CHAPTER - VII

NOSTROMO
CHAPTER 7

NOSTROMO

Subject Matter and Setting:

Nostromo is no exception to the fact that Conrad, in the interest of naturalism bases his stories on social facts and natural reality. Here, he deals with subjects from all walks of life (aristocracy, common people, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, bandits, politicians, capitalists, etc.) battling it out to survive with dignity under successive periods of civil strife and military regimes. This basis of reality makes this novel very relevant to the present age and also to the future ones, because in the guise of fiction, a writer can tell the truth more easily.

We can easily relate the story to what happened in India and many other countries by way of British Colonization, to the American marine presence in Haiti, to the civil strife in Somalia, to the American occupation of Iraq, to the civil war in Rwanda with the Belgian interests, and so on. Conrad has successfully captured the world of political revolutions and presented it as a microcosm. Nostromo both defines and delicately dissects the problems in the imaginary South American country of Costaguana with the indigenous inhabitants and the foreigners taking sides with different forces and ideologies.
like Capitalism, Communism, Liberalism, Colonialism, Republicanism, Federationalism, Imperialism, Separatism, Conservatism, etc. Conrad’s subtle analysis of human motives and springs of action in times of political upheaval makes it both a political novel and a psychological novel. The latter, because the reader gets to understand the characters inside-out, through their deepest thoughts. In this novel, Conrad explores the effects of a revolution upon people of various social strata.

Though the novel deals with various themes, we can always see subjects from the lower strata of society struggling for survival in harsh and miserable conditions. Though Nostromo is extraordinary, he symbolizes the ordinary working class or the common people. There is an intertwining of the adventures of Nostromo, the fortunes of the Goulds and the fates of the people of Costaguana. Though a work of fiction, we can certainly trace the basis of natural reality on which the novel is developed. In the author’s note Conrad tells us that, similar to many of his longer stories, the first hint for *Nostromo* came to him in the form of a stray anecdote without any valuable details. He says that in his early youth, sometime in 1875 or 1876, he had heard the story of a man who “was supposed to have stolen single-handed a whole lighterful of silver, somewhere on the ‘Tierra Firme’ seaboard during the troubles of a revolution”\(^1\) Conrad further says that he had forgotten that story till twenty
seven years later, when he chanced upon it in a small volume that he picked up outside a second-hand bookshop. (Frederick Benton Williams' "On Many Seas": 'The Life and Exploits of a Yankee Sailor'.)

The book, he says, contained the life story of an American seaman written by himself with the help of a journalist. Conrad writes that his chief authority for the history of his fictional country was his friend, Don Jose' Avellanos, who was Minister to the courts of England and Spain. His unpublished book History of Fifty Years of Misrule has been the source for Conrad, who hopes that the readers trust his accuracy. He specifically points out to us that the historical allusions have not been dragged in to show off his unique scholarship, "but that each of them is closely related to actuality; either throwing a light on the nature of current events or affecting directly the fortunes of the people of whom I speak." ² Though the subject matter is wrapped in themes like political intrigue and betrayal, it is not totally pessimistic because a civil society in-the-making does emerge in Costaguana.

Setting:

Nostromo begins with a detailed description of nature – the climate and geography of the province of 'Sulaco', where most of the action would take place. Compared to Heart of Darkness with its thin plot and lengthy landscape
descriptions, in *Nostromo* we find that landscape ambience is a tightly controlled strategic accompaniment to political realism. The story is set in an imaginary South American country called ‘Costaguana’, which has never seen civil rule. Revolution is a way of life in this country. Most of the story is set in the imaginary province of Sulaco, which is a port town deeply isolated from the rest of Costaguana. The silver mine situated in the mountains just outside the town becomes the hub of activity and also the reason for turmoil in the country. How the silver mine attracts the various characters and governs their lives and destinies, and how it exacts a price from each character for its success, becomes the major subject of the novel. Just as Conrad creates characters from all strata of society, he creates a natural picture of Sulaco in the beginning of the novel wherein there are long paragraphs describing the misty mountains, the snow-capped peak of ‘Mount Higuerota’ overlooking the ‘Campo’, the peninsula of ‘Azuera’ with its rocky ravines, the Cape of ‘Punta Mala,’ the windless gulf - ‘Golfo Placido’, the three islands - ‘The Isabels’, the ghettos of dock workers, etc.
Method:

Conrad uses an unidentified third person omniscient narrator to present the story. This device allows for an objective and detached method. He starts the novel with a meticulous and detailed description of the place (Sulaco), where most of the action happens. His detailed descriptions of the climate and geography of the place help the reader build a very naturalistic mental picture of the ‘Occidental Province’, which is isolated by mountains from the rest of the country. In science fiction, critics call this picturisation as ‘world-building’ Conrad has created an entire country complete with history, geography, economy and polity, and then blended them into an exciting and unique plot. The readers would be requiring patience to allow Conrad build up the picture of Costaguana in the initial part of the book, but their patience will be rewarded well later in the novel where there is ample character-driven action to compensate for the scholarly and careful documentation of the historical background of Costaguana. After the initial world-building, Conrad suddenly takes the readers into the middle of the action and suspense, but the transition is seamless. He develops intrigue and the action moves at a breath-taking pace, but movement from one incident to the next is smooth. Sometimes, characters are introduced suddenly in the middle of an action sequence: For example, when the Goulds and the other mine employees are anxiously waiting for the
first silver ingot to be turned out, Conrad suddenly refers to the bandit Hernandez and his exploits. This technique is used to expose the nature of the country and the factors that have made it so. By this, Conrad also gives us a wide view of human natures.

In spite of its profusion of characters and incidents, if a reader skips even a few paragraphs, he would risk losing the thread of the narrative. Conrad documents the beginnings of, and mounting momentum towards an event that would affect all aspects of the narrative and every living character, the event being the revolution. He meticulously sets up every facet and builds reader expectations for it. He then skips the event entirely, jumping several years between chapters, and goes about presenting the new circumstances simultaneously along with the relevant details of the years skipped in between. At such times, he focuses more on the past than taking the narrative forward, but still, the reader doesn’t get bored. There is no fixed chronology. Conrad keeps moving from the present to the past through flashbacks of the characters and glimpses of the future. Scenes are portrayed through the perspectives of various characters and therefore, one can sometimes see the same scene replayed through different points of view. This allows the reader to get multiple perspectives on events. For example, Giorgio Viola’s perspective is that of a working class man, which contrasts with the perspective of Charles
Gould, the Capitalist town leader. No particular character or class perspective is allowed to dominate the story, thereby giving the reader a chance to develop his own personal interpretation regarding the relation among characters. This also helps the reader to get a complete picture of the inter-related class structure of the characters. Some more examples of this method can be seen, where the civil strife going on in Sulaco is described from Martín Decoud’s point of view in the form of his letter to his sister in Paris. On page 270*, the narrative is given in Captain Mitchell’s words and on pages 388* and 389*, [*London: Penguin, 1994] the scene at Casa Viola with Nostromo and Giorgio is suddenly left behind and we are carried forward to the post-battle Sulaco through Captain Mitchell’s commentary to the visitors whom he shows around town. But all this is related by the omniscient narrator. This method of jumbled chronology resembles the working of the human mind which remembers incident by incident and pieces together the meaning by gathering impressions unchronologically.

Plot and Characters:

We can find a large number of characters in Nostromo and this is typical of naturalist works. The characters here can be divided into two groups: The Westerners, and the indigenous inhabitants of Costaguana. Though the novel
has such a huge number of characters belonging to several factions, Conrad achieves humanity in the plot by sympathizing with individuals, and not with groups. Ultimately, Nostromo is a story about individuals and their desperate need for love. Let us just take a look at the list of characters before discussing the plot.

**Principal Characters:**

1. Nostromo (Giovanni Battista Fidanza): Former Boatswain, then the foreman of the dock workers.


3. Martin Decoud: Parisian journalist, a dandy, Don Jose’s Godson.

4. Don Jose Avellanos: Statesman, Poet, Man of culture, Gould’s neighbour.

5. Dr. Monygham: English Doctor – sceptical, bitter.


7. Giorgio Viola: Italian Hotel Keeper. (Formerly a loyal fighter under Garibaldi).


Secondary Characters:


11. Teresa Viola: Giorgio Viola’s wife from Spezzia in Italy.

12. Antonia: Don Jose’s daughter, lover of Martin Decoud.


17. Pedrito Montero: the unscrupulous brother of General Montero.


19. Advocate Moraga: Nephew of Don Jose and Agent of the San Tome mine.


21. Mr. Smith: the other Superintendent of the O.S.N. Company.

22. Father Roman: the Priest of the mining villages.

23. Mr. Scarfe: the young British railway staff staying in Violas’ hotel.

24. One-eyed General Barrios: known for political loyalty, but always in gambling debts.

25. Bonifacio: Muleteer of Don Jose.
26. Father Corbelan: brother-in-law of Don Jose Avellanos, Antonia’s Uncle, Grand Vicar of the cathedral and a missionary to convert local Indians to Christianity.

27. Sotillo: the highly corrupt and cruel Commandant of the Esmeralda regiment, who had once ordered a man to be flayed alive. (Then tortures Mr. Hirsch to death.).


29. Father Beron: the army Chaplain under the dictator Guzman Bento, who tortures Dr. Monygham to get a false confession.

30. Anzani: the universal shopkeeper

31. Holroyd: the American Mining Tycoon, who finances the San Tome Mine and also markets the produce.

32. Bernhardt: the brave little German telegraphist.

33. The unnamed telegraphist from Esmeralda, who warns the people in Sulaco.

34. Don Juste Lopez: President of the provincial assembly.

35. Senores Gamacha and Fuentes: Deputies to the provincial assembly, who later become Pedro Montero’s close associates.

36. The Chief Magistrate.
37. The Political Jefe.

38. The Widowed Senora Gavilaso De Valdes.

39. Her second son, Jaime – who joins Barrios’ army.

40. Her eldest Son – A Gambler.

41. Her two younger boys

42. Ramirez, the young man trained by Nostromo to take his place as Foreman of the dock workers, woos Giselle.

43. and several servants of the Casa Gould household

The plot mainly deals with the adventures of two men - one is the idealist mine owner Charles Gould who fails, and the other is the representative of the working class – Nostromo. Interwoven beautifully with the fortunes of these two is the politics of Costaguana. In our study of naturalism, it is important to know that Conrad’s characters in Nostromo are based on real-life characters. Talking about the social and racial contrast between Charles Gould and Nostromo in his author’s note, Conrad says that he didn’t hesitate to make the central figure an Italian as it was perfectly credible: because Italians were moving into the occidental province in huge numbers at that time. The chief basis for Nostromo’s characterization was received from a Mediterranean sailor called Dominic, during Conrad’s early days as a sailor. Conrad was engaged in
an ‘absurd’ adventure with Dominic (most probably gun smuggling): “Many of Nostromo’s speeches, I have heard first in Dominic’s voice. . . . But Dominic the Corsican nursed a certain pride of ancestry from which y Nostromo is free; . . .”3 In his author’s note Conrad’s words again indicate that the character of Don Jose Avellanos is based on his real friend of the same name who was a statesman, and the character of Antonia is also based on Conrad’s first love. He confides that if anything could induce him to revisit Sulaco, it would be Antonia: “Why not be frank about it? - The true reason is that, I have modeled her on my first love.”4

Both the main characters are idealized, but the writer does not dehumanize them. Charles Gould lives only for his ideals of bringing economic progress and prosperity to the town by advancing the material interests of the silver mine. So much so, that his wife Emilia becomes isolated and lonely because he is totally consumed by his ideals. He manages to keep the mine running successfully by bribing the successive governments. The very success of the mine, rather than creating money for modernization, destabilizes local politics because the profits produced by the mine attract local war lords who fight over it. Here, one finds ample of examples of social Darwinism and the concept of ‘Survival of the Fittest’. The bandit Hernandez, the anti hero
Nostromo, Don Pepe, General Barrios, Father Corbelan and many more characters exemplify the concept of social Darwinism.

Though Nostromo, for the most part is incorruptible, when he finds that he has been used by the rich people, he is also finally corrupted. This in fact, makes his character human. When the mining town is besieged by the revolutionary Montero, the silver mine and its silver are in danger of being seized by the rebel forces. Resolved not to allow his silver to become the spoil for his enemies, Gould entrusts it to Nostromo believing him to be incorruptible. Nostromo undertakes to hide the silver because he sees in the mission an opportunity to increase his own fame and sense of heroism, and not out of loyalty to Gould. Ultimately, even though men may act from the finest of motives, Conrad shows that under the influence of the environment, surroundings, temptation and harsh reality, men’s good intentions are transformed or defeated.

Though Nostromo, with the help of a ruined cynic of a doctor (Dr. Monygham) and the journalist Martin Decoud, restores some kind of order and peace to Sulaco, his mission fails to bring him the fame he had hoped. He feels slighted and used. Feeling that he has risked his life for nothing, he is consumed by resentment, which leads to his corruption and ultimate destruction. Though Nostromo and his associates appear to be acting for the general good, they are
in reality acting for selfish reasons. But despite all this, none of the characters is a depraved monster or betrays his fundamental humanity. Gould is changed for the worse in defending his property, but this has not been highlighted. The character of Martin Decoud is driven to madness and suicide from sheer loneliness, but here we don’t find absence of morality as in the *Heart of Darkness*.

Some critics would argue that if a plot is a logical progression of events, then *Nostromo* actually has two connected stories with common characters: the main story deals with the political developments, and the closing chapters deal with the personal lives and motivations of Dr. Monygham, Decould and Nostromo; Nostromo’s ill-fated love for Giorgio Viola’s youngest daughter Giselle, in particular. When the extraordinary political events fade, the novel switches to the relatively ordinary personal lives of the characters. By pinpointing the deepest personal motives responsible for the political action of these three men, Conrad humanizes their characters.

**Themes:**

In his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition, Martin Seymour Smith says that *Nostromo* is Conrad’s statement on what he perceived as the
truth about the world. Since the book tries to present the real world in a microcosm, we find many themes interwoven into it.

The class divide and conflict between the rich capitalists and the poor working class, selfishness and betrayal versus loyalty, courage and sacrifice, fight between the forces of tyranny and liberty, corruption, love, loneliness and violence are some of the obvious themes.

Capitalism, Imperialism, Colonialism, Democracy, revolution and social justice are some of the other themes explored. The unity of the foreign merchants who are the major base of the local economy and their support to the Ribierist cause has great relevance to what has happened in many places in the world including India. The Oceanic Steam Navigation (OSN) Company, the Railway Company, the Gould mine, they all lead to material prosperity no doubt, but the American mine financer Mr. Holroyd wants to spread his sect of Christianity and sends his missionary priests on proselytizing missions. All these foreign powers try to survive by controlling the local politics and economy and by backing the local leaders who favour them. They also secure second hand automatic rifles etc., for their favoured leaders, build up fortified company headquarters and maintain armed workers and guards. This is similar to what happened in India and other colonies of the British Empire through the East India Company. The fighting that ensues in Costaguana as a result of
Gould's success with the silver mine is not much different from the violence that wracked Congo-Brazzaville more recently where oil concessions became a treasure, over which murderous factions fought. The San Tome mine of Sulaco represents the ingenuity of Charles Gould and not that of the locals. This is very similar to the oil, natural gas and mineral concerns in the developing countries that represent the ingenuity of the Western Corporations that alone have the technical and organizational know-how to exploit such resources profitably. Therefore, the themes taken up in *Nostromo* are going to be relevant for a long time to come. Though Costaguana is a fictional country, it represents the turbulent political history of many countries in Central America. From the perspective of Martin Decoud, who, for a time is an outside observer of the turmoil in Costaguana, the Central American countries continue the cycle of civil conflict without any chance of developing a stable democracy. Though democratic ideals are debated throughout the novel, this discussion occurs only among the upper classes.

Conrad shows that even authentic heroes like Nostromo are motivated by personal vanity or selfish reasons rather than by ideals and that, such vanity, instead of being bad, can be the true source of incorruptibility. Dr. Monygham and Martin Decoud are brave because each wants to impress a particular woman: (Emilia Gould and Antonia Avellanos, respectively) Nostromo is brave
because he seeks a high reputation that is exchangeable for money. Nostromo is a local legend because he is a man of principle who has always kept his word without any regard for the risk to his life. But when he suddenly realizes that the treasure of silver is “his”, he is corrupted by greed and decides to grow rich slowly. (Without disclosing the secret of his treasure to anyone).

Though it is Nostromo’s loyalty to the people that helps them overcome the crises, his motives are dark. Moreover, he is not loyal to the woman who loves him. He asks for the hand of Linda, the elder daughter of Georgio, and is betrothed to her. But he betrays her by planning to elope with her younger sister Giselle. Betrayal can be seen in the novel at various levels. General Montero and his brother Pedro betray the Ribierist cause by rising in revolt, and Sotillo, the Commandant of the Esmeralda Regiment in the Ribierist army betrays by defecting to the Monterists. Nostromo also betrays the faith placed in him by Gould by stealing the silver.

Emilia Gould loses her husband to the mine, which becomes his obsession. As a result, she is lonely throughout her life. When Nostromo leaves Martin on the island with the silver, he is unable to bear the loneliness of solitude and is ultimately driven to suicide. Whatever the themes, the characters seem to be controlled by external or internal forces that enslave their free will.
Perhaps it is because Conrad is originally a Pole who knew Russian tyranny as a boy, that he succeeds in portraying the theme of tyranny so realistically and with such universal appeal. With an exposition of colonialism, civilization and savagery, he shows us what is necessary to overcome tribalism and jealousy, and leave behind the rule of man in favour of the rule of law. Conrad is suspicious of the compromises required and prices paid in order to achieve a civilized rule of law. He also suspects whether it can be truly maintained, but suggests that any half measures or compromises only lead to more savagery in the long run.
Interaction of Man and Nature:

Realistic descriptions of the conflict between man and nature are a hallmark of Conradian literature. Even in *Nostromo*, which is set in the imaginary South American country of Costaguana, he builds up a vivid image of the natural elements in the reader’s mind. His descriptions are so candid that the reader can easily visualize the natural forces interacting with the human characters. Even though the major themes deal with politics and revolution, the forces of nature pervade the action time and again. However, Conrad’s art is such that the conflict between man and nature is made a natural part of the action and we never feel that any such part is tacked on. Nature is always a mute, but indifferent force against which the human characters struggle.

Except Cayta, the other harbours of Costaguana are either small and inconvenient inlets in an iron-bound coast, or just open roadsteads exposed to the winds and battered by the surf. The omniscient narrator tells us that “Perhaps the very atmospheric conditions which had kept away the Merchant fleets of bygone ages induced the OSN Company to violate the sanctuary of peace sheltering the calm existence of Sulaco.”

The company’s fleet of steamers had disregarded the natural difficulties and succeeded in establishing trade. Similarly, the railway company had succeeded in laying the tracks in Sulaco. The successful San Tome silver mine
is another example of the triumph of the human spirit in its clash with nature. Many individual workers had died in their endeavours, but ultimately, the success of these three institutions symbolizes the victory of the human spirit. As an individual man, Sir John, the chairman of the railway company may feel like a puny mortal in front of nature, but the human spirit always struggles to overcome the challenges:

*For all the indifference of a man of affairs to nature, whose hostility can always be overcome by the resources of finance, he could not help being impressed by his surroundings during his halt at the surveying camp established at the highest point his railway was to reach.*

Even when the railway is to be laid on the high mountainside in almost impossible terrain, the following extract aptly illustrates the indomitable spirit of man struggling against nature:

*Of the young fellows at the table, to whom the survey of the track was like the tracing of the path of life, more than one would be called to meet death before the work was done. But the work would be done: the force would be almost as strong as a faith.*

At the height of the revolution, the popular General Ribiera flees to escape the rebels who pursue him under the leadership of Pedro Montero.
Ribiera, with his guide and muleteer Bonifacio somehow reaches the mountain passes, but because of the freezing winds and heavy snowfall, Ribiera loses his horse and gets separated from his guide. Luckily for him, and unluckily for Pedro, the cold wind of the mountains blows at the pursuers on top of the pass, killing a few of them and their animals with the icy blast. The remnant of the pursuing party finds Bonifacio lying half dead at the foot of a snowy slope and immediately bayonets him to death. Ribiera would also be their next target, but they get lost in the forests at the foothills. As is usual in Conrad, nature is just an indifferent force to the hunter and the hunted alike. The darkness of the night in the gulf, and the absence of wind on the night of sailing with the silver-laden lighter is a favorable friend to one (Nostromo and Martin) and is unfavorable to the other (the rebel Commandant Sotillo and his steamer full of soldiers).

"The darkness is our friend", the capataz murmured into his ear. "I am going to lower the sail, and trust our escape to this black gulf".

Even if Nostromo wants to sink the treasure and prevent it from going into the wrong hands, it would be possible only because of the impartial ocean (Nature). Later on, it is again nature which helps him when he sinks the boat to destroy all clues of the treasure and himself.
Conflict with hostile nature and circumstances serves as a test of character and manhood where ultimately, the human spirit wins. After the boat sinks, when Nostromo comes back by swimming a very great distance across the gulf, Dr. Monygham recollects his earlier days when he had singlehandedly encountered the worst of physical dangers. He is well aware of the most dangerous element common to all such situations; namely, "the crushing, paralyzing sense of human littleness, which is what really defeats a man struggling with natural forces, alone, far from the eyes of his fellows.”

Because of his past experiences, the doctor understood well and appreciated the way Nostromo had successfully confronted the situation with an undismayed mind: “Of Course, the man was an incomparable swimmer, that was known, but the doctor judged that this instance testified to a still greater intrepidity of spirit.”
Conrad’s Vision of Man:

Conrad’s vision of man as an indomitable being can be seen consistently through all his works, and *Nostromo* is no exception. Not just once, but a number of times Nostromo faces situations where he is almost on the verge of doom. At such times, he falls back on his innate strength and surmounts the most difficult of situations. Since the name ‘Nostromo’ means ‘Our Man’ and the character is a bridge between the working class and the rich capitalists, Conrad addresses the human condition as a whole, with a vision that encompasses history, politics, war and love.

Fate seems to have dominated human lives, but the soul asserts its nobility by constantly struggling, with courage and endurance. Charles Gould’s father dies because of the harassment of the successive rogue factions that come to power in Costaguana. They snatch away his business profits time and again and this leads to his nervous breakdown and finally, death. Though Charles’ father had asked him not to work the silver mine which had caused most of the trouble, Charles sets out to vindicate his father by restarting the defunct mine. While mourning his father’s death, Charles is filled with an angry desire for action (working of the mine) and he makes a firm resolve to make it a serious and moral success. Conrad’s vision is voiced by the narrator here:
Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions. Only in the conduct of our action can we find the sense of mastery over the fates.\textsuperscript{10}

Ultimately, he succeeds in running the mine in spite of all obstacles, due to his firm faith in the ideal of economic progress through the advancement of material interests. His ingenuity, endurance and courage are supported by the loyalty and sacrifice of other people like his wife Emilia, Nostromo, Don Pepe and many others. It is because of these noble human virtues that the people of Sulaco get some peace, security and prosperity amidst the continuous civil strife under successive military regimes in the country. In spite of the fact that Charles’ father had prohibited him from running the mine, Charles and Emilia take up the idea of its rehabilitation like a compulsive challenge. Their attitude towards it and Conrad’s vision of man find expression in the words of the narrator as follows:

\textit{The very prohibition imposed the necessity of success. It was as if they had been morally bound to make good their vigorous view of life against the unnatural error or of weariness and despair.}\textsuperscript{11} (emphasis added).
The words in bold indicate that weariness and despair in human beings are an unnatural error and going by that, the converse is true: that is, endurance, courage and hope are the true qualities of human nature.

Let us take a look at two more instances of loyalty, courage and sacrifice: when the rebel army of Pedro Montero occupies the town of Sulaco, Pedro sends a messenger to Don Pepe who is the man in charge of the mine works in order to bribe him into betraying Charles Gould and allow Pedro’s men to take over the mine. Don Pepe values his honour more than his life and is ready to defend the mine till his last breath. He is steadfast in his promise to destroy the mine with dynamite (in the worst case) to prevent it from going into the wrong hands.

Dr. Monygham is described as a morose, ruined cynic who has lost faith in humanity. People shun his bitter and sarcastic remarks. As an English settler in Costaguana, he is known to have been tortured till he became a cripple by a sadistic army Chaplain (who still appears in his nightmares) under one of the dictators called Guzman Bento. In spite of such a painful past, the doctor rises to the occasion when the town is on the verge of being pillaged by the rapacious commandant Sotillo and his forces. The doctor may have acted on selfish motives, perhaps for his love and loyalty to Emilia Gould, but, nevertheless, his noble gesture saves the townsfolk. At great risk, he goes and fools Sotillo in
order to prevent him from proceeding into town. “Let me try to serve you to the whole extent of my evil reputation. I am off now to play my game of betrayal with Sotillo, and keep him off the town.” ¹² Such instances of courage and loyalty illustrate the sublime nobility of the human soul, and also highlight Conrad’s belief in man’s spirituality and capacity for faithfulness to fellowmen even in a generally immoral setting that is full of selfishness and treason.

**Interaction between Atmosphere and Character:**

In the very beginning, Conrad creates an atmosphere by elaborate descriptions of the landscape, the geography and climate of the Republic of Costaguana, especially the province of Sulaco. In *Nostromo*, landscape ambience becomes a controlled, strategic accompaniment to political realism. Conrad’s naturalistic description of Costaguana and its province Sulaco deserves commendation because his description captures so many of the finer details about small and isolated third world states. In addition, the rich atmosphere of the novel helps the reader get a naturalistic ‘feel’ of the action going on in the novel. The atmosphere pervades all through: even in times of peace and in times of violent action.

The quotation from Shakespeare which is given as an epigraph to *Nostromo*: “So foul a sky clears not without a storm” ¹³ sets the mood of the
reader regarding the scenes that would unfold. Though the epigraph hints at a pessimistic world-view and scenes of upheaval, a note of hope is also implied in the possible clearing of the “foul sky.” As is characteristic of naturalist works, the characters come alive because of their interaction with the atmosphere. The detailed descriptions of natural setting are used symbolically throughout the novel. The epigraph is taken from Shakespeare’s *King John*, Act IV Scene 2, where King John speaks in front of a messenger who brings him news of invasion, just after he has heard of King Arthur’s death, (who actually had been murdered on his orders, but is really still alive, unknown to John.) As the epigraph portends, the themes of invasion, bloodshed, error and repentance are all dealt with in Nostromo also.

The imagery of storms symbolizes political conflict and upheaval in the novel: in the beginning of the novel itself, the narrator tells us that “The political atmosphere of the Republic was generally stormy in these days.”

Accordingly, as the novel progresses, we witness three revolutions; namely, the Ribierist, the Monterist, and the War of Separation. Even towards the end of the novel we come across certain hints of an impending workers’ revolution because the working class citizens, refugees and immigrants of Sulaco form secret societies and have meetings that are presided over by Nostromo and the Archbishop. When Dr. Monygham reports these
developments to Emilia Gould, he also says that these people may start another revolution with a new motto of ‘Wealth for the People.’ On hearing this, Emilia Whispers “Will there be never any peace? Will there be no rest?”  

In the light of these developments, it does strike our attention that according to the epigraph, a foul sky cannot be cleared without a storm (which is more foul weather). Therefore, Nostromo throws light on our political condition (foul sky) which we hope to clear by more of dirty politics.

The attitudes and apprehensions of the natives of Sulaco are a result of the geographical isolation of the place, which develops a general feeling of powerlessness and futility in the people. When Don Pepe shows the abandoned jungle-grown mine and the San Tome gorge to Emilia Gould for the first time, he calls it a “Paradise of Snakes”.

We see that several conspiracies are hatched in Sulaco, but when the success of the restarted mine brings prosperity and material development, the isolated position of the place makes the people desire independence from the rest of the country because they are cynical about the political future over “the mountains” that isolate their port town. (With the sea on one side and the mountain ranges on the other) The people of Sulaco find that it is almost impossible for enemies to attack them by surprise, thereby making it easy to defend themselves.
Conrad doesn’t introduce any characters in the first few pages but only describes the natural setting. In actuality, he is preparing an introduction which is richly packed with symbolism. The imagery introduced here is fully developed later in the course of the novel.

All the names given to the natural elements and their meanings in Spanish are intended to create imagery; for example, the name of the Cape ‘Punta Mala’ means ‘bad end’. ‘Golfo Placido’ means ‘Placid Gulf’ and suggests that man is alone in an amoral universe because morally, the placid gulf is indifferent to both good and evil, similar to the snow capped mount Higuerota, “Whose Cool purity seemed to hold itself aloof from a hot earth.” ¹⁷ (emphasis added). Sometimes, the natural elements seem to take on the aspect of the people who react to and associate with it. For Teresa, the dying wife of Giorgio Viola, the pain of disease makes nature also look gloomy:

*For years its (the pain’s) gnawing had been part of the landscape embracing the glitter of the harbour under the wooded spurs of the range; and the sunshine itself was heavy and dull-heavy with pain - not like the sunshine of her girlhood, . . .* ¹⁸

The province of Sulaco is described as a sleepy pastoral port town which is also isolated from the rest of the country. When Sir John, the chairman of the railway company meets Mrs. Gould, he says that he had no notion that a place
on a sea-coast could remain so isolated from the world, as though it were a thousand miles inland. He asks her whether anything had ever happened there for a hundred years before that day - “Nothing ever happened in Sulaco. Even the revolutions, of which there had been two in her time, had respected the repose of the place.” 19 So much was the effect of isolation on Sulaco that the aristocratic families did not readily welcome the railway which could lead to the development of their town:

"It had been lying for ages ensconced behind its natural barriers, repelling modern enterprise by the precipices of its mountain range, by its shallow harbour opening into the everlasting calms of a gulf full of clouds, by the benighted state of mind of the owners of its fertile territory - . . . who seemed actually to dislike and distrust the coming of the railway over their lands." 20 (emphasis added)

A graver example of the interaction between atmosphere and character can be seen when Martin Decoud dies on the island of Isabel due to solitude. He has food and water to keep himself alive, but he is unable to bear the solitude of the place and ultimately commits suicide.

By creating an atmosphere that pervades the novel and the interaction of the characters with it, Conrad succeeds in developing a very realistic picture of man.
Conrad's Philosophy of Life:

*Nostromo* deals with the effects of unrestrained greed and imperialist interests on the lives of several characters. Though many of the characters begin acting with the best of intentions, they ultimately get corrupted. In spite of this, the novel highlights Conrad's belief in fidelity, moral discipline and the need for human solidarity and communion.

Though Nostromo is corrupted in the end, for the most part of the novel, it is only his staunch loyalty to his employers and to the Ribierist cause that saves the people from the terrors of the revolutionary army. Captain Mitchell says that Nostromo was “incorruptible” and absolutely above reproach. The old Italian hotel keeper Georgio Viola is greatly respected by the Italian immigrants wherever he lived because he had once fought bravely and selflessly with the people’s leader Guiseppe Garibaldi in Italy. Though these immigrants listened readily to his tales of war, he regretted that they could not understand what he got by risking his life. In Viola’s answer, Conrad’s philosophy of life is hidden with 'fidelity' and 'Sacrifice' as the watchwords: “We wanted nothing, we suffered for the love of all humanity!”

We can also find Conrad’s philosophy being stressed through the exploits of the character of Hernandez the robber. He has a soft corner for the poor, whom he leaves alone, but he robs the upper class people and flogs government
officials. Despite several attempts by various army troops, he had not been captured or killed. Even putting a price on his head had failed to get results. On one occasion, a local fiscal officer had offered him a hefty sum of money and safe passage out of the country for the betrayal of his band. Even this trick that usually worked, failed in this case because; “Hernandez evidently was not of the stuff of which the distinguished military politicians and conspirators of Costaguana are made.” 22 It is clear that though Hernandez terrorized some people, he is basically a moral person who remained strong and loyal to his fellow men. It is only their mutual fidelity and solidarity that helps them face the government forces successfully.

Conrad may not offer any formula for the redemption of society but he strengthens our faith in the final reality that humans are basically moral beings. The Goulds’ silver mine brings some material progress and social security to the people of Sulaco. A great number of locals migrate from different parts of Costaguana to join the workforce at the mine because of the hope and security it offers. At the same time, the mine destabilizes local politics and attracts the murderous local factions who are ready to fight over the money generated by the mine. Distressed and concerned over all the tumult created by the mine, Emilia wonders aloud to Charles:
Ah, if we had left it alone, Charley! . . . We have disturbed a good many
snakes in that Paradise, Charley, haven't we?" 23

Charles remembers that when she had first seen the abandoned jungle-
grown mine in the San Tome gorge with its waterfall, Don Pepe had called it a
paradise of snakes. With great endurance, courage and effort of will, Charles
had made the mine a profitable venture. So much so, that he could easily desert
the mine and its dependents to live luxuriously as a rich man in Europe for the
rest of his life. However, his approach to the crisis of civil war is unselfish,
brave and magnanimous. His approach asserts Conrad's philosophy of fidelity
and sacrifice because Charles says to his wife: "It is no longer a paradise of
snakes. We have brought mankind into it, and we cannot turn our backs upon
them to go and begin a new life elsewhere." 23

Even at the risk of being killed or severely tortured, the telegraphist of
Esmeralda manages to escape his captors (the Monterist revolutionaries) and
warns the people of Sulaco before being detected and stopped by them. This is
another incident that highlights the noble human traits of fidelity and sacrifice.
The importance that Conrad gives to faith, can be seen from the sentence of the
narrator who explains the death of Martin Decould: "The brilliant
Costaguanero of the boulevards had died from solitude and want of faith in
himself and others." 25 [emphasis added].
Conrad’s deep philosophical understanding of the human condition is evident through the words of the narrator when Nostromo realizes that the only other person in the world who knew the secret of the hidden silver is dead: “And the spirits of good and evil that hover about a forbidden treasure understood well that the silver of San Tome was provided now with a faithful and lifelong slave.”  

After Nostromo decides to grow rich gradually by stealing the silver, Conrad, through the narrative voice tells us that a crime entering a man’s existence ate it up like a malignant growth and consumed it like a fever. Because of the crime, Nostromo loses his peace and gets the genuineness of all his qualities destroyed. Further on, when Nostromo is attracted to the beauty of the younger of the two Viola sisters and starts romancing her, the following words in the narrative voice reveal Conrad’s deep philosophical insight:

*His desire had grown within him. He had two masters now.*

Conrad means to say here that one is the greed for the treasure of silver, and the second one is his attraction to the girl.
NOTES

2 Conrad, Nostromo, 11.
3 Conrad, Nostromo, 12.
4 Conrad, Nostromo, 13.
5 Conrad, Nostromo, 21.
6 Conrad, Nostromo, 45.
7 Conrad, Nostromo, 46.
8 Conrad, Nostromo, 234.
9 Conrad, Nostromo, 357.
10 Conrad, Nostromo, 66.
11 Conrad, Nostromo, 73.
12 Conrad, Nostromo, 339.
13 Conrad, Nostromo, 6.
14 Conrad, Nostromo, 22.
15 Conrad, Nostromo, 419.
16 Conrad, Nostromo, 97.
17 Conrad, Nostromo, 35.
18 Conrad, Nostromo, 34.
19 Conrad, Nostromo, 42.
20 Conrad, Nostromo, 43.
21 Conrad, Nostromo, 39.
22 Conrad, Nostromo, 100.
23 Conrad, Nostromo, 180.
24 Conrad, Nostromo, 18.
25 Conrad, Nostromo, 408.
26 Conrad, Nostromo, 412.
27 Conrad, Nostromo, 447.