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OPTICS IN THE WORKS OF JOSEPH CONRAD

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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## ABSTRACT

## OPTICS IN THE WORKS OF JOSEPH CONRAD

BY NAVID SAEDI

This thesis explores optical physics in two novels by Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*. The first part of this thesis concerns the *Patna* incident in *Lord Jim* and explores how Conrad uses the physics of 19<sup>th</sup> century dioramas to outwardly express the psychology of the novel's eponymous lead. The *Patna's* masthead light, I suggest, follows Jim throughout the novel, manifesting in different forms and movements of light. The second part of this thesis explores the final chapter of *Nostromo*, "The Lighthouse," and argues that Conrad offers readers two lighthouses in the chapter. The first "lighthouse," the Custom House, confronts Nostromo with death through a transition from shadows to silhouettes, while the latter, Great Isabel lighthouse offers him immortality through light and materiality. Through my analysis, I hope to show how Conrad overcomes the restrictions of language to communicate through optics otherwise inscrutable truths of his characters.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Grossman for his generosity, patience, guidance, and time. Professor Grossman has influenced my writing and thinking beyond measure, and I will be forever grateful to have completed this challenging project under his tutelage. I'd also like to thank Professor Cunningham for her guidance early on. Thank you to my father, who has given me the opportunity of a lifetime in attending UCLA. Finally, thank you to my family and friends for distracting me whenever I neared the tipping point.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, and also to Rose, whose thesis I hope to read one day.

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## INTRODUCTION

My goal in this thesis is to introduce Conrad's use of optics into existing Conrad scholarship, which already has much to say about the narrative structures of his novels and has noticed his use of visual language. Conrad's approach to language differed from his contemporaries. He found written language restrictive as a medium for communication. For Conrad, the ongoing shift, sometimes called modernism, toward narratives focused on subjective perception inspired, I suggest, a special emphasis on optical language and details.

The optics I pay special attention to in this thesis are Conrad's use of shadows, silhouettes, darkness, optical illusions, and the movement of light. These often relay important information about character interiority, psychology, and other significant aspects of story that may otherwise be inscrutable or difficult to communicate outside of visual language.

I came to this topic by first recognizing a pattern of repetition in Conrad's work. His major novels contain similar optical motifs and use many of the same specific optical phenomena. Take, for example, the deaths of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and James Wait in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, who both perish in a darkened room, staring into the light of a lantern, unable in their final moments to see the light. More extensive similarities emerge in his nautical scenes. *Nostromo's* Golfo Placido scene and *Lord Jim's* *Patna* episode both unfold in impenetrable darkness on placid waters, and inherent to

both scenes is a psychological element that exists because of the extreme optical conditions.

Conrad scholarship, for the most part, has done a good job of drawing attention to his visual language.<sup>1</sup> Most importantly for this thesis, Susan E. Cook's 2012 article "Nostromo's Uncanny Light," analyzes the lighthouse at the end of *Nostromo* in context with the 19<sup>th</sup> century wave-particle theory of light. Other recent scholars who've explored Conrad's visuals include Daniel Hannah and John G. Peters; also, brief mentions appear in older scholarship from Zdzislaw Najder, Vincent P. Tartella, and Edward Said.<sup>2</sup> But all these scholars, with the exception of Cook, fail to connect

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad is widely labeled an "impressionist," in reference to his visual language and the way he uses subjective perceptions to build scenes. I, however, find this term problematic and slightly vague. Other scholars agree. Zdzislaw Najder and John G. Peters have both criticized the use of the term, Peters finding it a common misuse when conflated with the idea of impressionist painting, and Najder feeling it's inappropriate because Conrad himself did not compose his work with this in mind. In any case, my analysis will veer away from impressionism to explore a different aspect of Conrad's visual style.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Hannah, "'Under a Cloud': Silence, Identity, and Interpretation in *Lord Jim*," *Conradiana* 40, no.1 (2008): 48-49; John G. Peters, "Joseph Conrad and the Epistemology of Space," *Philosophy and Literature* 401 (2016): 98-123; Zdzislaw Najder, "Conrad in His Historical Perspective," in *Critical Essays on Joseph Conrad*, comp. Ted Billy, (Boston: G.K.



Conrad's use of optics to the optical science and advancements of his time, and none fully embrace how Conrad's use of optics enhances our understanding of his work.

The structure of my thesis embeds literary analysis in 19<sup>th</sup> century optical science and advancements, including optical discourse and forms of optical entertainment. "Nineteenth century scientists...were pursuing a single explanation of cosmic processes that would include light, heat, and sound and that would construe them all as motion, passing irreversibly beyond the reach of the senses and dissipating irregularly through the ether."<sup>3</sup> This pursuit is reflected in a multitude of optical novelties and forms of entertainment, which began emerging early in the 1800s. The diorama, for example, invented in 1820 by L.J.M. Daguerre, changed the way casual observers consumed art. Before the diorama, agency lay with the observer, as he or she could choose how to view a painting, for instance, from what perspective and for how long. But the diorama, a precursor to modern cinema, revolutionized viewing by making the observer *immobile*, and instead using the movement of light to change the perspective of paintings done on

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Hall & Co., 1987), 20; Vincent P. Tartella, "Symbolism in Four Scenes in *Nostromo*," *Conradiana* 4, no. 1 (1972): 63-70; Edward W. Said, "Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative," in *Critical Essays on Joseph Conrad*, compiled by Ted Billy (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987), 28-45.

<sup>3</sup> Gillian Beer, "Wave Theory and the Rise of Literary Modernism," in *Realism and Representation*, edited by George Levine (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993): 196.

large pieces of cloth.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, theater experiences like shadow plays, magic lantern shows, and Phantasmagoria used optical illusions to invoke terror in audiences with horrific image projections. Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century came an event that combined, within a natural phenomenon, these optical physics and the concept of subjective viewing. In 1883, a catastrophic volcanic eruption occurred on the small volcanic island of Krakatoa in Indonesia. The resultant debris created an atmospheric effect worldwide that would come to be known as Krakatoa Sunsets. Scientists and artists around the world increasingly inspected the heavens, attempting to record and understand the now uncanny behavior of the sun. Indeed, in all these cases, it was the *movement* of light that came into great interest during Conrad's time. Along with a transition in Victorian perception from an *objective* to *subjective* approach, 19<sup>th</sup> century optical physics forged a link between optics and psychology. Conrad's work follows this tradition.

This thesis, divided into two sections, will attempt to read two of Conrad's novels in relation to 19<sup>th</sup> century optics in hopes of revealing Conrad's resultant achievements with language, narrative structure, and character psychology. The first section, titled "The Immobile Observer: Diorama Physics in *Lord Jim*," will focus on the *Patna* incident in *Lord Jim* (where Jim misperceives that the ship is sinking and abandons it along with its 800 passengers), and will show how Conrad recapitulates the

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<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990): 112-113.

*Patna's* single masthead light in Jim's psychology, through optical movements nested in diorama physics. The second section, titled "*Nostromo's* Two Lighthouses: Death and Immortality," will analyze the third and final part of *Nostromo*, "The Lighthouse," suggesting that there actually two different lighthouses in the chapter, the Custom House and the traditional lighthouse on the Great Isabel, and that the former confronts Nostromo with death, while the latter offers him immortality. His death at the end of the novel thus reads like a suicide, which immortalizes his name through light.

My overall goal with this thesis is to continue the trend in recent decades toward a scientific reading of Conrad's work. Most of my observations will connect traditional Conrad scholarship concerning character development and psychology with more recent observations about science and visuality. There are, admittedly, several ways to approach this topic. Readings based in character and narrative theory, for example, are available and completely valid. I, however, have decided instead to focus on optics in relation to subjectivity and the development of character psychology. I've narrowed my focus to Conrad, as I feel he, when compared to likeminded contemporaries, such as Henry James and Thomas Hardy, most readily represents these aspects in his work. Henry James especially offers a good counterpoint to Conrad, as James, often grouped together with Conrad as a "modernist" or "impressionist," also uses subjectivity in his work, but does so at the expense of visuality.<sup>5</sup> Isabel Archer's famous stream-of-

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<sup>5</sup> James embraced visuals in his own right. He, like Conrad, found great interest in the evolution of the optical tools of his time. Several of his works, such as "Daisy Miller,"

consciousness monologue in *Portrait of a Lady*, for example, while demonstrably subjective, remains confined within her head as feelings expressed through free indirect discourse, subjectivity expressed through words that connote emotions rather than images that engage the psyche. Conrad, conversely, veers away from such a restrictive point of view and instead expresses character psychology through visuality, using subjectivity and optics in place of more traditional literary techniques.

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*Portrait of a Lady*, and *What Maisie Knew*, reference or use optical mediums directly. *The Ambassadors*, for example, even has a theme of illusions. But these illusions have less to do with the science of optics and are more attributed to the main character, Strether, misreading or misperceiving situations. What I'm suggesting is that while James draws inspiration from 19<sup>th</sup> century optics, Conrad fully embraces and instantiates the optical physics of his day inseparably from the content of his stories. For an excellent overview of Henry James and optics see Jonathan Freedman, "The Ambassadors and the Culture of Optical Illusion," *Raritan-a Quarterly Review* 34, no.3 (2015): 133-157.

### THE IMMOBILE OBSERVER: DIORAMA PHYSICS IN *LORD JIM*

There are three separate narrators in *Lord Jim*. The first is a traditional, third-person narrator. Then, embedded within this larger narrative, is Marlow, a seaman spinning a yarn about a remarkable young man he once encountered—Jim. Third, Jim himself is allotted considerable narrative space, as Marlow often quotes their conversations verbatim. All three narratives run parallel to one another and revolve around a central event, the *Patna* incident, which sets the entire novel in motion. Jim, an officer on the *Patna*, abandons the ship with three other officers as he begins to suspect the ship, with its 800 passengers, is sinking. The narrative unfolds outward from this event and is designed entirely to test Jim's resolve in recovering his dignity and reassembling his identity after the episode essentially ends his maritime career.

Conrad scholarship has recognized the complexity of *Lord Jim* and responded to it by approaching the novel from multiple perspectives. A considerable portion of criticism focuses on the novel's remarkable narrative structure. In the early fifties, Robert F. Haugh divided *Lord Jim's* narrative structure into three separate *jumps*, each corresponding to a stage of Jim's psychological progression.<sup>6</sup> Since then, several scholars have either responded to or built upon his claims. In 1972 Edward Said deemed *Lord Jim* "one of the first of Conrad's extended narratives to make knowledge,

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<sup>6</sup> Robert F. Haugh, "The Structure of 'Lord Jim,'" *College English* 13, no. 3 (1951): 137-141.

intelligibility, and vision into functions of utterance.”<sup>7</sup> What Said picked up on, and what subsequent scholars have expanded on, is Conrad’s expression through visuals. In 2008, Daniel Hannah explored silences and gaps of communication in *Lord Jim*.<sup>8</sup> He approached the subject from inside the narrative, looking at the incommunicable aspects of Jim’s identity crisis, and, on an aesthetic level, claiming Conrad’s multiple parallel narratives create a silence for the author, while widening the possibilities of interpretation from the reading public. Recently, in 2011, Reuben Sanchez built directly on Haugh’s observations by exploring *Lord Jim* as a circular narrative told through repetitive themes, events, and imagery.<sup>9</sup>

While it’s difficult to encompass the broad range of arguments about *Lord Jim*, the scholarship I’ve mentioned will hopefully provide a glimpse of what is noteworthy about what Conrad has achieved with his experimental narrative structure. What I’m most interested in, however, is how this narrative structure forces Conrad to innovate his language and imagery. All the scholars I’ve mentioned agree that Conrad found difficulty not just in the expressive capabilities of written language, but also in

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<sup>7</sup> Said, “Presentation,” 39.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah, “‘Under a Cloud,’ 39-59.

<sup>9</sup> Reuben Sanchez, “Conrad’s ‘serried circle of facts’ in *Lord Jim*,” *Conradiana* 43, no.1 (2011): 61-83.

expressing the complexities of human issues through words.<sup>10</sup> This complexity deepens and becomes ironic when considering the artistic medium of Conrad's choice. Yet with *Lord Jim* he manages to overcome these communicative obstacles by offering a strong optical leitmotif.

Throughout my argument I will refer often to *optics*. My use of *optics* is less concerned with sight and gaze, and more focused on the behavior of light, its effects on characters' actions, subjective perceptions, or appearances, and also how Conrad's various uses of light imagery help ameliorate the novel's communicative difficulties or barriers of understanding. My argument will be framed in the context 19<sup>th</sup> century dioramas. I hope to show how Conrad may have drawn inspiration from the optical physics of dioramas—an immobile audience perceiving active light—to innovate *Lord Jim's* storytelling. The first part of my argument will be based around the Krakatoa volcano eruption of 1883, which took place on a small island in Indonesia, not far from the fictional Patusan—an event hugely influential to Victorian art and science, which spurred a conversation and eventual reconciliation between the two. The residual effects of this eruption physically changed the appearance and behavior of the sun as seen around the world, and the resulting phenomenon forced artists especially to alter

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<sup>10</sup> I must concede the fact that Conrad's novels are, of course, composed of words. But what I am referring to has more to do with the absence of visual imagery. Conrad, when exploring psychology, does not remain isolated inside of characters' heads. He instead makes manifest their inner struggles through subjective optical phenomena.

the ways they perceived and analyzed light. The Krakatoa sunsets created a *natural* diorama of sorts, which Conrad represents in his descriptions and uses of light in relation to Jim and Marlow on Patusan. The second part of my argument concerns Jim's abandonment of the *Patna*. I will discuss the movement of light within the *Patna* scene, both physically, and also figuratively, in how Conrad imitates or recreates the *Patna's* masthead light to follow Jim throughout the novel. These successive repetitions, I will argue, are an outward expression of Jim's inability to free himself psychologically from the *Patna* incident. Through these arguments, I hope to show how the diorama epitomizes Conrad's structure in *Lord Jim*, having light move in relation to people, which allows him to overcome the restrictions of language in order to convey the otherwise inscrutable significances of Jim's experience.

It is helpful to think of Conrad's imagery overall in *Lord Jim* within the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century optical entertainment. Conrad integrates into his scenic descriptions some of the most popular optical media of his time:

There was, as I walked along, the clear sunshine, a brilliance too passionate to be consoling, the streets full of jumbled bits of colour like a damaged *kaleidoscope*: yellow, green, blue, dazzling white...Under the shade of a lonely tree in the



courtyard, the villagers...sat in a picturesque group looking like a *chromolithograph* of a camp in a book of Eastern travel.<sup>11</sup>

The references to kaleidoscopes and chromolithographs let us know that these forms of optical media were on Conrad's mind and useful to him in communicating through an alternate medium.<sup>12</sup> *Lord Jim* carries this frustration as a leitmotif threaded through the three previously mentioned concurrent narratives. "When [Conrad] employs multiple narrators in *Lord Jim*, he is less intent on justifying how Marlow knows what he knows than in demonstrating how different people see the same event differently."<sup>13</sup>

Jim's narrative wants to convince Marlow to believe in his retelling of the *Patna* incident, while Marlow seeks to justify to himself and his audience his investment in Jim, who is disgraced. Both men find difficulty putting into words their feelings and

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, ed. Jacques Berthoud (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 114. Italics mine.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Said comments on Conrad's relationship with language, saying: "For Conrad the meaning produced by writing was a kind of *visual* outline to which written language can approach only from the outside and asymptotically. We can perhaps ascribe this hobbling limitation upon words to Conrad's concurrent faith in the supremacy of the visible and his radical doubt of the mimetic power available to written language" in "Presentation," 33.

<sup>13</sup> Peters, "Epistemology," 120.

experiences. To this end, Edward Said observes “[Conrad’s] use of such devices as the inquiry [into the *Patna* incident]...incarnates the process of drawing near in retrospective language to a sight...for which language might no longer be necessary.”<sup>14</sup> More recently, Daniel Hannah explores silence in *Lord Jim* as an alternative to spoken language, an avenue to understanding and a way to affirm mutual comprehension. Language can even become “disruptive,” as sometimes it fails to communicate the complexities of the human experience.<sup>15</sup> “The founding moment for Jim and Marlow” in the courtroom at Jim’s inquiry is borne out of “the silent affirming of silence”<sup>16</sup> as Jim stammers during his questioning and finds brief respite in a shared glance with Marlow, who’s sitting in the audience.<sup>17</sup> Thus Conrad elevates communication beyond spoken language, into the realm of the visual.

The diorama, refined for mass consumption by Daguerre in 1820, embraced visuality and created a new optical experience, which combined elements of traditional art and theater with advancements in machinery.<sup>18</sup> It consisted of a large painting,

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<sup>14</sup> Said, “Presentation,” 33

<sup>15</sup> Hannah, “Under a Cloud,” 43.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 24

<sup>18</sup> Crary has an entire chapter dedicated to the most popular 19<sup>th</sup> century optical media and how they functioned. See Crary, *Techniques*, 97-136.

usually done on some sort of cloth, lit from different angles to transform the aspect of a scene. Jonathan Crary analyzes the diorama as an essential optical advancement, saying:

Unlike the static panorama painting which first appeared in the 1790s, the Diorama is based on the incorporation of an *immobile* observer into a mechanical apparatus and a subjection to a predesigned temporal unfolding of optical experience. The circular or semi-circular panorama painting clearly broke with the localized point of view of perspective painting or the camera obscura, allowing the spectator and ambulatory ubiquity...The multi-media Diorama removed that autonomy from the observer, situating the audience on a circular platform that was slowly moved, permitting views of the different scenes and shifting light effects.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This quote is not found in Crary's book, but it does appear in an article of the same name published in *October*. All other Crary citations refer to the book. Crary, "Techniques of the Observer," *October* 45 (1988): 22.

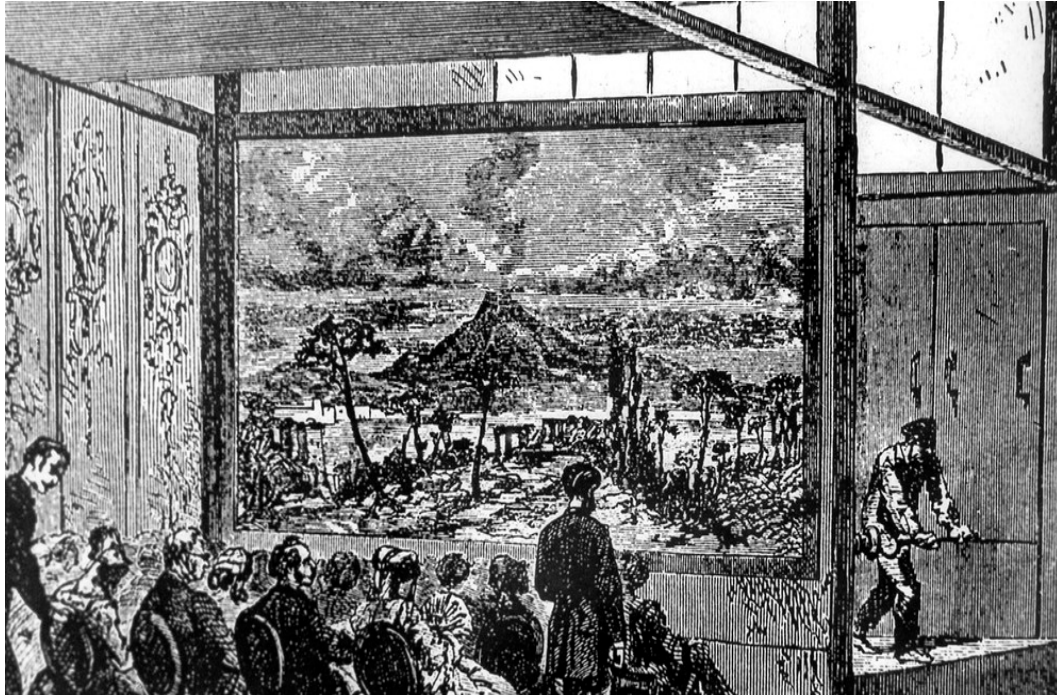


Figure 1. Diorama, 1848. Audience watches a recreation of the eruption of Mount Etna, while an apprentice manipulates light from behind the screen.

Conrad adopts the fundamentals of the diorama and applies them to *Lord Jim*. Of particular interest here is the *immobility* of the audience and the *movement* of light. “In light-based media, light does not simply illuminate existing scenes; it creates them.”<sup>20</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, in his book *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, makes this distinction to differentiate between the notion of light as something that makes the world visible, or that, alternatively, creates the visible world. The diorama, in Schivelbusch’s view, is spectacular because of how it

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<sup>20</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, translated by Angela Davies (Munich Wien: University of California Press, 1988), 220.

immerses its observers completely. It creates, through light movement, a sort of dream world, inside of which observers can lose themselves, as if becoming part of the painting itself.<sup>21</sup>

A great example of diorama physics occurs during Marlow's final departure from Jim and Patusan. The account begins with a diorama-staged scene, as Marlow describes Patusan "like a picture created by fancy on a canvas, upon which, after long contemplation, you turn your back for the last time. It remains in the memory motionless, unfaded, with its life arrested, in an unchanging light."<sup>22</sup> Immediately, Marlow creates for us an account of a *natural* diorama, composed of Patusan's natural light and landscape. But he sets himself apart from Jim by reclaiming his agency as a viewer. Notice how the light, from Marlow's perspective, is *unchanging*. By turning his back, he is, therefore, no longer the "*immobile* observer," in Jonathan Crary's words, but an active one who decides the effect of what he perceives. Jim, however, remains immobile throughout the entire scene, subject to the natural diorama's psychological effects. This fact is accentuated as Jim and Marlow take a boat downriver to a beach

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<sup>21</sup> Much of Schivelbusch's observations come from the fact that the audiences viewing dioramas were essentially immersed in total darkness. The illuminated diorama print, therefore, became an overpowering source of light. In *Lord Jim*, the overwhelming power of light is evident, and we, the readers, follow Jim and Marlow into the light-manufactured worlds of Conrad's imagery.

<sup>22</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 241.

where a canoe is waiting to take Marlow “back to the world.”<sup>23</sup> Almost immediately, in Marlow’s account, we find the description of a “high sun,” putting them temporally somewhere around noon.<sup>24</sup> Then, when they land at the small beach, which contains Marlow’s canoe, the sunshine is described as “colorless.”<sup>25</sup> But the vibrant description of the scenery seems to contradict the sun’s colorlessness. “It was as if a great hand far away had lifted a heavy curtain,” Marlow says, “had flung open an immense portal. The light itself seemed to stir, the sky above our heads widened [...] I revelled in the vastness of the opened horizon.”<sup>26</sup> Marlow’s description matches contemporary first-hand accounts of the effect of viewing dioramas. The lack of visual distance between viewer and screen made it possible<sup>27</sup>

apparently to sweep away the boundaries, for the viewer, of a picture, that is, in fact, bounded. This effect is achieved by removing the frame from the picture and, after reducing it to a greater or lesser degree, placing it in front of the

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<sup>23</sup> Also of interest here is Marlow’s desire to leave the illusory dream world of the diorama, and Jim’s willingness to remain immersed. This contrast alone speaks to each characters’ mental state. *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted*, 217.

picture. The frame thus becomes an aperture for looking through, and the picture lying behind it appears to the spectator to be unlimited, while its 'visibility' is effectively heightened.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, Marlow's "eyes roam through space," while Jim has "his head sunk on his breast," never "raising his eyes, as if afraid to see writ large on the clear sky of the offing the reproach of his romantic conscience."<sup>29</sup> Immediately, Jim's conscience is linked with the sky, the light, optical conditions. The contradiction between colorless sun and vibrant scenery emerges in the "vast and increasing distance" between Jim and Marlow.<sup>30</sup> Where the former is *immobile* and colorless, the latter is vibrant, filled with life, "respond[ing] to the inspiring elation of freedom."<sup>31</sup> There is a clear distinction in this scene between freedom and entrapment. Marlow finds freedom in the extraordinary optical conditions, the "stirring" and "widening" of light; Jim appears trapped by them.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Alfred Auerbach quoted in Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted*, 217.

<sup>29</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 241.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>32</sup> Jim's entrapment is another common sensation felt by 19<sup>th</sup> century diorama audiences. On source describes the feeling as an "impossibility of withdrawing from delusion. I feel as though I am chained to it with iron bands." See Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted*, 215.

The link between Jim and the sun deepens as the scene progresses. As Jim and Marlow get nearer to saying their goodbyes, the sun becomes “low...glowing, darkened and crimson, like an ember snatched from the fire,” and “the sea lay outspread offering all its immense stillness to the approach of the fiery orb.”<sup>33</sup> Jim’s eyes move, for the first time, landing “upon the waters, whose blueness had changed to a gloomy purple under the fires of sunset.”<sup>34</sup> The sun’s decent from high noon to dusk, and the correlating shifts in light and color, correspond to the figurative distance forming between Jim and Marlow. This scene contains what Zdzislaw Najder calls “[Conrad’s] two most characteristic devices: the narrator within the story and the time-shifts.”<sup>35</sup> “The result of these devices is a sort of ‘sceptical realism’” says Najder. “What is understood and explained is also carefully distilled; in the place of the author’s direct comments...we are faced with a subtle interplay of points of view, varying scopes of knowledge and insight, flashes of moral revelation. The time-shifts create an illusion of a gradual getting-at-the-truth about facts and about the character of the heroes.”<sup>36</sup> By the time we arrive at sunset, the “fiery,” toiling sun represents Jim’s inner turmoil, which Marlow cannot *directly* comment on because it is not evident in Jim’s apparent stoicism. But perhaps he need not comment on it. “Who could tell,” Marlow exclaims, “what forms,

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<sup>33</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 243.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Najder, “Historical Perspective,” 21.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.



what visions, what faces, what forgivenesses [Jim] could see in the glow of the west!"<sup>37</sup> The powerful image of the sun, as Najder would likely agree, suffices for *our* understanding of Jim's predicament, even if Marlow himself is not fully aware of its intricacies.

Next comes the actual moment of departure, when Jim and Marlow say their final goodbyes. Several critics have approached this scene. Most recently, John G. Peters has said the scene "exemplifies" a "process [where] phenomena intertwine, ending in a unique experience that joins subject, object, and context in an interdependent event."<sup>38</sup> Peters analyzes the scene from two perspectives. His first reading finds "fluidity" within all the elements in the scene, making the optical conditions and setting inseparable from Jim and Marlow. His second reading is an epistemological one, citing Marlow's past and personal history as directly influential to his "perception of [his and Jim's] final moments together."<sup>39</sup> Daniel Hannah in 2008 and Edward Said in the seventies, both analyzed the scene in terms of Jim's inability to speak, and how this silence is one in a string of silences that pervade the novel and develop Jim's identity.<sup>40</sup> My approach to the scene aligns more closely to optics, specifically how the *natural diorama* of Krakatoa sunsets expresses, through the physics of dioramas, Jim's

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<sup>37</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 243.

<sup>38</sup> Peters, "Epistemology," 101.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> See Said, "Presentation"; and Hannah, "Under a Cloud."

psychology. I am attempting to combine these two strands of scholarship, suggesting that the inseparable optical conditions of the scene exist *because* of Jim's inability to speak, as a means of communicating to readers what may, keeping with the novel's theme of *silence*, otherwise go unsaid.

The description of the sun, in all its specificity and vividness, arrested my attention on first and subsequent readings of the scene. Particularly in this passage, which we find on the last page of the chapter:

Jim, at the water's edge, raised his voice, 'Tell them...' he began. I signed to the men to cease rowing, and waited in wonder. Tell who? The half-submerged sun faced him; I could see its red gleam in his eyes that looked dumbly at me... 'No—nothing,' he said, and with a slight wave of his hand motioned the boat away. I did not look again at the shore till I had clambered on board the schooner.

"By that time the sun had set. The twilight lay over the east, and the coast, turned black, extended infinitely its somber wall that seemed the very stronghold of the night; the western horizon was one great blaze of gold and crimson in which a big detached cloud floated dark and still, casting a slaty shadow on the water beneath, and I saw Jim on the beach watching the schooner fall of and gather headway.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 244.

Conrad divides the scene spatially into two halves: east and west. Marlow moves toward the western horizon, the setting sun, while Jim stands motionless in the east. In the first chapter of *Lord Jim*, the narrator tells us Jim “retreated in good order toward the rising sun.”<sup>42</sup> Now, Jim holds unwaveringly to this conviction, his retreat, by remaining where the sun will eventually rise again instead of following Marlow into the “great blaze” of the western sunset. But what I would like to draw attention to is the shift in Jim’s “retreat.” Jim himself is no longer *chasing* or *retreating*. Instead, he is immobile, while the sun, the light, is doing all the movement. In fact, if we look at the two halves of the scene, the western half contains all the movement—the setting sun, Marlow’s canoe—while the east lay still. This juxtaposition furthers the divide between Marlow and Jim. On one level, Marlow is drifting away from Jim’s position, and so there is a physical distancing. But there is also a figurative cleaving between their notions of hope. Jim’s romantic aspirations keep him always where the sun will rise, whereas Marlow’s pragmatism draws him west, “back to the world” and the safety of familiarity. This staging is also important because it allows Jim to face the setting sun. Marlow describes the western horizon as “one great blaze of gold and crimson,”<sup>43</sup> while “twilight [lies] over the east, and the coast, turn[s] black, extend[ing] infinitely its sombre wall that seem[s] the very stronghold of the night.”<sup>44</sup> A dichotomy thus emerges. Although

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Marlow stands in light, and Jim in darkness, each still faces the other, sees the backdrop of the horizon behind the other, and makes judgments accordingly. What each character sees is a reflection of the other's mentality. Marlow, as discussed, sees the darkness of Jim's fate and recognizes in his somber narration that he will most likely never see Jim again. Regardless, he still stops the departure of the canoe to offer Jim a final chance to change his mind. Thus Marlow, although recognizing that the probability of Jim leaving is slim, still acknowledges it *is* a possibility—he seeks in the darkness of the eastern coast a sliver of hope. This sliver of hope subtly manifests as a tinge of gold cresting the crimson sun behind Marlow, which Marlow describes seeing just before his final departure. Jim, however, facing the gold and crimson horizon, seems to see nothing of the gold, nothing of Marlow's hope, but, instead, as Marlow describes: "The half-submerged sun faced him; I could see its red gleam in his eyes that looked dumbly at me." Jim only sees red—only one possibility. For him, the decision has been made, all other options eliminated, all the wavelengths of the sun's light distilled to one.

In a strange bit of description, Marlow briefly focuses on the *eastern* horizon—"The twilight lay over the east"—despite the spectacular *western* sunset. This brief narrative turn toward the east at dusk can be linked to a decisive moment in Victorian science and art. The 19<sup>th</sup> century had scientists and artists questioning not just the science but also the process of observation. "Who looks east?" asks Thomas A. Zaniello. "Indeed this is the key question for a scientist or naturalist or, one might add, a poet, since the ability to 'look' where often no one else bothers to look is characteristic of both

scientists and artists.”<sup>45</sup> Zaniello goes on to describe the event that attracted more eyes to the heavens in the 19<sup>th</sup> century than perhaps any phenomena before or since: “On the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of August 1883, the volcano on the island of Krakatoa in the Straits of Java erupted violently and continuously, bringing death and destruction to a vast area of the South Pacific and changing an island into a rocky wasteland in a few days.”<sup>46</sup> This disaster became a central point of contention between Victorian artists and scientists in the 1800s regarding an optical phenomenon termed “Krakatoa sunsets.” After the volcanic eruption, artists and scientists alike began noticing spectacular sunsets, not just in the Far East, but also in London, Germany, and far-reaching places all over the world. These sunsets began appearing in the works of prominent Victorian figures, such as artists John Sanford Dyason and William Ascroft, art critic John Ruskin, and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.<sup>47</sup>

Although “a number of scientists stated publicly that it was impossible for volcanic dust to be ejected to such a great height and to be carried such great distances,” still, a great majority of Victorian thinkers attributed the residual dust from the volcanic eruption as causing some sort of atmospheric disturbance, which was responsible for

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas A. Zaniello, “The Spectacular English Sunsets of the 1880s,” in *Victorian Science and Victorian Values*, ed. James Paradis and Thomas Postlewait (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 258.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 247

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

the uncanny sunsets.<sup>48</sup> In any case, the event focused the attention of vast numbers of people to the movement and behavior of light. The rendering of these sunsets in artistic works was particularly important, since photographic technology at the time could not record color.<sup>49</sup> Yet the sunsets were so sensational that some artists' depictions were hard to believe. As one source describes it, "[I]f the Krakatoa sunsets had been painted by Turner, it would be assumed he was 'either delirious or drunk.'"<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, we can at least attest to the accuracy of Conrad's depiction. Conrad would have been in the area of the eruption a few months before it happened, and several voyages in the subsequent decade would return him there. We know that he passed directly through the Straits of Sunda (where the Krakatoa volcano is located, in between the islands of Java and Sumatra) around March of 1888<sup>51</sup> And he was constantly in the Far East from September of 1883 until the end of his maritime career in November of 1893.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps because of his extensive experience in Java, Sumatra, and the surrounding area, he situated the fictional Patusan itself just north of the Krakatoa

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>51</sup> Zdzislaw Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 106.

<sup>52</sup> Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, ed., *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 1, 1861-1897 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), xxi-xxii.

eruption. All this to say, that Conrad, perhaps as much any other artist, scientist, or intellectual of his time, was well-equipped to describe the sunsets, as he would have perceived them both before and after the eruption. But why should the accuracy of his description matter?

If we compare Conrad's account of the Patusan sunset with scientific descriptions of Krakatoa sunsets contemporary to his time, we find a remarkable likeness between the two. Below is an excerpt taken from *The Eruption of Krakatoa and Subsequent Phenomena* written in 1888:

At about 4 minutes after sunset the sky becomes slightly purplish...The purple soon becomes red; below the red are orange and yellow; and below them is a bluish band, into which the greyish watery patch has been gradually converted...At first [the sun] extends as an arc from W. by N. to S.W. When its upper edge has descended to  $10^{\circ}$  above the horizon, it becomes fiery red, and when nearer to the horizon, dark red... Shortly after sunset a red glow will make its appearance...being very feint at first, but as the brightness of the sky near the horizon dies away with the receding sun the red glow will expand downwards, becoming at the same time more brilliant, until at last the whole western sky will

be lit up with a beautiful light, varying from a delicate pink to a very intense scarlet.<sup>53</sup>

Conrad includes nearly every detail of this description into his narrative, from the gradation of the sky from blue to purple to red, to the precise directional trajectory of the sun to the brilliant mixing of red, gold, and scarlet as the sun dies. What Conrad achieves with his descriptive sunset is a scientific reproduction of the movement of light in agreement with dioramas. Notice how, in the structure of the scene, Jim's actions are reduced so that he remains immobile, while the rest of the narrative and descriptive emphasis is transferred to the movement of light. It is in these terms that *natural* diorama of the Krakatoa sunset becomes evident, and we most clearly understand Conrad's aim in relation to the optical physics of the phenomenon: Jim takes on a fatalistic quality, remaining immobile and helpless as the forces of the world work on him.

Light and movement remain inexorably linked in the *Patna* episode, which sets in motion the entire narrative. As Jim, concerned the ship may be in danger of sinking, inspects the bulging bulkhead of the *Patna*, "holding up [his] lamp along the angle-iron in the lower deck...a flake of rust as big as the palm of [his] hand [falls] of the plate all of itself [...] The thing [stirs] and jump[s] off like something alive while [he is] looking

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<sup>53</sup> G.J. Symons, ed. *The Eruption of Krakatoa and Subsequent Phenomena: Report of the Krakatoa Committee of the Royal Society* (London: Trubner and Co., 1888), 156-157.



at it.”<sup>54</sup> In the otherwise vague darkness below deck, the single lamp funnels Jim’s focus to the precise segment of the bulkhead where some sort of action takes place. The paint peels itself from the bulkhead, it seems, at contact with light. Jim admits to Marlow that the light provided him with a clear, unmistakable vision that ultimately convinced him “there was nothing [he] could do”; the ship was going to sink.<sup>55</sup> The image of the paint peeling off the bulkhead, whether manipulated or exaggerated by light, nonetheless is perhaps the most influential image in the entire novel, as it “overburden[s]” Jim with “the knowledge of an imminent death” and provides him the impetus to abandon the ship, which he perceives to be a lost cause.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps nowhere are optics more crucial to the plot than during the *Patna* incident. Most scholars who analyze *Lord Jim* incorporate the *Patna* into their argument. Daniel Hannah analyzes the residual effects of the episode on both Jim and Marlow, and how the inexpressible psychological aspect of it manifests itself in silences and gaps in language between the two men.<sup>57</sup> Robert Hampson and Richard Ambrosini explore how Jim attempts to regain his sense of self-identity while reconciling his actions against the seaman’s code of conduct, with Ambrosini’s analysis approaching the topic

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<sup>54</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 61.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>57</sup> See Hannah, “Under a Cloud,” 43-44.

more from a narrative-structural standpoint.<sup>58</sup> Most scholarship either takes on the novel's narrative structure, or the lasting effects the *Patna* episode has on Jim, or both. It is nearly impossible to discuss the book without at least referencing the incident and its residual effects. That said, there is one aspect of the *Patna* incident that has gone unexplored – the *Patna's* single masthead light.

While my comparison between Jim and the *Patna's* masthead light may be unique in Conrad scholarship, the idea that the *Patna* in some ways “follows” Jim throughout the novel is not. Several scholars have found in the narrative structure of *Lord Jim* three separate jumps.<sup>59</sup> The first one is technically a non-jump, when Jim fails to act while on the training ship. The second jump is from the *Patna* itself. And third is Jim's escape from Rajah Allang's prison in Patusan, when Jim jumps from the top of a wall to his freedom. All three jumps mark different stages in Jim's psychological development. I endorse this theory. Yet I would like to propose an additional way the *Patna* incident haunts Jim – depicted through optics.

Reuben Sanchez suggests, “[these] jumps...are part of a larger pattern of repetition,” and that “Conrad emphasizes repetition, seemingly *ad infinitum*, in *Lord Jim* [...] Although the story involves Jim's efforts to move forward – that is, to put the fact of the *Patna* behind him and manifest the heroic ideal he has of himself – he essentially

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<sup>58</sup> See Hampson, *Betrayal and Identity*, 101-137; See also Richard Ambrosini, *Conrad's Fiction as Critical Discourse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 116-191.

<sup>59</sup> See Haugh, "The Structure of "Lord Jim,""; See also Sanchez, “serried circle”.

wanders in circles.”<sup>60</sup> Building on Sanchez’s claims, there are several ways the *Patna* incident replays in Jim’s life. I will distance myself, however, from Sanchez’s assertion that these repetitions necessarily stifle Jim’s progression. As will become evident, Jim reliving the incident, even in subtle ways, allows him to take steps forward.<sup>61</sup>

While Jim is still on board the ship, after the other three officers have leapt overboard, he claims to have heard the *Patna*’s passengers, “‘Eight hundred living people,” yelling for him to follow suit and abandon the ship as well.<sup>62</sup> The psychological effect of the yelling is Jim’s main excuse for his jump overboard. Yet once he escapes the *Patna* and occupies the lifeboat with the other officers, the focus of his senses shifts from auditory to visual, despite the conditions being described as “annihilation,” it was so dark.<sup>63</sup> The *Patna*’s masthead light, being the only part of the ship visible from the lifeboat, instigates the shift from auditory to visual sense perception. In essence, the light becomes not just a metonym representing the ship and its passengers for Jim and the other three officers, but also the physical body of the ship. Any of the light’s movements, therefore, become interpreted as the ship’s movements,

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<sup>60</sup> Sanchez, “serried circle,” 62.

<sup>61</sup> Meaning, the recapitulations of the *Patna* episode seem to happen at times when Jim is making some sort of breakthrough, psychological or otherwise. These breakthroughs do not necessarily lead to good decisions; but they do lead to action.

<sup>62</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 81.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

and the light's eventual disappearance is unanimously accepted among the quartet as indicative that the ship has sunk. "The chief engineer declared that the mast-head light at the moment of sinking seemed to drop 'like a lighted match you throw down.'"<sup>64</sup> Jim validates this observation, telling Marlow "The lights were gone. No mistake. The lights were gone. Couldn't expect anything else. She had to go."<sup>65</sup>

Conrad imbues this single light with immense power. So much so, in fact, that its appearance eliminates common sense within its perceivers. Jim, for example, claims to hear "Shouts for help" as the ship is supposedly sinking, which the other officers deny hearing.<sup>66</sup> "So there had been no shouting," Jim later tells Marlow – "Imagination. I had to believe [the other officers]. I could hear nothing anymore."<sup>67</sup> Jim's denial is problematic. Based on his previous testimony, the night was not only impenetrably dark but also remarkably still and quiet, with little wind and placid waters. If the ship were sinking, wouldn't some disturbance, either audible or physical, be detectable? Based on Jim's and the officer's proximity to the ship, wouldn't, at least, the water beneath the lifeboat experience turbulence while the *Patna* was sinking?

The masthead light eliminates all these possibilities from Jim's mind. It not only controls his thinking, but it also assumes for him multiple forms. It at once represents

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

the physical ship, the voices of eight hundred passengers, and, figuratively, the death of his dream. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell observes, "Light, indeed...is one of the primary images in realistic novels concerned to dispel the illusions of their protagonists."<sup>68</sup> The masthead light dispels Jim's dream of being a maritime hero with an optical illusion. As Jim and the other officers lay immobile and helpless in their lifeboat, they witness the *Patna's* masthead light suddenly disappear. What they assume is the ship sinking is in fact an illusion caused by a single gust of wind: "Being thus out of trim, when the squall struck her a little on the quarter, she swung head to the wind as sharply as though she had been at anchor. By this change in her position all her lights were in a very few moments shut off from the boat to leeward."<sup>69</sup> The immobile audience, reader and four officers alike, thus think the light has been extinguished, when, in fact, it has only moved and been blocked by the body of the ship. This optical illusion proves crucial in Jim's psychological development, as it follows Jim throughout the entire novel.

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<sup>68</sup> Ruth Bernard Yeazell studies the various ways Thomas Hardy designs light specifically for the psychological probing of his characters and as a way to turn his protagonists into subjective viewers. Both the psychological element and subjectivity are immediate in the *Patna* incident, brought on by the optical effect of the masthead light. George Levine quoted in Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "The Lighting Design of Hardy's Novels," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 64, no. 1 (2009): 57.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

The masthead light follows first reappears in an encounter between Jim and Marlow. As Jim retells the fateful events of the *Patna* episode, he and Marlow are seated in the dining room of a hotel. In a break from Jim's narrative, Marlow describes a candle burning on the table between them, saying:

The dim candle spluttered within the ball of glass, and that was all I had to see him by; at his back was the dark night with the clear stars, whose distant glitter disposed in retreating planes and lured the eye into the depths of a greater darkness; and yet a mysterious light seemed to show me his boyish head, as if in that moment the youth within him had, for a moment, gleamed and expired.<sup>70</sup>

On an aesthetic level, Marlow's description of the candle flame mirrors Jim's description of the *Patna* light. Conrad's juxtaposition of this descriptive narrative against Jim's retelling creates the illusion that the *Patna* masthead light itself has been captured within "the ball of glass," and so has rediscovered Jim. Furthermore, it is solely by candlelight that Marlow is able to discern Jim at all, much like how Jim had only the masthead light to distinguish the *Patna* after abandoning it. Conrad provides a further layer of identification between Jim and the light, as the brightness of the candlelight darkens the area around and behind Jim, while providing his face and body with the grace of warm light. Immediately, we recognize the "mystery" of the light,

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<sup>70</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 93.

which Marlow describes. It reveals both the darkness and the youthful innocence in Jim. In the passage's final line, Conrad signals clearly the link between Jim and the *Patna*, as, just like the masthead light, the youth within Jim "gleams" and "expires," thus solidifying in our minds, and Marlow's, that, unlike for the other three officers, a part of Jim died when the *Patna's* light disappeared.

The second imitation of the masthead light occurs later in the Malabar hotel room. So far, we've seen Conrad manipulate psychology and interiority through various flames. But he uses other mediums of light to achieve similar effects. When Marlow and Jim go back to Marlow's room at the Malabar hotel, Marlow writes a letter inside the room, while Jim stands out on the verandah, staring into an obscure darkness. Initially, keeping with the trend, the only light in the scene is a single candle on Marlow's desk. By the light of this candle, Marlow is able to distinguish, just barely, the outline of Jim's back and nothing more. "Through the open door," Marlow says, "the outer edge of the light from my candle fell on his back faintly; beyond all was black; he stood on the brink of a vast obscurity, like a lonely figure by the shore of a somber and hopeless ocean."<sup>71</sup> As Marlow continues writing his letter, however, the "abrupt" noise of thunder forces him to "lift [his] head."<sup>72</sup> The following passage is a description of what he observes:

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<sup>71</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 125.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

The sustained and dazzling flickers seemed to last for an unconscionable time. The growl of the thunder increased steadily while I looked at him, distinct and black, planted solidly upon the shores of a sea of light. At the moment of greatest brilliance the darkness leaped back with a culminating crash, and he vanished before my dazzled eyes as utterly as though he had been blown to atoms.<sup>73</sup>

Marlow views Jim singularly and boldly outlined in silhouette against the incandescent sky, framed like a diorama painting by the door leading out to the verandah. The scene behind Jim then transforms from one form of obscurity, darkness, to another—total light, in the attack of a lightening storm. This sort of transition was common in dioramas, as light reflected or refracted from different angles could change night scenes to day, or vice versa, or even simulate weather, such as thunder and lightening storms.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 129.



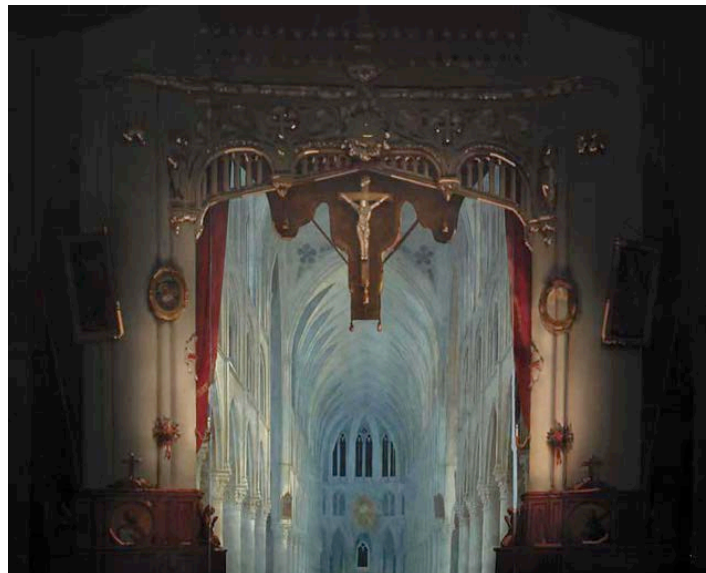


Figure 2 - 3. Daguerre, *Perspective d'une nef Gothique*, 1842. (Top) Reflected light. (Bottom) Refracted light. The angle and intensity of light creates changes in the image. Aside from night and day effects, the diorama was also able to create impressions of weather or to produce movement within the image, such as the flickering of torches or candles.

The two extreme optical conditions in the scene signal coexistence within Jim of both darkness and light, and, more importantly, that one equals the other, neither the

dominating mode. The focus of the passage, however, is “the moment of greatest brilliance,” when “the darkness [leaps] back with a culminating crash,” and Jim “[vanishes]” as if “he [has] been blown to atoms.” Again, we find Jim *immobile* as the light around him moves. One way to interpret this jarring transition is to view it as a metaphor. Marlow witnesses Jim’s “darkness” recede, and what is left is a youth of “great brilliance,” an internal “sea of light” exposed, contained within him at a molecular level, within the atoms that compose him. It becomes difficult, then, to wholly categorize Jim as negligent, nefarious, or selfish, as we do the other three officers, because we are literally seeing the light inside him made manifest. Another way to read the transition is that Jim continues to be consumed by light. We can interpret the sudden and annihilating shift from dark to light as an expression of that single image—the lonely masthead light—haunting Jim still, except this time the scene plays in reverse. Where the *Patna* episode went from light to darkness, with the disappearance of the masthead light, this scene flips optical conditions and goes from dark to light, signaling a complex and continual recapitulation of the event in Jim’s psychology. In any case, it becomes evident that the masthead light, for Jim, is a prominent source of guilt and counterfactual thinking.

The third imitation of the masthead light occurs during Marlow’s final goodbye to Jim, previously discussed. Marlow catches a glimpse of Jim, at their final meeting, when Jim’s success in Patusan has begun to diminish. What Marlow sees portends disaster. As his canoe drifts further away from Jim, Marlow remarks that Jim is “only a speck, a tiny white speck, that seem[s] to catch all the light left in a darkened

world....And, suddenly, I lost him."<sup>74</sup> We see, in this description, echoes of the *Patna's* single masthead light, which itself burned solitarily in darkness, only to suddenly extinguish or disappear. In essence, Jim has lost his agency over light, so much so that he himself, it seems, has transformed into the *Patna* light. Conrad subtly reminds us of the inescapability of Jim's fateful decision to jump from the ship. Moreover, if we compare Marlow's final goodbye to Jim and Patusan against his first impression of Jim in Patusan, we find a marked progression of character for Jim, represented by the movement of light. "He had regulated so many things in Patusan!" Marlow says, of his first impression of Jim on the isolated island. "Things that would have appeared as much beyond his control as the motions of the moon and stars."<sup>75</sup> Jim's success in Patusan translates for Marlow in terms of Jim controlling light. His growing confidence becomes, for the first time in the novel, a controlled agency over light. It seems to be no longer out of his reach or his control, as it was during the *Patna* incident, for example. But Conrad brings Jim full circle by divesting him of his control over light during his last meeting with Marlow.

The final and most comprehensive repetition of the *Patna* incident comes in chapter 31. Jewel awakens Jim in the middle of the night, holding in her outstretched hand a torch before his face. "The glare of a red spluttering conflagration [goes] on in mid-air," reminiscent of the *Patna's* "red side-light glowing large in the rain like a fire

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>75</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 160.

on the brow of a hill.”<sup>76</sup> Jewel’s purpose is to warn Jim of a possible assassination attempt on his life, and to excite him into action by offering him a pistol and the location of the conspirators, with the implication that he should kill them immediately. As we’ve seen throughout the novel, light once again instigates action. Jewel’s torch jars Jim from out his sleep, and then acts as a guidance mechanism, leading him to a house containing the four men who are apparently plotting his assassination. The argument can be made that it is Jewel, not the light, which technically instigates Jim’s actions. But two points counteract this assertion. First, Conrad places a greater emphasis on the play of light throughout the scene than he does any other factor, including Jewel or Jim. Second, an endnote in the Oxford World Classic’s edition of the novel shares the following insight:

[T]his torch, which first appears at p. 215 and is extinguished in the river at p.220, here becomes symbolic. The torch-holding female figure acquired iconic life after the French Revolution, for example signifying freedom with the Statue of Liberty (a gift to the USA from France), or of vengeful disclosure as in Picasso’s *Guernica*. Here Jewel gives Jim life by inciting him to violence – a success which she will be unable to repeat at the novel’s denouement.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 215, 81.

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Berthoud, ed., in Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 326.

Of interest here is the reading of the torch as a symbol representative of “freedom.” Jim, after arriving at the house, breaks in to find only emptiness and darkness. Then, from the obscurity, one of the men rushes at him with a kris<sup>78</sup> and Jim, *deliberately*<sup>79</sup>, pulls the trigger and shoots the man dead. Importantly, Marlow lets us know that Jim was “absolutely positive and certain” of the killing.<sup>80</sup> This, of course, would be the first time in the novel that Jim takes any definitive action, of which he is *positive* or *certain*. Here we find a marked progression from his fearful paralysis on the training ship, or his unconscious leap from the *Patna*, or even his escape from Rajah Allang’s prison, which had Jim running directionless and scared in the aftermath. Now Jim *approaches* danger. He embraces it. He is, in essence, freed from the constraints of his inability to be a man of action. The “unswaying flame burn[ing] blood-red without a flicker,” strengthens this reading, as its image dominates the otherwise obscure darkness of the house after Jim kills the Malay.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the murder returns credibility to Jim’s name. Three

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<sup>78</sup> A Malay dagger.

<sup>79</sup> I emphasize this to convey that the killing was not instinctual but calculated. Here is Marlow’s account of it: “[Jim] told me he was experiencing a feeling of unutterable relief, of vengeful elation. He held his shot, he says, deliberately. He held it for the tenth part of a second, for three strides of the man—an unconscionable time. He held it for the pleasure of saying to himself, That’s a dead man!” (*Lord* 218).

<sup>80</sup> Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 218.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

more Malay slink out from the darkness and throw themselves at Jim's feet, begging for their lives, now adding "Tuan"<sup>82</sup> to the monosyllable of his name. Jim and Jewel, by the light of the unwavering torch, lead the three men to a riverbank. Here, Jim audaciously recreates the *Patna* episode by urging the three men to "'Jump!'" into the river.<sup>83</sup> Of course, they oblige and then get carried off in the current. The three men represent the other three officers, with whom Jim abandoned the *Patna*. The crucial difference here, however, is that Jim does not join them. He extricates himself and counterfactually assumes the power, bravery, and heroics he wished he'd practiced that fateful night; he reclaims his dream. After the Malay men leap, Jim gazes at Jewel, searching for confirmation in her eyes. She gives it to him by hurling the torch into the river, "The ruddy fiery glare, taking a long flight through the night, [sinking] with a vicious hiss."<sup>84</sup> Most immediately, we recognize the torch as the *Patna's* masthead light, and the hiss as the sea on the night of the *Patna* disaster, which "hissed 'like twenty thousand kettles.'"<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> The word for *lord* in Malay.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

### NOSTROMO'S TWO LIGHTHOUSES: DEATH AND IMMORTALITY

As with *Lord Jim*, Conrad continues his attempt to express the inscrutable truths of his characters in *Nostromo*. One major difference between the two novels' use of optics lies in their treatment of light. Where *Lord Jim* employed diorama physics, the immobile observer and active light, *Nostromo's* light is fixed, contained within the structure of two different lighthouses, while Nostromo himself moves or transitions from one to the other.

This chapter examines Conrad's treatment of optics in the final section of *Nostromo*, "The Lighthouse," and suggests that doing so reveals Nostromo is making a final two-step journey toward his own death at the novel's close. There is seemingly just one lighthouse in *Nostromo*, which appears thirty pages before the novel's end and has endured widespread criticism from scholars who praise the first two-thirds of *Nostromo* and often dismiss the third section as tonally imbalanced and the lighthouse itself as merely a convenient trope to bring together several narrative threads.<sup>86</sup> Susan E. Cook's

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<sup>86</sup> Cook summarizes *Nostromo's* negative critical response, starting with "[Edward] Garnett's 1904 review in the *Speaker*"; to Ian Watt's "Joseph Conrad: *Nostromo*" (1988); to Brian Richardson's "Sex, Silver, and Biblical Analogues: Thematic and Intertextual Resolutions at the end of *Nostromo*" (2008). She reveals a trend in scholarship toward reading "The Lighthouse" as "forever in tension with the novel's more pragmatic and less idealistic edge," which creates a "tonal fracture" in the narrative. See Susan E. Cook,

interest, in her article “*Nostromo’s Uncanny Light*,” partly like my own, is in Conrad’s use of light in “The Lighthouse” chapter, and how the optical structure of the scene justifies the presence of the lighthouse as something more than a romantic trope. Specifically, Cook explores the ways in which the contemporary 19<sup>th</sup> century science concerning light’s wave-particle duality affects Conrad’s storytelling in *Nostromo*. The gist of Cook’s argument is that Conrad draws from the progressive science of his day, which had two contesting strands in wave theory and particle theory, and thereby extends light symbolism beyond the literary tradition of light solely equaling Truth, spirituality, or enlightenment. As Cook smartly explains, just as light itself is composed of two variables, wave and particle, one immaterial, the other material, so too does light in *Nostromo* assume dual meanings or connotations. Building on Cook’s reading, but attending to Conrad’s use of optics throughout the “The Lighthouse,” I make the case that there are actually two lighthouses—the Custom House in addition to the traditional Great Isabel lighthouse—and that the first confronts readers with the visual differences between shadows and silhouettes so as to convey Nostromo’s encounter with his own mortality, after which the second (the physical lighthouse) renders a second-step toward death in confronting Nostromo with the possibility of immortality. In Cook’s terms, I would suggest that where the Custom House uses the immaterial

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“*Nostromo’s Uncanny Light*,” *Conradiana* 44, no. 2-3 (2012): 134. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cnd.2014.0003>.



properties of light to confront Nostromo with death, the Great Isabel lighthouse uses materiality to offer him immortalization.<sup>87</sup> In making this argument, I will be suggesting that Conrad uses optics in “The Lighthouse” concordant with the scientific dialogue and artistic understanding of optics among his contemporaries, but that in doing so he also renders light and darkness into mediums that interact directly with human psychology.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Partly, we can attribute the material-immaterial contrast to the physical movement of the silver treasure in the novel. It is first housed within the Custom House and then transported to the Great Isabel, to be buried near the spot where the lighthouse will eventually be built. Thus we could claim that materiality, ethical and moral quandaries in tow, follows the silver. The silver is inexorably tied with Nostromo symbolically, figuratively, and literally, and thus important to understanding how the novel combines multiple themes, in this case the relationship between materiality and immortality. For a more comprehensive study on the link between the silver and Nostromo see Tartella, “Symbolism,” 63-65.

<sup>88</sup> In his study of physical spaces in Conrad’s work, Peters states, “Conrad works from an impressionist epistemology...to reveal a gap between subjectivity and objectivity, since phenomena can only be encountered through the medium of a single consciousness at a fixed place and time” (100). “[T]he resulting subjective space then leads to large questions of knowledge in general, as Conrad ultimately comes to the conclusion that all knowledge is contingent, dependent upon the context in which it is

The first part of my argument studies the Custom House, where the transition from shadows to silhouettes corresponds to Nostromo's epistemic progression toward accepting his mortality. Then, the second part of my argument deals with the Great Isabel lighthouse and how the physical structure of the lighthouse is vital to the novel's conclusion, which effectively immortalizes Nostromo.

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experienced" (98). This principle remains the same when transferred to optics. See Peters, "Epistemology," 98-123.

## TWO LIGHTHOUSES IN "THE LIGHTHOUSE"

### 1. THE CUSTOM HOUSE

The Custom House scene is in some ways the climax of the novel. It occurs about twelve hours after Nostromo's shipwreck on the Golfo Placido. While attempting to transport Sulaco's silver off the island and out of the hands of Sotillo and his rebels, Nostromo's cargo-lighter collides with Sotillo's steamer in the impenetrable darkness and stillness of the Golfo Placido. Having survived undetected, Nostromo buries the treasure on the Great Isabel, the largest in a string of islands just off the shore of Costaguana, and then attempts to swim back to Sulaco. Exhausted, he sleeps, marooned on an island for twelve hours, and then returns to land and aimlessly wanders along the shore until the solitary lights of the Custom House lure him in. Inherent to this sequence of events is a psychological instability, which Nostromo toils with. He knows that the mission to transport Sulaco's silver is dangerous and unlikely to succeed. Yet he accepts the mission. Any alternative decision would blemish his otherwise spotless reputation as an intrepid servant to the wealthy, and a man immune to failure. Partly, he takes umbrage that his name is the first uttered when the wealthy require reckless or dangerous favors, especially because they only compensate him with words of praise and nothing more. The incident on the Golfo Placido validates Nostromo's concern, as he is ostensibly dead upon his return,

having been thought a casualty to the collision, and Sulaco has already seemingly moved on from him. The idea to slowly steal the silver treasure has yet to occur to him. But through his encounter with death in the Custom House, Nostromo will evolve his once incorruptible morality to justify keeping the treasure for himself as a form of compensation, and, more importantly, a pathway to immortality.

Conrad does not introduce the traditional lighthouse on the Great Isabel for nearly 150 pages into the section. His decision to name the section “The Lighthouse” thus can feel baffling. But this title, in fact, confirms the reading of two separate lighthouses. If “lighthouse” is broken up into its two constituent words, “light” and “house,” we find an allusion to the Custom House, whose upstairs window, lighted by two candles “[throws] a gleam afar over land and water, like a signal in the night.”<sup>89</sup> The first “lighthouse,” therefore, appears in the form of the Custom House, which is introduced on the first page of the section, and which Nostromo later unwittingly encounters while in a state of mental unrest after his failure on the Golfo Placido. In 1987, Leonard Orr explored the possibility of the Custom House’s significance as symbol “warning [Nostromo] against violent action, against fear.”<sup>90</sup> Orr, who is well-

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<sup>89</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo*, ed., Jacques Berthoud and Mara Kalnins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 325.

<sup>90</sup> Orr supplements this observation with a brief parenthetical – “(as a lighthouse warns sailors)” – which is the only correlation between the Custom House and a lighthouse that I’ve found in any scholars’ work. See Leonard Orr, “The Semiotics of Description in

positioned to do so, never fully reaches the optical significances of the Custom House, and as a result he misses an opportunity to juxtapose his excellent semiotic observations against Nostromo's later experiences with the Great Isabel lighthouse.<sup>91</sup> I hope that a deeper analysis of the scene, built around the insight that the Custom House is itself one of two lighthouses in *Nostromo*, will help bridge this gap and clarify Nostromo's existential relationship with death.

Conrad constructs the Custom House scene as a meeting between two adversaries, Nostromo and Dr. Monygham, whose ideologies differ vastly, and whose opinions contrast in relation to how the revolution should be dealt with. Nostromo no longer wants to be involved with it, thinking he'd done enough to risk his life for a mission that was hastily and ill-advisedly concocted, and who is now feeling the sting of betrayal after seeing the widespread non-reaction to his supposed death during the mission. Dr. Monygham, on the other hand, aims to deal directly with Sotillo, the general of the invading rebel army, who is in search of the treasure Nostromo was tasked with displacing. Monygham has returned to the Custom House, in search of Sotillo, intending to lie to the general about the purported location of the silver, though

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Conrad's *Nostromo*," in *Critical Essays on Joseph Conrad*, compiled by Ted Bill (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987): 126.

<sup>91</sup> Orr's argument focuses on Hirsch's hung corpse and its semiotic importance to the novel. Many of his observations find that Hirsch, both in this scene and earlier scenes, forecasts the future events or consequences the narrative will explore.

even he, Monygham, is under the impression that the silver has sunk on the Golfo Placido along with Nostromo. Learning Nostromo has survived, though, Monygham now plots to convince the Capataz (meaning the boss—Nostromo's honorific) to undertake yet another perilous journey, this time 400 miles south through enemy territory, in order to retrieve an army from Cayta and effectively end the revolution.

The optical structure of the Custom House, I will argue, is one that involves the evolution of shadows into silhouettes as an epistemic statement. 19<sup>th</sup> century optical advancements found particular interest in shadows and silhouettes as forms of entertainment. Science linking optics with psychology inspired several novelties and devices, which used optical physics to entertain audiences. Magic lantern shows, shadow plays, and Phantasmagoria<sup>92</sup> all used shadows, silhouettes, or projections of some kind to invoke terror in audiences, and were among the most popular optical experiences contemporary to Conrad.

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<sup>92</sup> A type of magic lantern show where a light source invisible to the audience projects images of horror and death onto a screen.

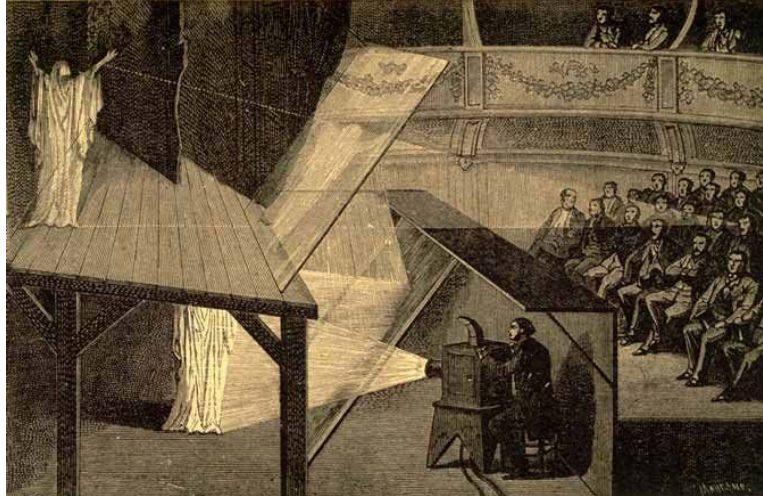


Figure 4. Pepper's Ghost, c. 1862. An example of 19<sup>th</sup> century Phantasmagoria. A holographic ghost is created for the audience through optical trickery.

These optical phenomena inspired what Jonathan Crary terms *subjective* viewing. In *Techniques of the Observer*, Crary explores the radical shift from objective to subjective viewing in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and how this shift reworked previous ideas of epistemology and empirical knowledge gained through vision. The 19<sup>th</sup> century transformed the observer into an "active, autonomous producer of his or her own visual experience."<sup>93</sup> This new observer radically reimagines the 18<sup>th</sup> century concept of vision, where objects in view impose themselves upon the observer instead of the observer imposing meaning upon them. "In the aftermath of Kant's work there is an irreversible clouding over of the transparency of the subject-as-observer. Vision, rather than a privileged form of knowing, becomes itself an object of knowledge, of observation."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Crary, *Techniques*, 69.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

Consequently, visual knowledge or truth within the Custom House scene is not imposed by objects, nor generated inside observers, but it is found in the relation between the two. Nostromo thus self-produces truth from the structure of optics within the Custom House.

The scene begins with Nostromo encountering a shadow, which is projected on a wall by the light of two candles<sup>95</sup>, in the otherwise empty Custom House. This shadow appears like the “shapeless, highshouldered shadow of somebody standing still,” as if “meditating, or reading a paper.”<sup>96</sup> While not immediately evident, it will soon become

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<sup>95</sup> The two candles are strange and somewhat confounding objects. They seem to survive through Hirsch’s torture and death, and then remain lighted through the night until they extinguish inexplicably at Nostromo’s touch. My analysis of the candles may be helpful for anyone interested in ocular optics. To me, they function like binocular vision, each representing a different perspective (Nostromo’s and Monygham’s), coming together in harmony to form a single image (Hirsch’s shadow). The scene thus becomes about two contrasting ideologies attempting to reconcile, with the gruesome reminder of the revolution hanging between them in the form of Hirsch’s corpse. That the candles extinguish at Nostromo’s touch reads to me like a statement: Nostromo is either unable or unwilling ever again to reconcile or relinquish his beliefs to someone else’s.

<sup>96</sup> Conrad, *Nostromo*, 305.



clear that the shadow's caster is in fact the projected shadow of Hirsch's murdered, tortured, and hung corpse.

Just in this short summary we find several similarities and differences between Plato's allegory of the cave and what I see as Conrad's recreation of it. They are similar in that for both allegories shadows represent a false image and so the lowest level of attainable truth. For instance, not only does Hirsch's shadow initially falsely represent a corpse as a living man, but it also conflates the idea of horrific death with peacefulness or meditation. A further similarity exists in that each allegory pursues the progression from ignorance to enlightenment. We could, at this point, read the scene as we do Plato's allegory, correlating shadows to ignorance and light to truth. But it is here that Conrad diverges from Plato. Where Plato's path to enlightenment removes his subjects from the shadows and brings them into light, Conrad takes the opposite approach by eliminating light from the Custom House altogether<sup>97</sup>, and instead forging a path to truth from one form of darkness to another: the evolution from shadows to silhouettes.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, where Plato offers straightforward binaries of shadows as

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<sup>97</sup> "Nostromo had advanced, and stooped slightly to look. 'I seem to have seen that face somewhere' he muttered [...] Seizing the remaining light, he thrust it under the [corpse's] drooping head...Then the heavy iron candlestick, as if struck out of Nostromo's hand, clattered on the floor." See Conrad, *Nostromo*, 305.

<sup>98</sup> Plato tells us "In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty." In relation to Plato's allegory, this quote

ignorance and light as Truth, Conrad complicates these notions. For Conrad, shadows, silhouettes, and darkness do not solely represent ignorance, but instead contain elements of truth *and* falsity, ephemerality *and* substantiality. Conrad divides the Custom House scene into two halves, the first concerning Nostromo's initial contact with Hirsch's shadow, the second half concerning a conversation between Nostromo and Dr. Monygham, where Monygham's attention seems constantly diverted toward the mystery of Hirsch's death, namely why he was tortured *and* shot. The intermission between the two halves divulges the circumstances of Hirsch's death, showing us Sotillo torturing him, and, eventually, shooting him through the heart. Once we acquire the details of Hirsch's death, a retroactive consideration of the shadow reveals it to be essentially a snapshot of Hirsch's moment of death. Because Hirsch remains in the same position in which he died up until Nostromo finds him, the corpse's shadow projects for Nostromo and Monygham the confounding mystery of Hirsch's end. The irony and complexity of the scene is that neither Nostromo nor Dr. Monygham can comprehend this fact.<sup>99</sup> What I am suggesting is that the interplay between light and darkness creates

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represents the progression from darkness to light, the sun being the last thing seen, and so the most true. For Conrad, a progression also exists, except inverted, from darkness into greater darkness, shadows to silhouettes. See Plato, *The Republic*, translated by G.M.A Grube, revised by C.D.C Reeve (USA: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 189.

<sup>99</sup> Dr. Monygham, especially, seems confounded by the physical circumstances of Hirsch's death. The mystery of why Hirsch was hung *and* shot remains perpetually

an indecipherable mode of communication, a sort of *shadow language*, which neither Nostromo nor Dr. Monygham can fully decipher. It is as if Conrad is teasing the limited capabilities of his characters, evidenced by the optical play as well as the narrative break between the scene's two sections, in a further commentary, in line with Plato, about what levels of truth mortals can attain.

Quite literally, therefore, we can read Hirsch's projected shadow as a performance. Indeed, this reading would place the scene in the tradition of "shadow theaters," which Rachel Palfreyman says, "developed according to a number of parallel myths as an attempt to overcome death."<sup>100</sup> People were "recreated after death as shadows to soothe their mourners."<sup>101</sup> Palfreyman goes on to analyze the work of Lotte Reiniger, a German silhouette artist, by elevating Reiniger's fixation on shadows and silhouettes as more than a mere aesthetic choice but rather one with deep psychological and philosophical implications:

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unsolved for Monygham. Yet Nostromo is not bothered by it. He is instead focused on the existential and ethical consequences of Hirsch's death, signaling to the reader a hierarchy of sorts, where Nostromo gains from the scene greater understanding of life and death through his interaction with shadows and silhouettes.

<sup>100</sup> Rachel Palfreyman, "Life and Death in the Shadows: Lotte Reiniger's *Die Abenteuer Des Prinzen Achmed*," *German Life and Letters* 64, no. 1 (2011): 14

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

[Reiniger's work a]esthetically and philosophically...embraces a theatrical tradition which explores a mystical relationship to the dead, refusing separations and opposites, and celebrating the metamorphosing body [...] the origins of the shadow theatre show a connection to death quite clearly – both Chinese and Turkish myths suggest that the shadow theatre is invented to allow shadows to substitute for the dead in a clear and successful attempt to fox the living.<sup>102</sup>

Shadows and silhouettes, especially Hirsch's, thus inherently contain what Plafreyman terms the "interplay between life and death"<sup>103</sup> It is this interplay that engages Nostromo and presents him with the existential dilemma between death and immortalization.<sup>104</sup>

Up to this point, I've been using shadows and silhouettes somewhat interchangeably. But it is helpful here to distinguish between the two, as both Nostromo

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>103</sup> Plafreyman, "Life and Death," 14.

<sup>104</sup> Orr makes the case that Hirsch's sole purpose in *Nostromo* is to serve as a symbol of fear, abuse, and death. The structure of this scene, Orr argues, kills, revives, and then kills Hirsch again. The significance of this is that Hirsch's body remains through the abuse, torture, and death doled out on it, and so his corpse assumes an air of invincibility, something transcendent and superhuman, or, in my interpretation, immortalized. See Leonard Orr, "Semiotics," 126.

and Hirsch begin the scene as shadows and eventually transform into silhouettes. In his book *Seeing Dark Things*, Roy Sorensen makes useful observations about the differences between shadows and silhouettes.<sup>105</sup> The center-point of his argument is that “An object’s genuine silhouette has a more robust resemblance to the object than does the object’s shadow.”<sup>106</sup> In essence, “A shadow is no more a part of man than his footprint.”<sup>107</sup> So to genuinely *see* an object it is not sufficient to see only its shadow. For instance, “You can see the shadow of an object that is outside your visual field,” but, “[y]ou cannot see the silhouette of an object that is outside your visual field.”<sup>108</sup> Much of the difficulty in inferring facts about a shadow’s caster solely from the shadow lies in how dependent shadows are on the position and intensity of light. A shadow evolves easily, whereas the silhouette of an image will remain constant unless the object itself undergoes a physical change. Palfreyman’s and Sorensen’s observations overlap in the notion that the appearance of a shadow relies on its light source, meaning the shadow itself will “mutate and shapeshift” depending on the conditions of light and certainly in candlelight as the movement of the flame distorts the shadow.<sup>109</sup> Shadows, therefore, move constantly and thus engender aliveness, while silhouettes either move or remain

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<sup>105</sup> Roy Sorensen, *Seeing Dark Things*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

unchanged depending on the bodies they're attached to. The Custom House scene plays with this fact in a way that combines it with several other strands of observational or optical science.

We find in these distinctions the philosophical nuances of Conrad's optical structure. The scene's progression from shadow to silhouette represents the gradual strengthening of Nostromo's understanding of his existence and mortality. Hirsch, we know, begins the scene as a shadow; indeed, Nostromo does as well. As he unknowingly journeys toward the Custom House, Conrad describes Nostromo as "flitt[ing] along the shore like a pursued shadow."<sup>110</sup> Conrad then deepens the connection between Nostromo and Hirsch by having both of them "die," Hirsch literally, Nostromo figuratively, as everyone assumes he has died in the collision on the Golfo. Then, early on in the Custom House scene, after the candlelight has been extinguished while Nostromo was trying to determine Hirsch's identity, "the dead blackness sealing the window-frames bec[omes] alive with stars."<sup>111</sup> At this point, Hirsch transforms from a shadow into "an upright shape nearly lost in the obscurity of the inner part of the room."<sup>112</sup> He is, therefore, somewhere in between a shadow and a silhouette, no longer a shadow, yet not visible to the unadjusted eyes of Nostromo and Monygham. Then, while attempting to parse through the multiple possibilities of his

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<sup>110</sup> Conrad, *Nostromo*, 303.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

fate, Nostromo “thoughtfully, star[es] into the obscurity of the room,” which is “pervaded by the gruesome enigma of the tortured Hirsch.”<sup>113</sup> Now Nostromo’s eyes have acclimated to the darkness.<sup>114</sup> That is, since no new light has been introduced to the scene, darkness functions as the medium to truth. Finally, at scene’s end, to Nostromo’s and Monygham’s “eyes, accustomed to obscurity, the late Señor Hirsch, growing more distinct, seem[s] to have come nearer,”<sup>115</sup> so that Nostromo appears “as shadowy to the doctor’s eyes as the persistent immobility of the late Señor Hirsch.”<sup>116</sup> Through a series of gradual, careful steps, Conrad finally makes Hirsch “distinct,” as darkness in darkness, while, at the same time, distancing the narration from Nostromo’s perspective to show how he himself has changed, subjectively, to assume the tortured,

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>114</sup> “Therefore each of you in turn must go down to live in the common dwelling place of the others and grow accustomed to seeing in the dark. When you are used to it, you’ll see vastly better than the people there.” Plato here is speaking about the leaders or guardians of his hypothetical perfect republic. Because they, and only they, have attained Truth, are they able to acclimate to darkness and find Truth even there. See Plato, *The Republic*, 192.

<sup>115</sup> Conrad, *Nostromo*, 327.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 326.

neglected, and *silhouetted* form of Hirsch.<sup>117</sup> This transition inexorably links Nostromo with Hirsch's corpse.

Moreover, the progression from shadow to silhouette also signals the passage of time. For now, Nostromo is protected by darkness, but once the sun comes up he will undoubtedly be discovered. His survival will be tainted with suspicion as to why and how he survived, and he will be questioned about the location of the silver. His existential ultimatum, therefore, goes as follows. Since most of Sulaco assumes he has drowned in the Golfo Placido, he could, if he wanted, disappear from the island and start a new life someplace else. This action, however, would essentially erase the years of work he put into building the reputation of his name, and he would be written into history as a once great man who suffered an ignominious end. The counter to this decision would be to accept Dr. Monygham's perilous mission, to succeed at it, and then to return in glory, immortalized in history as the man who saved Sulaco from Monterist forces and spurred the eventual founding of the independent Occidental Province. Nostromo decides on the latter. But, for now, I am less concerned with the implications of his decision than the *how* and *why* of it. I suggest that Nostromo decides to accept Dr. Monygham's proposition because he realizes, through a shared

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<sup>117</sup> For a slightly different perspective: "Nostromo's end is cataphorically described through his identification with Hirsch; when he again believes he is betrayed, he cries out 'with a violent movement, as shadowy to the doctor's eyes as the persistent immobility of the late Senor Hirsch'. See Orr, "Semiotics," 127.



commonality between himself and Hirsch's corpse, the shame and ignominy of neglect and death.

Several crucial beats in this regard come directly after Nostromo has made visual contact with the silhouetted corpse. For example, after glancing at Hirsch's corpse, Nostromo's repeated utterance of, "there is no need to talk of dead men. *But I am not dead yet*" implies a journey toward death, one started at the beginning of the chapter and continued here.<sup>118</sup> Next, as Monygham "develop[s] his view of Sotillo's dangerous influence," Nostromo "listen[s] as if in a dream, [feeling] himself of as little account as the indistinct, motionless shape of the dead man whom he saw upright under the beam, with his air of listening, also, disregarded, forgotten, like a terrible example of neglect."<sup>119</sup> Hirsch's silhouette becomes, as Mark Stockdale puts it in analyzing a different context in Conrad, "an elemental fact that frequently acts upon human consciousness...creating a dream context in which the familiar parameters of 'reality' are dissolved and in which it is as though the subject beholds his own existence from an

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<sup>118</sup> Nostromo first utters this phrase at the beginning of the chapter VIII, p. 298. Conrad designs the scene as a figurative rebirth into the world for Nostromo. It contains, therefore, an implied binary between life and death. This is why I suggest his repeating it a second time signals a process is taking place, one toward death. Conrad, *Nostromo*, 312; my italics.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

outside perspective.”<sup>120</sup> Nostromo sees himself while gazing at Hirsch’s corpse. In Hirsch’s silhouette Nostromo finds “the crushing paralysing sense of human littleness,” which he himself feels.<sup>121</sup> This commonality reveals to Nostromo that his existence perhaps holds lesser value than his death. Moreover, the psychology of this revelation disturbs him, because it shows in extreme clarity the shallowness of the reputation he has built for himself—or, rather, that others have built for him. While the shadow of Hirsch’s corpse undoubtedly appears alive at the start of the scene, so too does his silhouette seem to become more alive as the scene progresses.<sup>122</sup> At first glance, this fact may seem to contradict the previous scholarship I’ve presented about the movement of shadows and the relatively immobile stability of silhouettes. But in fact, in a way, it affirms it when combined with other scholarship I’ve previously mentioned. If we bring Crary’s subjective viewer argument into this discussion, then it only strengthens the claim that Nostromo’s subjective and personal connection with Hirsch’s corpse is Conrad’s focus in the scene, as we know that otherwise the corpse’s apparent revitalization would be scientifically impossible. At last we find within the optical structure of the scene a harmony between the four different strands of scholarship I’ve

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<sup>120</sup> Although Stockdale focuses his analysis on Conrad’s symbolic use of the sea, the same principles apply to Conrad’s use of optics. Mark Stockdale, “Conrad’s Sea: Invisibility and the Death of a Symbol,” *Conradiana* 38, no. 1 (2006): 2.

<sup>121</sup> Conrad, *Nostromo*, 312.

<sup>122</sup> See Conrad, *Nostromo*, 310.

presented – Palfreyman’s life and death binaries, Sorenson’s epistemic analysis, Crary’s subjective observer, and Stockdale’s relation between symbols and consciousness – all combining in Nostromo’s existential encounter with Hirsch’s corpse.<sup>123</sup>

Consequently, Nostromo takes a conscious step away from his established name, denouncing his identity and his accomplishments. When, for instance, Dr. Monygham attempts to sympathize with Nostromo by using Nostromo’s revered nickname, Capataz, Nostromo lashes out, “The Capataz is undone, destroyed. There is no Capataz. Oh no! You will find the Capataz no more.”<sup>124</sup> Directly after this pronouncement, Nostromo’s “eyes [meet] again the shape of the murdered man suspended in his awful

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<sup>123</sup> Sorenson makes the useful distinction between shadows and silhouettes and the extent to which each can tell us about the object it belongs to. Hirsch’s shadow, for example, gives us a different narrative than his silhouette, most obviously in that he still appears alive in shadow form; Palfreyman then builds on these distinctions showing how they function in art, drawing on an ancient tradition of using shadows and silhouettes as ways to bring the dead back to life; Crary then allows us to isolate Nostromo’s perspective and understand how the optical effects of Hirsch’s corpse can indeed affect Nostromo’s psychology; Stockdale rounds out these observations by showing how Conrad uses symbolism and visuality throughout his work as a means of accessing consciousness.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

immobility," and "he ask[s], wondering gently – 'Why did Sotillo give the estrapade<sup>125</sup> to this pitiful wretch?'"<sup>126</sup> Nostromo's response to Hirsch is sympathetic. Moreover, it is the first real sign of sympathy Nostromo has shown thus far in the novel. I read this moment as the moment of Nostromo's direct contact with his own mortality. He understands that if this disgraceful death happened to Hirsch, it could also happen to him. Based on how his "acquaintances" tasked him with a reckless mission to transfer Sulaco's silver and betrayed immediately after his false death, Nostromo realizes that no protection will stand in Sotillo's way if the general chooses to give Nostromo the same treatment he gave to Hirsch.<sup>127</sup> Nostromo's denunciation of his own name, therefore, reads not as an effort toward reinventing his identity, but more a declaration of intent; it adumbrates his death at the end of the novel. Nostromo never reinvents himself. In fact, the events at the end of the novel enhance, if anything, the identity he already has in place. His death, I suggest, is a form of suicide, which will allow Nostromo to keep agency over his fate, and, as will become evident, immortalize his name.

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<sup>125</sup> A form of torture where the wrists are tied behind the back and pulled up above the head, supporting the entire weight of a suspended body.

<sup>126</sup> Conrad, *Nostromo*, 314.

<sup>127</sup> Nostromo explains to Dr. Monygham the pain of betrayal after realizing no one cared after learning of his supposed death, and that the mission to transport the silver was "a fool's business that could not end well." See *Ibid.*, 309.

## 2. THE GREAT ISABEL LIGHTHOUSE

A mere thirty pages before the end of the novel, Conrad introduces the proper lighthouse on the Great Isabel. An endnote in the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Nostromo* tells us, "in the late nineteenth century small lighthouses would have been equipped with incandescent oil-vapour lighting focused by compound-lens mirrors. There is no hint of electricity on the Great Isabel."<sup>128</sup>

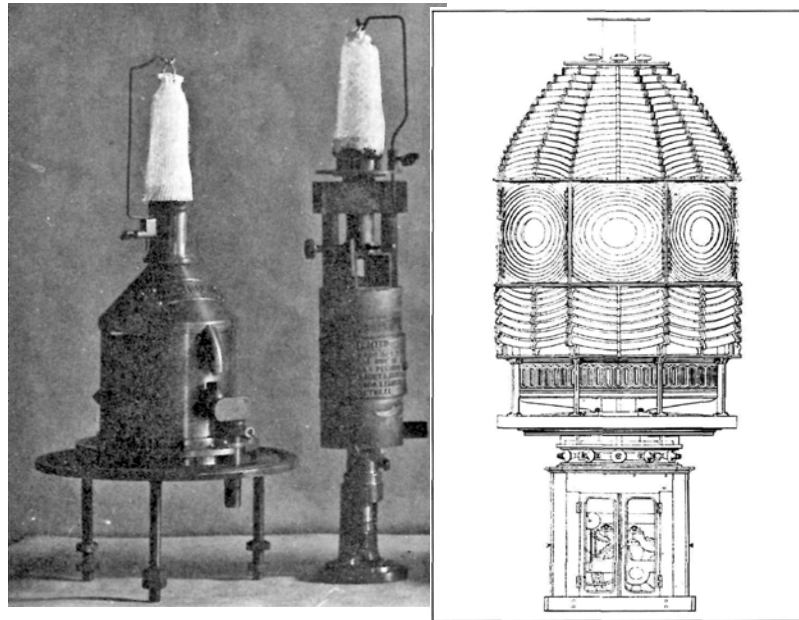


Figure 5-6. (Left) Incandescent oil lamps, widely used in lighthouses before the advent of electricity. (Right) the refracting apparatus or compound-lens mirror.

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<sup>128</sup> Conrad, *Nostromo*, 447en395.

As I see it, the Great Isabel lighthouse is an object of materiality, evidenced by two facts. Aside from being considered privately owned property, lighthouses require manual labor to keep them operating and in good condition.<sup>129</sup> The lamps must be tended to, cleaned of excess filament and replenished with oil; the compound-lens must be shined and kept optimally reflective; the rotating apparatus must be cranked periodically to keep the light rotating. Lighthouse keepers were tasked with more duties than these, but at least the extent of their importance is evident; the light cannot operate autonomously. These material aspects of the lighthouse are what assist Nostromo's eventual self-sacrifice in hopes of achieving immortality, not the light itself, as he initially feared would lead to his demise. It is, after all, the lighthouse's need for a watcher that prompts Nostromo to elect Georgio Viola, a close friend, and his daughters, to relocate to the Great Isabel. Their permanent residence on the island gives Nostromo a legitimate reason to continually visit the Great Isabel, while slowly stealing from his hidden stockpile of silver.

The lighthouse, when first introduced, is in the process of being constructed. It initially fills Nostromo with "amazed dread."<sup>130</sup> This is reminiscent of how Nostromo feels on first viewing Hirsch's shadow in the Custom House. Similar to that scene, the narrative here signals to readers that a progression is underway, this time represented

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<sup>129</sup> "'The light is private property,' [Captain Mitchell] used to explain. 'It belongs to my company.'" See Conrad, *Nostromo*, 379.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

by the in-process construction of the lighthouse. Just as he did with Hirsch's silhouetted corpse, Nostromo again discovers facts about himself while gazing at the lighthouse. For example, shortly after the first time he sees the lighthouse under construction, Nostromo's thoughts turn to death and suicide:

He was checked by the thought that [suicide] was no escape. He imagined himself dead, and the disgrace, the shame going on. Or, rather, properly speaking, he could not imagine himself dead. He was possessed too strongly by the sense of his own existence, a thing of infinite duration in its changes, to grasp the notion of finality. The earth goes on for ever.<sup>131</sup>

The lighthouse imbues Nostromo with a sense of invincibility, as if the structure itself, towering on a cliff over land and sea, anticipates its permanence even in its incipient stage. This feeling of invincibility is in sharp contrast to the mortal dread he experienced in the candlelight of the Custom House, while watching the shadow of a dead Hirsch flicker and come to life in his view. In that scene, Nostromo seemingly comes away humbled by his mortality and reconciled to the fact that there are more important and substantive issues at hand than his unblemished reputation. Yet, with the image of the lighthouse, Conrad reverses this epiphany. Now Nostromo is

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<sup>131</sup> Conrad, *Nostromo*, 377.

“possessed too strongly by the sense of his own existence...to grasp the notion of finality.” This reversal is crucial to the novel’s ending.

More than one critic has discussed Jim’s murder at the hands of Doramin in *Lord Jim* as an act of suicide.<sup>132</sup> Conrad is not shy about repeating motifs, especially when killing his characters.<sup>133</sup> I suggest, therefore, that the suicide reading is available for *Nostromo* as well. With the enduring presence of the lighthouse, Conrad solidifies in Nostromo’s mind the idea of eternity and legacy. The lighthouse is, after all, a symbol of the endurance of the Sulacan people, who’ve survived yet another violent revolution, this time with such a complete victory that they’ve successfully seceded from Costaguana to form their own independent Occidental Republic. The Republic has quickly industrialized and developed, and is thus in need of lighthouse to assist its burgeoning trade industry. Perhaps more than anyone, Nostromo is responsible for this

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<sup>132</sup> See Matthew G. Condon’s “The Cost of Redemption in Conrad’s *Lord Jim*,” *Literature and Theology* 12, no. 2 (1998): 135-148; Also Ian P. Watt, “The Ending of *Lord Jim*,” in *Critical Essays on Joseph Conrad*, edited by Ted Billy (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1987): 85-101.

<sup>133</sup> See the deaths of James Wait in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* and Kurtz’s death in *Heart of Darkness*. As mentioned in my introduction, both die with a lantern in front of their face, unable to see the light. We find a further similarity between Jim’s death in *Lord Jim* and Nostromo’s in *Nostromo*; both men are shot in a way that can be interpreted as suicide.



victory. By taking the perilous trip south to Cayta to retrieve Barrios's army and relieve Sulaco from the pressures of the Monterist siege, he directly plays a part in the liberation of an entire population. The lighthouse, therefore, becomes a symbol representative of Nostromo's legacy. Additionally, the lighthouse serves a purpose in line with other uses of light in fiction contemporary to Conrad's time.

Lindsay Gait Gibson studies the use of light in Thomas Hardy's work<sup>134</sup> and observes that for Hardy "the lighted window...is a visually permeable substitute" for obstacles that otherwise prevent romances from happening, such as "class disparity, the presence of other spouses, [and] the absence of reciprocal desire."<sup>135</sup> Conrad also employs this symbolic use of lighted windows in *Nostromo*. But he deviates from Hardy's use of light symbolism and innovates its application in two ways, through the structure of the lighthouse. First, he surrounds and infuses within his light sources what Susan E. Cook would term the binary of material and immaterial. Second, he allows the lighthouse to invoke and embody the ideal of romance while simultaneously impeding

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<sup>134</sup> The reason I've brought Hardy into this discussion, even though his use of light differs slightly from Conrad's, is to show that his contemporaries too were thinking of the ways light affects human psychology, spatial awareness, and interactions. Victorian writers who embraced modernism understood that light transcended the aesthetic value Realist writers prescribed it, and they reimagined light through science and philosophy.

<sup>135</sup> Lindsay Gail Gibson, "Hardy's Lit Interiors," *Thomas Hardy Journal* 30 (2014): 176.

its occurrence. Nostromo elects his affianced Linda Viola to be the lighthouse's keeper. The light becomes Linda's "duty," and while she's tending to it, Nostromo carries out a secret affair with her younger sister, Giselle.<sup>136</sup> The physical structure of the lighthouse facilitates Nostromo's immoral behavior; its light, it seems corrupts and "fails to enlighten," thus "disrupt[ing] a centuries-old metaphoric association of light with truth and illumination."<sup>137</sup>

A second, and to me more interesting way, Conrad uses light here is that he allows the light to create darkness. Practically speaking, the lighthouse's beam illuminates the sea while neglecting, and further darkening as a result, the land over which it is built. Where "Hardy's characters covet what they see through lit windows,"<sup>138</sup> Nostromo covets what lies in darkness. He becomes obsessed with the silver buried in the dark part of the island, which is further darkened in contrast with the lighthouse's horizontal sweeping beam, and he proposes to Giselle they clandestinely meet at "the window when it's dark," further subverting Hardy's symbolism.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

<sup>137</sup> Cook, "Nostromo's Uncanny Light," 128.

<sup>138</sup> Gibson, "Hardy's Lit Interiors," 165.

<sup>139</sup> Conrad, *Nostromo*, 391.

It is only fitting, then, that Nostromo dies in the darkest part of the Great Isabel island, within a shadow, “where the shade [is] blackest.”<sup>140</sup> One night, Georgio Viola, wanting out of pride to protect the sanctity of his youngest daughter, Giselle, from the advances of the thief Ramirez, prowls the Great Isabel with a shotgun. He mistakes Nostromo for Ramirez in the obscuring darkness and shoots him dead. Nostromo’s death is, as I’ve suggested, a form of suicide. Nostromo, who, like Ramirez, also lusts after Giselle, has been warned by Giselle herself to stay away from the island on this particular night at the risk of being shot by the overzealous Georgio. Nostromo implicitly ignores these warning, knowing full well the danger he is putting himself in. But why? Why would Nostromo seek a death as public and ignominious as the one he suffers at the hands of old Georgio? I suggest Nostromo’s legacy is at stake here, as shown by this passage:

Nostromo, the miscalled Capataz de Cargadores, had made for himself, under his rightful name, another public existence, but modified by the new conditions, less picturesque, more difficult to keep up in the increased size and varied population of Sulaco, the progressive capital of the Occidental Republic.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 378.

This short passage reveals the full cycle of Nostromo's psychological struggle and how and why the lighthouses become pivotal symbols in the novel. After spending years in a post-revolution Sulaco, which is now the capital of the newly independent Occidental Republic, Nostromo recognizes the rapid socio-economic growth that has taken place there. He feels for the first time that perhaps the country once synonymous with his name has stopped needing him.<sup>142</sup> In this sense, he regresses. No longer is his goal to repair his damaged pride and reputation. Instead, he reverts back to his former self, wishing now to etch his name permanently into the history of the Occidental Republic.

The lighthouse on the Great Isabel is a "traditionally romantic lighthouse,"<sup>143</sup> placed "alongside more modern technologies, pragmatic political uses, and capitalist concerns."<sup>144</sup> Like the lighthouse itself, Nostromo becomes a symbol infused with a mixture of romantic nostalgia and progressive modern ideologies. The lighthouse,

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<sup>142</sup> From a socio-economic perspective, the invigorated economic climate of Sulaco post revolution instills hope and ambition into the once destitute citizens. It distracts them with not only their own refreshed ambitions but also with the introduction of more advanced technology, like electricity; Nostromo no longer reserves a guaranteed portion of the citizens' attention, adoration, and respect.

<sup>143</sup> Meaning a lighthouse that uses oil-vapor lanterns instead of electricity, especially when the rest of Sulaco has advanced at least that far technologically.

<sup>144</sup> Cook, "*Nostromo's Uncanny Light*," 134.

therefore, becomes a symbol erected in Nostromo's image, a reflection of his inner struggle, in the same way Hirsch's shadow and silhouette functioned as a mirror in which Nostromo realized truths about the worthlessness of his reputation, the littleness of his existence, and about death.<sup>145</sup> Building on Cook, we might say that the issue being dealt with here in the aesthetic parallel of the two lighthouses—material versus immaterial, wave versus particle—is about Nostromo, set post-Hirsch on a journey toward death, either embracing the ephemerality of his existence, or, like the lasting materiality of the silver ingots and the structure of the Great Isabel lighthouse, striving for immortality. It is this immortality that he ultimately seeks and achieves in death. The optics of the ending of the novel confirm this reading.

Immediately after Nostromo's death, light in the novel no longer dies out but instead becomes sustained and material. The very next scene, for example, has Dr. Monygham walking under a row of electric lamps in Sulaco, approaching the Casa

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<sup>145</sup> Ludwig Schnauder reads the liberation of Sulaco as the direct result of the actions of what he terms "martyrs" or "the founding fathers," namely Decoud, Nostromo, Hirsch, and Dr. Monygham. In his reading, the actions of these four men were not altruistic but selfish, not coordinated but accidental, each man concerned the complexities of their individual problems instead of the revolution. We can thus read the lighthouse as a symbol honoring Nostromo's psychological journey and not necessarily his actions alone. See Ludwig Schnauder, "Free Will and Determinism in 'Nostromo,'" *The Conradian* 29, no.2 (2004): 59-74.

Gould. He commands Basilio, the majordomo of the Gould house, multiple times *not* to “put out the lights.”<sup>146</sup> Then, later, in the final paragraph of the novel, Dr. Monygham observes “the bright line of the horizon, overhung by a big white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver,” which is “the genius of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores dominat[ing] the dark Gulf containing his conquests of love and treasure.”<sup>147</sup> In the end, Nostromo himself seems to transform into “a mass of solid silver,” represented by the light on the horizon, thus embodying dual materiality and immateriality, and becoming eternalized in the history of Sulaco.

The main argument becomes evident: the construct of optics works in process to solidify and immortalize the ephemeral, internal, and deeply personal truth of Nostromo’s psychological toil with his own identity. Where the Custom House “lighthouse” represents the intangible mental realm, the Great Isabel lighthouse is the embodiment of materiality expressed through the construction of rock and light apparatus, and the necessary incarnation of the narrative’s revolutionary thread, the technological, social, and economic progression. Both lighthouses embrace optical motif and symbolism. In doing so, they render the otherwise inscrutable expression of Nostromo’s quest toward immortalization.

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<sup>146</sup> Conrad, *Nostromo*, 397.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

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