

Disentangling the twins of Conrad's psyche



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Joseph Conrad spoke such truth about the inner working of humankind when he said through his character Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*, “ A man's most open actions have a secret side to them” (pt. 1, ch. 2). This would become a ghostly introduction to his next work *The Secret Sharer* published a year later. Joyce Carol Oats says in the introduction of the text that “ the young captain is the ‘ head,’ the consciousness; and the romantic fugitive Leggatt the ‘ body,’ the physical being” (13; introd.). Nevertheless, with a more detailed exploration, the characters, in fact, play opposite roles.

Conrad has created a wonderfully detailed portrait of the inner self through a doppelganger relationship representing the philosophy of opposition of self: the ego (the captain) and the id (Leggatt). It can be agreed on when Oats does say that Conrad is “ a master of the psychological novel” (7; introd.).

Conrad shows his own thoughts about the duality of man through a compelling story of a young captain stumbling upon a terrible secret.

However, the story goes beyond a simple tale of mystery. It is a commentary on a stranger in a sea of inexperience who must reach out to find the sharer of secrets, an inner self that is complementary to the opposing outer facade.

Conrad establishes the roles of the captain and Leggatt through the story's epiphany found in the final sentence of the text. “ The secret sharer of my cabin and of my thoughts, as though he were my second self, had lowered himself into the water to take his punishment: a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny” (Conrad, 62). They are both free men with a new destiny as punishment for breaking the rules and going against the

norm established by sailors of the past. And if freedom were punishment for harboring the fugitive, the captain would accept it.

Commenting on the role of the narrator in a story, Norman Friedman maintains that when the author moves to the “ I” point of view “ as witness he hands his job completely over to another. Albeit the narrator is a creation of the author, the latter is from now on denied any direct voice in the proceedings at all” (150). The credibility of the narration comes from the fact that Conrad doesn't push his opinion into the story directly. He gives the reader everything through the limited view of the captain, who doesn't have a name and can be associated directly to Conrad himself. With the author out of the narration and into the character, the captain, a shell, is the one who must see and realize everything to draw closer to Leggatt, his wandering spirit, as a complete character. The logic behind him harboring a murderer is now a metaphor of a complimentary opposite. No one is capable of doing great things alone. Another self must lurk in the shadows to spur them on, someone to share a secret with to survive a hostile world full of strangers. The captain is the ego, which is the outer shell molded by circumstance and can't fully change; while Leggatt is the id, that inner instinct that runs rampant through consciousness and is susceptible to change, thus bringing a change about to the ego, or the character itself.

An interesting philosophical question is, can a body survive without a soul, or, is there really a soul? Conrad tries to show the significance of this unverifiable question through the secret sharers. First, the captain is a shell of a man, lacking experience and self-confidence, being a total stranger to himself (Conrad, 19). He is missing something in his life, and when the

fugitive boards the ship the key element is found. Within the same paragraph that Leggatt boards the ship, the captain is already calling him his “double” (Conrad, 25). An ideal is in the features of the young man that strikes a stark contrast against the other shipmates whom he doesn't know or even wish to know. At first contact, a distinct line is separating the two characters as individuals but the lines soon fade near the end of the tale as both become one.

To contrast the two, Leggatt is totally free, like the Biblical Cain, “ready enough to go off wandering on the face of the earth” (Conrad, 31). He is skilled and sure in what he does, especially as a swimmer. He takes no nonsense from anyone, seen in the fact that he is willing to kill a man for not doing his duty and jeopardizing the lives of other men, “and that was price enough to pay for an Abel of that sort” (Conrad, 31). Even locked up in the captain's cabin is an infringement on his freedom for “as usual he stared through the port” (Conrad, 53), as a prisoner would stare out of barred windows. Upon seeing this free soul, the captain wishes freedom also, although a different kind: freedom from the bonds the establishment has imposed upon him. He tells Leggatt that he did not want to be on this trip, and perhaps felt forced upon the command, “I had been appointed to take charge while I least expected anything of the sort” (Conrad, 33). He can see Leggatt is now released and free, and a sense of adventure lingers in the fugitive's future. The captain fears that to follow the law exactly would only continue to lead a life void of soul, without any redeeming qualities that, perhaps, leads to a life similar to that of the “tenacious beast” (Conrad, 43), the captain of the *Sephora*: “To the law. His obscure tenacity on that point

had in it something incomprehensible and a little awful; something, as it were, mystical, quite apart from his anxiety that he should not be suspected of 'countenancing any doings of that sort.' Seven-and-thirty virtuous years at sea, of which over twenty of immaculate command, and the last fifteen in the *Sephora*, seemed to have laid him under some pitiless obligation" (Conrad, 41).

The captain knows what he does not want to be, but has yet not realized what he can be. He is still not whole. He is far too nervous, and if he were alone in his secret, he would have collapsed under all the pressure put on him by his crewmates and the *Sephora* captain. If Leggatt is anything, he is the confidence, courage, and strength for the shockingly inexperienced captain. "The ringing of the supper bell made me start. He [Leggatt] didn't though; he only released his grip," (Conrad, 56). And because he was not totally alone in commanding the ship, he could perform what would have been impossible for him to do previously, nor would he have had the opportunity to show his strength as a captain. The opposition of self is what brings out this quality in the captain.

The captain is very calculating in his thoughts; he seems to think too much about what will happen, and a sort of cowardice arises from it. However, Leggatt throws his cares to the wind, swimming out until he finds safety or drowns. He will do what has dignity for himself. The clear distinction between the two sharers starts to come together at the end of the novella; the soul merges with the body; the id and ego come together to form a complete and full character in the captain.

At first, the captain sees Leggatt just as a paragon, a similarity that “ wasn’t a bit like [him], really” (Conrad, 29), but near the end of the story, the captain starts to think Leggatt as himself, literally. He will risk his own position and even his and the crewmates lives for the safety of the other self. His chief and first mate both appear terrified over his decision to move the ship off course close to the land. Still, he is determined, and for the first time, he actually becomes like Leggatt, striking out into uncharted waters until he finds safety or drowns. He will now do what has dignity for himself. His words echo the risk of his actions. “ I realized suddenly that all my future, the only future for which I was fit, would perhaps go irretrievably to pieces in any mishap to my first command” (Conrad, 55). Nonetheless, he continues never deviating from his course. He would have been doomed too, the water unreadable in the dark, except the sign left by Leggatt. The hat given on a whim to protect Leggatt from the sun, as if it would be his own head, becomes a symbol of the psyche, the marker to regulate the captain’s response to the environment. With that final token, he could read the water and save the ship. He survives the fires of the forge and becomes complete. Though Leggatt has left and found his freedom, the captain too has regained his own.

Everything has come full circle. The feeling at the end repeats the beginning. That is, the loneliness the captain feels, being but a shell of a man, echoes at the end when he fears the barrenness and loneliness of the isles of the Kohring where “ not a gleam to be seen, not a sound to be heard” (Conrad, 58), for his friend, that being his soul, to complete the character. They have merged into one.

Taking the psychological approach to the text, the plausibility for the captain to accept this fugitive becomes more than, as Oats says, “superficial and far too heavily underscored” (12; introd.). These two characters don't lack any superficiality; they are just reacting to the circumstances in which they have been placed. Characters, fictional or factual, must come to terms with themselves, no matter how vile the past, and prove to hold up under pressure, to become a better person in the end. Hope for improvement, even under the worst of conditions, is what creates talent, as Conrad himself proved through surviving the horrors of his voyages to emerge as a talented writer sharing the secrets of his inner self.

Works Cited

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