

# Narration and perspective in the secret sharer



Joseph Conrad's story *The Secret Sharer* is a first-person account written in two parts from the perspective of an untried sea captain. The separation of the two segments almost perfectly coincides with a distinction in the narrative voice. In the first part of *The Secret Sharer* the captain is displaced, unassuming and uncalculating. At this point narrative descriptions help to establish situation as they more resemble unattached observations. It is upon the discovery of Leggatt that narration begins to evolve. Due to an unexplained, instantaneous rapport, the captain unquestioningly receives Leggatt's story and puts him into hiding. At this point paranoia begins and the narrator's mind admittedly begins to lose structure: "The dual working of my mind distracted me almost to the point of insanity," admits the captain (Conrad 96). The narrator's thought process is more clearly illustrated upon the arrival of the captain of the *Sephora* in the second part of the story. Narration switches from being generally situational to more personal and inward; for instance, the captain observes that "My lack of excitement, of curiosity, of surprise, of any sort of pronounced interest, began to arouse his distrust" (99). Of course there is no explanation as to how the captain knows distrust is being provoked; there is no depiction of Archbold's expressions or actions. Readers must, at this point, either trust the intuition of the narrator or presume his fears to be unfounded. In the same paragraph, Conrad effectively communicates the multiple levels of seemingly erratic conscious reasoning that we all possess: "And yet how else could I have received him? Not heartily! That was impossible for psychological reasons...Surlily? Yes, but surliness might have provoked a point-blank question" (100). The captain is cognizant of actions and counter-actions, he becomes especially conniving: "From its novelty to him and from its nature, punctilious courtesy was the

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manner best calculated to restrain the man" (100). Here the captain shows his grasp of reasoning has not left him, yet his improbable fears are still present: " If he had only known how afraid I was of his putting my feeling of identity with the other to the test!"(100). These unwarranted fears plant seeds of doubt in the reader's mind as to the mental welfare and subsequently the reliability of the narrator. When Archbold speaks next he says, " I reckon I had no more than a two-mile pull to your ship. Not a bit more" (100). This is an obvious indication of suspicion, but the narrator quickly deflects a more direct line of questioning (as to whether Leggett might have had the ability to swim that distance) by saying, " And quite enough, too, in this awful heat" (100). One might suspect self-preservation as the motive to this redirect but the author goes on to state, " Necessity is the mother of invention, but fear too, is not barren of ingenious suggestion. And I was afraid he would ask me point-blank for new of my other self" (100). The captain concedes to fear being an instigator to his deception but maintains a fear of being asked outright. He explains that " for psychological (not moral) reasons" (100) he cannot convey a direct lie. Readers can only speculate what psychological reasons prevent his lying as opposed to deceiving or preventing a situation in which he would have to be untruthful. He does indicate to a moral lapse, but whether this is in regard to his personal stowaway or some previous event is not known. As to what if anything incites suspicion in Archbold's mind can only be approximated. Perhaps it could be attributed to " ready-made suspicions" or perhaps it was the " queer" actions or poor deceptive capabilities of the captain. Every thought, action, or word from the narrator was, during this encounter, strategic. " My only object was to keep off his inquiries," (100) he states. Any

small step towards laying suspicion directly on the captain is quickly supplanted out of fear. In this particular passage, Conrad successfully portrays the various planes of reasoning that a lone man in personal distress encounters. His effectiveness can be attributed to his method. Through his use of the narrator portraying the actual author of the story and a consequent lack of perspective, Conrad entices the reader to think vicariously from the narrator's perspective and speculate as to what is missing. This passage articulates a very human process of paranoid thinking with which anyone can identify. It explains the captain's mindset but raises many other questions that have no hope of being answered. In so doing, it gives a truly realistic dimension to the character of the captain and his story, making *The Secret Sharer* a valuable contribution to American literature.