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## *THE LONGING FOR HISTORY IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S NOVEL NOSTROMO*

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### **Abstract**

Joseph Conrad wrote Nostromo (1904) at the crucial moment that witnessed the clash between the retreating nineteenth and the ensuing twentieth century. The period encompassed the point of no return towards the logical perfection of the Golden Age and ushered the world towards the meaningless chaos of modernity. The paper argues that being conscious of the approaching subservience of the traditional treatment of history to the random collection of histories typical of the twentieth century modernity, Joseph Conrad's Nostromo is expressive of the persistent longing for the meaningful, solid, epic-like occurrences from the past, as opposed to the absurd mutability of contemporary histories. Yet, this yearning is devoid of any traces of hope and is, therefore, indicative of Conrad's prophesy regarding the impossibility of certainty and meaningful history.

**Keywords:** Conrad, Nostromo, History, Longing.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad wrote *Nostromo* (1904) at the crucial moment that witnessed the clash between the retreating nineteenth and the ensuing twentieth century. The period encompassed the point of no return towards the logical perfection of the Golden Age and ushered the world towards the chaos of modernity with its meaningless war games, power politics, capitalism, colonialism, violence, greed and destruction. With the commencement of the twentieth century, there occurred a radical shift from the “closed, finite, measurable, cause-and-effect universe of the nineteenth century to an open, relativistic, changing, strange universe, which advanced from an evolutionary, developmental model of existence to a system propagating symbolic ways of recreating a sustainable ontological ground” (Loidolt, 2007, 2), as exemplified in the works of Jung, dealing with the concept of universal archetypes, and those of Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Joyce, Adorno, Benjamin and others, advocating that the forces governing human behavior in any sphere, be it psychology, politics, economy, etc., are hidden and permutable. This shift was instigated by the challenges to the nineteenth century science and its assurance in its capability to explain the universe; rapid industrialization and the consequent displacement of people; “the hypocritical association of Christianity with capitalism and colonialism” (Loidolt, 2007, 2); the growing awareness of different cultures in colonies which had different but well-argued world-views; and important changes in philosophical thought which suggested that “‘reality’ was an internal and changeable, not an externally validated, concept, and that what is considered ‘real’ is based on the desire for power, not on any objective warrant” (Loidolt, 2007, 2). What is more, the period was subject to an increasing sense that culture lost its department, that there is “no center, no clarity, that there was a disintegration of values. This “loss of faith in a moral center and moral direction was based on the recognition that the traditional values have, after all, led only to horrid wars and exploitation of other cultures and races” (Loidolt, 2007, 2). Hence, the feeling of the loss of ‘ontological ground’, or, the loss of “confidence that there exists a reliable, knowable ground of value and identity” (Loidolt, 2007, 2), resulted in the fact that the traditional treatment of the concept of history, as a congruent combination of events repeating themselves in a circular nature and fixed in written records, and “a universal process in which all social formations, nations and persons had their appropriate but subordinate role in the development of the totality” (Novack, 2011, 3) vanished. It was superseded by a multiplicity of antinomic modernist histories based on pure discourse or its complete lack, arising in the world governed by the material needs of capitalism.

Joseph Conrad might have really believed that “mankind’s entire history could be reduced to the words ‘they were born, they suffered, they died’, but as he goes on to say in his note to *Chance*, ‘it is a great tale’” (Rodwan, 2009, 2), which is simply impossible in a confounding, unstable and meaningless modernist universe. “Conrad’s “*Nostromo*”, possibly the founding text in modernist historiography, self-consciously plays with the ambiguity of the term ‘history’, which stands for both a historical referent and a historical narrative itself” (O’Malley, 2015, 60). Despite the fictional nature of the novel, *Nostromo* is in many ways ‘historical’ in its setting, yet this grand ‘history of Costaguana’, if considered in its traditional sense, gets lost in the chaos of subjective historical narratives permeating the novel. While the novel often critically suggests the unreliable and fabricated nature of any work of history, *Nostromo* also insists on the fact that history as a construct is a necessary aspect of the human condition. “What makes “*Nostromo*” such a forceful initiation of the modernist historical novel is its awareness of the human need of such narratives. Conrad wants more history in the world, not less” (O’Malley, 2015, 67), even if this world is characterized by modernist relativity, ambiguity and incessant changeability. As a consequence, Joseph Conrad’s novel *Nostromo*, portraying history as an intangible structure on the verge of collapse, is abundant in instances of nostalgia for history in its traditional sense. The novel contains multiple occurrences of yearning for the meaningful perfection of the Golden Age, as well as chivalrous actions of epic-like heroes eager to lead their country to progress, in order to be glorified in the annals of history, as “Conrad perceived a simultaneous heroism and foolhardiness in efforts to find meaning in stories of humanity’s suffering and death” (Rodwan, 2009, 3). The scheme of the characters’ actions in the narrative, as well as their personal qualities, allow the reader to reveal a skeleton of the traditional historical epic, underlying the chaos in the novel. Yet, the fact that Conrad offers the setting for epic action, but fails to materialize it in open is indicative of the “futility of hoping to find significance” (Rodwan, 2009, 3) of existence, and of the author’s persistent longing for the traditional understanding of history absent from the modern world. The idea is supported in the novel through instances of wistful meditation on the glory of the past, rather than direct resort to determined action. As a result, throughout the novel, Conrad “labels events, things and people ‘unspeakable’, ‘indefinite’, ‘inexpressible’, ‘imperceptible’, ‘impenetrable’, ‘inexplicable’, ‘difficult to imagine’, ‘incomprehensible’ and ‘inconceivable’, and he structures his narratives in ways that further diminish any possibility of certainty” (Rodwan, 2009, 3) or reliable history.



The paper argues that being conscious of the approaching subservience of the traditional concept of history to the disarray of historical discourses of the twentieth century, Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* is expressive of the longing for the meaningful epic-like occurrences from the past, as opposed to the absurdity of modern era. This yearning is devoid of any traces of hope and is, therefore, indicative of Conrad's somber prophesy regarding the impossibility of certainty and meaningful history: "There's no doubt about breaking a stone. But there's doubt, fear – a black horror, in every page one writes" (Conrad, 1983, 410).

## 2. LITERARY ANALYSIS

Edward Crankshaw, one of the major analysts of Joseph Conrad's works, noted that "the novel begins with the beginning of the end, and the end is with us throughout the entire narrative" (1976, 67). This fact seems to foreshadow the destiny of history in *Nostromo*, which depicts the world of absurdity, engendered by the yearning of capitalism for the world hegemony, and its endeavor to attain the power to establish the rules of tracing and recording the past.

The novel opens with Captain Joseph Mitchell's kaleidoscopic description of Sulaco, one of Costaguana's major provinces – "the luxuriant beauty of the orange gardens" (Conrad, 1987, 39). The narration is taken backwards and forwards, leaving the reader incapable to establish a linear view of events and to form an adequate idea about the history of the republic. Therefore, it becomes impossible to "organize the novel conventionally. Instead, Captain Mitchell presents Costaguana as if it already possesses an independent historical existence, to be acquired by readers incidentally and piecemeal" (Berthou, 1979, 97). Thus, instead of synthesizing the differences, reading through a collage adds to the atmosphere of chaos permeating the initial pages of the novel.

Captain Mitchell acts as a primary narrator of Costaguana's events, which are later to be related by a score of other narrators. This fact emphasizes the idea that an individual exists not only in relation to one's personal self, but also in relation to others, and is at once both, the subject and the object, the observer and the observed. The sense of further disharmony is instigated by the fact that in the course of narration Conrad significantly modifies the topography of Sulaco:

"The harbor gate must be facing the harbor, which is to the north-west, since *Nostromo* from his vantage-point will have direct sight of it; [nevertheless,] the fact that Charles Gould looking over the square from the audience chamber of the Intendencia and seeing the 'snowy curve of Higueroa' next to 'the perpendicular lines of the cathedral towers' – require a north-south orientation of the square, since the mountain is due the east of Sulaco" (Hampson, 2005, 131-132).

Sulaco is, thus, not only a composite city, but an unstable place, in which it is difficult to orient oneself. The idea emphasizes the plurality of reality and the unreliability of historical interpretations.

*Nostromo* takes place in the land engraved on the map of the South America as a consequence of the colonial greed of Spanish conquistadors. Therefore, the territory becomes separated from conventional European habitat by the sense of physical and psychological distance: "No, but imagine our forefathers in morions and corselets drawn up outside the gate, and a band of adventurers just landed from their ships in the harbor there" (Conrad, 1987, 120). Consequently, the "history in *Nostromo*" becomes the distance – geographical and moral – between the intentions of 'grave and reverend persons', who promote colonial expeditions, and the never fully observed activities of the armed 'thieves' and 'adventurers' in far off territories" (Reilly, 1993, 137). In this way, history turns into a "kind of tenuous meditation between mutually unknowing activities" (Reilly, 1993, 138). As a rule, it is language that bears responsibility for articulating the meaning of colonialism, which few others apart from the colonizers and the colonized can see and experience. Speech gets free from reference to action, and the narrator simply "glories colonial history as a play of names, splendidly detached from reference" (Reilly, 1993, 138). Hence, the republic of Costaguana seems to be lacking certain location, except for Captain Mitchell's initial description and Don Jose Avellanós' chronicle, named "Fifty Years of Misrule" (Conrad, 1987, 213).

Colonialism is empowered with the ability to "inscribe previously blank spaces with exported names" (Reilly, 1993, 138). The novel abounds in foreign names, be it the American Bar on Plaza Major, or Indian girls, named Brigidas and Marias. Thus, the multitude of discourses in the novel struggle to assert their rival claims to authenticity, rendering history a "gigantic tale all of whose figures and meanings can be reversed in alternate telling" (Reilly, 1993, 141). As long as there exists no paragon of authenticity, allowing one to verify the truth of existence, history loses its value of an accurate register, which catalogues the meaningful succession of events, and disappears in the chaotic interchange of unreferenced signification. Even though Conrad frequently uses



the adjective 'material' to accompany such nouns as 'interest' and 'change', as in "I pin myself to material interests" (Conrad, 1987, 281), within a particular historical context where an unsecured language form roams free of reality, "actions and facts threaten to dissolve into pure discourse" (Panichas, 2005, 72), making even such solid adjectives as 'material' devoid of their original meaning. The disordered atmosphere in *Nostromo* is also enforced by an inner paradox embedded in the novel, which attempts to "analyze the historical development of capitalism and its correlative colonialism, while being itself a strand with the discourse of capitalism/ colonialism and hence disposed to endorse its own values" (Berthoud, 1979, 100). Conrad's vision of history as a relentless warfare caused by the "duality of man's nature and the competition of individuals" (Johnson, 1971, 127) sustains the air of destructive chaos pervading modern history. As a consequence, the overall disequilibrium in *Nostromo*, dealing with futile attempts to create history for Costaguana, is symbolic of the ensuing modern world devoid of history and hopelessly entangled in the never-ending interchange of signs, rearranged according to the interests of the ruling class. Thus, "even the big green parrot in its cage seems to await it with high expectations when it screams out 'Viva Costaguana!'" (Panichas, 2005, 63).

The end of the nineteenth century was marked by numerous instances of organized violence, bombings and terrorist attacks on both domestic and global arena, which at that time seemed nothing but anarchical crime for crime's sake. Yet, anarchy was not as pointless as it seemed, as it had lethal and large-scale goals, aimed at "transgression not just against the law, like common murder, but against the authority of the law, against the very terms by which law understood itself" (Fothergill, 2005, 138). Indeed, a living being, in a quasi-suicidal fashion, often works to destroy its own protection, in order "to immunize itself against its own immunity" (Borrador, 2003, 124). Thus, the 'immunized' antibodies attain total power over the old bodily laws, which are desperately trying to regain control over the failing system of immunity. In *Nostromo*, it is Mr. Holroyd, a wealthy American industrialist and financier of the San Tomé Mine, who plays the role of the anarchist and the antibody, and also foreshadows the onset of global capitalism, which "arbitrarily exerts its will, defying any sense of international law, and disregards the interests even of those it employs to achieve its means" (Fothergill, 2005, 144). Being the soul benefactor of the Gould Concession, as well as its major profiteer, Mr. Holroyd is interested in exploiting and promoting the power of technology, as well as its sophisticated communication devices in order to 'transmit' human condition into his utopia of 'commodified history':

"We shall be giving a word for everything; industry, trade, law, journalism, art, politics, and religion, from Cape Horn clear over to Smith's Sound, and beyond, too, if anything worth taking hold of turns up at the North Pole. And then we shall have the leisure to take in hand the outlying islands and continents on earth. We shall run the world's business whether the world likes it or not. The world can't help it - and never can we, I guess" (Conrad, 1987, 77).

The total linguistic dominion sought by the "arch-capitalist" (Fothergill, 2005, 142) Holroyd is anarchic in its origin, as it implies the destruction of an old-style dialogue among members of any community, followed by the emergence of the "interminable monologue" (Reilly, 1993, 165) imposed by capitalist power.

As a consequence, the intensity of counteracting forces in the novel sustains the air of destructive chaos pervading modern history and engenders immobility, which pervades the structure, setting and narrative of the novel. Thus, Mr. Gould's face is described as "calm with that immobility of expression" (Conrad, 1987, 321), while old Garibaldino possesses "monumental repose in his immobility" (Conrad, 1987, 455). The "still and sad immobility" (Conrad, 1987, 430) touches the face of Mrs. Gould, while father Corbelan remains "motionless for a long time" (Conrad, 1987, 185) at the beginning of the novel. The same holds true of the grand stillness of landscape in the "inviolable sanctuary of the deep Golfo Placido, as if within the enormous semi-circular and unroofed temple open to the ocean, with its walls of lofty mountains hung with the mourning draperies of cloud" (Conrad 1987: 39). The novel abounds in descriptions of tableaux-like instances, which show that the immobility immanent in characters, setting and narrative structure, "subservient to the ideology of capitalism and appearing to activate the subversive potential within historical change" (Ryan, 1982, 75), smother history and denies the existence of change.

The appearance of the American Bar on Plaza Major serves as a symbol of ensuing global capitalism that substitutes the original notion of history with the meaningless interplay of signs. In this connection, the position elaborated by Karl Kraus becomes illustrative: "How is the world governed and how do wars begin? Politicians tell lies to journalists and when politicians read them in print they believe them" (Brinks, 2006, 14). Indeed, the major goal of capitalism is to disseminate the 'right ideas' and the 'right history', which propagate its long-term goals via high-tech ways of communication, so as to make the traditional notion of history obsolete. The atmosphere of looming global capitalism is present in Conrad's *Nostromo* from the very start of the novel. In a way, it prophesizes the situation in today's world: "We now live in a world where local



economies and cultures are tightly bound into global ones" (Hampson, 2005, 129). Hence, in *Nostromo* the general theme of history as a concept is confluent with the specific theme of personal histories of its characters, each of which is tightly interwoven with the dominating history of San Tome mine.

The novel contains numerous accounts of histories. They include the covert overall history of colonialism and capitalism, a history of San Tome mine and Gould Concession, Captain Mitchell's narrated history of Costaguana and Sulaco, Don Jose Avellanos's written opus entitled "Fifty Years of Misrule", Decoud's analysis of Montero's uprising depicted in letters to his sister, as well as private histories of various characters. The array of histories permeating the novel allow the reader to construct an image of governmental regimes succeeding each other in Costaguana, including the dictatorship of Guzman Bento, the Ribierist government and the rule of the Blancos, Montero's uprising and his defeat leading to Sulaco's independence, which has been threatened, in its turn, by the seeds of Communism sewn into the minds of the public. Yet, the outward image of solid historicity in the novel serves as a mask to hoax an inexperienced reader into a trap of envisioning history as a concept based on the categories of meaning, logic and aim, which become outdated with the onset of global capitalist values.

By the end of the narrative many characters find themselves in an immobilized state that might remind the reader of signs devoid of signification. Thus, Mr. Gould, an epitome of materialism and commodification, the silver oligarch of Sulaco, turns into a vague construct towards the end of the novel: "Mrs. Gould watched his abstraction with dread. Charles Gould's fits of abstraction depicted the energetic concentration of will haunted by a fixed idea. A man haunted by a fixed idea is insane" (Conrad, 1987, 322). The same destiny awaits the rest of characters: "Nostromo here and Nostromo there - where is Nostromo?" (Conrad, 1987, 351). Similarly, towards the end of the novel there is a desperate attempt to instill some material objects with all sorts of meaning, instigated by the futile hope to find significance of existence, as well as the author's persistent longing for the traditional understanding of history absent from the modern world: "[Mrs. Gould] endowed that lump of metal with a justificative conception, as though it was not a mere fact, but something far-reaching and impalpable, like the true expression of an emotion or the emergence of a principle" (Conrad, 1987, 117). The analogous fate lies ahead of Decoud when Nostromo extinguishes the light in the lighter. Decoud feels "as if his companion had destroyed, by a single touch, the world of affairs, of loves, of revolution, where his complacent superiority analyzed fearlessly all motives and all passions, including his own" (Conrad, 1987, 241). As a consequence, Decoud dies of solitude on the island of Great Isabel, being trapped by the opaqueness of Golfo Placido. Likewise, Captain Mitchell's concept of history rules out any genuine understanding of history: "the more he feels him to be in the thick of 'epoch-making' events, the more confused he is outside of them" (Conrad, 1987, 107). Ironically, the same destiny awaits Don Jose Avellanos's historical opus "Fifty Years of Misrule" (Conrad, 1987, 213), which has been fired from a cannon at the rebelling mob.

As the novel develops, the Gould Concession, "imperium in imperio" (Conrad, 1987, 218), obliterates the individuality of people in Sulaco and "diminishes the distinguishing and refining moral value; deprives the human community and the human soul of intrinsic value" (Panichas, 2005, 59). Therefore, no private histories can attain any value in the shadow of the mine, which is reminiscent of the concept of the death of history under the rule of capitalism. The history of the San Tome mine itself cannot withstand the loss of signification in the modern world, as it has to pay a high price for its material progress in terms of becoming an "object of foreign exploitation and pursuit of power" (Panichas, 2005, 55). Thus, the mine's independence loses relevance in the power game of foreign material interests. As a consequence, the air of obliteration dominating the novel underlines Joseph Conrad's belief in the major axiom of Marxism - capitalism spells conflict of opposing interests, which justifies Dr. Monygham's words: "there is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests" (Conrad, 1987, 423).

The sense of immobility permeating the novel can be also exemplified by the presence of multiple binary oppositions, accentuating the gradual disappearance of meaning in the age of modernism. On the one hand, the reader is confronted by the themes of colonialism, conquest, imperialism, global capitalism and technological progress, which carry a negative connotation in the novel. While on the other, the reader gets surrounded by the semantically positive thematic line of popular movements, wars of independence and emergence of communism among the exploited population of Sulaco. Similarly, "Gould and Nostromo act as agents and Dr. Monygham and Decoud as critics" (Berthoud, 1979, 112). In this way, the concept of action is being set against the concept of thought. In addition, Charles Gould employs "dynamite" (1987, 387) in the defense of San Tome mine as both a "weapon" (Conrad, 1987, 389) and an "argument" (Conrad, 1987, 389). Thus, an emphasis is being put on the "duality inherent in history under capitalism" (Reilly, 1993, 164), which allows Gould to eliminate the difference between violence and discourse, and foreshadow the dissolution of



historical meaning. The same line of reasoning may be traced in the use of identical green and white uniforms by the inhabitants of the mine, obliterating their individuality, and also in the striking recurrence of certain female names, like Brigida and Maria, which can be explained by the purposeful “homogenization and deculturization of indigenous people” (Hampson, 2005, 134) under capitalist regime. In the same way, many characters in the novel undergo the process of identity destabilization. Thus, Charles Gould describes himself as both “an adventurer in Costaguana, the descendant of adventurers enlisted in a foreign legion” (Conrad, 1987, 311) and “no adventurer” (Conrad, 1987, 60). The same holds true of Nostromo, who at the beginning of the novel is described by Captain Mitchell as a sort of an epic hero, while by the end of narration we realize that he is nothing but the head of an “outcast lot of very mixed blood, mainly negroes” (Conrad, 1987, 312). What is more, Nostromo “undergoes a metamorphosis from a ‘natural man’ into what could be termed ‘conscious man’, as according to Conrad every human being must be born twice” (Berthoud, 1979, 117). Yet, this transformation that he undergoes on the shores of Sulaco is tainted by the touch of darkness, symbolized by the menacing cry of a bird: “Ya-acabo! Ya-acabo!” (Conrad, 1987, 352).

Though Joseph Conrad’s novel *Nostromo* portrays history as an amorphous structure on the verge of collapse, it is still abundant in instances of profound longing for history in its traditional sense. The novel contains occasions of nostalgia for chivalrous actions of epic heroes of the Golden Age, recorded in historical annals. In this respect, the description of Sulaco at the beginning of the novel may be interpreted as a symbol of an antique amphitheater used for dramatic performance. Yet, Conrad “offers the setting for epic action, but fails to materialize it” (Reilly, 1993, 176), which presupposes melancholic meditation on the glory of the past, rather than determined action. Similarly, Charles Gould is depicted as the “capitalist engineer in his heroic phase” (Berthoud, 1979, 109). Just like an epic hero for whom action means work and work means conquest, Mr. Gould is obsessed with the “creation of a new world out of the ‘material’ of the given world” (Berthoud, 1979, 109), despite the fact that the world that he created gets overtaken by the sense of absurdity. Nostromo, in his turn, may be also portrayed as an epic hero embarking on various errands and voyages to glorify his land, though driven mostly by the motive of satisfying his personal vanity. The character’s eventual homecoming and his death at the end of the novel can be also evaluated as a sort of longing for the epic past. According to the epical canons, there is usually something in narration that survives the fall of the tragic hero: “the gored is able to recover at least a measure of its original integrity, the scattered universe to reassemble itself into at least some degree of order” (Berthoud, 1979, 117). Yet, by portraying Nostromo totally abstracting himself from reality at the end of the novel, Conrad seems to create a typical modernist historical perspective devoid of any traces of hope.

*Nostromo* is literally pervaded with multiple examples of longing for the epic past. “Frenchified Decoud” (Hampson, 2005, 59) - a young man initially disinterested in the fate of the republic of Costaguana, but eventually becoming a journalist in Sulaco, accomplishing an archetypal epic voyage and getting the title of founding father of the nation, strongly believes in the Second Empire’s “Caesarianism” (Conrad, 1987, 214), as the only regime suitable for independent Sulaco. Similarly, the hotelkeeper Viola serves to reflect Conrad’s deepest longing for the values of an epic past, as he embodied virtue, heroism, chivalry, loyalty and honor - all the values constantly violated in Costaguana. Charles Gould is often being called “El Rey de Sulaco” (Conrad, 1987, 357), while the “equestrian statue of Charles IV at the entrance to the Alameda is known as the Horse of Stone” (Conrad, 1987, 48). Montero physically resembles an Aztec god, while Holroyd - the “Steel and Silver King” (Conrad, 1987, 215) - resembles a profile on a Roman coin. The novel also employs epic-like terms “Imperium in Imperio” (Conrad, 1987, 218) and “Olympus of plutocrats” (Conrad, 1987, 87). In addition, names from Roman mythology, like Juno, Minerva, Ceres, Hermes and Cerberus, are used to distinguish among O.S.N. sea vessels.

All in all, based on the nature of character’s roles in the novel, as well as their personal qualities, one can trace the covert skeleton of a traditional epic in the overall chaotic world of *Nostromo*, exemplifying Conrad’s desperate longing for historical meaning gradually vanishing from the modern world.

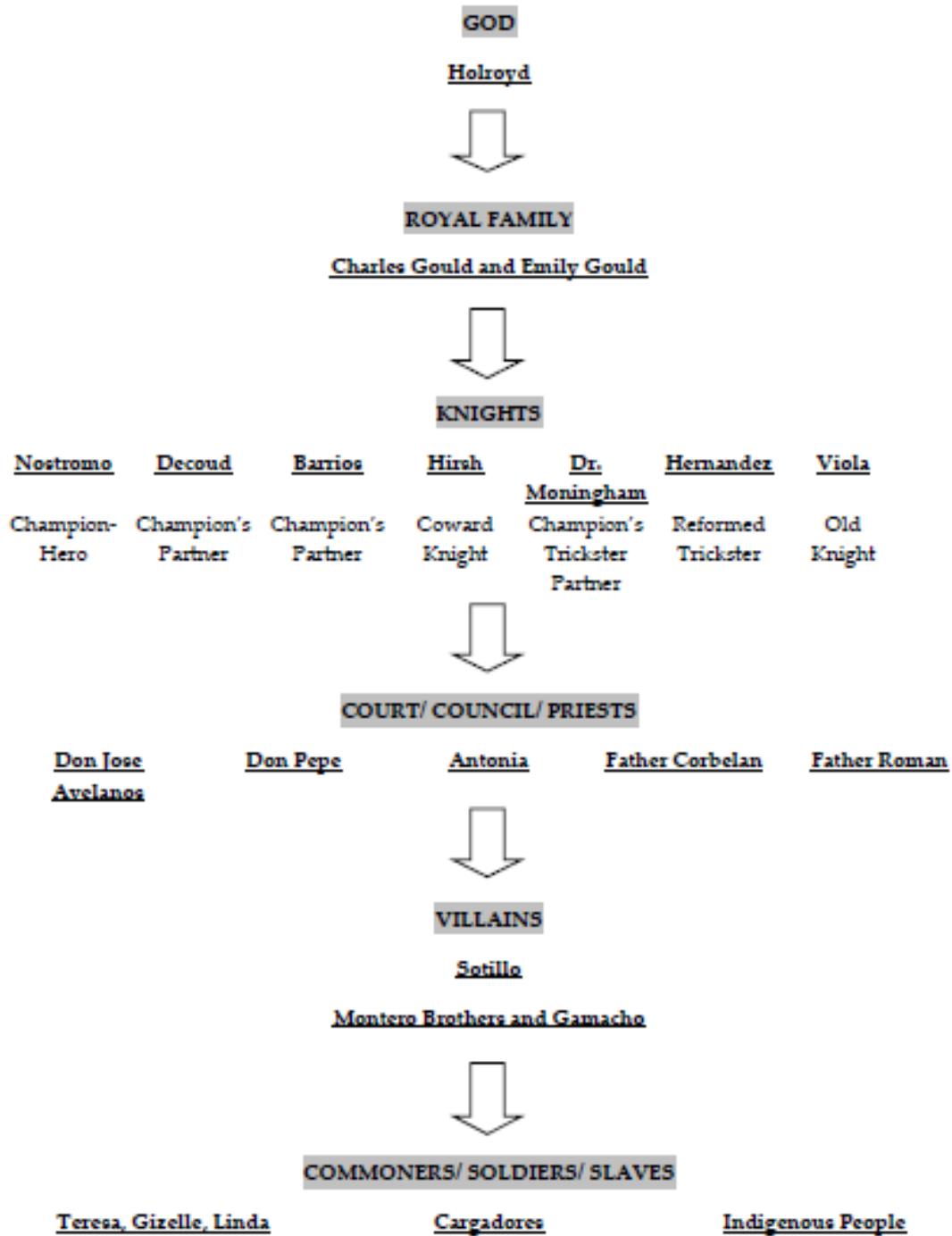


Figure 1: Epic hierarchy in Joseph Conrad's novel *Nostromo*.

### 3. Conclusion

Joseph Conrad's novel *Nostromo* is greatly permeated with longing for the meaningful, epic-like actions of the past. This longing takes place against the background of the beginning of the twentieth century, when the



traditional treatment of the concept of history, as a congruent combination of events repeating themselves in a circular nature and fixed in written records, has started to vanish. It was superseded by an antinomic reality based on pure discourse or its complete lack, aimed at silencing and subduing history according to the material needs of the ensuing capitalist modernity. This idea is reflected in the novel *Nostromo* through instances of wistful meditation on the glory of the past, rather than direct resort to determined action. Conrad structures the narrative in ways that diminish any possibility of certainty or reliable history. The failure of major characters to achieve their goals, as well as the flaccid character of longing in the novel, which is devoid of any traces of hope, are, therefore, indicative of Conrad's somber prophesy regarding the impossibility of certainty in the modern world and the approaching death of history.

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