

## **Conrad, The Secret Agent (1907)**

1857–1924, English novelist, b. Russia (now Ukraine),  
originally named Józef Teodor Konrad Walecz Korzeniowski.

Born of Polish parents, he is considered one of the greatest novelists and prose stylists in English literature.

Heart of Darkness (1902)

distinctive, opulent prose style

Conrad's novels combine realism and high drama.

Their settings include nautical backgrounds as well as high society, and international politics.

Conrad was a skilled creator of atmosphere and character; the impact of various situations was augmented by his use of symbolism. He portrayed acutely the conflict between non-western cultures and modern civilization.

His characters exhibit the possibilities for isolation and moral deterioration in modern life.

The Secret Agent was inspired by an anarchist attempt made on the Greenwich Observatory in 1894.

The 'Author's Note' states "This book is that story, reduced to manageable proportions, its whole course suggested and centred around the absurd cruelty of the Greenwich Park explosion."

Conrad, lived in London at that time,  
he would have read the newspaper accounts of the incident,  
which were brief and at first mysterious,  
like the articles in the novel.

However they did establish that the victim was Martin Bourdin,  
a man linked to anarchism,

he was badly mutilated, and had probably stumbled as he carried a bomb.

It later emerged that Bourdin was brother-in-law to a known anarchist, Samuels.

These details provided the skeleton for Conrad's tale.

### Plot synopsis

MK attempts to cross out of Brandenburg to sell his horses. He is stopped at the gate near Tronka castle and is asked to produce a pass. He holds no pass and in lieu he offers his two black horses. He rides off to Dresden to settle the matter and leaves Herse (servant) to keep the horses in his stead.

MK begins lawsuit. Suit is thrown out b/c Tronka is related to the Elector. Another suit is filed and that is shelved (more nepotism.) MK decides to sell his house. Lisbeth (wife) offers to settle the court matter herself b/c she had a relationship with official before her marriage to MK. She returns (in rough shape) and quickly dies.)

MK sends letter requesting retribution (horses fattened, money to Herse for injury and property loss, etc) He receives nothing and bands a group with the help of Herse and attacks the castle. The band follows the escaped Tronka to a convent (run by his relative) and continued to Wittenberg where he posts a manifesto detailing the wrongs against him.

In response, Martin Luther writes a public letter to MK requesting him to cease actions against people and the state. MK travels to Leipzig and reads Luther's placard and decides to visit him. They discuss the matter and Luther offers a peaceable solution: wouldn't it be better for MK to fatten the horses himself?

Junker is released from prison. Knacker of Dresden enters to decide MK's fate. MK agrees. Chancellor wants payoff. Public opinion changes after the incident.

MK and Negalschmidt are enemies. MK visits home and remains watched under house arrest. Negalschmidt writes and offers to liberate MK if MK agrees to re-join the band. The letter is intercepted and brought to Baron von Wenk, the Elector and President. They pass letter back to MK. He agrees to the proposal (for freedom) and is arrested. He confesses and is sentenced to the gallows.

MK is taken to Berlin. Runs into Chancellor and Elector. Elector requests vial on MK's neck. MK refuses because he was treated badly in Dresden. The Elector asks council to pardon MK to no avail.

Elector finds a woman to impersonate the gypsy. She is a real gypsy (MK's dead wife.) MK is offered Communion by Luther. The state grants MK's wishes and his horses are fattened and restored. On the gallows, MK eats the gypsy's prophecy. The Elector collapses and MK is killed.

question            how did Mr. Verloc and Winnie meet?

Mr Verloc was a lodger in the house kept by Winnie's **mother**, who now lives with them above the shop. She is dependent upon her daughter.

Winnie also looks after her brother **Stevie** who is blond, "delicate" and unworldly.

question            which incident from the past illustrates how Stevie's character?

when working in an office two other boys persuaded him to set off "fierce rockets" in the corridor by telling him that the company was unjust and oppressive.

stevie cannot be trusted to work, and how he can be exploited:

pre-shadows the role Stevie plays in the novel..

question            why does the professor carry the bomb?

so that he can commit a kamikaze explosion at any moment.

This gives the

Professor a sense of power, especially since he feels it means he could outwit the police since if they tried to arrest him he could detonate the bomb thus killing himself and anyone close by him.

### **Atmosphere and setting: location, light, style**

The novel is very clearly set in London (the city Conrad depicted as the actual Heart of Darkness in the last lines of that novel).

Conrad succinctly places the action in a restrictive and unenlightened city:

"The shop was small, and so was the house. It was one of those grimy brick houses which existed in large quantities before the era of reconstruction dawned upon London."

Conrad depicts a dingy, vast and uniform capital.

Brett Street: impersonality of the metropolis

Conrad's creation of atmosphere is very economical; accuracy and lack of extravagance.

Light is used throughout

as a form of 'pathetic fallacy' since it regularly matches the feelings of the protagonists.

**question      find some passages that describe light and atmosphere**

London, the centre of "the Empire on which the sun never sets" is ironically dark and shadowy.

The gloom gives a sense of danger, of obscurity, of confusion and amorality.

question      what clues suggest it was stevie?

Heat's visit to the hospital to

view the remains of the victim of the bomb is described: the body he inspects is "a heap of rags, scorched and bloodstained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast".

question:      how does this relate to heart of darkness?

the Chief Inspector is told that the man

seen heading towards the scene of the explosion just before the bomb went off was "a fair-haired fellow". This is the first of four major clues in this chapter that point to the idea that it was not Verloc who died.

the Chief Inspector

salvages from the remains a small, triangular label attached to a velvet collar, which later turns out to be a sure sign of the identity of the corpse.

question      was it a suicide bombing?

Sir Ethelred sheds more light on the incident, stating that the bomber "has destroyed himself by accident", and muses on whether the man was a deaf mute.

## Structure

Conrad's novel is intricately constructed  
to affect the reader:

question      does he give us all the info we need?

it leaps in time and setting and drops out bits of information  
so as to manipulate a reader's understanding.

These features lead to a dense, obtuse novel  
in which it is hard to gain an overview,  
and thus the themes of lack of social awareness  
and insufficient communication ...

("he [Verloc] did not really know what to say to Stevie" etc.) ...  
are reflected in the book's form.

the impression of 'compartments' of partial understanding  
is promulgated:

via the structure,

we are aware of insufficient understanding of each secluded character  
because we ourselves are only privy to one dimension.

question    What is the importance of Stevie in The Secret Agent?

Winnie's "delicate brother", blond and "in a frail way, good looking, too, except for the vacant droop of his lower lip" is inveigled into anarchistic activities and becomes a "heap of rags, scorched and bloodstained". The reader's recognition of his death unfolds over the course several chapters, and consequences of it continue until the suicide of Winnie, after which his sacrifice is made even more poignant by being forgotten and in vain, an "unpenetrable mystery". The fate of Stevie is central to the plot of the novel: he is a manipulated altruist, an unwilling catalyst, and a victim of hypocrisy.

The sacrifice of Stevie symbolizes the destruction of our liking for humanity.

Stevie is a figure that contributes to the novel's satire of anarchism,  
in that he displays  
more revolutionary altruism than any of the professionals,  
yet has no capability as a terrorist.

question      how to compare stevie to the other characters?

he's selfless. how are the others self-involved?

Stevie's "innocent but pitiless rage" is thus a danger to himself, and  
by contrast to the peripheral characters' self-interestedness (the Professor, making bombs  
to boost his sense of power; the Assistant Commissioner, backstabbing Heat to make

himself seem less culpable; Ossipon, chasing girls for their money etc)

stevie's extreme

selflessness appears half as a beacon to which to aspire, and half like a mental deficiency.

question        What is the flaw in Winnie Verloc's character?

Like a character

in a Greek drama, Winnie is a tragic figure  
not because she has committed a crime but  
because of an inherent flaw:

her deep and "philosophical reserve"  
that allows her to distance herself  
from the appalling events around her.

In this sense she is the reader's  
representative in the novel,  
ignoring the truth  
until she becomes entangled in the problem itself by not reacting.

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