

Overplayed or underappreciated: the question of Conrad in the British canon



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Joseph Conrad's work is an apparent staple of the 20th century British canon. Few literature students manage to weave their way toward a degree without being exposed to his iconic novella *Heart of Darkness*. While it is undeniably a powerful piece of writing, the analysis of its themes has been so repetitive and overplayed that one begins to wonder if it deserves its place in the canon at all. In contrast, Conrad's later work—namely the short story titled *The Secret Sharer*—offers a far more subtle, nuanced approach to similar themes. Although it is presently less popular than *Heart of Darkness*, *The Secret Sharer* is far more worthy of analysis and therefore more deserving of a place in the British literary canon.

In order to determine whether a work belongs in a canon in the first place, we must first contemplate what exactly a canon is. In his essay "An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon," Charles Altieri paraphrases Frank Kermode when he says, ". . . canons are essentially strategic constructs by which societies maintain their own interests, since the canon allows control over the texts a culture takes seriously and the methods of interpretation that establish the meaning of 'serious'" (38). In other words, any given collection of canon literature is a carefully controlled presentation of a culture or subculture's values; it is a direct reflection of the way a select group perceives itself.

At a glance, this makes *The Secret Sharer* appear strangely juxtaposed with the rest of the British canon. It was not written by a native Briton—though Conrad was ultimately a naturalized citizen—and therefore it is difficult to argue that it is a direct reflection of British values or ideals. Beyond that, the short story's themes of questionable morality and the underlying human psyche do not cast British cultural values in a positive light. Which brings us

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to the question: does *The Secret Sharer* serve as a representation of British culture? The answer will unequivocally determine whether the story deserves a place in the British canon, and so an analysis of its themes is in order.

At the beginning of *The Secret Sharer*, we are met with an unnamed speaker who describes in the first lines his surroundings at sea. The major themes in the story are hinted at in the final sentence of the introductory paragraph, when the speaker says: “ And then I was left alone with my ship, anchored at the head of the Gulf of Siam” (Conrad 4). In as few words as possible, this tells us what we need to know. The speaker describes it as his ship, revealing to us that he is the captain. He makes mention of being alone, which becomes one of the overarching issues throughout the story. Finally, he gives away his location, which is far more important to the message of the story than it initially appears.

The story is set in the Gulf of Siam, which is known in the present day as the Gulf of Thailand. Interestingly, Thailand is one of the lucky eastern countries to escape colonization. While at the surface themes of colonialism seem to be more present in some of Conrad’s other work, there is a carefully woven undercurrent of colonial and imperialist attitudes throughout *The Secret Sharer* that ultimately shape the story. The setting is important due to its implications: while Thailand may never have been colonized, the British seafaring presence no doubt hints at their presence in the surrounding countries. The speaker’s ship is representative of one of the many ships in constant transit between these colonized lands and the British homeland.

This brings us to Conrad's decision to make the speaker a recently-appointed captain. It is quickly revealed to us that the speaker is somewhat insecure, despite his newfound position. This creates the sense that the speaker is both the everyman and in a position of power, suggesting that his actions throughout the story could reflect the actions of anyone (or, at least, any western male) in the same position. In this regard, the characterization hints at western morality on the broader scale, and so we begin to see how it might fit into the British canon.

Of course, the speaker is not the driving force of the story, although he does help to shape our perception of it. It is the presence of a stranger aboard the ship that sets the events of *The Secret Sharer* in motion. When the speaker first encounters the stranger, he describes him as follows: "With a gasp I saw revealed to my stare a pair of feet, the long legs, a broad livid back immersed right up to the neck in a greenish cadaverous glow. One hand, awash, clutched the bottom rung of the ladder. He was complete but for the head. A headless corpse" (Conrad 7)! Almost immediately, the speaker realizes the man does have a head, and is very much alive . . . but this initial encounter is key to understanding the perception of the stranger that follows. Leggatt, as we learn he is called, also plays the role of the everyman; his initial perceived headless state represents the ambiguity and fluidity of his identity. He instantly becomes a fill-in-the-blank, upon which the speaker casts his own perception of himself.

This becomes more relevant as Leggatt's crimes are revealed. The speaker chooses to abuse his newfound power by harboring a fugitive aboard his ship—one who has committed murder, which has long been regarded as one of
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the more heinous of crimes. The speaker's ultimate reason for this seems to lie in the similarities to himself he sees in Leggatt. This links back to the undercurrent of colonial themes within Conrad's work. It is the perfect representation of the implicit bias present in western cultures, by which those who are perceived as "like" are excused even for the most atrocious of actions, while those who are labeled "other" are ostracized and even criminalized for the arbitrary. The speaker acting as a shield for Leggatt because they are "alike" is symbolic of the willful ignorance and justification of western cultures as a whole.

The primary conflict throughout the story revolves around the speaker's concealment of Leggatt. The question of whether the speaker will reveal Leggatt to his comrades or allow him to escape without answering for his crimes parallels the idea of confronting one's demons or ignoring them. The speaker shares his feelings on the matter when he says, "I was extremely tired, in a peculiarly intimate way, by the strain of stealthiness, by the effort of whispering and the general secrecy of this excitement" (Conrad 15).

Though this seems to suggest the speaker is tired of hiding things and wants to confront the issue, he ultimately opts to aid Leggatt in an escape. The speaker has essentially ignored his demons. He never owns up to his actions in concealing Leggatt, but ironically the sequence of events leads to the speaker gaining his crew's trust all the same. This suggests one of the great problems with western culture; it is often viewed as more acceptable to "save face" than to own up to admit to doing wrong. Presentation is often valued above virtue, and this is exactly the case for the speaker of *The*

Secret Sharer. Although he aided a murderer in his escape, he is satisfied with himself in the end because he gained the respect of his shipmates.

While there are no defined lines to determine what criteria a canonical work should meet, a strong sense of culture and an openness to analysis are key factors in making a work worth studying. At its core, *The Secret Sharer* serves as a critique of British culture on both the individual and general level. It highlights the strong influence colonialism and imperialism has on the development of the British identity, even when present only on a subconscious level. While not necessarily depicting British culture in the most positive of lights, it no doubt offers insight into the cultural history. The ambiguity of the story leaves it wide open for a variety of interpretations, making it a perfect candidate for the British canon that it will not wear out its welcome anytime soon.

Works Cited

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