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## “Freeze on to this sleeping suit”: Teaching Joseph Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer”

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Certain literary works readily offer much of their deeper meaning on first and even second reading. Those works can be encouraging for students and teachers alike. Yet those works which are least amenable to initial readings often provide greater rewards to the diligent readers who are willing to engage in multiple readings. These more difficult and challenging works, however, present a classroom dilemma since teachers and students are working under the constraints of time. Although the more “difficult” works are potentially rewarding in the long run, they are often passed over because of the extra time that must be spent to understand them. I have found that two of Joseph Conrad’s works exemplify this problem.

In my teaching experience, I have returned many times to teaching *Heart of Darkness* (first serialized in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* starting in 1899) and “The Secret Sharer” (composed in December of 1909). These are complimentary works, dealing as they do with very similar thematic material, but they are far from what we might call “user-friendly,” yielding very little of their substantial depth upon one’s first encounter with them. I recall, in particular, one student’s comment about *Heart of Darkness*: “I didn’t completely hate it.” And this, it turns out, she had meant as a more or less positive commentary on her experience reading the story for the first time. In other words, she explained to me, she could sense that there was meaning, something was “happening” in the story, but she also knew that she wasn’t really getting it, even as she dutifully turned the pages, becoming more and more frustrated as she progressed; the temptation to simply “hate it” and move on to something else was certainly there.

This frustration is also a fairly common reaction for those coming to Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer” for the first time: the feeling that something is going on beneath the surface, so to speak, but that it will take considerable work to get at it. I have stuck with Conrad precisely *because*

he presents such difficulty, though as I try to stress to my frustrated students, it is a difficulty that will be repaid in the long run. I have found that focusing students' attention on the narrowest of details as a *starting point*, rather than as a later compliment to grasping the "big picture," has proven fairly successful in helping students realize that the extra effort in reading Conrad is ultimately rewarding. Thus my teaching of Conrad, and "The Secret Sharer" in particular, is a process of expanding scope, from the micro- to the macro-level. The specific detail I use to get discussion going on "The Secret Sharer" occurs late in the story; it is an attractively weird idiom employed by Leggatt, the fugitive that the young captain-narrator has been harboring aboard his ship. Leggatt, at the point of his leaving the ship in order to swim ashore, presumably departing the captain's life for good, says to the captain, "I shall freeze on to this sleeping suit," referring to the night clothes that he has borrowed from the captain (62). The phrase "freeze on to" is very odd, as I will elaborate below.

The captain-narrator himself provides a useful thematic overview of the story he tells: having just taken his first command at sea, the captain believes he must live up to the "secret," "ideal conception" of the persona he has imagined for himself (35). The problem is: how does one do this, especially when the imagined persona must assume a position of great authority and responsibility? The reader will be left to decide whether the conception of himself that the captain holds is positive or negative and whether the captain will lead his crew as part of the ship's community or as a tyrant whose power at sea cannot be challenged. Leggatt's use of "freeze on to" has embedded in its various connotations these much broader questions.

We recall that the action of the story is relatively straightforward, though the telling is complicated by the unreliability of the captain-narrator (he names neither himself nor his ship, for example). The story begins with the ship becalmed in the Gulf of Siam. Late one night, the captain has taken watch himself (an unusual decision that does not go unremarked by the crew), at which point Leggatt arrives. He explains that he has escaped custody aboard his own ship, the *Sephora*, where he had been imprisoned by that ship's captain, Archbold, for having killed a fellow crewmember during a violent storm. The murder, at least as Leggatt presents it and as the captain accepts it, was necessary to save the *Sephora*. The captain-narrator harbors Leggatt, whom he describes as his mirror image, until he can maneuver his ship perilously close to land so that Leggatt can jump overboard and swim to safety.



For the young captain, Leggatt provides the confidence and self-assurance to command a ship at sea; however, part of this confidence and self-assurance is, by implication, the capacity to commit murder. And while Leggatt will explain to the young captain-narrator that the murder was necessary to save the storm-wracked *Sephora*, there are suggestions that Leggatt's actions are not so heroic and that the captain understands them as heroic only because he needs to believe in himself as capable of equally violent behavior. It appears that Leggatt's ability to act decisively and violently in a crisis is exactly what the young captain believes it means to *be* a captain; he is the absolute authority, deferring to no one on board, nor to any abstract legal system that applies on land.

Below I provide a reading of the phrase "freeze on to" in the context of the hot/cold imagery pattern that runs throughout the story. The result will ideally be another strategy for exploring the depths of Conrad's work in the classroom, within the time constraints so familiar to students and professors. The extremely narrow focus will help to ground early readings of the story in the particulars of Conrad's very nuanced language but will ultimately point to the broad complexities of the story: the fundamental questions of leadership, authority, and ethics.

The *OED* provides one definition for "freeze" as "to hold on to (a person or thing)," but also suggests that the phrase may connote a positive attachment, as in the example provided from *The Western Gazette* of 1897: "Londoners, when they get hold of a good thing, like to 'freeze on to' it" ("Freeze"). Leggatt's use of "freeze on to" in this sense stands out in "The Secret Sharer," set in the tropical Gulf of Siam, which otherwise emphasizes the heat and closeness of the setting. It also, as I show to students by tracing hot/cold imagery in the story, stands in contrast to the thematic pattern that Conrad has established to that point.

Each instance of cold imagery, *except* Leggatt's usage, suggests distance between the captain and his shipmates; conversely, heat imagery suggests an oppressive force that weighs upon the captain, quite possibly aligned with the weight of responsibility he feels in taking his first command. Leggatt's specific usage, however, complicates the cold imagery pattern, as it connotes the *close* relationship between the captain and him; it further suggests a positive attachment between the two, for I assume that Conrad intended to connote the sense of Leggatt having gotten "hold of a good thing" (to paraphrase the *OED* example quoted above) in meeting the captain. Crucially then, the imagery of cold as indicative of closeness in this one instance highlights the degree to which the cap-

tain and Leggatt's bond is established in opposition to all other relationships in the story. In Leggatt's unintentional inversion of the image pattern—using “freeze” as indicative of closeness, not distance—we are reminded that the relationship between the captain and him is reciprocal: Leggatt gains something from the captain while at the same time the captain gains something from Leggatt. Ultimately, I believe that the connotations of the “freeze on to” phrase suggest the possibility that the captain and Leggatt remain far more connected, even dependent upon one another, than would seem evident from their final physical separation in the narrative. Indeed, the very telling of the tale by the captain-narrator, at a distance of some years he admits, may hinge on the persistence of his connection to Leggatt. And while critics have certainly noted the closeness between Leggatt and the captain as the story unfolds, most have assumed that their physical separation at the tale's conclusion is a decisive break. Such an assumption, however, may not be the case.

When teaching the story, I begin by tracing the hot/cold imagery in class, having alerted students to remark such imagery as they read. The in-class work here is fairly easy, since there are relatively few instances of hot/cold to discover, though the pattern is fairly consistent. Michael Jones, commenting on the tension between captain and crew, suggests that the crew “pose a threatening audience and jury and form a possible invasion into the captain's private heroic world” (87). When the captain tells us that he has given his “first particular order” on the ship, he goes on to say that he presides over breakfast with what he calls a “frigid dignity” (48). In fact, just prior to giving the chief mate this first order, the captain smiles at the approaching mate in such a way that “froze his very whiskers” (48).

These variations of freezing or cold imagery as metaphors of distance stand in marked contrast to the various expressions of heat. Ironically, though, the use of heat as an oppressive image will figure more obviously only with the arrival of Leggatt, surely because it is with the secrecy of having to harbor Leggatt that the captain begins to align himself more clearly *against* his own crew and to feel it an invasive, prying antagonist. Early in the narrative the captain is alone at night on deck—this is prior to the arrival/emergence of Leggatt—when he notes that he is relatively “at ease” in the “warm breathless night” (36). He even rejoices in the “security of the sea as compared with the unrest of the land” (36). However, with Leggatt on board, the “warm breathless night” (36) turns into the “warm, heavy tropical night” (39) that closes about Leggatt's



head within the captain's cabin just as Leggatt is about to narrate his version of the murder for which he is responsible.

The heat imagery continues, turning more and more ominous the more Leggatt and the captain bond *against* the idea of a socio-legal order outside the absolute power of a commander at sea. The captain remarks that his cabin is "as hot as an oven" and that Leggatt's chin "glistened with perspiration" (48). Further, when the captain under whom Leggatt served, Archbold, arrives to the young captain's ship, the captain-narrator himself notes the "awful heat." And as the story nears its climax, the captain reflects back on what has been the "closeness of the heat in the gulf," a heat that has been "most oppressive" (64). It is at this moment that the captain feels least at ease with his command of the ship, for he must give bizarre orders to open the quarter-deck ports and to maneuver his ship dangerously close to land (in order to give Leggatt his best chance at swimming to shore). Having to assert his authority, the captain, as has become his habit, feels the pull of Leggatt's presence, even referring to him directly, for the first time in the story, as a second captain (64). Conrad emphasizes the closeness of the two—a closeness aligned directly against the rest of the crew on the ship—for the captain has chosen to continue wearing his own sleeping suit, as of course Leggatt wears another of the captain's sleeping suits.

Thus we reach Leggatt's assertion that he will "freeze on to" the borrowed sleeping suit in the context of heat imagery which has, throughout the story, suggested an increasingly oppressive weight against which the captain must define his first command. At the same time, cold imagery has served to suggest a distance between the captain and his crew, a distance he perhaps thinks he must assert and preserve in order to establish his position of absolute power. Of course, the captain also needs literal space to harbor Leggatt, for Leggatt (or the captain's idea of Leggatt) has been crucial to the captain's ability to take command of his crew and to assert his authority, which he assumes is limited only by his own moral framework, not that of a maritime code or land-based legal and social system.

While the particular phrase upon which my reading hinges—"freeze on to"—may at first seem a mere colloquialism that is of little importance in the overall story, it undeniably represents a meaningful choice of words in a story so dependent on very specific and particular diction. Exploring class distinctions in "The Secret Sharer," Cedric Watts has noted that the captain and Leggatt share the same "tone, style, phraseology and

assumptions" (27). And Conrad himself famously said of this story, composed as it was in a short period during which he was also working on the novel *Under Western Eyes*, "the Secret Sharer, between you and me [Conrad is writing to his friend Edward Garnett], is it. Eh? No damned tricks with girls there. Eh? Every word fits and there is not a single uncertain note. Luck my boy. Pure luck" (qtd. in Knowles and Moore 337). It would be surprising that within this context—a story in which language and word choice matter deeply because it is a story about telling stories, and for which Conrad believed he had all material, "every word," in place—that a declaration by one of the main characters, at a key moment in the narrative, be nothing more than an off-hand idiom. Indeed, in another letter, this one to Edith Wharton in response to her request that the story be translated into French, Conrad declines, asserting that it is "particularly English, in moral atmosphere, in feeling, and even in detail" (qtd. in Knowles and Moore 337). Clearly, the minute particulars mattered for Conrad.

"The Secret Sharer" is generally understood to be a study in the psychology of power and leadership, involving what Gail Fraser identifies as the "familiar Conradian paradox" of divided loyalties (40). Daniel Schwartz describes it as a tale in which a captain is "faced with circumstances and emotional traumas for which neither the maritime code nor his experience has prepared him" (80). The captain is left to fashion his *own* ethical code. And as Jones notes, "The external standards for heroic conduct are invented from the stage the captain sets up for himself on the deck of the ship. He clearly imagines his own moral universe in which he both legislates and performs the heroic ordeal" (86; and note the etymological play in legislate/Leggatt). Young and uncomfortable with his first command, the captain requires the appearance of the fugitive Leggatt, whom the captain declares is his "double," his "other self," and his "secret self," since Leggatt embodies those qualities that the young captain believes he must discover in himself if he is to take what he understands to be proper command of his ship.

While the relationship between the captain and Leggatt is generally understood in terms of what Leggatt provides for the captain (be it the capacity for heroism or the capacity for violence), it is equally revealing to consider what the captain, perhaps unwittingly, provides for Leggatt. This focus is where the otherwise off-hand expression—that Leggatt will "freeze on to" the captain's sleeping suit—becomes even more meaningful. If we assume that embedded within the phrase is a degree of thanks,



expressed by Leggatt to the captain, and that the two do, following Watts' argument, share the same assumptions and phraseology, then we might ask: What is Leggatt thankful to the captain for?

The answer to this question is that Leggatt, in addition to receiving literal protection from the captain, will not be judged for his actions aboard the *Sephora* by any socio-legal system other than what the captain has provided. Any strictly legal judgment would surely see Leggatt for the murderer that he is, while the captain has, of course, understood Leggatt to be a hero. The captain provides for Leggatt a judgment—a vindication—which is not that of the "shore people" (36 and referred to throughout the story), nor is it the judgment of his actions that is handed down by Archbold, who, as much a shore person as anybody, abides by conventional maritime code; "I represent the law here," he declares to Leggatt (44). (One imagines the young captain-narrator declaring, not that he *represents* a legal system, but that he *is* the legal system.) It is at the moment of planning their separation, Leggatt suggests that he will remain attached to some positive aspect of the captain through keeping the borrowed sleeping suit. This suggestion complicates the idea that Leggatt, as the violent aspect of the captain, is entirely "expurgated" from the captain's psyche, to use Daniel Schwartz' term (87), by the end of the tale when the two are physically separated.

The captain represents a positive judgment of Leggatt's actions (positive from Leggatt's point of view, of course) that has not been provided by anybody else in tale, and will ostensibly not be provided by any land-based court of law that Leggatt may eventually face; Leggatt describes such a court as "an old fellow in a wig and twelve respectable tradesmen" (62) and earlier imagines that his story is "a sufficiently fierce story to make an old judge and a respectable jury sit up a bit" (41). He also twice mentions his father, a "parson in Norfolk," who must weigh on Leggatt's mind as representative of a biblical judgment which he imagines will be no more generous than that of the courts (40; 41). Schwartz has noted that Leggatt is "abandoned to a world where the captain's epistemology is irrelevant" (87). It is equally the captain's ideology, his understanding of authority and command, that will be irrelevant, but the abandonment is partial at best. Of course, the two will be physically separated, but I would contend that Leggatt continues in the world with the captain's ethical and moral system as the basis for his future actions. It is easy to speculate that those future actions could be as violent as what occurred aboard the *Sephora* and that Leggatt will justify himself based not on



conventional land or maritime codes of behavior, but rather on the ethical system he believes the captain to "understand" (a term Leggatt uses throughout the story).

In other words, for Leggatt, the captain-as-judge will replace the Archbolds of the world as well as any old fellows in wigs and respectable tradesmen, not to mention his father the parson in Norfolk. Indeed, many critics identify the captain's "floppy hat" as a "parting gift," as James Hansford calls it, from the captain to Leggatt, but one that is "given back" (37). This view indicates the symbolic *detachment* of Leggatt from the captain. Crucially, though, the sleeping suit is *not* returned, hinting that the captain and Leggatt, though physically separated, remain necessary to one another: complicit judges of one another's actions.

The captain remarks that at sea they are "far from all human eyes, with only sky and sea for spectators and for judges" (34). The captain must not admit any source of ethics or law other than what he decrees; any other ethical or legal system would judge Leggatt a murderer and the captain himself guilty of harboring a fugitive. Norman Page argues that the "plain duty" of the captain is, in fact, to "hand [Leggatt] over to the proper authorities" (158); and Schwartz notes that Leggatt and the captain have "violated every tenet of the maritime code" (81). However, "far from human eyes" is the moral tabula rasa of the sea that the captain inscribes with his judgment of Leggatt. Conrad remarked in a letter that the sea is "indifferent to evil and good" (qtd. in Zabel 96), and he frequently turned to the sea as the arena in which those in power need not defer to conventional socio-legal arrangements or codes, as represented by captain Archbold.

I am thus not convinced that the physical separation of the captain and Leggatt at the conclusion of the story is as decisive a break as it may appear to be. The sleeping suit itself, that physical mark of the two seamen's identity, and standing as it does for the vindication that the captain's judgment provides, remains with Leggatt to connect them. So the captain may assume what Schwartz identifies as his "hierarchical position as captain" (87), but I would argue that he does not, as Gail Fraser suggests, "integrate himself into the ship's community" (41). I think it a real possibility that the captain rules his ship with a violence that he has learned to justify in his encounter with Leggatt. In other words, his captaincy is a sham, the rule of a violent tyrant, perhaps as undeserved as his initial appointment as captain is likely to have been. (In one of his narrative elisions, the captain tells us, "in consequence of certain events of no

particular importance, except to myself, I had been appointed to the command only a fortnight before" (34). We later learn that Leggatt himself assumed his position because, in Archbold's words, "His people had some interest with my owners. I was in a way forced to take him on" (53.).

The "freeze on to" exchange between the captain and Leggatt—so attractively weird within the tale and also very tangible for readers who are new to Conrad's style—heightens the degree to which the two characters remain connected *after* Leggatt's departure, and thereby suggests very dark overtones for Leggatt's future and for the captain's command. Beginning with a narrow focus on the connotations of the "freeze on to" phrase, and then placing this usage within the relatively accessible pattern of hot and cold imagery throughout the story, provides a convenient way into the much more subtle, yet so crucial themes upon which the story turns: authority, command, responsibility, and leadership. While Conrad's maritime world may be far removed from the experience of most reader's today, these themes are still very much present in the modern social and political landscape.

By way of concluding discussion of the story when I am teaching it, I ask my classes to consider just what has compelled the captain to tell this story at all, from a "distance of years" as he admits (51). Is it guilt? Is the captain now in need of vindication for violent actions of his own? Is he ultimately telling the tale as a form of explanation, even self-defense? Clearly, the captain believes in Leggatt's heroism, even after a number of years, and in his own judgment of Leggatt's actions as correct. The great ambivalence that will continue to attract critics and readers alike to Conrad's story is that Leggatt escapes the ship as "a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny" (70). But Leggatt's "freedom" is the result of the captain's favorable judgment of the murder aboard the *Sephora*. So what might be the destiny of such a man? Will it involve further actions that are justifiable only in a moral framework that allows for such violence? Is the captain himself a "free man," and in what sense? Free to do as he pleases, having now provided this kind of judgment for Leggatt? Will he in fact exercise his power in that potentially corrupted moral framework, for he seems to truly believe that "theoretically, I could do what I liked, with no one to say nay to me within the whole circle of the horizon" (48)?

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