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As a Murray State University Spanish major, Lance Lee studies the language and culture of the Hispanic world, but he also studies the literature as a means to obtain a better understanding of Hispanic cultural history and for the overall improvement of his linguistic skills. Reading literature is one of his favorite pastimes. During Dr. Mike Waag’s Spanish-American Novel class, Lee became interested in the topic of structure of old and new Latin-American novels and thus felt compelled to research the topic further. His essay is presented in Chrysalis in both English and Spanish.

ABSTRACT

From Juchipila to Comala: A Structural Comparison of the Latin-American Old and New Novel

When one thinks of Latin American literature, the great Columbian novelist Gabriel García Márquez and his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* may come to mind; however, the novel as a literary genre has not always thrived in Latin America. Since the literary tradition of Spain focused on poetry and theater instead of the novel, the same tradition was carried to Latin America by the Spaniards during their colonization of the new continent; Latin American authors had few novels as models to emulate. At first, the novelists imitated European and American works. As a result, Mariano Azuela’s novel of the Mexican Revolution, *Los de abajo*, which was written in 1915, exemplifies a traditional novel, particularly in its chronological structure. In 1955, Juan Rulfo wrote his most famous Mexican novel *Pedro Páramo*, and by then the literary tradition of the Latin American novel had developed a great deal more, abandoning the standard chronological model of Europe for a style that is uniquely Latin American. I will explore the structure of these two Mexican novels in order to compare what makes a traditional versus a new Latin American novel.

FACULTY MENTOR

C. Michael Waag has taught at Murray State University since 1986 in the Department of Modern Languages where he is professor of Spanish and Latin American literature. His particular area of research is Ecuadorian literature. He has presented numerous papers at national and international conferences and has published 12 articles in journals and reference works in his field. He was a Fulbright Scholar to Ecuador (1989-90), and he co-founded and served as president for 10 years in a research organization, the Association of Ecuadorianists. He is director of Cinema International. He actively promotes study abroad and has dedicated many of his summers to teaching abroad in Mexico and Spain with the Kentucky Institute for International Studies.
Latin-American Novel

From Juchipila to Comala: A Structural Comparison of the Latin-American Old and New Novel

Upon beginning to write in the new Latin-American continent, Hispanic writers were influenced in a large part by the literary tradition of Spain. The most popular genres of Spanish literature at the time were poetry and theater, which the new Latin-American authors already knew how to write, having carried the Spanish poetic tradition from Spain to Latin America. The poets of the new world of Latin America are famous—Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz of Mexico is perhaps the best-known such writer. In contrast to the other literary genres of the new world, the Latin-American novel does not come from a strong, well-established literary tradition. For that reason, the genre of the novel had to be explored by Latin-American writers just like the new world had to be explored by the Spaniards. Therefore, the Latin-American novel has changed a great deal throughout its relatively brief existence in Latin America.

The Latin-American novel was born in 1816 when Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi wrote the first Latin-American novel, *El Periquillo Sarniento*. Although not a work of great literary value, the work is important for being the first novel written in Latin America. The Latin-American novelistic tradition began in Mexico, and until the present day, it has played a major role in the artistic representation of Mexico. Although the development of the Mexican novel cannot perfectly represent the course of the novel throughout all of Latin America, it serves well as a model for my examination of the structural and stylistic evolution of the genre in Latin America. After providing a brief history of the novelistic genre, I will focus on the differences between the traditional and new Latin-American novel, placing emphasis on structural differences between the two. Two Mexican novels dealing with the Mexican Revolution will be analyzed—*Los de abajo* (1915) and *Pedro Páramo* (1955).

*Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin-American Writers*, by Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann (1967), deals with the origins of the Latin-American novel. In obtaining their information, the authors traveled around the world to interview several Latin-American authors. In the prologue, Harss and Dohmann explain the origins of the novel, or, better said, the lack of origins. The first literary figures in Spain were aristocrats who wanted to display their talents for writing, and the best way of letting doing so was to write poetry (Harss and Dohmann, 1967, p. 1). The authors describe why the Spanish aristocrats did not want to write novels:

Their art was an aside, a form of mental acrobatics, or a social grace. No risk was involved. Nothing was at stake. The notion of artistic vocation as a form of total commitment engaging the whole man was practically unknown. There was nothing in the Spanish or Portuguese tradition to encourage it. And perhaps the novel, in the modern sense of the word, cannot exist without it. Which may explain why the form has never flourished in Spain. The novel is a monomaniacal form and can only live dangerously. (Harss and Dohmann, 1967, p. 1)

Nevertheless, Spanish works that are precursors to the Latin-American novel do exist. Harss and Dohmann note the few Spanish novelists that there were. For example, in the 16th century, the Renaissance writer Fernando de Rojas wrote *La Celestina*, which is a very long work resembling a novel. Additionally, several novels treating knighthood appear. Also, there are picaresque novels like *Lazarillo de Tormes*. At the same time, one cannot forget the most important Spanish author, Miguel de Cervantes, who wrote the famous Spanish novel *Don Quijote*. After Cervantes, there were very few well-known authors to influence the Latin-American novel (Harss and Dohmann, 1967, p. 2). On the other hand, the Peruvian author Mariano Vargas Llosa (1968) mentions in his article about the historical roots of the Latin-American novel, “Primitives and Creators,” that the scarcity of Spanish novels that did exist to inspire Latin-American authors were prohibited from entering the new world for three centuries due to the Spanish Inquisition.
novels being produced in Spain were forbidden by the Catholic Church in the Americas because the Church considered them to be harmful to the innocent minds of the indigenous people. Despite the fact that the indigenous people could not read, the Inquisition feared that they would not continue to believe in God after reading the Spanish novels (Llosa, 1968, p. 1287).

The genre of the novel appears in Latin America toward the beginning of the 19th century when Lizardi published the first novel El Periquillo Sarniento. It was a feuilleton; that is, “a form of social satire wavering between scatology and preachy didacticism” according to Harss and Dohmann (1967, p. 3). The thematic roots of the revolutionary and social novels like Los de abajo can be found in this novel. After Lizardi’s novel, the Romantic period arrived in Latin America. The Romantic novelists of the 19th century produced many works; however, the works that continue to be read today are few. Throughout this period, Latin-American novelists were influenced by the current stylistic and thematic concerns that came from Europe instead of forming a literature based upon Latin-American culture (Harss and Dohmann, 1967, p. 5).

In the last part of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century, Latin-American authors were writing books that dealt with social themes. For example, Mariano Azuela wrote Los de abajo (The Underdogs), the novel of the Mexican Revolution, that began the genre of the social novel that followed. Other authors of the same genre include--Martín Luis Guzmán, El Águila y la Serpiente; Ricardo Güiraldes, Don Segundo Sombra; Edward Bello, El Roto; Alcides Arguedas, Raza de Bronce; and José Eustacio Rivera, La Vorágine. Another novelist outside of Mexico, the Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos, exemplifies well the environment of Latin-American literature during the 1920s and 1930s (Harss and Dohmann, 1967, p. 5).

The novelist’s attitude toward his society, for instance, is a lot more ambiguous and complicated than it was some years ago. Most of our young novelists now are as committed politically as their predecessors, but they make a clear distinction, as they should, between activism and literature. (1967, p. 27)

The difference between the traditional style and the new style of writing contrasts itself in Los de abajo by Mariano Azuela and Pedro Páramo by Juan Rulfo, respectively. According to Harss and Dohmann, the new novelist reflects instead of persuades: “The novelists’ contribution to the cause is to tap and shape the new forces it has released, not by persuasion but by reflection” (1967, p. 28).

The new Latin-American novelists do not imitate European novels, but rather they stem from their own traditions that are now well-developed. They dedicate themselves first to the artistry of writing instead of the political. Naturally, the new novelists do write about common themes that the old novelists dealt with as well, but the new novelists do so in a completely different manner. The theme of the writing does not necessarily vary; however, the important factor for distinguishing between the traditional novel and the new novel is the style of writing. The structure and style of the novel constitute a large part of what determines whether a novel is traditional or new. To understand what makes a traditional structure, the reader may observe the chronological structure of Los de abajo. In contrast to Pedro Páramo, Los de abajo is written in a very chronological manner. Azuela never breaks with his chronology, except one time in the first section, during chapters 16 and 17, in which an episode of simultaneous action appears.

Published for the first time in 1915, the novel Los de abajo deals with a simple man, Demetrio Macías, who becomes a revolutionary after witnessing the burning of his house at the hands of federal soldiers. Demetrio’s conflict lies with Don Mónico, the local political boss, or cacique, of the region and owner of the majority of the surrounding lands. Demetrio barely escapes being killed by Don Mónico’s henchmen and joins the revolutionary cause. After a military career of approximately two years (1914-1915), he dies after being ambushed by an opposing revolutionary band in the same canyon of Juchipila where he began his revolutionary career.
The fragmented chronology begins in chapter 16 when Demetrio Macías and his troops are about to attack an army of federal soldiers. The boss of the federal soldiers is thinking about the impending defeat of Demetrio’s army, and the great honor he will receive for defeating Demetrio’s army when the attack begins: “Y se apretó las manos con regocijo, en el mismo momento en que un estallido lo dejó con los oídos zumbando”[1] (Azuela, 1992, p. 47). In the following chapter, the attack has not yet occurred. Now, Azuela describes the event again from the perspective of Demetrio:

Se sonrió con satisfacción, y volviendo la cara a los suyos, exclamó: --¡Hora! ... Veinte bombas estallaron a un tiempo en medio de los federales, que, llenos de espanto, se irguieron con los ojos desmesuradamente abiertos. Mas antes de que pudieran darse cuenta cabal del trance, otras veinte bombas reventaban con fragor, dejando un reguero de muertos y heridos. [2] (Azuela, 1992, p. 48)

Another technique more typical of the new novel that Azuela employs is elliptical dialogue. This dialogue leaves spaces in the conversation that the reader must fill on his or her own. These spaces in dialogue also add to the episodic nature of the novel and are moreover precursors to the techniques of the new novel. There are many examples of elliptical dialogue throughout all parts of the novel. Toward the end of the work, the speech of Demetrio makes the elliptical dialogue evident upon answering Anastasio, a soldier tired of fighting in Demetrio’s army:

Y nosotros estamos ya pa despachar a Villa y a Carranza a la ... a que se diviertan solos ... Pero se me figura que nos está sucediendo lo que a aquel peón de Tepatitlán. ¿Se acuerda, compadre? No paraba de rezongar de su patrón, pero no paraba de trabajar tampoco. Y así estamos nosotros: a reniega y reniega y a mátensos y mátensos ... Pero eso no hay que decirlo, compadre ... [3] (Azuela, 1992, p. 114)

Although the structure is chronologically creative, as in Pedro Páramo, it still has much artistic merit, and it is obvious that Azuela gave some sort of form to his work; however, the issue of structure in Los de abajo is a topic of debate. In his article “The Structure of Los de abajo,” Clive Griffin explains what various critics think of Azuela’s structure: the great conflict that is difficult to reconcile is the discrepancy between the episodic nature of the work and the circular design. According to Griffin, Azuela contradicts himself in what he writes about his works. Azuela remarks that Los de abajo represents his experiences during the Revolution with verisimilitude, but, on the other hand, he says that he imposed a coherent structure (Griffin, 1981, p. 25-26). If Azuela added a circular structure, he obviously did not write solely his observations of the Revolution. Azuela certainly employs consciously a logical and aesthetic structure, despite the contradictory statements that the author makes about his own novel.

Upon even a first reading of the book, the circular structure makes itself clear to the reader; the action begins in the canyon of Juchipila and ends in the same canyon. According to Griffin, returning to the canyon “can be interpreted as a comment upon the futility of the Revolution, a point which Azuela stresses throughout the novel” (Griffin, 1981, p. 27). Aside of the symbolic implications, the circular structure is used to fortify the unity of the novel.

Also, the aesthetic nature of the structure may be observed in the division of the three parts. The first part is the longest section, whereas the third part is very brief with respect to the others; this structure certainly cannot be accidental either. Like the Revolution, or as it is colloquially called in the novel, la bola (the ball), the action continues more quickly in each successive section, and, the size of each part reflects the change of the intense speed of la bola. While talking with his wife at the end of the novel, Demetrio throws a stone into the canyon, summarizing in a few words the basic gist of la bola: “--Mira esa piedra cómo ya no se para” [4] (Azuela, 1992, p. 117). The structure reflects the rapidity of the Revolution, and the feeling of the people united with the movement. The metaphor of the stone thrown into the canyon captures perfectly the movement of the Revolution, each time more rapid and powerful. To involve oneself in the Revolution is like boarding a moving train that continues to speed up, finally making it impossible to dismount the train without killing oneself. Some characters in the novel, like Luis Cervantes, abandon the cause before harming themselves, but others like Demetrio do not escape without dying.

Griffin offers multiple explanations for the structure of the novel. First, Azuela did not know whether his work was going to take the form of a novel or that of a series in a magazine, and for that reason, he wrote in a very episodic manner in order to publish his work in both forms. Additionally, Demetrio’s men are not very talkative; they are men of action. Thus, the characters influenced Azuela’s decision to create an episodic form. Griffin says: “The apparent...
fragmentation of the structure is thus a reflection of the peasant lack of coherent appreciation and, especially, verbalisation of their experience” (Griffin, 1981, p. 38). At the same time, perhaps he wanted to represent the perspective of a common revolutionary to reflect the chaotic war, and according to Griffin, the result of this structure illustrates “the confusion which an isolated band of guerrillas must feel in any war and especially in a war as complex and fragmentary as the Mexican Revolution” (Griffin, 1981, p. 37-38).

Although the structure of Los de abajo is traditional, Azuela’s novel is a precursor to the new Latin-American novels. The literary critic Luis Leal, who has written a great deal on Mexican literature, says that in Azuela’s work: “Encontramos un espíritu de inconformidad y rebeldía y un ardiente deseo de luchar por mejorar las condiciones de vida del pueblo mexicano”[5] (Leal, 1989, p. 859). The same nonconformity can be found in the unique structure of Pedro Páramo. Like the writing of Rulfo, Azuela’s narrative is “en movimiento, en constante búsqueda de la estructura apropiada para dar expresión a los temas de la hora”[6] (Leal, 1989, p. 859). For Azuela, the novelist before the Revolution “no había logrado producir obras a la altura de las europeas”[7] (Leal, 1989, p. 860).

On the other hand, the European novel did not serve as a model for the structure and the narrative of Los de abajo, but rather Azuela tells his own observations of the war (Leal, 1989, p. 864). Also, Azuela was the first novelist of the Mexican Revolution, beginning to write during the Revolution, in contrast to novelists like Gregorio López y Fuentes, Rafael Muñoz, José Rubén Romero and Cipriano Campos Alatorre, who published their works between 1930 and 1940 (Leal, 1989, p. 866). Saying that Azuela was a precursor to the new novelists, Leal concludes by saying that Azuela was very important despite what some critics may say:

El legado de Azuela no termina allí, con los narradores de la Revolución. Su presencia la intuimos en Agustín Yáñez, en Juan Rulfo, en Carlos Fuentes, y en verdad, en algunos de los más grandes narradores hispanoamericanos. A pesar de los defectos que algunos críticos les encuentran, las novelas de Mariano Azuela ayudaron a crear no sólo una conciencia nacional, sino a preparar el terreno para la nueva novela hispanoamericana.[8] (Leal, 1989, p. 866)

In great contrast to Azuela, Rulfo presents to the reader a new Latin-American novel of chronological fragmentation. Trapped in the world of Pedro Páramo, the reader must participate if he or she wants to comprehend the action of this universe of dead people. Upon reading the first works of the novel “vine a Comala porque me dijeron que acá vivía mi padre, un tal Pedro Páramo”[9] (Rulfo, 2003, p. 65), the novel seems traditional to the reader, but it is evident that the novel is not at all traditional after reading two or three pages. Soon the narration shifts from first person to the memories of Juan’s mother. Suddenly, the reader begins to become even more confused after realizing that the text has changed narrators. In this fashion, with similar structural surprises, the novel continues.

The plot is easy to summarize. A young man named Juan Preciado looks for his father Pedro Páramo after the death of his mother Dolores, who has ordered Juan to go looking for his father in Comala after she dies. Juan Preciado’s search is the vehicle for becoming acquainted with life story of the cacique Pedro Páramo and the town of Comala. The structure of Pedro Páramo is less easy to summarize than its plot. Rulfo’s narrative leads the reader along paths that lead to a tidbit of enlightenment or other times to false clues. Because of the radically fragmented structure, Pedro Páramo exemplifies the new in the Latin-American novel.

The novel does not have numbered chapters, but rather 69 fragments. One may separate the text into two parts: the death of Juan Preciado marks the division of the two. In the first part, Juan narrates the majority of the fragments, and he appears to be alive. Later, the reader learns that Juan is dead, telling his story to Dorotea, the woman that shares his tomb. Also, the first part does not deal solely with Juan’s story, but other fragments appear as well, dealing with the life of Pedro Páramo or other happenings of Comala. In the second part, the reader learns more about Pedro Páramo’s life, and, as in the first part, there are some fragments that deal with other characters in Comala. That is to say, the division of the novel into two sections is not at all scientific; Rulfo crafts various fragments that form a coherent story like the strokes of an impressionist painting.

According to the critic Joseph Sommers, the structure of the narrative is directly related to the vision of reality that the author has: “Juan’s death actually serves as a dividing line between two perspectives of narration. Here structure and the technique of withholding information are related to the vision of reality” (Sommers, 1968, p. 78). In the first part, the reader observes the
dead world of Comala through the seemingly living eyes of Juan (Sommers, 1968, p. 78-79). Like a “mirror image” of the first part, the second part reflects the living world of Comala through the dead eyes of Juan and Dorotea (Sommers, 1968, p. 79). Despite the life present in both parts, death dominates the scene: “In the first half, the presence of death contaminates existence; life is a living hell. In the second half, life contaminates death, making that condition hell also” (Sommers, 1968, p. 79).

Also, the mysterious and suspenseful element of the structure contribute well to the sense of the novel; for example, the reader does not know the name of the protagonist Juan Preciado until much has happened in the novel (Sommers, 1968, p. 82). Although the plot is not based on mere action, the reader still desires to learn what happens in the novel. The reader must always pay attention to each detail of the novel in order not to get lost, and still it is easy to become confused. Additionally, the details present sometimes do not suffice to facilitate completely the reader’s understanding of the plot. Mariana Frenk notes in her article that deals with Pedro Páramo that physical descriptions of the characters never appear, except in one case with Pedro, who is described two times as “enorme” (Frenk, 1974, p. 43). Key events such as the murder of Pedro Páramo by his son Abundio are not directly described, but insignificant details and irrelevant fragments dealing with unknown characters sometimes have entire fragments devoted to them (Frenk, 1974, p. 43). Thus the mysterious of the novel fascinates and frustrates the reader at the same time.

The story of Pedro Páramo does not seem coherent upon a first glance, and after reading the entire novel, the reader still doubts that he or she has understood it all. In Los de abajo on the other hand, Azuela leaves few events without explanation, but Rulfo does not care whether the reader loses himself in the phantasmal town of Comala. Although the elliptical dialogue of the new novel appears in Azuela’s traditional novel Los de abajo, it generally follows the narrative conventions of the day, and it is little work for the reader to understand the story. In contrast, Rulfo wants the reader to be forced to participate in order to understand. The reader must become one of Comala’s dead in order to hear what the dead are saying. The world of Pedro Páramo is static, existing organically without the sense of action. Although important plot twists occur in the novel, the reader hardly ever learns of the events directly. For example, the death of Miguel Páramo is told four times, but the reader never witnesses the accident with the horse on which he dies.

As notably different from the traditional novel, the reader has to construct the plot from the fragments. Although Pedro Páramo is a novel that is difficult to comprehend, the difficulty becomes worth the effort, and, for that reason, people continue to read it. Rulfo demands that the reader work in order to understand, but, upon the novel’s conclusion, the reader feels a great pride after having conquered the work. The concept of reader participation indicates the change from the traditional novel to the new. Through the liberation of the reader, the experience of reading the new novel is a fairly different process altogether from reading the traditional novel. According to Carol Clark D’Lugo, the reader opens his eyes after reading Pedro Páramo: “The reading of this novel can be translated into a process of liberation for readers, as they are dislodged from their conventional conditioning to a passive experience” (D’Lugo, 1987, 468). If the reader is going to understand the work, it is impossible to read it inside of a fixed schema (D’Lugo, 1987, 471).

For the reader, the novel is a complex experience instead of a simple story. Because of the novel’s static nature, inside Pedro Páramo a deep, mysterious, and tragic world exists—a world in which one may become lost over and over again. The novel’s static nature creates an environment that can be visited again and again in order to chat with Eduviges, Juan or Dorotea. Thus the new novel seems more organic and alive than the traditional novel.

Conclusion

Between the two works of Azuela and Rulfo, the distinct cosmovision that influences the novels is striking. To clarify, cosmovision entails that which constitutes the attitude of the author towards the world and how he or she thinks about life and death. As mentioned, Azuela imitates aspects of the European novel in Los de abajo, and thus, he imitates the cosmovision of Europe. Life is represented very chronologically, and it makes perfect sense. In contrast, Rulfo utilizes the cosmovision of Mexico in order to structure his Pedro Páramo. In the new Mexican cosmovision, the appearance of the dead and the fragmented structure of the novel are expected. This influence of indigenous cosmovision in Latin-American literature is referred to as magical realism; magic occurring in the work seems ordinary to the characters of the novel. The beliefs of the Aztecs, Mayans and other indigenous tribes of Mexico mix with the European perspective in order to form a coherent cosmovision for the Mexico of today. Thus one may
observe the development of the Mexican cosmovision from the traditional novel, Los de abajo, into the new novel, Pedro Páramo. In summary, all Latin-American novelists, not only the Mexican novelists, had to explore the appropriate cosmovision for their respective countries. Although Los de abajo and Pedro Páramo do not perfectly represent all of Latin America, they demonstrate the changes among the structure of the Latin-American traditional and new novel well.

References


Footnotes

[1] “And he clasped his hands with delight, right in the same moment as an explosion left his ears buzzing.”

[2] “He smiled with satisfaction, and turning his face to his troops, he exclaimed: —Now! ... Twenty bombs exploded at once in the middle of the federals, who, full of fright, looked up with their eyes wide open. But before they could come to their senses, another 20 bombs burst with a great uproar, leaving a trail of dead and injured.”

[3] “... And we’re all ready to dispatch Villa and Carranza to the ... they can have fun alone ... But I figure that what’s happening to us is the same thing that’s happening to that peon of Tepatitlán. Don’t you think so, compadre? He never stopped griping about his boss, but he never stopped working either. And that’s how we are: we keep griping and griping but we keep fighting and fighting ... But that goes without saying, compadre ...”

[4] “Look at that stone and how it now does not stop itself.”

[5] “We find a spirit of nonconformity and rebellion and an ardent desire to fight to better the conditions of living of the Mexican people.”

[5] “in movement, in constant search of the appropriate structure to give expression to the themes of the present”

[6] “had not achieved the production of works at the same height as those of Europe”

[7] “The legacy of Azuela does not end there, with the narrators of the Revolution. His presence we intuit in Agustín Yáñez, in Juan Rulfo, in Carlos Fuentes, and in reality, in some of the greatest Latin-American narrators. Despite the defects that some critics find, the novels of Mariano Azuela helped to create not only a national conscience, but to prepare the terrain for the new Latin-American novel.”

[8] “I came to Comala because they told me that my father lived here, a certain Pedro Páramo.”