

Self-Deception Leading to Destruction: Pessimism Portrayed in The Secret Agent

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad, a familiar personality of both the 19th and the 20th centuries, experienced scientific development and modernity simultaneously. It was during which anarchism as a movement sprouted in London. With the autobiographical tinge, Conrad expressed his pessimistic pains through the character of Adolf Verloc in the novel *The Secret Agent*. This paper stages out the fact how destruction is caused due to self-deception which is ultimately supported by the factors like dominant empire, oppressiveness, dishonest and the act of anarchism as well as revolutionaries who are all at their upper hand. .

KEYWORDS-Anarchism, modernity, self-deception, pessimistic, oppressiveness, revolutionary.

Declaration: An abbreviation S.A is used to denote the novel *The Secret Agent*.

When anarchism and revolution joined hand in hand accompanied by scientific development and industrial progress, the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries questioned political set ups, morality armaments and war. Being part and parcel of both the centuries, Joseph Conrad expressed the increasing issues of psychological pathologies in the civilized society where sympathy gains no place.

Joseph Conrad portrays the realities of his society through his characters coloured with his experiences. His *The Secret Agent* discusses the failure of an anarchist Martial Bourdin in 1894 who attempted the bomb blast to destroy the Greenwich Observatory. Joseph Conrad lived an exiled life as a child during Russian power in Poland. After losing his parents, under the care of his uncle, he spent most of his time in the sea with raising and falling dreams. It was the time of Victorian era, when identity crisis is leading other problems of the society. Mr. Adolf Verloc, the protagonist of this novel is basically a dual agent, an agent showing anarchism and the other as a secret agent to a foreign country. Under the rule of Russian empire, Conrad received no space for his polish identity. His experience full of undesirable happenings and inactive political system of the nation, his loneliness, psychological stress and circumstances made him a pessimist. His depression is due to unrealistic negative views about the world. The continuous outcome of negative and undesirable happenings lead him to be a pessimistic.

Joseph Conrad, in most of his novels, portrays the realities of the society through his characters, which are his personal experiences or his learning from other's experiences. His novel *The Secret Agent*, brings to light the failure of an anarchist

Martial Bourdinin 1894 who attempted the bomb blast to destroy the Greenwich Observatory. Conrad acquired a deep suspicion of everything happened in his youth days, in the Russian ruled society. It was a hectic time of revolutionary and was resisting an emerging anarchist movement. The main character Mr. Adolf Verloc was a double agent, one as an anarchist and the other as the secret agent to a foreign country. As a child, Conrad was forced to exile from his motherland and resulted in the loss of his parents. The Russian empire never allowed him to prove his identity as a Polish man. The repeated undesirable happenings in his life and the inactive political system of the country, his loneliness filled him with depression, and every circumstances made Conrad to be a pessimist.

Joseph Conrad was born to a Polish parents in 1857 during the Russian rule. As a small boy Conrad was exiled with his parents from Poland into Russia's Frozen north by the Russian Rulers. Both Conrad's father and grandfather were patriotic and played a significant role in Polish independence. After the death of his parents at his early age, Conrad was roaming like a dreamer whose dream became a hopeless faith. He was brought up by his uncle and spent most of his life time in the sea. It was during the Victorian period, known as the modernist period when technology and industrial progress appeared everywhere. At the same time science had brought the concepts of anarchism and revolutionary in the society. Many writers of that period started writing about realities and their writings were based on the themes of the day's current status, the question of political organization, the morality of armaments and war. The famous novelist of that period Henry James's writings present the characters within an identifiable social world whereas Conrad focussed on the decline of civilization than to individual human failures. Conrad's writings seem to express the increasing of the psychological pathologies in the civilized country where the characters get no sympathy.

The word pessimism is derived from the Latin word *pessimus* meaning 'the worst'. At first it was used by Jesuit critics of Voltaire in 1759. According to philosophy, pessimism means ethic that seeks to face up to the distasteful realities of the world and eliminate irrational hopes and expectations which may lead to undesirable outcomes. Like Conrad, Thomas Hardy and T.S.Eliot also portrayed pessimistic ideas in their writings. Hardy is the father of pessimistic novels and successor of modern novels. Hardy expresses his philosophical ideas in which he says that men are mere puppets in the hands of wicked fate. Hardy's novels depict some of his personal experiences. As a child he did not attend school and lacked scientific knowledge and his childhood days passed without money. His sufferings brought out through his characters as a pessimistic pains in his novels. T.S.Eliot also examined his pessimistic ideas in his poem "The Waste Land", as he portrayed the characters based on the manners of individual living during the World War I generation. The characters encounter distress and morality are thrown out while they still seek hope for a good resolution.

Joseph Conrad was a man of solitary, romantic creature of will who at any cost wanted to express his understanding upon the world because he could not remain in a world that did not reflect his importance in it. As D.H.Lawrance pin-pointed out that every writer pens his pains through his writings, Conrad too expressed his pessimistic pains through the character of Adolf Verloc in his novel 'The Secret Agent'.

Joseph Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* exhibits the growth of technology during the Victorian period as well as the modernist time where the anarchism also spread very quickly in the society. This novel also penetrates through human's failure while facing the realities. Conrad voiced his own sufferings through his character Mr. Adolf Verloc. Verloc maintains a shop which sells pornographic materials but secretly he uses the shop as a meeting place for his friends who discuss the revolutionary steps to be taken against the Government. He belongs to the group of anarchists, of which Comrade Ossipon, Michaelis, Karl Yuntand the Professor are recognised as feeble terrorists, and their actions are known to the police. This group produce anarchist literature entitled F.P, which is the abbreviation of Future of the Proletariat.

Conrad brings out the pessimistic views of British Society in his novel *The Secret Agent*. He also portrays the ineffective lifestyle of London city due to industrialization. The growth of technology brought crutches to the anarchism. The foreign countries selected spies from London city in order to know the movements of the anarchists so that they can make use of the chance to destroy the society, especially the Greenwich Observatory. The foreign embassy uses Mr. Adolf Verloc as the puppets in their hands to destruct the Greenwich Observatory. The main character, Mr. Adolf Verloc works as a double agent which is quite unknown to his wife. He lives with his wife Mrs. Winnie, her mentally retarded brother Stevie and her mother. Verloc's relationship with his wife reveals the fact that he is not interested in family life, because he never let her know his whereabouts during the day time. His ineffectiveness in his work shows that he is a man of no aim, especially when Verloc is taken to the private room of Mr. Vladimir, the First Secretary of the foreign embassy. Mr. Vladimir warns Verloc for his inactiveness about the destruction of the Greenwich Observatory and not utilizing the help of other anarchists. The foreign embassy, supposed to be the Russian, trusts such a violence would thrust England to adopt severer political measures of suppression of political crimes. Verloc also acted as a secret agent appointed by the Chief Inspector Heat to give him information about the revolutionaries. The Chief Inspector Heat gives Verloc complete police protection for his exchange of information.

Conrad's pessimistic view of society exposes through each character's individual relationships with others. Mrs. Minnie Verloc who sacrifices her love for her family leads a monotonous married life. She needs a home to look after her brother and her mother. She has been living with Mr. Verloc for seven years, and during these married years, she never asked anything about Verloc's occupation and his whereabouts during the day time. She and her brother look after the shop during the day time. Mrs. Verloc desires her husband to get closer with his brother. She creates chances for their being together like suggesting Verloc to take Stevie for a walk. She has no desire in sharing personal feeling with her husband at the same time she does not bother the welfare of her husband. Her distance with her husband and her lack of communication with him leads to face the undesirable happenings in her life. As Jacques Berthoud points out that "Winnie is as impenetrable as her mysterious husband because of the utter lack of curiosity" (150).

Conrad portrays Winnie's character with positivity, such as her motherly love towards her brother though she mostly expresses her negative attitude. Her blind obedience to social conventions leads to the most unexpected happenings in her life like the death of her brother, the murder of her husband by herself and her subsequent suicide. Winnie's impatience to listen to her husband is the reason for her mental

irritation which ultimately results in the murder of her husband. Thus this novel is a real portrayal of undesirable incidents and influences in each and every character.

Conrad clearly draws the symmetrical images through the character Stevie. He has the mannerism of drawing when he undergoes a kind of restlessness. Thus, Stevie started drawing circle after circle when he listens to the conversation of Verloc with his friends regarding the terrorists' attack in the city. His restlessness initiates him to draw circle after circle which shows that he is quite unbearable to the secret threat on the society. It is clearly shown in the bomb blast incident in Greenwich Observatory. Stevie followed the instructions of his brother-in-law and couldn't find a way to escape after fixing the bomb in the Greenwich. Stevie's mental ill-health leads him to great confusion. This cruel attitude of Mr. Verloc, utilizing mentally retarded boy to destroy the Greenwich Observatory confirms his pessimistic ideas. It shows that he is bundled with the threads of pessimism and finds no rays of positivity in him.

Like Conrad, H.G. Wells' novel 'The Time Machine' 1895, also portrays the advanced technology of Victorian era which was surrounded by technology and industrial progress especially lived with the threat of atomic bombs. It seems to be a new trend in modernist anxieties. Conrad's novel 'The Secret Agent' elucidates both anarchism and modernist culture through the character of the professor. The Professor symbolises both anarchism and modernist culture which resulted in negative effects in the society.

The Professor in this novel is portrayed as the conflict of human and machine embodied as one being, because always he used to carry a bomb in the pocket. This peculiar behaviour of the professor shows the reality that the technology of the professor's mechanics would have improved since the Victorian period due to modernist "progress". It is the professor's desire to become a "perfect detonator" (S.A. 86) the idea that is the outcome of the modernist's achievement. The professor's intention is to shock the society and make an alert about the downside of scientific and technological progression. As Samuel Thomas pointed out that by "fusing himself into a living weapon"

The character of the professor stances a threat to the society and also represents the greater danger conceived during the modernist culture. The professor's body has become a machine, especially his carrying the bomb in his body creates anxieties towards technology and industrialisation which are the root cause for the destruction in the society. The action of the professor leads an individual to have less possibilities to live in such a society. Portrayal of such an individual threatens the public to have hope to live in that society.

Conrad also suggests that lack of communication leads to unloving companionship in the family as well as in the society. The entire novel tells that Mr. Verloc keeps tight-lipped towards his wife, friends and his higher officials. When Mr. Vladimir warns him in delaying explosion at the Greenwich, Mr. Verloc doesn't respond. In the same way he is reticent when the Assistant Commissioner enquires Mr. Verloc about Stevie's involvement in the bomb blast. Both Mr. and Mrs. Verloc have less interest in sharing their hidden pains of their past lives. Mr. Verloc was betrayed by a spy woman and Mrs. Verloc sacrificed her love towards a butcher's son and married Mr. Verloc. Mr. Verloc's relationship with his friends, Comrade Ossipon, Michaelis, Karl Yunt and the nameless Professor shows that he is not an open minded

person to anyone. On the other hand, Verloc's friends too live aimlessly and lack individualism focussing pessimistic attitude throughout the novel.

Mr. Ethelred, The Home Secretary who is in a high political power is not ready to listen the details when the Assistant Commissioner describes the bomb-outrage of Greenwich. Mr. Ethelred told that "Don't go into details, I have no time for that... spare me the details" (S.A. 118). When the Chief Inspector Heat doubts Michaelis and informs the Assistant Commissioner about the violence of Greenwich, the Assistant Commissioner is not ready to heed to it. On observing Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, lack of communication leads to misinterpretation and destruction of the self and the society.

The Secret Agent also speaks about the disappointments that make the characters have no optimistic hold on life. In this novel, Conrad voiced his own disappointments through the characters which he faced in his life. Conrad's disappointment started when he was banished from his own land at his early age and then the loss of his parents. As a grown child he was not allowed to prove himself as a Polish man. Conrad brings out his pains through the characters in the novel.

The main character Mr. Verloc was totally shattered when he was betrayed by a woman whom he truly loved. After the death of Stevie, Winnie could not tolerate her husband's unkind behaviour, she felt frustrated which ultimately led her to murder her husband, Mr. Verloc. When Winnie brought a knife pointing to Mr. Verloc, he couldn't expect that from her because he believed that she was a very obedient wife as she satisfied his needs and was sincere to him till then. Mrs. Winnie didn't give a chance to Mr. Verloc for any kind of explanation. This action of Winnie's dissatisfied attitude threatened Mr. Verloc and he was helpless towards the undesirable happenings. After murdering Mr. Verloc, Winnie ran away from her house. She was wandering aimlessly in the London Street. On her way, she met Comrade Ossipon, one of her husband's friends who had special interest on women. Winnie told him about the murder of her husband and pursued Ossipon to help her. Comrade Ossipon had believed that Mr. Verloc was killed in Greenwich Park. He was ready to help Winnie not on the ground of his friendship with Mr. Verloc but for the benefit of the money that Winnie had in her hands.

On Winnie's request Ossipon visited her home with her. After collecting the valuable things and money from the home and the shop, she planned to escape to the Continent. Ossipon was shocked to see the dead body of his friend Mr. Verloc there and frightened by the behaviour of Mrs. Winnie. He wanted to escape from Winnie and he gave up his plan of swindling money from her. He was hunting for an opportunity to move away from the place. Ossipon was filled with terror that she might have another knife for him. Both rushed to the Waterloo Station for the train that would take her to Southampton and the cross-Channel boat for France. After getting into the train Ossipon left Winnie alone in one compartment. Ossipon, an anarchist, "flush of safe banknotes as never before in his life", escaped from the train. (S.A. 260) As critic, Chull Wang pointed out that "what the anarchist are doing in the society is an outrageous betrayal of humanity" has come true. Winnie was upset and she didn't know what to do. She became mad and she jumped into the water and committed suicide.

Conrad finds expressing the realities of his time easy as he emphasises on the sufferings of human beings that have experienced by himself or what he observes

around him. Like Henry James, Conrad is one of the makers of modern fiction. Most of his writings are set at sea and on the sea-port. In his novel *The Secret Agent*, he pronounced the unoptimistic ideas of life absorbed from every individual's life. He belonged to the Victorian era which was moving ahead with technological advancement and become the stage for many undesirable events which make every human beings to become bundles of pessimistic attitudes.

The Secret Agent exposes anarchy in life that honours no value, no principle, and no virtue. Conrad depicts the active mind of the revolutionary which restores the abstract and determined forms of ideology, which Russell Kirk defines as "a passionate endeavour to overthrow the spiritual and moral order". Conrad empowers his readers to find anarchism as a result of modern technology that makes one to absolute denial and rejection of peaceful life and spirit. This novel views the philosophy of anarchism and its consequences to its ultimate point of negation through destruction.

The novel *The Secret Agent* focuses negative approaches of life. Each and every characters finds undesirable shortcomings in life. Everyone is disappointed at a point of time and tries to react to it at some other point. Throughout the novel the characters search for a bit of humanity with positivity to mould them and to think optimistically. The suffering of every individual reveals the reader to observe the pessimistic ideas spread during Conrad's period. This paper probes the psychological sufferings and the consequences of such sufferings in common. These sufferings are mainly due to the trust on others and the betrayal of the trusted ones. For example Mr. Verloc's commitment as a secret agent makes him treat Stevie as his instrument for the bomb blast. Mrs. Winnie's commitment to take care of her brother and her mother leads her sacrifice his lover and marry Mr. Verloc. Stevie, being abnormal, is forced to trust his sister Winnie and his brother-in-law Mr. Verloc. After the death of Winnie's brother and the murder of her husband, Winnie trusts Ossipon and believes that he will protect her and she can escape to Continent with his help. But she is betrayed by Ossipon and she ends up her life by committing suicide. Thus Conrad emphatically presents that disappointments lead one to take adverse decision in life and the repeated failures or undesirable accomplishments make people pessimistic. Thus every incident and every attitude of an individual clearly point out the pessimistic approach and elaborates how the sense of self-deception leads to destruction through this novel.

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