

Q. Critically analyse Joseph Conrad's The Secret Sharer.

Or

Q. Discuss how Conrad artistically weaves the themes of isolation and doppelganger into the story The Secret Sharer?

Or

Q. Comment on the conflict of identity and duality in the fiction The Secret Sharer.

And: Joseph Conrad was an English novelist and short-story writer of Polish descent. He exists in history as an illustrious man of literature. His experiences as a sailor translate decorously in his various novels and short stories. "The Secret Sharer," published in 1910, greatly exemplifies this translation. The setting of this short story takes place on the ocean, or more precisely, the Meinam River in the Gulf of Siam.

The Secret Sharer is a short book that is very near to perfection. In the opening paragraphs and the title there is not a word wasted. Each of those words serves to forecast the work in miniature. The story, however, exists as more than just a reiteration of a sailor's life; it explores the features of the human psyche.

"The Secret Sharer" stands as a perplexing examination of every person's dual nature, and how each person must resolve this duality for the self to grow. The themes of isolation and doppelganger constitute the profound message in the plot. With them, Conrad takes his readers on a metaphorical journey.

The unnamed Captain endures as the central character in the novel

His lack of a name represents his lack of self-knowledge, and thus, his lack of identity. The ship, he commands lacks a name as well, which represents his absence of knowledge for his crew. Given this command only a fortnight before, the Captain feels out of place onboard. Due to this, he stands alone on the decks in the beginning of the story. The theme of isolation presents while in the beginning, the Captain continues to solemnly examine his surroundings. This suggests the complete isolation the Captain feels in his heart. Shortly thereafter, he leaves to eat dinner with his crew.

The Captain's isolation further intensifies when he states a simple observation that he feels like a stranger to both the ship and himself. For the sake of his own comfort, he makes a magnanimous gesture to keep anchor watch until one o' clock, something unheard of for a Commander. In the darkness, he meditatively smokes a cigar and evaluates the "strangeness". In the depths of isolation, the captain then notices that the ladder had not been brought up from the side of the ship. As he proceeds to pull it himself, the force merely recoils back upon his body. At the bottom of the ladder hangs a naked man. The Captain then asks in a surprisingly ordinary tone, "What's the matter?" The man introduces himself to the Captain as Leggatt. Although the Captain lacks an identity, he immediately identifies himself with the stranger. A mysterious communication establishes between the two after only a few exchanged words. The captain then quietly takes the man to his room, where he offers him one of his sleeping suits. He takes notice that his "sleeping suit was just right for his size." (SS) This suggests that the two men correspond with each other, and bluntly introduces the doppelganger (double walker) theme.

Leggatt proceeds to tell the Captain that he killed an insolent sailor in an effort to save his ship. He also tells him of his escape. This background suggests Leggatt's bravery and irrationality. In contrast, the

Captain exemplifies a more timid and civilized nature. The Captain notices this contrast as well - "a stubborn if not steadfast operation; something of which I should have been perfectly incapable." (SS) From this point on, the Captain continues to refer to Leggatt as his "double". In the midst of his isolation, the Captain finds a figurative double. Thus, the doppelganger theme directly results from the isolation theme. A precedent for the doppelganger concept lies in the beginning of the story, when the Captain stands alone and examines his surroundings. The two clumps of trees he notices represent two separate entities that are the same, such as the himself and Leggatt. The scorpion found in the Chief Mate's cabin serves as a symbolic precedent as well. It applies to Leggatt in terms of danger, intrusion, and concealment. Also, they both symbolize the darker self that plagues everyone. In essence, Leggatt represents black, while the Captain represents white. Therefore, when they come together in the cabin, they both wear gray sleeping suits. This also represents the meeting of the conscious and the subconscious. Together, they equalize, and form the perfect commander. This concept demonstrates itself in the end, when the Captain acts courageously in response to Leggatt's influence. As the ship approaches Koh-ring, the Captain directs his men in an aggressive manner. Throughout this entire scene, he keeps his composure, and wins the respect of his crew. Overall, Conrad's story portrays how Leggatt influences the Captain, and by doing so, transforms him into the perfect commander. The timid Captain's initial situation reflects the situations in every person's life, when they must evoke their inner courage.

Under the above, the profound message of "The Secret Sharer" illustrates is the self discovery in the form of interacting with others. One may meet someone who provides insight to the inner and unknown self by cultivating one's personality. Conrad artistically weaves the themes of isolation and doppelganger into the story as he conveys this message. The Captain takes a metaphorical journey and experiences self growth. In the end, both him and Leggatt can look to a "new destiny."

To sum up, we can say that "The Secret Sharer" is both a psychological and autobiographical piece of writing, and may be considered one of Conrad's finest short works. Though the ambiguity remains whether the Captain or Leggatt can "be identified as the sharer of the secret or as the concealed or hidden sharer," But Conrad's narrative technique provides us with a clearer understanding of "The Secret Sharer."