

コンラッドと疎外

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Conrad and Alienation

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CONRAD AND ALIENATION

Joseph Conrad, the Polish-born British writer of tales of adventure on the high seas, often dealt in his novels with the theme of the alienated individual. Writing at the turn of the century, Conrad anticipated the preoccupation with alienation in Western society, which would soon come to hold a central place in the minds of twentieth century novelists. Conrad looks at the problems of the individual who feels not only cut off from other people, but also suffers paralyzing anxiety in his search for a personal identity. Conrad's short novel, *The Secret Sharer*, written in 1909, deals particularly with this issue of alienation and identity.

CONRAD'S BACKGROUND

Joseph Conrad was born in 1857 in the Polish Ukraine. At this time Poland was dominated by Russia, and Conrad's father, a literary man as well as a Polish nationalist, ran afoul of the Russian authorities. As a result, Conrad and his family were sent into exile in Russia in 1862. Joseph then suffered family tragedies when his mother died two years later, and his father followed her into death four years subsequently. Thus, Joseph was orphaned at the age of eleven. When he reached the age of sixteen, Joseph left the continent to become a sailor in the British merchant marine.

Professor C.B.Cox of Manchester University points out that Conrad's loss of his parents at an early age caused him to develop "habits of solitude, a depressive sense of loneliness which he carried with him to his grave."¹ Evidence has also been uncovered that shows that Conrad tried to commit suicide when he was twenty-one years old. Professor Cox says that as a result of the attempted suicide, "Conrad suffered from fits of depression and nervous breakdowns, of varying importance, for the rest of his life."² Conrad's mental condition gives us insight into some of the reasons he chose to write about alienation and the search for identity.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Conrad's short novel *The Secret Sharer*, written in 1909, and published as one of three short novels in *'Twixt Land and Sea* in 1912, is based in part on two historical incidents. These two events were Conrad's first experience in command of a ship, a voyage from Bangkok to Singapore

as captain of the *Otago* in 1888, and the true story of a murder at sea on the *Cutty Sark*, which occurred in 1880.

Professor Norman Sherry of the University of Singapore has made a detailed study of the historical documents relating to Conrad's sailing career. Sherry points out that "Conrad's experiences in taking up his first command were in many ways nightmarish. He certainly struggled against sickness, lack of crew, and calms in the Gulf of Siam."³ Conrad must have felt a sense of anxiety and insecurity as well as fears of failing to execute his responsibilities as captain of his ship, and this is reflected in the concerns of the fictional captain in *The Secret Sharer*.

The other incident, *The Cutty Sark* murder case, also provided elements for Conrad to illustrate the issue of a captain's responsibility to the men under his command. In *The Cutty Sark* incident, the chief mate of the ship killed another seaman on board the ship, but the captain failed to turn the killer over to the proper authorities for trial, but rather helped the man to escape justice. The captain soon began to regret his rash action and thereafter committed suicide. Professor Sherry has this comment on Conrad's thinking: "Perhaps it was this consciousness of the very real possibility of failure which caused him in his fiction to connect famous sea-crimes with his own knowledge of the conditions of moral isolation in which man's weakness could take control."⁴

THE PLOT OF THE NOVEL

The Secret Sharer begins with a description of the captain's ship's anchorage in the Gulf of Siam. The description of the setting gives us,

as C.B.Cox puts it, "...a hint of menace, of man's isolation in a dangerous and inexplicable universe. Land, sea and sky merge together in a moment of stillness, a kind of dream-landscape..."⁵

The captain, narrating his own story, sets the stage for his story in a philosophical and psychological manner: "In this breathless pause at the threshold of a long passage we seemed to be measuring our fitness for a long and arduous enterprise, the appointed task of both our existences to be carried out, far from all human eyes, with only sky and sea for spectators and for judges."⁶

The captain informs us that he has only been with this ship and crew for several weeks and is thus a virtual stranger to the men under his command. Then, with a comment which foretells the psychological crisis to come, he adds that "if all the truth must be told, I was somewhat of a stranger to myself."⁷

Here at the very outset of the story, we begin to see the captain as a man who is extremely unsure of himself and fearful about whether he has the ability to lead his men. His first action as captain is to take the first night's watch himself rather than delegate the duty to one of the crew. The crew members find this rather peculiar, but do not comment on it before the captain. However, the captain realizes that his action must seem odd, but nevertheless he stands by his decision.

While musing about this first action which has begun the process of alienating the crew from him, the captain's attention is diverted by a cry from the water. Thrashing in the sea alongside the ship, is a man shouting for help. The captain, alone on deck, pulls the man aboard without alerting the crew, who are all below decks asleep. By not involving the

crew in the rescue, the captain has placed another psychological barrier between himself and the crew.

The rescued man, Leggatt by name, tells the captain that he has escaped from another ship which is anchored nearby. Leggatt had killed a fellow crew member during a violent storm. Leggatt had killed the man in a fit of temper because the man would not help Leggatt lash down a sail which had blown loose and threatened to cause the ship to be sunk by the storm. The captain finds himself immediately sympathetic to Leggatt. When the captain finds that he and Leggatt are both from the same hometown, their bonds of friendship are cemented.

The captain then decides to harbor Leggatt until such time as an escape can be made at another landfall. The captain instinctively knows that the crew would not approve of his decision, and therefore the captain hides Leggatt in his own cabin. There follows a nerve-wracking game of hiding Leggatt whenever the captain's steward brings meals or attempts to clean the cabin. The captain begins to feel that the other crew members must know something is amiss, and he tortures himself with questions and surmises about what the crew is thinking and doing.

The strain of trying to hide Leggatt from the crew takes its emotional and mental toll on the captain's concentration, and he begins to feel his personality and identity are collapsing. This process is helped along by the captain's increasing identification with Leggatt. As Leggatt tells the captain about his life and adventures, the captain begins to admire Leggatt more and more. The captain notes that while Leggatt remains cool and calm and in complete possession of himself, he himself is going to pieces. The captain broods upon this and begins to see Leg-

gatt as his own other, secret self.

Finally the captain can bear the strain no longer, and he and Leggatt work out a plan for Leggatt to secretly disembark in the dark of night while they are sailing quite close to the coast. When the time comes, the captain risks his ship and the lives of his men in order to bring the ship in close enough to the coast for Leggatt to swim ashore. Leggatt safely escapes without the crew knowing it, and the captain exults in his newly found decisiveness. The captain feels that he has faced the fears within himself and can now deal with his crew with confidence.

ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL

Conrad's emphasis is on the personal search for identity and struggle against alienation. The captain is obviously alienated from his crew as well as from himself. The captain almost immediately identifies with Leggatt as soon as he meets him. Leggatt possesses the self-confidence which the captain lacks. As Professor C. B. Cox puts it: "Leggatt's self-confidence contrasts with the self-questioning, Hamlet-like behavior of the captain... what the captain draws up from the sleeping waters corresponds with his own dream of an ideal personality.... Leggatt is active, energetic and self-possessed, and has proved himself in dangerous extremities." ⁸

Identity is thus equated with self-confidence and the ability to act aggressively. Another critic feels that the captain is "an example of hyperconscious modern man who fastidiously thinks of the consequences of every action to the point where he cannot do anything....

Conrad wishes us to perceive Leggatt and the captain as representatives of a split in modern man between his mind and his instinct.⁹ One must draw the conclusion that Conrad's answer to the problem of alienation is that each individual should not be afraid to follow his instincts, his more primitive self, and thus his personality will be integrated and liberated.

The issue of personal responsibility is not dealt with by Conrad. Leggatt had killed a man and was not in the least repentant about it. Leggatt attempts to justify himself with excuses and the captain accepts them without question. Leggatt complains that he will have to wander the earth as a fugitive and this is punishment enough for his crime. The captain responds that in exceptional times exceptional methods must be applied. The captain then goes on to put his own crew in danger in order to help Leggatt escape the ship and swim safely to shore.

The captain feels that he has undergone a type of initiation into manhood, and assumes that from now on the crew are going to respect him as a strong and forceful man. The captain is so wrapped up in his own problems that his responsibility to his men is completely ignored. Preoccupation with the problems of identity and alienation should not obscure the equally important issues of responsibility to others as well as to oneself.

FOOTNOTES

¹ C. B. Cox, *Joseph Conrad: The Modern Imagination* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1974), p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³ Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), p. 249.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 144.

⁶ Joseph Conrad, "The Secret Sharer" in *Twixt Land and Sea* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 88.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 145.

⁹ Daniel R. Schwarz, *Conrad: The Later Fiction* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), p. 3.