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20th Century Literature

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September 28, 2012

To Be Continued...

"I'm afraid I'll have to spoil your holiday for you though, there's a man blown up in Greenwich Park this morning" *Ridgway's* 4 October 1906, 64). It would be difficult to walk away from a sentence like that without some level of curiosity or anxiety. A cliffhanger purposefully leaves a reader in suspense and an author must control its usage to steer the amount of built up tension to obtain different results. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* was first serialized in eleven issues of the magazine *Ridgway's* in 1906. In this first printing of the drama Conrad had to strategically use the breaks between each publication in order to both help add suspense in the development of events and characters and to keep the readers interested enough to buy the next issue. The last sentence of each printed section in *Ridgway's* is not located in the middle of chapters and scenes, leaving a reader uneasy with questions regarding the future of the drama. This adds much needed mystery and ensures the return of readers to the novel.

Suspense is crucial in a novel that unravels with anarchist plots and marital unhappiness. It dramatizes the events and allows for sympathy towards the characters, engaging the reader enough to want to keep reading, consequently ensuring publication space for the author. Unlike in books where all pieces are held together, publications in magazines cannot afford to end with the finality of a chapter without losing a necessity to be continued. The chapter endings in the expanded novel (I am using the 2007 Penguin edition) instead offer types of finalization; they break the book into separate scenes or conclude the different fragmented points of view. The second chapter's ending, for example, gives closure to the

background story of Winnie's engagement to Mr. Verloc and allows the third chapter to begin in the opening scene of the anarchists meeting. The cliffhangers in the book, a one time purchase, only need to intrigue the reader to keep flipping the pages; they do not cause huge pauses especially because even the breaks between chapters are presented in the same page. When located in weekly publications, however, the pause has to be an interruption in the story to create a sense of tension and raise unanswerable questions—until the reader buys the next issue.

The breaks separating each issue do not end with the chapter's finality. It would be dangerous to do so for two reasons. First it would steer a reader away from looking forward to the next segment, and also it would exclude the dramatic questions that a reader can think about during the break of a week. If one were to look only at the last lines of each section, one would arrive at very dramatic sentences such as, "What sort of man was that stranger? Would you mind telling me?", or the third issue's, "The artist never turned his head; and his frenetic application to the tank, his back quivered, his thin neck seemed ready to snap" (*Ridgway's* 10 December 1906, 46; 20 December 1906 62). Each section leaves the reader with many questions: whether about the different characters' true natures, about how the plot will unfold, or how it has unfolded and they missed it. Evidently Conrad purposefully chose lines that would create meditations on questions which may only be answered in the future sections. Additionally, the concerns born from the intriguing pauses strategically work towards the development of the characters and plot and progression of the mysterious facts surrounding the explosion.

One excellent example of a the purposeful cliffhangers lies in the second installment. It ends with a worrisome sentence about the protagonist, "Mr Verloc felt a queer sensation of faintness in his stout legs" (*Ridgway's* 13 October 1906, 52). Previously a reader knows about Verloc's job as a secret agent and his current trouble with the Embassy employing him.

The State Councillor tells him that his “reports for the last twelve months” have been useless, he is called fat and lazy and on he is unable to present any evidence to help his case (*Ridgway’s* 13 October 1906 50). A reader may empathize with the round and seemingly pathetic agent since he says he has given eleven years of his life for the cause, and even spent “five years rigorous confinement in a fortress” on the job (51). Even is most prideful talent of owning a voice so loud that “there was no uproar above which he could not make himself heard” is quickly shut down (53). Verloc is in trouble because has not done anything of substance as a secret agent and his employers want him to start a true rebellion in the city in order to get police intervention; “no work, no pay” they tell him (53). Thus amidst the threat of being fired from this dangerous duplicitous job, we are left with his “queer sensation of faintness in his stout legs” (53).

In the book this scene is immediately followed by another five pages which finalize the interview between the threatened employer and his boss. To find out how Verloc will react and how that will affect the plot, one must simply read on and look to explore the different views of the multiple characters in the chapters that follow. The cut in the magazine however, creates a dramatic tension between what will be done and what we may expect from a man at the brink of desperation as lazy and unaccustomed to real work as Verloc. Readers will find themselves conflicted, should they expect and hope for a revolutionary action and await a major event in the book that would “stimulate vigilance” from the police as Verloc was ordered to instigate? (53) Although nothing violent or revolutionary has actually happened, the prospect of a scared secret agent fabricates a dramatic tension. The idea forces a reader to ponder on Verloc as a character and on the future of the plot. It is a precarious situation for both him and the reader: does one want to know what he will do with this offer? Just how much violence may we expect from the novel?

The way that cliffhangers cause anxiety also force the reader to think about the connections between the multiple fragmentations within the drama in order to solve the questions on the plot. When the fourth section ends with the anarchist Ossipon telling the Professor that “there’s a man blown up in Greenwich Park this morning”, only a disconnected reader would be unworried about the identity of this man (64). The cliffhanger effect starts even before this sentence with their conversation about the ‘perfect detonator’ since up to this point the reader knows that both the explosives expert and the famous anarchist belong to Verloc’s group and that the embassy asked him to blow up the scientific institution Greenwich Park. Although the conversation starts in a new chapter in the book, the magazine also has it formatted as starting directly after Mr. Verloc’s detached conversation with his wife about taking care of her family. With all this evidence the section forces on a reader, one will wonder about Verloc’s exact involvement in the bombing, and even worry about his life.

Through the strategic use of dramatic last sentences interrupting the chapters and trains of thought, Conrad ensured the return of his readers and consequently his publication space in every issue of *Ridgway’s*. The sendoff sentences between the weekly publications had to be used with utmost care to generate the perfect combination for the audience to return to it every single week. Although they might create more artificial tension than desirable for the book, the effects of each cliffhanger allowed the story to flourish.

Works Cited

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- Conrad, Joseph. *The Secret Agent*. London: Penguin, 1996. Print.