

# The Green House Short Guide

## The Green House by Mario Vargas Llosa

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# Characters

Characterization in Vargas Llosa's novel does not emphasize psychological development. He describes each character's existence on a surface level and rarely delves into the motives behind his actions. Thus motivation is ambiguous and unclarified. It is part of the author's strategy to involve the reader, for it is left to each reader to discern a character's motives from dialogue and from given situations and circumstances.

The characters whose stories unfold in the settings of Piura and Santa Maria de Nieva are Bonifacia, also known as Wildflower, Jum of Urakusa, Fushia, Anselmo, and a group known as Los Inconquistables. The most memorable is Bonifacia, an eight-to-nine-year-old Aguaruna Indian girl who is abducted by Spanish nuns to be converted at their jungle mission. There she is given the Christian name Bonifacia. Years later, as a young woman, she marries a soldier identified merely as the Sergeant, stationed at the military post.

When he is discharged from military service, he takes her to live in Piura. In Piura the Sergeant, now a civilian, is identified as Lituma. Subsequently, Lituma is incarcerated for killing a landowner (el Seminario) during a game of Russian roulette. Bonifacia, left alone, is seduced by one of her husband's friends, Josefino, who forces her into prostitution. At the brothel, the Green House, her identity changes along with her situation. Now she is known as Wildflower. The dual identity of these two characters Bonifacia/ Wildflower and Sergeant/Lituma underlines the author's intention to show the pervasive influence of social background and circumstances on a character's fate.

Bonifacia's jungle origins are connected with Jum of Urakusa, the Aguaruna chieftain who is viciously tortured and humiliated by the governor Julio Reategui for having tried to form a cooperative among the Indians during the rubber boom. In a conversation that Bonifacia has with the Mother Superior while still interned at the mission it is inferred that Jum may have been her father. Jum, after being released by Reategui, joins an Indian army of raiders led by Fushia, a feudal warlord.

Fushia, a fugitive from the Brazilian police, settles on an island in the upper Marañon whence he raids Indian villages for rubber and hides. Occasionally he also kidnaps girls for his personal harem. The virile and adventurous Fushia, afflicted with leprosy, ends up in a leper colony.

Jum's and Fushia's narratives are set completely in the jungle, whereas Bonifacia/Wildflower's story serves as a link between Piura and Santa Maria de Nieva. In Piura, most of the action takes place at the brothel, the Green House, founded by Anselmo, a mysterious character who emerges from the jungle. The most important incident in Anselmo's narrative is his abduction and seduction of a deaf-mute girl with whom he lives at the brothel. Subsequently, the enraged inhabitants of Piura led by the priest, Father Garcia, accuse Anselmo of immorality and corruption and set fire to the brothel.



Years later, a second Green House is established by la Chunga, Anselmo's and the deaf-mute's daughter.

Finally, there are the Inconquistables, a gang of seemingly carefree unemployed youths who roam the streets and bars of the slum La Mangacheria. Lituma, Bonifacia's husband, and her seducer, Josefino, are members of the group.

## Social Concerns

In *The Green House*, which spans about forty years, Vargas Llosa depicts Peru's social conditions in two settings, the jungle environment at Santa Maria de Nieva which features a mission and military outpost along the upper Marañon river in the Amazon jungle, and Piura, a provincial town in northwestern Peru. By juxtaposing several story lines, he is able to focus simultaneously on several social concerns.

The tragic results of efforts to Christianize the Indian are exemplified by the plight of young Aguaruna Indian girls who are abducted by a group of Spanish nuns (with the help of soldiers stationed at Santa Maria de Nieva) for the purpose of training them at their jungle mission. Uprooted from their culture and thrust into an alien world that never accepts them because of their racial origins, the girls end up in prostitution or servitude. The torture and exploitation of the Indian during the rubber boom days are graphically described to reveal the author's concern for the Indian, who continues to be victimized by ruthless government officials and unscrupulous feudal overlords. The portrayal of a group of ne'er-do-wells in the slum expresses Vargas Llosa's preoccupation with the effects of unemployment on the burgeoning young population in Spanish America. Finally, in describing the conditions at the brothel in Piura, he condemns the institution as an exploiter of women, and in denominating it the Green House, he evokes an image synthesizing all of Peruvian society (rural and urban alike) as one exploitative brothel.

# Techniques

Vargas Llosa uses a variety of techniques to render as graphically and objectively as possible the surroundings that affect each character's actions.

To achieve a surface portrayal of reality he often resorts to cinematic devices such as an omniscient "camera eye" that registers details and objects in a given setting. The multilayered structure is achieved mainly through montage (another simulated film device), which serves not only to juxtapose time frames but also to contrast the past and present of a character's existence in different settings.

Vargas Llosa also employs a device referred to by critics as the telescoping of dialogues, one which juxtaposes the dialogues of different characters (on the same incident) from different points in time. The dialogues encompass the immediate present, an immediate past and a more remote past.

They telescope distance in time, moving from the present to the past, from the past to the present.

# Themes

The absence of chronology and causality endows anecdotal material with a universal quality. Hence, well-known Spanish American fictional topics are converted into themes of broader scope: the exploitation of the Indian emphasizes the inhumanity of man to man while the machismo element pervading the novel broaches the general theme of violence as a synonym for manhood.

The novel's determinism — the assumption that environment, circumstances, and situation are the decisive factors in a character's life and fate — precludes any possibility of individual development or, accordingly, of social progress. Therefore the novel presents an existentialist dilemma: Man's frustrated attempts to take charge of his life lead only to despair. All the characters are caught in a web of thwarted intentions. The fragmentation of the narrative structure conveys the frustration, alienation, and helplessness of each character.

## Literary Precedents

The works of the contemporary Spanish American writers known as the "novelists of the boom" are characterized by techniques revealing the influence of James Joyce, William Faulkner, and John Dos Passos. The writings of Vargas Llosa, who is part of that group, exemplify this influence and that of Gustave Flaubert. In several interviews and in *The Perpetual Orgy: Flaubert and Madame Bovary* (1986; *La orgia perpetua: Flauberty Madame Bovary*, 1975), Vargas Llosa has emphasized Flaubert's objectivity in his presentation of character, plot, and action.

Objectivity and impersonal presentation (free of authorial intrusion and mediation) are characteristic of Vargas Llosa's novels. Joyce, Faulkner, and Dos Passos have inspired his juxtaposition of temporal planes, use of multiple points of view, and telescoping of dialogues.





# Copyright Information

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