

# "We Read You": Spies, Documents, and Identity in Joseph Conrad and John le Carré

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**Abstract:** The spy is commonly perceived as an individual who assumes a false persona in order to obtain intelligence. Such a perception assumes that the spy has a stable sense of identity underneath the mask he or she wears every day, an assumption this thesis seeks to problematize. A comparative reading of John le Carré's *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* will demonstrate that the spy cannot form an identity divorced from espionage. The thesis begins with an investigation into the importance espionage assigns to the reliability of knowledge, and the manner in which the two novels use documents to engender epistemological uncertainty. This uncertainty extends to the spy's own identity, as each work figures the secret agents themselves as documents: in le Carré the spy is likened to a palimpsest, while in Conrad to a blank page. These figurations require the spies to overcome their continual instrumentalization at the hands of their superiors in order to form a personal identity. In both novels, betrayal is offered as a means to surmount these obstacles: in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* it is betrayal of one's country, while in *Under Western Eyes* it is a betrayal of the self, a confession. Ultimately, betrayal is unsuccessful as a means of separating an agent's identity from espionage. By exploring the usage of theatrical imagery in the two novels in light of Erving Goffman's theory of the self and by examining the particular relationship between espionage and the state, the spy is shown to occupy a unique position within the broader question of identity.