

The Double Narrative in the Secret Sharer

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ABSTRACT. Since the publication of Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*, critics have interpreted it from the perspective of psychoanalysis, initiation story, gender study, and new historicism. This essay focuses on covering the reason of the captain's harboring Leggatt a murderer on *Sephora*. The essay explains the reason of the captain's reckless harboring from the perspective of double narrative.

KEYWORDS: Double narrative, Homosexuality, Conrad, The secret share

1. Introduction

Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* is about a newly pointed captain who proposed to take anchor watch himself to let other crew members to rest. The captain occasionally saves the chief mate Leggatt from the neighboring ship *Sephora* and he offers to help Leggatt after hearing the sketch of Leggatt's story. Leggatt has killed one of the sailors out of "fit of temper" (Conrad 10), and is going to face the trial back home as scheduled by captain Archbold. The captain hides Leggatt in his stateroom with great efforts and much consideration to prevent other person's knowledge of the incident. When captain Archbold visits the captain trying to gain some information about the fugitive, the captain didn't reveal the existence of Leggatt in his cabin. After the interaction with each other for a few days, the captain realizes that they are so similar to each other that Leggatt is exactly his "alter ego". In the end of the novella, the captain sends Leggatt away by stopping the ship as close as he can to make it more convenient for Leggatt to escape.

Since the publication of the novella, the argument centers round the captain's motivation of harboring a murderer in spite of the law. Bruce Harkness argues that the captain saves Leggatt out of his homosexual affection for Leggatt that "Conrad has made explicit the homosexual nature of relationship between Leggatt and the captain" (56). The true secret shared between the captain and Leggatt is their homosexuality which is bared by Conrad out of his consideration for his Edwardian readers. It is also proposed by some scholars that the captain's endeavor to help Leggatt is "a demonstration of sympathetic understanding" from the perspective of conscience (Williams 627). What's more, some scholars like Amit Marcus read *The Secret Sharer* from the perspective of archetypal characters of Oedipus to interpret the weird relationship and attachment between the captain and Leggatt. Still, there are some scholars like Louis H. Leiter that study the echo structure in *The Secret Sharer*.

The enigma entailed in the captains harboring Leggatt on the ship in spite of all sorts of explanation offered by critics and scholars. Why does the captain risk his career, the life of the crew members, and his own life to help Leggatt? Why does the Captain focus on his vague similarity with Leggatt with the ignorance of their difference? These questions inevitable involves the theme in *The Secret Sharer* like the double narrative. This essay will employ the theory of double narrative to uncover the reason of the captain's feeling of having an alter ego.

2. The Theme of Double Narrative

The archetypes of self-division and self-duplication have been quite ubiquitous in the creation of double narrative in the Romantic fiction of the nineteenth century. It is also believed that in the Romantic fiction that "doppelganger narratives are no longer based on the superstition of the religious and psychological dimensions, and this sort of double has been familiarized and has become an inflated cliché" (Marcus 187). On the other hand, Dryden believes that the shattered self-identification is closely correlated with the modern social environment (41). There are also psychoanalysts like Freud, Jung, and Lacan believe that the double is a figure of split personality in fictional narratives. It is quite obvious that the reading of double in literature is of great importance in terms of aesthetics, biology, and technology. The traditional definition of the double narratives are narratives where "the protagonist believes that another character is a (usually false, deceptive, and inferior) copy of his self,

or of part of his self, and where this belief finds support in some textual evidence” (Marcus 190). This version of definition always means that the narrative is narrated not only from the perspective of the protagonist but also the other characters. What’s noteworthy is that the traditional definition has ignored the circumstance where significant analogies are drawn between the main character and other characters without obvious indication that any character is inferior or derivative.

Romantic Doppelganger narratives are generally characterized from some certain perspectives. Firstly, the double is not completely identical to the original one, while their difference “is responsible for the dynamic tension that always exists between them” (Keppler 11). Secondly, the appearance of the doubles usually happens to the men of solitude and isolation. The mind of the protagonist with the doubles indicates his or her resistance against the loss of identity completely and the potential personality deep down his or her mind which can be deemed as a challenge against the ideal of stable and coherent self in the western culture. As for the derivation of the doubles, some claim that the double exists only in the imagination of the protagonist from the perspective of nature, while some claim that the double exists in the world where supernatural forces and laws rule. The relationship between the double and the protagonist is quite intense with their mutual rivalry because of the belief that the double is “uncanny harbinger of death” (Freud 235). This intense relationship generally derived from the fact that the protagonist takes his priority to the double for granted.

The reason that the captain regards Leggatt as his double is that there are some similarities from the perspective of both physical qualities and personality. When the captain first sees Leggatt’s face clearly, he realized that “the shadowy, dark head, like mine,” and “as though I had been faced by my own reflection in the depth of a somber and immense mirror” (Conrad 10). The captain focused on the physical similarities between himself and Leggatt, which might be the first reason of his trust without any hesitation to Leggatt. The captain even thinks that anyone who enters his cabin on occasion of their conversation would mistake them as two same captains talking to each other. What’s more, there are experience similarities between the captain and Leggatt. They both are “Conway boys” (Conrad 10), which differentiate them from the other members on the ship and offers more similarity to them. Therefore, it might also be the fraternal relationship that leads to the captain saving Leggatt. Going to the same school stands for the fact that they are from the same social strata, which might renders the captain choose to help the people from the same social circumstance. As for the other members on the ship like his mate, the captain despises him for his baseness that “I thought suddenly of my absurd mate with his terrific whiskers and the ‘bless my soul-you don’t say so’ type of intellect” (Conrad 10). Some scholars argue that the same social strata is the source of the captain’s empathy, while this essay tries to point out that the social strata is just one other factor that the captain deems Leggatt as his double.

On the other hand, the physical similarity might be delusional and is derived from their empathy for each other. The captain feels lonely on the ship which has been repeatedly mentioned by the narrator that “my position was that of the only stranger on board” and “my strangeness, which had made me sleepless, had prompted that unconventional arrangement”(Conrad 4-6). The captain was newly appointed while the other members had been together for eighteen month, so he is kind of isolated from other members like Leggatt is isolated for his murdering one of his hands. Except for the time being, the captain is lonely because of his youth and lack of experience and he believe that “I was young too, young enough to make no comment” (Conrad 10). The captain felt that he wasn’t trusted by the other members of the ship because of his youthfulness and lack of experience, while Leggatt killed one of the hands on the *Sephora* for the same reason. This reveals that the captain understands Leggatt’s situation and “should he face a similar predicament unprepared, he might react as impulsively as Leggatt, commit a horrible crime and be expelled or killed” (Marcus 206). The experience and appearance of Leggatt render the captain more aware of his own personality, which indicates that the captain isn’t afraid of self-knowledge and willing to face his double.

The captain begins to suspect that he is insane for seeing his double that “an irresistible doubt of his bodily existence flitted through my mind. Can it be, I asked myself, that he is not visible to other eyes than mine? ” (130). On the other hand, there are incidents can persuade both the captain and the readers that the existence of Leggatt is true. The first incident is the visit of the skipper from the *Sephora* that conveys another version of the murder process and the proof of the existence of Leggatt. This visit may relieve the captain from the doubt of the existence of Leggatt to a large extent and convinced the captain that the murder and the murderer are true in the material world instead of the delusion inside his mind. The second is that the situation where the steward heard the sounds inside the captain’s cabin while he isn’t there. “I could have sworn I had heard you moving in there not a moment ago” (Conrad 27). As a result, the appearance of the captain’s double is neither the delusional imagination of the narrator nor the result of supernatural forces, but a pure coincidence that Leggatt happens to aboard the ship. It means that it is exactly the involvement of the external world that proves the captain’s sanity. These two incidents also prove the authenticity of this story to the readers.

3. Conclusion

The arrangement of this essay is that the double narrative in the novel provides the captain better knowledge of himself as a young man and a captain. The captain believes that he is isolated by the crew members because of his identity as the newly appointed captain. The encounter with Leggatt reminds the captain that they are similar in terms of interpersonal relationship on the ship, which implies the potential that the captain might kill some crew members on the ship “out of fit” too. On the other hand, the subtheme of the homosexual relation between the captain and Leggatt, and the subtheme of the moral dilemma are also connected with the theme of double narrative. The homosexual relationship can be interpreted as the source or the result of the identity of the double and the original, which has not been clearly recounted in this essay. The moral dilemma is one of the tests in the process of initiation, therefore the occurrence of the moral dilemma is of great importance to the initiation of the captain. Interpreting those themes individually is not so helpful for the understanding of the double narrative and initiation in the story.

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