

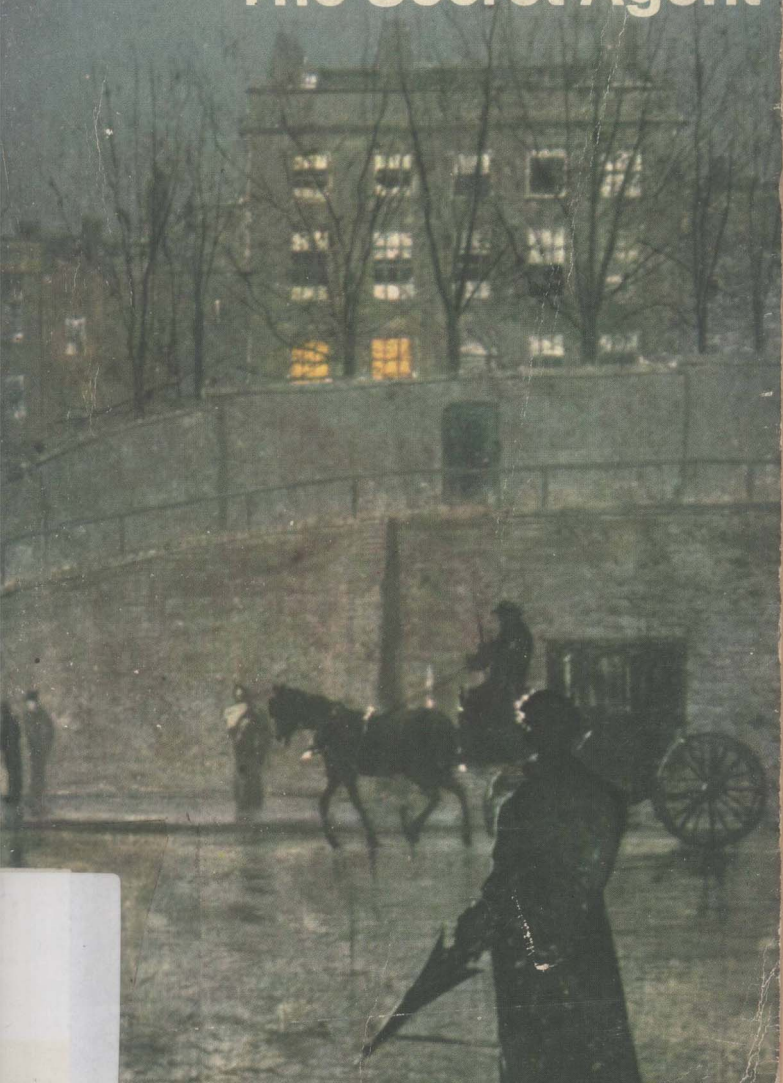


Penguin Modern Classics

外语系

# Joseph Conrad

## The Secret Agent





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# THE NIGGER OF THE 'NARCISSUS', TYPHOON, AND OTHER STORIES

This volume contains some of the best short work by which Conrad's reputation came early to be connected with ships and the sea.

*'The Nigger of the "Narcissus", which was the first of Conrad's novels to have the sea as a setting, contains, more than anything else he wrote, the essence of his experience at sea and of his views on the practical conduct of life' – Jocelyn Baines in Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography.*

In *The Nigger* the author uses the Kipling touch in his description of life in the fore-castle of a sailing-ship – 'a fragment detached from the earth . . . like a small planet'. Dominating the scene is the figure of Allistoun, the vessel's master.

*Typhoon* is the long short story in which the unimaginative Captain MacWhirr fights a steam-ship through a violent Pacific storm with a boat-load of cowering coolies, and accompanying it are *Falk* (later described by the author as 'an episode in the story of my first command'), *Amy Foster* and *Tomorrow*.

*Also published in Penguins*

Chance

## LORD JIM

The sailor who is the dominant character of this long narrative once lost his nerve in a crisis. After the official inquiry had condemned him for abandoning his ship, Jim became preoccupied in the task of redeeming himself – not in the eyes of the world but, so to speak, in the sight of his own soul. He was an impressive and enigmatic figure, known in every Eastern port and trading-station, and his whole behaviour contradicted the stigma of cowardice which rested on his name. The final chapter of his restless pilgrimage took him into the jungles of Malaya where he earned his title of 'Tuan' – or Lord – Jim from the subjects of the little empire he established there.

No less fascinating than the motives and adventures of this strange personality is Conrad's method of unfolding the story. For here he adopts that device of 'oblique narration' which discloses events and impressions as they appeared to eye-witnesses and which thereby intensifies their immediacy. It is by this adoption of the manner of the Ancient Mariner that Conrad makes the tale of *Lord Jim* so vivid and compelling.

*Also published in Penguins*

Under Western Eyes

## VICTORY

'*Victory* is . . . among those of Conrad's works which deserve to be current as representing his claim to classical standing; and of the novels . . . in that class it is the one that answers most nearly to the stock notion of his genius' – F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition*

'Heyst is perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the most complex, character that Conrad created . . . [he gives] *Victory* a depth of suggestion that places it among Conrad's best novels' – Jocelyn Baines in *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*

This is the story of a man's attempts to detach himself from the central current of life. Axel Heyst, the disenchanted Swede, becomes involved in the operation of a coal company on a remote island in the Malay Archipelago. When that fails he turns his back on humanity until, once again, he is drawn into contact with the world by a girl whom he chivalrously rescues and bears off to his island retreat. The arrival of a sinister trio of adventurers, bent on robbery, calls down on the characters' heads the thunder of doom which has been gathering in the final chapters.

*Also published in Penguins*

Youth/The End of the Tether

## NOSTROMO

'If . . . his most considerable work had had due recognition, it would be known as one of the great novels of the language. For *Nostromo* is most certainly that' – F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition*

'Of the novels, *Nostromo* is undoubtedly the finest; a good case could be made out for considering it the greatest novel in English of this century. It represents a remarkable extension of Conrad's genius' – Walter Allen in *The English Novel*

Amid the grandiose scenery of South America, against the exciting events of a revolution, Conrad ironically displays men, not as isolated beings, but as social animals. Arnold Bennett regarded the book, with its very wide canvas, 'as one of the greatest novels of any age'. And Jocelyn Baines, in his fine critical biography of the author, has written:

'*Nostromo* is Conrad's most ambitious feat of imagination and is worthy of comparison with the most ambitious of all great novels, *War and Peace*.'

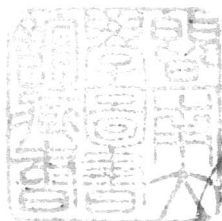
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## THE SECRET AGENT

英小说

Joseph Conrad (originally Konrad Korseniowski) was born in Russian Poland in 1857, and passed his childhood in the shadow of revolution. His parents died when he was quite young. At the age of seventeen he went to Marseille to become an apprentice in the merchant marine. This began a long period of adventure at sea, Conrad having his share of hardship, shipwreck, and other accidents. He became a British subject in 1886. In 1889, at the age of thirty-one, he came to London for a rest after fifteen years at sea. On this short London holiday he began writing a sea novel, which, after surviving subsequent jungle travel, shipwreck on the Congo, and a railway cloakroom in Berlin, came into the hands of Edward Garnett and through him to a London publisher. The book was *Almayer's Folly*, destined to be the first of a long series of novels and stories, mostly inspired by his experiences of life at sea, which have placed him in the front rank of English literature. He died in 1924.







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外文书库

JOSEPH CONRAD

# THE SECRET AGENT

A SIMPLE TALE



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TO H. G. WELLS

*The chronicler of Mr Lewisham's love  
the biographer of Kipps and the  
historian of the ages to come  
this simple tale of the nineteenth century  
is affectionately offered*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE origin of *The Secret Agent*: subject, treatment, artistic purpose, and every other motive that may induce an author to take up his pen, can, I believe, be traced to a period of mental and emotional reaction.

The actual facts are that I began this book impulsively and wrote it continuously. When in due course it was bound and delivered to the public gaze I found myself reproved for having produced it at all. Some of the admonitions were severe, others had a sorrowful note. I have not got them textually before me but I remember perfectly the general argument, which was very simple; and also my surprise at its nature. All this sounds a very old story now! And yet it is not such a long time ago. I must conclude that I had still preserved much of my pristine innocence in the year 1907. It seems to me now that even an artless person might have foreseen that some criticisms would be based on the ground of sordid surroundings and the moral squalor of the tale.

That of course is a serious objection. It was not universal. In fact it seems ungracious to remember so little reproof amongst so much intelligent and sympathetic appreciation; and I trust that the readers of this Preface will not hasten to put it down to wounded vanity or a natural disposition to ingratitude. I suggest that a charitable heart could very well ascribe my choice to natural modesty. Yet it isn't exactly modesty that makes me select reproof for the illustration of my case. No, it isn't exactly modesty. I am not at all certain that I am modest; but those who have read so far through my work will credit me with enough decency, tact, *savoir-faire*, what you will, to prevent me from making a song for my own glory out of the words of other people. No! The true motive of my selection lies in quite a different trait. I have always had a propensity to justify my action. Not to defend. To justify. Not to insist that I was right but simply to explain that there was no perverse intention, no secret scorn for the natural sensibilities of mankind at the bottom of my impulses.

That kind of weakness is dangerous only so far that it exposes one to the risk of becoming a bore; for the world generally is not interested in the motives of any overt act but in its consequences. Man may smile and smile but he is not an investigating animal. He loves the obvious. He shrinks from explanations. Yet I will go on

with mine. It's obvious that I need not have written that book. I was under no necessity to deal with that subject; using the word subject both in the sense of the tale itself and in the larger one of a special manifestation in the life of mankind. This I fully admit. But the thought of elaborating mere ugliness in order to shock, or even simply to surprise my readers by a change of front, has never entered my head. In making this statement I expect to be believed, not only on the evidence of my general character but also for the reason, which anybody can see, that the whole treatment of the tale, its inspiring indignation and underlying pity and contempt, prove my detachment from the squalor and sordidness which lie simply in the outward circumstances of the setting.

The inception of *The Secret Agent* followed immediately on a two years' period of intense absorption in the task of writing that remote novel, *Nostramo*, with its far-off Latin-American atmosphere; and the profoundly personal *Mirror of the Sea*. The first an intense creative effort on what I suppose will always remain my largest canvas, the second an unreserved attempt to unveil for a moment the profounder intimacies of the sea and the formative influences of nearly half my lifetime. It was a period, too, in which my sense of the truth of things was attended by a very intense imaginative and emotional readiness which, all genuine and faithful to facts as it was, yet made me feel (the task once done) as if I were left behind, aimless amongst mere husks of sensations and lost in a world of other, of inferior, values.

I don't know whether I really felt that I wanted a change, change in my imagination, in my vision, and in my mental attitude. I rather think that a change in the fundamental mood had already stolen over me unawares. I don't remember anything definite happening. With *The Mirror of the Sea* finished in the full consciousness that I had dealt honestly with myself and my readers in every line of that book, I gave myself up to a not unhappy pause. Then, while I was yet standing still, as it were, and certainly not thinking of going out of my way to look for anything ugly, the subject of *The Secret Agent* – I mean the tale – came to me in the shape of a few words uttered by a friend in a casual conversation about anarchists or rather anarchist activities; how brought about I don't remember now.

I remember, however, remarking on the criminal futility of the whole thing, doctrine, action, mentality; and on the contemptible aspect of the half-crazy pose as of a brazen cheat exploiting the poignant miseries and passionate credulities of a mankind always so tragically eager for self-destruction. That was what made for me its philosophical pretences so unpardonable. Presently, passing to par-

ticular instances, we recalled the already old story of the attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory; a blood-stained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought. For perverse unreason has its own logical processes. But that outrage could not be laid hold of mentally in any sort of way, so that one remained faced by the fact of a man blown to bits for nothing even most remotely resembling an idea, anarchistic or other. As to the outer wall of the Observatory it did not show as much as the faintest crack.

I pointed all this out to my friend who remained silent for a while and then remarked in his characteristically casual and omniscient manner: 'Oh, that fellow was half an idiot. His sister committed suicide afterwards.' These were absolutely the only words that passed between us; for extreme surprise at this unexpected piece of information kept me dumb for a moment and he began at once to talk of something else. It never occurred to me later to ask how he arrived at his knowledge. I am sure that if he had seen once in his life the back of an anarchist that must have been the whole extent of his connexion with the underworld. He was, however, a man who liked to talk with all sorts of people, and he may have gathered those illuminating facts at second or third hand, from a crossing-sweeper, from a retired police officer, from some vague man in his club, or even, perhaps, from a Minister of State met at some public or private reception.

Of the illuminating quality there could be no doubt whatever. One felt like walking out of a forest on to a plain – there was not much to see but one had plenty of light. No, there was not much to see and, frankly, for a considerable time I didn't even attempt to perceive anything. It was only the illuminating impression that remained. It remained satisfactory but in a passive way. Then, about a week later, I came upon a book which as far as I know had never attained any prominence, the rather summary recollections of an Assistant Commissioner of Police, an obviously able man with a strong religious strain in his character who was appointed to his post at the time of the dynamite outrages in London, away back in the eighties. The book was fairly interesting, very discreet of course; and I have by now forgotten the bulk of its contents. It contained no revelations, it ran over the surface agreeably, and that was all. I won't even try to explain why I should have been arrested by a little passage of about seven lines, in which the author (I believe his name was Anderson) reproduced a short dialogue held in the Lobby of the House of Commons after some unexpected anarchist outrage, with the Home Secretary. I think it was Sir William

Harcourt then. He was very much irritated and the official was very apologetic. The phrase, amongst the three which passed between them, that struck me most was Sir W. Harcourt's angry sally: 'All that's very well. But your idea of secrecy over there seems to consist of keeping the Home Secretary in the dark.' Characteristic enough of Sir W. Harcourt's temper but not much in itself. There must have been, however, some sort of atmosphere in the whole incident because all of a sudden I felt myself stimulated. And then ensued in my mind what a student of chemistry would best understand from the analogy of the addition of the tiniest little drop of the right kind, precipitating the process of crystallization in a test tube containing some colourless solution.

It was at first for me a mental change, disturbing a quieted-down imagination, in which strange forms, sharp in outline but imperfectly apprehended, appeared and claimed attention as crystals will do by their bizarre and unexpected shapes. One fell to musing before the phenomenon – even of the past: of South America, a continent of crude sunshine and brutal revolutions, of the sea, the vast expanse of salt waters, the mirror of heaven's frowns and smiles, the reflector of the world's light. Then the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world's light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives.

Irresistibly the town became the background for the ensuing period of deep and tentative meditations. Endless vistas opened before me in various directions. It would take years to find the right way! It seemed to take years! . . . Slowly the dawning conviction of Mrs Verloc's maternal passion grew up to a flame between me and that background, tingeing it with its secret ardour and receiving from it in exchange some of its own sombre colouring. At last the story of Winnie Verloc stood out complete from the days of her childhood to the end, unproportioned as yet, with everything still on the first plan, as it were; but ready now to be dealt with. It was a matter of about three days.

*This* book is *that* story, reduced to manageable proportions, its whole course suggested and centred round the absurd cruelty of the Greenwich Park explosion. I had there a task I will not say arduous but of the most absorbing difficulty. But it had to be done. It was a necessity. The figures grouped about Mrs Verloc and related directly or indirectly to her tragic suspicion that 'life doesn't



stand much looking into', are the outcome of that very necessity. Personally I have never had any doubt of the reality of Mrs Verloc's story; but it had to be disengaged from its obscurity in that immense town, it had to be made credible, I don't mean so much as to her soul but as to her surroundings, not so much as to her psychology but as to her humanity. For the surroundings hints were not lacking. I had to fight hard to keep at arm's length the memories of my solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days, lest they should rush in and overwhelm each page of the story as these emerged one after another from a mood as serious in feeling and thought as any in which I ever wrote a line. In that respect I really think that *The Secret Agent* is a perfectly genuine piece of work. Even the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind, was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity. It is one of the minor satisfactions of my writing life that having taken that resolve I did manage, it seems to me, to carry it right through to the end. As to the personages whom the absolute necessity of the case - Mrs Verloc's case - brings out in front of the London background, from them, too, I obtained those little satisfactions which really count for so much against the mass of oppressive doubts that haunt so persistently every attempt at creative work. For instance, of Mr Vladimir himself (who was fair game for a caricatural presentation) I was gratified to hear that an experienced man of the world had said 'that Conrad must have been in touch with that sphere or else has an excellent intuition of things', because Mr Vladimir was 'not only possible in detail but quite right in essentials'. Then a visitor from America informed me that all sorts of revolutionary refugees in New York would have it that the book was written by somebody who knew a lot about them. This seemed to me a very high compliment, considering that, as a matter of hard fact, I had seen even less of their kind than the omniscient friend who gave me the first suggestion for the novel. I have no doubt, however, that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won't say more convinced than they but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them had ever done in the whole course of his life. I don't say this to boast. I was simply attending to my business. In the matter of all my books I have always attended to my business. I have attended to it with complete self-surrender. And this statement, too, is not a boast. I could not have done otherwise. It would have bored me too much to make-believe.