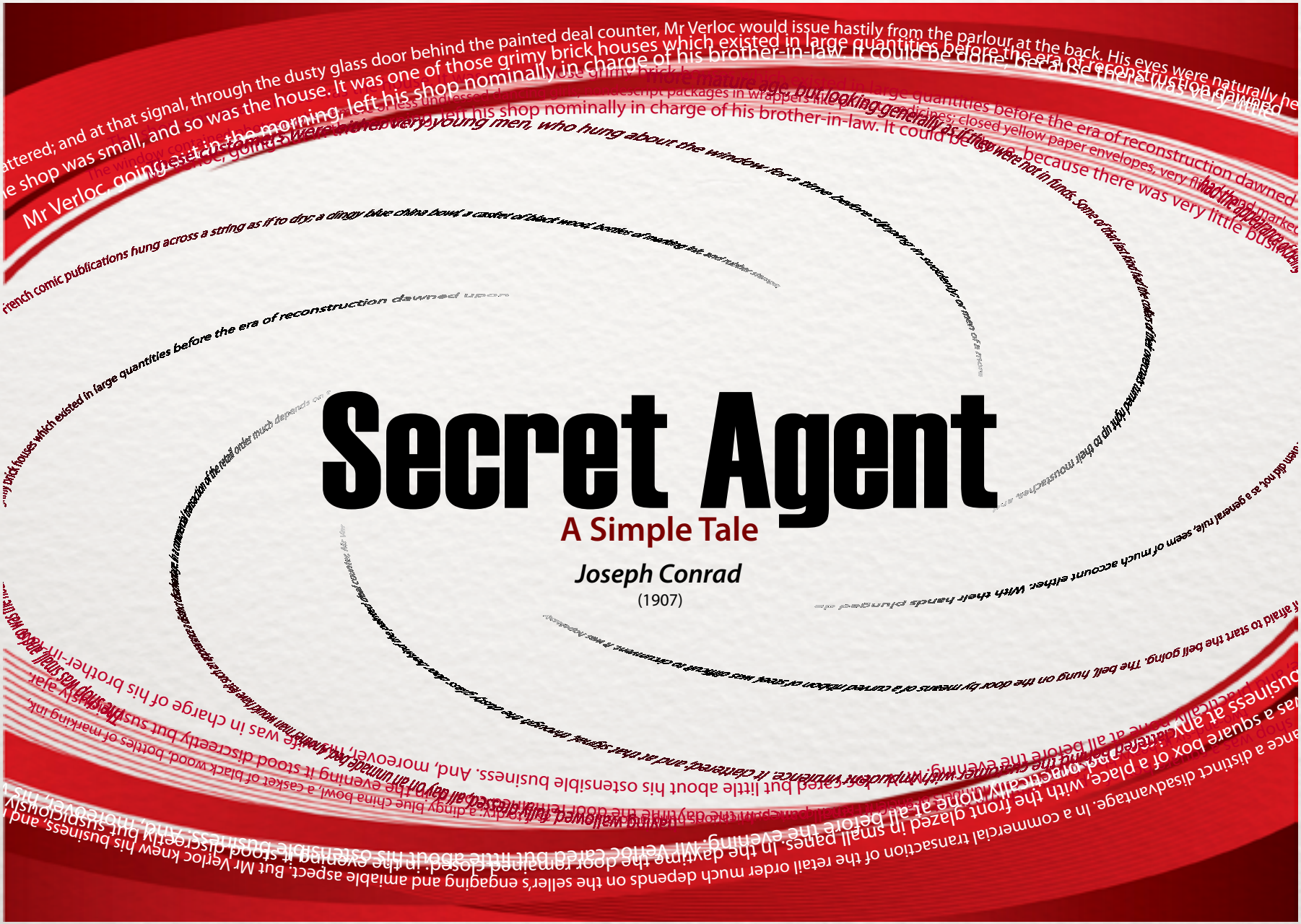
OCR
RECOGNISING ACHIEVEMENT

English Reading List



Introductions and Suggested Reading

These Introductions and Annotated reading lists are intended for teachers preparing to teach this text for the first time for Unit F661 in the OCR GCE AS Level in English Literature, though some materials may be shared directly with students. Most of the concerns highlighted address literary, biographical, historical or other contextual concerns, as indicated in the margin (AO4). Others point to critical approaches that may be juxtaposed with the candidate's own (AO3). Very occasionally some help is given exploring the text (AO2) though it is assumed that this work will be carried on in centres.

It is the intention that most of this material will be found directly relevant to AS study, teachers are reminded that Assessment Objectives do not directly establish the quality of an answer, but only assist to place it accurately within an assessment band. It follows that no marks are given directly for demonstration of AOs and that unless properly assimilated into the candidate's discussion, undigested lumps of contextual material may often inhibit rather than enhance an answer.

The brief suggestions for further reading will need to be filtered by teachers before they are presented to students; I would, however, recommend a general textbook on the novel, regardless of your choice of text. This is Jeremy Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel* (Arnold), which first appeared in 1985, and has been frequently updated and reprinted. Hawthorn's sense of the history of the novel is astute, his use of examples informative and unthreatening. He is impatient of jargon, and his definition of key-terms ('realism', Modernism') is accessible. Here is a sample of his method. Here he tests the value of successful viewpoint choice:

I have tried to find good audio-book readings of all the novels, convinced that they aid student comprehension more than is generally realised. I also hope teachers will find my views of film versions helpful. No area of A-Level study has

improved as much as performance-criticism, where film and television versions (in the case of novels) are viewed by candidates as critical readings of the base-text. Obviously this process will be short-circuited if candidates think of filmed novels merely as pale substitutes for reading, or, worse, as substitutes.

Please note that where editions of texts are suggested, these are only recommendations. OCR does not specify editions of texts to be used, and F661 is a closed text examination.

Pole and Russian

Conrad was born in a Polish-speaking part of Ukraine that had traditionally been included in Poland by those, like Conrad's parents, who dreamed of Polish independence. Unfortunately Poland at this time had been carved up among three empires, and Conrad lived in the Russian segment, subject to the brutal repression of the Tsarist regime. In 1862 Conrad's father was arrested for seditious activity and exiled to Russia where both he and his wife eventually perished of tuberculosis, leaving Conrad orphaned at the age of twelve. The novelist never forgot or forgave his family's sufferings at the hands of the Russians. Even after he had become a British subject, and Britain had signed the 'triple entente' with France and Nicholas II in 1907, Conrad continued to write and think of the Tsarist regime as a slave reflects on a hated master. The Russian 'Harlequin' in *Heart of Darkness* is presented as a nasty sycophant, hopelessly in thrall to Kurtz's fascist charisma, and his brutal authoritarian theories. In *The Secret Agent* the deepest of the book's many ironies is that the bomb-plot on the Greenwich Observatory is not dreamed up by a discontented Frenchman or exiled German intellectual, an international anarchist syndicate, or even Mr Verloc. It is the work of Mr Vladimir, a careerist diplomat, working in the Embassy of a major European power, threatening his victims in a 'guttural Central Asian tone.' He means to destabilise Europe, and demolish popular respect for science, by reinforcing his own arbitrary power. Conrad thought that the Russian way.

AO4 Biographical context

An Adopted Englishman

AO4 Biographical context

Conrad spent considerable time in England in the 1880s (when *The Secret Agent* is set), but settled there around 1894. By the time he wrote *The Secret Agent* he had been resident for about twelve years, and was becoming more confident in his assessment of Britain and the British. He knows his material well. His interiors are convincing: the Westminster lobby, the suburban police-station, the Soho porn-shop. Yet throughout the novel the narrator surveys British society with a slight air of cosmopolitan detachment. He finds the British system of government privileges mad workaholics. He thinks the permanent Civil Service in Whitehall marvellously dedicated but hopelessly overworked. Sir Ethelred, the Home Secretary, is so diary-driven he never has time for 'detail'. Thus the most important business of an Empire on which the sun never sets is conducted at breakneck speed over half-filled coffee cups. He has reservations, too, about the devious, self-contained working-methods of the Assistant Commissioner, which have been learned in the British colonies, and which are not quite democratic: he thinks his subordinates are not there to help him, but merely get in his way. Despite these reservations, however, Conrad pays his adopted country plenty of compliments in the novel. The Assistant Commissioner may be a maverick, ignoring the rule-book, gliding about slimy London like Sherlock Holmes in disguise. But he gets a result. At the end of the novel Vladimir is packing his bags, en route to somewhere like St Petersburg. Or possibly Siberia. At any rate, he will not threaten Victoria's empire again. In the same way *Heart of Darkness*, possibly the most anti-imperial story every written, includes a scene where Marlow examines a map of Africa, and after satirising the brutal or inefficient methods of Germans, Danes etc. praises the red bits, the British bits. 'Some real work is done in there,' says Marlow. And Conrad, who had done some of it himself, believed it.

The Dark Heart of Empire

AO2
Literary contexts
AO4
Biographical and historical contexts

But if Conrad excepts Britain from the cruelty perpetrated by other European colonists, that doesn't mean he exonerated his adopted country from the burden of imperial guilt. The novella *Heart of Darkness* (1897), as is well known, explores the atrocities presented by the Belgian King when he decided to run the Belgian Congo as a private company rather than as a colonial possession. Yet Conrad famously begins story not on the Congo River, but on the Thames, leading to invidious comparisons between Leopold's tin-pot empire and Victoria's massively professionalised one. Conrad claims, that London, too, has been 'one of the dark places of the earth', that those who work to soften the sufferings in London's East End are similar to the missionaries of 'darkest Africa'. *The Secret Agent* goes further, its *Author's Note* (written 1920) calling the sprawling city of eight million 'a cruel devourer of the world's light …a dark vision of moral and spiritual inertia.' In the same Note Conrad explains that he had gathered material for the novel like an investigative journalist on 'solitary walks all over London in my early [English] days' (the 1880s). The novel is set in 1886.

Is London or the Belgian Congo the 'Darkest' Place on Earth?

AO4 Historical context

In the 1890s (not long after Conrad's novel is set) an analogy was often made between Darkest Africa and Darkest London. "As there is a Darkest Africa is there not also a Darkest England?" enquired General Booth of the Salvation Army:

> *Civilisation, which can breed its own barbarians, does it not also breed its own pygmies? . . .What a satire it is upon our Christianity and our civilisation, that the existence of these colonies of heathens and savages in the heart of our capital should attract so little attention!*
>
> William Booth, In *Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890).

Suggested reading

Suggested reading

Ian Watt, ed., *The Secret Agent: A Casebook* (1973) is probably still the most valuable critical book on the novel, edited by the man who has come to seem Conrad's most significant twentieth century critic.

Additional Reading:

Thomas C. Moser's *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (1957)

Albert Guerard's *Conrad the Novelist* (1958).

These are the standard critical studies of Conrad's fiction

In the Shadow of Dickens

AO4 Literary context

If the darkness of London in *The Secret Agent* is Conrad's own, its grotesque animism owes a lot to Dickens, who describes and mythologises London in every one of his fifteen major novels. The Dickens influence is apparent early on, in the joke about the house near Verloc's Embassy that has been misplaced by the Post Office, but also in the sumptuous nastiness of the Assistant Commissioner's descent into a foggy street 'like an aquarium from which the water has been run off.' Sir Ethelred's Ministry owes something to Dickens's satire of the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office in the third number of Little Dorrit ('Containing the Whole Science of Government'), while his Clerk 'Toodles' is named satirically after an engine-driver in Dickens. To get a good sense of Dickens's anthropomorphic city read the opening of Chapter 9 of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), a description of Todgers's Boarding House in the City of London. It is intriguing that when Henry James wrote a novel about anarchistic disturbances in London (*The Princess Casamassima*, 1886) he too, like Conrad, was driven into a number of descriptions of the City so 'Dickensian' as to seem almost homages.

Anarchism: A 'Quiet Siding'

AO4 Historical/ political context

The political activists in Conrad's novel are not Marxists, the most influential radical political philosophy by the time the story appeared (1907). Instead they reflect a range of earlier Anarchist traditions, broadly Libertarian in outlook, contrasting with Marx's belief in authoritarianism. Some, like Michaelis, are philosophic anarchists, hoping peacefully to effect the overthrow of political institutions; others, like Yundt, are little more than junkies of an unthinking and self-gratifying brutality. Ossipon is an intriguing figure. His idleness has led him to write pornography posing as medical textbooks, but he is also an early proponent of eugenics, fascinated by Stevie's 'degenerate' appearance and toying with theories of 'evolved' superiority, as popularised in the late 1870s by Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909). Conrad mocks him by giving him an appearance evoking the textbook conception of a 'degenerate': 'A bush of crinkly yellow hair topped his red, freckled face, with a flattened nose and prominent mouth cast in the rough mold of the negro type. His almond-shaped eyes leered languidly over the high cheekbones.'

Though they ostensibly hold modish, far-reaching creeds, all of Conrad's anarchists turn out to be sensual cowards. So lacking in daredevil instinct are they that when Vladimir needs blue touch-paper for malicious scheme, he turns to the dilatory and evasive Mr Verloc, who looks as though he's 'wallowed, fully dressed, all day on an unmade bed', confident that this is the man to get the job done. But if Conrad, Vladimir and even Verloc make most of the anarchists look ridiculous and ineffectual, there is one who emerges from the book with moral credit. This is an expert in the recent science of high-explosives, Verloc's Guy Fawkes, known only as 'the Professor'. He is a genuine philosopher and, if only he could only perfect his detonator, perfectly willing to die for his cause. The police do not understand him, give him a wide berth, call him a 'pest'. In short, the Professor, unlike the others, is an extremist. 'And every extremist,' writes Conrad, 'is respectable.'

Anarchists, Terrorists and Spies in Fiction

AO4 Literary contexts

Conrad's agitators are more selfseeking than Henry James's in the other great novel in English on this theme, *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), and less effectual than those in Oscar Wilde's early play, *Vera*, or the *Nihilists* (1892). The anarchist threat had become a well-worn fictional subject. Wilde predictably sees the funny side of anarchist outrages, introducing a twee (and ineffective) exploding clock into *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* (1888). Events in Conrad's novel derive fairly directly from a well-publicised attempt by Michel Bourdin, an anarchist pamphleteer and his brother-in-law, to blow up Greenwich Observatory on 15 February 1894. London was at this time a well-known haven for active terrorists, partly owing to the traditional British hospitality towards subversives active against continental regimes. More detailed discussion of terrorist movements in late-Victorian London can be found in Hermia Oliver, *The International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London* (1983) and Barbara Arnett Melchiori, *Terrorism in the Late Victorian Novel* (1985). Conrad subtitles The Secret Agent, perhaps a little defensively, 'a thriller', though this constellates it with many novels about the newly glamorous topic of international espionage produced at this time. One of the most readable, about the secret establishment of German Naval Bases in the North Sea, is Erskine Childers's *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903); after the First World War Somerset Maugham compiled his masterful series of Ashenden spy-stories, one of which Hitchcock filmed at about the same time as *The Secret Agent*.

A Blown-Up Short Story?

As often happened with Conrad's novels, *The Secret Agent* began as a short story, focusing on Verloc, and intended to be the same length as two other stories written concurrently, both also focused on political terrorism. The first of these, '*The Informer*', introduces the Professor, according to Conrad the only 'respectable' character in *The Secret Agent*. Both 'The Informer' and the other story, '*The Anarchist*', were later collected with other tales of modest length into the volume *A Set of Six* (1908), but *The Secret Agent* grew into a substantial novel. Possibly aware of this gradual lengthening process in composition, some commentators find the characters of *The Secret Agent* undeveloped and undeveloping, more akin to the population of a short-story rather than a novel; they also consider suspiciously like a bundle of short-stories its (apparent) lack of unifying theme and what Conrad's early biographer Jocelyn Baines calls its tendency to fall 'apart into a succession of only superficially related scenes.' Others think that the novel's unusual gestation forced its author into unparalleled economy of effect and design, making it, according to John G. Peters, 'his most perfectly constructed novel.' Given that its characters each only appears in a handful of scenes, and there are so many of them in such a comparatively short book, try to decide for yourself how successfully Conrad has bound them together.

AO2
Structure of novel
AO3
Opinions of other readers

Conrad's 'External Narrator'

AO2 Narrative voice

Everyone agrees that Conrad's method of narration in this novel is less sophisticated than in his earlier work. Instead of the leisurely development provided by a limited narrator or several narrators, *The Secret Agent* prefers a sharp, jaded narrative voice: one who seems to know everything but is distinctly unimpressed with his knowledge. He is not characterised, remaining an 'external narrator': a selective image projected by Conrad. Ill-informed, speculative or mutually contradictory narrators, such as those Conrad uses in *Lord Jim* (1900), give the impression that life is very complex, information unreliable, and human beings ultimately unknowable. But the narrator in *The Secret Agent* knows his characters to the point of overkill: they never surprise him, and their dearth of invention (for example, Verloc's vapid 'Don't!' when Winnie is about to plunge in the bread-knife) exasperates him to the point where he never addresses them or us in other than the ironic mode. A typical example might be this: 'And Mr Verloc, steady like a rock–a soft kind of rock.' F.R. Leavis in his chapter on Conrad in *The Great Tradition* (1948) brilliantly analyses the impact of this cynical narrator. The suggestive monotony of the tone is best experienced in a good reading of the novel, such as David Threlfall's for Chivers Audio Books (1997). The narrator is sometimes compared with T.S. Eliot's 'Modernist' narrator in *The Waste Land* (1922) leading you around the 'Unreal City' to overhear snatches of sinister conversation–often, as in the novel, at cross purposes, for this is a novel where nobody understands or seems to care much about the purposes of anybody else.

Flashing Forward

Studies of Conrad's narrative consider not only the narrative voice but the use of flash-forward in the novel, grimly underscoring ironies. One strong example is Stevie's sentimental empathy with the suffering cab-horse after we know he's been blown to bloody atoms; another (the most celebrated) Stevie and Verloc going off like 'father and son' when we know 'Daddy' is leading 'junior' to his death. Such wrenching and even fracturing of the novel's time-scheme comes pretty close to undermining any attempt (on which so many human disciplines depend) to understand events in their historical order. Such effects are further developed in Conrad's other 'political' novels, *Nostromo* and *Under Western Eyes*. In the latter a corrupt politician, Mikulin, stitches up the hero, Razumov, just after the narrator informs us how he himself was soon to be dismissed by a cabal of enemies. A more recent novel making excellent use of flash-forward to provide the perspective of eternity which dwarfs human doings is Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1963): knowing which of the charismatic schoolmistress's pupils betrayed her and why from the beginning of the book makes it harder for the reader to take her subversive personal agenda seriously.

AO2 Narrative structure

Conrad and Narrative Theory

Conrad's fiction is one of the most frequent case-studies in books on narrative theory. These may seem abstruse at AS, but, if you're keen, the following books engage with the novel's most striking narratological effects: Jeremy Hawthorn, *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment* (1990); Jacob Lothke, *Conrad's Narrative Method* (1989). A convenient introduction, with useful bibliography, is to be found in Jakob Lothe's essay '*Conradian Narrative*' in J.H. Stape, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (1996). The Russian Formalist distinction between fabula (the raw narrative events) and sjuzet (the structural logic and unpredictable ordering of events Conrad chooses to use) is particularly useful when studying novels like *The Secret Agent*, which make extensive use of flashes forward and back. It might be a useful exercise to sketch the outline of the novel's fabula (its events in strict narrative order) to see how it differs from the novel you have read (its sjuzet).

AO2 Narrative structure

Conrad and Women

AO2
Literary context: other Conrad texts

Discussion of the way women are presented in Conrad's fiction has been a growth area in the academy in the last twenty-five years. This is partly predictable: the rise of feminist studies and female academics has guaranteed that the role of women in canonical texts will be freshly explored. But in Conrad's case their discoveries have been particularly far reaching. The traditional view as Conrad as a 'man's writer' sees women as insulated from his books' deepest concerns. Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* went so far as to say 'It's queer how out of touch with truth women are.' Such 'ring-fencing' of the woman's world from the adventures of Conrad's heroes led to the charge that when he does introduce them it is as reductive stereotypes. In Heart of Darkness, for instance, the pale, patient 'intended' and Kurtz's 'savage and superb' mistress have been fitted to the pattern of Madonna and whore. But recent work by Ruth L. Nadelhaft and Susan Jones suggests that while the heroines of Conrad's early fiction may be masked by a smoke of rhetoric, what they actually do and think is often feisty and unexpected. As has long been known, Conrad's later fiction makes women into central figures, rather than walk-on parts and juvenile leads, and Jones makes a strong case for *Chance* (1912) as a book in which the story of the heroine is continually appropriated by designing or ignorant male narrators.

The History of Winnie Verloc

AO4 Literary contexts; AO2 literary exposition

The Secret Agent is possibly, however, the most significant book Conrad wrote about a woman. He insisted that its key character was not Mr Verloc or the Assistant Commissioner or even the Professor, but that the book was 'essentially the history of Winnie Verloc.' He also, in his Author's Note, considers her the only 'true anarchist' in the novel, 'the only character who performs a serious act of violence against another.'

Winnie's is essentially a case of arrested development. Brought up in a brutal under-resourced environment, she is denied the husband she thinks she wants, and retreats into her mother's scheme to find a meal ticket among her lodging house boarders, lighting fairly soon on lazy, bloated Adolf Verloc. He seems, in his turn, to have been seduced by 'the provocation of her unfathomable reserve.' There is little human warmth in this, and no romance, but it does draw her closer to her affectionate, mentally retarded brother, Stevie, who starts to function both as her lover and child. Conrad likes to write about people whose coping strategy is obvious, tightly stretched and brittle. Then, when it snaps, they fall into the abyss of the universe, and Conrad tests if they sink or swim. Thus Lord Jim in *Lord Jim* cannot come to terms with the loss of his good name; Dr Monygham (*Nostromo*) with his shame that he betrayed his friends under torture; Martin Decoud, essentially an urban creature, commits suicide when left alone on a silent island (also *Nostromo*). In many ways Winnie's case is similar to theirs. When Stevie is blown to bloody atoms her raison d'etre as a human being disappears. So she kills the man who let him be killed, Mr Verloc; then, already using up her options, she runs away. A few days later, like Decoud, she kills herself, as a moral abyss (specifically the space under the hangman's trap-door) yawns beneath her. Winnie Verloc did not 'think life bore much looking into', very like her male forebears. But this time Conrad's subject is a woman. She is not, like Jim, free to choose her career, or able to hide at the ends of the earth, like Monygham. She has compromised cruelly, sinking herself in a loveless marriage to purchase the security a woman

needs, and she does not do depths because frankly they terrify her: 'the drop given was fourteen feet.' The world has suddenly turned unfriendly. Immoral ruses, like selling pornographic postcards, no longer work. She offers her 'full, rounded' body to Ossipon ("I won't ask you to marry me," she breathed out in shame-faced accents.') and is refused, in a most unfriendly way. It is not easy being Winnie Verloc in the male world of The Secret Agent, which, since her marriage, and possibly all her life, is the only one she has known.

More Female Roles

AO2
Textual exposition
AO4
Social context

Other women in the novel have smaller roles, but not negligible ones. Winnie's mother famously sacrifices herself by moving out of the Verloc home into almshouses. This introduces Conrad's famous slow-motion description of the cab-ride and prompts Stevie to comment bitterly on the class system. Neither Stevie nor Winnie reads their mother's motives very well. She is quitting Verloc's home so there will be more room in it for Stevie. Winnie, in a much better position than her 'holy fool' brother to appreciate this plan, seems blind to it, even blaming her mother for selfishness. Some critics have argued that Winnie's mother provides the only example of entirely selfless behaviour in the novel. It is typical of *The Secret Agent* that it should go quite unnoticed.

The other two significant female characters are more privileged. The Assistant Commissioner's wife is, like most things, a brake on his cavalier, rule-bending spirit. *The Great Lady*, Michaelis's cheerleader, is more relaxed, reminding us that many of the liberal salons of nineteenth century Europe had female patronesses, but also (Vladimir's foot in her door) how vulnerable to male exploitation is the arbitrary power she has come to possess.

Susan Jones in *Conrad and Women* (1999) gives an excellent, accessible account of ways in which Conrad's women characters have recently been revalued.

Stage, Screen, Audio

AO3
Opinions of other readers via adaptation

The Secret Agent has a long, successful history of adaptation to other media, though any dramatic version casts off what Jeremy Hawthorn calls 'the heart of the work's power: the bitter but pityingly ironic attitude of the narrator towards the characters and events of the novel.' Conrad's own 1919 dramatisation of the novel, eventually staged in 1922, was found too 'talky', but a few years later the book stormed the new medium of 'talking' cinema, becoming the basis of one of the finest films of Hitchock's (more violent) British period, retitled *Sabotage* (1936). Freely available on DVD this is worth watching for a creepy meeting between Verloc and the Vladimir character in the aquarium at London Zoo, where the City's demolition is projected as a vision among the columns of a fish tank, and for Stevie's slow-motion bus (as opposed to cab) journey across central London before the bomb goes off (foreshadowing 7/7). Hitchcock supplies a quite implausible happy ending for Winnie (but not Mr Verloc). This helps to show how bleak and uncompromising is the plotting of Conrad's book. There are good television versions from 1967, 1975 and 1992, and an underrated film from 1996, featuring an uncredited Robin Williams as the Professor, before Hollywood had properly caught up with his dark side. For buffs there is a useful study of *Conrad on Film* by Gene M. Moore (1997).

Audiobooks are available from Tantor Classics, read by Steven Crossley; from Blackstone Audiobooks, read by Geoffrey Howard; and from Chivers Audio Books, read by David Threlfall. All three readings are unabridged.