

## Conrad's "The Secret Sharer": Three Questions

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**Introduction:** "The Secret Sharer" is one of Joseph Conrad's unchallenged successes. Though he wrote this "short" story in the middle of a grinding struggle to finish his novel *Under Western Eyes*,<sup>1</sup> Conrad himself correctly predicted that qualified readers would admire it.<sup>2</sup> It has become his most popular work after *Heart of Darkness*. Yet in spite of all the attention it has received, the story raises a few questions that have never been answered with finality. Two of the most common questions relate to Leggatt, fugitive first mate of the *Sephora* and the "secret sharer" of the captain-narrator's quarters: first, is Leggatt real or a figment of the narrator's imagination, and, second, does the undeniable fact that Leggatt killed a mutinous crewman make him a murderer? Part I is intended to answer the first of these questions, and Part II, the second. For those who have never read the story, a very brief plot summary precedes the discussion.

**Plot:** The young captain of an English ship, embarking on his first command in the Gulf of Siam, is visited by a man named Leggatt, first mate of the British ship *Sephora*, which is anchored two miles away. Leggatt is somewhat younger than the captain, but of the same generation and having a similar background; they even went to the same exclusive maritime school (Conway).<sup>3</sup> The visit occurs

on the captain's solitary night watch, and no one else sees Leggatt. It transpires that Leggatt has escaped his own ship and swum to this one (stopping to rest on two barren islets, then with no special purpose swimming for the light on the captain's ship) because he killed a sailor and was being held for murder. The captain, even before hearing all the details of the "murder," decides that (1) it was justifiable homicide and (2) due to a combination of unlucky facts, Leggatt could never get a fair trial.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the captain determines to hide Leggatt until he can secretly deposit him near an inhabited island. After enduring the torments of the damned, the captain succeeds in doing exactly that. The story has many additional nuances. For example, in helping to smuggle Leggatt into the Gulf near the island of Koh-ring, off Cambodia, the captain comes so close to the island that he risks scuttling the ship; and this daring action mysteriously proves the final step in the new captain's rite of passage into full mastery of his ship. (Since the captain is actually the narrator of the story, he will usually be referred to as "the narrator" in the following discussion.)

**Part I:** The main critic to actually question Leggatt's existence — in other words, to question the narrator's sanity — is Michael P. Jones, who will be discussed presently. What I take to be the correct view is well expressed by Norman Page: "Conrad has taken care to plant evidence" that Leggatt really exists, even though there is "undoubtedly something spectral about him" (Page, 156). This is seconded in almost the same words by Leo Gurko<sup>5</sup>: "Meanwhile the physical identity of Leggatt, the fact that he is not simply a projection of the captain's subconscious, is reaffirmed throughout..." (Gurko, 93). The word "subconscious" perhaps suggests the train of

thought by which this question arose in the first place. Albert J. Guerard interprets Leggatt as a sort of final piece in the jigsaw of the narrator's character. In Guerard's view Leggatt represents the unconscious instincts that the narrator has to rely upon in order to achieve full maturity, here meaning full command of his ship. Leggatt's killing of the *Sephora* crewman suggests that he is "criminally impulsive" and an embodiment of the narrator's "own potential criminality." The narrator (apparently with Conrad's blessing)<sup>7</sup> never tires of calling Leggatt his "other self" and words to the same exact effect. This, Guerard explains, is because the narrator must learn through Leggatt to commune with "the primitive and unconscious sources of being" latent in himself (All proximate quotes Guerard, 26).

My own reading differs in important respects from Guerard's, though he is very helpful in explaining certain elements in the story: above all, the nature of Leggatt's influence on the narrator. Leggatt is always resolute, and the captain acts with increasing resoluteness because of his contact with this unshakable paragon. I am not convinced that his experience amounts to the "classic night journey and willed descent into the unconscious" (Ibid.) that Guerard interprets the story as, and I positively disagree that Leggatt is any kind of criminal, as I will explain in Part II. But Leggatt's appeal to the narrator is clearly intuitive. There is a shared sense of values between them, partly because they are both "Conway boys" (Text, 89). The narrator seems only too ready to accept Leggatt's version of how he killed the *Sephora* crewman. As Jakob Lothe points out, there is a certain "bluff arrogance" in the narrator's response "... when Leggatt confesses, 'I've killed a man,' and the narrator offers

the confident explanation, 'Fit of temper'" (Lothe, 62). This is not to say that Lothe, Guerard, and other critics (e.g., Daleski) are right in reading something negative into Leggatt's character here. I do not. But the narrator obviously bases his judgment on intuition rather than the facts, which he has yet to hear. We see in *Lord Jim* that Conrad was aware of how intuition could be misplaced.

Guerard's interpretation also conforms nicely with the basic images that Leggatt conjures up from the beginning. He is usually seen in the dark (in the recessed portion of the narrator's L-shaped quarters); and, at least at a glance, especially in these spectral surroundings, he resembles the narrator, as the latter explains with due qualifications:

He was not a bit like me, really; yet, as we stood leaning over my bed-place, whispering side by side, with our dark heads together and our backs to the door, anybody bold enough to open it stealthily would have been treated to the uncanny sight of a double captain busy talking in whispers with his other self (Text, 93).

Furthermore, the narrator's very first view of Leggatt is of what looks like a body without a head. This suggests the kind of jigsaw connection that Guerard sees. The narrator has already shown himself to have a lively imagination. Though as competent as the unreflective Captain MacWhirr of *Typhoon*, he is an obvious foil to MacWhirr. In metaphorical terms, he already has a head. What he needs to bring to the surface (he already possesses and has demonstrated it)<sup>9</sup> is something signified by such phrases as "intestinal

fortitude" and "guts" — that quality suggested by the body *as opposed to* the head. This is what Leggatt's example and problem activate in the narrator, whose ultimate task is to do what he considers to be right in spite of the bad influences around him, as Leggatt did, and as Lord Jim failed to do. Leggatt has that indefinable quality which Captain Marlow in *Lord Jim*, lamenting Jim's lack of it, called "an unthinking and blessed stiffness" (*Conrad, Lord Jim*, 38) — presumably of spine, also suggested by the "headless" body.

Thus we can see that Leggatt is an important influence on the narrator. But influence and significance do not make Leggatt a possible figment of the young captain's imagination, as Michael P. Jones suggests he is:

Much of the fun of reading this story is not in trying to decide whether or not Leggatt exists but in observing how unable the captain is to consider such an issue. "Can it be," he asks himself in a way that characteristically neither confirms nor denies, "that he is not visible to other eyes than mine?" The fact that he is so incredulous over an obvious possibility implies that we may possess a freedom of imagination in observing his situation that he himself does not have (Jones, 109).

Jones admits the possibility that Leggatt really exists outside the captain-narrator's mind, but he regards the very incredulity with which the narrator questions his own sanity as amusing "fun," as though a really imaginative person would question his own sanity as a matter of course. However, in everyday life (the only conceivable

touchstone in such a case) do we really call a person who doubts the prolonged evidence of his senses imaginative — or do we call him disturbed? Gurko and Page do not specify the clues of Leggatt's external existence that they refer to, but there are many. In fact, the evidence is *a priori*: if the narrator was hallucinating as captain — years before narrating this story — have the intervening years of reflection failed to open his eyes to possibilities that Jones sees at once? They should have, unless we take him to be another dense, complacent Captain MacWhirr. But he is obviously not that. To belabor the obvious, his witty evocation of the first mate<sup>10</sup> and the *Sephora's* captain prove both his sanity and his imagination.

It might be natural for a person as isolated as the narrator to ask himself, in an unguarded moment, if he has imagined something, and the narrator does so. But it would be an excess of imagination — it would be real madness — to continue to doubt the experiences of a prolonged period when they have involved consequences and interactions like those of the story. How, for instance, does the narrator *already* know the whole story that the visiting *Sephora* captain relates to him unless a real person has told him? Surely Jones isn't suggesting that the narrator is imagining the visit of the older captain as well. This would be no less absurd than speculating that the narrator *as* narrator years later is really writing from a madhouse and may never have been outside England. We have to conclude that, for all his symbolic import, Leggatt is physically present on the ship.

**Part II:** In discussing his throttling of the mutinous *Sephora* crewman, most commentators refer to Leggatt as a "murderer." If all

of these critics felt Leggatt was really culpable, the word would be understandable, but even those who exonerate him, as many do, tend to apply it. This strikes me as a kind of overstatement and misuse of language surprising in English specialists. We would not apply such a word to a man or woman acting in self-defense or a soldier doing his honest duty.

However, whatever we call Leggatt, the real question is: Can what he did be justified? As already suggested, Guerard considers the act to be a real murder; he is not merely using an emotive word. But I fear that Guerard's desire to make Leggatt a symbol of the dark side of human nature tempts him into the premise that Leggatt is "lawless." A more ambivalent view is expressed by H. M. Daleski, who infers that Conrad at least did not intend to make Leggatt "a murderous ruffian" (Daleski, 173). But Daleski feels that the dehumanization of the dead sailor, both by Leggatt himself and by the totally sympathetic narrator, constitutes a lapse in "moral discrimination" that is hard to explain: "Given the fineness of Conrad's moral discrimination, it is difficult to account for his apparent unawareness of some of the moral obliquities of Leggatt's position..." (Ibid.). Daleski is very sensitive in responding to the rhetoric used to dismiss the slain sailor (e.g., the cur, rat, and — via the verb "crushed" — insect images), but concludes that Leggatt's "high-mettled readiness to assume responsibility coexists with an arrogant refusal to accept it in respect of the death of the sailor" (Ibid., 178).

I cannot see that Daleski makes a case for Leggatt's doing more than he did. Leggatt had the choice of allowing the mutinous sailor to pursue his insolence in "a sea gone mad" (Text, 108) or

dealing with him by the only means available. After Leggatt knocked the sailor down, it was not he who pursued the fight; it was the other man: "I believe the fellow himself was half crazed with funk. It was not time for gentlemanly reproof, so I turned round and felled him like an ox. *He up and at me*" (Text, 90; italics mine).

Not a single critic I have consulted mentions the very close parallel between this scene and Captain MacWhirr's felling of his mutinous and cowardly second mate (a disgrace to the Merchant Service, though not much of a danger to his ship, since he is disregarded by those around him) in *Typhoon*. There is more than a mere consensus that MacWhirr acted properly — the propriety of his action is simply taken for granted.<sup>11</sup> Yet if Leggatt is culpable for anything he does in this scene, it is for an action identical to MacWhirr's, striking his antagonist, and not for the throttling that follows. The rest of the fight — which was brought on by the man's retaliating (which Captain's MacWhirr's second mate wisely refrained from doing) — was a matter of unconscious inertia. If we use Leggatt's words to convict him, we must assume them to be accurate; and he clearly claims to have been unconscious:

We closed just as an awful sea made for the ship. All hands saw it coming and took to the rigging, but I had him by the throat, and went on shaking him like a rat, the men above us yelling, "Look out! look out!" Then a crash as if the sky had fallen on my head. *They say* that for ten minutes hardly anything was to be seen of the ship....*It seems* they rushed us aft together, gripped as we were, screaming

"Murder!" like a lot of lunatics, and broke into the cuddy. And the ship running for her life, touch and go all the time any minute her last in a sea fit to turn your hair grey only a-looking at it. *I understand* the skipper, too, started raving like the rest of them....They had rather a job to separate us, *I've been told*. A sufficiently fierce story to make an old judge and a respectable jury sit up a bit. The first thing I heard *when I came to myself* was the maddening howling of the gale...(Ibid., 90-91; italics mine).<sup>1 2</sup>

These are not the actions of a murderer but of an isolated man first doing his duty under duress, then succumbing to the inertia of a struggle, and finally frozen in an unconscious grip. Daleski's comment on Leggatt and his narrator-soulmate's dismissal of the murdered man is perceptive, but it invites obvious objections. Yes, the sailor was a human being, not an animal; but it is *because* he was a human being that people of a much humbler disposition than Leggatt would find sympathy impossible. Objecting to Leggatt's use of epithets such as "rat" and "cur" to express his contempt rather smacks of Captain MacWhirr's hilarious condemnation of metaphor in *Typhoon*. It also prefigures (admittedly without the sanctimony) the Political Correctness mindset of the eighties and nineties<sup>1 3</sup>

I shall end with the more sympathetic analysis of Kenneth Simons. Simons rightly, I think, observes that Conrad enacts the scene in such a way as to make us see Leggatt as possessing a superior knowledge of the moral issues involved:

The vividness of Leggatt's subjective experience and the challenge to the reader's ethical prejudices are captured in the same stroke; the civilized schema of law is retained only in a nominal form, figured as being dependent upon a stable context, and thus appears largely although not entirely irrelevant to the case. The apocalyptic conditions that force Leggatt to take the matter into his own hands are, as he says, "no time for gentlemanly reproof" (Simons, 97).

Ultimately, Leggatt is "the binding force of Eros in its war against death" because "Moral force is not an abstraction, but a weapon, a gun, which Eros uses in its struggle against death" (Ibid., 112-13). This strikes me as not only good but brilliant and well worth the space it takes to quote. However, I feel that Simons unnecessarily insists on Leggatt at the same time being a "murderer."

Most commentary on "The Secret Sharer" attempts to construct some theory that accounts for the problem of Leggatt's being both X's ["X" is Simons's name for the narrator-captain, since we never learn his real name] "ideal self" and a murderer. A serious misreading of the story is inevitable unless we recognize that first the problematic connection between ideal self and murderer is precisely the challenge which the story mounts to the reader's ethical preconceptions, and second that it is a problem only if unthinking primacy is granted to the legal framework and the murder is considered as a conventional deviation from it. Actually this is reversed; ultimately Conrad is interested in Leggatt as a judge, not as a criminal. The

character, as his name implies, is an emissary from a higher order (Ibid., 95).

“As the name implies” refers either to the Latin noun for *law*, which in the genitive is *legis* or to such English words as *legal*. Yes, we gratefully assent, Leggatt is the judge. But isn't calling him a murderer then a misleading oxymoron? If Leggatt has the right to do as he does — if, as Simons notes, Conrad succeeds in making us feel the superiority of Leggatt's judgment in the concrete situation — then he is not a murderer in any meaningful sense. This is why the captain-narrator never wavers in his appreciation of him.

In conclusion, I feel that despite all the critical disagreement on the two questions, there is one correct answer to each: Leggatt is not a figment of the narrator's imagination, and his own misgivings to the contrary are mild and temporary, and justifiably so; and though Leggatt strangled the sailor, his action was fully justified under the circumstances. Therefore, he is not a murderer.

### Notes

1 Any number of sources attest to this. See, for instance, Owen Knowles, *A Conrad Chronology* (London: Mamillan Press Ltd., 1989), p.76 : “Under terrible stress in 1909 from *Under Western Eyes*. Had finished Part III but desired to finish the whole project. In October he reports to *JBP* an ‘awful time during May, June, and July, what between disease, drugs, and worry,’ and in November suffer from a feverish cold and mental exhaustion, feeling that

unless *UWE* is soon finished he is 'totally undone.'"

2 See Conrad's letter to Edward Garnett in Frederick Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1979), p.722:

"The Secret Sharer, between you and me, is it... Luck my boy. Pure luck. I knew you would spot that one."

3 It is worth noting that Jim, of *Lord Jim*, also went to maritime school, while the *Sephora's* plebeian captain didn't.

4 Leggatt, like the narrator, is an outsider on his ship. But the *Sephora* is indefinitely worse than the narrator's ship. It has a cowardly old captain, who is intimidated by his awful first mate and steward, and the rest of the crew reflect the ethos of these men. To complicate matters, the captain seems to be ashamed that Leggatt saved the ship by setting the foresail, while he, the senior officer, merely whimpered in despair. He goes so far as to take credit for setting the foresail himself, and is obviously capable of testifying against Leggatt, as are many other crewmen.

5 The captain's close call is really a bigger moral problem than Leggatt's killing of the sailor. As numerous critics point out — and it is obvious in any case — the captain doesn't have to pass so close to the island to ensure that a swimming champion like Leggatt would make it to shore; so why is he endangering his ship and crew? Kenneth Simons, in an otherwise excellent essay that I shall refer to later, waxes Nietzschean in his defense of the captain's action (Simons, 114). My own thought is that after the excesses of this

century, many of them under the aegis of new philosophical systems (Nietzsche was popular with the Nazis; Marx, of course, with Stalin and Mao), we ought to treat abstract defenses of questionable actions with a certain rude scepticism. If an action endangers lives, its motive should be practical and concrete.

6 It might be pointed out by the grateful reader that Gurko is an excellent and concise Conradian critic. His view is always just, clear, and elegantly expressed.

7 The narrator constantly refers to "my secret self," "my other self," and even, at the beginning of the last visit, "my very own self": "On opening the door I had a back view of my very own self looking at a chart" (Text, 118): All references to "The Secret Sharer" are referred to as "Text"). Either this insistence is a minor flaw or it has some point that I haven't fathomed yet.

8 "I tell you I ought to know the right kind of looks," Marlow says. "I would have trusted the deck to that youngster on the strength of a single glance, and gone to sleep with both eyes — and, by Jove! it wouldn't have been safe.... He looked as genuine as a new sovereign, but there was some infernal alloy in his metal." (Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 40). And the resemblance between Leggatt and Jim is not only palpable but conscious on Conrad's part: thus Leggatt mentions the detail of his father being "a parson in Norfolk" (Text, 89) just as Jim "came from a parsonage" (Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 10). Leggatt, unlike Jim, does prove sound, but Conrad's evident point is that intuition alone does not establish this.

9 The narrator is put off from the beginning by the impudent second mate (the only man aboard younger than himself). When the rather silly first mate says, "You don't say so!" presumably for the thousandth time, the second mate hints at the wish to ridicule him. But the captain will have no part of it: "...but as our eyes happened to meet I detected a slight quiver on his lips. I looked down at once. It was not my part to encourage sneering on board my ship" (Text, 83). As the story progresses we can trace the captain's increased assertiveness in his greater severity with this second mate.

10 At one point he refers to the first mate by the latter's favorite expression: "It occurred to me that if old 'Bless my soul — you don't say so' were to put his head up the companion and catch sight of us..." (Text, 91).

11 The second mate from *Typhoon* has made many parallels, such as Donkin in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* He is a typical shirker, in Conrad's theology belonging in one of the lower circles of the hell. When we note Leggatt's very tense comment on the kind of "cur" that the sailor he fought with amounted to, we are at a distinct disadvantage if we haven't encountered this recurring type in more concrete form. *Typhoon's* second mate is a minor character compared with Donkin, but, if anything, he is more effective and startling. As an example of the impressions he makes, when anyone looks for him in his cabin, he is always wide awake, "glaring irritably from a soiled pillow" (Conrad, *Typhoon*, 216). In the scene referred to, he attacks Captain MacWhirr in the middle of the typhoon under the very roof where the helmsman is performing really heroic

duty. MacWhirr strikes him down, having previously fired him:

"Lost his nerve," he explains to his engineer. "Damned awkward circumstance" (Ibid., 253). This shirker is likened to an animal as explicitly as the *Sephora's* slain seaman: "The second mate was lying low, like a malignant animal under a hedge" (Ibid., 243). But here, since Conrad himself (as third-person narrator) is commenting, the simile can hardly be intended to reflect on the user.

12 The omissions in this quote (suggested by successive periods) mostly refer to the storm and would only enforce the point.

13 This paper is devoted to internal evidence of Leggatt's good character. For external evidence — some indication of Conrad's private opinion of Leggatt — see Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966, 1976, p.256. The model for Leggatt was a Sydney Smith, first mate of a ship called the *Cutty Sark*, who killed a seaman with a punch and was subsequently tried and convicted of a crime amounting to involuntary manslaughter. Jocelyn Baines, the Conradian biographer, is cited as commenting that "Conrad softened the crime... and also softened the character of the mate." Baines adds that Smith "was apparently a despotic character with a sinister reputation," as opposed to Leggatt: "Leggatt was, however, clearly an exemplary sailor, and his provocation was greater; it was in the middle of a storm when the fate of the ship was at a stake and the captain had lost his nerve". (Quoted in Sherry, 256). Sherry notes that Baines's source was imperfect and that more recent evidence shows Smith to have been a more admirable character: "Baines took his assessment of the character of the

mate of the *Cutty Sark* from Lubbock's account, but Sydney Smith was given a good character at his trial by his employer John Willis who also helped him to find a berth when he came out of prison" (Ibid.). Whether or not Conrad's expressed sympathy for Smith was based on a favorable view of his character, it is clear that he rendered Leggatt as a much gentler figure than Smith. In fact, as Leggatt's being a Conway boy and son of a parson suggests, he is a member of the Merchant Service's elite.

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