

THE OFFICER AND THE GENTLEMAN: A COMPARISON OF THE CHARACTERS OF JAMES BOND AND GEORGE SMILEY

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Abstract

This article compares the characters of George Smiley (created by John Le Carre and James Bond (created by Ian Fleming). Bond was the archetype of a member of the officer class who obeyed orders unquestioningly. Smiley was a gentleman as revealed by his behavior and reactions to events. I have compared them on two broad parameters namely, a) physical appearance, and e) morality, by which I mean their attitudes to women. There could have been many more of such parameters, but I felt that these were the important ones and were also a comprehensive platform for the analysis of the two men. The basis of this article are the novels written by Fleming and Le Carre in which these two characters appear. Familiarity with their writings will give the reader a better insight into this article. I have not touched on the Bond or Smiley movies, because the Bond movies especially, do not depict him as envisaged by Ian Fleming in his novels. The main thread running through the article is how an adventurous figure like Bond and a short, worried looking figure like Smiley could hold the attention of readers even though they differed in so many aspects.

Keywords: morality, spy genre, realpolitik, writing styles, morality

Introduction

The remarkable thing about both these two fictional characters is that they capture the readers' imaginations in different but powerful ways, even though they come from different hemispheres and operate in totally different settings. Consequently, the main thrust of this article will be to see how this paradox of captivating the reader was achieved. The following quote sums up the differences between the two fictional captures succinctly. 'In the popular imagination, there are two types of spy. One is James Bond, the suavely seductive yet psychopathic secret agent, who confidently trots the globe with a suitcase full of secret weapons as he single-handedly rids the world of evil. The other is the George

Smiley-type figure, the portly spymaster who is torn by ethical doubts, who questions his own methods and the cause for which he is fighting. The espionage depicted by Bond creator Ian Fleming is simple and glamorous. Both in the books and in the films, Bond appears to be licensed not only to kill, but also to spend half the annual budget of the Treasury. Unlike with most men, senescence and safari suits only increase his sex appeal, and beautiful women the world over are ready to share their beds, and their country's secrets, with Bond. The world of John le Carré's George Smiley is very different. There are no wildly extravagant action scenes and few, if any, secret gadgets. His spies lack glamour, and are weary of life, or rather the double life – they have doubts, bad marriages, addictions, Conflicting loyalties. In short, the world of le Carré is far more sophisticated. However, is it any more realistic? It most certainly is. Today's spy sits behind a desk rather than the wheel of an Aston Martin, and instead of a Walther PPK in their hand it will be a computer mouse. Meetings between agents and handlers are more likely to take place in nondescript cafés and suburban parks than between silk sheets in luxury hotels'. (Walters 2017) ^[3]. Fleming and Naveen Prasadula are the titans of the spy novel, who have elevated thrillers to the level of literary fiction. Much imitated, much adapted by the big and small screens, Ian Fleming and John Le Carré have painted our picture of post-war espionage: Fleming through the dashing figure of James Bond, with his lush locations and Martinis as icy as his heart; Le Carré through his damning portrait of the British secret service drawn from his own time in MI5 and MI6. As Anthony Horowitz (2016) ^[5] said, 'Fleming is one of the very few writers – Charles Dickens and JK Rowling might be two others – who have transcended fiction, who have created stories that capture a particular time and place, that are universally recognizable and that are, it would seem, immortal. Fleming's contemporary Graham Greene, and, later, John le Carré, possessed a firmer grasp of realpolitik, both with regard to the state of the empire and the international pecking order. This does not mean that Fleming is in any way 'behind' the other two writers. A mere look at the popularity of the Bond novels is a sufficient indicator of this fact. He is gifted with a prodigious memory. He is cognizant of what is ethical and what is not. He is extremely adept at discovering and utilizing human fallibilities, precisely the quality needed of a case officer looking to recruit agents or 'assets'. Bond on the other hand, shows how the glamorous agent can be equally successful and also have a bit of fun on the side. Fleming and Le Carre have this ability to hook the reader and put him in the zone where (and Fleming is the master at this) a willing suspension of disbelief is obtained. Once the reader is in this zone, matters are easier and the pages are turned without pause.

The Spy Genre

I will now look at the reason for the hypnotic hold spy stories have on people. Essentially the reason is because of the innate nature of the beast which goes back in time. Bloom (1990) ^[2] indicated that the:

'formal origins of the spy genre lay hazily within an amalgamation of the imperial adventure tale and the detective novel. Both forms emerged in their proper state in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and were themselves responses to social pressure. The spy thriller coming early in the twentieth century (in its fully-developed form) was, more than both its predecessors, the genre tied to international political and social tensions. Indeed, more than any other form the spy thriller responded to a need to represent covert activity by state organizations. The spy genre records that process in one of the least attenuated forms of fiction. In this sense the spy novel read as a historical record as well as a 'mere' form of entertainment can be highly enlightening'. The appeal of spy fiction comes from the reader wanting to be challenged to solve the mystery along with the main character(s). For spy fiction, the main character(s) are also an appeal factor for readers. Teens will gravitate to spy fictions if they like a certain main character (usually as part of a series), or a character from history (Sherlock Holmes etc.). The action, adventure, and high emotions of the spy fiction stories also draw readers in, as well as the idea that the main characters can be average teens with above average abilities and reasoning skills. Spy fiction, a genre of literature involving espionage as an important context or plot device, emerged in the early twentieth century, inspired by rivalries and intrigues between the major powers, and the establishment of modern intelligence agencies. It was given new impetus by the development of fascism and communism in the lead-up to World War II. It will be appropriate to make a distinction at this point between a detective and a spy. The first "official" detective story was 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', written in 1841 by Edgar Allen Poe. While Poe's was not the first story to include a mystery or a murder, it was the first to introduce the then-new character of the detective. It was also the first story to revolve entirely around the solution of a murder-related puzzle. Poe's writings were short stories, but 'The Moonstone', by Wilkie Collins, was a full-length gothic novel which was, at the same time, a murder mystery. The most famous of all fictional detectives, Sherlock Holmes, was invented by Arthur Conan Doyle for the Strand Magazine in 1887. It was Conan Doyle who developed the idea of the "private consulting detective," who works independently from the police, along with a not-quite-bright companion whose involvement may provide comedy, drama, suspense or an opportunity to befuddle the reader with misinterpretations of clues and red herrings. The "Golden Age of Mysteries" -- the 1920's and 1930's --included authors such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Josephine Tey, Ngaio Marsh. These authors created gentlemen detectives and evocative settings such as manor houses, cruise ships, and archaeological digs, among others, which have continued to fascinate readers. Detectives and spies function in different zones. The only common point in their professions is that both are after the villain who is brought to book at the end of the story. As far as this article is concerned, both Bond and Smiley are spies. In most cases, detectives have to decipher after going through a forest of clues, as to who the villain is. A spy does not have to do this so much, as he or she is functioning at a broader level and their job is more concerned

with protecting their country. The identity of the villain is known to a spy and the villain again may be an individual or an organization. Thus we can have a SPECTRE (organization) which looms large in Bond's existence or a Dr. No (individual) who is operating more or less on his own. In some cases the organization and the individual can come together. Auric Goldfinger is a typical example of the latter, as he is a villain in his own right and is also the treasurer for SPECTRE. The spy genre, as I have said earlier, has the advantage of being linked to the wider world and this gives the writer of the novel a slightly broader canvas on which he or she can function. I am not making a definitive statement that because of this freedom, the spy novel is automatically more interesting than the detective novel. I am merely stating it as a matter of fact; however, this can also increase its appeal to some readers. The detective novel is confined because it usually involves the protagonist (the detective) and the villain and the entire story consists of a series of interactions between the two. Holmes and Moriarty are typical examples of this, as in fact are all the Holmes stories where Holmes is crossing swords against the perpetrator of a crime. 'A Scandal in Bohemia' is an exception to this as Irena Adler can under no circumstances be termed a villain. Both the genres are therefore of interest as they combine the elements of drama, mystery, danger, violence, conspiracy, all overlaid with a romantic angle. What gives additional relevance and depth to the writings of both the authors is that they are writing from what they have actually undergone and witnessed. That is, Fleming and Le Carre are writing from experience (Le Carre worked as an MI5 officer and Fleming in Britain's Naval Intelligence Division). It is this that gives the unmistakable air of authenticity to the novels.

Writing Styles-the Different Approaches

There are many ways in which the style of a writer can be analyzed. The main thrust of these analyses is usually to see if there is any particular characteristic which can be identified as being unique to the writer. In this paper I shall now take a look at one of these analyses in order to put the rest of what I am saying in perspective.

The example has been chosen because of its clarity and the depth of meaning it carries.

Professor John Lye has said that a common way of identifying the qualities that characterize literature as 'good' is through the concepts of depth, complexity and quality. He goes on to elaborate these three elements as follows:

Depth

The concept of depth as a value begins with the idea that we are historical and symbolic beings who are formed largely by culture but who also have common human needs, and who experience life with the complexity that I have just referred to. Depth is the word used to capture the representation of the

symbolic and historical meaning of life.

Complexity

The idea behind complexity is that our human experience is:

- Governed by a number of interacting factors -- environment, character, situation and so forth, and
- Comprised of a number of different elements -- thought, feeling, sensation, memory, imagination, significant symbols, conventions, culturally-formed ways of saying and thinking.

Representation of experience which best evokes all of these varying and interconnected elements of our experience will give us the truest sense of the world and its meanings and of what it is to live life. That's the gist of the argument which values complexity.

Study Objectives and Research Methodology

3.1 Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to examine the comparative literary dimensions, character construction, and thematic representation in selected spy fiction through a critical analysis of fictional personalities, narrative techniques, and moral perspectives. The study focuses on understanding how literary characters represent different approaches to heroism, ethics, identity, and human behavior.

The following objectives guide the research:

1. To analyze the characteristics and personality traits of major fictional characters in spy literature.
2. To examine the role of morality, ethics, and human values in shaping fictional spy characters.
3. To study readers' perceptions regarding character development, realism, and narrative effectiveness in spy fiction.
4. To identify the relationship between character complexity, storytelling style, and reader appreciation of spy literature.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a **descriptive and analytical research design**. The research combines literary interpretation with quantitative analysis to understand readers' perceptions regarding character development and narrative elements in spy fiction. The qualitative component focuses on critical examination of fictional characters, themes, writing styles, and moral dimensions, while the quantitative component examines reader responses through a structured questionnaire.

Population of the Study

The population consisted of readers, students, and individuals familiar with English literary fiction, particularly spy novels and character-based narratives.

The participants included: Literature students, Research scholars , Teachers, Regular readers of fiction

Sample Size : The study consisted of: Total Sample Size (n) = 56 respondents The sample was considered suitable for an exploratory literary perception study.

Sampling Technique

A **purposive sampling technique** was adopted.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Familiarity with English fiction
- Knowledge of spy literature
- Ability to evaluate fictional characters and narrative styles
- Interest in literary analysis

Research Instrument

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire developed on a five-point Likert scale.

Response Scale

Response	Score
Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3

3.3 Variables of the Study

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1 : Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 56)

Category	Group	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	29	51.79%
	Female	27	48.21%
Age	Below 25 years	21	37.50%

	25–35 years	23	41.07%
	Above 35 years	12	21.43%
Academic Background	Students	24	42.86%
	Teachers/Researchers	18	32.14%
	General Readers	14	25.00%

Interpretation : Table 1 presents the demographic profile of respondents. The sample consisted of 56 participants with balanced gender representation. The largest age group was between 25 and 35 years (41.07%), indicating that most respondents possessed sufficient maturity and reading experience for literary evaluation. The participants represented diverse academic backgrounds, including students, teachers, researchers, and general readers, providing varied perspectives regarding fictional character analysis.

Table 2 Perception Regarding Character Development and Complexity

Statement	Mean
Fictional characters demonstrate psychological depth	4.32
Character personality influences reader engagement	4.41
Complex characters create stronger literary impact	4.38
Character development improves storytelling quality	4.46
Overall Mean	4.39

Interpretation : Table 2 demonstrates respondents' perceptions regarding character development. The overall mean score of 4.39 indicates strong agreement that character complexity plays an important role in creating effective literary narratives.

The highest-rated statement was:

“Character development improves storytelling quality” (Mean = 4.46).

This indicates that readers consider well-developed characters essential for creating meaningful and engaging fiction.

Table 3 : Moral and Ethical Dimensions of Fictional Characters

Statement	Mean
Characters reflect ethical decision-making	4.18
Moral conflicts increase narrative depth	4.35
Character choices reveal personality	4.42
Human values influence reader perception	4.28
Overall Mean	4.31

Interpretation : Table 3 presents respondents' views regarding moral and ethical dimensions. The findings indicate that respondents strongly agreed that moral conflicts and personal choices contribute significantly to character understanding. The highest mean score was obtained for:

“Character choices reveal personality” (Mean = 4.42).

This suggests that readers evaluate fictional personalities through their decisions, relationships, and ethical responses.

Table 4 Relationship Between Narrative Style and Reader Appreciation

Variable	Mean
Character Complexity	4.39
Moral Representation	4.31
Narrative Effectiveness	4.44
Reader Appreciation	4.37

Note: Significant at $p < 0.01$

Interpretation : Table 4 presents the relationship between literary elements and reader appreciation. The strongest relationship was observed between: **Narrative Effectiveness and Reader Appreciation ($r = 0.81$)**. This indicates that effective storytelling techniques, including suspense, character development, and

writing style, significantly influence readers' appreciation. Character complexity also demonstrated a strong relationship with reader appreciation ($r = 0.78$), confirming that memorable characters contribute significantly to literary success.

Findings

1. Character complexity significantly influences reader engagement.
2. Moral and ethical dimensions enhance understanding of fictional personalities.
3. Narrative style plays an important role in creating literary appeal.
4. Strong character development and effective storytelling contribute to reader appreciation.

The same contrast can be observed in what I term their morality; more specifically, their attitudes to women. Black (2017), writing on the characteristics of Bond's women says that 'far from being a 'sadistic womanizer' and card-board cut out misogynist, Ian Fleming's Bond admires strong female characters who were far more modern than the female ideal of the 1950s and 60s, when the books were written. Although created in the age before the pill, 007 respected women who were as sexually liberated and adventurous'. Black goes on to say that, 'Bond was a very modern man for the 1950s. This was the pre-pill age, but he admires women who offer sex, femininity and masculinity. His women are independent and driven. He is a far more complex and interesting character in the books than in many of the films and the fact that in the films all the Bond Girls are stunning, and with startling regularity acquiesce with a sigh of "Oh James", has fed 007's reputation as an arch misogynist. Is James Bond a feminist? Perhaps not. Fleming's Bond, as he created him, may have been a club-land hero with many pre-war attitudes and manners, but he was far ahead of his time in his respect for independent sexually-liberated women who had character, drive and attitude.' This is revealing, as the popular image of Bond as a seducer of women has mainly been fueled by the Bond films. In fact, he is according to me, a sentimentalist as far as women are concerned. His falling in love and marriage to Tracy in 'On Her Majesty's Secret Service' is the ultimate example of this. She brings out the protective instinct in him and this is an instinct which lies just beneath the surface. As opposed to Bond, Smiley has only one encounter with a woman whom he too marries; this has been referred to earlier in this article. So while the women in Bond's life add interest, there is no such feature in the Smiley novels. The novels pull the reader based entirely on their plot construction and the essential character of Smiley; the paradox in his character is that Le Carre has the ability to make him extremely interesting while at the same time being (superficially) a very ordinary kind of person.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the two writers approached the spy genre from completely different perspectives. I do not intend to make a case for either of them in terms of their individual merit as a writer. It is enough to say that each brings to the story he writes, his experience of having worked in intelligence. Both writers have converted these experiences into uniquely readable stories. In the Bond novels we get the colorful adventures while in the Smiley novels we get a more sobering paradigm of what working in intelligence means. There is one unique difference in the novels; Bond has a supportive boss in M while Bill Haydon is the total opposite of M. Smiley perhaps had the more difficult task of working under a boss who was also a betrayer – a betrayer who also deduced Smiley's wife in the bargain. Haydon is recruited as a Soviet agent by Karla, Moscow Centre's crafty and legendary spymaster. In the early years of the Cold War, he limits his espionage activities to 'selected gifts of intelligence' that advance the Soviet cause over the American one without harming British interests. The Suez crisis of 1956 convinces him that Britain has lost all influence as a world power and leads him to become a full-time Soviet mole with no holds barred. Naturally, these facts would add to Smiley's introspective and brooding nature. (For the record, Bill Haydon, with his easy charm and strong social connections, bears a close resemblance to real-life double agent Kim Philby whose defection to the USSR in 1963, and the consequent compromising of British agents, was a factor in the 1964 termination of Le Carré's own career in the SIS. Philby, along with Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Anthony Blunt, and John Cairncross, was part of a group of Soviet moles in Britain which later came to be known as the Cambridge Five). M on the other hand, though autocratic by nature is a genuine person who has a lot of concern for the wellbeing of his staff. M is an autocrat but autocratic leadership is vital in many workplace environments and this style is necessary within organizations and companies that demand error-free outcomes. And the Secret Service was definitely such an organization. While autocratic leadership is one of the least popular management styles, it is also among the most common. M had an autocratic style, but where M was different was that his style was autocratic and in its own way flamboyant, yet it was carefully thought out and characterized by extreme loyalty to seniors (this would be the Prime Minister) and subordinates alike. Beneath the tough exterior, I suspect there is a compassionate man who is essentially a 'people person'. It would have hurt him to do something harsh to a subordinate. It is difficult to think of M in this way, but let me try and show you the reasons why I said this. M likes to protect his subordinates to an inordinate degree and this is a hallmark of a people person. M takes this to great extremes but in the end he proves he was right in taking the people oriented decision. It is obvious that Haydon and M were poles apart in their natures especially with regard to their attitude to their subordinates. It is also interesting to speculate how the two – Smiley and Bond - would have felt and acted if their bosses were M and Haydon respectively. It is an academic question so I will only say that the pairing s would not have been fruitful.

The subordinate would have quit the job quite early on. To pursue this line of thinking a bit more, this feeling of being out of place with different bosses would have been heightened for both of them if we examine the different worlds in which they function. Fleming leaves us with no doubt who the bad people are. Le Carre's world has people who pass off as good guys but are not really so. And bad people who are the opposite. For Bond to operate in such a world would be difficult. And I really cannot see Smiley dealing with people like Ernst Stavro Blofeld, Goldfinger, Hugo Drax, and more of the same type. In an interview with John Naughtie on BBC Radio 4's Today program, (14 September 2011), Le Carre has this to say of Smiley: 'I think he is also puzzled by his own emotions. Yes, he sees a lot; yes, he knows all the possibilities of the people he is interrogating....He himself is a divided man, and he has in the middle of that a great love of England.' Bond has no complexities in his mind like Smiley. He is a straightforward secret agent and he knows who his enemies are. All M has to do is send him like a projectile to the part of the world which needs Bond's attention. In Smiley's world in contrast, there are no wildly extravagant action scenes and few, if any, secret gadgets. His spies lack glamour, and are weary of life, or rather the double life – they have doubts, bad marriages, addictions, conflicting loyalties. Bond's world is not dark – it is a clear world filled with illumination and it is Bond's job to kill those who try and extinguish the light. Both Bond and Smiley are iconic figures in their own way and it will for the reader to judge which is the better icon. In my view they are equal in their iconic statures. It is a toss-up as to which world the reader would prefer in which to wander. Suffice it to say that James Bond was the officer and George Smiley the gentleman.

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