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The Secret Agent



Synopsis

Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is a tale of anarchism, espionage, and terrorism. Our agent, a man named Mr Verloc, minds his own business while he keeps his shop in London's Soho, alongside his wife, who attends to her aged mother and disabled brother. Their lives are turned upside down when Verloc is reluctantly employed to plant a bomb and destroy an observatory in London. What was once the perfect bomb plot inevitably turns awry and Verloc, his family and his associates are forced to face the consequences. Conrad's later political novel bears all the hallmarks of his captivating style. *The Secret Agent* brims with melodious and poetic language, alongside crystal-clear psychological insights that could only be the work of a uniquely gifted storyteller.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Secret Agent was a major risk for Joseph Conrad, a London tale of international political intrigue far removed from the symbolic sea adventures he had previously written. That it is not only one of his greatest triumphs but also one of the best novels of its kind testifies to his greatness. The diversity it introduced to his canon is truly remarkable; very few writers have works so different in nearly every respect. It is thus essential not only for those who like his other work but also for those who do not. The immediate subjects are terrorism and anarchism, and I know of no work that uses them with more brilliance or verisimilitude. Conrad's Preface says that he thought it a high compliment when terrorists and anarchists praised its realism, and he indeed deserved it. He brings this truly underground world vividly to life, depicting everything from speech to customs to dress in

believable detail. The vast majority of course want nothing to do with such a world, but the peek is undeniably fascinating. Conrad's psychological insight is particularly intriguing and valuable. All this brings up the important - some would say central - point of how Conrad views these characters. That terrorists and other unsavory personages have been sympathetic to it - particularly the Unabomber's obsession with it - seems to strongly suggest that Conrad leans toward them, but a close reading of the text or mere glance at his Preface shows otherwise. He clearly has nothing but contempt for them; this comes across forcefully in the narrator's ironic mockery and Conrad's noting that Winnie Verloc is the only true anarchist - a terrorist jab if ever one existed. In his view, they were pretentious, portentous, and above all, simply ineffectual with greatly exaggerated self-importance.

Joseph Conrad's 1907 novel, "The Secret Agent," is a difficult little book. Its story is difficult and its characters are largely unpleasant. By difficult and unpleasant, I don't mean to say the novel isn't any good. Far from it. These terms I mean to denote the impenetrability of motive, of sense. The story of a group of anarchists, police, and a family caught in the middle in late Victorian England, "The Secret Agent" is far from Conrad's subtitle, "A Simple Tale". The novel, for me, is about hatred, mistrust, and breakdowns in communication."The Secret Agent" begins early one morning in 1886. Mr. Verloc, a secret agent for a foreign embassy, who lives in a small apartment with his wife Winnie, her mentally ill brother, Stevie, and their mother. Keeping an eye on a particularly ineffectual anarchist community in London, Verloc pretends to be an anarchist revolutionary himself. As the novel opens, Verloc is called in by his new employer Mr. Vladimir. Vladimir, discontented with the apparent lack of production out of his secret agent, and even further with the lackadaisical English police, wants Verloc to act as an agent provocateur, and arrange for a bomb to spur the English government to crack down on the legal system. As religion and royalty are, according to Vladimir, no longer strong enough emotional ties to the people, an attack must be made upon "Science," and he selects the Greenwich Observatory as the appropriate site for action. The novel introduces us to a range of wholly unsympathetic characters.

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