

# The Russian Influenza as Extended Metaphor in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

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## Abstract

*In *The Secret Agent*, Joseph Conrad introduces anarchist Adolf Verloc and links his arrival in London to the unseen yet deadly viral arrival of the influenza. I argue that, in so doing, Conrad creates the character descriptions of Verloc and his family as metaphorically representative of the virus and its symptoms. Conrad complicates the story by setting it in 1886, inviting the reader to recall the terrifying events of the 1889 Russian Pandemic and the 1894 attempted bombing of the Greenwich Observatory and to envision a Britain whose innocence is shattered by destructive forces unseen with the naked eye. By expanding on the connection between the progression of time and the notion of fluid borders, both of which feed the rush of 20th-century modern technology, Conrad's characters represent the emergence into a world over which Britons perceived that they had little control.*

When Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* was released in 1907, negative reviews focused on "the book's difficulty and inaccessibility to the 'ordinary reader'" (Najder 379), allegedly because of Conrad's "foreign origins." However, one cannot help but wonder if the real reason for such criticism was fear in the face of reality. Studies of turn-of-the-century Britain show the nation seeking to define itself in the new modernist period, a time fraught with societal challenges from within and without, many originating far beyond England's borders (Honigsbaum 300). In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad highlights Britain's sense of vulnerability by setting the novel in 1886 and inverting time to incorporate two major events that, in reality, came later. The first is the highly documented Russian Flu pandemic of 1889-1890, and the second is the attempted bombing of the Greenwich Observatory by French anarchist Martial Bourdin in 1894 (Butterworth 329). Conrad heightens the sense of terror by taking readers back to 1886, a time when Britons feared loss of control in the rush of modern technology. He inverts time to combine that fear with these two later national events that were both media sensations.

While in France in 1884, Conrad was taken for an anarchist himself, though he was later absolved of suspicion. The incident, combined with Bourdin's attempt on the Greenwich Observatory, influenced Conrad's thinking in *The Secret Agent* (Newton 117). In the novel, he characterizes time and the fluidity of borders in terms of pandemic influenza, extending the metaphor of terrorism as a virulent crisis through anarchist Adolf Verloc and his immediate family, Winnie and Stevie. Michael Martin touches on the notion of virulence when he claims that *The Secret Agent* is not just an espionage novel but also fits the genre of "the pre-Great War invasion narrative . . . depicting myriad ways in which British society is imperiled by Continental miscreants" (253). Martin goes on to explain these fictional devices depicting "London [as] denationalized by malevolent foreigners, a generalized xenophobia and specifically a visceral Germanophobia, a British populace in a state of physical and mental decline, and acts of aggression that paradoxically 'vaccinate' Britain by stimulating its resistances" (260 emphasis added). Martin, however, is not the only writer to hint at metaphorical virulence in the literature of the period.

Writing about a text within the same general time period, Katherine Kelly explains that Heinrich Ibsen's *The Doll's House* (1879) deals with pandemic and mod-

ernism. She writes that “Ibsen used metaphors of disease and pollution to signal the urgent need to break with the past and prepare for a new future” (24). Conrad’s view of the future was not one of clarity but of contamination. While Kelly writes that Ibsen was “dismantling . . . tradition in preparation for coming change – a great clearing away in advance of a new age” (24), Conrad’s metaphorical use of pandemic in *The Secret Agent* is not optimistic about the future. I examine his view of the future and contend that, for Conrad, modernism means uncertainty, threat, loss of control, and even loss of life. He reflects the sense of vulnerability that plagued turn-of-the-century British society as it emerged from the first flu pandemic in 1890. In this paper, I argue that Conrad captures this feeling and plays upon Britons’ fears of an invisible killer, extending the metaphor of influenza to anarchists in *The Secret Agent*.

From the first chapter, Conrad sets an ominous tone through a metaphorical connection to pandemic influenza. Alluding to the insidious and pervasive nature of terrorism as embodying the symptoms of disease, Conrad writes of Verloc: “He generally arrived in London (like the influenza) from the Continent, only he arrived unheralded by the Press; and his visitations set in with great severity” (6). Conrad illustrates here and at the end of the novel that, unlike the public health issue manifested by influenza, people could be warned about and take appropriate precautions for safety, terrorists cannot so easily be identified. Rather, like influenza, terrorists slip across borders unknown and unseen. Mark Honigsbaum explains that “the Russian influenza was peculiarly ‘modern’—a pandemic that seemed to be intimately linked to modern trade and transportation technologies and the increasing speed of global communications” (300). From post-Victorians’ perception, modernist period change moved faster than man and, thus, man was not in control anymore. Honigsbaum further elaborates this point: following the trajectory of the Russian Flu as it swept through Europe and North America, his research reveals that the virus “spread rapidly between European capitals via international rail, road and shipping connections in a westward progression that was the subject of widespread commentary in both the daily and periodical press” (300). Modern mass transit created a realistic fluidity of borders through which materials and people quickly moved. Influenza’s infectious invisibility allowed it to travel as an unseen passenger on mass

transit, changing the public's perception of the impressive speed that moved goods and people to that of a horrifying invasion of swift and deadly proportions. For these emerging modernists, "the idea that the influenza 'microbe' might hitch a ride on these symbols of the machine age was doubly disconcerting" (304-5).

Conrad's metaphorical use of the spread of influenza relates to the unseen activity of anarchists, and creates a sense that terrorism is virulent in its ability to sicken society by inciting paranoia and a perceived inability for people to protect themselves from it. Most poignant is Conrad's illustration in *The Secret Agent* of a turn-of-the-century awareness of the unpredictability of who will live and who will die. Most notably, he does this when he creates a microcosm of pandemic in the members of the Verloc household. Whenever he uses flu-like symptoms as metaphor in the novel, only Verloc and his family are described in connection with them. For Verloc, the description begins with Mr. Vladimir's warning that he must soon take action or face termination from employment with the embassy. Vladimir's pronouncement to Verloc that "We don't want prevention – we want cure" (22) initiates Conrad's allusions to terrorism as illness. Vladimir incites fear in Verloc that he must act in order to preserve his income from the Embassy. Just as an influenza epidemic creates vigilance among people to preserve their own health, Vladimir's discussion with Verloc reveals that an act of terrorism will incite people's fears and affect their confidence in their protectors if law enforcement is unable to prevent such acts.

Conrad emphasizes that Verloc is a foreigner on English soil. Richard Niland calls attention to Conrad's description when he writes that "Vladimir's 'amazingly guttural intonation' is 'not only utterly un-English, but absolutely un-European' (*SA* 24), and his orchestration of the bomb outrage—allowing Conrad to highlight a malignant Russian influence—guarantees that all 'foreign scoundrels' are suspected by the establishment of being 'likely to throw something,' causing 'a national calamity' (*SA* 112)" (Niland 131). Carrying these concerns with him, Verloc first displays symptoms of impending influenza after meeting with fellow anarchists. He arrives home thinking to himself that "he hoped he was not sickening for anything" (46), and at Winnie's inquiry about his health, he says to her, "I don't feel very well,' . . . passing his hand over his moist brow" (48). The remainder of the characters in the novel remain untouched by such description and are described for their physi-

cal features instead. For example, Michaelis is described as “round like a distended balloon, he opened his short thick arms” (42), while “Comrade Ossipon’s thick lips accentuated the negro-type of his face” (42), and Karl Yundt, in his departure from the meeting, “rais[es] an uncertain and clawlike hand” (43). The anarchist group is “a sad lot – misshapen, overweight, grotesque, bloodthirsty, lame” (Raskin 193). In contrast to the grotesque physical features of the anarchists, Conrad distinguishes the members of the Verloc household with descriptors of influenza symptomatology. A better understanding of the suspected causes of the Russian flu and its symptoms, however, is necessary to establish the connection with influenza to Verloc, Winnie, and, indirectly, Stevie.

Health practitioners in the 1890s believed that the Russian influenza may have spread through “atmospheric electrical phenomena” (Smith 62) such as ozone impurity, meteors releasing “a poisonous gas from outer space” (64) or “comets’ tails convey[ing] freeze-dried organisms, including influenza viruses, gathered from interstellar dust” (65). One scientist’s report reassured the public that the ozone level at Greenwich was normal (63). Suspected influenza connections researched at Greenwich and the focus of Greenwich Observatory for Bourdin’s attempted bombing connects the two threats with effects on time and transportation, creating a sense of vulnerability in the post-Victorian mind. Almost personifying the influenza by the ability to choose its victims, “influenza seemed to single out the urban middle classes and, in particular, male heads of households for attack, as well as by the fact that the earliest recorded casualties were precisely those considered most essential to the smooth functioning of Victorian society and economy, such as diplomats, post office workers, lawyers, and employees of banks and insurance firms” (Honigsbaum 300). Influenza, like the terrorist attempt on the Greenwich Observatory, was an attack on time. F.B. Smith writes that, because of the virus, “the economy was disrupted. Postal services were curtailed for weeks, particularly during the 1891 and 1892 epidemics, because letter deliverers, sorters, and overseas parcels officers were especially affected” (58). Although influenza cannot consciously and willfully attack like terrorists can, its invisibility and malignant presence likens the virus metaphorically to terrorism’s effects on people in its disruption of schedules and day-to-day living. While terrorists disrupt timetables with destruction and death,

likewise, influenza disrupts timetables with critical illness and death.

Similarly, reports in newspapers suggested not only a potential for infections through the fluidity of terrestrial borders but also mysterious cosmological borders. Additional concerns included earthquakes and the flooding of the Hwang Ho River in China in 1888-89, which left carcasses of animals rotting along its banks that scientists believed could release airborne pathogens (Smith 63). The Russo-Japanese War was also blamed for the transmission of disease, as infected troops moved about on trains with civilian passengers, systematically spreading influenza westward (66). Symptoms of Russian flu recorded by health practitioners included “sudden fever which lasted for three to five days to a fortnight, chills, especially in the back, and thumping muscular pains, runny nose and eyes, sneezing or dry coughing, prostration for up to a fortnight, loss of appetite and (occasionally) sense of smell, and photophobia” (Smith 56). Just as no one seemed to know how terrorists came to be in London, scientists could also only guess at the origin of the contagion. One particular example of how Conrad establishes an “influenza-like atmosphere” in the story is when he writes about the bomber’s death at the Greenwich Observatory as being “a raw, gloomy day of the early spring” (66) and then describes Verloc and Winnie with numerous influenza symptoms.

Drawing on the various influenza medical theories as well as first-hand experience, Conrad effectively characterizes Verloc as a living metaphor for the virus itself. For example, he describes Verloc as already feeling unwell as goes walking on a damp, cold evening leading “a cortège of dismal thoughts along dark streets” (146). His very thoughts are like a funeral procession in the night, foreshadowing death in the coming pages of the novel and bringing to readers at the time the recollection of such scenes in the wake of the Russian influenza epidemic. Upon reaching home, he announces that he will go to the Continent, passing across the border of England for a buying trip for his shop (149). Upon his return, the tragic action of the novel unfolds with Conrad’s metaphorical descriptions of viral symptoms that pave the way for the demise of the Verloc household members. In his plan to enlist Stevie, Winnie’s intellectually disabled brother, to place the bomb at the Greenwich Observatory, Verloc proposes to Winnie that Stevie go to the country and stay with the anarchist Michaelis at his cottage (156). It is likely that Winnie

would have thought this a good idea, because taking the country air was supposed to be a preventative measure against disease, and a method for city-dwellers to purify their bodies from urban pollution. News reports of the period indicate that people attempted to escape the flu by taking the country air (Mussell 12). Among influential members of society who fled for the country was Queen Victoria who “refused ‘personal intercourse with individuals from London,’ and ha[d] all messages from the foreign office disinfected” (12). Therefore, Stevie is protected from being described with flu-like symptoms and, instead, dies from exposure to Verloc’s plan.

Much like the destructive effect of influenza coming as a shock to Britons at that time, the destruction of all three members of the Verloc household comes as a shock to readers. Martin Bock writes that “the Verloc family, like a ‘perfect detonator,’ is a tightly restrained and delicate domestic mechanism that is easily disturbed by Vladimir’s insistence that Verloc earn his “pay as an agent provocateur” (102), likening the family to explosives. The timing and effects of the deaths work both as a metaphor for influenza and as the literal effects of terrorism. First, Conrad leads readers to believe that Verloc died in the explosion at the Greenwich Observatory. Readers sense this confirmation through the extended discussion among the anarchists who knew him. Ossipon says, “I don’t know what came to Verloc. There’s some mystery there. However, he’s gone” (65). When Conrad writes about Stevie setting off fireworks in the stairwell of the milk company (8), he foreshadows Stevie’s death, creating for readers the first shock when they are led to believe that it is Verloc who died. Conrad sets up the second shock when he leads readers to believe that Winnie, who has just learned from Verloc about her brother’s death, has gone upstairs to dress in order to leave her home. When Verloc calls to her to come sit with him on the couch, Winnie unexpectedly seizes the moment to exorcize her passion and grief when she noiselessly picks up the carving knife from the sideboard, ending the scene by killing Verloc with the knife. This scene comes as a shock to readers because Conrad writes that initially Winnie obeyed Verloc’s call to come sit with him on the couch, illustrating that “she started forward at once, as if she were still a loyal woman bound to that man by an unbroken contract” (215). However, Conrad shifts from Winnie’s obedience to her acting upon impulse when he writes that “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” (215). By the end of the scene, Winnie changes from submissive wife to impassioned killer. The third shock for readers comes when the anarchists’ earlier supposition that Verloc is gone in the explosion is proven false. After killing Verloc, Winnie meets Comrade Ossipon in the street and sends him into the flat to turn off the lights. In the semi-darkness, he makes out the form of Verloc in repose on the couch and suddenly realizes that it was not Verloc who blew himself up at the Greenwich Observatory. Ossipon first thinks Verloc is sleeping, but when he realizes what he is seeing, Conrad writes that “a yell coming from the innermost depths of his chest died out unheard and transformed into a sort of greasy, sickly taste on his lips” (234). Conrad continues the scene expressing that “Comrade Ossipon made out the handle of the knife [and] . . . turned away from the glazed door, and retched violently” (235). The fourth and last shock is Winnie’s suicide as she attempts to escape for the Continent, explained by the press as “An impenetrable mystery [which] seems destined to hang forever over this act of madness and despair” (Conrad 252). Sarah Cole writes that the Victorian “sensationalist-minded press . . . spread word of anarchist outrages far and wide and help[ed] to stir public fear and interest” (317). Conrad replicates media sensation in aligning these four shocks with influenza, extending the metaphor by tying it with the real fears people held about the disease, not knowing who will live and who will die.

Unfortunately, terrorism does not function in the novel just as a sickness affecting the public but instead as a contagion that impacts the characters themselves. In their efforts to train Stevie to be a good worker, Winnie and her mother teach him docility and obedience to the point that he is described among the young men of London as “none more affectionate and ready to please, and even useful, as long as people did not upset his poor head” (49). If Verloc is influenza, Winnie and her mother unwittingly place Stevie in the spray of the sneeze that is Verloc’s plan to blow up the Greenwich Observatory. Thinking to affirm Stevie’s place as a useful member of their household, Winnie tells Verloc, “You could do anything with that boy, Adolf . . . He would go through fire for you” (151). And go through fire he does, when he stumbles with the explosive varnish can in his grip. At this point in the novel, Verloc is described as fully symptomatic of influenza: “his head

held between his hands. . . his teeth rattled with an ungovernable violence, causing his whole enormous back to tremble at the same rate” (157). Further, “his eyes were bloodshot and his face red. . . . His appearance might have been the effect of a feverish cold. He drank three cups of tea, but abstained from food entirely” (159). Note, these are the very symptoms of flu reported at the time, according to Smith. Conrad goes on to describe that Verloc was not himself, either physically or mentally (160): “his features were swollen and [he had] an air of being drugged” (161). Winnie was concerned about her husband’s state and saw “something wild and doubtful in his expression [that] made it appear uncertain whether he meant to strangle or to embrace his wife. . . . He had gone in red. He came out a strange papery white. His face, losing its drugged, feverish stupor, had in that short time acquired a bewildered and harassed expression” (162). Still puzzled, Winnie wonders why Verloc “should remain . . . leaning over the table, propped up on his two arms as though he were feeling giddy or sick” (164). All of Verloc’s virulent symptoms soon come clear to Winnie when she learns that her husband is an anarchist who enlisted her brother, involuntarily, on a mission of death.

When Winnie learns of Stevie’s death, the influenza of terrorism is out of Verloc’s previously perceived control and becomes manifest in Winnie. Conrad then describes Winnie’s actions as mimicking viral symptoms: “her lips were blue, her hands cold as ice, and her pale face, in which the two eyes seemed as two black holes, felt to her as if they were enveloped in flames” (172). She “reeled to and fro” and had “crazed eyes” (172). Verloc finds that “the prospect of having to break the news [of Stevie’s death] to her put him in a fever” (189). Both Verloc and Winnie are overcome with influenza-like symptoms as they wrestle with the tragedy of Stevie’s death. Winnie’s mind is fevered with passion, and when Verloc looked at her “he was startled by the inappropriate character of his wife’s stare” (197). Conrad indicates that her “mental condition had the merit of simplicity; but it was not sound” (205). Winnie’s condition follows the observations of doctors during the Russian influenza pandemic. Having exhibited the typical physical signs, Winnie then exhibits the “peculiar ‘cerebral disturbances’ and other worrying ‘nervous sequels’ . . . [that doctors said] could also result in psychoses sufficient to trigger suicidal thoughts or the urge to take the life of a close family member” (Honigsbaum 311). What was

a seemingly straight-forward plan to infect the city with paranoia of catastrophe comes home to Verloc in his inability to account to Winnie for his own responsibility in Stevie's death, infecting her with a hatred and passion enough to kill him.

At this point in the novel, the reader can anticipate Winnie killing Verloc. However, when she flees for the Continent with Ossipon, her suicide comes as a surprise that substantiates Paul Armstrong's assertion that "the characters in this novel repeatedly experience astonishment at finding that they can no longer count on what they believed, assumed, and trusted" (86), which echoes the post-Victorian movement into modernism, a time of immense change that challenged traditional beliefs and cultural norms. Verloc's attempted act of terrorism spread infection into his family, ending Stevie's life, Verloc's life, and eventually Winnie's as her fevered fear of imprisonment and hanging for his murder drives her mad and results in her suicide. Honigsbaum writes that the Russian influenza had neurological aftereffects for some people and resulted in increased suicide rates (314). Conrad adds Winnie to that number as he brings the novel full circle from likening Verloc to influenza at the novella's beginning to the Professor's reflections at the novella's end.

Closing the novel on an ominous note, Conrad characterizes the Professor, who keeps a bomb in his pocket at all times, as "unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men" (255). The pandemic metaphor ends with Verloc and Winnie's deaths, but Conrad leaves his readers realizing that unlike the coughing and feverishness of influenza revealing its presence, by the end of the novel he sees anarchists as "pest[s] in a street full of men" (255), unknown as a threat with the potential to kill, much like a plague of rats. In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad demonstrates the pandemic potential for terrorism as Verloc arrives from the continent and sets off a series of events that inflict destruction and death within his own close circle of relations, ending any future prospect of violence at his hands. However, Conrad makes clear that Verloc's end is not the end of terrorism, just as Britons realized that the end of one pandemic did not mean an end to those in the future. Closing the novel with the image of the Professor, armed with hidden bombs on his person as he walks the crowded streets of London, the reader knows that terrorism, like influenza, will strike again – random, unseen, and deadly. As England's Victorians moved under a cloud of sorrow into the twentieth-century, facing the death of their

longest reigning queen, Victoria, in 1901, they soon were faced with the first recorded pandemic and also dealt for the first time with the threat of anarchist terror plots. Gathering these threads of grief and shock, Conrad taps into turn-of-the-century paranoia in *The Secret Agent*, illustrating a Britain that the sensationalist media took advantage of, striking fear into the hearts of the public and exacerbating feelings of their world as out of control.

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