ossipon is quieted by this blunt truth, but not before he attempts to explain himself. Stevie has been quietly listening to all of this from the kitchen door. Michaelis continues his original thoughts, discussing how the big capitalists were devouring the little capitalists, and how all the poor were suffering for it. Then, Michaelis suggests patience is all the action that is needed, because eventually they will all devour each other, and the poor will rise again. Ossipon does not agree.

Action is necessary, Ossipon says. Michaelis agrees, but the action he has in mind is more through education, and the arts and sciences. These are the things that will bring the phoenix out of the ashes. Ossipon again disagrees, saying knowledge is not helpful and that only emotion is helpful. Yundt announces that the constant state of economic conditions is cannibalistic. Stevie hears this and is greatly upset by it. The three men then take their leave, and Mr. Verloc sees them out, gratefully.

Mr. Verloc goes around the room putting out the lights, his thoughts full of his friends. Mr. Verloc is disappointed with their opinions, still tied up in emotional knots over what Mr. Vladimir told him. When Mr. Verloc finally looks up and finds Stevie watching him, he does not know what to do with the boy. Mr. Verloc quietly suggests that Stevie go to bed, but the boy is clearly upset. Mr. Verloc goes upstairs and wakes his wife to let her know about Stevie. While she is gone, Mr. Verloc undresses, still thinking of his problem.

When Mrs. Verloc returns to the room, she finds her husband standing at the window. Mrs. Verloc talks her husband into bed and offers to take his mind off his problems, but Mr. Verloc is not interested in distractions. Mrs. Verloc tells her husband that her brother is upset about what he heard in the parlor, and she had to wake her mother to sit with



him until he falls asleep. Mr. Verloc is unconcerned with the boy and asks his wife to put out the light, so that they can go to sleep.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Mr. Verloc's friends discuss the state of current affairs, touching on the theme of social reform and acts of terror. This discussion greatly upsets Stevie, Mr. Verloc's brother-in-law. Through this, the reader learns that Stevie is very sensitive to cruelty toward other human beings, a fact clearly shown by his reaction to Yundt's description of the current economic conditions. This foreshadows Stevie's reactions to latter events, as well as Stevie's role in Mr. Verloc's terrorism plot.

The relationship between Stevie and Mr. Verloc is also touched upon in this chapter, exploring one small aspect of the theme of relationships. Stevie is an oddity in Mr. Verloc's mind, a person to be cared for and supported, but not necessarily spoken to or personally cared for by Mr. Verloc, himself. Mr. Verloc tells the reader that he neither likes nor dislikes Stevie. Mr. Verloc accepts the boy, simply because he is a part of his wife's life, and he loves his wife very much. This also touches on the theme of trust. It is clear that Mrs. Verloc must trust her husband in order to bring her mother and brother into his home.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Ossipon is clearly upset, when he walks into a neighborhood bar one afternoon. Ossipon has just learned from a paperboy that a man was blown up in Greenwich Park that morning. Ossipon is doubly surprised and upset,. Sitting at the bar, he finds a man, called "The Professor." This man is known to build bombs, such as the one that went off in the park that day.

Ossipon sits beside him and asks if he has heard the news. The man has not, however, he is also not surprised by it. Ossipon wonders what would happen if the police connected the bomb with The Professor. The Professor laughs and shows Ossipon the detonator for a bomb that he always carries in his pocket. If the police ever try to arrest The Professor in a public place, he will simply reach into his pocket and detonate a bomb that will kill him and anyone within fifty feet.

The Professor then tells Ossipon that he is not afraid of anyone. His only desire in life is to create the perfect detonator. The Professor says that he works for no one, other than himself. Ossipon pushes The Professor on the bomb that went off that morning, asking if he recently sold anyone a bomb that could have done it. After much delay, The Professor finally confesses that he had recently sold such a bomb. The bomb he built was hidden inside a varnish can to disguise its true nature. The Professor says he sold this bomb to Mr. Verloc.

Ossipon is very upset by this information. Ossipon assumes that it was Mr. Verloc who had blown himself up. Ossipon does not know if he should go to Mr. Verloc's shop to see if he truly did blow himself up, or if he should stay away in case the police have already learned the dead man's identity. The Professor leaves, and by the time Ossipon follows, he is nowhere to be found.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The theme of social reform and acts of terror is touched upon here again. Clearly, Mr. Verloc has made his decision as to what he should do to please Mr. Vladimir. However, this decision has lead to someone's death, perhaps Mr. Verloc's. This also foreshadows future chapters, since the writer does not reveal at this point exactly who it is that has died.

The Professor is an interesting character. The Professor, though a bomb maker, is not interested in the same social issues that spur Mr. Verloc and his friends. The Professor is solely interested in bombs, which again touches on the theme of social reform and acts of terror, emphasizing the acts of terror. The Professor only wants to aid in destruction, but the reason for the destruction does not bother him. There is also foreshadowing in Ossipon's next action. Will he go to Verloc's shop, or will he stay

away? Ossipon's decision will color events yet to take place, therefore, this is foreshadowing.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The Professor walks down the street, his hand wrapped around the detonator in his pocket. The Professor observes the people he walks past, amazed at how secure they all feel, unaware that at any time a bomb could go off and kill all of them. The Professor then turns into an alley between two busy streets and runs into Chief Inspector Heat. The Professor's hand tightens on the detonator. Heat says that he is not interested in The Professor today. The Professor laughs and says he better be glad for that, because he will never succeed in arresting him.

Chief Inspector Heat is still thinking of the scene that he has just come from. Heat assured the Secretary of State himself last month that no acts of terrorism would happen in the near future, because Heat himself has his eye on all known terrorists. Except this morning, a bomb has gone off. Heat has just returned from the morgue, where a box full of unrecognizable human remains that had to be retrieved with a shovel, waits to be identified. Heat is disgusted by the sight; however, he is a cop and draws upon the force of his personality to look at the remains with a critical eye. Finally, Heat picks up a piece of cloth that was once an overcoat and finds a blue cloth with an address written on it.

Heat is rushing back to police headquarters, now, sure that he has solved this case single-handedly. Heat is deeply annoyed at having run into The Professor. Heat quickly dismisses the anarchist and continues on his way. At headquarters, he goes to the office of his supervisor, the Assistant Commissioner. Heat has earned his position within the department without the help of his supervisors, and he does not like having to deal with these men, who do not even participate in real police work anymore, especially his current supervisor. Heat walks into the office with the intention of only revealing what he must, so he can be left alone. However, his new supervisor has other plans.

Heat tells the Assistant Commissioner that there were two men spotted by a witness in the park that morning, one fair-haired and one older and larger. The medical examiner believes the man who died is the fair-haired gentleman, and the larger one was seen walking away from the scene before the explosion. Heat then tells his supervisor that the gentlemen were also spotted at the train station coming in on a train from Maze Hill, a station not far from where Michaelis is known to have been staying in order to write his autobiography. The Assistant Commissioner is deeply upset to learn that Michaelis may have been associated with this unpleasant business.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The introduction of Chief Inspector Heat is foreshadowing into the rest of this investigation. While Heat is not currently interested in The Professor for this bombing, it



is clear that he knows who he is and probably is aware that The Professor had something to do with it. However, at this time, he does not have any evidence of that. There is the blue cloth that he found with the remains of the body. This again is foreshadowing, because the cloth is a clear clue into who may have died that morning. When it is later revealed that the victim was fair-haired, the reader is made aware that it is not Mr. Verloc who has died, since he did not have fair colored hair. This satisfies some foreshadowing from the previous chapter.

Another man is seen with the fair-haired victim, a stocky man who could be Mr. Verloc. This opens up more questions for the reader. If the victim is not Mr. Verloc, then who is it? This again is foreshadowing. The fact that the victim and his accomplice got off a train from the same place where Michaelis is staying also raises questions and seems to point the evidence toward Mr. Verloc and his friends. However, the most interesting foreshadowing at the end of this chapter is the Assistant Commissioner's reaction to the mention of Michaelis's name.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The patroness of Michaelis is a good friend of the Assistant Commissioner's wife. The Assistant Commissioner is very grateful to this great woman for teaching his wife how to be a proper wife. The Assistant Commissioner remembers a time when he met Michaelis. Michaelis had been invited to the woman's home and told his story of how he was convicted of murder for planning a prison break that ended tragically with the death of a police officer. Michaelis was very charming and articulate, the Assistant Commissioner remembers. The lady took Michaelis under her wing immediately, and it is her home in which Michaelis now lives.

The Assistant Commissioner is concerned that, if they link Michaelis to this bombing, the lady will suffer irreparable damage to her reputation and will never forgive him. Therefore, his wife will not forgive him. The Assistant Commissioner decides that he must take an active role in this investigation, an idea that is not totally unpleasant to him. The Assistant Commissioner was once the chief of police in a small English province, where he could participate in real police work, a job he greatly enjoyed. However, when in London on vacation, he married on the spur of the moment, and his wife was not excited about living abroad. Therefore, he took this job, and has unhappily settled into it.

The Assistant Commissioner asks Heat what exactly he has against Michaelis. Heat refuses to reveal any evidence against Michaelis, except the train that the two suspects walked off of. Heat also reveals, when pushed, that he has not contacted the police in Maze Hill to verify his current information. Furthermore, Heat reveals that Michaelis has not done anything wrong.

When asked about the bomb, Heat does not mention his encounter with The Professor. In truth, Heat is afraid of The Professor and is reluctant to continue any type of communication with him. However, Heat does reveal that he has a secret contact who keeps him aware of the actions of all the known anarchists in the area. Heat is confident that the information his informant has given him is true.

The Assistant Commissioner feels that Heat is hiding some information. The Assistant Commissioner pushes Heat, leading Heat to reveal his deep dislike of his supervisor, until Heat shows the Assistant Commissioner the blue cloth he took from the coroner's office. The Assistant Commissioner studies the address on the cloth and asks if Heat knows who it belongs to. Heat eventually reveals that the address is Mr. Verloc's. Heat met Mr. Verloc in the bathroom of the Baron Stott-Wartenheim, the French Ambassador several years before. Heat was guarding two Imperial Highnesses and the Imperial Chancellor at the time, and the Baron informed Heat that one of his secret agents had information regarding the three gentlemen. Heat spoke to him and acted on his information.



Several months later, Heat saw the same man in the street and had a cop follow them. The officer reported that the man was one Mr. Adolf Verloc, and that he had gotten married that day. Heat approached Mr. Verloc several weeks later and offered to protect his business packages from discovery, if he would act as his informant. That was seven years ago.

The Assistant Commissioner asks if the home of Mr. Verloc is being watched. Heat assures him that that's not the case. The Assistant Commissioner gives the blue cloth back and dismisses Heat after demanding an update on the case the following morning. After Heat leaves the building, the Assistant Commissioner also leaves.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter begins with a flashback into the past of the Assistant Commissioner. Now, the reader knows why the mention of Michaelis upset the Assistant Commissioner, satisfying foreshadowing from the previous chapter. This also creates new foreshadowing by presenting to the reader the dilemma the Assistant Commissioner now faces, in regards to his and his wife's relationship with Michaelis's patron.

There is also foreshadowing into the future of the investigation with this chapter. The blue cloth with Mr. Verloc's address on it reveals to the reader the fact that there is only a small number of people who could have been the victim that morning. The fact that Mr. Verloc has been working for Heat also reveals to the reader that Mr. Verloc has a lack of loyalty to any one agency. This foreshadows the events of coming chapters, suggesting perhaps a scenario that touches not only on the theme of trust, but also the theme of relationships. Finally, the Assistant Commissioner's decision to investigate this case on his own also sets up foreshadowing, as it relates to the rest of the police investigation into this tragic event.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The Assistant Commissioner walks to a public edifice and speaks to the private secretary of the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State is very tired, having worked all day. The Assistant Commissioner is shown into the Secretary of State's private rooms to brief him on the bombing in Greenwich Park. The Assistant Commissioner tells the Secretary of State all he has just learned, minus unnecessary details. The Assistant Commissioner then asks the Secretary of State to remove Heat from the case. When pressed on his reasons, the Assistant Commissioner says that he has reason to believe that Heat's opinion on the case is jaded and that he, the Assistant Commissioner, will be able to get to the bottom of the plot quickly.

The Secretary of State agrees with the Assistant Commissioner's plan and asks that he come back to report his findings that very night. The Assistant Commissioner is pleased with this decision. The Assistant Commissioner then outlines his actions, and the Secretary of State dismisses him. The Assistant Commissioner is very happy about the entire meeting and is excited to begin work on his plan. After exchanging a few words with the private secretary regarding the case and the Nationalization of Fisheries Bill that the Secretary of State is currently working on, the Assistant Commissioner leaves.

The Assistant Commissioner goes back to his office to make sure Heat has gone home. He then sends a note to his wife to apologize for not being able to escort her to dinner at Michaelis's patron's home that night. The Assistant Commissioner then changes into more casual clothes and goes to an Italian restaurant for dinner. At the restaurant, the Assistant Commissioner notices how everyone in the place seems to be without nationality, as he himself appears to be. This idea fascinates him, this ability to hide one's true self. After his dinner, Assistant Commissioner goes down Brett Street where Mr. Verloc's home and shop are. The Assistant Commissioner hides from an officer walking his beat and observes the open door of the shop from across the street. The home seems warm to the Assistant Commissioner, however the lack of light on the street causes it to appear sinister in the Assistant Commissioner's eyes.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The Assistant Commissioner's conversation with the Secretary of State outlines a plan of action that foreshadows more of the investigation into the bombing at Greenwich Park. The Assistant Commissioner, who is used to doing his own investigations, has jumped at the chance to be more involved in this investigation. He does this not only because of his wife and her friend, which touches on the theme of relationships, but because of the fact that he enjoys this sort of work. There is perhaps the possibility that the Assistant Commissioner is also jumping at the chance to show up one of his best,

yet cockiest, investigators. This, too, is foreshadowing into the remaining parts of the investigation.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Mrs. Verloc's mother, a few weeks before the bombing, has arranged to move into a charity home. Mrs. Verloc's mother worked for quite a time to convince the officials of the charity that she did deserve this home. This was difficult, because the charity homes were usually for widows without children. However, Mrs. Verloc's mother managed to cry every time an official pushed her for answers and was able to charm her way into one of the tiny houses. Mrs. Verloc's mother has made this move, because she wants to be sure that Stevie will always be taken care of. She feels that it is best to make sure of this before she dies, rather than worry about it on her deathbed.

Mrs. Verloc is not happy about her mother's decision and feels slighted that the woman no longer wishes to live with her. However, Winnie's mother has not explained her true motivations to her. On the ride over to the charity home, Stevie becomes upset when the cab driver begins to whip the horse, because once Stevie was whipped, and he knows how much it hurts. Stevie tries to climb off the cab and walk, however, Winnie talks him into getting back on.

At the house, after taking a few packages inside, Stevie talks to the cab driver. The cab driver complains about how difficult it is to work as a cabby at night and provide for his wife and four children. Stevie becomes very upset about the man's plight. On the way to the bus stop, Stevie discusses this with Winnie. Stevie says it is difficult to be poor and that the police should do something. Winnie must explain to Stevie that the police do not help people, simply because they are poor. Winnie says the police are there to make sure that the poor do not take things from the rich. The Winnie makes a silent promise to herself that Stevie will never be poor or want for anything.

Mr. Verloc is mostly oblivious to the domestic problems in his own house. Mr. Verloc is aware that Winnie's mother has moved away, however, it does not really matter much to him. Stevie, however, shows more respect and admiration to Mr. Verloc since his mother is gone, because Winnie has made it clear to him that Mr. Verloc is to be respected. Winnie discusses her concern for Stevie with her husband that night, as they get ready for bed. Winnie is concerned that Stevie will be depressed. Mr. Verloc tells her to bring in the woman from down the street to help her, because he has to go out of the country on business for the next few weeks.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter takes place several weeks before the bombing, so in that sense, it is a flashback. Mrs. Verloc's mother has decided to move out to be sure that Stevie will be cared for after she has died. This decision illustrates the themes of trust and relationships. Mrs. Verloc's mother is entrusting her most valuable asset, her son, to her



only daughter. Plus, she is ending her relationship in the family, as it has been defined through the first few chapters of the novel. This is foreshadowing of future events that the reader has already been introduced to in previous chapters. Mrs. Verloc's mother's absence will change the dynamics of the family life. This is also foreshadowing into future events.

Mr. Verloc's apparent oblivion to these family dynamics also foreshadows future events. Mr. Verloc does not seem to care one way or the other about Winnie's mother nor her brother. However, Stevie is so infatuated with his sister's husband that he adjusts his behaviors in order to prevent Mr. Verloc from becoming annoyed by him. This also foreshadows future events, namely Stevie's unshakable trust of his brother-in-law and his willingness to obey anything the other man may request of him.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Mr. Verloc comes back from his trip ten days later, still distracted by his troubles. Winnie is similarly distracted by Stevie's depression at his mother's sudden departure. At breakfast, the first day of Mr. Verloc's return, Stevie becomes agitated when the neighbor woman begins to complain about the difficulties of raising children on little money. That afternoon, Mr. Verloc decides to go for a walk, and Winnie requests that he take Stevie with him. This surprises Mr. Verloc, as Winnie has never made this request before. However, he agrees to do it. Winnie assures Mr. Verloc that he need not worry about Stevie wondering off, since she knows he will find his way home on his own if necessary.

For several days, Mr. Verloc continues to take Stevie on walks with him. Winnie is pleased by her husband's new interest in her brother. Winnie watches them walk away and thinks how they could be father and son. Winnie is pleased by this idea. Winnie is concerned, however, about the things Stevie hears when he is out with Mr. Verloc, and Mr. Verloc runs into his friends. Mr. Verloc does not comment on these concerns, since it was Winnie's idea that Mr. Verloc spend more time with the boy.

One day, Mr. Verloc suggests that Stevie go on a little vacation in the country. Mr. Verloc suggests a change of scenery will help Stevie get past the absence of his mother. When put this way, Winnie cannot object. Mr. Verloc takes Stevie to Michaelis's home in the country. Stevie goes most willingly, almost offended when Winnie tries to straighten his collar before he goes, acting more adult than he ever has before. Now, Winnie is alone quite often, something she is not used to. Mr. Verloc goes out most every day for his walks and is gone an extra long time the day of the bombing.

When Mr. Verloc comes home that night, he seems ill. Winnie prepares him a meal, while he sits close to the fire, shivering all over. Mr. Verloc tells Winnie he has removed all their money from the bank and suggests that they might move to France or America some time soon. Winnie is unwilling to go, though she is affectionate with her husband, offering to take care of him in any fashion he might enjoy. Winnie encourages him to eat the bread and meat that she has prepared for him, until the shop bell rings. Winnie suggests that Mr. Verloc take care of it, since she has her apron on.

When Mr. Verloc returns to retrieve his overcoat, Winnie goes into the shop to see who has called. Winnie sees a foreign looking gentleman and assumes he is one of Mr. Verloc's many friends from the continent. Winnie asks him if he speaks English and then suggests a hotel that he might ask Mr. Verloc to take him to for the night. When the man asks if perhaps her husband might have slipped out the back door, Winnie goes looking for her husband. Mr. Verloc is in the parlor still. Winnie asks if the man is from the Embassy. Mr. Verloc is surprised to hear her ask that question, until Winnie tells him



that he talks in his sleep. Mr. Verloc hands Winnie a new pigskin pocketbook full of money and asks her to hide it. Winnie slips it under her bodice.

A few minutes after Mr. Verloc and the stranger leave, Chief Inspector Heat comes into the store. Heat is in street clothes, therefore, Winnie does not know who he is. Heat asks for her husband. When he learns that Mr. Verloc has gone out and with whom, Heat becomes agitated. Heat begins to question Winnie about the bombing, however, Winnie knows nothing about it. Winnie does not make a habit of getting the evening paper and has no reason to know about the bombing. Then, Heat notices the marking ink that the Verloc's sell in their store. Heat pulls out the blue cloth and asks Winnie if she recognizes it.

Winnie identifies the cloth as a piece that she sewed into Stevie's overcoat. Heat wants to know what her brother looks like and is pleased with her description. Heat then hands Winnie the evening paper. However, Mr. Verloc reenters the store before she has a chance to read it. Heat and Mr. Verloc go into the parlor, and Winnie kneels before the door to listen at the keyhole, concerned as she is now for her brother. Through the course of their conversation, Winnie finds out that Stevie has blown himself up. Mr. Verloc arranged the entire plot, Mr. Verloc took Stevie to the park, gave him the bomb and left him to plant the bomb.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The beginning of this chapter starts again in the past, before reaching the day of the bomb and returning to the timing of the previous few chapters. Mr. Verloc's relationship with Stevie begins to grow in this chapter, touching on the theme of relationships, as Mr. Verloc begins to take Stevie on his walks. During the course of these walks, Mr. Verloc learns that Stevie is quite concerned with the human condition, especially with that of the poor in their country. Since their opinions on the subject seem to be similar, Mr. Verloc begins to form a plot that will lead to Stevie's tragic death, thus foreshadowing events that have in essence already happened.

When Mr. Verloc returns the day of the bombing, Winnie is quite affectionate with her husband. She's terribly concerned about the cold that she believes he is developing, touching again on the themes of trust and relationships. This affection foreshadows, with some irony, the reaction that Winnie will display when she learns the truth about her husband's ailment later that same evening. The stranger in the shop is clearly the Assistant Commissioner, whose arrival was foreshadowed in a previous chapter. Heat's reaction to the Assistant Commissioner's appearance was also foreshadowed in a previous chapter. Heat's actions, too, seem foreshadowed. Heat is clearly an unkind and ambitious man, who will do whatever it takes to solve a crime. Today, the extent of his ambition seems to include announcing Stevie's death without the compassion Winnie deserves.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The Assistant Commissioner returns to the Secretary of State to report on his current progress. On the way inside, the Assistant Commissioner shares with the private secretary that a big fish in London political circles will soon be taken down. The Assistant Commissioner tells the Secretary of State that Mr. Verloc has admitted that Mr. Vladimir of the Embassy is the one who masterminded the bombing in Greenwich Park. He also states that the Greenwich Observatory was the intended target. The Assistant Commissioner is confident that, with Mr. Verloc's testimony, they will be able to get Mr. Vladimir. The testimony also clearly absolves Michaelis of any involvement. The Secretary of State is concerned that the Assistant Commissioner did not put Mr. Verloc in prison. The Assistant Commissioner says that it was unnecessary. Mr. Verloc has a wife, who will be unwilling to leave the country, and Mr. Verloc will not leave her behind.

The Assistant Commissioner then goes home and changes before joining his wife at her friend's home. Once there, the Assistant Commissioner discovers that Mr. Vladimir is a guest. The Assistant Commissioner follows Mr. Vladimir out of the house a few minutes later and tells him of his conversation with Mr. Verloc. The Assistant Commissioner makes it clear to Mr. Vladimir that his days of anarchy are finished. The Assistant Commissioner is convinced that Mr. Vladimir will no longer be a threat to London.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The Assistant Commissioner is quite satisfied with everything that Mr. Verloc has told him and happy to report to anyone who cares that Michaelis had nothing to do with the bombing, thus satisfying foreshadowing from several other chapters. The Assistant Commissioner's conversation with Mr. Vladimir also satisfies foreshadowing in this chapter by scaring the man into submission and ending his reign of terror over London. It also opens some foreshadowing for the reader, who must wonder what Mr. Vladimir will do now, and if it have any consequences for Mr. Verloc.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Mr. Verloc confronts Winnie in the shop after Heat has left. Winnie refuses to look at Mr. Verloc, even after he tries to physically remove her hands from her face. Winnie rises and runs into the kitchen. Mr. Verloc finds her there, with her head resting on the table. Mr. Verloc begins to talk to her, telling her about his life as a secret agent for the first time and explaining everything that has happened up to this point. Winnie listens, thinking of Stevie and all the sacrifices that she has made for him. Winnie thinks of how she married this man and put up with his unpleasant friends for Stevie. All of that is now pointless.

Mr. Verloc tries to convince his wife of how much he loves her, and how that should be enough for her now. Winnie barely hears him. Winnie's head is so full of memories of her young brother, of taking care of him when even she was still a baby, of protecting him from his father, of caring for him when no one else would or could. Winnie then thinks of how much Mr. Verloc and Stevie looked like father and son the last time she saw them together. Winnie becomes convinced that now she is free. Winnie goes upstairs, and Mr. Verloc thinks she has gone to rest. Mr. Verloc goes into the parlor and finds the dinner Winnie sat out for him earlier. Suddenly, Mr. Verloc is very hungry. He begins to eat quickly, leaving the carving knife for the meat on a plate. After a while, Winnie returns from upstairs, dressed completely in hat and veil as though about to go out.

Mr. Verloc tells Winnie that she cannot go out tonight, not even to tell her mother about Stevie. Winnie refuses to answer. Mr. Verloc then tells Winnie that she must prepare herself. Mr. Verloc is sure he will go to prison very soon, and Winnie must take care of the shop. When Mr. Verloc is released from prison, they will sell the shop and leave the country. Mr. Verloc is afraid that after his release from prison, he will be a target for murder from the people he crossed in his time as a secret agent. Mr. Verloc assures Winnie repeatedly that all will be well, if he can just survive until they can sell the shop. Then, when Winnie still refuses to respond to him, Mr. Verloc tells Winnie that he forgives her for what she has done, sewing the labels into Stevie's coat and not telling him. If not for that, the police might never have found out that it was he who was behind the plot. Mr. Verloc lays on the couch and says that Stevie's death is as much Winnie's fault as his own, because she forced him to take the boy for all those walks.

Winnie becomes very focused on the blame that Mr. Verloc has put on her shoulders. This man who took her brother from her, this man who murdered her brother is attempting to blame her for it. When Mr. Verloc calls to her and asks her to come to him, Winnie goes willingly, picking up the knife as she goes. Mr. Verloc does not see the knife and never moves a limb, before she plunges it into his breast. Winnie watches her husband for a long few minutes, before she sees the blood dripping from his wound. This sight causes her to jump up and run from the shop.



Chapter 11 Analysis

Winnie is understandably upset about her brother's death. Mr. Verloc's lack of understanding in this moment of crisis has been foreshadowed in previous chapters. Mr. Verloc has never showed much interest in his wife's family members, except in the idea that they were people to support and that they were important to his wife. However, Mr. Verloc's only concern in regards to Stevie's death was the idea of telling his wife, and Heat took care of that. Now, touching on the theme of relationships, Mr. Verloc wants his wife to get over her grief and start paying attention to him and his needs.

Winnie's reaction to Stevie's death is expected. Winnie's concern for Stevie has been well established in previous chapters, thus this reaction is satisfaction of past foreshadowing. This also touches on the theme of relationships. Winnie loved her brother and her affection for her husband only went as far as how much he could help her brother. With her brother gone, Winnie no longer feels any loyalty to Mr. Verloc. In fact, Winnie realizes she is now free of the bonds that Mr. Verloc's wedding ring has placed on her.

The theme of trust is also a big factor in this chapter. Winnie married Mr. Verloc for the sole purpose of taking care of her brother. Winnie trusted Mr. Verloc to provide a home and food for herself and her family. Winnie also began to trust the Mr. Verloc would provide the same diligence and concern for Stevie that she showed, in exchange for her role as a good wife. Mr. Verloc betrayed Winnie in this. Therefore, she betrayed him by taking his life. This was foreshadowed in previous chapters.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Winnie runs from the house, unsure of what to do now. Winnie cannot go to her mother. Winnie's relationship with her mother was primarily about Stevie, and now that Stevie was gone, that bond was broken. Winnie is deathly afraid of hanging in the gallows. Winnie keeps thinking of the line she has read in the paper many times, the drop given is fourteen feet. Winnie does not want to fall fourteen feet.

Winnie decides she must throw herself from the nearest bridge. However, emotional shock has made it impossible for Winnie to walk very far. Suddenly, a man she knows comes up to her to offer his aid. It is Ossipon, the most vile of all her husband's friends. However, in her dire need, Winnie is happy to see Ossipon. Winnie tries to tell Ossipon what it is she has done, however, she does not speak as clearly as she thinks she has. Winnie begs Ossipon to take her away, to help her avoid the gallows. Ossipon agrees, believing that Mr. Verloc blew himself up that morning. Ossipon remembers a train that will leave at midnight and suggests they take it. However, Winnie remembers that she forgot to lock the door at the shop and insists they return.

At the shop, Winnie sees that the light is still on in the parlor. Winnie tells Ossipon to go in and turn it off. Ossipon sees Mr. Verloc's body and becomes ill, suddenly frightened for his own life. Winnie cries out that a cop has seen her. Winnie locks the door, and they wait in the dark. When the policeman checks the door handle, Winnie begs Ossipon to kill her before they can take her away to the gallows. Winnie promises to give Ossipon anything he wants, her body, her love, in exchange for his help in any manner necessary. When the policeman leaves without discovering them, Ossipon agrees to take Winnie to the train.

Ossipon and Winnie agree that they should not be seen together. Winnie gives Ossipon Mr. Verloc's money and assures him that it cannot be traced back to Mr. Verloc, because he banked under a false name. At the train station, Ossipon buys the tickets, slips one to Winnie, and then meets her in a private compartment on the train. Ossipon assures Winnie that everything will be all right. However, when the train begins to move, Ossipon jumps, abandoning Winnie with no money.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Winnie's fear of the gallows too has been foreshadowed. The writer clearly describes Winnie as a respectable, law abiding woman. There is no reason Winnie would ever be the type of person who would do anything to face the gallows. Now that she has, she is immobilized by fear. It is an ironic twist that the only friend Winnie finds she can turn to in this time of trouble is the one friend of her husband's that she has never liked

because of his leering glances. However, like she did with Mr. Verloc for the protection of Stevie, Winnie is willing to do anything to assure Ossipon's loyalty and help.

Ossipon's fear of Winnie, while perhaps justified, is also somewhat ironic. Winnie is a beautiful woman, and Ossipon has been interested in her since the day he met her. When Ossipon abandons her, a moment that has been foreshadowed through the description of his character, Ossipon has put the final nail in Winnie's coffin. This foreshadows the final chapter of the novel, causing the reader to wonder what will happen to poor Winnie.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Ossipon and The Professor are at the country home of Michaelis on a visit. Michaelis is all but oblivious to what has been happening around him. Michaelis was not even aware that Mr. Verloc had come and collected Stevie on the day of the bombing.

Ossipon suggested that they go out and get a drink. The Professor teases Ossipon about his new drinking habit. The past few weeks Ossipon has been seen drinking more often than pursuing his collection of beautiful girlfriends. The Professor wonders why this is so. Ossipon fingers a newspaper clipping in his pocket that has the answer. The clipping is of an article about a woman who threw herself overboard of a steamer. Ossipon knows the woman was Winnie Verloc, and he is full of guilt for his role in her death. Ossipon cannot bring himself to touch another woman after what he has done.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Ironically, Ossipon feels guilt for what he has done. Perhaps, he is not the cold person he appeared to be in the last chapter. The article in his pocket clearly answers the foreshadowing that left the reader questioning Winnie's fate in the last chapter. The novel is titled *The Secret Agent*. However, in another twist of irony, the novel seems to be more about what Winnie has lost and about Winnie herself, than about the secret agent, her husband. Perhaps the title of the novel does not refer to Mr. Verloc after all.



Characters

Mr. Adolf Verloc

Mr. Verloc is a lazy man, who has chosen as his profession to sell pornographic material. Mr. Verloc is half-French, half-English. Due to this dual citizenship, Mr. Verloc is able to act as a spy for his home country of France while living and working in London. Mr. Verloc was known as a very valuable secret agent under the previous ambassador of the French government in London. However, the old ambassador has gone and his post has been taken by another more ambitious man. Mr. Verloc finds himself in a position that forces him to be more active or face the consequences of his prior activities as a secret agent.

Mr. Verloc is a member of the Red Committee, a communist group committed to social change. However, Mr. Verloc finds it difficult to find someone to help him create the proactive situation that his new boss at the embassy has asked him to create. Eventually, Mr. Verloc is forced to make a decision that will save him from exposure but will put his young brother-in-law at risk. Mr. Verloc neither likes nor dislikes his simple-minded brother-in-law. Mr. Verloc loves his wife very much, therefore, he puts up with her family and the boy. When his wife encourages him to take the boy for walks and to spend more time with him after their mother moves out in order to distract the boy from his grief, Mr. Verloc realizes the boy would be the perfect accomplice in his plan. Mr. Verloc knows that if the boy were caught setting a bomb at the Greenwich Observatory, he would only be placed in a hospital because of his mental limitations. It never occurs to Mr. Verloc that the boy might hurt himself in the process of setting the bomb. When the unthinkable does occur, Mr. Verloc deeply underestimates his wife's affection for her brother.

Winnie Verloc

Winnie Verloc is the daughter of a disabled widow and sister to a mentally challenged young man. Winnie, from a very young age, has taken on the responsibilities of caring for her family, beginning with the daily protection of her younger brother from their father's prideful disgust of his son's infirmity to the care and support of her disabled mother. When it came time to make a marital commitment, Winnie falls in love with a young butcher, who could not possibly afford to care for Winnie and her mother and brother. Therefore, young Winnie pushes her love away in order to make a more profitable match with Mr. Verloc. Mr. Verloc is an older gentleman, a wealthy businessman, who is so in love with his young wife that he has no problem taking on her other family members.

Winnie is a good wife to Mr. Verloc, waiting on him in a style that has become old-fashioned, caring for his home and his business when he is away. Winnie does not like her husband's politics, especially when they excite her young brother, however, she



does not quarrel with her husband over her own opinions. Winnie is grateful to her husband for being so generous to herself and her family. However, after her mother makes the decision to move out to relieve the burden she's placed upon her daughter and assure that her son has a home to live in when she passes away, Winnie pushes her husband to spend more time with her brother to distract him from his grief over his mother's departure. When her husband suggests the boy be taken to the country for a vacation, Winnie again trusts him and is happy to see his new interest in Stevie.

Winnie is not the type of woman to sit around and read the newspaper. Winnie likes to keep busy, cleaning and sewing and doing all the domestic tasks that a good wife should do. That is why Winnie is unaware that a bomb went off in Greenwich Park, until a police officer comes to the store to talk with her husband. When the officers shows her a piece of cloth that she herself sewed into her brother Stevie's jacket, and she overhears this same officer tell her husband of the man who has blown himself up, Winnie discovers that her husband has murdered her brother. Winnie has suddenly lost her reason for living, her reason for being married to the man who blames her as much as himself for the death of her beloved brother. Winnie kills him and turns to another man she thought that she could trust, only to find that he will also betray her.

Stevie

Stevie is the younger brother of Mr. Verloc's wife, Winnie. Stevie is a simple-minded, young man, who is very kind, unless he is excited. When excited over some injustice, Stevie can become violent. This and his boyish enthusiasm are why Stevie has trouble keeping a job. Winnie learned from an early age that Stevie must be protected from the outside world. Winnie makes sacrifices in her own life, in order to assure Stevie's protection. She goes as far as ensuring a good marriage, in order to establish that Stevie will never have to hold down a job.

Stevie has strong feelings about the injustices of the world. Stevie's father was abusive toward his son, as were several of Stevie's past employers. Therefore, Stevie has many opinions about the world that include a deep-seated anger regarding poverty and the attitudes of the wealthy. Mr. Verloc preys on this ideal, and Stevie's deep-seated respect and awe of Mr. Verloc, himself, in order to encourage Stevie to help him with his plot to blow up the Greenwich Observatory. However, no matter how many times Mr. Verloc showed the boy what to do, he could not foresee that Stevie would trip over a tree root, and the bomb would explode in his hand.

The Professor

The Professor is a self-proclaimed anarchist. The professor is so-called, because he was once an assistant demonstrator in chemistry at a technical school. The Professor is an expert in bombs and well known for creating bombs to support his anarchical beliefs. The Professor walks around town with a bomb wired through his coat, in case the police



ever try to arrest him. The Professor is confident that if a police officer ever approaches him in public, he can and will blow them both up.

The Professor is in the outer folds of the International Red Committee and well known to Mr. Verloc and his associates. The Professor designs and builds the bomb that Mr. Verloc wishes to use to blow up the Greenwich Observatory. Upon hearing the news of the explosion in the Greenwich Park, The Professor is sure it is Mr. Verloc who has died.

Mr. Vladimir

Mr. Vladimir is the new First Secretary at the French Embassy. Mr. Verloc is called to see him in the morning, when his associates might see him enter the building. Mr. Vladimir is not a nice man. He is untrusting of the English government and the English police. Mr. Vladimir feels that Mr. Verloc has not been a very good secret agent. In fact, Mr. Vladimir believes that his predecessor greatly embellished on Mr. Verloc's help in the past. Mr. Vladimir wants Mr. Verloc to do something that is worthy of the check he draws from the Embassy every month. In telling Mr. Verloc what he wants, Mr. Vladimir talks of the middle class's obsession with the sciences, and that a bomb going off in or near a building devoted to science would be enough to frighten the middle class people of London. In his demands to Mr. Verloc, Mr. Vladimir leaves Mr. Verloc with the impression that, if he does not do something to impress the middle classes, Mr. Vladimir will let his identity and his past work at the Embassy be known. This would put Mr. Verloc in a position to be arrested or murdered.

Assistant Commissioner

The Assistant Commissioner of Special Crimes is new to the aristocratic position he now holds in the London police department. The Commissioner was the head of a police force in one of England's provinces, until a vacation back in London found him married to a proper English wife, who refused to live abroad. While his current job is more prestigious, the Commissioner is bored with the lack of real police work. The Assistant Commissioner is now expected to spend the majority of his time doing paperwork.

When faced with the evidence in the bombing at the Greenwich Park, the Commissioner is upset that the evidence seems to point to Michaelis, a friend of his wife's lady friend, the Commissioner becomes more deeply involved with the hope of turning the investigation in another direction. To do this, the Commissioner must go behind the back of his best investigator and in list the help of the Secretary of State. The Commissioner, however, enjoys this chance to do some real police work again and the idea of taking down Mr. Vladimir only sweetens the deal for the Commissioner. However, when Mr. Verloc is killed, the whole case against Mr. Vladimir is ruined.



Chief Inspector Heat

Chief Inspector Heat is a police detective with the Special Crimes Unit. Heat is a well-decorated cop who has risen to his current position by using men like Mr. Verloc for information in exchange for the freedom to conduct his personal business any way he likes. Heat greatly admires the petty thief and his skills on the street and is not above using similar tactics in his own police work. Heat is annoyed with the new Assistant Commissioner because the man will not keep his nose out of Heat's business and allow him to perform his investigations as he sees fit. Heat is even deeper disturbed when he discovers that the Assistant Commissioner has used the information that Heat himself gave and stepped into the investigation to close the case before Heat can take down Michaelis. In his frustration, Heat tells Winnie about the death of her brother in a callous and uncaring fashion.

Michaelis

Michaelis is a man on parole, who was put in prison for planning a rescue of some prisoners in a police van. The plan had gone wrong, and a police officer was killed. At the time of the crime, many people believed that Michaelis should be hanged. Upon his release, however, there was much sympathy among the wealthier set. Michaelis found a woman, who was sympathetic to his cause. She put him up in a remote country home, so he could write his memoirs in peace. Michaelis is a member of the International Red Committee with Mr. Verloc. It is Michaelis's country home where Mr. Verloc takes Stevie during the planning of the Greenwich bombing, which leads Chief Investigator Heat to believe Michaelis is behind the bombing. It's a fact that worries the Assistant Commissioner, because Michaelis's benefactor is his wife's lady friend. However, it turns out that Michaelis knew nothing of the plot.

Alexander 'Tom' Ossipon

Ossipon, or the "doctor," is another member of the Red Committee with Mr. Verloc. Ossipon is known by the nickname of the doctor, because once he illegally published a pamphlet about the socialistic aspects of hygiene. He was also a former medical student, who left school without a degree and lectured to men's organizations. Ossipon is a womanizer. He upsets Mrs. Verloc so much with his leering glances, that she refuses to even discuss him with her husband. Later, after Mr. Verloc's failed attempt to bomb the Greenwich Observatory, it is Ossipon who Mrs. Verloc turns to for help, when her situation is at the bleakest. Ossipon, so fearful of Mrs. Verloc's actions with her husband and the possibility that she may repeat these actions with him, steals her money and abandons her on a train.

Karl Yundt

Karl Yundt is another member of the International Red Committee with Mr. Verloc. Karl Yundt is an opinionated man, who is so infirm and dependent on his live-in female companion, that he could not make her leave when he tired of her. Mr. Yundt calls himself an old terrorist and seems to be the unofficial leader of the group before Mr. Verloc. It is Mr. Yundt, who stands up for Stevie, when Ossipon calls him a degenerate and a potential criminal by calling the logic behind the statements ridiculous.



Objects/Places

The Greenwich Observatory

The Greenwich Observatory is the place of science that Mr. Verloc decides to blow up to rouse the middle class of London.

Mr. Verloc's Shop

Mr. Verloc's shop is a pornographic shop that also sells stationary products. The shop is located in the front of the Verloc home and is the scene of Mr. Verloc's death.

The International Red Committee

The International Red Committee is the organization that Mr. Verloc, Mr. Yundt, Mr. Ossipon and Michaelis belong to in the idea of bringing about social change. However, it appears that all the gentlemen tend to do is discuss their political beliefs, not act upon them.

London

London is where the novel takes place.

Varnish Can

The bomb that takes the life of Stevie is placed inside a varnish can, so it can be transported without attracting attention.

The Explorer's Club

The Explorer's Club is an exclusive club in London that many of the government officials belong to, such as Mr. Vladimir.

Silenus

Silenus is the bar where Ossipon finds The Professor after the bomb goes off in the Greenwich Park, and where Ossipon spends the majority of his time at the end of the novel.



Continental Hotel

The Continental Hotel is where Assistant Commissioner takes Mr. Verloc, in order to discuss the bomb and Mr. Vladimir's role in the planning of the plot.

The Carving Knife

Mrs. Verloc sets out a carving knife for Mr. Verloc's supper the night of the bombing and uses it later to take his life.

Blue Cloth

When Chief Inspector Heat goes to inspect the remains of the man who was blown up in Greenwich Park, he finds a piece of blue cloth with the address of Mr. Verloc's shop written on it. This is how Winnie allows Heat to identify the body.



Social Sensitivity

The *Secret Agent*, considered by scholar F. R. Leavis to be one of Joseph Conrad's two "supreme masterpieces," is a brilliantly ironic narrative depicting Edwardian London's seedy and dispossessed underworld of revolutionist and anarchists. Having been a Polish nationalist in exile, and having experience of working with revolutionists and espionage agents in Switzerland and Marseilles, Conrad was familiar with the tactics and rationalizations used by political agitators and terrorists. Moreover, he had become fascinated with the twilight world of international political activity in London - a haven for political exiles from Europe during the late nineteenth century - after he learned of an actual attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory in 1894. However, although *The Secret Agent* is ostensibly set in the 1880s, some critics have observed that in many respects the novel is more representative of Edwardian London at the time of its composition in 1906. Readers today will be reminded of current examples of international terrorism involving dissident groups from the Middle East, as well as examples of America's domestic anti-government terrorism, like the infamous Oklahoma City bombing.

Conrad's readers may also find themselves intrigued by the plight of Mrs. Verloc, the frustrated wife who becomes one of the victims of her husband's foolish and ineffectual covert political actions.

Fettered by an unhappy marriage to a husband who sells pornography and spends much of his time in intrigues as a minor spy and mercenary informant, Winnie Verloc is a surprisingly sympathetic portrait of an intelligent and sensitive woman imprisoned by her circumstances. Perhaps the central figure of the novel, Mrs. Verloc becomes the victim of a tragic destiny which merits comparison with similar treatments of wives submerged in miserable circumstances in the finest of nineteenth century novels, such as Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857).



Techniques

Unlike some of Conrad's other novels and stories, such as *Lord Jim* (1900; see separate entry), there is no dominating first-person narrator in *The Secret Agent* comparable to Charles Marlow. Moreover, the reader is not given a series of different narrative perspectives as in *Lord Jim*, or, as in *Nostromo* (1904; see separate entry). Conrad employs an apparently straightforward narrative technique in the tradition of conventional realism, a narrative method that appears deceptively simple.

Yet Conrad's narrative voice is controlled by a rigorous and masterful sense of irony. Conrad's selective use of incident tends to undercut the melodramatic and sensationalist nature of some of the story's events—a major bombing, a murder, a suicide. One result of Conrad's narrative method and tone is to deny glamour and dignity to nearly all his characters.



Themes

Themes

One obvious theme is Conrad's interest in the types of people who become involved in terrorism, described in the group of anarchists and revolutionaries who cluster around Verloc. In general, they are unsympathetic people who feel dispossessed of their heritage or suffer from frustrating mediocre lives. Verloc, the central figure in the group, is an example of a cynical man without political convictions who finds espionage and discussions of anarchy a useful way to make a living. The Professor is obsessed by a single idea; Ossipon is a predator who preys mainly on women, using political discussion and agitation as a mask. At the same time, Conrad avoids oversimplifying matters, for he shows that Verloc is indeed a pawn of a foreign power (he is given orders by an agent at the Russian embassy), and the British police, although well aware of the existence of fringe groups, find it pragmatic to allow them to exist because they can be useful scapegoats.

In short, scarcely any character connected with Verloc's group is actually innocent, except for Winnie Verloc's retarded brother, Stevie, and her crippled mother. Winnie Verloc herself, however, is less culpable than the men, although she finally loses her restraint and murders her stupid husband not because he tried to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, but because his scheming has led to the death of Stevie.

Another characteristically Conradian theme is a study of self-deception and its role in the development of moral corruption. Verloc is in many ways self-deceived, since he does not admit to himself how sordid his methods of making a living are, and he cannot acknowledge that he actually wanted to be rid of the mentally deficient Stevie. Similarly, Ossipon is not fully honest with himself about his tawdry way of preying on women.

The Professor and some of the other anarchists are also self-deceiving about their political beliefs. The Professor, in particular, imagines himself to be strong and an enemy of the weak, yet he himself is a model of the socially impotent man seeking revenge on society through the fantasy of blowing it up. Through Inspector Heat and the higher English officials, Conrad also suggests that legal authority in Great Britain is tacitly complicit in the petty intrigues of the anarchists.

The extent to which people exploit other people is also a theme explored in *The Secret Agent*. Winnie allows herself to be sexually exploited by marrying Verloc, whom she does not love, for the sake of Stevie and her mother. Verloc also exploits his employers by his petty espionage, although they in turn are ready to use him without worrying about his fate.

Ossipon lives by exploitation of women.



Contemporary readers may be disappointed with Conrad's treatment of terrorism, since they may believe that fictional terrorists should be portrayed in a more sinister light. However, Conrad seems to present his seedy band of terrorists as both potentially evil and banal in their enterprises. Indeed, a subtitle of the book might have been the title Hannah Arendt gave to her famous study of Adolph Eichmann—"The Banality of Evil."

Trust

Trust is an issue in the novel, *The Secret Agent*. Without trust between Stevie and Mr. Verloc and Mr. Verloc and his wife, Winnie, many events that transpire throughout the novel's pages would not have been possible. Winnie marries Mr. Verloc for the pure reason that she needs a husband who can support not only her, but also her mother and brother. Winnie has turned away her true love for this man who is much older but also much more prosperous. Winnie does all she can to be a good wife to Mr. Verloc in exchange for this protection that his wealth can provide for her family, especially her brother Stevie, who cannot hold down a job. After seven years of marriage, Winnie has begun to trust that her husband, though not overly in love with Stevie but tolerant of him, that Mr. Verloc will always do the right thing toward her brother and never put him in harm's way. However, when Winnie learns that Mr. Verloc gave Stevie a bomb and allowed him to blow himself up with it, Winnie feels her trust was betrayed.

Stevie is a simple young man, who has the emotions of a boy half his age. Stevie admires and respects Mr. Verloc greatly, because Mr. Verloc has never done anything to hurt him. When faced with the confusing and emotionally charged ideas of inequality for the poor, Stevie finds himself embracing many of Mr. Verloc's own communist view, without really understanding any of it. Mr. Verloc preys on this new confusion in his brother-in-law and uses that and Stevie's blind devotion to entice the boy into planting a bomb at the Greenwich Observatory. When Stevie trips on a tree root, and the bomb goes off, Mr. Verloc is saddened for his wife. However, his main concern is his own safety. This is a total disregard for Stevie. It breaks not only the trust Stevie placed in his brother-in-law, but it destroys the trust between husband and wife.

Relationships

The family relationships in this novel, particularly Winnie's devotion to her brother Stevie, are quite strong and relevant to the events of the story. It is generally accepted that the novel is about Winnie, though she appears to only be a minor character throughout the majority of the novel. Winnie is the injured party when the scheme to blow up the Greenwich Observatory goes tragically wrong, though the plot was engineered to save Mr. Verloc from possible exposure and death. Winnie has devoted her entire life to her brother, first protecting the poor boy from his own father, then caring for him when their mother became disabled, and finally marrying a wealthy man so that Stevie would always be cared for and not have to work. Winnie has given up freedom and love for her brother and thrown all her trust on to this man, who has a secret life that he has refused to disclose to her.



Winnie's mother leaves her in order to assure that Stevie will always have a home to live in, and someone to care for him. Winnie, a good girl who almost never says a cross word nor argues with her elders, is upset by her mother's abandonment. She feels that the bond between mother and daughter no longer exists, when Stevie is removed from the picture. Winnie is also at a loss as to what her role in the world will be when Stevie is gone. No longer must she be the perfect wife; no longer does she have a child-like man to care for. Winnie is free. However, she does not know what to do with her new freedom. All relationships have ceased to exist in the realm of reality that they belonged to, when Stevie was alive. Stevie's death has redefined Winnie's entire existence.

When Mr. Verloc dares to blame Winnie for Stevie's death by suggesting that Winnie's insistence that Mr. Verloc spend more time with the boy was the cause, Winnie loses all respect and concern for her husband. Suddenly, in her mind, Mr. Verloc is a murderer who has made one of her as well. Winnie strikes out at her husband, not out of anger but out of grief and confusion. Now, she is a free woman and does not wish to be so. With Mr. Verloc dead, Winnie turns to the one man she detests the most for help, offering not only her money, but her body and soul. When this man destroys her trust as well, Winnie finds no other avenue open to her but death. It is Stevie's death that redefines every relationship in Winnie's life, and Winnie who suffers the greatest from Mr. Verloc's terrorist plot.

Social Reform and Acts of Terrorism

Mr. Verloc's group of communists gather, in order to discuss the repression of the poor and disenfranchised and plot ways in which to repair this repression. Mr. Verloc is a part of this group in order to serve as a secret agent and gather information for the French government. However, his small group has become weak and less than aggressive. It is this fact that causes the French diplomat, Mr. Vladimir, to suggest to Mr. Verloc to plant a bomb in a place that will create great concern among the middle classes of London. Mr. Vladimir wants Mr. Verloc and his group to be more proactive, to do more than discuss the issues and listen for information about other terrorist acts. Mr. Vladimir belongs to a group of people who believe that only action can bring about change. However, the actions he encourages Mr. Verloc to engage in cause the situation that lead not only to Mr. Verloc's own death, but the death of his wife and brother-in-law as well.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad is omniscient third person. The narrator jumps from the minds of Mr. Verloc, Ossipon and Mrs. Verloc quite frequently as well as the minds of Chief Inspector Heat and the Assistant Commissioner. These jumps are regularly made from chapter to chapter with a few jumps taking place within a chapter, and sometimes in the middle of a scene. However, instead of confusing the reader, most of these jumps are well marked and easy to follow.

The author uses this point of view, in order to allow the reader to hear the thoughts of the various characters. This allows the reader access to back story that might not have been available with another point of view format. This novel is full of many colorful characters that could not be fully appreciated if not drawn out with human characteristics that will influence the turn of the plot at some point or other through the novel. This point of view creates a rich picture that may not have been visualized, if written in another style.

Setting

The novel takes place in London around 1886. The majority of the novel takes place inside the seedy pornography shop that belongs to the Verloc's. Rather than being scandalous, however, this shop is described in detail only once. The nature of the shop is only mentioned in passing throughout the rest of the novel. Behind the shop is a home that Winnie herself considers respectable. There is a parlor behind the shop, and this is where most of the scenes between Winnie and Mr. Verloc take place.

The fact that the Verloc's shop is a pornographic one, however, does lend an air of disrespect to the novel that colors the scenes later in the novel. It is not scandalous, but there is a sense of roughness, of living in a lawless world. This feeling lends understanding to the scene in which Winnie stabs Mr. Verloc, suggesting to the reader that perhaps by the very nature of his career that, perhaps, this is something Mr. Verloc might have expected at some point in his life. In fact, Mr. Verloc is speaking of an event in which he might be stabbed just minutes before Winnie commits that very act. Except it is not Winnie who the man expected the fatal blow to come from, but one of the person's he might have injured in all the years that he was a secret agent.

Language and Meaning

The language of *The Secret Agent* is proper, somewhat stiff, in accordance with the time in which the events take place. Joseph Conrad uses many words that are archaic and rarely used in modern language. However, despite this stiff and somewhat difficult language, the meaning is still clear.



Conrad uses several foreign phrases throughout the novel as well. These phrases are meant to express sentiments that could only be expressed in their native language, and they also incorporate the French language since the French are a large part of this novel. It is not the French who use these phrases, however, although there are several times when Conrad tells the reader that the characters are speaking in French when he is expressing their dialogue in English. This technique reminds the reader that many of the characters in this novel, including Mr. Verloc, are French.

Structure

The novel is written in thirteen chapters, each chapter spanning as many as thirty pages each. Each chapter is broken into several scenes, some with as many as three scenes with one main character and some with only one scene with several main characters involved. Time moves in starts in spurts in this novel, the first few chapters jumping a full month and then the middle of the novel bringing the reader back to the first of that month, before once again jumping to the night of the bombing. However, this jumping around, like the jumps between the minds of the readers, is clearly marked by a change in chapters and scenes.



Quotes

"The shoulders of Mr. Verloc, without actually moving, suggested a shrug." Chapter 2, pg. 55

"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." Chapter 2, pg. 59

"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." Chapter 3, pg. 76

"They swarmed numerous like locust, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed, impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror, too perhaps." Chapter 5, pg. 103

"With all his healthy contempt for the spirit dictating such speeches, the atrocious allusiveness of the words had its effect of Chief Inspector Heat." Chapter 5, pg. 111

"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." Chapter 6, pg. 120

"And, as a matter of fact, he got it at last. He hung back to utter it at once.

'Bad world for poor people.'" Chapter 8, pg. 168

"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." Chapter 8, pg. 170

"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'." Chapter 9, pg. 194

"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." Chapter 11, pg. 214

"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."
Chapter 11, pg. 220

"He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men." Chapter
13, pg. 269

Adaptations

Conrad himself produced a stage version of *The Secret Agent* in 1919-1920, hoping perhaps to gain some new revenue from an old novel. Unfortunately, Conrad's creative powers were now in decline, and his experience of writing for the theater was very limited. Nevertheless, the play was accepted for performance and presented in November 1922.

Although Conrad followed rehearsals closely and was fairly pleased with the performance, the work was strongly rejected by the newspaper reviewers and treated with indifference by the public.

Although at first Conrad professed indifference about the play, he was very disappointed by the outcome of its staging, and he eventually began to blame the reviewers rather than the director and the actors.

Since he turned to stage adaptations of his work late in his career, Conrad's work as a dramatist was not distinguished by commercial success or praise from critics.

But motion picture adaptations of *The Secret Agent* have shown that this novel (like some other Conrad works) contains elements of effective drama.

Alfred Hitchcock's 1936 film *Sabotage* starring Sylvia Sydney, Oscar Homolka, John Loder, and Desmond Tester, brilliantly captures the sinister and ambiguous atmosphere of Conrad's tattered and seedy underground London in black and white and various shades of gray. Focusing on the entrapment of Mrs. Verloc, Hitchcock's film explores one of his favorite themes, the plight of an innocent person struggling to extricate herself from a situation inspiring paranoia which he or she does not understand. This film is considered by some as one of the masterpieces of Hitchcock's "British period."

Readers may find it confusing that another celebrated Hitchcock film of 1936 was given the title of *The Secret Agent*. However, this suspense movie, starring John Gielgud, Madeline Carroll, and Peter Lorre, is a more conventional spy story based on W. Somerset Maugham's novel *Ashenden Or. The British Agent*.

A fine 1996 film adaptation starred Bob Hoskins, Patricia Arquette, and Gerard Depardieu. This was a reasonably faithful adaptation, with excellent performances by Hoskins as Verloc and Depardieu as Ossipon. The lovely Arquette offers a surprisingly strong and credible interpretation of Winnie Verloc. It should be noted, however, that the youthful Patricia Arquette is perhaps more glamorous than the Winnie Conrad envisioned.

Written and directed with great care by Christopher Hampton, this film produces some haunting images, particularly the opening sequence showing the Professor in his slow intense, obsessive walk, and a closing sequence reworking the same image.



Key Questions

Readers will very likely be reminded of contemporary terrorist acts and situations, whether involving international terrorists in European cities, or acts of domestic violence in the United States by antigovernment agitators. Discussion could focus on the nature of terrorist groups and the motives which entice people to become involved in causes which induce acts of violence against society and governments.

Another area to pursue is the flawed marriage of Verloc and Winnie Verloc. In what ways is Winnie a victim of her husband's sexual aggression as well as his petty schemes? What justification does Winnie have for her tragic act of murdering Verloc? Perhaps Winnie Verloc's marriage can be seen as a paradigm of many Victorian marriages, which were apparently placid on the surface, but tarnished by the husband's attempt to dominate matters.

1. What elements of *The Secret Agent* seem to have contemporary relevance?

What comments does the novel make about the nature of terrorist activities?

2. Discuss Conrad's handling of Stevie as a character. What makes Stevie a sympathetic character?

3. What is the British government's attitude toward the terrorist activities of Verloc and his circle? What picture of the authorities is offered by Conrad? To what degree is this view a satirical one?

4. Describe as many instances of irony as you can find in Conrad's treatment of the attempted bombing of the Greenwich Observatory.

5. In what ways is Ossipon an unsympathetic character? Is his final betrayal of Winnie Verloc to be expected?

6. How does Verloc's method of making a living offer an indication of his attitude toward his wife, especially as it is revealed in her moment of grief?

7. Is the Professor insane, or merely carrying his theories to a logical conclusion?

8. What purpose does the Russian government have for creating an act of terrorism in Great Britain?

9. What are the main reasons for Winnie Verloc's suicide? What is the cause of her greatest sorrow, the loss of her brother, the murder she commits, or her betrayal by Ossipon?

10. Compare Winnie to other famous tragic heroines, such as Thomas Hardy's Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891; see separate entry) and Gustave Flaubert's Emma Bovary in *Madame Bovary* (1857)?



11. What is Conrad's view of terrorist activities? Are they merely sordid and petty, or do they constitute a genuine threat to civilization? What might be Conrad's view of international terrorism today?



Topics for Discussion

How does the terrorist aspect of this novel relate to what has been happening in modern times, i.e. September 11, 2004.

In your opinion, what is this novel truly about? Most people accept that the novel is about Winnie Verloc and the destruction of her family. Do you agree?

Diagram the character of Mr. Verloc. What do you believe his motivations were? Do you believe that he used Stevie, knowing he may die? Or, did he simply pick Stevie, because he would not go to jail if caught? Was Mr. Verloc justified in his actions? Was Winnie justified in killing Mr. Verloc?

Discuss murder and terrorism. In what situations are terrorist acts justified? Are they justifiable at all? What about murder? Did Mr. Verloc have the right to put Stevie in the position he did? Did Mrs. Verloc have the right to avenge her brother's murder by killing Mr. Verloc?

Discuss the point of view and structures of this novel. This novel is written in a more proper language than novelists use today. How do you think a modern writer might change this novel? Would a more modern version be better or worse? What if the novel had been written in first person point of view? Whose point of view should it have been written in?

Discuss the actions of the characters of Chief Inspector Heat and the Assistant Commissioner. Were Heat's actions illegal? Knowing that Heat used Mr. Verloc as an informant, do you think he should have arrested Mr. Verloc when he learned the truth regarding Stevie's death? Should the Assistant Commissioner have arrested Mr. Verloc? Should the Commissioner have put Mr. Verloc under protective custody? Should the Commissioner have told Mr. Vladimir about Mr. Verloc's confession?

Were the actions of Mr. Vladimir ultimately responsible for the death of Stevie? Of Mr. Verloc? Of Mrs. Verloc?



Literary Precedents

One of the major influences on Conrad's political fiction has generally been considered to be Dostoevsky's novels, especially *The Possessed* (also published as *The Devils*, 1872; see separate entry) with its satirical treatment of Russian radicals.

Whereas Dostoevsky, however, tended to view anarchists and revolutionaries as virtually demonic in their nature and behavior, this Conrad novel treats them as less dangerous and somewhat more ineffectual and self-destructive than Dostoevsky's radicals. Martin Seymour-Smith also concludes in his 1984 "Introduction" to the Penguin edition of the novel that Conrad's reading of the writings of revolutionaries and anarchists, especially Ivan Bakunin—as well as newspaper accounts of the 1886 attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory—was a strong influence.

Other literary influences on Conrad were nearer at hand. Frederick Karl was one of the first to note, in *A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad* (1960), that Conrad's London owes much to the dingy gaslit and impoverished neighborhoods of London of Charles Dickens's later novels, especially *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Conrad had in fact been an avid reader of Dickens's novels in his years at sea. Another influence that has been cited is that of Zola and other naturalistic fiction writers, particularly in regard to Conrad's depiction of urban squalor. However, yet another precedent for Conrad may have been somewhat closer to Conrad's own literary world, namely Henry James's major novel *The Princess Cassamassima* (1886), which also deals with London's twilight world of revolutionaries and radicals. Conrad admired much of James's fiction, corresponded with James, and made a gift of one his novels to the masterful American realist.

In his treatment of the frustrating circumstances of Mrs. Verloc's life, Conrad was probably influenced by the classics of nineteenth-century realism, particularly Flaubert's *Madam Bovary*, a classic study of a frustrated wife imaginatively smothered by a sterile environment and a marriage to an unimaginative mediocrity. However, it is less likely that Conrad was influenced by the fiction of George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), whose *Middlemarch* (1872) is a classic treatment of the theme of an intellectually frustrated wife in an unrewarding marriage. As a matter of fact, Conrad may not have had a very extensive knowledge of Eliot's work.

At any rate, Zdzislaw Najder in *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* (1983) repeatedly stresses his contention that Flaubert was one of the major literary influences on Conrad's work. At any rate, Conrad had a fairly good knowledge of French, even writing letters in that language, and was clearly capable of reading Flaubert and his disciples (such as de Maupassant) without translations.



Related Titles

An obviously related work in Conrad's canon is *Under Western Eyes* (1911), his major effort to deal with the experience of Polish nationalists in exile. Unlike *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes* is set in Switzerland and Russia, but the latter book also deals with the petty intrigues of revolutionists and political agitators, and the many ways they betray their cause and values.

The Secret Agent also shares some thematic concerns with *Nostromo*, Conrad's other major novel of political events. But *The Secret Agent* differs strongly from *Nostromo* in certain ways: *The Secret Agent* lacks both *Nostromo's* exotic setting and its epic presentation of the momentum of historical events.

At first glance, *The Secret Agent* seems to have little in common with Conrad's sea stories and his tales of Europeans tested in the Malaysian or Indonesian jungles.

But a second glance suggests that the petty betrayals of Conrad's spies and anarchists are reminiscent of the world of *Lord Jim* where, the behavior of the white European characters, apart from Marlow, Jim, and Stein, is frequently cowardly and deceitful. The ragtag and self-serving band of political activists in *The Secret Agent* may remind readers of the officers of the *Patna*, the ship from which Jim deserts; and some of them might have been at home among the pirates in *Gentleman Brown's* crew of raiders.



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