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20th Century Literature

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Fragmentation and *The Secret Agent*: The Whole and the Sum of its Parts

“Lea & Perrins’ Sauce: Found in every well equipped pantry. The bottle has been copied by many, but the Sauce has never been equaled” (Ridgway’s Vol. 1, No. 11, Pg. 45). The advertisements that fill Ridgway’s journal are short, sweet and to the point. Their aim is the brief consideration of, and interest in *things*. But what if one of the advertisements read “Winnie Verloc: Never looks too deep into things. She makes a great housewife, but she also cares for her troubled brother”. Conrad understood that people are not to be treated in the same fashion as things. People have a greater dignity, a more important purpose, and a greater relation to each other. The context of the original serialization of *Secret Agent* emphasizes Conrad’s theme of fragmentation because the pieces of the story resemble the string of details and motives he connects in order to arrive at a better understanding the human person.

The first printing of Conrad’s *Secret Agent* was nestled among news reports, editorials, interviews, and other writings. Conrad’s story came out to the public in eleven installments, each competing for the interest of the reader against dozens of other topics and stories that filled the journal. In contrasting the experiences of reading the story as a novel and viewing the story as a collection of contributions to a journal, the serialization accentuates the brokenness and the disunity of the various characters and motivations. As a zoom feature takes a photograph and looks at the individual pixels of color, so does the serialization take Conrad’s work and presents it as a collection of colors and images instead of as one complete picture.

The serialized form of the story fits thematically, although ironically, with Conrad's mission to reveal a deeper meaning amidst fragmented modernity. The pieces of the story in *Ridgway's* magazine are fragments themselves, adding to chaos of the tale. However, since Conrad is trying to give life to fragments and pieces of a human experience, it is ironic that his method of revealing such life requires bits and pieces of his own writing.

The most obvious picture of fragmentation in Conrad's story is the unsettling imagery of Stevie's fragmented body, blown to pieces by the bomb. Throughout the novel Conrad stamps the illustration in the reader's mind of the grotesque scene of Greenwich Park. Among the first descriptions of the body as found at the scene, Chief Inspector Heat observes "a sort of mound—a heap of rags, scorched and bloodstained" and "his eyes (search) the gruesome detail of that heap of mixed things, which seem to have been collected in shambles and rag shops" (Conrad 69, 70). Conrad burns these visions of scraps of human life into his readers minds most effectively with the repeated mention of the shovel used at the crime scene. As the Chief Inspector relates to Verloc, "I tell you they had to fetch a shovel to gather him up with", the reader can sympathize with Winnie—who overhears from behind the door—clutching that familiar image of a shovel because an image of "limbs, gravel, clothing, bones, and splinters" is much harder visualize (Conrad 166).

Conrad also expresses fragmentation in the shift of narrative voice. Although he is "telling Winnie Verloc's story" he meanders in and out of the narrative thoughts of several of the other characters. Without even displaying specific thoughts, Conrad leads the reader into the mind of the characters by unraveling their personal motivations for acting. These are not motivations as Winnie or Verloc might see them, but they are the internal private emotions of the characters. The conversation between Chief Inspector Heat and the Assistant Commissioner

embodies this broken train of thoughts that alternates between one Heat's thoughts, the Commissioner's thoughts and the neutral voice of the narrator.

First Conrad describes that "the Assistant Commissioner felt as if he were going to do some real work for his salary... 'I'll turn him inside out like an old glove'" indicating his dissatisfaction of his regular duties, his desire for police work, and his eagerness to find out what Heat is hiding (Conrad 95). The point of view then shifts away from the Assistant Commissioner and into a neutral description noting "the slight approving movement of the Assistant Commissioner's head went far to pacify the resentful astonishment of the renowned officer" demonstrating the tension between the two men (Conrad 95). Conrad then effortlessly slips into Chief Inspector Heat's point of view engaging in a description of former commissioners and eventually concluding that the Assistant Commissioner was "harmless—odd-looking, but harmless" in the Inspector's eyes (Conrad 95).

In a similar way, the reader engages the inner thoughts of Winnie's mother when she reveals that "her act of abandonment was really an arrangement for settling her son permanently in life" (Conrad 129). The thoughts of the Professor are better understood when he contemplates how he "opened his eyes to the true nature of the world, whose morality was artificial, corrupt and blasphemous" (Conrad 64). This method of focusing on the personal motivations of various characters contributes to the complete work by adding many details, perspectives, and incentives for action. In this way the work as a whole is not simply a tale of Winnie Verloc's life, but rather it is an expression of the humanity, which Winnie shares in common with everyone else.

Therefore the effect of using bits and pieces to assemble a whole is that by being a part of the whole, each bit and piece has significantly more meaning when placed within a context of a shared experience. The Greenwich explosion acts as an event that all the characters have in

common and have some sort of personal stake in. Individually, their various thoughts and reactions to the explosion are only significant to themselves, but when understood together, bombing in the park becomes significant to every human. Conrad takes a seemingly heartless, cold act, and inserts meaning into it by drawing out the causes. Drawing on emotions of loyalty (from Stevie to Verloc), selfless sacrifice (Winnie's mother for her children), personal pride (the Commissioner), indignation (the Professor), maternal care (Winnie for Stevie), husbandly protection (Verloc's attempt to provide for his family) and righteous patriotism (Chief Inspector Heat), Conrad shows the universality of the dangers of trust and the sacrifices of love, and how such ordinary struggles can lead to the most horrible events, such as the bombing.

So the original serialized version of this story, adds to the feeling of "bits and pieces". The readers of the time would only be able to read one section of the time, allowing for greater reflection over that one part rather than glossing over it in order to try to look at the whole. As a modern reader, looking at the full novel through the lens of its older, serialized form, the book's unity becomes even more evident, emphasizing that each contribution is placed and carefully crafted for the purpose of the whole story. Each nuance of the conversations between the anarchists or between the Assistant Commissioner and Sir Ethelred somehow affects Winnie Verloc's life and experience because of their shared connection in the bombing.

Conrad fashions a meaningful, emotional, and universal experience out of his construction of Winnie's story by using themes of fragmentation in his descriptions and in his narrative voice in order to convey a deeper meaning of seeming trivialities. By utilizing small pieces of a number of characters' stories, he brings a depth to the work by showing the connections people share with one another that are not evident at first glance. The serialization of the *Secret Agent* contributes to this method and contributes also to the way the modern reader

understands the novel. Conrad seeks to elevate human experience beyond its face value. Words on a page do not have significant meaning in themselves, but only when united to something universal. Conrad makes it impossible to trivialize Winnie's life as if it were a mere advertisement in a magazine—her tale deserves more consideration than the simple passing glance one might give to Lea & Perrins' Worcestershire Sauce.

Works Cited

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