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"POOR STEVIE"

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For physically disabled and mentally ill people

"Most ignorance is vincible ignorance. We don't know because we don't want to know."

Aldous Huxley

Abstract: The article presents an interpretation of 'The Secret Agent" in which the autistic Stevie is the most important character in the whole novel. The analysis of the statements and behaviours of individual characters allows us to show how confusing their attitude toward Stevie was. The article functionalises knowledge about the ways of defining physically and mentally ill people at the turn of the twentieth and twentieth centuries, and proves that an autistic man was not distinguished from cases of the most severe psychiatric diseases, as evidenced by many scenes in the novel. The article incorporates the perspective of disability studies into Conrad's studies.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, disability, autism, psychology

INTRODUCTION

Idiot. Imbecile. Feeble-minded. Fool. Degenerate. Deficient. Uneducable. Defective. Unimprovables. Unfortunates. Two-thirds of a man. Eugenic imperatives.[1] All words that long ago, and once in a while still, described people who had intellectual disabilities, neurological disorders, physical disabilities, and mental health issues.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, eugenicist, spoke of "this retardation" "as if nature had sprained her foot,"[2] "'impediments' to natural perfection" that should be "remov[ed]" from society.[3] When stacked up against such phrases from the nineteenth century,

[1] Lawrence B. Goodheart, "Rethinking Mental Retardation: Education and Eugenics in Connecticut, 1818-1917," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 59, 1 (2004), pp. 93-107.

[2] Ralph W. Emerson, *Emerson's Complete Works* (Boston and New York: Houghton and Mifflin, 1893), p. 42.

[3] John L. Thomas, "Romantic Reform in America 1815-1865," *American Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (Winter, 1965), p. 656.

even today's "fucktard" sounds less excessive. And Emerson's poetry about "purging" and "purifying," "pure by unpure," does not seem so charming (*Astrę*).[4]

People have always been afraid of what, or whom, they do not know and/or understand. Why else would society institutionalize people with disabilities? Disabilities of all kinds. Why else would, in *today's* society, 98% of women in Denmark who discover through prenatal testing that they are to deliver a baby with Down Syndrome, demand, and receive, abortions?[5] An average of two babies with Down Syndrome are born in Iceland a year. This is how eugenics has evolved from Adolf Hitler and his Nazis' vast array of gas chambers, which they once deemed worthy of people with Down Syndrome and those discussed above.

STEVIE

But this article is not about Emerson, Down Syndrome, Hitler, or even necessarily eugenics. It's about Stevie. "Poor Stevie," an often mentioned but rarely studied character from Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (C 7).[6]

In discussing Stevie, one must start with the cover and subtitle of the novel *A Simple Tale*. "Simple." "Simple" or "simple-minded" are terms that could easily have been used to describe Stevie. Still today, Merriam Webster includes "lacking in intelligence: STUPID" in its definition of "simple."[7]

The subtitle is considered to be an ironic one,

> as R. W. Stallman once observed, "the only thing simple" in the novel is Stevie, and, for a mental defective, even Stevie is still a surprisingly complicated character. Therefore, Conrad's double assertion must represent a minor authorial joke, for as those readers who trust the subtitle soon find out, *The Secret Agent* is anything but simple.[8]

[4] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Astrę," *Emerson Central*, 15 Aug. 2022, https://emersoncentral.com/texts/poems/astre/ [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[5] Julian Quinones and Arijeta Lajka. "'What Kind of Society Do You Want to Live in?': Inside the Country Where Down Syndrome Is Disappearing," *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 15 Aug. 2017, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/down-syndrome-iceland/ [accessed: 26.05.2020]. In 2020, the percentage in the United States itself has gone down to 67% (Chris Kaposy, "The Ethical Case for Having a Baby with Down Syndrome," *The New York Times*, 16 Apr. 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/opinion/down- syndrome-abortion.html [accessed: 26.05.2020]. Current data on the United States' contribution to the above statistic was unavailable. This paragraph is not to be interpreted as anti-abortion remarks but to make a point about eugenics.

[6] Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, ed. and with notes by Peter Lancelot Mallios (New York: Modern Library, 2004). This edition will be referenced directly in the text by abbreviation C and page number in parentheses.

[7] "Simple," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/simple [accessed: 22.08.2020].

[8] Arnold E. Davidson, "The Sign of Conrad's Secret Agent," *College Literature* 8, no. 1 (1981), p. 33, *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25111358 [acccessed: 26.05.2020].

Had he been born today; a "simple-minded" individual would be given several different labels. Far, far kinder labels than those mentioned above, but labels nonetheless. Terms such as "mentally handicapped," "special needs," "developmentally delayed," "intellectually disabled," even "mentally retarded" (used in medical context) are all presently used, with varying degrees of acceptance and success, to describe someone[9] who, by definition, has an IQ lower than 70.[10]

Upon modern day analysis, however, Stevie has been given not a new label, but a diagnosis. Though "the condition of autism would not be identified for another 35 years or so," (from the publication of *The Secret Agent* in 1907) it has been argued that Stevie was autistic.[11]

Joseph Conrad did an excellent job conveying the condescending nature of the period and the novel's characters through his writing style. An easy example: in a novel deliberately full of surnames and titles (e.g., Mr. and Mrs. Verloc, Chief Inspector Heat, Comrade Ossipon, etc.), Stevie was the only character whose name was never preceded by a title. (The exception to this is Stevie's mother, whose name was never given.)

A fair amount has been written about Stevie since *The Secret Agent* was published in 1907. You can hardly read an article on the novel without reading the author's theory on the symbolism of Stevie's famous circles.[12] A lot has been said about the impact Stevie's death had on the other characters, chiefly Winnie.[13] His interaction with the horse and cabbie has also been analyzed many times.[14] *This* author would like to explore Stevie's role *before* his death, namely how well the other characters knew him and how they and society viewed people like Stevie in 1886.

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[9] Chris Nash et al., "What's in a name? Attitudes surrounding the use of the term 'mental retardation,'" *Paediatrics & Child Health* 17, no. 2 (2012), pp. 71-74, doi:10.1093/pch/17.2.71 (1, 2, 6).

[10] William E. Benet, "IQ Classifications," *Assessment Psychology Online* 2019, www.assessmentpsychology.com/iqclassifications.htm [accessed: 22.08.2020]; Campbell M. Gold, "Morons, Imbeciles, and Idiots," *MORONS, IMBECILES, and IDIOTS Compiled by Campbell M Gold*, CMG Archives, 2011, https://campbellmgold.co.uk/archive_esoteric/morons_imbeciles_idiots.pdf [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[11] Stuart Murray, "From Virginia's Sister to Friday's Silence: Presence, Metaphor, and the Persistence of Disability in Contemporary Writing," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 6, no. 3 (2012), p. 250. Project MUSE, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/487892; Joseph Valente, "The Accidental Autist: Neurosensory Disorder in 'The Secret Agent,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 38, no. 1 (2014), p. 20, *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jmodelite.38.1.20 [accessed: 26.05.2020]. The author would like to remind the reader that autism spectrum disorder is a neurological disorder, not an intellectual disability and not based on IQ. The point to be made is that no distinction was made between any of these diagnoses in 1886.

[12] Leon Guilhamet, "Conrad's 'The Secret Agent' As the Imitation of An Action," *The Polish Review* 20, no. 2/3 (1975), p. 145, *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25777279 [accessed: 26.05.2020]; Maggie Holland, "A Thoughtful Reading Guide to 'The Secret Agent': A Semiotic Text," *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 10 (2015), pp. 223; John Lutz, "A Rage for Order: Fetishism, Self-Betrayal, and Exploitation in 'The Secret Agent,'" *Conradiana* 40, no. 1 (2007), p. 13, doi:10.1353/cnd.0.0007.

[13] Guilhamet, "Conrad's 'The Secret Agent,'" p. 152; Holland, "A Thoughtful Reading Guide," p. 226.

[14] Lutz, "A Rage for Order," p. 12; Wendy Moffat, "Domestic Violence: The Simple Tale within 'The Secret Agent,'" *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 37, no. 4 (1994), p. 488.

What is factually known about Stevie, as is true of most of the characters in the novel, is very little. Stevie was very much like a child, even though he was close to Winnie in age. His exact age was never given, but it is clear that, physically at least, he was no longer "that boy" as to whom he was frequently referred (C 7, 32, 48). He could not live on his own. He obviously could not protect himself. As a child, Winnie protected him from their father. She never guessed the need to protect Stevie from her husband.

Stevie could read and write, to some degree. Though Winnie later regretted the insight it granted him, he had been intelligent enough to have had at least some schooling in a regular school, because there was no way his family could have afforded to send him to one of the very few schools established for boys like Stevie at the time. Stevie had to have been smart enough to at least keep up with his classmates to the point of passing on to the next grade. This shows that his problems lied with his "social rather than [his] educational disabilities."[15]

Wiesenfarth states that "the structure of the novel is more totally meaningful when seen as organized around Stevie. My argument is that Stevie is, in Henry James's words, the 'centre, the point of focus of all the rest.'"[16] He asserts that Stevie is what keeps it, the characters and plot, all together. Which means that, upon Stevie's death, everything fell apart. Stevie became "the agent of their fears and hopes and loves and hates."[17] Stevie was the key. Everything revolved around him, even the structure of the novel, its changing timeline. Clark calls Stevie "the detonator of Conrad's events" and "the moral heart of the story."[18] Holland points out that *The Secret Agent* is "anarchic in form as well as content," referring to the various time and character point of view shifts throughout the novel.[19] It is through the shifting characters' points of view that the reader is afforded many different views and impressions of Stevie.

For a tale of such violence, betrayal, and malice, *The Secret Agent* has its share of optimists. Or perhaps rather, characters who simply choose to be naive. Winnie envisioned her husband and brother to be like "father and son" and felt "it was her work" that had brought them to that point (C 153). And "though Verloc is loved for what he can provide for Stevie, and only that, he is ultimately victimized by his idealistic belief that he is loved for himself alone."[20] Stevie worshiped his sister and idealized

[15] Mark Jackson, "'It Begins with the Goose and Ends with the Goose': Medical, Legal, and Lay Understandings of Imbecility in Ingram v Wyatt, 1824-1832." *Social History of Medicine* 11, 3 (1998), p. 380.

[16] Joseph Wiesenfarth, "Stevie and the Structure of 'The Secret Agent,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 13, no. 4 (1967), p. 513, *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26278664 [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[17] Wiesenfarth, "Stevie and the Structure," p. 515.

[18] Jill Clark, "A Tale Told by Stevie: From Thermodynamic to Informational Entropy in '*The Secret Agent*,'" *Conradiana* 36, no. 1/2 (2004), pp. 16, 25, *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24635031 [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[19] Holland, "A Thoughtful Reading Guide," p. 222.

[20] Guilhamet, "Conrad's 'The Secret Agent,'" p. 153.

his brother-in-law. Truly, it was only Stevie's mother who completely saw through the idyllic "Verloc hearth" with clear eyes and head.[21]

WINNIE

Mrs. Winnie Verloc knew her brother Stevie better than anyone. She and Stevie were remarkably close. Winnie knew how to "manage" Stevie, much more so than his own mother did (C 46). "He was much more mine than mothers. I sat up nights and nights with him on my lap, all alone upstairs, when I wasn't more than eight years old myself. And then – He was mine, I tell you" (C 225). Given the established familial bond and the fact that Winnie had no children of her own, it is tenable that she come to think of Stevie as her own son, as is sometimes typical of primary caregivers.[22] As a mother would, Winnie made a great sacrifice for Stevie. She married Mr. Verloc to obtain security for Stevie and their mother. She made an "economic arrangement" instead of marrying the man she loved, the butcher's son.[23]

Winnie knew what bothered Stevie. She knew that using the word "steal" would make Stevie "uncomfortable" because "Stevie was delicately honest" (C 142). Winnie knew how violence upset Stevie. "He can't stand the notion of any cruelty," she tried to explain to her husband (C 50). For this reason, she kept Stevie occupied and as much out of earshot as possible while Mr. Verloc and his fellow anarchists held their meetings. She felt that Stevie wasn't "fit to hear what's said here. He believes it's all true. He gets into his passions about it" (C 49). Hence, Winnie, had she bothered to give it any real thought, quite possibly would have understood why Stevie went along with his brother-in-law's scheme. In addition to his fierce loyalty to Mr. Verloc, the passionate, justice seeking side of Stevie would have been brought out by the bomb plot. (Although it's not likely Mr. Verloc told Stevie precisely what his errand was, much less what it was about.) After Stevie read about a German officer tearing off half of a recruit's ear, Winnie said that Stevie would have "stuck that officer like a pig if he had seen him then. It's true, too!" (C 50). Winnie understood that there was restrained violence in Stevie. However, she considered "restrained" to be the key word and worried no more about it than that.

Winnie was very good at not worrying, or at least not thinking too hard about things. Her philosophy was that "things do not stand much looking into" (C 145). This philosophy extended beyond her life, her marriage, and her husband's double

[21] Wiesenfarth, "Stevie and the Structure," p. 514.

[22] Meghan Casserley, "Who's Your Mommy? The Secret Struggle Between Mothers And Nannies," *Forbes*, 18 Feb. 2011, https://www.forbes.com/sites/meghancasserly/2011/02/18/cameron-macdonald-shadow-mothers-university-of-california-childcare-working-nanny/#1e835fd877ab [accessed: 22.08.2020]; Chris R. Fraley, "A Brief Overview of Adult Attachment Theory and Research; R. Chris Fraley," University of Illinois – Champaign Department of Psychology, 2018, https://labs.psychology.illinois.edu/~rcfraley/attachment.htm [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[23] Lutz, "A Rage for Order," p. 7.

life to her thoughts on Stevie. She made very little effort to better understand Stevie's disorder, or rather to "investigate her brother's psychology" (C 138). She was no more interested in the inter-workings of his mind that those of Mr. Verloc's organization. Moffat attributes Winnie's philosophy to the deal she had struck to "avoid a nonoccurrence of her frightening childhood" in which she protected Stevie from their drunken father.[24] She not only held up her end of the "pragmatic" bargain but asked no questions of her husband in order "to create an arrangement which affords her the autonomy to protect her brother."[25]

Her brother was "delicate" (C 7) and "docile" (C 141) but "excitable" (C 49). Stevie was "absent minded," but getting less so, the optimist in her was sure (C 135). Winnie knew Stevie to be "amiable, attractive, affectionate, and only a little, a very little, peculiar" (C 143). "And she could not see him otherwise" (C 143). That was it. End of story.

That is, until the day she found out her brother's remains were being scraped off the ground with a shovel. It was at this point that "Winnie experiences a profound shock."[26] All at once she saw everything she'd been refusing to see, acknowledged it, and experienced something between a wake-up call and a reality check. This shock was so great that it was the catalyst of a darkly cathartic, and ultimately destructive, series of events. Mr. Verloc's murder was the result of the "violation of an unspoken quid pro quo."[27] He was supposed to provide for and protect Stevie in return for Winnie's wifely duties and affections. He failed, she snapped. The husband she trusted to keep her family together had betrayed her and their arrangement.

An example of Winnie's disinclination to learn more about or understand Stevie is their walk to the bus stop from their mother's new home.

> Winnie soothed his excitement without ever fathoming its twofold character. Mrs. Verloc [note the transition to formal address] 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 (C 139).

Obviously. For all she knew about Stevie, Winnie did not know much *of* Stevie.

Winnie's reluctance to admit, even to herself, that Stevie was anything more than "peculiar" (C 143) could well have been another reflection of her fiercely protective nature. Winnie may not have even realized she was being defensive. Her attitude appears, according to the insights provided by *The Secret Agent*, to have been entirely subconscious. "With increasing vehemence and moral judgment, state officials in the nineteenth century viewed mentally retarded people as burdensome, dangerous, or both."[28] By admitting that Stevie was, say, more than a little peculiar, Winnie would

[24] Moffat, "Domestic Violence," p. 476.

[25] Moffat, "Domestic Violence," p. 476.

[26] Lutz, "A Rage for Order," p. 6.

[27] Moffat, "Domestic Violence," p. 477.

[28] See Goodheart, "Rethinking Mental Retardation," p. 92. In reference to "burdensome," Stevie's mother did once refer to Stevie as "a terrible encumbrance," referring to her daughter's future and ensuring one for Stevie (C 7). "Burden" is a point of view, a state of mind. Winnie did not see Stevie in such

have had to likewise acknowledge that her brother was what people in 1886 deemed a "menace to society."[29] This reluctance coincides with their mother's great fear of Stevie being taken from her and sent to a workhouse.

STEVIE'S MOTHER

Both Winnie and Conrad assert throughout the novel that Stevie is closer to Winnie than his mother. Stevie's mother seemed to be incapable of performing some of the interactions he had with Winnie. For example, it was Winnie who knew how to reason with Stevie and get him back onto the cab, not their mother. But Winnie is wrong in viewing her mother as "impotent" (C 199). While their mother may not have understood Stevie himself, she best understood what would be in store for him, and people like him, should he not have the security Mr. Verloc provided. (Such as he provided it.)

Joseph Conrad wrote in a letter to Edward Garnett in 1907, "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."[30] Conrad was referring to Stevie's mother, "a 'secret agent' in her private plan to help Stevie."[31] While Winnie, who could also be considered the titular secret agent when considering her marriage to Mr. Verloc, "loyally paid for" security for Stevie through sacrifice (C 199), their mother "heroic[ly]" sacrificed herself to try and ensure he keep it (C 133). "Stevie's welfare superseded every other norm for action in their lives," "the meaning of Winnie's and her mother's lives depends on Stevie's staying alive."[32] Together, the women did their best to protect "that poor boy" (C 134). But, as the saying goes, you can't protect your children from everything. Or everyone.

Like Winnie, her mother did not try to comprehend the finer points of Stevie's "peculiar[ities] (C 143). She and her daughter even "harbor[ed] the fantastic belief that Stevie's condition is improving."[33] They felt certain he was becoming less absentminded. This "justifies Winnie's unhappy existence."[34] She could bear her burdens if Stevie was getting better.

Their mother was at least informed enough to know that her son would likely go to a workhouse and not an asylum. Her son being taken and put away was her greatest fear. It was not an unfounded one. Even more alarming is the notion that workhouses

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a way, any more than she would have a young son of her own. Their mother was, as stated, concerned in paramount for her children's futures.

[29] Goodheart, "Rethinking Mental Retardation," p. 90.

[30] Qtd. in Cedric Watts, *Joseph Conrad: 'The Secret Agent.' Literature Insights*, Tirril: Humanities--Ebooks, 2007, p. 14.

[31] Watts, *Joseph Conrad*, p. 14.

[32] Wiesenfarth, "Stevie and the Structure," p. 514.

[33] Guilhamet, "Conrad's 'The Secret Agent,'" p. 147.

[34] Davidson, "The Sign of Conrad's Secret Agent," p. 38.

were "often used as a secure place of surveillance before the individual could be transported to the county institution."[35] An individual's future placement in an institution could be determined by his or her behavior displayed in the workhouses.

MR. VERLOC, WORKHOUSES, AND ASYLUMS DURING THE PERIOD OF *THE SECRET AGENT*

According to the New Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, "Conditions in the workhouse were to be harsh and unattractive so as to discourage all but the most desperate from wanting to be admitted."[36] The threat of the workhouse was the motivation for Stevie's mother's sacrificial exit from the Verloc household. She was afraid that Mr. Verloc would someday run out of patience with Stevie and she felt that "the less strain put on Mr. Verloc's kindness the longer its effects were likely to last" (C 133). She theorized that her absence would eliminate some of that strain.

After Stevie's death, Mr. Verloc, a master at rationalization, asserted that Stevie "was half-witted, irresponsible. Any court would have seen that at once. Only fit for the asylum" (C 173). He saw himself as doing Stevie a favor. Someone reading the novel today, unfamiliar with the system in 1886, could easily assume that, by 'asylum,' Mr. Verloc meant that Stevie was mentally ill and "fit" for a psychiatric hospital. As the case was in 1886, there was not much of a difference to the general public. As explained, mental illness and intellectual disabilities had not been explored, observed, or researched enough for a proper distinction to be made between the two. This distinction is still not always made.[37] The subjectivity of a heading like "deviant" was far reaching and, if one was determined, it took more creativity than effort to make the label fit a great deal of Nineteenth Century London.[38]

Mr. Verloc insisted to the Assistant Commissioner that an asylum would have been "the worst that would've happened to" Stevie had he been caught and arrested instead of accidentally blown up (C 173). The ignorant Mr. Verloc would have at any time, were it not for Winnie, readily signed Stevie over to people who might lock him "in side rooms 'in a nude state' for weeks at a time where people 'slept on the floor without either bed or pillow, being supplied only with strong quilted rugs', packing violent patients in wet sheets, or restraining them by belts, wrist straps and locked

[35] Anne Shepherd, David Wright, "Madness, Suicide and the Victorian Asylum: Attempted Self-Murder in the Age of Non-Restraint," *Medical History* 46 (2002), p. 185.

[36] E. D. Myers, "Workhouse or Asylum: the Nineteenth Century Battle for the Care of the Pauper Insane," *Psychiatric Bulletin* 22, no. 9 (1998), p. 575.

[37] Nicole Chavez, Alonso Melissa, "Police Took a 6-Year-Old Girl to a Mental Health Facility in Florida Because She Was 'out of Control' at School," *CNN*, Cable News Network, 15 Feb. 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/15/us/florida-girl-mentalhealth-baker-act/index.html [accessed: 22.05.2020].

[38] Peter McCandless, "Liberty and Lunacy: The Victorians and Wrongful Confinement," *Journal of Social History* 11, no. 3 (1978), p. 367, *JSTOR*, https:// www.jstor.org/stable/3786820?origin=JSTOR-pdf&seq=1 [accessed: 26.05.2020].

gloves."[39] Though his methods were largely condemned, the man responsible for these particular techniques nevertheless "was appointed King's College Hospital's first professor of psychological medicine in 1871" and had seven lectures published in 1873 alone.[40] Those presiding over or working in an institution might have made Stevie sleep in "a cage-like 'crib bed.'"[41] Or perhaps Stevie would have been put in a place where people were "chained to benches and walls with their food being passed into them in tins tied to the end of long poles."[42]

"Retarded females were sexually vulnerable, especially in almshouses."[43]

Stevie certainly would have been drugged to some extent.[44]

"No record was kept of restraint or seclusion, both of which could be carried out without the sanction of a medical officer: there were no registers or records of accidental occurrences."[45] Occurrences. Another term with a wide-reaching definition.

The existence of asylums, and for lack of a better word, their expediency, also explains why Mr. Verloc would have assumed that Stevie, who (before the discovery of autism) would have clearly been considered only mildly to moderately intellectually disabled, would have been admitted into an asylum without question. Worldly as Mr. Verloc was, chances are he had never seen anyone severely mentally handicapped, and likely not with autism, to give him any perspective on the complex matter. The majority of moderately to severely handicapped people – including not only intellectually disabled people but the physically disabled, the mentally ill, and those we now know of as autistic – were in asylums as a matter of routine. He could not accurately place Stevie on the spectrum if he did not have a clear picture of what, or who, was on either end of the spectrum.

CLASSIFICATIONS

In describing *The Secret Agent*, Joseph Conrad wrote, "It contains half a dozen anarchists, two women, and an idiot. They're all imbeciles."[46] Yet another thing

[39] Andrew Roberts, "Mental Health History Timeline," *Mental Health History Timeline*, Middlesex University, 22 May 2003, Web. 16 Oct. 2011, http://studymore.org.uk/mhhtim.htm [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[40] Roberts, "Mental Health History."

[41] "Diseases of the Mind: Highlights of American Psychiatry through 1900–19th Century Psychiatric Debates," *National Library of Medicine – National Institutes of Health*, National Institute of Health, 13 Sept. 2011, Web. 15 Oct. 2011, https://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/diseases/debates.html [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[42] Melvin Baker, "Insanity and Politics: The Establishment of a Lunatic Asylum in St. John's, Newfoundland, 1836-1855," *Newfoundland Quarterly* LXXVII, 2, 3 (1981), p. 27, Web. 16 Oct. 2011, http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~melbaker/stabb.htm [accessed: 22.08.2020].

[43] Goodheart, "Rethinking Mental Retardation," p. 95.

[44] Shepherd, Wright, "Madness, Suicide," p. 179

[45] Gwendoline M. Ayers, *"4." England's First State Hospitals and the Metropolitan Asylums Board, 1867-1930*, Berkeley: University of California, 1971, Socialist Health Organization, 13 Dec. 2009, Web. 15 Oct. 2011, http://www.sochealth.co.uk/history/imbecile.htm [accessed: 22.08.2020].

[46] Qtd. Moffat, "Domestic Violence," p. 469.

Mr. Verloc did not know was that there were three general classifications of people with intellectual disabilities in Nineteenth Century London.[47] At the far end of the spectrum there were "idiots," the severely disabled. In the middle were "imbeciles." On the other end were the "feeble-minded."[48] These were people on the "borderland of imbecility."[49] People were placed in the category of "feeble-minded" based on concepts like "the childishness of the weak-minded, their inability to manage their own affairs or adequately to protect themselves, their social rather than their educational disabilities, and their vulnerability to imposition."[50]

Today, people are, by definition, classified as intellectually disabled or developmentally delayed based on their IQ, 70 or under, and also by the particular type of disability they have.[51] Classifications have changed dramatically over the years along with the aforementioned labels. The term "high functioning" is just one example of a new system of classification and, more specifically, diagnosis. "Idiot savant" has become "savant" in the last twenty years or so.[52] People with Down Syndrome are no longer classified as or referred to as "mongoloids."[53] People with congenital hyperthyroidism are no longer referred to as "cretins."[54] (All of this is said with the exception of a distinct few people who are either uneducated, unchangeable, or both.)[55]

Stevie, had his disability been acknowledged, would likely have, in 1886, been considered "feeble minded." As "the condition of autism would not be identified for another 35 years or so" the "ensemble of attributes at once consistent with and corrective of the dominant contemporary social and scientific autist" that Stevie possessed were what Joseph Valente called an "unwitting intervention in the history of cognitive disability."[56] As an example of these attributes – people with autism generally have "stems," or "stimming.behaviors."[57] This author immediately pegged

[47] The author addresses here people with intellectual disabilities, as does the source cited. However, the terms discussed applied to other groups as well, particularly the mentally ill.

[48] Jackson, "'It Begins with the Goose,'" p. 364.

[49] Jackson, "'It Begins with the Goose,'" p. 379.

[50] Jackson, "'It Begins with the Goose,'" p. 380.

[51] Benet, "IQ Classifications"; Gold, "Morons, Imbeciles, and Idiots."

[52] Idiot savant, *The American Heritage® Medical Dictionary*, (2007), https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/idiot+savant [accessed: 22.08.2020].

[53] Paul Brians, "Washington State University," *Common Errors in English Usage and More Mongoloid Comments*, Washington State University, 25 May 2016, https://brians.wsu.edu/2016/05/25/mongoloid/ [accessed: 22.08.2020].

[54] Robert B. Taylor, *White Coat Tales: Medicine's Heroes, Heritage, and Misadventures* (New York: Springer, 2008), p. 83.

[55] George Clooney's character in the Netflix production of *Catch-22* uses the term "mongoloid" as a way to insult a group of soldiers. The above statement is not a reflection on him or his method portrayal of a very foul man in 1942. Just for the record.

[56] Valente, "The Accidental Autist," p. 21.

[57] Steven K. Kapp et al., "'People Should Be Allowed To Do What They Like': Autistic Adults' Views and Experiences of Stimming," *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice* 23, no.7 (2019), doi:10.1177/1362361319829628.

Stevie's circles as one, Valente saw Stevie's speech patterns as another.[58] Valente also listed "hyperesthesia, bodily agitation, sensory disintegration" as "primary symptomology."[59]

As to Stevie's circles, there are many theories as to what point Joseph Conrad was trying to make with them, as they were prominent throughout the novel and screamed "symbolism" to many. Guilhamet called them "rather too-obvious symbols of perfection,"[60] which is meant to contrast with Stevie, who is imperfect. Stallman said they represent the novel's "circular design."[61] Lutz claimed that Stevie was trying to "understand the origins of human misery and to the power of the reified social relations that resist such formulations."[62]

Davidson said the circles "signify nothing."[63] While he may not have been on the same wavelength, that is exactly what Murray (who backed up this author's opinion) thought, too.

> For all that Conrad here implies how the circles should be read—the 'mad art'—and for all that the scene has invited so much critical commentary because of the desire to interpret the drawings, it could be that we should read Stevie's geometry in terms of the pleasure that he gains from producing them; a disabled, here autistic, pleasure.[64]

Drawing circles repetitively is a classic example of a stimming behavior performed by many people with autism (Mccubbins). There is no deep meaning, no symbolism. It is a natural, common behavior, as indicative of Stevie's autism as hyperesthesia.

MR. VERLOC

What Mr. Verloc *did* know about Stevie was that he was incredibly loyal, he had a "blind devotion" to Mr. Verloc to the extent of "fanaticism" (C 188). Mr. Verloc was flattered by Stevie's "submission and worship" (C 189). So, when Mr. Verloc couldn't find anyone "crazy enough or hungry enough" (C 210) to carry out his all-but-guaranteed suicide mission, *he found someone feeble-minded enough*.

[58] Valente, "The Accidental Autist," p. 27.

[59] Valente, "The Accidental Autist," p. 30.

[60] Guilhamet, "Conrad's 'The Secret Agent,'" p. 145.

[61] R. W. Stallman, "Time and The Secret Agent," in *The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium*, ed. R. W. Stallman (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1960), p. 235.

[62] Lutz, "A Rage for Order," p. 13.

[63] Davidson, "The Sign of Conrad's Secret Agent," p. 40.

[64] Murray, "From Virginia's Sister, p. 78.

EUGENICS, COMRADE OSSIPON, AND CESARE LOMBROSO

As it has been briefly mentioned above, the theory and practice of eugenics pulled in some pretty big name believers. William Faulkner,[65] H. G. Wells, Henrik Ibsen, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Elliot, Margaret Sanger,[66] Helen Keller, Alexander Graham Bell, Winston Churchill,[67] and Former President Theodore Roosevelt.[68]

Among several comments in favor of eugenics and sterilization of "degenerates," Roosevelt wrote in a letter to Charles Davenport, "society has no business to permit degenerates to reproduce their kind."[69] He likened the idea to farmers choosing the better stock to breed. Any farmer who didn't was "fit for an asylum."[70] Those words should sound familiar—they're Mr. Verloc's, quoted above.

George Bernard Shaw, also a eugenicist (think *Pygmalion*),[71] once wrote, "Where there is no knowledge, ignorance calls itself science."[72] Out of all the characters in *The Secret Agent*, Comrade Ossipon claimed to know the most about feeble-mindedness, idiots, degenerates, and criminals (C 38, 39) when, in actuality, he was the most ignorant of them all. He was a medical school dropout who still managed to acquire the moniker of "Doctor" (C 38). He "scientifically" (C 39) diagnosed Stevie as a "degenerate" (C 38) after a "glance at the lobes of his ears" (C 39). In other words, Stevie's large ears, with the lobes separated a certain way from his head, marked him as a born criminal.

Ossipon also diagnosed Winnie after he learned she had killed her husband, as if it were all coming clear to him as "he gazed scientifically at […] the sister of a degenerate, a degenerate herself—of a murdering type. He gazed at her and invoked Lombroso […]. He gazed at her cheeks, at her nose, at her eyes, at her ears… Bad! … Fatal!" (C 242).

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[65] Jay Watson, *Faulkner and Whiteness*, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011, doi: 10.14325/mississippi/9781617030208.001.0001.

[66] Chris Jones, "Column: Eugenics, George Bernard Shaw and the Need for a Dramatic Reckoning," *Chicago Tribune*, 22 July 2020, https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/chris-jones/ct-ent--eugenics-shaw-jones-0726-20200722-npkizsggpjd3xeh6inpborivzu-story.html [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[67] Matthew Archbold, "7 Beloved Famous People Who Were Wildly Pro-Eugenics," *National Catholic Register*, 14 Nov. 2014, https://www.ncregister.com/blog/matthew-archbold/7-beloved-famous-people--who-were-wildly-pro-eugenics [accessed: 22.08.2020].

[68] Theodore Roosevelt, "From The Outlook, January 3rd Letter of 1913," Received by Charles Davenport, *Letter by Theodore Roosevelt to Charles Davenport: Society Should Not Permit Degenerates to Reproduce Their Kind.*, Eugenics and Other Evils, 9 Jan. 2015, https://eugenics.us/letter-by-theodore-roosevelt-to-charles-davenport-society-should-not-permit-degenerates-to-reproduce-their-kind/176.htm [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[69] Roosevelt, "From The Outlook."

[70] Roosevelt, "From The Outlook."

[71] Jones, "Column: Eugenics."

[72] George Bernard Shaw, *Maxims for Revolutionists*. EBook #26107, Project Gutenberg, 2011, *Project Gutenberg's Maxims for Revolutionists, by George Bernard Shaw*, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/stream/maximsforrevolut26107gut/26107.txt [accessed: 26.05.2020].

Ossipon's line of reasoning was based on the works of "eugenic phrenologist" Cesare Lombroso.[73] Along with his earlobe theory, and his size of the forehead theory, Lombroso came up with several other "marks of degeneration." A tattoo indicated what is now known as borderline personality disorder[74] and being born left-handed meant all kinds of trouble.[75]

In 1912, Charles Ellwood wrote an article that was largely critical of Lombroso in regards to Lombroso's theories on defining the 'born criminal' by atavism, tattooing, and more.[76] The article was more or less a book review of Lombroso's "Crime, It's Cause and Remedies." Ellwood explained that "Congenital criminality is identical, according to Lombroso, on the one hand with moral insanity or imbecility, on the other with a peculiar form of psychic epilepsy."[77] Ellwood goes on to say that "Lombroso unquestionably demonstrates" that "the epileptic class is a very dangerous defective class in society and should be dealt with […] if degeneracy and crime are to be successfully combatted."[78]

By 1886, Lombroso had already "responded to objections"[79] to some of his theories. In *The Secret Agent*, Karl Yundt described Lombroso as both an "idiot" and an "imbecile" (C 39). As explained above, it is impossible to be both. Today his views, "are largely discredited" by leading scientists (Encyclopedia Britannica) and his thoroughly debunked work (including criticism from Sigmund Freud himself[80]) is considered, at best, a stepping stone in criminology. However, there are still a few stray followers out there who presume to (inaccurately) diagnose fetal alcohol syndrome by the shape of a person's face.[81]

[73] Lennard Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," *The Disability Studies Reader*, 26 May 2014, p. 13, www.academia.edu/1134554/Constructing_Normalcy [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[74] Giuseppe Carrà, Francesco Barale, "Cesare Lombroso, M.D., 1835-1909," *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 161, no. 4 (2004), p. 624.

[75] Howard I. Kushner, "Cesare Lombroso and the Pathology of Left-Handedness Cesare Lombroso and the Pathology of Left-Handedness," *The Lancet* 377, no. 9760 (8 Jan. 2011), pp. 118-119, doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(11)60009-3.

[76] Charles A. Ellwood, "Lombroso's Theory of Crime," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 2, no. 5, ser. 6 (Mar. 1912), 6, p. 720, https://studylib.net/doc/8882721/lombroso-s-theory-of-crime---scholarly-commons [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[77] Ellwood, "Lombroso's Theory," p. 722.

[78] Ellwood, "Lombroso's Theory," p. 723.

[79] The Development of Lombroso Studies – Mucri – Criminology Museum," *Museo Criminologico – Mucrì*, Ministry of Justice, Web. 16 Oct. 2011, https://www.museocriminologico.it/lombroso_3_uk.htm [accessed: 26.05.2020].

[80] Clark, "A Tale Told," p. 7.

[81] Laura E. Rice, Fauzia Sheikh, "Dr. Fauzia Sheikh, Roxbury Treatment Center," 6 June 2017.

PERCEPTION OF "FEEBLE-MINDEDNESS" IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

His family's inability to understand Stevie is an excellent metaphor for the nineteenth century society's ignorance of the people like him, of intellectual disabilities as well as mental illness. The asylum is a succinct representation of that ignorance and fear. Both intellectual disabilities and mental illness are discussed here and above because, in 1886 and 1907, they were considered one and the same. The asylums confined both the mentally ill as well as the mentally and developmentally disabled because a distinction was seldom made between, barring dual diagnoses, the very different groups of people.[82] The Idiots Act took effect, coincidentally, in 1886, which "did something to lessen the legal overlap, but the Lunacy Act (1890) again included idiot in the definition of lunacy." The 1891 British Census lumped together "lunatic, imbecile or, idiot."[83] Finally, in 1913, with the Mental Deficiency Act "vigorous efforts began to be made to find separate provisions for the mentally handicapped."[84] These "separate provisions" were "'colonies' designed to separate defectives from the gene–pool of the nation.[85]

These "rehabilitating" accommodations for all groups concerned were so ghastly and unbearable that

> during 1881, twenty-three patients had committed suicide in licensed institutions for the insane. Of these, most patients contrived to hang themselves with bedsheets, handkerchiefs tied together with bootlaces, or by 'roller towels.' Some patients fatally threw themselves down stairs, whilst others cut their throats with knives smuggled out of the scullery… One patient escaped from Whittingham Asylum and lay down on the London and North Western Railway line, where he was found decapitated the next day.[86]

There are those who would argue that Stevie was better off back with the shovel.

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[82] As is mentioned above, in spite of a great deal of progress, this gross misconception has not yet been totally rectified. A six-year-old girl with "special needs" who was being "tested for autism" was, in recent years, sent by her school to a "mental health facility" for "acting out" (Chavez, Alonso, "Police Took").

[83] Roberts, "Mental Health History."

[84] *British Medical Journal*, p. 339.

[85] Roberts, "Mental Health History."

[86] Shepherd, Wright, "Madness, Suicide," p. 176.

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