The Secret Agent

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOSEPH CONRAD

Joseph Conrad was an English novelist of Polish ancestry and British citizenship. He was born into what was then the Russian Empire; his Polish parents were exiled for nationalist activities while he was a child and both died by the time he was 11. Conrad always harbored guilt about the fact that he didn't follow in his parents' political footsteps and instead opted for a life of exile. Conrad was educated in L'viv and Krakow; English was his third language, and he didn't master it until his twenties. As a young man, he embarked on a navy career. He joined the British Merchant Service in 1878, sailing as far as Australia. In 1886, he became a British subject. After concluding his naval career in 1894, Conrad got married and had two sons. He began writing in the 1880s, and his major works, including *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, and *The Secret Agent*, were produced between 1897 and 1911.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Anarchism is an umbrella term for political philosophies and movements that reject hierarchical authority and typically seek to abolish the state; it is also associated with anti-capitalist and libertarian socialist thought. A range of anarchist perspectives is reflected in *The Secret Agent*: some, like The Professor, favor violent revolutionary tactics. Others, like Michaelis (who may have been based on the Russian philosopher Peter Kropotkin) reject violent measures, instead focusing on helping society evolve to adopt an economic system based on mutual cooperation and aid. In 1894, a revolutionary French anarchist named Martial Bourdin attempted to carry out a bombing in London, but his explosives went off prematurely, killing him. Bourdin's motives and target were unclear, but it appears that he intended to bomb the Greenwich Observatory. After discussing this incident—which he called "a blood-stained inanity"—with the writer Ford Madox Ford, Conrad based the character of Stevie on Bourdin. The Greenwich Observatory incident, along with the high-profile assassinations of figures like United States President William McKinley, had already brought anarchism into the popular consciousness. In England, anarchism was associated with the immigrant neighborhoods of London's Soho district and was a subject of debate in mainstream periodicals like *Blackwood's Magazine*, which also serialized a number of Conrad's writings.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Secret Agent is an early predecessor of the spy thriller genre that boomed in popularity throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Other early espionage novels include Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and Conrad's own *Under Western Eyes* (1911). Ian Fleming's James Bond series, about a British Secret Intelligence officer, are perhaps the most famous spy novels of all time. The spy plot at the heart of *The Secret Agent* is specifically rooted in anarchism, a political movement that's also explored in Henry James's 1886 novel *The Princess Casamassima* and G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908). Furthermore, Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852) influenced Conrad's portrayal of London in the novel.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale
- **When Written:** 1906
- **Where Written:** France and London
- **When Published:** 1907
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Spy Thriller
- **Setting:** London, England
- **Climax:** Winnie Verloc stabs Adolf Verloc to death
- **Antagonist:** Anarchist terrorism; Mr. Vladimir; Mr. Adolf Verloc
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Unabomber and the Professor. *The Secret Agent* was a favorite book of Ted Kaczynski, the American anarchist and terrorist known as the Unabomber. Kaczynski identified strongly with the character of The Professor, and he sometimes used variations on the name "Conrad" as aliases.

Tragic Associations. Terrorism is a major theme in *The Secret Agent*, and a *Slate* article in late September 2001 identified the novel as one of the American media's three most cited works of literature in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

PLOT SUMMARY

Mr. Adolf Verloc, a shopkeeper in his forties, heads out into the **London** streets one morning, leaving his business in the hands of his wife, Winnie, and Winnie's brother Stevie. Winnie looks after Stevie, who is mentally disabled, as if he's her son. She married Verloc seven years ago because he had the money and willingness to support her, Stevie, and their sickly, widowed mother.

Verloc attends a meeting at a foreign embassy with a secretary named Mr. Vladimir. Verloc has been secretly employed by the embassy as an undercover agent for 11 years, but Vladimir believes that Verloc has grown lazy and isn't earning his keep. To keep his job, Verloc must give the complacent English "a jolly good scare" by instigating a terrorist bombing. The bombing will be attributed to anarchists, which will turn public opinion against these revolutionaries. Vladimir recommends staging an attack on "science" by bombing the Greenwich Observatory.

Verloc meets regularly with a revolutionary society called The Future of the Proletariat. The group includes Michaelis, a gentle idealist who's out on parole after being imprisoned for his involvement a robbery; Ossipon, a medical school dropout obsessed with pseudo-scientific theories; and Yundt, a would-be terrorist. However, none of these men are violent or particularly effective in any way. Verloc, meanwhile, feels tormented by Vladimir's threat and can't decide what to do next.

The story flashes forward to the aftermath of a terrorist bombing in Greenwich Park. Ossipon is having a beer with a mysterious figure called The Professor, an anarchist and bomb-maker who has a detonator and explosive device on his person at all times. Because the police know that he'll set off the detonator if they try to arrest him, he wanders the city freely. He also believes his deadly potential makes him superior to other anarchists. When The Professor hears about that day's bombing, he readily admits to Ossipon that he supplied Verloc with the explosives for the attack. After leaving this meeting, The Professor has a menacing run-in with Chief Inspector Heat, the police department's "expert in anarchist procedure."

Chief Inspector Heat is distressed by the bombing. Two men were seen getting off the Underground, and the bomber stumbled over a tree root and fell, blowing himself up. Importantly, Inspector Heat salvaged a scrap of a coat from the bomber's remains. Inspector Heat hates anarchists, and when he hears that the suspected bombers arrived on a train from Michaelis's neighborhood, he's determined to pin the crime on Michaelis—that way, even though Heat afraid of apprehending The Professor, he can still gain a symbolic victory over anarchists. However, Heat's boss and rival, the Assistant Commissioner, has society connections to Michaelis through the latter's patroness, and he hopes to exonerate the anarchist for fear of offending the woman. The Assistant Commissioner decides to take this matter into his own hands. He also examines Heat's scrap of cloth and discovers that the address of Verloc's shop is inked onto it.

The story then flashes back to before the bombing. Winnie's mother has secured a place in a retirement home for widows, hoping that leaving Stevie in Winnie's care will be better for him. Although Winnie is upset that this move will make people think that Winnie was a poor caretaker, she and Stevie accompany their mother to the home. During the ride, Stevie is distraught by the cab driver's evident poverty and the way he whips his sick horse. Stevie is deeply affected by others' suffering, and when he can't do anything to resolve it, he becomes quietly enraged.

Just after this, Verloc takes a trip to the Continent (mainland Europe) for undisclosed reasons. Upon his return, Winnie asks him to take a greater interest in Stevie—he's been moping around since their mother left. Verloc and Stevie begin to bond over walks, though when Stevie's agitation persists, Winnie agrees that he should be sent to Michaelis's cottage for a stay in the countryside. Unbeknownst to Verloc, Winnie sews Stevie's address into his coat in case he ever gets lost.

On the day of the bombing, Verloc comes home in the evening, seeming ill and out of sorts. He tells Winnie he's withdrawn his entire savings from his banks on the Continent, and that he thinks they should move abroad. Their discussion is interrupted by the Assistant Commissioner's arrival. Winnie asks Verloc if the Commissioner is a foreigner from the Embassy—she's heard Verloc talking about such things in his sleep. Verloc angrily steps outside with the man. While he's gone, Chief Inspector Heat visits the shop and shows Winnie the scrap from the coat, which she recognizes as Stevie's. When Verloc returns alone, he and Heat discuss the bombing in the other room. Winnie eavesdrops and puts together the details, realizing with horror that Stevie was killed in the bombing and that Verloc was responsible.

After Inspector Heat leaves, Verloc feels sorry for Winnie—he never meant for Stevie to die. He'd even grown somewhat fond of the loyal boy during their walks, during which he'd taught Stevie to distrust the police and prepared him to express his rage against them by bombing the Greenwich Observatory. However, when he tries to explain all this to Winnie, she remains immobile and silent with grief. Verloc thinks that Winnie is being unreasonable, and that she's failed to understand how much pressure he's been under because of Vladimir. Anyway, Winnie is partly to blame, too, for forcing Stevie to spend time with him and for putting his name in his coat, leading the police back to them. Winnie briefly considers escape but then, in a passion, plunges a carving knife into Verloc's chest before he can react.

After Verloc dies, Winnie wanders the streets, contemplating suicide in order to avoid being hanged for murder, until she stumbles into Ossipon. Ossipon heard about the bombing and was coming to the Verlocs' on the assumption that Verloc was the man killed. He has feelings for Winnie and also hopes to gain access to Verloc's money, so he agrees to help Winnie flee to France. However, Winnie's seemingly unhinged ranting against Verloc disturbs him. His fear deepens when he learns that the whole affair is entangled with a foreign embassy. When they stop by the Verlocs' shop, Ossipon sees Verloc's corpse, realizes the full truth of what's happened, and becomes terrified of Winnie. He helps Winnie onto a train for the coast

and jumps from the train at the last minute, Verloc's money in his pocket.

Ten days later, Ossipon has another beer with The Professor while they discuss anarchism. Their friend Michaelis persists in idealistic theories, while Ossipon believes that science will eventually rule society—but The Professor remains devoted to the destruction of all things. However, Ossipon no longer has much heart for the subject; he is haunted by the news of Winnie's suicide by jumping off the cross-channel ferry. Ossipon and The Professor go their separate ways, The Professor blending into the London crowds with his hidden explosives, "unsuspected and deadly."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Adolf Verloc – Mr. Verloc, the novel's protagonist (and eventual antagonist), is the titular secret agent. He lives in **London** with his wife of seven years, Winnie. Though he runs a shop selling pornography and contraceptives, he is primarily a secret agent for an unidentified foreign embassy. Verloc is a large man in his forties with heavy-lidded eyes and a big mustache. He has a good-natured, generous personality, though he is also lazy, preferring to stay in bed past noon and to avoid unnecessary labor. Verloc got his start in spying when he stole military secrets from the French Army (he is British by nationality, but his father was French), hoping to impress a girl, who then betrayed him. After that, Verloc began working as a secret agent for the embassy; he has done this for 11 years. Verloc is a Vice President of a revolutionary society called the Future of the Proletariat (F. P.). Despite his revolutionary involvement, Verloc is conventionally respectable in many ways: he's contentedly married to Winnie, and he isn't strongly ideological. However, when Mr. Vladimir (the First Secretary of the Embassy) pressures Verloc to commit a terrorist act in order to stir outrage against anarchists, Verloc can't bring himself to confess his involvement to Winnie. Instead, over the coming weeks, Verloc coaches Winnie's brother Stevie to commit the bombing. After the Assistant Commissioner and Chief Inspector Heat get Verloc's confession, Verloc spends his last hours ranting to Winnie about Vladimir's disloyalty in putting him in this position. Verloc remains complacent about Winnie's love for him until the moment she plunges a knife into his chest, killing him to avenge Stevie's death.

Mrs. Winnie Verloc – Winnie is Verloc's young wife. She married Verloc seven years ago (even though she'd loved another man more), because Verloc was willing to support Winnie's dependents, her mother and her beloved brother Stevie. Besides helping the two of them, Winnie runs the Verloc household and assists with her husband's shop. She is passionately protective of Stevie, though her everyday temperament is so undemonstrative that nobody would guess how angry she gets when Stevie is threatened or hurt. After Winnie's mother moves out of the house, Winnie encourages Verloc to take more of an interest in Stevie and feels triumphant when the two begin taking frequent walks together; she thinks that they look almost like father and son. However, after she learns that Verloc is responsible for Stevie's death in the bombing, she is shaken from her typical reserve and, in the midst of Verloc's self-pitying rantings, stabs him to death in a furious passion. Fearing that she'll be hung for the murder, she flees the house with the plan to commit suicide, and she happens to stumble into Comrade Ossipon. Ossipon and Winnie have always been attracted to each other, so Winnie is able to persuades him to help her escape to France—but when Ossipon learns that she killed Verloc, he jumps off the train at the last second. Seeing no way out, Winnie commits suicide by jumping into the English Channel.

Stevie – Stevie is Winnie's younger brother. He lives with the Verlocs, and Winnie watches over him like a mother. Stevie has an unnamed mental disability and cannot live independently, though he can read and write and has held jobs occasionally. He is highly emotionally sensitive, especially when he hears stories of injustice and suffering (Stevie's late father, ashamed of having a disabled son, was violent toward him when Stevie was a boy). Stevie lives a quiet, predictable life; his main hobby is drawing circles on pieces of paper. However, Stevie's deep sympathy is coupled with rage in the face of injustice, something that even Winnie has never fully understood. This rage comes out especially in Stevie's encounter with a cab driver who beats his horse. After Stevie's and Winnie's mother moves out, Stevie is depressed, so Verloc begins taking an interest in him, manipulatively teaching him to mistrust the police and preparing him to carry out the bombing of the Greenwich Observatory that Verloc has been plotting. Because Stevie trusts Verloc and has a burning desire to avenge the sufferings of the weak, he goes along with Verloc's teaching and plotting. On his way to bomb the Observatory, however, Stevie stumbles and falls on the explosive, dying instantly.

Mr. Vladimir – Vladimir is the First Secretary of the Embassy of an unnamed European country. He is a young man with a reputation for wit. Vladimir accuses Verloc of being lazy and insufficiently useful to the Embassy. Although Vladimir doesn't seem to have a good understanding of socialist or anarchist views, he orders Verloc to carry out a series of terrorist attacks in order to turn public opinion against revolutionary sentiments in British society. He tells Verloc to attack the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, since an attack on "science," specifically astronomy, won't be mistaken for simple class-based grievance. Thoughts of Vladimir haunt Verloc throughout the story. Vladimir is also part of Michaelis's patroness's social circle, and he encounters the Assistant Commissioner there at the end of the story. The Assistant

Commissioner warns Vladimir that the police will begin to crack down on foreign meddling.

Chief Inspector Heat – Chief Inspector Heat is a detective in **London**'s Special Crimes Department; according to his job description, he's an "expert in anarchist procedure." He used to specialize in thieving, and he understood and respected professional thieves, whose instincts were connected to those of the police. By contrast, anarchism makes no sense to him, because it is inherently meaningless, and the process of catching anarchists has no rules. Heat has risen quickly through the professional ranks because he's good at telling his superiors, like the Assistant Commissioner, what they want to hear. He suspects Michaelis's involvement in the Greenwich bombing, and since he dislikes anarchists, he doesn't have any qualms about letting Michaelis take the fall for the incident (despite little direct evidence), in order to satisfy public opinion. Heat also has a casual relationship with Verloc, letting him run his shop of shady wares in exchange for occasional information about anarchist activities. His boss and rival, the Assistant Commissioner, believes that Heat's duty to opposing anarchism dangerously outweighs his duty to the Special Crimes Department. On the night of the bombing, Heat questions Winnie and then Verloc about what happened, using a recovered scrap of Stevie's overcoat to help him draw the conclusion that Stevie was the bomber and that Verloc was the mastermind behind the attack. He encourages Verloc to make a run for it, since Verloc might not get the light prison sentence he expects.

The Assistant Commissioner – The Assistant Commissioner is Chief Inspector Heat's superior and rival in the Special Crimes Department. He doesn't enjoy his job because he must depend on his subordinates to do most of the investigation, and case outcomes are sometimes pressured by public opinion. The Assistant Commissioner has a personal connection with Michaelis's wealthy patroness, whom the Commissioner doesn't want to offend—so when he hears from Chief Inspector Heat that Michaelis might be connected to the Greenwich bombing, he decides to take the investigation into his own hands, circumventing Heat. He even appeals to Sir Ethelred to try to get Heat fired. Relishing the chance to do detective work again, the Assistant Commissioner beats Inspector Heat to the Verlocs' shop and gets a confession from Verloc. After reporting his success to Sir Ethelred, he goes to a party at the home of Michaelis's patroness and happens to meet Mr. Vladimir there and warns him that this case will be the first step toward ridding the country of such foreign meddling.

Comrade Alexander Ossipon – Comrade Ossipon is a member of Verloc's anarchist circle along with Michaelis and Yundt, Comrade Ossipon is the primary author of the Future of the Proletariat political pamphlets. Ossipon is also friends with The Professor. He is a medical school dropout with an interest in pseudo-scientific social theories. Ossipon also enjoys women (especially those with money) and has always been attracted to Winnie Verloc, though she ignores him. After the Greenwich bombing, Ossipon latches onto Winnie in hopes of getting Verloc's money. When Ossipon discovers that Winnie has killed Verloc, however, he becomes terrified of the whole affair. He helps Winnie escape to France but flees with Verloc's money at the last minute. After news of Winnie's suicide (she jumps overboard into the English Channel), Ossipon can't stop thinking about her.

Michaelis – Michaelis is a member of Verloc's revolutionary circle. He is referred to as a "ticket-of-leave apostle," referring to the fact that he served a prison term and is now on probation. He was arrested as a young locksmith for a minor role in an anarchist plot, during which a policeman was killed. He is rotund and pale with a gentle, trustful personality and humanitarian sympathies. Michaelis is mostly interested in the role of economic conditions within history, believing that the system of private ownership is beginning to self-destruct—theories he has honed during his years behind bars. Michaelis is supported by a wealthy patroness. At the time of the Greenwich bombing, Michaelis is staying in a country cottage, writing an obscure and disjointed autobiography. Stevie, to whom Michaelis has always been kind, is staying in the cottage at the time, but Michaelis remains oblivious to the bomb plot.

The Professor – The Professor is an independent anarchist and bomb-maker who provides Verloc with the explosives for the attempted Greenwich bombing. Despite his unimposing stature, he is both more confident and more dangerous than the other anarchists: he always carries an explosive detonator in his pocket, protecting him from the authorities, who are afraid to get too close. He is called The Professor because he once served on a chemistry faculty. The Professor prides himself on his freedom from conventional moral categories. The Professor had always dreamed of climbing from poverty to affluence, and when his ambitions were thwarted, he turned to anarchy out of bitter vengeance. He is not invulnerable, however: he most fears being one against many. At the end of the book, The Professor remains devoted to his belief in the destruction of all things.

Winnie's Mother – Winnie and Stevie's widowed mother lives with the Verlocs. She is stout and unwell, immobilized by swollen legs. Winnie's mother doesn't really understand what Winnie sees in Verloc, but she accepts their marriage as beneficial, since Verloc is a good provider for her, Winnie, and Stevie. However, in order to better provide for Stevie's future, she moves into an almshouse for innkeepers' widows so that the Verlocs won't have to support both her and Stevie—and so that Stevie will have a stronger claim on others' support as he grows older.

Sir Ethelred – Sir Ethelred is a high-ranking politician, a secretary of state. He is a bulky man with drooping eyes. He

grants the Assistant Commissioner freedom to circumvent Chief Inspector Heat in order to investigate the Greenwich bombing. Sir Ethelred is trying to get a controversial fisheries bill through Parliament and has recently been subject to protests targeting him as a socialist.

Cab Driver – The cabby drives the carriage that takes Winnie's mother, along with Winnie and Stevie, to her new retirement lodgings. The driver is old and poor with a hook for a hand; his appearance intimidates the women, although he has a good safety record. Stevie is distraught when the driver whips his old, feeble horse during the ride.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Karl Yundt – Yundt is an elderly, decrepit, would-be terrorist who, with Michaelis and Comrade Ossipon, is in Verloc's revolutionary circle.

Privy Councillor Wurmt – Wurmt works at the Embassy. He is a melancholy, near-sighted man with bushy eyebrows.

Toodles – Toodles is Sir Ethelred's young, unpaid private secretary.

Michaelis's Patroness – The patroness is a wealthy old woman with a wide-ranging social circle. She sympathizes with and financially supports Michaelis. She also has connections with the Assistant Commissioner and Mr. Vladimir.

THEMES

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ANARCHY, TERRORISM, AND CORRUPTION

Due to high-profile assassination attempts against heads of state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (like the shooting of U.S. President McKinley in 1901), anarchy was a hot topic when Conrad wrote *The Secret Agent* in 1906. However, anarchism wasn't a unified political movement: it was more of a diverse collection of ideas centering on the rejection of government and authority; some anarchists (like The Professor in the novel) were violent, while many were not. In the novel, **London** shopkeeper Adolf Verloc is both a secret agent for a foreign embassy and an infiltrator of an anarchist group, and the anarchists he associates with are harmless and ineffective. However, in his role as a secret agent, Verloc is tasked with a terrorist attack which will implicate them (this is meant to provoke the British people into fearing anarchism). After the bombing, the people who suffer most are not anarchists after all, but ordinary Londoners who are altogether uninvolved in politics. Rather than provoking a public outcry, Verloc ends up destroying himself and his family, suggesting that political violence is meaningless and counterproductive. Through the self-sabotaging efforts of secret agent Verloc on behalf of the foreign embassy, Conrad suggests that political violence is self-defeating and senselessly destructive—especially for the everyday people whom violent political movements claim to side with.

In the novel, foreign embassy official Mr. Vladimir portrays anarchism as a menace tolerated by the English masses, though he focuses on the wrong target. According to Vladimir, the English people care too much about political freedom and have therefore become complacent about the danger that anarchists pose. Mr. Vladimir tells Verloc, "England must be brought into line. The imbecile bourgeoisie of this country make themselves the accomplices of the very people whose aim is to drive them out of their houses to starve in ditches. […] What they want just now is a jolly good scare." England, he argues, has unwittingly sheltered anarchists who threaten English society's well-being, and the middle class needs to be shocked out of its complacency.

The Professor, a lone anarchist and bomb-maker, embodies an extreme form of anarchism. Unlike the tamer anarchists Verloc associates with, The Professor constantly carries explosives; he threatens to kill himself, the authorities, and ordinary bystanders at any time. His abandonment of conventional morality makes him dangerous: "[The police's] character is built upon conventional morality. It leans on the social order. Mine stands free from everything artificial. […] They depend on life, […] whereas I depend on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked." In other words, at its extreme, anarchism is unconstrained by allegiance to everyday morality and the social order. Because conventional authorities—and for that matter, most anarchists—adhere to conventional morality, they don't resort to indiscriminate violence, whereas the Professor can use death (terrorism) as a tool to communicate his message at any time.

Short of overt terrorism like The Professor's, anarchism is unlikely to achieve real social change. The Professor mocks the other anarchists—like Verloc's friends Michaelis, Ossipon, and Yundt—who remain stuck on ideas instead of terrorist action: "The [anarchist] and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality—counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical. He plays his little game—so do you propagandists." Because anarchists who stick to propaganda remain tethered to conventional morality, anarchists and legal authorities are just two sides of the same coin. In other words, the more conventional anarchists whom Verloc has infiltrated aren't a threat to the social order. Thus, Verloc's "jolly good scare" on behalf of Vladimir and the foreign embassy, meant to implicate his friends, is destined to fall

flat—it will only distract the police from dealing with truly dangerous figures like The Professor.

Political violence, whether anarchist or anti-anarchist, tends to harm those it's allegedly meant to help. The most vulnerable characters in the novel suffer the most because of anarchist panic. In particular, the one forced to carry out the bombing for the Embassy, Verloc's disabled brother-in-law, Stevie, is the one who suffers most because of it—not any anarchist. After Verloc gets Stevie to bomb the Greenwich Observatory to stir outrage against anarchists, Stevie stumbles and gets blown up instead. After this, Stevie's sister, Winnie (Verloc's wife) is so distraught that she ends up killing Verloc in revenge. Then, finding herself alone and helpless in the world, she commits suicide: "She had become a free woman with a perfection of freedom which left her nothing to desire and absolutely nothing to do, since Stevie's urgent claim on her devotion no longer existed." When Winnie is bereaved by meaningless violence, she is freed not only of the obligation of caring for Stevie, but of loyalty to her husband. Yet, rather than feeling liberated by this, she feels empty and existentially lost. Through Winnie, the novel emphasizes that anarchist panic—and indeed an "anarchist" attitude of freedom from all ties—can actually harm those they're intended to help. In Winnie's case, her actions leave her without ties to her family, to London, or even to life itself.

As if to symbolize harmful rejection of ties, Winnie gets on a ferry to the Continent (mainland Europe) and jumps overboard to avoid arrest for Verloc's stabbing—she believes she has nothing left to live for. More than the theoretical anarchism of Verloc's friends and even more than the misguided violence of the Observatory bombing, Winnie's crime and suicide demonstrate the self-defeating nature of political violence. And at the close of the novel, The Professor still walks free on London's streets—showing that the Embassy's plot has not only failed to turn public opinion against anarchism as a whole, it overlooked the most potent threat.

FOREIGNERS AND THE MODERN CITY

Victorian **London** was one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities: London is both the heart of the British Empire and the place where people from all over the world come to live. Specifically, London's Soho district, where *The Secret Agent* is set, had a reputation for its large immigrant population and also for being disreputable, a place where unfamiliar (foreign) political ideas flourished. Much of the novel's plot deals with the English authorities' discomfort with "foreign" elements, as authorities try to target and expel unwanted movements like anarchism. Yet Conrad suggests that this preoccupation with foreignness is symptomatic of living in a modern city: in a big, cosmopolitan city like London, nobody (whether foreign or native-born) is all that connected to their neighbors or community. Because of this, attempts to isolate and expel foreigners not only fail to resolve that alienation, they're not even effective. Conrad paints a bleak picture of modern urban life, suggesting that it's profoundly isolating for everyone but is especially alienating for immigrants.

Conrad portrays the modern city as an inhospitable place that cuts people off from one another. As Verloc broods about his role as a secret agent, the city reflects his sense of alienation from other people: "he pulled up violently the venetian blind, and leaned his forehead against the cold window-pane—a fragile film of glass stretched between him and the enormity of cold, black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones, things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man." The material that makes up city life is "unfriendly" and, even if it offers basic shelter, it doesn't provide a homey atmosphere where people can easily connect and thrive.

The sense of alienation flows out of the inhospitable environment. While watching paperboys sell newspapers, an anarchist named Ossipon reflects on the inescapable filth of the city: "the grimy sky, the mud of the streets, the rags of the dirty men, harmonised excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printers' ink. […] The trade in afternoon papers was brisk, yet, in comparison with the swift, constant march of foot traffic, the effect was of indifference[.]" The entire atmosphere of London is "gloomy," "grimy," and "rubbishy," and the constant rush of people seems to be part of this oppressive atmosphere; their "indifference" reinforces a sense of alienation between people. Later in the novel, after Mrs. Verloc vengefully murders her husband and finds herself wandering helplessly through the city, its atmosphere reinforces her sense of being alone: "She was alone in London: and the whole town of marvels and mud, with its maze of streets and its mass of lights, was sunk in a hopeless night, rested at the bottom of a black abyss from which no unaided woman could hope to scramble out." The muddy, dark city, which is difficult to navigate, underscores the helplessness of a vulnerable woman in the massive city.

The city is especially inhospitable to "dirty" foreigners, though ultimately, there's not a perfectly clear boundary between foreign and native, meaning that it's impossible to expel foreignness. Verloc is unavoidably influenced by London's foreign influences. "He sat down to consume [supper] without conviction, wearing his hat pushed far back on his head. It was […] the frequentation of foreign cafes which was responsible for that habit, investing with a character of unceremonious impermanency Mr Verloc's steady fidelity to his own fireside." Verloc's habits are permeated with "foreign" influences, giving him an "impermanent" manner at home—he's faithful to his home, yet there's a sense that he never completely belongs there, either. And although London's so-called foreignness is undesirable to authorities, it can't be eradicated entirely. The Assistant Commissioner investigating foreign anarchists believes that the Observatory bombing is a good starting point for "the clearing out of this country of all the foreign political

spies, police, and that sort of—of—dogs. In my opinion they are a ghastly nuisance; also an element of danger. [...] The thing's becoming indecent." To him, foreign influence is something that must be cleansed from London; it's not only un-English, but somehow inhuman. However, in the end, the police's efforts haven't actually rid London of foreign political elements—and importantly, they're unable to apprehend Verloc, whose terrorist bombing is meant to copycat foreign anarchism but is actually executed by British people.

Ultimately, then, foreign elements can't be simply ejected from London; such elements are too deeply embedded in British life, making them ironically too British to be eradicated. The bigger problem with the city isn't that it's contaminated by outsiders, but that it's an inhuman environment for everyone who lives there. Foreigners might be scapegoated, but the alienating atmosphere of modern urban life is a universal problem.

WEAKNESS, VULNERABILITY, AND ABUSE

The struggles of the poorest and weakest in society are a frequent focus of *The Secret Agent*. The anarchist characters claim, at least outwardly, that their activities are meant to improve poor people's lot in life. More specifically, Winnie Verloc's disabled brother, Stevie, exemplifies the frustration of vulnerable people who have no outlet for their sufferings. Indeed, Stevie's sufferings are more acute because his own background of abuse and disability causes him to feel others' pain as if it's his own. Stevie's struggles—culminating in Verloc's callous recruitment of him to carry out the Observatory bombing—end up destroying him. Through the example of Stevie's vulnerability and shocking death, Conrad argues that the most vulnerable members of a society often have no outlet to voice or cope with their suffering, which makes them susceptible to further exploitation. However, he also hints that the vulnerable will ultimately be vindicated.

Being weak and vulnerable himself, Stevie is especially sensitive to others' suffering. Stevie gets worked up about things he doesn't understand, as his sister, Winnie, observes: "If I had known [Verloc's anarchist friends] were coming to-night I would have seen to it that he went to bed at the same time I did. He was out of his mind with something he overheard about eating people's flesh and drinking blood. [...] He isn't fit to hear what's said here. He believes it's all true. He knows no better. He gets into his passions over it." Stevie is vulnerable to exaggerated anarchist rhetoric because he takes it literally, and it stirs up his emotions. He especially can't stand it when other beings suffer, though there is little he can do about it. During a cab ride, he entreats the cab driver not to whip the infirm, terribly slow horse, and when the driver doesn't stop, Stevie scrambles down from the cab and insists on walking alongside the cab instead. As he looks at the thin horse and hears the cabby talk about his family's poverty, Stevie feels deep compassion that he can barely express: "'Bad! Bad!' His gaze remained fixed on the ribs of the horse, self-conscious and somber, as though he were afraid to look about him at the badness of the world. [...] 'Poor! Poor!' stammered out Stevie, pushing his hands deeper into his pockets with convulsive sympathy. He could say nothing; for the tenderness to all pain and all misery" overpowers him. For Stevie, the horse's and cabby's situation of pain and poverty sums up the "badness" of the whole world. Used to suffering himself, Stevie is especially sensitive to such suffering in others, yet because of his own disability, he's limited in his ability to express it—or do much about it.

Stevie has no outlet for his pain over others' suffering, something that Conrad suggests is often the case for a society's most vulnerable members. Because Stevie doesn't have a way to articulate or otherwise respond usefully to suffering, he gets angry when he witnesses suffering: "In the face of anything which affected directly or indirectly his morbid dread of pain, Stevie ended by turning vicious. [...] Supremely wise in knowing his own powerlessness, Stevie was not wise enough to restrain his passions. [...] The anguish of immoderate compassion was succeeded by the pain of an innocent but pitiless rage." Nobody else takes seriously the full extent of Stevie's rage; his sister and mother always just assume he's "excitable" and leave it at that. But Stevie is desperate for an outlet for his rage—the rage being, again, a result of his own compassion and vulnerability. Stevie's emotional sensitivity and severe cognitive challenges make him vulnerable to manipulation and abuse, which his brother-in-law, Verloc, callously takes advantage of. In the end, however, Verloc gets caught, which somewhat vindicates Stevie.

When he needs someone to carry out the Observatory bombing, Mr. Verloc recruits Stevie and plays on Stevie's vulnerability and rage. He wears down Stevie's instinctive trust in the police by persuading him that the police are the enemy and sends him off to carry out the bombing, during which Stevie is accidentally killed. Ironically, Stevie's need for special care leads to the crime being solved: "That his wife should hit upon the precaution of sewing the boy's address inside his overcoat was the last thing Mr Verloc would have thought of. [...] That was what she meant when she said that he need not worry if he lost Stevie during their walks. She had assured him that the boy would turn up all right. Well, he had turned up with a vengeance!" Verloc just took advantage of Stevie instead of considering any of his needs, so it never occurred to him that Winnie would have placed identification on Stevie's clothes—leading to Verloc getting caught.

Because Verloc doesn't understand Stevie's value, he also doesn't understand his wife's grief over losing her brother: "The mind of Mr Verloc lacked profundity. Under the mistaken impression that the value of individuals consists in what they

are in themselves, he could not possibly comprehend the value of Stevie in the eyes of Mrs Verloc." His incomprehension leads to complacency, and he is caught off guard by his wife's own rage, which leads her to stab him to death. Thus, Verloc's attempt to use Stevie is his own undoing in the end. In this way, Conrad suggests that abuse of the vulnerable won't go unpunished forever.

LOYALTY, CONVENTIONALITY, AND REBELLION

Though the ostensible drama of *The Secret Agent* is the Observatory bombing plot, the novel's underlying drama is Winnie Verloc's transformation from conventional wife to rebellious murderer. Winnie and Adolf Verloc have a quiet, unexpressive marriage that rests on taken-for-granted domestic routines, despite the "shop of doubtful wares" (essentially a pornography shop) that they run. However, when Winnie learns that Verloc enlisted her beloved brother, Stevie, for his terrorist plot, resulting in Stevie's death, the façade of domestic peace is shattered, and Winnie's loyalty to Verloc is destroyed with it. In enlisting his brother-in-law in a fatal terrorist plot, Verloc shatters his conventional domestic life, which leaves Winnie free to be subversive, too—culminating in her killing Verloc and fleeing **London**. Through Winnie's stark transformation, Conrad suggests that loyalty to conventional structures like marriage is often more fragile than it appears; when their most treasured bonds of loyalty are violated (like Winnie's bond with Stevie), people will rebel from conventionality.

At the beginning of the story, Winnie's loyalty to Verloc is based on her conventional expectations for marriage and domestic life. Winnie is loyal to Verloc because he fulfills her expectations of him as a reliable provider: "Winnie did not expect from her husband in the daily intercourse of their married life a ceremonious amenity of address and courtliness of manner; […] always foreign to the standards of her class. She did not look for courtesies from him. But he was a good husband, and she had a loyal respect for his rights." Winnie, in other words, is content in a conventional marriage in which she trusts her husband and remains faithful to him in exchange for his provision. At least superficially, Winnie is also content with everyday domestic life: "She glanced all round the parlour […] Ensconced cosily behind the shop of doubtful wares, with the mysteriously dim window, and its door suspiciously ajar in the obscure and narrow street, it was in all essentials of domestic propriety and domestic comfort a respectable home." Verloc's day job is running a shop that sells pornographic and contraceptive items—things that were deeply taboo in the late 19th century (when the novel is set). This socially deviant occupation hints that, "domestic propriety" notwithstanding, everything in the Verlocs' home isn't as it should be.

When Winnie discovers that Verloc has betrayed her by enlisting her brother in a fatal terrorist plot, her loyalty evaporates along with the façade of her conventional domestic life, and she rebels. Indeed, after Winnie overhears the police inspector investigating Verloc regarding the bombing and Stevie's death, her domestic coziness melts away: "The perfect immobility of her pose expressed the agitation of rage and despair, all the potential violence of tragic passions, better than any shallow display of shrieks […] could have done […] In that shop of shady wares […] which seemed to devour the sheen of the light, the gold circlet of the wedding ring on Mrs Verloc's left hand glittered" like "a piece from some splendid treasure of jewels, dropped in a dust-bin." Winnie's impassive, quiet demeanor is revealed to hide a potential for fury, and the shop no longer seems just incompatible with domestic life. Rather, it reveals the hollowness of that life; her wedding ring even glitters mockingly against the "shady" backdrop. When Mrs. Verloc's sense of security is stripped away by Stevie's death, her true nature is revealed: "The exigencies of Mrs Verloc's temperament, which, when stripped of its philosophical reserve, was maternal and violent, forced her to roll a series of thoughts in her motionless head. […] With the rage and dismay of a betrayed woman, she reviewed the tenor of her life in visions concerned mostly with Stevie's difficult existence from its earliest days." Caring for Stevie has been Winnie's whole life, and when she is deprived of that meaning, "reserve" gives way to the capacity for violence. In turn, Mrs. Verloc's capacity for violence transforms into rebellion. When Mrs. Verloc realizes that she's not obligated to remain loyal to Mr. Verloc, she begins "to look upon herself as released from all earthly ties. […] Her contract with existence, as represented by that man standing over there, was at an end. She was a free woman." Without Stevie, and with no reason to remain loyal to her husband, Winnie is freed from conventional constraints. This "freedom" soon leads Winnie to try to more literally free herself from her husband, and from society's expectations, by resorting to drastic measures: she kills Verloc and then commits suicide.

As Winnie tells Ossipon before she flees London, her life has been one of thankless care for others, and now there's no clear place for her in society: "Look here, Tom! I was a young girl. I was done up. I was tired. […] I sat up nights and nights with [Stevie] on my lap, all alone upstairs, when I wasn't more than eight years old myself. […] You can't understand that. No man can understand it. What was I to do?" In Winnie's view, no man, including a husband, can understand the bond she shared with her needy brother; when that fundamental bond is violated, she feels justified in leaving all other loyalties behind.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

LONDON

London symbolizes the inhospitality and profound alienation that Conrad implies is characteristic of modern life. Its drab physical environment mirrors the loneliness, malaise, and sometimes overt hostility that people experience in industrialized society. In the novel, London is most often described as dark, muddy, rain-soaked, and bleak; it's an invariable landscape of brick and stone. The city's misty gloom tends to envelop people as they go about their lives, blurring their identities and thereby separating people from one another. This represents the idea that modern life, particularly in urban environments, is inherently isolating and largely devoid of meaningful experiences or interpersonal connections. Sometimes, London's murky atmosphere is also portrayed as a home in which dangerous "foreign fish" can swim, an image reflecting Victorian anxieties about foreign-born political dissidents.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Secret Agent* published in 1907.

Chapter 2 Quotes

> England lags. This country is absurd with its sentimental regard for individual liberty. [...] England must be brought into line. The imbecile bourgeoisie of this country make themselves the accomplices of the very people whose aim is to drive them out of their houses to starve in ditches. And they have the political power still, if they only had the sense to use it for their preservation. I suppose you agree that the middle classes are stupid? [...] What they want just now is a jolly good scare. This is the psychological moment to set your friends to work.

Related Characters: Mr. Vladimir (speaker), Mr. Adolf Verloc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

For more than a decade, Mr. Verloc has worked for an unidentified foreign embassy as a secret agent, and this embassy wants Verloc to monitor anarchist activities in England in order to help contain the threat of terrorist violence. However, Mr. Vladimir, an embassy official, now tells Verloc that not only has his work been unsatisfactory, but the whole country's complacency about anarchism is dangerously self-sabotaging. Vladimir argues that England is too devoted to individuals' rights—presumably, including the right to express minority opinions in politics. In particular, Vladimir argues that the bourgeoisie, or middle class, have become too tolerant of revolutionary sentiments that wish them ill—by doing so, they're undermining their very existence as a class.

For this reason, Vladimir urges Verloc to incite his anarchist friends to commit a terrorist act. According to Vladimir's plan, such a "jolly good scare" (even though it's fabricated by opponents of anarchism) will shock England's general population out of their complacency and turn them against the revolutionaries they've tolerated thus far. In this sense, Vladimir seems to believe that it's morally justifiable to commit an act of terror as a means of changing people's minds and preserving Britain's traditional social order. However, this is a hypocritical mindset, as Vladimir wants Verloc to ingratiate himself with and mimic the tactics of the same revolutionaries that he claims to despise. And in all likelihood, the "jolly good scare" will harm the very people it's intended to benefit. With this, Conrad begins to imply that political violence, regardless of who carries it out or what their motivations are, is senseless and counterproductive.

> And Mr Vladimir developed his idea from on high, with scorn and condescension, displaying at the same time an amount of ignorance as to the real aims, thoughts, and methods of the revolutionary world which filled the silent Mr Verloc with inward consternation. He confounded causes with effects more than was excusable; the most distinguished propagandists with impulsive bomb throwers; assumed organisation where in the nature of things it could not exist; spoke of the social revolutionary party one moment as of a perfectly disciplined army, where the word of chiefs was supreme, and at another as if it had been the loosest association of desperate brigands that ever camped in a mountain gorge.

Related Characters: Mr. Adolf Verloc, Mr. Vladimir

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Vladimir tells Verloc his plan for a terrorist scare to frighten the general population and turn them against anarchism. Mr. Verloc, who participates in revolutionary circles as a secret agent, realizes that Mr. Vladimir does not

really understand the groups to which he's so fervently opposed. For example, he doesn't recognize the diversity of viewpoints and methods that fall under the general umbrella of "anarchism"—he thinks thoughtful political writers are no different from "bomb throwers," or terrorists, and assumes much more uniformity than actually exists.

This is also shown by the fact that he thinks of the revolutionaries as if they're both a "disciplined army" and a loose collection of bandits. Conrad satirically hints that Vladimir's conception of revolutionaries is typical of most people's in London in the late 1800s: he's fearful of forces he only dimly understands and is therefore unable to respond to those forces in a measured, reasonable way. And, ironically, Vladimir's ignorance and hatred makes him seem just as irrational and reactionary as the anarchists he's criticizing. With this, Conrad implies that those who vehemently oppose revolutionary movements are often just as violent and dangerous as the groups they claim to despise—if not more so, given that Vladimir wants Verloc to commit a serious act of political violence just to provoke public outrage against anarchism.

> Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasion, or bribes. Moreover, I am a civilised man. I would never dream of directing you to organise a mere butchery, even if I expected the best results from it. But I wouldn't expect from a butchery the result I want. Murder is always with us. It is almost an institution. The demonstration must be against learning—science. [...] The attack must have all the shocking senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy.

Related Characters: Mr. Vladimir (speaker), Mr. Adolf Verloc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Vladimir gives Mr. Verloc his latest assignment as a secret agent: to stir up public outrage by staging a bombing that will be attributed to anarchists. Mr. Vladimir believes that anarchism constitutes a threat to international security, but that British people are insufficiently concerned about it. That's why Vladimir thinks Verloc must terrify the public—and why the incident must have a sense of "madness" about it. Madness can't be understood or reasoned with, so it is more frightening than a crime whose motives can be clearly mapped out.

Moreover, the bombing can't simply be an act of indiscriminate violence, because people in modern Britain have become jaded about murder. Instead, it must target an institution that people care about—namely, science. This is why Vladimir instructs Verloc to attack the Greenwich Observatory (an astronomical institution). Since science is increasingly how people make sense of the world, an attack on science (even more than an attack on the monarchy or religion, Vladimir argues) will feel like "gratuitous blasphemy" to people. It will be an instance of senseless madness—a symbolic destruction of truth and meaning—that might finally stir people to take the threat of anarchism seriously.

> Winnie after the death of her father found considerable consolation in the feeling that she need no longer tremble for poor Stevie. She could not bear to see the boy hurt. It maddened her. As a little girl she had often faced with blazing eyes the irascible licensed victualler in defence of her brother. Nothing now in Mrs Verloc's appearance could lead one to suppose that she was capable of a passionate demonstration.

Related Characters: Mr. Adolf Verloc, Stevie, Mrs. Winnie Verloc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Winnie Verloc's deepest devotion is not to her husband, but to her disabled younger brother Stevie, whom she's cared for and protected all her life. When they were growing up, Winnie and Stevie's father, dismayed over having an "abnormal" son, would often lash out in anger and violence at him. This introduces the idea that people who are particularly weak or vulnerable tend to be more easily exploited, as they're often less equipped to stand up for themselves or properly cope with the difficulties in their lives. Winnie was therefore forced to be Stevie's protector, and as such, she was "maddened" by mistreatment of Stevie and fearlessly stood up for him. But because it has been such a long time since Stevie needed such protection, nobody can imagine quiet, predictable Winnie behaving passionately in any way.

Conrad references this bit of Winnie's past, however, as a sign of things to come later in the story. Though Stevie is not currently threatened, Winnie's protective instinct remains.

Thus, when Stevie is killed because of Verloc's plot, Winnie ends up murdering Verloc to avenge her beloved brother. The protective instinct overtakes Winnie, and she displays the passion and madness that would not have made sense for her character if her childhood role had not been explained earlier. With this outcome, Conrad seems to suggest that even though vulnerable people (like the disabled and rather naïve Stevie) experience undue suffering, misdeeds against them won't go unpunished.

Chapter 3 Quotes

"I had to take the carving knife from the boy," Mrs Verloc continued, a little sleepily now. "He was shouting and stamping and sobbing. He can't stand the notion of any cruelty. He would have stuck that officer like a pig if he had seen him then. It's true, too! Some people don't deserve much mercy." Mrs Verloc's voice ceased, and the expression of her motionless eyes became more and more contemplative and veiled during the long pause. "Comfortable, dear?" she asked in a faint, faraway voice. "Shall I put out the light now?"

Related Characters: Mrs. Winnie Verloc (speaker), Stevie, Mr. Adolf Verloc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Winnie Verloc's brother, Stevie, is mentally disabled, and he's extremely sensitive to any suggestion of violence. Because he was often terrorized by their father's abuse as a child, Stevie can't bear to see any other person or creature in pain, and he becomes angry and even violently defensive when he encounters suffering. In the episode Winnie recounts here, Stevie read about a military officer's cruelty in a newspaper and began tearfully raging with a knife in hand. This story, as recalled by Winnie, shows the depth of Stevie's sympathy with the oppressed and hints that he will take extreme actions in hopes of avenging oppression. Indeed, Winnie's husband, Verloc, eventually takes advantage of Stevie's compassion and sensitivity, effectively brainwashing him to commit a terrorist attack by convincing him that the police are oppressive. With this, Conrad seems to be suggesting that disabled or otherwise vulnerable people like Stevie are particularly at risk of being taken advantage of.

Winnie's reaction to is also noteworthy. For one thing, it's not clear whether she realizes that Stevie really *would* do something violent out of anger, or whether she just chalks up his rages to "excitability." For another, her remark that "some people don't deserve much mercy" also suggests that Winnie is capable of acts of vengeance herself, foreshadowing later events. The cozy domestic backdrop of these remarks contrasts with the drama to come later, when both Stevie and Winnie's potential is realized: Stevie commits and is killed in the attack, and Winnie stabs Verloc to avenge Stevie's death.

Chapter 4 Quotes

"I have the means to make myself deadly, but that by itself, you understand, is absolutely nothing in the way of protection. What is effective is the belief those people have in my will to use the means. [...] Therefore I am deadly [...] Their character is built upon conventional morality. It leans on the social order. Mine stands free from everything artificial. They are bound in all sorts of conventions. They depend on life, which, in this connection, is a historical fact surrounded by all sorts of restraints and considerations, a complex organised fact open to attack at every point; whereas I depend on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked. My superiority is evident."

Related Characters: The Professor (speaker), Mr. Adolf Verloc, Comrade Alexander Ossipon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Comrade Ossipon, a member of Verloc's circle of revolutionary friends, meets with The Professor, an enigmatic anarchist who operates outside of their circle. The Professor explains to Ossipon what, in his view, makes him "superior" to the other anarchists: The Professor makes explosives, and he has an explosive device on his person at all times, which he can detonate at any moment by simply pressing a button. As he explains to Ossipon, however, the explosive device isn't actually what makes him deadly. Rather, it's others' knowledge that he is willing to use the device and has the strength of character to detonate it at any time—this makes others afraid to get near him while he roams the world freely.

The Professor looks down on other anarchists because they operate within the system of "conventional morality." That is, they stop short of doing anything that would truly disrupt the social order—like blowing themselves and bystanders up in order to make a political point. They remain committed to life, in other words, with all the connections to other

people, institutions, and society that "life" implies. By contrast, The Professor "[depends] on death" and is therefore freed from all such connections, making him willing to commit atrocities. He believes this makes him superior to those anarchists—like Ossipon, Verloc, and their friends—who merely theorize about revolution.

❝ "You revolutionists," the other continued, with leisurely self-confidence, "are the slaves of the social convention, which is afraid of you; slaves of it as much as the very police that stands up in the defence of that convention. Clearly you are, since you want to revolutionise it. It governs your thought, of course, and your action too, and thus neither your thought nor your action can ever be conclusive [...] The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality—counter moves in the same game [...] at bottom identical."

Related Characters: The Professor (speaker), Comrade Alexander Ossipon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

The Professor continues to explain to Ossipon what makes him "superior" to revolutionaries who are less committed to violence than himself. The key is that the others remain hampered by social convention, no matter how much they claim otherwise. This is shown by the fact that the revolutionaries are locked in conflict with the police, which makes both groups just opposite sides of a single coin known as "legality."

Furthermore, the fact that they want to revolutionize convention shows that they remain indebted to it. In other words, they understand themselves and their goal in relation to existing conventions of law and morals, even if they ultimately seek to overturn them—the existing social order still shapes the revolutionaries' thoughts and actions. And, in this way, The Professor thinks that both police and terrorists are playing the same game. The Professor, on the other hand, believes that he is truly his own man. He plots and acts alone, and the fact that he constantly carries explosives on himself—and is willing to destroy himself at a moment's notice—sets himself apart both physically and symbolically from both other self-proclaimed terrorists and the police.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ The way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds. The Professor's indignation found in itself a final cause that absolved him from the sin of turning to destruction as the agent of his ambition. [...] By exercising his agency with ruthless defiance he procured for himself the appearances of power and personal prestige. That was undeniable to his vengeful bitterness. It pacified its unrest; and in their own way the most ardent of revolutionaries are perhaps doing no more but seeking for peace in common with the rest of mankind—the peace of soothed vanity, of satisfied appetites, or perhaps of appeased conscience.

Related Characters: The Professor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator suggests that even anarchists who are committed to their principles have underlying personal motives: The Professor, for instance, grew up in poverty and was frustrated in his efforts to gain affluence and power. He then channeled his sense of personal failure into a rejection of conventional values and structures. Becoming a terrorist, then, allows him to "[exercise] his agency" in a way that the conventional world (in his view) denied him the ability to do.

The narrator suggests that stories like The Professor's are common among revolutionaries. In other words, despite their outward rejection of authority and other facets of society that most people take for granted, they aren't really so different from other people—they are just trying to come to terms with pain, disappointment, and desire like anyone else. By portraying The Professor in this way, Conrad isn't suggesting that revolutionary beliefs are just a cover for personal bitterness. Rather, he's suggesting that even the most ardent believers in revolutionary ideas are, like anyone else, products of their own personal histories and contexts.

[Inspector Heat] could understand the mind of a burglar, because, as a matter of fact, the mind and the instincts of a burglar are of the same kind as the mind and the instincts of a police officer. Both recognise the same conventions, and have a working knowledge of each other's methods and of the routine of their respective trades. [...] Products of the same machine, one classed as useful and the other as noxious, they take the machine for granted in different ways, but with a seriousness essentially the same. The mind of Chief Inspector Heat was inaccessible to ideas of revolt. But his thieves were not rebels.

Related Characters: The Professor, Chief Inspector Heat

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Before Chief Inspector Heat began investigating anarchists, he investigated professional burglars. His earlier line of work made more sense to him, since professional burglars have carefully honed methods. Inspector Heat mastered these, and this gave him a kind of respect for the systematic minds of thieves. In turn, the thieves had a grudging respect for him. Both burglar and detective were basically working within the same system of law, observing the same conventional norms. In their own way, then, burglars respect norms and operate within the social order, even if they break the law.

In contrast, anarchists claim not to respect norms; their revolutionary activities, like bombings, are intentionally meant to disrupt institutions, shatter expectations, and create chaos. None of these things are logical or predictable to the Inspector, so he struggles in his new role as the Special Crimes Department's "expert in anarchist procedure." Inspector Heat's reflections on burglars reinforce The Professor's comments earlier in the previous chapter: compared to The Professor himself (a real anarchist), police and criminals are really opposite sides of the same coin.

Chapter 6 Quotes

The Chief Inspector lost himself suddenly in a discreet reflective mood; and the Assistant Commissioner repressed a smile at the fleeting thought that the reputation of Chief Inspector Heat might possibly have been made in a great part by the Secret Agent Verloc.

"In a more general way of being of use, all our men of the Special Crimes section on duty [...] have orders to take careful notice of anybody they may see with him. He meets the new arrivals frequently, and afterwards keeps track of them. [...] When I want an address in a hurry, I can always get it from him. Of course, I know how to manage our relations. I haven't seen him to speak to three times in the last two years. I drop him a line, unsigned, and he answers me in the same way at my private address."

Related Characters: Chief Inspector Heat (speaker), Mr. Adolf Verloc, The Assistant Commissioner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

Chief Inspector Heat, a police detective specializing in anarchism, tells his boss, the Assistant Commissioner, about Verloc's role as an informant on London's anarchist activities. Basically, Verloc is the primary contact for anarchists coming to England from other countries, and he occasionally slips their details to Heat. After this conversation, the Assistant Commissioner becomes annoyed that Chief Inspector Heat has access to inside information which the Assistant Commissioner believes ought to be the property of the entire Special Crimes Department. This motivates him to investigate the crime himself, and he ends up catching Verloc before Heat does.

The bigger irony of the quote is that, while Heat's reputation is based on his so-called expertise on anarchism, the Greenwich bombing was instigated by the embassy and not by London's anarchists. In fact, most of Heat's knowledge of London anarchism has been filtered to him through Verloc the secret agent, not directly from anarchists. Thus, there's a satirical element to Heat's "expertise" and a suggestion that, after all, nobody can master something as shapeless and politically entangled as anarchism.

Chapter 7 Quotes

There is a peculiar stupidity and feebleness in the conduct of this affair which gives me excellent hopes of getting behind it and finding there something else than an individual freak of fanaticism. For it is a planned thing, undoubtedly. The actual perpetrator seems to have been led by the hand to the spot, and then abandoned hurriedly to his own devices. The inference is that he was imported from abroad for the purpose of committing this outrage. At the same time one is forced to the conclusion that he did not know enough English to ask his way, unless one were to accept the fantastic theory that he was a deaf mute. [...] But an extraordinary little fact remains: the address on his clothing discovered by the merest accident, too.

Related Characters: The Assistant Commissioner (speaker), Mrs. Winnie Verloc, Stevie, Mr. Adolf Verloc, Sir Ethelred

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

The Assistant Commissioner reports to his boss, secretary of state Sir Ethelred, about the details of that day's bombing in Greenwich. This narrative of the event is significant because, using dramatic irony and alternating points of view, Conrad allows the audience to begin to guess what happened, even though it takes much longer for the characters investigating the bombing to put the details together.

The bomber being "led by the hand" and "hurriedly abandoned," seemingly lost and unable to fend for himself, points to Stevie, Verloc's disabled brother-in-law, carrying out the bombing, perhaps having been exploited by Verloc to do so. Later, it also emerges that Stevie's sister, Winnie, has sewn Stevie's address into his coat, ironically so that he won't get lost—and this seemingly insignificant detail is what leads the police to Verloc's shop.

The Greenwich bombing in the novel was based on a real-life incident. In 1894, a radical French anarchist was killed by explosives he was carrying in Greenwich Park; it was thought that the man intended to blow up the Observatory and that he may have been disabled in some way.

His descent into the street was like the descent into a slimy aquarium from which the water had been run off. A murky, gloomy dampness enveloped him. The walls of the houses were wet, the mud of the roadway glistened with an effect of phosphorescence, and when he emerged into the Strand out of a narrow street by the side of Charing Cross Station the genius of the locality assimilated him. He might have been but one more of the queer foreign fish that can be seen of an evening about there flitting round the dark corners.

Related Characters: The Assistant Commissioner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the Assistant Commissioner emerging from his office in order to investigate the Greenwich bombing. Throughout the novel, the damp, gloomy atmosphere of London symbolizes the inhospitality of modern life. Yet it's sometimes also portrayed as having a dampening, blurring effect on human identity that makes people look "foreign" and unrecognizable, even to themselves. That's the case here, as the Assistant Commissioner is "enveloped" by the murky environment and looks more and more like a "queer foreign fish" the deeper he goes into the city.

Consigned to his office behind mounds of paperwork, the Assistant Commissioner has been unhappy with the lack of firsthand investigation in his job, especially compared to the work he once did abroad. Now, taking the initiative to do detective work again, he is once again "assimilated" into a foreign atmosphere, subtly blurring into the city's strangeness. The passage also suggests that there's something so inherently "foreign" about modern London that the city's foreignness can't be isolated from it; to enter London's streets is to become foreign oneself.

And he himself had become unplaced. It would have been impossible for anybody to guess his occupation. [...] A pleasurable feeling of independence possessed him when he heard the glass doors swing to behind his back with a sort of imperfect baffled thud. He advanced at once into an immensity of greasy slime and damp plaster interspersed with lamps, and enveloped, oppressed, penetrated, choked, and suffocated by the blackness of a wet London night[.]

Related Characters: The Assistant Commissioner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

This passage again explores London's atmosphere and its effect on those who enter it. The Assistant Commissioner has stopped to eat dinner at a small Italian restaurant in one of the city's immigrant neighborhoods. He finds that this restaurant doesn't feel fully Italian or fully British; in fact, eating here makes him feel "unplaced," not belonging to any country in particular. This supports Conrad's argument that, despite anxieties about foreignness in Victorian London, foreign influences had been thoroughly assimilated into London by this time—and the resulting atmosphere assimilates others in turn.

This blended atmosphere of modern London blurs people's identities, making them indistinct from one another and unrecognizable to themselves. This suits the Assistant Commissioner's purposes well, as being "unplaced" unshackles him from his office duties and sets him free to do detective work as he sees fit. Yet, even as it provides cover for secrets, the city remains an inhospitable place—its darkness oppresses, chokes, and suffocates everything. London, and the modern city more broadly, is not a place that's conducive to human thriving overall.

Chapter 8 Quotes

On the box, Stevie shut his vacant mouth first, in order to ejaculate earnestly: "Don't."

The driver, holding high the reins twisted around the hook, took no notice. Perhaps he had not heard. Stevie's breast heaved. [...]

"You mustn't," stammered out Stevie violently. "It hurts."

"Mustn't whip," queried the other in a thoughtful whisper, and immediately whipped. He did this, not because his soul was cruel and his heart evil, but because he had to earn his fare. [...] But on the bridge there was a commotion. Stevie suddenly proceeded to get down from the box.

Related Characters: Cab Driver, Stevie (speaker), Mr. Adolf Verloc, Winnie's Mother, Mrs. Winnie Verloc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the novel, the action shifts, improbably, from the bombing investigation to Winnie and Stevie's mother's journey to the charity house. On the surface, this passage is about Winnie's mother's relocation in a shabby, slow carriage, but it also shifts the focus to the character who will be the turning point in the story: Stevie.

Stevie becomes characteristically distraught when the cabby whips his emaciated, feeble horse in order to speed the carriage's journey. The driver isn't being wantonly cruel; in fact, he is as unwell as his horse, with a hook for a hand, and himself poor and downtrodden. But Stevie is so sensitive to other creatures' pain that he can't bear for the horse to suffer. When the driver doesn't desist, Stevie does the only act of protest he can think of: getting out of the cab altogether, ignoring the possible danger to himself.

This quote not only shows Stevie's extreme sensitivity (based on his own past abuse) but his fervent sense of justice and his almost instinctual need to remedy injustice. These traits make it easy for Winnie's husband, Verloc, to cruelly manipulate and take advantage of Stevie later in the story. The passage also brings out the theme that the weakest in society tend to understand suffering the best, yet they're the most helpless to extricate themselves from it and can even get caught up in perpetuating it.

The tears of that large female in a dark, dusty wig, and ancient silk dress festooned with dingy white cotton lace, were the tears of genuine distress. She had wept because she was heroic and unscrupulous and full of love for both her children. Girls frequently get sacrificed to the welfare of the boys. In this case she was sacrificing Winnie. By the suppression of truth she was slandering her. Of course, Winnie was independent, and need not care for the opinion of people that she would never see and who would never see her; whereas poor Stevie had nothing in the world he could call his own except his mother's heroism and unscrupulousness.

Related Characters: Mrs. Winnie Verloc, Winnie's Mother, Stevie (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

Winnie's mother manipulates her way into a retirement home for the widows of innkeepers by weeping in front of the home's manager. But her tears aren't faked, either. Leaving the Verlocs, with whom she's lived until now, is a complicated display of loyalty to her children, though it doesn't look like that on the surface. By entering a charity home, Winnie's mother implies that she has nobody else to take care of her. This could be especially shaming for Winnie, as anybody might assume that she has refused to care for her own mother. But really, Winnie's mother does this in order to make sure that Stevie is protected. By retiring and becoming dependent on charity herself, she makes sure that Winnie inherits Stevie as a dependent—it's the most she can do to provide for him, since he is unable to fend for himself. Her self-sacrifice, and sacrifice of Winnie's reputation, shows how complicated loyalty can be in a society where many are too vulnerable to care for themselves.

"Poor! Poor!" stammered out Stevie, pushing his hands deeper into his pockets with convulsive sympathy. He could say nothing; for the tenderness to all pain and all misery, the desire to make the horse happy and the cabman happy, had reached the point of a bizarre longing to take them to bed with him. And that, he knew, was impossible. For Stevie was not mad. It was, as it were, a symbolic longing; and at the same time it was very distinct, because springing from experience, the mother of wisdom. […] To be taken into a bed of compassion was the supreme remedy, with the only one disadvantage of being difficult of application on a large scale. And looking at the cabman, Stevie perceived this clearly, because he was reasonable.

Related Characters: Stevie (speaker), Mrs. Winnie Verloc, Winnie's Mother, Cab Driver

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

While dropping off his mother at her new retirement home, Stevie ends up chatting with the cab driver. The cabby is feeling defensive because Stevie got so upset about the condition of the cabby's old horse. The cabby tells Stevie that he is poor and must do what he can to survive in this world. At this, Stevie feels deeply sympathetic and wishes that he could make both the cabby and the horse feel better.

When Stevie was distraught as a child, his sister, Winnie, would comfort him by taking him into her bed for the night. Stevie's desire to do this same thing for the cabby and the horse, though absurd and impracticable, shows the depth of his compassion. Because of his own experience with suffering, he identifies deeply with anyone who suffers—and when he cannot follow through on his instinct to comfort and help, he becomes deeply frustrated. By calling Stevie "reasonable" in this way, the narrator suggests that Stevie has a stronger moral compass than many other characters do. He can't understand revolutionary theories of economic oppression in order to make sense of the world around him, but he sees and sympathizes with human pain, likely even more than the revolutionaries do.

Mrs Verloc, his only sister, guardian, and protector, could not pretend to such depths of insight. […] And she said placidly:

"Come along, Stevie. You can't help that."

The docile Stevie went along; but now he went along without pride, shamblingly, and muttering half words, and even words that would have been whole if they had not been made up of halves that did not belong to each other. It was as though he had been trying to fit all the words he could remember to his sentiments in order to get some sort of corresponding idea. And, as a matter of fact, he got it at last. He hung back to utter it at once. "Bad world for poor people."

Related Characters: Mrs. Winnie Verloc, Stevie (speaker), Mr. Adolf Verloc, Cab Driver

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

Because of his own experiences of suffering, Stevie has profound insight into other people's pain. When he sees the downtrodden cab driver beating his old horse, for example, he perceives that, in some way, the driver's actions are a projection of his own unhappiness and poverty. Winnie, however, takes the world as she finds it; since Stevie can't solve the problem of the cabby's unhappiness, she believes that he needs to let it go.

This complacency doesn't satisfy Stevie, however. His experience with the ragged horse and driver symbolizes Stevie's pain and sympathy for all oppressed people, hence his tormented outcry: "Bad world for poor people." In a few words, Stevie sums up the intractable problems that England's poor and vulnerable people—himself

included—find themselves in. Stevie's inability to channel his unhappiness in a productive way makes him even more vulnerable, a position that Winnie's husband, Verloc, later takes advantage of.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"You know you can trust me," Mr Verloc remarked [...] with hoarse feeling.

Mrs Verloc turned slowly towards the cupboard, saying with deliberation:

"Oh yes. I can trust you."

And she went on with her methodical proceedings. She laid two plates, got the bread, the butter, going to and fro quietly between the table and the cupboard in the peace and silence of her home. On the point of taking out the jam, she reflected practically: "He will be feeling hungry, having been away all day," and she returned to the cupboard once more to get the cold beef. [...] It was only when coming back, carving knife and fork in hand, that she spoke again.

"If I hadn't trusted you I wouldn't have married you."

Related Characters: Mrs. Winnie Verloc, Mr. Adolf Verloc (speaker), Stevie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after the Greenwich bombing in which Stevie is killed but before Winnie learns of his death and her husband's culpability for it. Verloc was the one who recruited Stevie and manipulated him into carrying out the attack, but Winnie has no idea about any of this. This quote is marked by the serenity of the Verlocs' home, which will be shattered a short time later when Winnie learns the truth. Her methodical setting of the table, and her solicitude for Verloc's comfort, make a darkly ironic contrast for what will happen later in the story, after Winnie turns on him.

Though the audience knows that Verloc has been gone all day because he was carrying out the bombing, Winnie believes that everything is the same as before—though the carving knife hints at what's coming (Winnie eventually stabs Verloc to death to avenge Stevie's death). Winnie's deepest trust in Verloc is rooted in his willingness to provide for Stevie. That makes her assertion of trust in Verloc, unknowingly made after Stevie's death, all the more jarring. After she learns that her trust has been betrayed, her loyalty to Verloc will be correspondingly broken.

She glanced all round the parlour, from the corner cupboard to the good fire in the grate. Ensconced cosily behind the shop of doubtful wares, with the mysteriously dim window, and its door suspiciously ajar in the obscure and narrow street, it was in all essentials of domestic propriety and domestic comfort a respectable home. [...]

This was the boy's home too—the roof, the cupboard, the stoked grate. On this thought Mrs Verloc rose, and walking to the other end of the table, said in the fulness of her heart:

"And you are not tired of me."

Related Characters: Mrs. Winnie Verloc, Mr. Adolf Verloc (speaker), Stevie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

This ironic passage contrasts the seeming coziness and tranquility of the Verlocs' home with the reality that their marriage is about to dissolve. The Verlocs' domestic life already has an intrinsic irony. Their shop sells items (like contraceptives and pornography) that don't line up with what Victorian domestic life is supposed to look like. Furthermore, the slightly open door subtly hints that their home, for all its appearances of self-contained coziness, is open to the outside world (namely Verloc's career as a secret agent), making their marriage at least partly a matter of convenience that's fated to die with Verloc's job.

Winnie doesn't see any of this, though, because her satisfaction with her marriage is based on Verloc's willingness to provide for Stevie. Winnie's words ("and you are not tired of me") recall her assertion from earlier in the book, that before Mr. Verloc tired of Stevie, he would have to tire of *her* first. In a sense, though neither of them yet realizes the implications, that has now happened. Once Winnie learns that Stevie has been cruelly killed on Verloc's watch, her illusions about her marriage will disappear.

Chapter 10 Quotes

"A genuine wife and a genuinely, respectably, marital relation. He told me that after his interview at the Embassy he would have thrown everything up, would have tried to sell his shop, and leave the country, only he felt certain that his wife would not even hear of going abroad. Nothing could be more characteristic of the respectable bond than that," went on, with a touch of grimness, the Assistant Commissioner [...] "Yes, a genuine wife. And the victim was a genuine brother-in-law. From a certain point of view we are here in the presence of a domestic drama."

Related Characters: The Assistant Commissioner (speaker), Mrs. Winnie Verloc, Mr. Adolf Verloc, Sir Ethelred

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

When the Assistant Commissioner reports back to Sir Ethelred about the bombing case, Sir Ethelred is surprised to learn that Verloc is married. Marriage doesn't fit the image of a secret agent involved in anarchist activities, which reject conventional social and political structures by definition.

Verloc's marriage gives his work (both as a pornography shop owner and as a secret agent) a façade of respectability. Yet, at the same time, Verloc seems genuinely attached to his wife—after the Embassy orders him to carry out the bombing, Verloc wants to flee the country, but since that would involve telling Winnie the truth, he ultimately carries out the bomb plot instead. In a way, the novel can be viewed as a story of conflicting loyalties, as Verloc allows himself to be pulled between his involvements with the Embassy, the anarchists, and his affection for his family. This explains the Assistant Commissioner's remark, "we are here in the presence of a domestic drama."

Chapter 11 Quotes

Like a peripatetic philosopher, Mr Verloc, strolling along the streets of London, had modified Stevie's view of the police by conversations full of subtle reasonings. Never had a sage a more attentive and admiring disciple. The submission and worship were so apparent that Mr Verloc had come to feel something like a liking for the boy. In any case, he had not foreseen the swift bringing home of his connection. That his wife should hit upon the precaution of sewing the boy's address inside his overcoat was the last thing Mr Verloc would have thought of. [...] That was what she meant when she said that he need not worry if he lost Stevie during their walks. She had assured him that the boy would turn up all right. Well, he had turned up with a vengeance!

Related Characters: Winnie's Mother, Stevie, Mrs. Winnie Verloc, Mr. Adolf Verloc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

"Peripatetic philosopher" ("peripatetic" meaning "walking around") refers to the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who was said to have walked with his students while he taught. This is a chilling comparison to Verloc's method with Stevie: encouraged by Winnie, Verloc had begun taking walks with Stevie to distract Stevie after his mother's departure. What Winnie didn't know was that Verloc was using these walks to drill Stevie for his role in the Greenwich bombing. Verloc did this by wearing down Stevie's lifelong admiration for the police, ensuring that he would mistrust them and protect Verloc in the event that was arrested. He also channeled Stevie's instinctive anger at injustice into the bombing, letting it become a cathartic expression of Stevie's pain over the suffering of the poor and vulnerable.

Winnie also played an unwitting role by teaching Stevie to trust Verloc and show him gratitude for his provision for Stevie. Though she helped make Verloc's exploitation of Stevie possible, however, she also makes it possible that Verloc will be found out: the address sewn into Stevie's coat (in case he ever got lost) later leads the police back to Verloc's shop.

It was obviously unreasonable, the mere cry of exaggerated grief. He threw over it the mantle of his marital indulgence. The mind of Mr Verloc lacked profundity. Under the mistaken impression that the value of individuals consists in what they are in themselves, he could not possibly comprehend the value of Stevie in the eyes of Mrs Verloc. She was taking it confoundedly hard, he thought to himself. It was all the fault of that damned Heat. What did he want to upset the woman for? But she mustn't be allowed, for her own good, to carry on so till she got quite beside herself.

Related Characters: Chief Inspector Heat, Stevie, Mrs. Winnie Verloc, Mr. Adolf Verloc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Verloc takes people at face value, and this becomes his undoing. He sees Stevie as an expendable tool that he can use to get himself out of his difficulties with the Embassy. For that reason, he can't understand the depth of Winnie's grief over his death, finding her distress disproportionate. This also makes it easy for Verloc to transfer the blame from himself to Chief Inspector Heat for upsetting Winnie, even though Heat simply delivered the news.

Because Verloc doesn't look deeply into people or emotions himself, he doesn't comprehend the depth of his wrong against Stevie or against Winnie and believes that his deeds can simply be glossed over as part of the effort to save his own skin. Selfishly, he also takes for granted that Winnie's loyalty is primarily to him, not to Stevie. That's why he's completely unprepared when, a short time later, Winnie plunges a knife into his chest to avenge Stevie's death, killing Verloc.

The lodger was Mr Verloc, indolent, and keeping late hours, sleepily jocular of a morning from under his bedclothes, but with gleams of infatuation in his heavy lidded eyes, and always with some money in his pockets. There was no sparkle of any kind on the lazy stream of his life. [...] But his barque seemed a roomy craft, and his taciturn magnanimity accepted as a matter of course the presence of passengers.

Mrs Verloc pursued the visions of seven years' security for Stevie, loyally paid for on her part; of security growing into confidence, into a domestic feeling, stagnant and deep like a placid pool[.]

Related Characters: Winnie's Mother, Stevie, Mrs. Winnie Verloc, Mr. Adolf Verloc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

When Winnie stabs her husband, it's primarily an act of vengeance for disloyalty. This is seen in Winnie's reflections in the moments leading up to the fatal act. She thinks back to the way her life could have gone if she hadn't married Verloc: she might have married the kind man who once dated her, but who was unprepared to provide for Stevie and Winnie's mother in addition. In the aftermath of that heartbreak, Winnie settled instead for Verloc, a lodger in her mother's inn. Verloc lacked the "sparkle" of the man who had come before him, but he had money in his pockets, and he was willing to provide for those who were most important to Winnie, so she married him. Their seven years of marriage, and Winnie's faithful loyalty to Verloc during those years, were mainly for Stevie's sake. Even if their marriage was "stagnant," it also had a depth of trust. Now that this trust has been shattered, however, Winnie's loyalty to Verloc has been broken as well.

She started forward at once, as if she were still a loyal woman bound to that man by an unbroken contract. Her right hand skimmed slightly the end of the table, and when she had passed on towards the sofa the carving knife had vanished without the slightest sound from the side of the dish. [...] But Mr Verloc did not see that. He was lying on his back and staring upwards. He saw partly on the ceiling and partly on the wall the moving shadow of an arm with a clenched hand holding a carving knife. It flickered up and down. Its movements were leisurely. They were leisurely enough for Mr Verloc to recognise the limb and the weapon.

Related Characters: Comrade Alexander Ossipon, Stevie, Mrs. Winnie Verloc, Mr. Adolf Verloc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

In this climactic passage, Winnie gets back at Verloc for betraying her trust by getting Stevie killed. At first, Winnie pretends she is still loyal to Verloc, but she betrays that loyalty in practically the same motion, picking up the knife

with which she'd just prepared his dinner and fatally stabbing him with it.

With its emphasis on the domestic setting—Winnie takes Verloc by surprise as he dozes trustingly after a satisfying meal, taking her love for granted—the passage highlights the connection between loyalty and domesticity in the novel. When loyalty is betrayed, domestic harmony is likewise disrupted, suggesting that wider society is unraveling in turn. After Verloc's murder, Winnie is not only released from the bonds of marriage but from all conventional bonds, as well. In accordance with that disconnected state, Winnie drifts helplessly around the city until she enlists Ossipon, by chance, to help her escape to France.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ 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. She was the most lonely of murderers that ever struck a mortal blow. She was alone in London: and the whole town of marvels and mud, with its maze of streets and its mass of lights, was sunk in a hopeless night, rested at the bottom of a black abyss from which no unaided woman could hope to scramble out.

Related Characters: Mr. Adolf Verloc, Mrs. Winnie Verloc

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

Describing Winnie's plight after murdering Verloc, this passage highlights the fact that in Victorian London, women were generally more vulnerable than men. While Verloc could flee to the Continent (mainland Europe) or to America to escape a crime (having access to a "vast world created for the glory of man"), Winnie does not have the means, knowledge, or connections to do the same.

The quote also draws on the symbol of London as a disorienting, inhospitable place, characterized by mud, impenetrable mazes, and confusing lights; it offers no shelter to Winnie or any clear path of escape. In that way, the city also reflects the political and domestic mess into which Winnie has been entangled: her husband's wide-ranging but self-serving connections with police, anarchists, and foreign influences have narrowed Winnie's options and left her helpless. Though Winnie later succeeds in leaving England, it's only so that she can drown herself in the English Channel. Winnie's freedom from Verloc ends up dooming her.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Mr. Verloc goes out one morning, leaving his small **London** shop in the care of his brother-in-law, Stevie. Verloc's wife, Winnie, supervises Stevie in turn. The shop's front window contains photos of dancing girls, odd packages, French publications, and newspapers like *The Torch*. Mostly, the customers are nervous young men or poor older men.

The shady contents of Mr. Verloc's shop immediately inject elements of questionable legality, foreign influence, and rebellion from convention into the story. The Torch *was an anarchist newspaper published by the Rossettis—extended family of poet Christina Rossetti, and cousins of novelist Ford Madox Ford. Ford was Conrad's source for information on London anarchism.*

Usually, when the shop bell rings, Verloc emerges from the back. He is a heavy-eyed man with a rumpled, rather lazy appearance. Sometimes Winnie answers the door instead. She is young, full-figured, and tidy, and she treats the awkward male customers with detachment. Winnie's mother, a stout and sickly woman with swollen legs, also lives in their house. She used to be married to an innkeeper, and now, as a widow, she provides for herself by renting out some apartments in Belgravia. Winnie helps out with the lodgers—that's how she met Verloc, who stayed there for occasional stretches.

Verloc and Winnie seem an unlikely couple: Verloc is unkempt, while Winnie is young and attractive. Winnie's ailing mother, dependent on her daughter's support, provides more insight into the couple's relationship. It seems that, despite Verloc's "lazy" appearance, he's a trustworthy provider for both women.

After Verloc and Winnie got married, Winnie's mother gave up the lodging-house, and she moved into their house in the less fashionable Soho neighborhood. Winnie's brother Stevie, a delicate boy with a mental disability, joined the household too. Stevie was always a well-behaved boy, except for an episode when he was 14, when "tales of injustice" spurred him to set off fireworks in the office building where he worked as an errand-boy. Nowadays, Stevie's main hobby is using a compass to draw circles on pieces of paper. He also helps Winnie around the house, and Winnie looks after Stevie as if he's her son.

Verloc not only cares for Winnie and her mother, but also for Winnie's brother Stevie, who is unable to support himself. The incident with Stevie and the fireworks, however, foreshadows Stevie's later outbursts against "tales of injustice." Though he's normally docile and predictable (drawing endless circles, for example), he's also capable of shocking behavior when he's given sufficient motivation. Winnie is deeply loyal to her brother, which suggests that she'll stand by him regardless of his behavior.

CHAPTER 2

Sharply dressed and alert, Mr. Verloc heads out unusually early one morning at about half-past 10. The dull English sun covers the **city** with a rusty light. As Verloc watches well-to-do people enjoying themselves in Hyde Park, he feels protective of them, their opulence, and the social order—it must all be defended from the "enviousness of [...] labour." Verloc himself avoids all unnecessary labor. He also has the look of someone who makes his living upon the "vices" and "baser fears" of humanity.

Though the nature of Verloc's work isn't yet revealed, Verloc clearly feels a sense of obligation toward London's people and the conventional social order. He sees the laboring classes as "envious" of the wealthy and therefore as a threat to the social order—and he sees himself as standing against that perceived threat. However, the narration suggests that Verloc isn't above benefitting off of others' "vices" and "baser fears," which suggests that his line of work is somehow immoral and harmful to others.

Verloc is well-dressed because he has business at a foreign Embassy. When he arrives at there, he shows an envelope at the door and is soon admitted to a small private room. Here, he's joined by Privy Councillor Wurmt, a melancholy, near-sighted man with bushy eyebrows. Wurmt places a stack of papers on the table: they are Verloc's reports. Wurmt says that they are dissatisfied with the scandalously lax attitude of the British police, so they want Verloc to do something to change that—to stir up unrest. Verloc, however, doubts that anything can be done.

Verloc is employed by an unnamed foreign embassy, apparently having reported to them for some time. This embassy's officials believe that the British aren't worried enough about certain unnamed threats, and that this laxity poses a threat to their country's interests too. They want Verloc to do something to change British minds.

Wurmt decides that Verloc had better see Mr. Vladimir. He steps out, leaving Verloc sweating. Soon Verloc is led by a servant into a thickly carpeted room where First Secretary Vladimir sits. Mr. Vladimir is a young, clean-shaven man with a witty reputation in society. He coolly questions Verloc about his youthful spying while serving in the French Army, and then he abruptly asks Verloc what he has to say for himself. Verloc has gotten out of shape, Vladimir accuses—nobody would believe he is a desperate anarchist. Vladimir suspects that Verloc is lazy.

The meeting with Vladimir seems calculated to intimidate Verloc; Verloc does not seem to be very familiar with the younger man. Verloc has a history of spying, and his current job is based on the pretense that Verloc is an anarchist—one of a number of revolutionary groups that reject hierarchy and sometimes even the state. However, Verloc has gotten soft: he looks too comfortable with his life to be a convincing anarchist.

Sulkily, Verloc explains that he has worked for the Embassy for 11 years, first based in Paris and now in **London**. (He is a British-born subject, but his father was French.) Mr. Vladimir says that Verloc hasn't made good use of his position; the Embassy isn't a philanthropic institution. Now, the Embassy wants to see some activity. Verloc tries to defend himself, but Vladimir is offended by his raised voice. Verloc explains that his effortlessly loud voice has served him well at socialist meetings, but Vladimir angrily retorts that they have no use for his voice—they want *facts*.

Verloc has made a good salary by spying for the Embassy, but Vladimir doesn't think he's been earning his keep. Under Vladimir's watch, that will now change. Verloc might be able to make a believable outward show of enthusiasm at political meetings, for example, but that's not accomplishing anything for the Embassy—they want him to effect real change.

Mr. Vladimir says that Verloc's title is "agent provocateur," but that he hasn't done anything "provocative" for years. It's not enough to *prevent* violence—the Embassy wants a cure. Then, Vladimir asks Verloc about some gray leaflets. Verloc identifies these as belonging to the F.P., or Future of the Proletariat, a revolutionary society of which he's a vice president. Vladimir is unimpressed.

An agent provocateur's job is to provoke others—in this case, socialists and anarchists—into doing something illegal. Verloc has been falling short, however, contenting himself with publishing anarchist pamphlets and sharing information about anarchist plots.

England, Mr. Vladimir tells Verloc, is far too wedded to ideals of individual liberty. The middle classes must be scared in order to shake them loose from that. He tells Verloc his idea, though it's clear to Verloc that Vladimir doesn't really understand the views of revolutionaries—he lumps them all together and thinks that they're mostly "bomb throwers." But Vladimir won't hear any protests as he lays out his plan for "a series of outrages" that will push public opinion in favor of repressive laws. The outrages, he tells Verloc, don't have to be especially bloody; they only have to frighten people.

Vladimir believes that the English masses care more about individual rights than about the threat of anarchism, and he's adamant that Verloc needs to pressure anarchists to commit an act of terror (whether violent or merely startling) to turn British society against anarchism. Vladimir's apparent ignorance of anarchism's complexity—he seems to think that all anarchists are "bomb throwers" who believe the same things and all follow violent tactics—suggests that anti-revolutionary fears weren't always grounded in reality. But accuracy doesn't matter to Vladimir; he just wants England to crack down on anarchism, which he perceives as a threat to the social order.

Mr. Vladimir says they must attack today's middle class "fetish," which is neither the monarchy nor religion—it is science. Attacks on heads of state have become rather commonplace, and an attack on a church or a theater wouldn't seem sufficiently political; all these would merely seem like outbursts of frustration, which the press would readily dismiss. In Mr. Vladimir's view, "bomb throwing" must go beyond vengeance; in order to have an impact, it must be destructive. That's why the attack should target something beyond ordinary human passions. Every fool believes in science, even if he doesn't understand it, and the upper classes believe that science is the foundation of their prosperity. Attacking it would seem like madness, which is more terrifying than simple murder.

Darwin's theory of evolution, rapid technological progress, and other 19th-century advancements made science an important facet of everyday people's lives, even displacing political and religious loyalties for some. Vladimir believes that attacking science would therefore be a symbolic attack on the heart of modern society. More than a merely political or religious target, a random attack on science would seem "mad," or irrational, undermining the seemingly untouchable authority and lofty rationality of science.

Mr. Vladimir proposes attacking astronomy, because this would not be mistaken as a mere class grievance. Besides, everyone has heard of Greenwich, no matter their class. Vladimir thinks that "the blowing up of the first meridian" will cause widespread anger and panic.

The district of Greenwich contains both the Royal Observatory and the Prime Meridian, 0° longitude, which had just been established in 1884. As such, "the blowing up of the first meridian" seems to be mean that Vladimir wants to bomb the Royal Observatory. Most people in England (and in other parts of the world) would be familiar with these landmarks, which is why Vladimir believes that blowing up the Observatory would be an effective terrorist attack.

Verloc points out that such an attack will cost money, but Mr. Vladimir is adamant that Verloc will only be paid his usual fee until he's able to execute an attack. He's appalled to learn that Verloc not only keeps a shop, but that he's married too. He can't believe that Verloc maintains any credibility in the anarchist world. In any case, Verloc must provoke an "outrage" within one month, or else the Embassy will fire him. Vladimir dismisses Verloc. Ignoring his surroundings, Verloc hurries home from the Embassy and spends the rest of the day sitting immobile behind the shop counter.

Verloc is far from being an anarchist stereotype: his shop represents capitalism, which many anarchists oppose, and his marriage seems to fly in the face of anarchism's emphasis on personal freedom over traditional social structures or institutions. To Vladimir, these are further marks against Verloc; it's time for him to prove himself, or else he loses his job. Verloc is a lazy person and has coasted along in his position for a decade, so this encounter with Vladimir rattles him.

Winnie leaves Verloc alone. As she prepares supper, she tells Stevie, who's been sweeping and dusting the house, to wash up for the meal. Stevie always takes care to be clean for mealtimes, not wanting to offend Verloc. Verloc, however, never gets angry at Stevie, unlike Stevie's and Winnie's father. Winnie used to be "maddened" by her father's rages toward Stevie. Nowadays, nobody would guess that Winnie is capable of any sort of passion.

Stevie has a history of abuse, having been mistreated by his father, and this abuse was a terror to Winnie as well. Because of this history, Verloc's toleration of Stevie—simply letting him be—is grounds for both Winnie's and Stevie's trust in Verloc and their loyalty to him. Stevie seems to look up to Verloc and want to please him. Meanwhile, in contrast to her "maddened" state in the past, Winnie is a peaceful person who never gets angry, especially without provocation.

At dinner, Mr. Verloc is so thoughtfully silent that Winnie and her mother watch Stevie anxiously, not wanting him to disturb the master of the house. Winnie's father was ashamed of having a "peculiar" son and treated him brutally as a result. Verloc, by contrast, pays little attention to Stevie. Winnie always tells her mother that if Verloc tires of Stevie, he'd better tire of *her* first. Though Winnie's mother doesn't understand what Winnie sees in Verloc—she could have married a younger man—she decides that their match is lucky, since Verloc is a good provider for them all.

The history of abuse lingers even in the Verlocs' house; though Verloc doesn't lash out at Stevie, Winnie and her mother are frightened to this day of what will happen if Stevie offends the man of the house. Ultimately, Winnie's loyalty to Stevie is greater than her loyalty to Verloc—a fact that will take on greater meaning later in the novel.

CHAPTER 3

Michaelis, a pale, fat man on parole from prison, is in Verloc's parlor. He argues that ideals are worthless and that economic conditions are what *really* move history. Karl Yundt, an elderly, decrepit, self-described terrorist, also sits with Michaelis and Verloc. He says that he has always dreamed of a band of pitiless destroyers who'd be willing to cause death for humanity's sake, but he has never been able to find them. Mr. Verloc, seated in another corner, gives assenting grunts. Michaelis says that he's more optimistic than Yundt: he believes that the property-owning class is beginning to self-destruct, which will lead inevitably to the collapse of private ownership.

In this passage, Verloc meets with the anarchists whose group he's infiltrated as an undercover agent. They are a diverse bunch, reflecting the range of anarchist beliefs that Mr. Vladimir failed to acknowledge in the previous chapter. Michaelis is most interested in ideas and economic theories, whereas Yundt yearns for the merciless, destructive action that fits with Vladimir's stereotype of anarchists as senseless "bomb throwers."

Comrade Ossipon, the primary author of the F.P. pamphlets, sits in front of the fire. He has curly yellow hair and high cheekbones and smokes a cigarette. Michaelis, used to talking to himself without any feedback or response in prison, keeps monologuing about the economic forces inexorably shaping history; he's interrupted only by a harsh laugh from Ossipon. Verloc takes this opportunity to open the kitchen door for some air, revealing Stevie sitting at the table, drawing circle after circle. Ossipon admires the "degenerate's" drawings.

The use of the term "degeneracy" comes from the popularity of evolutionary theory in the late 19th century, when it was commonly believed that some individuals (or races) displayed marks of the regress of humanity rather than its progress. Here, Ossipon believes that Stevie is "degenerate" or inferior because of his mental disability. His observation about Stevie will become significant toward the end of the novel.

Ossipon is a medical school dropout who has since worked as a wandering lecturer on various socialist topics. Citing a writer named Lombroso, he confidently tells Verloc that the shape of Stevie's ears is a clear marker of "degeneracy." Verloc blushes faintly at the mention of science; it reminds him of Mr. Vladimir. Meanwhile, Yundt picks a fight with Ossipon, arguing about the status of criminals in society and the nature of so-called crime.

During this period (the late 19th century), a pseudo-science called criminal anthropology, popularized by an Italian physician named Lombroso, claimed to be able to identify so-called "degenerates," criminals, and other groups of people on the basis of certain physical traits. Meanwhile, Verloc is uncomfortably reminded of Vladimir's demand that he provoke this anarchist group into committing an act of terror.

As Stevie heads off to bed, he overhears Yundt talking about the branding of criminals, and he freezes in horror. Even the thought of physical pain fills Stevie with distress and indignation.

Because of Stevie's background of abuse, he is especially sensitive to others' suffering.

Michaelis continues to argue that because history operates according to unchangeable economic laws, propaganda—the education of the masses—must be carefully carried out. In response, Ossipon argues that the laws aren't written in stone, and that the emotional manipulation of the masses matters greatly. Yundt describes current economic conditions as "cannibalistic," causing Stevie, out of sight, to gulp and sink to the floor. Soon after, Verloc's guests say goodnight.

The men's discussion continues to reveal the anarchists' divergent views: Michaelis continues to favor heady theories, whereas Ossipon emphasizes the role of the masses (and hence the importance of manipulating them) in moving society. Stevie understands only the anarchists' most literal expressions, and their references to violence and cannibalism distress him.

As Verloc locks the door behind his friends, he feels dissatisfied. Compared to Mr. Vladimir, they all seem hopelessly useless and lazy, like himself. He knows that Yundt is cared for by an elderly woman, and Michaelis, too, is supported by a wealthy old lady in the countryside. Ossipon, for his part, depends on naïve young women with savings accounts. Verloc, more inclined to conventional respectability, is offended by his friends' morality, yet he shares in their dislike of discipline and effort. Verloc thinks again of Mr. Vladimir, who seems so much more dangerous than his friends. Unlike the others, Verloc has to work to support a woman, and he can't afford to indulge in ideas and talk.

Ironically, Verloc's socialist acquaintances are less intimidating than Vladimir, who wants Verloc to stage an atrocity in anarchism's name. These anarchists aren't particularly imposing figures—they all depend on others to support them. Verloc is more conventional in his lifestyle, and he also has greater responsibilities. Thus, although he has some traits in common with the anarchists—enough to blend in—he doesn't align with them ideologically. Yet, despite his disagreements, his work for the Embassy seems to be much more financially than ideologically motivated.

As Verloc gets ready for bed, he looks over his shop. He chose his line of work because he has always been drawn to "shady transactions" that make money easily; and because of his associations with spies and anarchists, he was already used to being watched by the police. Before heading upstairs, Verloc is surprised to see that Stevie is still up. Watching his brother-in-law pacing and talking to himself in the kitchen, he reflects that he must provide for Stevie, too, as well as for his wife and mother-in-law. Feeling burdened, Verloc goes upstairs.

Laziness accounts for Verloc's choice of profession. Like his job for the Embassy, his "shady" wares (selling pornography and other socially taboo items) are primarily a means to an end. Because of his marriage, Verloc faces working-class burdens from which his anarchist friends are mostly free.

Verloc wakes up Winnie to deal with Stevie. Then, while undressing, Verloc looks out the window at the "inhospitable" **city**, a dark and muddy mass of brick and stone. The view matches his foreboding. For a moment, he thinks he sees Mr. Vladimir's face reflected there. Winnie returns and urges him to come to bed. Dreading insomnia, Verloc gets her talking about Stevie's stubbornness. Winnie always rises to Stevie's defense, and she encourages Verloc to think of Stevie as a useful member of the household. Overhearing the guests just gets him too worked up, she says, because he doesn't understand them. The other day, Stevie even read an F.P. tract about a brutal military officer, and the cruelty in the story made him cry and stomp around with a knife. Verloc doesn't respond, but, resigned to a sleepless night, he lets Winnie put out the light.

London is portrayed as a place unfit for human life: its impenetrable exteriors, darkness, and filth create an atmosphere of oppression and gloom. This atmosphere matches Verloc's mounting sense of doom over Vladimir's demands. Winnie, however, is oblivious to Verloc's concerns and doesn't appear to know anything about his double life. As usual, she is mainly concerned about Stevie's well-being, especially his strong emotional responses to others' suffering—the full significance of which she doesn't yet understand.

CHAPTER 4

Ossipon is sitting at a table in a dark, vaulted hall with chandeliers and medieval paintings. Near the door, a mechanical piano plays a noisy waltz. Across from Ossipon, a small man with spectacles, who's known as The Professor, drinks beer. Despite his unimpressive demeanor, the man has an air of calm self-assurance that Ossipon finds impossible to penetrate. The man claims not to have heard the upsetting news that Ossipon heard from a newsboy a short time ago.

The story flashes forward in time, after Verloc's "outrage" has been carried out, though it will take a while for all the details of the incident to fall into place. Ossipon, one of Verloc's revolutionary friends, meets with a mysterious figure. The jarring combination of medieval and noisily modern elements in the setting adds to the feeling of chaos.

Ossipon questions The Professor about his "stuff," and the man claims that he unhesitatingly gives some to anyone who asks for it. He doesn't even fear the police—they know that he always has explosives on his person. Therefore, he'll never be arrested; none of them is "heroic" enough for that. The Professor always walks with his hand closed around a rubber ball in his pocket that, when pressed, activates a detonator. He shows Ossipon a glimpse of the rubber tube poking out of an inner pocket, and Ossipon shudders at the thought of how quickly The Professor could destroy himself and take the whole building with him.

The Professor makes and distributes explosive devices. In fact, The Professor wears an explosive device attached to himself, ready to be detonated at any moment. This deters the police from trying to arrest him—under threat of arrest, he could kill himself, the police, and any bystanders. Though it's not clear what motivates him, The Professor appears to be much more devoted to terrorism than any of the revolutionaries who've appeared so far in the story.

The Professor says that the key is "force of personality." Simply having the *ability* to blow himself up doesn't protect him; he's protected by others' belief that he has the *will* to do it. That is what makes him deadly. Furthermore, even other people with strong personalities base their character on "conventional morality," but The Professor does not. His personality is based on freedom from artificial constraints, and indeed upon death. When Ossipon compares him to Yundt and the other revolutionary propagandists, The Professor sneers; those men have no independence of thought, no character.

Other people know that The Professor means business—he's not just posturing—and that's what makes them fear him. His willingness to blow himself up comes from the fact that he doesn't feel bound by normal ideas of right and wrong. Because he considers himself to be free from moral responsibility, he welcomes death (both his own and others') to a degree that most people cannot.

The Professor explains that his goal is simply "a perfect detonator." He notes Ossipon's wince and says that revolutionaries can't bear the idea of something definite. Revolutionaries, by definition, are dependent on conventional social order, because they're trying to revolutionize it. This makes them no better than the police they claim to oppose. Revolution and legality are two sides of the same coin, in other words. Unlike the revolutionaries, The Professor concludes, this makes him a "true propagandist."

The Professor doesn't have some abstract revolutionary goal—he just wants to destroy, *and to do it perfectly. Ossipon is uncomfortable with this bare motivation. The Professor sees this as his whole problem. Revolutionaries are locked in conflict with the things they want to overturn (like the law) and flinch in the face of a real solution—that is, destruction. The Professor's willingness to destroy everything, including himself, makes him a more genuine anarchist in his own eyes.*

Ossipon changes the subject. He tells The Professor that a man was blown up on Greenwich Park this morning, and he shows The Professor a newspaper. There aren't many details: at the site of the detonation, there's a big hole in the ground, with fragments of a man's body scattered around. It's assumed that the bomber meant to blow up the Observatory.

The bombing isn't shown directly in the novel—only its results are mentioned. This allows Conrad to prolong the mystery of what really happened. He bases the fictional incident on a real-life 1894 bombing attempt on the Greenwich Park Observatory, in which the bomber accidentally killed himself.

Ossipon says that he knew nothing about a plot of this nature, and it's bound to make revolutionaries' position more difficult in this country. Staring hard at The Professor, he realizes that some of the other man's explosives must have been used. The Professor readily admits it. Indifferently, he says that the fates of individuals don't matter to him.

Ossipon is the type of revolutionary who, unlike The Professor, isn't interested in destruction. The Professor, for his part, is willing to supply anyone who has a destructive goal.

The Professor goes on to say that unlike America, which has a fundamentally anarchistic character, England idealizes the notion of legality too much, and the aim of anarchists should be to defeat this fallacy. He'd like nothing better, he claims, than to be taken down in a public shoot-out by the police; then, the "old morality" would be halfway undermined already.

The Professor thinks that England has a law-abiding temperament that anarchists must work to undermine. If the police were brave enough to confront him in public instead of abiding by convention out of fear for others' safety, that would actually serve The Professor's goal.

Ossipon asks The Professor if he can describe the person to whom he gave his explosives, and The Professor immediately names Verloc. Surprised, Ossipon explains that Verloc wasn't original or important, but he was nevertheless a useful and trusted figure who was good at staying under the police's radar. He hasn't seen Verloc for a month and can't imagine what his motive might have been. He wonders what will become of Winnie, with Verloc apparently dead. The Professor describes the detonator he created for Verloc: it was on a 20-minute timer, so Verloc either ran out of time or dropped the explosive by accident.

Verloc's involvement in the bombing is established, and Ossipon assumes this means that Verloc has been killed. His motive remains a mystery, but whatever Verloc's reasons, something obviously went wrong with the bombing attempt.

Ossipon wonders what to do next—the F.P. revolutionaries must disassociate themselves from the incident. He wants to visit the Verlocs' shop to find out more details, but he's afraid the police will be there, hoping to arrest somebody. Perhaps, he thinks, Verloc's remains were so utterly destroyed that the bombing won't be traced back to him. The Professor advises Ossipon to attach himself to Winnie Verloc, and then he leaves. The mechanical piano plays a gloomy Scottish air as Ossipon slowly leaves the building.

The bombing puts Verloc's associates in a vulnerable position, and Ossipon is at a loss. Showing his lack of concern for convention, The Professor simply tells Ossipon to attach himself to the widow, presumably for the money. The music, meanwhile, gives an ominous feeling to the scene, foreshadowing trouble on the horizon for Ossipon and Verloc's other associates.

Outside, newspaper sellers are at work on the cold, muddy, early spring day. The mud, the sellers' ragged clothing, and the newspaper ink all have a matching drabness. Even as many papers are sold, many more people hurry past with an air of indifference.

The newspaper sellers add to the overall sense of London's dull, dirty, inhospitable atmosphere. The indistinct masses of people on the city streets don't seem to care much about one another.

CHAPTER 5

The Professor walks along feeling mildly disappointed by the news of the failed bombing yet hopeful that the next one will strike a more consequential blow. The Professor is an ambitious man who always dreamed of rising from poverty to affluence—and when his dreams were thwarted, he came to believe that the world's systems were corrupt. In his vengeance, he finds a measure of power and prestige.

A little insight is given into The Professor's background—he wasn't always so indifferent to social norms. In fact, he used to want to make a name for himself, but he came to believe that the world was against him. By standing apart from society's systems and rules, he now feels that he's accomplished something.

As The Professor walks among the **London** crowds, he feels a stab of fear. Occasionally, he doubts that humankind can truly be moved. As he cuts through an alley, he is suddenly met by Chief Inspector Heat of the Special Crimes Department, a man with a drooping a mustache, an overcoat, and an umbrella. The Professor looks at the Inspector menacingly; in his mind, the Inspector represents the forces of "law, property, oppression, and injustice."

For The Professor, ultimate success includes persuading the masses, and he fears that this goal is too formidable. As if to reinforce his doubts, a policeman, symbol of everything The Professor rejects—"law, property, oppression, and injustice"—stumbles on him at this precise moment.

Chief Inspector Heat, a so-called "expert in anarchist procedure," has had a difficult day. A week ago, he had told a high official that there would be no outbreaks of anarchist activity. A wiser man would not have made such a confident statement, but Inspector Heat knew what his superiors wanted to hear and was ambitious for promotion. Unfortunately, when confronted with the news of the explosion that morning, he had displayed his surprise quite obviously in front of the Assistant Commissioner.

Inspector Heat is mainly concerned about self-advancement. Today's surprising event suggests that Heat's expertise in anarchist activities doesn't match his title, as he failed to foresee the bombing. The reader, however, can infer that anarchist weren't actually responsible—if Verloc really was the bomber, the event was only staged to look like the work of anarchists.

During his investigation that morning, Chief Inspector Heat had been shocked, nearly sickened, by the appearance of the terrorist's remains. Though the terrorist seemingly died instantly, Heat can't imagine that there was no suffering. The constable on the scene had told Heat that two men had emerged from the Underground, with the slighter man carrying a can of varnish in one hand. The constable figures that the culprit must have stumbled over a tree root, with the bomb exploding directly underneath him. Overcoming his horror, Inspector Heat takes a relatively clean piece of broadcloth from the heap of remains, examines it at the window, and stuffs it in his pocket—it's a clue.

From the details of the case, it emerges that two men were involved in the Greenwich Observatory bombing attempt. Ossipon believes that Verloc was responsible, but at this point, it's a mystery as to who the second man was who tripped and fell. The scrap of a coat pocketed by Inspector Heat will be a key to solving this part of the mystery.

It was under these circumstances that Chief Inspector Heat had come upon The Professor. He hadn't been thinking about anarchists at the time. Heat used to specialize in thieving, a crime which wasn't so chaotic—it was, at least, done for a reason. Inspector Heat felt that he could understand a burglar's mind, and, in a way, they overlapped with the instincts of a police officer. Thieves weren't rebels, and they submitted grudgingly to the moral order that Inspector Heat represented.

Inspector Heat's old job made more sense to him because thieving involves logical motives and planning—even when committing crimes, thieves acknowledged the basic legitimacy of the law. Anarchists, on the other hand, reject and resist the law's legitimacy. Ironically, Heat's thoughts support The Professor's earlier comments about revolution and legality being two sides of the same coin.

Caught off guard, Chief Inspector Heat tells The Professor that he is not presently wanted for a crime, and that when the Inspector desires to arrest him, he will know where to find him. The Professor laughs derisively at this and tells the Inspector that when that day comes, he supposes that the Inspector's friends would do their best to sort out the two men's remains. He also taunts Heat that, in this sheltered alley, it would be the perfect opportunity to put a stop to him with minimal loss of life. Chief Inspector Heat manages not to show how much this rattles him. He warns The Professor that, in the end, the police will be too much for The Professor and his kind. The Professor, who hates the reminder that he is one against many, is somewhat intimidated by this. Heat, on the other hand, walks off feeling heartened.

If Chief Inspector Heat really wanted to put an end to The Professor, this would be the ideal place to do it. His hesitation shows that there are things more important to Heat than stopping The Professor (like his own life). The Professor's mockery of Heat is diminished, however, by the reminder that The Professor is vastly outnumbered. Even though he claims to be detached from all norms and to only care about for destruction, The Professor does hate to be reminded of his weakness.

Right now, Chief Inspector Heat's biggest problem is dealing with his superior, the Assistant Commissioner, who tells him that the whereabouts of all known anarchists are presently accounted for. Inspector Heat tells his superior what he learned during his investigation, including his opinion that there were two men involved.

Earlier today, Inspector Heat was embarrassed in front of the Assistant Commissioner because the bombing caught him, a supposed expert, off guard. Inspector Heat now hopes to redeem himself in his superior's eyes.

The Assistant Commissioner considers this as he looks out at the miserable **London** rain. The Assistant Commissioner dislikes his job because he is so reliant on subordinates and so burdened by the pressures of public opinion. At the moment, he doubts Chief Inspector Heat's informant, the old woman who saw two men emerge from the underground; they hailed from an unlikely country station. But Inspector Heat points out that Michaelis stays in a cottage in that rural neighborhood. At the mention of Michaelis, the Assistant Commissioner forgets about his usual evening card game at his club, and he feels a renewed interest in the whole situation.

Though there's no clear motive as yet, Heat is able to tie the eyewitness's clues to a known member of Verloc's revolutionary circle, Michaelis. This piques the Assistant Commissioner's interest, suggesting that he'll be willing to follow Inspector Heat's lead despite the latter's professional failure.

CHAPTER 6

Michaelis's patroness has connections with the Assistant Commissioner's wife. The patroness is a rich, influential old lady. She is an intelligent woman who attracts a vast and varied social circle; she "liked to watch what the world was coming to," and guests can never quite guess who they'll meet in her drawing-room. Some years ago, Michaelis received a life sentence for a plot to rescue some prisoners from a police van. During the incident, a policeman with a wife and family was shot and killed, arousing popular outrage. At the time, Michaelis was just a young locksmith whose role was little more than to open the van.

The Assistant Commissioner has a personal connection to Michaelis, through the elderly society lady who supports Michaelis financially. Michaelis's youthful complicity in an anarchist plot led to years in prison, which destroyed his ability to support himself afterward. Michaelis's dependence on the old lady, and his connection through her to mainstream society figures, shows that revolutionary circles aren't so separate from conventional ones.

Michaelis was equally distraught by the death of the policeman and by the failure of the plot, and he received a life sentence for his seeming callousness. He had an innocent and trustful personality, with humanitarian sympathies that deepened while he was in solitude. After his release, Michaelis wound up in the old patroness's circle—she was impressed with his optimism and lack of bitterness. Thanks to her, his first public appearance since jail was a success.

Michaelis has spent most of his time theorizing in solitude, not plotting violence, and his ideas have made him an interesting party guest. His character may be based on Peter Kropotkin, a Russian anarchist in Conrad's day who promoted economic theories based on mutual cooperation.

After Michaelis left that night, the patroness expressed disbelief that someone like him could be a "revolutionist." She believes that Michaelis has a saintly temperament, and she pities him because his loved ones all died while he was in prison, and he's lost the means of supporting himself. Someone, she decides, will need to look after him. The Assistant Commissioner, who was there at the time, hadn't voiced an opinion, but he'd shared the patroness's belief that Michaelis seemed harmless, if perhaps a bit mad. So, when the Greenwich bombing occurs, and Michaelis appears to be connected, the Assistant Commissioner immediately thinks of the elderly patroness and her steadfast defense of Michaelis. If Michaelis gets sent back to jail, his health won't survive it, and the patroness won't forgive the Assistant Commissioner.

Michaelis is the kind of revolutionary that mainstream society finds relatively palatable: he's interesting and sympathetic, and his ideas seem too impractical to threaten the status quo. Even the Assistant Commissioner wants to defend him in order to protect his own position in society. Again, revolutionary circles and mainstream society can be surprisingly intertwined.

With all this in mind, the Assistant Commissioner tells Heat that it will be important to gather sufficient evidence against Michaelis. Heat is confident that he can get enough to satisfy the public and send Michaelis back to jail. When Heat gives an arrogant little laugh and says, "Trust me," the Assistant Commissioner whirls around, feeling suspicious. Sitting down at his desk, he demands to know what Heat has got up his sleeve. A born detective tied to his paperwork, the Assistant Commissioner can't help unleashing his suspicion somewhere. He senses that Heat's loyalty is primarily to himself, and he suddenly relishes a challenge.

The Assistant Commissioner warns his subordinate to be careful about pursuing Michaelis. For his part, Heat doesn't seem terribly concerned about making an airtight case against Michaelis; he just wants to get an anarchist behind bars in order to satisfy the public and protect his own job. But the Assistant Commissioner has an interest in protecting Michaelis and wants to put Heat in his place.

The Assistant Commissioner questions Chief Inspector Heat about Michaelis's doings, though he's perfectly aware of them himself. Michaelis has retired to the countryside because he's working on his autobiography, in a cramped cottage that's comfortably reminiscent of prison. Inspector Heat, for his part, has always resented Michaelis's status as a kind of celebrity prisoner. He is comfortable arresting someone on a bare suspicion; his previous superiors would have allowed it. Besides, Michaelis will be easier to arrest, and his arrest more palatable to public opinion, than certain others Inspector Heat has in mind. To do so would feel like a personal triumph.

After his demoralizing encounter with The Professor earlier today, Chief Inspector Heat is especially eager to arrest an anarchist—and Michaelis presents a much safer, more approachable target than the bomb-laden Professor. Apparently, Heat's reasoning would have been accepted by his department in the past, suggesting that the anarchists have some good reasons to resent the police.

The Assistant Commissioner wants to know why, if Heat is so convinced about Michaelis, he didn't seek Michaelis's arrest before coming into this meeting; Heat shouldn't toy with him like this. Chief Inspector Heat starts sweating with indignation. The conversation turns to Heat's investigation that day, and Heat pulls out the scrap from the coat. The Assistant Commissioner finds an address, 32 Brett Street, inked onto the fabric. Heat tells him that's Verloc's shop. Heat further explains that the department has always been aware of Verloc's role as an embassy spy, but that exposing him was never thought to be publicly useful.

The Assistant Commissioner won't let Chief Inspector Heat get away with such shoddy reasoning. When they look at the concrete clues at hand, they confirm a connection to Verloc. In the past, however, the department has tolerated Verloc's spying. Motivated largely by public opinion, they have been selective about which matters to pursue and which to overlook.

Under the previous ambassador, Heat even met Verloc and acted on intelligence that Verloc passed along. Since then, Heat has occasionally crossed Verloc's path and kept tabs on him. One evening, he went to Verloc's shop, and Heat told Verloc that as long as he didn't get involved in anything too outrageous, the police would leave his shop alone. In exchange, Verloc gives Heat occasional useful "hints." He knows that Verloc often meets with new foreign arrivals and keeps track of them. He and Heat exchange unsigned communications from time to time. However, the latest bombing came as a total surprise.

The legality of some of Verloc's wares (contraceptives and pornography) is considered shady, so police interference could wreak havoc with his business. The police overlook Verloc's business in exchange for hints about foreign anarchist activity in London. However, they received no warning of today's incident.

Though Heat insists that he must do his work as he sees fit, the Assistant Commissioner is annoyed at having been kept in the dark, and at Heat's persistent belief that Michaelis is more relevant to the case at hand. He tells Heat to report back tomorrow to discuss things further. Not long after the Chief Inspector leaves, the Assistant Commissioner, too, puts on his hat and leaves the building.

The Assistant Commissioner doesn't appreciate that Heat has his own personal informant. Despite Heat's certainty about the best direction to pursue, the Assistant Commissioner is ready to take the case into his own hands.

CHAPTER 7

The Assistant Commissioner walks through the muddy streets, enters a public building, and speaks to Toodles, a young, unpaid private secretary. Toodles warns that his boss isn't in a good mood, but he gets permission for the Assistant Commissioner to enter. He is soon ushered into the presence of Sir Ethelred, a Secretary of State, a bulky, droopy-eyed, hawk-nosed man who immediately asks if this is the beginning of another "dynamite campaign." He doesn't want any details. The Assistant Commissioner assures him that it isn't another terrorist campaign, but Sir Ethelred is skeptical—a month ago, he received the same assurance, yet today's attack still happened.

The Assistant Commissioner approaches his own superior, a member of Parliament. Sir Ethelred just wants the barest details about what's happened—whether the bombing was terrorism or not—suggesting that, among both high-ranking politicians and ordinary people, accurate perceptions of revolutionary activity are rare. People prefer to get the simplest, most digestible soundbites about complicated matters rather than trying to understand the. nuanced motivations of these movements.

The Assistant Commissioner tells Sir Ethelred that he can offer a different perspective from Chief Inspector Heat's. For example, today's incident doesn't fit the profile of a typical anarchist attack. He succinctly runs through the details of the case. Sir Ethelred is appalled at the involvement of a foreign embassy and decries the "methods of Crim-Tartary." But the Assistant Commissioner assures him that he thinks the crime amounts to mere childishness, not sophisticated international intrigue. However, he agrees that secret agents are dangerous and shouldn't be tolerated. That's why he's come to speak to the Secretary of State in person.

The Assistant Commissioner tries to persuade Sir Ethelred that this isn't a typical anarchist plot, but Sir Ethelred's reaction to the Embassy connection shows that he isn't entirely convinced. "Crim-Tartary" refers to the Crimean region of Russia and to the Tartar people, a Central Asian ethnic group renowned for its ferocity as warriors. This is an exaggerated perception of the forces involved, to say the least, but it indicates that the British police are anxious about foreign interference.

In closing, the Assistant Commissioner tells Sir Ethelred that he thinks Inspector Heat ought to be replaced because of his use of the secret agent for information. Such information ought to be the property of the Special Crimes division overall instead of being Inspector Heat's exclusive source. Heat will resist this, of course, since he sees such measures as siding with criminal revolutionists.

The Assistant Commissioner moves against Inspector Heat on the grounds that Heat isn't loyal enough to the department—he hoards an exclusive information source to himself.

The Assistant Commissioner says that the existence of foreign spies in revolutionary groups throws a wrench in the police's surveillance of such groups—it makes everything uncertain. This is even more true because the Commissioner is convinced that incidents like today's bombing are "episodic," not part of a larger scheme. The foolhardiness of the affair is evidence of that fact; the stumbling nature of the crime suggests that someone ignorant of English was recruited for the job, or possibly someone deaf and mute. In any case, the Assistant Commissioner intends to go over Inspector Heat's head to solve the mystery. He believes that Heat's sense of duty—particularly his determination to implicate prominent anarchists—is tainting his investigation. Therefore, the Assistant Commissioner wants a free hand to solve this case himself. Sir Ethelred grants it, telling the Commissioner to report back later tonight with his discoveries; Toodles will let him in.

The Assistant Commissioner thinks that today's bombing should be viewed as an anomaly—not part of a carefully planned, systematic campaign. Such unpredictable events, he believes, are the result of foreign meddling. The clumsiness of the incident suggests that whomever was responsible for the bombing wasn't very competent for the job. By making a case that this isn't the typical anarchist job, the Assistant Commissioner successfully overrules Inspector Heat (who's committed to blaming anarchists) and wins Sir Ethelred's trust in dealing with the case.

Sir Ethelred is curious about the Assistant Commissioner's interest in the case, and the Commissioner replies that it's simply his impatience with old methods and secondhand information. Sir Ethelred wishes him well, and the Commissioner says goodbye to Toodles, who explains that Ethelred is under a lot of stress dealing with attacks on his bill for the nationalization of the fisheries—people are calling it the beginning of a social revolution. There have been protests, and Toodles fears that a "foreign scoundrel" might throw a bomb at Sir Ethelred. The Commissioner puts him at ease and then heads back to his office.

Around the time of the Greenwich bombing, the Second Fisheries Bill was going through Parliament. Conrad portrays the bill as more revolutionary than it actually was—entirely nationalizing the fishing industry. In fact, the fishing industry simply came under a different national jurisdiction. However, Conrad uses this example, and Toodles's reaction, to show the overall English nervousness about "foreign scoundrels" at the time.

A short time later, the Assistant Commissioner heads out into the dank, gloomy **city**. He catches a cab and is soon deposited in front of a small Italian restaurant. As the Commissioner eats his solitary meal, he enjoys a pleasant sense of freedom. As he prepares to leave, he catches sight of his reflection and thinks he looks "foreign." He feels that nobody would guess his identity or occupation. He disappears back into the wet London night and makes his way to Brett Street, not far away. He feels oddly cheerful and adventurous. The Assistant Commissioner watches a policeman disappear down Brett Street and then observes the Verlocs' shop from a distance. Its door is ajar.

The Assistant Commissioner's city wanderings and solitary meal symbolize his freedom from sitting behind his office desk and being dependent on his subordinates. He is getting back into the riskier solo detective work that he prefers to do. In addition,, the reference to the Italian restaurant and the Assistant Commissioner's "foreign" look are intentional. Despite his own desire to isolate and expel foreign elements from London, London has assimilated elements of foreign cultures, and the resulting cultural mix rubs off on English citizens too. In other words, it's not possible to fully separate "foreign" and "native."

CHAPTER 8

Drawing on her late husband's social connections, Winnie's mother has secured a place in an almshouse for innkeepers' widows. She carried out this task in secret, then surprised her daughter with the news one day while Winnie was dusting. Winnie's mother tells her the details of her scheme, and Winnie accepts this information in silence. Winnie's mother thinks about how to dispose of her furniture, her only possessions. If she gives the furniture to Stevie, it would seem to weaken his position of complete dependence, so she leaves everything to Winnie.

At this point, the novel flashes back to events that took place several weeks before *the bombing, but after Verloc had received his assignment from Vladimir. Winnie's mother moves out of the Verlocs' home, hoping to provide better for Stevie's future. Ironically, she does this by making him more dependent on Winnie. If it looks as if he should be able to fend for himself, he could end up in an even more vulnerable position.*

When it's time for Winnie's mother to leave Brett Street, Winnie and Stevie come along for the cab ride. The carriage is drawn by an ill horse, and the driver has a hook for a hand. Seeing this, Winnie's mother draws back, but a constable reassures the women that the driver has been driving for 20 years without accident. The three of them climb into the carriage, which proceeds very slowly down the streets. Stevie, distraught, urges the driver not to whip the sick horse. When the driver doesn't refrain, Stevie suddenly scrambles down from the box, causing a commotion. He is unhurt, but he resists getting back into the carriage until Winnie tells him that Mr. Verloc would be displeased with his behavior.

The scene with Winnie, her mother, and Stevie is significant primarily because of what it reveals about Stevie's character. It's already been established that Stevie gets upset at any mention of other creatures' suffering. During the cab ride, he can't bear to see the weak horse whipped at all, even to make their journey faster. He resists taking any part in the horse's suffering, instead sympathizing with the horse's pain and wishing he could fix it.

As the ride slowly progresses, Winnie tells her mother that she doesn't believe she will be happy in her new home. Wasn't she comfortable with the Verlocs, she asks? And what will people think? Winnie's mother assures Winnie that she's been the best of daughters. The rattling of the rickety carriage makes it necessary for the women to scream their conversation at each other. Winnie's mother looks out the window in shame, knowing that her entrance into a charity home will reflect poorly on the Verlocs. To secure a place, she had wept shamelessly in front of the charity chairman, letting him believe the worst.

Winnie's mother's departure puts Winnie in a vulnerable position: by moving into a charity home, Winnie's mother implies that her own daughter is unable, or worse, unwilling to provide for her. This would have been a social stigma at the time, as women in Victorian England were expected to be caregivers and homemakers above all else. Winnie's mother allowed the charity people to believe that Winnie was an insufficient caregiver order to secure a place there—and she did this, ironically, out of loyalty to both her children and their long-term well-being.

Winnie's mother's tears had been genuine—she'd felt that she was sacrificing Winnie for Stevie's sake. Though she doesn't doubt Winnie's loyalty to Stevie, she is also realistic, and she believes that over time, Mr. Verloc's patience with Stevie will wear thin. By retiring to the charity home, Winnie's mother ensures that Winnie basically inherits Stevie, making him legally dependent on her, and thereby ensuring that he's safe for the rest of his life.

Winnie's mother believes that at some point, Mr. Verloc will get tired of voluntarily providing for Stevie, putting Stevie in a helpless situation. By effectively taking herself out of the picture, she hopes to ensure Stevie's legal dependence on Winnie. This situation shows how vulnerable women and disabled people often were in working-class Victorian London.

Winnie promises that she will come to visit her mother often, and so will Stevie; Winnie points out that his mother's departure will be devastating for him. Winnie's mother worries that the trip—two omnibuses and a short walk—will be too difficult for Stevie to manage alone, but Winnie promises that she'll make sure Stevie doesn't get lost. Abruptly, the carriage pulls up in front of a group of small, gabled houses. After helping his mother with her bags, Stevie comes outside and stands near the cab driver.

Stevie's mother's move will leave Stevie feeling disoriented and insecure, both practically and emotionally. The need to make sure that Stevie doesn't get lost in the city will become an important point later in the story.

Stevie stares sadly at the thin, drooping horse with uneven ears. Suddenly, the cab driver pokes Stevie in the chest with his hooked hand and says that the horse isn't lame or abused; how would Stevie like to drive drunks around in the middle of the night? But the cabman has a wife and children to support. When he remarks that it's not an easy world, Stevie bursts out with "Bad! Bad! [...] Poor! Poor!" Filled with sympathy, he suddenly wishes he could make both the horse and the cabman happy and comfortable. He watches as the cabman and horse painfully journey onward.

The cab driver defends himself against Stevie's implication that the horse is mistreated. In fact, the driver, too, has a difficult life. Stevie readily identifies with this and struggles to express the strength of his feelings in words. He feels overcome not only with sympathy for the cabby's and horse's struggles, but with an inability to do anything to help them.

Waiting outside the charity house, Stevie's indignation mounts; his tenderness toward others' suffering is joined to an innocent rage. Even Winnie has never understood this, never inquiring too deeply into things. She remains oblivious tonight, taking Stevie's arm after saying farewell to her mother. She flatters Stevie by asking him to look out for her on the way home. As the two pass the old cab and its decrepit horse parked outside a pub, Stevie keeps repeating, "Poor brute, poor people!" and "Shame!" Winnie just says, "Come along, Stevie."

Because Stevie struggles to express himself verbally, other people don't understand the range and depth of his emotions. Even Winnie, who takes most things at face value, usually dismisses Stevie's emotions without asking questions about them. She doesn't appreciate the anger that boils beneath the surface of Stevie's compassion and helplessness.

Deeply moral in his instincts, Stevie wants someone to be punished for the world's cruelty toward poor people. He suggests to Winnie that the police could help, but Winnie tells him that isn't the police's job. Stevie is shocked. He's always idealized the police as suppressors of evil. Why, then, do they pretend to be good? Winnie, somewhat echoing Mr. Verloc's revolutionary friends, tells Stevie that the police are there to stop those with nothing from stealing from those who do have things. She avoids using the word "steal," because the mere mention of such crimes upsets Stevie, yet Stevie is also upset when told that even the hungry aren't allowed to take from the rich.

Stevie's moral instinct overlaps with the instincts of some of the revolutionists in an interesting way. Like them, he perceives that the world is structured in an unfair way that hurts vulnerable people. Unlike them, however, he expects existing institutions (like the police) to fix the disparity. When Winnie tells him that this isn't how the world works, Stevie is disoriented further.


An hour later, back on Brett Street, Mr. Verloc is sitting at the shop counter, staring at a newspaper, when Winnie and Stevie get home. Later, over supper, Mr. Verloc is silent. Winnie had warned Stevie that Mr. Verloc would be sad about their mother's departure, and Stevie believes with all his heart that Mr. Verloc is a good man, so he keeps quiet at the table. After dinner, Mr. Verloc wanders the streets in a failed attempt to escape his thoughts, and then he comes back home to find Winnie already in bed.

Though Winnie tells Stevie that Mr. Verloc is upset about their mother moving out, he's really fretting about the bombing. Winnie has taught Stevie to revere and trust Mr. Verloc because of his provision for Stevie. This trust makes Stevie vulnerable, too, if Verloc ever chooses to exploit it.

Winnie is awake, lonely and troubled over her mother's departure. Mr. Verloc silently wonders if Winnie's mother had sensed disaster and fled, like rats fleeing a sinking ship, but he doesn't say anything. As Verloc gets into bed, he nearly confesses everything to Winnie. In his own way, he loves her—yet he's also lazy, and he can't bring himself to disrupt their domestic peace right now. Instead, he tells Winnie than tomorrow, he's leaving for the Continent (mainland Europe) for a week or two. It's not unusual for him to make such trips, so Winnie doesn't comment. She says that she and Stevie will get by just fine, then puts out the light.

Verloc almost changes the course of the story by confiding in Winnie about the position that Vladimir has put him in. Yet this runs completely against the grain of Verloc's nature and the normal pattern of their quiet, reserved household, so the opportunity passes.

CHAPTER 9

Mr. Verloc returns from the Continent (mainland Europe) 10 days later, apparently unrefreshed, and Winnie chats with him over breakfast. In his absence, she cleaned the house, managed the shop, and saw some of Verloc's friends—like Mr. Michaelis, who is on his way to the country, and Comrade Ossipon, who made Winnie blush faintly. Stevie, she tells Verloc, moped a lot in his absence. Presently, when Verloc takes off his hat, Stevie eagerly removes it to the kitchen. When Verloc is surprised, Winnie tells him that Stevie would do anything for him.

In Verloc's absence, things have carried on much as before, with the exception of Ossipon flirting with Winnie, which she rejects out of steadfast loyalty to her husband. Verloc is usually oblivious to Stevie and has overlooked Stevie's respect and eagerness to please him. Winnie's observation about Stevie—that he's pliable in Verloc's hands—has an ominous note, since it subtly hints that Verloc may take advantage of Stevie later on.

In the kitchen, the charwoman, Mrs. Neale, is scrubbing the floor. Whenever Stevie comes near, she starts complaining about her poor children, since Stevie always gives her whatever pocket money he has on hand. Today, finding no shillings in his pocket, Stevie bangs on the table in frustration, and Winnie has to comfort him.

Stevie is easily manipulated by others' suffering: just hearing someone express a need makes him want to remedy it. When he can't, however, he lashes out in frustration.

Later that day, Winnie asks Verloc to take Stevie for a walk—he is moping too much. Verloc objects that Stevie would get lost, but Winnie tells him that Stevie worships him—and anyway, he's able to find his way back. She watches as the two walk down the street in similar coats and hats, thinking that they could be mistaken for father and son. She feels proud of herself for cultivating that kind of relationship between the two. She believes Verloc has been taking more notice of Stevie, too. However, since they began taking walks together, Stevie has been spending more time muttering to himself, clenching his fists, and scowling. He's even neglecting his hobby of drawing circles. Winnie worries that Stevie is hearing things from Verloc's anarchist friends that are upsetting him.

Winnie starts encouraging Verloc and Stevie to spend more time together, which will prove consequential later on in the novel. She thinks they look like father and son; and while she means this as a positive thing, it hints that Verloc may be as abusive as Stevie's real father was, albeit in a subtler way. The walks even seem to have an agitating effect on Stevie. However, Winnie never inquires too deeply into things, and she doesn't suspect anything of Verloc—she assumes it's his friends' fault for getting Stevie stirred up.

When Winnie brings this up, Verloc suggests that it might be time for Stevie to get out of town for a while—he could stay in Michaelis's cottage. Michaelis has always been kind to Stevie, and Winnie likes him, so she agrees. She remarks that Verloc, too, seems to have grown fonder of Stevie recently, but Verloc just swears unhappily under his breath. The next day, he and Stevie depart for the country. As they go, Stevie gives Winnie an unusually gloomy look, different from his usual childlike trustfulness.

Verloc has begun to plot the attack. Michaelis provides a convenient place for Stevie while Verloc puts his bombing plan in motion. Winnie doesn't suspect anything bad, however, and she certainly doesn't guess that her and Stevie's farewell could be their last. Stevie's coldness, however, hints that Verloc's manipulation of him has already taken effect.

While Stevie is in the country, Winnie spends more time alone. On the day of the Greenwich bombing, Winnie hasn't seen Verloc all day. She is sewing at the shop counter when he gets home at dusk, and she doesn't look up as he walks in. Verloc barely speaks to Winnie, but she's used to that. As she goes about her kitchen duties, however, she notices an odd sound and finds Verloc sitting in front of the fire, clutching his head. He has thrown off his coat and hat, and his teeth are chattering. Winnie is startled and uneasy.

After flashing forward into the future and then back into the past, the story catches up to the day of the bombing. Again, however, only the aftermath is seen, this time from Winnie's oblivious perspective. She is going about her normal domestic routines, but Verloc is clearly not himself.

Winnie questions Verloc about his day. He tells her that he's been to the bank and withdrawn all their money, but that she can trust him. Winnie quietly agrees and methodically goes about preparing their supper. After setting the table, she goes into the kitchen to get the carving knife and fork. As she returns to the table, she remarks that if she didn't trust Verloc, she wouldn't have married him. She calls him to the table, telling him he should nourish his cold. He comes to the table but only drinks tea. He speaks vaguely of emigrating to France or California.

Winnie and Verloc's marriage is based on mutual trust: on Winnie's side, it's trust that Verloc will provide for her and especially for Stevie. This trust is the entire basis of Winnie's conventional domestic routine, which she carries out unvaryingly today, even though Verloc is behaving strangely. Meanwhile, the appearance of the carving knife at the table will have important consequences.

Although this suggestion is unexpected, Winnie attributes it to Verloc's cold; he isn't himself. She reminds him that they have a comfortable life. She looks around their cozy, respectable home, which only lacks Stevie at the moment. She also gives Verloc a lingering kiss on the forehead and reminds him that he hasn't yet tired of her.

The dramatic irony of the story builds. Winnie still appears to be oblivious to the fact that anything has changed and that her respectable home is actually a façade. Importantly, her comment that Verloc hasn't tired of her recalls her insistence to her mother that if Verloc ever got tired of Stevie, he'd have to be tired of her as well.

As Winnie clears the table, she calmly rejects Verloc's suggestion of moving abroad—she doesn't think Stevie could handle that. She tells Verloc that he'd have to go without her, but she immediately regrets sounding unkind. To make up for it, Winnie gives him a flirtatious look and says he'd miss her too much to leave her behind. Verloc steps forward as if to embrace Winnie, but then the ringing of the shop bell interrupts them. Mechanically, Verloc goes to answer the door. Winnie keeps washing the dishes, and Verloc is gone for a long time.

Winnie continues to trust Verloc and show affection to him, still seeing him as a steadfast provider for herself and Stevie— but the interruption of their embrace foreshadows an impending disruption of their domestic peace.

When Verloc returns from the shop, he is pale. Staring at the overcoat thrown across the sofa, he tells Winnie that he'll have to go out this evening. Winnie goes into the shop and finds a man with a twisted moustache, looking damp from the **city** streets. To Winnie, he looks foreign. After a while, she asks him if he's from the Continent and whether he understands English and he gives her a strange smile and answers without an accent. Winnie assures the stranger that her husband will take good care of him, and she recommends a nearby hotel for his lodgings.

Verloc is shaken—it seems that he's been tracked down because of the scrap of Stevie's coat found at the scene of the attack (hence why Verloc stares at his own coat). Winnie assumes that the stranger is one of Verloc's foreign contacts and addresses him accordingly. However, this person is likely the Assistant Commissioner, looking uncharacteristically "foreign" after his wanderings through the city.

After a while, Winnie goes back into the house to see what's keeping Verloc. He's put on his coat, but he's leaning against the table as if feeling sick. He admits that he knows the man in the shop, but he won't tell Winnie from where. She asks if he's from the Embassy, and Verloc looks frightened. Winnie explains that Verloc has been talking in his sleep lately. The subject of the Embassy seems to anger Verloc. He gives Winnie his pocketbook full of bank notes for safekeeping and goes out to deal with the visitor.

Up until this point, Winnie hasn't been directly in the loop regarding Verloc's work for the Embassy. Verloc has been so distraught, however, that he's been talking about the Embassy in his sleep, so Winnie is more aware than he has believed. Surprisingly, though, she doesn't seem to have overheard anything about the bomb plot.

After Verloc goes out, Winnie looks around the house again: it suddenly seems lonely, remote, and unsafe. She conceals the pocketbook in her bodice. Then, she hears the shop bell again and goes to meet the customer, whom she vaguely recognizes: it's Chief Inspector Heat. Heat had walked most of the way home before deciding to double back and ask Verloc some casual questions; though he's effectively been thrown off the bombing case, there's nothing to stop him from approaching Verloc as a private citizen. He hopes to catch Verloc off guard and maybe hear some incriminating remarks about Michaelis.

After Verloc goes out with the Assistant Commissioner, the atmosphere of the shop changes right away, as if signaling the coming change in the Verlocs' relationship. Meanwhile, Chief Inspector Heat hasn't given up, though he's still focused on trying to apprehend Michaelis.

As Winnie idly rummages around the shop, Chief Inspector Heat introduces himself and questions Winnie about Verloc's whereabouts. From Winnie's description of Verloc's present companion, Heat knows it's the Assistant Commissioner. He feels disgusted and believes that his superior is mishandling the case. He looks closely at Winnie, suspecting that she could give him further information. Winnie is baffled by his questions—she hasn't read any news today.

Chief Inspector Heat mistrusts the Assistant Commissioner and hopes to beat him to solving the case. However, although Heat assumes that Winnie has inside information about the revolutionary circle's activities, she isn't even aware of today's bombing incident.

Chief Inspector Heat tells Winnie that he's here to speak to Verloc about a stolen overcoat. Mindful of the wad of money in her dress, Winnie jumps a bit at the mention of stealing. She says they haven't lost an overcoat. Just then, Heat notices a bottle of purple marking ink in the shop and pulls out the label in his pocket. Winnie recognizes it—she'd written and placed the label inside Stevie's coat. She explains that Heat can't question Stevie because he's in the country with Michaelis. Heat's eyes brighten knowingly, and he questions Winnie further about Stevie. The young man who'd been seen that morning was described as looking peculiar and nervous; he notes that Winnie describes her brother as "excitable."

The labeled scrap of Stevie's coat finally reappears. Winnie had lovingly placed this in Stevie's coat to ensure that he could make his way back to the shop if he got lost—but instead, it has led the police to the Verlocs. Chief Inspector Heat, however, still doesn't recognize the breakthrough on his hands; he still thinks that Michaelis is his target.

Heat shows Winnie the coat scrap. Instantly recognizing it, she staggers a little. Heat realizes that the details of the case have fallen into place: Stevie was the bomber, and Verloc was the "other man." He tells Winnie that he thinks she knows more than she's letting on. Winnie ponders for a minute and then suddenly goes rigid. At that moment, Verloc comes in.

The pieces of the case finally fall into place for Inspector Heat, as he realizes that Stevie and Verloc must have been accomplices in the bombing. Winnie seems to realize that something is amiss with Stevie and Verloc as well, though she doesn't yet know exactly what's happened to Stevie.

Ignoring Winnie, Verloc asks what Inspector Heat is doing there. He and Heat step into the parlor and shut the door, whereupon Winnie runs to the door and presses her ear to the keyhole. Heat accuses Verloc of being the second man in the bombing plot. He further says that he knows Verloc has been talking with the Assistant Commissioner, but that Heat is the one who *really* solved the crime. Though Winnie can't see it, Heat shows Verloc the scrap of Stevie's coat.

Winnie remains shut out of the details of the case, but she now hears everything. Inspector Heat maintains that he cracked the case, though moments ago he had a completely different resolution in mind. This shows that Heat is devoted to his own pride and reputation above all else.

Chief Inspector Heat encourages Verloc to get away, and that he doesn't think the Department will pursue the case further. Verloc laughs a little, saying that Heat probably wants "the others" to deal with him, now that everything is coming out. Heat asks Verloc how he got away from the scene of the crime, and Verloc says that he just ran away when he heard the premature bang. Heat says that the bomber stumbled against a tree root and that his remains had to be gathered with a shovel. Hearing this, Winnie stumbles away from the keyhole, covering her ears, her eyes wild.

The department has tolerated Verloc's activities in the past, and Heat thinks the same will be true now. Verloc thinks this will just give the Embassy, now exposed, the opportunity to eliminate him for betraying them instead. However, while the men discuss Verloc's fate, all Winnie hears are the horrifying details of Stevie's death. From the beginning of his involvement in the plot to the end, he has been treated as literally disposable.

Meanwhile, Verloc tells Heat that he plans to make a full confession. Heat reflects on what this will mean: the exoneration of Michaelis and the exposure of The Professor's bomb-making work, not to mention a departmental shake-up. Heat says that he wouldn't trust the Assistant Commissioner, and that even if Verloc agrees to testify with the expectation of a lighter sentence in exchange, he might be surprised by what happens. Again, he urges Verloc to get away while he has a chance; some in the Department still believe he's dead, after all.

Heat would still prefer that Verloc escape prosecution for the crime, presumably so that he can still turn some aspect of the case in this own favor and wrangle credit for it. Since some people believe that Verloc was the bomber who got killed, there's still hope that he can escape.

Inspector Heat asks what drove Verloc to get involved with such a plot. In his explanation, Verloc calls Mr. Vladimir a "Hyperborean swine." Heat leaves, and the shop bell startles Winnie from where she's been sitting frozen at the counter, hands pressed to her face. Against the dull firelight, Winnie's wedding band glitters brightly.

"Hyperborean" refers to an inhabitant of a northern region—though Vladimir seems more likely to be Russian, which is to England's east. Whatever the accuracy of his expressions, Verloc blames the Embassy for everything.

CHAPTER 10

The Assistant Commissioner travels to Parliament, where he is met by Toodles. As Toodles leads the Assistant Commissioner to Sir Ethelred, the Assistant Commissioner talks about catching his "sprat", which might be used to catch a bigger fish (Mr. Vladimir) in turn. When the Assistant Commissioner is seated in front of Sir Ethelred's desk, he explains that he discovered Verloc was eager to confess. Verloc quickly told him of Vladimir's instigation and Stevie's involvement. Michaelis wasn't involved and probably still doesn't know about it, though Stevie had been staying with him. Verloc turned up at Michaelis's this morning and took Stevie out on the pretense of a country walk.

In contrast to the more domestic scene that occurred at the end of Chapter IX, the Assistant Commissioner now travels to the center of British power. While Inspector Heat was mainly concerned about nailing a specific culprit, the Assistant Commissioner is eager to exploit the political dimensions of the case by uprooting foreign spies. (A sprat is a very small fish, and here it symbolizes Verloc.)

The Assistant Commissioner continues filling in Sir Ethelred on Mr. Vladimir. Both men think the whole situation sounds far-fetched, but Verloc evidently took it seriously and felt threatened. He got carried away, fearing betrayal by the Embassy people, and acted out of fear and anger. The Assistant Commissioner doesn't believe that Verloc is a hardened criminal or that he ever intended for Stevie to die. The whole affair, he reflects, has the air of someone who committed suicide in hopes of putting an end to his troubles, only to discover that it did nothing of the kind. In any case, he tells Ethelred, he let Verloc go; he doesn't believe that Verloc is a flight risk.

The Assistant Commissioner and Sir Ethelred suspect that Vladimir was playing Verloc—that Vladimir didn't intend his threats very seriously, and that Verloc, believing the worst, allowed fear to get the best of him. As. result, Verloc acted out in senseless violence and made things much worse for himself. To the police, Verloc's meltdown seems incidental; the Embassy is the more significant target.

As Sir Ethelred dismisses the Assistant Commissioner, the latter confirms that, indeed, Verloc has a wife whom he genuinely seems to love and respect. The whole thing, in fact, is really a "domestic drama."

Sir Ethelred finds Verloc's marriage odd, given his other associations. The Assistant Commissioner's remark about a "domestic drama" could be read as Conrad's comment on the significance of the book as a whole, suggesting that the story's primary conflict is interpersonal rather than political.

As the Assistant Commissioner goes on his way, he feels a "crusading" impulse. After going home to change, he goes to the home of Michaelis's patroness, where his wife currently is. He greets the elderly patroness and assures her that although Michaelis was under some suspicion, he has been cleared. Then, the lady introduces him to a figure seated nearby—Mr. Vladimir. The patroness explains that, in light of today's bombing, Vladimir has been frightening her with stories of revolution—anarchists like the bomber must be suppressed. Sarcastically, the Assistant Commissioner says that he's sure that Vladimir understands the true significance of the incident.

Encouraged by his success with the case and Sir Ethelred's approval, the Assistant Commissioner is eager to seek out spies. Apparently by coincidence, he discovers Mr. Vladimir at the home of their mutual acquaintance, Michaelis's patroness. Mr. Vladimir has been manipulating the influential patroness with stories of anarchist outrage, and the Assistant Commissioner sees exactly what he's doing. Ironically, revolutionists and police bump into one another in London's wealthy drawing-rooms—confirming The Professor's cynicism about his fellow anarchists (they and their pursuers are mutually dependent).

After Mr. Vladimir leaves, the Assistant Commissioner hurries to intercept him. When Vladimir sees no cabs available, they walk down the street together, and the Assistant Commissioner casually mentions that they've gotten ahold of Verloc. Vladimir appears unshaken, but inwardly he's amazed by the cleverness of the English police—he hadn't believed that they were capable of it. The Assistant Commissioner says that he's grateful for this opportunity to begin clearing the country of foreign spies; the persecution of Verloc will also be useful for turning public opinion against revolutionaries. He adds that they'll now succeed in rooting out all anarchists, and it only remains to get rid of the agent provocateur. Mr. Vladimir catches a cab and leaves without a word.

Vladimir has underestimated the English police, whom he believed were ineffective and complacent. Ironically, the persecution of Verloc may end up achieving part of Vladimir's goal—awakening public opinion against anarchists—but in the process, he and the Embassy have also landed within the government's sights. Vladimir's disappearance from the story suggests that the influence of foreign spies will also fade from British life.

CHAPTER 11

After Chief Inspector Heat leaves, Verloc paces around the house, feeling sympathy for his bereaved wife. As an upside, Inspector Heat broke the news to Winnie, so now Verloc doesn't have to. He'd never even meant for Stevie to die—he hadn't foreseen an accident like this. He'd expected that Stevie would get arrested, but he wasn't afraid of that—he trusted in Stevie's blind loyalty, and he'd spent their recent walks impressing on Stevie the importance of silence. Verloc had also spent a lot of time carefully changing Stevie's view of the police.

Back at the Verlocs', Verloc reflects on what happened to Stevie, but his thoughts about the matter are superficial. He didn't want Stevie to die, but beyond that, it's clear that he still viewed Stevie as just a tool for getting a job done. He manipulated Stevie's trust and took his loyalty for granted.

Why, Verloc wonders bitterly, did his wife sew Stevie's address into his clothes? He decides not to reproach her about it. He goes up to the shop counter and offers, "I didn't mean any harm to come to the boy." Winnie shudders in response and says nothing. Verloc says that Inspector Heat shouldn't have upset Winnie with his harsh words; Verloc had spent hours trying to think of a softer way to break the news. When Winnie keeps sitting there with her face in her hands, Verloc decides that he'd better leave her alone for now. He goes into the parlor and appreciatively sits down to the cold beef and bread that Winnie laid out for him earlier, but for which he'd had no appetite at the time.

Winnie's gesture of care for Stevie—sewing his address into his coat—ends up hastening the Verlocs' undoing. This suggests that Winnie's utmost loyalty is to Stevie, and that when he is removed from the picture, her lesser loyalties—like her marriage—inevitably collapse. For the time being, Verloc remains oblivious to this fact. Having confessed, he feels that the worst is behind him.

Verloc isn't being callous; he'd been so nervous that he'd eaten nothing all day, from the time he arrived at Michaelis's this morning to claim Stevie. Now that the bombing and its aftermath are behind him, Verloc's appetite returns forcefully. After devouring his dinner, he again approaches Winnie, who hasn't moved. He tells Winnie that it "can't be helped" and encourages her to pull herself together, since he'll be hauled off to prison soon. He's not trying to be inhumane, but it isn't within his nature to understand the depth of his wife's feelings for Stevie.

As far as Verloc is concerned, life is mostly back to normal, even if it includes a prison sentence, and he doesn't understand why Winnie doesn't feel the same way. Because he didn't view Stevie as a full human being whose loss is a tragedy, he finds his wife's grief incomprehensible.

Finally, Verloc tells Winnie to look at him and, in an unfeeling voice, Winnie says she never wants to look at him again. Verloc thinks she is simply being unreasonable. When he tries to pull her hands away from her face, Winnie suddenly runs from the room. Verloc sits down in the chair that she left and contemplates his inevitable imprisonment—perhaps he'll move abroad after he's released. If only Winnie hadn't sewn Stevie's address into his coat and gotten Verloc caught, then he would have had great success with the Embassy. Nevertheless, unfortunate though Stevie's death might be, Verloc *did* succeed in producing a moral outrage—it just wasn't the kind of outrage he intended. He accepts this with a fatalistic spirit.

From Verloc's point of view, the biggest disaster in the bomb plot is that Winnie sewed identification into Stevie's clothes. If it weren't for that, he might have gotten off free, proving himself to the Embassy and reaping the rewards of a successful terror attack. Instead, the greatest "outrage" produced is not a shakeup of public opinion but a rift in his own marriage.

Verloc worries about what will become of his shop while he's in prison, if Winnie is too distraught to watch over it. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Winnie is sitting at the table in Stevie's usual seat. Verloc wants to confide in his wife about the way that Vladimir has haunted him over the past weeks until he was forced to take action. Finally, fists clenched, he tells Winnie that she doesn't know what he's had to deal with—he's been susceptible "to having a knife stuck into me any time."

Self-pitying and oblivious to the depth of his wife's grief, Verloc rants to Winnie about how he has been mistreated in all this. His comment about "having a knife stuck into" him foreshadows his imminent fate.

Verloc continues his rant. He resents Vladimir toying with him—many high-profile people owe their lives to him. He's risked his life disrupting revolutionary plots for the past 11 years; the old Baron he used to work for appreciated him, but now an "overbearing swine" has come along. He notices that Winnie is sitting up now. Verloc seethes over Vladimir's disloyalty. *He* has been loyal to his cause over the years, and it's only his loyalty to Winnie, he tells her, that kept him from grabbing Vladimir by the throat on the spot.

Verloc sees his situation in terms of loyalty and betrayal. Because he has faithfully informed on assassination plots, he feels entitled to the world's gratitude; Vladimir's disrespect and manipulation therefore enrages him. If he didn't care about being around for Winnie, he would have killed Vladimir. Verloc fails to see that by getting Stevie killed, he has betrayed Winnie.

The novelty of confiding in Winnie pushes Stevie from Verloc's mind. Because of this, Verloc is startled when he looks up and sees Winnie's strange expression. She seems to be staring at the wall beyond him, but when Verloc turns and looks, he "saw no writing on the wall." He just feels frustrated that Winnie isn't responding as he'd hoped to the collapse of his career as a secret agent. She isn't taking things at all as he'd imagined. He tells her that she'd better go to bed and have a good cry.

The "writing on the wall" is a reference to the Old Testament Book of Daniel and is a proverb for an ominous warning. In this case, it hints that Verloc is soon to meet his end—but Verloc's blindness to the "writing" shows how clueless he remains about what he's done and how Winnie has been affected.

But the nature of Stevie's death stops Winnie's tears. Her life has always revolved around Stevie. Images of her childhood care and protection of Stevie flash through her mind, most of them involving her father's violence. She also thinks of a kind man she'd once loved but rejected because he didn't accept Stevie; Verloc, on the other hand, quietly tolerated Stevie, though there was nothing otherwise special about him. Winnie's visions conclude with the sight of Verloc and Stevie walking up Brett Street looking like father and son—a scene Winnie had enabled.

Stevie has always been at the center of Winnie's life—in particular, protecting Stevie from harm and providing for him has been her lifelong goal. She has even put her own happiness aside in order to secure the best situation for Stevie. But because she didn't believe Verloc capable of hurting Stevie, she has deceived herself all along, even pushing Stevie into Verloc's grasp.

Winnie keeps staring at the blank wall. Verloc, meanwhile, nourishes his revenge toward the Embassy. This is in keeping with his personality—he has long been in the habit of betraying others, after all; it doesn't matter if they're anarchists or diplomats. Verloc wishes for some word of comfort from his wife, but all she can think is that Verloc took Stevie away from her and murdered him.

Winnie and Verloc each privately nurse their respective desires for revenge. For Verloc, betrayal is second nature. For Winnie, however, it's something new, as she has always accepted her life and other people at face value and acted accordingly. Now, she is forced to look beneath Verloc's exterior and figure out how to respond.

Winnie finally looks at Verloc, but he's looking at the ground. He gives Winnie instructions about running the store while he's in jail. She'll have to be prepared to sell the business before he gets out, so they can leave London; he doesn't want the other revolutionaries to stab him in the back. "I am too fond of you for that," he tells Winnie. Winnie's face flushes slightly at these words. She doesn't take in much of what he's saying, and she continues obsessing over Verloc's betrayal.

Verloc continues to think mainly of himself and his own future prospects, and to conflate Winnie's well-being with his own. He assumes that his being killed is the worst that could happen for her too.

When she hears Verloc mention escaping abroad, Winnie's thoughts automatically turn to Stevie's well-being, only to remember that there's no longer any need to worry for him. She further realizes that she no longer has to stay with Verloc herself, and she begins to think of herself as a free woman. She walks out of the kitchen and disappears upstairs. Verloc feels disappointed by Winnie's reserve, but he also feels hungry again, so he sits down and eats more roast beef.

As Winnie thinks of Stevie, she realizes that with him gone, her fundamental tie of loyalty to Verloc has been cut. This, in turn, frees her from her marital obligations and from her conventional domestic life altogether. Verloc has betrayed her trust, and she no longer owes him anything.

Upstairs, Winnie opens the window, and Verloc hears her getting dressed to leave the house. Winnie had thought at first of either throwing herself out the window or screaming for help—she isn't sure what to do with her newfound freedom—but she ends up doing neither. When she returns to the kitchen, Verloc assumes that she is going to see her mother, and he discourages her from going out at this hour of the night. Winnie realizes that Verloc will never let her go anywhere again. Nervous about his wife's silence, Verloc pulls the black veil from her face. He had no other options, he tells Winnie. Anyway, *she* is at fault, too—she kept urging him to spend time with Stevie. In fact, she's as much responsible as he is for Stevie's death. Exhausted, he finally flings himself on the sofa. All of Winnie's energies are exhausted.

Winnie realizes that, now that Verloc has confided in her, he's not going to let her go free. What's more, his ongoing, desperate self-justifications show that he takes no real responsibility for what has happened to Stevie—be even shifts the blame onto Winnie for bringing Stevie to his attention so much. Verloc is unable to comprehend anything deeper as to what the loss of Stevie means for Winnie.

As Verloc makes himself comfortable, he mutters that he wishes he'd never seen Greenwich Park. Winnie pictures Stevie's remains being gathered in the park, and her stony expression gives way to one more violent. But Verloc, finally at rest and confident in her love for him, doesn't see this. He calls Winnie to his side, and she obeys. As she does so, she silently picks up the carving knife from the table. When she reaches the sofa, there is just enough time for Verloc to see the shadow of Winnie's arm moving up and down with the knife in hand. There is enough time for him to realize that his wife has gone mad and to imagine trying to escape. But by the time he thinks of all this, the knife is planted in his breast. He starts to say, "Don't," as he dies.

Verloc is complacent about Winnie's love for him until the very last moment of his life—hence his relaxing on the sofa. When Winnie kills Verloc, he rests in a vulnerable, trusting state, invoking the way Stevie trustingly submitted himself to Verloc's guidance and instruction. For her part, Winnie's act is an outburst similar to Stevie's: a vulnerable person has been hurt, and she lashes out violent because there is nothing else she can do to fix the situation. She pays Verloc back for his betrayal of her trust.

Winnie takes a deep breath, feeling free at last. She no longer has any responsibilities or obligations; she doesn't even think. After a long time, she notices that the "tic" noise she's been hearing, which she mistook for the clock, was actually her husband's blood dripping to the floor. She is shocked into action and runs toward the door, knocking the table aside as she goes. Verloc's hat drifts to the floor.

Verloc's death frees Winnie from her ties to him, and indeed from her ties to domestic life—freed from these bonds, she has no clear place in conventional structures. She is a kind of rebel—in a way, an anarchist defying law and conventionality.

CHAPTER 12

Winnie does not step beyond the front door. After the initial exhilaration, she now feels afraid. For Verloc, she only feels contempt—but she realizes that she is the only living murderer in the room. Though stabbing Verloc had momentarily relieved her rage, Winnie is now compelled to look more deeply into the matter, and all she can see is the gallows. She pictures being hung in some obscure jailyard and feels afraid. Newspaper accounts of hangings always say something like, "The drop given was fourteen feet." She starts feeling choked and panicky, and she resolves to jump off a bridge.

Though Winnie felt liberated moments earlier, she realizes that she has trapped herself in new difficulties—hanging is the only way a murder charge is likely to end. She is freed from most of her earthly ties, but she is still accountable to the law. She decides that the only escape is to commit suicide.

Only a few minutes have passed since the stabbing. Winnie drags herself outside, where the damp air feels suffocating, and the atmosphere of the dark, misty **city** envelops her. She feels friendless and tries to forget about her mother. Winnie keeps dragging herself one step at a time, her fear of death dogging her. She thinks for a moment about fleeing abroad, but she can't do this without help and connections. London is "a black abyss from which no unaided woman" can escape.

Throughout the novel, London has always had an unfriendly air—now, in the aftermath of the stabbing, its atmosphere feels deadly and devoid of help or comfort. Unlike Verloc, who had the freedom and connections to flee abroad, Winnie doesn't know anyone who can help her, an "unaided woman," avoid being engulfed by the overwhelming "abyss" of the city.

Moments later, Winnie finds unexpected help: Comrade Ossipon is peering at her through her black veil, believing she looks drunk. To Ossipon's surprise, Winnie leans against him, surprised that he recognizes her. He tells her he has been thinking of her lately, and indeed has *always* thought about her. Ossipon has been hovering near Brett Street for the past two hours, trying to decide if he dared approach the widow, though he doesn't tell her that part. Winnie tucks her hand under his arm and begins directing him down the street.

Just when Winnie is desperate, one of Verloc's revolutionary associates shows up out of nowhere. The novel has hinted at his crush on her before, though Winnie has always rejected him out of loyalty to Verloc. Now, there's nothing to stop Winnie from attaching herself to him.

Ossipon tells Winnie that he read about the bombing in the paper, and he decided to come and find Winnie, whom he's always loved. Inwardly, he wonders about the shop's business value, but he tries to focus on the romantic side of things. He is surprised that Winnie is being so receptive.

Earlier that day, believing that Verloc was dead, The Professor urged Ossipon to attach himself to Winnie. Ossipon's interest in women is always mercenary—though he genuinely likes her, he also has an interest in whatever money has been left to her.

Winnie says she always ignored Ossipon because she was a respectable wife, "till he made me what I am." But as far as she's concerned, Verloc stole the last seven years of her life. When they married, Winnie was a tired young woman with others dependent on her; Verloc was willing to support her mother and Stevie, so what else could she do? But he turned out to be "a devil."

Winnie blames Verloc for making her what she is—that is, turning her into a killer. She now believes that she married him on false pretenses, having believed him to be a much better person than he later revealed himself to be. She was a helpless woman with others who were dependent on her, susceptible to being taken advantage of.

Ossipon feels stunned by this ferocious statement; he doesn't know what Verloc could have done, but he tries to comfort Winnie, assuring her that Verloc is dead now. Winnie, relieved and triumphant, grabs his arm and says, "You guessed what I had to do." Ossipon, however, is confused by Winnie's words and her frenzied state. He starts to wonder if the Verlocs' marriage was so unhappy that Verloc bombed Greenwich Park as a way of committing suicide, making fools of the police, the press, The Professor, and the revolutionary world over a domestic dispute. He wonders if Winnie is the real "devil."

In her ranting against Verloc, Winnie mistakenly believes it's clear to Ossipon that she killed her husband. Ossipon, sure that Verloc is dead, assumes no such thing. Instead, he wonders if the bombing was Verloc's reaction to a private marital dispute—and if, perhaps, Winnie is the "devil" in this situation.

Comrade Ossipon wonders how Winnie came to know about the bombing (he doesn't believe that Verloc would have told her his plans). She explains that Chief Inspector Heat came, and that she overheard that they had to "gather him up with a shovel." She adds that the police were on "that man's side" and did nothing. After that, an Embassy foreigner came. Ossipon is shocked by this detail— the matter is becoming much deeper than he thought it was. He tries to stop speculating and focus on Winnie.

Previously, Winnie thought the Assistant Commissioner looked like a foreigner. Because she'd overheard Verloc muttering about the Embassy in his sleep, Winnie makes the incorrect assumption that the Assistant Commissioner must have been from the Embassy. Despite the mistake, Ossipon learns from this detail that the conspiracy is bigger than he'd imagined.

Winnie begs Ossipon to flee with her to the Continent (mainland Europe). Ossipon, who feels that the whole affair is becoming too murky for him, is happy to oblige. But what about Verloc's money? He tells Winnie there won't be a train until this, and he doesn't have the money anyway. At that, Winnie remembers the cash tucked into her bodice. The pair embrace in mutual relief, but Ossipon is still baffled by Winnie's evident fear. "Haven't you guessed what I was driven to do!" she exclaims. In her terrified state, she thinks that she's revealed more to Ossipon than she really has.

Winnie now has someone to help her escape, and Ossipon has access to the money he wants—but Ossipon still doesn't understand the full situation that Winnie is drawing him into.

Ossipon is used to excitable women and asks no further questions. He suddenly remembers that a boat leaves Southampton for France at midnight; they can catch a train at 10:30. He starts making plans. Suddenly, Winnie remembers that she left the shop door open. When they approach the shop, she notices that she also left the parlor light on. She pushes Ossipon toward the shop, begging him to take care of it for her. Ossipon doesn't want to argue with her over trifles, so he obliges. When he looks into the parlor, however, he stifles a yell when he sees Verloc resting on the sofa. It suddenly occurs to him that the Verlocs are plotting together to kill him, or perhaps to trap him for the police.

Ossipon finally sees Verloc's remains and realizes that there's more to this situation than he'd believed. At first, though, he doesn't realize that Verloc is dead and believes that he's been pulled into some sort of trap.

In the middle of his terror, Ossipon notices the hat upended on the floor. From there, his eyes gradually move toward Verloc's partially closed eyes and then to his chest, from which a knife handle protrudes. Ossipon begins to retch. Just then Winnie rushes into the shop and clutches him, afraid that a passing constable has spotted her. The police have been instructed not to meddle with Verloc's shop unless something is obviously wrong. Having spotted Winnie on the street, the constable tries the door and briefly shines his lantern at the window. Winnie tells Ossipon to kill her if the constable gets in, but the constable walks away, assuming that all is well.

Ossipon finally understands the full horror of the situation. Ironically, Verloc's past criminal activities probably prevent Winnie from getting caught on the spot—as an informant for the police, Verloc the authorities aren't suspicious of him, so they don't see any reason to meddle in his private affairs.

Ossipon finally gets the parlor light shut off, trying to accept what's happened. He doesn't believe that Winnie is capable of committing a crime like this alone, and so he still isn't convinced that there isn't someone else lurking in the house to kill him—who knows where this might end? Winnie begs Ossipon not to let her be caught and hanged. She'll do anything for him, love him or be a slave. From her ravings, Ossipon figures out that it was in fact Stevie, the "degenerate," who was killed in the bombing. As Winnie clings to his legs snakelike, Ossipon feels terrified of her; she seems like "death itself." She tells him he can't get rid of her now, "not unless you crush my head under your heel."

Winnie, terrified of death, abases herself before Ossipon, looking for any escape. Winnie's words, "unless you crush my head under your heel," are a reference to the biblical Book of Genesis, when God places a curse on the serpent who tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. Here, Winnie is the snake, tempting Ossipon and threatening to bring him down with her into death.

Ossipon imagines Winnie running into the street and sending the police after *him* as the murderer. He also imagines fleeing to an obscure part of Europe and living in fear of her for the rest of his life. Finally, he pulls himself together, and they leave the shop and catch a cab for the train. He gives Winnie instructions about buying the tickets and boarding the train separately, in case they are recognized. Winnie gives him Verloc's money and tells him that Verloc banked under the name of Prozor.

Ossipon fears that Winnie will force him to take the fall for Verloc's death, so he starts plotting escape. Trusting him, Winnie willingly hands over Verloc's bundle of cash.

At the station, they follow their plan and are soon concealed in a train compartment. Ossipon speaks to the guard to make sure they won't be disturbed during the trip. Winnie softens, moved by Ossipon's care for her. Ossipon, for his part, is "free from the trammels of conventional morality," yet still beholden to "the rule of science." He gazes back at Winnie and sees her as a degenerate in her own way—a murderer. He studies her features for confirmation and concludes that Lombroso would agree.

Though Ossipon doesn't care to abide by most social conventions, he still adheres to certain rules, though their legitimacy is questionable—earlier in the book, Ossipon had expressed belief in the pseudo-scientific theories of Lombroso, who held that certain types of "degeneracy" could be detected from physical features. Though Winnie doesn't share her late brother's disability, she appears morally corrupt to Ossipon as well.

When Ossipon mentions the resemblance between Winnie and Stevie, Winnie finally breaks into helpless sobs. Ossipon encourages her to step farther away from the platform, then, at the last moment before the train pulls away from the platform, he opens the carriage door and leaps out. He gets up, bruised and shaken, at the very end of the platform and tells the crowd of concerned railway workers that he has just sent his wife off to her dying mother's house and didn't notice that the train was moving until the last second, leaping out on impulse. Ossipon then walks out of the station, the banknotes in his pocket. He walks all the way home through the misty, sleeping **city** until he reaches his flat, where he lies awake until dawn.

While Winnie is distracted, Ossipon jumps off the train at the last possible moment, extricating himself from Winnie's downward spiral. With Winnie bound for the Continent (mainland Europe), Ossipon is presumably safe. If Winnie tries to return to London, she runs the risk that Ossipon will have told the police about her crime. And since Ossipon has made off with Verloc's money, Winnie is both helpless and friendless.

CHAPTER 13

Comrade Ossipon has come to visit The Professor in the ugly, spartan room in East **London** that The Professor has rented. The Professor tells Ossipon about his recent visit to Michaelis. Michaelis hadn't heard anything about Verloc's death. He only focuses on his autobiography, which lacks logical reasoning and talks about planning a world with lots of gardens and flowers, in which the strong care for the weak. The Professor believes that Michaelis's ideas are sheer folly—the weak, he thinks, are the source of all evil. They have all the power and they oppress the strong, so they must be exterminated.

More than a week has passed since the previous chapter, and some of London's remaining revolutionaries are now discussing recent events. Characteristically, the idealistic Michaelis remains oblivious to what's happened. The contrast between him and The Professor once again shows the broad range of perspectives among revolutionaries. Whereas Michaelis wants to protect the weak, The Professor sees them as a harmful drag on society.

Ossipon suggests that they go get a beer. As they ride the omnibus, Ossipon admits that Michaelis's plan is silly. However, he might not be completely wrong: 200 years from now, doctors will rule the world, and science will triumph, extending the lives of the strong. The Professor rejects this idea. At the pub, he raises a toast "to the destruction of what is."

Ossipon, too, remains loyal to his earlier beliefs, namely his devotion to science. Like The Professor, he believes that the strong will triumph, but he thinks that this is because science will favor them—essentially, he believes in eugenics. The Professor sees the elimination of the weak as a step toward "the destruction of what is"—that is, the destruction of all existing social structures and institutions.

As Ossipon and The Professor drink, Ossipon pulls an old newspaper from his pocket and rereads a line he has memorized: "An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair." These words fall under a headline about the suicide of a female passenger aboard a cross-channel boat 10 days ago. Ossipon has been obsessed with these words and unable to date any other women since. He imagines Winnie on the boat in her veil, sickly and silent. When Winnie disappeared from the boat, she only left behind her wedding ring.

Ossipon and The Professor's meeting echoes their conversation in Chapter IV, on the day of the bombing. In the aftermath, Ossipon is a changed man. The newspaper account reveals that Winnie, only identified as a maddened female passenger, jumped overboard. Though Ossipon had once drifted happily between women, he can't get Winnie out of his mind; only he understands her fate.

When The Professor is about to leave, Ossipon asks him what he knows of "madness and despair." The Professor says there are no such things. The world doesn't have enough passion to sustain them; it is mediocre. So was Verloc; so is everyone. He gets up to leave and tells Ossipon that the small fortune Ossipon acquired hasn't done him any good. Ossipon offers him the money, but The Professor just smiles and says he'll send Ossipon a bill for some chemicals he needs.

The Professor doesn't believe that anyone in the modern world is strong enough to muster up real madness or despair, so he just goes back to working on his perfect detonator. Ossipon doesn't care about keeping Verloc's money; The Professor probably wanted it for his own purposes all along, hence encouraging Ossipon to attach himself to Winnie.

Ossipon continues to sit there, repeating the words "An impenetrable mystery [...] this act of madness or despair." Eventually, he wanders out of the beerhall and aimlessly along the streets. He hasn't been able to think, eat, or sleep; his revolutionary career is at an end. Meanwhile, The Professor wanders too, avoiding the detestable crowds of people. He doesn't think about his future, instead thinking of himself as a "force." He cherishes thoughts of destruction, since it's the only thing that will bring "regeneration" to the world. The frail man passes through the crowds, "unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men."

The novel's anarchists go their different ways, with Ossipon fading into insignificance in the anarchist scene in his distraction and obsession over Winnie's death. Only The Professor remains active in his plotting. He is dangerous precisely because of his ability to fade inconspicuously into the multitude and his willingness to become a destructive force—as he sees it, for the sake of humanity's betterment. The story thus ends on an ambiguous note. On one hand, anarchism has failed to be the terrifying threat it purported to be when Vladimir set Verloc to work on his bomb plot. On the other hand, the rare Professor-like figure could always be at large, "unsuspected and deadly," undetectable and unstoppable.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*The Secret Agent*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Oct 2020. Web. 23 Oct 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*The Secret Agent*." LitCharts LLC, October 23, 2020. Retrieved October 23, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-secret-agent.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Secret Agent* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Conrad, Joseph. The Secret Agent. Penguin. 1907.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Conrad, Joseph. The Secret Agent. London: Penguin. 1907.