

The Secret Sharer

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)

A Critical Analysis

'The Secret Sharer' is a compelling short story by Joseph Conrad written in 1909. It was first published in 'Harper's Magazine' in 1910, and as a book in the short-story collection 'Twixt Land and Sea' (1912).

The story takes place at sea, near the Gulf of Siam, and is told from the perspective of a young nameless Captain. The captain is unfamiliar with both his ship and his crew, having only joined their company a fortnight earlier. The Captain is furthermore unsure of himself, questioning his ability to fulfil the role of such an authoritative figure. These themes are explored through symbols throughout the novella.

The captain soon encounters a naked swimmer holding onto the side ladder of the ship while he is alone at night on look-out duty. He helps the mysterious swimmer onto the boat and hides him in his cabin without the rest of the crew's knowledge. He then learns of the mysterious swimmer's past. His name is Leggatt. He swam away from a nearby ship, called the Sephora, where, as chief mate, he killed another crew member for insolence during a storm.

The captain keeps Leggatt hidden in his quarters, away from the suspicious crew members and a visit from the skipper of the Sephora. Eventually, the Captain allows Leggatt to escape by bringing the ship perilously close to land for Leggatt to swim away safely. Though this risky sailing manoeuvre nearly sends the ship into the rocks, testing the Captain's seamanship, he succeeds in leading the ship away.

The story was created while Conrad was writing 'Under Western Eyes'. He wrote 'The Secret Sharer' as a break from his much larger novel. There are striking similarities between the two pieces. The story originally appeared in 'Harper's Magazine', under the title 'The Secret-Sharer'. But, Conrad revised the title to make it more ambiguous, making Leggatt secretly share with the captain, rather than merely sharing a secret.

The story contains elements of real events. The chief mate of the Cutty Sark killed another crew-member for insolence during a storm, and was later arrested in London for his murder. Conrad also drew on his own time as captain of the Otago, when his first mate did not trust him, and got a particular scare when Conrad manoeuvred the ship dangerously close to rocks in the Gulf of Siam.