

Self Discovery in Joseph Conrad's The Secret Sharer

Robert Milton Underwood, Jr.

© 2008

Self Discovery in Joseph Conrad's The Secret Sharer

Joseph Conrad's The Secret Sharer is a story about a man facing himself in a way he hadn't yet experienced. The story is told as a narrative from the point of view of the captain. It is as if the captain needs to tell his story¹ as a part of his burgeoning self awareness. He was exposed to a part of his self that had been repressed or unknown. His ever-expanding awareness of self is a common theme in the novel. To better understand himself, the captain contemplates, learns, and ultimately rejoices by moving forward with confidence in his self discovery.

Individuals often set up an inner image of themselves that is idealized. In private inner worlds, people imagine themselves being great, courageous, and other strong and positive qualities. People's opinions of themselves are often skewed quite strongly in a positive direction (Dunning 69). But through stress, or strain, or new and unknown circumstances, self-doubt can surface in one's consciousness. Extreme pressures can cause problems with confidence. It was this attitude of self doubt with which the captain started his seafaring² journey.

When the captain took his first command of this ship he was insecure. It was an insecurity he had never quite felt before. He was uneasy in his private office, sensed the peril of leaving land, and had a skeptical crew because his authority was untested in front of them. As his first night on the ship approached, he had self doubt in his active consciousness, and he felt a strange sense of solitude and estrangement. The captain may have created heroism in his own inner world, but that image didn't match how he felt on his ship that first day. As a leader, he was self conscious but does not rule with an iron hand. He actually does the opposite by volunteering to take the first watch. He is the kind of leader who would not ask his men to do something that he would not also do. Volunteering to take the first watch gave him the chance to

¹ Conrad's narratives often pay attention to the motivation of the stories being told; this is evidence of a self-consciousness that felt it necessary to justify in some way the telling of a story (Billy 29).

² The sea is symbolic in many of Conrad's novels in that it is used as a means to test individuals (Bender 94).

be alone with his thoughts and it also gave him the power to be in charge of something, even if it was only the first watch.

At the beginning of the story, the captain felt alone on the ship. The stranger obviously felt isolated and alone. Sometimes the least little common ground will create a bond. It makes them think that they are alike in some regard, and in this case, aloneness was that commonality. Self-similarity is one of the strong directive forces of the behavior of humans (Rosenbloom A12), and when someone is similar, they are often given special privileges or are treated more favorably than others around them.

Another self had come to live in “the masked rectitude of his life” (Bender 98). The captain felt he had almost been a stranger to himself and to the crew when he took charge of the boat. Observations of others are often reflections of ourselves and our own viewpoints. One can see in another what one sees in oneself. Also, one can observe in another person what one fails to see in oneself. He saw in Leggatt what he missed seeing in himself. The captain takes in Leggatt, tacitly condones his crime, shares clothing with him and hides him in his cabin. He finds himself *sharing* Leggatt’s *secret* existence, and thus the title The Secret Sharer³. It was the captain, not Leggatt, who was more worried about Leggatt’s being discovered, and this was greater evidence of his uncertainty in himself. But gradually the captain started to become more cognizant of his inner self.

In a sense Leggatt is an alter ego, an unrealized potentiality in the character of the captain-narrator. Leggatt represents the hidden inner side of the captain. That hidden side may be shadowed, dark, full of fear, replete with self doubt, and it may be a side of himself that the captain doesn’t really know.

³ Other titles that Conrad originally considered were The Second Self, The Secret Self, or The Other Self (Karl 675). Upon considering “The Secret Sharer,” he originally thought it “may be too enigmatic” (Najder 352).

By bringing in Leggatt and protecting him, the captain was accepting that other side of himself. The captain and Leggatt were two characters who reflected the composite nature of a contradictory identity (Cox 7). So, while they were initially attracted by the similarities of aloneness and isolation, it was the difference in them that helped broaden the self awareness of the captain.

By taking in Leggatt, the captain took the law into his own hands, and effectively became an accessory to his crime after the fact. It is as though before the captain could properly manage his own crew and ship, he had to exert symbolic authority of his life by siding with the criminal and flout legal authority (Andreas 138). The captain's first encounter with the stranger Leggatt offered him the power of life over death for the man had he disallowed the latter's entry onto the ship. The captain recognized that Leggatt considered such a possibility. Instead, the captain showed consideration. The granting of compassion was the implementation of authority, and this outward expression of power begins to open him up internally. The captain actually lives a double life for a time. His inner self took on a richer force with its duplicity and sneakiness.

Those who refuse to accept the existence of the other part of themselves, choosing instead to only idealize themselves, are lacking in self knowledge. People must come to know themselves and be true to themselves—the self in the shadow as well as the self in the light. Even Shakespeare had the perspicacity to write, “This above all: to thine own self be true.”⁴ But being true and honest with oneself is extremely difficult to do. Benjamin Franklin observed in his Poor Richard's Almanac from 1750 that "There are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one's self." To know oneself on a deep level is difficult, especially when the conscious mind is often focused on the everyday tasks at hand. The captain was forced into such a face-to-face situation with himself when he met Leggatt.

⁴Hamlet, Act I, Scene III.

The captain understands Leggatt's terror so well that it seems more like commiseration, rather than empathy, with which he listens to Leggatt's description of the events of his crime. For the captain to be so accommodating, he has to have a part of himself understand that killing is not always wrong. Perhaps he could imagine himself in the similar circumstances of killing a man unintentionally.

Instead of an "I," the captain became a "we" with Leggatt. In his broadening of his awareness, he realized an extension of himself. He and Leggatt symbolically became one entity, and as an enlightened man becomes one with humanity, realized that Leggatt's survival was *his* survival.

The captain didn't want Leggatt to leave at first. He was perhaps afraid of having to be left alone with the ship and with the wondering about whether he would be able to sustain his new awareness. He cared so much for Leggatt that he gave him a hat when he left the ship, as if he was caring for himself. The hat is a symbol of uniqueness and identity. Hats are very personal and individual, and giving the hat to Leggatt actually symbolized the giving of something of himself to the other man.

The shared hat symbolizes the whole personality, the unity of the self. When the floating hat helps him steer the ship away from the dangerous shoreline, the captain has a new level of confidence, and his crew are impressed with his ability. But as the ship successfully pulled away from the shore, he realized that he was confident with his new inner completeness. There is a spiritual awareness of the full man inside as he becomes whole again with his idealized self.

By helping Leggatt gain freedom, he also releases the guilt associated with hiding him, and signals the successful integration of the captain's personality through an intense encounter with the shadowy forces of his secret self (Knowles 337). The story is on its deepest level a

parable of self knowledge, an adventure of the soul. His newfound freedom is almost like an exorcism (Billy 69) in that he became tormented as if possessed, then was freed upon acquaintance with, and final separation from, the secret sharer.

In the end, the captain comes off triumphant from both moral and professional problems. Morally, he did a kind thing for a man in need, a man whose crime, due to mitigating circumstances, need not necessarily be judged so severe as defined by the strictest interpretation of the law. Nevertheless, he now gave up any connection with the hiding of an alleged criminal. Professionally, he finally had the confidence and respect of his crew.

It was through the act of the secret sharing that the captain ultimately was faced with his secret self, the depths of his inner self, and becoming aware of this was an epiphany for him. We must all be secret sharers. It is not necessary to share the deeper shadow side with everyone, but everyone must share that side with his or her idealized version of self. He knew then that he could be true to his own self.

“ ‘Know Thyself’ was written over the portal of the antique world. Over the portal of the new world, ‘Be Thyself’ shall be written⁵.” The captain had a broader picture of himself with which to see his whole self, and with this new awareness, he proceeded confidently knowing that he could fully *be* himself. He could be himself completely in terms of sound judgment, effective leadership, inner confidence, and mental clarity.

⁵ Oscar Wilde. “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” Fortnightly Review February 1891. <http://www.quoteland.com>.

Works Cited

- Andreas, Osborne. Joseph Conrad: A Study in Non-Conformity. 1959. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1969. 135-138.
- Bender, David, pub., et. al. Readings on Joseph Conrad. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1998. 79-100.
- Billy, Ted, ed. Critical Essays on Joseph Conrad. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1987. 69.
- Conrad, Joseph. Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer. New York: Penguin Group, 1997.
- Cox, C. B. Joseph Conrad: The Modern Imagination. London: J. M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1974. 7, 85.
- Dunning, David, Chip Heath and Jerry M. Suls. "Flawed Self-Assessment: Implications for Health, Education, and the Workplace." Psychological Science in the Public Interest 2004: Vol. 5, No. 3. 69.
- Karl, Frederick R. Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979. 675, 722.
- Knowles, Owen and Gene M. Moore. Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad. Oxford: University Press. 337.
- Najder, Zdislaw. Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 352.
- Rosenbloom, Stephanie. "Quest to find Google twin is more than ego – it's scientific." Austin American-Statesman 10 April 2008, final ed.: A1+.