CHAPTER - VIII

THE SECRET AGENT
CHAPTER 8

SECRET AGENT

Subject Matter and setting:

Most of Conrad's novels have a natural setting like the sea, forests, or some exotic land. But here, the story is set in London of the 1890's. Amidst the impersonal and squalid atmosphere of the metropolis, life itself becomes the subject matter, with its paradoxical mixture of triviality and dignity, struggle and frustration, beauty and vulgarity. The story is a revelation of human life in some of the unusual aspects. Set in the damp, dingy streets of London, the subjects are from the lower middle class. Except for a few; the Assistant Commissioner of Police, the British Home Secretary, the Russian Embassy Officials and the rich lady patroness of Michealis, all other characters are from the lower strata of society. Through characters like Winnie's mother, Winnie, the Charwoman Mrs. Neate and the crippled Cab Driver, Conrad portrays the human struggle to survive under harsh and miserable conditions. At the same time, the story deals with the sordid subject of underground crime and intrigue among some foreign anarchist revolutionaries staying in London. With a mixture of such subjects, the incidents that arise are bomb throwing, murder
and suicide. Though such incidents are somewhat unusual and far removed from the daily routine of human existence in a city, Conrad’s story is rooted in social facts and renders us the natural reality of the human reactions and limitations in such situations. Conrad is not just a realist but a naturalist and it is in the interest of naturalism that he bases his works on social facts and natural reality. This novel is based on the actual unsuccessful attempt in 1894, to blow up the Greenwich Observatory.

Conrad informs in his author’s note that, “... the subject of The Secret Agent — I mean the tale — came to me in the shape of a few words uttered by a friend in a casual conversation about anarchists or rather anarchist activities; how brought about I don’t remember now.”

When his friend told him that the man who blew himself up was half an idiot and that his sister committed suicide afterwards, Conrad condoned the criminal futility of the whole affair including the anarchist doctrine, action and mentality.

Conrad kept working on this information and also tells us in his author’s note that he felt himself stimulated by some passages from a book of reminiscences by an Assistant Commissioner of Police whose name he believed was Anderson. Conrad says that one particular passage of about seven lines where the author reproduced a short dialogue with the Home Secretary, held in
the lobby of the House of Commons after an unexpected anarchist outrage, specially attracted his attention. Conrad says that the Home Secretary (Probably Sir William Harcourt) was irritated and the Police Official was apologetic because Harcourt didn't like to be kept in the dark in the name of Secrecy. Apart from these factual inspirations, we can also see that the setting and background of the novel is realistic. At the time when the bomb outrage at Greenwich occurred, England was following a very liberal domestic policy regarding foreign anarchists who stayed in England. The novel was published in 1907 when the communists had not come into power yet in Russia and the country was governed by the Emperor (Czar).

The story of this novel pertains to the period between 1894 and 1907. The motive of Vladimir and the Russian Embassy in instigating Verloc to organize some anarchist outrage is to create panic and fear among the English people. This was intended to instigate the English police into suppressing the anarchists and instigate the English government into passing repressive legislation to curb the anarchists because they might pose a threat to imperialist rule in Russia.

This situation prevailed in reality also. Both in reality and in the novel, the English government did nothing of that sort. There are numerous facts that pertain to the developments portrayed in the novel. It is not at all improbable
that Conrad might have followed the press coverage of the incident and the developments in the investigation that followed. Though the press reports were very brief initially, they established that the victim was Martin Bourdin, that he was badly mutilated by the premature explosion, and had probably stumbled as he carried a bomb. Later, it came to light that he was brother-in-law to a known anarchist by name Samuels. These details could have provided the skeleton framework for Conrad's novel.

The reports of breaking news made it clear that Bourdin was carrying the bomb towards the Greenwich Meridian Observatory and was later taken to the Seaman's Hospital in Greenwich where he died. Later reports also mentioned the 'Autonomie Club' which was an anarchist meeting place (similar to Verloc's shop cum house in the novel) and it was an institution which was perfectly legal under the liberal British laws. In Conrad's novel, this provokes the Russian First Secretary to initiate the act of terror, in order to cause a tightening of British domestic policy. The Russian embassy wanted to force the hand of the British government in arresting all the anarchists harboured in Great Britain, but the British Government does not do so.

The mass media and certain social critics of the time have commented on the tardiness of the police in investigating the Greenwich bomb outrage. It seemed odd that the police investigation mostly ignored Samuels, the brother-
in-law of the dead bomber. The police also ignored some other prominent figures, but raided the ‘Autonomie Club’ and arrested many innocent anarchists. Conrad portrays a similar thing in his novel, where the Chief Inspector Heat does not arrest Verloc, but wants to implicate the innocent Michealis in the crime because Verloc is his valuable informer and by protecting him, Heat would safeguard his own reputation and also cover up his unofficial and illegal connections and methods.

Though the setting of this novel is different from his other works, the common place and unheroic setting is typical of Conrad’s naturalist works. Here Conrad concentrates on the normal, ordinary people as the subjects, who become a part of abnormal incidents and in doing so he shows us, that which is natural in human nature, which does not change in any type of situation. It is quite clear that Conrad’s own personal experiences enrich this work because he tells us in the author’s note that he didn’t lack hints for creating realistic surroundings for Winnie’s story. He says that he had to fight hard to control the memories of his solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in his early days. “... lest they should rush in and overwhelm each page of the story as these emerged one after another...”
Method:

At the very outset, we come across the Scientific Method with its scientific objectivity by way of elaborate descriptions of the bodily functions and the emphasis on meticulous details. After the initial description of the appearance of Verloc’s shop, we get detailed descriptions of the physical appearance of Mr. Verloc, Winnie and her mother in the first three pages itself. Later on, the descriptions of Stevie, Karl Yundt, Michaelis, Ossipon, the Professor and others contain such minute details that the reader can visualize these characters candidly.

One of the aspects of the method in *The Secret Agent* that some critics point out is that the otherwise gripping story is impeded in its narration by too much of description and psychological analysis. However, this helps Conrad to portray life and society with truthfulness and objectivity akin to the way the subject matter of science is studied. Due to this method, the characters and scenes come alive convincingly to the reader as never before.

*The Secret Agent* contains thirteen chapters of varying length that do not follow chronology. There are several time shifts in the narrative that comes in the voice of an omniscient observer. This narrative device enables an objective and detached approach on the part of the author.
At the end of chapter three the scene where Winnie turns off the light, the narrative jumps forward more than three weeks. What happens in the gap in between is gradually presented to the reader through flashbacks. In Chapter eight, the novel flashes back to an earlier time where chapter three is left off: that is, three weeks before the day of the bombing while Verloc is anxiously planning to execute Vladimir’s orders. These shifts in time and setting and the letting out of small pieces of information in between serve to manipulate the reader’s understanding. This also makes the novel difficult reading by normal standards. The form of the book is perhaps purposely designed to mirror the lack of social awareness and insufficient communication among the characters. The readers are also given access to only one dimension, thereby continuing the impression of compartments of partial understanding. In other words, the unexplained gaps in chronology reflect the blackness of the metropolis, and the dangerous barriers between its inhabitants. Conrad applies an ironic method to his subject throughout this novel which is best explained and defended in his own words in his author’s note:

In that respect, I really think that ‘The Secret Agent’ is a perfectly genuine piece of work. Even the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind, was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn
as well as in pity. It is one of the minor satisfactions of my writing life that having taken that resolve I did manage, it seems to me, to carry it right through to the end.\footnote{\[\]}

It can be concluded regarding the method in this novel that in Conrad’s hands, the novel of Winnie’s degeneration with its anarchistic end of utter desolation, madness and despair, receives an ironic treatment no doubt, but this method enables him to give the most vivid, clinical and panoramic slice-of-life drama. Ultimately, Conrad says that by telling the tale as he has done it in this novel, he has not intended “to commit a gratuitous outrage on the feelings of mankind.” \footnote{\[\]} It is obvious that his method, rather than being an outrage, is simply a typical example of the naturalist method.

Conrad combines the objective spirit of French naturalism in his novel of adventure. We could say that his method of time shifts and portrayal of psychological inner life of characters owes something to Henry James. Conrad presents various points of view that cross and re-cross one another. Due to his desire for objectivity, he presents the facts of his plots as reflected in several minds and the reader has to follow and harmonize the visions. This method may raise some uncertainty to the reader, but ultimately it creates a highly naturalistic effect.
Plot and Characters:

*The Secret Agent* has a dense plot but we cannot find any conventional hero or heroine in it. As compared to Conrad’s other works, there are a relatively lesser number of characters here. Mr. Verloc is a spy in the pay of the Russian embassy in London and has managed to continue in his position for eight years, without doing anything much except writing voluminous reports. Suddenly, his new bosses threaten to terminate his services unless he does something tangible in order to justify the pay he receives. He is asked to organize a bomb blast at the Greenwich Observatory so as to rouse British opinion and the action of the British police against the foreign anarchist refugees in England. In fear of losing his job and security, he procures a time bomb and incites his wife’s brother Stevie to plant the bomb. Being a mentally deficient boy, he stumbles and blows himself to bits. By a mere chance, the police come to know his address and trace the conspiracy to Verloc’s house. But before the Police can take decisive action, Verloc’s wife Winnie discovers that her husband was responsible for Stevie’s death. Maternal affection for her invalid brother drives Winnie into a fit of rage and she murders Verloc. Then, as she is flying from justice, she is robbed and deserted by a rascal who poses as a helpful friend. With no one in the world to turn to, she commits suicide by jumping into the sea from a steamer.
Though the plot is only so much, the skill with which Conrad brings alive the characters and makes the reader empathize with the emotions of the characters is just fantastic. Conrad’s pictorial gift enables one to see the whole scene and realize his profound and comprehensive knowledge of human nature. In fact, F.R. Leavis has highly appreciated this novel and said that it is one of the novels that have a perfect structure.

Chief characters:

1. Mr. Adolf Verloc – The Russian spy in London.
2. Winnie Verloc – His wife.
3. Stevie (Stephen) – Winnie’s dimwitted brother.

Secondary characters:

4. Winnie’s Mother.
5. Mr. Wurmt – Privy Councillor / Chancelier d’ Ambassade.
6. Mr. Vladimir – First Secretary of the Russian Embassy.
8. Karl Yundt (nick named ‘The Terrorist’) – Old, bald and gouty revolutionary anarchist.
10. The rich and affluent lady patroness of Michaelis – very active socialite.
11. The Assistant Commissioner of Police.


15. The Professor (his nickname) – designer and supplier of explosives to terrorists.


17. The crippled night cab driver.

In Conrad’s portrayal of these characters we find gripping realism that heightens the naturalistic effect. Since he has used the ironic method, his perspective of satiric contempt towards the characters appears to laugh at them without taking them seriously. The characters are mostly from the lower socio-economic strata and are shown to be struggling for survival against forces beyond their control. There is a consistent emphasis on the social environment of the characters who are shown to be in subordinate relation to it. The other forces governing the characters are heredity, instinct and passions. They are what they are and they act and react as they do because of the forces mentioned
above. When we understand the characters in relation to their surroundings, they become very naturalistic.

Mr. Verloc was a man born of industrious parents for a life of hard work, but by nature (constitutionally) he was averse to any kind of exertion. With such an indolent disposition and having some intelligence, he naturally prefers a vocation that does not involve any hard work. He had spent five years in rigorous imprisonment after being caught stealing the design of the improved breach lock of the new field gun of the French Artillery. Then he works as a double agent for three parties: namely the Russian embassy, Chief Inspector Heat of the London Police and the group of foreign anarchists in London. After having known his nature and circumstances, all his later actions and reactions do not surprise the readers. In other words, we feel that it is natural for a person like him to pull along doing as little as possible for his employers. When his comfortable life and security are threatened, it is but natural for him to take desperate action to save his livelihood.

Winnie had spent her life as a work maid in the paying guest establishment run by her widowed mother. Though she falls in love with the young son of a butcher, the butcher prevents his son from a marriage that would entail maintenance of both Winnie’s mother and her idiot brother. These socio-economic circumstances of real life prompt her to marry the well-to-do Verloc
because he expresses willingness to maintain both her mother and brother after marriage. Winnie is by nature very incurious about matters. She doesn’t think deeply about things (including Verloc’s profession and activities). She marries Verloc out of sheer necessity and not out of love. Accordingly, she serves him as a faithful and good wife. In the seven years of marriage, they were childless, and naturally, all her maternal instinct and love finds expression on her idiot brother.

With this background, the reader is not at all surprised by her reaction when she comes to know that Verloc is responsible for her brother’s horrible death. Her act of stabbing Verloc and the later act of suicide when her last and only hope of support in life cheats and deserts her, are just natural consequences in the given circumstances.

Stevie’s character is governed more by heredity. He is a congential idiot with a vacant droop of the lower lip as a symptom. It is but natural that he is totally dependent on his sister Winnie. Hate and abhorrence of pain and injustice is inherent in his innocent self. These facts make him gullible and easily susceptible to incitement. Sympathy towards the pain and suffering of the horses, the cab driver and the maid Mrs. Neate is a natural extension of his character. When he is programmed to believe that Mr. Verloc is ‘good’, by his mother and sister, he quite naturally agrees to plant the bomb at his behest.
Thus, even the incident where he stumbles and blows himself up appears quite plausible, considering his natural weakness.

The thoughts and actions of Winnie’s mother are also guided by her maternal instincts. Firstly, she readily encourages Mr. Verrloc’s proposal to marry Winnie because it would secure Stevie’s future. Secondly, she again secures a future for Stevie by moving out of the Verloc household to live in an alms house.

By this act of self sacrifice, she feels that Stevie would now become Winnie’s sole responsibility (Whereas earlier she was also a dependent on Winnie). In addition, she would have reduced the burden on Mr. Verloc who is the bread earner in the household. Notwithstanding the tragic chain of events that follow, she had succeeded in her endeavour.

Michaelis is a victim of the social surroundings and circumstances. As a young locksmith, he helps free some anarchist prisoners being transported to prison. In the unsuccessful attempt, a constable gets killed, but Michaelis is not even aware of this. He is sentenced to life imprisonment and because of the sedentary life in prison, he grows unhealthily obese. When he is let out after serving fifteen years on a ticket-of-leave, he finds that the members of his family are either dead, or have migrated. Being unfit and out of touch to carry on his trade, he has to throw himself on the charity of a rich socialite lady
benefactress who pities him. Therefore, he is a victim of social circumstances and an insensitive legal system, both of which are beyond his control.

Ossipon is an ex-medical student without a degree. He then wanders as a lecturer to working men's associations, lecturing on topics like the socialistic aspects of hygiene. He also authors a quasi-medical study in the form of a pamphlet which is promptly seized by the police due to its social impropriety. Gifted with a robust physique, he becomes a womaniser, exploiting servant girls who have savings accounts.

True to his nature and background, he approaches Winnie to exploit her widowhood. His primary objective is to get Verloc's savings from her, and the secondary one is to take her to bed. When he comes to know that Verloc did not die in the bomb blast, but was stabbed by Winnie, his sexual passions give way to horror and the instinct for self preservation takes over. This makes him rob her of her money and desert her. Though nobody in the world knows that he has been directly responsible for Winnie's suicide, his knowledge and guilt weighs him down heavily and isolates him from the world. We can say that in spite of his unscrupulousness, it is the inherent human sense of morality or humanity that troubles his conscience.

The Assistant Commissioner of Police is quite successful in his job when posted at an Eastern colony. He has a natural flair for detective work and action
oriented work. After marriage, he ends up in London with only paper work, which makes him feel out of his element. He dislikes the work but cannot help it because his wife has high and powerful connections that she uses to get him posted to London. She is not ready to move to the tropical colonies because of her misconceived notions. Therefore, he is also controlled by social forces beyond his control. However, his natural detective instinct helps him to force out important information from Inspector Heat who is trying to implicate the innocent Michaelis just to save his own reputation. Again with his natural flair, he goes to verloc’s place in disguise and solves the case successfully.

The 'Professor' is called so because he once worked as an Assistant Demonstrator in Chemistry at a technical institute. He is a man of humble origin having brilliant intellectual capacities. He is inspired by stories of men rising from extreme poverty to positions of authority and status, and he sets himself a similar goal, but to be achieved only by merit and not by tact and social manipulation.

Despite his natural abilities, he feels that his short, frail stature and mean looks hinder his progress. His dreams are shattered when he encounters unfair treatment at the hands of his employers, not just at one, but at both the places where he worked. Therefore he develops a grievance against society and his pent-up genius makes him an anarchist. He is a strong character in this novel
because he has the courage of his convictions and is ready to kill and be killed for his cause. His anger against society makes him a dangerous and destructive force. Ultimately, what he is and what he does is an outcome of the socio-economic elements. His stand can be taken as an example of social Darwinism. He is an intellectual genius no doubt, but he is not fit to survive and thrive in the social environment because he doesn’t use tact and other social skills.

The night cab driver with a metal contraption in place of his left arm has two kids and a wife to feed at home. He has no choice but to whip the lame horse in order to eke out a living. Similarly, the charwoman Mrs. Neate has four kids to support, which she does by performing chores at people’s houses. These two characters are types that represent the poor working class life with its perennial drudgery and poverty. However, they too are the by-products of the social system.

Thus, Conrad has presented a variety of characters that are shown to be in a subordinate relation to their social environment. In spite of their moral falls, he does not dehumanize them.
Themes:

The general themes of struggle, survival, violence and determinism found in naturalist works are to be found in this novel too, but we can distinguish two levels here: the political and the domestic. At the political level, we have the conflict between the preservers and enemies of the social system: the former represented by the officials of the Home Department and the Police, and the latter represented by the Russian Ambassador Vladimir and the anarchists like the Professor. At the domestic level, the novel deals with Winnie's struggle through life. Along with her, we also find the struggle of her mother to maintain her children by running a paying-guest establishment, and then later, her struggle to secure a stable future for her idiotic son Stevie. The human struggle for survival in general is represented by characters like the Charwoman Mrs. Neate and the physically handicapped night cab driver. Conrad makes these two levels of themes get together seamlessly.

If the theme of violence is considered, there are two major incidents of violence, where one is political and the other is domestic. The bomb blast that accidentally kills Stevie is instigated by the Russian First Secretary for political reasons. One of his intentions is to force the British police into arresting all the foreign anarchist refugees in London because they pose an indirect threat to the imperial Czarist regime in Russia. His other intention is to
move the British legal system to tighten the domestic policy and laws against the anarchist refugees and their activities in England. Ultimately, he fails because the British authorities see through the conspiracy and also come to know of his chief part in the whole affair. In a way, Conrad has definitely upheld the ideal of democracy even though the novel deals with the theme of anarchism.

The other incident of violence where Winnie murders her husband Verloc by stabbing him with a carving knife is a domestic affair. In the first place Winnie agrees to marry Verloc because he agrees to maintain both her mother and her invalid brother after the marriage. Being childless even after several years of marriage, the mentally deficient Stevie becomes the center of all her maternal caring, protection and affection. Naturally, it is a tremendous shock to her to know that Verloc was responsible for misusing Stevie’s innocence. (Which ultimately leads to him being blown to pieces by the bomb he was asked to plant at Greenwich Observatory by Verloc).

Many reviewers and critics agree that Conrad’s treatment of the theme of anarchism is masterly. His penetrating insight into the characteristics and psychology of anarchists and terrorists would prove very useful to those who want to study contemporary politics.
Along with the theme of survival, the themes of isolation, selfishness and corruption also figure as minor themes. Ossipon is a selfish womanizer who exploits confiding servant girls who have savings accounts. The Assistant Commissioner certainly wants to know the foreign hand behind the bomb blast, but one of his motives in taking the investigation into his hands is to protect Michaelis because he doesn’t want to lose favour of the rich and affluent patroness of Michaelis. It is implied here that this lady had enough power and connections to get him transferred or posted elsewhere. Moreover, she is a close friend of the Assistant Commissioner’s wife. Therefore, in spite of good intentions, he is also selfish and corrupt. Similarly, the Chief Inspector Heat is able and efficient in his work, but he is selfishly thinking about his own reputation, salary and promotion; even at the cost of injustice. This is because he knows Verloc’s involvement in the bomb blast but wants to implicate and arrest Michaelis immediately after the bomb outrage. He thinks that his reputation would be maintained by satisfying the public with such a prompt arrest of the criminal. In addition, by implicating Michaelis in the case, he would be preventing the exposure of his unofficial but very useful connection with his informant Verloc. Michaelis is innocent, but Heat has no scruples in making him a scapegoat. Thus he is also corrupt.
Winnie's end and the concluding parts of the novel have prominent examples of the theme of isolation. After the murder when Winnie feels the fear of being hanged for the crime, she is obsessed by the instinct for survival. Thus, she places blind trust in Ossipon (whom she should actually suspect in normal circumstances). Her sense of loneliness makes her lean on him for help in fleeing from justice. Later when he deserts her, the sense of moral isolation (which is the combined result of Stevie's death and Ossipon's desertion), overshadows her fear of death because she jumps to her death from the steamer. Though nobody knows about this affair, Ossipon's guilt and knowledge of his role in the suicide leads to his isolation and takes away his peace forever. All the human drama with its various passions and themes takes place in the background of London as a mute witness. This makes us feel that the human fight for survival goes on in an amoral and indifferent universe where nature acts (on the lives of humans) as an indifferent force.
Interaction of Man and Nature:

_The Secret Agent_ is much different from many of the other novels discussed so far because it is set in metropolitan London of the 1800’s. In most of his other novels, we have an abundance of natural scenery like the sea, mountains, forests and plains where man is seen to be battling against the forces of external nature. But here, such direct conflict with external nature is minimal. Much of the conflict between man and nature in this novel is internal, involving human nature and adverse circumstances. Rather, the elements of external nature like the sunlight, the darkness of the night, the mist, the fog, the rain, the roads and buildings are either used symbolically or to create an atmosphere of gloom, which is in keeping with the general mood of the story and its characters.

Verloc is unable to sleep because of his anxiety after Vladmir’s threats. He vacantly stares out of his bedroom window pane which is described as a fragile film of glass that separated him and the “enormity of cold, black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates and stones. Things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man. Mr. Verloc felt the latent unfriendliness of all out of doors with a force approaching to bodily anguish.”

By such descriptions, Conrad is creating the image of an indifferent and unfriendly nature. But at a subtler, subliminal level it is suggestive of the
struggle going on in the minds of his characters: (The last three pages of chapter
seven are full of details which do not actually contribute to the development of
the plot.) On the way from his office to Mr. Verloc’s shop, the Assistant
Commissioner of Polices dines at an Italian restaurant and steps out:

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, which is composed of soot and
drops of water. 6

Such passages indicate the hostility of nature and contribute to the
solemn, somber and gloomy atmosphere. More importantly, the naturalistic
effect in the novel is heightened.

Considering the inherent nature of the characters, Stevie’s compassionate
nature makes him sympathize with all suffering creatures including the cabman,
his horse, and Mrs. Neate. Ultimately, it makes him agree to plant the bomb
and thus leads to his destruction.

Mr. Verloc is very indolent by nature, which makes him opt for the jobs
which do not entail honest labour. It is because of such a nature that he ends up
as a double agent to three different parties.

Nature asserts itself in the form of maternal love and devotion in the
childless Winnie. Ultimately, it is this maternal nature that makes her lose her
calm and stab Verloc. Even in case of Winnie’s mother, her maternal love for Stevie urges her to the noble act of self sacrifice by moving out from Verloc’s house to live in a house of charity. Their inherent natures seem to undo these characters.

Nature also poses a challenge in another way. The terrorist Karl Yundt is old, toothless, bald, weak and has gouty fingers. This makes him dependent on the sympathy of a woman who takes care of him. Similarly, the lack of exercise in prison makes Michaelis so obese that he finds it difficult even to walk properly. However, because of this natural condition he becomes an object of sympathy for people, especially the affluent lady who patronizes him.

Winnie’s mother suffers from swollen legs and therefore cannot move much. This makes her dependent on Winnie and her husband. Stevie is a congenital idiot and this natural condition is in a way chiefly responsible for much of what happens in the story.

The Professor’s short and mean looking physique hinders his growth in society. But combined with a naturally gifted intellect, he turns out to be the character that he is: a ruthless and deadly anti-social anarchist.

Thus, irrespective of whether there is any external conflict or not, nature as a force is constantly working in the lives of men, giving shape to their destinies and characters.
Conrad's Vision of Man:

Conrad's vision of man being indomitable, with a sublime nobility of courage and endurance can be seen in the character of Winnie's mother. The innate nobility of her soul is asserted by way of her act of self sacrifice for the sake of Stevie's welfare. Though she is very secure and comfortable in her son-in-law's house, she doesn't want to stretch his generosity. She decides to move into an alms house to live on public charity even though she knows that her action would embarrass Winnie by the typical acrid comments of people in such situations. She takes a lot of trouble to convince the authorities of the alms house to admit her. She does all this to settle Stevie permanently in life. This act reveals her to be a heroic old woman. However, apart from this single instance of self sacrifice, the rest of this novel gives us a very bleak and gloomy vision of the world which is shown to be dominated by materialistic values. Winnie's maternal affection for Stevie and her mother's love for him are perhaps the only redeeming factors that represent spiritual values. The reader may feel repelled and depressed by this sordid world vision. In a way, all the tragic events in the book are the consequences of the false and perverted values which dominate the world in this novel. (But these two women undergo much suffering because of these spiritual values.)
The Assistant Commissioner's words seem to embody Conrad's vision when he says to Sir Ethelred the Home Secretary; " 'However, this is an imperfect world . . .' 'Yes, Sir Ethelred . . . An imperfect world.' "

When Stevie is pained to see the horseman whipping the horse in order to feed his kids and family at home, he utters the word "Shame!" which was the most he could, to express his complete and profound indignation and horror "At one sort of wretchedness having to feed upon the anguish of the other". Ultimately, Stevie sums up his understanding by saying: "Bad world for poor people". which can be said to express the world vision portrayed in this book.

Yet another passage aptly expresses Conrad's vision of man in this world:

*The Cabman looked at the pieces of silver, which, appearing very minute in his big, grimy palm, symbolized the insignificant results which reward the ambitious courage and toil of a mankind whose day is short on this earth of evil.* (emphasis added)

Though the vision conveyed here is bleak and gloomy, it is not very far from actual reality and this is a characteristic feature of naturalism.
Interaction between Atmosphere and Character:

In *The Secret Agent* we do not have much natural scenery as we find in the other novels of Conrad where the natural setting provides ample scope for depicting the various elements of nature like the sea, the mountains, the plains and the jungles. Since the story is set in the metropolitan city of London, Conrad has got relatively fewer elements of nature to create the atmosphere as compared to his earlier novels. However, with whatever elements he has at his disposal, he creates an atmosphere that is dark, bleak, gloomy, oppressive and sinister. He creates the image of a monstrous city that seems to be an impersonal power of darkness. Conrad doesn’t describe a pleasantly modern and sanitized London, but dwells only on its bleak aspects because creation of atmosphere is very important for him. Through the interaction between the characters and atmosphere Conrad develops the most realistic picture of man. The atmosphere pervades throughout the novel and grips the readers so much that at times, we may feel repulsed by it. In any case, it can be justified because the atmosphere is perfectly in keeping with the sordid story and general mood of the characters. The atmosphere and imagery is sometimes used symbolically also.

In his author’s note Conrad tells us that when he began writing this novel, he visualized a man made “monstrous town” that was “indifferent to heaven’s
frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world’s light.”¹⁰ (emphasis added) According to him, the city had enough room for any story, enough depth for any passion, enough variety for any setting and enough darkness to bury five millions of lives. It should be noted that this is in stark contrast to his view of the sea as the reflector of the world’s light.

Compared to his earlier sea novels, this novel doesn’t contain a profusion of similes and metaphors but still, with a skilful and economic use of language, Conrad creates an extremely powerful atmosphere. He uses the elements from a metropolitan cityscape of the 1800’s: The darkness of the night, the sunlight, the fog, the mist, the rain, the streets, the buildings, the carriages, etc.

London, which is the centre of ‘The empire on which the sun never sets’ is ironically dark and shadowy. The murky blackness of the metropolis symbolizes the dangerous social barriers between its inhabitants. Colour and light are used effectively to differentiate the social strata in the novel. The lady patroness’ great drawing room is flooded with “the light of six tall windows”¹¹ and has upholstery consisting of “faded blue silk”¹¹ and a “gilt frame screen”.¹¹ These airy and rich colours are contrasted with the grey and shadowy colours of the less privileged class.

Conrad has superbly captured the spirit of London and mixed it into his characters. The result is that we feel its foul and mysterious presence behind
the dull and insignificant characters who are described to be moving like fish in a dingy aquarium. Conrad uses the contrast between light and darkness throughout the novel and it reflects the moods and feelings of the characters involved. The gloom evokes a sense of danger, obscurity, confusion and amorality. The sense of darkness is further reinforced by association with a void when we are presented the images of a dingy aquarium, a pit, a drained aquarium, an abyss and a well. They symbolize the dark and meaningless void in which the people of London exist. In creating the atmosphere, Conrad makes use of all our natural reactions to darkness and uses it to symbolize all that is negative. The readers are continuously made to feel the darkness by making references to small and insignificant lights.

Verloc maintains a shop of shady wares (Pornographic books and rubber contraceptives) and this shop is described to be nestling in a “shady street”, where the sun never shone. It is endowed with a darkness that both devours and tarnishes.

When Mrs. Verloc discovers that her innocent brother Stevie has been blown to bits because of her husband’s selfishness and callousness, her feelings can be deduced easily from the description of the atmosphere:

*In that shop of the shady wares fitted with deal shelves painted a dull brown, which seemed to devour the sheen of the light, the gold circlet of the wedding ring on*
Mrs. Verloc’s left hand glittered exceedingly with untarnished glory of a piece from some splendid treasure of jewels, dropped in a dustbin.\textsuperscript{13} (emphasis added)

Since an object thrown into a dust bin is sullied and tarnished, this image perfectly conveys to us Winnie’s feelings about her marital relationship, which has been sullied by Mr. Verloc’s outrage. In addition, the mention of exceeding glitter and untarnished glory makes the description very ironical and grimly humorous. The excessive glitter also serves as an insignificant light that contrasts with the darkness of the shop.

In Chapter 8, there is a poignant scene where Winnie’s mother is taking a cab ride to the alms house. Here, the darkness of the night represents her feelings and her situation in life when it is contrasted with the insignificant gas light of the shops and the glow on her cheeks:

\textit{Night, the early dirty night, the sinister, noisy, hopeless, and rowdy night of South London, had overtaken her on her last cab drive. In the gaslight of the low-fronted shops her big cheeks glowed with an orange hue under a black and mauve bonnet.}\textsuperscript{14} (emphasis added)

In the beginning of chapter one, Mr. Verloc’s small shop and small house in the narrow Brett street of Soho locality is described as “one of those grimy brick houses which existed in large quantities before the era of reconstruction
dawned upon London.”  

This description, especially the word ‘grimy’ evokes many images of dust, neglect, pollution, shabbiness and penury, which is associated with the life of Londoners. In chapter two, the apparently sunny morning on which Verloc sets out to the embassy is on a closer look, having a sinister aspect. It is a “peculiarly London sun” which looks “bloodshot” and gives a “dull effect of rustiness” wherever it shines. It also throws a “diffused light” everywhere “in which neither wall, nor tree, nor beast, nor man cast a shadow.” The city is so vast, diffuse and impersonal that nothing personal can make any difference in its existence, (including the death of innocent Stevie in the bomb outrage). This imagery and atmosphere of a town without shadows reinforces the impression of sterility of the materialistic world portrayed in the novel. The passage describing the ACP’s departure from his office builds an atmosphere of emptiness:

*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.*

The image of the drained aquarium suggests a dark void and this symbol gets repeated further in the novel. The small light of phosphorescence helps in
heightening the effect of darkness. The use of contrast between light and darkness takes on various menacing connotations every time it is presented.

When the Assistant Commissioner steps out of the Italian restaurant, he is said to enter the street which is described as:

... 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, which is composed of soot and drops of water." 18 (emphasis added)

The highlighted words here give sinister glimpses of the darkness. After just a few lines, the description makes the people seem to disappear into the darkness as though into some bottomless pit that devours not only people, but also the light:

Only a fruiterer's stall at the corner made a violent blaze of light and colour. Beyond all was black, and the few people passing in that direction vanished at one stride beyond the glowing heaps of oranges and lemons. No footsteps echoed. They would never be heard of again. 18

The atmosphere seems to indicate the foreboding sense of doom that awaits Winnie, who would never come back. Earlier in chapter four, Ossipon imagines the restaurant changed into "a dreadful black hole, belching horrible fumes choked with ghastly rubbish of smashed brickwork and mutilated
corpses.” 19 [emphasis added]. This image of a black hole pervades throughout the novel because Winnie’s eyes are likened to two black holes, conveying the sense of vacancy and hopelessness towards the end of the story.

After the murder, Winnie realizes that she could be hanged for the crime (she is terrified of the gallows where the convict to be hanged would be given a drop of fourteen feet to break the neck). Then she thinks of fleeing from justice, but she realizes that she was alone in London and there was nobody in the world that could help her. In her sense of helplessness and desperation, she contemplates suicide by jumping from a bridge into the Thames. She hesitates to step out of the shop because the street frightens her. This is because the street led her either to the gallows or to the river. Any way, it was like a black hole of death that loomed before her. When she finally does step out onto the street, the open air of the street is said to give her a foretaste of drowning. The atmosphere is created by the descriptions of the slimy dampness that envelopes her, enters her nostrils and clings to her hair. Though not raining, each gas lamp is said to have “a rusty little halo of mist” 20 The street is black and the light coming out of the window of a restaurant glows faintly, giving out a soiled blood red light. These descriptions convey to us the sense of despair and despondency that had filled Winnie’s whole being. The atmosphere of hopelessness is further aggravated by allusions to an abyss and later to a well:
after the murder Winnie is all alone in London, which is a town of “marvels and mud,” and with its “maze of streets and its mass of lights,” it was sunk in a hopeless night and it rested “at the bottom of a black abyss from which no unaided woman could hope to scramble out.” [emphasis added]

Even when Ossipon offers to help this woman, her sense of hopelessness is not relieved. In fact, the following passage seems to forebode the loss of Winnie’s life in an unfeeling and indifferent city of void, despite her efforts to cling on:

Winnie Verloc turning about held him by both arms, facing him under the falling mist in the darkness and solitude of Brett Place, in which all sounds of life seemed lost as if in a triangular well of asphalt and bricks, of blind houses and unfeeling stones. [emphasis added]

Thus, the atmosphere and imagery in this novel are used to reflect the life situations and thoughts of the characters. The interaction between the character and atmosphere brings alive the characters and this makes the work very naturalistic.
Conrad’s Philosophy of Life:

Though Conrad mostly uses a comic mode of writing to treat the subject ironically, this novel offers a tragic vision and a pessimistic philosophy. At the same time we must note that however dark his vision may be, it is not totally devoid of hope. At the political level, Conrad scorns the destructive mentality of the anarchists, represented by the Professor. Even though the police department has its cases of corruption, it is not a totally hopeless picture either. We see the victory of the Assistant Commissioner (The man of self knowledge) over the short sightedness, corruption, egotism and fanaticism that combine to give rise to a society characterized by moral emptiness and police tyranny in this novel.

Conrad saw evil within man and in the environment. The character of the Professor illustrates the evil within man, and the thieves are the byproducts of the evil in the society and environment. Conrad gives us a contrast between the thieves and the Professor when Chief Inspector Heat analyses them comparatively. Heat feels that a basic humanity was common to both the police and the thieves because they both submitted to the severe sanctions of morality with a certain resignation. He accepts them as his fellow citizens who have gone wrong because of imperfect education.
Heat feels that thieving was not totally absurd after all. Though perverse, it was also a form of human industry, "undertaken for the same reason as the work in potteries, in coal mines, in fields, in tool-grinding shops." For Heat, the only difference between thieving and other kinds of labour was the nature of risk. Neither Heat, nor the thieves that he pursued were insensible to the serious moral differences between thieving and honest labour. That means, the thieves always knew that their activities were wrong and immoral. Both the thieves and other professionals were products of the same social machinery, but the former were categorized as "noxious" and the latter, including Heat, as "useful." In contrast to the thieves the Professor is a rebel, an absurd anti-social element, without any scruples or sense of morality. The thieves are sane, but he is insane and has morbid ideals of destruction. The thieves are free from any shades of hate and despair with which the Professor is possessed. The thieves have a respect and regard for the laws and authority whereas the professor does not care about these. Therefore the professor is a dangerous fanatic who represents the evil in man. One of the reasons for the Professor's fearlessness apart from his madness is the bomb he always carries on his person. He is determined to blow himself up and many others around him if the police try to arrest him. For this, he always keeps the detonator button handy in his pocket. He apparently looks fearless and confident, but in the scene where
he is confronted by Inspector Heat in a narrow street, his true predicament is exposed. According to Conrad’s philosophy, fidelity and a sense of solidarity with the human race can enable man to wage a successful war against evil and to overcome it. This philosophy is amply illustrated in the scene mentioned above.

In the dialogue that ensues after the confrontation in the narrow street, Heat asks the Professor to give up his activities and surrender, because the police outnumbered him: “Give it up. You’ll find we are too many for you.”[^24] On hearing this, the Professor’s mocking smile wavers as though “the mocking spirit within had lost its assurance.”[^24] The word ‘we’ in Heat’s sentence here includes the common people: “the hint of an invincible multitude behind that man’s back roused a sombre indignation in the breast of the Professor.”[^24] He gets disconcerted by thinking of the “Unattackable stolidity of a great multitude”[^25] which was “the haunting fear of his sinister loneliness.”[^25] In the face of such solidarity among the good people, the Professor forces himself to laugh, but his laughter does not last long. When he moves out into the adjoining street he is described as a “sad faced”[^25] and “miserable little man”[^25] walking with the “nerveless gait of a tramp.”[^25] In contrast, the inspector walks with a “purposeful briskness”[^25] and with a
consciousness of his solidarity with the human race which is pre-eminently moral:

... but consciousness of having an authorized mission on this earth and the moral support of his kind. All the inhabitants of the immense town, the population of the whole country, and even the teeming millions struggling upon the planet, were with him—down to the very thieves and mendicants. Yes, the thieves themselves were sure to be with him in his present work. The consciousness of universal support in his general activity heartened him to grapple with the particular problem.  

The case of Winnie’s mother moving out of Verloc’s house to ensure permanent security to Stevie serves to illustrate the important concepts of fidelity and sacrifice which are central to Conrad’s philosophy. As a widow, Winnie’s mother knew well the impermanence of things in life as is seen from her reflections: “The first sense of security following on Winnie’s marriage wore off in time (for nothing lasts), ... she reflected stoically that, everything decays, wears out, in this world;”

Her loyalty to Stevie, Winnie and even Mr. Verloc is the only positive and spiritual aspect in the novel. She has to go through a tremendous moral ordeal in order to accomplish the act of self sacrifice. She has to make entreaties to her late husband’s friends to influence the officials of the alms house to admit her. She even has to lie to the officials that her daughter Winnie
has turned her out of the house. She knows that her action would hurt Winnie and also evoke harsh comments from the people against Winnie but, she steels herself against all such troubling and painful feelings just to settle Stevie permanently in life. This act of self-sacrifice of the old woman makes her a heroine in this novel and it is one of the rare instances in the book that has positive connotations. Ultimately, as per Conrad’s philosophy, “this is an imperfect world” of ours and it “is not such a very serious affair after all.” Conrad may not offer any recipe for the redemption of society, but through characters like Winnie’s Mother, the Assistant Commissioner and the repentant Ossipon, he strengthens the faith in the ultimate reality that humans are pre-eminently moral beings.

_The Secret Agent is quite relevant even now:_

For people who are interested in criminal psychology and criminology, the character of the Professor offers a valuable study. The likes of suicide bombers who blew up Rajiv Gandhi, or the fanatics who perpetrate such crimes can be understood well through the character of the ‘Professor’.

Even in real life we can find impulsive murderers like Winnie and unscrupulous womanizers like Ossipon and by studying such characters, we can get insights into the working of criminal minds. Throughout the world it is a
known fact in the police circles that many times, the police officers allow petty
and less harmless criminals to continue their trades in return for intelligence
about the bigger and more dangerous criminals. Thus, the kind of relationship
shown between Mr. Verloc and Inspector Heat is not an unusual thing among
the police in today's scenario.

The portrayal of the activities and modus operandi of the embassy
officials, the police, and the secret agent is so authentic that if people from these
professions read this novel, they will vouch for its authenticity.
NOTES

2 Conrad, The Secret Agent, vi.
4 Conrad, The Secret Agent, viii.
6 Conrad, The Secret Agent, 140.
7 Conrad, The Secret Agent, 130.
10 Conrad, The Secret Agent, vi.
11 Conrad, The Secret Agent, 98.
14 Conrad, The Secret Agent, 150.
18 Conrad, The Secret Agent, 140.
21 Conrad, The Secret Agent, 255.
26 Conrad, The Secret Agent, 152.
27 Conrad, The Secret Agent, 130.
28 Conrad, The Secret Agent, 141.