

Essential Short Stories

Teaching Unit

The Secret Sharer

by Joseph Conrad

written by Halina Adams

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Biography

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), a Polish-born British novelist, adventurer and explorer, was most famous for writing short stories and the novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

Conrad was born in the Ukraine to a poor, very patriotic family of Polish intellectuals. His original name was Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski. His family drew the ire of the Russian government, leading to the exile of Joseph's father. The family moved to Krakow, where both parents died before Joseph turned eleven. At sixteen, Conrad left Krakow and began his life at sea. He traveled to many foreign countries and cities—including Argentina, Marseille, Venezuela, Constantinople, and Bombay, to name a few—and worked several different jobs. Some jobs, like gunrunning and espionage, provided the basis for his later novels, while others merely paid the bills. Almost all of Conrad's sea travels made their way into his fiction, most notably in his famous novel *Heart of Darkness*, which relates Conrad's journey down the Congo.

Despite writing in English as his third language (he wrote in Polish and French first), Conrad is often considered to be one of the foremost English prose writers. His style often follows the tradition of Romanticism in that he pits awesome and sometimes terrifying depictions of nature against complex psychological dilemmas negotiated by his narrators. In each of his stories, Conrad creates a tiny world in which larger artistic and moral questions play out. Often, critics compare his vivid yet sparse descriptions to the visual artistic movement known as Impressionism.

Conrad's works came under fire in the twentieth century when writer-theorist Chinua Achebe wrote an article in 1975 entitled "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." In the article, Achebe attacked Conrad's depictions of native people and the African continent, claiming that the story perpetuated racial stereotypes and used racially insensitive language. Because of this, Achebe argues, Conrad's story cannot be considered great literature. Proponents of Conrad's writing pointed out that Conrad used such imagery and language to highlight the problems with European colonialism and that any reading of *Heart of Darkness* requires an understanding of this irony.

Joseph Conrad died of a heart attack on August 3, 1924.

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Plot Summary

The story opens aboard a nameless ship in the Gulf of Siam, just north of the River Meinam. A nameless narrator, the young captain of the vessel, explains that he has been in charge of the ship for the last two weeks, and that the ship is about to embark on a journey home. The captain expresses his uneasiness with his crew members and mates, frequently describing the sense of loneliness he feels aboard the ship. He relates a conversation between himself and his officers about another ship, the *Sephora*, which is anchored in a natural harbor a few miles from their own ship. The captain informs the first mate that he will take the first watch in order to allow his crew to rest. The first mate seems surprised by this strange order, but does not argue with the captain.

During the watch, the captain continues to think about how little he really knows his crewmen and his ship. Late into the captain's watch, he realizes that a rope ladder has been left unfurled over the side of the ship. Annoyed, the captain goes to retrieve the ladder, only to discover a naked man holding on to the other end, floating in the water. Despite the new arrival's strange appearance, the captain does not raise an alarm. The man in the water explains that his name is Leggatt and that he has been swimming since nine in the morning. The captain immediately feels a connection with Leggatt, helps the man aboard, and gives the new arrival a pair of pajamas.

Once he has Leggatt aboard, the captain ushers his guest to his own cabin. There, Leggatt reveals that he is the chief mate of the *Sephora*, and that he killed a man aboard the other ship. The captain compassionately listens to Leggatt's story: during a wild storm, Leggatt was trying to save the *Sephora*, yet one sailor would not cooperate. Leggatt went mad and began to strangle the man. In the confusion of the storm, the two men were swamped by waves, Leggatt lost consciousness, and when he awoke, his fingers were wrapped around a dead man's throat. He was imprisoned for several weeks until he was able to escape, swimming to the nearby islands where he faked his suicide by tying a rock to his clothing. He left the island when he saw the captain's ship, swimming almost all day to get there.

The captain sympathizes with Leggatt, frequently expressing the sense that the other man is somehow his "double" or "other self," and decides to keep Leggatt hidden in his cabin. This proves to be more difficult than the captain anticipated, for his crew takes the captain's strange behavior to be signs of either madness or drunkenness, and the captain of the *Sephora* comes aboard to search for Leggatt. Eventually, Leggatt convinces the captain that he must be marooned. Though hesitant at first, the captain eventually concedes; the two devise a plan in which the ship will sail almost dangerously close to the coast of Koh-ring so that Leggatt may jump ship and swim to safety.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. identify several major concepts in Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" and point out how they are depicted:
 - the different aspects of feeling alone
 - the importance of friendship
 - the darker aspects of human nature
 - the importance of self-knowledge
 - the struggle between nature and man
 - the concept of the double
 - the contrast between what is thought to be right and what an individual thinks is right
 - how a character matures
 - the consequences of duty and class
 - using allegory to make a point about larger universal issues
2. explain how the description of a character can change in the story.
3. follow Conrad's use of foreshadowing, suspense, and description.
4. comment on the juxtaposition of man and society.
5. identify how setting plays an important role in a story.
6. explain various symbols and motifs, including:
 - the gray pajamas
 - the bathroom
 - the captain's mistrust of his crew
 - the reasons for not turning Leggatt over to the authorities
 - the contrast between land and sea
 - the scorpion and other animal imagery
 - destruction and redemption
 - the captain's hat
 - duality
7. discuss the differences between the captain and the captain of the *Sephora*.
8. point out examples of Conrad's "Impressionistic" style.

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Study Guide

Vocabulary

alluding – indirectly referring to something without naming it
arduous – hard to achieve, complete, or attain
cistern – a large water-tank, sometimes used to store liquor
contrived – artfully planned; faked
cuddy – the captain's cabin, often where the officers eat their meals
detained – held back; held prisoner
discomfiture – confusion; frustration
forecastle – the forward part of a ship where the sailors live
gale – a very violent storm
incredulity – refusal to believe; suspicion
intervals – periods of time between events
mantle – a cloak, hood, or other piece of clothing worn for protection against the elements
monotonous – a boring, unvaried sound or speech that has only one note
nomad – a wanderer; someone who does not have a permanent home
opaque – dim, dark; not transparent
oppressive – overwhelming; putting an unbearable burden on
pagoda – a temple or sacred building, usually Buddhist or Hindu
pantomime – using gestures or other non verbal cues to express something
phosphorescence – glowing in the dark; light that does not give off heat
punctilious – obsessed with rules, procedures, or decorum
somber – dark; gloomy
sovereigns – English coins made of gold
symmetrical – well-balanced; proportionate
tenacity – being especially firm or stubborn about something
urbanely – blandly polite; courteously; mannerly

1. Using textual references, explain how Conrad shows the similarities between Leggatt and the captain.
