

Conversation in the Cathedral Short Guide

Conversation in the Cathedral by Mario Vargas Llosa

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Characters

As in *The Green House* (1966), Vargas Llosa defines each character through his actions, dialogue, and circumstances affecting his conduct. Although the motives behind each character's actions are never clarified, there are several whose motives are not difficult to discern given their extensive participation in the story's plot and many subplots.

The story is told essentially by five main narrators: Santiago Zavala, a newspaperman and son of the wealthy industrialist Fermin Zavala; Cayo Bermudez, head of police and intelligence and Minister of Internal Affairs; Amalia Cerda, a servant at the Zavala's house; Ambrosio Pardo, a chauffeur for Bermudez, later for Zavala, and finally for Amalia's husband; and Queta, a prostitute at the brothel run by Hortensia. Their stories are told within the framework of an ongoing conversation between Santiago and Ambrosio in a sleazy bar named *The Cathedral*. Santiago runs into Ambrosio, his father's former chauffeur, in the bar a few years after the events described in the novel have transpired.

Santiago is the central character whose narrative encompasses four periods in his life: his student days at the University of San Marcos, his work as a newspaper reporter with *La Cronica*, the discovery of his father's homosexuality, and his marriage to Ana. The most important incidents occur in his student days at the University where he becomes part of a leftist group. It is here that he becomes aware of the injustice, cruelty, and repression promoted by the dictatorial regime with the support of the upper class. Unfortunately, his involvement in the group is probably motivated more by his infatuation with Aida, a leftist revolutionary, than by any interest in social change; for he soon gives up his association with the group to devote himself to a mediocre existence. His actions reveal his lack of will to commit himself to any demanding profession or cause.

His father, Fermin Zavala, is mainly concerned with preserving his position of power within the economic and political structure. Consequently, he accommodates himself to the corrupt practices of the dictatorial regime. His hidden second life as a homosexual is revealed during the reporting of Hortensia's murder. Hortensia, the madame of the brothel maintained by Bermudez, is killed by Ambrosio for attempting to blackmail Fermin Zavala.

Ambrosio, Zavala's chauffeur, reveals during a sexual encounter with Queta, a prostitute at the brothel run by Hortensia, that he has become Fermin Zavala's lover. Ambrosio is characterized by an abject, pathetic loyalty, first to Bermudez, later to Zavala. To acquire the protection of a prominent man, he is willing to compromise his virility.

Criticism of the Odría government revolves around Cayo Bermudez, the Minister of Internal Affairs. He is a cynical, depraved opportunist whose actions are defined by deception and betrayal. It is interesting to note that both Cayo and Ambrosio are from Chincha, a province south of Lima, where they knew each other as children. Ambrosio is the son of an exconvict and a street vendor, whereas Bermudez is the son of a



prominent money lender. They separate when Bermudez goes off to school and meet again when Cayo, now Minister of Internal Affairs, offers Ambrosio a position as his chauffeur. As minister, Bermiidez supervises an efficient domestic spy network whose main function is to discover sordid clandestine relationships and ferret out any political opposition.

Amalia represents the servant class.

Through her narration the reader is made privy to intimate details at the Zavala household, and later when she is employed by Hortensia, to the life at the brothel, the prostitute's dealings with the powerful of Peru, and finally to Hortensia's and Queta's lesbian relationship.

Numerous secondary characters representing different aspects of Peruvian life parade through these narratives. The author's main purpose is to use his characters to denounce corruption, immorality and mediocrity.

Social Concerns

Vargas Llosa analyzes in *Conversation in the Cathedral* the corrupting influence of the Manuel Odría dictatorship on all sectors of Peruvian society from 1948 to 1956. He incisively portrays wealthy industrialists, impoverished civil servants, leftist students, newspapermen, employees and whom survive environment by workers, domestic prostitutes, many of in this tyrannical en giving unquestioning support to the dictator. In order to gain such acquiescence, the dictator resorts to a cynical system of intimidation using the secret police and intelligence to blackmail his opposition and to ferret out any possible subversive elements. His minister of internal affairs supports a brothel where prominent politicians and industrialists participate in perverse sexual practices and reveal their clandestine activities to seductive conniving prostitutes.

The complicity of the wealthy class is also explored. Afraid to lose their position of economic and political power, the oligarchs and the new industrialists go along with the repressive measures of the dictatorship. The tacit acceptance of injustice and cruelty generates conflict between politically conservative upper-class parents and their more socially aware and responsible offspring. Unfortunately, the new generation is often too cowardly and vacillating about rejecting the values and advantages of their social class.

Techniques

This extensive novel is intricately structured. Originally it was published in two volumes comprising 675 pages.

It is divided into four narrative units, each composed of unnumbered sequences presented from the point of view of one of the five narrators (Santiago, Bermudez, Amalia, Ambrosio, and Queta). The first part comprises ten sequences, the second has nine, the third has four, and the fourth has eight. In the second and fourth units each sequence is characterized by shifting point of view. For instance, in the first sequence in unit two (this is the most complex unit), point of view changes twelve times.

In addition to this intricate structure, the narrative features an omniscient narrator who functions as a camera eye describing objects and actions in a given setting. The telescoping of dialogues is also one of the dominant devices used to juxtapose time and space.

In this novel Vargas Llosa refines his use of narrative point of view, dialogue, and juxtaposition of time frames. Cinematic influences pervade the novel's endeavor to create an objective presentation of the total reality of Peruvian society during a given time period. Vargas Llosa's intention and purpose is to incite the reader to visualize the world unfolding before him and to challenge him to make his own value judgments.

Themes

Two dominant themes are developed: the first is the corruption and evil generated by the repressive regime and the resulting injustices it perpetuates. There is no hope for a society lost in a morass of degeneration, depravity and sexual degradation. Well-intentioned characters are overcome by pervasive destructive forces to become pathetic loyal subjects.

The second theme is the loss of individual will or the inability to exercise one's will to rise above mediocrity.

Through the central character's introspective view of his life, Vargas Llosa examines the doubts, anxieties and indecision of a human being who prefers anonymity, neutrality and failure to self-assertion and social responsibility.

Literary Precedents

The subject of repressive dictatorship treated in *Conversation in the Cathedral* has been dealt with also in such wellknown novels as *El Senor Presidente* (1975; original in Spanish, 1946) by the Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias and *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975; *El otono del patriarca*, 1975) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Both novels depict the devastating effect of a dictatorship on the country's citizenry.

Related Titles

Vargas Llosa's analysis of contemporary Peruvian society begins with his first novel *The Time of the Hero* (1963), inspired by his traumatic and unforgettable two years at the Leoncio Prado Military Academy. This novel may be considered a bildungsroman because it is based on the author's educational experience and formative adolescent years.

The novel narrates the life of five first-year cadets at the military academy from their individual points of view. The plot centers on the resistance of the five to upper-class hazing, their stealing of a chemistry exam, the subsequent denunciation of the culprit by one of the five, and the shooting of the informer during military maneuvers.

While the novel focuses on the military establishment and the false pretensions of honor, integrity and discipline it generates, it also depicts family conditions and situations that cast a light on hypocritical values promoted in other sectors of society.

The Peruvian author's fifth novel, *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* (1973), questions the motives of the military and religion by satirizing their activities. It is the story of a diligent army captain, Pantaleon Pantoja, whose reputation for efficiency and reliability leads his superiors to send him on a secret mission to Peru's northeastern tropical region to organize a squadron of prostitutes. A series of rapes have been committed by soldiers stationed in the distant jungle, and the generals in Lima feel that the prostitutes will relieve not only the soldiers' sexual needs but also tension between the inhabitants of the region and the army.

Alternating with this plot is the story of a religious fanatic, Brother Francisco, and his zealous followers whose barbaric practices include crucifixion of animals and humans. The plot stresses the outrageous behavior of the representatives of two established orders, the military and the Church. Their zealotry in the pursuit of ludicrous tasks parodies the systems they represent.

With the publication of *Aunt Julia and The Scriptwriter* (1977), Vargas Llosa broke away from his denunciation of Peru's social problems. An entertaining humorous work, it parodies radio soap operas, which are written here by an eccentric character, Pedro Camacho, and the deep involvement of the listeners in their fantastic and unbelievable episodes. Along with the soap opera fictions, Vargas Llosa narrates the vagaries of a complicated love affair between Marito Varguitas, an eighteen-year-old student, and his thirty-year-old divorced Aunt Julia.

Various critics have observed that *Conversation in the Cathedral* is an excellent example of metafiction. One of the characteristics of metafiction is that the author, as one of the characters (Marito, in this case), explores the process of writing. At the time of the writing of this novel, Vargas Llosa was already an accomplished writer whose maturity enabled him to recreate his youthful experiences with humor and understanding, not only for his own embryonic attempts, but also for his bizarre model

Pedro Camacho. The reader is called upon to experience the author's own emotions as he reproduces his fictional account of his early writing attempts. The theme of the novel — the experience of becoming a writer — becomes the metafiction being created by the reader from the fictional account.

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