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### Contextual Implications of *The Secret Agent*

When it was first published, Joseph Conrad's novel, *The Secret Agent*, was serially published in *Ridgway* magazine in 11 parts. This not only led to a building of anticipation in the readers, but also forced them to consider the portions of the novel that they were reading in the context of the magazine as a whole. Being a self described "militant" magazine, the inclusion of this serial specifically forces the reader to make some interesting considerations in regards to the international state of affairs at that time. The typical reader of such a publication would certainly be interested in a story dealing with the same topics as *Secret Agent*, so the publishers of *Ridgway's* magazine would have to take careful consideration of which articles and editorials would be included surrounding each section of Conrad's serial. A particularly notable juxtaposition of serial and articles happens to be the issue of *Ridgway's* in which the first two chapters of *Secret Agent* were published. The first two chapters of the work deal with the characters and, more importantly, Mr. Vladimir's plan; the surrounding articles in the magazine mainly deal with the invasion of Cuba. The context of the issue in which these first two chapters were published affects the overall reading of the story by raising the issue of the real possibility of a plot of the type Mr. Vladimir suggests, and viewing this work as a plausible reality.

In this issue of *Ridgway's*, readers were given an article regarding the recent revolution that took place in Cuba. This piece outlines the events that took place in Cuba, in which the

American military moved in and led a revolution against the current Cuban regime. This alerts readers to the fact that all is not well in nations surrounding the United States, and that some action is needed to retain peace on the home front. The article states, in referring to the recent events, “Will it require another revolution to convince the long-suffering American people that the only means of maintaining peace in the Pearl of the Antilles is to raise over it the American flag?” (9). The article continues immediately after this quote to elaborate on the nature of America's involvement, which is described as an act “for the protection of the life and property of [America's] citizens,” (10). With statements such as these being the focal point of an article preceding *The Secret Agent*, it is easy to view the content of the story through the lens of this context. For example, those lines are immediately brought back to mind when Verloc thinks to himself, on the way to see Mr. Vladimir, “All these people had to be protected. Protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury,” (15). Verloc's words have the same tone, and nearly the same wording, as the description of the American reasons for getting involved in Cuba. What this does for a reader of this magazine is to consider the events of and following that passage of *Secret Agent* as very possible and very real, as well as allying American sympathies with Verloc's. A parallel of this kind is also suggested through this context in regards to Mr. Vladimir's plan, which he describes as “a series of outrages, executed here in [England], not just planned here,” which is startlingly similar to the actions of the Cuban Liberal party, who are described as setting fire to their own farms and driving away all of the livestock (24). This again shapes the reading of *Secret Agent* by making it seem more real, seeing as nearly identical events are taking place so close to home. It also shows that this type of behavior is global, and can happen anywhere, including Cuba and England. Clear affiliations of real nations and fictional characters are also formed, and this will affect the reading of this story by showing the

consequences of these actions done in reality.

While the roundup of news following the first section of *Secret Agent* also discusses the Cuban revolution, the content which most affects the reading of the story still remains in the first article about Cuba. In addition to drawing parallels between specific characters and national actions, the context created by this juxtaposition also shapes a reading of this story by illustrating the class divide that exists in the world, and the actions one class might take against another. The article about Cuba stresses that the American involvement in this revolution was solely greed based, with the Americans motivated by the protection of their property. Property is precisely what Verloc points out about the English society that needs to be protected. As he is walking to the embassy, Verloc thinks to himself, “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,” (15). His motivations for protecting these things rest on his belief that the ruling class, who would have luxuries such as this, are essential to the success of the country. He goes on to say, “the whole social order favorable to their hygienic idleness had to be protected against the shallow enviousness of unhygienic labor,” (15). Similar to the motivations of the American involvement in Cuba, the upper class is completely motivated by greed and self preservation. In this instance, when Verloc refers to protecting property, he means that the lower class is the threat to the order and success of the wealthier class. Since he deals with members of the lower class daily in his shop, Verloc feels as though he can sense their desperation, which has given him a reason to believe that they could be a threat to the way of life of those who run the country. By reading *The Secret Agent* simply as a novel, one simply reads it as a fictional tale that is somewhat farfetched. But by reading it in the context of the *Ridgway's* magazine, one sees that the issues being dealt with in the story were very real at the time of publication, and having this

story next to actual news articles serves to enhance the reality of both.

Reading this story within the context of a magazine changes affect of it entirely. Without the context of the articles around it, *Secret Agent* is merely a work of fiction, albeit a brilliant one. It would be hard to see the events of this story ever being possible, or to think that anyone out there would hold the beliefs of the characters in the story. But, when placed next to an article about world affairs, one begins to see that the world is not too different from the world depicted by Conrad. By having *Secret Agent* serialized in this context, Conrad was able to connect to his audience in a way that would not be possible otherwise. He can place his work next to current events and show the prevalence of his message.

## Works Cited

Conrad, Joseph. *The Secret Agent*. London: Penguin, 2007. Print.

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