From Bloom’s Major Short Story

Writers: Joseph Conrad

“The Secret Sharer”

Mr. Guimaraes

AP English Prep
List of Characters in
“The Secret Sharer”

The captain is the story’s narrator. He is new to the ship and is nearly the youngest man on board. This is his first command.

Leggatt is the former first mate of the Sephora who has killed a man. He is no more than twenty-five, with “regular” features, light eyes, and a small brown mustache. He is uncannily steady, calm, and sure.

The chief mate is one who enjoys puzzling over seeming mysteries. His “frightful” whiskers are what the captain notices most about him.

The second mate is the only man on board that is younger than the captain. He is quiet, willing to question the captain, yet easily subdued.

The skipper of the Sephora has been her captain for fifteen years and is well-known, having been at sea for thirty-seven years. He has a name the narrator says he cannot remember with certainty, but he thinks it is something like Archbold. The narrator says his strongest trait is his “spiritless tenacity.” He conforms to the rules.

Critical Views on
“The Secret Sharer”

PAUL L. WILEY ON THE CAPTAIN’S BATTLE IN FOLLOWING HIS PERSONAL CODE OF ETHICS

[Paul L. Wiley has been a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin and is the author of Novelist of Three Worlds: Ford Madox Ford. He describes in this extract the arduous consequences of the captain’s decision to abide by his own morality instead of society’s.]

The shock of discovering Leggatt swimming alone in the sea gives the Captain both visual proof that the world is not secure and also an image of that side of his own nature which is immured in the same dark waters. In consequence he feels identified with Leggatt and accepts without hesitation the latter’s story of having killed one of the crew of the Sephora under the stress of passion during a storm. Leggatt’s danger thus conveys a warning not only of the Captain’s own limitations, already glimpsed by the reader in the matter of the anchor watch, but also of the peril of self-idealization in a world hostile to ideals. This disclosure of the conflicting tendencies in man leads to the feeling of duality which brings the Captain near the point of madness. The psychological aspect of his dilemma merges with the moral problem of helping a man guilty of a crime according to social convention. In aiding Leggatt, he acts in accordance with necessity and with the instinct of sympathy; yet the partnership between the two men, which enables the Captain to obtain self-knowledge, also stands in the way of his approach to familiarity with his ship. His erratic behavior in keeping Leggatt concealed makes him suspect in the eyes of the crew.

This situation reaches a climax in the scene between the Captain and Archbold, the master of the Sephora, when the latter arrives in search of his missing captive. The alternatives before the Captain here are (. . .) to surrender Leggatt to punishment at the cost of human feeling or to protect him at the risk of the Captain’s whole future. Archbold completes, therefore, the main triad of characters who figure in the allegory of conventional and private justice. He appears to represent a narrow creed of vengeance at variance with
conditions in a world of accident. He seems to the Captain dull and tenacious in a spiritless way in his desire to turn Leggatt over to authority despite the fact that the mate's courageous performance during the storm has saved the ship:

His obscure tenacity on that point had in it something incomprehensible and a little awful; something, as it were, mystical, quite apart from his anxiety that he should not be suspected of "countenancing any doings of that sort." Seven-and-thirty virtuous years at sea, of which over twenty of immaculate command, and the last fifteen in the Sephora, seemed to have laid him under some pitiless obligation.

Yet Archbold stands for the law on the Sephora; and in taking sides with Leggatt against him, the Captain disobeys a mandate of established legality in favor of a personal code which recognizes the common bond between men in their submission to error. The incident is timed expertly to occur at the moment when the Captain's efforts to hide Leggatt have strained his endurance to the utmost and thus to emphasize the full burden of choice that oppresses modern man caught in a state of divided loyalties. (…) The Captain comes to the verge of disaster in fulfilling his pact with Leggatt and in acquiring knowledge of human capacities for strength and weakness. Yet the hat which he gives Leggatt as a token of pity saves him and his ship under the shadows of Koh-Ring and marks his acceptance of the concrete fact that determines action.


EDWARD W. SAID ON HOW THE CAPTAIN IS DETERMINED NOT TO CHANGE

[Edward W. Said is Old Dominion Foundation Professor of Humanities at Columbia University. Among his many books are Literature and Society (1980) and Culture and Imperialism (1993). Here he takes issue with the critics that see the captain as a better man because of his encounter with Leggatt.]

Conrad has now established the sweep of his literary universe: he has question-begged away the process by which truth is corrupted into serviceable ideas by man's egoism. England and her closet of imagery have become his, shielding him from the heart of darkness. And it is precisely into this eminently British realm, inhabited with youthful discomposure by the narrator of "The Secret Sharer," that Conrad introduces Leggatt.

The challenge before the neophyte captain (whom I shall call X) is seen against an English background of "fair play" and innate racial superiority. His ideal conception of himself, he thinks, will have to be tried according to British tradition and the exigencies of Leggatt's difficult, but unmistakably British, presence. X's self-conscious effort to play his part is not only to keep Leggatt safe; he also wants to keep his activity within certain strategic restrictions. Together, the two young men threaten these restrictions by revealing their discontent with them. Leggatt shares X's unadmitted wish to escape from the notion, social, and philosophic prison in which for better or for worse X had, like Conrad, willfully placed himself. In order to attain goals that his prison does not allow, X must honestly ask himself the question: Am I able to realize my ideal of freedom by myself? The question is answered when X receives the man out of the dark, as a phosphorescent gleam of light emanating from the indifferent sea, and keeps him hidden on board as a temporary apostle of unrestricted freedom. X performs his risky concealment of the fugitive, but then goes no further. It is difficult to believe, as some critics have suggested, that X is a great deal better for his brief encounter with Leggatt. Leggatt simply increases X's confidence in the world of his previous choice. There is no probing of the idea because that idea "will not stand much looking into." Once X has no more use for Leggatt, Leggatt returns to the sea.

Just as a storm gains its full identity in the heart of the exemplary sailor who resists its attack, so Leggatt's presence on the ship endows X with an image of his secret self. But the image is both covert and strangely shameful. On his own ship, in bondage to its limited world, alienated from his crew, X uses Leggatt to gain an even more determined hold on himself as he is. The test of his ideal view of himself returns X to the British world he knows best. In short, "The Secret Sharer" is a hortatory intellectual fable about why a tricky escape from so-called duty is not after all possible. The image of the
It is evident it is not out of a sense of obligation to Leggett that the captain regards it as 'a matter of conscience' to take his ship so dangerously close to the shore, for he knows that Leggatt is a strong swimmer, and the mate has earlier told him that, in covering the distance of two miles between the Sephora and the captain's ship, he swam the 'last spell' of 'over a mile' without any rest. Nor does it seem adequate to say, as Albert J. Guernard does, that the captain is 'evidently compelled to take an extreme risk in payment for his experience', it not being clear to whom he owes such a debt. He would seem to be driven rather by a need to put both himself and his ship to an extreme test as a necessary preliminary to his taking effective possession of it as its captain. It is striking, in this respect, that the test should be depicted (as in the case of Leggett's killing of the sailor) in terms of a holding on that is simultaneously a letting go: 'under any other circumstances', the captain reflects, he 'would not have held on a minute longer', but he does in fact hold on, letting the ship go closer and closer, giving it its head, as it were, until the 'black southern hill of Koh-ring' seems 'to hang right over the ship like a towering fragment of the everlasting night' and to be 'gliding irresistibly' towards it. The watch gaze 'in awed silence', but the captain lets the ship go on, ordering the crew not to 'check her way', until it seems as if the ship is 'in the very blackness' of the land, 'swallowed up as it were, gone too close to be recalled, gone from [the captain] altogether.'

Unlike Leggett at the sailor's throat, however, the captain never loses his self-control, and at the last moment succeeds in bringing the ship round:

Already the ship was drawing ahead. And I was alone with her. Nothing! No one in the world should stand now between us, throwing a shadow on the way of silent knowledge and mute affection, the perfect communion of a seaman with his first command.

Though the captain may start as 'a stranger to the ship', he comes to full knowledge of it as a result of this experience, the 'silent knowledge' that he has of it evoking, in its context of 'mute affection' and 'perfect communion', the sort of knowledge that a man may take of a woman. The captain, that is, sees himself as having fully taken possession of his ship; we see, furthermore, that he has ceased to be 'somewhat of a stranger' to himself, and that, having learnt to know his own resources, he has also taken full possession of himself.
During the manoeuvre, the self-possession he demonstrates in snatching the ship from disaster is shown to coexist with a capacity for letting go; just as his fitness for the responsibility of command (which he proves at the same time) is seen to coexist, given the way in which he risks the safety of his ship and the lives of his crew, with a pronounced tendency to irresponsibility. But the sort of knowledge he comes to as a result of the experience suggests the integration of these dark Dionysian qualities in a self that will henceforth be proof against their disruptive influence, for we are told that nothing can now ‘throw a shadow’ on his seamanship, on his ‘perfect communion’ with his ‘first command’.

As the captain waits ‘helplessly’ to see whether the ship will come round, he reflects that what he needs is ‘something easily seen, a piece of paper, which [he] could throw overboard and watch’; but he has nothing on him, and has no time to run down for it. Suddenly he makes out ‘a white object floating within a yard of the ship’s side’ and recognizes his ‘own floppy hat’, which he has earlier given Leggatt and realizes ‘must have fallen off his head’ (…) Conrad’s provision of so fortuitous a saving mark ‘to help out the ignorance’ of the captain’s strangeness is a weakness in the story, for it makes his achievement of knowledge too much a matter of chance—and turns the highest kind of seamanship into a tightrope of contingency. But the terms in which the hat is presented also suggest that it is not by chance alone that we are to see the captain as being saved. The hat which saves him is ‘the expression’ of his pity; and it is in more than a physical sense that he is saved by his pity, the ‘sudden pity for mere flesh’ that he feels for Leggatt from the moment he comes aboard, and which (among other things) makes it impossible for him to give Leggatt up to the captain of the Sephora. What his pity saves him from, indeed, is depicted at length in the story of Razumov in Under Western Eyes.


Stephen K. Land on the Underlying Reason Why Leggatt Must Leave the Ship

[Stephen K. Land has been head of English and deputy headmaster at an independent boarding school in England and previously taught at the University of Virginia. He has written From Signs to Propositions: the Concept of Form in Eighteenth-Century Semantic Theory. Here he explains that the captain must get rid of Leggatt to maintain his own authority with his crew and the psychological strength his position requires.]

To give up Leggatt is the obvious and tempting thing to do and would correspond to the betrayals of the earlier political heroes (in Conrad’s stories). Unlike them, however, the Captain at once recognizes as paramount the bond between himself and his dependent and has no thought of surrendering him to authority. None the less, it is not “right” for him simply to accept and identify with Leggatt, any more than it would be “right” for Razumov to join Haldin unreservedly, for Verloc to become an anarchist in earnest, or for Nos-tromo to give himself to popular insurrection. The hero’s task is not to engage in the conflict, for both sides of which Conrad shows a roughly balanced mixture of contempt and respect, but to steer a way through it to a satisfactory and guiltless independence, such as is to some degree achieved by Emilia Gould and Natalia Haldin. The Captain, in particular, cannot accept as permanent and final his identification with Leggatt, for the obvious reason that to do so would be to condone discipline and to run the perpetual risk of the breakdown of his command.

The Captain must steer a middle way, asserting his individuality against both Archbold and his own crew. Here, as usual with Conrad, there are deep ambiguities on both sides. Archbold represents law and authority, the near-divine right of captains formerly expounded in the persons of Allistoun and MacWhirr, yet he is also shown to be a liar and an incompetent who fails to measure up to the higher standards of seamanship represented by Leggatt. The crew, while strongly inclined to be critical of their new Captain’s unorthodox methods, are themselves given to indiscipline, particularly the first and second mates, who are both brought into line by the Captain as the story progresses.
To complete his course without compromise the Captain must avoid both extremes. He must neither surrender Leggatt to Archbold nor allow Leggatt to remain as a threat to his own authority. There are, therefore, two movements to the tale. In the first, the fugitive is taken on board by the Captain and successfully concealed from Archbold. In the second, the disruptive influence of Leggatt not only causes the Captain to act in a manner which brings him to ridicule and disrepute among the crew, but also has a psychological effect upon him adverse to the exercise of his new command.

There are to a seaman certain words, gestures, that should in given conditions come as naturally, as instinctively as the winking of a menaced eye. A certain order should spring on to his lips without thinking; a certain sign should get itself made, so to speak, without reflection. But all unconscious alertness had abandoned me. I had to make an effort of will to recall myself back (from the cabin) to the conditions of the moment. I felt that I was appearing an irresolve commander to those people who were watching me more or less critically.

Having been brought aboard, therefore, Leggatt must be removed. The hero’s own success requires that he not only save Leggatt from Archbold but also dismiss him, which he does in the second movement of the story.

This is accomplished when, with exaggerated risk, the Captain takes his ship at night dangerously close to land so that Leggatt may swim unnoticed to safety. The risk is psychologically and logically necessary, for the Captain, having accepted his responsibility for Leggatt in the first movement of the tale, must complete the second without renouncing or going back upon what he has done.


BARBARA JOHNSON AND MARJORIE GARBER ON THE NUMEROUS FATHER-Figure CONFLICTS

[Barbara Johnson is a professor of French and comparative literature at Harvard University and a distinguished literary critic and theorist. Among her many books are The Critical Difference (1980) and A World of Difference (1987). Marjorie Garber is a professor of English at Harvard University and the author of Coming of Age in Shakespeare (1981). They examine here the many instances of rivalries with father figures.]

When we turn to the second paradigm of psychoanalytic reading, the pathology of the character, we discover a very similar Oedipal conflict in Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer.” If by Oedipal we mean competition with or rivalry with a father or father figure, or, by extension, threatening figures who wield power and seem to disempower the protagonist, the story has more than enough such conflicts to offer. There are several candidates for the role of father, notably the chief mate on the ship, an older man with “a terrible growth of whiskers,” “round eyes and frightful whiskers,” like many emblems of castration in Freud (e.g., “The Head of the Medusa,” “The Uncanny”), and, later, the skipper of the Sephora, also older, also whiskered, a married man whose name might be Archbold (a splendidly potent name) but the narrator isn’t sure—he has repressed it, and explains away the repression: “at this distance of years I hardly am sure.” . . . “Captain Archbold (if that was his name).”

At the inception of the story, before the arrival of either Leggatt (the double) or “Archbold” (if that is his name, the nameless, almost named, figure of fatherhood and the Law), it is the chief mate who seems to threaten the narrator’s authority. He is obsessed by uncanny castration images—the mate’s whiskers, the scorpion in the inkwell—and beset by doubts. Do I have the right to be alone with my ship? Is my command secure? Aren’t the father figures around me going to do me harm? As the story opens, the young captain has decided on a demonstration of his own self-sufficient super-potency. He will stay awake himself, rather than set an anchor watch, and assume command of the sleeping ship. Feeling better, determined “in those solitary hours of the night to get on terms with the ship of which I knew nothing, manned by men of whom I knew very little
more," he relaxes enough to take heart from "the reasonable thought that the ship was like other ships, the men like other men." Heartened, he thinks of smoking a cigar ("Arriving at that comforting conclusion, I bethought myself of a cigar and went below to get it"). Sometimes a cigar, when fetched from "below," from the unconscious, is more than a cigar. He stands confidently on the deck, bare-foot, in his sleeping suit, "a glowing cigar in my teeth," the picture of male potency (or of infancy imitating male potency). At this point he notices something dangling from the side of the ship, something that shouldn't be there—the rope ladder. He realizes with annoyance that it is his fault the thing is hanging out—since he dismissed the watch—and that he'd better put it back in before anyone notices, since it is a sign of inefficient command. The excessive object thus doubles the cigar: the display of the phallus is both desirable and punishable. "I asked myself whether it was wise ever to interfere with the established routine of duties even from the kindest of motives. My action might have made me appear eccentric. Goodness only knew how that absurdly whiskered mate would 'account' for my conduct, and what the whole ship thought of the informality of their new captain. I was vexed with myself." Consumed with anxiety, with castration fears, he sees something in the water, and the cigar drops out of his mouth.

I saw at once something elongated and pale floating very close to the ladder. Before I could form a guess a faint flash of phosphorescent light, which seemed to issue suddenly from the naked body of a man, flickered in the sleeping water with the elusive, silent play of summer lightning in a night sky. With a gasp I saw revealed to my stare a pair of feet, long legs, a broad livid back immersed right up to the neck in a greenish cadaverous glow. One hand, awash, clutched the bottom rung of the ladder. He was complete but for the head. A headless corpse! The cigar dropped out of my gaping mouth with a tiny plop and a short hiss.

The cigar drops out of his gaping mouth at the image of the headless corpse, the apparent realization of his castration fears. He is going to be punished by the whiskered mate and others for what he has done—or failed to do. But then the body's head appears, and, as in the Medusa story, he is released from his condition of stony paralysis: "it was enough for the horrid, frost-bound sensation which had gripped me about the chest to pass off." He is still intact—and so is the other. He is not guilty; indeed, it is the other man who is guilty, and guilty of murder, the murder of a "father" figure, the murder the

narrator in part desires but won't and can't permit. Arriving at this point in the young captain's train of thought and complex of fears, Leggatt represents the part of the narrator he can't accept or integrate. The dilemma is posed; shall I integrate him? Shall I acknowledge him as part of myself? If I do, then I can perhaps have a sense of proportion about the guilt I thought was so unacknowledgable. I will not be totally innocent, but I will be able to take command without feeling so threatened by catastrophe. I will understand that the law is often absurd—that to take command is to be able to assume guilt and to issue arbitrary orders, to let the symptom go (open the portholes, sail too close to land).

The two versions of the murder story the narrator hears, one from Leggatt, the other from "Archbold," are both his fantasies. In one, Leggatt's story, the ship is in danger, the captain impotent and ineffectual, unable to give the order to reef the foresail, the other man is obstructive; he, Leggatt, acts heroically in the face of the fathers' failure, eliminates the obstruction, and saves the ship. In the other story, told by the skipper of the Sephora, it is the young chief mate, the rebellious son, who must be punished and disinherited:

"You see, he wasn't exactly the sort for the chief mate of a ship like the Sephora." I had become so connected in thoughts and impressions with the secret sharer of my cabin that I felt as if I, personally, were being given to understand that I, too, was not the sort that would have done for the chief mate of a ship like the Sephora.

Archbold would like to call Leggatt a suicide, to assume that he killed himself out of guilt. The "truth" of this primal scene is unrecoverable, and does not in fact exist; it exists only in its retellings, or rather in the narrator's retellings of those retellings, and both dramatize his unconscious fears, satisfy his unconscious needs: to be a hero; to be punished; to be a man; to be a child.

In the end, having harbored and released the fugitive, the young captain can be alone with the ship, with the command. He has come out the other end of the Oedipal crisis by accepting the necessity of losing a part of himself: his fantasy of guilty omnipotence. In essence he has arrived at a new, revisionary version of castration as enabling.

The narrator says that Leggatt swims away 'to take his punishment.' At the realistic level, this remark is true only in the sense that Leggatt has chosen to begin a self-imposed exile as a fugitive. In the most obvious sense, however, the remark is a lie, since Leggatt is fleeing the punishment that would assuredly await him if he were put on trial for killing a man. Indeed, one of the most enigmatic features of the tale is that the narrator never seems to appreciate the moral enormity of his own readiness to help a felon to elude justice. Leggatt killed a man who impeded his endeavour to set a sail during a storm. He believes himself to be entirely justified in his homicidal action, since the sail saved the imperilled ship. The hero unquestioningly accepts Leggatt's view. An unsavoury moral implication is clearly that some men constitute a bold elite with the right to override long-established moral and legal principles. One elegant structural and ethical irony of the tale is that whereas Leggatt had thought it right to kill a man in order to save a ship and her crew, the hero thinks it right to imperil a ship and her crew in order to save a man. As Leggatt resembles a complementary mirror-image of the hero, so the eventual crisis on the young captain's vessel resembles a complementary mirror-image of the crisis on Leggatt's vessel.

The structural elegance of the tale is also illustrated by that detail of the 'white hat' in the sea. (...) The kindly gift has rewarded the giver, just as the captain's aid to Leggatt has resulted in a test of seamanship which enables the captain to gain confidence in his own authority over the ship. Like The Shadow-Line, this is a story of initiation by ordeal into maturity. Lucid, adroit, economical, elegant, 'The Secret Sharer' is both a vivid yarn and a tantalising rune. By depicting complicity with a violent outlaw as a near-mystical imperative with a valuably positive outcome, it displays in extreme form the defiantly Romantic and almost Nietzschean aspect of Conrad's paradoxical temperament. The tale complements Under Western Eyes, in which a fugitive is betrayed and the betrayer undergoes protracted anguish.

GAIL FRASER ON THE CAPTAIN’S DISCOVERY OF HIS AUTHENTIC SELF

[Gail Fraser is an instructor in English at Douglas College in British Columbia. She has written Interweaving Patterns in the Works of Joseph Conrad, as well as several articles on Conrad. Here she explains that in order to become part of his ship the captain must accept Leggatt and his "other self.”]

In 'The Secret Sharer', the plight of the outsider is more ambiguously treated. Part of the story's fascination is its reluctance to endorse in a straightforward way the young captain's decision to shelter Leggatt and help him evade 'the law of the land'. In this respect 'The Secret Sharer' dramatizes a familiar Conradian paradox, for the captain's immediate sympathy for the outlaw conflicts with his need to achieve solidarity with his officers and crew. His division of loyalties is represented as an intensely problematic division of self: 'I was not wholly alone with my command; for there was that stranger in my cabin. Or rather, I was not completely and wholly with her. Part of me was absent.' Conrad opposes the L-shaped cabin, which symbolizes the captain's 'secret partnership' with Leggatt, to the ship's deck and the 'established routine' of the community he ostensibly leads. In the story's dramatic ending, however, these contradictory stresses are resolved, and even before the Kohring crisis, the captain confesses that he is 'less torn in two' when he is with his 'double'. Earlier still, before Leggatt's mysterious arrival, he admits that he is both a stranger to the ship and a stranger to himself. To integrate himself into the ship's community as commander, the captain must first demonstrate solidarity with Leggatt, the outsider and his 'other self'.

In posing this dilemma of dual responsibility, Conrad adds an important dimension to the Doppelgänger tradition, which conventionally treats the protagonist's 'double' as a side of the self that has been hidden or repressed. 'The Secret Sharer' is like other fictions of this type because it explores Leggatt's role as counterpart of the captain's outward, public identity: to deny his existence (as in a lie to Captain Archbold) would amount to self-mutilation. In effect, though, it is the captain's moral feelings for Leggatt as another individual—a fellow officer—that set this story apart from works like Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde or Dostoevsky's 'The Double'.

Conrad's allusions to the Cain and Abel story in Genesis, and his direct reference to the passage in which the Lord sets his mark upon Cain, gives the captain's act of fellowship a parabolic resonance. The contrasts between Leggatt and Cain are as important as the parallels. Unlike Cain, Leggatt kills an 'Abel' who is threatening the safety of the community; unlike Cain as well, Leggatt goes into the wilderness without 'the brand of the curse... to stay a slaying hand.' At the same time, the captain's instinct to protect Leggatt does not merely constitute an affirmative response to the question 'Am i my brother's keeper?' Rather, it involves his discovery of an authentic self—in the sense used by psychologists who give primary significance to the interdependence of public and private roles—by recognizing his responsibility for another human being.


JOYCE CAROL OATES ON THE CAPTAIN’S PREJUDICE

[Joyce Carol Oates is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University. She is a Pulitzer-Prize nominee who has written numerous novels and collections of short stories, poetry, and plays. The captain bonds with Leggatt. Oates argues in this extract, because he is of his own class and background.]

The famous tale "The Secret Sharer," from Conrad's collection 'Twiixt Land and Sea (1912), similarly reflects the narrowness of its creator's perspective. Here it is class, not sex or race, that determines a man's worth: an immature young captain, uneasy in his responsibility, mysteriously protects a fugitive named Leggatt, who has fled another ship after having killed a man; the young captain goes to extraordinary, foolhardy risks to allow Leggatt to escape being brought back to England to be tried; by the end of the suspense story, with the flight of Leggatt, the equation between the two men, forged out of their similar backgrounds and temperaments, has been many times reiterated: Leggatt swims clear of the ship "as though he were my
second self . . . a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new
destiny.

The difficulty for contemporary readers of “The Secret Sharer,”
which was one of Conrad’s favorites among his own stories, is that
the bond immediately forged between the young captain and the
young fugitive is class-ordained and narcissistic: Leggatt has even
attended the captain’s school, Conway (“You’re a Conway boy?”).
Leggatt’s act of violence is portrayed as a virtuous act by an
upstanding if hot-headed first mate; the man he has killed is of a
lower social rank, one of the common sailors: “He wouldn’t do his
duty and wouldn’t let anybody else do theirs . . . You know well the
sort of ill-conditioned snarling cur—” Why does the young captain
so eagerly take Leggatt at his own word, and make no attempt to
verify the story? ( . . . ) Where the Doppelgänger (“double”) rela-
tionship between Marlow and Kurtz is mysterious, subtle and ever-
shifting in its meanings, the relationship between the captain and
Leggatt is superficial and far too heavily underscored. But “The
Secret Sharer” remains one of Conrad’s most characteristic stories,
and it contains passages of language as beautifully evocative as the
most celebrated passages in “Heart of Darkness.” The opening is
particularly effective, setting the tone for a tale of solitary risk and
initiation:

On my right hand there were lines of fishing stakes resembling a mys-
terious system of half-submerged bamboo fences, incomprehensible
in its division of the domain of tropical fishes, and crazy of aspect as if
abandoned forever by some nomad tribe . . . for there was no sign of
human habitation as far as the eye could reach.

The silent approach of Leggatt, like a phantom in a dream:

The side of the ship made an opaque belt of shadow on the darkling
glassy shimmer of the sea. But I saw at once something elongated
and pale floating very close to the ladder. Before I could form a guess a
faint flash of phosphorescent light, which seemed to issue suddenly
from the naked body of a man, flickered in the sleeping water with the
elusive, silent play of summer lightning in a night sky. With a gasp I
saw revealed to my stare a pair of feet, the long legs, a broad livid back
immersed right up to the neck in a greenish cadaverous glow. One
hand, awash, clutched the bottom rung of the ladder. He was com-
plete except for the head. A headless corpse!