**The Secret Sharer**

1. **Summary**

An unnamed captain, reflecting on an experience that happened years ago, tells his readers of his first real command - when he was appointed to take a ship home to England, when the crisis of imitation into knowledge of his ship and his crew was complicated by an unforeseen partnership with an escaped criminal. The episode begins in the Gulf of Siam, just off the coast of Cambodia.

As a sailing ship awaits a favorable wind, darkness falls, and the captain surprises the crew by taking the anchor watch himself. As he strolls the silent deck in his sleeping-suit, his serene reverie is broken by his discovery that the rope side-ladder has not been hauled in. The captain is astonished to find that a naked swimmer is floating at the end of the ladder. In the quiet of the sleeping ship, the two talk and the man, named Leggatt, elects to come on board. The captain, sensing "a mysterious communication" has been established between them, provides his intuitively perceived "double" with an identical sleeping-suit.

As the dialogue continues, the captain is startled to learn that Leggatt, a young chief mate, has killed a man at sea and has been held prisoner for weeks aboard the Sephora. As Leggatt relates the particulars of the homicide, the captain finds that the fugitive appeals to him "as if our experiences has been identical as our clothes." Leggatt tells how a seaman panicked during the fury of a storm as they were trying to set a reefed foresail, how he fought the man - and later, when the storm subsided, the seaman was dead and Leggatt was charged with his murder. As the captain listens to the account, his identification with Leggatt deepens "I saw it all going on as though I were myself inside that other sleeping-suit." He takes Leggatt to his stateroom, and the grimly comic game of hosting his "secret sharer" begins.

Part 2 of the tale opens with a visit from Captain Archbold, skipper of the Sephora, who is searching for his fugitive first officer. The narrator later will state that "I could not, I think have met him by a direct lie" - and for psychological (not moral) reasons." But the narrator goes beyond deceptive actions to protect his partner with saving lies. Although Captain Archbold admits that Leggatt's reefed sail saved his ship in the storm, this self-righteous guardian of law and order is determined to give his mate up to the shore authorities. Leggatt's protector goes through the successful charade of showing his suspicious visitor over the ship, and at last Archbold leaves empty-handed.

The ship makes its way down the east side of the Gulf of Siam and at last, among some islands off Cambodia, the captain agrees to help Leggatt swim to freedom. To the surprise of the crew, the captain tacks the ship and sails in dangerously close to the shore. He smuggles Leggatt into the sail locker, and just before they shake hands and part, he places his hat on his "other self."

By now the crewmen are watching in awed silence as the ship moves toward the towering blackness of Koh-ring. The captain, a stranger to his ship, finds it impossible to tell whether she is moving safely away from disaster until in the gathering darkness he detects, floating near the ship's side, the hat he had given to Leggatt. This "saving mark" confirms that the ship is sailing out of danger. With the secret stranger gone, the captain is left alone with his ship at last, enjoying "the perfect communion of a seaman with his first command." He walks to the taffrail and catches a final evanescent glimpse' of the white floppy hat, left behind to mark the spot where the captain's "secret sharer," his "second self," had "lowered himself into the water to take his punishment; a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny."

**2**. **Characters:**

## Nameless Captain

The narrator of the story, this is a young man who only a fortnight before the story begins receives his first command of a ship. Because he has been on the ship only two weeks, at the beginning of the novel he feels like he is not only a "stranger to the ship" but also a "stranger to himself." Deeply introspective, he is one of only two characters in the book that is fully exposed throughout Conrad's story and the story revolves around his personal inadequacies and the resolution of those same inadequacies. Once he rescues Leggatt, an escaped criminal, he feels a deep bond with the man, like he is his "secret self," hence the title of the book. By hiding him and assisting him to escape, the captain not only regains control of his own life, but he overcomes his personal inadequacies, wins the respect of his crew, and most importantly, comes to know himself much better.

## Leggatt

An escaped criminal, it is his presence on the nameless ship that brings crisis to the captain and his ship. Originally, a first mate on the nearby Sephora, during a storm Leggatt, in a just rage, murdered an inferior, but in the process, saved the ship. Unappreciated, he is locked up for weeks before he escapes the ship and swims to nearby ship on which the captain resides. Like the captain, he is a young man and went to the same boy's prep school as his "secret self." While onboard the ship, Leggatt's presence is not revealed to anyone but the cabin, because the man hides in the captain's quarters, particularly in his bathroom, wearing a gray sleeping suit that is identical to the captain. Coincidently, the man is the same size and build as the captain, as well as having the same color of hair. After four days on the ship, Leggatt realizes that he cannot go back to society (he is willing to accept the consequences of his actions) and so, with the captain help, he is smuggled off the ship, never to be heard of again.

## Captain Archbold

The captain of the Sephora, many critics believe that he is the true villain of The Secret Sharer. With red whiskers, he is nervous and scared of all that is on his ship, including the first mate, Leggatt, and even his wife. Harsh and unwilling to compromise or admit that he is wrong regarding his stance towards Leggatt, he is a foil to both the captain and Leggatt as someone who is strictly law obeying. During his conversation with the captain, he gives off an air of fussy distraction, and in his most authoritative act sticks out his tongue to imitate the death mask of Leggatt's victim. Archbold's solemnity is contrasted with the playfulness of the captain, who fakes being deaf and happily leads his guest on a futile search of the ship.

## The Chief Mate

Throughout the narrative, the captain refers to this character as "terrible whiskers," "frightful whiskers," and "terrific whiskers." The captain considers every occurrence on the ship, trying to figure out they why and how of things. Most identifiable, he is concerned with why a scorpion chose his cabin to drown in an inkwell.

## The Second Mate

The only man on the ship who is younger than the captain, he is extremely critical and looks down on the captain.

## The Steward

His main function is plot, as the character who comes in closest contact with the captain, he is most likely to discover the secret of Leggatt. Primarily because of this function, the captain becomes rude and surly towards him throughout the course of the narrative.

**3. Themes:**

## The Captain's White Floppy Hat

The symbol of the white hat, at the end of the book, is a symbol of good, of the captain's pity and mercy for "his other self." The item also represents the physical parting of the captain and Leggatt, who have throughout the story fused into one (even the grammar eventually refers to Leggatt and the captain as one person, and the name Leggatt is used very infrequently throughout the book). The hat was the pinnacle of this language and the captain's identification with his secret self: when he justifies giving the hat to Leggatt he says "I saw myself wandering barefooted, bareheaded, the sun beating on my dark poll. I snatched off my floppy had and tried hurriedly in the dark to ram it on my other self." That he leaves the hat is significant, because it symbolizes the parting between the two. More significantly, and ironically, however, the hat literally points the way to the Captain's successful maneuvering of his ship to a safe place, an act that insures his acceptance and the salvation of himself, his ship, and all those aboard the ship. The implication, then, could be that by pitying our "dark selves," by accepting and helping them to grow, we help ourselves, forgive ourselves, and enable ourselves to escape their reaches.

## Sleeping Suits

These suits, which both the captain and the "secret self" wear, represent the place where the "dark self" and the self communicate. Their color, gray, further emphasizes the gray area where the conscious and the subconscious meet. Furthermore, these symbolic pieces of clothing are important because they clothe the two different men identically. That they are associated with sleeping and the night, adds to the dream-like effect of the captain's encounter with "the secret self." The association with the night also emphasizes the "darker self" or the subconscious that Leggatt represents.

## Leggatt

Clearly, the person of Leggatt is central to the story, and extremely symbolic. In one reading of "The Secret Sharer," Leggatt represents a lawless, subrational side of the self which may lie dormant until some moment of moral stress, and then must somehow be encountered. Another similar reading holds that Leggatt represents the subconscious that is buried deep within all. This function is revealed to the reader through many ways. The first point that emphasizes this is Leggatt's utter lack of rationality (contrary to the Captain's descriptions of him as intelligent' and sane'). In his own element, the fishlike Leggatt loses even the appearance of rationality: "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 . . . He was complete but for the head. A headless corpse!" If Leggatt symbolically lacks a head, as this description and his name imply, then there is little surprise in his finding the narrator's hat useless when at the end of the story he returns to his native element. Also, the fact that he was a naked swimmer when he was discovered, is of importance, because that symbolizes that he is stripped to his basic substance, in his native element, the water. However, because his color is "pale" and he is immersed in " a greenish cadaverous glow," in Conrad's terms means that he is generally an evil person (the pale' and lack of color), however, the light coming from him indicates the possibility of something good evolving from him in the end, that is, the captain's maturation.

## Scorpion

One of the important, but subtle, symbols within the first part of the story is the scorpion that the chief mate finds in his cabin. In the story, the mysterious creature causes the mate much speculation as why it chose his particular cabin and drowned itself in his inkwell. As the story progresses, the same questions can be applied to Leggatt, as the scorpion in the mate's cabin and Leggatt in the Captain's cabin are similar - they are dangerous, they come from places that are far removed from the boat, and they hide in cabins. The scorpion, therefore, symbolizes the future intrusion of Leggatt on the ship and within the captain's cabin. The mate's speculation concerning the scorpion, however, can also be applied to Leggatt - it is not that he has chosen specifically the captain, but he is a more universal symbol of the subconscious and "darker self" that plagues everyone, everywhere.

## Captain Archbold

Captain Archbold, as discussed in the character summaries, represents the law and the irony between doing what is right and obey the law. His unwillingness to be flexible concerning the extenuating circumstances around the murder that Leggatt commits shows the difference between the law and doing what is right.

## Nameless captain and ship

The nameless captain and ship is surprising in this story is surprising, given the fact that they are the central figures on the book. They, therefore, are symbolic of the universality of the tale. The captain is every man and the ship is the journey that every man must make. By leaving these key elements of the story nameless, Conrad emphasizes that each of us has a dark side that we must confront at sometime on life's path.