Secrecy and Trust in John Le Carré’s *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*

John Le Carré’s 1963 spy novel *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* sets the pace for the ambiguity of both morality and mortality when the protagonist Alec Leamas watches his cohort Karl Reimeck gunned down in area Leamas assumed was safe. Le Carré takes this opportunity in the infancy of the novel to tell the reader two things: in the world of espionage, there is no such thing as absolute safety, and, secondly, the world of a spy is encircled in uncertainty. To stress the latter part, Le Carré presumably chose his verbiage with a purpose in the scene of Reimeck’s assassination by giving the shooter no more description than of being an “East German sentry.” In doing so, Le Carré made the killer nothing more than a nameless, faceless entity— a systemic part of the military complex and no longer an individual.

The irony in governments making the decision regarding right and wrong, moral or a(im)moral, is that the agency (government) acts on the will of one or few decision makers in the uppermost echelons of a government. Reimeck’s murderer is methodical, even as “the East German sentry fired, quite carefully, away from them into his own sector” (8). In this action, Le Carré shows his readers— in an ambiguous fashion— that governments are willing to turn against their own for what they perceive to be the greater good. There remains a dichotomy between the individual being erased once one is indoctrinated into a government (especially in lower levels such as the case with the East German sentry), yet the idea of an autonomous government is also erased when stripped down and viewed as nothing more than a figurative puppet behind a select group of powerful puppeteers.

As a genre, spy literature is centered around deception, lies, and looking at surroundings past their face value; so, too, is the detective genre. As Barzun explicates in his “Mediations” article, there is large difference between spy and detective narratives in fiction. Bazrun said that, “under a surface likeness the purposes of spying and criminal detection are opposite: the spy aims at destroying a polity by sowing confusion and civil strife; the detective aims at saving a polity by suppressing crime” (172). In pointing out this key difference, Barzun not only cements the questionable morality of the spy, but also that of the government. Le Carré adds a layer of morality and questionable governmental ethics in the conversation between Leamas and Fiedler. Leamas, though beaten down through losses, gives off the impression that he still believes he is on the side of right is fighting against the wrong (or the evil). As is revealed throughout the conversation, right and wrong are situationally-dependent. When Fiedler asks Leamas about the possibility of London ordering the murder of himself, Leamas replies with a simple “it depends” response. Fiedler takes the opportunity to lead Leamas to a realization of his own government when he replies with, “It depends on the need. Like Stalin, in fact. The traffic accident and the statistics. That is a great relief” (162). Le Carré’s reference to Stalin is an interesting one because, while almost everyone can agree that Stalin and his reign were nothing short of horrendous, there will always be a group who agrees with an act or ideology, making all abstract matters and their results dependent on the need.

Dependency is another theme in spy literature; especially in Le Carré’s work. Agencies depend on a myriad of different departments and personnel, and vice versa. Hindersmann argues that the agent relies on the agency more than the agency depends on the agent. The agency (in this particular instance, the intelligence service) views their personnel as a necessary expendable, but Hindersmann argues that, “the intelligence service not only becomes a surrogate family but also a surrogate religion” (26). This surrogacy of both family and religion implies the intelligence service becomes an entity that is all-consuming for the agent. Le Carré reiterates the point of Hindersmann in even the beginning stages of the relationship between Leamas and Liz Gold. To say Le Carré gives the beginning of the couple’s relationship a brief synopsis would be an understatement because the author gives more of a bullet point-style account beginning with the first dinner, mentions that there were other dinners, and goes into one evening of particular interest. That evening— would could have been any number of dates between Gold and Leamas (Le Carré does not specify)— includes a conversation between the pair about God or any other deity. When Gold seems surprised at the vague answers of Leamas, he replies with, “‘Sorry, Liz., you’ve got it wrong. I don’t like Americans and public schools. I don’t like military parades and people who play soldiers.’ Without smiling, he added, ‘and I don’t like conversations about Life’” (31). What is interesting about Leamas’ response is twofold: he infers he is not only comfortable with his life in the shadows as an agent, but he also does not pay any attention to philosophies. Le Carré’s use of a capital “L” when Leamas says “life” is an interesting choice because it is an intentional move to draw his reader’s attention to the word and its significance. In this context, the word acts as an umbrella term which implies “life” being the philosophical questions involved in it. Further, Le Carré’s use of the capital letter is a dichotomy because it allows the reader to assume that, since Leamas does not wish to work in philosophies, he must then be one who feels most comfortable in absolutes, but his existence as a spy is centered in the grey areas of morality.

As is often the case in relationships involving dependency, there will be an imbalance of power. In Le Carré’s novel, there is a constant struggle of power between Leamas and the Circus, but Brooker helps the reader realize that the Circus holds the power when he says that, “as Derrida notes, the dominant powers picks the terms, legitimizes the vocabulary, and decides the official interpretation” (148). Le Carré’s novel drives in the Derrida’s point (through Brooker’s article) even in the way the novel is written. Throughout the entirety of the book are agency-specific terms; words that the agency has coined and its personnel adopted in everyday language. Just in the use of these terms, MI6 (the Circus) shows that it is the dominant power. During a conversation with Fiedler, Leamas tells the former that, “I’ve told you all I know” (117), but Fiedler shows that, acting as the face of the agency, he knows Leamas is not being honest, even if unintentionally when he replies with, “Oh no, you haven’t. You have told us all you are *conscious* of knowing” (117). In this line, Le Carré proves that both Brooker and Hindersmann’s points are valid. Brooker’s point is validated by showing that the agency knows more than anyone involved, cementing their status as the most powerful entity. The same line Fiedler says to Leamas also shows the truth in Hindersmann’s point about surrogate religion when Fiedler implies that the agency is an omniscient (and also unseen) entity, similar to religious figures.

The spies in Le Carré’s novel all hover in ambiguity of morality, but the agency is just as bad, if not worse; the agency is only viewed as being the “good” entity. Le Carré also brings up an interesting concept of morality when he forces his reader to determine between if an act of an individual is bad or if the entity issuing the order is the evil. One must wonder if the East German sentry who killed Karl Reimeck was an evil person, or if he was a possibly moral man acting on the orders of an immoral entity.

Works Cited

Barzun, Jacques. "Meditations on the Literature of Spying." *The American Scholar*, vol. 34, no. 2, 1965, pp. 167-178. Accessed 2 Feb. 2019.

Brooker, Will. "In Focus: The Long Shadows of 9/11. Science Fiction, Thrillers, and the War on Terror." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 1, Feb. 2011, pp. 145-148. Accessed 2 Feb. 2019.

Carré, John L. *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold: A George Smiley Novel*. Penguin, 2012.

Hindersmann, Jost. ""The right side lost but the wrong side won": John Le Carré's Spy Novels before and after the End of the Cold War." *Clues*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2005, pp. 25-37. Accessed 2 Feb. 2019.