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Going in Circles: Atomization and Fragmentation in *The Secret Agent*

Elizabeth Gabster

elizabeth.gabster@rochester.edu, x42717
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An author is an artist, a painter of words. Though works of literature are composed of lettered text, an author can paint very vivid images that underlie his words. One such powerful image is that of Stevie's circles in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. These circles are described as innumerable, coruscating, whirling, overlapping, and tangled together in a chaotic penciled image on paper. Stevie, the mentally debilitated brother of Winnie Verloc, devotes himself to these drawings as his favorite pastime. The characters pay no heed to the drawings of a feeble mind, but these circles haunt Conrad's novel—even the narrative structure is circular! Circles allude to harmony and eternity, to repetition and stagnation, to boundaries and absence. I would like to propose that Stevie's circles on the page hint not only at these allusions but also illuminate the state of London's society. Conrad uses Stevie's drawings to show that the society's bonds and unity have been blown apart, reduced to mere (circular) atoms whirling through space. Each separate character confines himself to an individual insular bubble, focused only on his own concerns and deaf to the words or needs of others. The characters of *The Secret Agent* make no attempt to listen to each other or sympathize; they cannot even hold a successful conversation together. Only Stevie, the artist and creator, is outside of this chaos. No other character looks beyond his selfish sphere of individuality to display compassion for another being. It is due to Stevie's humanity, which seems so alien in Conrad's atomized London, that he cannot survive and is doomed to destruction.

From the beginning, Stevie is marked as different. His character is first introduced as a "terrible encumbrance" and "difficult to dispose of" (SA 25). His mental facilities and memory skills are lacking, and yet his actual illness or mental condition is never defined. Conrad only says that he suffers from the "anguish of immoderate compassion" (SA 138). The amount of empathy he feels for the world around him is not normal in this atomized society. He also does not fit in another way—he cannot communicate using society's language. With a surge of

emotion that cannot be expressed in the language of the atomized society, excitement robs him of the “power of connected speech” (*SA* 130). Instead, Stevie must communicate in other ways, such as through his actions and his drawings.

Stevie most effectively communicates not through words but through his drawings of circles. Conrad notes his pastime of drawing circles when he introduces Stevie’s character in the first chapter, indicating through this early notation that this is a key aspect of his character. Stevie “applied himself to that pastime with great industry” using pencil, paper, and compass to create carefully-crafted, perfect circles on the page (*SA* 27). During the anarchists’ meeting, Stevie sits in the kitchen, focusing on his drawings, and the narrator describes them in greater detail:

[T]he innocent Stevie, [was] seated very good and quiet, at a deal table, drawing circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable. (*SA* 52)

Conrad utilizes a flood of adjectives and stretched phrases that illustrate the chaos of circles not only in the image they describe, but in the wild, whirling language itself. The reader is swept up in the wild language that conveys the power of the image. The circles consume the page—overlapping each other, within each other, and with their uniform curves entangled chaotically. This image of chaotic circles is repeated and referenced throughout the text. Much later, the narrator reckons back to the earlier passage by summarizing Stevie’s (former) hobby as “the pastime of drawing those coruscations of innumerable circles suggesting chaos and eternity” (*SA* 185). Conrad calls attention back to the circles without explanation. He subtly describes the circles as “suggesting” such universal and deeply philosophical themes, but never explicitly tells his own purpose in selecting the shape. Instead, he leaves it to the readers to interpret the image and all of the weighty meanings it carries.

In order to fully appreciate the ambiguity of Stevie's circles, one must first step back and consider what a circle *is* in essence and what its shape traditionally signifies. Mathematically, it is the perfect shape. Every point on this polygon of infinite sides is exactly the same distance from the center. Thus exactitude conveys a sense of completeness and harmony. Every point seems united, every curve inseparable from the others; this is a wholeness that cannot be broken apart. With such unity, there is neither beginning nor end to a circle. It is a perfect mark of infinity and endless, immeasurable time.

However, complete perfection and eternity can be a disconcerting idea. When tracing the curves of a circle, one follows a repetitive motion, moving over and over again in the same space. Thus, a circle is not only a sign of the infinite but of an infinite cycle of repetition. As Stallman explains, "What eternity lacks is precisely what characterizes life or time's continuity, namely the unpredictableness of things" (Stallman 251). An eternal circle has no change, no randomness, no surprises, and no improvement; all is always the same. Once caught inside this circle, there is no escape and one will be forever circling in its endless monotonous repetition, the same motions in the beginning as always.


A circle might also be viewed not as through its curved boundaries, but through the space within. A circle fences off a part of space from the rest of the world; its borders have definition, but in its center there may be an absence. This absence is a hole and a lack of something. The numerical symbol for nothing (zero, 0) emphasizes this lack. Interestingly, Conrad compares eternity to an absence in his novel. Winnie considers the ticks of a clock as time descending into the "abyss of eternity" (*SA* 146); Ossipon declares that "eternity is a damned hole" (*SA* 233). Both characters view eternity as a gaping absence that seems to consume time and life as they know it. Everything must descend into this hopeless circle of eternity with no regeneration.

Within the text, the circle is closely related to Stevie himself through his drawings, whereas another shape, the triangle, represents the secret agent Adolf Verloc as his secret symbol in the Embassy's documents. The contrast of these two shapes is unmistakable. One is smooth and fluid, whereas the other is sharply pointed. In contrast to a circle's infinite number of sides, a triangle has the fewest number of sides possible to make a polygon. When drawing, a circle can be drawn fluidly without a break in motion, whereas a triangle requires precise movements and sharp changes in direction. However, a true and thus *perfect* circle cannot easily be drawn without a compass or other tool to provide the exact curve; a triangle can be formed by merely connecting three dots.

Despite the at-first seemingly small detail, the identification of these characters with their respective shapes is important throughout the narrative. One might argue, like Comrade Ossipon, that Stevie and Verloc's shapes are merely arbitrary and not a detail to focus on. Ossipon observes Stevie's circles as merely symptoms "typical of this form of degeneracy" (SA 52), brushing aside any of their deeper significance with a medical air of superiority. Similarly, critic Richard Curle considers Stevie's circles as merely thoughtless busy-work to keep the hands occupied for a mind devoid of independent thoughts (Curle 128). Circles are a traditional sign of a mind that is not entirely sound; idioms such as "rowing your boat with one oar" or the circular motion of one's finger beside the head are ways of indicating that someone is crazy. However, Ossipon and Curle only consider this surface level; Ossipon is blind to Stevie's insight and communication through his drawings, and Curle does not consider the weight that Conrad gives the image by repeating it frequently.

Indeed, if based solely on the frequency of references, Stevie's circle seem more important in the text than Verloc's triangle—strange that the shape of a pastime is given more focus than the shape of an occupation. Perhaps Verloc's triangle is merely an arbitrary symbol;

after all, Baron Stott-Wartenheim might have merely flipped the first letter of his agent's name in order to conceal his identity, and Verloc's connection to the triangle is only mentioned twice in the text (*SA* 39, 145). However, Stevie's circles are mentioned repeatedly throughout (esp. *SA* 27, 52, 151, 185), always with long sentences or ambiguous phrases—describing something as simple as shapes on a page! Conrad thus highlights this idea and alerts the readers not to brush the image aside as the characters do.

Additionally, a circle often forms part of symbols for political and religious group, creating a curved border to separate the mark within from the world outside. One very relevant example is the international symbol for anarchy—an “A” drawn within a circle.  Historians are uncertain of the date of origin of this Circle-A; the first preserved image of the symbol dates to the Spanish Civil War (1936), but it may have been in use long before then (McKay). Though we cannot be certain if Conrad was familiar with the Circle-A, one might consider the symbol with *The Secret Agent* not as an “A”, but as a triangle and a line within a larger circle—Verloc's triangle within Stevie's circle.

Beyond geometric observations, a circle seems to often carry lofty implications of eternity and thus religion or morality, whereas a triangle often signifies things of the earth, such as the triangular pyramid of a rigid social structure. Fleishman suggests that the circle is “the emblem of moral freedom with all its dangers” whereas the triangle represents “enclosure and secrecy” (205). As stated previously, such connection with eternity and morality can be unsettling and perhaps even dangerous, as the mortal struggles to comprehend the eternal or the hole of eternity. Additionally, when considered as the Greek delta, the triangle also implies change whereas the circle implies repetition; ironically, Verloc is not the agent of change and the society is left in repetition at the end of the novel.

Critic Douglas Kerr takes this further and argues that Stevie's circles represent the repetitive cycle of all of the anarchists of Verloc's association. He interprets Conrad's use of the circle as "speak[ing] to an ironic curtailment of any faith in improvement, whether progressive or revolutionary" (Kerr 352). According to Kerr, the circle is not harmonious, but a hopeless reminder of the cycle of eternity, with no change or improvement possible. The anarchists talk and talk, but fail to agree or even see eye-to-eye, let alone to take any action. As Kerr succinctly states, "The longer the anarchists talk about revolutionary change, the more they guarantee that it will not happen" (Kerr 350). The Future of the Proletariat has doomed itself to a cycle of only more of the same; they talk of change, but will never make any progress.

Kerr makes the interesting point of the anarchists' circular talk and lack of progress or social change. Indeed, at the end of the novel, Verloc insists that he will come clean, out the Embassy, and "upset many things" (*SA* 167). However, Verloc is killed and silenced before he can testify, so this upset can never come about; without an agent and witness to clear the way and lead the revolution, society remains locked within its cycle of stagnation and corruption. It is not merely the anarchists who remain locked in a vicious cycle, but all of society.

Even the narrative structure itself is locked in a cycle of confusion and repetition. After an introduction to the characters in the first three chapters, the plot leaps forward non-linearly at the beginning of the fourth to a time after the explosion; readers learn about the event through hearsay and are lead to believe that Verloc has blown up. The Verloc family is absent until Chapter VIII when the narrative circles back again to continue the tale from their perspective prior to the explosion. This confusion of the scenes causes uncertainty in the readers and a hopeless repetition of the brutal explosion again and again, without ever seeing it clearly.

This lack of linearity displays Kerr's view of the lack of regeneration and the stagnation of Conrad's texts signified through his circles. Kerr argues that Conrad's circular narrative

shows his “scepticism about the ability of anyone to get anywhere in the end” [sic] (Kerr 350). There is no growth; there is no change. With a possible argument for the exception of Winnie, no character is dynamic in this text; all remain statically the same from when they are first introduced in the book until its final pages. Verloc lived and died believing that he was loved for himself, never venturing beyond his insular selfish sphere. The Professor still wanders the streets with a bomb, waiting to be an explosion in the masses. Winnie responded violently when she discovered that her brother had been ripped from her protection, but she remained just as lonely and isolated after Verloc’s death as she was during the marriage; her disjointed conversation with Ossipon becomes identical to her disjointed conversations with Verloc, as two people who are unable to understand one another. Stevie, the pure uncorrupted figure of compassion, remained an ideal that was destroyed by society. This circular narrative offers no hope for rebirth or new life, but an endless cycle of no escape, just the same over and over again.

But despite this extension of Kerr’s analysis, his interpretation of Stevie’s circles is limiting in that it unfalteringly only considers one possible meaning for the drawing—that is, that the anarchists will remain stagnant and never achieve their revolutionary goals. Instead, he should note that Stevie does not only draw the circles when the anarchists are present—this is a regular pastime at all hours of the day. Additionally, the amount of space that Conrad devotes to describing these circles is very significant; these are not merely the shapes of the discussions, but a “coruscating whirl” and a “rendering of cosmic chaos” (*SA* 52). Such a lofty description extends the shapes far beyond just that room of frustrating conversations. Stevie’s wild hopeless circles act as a visualization of the anarchists’ circular debates for that one scene, but his drawings (or lack of drawings, as on *SA* 151 and 185) distinguish them with more universal implications.

Fleishman takes a broader perspective by analyzing the detailed description of the circles. He views the concentric circles on the page as a harmonious arrangement of spheres, offering examples such as society or the heavens, whereas the eccentric circles mark the eccentric individuals (such as Stevie) who cannot exist within the social order (Fleishman 204-5). Thus, he concludes that the wild tangle of shapes display a dichotomy, suggesting “an awesome perfection, [and] an irrational humanity” (205). The chaos of circles seems both universal and unnatural.

Fleishman provides excellent points by analyzing the descriptions of the circles in detail and considering possible meanings of concentricity and eccentricity. However, in contrast to Kerr’s narrow view, which is too specific to the scene, Fleishman’s analysis is almost too broad and abstract and difficult to apply within the narrative. After all, though Stevie may be eccentric within this society, where might one find the harmony and perfection within this society?

Instead, let us consider the circles not as a whole mass, but as individual spheres, whirling and colliding, overlapped and entangled. Building upon previous interpretations, the circles are complex and ambiguous symbols of confusion and chaos, harmony and eternity—and of each individual in the fragmented society of *The Secret Agent*. The entire society is atomized and made up of these blindly individualized circles (or atoms), colliding together but hopelessly without feeling or humanity for each other. I offer this atomized view of Stevie’s circles not as the ultimate answer, but as a screen through which to view and interpret the novel. A circle for Verloc, a circle for Winne, a circle for Ossipon and one for every other character—all independent of each other and moving through life without concern for one another. Like the movement of atoms (described by the science that Vladimir is so eager to destroy), the individuals of this society rush through space enclosed in their own circular bubbles, blind to the existence of those around them, and completely deaf to their words or needs. Stallman

eloquently describes this atomization of society as each individual within a “circle of insularity, each insulated from another by his own self-love, by self-illusions and fixed ideas or theories” (Stallman 236). Each circle represents an egocentric individual who only speaks his own beliefs, and with his curved boundary, refuses to listen to others and fences off any communication. This is an ultimate text of the confusion and assumptions of many individuals, each blind to one another, and the tragedy that results from such fragmentation. All are hopelessly deaf to each other and oblivious to others’ needs. Moving like atoms chaotically careening through space, individuals are colliding but never truly emphasizing with each other.

The Secret Agent is a text dealing with an attack on the Greenwich Observatory and thus an attack on science itself. The Embassy directs Verloc to send his bomb directed toward science as an institution, destroying the “sacrosanct fetish” of science and learning (*SA* 43). Along with this obvious connection to science, the descriptions of Stevie’s circles remind the readers of atoms and Atomic Theory. Returning to the lengthy description quoted above, his drawings are an innumerable “coruscating whirl” with “uniformity of form” and a suggestion of “cosmic chaos” (*SA* 52). The use of “coruscating” (later repeated as “coruscations” of circles on 185) implies that there is brilliance to these circles, like a sudden flash of an explosion or collision. Conrad explicitly uses this uncommon word both times that he describes the circles themselves (*SA* 52, 185), also repeating the implications of chaos and eternity in the image. The descriptions of Stevie’s circles allude very strongly to descriptions of atoms—tiny particles of uniform shape within the same element—careening into each other in miniature explosions. Yet it is through this chaotic motion and coruscations of miniscule particles that the entire universe and eternity as we know it is created.

With links to science and Atomic Theory, it is important to consider the extent of scientific study of the atom during Conrad’s time. Conrad began writing *The Secret Agent* in

1905, the same year that Einstein published a paper on the statistical study of the chaotic Brownian motion of atoms (Allison). In 1897, JJ Thomson published his experiment using cathode rays and verifying the existence of negative particles—electrons—within atoms, and thus establishing *The Secret Agent's* most contemporary working model of the atom (ThinkQuest). In the nineteenth century, physicists Rudolf Emanuel Clausius and William Ramsay observed and studied the chaotic movement of atoms and their collisions, seeking to explain the chaos through statistics (ThinkQuest). These advances were published and publicized, energizing the public as scientists moved step-by-step closer to explaining the universe.

Additionally, although scientists had not clearly yet determined how atoms bond, they were very aware that certain atoms are more likely to be attracted to or repel certain other atoms, often influenced by electronic charge. Today, we know that atoms might join through ionic or covalent bonds to create a molecule, and molecules might have polar charges. Covalent bonds are held strongly together, jointly sharing electrons. In contrast, ionic bonds are held together only loosely by electronic charge; if elements sharing an ionic bond are dissolved in water or other substance, the elements separate to become free-floating ions with strong electric charges. Such ions, or individuals, are disunited, dissociated, and have lost social unity. The London of *The Secret Agent* is a very ionic society, where people are only held together by bare necessity and easily separate when that necessity is gone. For example, Ossipon and Verloc share basic overlapping political views, but Ossipon quickly abandons his loyalty to Verloc to make advances on his wife (*SA* 212). Winnie marries Verloc and entwines her circle with his but only so as to support Stevie; when she learns that Stevie is dead, she quickly untangles herself and considers herself a “free woman” with the obligation gone (*SA* 195). Like ions, these characters separate from each other as quickly as possible.

Following another characteristic of atoms, this society is also a world of polar opposites. Conrad sketches many of his characters in opposition to each other, setting them up at extremes and making them unable to communicate. Like atoms with polar charges, the opposite atomized individuals are often attracted, contrasted in scenes together. During the meeting of the Future of the Proletariat, Michealis and Yundt are introduced. Michealis, the “the ticket-of-leave apostle” (SA 49), is the dreamer of the socialist ideal and takes only a passive role to wait and speak eloquent words; in contrast, Yundt, “the famous terrorist” (SA 54), preaches words of violent and immediate action. The two are in extreme contrast to each other and cannot effectively share ideas or communicate on each other’s level. However, Yundt’s description also sets him up as a polar opposite to a character introduced in the following chapter—The Professor. Though both believe that action and violence is the way to bring social change, Yundt speaks vocally but makes no movement himself against the social institutions he claims to despise, whereas The Professor speaks little but walks through society with a bomb in his pocket, ready to explode at any moment. Yundt is described as “no man of action [... but rather the] evoker of sinister impulses” (SA 54) whereas The Professor is the “unwholesome-looking little moral agent of destruction” (SA 78). Yet again, when Chief Inspector Heat stumbles across The Professor by chance, he calls it a “specially unwelcome” meeting, as the figure of the Law and the figure of Terrorism, polar opposites, face each other on a deserted street (SA 84). Heat’s life is defined by rules and order, whereas The Professor embodies chaos and disorder. Finally, the two policemen themselves are set as polar opposites of one another. Chief Inspector Heat is a Londoner who prefers his own order and order of bureaucracy, whereas the Assistant Commissioner is the unnamed (and thus undefined) foreigner—tall, dark, and quixotic, constantly trying to shake things up and get to the answer most efficiently and honestly rather than manipulating the law for his own means. The Assistant Commissioner works for idealized justice, whereas Heat is the

bureaucracy of the old institution. Because of the polar differences of all these pairs of characters, they cannot effectively co-exist or communicate with each other.

Though they never share the same scene, the Professor and Stevie are two polar opposite characters that seem to form the two moral extremes of this work and show the extent of atomization. The Professor is intensely logical, rational, and profoundly unsympathetic. Stevie is illogical, with a feeble mind and mental disabilities, yet he is profoundly sympathetic to everyone around him. Indeed, whereas The Professor separates himself through his terrorist goals and his aim to be a violent moral agent, destroying the masses and cleansing society, Stevie is set apart because of his compassion. Though his mental facilities are certainly weak, his actual disability or mental condition is never defined—he is only said to suffer from the “anguish of immoderate compassion” (138). Stevie empathizes very strongly with every other individual in the world, whereas the other characters feel no compassion toward each other.

Stevie’s intense compassion is his illness and his handicap. The Oxford English dictionary states that the word “compassion” is derived from the Latin roots “com” and “pati”, that is, together suffering. Stevie takes on the emotions of everyone around him and suffers together with them; his compassion sets him apart in this atomized society. No one else shows any compassion in this novel; unlike the other characters, Stevie is not confined within one of his circles with no care for with whom he collides. Rather, his immensity of feeling places him outside of this chaos of circles, enabling him to be the one who perceives them and who can draw them.

Some might argue that Winnie Verloc shows compassion, and perhaps also the Assistant Commissioner. At the least, these characters do seem to lean more toward Stevie’s compassionate extreme rather than The Professor’s heartless, selfish view. Winnie cares for her brother and mother and selflessly gives up her chance at love by marrying Verloc for their

security; the Assistant Commissioner, constantly marked with the adjective “quixotic”, is an outsider who is determined to set things right in London society and bring the guilty to justice. However, neither of these characters shows compassion. Winnie displays a strong protectiveness that turns to maternal rage to guard her brother’s well being, but she considers herself his caregiver and mother, not his sympathizer. When applying the image of the circles to Winnie, she considers Stevie and her mother to be one of the concentric circles, sheltered within her own and traveling together within her sheltered space through space and time. In this view, she believes that her one dependent—her mother—chose to remove herself from the concentric shelter, but her other dependent—Stevie—was wretched from her protective bubble and murdered. She reacts in retaliation against this robbery. She does not see that though Stevie may be dependent on her for his physical needs, he is not within her concentric sphere but outside of the chaos of the circles; he is able to provide readers with a visual representation of the atomization of society. When it comes to the suffering of others, Winnie merely declares, “It’s not our business—is it?” (*SA* 62). She shows a shallow “ready compassion” for the cabman’s horse with the expression of “Poor brute!”, but she does not try to fathom their suffering and only views it as a pity (*SA* 139). She cannot understand the depth of feeling Stevie has for the experience. Winnie is just as deaf to the rest of the world as everyone else.

In turn, the Assistant Commissioner is an outlier on the page of circles, not tangled much with the others. He is the unnamed Quixote exhibiting not compassion but a strong idealistic morality. However, as an outlier, he himself has an epiphany moment similar to that of the circles on the page; as he departs the restaurant, he observes his fellow patrons as individuals, but finds himself unable to see anything in their physical appearance that would lend to an assumption about nationality, personality, or occupation. He finds that “he himself had become unplaced” (*SA* 124), freed from the assumptions that other people would place on him. Like the

epithets throughout the text, which grow increasingly longer and more complex, the Assistant Commissioner realizes the weight that people apply to physical appearance to define a stranger and revels in the freedom of seeing others as individuals rather than assumptions. The Assistant Commissioner is able to *see* (at least momentarily), while the other characters are completely blind to the depth of each other. Yet the Commissioner remains egocentrically focused on his personal goals and shows no compassion; thus he remains a circle on the page.

Stevie shows true compassion by empathizing with strangers and individuals with whom he might have nothing in common. He wails, stamps, and sobs at the story of the German soldier tearing off the ear of a recruit—an unnamed stranger whom he will never meet—because he “can’t stand the notion of any cruelty”, whereas the other characters are desensitized and do not care (*SA* 62). Similarly, when Mrs. Neale bewails her sorrows of poverty, Stevie is eager to help ease her suffering and becomes angry if he has no shilling to give her; “somebody should be made to suffer” for how all of her woes have piled on (*SA* 149). Mrs. Neale meanwhile takes advantage of his immoderate compassion to bewail her sufferings more often, but Stevie, who is outside of this atomized corrupt society, cannot perceive her motives.

The most telling example of Stevie’s compassion is his encounter with the cabby and his horse. During the cab ride, Stevie is distressed when the cabby lifts his whip, to the point that he can only communicate through his eyes and through stammers. He manages to stammer out, “Don’t. [...] Don’t whip. [...] You mustn’t. [...] It hurts.” (*SA* 129). He protests out of concern for the horse, not wanting the animal to suffer from the flick. When the cabby does whip, Stevie’s suffering with the horse is so great that he jumps out of the cab, and his excitement “robbed him of the power of connected speech” to express his indignation and compassion (*SA* 130). However, the cabman later communicates with the boy, and the physically handicapped driver with a hook for an arm connects with the mentally handicapped boy. This is one of the

few instances in the entire novel that one character actually listens to another and sympathizes with him; ironically, though Stevie listens closely to the cabman's woes, he is unable to verbally respond in connected speech. He can only stammer "Bad!" "Poor!" and "Shame!" implying not the detached pity that Winnie feels, but a deep personal sympathy and indignation at "one sort of wretchedness having to feed upon the anguish of the other" (*SA* 139); that is, that the poor cabman must whip the lame horse in order to make a living. Stevie suffers jointly with the cabman and declares shame on the world for letting such a situation exist. However, the mysterious cabby seems otherworldly, riding the "steed of apocalyptic misery" and compared to the "Cab of Death" (*SA* 136, 139). The cabman is everyone and no one, signifying the London lower working classes as a whole and yet also seeming unhuman. Despite Stevie's bond with the cabby, the cabby does not connect with Stevie, but continues his preparations and tales of woe "as if Stevie had not existed" (*SA* 137). With no means to effectively verbally communicate, Stevie cannot make the connection two ways. His language is limited, and his thoughts that are understood by others are constricted only to the few words that he is able to express. He remains and outsider.

Stevie's separateness and mental feebleness provides telling insights into the atomization of society. Fleishman marks him in the tradition of the Fool, a comical character "who is free to reveal the madness and corruption of society with impunity" (203). Like the Fool in *King Lear*, insanity provides a means of social critique; Conrad utilizes the innocent and optimistic Stevie to reveal the bitter realities of his atomized world. Only Stevie can reveal this reality, as "Such naïve realism stands in contrast to the conscious or unconscious obfuscation of the truth by the other characters" (Fleishman 204). His revelation of truth, shown through his circles and his depth of compassion, marks Stevie as an outsider. However, like a guru on the mountain, when one is removed from the world one might see it more clearly, and indeed, Stevie suggests clarity

despite mental debilitation. He cannot form full sentences or speak in connected speech, but he can express his feelings on the page. His expression and his communication take the form of a coruscating whirling mass of circles that Conrad uses as subtle social commentary. As an outsider and unconscious clairvoyant, Stevie's images display his world as how it really is—a fragmentation of individuals who are tangled together but cannot connect with each other, whirling through space but blind to each other and devoid of compassion.

Fleishman argued that Verloc's triangle signified enclosure, but I would argue that Stevie's circles also signify enclosure. Like any closed shape, a circle draws boundary lines and fences off one part of space from the rest of world. When so rigidly enclosed within a space, it is very difficult to break open your boundaries and find connection with another individual (who is also rigidly enclosed). This act is nearly impossible, as separate individuals are thus not communicating on the same plane and not able to connect their ideas across the space between circles or to the individual who has closed himself within.

Such hopeless communication has many examples throughout the text—indeed, almost every scene of dialogue is not a connected exchange, but two individuals who cannot understand each other and rather seem to be talking aloud to themselves. Michealis the ex-convict cannot recover a continuity of his thought when hearing other voices; his time in prison caused him to develop grand dreams and eloquent ideals for the future, but he cannot bear the sound of another voice. “He talked to himself, indifferent to the sympathy or hostility of his hearers, indifferent indeed to their presence [...T]he mere fact of hearing another voice disconcerted him painfully, confusing his thoughts at once—these thoughts that for so many years [...] no living voice had ever combated, commented, or approved” (*SA* 51). Despite his eloquence, Michealis cannot listen to another human being, so his ideas remain grand but stagnant, with no feedback or shared conversation with others. He despises conversation or connections with other human beings but

prefers the “sepulchral silence” of his prison cell for the “socially drowned” (*SA* 51). As trustful as a child (95), Michealis is also just as egocentric and selfish for attention; he cannot even perceive the words of others. He disconnects himself with idealized dreams that will never become reality because of his inability to share a conversation. It is ironic that these anarchists fight for cooperative world order, but cannot even cooperate or listen to each other.

Despite his triangular symbol, Verloc, the anarchist, is trapped within one of Stevie’s circles on the page. (Thus he embodies the image of the Circle-A anarchy symbol). Like the other characters in this text, he careens through life completely blind to the needs of those around him and focused only on his own concerns. Again and again, he and Winnie interact, but they hold two conversations at the same time, speaking different languages and failing to recognize that the other is not listening. When Verloc returns from the Embassy and he lies in bed with his wife, she speaks of her concerns about Stevie, yet he does not hear a word, “as if her voice was talking on the other side of a very thick wall” (*SA* 61). Verloc cares nothing about her worries but is deeply immersed in his personal fears. After the bombing, Verloc realizes that “Mrs. Verloc’s philosophical, almost disdainful incuriosity, the foundation of their accord in domestic life, made it extremely difficult to get into contact with her now that this tragic necessity had arisen” (*SA* 185). A lack of communication was the basis of their married life, yet after the bombing and Stevie’s death, the two react on different planes. Winnie is in shock, slowly processing that her brother was wrenched from her protective shell; Verloc meanwhile moves on quickly but cannot comprehend why his wife is so upset about the boy. Indeed, he could not “understand either the nature of the whole extent of that sentiment [...] it was impossible for him to understand it without ceasing to be himself” (*SA* 182-3). Verloc is one of the most egocentric and selfish characters in the text, with no feelings of sympathy or compassion; he cannot even begin to relate to his wife. The insular walls of his circle are rock-hard, not even allowing a

thought of such connection. Through this scene, Verloc is constantly “not in accord with his audience” (*SA* 193), and Winnie is equally not attempting to communicate with him. They are blind and deaf to each other; only the reader is privy to the two completely separate worlds.

Marriage is supposed to be the joining of a man and a woman, and thus the joining of their two individual circles like wedding bands linked together. However, the Verloc marriage does not function in this way; despite seven years of marriage, Verloc and Winnie remain completely deaf to each other and never learned to communicate; their circles crash into each other and become entangled with the social obligations of their relationship, but they do not actually show compassion for each other. Instead, in a marriage based on incuriosity and no communication, they are a prime example of atomization. Verloc selfishly wants everyone to care about him, but does not sympathize with or even listen to others. Winnie is lonely and isolated both in her marriage and after she is a “free woman” (*SA* 195) with a murdered husband.

The isolation of her circle is evident also when she deliriously runs into Ossipon. She sees him as a savior and clings to him; her concurrent circles (her dependents of Stevie and her mother) are gone, she freed herself by destroying the circle with whom she was entangled (Verloc), yet she unstably collides with another individual circle and entangles herself with him. Like her conversations with Verloc, her conversations with Ossipon are equally empty as both individuals talk to themselves and assume the other understands. Ossipon hints at a romantic fling, whereas Winnie thinks that she has made a full confession of her murder. “Distracted by the vividness of her dreadful apprehensions, [...] she had imagined her incoherence to be clearness itself. She had no conception of how little she had audibly said in the disjointed phrases” (*SA* 217). Like Verloc speaking to a shocked and vacant Winnie, Winnie believes that she too has explained everything to Ossipon. But Ossipon cannot read her mind; he entered the scene assuming that Verloc had died in the bombing and does not realize his mistake in Winnie’s

incoherence. Ossipon only realizes the truth when he enters the house and sees the body—it is not language, but the vision that clarifies reality for Ossipon.

Entanglement thus seems to signify uncertain relationships and failed communication. Stevie's drawing describes a "tangled multitude of repeated curves" (*SA* 52). It is not a harmonious tangle, but more of a loss of identity demonstrated throughout the book—there are polar opposites that attract each other in order to pointedly display their stark differences, and there are the entangled circles that violently entwine but do not actually connect with or understand one another. Verloc and Winnie are entangled through the social roles of their marriage, though the two share no personal meaningful connection and cannot even communicate; the frenzied Winnie latches on to Ossipon, he sees "the woman twined round him like a snake, not to be shaken off" (*SA* 223). He shudders at the thought of such a parasitic relationship and shakes her off when he leaves her on the train. Though entangled, they are just as atomized and isolated.

Stevie, the unconscious clairvoyant, draws his circles throughout the text and displays the truth of relationships in his world—they are a mere entangled façade with no communication or compassion. However, in one notable scene, Stevie fails to draw his circles. After Stevie has been accompanying Verloc on his walks, Stevie purposely abandons his pastime; Conrad makes a point of calling attention to his "blank and idle" paper and pen, while Stevie clenches his fists and scowls at the wall (*SA* 151). This lack of artistic creation denotes an abandonment of his attempts to communicate. Ripped from Winnie's sheltered Eden, Stevie's innocence must face the realities of the world and the complexities of its atomized inhabitants who do not share his compassion. His reaction is very ambiguous, but definitely forebodes his final outcome. Language has failed him; he can only communicate in broken phrases, and others cannot comprehend their depth. Drawing has failed him; others see his insightful circles as merely signs

of his degeneracy rather than a reflection of the truth of society. Ultimately, the bomb itself acts as a final communication; the explosion becomes a violent replacement for language.

Stevie's compassion is his downfall. Such immoderate compassion cannot exist in a society where every individual is blind to all others and cannot even communicate successfully. Such compassion betrays Stevie by enabling him to relate to other individuals and trust too strongly in his harsh world; he trusts Verloc with a godlike devotion, but Verloc only sees this devotion as a means to his own ends. Verloc sees Stevie as equated with furniture, as another nuisance to take over and dispose of (*SA* 27). His walks with Verloc force him to confront the harsh reality of his world, and he begins to realize that the other characters have no compassion but are egocentric and careless of the feelings of others. Stevie created subtle images of this truth from the beginning through his circles, but the encounters on the walks (encounters that we as readers are not privy to, so we must only draw conclusions from his reactions) shatter his surface-level optimism to make him realize this on a conscious level. He chooses to stop drawing and thus to stop communicating. Like the quixotic Assistant Commissioner, Stevie wants to right the wrongs in the world and punish someone. His compassion equips him with a strong sense of indignation that makes him personally feel affected by the injustice of the world. His indignation resulted in explosion before, when the office boys played with his feelings to work his compassion into a frenzy and cause an "altruistic exploit" of exploding fireworks in the stairway (*SA* 26). Like the fireworks, the Greenwich bomb shows Stevie's misguided hope to try to help others through a violent explosion for the betterment of the world. With his limitless trust and inability to act selfishly within a society reduced to ionized, self-centered atoms, others take advantage.

On the surface level of the plot, Stevie as a character is doomed through his misplaced trust in individuals who care for no one but himself or herself. On the deeper thematic levels, it

is not only Stevie the character but Compassion itself that cannot survive in this society. Stevie functions as a figure of purity and innocence in a narrative full of individuals in insular spheres. While the other characters speak in disjointed dialogues that are two separate conversations, Stevie listens closely to everyone. He is the only character to truly display compassion, and this trait sets him apart in this society. Stevie embodies the traits that are missing from his London society—trust and innocence, empathy and compassion. Society rejected these traits in favor of an insular atomized reality of individualism. Stevie himself is actively and violently rejected by society and blown to bits. Compassion has no insular shell in which to protect itself, and with no circle, Stevie the outsider, the unconscious clairvoyant, is destroyed.

Stevie's carefully traced chaotic circles provide a framework through which to view the entire course of the novel. His circles display the truth of the world around him as individuals clashing together like atoms—colliding but never emphasizing with and never listening to each other. Some are eccentric and overlapping, sharing similar belief systems; others are entangled as those with social obligations or parasitic relationships. Conrad sets many pairs of characters as opposites, like polar atoms with contrary electric charges. But none of these characters can successfully communicate or understand each other. As the only character who truly shows compassion, Stevie is set apart outside of this atomized world of insular bubbles. Conrad uses his drawings as an outlet to describe the world and as a social commentary, though Stevie, as an uncorrupted figure of Compassion, cannot survive within it.

Annotated Bibliography

Conrad, Joseph. *The Secret Agent*. New York: Signet, 1983.

Allison, Andy. "Jean Perrin and Atomic Theory Calculating Avogadro's Constant". 3 October 2008. *Suite101*. 6 December 2008.

<http://physicshistory.suite101.com/article.cfm/jean_perrin_and_atomic_theory>.

Allison's article provides insights into the history of Atomic Theory at the turn-of-the-century, especially regarding Avogadro's number and Einstein's studies.

Atom: The Incredible World. Oracle ThinkQuest Team #19662. 6 December 2008.

<<http://library.thinkquest.org/19662/>>.

This website, created through the Oracle Education Foundation, explains the basics of atoms and the history of their study throughout the centuries.

Ching, Yuet May. "'A heap of nameless fragments': Sacrifice, Cannibalism, and Fragmentation in *The Secret Agent*". *The Secret Agent: Centennial Essays*. Ed. Allan H. Simmons and J.H. Stape. New York: The Joseph Conrad Society, 2007. Pp 36-48.

Ching examines traditions of sacrifice and cannibalism from a variety of cultures and applies these to *SA*, especially in terms of the scenes at the Silenus pub and Stevie's death (a sacrifice or a cannibalistic feast for society).

Cox, C.B. *Joseph Conrad: The Modern Imagination*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1974. 83-101.

Cox shows *SA*'s grimness and pessimism in its lack of order, breakdown of routine, and loss of identity. Examples include Verloc's insomnia embodying a breakdown of his known reality; Winnie's reaction to Stevie's death as a loss of purpose and identity; and the collapse of the security of the domestic space.

Curle, Richard. *Joseph Conrad and His Characters: A Study of Six Novels*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1957.

Richard Curle examines five of the main characters of *The Secret Agent* in great detail—Verloc, Winnie, Stevie, The Professor, and the Two Policemen.

Fleishman, Avrom. "The Symbolic World of the Secret Agent". *ELH* 32 (1965): 196-219.

Fleishman analyzes Stevie in his contrast to the rest of the world—he is free to reveal the madness of society and is morally free, and yet in danger. Fleishman further dissects the symbolism of the circle as perfection and its inability to survive in a human realm, as opposed to Verloc's triangle as enclosure within society.

Kerr, Douglas. "Conrad's Magic Circles". *Essays in Criticism* 53 (2003): 345-365.

Kerr examines the circles uses in a number of Conrad's texts. He interprets the circles in *SA* to signify the lack of progress by the anarchists toward their goal of social revolution. Instead, society remains stagnant and unchanging.

Majewska, Monika. "Stevie: Conrad's Christ?" *Joseph Conrad: East European, Polish, and Worldwide*. Ed. Wieslaw Krajka. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. 87-112.

By considering Stevie's character in relation to Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin, Majewska proposes that Stevie might also have some messianic symbolism in his character. She further suggests that *SA* might be a parody of the crucifixion and the demise of the Christian Holy Family. Majewska makes some interesting points as she considers the atomized society existing around the characters and the nonsensical verbosity (94) of the anarchists' in contrast to Stevie's silence.

Martinière, Nathalie. "Sight, Geometry and Metaphorical Architecture in *Nostramo* and *The Secret Agent*". *Conrad in France*. Ed. Josaine Paccaud-Huguet. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. 235-250.

Martinière describes the chaos of the turn-of-the-century when Conrad was writing and the influence of new scientific breakthroughs reworking man's foundation of reality. This confusion and shaky reality is reflected in *SA*. Martinière points to the disruption of the linearity of the plot, the chaos in the world within the stories, and the confusing architecture (such as the numbering system in London). Additionally, she touches upon Stevie's circle as a symbol of order and peace versus Verloc's triangle as signifying disorder and chaos.

McKay, Iain et al. *An Anarchist FAQ*. 2008. The Anarchist FAQ Editorial Collective. 6 December 2008. <<http://www.infoshop.org/faq/append2.html>>.

McKay et. al. provide a history of anarchism and a study of the symbols of anarchism, especially tracing the history of the Circle-A symbol.

Stallman, R.W. "Time and *The Secret Agent*". Ed. R.W. Stallman. *The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium*. Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1960.

Stallman examines time, symbolization, and the fragmentation of society in *SA*. This essay was instrumental in establishing the analysis of Stevie's circles, and many future critics have referenced back to Stallman's work in order to further build upon his theories.

Rieselbach, Helen Funk. *Conrad's Rebels: The Psychology of Revolution in the Novels from Nostromo to Victory*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985.

Rieselbach provides insights into the revolutionary themes underlying *SA*, including the actions of the anarchists. She especially focuses on the Verloc marriage and how this marriage is indeed the cradle of anarchy.