

The Torrent Short Guide

The Torrent by Vicente Blasco Ibáñez

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Characters

Several critics have suggested that Leonora, the female protagonist of *The Torrent*, closely resembles a Russian opera singer romantically linked with Blasco Ibanez shortly before the writing of the book. Leonora, whether patterned on a real-life character or not, is a well developed melodramatic heroine: Born in Valencia, her freethinking republican father, who was a doctor, abandons the region and moves to Milan where he wants his daughter to be trained in opera. After suffering untold misery, including rape, Leonora triumphs as a diva in Europe's opera houses. Recently widowed, she returns to her native Valencia, to her aunt's cottage, to recover from a life that has left her exhausted and alone. There she meets the young Rafael Brull, a deputy to the national parliament who falls madly in love with her. He is the son of a local cacique (political boss) and rich landowner. His widowed mother is dona Bernarda, a spiteful and domineering woman who, together with don Andres, a political manager, attempts to control the young man and arrange for a more suitable marriage.

The reader is not surprised when the lovers' scheme to elope fails. Each character is drawn to represent a particular type, and Rafael, the male protagonist, is portrayed as feeble and cowardly. He is the weak link in the love relationship, yet he is a necessary figure if the Brull family is to maintain its power and prestige in future generations. As the heir, he chooses power and tradition over love and happiness.



Social Concerns

Like much of Blasco Ibanez' early fiction, *The Torrent* is based on characters and situations that in many respects typify his native province of Valencia. This work differs from others in the Valencian cycle because of the author's choice of characters. His central concern here is with the family of a powerful local landowner and political boss rather than with the workers of the land. The family is autocratic, hypocritical, cruel, and self-serving.

They are destined to perpetuate these qualities into future generations missing out on the opportunity to experience true love and happiness. On the political level, they will fail to secure and advance the future of the country.

The novel serves to expose the ruling class as rigid and ineffectual.

The general backdrop of this tale, as with others in this group, is the countryside around the city of Valencia.

This book, in particular, takes place in the midst of its famed orange groves, inspiring the novel's original Spanish title, *Among the Orange Trees*. This earthly paradise, whose Moorish history is recounted in detail, is used by the author not only to celebrate nature and its beauty — in contrast with artifice — but also to exemplify energy and passion; the lovers are excited by the intoxicating scent of the orange blossoms, and their desire is consummated. Their love founders when society and convention conspire to put an end to their attachment.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Blasco Ibanez is a descriptive artist whose ability with the pen resembles that of an Impressionist painter. The geography, history, and landscape of the huerta are richly, eloquently, and colorfully depicted in *The Torrent*. The reader can easily partake of the strong scent of the orange flowers in full blossom that so affect the two lovers and can be impressed by the forceful narration of many of the scenes.

The characters of the novel are described with care and in detail. They are assigned traits that reveal spiritual characteristics: Leonora is blonde, tall, and pure — life's reverses notwithstanding. Rafael, youthful and handsome at first, degenerates into a bald, fat and ineffectual human being. The other characters, less developed than the two protagonists, are interesting as prototypes of provincial life. One of them, an old Cortes deputy who opposes Rafael, speaks eloquently in favor of policies advocated by Blasco himself. Today's reader can be easily engaged by the strong narrative line of the novel and will sympathize with the frustrations of the lovers; the unhappy end of the work, however, will neither surprise nor disappoint.

Blasco Ibanez' early novels, *The Torrent* among them, are considered excellent examples of Naturalism, the literary movement whose main exponent was the French writer Emile Zola.

Blasco was a staunch admirer of the French author. Blasco's interest in the plight of the lower classes; his detailed and accurate description of people and landscape, including the more unsavory traits in their character and their physical and moral shortcomings; his commitment to social justice; his belief in the importance of environment in the shaping of a person's character, are all instances of deliberate imitation of his much admired colleague. In *The Torrent*, there are also elements of costumbrismo, or a detailed and deliberate inclusion of local folklore and color.

Last, but not least, some critics consider Blasco a good exponent of literary realism in his avoidance of the exotic, his democratic eye, and his use of the environment as a literary conceit.

Themes

The Torrent, the English title of the novel, refers to an important episode in the book based on a historical fact, a serious flood caused by the river Jucar, and the efforts of local farmers to make the waters subside. The lovers meet in this atmosphere and they fall in love; she is an outsider, an experienced and accomplished woman who represents freedom and passion; he is the heir to an important estate and political responsibilities who, early on, is seduced by the prospects of the fuller and more exciting life that the relationship promises. The hero, however, is unable to free himself from his own environment and accepts, almost without a struggle, the path chosen for him. He inherits his father's lands but also his politics and prejudices. In the process, he abandons his hopes and dreams, and the woman he loves. Society, portrayed here as traditional and repressive, triumphs at the expense of the individual. The opportunities for freedom and renewal, which take the form of the woman from outside, are rejected and defeated. Nature, as the force capable of unleashing energy and love, must also be repressed just as the waters of the river must be contained.

Adaptations

Please see the biographical entry on Blasco Ibanez.

Related Titles

Blasco Ibanez was a hugely prolific writer. Aside from the novels he authored, he left several volumes of short stories and at least one play. Depending on their date of composition, these stories tend to resemble — both stylistically and thematically — the longer fiction written by Blasco. The collection of short stories entitled *La condenada* (1900), for example, belongs to the Valencian cycle. The main characters are poor, local types struggling to survive in a harsh social and economic environment. *Luna Benamor* (1919; original in Spanish, 1909), is perhaps the most famous of Blasco's short fiction volumes. The lead story of the collection, from which the book takes its name, revolves around the fortunes of star-crossed lovers unable to consummate their relationship because of religious differences. It is reminiscent of *The Torrent*. The story takes place in North Africa, a locale chosen after Blasco visited the area. As in his longer fiction, geography and local customs figure prominently in the text. *The Old Woman of the Movies and Other Stories* (1926; *El prestamo de la difunta*, 1921) is the last collection of short fiction translated into English. It contains several cosmopolitan tales, as the author moves back and forth from Europe to America, not unlike the characters of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1918).



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