

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

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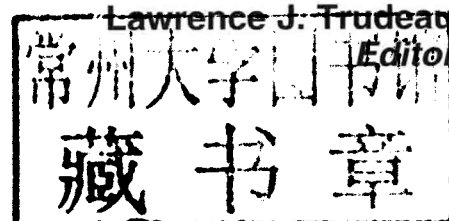
Volume 293

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**

Lawrence J. Trudeau

Editor



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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. The great poets, novelists, short-story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey of an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Volumes 1 through 87 of TCLC featured authors who died between 1900 and 1959; beginning with Volume 88, the series expanded to include authors who died between 1900 and 1999. Beginning with Volume 26, every fourth volume of TCLC was devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers. With TCLC 285, the series returns to a standard author approach, with some entries devoted to a single important work of world literature and others devoted to literary topics.

TCLC is part of the survey of criticism and world literature that is contained in Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), *Shakespearean Criticism* (SC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC).

Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the author's name (if applicable).
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication information of each work is given. In the case of works not published in English, a translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is a published translated title or a

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- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors who have appeared in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in *TCLC* as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Drama Criticism*, *Poetry Criticism*, *Short Story Criticism*, and *Children's Literature Review*.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the numbers of the *TCLC* volumes in which their entries appear.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

Citing *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as Modern Language Association (MLA) style or University of Chicago Press style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a works cited list set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (New York: MLA, 2009. Print); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

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The Secret Agent

Joseph Conrad

(Born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski) Polish-born English novelist, essayist, and short-story writer.

The following entry presents criticism of Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* (1907). For additional information on Conrad's life and works, see *TCLC*, Volumes 1, 6, and 291; for additional information about the novella *The Heart of Darkness*, see *TCLC*, Volume 13; for additional information about the novel *Nostromo*, see *TCLC*, Volume 25; for additional information about the novel *Lord Jim*, see *TCLC*, Volume 43; for additional information about the short story "The Secret Sharer," see *TCLC*, Volume 57.

INTRODUCTION

The Secret Agent by Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) explores the nature of human agency and free will against the backdrop of a planned terrorist attack in 1890s London. Conrad derived its basic narrative from accounts of the failed bombing in 1894 of the Royal Greenwich Observatory, then the oldest scientific research institution in England. As in the real-life event, the bomber in the novel stumbles and detonates the bomb before reaching his intended destination. Conrad's substantial additions to the story mainly involve the behind-the-scenes maneuvering of Adolf Verloc, a secret agent who helps plan the attack, as he attempts to navigate the tangles of his social, professional, and family life. Despite meticulous planning, Verloc and his associates can no more ensure the success of their attack than the London police can prevent it. The thoroughness with which this theme is developed has led some critics to suggest that the real "secret agent" of Conrad's tale is not a human being but a force—such as time or entropy—that works to undermine all human efforts. In addition to its reflections on the state of anarchism and political liberty in Edwardian England, the novel portrays a worldview colored by a variety of developments in nineteenth-century science, including thermodynamics, the theory of evolution, and the emerging discipline of criminology. *The Secret Agent* is marked by a deeply pessimistic attitude toward life, not unusual for an early work of Conrad's. *The Secret Agent* was generally well received by contemporary critics, although it achieved little commercial success during his lifetime. In 1922 Conrad adapted his novel as a play, which also received little attention. Yet the work continues to fascinate literary scholars, who regard it among the important cultural and political discourses of its time.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Conrad's novel of espionage and double-dealing centers on Verloc, who operates a pornography shop in London as a front for his association with a group of anarchists known as the Future of the Proletariat (F. P., for short). The principal figures in this somewhat dysfunctional organization are the impoverished and power-hungry Comrade Ossipon; the corpulent ex-convict Michaelis; a misanthropic, death-obsessed chemist known as the Professor; and the self-described terrorist Karl Yundt. Unbeknownst to these would-be revolutionaries, Verloc is working as a double agent for the embassy of an unnamed country, generally assumed to be Russia, and as an informer for the local police. His job is to monitor the anarchist cell and report on their activities. At the novel's start, Verloc's home life is simple and uneventful. His wife, Winnie, views him as a respectable if unimaginative man, and Winnie's aging mother often praises her for having married so well. Winnie's mentally disabled younger brother, Stevie, looks up to his brother-in-law with a kind of filial awe.

One day, Verloc is summoned to the embassy, where he is berated and humiliated by his new superior, Mr. Vladimir. He is warned that the English government, despite the embassy's wishes, has failed to crack down on anarchism in any meaningful way. If this does not change, Vladimir says, Verloc will be summarily dismissed. To redeem himself, Verloc must engineer a high-profile attack that can be blamed on the anarchists. Vladimir chooses the Royal Greenwich Observatory as the site of the attack, believing the building will attract attention because it symbolizes science, the "fetish of the hour that all the bourgeoisie recognize," and because it would appear to be the work of absolute madness. The main narrative, interrupted by a series of flashbacks, then moves to a later time when the bombing is being investigated by the police. In one of the flashbacks, Verloc enlists the gullible and compassionate Stevie to plant a time bomb at the observatory. Stevie is all too willing to oblige, but detonates the explosives prematurely, dying in a gruesome fashion. Police identify his remains from a label on his coat noting the Verlocs' address. While Verloc is out of the house, a police inspector presents Winnie with evidence of her husband's involvement in Stevie's death. When Verloc returns, Winnie stabs him to death with a knife and flees the shop in a panic. Knowing that she will be hanged if her crime is discovered, Winnie attempts to flee to France with Ossipon, to whom she entrusts Verloc's remaining money. When he learns of the murder, however, Ossipon spurns Winnie, and she drowns herself in the English Channel. The novel

closes with Ossipon and the Professor reflecting on a newspaper account of Winnie's death and discussing potential uses for Verloc's wealth.

MAJOR THEMES

The Secret Agent expresses a profound pessimism about the ability of humans to act meaningfully in an indifferent or hostile universe. Conrad underscores this point via a vivid and systematic use of imagery, likening the novel's characters to children, animals, and inanimate objects. Walking to his meeting with Vladimir, Verloc fancies himself an agent in the most basic sense of the word, as one empowered to act, in this case as a secret protector of English society. Conrad ensures that the reader does not share this illusion for long, however; he presents Verloc first as "undemonstrative and burly in a fat-pig style," one of the porcine images that recur in the novel, and later as "a soft kind of rock." Stevie, with his limited mental resources, his ingenuous naïveté, and his empathy for horses, is even more vulnerable to such comparisons. Alive, he is repeatedly described as a "domestic animal"; dead, having blown himself up in a public park in despair over the depravity of humanity, he is likened to "the by-products of a butcher's shop." Even Vladimir, the supposed diplomatic mastermind, is described by the narrator as a "preternaturally thriving baby," and Verloc echoes this comparison in a moment of anger.

The events of the novel further support the contention that humans exercise as little control over their fates as do infants or animals. In various ways, the failed bombing frustrates the intentions, good or ill, of nearly every character. Verloc, in an effort to save his job, brings about his own murder instead. Stevie, who is motivated by a carefully inculcated empathy for the working classes, aids no one and destroys himself. Vladimir, who conceives the bombing as the ideal means of calling attention to London's anarchist cells, is disappointed in the effectiveness of his plans. The novel's more sympathetic characters fare little better. The police inspectors, through an accident of timing, provoke Winnie to stab her husband, but the police do seem to have a sense of who was involved in the plot. Vladimir, instead of striking a blow for liberty, does little more than cause a momentary newspaper sensation, as the crime's association with anarchism remains speculative in the minds of Londoners. The only characters who enjoy more than a momentary triumph are the opportunistic Ossipon, who pockets Verloc's savings, though he is consumed with guilt, and the Professor, whose obsession with "ruin and destruction" is well suited to the chaotic world in which he lives, though he doubts the effectiveness of his bombs to move the English masses.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

In general, *The Secret Agent* was warmly received by contemporary reviewers, who praised the work for its psycho-

logical depth and interesting characters. The *New York Times* (1907) lauded the novel as a "very complete and admirable example" of Conrad's gift for character development, which, the reviewer suggested, is what separates Conrad, with his penchant for sensational plots, from writers of commercial fiction featuring spies and detectives. Desmond MacCarthy (1907-08), writing for the *Albany Review*, seconded this observation and maintained that Conrad's portrayal of anarchist intrigue rises "far above the level of sensationalism." Frederic Taber Cooper (1907-08) called both the plot and the characters of *The Secret Agent* "consistently and effectively realistic," enough so that he felt Conrad would be described more accurately as a realist than as a spinner of romantic yarns.

In the 1950s and 1960s many scholars sought to understand the relationship between Conrad's novel and the foiled bombing incident of 1894 that formed the basis for its plot. Norman Sherry (1967) noted that Conrad initially admitted the event had inspired his novel but later denied anything beyond a coincidental connection. To test these assertions, Sherry turned to newspaper accounts of the bombing, where he found close parallels to Conrad's prose. Eloise Knapp Hay, whose 1963 essay (see Further Reading) records a similar project, suggested that the sensational and sentimental language of the newspapers strongly influenced the tone and plot of *The Secret Agent*.

However, as Ian Watt (1973; see Further Reading) observed, the bombing incident was only one of a complex of sociopolitical events that inspired the novel's composition. At the turn of the century, the presence of anarchism was strongly felt in England and especially in continental Europe, where, as in Conrad's novel, extreme measures were taken to repress revolutionary activity. A further idea of the middle class's attitude toward anarchists—a mixture of fear and moral censure—was given by John E. Saveson (1974; see Further Reading), who surveyed essays printed in the popular *Blackwood's Magazine* to show that Conrad was merely presenting the public's "widely accepted view" of the anarchist movement.

Earlier literature also informed Conrad's novel in various aspects, including its descriptions of London, which Hugh Epstein (1992) identified as a synthesis of elements from Charles Dickens, Ford Madox Ford, and Anatole France. Moreover, contemporary scientific thought played a considerable role in shaping the worldview of the novel. Ludwig Schnauder (2007) contended that while Conrad had little regard for theoretical science, *The Secret Agent* "suggests that Darwinian forces determine our lives externally but also internally." Michael Whitworth (1998) observed that nineteenth-century discoveries in physics likely helped to reinforce the novel's pessimistic tone. Specifically, Whitworth pointed to the second law of thermodynamics, which Conrad's contemporaries interpreted to imply the eventual "heat death" of the universe.

Critics have taken various positions regarding the overall political and philosophical stance expressed in *The Secret Agent*. Most agree that the work is generally nihilistic in tone, with any life-affirming message offered only briefly and grudgingly. R. W. Stallman (1959) contended that time is the true "secret agent" of the novel, covertly working to foil the plans and aspirations "that the muddling intellect contrives." U. C. Knoepfelmacher (1971) made a similar point in the course of explaining the novel's ironic tone, which he considered a consequence of "the absurdity that infects the world." A few critics have viewed the novel's grim, resigned quality as part of an ongoing ideological struggle. Daniel R. Schwarz (1976), for example, argued that Conrad's "language is constantly evaluating, controlling, and restraining the nihilism of the imagined world." In general, however, bleak pessimism has been accepted as the prevailing attitude of the work. Zdzisław Najder (1980; see Further Reading) suggested that to the extent that *The Secret Agent* reflects accurately upon society, "irony is indeed the only attitude worthy of a serious person." Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan (1992) went further, suggesting that in order to write such a work, Conrad must have "lost all faith in social and political institutions, in the capacity of organized society to act as an organic body, and in the natural conjunction of authority and responsibility."

Michael J. Hartwell

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- "The Heart of Darkness." *Blackwood's Magazine* Feb.-Apr. 1899: 164+. (Novella)
- Lord Jim: A Tale*. Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1900. (Novel)
- The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story*. With Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford). New York: McClure, 1901. (Novel)
- Typhoon*. New York: Putnam, 1902. (Novella)
- Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories*. Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1902. (Novellas and short story)
- Romance: A Novel*. With Hueffer (Ford). London: Smith, Elder, 1903. (Novel)
- Typhoon and Other Stories*. London: Heinemann, 1903. (Novella and short stories)
- Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard*. London: Harper, 1904. (Novel)
- One Day More: A Play in One Act*. Royalty Theatre, London. 25 June 1905. (Play)
- The Mirror of the Sea: Memories and Impressions*. London: Methuen, 1906. (Autobiography)
- The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*. London: Methuen, 1907. (Novel)
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- Notes on Life and Letters*. London: Dent, 1921. (Essays)
- Notes on My Books*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1921. Pub. as *Conrad's Prefaces to His Works*. London: Dent, 1937. (Essays)
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- Laughing Anne: A Play*. London: Morland, 1923. (Play)
- The Rover*. Garden City: Doubleday, Page, 1923. (Novel)
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The Nature of a Crime. With Ford Madox Ford. London: Duckworth, 1924. (Novel)

The Shorter Tales of Joseph Conrad. Garden City: Doubleday, Page, 1924. (Short stories)

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Joseph Conrad's Letters to Cunninghame Graham. Ed. C. T. Watts. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969. (Letters)

Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces by Joseph Conrad. Ed. Najder. Garden City: Doubleday, 1978. (Diary and short stories)

The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad. Ed. Laurence Davies et al. 9 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983-2007. (Letters)

CRITICISM

New York Times (review date 1907)

SOURCE: "Joseph Conrad's Latest and Best." Rev. of *The Secret Agent*, by Joseph Conrad. *New York Times* 21 Sept. 1907: BR562. Print.

[In the following review, an unnamed critic praises *The Secret Agent* as a "very complete and admirable example" of Conrad's ability to offer perceptive glimpses into human nature. This power of effective characterization is, for the reviewer, one major source of the "vast gulf" between Conrad's spy novel and commercial detective fiction.]

Mr. Joseph Conrad is a specialist in the sombre. Also he is able to write of woman without investing her with a shred of romance. Therefore, he is cut off from the wider popular favor. But there is no man alive more able than he to transmute life into words, which, being read, are transmuted into life again. His method, it seems, is almost mechanical. He takes the human creature, composite of conscious and unconscious impulses, obscurely motived in the roots of being and the tangle of desires and associations, made more complex, but not controlled by that reason which is to most men as a pilot house whose wheel is inexpertly geared to the rudder—he takes this mysterious creature, analyzes the part of each impulse in the creature's external action, and then reconstructs the whole upon white paper out of mere printed language in such fashion that the stark humanity of it throws the multitudinous detail—provided the reader has a fairly competent imagination—into the just perspective of real life. In other words, the reader, for the time being, is endowed, to his immense enlargement, with Mr. Conrad's eyes and insight; he sees and feels what Mr. Conrad would see and feel in the presence of the actuality. To compass this thing is the artist's gift, and when we insist on the "fairly competent imagination" in the reader we are not subtracting in the least from the artist's credit. So much imagination is the necessary complement of his own.

The present story, called "**The Secret Agent**," (Harper's) is a very complete and admirable example of Mr. Conrad's method. It is exceedingly sombre; it deals chiefly with persons in the lower and sordid walks of life, and though the scene is London and these persons include an international spy, several Anarchists, an Inspector of Police, and a reasonably handsome woman, the whole is managed without one touch of the romance in which the customary fiction of the subject stalks, glamorously and falsely enveloped. Mr. Conrad writes of Anarchists, even of foreign spies on the free soil of England, without melodrama. His secret agent, obese, indolent, shrewd in his small way, having the outward aspect of a successful plumber, of "steady fidelity to his own fireside," though his habit of wearing his hat in the house, "derived from the frequentation of foreign cafés,"

gives him a false air of “unceremonious impermanency,” is most attached to his wife. She, in her turn, though possessed of fine eyes and showing traces of French descent in the “extremely neat and artistic arrangement of her glossy dark hair,” is an entirely domestic and respectable woman, a good wife to Mr. Verloc, and devoted to a brother, rather weak in the wits, for whose sake, in fact—in order to provide him with a good home—she has married Mr. Verloc. Mrs. Winnie Verloc, like others of Mr. Conrad’s women, is a creature of sluggish mentality—“incurious,” says he. “Mrs. Verloc wasted no portion of this transient life in seeking for fundamental information. She felt profoundly that things do not stand much looking into. She made her force and her wisdom of that instinct.”

Mrs. Verloc’s mother, “a large female with a dark, musty wig” and enormous swollen legs, “heroic and unscrupulous and full of love for both her children,” is another inmate of the house of Verloc. Mr. Conrad will discover why she “conceived in the astuteness of her uneasy heart and pursued with secrecy and determination” a plan to get herself admitted to a certain almshouse.

The young man of little wit is naturally the other inmate of the house of Verloc. He has his part in the tragedy also. Steevie, a creature of “immoderate compassion, apt to forget mere facts—his name and address, for instance—had a faithful memory for sensations.” So, gazing upon a cab horse of “aspect profoundly lamentable,” and informed by the cabman that he had to make the miserable beast go because he needed the fares for his “missus and the kids at home,” Steevie was near choked with grief and indignation, “at one sort of wretchedness having to feed upon the anguish of another, at the poor cabman beating the poor horse in the name, as it were, of the poor kids at home.” Mr. Conrad discovers Steevie’s processes even further:

“The tenderness to all pain and misery, the desire to make the horse happy and the cabman happy, had reached the point of a bizarre longing to take them to bed with him. And that he knew was impossible. For Steevie was not mad. It was, as it were, a symbolic longing. At the same time it was very distinct,” because, “when, as a child, he cowered in a dark corner, scared, wretched, sore, and miserable, his sister Winnie used to come along and carry him off to bed with her as if to a heaven of consoling peace.” Thus the mechanics of poor Steevie’s “anguish of immoderate compassion.” “Shame!” he cried, at last. “Steevie was no master of phrases, and, perhaps for that very reason, his thoughts lacked clearness and precision.”

Conversely, Mr. Conrad, who is a master of phrases, and whose thoughts, even when the subject matter of them is elusive and complex beyond calculation, are both clear and precise. Therein is part of his mastery, but the secret of his real strength, one fancies, is just that sense of the potency of association in giving form to crude human impulses, which is shown in the bizarre mental symbol of Steevie’s passionate tenderness. Later, Mr. Conrad shows the work-

ing of other spells of association whose key is a phrase merely. Thus is a woman driven to her death and a man to madness. Figure to yourself the murderess flying through the night and the fog, haunted by the matter-of-fact words which in England are apt to conclude the brief newspaper account of an execution—“The drop given was fourteen feet.” In such fashion is the terror of the gallows made concrete—it bores at the consciousness like a fly buzzing against a window pane.

As remarked, the story is a sombre one. There is death in it, despair, revenge, a dumb, “hardly decent” passion of devotion, and a bestial and colossal selfishness; there are also all the domestic virtues. And there are Anarchists, human but freakish, each after his kind; one pathetically corpulent, gentle, harmless, and an optimist—an ex-convict; another a wizened fellow who manufactures bombs and spends his life seeking the “perfect detonator”; yet another, huge, a blonde beast, the natural Anarchist. Then there is a police officer—“principal expert in Anarchist procedure,” and a Secretary of Embassy, a “Hyperborean swine,” but daintily witty in society, who plans an “outrage which need not be especially sanguinary” but must be “startlingly effective.” Mr. Vladimir suggests, in fact, that the blowing up of Greenwich Observatory as an act “purely destructive” and impersonally directed against property and the “sacrosanct fetish” of the British public, science, will be a suitable demonstration to fill that public with a proper horror of Anarchists—a horror which will take the form of drastic repressive measures agreeable to the policy of his own swinish Hyperborean government. His secret agent, Mr. Verloc, is to get the deed done. Mr. Verloc does. Hence the story, which is in the sanguinary quality of the action all that even the melodramatist could desire. There is, nevertheless, a vast gulf fixed between Mr. Conrad and the melodramatist, between the human tragedy of “*The Secret Agent*” and the detective story of commerce.

Desmond MacCarthy (review date 1907-08)

SOURCE: MacCarthy, Desmond. Rev. of *The Secret Agent*, by Joseph Conrad. *Albany Review* 2 (1907-08): 229-34. Print.

[In the following review, MacCarthy offers a favorable assessment of *The Secret Agent* with reference to its depiction of contemporary English anarchism. For MacCarthy, the novel’s plot resembles that of other “sensational literature,” but Conrad’s refined style and the realism of his characters elevate the work “far above the level of sensationalism.”]

In 1894, a year of great anarchist activity, Martial Bourdin (anarchist) blew himself to pieces in Greenwich Park, his intention being to blow up the Royal Observatory.

This is the last anarchist “demonstration” of importance which has occurred in England during recent years; for the

exploits of Rolla Richards of Deptford, or of Davis of Birmingham, are hardly worth mentioning in the same breath.

The former demonstrated against several post offices in South London with small quantities of gunpowder; while the latter only threw a brick (wrapped, it is true, in a copy of the *Walsall Anarchist*) through a jeweller's plate-glass and scattered as many trinkets as he could lay hands on about the road before he was seized. For yielding to this not inhuman impulse he went to prison for eighteen months. The explosion of Martial Bourdin remains, then, the high water mark of anarchic activity in this country.

It was particularly startling to the Special Crimes Department, since it occurred at the very time when it was most clearly the interest of English anarchists to lie low. The discovery of bomb-manufacturing at Walsall in 1892, when six anarchists were arrested and sentenced to terms varying from five to ten years, had been followed by a series of outrages on the Continent, of which the outrage in the Barcelona theatre and the explosions in the Paris cafés, engineered by Ravachol, will be remembered with most disgust. The European powers in 1894 were busy in devising strong repressive measures in consequence, and they were very anxious to bring England into line with their own policy. It was at this moment that the demonstration against Astronomy occurred.

Mr. Joseph Conrad's last novel, *The Secret Agent*, deals with the Greenwich Park incident, and the story is the inner history, perhaps fictitious, perhaps true, perhaps half-true and half-fictitious, of that event.

When the story opens we see Mr. Verloc, secret agent of the Austrian Embassy, and anarchist spy, on his way from his dingy little shop of disreputable wares and semi-indecent literature to keep an appointment with his employers. "He trod the pavement heavily with his shiny boots, and his general get-up was that of a well-to-do mechanic in business for himself. He might have been anything from a picture-frame maker to a locksmith; an employer of labour in a small way. But there was also about him an indescribable air which no mechanic could have acquired in the practice of his handicraft, however dishonestly exercised: the air common to men who live on the vices, the follies, or the baser fears of mankind; the air of moral nihilism common to keepers of gambling hells and disorderly houses; to private detectives and inquiry agents; to drink sellers and, I should say, to the sellers of invigorating electric belts and to the inventors of patent medicines."

In the first few pages we are given in a masterly fashion a general idea of Mr. Verloc's domestic surroundings, of his wife (he is married), of her mother and of her brother, a queer, excitable youth; but, above all, we gather from a few vivid and ingenious indications, the character and mind of Mr. Verloc himself: his profound indolence, his "steady-eyed impudence," his good-nature and his sultry reticence.

The interview to which he is approaching is destined to have astonishing results; for he finds himself confronted with the alternative of being "chucked" or consenting to organise an outrage himself, intended to frighten the English government into falling in with the policy of repression on the Continent. The Secret Agent departs insulted, bewildered and afraid, and the upshot of this interview is that, failing in his attempt to instigate any regular anarchist to undertake the business at such a juncture, he uses in the end his half-witted brother-in-law, who, stumbling over a root in the fog, is blown to pieces. His wife, half maddened by what she considers the murder of her brother Stevie, stabs her husband as he lies on the sofa, the evening of the same day. In escaping from the house she runs up against "Comrade Ossipon," an anarchist, who has been in the habit of frequenting the little back parlour of the shop. He offers to help her escape, takes her money and then jumps out of the train as it leaves the platform: the news of her suicide from the deck of a Channel steamer appears in the papers next day.

Read in a brief abstract there is nothing to distinguish this story from other examples of sensational literature, were it not for the unusual motive running through it; but the book itself is far above the level of sensationalism. As all readers of Mr. Conrad's books know, he is a master of vivid description and of the psychology of violent emotion. No one describes better states of extreme excitement, or can give to scenes of horror more of that intensity which makes them really interesting. His power, too, of making the commonplace arresting and the familiar significant, stands him in good stead when dealing with the familiar dinginess of Soho. The wonder and merit of the book is that he succeeds in charging the slow and furtive lives of his principal characters and their surroundings with a Balzacian significance, without turning all London into a phantasmagorical city. There is another quality in his work which is curiously Balzacian. The details are extremely definite and real, yet they give the impression of having been imagined and then felt, rather than observed. His descriptions do not read like those of a man who has walked about using his eyes and then remembered what he has seen; but like those of a man whose sensations are born again in his imagination as pictures.

One of the principal characteristics of Mr. Conrad's work hitherto is that it has been cumulative in method. He has attained his ends by piling up the effect. In this book he is more concentrated than he has ever been before; almost every sentence contains some phrase upon which, if interest did not hurry him along, the reader would linger as containing the heart of the matter. There is a second noticeable characteristic: it shows more clearly than any other novel of exceptional imaginative merit, the influence of Mr. Henry James. It will be a significant fact to the historian of the contemporary novel, that a writer like Mr. Conrad, whose aim is intensity, whose *forte* is excitement and whose favourite subjects are violence and adventure, should have