

Patricide and the Double in Carlos Fuentes's *Gringo Viejo*

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In reading Carlos Fuentes's *Gringo viejo*,¹ (1985; *The Old Gringo*) one is struck by the masterful way in which he has conjoined fictionalized biography, dramatic action, and ideological concerns. It also becomes evident that it is a novel in which character psychology has a dominant thematic and structural role. Central to the psychological component are father-child conflict and the concomitant motif of patricide. This study examines Fuentes's use of literary doubling in his treatment of these themes and in his portrayal of the novel's three principal characters.

The "gringo viejo," of course, is a fictionalized Ambrose Bierce—the controversial American journalist and short-story writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1913, at the age of seventy-one, the historical Bierce set out for revolutionary Mexico, aware of the likelihood of dying there. Although he did maintain some written correspondence with a friend in the United States, it was not long before Bierce disappeared without a trace. In *Gringo viejo*, Fuentes presents an imaginary account of the writer's experience in Mexico.

A second main character is Harriet Winslow, a young American who meets the "gringo viejo" in Mexico and whose recollections of him form the novel's organizational frame. In contrast to the disillusioned and cynical old man, she is portrayed as naive and idealistic. Contracted to tutor the grandchildren of a wealthy landowner, Harriet is present at his estate when it is overrun by a group of revolutionaries who have allowed the "gringo viejo" to join them.

The third major character is Tomás Arroyo, the leader of a band of insurgents and the illegitimate son of the owner of the estate where Harriet is employed. Also an idealist, Arroyo embodies the spirit of protest that has motivated the revolutionaries to rebel against a system and a history of oppression and injustice.

Readers familiar with Ambrose Bierce's life and works will recognize the biographical accuracy and inaccuracy of various situations, statements, and

¹ Carlos Fuentes, *Gringo viejo* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985). Quotations are from the English translation of the novel prepared by Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985). Page references will appear in the text.

persons presented in the novel.² They will also readily perceive Fuentes's allusions to some of Bierce's short stories. The most important of these references are to "A Horseman in the Sky,"³ a story whose title is evoked in the following descriptive passage: "At this early hour the mountains seem to await the horsemen in every ravine, as if they were in truth horsemen of the sky" (79).

Set in the United States Civil War, "A Horseman in the Sky" begins with a description of a young Federal soldier who has fallen asleep while on guard duty. A flashback provides information about him. The only son of a wealthy Virginia couple, the boy had unexpectedly decided to join a Union regiment that was passing through his hometown. Acquiescing to his son's betrayal of the State of Virginia, the father stoically advises him: "Well, go, sir, and whatever may occur do what you conceive to be your duty" (AB. 359). The reader is then returned to the war scene to witness the young man awakening to the sight of a horseman on a distant ridge that borders a cliff. A grey uniform indicates that he is a Confederate scout who has discovered the presence of the Union force. For several moments, the young man anguishes over whether to kill his enemy. Recalling his father's parting counsel, he finally takes aim at the rebel's horse and fires. The scene immediately shifts to a Federal officer who observes "a man on horseback riding down into the valley through the air" (AB. 361)—obviously the Confederate soldier upon whom the sentry has fired. Another shift in scene occurs as a Federal sergeant approaches the young guard and asks if he discharged his weapon. The boy acknowledges that he shot at a horse and observed it fall off the cliff. Responding to the sergeant's inquiry as to whether anyone was on the horse, the young guard hesitatingly states: "Yes . . . my father" (AB. 363).

A common treatment of decomposition or fragmentation in literature involves the creation of several characters, all of whom represent a single concept or attitude. This technique has been referred to as "doubling by multiplication."⁴ Borrowing the motifs of parental conflict and patricide from "A Horseman in the Sky," Fuentes employs doubling by multiplication to link his ostensibly dissimilar characters and to introduce the presence of psychological conflict in the novel. In doing so, he alters and simultaneously comingles historical fact and the fictional antecedent of Bierce's story. The "gringo viejo," who, like Bierce himself, had been a Union soldier, is described as experiencing a dream in which his father served in the Confederate army. Without elucidating the nature of the father-son conflict, Fuentes introduces the patricidal motif by attributing the following thought to the "gringo viejo": "He wanted what he had dreamed of: the revolutionary drama of son against father" (54).

² See, for example, Carey McWilliams, *Ambrose Bierce, A Biography*, 2nd ed. (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1967), and M.E. Grenander, *Ambrose Bierce* (New York: Twayne, 1971).

³ *The Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce*, Ernest Jerome Hopkins, comp. (New York: Doubleday, 1970). Future references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation AB.

⁴ Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press: 1970) 4-5.

Juxtaposed with this dream is a dramatic battle scene in which the "gringo viejo" single-handedly attacks a group of Mexican Federal soldiers. Reinforcing the dream's psychological symbolism, the narrator clarifies that the American's inordinate act of bravery was in reality the externalization of unconscious rage directed at his father's memory: "it was toward this horseman, flashing his anger from the mountaintop, the gringo rode, not toward them, their machine gun lost now" (55). The thematic and structural importance of the "gringo viejo"'s dream and its patricidal implication is apparent in Fuentes's allusion to it on five other occasions in the novel.⁵ The conflictual nature of the paternal relationship is also underscored by the following description of the "gringo viejo"'s father: "a hell-fire Calvinist who also loved Byron, and who one day feared his son would try to kill him as he slept" (80).

Harriet Winslow's father, like the "gringo viejo"'s, was a military man. Because of him, she too bears the burden of psychological scarring. The narrator singles out two circumstances that have had lasting impact on her: (1) her discovery of her father's licentiousness and infidelity with a black servant and; (2) his abandonment of his wife and daughter in order to live in Cuba with another woman. Recurring references to her father attest to Harriet's psychological struggle in dealing with her loss of him on both the ideal and real levels. Paralleling the characterization of the "gringo viejo," her latent patricidal inclination is also expressed symbolically. When Harriet and her mother are overwhelmed by the economic necessity occasioned by the father's disappearance, they declare him dead in order to obtain a government pension. Harriet's lexical choice in referring to the incident has obvious psychological significance in the context of the patricidal theme: "We killed him, my mother and I, in order to live" (148).

Arroyo's father, while not in the military, was also an authoritarian figure by virtue of the absolute power emanating from his socioeconomic standing. Like Harriet's father, he was licentious. In fact, Arroyo is a produce of his abuse of power and position to sexually exploit a family servant. Arroyo's hatred for his father stems from that circumstance, as well as from the latter's refusal to recognize him legally. Even as a child, he would have readily killed his father if given the opportunity: "I spied him as he was drinking and fornicating, not knowing his son was watching him, waiting for the moment to kill him" (141-142). The intensity of his hatred only increased over the years, as evidenced in his virulent declaration to Harriet toward the end of the novel (189).

As these references indicate, the patricidal motif is developed in *Gringo viejo* in a concrete, insistent manner. A further examination of textual evidence points to the presence of a psychological paradigm that is less obvious, yet fully consistent with the motif as employed by Fuentes in his portrayal of all three characters. In his recent study, *The Son-Father Relationship from Infancy to*

⁵ See pp. 79, 88, 107, 142, and 145.

Manhood: An Intergenerational Inquiry,⁶ Peter Blos underscores the Freudian notion that usurpation of the father's position can be interpreted as an unconscious attempt to "annihilate" him. Interestingly, Blos uses the term "patricide" figuratively to describe such usurpation (150). Reflecting this phenomenon, there is a moment or circumstance in *Gringo viejo* in which each protagonist duplicates some important trait of his or her father and, moreover, is identified with him at that moment. (Consistent with the basic premise of psychological criticism that textual evidence can point to unconscious as well as conscious motivation in characterization, none of the protagonists in *Gringo viejo* perceives the psychological significance of these details.⁷) In the "gringo viejo"'s case, it is repeating his father's trip to Mexico more than fifty years earlier and distinguishing himself as a brave soldier: "The gringo thought how ironic it was that he the son was travelling the same road his father had followed in 1847" (80). For Harriet, it is her rejection of her cultural and religious values through surrender to her most primitive sexual desires with Arroyo. In doing so, she consciously identifies with her father: "Don't you know that with Arroyo I could be like my father, free and sensual" (146-147). In Arroyo's case, it is returning to the Miranda ranch and acting with the same arrogance and violence as did his father. The parallel between the two is underscored by Harriet's admonition of Arroyo: "you provoked yourself to prove to yourself who you are. Your name isn't Arroyo, like your mother's; your name is Miranda, after your father" (175). If it is true, as Jean-Michel Rabaté asserts, that "a father is not a 'problem' but a nexus of unresolved enigmas, all founded on the mysterious efficacy of a Name,"⁸ then Arroyo's choice of surname and Harriet's comment have particular significance in the patricidal context. Similarly, it should be remembered that the "gringo viejo" does not reveal his family name to anyone except Harriet while in Mexico. These details substantiate that, even on the unconscious level, the patricidal wish is central to Fuentes's depiction of all three characters.

As the plot of *Gringo viejo* unfolds, the paternal issue has profound effect on the manner in which the three protagonists relate and respond to one another and to events. In this regard, the "gringo viejo"'s role as father figure for Harriet and Arroyo merits special discussion. Their disposition toward relating to him as such is consistent with their figurative orphanhood: "General Tomás Arroyo, who, like her, had no father; both were dead or unaware, or what is the same as dead, both unaware of their children, Harriet and Tomas" (162). The "gringo viejo"'s role as surrogate father is compatible with his advanced age,

⁶ Peter Blos, *The Son-Father Relationship from Infancy to Manhood: An Intergenerational Inquiry* (New York: The Free Press, 1985). Future references are to this edition.

⁷ See Morton Kaplan and Robert Kloss, "Psychoanalysis and Literary Criticism," in *The Unspoken Motive* (New York: The Free Press, 1974) 3-43.

⁸ Jean-Michel Rabaté, "A Clown's Inquest into Paternity: Father, Dead or Alive, in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*," in *The Fictional Father. Lacanian Readings of the Text*, ed. Robert Con Davis (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981) 74.

position of respect among the revolutionaries, and the paternal affection and behavior he demonstrates toward both characters on several occasions.⁹

As a father figure, the "gringo viejo" facilitates Arroyo's and Harriet's resolution of the psychological conflict they experience as a consequence of their individual relationships with their fathers. It is well to clarify, however, that neither father has any active contact with his offspring in the historical present recreated in the novel, and that Harriet's and Arroyo's fatherlessness, as is often the case in literature, "is not so much the absence of relationship as a relationship to an absence."

In relating to the "gringo viejo" as a substitute father, Harriet and Arroyo each embody one pole of a basic endopsychic conflict: the love-hate relationship of child to father. Consequently, Fuentes has drawn his characters by also utilizing the literary device of doubling by division: "the splitting up of a recognizable, unified psychological entity into separate, complementary, distinguishable parts represented by seemingly autonomous characters."¹⁰

Arroyo, of course, represents the negative pole of the paradigm. The principal issues in his psychic struggle are lack of identity stemming from his father's refusal to acknowledge him, the hatred it engenders and the need to express that hatred and to avenge his father's treatment of him. (On a conscious level, the latter need is one factor which explains Arroyo's participation in the Revolution.) These issues play a decisive role in the culminating action of the novel: Arroyo's murder of the "gringo viejo." As the plot unfolds, a number of references are made to papers which Arroyo is safeguarding on behalf of his corevolutionaries. The papers date from the colonial period and constitute a legal claim to the land that Arroyo's family had appropriated. They also represent a de facto affirmation of personal and social identity: "The papers are the only proof we have that these lands are ours. They are the testament of our ancestors. Without the papers, we're like orphans" (166).

The "gringo viejo"'s eventual burning of the papers therefore acquires profound psychological significance. On the one hand, the papers are symbolic of Arroyo's identity and claim to legitimacy within the social system. On the other, the man who destroys them is, at this point in the novel, a substitute for his father. Consequently, the childhood trauma of the son being reduced to a non-person is symbolically recreated and relived on an unconscious level. The destruction of the papers provokes the hatred underlying Arroyo's previously mentioned patricidal wish and is externalized and expressed through his murder of the "gringo viejo". The psychological dynamics of the act mirror the drama of the Revolution itself: the socially and economically disenfranchised striking out against the fatherland that has denied them their patrimony and identity. Hence, with consummate artistry, Fuentes intertwines the personal drama of his characters with the historical drama of the Revolution.

⁹ Andre Bleikasten, "Fathers in Faulkner," in *The Fictional Father*, 117.

¹⁰ Rogers 5.

Harriet's relationship with the "gringo viejo" as a hypostatic father is developed more fully in the novel, and in a way which suggests her awareness of it. The exclusively positive nature of the relationship corroborates Fuentes's presentation of her and Arroyo as a "composite character." Having been deprived of a father from the age of sixteen, Harriet finds in the "gringo viejo" a person with whom she can openly share her innermost thoughts and feelings; an object of tenderness, concern, and love; and, ultimately, a literal replacement for her absent father. Her awareness of what the "gringo viejo" signifies for her is first alluded to in a conversation in which he states: "I thought a lot about you last night. You were very real in my thoughts. I think I even dreamed about you. I felt as close to you as a . . ." (103). Before he completes the thought, Harriet interrupts by asking: "As a father?" (103). In a subsequent exchange, she explicitly and dramatically communicates to him that he indeed represents a father to her: "Don't you know . . . that in you I have a father? Don't you know that?" (146-147). Similarly, when Harriet senses Arroyo's determination to kill the "gringo viejo," she begs him not to kill "the only father either of them had known" (163).

It is Arroyo's murder of the "gringo viejo," however, that provides Harriet a lasting solution for her psychological conflict. Having returned to the United States after his death, Harriet publicly states that she had gone to Mexico in order to visit her father, and that she had witnessed *his* assassination at the hands of Arroyo: "She says she saw him shoot her daddy dead" (172). Some time later, when his body is disinterred, she identifies it as her father's and has it buried in the family plot next to her deceased mother. Her words to the lifeless body of the "gringo viejo" confirm the presence of unconscious as well as conscious psychological motivation in the novel: "An empty grave is waiting for you in a military cemetery, Papa" (182). The abandoned child has fulfilled her need to have and love a father.

In sum, *Gringo viejo* is a multifaceted novel that deftly combines dramatic action, historical verisimilitude, and ideological statement. It is also a work of profound psychological dimension and implication. In utilizing the literary device of the double and developing the patricidal motif which he borrowed from Ambrose Bierce, Carlos Fuentes has imbued his novel with remarkable structural coherence and has touched upon human issues which transcend history, geography, and culture.