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# Domesticity as Gender Othering in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to explore gender relations in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Operating from the knowledge that gender is culturally determined feminists criticize male-dominated patriarchal societies, which they argue marginalize or discount women by limiting their opportunity for self-definition and self-actualization. The question that needs to be addressed, then, is: Is gender relation in *The Secret Agent* constructed around stereotypical representations? Or can this work be read otherwise? Our assumption is that Conrad's criticism of such patriarchal system is done through irony. The 'Edenic home' that would embody Conrad's cherished ideals is, as we know, a home browbeaten by a political exile. We shall argue that Conrad deals narratively with his own traumatic history by displacing it onto Winnie's otherness. This traumatic event is ironically expressed in the falling down of the novel's house, the house of an overweening, unquestioned patriarchy. On one hand, the fallen house symbolizes the 'idealization' of the Western society. On the other hand, it raises ideological issues in relation to the "Other", the oppressed.

We shall argue that the evidence of his biography, correspondence, and the fictional work under study suggest a complex relationship between the writer, the women in his life, and the fictional female characters. The importance of the female character, Winnie Verloc, may be explained by the fact that women played a vital role during his youth in Poland. In a letter of 1900 to Edward Garnett, Conrad himself remarked on the benefit he had received from the close bond and the extraordinary 'sister-cult' established amongst the Bobrowski women.

## INTRODUCTION

Conrad, as a sea writer, following masculine tradition - men in men's world, could have neglected women's themes and felt not prepared to engage in their concerns. However, we shall argue that the evidence of his biography, correspondence, and the fictional work, *The Secret Agent*, suggest a complex relationship between the writer and the fictional female character, Winnie Verloc. Conrad has initiated an astute exploration of female identity in fiction, and has explored the question of a woman's place in society in different ways. Sometimes, he makes her inhabit a place in society away from the harsh realities of the man's world; and occasionally, he portrays as a prominent female figure whose position offered an important critique of gender role. The importance of Winnie may be explained

by the fact that women played a vital role during his formative years in Poland. In a letter of 1900 to Garnett, Conrad himself remarked on the benefit he had received from the close bond established amongst the Bobrowski women: "There was an extraordinary sister-cult in that family, from which I profited when left an orphan at the age of ten" (Jean-Aubry, 1927: 291).

After the death of his mother, Ewa Korzeniowski in 1865, his father Apollo relied heavily on the support of Conrad's grandmother, Teofila Bobrowska. She is described by her son and Conrad's uncle Tadeusz, in his memoirs, as a proud, intelligent, open-minded, warm-hearted woman (Suzan Jones, 1999:40). When her son Apollo died in 1869, she was appointed one of Conrad's legal guardians, and her part in his upbringing extended to that of a nurturer. Always anxious about his health, she stayed with the orphaned Conrad in Cracow for long periods after his father's death (Najder, 1996:11-12).

The female companionship might have helped him during those years. Najder shows us that women occupy prominent roles in Conrad's earliest years; yet, he considers that Conrad has attached little significance to their presence as a substitute to his mother. Conrad, poignantly, recalled the intensity of feeling for his mother in the Author's Note of *A Personal Record* (1919). He describes the memory of her presence as one that dominated his recollections of the many people who wandered through the Korzeniowski's household at number 45, Nowy Swiat, in Warsaw in 1861:

Amongst them I remember my mother, a more familiar figure than the others, dressed in the black of the national mourning in defiance of ferocious police regulations. I have also preserved from that particular time the awe of her mysterious gravity which, indeed, was by no means smileless. For I remember her smiles, too. Perhaps for me she could always find a smile. She was young then, certainly not thirty yet. She died four years later in exile. (PR: x)

Conrad's relationship to his mother, along with the evidence of his early experiences and reading, shows that his childhood recollections, both personal and literary, offered a fundamental source for his later presentation of women in his fiction. In a letter to Edward Garnett Conrad recalled: "my mother was certainly no ordinary woman [...] I shall never forget my delight, admiration and unutterable regret at my loss (before I could appreciate her), which only then I fully understood." (CLJC VII: 245). The "no ordinary woman" is expressed in Winnie and other fictive women in his fiction.

### **WINNIE VERLOC: THE "TRUE WOMAN"**

Rather than limiting *The Secret Agent* to a political novel, we clearly aim at extending our examination to encompass a broader view of the social dynamic in relation to domesticity and gender "Other". Thus, we are interested less in the overt political dimension of the novel than Conrad's abstract sense of gender issue. Domesticity refers to the lived experience of private life, the cultural and material dimensions of the home, and an ideology that organizes ideas about work, gender identity, and family. Domesticity occupies a central place in Victorian culture. The sheer scale of this notion is reflected in the popular press of the day. In fact, newspapers, novels, sermons, political debates attest to the Victorians' preoccupations with the material, social, and political dimensions of private life.

In *The Secret Agent*, the theme of personal relationship in the private sphere is introduced through Winnie, where this private sphere is full of misguided assumptions. Mr. Verloc is just a safe provider to Winnie, and Winnie is a costly possession to Verloc, though they both believe they are loved for their own sake. Winnie's illusion of material security is stagnant; it is "without beauty and almost without decency" (SA: 244), shutting out the

world until the world explodes in her face. Mr. Verloc, who believes that he is fascinating enough to be loved for himself, has also been living in a stagnant illusion without beauty. Towards the end, when Stevie, Winnie's beloved brother, has been killed through Verloc's irresponsibility, Verloc quite steadily expects the tragedy to make no difference to his relation with his wife. Apparently, Verloc is not aware that his wife is "maternal and violent" (Ibid. 241). "She had to love him [Stevie] with a militant love. She had battled for him - even against herself. His loss had the bitterness of defeat, with the anguish of a baffled passion" (Ibid. 246). When she discovers that her husband is a monster, and she does not see - in the sense of being aware - what he has planned his death, and that his reply to grief is "let her have her cry. I'll go to bed with her, that'll put her right", a terrifying woman rises up with a carving knife in her hand to end her "contract with existence, as presented by that man standing over there [...] She was a free woman" (Ibid.251); in other words, she stops to be a "true woman", the loyal and the submissive woman. In her 1966 essay "Cult of True Womanhood" Barbara Welter describes the woman of 19th century America and Great Britain as a hostage in the home who possessed four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Winnie is no more a "true woman": she confronted her husband, grabbed a carving knife and stabbed him in the heart and killed him. The violent scene symbolizes the end of the Verlocs household.

To reinforce the theme of isolation where the woman is considered as the Other, Conrad regulated the couple's domestic life without any exchange or communication. Verloc loves his wife "as a wife should be loved - that is, maritally, with the regard one has for one's possession" (Ibid.179). This statement is a comment, not only on the Verlocs, but on marriage itself. This institution in the Victorian age regards the wife and her inheritance as the property of her husband. She has no right to dispose of her possession without her husband's approval. To fully understand this view and other sexist overtone that Conrad provides in the novel, the cultural framework and societal situation in which Conrad lived should be considered. We should argue that Verloc's sexism stems from the entirely patriarchal European world of which the character was a product. Men were the sole occupiers of positions of power in the Victorian society. The Western cultural agreement is based on a whole matrix of inter-male relationships involving competitiveness, desire, bonding, and the appropriation of power and knowledge. To maintain this system, women are used as sexual scapegoats by men and revered as a "shared desire" or common goal. As a result, women are prohibited from attaining positions of power. Due to this domineering social construct, Winnie in *The Secret Agent* is shown as hopelessly weak, and subservient to her husband.

Conrad's criticism of such patriarchal system is done through the ironical behavior of Winnie. To preserve the economic security that marriage has brought to her and to Stevie, she has to find a sharp way to maintain this 'security'; a security "growing into confidence, into a domestic feeling, stagnant and deep like a placid pool" (SA: 243). So, stagnation becomes an attribute of domesticity. This can be well exemplified by the scene where Winnie, first, tells Verloc that he would have to go abroad without her. She immediately regrets "the unwisdom" of her words; but removes their effect by giving Verloc, over her shoulder:

A glance, half arch, half cruel, out of her large eyes - a glance of which the Winnie of the Belgravian mansion days would have been incapable, because of her respectability and her ignorance. But the man was her husband now, and she was no longer ignorant, she kept it on him for a whole second, with her grave motionless like a mask, while she said playfully: "you couldn't. You would miss me too much". (Ibid. 196)

Winnie uses her 'charm' to negotiate with her husband. She reverses the power relationship through the confident appeal to a sexual habit as a conjugal right. However, the use of the phrase "grave motionless like a mask" expresses Conrad's criticism of the hypocrisy of marriage that he considers as an institution that has no improving effect on the moral qualities of men and women.

To make the reader share the characters' isolation and despair Conrad takes off the inside characters' veil concerning their thoughts and feelings towards each other. In chapter 11, "Verloc presumed that his wife had understood him but he would have been glad to hear her say what she thought at the moment" (Ibid. 246). Contrary to Mr. Verloc, the reader knows Winnie's thought: "this man took the boy away to murder him. He took the boy away from me to murder him!" Verloc is shown as one who does not understand his wife. The characters don't understand each other and themselves, people feel lost because they apparently have no idea of what the appropriate norms of feelings and actions are. The disintegration of modern life is symbolically expressed through Winnie. Actually, of the three deaths in *The Secret Agent*, those of Stevie, Verloc, and Winnie, only one is described directly, Winnie's murder of Verloc. The emphasis in chapter XI is not on the death of Verloc, but on Winnie and the extraordinary state of mind she reaches. This state is described in an accumulation of details which shows her progressively approaching a state of anonymity and melting into the blackness of death. Her state is like that of a somnambulist or insomniac. She watches with a lucid vigilance, but she does not see anything. She looks at a blank wall, "A blank wall- perfectly blank. A blankness to run at and dash your head against [...] She kept still [...] in astonishment and despair" (SA: 239-244). 'Blankness' here expresses darkness.

Indeed, everything Winnie sees has been turned into another expression of death. If what she sees is a symbol of death, she also contains death within herself: "[Mr. Verloc] looked straight into his wife's eyes, the enlarged pupils of the woman received his stare into their unfathomable depths" (Ibid. 248); "a tinge wildness in her aspect was derived [...] from the fixity of her black gaze where the light of the room was absorbed and lost without the trace of a single gleam" (Ibid.259). Winnie's depersonalization goes on through the sequence of events leading from her discovery that Verloc has caused Stevie's death to her murder of her husband, her meeting with Comrade Ossipon, their return to the shop, and his abandonment of her on the train going toward the Channel Boat, from which she will leap at last into the dark water.

At the end of Chapters III and VIII, the last words said by Verloc to Winnie are: "Put it [the light] out" (Ibid.60). The link between darkness and domesticity is too obvious here to be ignored, more so when one considers Winnie's reason and description of her marriage:

He wanted me, anyhow. What was I to do with mother and that poor boy? Eh? I said yes. He seemed good-natured, he was freehanded, he had money, he never said anything. Seven years--seven years a good wife to him, the kind, the good, the generous, the--And he loved me. Oh, yes. He loved me till I sometimes wished myself--Seven years. Seven years a wife to him. And do you know what he was, that dear friend of yours? Do you know what he was? ... He was a devil!"

(Ibid.276; ellipses Conrad's)

During the course of the novel, Conrad records Winnie's life from the time she was a young girl until the time the novel is set and shows her vulnerability as a woman who accepts her domestic role. The Victorian domestic ideology pivots on two central components: the binary logic of separate spheres whereby the feminine domain of private life and feeling opposes the masculine domain of public life and work, and the figure of

the domestic woman endowed both with a moral authority that derives from her self-sacrificial spirit and a socioeconomic authority that rests on the management of a household and the representation of familial virtues. The novel is set around the contemporary domestic ideology, and demonstrates that throughout her life Winnie she has had to make compromises. However, the harmonious domestic life is not the case for the Verlocs' since their union is said to be horrible and Verloc is described as a 'devil'. This drives Winnie to rebel and free herself from this domestic bondage.

Winnie' oppression has originated from an earlier awful experience, the horrible paternal domination that she recalls by entertaining:

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); a poker flung once (not very far), which stilled that particular storm into the dumb and awful silence which follows a thunder-clap. And all these scenes violence came and went accompanied by the unrefined noise deep vociferations proceeding from a man wounded in his paternal pride, declaring himself obviously accursed since one of his kids was a "slobbering idjut and the other a wicked she-devil." It was of her that this had been said many years ago. (Ibid. 242)

As we can see in the above quote, the memory of her father and his rage towards her is still alive in her mind. Winnie tries to express these scenes of violence through visions full of "unrefined noise", "deep vociferations", and "awful silence" that she witnessed in her childhood. As a young girl, she protected Stevie from her father's violence. Such torture emerging from absolutist/patriarchal arrogance is Conrad's disappointment in the development of the family.

The irony that shapes the final scene between Verloc and his wife results from the couple's mutual ignorance about their personal motives that Conrad, as artist, organized through the whole book. The sudden knowledge of Stevie's death makes Winnie's "moral nature [...] subjected to a shock of which, in the physical order", as "the most violent earthquake" (Ibid. 255). The reader witnesses the moral isolation that has kept the Verlocs, in their decent marital domesticity, strangers to each other: "Do be reasonable, Winnie, what would it have been if you had lost me!" Verloc was persuaded of being loved for his own sake. Winnie is, then, the central figure in the novel because she stands as a tragic character that goes from the most complete innocence to the most shattering knowledge of what lies beyond the world, the patriarchal world that othered her.

The themes of physical and mental isolation in *The Secret Agent* describe a condition of social fragmentation in gender relationship in the modern world. In its portrayal of women, Conrad seems to stir on popular stereotypes of the Victorian society, such as the domestic angel, the devoted matriarch and the obedient wife. Both Winnie and her mother have sacrificed themselves for Stevie. However, Conrad criticizes the patriarchal system where the woman is considered as the "Other". We consider that the female character in this fictional work, as the above analysis has shown, has a great importance since she introduces important issues of the novel. She stands as a modern tragic character. Arthur Miller in his "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1949), states that the modern tragedy raises issues and questions that disturb and shock the society. As we have seen above, Winnie stands as an important character that mediates Conrad's criticism towards the British culture and one of its important elements, marriage and family. In one of his letters to Edward Garnette, Conrad states: "I had your letter on the last day of my first year of married life. It was good of you to remember me and even accident was kind by bringing your missive on an ominous day" (CLJC I: 14). Conrad's relationship with his wife could

not be called affectionate when he characterized their first anniversary as “ominous” day. This may explain the ironic tone of Conrad’s portrayal of the Verlocs.

Conrad questions the patriarchal institution through his female character. Winnie is a victim of the patriarchal system that reduces her to the “Other”. She could not defend herself against her father’s brutality in her childhood, but she could stand to confront her husband’s brutality towards Stevie. The author states the importance of his female character in his Author’s Note where he writes: “Personally I have never had any doubt of the reality of Mrs. Verloc’s story; but it had to be disengaged from its obscurity in that immense town, it had to be made credible, I don’t mean so much as to her soul but as to her surroundings, not so much as her psychology but as to her humanity” (Ibid. xxxvii).

Winnie’s ‘surroundings’ is also important since the novel’s setting establishes the perspective of otherness. London becomes a space that allows Conrad to explore the ‘Other’. His choice of the city, London, is not accidental. Much contemporary urban fiction questions whether a family culture nurtured in the country could survive in the city. This fictional work shows the struggle of the protagonist to maintain his/her life in the face of urban pressures. Recalling his decision to set *The Secret Agent* in London, Conrad wrote in his “Author’s Note” to the novel that:

The vision an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven’s frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world’s light. There was enough room there to place any story, depth enough there for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives. (SA: xxxvi)

Conrad describes the setting as a “monstrous” place; the city is the place imposing the mode of human relationship peculiar to modern life. It is also “man-made”, a monstrous human construction which surrounds man with his image, and hides from him the light and truth of nature. The city generates its own darkness, a human darkness, an obscurity made of illusion, and blindness, the blindness of people who agree with Winnie Verloc that life doesn’t stand much looking into.

The characters move in a city which appears to be indifferent, or even hostile in their existence. Mr. Verloc is observed marching along “a street which could in every propriety be described as private. In its breadth, emptiness, and extent it had the majesty of inorganic nature” (Ibid.14). The city is even described as an “almost cannibalistic organism” that consumes its own inhabitants. London, then, is a mass grave, the inhabitants are simultaneously figured as trapped in death-in-life existence, ghosts drifting through society’s amoral structures. Brett Street itself acts as an induction into the gloom and isolation of the Verlocs’ home which, in turn, mirrors that of their domestic life. Conrad’s description of London as a cosmopolitan center, a picture of a foreigner who himself felt as the “Other”, as he notes it in the Author’s Note: “I had to keep at arms-length the memories of my solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days” (Ibid. xxxvii). Through Winnie, the author shows the physical isolation and mental isolation of both man and woman

Conrad’s characters are trapped in the city: “it was not earthly good going out. He [Verloc] could not find anywhere in London what he wanted. But he went out [...] along dark streets, through lighted streets, in and out of two flash bars [...] and finally back again to his menaced home” where his “domestic happiness seemed to drive the obscurity back upon itself, make it more sullen, brooding, and sinister” (Ibid.151). This foreshadows Mrs. Verloc’s otherness in the city where she commits suicide.

## CONCLUSION

*The Secret Agent* offers a different reading of the gender roles and domestic structures that have produced profound distress in Western middle-class culture. Conrad resolves the conflict between Winnie and the patriarchal house by making her leaving the falling-down house. The Edenic home that would embody the author's cherished ideals - Conrad's home was browbeaten by a political exile - ironically, ends with the falling down of the novel's house. In *The Secret Agent*, the ruin of the house is first expressed through the explosion of Stevie's body into pieces, then through the harsh murder of Verloc by his wife, and finally by the suicide of Winnie. The novel proffers visions of the fallen house - the house of an overweening, unquestioned patriarchy. On one hand, this fallen house symbolizes the 'idealization' of the Western society. On the other hand, it raises ideological issues in relation to the "Other", the oppressed inside home - women; and outside home (Britain) - the overseas natives. This idea is reinforced by the description of London, as "monstrous" and "cannibalistic", referring to the British Empire, and to the deeds of the colonial system in the overseas-colonies. In this novel, the gender discourse is metaphorically introduced. Conrad has demonstrated a keen awareness of the perception of the gender Other and has eloquently challenged the habitual thought that circulated in his time. However, the fictional work under study reveals the author as if he was constantly changing camps, moving from one to another, and this is, perhaps, due to the different stages in his social life and his spiritual evolution. We believe that his sea-experience helped him to understand more deeply the extensive and well-developed contradictions which coexisted among people. His personal surmounting of contradictions in his personal history was expressed as ambivalent forces coexisting simultaneously. Conrad's life is marked by restlessness caused by the feeling of exilic otherness. The absence of a secure home and the familial and national tragedy make him feel as an outcast, a social "Other" doomed to go first to sea and later to settle in a foreign country that he chose to be his homeland. These elements, the personal bleak and the political 'données' that shaped the writer's life may partly explain his sympathy towards the oppressed, the woman.

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