

The Enigma Code of “The Secret Sharer”

GEORGE KUTASH

DOI: 10.53720/XWMA9014

Abstract: While most commentary on Joseph Conrad's short story, "The Secret Sharer," focuses on the loneliness of the Narrator-Captain and on his perception of the fugitive Leggatt as his "double," this article shifts the attention away from these issues, and onto some other noteworthy aspects of the story. Conrad's piece of fiction is connected to a historical event which took place on board HMS Cutty Sark in 1880. There, Captain James Wallace committed suicide under the weight of responsibility he felt for a crime that had taken place on his clipper, and for his decision to allow the murder-accused to quietly slip away, thus perverting the course of justice. As an analysis of hints given in the story as to the protagonists' age and personal circumstances reveals, Conrad's Narrator-Captain is, in fact, James Wallace's fictional reincarnation, for whom Conrad rewrites history and provides him with a triumphant denouement. Conrad, thus, gives a different finale to the real-life saga and rescues young Captain James Wallace from an ignominious suicidal end. Conrad is motivated in this both by personal sympathy, and by social-class solidarity felt for Captain James Wallace. Further, the article contains a discussion of the structure of the narrative, which shows that the first half of the text is crafted in the form of a "tale of assembly," and an examination of the naming convention, which reveals that Conrad's practice of naming or leaving a person un-named in the story marks position in social hierarchy, and is a deliberate device.

INTRODUCTION

It was a childhood friend of mine who first drew my attention to “The Secret Sharer” (1910). He said that, at the time, he felt the same way as the captain

THE ENIGMA CODE OF “THE SECRET SHARER”

in Joseph Conrad’s brief masterpiece: diffident, full of self-doubt, and surrounded by strangers whom he could not share his thoughts with. Rather than loneliness, isolation, or self-doubt, however, to me, the piece read more as a narrative about antagonism across social class boundaries, and about an idealisation of class-solidarity among “gentlemen.” Having then studied the historical background to the story, and having contrasted characters and key aspects of the real-life events with the way Conrad had refashioned them in his fictional account, I came to the realisation that it must have been the fate of Captain James Wallace of the *Cutty Sark* with whom Conrad had sympathised greatly, and which weighed heavily on the author’s mind, and that, in his novella, he decided to put right in fiction what had gone tragically wrong in real-life thirty years earlier on the *Cutty Sark*’s fateful voyage from London to Anjer in 1880.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In his Author’s Note to *Twixt Land and Sea*, Conrad provides a brief explanation of the connection between “The Secret Sharer” and the historical incident on board the *Cutty Sark*:

Notwithstanding their autobiographical form the above two stories [i.e. *A Smile of Fortune* and *The Secret Sharer*] are not the record of personal experience. ... The basic fact of the tale I had in my possession for a good many years. It was in truth the common possession of the whole fleet of merchant ships ... The fact itself happened on board a very distinguished member of [John Willis’ merchant fleet], *Cutty Sark* by name ... (6)

The “fact” in this passage refers to an event which took place in August of 1880 while the *Cutty Sark* was sailing from London to Anjer in present day Indonesia under the command of James Smith Wallace (1853–1880). The ship was short staffed and had several seamen on board who were not fully competent. One of these was a black man by the name of John Francis.

The first mate of the ship was Sydney Smith. On the 9th or 10th of August, Smith was in command of the watch. In the course of hauling a sail around, he gave a command which Francis, being a rather incompetent sailor, was not able to carry out

properly. An exchange of harsh words ensued, during which Smith hurled racial slurs at Francis. Francis retorted and dared the first mate to follow up on his various threats. Francis also threatened to hit Smith with a capstan bar if he did. A physical altercation followed, during which Smith hit Francis on the head with a capstan bar. Having sustained a fatal injury, Francis never regained consciousness and died three days later (Sankey).

Following the incident, the *Cutty Sark* proceeded to its destination. Charles Sankey, who was an “apprentice,” i.e. a trainee officer on the ship, describes the mood on the ship as follows: “After this the mate kept to his cabin. The ship suddenly became quiet, the men going about their work in sullen silence with bitterness in their hearts ... Though Francis was far from being popular among us, the mate was openly despised ... Captain Wallace took over the mate’s watch till we arrived at Anjer, from which we were about ten days sail.” Defying the crew’s expectation, however, in Anjer, instead of facing the law, Smith was allowed to escape from the ship:

One night a number of bumboats came alongside to starboard to sell bananas, pineapples, bunches of small onions and packets of jaggery. Captain Wallace supplied the hands with money and soon we were carrying on a noisy brisk bargaining with the gesticulating natives. But on the port quarter a different scene was being enacted. The mate had evidently persuaded the captain to help him escape. Arrangements had been made with the captain of an American ship, the Colorado, which had just arrived from Hamburg, to take the bucko mate on board. Under cover of the excitement to starboard, the mate sneaked up on deck, dropped into a boat sent from the Colorado and was off. The steward reported him missing when he went to fix up his berth at 9 p.m. (Sankey)

The crew of the *Cutty Sark* were angry at the first mate’s escape of justice and declared that they would not work until Smith was found.

Sankey reports that “[t]he captain, to pacify them, took a number of men ashore to see the authorities. They sent out some native police to search the ships and made a big investigation, but really did nothing. They would not let one of our crew go with them to help in the hunt, knowing full well that it would be no trouble for sailors to rout him out of a ship.”

THE ENIGMA CODE OF “THE SECRET SHARER”

The closing chapter of the tragic saga was played out on the *Cutty Sark*'s forward journey to Yokohama. Sankey reports:

Captain Wallace had no sooner helped the mate to escape when he realised the position he had placed himself in. He knew there would be an official investigation when he got to Yokohama and with little doubt he would be held responsible for the mate's escape. The least he could expect would be to lose his certificate. He had an old mother and a young wife dependent on him in Scotland and the outlook was indeed very black. I don't think the captain took any sleep from the time we left Anjer. With bowed head he walked the poop night and day or stood gazing unseeing over the water.

Then, on the fourth day after leaving Anjer, Captain Wallace buckled under all the pressure, and committed suicide: he stepped over the taffrail at the stern of the ship, into shark infested waters, and either drowned or was mauled to death by sharks. He was only twenty-seven at the time, and the *Cutty Sark* was his first command as captain. Sankey recalls Wallace as a “splendid seaman, kindly and interested in the apprentices, with always a friendly word to any of our crowd that happened to go aft or at the wheel.”

Sydney Smith did not escape justice, however: in 1882, he was arrested in London and faced the Central Criminal Court on 3 August 1882. At the court hearing, after being informed of the facts of the case, Mr. Justice Stephen concurred with the defence in that Smith should not be charged with murder, but rather with manslaughter.

Since both the arguments on part of the defence and the concluding remarks of the judge are summarised very succinctly in “The Crime which Suggested *The Secret Sharer*,” a newspaper article published in *The Times* about the court case on 4 August 1882, I shall copy them below, in full:

The learned counsel addressed the court in mitigation of punishment, pointing out that the vessel was under-manned, and at the time in question the accused had had an important manoeuvre to perform with respect to the sail. The deceased behaved in an insolent and “lubberly” manner, and it was absolutely necessary that the prisoner

should assert his authority. Numerous witnesses were then called on the part of the defence to show that the prisoner bore an excellent character and was a man whose disposition was humane and kindly. The jury, by his Lordship's direction, then returned a verdict of manslaughter against the accused. Mr. Justice Stephen, in passing sentence, told the prisoner he had considered the case with anxious attention and with very great pain, because the evidence which had been given showed that he was a man of good character generally speaking and of humane disposition. He was happy to be able to give full weight to the evidence given in his favour. The deceased had certainly acted in a manner which was calculated to make the prisoner very angry, but it must be clearly understood that the taking of human life by brutal violence, whether on sea or on land, whether the life be that of a black or white man, was a dreadful crime, and deserving of exemplary punishment. He sentenced the prisoner to seven years' penal servitude. (qtd. in Walker 204–205)

DISCUSSION

When protagonists of the real-life event concerning the *Cutty Sark* are correlated with the fictional characters of “The Secret Sharer,” one can draw up the correspondence seen in Table 1. On a closer examination of the characters, however, and quite to the contrary of the factual correlations, a striking similarity becomes apparent between the captain of the ship where the incident took place, i.e. James Wallace, and the Narrator-Captain of the ship where the accused sought shelter (see Table 2).

Wallace was a twenty-seven-year-old captain on his very first command in charge of a ship when he had to deal with the calamity on board the *Cutty Sark*, and so was the Narrator-Captain when he had to decide what to do with the fictional equivalent of Sydney Smith on his ship, i.e. with Leggatt. Although the Narrator-Captain's age is not stated explicitly in the text, it is given there in code: Leggatt is described as a “well-knit young fellow of twenty-five at most” (88), and the captain as “being a couple of years older” (88). That coded agreement of ages between Wallace and the fictional captain cannot possibly be a sheer coincidence, and it must have been set up that way by Conrad, with a purpose in mind.

THE ENIGMA CODE OF “THE SECRET SHARER”

A further similarity is that the cause of Wallace’s downfall was the hostility of his crew who refused to accept his judgment regarding Smith’s fate. The Narrator-Captain of the fictional version also fears the reaction of his crew and anticipates hostility, which is why he plays an elaborate game of hide-and-seek on board his ship in a desperate attempt to keep Leggatt’s presence a secret. When considering the similarities listed above, one must conclude that although the factual parallel lies between Wallace and Archbold, i.e. between the two captains on whose ship the murder took place, the moral and dramaturgically valid correspondence cuts across this factual line and lies between Wallace and the Narrator-Captain.

There is no record, of course, of how Sydney Smith negotiated his escape with James Wallace on board the *Cutty Sark*, but we do have a record of how Conrad imagined the matching conversation to have taken place between Leggatt and Archbold on board the *Sephora*:

When we sighted Java Head I had had time to think all those matters out several times over. I had six weeks of doing nothing else and with only an hour or so every evening for a tramp on the quarter-deck ... I reckoned it would be dark before we closed with the land ... So I asked to speak to the old man. He always looked damnably sick when he came to see me—as if he could not look me in the face. You know that foresail saved the ship. She was too deep to have run long under bare poles. And it was I that managed to set it for him. Anyway he came. When I had him in my cabin (he stood by the door looking at me as if I had the halter round my neck already) I asked him right away to leave my cabin door unlocked at night while the ship was going through Sunda Straits. There would be the Java coast within two or three miles, off Angier Point. I wanted nothing more. I’ve had a prize for swimming my second year in the Conway ... He refused, looking more sick than ever. He was afraid of the men, and also of that old second mate of his who had been sailing with him for years ... Anyhow he wouldn’t. “This thing must take its course. I represent the law here.” He was shaking like a leaf. “So you won’t?”—“No!”—“Then I hope you will be able to sleep on that,” I said, and turned my back on him. “I wonder that you can,” cries he, and locks the door. (91–93)

In short, Leggatt requested in the story what Smith is likely to have requested in real life: the turning of a blind eye while he slips away. Captain Wallace on the *Cutty Sark* had said “yes,” and cooperated in the implementation of Smith’s escape. Captain Archbold, on the other hand, said “no.”

Here, Conrad reveals where his personal sympathies lie. Not only does he accept and approve of Captain Wallace’s course of action by having his fictional character follow Wallace’s example, but he gives the real-life saga an altogether different ending, whereby the fictional captain manages to outsmart all his distractors and lets Leggatt escape without suffering the disastrous consequences which awaited Wallace. Conrad’s fictional character, therefore, succeeds where Wallace had failed and sails away triumphantly. It needs to be pointed out also that, while Conrad did indeed retain by and large “the basic fact of the tale” in his fictional rendition, he altered several details in a tendentious way in order to allow sympathies to shift towards Leggatt and the Narrator-Captain. Readers pity John Francis in the real-life incident who was a coloured man suffering racial slurs, and who, while admittedly not terribly capable, was not deserving to be killed. In Conrad’s story, on the other hand, we barrack for Leggatt and for the Narrator-Captain, and we feel relieved when Leggatt finally lowers himself into the water near to shore. He is now a “free man striking out for a new destiny,” and the Narrator-Captain assumes his rightful command on the bridge “amidst cheery cries” (119). This shift of sympathies is achieved by altering in a tendentious way the personality traits of the above two fictional protagonists away from the “potentially reproachable” and towards the “morally correct and gentlemanly,” and by adding, on the other hand, a caricature-like touch to those characters who are an obstacle to the plan hatched by the Narrator-Captain.

Starting with an analysis of the shift in the characterisation of the accused manslaughterers: both Sydney Smith and Leggatt are officers who have treated an uncooperative seaman harshly. Subsequently, they both had to face the consequences of their actions which had gone too far. Smith is, however, described from the outset as a negative character, a bully, and a slave driver. Leggatt’s harshness towards the unnamed deckhand, on the other hand, is toned down. Leggatt is described to us as “perfectly self-controlled, more than calm—almost invulnerable” (107), someone who the Narrator-Captain “knew well enough ... was no homicidal ruffian” (89).

The two victims, from the real-life John Francis to the unnamed fictional sailor on the *Sephora*, also undergo a significant recasting by Conrad in order to help

THE ENIGMA CODE OF “THE SECRET SHARER”

underscore his intended message. Although Francis of the *Cutty Sark*, “resisted the First Mate’s authority and disobeyed an order” (Thorne), he was by no means an “ill-conditioned snarling cur,” nor “one of those creatures that are just simmering all the time with a silly sort of wickedness” (88), which is how the fictional version’s unnamed sailor, whom Leggatt had strangled to death on the *Sephora*, is described to us.

In order to lighten the readers’ conscience in accepting the Narrator-Captain’s decision and to help the reader feel at ease with barracking for the murder-accused Leggatt, Conrad also introduced into his fictional account two significant points about Leggatt’s character which were not present in the attributes of real-life Sydney Smith.

Firstly, he casts Leggatt as less of a culprit and more of a victim of accidental circumstances. He ascribes certain acts and circumstances to *happenstance* which then lightens the responsibility of those who are party to them. As we recall, the trigger of the conflict in both the real-life incident and in Conrad’s story is the act of the first mate killing a sailor. Thus, in both cases the *actus reus*, i.e. the “guilty act,” is identical. The *mens rea*, i.e. the “guilty mind,” however, which is crucial in establishing criminal liability, is of a different kind for Smith and for Leggatt.

Smith was found guilty of manslaughter of the “voluntary” kind. The key factor there is that his act was judged deliberate. Let us revisit the court report in this regard:

... the prisoner exclaimed, “I will come on the forecandle and heave you overboard, you nigger.” The deceased replied, “If you come up here I have got the capstan bar waiting for you.” The prisoner then went on to the forecandle and was seen to raise the capstan bar, with which he struck the deceased on the head. The blow knocked the man over the forecandle and over the deck, and he never spoke again. The prisoner said to the watch, “Did you see that nigger lift the capstan bar to me,” but the men replied that they did not. The prisoner said, “He will lift no more capstan bar to me, for I have knocked him down,” and he added “I have knocked him down like a bullock; he never gave a kick.” (qtd. in Walker 204)

In short, Smith knocked Francis on the head with a capstan bar: he knew what he was doing, and he must have been aware that a very serious—potentially fatal—
injury might result from his action.

Let us now check the nature of Leggatt's confrontation with the unnamed seaman during the deadly storm:

He gave me some of his cursed insolence at the sheet ... That was no time for gentlemanly reproof, so I turned round and felled him like an ox. He up and at me. We closed just as an awful sea made for the ship. All hands saw it and took to the rigging. I had him by the throat, and went on shaking him like a rat, the men above us yelling, "Look out! Look out!" ... *It's clear* that I meant business because I was holding him by the throat still. ... They had rather a job to separate us *I've been told* ... The first thing I heard *when I came to myself* was the maddening howling of that endless gale and on that the voice of the old man. He was hanging on to my bunk, staring into my face out of his sou'wester. "Mr. Leggatt, you have killed a man. You can act no longer as chief mate of this ship."
(89–90, emphases added)

Here, Leggatt hit the man, but the man got up and charged against Leggatt, i.e. he was not seriously injured by Leggatt's hit. Next, the two of them "closed," and Leggatt grabbed the man by the throat and shook him like a rat. From there on, however, the elements took over: a huge wave knocked Leggatt unconscious and the next thing Leggatt remembered was that members of the crew picked the two of them up, with Leggatt still holding the man by the throat.

Yes, Leggatt did hit the man, and yes, after the man retaliated and the two of them "closed," he did grab the man by the throat and shook him. But those actions do not normally result in death. As the italicised words in the text above suggest, the attack turned deadly while Leggatt was not in conscious control of his action. And that is very important, because by adjusting that particular detail in Leggatt's favour, Conrad, in his fictional account, changed the nature of the *mens rea* from *voluntary* to *involuntary* manslaughter, and by doing so, he shaved off a significant layer of guilt from Leggatt's crime, in comparison with what Sydney Smith was found guilty of.

Secondly, by going to pains in his fictional account to persuade readers that Leggatt is a considerate man who is careful to avoid harm to others, Conrad implies that letting him go would pose no threat to society. This assurance is delivered

THE ENIGMA CODE OF “THE SECRET SHARER”

in two instances in the text, firstly, when Leggatt tells the Narrator-Captain about his confinement on the *Sephora* after the fatal incident, and next, when he relates his thoughts about getting captured on one of the small islands *en route* on his swim from the *Sephora* to the Narrator-Captain’s ship:

God only knows why they locked me in every night. To see some of their faces you’d have thought they were afraid I’d go about at night strangling people. Am I a murdering brute? Do I look it? By Jove if I had been he wouldn’t have trusted himself like that into my room. You’ll say *I might have chucked him aside and bolted out there* and then—it was dark already. Well, no. And for the same reason *I wouldn’t think of trying to smash the door*. There would have been a rush to stop me at the noise and I did not mean to get into a confounded scrimmage. *Somebody else might have got killed*—for I would not have broken out only to get chucked back—and I did not want any more of that work. ...

Do you see me being hauled back stark naked off one of these little islands, by the scruff of the neck and fighting like a wild beast. *Somebody would have got killed for certain, and I did not want any of that.* (92–94, emphases added)

Our possible anxiety about letting a murder-accused avoid facing a judge and jury is soothed further by Conrad assuring us that after he “lower[s] himself into the water and strike[s] out for a new destiny” (119), Leggatt will not enter cheerfully the first pub on shore and celebrate his freedom with a good laugh and a pint of beer. Rather, he will “take his punishment” (119), the nature of which Leggatt himself had foreshadowed in a Biblical reference when he recounted to the Narrator-Captain his failed plea for freedom with Archbold: “I was ready enough to go off wandering on the face of the earth—and that was price enough to pay for an Abel of that sort” (93).

Thus, once nasty Sydney Smith is replaced with reassuring Leggatt, and poor racial-slur victim John Francis is replaced with an “ill-conditioned snarling cur,” our sympathies shift, and we feel quite comfortable with the Narrator-Captain’s decision to allow the accused manslaughterer to avoid justice.

GEORGE KUTASH

STRUCTURE OF THE NARRATIVE

It is noteworthy that “The Secret Sharer” is divided into two chapters. Whether acted out or narrated, events presented in the first chapter mirror those on board the *Cutty Sark*, except for the point where, in response to a request by the murder-accused to let him slip away, real-life Wallace says “yes” whereas fictional Archbold says “no.”

The real sequence of events involving the *Cutty Sark* had its own internal logic, and it concluded at Sydney Smith’s trial in London. The fictional account, however, had to move forward to a triumphant end for the Narrator-Captain and required a climactic point to mark the juncture at which fiction parts from reality. That juncture is the “facing-off scene” in the story, taking place in the salon of the unnamed ship.

In order to drive the storyline towards such a climax, Conrad uses a technique in the first half of the story which I shall refer to as a “tale of assembly.” By this term, I mean a detailed account within a story which tells how the various protagonists become drawn into a conflict and how they then converge at a location to grapple with the conflict which awaits resolution. A film-example of a “tale of assembly” would be the “Seven Samurai,” and its western version, “The Magnificent Seven,” where a lengthy leadup to the actual showdown describes how seven uniquely skilled warriors get drawn together for a confrontation with bandits who have been tormenting impoverished villagers in the mountains. Some readers may recall the scene in “The Magnificent Seven” where the bandits’ leader, Calvera, pulls up his horse in the middle of the village-square and casts his nervous eyes around, while the Magnificent Seven look calmly at him from their various vantage points. That shot captures perfectly the concept of the “assembly” in the sense I use this word in this article: the moment when all the protagonists gather at a designated spot for the confrontation which is at the core of the story.

Conrad needs to assemble only three protagonists, the Narrator-Captain, Leggatt, and Archbold. Accordingly, the venue to draw them to is also much smaller than a village square: it is the narrow salon of a merchant ship anchored in the Gulf of Siam. The first to arrive at the designated spot is the Narrator-Captain, having “been appointed to take charge while [he] least expected anything of the sort, not quite a fortnight ago” (95). Second on the scene is Leggatt: late at night he swims to the side of the Narrator-Captain’s ship, having made his escape from the *Sephora*. With the help of the captain he clammers on board, hides in the captain’s cabin, and tells the captain his story. The assembly is complete when the next morning

the boat of the third protagonist, Captain Archbold of the *Sephora*, pulls up at the side of the Narrator-Captain’s ship, having come to enquire whether Leggatt had been seen nearby (and suspecting that Leggatt is, in fact, hiding on the ship). Captain Archbold and the Narrator-Captain, then, take a seat at the table inside the salon, with Leggatt hiding nearby. The Narrator-Captain informs us exactly where Leggatt is “seated” for the occasion, though: “There he was on the other side of the bulkhead, four or five feet from us, no more, as we sat in the saloon” (100).

The moment of Archbold’s arrival marks the end of Chapter One in editions which divide the story into two chapters. In the Cambridge Edition, which does not mark chapters, that spot is at the end of the sentence, “[f]inally I went on deck” (99). With the end of Chapter One we move away from the facts derived from the events associated with the *Cutty Sark* and enter the world of fantasy where Conrad rewrites history.

Let us now inspect, from a dramaturgical point of view, who the two characters facing off across the table in the small salon, in fact, are. If we recall the table in which parallels were drawn between the real-life characters on the *Cutty Sark* and their counterparts in “The Secret Sharer,” we see that Archbold corresponds to Wallace: they are the captains of the ships where the crime took place and from where the accused escapes. However, while factually speaking the Narrator-Captain of the unnamed ship corresponds to the captain of the Colorado in that they are the captains of the ships where the culprit seeks shelter, we have established before that morally and dramaturgically speaking, the Narrator-Captain of the unnamed ship is, in fact, a fictional representation of Captain Wallace: they are of the same age and in the same situation of being on first command in charge of a ship. This leads to the rather startling conclusion that since Archbold corresponds to Wallace (captains of the ships where the crime was committed), and Wallace corresponds to the Narrator-Captain (same age, same situation), then Archbold must also correspond to the Narrator-Captain.

Put in plain English, the two individuals whom we see facing each other across the table are two alternative fictional representations of the one and the same Captain James Wallace: Archbold, on the one hand, being the “un-gentlemanly” version whom real-life Wallace had refused to become and met a tragic end as a result, and the Narrator-Captain, on the other hand, who is the “triumphant-gentleman” version of Wallace, reincarnated by Conrad and remoulded into a hero who pulls off

GEORGE KUTASH

successfully the feat which real-life Wallace had tragically failed at, and who then sails away victoriously, admired by his crew.

In short, it is Wallace vs. Wallace, an ungentlemanly, smallminded, and disapproved version of him facing off across the table with a gentlemanly-honourable high-class version, while the third protagonist, the murder-accused, is eagerly eavesdropping on their conversation to hear what his fate will be this *fictional* time around.

NAMING CONVENTION

Conrad's intention to underscore social-class distinctions in his novella can be detected also in the peculiar naming convention used in "The Secret Sharer." The only person in the story who is named unequivocally is Leggatt. He is presented to us as a fine gentleman cast into humiliating circumstances by an unfortunate chain of events which is described by Conrad emphatically as being beyond Leggatt's control. Even Leggatt, however, is mentioned by name only twice, first, when he introduces himself while still in the water, and second, when Archbold addresses him in relation to the incident on the *Sephora*: "Mr. Leggatt, you have killed a man. You can act no longer as chief mate of this ship" (90).

For the rest of the text, Leggatt is referred to either by personal pronouns or by a variety of appellations, many of which mirror the Narrator-Captain's perception that Leggatt is his "double," in that they are of a similar age, of a similar background, and that under similar circumstances he, the Narrator-Captain, might have acted the same way as Leggatt. Those appellations include *my double* (87–90, 94, 97–99, 103–104, 109, 114, 117), *my other self* (96, 108), *my second self* (99, 109, 117), and *the double captain* (91, 115). Conrad, however, has the Narrator-Captain make it state explicitly that the "doubleness" is purely imaginary: "He was not a bit like me, really; yet, as we stood leaning over my bed place, whispering side by side, with our dark heads together and our backs to the door, anybody bold enough to open it stealthily would have been treated to the uncanny sight of a double captain busy talking in whispers with his other self" (91).

There are other appellations used for Leggatt, as well, such as *mysterious arrival* (91), *unsuspected sharer of my cabin* (100), *secret sharer of my cabin* (101), *secret stranger* (118), all of which serve—in my view—primarily a grammatical and stylistic purpose, that of getting around referring to Leggatt by name. In fact, I have checked all the twenty-four instances where one of the above-mentioned appellations was used,

and they were all of the kind where a personal pronoun would not do, and the sentence itself required either a name, or an appellation.

Next, Archbold, the captain of the *Sephora* is also named, but only reluctantly and somewhat ambiguously: “... gave his name (it was something like Archbold—but at this distance of years I hardly am sure) ...” (99), and “I looked politely at Captain Archbold (if that was his name) ...” (100). Conrad undoubtedly had the option of either naming the *Sephora*’s captain unequivocally or letting his name remain in oblivion altogether because of the *distance of years*. Instead, however, he chooses to place the *Sephora*’s captain’s name somewhere half-way: in limbo.

My interpretation of the above is that in Conrad’s text, naming, or leaving a person un-named, marks position, and is a deliberate device. Starting with Leggatt, he is named unequivocally, as he is the causal agent of the conflict at the centre of the story and is cast in the light of an unfortunate but essentially positive character. It is his controversial action over which a judgment must be passed, which judgment in turn becomes the litmus test of moral fibre that sets Archbold and the Narrator-Captain apart.

In contrast, by naming Archbold somewhat grudgingly, Conrad places him one step down in the hierarchy of the protagonists. This accords with Archbold’s moral position, his judgement vis-a-vis Leggatt having been judged as smallminded. His inferior status is then further underscored by questions raised about his leadership qualities, by doubt cast over his integrity and even by his physical appearance being depicted as grotesque.

Starting with his appearance, this is what the Narrator-Captain tells us about Captain Archbold:

The skipper of the *Sephora* had a thin red whisker all round his face and the sort of complexion that goes with hair of that colour; also the particular, rather smeary shade of blue in the eyes. He was not exactly a showy figure; his shoulders were high, his stature but middling—one leg slightly more bandy than the other ... A spiritless tenacity was his main characteristic I judged. (99)

Later, the Narrator-Captain stops pulling punches altogether and states his impression of Archbold unambiguously: “He nodded keeping his smeary, blue, *unintelligent* eyes fastened upon me” (99, emphasis added). It is, however, not Archbold’s pathetic

appearance that marks him primarily as unequal to the two gentlemen “Conway boys,” i.e. Leggatt and the Narrator-Captain himself (Conway boys being graduates of HMS *Conway* training school for officers of the merchant navy). He is presented to us as unworthy of the command of a ship, altogether, as even after “seven and thirty virtuous years at sea of which over twenty of immaculate command, and the last fifteen in the *Sephora*” (101), he still had proven himself inadequate during the storm at the East Coast of Africa. It was Leggatt who had to step into the breach and save the ship by clever and decisive action. And, if that were not enough to demonstrate Archbold’s inferiority, we find out also that he lacks credibility: he claims credit for the decisive action mentioned above, when in fact, it was Leggatt who made the crucial call in Archbold’s place:

“That reefed foresail saved you,” I threw in.
 “Under God—it did,” he exclaimed fervently. “It’s by a special mercy I firmly believe that it stood some of these hurricane squalls.”
 “It was the setting of it ...” I began.
 “God’s own hand in it,” he interrupted me. “Nothing less could have done it. I don’t mind telling you that I hardly dared give the order.” (101)

Later, however, Leggatt explains to the Narrator-Captain that Archbold’s account of the events is false:

“The man told you he hardly dared to give the order.”
 I understood the reference to be to that saving foresail.
 “Yes. He was afraid of its being lost in the setting.”
 “I assure you he never gave the order. He may think he did, but he never gave it. He stood there with me on the break of the poop, after the main topsail blew away, and whimpered about our last hope—positively whimpered about it and nothing else—and the night coming on. To hear your skipper go on like that in such weather was enough to drive any fellow out of his mind.” (105)

In summary, a ship captain though Archbold may be, he is presented to us as anything but a *gentleman*.

THE ENIGMA CODE OF “THE SECRET SHARER”

Other instances of Conrad’s peculiar naming convention also point to position in a hierarchy. The two officers of the unnamed ship, for instance, are not given names at all. They are referred to only by their position. Their personality is described also in unflattering terms, being depicted invariably as somehow lowly, odd-looking, dull-witted, and uncouth. The first mate, for instance, had a “simple face overcharged by a terrible growth of whisker” (82). He is later referred to by the captain as “that absurdly whiskered mate” (85), “that imbecile mate of mine” (85), and as “my absurd mate with his terrific whiskers and the ‘Bless my soul—you don’t say so’ type of intellect” (88). The second mate is “a round-cheeked, silent young man, grave beyond his years” (82). In subsequent passages he is called a cub with a variety of epithets added to grace the key noun: sneering young cub (97), confounded cub (108), intolerable cub (111), and unplayful cub (113). These two officers—and also the steward, to some extent—are, nevertheless, at least given a “face.” The rest of the crew, far removed from the class of *gentlemen*, are, however, all faceless extras and nameless “jacks.”

CONCLUSION

There are two rescue-fantasies played out in “The Secret Sharer,” one which is quite apparent and another which is somewhat obscure. The apparent one involves the Narrator-Captain who rescues Leggatt from legal punishment for an unfortunate and tragic act for which he has already accepted self-punishment. This rescue is a part of the chain of events which mirrors those having taken place on the *Cutty Sark*, except that this time the fictional captain succeeds where the real-life captain had failed. There is, however, an aspect to this rescue which was completely missing when Wallace had consented to save Smith from the law and assisted him with slipping away unnoticed. That missing aspect is *admiration* for the target of the rescue. The rescue which the Narrator-Captain carries out shows all the hallmarks of the “delivering someone admired from difficult circumstances” rescue-variety, often encountered in romantic fiction. With a woman at the centre, the genre is referred to as *damsel-in-distress*. There are, however, numerous *fellow-in-distress* stories, as well, such as Robin Hood’s fellow-outlaws rescuing Robin from the gallows, Robin then rescuing Richard the Lionheart, and the three musketeers’ sticking to their motto of “One for all, all for one.”

Rescuing someone is a potent gesture of admiration, especially when it involves danger or self-sacrifice on the part of the rescuer. That is, of course, the case with the Narrator-Captain's rescuing Leggatt, for he was fully aware "that all [his] future, the only future for which [he] was fit, would perhaps go irretrievably to pieces in any mishap to [his] first command" (113).

One does not need to search hard to find indications of the Narrator-Captain's admiration for Leggatt: "He whispered, his arms folded on the side of my bed place, staring through the open port. And I could imagine perfectly the manner of this thinking out—a stubborn if not a steadfast operation—*something of which I should have been perfectly incapable*" (92, emphasis added).

Leggatt is described at every turn in glowing terms:

He had rather regular features, a good mouth, light eyes under somewhat heavy dark eyebrows, a smooth, square forehead, no growth on his cheeks, a small brown moustache, and a well-shaped round chin. His expression was concentrated, meditative under the inspecting light of the lamp I held up to his face; such as a man thinking hard in solitude might wear. My sleeping suit was just right for his size. A well-knit young fellow of twenty-five at most. He caught his lower lip with the edge of white, even teeth. (87–88)

Leggatt's voice is described as "calm and resolute. A good voice" (87), and as a person, he "looked always perfectly self-controlled, more than calm—almost invulnerable" (107). He could be marvelled at for "that something unyielding in his character which was carrying him through so finely" (110). In short, Leggatt is a remarkable specimen of a fine young gentleman and merchant-navy officer. Adding to that the element of old-school-tie solidarity, Leggatt becomes the ideal object of a rescue, if someone—like the Narrator-Captain—wishes to assert through such an action his view as to what he considers "proper," and where his sympathies lie.

At a different and perhaps more obscure level, however, the story is also a "rescue-fantasy" on Joseph Conrad's part, whereby he gives a different finale to the real-life saga on board the *Cutty Sark* and rescues young Captain James Wallace from an ignominious suicidal end. That rescue-fantasy is motivated by personal sympathy felt by Conrad for Captain Wallace who was a mere four years Conrad's senior and was only twenty-seven when he was driven to suicide, two years after Conrad

THE ENIGMA CODE OF “THE SECRET SHARER”

himself had attempted suicide by shooting himself in the chest, in Marseille, albeit under very different circumstances.

Conrad's suicide attempt is examined in great detail in C. B. Cox's "Joseph Conrad and the Question of Suicide" (1973). According to Cox, "[a]fter the attempted suicide in Marseilles, Conrad suffered from fits of depression and nervous breakdowns, of varying importance, for the rest of his life" (286). Further, Cox explains that

At the core of [Conrad's] psychological disturbances there seems a basic uncertainty about his own identity. In many of his stories a kind of dismemberment of personality takes place. Just as Virginia Woolf divided herself up into six characters in *The Waves*, so Conrad is repeatedly concerned with two characters who reflect the composite nature of a contradictory identity. The best-known example is "The Secret Sharer," where Leggatt is an alter ego, an unrealised potentiality in the character of the captain-narrator ... This uncertainty about identity is endemic in modern literature, of course, and in this way Conrad reflects the malaise of the contemporary disintegrating personality. His own jumps from Poland to France to England, from aristocrat to seaman to novelist, made him a living embodiment of this breakdown. His life and art testify to a continual, by and large unsuccessful search for a stable identity. (291)

Following from the observations by Cox, we can surmise that Conrad, throughout his life away from his native Poland, must have had to deal with the vexing issue of not being fully accepted and understood by those around him. He must have sympathised deeply, therefore, with the emotional vacuum and lack of supportive companionship which young Captain Wallace had found himself in, on his ship. That vacuum is, of course, of the same kind as the fictional Narrator-Captain of "The Secret Sharer" had to operate in, and in which Conrad must have found himself frequently, during his various travails while "jump[ing] from Poland to France to England, from aristocrat to seaman to novelist."

Conrad's aloofness, bordering on the disdainful for those whom he did not consider his social equals, is well documented in an eyewitness account of his mien as captain of the *Otago*:

Apart from his distinguished manners, the most striking thing about the captain of the *Otago* was the contrast between him and other skippers. ... Now, those shipmasters generally dressed in ducks, with caps or straw hats on their heads, their faces and hands tanned by sun and saltwater, their nails black with the tell-tale tar of their profession, their language forceful and often coarse, were not models of taste and refinement. Unlike his colleagues, Captain Korzeniowski [Conrad's Polish surname] was always dressed like a dandy. I can still see him (and just because of the contrast with the other sailors my memory is precise) arriving in my office almost every day dressed in a black or dark coat, a vest that was usually light in colour, and fancy trousers; everything well cut and very stylish; on his head a black or grey bowler tilted slightly to one side. He invariably wore gloves and carried a cane with a gold knob. From this description you can judge for yourself the contrast he made to the other captains, with whom, by the way, he was on strictly formal terms, generally not going beyond a greeting. He was not, of course, very popular with his colleagues, who ironically called him "the Russian Count" ... (Najder 129–130)

As we gather from the above account, Conrad insisted on his elevated social status, which he needed to assert quite forcefully by way of his strict dress code and by comporting himself conspicuously as a *gentleman* in an environment where neither his Polish noble ancestry nor his cultivated ways drew the recognition and respect that he had expected. When considering his sense of frustration and resentment towards those elements in society whom he regarded as socially inferior and whom he perceived as potentially hostile towards those higher up in the pecking order, it is easy to see how he had taken umbrage, in a vicarious way, at the attitude of the crew towards Captain Wallace on the *Cutty Sark* and how replicated those disagreeable attitudes to surround his fictional character, the Narrator-Captain. When contemplating what he himself might have done in Wallace's place, Conrad must have had a "*There, but for the grace of God, go I*" moment, and in 1910, thirty years after the historic event, he resolved his frustration by writing "The Secret Sharer" in which he revisited the events of 1880, and "rescued" Wallace's memory from

THE ENIGMA CODE OF “THE SECRET SHARER”

an ignominious end, to see his fictional counterpart triumph over his *un-gentlemanly* distractors, and sail away victoriously.

WORKS CITED

- Conrad, Joseph. “The Secret Sharer.” In *Twixt Land and Sea: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad*. Eds. J. A. Berthoud, Laura L. Davis, and S. W. Reid. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 6–119.
- Cox, C. B. “Joseph Conrad and the Question of Suicide.” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 55.1 (1973): 285–299. <<https://doi.org/10.7227/BJRL.55.1.12>>
- Najder, Zdzisław. *Joseph Conrad: A Life*. 1983. Trans. Halina Najder. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007. <<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781571136978>>
- Sankey, Charles Arthur. *The Ordeal of the Cutty Sark: A True Story of Mutiny and Murder on the High Seas*. 1957. *John Sankey*. Web. 12 June 2023. <<http://www.johnsankey.ca/ordeal.html>>
- Thorne, Nick. “Merchant Seamen Apprentices to Captains of the Cutty Sark.” *The Genealogist*, 17 May 2019. Web. 12 June 2023. <<https://www.thegenealogist.co.uk/featuredarticles/2019/merchant-seamen-apprentices-to-captains-of-the-cutty-sark-1104/>>
- Walker, Franklin, ed. “The Crime Which Suggested ‘The Secret Sharer.’” 1882. In *“Heart of Darkness” and “The Secret Sharer.”* By Joseph Conrad. New York: Bantam Books, 1969. 203–205.

GEORGE KUTASH

TABLES

	in real-life	in “The Secret Sharer”
accused	Sydney Smith, first mate of the <i>Cutty Sark</i>	Leggatt, first mate of the <i>Sephora</i>
victim	John Francis, a sailor on the <i>Cutty Sark</i>	an unnamed “miserable devil,” a sailor on the <i>Sephora</i>
captain of the ship where the incident took place	Captain James Wallace of the <i>Cutty Sark</i>	Captain Archbold of the <i>Sephora</i>
captain of the ship where the accused sought shelter	unnamed captain of the <i>Colorado</i>	Narrator-Captain of the ship anchored in the Gulf of Siam

Table 1.


	in real-life	in “The Secret Sharer”
captain of the ship where the incident took place	Captain James Wallace of the <i>Cutty Sark</i>	
captain of the ship where the accused sought shelter		Narrator-Captain of the ship anchored in the Gulf of Siam

Table 2.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

George Kutash is a retired Senior Lecturer in Japanese, formerly of James Cook University in Townsville, Australia. He obtained his undergraduate degree in Mathematics and Chinese Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in 1977, earned a Master’s Degree in Area Studies at Tsukuba University, Japan, in 1982, and a PhD in Japanese Linguistics at James Cook University, Australia, in 2002. This article is his first foray into the field of Literary Criticism, whereby he examines an oft-cited novella by Joseph Conrad which he feels has been largely misinterpreted.