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The Effect of Summarization on Authorial Intent: *Ridgway's* Serialization  
of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

In the context of literature one of the most fundamental relationships is that between an author and his reader. There is a sanctity involved in both the author's expression of thought and the reader's purposeful reading. Ideally, this relationship is direct which allows for an uninterrupted reflection upon an author's expression of thought. However, there is the occasional, but ever-increasing, occurrence of third-party commentaries entering this sacred relationship. In a modern age where condensed summaries are both uninformed and abundant, readers can find themselves immersed in an atmosphere of wild literary claims and hasty interpretations. Even more hindering to the relationship is the simplifying of a story to its plot. In such a scenario, a piece of art is reduced to nothing more than actions and reactions. The carefully crafted subtleties of character and emotion are thrown by the wayside in pursuit of quick and easy consumption. Summaries are an insufficient means to absorb literature's meaning. In the serialization of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, such an egregious fault against literature takes place. The presentation of Conrad's work is inundated with summaries that confine the story, distorting its true meaning. The inclusion of summaries not authored by Conrad takes away from his craft, hindering the author-reader relationship. The summaries' emphasis on plot, overly simplistic presentation of characters, and misleading headlines put a strain on Conrad's authorial intent.

Despite the editor's assessment of Conrad's stories as encapsulating more than "the bare bones of a plot," the insertion of a synopsis preceding each installment does just that (1.12). The

purpose of a summary is to condense the material of a larger body of work into a concise blurb that can be quickly absorbed and understood. It serves a purpose as a last-minute study tool, or to refresh one's memory on the most basic elements of a piece of literature. They are not designed to reflect the purpose or intent of the author's writing. By looking at the purpose of summaries, it can already be seen that, by definition, they are designed to inhibit, not enhance, the relationship between reader and author. In the case of *The Secret Agent*, the opening, italicized lines recap the politically charged events of the previous installment, while dismissing the development of characters. By definition, the summaries are serving their purpose of providing the bare minimum to the reader so that they may continue on their romp through the tale of "Diplomatic Intrigue and Anarchistic Treachery" (7.49). One must concede that summaries are a necessary part of serialization. After all, loyal readers may need to refresh their memory in regard to the actions published in the preceding edition and new readers may need to acquaint themselves with the past installments. However, the fact that summaries are a necessary part of serialization further demonstrates how presenting literature in this form damages the purpose of the writing.

In addition to promoting the bare essentials of the storyline, the summaries also promote an insufficient interpretation of characters. They are consistently reduced in the summary preceding each section to merely serving as Mr. Verloc's roommates: "Here he lives with his wife, her mother and her brother, Steeve, a weak-minded youth" (3.15). With this categorization, the nuances of the characters, especially Minnie and Steeve, are treated as secondary material. Yet, the development of Minnie and Steeve is important given that their dynamic is a driving force behind the climax of the story. Neither Minnie's "maternal vigilance" (1.14) nor the "force of her protecting passion" (10.43) are alluded to in any summarization. The characteristics crafted by Conrad that define Minnie beyond the title Mr. Verloc's "wife" (2.49) are essential to

understanding her decision to murder her husband. Perhaps more complicated is the character of Steeve who is seen as both “a terrible encumbrance” (1.14) and “delicately honest” (9.44). His devotion to his sister is seen in his dutiful nature which is marked by “blind love and docility” (1.14). Be that as it may, the dynamic traits of Steeve are reduced to the poor description of “weak-minded youth.” The lacking summary does injustice to Steeve and Minnie’s characters, the relationship they share, and their role in furthering Conrad’s story.

Even though the brief synopsis of events is removed in the last four installments of the story, the all-encompassing headline below the title remains (8.41). The caption describes *The Secret Agent* as a story of “diplomatic intrigue and anarchist treachers,” furthering the interpretation of the story as a rambunctious political adventure. (1.12). In contrast to this terse assessment, the story actually finds its foundations in the domestic tension between Mr. Verloc, Minnie and Steeve. When combined, the summary and overbearing headline drastically fail to express the internal *domestic* intrigue and treachery which takes place in the home of Verloc. The perceptions of Mr. Verloc are generally favorable. Minnie sees him as “a very good husband” (9.44). Minnie’s mother also asserts that Mr. Verloc’s “good nature” inspired within her a “sense of absolute safety” (1.14). And Steeve treats him with a “triumphant devotion” (10.41). On the other hand, the attitude of Verloc, particularly towards Steeve, is less than favorable. He attends to Steeve as one would attend to “a household dog” (10.41). And Verloc views him as being “half-witted” and “irresponsible” (11.43). By giving glimpses into his true character, Conrad shows that Verloc has an insensitive quality which reduces his ability to be a truly caring husband. These subtleties are not expressed in the summaries and can be missed if not all the installments are read. Delicately crafted aspects of Verloc’s character are important in understanding his improper reactions to the tragedy of Steeve’s death and his wife receiving the

news. After suggesting to his distraught wife that she go to bed and “have a good cry” he absurdly boasts that in his treatment of his wife “his own gentleness touched him” (11.44). The tension existing between the perception of Verloc and how he actually treats others is an essential detail that is not expressed in summarization, even though it plays a large role in the climax of the story.

Acknowledging the emphasis placed on plot, the inadequate presentation of characters, and the misguided assessments of the headlines are not intended to assert that only *Ridgway's* summaries are inferior, but rather point toward the deficiencies of summaries in general. The structure of serialization, which includes an elapsing of time between the reading of installments and a segmentation of narrative, produces a reader that requires the services of a summary. Due to the deficiencies of summaries, it can be deduced that any presentation of literature requiring an inclusion of a synopsis is one which disregards authorial intent. When the sanctity of the reader-author relationship is put at jeopardy, it follows that the message of the literature is sacrificed as well. Although the craft of Conrad can still be identified in *Ridgway's* presentation of *The Secret Agent*, its having to battle through the side effects of serialization and summarization affect the likelihood that Conrad's true message can reach the reader.

### **Works Cited**

Conrad, Joseph. "*The Secret Agent; a Simple Tale*." *Ridgway's* 06 Oct. 1906: n. p. *Conrad*

*First* The Joseph Conrad Periodical Archive. Web.