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Conrad's Nostromo: Reception, Theme, Technique

Jerome A. Long
Loyola University Chicago

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CONRAD'S NOSTROMO: RECEPTION, THEME, TECHNIQUE

By

Jerome A. Long

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LIFE

Jerome A. Long was born in Chicago, Illinois, December 20, 1935.

He was graduated from Loyola Academy, Chicago, Illinois, June, 1953, and was graduated from Loyola University, Chicago, June, 1957, with the degree of Bachelor of Science.

He was enrolled in the Graduate School of Loyola University in June, 1957, as a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts.

The following year he was an Instructor in English at Xavier University of Louisiana, New Orleans. In 1959, he became a textbook editor at Scott Foresman and Company, Chicago. He is currently employed by Armour Research Foundation of Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, in the publications section of the public relations department.
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CHAPTER I

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF NOSTROMO

As a colorful, romantic, but nevertheless significant writer, Joseph Conrad has always held a place in modern letters. What has happened to his reputation in the sixty-odd years since the publication of Almayer's Folly, his first novel, has not been an attempt to deny him any of these qualities: today Conrad is known for colorful—often exotic—settings, characters inspired with romantic ideals, psychological explorations into the minds of men introverted by physical and moral isolation, and a pervading pessimism concerning the conduct of men and their final destiny. Rather, Conrad's concern with moral and psychological problems has been emphasized so that he is commonly regarded as a bridge between the Victorian and the modern novelist and as an early exponent of pessimism and futility.

This last view of Conrad's place in modern letters is certainly evident in his recent popularity among critics (one might say "sudden," as well, in deference to the height of the upsurge in such a short time). The centenary of Conrad's birth (1857-1957) was, of course, a suitable occasion for such a resurgence of interest. An English translation of Jean-Aubry's important biography, The Sea Dreamer, appeared during the centenary, followed shortly by a new biography by Jerry Allen, The Thunder
and the Sunshine. Albert J. Guerard, a popular and commanding figure among Conrad scholars, thought it the proper time to publish a full and entirely new work on Conrad, *Conrad the Novelist*, which was inspired by an earlier monograph.¹ And during the centenary, *Modern Fiction Studies*, a journal of critical opinion, disclosed that it had received more manuscripts on Joseph Conrad than on any other single author, with the exception of the always popular William Faulkner.² But the centenary cannot entirely explain the revival of interest in Conrad that has been general since 1940. Underlying this revival is a sympathy toward Conrad which links his pessimism with the despair and disillusionment that have so largely characterized English and American letters since the First World War. Conrad is considered "current"; the troubles he treats in his fiction are felt to be analogues to the problems of the existentialists and other littérateurs who cultivate despair. Conrad, however, is not a student of any philosophical school of literature, nor does he subscribe to pessimism as a "smart" sentiment, fashionable in the literary market place, as, unfortunately, many lesser talents choose to do today. Conrad was a stubborn individualist, as were many of his characters.

Conrad's concern in his stories, over and over again, is focused on the conflict between an individual—with his convictions and his ideals of conduct—and an unknowing and uncaring world. These personal clashes of the Lord Jims, the Heysters, the Goulds, we like to believe, tell us something important about the private spiritual battles which are the currency of today's literature, and with good reason. This age is certainly a self-conscious one. Psychology and sociology have brought to light a private and public will and consciousness, and have supplied us with the tools to study them. This is an age which broods upon its own destruction, made imminent by much-heralded scientific research and technology. This is also an age of an insidious invasion of privacy by advertising techniques and an age of the suppression of the individual in the name of a greater social and economic good: the age of the "organization man" and subliminal perception advertising. Against this social and economic background stands, somehow, the individual, feeling as though the weight of the world is bearing down upon him.3

It is not the intent of this thesis, however, to establish what factors operate in modern life and letters that tend to make Conrad important and readable today, although they are certainly

3Colin Wilson's The Stature of Man (Boston, 1959) is an extreme example of the kind of sociological and psychological concern associated with today's literature. In that book, for instance, a plea is made for a new type of literary hero, made over to the specifications of Riesman's inner-directed man.
there and important to the contemporary reader. We are interested here in one particular novel, and not primarily for such implications as those suggested above but because of its position in contemporary critical debate. *Nostromo* is the sort of novel that is difficult to ignore, and its critical history bears this opinion out. Since its publication in 1904, *Nostromo* has been the center of a heated critical discussion. By no means a simple novel in its conception or in its execution, *Nostromo* had, early in its history, been censured for obscure intentions and for a narrative technique thought unnecessarily difficult; as a consequence, it had been assigned a place relatively low among Conrad's works. Today, however, it is placed in the first rank of his novels.\(^4\) Such a change is both understandable and sudden: understandable because there has always been a minority who have had nothing but praise for *Nostromo*, although that praise betrayed no deep understanding of the book; sudden because the critical work which drew *Nostromo* up to its present stature was principally that of one man, F. R. Leavis. Moreover, though *Nostromo* is generally considered today to be among the most important and accomplished of Conrad's novels, it is still the subject of what seems to be a never-ending debate over its thematic content. As is often the case with important works, just what the novel "means" has been

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\(^{4}\) Clifton Fadiman included *Nostromo* in his recent popular list of the world's one hundred most worthwhile books. See his *Lifetime Reading Plan* (Cleveland, 1960).
very difficult to determine.

It is the purpose of this thesis (1) to trace the changing critical opinion about Nostromo. (2) to show how the growing critical interest in Nostromo is due in large part to F. R. Leavis's treatment of that book in The Great Tradition, and (3) to consider the novel's thematic intent along with certain narrative techniques that help make that intent manifest. The remainder of this chapter will deal with the first of these objectives.

A summary of Nostromo is perhaps in order for the reader who has not recently read this complicated novel. The Occidental Province of the Republic of Costaguana is dominated by the San Tomé mine and its owner, Charles Gould, who thinks that wealth will force material and political progress upon the backward city of Sulaco. The silver, however, proves to be a corrupting influence. The devotion of Charles to the mine and to the ideals which it symbolizes for him eventually separates him from his wife, Emilia. Moreover, the promise of wealth provokes a revolution in the interior of the country.

Martin Decoud, a skeptical dandy just returned from Paris, falls in love with Antonia Avellanos, the patriotic daughter of the leading politician of the Province. At a crucial moment in

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5 For the sake of convenience, parts of the following summary follow that given by Albert J. Guerard in Joseph Conrad, p. 86.
the revolution, Nostromo, head of Sulaco's roustabouts and a natural leader of the people, is called upon to save a shipment of silver that is in danger of falling into the insurrectionists' hands. With Decoud, who as editor of the loyalist press fears execution as a political prisoner, Nostromo sets off in a small boat toward the middle of the gulf. On their way, however, they collide with a troopship. Nostromo beaches the boat on a nearby deserted island, but they are supposed dead. Nostromo buries the silver and leaves Decoud on the island, promising to return soon.

On the mainland, Nostromo becomes further involved with the revolution—this time, he must ride to Cayta, where military help for Sulaco waits for instructions. He takes on this dangerous mission for the sake of prestige. Meanwhile, Decoud becomes inconsolably disconsolate, despairs of ever returning to Sulaco, and shoots himself. Returning to the island, Nostromo is at first puzzled over the unattended treasure; then he resolves to appropriate it because he resents being used by the unappreciative ruling class. He occasionally returns to the island at night to reap his reward. When a lighthouse is built on the island, he sees to it that Giorgio Viola, his future father-in-law, and Viola's two daughters are made its keepers. One night when he is on the island, he is shot by Viola, who mistakes him for the unwanted suitor of one of his daughters.

The target of many critics' depreciative remarks, Nostromo cost the author himself many agonies. By Conrad's own admission,
he wrestled more with this novel than with any of his others. "The window was open; the door too stood open to that best friend of my work, the warm, still sunshine of the wide fields. They lay around me infinitely helpful, but truth to say I had not known for weeks whether the sun shone upon the earth and whether the stars above still moved on their appointed courses. . . . All I know, is that, for twenty months, neglecting the common joys of life that fall to the lot of the humblest on this earth, I had, like the prophet of old, 'wrestled with the Lord' for my creation. . . . 6 This kind of complaint, however, means very little in terms of actual success or failure; what it does indicate is the immensity of the task that lay before Conrad and the meticulous care with which he met it. It does, nevertheless, reveal a feeling that many critics have shared— that the creation of an imaginary country from a few hours' glimpse of South America 7 was too great an endeavor for Conrad. Even though Nostromo lay especially close to Conrad's heart, as his correspondence testifies and as his close friend Richard Curle maintains, it remains to this day a distinct case for critics, as so recent and eminent


7 Conrad seems to have spent about twelve hours in Venezuela twenty-five years before he started to write Nostromo. That visit was to provide his imagination with the background material for the novel. See Conrad's letter to Richard Curle in Richard Curle, Caravansary and Conversation (New York, 1937), p. 214.

*Nostromo* was first published in serial form in *T. P.'s Weekly* in 1904; a book edition followed the next year. Its reviewers voiced at that time the complaints that were to be heard repeatedly throughout its critical career: excessive technical difficulties and an obscure or confused thematic intention. "His style," wrote one reviewer, "wonderful as it is, does not make easy reading. It resembles nothing so much as the depth, the mystery, the riotous luxuriance of a tropical forest."\footnote{Frederick Taber Cooper, "The Man's Novel and Some Recent Books," *Bookman*, XX (November, 1904), 218.} Another complained about the arbitrariness of the novel's design. "It is less a novel than an opera in prose--the longest ever written. Its division into chapters and books appears to be purely arbitrary, gratuitous, and unnecessary perhaps. . . . "\footnote{"New Novels," *The Athenaeum Journal* (November 5, 1904), pt. 2, p. 619.} Another found it unnecessarily difficult. "It is only on the structural side that they [Conrad's novels] are conspicuously lacking, and it must be admitted that readers of 'Nostromo,' although they will find in the book ample reward for their pains in perusing it, will often reach the point of exasperation at its lengthy analyses, its interminable dragging out of incident, and its frequent harking
back to antecedent conditions.\textsuperscript{11}

These statements are typical of \textit{Nostromo}'s reception at the time of its publication. To be sure, there were complimentary views as well, but the praises given to \textit{Nostromo} at this time were of the most obvious and unimportant kind. They did no more than intimate that there might be an underlying reason for the intricate weavings of the narrative, or they needlessly pointed out the all-too-obvious vividness of Conrad's prose. The following example, typical of the "good" review, tells one nothing of critical importance: "Before long, out of the confusion, tumult, and a sense of labor, you emerge into one of those marvelous passages where Mr. Conrad has no rival; passages in which you live his scene, you taste, smell, and hear his people. . . . In chapters seven and eight, there is an episode described with such genius that, reading it under a blazing noonday sun, I felt only the midnight darkness of Mr. Conrad's tropic sea."\textsuperscript{12}

These reviewers, naturally enough, suffer from a lack of "distance," as is evident when they compare \textit{Nostromo} with other novels of that year. The January, 1906, issue of \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, for example, considering \textit{Nostromo} as part of a current trend of novels dealing with high finance, correctly evaluates Conrad's

\textsuperscript{11}William Morton Payne, "Recent Fiction," \textit{The Dial}, XXXVIII (February 15, 1905), 126.

\textsuperscript{12}Mary Moss, "Notes of New Novels," \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, XCVII (January, 1906), 46.
novel as head and shoulders above the other novels of 1905, such as *The House of Cards*, by John Heigh; *The Plum Tree*, by David Graham Phillips; *The Ultimate Passion*, by Philip Verrill Mighels; and *The Road Builders*, by Samuel Merwin. But the juxtaposition of these unremembered novels with *Nostromo* is humorous enough in retrospect.

*Nostromo* has displeased many people for many different reasons. For some, it was unintelligible because of its form: "Personally I do not care for *Nostromo*... There is no strong central motif in the book; there are too many actors with equal prominence, and the one giving the title to the book is a non-entity."\(^{13}\) For others, the novel was too narrow because of special, subjective interests; supposedly drawing life on a grand scale, the book actually examined a tiny, and for them a not very important, piece of it. "We never get a well-rounded conception of Costaguana as a whole; and we really never understand the revolution."\(^{14}\) Nor does Conrad reveal "the economic life as a whole; we never know how most of the people of Sulaco, apart from the mine and the railway, earn their living; and we can only guess at the economic life of the Campo."\(^{15}\)

\(^{13}\)Edward F. Curran, "A Master of Language," *Catholic World*, XCII (March, 1911), 802.

\(^{14}\)J. M. Robertson, "The Novels of Joseph Conrad," *American Review*, CCVIII (September, 1918), 452.

\(^{15}\)Ibid.
Conrad's reputation as a teller of sea tales and as a painter of exotic scenes militated against the popular reception of *Nostromo*, which could hardly be called a sea story. And although it is set in what might be described as an exotic background, the imaginary South American country of Costaguana, the novel is so far removed from exoticism that even the most adventurous-minded of Conrad's audience could not mistake "A Tale of the Seaboard" for mere romanticism. Nevertheless, Conrad's reputation had previously rested so heavily upon the sea and exotic tales that "the manuscript of *Nostromo* was catalogued... even as late as 1938] as 'Conrad's Great Sea Story.'"16

Up to this point our comments upon the critical reception of *Nostromo* have dealt with the general impact of the novel as recorded by relatively unimportant figures, who, nevertheless, by acting as weathercocks reveal with a great deal of accuracy the prevailing attitudes of the time. We now turn to the opinions of prominent men of letters. Perhaps the three most important such contemporaries of Conrad are Henry James, E. M. Forster, and Virginia Woolf, none of whom especially liked *Nostromo*.

Henry James, true to his own interests as an artist, recommended *Chance* for its superlative use of point of view, bypassing *Nostromo*, itself a *tour de force* of interwoven viewpoints.

For Conrad's technical achievement in *Chance*, James placed him "absolutely alone as a votary of the way to do a thing that shall make it undergo most doing."\(^{17}\) E. M. Forster seems to have bypassed Conrad altogether, for he thought that Conrad was "misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel; and that we need not try to write him down philosophically, because there is, in this particular direction, nothing to write."\(^{18}\) Nor does Virginia Woolf dwell upon *Nostromo*. Although she mentions in *The Common Reader* that "*Nostromo, Chance, The Arrow of Gold* represent that stage of alliance which some will continue to find the richest of all,"\(^ {19}\) she gives *Nostromo* no further comment.

But if *Nostromo* did not draw the attention of such important figures as James, Forster, and Woolf, it did attract the interest of a small band of lesser talents. Most vociferous among this group of literati was Richard Curle, aptly described by Albert J. Guerard as an imperceptive Boswell.\(^{20}\) Partly because of his friendship with Conrad and partly because he enjoyed so much those novels of Conrad which were the author's own favorites, Curle

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\(^{20}\)Guerard, p. 18.
took it upon himself to broadcast Conrad's achievements. He had the advantage, supposedly, of speaking with the authority that comes with intimate friendship. Their friendship began when Curle first wrote appreciatively about Nostromo, an occurrence pleasing enough for the neglected author to take notice of.

Somehow, Nostromo became Curle's pet, and he has continually tried to assure the reading public, almost from the date of its publication to the present day, of its exceptional worth. Unfortunately for Conrad and for the book, Curle's enthusiasm was not matched with an equally great perspicacity. As Guerard noted, "Curle considered Conrad 'thrilling' and 'volcanic without being anarchic'; his method was to meditate sentimentally on the book's characters as living persons. The very imperceptiveness, together with the harsh attacks on Curle's biography, seems to have aroused in Conrad a kind of fatherly affection."21 Perhaps because he felt the necessity of explaining the narrative sequences, whose difficulties were amply enumerated by reviewers and critics, Curle's own method of criticizing Nostromo consisted mostly of a retelling of the plot of the novel. Moreover, it was done in a cloying eulogistic style:

To read Nostromo is like drinking from a cold spring on a mountainside--it thrills you to the very marrow of your bones with a gulp of breathless and exhilarating life.

21Ibid.
Hostromo is Conrad's longest novel, and in my opinion, it is by far his greatest... It is one of the most outstanding tour de forces in all literature... In dramatic vigour, in psychological subtlety, and in the maintained feeling of a mood (an atmosphere at once physical and mental) Hostromo is a phenomenal masterpiece. It is Conrad's genius incarnate.22

Even Curle's most recent book23 follows this pattern. Though they may have impressed upon the reading public one man's strong opinion, Curle's writings about Hostromo offer no really serious comment on the book and conduct no satisfactory inquiry into the depth of meaning contained in that novel.

Also full of praise for Hostromo, and nearly as effusive, was Arnold Bennett, who claimed that he read it every year to remind himself how a novel should be written.24 John Galsworthy called Hostromo Conrad's "most sheer piece of creation";25 yet he seemed naively unaware of Conrad's great artistic endeavor. "The faults of the style are obvious, the merit is the merit of unconscious, and unforced, and in a sense, of accidental novelty."26 Galsworthy, reflecting his own interests, admitted one great fault in Conrad:

22Richard Curle, The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad (Garden City, 1928), pp. 85-86.


26Ibid., p. 630.
the failure to produce a story dealing with the upper class; although he did admit that Conrad has given us "insight, such as few have given, into fellow creatures so remarkably deficient in gentility. . . . indeed a waste of force." Generalized as this praise is, the names of these two novelists must have carried with them some authority among serious readers.

Georges Jean-Aubry, Conrad's famous biographer, also chose Nostromo as his friend's best novel. Yet even he was led in his choice, not by the amazing treatment of themes in the novel, but by the success of its style and imagery. "This capacity for reconstruction appears with a force and grandeur that seem those of genius in Nostromo. . . which many of his admirers—and in their ranks I range myself—choose as his masterpiece both for the strength of its suggestion and the beauty of its style."28

But outside of these few, close, literary friends, there were few contemporaries of Conrad who gave generous praise to Nostromo, although his reputation grew steadily during his lifetime. Helen Thomas Follett and Wilson Follett wrote in Some Modern Novelists (1918) that Nostromo is "the one work by which Mr. Conrad would

27Ibid., p. 632.

stand if he were to fall by every other."\(^{29}\) But this is not the majority opinion. Even as sympathetic a critic as John Macy feels that he must qualify his exuberance over Conrad's contributions. "Eyes accustomed only to darkness and uncertain lights are in condition to be deluded by phantoms of a false dawn; it is therefore unwise to greet with too great enthusiasm the arrival of Mr. Joseph Conrad."\(^{30}\)

John Macy, though by no means an important figure in Conrad criticism, gives us an indication of the opinion of a large number of early critics who valued Conrad as an impressionistic novelist and *Nostromo* as an interesting failure. The following criticism by Macy is significant because it reflects the attitudes of many of the time, and also because it comes from a fairly competent critic who is sympathetic to the general work of Conrad. In it are to be found phrases, sentiments, opinions that are to be heard many times. Macy serves us a fine example when he writes:

> It is necessary to remind Mr. Conrad that if a reader is to feel, he must first understand; if he is to hear, he must hear distinctly; and if he is to see, his eyes must be drawn by interest in the object, and it can only look in one direction at a time. *Nostromo* is told forward and backward in the first half of the book, and the preliminary history of the silver mine is out of all proportion to the story of *Nostromo*, the alleged hero of


the book. . . . Conrad has a mania for description. When anything is mentioned in the course of the narrative, though it be a thousand miles from the present scene, it must be described. 31

No reader of Conrad will fail to recognize the reference to Conrad's famous Preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus": "My task. . . . to make you hear, to make you feel. . . . before all, to make you see." 32 Unfortunately, this preface is also cited to show that Conrad had no moral intention in his writing, that he merely wished to record the sights and sounds of life's spectacle. 33

The sound, color, and visual imagery of Conrad's novels have always been given critical recognition; his impressionistic techniques have always been duly acclaimed. In fact, critics have generally emphasized the impressionistic techniques of Nostromo to the detriment of its theme. Such a critic is Joseph Warren Beach, who insists that Conrad's impressionistic technique (nicely defined by Beach as "a disposition to get his character in first with a strong impression and then work backward over his past before going on with the dramatic present which brought the story to its climax") 34 is most successfully employed in Lord Jim.

31 Ibid., pp. 699-700.


33 A warning against such an interpretation is given by Guerard in his Joseph Conrad, p. 15.

and in Chance. Conrad's material in Nostromo, according to Beach, is too rich for a book its size—the longest of all Conrad's novels. No one chapter holds the center of interest long enough for real reader-interest; no Marlow organizes the time sequences for the puzzled reader. "The result is that only the most resolute lovers of Conrad can push their way through the tangled underbrush of this well-nigh pathless forest."35

It is difficult, in fact, to find a criticism of Nostromo which does not treat the narrative techniques of that novel as a bugbear. And it is not farfetched to suggest that many of the early adverse opinions about Nostromo stemmed from a misunderstanding of Conrad's Preface to The Nigger, that many early critics thought Conrad was interested only in recording vivid sense impressions. When considering the Preface to The Nigger, the reader must remember that Conrad gave a reason for his preoccupation with impressionistic narrative devices: "If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask."36

That Conrad chose to discuss method in this Preface more than theme should not prejudice the reader into thinking that thematic


intent was a secondary matter to Conrad.

In 1930, Granville Hicks said that Joseph Conrad's reputation was shrinking. During that natural decline in a writer's reputation which follows his death, in this case, approximately fifteen years, Nostromo was scarcely discussed. As Morton Dauwen Zabel later said, "An apotheosis--romantic, fabulous, always uneasy and somehow incredible to him--attended his last years and lingered for some time beyond his death. Then a reaction, the inevitable, probationary reaction of literary reputation, set in as the violence and cynicism of contemporary events and attitudes in a disrupted time--the two decades entre deux guerres: 1918-1939--disrupted the note of heroic idealism Conrad had sounded." But during this time of silence and decline, one critic could say, "For some time past the present writer has felt bound to recognize that there are two quite distinct and contradictory views about Conrad. On the one side are those who are inclined to see in him the greatest writer in English prose in our century. . . . On the other are those who think, not only that his work is dead already, but that it never really came to life. . . .

At the close of the thirties, critical opinion was still

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37Granville Hicks, "Conrad After Five Years," New Republic, LXI (January 8, 1930), 192.

38Zabel, p. 2.

stern enough with *Nostrromo* so that there was no appreciable change in the earlier opinion that Conrad's sea stories, such as *Lord Jim* and "Youth," were his best efforts. Those few close friends of Conrad previously mentioned were still outspoken in their praise of the neglected masterpiece. Their attempts at analysis, however, remained superficial. Conrad's important, but conspicuously long, opening of *Nostromo*, for example, was explained away by a truly simple and misdirected reading of the book: "If one were writing about the French Revolution, one could leave so much for granted, knowing that the reader had a general knowledge of the period and character of the people. In *Nostromo*, Conrad had to begin at the beginning. Written for a Latin-American public, the book could have been done in half the space."

Ernest A. Baker, in his comprehensive ten-volume study, *The History of the English Novel* (1939), recognized the artistic achievement in *Nostromo* and perhaps showed that a new, deeper appreciation of the novel was soon to come. "He [Conrad] was too intelligent an artist, as well as too conscientious, not to aim at a comprehensive and homogeneous fabric and contexture; and he was now experienced enough to attain this with the ease of self-disciplined genius. Formerly, he used to rise to the occasion;  

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he knew now that the occasion was always present." But it remained for the critics of the forties, especially F. R. Leavis, Morton Dauwen Zabel, and Albert J. Guerard, to appreciate the richness of Nostromo by a close textual reading of the novel and by seeing it in relation to the other works of Conrad.

The following chapter will be devoted to the criticism of F. R. Leavis and its effect upon the current reputation of Nostromo, but a few remarks are necessary here. Leavis claimed for the novel that "it ... was] Conrad's supreme triumph in the evocation of exotic life and colour," thus placing it above Conrad's popular tales of the sea and exotic island life, especially Lord Jim—"neither the best of Conrad's novels, nor among the best of his short stories." Moreover, in "Nostromo Conrad is openly and triumphantly the artist by métier, conscious of French initiation and of fellowship in craft with Flaubert." But most of all, Leavis insisted upon the fact that Nostromo does form a "highly organized pattern," and that the pattern is "one of moral


42The time relationship between Leavis's and Zabel's writings on Conrad is important to remember here. Although Leavis published The Great Tradition in 1948, the parts pertaining to Conrad were originally published in the June and October, 1941, issues of Scrutiny. Zabel published several essays on Conrad between 1942 and 1947. He incorporated these into his introduction to The Portable Conrad, first printed in 1947.

43The quotations in this paragraph are taken from F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (Garden City, 1948), pp. 231-232.
significances."

In 1942, M. C. Bradbrook, realizing that the greatest reason for the common reader's lack of enthusiasm for Nostrono was Conrad's complicated narrative techniques, nevertheless upheld those techniques and accepted the novel as Conrad's highest achievement. "In the earlier works, irony was rare, and the parts of the tales had reinforced the whole by an intensification of the detail, by the power of implication. Now the different parts are played off, telescoped together, interwoven or run into each other." In that same year Zabel had written that Heart of Darkness, The Secret Sharer, Chance, Nostrono, Victory, Under Western Eyes "stand for both moralists and novelists to learn by, among the greatest books our century is likely to see." And Edward Wagenknecht, in 1943, exonerated Nostrono from the charge of excessive technical difficulty. "[Y]et much may be forgiven a novelist who creates a whole country, as did Conrad in these pages. In a way, indeed, he may be said to have recreated a world; for Costaguana is our modern world in little, with its greed and its twisted motives, its strange passion for bloodletting, its vain, tortured attempts to serve ideal ends by impure means, thus twisting its means and betraying its ends."

Morton Dauwen Zabel, one of the key figures in the current Conrad revival, emphasized in Conrad's work "the crisis of moral isolation and recognition in which the individual meets his first full test of character..." Zabel recognized that man's moral isolation is a significant theme in the work of a great number of modern novelists. That Conrad works so successfully within this important tradition substantially adds to his stature as a writer.

The plight of man on whom life closes down inexorably, divesting him of the supports and illusory protection of friendship, social privilege, or love, now emerged as the characteristic theme of his books. It is a subject that has become familiar to us in modern literature. Ibsen, James, Mann, Gide, and Kafka have successfully employed it. It appears in Joyce, in Hemingway, in Dos Passos, and other novelists of our time. Its latest appearance is among the French Existentialists, who have given heroism a new setting in the absurdity of society and the universe. But it is doubtful if any of these writers, possibly excepting Kafka, has achieved a more successful dramatic version of the problem than Conrad did—a more complete coincidence of the processes of psychic recognition and recovery with the dramatic necessities of the plot; and this for the reason which distinguishes Conrad's contribution to modern fictional method: his imposition of the processes and structures of the moral experience (particularly the experience of recognition) on the form of plot.

Zabel, claiming that Conrad has written several novels second to none in English fiction, chose Lord Jim for his masterpiece (presumably because it best exemplified the processes of psychic

recognition and recovery) and claimed for Nostromo the dubious distinction of being "the distinct test case for critics." 49

One notes, perhaps with surprise, the discrepancy between Zabel's personal reaction to Nostromo and his opinion that Conrad's distinguishing contribution to the method of modern fiction is "his imposition of the processes and structures of the moral experience...on the form of plot."

It [Nostromo] is a book incomparably rich among English novels in conception and material, but equally incomparable in dramatic impenetrability. For the present writer, the reading of it has been a matter of years, never found genuinely sympathetic until he too came to know something of the riddled scene of South American history it explores and by whose confusions it is almost defeated. Yet seen as a matrix and medium of Conrad's historical sensibility, the book grows in fascination, rings with the resonance of a profound if elusive drama of moralities, races, and creeds of conduct. 50

His appreciation of Nostromo would almost seem to depend upon his personal acquaintance with the novel's setting, not upon the coincidence of thematic intent and the necessities of the plot.

In his 1947 monograph, Joseph Conrad, Albert J. Guérard placed Nostromo among Conrad's best work. "My own feeling is that his best work, with the exception of 'The Secret Sharer' and The Shadow Line (finished 1915), was done between 1897 and 1904 (The Nigger of the Narcissus [sic], Lord Jim, Nostromo, 'Heart of

49 Ibid., p. 42.
50 Ibid., pp. 42-43.
Darkness,' 'Typhoon,' and 'Youth'). . . ."51 This monograph, though largely devoted to the exploration of psychological themes in Conrad's work, raised serious technical objections to Nostromo, especially to the first part of the novel. "The first hundred and seventy-five pages of Nostromo offer an uncontrolled elaboration of historical detail rather than a 'prolonged hovering flight of the subjective over the outstretched ground of the case exposed' [James's phrase]."52 The first part, in Guerard's opinion, stands badly in need of a detached narrator; the unequipped reader, or spectator of the fitful forces of history, cannot reassemble the scattered images with which Conrad has beleaguered him. "It is as though a flashlight were playing fitfully at random in a dark room full of still objects and moving people, the forces of history."53 In his more recent work, however, Conrad the Novelist, Guerard speaks more favorably of Nostromo, agreeing with Leavis that it is one of the great novels of the language.54 In this longer study, Guerard changes his mind about the first part of the novel, finding it now an extraordinary experiment in impressionism—an experiment which far outstrips that of Lord Jim. The first sixty pages, Guerard admits, "constitute an almost

51 Guerard, p. 28.
52 Ibid., p. 25.
impenetrable barrier to the lazy reader." But this impenetrability applies to the "lazy reader," not to the perceptive one. It is now the last part of the book that Guerard finds defective. "Nostromo is in fact a great but radically defective novel, and its greatest defect is that it is at least two hundred pages too long. This is not a matter of generalized diffuseness. The two hundred or more pages in excess come in the last two hundred and sixty." 56

Morton Dauwen Zabel and Albert J. Guerard were largely responsible for the renewal of American interest in Conrad during the forties. They both emphasized the thematic content in Conrad's works, realizing that the narrative techniques Conrad employed were not ends in themselves but means to a greater goal—"he would not permit the form to falsify the situation or the psychic and moral conditions it entailed." 57 Yet these two critics, although giving Nostromo a high place among the other fine works of Conrad, did not find the complicated tale of Sulaco worthy enough to merit first place. Zabel could not allow such an honor to the novel whose earmark was "dramatic impenetrability." Guerard saw some confusion in the opening pages and unnecessary verbiage in the last two hundred and sixty.

55Ibid., pp. 202-203.
56Ibid., p. 203. The defects of the last part of Nostromo are treated in this thesis in Chapter III, pp. 101-103.
57Zabel, The Portable Conrad, p. 35.
For a brief time after the opinions of Leavis, Zabel, and Guerard appeared, critics harked back to opinions unfavorable to Nostromo and to its author. Walter F. Wright in *Romance and Tragedy in Joseph Conrad* (1949) stated, "*Nostromo* (1904) is not more profound than Conrad's other works, but it is perhaps, as he himself believed, his 'largest canvas.'"\(^{58}\)

But others found *Nostromo* much to their liking. Robert Penn Warren, in his introduction to the Modern Library edition of *Nostromo*,\(^ {59}\) is the most generous of all critics in praise of the novel. Even Leavis at one point complained that there was "something hollow" about the reverberations of *Nostromo*, a "certain emptiness" to it.\(^ {60}\) Warren admits no major defect. He evidently finds a great affinity between his personal views and the pessimism established by Conrad in the novel. As a result, he offers a reading of the novel that in many respects has come to be regarded as the accepted interpretation.\(^ {61}\)

Irving Howe considers *Nostromo* Conrad's masterpiece. In his consideration of that novel in his article "Order and Anarchy: the Political Novels," Howe claims that Conrad attains a proper

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\(^{60}\)Leavis, p. 243.

\(^{61}\)See Chapter III, pp. 64-65.
aesthetic distancing in *Nostromo* and commends Conrad's political insights. "Like Forster's *A Passage to India* it may be read as a fictional study of imperialism, an area in which the two novels seem lonely, towering peaks . . . . By sublimating his political anxieties in the melodrama of a Latin Republic, Conrad gained what was indispensable to him as a writer: the protection of distance." 62 Furthermore, politics is not divorced, in Howe's mind, from morality: "the ideas of the book are thoroughly absorbed by its personal drama, with problems of morality and problems of politics coming to seem very much the same." 63 Howe thinks that there is in *Nostromo* an almost perfect fusion of politics and imagination, ideology and emotion. But like Leavis, he stops short of complete admiration, for there is "something lodged in Conrad's creative motives" that is traceable to his inability to commit himself fully to his own materials. 64

Also proclaiming *Nostromo* a work with distinctly political emphasis is Paul L. Wiley, who pointed out as well Conrad's moral concern in the novel, "in essence a great morality play in modern costume on the theme of human limitation." 65

Against the recent praise of *Nostromo* stand a number of critics who have tended to ignore the moral themes of the novel. Perhaps

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63 Ibid., p. 7.
64 Ibid., p. 19.
this is a natural reaction against what they consider the excesses of adulation. Marvin Mudrick, for instance, claims that Conrad is overrated because people have supposedly discerned matters of tremendous importance in what is only melodramatic language. Furthermore, he upbraids the psychological approach to Conrad, especially Guerard's interpretation of "The Secret Sharer."

"A writer is not responsible for the defects of his admirers, but it is perhaps some sort of judgment on Conrad that he has inspired so much criticism which must be filed under the phony-poetic... Henry Charles Duffin goes so far as to deny Nostromo any really creative distinction: "But is it not possible to imagine Nostromo being written by--Hemingway, say, or Somerset Maugham?--whereas no one but Conrad could possibly have written that other great novel, Lord Jim."67

Two very recent men to add their voices to the choir of Conrad criticism have offered nothing really new to the critical debate over Nostromo, but have tendered safe, conservative opinions about the novel. The first, Thomas Moser, after paying his respects to the vividness of Conrad's description and the mastery of characterization throughout most of Nostromo, observes the following: "We cannot blame Conrad for failing in the last few pages of


Nostromo; the reader is probably so tired himself that he will forgive the false characters and bad prose.  

Summarizing his opinion of the novel, he states, "Until recent years Nostromo has remained a neglected masterpiece. Conrad would be pleased to find it now at the top of most critics' lists, superseding Lord Jim, which Conrad seems not to have liked. . . . If Nostromo generally surpasses the bad portions of Lord Jim, it never soars so high. . . . We may admire Conrad's achievement in Nostromo, but for the Conradian manner at its most meaningful, we shall return stubbornly to Lord Jim."  

For the second, Robert F. Haugh, Nostromo remains the most difficult book in the entire Conrad canon. "The real lover of Conrad will of course read him entire. And it does take love to read the early stories, or to read The Arrow of Gold, The Rover, and The Rescue; more than affection even is called upon to read Nostromo." The ordinary reader is supposed to find Nostromo heavy going. "The historical prelude is intolerably slow, the issues unengaged for many pages and not made to flow through compelling situations until quite late in the book." The highest praise, indeed, that Haugh can give the book is a thinly  

69 Ibid.  
71 Ibid., p. 147.
veiled reproach: "The postures are profound in their moral meaning, and the scene is richly evoked, but all is slow. For the perceptive reader, however, the very slowness of the book may be useful. Conrad's ordinarily brilliant flow of events is so slowed that elements of his artistic conscience may be seen operating."72

This, in brief, is the history of the critical reception of Nostromo from its publication to the present day. Before 1940, critics tended to place the novel in a secondary position among Conrad's works because they found a confused thematic intention and/or a set of narrative techniques unnecessarily difficult. A minority of friends and fellow artists of Conrad--chief among whom stands Richard Curle--defended Nostromo against this appraisal, but their own praise was ineffectual for they made no orderly attempt to discuss the thematic intention of the novel. Critics writing after 1940, however, have generally assigned Nostromo a primary place among Conrad's other works. Some--notably F. R. Leavis--have unhesitatingly pronounced it Conrad's most important and accomplished novel. Even those recent critics whose praise of Nostromo is reserved, nevertheless treat it as a major work.

F. R. Leavis's treatment of Nostromo in The Great Tradition has played a major role in elevating that novel to its present position of eminence. The importance of Leavis's criticism lies

72Ibid.
in his insistence of two things: that the theme of *Nostromo* is central to Conrad's work and that the theme of this novel is represented by a highly organized pattern. The place of Leavis in the current Conrad revival will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.
CHAPTER II

THE TURNING POINT

Credit must be given to Morton Dauwen Zabel for reviving in this country a serious interest in Conrad as a major novelist. Albert J. Guerard, who today enjoys a highly respected place among Conrad critics, wrote in 1947 that there were "signs that Conrad is about to be 'rediscovered!'" and that the most encouraging of these was an essay by Morton Dauwen Zabel in the Winter, 1945, issue of The Sewanee Review.¹ In 1947, Zabel incorporated several of his essays on Conrad in the introduction to The Portable Conrad. Zabel's name on that well-known collection has since served to symbolize his popular place in the current Conrad revival.

But greater credit is due another man who, in one of England's most influential journals a year before Zabel's essays appeared, wrote two important essays that have greatly influenced critical thinking on Conrad in both England and the United States. The man is F. R. Leavis, and the essays that appeared in Scrutiny were eventually published as the chapters on Conrad in The Great Tradition, a book that has rapidly become a basic work on the

¹Albert J. Guerard, Joseph Conrad, p. 11.
novel. Writing about The Great Tradition just after its publication, Seymour Betsky warned that American critics, not in direct contact with the excellent work that had been done in Scrutiny,² "may make the mistake of seeing here little more than an intelligent and fresh book on the novel, instead of the major contribution it is."³ Although this warning has certainly not proved true, one nevertheless finds a lack of explicit recognition on the part of many recent critics of the major part Leavis has played in the present Conrad revival.

The most outstanding case is Albert J. Guerard's newest work on Conrad, Conrad the Novelist (1958). Guerard did not mention Leavis in his monograph, which appeared earlier and in which he acknowledged Zabel's importance, but the omission is even more noticeable in his later work because in its preface Guerard considers the worthwhile studies of Conrad that were made since his monograph. His list does not include The Great Tradition, even though it was published in 1948, a year after his monograph. Why this omission? Long before The Great Tradition Leavis had established himself as an imposing critic by his work with Scrutiny and by important critical studies like New Bearings in English

²Leavis was the guiding spirit of Scrutiny throughout the twenty-one years (1932-1953) that it was published. Scarcely an issue appeared without one of his reviews or articles.

³Seymour Betsky, "Mr. Leavis on the Novel," The Sewanee Review, LVII (July-September, 1949), 533.
Poetry (1930) and Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry (1936). In the text of his book Guerard frequently refers to Leavis; in fact, he occasionally quotes from The Great Tradition. What is noteworthy is that he often cites Leavis when he wishes to verify a widespread opinion ("F. R. Leavis is quite right in his estimate of Nostromo 'as one of the great novels in the language.'") Guerard, then, neglects to mention The Great Tradition in his preface not because he considers Leavis unimportant. He rather takes for granted that his reader is already well-acquainted with Leavis's reputation and with the important position he occupies in Conrad criticism. He mentions other critical studies because he wishes to acquaint his reader with new material.

Whatever Zabel's place may be in creating new enthusiasm for Conrad's entire work, Leavis's essays in The Great Tradition certainly mark a turning point in Nostromo's critical history. They were the impetus by which Nostromo rose in critical esteem to a top place among Conrad's novels. In them Leavis went far beyond all other studies of Nostromo in his assertion of two things: (1) that the theme of Nostromo is central to Conrad's whole oeuvre; (2) that the theme of the novel is represented by a highly organized pattern. In his study of Nostromo Leavis found no "dramatic impenetrability" or "riotous luxuriance of a tropical forest." Rather he found that Conrad imitated Flaubert by means

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4 Albert J. Guerard, Conrad the Novelist, p. 176.
of a "serious and severe...conception of the art of fiction." Rather he conceived of Nostromo as "one of the great novels of the language."

Above all else, Leavis is a practical critic. He is not interested in a theoretical approach to criticism and to literature. Following Arnold, who considered that the duty of the critic was to find out "the best that is known and thought in the world," Leavis has set himself to the utilitarian task of separating the good from the bad, the excellent from the mediocre, the significant from the ordinary. "The only way to escape misrepresentation," Leavis wrote in The Great Tradition, "is never to commit oneself to any critical judgment that makes an impact—that is, never to say anything." He, for one, may certainly speak of the hazards of criticism, for his way of speaking openly and forcefully about matters that he judges crucial has earned for him a certain amount of notoriety. Nevertheless, a discussion of values is the all-

\[5\] P. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (Garden City, 1948), p. 23.
[6] Ibid.
[8] The following is a good example of the kind of reception The Great Tradition enjoyed in some quarters:

"One of the foibles of the puritanical mind is that it inclines to argue with the Lord rather than to praise him; but it prefers to ferret out the Devil. Hence an obsession with the errors of other sects, which the believer surveys from cantankerous crags of self-righteousness and little hillocks of snobbery on his ever-upward way. Such a Gospel Hall air has been noted before in the literary criticism of Dr. Leavis; all outside the chapel were 'light and
important thing, as he stated early in his career. "Where there is a steady and responsible practice of criticism a 'centre of real consensus' will...soon make itself felt. Out of agreement and disagreement with particular judgments of value a sense of relative value in the concrete will define itself..."9

Like New Bearings in English Poetry and Revaluation, The Great Tradition follows this line of thinking; it attempts to establish a tradition in the English novel "by distinguishing the few really great novelists—the major novelists who count in the same way as the major poets, in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life."10 These great English novelists, according to Leavis, have been Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and, more recently, D. H. Lawrence. What is said of Jane Austen, the first of the novelists of the tradition (whom Leavis does not discuss at length, presumably because he anticipates that his reader will accept her as part of this tradition more readily than he will chaffy' members, to be ground down by a prose that dragged along in the tuneless and often incomprehensible groan of the chapel harmonium." —V. S. Pritchett, "Books in General," The New Statesman and Nation, XXXVII (January 15, 1949), 59.


10The Great Tradition, p. 10.
accept the others), is implicitly predicated of the others:

Jane Austen's plots, and her novels in general, were put together very "deliberately and calculatedly". . . . But her interest in "composition" is not something to be put over against her interest in life; nor does she offer an "aesthetic" value that is separable from moral significance. The principle of organization, and the principle of development, in her work is an intense moral interest of her own in life that is in the first place a preoccupation with certain problems that life compels on her as personal ones. . . . Without her intense moral preoccupation she wouldn't have been a great novelist.\textsuperscript{11}

This "morality" is not restricted to any one way of looking at life, let alone to any particular church's doctrine. It is morality in a wider sense: an "intense moral interest of . . . one's own in life that is in the first place a preoccupation with certain problems that life compels on . . . one as personal. . . . " Arthur Mizener has seen implied in Leavis's position that "the major form of the novel is—using the term in its widest sense—the novel of manners. . . . "\textsuperscript{12} It is certainly true that Leavis sees in Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad (as well as in D. H. Lawrence, the inheritor of the "tradition"\textsuperscript{13}) a concern for this question: how should a man live? It is, in fact, in the question of "what do men find to live for" that Leavis finds the informing or organizing principle of \textit{Nostromo},\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{12}Arthur Mizener, "The Discriminations of Mr. Leavis," \textit{Partisan Review}, XVI (May, 1949), 548.

\textsuperscript{13}Although he mentions D. H. Lawrence in \textit{The Great Tradition}, Leavis has reserved a full treatment of this author for his latest book, \textit{D. H. Lawrence: Novelist} (London, 1955).

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{The Great Tradition}, p. 232.
and it is in this question that the influence Arnold has had on him is most clearly shown.

What Leavis has done with Conrad in The Great Tradition, then, is to relate that novelist to a serious conception of the English novel. By measuring Conrad's works against such a high standard, he has in effect apotheosized Conrad's achievement.

According to Leavis, the theme of Nostromo is a political or public one represented by several themes or histories.

Nostromo has a main political, or public, theme, the relation between moral idealism and "material interests." We see the Gould Concession become the rallying centre for all in Costaguana who desire peace and order—the Constitutionalists, the patriotic idealists, the Robin Hood of the oppressed, the representatives of the financial power of Europe and North America. The ironical end of the book shows us a Sulaco in which order and ideals have triumphed, Progress forge ahead, and the all-powerful Concession has become the focus of hate for workers and the oppressed and a symbol of crushing materialism for idealists and defenders of the spirit. This public theme is presented in terms of a number of personal histories or, it might be said, private themes, each having a specific representative moral significance. 15

Furthermore, the informing and organizing principle of the novel is the question: "what do men find to live for—what kinds of motive force or radical attitude can give life meaning, direction, coherence?" Leavis has warned the reader, however, that "the impressiveness [of Nostromo] is not a matter of any profundity of search into human experience, or any explorative subtlety in the analysis of human behaviour. It is rather of the firm and vivid

15Ibid.
concreteness with which the representative attitudes and motives are realized, and the rich economy of the pattern that plays them off against one another.\textsuperscript{16}

Accordingly, Leavis traces the specific moral significances of the main characters of the novel.\textsuperscript{17} Charles Gould, the inheritor of the San Tomé mine, lives for the ideal purpose which he identifies with the success of the Gould Concession. Emilia Gould, his wife, stands for "personal relations and disinterested human sympathy"; she "looks on in starved loneliness at the redeeming triumph that is an ironical defeat of the spirit."

Holroyd, the American financier who backs Gould and who is interested in fostering a pure form of Christianity, "cannot without irony be said to give ideal significance to his love of power." But Nostromo himself, in Leavis's mind, has no ideal purpose. "He lives for reputation, 'to be well spoken of'--for his reflection in the eyes of others, and when, tempted by the silver, he condemns himself to clandestine courses the mainspring of his life goes slack." Martin Decoud, the inveterate skeptic, also has no ideal purpose in life; he is an "intellectual and 'dilettante in life.'" Moreover, Decoud does not possess the self-sufficiency he pretends to. Marooned for days on the Great Isabel, he discovers how far from self-sufficient he is and shoots himself.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 237.

\textsuperscript{17}For the following quotations that deal with Leavis's discussion of characters, see \textit{The Great Tradition}, pp. 233-243.
Of all the characters in the novel, Dr. Monygham, another skeptic, comes closest to being self-sufficient. "His scepticism is based on self-contempt, for his ideal (he is, in fact, a stronger and quite unequivocal Lord Jim) is one he has offended against; it is an exacting ideal of conduct. . . . His ideal, of course, isn't merely personal—it is of the same order as the moral ideal of the Merchant Service (he is 'an officer and a gentleman'); it owes its strength to a traditional and social sanction; and he has an outer stay in his devotion to Mrs. Gould."

Giorgio Viola, the protégé of Mrs. Gould, is also self-sufficient and perhaps is the most complete antithesis to Decoud. "He represents with monumental massiveness the heroic age of the liberal faith. . . . but it is part of the irony of the book that the achievements he stands for should have produced the South America we are shown."

Finally, Captain Mitchell, the man of solid character and stolid mind, represents the Merchant Service (to Conrad symbolic of "tradition, discipline, and moral ideal"). Captain Mitchell is "sane and stable to the point of stupidity. . . . These traits, it will be seen, qualify him for an essential function in the presentment of the action, to which he is related in a way symbolized by his triumphant sense—a sense uninformed by any comprehension of what is going forward—of being at the centre of things, whence history is directed, as he sits, an habitué, in Mrs. Gould's drawing room."
The minor characters are briefly epitomized. Señor Avellanos is a liberal idealist, who dies of disappointment; Father Corbelán a religious fanatic; Hirsch, the hide merchant, the embodiment of fear.

As Leavis sees them, the characters form the pattern of the book as tiles are tesselated to form a mosaic. The characters are not significant, in his mind, for any amount of depth psychology, but for the general pattern which their ideals and their actions form. In reference to the significance of the characterization, Leavis warns:

"They are present to us and are plainly what they are; and to try, by way of appreciation or criticism, to go behind that is to misunderstand what the book offers us. There is plainly no room in Nostromo for the kind of illustrated psychology that many critics think they have a right to demand of a novelist (and of Shakespeare). Consider the number of personal centres of moral interest, and the variety of themes. Consider the number of vivid dramatic scenes and episodes. Consider the different strands that go to the totality of the action. There is the private tragedy of the Goulds; there is Nostromo's history, involving that of the Viola family; there is the story of Decoud and Antonia; there is that of Dr. Monygham and his self-rehabilitation; and all these and so much else are subsumed in the public historical drama—the study, concretely rendered, of the play of moral and material forces, political and personal motives, in the founding of the Occidental Republic."

If the pattern, which is the manifestation of the interplay of material forces and moral idealism, constitutes the impressiveness of the book, that which makes it "one of the great novels of the language," what thematic statement does the pattern imply?

18Ibid., p. 238.
What is the significance of the pattern? These questions are not satisfactorily answered by Leavis. He claims that the theme of *Nostromo* "is not a question of a 'philosophy'; Conrad cannot be said to have one. He is not one of those writers who clear up their fundamental attitudes for themselves in such a way that we may reasonably, in talking of them, use that portentous term."¹⁹ As a consequence, Leavis talks about the novel's theme in terms of concrete occurrences, of pieces in the mosaic pattern which complement one another, and eschews a discussion in which he would be forced to consider the book as a vehicle for a debate of abstract issues or ideologies.

Yet Leavis does have something to say about the total significance of the moral pattern in *Nostromo*, even though he feels that little can be said about Conrad's positives. "It is easier to say what he rejects or criticizes."²⁰ He contends that Conrad "does believe intensely, as a matter of concrete experience, in the kind of human achievement represented by the Merchant Service-tradition, discipline and moral ideal; but he has also a strong sense, not only of the frailty, but of the absurdity or unreality, in relation to the surrounding and underlying gulls, of such achievement, a sense so strong that it often seems very close to Decoud's radical scepticism. . . ."²¹ As a matter of fact, Decoud

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¹⁹Ibid., p. 242.
²⁰Ibid., p. 241.
²¹Ibid., p. 242.
remains in Leavis's mind "at the centre of the book, in the sense that his consciousness seems to permeate it, even to dominate it. That consciousness is clearly very closely related to the author's own personal timbre. . . ."22 Perhaps the closest Leavis ever comes to dealing with the theme of the novel in abstract terms is his conclusion that "Decoud may be said to have had a considerable part in the writing of Nostromo; or one might say that Nostromo was written by a Decoud who wasn't a complacent dilettante, but was positively drawn towards those capable of 'investing their activities with spiritual value'--Monygham, Giorgio Viola, Señor Avellanos, Charles Gould."23

Besides his failure to explain what the "pattern" of the book signifies, Leavis perhaps errs in one other direction: he concedes too many excellences to the novel and denies it too many faults. Leavis allows only one fault in Nostromo: a "certain emptiness," not of theme or characterization, but of tone.

At any rate, for all the rich variety of the interest and tightness of the pattern, the reverberation of Nostromo has something hollow about it; with the colour and life there is a suggestion of a certain emptiness. And for explanation it is perhaps enough to point to this reflection of Mrs. Gould's:

"It had come into her mind that for life to be large and full, it must contain the care of the past"

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22Ibid.
23Ibid., pp. 242-243.
and of the future in every passing moment of
the present."

That kind of self-sufficient day-to-dayness of living
Conrad can convey, when writing from within the Merchant
Service, where clearly he has known it. We are made aware of
hostile natural forces threatening his seamen with ex-
tinction, but not of metaphysical gulfes opening under life
and consciousness: reality on board ship is domestic,
assured and substantial. . . . For life in the Merchant
Service there is no equivalent in Nostromo--no intimate
sense conveyed of the day-by-day continuities of social
living. And though we are given a confidential account
of what lies behind Dr. Monygham's sardonic face, yet
on the whole we see the characters from the outside, and
only as they belong to the ironic pattern--figures in
the futilities of a public drama, against a dwarfing
background of mountain and gulf.24

This "something hollow" appears to be akin to the "dramatic im-
penetrability" which Zabel found and to the "riotous luxuriance
of a tropical forest" which seems to have plagued a great many
critics. Of all the critics of Nostromo, perhaps Richard Curle
and Robert Penn Warren are the only ones who have taken complete
delight in the novel. That Leavis concedes this one fault is
significant, since the "intimate sense conveyed of the day-by-day
continuities of social living" might very well be expected to be
a chief characteristic of the "tradition," which Leavis contends
Conrad helped to establish.

In spite of Leavis's admission of this fault, one gets the
impression that Leavis has fitted his comments on Nostromo a
little too neatly into his general argument on what constitutes the
one great tradition of the English novel. If Jane Austen's plots

24Ibid., p. 243.
were put together very "deliberately and calculatedly" and her method of organization is inseparable from her moral concern with life, then Conrad, too, should exhibit such characteristics. One wonders if such ratiocination may not be the reason for the scant discussion of theme in Nostromo. Leavis is the sort of critic who is interested in promoting those authors and works that he thinks have not been duly appreciated. Both Conrad and Nostromo fit under such a classification, for Leavis began to popularize Conrad when appreciation for both that novelist and Nostromo was at a rather low level. Nostromo, moreover, is a fine example in its conception (not necessarily in its actual achievement) of what the "tradition" can be. Leavis's association of the crafts of Flaubert and Conrad, in reference to Nostromo, is important in this respect: it betrays to what Leavis aspires (insofar as to what the "tradition" aspires) and to what extent he emphasizes technique.

But certainly Leavis has contributed valuable material to the discussion of theme and organization in Nostromo. He has performed the practical function of setting down his studied judgments, so that "[o]ut of agreement and disagreement with particular judgments of value a sense of relative value in the concrete will define itself. . . ."
CHAPTER III

THEME AND TECHNIQUE

Technically and psychologically, Mostromo breaks with the methods used in Lord Jim, the novel that most frequently competes with it for top place among Conrad's works. In this earlier novel structural unity is maintained through deep and lengthy introspection: i.e., Jim's efforts to explain and rationalize his actions and Marlow's pains to understand and exonerate Jim.

Marlow's incredibly long speech in the first half of the book and the long, equally unbelievable, letter in the second half--in themselves clumsy devices to cement together the bits of Jim's story--become workable because they help lead the reader toward the ultimate questions of the novel. What kind of man is Jim? Will he ever satisfy his ideals? Is he really guilty of what Conrad considers man's worst sin--the betrayal of humanity and the desertion of duty? If guilty, has he succeeded in redeeming himself? Since Jim is "one of us" (as Marlow constantly reminds us in the novel), these questions involve us in the story, and thereby make the novel the story of universal guilt and of

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1 The competition between these two novels is a phenomenon that runs the entire gamut of Conrad criticism. For two recent works that emphasize this relationship see Richard Curle, Joseph Conrad and His Characters and Albert J. Guerard, Conrad the Novelist.
universal aspiration. In the compulsive sweep of the interior story, the dangerously obvious narrative devices lose their awkwardness and give us subtle performances.

The reverse is true in *Nostromo*. The story is mainly exterior; rarely do we share a character's consciousness. If *Lord Jim* resembles a diary or an intimate biography, *Nostromo* is most like the scenario of a motion picture; we see the people and the events that comprise the history of Sulaco. (It is surprising to recall how many of the novel's best effects are visual: Charles Gould's riding past the equestrian statue of Charles IV; Mrs. Gould's holding of the first silver ingot, still warm from the mold; Nostromo's wakening from the sleep after his swim from the Great Isabel to see a vulture swinging overhead.) Acting as a scenarist would act, Conrad has supplied us with an anonymous narrator whom we never see but whose voice we depend upon to comment on the pictures that are flashed before us. It is this narrator who, in travelogue fashion, introduces us to Sulaco in the first and second chapters. It is his voice that on page 354 reaffirms the supposition that the entire novel is set in the past.\textsuperscript{2}

The world views offered in these two novels are in many ways alike. Life is a frustrating experience in *Lord Jim* because men cannot live according to their ideals, even though strict ad-

\textsuperscript{2}Throughout this chapter page references to *Nostromo* will be from the Kent Edition (Garden City, 1925).
herence to them (principally honor and duty) is what makes life meaningful. Because Jim is "one of us," Marlow is impelled to investigate Jim's tenuous motives in deserting the sinking Patna, so that he can vindicate Jim and himself. Captain Brierly, the man who presides over Jim's hearing, though outwardly a strict disciplinarian (and like MacWhirr, seemingly one of those men who "had sailed over the surface of the oceans as some men go skimming over the years of existence to sink gently into a placid grave, ignorant of life to the last, without ever having been made to see all it may contain of perfidy, of violence, and of terror," nevertheless is so tormented by some secret sin of his own that he attempts to bribe Jim to run away from town before the hearing is finished, and, when this attempt fails, commits suicide.

Life is also a frustrating experience in Nostromo. Charles Gould discovers that his ideals are almost impossible to realize without compromise or debasement. At the time of Decoud's death we are told by the omniscient narrator that "[i]n our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part." Yet, twenty-four pages later we share this disillusioning thought with Mrs. Gould, now, evidently, the spokesman of the novel: "There was something inherent in the necessities of

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4Nostromo, p. 497.
successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea."\(^5\) Men must create ideals to live satisfactorily, but they find that actions done in the name of this greater good naturally frustrate their ideals. Moreover, politics and history make little sense in Nostromo: revolution follows revolution with no real progress in the social and economic condition of the country.\(^6\) Señor Avellanos sees his history of Sulaco, "Fifty Years of Misrule," used as wads for cannon loaded with the type of the Porvenir, the journal by which the Ribierist party intended to disseminate truth through the province.

But there is this overriding difference between the two books: Nostromo is much more pessimistic. It is true that in both novels men create for themselves certain ideals that are illusory but comforting, necessary yet frustrating. The difference is that in Lord Jim we are not committed to the viewpoint that Jim's life has been completely futile, as we are certain at the end of Nostromo that the lives of Charles Gould, Martin Decoud, and Nostromo have been. We suspend our final judgment on Jim

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 521.

\(^6\) For an excellent treatment of the political ideas in Nostromo see Irving Howe, "Joseph Conrad: The Political Novels," Kenyon Review, XVI (Winter, 1954), 1-19. He makes the following assertion: "Perhaps the central political point of Nostromo is that imperialism does indeed bring order, but a false order, an order imposed, an order which destroys the rhythms of native life and gives rise to the fumes of nationalism" (pp. 12-13).
because we want to believe that he is right, that his ideals have conquered rather than have been conquered; we are apprehensive of his fate, in other words, because we are uneasy over our own. The final truth of Lord Jim can be said to lie in its viewpoint. As in Einsteinian relativity, truth in Lord Jim is modified by the time and space in which circumstances occur; that is, the truth of an observation depends upon the observer's viewpoint. We experience many points of view in Lord Jim, and as a result we are willing at times to exculpate Jim from all blame (when we hear, for instance, of Captain Brierly's suicide), while at other times we place moral responsibility squarely upon Jim's shoulders (as when we learn through Marlow about the French officer's heroic watch upon the crippled Patna). The final thematic statement of Lord Jim seems to be the accumulation of all the conflicting points of view. This is why we suspend our judgment: we cannot choose between success and failure for Jim; we must choose them both.

Whatever our final judgment of Lord Jim might be, it is nevertheless true that one of the strongest sentiments in the novel is that Jim has overidealized his position, that the human community is willing to forget about the Patna affair if Jim allows himself to forget about it. There is, as a consequence, a great deal of hope for Jim, whether he takes advantage of it or not. There is little such hope in Nostrromo. Man's actions are bound to be frustrated. No matter how hard he tries to shape history, he sees another, foreign pattern emerge. He constantly strives to change
the pattern, but like the grain in a piece of wood, it can never be eradicated. Charles Gould accepted the challenge of history in resuming the operation of the Gould Concession, which had completely broken his father. The realization of certain high ideals through the successful running of the silver mine became for Charles a moral obligation. "The mine had been the cause of an absurd moral disaster; its working must be made a serious and moral success."\(^7\) He and his wife found that ". . . they had been morally bound to make good their vigorous view of life against the unnatural error of weariness and despair. If the idea of wealth was present to them it was only in so far as it was bound with that other success."\(^8\) But once this ideal was transferred to the arena of action, it became slated for failure. Through a commixture of bad judgments ("I pin my faith to material interests. . . . A better justice will come afterwards")\(^9\) and the inevitable propensity of events toward unforeseeable goals, Charles succeeded financially, but he recorded a gross moral failure. Husband and wife are driven apart by the obsession Charles has for the mine. Moreover, at the end of the book Dr. Monyghem predicts to Mrs. Gould that ". . . the time approaches when all that the Gould

\(^7\)\textit{Nostromo}, p. 66.
\(^8\)\textit{Ibid.}, p. 74.
\(^9\)\textit{Ibid.}, p. 84.
Concession stands for shall weigh as heavily upon the people as the barbarism, cruelty, and misrule of a few years back."\(^{10}\) And within the last pages of the novel,\(^ {11}\) we see Charles Gould prepared to deal with rebellious miners, once the proud beneficiaries of the justice guaranteed them under the Concession's aegis. The ideal, made by man and necessary to man, is unrealizable. It seems to lead him to his own destruction.

The futile love stories that involve all the main characters of the novel are another instance of the pessimism that is deeply ingrained in *Nostromo*. The Goulds, during their courtship and the first part of their marriage, seemed to possess common aspirations. They saw that if the management of the Concession was to be undertaken at all, it was to be undertaken in the right spirit for the right purposes. They were high idealists, ready with the strength and uncomplicated mentality of youth to strike down evil in the world. But in their early enthusiasm they were too abstract in their notion of justice. Charles was soon forced into the game of Costaguana politics, just as his father had been, though, of course, Charles was a much better player and held a much better hand. In order to survive, the younger Gould had to manipulate corruption with a "cold, fearless scorn." But he refused to discuss the ethical implications of his actions with his wife. "He trusted

\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 511.

\(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 555.
that, though a little disenchanted, she would be intelligent enough to understand his character safeguarded the enterprise of their lives as much or more than his policy."\textsuperscript{12} In fact, Charles uses the pose of silence throughout the book as a sign of moral integrity, but his silence eventually frustrates communication with his wife. He takes the following position early in the book and never budges an inch from it later, nor feels the need to confide in his wife over the political and financial manipulations that are its direct and natural result:

> What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Any one can declaim about these things, but I pin my faith to material interests. Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That's how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come afterwards. That's your ray of hope.\textsuperscript{13}

Mrs. Gould, however, grows during the book. If at the beginning, she is guilty, like her husband, of too abstract an idea of justice, she learns better than Charles what actual justice is, because her commitment is not to an ideal alone but to people. As Charles's narrow dedication to the mine leads him away from the humanitarian ideal that guides her life, she comes to a clear realization of their positions. She sees that in Charles's case "[t]here was

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 143.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 84.
something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea." Whereas her compassion for others enables her to see "the San Tome mountain hanging over the whole land, feared, hated, wealthy; more soulless than any tyrant, more pitiless and autocratic than the worst Government; ready to crush innumerable lives in the expansion of its greatness." 14

The second great love affair in Nostromo involves the patriotic niece of the Archbishop of Sulaco and the Paris dandy who had come to laugh at his country. Antonia Avellanos had an ideal love for Martin Decoud, in contrast to the sensual, passionate love that he had for her. But Antonia's love was misdirected, for she did not understand Don Martin or his motives. Her promised support, near the close of the book, for a future revolution in Costaguana to annex that area to the Occidental State is given in the name of her beloved's ideals. But nothing could have been farther from his intentions. Decoud instigated the revolution in Sulaco so that he could win Antonia. "She won't leave Sulaco for my sake, therefore Sulaco must leave the rest of the Republic to its fate. . . . I cannot part with Antonia, therefore the one and indivisible Republic of Costaguana must be made to part with its western Province." 15 Antonia's later devotion to Decoud, as though he were a patriot-saint, is a keenly ironic statement that a man's intentions can be

14 Ibid., p. 521.
15 Ibid., p. 215.
grossly misunderstood and that his actions can be stupidly mis-
interpreted.

Linda did not know her lover any better than Antonia knew
hers. At the very end of the novel Linda shouts Nostromo's name
from the top of the lighthouse, thus trying, through her over-
whelming love, to perpetuate his memory. But she misunderstood the
Capataz. She thought that Nostromo had come to the island for
Giselle, her sister. Ironically, Nostromo was shot for the
passion of another man. He had been using his connections with
the Viola family to visit the Great Isabel so that he could slowly
remove the treasure that was hidden there.

By no means is understanding limited to the pairs of lovers.
Even those to who Conrad extended a certainly amount of sympathy
suffer from this fundamental curse. The self-effacing Dr. Mony-
gham, for instance, though certainly at times the showcase for many
of Conrad's highly prized virtues—selfless idealism, high-minded
action, unstinted sacrifice—deceived himself when he heard Linda's
cry from the lighthouse. Just before, Mrs. Gould had refused to
tell him if Nostromo had, in his dying words, any confession to
make about the silver. The personal enemy of Nostromo and a man
of much greater character than the Capataz, Dr. Monygham believed
that Nostromo's name in the air over his head symbolized his own
inadequacy. He took in bitter humility, which for him was a sort
of perverted pride, the assured fact that Nostromo had won a
moral victory.
It was another of Nostromo's triumphs, the greatest, the most enviable, the most sinister of all. In that true cry of undying passion that seemed to ring aloud from Punta Mala to Azuera and away to the bright line of the horizon, overhung by a white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver, the genius of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores dominated the dark gulf containing his conquests of treasure and love.18

Conrad did not construct Nostromo according to an optimistic notion of what life is; his pessimistic view of life has been emphasized here because many critics have erroneously minimized it.17 As recently as 1954 Paul L. Wiley maintained that "[l]ove as a corrective to tragic error is eulogized more forthrightly in Nostromo than in the other books of this phase...it stands forth as the single value transcending the egotism of a materialistic world. At the end of the novel the storm created by the passions of men subsides to give place to the image of the solitary Linda tending the light above the darkness in which lies the treasure of the mine..."18 Nostromo, however, is a thoroughly skeptical book in which love deceives as often as it inspires, and to ignore the skepticism because it is not consonant with one's own Weltanschauung is to ignore the significance of the book.19 Indeed, some critics have refused to believe that Conrad's works support

16 Ibid., p. 566.

17 Albert J. Guerard quotes Stephen Napierski, a Polish critic, who was astonished that the English did not immediately perceive Conrad's skepticism: "Do they not feel the despair lurking behind those truly nihilistic books?" Joseph Conrad, p. 77.


19 Jocelyn Baines, author of the most recent book on Conrad to appear up to the writing of this thesis, agrees that Nostromo is
a serious commentary on life. Edward Crankshaw said, "Bothering about what Conrad meant in 'Heart of Darkness' is as irrelevant as bothering about what Mozart meant in the Haydn Symphony."  

Fortunately, many critics now realize that in his best works Conrad is bothering about something important, and that something is not an ingredient in a sugarplum world. Conrad's world, in fact, often resembles Hardy's, except that Hardy's is too openly sinister whereas Conrad's is impersonal and indifferent. But as with Hardy, the attempt to expain the cosmic is what merits for Conrad special consideration; that attempt is especially true for Nostromo, a novel that in theme and narrative technique tries to explain and imitate life.

In his Preface to Chance, Conrad insisted that an author's morality was bound to creep into his writing and be discernible at about every third line. With this clue in mind, we find special interest in the suicide motif that several of his characters establish: Floral and Charles de Barral in Chance, Captain Brierly in Lord Jim, Winnie Verloc in The Secret Agent, Heyst in Victory, and, of course, Decoud in Nostromo. And we find Decoud's skepticism especially helpful in evaluating the theme of Nostromo, since far more critics than Leavis have heard Conrad's own timbre

thoroughly pessimistic: "Nostromo is an intensely pessimistic book; it is perhaps the most impressive monument to futility ever created." Joseph Conrad; A Critical Biography (New York, 1960), p. 310.

in the boulevardier's voice.

Conrad dealt severely with Decoud at his death, in itself a great irony because of the chain of events that placed Don Martin on the Great Isabel. As a skeptic and intellectual, he found political action in Costaguana "screamingly funny." "Of course, government in general, any government anywhere, is a thing of exquisite comicality to a discerning mind; but really we Spanish-Americans do overstep the bounds. No man of ordinary intelligence can take part in the intrigues of une farce macabre." Yet Decoud found himself playing a principal role in this farce as gunrunner, revolutionist, intriguer, and framer of a new constitution. Earlier in the book Conrad had rebuked him for being "in danger of remaining a sort of nondescript dilettante all of his life. He had pushed the habit of universal raillery to a point where it blinded him to the genuine impulses of his own nature." Even though his newly found love for Antonia seemed to give impetus to genuine impulses, it nevertheless failed to sustain him during his isolated imprisonment on the Great Isabel; he stopped thinking of her after three days. "Both his intelligence and his passion were swallowed up easily in this great unbroken solitude of waiting without faith." Decoud's final undoing, therefore, was

21 Nostrono, p. 152.
22 Ibid., p. 153.
23 Ibid., p. 498.
a lack of faith, which deficiency Conrad had earlier described as a "mere barren indifferentism posing as intellectual superiority." Without this faith life became for him "a succession of incomprehensible images." Decoud could not deal with himself because the solitude imposed on a person from a mere outward condition of existence "becomes very swiftly a state of soul in which the affectations of irony and scepticism have no place." 

In spite of this stern reproof, Conrad is generally sympathetic with Decoud, for Don Martin seems to have perceived a disastrous truth.

After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality. It had merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature. In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part. Decoud lost all belief in the reality of his action past and to come.

Moreover, the observation at the exact moment of Decoud's death emphasizes the truth of his doubt and disbelief: "A victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity, the brilliant Don Martin Decoud, weighted by the bars of San Tomé silver, disappeared without a trace,

24 Ibid., p. 152.
25 Ibid., p. 498.
26 Ibid., p. 497.
27 Ibid. Italics mine.
swallowed up in the immense indifference of things." Here Conrad is closer to Decoud in feeling than he had ever been before; he had previously described him as a "nondescript dilettante" possessed of a "mere barren indifferentism posing as intellectual superiority." Here Decoud faces life's most essential and bitter truth: that man has an individual destiny only insofar as he believes in and idealizes his activity. This change of heart in Conrad is important because it reveals his personal feelings more than it does Decoud's actual situation. Here, more than in any other passage in the book, does the reader feel Conrad's personal involvement in the story. Conrad is at a crucial moral point—moral in Leavis's sense of "a preoccupation with certain problems that life compels... as personal ones." Conrad's preoccupation with the ultimate significance of life is probably no more forcibly or clearly presented than in the above passages. "In our activity alone do we find an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part." Conrad does not condemn Decoud because he saw that the universe was "a succession of incomprehensible images" or that his own individuality was really indistinct from nature. Conrad condemns Decoud because he had "lost all belief in the reality of his action past and to come," and because he had "recognized no other virtue than

28 Ibid., p. 501. Italics mine.

intelligence." In activity alone does man find meaning in life, which otherwise has none.

That Conrad endorsed activity as a principle of moral order is clear from his works. Captain MacWhirr, for instance, sustained the destructiveness of a typhoon (symbolically, the trials or storms of life) because of his seaman's discipline, unimaginative though he was. Captain Mitchell, the uncomprehending captain of the O. S. N., escaped death at Sotillo's hands because of the unyielding course of conduct that was unthinkingly, but habitually, his. But it was not with these simple-minded men that Conrad expended his greatest efforts. It was with the Lord Jims, the Heysts, and the Decouds that he explored the great moral problems for which his novels are famous, and it is in these characters that the ideals of fidelity, honor, and discipline take on their most profound meaning.

In the tension between the antipodes of complete skepticism and moral idealism are created Conrad's great themes. That this tension is seldom kept in equilibrium in any one character is perhaps inevitable, given the two extremes. The Decouds and the MacWhirrs rarely get together. And the characters who do seem to win for themselves some sort of salvation do so in equivocal terms:

30 In the Preface to A Personal Record, Conrad reiterated his belief that the world does depend upon some positive beliefs. "Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably among others, on the idea of Fidelity." A Personal Record, p. xxi.
Jim removes himself from society and Dr. Monygham thinks that Nostromo is a better man than he. Either an unsatisfying romanticism or a disillusioned remorse seems to be the outcome of these "successful" struggles. Mrs. Gould, who of all the characters in Nostromo comes to the best realization of the moral environment, who is at once the advocate of compassion and courage and the victim of disillusioned idealism, is condemned to desolation.

"With a prophetic vision she saw herself surviving alone the degradation of her young ideal of life, of love, of work—all alone in the Treasure House of the World."31

Conrad's vision of life as defined by these examples would be easily recognized as the radical skepticism it is were it not for his concomitant insistence upon the ideal value of things. This notion of the ideal, central to Conrad's concept of the "sustaining illusion of life," constitutes the main theme of Nostromo.

Conrad has said, "I have been called a writer of the sea, a descriptive writer, a romantic writer—and also a realist. But as a matter of fact all my concern has been with the 'ideal' value of things, events, and people. That and nothing else. The humorous, the pathetic, the passionate, the sentimental aspects came in of themselves..."32

In his introduction to the Modern Library edition of Nostromo, Robert Penn Warren has given what is

31 Nostromo, p. 522.

now a widely accepted interpretation of Conrad's use and meaning of
the "ideal." We here quote Warren at length because his explanation
is fundamental to any discussion of Conrad's moral universe.

The central passage of Lord Jim, Stein's speech about the
"destructive element," is the basic text for this theme of
Conrad [idealization]:

A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who
falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the
air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns--
"nicht wahr? . . . No! I tell you! The way is to the
destructive element submit yourself, and with the
exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the
deep, deep sea keep you up.

I take this, in the context of the action, to read as
follows: It is man's fate to be born into the "dream"--
the fate of all men. By the dream Conrad here means nothing
more or less than man's necessity to justify himself by the
"idea," to idealize himself and his actions into moral
significance of some order, to find sanctions. But why is
the dream like the sea, a "destructive element"? Because
man, in one sense, is purely a creature of nature, an animal
of black egotism and savage impulses. He should, to follow
the metaphor, walk on the dry land of "nature," the real,
naturalistic world, and not be dropped, into the waters he
is so ill-equipped to survive in. Those men who take the
purely "natural" view, who try to climb out of the sea,
who deny the dream and man's necessity to submit to the idea,
to create values that are, quite literally, "supernatural"
and therefore human, are destroyed by the dream. They drown
in it, and their agony is the agony of their frustrated
humanity. Their failure is the failure to understand what
is specifically human. . . . To conclude the reading of this
passage, man, as a natural creature, is not born to swim
in the dream, with gills and fins, but if he submits in his
own imperfect, "natural" way he can learn to swim and keep
himself up, however painfully, in the destructive element.
To surrender to the incorrigible and ironical necessity of the
"idea," that is man's fate and his only triumph.33

"Conrad's skepticism," Warren goes on to say, "is ultimately

but a 'reasonable' recognition of the fact that man is a natural creature who can rest on no revealed values and can look forward to neither individual immortality nor racial survival."^34 Reason in this sense, however, is the repudiation of the ideal values that man always creates for himself. "These values are, to use Conrad's word, 'illusions,' but the last wisdom is for man to realize that though his values are illusions, the illusion is necessary, is infinitely precious, is the mark of his human achievement, and is, in the end, his only truth."^35

This reading of Stein's speech and of the moral theme of *Lord Jim* is especially applicable to *Nostromo*, where idealization, with all its effects, is the dominant motivating force of nearly every character in the book. Though it offers a deep insight into *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, and the entire moral universe Conrad has created in his fiction, Warren's explanation fails in this one respect; it is too optimistic about those who readily embrace the dream. Only "[t]hose men who take the purely 'natural' view...who deny the dream and man's necessity to submit to the idea...are destroyed by the dream." In Warren's view these are the Kurtzes, the Browns, and those who are isolated because they have not taken the full risk of humanity.^36 But in *Nostromo* more than these types are

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^34Ibid., p. 377.

^35Ibid.

^36Ibid.
destroyed by the dream. Charles Gould has from the first submitted to the dream, to his ideal concept of practical action. We were told early in the book that he viewed his participation in the reopening of the mine in terms of a moral ideal. "A vague idea of rehabilitation had entered the plan of their life the Goulds . . . . It had presented itself to them at the instant when the woman's instinct of devotion and the man's instinct of activity receive from the strongest of illusions their most powerful impulse."37 Later in the novel Decoud remarks that Charles was one of those people "that will never do anything for the sake of their passionate desire, unless it comes to them clothed in the fair robes of an idea."38 But Charles is destroyed by the dream. His abstract notions of justice and rehabilitation are frustrated by the duplicity of his actions in providing for the safe administration of the mine.

In fact, Warren is generally too optimistic about Nostromo; he sees the condition of the people at the end of the book better than it was at the beginning. Capitalism, with its inherent ideal of order and preservation, has given shape to the natural, promiscuous forces of Costaguana. But such optimism is not a general reaction to Nostromo; nor should it be. By the end of the book we have seen the downfall of the three major figures whose activities

37Nostromo, p. 74.
38Ibid., p. 239.
and ideals have unified the discontinuous narrative—Charles Gould, Martin DeCoud, and Nostromo. We have seen the start that capitalism and industrial progress have made to destroy the traditional culture of the country. Mrs. Gould, who by the end of the book has clearly become the center of moral interest, realizes what the "good life" must be: "It had come into her mind that for life to be large and full, it must contain the care of the past and of the future in every passing moment of the present. Our daily work must be done to the glory of the dead and for the good of those who come after." This attitude is a sharp indictment of her husband's unfruitful life, warped by the obsession of a dead parent and indifferent to the injustice that falls upon the populace. And although she herself is committed to such a vision as she considers large and full, she clearly sees that her own life is filled with misery: "With a prophetic vision she saw herself surviving alone the degradation of her young ideal of life, of work, of love—all alone in the Treasure House of the World."

The theme of Nostromo may be said to be this: Men must live by ideals to live humanly, even if such ideals turn into obsessions. "To live by ideals" means to impose personal, interior standards of conduct upon the spectacle of life. This personal involvement with outside, impersonal events is what makes Conrad's artistic universe a moral one. Albert J. Guerard has put it this way: "A moral universe, however fictitious, is one in which conduct

39Ibid., p. 521.
signifies and all experience is symbolic."\textsuperscript{40} If we turn to the climactic scene in the novel, Nostromo and Decoud in the still blackness of the Golfo Placido, we shall see how Conrad's moral--that is, ideal--universe works.

Nostromo views the night's exploit as a personal affair. Just as Charles Gould considered himself fatally chosen to be involved in the affairs of Sulaco, the Mediterranean sailor feels that the removal of silver from the port is an important part of his destiny. "It shall be the most desperate affair of my life," he says out of the enormity of his egotism. He thinks it is matter of course that "[t]his thing has been given me like a deadly disease."\textsuperscript{41} Since the exploit will make his name famous up and down the coast, Nostromo will gladly die. Martin Decoud, on the other hand, sees nothing personal in his part in the grand plan. It is, in fact, his plan. With the silver Don Martin has political and military power; he can redirect the forces of Barrios and by another military coup separate the entire Occidental Province from the belligerent remainder of Costaguana. This project, however, is not the retort to a challenge perceived in the disposition of events; it is rather the result of a logical mind that sees what causes must operate to produce a certain effect. Don Martin tells Mrs. Gould very candidly that his reason for suggesting political separation is to win the love of the politically involved Antonia.

\textsuperscript{40}Albert J. Guerard, \textit{Joseph Conrad}, p. 83.
\textsuperscript{41}Nostromo, p. 264.
"I am not deceiving myself about my motives. She won't leave Sulaco for my sake, therefore Sulaco must leave the rest of the Republic to its fate. Nothing could be clearer than that." 42

And he later says, "...I [am]...the man with a passion, but without a mission..." 43 Other characters in the book act out of a sense of mission; Don Martin does not.

But if men through their natural inclination to idealize things, to personalize events, interpret the spectacle of events that make up life as personal and inexorable challenges, they act contrary to the actual condition of things. Yet, as Robert Penn Warren maintains, this contrariness is what is specifically human and of value. In his isolation on the Great Isabel, Decoud came to see that he was but a mote in the universe. "In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part." Activity, then, is what sustains man, what gives him une raison d'être. But such activity is based on illusion, on that propensity in man to idealize his existence, to give himself missions, to affirm stubbornly the reverse order of things, to believe that things are seen in their right perspective when the universe is interpreted through his eyes, not when the universe remains blind to his energies. Decoud realizes what is "right"

42 Ibid., p. 215.
43 Ibid., p. 246.
and commits suicide. Antonia carries out a "wrong" mission, but embraces life.

One of the most profoundly skeptical ironies of the book is that all activity is self-defeating, though it is the only meaningful element in life. Men's struggles to meet the terms of the universe are eventually defeated. Man, finding no Prometheus to save him, strikes his own fire, which for a time burns brightly but then dies out. If Decoud is defeated by self-knowledge, Nostromo and Charles fare no better with their vitalizing ideals; they face defeat just as surely, only a little later. If we consider those in the novel who achieve some notable degree of self-knowledge—Martin Decoud, Dr. Monygham, and Mrs. Gould—we find that the most optimistic note struck is Mrs. Gould's vision of herself—enduring alone and in misery.

F. R. Leavis has maintained that the theme of Nostromo is represented by a highly organized pattern. "Pattern" is, in fact, an excellent word to describe the organization of the novel, but it is more of a random pattern than Leavis would admit. It does not signify, for example, the kind of diagrammatic structure one finds in Pride and Prejudice, where the actions of a character after the turning point of the plot deliberately parallel his actions before the turning point. It means, rather, the impressionistic way characters and events are grouped. Consider, for instance, the way characters are freighted with attitudes toward the ideal. Unlike Lord Jim, in which the reader's final opinion
of Jim's career is likely to remain unsettled, Nostromo offers its reader clear evidence for the evaluation of all the major, and almost all of the minor, characters. The reader does not hesitate to judge Charles Gould, Martin Decoud, or Nostromo; nor is he unaware of the author's wary attitude toward the strong impersonal forces that shape the novel—silver and capitalism. Conrad's attitudes toward his material are evident because he has carefully planned the novel to elucidate the ideal.

By considering the cast of characters, one sees how the pattern is formed. Charles Gould and his wife assumed a moral responsibility for the successful operation of the Gould Concession because they viewed their activity in an ideal way. Yet Charles found that he could not control his actions: once he committed himself to the successful operation of the mine, he had to take those precautions necessary for its preservation—wholesale bribery. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Gould is a highly imaginative and idealistic young woman: "He [Charles] had struck her imagination from the first by his unsentimentalism, by that very quietude of mind which she had erected in her thought for a sign of perfect competency in the business of living." But whereas Charles becomes fanatical in his commitment to the idea of the mine, Mrs. Gould becomes more knowledgeable of the forces that are shaping their lives. She is sympathetic with the people and

44Ibid., p. 50.
their traditions, for she sees the damage capitalism is doing to the country.

Against Charles Gould, the sort of person who "will never do anything for the sake of...[his] passionate desire, unless it comes to...[him] clothed in the fair robes of an idea," is set Martin Decoud, a man who acts from passionate desire alone and not from deep-set convictions. In fact, it seemed to Decoud that "every conviction, as soon as it became effective, turned into that form of dementia the gods send upon those they wish to destroy.

Through his love for Antonia Avellanos, the daughter of the most prominent political leader of Sulaco, Decoud not only prolonged his stay in Sulaco (he had come only to deliver a shipment of guns to the government behind the back of the War Minister--the kind of farce macabre that he delighted in--and planned to return to his Paris haunts within a month), he also became the head of the government press in Sulaco. When the overthrow of the Ribierist government seemed imminent, Decoud proposed another revolution: the separation of the whole Occidental Province (of which Sulaco was the capital) from the remainder of the country. His proposal did not spring from any resurgence of patriotism in him; it rather flowed from the fact that Antonia was a loyalist. In short, Decoud represents the completely skeptical man, who distrusts not only political discourse but the totality of human activity.

Nostrommo's ideal is in his good name. For the first two-thirds of the book, he acts to gain prestige in the role of the

*Ibid., p. 200.*
Capataz de Cargadores. He saves Señor Ribiera from a mob, he risks his life to save a shipment of silver, he runs the revolutionaries' lines to send General Barrios and his troops back to Sulaco—and for these magnificent exploits he gains nothing but a good name among the people, whom he rewards by his presence and with whatever money he happens to have in his pockets. When he finally realizes that he has been taken advantage of, Nostromo steals the silver that was entrusted to him. But wealth proves to be a poor indemnification for the distresses his vanity has suffered.

The whole cast of characters contributes to the thematic pattern of the ambiguous nature of idealism, not merely the four main characters. Like Decoud, Dr. Monygham is skeptical about people and politics. The chief engineer of the railroad, speaking to the doctor about the motives of Charles Gould and financier Holroyd, says, "Upon my word, doctor, things seem to be worth nothing by what they are in themselves. I begin to believe that the only solid thing about them is the spiritual value which everyone discovers in his own form of activity." This is, especially in context, one of the main thematic statements of the novel, but it receives only a "Bah!" from the doctor. "Self-flattery. Food for the vanity that makes the world go around." But we are later told by the omniscient narrator that this seemingly complete skeptic "had made himself an ideal conception of his

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46 Ibid., p. 318.
47 Ibid.
Because he judged himself to be completely worthless, Dr. Monygham deported himself according to a severe rule of conduct that was based on self-effacement. This code found its fruition in his devotion to Mrs. Gould, to his mind the ideal woman. Later in the novel, Dr. Monygham openly subscribes to the ideal when he advises Mrs. Gould that the respite the Concession then enjoys from political turmoil is only temporary. "There is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests. They have their law and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and is inhuman; it is without rectitude, without the continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle." 49

Even lesser characters help form the pattern of idealism. Holroyd, for example, is described as a "dreamy idealist" who had an "insatiable imagination of conquest." 50 He undertook to finance the Gould Concession for two reasons: he felt that he and other business men like him were fated to "run the world's business whether the world likes it or not," 51 and he luxuriated in the hobby of running, not a mine, but a man--Charles Gould. Holroyd's

48He had once been the political prisoner of Guzman Bento, one of Costaguana's past tyrants. The Citizen-Savior, as this barbarian liked to be known, jailed a number of men on the pretext of putting down an insurrection. Since this revolt existed entirely in the mind of the Citizen-Savior, the confessions that were extracted through torture from the prisoners betrayed innocent men. Dr. Monygham was one of those who "confessed" very thoroughly, and he became a voluntary outcast from society because of his guilt.

49Nostromo, p. 511.
50Ibid., p. 76.
51Ibid., p. 77.
idealism is furthered manifested in his Calvanistic belief in a "purer form of Christianity"; he is the contributor of vast sums of money for a world-wide church building campaign. Father Corbelan, another minor—though vividly portrayed—character, is one more pursuer of the ideal, which for him is the Catholic Church's destiny in Costaguana. "The idea of political honour, justice, and honesty for him consists in the restitution of the confiscated Church property." At the close of the book we see Antonia and her cardinal uncle proposing still another revolution—to annex Costaguana (from which the Occidental Province had separated itself) to the Occidental State. Both are prompted to make this absurd demand by their enormous ideals; she to the ideal of her dead beloved, Martin Decoud, whom she wrongly supposes to have advocated such a plan from the beginning; he to his ideal of restored Church property. Even Pedrito Montero is made out to be some sort of idealist. He craves high political power so that he can put into effect the dreams he entertained while reading mediocre French historical novels in a Paris garret.

To continue our list of examples, we can cite Giorgio Viola, one-time retainer of the great emancipator Garibaldi. Old Giorgio places himself above the political turmoil of Costaguana because the revolutions do not contribute to the republican ideal to which he has deeply committed himself. Joe Mitchell, as we have mentioned earlier, acts according to the principles of honor and duty because

52Ibid., p. 188.
these ideals are deeply ingrained in his seaman's way of life. Don Pépé and Father Roman are like Joe Mitchell in that they lead their lives according to simple fidelity. The list can be extended until it includes almost every character in the book.

Besides the way characters are used to demonstrate the ambivalent nature of idealism, Nostromo is a "patterned" novel in another important respect: the way the chronology of the story is altered. Conrad used Marlow in Lord Jim and in Chance to reorganize chronology, and in so doing, created time patterns that emphasized his moral concern. It is characteristic of Conrad to fragment a narrative so that he can surround and study certain characters and events from many points of view in time and space. His mind almost seems to require this fragmentation and encircling to achieve the proper aesthetic distance from his material. It is certainly true in Nostromo that those scenes whose chronology is undisturbed and whose viewpoint is uncomplicated are the inferior ones in the novel. (This judgment especially pertains to the scenes in the lighthouse.) Moreover, Conrad's other great novels, such as Lord Jim, The Secret Agent, and Chance, also depend upon a careful and complicated chronology.

There is no semi-detached, semi-engaged personal narrator in Nostromo to regroup the incidents of the story so that they are seen from the viewpoint of one central character. There is an anonymous narrator who acts as commentator, but many of the novel's scenes are objectively rendered and depend upon their place in the
narrative pattern for their significance, impact, and irony. Although in *Nostromo* Conrad occasionally uses the viewpoint of one of his characters, such as Decoud in his letter to his sister and Joe Mitchell in his lengthy monologue near the end of the novel, this technique is not widespread; these two examples, in fact, are restricted to summary of action.

The following schema demonstrates how Conrad disrupted the time sequence in *Nostromo* to suit his own ends. It represents, of course, a great simplification, for there may be many changes of scene and time within a very few pages. Only important overt actions are listed. The numbers in the left-hand column refer to order of sequence, not to chapter number; the right-hand column is keyed to the left-hand one—the roman numerals designate part.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conrad's Chronology</th>
<th>Actual Order of Events</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part I</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Captain Mitchell summarizes Nostromo's rescue of Señor Ribiera and the successful repulse of the mob by the European elements within Sulaco</td>
<td>1) Part I—Chapter 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) The mob rushes against the European installations and is repulsed.</td>
<td>2) I—5</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Sir John, chairman of the railway committee, makes a trip to Sulaco for the ground-breaking ceremonies.</td>
<td>3) II—1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4) I—6 (first part)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5) I—3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6) I—6 (second part)</td>
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</tbody>
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53 Guerard traces ten shifts in point of view within five pages of the first chapter of Part III. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*, p. 207.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conrad's Chronology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4) The history of the Gould Concession is given from its beginnings to the time</td>
<td>7) II--2</td>
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<td>of Holroyd's visit to Sulaco.</td>
<td>8) II--3</td>
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<tr>
<td>5) Mrs. Gould travels through Costa­guana; through bribery, Charles receives</td>
<td>9) II--4</td>
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<tr>
<td>an authorization to reopen the mine.</td>
<td>10) I--2</td>
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<tr>
<td>6) The mine progresses; at the banquet in honor of Sir John, Mrs. Gould</td>
<td>11) II--5</td>
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<td>secures the promise that the railroad will not interfere with the house of the</td>
<td>12) II--6</td>
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<td>Violas.</td>
<td>13) II--7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part II</td>
<td>14) II--8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Charles Gould, with the approval of Holroyd, supports the Ribierist</td>
<td>15) III--1</td>
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<td>government.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2) General Montero, in collusion with his brother, attempts to seize supreme</td>
<td>16) III--2</td>
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<td>political power; General Barrios embarks from Sulaco to battle him.</td>
<td>17) III--3</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Martin Decoud (recently returned from Europe to present the general with the</td>
<td>18) III--4</td>
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<td>rifles he is using) meets his childhood sweetheart, Antonia Avellanos, and decides</td>
<td>19) III--6</td>
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<td>to remain in Sulaco; he becomes the head of the Ribierist journal.</td>
<td>20) III--5</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) Decoud tells Mrs. Gould that Montero won the battle before Barrios arrived; he</td>
<td>21) III--7</td>
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<td>secures her support for his plan to separate Sulaco from the rest of Costaguana.</td>
<td>22) III--9</td>
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<tr>
<td>5) After a mob, incited by the news of Montero's victory, unsuccessfully tries to</td>
<td>23) III--10</td>
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<tr>
<td>storm the European installations in Sulaco, Decoud writes a letter to his sister</td>
<td>24) III--11</td>
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<tr>
<td>in which he explains the events of the past several days.</td>
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Conrad's Chronology

6) To avoid the capture of a large shipment of silver, Nostromo and Decoud embark with it in the dead of night; when they are in the gulf, they discover Hirsch, a hide merchant, concealed in the boat.

7) The lighter collides with a troopship that was coming to occupy the port; Hirsch is accidentally carried off by the steamer's anchor.

8) Nostromo and Decoud beach their boat on the Great Isabel; Nostromo leaves for the mainland, leaving Decoud to guard the silver.

Part III

1) Captain Mitchell is arrested at the dock and imprisoned for a short time with Dr. Monygham; the doctor tells him that the silver has been lost and that Nostromo and Decoud are drowned.

2) Dr. Monygham persuades Sotillo, the colonel in charge of the troopship, that he will inform for him among the European element in Sulaco in order to locate the silver, which Sotillo thinks is hidden somewhere nearby.

3) Pedrito Montero, brother of the victorious general, enters Sulaco with an armed band.

4) Charles Gould defies Montero by telling him that the existence of the San Tomé mine depends upon his personal safety; if Charles should die, Don Pépé will blow it up.

5) Nostromo and Dr. Monygham meet at the Custom House, where the doctor was to have rendezvoused with Sotillo; they discover the body of Hirsch.
Conrad’s Chronology

6) Sotillo kills Hirsch in a fit of rage.

7) Dr. Monygham and Old Giorgio persuade Nostromo to ride to Cayta, where Barrios’ troops are garrisoned, in order to save Sulaco.

8) Captain Mitchell tells the story of Nostromo’s ride, the storming of Sulaco by the San Tome’ miners, and the arrival of Barrios and his army.

9) Decoud commits suicide.

10) The Goulds return from a year’s visit to Europe and the United States; Dr. Monygham informs Mrs. Gould of his suspicion that Nostromo is carrying on an affair with Viola’s younger daughter, although he is promised to the older.

11) When Nostromo learns that a lighthouse is to be erected on the Great Isabel, he nominates the Viola family to be its keepers so that he can visit the hidden treasure without suspicion; although promised to Linda, he confesses a passion for Giselle and tells her that he has stolen a fortune.

12) Old Giorgio, mistaking Nostromo for Ramirez, a suitor of Giselle, shoots the Capatax on one of his clandestine trips to the island.

The above schema, simplified as it is, demonstrates that Conrad deliberately jumbled the chronology of his story for the purposes of suspense and interest, as when he shows the cause of Hirsch’s death after Nostromo and Dr. Monygham have discovered the body, or when he discloses in a flashback Decoud’s reason for committing suicide. It also reveals one of the most important
narrative techniques that Conrad used to achieve continuity amid
the complexities and indirections of his fragmented story: the
creation of several reference points around which he grouped related
events. One such reference point is the flight of Señor Ribiera,
which is first mention on page 11, referred to in passing on page
130, and explained in full in Decoud's letter to his sister on
page 241. Another such point is the riot of Sulaco's populace,
which is first summarized in Chapter Two of Part I, presented in
present time from the point of view of the occupants of the Casa
Viola in Chapters Three and Four, and discussed from still another
point of view in Decoud's letter in Chapter Seven of Part II.
Similarly, Sir John's visit to Sulaco for the ground-breaking
ceremonies of the railroad he represents constitutes the present
time of Chapters Five through Eight of Part I. These reference
points (and there are more, minute allusions to the ones just
mentioned scattered throughout the book) make the narrative more
intelligible and coherent; they act as milestones by telling the
reader how close he is to a familiar episode. These groupings also
control the flow of experience and help create the illusion of life,
a discontinuous, fragmented experience that depends upon a reflective
agent to perceive relationships among heterogeneous events.

Part I of *Nostromo* is, in fact, an outstanding effort to
imitate life, or the conscious understanding of life. The real
story--Aristotle's "middle"--is begun in earnest in Part II, although
the action of the novel starts, in Chapters Two and Three of Part
I, in medias res. For the most part, the first section of Nostromo is concerned with background and antecedent conditions—the "beginning" of the story. Because there is a great deal of background to be assimilated and because Conrad wishes the reader to experience this material, this section of the novel is the most difficult.

It is also difficult because it contains the novel's most complicated chronological experiments. Time in Nostromo is not clock time; it is impossible to tell, for instance, how many years elapse between the reopening of the San Tomé mine and the riot in Sulaco caused by the Monterist victory at Sta. Marta. We are frequently conscious of a series of nows, of scenes experienced in the present time, although the entire novel is set in the past, as is evident in the introductory description of Sulaco and in a parenthetical remark about the present stable condition of the new Occidental State on page 354. Such control of time assures the control of experience, and the control of the reader's experience is important for Conrad's purposes in Part I of Nostromo.

A close study of the uncountable time-shifts is desirable for our understanding of Conrad's time techniques, but, unfortunately, a comprehensive study is almost impossible to make. Let us, therefore, examine a small but important part of the book. Chapters Five through Eight of Part I are good chapters to study for technique and organization, for most of the novel's factual background is given in them.
In Chapter Five, Sir John visits Sulaco for the ground-breaking ceremonies of the railroad and remarks to Mrs. Gould that Sulaco is an out-of-the-way place for a rather important harbor. The scene is set eighteen months before the action of Chapter Four, the mob's attempted storming of the Casa Viola. From this remark the chapter ranges back along the difficulties encountered in getting the railroad through to Sulaco. Sir John is shown talking to the engineer-in-chief at a mountain camp site, and the chairman of the railway committee wonders what sort of man Charles Gould is that without his intervention the conservative Dons of the provinces would not sell their land to the railroad. The chapter ends with a reference to Nostromo's escorting Sir John to Sulaco for the festivities.

The sixth chapter begins with an indirect reference to a remark made by Dr. Monygham (the first time that he is mentioned in the novel) that Nostromo's devotion to the Europeans in Sulaco might not be entirely disinterested. A hint is thrown out that the doctor is a skeptical man because of some unpleasant experience he suffered many years before. (This experience is later explained in full in Part III, Chapter Four.) The chapter then explains why Mrs. Gould kept her house open to an eccentric like the doctor and to everyone else in Sulaco--she felt that everyone seemed a little homesick. The next twenty-one pages trace the fortunes of the Gould family from Charles's grandfather to Holroyd's visit to Sulaco. These pages are especially concerned with the begin-
nings of Charles's obsession with the mine. (There are some momentary shifts of time even in these closely knit pages: Don José Avellanos, for instance, discourses on the patriotic nature of the San Tomé mine as a prelude to its history.) They deal with the courtship of Charles and Emilia and their idealistic attitude toward the proper working of the mine: "The mine had been the cause of an absurd moral disaster [his father's]; its working must be made a serious and moral success." Mr. Holroyd and two business associates visit the Goulds in Sulaco; Mrs. Gould is wary of Holroyd's strange sense of religion, but Charles comforts her by his strong feelings\(^{54}\) for the success of their operation, made possible only through Holroyd's backing. This meeting is reminiscent of another interview with Holroyd, when Charles, on his way to Sulaco from Europe to assume the management of the mine, stopped off in San Francisco to solicit the great man's backing. The scene shifts back to Holroyd's visit to Sulaco; Mrs. Gould still protests against the pseudo-religious destiny that Holroyd subscribes to. Charles claims that the intrusion of material

\[54\text{In this section much emphasis is given to "feeling" as the basis for action. "What do you feel about it [their interview with Holroyd], Charley?" Emilia asks. Charles can only offer an obscure explanation: "The best of my feelings are in your keeping, my dear." And as Charles talks convincingly about his passion for the mine, his wife thinks, "The thing is obvious. It could be felt. It required no argument." Vagueness (and eventually grave misunderstanding) results from this reliance upon sentiment: "A vague idea of rehabilitation had entered the plan of their life., That it was so vague as to elude the support of argument made it only the stronger."}
interests (such as Holroyd represents) into Sulaco is justified because of the greater good they will bring—peace and prosperity. The chapter ends with the ironic observation that Charles was competent because he had no illusions; he could be trusted in the life-and-death struggle for the Gould Concession because he was prepared to go to any length to succeed. It also ends with a warning: "For a moment he felt as if the silver mine, which had killed his father, had decoyed him further than he meant to go; and with the round-about logic of emotions, he felt that the worthiness of his life was bound up with success. There was no going back."  

The seventh chapter is very short. The scene is the Gould household, where Don José Avellanos is being entertained. The time, however, is unspecified; in fact, the conversations are reported rather than rendered. Dialogue is usually preceded by such a tag as "Don José Avellanos... would go so far as to say...", and action is commonly prefaced by such a remark as "Mrs. Gould would look up from the tea-table..." Don José remarks that his hostess has been a true patriot of the country, and the following three pages are devoted to her two months of wandering through the country, when she first came to Costaguana, to gain a firsthand knowledge of the people. The scene shifts to Charles, who secures through bribery the needed authorization to reopen the mine. (The time seems to be roughly concurrent with his wife's travels, but

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55 _Nostromo_, p. 85.
this relationship is inferred and cannot be substantiated by internal evidence. The scene is typical of the many episodes that pepper the novel and seem to be without time; they are referred to in much the same way as one might allude to an event by saying, "I once knew a man who..." The anonymous narrator then talks about Charles's political discretion, especially about his using an itinerant traveler named Boniface as his privy postman.

The eighth chapter (and the last one in Part I) is over thirty-five pages long and contains many time shifts. The opening sentence helps the reader relocate himself in the narrative. "Those of us who business or curiosity took to Sulaco in these years before the first advent of the railway can remember the steadying effect of the San Tomé mine upon the life of that remote province. With that sentence he is prepared for the sudden shift, twenty-one pages later, to the central scene of Chapter Five--Sir John's visit to Sulaco--making the seventy-two pages from pages 44 to 116 in effect an extremely complicated flashback, or rather making Chapters Five through Eight a narrative unit in itself, dependent for its chronology, interest, and intelligibility upon the visit of a man who symbolizes the intrusion of material interests into Sulaco. It also reminds the reader that the action of the novel is past action reported from present time (whatever point in history that may be).

56 Ibid., p. 95.
Nostromo is mentioned as one of the prime factors in the good 'labor relations' Sulaco enjoyed before the advent of the railroad. One of those anecdotal, timeless scenes is shown in which the Capataz rounds up his reluctant workers. Don Pepe, the civil administrator of the mine, is introduced to us by a reported piece of dialogue—really a chance exclamation about the method of impressment the Army uses. The mine's temporal and spiritual pastors—Don Pepe and Father Roman—are then described and shown in typical scenes introduced by the ubiquitous "would": "they would laugh," "Father Roman would say to some of his flock," "Don Pepe, the Gobernador, would go off."

The center of interest, after first touching on Charles Gould and then again on Don Pepe, shifts to Mrs. Gould. Two brief scenes are presented: Mrs. Gould at the "paradise of snakes," the term Don Pepe uses for the ravine adjacent to the mine, and Mrs. Gould holding the first ingot of silver poured at the mine. Don Pepe mentions the name of the bandit Hernandez as Mrs. Gould holds the silver. The outlaw's career is then summarized by the anonymous narrator.

To demonstrate how the mine has become an institution and the center of power in the province, the narrator presents a series of reported speeches by an unnamed political leader ("all...are the officials of the Goulds"), by Don Pepe ("We are all playing our heads at this game"), and by Don Jose Avellanos ("Imperium in imperio").
The narrator then calls the reader's attention to the Goulds' drawing room, where the initiates of the mine—Don Pepe, Avellanos, and Captain Mitchell, for example—often congregate. Interest momentarily rests on the figure of Captain Mitchell, who pompously claims that this or that current event "marks an epoch." The reader's attention passes on to the "epoch-making" first shipment of silver to San Francisco; it is described in the present, but with the usual "would" time qualifications: "In the whole sunlit range of empty balconies along the street only one white figure would be visible. . . ."57 The narrator continues the early history of the Gould Concession by commenting on the large unofficial pay list that benefited those of the proper official rank. This paragraph of commentary ends with a reported piece of typical conversation: "Charles Gould; excellent fellow! Absolutely necessary to make sure of him before taking a single step. Get an introduction to him from Moraga if you can—the agent of the King of Sulaco, don't you know."58

The narrator then prepares the reader for the scene at the banquet given in honor of Sir John: "No wonder, then, that Sir John, coming from Europe to smooth the path for his railway, had been meeting the name (and even the nickname) of Charles Gould at every turn in Costaguana."59 After one paragraph of transitional

57 Ibid., p. 114.
58 Ibid., p. 116.
59 Ibid., pp. 116-117.
material (Sir John's thoughts about the desirability of good faith, order, honesty, and peace for the success of his railroad and material interests in general), the reader finds himself back at the banquet scene in present time. Mrs. Gould talks to Sir John and mentions her despondency over the inevitable changes the railroad will make in the country she now loves so much. She asks him to spare the Casa Viola from the railroad's demolition crew, and her request is granted. She goes to the Viola household and tells Old Giorgio the news.

The camera eye then moves to the crowd that is celebrating in the streets. Nostromo comes into view astride a silver-grey mare; the horseman and the mount are both decorated with silver trappings. He meets his sweetheart and demonstrates his ostentatious self-esteem by having her cut off the silver buttons from his coat as a present. As this episode ends, the Juno, the ship carrying the President-Dictator Ribiera, swings out into the harbor. The narrator breaks in to comment upon Don Vincent Ribiera's next visit to Sulaco--upon a lame mule and beset by a mob. Captain Mitchell is quoted twice, but from two different times in the future. The first remark concerns Nostromo's rescue of Ribiera when he returns on a mule. The second looks ahead to the last chapters of the book--Nostromo's connection with the death of Don Martin. "'Sir,' he used to say afterwards, 'that was no mistake. It was a fatality. A misfortune, pure and simple, sir. And that poor fellow of mine right in the middle of it! A fatality, if ever there was one--
and to my mind he has never been the same man since."60

The greatest problem that Conrad faced in Part I was how to jam 128 pages with enough background material to make his panoramic novel comprehensible. He not only had to introduce the characters (all the principal ones are presented in the first part except Martin Decoud) and make the reader feel and see the physical surroundings; he had to make the reader experience the moral environment as well. He succeeded so well in these tasks by adhering to a single principle: he embellished the simple theme that the ideal motivates all men.

The fifth chapter is set eighteen months before the action of the preceding three chapters; yet the chronology created in Chapters Five, Six, Seven, and Eight forms a self-sufficient sequence. The intricate architectonics of their structure were conceived to answer the spontaneous query of Sir John: "Ah, yes! Gould. What sort of a man is he?"61 By revealing what sort of man the central character of this section of the book is, these chapters also give the public history of the Gould Concession and the private histories of many of the people who are connected with it.

Conrad uses a different central character in each of the book's three divisions. Part I is controlled by Charles Gould, for it contains, by and large, the history of the Gould Concession.

60 Ibid., p. 131.
61 Ibid., p. 42.
Martin Decoud is the centralizing character of Part II, for this section of the novel deals largely with his plan for separating the Occidental Province from the rest of Costaguana. He initiates most of the important action of this part, and we tend to see things through his eyes, as when he writes to his sister about the previous days' events or when he experiences the eerieness and darkness of the Golfo Placido on his clandestine voyage. Nostromo dominates the third part of the book. His sense of betrayal, his famous ride to Cayta, and his moral degeneration leading to his death are the section's main concern. The fact that there is no one hero whose exploits or problems unify the novel places additional emphasis upon the serviceability of the "patterned" plan of the book. Like The Nigger of the "Narcissus"—another of Conrad's novels that does not have a hero—Nostromo is not the personal history of one man.

The organization of these chapters is discursive, as is the

62 James Wait, a central figure in The Nigger in that his character is the pivot around which the ship's collective psychology turns, is not the hero of the novel in the ordinary sense. The subject of the novel is the interrelationships among the crew members of the Narcissus.

63 That Conrad titled his novel Nostromo seems to be a result of the original inspiration for the story. In a letter to Ernst Bendz, Conrad denied that he had ever intended Nostromo to be the hero of the book (G. Jean-Aubry, II, 269). The inspiration for Nostromo came when Conrad discovered the memoirs of a seaman who had stolen a lighter full of silver. (See Author's Note to Nostromo, pp. vii-ix.) This man's exploit evidently so firmly impressed itself on Conrad's mind that he naturally named his novel after the fictional character who accomplished a similar coup.
greater part of the book. The conversation between Sir John and Mrs. Gould provides the basic framework within which the quick digressions, the brief reported conversations, and the prolonged flashbacks are built. Through control of viewpoint and chronology -- as though he were running a newsreel to explain to the railroad official the estate of the Goulds in the community -- Conrad has recreated a great deal of Costaguana's history for the reader and at the same time has impressed upon his sensibility vivid sense impressions of the mine, the country, the people.

Control in this welter of impressions and historical incidents is largely made possible through the voice of Conrad's anonymous narrator, who is the chief commentator and film projector in the novel. Flashbacks and reported fragments of conversation can be spliced together into a credible sequence because there is a "voice" to make the incalculable number of transitions smooth. At the beginning of Chapter Seven, for instance, the reader's attention, which was engaged with Charles's history in Chapter Six, must now be turned toward Mrs. Gould. This switch is accomplished through reported dialogue:

Not that Don José anticipated anything of the sort [the destruction of Charles's work in rehabilitating the country; the scene is the salon of the Goulds]. He could not praise enough dear Carlos's tact and courage. His English, rock-like quality of character was his best safeguard, Don José affirmed; and, turning to Mrs. Gould, "As to you, Emilia, my soul" -- he would address her with the familiarity of his age and friendship -- "you are as true a patriot as though you had been born in our midst." 64

64 Nostromo, p. 86.
Don José's remark enables the author to trace some of Mrs. Gould's history, to show how she—unlike her husband—came to appreciate the great worth of the people. If it were not for the voice of the narrator, heard mainly in the "would's" that are scattered throughout this chapter, such a transition, complicated by the inclusion of bits of conversation and observations opportune remembered, would be impossibly clumsy.

The discursiveness of such a technique helps Conrad imitate life, for in reality one learns about an event piecemeal—through conversation spread over one's lifetime, through reports that become known helter-skelter. The reader hears about the flight of Ribiera in the first twenty pages of the novel, but fully understands all the occurrences that are connected with it only after two hundred pages have passed. In several places throughout the book, the reader sees the mob's rush against the European installations in Sulaco, but he must wait until Decoud's letter, almost half-way through the novel, before he gets a comprehensive view of the riot. He must wait until pages 479 and 483 to gain some notion of calendar time.

There are several other techniques that helped Conrad create the "reality" he wanted in **Nostromo**. Consider, for instance, the way he introduces characters. A character's name is usually mentioned before he is shown to the reader. This is the case with Dr. Monygham, who is first mentioned on page 44. He is shown on the next page in a typical circumstance—limping down the street
in an immaculate white linen coat to visit the salon of the Goulds. It is remarked that the doctor is a little "loco." Much later in the book (page 371) the reader learns why the doctor is an outcast, why he has a limp, and why for him a clean coat is incongruous. Conrad has prepared the reader for the doctor's moral regeneration by keeping alive interest in the sardonic, self-deprecating man whom Mrs. Gould goes out of her way to befriend; at the same time Conrad has approximated the unmethodical way in which we learn about people. The same method of introduction is used for Nostromo and for Decoud. Captain Mitchell mentions Nostromo's name early in the book. We see Nostromo perform briefly in Chapter Four when he invades the Casa Viola, but here our attention is focused on the Viola family. We hear Nostromo's name throughout Part I in connection with the safe journey of Sir John across the mountains. But we get our first sustained look at the "magnificent Capataz" in the final pages of the first section, pages 123-131. Here his pomp and his pride are indelibly pressed upon our imagination so that later we can recognize how consistently he acts from a profound sense of self-importance. Similarly, we hear of Don Martin before we encounter the man himself; at least we hear of his patriotic accomplishments: a shipment of improved rifles from Europe and the existence of a Ribierist press in Sulaco. The name of Holroyd, too, is familiar to us before we get to see the eccentric financier. And Father Corbelan, Hirsch, and Hernandez are also introduced in this way.
The casual smoothness of Part I may largely depend on the office of the anonymous narrator, but there are many fine effects in the novel for which he cannot claim credit. There are many passages, for instance, that owe their impact to the position they have been given in the novel's narrative pattern, they have gained special emphasis because they have been taken out of normal chronological order or because through sharp juxtaposition with other scenes they provide rich contrast or ironic commentary. Hirsch's death gains dramatic importance because of the sudden flashback that cuts in two a conversation between Nostromo and Dr. Monygham. The recounting in Chapter Seven of Mrs. Gould's travels through Costaguana gains prominence because it reveals through contrast (Chapter Six had given the history of Charles's obsession with the mine) the intrinsic differences between the two Goulds: that Charles was fanatically committed to an idea; whereas Emilia, although at first viewing the operation of the Concession abstractly, came to place the welfare of the people above the idea of the mine.

Symbolism plays an important role in promoting the themes of the novel, and of all the symbols used in Nostromo, silver is perhaps the most important. Throughout the book it stands for

65 See the chronological plan of the book on pages 77-80.

66 For a thorough study of the silver symbolism in Nostromo, see Winifred Lynskey, "The Role of the Silver in Nostromo," Modern Fiction Studies, I (February, 1955), 16-21.
various impersonal manifestations of the evil associated with material interests. The railway acts as a symbol for the inhuman material interests that are changing Sulaco for the worse; the telegraph line that accompanies the road acts in the same way:

"the sparse row of telegraph poles strode obliquely clear of town, bearing a single, almost invisible wire far into the campo--like a slender, vibrating feeler of that progress waiting outside for a moment of peace to enter and twine itself about the weary heart of the land." In the last section, the lighthouse symbolizes Linda's fidelity and the silver's irresistible attraction for Nostromo.

Careful use of language creates many special effects in Nostromo. Conrad repeatedly uses the word "incorruptible," for instance, to characterize Nostromo, and on occasion he uses that word with different ironic overtones with reference to Holroyd and Charles Gould. The mere repetition of words and phrases, like "silver" and "material interests," creates leitmotifs throughout the book. The very choice of names is sometimes indicative of a person's character: Holroyd (Holy rod) is a Puritanical financier with a religious mission; Captain Fidanza is Nostromo's assumed name after his theft of the silver. Very often the novel's language achieves ironic comment: Nostromo, when explaining to Dr. Monygham why he was surreptitiously leaving the Custom House when they met by accident, responds, "I was running away from his

67 Nostromo, p. 166.
shadow. . ." The shadow of the dead Hirsch that is thrown across the opening of the door]; thus he unconsciously confesses that for the first time in his life he has been afraid.

There is also the material one has come to expect in a Conrad novel: the irony and the personal and moral solitude. Irony takes many forms. The description "incorruptible Capataz" is perhaps the most notable of the book's verbal ironies. Almost all of Joe Mitchell's discourse is ironic, especially his monologue near the end of the novel, in which he, purportedly, is very perceptive. There is also visual irony: the marble medallion by which Antonia commemorates her betrothed and his political ideas; the cinematographic scene in which one Charles, the Rey de Sulaco, rides past the equestrian statue of another Charles, Charles IV of Spain. There is dramatic irony in Nostromo's conversation with Dr. Monygham when the Capataz lets the doctor think the lighter has been sunk by Sotillo's transport.

Solitude and isolation are constant conditions in Nostromo. The first page of the novel describes Sulaco's geographical isolation from the commercial world; the last page shows Linda and Dr. Monygham in the void created by Nostromo's death. Dr. Monygham and Father Corbelan each have experienced periods of extreme isolation; the doctor in a tortured confinement at the hands of dictator Guzman Bento and his inspired chaplain, Father Beron; the arch-

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68 Ibid., p. 425.
bishop in a self-imposed exile among the savage Indians of the interior. Charles, the man who guides the destinies of the Costaguaneras, is himself isolated by his post and by his taciturnity. Emilia Gould, betrayed by her husband’s unreasoned fidelity to the idea of the mine, sees herself "surviving alone the degradation of her young ideal of life, of love, of work—all alone in the Treasure House of the World."69 And, of course, there is Martin Decoud, the self-sufficient, sardonic man of action who does not believe in action. His eleven days of complete isolation on the Great Isabel so demoralized him that he killed himself.

When Conrad wrote a novel, according to Morton Dauwen Zabel, he "pondered, brooded, lived and slept with it, immersed himself in its mood and movement, began writing, and so moved, sensibly, forcibly, almost physically, into the impulse and element of the tale word by word."70 Such a method of work may be typical of many novelists. In Conrad’s case, however, it points to his painful concern with trying to recreate experience. Besides fragmenting and reorganizing chronology, Conrad tried to make his novels alive by careful writing, by close attention to concrete details. In Nostromo, particularly in Part I where he had to create a country’s history, Conrad struggled with the novel’s language, as his letters

69. Ibid., p. 522.
to Cunninghame Graham, John Galsworthy, J. B. Pinker, William Rothenstein, and Edward Garnett indicate. As a result of this attention to detail, Nostromo is filled with many fine passages of description, such as the following, which portrays the moving of the silver from the mine to the port:

The sleepy people in the little clusters of huts, in the small ranchos near the road, recognized by the headlong sound the charge of the San Tome silver escort towards the crumbling wall of the city on the Campo side. They came to the doors to see it dash over ruts and stones, with a clatter and clank and cracking of whips, with the reckless rush and precise driving of a field battery hurrying into action, and the solitary figure of the Senor Administrador far ahead in the lead.

The same sense of movement and the same ear for sound are exemplified in another carefully written passage:

The empty cars rolled lightly on a single track; there was no rumble of wheels, no tremor of the ground. The engine-driver, running past the Casa Viola with a salute of an uplifted arm, checked his speed smartly before entering the yard; and when the ear-splitting screech of the steam-whistle for the brakes had stopped, a series of hard, battering shocks, mingled with the clanking of chain-couplings, made a tumult of blows and shaken fetters under the vault of the gate.

Conrad counted on the abundance of concrete detail to suggest the presence of life. He also depended upon the meticulous rendering of detail to help him introduce characters. We see, for example, a vestige of Viola's old vehemence when he backs out of a

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71 G. Jean-Aubry, I, 315; 317; 334; 316; 336; 335.
72 Nostromo, p. 114.
73 Ibid., p. 172.
doorway swearing over a burning frying pan. We experience the humane care of Don Pepe when we see him try to find the whereabouts of the mother of a lost Indian boy, a cigar in his small mouth, a rosary looped around his neck.

Besides this attention to detail that characterizes the writing of Part I of *Nostromo*, Conrad shows a fine flair for creating dramatic situations in the second and third parts of the book. Consider, for instance, Sotillo's interview with Captain Mitchell. It is almost as though Conrad wrote the scene for the theater or for motion pictures, so visual and dramatic are its effects. The two arrogant men confront each other; the inept opportunist from Esmeralda pretending surprise at the capture of the frequenter of the Gould salon so that he can worm his way into "Fussy Joe's" confidence; the indignant naval officer demanding the return of his watch, which Sotillo's soldiers have purloined. Enraged by what he thinks are uncalled-for demands, Sotillo delivers a supercilious tirade against the arrogance of Englishmen and is just about to hand back the watch as a grand gesture of his benevolence when he discovers what a really fine mechanism the piece is.

He flourished his fist as if aiming blows at the prisoner's nose. Captain Mitchell, helpless as a swathed infant, looked anxiously at the sixty-guineas gold half-chronometer, presented to him years ago by a Committee of Underwriters for saving a ship from total loss by fire. Sotillo, too, seemed to perceive its valuable appearance. He became silent suddenly, stepped aside to the table, and began a careful examination in the light of the candles. He had never seen anything so fine. His officers closed
in and craned their necks behind his back. . . . He laid the watch on the table, then, negligently, pushed his hat over it."

If Conrad's prose style is in many instances superb, there are many times when it is second-rate. What is especially disconcerting is that bad passages are often found in scenes otherwise remarkable for their good writing. For instance, in the interview between Sotillo and Captain Mitchell, the reader comes across a piece of remembered action that, in context, intrudes upon the otherwise fast-moving scene: "Sotillo's temperament was of that sort that he experienced an ardent desire to beat him [Mitchell]; just as formerly when negotiating with difficulty a loan from the cautious Anzani, his fingers always itched to take the shopkeeper by the throat."75

From the beginning of Chapter Twelve, Part III (in which Nostromo is cast in the role of the perfidious Captain Fidanza), the writing and interest of the story deteriorates to an alarming extent. The scenes at the lighthouse, starring Nostromo, Old Giorgio, Linda, and Giselle, have all the psychological subtlety of an Italian grand opera. In them Conrad is even guilty of bad plotting, as when he reveals that Ramirez, the new Capataz and suitor of Giselle, had been in charge of the No. 3 boat—the very one that Nostromo used to haul the silver away from Sulaco. The parallel between the two men is much too facile. The underdeveloped

74Ibid., pp. 333-334.
75Ibid., p. 331.
character of Ramirez should not even be in the novel, except that
he gives Viola the excuse of prowling the island at night with a
loaded gun. These scenes near the end of the book are replete
with trite phrases and heavy-handed manipulation of characters. 76
Nowhere are these maladies more evident than when Conrad is forced
to portray Nostromo's love-making:

The dusk let him see yet the tender and voluptuous smile
that came instinctively upon her lips shaped for love and
kisses, freeze hard in the drawn, haggard lines of terror.
He could not restrain himself any longer. While she shrank
from his approach, her arms went out to him, abandoned and
regal in the dignity of her languid surrender. He held her
head in his two hands, and showered rapid kisses upon the
upturned face that gleamed in the purple dusk. Masterful
and tender, he was entering slowly upon the fulness of his
possession. 77

When Conrad chose the lighthouse as the obvious symbol of fidelity,
he could hardly avoid dialogue as the following:

"Where are you going, Linda?"
"To the light, padre mí?"
"Si, si--to your duty." 78

Even Mrs. Gould, one of the best female characters Conrad ever

76 Frederick R. Karl suggests that Conrad's efforts to meet the
deadline for T. P.'s Weekly may have caused the creative lapses
near the end of Nostromo. After a lengthy examination of the MS,
TS, serial, and Collected Edition versions, however, he concludes
that Nostromo suffers a breakdown of original conception. "For
all its wealth of incident and characters, Nostromo is too short
for its intentions; its insufficient ending, as Conrad himself
must have realized while revising it, is in reality an aesthetic
failure."--"The Significance of the Revisions in the Early Versions
of 'Nostromo,'" Modern Fiction Studies, V (Summer, 1959), 143.

77 Nostromo, pp. 537-538.
78 Ibid., p. 533.
drew, behaves in these pages like a character from a soap opera, as when she makes up her mind that it is her duty to see to it that Nostromo "does right" by Linda.

Besides these creative lapses near the end of the book, there is an inherent flaw in Conrad's basic approach to a comprehensive narrative: his use of an anonymous narrator who is free to report remembered conversation, to describe typical, characterizing action, and to inject other types of exemplificative material into the narrative. By using this technique, Conrad does gain some very excellent results, the establishment of multiple viewpoints through a unifying agency being, perhaps, the most important. But there are drawbacks as well. Although the main intent in Part I is to have the reader experience history directly, much of the action of that section is reported or customary action—the kind of distant experience the reader finds difficult to respond to. This disadvantage is usually suffered when Conrad uses the auxiliary "would" or some other construction employing customary action to range back over the past: "Mrs. Gould would say to her husband....", "just as when....", "He once had said....".

Nevertheless, in spite of the unevenness of its execution Nostromo is a great novel. It represents a view of history and of humanity that now is so central to the twentieth century's outlook that Albert J. Guerard could sincerely assert that "the novel's own view of history is skeptical and disillusioned, which for us
today must mean true." Even if one is not so skeptical-minded, one can appreciate the novel's attempt to explain life's ultimate significance and the novelist's uncompromising fidelity to his vision. Moreover, the themes of the book are coordinated with a set of narrative techniques that represent important innovations for the novelist's craft. In terms of disrupted chronology, multiple viewpoints, and an overriding narrative "voice," one sees in the creator of Costaguana the technical precursor of the man who created Yoknapatawpha County.

In retrospect, one also sees Nostromo as a book that has worn well with the years. Most of Conrad's work has been shot through with skepticism. Almayer's Folly, The Outcast of the Islands, and The Rescue dealt with Tom Lingard's frustrating failure in the Malayan Archipelago. Lord Jim depicted Tuan Jim's misdirected romanticism. Under Western Eyes explored the guilt of the student Razumov. Victory told the story of the skeptic Heyst, who finally came to learn to participate wholeheartedly in life, but who died in so doing. But Nostromo is the most skeptical of all Conrad's books, and it is perhaps to the existentialists of our day, who have led us to recognize the profundity of man's plight in the absurdity of the universe, that we should give the credit for

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79 Guerard, Conrad the Novelist, p. 177.

80 In his Preface to Conrad the Novelist Albert J. Guerard reported, "In 1945 I asked Mr. Faulkner whether he did not feel he had been particularly influenced by Conrad, and mentioned Nostromo in particular. Faulkner replied, 'I can see why you would think so.'" (p. xiv).
preparing public opinion for the implications of *Nostromo*. Today, better than any other of Conrad's novels, *Nostromo* tells us about a universe with which we are thoroughly familiar.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Jerome A. Long has been read and approved by a board of three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

Jan. 27, 1961
Date

[Signature]
Signature of Adviser