

Gringo viejo: The Labyrinth of Solitude Revisited

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With its setting in northern Mexico during the revolutionary period, its reference to historical figures, and its depiction and examination of early twentieth-century socioeconomic conditions in the country, there is ample justification for linking Carlos Fuentes's *Gringo viejo* (1985)¹ to the literary phenomenon commonly referred to as the novel of the Mexican Revolution.² Like other of Fuentes's works, it also reveals a profound indebtedness to Octavio Paz. Central to that influence are ideas and theories that Paz develops in his *classicerinto de la soledad*.³ This essay examines the way in which Fuentes has incorporated a number of Paz's major ideas into thematic and character development in *Gringo viejo*.

Fuentes's novel presents a fictionalized account of a trip to Mexico in 1913 by the American journalist and short-story writer Ambrose Bierce—the old gringo. Letters by the historical Bierce reveal that his motivation in crossing the border was to determine freely when and where he would die. At the beginning of the novel, the old gringo is dead and his body has been returned to the United States. The story is a reconstruction of his experience through the eyes of an omniscient narrator and the recollections of one Harriet Winslow, a young American woman whom the fictional Bierce befriends in Mexico and who plays a principal role in the events recounted in the novel. The third major character is the revolutionary Tomás Arroyo, the illegitimate son of the landowner whose grandchildren Harriet had been contracted to tutor. The novel describes the intertwining of the lives of these three characters against the backdrop of revolutionary skirmishes and celebrations. The action culminates in Arroyo's murder of the old gringo and his execution by order of Pancho villa.

As the title of Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad* indicates, its focus is on the experience of solitude, "the feeling and knowledge that one is alone, alienated from the world and oneself" (195). Two complementary ideas stand out in Paz's exposition of this universal phenomenon: (1) "a break with one world" and (2) an "attempt to create another" (204). Both concepts are at the

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

² See Roberto Fernández Retamar, "Carlos fuentes y la otra novela de la Revolución Mexicana," *Casa de las Américas* 4.26

³ Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973). Quotations are from the English translation by Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1961). Page reference will appear in the text. Two useful discussions of Fuentes's indebtedness to *El laberinto de la soledad* are Joseph Sommers, "La búsqueda de la identidad: *La región más transparente*," in *Homenaje a Carlos Fuentes*, ed. Helmy F. Giacomani (New York: Las Américas, 1971) 275-326; and Gary Brower, "Fuentes de Fuentes: Paz y las raíces de *Todos los gatos son pardos*," *Latin American Theatre Review* 5.1 (1971): 59-68.

core of characterization and thematic exposition in *Gringo viejo*. Employing the literary device of doubling by multiplication,⁴ Fuentes has incorporated the motif of breaking away from a personal world into his depiction of all three protagonists. When Harriet Winslow and the old gringo cross the border into Mexico, they sever their ties to family, occupation, culture, and country—factors which negate solitude by symbolizing and providing connection, union, and communion. Both forsake a life of comfort, routine, peace and security—Harriet, as a model school teacher; the fictional Bierce, as a respected and popular writer and journalist. The profound nature of that rupture can be seen in the description of the old gringo as he crosses the border: "He had felt freed the moment he crossed the border at Juárez, as if he had walked into a different world" (161).

Arroyo's situation is similar. His commitment to the revolution marked the end of a life of passivity and subservience, and assured vindication of his personal identity. Although the "border" Arroyo crosses is social and psychological rather than physical, i.e., his rebellion against the ruling class, it is no less real or dramatic.

In a number of passages in *El laberinto de la soledad*, Paz links the notions of breaking away and solitude to the state of being an orphan: "... any break (with ourselves or those around us, with the past of the present) creates a feeling of solitude. In extreme cases—separation from one's parents, matrix or native land, the death of the gods or a painful self-consciousness—solitude is identified with orphanhood" (64); "Solitude and orphanhood are similar forms of emptiness" (207).

The father-child relationship is a principal theme in *Gringo viejo* and, because of its connection to the ideas of orphanhood and solitude, further exemplifies the conspicuous presence of Paz's theories in the novel. The fathers of all three protagonists are remarkably alike in their authoritarian nature: the old gringo's and Harriet's fathers were military men; Arroyo's was a powerful landowner who exercised total control over his workers. Finally, each in some fashion abandoned his offspring, inflicting emotional and psychological trauma on them.

Harriet's father left his wife and daughter in order to go to Cuba during the Spanish-American war. Although the first version of his whereabouts points to his disappearance in action, it is subsequently revealed that he had abandoned his family in order to stay on the island with another woman. The figurative experience of having been orphaned is given symbolic expression through Harriet and her mother declaring him dead in order to qualify for a pension: "We killed him, my mother and I, in order to live" (148).

Arroyo's father was also licentious. In fact, Arroyo is product of his father's abuse of power and position to sexually exploit one of his servants. Denied paternal recognition, Arroyo views himself as fatherless: "I am the son of some

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

man's wild oats, the son of chance and misfortune" (62). Given the opportunity, he would readily effect true orphanhood by murdering his father: "I spied on him as he was drinking and fornicating, not knowing his son was watching him, waiting for the moment to kill him" (141-42).

The old gringo's father, like Harriet's, left his family for a military reason: to participate in the invitation of Mexico in 1847. While details of their relationship are not explored in the novel, it is clear that it too was strained, as evidenced by the patricidal motif also introduced into his characterization: "... he had dreamed that his father was serving in the Army of the Confederacy, against Lincoln. He wanted what he had dreamed: the revolutionary drama of son against father" (54).

In their respective ways, all three fathers divorced themselves from their children, resulting in the figurative, yet very real, orphaning of their offspring. Although the effects of that abandonment are described with greater detail in the case of Harriet Winslow and Tomás Arroyo, each protagonist's internal struggle is associated with a father-child conflict. This coincidence is consistent with Paz's ideas and corroborates Robert Con Davis's theory that "the question of the father in fiction, in whatever guise, is essentially one of father absence."⁵

Because of the old gringo's advanced age relative to that of the other characters, his role vis-à-vis the paternal theme has an additional twist in that he becomes a father figure for both Harriet and Arroyo. Fuentes makes this point from several perspectives. On one occasion, the fictional Bierce closes his eyes as he observes the couple and imagines them to be his son and daughter (60). Later, at the dramatic moment when Harriet senses Arroyo's intention to shoot the old gringo, she begs him not to kill "the only father either of them had known" (162). Arroyo, of course, murders the fictionalized Bierce. With the symbolic and psychological consequence of his and Harriet reliving the experience of being fatherless: "... and now they were both alone again, orphans" (174). Upon Harriet's return to the United States with the old gringo's body, she identifies him as the father she had gone to Mexico to visit and whose assassination she had witnessed: "She says she saw him shoot her daddy dead" (172).

Through their thoughts and recollections regarding their fathers, Harriet, Arroyo, and the old gringo return to the past and to their beginnings, another major theme of *El laberinto de la soledad*. Each experiences the mythological journey home which Harriet had attributed to Arroyo: "He had come again, he was trying to relive one of the oldest myths of mankind, the return to the lar [sic], the earth, the warm home of our origins" (129). In Harriet's case, this theme can be seen in the juxtaposition of dreams of her father with her leaving Washington for Mexico. In the old gringo's, it is evident in his identification with his father as he crosses the border.

It is appropriate to recall that in Paz's treatise, solitude, orphanhood, and the return to one's origins in order to break with them are but one-half of a di-

⁵ Robert Con Davis, *The Fictional Father. Lacanian Readings of the Text* (Amherst: The University of Amherst Press, 1981) 3.

alectical process. The second half, as previously noted, involves the creation of another order: "To live is to be separated from what we were in order to approach what we are going to be in the mysterious future" (195). The concept of rupture, therefore, connotes more than those external circumstances of culture, society, and family that in their respective ways Harriet, the old gringo, and Arroyo put behind them. It also suggests an internal, personal evolution toward self-realization. In Paz's view of this process, self-awareness is concomitant with change: ". . . the feeling that we are alone has a double significance: on the one hand it is self-awareness, and on the other it is a longing to escape from ourselves" (195).

In *Gringo viejo*, the notion of self-awareness is linked to the leitmotif of the mirror which Fuentes weaves into his narrative. In the case of the old gringo, it is the mirror that he uses to shave, and which enables him to contemplate the image of the new self into which he is transforming, a self that is nevertheless rooted in his past: "No one will ever see me old and decrepit. I will always be young because today I dare to be young again. I will always be remembered as I was" (15). Despite the apparent contradiction between the notions of personal evolution and self-realization and the old gringo's death wish, Fuentes has depicted the American in a struggle to become a different person. This is reflected in the old gringo's conscious decision to delay on several occasions any provocation of his Mexican comrades that might result in his death.

Individually, and prior to their meeting, Harriet and Arroyo also experience profound awareness of their personal identity as they observe themselves in a mirror. While living in New York, Harriet's daily routine of looking at herself in a mirror leads to a realization of the emptiness of her unauthentic existence: "She sat every morning before the mirror in her tiny bedroom on fourteenth Street, and there came a day when she admitted that her face was telling a story that didn't please her. She was only 31, but the features she traced gently on the mirror before touching her icy temple with the same finger seemed not older but emptier, less legible than ten—years before" (47).

Arroyo's life is also marked by the emptiness which stems from his father's refusal to acknowledge and recognize him legally. It is only when Arroyo enters the mirrored ballroom of his father's house that he senses that he indeed possesses an identity: "I spent my childhood spying. No one knew me. From my hiding places I knew them all. All because one day I discovered the ballroom of mirrors and I discovered I had a face and a body. I could see myself. Tomás Arroyo" (166).

The mirrored ballroom also plays an important role in Harriet's and Arroyo's self-knowledge and discovery. As the two dance in the ballroom, there is a moment when they see themselves and each other in the mirrors as if for the first time:

"Look. It's me."

"Look. It's you."

"Look. It's us." (109).

The statement "It's us," with its allusion to self-actualization, becomes highly significant when it is recalled that early in the novel, the old gringo identifies with Harriet because she, like Arroyo, is also engaged in a struggle to establish a sense of self-identity: ". . . she is here the same as I, fighting for her very being" (35). This thought reminds us that while the old gringo's ultimate objective is death, he too is preoccupied with self-realization.

In order for Fuentes's characters to evolve into their potential selves, they must break with present reality and their perceived identity. For them, Paz's notion of "rupture" and "the longing to escape from ourselves" become synonymous as they assert a wish for, or a new-found sense of control over their lives. The old gringo and Arroyo express it in identical terms: "My destiny is my own" (17, 81, 167).⁶ Harriet alludes to it as a motivating factor in her leaving the United States: "When I die, I want to be free of humiliation, resentment, guilt, or suspicion; mistress of myself" (44).

To achieve control over their destinies, the three require a freedom previously denied them, one they can obtain only through rebellion. Harriet's situation is a close reflection of the following description of all women offered by Paz: "She is never her own mistress. Her being is divided between what she really is and what she imagines she is, and this image has been dictated to her by her family, class, school, friends, religion and lover. She never expresses her femininity because it always manifests itself in forms men have invented for her" (197). In Harriet's case, existential freedom is diminished by a domineering mother who imposes modes of behavior that assure that she maintain the image of a cultivated woman, and by a boyfriend who categorizes all women as either whores or virgins, and forces upon her a stereotypical Madonna role.

Harriet is therefore entrapped and denied self-expression by all the circumstances of her life: her mundane schoolteacher's existence, her conservative dress and deportment, and her conformity to an image of femininity imposed by family, lover, and culture. Her rebellion first manifests itself in the decision to go to Mexico, and subsequently through sexual involvement with Arroyo. The latter is especially noteworthy given her nondescript and regulated past. Indeed, the primitive and unrestrained nature of that relationship render it the high point of her exercise of newfound freedom: "Arroyo had made her feel like a whore and she had revealed in being what she despised" (147).

Frustrated by a rigid socioeconomic system and by his father's refusal to acknowledge him, Arroyo finds freedom and control over personal destiny via his participation in the revolution. That act vindicates his personal identity and establishes his right, as that of his comrades, to own and farm the land that is rightfully theirs. The revolution permits Arroyo to experience honor and dignity and, for the first time, to view as real the ability to live "like a man" (164).

The old gringo is also portrayed as a victim of cultural circumstances he rejected—"he had mocked God, his Homeland, Money" (75), and as a pawn who has lived an illusion of freedom and self-determination while totally sub-

⁶ The English renditions vary slightly; however, in the original Spanish, the identical words are used.

servient to his employer. For him, rebellion against the father figure of William Randolph Hearst, the abandonment of his country and profession, and the search for death on his own terms, represent a declaration of freedom and an assumption of control over his own destiny.

As positive as the three protagonists' common entelechy is, it should not be forgotten that in Paz's view, as in Fuentes's novel, solitude is "the very condition of our lives" (195-96). Hence, in the novel's historical present, Harriet is repeatedly described as engrossed in her recollections, alone. Similarly, through their deaths, the old gringo and Arroyo are consigned to definitive solitude.

While our emphasis has been on characterization, and on elucidating Fuentes's indebtedness to Octavio Paz as he expands and probes the human dimensions of his protagonists, it should be reiterated that *Gringo viejo* is a novel about Mexico and the Mexican Revolution. In that regard, it is again striking to note the extent to which Fuentes has incorporated, consciously or unconsciously, major themes of Paz's essay. For Paz, the Mexican Revolution, as all revolutions, receives its impetus from the human need to realize potentialities that some outside force restrains: "... every revolution tries to create a world in which man, free at last from the trammels of the old regime, can express himself truly and fulfill his human condition" (143). In that sense, suggests Paz, the Mexican Revolution is part of a process of self-discovery: "[It] was an explosive and authentic revelation of our real nature" (135). Moreover, the issues of identity and self-realization are inextricably linked to a past in which solitude occupies a dominant position. In this context, the Revolution "was a movement attempting to reconquer our past, to assimilate it and make it live in the present. This will to return, the consequence of solitude and desperation, is one of the phases of the dialectic of solitude and communion, reunion and separation, which seems to rule our whole history. Thanks to the revolution, the Mexican wants to reconcile himself with his history and his origins" (146-47).

The parallel between Paz's thought and the view of the Revolution depicted in *Gringo viejo* is strikingly evident in the following passage from *El laberinto de la soledad*: "... the Revolution was an excess and a squandering, a going to extremes, an explosion of joy and hopelessness, a shout of orphanhood and jubilation, of suicide and life, all of them mingled together" (148).

In *Gringo viejo*, numerous references are made to the Revolution itself, as well as to its causes and participants. The intertwining of these thematic motifs links the specific experience of the protagonists to their historical and cultural milieu. For example, the oppressive and betraying father common to all three becomes every landowner who has abused those in his employ: "The worst master was the one who said he loved us like a father, insulting us with his compassion, treating us like children, like idiots, like savages ... " (164). As in the case of Arroyo, Harriet, and the old gringo, the oppressed can only attain the illusive ideal of freedom through rebellion: "That was the story of this land ... slaves or rustlers, never free men, and yet possessors of the right that allowed them to be free: their rebellion" (28). Barring the latter, the economically disenfranchised will not only continue to be deprived of what is duly theirs but, like each protagonist, will remain, in effect orphans, without a claim to legiti-

macy: "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 orphans" (166).

Those participating in the rebellion also experience a moment of truth when, like Arroyo, Harriet and the old gringo, they discover who they are: "One of Arroyo's soldiers held an arm toward the mirror. 'Look, it's you.' And his companion pointed toward the reflection in the other mirror. 'It's me.' 'It's us'" (40).

In sum, as in many of his works, Carlos Fuentes utilizes the three main characters of *Gringo viejo* to suggest a symbolic microcosm of the Mexican experience that clearly echoes many of Octavio Paz's major themes in *El laberinto de la soledad*. Underlying that vision, however, are universal themes which transcend the geographical and national frame of the novel. Fuentes's characters, who are significantly both Mexican and American, remind us that the experience of solitude— orphanhood, through rebellion, is ultimately a human one: ". . . each of us has a secret frontier within him, and that is the most difficult frontier to cross because each of us hopes to find himself alone there, but finds only that he is more than ever in the company of others" (161).