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For the Sake of Survival: Leggatt and Falk's Moral Transgression Under Extenuating Circumstances

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Abstract:

The existing body of Conrad criticism concentrates mainly on his novels. He has been read as exotic, existentialist, empiricist, misogynist and racist etc. As it often happens with a great novelist, his short stories are neglected. This paper examines Joseph Conrad's short stories "Falk: A Reminiscence" and "The Secret Sharer", focusing on the theme of crime committed under extenuating circumstances. Both works explore morally ambiguous actions that challenge societal norms and force the protagonists into isolation and self-reflection. In "Falk", the titular character's resort to cannibalism during a famine raises questions about survival ethics, guilt, and the societal consequences of transgression. Similarly, in "The Secret Sharer", the captain's decision to harbour Leggatt, a fugitive who has committed murder in a moment of necessity, highlights the tension between personal loyalty and professional duty. By comparing these narratives, this paper argues that Conrad's portrayal of crime transcends legal definitions, emphasizing the psychological and existential dimensions of guilt and redemption. The study seeks to demonstrate how these stories invite readers to reconsider conventional notions of morality and justice, illuminating the complexity of human behaviour in extraordinary situations.

Keywords: ambiguity, Conrad, crime, Falk, Modernist, psychological, Secret Sharer, transgression.

Joseph Conrad occupies a significant place in the modernist tradition, known for his exploration of moral ambiguity and the psychological complexity of his characters. His works often delve into the "grey areas" of human experience, resisting clear-cut distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong. This is particularly evident in his portrayal of crime, betrayal, and ethical dilemmas, which he uses to question the stability of societal norms and individual integrity. In "Falk" and "The Secret Sharer", Conrad's fascination with transgression emerges through characters who navigate inner conflicts and external pressures, reflecting broader modernist concerns with alienation and subjective truth. His nuanced approach to crime, not as a simple breach of law but as a catalyst for self-discovery and moral inquiry, underscores his contribution to a literature preoccupied with the complexities of human consciousness and moral uncertainty.

The concept of crime is an unusually problematic one because it is difficult to find any definition of crime that does not have a large element of circularity. In general, crimes are defined as events and actions that are prohibited by the criminal law of a particular country. This reduces the definition of crime to being what the criminal law says it is. The boundaries of a legal system are usually those of the nation-state. Again, there is a difference between national boundaries and cultural boundaries. England and Wales, for instance, have legal systems, which are different from that of Scotland. Yet it would be difficult to identify the difference in culture in border towns.

Almost all actions which mankind is capable of have at some time, at some place, been defined as "criminal" and almost all acts now defined as criminal were, at some time, at some place,

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socially acceptable and in agreement with the culture of the time, and hence not prohibited by the law.

The concept of crime changes from time to time depending upon changes in statutes, cultural meanings attached to their language, or customs allowing statues to lapse. Killing one's wife and her paramour was not a crime in most societies till fairly recently. Keeping and using tranquilisers and psychotropic drugs was not an offence till the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. The act of killing is not necessarily a crime: a soldier is rewarded for killing more and more people in battle; the executioner is only doing his honest work; and in ordinary fisticuffs somebody might have a heart attack and die without the other person really branded as a criminal. However, the guilt and stigma of the act largely depend on its context.

Because of the complexities involved in defining crime as mentioned earlier, it offers a promising area of exploration. It has attracted writers and poets interested in observing the human situation. Authors from Dante and Shakespeare to Dostoevsky and Camus have handled the theme of crime and punishment in their own intriguingly individual way. A significant section of Conrad's fictional output too including *Lord Jim*, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* has a crime at its centre.

The methodology employed for this paper involves a detailed close reading of "Falk" and "The Secret Sharer" to identify and analyse the depiction of crime. Particular attention is given to key scenes where the crimes are described or implied, dialogues and narrative elements that reveal the protagonists' motivations, internal conflicts, and guilt. The research incorporates perspectives from moral Philosophy, Psychology and literary theory. The analysis is contextualized with existing critical literature on Conrad's works, drawing insights from scholarly articles and essays that explore Conrad's treatment of morality, survival, and human psychology. The study examines recurring themes such as extenuating circumstances, isolation

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and guilt and redemption and reconciliation. The study includes historical and cultural analyses to situate the novellas within their socio-political context, particularly with respect to Victorian and early modernist attitudes toward ethics and justice. This approach ensures that the analysis is both grounded in the texts and enriched by broader theoretical and critical frameworks.

In both the stories, Conrad portrays crime as a deeply human phenomenon that transcends legality, focusing on the psychological burden of guilt, the moral dilemmas of survival, and the tension between societal norms and individual conscience.

Themes and Motifs in The Secret Sharer

Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" has its origin in an actual sea-crime, the murder on the Cutty Sark (Sherry 256).It appeared in the collection *'Twixt Land and the Sea* originally published in 1912. It is a psychological story narrated by a young, unnamed captain of a British ship who feels insecure and isolated as he takes command for the first time. His inexperience and self-doubt set the stage for a deeply introspective journey.

One night, while the ship is anchored near the Gulf of Siam, the captain discovers a stranger clinging to the ship's side. The man, named Leggatt, is an escaped fugitive from another vessel, the *Sephora*. He reveals that he killed a crew member in an act of self-defence during a storm to maintain order on his ship. The captain decides to shelter Leggatt, despite knowing this act makes him complicit in harbouring a fugitive.

As Leggatt hides in the captain's quarters, a profound bond forms between the two men. Leggatt represents a "secret self" for the captain—a reflection of his inner struggles and repressed desires. The captain, who has been struggling to assert authority and command respect, sees Leggatt as a symbol of decisive action and courage. Their relationship becomes one of mutual understanding, with Leggatt helping the captain confront his insecurities.

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Throughout the story, the captain must balance his loyalty to Leggatt with his duties to his crew. This tension reaches its peak when the *Sephora's* captain boards the ship in search of Leggatt. The young captain skilfully deceives him, further solidifying his alliance with the fugitive.

Eventually, the captain devises a risky plan to help Leggatt escape. He navigates the ship dangerously close to land to allow Leggatt to swim to freedom. The success of this manoeuvre not only ensures Leggatt's escape but also serves as a turning point for the captain. By taking decisive action, he gains confidence and solidifies his command over the ship.

Leggatt's crime has some extenuating circumstances. Yet, in legal terms, he is a criminal. Conrad was interested in depicting this dichotomy between the personal and social self. In killing the rebel, Leggatt saves many lives and prevents the ship from sinking.

Leggatt is confident that he took the right step in murdering the man. Nonetheless, his likening himself to Cain suggests that he is aware of the unconventionality of his action: "The 'brand of Cain' business, don't you see. That's all right. I was ready enough to go off wandering on the face of the earth- and that was enough to pay for an Abel of that sort." (Conrad *'Twixt* 94) There is a primal quality of inevitability and stoic resignation here. If one has been placed in such a situation, then let it be so. One is prepared to pay the price for it. For a while, it is no longer a moral question; only an existential choice to be made.

Leggatt has no regrets. Faced with dilemma, he decides his course of action and now that it is done, he is prepared to suffer not at the hands of the law, but society and religion. To them, he is an outcast, now a pariah: "What does the Bible say? Drive off the face of the earth! Very well. I am off face of the earth now." (114)

Conrad downplays the murder. The victim had been unruly, nearly mad with fear. To kill him was an unpleasant necessity for the captain. Norman Sherry quotes Jocelyn Baines that in changing the incident from the original incident:

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…Conrad softened the crime…and also softened the character of the mate. The mate of the *Cutty Sark*... was apparently a despotic character with a sinister reputation…Leggatt was, however, clearly an exemplary sailor, and his provocation was greater; it was in the middle of a storm when the fate of the ship was at stake and the captain had lost his nerve. (Sherry 26)

This altercation also shows Conrad's idea of work ethic. A man's loyalty to his profession comes first and other considerations are secondary. This concept of work ethic is similar to the Victorians. Their dedication, honesty and hard work led them to success, prosperity and word-wide fame of the nation, the reason why it continued to rule over nations for nearly two centuries and its unquestioned status as an Empire.

It is quite evident that Conrad did not intend Leggatt to be a cold-blooded murderer. This is supported by the authorial comments in the story that invest the character with great complexity. Leggatt is a parson's son, and a graduate from the best of training ships, *Conway.* And as an educated man from a decent family, he is supposed to look like a rogue.

If Leggatt is a "criminal", the captain is no less so far, he harbours a murderer, an act that is against maritime and legal codes. However, he lets Leggatt go off when he expresses a desire to leave the ship. At the end of it, the captain has gained a profound experience. Like much of Conrad's other works," The Secret Sharer" is deeply interpersonal. As both of Conrad's parents died when he was a child, he felt lonely and sad. His works often deal with a lonely person who is cut off from his fellowmen, like the captain in this story.

Exploring Key Themes and Symbolism in *Falk*

'Falk: A Reminiscence' appeared in *Typhoon and Other Stories*. It was originally published in 1903.This story may have been inspired from the *Mignonette* controversy, a case that caused a furore in England. The 1884 incident of the English yacht *Mignonette* is a notorious case of survival cannibalism that profoundly influenced maritime law and sparked debates about

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morality and necessity. The *Mignonette*, a 52-foot cruiser not designed for long voyages, set sail from Southampton to Sydney but was struck by a large wave and sank in the South Atlantic. The crew of four—Captain Tom Dudley, first mate Edwin Stephens, sailor Edmund Brooks, and cabin boy Richard Parker—escaped in a lifeboat with minimal provisions. After 19 days adrift and facing starvation, Dudley and Stephens decided to kill the ailing Parker for sustenance, a decision that saved their lives but later led to their trial. Rescued four days later, they were brought back to England, where their actions led to the landmark legal case R v Dudley and Stephens. The court ruled against the defence of necessity, affirming that murder, even in extreme situations, is legally indefensible.

This case, with its moral and existential dilemmas, resonates strongly with the thematic concerns of Joseph Conrad, particularly in his novella *Falk: A Reminiscence*. Conrad's work often explores the tenuous boundaries between survival, morality, and social norms, as seen in *Falk*, where the protagonist is haunted by his decision to kill and eat human flesh during an earlier ordeal at sea. The *Mignonette* trial, which was widely publicised in Conrad's time, provides a real-world parallel to the psychological torment and ethical quandaries faced by Falk. Conrad's interest in the darker impulses of human nature, the pressures of survival, and the moral ambiguity of extreme situations are vividly illustrated in both the novella and the real-life events of the *Mignonette*.

My paper highlights how Conrad uses fictional narrative to grapple with the same existential questions that haunted the Victorian legal and moral imagination. The public and legal rejection of the "custom of the sea" in the *Mignonette* case mirrors the isolation and judgment Falk experiences, as he struggles to reconcile his past actions with his present humanity. This connection enriches an understanding of Conrad's work as not merely fictional but deeply rooted in the ethical and philosophical discourses of his time.

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The eponymous sailor Falk is a mysterious Scandinavian and the tugboat captain of an unnamed port in the Dutch East Indies. He is looked at with suspicion and distrust for he is taciturn, keeps aloof and does not take meat. In a society of meat-eaters, this is considered peculiar. not only this, he does not even allow other men on the tug to take any meat. He blasts his cook when one of his engineers orders a fried turtle steak. His unusual anger at an apparently harmless dish startles the men around.

The narrator, a ship captain, becomes friendly with another ship captain, Hermann. Their ships are being loaded with freight at the port where Falk owns the only ship. Hermann's family travel with him along with his magnificent orphan niece. Falk too is a regular visitor but he always leaves when the narrator arrives.

The captain is dismayed to find that though he had finished loading before Hermann, Falk's tug was escorting Hermann's rather than his own. He learns that Falk saw him as a rival for Hermann's niece. He lies to Falk that he had a fiancée back home. A deal is struck that the narrator would press his suit and as a mediator between Falk and Hermann.

The narrator keeps his word. Though Hermann doesn't like Falk, he consents to hear him out for the sake of his niece. Falk announces that he has a confession to make. Already finding Falk to be a strange and withdrawn man, everyone listens with bated breaths. They are confounded and disgusted to learn that Falk had once indulged in cannibalism. Hermann refuses to listen any further.

Falk later tells the narrator the details. Years ago, the ship on which Falk had been sailing had broken down and they had drifted into the icy regions of the South Pole. When their limited rations of food ran out, the captain committed suicide out of sheer desperation. Falk took it upon himself the duty to distribute the little they had left on the ship. Early in the voyage, some stale meat had been thrown away as a health precaution. When the crew comes down to feeding

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on boiled boots and drinking kerosene, they regret their earlier decision. The stale meat now appears a delicacy to them. The crew loses its morale, feeling ill and hopeless. Ultimately, they start committing suicide. A handful of them remain alive. When the only other strong man on the ship, the friendly and helpful carpenter, talks of a sacrifice, Falk fails to understand its import. The turning point comes in Falk's life comes when the carpenter tries to kill him with a crowbar. Falk ducks and shoots him down. The carpenter is eaten by starving Falk and other surviving members on the ship. One by one the weakest is killed and eaten by others. Falk is the only survivor rescued by another ship.

Conrad's interest in the subject of food that is forbidden has deep psychological roots. In *A Personal Record*, he recalls the great impression made on him when he learnt from his grandmother that his Great Grand Uncle Nicholas Bobrowski, an officer in Napolean's army, had to kill an eat a dog once to appease his hunger. When the young Conrad confidently asserted that he would never act in a similar way, the grandmother only said, it was easy for him to say that because he had probably never known real hunger. He then goes on to name all the unusual and strange things he himself had eaten- "ancient salt junk…shark…trepang…snake." However, he affirms that it wasn't he who had eaten a Lithuanian dog but his uncle (Meyer 168-169). His emphasis and elaboration on this incident suggest that eating a common dog in his mind was probably akin to cannibalism.

Falk is honest and simple minded. He wants to confess his past to his future wife. He could have skipped the bizarre incident of cannibalism and won the girl's hand with greater ease, but he says: "I should want my wife to feel for me…. It has made me unhappy." (Conrad "Falk" 218)

Falk, unlike Conrad's other heroes escapes eternal suffering and punishment for his past deeds. He achieves his object-the girl and the consequent acceptance by society through marriage to

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her-simply by unburdening himself of his guilt. Stephen K. Land writes that by providing a positive end, Conrad was "deliberately experimenting with inversions of his usual themes." (97).

The relationship between sex and food has very old anthropological roots. As Levi Strauss points out in one of the languages of Cape York, cannibalism and incest which are considered social taboos in case of eating and mating respectively are conveyed by the same words- "kuta-kuta" (Curreli 550)

Perhaps, one of the reasons why he could not propose to Miss Vanlo was that she had a very weak constitution. She could have been unable to digest the fact that he had eaten once eaten men. Hermann's niece, on the hand, is an attractive, robust girl beaming with life. The writer feels they had been drawn together by a mysterious influence and made for a perfect couple: "In her grey track palpitating with life, generous of form, Olympian and simple, she was indeed the siren to fascinate that dark navigator, this ruthless lover of the five senses." (Conrad, "Falk" 234)

Falk's honesty stands in sharp contrast to Hermann's hypocrisy. He ridicules Falk for his want of morals and lack of scruples in disclosing his past before a group of decent, normal people. Yet, he is easily reconciled when the narrator points out the advantage of having his niece married to Falk. He would thus easily dispense with an extra burden now that her duties as a baby sitter and companion to his wife are no longer needed. Falk's fierce honesty reminds one of Mersault's in Albert Camus' *The Outsider* who would sooner go to the gallows than tell a lie to save his life. In a sense Falk is "an outsider", for he has refused to obey society's moral and religious codes which dictate that a man should readily die than feed on another man's flesh.

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Critical Reception and Interpretations

In *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography*, Bernard C. Meyer examines the profound impact of Conrad's early life experiences, particularly the loss of his mother, Ewa, when he was seven years old, followed by his father's death four years later. These events left Conrad orphaned at a young age, profoundly influencing his psychological development. Meyer suggests that these early traumas contributed to Conrad's complex relationship with food. He posits that the deprivation and emotional turmoil of his childhood may have led to a heightened desire for foods that were once inaccessible or denied to him. This longing can be interpreted as a subconscious attempt to compensate for the losses and unmet needs of his early years.

In her book *Food in the Novels of Joseph Conrad: Eating as Narrative*, Kim Salmons explores how Conrad's early deprivations influenced his relationship with food. She notes that Conrad's wife, Jessie, observed his lack of enjoyment in eating, suggesting a complex relationship with food that may have stemmed from his childhood experiences

Tony Tanner, in an illuminating essay on “Falk” alludes to Mauss’ and Durkheim’s book on *Primitive Classification.* While discussing the complexity of the growth of human mind, they write “the first logical categories were social categories…it was because men were grouped, and thought of themselves in the form of groups, that in their ideas they grouped other things.” (Tanner 534).

Thus, a man’s view of customs, traditions, achievements and failures are largely based on his society’s outlook. If he finds himself in a situation where he feels alienated and cut off from social norms, its value ceases to exist for him. He is then led on by his primitive instincts.

Falk kills the carpenter in self-defence not with criminal intent, and then realises that all the usual values have broken down. People are in despair and ready to kill to save rations, to feed

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on them. Tanner writes: "The breakdown of categories is intimately related to the more obvious themes of the breakdown of ship and the breakdown of the human body." (Tanner 35)

Conrad weaves the story in a manner, which dilutes Falk's offence. Like many of Conrad's other stories, the narrator here is a sensitive, intelligent and sympathetic man who is deeply absorbed in what he hears and sees. His reflections on the events in the story are analytical and they often provide a new perspective of looking at crime in different ways. Speaking of the struggle between Falk and the carpenter, the narrator reflects:

"The best man had survived. Both of them had at the beginning just strength enough to stand on their feet, and both had displayed pitiless resolution, endurance, cunning and courage-all the qualities of classic heroism." (Conrad, "Falk" 231)

Thus, what Falk has done is not seen as a crude, inhuman act but an act of necessity for survival. The tone of the narration also reflects some admiration on the narrator's part albeit grudgingly. In fact, as Lawrence Graver remarks: "Falk's cannibalism seem inevitable and trivially unimportant compared with the maliciousness of Schomberg and the stupidity of Hermann. (Graver 103)

Interplay between Falk and The Secret Sharer

Falk and Leggatt turn out to be vehicles for carrying Conrad's worldview and his quintessentially non-Victorian morals. Instead of the categorical moral stance of the age, these heroes display a characteristically modern ambiguity. In extreme situations where survival is at stake, they are craven not by altruistic ideals but by practical considerations

Both *Falk* and *The Secret Sharer* highlight how guilt becomes an isolating force, driving characters to the fringes of society. Falk finds redemption through love and confession, symbolizing the possibility of reintegration into society. The captain, however, achieves redemption by risking his career to give Leggatt a chance at freedom, demonstrating moral

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courage. Crime in both stories isolates individuals, yet it also creates unique bonds—between Falk and the narrator, and between Leggatt and the captain.

Conclusion

Critics have often delved deep into Conrad's personal life and his misfortunes to explain the conduct of men like Falk and Leggatt. However, what counts finally is not their sense of right and wrong but the essentially primeval nature of their experience and the artistic mastery of Conrad in bringing these characters to life.

Conrad's heroes live in a world where there is a clear distinction the ideal society and its mores on the one hand and the world of nature on the other-rolling seas, a vast sky meeting the sea at horizons, the serious business of living (which is not informed by a "higher" spiritual or moral purpose). When they come face to face with a situation where the question is whether it is their head which has to fall or the enemy's, they reflexively opt for the latter. There is no time for reason; intuition is enough. All the reasoning comes post-facto, at a later stage—away from the heat and urgency of the task of survival. It is this "obscurity"- moral ambiguity-of Conrad that is so disturbing yet fascinating.

The above stories present crime as a multifaceted and deeply human phenomenon, shaped by the pressures of survival and the limitations of societal norms. Both Falk and Leggatt act out of necessity, their actions reflecting the profound moral ambiguity that arises in extreme circumstances. Through their narratives, Conrad critiques the rigidity of legal and ethical frameworks, suggesting that the context and intent of a crime are as significant as its outcome. The psychological consequences of these transgressions—manifested in guilt, isolation, and the struggle for redemption—underscore the enduring impact of such acts on the human psyche.

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This comparative analysis reveals that Conrad's treatment of crime is not merely a commentary on individual morality but also a broader exploration of human resilience, identity, and the search for meaning in adversity. By grappling with their transgressions, the protagonists ultimately transform, achieving a fragile reconciliation with their inner selves and the world around them. Conrad's nuanced depiction of crime in "Falk" and "The Secret Sharer" invites readers to empathise with flawed characters and reconsider the boundaries between morality, legality and humanity.

Future research could explore how Conrad's treatment of crime compares with other modernist writers or how his maritime experiences influenced his depiction of guilt and redemption.

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