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Original Paper

Initiation Ritual and the Moral Self in *The Secret Sharer*

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Abstract

The relationship between the Captain and Leggatt is analyzed with emphasis on Leggatt's influence on the Captain's understanding of his moral self. The novella centers on this theme of a young, as yet untested, captain's finding of his moral self. Only when he understands his own morality, through the influence of Leggatt, can he be confident enough to command his ship.

Introduction

The Secret Sharer, by Joseph Conrad, is an initiation ritual novella. Keeping the initiation ritual in mind, two themes on literature found in *The Secret Sharer* will be discussed. They are point of view and the moral self as an essential metaphor.

The Secret Sharer revolves around two main characters: the Captain and the fugitive Leggatt. Leggatt has been accused and held in custody for the murder of a fellow crewman on his ship the *Sephora*. The death of the seaman at the hands of Leggatt comes about during bad weather, as Leggatt, in his capacity as chief mate of the *Sephora*, is directing the setting of a reefed foresail. Leggatt soon gets into an argument with one

of his crew over the setting of the foresail and a brawl ensues with Leggatt choking the man with both hands. A violent set of waves soon crashes over the *Sephora* and as the crew takes to the rigging, Leggatt and the man are still locked together, with Leggatt's hands around the man's throat. When the crew finds them sometime after the waves have stopped attacking the ship, Leggatt's hands are still around the man's throat, whose face is now black and lifeless. The *Sephora's* captain puts Leggatt under arrest, pending a trial on charges of murder when the *Sephora* returns home.

Leggatt, however, escapes from his ship and winds up on the ship of the young captain. The Captain, through circumstances untold in the story, has only taken command

of his ship, anchored in the Gulf of Siam, ready to head home, within the past fortnight. Apart from the second mate, he is the youngest man on board.

The Captain must face, in the person of Leggatt, his own moral self. The Captain is unsure of his competence to command a ship and at the same time he must gain the respect of a wary crew equally skeptical of his qualifications. He also must acquire the ability to be comfortable and confident with the decisions he makes. If he looks unsure and indecisive the crew will not respect him and he will be unable to command effectively.

This tension within the Captain, and between himself and his crew, plays itself out when the Captain must decide whether to help Leggatt escape or turn him in. Leggatt's confidence in his own self makes the decision for the Captain an easy one. Unsure of his own self, the Captain takes the strength, experience and confidence that Leggatt brings to his ship and uses it to take command of both his ship and himself.

Leggatt, through his manifestation as a fugitive, forces the Captain, through his decision whether to help Leggatt escape or not, to realize who his moral self is; this, at the same time, will bring about a confrontation with his crew over his competence to command and the authority that comes naturally from it. The result of this initiation into the difficult decisions authority brings leads the Captain to a satisfying understanding of his own moral self that he would never have known had he not been made captain in the first place.

I

Conrad writes *The Secret Sharer* in the "I" as protagonist style. The narrator is the Captain, the chief character of the story. As Norman Friedman writes in his book, *Form*

And Meaning In Fiction, "the protagonist-narrator, therefore, is limited almost entirely to his own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions."¹⁾ So *The Secret Sharer* leaves to the Captain the decision of whether he is right to help the fugitive Leggatt escape from the *Sephora*, thus releasing the reader from the obligation of considering Conrad's personal views on the laws of the sea, and Conrad's own moral judgement of the Captain's actions or decisions within the story. We must discover the Captain's moral self as he does, through experience.

Not all Conrad scholars agree with this interpretation, however. Albert J. Guerard, in his introduction to *The Secret Sharer*, writes that the story is "difficult to analyze and understand."²⁾ He sees Conrad's own views on the laws of the sea affecting the characters in *The Secret Sharer*: "A crime on shipboard, whether intended or not, was simply and irrevocably a crime."³⁾

But in order to truly know whether the Captain has come of age and can be sure of himself as a captain, Conrad's personal views must be swept aside. This is so because if, as Guerard believes, Conrad's basic principle of morality about the sea is law and order, Leggatt cannot have the importance he actually has in the story. His character would be evil and his influence on the Captain would be destructive. The death of the seaman at the hands of Leggatt on the *Sephora* would be simply a crime and Leggatt would have to face punishment for it. Conrad states clearly at the beginning, when he has the Captain talking about his voyage home with his ship, that the Captain's initiation as a ship's commander is to be without the influence of Conrad:

In this breathless pause at the threshold of a long passage we seemed to be measuring our fitness for a long and

arduous enterprise, the appointed task of both our existences to be carried out, far from all human eyes, with only sky and sea for spectators and for judges.⁴⁾

II

According to Edward C. Whitmont, in order to come to an understanding of our ego or self “we have to become aware of ourselves as individuals, apart from the external demands made upon us. We have to acquire a sense of responsibility and a capacity for judgement which is not necessarily identical with the external collective expectations and standards.”⁵⁾ Leggatt has come to terms with his inner moral self over the death of the seaman. He believes the seaman’s death at his hands is not murder. In the face of total condemnation by the crew of the *Sephora*, Leggatt is confident that his interpretation of what happened is the right one. It is his job to pass that characteristic on to the Captain.

The “I” as protagonist style allows Leggatt’s act to be judged by the Captain. For the Captain, Leggatt’s setting of the foresail was an instinctive act that saved his ship. The death of the seaman at Leggatt’s hands is not intentional but a tragic consequence of this instinctively lifesaving act that saved the *Sephora* from certain destruction. The Captain believes Leggatt to be a victim of circumstances: “And I knew well enough also that my double there was no homicidal ruffian.”⁶⁾ Since the story is told from the Captain’s point of view, a more positive light than Guerard puts on Leggatt must also be shown.

The understanding of our instinctive moral self courses through the theme of initiation ritual in *The Secret Sharer*. The point of contention in its interpretation has to do with whether or not Leggatt’s act is criminal. Guerard calls Leggatt outcast and primitive, with the Captain living vicariously through

him.⁷⁾ Daniel Curley, in his interpretation of *The Secret Sharer*, sees an error in Guerard’s not equating Leggatt with the Captain’s instinctive self but equating instinctive with evil.⁸⁾ Guerard fails to accept the Captain’s positive feeling for Leggatt. Guerard sees the Captain’s egoistic identification with Leggatt as something dangerous. He even asks his readers, “Why does the narrator (the “I”) of *The Secret Sharer* protect the criminally impulsive Leggatt?”⁹⁾ This thinking makes it the Captain doesn’t see Leggatt as criminal, but as someone confident in what he believes to be right and willing to keep that belief in the face of overwhelming opposition.

Leggatt feels no guilt for what he did. He is comfortable with his morality and it is this characteristic of Leggatt that the Captain comes to respect and take as his own. It materializes itself for the reader when the Captain chooses to help Leggatt escape rather than turning him in when the captain of the *Sephora* comes to the Captain’s ship looking for Leggatt.

Leggatt is a much more positive figure than Guerard believes. Before meeting Leggatt the Captain is very naive about the sea. “But I took heart from the reasonable thought that the ship was like other ships, the men like other men, and that the sea was not likely to keep any special surprises expressly for my discomfiture.”¹⁰⁾

The Captain must have his fitness for command tested, and he must be provided with a standard by which he can measure his success.¹¹⁾ Seen from this point of view, Leggatt needs to be a positive character. The Captain is looking for guidance. He is unsure of himself as a new captain. The narrator even tells the reader that the Captain is “almost as much of a stranger on board as [Leggatt].”¹²⁾ To have a destructive charac-

ter enter the picture would lead to adverse consequences for him and his crew. Conrad is sacrificing his own views on law and order to allow the Captain to acquire an understanding of his moral self and the subsequent confidence that engenders. If Conrad were to have written the story from his own point of view, Leggatt would have never left the Sephora — not because he couldn't escape, but because Conrad could not allow such a bad influence to counsel and guide this young captain thirsting to find out who his moral self really is.

The Captain decides to help Leggatt escape. In doing so, he attempts a dangerous steering maneuver with his ship around the islet of Kohring in the Gulf of Siam. To allow Leggatt a chance to escape and swim safely ashore, he exposes his ship to the possibility of running aground, and in the process brings himself into conflict with his crew over the intelligence of his command. At the same

time, he is attempting to gain control of his self. He's still not sure of himself as Leggatt leaves the ship: "And now I forgot the secret stranger ready to depart, and remembered only that I was a total stranger to the ship."¹³⁾

Only when the Captain sees the hat he had given Leggatt for protection from the sun drifting in the water, pointing the way to safety by the direction of its movement on the water, does the Captain understand his self and control his ship: "Ha! It was drifting forward, warning me just in time that the ship had gathered sternway."¹⁴⁾ This simple act of giving Leggatt the hat is the metaphor for the Captain's understanding of who he is and his initiation as captain of his ship: "A sudden thought struck me. I snatched off my floppy hat and tried hurriedly in the dark to ram it on my other self."¹⁵⁾ He had been right to help Leggatt escape and understands his morality to be at one with the result. The initiation is complete.

References

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- 3) Guerard A. J. (1983) Introduction. Conrad J. *Heart of Darkness & The Secret Sharer*, Signet Classic, New York.
- 4) Whitmont E. C. (1991) The Persona: The Mask We Wear for the Game of Living. In Downing C. ed. *Mirrors of The Self*, Jeremy P. Tarcher, Los Angeles.

Notes

- 1) Norman Friedman, *Form And Meaning In Fiction*, p.152.
- 2) Albert J. Guerard, "Introduction," p.8.
- 3) Ibid., p.10.
- 4) Joseph Conrad, *Heart Of Darkness & The Secret Sharer*, p.20.
- 5) Edward C. Whitmont, "The Persona: The Mask We Wear For The Game Of Living," p.14.
- 6) Joseph Conrad, *Heart Of Darkness & The Secret Sharer*, p.28.
- 7) Albert J. Guerard, "Introduction," p.9.

- 8) Daniel Curley, "Legate of the Ideal," p.81.
- 9) Albert J. Guerard, "Introduction," pp.8—9.
- 10) Joseph Conrad, *Heart Of Darkness & The Secret Sharer*, p.23.
- 11) Daniel Curley, "Legate of the Ideal," p.81.
- 12) Joseph Conrad, *Heart Of Darkness & The Secret Sharer*, p.34.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p.59.
- 14) *Ibid.*, p.60.
- 15) *Ibid.*, p.57.