Title: "The Idiots" and the "Secret Agent" : Conrad's simple tales of domestic drama

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‘The Idiots’ and The Secret Agent: Conrad’s Simple Tales of Women and Their Domestic Drama.

Joseph Conrad’s short story ‘The Idiots’ has been relegated to the fringes of the novelist’s canon, following its author’s derogatory comment of being an ‘obviously derivative piece of work’. In consequence, the majority of critics simply brushed it aside as an unsuccessful piece of juvenilia, while others analyzed mainly the French influences of Maupassant and Zola, or used it instrumentally as a springboard for far-fetched psychoanalytical or postmodern interpretative theories. The Secret Agent, on the other hand, is on the other extreme: highly acclaimed, regarded as a pillar of the Conradian literary temple, receiving much critical attention. In spite of the different critical status of these two works (as well as opposing critical assessments of their literary merits), this essay seeks to examine the thematic similarities between them as far as the creation of the main female characters is concerned. I would argue that Susan Bacadou (‘The Idiots’) is a prototype of the fully-fledged Winnie Verloc (The Secret Agent). Furthermore, as I hope to show, the bare bones of the existential situation of those two women are similar and their relations with men are alike. I have compared several stages of the heroines lives such as prenuptial, after marrying, the murder scene, and the final moments. This comparison resulted in disclosing many thematic similarities as well as a few differences.

Prenuptial life

The information that we can gather about the female characters' prenuptial lives is scarce, yet illuminating. Susan spent some time abroad in Paris 'with a Breton family'. We can only divine of her role there—perhaps that of an impoverished relative taking care of the children in return for board and lodging. Although it was arranged for her to stay in the celebrated European capital (which might have been her mother's plan to train Susan in some mercantile work), she was too homesick to continue her sojourn there. She could not bear being separated from her homeland (I 7) which reveals her sensitivity and emotionalism. Yet, strangely enough, there is not a word mentioned about Susan's attitude towards her fiancé or his courtship. On the contrary, the suitor's practicality and anti-emotionalism are accentuated. The decision to marry was undertaken by Jean-Pierre one evening over the heap of manure, in a businesslike manner, to solve a problem, namely the land needed ploughing, but the old parents were no longer able to till it. So the young farmer's motivation to find a suitable mate stemmed from the apprehension that the farm may deteriorate: 'It is not for me that I am speaking [...]. It is for the land. It's a pity to see it badly used. I am not impatient for myself' (I 5). Thus the ensuing marriage was a contract which the farmer sought to make and then to execute in order to supply hands for the cultivation of the soil as well as for the proper management of the household:

[T]he work of the farm was not satisfactorily done. [...] The fences were out of repair, and the cattle suffered from neglect. [...] At home the mother was practically bedridden, and the girls chattered loudly in the big kitchen, unrebooked, from morning to night. He said to himself: 'We must change all this.' (I 5)

The marriage, on Susan's mother's side, must have been perceived as an excellent bargain since 'the Bacadous were rich and influential' (I 7) and she as a 'woman of business' (I 10) probably viewed it as a chance not only to

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7 Cf. the paragraph introducing Susan's mother: 'Madame Levaille was a woman of business known and respected within a radius of at least fifteen miles. [...] [S]he was seen about the country, on foot or in an acquaintance's cart, perpetually moving, in spite of her fifty-eight years, in steady pursuit of business. She had houses in all the hamlets, she worked quarries of granite, she freighted coasters with stone – even traded with the Channel Islands.' (I 10) She is portrayed as an obstinate woman, knowing her mind, able to drive a hard bargain, and to convince others to her point of view.
disburden of her daughter (who could not be put to much use abroad) but also to extend her influence over the local area.\footnote{8}{Definitely, the mother was solely responsible for the well-being of the whole family since the father was described as 'deranged in his head' (I 16).}

The lack of commentary about Susan’s attitude towards the match, itself is a case in point because by omitting the fiancée’s emotions, Conrad, I believe, suggests that they were found irrelevant by her close relatives. It points also to the commodity-like status of the bride whose value is negotiated between the third parties. Accordingly, Susan was brought to the bridegroom’s house like one more possession of his. Besides, all the fine points of the nuptials are portentous. The wedding drive which was extremely uncomfortable with a lot of jerking, shocks and jolts (I 6), anticipates her uncomfortable married life. The motif of being carried rather than going by herself as far as Susan is concerned, reoccurs in the story three times and symbolises her predicament: she is the creature, not the maker of circumstances. The wedding procession also ominously evokes obsequies: the predominance of black colour (‘women all in simple black’, ‘dark ribbon’ of the wedding guests (I 6)), the gloomy ambience (‘somber procession’ (I 6)), and the effect it makes on the surroundings (‘scaring the little birds’ (I 6)). To crown it all, the word procession occurs in two, mutually incompatible, contexts in the short story, namely in the depiction of Susan’s wedding (the beginning of a new life) and at the finale of the narrative, when her dead body is carried on a handbarrow (the end of one’s existence), followed by a procession of several men (I 25).

On turning to Winnie’s premarital vicissitudes, one can discern some overlapping areas between the life stories of those two women. One of the noteworthy analogies is that both of them were daughters of public-house keepers. Susan’s mother owned a shop (or rather a bar room) where her own quarrymen got drunk, played cards, and which she cunningly opened on the paydays so that ‘the workmen could spend their wages without the trouble of going to town’ (I 15). Whereas Winnie was the daughter of a ‘licensed victualler’\footnote{9}{J. Conrad, The Secret Agent, Oxford World’s Classics, Oxford-New York 1998, p. 38. Based on the Dent Collected Edition of The Works of Joseph Conrad. Further references to this edition are by page numbers in parentheses after each quotation.} who additionally owned a boarding house. The situation at home was not propitious for the children to feel secure and loved. Her feeble mother was not capable of protecting the children from the fury of the father, who was ‘wounded in his paternal pride, declaring himself obviously accursed since one of his kids was a “slobbering idjut and the other a wicked she-devil” (SA 242). Consequently, it was Winnie who adopted the role of the mother, the only protector of the retarded brother, Stevie. Being a child herself, she took care of the younger sibling (‘putting the boy to bed’, ‘brushing the boy’s hair and tying
his pinafores- herself in a pinafore still’ (SA 242)) and bravely opposed the brutality of their father: ‘As a little girl she had often faced with blazing eyes the irascible licensed victualler in defense of her brother’ (SA 242). Those scenes of domestic violence happened again and again, indelibly stamping Winnie’s psyche. She still recollected with stunning details, being a grown-up woman, the traumatic moments when she had acted literally as a shield for Stevie:

She had the vision of the blows intercepted (often with her own head), of a door held desperately shut against a man’s rage (not for very long); of a poker flung once (not very far) [...]. All these scenes of violence came and went accompanied by the unrefined noise of deep vociferations proceeding from [their father]. (SA 242)

The effects of this maltreatment are twofold. Firstly, having witnessed the cruelty of her father, the listlessness of her mother, and wanting to survive emotionally, Winnie forged for herself a philosophic armour of the belief that ‘Things don’t bear looking into very much’ (SA 180)\(^\text{10}\), withdrawing into a shell to keep an unbridgeable distance between her emotional self and the exterior word, which became ‘her force and her safeguard in life’ (SA 153). The second thing was the acute awareness, bordering on obsession that she was responsible for the physical safety of her brother and after their father’s death also for the financial security of both her mother and the little boy. Hence she dutifully helped her invalid mother to run the boarding house. Winnie’s adolescent years were a time of self-sacrifice and self-denial because of exasperatingly hard work. The memories of those days when she had to shoulder the burden of attending to the needs of the clients and lodgers, visit her in a ghostly fashion:

[T]he dreary shadow of the Belgravian mansion descended upon her shoulders. It was a crushing memory, an exhausting vision of countless breakfast trays carried up and down innumerable stairs, of endless haggling over pence, of the endless drudgery of sweeping, dusting, cleaning, from basement to attics; while the impotent mother, staggering on swollen legs, cooked in a grimy kitchen [...]. (SA 243)

Being a child she lived in fear of the violent father; in adolescence, however, she had to combat another menace, namely that of destitution. Hence, she slaved away running the boarding house practically on her own. There were moments however when she forgot the burden and enjoyed the pleasures of life: she went out with a young man, a butcher’s son. She sensed that he could give her fulfillment in life, that with him she would be able to taste life:

\(^{10}\) That Conrad wanted to make it a distinctive and revealing feature of Winnie’s character is evident from the reoccurrence of this phrase or similar expressions throughout the book (cf. SA, p. 154, 169, 177, 178, 185, 188, 200, 230, 237, 241, 245, 267).
‘Affectionate and jolly, he was a fascinating companion for a voyage down the sparkling stream of life; only his boat was very small’ (SA 243). The major drawback of this acquaintanceship was that he could not provide for her and her family. Conscientiously mindful of the extra cargo she had to carry with her all her life, Winnie heartbreakingly terminated that friendship. Instead, she began to foster another relationship with a Mr Verloc who ‘always with some money in his pocket’ (SA 243) seemed to be infatuated with Winnie. Yet, she knew that she was trading in her personal happiness and satisfaction for the economic assurance of her relatives. She understood perfectly well what type of relationship she was entering and what chasm of emotional void it held for her:

There was no sparkle of any kind on the lazy stream of his [Verloc’s] life. It flowed through secret places. But his barque seemed a roomy craft, and his taciturn magnanimity accepted as a matter of course the presence of passengers. (Sec Ag 243)

The term trade ‘in’ accurately specifies the nature of their relation since she perceived this marriage solely in an economic perspective, a business deal of ‘give and take’ in which she provided her womanly charms, wifely attentions (SA 6), and in return obtained the financial support for her kin. It followed that, as economic agreement, it could be terminated once the conditions were not fulfilled by Verloc.  

Therefore, I think, we can perceive Winnie as a skillful manipulator who encouraged the amorous looks of one of the lodgers, in spite of her reserve “which never went so far as to prevent conversation, carried on the lodger’s part with animation, and on hers with an equable amiability” (SA 6). In that she differs from Susan who did not participate in the match-making and whose marriage was probably arranged by her mother. Referring to Winnie, there is also some slight suggestion that the ‘romance’ with the lodger was carried out with her mother’s encouragement or at least approval. She respected Mr Verloc and found him an excellent suitor, considering him to be “a very nice gentleman”. Yet, to call Winnie’s behaviour cynically opportunistic is to disregard completely her desperate situation. She had two people to provide for and a household to maintain (SA 275) while psychically as well as physically she found herself burnt-out (‘and it did seem as if I couldn’t do any more’ (SA 275)).

11 Cf. the terms she uses to refer to her marriage: ‘contract’ (SA 251, 262), ‘bargain’ (SA 259, 261 twice), ‘transaction’ (SA 259). Although K. Carabine pointed to me that this is conveyed in a free indirect style.

12 A similar tacit approval of the daughter’s liaison with a ‘suitable’ lodger on the mother’s side is depicted in J. Joyce, Boarding House in Dubliners, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1992, p. 56-64.

As a woman, she was forced to perform a male role without the prerogatives of men in the society of that time. It should be stressed that in order to support her family she was prepared to do anything; to the extent that she even considered the most humiliating way for her such as ‘going on the streets’ (SA 276). Winnie sacrificed too much to assess her conduct unequivocally as opportunistic: she denied herself the affection of the butcher’s boy, she surrendered her integrity so as to become a submissive wife, and to remain, in effect, Stevie’s mother.

On Verloc’s part, the marriage was intended to fulfill two aims: to satisfy his sexual needs as well as provide a façade for his clandestine activities. His vulnerability to womanly charms had been exposed in the love affair in France when he was betrayed by the woman he loved. On marrying Winnie and making her (and her relatives) totally dependent on him, he managed to secure for himself sexual services for life. What is more, as ‘the famous and trusty secret agent’ (SA 27), he was thus fulfilling Baron Stott-Wartenheim’s plan - to settle in London and lead the life of an ordinary city-dweller (SA 22). He needed someone to run his shop dealing in pornographic articles where in the evenings the anarchist comrades would meet. Winnie was sexually attractive, reliable and above all respectable and this was ‘all in one’ that Verloc wanted. So his reasons for marrying her were no less practical than Jean-Pierre’s. Both women function as a means to achieve something in the male game, in which their female partners are only pawns. Winnie, however attempted to be a player, too.

Married life; childbearing and childcare

The purpose of Jean-Pierre’s marrying was to produce an heir who would succeed in the wake of the father. However, the consuming desire to conceive a child meant different things for the Bacadous. As far as the man was concerned, it was, at the beginning, to defy the finality of death, the irreversibility of human mortality. Being acutely aware of the transience of his life and at the same time, remaining hostile to the ecclesiastical idea of an afterlife, he tried to furnish his own iconoclastic defiance of the churchly memento

14 That it was not mere shilly-shallying and that poor young women chose prostitution as a means of avoiding starvation and overwork can be seen on the example of G. B. Shaw’s heroine - Mrs Warren. As Shaw wrote in the preface to Mrs Warren’s Profession: “prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing, and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together”. Qtd. in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, M. H. Abrams et al. (eds.), New York, London 1986, p. 1762.
mori admonition. His secular answer was to conceive a son who would ‘be part of himself, and yet remain to trample masterfully on that earth when he was gone!’ (I 14). Living off land, tilling it, reaping its crops, Jean-Pierre observed the fertility cycle and longed to become part and parcel of the rite, yet with time he felt inferior to nature, as a ‘man worse than childless’ (I 11). Later on, the obsession to have a healthy male successor began to be propelled only by hatred and fear that some distant relatives would inherit his farm, had he no children.16 On the woman’s side, on the other hand, the tension to have children sprang from other sources. Susan’s desire to produce offspring was socially induced: she must have felt the social pressure upon her since once she bore the twins she was happy that no one could speak of her as ‘the unfortunate woman’ (I 7) – meaning a childless woman. Barrenness was a sign of God’s curse, while barren women were regarded as inferior and held in contempt.17 For the first time the stigma of accursedness hovered over Susan’s head, though this time the ghost was laid to rest.

The two sons Susan gave birth to, turned out to be retarded; still, it was not her who told Jean-Pierre about it:

He had returned late from the market, where he had overheard whispers behind his back. He revolved his words in his mind as he drove back. ‘Simple! Both of them....Never any use!... Well! May be, may be. One must see. Would ask his wife’ (I 8).

It is evident that there is no communication between the spouses. Susan's reaction to her husband's questions is moaning and sobbing, not an articulate response. The childcare was placed solely on the woman's shoulders who was left alone with the misfortune or rather her misfortune since it is hinted at (and only later on explicitly verbalized) that it was her fault; it was she that ‘could not rear children that were like anybody’s else’s’ (I 12). When another boy is born, the parents' reactions differ. Jean-Pierre keeps his distance to the infant, observing him ‘with that indifference which is like a deformity’ (I 8). It is the mother's anxiety which comes to the fore. Her constant attention to the baby is emphasized: no matter what she does physically (cleans the fireplace, scrubs the kitchen table (I 9), spiritually Susan remains by the cradle, constantly on the look-out for any sign on the part of the baby, that would confirm its

16 A similar point was made by C.Maisonnat in "The Venomous Sibilation of Subdued Words: Literary Heterosis and Generic Crossbreeding in "The Idiots", L'Epoque Conradienne, 2003, p. 56-57.
17 This opinion of the woman solely being guilty of the incapability of the spouses to beget children stems from the Old Testament where the woman was either blessed with offspring or cursed with barreness. Cf. the case of Sara (Abraham's wife), Rachel (Jacob's wife), Tamar (Er's wife). The situation of women depending on whether they had children or not in the biblical tribal society is thoroughly presented in E. Adamiak, Kobiety w Biblii (Women in the Bible), Kraków 2006, p. 17, 30, 33, 39.
normality. She suffers even greater loneliness when the boy turns out feeble-minded, too. Then the spouses drift further apart and 'mute affliction dwelt in Bacadou's farmhouse' (I 9). Jean-Pierre comes home infuriated and drunk and stops short of beating his wife and children whom, as a rule, Susan tries to keep out of his way for they enraged him (I 12). Neither does she receive any support from her mother who is always on the road. Whenever she visits Susan it is for a brief moment, in between her urgent business deals. Nor does Susan frequent her mother since it is almost impossible to trace her location: 'She very seldom slept for two nights together in the same house; and the wayside inns were the best places to inquire in as to her whereabouts' (I 11).

One more attempt is made by the parents to generate healthy progeny, and this time a girl is born. The father is heavily disappointed since everything revolved around the question of inheriting land, while a girl being regarded as a kind of property could not constitute an appropriate heir. He consoles himself, however, that probably the opposite sex of the baby will break 'the ill-luck' (I 12), besides the newborn girl could be like a commodity married to a diligent man who would take care of the farm: "One could marry her to a good fellow-not a good-for-nothing, but to a fellow with some understanding and a good pair of arms" (I 12). After the girl turns out to be simple-minded, Bacadou begins to drink and his previous fury evolves into violence and wife-battering. Susan is looked upon as the culprit and coerced to do things which she does not want to; one of them was, for instance, going to the market. Probably she dislikes being exposed to the public eye since she knows she is pitied, jeered at, and labelled 'the mother of idiots' (I 18). For the second time we see Susan carried in a cart, in the space formerly occupied by a pig 'that with tied legs, grunted a melancholy sigh at every rut' (I 12). The dehumanization of the woman is complete when, having been brutally 'knocked into the bottom of the cart, where she crouches, thrown about lamentably by every jolt' (I 13), she is lugged home as one more farm animal bought at the marketplace. The analogy to the first homecoming (on the wedding day) is strengthened by an explicit comparison: 'driving home in the dusk at a rate fit for a wedding', as well as by reiterating the ominous parallels to the interment: 'with a face gloomy enough for a funeral' (I 13). All in all, Susan is totally submissive in her marriage, a weaker party, controlled and later misused by her husband.

As regards Winnie's stance in marriage, her double role of a manipulator and merchandise must be stressed. Verloc presents himself in just the right moment so she decides to hatch the marriage contract whose real terms she is careful not to reveal to her spouse and at the same time enters it on a commodity-like basis. As long as he complies with the rules, she feels bound by the agreement. What is more, she tries hard to sustain his illusions that 'he was loved for himself' (SA 261). Mrs Verloc beguiles her husband into believing that he is the master and she - the servant. On entering the marriage contract she
sells her body and allows the merchant to treat her as his property: 'Mr. Verloc loved his wife as a wife should be loved – that is, maritally, with the regard one has for one's chief possession' (SA 179). However, though Susan may be viewed like an object over which the mother and the would-be husband haggle, and later on as a marionette whose strings are pulled by others, Winnie should be perceived rather as a cunning schemer. For one thing, she fosters the French bachelor's courtship; for another although being sold to him, she selects the buyer to whom she wants to be traded.

Throughout the married years, Winnie is aware of her sex appeal so she uses her womanly charms expertly just to keep Verloc satisfied and tied up. If, by any chance, she speaks her mind, she instantaneously withdraws, quickly obliterating her traces with sexual innuendoes:

[Her words] had sounded more unkind than she meant them to be. They had also the unwisdom of unnecessary things. [...] But she knew a way to make it as if it had not been.
She turned her head over her shoulder and gave that man planted heavily in front of the fireplace a glance, half arch, half cruel, out of her large eyes – a glance of which the Winnie of the Belgravian mansion days would have been incapable, because of her respectability and her ignorance. But the man was her husband now, and she was no longer ignorant. She kept it on him for a whole second, with her grave face motionless like a mask, while she said playfully:
‘You couldn't. You would miss me too much.’ (SA 196, emphasis mine)

This instance of marital friction and the tricks which Winnie applies, is, in my opinion, emblematic of the Verlocs relationship. There is an immense hiatus between what is said and what is thought in the conversation quoted above. The first clue to the diverging areas of oral and mental activities is the phrase 'that man' - it reveals an ever present distance and alienation of the woman. After seven years of marriage, Winnie still refers to her husband as 'that man' which may be understood as 'that man who constitutes the other party of the contract', 'that man who bought her body'. Now, the other – darker side of the transaction should not be disregarded. The terms of the deal are not easy for Winnie to execute. One thing is the fulfillment of marital duties which was a nightmare to her to the extent that she wishes herself dead: 'Seven years – seven years a good wife to him, the kind, the good, the generous, the – And he loved me. Oh, yes! He loved me till I sometimes wished myself – (SA 276). Nonetheless, she is

19 The topic of female aversion toward sexuality is treated by Meyer, p. 277.
bent on prolonging that agreement infinitely, applying the trick of her sexuality trading on his susceptibility to women's charms. Another is the everyday effort to lure her husband to believe that he is loved for his own merits.

In this particular case of marital chat, Verloc's response is immediate, as if a button was pushed inside his mind, as if Winnie successfully pulled the right string: "Mr. Verloc started forward. 'Exactly,' he said in a louder tone, throwing his arms at and making a step towards her" (SA 196). Another clue to, disclose the true nature of their relationship is the kind of look she gave him - 'half arch, half cruel'. 'Arch' in this context may mean knowing or superior, experienced or expert confirming the previous suggestion of the position she held in the liaison - overtly, an obedient wife but covertly, the superior, the ruler, and Verloc on the surface the dominant man, yet factually, a submissive sexual partner.20 He subconsciously takes part in that mating game whose rules were established by Winnie, and responds in an equally ambivalent way of the love-and-hate type: 'Something wild and doubtful in his expression made it appear uncertain whether he meant to strangle or to embrace his wife' (SA 196). One more detail which reveals Winnie's uneasiness about living with the man whom she does not love is the recurring notion of respectability, namely formerly (i.e. in her Belgravian times) she considered herself respectable. Now, she finds herself no longer eligible for that virtue because of that transaction in which she intentionally deceives her husband, taking advantage of the man's voluptuousness. Winnie is aware of the duplicity of her behaviour which consist in paying 'that man' with her body for the security he provides for her kin (SA 243).21 That is why she could not repeat the word 'respectable' in the context of the analyzed moment of marital friction. It is as if she had sold her body in return for the economic protection of her family members.22

Entering that contract with Verloc entailed ultimate renunciation. Instead of following her youthful passion for a handsome man who promised some excitement in life, she chose the unemotional stagnant (but stable) relationship with a much older man. Next, for the sake of her family, she keeps that contract valid by pretending to love the man, fulfilling the wifely obligations, serving him on a daily basis. She treats herself as a commodity to be purchased and used by a wealthy merchant (although she totally disregards

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20 'Thus, I believe, Soane's clear-cut classification of Winnie as the colonised subject and Verloc as the hegemonic ruler could be questioned by a detailed analysis of the Verlocs relations in the novel as the above discussed marital conversation has shown. (Soane, p. 48, 56)


22 P. Dolan calls that marriage 'pornographic'. 'The Plot in The Secret Agent', Convadiana 1984:3, p. 226. (But, on the other hand, the side effects which she suffered from were exasperating; she felt enslaved and oppressed by Verloc (SA 261), having no power over the 'fiber[s] of her body' (SA 261) regaining it the moment the contract had been broken).
the type of ‘commercial activities’ he undertakes) out of responsibility for her idiot brother and an invalid mother. To keep up that fake image of marriage Winnie resigns from any human closeness, aware that her ulterior motives may come to surface. She behaves very methodically and takes several steps to hide her secret plotting. First and foremost, she does not confide in her mother about her apprehensions about their future, keeping her in the dark as to why she had turned down the butcher boy, and chose Verloc (SA 40). Afterwards, she builds around herself a wall of incursiosity. It is her shield to ward off the danger of her husband confiding in her which could have caused the necessity of reciprocity. Thus their marriage is erected on the wobbly basis of ‘Mrs. Verloc's philosophical, almost disdainful incuriosity' which is the ‘foundation of their accord in domestic life [which] made it extremely difficult to get into contact with her’ (SA 237). Last but not least, she completely disregards other people's attempts to establish a more intimate relationship with her, e.g. her mother's hesitancy on entering the cab or the sexual glances of Ossipon since they form a potential danger to her carefully constructed castle of protection for Stevie. She resigned from any form of affection though she must have been thirsting for it. She doomed herself to utter loneliness in order to safeguard her retarded brother.

One more aspect of Winnie's utter renunciation is her conscious resignation from motherhood which is vaguely suggested in the text: 'And with peaceful pride she congratulated herself on a certain resolution she had taken a few years before. It had cost her some effort, and even a few tears' (SA 187). Only from the context in which this statement is uttered can the reader surmise what the decision was about. Namely, seeing Verloc and Stevie depart for the countryside, Winnie says to herself: ‘Might be father and son. [...] She was aware that it was her work’ (SA 187). To ensure for Stevie a well-founded and unassailable position in the household, she denied herself the possibility of having children. Thus Winnie, inadvertently, places herself in the position, that Susan so intensely wanted to avoid, i.e of ‘the unfortunate woman'. Still there is an extra twist to that conscious relinquishment – not having her own children.

23 The ambivalent status of Winnie selling her body to Verloc might be succinctly summarized by a passage written by a feminist lawyer Florence Kennedy: 'Prostitutes are accused, even by feminists, of selling their bodies; but prostitutes don't sell their bodies, they rent their bodies. Housewives sell their bodies. Housewives sell their bodies when they get married – they cannot take them back – and most courts do not regard the taking of a woman's body by her husband against her will as rape.' Qtd. in Dolan, p. 234.
24 Cf. Winnie's mother question when she was on the point of leaving the Verloc's household: “What do you think Winnie?” (SA 156).
25 Winnie did not cold-bloodedly turn down the young suitor. On the contrary, she was unhappy (SA 243) and even her mother realized that the conduct of her daughter changed after the affair had ended—Winnie was listless, 'dull' (SA 40).
she continued her role of a surrogate mother for Stevie. Of course, she must have felt mother-like prior to taking that resolution, already in the Belgravian mansion when she protected her little brother from the fury of the cruel father, putting the frightened child to bed and consoling him. This role is intensified later on when the natural mother turns an invalid and it is Winnie’s task to nourish them both. Yet it is not just her fancy to occupy the position of the mother. It is evident that Winnie was forced to take up that role and that in spite of her true love for the boy she inevitably regards the dependant as a burden:

The protection she had extended over her brother had been in its origin of a fierce and indignant complexion. She had to love him with a militant love. She had battled for him even against herself. (SA 246, emphasis mine)

Sheltering Stevie means sacrificing her passions, dreams, preferences, and that is why he becomes so precious to her: not only because he is her beloved little boy but mainly, I believe, because she sacrificed her identity to support his growth. This explains also why she tends to perceive his abnormality as a peculiarity of a negligible nature rather than a serious deficiency. Her love for Stevie is so great that she allows herself to harbour a vision of a peaceful and happy family, forgetting the mercantile character of the marriage. It is the only case when Winnie pursues her own pleasure, indulges herself in her own personal likings, not thinking about others: ‘[S]he stared at the vision of her husband and poor Stevie walking up Brett Street side by side away from the shop. It was the last scene of an existence created by Mrs. Verloc’s genius [...]’ (SA 244). She gets carried away with the dream of Mr. Verloc developing a true affection for his brother-in-law (SA 189) and becoming a father for him. However, by creating that vision of a loving family she unwittingly transgresses the terms of the contract in which she is the main commodity bought with a few extras (the mother and brother were treated en masse with the furniture (SA 10)). Pushing Stevie onto Mr. Verloc and changing his status in the household (from a part of the bride’s ‘whole visible fortune’ (SA 10) to an equal family member), Winnie lets the boy out of her motherly wings into the domain of the practical Verloc.28

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26 Yet, I would not call that tender sisterly affection ‘incestuous’ as Heimer does, p. 249.
28 This is evident in the departure scene when Stevie does not want to be treated as a child any longer. (SA 189)
The murder and suicide

Both women kill their husbands only in response to the previous wrong-doings they inflicted upon their wives. Susan is pushed to murder Jean-Pierre in self-defense. On that ominous night her husband comes home drunk and enraged blames her for bearing mentally deficient children. The maltreatment takes the form of physical violence as well as oral abuse ('creature of mischance', 'useless carcass') (I 23). It is not the first time she hears herself being called names (e.g. on the marketplace- 'the mother of idiots') thus her mind is imbued with the notion of her accursedness (I 18). On her part, she decides to stop that chain of conceiving feeble-minded progeny – it is the first time in her life that she takes the reins- yet she feels the invariable pressure of her husband to mate. Being the weaker party she finds herself in a cul-de-sac, she has nothing to say but meekly agree to the tyrant's will. Still she desperately attempts to defend herself:

'Ah! Again! ... I had my long scissors. I heard him shouting... I saw him near... I must – must I? ... Then take!... And I struck him in the throat above the breast-bone." (I 19)

Killing her husband, which is like unburdening herself of an oppressive yoke, allows Susan to recover her identity, her own body again: 'I want to live. To live alone – for a week – for a day' (I 25). Having been pitied and jeered at by the local community, she proclaims personal freedom and independent status for herself, though only momentarily.

Winnie, on the other hand, murders Verloc in a state of shock, having received the news of Stevie's death caused directly by her husband. Her mind revolves as if in a trance around one idea that 'This man took the boy away to murder him' (SA 246).29 She cannot think logically (SA 256), her thoughts are disconnected (SA 251, 257) and she takes in only snippets of the harangue uttered by her partner. The wife's first thought is that she is no longer bound by the terms of the contract since Verloc violated it. Rejecting her husband, similarly to Susan, Winnie feels free, released from all obligations towards others: 'Her contract with existence, as represented by that man standing over there, was at an end. She was a free woman' (SA 251).30 Winnie decides to leave the household, dressing for departure in black. From now onwards, she is consequently portrayed as a visitor, a wayfarer masked by a black veil.31 This depiction subsumes several symbolic meanings in Mrs. Verloc. Firstly, it pointedly

29 Cf. SA, p. 249, 256.
30 Cf. SA, p. 252, 254, 258.
31 Cf. SA, p. 255, 256, 259, 261. The motif of the mask has been introduced earlier at the already discussed scene of marital friction.
sums up the role of Winnie in that relationship- of a visitor, passer-by (which was many a time signalized by the notion of the unstable foundations of their marriage contract), just an evanescent female partner on the brink of departing. Secondly, reiterates the image of Winnie as a she-devil, introduced by her father, and later enlarged on by Ossipon; and thirdly, initiates the portrayal of her as Death itself, later elaborated on by the anarchist.\(^{32}\)

Mr. Verloc, though not knowing the true reasons of his wife’s going away, senses the threat of Winnie abandoning him for ever, and forbids her to leave. This in consequence, triggers a whole chain of images in Winnie’s mind since she thinks ‘pictorially’ (SA 262):

The man who had taken Stevie out from under her very eyes to murder him […] would not allow her to go out. Of course he wouldn’t. Now he had murdered Stevie he would never let her go. He would want to keep her for nothing. […] She could slip by him, open the door, run out. But he would dash out after her, seize her round the body, drag her back into the shop. She could scratch, kick, and bite – and stab, too. (SA 256, emphasis mine)

Visualising scenes of great brutality constraining her new-gained freedom and forcing her to continue to carry out the invalid contract, Winnie madly looks for protection, self-defense and in her mind, she picks up the idea formerly mentioned twice by her husband.\(^{33}\) It is reinforced when Verloc excuses himself, professing he did not want any harm happen to Stevie: ‘Strike me dead if I ever would have thought of the lad for that purpose’ (SA 257). Still, Winnie might have changed her mind, seeing her husband repose on the sofa and making no obstacles for her departure, had he not adopted the tone of the long-hated sexual servitude of Winnie. As it was in Susan’s case, the husband demanded the marital duties to be performed. The commanding ‘come here’ uttered ‘in a peculiar tone, which might have been the tone of brutality, but was intimately known to Mrs. Verloc as the note of wooing’ (SA 262) must have crushed against Winnie’s mournful mind with terrible yet illuminating force. The steps she took look as if pre-planned while she is portrayed like an automaton, a masked avenger hiding her fury behind emotionless dutifulness and obedience: ‘She started forward at once, as if she were still a loyal woman bound to that man by an unbroken contract’ (SA 262). It is a telling description throwing some light on the former times when the Verlocs united, which on Winnies part could have been moments she did something against herself.


\(^{33}\) ‘I stood the risk of having a knife stuck into me at any time these seven years we’ve been married […]’. (SA 238) ‘I have no mind to get a knock on the head or a stab in the back directly I am let out.’ (SA 248)
Describing the murder scene Conrad is careful to point at Winnie's similarity to Stevie, implying her losing contact with reality, not being herself: 'the resemblance of her face with that of her brother grew at every step, even to the drop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes' (SA 262). The act of murder produces some momentary hallucinatory effects (SA 263), but she quickly regains her perfect state of consciousness, once Verloc's claims on her body were no longer pressing.

After the homicide both women escape from the place of slaughter, looking for solace and protection within the community, which was denied to them. Susan turns to her mother who neglected her many times in the past. Madame Levaille's surprise at seeing her daughter lays bare the nature of the mother-and-daughter relationship:

'Here you are, my girl. What a state you are in!' [...] The old woman was startled, and the idea that the farm had caught fire had entered her head. *She could think of no other cause for her daughter's appearance*. (I 16, emphasis mine)

There has never been any emotional need on the mother's part to visit her child, so she is astonished why her girl should come to her. It throws some light on the emotional dearth that Susan must have felt, being left alone with the idiot children solely on her hands. On understanding what her daughter did, Madame Levaille becomes a cold, condemning mouthpiece of the society labelling her daughter with the already-heard names of 'mad woman' (I 17), 'wicked' and 'horrible woman' (I 19). Since her position and wealth are grounded on the society, Madame Levaille feels imperilled and on the instant, thinks egoistically of her threatened image mirrored in the eyes of the community she lives off:

She fancied the gendarmes entering the house, saying to her: 'We want your daughter; give her up:' the gendarmes with the severe, hard faces of men on duty. *She knew the brigadier well – an old friend, familiar and respectful, saying heartily, “To your good health, madame!”* before lifting to his lips the small glass of cognac – out of the special bottle she kept for friends. And now! ... She was losing her head. (I 18, emphasis mine)

The businesswoman understands perfectly well that the social position she holds is endangered and the only way to keep it intact is to stay in rank with the society and condemn and reject her daughter which she duly does (I 19). She classifies her along the lines the community previously did and insinuates suicide for Susan: 'There's no room for you in this world' (I 19). The mother abandons her child when she is grief-stricken, frightened and needs the consoling human presence most. On departure Madame Levaille utters the cruellest words a mother can say to a child: 'Wish you had died little' (I 19),
immediately adding an aside exposing her egoistical stance in life: 'I will never dare to show my old head in the sunshine again' (I 19). It is her 'disgrace' that comes to the forefront not Susan's misery. Leaving the place where she is not wanted, Susan feels hallucinatory, seeing the face of her husband following her with the pernicious intent of begetting more idiot children (I.20, 21).

The pattern of rejection reoccurs in the meeting of Susan with the group of seaweed-gatherers on the beach. They reiterate the epithet 'accursed' and cross themselves so as to fend off the devil. Thus Susan's stigmatization as a nefarious and unwanted member of the community is complete. The last representative of that harsh and censuring patriarchal society is Millot. Unwittingly, he becomes the irrevocable voice condemning Susan and a direct cause of her suicide Therefore this act of self-destruction is imposed on her by the society. That she does not want to kill herself is clear from her intention to return home to the four idiot children and to explain to the community (embodied in the figures of the judges) how unbearably oppressive her live with Jean-Pierre was. It was her personal Inferno which she bravely and alone tried to grapple with (I 23), however at the end she decides to share that experience with others. Susan believes that stating her reasons, the society will understand and perhaps forgive which would entail re-admittance among its members. In her final moments, off the cliff, she once again expresses her desire to live—live for herself only (I 25). Millot following her, uses the language evocative of pursuit and revenge: 'You led me a fine dance. Wait, my beauty, I must see how you look after all this'. For him it is a game like hide and seek or animal hunting. Indeed, when Susan escapes she is portrayed again like an animal ('crouching', 'scrambling out', 'rushing', 'leaping clumsily'). She takes Millot to be the dead spouse and drowns herself in fear of being touched again by him. Millot, on his part, calls her 'lunatic' (I 25) which was in line with the previous judgment of the rest of the society.

Winnie, on the other hand, after the murder does not run to her mother, since she was part and parcel of that burden which she felt freed of. Similarly to Susan however, Mrs. Verloc desperately wants to survive. Indeed, her initial desire to drown herself (reinforced by loneliness) is subsumed by the will to live once she discovered a fellow human being. As it was with Susan, the final relation with a man develops under false pretences and proves fatal. As Susan wanted to hear what she imagined in her mind (i.e. the voice of her dead husband), so does Winnie hear the longed-for words of consolation and acceptance: "'You recognized me', she faltered out [...]. 'Of course I did,' said Ossipon with perfect readiness." She wanted to perceive him as a protector and guardian whose roles he readily accepted. Both of them are plotters, though. Ossipon has always wanted to establish a more intimate relationship with Winnie (SA 272), yet she remained unresponsive since she tried to preserve at least outwardly the facade of a respectable woman. Winnie, on her part, is a
schemer, too; now she is in need, she intends to make use of his former overtly sexual looks.\textsuperscript{34} As Susan misinterpreted Millot to be the ghost of her dead husband and killed herself only on hearing that he was perfectly alive, so does Winnie mistake Ossipon for a messenger of new life (SA 274). He, however, contrary to Millot, is not helping the widow but planning to capture her money. As it was in Susan's case, Winnie is also classified as accursed and evil but this time the stigmatization is ultimate- she is the personification of the devil, or even she is death herself: "He [Ossipon] saw the woman [Winnie] twined round him like a snake, not to be shaken off. She was not deadly. She was death itself [...]" (SA 291).\textsuperscript{35}

Once she has trusted him completely, Ossipon takes advantage of her gullibility, leaving her alone with her feeling of guilt and fear of the gallows. It is this abandonment and loneliness that is the direct cause of Winnie's suicide, whereas it was human presence and male closeness in Susan's case. The pattern is reversed in the novel: in 'The Idiots' Millot truly wanted to give some assistance to the unfortunate woman, but his gestures and words were misunderstood for marital wooing; in \textit{The Secret Agent} the anarchist from the very beginning is plotting to deceive Winnie while she blindly desires him to be her rescuer and lover. Thus both heroines die in result of a wrong assessment of their male partners.

To crown it all, the final interpretation of the women's last acts belongs to men who in both stories falsify the female drama. Millot is to testify that Susan was out of her senses and fell off the cliff only by accident (I 26), whereas Ossipon by concealing his dishonest treatment of Winnie, indirectly participates in the composition of an enigmatic press note informing of a suicide of an unknown lady:

\begin{quote}
[H]e stole a glance at the last lines of a paragraph. They ran thus: 'An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair.' (SA 307)
\end{quote}

Those two fabricated reports of the reasons and circumstances of the women's deaths serve, in turn, male aims. In 'The Idiots' it is the Marquis who is

\textsuperscript{34} I cannot agree with the opinion that Winnie falls pray to Ossipon— at least at the beginning of their meeting- she is an equal player: 'What would you [Ossipon] say if I [Winnie] were to tell you that I was going to find you?' (SA 273). It is the anarchist who is the weaker party and is taken in. Cf. Soane, p. 56.

\textsuperscript{35} Cf. SA p. 295, 297. As it was with Susan who, having been called many times cursed, finally believed herself to be accursed, so did Winnie (having been called 'devilish', 'infernal' by her father, then her husband) internalize the idea of her devilish nature. This is evident when she evokes the image of the Virgin crushing Satan-the Serpent's head: "'Tom, you can't throw me off now," she murmured from the floor. Not unless you crush my head under your heel.'" (SA 291)
personally interested in upholding the false version of Mrs. Bacadou’s unfortunate fall so as to secure his royalist position in the community (I 26). In The Secret Agent, Alexander Ossipon makes use of Winnie’s money for his own purposes as well as for the destructive inventions of the Professor.

Conclusions

As far as the prenuptial life of the heroines is concerned, they both were raised by parents who ran a boarding-house or a public house, in both families there was not much love and the children were looked upon as encumbrance to the elders. Susan’s and Winnie’s fathers are presented as generally emotionally (or even mentally) deficient. Both daughters were working before their marriage, although Winnie’s hard labour comes to the fore. In those two cases, marriage was perceived as a kind of contract (either by the bride herself or by the third parties involved) to achieve some goals. The woman’s would-be husbands acted out of their own practical needs and treated the female partners as a means to an end.

Considering the heroines’ married life, it seems that there are more thematic dissimilarities. Susan was eager to have children whereas Winnie consciously resigned from motherhood. After giving birth to several idiot children, Mrs. Bacadou was abused by her husband and there was much violence in their household while the Verlocs seemed, at least on the surface, to be a harmonious and loving family. However, there are also some analogies which, I believe, run deeper under the superficial differences. Both women were unhappy and lonely in their homes, unable (or unwilling because of fear) to communicate their misfortune to others. They were viewed as commodities and overpowered by their husbands, though Winnie manipulated her partner. Last but not least, both women loved and protected their idiot (surrogate) child / children.

With regard to the committed crime, the women’s reasons for murdering their husbands were alike. Susan killed Jean-Pierre so as to protect herself against an unwanted act of procreation and also to defend herself from battery. With Winnie the order of the causes is reversed, but they remain the same: first, it was fear of Verloc’s violent counteraction to her departure, then, hatred of another sexual intercourse which her husband suggested. Their death is, in turn, caused by a wrong evaluation of male intentions. Finally, the story of their domestic drama is misrepresented orally (by the only witness of the tragedy) or in writing (in the press) in order to satisfy those men who remained in the game.

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