

Leading A Double Life

All humans keep secrets. No matter what the subject may be, people purposely withhold information from each other for many purposes. Some try to shield others from the pain such secrets would inflict on them. Others try to preserve their own reputation or make themselves look better. In *The Secret Sharer*, I find that the double serves as a catalyst for unlocking the captain's true personality. In illustrating the relationship between the two men, their similarities, and their differences, Conrad uses this character to teach the captain important virtues which allow him to become closer to his crew.

In order to understand the role of Leggatt in this story, one must first understand the character of the unnamed captain. Among his shipmates, the captain is an outcast. He claims that "all these people had been together for eighteen months or so, and my position was that of the only stranger on board" (9). Having only recently been given his position, Conrad heavily implies that the captain's connections earned him his post and as a result, he does not have the respect of his fellow sailors. Compared to the rest of them, he's young, inexperienced, and submissive—the opposite of what a leader should be. Above all, "what [he] felt most was [his] being a stranger to the ship; and if all the truth must be told, [he] was somewhat of a stranger to [him]self" (9). He is adrift, both in mind and at sea—the one part of his job he truly understands. As he says, "All its phases were familiar enough to me, every characteristic, all the alternatives which were likely to face me on the high seas—everything!... except the novel responsibility of command" (10). When he offers to take the anchor watch, his fellow sailors are astonished; nonetheless, they obey. He wants to learn more about his position and how to run it. While perhaps an abnormal action, it is one step closer to achieving the confidence he seeks. Alone

again on the deck, the captain again recalls his inherent freakishness. His situation seems hopeless; that is until Leggatt enters the picture.

Clinging to the rope ladder, the mysterious appearance of the captain's double can hardly be considered a coincidence. When the captain first lays eyes on him within the ocean, the man appears ethereal. Illuminated in the overhead flashes of lightning, he is naked, entirely drenched in the waters. Much in the same way, the captain feels exposed and vulnerable in his anxieties. Already, Conrad establishes a parallel between the two men, a connection the captain perhaps does not even recognize. Nonetheless, it is one he does not share with anyone else onboard. One could say that he is the missing link between the captain and his crew. As Leggatt climbs onto the deck, he is described as having "rather regular features; a good mouth; light eyes under somewhat heavy, dark eyebrows; a smooth, squared forehead; no growth on his cheeks; a small, brown moustache, and a well-shaped, round chin" (13). He is a manifestation of the captain's struggles and his experiences, all while sharing similar physical attributes. Both are young, dark-haired Conway boys who held high positions on ships and have lost their connection to them. All these characteristics aside, once they begin to interact, once the doppelganger begins to share his secret, the full extent of his purpose becomes realized.

At this point, Conrad drives the idea of the double into readers' minds most. Unlike the captain, his companion is everything he strives to be: confident, courageous, fearless, and authoritative. As he listens to the story, the captain says "[Leggatt] appealed to me as if our experiences have been as identical as our clothes. And I knew well enough the pestiferous danger of such a character where there are no means of legal repression. And I knew well enough also that my double there was no homicidal ruffian" (15). Quickly becoming attached to his double, the captain's trust in him initializes a secret relationship, so much so that the captain starts to

express seemingly uncharacteristic behavior. In reality, his new personality had always been there. All it took to unlock it was the key— his friend, his confidante, his double.

Not only does Leggatt help the captain repair his relationships with his crew, he also sets him forth on a path of leadership, one stronger and braver than that of the skipper of the *Sephora*. As the Captain continues his secret relationship with his double, risking everything to protect him, he must leave his comfort zone and embrace responsibility. He must take on the proper persona of his position. It is incredibly difficult for him, as he expresses his concerns and doubts to himself, saying “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*. I had no doubt in my mind” (26). However, by the end of the novel, he overcomes this fear. He challenges his men and begins to give out orders. Now, Leggatt is less a man so much as a personality— the captain’s true personality. As he says near the end, “...I hardly thought of my other self, now gone from the ship, to be hidden forever from all friendly faces, to be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth with no brand of the curse on his sane forehead to stay a slaying hand... too proud to explain” (42). All thanks to his mysterious doppelganger, the captain finally became who he wanted and needed to be.