

The Campaign Short Guide

The Campaign by Carlos Fuentes

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Characters

Fuentes has created a number of interesting characters in his historical novel. He makes use of a variety of ideas, but his characters are not reduced to being spokesmen of their beliefs. They are not allegorical figures.

Baltasar Bustos is the central figure. At the offset he is a bespectacled, plump clerk at the Superior Court of the Viceroyalty of the Rio de las Plata. His myopia is symbolic. The presiding judge is the Marquis de Cabra, husband of his beloved Ofelia. To test his ideas and to win the admiration of Ofelia Salamanca, he joins the wars of independence as a soldier, despite his physical limitations. He makes himself a soldier to the extent that the gauchos on his father's huge estate do not recognize him at first, when he returns for a visit. He has become as lean and saddle-hardened as any of them. His passion for Ofelia takes him from the Argentine pampas to practically every battlefield of the southern part of the continent. Yet he has seen only the naked back and buttocks of his beloved and the side of her face.

Of his two friends, Varelo, the printer is the more important. Varelo remains in Buenos Aires with his publishing business, and Xavier, the believer in Voltaire's aristocratic ideas, stays on his estate, content to view the conflicts from a distance with a sardonic eye. Both admire Bustos even if their attitude is indulgent of him. As narrator, Varelo sets the tone of the book. Both believe in independence, but neither takes direct action. Varelo taking his cue from Diderot, knows that the combatants are not aware that their field of action is constantly changing so they can never see the events of the wars in their entirety. He views them with the same patient indulgence with which he treats Baltasar.

Ofelia Salamanca has insisted on keeping her original name after marrying the Marquis. The reader sees her only briefly in a few appearances, so she is a shadowy figure. She is a very early champion of women's rights, although quite aware that this issue has never been considered by the men around her. She becomes a central figure in folk songs, even in the corridos of Mexico where Baltasar finally meets her. Very ill, her life is almost over and her famous beauty sadly wasted.

Ofelia's husband, the Marquis de Cabra, is described as "dry and cynical." Later in Chile he expands his own philosophy. Justice is unattainable as far as he is concerned. Corruption is the rule not the exception because human actions are prompted always by self interest. He is a very old man as is Jose Antonio Bustos, Baltasar's father.

Baltasar's relations with his father are strained although he owes his position at the Supreme Court to his father's influence and he owes the leisure to pursue his ideals to his father's wealth.

While fighting in San Martin's victorious army in Chile, Bustos meets the great liberator himself. Fuentes shows that Jose de San Martin is a prophet of Latin America's future. He predicts that unless the military is kept firmly under control in future governments,



there will be no end of future juntas disrupting whatever stability these countries may attain. The most honored of Argentina's heroes, he has also been the most ignored. Bustos participated in San Martin's victorious battle of Chacabuco, which freed the future countries of Chile, Bolivia, and Peru from Spanish domination.

In Veracruz, Mexico, Bustos meets Anselmo Quintana, a defrocked priest and independence fighter who gives him a philosophical perspective on his experience during the wars. No longer a priest but still a fervid believer in his own concepts of Christianity, Quintana is a contrast to Ildefonso de las Munecas, the priest and warlord Bustos had met in 1915. Father Ildefonso was at least partly insane and proclaimed a gospel of sex as often as the Biblical gospels. Quintana's concept of hell is that of a place of total silence where the word of truth cannot penetrate. All things sacred are expressed in words.

Christ the divine logos is a word also.

Quintana finally brings Baltasar face to face with the object of his ten year quest, Ofelia Salamanca. They cannot become lovers but she delivers to him the child he believed he had killed in that fire on the eve of May 24, 1810. He also learns that she has worked for the rebel cause all through the conflicts.

Social Concerns

The wars for independence, 1810-1820, in South America were led by young men of the landowning, aristocratic class like Baltasar Bustos and his friends. Most of these men were passionate in their pursuit of liberty, but it was the freedom of their own class which they wanted to secure. The liberation of the lower classes was given little or no consideration. Nor did it occur to many of them that the Indians should be given any rights at all.

Bustos sincerely believes that he wishes freedom for everybody, and when he meets Indians in Upper Peru, he makes a speech for their benefit in which he proclaims the ideals of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Harmony should exist between man and nature and all men in nature. He belatedly realizes that few of the Indians understand Spanish and that even those who did would find his philosophy unintelligible. Later in battle his first victim is an Indian, and he kills him because he is an Indian. He will agonize endlessly over this act gratuitous as he comes to an understanding of himself.



Techniques

The Campaign, as some critics maintain, may be Fuentes' finest novel. The narrative is both subtle and complex, but does not involve the experimental writing which characterized the author's other major novels. It is comparatively easier to read and is consistently pleasurable throughout. As usual, Fuentes is concerned with understanding history, in this book the history of the wars which made the various Latin American countries independent.

The story is based on the letters sent by Baltasar Bustos, a fighter for the cause, to his friends back in Buenos Aires where Bustos' role in the wars began. He is quixotically myopic as well as physically nearsighted. On the eve of Argentina's May revolution he tries to begin the process of establishing justice in his homeland by substituting a black child for the recently born son of the Marquisa de Cabra, wife of the Presiding Judge of the Rio de la Plata Viceroyalty. The comic and tragic events of the novel begin immediately. Semiblind, he blunderingly sets a fire which destroys the black child, and he fears the white one perished as well.

Fuentes places the whole continent of South America in perspective during the years 1810-1820. Bustos, who thanks to a view he attains of Ofelia Salamanca dressing, falls totally in love with her and pursues her, and the cause of justice, to Upper Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Venezuela, and finally Mexico.

The events in which he participates are described in the letters which Varela rewrites into more standard narrative form, placing them in the perspective of his philosophy (and of course, Fuentes') based on the writings of Denis Diderot.

This is a panorama of early Latin American history from the eve of May 24, 1810, until 1820 when Bustos is among the Mexican rebels. Bustos owes his education to books smuggled into Argentina in crates of religious supplies, chalices and priestly vestments which custom officials do not open.

The Holy Office has tried to censor the reading material sent into the Spanish colonies. Enlightenment philosophers are on the Index, but novels are also forbidden. Bustos and his friends meet in the Cafe de Malcos in Buenos Aires to discuss their ideas. He is a law student, but his real education takes place among the fighters for the cause of independence. The novel becomes a bildungsroman, the story of a young man's progress from youth to maturity.

The bulk of the armies for independence is made up of Indians, blacks, and mulattos, but Baltasar soon learns that no one is really interested in establishing justice and equality for them.

Racial inequality will plague Latin America throughout its history, and Fuentes shows the origin of the problem. Bustos has no understanding of the gauchos who work on his father's ranch, and the Indians around him in Upper Peru are completely strange to him.



Little wonder that the warlord/ priest Idefonso de las Munecas calls him boy and child. Bustos is given his chance to address the Indians with his revolutionary rhetoric, but soon after he meets a guide who sets him on the real path of understanding. "You spoke to these people from a mountaintop.

Now you must descend to the poor land of the Indians," Simon Rodriguez tells him. Fuentes skillfully takes his protagonist through the phases of this descent. In a cave he is given a vision of El Dorado, the city of gold of the Indian world, and is bewildered by it.

His philosophy is not adequate to this vision. Simon Rodrigues leaves him in a hospital and goes looking for other disciples. Nothing in Upper Peru is anywhere close to the dream of unity under nature preached by Rousseau.

Rather, innumerable guerilla bands led by self-seeking caudillos are everywhere. After recuperating on his father's ranch, Bustos rejoins the struggle under General Jose de Martin. He spends time in a brothel in Venezuela nursing an English prostitute, but his descent to the level of the Indians is not complete until he meets Anselmo Quintana in Mexico. The ex-priest shows him what revolutions should be about: the creation of political institutions based on Indian as well as Spanish traditions.

The novel's ending owes some of its aspects to mystery stories. Certain parts of Bustos' experiments are clarified. He finally meets Ofelia Salamanca, but this is anticlimactic. In the final stages of illness she puts her son, the one he feared he had killed in that fire in Buenos Aires, in his custody. His blindness is not completely cured, however. He will never learn that this boy is the son of his friend Manuel Varela with whom Ofelia had been having an affair for over two years. He returns to Argentina, and his campaign ends with the image of Ofelia put to rest, and an ordinary life before him.



Themes

Fuentes is a novelist with a pronounced philosophic bent. In his earlier works he uses the ideas of the existentialist philosophers, especially the French ones. In *The Campaign* his characters embrace the ideas of the eighteenth-century philosophers, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Diderot. Baltasar Bustos is a follower of Rousseau, Xavier Dorrego finds Voltaire more suitable to his temperament, and Manuel Varela believes that the philosophy of Denis Diderot is a better guide for life and politics. They are close friends who believe that liberty from the domination of Spain is inevitable, but Bustos alone actually fights to achieve this end.

Bustos' quest is a blend of idealism and the passion he feels for a married woman whom he hopes to impress. He has spied on Ofelia Salamanca in her boudoir while plotting to kidnap her child and replace it with the baby of a black prostitute. Ofelia, the wife of the Spanish Viceroy, is not even aware of his existence. Accidentally starting a fire as he leaves her residence, he feels that he probably killed her child and pursues her across revolutionary Latin America to express his regrets. This quixotic purpose is not realized until the end of the novel, and he never learns the full extent of the ironies involved in it.

Varela is the narrator and the ideas of Diderot are the ones which prevail in the story. In his recent writings Fuentes has accepted Diderot's ideas which anticipated the uncertainty principle of a more recent thinker, Werner Heisenberg. Since everything is constantly changing and it is impossible to get a total view of reality anyway, no philosophy can be adequate. Accordingly, history cannot be completely understood either. Baltasar Bustos' quest is futile, then, as all quests must be.

Fuentes has written at length on the importance of *Don Quixote* in modern literature. An understanding of this novel is for him the test as to whether a reader can ever be an adequate critic.

As long as there are men like Baltasar Bustos who will embark on quests despite how ridiculous they may seem to the more practical minds around them, there is hope for the human race.

Fuentes' outlook is not totally pessimistic.

Fuentes, who has been something of an ideologue himself, demonstrates in this book that ideologies always impose a kind of blindness when applied in their purest form. European theories were applicable to the conditions of Latin America only to a limited extent.

Baltasar Bustos believes that if ideals are passionately pursued, they can be realized. Rousseau has taught him this.



His passion is fueled by an ideal erotic passion. In him political goals and private lusts combine. A young bookish philosopher is forced to cope with realities which Jean Jacques Rousseau could not possibly have known.



Key Questions

Some readers may wish to read a history of Argentina's Wars of Independence to get a more detailed view of the subject. How accurate were Jose de Martin's fears about the future of his country? Was Argentina, and the other countries of the area, too racially mixed to become truly democratic? Do idealists like San Martin and the fictional Baltasar Bustos ever realize their objectives? San Martin, betrayed by his own Creole class, was forced out of Argentina in 1824 and died in Paris in 1850. What kind of national leaders have usually ruled the country?

Simon Bolivar's most famous comment on his campaigns was: "I have plowed in the sea." The leaders of the American Revolution did not suffer his fate. Why did this revolution turn out so differently? Fuentes believes that while Americans enjoy democracy at home, in their relations with other weaker countries they behave like fascists. Is this at all accurate?

1. Do the personalities of the three friends seem to match their philosophers, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Diderot?
2. To what extent has Fuentes made Baltasar Bustos a comic, even slightly ridiculous figure? How does he grow into a genuine and competent fighter for independence?
3. What does the fact the Fuentes plans to have Ofelia Salamanca appear in future novels say about her character? What characters in his earlier novels might also be called semi-mythical?
4. When does Bustos begin to realize that Rousseau's philosophy of the potential harmony of all men in nature does not apply to the political and social situation in Latin America?
5. Is Ildefonso de las Muecas a good teacher for an idealistic young man? Why?
6. What roles do Jose Antonio Bustos, Baltasar's father, and his sister, Sabina, play in the novel?
7. The gauchos on his father's estate are the first common people with whom Baltasar has had real contact.

They are also the closest to nature in keeping with Rousseau's philosophy.

Why does he hold them in such contempt?

8. Is the warlord Miguel Lanza typical of the guerrilla leaders in Upper Peru?
9. Simon Rodriguez forces Bustos to look at his reflection in a windowpane.

What does he see? Why is Fuentes so fond of mirrors and reflections?



10. Why is Bustos' letter from page 105-108 quoted directly by Varelo? He paraphrases most of the others.

11. Why does Bustos find the vision of El Dorado upsetting?

12. Aided by the speeches of his wife Evita, a skilled demagogue, Juan Peron in 1953 declared himself to be the spiritual heir of Jose San Martin. Is it likely that he was aware of the irony in this claim?

13. Is Gabriela Coe, whom Bustos will eventually marry, at all like Ofelia Salamanca? What prevents him from going to her?

14. Baltasar's campaign of war and love takes him to Mexico at its finish.

Why does Fuentes end the novel in his native country?

15. Are the beliefs of Anselmo Quintana and Denis Diderot similar? Why is the rebel priest the best of Bustos' mentors?

Literary Precedents

Baltasar Bustos is a kind of Don Quixote in pursuit of chivalric adventures and of his own lady Dulcinea as well. Fuentes has said that Bustos is also modeled on Pierre Bekuzov, the plump bespectacled hero of War and Peace. Pierre is a captive of Napoleon's army in that novel, not an actual fighter in the war against the French. Bustos owes something to Voltaire's *Candide*, also, a seriocomic story featuring a young idealist as he discovers the real human world.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989) is also about the Wars of Independence. Simon Bolivar, the Great Liberator, is being carried down river and into exile. But he is mortally ill and is really about to die.

The great union of South American countries he had envisioned can never take place. The lands he has freed are divided into squabbling separate states.

Bolivar dies in despair. The book published the same year as *The Campaign*, 1990, is referred to playfully toward the end of Fuentes' novel. Varela has received a manuscript from Columbia which he says he will not publish because it is too disheartening. Fuentes has a slightly more optimistic view of the Wars of Independence.

Related Titles

In a sense Fuentes is a philosopher of revolution, and most of his novels deal with the subject to one extent or another. He plans to write a book featuring Emiliano Zapata, one of the heroes of the Mexican Revolution. At times Fuentes seems convinced that Latin American countries are doomed to repeat revolutionary warfare through all their history, obeying Nietzsche's law of eternal recurrence. Unlike Federico Robles and Artemio Cruz, Baltasar Bustos does not betray the cause for which he fought, but retains some of his idealism.

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