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LIT 2000
Joseph Conrad
Betty Gilson
<http://www.artisttrue.com>

Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" is a great example of how the background or setting of a story can influence a character's decision. The beginning of the story takes place in a strange and foreign environment. The main character feels overwhelmed by the surrounding nature, which seems to control his ship. This lack of security makes him feel like he doesn't belong there—one of the characteristics of Conrad's characters in our study material—and he becomes alienated from his crew and ship.

That is why, when he finds a fugitive hanging on the side of the ship, an immediate connection is established between them. By trying to help the stranger, he feels he is helping himself a little bit. If it had not been for the strange environment, it is very unlikely that, under normal circumstances, he would have helped the stranger. In the end, the stranger will give him the greatest gift, in return for saving his life: after the Captain succeeds to successfully steer the ship out of danger, for the first time, he will feel connected not only with his ship, but with his crew and surrounding nature, as well.

The main character in the *Heart of Darkness* seems to be in a union with his surroundings and crew—initially. Shortly thereafter, while telling his story, Marlow's monologue reminds us of the isolation of the main character in "The Secret Sharer." The more he speaks of his adventure, the more the readers feel his isolation. Once again, the background of a story is very important for understanding how the main character feels and reacts because of it.

The two stories have in common the water, which sometimes is friendly and sometimes is not; but unlike in the “Secret Sharer,” the background in the *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* is more complex, involving scenes that take place on the ground, in the jungle, in hostile terrain, and with various characters, from soldiers to savages.

In the movie *Apocalypse Now*, more than ever the readers can witness how the settings can influence someone’s behavior. Because of Colonel’s Kurtz insubordination, a Captain is appointed to terminate him. While waiting for his mission, the Captain’s room seems more like a prison. Once again, like in most of Conrad’s stories, the readers feel the isolation of the main character, who can’t connect with his surroundings or the people around him. Fortunately for him, he will soon receive a mission that—unfortunately—will become a nightmare. To understand how characters classify a setting as friendly—or not—it is important to mention the scene where a tiger attacks one of the soldiers of the Captain’s classified mission. At that point, their patrol boat becomes more of a safe heaven for all of its crew, even though most of them will end up dying in the same boat, killed by bullets or arrows from the attacking enemy.

The background of the movie *Apocalypse Now* is set during the Vietnam War. This will influence the psychology of the main character in a more dramatic way than in *Heart of Darkness* or “The Secret Sharer”, which proves that the setting can have a powerful influence on its characters. In “The Secret Sharer” and *Heart of Darkness* the main character still has a chance to live a normal life, while in the movie the break up is permanent, and his tormented soul is condemned to total isolation for the rest of his life, unable to cope with the horrors of the war.

Conrad's stories are a fascinating study in how the human mind responds to its outside environment: the harsher the environment, the more difficult it is for a character to normally develop and live a normal life. Even the strongest characters are molded by their surroundings, and not all of them have the power to control, change—or avoid—their environment. The books and the movie illustrate that it's not always about choices. Sometimes people have no choice but to follow the structure and rules of an unscrupulous or irrational society, in order to survive.