

COMEDY AND TRAGEDY
IN
JOSEPH CONRAD'S NOSTROMO

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ABSTRACT

Comedy and tragedy play an important part in the fiction of Joseph Conrad. It is the purpose of this essay to examine the tragic and comic elements in Conrad's Nostromo. A Tale of the Seaboard.

The comedy and tragedy arise together from a world whose nature is inescapably chaotic. This world cannot be ordered, though many of the inhabitants attempt to do so; and, their actions lead to differences in appearances and reality. The nature of this world proves many of the characters' beliefs and ideals false.

The impression that comedy and tragedy occur in this world together, is reinforced by an interrupted time sequence, artistic distance, and the way in which certain facts are presented. The narrator directs the reader's reactions of pity and approval.

The characters perceive their world in several different ways--some can see the tragedy but not the comedy, some see neither, and some few comprehend the true nature of this world. For the last group, their circumstances cause great pain; to survive they need an unselfish ideal. The narrator, and through him, the reader, comprehend the tragedy and comedy of the dark universe, but with an artistic distance which lessens the pain.

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INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad's Nostromo, A Tale of the Seaboard portrays a small section of the world and its history--the province of Sulaco during a revolution which brings about its separation from the South American country of Costaguana. The novel details the story of the separation--its beginnings in the introduction of the "material interests" in the form of Charles Gould's San Tomé silver mine, its accomplishment in the formation of the Occidental Republic through Martin Decoud's revolutionary activities, and Dr. Monygham's predictions of its end in a new federalist movement. The main action of the story centers on the conflict between the pro-European Blanco party backed by Charles Gould's mine and the nativist Monterist party led by General Montero, his brother, and various opportunists like Sotillo. The Monterists are first able to overthrow the Blanco-backed president, Ribiera, but are in turn defeated by the Blancos. The history of the separation is also the story of the individual characters, among them, Charles and Emilia Gould, Dr. Monygham, Martin Decoud, and Nostromo, whose lives are affected by the material interests, by the revolution, and by their own inability to base their actions on a realistic vision of the world.

The world described in Nostromo is inescapably chaotic,

a dark universe, in which there is no controlling purpose and which cannot be reformed. Existence in this universe is both tragic and comic. Conrad explained, in a letter to R. B. Cunninghame-Graham, his conception of tragedy:

What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well--but as soon as you know of your slavery the pain, the anger, the strife--the tragedy begins. We can't return to nature, since we can't change our place in it. Our refuge is in stupidity, in drunkenness of all kinds, in lies, in beliefs, in murder, thieving, reforming--in negation, in contempt--each man according to the promptings of his particular devil.¹

Order cannot be imposed upon the world, and man's place in this universe, his human nature, makes his innocence a tenuous thing. These two conditions make many of the Costaguaneros' beliefs and ideals false.

Comedy also comes from consciousness of the dark universe. In another letter to Cunninghame-Graham, in which Conrad describes the world as a knitting machine which automatically manufactures terrible work but which cannot be remade or destroyed, Conrad exhibits an attitude of ironic comedy:

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions--and nothing matters. I'll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing.²

As the purposes of the Costaguaneros clash with the purposeless universe, their actions turn into farce. Their struggles produce divergences in appearances and reality. They take "refuge" in many of the beliefs and ideals that can only be absurd in their world.

The narrative method of Nostromo exploits the comedy inherent in the tragic aspects of Sulacan history and life. The narrator adds distance to the horrors of greed and fear by treating those people who exhibit these characteristics in a scornful manner. The narrator can minimize certain horrible and tragic facts by using a disjointed time sequence or by allowing a comically obtuse person, such as Captain Mitchell, to relate events. The narrative method heightens the reader's consciousness of the dark universe by making the comedy and tragedy apparent.

From attempts to live in this universe come various perspectives on the universe. Some characters, such as Sotillo and Pedrito Montero, the greed-driven leaders of the Monterist uprising, and Captain Mitchell, Sulaco's obtuse historian, see neither the comedy nor the tragedy. Other characters, like the Avellanos and Charles Gould, see the chaos but believe that it can be ordered. A few, Emilia Gould, Dr. Monygham, and Martin Decoud, perceive the comedy in the world as well as the tragedy. Yet recognizing both is not enough for survival in this world; the individual needs to believe and act upon an unselfish, humane ideal. Martin Decoud dies because he lacks this ideal; Dr. Monygham and Mrs. Gould survive by retaining some of their ideals, but they are badly hurt by the chaos in the world. Their lives are tragic. The narrator's perspective differs from that of Mrs. Gould and Monygham in that it provides a distance from that world, as well as an understanding of its comic and tragic nature.

I

Costaguana and Sulaco, while ostensibly located in South America, are imaginary countries. They serve as a microcosm of the dark universe; their story is the history of the world. Although they do not exist outside of the novel, the countries, especially Sulaco, and their citizens are created with realistic detail. The novel opens with a vivid description of Sulaco. A town situated on the Golfo Plácido, its sheltered harbor only lacks strong and steady winds to turn Sulaco into a thriving port. The gulf is motionless, protected by the peninsulas of Azuera and Punta Mala. Punta Mala is insignificant; Azuera is the setting of a legend concerning two gringos and an Indian dying in search of the treasure reputed to be buried in that rocky waste. The gulf itself, sailors point out, is cloudless by day, but at night

Sky, land, and sea disappear together out of the world when the Plácido--as the saying is--goes to sleep under its black poncho...The eye of God Himself--they add with grim profanity--could not find out what work a man's hand is doing in there; and you would be free to call the devil to your aid with impunity if even his malice were not defeated by such a blind darkness.³

Only the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company can circumvent nature, making it possible to securely transport three-pound balls of indiarubber and cattle up and down the coast. By land Sulaco is cut off from the rest of Costaguana by a steep

mountain range, crossed only occasionally by mule trains.

The province is, however, anything but the placid, sleepy place its isolation should make it. The wild actions of its people, combined with the chaos of the world, make Sulaco a country of farce where ironies abound. It is natural that, in this world, Nostromo, the incorruptible man, becomes capable of betraying his public at the same time circumstances force Monygham to trust him with the community's welfare. Hernández's life is full of contradictions. As a bandit he eludes the cavalry for years, aided by the treachery existing in the army. When made a respectable general, it seems that he is likely to follow tradition--the new revolution is always begun by the minister of defense--by aiding Corbelan, Antonia, and the Italian political clubs. The simple act of surprising Sulaco becomes complicated for Sotillo. The party he charged with arresting the railway's telegrapher got drunk and allowed their prisoner to warn Sulaco. Sotillo, not knowing that Sulaco has been warned, makes as stealthy an approach as is possible in a troop transport. One of his majors, suspecting treason, puts out the binacle light on the transport, temporarily halting the entire expedition. Sotillo's troubles do not end there and he is eventually killed by one of his own men. Martin Decoud, the intellectual revolutionary, gives a description and definition of Sulacan politics--

Imagine an atmosphere of opéra bouffe in which all the comic business of stage statesmen, brigands, etc., etc., all their farcical stealing, intriguing, and stabbing is done in dead earnest. It is screamingly funny, the blood flows all the time, and the actors believe themselves to

be influencing the fate of the universe. Of course, government in general, and 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.⁴

This is the comedy of an illusion of purpose placed against a greater and real purposelessness.⁵ The farce operates broadly through the populace and more narrowly through their leaders. Mrs. Gould finds the populace acting in "a comedy of naïve pretences."⁶ The nature of the world where comedy and tragedy occur together creates this farce, defying human plans and producing wide differences in appearances and reality. The farce subsumes both the grandiose schemes of the power seekers and the simple day-to-day concerns of the general populace. The chaotic universe produces in men a wide range of false beliefs and ideals.

The nature of the universe defies human planning; events occur in insane conjunctions and circumstances change rapidly. The episode of the removal of the silver, a daring undertaking to save the community of Sulaco, becomes ridiculous in this chaotic world. Decoud and Nostromo must avoid Sotillo on the large, dark Golfo Plácido; Sotillo wants to seize the silver. Naturally, or so it seems, the transport collides with the lighter. Sotillo is told by Hirsch, miraculously appearing on the transport, that the silver has been sunk. Sotillo, of course, does not believe him and sails on not achieving his aim. The lighter has only been damaged, but that prevents Decoud and Nostromo from intercepting a company steamer. Nostromo's knowledge of the silver's

safety opens an entire series of deceptions. Monygham gives Nostromo a very bad moment when Monygham suggests that he, Monygham, tell Sotillo a lie--that the silver is on the Great Isabel. Nostromo, knowing that the silver is there, does suggest an alternative hiding place, but nearly gives himself away by describing Sotillo's probable state-of-mind as he searches for the treasure. Nostromo keeps the silver's whereabouts a secret all his life. In the end, the shipment that seemed very important to the success of Decoud's plan for the separation is all but forgotten. Holroyd, despite telling Gould that he could provide no help during this sort of trouble, and without receiving that particular shipment, provides the necessary support to insure the success of the separation. No plan, no matter how carefully thought out, works the way it was intended to work because situations change quickly and unaccountably. The separation occurs more through chance than successful effort on Decoud's part.

If situations change rapidly and people see standards as fixed, appearances and reality begin to differ. What seems logical and true is illogical and false. Decoud believes, as he travels the boulevards of Paris, that no sane man would take part in the farce of any government, especially that of Costaguana. In Sulaco, however, he takes part in a revolution, is in fact its chief mover, without feeling that he is acting outrageously. Decoud even inverts the motive behind his separatist movement--he does not wish to be separated from Antonia Avellanos so Sulaco must be separated from Costaguana; however, everyone hails him as a patriot.

Political power in Costaguana is ostensibly centered in the law and parliamentary institutions. In reality, however, power is centered in the mine directed by Charles Gould and Holroyd, and in the cargadors, imperfectly controlled by Nostromo, who cannot get them to work on bullfight days. Charles Gould, the master of the mine, is known for his trustworthiness, but is capable of betraying the community for the 'good' of his mine; Hernández, the master of the campo and a feared bandit, can be trusted to safeguard the citizens during the fighting. Hernández is, of course, later made a general; and, Father Corbelan, a chaplain of bandits, is made a cardinal. These inversions of appearance and reality occur throughout the novel adding to the general confusion of affairs in Sulaco.

The idea of farce is connected with two recurring images in the novel, that of the parrot and that of smallness.⁷ The parrot, a bird which mindlessly repeats words he does not understand, is connected both with the populace and with their leaders. The reader recalls the Goulds' parrot repeating "Viva Costaguana!" when, in the miners' march to save Gould from Pedrito Montero's firing squad, a parrot is seen on one of the women's shoulders. Monygham describes the people's political clubs as making the noise of a parrothouse. Pedrito Montero has the parrot-like ability to learn languages; but more intelligent people are associated with this bird. At one point, the parrot imitates Mrs. Gould's voice; and, though Charles Gould firmly refuses to speak the bombast of Costaguanero officials, he is forced to listen to them and

they influence his actions. The image of the parrot gives a cumulative impression of the emptiness of political action in Costaguana. If these actions are mindless, they are also unimportant; Costaguanero affairs are described as Holroyd's hobby. Their battles are dwarf battles; their transports are regattas "with their air of friendly contest."⁸ This type of belittling reinforces the idea of Decoud's farce.

There is no part of life in Sulaco that can be separated from the dark universe. Even the simple, seemingly sane life of the common people and innocence of the children are subsumed by the chaos.⁹ The security and peace of the mining villages are tenuous because of Gould's ability to completely destroy the mine. Despite the fact that Gould does not blow up the mine, the villagers' state of contentment is short. Monygham predicts that in the next revolution, the populace will march to destroy the administrator of the mine instead of save him. Even while this innocence lasts it is ironically described:

[Don Pepe] and the padre could be seen frequently side by side, meditative and gazing across the street of a village at a lot of sedate brown children, trying to sort them out, as it were, in low, consulting tones, or else they would together put searching questions as to the parentage of some small, staid urchin met wandering, naked and grave, along the road with a cigar in his baby mouth, and perhaps his mother's rosary, purloined for purposes of ornamentation, hanging in a loop of beads low down on his rotund little stomach.¹⁰

Like Sulacan politics, this seemingly innocent world has its own motif in the refrain "Save the children." This is Señora Viola's chief concern and last request. Barrios' regatta sails partly for that purpose. Mrs. Gould feels a

responsibility for the Viola children, taking them in when their mother dies and going to Giselle when Nostromo is mortally wounded. Although fostering the innocent is an ideal that cannot be realized within the dark universe-- Giselle is an adult when Mrs. Gould goes to her and the miners grow discontented--action based on this concern is presented favorably. The characters who hold this belief in innocence are treated comically, but none of them is treated with harsh satire. Don Pepé and Padre Roman, Mrs. Gould's administrators of the mining villages, are contrasted to Charles Gould, who does not recognize all of his household dependents when they suddenly appear in his drawing room, terrified because Pedrito Montero and his army have entered Sulaco. Barrios, Padre Roman, Don Pepé, Señora Viola, and Mrs. Gould protect a worthwhile and humane ideal.

The people of Sulaco believe in many other ideals or hold certain assumptions besides that of saving the children. In the disordered universe, these beliefs appear ridiculous and the believers are treated with comedy ranging from gentle to ruthless. The validity of religious belief, faith in parliamentary institutions, and the hope in reform are investigated in light of the chaotic world and found wanting. The faith in reform is disproved by revealing the fallacy of the beliefs in the Ribierist government, in the material interests, and by exposing the true nature of the incorruptible man represented by Nostromo.

Religious beliefs are generally presented as a serious superstition of the common people. Giorgio Viola seems to

sum up this general attitude towards organized religion--he reads his Bible but leaves priests and churches to the women. Nostromo is uneasy about having left Señora Viola to die without going for a priest as she requested; he takes her subsequent curse on him seriously. Images of the people who 'pay' for cures by donating silver limbs to the church, a girl praying during the crisis of the separation, and Antonia in the church near the monuments of Decoud and Don José are contrasted with Father Beron who tortures Monygham, with Guzman Bento who is not beyond the mercy of allowing a condemned man to confess before his execution, and with Hernández whose simple piety has turned to fanaticism. These episodes are exploited either comically, as with Bento, or touchingly, as Decoud watches the elder Miss López's silent piety.

Religious beliefs, if they are not merely superstitions, become fronts for other motives or mixed up with the politics of the country. By the end of the novel, there appears to be an epic battle brewing between Cardinal Corbelan and Padre Roman, on the one hand, and Holroyd's missionaries, on the other. Padre Roman is a kind and simple man who has no more idea of where Europe is than his ignorant congregation. Father Corbelan, once an ascetic and fearless missionary, now spends much of his time lobbying for the return of church properties long confiscated by the state. He is made a cardinal in order to provide propaganda in battling Holroyd's protestant missionaries. Holroyd, the powerful financier, rationalizes his business dealings by claiming to use them

to further a purer form of Christianity. Mrs. Gould sees through this in the sense that she knows there is no reason to change the peasants' devotion from one form of superstition to another. In the coming revolution, Cardinal Corbelan and Hernández will undoubtedly proclaim that the material interests must be overthrown on religious grounds. Holroyd will, of course, fight them on such grounds, but the real motivation is political and material. The religious conflict is not important; it is, like the fine old stone bishop with the broken nose, and the confiscated church lands, a part of the past. Religious beliefs, like everything else that seems really important, are eventually drawn into the chaos.

Parliamentary institutions are ruthlessly attacked in the person of Don Juste. A staunch supporter of legality, he speaks for the surrender of parliamentary institutions to Pedrito Montero if only to preserve a semblance of legality. It is not Don Juste's speech which attracts attention, but his beard, half of which has been blown off during the day's fighting. Forced to shave it off entirely, he and parliamentary institutions lose, with it, much of their dignity. The parliament eventually does surrender to Montero; but, since by one mad reversal of this world, Gould (the king of Sulaco) and Nostromo hold the real power, the government's action becomes an empty gesture.

The belief in reform, in the ultimate perfectibility of man's condition and nature, which underlies faith in parliamentary institutions, is absurd in the dark universe.¹¹

Don José Avellanos has retained a belief in man's goodness despite great evidence to the contrary. Don José was imprisoned and tortured under Guzman Berto's dictatorship, and later wrote a book, Fifty Years of Misrule, chronicling Berto's and others' misuse of power in Costaguana. Don José's stirring speeches--"the impassioned declaration 'Militarism is the enemy'; the famous one of the 'trembling balance' delivered on the occasion of the vote for the raising of a second Sulaco regiment in the defence of the reforming government..."¹²--not only are clichés, but contradict each other. Don José's belief in the possibility of reform finds concrete expression in the Ribierist government, which fails, its president-dictator ignobly escaping death on a mule. Don José dies as a result of the suggestion that Sulaco surrender to the Monterists, but not before he apparently gives his blessing to a new plan--separation, which he once deplored. Don José's intense beliefs are tragic because they are not true in the dark universe; they are comic because, in the attempts to impose them upon the disorderly universe, ironic situations arise.

The Ribierist government was made possible not only by Don José, but also by Charles Gould and his material interests. Gould believes that through the San Tomé silver mine the material interests will impose the conditions necessary for their existence, peace and security, on Sulaco. This is undoubtably true; what is not true is that the conditions will be permanent or that all of the people will see the material interests as the proper guarantee of these

conditions. They provide the illusion of security for a long time, so that Antonia Avellanos can believe that reform is possible. It is, however, obvious to a skeptic like Dr. Monygham that neither Antonia nor the material interests will bring peace, prosperity, or security to Sulaco.

The Blancos as a group believe in many things--the Ribierist government and the material interests, for example. As soon as one anchor of hope disappears, they find another. They move from Ribiera to Decoud and finally to Nostromo, the perfect and incorruptible man. But by the time that the Blancos begin to rely on Nostromo, when he must ride for Barrios, he has become corrupted by the silver. The comedy that touches him at this point concerns his private fear rather than his public actions. Before he stole the silver, he was shown allowing his mistress to cut off the silver buttons on his jacket; after his return to Sulaco, his public displays are only mentioned. Instead, Nostromo's private emotions become the focus of the comedy as he runs from a dead man and then is indignant when Monygham tells him he need not be afraid. When he discovers a lighthouse being built on the Great Isabel he is appalled and thinks of jumping off his ship. Instead he has Giorgio Viola installed as lighthouse keeper and continues to slowly remove the silver. Nostromo's betrayal of the Blancos and the comedy which makes him ridiculous undercut the possibility that there can be an incorruptible man.

II

In the "Author's Note" to Nostromo, Conrad writes of Sulaco as if it really exists. He remembers Don José with affection and mentions his gratitude for his friends', the Goulds, hospitality. The only reason Conrad claims he would want to return to Sulaco is to see the "beautiful Antonia" again. At the same time, Conrad discusses some of the sources for the story and the characters, Nostromo and Antonia in particular.¹³ The reader can therefore identify Conrad as both the author and narrator at once.

As the narrator of Nostromo, Conrad exploits the comic and tragic events in Sulaco to lend distance to the dark universe and to prevent reactions of pity or approval on the part of the reader. The narrator does not keep a consistent viewpoint throughout the novel. Usually he is in the position of being omniscient, but sometimes he speaks as if he were far away from Sulaco in both time and space and as if he had heard about certain things second hand. Sometimes the narrator steps aside to let others, such as Decoud or Mitchell, speak; this often has an ironic effect. In addition to narration, there is much dialogue throughout the story. By bringing these various points of view together, the tragedy and comedy become apparent.

One technique the narrator uses in Nostromo is to

turn greed and fear into comedy,¹⁴ which distances these evils for the reader, thereby allowing him to fully appreciate the comedy and tragedy of events together. That comedy can serve as a correlative for evil or disorder has already been suggested by Stanton Hoffman.¹⁵ Nowhere in Nostramo is it suggested that Pedrito Montero, Gamacho, and Sotillo are not dangerous or that Hirsch's terror is not real. Yet, the evils of terror and greed are ridiculed by the use of highly visual slapstick and burlesque. The narrator continually steps back for a long-range view of these characters. For example, upon entering Sulaco, Pedrito Montero, the chief instigator of the Monterist uprising, gives a speech. Most of it is inaudible to the populace; the reader sees them enjoy watching Pedrito prance around and wave his arms in a fantastic manner.

In addition to this type of physical comedy, the narrator treats the motives and actions of these characters with scorn. Pedrito is lazy, greedy, and very much concerned for his personal safety. His idea of the perfect life, culled from French historic romances, is to be the Duc de Morny of Monterist Costaguana. Pedrito is disappointed in his quarters, which have suffered in the rioting, because he feels his image as a leader suffers without the proper, grandiose setting. He plots to remove Gamacho, the commander of the Sulacan National Guard, from the center of the power struggle by sending him off to fight Hernandez, where Gamacho will certainly be defeated. Gamacho's dignity is presented in one portrait:

...Gamacho...was lying drunk and asleep in the bosom of his family. His bare feet were upturned in the shadows repulsively, in the manner of a corpse. His eloquent mouth had dropped open. His youngest daughter, scratching her head with one hand, with the other wayed a green bough over his scorched and peeling face.¹⁶

Countless other minor figures like Gamacho are treated scornfully in the novel. Two important ones are Sotillo and Hirsch, who epitomize selfish greed and fear, respectively.

Sotillo acts in the manner of the greatest burlesque comedy. He is a turncoat. Once welcomed in the Goulds' household and, in his own eyes, suitor of Antonia, he renounces the Ribierist cause as soon as he is sure it is defeated. Needing a foothold in the new government, he goes to Sulaco to seize the silver and a bargaining position. He would not have sailed if he had known that Pedrito Montero was on his way there. His greed is demonstrated when, after childishly inspecting Captain Mitchell's gold watch, he slides his hat over it. His fear for his personal safety is shown when he pretends to be ill when he is approached by an emissary from Pedrito. After the danger departs, he gets out of his hammock, tripping over the blankets that are entangled around his boots. Sotillo forgets about the silver as soon as Hirsch, whom he is torturing for information about its whereabouts, spits in his face; Sotillo shoots Hirsch. Realizing that his officers will not like the fact that their only hope of recovering the silver is dead, Sotillo yet manages to brazen his position out with a lie and clears out of the building quickly. Sotillo is an effective representative of evil, despicable, but always ready with a

new ploy to turn the situation his way. By focusing on the comedy about Sotillo's person and motives, the narrator distracts the reader from the tragedy of Sotillo's greed and the suffering he causes to the people of Sulaco.¹⁷

The narrator treats fear comically, as well as greed. As Sotillo represents greed, Hirsch represents fear. The first time he appears in the novel, he tells Charles Gould a hair-raising story of being accosted by bandits while on the way to Sulaco. On first seeing them he hides behind a bush. Although Gould assures him that, since one of the men was Nostromo, Hirsch had nothing to fear, Hirsch continues to insist that he was in deadly peril. The next time he appears, he is discovered hiding on the lighter where his frightened sobbing gives him away. Hirsch relates his attempts to escape from the dangers of the riot and bemoans his presence on the lighter. Hirsch, imagining more terrors than really exist, appears ridiculous. With the crash of the lighter and his arrival on Sotillo's transport, his danger becomes equal to his terror, a fact which is hidden by his unconventional method of boarding the ship (he holds on to the transport's anchor and is eventually discovered and hauled up). Sotillo's desire for the silver causes him first to disbelieve Hirsch's story and later to torture Hirsch in order to discover the truth. The torture is funny rather than horrifying because the picture focuses on Hirsch's open mouth. Hirsch has become a man of many teeth, an epithet one of Sotillo's men has used to describe a very brave man. Hirsch finally realizes that

reality has become worse than anything he can imagine and spits in Sotillo's face; he is immediately executed. Hirsch remains behind to frighten Nostromo and puzzle Dr. Monygham. Through the narrator's use of slapstick, burlesque, and a scornful tone, part of the tragic universe, the fear, is revealed as comic.¹⁸

Through the use of a disjointed time sequence, the narrator adds to the irony of Costaguana's history. One example of this is the inversion of Ribiera's, the Blanco president, two visits to Sulaco. His first visit is one of state made to celebrate the building of a railroad by Sir John, an important financier, and his company's substantial loan to the government. The visit ends with a dinner aboard the Juno, the O. S. N.'s best ship. All of the important Blancos are there and the dinner ends with speeches and toasts. A discordant note is struck by one General Montero, but all those there agree that Montero is uncouth and of little account. This episode is highly ironic since the reader knows that the Ribierist government will fall in a coup d'etat executed by General Montero. Ribiera will flee over the mountains and only escape death at the hands of a Sulacan mob because Nostromo will intervene to save him. This particular use of chronology also emphasizes the repetitious nature of Sulacan history--this separation is just one part of a series of revolutions.

The narrator of Nostromo is extremely careful in how he reveals information to the reader. Dr. Monygham's story is told in pieces and not in chronological order so that the

reader, protected by his suspicions and recognizing that his pity is belated, can perceive the story's comic aspects.¹⁹ Dr. Monygham was tortured under Guzman Bento's reign and first appears as a man just beginning to be recivilized by the Goulds. That imprisonment under Bento was terrible is known from the facts of Don José Avellanos' case. In the sketch of Don José's ordeal, the focus is on the dictator, his methods of forgiveness, and his devotion to the Church; this draws the reader's attention away from the suffering and derides Bento. Monygham's case is first handled for comic effect; his limp causes him to stumble while running after Nostromo. The actual facts of his case are horrifying, worse than Don José's, who survived unbroken in spirit, but are given very late in the novel. Monygham's torture cannot be sentimentalized; the picture of him as he is freed is that of a scarecrow moving feet and sticks in turn and wearing the preposterous hat a guard has dropped on his head. The grotesqueness of Monygham's ordeal is emphasized so much that when the tragedy is revealed, it can be viewed without excessive pity.

The beginnings of the new Occidental Republic after the last battle of the separation are handled in such a way as to emphasize the comic side of certain events and discredit any attempt to ennoble the populace's actions. The narrator allows Captain Mitchell, a man unsuited to his role of historian, to relate events; it is the only record of the last battle of the Sulacan separation. The reader hears it, years after the event, along with an unnamed guest who is

bombarded with names, places, and quick changes from the present scene to past actions. The heaviest slaughter, Pedrito's last charge on Barrios' fortifications, is passed off as Mitchell points out the new buildings replacing the ones burned down that day. Mitchell happens to notice the Anzani store, and mentions that Anzani was killed by Gamacho's forces. Gamacho was ordered garroted for that crime by Barrios in the first of the executions heralding the new government. Though piqued because he was not let in on the plan, Mitchell describes his man Nostromo's ride to Cayta to bring back Barrios and his troops, judging that "The history of that ride, sir, would make a most exciting book."²⁰ With the ironic justice that sometimes occurs in this world, Sotillo, declared a traitor, dies by the hand of one of his majors, and Gould is saved by the miners and their parrot. At the end of Mitchell's discourse, the reader is told that the guest cannot quite draw the threads of this fairy story together. The reputation of Captain Mitchell and the way in which he tells the story make it difficult to take the battle seriously; what Mitchell sees as glorious history, becomes, for the reader, Decoud's farce.

III

The world of Nostromo is chaotic; tragedy is always imminent, but comedy is always present to those who are capable of recognizing the true nature of the world. There are absurd differences between appearances and reality; all beliefs representing order are broken against the overwhelming disorder. The human condition in this world is just as uncertain as the events; the mine may be destroyed at any moment Gould chooses and his choice could depend on the actions of a few petty, greedy men. The characters in the novel all have different ways of looking at this chaotic world, different levels of consciousness, which guide their actions in it. These perspectives are made up of some or all of three elements--a recognition of the tragedy, a recognition of the comedy, and a necessary illusion or faith in some one thing outside of the self. This necessary illusion is a mark of a person's humanity.²¹ Some of the characters, like Sotillo and Hirsch, may be said to have no perspective on their world. Captain Mitchell is just one step above them; he cannot see the comedy or tragedy, but only the glorious history. The Goulds and the Avellanos can see the tragedy clearly, but do not recognize the futility, and therefore the comedy, of their actions. Decoud, Monygham, and, later Mrs. Gould can see both the tragedy and comedy as they occur.

together. This comprehensive vision does not, however, insure their happiness. Decoud lacks an ideal and subsequently dies. Monygham and Mrs. Gould have their ideals, but are badly hurt by their situations. The person who sees the most is, of course, the narrator and with him, the reader. The narrator adds one more element to his perspective on this dark world and that is the distance necessary to look at it without pain.

The people in the novel who are at the lowest level of perception can see neither the comedy nor the tragedy. Sotillo, Pedrito Montero, Gamacho, and Hirsch, for example, are totally concerned with their own selves. They are greedy, petty, fearful of their physical safety, and vain; they live at the level of instincts. They bring about great destruction at times. Their example is not a way of viewing the world; they have no consciousness of anything outside of their selves. Those people do have a sort of ideal, for example, Pedrito's ambition to become a Costaguanero Duc de Morny, but it is not concerned with the good of society. Any appeal they make for society's reform serves merely to cloak their own very selfish ends.

One character who cannot see the tragedy and comedy of his world, but who does have a personal ideal beyond that of self interest is Captain "Fussy Joe" Mitchell. His ambition consists of taking part in and relating the "glorious" history of Sulaco. Continually speaking of historic epochs and the beginnings of eras, he is undermined in his role as historian by his inadequacy. He believes himself to be in

the thick of things everywhere but at the Goulds' where, of course, he is actually in the midst of history. Mitchell has no conception of personal danger; thus, when arrested by Sotillo he can be concerned about his confiscated watch. He cannot conceive that he was bound because Sotillo found one of Mitchell's movements threatening. He cannot comprehend Monygham's reasons for telling Sotillo that Gould is hiding the silver. Monygham's deceit may save Sulaco; Mitchell can only see that Monygham has slandered Gould. Unable to comprehend any but the most straightforward motives, Mitchell is oblivious of much of what is happening. His entire relation of the history is ironic; he does not know who or what should really be glorified. He is, in fact, the perfect historian for Decoud's farce.

There are other ideals besides Mitchell's glorious view of history in Costaguana. The ideal of working for the good of society is held by the Avellanos and the Goulds. All of these people have a belief in reform which will be total and permanent. All of them recognize the tragedy of their world, but they believe they can end it. They do not connect themselves with the farcical elements; Don José, despite his vast experience, is utterly serious as he gives his blessing to Decoud's plan. Don José stopped living when his colleagues wished to surrender the Ribierist cause to Montero. Antonia contributes to the future revolution in the name of ending oppression; she does not see the irony in her actions:

"How can we abandon, groaning under oppression, those

who have been our countrymen only a few years ago, who are our countrymen now?" Miss Avellanos was saying. "How can we remain blind, and deaf without pity to the cruel wrongs suffered by our brothers? There is a remedy."

"Annex the rest of Costaguana to the order and prosperity of Sulaco," snapped the doctor. "There is no other remedy."

"I am convinced, señor doctor," Antonia said, with the earnest calm of invincible resolution, "that this was from the first poor Martin's intention."²²

She does not recognize the futility of her cause. Antonia believes the chaos can be reformed and does not know Decoud's real motives for the separation--that Sulaco be separated from Costaguana so that he, Decoud, will not be separated from Antonia. She is deluded though her motives are noble.

Charles Gould places his faith in the material interests. He focuses on the San Tomé mine as the ideal way to bring about security. By the time of the separation, Gould is no longer concerned about the good of society, but with the good of the mine, which, for him, has become the good of society. His wife Emilia finally recognizes what the San Tomé mine has done to Sulaco, herself, and to her husband:

There was something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea. She saw the San Tomé mountain hanging over the campo, 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. He did not see it. He could not see it. It was not his fault. He was perfect, perfect; but she would never have him to herself.²³

Charles Gould has relegated everything, even human love, to the ideal of the mine. He is continually described as having no ironic eye. He is too serious about his actions. Like the Avellanos, he comprehends enough about the nature of

the chaotic world to perceive the disorder, but not enough to know that it is permanent. He does not see his life as tragic; others, however, are conscious of Gould's tragedy. Mrs. Gould felt like the Avellanos for most of her life, and was willing to help her husband establish the mine. Later she begins to realize the truth about her world.

Martin Decoud functions as a bridge figure between the reader's distant view of Sulaco and the inhabitants' active lives there. While in Paris, he defines the farce of Costaguanero politics, connecting it with all politics but intimating that it is an exaggerated case. On the scene, he is able to use his insight into the workings of the world and people's motives to further his own ends. He understands his role in the farce--he writes to his sister in Paris--

Prepare our little circle in Paris for the birth of another South American republic. One more or less, what does it matter? They may come into the world like evil flowers on a hotbed of rotten institutions; but the seed of this one has germinated in your brother's brain, and that will be enough for your devoted assent.²⁴

He sees the tragedy and comedy of the world, but his scorn cannot protect him; he has no real sense of any thing outside of himself. Decoud does love Antonia, but he ridicules the actions his love has led him to perform. For all of his great insight into the workings of other people's minds, Decoud lacks knowledge of himself. Facing a test, alone on the Great Isabel, Decoud finds he has nothing to turn his scorn on except for himself; even his love for Antonia cannot keep him from destroying the petty creature he now conceives himself to be. "The brilliant Costaguanero of the boulevards

had died from solitude and want of faith in himself and others."²⁵ Decoud's story points out the limitations of skepticism; his life is tragic because he is aware of his place in nature.

Monygham has had a tragic life, but it is not devoid of comedy which he can perceive. His problem, like Decoud's, is a lack of faith in himself and others. Unlike Decoud, Monygham is able to accept an ideal outside of the self and continues to live. He works for the good of the people, but he has no illusions as to the people's innocence. His irony is a defense against the mindless world.²⁶ Monygham lost faith in himself after he made a false confession while under torture and is partially recivilized by the Goulds. He falls in love with Mrs. Gould and she becomes his ideal. Being able to perceive the chaos, he knows what Charles' obsession is doing to her. When he acts to save Sulaco, he acts not only for the people, but to save the Gould concession and spare Mrs. Gould devastating pain. He is even grateful that his past actions have made him a fit person for deceiving Sotillo. Although he realizes his actions will not bring a lasting peace to Sulaco, through them he regains a measure of faith in himself. He continues to serve the people as a doctor and inspector of hospitals; his dreams of Father Beron, his tormentor, fade. Monygham never loses his skepticism; he always believed Nostromo has somehow stolen the silver. The change in his perspective is in his 'necessary illusion' which allows him to concern himself with acting for other people rather than concentrating on his degradation. Monygham

fosters the innocent; he is one of Mrs. Gould's agents at the three mining villages. It is this necessary illusion that gives Monygham his humanity and sustains him through his time of trial during the separation. This illusion prevents Monygham from turning his scorn upon himself, even though he does recognize the comedy and tragedy.

Mrs. Gould also changes her perception of this world during the course of the novel; Monygham helps her to a better understanding of it. In the beginning, like her husband and the Avellanos, she believed in the possibility of establishing peace and security in Sulaco. Her special province is the care of the people; she opens her house to all the homesick Europeans and, through Padre Roman, Don Pepe, and Dr. Monygham, she watches over all of the people involved with the San Tome mine. It is not until very late in the novel that she begins to see the ultimate failure of the mine to bring about permanent reform; Dr. Monygham enlightens her:

"Will there be never any peace? Will there be no rest?" Mrs. Gould whispered. "I thought that we---"

"No!" interrupted the doctor. "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."²⁷

Perhaps the moral principle which Dr. Monygham speaks of is Mrs. Gould's concern with humanity:

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.²⁸

Emilia Gould understands the chaos and what it will do to the moral principle, the necessary illusion, on which she bases her actions. Hers, unlike her husband's, is an entirely human concern. She feels that no one would understand this or even think to ask her about it except for Dr. Monygham. She goes to Giselle even though the thought of the lost silver pains her:

And Mrs. Gould, feeling her suppressed sobbing, nervous and excited, had the first and only moment of bitterness in her life. It was worthy of Doctor Monygham himself.

"Console yourself, child. Very soon he would have forgotten you for his treasure."

"Señora, he loved me. He loved me," Giselle whispered, despairingly. "He loved me as no one had ever been loved before."

"I have been loved, too," Mrs. Gould said in a severe tone.²⁹

Like Dr. Monygham, Emilia Gould comes to perceive the chaos of the universe and its irony; she will hold to her ideal, never again bitter. But this perspective will not save her from a lonely and unhappy life. She knows herself to be the powerless good fairy of the story. Pain is the price one pays for human involvement and perception at the same time in the dark universe. This is the perspective, however, which the narrator presents most favorably to the reader.

The narrator provides the reader with the necessary distance to counter the pain which occurs with Mrs. Gould's perspective by occasionally speaking of events as though they are long past and ordering events to protect the reader from reactions of pity. The narrator also reveals the deficiencies of other perspectives. For example, the narrator

has the only acceptable historical perspective. Captain Mitchell undermines the theory that Sulacan history could really be glorious and important; the narrator judges that the history of Nostromo's ride to Cayta would not make an exciting book. The Fifty Years of Misrule with its plea for order is scattered over the streets during a riot; the narrator has read it but imparts very little information about its contents other than its point of view. Decoud's letter which reveals his view of affairs and motives during the separation does not remain in Sulaco as an historic document, but is sent to Paris. The country is allowed to believe whatever it likes about Decoud's patriotism; his selfishness is suppressed. The narrator sees all the events and motives in their factual light. He does not believe in the glory of these events because they are either a product of the chaotic workings of the world or a result of the hidden and often base motives of the inhabitants. The narrator does take into account motives which are not base; although the narrator knows that order is not possible, he speaks of Don José with respect. The narrator allows the reader to see Decoud's opinion of events but also shows that Decoud lacked something in his interpretation. The narrator acknowledges that some people, like Monygham, act out of selfless and humane motives and without blindness as to the temporary nature of their successes. Nevertheless, history becomes an endless series of repetitive events--oppression breeds unrest and revolution in Sulaco and revolution breeds oppression. The narrator forces the reader

to see this.

The reader cannot choose the perspective of the characters who cannot see both the comedy and tragedy because the reader comprehends too much about the dark universe. The reader, likewise, cannot fully accept Decoud's ideas because Decoud is dead and the reader knows how he died. Because of the narrator's presentation, the reader perceives the tragedy and the comedy together; the reader is not blind, like Don José, to the never ending chaos. Because of the harshly satiric treatment of the selfish characters and the gently amused treatment of the characters who care for society, the reader realizes that an ideal which is concerned with the good of humanity is necessary to a humane perspective and life. The reader is also provided with the necessary distance from this world to see it clearly, yet without some of the pain felt by its characters. This then is the perspective of the narrator and the reader-- knowledge of the comedy and tragedy which occur together in the world, a necessary, humane concern or ideal, and an artistic distance from the world which prevents some of the pain.³⁰

Conrad's Nostromo presents the world as a dark place of unending chaos. In this world incidents both tragic and comic often occur. They are usually the result of human action which attempts to order the chaos through absurd beliefs. No purpose can succeed in this world. Everything is encompassed by the chaos--sanity, insanity, good, and evil. The people of this world all have a view of what is

possible to accomplish, but some are more aware than others. Those, like Dr. Monygham and Mrs. Gould, who can see both the comic futility and the tragedy of their lives and yet continue to have faith in what they know is an absurd but humane ideal, seem to be better off than those who recognize only a part of the whole or whose vision is clouded by a false belief. But Monygham and Emilia Gould are not protected from the pain of living in this type of world by their knowledge. In fact it is their knowledge which makes their lives truly tragic. Their perspective lacks the element of distance, which counters some of the pain of awareness at the expense of direct involvement with the dark universe. The reader and narrator have the best perspective possible of this world--a perspective in which comedy and tragedy, the absurd ideal, and artistic distance can be combined in order to comprehend the nature of the dark universe and the possibilities of life in it.

Notes

¹ Joseph Conrad, Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame-Graham, edited by C. T. Watts (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), pp. 70-71.

² Conrad, Letters, pp. 56-57.

³ Joseph Conrad, Nostromo (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1904; reprint edition, New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 22.

⁴ Nostromo, p. 130.

⁵ Stanton de Voren Hoffman, Comedy and Form in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), p. 22. Hoffman has done much work in the relation of comedy to the reader's perspective and to theme, and the use of burlesque in Conrad's work. Although he has not dealt specifically with Nostromo, many of his insights into later works, such as The Secret Agent, have been very helpful.

⁶ Nostromo, p. 53.

⁷ William E. King, "Conrad's Weltanschauung and the God of Material Interests in Nostromo," Conradiana, 3 (1971-1972), 42-43. King points out many disparities between reality and appearance in the novel. His article contains many valid points--that Decoud changes upon arriving in Sulaco, that Monygham's and Mrs. Gould's perspectives differ from that of the other characters, and that Monygham works for the good of Mrs. Gould and the people of Sulaco.

⁸ Nostromo, p. 392.

⁹ T. B. Tomlinson, "Conrad's Trust in Life: Nostromo," The Critical Review, 14 (1971), 64. Tomlinson has several valid points, especially concerning the comic effect of Padre Roman, Don Pepé, and Barrios, but is too optimistic in his overall view.

¹⁰ Nostromo, p. 94.

¹¹ Patricia Morley, "Conrad's Vision of the Absurd," Conradiana, 2 (1970), 59. Morley has also pointed out several differences between appearance and reality in Nostromo in addition to the false belief in reform.

¹²Nostramo, p. 118.

¹³Nostramo, pp. xii-xviii.

¹⁴Tomlinson, pp. 80-81.

¹⁵Hoffman, p. 25.

¹⁶Nostramo, p. 316.

¹⁷Elsa Nettels, "The Grotesque in Conrad's Fiction," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 29 (1974), 148-149. Conrad uses the grotesque to portray the dark universe in Nostramo in ways similar to those used in The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes.

¹⁸Tomlinson, pp. 80-81.

¹⁹V. C. Knoepflmacher, Laughter and Despair (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 249, 251. Knoepflmacher has pointed out many of the aspects of comedy and tragedy as they work together in Conrad's The Secret Agent. I am much indebted to his discussions of 'seers' and 'non-seers' and the necessity of an ideal and of the narrator's function of controlling the reader's reactions in The Secret Agent.

²⁰Nostramo, p. 384.

²¹Robert Penn Warren, "'The Great Mirage': Conrad and Nostramo," Selected Essays (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 40. Warren is especially interested in the way in which the most clear-sighted people are able to live in Conrad's dark universe.

²²Nostramo, p. 405.

²³Nostramo, p. 414.

²⁴Nostramo, p. 184.

²⁵Nostramo, p. 395.

²⁶Knoepflmacher, p. 250.

²⁷Nostramo, p. 406.

²⁸Nostramo, p. 414.

²⁹Nostramo, pp. 444-445.

³⁰Knoepflmacher, pp. 252-268.

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