

THE SECRET AGENT

by Joseph Conrad



THE AUTHOR

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was born Teodor Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski in Russian-occupied Poland. His father was a notable writer and opponent of the Russian presence in his fatherland. His political activities caused him and his family to be exiled to Siberia, where Joseph's mother died when he was eight. After return from exile, Joseph was sent to live with his uncle; his father died without ever seeing him again.

At age 17, Conrad ran away to Marseille, and spent the next twenty years as a sailor. Among his experiences was a trip on a steamboat up the Congo River in 1890, which became the basis for his most famous novel, *Heart of Darkness*, which understandably contains many autobiographical elements. His time in Africa ruined his health, so he returned to England, his adopted country, to seek his fortune as a writer, though he did on two other occasions return to sea. His novels, including *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Sharer*, and *The Secret Agent*, were praised by critics but produced little income. During his years in England he suffered poverty and poor health, but enjoyed the support of prominent friends such as H.G. Wells, Henry James and Stephen Crane along with his wife and children until his death in 1924.

The Secret Agent (1907) was based on an actual incident. In 1894, a man described as "half an idiot" attempted to blow up the Greenwich Observatory but was himself blown up in the process; his sister later committed suicide. Among Conrad's sources were a contemporary pamphlet describing the incident and the memoirs of the Assistant Commissioner of Police. The story reflects two fundamental evils - the dark, impersonal city of London (true also in *Heart of Darkness*) and the political environment of violent and hypocritical revolutionaries and government officials who care little for the people over whom they exercise power. The novel was referenced hundreds of times in the press following the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, and was the favorite book of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, who identified with the character of the Professor.

PLOT SUMMARY

CHAPTER 1

The reader is introduced at the beginning of the book to Mr. Verloc, who owns a small shop in London where he sells pornography. Since most of his business is at night, he often leaves the shop during the day in the care of Stevie, his brother-in-law. At night he and his wife minded the shop, though customers often were reluctant to make the purchases they sought from a woman. Verloc is often away, sometimes spending days on the Continent, but never shares his whereabouts with his wife. Stevie, frail, delicate, and feeble-minded (he often spends his time drawing circles on a piece of paper with a compass and pencil), is useless even for simple tasks like running errands and is mothered by his devoted sister. He and his mother, an invalid, live with the Verlocs above the squalid shop in Soho.

CHAPTER 2

One morning Verloc leaves the shop and heads westward through Hyde Park to an unnamed (probably Russian) Embassy. Privy Councillor Wurmt, a bureaucrat in the embassy, tells Verloc that he is very unsatisfied with his work to date; the papers he has submitted are useless. What is really needed is some significant disturbance that will make the police more vigilant and instigate repressive measures on the part of the magistrates. Wurmt then takes him to see First Secretary Vladimir, who is equally dissatisfied with Verloc's work. In the course of the conversation we discover that Verloc has spied for the embassy for eleven years, at one point stealing designs for a gun from the French, for which he served five years in prison after being betrayed by his lover. While his obesity gives him a harmless appearance, he has a powerful voice that has earned him the trust of those among whom he moves. Vladimir cares nothing for his voice, however; what he wants are facts and action. His membership in the "Future of the Proletariat" is equally useless, since all the revolutionary group does is talk and print pamphlets.

Vladimir threatens to dismiss Verloc from the embassy's payroll if he doesn't soon produce results. The results he has in mind involve disrupting the International Conference meeting in Milan to deal with terrorism in order to stimulate it to action rather than just talk. England is no better with its loose views of freedom, making the middle class the accomplices of the anarchists who are determined to destroy them. Vladimir then sets out his plan - a series of outrages executed by revolutionaries on English soil in order to wake up the sleeping giant. In the process, however, he shows an appalling lack of understanding of the revolutionary groups, their motives, methods, and organization, which deeply troubles Verloc. Vladimir proposes that the target be, not the church or the monarchy, but the true god of the modern age - science. Specifically, he wants Verloc to convince the anarchist group he has infiltrated to blow up the Greenwich Observatory; he gives him one month to carry out the plan. Verloc then returns to his shop, where Winnie is preparing dinner for the family.

CHAPTER 3

As the chapter begins, the revolutionary cell infiltrated by Verloc is meeting in his home. Those present include Michaelis, recently paroled after serving fifteen years of a life term in prison, the old terrorist Karl Yundt, and Alexander Ossipon, nicknamed the Doctor because he used to be

a medical student. They are engaged in debating the character of the revolution. Yundt advocates destructive violence while Michaelis believes that capitalism and the owners of private property will inevitably self-destruct. Ossipon sits and laughs at their debate, accusing Michaelis of advocating sitting still and doing nothing. Meanwhile, in the next room Stevie sits at the kitchen table drawing his interminable circles. When they leave, Verloc slams the door in frustration; Vladimir has given him a month to foment an outrage and his little revolutionary sect gives no indication whatsoever of actually doing anything. He despises his three compatriots, each one supported in his idleness by a loyal woman, while he has a woman for whom he must provide, to say nothing of her weakling brother and invalid mother. He tries to get Stevie to go to bed, but the boy is agitated by the conversation he overheard but does not understand, so Verloc wakes Winnie to deal with her brother. She tells her husband that Stevie should never be allowed to hear the men's talk because he thinks it is all true; she herself admires Michaelis, hates Yundt, and is uncomfortable around Ossipon. Finally she turns out the light, but Verloc knows he will not be able to sleep.

CHAPTER 4

As the chapter begins, Ossipon is in the basement of the Silenus Restaurant speaking with a thin little anarchist. The man claims that he has no fear of the police because they know that he carries an explosive charge in his pocket that can be easily detonated with the press of a ball. He is also trying to develop a more sophisticated detonator that can work instantaneously rather than yielding a delayed reaction. The little man, known as the Professor, scorns the revolutionaries and terrorists who seek his wares because they depend on the society they are trying to destroy, while he is free because he doesn't care whether he lives or dies. Total destruction is the only answer, and thus he gives his explosives freely to whoever wants them. Ossipon interrupts his diatribe against revolutionaries by showing him the newspaper, which has an article describing a bomb blast in Greenwich Park in which the bomber blew himself up but did no damage to the Observatory. He suspects that the little man provided the explosives for the blast and asks him to whom he gave them. The anarchist, known only as the Professor, says he gave them to Verloc, which Ossipon finds hard to believe. The Professor describes the bomb he made for Verloc, noting that the detonator was set for twenty minutes; such an accident could only have happened if the bomber set the bomb and then forgot the time. Ossipon, concerned that Verloc's folly would cost him the subsidy he received for his pamphlets from the Communists, tries to devise some way to distance himself and his little group from the atrocity. He, assuming Verloc to be the victim of the blast, decides to pay a visit to his widow to gather information.

CHAPTER 5

As the Professor leaves the restaurant, he considers the motives that drive his lust for violence. The son of a devout but poor family, he became convinced that any truly just society would be a meritocracy - one that rewarded his superior intellect with nothing but success and recognition. Any philosophy or religion that accepted the injustice of the world was therefore immoral, and the only true morality was a lifestyle that sought to destroy what was unjust. The failure of the bomb plot thus does not trouble him; he will simply keep on trying. What he fears, however, is that mankind is so far lost that even terror will not move them, not even violence will shake them from their apathy. As he walks down a dark alley he encounters Chief Inspector Heat, to whom he is well-known. To the Professor, Heat represents all that he seeks to destroy, the society to which he feels superior.

Heat has had a bad day and is frustrated, especially since he recently told his superior that no anarchist activity could possibly occur without the police getting word of it first. He has had nothing to eat all day, and the sight of the body, so blown to pieces that it had to be shoveled up in order to transport it to the morgue, had in any case cost him his appetite. Though little could be learned from the remains, an eyewitness at a nearby train station had spoken of two men, one large and one, the bomber, fair-haired and small and carrying what looked like a varnish tin. Heat doubted that the identity of the man could ever be established, but he took a fragment of the man's coat as possible evidence. He then took the train into town, where he encountered the Professor.

Heat tells the Professor that he doesn't want him, at least not yet, but the Professor responds by saying that, should he ever seek to arrest him, his name would appear in the obituary column the next day and his friends would have a great deal of trouble sorting out his remains from those of his enemy. Heat assures him that he will get him in the end and that his side will win because they outnumber people like the Professor, but the little man insists that he is doing his job better than the police are doing theirs. The two part and Heat dismisses the Professor as a lunatic; even a self-respecting thief values the rules of the society that he chooses to break. The Chief Inspector then goes to the office of the Assistant Commissioner, who verifies that every known anarchist had indeed been accounted for at the time of the explosion. Heat is gratified to find his word confirmed, but realizes that this gets him no closer to solving the case. His first task is to trace the other man seen with the bomber by the witness at the train station near the Observatory. Heat already knew the station from which the two men had come, though the Assistant Commissioner had trouble believing that anarchists would come from such a neighborhood. The Chief Inspector reminds him, however, that Michaelis lives in the same part of town. This is not good news to the Assistant Commissioner, who has indirect ties to the reformed revolutionary through his wife.

CHAPTER 6

The well-to-do woman who provides financial support for Michaelis is also among the more distinguished acquaintances of the Assistant Commissioner's wife. In fact, the policeman and the former convict had met in the old socialite's drawing room, much to the discomfort of the former. Michaelis had been arrested as a participant in a failed attempt to free political prisoners from a prison van, and since the botched operation had led to the death of one of the guards, he had been sentenced to life in prison but paroled after serving twenty years, after which he had developed a reputation as a humanitarian. The old woman had remarked that Michaelis had more the temperament of a saint than a revolutionary, while the other guests chiefly commented on his grotesque corpulence. The Assistant Commissioner tended to agree with the elderly patroness that Michaelis was basically harmless, so he was surprised when his name came up in connection with the Greenwich bombing and determined to keep the reformed revolutionary out of trouble, if for no other reason than to stay in the old woman's good graces.

As a result, when Heat mentions the name of Michaelis in connection with the bombing, the Assistant Commissioner is anything but pleased. Heat, on the other hand, believes that Michaelis never should have been released from prison in the first place and is quite willing to sacrifice him should the public demand that someone be punished for the outrage. When the Assistant Commissioner asks what evidence Heat has against Michaelis, he responds that the fact that he lives near the train station from which the bomber embarked is itself sufficient to move against him. The Assistant Commissioner then asks what Michaelis is doing in the village, knowing full well that he

is busy writing his memoirs of his years in prison. Heat realizes that Michaelis probably knows little about the bombing, but sees his arrest as a source of publicity and a way of getting the sentimental journalists who had made much of him since his release to turn against him. Besides, he would much rather direct his energies against the gentle Michaelis than against the almost-inhuman Professor. The Assistant Commissioner, however, forbids him to go after the ticket-of-leave apostle, which greatly offends Heat, who has seen other Assistant Commissioners come and go and is certain that this one will not last long. He then asks Heat if he has any concrete evidence, and the Chief Inspector tells him that he has found the address of the owner of the coat worn by the bomber, which had been sewn under the collar. The address is that of Verloc's pornography shop, and Heat knows that Verloc is an Embassy spy. In fact, for seven years Heat has been using Verloc as an informant in exchange for keeping the police away from his shop. The conversation ends with Heat assuring the Assistant Commissioner that Verloc had nothing to do with the bombing and insisting that Michaelis is still the most profitable line of inquiry. The Assistant Commissioner, however, who detests desk work, decides to investigate the matter for himself.

CHAPTER 7

The Assistant Commissioner then pays a visit to Sir Ethelred, the Secretary of State. He assures him that the Greenwich incident is not the beginning of a series of terrorist attacks, but Sir Ethelred reminds him that less than a month earlier he had been assured by Chief Inspector Heat that no assaults were being planned. The two agree that secret agents are not to be trusted, and the Assistant Commissioner advises that Heat be removed from the investigation because of his tendency to depend on such unreliable sources. He intends to take over the case himself and contact Verloc. After finding that Heat has already left and taken the scrap of overcoat with him, he takes a cab to Verloc's neighborhood, dines at a local restaurant, then locates the shop where the secret agent lives.

CHAPTER 8

Prior to the bombing, Winnie Verloc's mother, much to her daughter's surprise, sought admission to a charity almshouse on the other side of London and needed to take some of her furniture with her. She kept the worst pieces for herself and left the rest for the Verlocs in Brett Street. On the day of her move, Winnie and Stevie accompanied her. Commotion ensued when Stevie objected to the cab driver whipping his horse and later insisted on getting out and walking when he thought the load was too heavy for the horse to manage. Winnie, fearful that her brother might be lost, convinces him to return to the cab. Winnie's mother had an unusual motive for her move; her intention was to ensure Stevie's future by leaving him in the care of Winnie and her husband. When they arrive at the charity cottage, Winnie's mother insists that Stevie should visit her every Sunday, though both she and Winnie are afraid that he might get lost making the journey by himself and wind up in a workhouse after wandering the streets of London for days.

As Winnie and Stevie walk to the bus station, they pass the cab in the street. Stevie asks why the police don't prevent the cabbie's brutal treatment of his horse. She explains that the police don't give attention to such matters, and in good socialist fashion tells him that they exist to keep those who have nothing from taking things from those who have them, even if they are hungry. When they get home, Verloc is reading the newspaper and pays them no attention. He takes his wife for granted

and ignores Stevie, despite the fact that his brother-in-law idolizes him. That evening both Winnie and Stevie feel the absence of their mother acutely, but Verloc, with his worries about his assignment, pictures her as a rat leaving a sinking ship. Before going to sleep he announces to his wife that he will be leaving the next morning for a week or two on the Continent.

CHAPTER 9

When Verloc returns from his trip to the Continent, Winnie tells him that Michaelis had stopped in a few times and had told her that he was leaving for the country to spend time writing; Yundt and Ossipon had also dropped in, but she says little of them. Stevie eagerly takes his things and puts them away for him. As soon as Stevie enters the kitchen, Mrs. Neale, the housekeeper, starts whining about her hard life and her poor children, knowing that by doing so she might be able to get Stevie to give her whatever little money he has in his pocket. Today he has no money, so he pounds the table in anger at the injustice of the world. Winnie puts a stop to this, knowing that the woman drinks away her own small salary every week before she ever gets home. Later that day, Winnie asks Verloc to take Stevie with him on one of his many walks around the city, and he reluctantly agrees. In the days that follow, Stevie accompanies Verloc on all of his walks. Winnie notices that his temperament seems altered; he is no longer listless, but often tense and angry, and she fears that he is hearing things from her husband's friends that he ought not to hear. When she talks to her husband about her concerns, he suggests that Stevie be sent to the country for a while to stay with Michaelis.

On the day of the Greenwich bombing, Verloc is out of the house all day, returning in the early evening. When Winnie asks if he has seen Stevie that day, he angrily denies having done so. Verloc is clearly upset; he is trembling, with red face and bloodshot eyes, and he has no interest in his dinner. He tells Winnie he has taken all their money out of the bank but refuses to tell her why, though later disjointed phrases indicate that he is thinking of emigrating. She has no desire to do so, especially for the sake of her brother. Their conversation is interrupted by someone coming into the shop, and when Verloc, his face completely white, comes back from speaking to him, he says he has to go out again. He leaves with his visitor, the Assistant Commissioner, whom Winnie has never seen before, but before he goes he gives her the money he has withdrawn from the bank.

Shortly after they leave, Chief Inspector Heat enters the shop. He is disappointed to find that Verloc is gone, especially when he hears Winnie's description of the man with whom he left. He tries to get information from Winnie, but quickly finds that she is not even aware that the bombing has occurred. When he shows her the label from the overcoat taken from the corpse, she recognizes it as belonging to Stevie. When Heat asks where her brother is, she says he is with a friend in the country named Michaelis. At this Heat's eyes light up, since he is searching for some way to link Michaelis to the bombing. He also realizes that the other man seen by the eyewitness at the train station must have been Verloc. At that point Verloc returns and he and Heat go to the back room while Winnie listens at the keyhole, catching only the occasional sentence. Heat, realizing that Verloc is working for a foreign embassy, declines to arrest him but insists that he rather than his boss receive credit for solving the mystery. Verloc tells him that he intends to reveal the whole truth, and each shares with the other what he knows about the incident. Winnie, however, hears enough to know that Stevie is dead and that her husband is responsible. The last thing Heat wants is for the whole story to be revealed, knowing that this will expose the network of informants he has spent so much time building, and advises Verloc not to trust any promises he might have received from the

Assistant Commissioner but flee the country instead. Verloc agrees and Heat leaves, but Winnie is left in a fit of rage and despair.

CHAPTER 10

The Assistant Commissioner goes straight to Westminster to inform Sir Ethelred about what he has learned - that Verloc was at the center of the bomb plot, had been put up to it by Vladimir, and had coerced his brother-in-law Stevie to carry it out, after which the mentally-weak young man had stumbled and fallen on the bomb, setting it off. Furthermore, Michaelis, the target of Heat's inquiries, had nothing to do with the plot, and indeed no knowledge of it. Sir Ethelred asks if Verloc has been arrested, but the Assistant Commissioner says he let the man go home to his family because he is convinced that he has nowhere else to go and is in no mental state to plan any kind of flight. When their interview is over, the Assistant Commissioner goes to the home of Michaelis' patroness and assures her that her protégé is innocent of involvement in the outrage; she for her part is disgusted that the police would even consider him a suspect. While there he meets Vladimir, who has been trying to convince the august gathering that strong measures need to be taken against terrorists and radicals of all sorts in the aftermath of the bombing at Greenwich. He knows of Vladimir's role in the affair, of course, and accompanies him out of the house, letting him know in no uncertain terms that he intends to clear all foreign *agents provocateurs* out of the country.

CHAPTER 11

Verloc had not intended that any harm come to Stevie, but is now faced with his wife's knowledge of the truth. He does not consider the boy's death to be his fault, but rather an accident of fate. When he tries to tell Winnie that he meant the boy no harm, she says nothing, but buries her head in her hands, insisting that she never wants to set eyes on him again. He tries to calm her down and reminds her that there are practical matters to be considered in case he is arrested, but she refuses to set aside her grief and runs out of the room. Verloc believes a prison term is inevitable, but looks forward to it as a form of protection from those who might seek to do him harm. He hopes for early release and a peaceful life abroad. He tries again to speak to Winnie, explaining that it was all really Vladimir's fault for threatening him, but she ignores him. As he rambles on she stares in his direction, appearing to look at the wall over his shoulder. As she thinks back over her childhood spent protecting Stevie, her rejection of a suitor who would not accommodate him, her marriage to Verloc because he would, and the undoubted fact that he had taken her brother away to be killed, he vows revenge against the Embassy crowd. He then starts to speak about the future, of her need to keep the business going for two years, until they can safely leave the country.

Winnie says nothing, but goes upstairs, opens the window, debates whether to scream "Murder!" or throw herself to the pavement below, changes her clothes and prepares to leave the house. He thinks she is going to her mother's and reminds her that her mother would already be in bed, but Winnie has no clear notion of what she wants to do, other than get out of her husband's presence forever. Verloc even goes so far as to blame her for what happened, since she had been the one who had pushed him to take Stevie with him wherever he went. Exhausted, he lies down on the sofa, at which point his wife calmly picks up a carving knife and plunges it into his breast.

CHAPTER 12

What is Winnie to do now? She is not sorry for what she has done, but she is afraid of the consequences - in her case, the gallows. As she imagines the details of being hanged by the neck in some prison yard, she determines to throw herself into the Thames instead. As she stumbles uncertainly toward the nearest bridge, she is interrupted by Comrade Ossipon, who, thinking that Verloc had been the one killed in the explosion, was on his way to comfort the comely widow. He immediately professes his love for her, thinking all the time about the value of the shop and Verloc's bank account. As the two converse, they talk past each other in much the same way Winnie and Verloc had done prior to the murder; when he mentions Verloc's death, he has the bombing in mind, but she concludes that he is insightful enough to figure out the murder and its motivation. Winnie asks him to hide her until morning, but he lives with a roommate and falsely claims to have no money. She has some, however, and again asks him to hide her, even to the point of demanding that he kill her rather than letting the authorities catch her. This, of course, makes no sense to him whatsoever.

Winnie then remembers that she did not close up the shop. When they arrive there the lights are still on, but she is afraid to go in and sends Ossipon in instead. Needless to say, he is quite surprised to find Verloc's body on the sofa and thinks he is asleep. He is now convinced that the Verlocs have, for reasons that he cannot begin to fathom, engineered some kind of plot to kill him or turn him over to the police. He quickly realizes that Verloc is dead, however, and then suspects that Winnie intends to frame him for the murder. Suddenly the door slams shut and Winnie is embracing him, telling him that the police have arrived. The beat cop tries the door, finds it locked, and moves on. Ossipon is now afraid to enter the parlor, so he turns out the lights at the power box. Winnie again begs him to take her out of the country, or to kill her rather than let her be hanged. Now he finally understands what has happened and why. Suddenly she screams, he jumps and knocks her to the floor in the dark, and she clings to his legs for dear life.

Ossipon tells her that they must flee. He suggests Paris, and in the cab on the way to the train station they plan how they will buy tickets and embark separately so no one will know that they are together. Ossipon also finds out the name under which Verloc kept his bank account. He still fears Winnie - fears that she is mad like her brother, fears that she will frame him for the murder if the police catch them, and above all fears that a woman who has murdered one man will have no compunction about killing another. He gets them settled in the train, but as soon as it begins to move, he leaps from the carriage onto the platform with all of Winnie's money in his pocket.

CHAPTER 13

Later Ossipon visits Michaelis, where he finds the ticket-of-leave apostle living on carrots and milk and diligently working on his book, which is more of a utopian vision than a memoir. He envisions the strong devoting themselves entirely to serving and helping the weak. When Ossipon reports this to the Professor, the latter scoffs, insisting that the weak are the source of all evil and should be exterminated. The two go to the Silenus, where the Professor picks up an old newspaper. An article tells of the unsolved mystery of the suicide of a woman who threw herself into the sea from a cross-Channel boat, leaving her wedding ring behind. This so shocks Ossipon that he has no interest in the women from whom he takes his pleasure and through whose good will he supports himself. The Professor, on the other hand, leaves the restaurant unaffected, a force bent on the destruction of all that is weak and unworthy.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Adolf Verloc - The secret agent of the title, code name Δ, he owns a pornography shop in Soho from which he often takes unexplained absences. He is corpulent and lazy, preferring inactivity to activity whenever possible. At the prompting of Vladimir, his controller, he convinces Stevie to place a bomb at the Greenwich Observatory.
- Winnie Verloc - His wife, she is voluptuous in appearance and devoted to her husband and brother, whom she cares for in motherly fashion. When she finds that her husband is responsible for her brother's demise, she stabs him to death.
- Stevie - Verloc's brother-in-law, he is frail, feeble-minded, stutters frequently, and is totally dependent on his sister's care. At Verloc's urging, he blows himself up in a failed attempt to destroy the Greenwich Observatory.
- Winnie's mother - An invalid who lives with the Verlocs until she moves into a charity home.
- Vladimir - The First Secretary of an unnamed (probably Russian) Embassy, he employs Verloc as a secret agent and orders him to convince his anarchist friends to blow up the Greenwich Observatory.
- Michaelis - The "ticket-of-leave apostle" who was paroled from prison after serving fifteen years of a life sentence, he has earned a reputation as a great humanitarian.
- Karl Yundt - An old terrorist who is part of the "Future of the Proletariat" group infiltrated by Verloc, he advocates violence but has never engaged in a violent act in his life.
- Alexander "Tom" Ossipon - A member of the "Future of the Proletariat," he is known as the Doctor because he was at one time a medical student. He is the author of most of the revolutionary group's literature and considers himself a ladies' man, depending on vulnerable and lonely women to provide for his needs.
- The Professor - An anarchist who makes explosives and carries a charge and detonator with him in his pocket at all times, he was given his nickname because he used to teach chemistry at a technical institute. He is obsessed with inventing the perfect detonator and believes that society is so corrupt that destruction is the only true morality.
- Chief Inspector Heat - The head of the Special Crimes Unit who investigates the bombing in Greenwich Park. He believes that Michaelis is responsible for the outrage and is determined to connect him to the incident.
- Assistant Commissioner of Police - Heat's superior, he detests desk work and fancies himself an investigator, leading him to dig into the case of the bombing behind Heat's back and solve it by tracing the incident back to Verloc.

- Sir Ethelred - The Secretary of State, he authorizes the Assistant Commissioner to take over the case of the bombing from Heat, though he is much more interested in gaining passage of his Bill for the Nationalization of Fisheries.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“All these people had to be protected. Protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury. They had to be protected; and their horses, carriages, houses, servants had to be protected; and the source of their wealth had to be protected in the heart of the city and the heart of the country; the whole social order favourable to their hygienic idleness had to be protected against the shallow enviousness of unhygienic labour.” (ch.2, p.28-29)

“It might have been that he was the victim of a philosophical unbelief in the effectiveness of every human effort.” (ch.2, p.29)

“The general leniency of the judicial procedure here, and the utter absence of all repressive measures, are a scandal to Europe. What is wished for just now is the accentuation of unrest - of the fermentation which undoubtedly exists.” (Wurmt, ch.2, p.32)

“But there is learning - science. Any imbecile that has got an income believes in that. He does not know why, but he believes it matters somehow. It is the sacrosanct fetish.” (Vladimir, ch.2, p.43)

“Anarchists don’t marry. It’s well known. They can’t. It would be apostasy.” (Vladimir, ch.2, p.45)

“Mr. Verloc extended as much recognition to Stevie as a man not particularly fond of animals may give to his wife’s beloved cat; and this recognition, benevolent and perfunctory, was essentially of the same quality.” (ch.2, p.48)

“All idealization makes life poorer. To beautify it is to take away its character of complexity - it is to destroy it. Leave that to the moralists, my boy. History is made by men, but they do not make it in their heads. The ideas that are born in their consciousness play an insignificant part in the march of events. History is dominated and determined by the tool and the production - by the force of economic conditions. Capitalism had made socialism, and the laws made by capitalism for the protection of property are responsible for anarchism. No one can tell what form the social organization may take in the future. Then why indulge in prophetic phantasies? At best they can only interpret the mind of the prophet, and can have no objective value. Leave that pastime to the moralists, my boy.” (Michaelis, ch.3, p.49)

“I have always dreamed of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers, and free from the taint of that resigned pessimism which rots the world. No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity - that’s what I would have liked to see.” (Yundt, ch.3, p.50)

“The future is as certain as the past - slavery, feudalism, individualism, collectivism. This is the statement of a law, not an empty prophecy” (Michaelis, ch.3, p.55)

“The instinct of conventional respectability was strong within him, being only overcome by his dislike of all kinds of recognized labour - a temperamental defect which he shared with a large proportion of revolutionary reformers of a given social state. For obviously one does not revolt against the advantages and opportunities of that state, but against the price which must be paid for the same in the coin of accepted morality, self-restraint, and toil.” (ch.3, p.57)

“There is no occupation that fails a man more completely than that of a secret agent of police.” (ch.3, p.60)

“In the last instance it is character alone that makes for one’s safety. There are very few people in the world whose character is as well established as mine.” (Professor, ch.4, p.67)

“To break up the superstition and worship of legality should be our aim. Nothing would please me more than to see Inspector Heat and his likes take to shooting us down in broad daylight with the approval of the public. Half our battle would be won then; the disintegration of the old morality would have set in its very temple.” (Professor, ch.4, p.71)

“The complexion of that case had somehow forced upon him the general idea of the absurdity of things human, which in the abstract is sufficiently annoying to the unphilosophical temperament, and in concrete instances becomes exasperating beyond endurance.” (ch.5, p.84)

“I am doing my work better than you’re doing yours.” (Professor, ch.5, p.87)

“For him the plain duty is to fasten the guilt upon as many prominent anarchists as he can on some slight indications he has picked up in the course of his investigation on the spot; whereas I, he would say, am bent upon vindicating their innocence.” (Assistant Commissioner, ch.7, p.119)

“Bad world for poor people.” (Stevie, ch.8, p.140)

“Don’t you know what the police are for, Stevie? They are there so that they as have nothing shouldn’t take anything away from them who have.” (Winnie, ch.8, p.141)

“[Winnie] had an equable soul. She felt profoundly that things do not stand much looking into.” (ch.8, p.143-144)

“You could do anything with that boy, Adolf He would go through fire for you.” (Winnie, ch.9, p.148)

“In that shop of shady wares fitted with deal shelves painted a dull brown, which seemed to devour the sheen of the light, the gold circlet of the wedding ring on Mrs. Verloc’s left hand glittered exceedingly with the untarnished glory of a piece from some splendid treasure of jewels, dropped in a dust-bin.” (ch.9, p.168)

“From a certain point of view we are here in the presences of a domestic drama.” (Assistant Commissioner, ch.10, p.175)

“The unexpected march of events had converted him to the doctrine of fatalism.” (ch.11, p.181)

“The mind of Mr. Verloc lacked profundity. Under the mistaken impression that the value of individuals consists in what they are in themselves, he could not possibly comprehend the value of Stevie in the eyes of Mrs. Verloc.” (ch.11, p.183)

“Mrs. Verloc was sitting in the place where poor Stevie usually established himself of an evening with paper and pencil for the pastime of drawing those coruscations of innumerable circles suggesting chaos and eternity.” (ch.11, p.185)

“There was nothing behind him: there was just the whitewashed wall. The excellent husband of Winnie Verloc saw no writing on the wall.” (ch.11, p.187)

“At that precise moment Mrs. Verloc began to look upon herself as released from all earthly ties. She had her freedom. Her contract with existence, as represented by that man standing over there, was at an end. She was a free woman” (ch.11, p.195)

“Just try to understand that it was a pure accident; as much an accident as if he had been run over by a ‘bus while crossing the street.” (Verloc, ch.11, p.199)

“Don’t you make any mistake about it; if you will have it that I killed the boy, then you’ve killed him as much as I.” (Verloc, ch.11, p.200)

“As if the homeless soul of Stevie had flown for shelter straight to the breast of his sister, guardian, and protector, the resemblance of her face with that of her brother grew at every step, even to the droop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes.” (ch.11, p.202-203)

“Tom, you can’t throw me off now . . . Not unless you crush my head under your heel. I won’t leave you.” (Winnie, ch.12, p.223)

“An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair.” (ch.13, p.234)

“And the incorruptible professor walked, too, averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable - and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men.” (ch.13, p.237)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Critics have argued that the city of London is a central character in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. To what extent is this true? Consider what the descriptions of the city contribute, not only to the tone of the novel, but also to its plot and the portrayals of the characters.
2. Both Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and *Heart of Darkness* paint a negative picture of the city of London as the center of corruption and decay. Compare and contrast the roles played by these descriptions in the two novels, being sure to give attention to the worlds with which the author compares them in the two books.
3. Some critics have suggested that the real villain in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is the city of London, which is uniformly portrayed in the novel as dark and foreboding. What are the characteristics of the city that Conrad views as destructive of human life and happiness? Cite specifics from the novel to support your arguments.
4. In chapter 5 of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Chief Inspector Heat meditates on the difference between thieves and anarchists. Why is he able to identify with the one and not with the other? In what sense do police and common criminals share the same view of the world and society, while anarchists remain unintelligible to the authorities? Support your analysis with quotations from the novel.
5. During his childhood in Poland, Joseph Conrad's family had suffered much because of the activity of anarchists and revolutionaries. Conrad focuses on the mindset of such men in *The Secret Agent*. Discuss how his use of irony contains an implicit critique of such men and their philosophies of life, beliefs about society, and proposed solutions for society's ills.
6. In Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, the central characters are often associated with certain general traits - Verloc is "good," Stevie is "loyal," and Winnie lives by the maxim that "things do not stand much looking into." To what extent are these generalizations valid? Analyze the accuracy of each one, supporting your conclusions with details from the novel.
7. In chapter 11 of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, after the revelation of the manner of Stevie's death, Verloc and his wife are in the same room, but their minds are in totally different places. What does this "conversation" indicate about the two, both in their personalities and their relationship to one another? Have they ever been more than strangers to one another? What are the reasons for the distance between them? Support your conclusions with specifics from the novel.
8. Joseph Conrad once wrote that the central character in his novel *The Secret Agent* was not the titular spy Verloc, but his wife Winnie. Why do you think he said this? In what ways does the shallow and oblivious wife of the secret agent embody the central themes of the novel? What themes are brought out most clearly through the role played by her character in the story?

9. In Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Verloc's controller Vladimir advocates bombing the Greenwich Observatory because it is a symbol of science, the real god of late Victorian society. To what extent was this a valid assessment, and how do the plot and characters of the novel support the author's critique of the scientific worldview?
10. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* pictures science as the god of the late Victorian era, but it is portrayed as a false god. Consider the reliance on science, albeit of very different kinds, by Vladimir, the Professor, and Chief Inspector Heat. How does each serve to demonstrate the inadequacy of science as the basis for making sense of the world and living harmoniously within it?
11. Joseph Conrad's family suffered much, both from angry revolutionaries and from government officials who tried to suppress them. To what extent does his novel *The Secret Agent* reflect his distrust of both opposing groups? What are his major criticisms of each group? Why does he believe each group is ultimately destructive? Be specific.
12. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* began life as a short story entitled *Verloc*, and if one were to focus only on the plot of the novel, such a short-form work would make sense. What this indicates, however, is that the strength of the novel is not to be found in its plot but rather in its treatment of political ideas and human psychology. Choose one of these two and discuss how the plot of the novel serves as a vehicle for Conrad's greater concerns.
13. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is a great work of human psychology. In it the author writes much about the inner lives and thoughts of his characters. Choose one of the major characters in the book and analyze what we learn about that person's inner life - his or her thoughts and motives - and how knowledge of that inner life is essential for understanding the person's actions.
14. Joseph Conrad's family suffered much at the hands of government officials, and such officials do not come off well in his novel *The Secret Agent*. Analyze the three central government officials - Chief Inspector Heat, the Assistant Commissioner of Police, and Sir Ethelred, the Secretary of State - in terms of their personal motivations and lack of concern for the public they are supposed to be serving.
15. Chief Inspector Heat in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is sometimes compared with Sergeant Cuff, the detective in the first English detective novel, Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*. Is this comparison a fair one? In what ways are the two detectives the same and in what ways are they different? Who is the more admirable figure? the more successful? Use specifics from both novels to support your conclusions.
16. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* suggests that the real root of societal ills is found in the conflict within the heart of each individual. How do inner forces such as greed, lust, ambition, fear, and anger drive the actions that so often are traced falsely to ideology? Why does Conrad believe that people espouse ideas in order to justify their own inner desires? Be sure to use Scripture to discuss the validity of this assertion.

17. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* pictures the family as a microcosm of the larger society. In what ways are the roles and relationships within the Verloc family warped and distorted, and how do these distortions symbolize social ills and contribute to the development of the plot?
18. In Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Verloc is murdered by his wife Winnie because she holds him responsible for the death of her brother Stevie. This plot element bears some resemblance to the murder of Agamemnon by his wife Clytemnestra because he sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia in Aeschylus' play *Agamemnon*. Compare and contrast the motives and actions of the two women, giving special attention to the family contexts within which the deaths occur.
19. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* was dedicated to his friend H.G. Wells, one of the pioneers of science fiction as a literary genre. Though Conrad's novel is critical of science, it could hardly be viewed as more dystopian than Wells' novel *The Time Machine*. Compare and contrast the views of science in the two novels. Do the two authors see the same problems in the late nineteenth century glorification of science, or do they focus on different aspects of the popular form of idolatry? Use details from both books to support your arguments.
20. The story in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is not told in linear fashion. Much of the central part of the novel occurs before the failed bombing that is mentioned early in the novel. This strategy is not typical of mysteries or police procedurals. Why do you think Conrad chose this convoluted approach? Does it contribute to the themes of the novel or increase suspense on the part of the reader? Support your conclusions with specifics from the book.
21. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is a very dark novel because it criticizes so much about the modern world without advocating any alternatives. The author may despise the Professor's nihilism, but he offers no positive vision of society to counter it. Various forms of revolutionary dogma are subject to Conrad's contempt, but so are the police, the government, science, and the modern industrial city. Do you find in the novel any source of hope or comfort for mankind? How should a Christian respond to the Professor's determination to call upon madness and despair for the regeneration of the world?
22. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* ends with the vision of the Professor, who believes that the strong should annihilate the weak, leaving only himself, if he is strong enough. Compare this vision with that pictured by George Orwell in *1984*, where O'Brien characterizes the future as "a boot stamping on a human face - forever." The two novels were critiquing different political realities, but what ideas do they share? Are they equally hopeless in their assessment of the future of humanity?

23. In chapter 2 of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, the narrator says, "All these people had to be protected. Protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury. They had to be protected; and their horses, carriages, houses, servants had to be protected; and the source of their wealth had to be protected in the heart of the city and the heart of the country; the whole social order favourable to their hygienic idleness had to be protected against the shallow enviousness of unhygienic labour." This sounds very much like a socialist or communist description of capitalism. Is this critique one that the author shares? Why or why not? What other incidents or quotations from the novel would support your conclusion?
24. In chapter 2 of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Verloc's laziness is explained by saying that "It might have been that he was the victim of a philosophical unbelief in the effectiveness of every human effort." Such a philosophy would seem inevitably to lead to despair. Was this true for Conrad? Why, from a Christian perspective, is such a conviction the ground of genuine hope of salvation? What worldview differences account for the contradictory conclusions resulting from similar observations about the human condition?
25. In Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, both Yundt and Vladimir are convinced that action must be taken to increase the repressiveness of the government. Compare and contrast their reasons for wanting this to occur. Do the two have more in common than one would initially be led to believe? In what ways are they more alike than they are different?
26. In chapter 2 of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Vladimir has trouble believing that Verloc is a convincing anarchist because he is married and has a somewhat normal family life. He says, "Anarchists don't marry. It's well known. They can't. It would be apostasy." Why does he think this is true? Why do revolutionaries seek to undermine the family as the basic institution of human society? What is the author's opinion of this idea? Support your arguments with details and quotations from the novel.
27. In Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, would you describe Michaelis as a Marxist? Why or why not? In answering the question, give careful attention to his speeches in chapter 3 and be sure to support your arguments with references to specific teachings of Marxism.
28. In chapter 3 of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, the narrator says of Verloc, "The instinct of conventional respectability was strong within him, being only overcome by his dislike of all kinds of recognized labour - a temperamental defect which he shared with a large proportion of revolutionary reformers of a given social state. For obviously one does not revolt against the advantages and opportunities of that state, but against the price which must be paid for the same in the coin of accepted morality, self-restraint, and toil." Analyze this brilliantly ironic skewering of the hypocrisy of the revolutionary. Would you agree that what passes for revolutionary idealism is often nothing more than a desire for the good things of life without being willing to work for them? Support your argument using the statements of other revolutionary figures in the novel.

29. In chapter 4 of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, the Professor says, "To break up the superstition and worship of legality should be our aim. Nothing would please me more than to see Inspector Heat and his likes take to shooting us down in broad daylight with the approval of the public. Half our battle would be won then; the disintegration of the old morality would have set in in its very temple." What does he mean by this? Is he seeking martyrdom as a means of popularizing his cause, arguing that the enemy may be discredited by forcing him to oppose the revolutionaries with their own tactics, or does he have something else in mind? What is his plan for destroying the society on which he places no value?
30. Which characters in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* would you describe as pragmatists, and why? Support your assertions with quotations from the novel.
31. In Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, the mentally-challenged Stevie spends countless hours sitting at the table drawing circles on a piece of paper. In chapter 11, the narrator suggests that the circles symbolize chaos and eternity. Critics have engaged in considerable speculation about the significance of these circles. What do you think they represent? Why?
32. In chapters 11 and 12 of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Winnie Verloc pictures herself briefly as a free woman, then admits that she is really not free at all. What does freedom mean to her? Is she right in her assessment of her condition?
33. In chapter 12 of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Winnie, begging Ossipon to stay with her, says, "Tom, you can't throw me off now . . . Not unless you crush my head under your heel. I won't leave you." What is the point of this very odd allusion to Genesis 3:15? Is Conrad simply borrowing biblical language, or does he have something deeper in mind concerning the relationship between the two characters?
34. Joseph Conrad once wrote, "The ethical view of the universe involves us at last in so many cruel and absurd contradictions, where the last vestiges of faith, hope, charity, and even of reason itself, seem ready to perish, that I have come to suspect that the aim of creation cannot be ethical at all." He argues instead that the universe is impersonal and should elicit awe, allowing room for any religion except despair. How is his idea visible in his novel *The Secret Agent*? Does he picture the universe as impersonal? Does the story leave room for religious faith? Does it succeed in ruling out despair? Support your arguments with quotations from the novel.
35. In Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Winnie Verloc murders her husband because she believes him to be an evil person - a liar and a murderer. Yet his intention was to keep his family safe by carrying out an "outrage" without any loss of life whatsoever. Evaluate the morality of the central figure in the novel. In what respects is the character of Verloc moral and in what ways immoral? Be specific and support your conclusions.

36. Joseph Conrad, in the author's note to *The Secret Agent*, argues that the only true anarchist in the book is Winnie Verloc because she is the only one who actually carries out a deliberately violent act. Do you agree or disagree? Is an anarchist defined only by his or her actions, or may one be so defined by beliefs and convictions alone?