

## THE MOTIF OF GOTHICISM IN THE SECRET AGENT BY JOSEPH CONRAD



### Literature

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### Abstract

The stereotype utilization of a fear-causing beast in dark abyss teams up with Gothicism in a general sense. The ever-articulated elements of black horror are claimed to be transformed into the dynamics and requirements of modern life. Claimed to have a critical eye on traditional Gothicism, Joseph Conrad appears to be provocative for the re-analysis of gothic tendencies in his novels. If the objective of horror fiction stipulates the involvement of dangerous and gloomy imprisonment of a victim, we can well also expect such darkness injected into a 'spy novel' like *The Secret Agent* (1907). This paper, thus, deals with the elements of Gothicism such as darkness, silence, domesticity, psychological violence as reflected in the novel, which could be labeled as quite different from the mainstream.

### 1. Gothicism in The Secret Agent

Conrad utilizes the gothic in the same way within his other novels, like *Under Western Eyes* and *Nostromo*. In *The Secret Agent* (1907), the setting resembles the one in Dickensian style. *The Secret Agent* is set in London in the time when the city of shortage sanitation and security provides convenient ground for the novel's plot. The motif of politics and modernity is integrated with the background of the gothic variety (Peters, 2006).

In order to understand the existence of Gothicism in *The Secret Agent* (herewith the novel is to be cited as SA in references), it is better to recall why he chose London as the setting of the novel. On this point Conrad says;

... the vision of 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 for any setting ... (SA, 4).

An impediment to create human aspirations and deficient in human elegance, London is depicted as man's grave and dark repository representing the dumpsite of modernism. London with the population of five millions buries the inhabitants in a "death-like" existence crowded with ghosts hanging through society's conventional structure. The wide use of gothic fear is accounted for Conrad's early experiences. In a society where all is described in demise terminology, the omnipresence of Gothicism comes to the forefront in a closer examination of the setting. Ossipon thinks "he might just as well be put under lock" to underline the security breach in London. Security concerns dwell into every narrative. For example, the Professor's dwelling "the enormous iron padlock on the doors of the wall cupboard was the only object in the room on which the eye could rest".

The implications of secure confinement are more highlighted than the mere layout and description of the room. Gothic residue infiltrates in the architectural atmosphere of the city,

although the events are mostly handled Verloc's home and shop on Brett Street, which is the most gothic locations of the novel. Verloc's dwelling is "in a lonely street behind a shop where the sun never shone" (SA, 258). Brett Street is a place of large crowds edging to poverty, and self-representing in isolation from light and sound having a proper image of urban death-in-life, and mass grave. An overall isolation from the populous city is described well in these words:

It branched off, narrow, from the side of an open triangular space surrounded by dark and mysterious houses, temples of petty commerce emptied of traders for the night. Only a fruiter's stall at the corner made a violent blaze of light and color. Beyond all was black, and the few people passing in that direction vanished at one stride beyond the glowing heaps of oranges and lemons. No footsteps echoed (SA, 150).

Gothic threat comes from unique layout with the "dark and mysterious| shops and houses straying side by side. The dominant suspicions as regards the gothic connection of the houses are the result of the effacement of the border between the public and private. Apart from the rare mention of the citrus trees, the street of the setting completes itself with the image of graves.

Conrad exploits the levels of description in order to cover the gothic-inspiring atmosphere of the city. The Verloc's house stands out as "grimy brick house" (SA, 3), where darkness prevails all day long. Thus, the shop is represented as identical to the city's description as "cruel devourer of the world's light". Conrad says:

In that shop of shady wares fitted with deal shelves painted a dull brown, which seemed to devour the sheen of light, the gold circlet of the wedding ring on Mrs. Verloc's left hand glittered with the untarnished glory of a piece from some splendid treasure of jewels, .. (SA, 213).

Poorly illuminated, the shop gulps a light in the street being covered in "darkness of pornography" (SA, 287). In connection with the motif of darkness that serves for Gothicism in general, Conrad establishes a link between gothic darkness and domesticity, which is much apparent after Verloc's murder. Verloc's dominion over Winnie, his wife, is terrible enough to make its object wish for death. As a "demonic" person, Verloc creates Gothicism in his marriage, and it is allowed to take place due to the factors related to his secret profession. Verloc is advised to pretend to have proper family so that he should not cause suspicions about himself in his neighborhood. Winnie, however, is better oriented into the medium of Gothicism, as she has been exposed to various harsh treatments from the parents and paternal domination from her childhood. Therefore, Winnie has seen her marriage as an escape from paternal domination, which is gothic enough to be taken into the novel. That's to say, psychological torture through parental domination constitutes a variety of the Gothicism. Conrad further reinforces the gothic elements through partners in marriage, as they are the focus of ideology and social control rather than the union by emotion and understanding. Conrad turns the weapon of gothic atmosphere back on the bourgeoisie family, "as a manifestation of human nature in its discontent and imbecility" (SA, 7). Family members are so delicately described that they are "anarchists in The Secret Agent and treated as the symptomatic results of the society". For example, although Verloc is not a true anarchist, he represents an antisocial force.

Pressure on the family members originating from absolutist power and pride is a gothic element that is very common in the novel. Conrad connects this pride to the collapse of hopes in the betterment of family concept. However, violence within the family works for the burial for the victim of domestic gothicism. The cause of Winnie's plight in the family is not tied to only the experience; Conrad hints that the cause can be searched in the structure of a larger society.

The atmosphere of horror surrounding the institution of marriage in the novel is different in the impact it draws. The emphasis on appropriate marriage partners was the focus of ideology and control as well as the debate for many years. Patriarchal anarchism is the manifestation of human nature embedded in discontent and meaninglessness in the family. The subtext of the novel stands closer to the assertion that "anarchists are treated as ill-fates of the society. In this connection, the character, informer, estimates:

... they have no families, at any rate. Organization into families may answer to a need of human nature, but in the last instance it is based on law, and therefore must be something odious and it is impossible to an anarchist (SA, 9).

Although Verloc is not definitely an anarchist, he pretends to be so because the Greenwich bombing is tasked to instigate the British government into action that is for long ignored. However, Verloc is a "family man"; he reflects the whole social order favorable to the upper class that had to be protected against shallow envisions of labor (SA, 12). In this way, it is possible to connect the anarchic and bourgeois with a leveling operation.

Verloc is a representative with a commitment to the status quo in which domestic horror and drama are present, as the Assistant Commissioner remarks. The disintegration of the middle class reflects out over the whole society to the inward radiation of gothic darkness. The extension of the gothic demonization had taken place in the nineteenth century, and later lowered onto the shop owners and petty bourgeois. We see that social disease penetrates into the organization of family in the modern life creating gothic aspects and chaos of family life.

One reason involving family as an element of Gothicism is to elaborate on the "gothic darkness" as morality which encircles the marriage. The gothic novel also recounts the events emphasized on marriage partners from the bourgeoisie family in order to reinforce its focal pain in the society. The novel is treated as a milieu in which anarchists are ordinary residents, not as violence instigators. For example, although Verloc does not make an anarchist in the proper sense, he stands for a weapon that can be tasked as antisocial force when needs be. So the action that Verloc launches corresponds to an anti legalistic anarchy although its aim is just to activate the British government into responsibility. Verloc's vision is only to protect the social mechanism (SA, 15). In this way, bourgeois gothic members are linked to leveling operation for the good of social establishment.

The presence of domestic drama, as put forth by Assistant Commissioner, draws the family concept to the edge of Gothicism. The corruption at the heart of the middle class extends outward penetrating into gothic darkness as having slipped into petty bourgeois shop owner and lower categories of the society. In this infusion of gothic darkness, the family is reflected at a certain degree that social structure mirroring the family's interval formation is correspondingly

diseased. At the beginning of the novel, Verloc is described “generally arrived in London like the influenza from the Continent” (SA, 6). The sickness of the modern society extends widely and covers the nucleus agent of the society, which creates inherent chaos in family life. The major conflict in the Verloc family is the mixture of commerce with domesticity. That is to say, as Kate Ellis proposes, the domestic spoils the economic, and the private shades into the public. Wylie suggests that the ill-spread has penetrated too far to be uprooted with the help of legal applications. Thus, it is not wondering to discover all-encompassing “gothic sickness” finds its entry into the marriage. This black-soul devouring darkness was absorbed and lost without a single beam (SA, 259) just before Winnie’s murder of Verloc. Here, the novel completes its gothic domesticity through Winnie’s murder and suicide cycle in the destruction of Verloc’s marriage. Conrad maintains the gothic in this cycle with a strong impact on closure of marriage. The conduct of horror is traditionally prolonged with the inclusion and addition of subsequent incidents. The idea of horror is represented in Ossipon’s information to proceed with insanity lying ahead and waiting for him (SA, 307).

As a matter of fact, most of the characters suffer confusion that borders on darkness filled with horror. As chief inspector Heat informs, the agents of controlling society are anarchically divided which uproots judgment, logic, and intelligence of the ruling class. The Gothicism doesn’t necessarily impinge on hair-raising incidents of bloodshed; but such a division that incapacitates the organs of ruling mechanism can be also categorized as Gothicism as such a case leads to social and personal disintegration in the epistemological sense. In addition to such disintegration, revelations of confidential information out of control would lead to the gradual disintegration of the social control. As Heat fears;

The disclosure of many things, the laying waste of fields of knowledge, which, cultivated by a capable man, had a distinct value for the individual and for the society. It was sorry meddling. ... disorganize the whole system of supervision ... (SA, 211).

Heat now puts the individual before society which gives some help to the middle class optimism that can be found in the gothic novel. However, what Heat delivers is that the lack of social surveillance for the good of individuals will cause the bleak sacrifice of individuals for a higher authority. As one step further, the Professor states: “The terrorist and the placemen come from both come from the same basket” (SA, 69), a revelation that confirms Heat’s forecast and the collapse of the legal system, which in the end leads to the collapse of individual. The juxtaposition of legality and criminality highlights that the police and criminals work for their own system ignoring the welfare of bureaucratically government and legal-bound citizens. The gothic fear of individuality, robbing, killing, or smuggling impedes all hopes for the betterment of life in general. In this case, the society will be forced to adjust “despicable and megalomaniac types” that threaten to destroy the engine of society.

Loss of individuality is another fear that creates an element of Gothicism in the novel. Verloc’s visit to Mr. Vladimir early in the novel is depicted through Vladimir’s contempt for Verloc and his long-distance treatment of a constable who cannot see him. This act decreases Verloc to a ghostly presence, a fragmentation which can be seen as a part of Gothicism: a

detachment from the material world ... so complete” (SA, 37). In this system, Verloc is obligated to serve “an absolutism” that does not appreciate his individuality and which requires the disintegration of identity so that he can maintain his status quo only as a required element.

As a part of loss of individuality, Conrad’s demonization of mechanization is equally pessimistic on the way of Gothicism. Levine remarks that “Conrad has a moral cure that is incompatible with nature that produces Frankenstein as monster” (1981, 20). The loss of identity comes along with the inevitability of madness and death when natural resistance abounds. Thus, the individualism in the novel is devastating or immoral and fearsome.

## 2. Conclusion

Conrad considers modernity as the amalgamation of confessions. The modern industrial city long seen as a source of destitute, alienation, oppression and Gothicism in the modern sense, is endowed with social control, epistemology and domesticity, which together combine and rob consciousness of individuality. Conrad asserts that the individual has lost the battle against the “modern” gothic tradition with a modernist rupture of method creating suspense in the same way as Shelley’s Frankenstein. As it is hard to escape from Frankenstein’s capture, Verloc is downsized to incapacity to fight against the system, a gothic nightmare, only waking into another form of the dream. Conrad’s novel is a progression in a heavily criticized and gothicized social critique. It condemns all aspects, material or metaphysical of modern life. So, this is the modified reappearance of the conventions of an earlier genre reading the demise of the target society.

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