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On the Dark Side: Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" and Valenzuela's "La palabra asesino"

Abstract

Conrad's famous "The Secret Sharer" and the short story "La palabra asesino" ["The Word 'Killer'" in its English translation] by the Argentine Luisa Valenzuela both concern psychological self-exploration and self-discovery, through contact with a killer, a situation which challenges conventional moral standards. It is suggested that a comparison between the two stories may throw reciprocal light on both of them. In each story an act or acts of murder becomes a trigger which sets off a train of psychological events, somewhat different in the two cases. Discussion of the differences highlights the authors' priorities and the significance they attach to the darker side of the human personality. Both stories are highly ambiguous; but the ambiguity serves a different purpose in each case. Conrad is concerned with psychological "doubling"; Valenzuela with exploration of aspects of the human personality which in turn may be related to aspects of Argentina's collective personality as it expressed itself during the "Dirty War." An examination of the different forces in play in the two stories improves our understanding of both.

Keywords

Conrad, The Secret Sharer, Valenzuela, La palabra asesino, human personality, murder, Dirty War, Argentina, ambiguity

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The most outstanding feature of Spanish American fiction in the second half of the twentieth century was the emergence of the "Boom" writers, headed by Gabriel García Márquez. With the Boom, Spanish American fiction can be said to have come of age and to have taken its place in mainstream Western fiction, capturing a huge international audience. Since the Boom the most striking fact related to Spanish American fiction has been the emergence of a galaxy of women novelists and short story writers (the Boom group were all men) among whom the Argentine Luisa Valenzuela occupies a prominent if not a leading position, equidistant from the extreme reader-friendliness of Isabel Allende on the one hand, and the equally extreme experimentalism of her fellow Chilean Diamela Eltit on the other. Early in her career, Valenzuela seemed set to move in the latter direction, with *El gato eficaz* (1972), written (significantly) at the Writing School of the University of Iowa where several other major Spanish American writers of her generation honed their skills, and *Cola de lagartija* (1983). Both of these are very difficult and demanding novels in contrast to the much more accessible short stories of *Cambio de armas* (1982) which include "La palabra asesino," translated as "The Word 'Killer'" in *Other Weapons* (1985). In what follows I look comparatively at this very accomplished story and Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" (1910) with which it has features in common. It is not suggested that Valenzuela knew Conrad's novella, though the possibility cannot be discounted. Valenzuela was steeped in the writings of Borges, who was undoubtedly Spanish America's leading Conrad fan and may

well have become acquainted with Conrad's stories through her admiration of Borges or at Iowa.

Both "The Secret Sharer" and "The Word 'Killer'" illustrate the theme of psychological self-exploration and self-discovery which played an important role in Modernist fiction, perhaps influenced the French roman d'analyse in the nineteenth century. The notion that such exploration could lead to increased awareness of a hidden, repressed, darker self emerged primarily from the writings of E.T.A. Hoffmann and was quite familiar from famous works such as Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* (1872) and Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). Indeed it is this latter which caught Borges's attention. His interest in Conrad was chiefly in connection with the idea of self-betrayal, as in Lord Jim and other works, but his attraction to Stevenson's celebrated novella may be said to have launched literary interest in the dark side of the self in modern Spanish American fiction. In England it figures prominently in the work of both Conrad and D.H. Lawrence, though in rather different ways. In a letter of 15 March 1915 to Bertrand Russell, Lawrence wrote "The whole universe of darkness and dark passions—the subterranean black universe of the things which have not yet had being—has conquered for me now, & I can't escape" (qtd. Monk 409). Ray Monk comments "The idea that truth came from darkness, from underground, from a region inaccessible to conscious thought, was becoming increasingly central to Lawrence's philosophy" (406). What is important is that this "truth," which for Lawrence was connected with the passions and the instincts, for him could be a liberation, like the bursting of a bud or breaking out of a shell. It is not entirely clear that such was quite the case with Conrad. His narrator-captain in "The Secret Sharer" seems at least at one level to be testing himself in order to see if he can live up to his self-ideal. Valenzuela's view of the process of self-discovery is different from that of either Lawrence or Conrad. In her story a highly intelligent and self-analytic young woman finds herself in love with a man who has killed, not once, but several times. That is to say that, in a sense, a process of intensification has taken place between Conrad's story and Valenzuela's, the latter's story representing a more extreme situation.

Both Conrad's story and Valenzuela's contain an obvious

psychological dimension. Indeed Albert Guerard refers to "The Secret Sharer" as "this most frankly psychological of Conrad's shorter works" (Harkness 65). In both cases the central characters undergo a process of increasing self-awareness which leads them at the end to a discovery. In the case of Conrad's captain, Guerard tells us that he "moves from his sense of being a stranger to his ship, and to himself, to a final mature confidence and integration" (Harkness 65). In other words, he passes his own test. There is an important distinction to be made here. The discovery which the captain will make is portended at the beginning of the story by two references, first to himself and his ship "measuring our fitness for a long and arduous enterprise" (Harkness 4) and second to himself as he wonders "how far I should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly" (Harkness 5). What he has to find out, that is, is not what he has to live up to. That ideal conception of himself is there already. The question is whether he can live up to it. It may be questioned whether this fully amounts to what Guerard calls a "profound spiritual change" or a "rebirth" (Harkness 59). It is a discovery about himself, about his own inner resources; the kind of discovery about themselves which people make when they find themselves in a highly unusual and threatening situation

What makes the captain's test similar to that of the central character in Valenzuela's "The Word 'Killer'" is that it involves a challenge to conventional moral standards. The fundamental similarity between the two stories consists in the fact that, in both, the central character finds him/herself in an intimate relationship with a killer. The basic difference is that in Valenzuela's story the killer is not seen so overtly as a double or second self of the central figure. This difference is in fact crucial, as Curley's article in Harkness's collection makes clear. For part of what is central to both stories is the respective degree of moral justification enjoyed by the two killers. Leggatt in Conrad's story is legally guilty, and hence is removed from his position of Chief Mate and placed under restraint by his captain on the *Sephora*. This is what involves a difficulty for Guerard. He accepts that Leggatt's crime is what he calls "marginal" (Harkness 64 and 66). Nevertheless, he stresses that the reader should not empathize too much with him, and not suppose that

Conrad “unequivocally approves” of the captain-narrator’s decision to harbor him. The grounds for this appear to be that Leggatt shows “contempt for law” (Harkness 66) in his discussion of his experience. The problem is that the more the reader does in fact empathize with Leggatt and thus to some extent suspends moral judgement, the easier it becomes to understand the captain’s decision to help him. This undermines the contention that, in helping him, the captain is enabled to explore his dark side and undergo a spiritual change. Curley on the other hand avoids this difficulty by asserting that Leggatt’s action constituted “a crime in form but not a crime in fact” (Harkness 77). Hence, in Curley’s view, the captain’s problem is that of inventing “an individual moral solution” (Harkness 79) for a situation in which Leggatt’s moral responsibility is ambiguous and in which mere bad luck played an important role.

The crucial importance of Curley’s approach in relation to Valenzuela is that he rejects completely any notion that the captain’s decision and subsequent actions are “based on a secret bond of criminal impulsiveness” (Harkness 79) and hence can have nothing to do with exploring his dark side, or what Curley calls “the darkness of his own heart” (Harkness 79). This seems to sell Conrad’s story a little short. In sum, we can say at this point that both Guerard and Curley accept Conrad’s intention to make a degree of identification between the captain and Leggatt a major part of the core of the tale. Where they differ is in respect to the kind of identification. Guerard implies that the captain “detected in himself . . . a more interior outlaw-self” (Harkness 68), whereas Curley really sees in Leggatt not much more than the agent of an “initiation ritual” (Harkness 82) involving the captain. Much of the earlier modern criticism of “The Secret Sharer” turns of this difference. Some critics explicitly agree with Guerard. R.W. Stallman, for instance, writes that the captain-narrator “has experienced enough of life to enable him to recognize the potentiality in himself for committing an irrational and possibly even a criminal act and to sympathize therefore with Leggatt’s plight (Harkness 107). Hewitt (73-76. qtd. Harkness 120) follows suit. Benson (Harkness 86) and Baines, on the other hand, equally explicitly disagree, the latter insisting that Conrad “certainly had no intention that he [the captain-narrator] should be a symbol of the dark impulses of human nature” (Harkness, 120). Gettman

and Harkness make a brave attempt to be even-handed and to shift the discussion from the psychological: the question of the narrator-captain's evolution of self-knowledge, to the moral, and the question of Leggatt's guilt and the captain's response to it. But the two are inseparable and Gettman and Harkness eventually come down on the side of Guerard, accepting that Leggatt represents "the evil, impulsive side of the Captain" (Harkness 131) while at the same time asserting that this side of his personality has a place on shipboard. Louis Leiter, finally, concurs in seeing Leggatt as representing "the Cain aspect" of the captain's personality (Harkness 137), as, more hesitantly, does Daniel Schwarz, when he writes that "it seems that Leggatt represents his [i.e. the captain's] own potential for evil (Conrad 8) and on the next page refers to the captain's "Cain identity."

Since the early 1960s, as Ted Billy testifies, the contrasting interpretations of "The Secret Sharer" have remained largely polarized, allowing new elements of critical commentary to enter the picture. These, which include the relationship of the story to Conrad's own state of mind and personality at the time of writing, to insanity or to homosexuality and the story's symbolism, among other issues, do not concern us here. On the other hand, some more recent critics, from Grover (1971), through Daleski (1975) and Steiner (1998) to Billy (1997) have attempted to overcome the polarity by suggesting that Conrad's presentation of Leggatt is smudged or blurred (Grover,151), or that the captain in the end integrates his darker side with an increased self-command (Daleski, in Carabine, 319; Steiner179), or that Conrad's viewpoint rests on the notion that the self is unknowable. Following Grover up to a point, Billy declares rather repetitiously that "Leggatt represents neither a higher, ideal self, nor a lower, insinctive self, but rather an unknown self, whose nature may or may not ultimately manifest itself" (25). But it has to be said that his conclusion, that "Conrad lures us to a door that remains closed" (27) looks suspiciously like a cop-out.

The problem for all critics of "The Secret Sharer" is that Leggatt's action on the *Sephora* during the storm is legally a crime but morally ambiguous. On the one hand he surrenders to a violent impulse which costs a man his life, and shows no remorse. On the other hand, his victim is an abject figure and Leggatt's action may

well have saved the lives of the rest of the crew. My contention here is that a comparison of this story with Valenzuela's "The Word 'Killer'" throws reciprocal light on both tales. In which sense? Something we have to notice at once is that Valenzuela uses two very different strategies from those of Conrad. In the first place, she uses a third person, instead of a first person narrator. Why is this important? Because as J.D. O'Hara, R.D. Wyatt and Brian Richardson point out, the use of the first person raises the possibility that we are in the presence of an unreliable narrator, and thus greatly increases the ambiguity of Conrad's tale. Valenzuela, by contrast, not only uses a third person narrator, albeit one who focalizes the narration on "her," but also allows this narrator to comment on the situation, sometimes with critical remarks about the central character. As Fulks emphasizes "The reader is not invited to enter the more intimate I/you relationship of first-person narration, rather, she and the narrator will be observers of this character" (180). The primary effect of this is to shift the emphasis from the ambiguity, both moral and psychological, inherent in Conrad's treatment of the situation right up to the very end, to a possible solution at the climax of Valenzuela's story. This is a major change. It allows the reader to feel a confidence in the narrative voice which is at least somewhat compromised in Conrad. In addition, Valenzuela greatly modifies the moral issue. The lover of the female central figure is quite unambiguously a criminal and a killer. Early in the story he proclaims "I've killed enough men to last me a lifetime" (66). We learn that he is a Vietnam Veteran and that some of the killing took place during the fighting. But of much greater moral importance is the fact that he has spent many of his 28 years of life in reformatories and prisons, and that at the age of 17 he killed two drug dealers in the course of an attempt to steal their drugs and money.

How does this situate him with respect to Leggatt? There is a certain similarity, to the extent that the victims are also abject. They are dealers, the killer alleges (and therefore, from the readers' point of view, potentially responsible for the probable deaths of some of their clients from overdosing or some other drug-related cause). But also, we are told, they are "heavies": "Killing was their business" (68) It was kill or be killed. So far, so good. Leggatt's victim too was endangering other lives, those of the rest of the crew. But he was

not a criminal and his death was not part of a heist gone wrong. The situation is still ambiguous; the victims in Valenzuela's tale were sociopaths and there was an element of self-defence involved. But the killer is not the respectable son of a parson; he is a felonious street-kid, and the surrounding circumstances were those of a crime (albeit the Spanish proverb tells us that he who steals from a thief earns a thousand years of pardon). Valenzuela, as we have suggested, has greatly intensified the situation.

But we are in the presence, let us remember, of a triggering device. In both stories the killing is important chiefly, if not entirely, for the train of psychological events which it sets off. How do these compare in the two stories? One of the most important differences concerns the idea of doubling. Hints of this appear in Conrad's story from the earliest stage of the captain's relationship with Leggatt. The tone of his voice in his first few words "somehow induced a corresponding state in myself" (Harkness 8) and very shortly thereafter the captain reflects "It was, in the night, as though I had been faced with my own reflection in the depths of a sombre and immense mirror" (Harkness 9). A highly significant argument in favor of the notion that Leggatt's situation prompts awareness of the captain's "dark side" is that this last reflection occurs immediately after Leggatt's admission that he has killed a man. This fact deserves heavier emphasis than it has received. But what is immediately stressed by Conrad emerges only much more slowly in Valenzuela and with a quite different implication. Both Conrad and Valenzuela almost inevitably use the symbol of the mirror. But there is a significant shift in the way they use it. In Conrad, as we have just seen, it is used to imply the captain's immediate recognition that there is something of himself reflected in Leggatt or vice versa. This is developed later when the captain imagines his Chief mate seeing double, and the reference to a "double captain" shortly after. The physical similarity implies a mirror-image. But in Valenzuela it is the lover who tries to see himself reflected in "her." In Conrad we only see Leggatt filtered through the captain's first-person presentation of him. But in Valenzuela's story the third person narrator is able to move the reader's attention from "her" to her lover, and to what he hopes to get out of the relationship. Valenzuela uses two images in this connection. One is that of "her"

lover throwing stones into a pond (i.e. using verbal mechanisms—not direct questions—to try to reach a better understanding of himself, through her: “to probe his depth in her” [71]). The second is that of taking a trip across the United States in a truck the cabin of which is covered with mirrors, in which he can shut himself in and try to figure himself out:”to close himself in and try to find himself” (71). “She” rejects such a process and advises him that mirror-images are deceitful. Nevertheless he goes on “using her as a mirror in a search to understand himself” (71).

In other words, in this story, both the central figures are searching for a better understanding of themselves, and hope to find it (at least in the lover’s case) through contemplating their reflection in the other. But here we reach another crucial element in Valenzuela’s story. While her lover hopes that self-reflection in the other will provide valid insights into his personality, “she” insists that this is an illusion: “don’t look for yourself in the mirrors,” she counsels him, “look inside yourself” (71). And later, much more significantly, the narrator on her behalf asserts categorically “He wants to search for himself, to search for himself in her, and she in him, and it doesn’t work. No one is found” (78). This uncompromising assertion of the unsurmountable otherness of other people, even those we love, means that in Valenzuela’s view we are cast entirely on our own resources; there is no reciprocity or cooperation. Anything we learn about ourselves from contact with someone else is through a strictly private process. No doubt this is just as true of Conrad’s captain. But he does not question the mirroring process that takes place during Leggatt’s time on board his ship; he recognizes it and accepts it. The great symbol of this merging of their two personalities is recognized when he gives Leggatt his hat at the end. The two men have “met” in a way that Valenzuela’s narrator does not believe in. The hat, which provides the happy ending (in a sense) of Conrad’s story is an objective, tangible object. It symbolizes among other things the fact that through their relationship, whatever else the captain has discovered about his inner self, he has got a grip on himself, his ship and his crew, which he did not feel he had before. Valenzuela’s central character also in the end gets a grip on herself and on her situation, but in a quite different way: by enunciating verbally the state of consciousness which she has finally achieved.

Initially, it is the difference between Valenzuela's unnamed central character and her lover that is metaphorically brought out "She's barely opaque." (By comparison he's dark and "transparent" [64].) She is "opaque" at the beginning of the story because she does not understand herself or her relationship with her lover; whereas the captain in Conrad jumps towards identification, and through this to a new level of self-awareness. In Valenzuela what takes place is the opposite: a slow process of self-discovery, ending only with a certain degree of identification which does not amount to a "meeting" and is essentially self-concerned. To start with, Valenzuela's "she" is fascinated, but tries to keep her distance. As her lover confesses his crimes, her first reaction is to feel the attraction of the fear that he inspires in her. Then follows a desire to make up to him through her love for the years he has lost in prison; but this does not exclude "horror" and "shock" (67).

Meanwhile, like Leggatt, he shows no remorse: "I don't feel any pity" (68). In response, like the captain for Leggatt, she feels a certain admiration for him; specifically for his ability to fight his way out of the ghetto and to conquer his drug-addiction. For a moment she even sees his killings as justified. Unlike Conrad's captain, however, she is a deeply reflective intellectual, modelled, one cannot help thinking, on Valenzuela herself, with strong, consciously æsthetic allegiances. Hence, even as she attempts to justify him and enjoy his physical attractiveness, she asks herself the crucial question: "Does beauty change when beauty has gone around destroying the perfection of others" (69) and recognizes that "She feels deeply upset about the disorder, or rather, about the order that's been subverted by death" (70). And yet, paradoxically, she feels deeply drawn "to get closer and closer to the fire, become part of it" (71), seen as a temptation—the temptation of the abyss. In all of this there is no doubling. The emphasis is on quite the opposite: her inability to come to terms with what she has discovered about his criminality, despite his—and its—attraction for her. Already we have been told that, although she has recognized the relevance of the word "killer," she has kept it inside her mind, unable to enunciate it verbally (69). Now, for the second time, the same point is made (73). But just before the repetition we hear that "she" is able to forget, amid her lover's embraces, two symbols connected with a trip she had made

to the sea-side at Tlacoyunque. The first is “the prehistoric pelican.” The second is “the most worn-down cliff.” Both are in “in a timeless scenery” (73). What are we to make of them? Clearly they are intended by Valenzuela to be read as warning symbols related to a timeless pattern of ethical principles. The pelican in mythology is a powerful feminine symbol of maternal self-sacrifice: in the absence of other food, she feeds her young with her own life-blood (Shaw 180). This is the very opposite of murder. For “her” to forget the pelican implies that “she” is betraying her femininity. The eroded cliff on which the pelican stands looking at her is another warning: it seems to symbolize traditional morality eroded by modern immoralism and scepticism. The implication of these two symbols seems to be that by subordinating her moral principles to her desire for her lover, she is somehow failing herself. She must, in other words, find a different solution.

Before she is able to do so, her situation becomes so stressful that it begins to threaten her mental balance. What has happened? As we have seen, initially, after surrendering to physical desire, she began to suspect that it was precisely her lover’s dangerousness that attracted her: “There’s no doubt in her mind that it will come to a bitter end, and maybe that’s what she is looking for” (66); and later we find the reference already quoted to playing with fire. Although he specifically denies that there could be any danger to her in the relationship, her suspicion about herself survives: “She loves the killer, and, what’s worse, now she may also love him *because* he’s a killer.” It is at this point that she feels herself to be on “The verge of insanity” (73). How does that compare with the situation of Conrad’s captain? He too feels himself to be on the verge of insanity at one point: “It was very much like being mad, only it was worse, because one was aware of it.” (Harkness 17). But there is a crucial difference. “She” in Valenzuela feels herself to be on the edge of insanity because of the attraction for her of the idea of homicidal violence. In other words, she has explicitly recognized her “dark side.” Whereas the captain in Conrad is pushed towards a sense of incipient madness because of what he calls “the dual working of my mind” which he affirms “distracted me almost to the point of insanity” (Harkness 17). What is affecting him is the uncanny sensation of living in front of a mirror which identical twins sometimes have. Between the two

men, as Cedric Watts has shown, there is "a complicated ethical linkage (28) but this does not amount to a shared attraction to evil such as Valenzuela postulates. Watts is prepared to go no further than admitting that the captain endorses Leggatt's "elitist ethic" which overrides a merely legal interpretation of his action on board the *Sephora* during the storm. This is significantly less than recognizing in himself an "outlaw-self" or a "Cain identity." In fact, Watts holds that the captain "experiences virtually no ethical dilemma" (30). This is perhaps a rather extreme view, but it emphasizes what in the end really separates "The Word 'Killer'" from "The Secret Sharer." While we may not be fully convinced that the captain's "torment is psychological rather than ethical" (30), what is unquestionable is that "her" torment in "The Word 'Killer'" is both. Given that, as we noted above, "The Secret Sharer" has been seen as one of Conrad's most "psychological" stories, psychoanalysis has always hovered in the background of critical commentaries on the story. Where it comes to the fore is in Daniel Schwartz's "Creating a Second self: Transference as Narrative Form in 'The Secret Sharer.'" Schwartz writes: "In a sense we are in the position of an analyst hearing the analizand and sorting through an incomprehensible, even traumatic experience" (81). My view is that this is more applicable to Valenzuela's "she" than to Conrad's captain. Even if the latter for a moment feels that he is losing his balance, to refer to him as Schwartz does, as neurotic and even subject to paranoia (82) seems to border on exaggeration. However, it is quite possible to agree that when the captain at the end of Conrad's story endangers his ship more than is really necessary for a strong swimmer like Leggatt to save himself, there is a "symmetry" as suggested by Watts, with Leggatt's "crime" on the *Sephora*, and that the captain's putting his ship at risk is in a sense an "acting out" of a cognate situation. All of this is part and parcel of the "doubling" of the two men. It implies two things. On the one hand that, as Conrad wrote the story, he was consciously creating the parallelisms that Watts so convincingly lays out side by side. On the other, that whatever view we as readers adopt about any possible degree of guiltiness in Leggatt implies, and is intended to imply, a similar potentiality in the captain. Whether that suggests an outlaw personality or a "dark side" is for each reader to assess.

Not so in the case of Valenzuela. Here the analogy with

psychological analysis is much clearer. One only has to read her interview with Gazarian Gautier with its repeated references to the unconscious mind to recognize how important her own interior life and those of her characters are to her writing, despite the fact that so much of it has to do with the often desperate position of her country in the recent past. In fact, few critics would contest the view that she projects what she calls “the structure of our deepest unconscious” which for her is the source of all true understanding of behaviour (Gazarian Gautier 306) on to the problems of Argentina. A possible key to the understanding of “The Word ‘Killer’” is to be found in the interview in question when Valenzuela says: “The deep unspeakable thing is what you don’t dare say, because it is your own dark side relating to other dark sides. So that it is always there crouching somewhere inside you, trying to avoid being brought out in the open, and wanting to come out nevertheless” (316). If, as Guerard so long ago insisted, Conrad’s captain had a dark side, it remains implicit and we as readers have to extrapolate it from his recognition of Leggatt as his double and from the symmetries in their behaviour. But in Valenzuela’s “she” it becomes explicit at the end.

In her story, much more than in Conrad’s we can see the analogy with the process of psychological analysis. When that takes place the analyst’s role is not to explain directly to the patient what is causing his or her problem, but to induce the patient him or herself to uncover the hidden cause. This is what produces the therapeutic effect. We can see this process taking place in “her” in Valenzuela’s story. In the early part she feels “astonishment” as she realizes fully that her lover is a killer. At this point her reaction is to question herself: “she asks herself how and why to get to bed with the killer, a killer in cold blood” (69). As she explores her responses there is an explicit reference to psychoanalysis, when she uses her acquaintance with it to consider the question of whether he has suppressed important details in his account of his criminal past. In her own case, however, the problem is to reconcile his behaviour with her sense of an “order” (70), implicitly a moral order, which his killings have subverted. Interestingly, it is now that for the first time that she admits to herself that she is really in love with him. What brings her close to insanity is the contradiction between her sense of a moral order and her love for a man who has totally contravened

it. Something has to give. What gives is the idea of a moral order. It is now that she recognizes her own dark side: "What else could she possibly do? Go out herself, and kill, disrupt order for the hell of it, because there is none" (74).

This is the pivotal moment: the moment of discovery that she too has the potentiality to behave in a way that shatters any sense of adherence to a moral order. Her situation, at least from her own point of view, is tragic, in the sense that tragedy arises from a balance of equally justified forces, in this case love versus endorsement of a moral order. This is the *agnorisis*, the realization, at the end of an evolution of insight, which is intended to bring submission to the way things are to the tragic figure, and catharsis to the spectators. Hitherto "she" has been resisting, repressing, evading, re-interpreting her growing awareness. Now at length she faces it. The underlying question had already been enunciated: how can she accept him? Now she has the answer. Seeing some marks on her lover's back confirms her new level of self-understanding when she realizes that she herself might have wanted to mingle desire with sadism. The stages of development of this realization have been very explicitly marked by the three-fold reference to her inability to bring herself to pronounce the word "killer" aloud. But, having acquired consciousness of "the deep unspeakable thing" in herself, she is now finally able to shout the word out, to overcome repression of it. In psychological terms, this is the therapeutic moment of release of tension. By bringing the word out she is able finally to come to terms with the situation, to face it and her lover for what they are. We do not know the outcome, whether she is now able to go forward with the relationship or whether the full realization which she has achieved will mean the end of it. "The Word 'Killer'" is in that sense a more open ended story than "The Secret Sharer."

There the captain has passed the test, whether or not he has in the process discovered a dark side in himself. We intuit that from now on he will have a self-assured relationship with his ship and crew. He has achieved "the perfect communion of a seaman with his first command" (Harkness 36). By contrast the final sentences of "The Word 'Killer'" are ambiguous. Almost simultaneously "she" feels free to plunge into physical desire and to throw herself out of the window before finally shouting the word "killer," which,

the narrative voice informs us, could be either a call (to him?) or an accusation. The last words of the story tell us that in shouting the word she was “giving birth” (78), but it is not clear in which sense. Plainly she is giving birth to a painful realization, but we are left wondering whether the result will be the end of her affair with the killer or not. This is not just relevant to her private dilemma. For it has to taken into account that “The Word ‘Killer’” can, and perhaps should, be also seen also as a national allegory in which “she” is in some way representative of the Argentine people and her homicidal lover may stand for the murderous military regime responsible for the “Dirty War” in the country between 1976 and 1983. As in other works of hers, Valenzuela seems to be commenting indirectly on the ambivalent relationship between the masses and the dictatorship, so that the ambiguous ending may be intended to suggest that Argentines need to reach a full realization of what the military dictatorship really involved, in terms of loss of life among the “disappeared.”

As we look back at “The Secret Sharer” and “The Word ‘Killer’” side by side, certain features come into focus. The first and most important is Conrad’s choice of first person narrative in “The secret Sharer.” Comparison with “The Word ‘Killer’” shows clearly that to have told the captain’s story in the third person, as Valenzuela tells “hers” would have made some form of narratorial commentary unavoidable, with a consequent loss of ambiguity. From this choice important consequences follow. The main one is the captain’s ability to project the idea of doubling on to his relationship with Leggatt as something subjective, so that the degree to which it operates is for each reader to evaluate. As we have seen this sense of doubling begins almost at once in “The Secret Sharer,” whereas in “The Word ‘Killer’” the female central character undergoes a process of discovery throughout the tale which culminates only at a late stage when she realizes that she shares his “dark side.” This means that the forces in play are different. Even if we allow for the possibility of a latent homosexual attraction, the captain is not in love with Leggatt. They are bonded together by certain class and training experiences and the subtle parallelism in their respective situations, cut off from their companions. The captain has to offset this against the moral ambiguity of Leggatt’s position as a result of his behavior aboard the

Sephora. Everything here is much more implicit, including most of all the quality of the captain's awareness of his moral dilemma, than in Valenzuela's story. There the forces in play are much more explicit: love on her side and a much stronger moral taint on his. Hence the captain's evolution, which is eventually towards confidence in his ability to command, as we see from the disagreements of the critics in this respect, remains slightly mysterious. On the other hand "her" evolution is entirely to do with self-discovery. In Conrad the process of evolution is complete and favorable at the end of the story. In Valenzuela this is not, or at least not yet, the case. Hence the greater open-endedness of "The Word 'Killer.'" What, in conclusion, the comparison of the two stories reveals is a question of priorities. Nearly all critics agree that, whatever the captain discovers about himself through seeing himself as Leggatt's double, the result is positive. Conrad is concerned in the last resort to show that out of participation in an ambiguous moral situation can come greater self-awareness and self-command. Valenzuela is really only concerned with a process of self-discovery regardless of any consequences it may lead to. Because of the quasi-allegorical elements in some of the stories in *Other Weapons*, such as the collection's title story, her priority is explicitly that of revealing her central character's (and possibly Argentina's) "dark side." Both stories are in a sense challenging moral fables, but the challenge is in the end revealingly different.

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