

# The Death of Artemio Cruz Study Guide

## The Death of Artemio Cruz by Carlos Fuentes

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# Contents

|  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| <a href="#">The Death of Artemio Cruz Study Guide.....</a> | <a href="#">1</a>  |
| <a href="#">Contents.....</a>                              | <a href="#">2</a>  |
| <a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>                          | <a href="#">4</a>  |
| <a href="#">Prologue.....</a>                              | <a href="#">6</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapter 1, 1941: July 6.....</a>               | <a href="#">8</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapter 2, 1919: May 26.....</a>               | <a href="#">10</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter 3, 1913: December 4.....</a>           | <a href="#">12</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter 4, 1924: June 3.....</a>               | <a href="#">14</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter 5, 1927: November 23.....</a>          | <a href="#">15</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter 6, 1947: September 11.....</a>         | <a href="#">16</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter 7, 1915: October 22.....</a>           | <a href="#">18</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter 8, August 12, 1934.....</a>            | <a href="#">20</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter 9, 1939: February 3.....</a>           | <a href="#">22</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter 10, 1955: December 31.....</a>         | <a href="#">24</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter 11, 1903: January 18.....</a>          | <a href="#">26</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter 12, 1889: April 9.....</a>             | <a href="#">28</a> |
| <a href="#">Characters.....</a>                            | <a href="#">29</a> |
| <a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>                        | <a href="#">33</a> |
| <a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>                    | <a href="#">35</a> |
| <a href="#">Techniques.....</a>                            | <a href="#">36</a> |
| <a href="#">Themes.....</a>                                | <a href="#">37</a> |
| <a href="#">Style.....</a>                                 | <a href="#">41</a> |
| <a href="#">Quotes.....</a>                                | <a href="#">44</a> |
| <a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>                         | <a href="#">45</a> |
| <a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>                 | <a href="#">47</a> |



[Literary Precedents.....](#)48

[Related Titles.....](#)49

[Copyright Information.....](#)50



## Plot Summary

*The Death of Artemio Cruz* is a sweeping novel about 20th century Mexico, viewed through the prism of Artemio Cruz's life. Cruz is an idealistic young soldier during the Mexican Revolution dedicated to redistribution of land so that peasants may enjoy a decent life. By 1919, the successful revolution has deteriorated into a series of confusing and bloody skirmishes between rival rebel factions that won't truly end until 1942. Cruz betrays a fellow soldier and blackmails the man's sister into marriage, ensuring his position in a wealthy land-owning family. He quickly becomes a wealthy, arrogant, unprincipled scoundrel—the exact types he fought against during the revolution. Throughout his long life, Cruz continues to accumulate wealth by way of corruption, betraying his family, lovers and former comrades alike. Eventually, Cruz's lust for wealth results in the death of his only son, Lorenzo.

Although it is not revealed until almost the end of the novel, Cruz is the illegitimate son of a handsome, wealthy young heir to a plantation or hacienda. The arrogant young man raped Cruz's mother, a young mulatto slave. After Cruz's birth, his mother is beaten and forced to leave. Cruz is raised by his uncle Lunero, a man he would defend to the death if necessary.

After Lunero's death, Cruz joins the revolutionary movement, dedicated to wresting the land from a few wealthy individuals and allowing each peasant enough fields to feed his family. Cruz's first love, Regina, is hanged by the opposing forces. By 1919, Porfirio has been defeated and the country seems enmeshed in permanent, bloody confusion. When Cruz is imprisoned with an idealistic young officer, Gonzolo Bernal, he gains valuable information about the man's personal life. Cruz makes no effort to save the man, who is executed by a firing squad.

Using deceit and deception, Cruz parlays the information he gained from Bernal into a loveless marriage with the officer's young sister, Catalina. Because women are not allowed to own property, Cruz inherits all the family's wealth in a short time, when Don Bernal, the father, dies. There is little available cash, but a vast fortune in land. Cruz soon expands the family's holdings through trickery and violence.

Cruz buys a newspaper in Mexico City and uses the power and voice it gives him to expand his business holdings. He uses the paper to blackmail business competitors and destroy uncooperative politicians. Cruz begins to act as an intermediary, facilitating corrupt business deals to sell the country's natural resources to U.S. businessmen—for a hefty fee, of course.

Cruz sends his only son, Lorenzo, to manage the family estate at Cocuya at the age of 12, partly to spite Catalina, who adores the boy. At 17, idealistic and determined to join the fight against the Fascists, Lorenzo books a passage to Spain. The boy is killed in the fighting, leaving Cruz with only a daughter, Teresa, whom he disdains. On his deathbed, Cruz torments both women, lying to them about the location of his will. In fact, he has left the bulk of his estate to his loyal aide, Padilla.



The seamless transformation from an impoverished, idealistic youth to a corrupt, decadent middle age and the turbulence of Mexican history are the primary messages of the novel. Fuentes suggests that only those who die young or live in abject poverty manage to retain their idealism.

The author ably uses Cruz's free-ranging, disembodied consciousness as he dives to explore different points of view and language styles throughout the novel. Fuentes uses metaphor and juxtaposition like a poet, interspersing vivid action scenes with Cruz's stream-of-consciousness thoughts. Sam Hileman ably translates Fuentes' prose, which includes lengthy sections without punctuation, and unusual passages told in the second person.



# Prologue

## Prologue Summary

*The Death of Artemio Cruz* is a sweeping novel of Mexican history in the 20th century, viewed through the prism of one man's life. Cruz is an idealistic young soldier fighting in the Mexican Revolution dedicated to redistribution of land so that peasants may enjoy a decent life. By 1919, the successful revolution has deteriorated into a series of confusing and bloody skirmishes between rival rebel factions that never truly end until 1942. Cruz betrays a fellow soldier and blackmails the man's sister into marriage, ensuring his position in a wealthy land-owning family. He quickly becomes the type of wealthy, arrogant, unprincipled scoundrel that he fought against during the revolution. Throughout his long life, Cruz continues to accumulate wealth by way of corruption, betraying his family, lovers and former comrades alike. Eventually, Cruz's lust for wealth results in the death of his beloved only son, Lorenzo.

Artemio Cruz, aged 71, awakens in bed while battling a serious illness. He is surrounded by doctors, but unable to hear their words. His penis is pierced by a catheter, and he feels as if he has brass coins on his tongue. The doctor is surprised that Cruz has regained consciousness in "the very hour of his death." Cruz feels disoriented and disconnected from his body.

Despite his doctor's assertions, Cruz is convinced that he is suffering from no more than a minor bout of poor circulation. His wife Catalina and daughter Teresa are present. When Cruz asks them to open the window, they see it as another of his endless manipulations and refuse to do so.

Cruz immediately asks for Padilla, his right-hand man, who is waiting just outside. Cruz's teenage granddaughter Gloria approaches the bed. He barely recognizes her and waves her away. The women summon a priest to perform the last rites, and Cruz accedes, although he is scornful of the priest and refuses to believe in God.

Becoming more lucid, Cruz relives the events of the previous day, April 10, 1959. He remembers remaining calm while everyone else panicked as the plane from Sonora experienced engine trouble. The plane eventually landed safely.

## Prologue Analysis

Although it is not apparent for many chapters, Cruz is being treated in his own bed, rather than in a hospital, as was the custom of the time in Mexico. The reference to brass coins foreshadows Cruz's death, as coins were often placed over the eyes of a corpse. This underscores the seriousness of Cruz's illness. Cruz's disassociation from his body allows him to see events of his life objectively.



This section introduces the setting of the novel - Cruz's bedchamber, with his wife, daughter, doctors and priest present. Although Cruz's mind ranges far and wide during the narrative, the actual setting changes very little.

A comic note is introduced in the continuing ineffectiveness of the doctor, who must constantly consult with his colleagues and perform more tests, when any fool can see that Cruz is dying.

Cruz is immediately exposed as a manipulative schemer by his wife and daughter's distrust. A hypocrite, Cruz cooperates with the priest while thinking the most scornful thoughts about religion. He was in Sonora to bribe some inspectors. His duplicity is apparent when he considers publishing an expose of the corruption in his newspaper, while simultaneously ensuring the inspector's "loyalty."

A unique feature of this novel is the frequent use of the second-person point of view, when Cruz addresses himself as "you." This first appears at the bottom of page 7.



# Chapter 1, 1941: July 6

## Chapter 1, 1941: July 6 Summary

Riding to work in his chauffeured limousine, Cruz reads the paper and glances up just in time to see two women enter a boutique. Afterwards, the two women go to a department store, where the mother buys expensive moisturizer. They dine at an elegant restaurant, although the mother doesn't eat because she's watching her figure. The daughter wonders aloud if her father will attend her wedding shower. Her mother replies that she has no idea. The two women window shop until lunchtime, then dine at an elegant restaurant.

Catalina's character is revealed as remote and pretentious. This is demonstrated when she refuses to shake the shop owner's hand and pretends to engage in a spirited conversation with her daughter while they wait. The two review all the shop's wedding dresses for the second time.

In his office, a North American businessman explains a destructive mining process to Cruz. Because Mexican law prohibits the transfer of natural resources to foreigners, Cruz is acting as the front man in this transaction. He will collect a hefty fee, as well as retain the rights to the lucrative timber on the land. The North Americans will strip the soil of valuable minerals, damaging the environment in the process.

At his deathbed, Cruz continues to scorn the priest who is giving him last rites. Cruz's own body disgusts him. He lies to himself about the severity of his illness, yet underneath, realizes that death is near. Cruz ruminates that life is not black and white; it is almost impossible to separate good from evil.

## Chapter 1, 1941: July 6 Analysis

In the initial flashback of this chapter, Fuentes switches to the third-person past tense when referring to Cruz. Shifts in tense and point of view allow Fuentes to indicate a wide variety of times and places, as Cruz's mind reflects upon his entire life. In the first of many abrupt shifts, the narrative changes to a third-person omniscient point of view inside the shop. The point of view shifts back to Cruz near the end of the section, where he addresses himself in the second-person.

Cruz's emotional detachment from his family is emphasized by the fact that the two women - his wife and daughter - are not immediately identified. This is exacerbated because the two women are referred to only as "the mother" and "the daughter." Only after several chapters are their names revealed. The point of view quickly shifts to events that transpired inside the shop, which Cruz cannot possibly know.

This chapter is important because it shows the vapid, meaningless, unhappy lives of wealthy women. Cruz has abandoned all his ideals only to create boredom. He sells the





country's natural resources illegally, auctioning his grandchildren's legacy to the highest bidder. The abrupt, unwarned shift in point of view back to Cruz emphasizes the corruption that funds the two women's casual wealth. In Cruz's view of the world, when the North American businessman doesn't offer him a bribe, he is exploiting Cruz.



## Chapter 2, 1919: May 26

### Chapter 2, 1919: May 26 Summary

Following the execution of Gonzalo Bernal, Cruz uses heroic tales of the man's last moments to worm his way into the family's bosom. The family is obviously wealthy, living in a huge house with a fortune in books and precious objects. They are the area's major landholders, with acreage worth a fortune. Still, because of the revolution, there is a shortage of cash. There is not even enough money to buy the seed for crops. Peasants demand that Don Bernal give part of his land to them and the local police offer no help.

Senor Bernal introduces Cruz to his daughter, Catalina. Catalina's attitude towards Cruz is complex. She sees through his ruses, yet is sexually attracted to the young man. Cruz manipulates Don Gamaliel Bernal into allowing a marriage between Catalina and Artemio. Because Cruz is the only hope of saving the family's extensive holdings, Don Bernal refuses to see how corrupt the man is.

Catalina recognizes Cruz's evil intent, but agrees to the marriage as a dutiful daughter. She realizes that her father is sacrificing his only child to keep the family fortune. She falls asleep dreaming of Ramon, the boy that she loves. For his part, Cruz dreams of a young woman who murmured, "I waited for him with happiness that morning. We rode our horses across the river."

### Chapter 2, 1919: May 26 Analysis

It is apparent that Cruz is a slimy character, although his role in Bernal's death is not immediately revealed. Cruz is calculating, devising a story of Gonzolo's final moments that will endear him to the wealthy family.

This chapter introduces the theme of the endless cycle of idealism and corruption throughout Mexico's history. Senior Bernal, who seems like a pious man, bought his extensive lands when Juarez put all the church property up for sale after the Mexican Civil War of the 1850s. Purchasing large tracts of land for very little money, the wealthy landowners set up a system by which most peasants were bound to servitude, almost as slaves.

In turn, Bernal is in danger of losing his holdings to leaders of the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910. The revolt, lead by Emilio Zapata, was primarily a movement of peasant guerillas and urban intellectuals. The major aim of the revolution was to wrest land from foreign countries and wealthy families, and redistribute it to the common people, ending their hopeless poverty. Although the rebels won the war, their economic dreams of a vibrant Mexican middle class were not realized.

Eventually Cruz gains the Bernal property and secures it through deceit and corruption. The message is clear: idealism always results in death and corruption.



## Chapter 3, 1913: December 4

### Chapter 3, 1913: December 4 Summary

Cruz, a young lieutenant, wakes in the arms of his young lover, Regina. Regina suggests that she will find a way for them to be together forever. She'll steal into each town before the rebels take it and be waiting for him there. In reality, they meet for an occasional stolen night.

The two met when Cruz, taking a break from battle, found Regina walking alone outside her village. He abducted and raped her, common behavior of soldiers at the time. Regina is in love with him, but it's too painful for her to think of the initial rape. Instead, she weaves a romantic story of their first meeting, in which she says she was gazing into the water on a beach and saw a handsome face beside her own. The two fell in love, and he peruses her on horseback. The myth ends with the words, "I waited for him with happiness that morning. We rode our horses across the river." Cruz loves her so much that he feels that by looking at her he is looking at himself.

After breakfast, Cruz rejoins his troops to prepare for battle. When the fighting starts, Cruz, leading a small group of men, is knocked off his horse and hides beneath a fallen tree. In the confusion, no one notices. When the fighting ends, Cruz abandons one of his wounded men and rides away. Another trooper saves the man, carrying him to a place where he can die in peace.

Some soldiers report that the defeated Federal troops have taken revenge on the pueblos. They have taken 10 hostages who will be killed if the rebels don't surrender the plaza. Of course, surrender is impossible. Riding past the pueblo, Cruz recognizes Regina's starched skirt among the dead. For the first time since he was just a child Cruz cries. At night, he repeats the myth of their meeting over and over, ignoring the rape that took place. He pretends that Regina has simply traveled to the south, where it is safer. Now, Cruz reflects that Regina was his only true love. He feels contempt for Catalina and Teresa, whom he sees as common.

### Chapter 3, 1913: December 4 Analysis

The brave, idealistic revolutionaries are quickly reduced to mere bandits. Fuentes uses irony when he points out that it became simpler for the rebels to rob the rich and go on to fight another battle rather than attempt complicated reforms. The reader is well aware that such an attitude implies the defeat of the revolution, even though the battles have been won.

Because he has come to love Regina so much, Cruz prefers to believe her myth about how they met, rather than the reality. He constantly repeats the story to himself. Regina symbolizes innocence and idealism. When she dies, Cruz's own tenuous idealism dies



with her. Just as Cruz has abused Regina by raping her, the revolution betrays Mexico by failing to fulfill the dreams of economic equality.

Cruz's cowardice in battle goes unnoticed and the Major hails him as a hero when Cruz's troops are victorious. Regina's death is foreshadowed in the news of the pueblo hostages. Cruz's corruption is illustrated again as he instructs his newspaper editor not to print stories about a political uprising in the 1960s. He conceals the government's violent response. Cruz uses his position as newspaper publisher to fabricate stories about his enemies and conceal wrongdoing by his cohorts. Cruz is so cynical he thinks of Jesus as simply a carpenter's son with 12 press agents.



## Chapter 4, 1924: June 3

### Chapter 4, 1924: June 3 Summary

Catalina and Artemio, married for five years, have established an uneasy truce. She is cold and remote during the day, barely speaking to him. At night, her body betrays her and she finds passion with the man she abhors. Catalina's resentment is fueled by the knowledge that Artemio forced Ramon, her lover, to leave town before the marriage. For his part, Artemio seems to accept Catalina's silent daytime contempt as his due.

Don Bernal died shortly after the wedding. As the husband, Cruz inherited the family's extensive lands, which are now threatened by the revolutionaries. Cruz promises the rebels that he will foreclose on a wealthy family and divide their fields with the peasants. He vows to share the fertile irrigated fields as well as the less productive dry land. Instead, Cruz sells parcels of the arid land and buys even more land in the pueblos near Cocuya.

Several of the wealthy men commit suicide after Cruz forecloses on the mortgages originally held by Don Bernal. The wives shun Catalina, who is completely isolated. Even after her daughter is born she remains silent. Eventually Catalina and Cruz have a son, as well.

Cruz orders his overseer to confiscate rifles from all the peasants. Only a dozen or so of the roughest men are allowed to keep guns, and they all follow Cruz's orders. On his deathbed, Cruz continues to ruminate on his business dealings with pride. He thinks about the women in his life: Laura, Lilia, Catalina. In an ambiguous passage, Cruz seems to remember a sexual interlude with Father Paez, a priest that Catalina was protecting from the rebels.

### Chapter 4, 1924: June 3 Analysis

The chapter opens in Catalina's point of view, as she ruminates about her sexual relationship with her husband of five years. She is well aware that she is living with the man who betrayed her brother and humiliated her father.

Cruz has effectively assumed control of the local militia. Whenever a peasant tries to rebel, the militia members shoot him and claim he was committing a crime. Cruz's seamless transformation into a corrupt despot - exactly the type of man the revolutionaries are fighting against - is complete.

Cruz feels absolutely no guilt regarding his many shady business deals. In fact, they are a continuing source of pride to him. Along with Regina's myth, they are his only solace. The only moral men that Cruz knows are the peasants, who are desperately poor. He reflects that such men are idealistic only because they have never had the opportunity to be anything else.



## Chapter 5, 1927: November 23

### Chapter 5, 1927: November 23 Summary

Cruz visits corrupt friends in Mexico City where one friend tells Cruz that all the priests will be shot the following day, because he is sure that Cruz will keep the secret. While in the city, Cruz visits a brothel.

Cruz recalls meeting with the President and advising him to draft all the remaining rebels into the army and send them to die in a war. He remembers meetings where blustery American businessmen pressured the politicians to violently quash any rebellion. The businessmen threaten to withdraw their financial support from the country if their terms are not met.

As Cruz lies on his deathbed, Catalina and Teresa search fruitlessly for his will. Finally, they ask him where he has put it. Cruz pretends that he can't remember.

### Chapter 5, 1927: November 23 Analysis

The Roman Catholic Church has long supported the existing power structure, so the revolutionaries view priests as enemies. During the Mexican Civil War in the 1850s, the extensive land holdings owned by the Church were confiscated and sold. Don Bernal was one of the buyers who became wealthy as a result. Now, during the Mexican Revolution, priests are being killed and their lands taken.

A major historical shift in the novel is the change from an agricultural-based economy to one based on natural resources. During Don Bernal's days, land was the source of all wealth. Men who owned vast tracts of land became wealthy by selling the agricultural products their land produced. By the end of Artemio Cruz's life, simply owning land was no longer a source of great wealth. Instead, men became wealthy through buying and selling natural resources such as oil, gold and timber. The economic change has continued in our own time, with services such as healthcare and intellectual property such as software frequently becoming the source of wealth.

In the eight years since open conflict ended, Cruz has become politically connected. The politicians are corrupt and easily swayed by wealthy men like Cruz or businessmen from the U.S. Business transactions have become as pleasurable - and as profane - to Cruz as sex.

Cruz enjoys tormenting Catalina and Teresa by pretending that he can't remember where he has put his will. The eventual terms of the will are foreshadowed by Cruz's enjoyment of the women's distress.



## Chapter 6, 1947: September 11

### Chapter 6, 1947: September 11 Summary

Now in his 50s, Cruz awakens in his posh beach house with his beautiful young mistress Lilia. They have planned to use a friend's yacht during their stay. In the chauffeured car on the way, the girl reads stories about movie stars aloud from a Mexico City paper. Cruz does not tell her that he owns the newspaper.

On board the wealthy man's yacht, they learn that their host has absent-mindedly promised a young man named Xavier Adame that he can use the ship as well. Adame says he's sure that Cruz won't mind sharing. Adame is young, handsome and muscular. He is nearly naked, dressed only in a skimpy bathing suit.

As the two young people sun on the upper deck of the yacht and flirt, Cruz is intensely jealous. He is too aware of his flabby legs, wrinkled skin and occasional impotence. After lunch at the club, Cruz takes a nap. Lilia goes out, possibly to meet Adame. Cruz overhears people by the pool referring to him and Lilia as "beauty and the beast."

Catalina and Teresa continue to look for the will. Cruz amuses himself by pretending that he left it in a box on his desk or in a shoe. Cruz calls for his assistant Padilla and recalls a discussion the two had recently about how to control some troublesome rebels. Cruz thinks of his son Lorenzo and misses the boy. He remembers riding his horse along the beach with Lorenzo and through the water.

### Chapter 6, 1947: September 11 Analysis

Cruz's wealth is demonstrated by his lush surroundings and his gold-plated razor. The presence of a mistress, Lilia, is also an indication of wealth in the Mexican culture of the time. On the yacht, Cruz thinks not of having sex *with* the girl, but of satisfying his desire *upon* her, emphasizing the lack of connection between them. This remoteness is also illustrated by Cruz's lack of candor about his ownership of the newspaper.

Cruz is jealous of Adame's handsome face and impressive physique, but he is even more envious of the man's youth. Now in his 50s, Cruz is well aware that each body carries a time bomb within it. Cruz clearly resents the younger man flirting with Lilia, but he can find other mistresses. Despite his wealth, Cruz can never recapture the vibrancy of youth. Adame symbolizes all that Cruz has lost - his youth, the opportunity for true love, a happy marriage, and most of all an easy idealism that never matures into corruption. Despite his wealth, Cruz begins to realize that he can have few of the things that he really wants.

Cruz's discussion with Padilla is similar to conversations he has with wealthy cohorts and politicians in other sections about troublesome rebels. Taken together, the passages underscore the differences in Cruz's outlook now that he is wealthy. As a





young man, Cruz fought with the rebels in the revolution. Their goal was to redistribute the land so that workers could earn a decent living and feed their families. When he left the conflict in 1919, Cruz rapidly became a member of the establishment dedicated to preserving the status quo. Now, his primary focus is quelling any signs of rebellion that might encourage the poor. Cruz is in a position of brutally ending the very revolution that he once fought for.

Cruz's memories of riding with his son Lorenzo echo the myth of his life with Regina. The same phrases are repeated. This passage underscores how much our own history depends upon the myths we choose to tell ourselves over and over. Catalina blames Cruz for their son's death and wants him to feel guilty. Instead, Cruz chooses to remember the two riding across the river in perfect harmony.



# Chapter 7, 1915: October 22

## Chapter 7, 1915: October 22 Summary

A soldier, Cruz wraps himself in a blue serape against the icy wind and crouches in an open camp. The army is out of food and water and Cruz is very hungry. The small detachment is chasing the illusive scattered remnants of rival rebel factions. During his time in the revolution, Cruz has learned to survive battle. He is often surprised at the way his body ducks and dodges bullets when he is not consciously aware of any danger.

With a Yaqui Indian named Tobias, Cruz is sent with a message for the enemy commander. The two are caught in a skirmish and a horse falls on Tobias, breaking both of his legs. They are captured and taken to the jail at Perales, where they will likely face a firing squad.

Tobias urges Cruz to escape. As they pass near an abandoned mine on the way to the jail, the Yaqui creates a diversion, allowing Cruz to flee into the branching cavern. The soldiers block the mine entrance with heavy rocks and Cruz finds himself trapped. He wanders through the branching shafts, lost, until he finally finds an exit. Starving and thirsty, he stumbles out of the mine to find the soldiers waiting for him, relaxing beside a campfire.

At the jail in Perales, Colonel Zagal offers Cruz his freedom if he will give information on Carranza's battle plans. Cruz initially refuses, but challenges Zagal to a duel to settle the matter honorably as two gentlemen. Zagal refuses and orders Cruz thrown in a cell. The Yaqui is in the cell, as well as an envoy from Carranza named Gonzolo Bernal. They are all to be executed.

Through the night, Bernal and Cruz discuss the war. Cruz notes that at the beginning the revolution was designed to raise all men up. Now, it has degenerated into bloody squabbles between different revolutionary factions. Bernal says, "A revolution is shaped on battlefields, but once it is corrupted, though battles are still won, the revolution is lost." Bernal argues that the few remaining idealists are ignorant and bloody men. The rest want only a half-revolution, compatible with their interests, so they can replace Don Porfirio's elite themselves.

As the night wears on, Bernal speaks fondly of his wife and tiny son. He talks about his sister Catalina and his father. The two men argue about the revolution. Cruz decides to give Zapal false information. Cruz tries to bargain for the Yaqui's life and let Bernal be executed. Instead, Colonel Zapal has Bernal and the Yaqui executed at dawn, while he continues to bargain with Cruz.

Just as the firing squad kills the two men, Carranza's forces overrun the town. The soldiers flee, but Colonel Zapal remains. Cruz renews his offer of a personal duel of



honor between the two and Zapal agrees. If he doesn't kill Cruz before they reach the middle of the patio, Cruz can go free.

Zagal fires at Cruz twice but misses. Cruz holds his fire as a point of honor and the two men meet at the center of the patio. Zagal laughs and makes a friendly gesture, putting his gun aside. Cruz fires two rapid point-blank shots and hits Zagal in the midsection.

On his deathbed, Cruz is visited by his granddaughter, Gloria. He relishes rumors that she is involved with Padilla's son. He overhears Catalina asking Padilla's opinions. Catalina notes that Padilla is involved in every aspect of Cruz's business, and will be difficult to replace. Teresa bemoans the fact that Cruz skipped her wedding.

## Chapter 7, 1915: October 22 Analysis

The contrast between Cruz's deprivations as a soldier in the revolution and his current luxurious life only underscore his moral corruption. Different factions of the revolution are in conflict with each other, making the war difficult for outsiders to follow. At times, these disagreements include battles. Cruz is a member of the forces of Carranza, an enemy of another revolutionary leader, Pancho Villa. It is Villa's forces that Cruz is actually pursuing. Eventually Cruz is captured and taken to jail.

Bernal's arguments on the revolution reflect the author's opinion and form a major thesis of the novel. While the rebellion started out as a true revolution, it has degenerated into a ruthless grab for power by immoral men who will use any means to ensure their own wealth. It becomes clear that Bernal is still an idealist who truly hopes that the revolution will bring a better life to Mexico, although he is becoming discouraged.

Gonzolo Bernal symbolizes the idealism of the revolution, which is destroyed by the warring political factions. The Yaqui symbolizes honor and loyalty, which have also been destroyed in the fighting. Only Cruz, symbolizing deceit and corruption, remains intact. Cruz's corruption is complete when he challenges Colonel Zagal to an honorable duel and then gut-shoots the man by ruse.

The information that Cruz was a Captain in Carranza's army explains his political connections later in life. Carranza was the President of Mexico from 1915 to 1920. The conversation between Catalina and Padilla foreshadows Padilla's inheritance of the Cruz financial empire.



## Chapter 8, August 12, 1934

### Chapter 8, August 12, 1934 Summary

At the apartment of his mistress Laura, Cruz prepares for an evening on the town. The two met at a concert, where they happened to be seated next to each other. Laura has left her husband and moved into an apartment, apparently paid for by Cruz.

The phone rings and Catalina asks to speak to her friend Laura. Catalina has reconsidered and wants to purchase a sofa Laura had thought of selling. Catalina says it will perfectly compliment the draperies in the vestibule of her new house. Later, as the two make love, Laura urges Cruz to choose between her and Catalina. Cruz reminds her that he never promised her anything.

On his deathbed, Cruz is aware of Teresa sobbing nearby. Catalina sent Teresa away to boarding school when she was six years old so that Catalina could devote all her time to Lorenzo. When the boy turned 12, Cruz took him to Cocuya to manage the hacienda there. Cruz remembers riding horses on the beach and across the river with his son Lorenzo. The last time, Lorenzo informed his father that he would be leaving on a ship in 10 days to join the fighting.

### Chapter 8, August 12, 1934 Analysis

The telephone conversation between Catalina and Laura illustrates the relationship between the two women. They are close friends, which makes Cruz's duplicity even worse. Yet, it's hard to like Catalina. She uses her superior wealth and social position to force Laura to sell the sofa out of her living room.

Lorenzo tries to persuade his father that he is doing the right thing by fighting a war thousands of miles away on another continent. Lorenzo argues that his father is equally idealistic. Lorenzo tells his father that he would do the same thing. This shows that Lorenzo is completely unaware of his father's corruption.

There is a great deal of irony in Lorenzo's statement. Although Cruz did, in fact, join a revolution in his youth, he would certainly not do anything like that at this point in his life. Lorenzo assumes that his beloved father has remained an honorable man. The reader is very aware that Cruz suffers from the worst sort of moral decay.

On his own part, Cruz seems to value Lorenzo's idealism above all else. It's interesting to speculate on Lorenzo's fate if he had returned from fighting the Spanish Civil War. Would Cruz eventually grow tired of a middle-aged son who was still so innocent? Would Lorenzo, like his father, simply have become corrupt over time? It seems that only through death can Lorenzo remain the idealistic young man his father admires. In fact, Lorenzo is exactly the type of young man that Cruz delights in destroying.



The motif of riding horses across the river symbolizes the power of myth in our lives. With this single refrain, Cruz remembers Regina and repudiates Lorenzo's death. More importantly, he returns to a time when he was idealistic - a time he unconsciously yearns for.



## Chapter 9, 1939: February 3

### Chapter 9, 1939: February 3 Summary

On the roof of a building somewhere in Spain, the 19-year-old Lorenzo remembers hunting with his father. The gun he now has in his hands is rusty and nearly useless. He waits with his friend Miguel. They fire on the enemy until their ammo runs out, then head towards the river. They meet three female soldiers named Nuri, Maria and Dolores. Lorenzo is attracted to Dolores, a gawky girl dressed in trousers and a man's jacket.

At the riverbank, the five plot how to cross. The only bridge is probably mined. Finally, they decide to take their chances with the bridge. When they cross safely, Lorenzo and Dolores embrace.

The five camp on a hillside. Lorenzo pens a letter to his parents, telling them how much he loves Spain. "I will never forget my life here Papa, because it is here that I have learned all that I know. It's very simple. I will tell you when I get back home." Lorenzo thinks of his father and believes that he would be proud. He is sure that his father would fight for justice, as Lorenzo is doing. That night Lorenzo and Dolores sleep together. The French and safety lie just on the other side of the mountain.

The next morning the five are trapped under a cart by enemy fire. Lorenzo stands, trying to fire their last two bullets with a useless gun. Miguel urges Lorenzo to get down and even as he falls, Lorenzo realizes that he has been hit. Dolores kisses him and takes his final letter with her to mail.

On his deathbed, Teresa chastises her father for taking Lorenzo away from the family by sending him to Cocuya at the age of 12. Catalina shushes Teresa and cries for Lorenzo. Cruz dreams of riding horses across the river with his son while the doctors argue over his diagnosis and the best course of treatment.

### Chapter 9, 1939: February 3 Analysis

The narrative shifts to Lorenzo's point of view, giving information that Cruz could not possibly know. The boy's death is foreshadowed in the words he writes to his father.

Lorenzo's idealism is touching. The boy symbolizes Cruz's own youthful idealism. More than any other passage, this chapter illustrates the premise that idealism is essentially futile. The idealistic either die young, like Lorenzo, or become corrupt middle-aged men, like his father. In some ways, death is to be preferred. In death, Lorenzo still has his illusions. The boy dies believing that his father is an honorable man who would fight for justice. In some ways, Cruz feels that he has forced Lorenzo into the idealistic destiny that Cruz himself failed to fulfill.



Cruz never shows any remorse for his immoral ways. The closest he comes is in this chapter, when he reflects that there are worse things than an abandoned dead body covered by ice and sun. At least, he reflects, Lorenzo's eyes were always open. By this, Cruz means at least the boy remained idealistic. He was never forced to ignore his own corruption.

The language used to describe Lorenzo's interlude with Dolores is very similar to the description of Artemio's relationship with Regina. There is no doubt in Lorenzo's mind that he and Dolores will be together forever.



# Chapter 10, 1955: December 31

## Chapter 10, 1955: December 31 Summary

Cruz greets the press at an elaborate New Year's Eve party at the Coyoacan mansion. This is the only night of the year that he entertains people. He presents Lilia at the party, sumptuously surrounded by luxury. The two have lived together for eight years and Cruz's love has become fatherly. A feast of wildly expensive luxuries is served with the finest wine. Behind the antique walls, Cruz hears the shuffle of rats. Catalina dines at the house in Lomas, alone with Teresa and Gerardo.

Cruz loiters and eavesdrops on his guests' conversations, which are revealed as disjointed and largely meaningless phrases. Some of his guests refer to Cruz as the Mummy of Coyoacan. They gossip about Laura, his previous mistress and express pity for his wife Catalina.

On the patio, a young man named Jamie, the son of a political enemy, approaches Cruz. Obliquely, he asks the older man for a job. Cruz is offended by the young man's nerve and lack of idealism- so similar to a younger version of himself - and tells him to make an appointment with Padilla. Jamie's youth reminds Cruz of his own son Lorenzo, now long dead. For a while, Cruz loses himself in memories of Lorenzo and Laura.

Cruz watches men and women headed towards the bathroom to urinate his expensive wines and defecate his luxurious foods, thinking that expelling waste may be the ultimate pleasure of the evening.

In the present, Cruz awakens in a car, frightened at first that it might be a hearse. He fears he's dead, but then decides that he has had some sort of attack. In his illness, Cruz thinks of his true legacy, the important names of his life "Regina... Tobias... Paez... Gonzalo... Zagal... Laura, Laura... Lorenzo..." His thoughts turn again and again to Regina. Finally, Cruz is taken out of an ambulance and wheeled into a hospital where Dr. Sabine will operate on him.

## Chapter 10, 1955: December 31 Analysis

This chapter provides a glimpse into Cruz's lifestyle near the end of his life. It contains little factual information, as much of the chapter is taken up by murmured half-sentences from the overheard conversation of Cruz's guests.

Cruz's control of the press is complete. When a photographer snaps an unflattering photo of the old man, he wordlessly opens his camera and destroys the film. He is less in control in his personal life. Lilia, his aging mistress, nags him like a wife.

Rats symbolize decay, death and corruption. When Cruz hears the real or imagined rats in his sumptuous palace, he is subliminally reminded of his immorality. The rats also



foreshadow Cruz's death. The theme of corruption is extended when Cruz imagines all his sumptuous food and drink as merely bodily waste to be flushed down the toilet.

The conversation of the cocktail party is overheard sentence fragments. Cruz's thoughts in the ambulance are disjointed phrases separated by ellipses. The choppy nature of the prose suggests both Cruz's weakness and his panic, speeding up the narrative.

The important names of Cruz's life are especially evocative. Two are women he has loved, but the other five are the names of men who Cruz killed, or caused to be killed. These include Gonzalo Bernal, Colonel Zagal and Lorenzo Cruz. Cruz reflects that his true legacy in the future is these names and the spoils of corruption. He thinks of the lying articles published in his newspapers and an entire class of wealthy people without any natural affection or decency. Near death, Cruz gives no thought to his wife, daughter or granddaughter. Corruption and destruction define Cruz's life, much more than love or family.



# Chapter 11, 1903: January 18

## Chapter 11, 1903: January 18 Summary

Cruz hears the mulatto Lunero grumbling. He and the man live in a rude hut on a ruined plantation. The hacienda has been burned except for a single room that houses the old woman, the grandmother. Senor Pedro lives in the ruined shell of the house, drinking himself into a stupor each day. The vast surrounding lands have been taken by General Juarez's men and given to others.

Lunero's grandfather was a black slave imported from Cuba. Cruz was the son of Lunero's sister Isabel Cruz and the plantation's dashing young heir, Atanasio Menchaca. The day Cruz was born, the other slaves of the plantation ran his sister off beating her with sticks, but left the baby behind. Isabel was just one of the many young Negro, mulatto and Indian women that Atanasio raped.

At one time, the Menchaca family was wealthy and owned vast acreage with a beautiful hacienda. Atanasio's father, Ireneo Menchaca, died fighting against Juarez. The hacienda was burned and the land passed to others. Only the two sons and a few slaves were left to care for the old woman.

Sergeant Robaina, a comrade of their father's whom they remember from childhood, contacts the two young Menchaca brothers. Robaina tells them he has recovered their father's remains and they can give him a decent burial. The boys secretly meet the trusted man on a dark night. Robaina betrays them and they are attacked by four of Juarez's men. Pedro, ever the coward, jumps on his horse and flees with their only weapon, a shotgun, while Atanasio is hacked to death by machetes.

At 13, Cruz helps the mulatto man support the old woman and Senor Pedro. They carve canoes from logs and sell them in a nearby town. To earn extra money, the two make candles for festivals. With the money, they buy food for the woman and drink for the man, keeping only a single coin for themselves.

Lunero is aware that he must soon leave Cruz. The sign-up man in the frock coat has already been here looking for him twice and skilled tobacco workers are needed in the south. Lunero knows if he refuses to go he will be shot. Still, he worries about who will care for the two white people at Cocuya when he is gone. Cruz assures him that he can carve canoes and make candles on his own. Still, the boy doesn't want Lunero, the only parent he has ever known, to leave.

Cruz knows that the man in the frock coat is coming to take Lunero away and he doesn't want the mulatto to go. Cruz sneaks into the house and takes the loaded shotgun. He hides near the hut and shoots the man in the frock coat who comes to take Lunero away. Cruz is shocked to learn that he has shot Pedro, instead of the hated sign-up



man. The mulatto and the boy flee together to the south. The sign-up man arrives in his frock coat and brutally knocks down the old woman.

On the operating table, Cruz dreams of that time as a boy, making candles with Lunero in the beautiful hills of Cocuya. When they leave the ruined hacienda, Cruz feels that he is embarking on a wonderful adventure. That feeling quickly evaporates when the sign-up man shoots Lunero in the back.

## **Chapter 11, 1903: January 18 Analysis**

This chapter reveals Cruz's origins as a bastard son and servant to a destitute family. Cruz's childhood in poverty is described as idyllic, suggesting that true honor and happiness can only be achieved in poverty.

This information explains why Cruz was so eager to sell off the land near Perales and buy land in Cocuya. He has recovered his father's former wealth and rebuilt the hacienda to even greater luxury than before. This is Lorenzo's birthright, the land that Cruz was so eager for his son to manage.

Mexico has come full circle with Cruz's triumph in Cocuya. He is the great-grandson of the original owners who lost the land to Juarez. He is also the great-grandson of a black Cuban slave, who obtained the land through the success of the bloody Mexican Revolution. Finally, the land has been restored to him, leaving a bloody trail in the process. Cruz's victor is hollow, however, because both his son and his own ideals are dead.

A traditional view of women is conveyed in Ludivinia Menchaca's attitude towards her son's lovers. Ludivinia scorns her son Pedro who only has liaisons with willing women in Mexico City. She admires her eldest son, Atanasio, who rapes many virgins in Cocuya. In Ludivinia's worldview, the loose women of Mexico City are harlots, while the young girls of Cocuya are unwilling to have sex and are therefore honorable. Ludivinia loves Atanasio but feels nothing for her younger son.



## Chapter 12, 1889: April 9

### Chapter 12, 1889: April 9 Summary

Lunero holds his sister's shoulders while she painfully gives birth to a white baby, the son of the master of the house. He will grow to have Atanasio Menchaca's green eyes. As Lunero hears the boots of those who have come for his sister, he slaps the baby, causing the child to give its first cry.

On the operating table, the surgeons open Artemio Cruz up only to find that his disease is too advanced for them to help. He has gangrene and a perforation, eaten away from the inside. He dies on the operating table.

### Chapter 12, 1889: April 9 Analysis

This chapter traces Cruz's birth in the hut in Cocuya, intercut with scenes of his death. This suggests that birth and death are one, which implies a belief in eternal life. It also creates a sense of destiny in Cruz's life, as if everything that has come about is pre-ordained. This is extended in the timing of Cruz's birth just before his mother is dragged away and beaten, never to be seen again.

Artemio Cruz's death is the ultimate symbol of the corruption of his life. He has rotted from the inside and is beyond hope.



# Characters

## Artemio Cruz

Artemio Cruz is an avaricious man who believes that might makes right. He has no twinge of conscience when he destroys honest men or sells natural resources, squandering the next generation's inheritance, to buy meaningless baubles for his wife and daughter. In fact, there are no honest men in the novel, except for those who died as young revolutionaries. There are only men who are less accomplished at corruption than Cruz is.

As an idealistic young revolutionary, Cruz dreams of improving life for all Mexican people. He kidnaps and rapes a young woman, which is considered normal behavior for the time and place. Yet, when Cruz is captured and faces death, he unhesitatingly betrays his comrades. Without a second thought, he leverages the death of his brave companion, Gonzolo Bernal, to gain access to the family. Cruz uses blackmail to coerce a marriage with Catalina, inheriting all her father's lands. He brutally puts down a revolution a few years later and promises land to the peasants but he goes back on his word. Cruz buys a newspaper with his ill-gotten riches and gains control over politicians and the wealthy by printing defamatory lies.

The most interesting thing about Artemio Cruz is that there is never a decisive moment when he chooses to abandon his ideals and betray his friends. As a young revolutionary, Cruz has vague hopes for a better future for himself and all Mexicans. When Cruz is presented with the opportunity, he abandons those idealistic dreams without the slightest hesitation. With this seamless transformation, deceit and violence are presented as inevitable. Fuentes suggests that corruption is woven into the fiber of the Mexican psyche. This is an assertion that would be highly offensive had it not been made by a member of that society.

## Catalina Cruz

Catalina Cruz doesn't love her husband Artemio and really has no reason to. Cruz betrayed her brother Gonzolo, allowing him to be shot by a firing squad. He coerced her father into allowing the marriage. Because women are not permitted to own property, Cruz inherited her father's extensive lands. He proceeded to expand his holdings through treachery and deceit, using violence when necessary. He had a series of affairs, often flaunting mistresses in public. Worse yet, he first took Catalina's son from her, then caused the boy's untimely death.

Catalina Cruz develops into a shallow, arrogant woman. She refuses to shake hands with a highborn shopkeeper and leads a vapid existence. Catalina recruits her daughter as a co-conspirator against her husband, who continually tries to manipulate the two.



Despite her hate for her husband, Catalina Cruz is betrayed by her body. She responds to him sexually and although she seldom speaks to him during the day, early in the marriage their nights are passionate. Artemio Cruz chooses to see this as evidence of his wife's secret love for him, but she genuinely abhors the man.

By the time of Artemio's death, Catalina has settled into a comfortable existence. While she still abhors her husband, she very much enjoys the perks of being a wealthy man's wife. She has enlisted her daughter's support and the girl's attitude towards her father mirrors Catalina's own. The couple no longer shares a bed and Catalina is relieved that Artemio focuses his waning passions on mistresses.

## **Gonzalo Bernal**

Catalina's heroic, idealistic older brother is shot by a firing squad. We know little about Gonzalo, except that he is idealistic and dies young. He symbolizes all of Mexico's dead heroes. Fuentes uses Gonzalo to suggest that it is only possible to remain idealistic if one dies very young.

Imprisoned with Cruz, Bernal refuses to turn traitor. Cruz has no such scruples and betrays Bernal. After Bernal's death, Cruz exploits the young hero's wealthy family in their grief. Artemio worms his way into the family's good graces with fictitious tales of Bernal's last days. Because of the revolution, the once wealthy family has little ready cash, although their landholdings are undiminished.

Cruz takes control of the situation and forces Bernal's father to consent to a marriage between the beautiful daughter of the house and Artemio Cruz. Cruz gains both a wife and a fortune in land, through his duplicity. Catalina is well aware before the marriage that Cruz is corrupt, but consents as a dutiful daughter. Bernal's father ignores all signs that Cruz is evil and maintains his belief in Cruz's honesty for the short years until his death.

## **Lunero**

As an impoverished young boy, Cruz thinks of Lunero simply as "the mulatto" but in fact, the man is Cruz's uncle. Cruz was conceived when the wealthy white estate owner raped one of his mulatto slaves, Isabel. After the baby's birth, the woman was beaten by the other slaves and forced to flee for her "unchaste" behavior. Lunero stays with the baby and raises him, until the man is killed when Cruz is 13. Together, the two make and sell canoes and candles, supporting Cruz's remaining white relatives - a senile grandmother and a drunken uncle.

## **Lorenzo Cruz**

Lorenzo is Cruz's only son. Cruz considers him a man at the age of 12 and puts the boy in charge of managing the family's extensive estate in Cocuya - the same estate where



Cruz was born in a slave's hut. At 17, Lorenzo decides to travel to Spain and fight against Franco in the Spanish Revolution. Cruz objects, but Lorenzo reminds his father that he fought in his own revolution as a youth. At the end of the war, fleeing to France, Lorenzo bravely tries to save the woman he loves, and is gunned down just one hill away from safety.

## Regina

Artemio Cruz's first love, Regina is described as so young that she has "the pubis of a child." We know very little about Regina except that she is beautiful and Cruz loves her. This character, however, introduces a very important theme into the novel. As a young soldier, Cruz kidnaps and rapes Regina - a brutal form of courtship that was not uncommon at the time. Improbably, the two fall in love. Regina refuses to accept the way they met and instead creates a charming story about her pursuit by a handsome, honorable young Cruz. This lie assumes the power of myth and sustains Cruz until his death, although he knows it to be false. Regina is one of several people in the village hung by opposing forces in an act of retribution.

## Teresa

Teresa is Catalina and Artemio Cruz's only daughter and only surviving child. As the novel opens, she is a spoiled, wealthy young woman about to be married. Cruz does not even bother to attend his daughter's wedding. Eventually Teresa has a daughter named Gloria, Artemio's only grandchild. In the perpetual rift between Artemio and Catalina, Teresa always takes her mother's side. Although Artemio makes sure that his daughter's material needs are lavishly supplied, he is emotionally detached. Teresa is very much her mother's daughter.

## Padilla

Padilla is Cruz's extremely competent and trusted assistant. He records Cruz's comments and translates them into action. Cruz's comments strongly suggest that he has left the bulk of his fortune to Padilla in his will.

## Gloria

Gloria is Cruz's only grandchild, a beautiful adolescent girl. Cruz completely ignores the girl and pretends not to recognize her. He notes with some amusement that she is carrying on a flirtation with Padilla's son.



## Don Bernal

Don Bernal is Catalina's father, Artemio Cruz's father-in-law. The elegant old man has depleted the family fortune making low-interest wartime loans to other wealthy families. As long as he is alive, the neighbors realize that Don Bernal will never foreclose on the mortgages. After the marriage, Cruz humiliates Don Bernal. When the old man dies, Cruz raises the interest rates on the loans and forecloses on the mortgages, gaining many valuable lands. He sells the land and buys vast acreage cheaply in other parts of the country including Cocuya.

## Gerardo

Gerardo is Teresa's husband. Although Cruz approved the marriage, he regards Gerardo as weak and ineffectual. This is exacerbated by the fact that the couple is supported by Cruz's wealth.





# Objects/Places

## The Hut

Artemio Cruz was born in a rude slave's hut on a plantation in Cocuya. The boy and his uncle, Lunero, are forced to flee the hut after Cruz accidentally shoots a white man while trying to save Lunero.

## The River

Cruz and his lover Regina linger by the river. Regina invents a happy fable about their meeting, when she saw his reflection in the pool of water. In this daydream, the two rode horses across the river. This phrase becomes a talisman of sorts for Cruz.

## The Plaza

As a young revolutionary Cruz returns from a mission to find that enemy soldiers have hung several civilians in the plaza as an act of retribution. His worst fears are realized when he recognizes Regina as one of the dead.

## The Jail in Perales

Cruz is captured by enemy soldiers and taken to the jail in Perales. There, Cruz meets Gonzolo Bernal, an idealistic young officer. Both Bernal and Cruz's companion Tobias are executed in Perales. Cruz escapes the same fate through duplicity, although he makes little effort to save the other men.

## The Bernal Family Land

The Bernal family has little ready cash because of the war, but their enormous land holdings make them wealthy people. Cruz uses the personal information he learned about Gonzolo Bernal - and the man's death - to become the owner of the family's property.

## Mexico City

When Cruz's old commander becomes president of Mexico, Cruz's political influence increases greatly. Cruz's business is based on Mexico City, although he regularly travels to the family's various ranches.



## **The Newspaper**

Cruz acquires a Mexico City newspaper and uses it to leverage even more wealth. He regularly threatens stubborn enemies with fake stories or keeps negative information out of the paper to collect still more bribes.

## **Cocuya**

As soon as he becomes a property owner, Cruz quietly begins welling off less-desirable land to buy the old hacienda in Cocuya and restore it. Only at the end of the novel is it revealed that Cruz is, in fact, buying the estate where he was born. Everything that Cruz does is aimed at building this property and leaving it to his son. At 12, Lorenzo assumes control of the estate at Cocuya.

## **The Beach**

In the only idyllic moments of his adult life, Cruz and Lorenzo frequently ride horses on the beach near Cocuya. This is reminiscent of Regina's myth of love.

## **The Will**

Even on his deathbed, Cruz manipulates his wife and daughter. He enjoys their distress when they cannot locate his will and lies to them about its location.

## Social Sensitivity

Written in part in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution, *The Death of Artemio Cruz* expresses Carlos Fuentes' disappointment in the revolution in his own country which changed nothing as far as the average Mexican was concerned. Desperately poor before the conflict, he was equally impoverished and repressed in the decades following the end of fighting. A change of oppressors took place in which ruthless opportunists practiced the same methods that the Revolution was supposed to end.

Artemio Cruz, originally from the very lowest strata of Mexican society, simultaneously proclaims the glories of the Revolution in the newspapers he controls and betrays its principles in his business practices. The common people of the country seem doomed to a misery which political upheavals never alter.



## Techniques

In *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, Fuentes perfects the experimental techniques he had used in his two previous novels, *Where the Air Is Clear* and *The Good Conscience* (1959). Thanks to its superb organization this novel is his best and most demanding work. Cruz's consciousness is presented through alternating sections in which Cruz uses the first-person singular I, the second-person you, and the thirdperson he, those parts which feature the novel's twelve flashbacks, which according to Fuentes are patterned on the twelve levels of Dante's *Inferno*. The twelve portions are presented from the point of view of the dying man in the present on his deathbed. As long as his powerful will is intact, Cruz's ego retains the dominance it has enjoyed throughout his life. As the physical Artemio Cruz declines, the voice addressing Cruz as "you" gets stronger. It is the voice of a conscience which the tycoon has suppressed during his career. It reminds him of the flaws in his nature which made him a failure as a soldier, husband, and father.

The third-person singular portions may be seen as an attempt by Cruz to view objectively what he considers the most important events in his life. However, an omniscient narrator covers incidents which Cruz could not possibly have known directly. Some critics maintain that these flashbacks are the best parts of the novel because they dislike the difficulty that Fuentes' experiments impose on the reader. The flashbacks are dated: 1941, 1919, 1913, 1924-1927, 1947, 1915, 1934-1939, 1955, and 1889. The 1889 episode features the birth of Artemio Cruz and is juxtaposed with the operation during which he dies, to emphasize possibly, the brevity of life, during which death is never far away.

Thus a cynical exploiter examines his life, and finds on his deathbed a conscience that he could not quite kill. Three voices, all belonging to Artemio Cruz, view a life which has made many solid accomplishments, but is nevertheless sadly fragmented. As the novel begins, Cruz sees his face in the tiny mirrors which decorate his daughter's purse lying beside his bed. The mirrors show portions of his face rather than a complete picture, symbolizing the fragmentation of his life. Mirrors are a favorite device which Fuentes uses in other novels to show his characters how they appear to others. Total self-absorption over a lifetime is ultimately self-defeating.



# Themes

## Themes

The title names one of the novel's principal themes. As helpless as any of his less fortunate fellow citizens, as his body breaks down, riches and political power mean little as Cruz relives key episodes in a life that he finally realizes will soon be over. His dominating ego at one point even attempts to exact a deal from God, although he is the least religious of men.

In the course of his career he has come close to death on several occasions: in childhood when the hacienda owner who had made his mother pregnant would have killed Artemio had he not been betrayed and killed first; during the revolution he is wounded while deserting his men and later he escapes execution by betraying his fellow prisoners, the Indian Tobias and the lawyer Bernal, whose death he will later use as an entree into Bernal's family; and through accident such as planes which nearly crash, but fail to do so. Up to the point of his actual death he has deluded himself into believing that his is a charmed life.

The theme of betrayal was an important part of *Where the Air Is Clear* (1958; see separate entry) and is continued in this novel. Fuentes seems to insist that the rulers of Mexico are Judases, and they appear again and again in the nation's history. Artemio Cruz is an archtraitor whom circumstances, which he has cleverly exploited, have made him one of the builders of the modern nation. He attracts other minor traitors such as Jaime Ceballos, a character in several of Fuentes's novels. The betrayal of the Revolution is the fundamental treason of which most successful men in the country are guilty.

Capitalistic greed is the dominant ethos of the new ruling class. Fuentes' primary concern is the distortion of character which a life devoted to greed and the acquisition of power produces. Cruz realizes his human potential rarely in his later life. He and men like him produce an entire nation of fragmented existences.

Mexican history is as important in this novel as it was in *Where the Air Is Clear*, but Fuentes does not present a panorama of past events. Cruz, who has participated in many of its significant events, experiences Mexican history from the turn of the century until 1955. He and Mexico are both thoroughly corrupt, and this era, despite the Revolution, continues a pattern all too familiar to anyone who knows the country. Outside influences have contributed to this pattern, but Fuentes places most of the blame on Mexicans themselves.

## The History of Mexico

The *Death of Artemio Cruz* illuminates the bloody history of Mexico during the 20th century through the life of one man. Cruz is a minor player in crucial historical events,



including the revolution. A major thesis of Fuentes's work is that corruption is inexorably intertwined with the history of Mexico.

The novel covers the Mexican Civil War of the 1850s and the Mexican Revolution which began in 1910. Pancho Villa and Emilio Zapata are peripheral figures in the novel. Although fighting in the Mexican Revolution was sporadic after 1919, bloodshed continued into the 1920s and 1930s. Cruz fights with the revolutionaries until 1919, but as a wealthy landowner, he opposes them—sometimes using violence—in the later stages of the war.

Fuentes's view of Mexican history is not peopled with heroic figures, dramatic battles or great leaders. Artemio Cruz is not privy to any secret plots or sweeping campaigns. He is not the confidant of any future world leaders or the witness to any honorable sacrifices. This is Mexican history devoid of heroes and villains, as the slow, inexorable erosion of ideals and the inevitable slide into corruption.

Instead of portraying heroic events, the author examines the mundane realities, the process through which idealistic revolutionaries turn into corrupt bureaucrats simply through inevitable erosion and the eternal need to make a living. Although the novel focuses on Cruz's exploits, the implication is that Mexican society is filled with countless men like Artemio Cruz, each of whom has abandoned their ideals to become wealthy.

The novel traces economic development in Mexico in the 1900s. At the beginning of the novel, the Mexican economy is based on land and agriculture. The enormous wealth of a few families is based on their ownership of vast tracks of fertile land, while even the most skilled peasants are often hungry. At the end of the novel, the country's economy is based on the exploitation of its natural resources. By the end of the novel, Cruz is collecting enormous bribes to act as a facilitator for U.S. companies that wish to illegally purchase gold, oil and mineral rights in Mexico.

By the end of the novel, the Mexican revolution has accomplished little. Mexican society remains stratified into a few wealthy people and many starving peasants, with almost no middle class. The only change is that former revolutionaries like Cruz have become complacent members of the corrupt establishment.

## **Revolution vs. Corruption**

As an idealistic young man, Artemio Cruz joins the revolutionary forces to break the stranglehold that the wealthy and corrupt have on Mexican culture and economy. The revolutionaries, lead by several competing leaders including Pancho Villa, Zapata and Carranza, dream of liberating the vast land holdings of the wealthy and distributing the holdings equally among the peasants. They dream of an economy that includes a thriving middle class, where ordinary Mexicans have enough land to earn a living for themselves and their families.

While many of us would view corruption as the opposite of idealism, Fuentes sees revolution as the antithesis of corruption. One of Fuentes's strongest underlying



premises is that only young revolutionaries can be idealistic. Idealism is a luxury available only to adolescents or to the poorest of the poor. Citizens who are mature, and especially those who are wealthy, are inherently corrupt. Corruption, Fuentes suggests, is the natural condition of the human soul.

Cruz is the perfect example of both moral and economic corruption. Once a passionate young idealist who hoped to bring peace and prosperity to a growing middle class, Cruz quickly grows into a man who betrays his comrade in arms, then forces the man's sister to marry him. The idealistic young revolutionary instantly changes into a wealthy member of the establishment. Cruz becomes exactly the type of person he fought against as a revolutionary. The mature Cruz brutally squelches an attempted uprising, a second revolution, with a consummate act of betrayal.

Cruz buys a newspaper and uses the paper to further his own business interests. He invents stories and unfairly attacks competitors in the press, resulting in their downfall. Artemio blackmails wealthy politicians and businessmen by threatening to run defamatory stories on their real or imagined exploits in his newspaper. He forces some of these businessmen to illegally sell precious natural resources of oil and gold to businessmen from the U.S., collecting hefty commissions as the "front man" on the sale.

Fuentes's message is clear. Only adolescent revolutionaries are idealists. Maturity brings inevitable corruption. Cruz's adolescent ideals are the diffuse, nebulous dreams of an impractical young boy. His mature betrayal of the country, in accepting bribes to turn national resources over to U.S. businessmen, is presented as unremarkable. Instead, the author suggests that corruption is an inevitable part of maturity, like body hair or a deepening voice. It may take slightly longer to develop, but is as predictable.

Although the title is *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, the novel is concerned primarily with Artemio's life, not his death. Death symbolizes the ultimate corruption. It is the inevitable destination of a path that Cruz, and by implication Mexico, has been on since the revolution.

## Myth vs. Reality

The author interlaces scenes of searing realism with a recurring motif of myth. The power of this myth is focused on variations of one key phrase: "We rode our horses through the water." This phrase recurs like the refrain of a song throughout the novel.

The origin of this phrase - this myth - is particularly evocative. As a young soldier, Cruz abducted and raped a young virgin he chanced upon on the road near her village. The two fell deeply in love and Cruz thereafter spends all his free time with Regina. To many modern female readers, it seems wildly improbable that a young girl would develop a deep romantic love for the man who abducted and brutally raped her. To Fuentes, writing before the feminist movement, it seems perfectly natural. It's no more than tempestuous dating behavior.



Although Regina loves Artemio Cruz deeply, she cannot bring herself to speak the truth about their initial encounter, even to him. Instead, she invents a myth where they were both out riding horses. Struck by her beauty, a besotted Artemio followed her across the river and eventually wooed and won her. The beauty willingly succumbed to the dashing soldier. Regina tells Artemio this myth of their meeting until it becomes more real to him than truth. History, then, becomes the lies that we tell ourselves.

Artemio Cruz claims not to believe in eternal life, or divine justice. He pays lip service to the Catholic Church, but privately scorns the priests. Cruz doesn't believe in truth, honor, beauty or justice. Outwardly, he is a complete cynic.

Yet, throughout the novel runs the hopeful refrain of the phrase, "We rode our horses across the river." Although he is not fully aware of it, Cruz does believe in this hopeful myth. The myth symbolizes his one true love, Regina, and what their life together could have been in another world. The same refrain plays endlessly in Cruz's mind when he enjoys the companionship of his son, Lorenzo.

Although Cruz has no conscious regrets, the continual refrain of this myth illustrates his longing to believe. The myth symbolizes Cruz's secret need to believe in something - anything - greater than himself and his greed. The myth symbolizes not only love and loyalty, but also an alternate reality where shining, idealistic revolutionaries rode through the mists to conquer corruption and to usher peace and prosperity to a troubled Mexico. Ultimately, the phrase embodies Cruz's unconscious wish to believe in something greater than himself.





# Style

## Point of View

The author employs a distinctive "frame within a frame" structure. All of the novel's "action" takes place in Artemio Cruz's mind as he lies on his deathbed. Yet, within that frame, there are several different points of view.

Often events are told from Catalina's point of view. As Cruz's estranged wife, it is unlikely that she would have shared her innermost thoughts and feelings with him, yet he sees scenes through her eyes - even when he was in another city. He also sees scenes through the eyes of Regina, his long-dead first love. He sees Lorenzo's death from his son's point of view, although they were in different countries at the time.

This particular technique allows Fuentes to introduce a much wider variety of material into the novel. It also implies the existence of God and of eternal life, though Cruz does not believe in either. Cruz is gifted with a God-like omnipotence in his final days, frequently viewing events through the eyes of another person. In his illness, Cruz can "remember" scenes that occurred when he was not present and is privy to others' most intimate thoughts and feelings. This very omnipotence implies that Cruz is on the brink of eternal life, although he does not consciously believe in religion.

## Setting

In a strict sense, the setting of the novel is Artemio Cruz's chamber in the family home near Perales, where he lies on his deathbed. Much of the narrative is in the first person present tense, from Cruz's point of view. However, most of the action takes place within Cruz's mind, where he ranges far and wide over events during his lifetime.

Through Cruz's thoughts and memories, the narrative ranges across all of Mexican history in the 1900s, from the Mexican Revolution to the aftermath of World War II. It covers locations from Cocuya to Monterey, from Mexico City to Sonora.

Despite this variety, Cruz is often in unspecified locations, first as a young soldier and then as a mature businessman. The author consciously uses this technique to write the novel as a history of all Mexico, not any one place or region. This suggests that Cruz's story is universal and can be found throughout Mexico.

Much of the novel is written in the second person, using "you" as Cruz tells himself the story of his life. Rather, he retells himself familiar, realistic tales about his earlier exploits.



## Language and Meaning

*The Death of Artemio Cruz* is translated from Spanish by Sam Hileman. Extremely long, complex sentences and pages unrelieved by any paragraph breaks provide a challenge for the reader. At some points, paragraph breaks are scarce. They are used almost exclusively to signal shifts in point of view. Other sections of the work reflect an unpunctuated, flowing narrative style that is suggestive of the "stream of consciousness" writing of 1960s American authors. The sentence structure becomes more complex, even convoluted, as Cruz ages - and as his physical condition deteriorates.

The repetition of the phrase "We rode our horses across the river" introduces the motif of myth in Cruz's life. This is a phrase that Cruz uses often when thinking of his lover Regina or his son Lorenzo - both now dead. These are almost the only two positive relationships in Cruz's life. The potent phrase is a talisman of sorts, giving the cynical, corrupt Cruz something to believe in. Its inclusion implies that even the most corrupt humans have an underlying need to believe in something.

The author ably uses dialogue to establish character. On page 69, an ignorant young trooper uses phrases like "We're ...givin'...'em...hell" as he lies dying. He uses terms like "ain't" and "licked." The use of slang and non-standard usage paints a powerful picture of an ignorant, albeit dedicated man who is a member of the lower class.

The narrator's voice, which is often Cruz's voice, becomes more educated and sophisticated as Cruz ages. The untutored language of the simple young soldier contrasts with the cultured tones of the sophisticated man Cruz becomes. Cruz constantly thinks of exploitative foreign businessmen as "North Americans," although they are far more likely to be citizens of the U.S. rather than Canada.

Fuentes shows great skill with juxtaposition and metaphor. This is especially evident on page 79, when he describes Regina. Her eyes are described as black gems, and the flesh of a lover as dark cherries. Fuentes often signals shifts in time and point of view with shifts in tense. This is effective, though Cruz's thoughts are often rambling and chaotic as he relives various scenes in his life in no particular order.

## Structure

The structure of the novel, like Cruz's thoughts on his deathbed, is loose and rambling. The narrative flits from one scene to the next, across time and space, like a butterfly among flowers.

There are no real chapters in the novel. Dates are introduced into the novel periodically, but there is not even a page break between sections. The novel is loosely divided by date, elaborating on decisive events in Cruz's life and in the history of Mexico. Within those loose divisions, there is a jumbled flood of memory and scenes. These include flashbacks, flashforwards and scenes at which Cruz was not present. By deemphasizing



the chapter separations, Fuentes emphasizes that all of Mexican history is a single tapestry woven of corruption and greed. Artemio Cruz, like countless other morally depraved men, is but one thread in that tapestry.

In all, there are 13 chapters or divisions within the 305 page narrative, including a prolog. The majority of these chapters are approximately 15 to 30 pages long, although the last chapter is much shorter, as the pace of action quickens and Cruz's death approaches.



## Quotes

"You will take satisfaction in thinking about this little arrangement, though at the same time it will seem possible material for a short red-ink expose story in the newspaper you own, and now you tell yourself that thinking about it is really a waster of time." Prologue, pg. 9

"He related the story of Gonzalo Bernal's last moments in Perales, and the doors of the home opened to him." Chapter 2, pg. 32

"He was always so pure," said the father, Don Gamaliel Bernal. "He always believed that action contaminates us and obliges us to be false to ourselves unless it is presided over by very clear thinking. I believe that was shy he left home." Chapter 2, pg. 32

"Unfortunate land, said the old man to himself as he walked slowly back to the library, unfortunate land where each generation must destroy its masters and replace them with new masters equally ambitious and rapacious." Chapter 2, pg. 45

"I waited for him with happiness that morning. We rode our horses across the river." Chapter 2, pg. 52

"Her body waited beside him and he, without speaking or looking, stretched until he touched the bed's iron bar with his toes and the tips of his fingers. Dawn was still far off." Chapter 3, pg. 59

"It was not true that a girl of eighteen had been thrown helplessly across his horse and carried back to the officers' dormitory to be violated in silence." Chapter 3, pg. 77

"He thought about the women he would like to know, for he could not remember those he had known." Chapter 7, pg. 171

"Many years of hard fighting have passed since we first rose against Don Porfiro. Then we fought alongside Madero, then against Orozo's reds, then against Huerta's bastards, and finally against you sons of bitches in Carranza's army. A long time, we are tired." Chapter 7, pg. 176

"And she does not know that there is something worse than an abandoned dead body, that the ice and sun buried him, that his eyes, picked out by birds, will be eternally open: Catalina stops rubbing my forehead with the cotton and moves away and I don't know if she is crying" Chapter 9, pg. 234

"I will leave them the will...I will bequeath them those dead names... Regina... Tobias... Paez... Gonzalo... Zagal... Laura,Laura... Lorenzo..." Chapter 10, pg. 263

"The second, Cruz lad, the second. And then we will really sell candles, not only around here but to people up the river, too. They know ours are best." Chapter 11, pg. 275



## Key Questions

The Mexican Revolution is remembered as a time when Mexicans were for a brief period united in their efforts to promote justice and to end decades of injustice. When in American history have our people been similarly united? Did our revolution have the same effect on Americans of all classes? By common consensus the Mexican Revolution is viewed as having been also betrayed and aborted.

After all the battles, the haciendas continued as formerly, sometimes with new owners, but as often with the same families as before. What had the Revolution accomplished? A discussion might use this question as a topic, and the Mexican Revolution might be compared with other revolutions during this century.

Artemio Cruz is one of Fuentes' most memorable characters. His lack of scruples as a robber baron is not uniquely Mexican. When has our history produced similar figures? Is Cruz much different than James Fisk (1834-1872) who allegedly said, "I can hire half of the working class to kill the other half of the working class"? Is this boast not entirely inaccurate? Fisk was a railroad magnate and financier of the Gilded Age in the United States. Why do countries produce men like him and Cruz? During the 1980s some of our leaders were proclaiming greed as more of a virtue than a vice.

1. Unlike Federico Robles, another revolutionary in *Where the Air Is Clear*, Artemio Cruz is depicted as a coward.

Why does Fuentes present him as a failure as a soldier?

2. In his talk with Cruz on the night before his execution Gonzalo Bernal shows that he has become cynical about the Revolution and its goals. Does Fuentes himself seem to share this cynicism?

3. Don Gamelio Bernal is a very dignified old aristocrat. Is he at all like son-in-law Cruz?

4. The goals of the Revolution made no provision for the liberation of women.

Are Catalina Bernal and her daughter, Teresa, typical women of the upper class in Mexico?

5. To what extent has Fuentes made Artemio Cruz a descendent of Mexico's conquerors, including Hernando Cortes?

6. Comment on the tripartite presentation of the character of this dying man.

Which of the consciousnesses—I, you, or he—do you find most convincing?

7. What is the significance of the phrase, repeated at least twelve times in the "I" sections, "Let us cross the river on horseback"?



8. If we hear three distinct voices of Cruz's consciousness, is it also true, as some critics have said, that Fuentes' book can be interpreted on three different levels, the personal, the national, and the universal?
9. Has Fuentes succeeded in making Cruz a tragic figure? To what extent?
10. Lorenzo Cruz dies in Spain with his idealism intact. As far as Artemio Cruz is concerned, what also dies with his son?
11. Cruz has conquered all opposing forces on his way to becoming one of the country's most successful men. What conquers him the closer he approaches death?
12. If ever a human individual seemed totally corrupt, Artemio Cruz seems to qualify for this description. Is Fuentes being realistic when he shows that a latent idealism in Cruz has never quite died?
13. After the loss of Regina during the Revolution, Cruz had at least one more possibility for genuine love. Why did he refuse to accept it?
14. Do such novels as *Where the Air Is Clear* and *The Death of Artemio Cruz* explain the hostility of the establishment in Mexico to Carlos Fuentes?



## Topics for Discussion

Who is Artemio Cruz's biological father? As a child, does Cruz feel more affection for his father or for Lunero? Why?

In your opinion, did the rebels win the Mexican Revolution? Why or why not?

Cruz is an idealistic young man before Lunero's death, yet by the 1920s he is sly, deceitful and corrupt. What causes the change?

Author Carlos Fuentes suggests that idealism is a luxury only the young can afford. Do you agree?

Imagine how Artemio Cruz's life would have been different if he had not become corrupt. Write a paragraph explaining how his life would have turned out.

Do you agree that all wealthy people are necessarily corrupt? Why or why not?

Why does Artemio Cruz marry Catalina? Is the marriage a happy one?

What opportunity does Artemio Cruz recognize when he is imprisoned with the idealistic young Gonzalo Bernal? If Bernal had lived, would Artemio have inherited any land?

## Literary Precedents

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) is in part a model for Fuentes' book. In Faulkner's adaptation of a folk tale, a southern poor white family takes the body of the mother, Addie Bundren, from their hill farm down to Jefferson so she can be buried with her family. No member of this family rises to the status of Artemio Cruz, who was himself desperately poor as a child. Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1885) describes the ordeal of a man dying of cancer. Unlike Artemio Cruz, Ivan Ilych, who Tolstoy insists is a very ordinary man, receives spiritual insight and accepts his death calmly after his intense suffering.





## Related Titles

Jaime Ceballos is a leading character in *The Good Conscience* and appears in *Where the Air Is Clear* as the fiance of Bettina Regules, the financier who completes the ruin of Federico Robles. The Mexican Revolution and its betrayal is also a theme in *Where the Air Is Clear* and forms the background of *The Old Gringo* (1985; see separate entry). Fuentes has said that his proposed trilogy which has begun with *The Campaign* (1991; see separate entry) will culminate in the Revolution.



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