

## The Corporation in Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*

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### Abstract

Through its chronicle of the advent of corporate capitalism, Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* explores the tensions intrinsic to the *corporate*, and dramatizes the loss of individual integrity as the corporation grows increasingly autonomous. The act of incorporation originally is intended to endow the San Tome silver mine in the novel with an organic unity and sensibility, animating what otherwise would have been a mere profit-generating instrument. The fusion of humanist sensibilities and pragmatic considerations allows the owner of the mine, Charles Gould, to attribute qualities of personhood to the mining enterprise. However, it soon becomes apparent that the personhood of the corporation, which strives to realize the corporate will to infinitely perpetuate itself at all costs, competes with the expression of the individualism of those who purportedly own it or run it. The tension inherent within an incorporated business enterprise shows through the word *corporate*, which simultaneously denotes a physical, corporeal body and a disembodied, aggregate of many. *Nostromo* explores the precariousness of the organicist imagination that the mine, when incorporated, would create a social collective uniting individuals of disparate interests. Through delineating how the corporation corrodes the spectacular individualism of the title character Nostromo, as he becomes a willing servant of the silver mining enterprise, Conrad expresses his skepticism towards the practice of anthropomorphizing the business corporation. Like the silver of the mine, Nostromo, when incorporated into the corporation, finds the value of his actions defined only in terms of corporate philosophy, abbreviated in the novel as the pursuit for "material interests". At the end of the novel, it becomes obvious that the mine, immortal and amoral in its operation, consumes the initial idealism and eventually the human lives who have grown to be obsessed with it. *Nostromo* is an enquiry into the origins of corporate power, and the fictiveness of the *corporate*. Conrad's critique of the anthropomorphization of the corporation in *Nostromo* anticipates our contemporary concerns regarding the ontological status of the corporation.

## Reflection

During my internship at a law firm last year, I was struck by the imbalance of bargaining power between the business corporation and the private individual. My encounters with clients whose everyday life had been severely affected by the years of toilsome litigation fueled my interest in how the modern legal system places the individual in a disadvantageous position when engaging in lawsuits with the corporation, which is unbound by corporeality. This capstone project provides an invaluable opportunity for me to critically examine the genealogy of corporate personhood.