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The Theme of 'Self-discovery' in Joseph Conrad's 'The Secret Sharer'

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Abstract

"The Secret Sharer" is considered as one of Joseph Conrad's best works. Critics view the story as typical of Conrad: the theme of self-discovery, the psychological depth of character, precise and evocative details. It is largely a psychological portrait and is semi-autobiographical. Critics have differed greatly in their interpretations of specific details and actions in "The Secret Sharer," some interpreting Leggatt as symbolizing a "dark side" of human nature, others focusing on the story as a rite of passage. Ultimately, most critics view the story as representing the quest for self, which is both tragic and complicated. In this article, an attempt has been made to assess the theme of 'self-discovery' in Conrad's "The Secret Sharer".

Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" was written in only two weeks in 1909. This story and two others make up the book *Twixt Land and Sea* which was first published in 1912. Conrad considered three other titles for his story about identity: "The Second Self," "The Secret Self," and "The Other Self". The tale is based on a true story about a murder on the ship *Cutty Sark* in 1880 by a sailor with a wicked reputation. The murderer jumped ship and was captured; he was eventually acquitted of murder but found guilty of manslaughter. Conrad's story varies from the real tale in that the real crime was deliberate and committed by a vicious man. In the fictional version, Leggatt is attempting
to save his ship from a sailor who will not obey orders. "The Secret Sharer" is considered to be both a psychological and autobiographical piece of writing, and is largely considered one of Conrad's finest short works.

"The Secret Sharer" was published in1910, eight years after the publication of his famous novel *Heart of Darkness.* Critics view the story as typical of Conrad: the theme of self-discovery, the psychological depth of character, precise and evocative details. Like Conrad's other works, the story is largely a psychological portrait and is semi-

autobiographical. Critics have differed greatly in their interpretations of specific details and actions in "The Secret Sharer," some interpreting Leggatt as symbolizing a "dark side" of human nature, others focusing on the story as a rite of passage. Ultimately, most critics view the story as representing the quest for self, which is both tragic and complicated.

"The Secret Sharer," one of Polish-born Conrad's more widely read sea stories, is a psychological tale narrated by a young ship captain who finds himself harboring a fugitive from another ship. As the story opens, the narrator has just taken command of his first ship, which is anchored in the Gulf of Siam. The captain reveals the extent of his insecurity at the beginning of this long voyage, comparing himself to the ship itself: "we seemed to be measuring our fitness for a long and arduous enterprise, the appointed task of both our existences to be carried out"[1]. Recognizing that this journey will be the opportunity he needs to test himself, he assumes an uneasy command of a considerably older and more experienced crew.

Much to the astonishment of his crew, the captain decides to take a five-hour watch himself the first night while they remain at anchor waiting for enough wind to begin sailing. Although another ship, the *Sephora* is anchored not far away, the captain revels in the solitude and peacefulness of walking the decks alone.

Soon, however, his mood is shattered by a startling discovery. Pausing to pull up a ladder he believes someone carelessly left over the side, he is astonished to see "something elongated and pale floating very close to the ladder" (372). The shape turns out to be "the naked body of a man" (372), clutching the bottom rung of the ladder with one hand. The two men begin a whispered conversation, which establishes the "mysterious communication" (373) between them that drives the remainder of the plot.

The mysterious swimming man introduces himself as Leggatt and explains that he has escaped from the *Sephora* because he has been imprisoned awaiting trial for killing a man. Later, Leggatt further explains that the man he killed had refused to follow orders in the midst of an awful storm and that his actions may have saved the ship and the rest of the crew. Because the young captain believes the fugitive's story, and because he sees so much of himself in Leggatt, he decides to hide him in his quarters.

The two men are bound together by the secret they share, and the captain becomes an accomplice to Leggatt's crime because he must deceive his own crew in order to hide the fugitive. The relationship becomes more complicated when the old captain from the *Sephora* boards the ship to search for and inquire about the missing man. Though he escapes detection, Leggatt now knows that he will not be treated justly if he surrenders, declaring, "It

would never do for me to come to life again" (393). And so, the two sharers of the secret devise a plan to allow Leggatt to escape to land, though he is doomed to a life of wandering.

The untested young captain commands his crew to sail dangerously close to land in order to allow Leggatt to slip out undetected. He is fully aware that he is risking not just his career but also the safety of his ship and crew. Telling his crew he is looking for "land wind," he takes the ship so close that "the great black mass [is] brooding over [the] very mastheads" (400). Finally, he gives the order to turn away, but he is so unfamiliar with the feel of the ship that he cannot tell in the dark if he is successful. At last he sees a marker drifting astern and he knows that he has successfully avoided losing his ship. He also knows that Leggatt has slipped away undetected; the marker is the captain's own white hat that he thrust upon Leggatt before he left him.

In "The Secret Sharer", Conrad tells the story of two simultaneous journeys: the literal sea journey, and the young captain's journey toward self-discovery. That his ship barely gets underway in the final pages of the story is an indication of which of the two journeys Conrad found most interesting. The young captain of the unnamed ship, who has just taken command of the vessel, and who, in his own words, is "somewhat of a stranger" (370) to himself is given the opportunity and incentive to embark on his own journey toward self-knowledge. Conrad uses a double for the captain, to force him to look into his "self" from the outside, and to journey through his own darker side towards a greater understanding of himself. Only after completing this journey will the young captain be capable of leading his skeptical crew on a literal journey.

The opening paragraph of the story suggests that the captain's path to self-knowledge will not be well marked. The adjectives with which the narrator describe his surroundings give clues to his sense of strangeness and dislocation: "mysterious," "halfsubmerged," "incomprehensible," and "crazy of aspect" (368). The young man feels as though he is without all his familiar landmarks. He then takes his first tentative steps toward commanding his crew by rashly dismissing the night watch and walking the decks alone. Earlier in the evening he has wondered if he "should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly," (370) indicating that he recognizes that the voyage will test and solidify his sense of self, and revealing an unusual degree of self-consciousness. Of course, the journey he has in mind is the literal sort, and he cannot anticipate what awaits him on the bottom rung of the ship's ladder.

When the captain leans over the side and sees the white shape by the hull, the appearance of the seemingly headless body alongside the ship gives literal form to the captain's self-consciousness. He feels "painfully" that he is a stranger among men, and that

his actions might have made him "appear eccentric" (372). That the captain first perceives the body of Leggatt as headless is significant as well; it suggests that immediately their identities are fused by the captain figuratively placing his head on the other's body. Their "mysterious communication" (373) is sealed when the captain notices that "the selfpossession of that man had somehow induced a corresponding state" (373) in himself. After Leggatt reveals the reasons for his fugitive status, after he shares his secret, the captain regards the visitor and thinks: "It was, in the night, as though I had been faced by my own reflection in the depths of a sombre and immense mirror" (374).

The remainder of the first part of the story illuminates the ways in which the two young men share traits and experiences in common, how each man reflects himself back to the other. They are both about the same age and have attended the same training school, Conway, which establishes a kind of fraternity between them. Each of them also feels alienated from the crew of his ship. Conrad emphasizes these similarities, perhaps to the point of excess, by stressing the imagery of doubling. They are both dressed in identical clothing; Leggatt wears the captain's spare "sleeping suit," a designation that suggests the unconscious, the sleeping self inside the waking or conscious self. The captain speculates that anyone looking into his cabin "would have been treated to the uncanny sight of a double captain busy talking in whispers with his other self" (377). After several days of secretly sharing his cabin with Leggatt, and of sharing Leggatt's secret, the captain begins to succumb to the pressures:

> I was constantly watching myself, my secret self.... It was very much like being mad, only it was worse because one was aware of it. (382)

It becomes clear that soon both young men will have to take some action. The sense of urgency intensifies when suspicious old captain Archbold of the *Sephora* questions the captain and reveals that he will have to report Leggatt's disappearance as a suicide. The grizzled cynicism of old Archbold is in stark contrast to the young captain's untested innocence, and Archbold's stubborn attachment to following the rules makes the captain's risk-taking appear even more brash.

In the second part of the story, Conrad dramatizes the mirroring, or complementary, aspects of the relationship between the two young men rather than their similarities. This shift in emphasis suggests that the self-reflexive phase of the narrator's journey toward self-discovery may be coming to an end. The biggest difference between the two men is that while Leggatt has killed a man in order to avoid shipwreck, the captain is willing to risk shipwreck in order to save the life of one man (Leggatt). Furthermore, the young captain is hoping the experiences of his first command will make him more a member of the community of the ship and will enable him to make a name for himself on the seas and land.

Leggatt, however, seeks to escape the censure of the group and the rule of the sea and knows that his existence from now on will be anonymous, that he is doomed to wander the earth without roots and that he will likely never regain his career as an officer. "It will never do for me to come to life again," (393) he says.

After the two of them decide on a plan that will allow Leggatt to escape to the Koh-ring, the nearby island that they presume to be the most habitable, the story becomes more suspenseful. Conrad poses two questions as the story draws to a conclusion: Will Leggatt get away safely? and, will the young captain avoid losing the ship and his crew's confidence in the tricky maneuvering near the rocky coastline? The narrative focus remains, however, on the psychological dimension of the story. The events provide precisely the kind of crucible, or severe test, the young captain had been seeking in which to forge his identity. He is aware that he has gained all he can from looking into his "other self" and now he must move from contemplation to action. He must establish the same kind of "mysterious communication" with his ship and crew that he had established with Leggatt. Before he even gives the orders to sail toward land he mutters to himself:

> I realized suddenly that all my future, the only future for which I was fit, would perhaps go irretrievably to pieces in any mishap to my first command. (396)

His realization of the risks he is about to undertake is made all the more palpable because he must witness his "other self" literally throw away his future as he slips out of the port into the dark water, in a symbolic reversal of the manner in which he happened to come aboard the ship in the first place.

Of course, the captain does manage to avoid losing his ship and crew on the reef. In the process he achieves "the silent knowledge and mute affection, the perfect communion of a seaman with his first command" (401). But the manner in which the captain achieves this goal leaves the reader to resolve some difficult moral issues. We are left to wonder, for example, if the captain's newfound confidence in his command was justly achieved. He seems to take credit for planning to use the hat as a saving marker, when in fact it was an accident since he had intended for the hat to be used to protect Leggatt from the sun. This tendency looks a great deal like pride, an excess of which would almost certainly turn his crew against him in the future. Furthermore, though the captain is correct in believing that he will only be able to plumb the limits of his character in the throes of a crisis, is he justified in creating a dangerous situation just so he can test his courage and skill? Ultimately, Conrad poses a question of a more psychological nature. Is it possible to journey to the dark side of the self, which surely the narrator did, symbolized by his identification with the fugitive killer Leggatt, and emerge wiser but otherwise unchanged by the experience? In other words, is

such self-knowledge gained at too high a price? Has the narrator become too much like the killer, as his willingness to risk the lives of his crew on the Koh-ring might suggest?

The story can also be read as a *bildungsroman*[2] – a tale of a young man's coming of age, much like Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, or James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Examining the story in light of these deeper levels of meaning transforms the work from a typical adventure story to an allegorical work, rich in symbolism – a work of 'self-discovery'.

Notes

1. Joseph Conrad. *Best of Joseph Conrad.* Vol.1. (New Delhi: Printline Books, 2004) 369. All the quotations from the story have been taken from this edition. Page numbers in parentheses have been given in the body of the text.
2. J. A. Cuddon in his *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines *Bildungsroman* as "('formation novel'). This is a term more or less synonymous with *Erziehungsroman* - literally an 'upbringing' or 'education' novel. Widely used by German critics, it refers to a novel which is an account of the youthful development of a hero or heroine (usually the former). It describes the process by which maturity is achieved through the various ups and downs of life." p.81.