

1907 Conrad Novel May Have Inspired Unabomb Suspect

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In Joseph Conrad's novel "The Secret Agent," a brilliant but mad professor abandons academia in disgust for the isolation of a tiny room, his "hermitage." There, clad in ragged, soiled clothes, he fashions a bomb used in an attempt to destroy an observatory derisively referred to as "that idol of science."

Federal authorities believe Theodore J. Kaczynski, the former mathematics professor who loved Conrad's works well enough to read them about a dozen times, may have drawn upon the 1907 novel. Even before identifying Kaczynski as a suspect in the Unabomber case, FBI agents noted the parallels between Conrad's theme of science as a false icon and the Unabomber's targeting of scientists and technological experts and his condemnation of technology in letters to news organizations.

Investigators sent "The Secret Agent" and other Conrad works to scholars last summer, hoping for insights into the mind of a killer who eluded them for 18 years.

With Kaczynski's April arrest, the parallels fell neatly into place. Kaczynski, a brilliant man who has been troubled most of his life, fled academia for a hermit's existence in a Montana shanty, where, grossly unkempt, he lived for a time off turnips he grew behind his cabin. One of the anarchists in the novel lived on a diet of raw carrots. Further, in his letters, Kaczynski depicted technology as evil.

Federal agents say they believe that Kaczynski, 54, used "Conrad" or "Konrad" as an alias on at least three occasions while staying at a hotel in Sacramento where he allegedly went to mail bombs. By coincidence, reference books list Conrad's birth-given name as either Teodore Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski or Jozef Teodore. Kaczynski's full name is Theodore John Kaczynski.

Kaczynski's alleged use of the initials "FC" on a number of bombs and in letters to news organizations is yet another similarity. The Unabomber's letters said the initials stood for "Freedom Club." In "The Secret Agent," anarchists use the initials "FP," or "Future of the Proletariat," in their leaflets.

Kaczynski, who is charged with killing two people and injuring six others in a total of seven bombings, grew up with Conrad's complete works in his family's suburban Chicago home. During 26 years in the Montana wilderness, he pored over Conrad's writings. In a 1984 letter to his family, "Ted said he was reading Conrad's novels for about the dozenth time," said Washington attorney Anthony P. Bisceglie, counsel to Kaczynski's brother and mother.

Although Kaczynski has been an avid reader of fiction and nonfiction, his absorption with Conrad and the uncanny similarities between the Montana recluse, the Unabomber's 35,000-word manifesto and characters in "The Secret Agent" may provide a rare glimpse into Kaczynski's mind – and his view of himself.

Considered one of the 20th century's great authors, Conrad wrote about alienation and loneliness and portrayed science and technology as nefarious forces naively exalted by the public. In "The Secret Agent," the Polish-born author created a character who wants to destroy an observatory he sees as a symbol of science, "the sacrosanct fetish of today." The Professor, a brilliant but deranged man who walks around strapped with explosives and is devoted to constructing "the perfect detonator," supplies the device.

Describing a similar character, also nicknamed the Professor, in his short story "The Informer," Conrad wrote: "Explosives were his faith, his hope, his weapon and his shield."

If Kaczynski did indeed draw from Conrad's characters in plotting bombings, he would not be the first killer to find inspiration in literature or film. Mark David Chapman, who killed musician John Lennon, was obsessed with the novel "Catcher in the Rye." John W. Hinckley Jr., who shot President Ronald Reagan, was consumed by the film "Taxi Driver."

"Somehow the book and the movie keyed in to whatever delusion or fantasy they had and gave it a push," said forensic psychiatrist Robert I. Simon, author of "Bad Men Do What Good Men Dream," a study of stalkers, psychopaths and killers. "It's not the books themselves, but the individuals" who are at fault, he added.

On the Unabomber's trail, federal agents were struck by the similarity between Conrad's themes of anarchy, alienation and dehumanization and the written justifications the Unabomber gave for his deeds. In a letter to the New York Times last year, the Unabomber described "FC" as an anarchist group and said its 18-year bombing spree, which left three dead and 23 others injured, was designed "to promote instability in industrial society and give encouragement to those who hate the industrial system."

The Unabomber continued in that vein in his manifesto, published in The Washington Post in September at the urging of federal authorities. He said since it is impossible to separate technology's beneficial and destructive parts, it must be wiped out and man must return to nature.

The main character in Conrad's best-known work, "Heart of Darkness," abandons European civilization for the jungle of the Congo.

In "The Secret Agent," Conrad's characters deride science and technology. "At every stage, science, pseudoscience and technology are perverted forms, false idols rather than the real thing," Frederick R. Karl wrote in his introduction to the Signet Classic 1983 edition.

The novel's setting is London in the 1890s when England was beset by a wave of anarchist bombings, including an attempted attack on the Greenwich Observatory. That incident is at the novel's center.

The bomb carrier, Stevie, a troubled boy who blows himself up when he trips en route to the observatory, is viscerally protective of animals throughout the story – strikingly similar to the youthful Kaczynski as described by his family.

The Professor is portrayed as a solitary figure. On a rare walk through the city, he longs for his tiny room, which Conrad describes as "lost in the wilderness of poor houses, the hermitage of the perfect anarchist."

"I've the grit to work alone, quite alone, absolutely alone," says the Professor, who abandoned chemistry because he felt unfairly treated by the technical institute where he worked.

Kaczynski abandoned an assistant mathematics professorship at the University of California at Berkeley, but for a different reason: He feared engineers would use what

he taught them to destroy the environment, according to the family. The Professor asserts, "What's wanted is a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life." To move that along, the Professor "depends on death."

"The Professor's indignation found in itself a final cause that absolved him from the sin of turning to destruction as the agent of his ambition," Conrad wrote.

The order to blow up the observatory comes from a character named Vladimir, an embassy head from an unnamed country who is disdainful of science. "Any imbecile that has got an income believes in that," Vladimir says. "He does not know why, but he believes it matters somehow."

Vladimir says he would like to throw a bomb at mathematics; since that is impossible, he picks the observatory. He describes murder as a byproduct of modern society.

The Unabomber's manifesto posited a similar thought. "Many or most primitive societies have a low crime rate in comparison with our society," it states. "Since there is no reason to suppose that more modern men than primitive men have innate predatory tendencies, the high crime rate of our society must be due to the pressures that modern conditions put on people." Staff writers John Schwartz and Pierre Thomas and researcher Bobby Pratt contributed to this report. CAPTION: Joseph Conrad's characters deride science, technology as "false idols."

A critique of his ideas & actions.

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