In “The Secret Sharer” Joseph Conrad presents an initiation story where the main character becomes appointed to the role of captain, and must mature to the role. The Captain is confronted by Leggatt who represents a bad dream of the Captain’s come to life, by embodying his fear of failure of command which may result from his self-described strangeness. The Captain none the less gives aid to Leggatt and goes through an ordeal in doing so, the point the trial being that in undertaking it the captain may lose his doubts and strangeness which are the only impediments to “the perfect communion of a seaman with his first command” (Conrad 282). In reaching this understanding of the tale as an initiation story one must first come to a conclusion about the characters in the piece; what are the natures of the Captain and Leggatt? The Captain as the narrator shares his most intimate thoughts in the piece and gives his most internal version of the events on the ship, while also describing in multiple passages his strangeness and his doubts, both about himself and about those around him, except for Leggatt, with whom his feels not at all a stranger, and in fact very closely acquainted. Leggatt represents the Captain’s own blurred mirror-image of himself, in some ways superior and in other ways deficient in those traits which the Captain values in his character. Leggatt is also host to much speculation about his criminality, begging the question of whether he is the “homicidal ruffian” that the Captain assures the reader he isn’t (Conrad 259). With clear understandings of the nature of the characters it’s possible to create cogent explanations of the function of the relation between the Captain and Leggatt, and the significance of the maneuver at Koh-ring Island and of the appearance of his hat.

There is a valid question in the reliability of the Captain as narrator. The Captain is given to omissions in his story. The omissions are notably conspicuous because they are made consciously and presented directly in the text, such as in the first example where the Captain
Hirsch

says, “In consequence of certain events of no particular significance, except to myself, I had been appointed to the command only a fortnight before” (Conrad 255). The Captain allows for a minor contradiction in his narrative here, for if the events truly had no significance, why would one state such a fact? The line appears to be given in answer to a question which the story had not asked, but was still very important: “How did such a young man achieve this command?” If one presumes that the narrator is not possessed of the merit to warrant his command, then his appointment must be the result of failed judgment of his superiors or the result of some shameful inequity, or perhaps both. However, it is much more likely that the Captain does possess the natural merit to be named to his position: he says of his orders to take his ship back to England, “All its phases were familiar enough to me, every characteristic, all the alternatives which were likely to face me on the high seas—everything!... except the novel responsibility of command” which indicates the Captain has deep experience in the work at hand (Conrad 256). But his youth which brings hand in hand with it his strangeness and doubt makes him an unlikely, though not impossible, choice for command. When speaking to Leggatt the Captain says on the same subject, “I had been appointed to take charge while I least expected anything of the sort” which indicates also that if there were any underhanded dealings which caused him to be appointed he is unaware of them, and the key fact of the appointment remains the Captain’s youth. Taking this into account, the simultaneously explicating and omitting line of narration then comes to mean that whatever caused the Captain’s unlikely appointment truly is significant to no one else, that it is neither scandal nor folly, but merely a fortuitous chance for a young officer.

Conrad critic Brian Richardson argues the unreliability of the Captain’s narration, by citing the record of the meeting between the Captain and Leggatt’s former captain, Archbold,
as an instance where the Captain as narrator “Suppresses all rival accounts of Leggatt and his activities on the Sephora”, and Richardson also notes that “the alternative account provided by the crew of the other ship who knew Leggatt and witnessed the killing also goes unrecorded” (2). Richardson’s suggestion is that there is something of substance in Archbold’s and his crew’s version of Leggatt’s story, and that the Captain has excluded that information due to his personal bias. Archbold, however, has more cause for bias than the Captain.

Archbold says of himself, “I’ve never heard of such a thing happening in an English ship. And that it should be my ship,” and the Captain describes Archbold’s speech as suspect: “He mumbled to me as if he were ashamed of what he was saying; [...] in the manner of a criminal making a reluctant and doleful confession” (Conrad 268, 267). Archbold clearly has a great deal of pride for his command and shame on account of this crime taking place on his own ship. Archbold even admits, aloud, that “I never liked him somehow” making absolutely plain that he has clear and motivated bias against Leggatt (269). Steve Ressler, also a critical examiner of Conrad’s story, argues that “If the reader does not accept the accuracy of the narrator’s depiction of Archbold, his entire narrative becomes hopelessly tainted” (113). Essentially, the Captain’s narration at this point is a matter not of his opinions but of facts, and if one questions the reliability of the Captain to provide factual accounts of events, then the entire story should duly be called into question. As J.L. Simmons puts it in his essay, “The Dual Morality in Conrad’s The Secret Sharer,” “Criticism has overstepped its bounds when it negates the basic impressions with which it must work” (67). The Captain’s choice to verbally edit his story must be trusted, else the reader and interpreter will soon find them self second-guessing not only the narrator as the teller of this story, but Conrad as the author of the story.
The Captain’s most important trait in this story is his self-described strangeness: “what I felt most was my being a stranger to the ship; and if all the truth must be told, I was somewhat of a stranger to myself” (Conrad 255). Ted Billy interprets the Captain’s strangeness as “quasi-pathological” in the beginning of the story, and increased to the level of “incipient madness” at the climax (26, 25). However, as the story is told from the Captain’s internal perspective, it is possible to mistake his hyperbole for madness. Douglas Hewitt states that the Captain’s strangeness signifies “that fear that there are parts of himself which he has not yet brought into the light of day and that these aspects of his personality may interfere with ‘that ideal conception of one’s own personality’”, and then goes on to say that Leggatt is the embodiment of the Captain’s strangeness (149). The Captain’s strangeness is another label for his self-doubt in his ability to be a captain & commander of sailors. The Captain voices his opinion of other crewmen’s duties when he say, “They had simply to be equal to their task”, which is exactly what he has had to do up until now; the nature of a captain’s duty is much different (Conrad 255). The Captain’s self-doubt create both the inciting incident and the climax of the story: he is “responsible for the dangling ladder [...] He has in a sense summoned Leggatt” and later the maneuver at Koh-ring reflects the Captain’s “insecurity and a consequent compulsion to test the self,” according to Conrad critic Albert Guerard (41, 42).

The Captain’s second-most important trait is his caring nature, though another term for it could be softness. The Captain’s kindness shows itself only a few distinct times in the story, but it is an important motivation for his actions with Leggatt and a facet of his maturing in the climax. At the very opening of the story the Captain sits with his officers at the supper table and his second mate looks at him, giving the impression that he is going to sneer at him, and the Captain looks away saying that “it was not my part to encourage sneering on board my
ship” (Conrad 255). As captain of his ship, he certainly need not look away; if he is sneered at he could administer corporal punishment. The Captain chooses not to do this because he’s a kind man, and instead avoids the situation altogether. Then immediately after dinner the Captain informs his first mate that he will take the anchor watch because his crew has “had plenty of hard work, and the night before they had very little sleep” (Conrad 256). Many interpreters have cited this action of the Captain to be symptomatic of his strangeness and eccentricity. Certainly after he gives the order the Captain considers whether it will considered eccentric, but the motive was not doubt or confusion; the Captain was motivated to let his whole crew turn in by his good nature. That same goodness also motivates the Captain to give Leggatt comfort and sympathy throughout the story, as well as his floppy hat. While kindness is very much a part of the Captain’s character, Leggatt works as a foil, and is very different.

There is much disagreement as to what Leggatt actually represents, and to the nature of his character. Leggatt is described as a “darker, more interior, and outlaw self” who has “repudiated law and tradition” according to Albert Guerard, and Leggatt’s existence furthermore, “provokes a crippling division of the narrator’s personality” (42, 41). By Guerard’s account Leggatt is a sinister delinquent whose very presence is destructive to the Captain. Zivah Perel depicts Leggatt as, “the romance adventure hero. [...] he cannot be doubted, even if he murders”, and says also that Leggatt “appears like a merciless murderer who lacks any self control” (12, 13). For Perel, Leggatt is a “homicidal ruffian” who is beyond reproach because of his resemblance to hyper-manly, over-muscled characters from trashy supermarket romance novels (Conrad 259).
Steve Ressler maintains that Leggatt represents some traits which are “demonic and savage” and some traits which are “an ideal possibility for the captain, an inspiration and example” (110). Ressler’s version of Leggatt possesses a fount of willpower which can “move a man into actions both brave and lawless” (110). Leggatt is shown as a pure model for the Captain by J.L. Simmons: his crime is pardoned by the ethically relative “morality of the sea” under which his crime was necessary and right (67). The Captain is trying to attain the ideal method of command and “this ideal is dramatized in the person of Leggatt,” who is a “saint” worthy of “canonization” (Simmons 67, 68). Ted Billy goes in a different direction and states that Leggatt, “stands for the unknown self hidden inside every individual” and he ultimately signifies, “the unfathomability of human identity” (24, 21). Billy believes that Leggatt is meant to be a mystery, “unknowable in rational terms,” and a “darkness lying beneath the surface of consciousness and defying all attempts at exploration” (24).

Lawrence Graver recognizes both those who say Leggatt is a lower, primitive self, and those who argue that Leggatt is an ideal with which the Captain desires synthesis. Graver’s conclusion is that Leggatt “is neither higher nor lower, only different” (151). Given the facts of the story, this is perhaps the wisest interpretation. Compared with the fairly quiet life of the Captain at the opening of the story, his ship not even under sails but rather being towed, Leggatt’s actions appear to be of mythic proportions. However, Leggatt’s circumstances were equally mythic. In a squall described as “the end of the world” and having to “face it day after day”, any actions he took were bound to be magnified by scope of his situation (Conrad 272). In confession of this Leggatt states that, “I was precious little better than the rest. Only—I was an officer of that old coal wagon, anyhow...” indicating that he is not a magnificent individual, and the true cause of his bravery was his sense of responsibility and duty as an officer. This
lesson is not lost on the young Captain as he immediately follows by saying, “I quite understand” (Conrad 272). As with the Captain, Leggatt had a great newness to command on the Sephora; however, Leggatt did not share the Captain’s kind heart. Leggatt is more aggressive, meaner than his other, and thus when he was strained excessively, he acted with excessive aggression. The circumstances of the squall magnified Leggatt’s failure and aggression: “I tell you I was overdone with this terrific weather that seemed to have no end to it” (Conrad 260). Leggatt’s experience highlights his strengths which save the ship and his weaknesses which doom him, creating a composite image which important as a failure. It as an example of a man who was confronted with one of the “special surprises” of the sea and found out whether he “should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one’s own personality every man sets up for himself secretly” (Conrad 256, 255). In and of his own story, Leggatt may have been a fine and determined sailor, but he was doomed because of his unmitigated aggression.

Opinions of Leggatt’s criminality truly run the gamut, from Brian Richardson’s assessment of Leggatt as a “reckless devil” no different than the “homicidal ruffian”, to J.L. Simmons’s assertion that “to employ Freudian terminology [...] Leggatt’s function, as far as the narrator is concerned, is the super-ego,” suggesting that his actions are beyond question (Richardson 6, Conrad 259, Simmons 67). The fact of Leggatt’s crime remains the same throughout all interpretations, but to interpreters like Richardson, Leggatt is viewed as “a smooth tongue who is skilled in telling the right lie to the right person,” and any account Leggatt offers for himself is discarded (6). Osborn Andreas’s interpretation of the story focuses entirely around Leggatt being an outlaw; the “individual who is a law unto himself,” implying that Leggatt is a natural criminal (135).
Consider, however, that when the reader first meets Leggatt he is holding on to the ship’s rope ladder and the Captain says, “I had somehow the impression that he [Leggatt] was on the point of letting go the ladder to swim away”, and later Leggatt himself admits that “the question for me now is whether I am to let go this ladder and go on swimming till I sink from exhaustion or—to come on board here” (Conrad 258). Leggatt’s sentiment is reinforced by the Captain who comments, “I felt this was no mere formula of desperate speech, but a real alternative in the view of a strong soul,” making it doubly clear that Leggatt is contemplating ending his life in earnest, now that he has escaped the Sephora (Conrad 258). Leggatt expands on his intentions when he talks about how he threw away his clothes to continue swimming, saying “That was suicide enough for me. Let them thing what they liked, but I didn’t mean to drown myself. I meant to swim till I sank—but that’s not the same thing” signaling that his purpose in escaping the Sephora is not to avoid punishment but rather to inflict it upon himself. Leggatt cites the story of Cain and Abel, where the murderer Cain is marked by God that he shall not be killed for his crime but forced to walk the earth as a vagabond, and he confesses “I was ready enough to go off wandering on the face of the earth—and that was price enough to pay” (Conrad 262). In the end of the story Leggatt reaffirms and embraces his Cain-like punishment when he petitions the Captain to maroon him on an island. All in all the character of Leggatt, while not very emotional, is clearly repentant for his crime, and not a “homicidal ruffian” or a “reckless devil” (Conrad 259, Richardson 6).

From the moment Leggatt arises from “the bottom of the sea of the unconscious” to the moment he returns to it, he serves as a personification and reflection of the Captain’s self doubt and strangeness (Billy 24). The circumstances of Leggatt’s arrival and the nature of his
character both suggest that he is somewhat unreal: a kind of phantom, a figment of the
Captain’s imagination, or more particularly a dream, as Steve Ressler describes: “The night
setting, the captain in sleeping garb, his mood of reverie and introspection evoke the world of
dreams” (110). Leggatt is bluntly made out to be the doppelganger of the Captain, both
factually in that they attended Conway, and the Captain’s clothing fits Leggatt perfectly, and
figuratively by the Captain’s repeated descriptions of him like “my own reflection in the
depths of a somber and immense mirror” (Conrad 259). In this view, the significance of
Leggatt’s tale becomes the litany of the differences between the two, for everything else hints
at the characters’ perfect similarity. The significance of Leggatt’s story to the narrator is two-
fold. First, Leggatt possesses the bold self-assuredness necessary to be a commander, which
the Captain doubts of himself. Second, Leggatt is a failure as a commander because he could
he could not maintain discipline in himself or his crew, and his aggression resulted in his
committing murder, while conversely the Captain is by nature kind. Although the existence of
Archbold and the boat crew from the Sephora corroborate Leggatt’s bodily existence, in
regard to the Captain Leggatt is arguably more significant as a dream than a real person. Ted
Billy describes him as a “nightmarish doppelganger, the ‘grey ghost’ who haunts that
narrator’s consciousness”, but when describing Leggatt as an element of the Captain’s
unconscious it’s important to remember that he is a dream, not a diagnosis (26). Leggatt’s
boldness and failure to maintain discipline do not constitute an indictment of the Captain’s
capabilities; rather they are a tableau which the Captain may reflect upon.

The Captain reflects upon this dream-doppelganger sympathetically, above all. As
Paul Emmett describes, “his feelings for Leggatt are most assuredly complicated, despite the
fact that almost all critics, whether they themselves see Leggatt as angel or devil, tend to
accentuate the captain's positive feelings for his stowaway” (5). Leggatt’s story could very easily have been the Captain’s own for they shared the same newness to command. Reflecting upon his dream of Leggatt’s first attempt at command during the squall and its tragic failure and considering his own predicament, the Captain “realized suddenly that all my future, the only future for which I was fit, would perhaps go irretrievably to pieces in any mishap to my first command”, and out of sympathy he gives Leggatt safe harbor in his cabin (Conrad 277). The Captain proceeds in this course for days, weeks even, protecting and coddling his dream. Eventually Leggatt, ever-aggressive and determined to exact his exile in punishment for his crime, insists to the Captain that he be marooned. This scene marks the beginning of the resolution of the story as the Captain’s kindness comes into conflict with Leggatt’s aggression. At first the Captain resists Leggatt’s request, but Leggatt forces the issue:

“Impossible!” I murmured. “You can’t.”

“Can’t? . . . . Not naked like a soul on the Day of Judgment. I shall freeze on to this sleeping suit. The Last Day is not yet—and . . . you have understood thoroughly. Didn’t you?”

I felt suddenly very ashamed of myself. I may say truly that I understood—and my hesitation in letting that man swim away from my ship’s side had been a mere sham sentiment, a sort of cowardice. (Conrad 275, 276)

What the Captain is to have understood is the nature of doppelganger’s motivations, and how Leggatt must treat himself aggressively if he is to take his punishment. Also the Captain identifies that his own excessive protectiveness of Leggatt has made him act cowardly, like a mother unwilling to let go of her young. In this scene the Captain begins to learn that he must
be aggressive as well as kind, though he must learn from Leggatt’s failure and control himself. Shortly after that very discussion the signs of the growing change are clear: as the Captain sees his insolent second mate on deck, hardly awake and, “in such a slack, improper fashion that I came down on him sharply”, which is certainly a change from earlier averting his gaze when he sensed a sneer coming at him (Conrad 276). The next day the Captain points out that he was also dressed like Leggatt, commenting that “I had remained in my sleeping suit, [...] and the crew were used to see me wandering around in that airy attire”, so the Captain resembles his doppelganger in clothing as he will come to resemble him in demeanor (Conrad 277). As the Captain takes his ship towards Koh-ring Island, the relationship between him and his dream-doppelganger also changes; in the first half of the story when Leggatt speaks, “there was something that made comment impossible, in his narrative” and as such he talks at length, while the Captain can only manage “a futile whisper” to address his dream (Conrad 263). On the final night Leggatt is on board, though, the roles are reversed: when the Captain vocally offers Leggatt three coins that he can buy food or whatever when he reaches his island, the dream silently “shook his head” (Conrad 279). When the Captain urges his double more forcefully and again vocally, Leggatt only “smiled and slapped meaningly the only pocket of the sleeping jacket” (Conrad 279). So whereas in the beginning Leggatt was the more dominant figure who controlled their conversations, in the end the Captain has become the assertive speaker, indicating his development.

The maneuver at Koh-ring Island where the Captain skirts his ship dangerously close to land is obviously the height of action in the story, though there is disagreement as to whether it is the actual resolution. Throughout “The Secret Sharer” the Captain is trying to mature into a capable commander in order to achieve, “the perfect communion of a seaman
with his first command” which he eventually does accomplish (Conrad 282). Thus it is important to know whether the maneuver is the cause of the Captain’s maturing, or the effect of the Captain’s maturing. Albert Guerard argues that the Captain matures solely through introspection and because of, “The whispering communion of the narrator and his double [...] But it is obvious to both men that the arrangement cannot be permanent” (42). The Captain skirts Koh-ring Island so closely because he has matured thanks to Leggatt, and he “is compelled to take an extreme risk in payment for his experience” (Guerard 42). Lawrence Graver also contends that the Captain matures through taking council with Leggatt, and “Once he accepts the inevitability of Leggatt’s departure, the captain begins to conform more closely to the ideal of the perfect commander” (157). The piloting of the ship near Koh-ring Island is by Graver’s account, “a gesture of self-assertion” from the already matured Captain (157). Other interpreters of the story describe the maneuver at Koh-ring Island as the moment when the Captain matures. J.L. Simmons makes the maneuver out as a crucible where the Captain asserts himself as a commander: “Without the dramatic moment there would be little chance that the captain could change the nature of his relationship with the crew” (70-71). Douglas Hewitt describes the maneuver as the cause of the Captain’s maturity, but for different reasons. Hewitt sees the event as the Captain exercising himself of Leggatt, and the strangeness that he says comes with his doppelganger, and thus he gains maturity (149, 150).

The central moment in the Captain’s growth is the maneuver at Koh-ring Island; it is the cause of his real maturity. The Captain is actively engaged in trying to gain self-knowledge and mature, and he studies by reflection upon his dream-doppelganger, Leggatt. While the Captain does begin to mature through his reflections upon Leggatt, thought and reflection alone cannot totally reveal, “how far [the Captain] should turn out faithful to that
ideal conception of one’s own personality” (Conrad 255). Through this reflection the Captain comes to realize that Leggatt failed because he lost control of himself (or perhaps lost self-knowledge of himself) during a crisis, and if he wants to be a success, then he must face a crisis himself and keep control. The Captain may think and reflect that he has self-knowledge and that he is a commander of men, but just as much as Leggatt’s failure matured him, the Captain must undergo an equal ordeal to experience that same development. J.L. Simmons agrees that in the experiences of Leggatt on the Sephora and the Captain at Koh-ring Island, “there is a clear case of symbolic re-enactment” (70). Just as Leggatt said the storm that struck the Sephora was like “the end of the world”, the Captain similarly described his ship’s predicament at Koh-ring island like, “a bark of the dead floating in slowly under the very gate of Erebus” (Conrad 272, 280). Within Leggatt’s crisis he was the first mate and Captain Archbold was “raving” and “whimpered about our last hope” (Conrad 250, 271). For the Captain’s crisis his first mate “made as if to tear his hair, and addressed me recklessly” (Conrad 280). The Captain re-enacts Leggatt’s outburst at his crewman when he grabs his first mate, and here he distinguishes himself from his dream-doppelganger: while he must be “pretty fierce” with his mate, as Leggatt had to be with his crew, the Captain controls himself and is only as fierce as necessary to get his mate under control (272). Even if his ship were to be dashed on the rocks of Koh-ring Island, the Captain is without a doubt in command of his crew.

The means by which the Captain keeps his ship from being destroyed is the appearance of the hat he gave to Leggatt, “floating within a yard of the ship’s side” (281). The hat floats very near to the ship, just as Leggatt had when the Captain first discovered him, and is illuminated in the same way as, “A phosphorescent flash passed under it” (281). As many
critics point out the sea is largely symbolic of the unconscious, particularly the Captain’s unconscious, and Leggatt rises out of it like a dream; however, when he does he appears “complete but for the head. A headless corpse!” (Conrad 257). While Leggatt of course does have a head, the symbolism is more important for the Captain by nature of his doppelganger relationship with Leggatt. At the beginning of the story the Captain feels as a stranger to himself and is nervous about his position, and as such he first perceives the dream out of his self-conscious as headless. By the end of the story he has matured past his doubts, and when he looks into the ocean he sees his hat, a synecdoche for a head, the head which Leggatt appeared to be missing. The hat thus represents that the Captain has got his head about him so to speak, and in the same way that Leggatt the dream became embodied, the hat embodies the Captain’s confidence.

Describing the ship while nearing Koh-ring island, Conrad writes, “the sails slept”, another reminder of the dream-like qualities of his story. The inciting incident is the night arrival of a dream of the Captain, a dream of confidence, but at the same time of failure. The Captain is young and uncertain of himself, but Leggatt is younger still and entirely self-possessed, and a repentant failure and murderer. Through great reflection upon Leggatt the Captain begins to mature, to understand what made Leggatt succeed and what made him fail, and forces a crisis to compel his own development. Very fortunately for him and his entire crew, The Captain is victorious and passes his ordeal, managing at last to awake from his dreams and become a commander, the Captain.
Works Cited


