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Communication and Self-Understanding in *The Secret Agent*

The Secret Agent, by Joseph Conrad, was first published as a serialization in a periodical called *Ridgway's* in 1906. If one who, after reading the final edition of the novel, reads this serialization, he will notice that the endings are very different in the two versions. The mere difference in length of the endings alone is proof: the scene in which Mrs. Verloc murders her husband lasts for approximately two pages in the serialized version, while lasting a full twenty-eight pages in the final version! Remarkably, however, there are no new plot points. The sequence of action remains almost exactly the same. The role of actions, then, and of those particular actions, seems to be of primary importance to the novel as a whole. On the other hand, the additions must be supposed to have great importance as well. Most of Conrad's additions take the form of psychological descriptions of the characters and detailed accounts of the thoughts running through their minds. How much is gained by this addition? This question, though it may initially sound unimportant when put in these terms, is more fundamentally a question about the importance of human action and human thoughts and feelings in determining who a human person is. In *The Secret Agent*, the internal aspects of characters and the external manifestations of them, as represented by their thoughts and actions respectively, are strangely disjunctive, revealing an inherent difficulty in the characters' self-understandings and communicative efforts.

Though the action in the scene of Verloc's murder is certainly crucial, it appears that an account of actions alone does not suffice as an explanation for those actions. The action sequence of this scene, as remarked earlier, is almost the same for both the serialized and final

versions of the novel. An account of the actions in this scene—described without any of the descriptions of characters’ thoughts or of their surroundings—would work as a plot summary for both versions. It would look something like the following. *Verloc sees Winnie and keeps his distance. He eats some bread and beef from the table. He keeps repeating her name, telling her to pull herself together. He tries to pry her hands from her face, and Winnie frees herself and runs into the other room. Verloc makes a couple of suggestions to her, telling her to not to go out so late, to go to bed, and to maybe have a good cry. Verloc sits on the sofa. He reaches out to grab Winnie’s hand, but she tears herself away violently and, in so doing, knocks the carving knife off of the table. Winnie picks up the knife and kills Verloc with it.* An account such as this one, were this account all that Conrad wrote for this scene, would utterly baffle the reader.

Seeing only the outward actions, what could one conclude? When simply looking at the actions in themselves, one cannot really know the meaning of them. The narrator points to this when telling of how Mr. Verloc, attempting to pull Mrs. Verloc’s hands away from her face, only succeeds in removing her from the chair. He says: “It had all the appearance of a struggle for the possession of a chair, because Mr. Verloc instantly took his wife’s place in it” (186). The struggle has absolutely nothing to do with the chair. A third party, however, having nothing else to go by but how the actions themselves appear on the surface, could easily make this misinterpretation. Actions, then, though of obvious importance, are insufficient for understanding a character, because they are not self-explanatory.

One can, when looking at the serialized version *The Secret Agent*, begin to see the necessity of something else besides an account of a character’s actions to explain those actions. Given descriptions of Mr. Verloc’s internal state but not of Mrs. Verloc’s, the reader is placed in a position in which he can see Verloc’s internal state perfectly but can read none of Mrs.

Verloc's in her quiet immobility. Just prior to the above passage about the struggle, the narrator says: "*She gave no sign. He caught hold of her wrists, moved by a brutal pity to uncover her face*" (Vol. 1, No. 11, p.43, my emphasis). This short description, by providing insight into Verloc's mental state, easily discredits the potential theory that the struggle occurred for the possession of a chair. Thus, with a description of Verloc's internal thoughts and feelings, the reader can understand his actions with greater ease. It is not easy, however, for the reader and for Mr. Verloc as well, to understand Mrs. Verloc. The narrator says: "her stillness was too much for his feelings" (Vol. 1, No. 11, p. 43). The gross disproportion between what Verloc himself feels and what he perceives of Mrs. Verloc's feeling is overwhelming. The narrator gives the reader that same sense of disproportion by describing Verloc's thoughts and motivations at length, while hardly describing those of Mrs. Verloc. Thus, this version, while enlightening the reader as to Verloc's mental condition, keeps the reader in that frustrating position of not being able to understand Mrs. Verloc and what could have possibly driven her beyond the bounds of normal grief to actually murdering Verloc.

The final version, by supplying far more insight into the minds of both Mr. and Mrs. Verloc, provides more clearly the crucial distinction between the internal and external aspects of a character. There is a strange disjunction between the internal and external, which seems to account for the almost complete absence of communication in this scene. After Verloc's own account to his wife of their immediate and long-term dangers and his determination to avoid death, Mr. Verloc says: "I am too fond of you for that" (197). As the reader perceives it, the words of Mr. Verloc could be thought of as kind and thoughtful, if a bit lacking in insight. It seems, in any case, that Verloc cares deeply for his wife and desires the best for her. But Mrs. Verloc cannot comprehend this. She reacts to his words much differently than Verloc would

have wanted: “Having done away with visions of the past, she had not only heard, but had also understood the words uttered by her husband. By their extreme discord with her mental condition these words produced on her a slightly suffocating effect” (197). The mental state referred to is a train of images of her brother Stevie while he was alive, as well as the thought that Verloc had just murdered her brother. All of these thoughts and visions are hiding behind a perfectly immobile face, so Verloc cannot possibly guess at them. Verloc is not really at fault for the ill effect of his words, yet they produce the effect all the same. The problem in this scene is that neither Verloc nor his wife is aware of each other’s internal states of mind. Mr. Verloc has no idea that behind Mrs. Verloc’s silent eyes are passing the images of her beloved Stevie and thoughts of his death. There is, then, a failure to express the internal state of mind in external words and actions which seems to account for the miscommunication between Mr. and Mrs. Verloc.

The discord between the characters’ interiors and their exterior manifestations suggests an important question about where a person’s identity comes from: are the characters who they are due to what they think and feel, or only to what they actually express? Verloc seems well-intentioned, and he seems to hold a good opinion of himself in spite of all that he has done and all the misery he has caused his wife. His self-justification stems not from thoughts about what he has said or done, but from the good person that he is on the inside. The narrator says of Verloc: “He had grown older, fatter, heavier, in the belief that he lacked no fascination for being loved for his own sake” (199). Verloc expects to be loved simply for being who he is, not for any action he has done. This strange notion seems to come out of the disjunction between the internal and external selves, and from the fact that, unless one has the benefit of an omniscient third-person narrator, the only person whose inner self one can know fully is one’s own.

Therefore, though every person has some inner self that they themselves may value for its own sake, that inner self is simply not readily apparent to the world. Much effort therefore must be put into communication and action in order to make it manifest externally. Unfortunately for the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Verloc, it is, as the narrator states, based on “tacit accord” in which they “refrained from going to the bottom of facts and motives” (195). It is, perhaps, this habitual silence and this lack of communicative effort that doom their marriage from the start.

Real communication and a true self-understanding are difficult to attain. Due to the difference between the internal and external selves, a man can easily go through his life thinking that he is a good person, while never actually *doing* anything good. By looking at what the two versions of *The Secret Agent* have in common—the sequence of action—one can see the obvious importance given to action in the novel. Yet still it seems that the human person must be more than just his actions, since actions cannot be explained by themselves. There is the continual stream of thoughts, feelings, emotions, intentions that pass through one’s mind at all times. This stream, this internal self, does have real existence; when understood clearly, the internal thoughts of characters function as explanations for their actions. Yet one cannot be loved for merely for that internal self in the way that Verloc assumes. Surely one’s internal thoughts, feelings, and emotions are important, yet if these thoughts are never put into words or actions, they cannot really be something worth being loved. This interpretation may sound rather despairing, but it is not. One needs only work hard to transform what might be good on the inside into good actions and communication with other people.

Works Cited

Conrad, Joseph. *The Secret Agent*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007.

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