WINNIE VERLOC AND HEROISM
IN THE SECRET AGENT

THESIS

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By

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Winnie Verloc's role in *The Secret Agent* has received little initial critical attention. However, this character emerges as Conrad's hero in this novel because she is an exception to what afflicts the other characters: institutionalism.

In the first chapter, I discuss the effect of institutions on the characters in the novel as well as on London, and how both the characters and the city lack hope and humanity.

Chapter II is an analysis of Winnie's character, concentrating on her philosophy that "life doesn't stand much looking into," and how this view, coupled with her disturbing experience of having looked into the "abyss," makes Winnie heroic in her affirmative existentialism.

Chapters III and IV broaden the focus, comparing Winnie to Conrad's other protagonists and to his other female characters.
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INTRODUCTION

The Secret Agent, although primarily approached by the critics as a political novel, is also a social and a domestic drama played out in the back parlour of a secret agent's pornography shop, and on the dreary streets of London. Conrad admits in a letter to John Galsworthy that he did not intend this to be a political study: "I had no idea to consider Anarchism politically, or to treat it seriously in its philosophical aspect" (Karl, The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, 3: 354). And to Marguerite Podarawska, "you well know that anarchy and anarchists are outside my experience; I know almost nothing of the philosophy, and nothing at all of the men" (Guerard, 266). And, truly, this novel transcends the particularly political. However, there seems to be quite a bit of confusion as to what exactly Conrad was intending when he wrote this novel—and the brief, various and contradictory material that appears in his letters and in the 1920 Author's Note to the novel is mostly useless. However, some count it among his best; F.R. Leavis calls it "a masterpiece" (77). Although criticism surrounding this novel has been on the increase since the early 1980's, there is much that has yet to be said regarding its meaning. One area which is most definitely lacking initial study is the characterization of Winnie Verloc. Just why critics have been so resistant to placing her among Conrad's other heroes is hard to
determine. She, in fact, closely resembles them in character, in
circumstance, and in fate; yet she only very occasionally
receives adequate analysis, and this is usually confined simply
to her role as a female in the work. Winnie deserves to be given
more consideration, and I hope that I succeed in at least piquing
a bit of critical interest in her character.

Conrad originally intended Adolf Verloc to occupy the
central role in this novel. The working title for the piece was
called "Verloc," and it was not until Conrad did extensive
rewriting, adding approximately 30,000 words to his original
manuscript, that he expanded Winnie's role to the size it is. In
his preface to the 1920 edition, he suggests that Winnie is
indeed the central character of the novel. He writes of this
matter: "At last the story of Winnie Verloc stood out complete
from the days of her childhood to the end. . . . This book is
that story" (41). Yet, many critics still assert that Winnie's
alleged laziness, stupidity, dullness, lack of individuality, and
any number of other weaknesses nullify her position as the
central character, and by implication, her role as the hero of
this work.

I suggest, as Conrad himself suggests in the Preface, that
"the figures grouped about Mrs. Verloc and related directly or
indirectly to her tragic suspicion that 'life doesn't stand much
looking into,'" serve to confirm Conrad's theme that life indeed
does not stand scrutiny. Because when looking at life through
Conrad's eyes, one realizes that there is no hope nor happiness
available to us; all is darkness. Conrad writes to R. B. Cunninghame Graham of this philosophy:

Egoism is good, and altruism is good, and fidelity to nature would be best of all, and systems could be built, and rules could be made—if we could only get rid of consciousness. What makes mankind tragic is not that they are victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well—but as soon as you know of your slavery the pain, the anger, the strife—the tragedy begins. We can't return to nature, since we can't change our place in it. Our refuge is in stupidity, in drunkenness of all kinds, in likes, in beliefs, in murder, thieving, reforming, in negation, in contempt—each man according to the promptings of his particular devil. There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that whether seen in a convex or a concave mirror is always but a vain and fleeting appearance. (Karl, 2: 30)

Winnie's perception that "life doesn't stand looking into," therefore, is a means of expressing that human life cannot stand consciousness. Because Winnie is the only fully conscious character in the novel besides the insane Professor and her mentally retarded brother, she emerges as the hero. It is she
who sees the horror of living, and in her last moments,
paradoxically, embraces this useless life, accepting the
meaninglessness she has discovered. Winnie's end is tragic, not
because she dies, but because she sees; and fight as she does,
she cannot live without meaning.

Conrad uses the institutions of politics and science—as he
used money in *Nostromo*—as the abstractions to which the
characters in this novel adhere. Each gives up the personal
freedom, the choice to remain individual, by embracing a
conventional institution. It is through this, as well as his use
of London's glaring reflection of society's squalor, and through
his melding of the animated with the inanimate, creating a
macabre and confusing world, that Conrad exhibits the futility of
English life in the 1870's—and by suggestion, of all life, at
all times. For Conrad's world is not specifically English, nor
is it modern, nor political, nor mechanical. It is an object-
filled world in which man cannot find his true self, where
individuals are lost in meaninglessness.
CHAPTER I

THE PLAYERS AND THEIR SETTING

Conrad's fundamental concern with identity, with its definition, its restrictions, its susceptibility to challenges, is addressed in all of his major works. He found the study of the self beset by society and its requisite temptations and moral trials vital to an understanding of mankind. In The Secret Agent, Conrad explores this problem even further and for the first time uses a city setting, London, both to produce and to further aggravate the characters' failure to define or to subsequently remain loyal to a definition of themselves. Within this concern, Winnie Verloc, by not establishing an institutional self, emerges as an exception to the standard.

John Lester Jr., in his expansive survey of the period, emphasizes the instability of the late Victorian/early Edwardian era: "we may best depict the cultural mood of these years as a drift from unrest to an intense excitement, from excitement to bewilderment, and thence to a darkening disillusionment," and says that man of this period longed for an identity and "searched for definition of that identity" (3). The characters in this novel reflect the culmination of this search for an identity in that each maintains an almost fervent adherence to an idea or a faith; in other words, each embraces an institution, what each perceives as an end to the search. The anarchists seek some kind
of definition through their politics, Chief Inspector Heat and the Assistant Commissioner through theirs, Comrade Ossipon through science, Mrs. Verloc's mother through her role as a mother, and Adolf Verloc through his protection of the status quo.

In this novel, as in *Under Western Eyes* and *Nostromo*, Conrad presents a world without order in which the characters must choose among many attractive and yet contradictory social or political ideologies. Conrad considers the strongest person in a society the one who can assimilate conflicting ideas while still maintaining something of a personal definition. One reason he objects to the person who does not sustain a resistent attitude in the face of society's conventions is that to align oneself with an institution is to give up a part of one's identity. The Professor recognizes the allure of anarchism—even of police work—but, I believe, Conrad states his own views when the Professor says to Ossipon that each of the conventions is debilitating: "It governs your thought, of course, and your action, too, and thus neither your thought nor your action can ever be conclusive" (93). Choosing an ideology based on something outside of the self and not of the self's own creation is a denial; for how can one truly espouse a creed which is not based on experience, on trial and error? Once again, it is the Professor who addresses this idea: "You are the worthy delegates for revolutionary propaganda, but the trouble is not only that you are as unable to think independently as any respectable
grocer or journalist of them all, but that you have no character whatsoever" (93). The inability to think independently, to be "a posturing shadow" (93), as the Professor describes it, therefore prohibits the development of a non-institutional self. Ironically, it is Michaelis who asserts this idea of the repression of the self and uses it to reflect on life as a whole: "All idealization makes life poorer. To beautify it is to take away its character of complexity--it is to destroy it" (73).

While Conrad offers several conventions which engage the characters in The Secret Agent, he particularly concentrates on the political conventions as the most pernicious. Daniel R. Schwarz suggests that Conrad presents political involvement as a "maelstrom that destroys those it touches" (153), and that when one commits oneself to a political idea one "surrenders a crucial part of one's personality" (154). Schwarz sees the political games played in The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes as ruinous, and at bottom only a diversion: "characters whose active lives revolve around upholding the status quo or destroying it have sacrificed their humanity to a ritualistic hunt in which values and ideals are subsumed by the chase and in which each character is bathetically both hunter and prey" (153).

But it does not ultimately matter which convention one chooses, because basically all repress the true self. Conrad reveals his attitude toward this matter in a 1903 letter written to his friend R. B. Cunninghame Graham, an active socialist orator and writer:
You seem to me tragic with your courage, with your beliefs and your hopes. Every cause is tainted: and you reject this one, espouse that other one as if one were evil and the other good while the same evil you hate is in both, but disguised in different words. I am more in sympathy with you than words can express yet if I had a grain of belief left in me I would believe you misguided. You are misguided by the desire of the impossible—and I envy you. Alas! What you want to reform are not institutions—it is human nature. Your faith will never move that mountain. Not that I think mankind intrinsically bad. It is only silly and cowardly. (Karl, 2: 119)

In effect, this passage illustrates Conrad's belief that to adhere to any one cause is futile; all are tainted; all merely reflect a "silly and cowardly" mankind in desperate search for guidance. In The Secret Agent, the Professor makes this point by juxtaposing the anarchists and the police: "Revolution, legality . . . forms of idleness at bottom identical" (94). No one character, no one institution emerges here as more harmful than another. And, while Ossipon can be viewed as somewhat of a villain, it is not his blind devotion to Lombroso's tenets or his beliefs as an anarchist which should be implicated, but his fundamentally selfish character.

Although Conrad maintains that mankind is mostly weak, susceptible to the allure of moral and social conventions, his
view is not entirely judgmental; he also feels compassion for mankind's foolishness. This can be seen to a small extent in the letter reprinted above. Conrad laments that he cannot share Graham's optimism: "I envy you. Alas!" He reveals a similar commiserative attitude in his 1920 Preface to *The Secret Agent*, when he writes that the anarchist activities on which he based his story reminded him of a "half-crazy pose as of a brazen cheat exploiting the poignant miseries and passionate credulities of a mankind always so eager for self-destruction" (39). Serajul Choudhury suggests that Conrad's political novels are a "searching examination of the evils of man's readiness to believe" (38). However, I believe that Conrad has more compassion for human beings than Choudhury allows him, and that perhaps a more accurate account of Conrad's feelings might be that Conrad is saddened by a person's unawareness of his individual nature. Yundt, Ossipon, and Michaelis appear tragically misinformed, not evil. They believe in utopias, the possibility of change, and while Conrad thinks this foolish and lazy, he is sympathetic with their vulnerability to insidious forces. Or, as the Professor states, facing institutions requires "grit of a special kind" (96). And to not have that grit is less evil than pitiable.

Heat's perspective on the Greenwich bombing outrage illustrates the disruption characters experience when their beliefs are shaken, their illusions exposed and threatened:

Heat had discovered in the affair a delicate and
perplexing side, forcing upon the discoverer a certain amount of insincerity—that sort of insincerity which, under the name of skill, prudence, discretion, turns up at one point or another in most human affairs. He felt at the moment like a tight rope artist might feel if suddenly, in the middle of the performance, the manager of the Music Hall were to rush out of the proper managerial seclusion and begin to shake the rope. Indignation, the sense of moral insecurity engendered by such a treacherous proceeding joined to the immediate apprehension of a broken neck, would, in the colloquial phrase, put him in a state. And there would be also some scandalized concern for his art, too, since a man must identify himself with something more tangible than his own personality, and establish his pride somewhere, either in his social position, or in the quality of the work he is obliged to do, or simply in the superiority of the idleness he may be fortunate enough to enjoy. (212)

Regardless of the inherent strength or weakness of a character, without the security of a firmly maintained philosophy, he cannot move through the modern world without suffering incredible trauma.
Although the anarchists in the novel express their revolutionary ideas in different manners, each most stubbornly clings to political upheaval, or anarchy. Each expounds his philosophy, lives by it as closely as his individual personality allows, and refuses to consider a more individually chosen view of life. The Professor when speaking to Ossipon describes the anarchists as "slaves" of the social convention. "It governs your thought, of course, and your action, too, and thus neither your thought nor your action can ever be conclusive" (193). The narrator describes the anarchists as ignoble, vain, and manipulative:

The majority of revolutionists are the enemies of discipline and fatigue mostly. There are natures, too, to whose sense of justice the price exacted looms up monstrously enormous, odious, oppressive, worrying, humiliating, extortionate, intolerable. Those are the fanatics. The remaining portion of social rebels is accounted for by vanity, the mother of all noble and vile illusions, the companion of poets, reformers, charlatans, prophets, and incendiaries. (82)

Michaelis, the "ticket-of-leave apostle," has the most humanitarian estimation of anarchist views. He believes in the power of change, and his particular brand of anarchy stems from his desire to do good. Michaelis's enthusiasm for a positive future is nearly religious in its zeal; he is described as "angelic," with "the temperament of a saint" (123). However,
though Michaelis is the only anarchist described in positive terms, yet he is characterized as a simpleton, blindly leading a way to his idea of a utopian society where the world will be planned out "like an immense and nice hospital, with gardens and flowers, in which the strong are to devote themselves to the nursing of the weak" (264). His idealism is likened to that of "those saintly men whose personality is lost in the contemplation of their faith" (180). But Michaelis believes he has the answers, and when pressed by Yundt into admitting his blind optimism, he defends the reasonableness of his ideas: "he did not depend upon emotional excitement to keep up his belief, no declamations, no anger, no visions of blood-red flags waving, or metaphorical lurid suns of vengeance rising above the horizon of a doomed society. Not he! Cold reason, he boasted, was the basis of his optimism" (75). Romantic, and still manifestly absurd, Michaelis has relinquished his personality and even his knowledge of that loss to his philosophy, clinging tenaciously and unremittingly to his views:

Michaelis pursued his idea—the idea of his solitary reclusion—the thought vouchsafed to his captivity and growing like a faith revealed in visions. He talked to himself, indifferent to the sympathy or hostility of his hearers, indifferent indeed to their presence, from the habit he had acquired of thinking aloud hopefully in the solitude of the four whitewashed walls of his cell, in the sepulchral silence of the great blind pile
of bricks near the river, sinister and ugly like a colossal mortuary for the socially drowned. (75)

Michaelis sees only his own truth; his indifference to others reaffirms his idealism. In addition, Michaelis's ideas are useless, as useless as his vision of physical reality.

Karl Yundt, too, subscribes to the idea that anarchism can change the world for the better. On the other hand, his is a fatalistic and violent vision. He wishes for complete annihilation, dreaming of a "band of men, absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers" (74). And with these men, he intends to secure death as the substitute for the current mess of society. He sees no answer but to level all that exists. He asks for "no pity for anything on earth . . . and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity" (74).

As in Michaelis' case, Conrad undermines this character's credibility. Yundt, like Michaelis, is unyielding; he refuses to listen to the others' arguments. He has chosen his philosophy, and in conversation with his comrades will not waver. In addition, any recognition which might have been his due for his strict policy is prevented by his hypocrisy, for he had "never in his life raised personally as much as his little finger against the social edifice" (78). This "swaggering spectre" (81) is ineffectual, and has always been ineffectual. And now, old and moribund, even his prophesying is hollow: "The shadow of his
evil gift clung to him yet like the smell of a deadly drug in an old vial of poison, emptied now, useless, ready to be thrown away upon the rubbish-heap of things that have served their time" (78).

On the other side of the law, the Assistant Commissioner and Chief Inspector Heat exhibit similar unshakable beliefs in an institution. The Professor's remark to Ossipon highlights the juxtaposition of these two clashing factions, rigid institutions and anarchy: "You revolutionists . . . are the slaves of the social convention, which is afraid of you; slaves of it as much as the very police that stand up in defense of that convention" (93). Later he describes the police force's character as being "built upon conventional morality. . . . They are bound in all sorts of conventions" (93). Accordingly, the lawful servants appear as rigidly true to a convention as the anarchists; they too have trouble defining their character in a chaotic society which cannot promise security or comfort. Heat and the Assistant Commissioner, simply characterized, subscribe to their conception of the law, which ultimately becomes a convention. Later, the narrator draws a similar comparison: "the mind and the instincts of a burglar are of the same kind as the mind and instincts of a police officer. Both recognize the same conventions. . . . Products of the same machine, one classed as useful and the other as noxious" (110-111).

Chief Inspector Heat is described as a loyal servant of the police department. He works hard, cares a great deal about his
position, and is successful in it; he becomes the principle
expert in anarchist procedure in the department. But for all his
loyalty and service, Heat is little more than a company man,
someone who will do what is expected of him, maybe a bit more,
but who doesn't necessarily put his heart into his work. John
Winner sees Heat as fundamentally lazy, pointing out that Heat is
"deflated at the end by association with the idle rich and with
the theme of demonic inertia elsewhere embodied in Mr. Verloc"
(6). Leo Gurko describes Heat as a complacent officer: "The
ethical issue does not exist for Heat. . . . It is not justice he
is after, but success, and success is based on the tenacious
pursuit of routine. Any departure from the line of least
resistance threatens his position" (174). The narrator's
description of Heat as a man whose mind is "inaccessible to the
idea of revolt" (119) agrees with this assessment. In light of
Heat's loyalty to his position, his attitude about law should be
seen not so much as a personal conviction as a public alignment.
He considers himself having "an authorized mission on this earth"
with "the moral support of his kind" (113).

The Assistant Commissioner displays an attitude toward law
similar to Heat's. Like Heat, the Assistant Commissioner is
successful, persevering and loyal; also like Heat, he does not
care for justice as much he cares for his job. When faced with
the suggestion of picking up Michaelis for involvement in the
Greenwich Observatory bombing, he scrambles to find some way to
distract Heat's interest in the ticket-of-leave apostle. The
Assistant Commissioner does not want the case to upset Michaelis's patron and consequently his wife, and he finds this motivation stronger than any consideration of personal ethics. In his confrontation over the matter with Heat, he repeatedly whispers to himself, "she will never forgive me" (125). And he understands that the basis of his actions is questionable; he cannot "taste the comfort of complete self-deception" (201).

Comrade Ossipon, nicknamed "the Doctor," while fundamentally an anarchist, has more personal conviction about his ideas in science; he specifically adheres to Lombroso's theory of criminology, which asserts that physical degeneracy directly reflects social degeneracy. Ossipon's contribution to the anarchists' discussion in Verloc's parlor is confined to vague analyses of Stevie's physical type. He does not have anything to say regarding either Yundt's or Michaelis's philosophies. His glance at Verloc during this discussion is described as a "glance of insufferable, hopelessly dense sufficiency which nothing but the frequentation of science can give to the dullness of common mortals" (77). Ossipon is incapable of transcending the merely scientific.

At the end of the novel, he still persists in this reductive scientific reasoning, looking this time at Winnie as a subject of study: "He gazed at her and invoked Lombroso, as an Italian peasant recommends himself to his favorite saint" (259), and this analytical diversion is undertaken only after he has already discovered that she has murdered her husband. The narrator
describes Ossipon as almost a scientific zealot: "If Comrade Ossipon did not recommend his terrified soul to Lombroso, it was only because on scientific grounds he could not believe that he carried about him such a thing as a soul" (259). When faced with the moral question of whether to help Winnie, to steal from her, or to leave the situation altogether, he does not search his soul, he submits "to the rule of science" (259).

Besides the institutions of science, anarchism and law, two other characters adopt, though again unconsciously, a specific lifestyle as the overriding determination in their lives: Winnie's mother embraces her role as a family member, and Adolf Verloc aligns himself with the values and judgements of the lower-middle-class and, consequently, indolence.

Winnie's mother puts her family first. Her primary concern in her later years is to see that both Winnie and Stevie are taken care of. This familial view is what dictates all of her actions. Initially, she lives with Winnie and her new husband to help care for Stevie; when she sees that the three young people are settled, she feels sufficiently comfortable with the situation to leave. She believes that her daughter's future is "obviously assured, and even as to her son Stevie she need have no anxiety" (48). Leaving the shop on Brett Street to go to the almshouse, then, is primarily a move to free her daughter and son-in-law from her encumbering presence; she does not want to irritate the "good Mr. Verloc" any longer. Her attention also to the family furniture and how she should distribute it is entirely
dependent on how it will affect the minds of Verloc and Winnie; she takes only the crudest pieces, the smallest amount that will allow her to get by, and leaves the rest for Winnie. She does not leave it for Stevie, because she does not want Mr. Verloc to be "beholden to his brother-in-law for the chairs he sat on" (156). She thinks of everyone before herself.

The mother is thus heroic in her self-sacrifice. Edward Garnett, in a review appearing in Nation, comments on the heroic dimensions of the mother. Conrad responds enthusiastically to the review in a letter to his friend: "I am no end proud to see you've spotted my poor old woman. You've got a fiendishly penetrating eye for one's most secret intentions. She is the heroine" (Karl, 3: 270). And, in many respects, the mother is heroic. She takes little for herself and gives to her children, and her sacrifices truly sadden her. When she leaves the house on Brett Street, the narrator says, "she had wept because she was heroic and unscrupulous" (158). But to view the mother as strictly heroic is reductive, and Conrad can only have meant his comment to Garnett cursorily, since the mother's further characterization, as well as Conrad's later comments about the novel, contradict this.

One reason for saying that the mother's actions are not heroic is that much of what she does is done passively. She allows Winnie's choices to supersede her own: "When Winnie announced her engagement to Mr. Verloc her mother could not help wondering, with a sigh and a glance towards the scullery, what
would become of poor Stevie" (50). This emphasis on "poor" Stevie, which is repeated each time the mother refers to her son, suggests a throwing up of hands, as if there were little she could do for her son. And, actually, she does very little. It is Winnie and Verloc who secure a job for Stevie; it is Winnie who encourages him to go out walking or to visit with Michaelis; it is again Winnie who keeps him active around the shop. Winnie's "impotent" mother merely watches, a "motionless being" (48), lamenting that Stevie is a "terrible encumbrance" (48). She is satisfied with allowing Winnie to raise her son, and "in her heart of hearts she was not perhaps displeased that the Verlocs had no children" (48).

In addition to her passivity, the mother exhibits a blindness, almost a denial, of the family's true domestic situation. Though Winnie is painfully aware of her father's abuse of both herself and her little brother, her mother seems oblivious to this aspect of her husband's character. She romanticizes her family life, refusing to see its pernicious elements. In talking of her dead husband, she refers to him as "dear daddy" and "your dear father."

This attitude of unwitting complaisance is continued in her relationship with her son-in-law. She considers Verloc a perfectly adequate husband for her daughter; she thinks, "that excellent man loved his wife, of course" (161), and when trying to describe her feelings about Verloc to her daughter, "words failed her on the subject of Mr. Verloc's excellence" (159).
Whether she is fooling herself or simply cannot see the problems in her daughter's marriage, her blindness can be seen as detrimental to her daughter's well-being.

The mother's attitude toward Winnie raises another question: is the mother able to act unselfishly? She is happy that Winnie has forsaken the butcher's son--perhaps the only true love Winnie could have known--in favor of the stable, comparatively wealthy Verloc. In adopting this posture, she does not take into account her daughter's emotional needs, only the physical needs of Stevie. The narrator says that the mother's attitude was that "girls frequently get sacrificed to the welfare of the boys. In this case she was sacrificing Winnie" (161). Suresh Raval agrees, describing the mother in highly negative terms: "The mother's excessively sentimental love for the son prevents her from loving the daughter; the daughter is to be a surrogate mother to the son, and is taught to sacrifice her life to that end. Winnie's denial of her own life thus springs from her mother's destructive, uncritical sentimental love" (106). While Raval may overstate the case somewhat by asserting that the mother is the exclusive agent of Winnie's denial of life, the mother's reactions to Winnie's life choices must be regarded as not altogether altruistic, nor can it be said that she has even clearly conceived them.
Adolf Verloc, the secret agent of a foreign government can be and has been considered the central character in this novel. As agent A, and the agent provocateur of the anarchists, his role is central to the action of the novel. His is the only character who meets and knows at least peripherally all of the other characters. But clearly, Verloc is not the hero, nor yet the antihero of this novel, as has been suggested by several critics. And his susceptibility to convention is as strong as, perhaps even stronger than that of the institutionalists and the anarchists.

Verloc obviously does not qualify for heroic status in this story. The reader does not identify with his situation (Verloc cannot adequately identify with it himself), nor does the reader particularly care about his failure or success. Conrad has drawn him as an entirely unsympathetic character: he is unconscious of his effect on others' lives; he cares little about his own role in either the bombing incident or in Stevie's death and his wife's succeeding trauma; and he resists the impulse to actively pursue anything in his own life. His character is unattractive in its simplicity and its lack of feeling.

Nor does Verloc appear as an anti-hero. John Batchelor argues that Verloc is an anti-hero, the Wellsian anti-hero: "The Secret Agent takes the Wellsian anti-hero and puts him in hell. The Wellsian lower-middle-class world is recognizably present in Verloc himself" (67). Batchelor's assertion, however, never
addresses the fact that Verloc is not a failure in his job. Verloc's one commission in this novel, to cause an outrage which will strike at the public's infatuation with science and which will create turmoil and disunion among the anarchists, is successful. Although Verloc does bungle the job by using Stevie, allowing the event to be traced back to himself, it is not entirely a labor in vain. Verloc reasons, "well, it was a failure, if not exactly the sort of failure he feared" (214), and later, "Stevie's violent disintegration, however disturbing to think about only assured the success; for, of course, the knocking down of a wall was not the aim of Mr. Vladimir's menaces, but the production of a moral effect" (215). This view of his success is particularly true when seen in light of Verloc's limited experience and intellectual capacity, and the low expectations of Vladimir, Mrs. Verloc and himself. Verloc does not aspire to much, and therefore cannot fall from any great height.

Verloc's weakness is not the same as the anarchists', however. He has no illusions about changing the world or creating anything new of the old. Verloc's reaction to questions of change is to "not trouble his head about it, his mission in life being the protection of the social mechanism, not its perfectionment or even its criticism" (53-54). He wants to protect society's status quo. When walking along the pavement on his way to Vladimir's office, he looks around at the buildings, the houses of Londoners, and feels aligned with their complacent
lives: "They had to be protected; and 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; the whole social order favorable to their hygienic idleness had to be protected against the shallow enviousness of unhygienic labor" (51-52). It is not ideas Verloc wants to protect, but physical manifestations of idleness.

But it is not as if Verloc has particularly chosen his route; mainly Verloc lacks intelligence; he is unable to imagine a lifestyle besides his own. "Man of no ideas," Ossipon says, continuing, "The only talent he showed really was his ability to elude the attentions of the police somehow" (80). "Intellectually," he says, Verloc is "a nonentity" (98). Verloc's stated lack of talent as an orator, the fact that he's a married anarchist (which Vladimir believes is ridiculous), his lack of insight into his wife's or his mother-in-law's feelings all attest to his low mental capability. And this want of intelligence and lack of mobility is what leads him to embrace his own brand of conventionality, idleness.

Verloc is portrayed as "a man driven by an actual principle of indolence" (34). His motivations for continuing with either Vladimir's request or his shop's business is simply to protect his idleness. The narrator describes his actions as being "moved by the just indignation of a man well over forty, menaced in what is dearest to him--his repose and his security" (81). His laziness is extreme, preventing him from "taking the initiative
to action. He was in a manner devoted to it with a sort of inert
fanaticism, or perhaps rather with a fanatical inertness" (52).
And he has trouble stirring himself to action: "Mr. Verloc would
have rubbed his hands together with satisfaction had he not been
constitutionally averse from every superfluous action" (81).
Vladimir even accuses him of being "too lazy to think" (65).

Repeatedly, Conrad reinforces the idea that Verloc's
idleness negatively affects his ability to interact with people.
Accustomed to worrying only about himself and his precious ease,
he cannot see and therefore cannot truly care for the people with
whom he shares his life. He refrains from questioning Winnie's
thoughts, her "mystery;" he "forbore touching that mystery" out
of "timidity and indolence" (174). And he likewise ignores
Stevie: "The figure of his brother-in-law remained imperceptible
to him" (171); Verloc "extended as much recognition to Stevie as
a man not particularly fond of animals may give his wife's
beloved cat" (72). In the scene in which Verloc first confronts
Winnie after she has discovered Stevie's death, Verloc cannot
comprehend his wife's pain:

Mr. Verloc was a humane man; he had come home prepared
to allow every latitude to his wife's affection for her
brother. Only he did not understand it without ceasing
to be himself. . . . The mind of Mr. Verloc lacked
profundity. Under the mistaken impression that the
value of individuals consists in what they are in
themselves, he could not possibly comprehend Stevie in
Verloc's egoism and his apparent dismissal of the possibility of genuine human connections further testify to the idea that Verloc is essentially a nonentity in this novel; he cannot, nor does he desire to interact with anyone in his world; his lack of faith in anything belies a faith that nothing is what should be important. This paradox is at the core of his immobility.

Conrad's awareness of the weakness of man extends to an awareness of its source and reflection in the world man inhabits. This world, Conrad's chaotic, amoral universe, the "impenetrable darkness," which appears in most of his fiction, offers no guidance, no reprieve to a mankind assailed by questions both spiritual and moral. How can man establish a code of behavior when all that surrounds him suggests turmoil and inscrutableness?

The London of The Secret Agent, much like the Congo of "Heart of Darkness" and Costaguana of Nostromo, is more than merely a backdrop to the action of the novel; it also serves as a forceful and ever present antagonist to the characters, an additional factor which negatively affects their ability to live genuinely, to be able to clearly define their own lives. In an often-quoted letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, Conrad discusses his perception of a contemporary, materialistic society:

There is--let us say--a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps and iron and behold!--it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to
embroider, --but it goes on knitting. You come and say: 'This is all right: it's only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this, --for instance --celestial oil and the machine will embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold.' Will it? Alas no. You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident -- and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is -- and it is indestructible! (Karl, 1: 425)

Conrad describes the London he wished to portray, an insensitive machine, in his preface to The Secret Agent as "indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles, a cruel devourer of the world's light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives" (41). His intention, to draw a despicable, "cruel devourer" is realized in the London seen in The Secret Agent; Conrad creates a massive, dark, almost uninhabitable world, an "inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones, things in themselves unlovely and
unfriendly to man" (84).

Most of the action in the novel takes place at night; the streets are foggy and damp, and the street lights dim. This London is cruel and hopeless. At one point, The narrator describes the Assistant Commissioner leaving his office, going down to the street: "His descent into the street was like a descent into a slimy aquarium from which the water has run off" (172). Later, he describes Winnie in the city: "She was alone in London: and the whole town of marvels and mud, with its maze of streets and its mass of lights, was sunk in a hopeless night, rested at the bottom of a black abyss from which no unaided woman could hope to scramble out" (240). This word, "hopeless," is repeated in the description of the setting, but with a different emphasis as he later discusses Ossipon in the same streets after having left Winnie: "He walked through Squares, Places, Ovals, Commons, through monotonous streets with unknown names where the dust of humanity settles inert and hopeless out of the stream of life" (262). The characters move slowly through the city, shaken by the "unlovely and unfriendly" environment, unable to exact any comfort or direction from its malignant nature.

The environment in this novel reflects the despair which afflicts each of the characters. Gurko, when discussing Conrad's sea narratives, describes Conrad's ready ability to meld his environment with his philosophy as his "ecological mystique," and claims Conrad realizes his idea of the impact of nature and society on man more fully than any of his contemporaries (160).
Gurko's assessment can be extended to include Conrad's city settings. In *The Secret Agent*, as in *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad's civilization is a cluttered, depressing environment, mirroring a fragmented, dismal mankind.

Walter Allen describes how Conrad uses nature as a catalyst to, even as an agent of destruction for the challenged man:

Conrad is the novelist of extreme situations. In the greater part of his work his theme is man against himself, the environment, whether the sea or exotic place, having a double function to isolate the character and the larger world of men, so that he can be put *in extremis*, and to act as the agent of his self-confrontation. Nature itself can then become a symbol of evil; or rather, nature and the human being appear to exist almost as manifestations of each other.

(303)

Allen's appraisal of Conrad's use of nature illustrates his description with references to *Lord Jim*, but stops short of including an environment like the London in *The Secret Agent*. This setting admits both the isolation of character—as can be seen by the seclusion of the "empty," "narrow" streets, the loneliness of the characters dwarfed by huge buildings, poorly illumined by unrevealing street lamps—and the manifestation of man's nature in the entanglement of its street, the misrepresentation of its streets signs, the rotted essence of its alleyways and deserted buildings.
Further, Conrad obscures the line between man and city by animating items on the street and by mingling the human with the inorganic. One example is the scene in which Verloc walks to the Embassy: the streets are dimly lit by only a "bloodshot London sun," and "neither wall, nor tree, nor beast, nor man cast a shadow" (51). Conrad here juxtaposes and fuses man with the inanimate. He repeats this formula: "There were red, coppery gleams on the roofs of houses, on the corners of walls, on the panels of carriages, on the very coats of horses, and on the broad back of Mr. Verloc's overcoat, where they produced a dull effect of rustiness" (51). This melding of animate and inanimate reaches an oxymoronic stature in the narrator's comment that the city "in its breadth, emptiness, and extent . . . had the majesty of inorganic nature, of matter that never dies" (53). Another instance is the narrator's description of the effects of Stevie's fireworks episode in the staircase of the milk firm: "silk hats and elderly businessmen could be seen rolling independently down the stairs" (49). And another in Ossipon's imagining the Professor in the streets; in this instance the Professor's glasses are personified: "Ossipon had a vision of these round black-rimmed spectacles progressing along the streets on the top of the omnibus, their self-confident glitter falling here and there on the walls of the houses or lowered upon the heads of the unconscious stream of people on the pavements" (89). Later, a carriage is described: "the van and horses merged into one mass, seemed something alive--a square-backed black monster blocking
half the street, with sudden iron stampings, fierce jingles, and heavy, blowing sighs" (153). The machine which Conrad describes to Graham has merged the human with the nonhuman and created a dehumanized city.

A scene which I believe epitomizes Conrad's idea in *The Secret Agent* of the city as a reflection of and a melding into an image of evil occurs in the passage in which the Assistant Commissioner enters an Italian restaurant on Brett Street before questioning Verloc about the bombing:

> On going out, the Assistant Commissioner made to himself the observation that the patrons of the place had lost in the frequentation of fraudulent cookery all their national and private characteristics . . . these people were as denationalized as the dishes set before them with every circumstance of unstamped respectability. Neither was their personality stamped in any way, professionally, socially, or racially. They seemed created for the Italian restaurant, unless the Italian restaurant had been perchance created for them. But that last hypothesis was unthinkable, since one could not place them anywhere outside those special establishments. One never met these enigmatical persons elsewhere. It was impossible to form a precise idea what occupations they followed by day and where they went to bed at night. And he himself had been unplaced. . . . A pleasurable feeling of independence
possessed him when he heard the glass doors swing to behind his back with an imperfect thud. He advanced at once into an immensity of greasy slime and damp plaster interspersed with lamps, and enveloped, oppressed, penetrated, choked, and suffocated by the blackness of a wet London night, which is composed of soot and drops of water. (152)

In this passage, the Assistant Commissioner walks from a scene in which humans have lost all of their personal characteristics into a London night which chokes, oppresses and suffocates. To Conrad, these dual forces of society and nature at work upon one person are sufficiently injurious to make an individually chosen and hopeful life near impossible.
CHAPTER II

WINNIE

Despite the variety of critical opinions surrounding the question of Winnie Verloc's role in *The Secret Agent*, all critics seem to agree that an understanding of Winnie's character is essential to an understanding of the novel. Jack Biles suggests she is "the agent of death" (101); Robert Andreach sees her as the "virgin mother, who offers her brother-son to mankind" (112); Jocelyn Baines calls her self-centered and weak (185); and Avrom Fleischman says she is the personification of the "wide spread condition of impenetrability and insensitivity of mankind at large" (195). There are many and varying analyses, but the ones I have mentioned here are typical. And it is not surprising: Winnie is a frustratingly complex character, at one moment dull and quiet, at the next, sensitive, fiercely protective and murderous. However, as I've established in the introduction, it was Conrad's intention that she be the central character; and it is my intention to prove in this chapter that, despite being a woman, Winnie is the hero of this novel. I base this assertion on the fact that Winnie transcends the other characters' weaknesses, living genuinely by no one's example or suggestion but her own; that she is isolated by and from the city, remaining unaffected for the most part by its squalor and oppression; and that she, like other Conradian heroes has a perceptive flaw:
though she lives genuinely, allowing herself to remain unencumbered by the influence of conventions, her refusal to look deeply into things prevents her from living truly, and when she does face life's full impact, the knowledge of its arbitrariness and cruelty being too much to live with sanely, she kills herself.

Though Conrad does not describe Winnie as "free" until near the end of the novel--after she has discovered Stevie's death and her husband's role in it, when he describes her as "Mrs. Verloc, the free woman" (227)--in a sense, Winnie is free throughout the novel. Perhaps not free of attachments, what Conrad at least superficially connotes in calling her "the free woman," but free just the same. Winnie is free because she has "no illusions" (173). Winnie approaches each situation in her life with an open mind, without the categorical restrictions that someone like Ossipon or her husband might apply.

Though no innocent--she grew up with a physically abusive father; she has lost at love, has suffered from poverty; and there are even suggestions in the text that she has had experience with prostitution--she approaches each situation guilelessly. For example, she understands the implications of working in a pornographic shop, yet also understands that not having had any bad experiences with the situation personally it is not necessary for her to refuse to work in the shop. Winnie's reaction to her husband's colleagues, the anarchists, is another instance of her openness; she is not shocked by their reactionary
and internecine conversation; it is only when Stevie reacts painfully to the pictures Yundt has supplied of the economic conditions "nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the people" (80) that she objects to it at all. She says to her husband, "He is not fit to hear what's said here. He believes it's all true. He knows no better" (86). This line suggests that Winnie not only understands the content of the conversations, but that she recognizes what the anarchists don't themselves, that their conversations consist of empty phrases, the ramblings of ineffective political windbags. She confirms this attitude with her reaction to their literature; it upsets her brother, and she reflects that it doesn't bring in money: "It's silly reading--that's what it is. There's no sale for it" (87). She sees its uselessness, how it can hurt people, and also how it does not sell.

This freedom--of thought, of action, of alliance--is what sets her apart from the other characters in this novel. She will never "invoke Lombroso," as does Ossipon, nor cling to an established position, as her husband does. Although perhaps unconsciously, Winnie maintains an autonomy unhindered by social or familial conventions. The narrator describes her ability to remain strong in the face of public appraisal: "Winnie was independent, and need not care for the opinion of people she would never see and who would never see her" (161). She does not, therefore, adhere to a conventional morality. In each situation she faces, she reacts within the limited context of her
own personal experience. In telling her brother that Mr. Verloc was "good," and that he should look up to and trust the man, she does it "for reasons that had nothing to do with abstract morality" (171); she does it because she knows Stevie trusts her, and if she thinks it is in his best interest, she will convince him to trust her husband.

In addition to Winnie's capacity for individual thought and conception, Winnie has the ability, like no other character in the novel (except, perhaps, Stevie and the Professor, whom I will discuss in the concluding chapter), to remain unaffected by society: she is solitary, not a part of the machine that Conrad describes. Suman Bala suggests that Winnie exists in a "tremendous state of solitariness" (189), and truly, she is painfully alone, caring for her mother, her brother, and her husband, without help, without emotional support from anyone. Her isolation is compounded by her "unfathomable reserve;" she is not open to the male customers, to the anarchists, and the face she shows to even her husband is "veiled." Unlike the other characters in the novel who are affected by their connections with each other, Winnie remains aloof and alone.

Conrad intended, by making her a free and isolated character, that Winnie should be the character who emerges as the focus in this novel. She is Conrad's isolated human being, who makes her way through a chaotic world. And, at least initially, she is strong, stronger than the rest of the inhabitants of Brett Street. Moreover, Winnie is the hero of this novel because she
remains central to another concern of Conrad's in The Secret Agent: love is a viable alternative to living a life where other genuine feelings are nearly impossible.

However, many critics see Winnie as a sentimental and self-denying woman, and further, a woman who will do anything to secure a safe and happy life for her retarded brother. Suman Bala sees Winnie as an exploiter, who uses Verloc's money to gain security for herself and her family: "Her marriage . . . is nothing less than a calculated deception and an exploitation of Verloc" (185). Suresh Raval states that Winnie does not love her brother, but unconsiously depends upon him to give her life direction; he says Winnie's life "is predicated upon a denial of her self, of her legitimate aspirations as a young woman. Given the conditions of her life, the whole moral force of her existence is reduced to a protecting affection for Stevie. Winnie cannot be credited with having truly chosen her course of life," but she allows it to be controlled by an "instinctive, unreasoning response of sentimental sisterly affection" (105). Paul Dolan agrees, reducing Winnie and her sacrifice to a "rational plan" with her life as "appropriate payment" (227).

Indeed, it is easy to see why Winnie has been viewed as a self-sacrificing character. It would seem that her denial of her love for the butcher's son, and her subsequent loveless marriage to Verloc suggest that Winnie cares less for her own happiness than for her brother's protection, that her life has been indeed exchanged for her younger brother's life. However, Winnie does
not love Stevie only out of a familial responsibility, nor does she nullify her own existence in securing Stevie's as her mother does.

Winnie lives independently, not submissively. Her marriage to Verloc is genuine, and not a sham marriage simply undertaken to obtain a home for Stevie. While she and Verloc do not have a close nor a particularly emotional bond, there are moments in the novel where the reader can see that Winnie is more than role-playing with Verloc. Not only does she care about his catching cold, eating right, or getting enough sleep, but she also delivers an "unexpected and lingering kiss" (185); she banters with him "playfully" (186), and she recognizes that though originally her motive in marrying Verloc had been to settle herself and her family in life, the relationship had been "security growing into confidence, into a domestic feeling" (220). Granted, Winnie does give up her butcher boyfriend primarily because she is responsible for Stevie's welfare, but as the narrator puts it, "his boat was very small. There was room in it for a girl partner at the oar, but no accommodations for passengers" (220). And, while Winnie is not self-sacrificing, neither is she selfish enough to think only of herself, and ignore the needs of her mother and her brother. As Winnie herself says, "'What is a girl to do? Could I've gone on the street?'" (244) Her options were comparatively bleak.

In addition, had Winnie been self-sacrificing as a rule rather than having truly loved Stevie, wouldn't her sacrificial
character have extended to her attitude regarding her own mother? But it does not; Winnie is willing to allow her mother to move to the almshouse, is, in fact, impassive about her departure. And as to the furniture, "she assumed that mother took what suited her best" (156). Though she is kind and patient with the woman, Winnie does not exhibit any of the sentimental or unreasoned reactions that have been attributed to her relationship with her brother.

Winnie's love for Stevie is genuine. Her reactions to her brother connote a sisterly affection; she worries over her brother's well being; she feels protective of his overly-sensitive feelings; when he's gone to visit Michaelis, she misses him "poignantly;" and she romanticizes his character, sometimes gazing at him affectionately and talking of him often. "She saw him amiable, attractive, affectionate and only a little, a very little peculiar" (170). She describes him to her husband: "There was no young man of his age in London more willing and docile than Stephen: none more affectionate and ready to please, and even useful" (85). She genuinely feels that this is true.

As to her protective attitude toward her brother, her motivation is understandable for three reasons. First, Stevie is mentally-retarded. This disability prevents him from taking care of himself, therefore enlarging Winnie's role as a family member. She must of necessity keep track of his daily movements, so he will not get lost or into trouble, which he has been known to do on several occasions.
Also, Stevie is excessively sensitive and childlike in his emotions; he cannot "stand the notion of any cruelty" (87). Winnie must prevent him from getting too upset, because if she does not, Stevie begins "shouting and stamping and sobbing" (87). He reacts so strongly to Yundt's comment about eating people's flesh, that Winnie has to take the carving knife away from him. And when two office boys with whom he had been working "worked upon his feelings by tales of injustice and oppression till they had wrought his compassion to a pitch of frenzy" (50), Stevie, foreshadowing the Greenwich explosion, sets off fireworks in a downtown London building.

And most important for Winnie's attitude toward Stevie, particularly from a psychological viewpoint, Stevie had been beaten by his father as a boy, and this memory of the pain remains: "Stevie knew very well that hot iron applied to one's skin hurt very much" (79); and "Stevie knew what it was to be beaten. He knew it from experience" (168). Winnie's magnified protective instinct appears natural in light of this physical abuse: "She had to love him with a militant love. She had battled for him" (223). Conrad describes Winnie defending Stevie from her father when she was just "a little girl," facing "with blazing eyes the irascible licensed victualer in defense of her brother" (49).

Winnie's vigilance, therefore, in caring for her brother stems from three explainable sources. To attribute this love because of its intensity to an idealization or to sentimentality
is to ignore the viability of these sources. Allan Hunter, in his assessment of Winnie's character combines this argument with the one I made earlier regarding Winnie's strength of character: "It is surely a mistake to think that because she is self-denying for Stevie and her mother, that she does not have an individual selfhood. Paradoxically, she has a very rigid identity which includes the trait of acting selflessly, namely, for Stevie" (168).

Winnie's love for Stevie should be seen as a positive force in the amoral environment of this novel. Although ultimately both characters die senselessly, Conrad is careful to maintain the positive impression that these two create. Winnie is described as "good" and full of "compassion" (168-9), as is Stevie. And Stevie "prided himself on being a good brother" (169), and Winnie acted with equal "sisterly devotion." Their relationship is touching in its simplicity and strength; Winnie, when walking along the street with Stevie, holds "tight to his arm, under the appearance of leaning on it," and her brother reacts positively: "this appeal to manly protection was received by Stevie with his usual docility. It flattered him. He raised his head and threw out his chest." (167). To the end, both brother and sister treat each other respectfully; each reacts tenderly and with sympathy toward the other, each protecting the other and giving comfort in a comfortless world. The narrator says, "thus when as a child he cowered in a dark corner scared, wretched, sore, and miserable with the black, black misery of the
soul, his sister Winnie used to come along and carry him off to bed with her, as into a heaven of consoling peace" (165). In a novel where betrayal and apathy reign, Winnie's love for Stevie elevates her life to a "life of single purpose and of noble unity of inspiration, like those rare lives that have left their mark on the thoughts and feelings of mankind" (177). Winnie and Stevie's relationship serves to ground the two characters in a moral world. They have a purpose for living, a purpose that is tangible and based on personal emotion and experience.

Aaron Fogel asserts that Conrad saw Winnie's "simple suspicion" as the "organizing idea of the book: that inquiry is dangerous, that life won't stand scrutiny" (151). And, certainly, Winnie's most apparent quality is her refusal to look deeply into things. Conrad repeats this characterization of Winnie no fewer than sixteen times throughout the novel, obviously wanting to emphasize its importance. Winnie's rejection of surface penetration is what eventually brings about the novel's climactic murder and her suicide. In addition, Winnie's suspicion cements her role as the novel's hero, in that it isolates her from the rest of the characters and the city. And because when she does allow herself to see beyond the surface, when she does face life's uglier truths, her rejection of life's manifest absurdity and cruelty causes her to denounce it altogether.

Most of the critics attribute Winnie's philosophy that "things do not stand much looking into" (180) to a lack of
insight or curiosity, and consequently to a lack of mental depth. Gurko sees her as a "passive" character trapped "in an inertia" (174). Suman Bala finds Winnie dull, remarking that she "neither offers nor invites confidences. In all of her actions and relationships, she presents the idea of a person who lives deliberately on the surface of life and refuses all real communication with those around her. She has cultivated incuriosity" (177). He perceives her stoicism as a shallowness: "Winnie deliberately refrains from trying to pierce beneath the surface of life. As long as Stevie is protected, she calmly accepts life" (179). Avrom Fleischman agrees, saying she has an "incapacity for intelligent life." He asserts that her refusal is "the motto not only of her intellectual laziness but also of her mental weakness" (195). And Fogel sums up her philosophy thus:

Even as Conrad can make a story only by scaling down his own chaotic vision of London's immensity, he gives us a central character who tries to do something similar, though in a more pathetic way: Winnie tries, and fails, to narrow the range of what she is forced to see, because to see more would kill her. The implication is not that Winnie is not simply wrong for trying, like Jocasta, to limit and contract her range of inquiry . . . but because she is not permitted to do it successfully. (151)

These assumptions of Winnie's dullness and shallowness,
however, are contradicted by the text, for Winnie's actions reveal an intelligence and sharpness of instinct which a dull or shallow person could not attain. Conrad intentionally thwarts his own analysis of Winnie by making her alert and intuitive. She sees beneath many surfaces. Her instinct tells her not to allow herself to look deeply into things because they cannot "stand looking into" (172) and the narrator comments that she makes "her force and her wisdom of that instinct" (172).

For example, Winnie sees the police for what they are, describing their purpose to Stevie: "They are there so that them as have nothing shouldn't take away from them who have" (170). When she talks to her husband regarding Mrs. Neale, the cleaning woman, she sees beneath the cleaning woman's surface: "She was well aware that directly Mrs. Neale received her money she went round the corner to drink ardent spirits in a mean and musty public house--the unavoidable station of the via dolorosa of her life." Conrad then juxtaposes this perceptiveness with Winnie's philosophy: "Mrs. Verloc's comment upon this practice had an unexpected profundity as coming from a person disinclined to look under the surface of things. 'Of course, what is she to do to keep up? If I were like Mrs. Neale I expect I wouldn't act any different!'" (178). It is not surprising therefore that so many critics have viewed Winnie as dull, seeing that Conrad intentionally subverts his own analysis of Winnie by making her perceptive and keen.

Winnie's reactions to her husband are likewise sharp. Even
though Verloc does not let Winnie in on the secrets of his life, what he does daily, what exactly his position is, that he is a double agent, Winnie seems to have a clear understanding of her husband's dealings. She doesn't ask him much, but she seems cognizant of most of what he does. As to marriage, Conrad describes her as "no longer ignorant" (186). Her perceptiveness enables her to see Stevie's attitude toward her husband when he cannot; her statement, "You could do anything with that boy, Adolf. . . . He would go through fire for you" (177), not only foreshadows Stevie's death, but is also an elucidation of the situation. And, of course, her repeated statements that it is Verloc, not herself as he suggests, who kills Stevie are unconfused: "This man took the boy away to murder him. He took the boy from his home to murder him. He took the boy away from me to murder him" (222). While these words are wrought with more meaning than just their surface reality, their deliberate, reducing nature reveals an intellect capable of perceiving the malevolence at the heart of Verloc's thoughtlessness.

Winnie's treatment of Stevie is similarly sensitive and keen. She recognizes just how much emotional stimulation he can take, precisely how sensitive he is. The narrator's remarks that in regards to Stevie, Winnie had "the unerring nature and the force of an instinct" (174). She sees intuitively that Stevie "can't help being excitable," but that "it isn't his fault" because he is "no trouble when he's left alone" (87). She takes great pains to keep him away from situations which might arouse
his profoundly compassionate nature. We see her suppress potentially violent situations by taking the knife out of his hand, or gently invoking Mr. Verloc's potential disappointment in him in order to get him to act sensibly. Moreover, despite the fact that Winnie does not "investigate her brother's psychology" (167) in trying to determine how to deal with him, she penetrates each situation so successfully that Stevie is never frightened or upset by her, a feat that no one else in the novel accomplishes.

Therefore, the dullness to which critics often allude should not be accepted without skepticism. Winnie's keen intuition does not so much preclude looking into things as it renders looking into them unnecessary, implying that Conrad did not intend her to be flat and dull, but rather sharp enough to understand the difference between analysis and intuition. "But what's the use of talking about all that?" Winnie asks Stevie after he has expressed dismay at finding out that the police protect the rich; "You aren't ever hungry" (170), she adds practically. When he laments, "Poor! Poor!" in talking of the horse, she tells him to "come along . . . you can't help that" (168). Being practical, she wants to thwart Stevie's "barren speculation" (173), prevent him from becoming overwrought, prevent his useless pain. Her treatment of Verloc is similar; she senses deeper meanings in many of his conversations with her, but "for the purposes of practical existence" (189) she suppresses such futile exploration.

Maintaining control over what she allows herself or her
brother to assimilate is Winnie's method of keeping her cynicism at bay. For, paradoxically, Winnie is not ignorant of what she ignores. Her life has been beset by many difficulties—poverty, loss, abuse—and because she has seen the worst of this "earth of evil" (164), her statement, "I don't trouble my head about it" (191) should be taken literally. Hers is not a lack of skepticism or an inability to penetrate the surface, but a conscious choice to maintain her mostly neutral outlook. The narrator refers to this choice when he says of her, "Mrs. Verloc wasted no portion of this transient life in seeking for fundamental information. This is a sort of economy having all the appearances and some of the advantages of prudence. Obviously it may be good for one not to know too much" (167). Winnie recognizes where inquiry leads, that life doesn't stand scrutiny, and she prefers not to waste her time confirming what experience, intuition and practical reasoning can teach her.

Hence, within the context of Winnie's family situation, her philosophy of refusing to penetrate the surface enables her to be a supportive and protective wife and mother. And although she suffers at times from loneliness, her "equable soul" (173) allows her to magnanimously maintain control over the domestic situation. She recognizes her role in the family, and reacts accordingly, therefore reducing the amount of stress on Verloc and on Stevie. When Verloc returns from the continent, "Winnie, his wife, talked evenly at him the wifely talk, as artfully adapted, no doubt, to the circumstances of his return as the talk
of Penelope to the return of the wandering Odysseus" (176). In this way, Winnie successfully manages what is most important to her life, her family.

Although there is reason to regard Winnie as the hero of The Secret Agent, Conrad's statement in a letter to his friend John Galsworthy regarding skepticism cannot easily be reconciled with the idea that Conrad intended Winnie to be the hero of The Secret Agent. He writes, "You want more skepticism at the very foundation of your work. Skepticism, the tonic of minds, the tonic of life, the agent of truth,—the way of art and salvation" (Karl, 2: 359). This passage, often cited when speaking of Conrad's political novels, while bearing upon Conrad's philosophy, should not be regarded as an epitome of his ideas, as some critics have suggested. He wrote it specifically in reference to an author's relationship to his work. To take it alone is to take it out of its intended context. Therefore, when Bala, as others, suggests that a lack of skepticism is "for Conrad the most contemptible crime" (37), one must ask if this indeed is accurate. For, in The Secret Agent, doesn't Conrad intend, more likely, to illustrate that man must trust in his own perspective, whether it is skeptical or questioning, or a ruthlessly protected compilation based on his own experiences? As long as humans refer to themselves, rather than feeding on illusions, don't they maintain a fidelity to self beyond normal expectations? This basis for living, for what Choudhury refers to as "a somewhat Keatsian disbelief in everything except the
truth of this own sensations" (42), is, I believe, at the core of *The Secret Agent*, and is the focus of Conrad's portrayal of Winnie.

Winnie has chosen to trust her own intuitive, practical judgements instead of delving into each situation, and she is the only authentic character in this respect; although the other characters are not skeptics, each embraces an illusion. This trust in the self is what Conrad refers to in another letter to Galsworthy, in which he comments, "One's own personality is only a ridiculous and aimless masquerade of something hopelessly unknown." "There remains," he concludes, "nothing but the surrender to one's impulses... which is perhaps a nearer approach to truth than any other philosophy of life" (Karl, 2: 401). Winnie's suspicion that life doesn't stand looking into approximates this surrender, her "safeguard in life" (155).

In the final chapters of the novel, however, Winnie's philosophy is challenged; she is stripped of her simple strategies and defenses, and is confronted by betrayal, murder and loss. Here, Winnie's life falls apart, with everything that is important to her, her home life, her brother Stevie, taken away from her. This situation, which would be disruptive for anyone, is particularly cataclysmic because of Winnie's philosophy, which she now can no longer use. She is forced for the first time to look into the "abyss," and this glimpse of madness makes her desperate enough to murder her husband.
Therefore, Winnie's refusal to look beneath the surface of life is both her strength as a character and her weakness. Heretofore, Winnie has believed that her protective stance will be able to withstand any test, and, for the most part, she has been right. She has survived a mostly loveless marriage, a confusing and unrewarding love for her brother, as well as deprivation, secrecy and lies. However, while Winnie has let life happen around her without being dismayed by its senselessness or its lack of reward, she has not been prepared for a situation in which "the unexpected march of events" (211) does not allow her to look past the deeper truth, when the deeper truth is at the surface. In other words, Winnie must fully face death for the first time. The narrator describes her reaction to her brother's murder: "Mrs. Verloc who had always refrained from looking into things, was compelled to look into the very bottom of this thing" (237). And the result of this confrontation is "madness and despair" (268).

Raval's interpretation of Winnie, that "when circumstances force her to look, she loses control" (106), is only partly true. She is forced to look, she does lose control, but she also regains control and makes a conscious decision. Winnie is not a floundering, fanatical woman striking out at nothing. Her blow eventually and precisely is directed at the heretical agent of her life's destruction. And her later reaction to the murder is calm and sensible; she does not romanticize its importance, but remains controlled, although very cold: "Mrs. Verloc entertained
no vain delusions on the subject of the dead. Nothing brings them back, neither love nor hate. They can do nothing to you. They are as nothing" (237).

Winnie's response to Stevie's death, to her own murderous act, and to the consequences of that act are mostly calm and thoughtful. In these pages, Conrad has Winnie see into the reality of death and its requisite horror; Winnie peers into the darkness, into the futility at the heart her life, and her reaction is at the same time passionately human--fearing death, loving life--and aggressively imperturbable and hard. Conrad has Winnie eventually see the truth, his truth, that life is worth living even without meaning or love, "without grace or charm or purpose" (260), that the fear of death is a weakness, but that it is overpowering and unavoidable. As Winnie clings to Ossipon on the street after having fled the murder scene, she begins to conceive of the sublimity of living, her truth. "As often happens in the lament of poor humanity rich in suffering, but indigent in words, the truth--the very cry of truth--was found in a worn and artificial shape picked up somewhere among the phrases of sham sentiment" (260).

Winnie, of course, is alone in her realization; her husband cannot share her discovery. He "wallows" on the couch, wishing "that lad had not stupidly destroyed himself" (227). Winnie's inflexible will in the face of his entreaties, her "unreadable face, against which his nervous exasperation was shattered like a glass bubble flung against a rock" (230), wounds and infuriates
him. The narrator highlights the differences between these two characters' conceptions of the incident by describing how each reacts to the whitewashed wall in the kitchen. Verloc, when he sees her staring at the wall over his shoulder with a "peculiar" expression, turns around to look at it: "There was nothing behind him: There was just the whitewashed wall. The excellent husband of Winnie Verloc saw no writing on the wall" (218). Winnie sees nothing on the wall also, but her view of this nothing is perceived as the meaninglessness of everything: "Mrs. Verloc gazed at the whitewashed wall A blank wall--perfectly blank. A blankness to run at and dash your head against. Mrs. Verloc remained immovably seated. She kept still as the population of half the globe would keep still in astonishment and despair, were the sun put out in the summer sky by the perfidy of a trusted providence" (221).

But Winnie must change incredibly before she faces the paradox inherent in loving an absurd life. Initially, immediately after Verloc has admitted his role in her brother's death, her reaction is only a series of visions of her life which she cannot yet interpret:

With the rage and dismay of a betrayed woman, she reviewed the tenor of her life in visions concerned mostly with Stevie's difficult existence from its earliest days. . . . But the visions of Mrs. Verloc lacked nobility and magnificence. She was herself putting the boy to bed by the light of a single candle
She remembered brushing the boy's hair and tying his pinafores—herself in a pinafore still; the consolations administered to a small and badly scared creature by another creature nearly as small but not quite so badly scared; she had the vision of the blows intercepted (often with her own head), of a door held desperately shut against a man's rage (not for very long); of a poker flung once (not very far), which stilled that particular storm into the dumb and awful silence which follows a thunderclap. (219-220)

These images of love, protection and fidelity overwhelm her, and she cannot reconcile this new world with no Stevie, with a husband who expects her to accept part of the blame for his destruction—"you've killed him as much as I" (231)—with her visions of the old. The change is violent when it comes, and although she is still calm, it taps a madness in her, a dark side which, from that point forward, will ever be present.

From her visions of love and protection, she envisions Stevie's violent destruction in great detail, and in the final moment before her complete freedom and calm, she pictures her beloved brother's head:

Mrs. Verloc closed her eyes desperately, throwing upon that vision the night of her eyelids, where after a rainlike fall of mangled limbs the decapitated head of Stevie lingered suspended alone, and fading out slowly
like the last star of a pyrotechnic display. Mrs. Verloc opened her eyes.

Her face was no longer stony. Anybody could have noted the subtle change of her features, in the stare of her eyes, giving her a new and startling expression; an expression seldom observed by competent persons under the conditions of leisure and security demanded for thorough analysis. Mrs. Verloc's doubts as to the end of the bargain no longer existed; her wits no longer disconnected, were working under the control of her will. (233)

It is at this precise moment in which Winnie gains the deepest insight into the horror of death and subsequently its undeniable impact on living, that Verloc calls her to him in a tone which "was intimately known to Mrs. Verloc as the note of wooing:"

"'Yes,' answered obediently Mrs. Verloc, the free woman. She commanded her wits now, her vocal organs; she felt herself to be in an almost preternaturally perfect control of every fibre of her body. It was all her own because the bargain was at an end. She was clear sighted. She had become cunning" (233). Although justification for this act of murder is neither needed nor particularly sought after, I believe that under the conditions of extreme emotion and despair with which Winnie was dealing, Conrad intended the act within the context of Winnie's experience to be at least comprehensible, or as the narrator states, "It was an obscurely prompted blow" (237).
The truth Winnie sees is of a dispassionate and inscrutable world in which man and machine are one, both unfeeling, both unconscious. And, when Winnie realizes the horror of it, the feeling is pervasive: "it was in her veins, in her bones, in the roots of her hair" (223). Conrad succeeds in depicting this world by once again animating the inanimate and subverting the animate. When Winnie realizes that Verloc "took the boy away to kill him!" (224), the narrator describes the nature of this thought: "In its form, in its substance, in its effect, which was universal, altering even the aspect of inanimate things, it was a thought to sit still and marvel at for ever and ever. Mrs. Verloc sat still. And across that thought (not across the kitchen), the form of Mr. Verloc went to and fro, familiarly in hat and overcoat stamping with his boots upon her brain" (224-5). Winnie and Verloc, themselves, both become likened to objects, de-animated by the uselessness of their emotions and thoughts. "The waves of air of the proper length, propagated in accordance with correct mathematical formulas, flowed around all the inanimate things in the room, slapped against Mrs. Verloc's head as if it had been a head of stone" (232). And Winnie sees Verloc's dead body as "nothing." "He was not worth looking at. . . He was of less practical account than the clothing on his body, than his overcoat, than his boots--than that hat lying on the floor" (237). In the horrifying last moments of the scene, Winnie, alone in the silence, listens to what she at first believes is the ticking of the clock, until slowly it dawns on
her that it is the "tic, tic, tic" of her husband's blood; this realization leads to Winnie's culminating act in this murder scene, when she at last lets out a shriek and runs; here, Conrad reintroduces Verloc's static hat:

Finding the table in her way, she gave it a push with both hands as though it had been alive, with such force that it went for some distance on its four legs, making a loud scraping racket, whilst the big dish with the joint crashed heavily to the floor.

Then all became still. Mrs. Verloc on reaching the door had stopped. A round hat disclosed in the middle of the floor by the moving of the table rocked slightly on its crown in the wind of her flight. (236)

Fogel insists that throughout the traumatic concluding action of the novel Winnie does not learn anything, but is only "retraumatized:" "What we have here . . . is an absolute stasis in relational form, not a dream or drama" (155). However, Winnie does learn; she learns that even though she has seen the worst that life can offer--"Blood and dirt. Blood and dirt" (260), as she intones to Ossipon--she yet fears death. Further, "all her strong vitality recoiled from the idea of death" (241), and she recognizes this fear as a weakness: "'Oh Tom! How could I fear to die after he was taken away from me so cruelly! How could I! How could I be such a coward!'" (260) She lamented aloud her love of life, even though, as Conrad describes it, it is "without grace or charm, and almost without decency, but of an exalted
faithfulness, even unto murder" (260). Therein, too, lies her strength, because of all the characters in this novel, Winnie not only has a pervasive and admitted death fear, she also essentially overcomes it by killing herself. Therefore, the edification she acquires by facing her conception of Stevie being blown up cements another aspect of herself she had not been in touch with because it couldn't "stand looking into."

Winnie's death fear is manifested once again in the objectifying of her feelings. She looked "into the very bottom" of her murder of Verloc, and "she saw there an object. That object was the gallows. Mrs. Verloc was afraid of the gallows" (237). This object is further transformed into a sort of mantra-"The drop given was fourteen feet"--which Winnie repeatedly invokes to facilitate her flight. Her fear is debilitating mentally, and is pervasive enough to affect her physically as well: "Her throat became convulsed in waves to resist strangulation" (238). This violent reaction and her subsequent reactions to Ossipon exhibit a character clinging to a life devoid of meaning.

Hunter asserts that Winnie merely repeats her mistakes by choosing to smother her individuality in another man, therefore not escaping "her selfhood" (169). And although this assessment is partly true, to emphasize the repetition of the event rather then its implication within its context is to unnecessarily reduce Winnie's reactions to a patterned response over which she has no apparent control. Considering the wiliness and
attractiveness of Ossipon, "whose glance had a corrupt clearness sufficient to enlighten any woman not absolutely imbecile" (220), and Winnie's desperation in the face of death, Winnie's individuality is not solely at issue; it should not be the focal point of an inquiry into her behavior under these circumstances; she is reaching out for aid. Certainly in her loneliness--"she was the most lonely of murders that ever struck a mortal blow" (240)--she desires the comfort of a man who at least appears to want to help her. She is desperate enough, with a heart "full of revolt against death" (243), to offer herself as a mistress rather than a wife, which shames her incredibly. But, the "depths of loneliness made round her by an insignificant thread of blood trickling off the handle of the knife" (244) gives her sufficient inspiration to offer everything to Ossipon, her "messenger of life" (260), rather than face the gallows. In fact, by repeating the action of turning to a man for her salvation, she gives up her newly gained freedom, exchanging her freedom for the possibility of life. In this sense, Winnie's end is tragic.

Paradoxically, Winnie's fear of death by hanging coupled with her contradictory love of life and knowledge of its futility drives her to suicide. Alone, desperate, near mad with the conviction her life hasn't stood looking into, she throws herself off of the cross-Channel boat into the dark water. Conrad's observation in Victory, that "every age is fed on illusions, lest men should renounce life early and the human race come to an
end," can be applied here. In effect, Winnie renounces life, accepting its evil, and kills herself. But in the end, "behind that mask of despair there was struggling against terror and despair a vigor of vitality, a love of life that could resist the furious anguish which drives to murder and the fear, the blind, mad fear of the gallows" (267). In Winnie, Conrad expresses all the futility, but at the same time, through her genuine love for Stevie and her love of life, all of the sympathy of his novel. Because it is grounded in love, Winnie's force, the killing, suicidal force of "madness and despair," is what makes her story worth telling. For in her life force is a denial of the weakness, whether good or bad, which envelopes the rest of the world of The Secret Agent.

Although the effects are limited, Winnie's struggle with despair and her murder of Verloc leave a legacy in the novel; Comrade Ossipon, characterized before this episode as a selfish user of women, changes somewhat by his contact with Winnie. Granted, his actions remain true to his self-indulgent character, but he notices that while he is afraid of her and disgusted by her, he is greatly affected by her situation; "he felt something abnormal going on" (244) within himself. Initially, he reacts to Winnie as he has always reacted to his women, assigning female impetuosity to her violent reactions. But slowly he becomes aware of being party to an unusual and disturbing event. He is horrified at the sight of Verloc's body: "Terrified scientifically" (254), "he was incapable by now of judging what
could be true, possible or even probable in this astounding universe" (253). The narrator again describes the hat: "But the true sense of the scene he was beholding came to Ossipon through the contemplation of the hat. It seemed an extraordinary thing, an ominous object, a sign" (250). When Winnie pleads with him to go back into the parlor to turn off the light, he thinks again of the hat: "he was not superstitious, but there was too much blood on the floor; a beastly pool of it all round the hat" (252).

And the effect of this scene on Ossipon, it seems, is permanent. Disheveled, ignoring his appointments, "beginning to drink with pleasure, with anticipation, with hope" (269), Ossipon is "menaced" by his knowledge in "the very sources of his existence. . . . It was an obsession, a torture" (266). The phrase from the newspaper, "'an impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair'"(266), plagues him and he wonders if he, "alone of all men, will ever be able to get rid of the cursed knowledge" (266). On the last page, Ossipon walks out of the bar from his meeting with the Professor convinced that his life will never be able to return to the way it was.
CHAPTER III

WINNIE AMONG CONRAD'S MEN AND WOMEN

Asserting that Winnie is the hero of *The Secret Agent* introduces an important question: How does Winnie as a person and as a woman fit in among Conrad's established heroes? Gurko suggests that the point of looking for a hero at all is moot, since Conrad is writing about "the life of man in the great city." He says, "because Conrad's conception of that life, *The Secret Agent* cannot have a hero," adding that although "the characters without exception are split away from their ideal selves, as are all Conrad figures," they are "prevented from summoning the moral energy to overcome their difficulties, the very energy that gives Conrad's other novels their heroic dimensions" (169).

But *The Secret Agent* seems to be like Conrad's other novels because of this very fact. None of the characters including the heroes are able to completely and successfully overcome their difficulties, and this frustrating inability is what makes them human. Instead, Conrad's heroes come closest to "summoning the moral energy" through their isolation, their mystery, their contemplation of the horror of existence, and their eventual and existential challenge: their death. So it is not so much a matter of success versus failure or strength versus weakness which defines for Conrad a hero, but the freedom which leads to a
private awareness, whether accepted or eventually refused, of one's powerlessness and fragility in a world which is dismal, irrational and with only illusions for comfort. No one in The Secret Agent comes close to such an awareness, except for Winnie.

However, as I've outlined in the preceding chapter, many critics have trouble seeing Winnie as a heroic or even as an interesting character. Jocelyn Baines finds her weak, an "essentially minor" character. He describes her character thus:

Winnie herself is on such a low level that one wonders whether there was ever an element of choice, therefore of virtue, in her self-sacrifice or whether it was merely as instinctive as an animal's defense of its offspring; certainly her terror of death at the end is closer to the reaction of an animal scenting blood in a slaughterhouse than to that of a human being. Thus although there is pathos in the book there is no tragedy because there is no sense of waste, no suggestion that the characters were made for better things: Winnie and Stevie might have had a less gruesome fate, certainly, but not a nobler. The final effect is of negation and squalor. (337-8)

And Bruce Redwine agrees with his assessment, claiming that Winnie is too "unpleasant" to be considered as the major focus in the novel. "Winnie's unattractiveness as a protagonist," he argues, "blocks her acceptance as the central figure in the novel" (255).
However pertinent these arguments seem, they basically disregard the fact that many of Conrad's heroes lack nobility due to their weaknesses. Decoud in *Nostromo* fails because he is weak. When put to the ultimate test on the Great Isabel, he fails, his sense of his own identity slipping away from him. Kurtz's susceptibility to the savagery within him causes him, too, to ultimately fail. And, of course, Marlow's weaknesses cause him to fail repeatedly. Cedric Watts argues that many of the "patently honorable characters can be seen as quixotic, either because their values are anachronistic or incongruous, given the nature of the environment in which those values operate, or because their idealism has the quality of a delusion or monomania" (74). Again, Winnie falls into this category; her unselfish love for her brother is incongruous in a world filled with self-interested people. Further, her refusal to look deeply into Verloc's and into her married life renders her incapable of anticipating Verloc's senseless betrayal. In effect, she fails to foresee what might happen to her world if Stevie is taken away because it won't stand foreseeing.

The emotional isolation of Conrad's protagonists--Jim, Heyst, Kurtz, Razumov--is often cited by his critics. Each character restricts his relationship to the world, whether consciously or unconsciously, and each remains outside of the concerns of the society which he inhabits. Gurko sees them as "loners, far more at home in their own company than in society" (xii). Of Jim, Marlow says, "I can't with mere words convey to you the
impression of his total and utter isolation" (272), and this comment describes Jim at a time when he is content in his situation, in love with Jewel, having just become Patusan's leader. Winnie's domestic situation, as well as her intuitive integrity isolate her. She is alone behind the counter in the shop, alone in the back of the house while Verloc entertains his colleagues, and is left alone by Stevie's, her husband's and her mother's various departures.

However, isolation among Conrad's protagonists does not necessarily imply desolation; in fact, most of Conrad's protagonists prefer this simple, lonely life to one of interaction or excitement. Razumov resents being drawn into the conflict with Haldin, not only on moral grounds, but also because it disrupts his quiet life. Finally, angry at the confusion and complication of Haldin's intrusion and the police department's badgering, he says to his interrogator, Councillor Mikulin, "To retire--simply to retire" (107). Jim and Kurtz, happiest in their secluded settlements, accept the greater part of the simple life of the savages as well as the heightened isolation of being alone of their race. And Winnie, too, prefers to stay in rather than go to the theaters, or go out walking. Stephen K. Land describes this need among Conradian heroes when analyzing "Il Conde" and "The Duel," two stories written shortly after The Secret Agent; he suggests that "the new Conradian hero" is "the man who seeks to follow a quiet life unobtrusively, but who is prevented by ironic fate from doing so" (157).
Further, this isolation, this quiet life is often underscored in the quiet of the men themselves, a muteness which creates around each an air of mystery. Marlow talks of Jim's fame in terms of its silence: "it shared something of the nature of that silence through which it accompanied you into unexplored depths, heard continuously by your side, penetrating, far-reaching--tinged with wonder and mystery on the lips of whispering men" (272). Kurtz's "quiet" voice, and Razumov's reserve--"he was a man of few words" (148)--also suggest the connection between isolation and quietness. Winnie's silence, too, is often commented on in the text. In the scene in which Verloc confronts Winnie with the facts of Stevie's death, Verloc complains bitterly about her "devilish way" of holding her tongue; "'enough to make some men go mad!'" (231). Ossipon, too, is frightened by her incoherent snatches of language. But he is especially struck by the air of mystery she imparts; he tries to gaze into her face, but it is "veiled in black net, in the light of the gas-lamp veiled in a gauze of mist" (246). Silent, inward, the protagonists are men or women restraining judgement and realizing somewhat the futility of their protestations.

The most pervasive characteristic of the protagonists' make up, however, is revealed by Conrad's placing each into a overwhelmingly tense situation faced with what becomes for each a life-determining decision. And in this situation each confronts a side of life, or a side of the self much darker than any he has imagined. The pattern varies, of course, but the essentials
remain the same. Winnie Verloc experiences this type of disruption in The Secret Agent; her life before the bombing is calm, uneventful by comparison. She is faced with a life-changing situation, and her confusion at the horror of her brother's senseless death and of her own capacity for murder is as disruptive and chilling a position as those experienced by any Conradian protagonists.

It is through these horrifying situations, in which the protagonists face the immutability of mortality and its inherent ugliness, that Conrad discloses his concern with the failures of the individual. Although essentially strong in her love, her force, her intelligence, Winnie weakens and falls before the fear of death. Hunter likens her to Kurtz: "If one removes the surface impediments to action as happens to Winnie, she is left with no responsibility, no direction and no motivation, and as dangerous as Kurtz" (181). She is freed from responsibility by her gaze into the darkness, and this freedom allows her to kill, as it does Kurtz. Goonetilke also sees her as Kurtzian: "Like Kurtz in a different context, she is unable to cope with a state of complete freedom. She develops a murderous cunning and a macabre sense of irresponsibility and idleness; Kurtz wanted to 'exterminate the brutes,' she exterminates her husband" (147).

Winnie's death is an echo of several Conradian deaths. Traumatized by the destruction of her brother and by her husband's coldhearted behavior, she is nearly overcome by the enormous force of her death fear: "The fear of death paralyzed
her efforts to escape the gallows" (239). But somehow, after the final blow she receives from Ossipon's deserting her on the train, she gathers strength enough to carry out her suicide. However, once she has assimilated the facts surrounding Stevie's death, she is conscious of what she has seen, what she has experienced, and she will never be able to escape that consciousness. In this way, she is a lot like Kurtz, Jim, and Decoud, even Brierly. The full consciousness of her own inadequacy and of the inadequacy of life in general causes her to kill herself.

In his discussion of Conrad's protagonists, Serajul Choudhury describes their predicament in terms of their consciousness: "Conrad's heroes die, morally and really, long before they get killed or kill themselves. The physical death is an aftermath, and the tragedy is the tragedy of private awareness, which is all the more painful in being secret" (9). And Watts describes the deaths as a "coup de grace to those who have been misunderstood, frustrated or disillusioned" (48). Winnie dies, much like other Conrad protagonists as described by Choudhury, when she kills Verloc; she strikes the blow which ends her own life and freedom before she literally dies.

If Winnie is the hero of The Secret Agent, she is Conrad's first female hero. And, in light of the amount of criticism directed at investigating Conrad's attitude toward his female characters, this assessment might be useful. John Batchelor's playful formula for analyzing Conrad's fiction highlights the
critics' lack of readiness to accept a female protagonist in Conrad. He considers Conrad a writer of strictly masculine characters: "Ask these questions together. 'What is man?' What is the significance of his life?' Circle the male figures of these narratives" (8). We should not suppose, however, as some critics like Batchelor do, that Conrad is a misogynist. Many of his female characters are not fully drawn perhaps, but there is no conclusive evidence that Conrad hated women. Or more accurately, as Frederick Karl points out, "Marlow is a misogynist, Conrad was not" (The Three Lives, 284). It would not be altogether surprising, however, to find Winnie listed among Conrad's protagonists, since during the years in which Conrad created his political novels, the roles of his female characters expanded and their characterizations complexified considerably. One need only compare the major roles of Emilia Gould, Antonia Avellanos and Nathalie Haldin to women of earlier stories--Jewel or the Intended. It seems that Conrad initially allowed his female characters a merely alternative viewpoint, albeit an important one, in contrast to the views of his male protagonists. Gradually and precisely Conrad developed women's roles in his novels into something increasingly substantial and varied. Female characters in the early novels were mostly two-dimensional, with their overriding characteristic being their humanity. And although Conrad never wholly departs from this aspect of his characterization of women, in his later works, he expands their intelligence, their moral influence and their
individuality. Land writes of the shift in Conrad's attitude toward his female characters:

A literary reason for Conrad's new interest in female characters may be found in the movement we have already observed in Nostromo, away from plots which turn exclusively upon a single male hero, towards a kind of novel which looks more widely into the world and deals with situations involving a number of characters of more or less equal weight. The worlds of the political novels do not turn solely upon individual fates, nor are they entirely dominated by male figures. Nostromo is in this respect a transitional work, in that Emilia, although an important and fully rounded character, is overshadowed by the males and allowed little direct involvement in the action. With Winnie Verloc we come to the first of Conrad's heroines to claim almost equal status with the hero. (155)

In Susan Brodie's article on Conrad's feminine perspective, she suggests that the women of this period take on the role of a "guiding ideal;" (144) this position pits the female characters' humanity against the male characters' selfishness and self-destruction. She does not concern herself with Winnie, but looking at her assessment of Nathalie Haldin's relationship to Razumov reveals her idea of Conrad's women as a balance to his protagonists: "Only through her truthfulness can he see the baseness of his attempts to protect himself at the expense of
others; only through her unselfish, trusting nature does he begin to sense the importance of solidarity. In Miss Haldin we see, indeed, the reflection of Razumov's hidden nobility" (144). Brodie shows that Conrad's women are placed beside the men to balance male selfishness with female humanitarianism. Although Winnie can be placed loosely into this role as humanitarian, she also can be placed into the role of the selfish male. Perhaps Nathalie's or Emilia's are completely humanitarian loves, concerned with the good will of mankind in general, but Winnie's love stops with her brother, not even extending to a filial love for her mother. Ultimately, Winnie's specific sympathy for Stevie implies a character capable of humanitarianism, but not necessarily by extension a character fully representative of this traditionally female attribute.

Anthony Winner's conception of the female in Conrad is similarly limiting: "Conrad's irony--in one of its least engaging qualities--portrays women's moral romanticism as powerless to cope with the demands that realities place upon faith" (9). Once again, Winnie does not fit in with many critics' views of Conrad's women. Winnie, then, should be viewed as a melding of the two sexual roles most critics see Conrad using: she maintains the humanity and the unselfish, self-sacrificing characteristics of the females, and incorporates the selfish and self-destructive impulses of the males.

Besides the few and typically misogynistic comments made by Ossipon regarding women, the only statement the narrator makes
regarding Winnie's gender appears after Winnie has found out about Stevie's death. It reveals what I'm suggesting, that Winnie has the capability for both traditionally masculine and feminine traits; Verloc sees Winnie's grief and advises her to cry:

'You go to bed now. What you want is a good cry.'

This opinion had nothing to recommend it but the general consent of mankind. It is universally understood that, as if it were nothing more substantial than vapour floating in the sky, every emotion of a woman is bound to end in a shower. And it is very probable that had Stevie died in his bed under her despairing gaze, in her protecting arms, Mrs. Verloc's grief would have found relief in a flood of bitter and pure tears. (219)

But Winnie does not cry; she very assertively, very selfishly murders her husband. Then she murders herself. The aggressive force behind these actions is unparalleled among Conrad's other female characters.
CHAPTER IV

MADNESS AND DESPAIR

John Patterson, in his appraisal of Conrad and his contemporaries writes, "the novelist best expressed his feelings for life not by making it more marvelous than it was but by making it as marvelous as it was. Like Wordsworth, his mission was to prove the ordinary extraordinary enough. It was to prove that the modern or moral form of heroism was just as remarkable in its way as the ancient or physical form of it" (102).

Conrad's The Secret Agent reflects this concept of the ordinary, which is one reason that his critics have disagreed about the novel's meaning. It is not an easy-to-label sea tale; nor is it a love story, or even a political novel. It suggests the ordinary in its unassuming characters, its squalid city setting, its bleak outlook. Its hero, Winnie Verloc, is very ordinary, perhaps simple; yet she embodies the search for the self as desperately as do Conrad's other heroes. And the end of her search is madness and despair.

The ordinary for Conrad was the bleak. He portrayed the world as he saw it, impersonal, cruel, without any hope whatsoever. And the individual in this world stands little chance of sane survival, unless he hides, as do the anarchists and the police, behind an assumed personality, an adopted illusion. Conrad writes to Edward Garnett of the frailty of the
When the truth is grasped that one's own personality is only a ridiculous and aimless masquerade of something hopelessly unknown the attainment of serenity is not far off. Then there remains nothing but the surrender to one's impulses, the fidelity to passing emotions which is perhaps a nearer approach to truth than any other philosophy of life. And why not: If we are "ever becoming--never being" then I would be a fool if I tried to become this thing rather than that; for I know well that I never will be anything. I would rather grasp the solid satisfaction of my wrongheadedness and shake my fist at the idiotic mystery of Heaven. (Karl, 1: 266)

This novel reflects Conrad's shaking fist, and the men and women of London who strive to become something ideal, something they've conceived in their minds are destined never to be anything, not even themselves. However, neither Stevie nor the Professor idealize their lives, their roles; each submits only to his impulses. And because of their insanity, they are able to see the truth, and are able to assimilate it.

The narrator of The Secret Agent writes, "the Professor had genius, but lacked the great social virtue of resignation" (98). Living freely, this character, the "perfect anarchist," is the epitome of a man living isolated from all men, from their concerns, their feelings, even their institutions. The
Professor's anarchist leanings do not come from having learned of anarchy as a political movement, but through his devoted personal interest in explosives, and his subsequent desire to create the "perfect detonator." His philosophy, while vaguely conceived, consists of basic annihilation of all human beings. But this annihilation is not like Yundt's, pernicious and avenging; it is practical, seeing. The Professor describes himself to Ossipon: "In the last instance it is character alone that makes for one's safety. There are very few people in the world whose character is as well established as mine;" and when Ossipon asks how he manages it, "Force of personality," the Professor mumbles, and repeats, "force of personality" (92). This personality, who can see the anarchists for what they are, the police, and even Winnie though he had never met her--"Fasten yourself upon the woman for all she's worth" (101)--echoes Conrad's description of himself in the letter above. The Professor's attitude is actually very similar to Conrad's in many respects; admittedly, the Professor's extreme bitterness and his violent means are not reflective of Conrad's philosophy, but his coldness and his seriousness are. He reflects, too, Conrad's view of the weak; however he has a more sinister and critical view than Conrad:

The source of all evil! They are our sinister masters—the weak, the flabby, the silly, the cowardly, the faint of heart, and the slavish of mind. They have power. They are the multitude. Theirs is the kingdom of the earth. Exterminate, exterminate! That is the
only way of progress. It is! Follow me, Ossipon. First the great multitude of the weak must go, then the only relatively strong. You see? First the blind, then the deaf and dumb, then the halt and lame—and so on. Every taint, every vice, every prejudice, every convention must meet its doom. (263)

Much of what the Professor says has such depth of insight as to be prophetic. Almost Marlow-like in his closeness to Conrad's philosophy of the self and its inability to attain true definition, the Professor acts as a commentator on and a clarifier of the action. The only two times he appears in the novel are after the bombing and after the murder/suicide. And what he says on each occasion gets to the heart of the matter.

The other character who has undeniable insight into reality is the other mentally unstable character in the novel, Stevie. Winner writes, "Stevie and the Professor stand outside the game;" he argues that "Stevie is the obverse of the Professor, who is not wise enough to know his own powerlessness. Both are bombs manufactured by London's reality. At issue is the need for some power to make sense of this reality" (76). Stevie, apparently weak, has strength in that he constantly acknowledges the atrocities around him; he knows the horror of the poor, and the beaten, and the hungry. His reaction to the broken horse that pulls the cab for himself and his sister and mother is his reaction to anything pitiful: he regrets the pain of living. His mental deviation is manifested in his drawing circles, "a
coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable" (76). Stevie knows, like the Professor, and like his sister once he's gone, the fear of living in an unjust and chaotic environment.

In the end, no one remains but the traumatized and weakened Ossipon, and the mad, but insightful Professor. And no one has been successful; no one has been able to peer into the abyss without either discovering "madness or despair." When Ossipon and the Professor sit in the Silenus at the end of the novel, Ossipon asks the Professor, "What do you think of madness and despair?" And the Professor replies,

There are no such things. All passion is lost now. The world is mediocre, limp, without force. And madness and despair are a force. And force is a crime in the eyes of the fools, the weak and silly who rule the roost. You are mediocre. Verloc, whose affair the police has managed to smother so nicely, was mediocre. And the police murdered him. He was mediocre. Everybody is mediocre. Madness and despair! Give me that for a lever, and I'll move the world. (268)
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