

Spies essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the novel *Spies*, Frayn presents the character of Uncle Peter in a variety of ways. Although he is not physically present for a large portion of the novel, the contrasts in his character, such as the conflicting traits of the brave fighter and the terrified man, are developed throughout. We are first introduced to Uncle Peter in chapter two, as an absent figure of worship in Auntie Dee's house. Uncle Peter is established as a bomber pilot away fighting during WW2, a particularly dangerous job that generated a great level of respect amongst the people of the Home Front, as demonstrated by the young Stephen's idolisation of him.

His wife, Dee, is therefore depicted as having transformed their house into a shrine to her husband, with 'the untidiness itself glow[ing] with a kind of sacred light... they reflected the glory of Uncle Peter'. He is portrayed as a warm and loving father and husband, with a kind and open nature mirrored by his wife and his baby girl, Milly. Hints of his supposed character are given to us, and we learn of his 'cheerful bravery' and 'recklessly open smile'. We learn of his caring for his daughter later in chapter four when he is said to be 'laughing... e was holding her [Milly] in his arms'.

These traits establish Uncle Peter as a friendly and likeable character, seemingly perfect, and a model of ideal masculinity and bravery to young Stephen, as well the children and women of the Close. The religious connotations surrounding Uncle Peter permeate several chapters, first appearing on more than one separate occasion in chapter two, and reinforced in chapter 4. He is said to be 'like a saint', and the image of his portrait being surrounded in a silver frame creates a sense of how his character is loved and idolised.

The motif of the silver framed picture first appears in Auntie Dee's house as 'a photograph of Uncle Peter in a silver frame on the mantelpiece', and reinforced when another picture appears in the Hayward's dining room, 'on the sideboard, between two cut-glass decanters, is Uncle Peter, in another silver frame'. This is indicative of the general support Uncle Peter has from the families of the Close, but also hints at a more complicated relationship between Uncle Peter and the Haywards.

The picture in their house is solely of Uncle Peter, with no mention of his wife or child. It also takes precedence amidst photographs on the Hayward's mantelpiece, rather than those of Mr Hayward. Chapter four portrays the more literal idolisation of the children of the Close with 'their worshipping faces reflected in each of the shining brass buttons on his uniform'. Again, he is seen to be a happy and warm character, an image of protection for the children with the eagle emblem on his hat personified as a 'spread[ing] its gilt wings protectively'.

He is clearly seen as a character that younger Stephen, as well as the majority of younger boys, aspires to be. Yet, even at this stage, there are slight indications that the character of Uncle Peter, and the image of perfection that he embodies are largely due to the perspective of the child, Stephen, and how he viewed Uncle Peter at a young age. References to 'blood-red' and a 'uniform flecked with pink' imply a more violent and realistic aspect of war, less focused upon by the younger generation.

In many ways, the character of Uncle Peter is representative on the surface of everything that a younger Stephen aspires to be. He epitomises the love

and respect Stephen wants to obtain from his family, Keith, and his peers, the excitement of war that Stephen has been raised to find enticing, and the supposed personal strength and character that Stephen wishes he had himself. This influences many of Stephen's decisions later on in the novel, and creates a sense of denial within him as he begins to realise that Uncle Peter's life is not as desirable as it may seem.

There is a stark contrast in personality between how Stephen perceives Uncle Peter, and that of the tramp, who is later revealed to be the same man. Uncle Peter as Stephen's hero – a happy and well-adjusted man, happy and secure. The tramp in contrast is seen by Stephen to be '... scared of me [Stephen]. He's that low in the table of human precedence', living in filth and squalor, waiting to die. In order to preserve his own childhood preconceptions of war heroes and of Uncle Peter, Stephen at first subconsciously chooses to deny the fact that the tramp in the Barns is not a German spy, but Uncle Peter.

The concept of Uncle Peter as a deserter – that war may not be as impressive and as much of an adventure as it may seem, that ' you start playing some game, and you're the brave one, you're the great hero. But the game goes on and on, and it gets more and more frightening', seems incomprehensible to Stephen at first, but he later begins to understand the bleaker reality of war. It is Uncle Peter who helps Stephen to mature and understand the more negative aspects of adult life, as expressed when Stephen states ' The game is over.

This is representative of Stephen's growth, as childish games such as spying no longer seem appropriate when confronted with the harsh truth of reality. Uncle Peter's relationship with Mrs Hayward inadvertently dominates the majority of the novel, as Stephen's accidental discovery of Mrs Hayward's secret activities involves the young boy with the difficulties that the adults face. The fact that 'she's [Mrs Hayward] taken him to her bosom – and taken him away from Auntie Dee's' shatters preconceptions of Uncle Peter and Mrs Hayward as the epitome of good partners.

This extramarital affair is socially unacceptable, yet inspires the sympathy of the reader as there seems to be genuine affection, contrasting that of Mr and Mrs Hayward's marriage. The idea that Uncle Peter could have 'always known that she was really the one', and that Stephen's preconceptions of the relationships were wrong, emphasises the childlike perspective of Stephen. Stephen is used to take messages between the couple, and is attempting to discover what is really going on, and the issue of secrets and spying dominates the novel.

The death of Uncle Peter in chapter ten largely forms the climax of the novel. The train, which was a sinister element of the novel identified early on as 'pass[ing] invisibly' around the Close, ironically is carrying shattered aircraft parts as cargo. Eventually the train kills Uncle Peter – either as an act of suicide or as a result of a chase, thus showing how the war that glorified and inspired such worship of Uncle Peter, eventually was his own undoing.

The pressure from his peers and his country to perform and fight, despite his terror is shown to have had a devastating effect on his mental stability, and

the guilt he feels from the deaths he has caused eventually provoke feelings of desolation. Uncle Peter as a character is therefore used as an allegory for the dark and troubling nature of war, and no one involved is left unscathed. For many, it meant death or a ruined life, others deep psychological trauma. He is representative of the thousands of men deeply damaged by the effects of war, whichever side of the fight they were.