

Anticipating the Existentialist Hero in Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* and Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*

Mikhail Lermontov'un *Zamanımızın Bir Kahramanı* ve Joseph Conrad'ın *Nostromo*'sunda Varoluşçu Kahramanın Habercileri

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Abstract

Tracing the similarities and differences between fictional characters belonging to different literary periods may provide good insight into how a character type may evolve through time in line with changing conditions and perspectives. This paper engages in such an activity and attempts to explore the traces of the existentialist and absurdist hero as set out by figures like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in two earlier examples of Western literature. The paper first looks at Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1840), analyzing the major character, Pechorin as a "superfluous man" – a distinctive character type widely encountered in nineteenth-century Russian literature. It then focuses on Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* (1903) and looks into how the two major characters, Nostromo and Decoud, include traces of the superfluous man on the one hand and look ahead to the existentialist hero on the other. In doing all this the paper suggests that the superfluous man has evolved in time into the existentialist and absurdist hero and that the characters in Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* and Conrad's *Nostromo* clearly anticipate this development.

Keywords: Superfluous Man, Existentialist Hero, Absurdist Hero, Lermontov, Conrad.

Öz

Farklı edebi dönemlere ait roman karakterleri arasındaki benzerlik ve farklılıkları incelemek, herhangi bir karakter tipinin zamanın değişen şartları ve fikirleri içerisinde nasıl evrildiğini görmeye de olanak sağlar. Bu çalışmada böyle bir amaç güdülmekte ve Jean-Paul Sartre ve Albert Camus gibi düşünürlerin çizdiği varoluşçu ve absürd karakter tiplemesinin izleri önceki edebi örneklerde aranmaktadır. Çalışmada öncelikle Mikhail Lermontov'un *Zamanımızın Bir Kahramanı* (1840) üzerinde durulmakta ve buradaki "lüzumsuz adam" tiplemesi, başkarakter Pechorin üzerinden incelenmektedir. Sonrasında ise Joseph Conrad'ın *Nostromo* (1903) romanı irdelenmekte ve buradaki Nostromo ve Decoud isimli iki ana karakterin bir yandan "lüzumsuz adam" izleri barındırdığı, diğer yandan da varoluşçu kahramanın habercisi olarak ortaya çıktığı vurgulanmaktadır. Tüm bunları yaparken bu çalışmada, "lüzumsuz adam"ın zaman içerisinde varoluşçu ve absürd karaktere evrildiği ve de Lermontov'un *Zamanımızın Bir Kahramanı* ile Conrad'ın *Nostromo*'sunda çizilen başkarakterlerin bu değişim ve gelişimin habercisi olduğu öne sürülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Lüzumsuz Adam, Varoluşçu Kahraman, Absürd Kahraman, Lermontov, Conrad.

In the literary imagination the philosophy of existentialism is rightly equated with figures like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who created their most memorable fictional characters from the 1930s to the 1950s. But it is well known that existentialism predates Sartre and Camus, having its origins in philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). It is also well known that questions and ideas reminiscent of existentialism, such as the meaning of life and the predicament of the human

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being in an increasingly alien world and indifferent universe can be found even earlier in the world of art and literature. In searching for the antecedents of the existentialist hero, a good place to begin is nineteenth-century Russian literature, which witnessed the emergence of “the superfluous man” in the works of authors like Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) and Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883). One aim of this paper is to explore the portrayal of the superfluous man in Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* (1840) in order to see in what ways this type can be regarded as a forerunner of the absurdist and existentialist hero of the first half of the twentieth century. A further aim is to look at a somewhat later example from British literature, namely Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1903) to see how the major characters in this novel exhibit certain traces of the superfluous man and anticipate at the same time the absurdist and existentialist characters of the coming decades. Analyzing a Conrad novel to look for signs of absurdism and existentialism is an informed decision, given that Conrad has always been a novelist drawn towards pessimism owing to his “intermittent but powerful sense of the universe as a soulless mechanism determining human lives” (Watts, 1993, p. 65). Furthermore, Conrad’s interest in nineteenth-century Russian literature and especially in Turgenev, who named his famous short story “The Diary of a Superfluous Man” (1850), makes it worthwhile to compare his characters with Lermontov’s in order to see in what ways they are similar to the superfluous hero and in what others they depart from him. This paper will first focus on the concept of “superfluity” and elaborate on it through an analysis of Lermontov’s protagonist, Pechorin, in *A Hero of Our Time*. This will be followed by a discussion of *Nostromo* with respect to two major characters – Decoud and Nostromo – who change and evolve in the course of the novel to attain qualities reminiscent of the superfluous man on the one hand and the absurdist or existentialist hero on the other. All this discussion, it is hoped, will provide a perspective as to how an existentialist outlook was anticipated by earlier writers who were concerned with questions about the human predicament in an indifferent universe.

The superfluous man is a product of the social, cultural, and political atmosphere of nineteenth-century Russia, epitomizing the dissatisfaction, inactivity and indolence of a large class of educated people of the time. It is possible, however, to put the type in a wider context as Cedric Watts (1993) does in his *Preface to Conrad*:

He is the offspring of certain rather lonely, self-pitying and unlucky heroes of the Romantic period: notably Goethe’s sorrowful young Werther and Byron’s moody Childe Harold. In turn, he is the progenitor of certain neurotically self-conscious and rather impotent figures of twentieth-century literature: Rilke’s Malte Laurids Brigge, Eliot’s Prufrock, Sartre’s Roquentin (for yesterday’s Existentialist is last week’s Superfluous Man), Camus’s Clamence, Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert, and numerous futile protagonists in Samuel Beckett’s works. (p. 65)

As the name itself suggests, this character type is marked by a sense of superfluosity, which Watts (1993) interprets as being “without role or function; isolated from society” (p. 66). In his *Dictionary* Cuddon (1991) attempts at a general definition of this type, saying that the term “... denotes an idealistic but inactive hero who is aware of and sensitive to moral and social problems but who does not take action, in part because of personal weakness and lassitude, in part because of social and political restraints to freedom of action” (p. 933). A similar definition is provided by Paul Foote (1987) in his “Introduction” to the Penguin edition of *A Hero of Our Time*:

... ‘superfluous’ men were men set apart by their superior talents from the mediocre society in which they were born, but doomed to waste their lives, partly through lack of opportunity to fulfill themselves, though also, in most cases, because they themselves lacked any real sense of purpose or strength of will. (p. 10)

Two characteristics of the type stand out from these definitions. Firstly, the superfluous man is a character who is somewhat different from and usually intellectually superior to the people around him. That is, he is cut out for the role of a “hero”. Secondly, however, he is unable to perform this role because he is “doomed to inactivity” due to external circumstances

as well as his own disposition (Foote, 1987, p. 14). He is, therefore, a discontented character with a potential to cause misery to himself and to others. He is, in fact, the new type of “hero” – the only kind a more modern age can produce – hence Lermontov’s title, *A Hero of Our Time*.

Alexander Pushkin is said to be the first writer to use the word “superfluous” in the sense described above in his verse novel *Eugene Onegin* (1823-31). Following this, Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* (1840) reinforced the concept in Russian literature. Then Turgenev “popularized the term” in his short story titled, “The Diary of a Superfluous Man” (1850), and “a development of the type” was achieved again by Turgenev in his *Rudin* (1856) (Cuddon, 1991, p. 933). All these writers depicted various versions of the superfluous man, and this is one of the reasons why the term defies a full definition. Nevertheless, a character like Lermontov’s Pechorin may be considered an important representative of the type, and a close analysis of his character may provide further insight into the superfluous man.

A Hero of Our Time is mainly about the experiences and adventures of Pechorin, an army officer serving in the Caucasian War (1817-1864). The novel does not follow a single narrative technique since the first two sections of the book are narrated by an anonymous traveller who introduces the reader to Maksim Maksimych, and through him, to Pechorin, while the last three sections are made up of Pechorin’s journal, in which Pechorin himself becomes the narrator of his own feelings and actions. This kind of variation in narrative technique helps the reader to form a more comprehensive opinion of Pechorin since he has the chance to witness not only other characters’ evaluation of this protagonist but also Pechorin’s own self-analyses.

What draws the reader’s attention most either in Maksim Maksimych’s story or in Pechorin’s own accounts is Pechorin’s difference from the characters around him. He is definitely not an ordinary type, and he could easily be labelled as an odd character. His extraordinary way of approaching people and events is observable in almost all aspects of his life, from his love affairs to his military duty in the army. It is no wonder, then, that one of his most conspicuous traits is his isolation. He finds it hard to relate to others just as others find it hard to relate to him. Moreover, he does not even hesitate to ruin the few friendships he has formed. His relationship with Maksim Maksimych, his fellow-officer and friend at the fort, is such an example. When Pechorin meets Maksimych years later at a traveller’s inn, he is quick to break the heart of this old man. While Maksimych is so enthusiastic about having met an old friend, Pechorin treats him in a rather cold and indifferent manner. He leaves Maksimych at the inn, disappointed:

‘Yes,’ he [Maksimych] said at last, trying his best to preserve a nonchalant air though tears of disappointment still showed in his eyes, ‘we were friends, of course, but what is friendship nowadays? What am I to him? ... What a fop his visit to St. Petersburg has made him! ... I knew all along of course, that he was the flighty sort of fellow you can’t count on. ... nothing good will come of those who forget old friends’ (Lermontov, 1995, pp. 45-46).

Another friendship Pechorin makes and then ruins is with Dr. Werner at the spa town of Pyatigorsk where Pechorin stays for some time. At the beginning Pechorin feels close to Werner because he thinks they have a similar outlook on many issues. They get on rather well for a certain period of time, but Pechorin brings this friendship to an end, too. After the nasty event of the duel with Grushnitsky, in which Werner has also been involved, Werner visits Pechorin to warn him of the increasing suspicions about the death of Grushnitsky. Pechorin’s cold attitude to Werner at this instance is enough to break Werner’s heart:

‘Where have you come from, doctor?’

‘From Princess Ligoyskaya’s. Her daughter is ill. ... But that’s not why I am here; the trouble is that the authorities are beginning to suspect, and though nothing definite can be proved I would advise you to be more cautious. ... So goodbye – perhaps we shall not see each other again – very likely you’ll be sent away.’

He [Werner] paused on the threshold; he wanted to shake my [Pechorin's] hand. And had I given him the slightest encouragement he would have flung himself on my neck; but I remained as cold as a stone, and he went away. (Lermontov, 1995, p. 130)

All such examples are rather indicative of Pechorin's cynical way of approaching friendship and other issues. His own view of friendship is worth noting: "... I am incapable of friendship. Between two friends one is always the slave of the other, though frequently neither will admit it; the slave I cannot be, and to dominate is an arduous task since one must employ deception as well; besides I have the servants and the money!" (Lermontov, 1995, p. 71)

Pechorin, then, is an isolated character who is discontented with everything around him. His discontent manifests itself mainly in the form of boredom and cynicism. Furthermore, he finds it hard to settle down, and he is seen in the novel continually journeying from one place to another as though he is seeking solace in travel. As Foote (1987) explains, Pechorin is "... proud, energetic, strong-willed, ambitious, but, having found that life does not measure up to his expectations of it, he has grown embittered, cynical, and bored" (p. 10).

Pechorin's cynicism and boredom coupled with his egotism are among the main reasons why he gives harm to those around him. The novel abounds in descriptions of how Pechorin harms, hurts, or injures those in his environment. The misery he causes ranges from minor heartbreaks (e.g. his friendship with Werner and Maksimych and his love affairs with Princess Mary and Vera) to more serious offences (e.g. abducting Bela, a chieftain's daughter) and even to murder (e.g. Grushnitsky's death in the duel). It is often hard to discern the motives behind Pechorin's malevolence, and sometimes he too has difficulty accounting for his actions. One such instance is when he asks himself why he is courting Princess Mary and thus trying to break the heart of Grushnitsky who is head over heels in love with her, although he himself is not attracted to her in any way:

I often ask myself why it is that I so persistently seek to win the love of a young girl whom I do not wish to seduce and whom I shall never marry. ... What is it that spurs [*sic.*] me on? Envy of Grushnitsky? Poor chap! He does not deserve it. Or is it the result of that malicious but indomitable impulse to annihilate the blissful illusions of a fellow man in order to have the petty satisfaction of telling him when in desperation he asks what he should believe: 'My friend, the same thing happened to me! Yet as you see, I dine, sup and sleep well, and, I hope, will be able to die without any fuss or tears!' (Lermontov, 1995, p. 92)

It is as though Pechorin tries to make up for his boredom and discontent by displaying his power and ability to dominate over others. In all his actions his ego is always in the foreground. His own self-analysis is rather illuminating in this respect:

I sense in myself that insatiable avidity that devours everything in its path; and I regard the sufferings and joys of others merely in relation to myself, as food to sustain my spiritual strength. ... my greatest pleasure I derive from subordinating everything around me to my will. Is it not both the first token of power and its supreme triumph to inspire in others the emotions of love, devotion and fear? (Lermontov, 1995, p. 92-93).

Pechorin's strong ego and cynicism, then, are his major means of survival in a world from which he has been alienated and towards which he feels hostile.

Why this alienation and hostility? It is possible to argue that the main reason is Pechorin's difference from others and especially his intellectual superiority. He thinks too much and questions too much, which eventually lead to a sense of dissatisfaction with everything and everybody around him, including himself. The more he contemplates and probes into himself and others, the more cynical and disappointed he feels about the nature of man and the mediocrity of the world he is living in. He does not, however, take meaningful action to cope with this situation. Instead, he prefers to torture himself and others continually and to engage in purposeless activities, making use of these perhaps as an escape mechanism. As Wachtel

(1998) argues, “What is remarkable about Pechorin ... is the contrast between, on the one hand, his seemingly highly developed self-understanding coupled with his evident talent, and, on the other, his inability to accomplish anything except the production of misery for himself and those around him” (p. 133). Such an inherent contradiction is peculiar not only to Pechorin’s character but to all other representatives of the superfluous man in Russian literature. However different they may be in other respects, usually these types are all “... characterized by a disastrous alienation from other human beings and from purposeful activity” (Mathewson, 2000, p. 15).

This is not the only contradiction in Pechorin’s character, however. It is interesting that Pechorin often engages in self-deception despite his outstanding talent for self-analysis. This is perhaps another escape mechanism he makes use of in order to cope with his acute awareness of his situation. One of the best examples of Pechorin’s self-deception in the novel is his explanation of how things have eventually worked out in the best way at the end of the unfortunate day on which he engages in a duel with Grushnitsky and kills him. Immediately after the duel, he goes to his lodgings and there receives a letter from Vera, his old girlfriend with whom he is still in love, telling him that she is taking leave of him with a broken heart. On reading the letter, unable to resist his impulses, Pechorin mounts his horse in order to catch up with Vera, and literally rides it to death. Being overburdened by the day’s disastrous happenings, all of which he himself has been the cause, he weeps bitterly and then falls asleep. On waking, he reasons to himself in a way as though he feels totally indifferent to the events of the previous day: “Everything works out for the best. As for this new sensation of pain, it served as a happy diversion, to employ a military term. It does one good to weep, and had I not ridden my horse to death and then been compelled to walk the fifteen kilometers back, I perhaps should not have closed my eyes that night either” (Lermontov, 1995, p. 130). The careful reader, however, is aware of the fact that Pechorin is actually deeply affected by all that has happened, and that his cool, uninterested manner is self-deception only.

The dual nature of Pechorin is also evident in his attitude towards life. He is a character “... torn between a full-blooded desire to live and a negation of all that life has to offer” (Foote, 1987, p. 13). On the one hand, Pechorin appears quite fond of living. He is rather sensuous, and he definitely likes a beautiful landscape. His various descriptions of nature, which are highly emotional and poetic, are a further indication of this fondness. On the other hand, however, he is at times quite ready to give up his life. This is best illustrated in the case of the duel he fights with Grushnitsky. He is not satisfied with fighting an ordinary duel, and deliberately proposes conditions that would make the duel much more dangerous for his own life as well as his opponent’s. At instances like this, he is rather indifferent to life, which he at other times is rather fond of. Such abrupt shifts in outlook can only belong to an extraordinary character like Pechorin.

It is sometimes the case that Pechorin is unable to form a single, consistent opinion on an issue, and this is a further indication of his self-contradictory nature. In the novel, the final chapter titled “The Fatalist” provides a good example for this. The whole chapter serves to demonstrate Pechorin’s conflicting opinions on whether or not to believe in predestination. He starts off as a firm disbeliever in predestination; however, the various experiences he goes through somewhat change his mind, but even at the end he is not sure whether or not he can call himself a fatalist: “After all this, one might think, how could one help becoming a fatalist? But who knows for certain whether he is convinced of anything or not? And how often we mistake a deception of the senses or an error of reason for conviction!” (Lermontov, 1995, p. 142). These words of Pechorin again illustrate the duality he suffers from – a duality which is one of the major causes of his skepticism, cynicism, and discontent. Being acutely self-aware, Pechorin himself summarizes his situation in one of his conversations with Dr. Werner: “I weigh and analyze my own emotions and actions with stern curiosity, but without sympathy.

There are two men in me; one lives in the full sense of the word, the other reasons and passes judgment on the first” (Lermontov, 1995, p. 120).

In the light of the above analysis of Pechorin’s character, one can ask in what ways the superfluous man compares with the existentialist hero. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that Pechorin shares some qualities with him. His higher intelligence coupled with his discontent and alienation are reminiscent of the absurdist character’s acute awareness of “the whole extent of his wretched condition” (Camus, 1955, p. 90). Furthermore, there are times in the novel when Pechorin seems to hold his freedom in high esteem, in a fashion that recalls Sartre’s emphasis on how human beings are “condemned to be free” (Sartre, 2003, p. 93). Accounting for his inability to propose marriage to Princess Mary, for example, Pechorin says: “I would make any sacrifice but this, twenty times I can stake my life, even my honour, but my freedom I shall never sell” (Lermontov, 1995, p. 110). At other times, however, Pechorin’s inclination towards fatalism is seriously at odds with Sartre’s argument that “there is no determinism – man is free, man *is* freedom” (Sartre, 2003, p. 93). Also, like other superfluous characters, Pechorin is incapable of meaningful action. This is yet another quality that sets him apart from the existentialist hero who, in Sartre’s view, is “nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (Sartre, 2003, p. 91). It may be argued, then, that the superfluous man has the seeds of existentialism in his character, but they are yet dormant and awaiting the influence of time to become active.

From Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* (1840) to Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1903), there is a significant move forward in time, and it is worth considering to what extent this movement brings the major characters of this novel closer to an existentialist status.

Nostromo is mainly about the experiences and adventures of various characters living in the imaginary South American country of Costaguana – a country torn by continual strife, civil wars, and dictatorships. Of the several major characters in the novel, Nostromo and Decoud are the ones most comparable to Lermontov’s Pechorin. Initially in the novel, Nostromo and Decoud appear as two rather different characters. Nostromo is a trusted Italian foreman working for Captain Mitchell’s Oceanic Steam Navigation Company. Martin Decoud, on the other hand, is an intelligent and educated young man of “Spanish Creole” origin (Conrad, 1977, p. 134), who becomes the journalist of the local newspaper of Sulaco. However, a significant event in the novel brings these two characters together and causes them to go through similar experiences that change their outlook on life once and for all. Both are, in a way, shaken out of their complacency and faced with the deeper and more unpleasant realities of existence.

Early in the novel, Nostromo is presented as a “handsome, robust, courageous” man who “... enjoys his reputation as the successful leader of the lightermen” (Cox, 1977, p. 26). He appears rather pleased with the life he is leading and with the people around him who are mostly appreciative of his trustworthiness as well as his ability to handle difficult matters. Whenever a problem presents itself either among Captain Mitchell’s lightermen, or in the Viola household where Nostromo is staying, or even in Charles Gould’s silver mine, the first person that comes to mind is Nostromo. Signora Teresa’s attitude at the beginning of the novel when a revolutionary mob is about to invade her house is indicative of this: “She [Teresa] seemed to think that Nostromo’s mere presence in the house would have made it perfectly safe” (Conrad, 1977, p. 29). His reputation is so great that, in the eyes of many characters in the novel, he is like the fictitious hero of an adventure story. Furthermore, Nostromo himself seems to derive great pleasure from this situation, and it is as though his actions are primarily motivated by a need to live up to his reputation and to make it even more excellent. In her study of Conrad’s fiction, Suman Bala (1990) describes Nostromo as “...an egoist with a passion for reputation. He is presented as a man of impetuous activity and vanity who is resolute, courageous, vigorous,

and honest in his own way” (p. 155). This description draws attention to a significant characteristic of Nostromo, which may be overlooked by the less careful reader: Nostromo’s love of reputation is so great that, in whatever he does, his ego is always in the foreground. In this respect, he is comparable to Lermontov’s Pechorin, but there is an important difference between them. Right from the beginning Pechorin is aware of his egotistical inclinations and internal contradictions whereas, initially, Nostromo is completely unaware of this side of his character. In Goldman’s (2013) words, “Nostromo is not reflective; nor does he have a developed sense of self, relying entirely on others to provide his self-image” (p. 186). Early on in the novel, then, Nostromo, does not share Pechorin’s sense of discontent. On the contrary, he is depicted as a rather superficial character who has never looked into himself and who is, therefore, leading a life mostly made up of smug satisfaction.

As for Martin Decoud, he also enjoys a good reputation like Nostromo. Decoud is a man highly esteemed by many in Costaguana, and his reputation stems mainly from the articles he has written for the newspaper of Sta Marta: “Everybody in Costaguana ... knew that it [the special correspondent writing the articles] was ‘the son Decoud’, a talented young man, supposed to be moving in the higher spheres of Society” (Conrad, 1977, p. 134). The value attached to Decoud is also evident in his being selected “the executive member of the patriotic small-arms committee of Sulaco” (Conrad, 1977, p. 135) and in his later appointment as the journalist of Sulaco. Furthermore, Decoud also seems to relish his reputation. Though he does not admit it himself, one of the main reasons he decides to stay in Costaguana is the admiration felt for him by the people of Sulaco.

Like Nostromo, Decoud’s character is also marked by contradictions. At first, he appears as a rather cynical man looking down on the people of Costaguana and ridiculing their efforts to bring peace and stability to the town:

Of his own country [Costaguana] he [Decoud] used to say to his French associates: ‘Imagine an atmosphere of *opera bouffe* in which all the comic business of stage statesmen, brigands, etc., etc., all their farcical stealing, intriguing, and stabbing is done in dead earnest. It is screamingly funny, the blood flows all the time, and the actors believe themselves to be influencing the fate of the universe. ... these Ribierists, of whom we hear so much just now, are really trying in their own comical way to make the country habitable, and even to pay some of its debts. (Conrad, 1977, pp. 134-135)

Decoud is not always this cynical, however. The narrator hints at this when he describes how Decoud’s “habit of universal raillery” at times “blinded him to the genuine impulses of his own nature” (Conrad, 1977, pp. 135). Some of these “genuine impulses” become explicit when Decoud is moved by the efforts and sincerity of people like Don Jose Avellanos and decides to stay in Costaguana, to which he has initially come mainly for holiday reasons:

... Don Jose ... embraced him [Decoud] with tears in his eyes.
‘You have come out yourself! No less could be expected from a Decoud...’ He moaned, affectionately. And again he hugged his godson. This was indeed the time for men of intellect and conscience to rally round the endangered cause.

It was then that Martin Decoud, the adopted child of Western Europe, felt the absolute change of atmosphere. He submitted to being embraced and talked to without a word. He was moved in spite of himself by that note of passion and sorrow unknown on the more refined stage of European politics. ... he felt how impossible it would be to tell these two people [Don Jose and his daughter, Antonia] that he had intended to go away by the next month’s packet. (Conrad, 1977, pp. 137-138)

Decoud’s dual nature becomes quite obvious in this passage. As suggested above, the major factors in Decoud’s decision to stay in Costaguana are his enjoyment of reputation and flattery as well as his love for Antonia. But the passage also reveals that he has a conscience and a heart that can be moved when faced with deep and sincere feelings. Decoud also shares with Nostromo a sense of complacency early on in the novel. His self-contentment and firm belief in his own ideas even culminate in self-deception from time to time. As the narrator aptly

remarks, "He [Decoud] imagined himself Parisian to the tips of his fingers. But far from being that he was in danger of remaining a sort of nondescript dilettante all his life" (Conrad, 1977, p. 135).

A major event, however, takes place in the novel and causes Nostromo and Decoud to abandon their sense of complacency, positioning them closer to the discontentment Pechorin suffers from. The event in question is the smuggling of a great quantity of silver out of Sulaco in order to prevent it from being appropriated by Montero's rebels who pose a threat to Ribiera's more or less stable government. The persons appointed to this difficult job are Nostromo and Decoud, two trustworthy men in the eyes of many. They sail out into the Gulf on a lighter loaded with the silver. However, they are not fortunate enough and they collide with a ship belonging to Montero's rebels. Despite the collision, Nostromo and Decoud manage to prevent the lighter from sinking and they "beach" it "... on an island and bury the cargo of silver in a safe hiding place" (Spittles, 1990, p. 48). Although it looks like a simple adventure story, this is the event that transforms both Nostromo and Decoud from smug satisfaction to painful awareness. It may be said that in existentialist terms, this is the event that causes them to be struck by a sense of meaninglessness and absurdity.

The Placid Gulf that Nostromo and Decoud journey through has a special symbolic significance. In the description of the Gulf below the emphasis on "darkness" is most pertinent:

At night the body of clouds advancing higher up the sky smothers the whole quiet gulf below with an impenetrable darkness.... Sky, land, and sea disappear together out of the world when the Placido – as the saying is – goes to sleep under its black poncho. The few stars left below the seaward frown of the vault shine feebly as into the mouth of a black cavern. In its vastness your ship floats unseen under your feet.... The eye of God himself ... could not find out what work a man's hand is doing in there; and you would be free to call the devil to your aid with impunity if even his malice were not defeated by such a blind darkness. (Conrad, 1977, pp. 19-20)

It is this "blind darkness" that Nostromo and Decoud find themselves in during their journey. Symbolically speaking, the darkness of the Gulf enables them to gain a deeper perception. They look into themselves and see the "darkness" within; they look around and see the "darkness" without. They are no longer carefree and complacent characters. It is as though they are re-born as a result of this voyage, but the new life that awaits them is a rather painful one – as painful as Pechorin's and perhaps even more – because now they are acutely aware both of themselves and of their surroundings.

After hiding the silver on the island, Nostromo returns to Sulaco and there becomes "increasingly disillusioned" as he gradually realizes "... how the other Europeans have used him" (Spittles, 1990, p. 48). All his past idealism and sincerity are shattered, and he turns out to be a rather sad and cynical man. "With a sense of revulsion" he now perceives "the empty inauthenticity of his life" (Bohlmann, 1991, p. 93). He sadly reaches the understanding that "... in a universe devoid of God, of responsiveness, of ultimate purpose, ... [human beings] were all futile and deranged, the sense of effective action being only an illusion" (Watts, 1993, p. 71). Furthermore, Nostromo becomes – in a rather ironic fashion – a corrupt character. He allows everyone to go on believing that the silver went down to the bottom of the sea while he appropriates it himself and becomes a rich man. His corruption also makes itself evident in his love affairs. Although he is engaged to Giorgia Viola, he carries on a relationship with Giselle Viola, Giorgia's sister. In this way he betrays not only his fiancée but also his friend, old Viola, the father of the girls. Nostromo now becomes more comparable to Pechorin, especially in terms of his suffering, cynicism and tendency to give harm to others around him. Like Pechorin, Nostromo was also fit for the role of a hero, but the "darkness" both within and without hindered him from becoming one. In this sense he, too, can be considered "a hero of our time".

Decoud goes through a similar transformation. After Nostromo leaves for the town, Decoud is left alone on the island for several days. This is a traumatic experience for him. In his isolation he contemplates the meaning of his life and cannot come up with any satisfactory answer. He awakens, gaining insight into his human condition, but this brings pain along with it:

After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality. It had merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature. In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part. Decoud lost all belief in the reality of his action past and to come. (Conrad, 1977, p. 409)

In existentialist terms, Decoud is struck by an unbearable sense of absurdity. He is no longer the confident and contented character he used to be. "He feels that his earlier life has been superficial. All life appears meaningless and futile, destined to end in a darkness such as [that of the Gulf] ..." (Bala, 1990, p. 153). As Amar Acheraïou (2004) contends,

Rather than finding in his innermost self the energy and faith required to face his condition, he [Decoud] is depressed by his thoughts and perplexed by his individuality. Within such an existential precariousness, his ironic thought and skepticism prove unable to secure the continuity of his being and the unity of his mind and body. Caught in an absurd sense of de-realization that robs his body of movement and his life of coherent meaning, he not only loses 'all belief in the reality of his action past and to come' ... but also doubts the very intelligence that he considers a supreme virtue. (pp. 56-57)

It is no wonder, then, that Decoud fills his pockets with two bars of silver and drowns himself. Decoud's act of suicide prompts one to ask to what extent his behavior is compatible with what is expected of an existentialist character. Although an initial response may be to regard Decoud as "an existentialist hero" exercising "his choice of suicide" (Bala, 1990, p. 160), a more careful reading would still set him apart from this type. As Bohlmann (1991) aptly puts it, "Even if death may have the virtue of ending pain, Conrad's view of it is ultimately at one with Sartre's assessment of it as absurd, as meaningless nullity" (p. 41). Considered from this perspective, Decoud's suicide is not the kind of free choice and meaningful action reiterated so forcefully in Sartre's philosophy. On the contrary, it is an indication that "... Decoud ... turns out to be hollow, unable to face his solitary existence and to secure his survival" (Acheraïou, 2004, p. 57). It can then be argued that, although Decoud's suicide in the face of absurdity appears more courageous than Nostromo's reaction to his predicament, from an existentialist perspective, the two characters are not really much different and both fail to live up to the standards expected of an existentialist hero.

In the light of all this discussion it is possible to argue that there has not been much of a change from Lermontov's superfluous Pechorin to Conrad's Nostromo and Decoud. But it would also be unfair to put these characters in exactly the same category. Although they sometimes share certain qualities with Pechorin, Nostromo and Decoud are definitely not superfluous men. Their thoughts and actions carry much more weight and purpose throughout the novel even though they are physically and psychologically defeated at the end. This could suggest that, with the coming of the new century, the superfluous man has evolved, attaining qualities that bring him closer to the existentialist hero. With these characters the sense of absurdity is more acutely felt, which is also in line with Conrad's general vision of "... the individual as a solitary being hurled by chance into an irrational world, battling ... the indifferent obstacles that ... induce in him an alienating sense of anxiety ..." (Bohlmann, 1991, p. 2). Nevertheless, Nostromo and Decoud still lack the energy and the potential to cope with their predicament in the more purposeful and meaningful way expected of the existentialist hero. Possessing traces of superfluousness on the one hand and looking ahead to the more positive stance of the Sartrean hero on the other, they clearly remain in limbo, corroborating their transitional status as characters belonging to a turn-of-the-century novel.

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