

## WOMEN IN CONRAD'S FICTION – THE STORY OF WINNIE VERLOC

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**Abstract:** Joseph Conrad's novel entitled *The Secret Agent* has three main thematic threads: those of social convention, psychology and politics. Against this background, we follow the story of Winnie Verloc's humdrum existence, which is conditioned by the low social status of her family, the sense of alienation and distance that exists between herself and her husband, her own inborn psychological traits and her position as a woman, who – like other women at that time – had no say in important matters and was excluded from many areas of public life. Shocked by the tragic death of her beloved brother – which, to make matters worse, has been caused by her own husband – she kills the latter and – after suffering a nervous breakdown – takes her own life.

Winnie Verloc's story has been variously interpreted by literary critics, who differ particularly in their assessment of her motives for murdering her husband (B. Harrington, B. Soane), linking it with a critique of the hypocrisy of the bourgeois world and also of the big city, which is seen as a source of moral degradation. Her story is also sometimes interpreted in a 'domestic' colonial context (B. Soane) and through the optic of the status of Woman as the Other, who is deprived of her rights and dignity. Her life is also interpreted in terms of betrayal (W. Heimer) and the futility of her devotion to her brother, her fate being the epitome of lone sacrifice. Worthy of note is an attempt to look at Winnie from the point of view of her husband, together with a negative assessment of the fact that she married Verloc purely in order to safeguard her brother's future (P. Dolan). W. Tillyard for his part wonders whether Winnie is a tragic figure.

In conclusion, we may say that on a social plane, Winnie's fate appears to be a consequence of the disintegration of the bourgeois world, while on a psychological plane it can be seen as a consequence of personal traits of character or inborn predispositions. On a political plane, Winnie's story can be viewed through the optic of movements for the emancipation of women, as well as her unwitting involvement in a complicated political game.

**Keywords:** moral conventions, social exclusion, love, sacrifice, alienation, atavistic rage, crime

## I

In the ‘Author’s Note’ to *The Secret Agent*, Conrad makes the following statement:

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 to her psychology but as to her humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Winnie Verloc is mentioned several times, though in the novel itself – as is usual in Conrad’s works – the reader makes the acquaintance of a number of different characters, almost all of whom are clearly drawn as quite distinct individuals. We may therefore ask why it is Winnie who is singled out in the *Author’s Note*. Who is she? a typical Victorian wife who is subservient to her husband? Or does she perhaps become her true self only when she chooses freedom and – taking the initiative – commits a crime?

The story of Winnie Verloc is also a pretext, being the framework for another story, i.e. the absurd bomb attack on the Royal Observatory in London’s Greenwich Park – a motif which Conrad used in order to pour scorn on the futility and senselessness of anarchy and terror, which brought suffering and death to innocent bystanders. At the same time, he exposed the modus operandi of certain States that were willing to resort to any provocation in order to maintain the status quo. If the story was to make a profound impression on the reader, however, it was not enough for it to be set in the political realities of the day. It also had to be presented as the tragedy of a person who had been unwittingly caught up in a political game. That person was none other than Winnie, hence Conrad’s use of the words “Mrs. Verloc’s story”.

One of Winnie’s main traits would seem to be indifference or reserve with regard to reality. She has been leading a monotonous existence. The atmosphere of her childhood was not one of homely warmth. After the death of her father she helped her mother to run a small boarding house. It was then that she experienced her first disappointment in romance. Although her love was requited, the boy’s family did not approve of his choice and so the lovers had to part. So, when Verloc came along and proposed to her, she accepted. Were it not for “the provocation of her unfathomable reserve”,<sup>2</sup> her beauty would have been nothing out of the ordinary: “Winnie had also other charms: her youth; her full, rounded form; her clear complexion.”

Having moved into Verloc’s small abode in one of Soho’s narrow streets, she runs the house and continues to take care of her retarded younger brother Stevie, who – being excitable and oversensitive – bursts into tears at the sight of suffering or wrongdoing and is generally unable to cope with life. He is totally dependent on others and

<sup>1</sup> J. Conrad. *Complete Works*, Vol. XIII, *The Secret Agent*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Page & Company, 1924, p. xiii (Author’s Note).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Winnie's attachment to him has in time become almost motherly. The fact that Verloc is kind to the boy and has taken him in is therefore of prime importance to her.

Among political activists, anarchists and sundry adventurers Adolf Verloc is known as a member of the "Proletariat Society" – which, as it turns out, he has infiltrated on behalf of the secret service of a foreign power. On occasion, he has also acted as a police informer. His way of life is therefore different from that of ordinary people. In the evenings he is usually out. Sometimes his associates meet downstairs in the parlour behind the shop.

Winnie asks no questions. With characteristic calmness, she accepts the fact that her husband's work is – as he himself has put it – "in a way political",<sup>3</sup> for "it was Mrs Verloc's principle to ignore" "the inwardness of things".<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this attitude could be seen to be one of the causes of the tragedy that later unfolds. Does she never wonder about the real nature of her husband's occupation, however? Is she never puzzled by the gloomy little shop, which – with its haphazard assortment of "wares" – is reminiscent of a junk shop and whose purpose is merely to give the appearance of being a business establishment?

The married life of the Verlocs consists of routine gestures and superficial exchanges of words. Tired and beset by problems, Verloc usually comes home late and is not in a talkative mood. Their silent coexistence is illustrated by the short, almost wordless whiles that they spend together in their bedroom. Self-restraint not only keeps them apart, but also becomes a kind of trap. Events gradually reveal the illusory nature of the couple's "tacit accord".<sup>5</sup> Their marriage functions without any trace of love, being a more or less mutually advantageous contract. Verloc "found at home the ease of his body and the peace of his conscience, together with Mrs Verloc's wifely attentions and Mrs Verloc's mother's deferential regard."<sup>6</sup> Winnie for her part appreciates the fact that her marriage assures Stevie a safe existence, while her mother sees it as a stroke of good fortune: "Her son-in-law's heavy good nature inspired her with a sense of absolute safety."<sup>7</sup>

As we know, the Victorian age developed moral principles and social conventions that for a long time governed the lifestyle of the middle class in particular. A woman's role was to care for her husband and the family home, while that of a man was to be the family breadwinner. This is so in the Verloc household, but only for a certain time.

One day – acting under pressure from the people who control him – Verloc organizes a bomb attack using Stevie, who obeys him implicitly and is killed outright by the explosion. Hearing the news of her brother's appalling death, Winnie feels that the world has collapsed around her, for she no longer has anyone to care for. Her immediate reaction is one of numbness: "Mrs Verloc gazed at the whitewashed wall. A blank wall – perfectly blank. A blankness to run at and dash your head against. Mrs

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Verloc remained immovably seated.”<sup>8</sup> There is only one thought in her mind: “This man took the boy away to murder him. He took the boy away from his home to murder him. He took the boy away from me to murder him!”<sup>9</sup> She does not plan to seek revenge, however. Her only desire is to leave. When she rouses herself, she realizes that after the death of her brother she is once again free to choose her own destiny, having no sense of obligation towards her husband, who – not suspecting anything and being totally incapable of showing any empathy (“Mr Verloc had the misfortune not to be in accord with his audience”<sup>10</sup>) – with “a note of wooing”<sup>11</sup> in his voice bids her to join him on the sofa, thus provoking the paroxysm of fury that prompts her to murder him there and then.

## II

Initially, Winnie is a likeable character. She is an exemplary daughter. She cares for her brother and is loyal to her husband. At heart, however, she is indifferent to the world. She is also indifferent to her husband and his preoccupations. Is this because she chooses to ignore “the inwardness of things” – or is it because she is afraid that she might “see” too much? a conflict of interests, perhaps – or mutually exclusive values? a complexity that is beyond her comprehension? Or perhaps she fears that by acknowledging certain facts she will be compelled to make a choice or take a decision? She has already made her commitment, however. What matters to her most is her brother’s future. She cannot bring herself to admit that the goal which she has set herself is being attained at the cost of her life and perhaps also at the cost of certain principles. It is more convenient for her not to see and not to hear what is going on around her. Maintaining appearances is a means to achieving an end and for Winnie that end is to safeguard Stevie’s future. The determination with which she works towards achieving that end eventually leads her to commit a crime. In a fit of rage, she kills her husband, but that merely compounds her problems without solving anything. As she panics, her thoughts become chaotic and she cannot decide whether to commit suicide or flee abroad: “Spain or California. Mere names. The vast world created for the glory of man was only a vast blank to Mrs Verloc. She did not know which way to turn. Murderers had friends, relations, helpers – they had knowledge. She had nothing.”<sup>12</sup> The sudden arrival of Verloc’s associate Ossipon – a would-be doctor who pretends to be a revolutionary – offers her a ray of hope. Seeing this as her last chance, Winnie somewhat incoherently tries to persuade him to flee with her. Both play for high stakes. For the “robust anarchist” the prize is money and the prospect of an easy life. For Winnie it is quite simply her life.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

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### III

Conrad has no illusions about human nature. Winnie's life is driven by one overriding concern – her brother's welfare. When her dear Stevie perishes, she murders the man who is responsible for his death, whereupon all the energy is drained from her body and her initiative evaporates. Paralysed by fear, she loses her resolve and becomes a thoroughly confused and lonely creature who – being desperately in need of moral support – is willing to forego the social conventions that she has hitherto observed. However, the narrator gives us to understand that Winnie's 'rebellion' is not inspired by any idea of emancipation, but is rather the result of an instinctive imperative to mete out justice. Is she therefore – notwithstanding the circumstances – still a prey to illusions? Does she really want to flee with Ossipon? Can she really believe that their enterprise will succeed? So shaky is her state of mind that she cannot be fully aware of what she is doing. When she is on the boat, nobody can get through to her. Try as they might, the stewardess and the sailor are unable to help her. Before she jumps into the sea she has already plunged into darkness, for it would seem that she is led to make her suicidal leap more by instinct than by conscious reflection, which would mean that Conrad saw this character as an elemental force or the personification of nature, as it were. Such a portrayal of Winnie's supposed liberation would seem to testify to the reserve with which Conrad viewed women's emancipatory ambitions.

### IV

Let us now turn to what literary critics have made of Winnie's story. Several scholars have wondered whether Cesare Lombroso's<sup>13</sup> theory may have influenced the construction of Conradian characters. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, this Italian psychiatrist, anthropologist and criminologist became well known for his view – based on the tenets of social Darwinism – that a propensity for crime is an inherited trait and that a "born criminal" can be recognized by certain physical defects and atavistic behaviour patterns. Lombroso was of the opinion that the human psyche was capable of "evolutionary regression" by exhibiting the characteristic traits and behaviour patterns of distant ancestors. Ellen B. Harrington<sup>14</sup> is one of several scholars who have tried to determine whether Conrad was familiar with Lombroso's theory and whether he might have made use of it in creating his characters – and his female characters in particular. According to Harrington, Conrad's attitude towards Lombroso's ideas was ambiguous. While he derided the Italian psychiatrist's oversimplified classification of social degenerates, he would seem to have

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<sup>13</sup> 1835-1909.

<sup>14</sup> E.B. Harrington. "The Female Offender the New Woman and Winnie Verloc in *The Secret Agent*". In: *The Secret Agent: Centennial Essay*. Eds. A.H. Simons, J.H. Stape. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007.

used the theory of personality regression in drawing the character of Winnie. Let us therefore look at the dramatic events of that fateful afternoon from the perspective of Lombroso's theory.

On coming back home, Verloc finds that his wife has become totally withdrawn, as if her mind was somewhere else. Try as he might, he cannot draw her into conversation and finds her silence frightening. Winnie for her part still cannot fathom what has happened. She is tormented by one thought: "This man took the boy away to murder him."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as the narrator explains: "Mrs Verloc's mental condition had the merit of simplicity; but it was not sound. It was governed too much by a fixed idea."<sup>16</sup> [...] „Her personality seemed to have been torn into two pieces, whose mental operations did not adjust themselves very well to each other."<sup>17</sup> When she eventually pulls herself together, she is in a new frame of mind: "[...] having all the force of insane logic, Mrs Verloc's disconnected wits went to work practically."<sup>18</sup>

Harrington compares Lombroso's ideas concerning crimes committed by women with the way in which Winnie's crime is depicted by Conrad. We do not know the exact moment at which she conceives the idea of killing her husband. All we know is that it transforms her facial features: "[...] the resemblance of her face with that of her brother grew at every step, even to the droop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes."<sup>19</sup> Harrington is of the opinion that in making Winnie bear an eerie resemblance to her dead brother, Conrad may have been influenced by Lombroso's theory. Could it be that Winnie's identification of herself with Stevie and her physical resemblance to him at a moment of heightened tension are an external expression of mental regression? As we know, Lombroso held that the atavistic traits of our distant ancestors lie dormant within us and come to the surface in particular situations. The words which Conrad's narrator uses to describe the state of Winnie's mind as she plunges a knife into her husband's chest would seem to echo this view: "Into that plunging blow, delivered over the side of the couch, Mrs Verloc had put all the inheritance of her immemorial and obscure descent, the simple ferocity of the age of caverns, and the unbalanced nervous fury of the age of bar-rooms."<sup>20</sup> Harrington also lays emphasis on the fact that the strength of Winnie's attachment to her brother is the prime motive for her crime. Her "maternal vigilance" is mentioned by the narrator at the end of Chapter I.<sup>21</sup> Writing about crimes of passion committed by women, Lombroso states that the wounding of a woman's maternal feelings may act as an impulse that drives her to commit a crime, for a woman treats her child as part of herself.

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<sup>15</sup> J. Conrad, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

## V

Femininity is not a likeable trait in *The Secret Agent*. It is used instrumentally as part of a game. First it serves to keep Winnie's marriage within the framework of Victorian tradition. Later, when there is no longer any need to keep up pretences, it is used by the terrified Winnie to win Ossipon over into protecting her from danger. However, she is unable to find the support that she needs, for – as Harrington observes – the woman whom Ossipon previously desired now personifies a certain overpowering, possessive femininity that quite simply frightens him. The so-called anarchist is at one and the same time startled and filled with fear by her metamorphosis. Having learnt that Winnie has killed her husband, “[...] he gazed scientifically at that woman, the sister of a degenerate, a degenerate herself – of a murdering type. He gazed at her, and invoked Lombroso, as an Italian peasant recommends himself to his favourite saint. He gazed scientifically. He gazed at her cheeks, at her nose, at her eyes, at her ears ... . Bad! ... Fatal! Mrs Verloc's pale lips parting, slightly relaxed under his passionately attentive gaze, he gazed also at her teeth. ... Not a doubt remained ... a murdering type.”<sup>22</sup>

Conrad openly pokes fun at the “scientific” bent of this erstwhile student of medicine. Indeed, he amuses himself at Ossipon's expense and has no qualms about mocking the ‘omniscience’ of science. Neither does his irony spare Winnie, who decides that the understanding she had with Verloc is no longer valid after the death of her brother. She feels free – free of her obligations – but turns out to be completely unprepared for the challenges posed by her freedom. At every turn the narrator stresses the illusory nature of that freedom: “[...] the free woman who had had really no idea where she was going to [...]”<sup>23</sup> Mrs Verloc was a free woman. [...] she did not exactly know what use to make of her freedom.<sup>24</sup> As Harrington observes, the crime committed by Winnie is an ironic act of freedom, for after the killing she is overcome with fear. A moment ago, she was strong enough to stab her husband to death and now she panics at the sight of blood: “With a sudden snatch at her skirts and a faint shriek she ran to the door, as if the trickle had been the first sign of a destroying flood.”<sup>25</sup> Her freedom is very short-lived, as she turns out to be incapable of taking any decision. She clings tightly to her husband's associate, whom she comes across by pure chance, thus returning to the state from which she has just freed herself. As the narrator comments ironically: “Mrs Verloc was no longer a free woman.”<sup>26</sup> Harrington argues that Winnie's freedom is not liberation, but rather yet another sexual transaction. Shocked by what she has done and at the same time firmly entrenched in traditional morality, Winnie is incapable of choosing her own path in life. By

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

adopting an attitude of ironic aloofness, Conrad's narrator – Harrington concludes – casts doubt on women's ability to really free themselves from their traditional roles.

## VI

Bev Soane gives an interesting analysis of Winnie's plight.<sup>27</sup> She compares the private space of the house in Brett Street to a colonial territory, the couple's relationship being compared to that between colonizers and the colonized. Winnie's domestic space is a little colony. Like the space of a colony, this space is a void filled with the force of the colonizer and – like colonized peoples – the inhabitants of the house in Brett Street are subjects, their easy-going governor being Verloc. The women's space is separated from that of the men. Soane cites similar opinions of other scholars, for example William Bonney, who interprets the "blank space" in Conrad's texts as a virgin void – "a feminine space whose semantic openness invites cerebral colonization."<sup>28</sup> Just as colonized territories are plunged into silence, so Winnie's story is depicted as being one of silence, this being a symbolic metaphor, as it were, or perhaps an ontological characteristic of her fate.<sup>29</sup>

## VII

Verloc's clumsy efforts to draw his wife into conversation on that fateful evening are thwarted by her silence – that silence behind which she used to hide herself away in an attempt to escape the ordeal of reality and which now has been raised as an impenetrable barrier. Zdzisław Najder has observed that silence is an important aspect of Conradian characters.<sup>30</sup> Silence affords Winnie an illusion of security only as long as she is able to avoid confronting reality or engaging with it. It can also be a form of resistance to male domination. The success of her marriage depends on her ability to avoid naming or giving expression to certain matters. In her case, silence has yet another aspect: as she rarely speaks and is rarely spoken to, she is not privy to knowledge, which in her household is a male preserve. Knowledge, ideas and symbols are variously distributed among men and women and serve to reinforce or modify sexual differences. As Andrew M. Roberts writes, in dominant relationships

<sup>27</sup> B. Soane. "The Colony at the Heart Empire Domestic Space in *The Secret Agent*". *The Conradian* 2005, Vol. 30, № 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Z. Najder. "Cisza i milczenie w dziełach Conrada". In: *Semantyka milczenia*. Ed. K. Handke. Warszawa: Sławistyczny Ośrodek Wydawniczy, 1999.



knowledge becomes strength.<sup>31</sup> Conradian women are often portrayed as being ontologically imprisoned, as they do not participate in the exchange of knowledge.

## VIII

Tracy Jordan for her part tries to look at Winnie through the eyes of her loving husband Verloc, for whom she is “sacred, mysterious, untouchable”.<sup>32</sup> And very important. Like that of a child – and like that of Stevie – Verloc’s emotional equilibrium depends on Winnie. One evening, he tries to evoke Winnie’s sympathy saying “I haven’t been feeling well for the last few days.” This sorrowful utterance hardly makes any impression on Winnie, who reacts in her usual superficial, routine-like manner. Verloc is forced to compete with Stevie for his wife’s attention in order to “snatch” a token of love from her. However, her indifference leaves him fearful in his solitude and the void of the black night.

## IX

Conrad unequivocally disputes the advisability of Winnie’s philosophy of ignoring “the inwardness of things”, for the reserve and aloofness which she cultivates eventually turns against her. The unceasing struggle for Stevie’s welfare that gives her life a sense of purpose relentlessly leads to disaster. In this story, the idea of sacrifice is treated with consummate irony. As Paul Dolan aptly remarks: “Self-sacrifice, the essential social virtue, is revealed in *The Secret Agent* as carrying within itself terrible possibilities.”<sup>33</sup> All Winnie achieves by forsaking her own dreams of love, by being indifferent to her mother’s fate and by devoting her life to attaining one particular goal is death and infamy. She behaves like a fanatic, sacrificing everything for one idea. Could it be that some scholars are going too far in their refusal to acknowledge that Winnie is a tragic figure? Her fate has all the hallmarks of tragic irony, if only because she herself – albeit with the best intentions – contributes to her brother’s appalling death. This is surely a classic example of undeserved guilt. The question arises as to whether all Winnie’s actions are governed by destiny or fate, or whether it is she who has sealed her own fate.

<sup>31</sup> A.M. Roberts. “What Else Could I Tell Him? Confessing to Men and Lying to Women in Conrad’s Fiction”. *L’Epoque Conradianne* 1993, Vol. 19.

<sup>32</sup> T. Jordan. “Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*: Kids, Chaos and Cannibalism”. *Conradiana* 1987, Vol. XIX, № 1, p. 66.

<sup>33</sup> P. Dolan. “The Plot in *The Secret Agent*”. *Conradiana* 1983, Vol. XVI, № 3, p. 226.

## X

As we have seen, *The Secret Agent* can be interpreted within a social, psychological or political context. Viewed from a social perspective, Winnie's fate largely corresponds with an observation that the author makes in his preface to the novel: "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 to her psychology but as to her humanity." In telling Winnie's story, Conrad takes to task the age in which she lived and of which she was a 'product'. And, of course, the great metropolis – the capital of an empire "on which the sun never set" – was a symbol of that age. He compares the streets of London to a "slimy aquarium from which the water had been run off."<sup>34</sup> This is a city which is in moral decline and in which interpersonal relations have been destroyed. Selfishness, coupled with the pursuit of money and personal success, have blinded people to the fate of others. London is a 'laboratory of progress' in which only those who adapt to its particular conditions have any chance of survival. Such is the setting in which Winnie's story unfolds and her tragic end – as Conrad would appear to have us believe – is but the inevitable consequence of the circumstances in which she grew up. The novel's represented world is devoid of hope, for the only alternative to a self-seeking Society that is preoccupied with external appearances are a collection of hapless failures who have been relegated to its margins. Winnie's story admirably fits into this world, highlighting its misery and its hypocrisy. It fits into a vision of a Society that is nihilistic and devoid of moral principles. It is a matter of tragic irony that the very Victorian ideals which built the might of the Empire have degenerated into a routine and become an end in themselves, thus laying the foundations of a world that is devoid of human feeling.

By viewing the novel from the perspective of Lombroso's psychological theory we can discern traces of atavistic behaviour in Winnie's actions. Let us note that – notwithstanding certain minor differences of opinion – scholars agree that Conrad was well acquainted with Lombroso's views, if only because he would have seen articles about them in "Blackwood's Magazine". Indeed, he makes several references to Lombroso in the text of his novel. However, he treats the Italian's theory with characteristic reserve reinforced with irony and at times blatant ridicule, thus underlining the unfathomable mystery of the human psyche, which does not lend itself to typological classification of any kind.

Lastly, Winnie's story can and should be seen within the contemporary political context of the struggle for women's emancipation, which by the end of the nineteenth century had become an important feature of the British political scene. Conrad was only too aware of the fact that Victorian notions of the role of women in Society were increasingly seen as being anachronistic and no longer acceptable. The idea that women ought to be subservient to their husbands and that their lives ought to be confined to the world of their daily household chores was being met with resistance. In

<sup>34</sup> J. Conrad, *The Secret Agent...*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

*The Secret Agent*, however, this resistance is provoked by an exceptional event which utterly devastates Winnie – the death of her brother, for which she blames her husband. Were it not for this event, her game of marital pretence would no doubt have continued. Her desperate action cannot bring her the freedom she desires and her grotesque attempt to liberate herself eventually turns out to be a mere caricature of freedom. Conrad gives us to understand that – firstly – this is because the inertia proceeding from social conditioning and tradition is too strong. Secondly, it is because Winnie is her own opponent. He steers the course of events in such a way that it is Winnie's very nature that is shown to be partly responsible for her undoing. Is not this reminiscent of certain reflections made by Marlowe in *Chance*? There we read of "that something in them precise and mysterious, acting both as restraint and as inspiration; their femininity in short which they think they can get rid of by trying hard, but can't, and never will."<sup>35</sup>

The manner in which Conrad constructed the character of Winnie reflects the crisis of the Victorian social model on the one hand, whilst on the other hand it reflects the scepticism with which he treated feminist movements. By portraying an extreme practical example of women's emancipation, he exposes the idea to ridicule. The "free woman"<sup>36</sup> panics and cannot cope – even though she has a large sum of money at her disposal – and, once again, demeaning and humiliating herself, looks to a man to rescue her. Conrad discerned the richness of a woman's inner being and was aware that women were not always able to take advantage of their potential. What he valued above all in women was their femininity, which is perhaps why he was less than sympathetic towards their emancipatory ambitions.

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz

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<sup>35</sup> J. Conrad. *Complete Works*, Vol. II, *Chance*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924, p. 63.

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