

***THE SECRET SHARER:***  
**CONRAD'S TURN OF THE WINCH**

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*“I was appointed to my command only a fortnight ago. I know very little of my officers. Neither do I know much of the hands. I am a stranger to my ship, and (except for the second mate) I am the youngest man aboard, and I am as yet untried by a position of the fullest responsibility.”*

*“I am a very well-known shipmaster. I have been at sea now for seven and thirty years of which over twenty of faultless command, the last fifteen of them on the *Sephora*. My second mate and my steward have sailed with me for many years. I am married, and my wife sometimes travels aboard.”*

The older of these men tells at first hand a story about a storm that he and his men had endured, and about a killing on his ship during the storm committed by a mate who had served on that ship with him for about ten weeks. The younger man tells at second hand a different version of the same story derived from the fleeing mate, whom he had hidden on impulse, and with whom he had several hurried, whispered, clandestine meetings over a few days. Which would you be inclined to believe?

Most critics of “The Secret Sharer,” determined at least not to be classified with respectable tradesmen or bewigged old fogies, have no difficulty in answering such questions against the older man, the captain of the *Sephora*. But I think readers were meant to have *some* difficulty, as my arrangement of the above passages should indicate. The passages are made up of facts gleaned from the story, and most of the statements there are essentially quotations with some slight changes in grammatical person and in tense.

It has always seemed clear to me that the Young Captain (henceforth YC) is, in some important respects an unreliable narrator; but reading the literature I find only two scholars who agree with this assessment: J. D. O’Hara (1965) and R. O. Wyatt (1973).<sup>1</sup> O’Hara called his article “Some Unlearned Lessons in The Secret Sharer,” and it appears that they were still largely unlearned by 1973 when Wyatt wrote reinforcing O’Hara’s position, and remain largely unlearned in 1984, as far as I can judge. In his influential book *Conrad’s Short Fiction* (1969), for example,

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Lawrence Garver puts O'Hara's article in his select bibliography, but does not even advert to his thesis.<sup>2</sup> G. R. Dussinger (1969) devotes an extended footnote to O'Hara's major points but her response is less a refutation than a spirited outburst which refuses to recognize that omissions to which the text draws your attention may be as significant in a story by Conrad as in one by Henry James (p. 600, n. 4).<sup>3</sup> Joan S. Steiner (1980) also relegates both O'Hara and Wyatt to a footnote dismissing the ideas of the first as "dubious" and those of the latter as "equally questionable", though she does not devote any space to refuting their positions.<sup>4</sup> Steve Ressler (1984) ignores them entirely.<sup>5</sup>

Refutation would be difficult, I think, because both O'Hara and Wyatt make their points distinctly and well, free of jargon, and based solidly on the text with little in the way of speculative forays. It would appear that later critics find it more convenient simply to ignore their objections or dismiss them in footnotes than to confront them seriously. One reason why Wyatt's article especially may have had less impact than it should have done is his blessed brevity. Three of his major points are made in one short paragraph (the last on p. 20) and another in one sentence ("There is a tremendous irony ... p. 21). O'Hara had the poor taste to bring his naval experience to bear in an area traditionally innocent of any such practical knowledge. We academic landmen tend to feel uncomfortable with that.

The purpose of this article is to re-assert the view that YC is an unreliable narrator, although it is in no way a substitute for the O'Hara and Wyatt articles themselves. I shall be examining, though at more length and in a somewhat different fashion, several of their points and adding some of my own. Since I wish to deal here only with YC's credibility, I shall confine myself largely to those aspects of the story where there is some way of testing the reliability of his narrative. By this I do not mean, of course, that I think he is lying, but simply that he is not telling the whole story.

But first let me note a fact that is suggestive rather than conclusive: the story takes place in a kind of void. Except for the bare fact of his *Conway* training the narrator has no past, nor does he have any future. He has no name, and neither do his officers, his men or his ship. He may not be eternally condemned to tell his tale, but he does rather come out of nowhere to tell us his compelling yarn, as odd and

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as interesting as that of the Ancient Mariner. He is certainly no Marlow, back in London from the Congo, telling his story to an intelligent and seawise audience who know him well. He is not even, in this respect, like his double of *The Shadow Line* who is nameless also, to be sure, but whose history immediately preceding his command is given in considerable detail, and who completes his voyage trial and brings his ship into port. His story is heard by the sagacious seaman Captain Giles, who applauds his resolution to go on, and in a sense confirms the young captain in his new state. The very different situation in *The Secret Sharer* is, presumably, no accidental slip on Conrad's part. It adds to the tale one more element of mystery which Conrad clearly wants in this story. It is also, of course, one reason why he cannot have Marlow's friends listening. They might ask some penetrating questions on our behalf, especially the Director, himself a *Conway* Old Boy. We do not know this narrator, as Marlow's friends know Marlow. In fact we know nothing at all about him except his age (about 27) and his training school, and the fact that he is totally new to his ship.

For a judgment about the reliability of this stranger's strange narrative the scene where the captain of the *Sephora* comes aboard, is central. Wyatt (p. 20) aptly remarked the "peculiar animus" of the narrator's tone in his account of this visit. It is markedly supercilious, contemptuous, dismissive. What, for example, is the name of the captain of the *Sephora*? "It was something like Archbold—but at this distance of years I hardly am sure." Putdown and evasion number one. YC expects us to believe (and he has been successful with the majority of readers) that he cannot remember the name of the captain, though he can remember the name of his ship and of his mate, not to mention the many other details of the affair, one of the most momentous incidents of his life. The pretense is preposterous, especially when we recall that the older captain was a well known shipmaster sailing in the same waters who had commanded merchant ships for twenty years. If, by chance a young master did not know who he was before the event, he or anyone else would certainly know afterwards. But our narrator does not quite remember! How much else will he try to conceal, distort or half-remember? We have certainly been put on our guard.

One thing he is determined to conceal is Archbold's version of the Leggatt business, without which the audience cannot make a reasonable judgement. YC's

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mock physical deafness is an obvious, even heavy-handed, symbol of his very real mental deafness; he hears but will not heed, and certainly does not tell. “Archbold” raises his voice to tell his story. What is that story? Oh, “it is not worthwhile to record that version.” *We* should be the judges of that, but we do not get the chance. All we hear are bits, though Conrad makes sure that they are significant bits: the extreme violence of this “gentleman’s” attack on a common seaman, a fact not in dispute; and the older captain’s claim that he, not Leggatt, gave the order to reef the sail, an order on which the mate has so prided himself, and a matter, therefore, much in dispute. But whether “Archbold” mumbles or shouts we are not going to be allowed to hear him out. YC is never more Leggatt’s double than he is here. Neither of them wants the full enquiry that “Archbold” is willing to face.

Then there is the language in which the narrator chooses to describe the captain of the *Sephora*: his physical appearance, his actions, his words, even his feelings, (among which “he groped shamefacedly”). Everything is derogatory. With his “smeary blue eyes”, and his bandy legs, “he was not exactly a showy figure.” When he gave his name, the name of his ship and some other particulars, he did so “in the manner of a criminal making a reluctant and doleful confession.” Why on earth would this be so? YC shortly thereafter tells us sneeringly of the veteran commander’s justifiable pride in his excellent record. These two attitudes attributed to “Archbold” do not fit well together: pride and shame in the same things. Moreover, YC had recently heard another confession from an avowed killer, who was not exactly reluctant and not at all doleful, and who did not even ask for absolution, but just complained about his penance. YC’s dismissal of guilt was unquestioning; it implied that absolution was not even necessary; no real sin had been committed. This confessor judges those who come to tell him their tales by some personal standard that has little to do with their acknowledged dubious deeds or their known virtues.

Even the fact that “Archbold” drinks no liquor is subtly made to tell against him: “He drank two tumblerfuls [of water]. Terrible thirsty work” visiting the neighboring islands. “What was that for — fun?” asks our YC. The taunt is hopelessly immature.

“Seven and thirty *virtuous* years at sea, of which over twenty of *immaculate* command, and the last fifteen on the *Sephora*”(emphasis mine). The sneer built

into this resume of the splendid record of a veteran commander is unbecoming, to put it gently; the common view among academic critics that it is deserved strikes me as perverse. The impatience and annoyance of the young man in *The Shadow Line* with Captain Giles provides an interesting contrast, and his final response to the older commander is duly respectful. Conrad carefully, if slyly, gives us as much solid information about “Archbold” as he does about Giles, however colored by YC’s biased view. This should surely help us to make some reasonable judgment between Leggatt and “Archbold” and their respective tales.

Who, among those who have any knowledge of Leggatt, takes his part? Nobody. And this according to Leggatt himself. “Archbold” refused to let him slip overboard at a convenient spot. Leggatt explains why: “He was afraid of the men and also of that old second mate of his who had been sailing with him for years—a grey-headed old humbug; and his steward too.... Those two old chaps ran the ship.” Leggatt’s sneer at “Archbold’s” alleged “weakness” can hide only from those who believe in that “weakness” Leggatt’s self-damning admission that the other officers and the men are against him. There is not much left, one would have thought, but one recent critic actually found this to be a point in Leggatt’s favor.<sup>6</sup>

The opposition of the men is confirmed, if confirmation is needed, just after “Archbold” has left YC’s ship. YC’s chief mate tells him that the visiting crewmen from the *Sephora* have told their version of the Leggatt story, and have hinted that the murderer might be hidden aboard YC’s ship: “There was some dispute about it,” he says. “Our chaps took offence. ‘As if we would harbor a thing like that,’ they said. ‘Wouldn’t you like to look for him in our coal hold?’ “ Both sets of seamen seem to agree that Leggatt is some form of low life.

Not so incidentally Conrad has here once again pointedly passed up another opportunity to give us a different version of the tale than Leggatt’s, this time derived from the crew of the *Sephora*. They might know whose daring act of seamanship it was that saved them from disaster. But Conrad (or his creation Leggatt) has cast such a spell over us readers that most critics pay little attention to all these hints, and opt wholly for Leggatt.

It is time to cite at some length a version of the standard interpretation. I choose J. L. Simmons’s version because it puts in one bald paragraph the typical attitude to

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“Archbold” that I have been questioning. It shows quite neatly how one falls into the rather simple trap that Conrad has set. Referring to a well-known critic of Conrad, Simmons says:

Guerard uses this abject man [“Archbold”] to throw doubts on Leggatt’s capabilities; but to take this captain’s word that Leggatt “wasn’t exactly the sort for the chief mate of the *Sephora*,, requires the reader to overcome not only incorrigible sympathy for Leggatt, but incorrigible pity and antipathy for the man so unimpressive that the narrator cannot even remember his name. For we have in the captain of the *Sephora* one of Conrad’s brilliant portraits of a miserable failure, the man who has failed the test. True he has spent thirty seven “virtuous years at sea, of which over twenty of immaculate command;” but there is an evident failure of perception if one is to view his record as a sign of Conrad’s respect. It is not “the routine action of ordinary seagoing, but action of some extraordinary kind,” the crisis, which proves the ideal seaman. And in the moment of crisis this captain fails. Like Lord Jim after his failure, the captain attempts rationalization, It becomes with him an *idée fixe* that Leggatt be turned over to the law of the land..<sup>7</sup>

The critic’s own word “incorrigible” might be an accurate word to describe the attitudes expressed in this paragraph. To take only some of them: What evidence is there that “Archbold” is an “abject man, a “miserable failure”? Well, we have the statements of two detractors each of whom has been alive far fewer years than “Archbold” has been at sea. One is a mate, twenty-five years old; the other is his double, a totally untried captain a couple of years older. Surely the sensible response has to be that miserable failures do not get hired by any owner year after year to command ships. And what on earth is the “routine action of ordinary seagoing”? Are we honestly to suppose that in Archbold’s “routine seagoing” he has not seen more storms than his mate has years? Who is better qualified than the man who has captained the ship for the past fifteen years to decide who is or is not the right sort of chief mate for the *Sephora*? A twenty-five year old graduate of the *Conway* tells another Old Boy of the same school a “nice little tale.” Because this telling colors everything the second one sees in “Archbold”, is the reader obliged to see the veteran captain with their eyes only? That would be to join the Old Boys against the old boys.

Conrad has carefully scattered enough doubts through the text to make the reader properly suspicious of important parts of the narrator’s version of the story. Yet,

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just as surely, he presses us with the narrator's stubborn total conviction that he has done the right thing, and most critics seem to agree with YC more or less wholeheartedly. In a fine essay that emphasises a sceptical view of some of YC's attitudes, but which stops short of regarding him as an unreliable narrator, David Eggenschwiler remarks: "By and large we should give ourselves over to the narrator's point of view. But not entirely.... This ironic perspective towards the narrator, does not have to subvert the mythic elements of the story." My scepticism is considerably deeper than Eggenschwiler's but I would agree that it does not have to subvert the mythic elements in the story. It does emphasise the greater complexity of a tale that makes it impossible to come to any certain conclusion about the total truth of Leggatt's story and hence the propriety of the actions of YC, who makes his decision *before* he hears "Archbold's" story, and who persists in it afterwards. In addition, he shows no interest in the crewmen's version, and he forces us to remain ignorant of both.

Conrad has made sure that we do not and we cannot know the whole story, but he also makes us live intensely with YC's instinctive decision that he is right; with his persistence despite other versions of events on the *Sephora*, with his willingness to go to any length reasonable and unreasonable, to back it up. We are made to feel his profound psychological certainty, even at a distance of years, of the rightness of his action. It is this unshakeable assurance that has exercised its compelling sway over generations of readers, so that many readers not only feel his certainty, but share it.

Conrad has surely been justified in his crow of delight at his success with the story, as he wrote to Edward Garnett: "the *Secret Sharer* between you and me is *it*. Eh? No damned tricks with girls there. Eh? Every word fits, and there is not a single uncertain note. Luck, my boy. Pure luck." <sup>9</sup>

I could not even begin to prove it, but I like to think that his remark about "damned tricks with girls" is a reference to Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* which Conrad had read when it came out in 1898. Dubious narrator there too. Eh? No definite answers to many of the questions raised there either. Eh?

I suspect Conrad felt proud that he had written a story to match the famous teaser

of his “cher maitre.” If indeed Conrad felt that he had written a story to match that of James, the remarkable variety of interpretations of his tale would seem to bear him out.<sup>10</sup>

NOTES

1. “Unlearned Lessons in ‘The Secret Sharer,’” *College English*, 26 (1965), 444-50 and “Joseph Conrad’s ‘Secret Sharer:’ Point of View and Mistaken Identities,” *Conradiana*, 5 (1973), 12-26. Since the story itself is generally read in a variety of editions, I have not thought it helpful to cite page numbers for quotations from it.

2. **Conrad’s Short Fiction** (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p.230.

3. ‘The Secret Sharer:’ Conrad’s Psychological Study,” **Texas Studies in Language and Literature**, 10 (1969), 600, n. 4.

4. “Conrad’s ‘Secret Sharer:’ Complexities of the Doubling Relationship,” *Conradiana*, 12 (1980), 173-86.

5. “Conrad’s ‘Secret Sharer:’ Affirmation of Action.” *Conradiana*, 16 (1984), 195- 214.

6. See Ressler, cited in note 5.

7. “The Dual Morality in Conrad’s ‘Secret Sharer,’” **Studies in Short Fiction**, 2 (1965). 213.

8 David Eggenschwiler, “Narcissus in ‘The Secret Sharer,’” *Conradiana*, 11 (1979), 29.

9. **Letters from Joseph Conrad**, ed. Edward Garnet (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1928), p. 253.

10. I find no support for this view in Elsa Nettels’s book, **James and Conrad** (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977) where in a passing remark she says pretty much the opposite: “The governess, a first person narrator, is a character whose reliability as a witness we are invited to question, as we are not moved to question the narrator of, say, ‘The Secret Sharer.’... The very certainty with which the governess declares the motives of her ghostly adversaries provokes doubt” (p. 192). One agrees about the governess, of

course, but what of the certainties of our YC narrator about the very substantial “Archbold”?

To support my guess, however slightly, I note that in *The Shadow Line*, that other and later version of “The Secret Sharer” this phrase occurs: “There was a renewed moment of intolerable suspense; something like an additional turn of the racking screw.” Even more shadowy as evidence. I suppose, but suggestive nevertheless, is the occurrence of the following expression in a letter of Conrad’s concerning *The Turn of the Screw*: “it evades one, but leaves a kind of phosphorescent trail in one’s mind” quoted in G. Jean-Aubry, **Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters** (New York: Doubleday, 1927), 1:256, also cited in Nettels. p. 20. Could it be that the phosphorescent trail with which Leggatt comes and goes began with a reading of James’s tale? I think enough of the possibility to risk the rather pawky title I have given to this essay.