

The Secret Sharer

by
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THE SECRET SHARER

Joseph Conrad

A critical paper by

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Why in the world did he do it?

Tell me now, isn't that what you thought, or even said aloud, when reading this brilliant novella? Why does the narrator, when he was a young man in command of his first ship, risk everything – his career, his ship, his entire crew – to rescue Leggett, a fugitive from justice and a confessed killer, whom he conceals aboard his ship and then needlessly puts his ship in danger to expedite Leggett's escape?

Conrad has his narrator tell us that all this recklessness results from his sense that Leggett is the narrator's "second self", that he and the narrator bear a remarkable and compelling similarity. Certainly, that alone is an interesting concept, but this fascinating story, the reader feels, must have a greater, unspoken meaning. In fact, even the title, *The Secret Sharer*, can be ambiguous: is the Sharer secret, or is it a Secret that is being shared? And if it is a shared secret, what is the secret and by whom is it being shared? Although this was Conrad's favorite story, even he might have been uncertain about the meaning of the title: in early publications he inserted a hyphen between Secret and Sharer, and then in later editions, he modified the meaning by removing the hyphen.

But getting back to trying to answer our original question, why did he do it?, let's start by having some fun. Other than geographical sites, Conrad's narrator provides us with the names of just three principals. Unnamed are the narrator's ship, the first mate, the second mate, the steward and the narrator, himself. The three name are: Leggett, the Sophora, the ship from which Leggett

escaped and Archbold, the captain of that ship. However, the narrator, after many years, is uncertain that he is remembering Archbold's name correctly. So, that leaves us with only two names: Leggett and Sophora.

The name Leggett is a Middle English name for a village official, who represents that village at the local feudal manor court. Sophora, in this case, is not the name of a popular British cosmetic firm, but the Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew name Zipporah, who was Moses' wife. The Bible tells us that Moses married her after he was forced to flee Egypt because he had killed an Egyptian, who was beating an innocent Hebrew. Doesn't this sound familiar? Leggett flees the Sophora because he killed a man, who was preventing him from saving the Sophora during a monstrous storm. So then, Leggett is Moses, who is leading the narrator to the promised land. The body of water crossed in Leggett's escape from the narrator's ship is, therefore, the Red Sea, and the mountain that the ship almost sails into during Leggett's final escape is, of course, Mt Sinai, and, and. . .

Wait a minute! Hold it right there! This is going way over the top! Better that we curb our enthusiasm and just try to get back to a reality that might truly answer our initial question: why did he do it? And the reality is that the narrator, as a young man, intuitively recognizes that the issue underlying Leggett's condition is one of crime and punishment. When the narrator misleads Archbold about Leggett's whereabouts, he claims that he cannot tell an outright lie, not for moral reasons, but for "psychological" reasons. For the same reasons, whether moral or "psychological", the narrator immediately grasps Leggett's dilemma. Unlike Archbold, he accepts the fact that Leggett, under enormous emotional stress, had to strenuously subdue the troublesome crew member if they were to hoist the last remaining sail and save the Sephora from a storm-driven destruction. Yes, in these harassing circumstances and with the ironically named Archbold in total emotional disarray, he did kill that seaman, but was it, as Archbold automatically assumes, murder subject to capital

punishment? Certainly a British court of law, operating under the severe maritime penal codes of that time, would conclude, as Leggett believes they would, that this was unmitigated murder. However, the narrator, intuitively assessing the nuances of the situation and protects Leggett from such an unjust fate. So, why did he do it? Because, in this instance, the narrator is doing the right thing, or at least what he thinks is the right thing.

Let's look for another answer to the why did he do it? Question. The narrator sees Legget as his "second self" and repeats this assertion, using one phrase or another, throughout much of the novella. And certainly there is a great similarity: they are about the same age, they are of the same social class (they went to the same school) and most of all they possess a strikingly similar appearance. In fact, it's why the narrator initially responds so sympathetically to Leggett. This is obviously the principal theme of the narrative. But is it possible that these two men are not so completely alike? Let's take a closer look at what the narrator recalls of this life-changing event that had occurred in his early adulthood. The story begins with him describing what feels to him to be a melancholy and lonely landscape. Although he is the captain of his first ship (or perhaps because of it), he also feels a sense of both isolation and inadequacy. He is the second youngest aboard the ship; a ship, as well as a crew, that is totally unfamiliar to him. As captain, his commands to the crew are perfunctory and almost play acting.

Enters Leggett, who had just taken the bold action of escaping from imprisonment on his own ship, the Sophora, and bravely swimming across the gulf to the narrator's ship. When the narrator discovers him, Leggett, despite his desperate condition, does not appear to be distraught. He assertively demands to speak to the captain and confidently explains his circumstances. Immediately, the narrator feels an instinctive sense of identity with Leggett because of their similar outward appearance. But, in fact, their character and personality are totally different. Where Leggett is decisive, the

narrator struggles with fear and uncertainty. On several occasions, the hideout that Leggett uses is nearly discovered. Panicked by the possibility of a disclosure, the narrator becomes highly agitated. But, in contrast, Leggett, having successfully escaped detection, appears unruffled and preternaturally calm.

However, by the time the narrator facilitates Leggett's escape, the narrator has finally shed his diffident personality and has actually taken on Leggett's confident resolve; a fundamental personality transformation that will change him forever. But for his encounter with Leggett, the narrator might likely have become another Archbold, an unthinking disciplinarian, who crumbles in the face of danger. As Lerner and Lowe would write many years later in a different context: "there, but for you, go I".

But the narrator is now resolved to test his newfound courage, just as Leggett had tested his own courage when he saved the Sephora by raising its last remaining sail during the destructive ocean storm. Although knowing full well that Leggett is an accomplished swimmer, the narrator is determined to facilitate Leggett's escape, and, despite the bewilderment of his terrified crew, the narrator needlessly steers his ship so dangerously close to land that he recklessly risks his ship, its cargo and the lives of his crew. But Leggett does successfully leap from the ship. Now the narrator must reverse the ship's course, but, being new to the ship, he cannot be certain that it can respond quickly enough to avoid running aground. He needs a marker in the water to judge how well the ship is maneuvering. The marker that he needs is his hat floating in the water, and it indicates that his ship has successfully executed its turn. It's the hat that the narrator had previously given to Leggett to help protect him in his future journey. Leggett is now symbolically returning that hat in recognition of the narrator's new act of bravery and to reward him by aiding him in navigating back to safety.

So, in conclusion: why in the world did he do it? I've suggested two

answers . First, the narrator made the judicial decision to save Leggett from a certain court ordered death penalty. Secondly, and more importantly, that by saving Leggett, the narrator was then able to save himself. The Leggett of today would be the narrator of tomorrow. The narrator thereby assures himself of an honorable life of responding assertively to any crises or to any situation that demands it. And perhaps, as a result, Leggett did in fact lead the narrator to a promised land: a land of self-assurance and responsibility.