Where the Air Is Clear Study Guide

Where the Air Is Clear by Carlos Fuentes

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Introduction

The publication of Carlos Fuentes's debut novel in 1958 created much controversy with its critical and loosely Marxist look at the social strata and history of Mexico City. *Where the Air Is Clear* deals with the issues of Mexican identity and need for selfknowledge, and paints a society torn between its ancient mythology and the contemporary modernity, severely shattered on social, political, economic, and spiritual levels. The novel, often called one of the primary works of the magic realism tradition, also established Fuentes as Mexico's leading contemporary novelist and one of the founders of "El Boom" in Latin American literature.

The thorough blend of myth, history, and modernity in the novel, as in Fuentes's other works, signifies the author's search for the viable identity of his country which would encompass its ancient roots as well as its present society. The characters of *Where the Air Is Clear* present diverse personal experiences as affected by the Mexican Revolution of 1910. From Ixca Cienfuegos, a mysterious embodiment of the Aztec war god, to Federico Robles, a revolutionary turned business tycoon who rejects his Indian heritage, Fuentes examines Mexican history and society through his characters whose names and individual memories comprise the novel's chapters. Vacillating perspectives and montage-like sections compose Fuentes's experimental narrative style, giving it a surreal tone and enabling him to present the vast and self-contrasting spectrum of personal memoirs and lifestyles in Mexico City. The frag mentary nature of his fiction reflects the author's vision of his country; Fuentes told John P. Dwyer in an interview, "our political life is fragmented, our history shot through with failure, but our cultural tradition is rich, and I think the time is coming when we will have to look at our faces, our own past."

Author Biography

One of Mexico's premier novelists and its foremost 'ambassador without a portfolio' (someone who utilizes his celebrity status to political ends), Fuentes has been a champion of goodwill for relations between the West and Latin America; good relations between the United States and Mexico has been a particular interest. This agenda shows in his fiction and intellectual enterprises.

Like other prominent members of the intellectual elite in Latin America and key figures of "El Boom," Fuentes comes from the ruling class. His father, Rafael Fuentes Boettiger, was a career diplomat stationed in Panama City in 1928 where his wife, Berta Macias Rivas, gave birth to Fuentes on November 11. Boettiger's career moved the family to Brazil in the early 1930s and then to Washington, DC from 1934 to 1940. While in Brazil, Boettiger served as secretary to Alfonso Reyes□a famous writer himself. Reyes later mentored Fuentes. At elementary school in Washington, DC, Fuentes experienced the tensions existing between the U.S. and Mexico for the first time. The impression stayed with him and became a major theme of his fiction. The family's next stop was Santiago, Chile, where Fuentes attended the Grange school with Jose Donoso, who later became a writer in his own right and who credits Fuentes with starting "El Boom."

Fuentes, after attending high school in Mexico City, stayed in his home country to attend the National University of Mexico. During his university years, Fuentes began writing as a hobby. After graduation, he studied international law in Geneva, Switzerland, as he began to follow in the footsteps of his role models. His career in foreign affairs began in the 1950s and culminated in an ambassadorship to France from 1975 to 1977. Fuentes resigned his ambassadorship when it was revealed that Mexico's current president, Gustavo Diaz Ordaz, ordered the Tlateloco student massacre in 1968.

The publication of *Where the Air Is Clear* in 1958 not only made Fuentes an internationally recognized writer but launched "El Boom," an intense period of international recognition of Latin American literature. Beginning with Fuentes' work of 1958, novels of "El Boom" brought universal themes and sophisticated technique to the literature of Latin America, making the career of novelist viable.

Fuentes married screen actress Rita Macedo in 1959, with whom he had one daughter. They were divorced in 1969. In 1972, Fuentes married Sylvia Lemus, a journalist, and they had two children. Fuentes has won many awards and served as visiting lecture or fellow at many universities, including Cambridge, Princeton, and Harvard. The most notable appointment was his election to the Colegio Nacional in 1972 where the welcoming speech for his appointment was delivered by the Nobel Prizewinning poet Octavio Paz.

President Miguel de la Madrid awarded Fuentes the Mexican Premio Nacional de la Literatura in 1984. Three years later in Madrid, King Juan Carlos awarded him the Spanish Premio Cervantes. During the 1990s, Fuentes has remained active, especially

as a writer of Hispanic cultural history and essays encouraging positive Mexican-American relations.

Plot Summary

Ixca and Gladys Garcia

Through a collection of character sketches in Mexico City, Fuentes shows the dynamism of postrevolutionary Mexico in the 1940s and 1950s as it tries to sort itself out. The characters can be seen as deities struggling for control of Mexico. The figure tying them all together, Ixca Cienfuegos, discounts the present and future to believe in the past. He is in fact a doorway for the reemergence of the Aztec gods who want revenge for their overthrow by the Spaniards. In keeping with Aztec mythology, Ixca needs a blood sacrifice to bring about a return to the past and an overthrow of the new gods, the jet set. Ironically, the other figure looming throughout the novel is Gladys Garcia, a verifiable descendant of the Aztecs, a prostitute whom Ixca, in all his wanderings, never meets. But Ixca wanders through the jet-set class and the lower classes as he tries to find a suitable sacrifice.

Navel of the Moon

The jet set gathers at Bobo's party for a night of fun; intellectuals, artists, ambitious beauties, ty coons, old aristocracy and the *nouveau riches* ("newly rich") mingle and exchange social favors at the event. As aged *bon vivants* seduce novices and well-dressed women exchange "class for cash" at Bobo's, in the city's poor neighborhoods a cabdriver takes his family to dinner because he gambled on a horse race and won, and an illegal immigrant worker returns from California with gifts his family can't use because they don't have electricity. At the party, Norma breaks Rodrigo's heart, while her husband Federico "takes care" of Librato, an associate injured at work, in an example of business cruelty. Other characters are introduced in respective loneliness: Federico's mistress Hortensia, Rodrigo's mother Rosenda, and the cabdriver's wife Rosa□whose husband dies in a car crash after their dinner. Ixca scans the party with disgust, noting the social roleplaying that all engage in, because everybody needs favors to maintain their own social status. The morning after the party, Ixca visits his friend Rodrigo who is considering suicide and views the decadence of the de Ovandos family.

Ixca Shows the Lower Class

Federico Robles tells Ixca about his childhood memories of hardship in rural Mexico, his apprenticeship with the local priest and expulsion when he got involved with his niece, his experiences of fighting in the revolution, and the transition afterward described in terms of progress. Federico becomes a wealthy and powerful banker in the corrupt new economy.

Norma Larragoiti recalls her poor background, her arrival to the city to live with her bourgeois uncle, and the social ambition that made her trade her beauty and elegance

for a place at the top, achieved with her marriage to Federico. Her life feels sterile and unhappy.

At the end of Part I, Ixca and Rodrigo Pola walk to a local bar, where the poet dwells in his intellectual identity crisis and recalls his school days and youth, his involvement with the college poets, his failed relationship with Norma, and the unsuccessful life he has now.

Mother Wants a Sacrifice

Part II opens with an anonymous old man showing his grandson where the palaces used to be along the streets of Mexico City before the revolution. Within the "City of Palaces," Federico reviews his marriage as he watches Norma preparing for another superficial social function; in the meantime, the jet-set members gather for a meeting with a Serbian prince, which turns into a bizarre physical fight when the aristocracy is offended by the opportunist comments about "trade over tradition." Natasha talks to Rodrigo about the marginalism of the Mexican ideological system and culture.

Ixca finds out about Federico's business machinations and crimes from his old acquaintance Librado Ibarra, who became a union lawyer after the revolution, turned to investment capitalism to keep afloat, and got injured in the process. Ibarra reveals more of Mexico's history.

Ixca continues his search for pre-revolution memories, but finds a cool reception at the bottom of the social ladder, with the cabdriver Beto and the immigrant worker Gabriel. Later, Gabriel dines with his father's old friends who fought in the war. He then goes to the poor man's night on the town: a bullfight, a bar, and a whorehouse.

Ixca visits his mother Teodula, who announces that she is waiting to die and asks for a sacrifice. The two perform the death rituals for Teodula's family.

Meanwhile, the widow's neighbor Rosa gets a job in Norma's household; Gabriel gets beat up by a gang.

Ixca Attempts to Select a Sacrifice

Ixca visits Rodrigo's mother, who recalls her marriage, loss of her husband, and ensuing poverty. She dies wishing to see her estranged son. Ixca arranges Rosenda's funeral and sends Teodula to tell Rodrigo, who snubs her. Rodrigo writes about his weakness and indecision in choosing how to live his life; Ixca tells him of his beliefs in the eternal, ancient Mexico of the Indian gods, and proclaims that sacrifice is divine. Unfortunately, despite Ixca's urging, Rodrigo does not kill himself.

Federico and the poet Manuel Zamacona discuss the new society, in a clash of the capitalist and spiritual views. Later, Federico finds peace with Hortensia. Pimpinela refuses to answer Ixca's questions about her life; once alone, she recalls how she

adapted to the post-revolution Mexico, trading her class for the money of the opportunists, in an effort to survive.

Ixca Tries to Sacrifice His Love

Ixca questions Norma about her memories; the two are attracted to each other and become lovers. She fears his untouchable, confident social attitude, because her status depends on keeping up appearances. The jet set spreads the rumor about Ixca and Norma; word gets out about Federico's business machinations. Rodrigo decides to pursue financial success as a screenplay writer. Ixca takes Norma out on the boat during a storm and throws her into the water; she swims out, believing he drowned, and goes wild after the close encounter with death.

Non-Ceremonial Sacrifices

Regules arranges Federico's downfall and makes a profit out of it. Ixca returns to Teodula and has a vision of the Robles's destruction. During Ixca's visit, Hortensia remembers her life, hardships, blindness, and love for Federico. Norma refuses to play social games and breaks ties with the jet set; Federico realizes his collapse; Ixca preaches the authentic power of Mexico to Manuel. Federico remembers with guilt the murder of a union worker that he ordered.

During the Independence Day celebration, the jet set parties; Gabriel and his friends get drunk, vent their discontent, and he gets killed; Rosa's child dies; Manuel gets shot for no reason; and a fight between the Robles results in a house fire, in which Norma dies. Teodula accepts her death as sacrifice and tells Ixca to abandon his modern life and stay to live with Rosa.

Mercedes refuses to see Ixca but recalls her life and relationship with Federico years ago in her uncle's house, which resulted in the birth of her son Manuel. After wandering into Gabriel's wake, Federico goes to Hortensia as his last resort for redemption.

Ixca Is Still Trying

Part II opens three years later. Regules's daughter proves the continuance of the jet-set snobbish tradition in her relationships. The new gods will not die. Ixca meets now-successful Rodrigo and almost gets them into a car crash as he reveals that his effort to bring back the Aztec gods has failed. Ixca complains to Rodrigo that his mother forced him to live with Rosa, "that servant girl," and abandon the "authentic" life. Ixca then resumes the narration and invokes the gods and the people, nameless and named, to save Mexico.

Part 1, Section 1, "My name is Ixca..."

Part 1, Section 1, "My name is Ixca..." Summary

The book opens with Ixca Cienfuegos, a citizen of Mexico City, speaking about his country's difficulties. A noble land unlike any other, Mexico nonetheless cannot shake of its lethargy, its poverty and its envy of Europe. He urges the city, an "eagle without wings" to join together and raise itself up again, and to find a place where 'the air is clear'.

A quick portrait of an aging prostitute, Gladys Garcia, shows the woman waking up in a wet street after a long night of work. From her eyes the refuse-filled street is described, with its neon ads, dead dogs, sleeping children, bikes, and cabbies. She has been on the streets since age thirteen, and hasn't seen her family since she left home. Passing a glamorous couple taking a car to a party, she thinks they look 'like gods who had risen like statues...amid lesser beings" and she goes to buy a cigarette holder to imitate them.

Part 1, Section 1, "My name is Ixca..." Analysis

An assortment of characters quickly appears, one after another, in the opening, as if to show a member of every group comprising the city's population, from the aristocrats and social climbers to the marginalized intellectuals and the peasant farmers.

The style also shifts abruptly from one scene to another, contrasting one, depicting the extreme oppositions inherent in the city. Ixca's exhortation to Mexican citizens is followed by a portrait of an impoverished prostitute, who herself crosses paths with an enviable wealthy couple. In a few pages, the great differences in living and social conditions are depicted, including the way the poor can't help but emulate the fabulously rich.

Part 1, Section 2, "Navel of the Moon"

Part 1, Section 2, "Navel of the Moon" Summary

A couple of young, attractive social climbers, Pichi and Junior, are on the way to a party given by Bobo, whose gatherings are carefully designed to mix the old aristocrats, the nouveau riche, artists and intellectuals, and the stylish young crowd. All the major characters appear in rapid succession, and Ixca observes them all with a critical and knowing eye. In such a hot, polluted and filthy city, no one can avoid stinking a little, but these people make their stink elegant, he reflects.

Zamacona, a poet, lectures to the younger, eager crowd of writers on the need for keeping art free of political clichys. Federico Robles, the banker, is meanwhile ruthlessly pushing his business interests forward by refusing to hear the case of an injured worker. Roberto Regules, a lawyer and businessman, tries with his wife Silvia to keep up appearances, despite marital strife and infidelity. In the background, servants keep up a perpetual flow of liquor and delicacies to guests who compete to produce witticisms about politics, literature, and philosophy,

The narrative shifts abruptly from the festive party to a working family's rare night out at a cheap restaurant. Juan and Rosa Morales, having gotten lucky at the races, are out with their three kids, splurging on a bottle of wine.

Back at the party, the arrival of Rodrigo Pola, a young poet, creates little stir. Still struggling to find his own voice, Pola feels slightly superior to the crowd but attends the gala regardless. He runs into the aristocratic clique, Prince Vampa, Charlotte Garcia, and Natasha; these three hold the rest of the crowd in disdain since they consider themselves the only true heirs of Mexico's noble traditions. Since Natasha is a fading beauty and the "monarch of Mexico City's international set", flatterers and young writers cater to her every whim.

A stream of guests arrives one after another. An impoverished Countess who has nothing to eat at home but Rice Krispies shows up for the food. Norma Robles, a renowned beauty married to the millionaire Robles, turns many heads when she walks in. Rodrigo has a discouraging conversation with Norma, whom he's adored ever since their first adolescent kiss decades ago. She, however, only gloats about the delights of being rich and asks him not to spoil her evening with politics or nostalgia. She informs him that intellectuals like himself are quite useless, and mocks his love for her, as well as his timidity and his writing. Literature is just as important as a nice handbag, she says.

Suddenly her attention turns to the newest arrival, the legendary aristocrat Pimpelina de Ovanda, on whom Norma utterly depends to raise her in the social hierarchy. The aristocrat and the banker's wife trade "cash for class" and vice versa, the narrator points out.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the city, a young laborer named Gabriel returns home from his stint working at a US factory. Though he brought his mother a food processor to save her hours of kitchen labor, he'd forgotten they had no electricity. The appliance is used as a flower vase instead.

The narrative jumps back to the party, which grows wilder and sillier. Bongo drummers arrive to heighten the mood, and all inhibitions fall away in an orgy of cognac, jungle rhythms, wisecracks, and sex.

At the same time, in his office, Federico Robles continues to negotiate business deals, enlisting a man named Roberto Regules to do play a vital that involves soiling his reputation.

Part 1, Section 2, "Navel of the Moon" Analysis

The novel is set in a crucial period of Mexican history, thirty years after the Revolution that overthrew the system of feudal agrarianism and brought about social and economic reforms. All of the major characters are in some way reckoning with the aftermath of the 1920's revolution: deaths of family members, enormous changes in financial and social status, uncertain values, balancing economic growth against exploitation, and keeping true to Mexico's own cultural heritage in a time of destabilizing and rapid change.

Like many of the book's "mestizo" characters who have mixed parentage, Mexico's entire population is of mixed ethnic origins. While European culture had higher social prestige in Mexico's past, due to their wealth, education, and class traditions, precisely this belief in the superiority of the old European aristocracy comes under question in the book, by many characters. This contrast between European and indigenous culture also helps structure other, related oppositions, such as individualism versus solidarity, gain versus sacrifice, capitalism versus socialism, destiny versus duty, maternal versus paternal, light versus darkness, famous versus anonymous.

The party scene serves to introduce most if not all of the main characters, notably the wise Ixca Cienfuegos, the poet Rodrigo Pola, the writer Manuel Zamacona, the banker Robles and his wife Norma, the aristocratic group led by Pimpenela. The party brings together the social elite in a whirl of decadence; everyone is trying to better their position by being seen there in the right company.

By way of contrast with this elite social nucleus, the narrative abruptly shifts to scenes showing the faceless crowds who live in squalid poverty and depend solely on luck for their occasional small joys. The Morales family, Gabriel the migrant worker, and Rodrigo Pola's mother are all representatives of the millions outside of and ignored by the social elite.

By jumping constantly from the world of the rich and successful to the world of the laboring, suffering masses, the narrator constantly recalls the fact that the destinies of those inhabiting these two very different spheres are inescapably intertwined. The

partygoers dance on, oblivious to the events around them, the wheeling and dealing of the business elite and the struggles of the common people.

A few of the characters are indeed trying to make sure that they bridge this divide between the many and the few, and stay on the privileged side. Rodrigo Pola the penniless poet, Norma the millionaire's wife, her unattractive but ambitious husband, are among those who managed to overcome their peasant birth and make it to the top of the social circle.

The Robles, Norma and Federico, represent the class of newly rich entrepreneurs who took the place of the aristocratic families at the top of the social ladder. Robles is characteristically not even at attendance at the party, as he is far too busy with his financial schemes to take a moment of repose. His wife handles the social agenda while he handles the financial one. Both of them are addicted to the power and prestige that they have worked so hard to attain, and both maintain unceasing efforts to maintain and increase their status: Robles does business at all hours while Norma courts the aristocracy on all occasions.

However, they remain concerned that their place is precarious; the "nouveau riche" who came by their money by earning it rather than inheriting it can never boast the same level of sophistication, culture, and even "breeding" that characterized the aristocracy for many decades, particularly under the Diaz government from xxx to xxx. Hence the newly rich continue to look up to, and take commands from, the nearly defunct aristocracy represented by the de Ovando family, (Pimpenela and her aunt Dona Lorenza). In turn, the aristocrats depend on the nouveau riche for their financial well being. "Give me cash and I'll give you class" declares Pimpenela.

Aristocratic families like the de Ovandos, lost all their money during the social revolution of xx, when land was redistributed and feudalism was replaced by emerging capitalism. After the xx, the landowners and old aristocratic families lost their wealth and status to self-made businessmen like Robles and Regules, who undertook the work of investing in the countries rapidly growing, albeit chaotic and unregulated, economy.

Part 1, Section 3, "Squeezed into the pajamas of a thinner time..."

Part 1, Section 3, "Squeezed into the pajamas of a thinner time..." Summary

The morning after the party, Bobo begins cleaning up after his guests. Elsewhere in the city, most of the characters sleep late or lay in bed, except for the aristocratic heiress Pimple and the banker Robles.

In his high glass office tower, Robles reflects that he no longer has to walk in the "flea circus" on the street nor smell the sweat of all the 'necessary nobodies" laboring there. With his unceasing efforts to make himself someone important, he's earned to right to elevate himself above these bankrupt nonentities forever, he muses. Meanwhile his exquisitely beautiful wife Norma lies in the sun purposelessly and inert. Her main worry is how to get more admiration and attention.

Zamacona, also a writer, begins his day with an essay on Mexico's eccentricity and position in the world relative to European civilization, comparing his country to Spain and Russia. The problem consists in not truly comprehending one's origins, he thinks, as Mexico's origins are mixed and impure. Instead of looking to the past, they must create their own originality and beginnings. Seeking one's distant origins resembles seeking for an unknown paternity, he reflects, and is a difficult if not impossible quest. What, or whom, should Mexico take as a cultural model, he wonders. The growing struggles for power tends to corrupt the citizens (like Robles) if it is not bound to values and to responsibility. He finishes his essay and feels the futility of it; he tears up the pages and hurls them at the sun.

Ixca has woken up Rodrigo Pola, the poet, in his flat. Rodrigo complains of his own failures, such as his first napve manuscript (called "Lavender Verse") and his inability to win Norma's love. As he complains, he reads casually in the paper of the car crash of Juan Morales, a cab driver, and his family; he presumes it was due to drinking.

Ixca initially tries to rescue Pola from his lethargy and self-defeating habits. He tells Pola that he will have to make a choice: either to be anonymous and united with his brethren, or to construct an important, successful name and image that will nonetheless isolate him from his fellow man. Pola laments not having attained the same level of success as the Robles, while Ixca thinks instead of all the faceless Mexican people at the bottom of the social system, those who only work to survive.

Rodrigo explains his own family history to Ixca, providing some insight into why he has never managed to make a name for himself nor identify with his fellow man. Pola's own father was killed in the war before he was born.

Part 1, Section 3, "Squeezed into the pajamas of a thinner time..." Analysis

A major theme is introduced by the thoughts of Zamacona, who ponders the inability of Mexico to find the proper balance between following the western socio-economic model and her own traditions. The demands of the modern world force the country towards capitalism, and the model provided by the western world places value on European culture and language, Christianity, and individualism. On the other hand, the traditions of Mexico include the Indian customs, pagan religious beliefs, and a collective social order. Mexican history is a hybrid between native and European, just as many Mexicans (like Norma) are of an ancestry that mixes both European and Indian.

Pola is a complex character torn between contradictory desires. He yearns for material and social success but at the same time wants to discover his true voice as a Mexican writer. His encounter with Norma at the party briefly illustrates their brief romantic history; she spurned him long ago but he has never forgotten her. He is captivated by her beauty and glamour, and seems not to care that she has sold herself to the highest bidder by marrying the millionaire Robles.

Ixca represents the ancient traditions of Mexico; his speech is full of references to the old pagan gods and the imagery of the ancient traditions that honor the sun, the landscape, native animals and plants, death and fire. He is on a relentless search to restore Mexico's glory and self-respect, and takes a deep interest in all the major characters.

Ixca oversees the entire whirl, and has a way of inspiring people to confess the darkest secrets of their souls to him. Over time, he receives all the confidences of Robles, Rodrigo Pola, Pola's mother, Norma, and others. In that sense he resembles a priest, however he is so steeped in the traditions and culture of ancient Mexico that it would be more suitable to associate him with a priest or shaman of an ancient Mexican religion. His mother, it turns out later, retains strong ties to ancient religions with their care of the dead and demand for the occasional sacrifice.

Structurally, much of Part One of the novel is taken up largely with setting the stage and exploring the lives of three major characters: Robles, Norma his wife, and Pola. The presentation of these three character's lives begins with Pola, moves to Robles, then his wife, and ends again with Pola. Pola's story, therefore, serves to frame the entire constellation of relationships between the three of them.

Pola's story symbolizes the fate of Mexico in general, as he is uncertain as to his roots and his future, and continues to struggle to find his true voice and place. Much of his confusion is attributed to not fully understanding his origins, namely his own father, and thus the following tale of how Pola's father, Gervasio, died in prison takes on a special relevance.

Part 1, Section 4, "Gervasio Pola"

Part 1, Section 4, "Gervasio Pola" Summary

Rodrigo Pola's father, Gervasio Pola, was a hero of the xx revolution who died by firing squad in the Belen prison. Prior to this execution, Gervasio Pola staged an escape with three comrades via a garbage cart. Their plan is a desperate one, and has little chance of success, as they themselves are aware. Some of them continue to ask what will happen, in this scenario or that one; Gervasio Pola tells them their job that in a fight, there are times when thinking is counterproductive. "Just fight," he tells them. Their goal was to reach the Zapata headquarters at Tres Marina, but in order to maximize their chances of success Gervasio Pola insisted that the group split up and go separate ways. The other men resisted, wanting to remain together even unto death, but Gervasio Pola insisted. He even left behind his injured companion, resisting his pleas to stay with him on the cold solitary mountain.

He reaches the Zapata outpost and announces his readiness to join the movement, but tragically it turns out that the General Zapata has been overthrown by a General Huerta, loyal to the Federal government, and in charge now of the Tres Marina camp. Gervasio Pola is returned to prison and encouraged to inform the guards of the whereabouts of his companions. Knowing they will not survive in the mountains, and remembering their wishes to die together, he gives up the information. They all hold hands and console each other as the firing squad delivers the first volley.

Part 1, Section 4, "Gervasio Pola" Analysis

The death of Gervasio Pola, Rodrigo Pola's father, in prison is one of the key symbols in the story. While he could have chosen to die alone, instead he led the enemy to his friends, so that they could all die together. Whether this was an act of cowardice or of solidarity cannot be resolved easily, but the men died all together, holding hands.

Part 1, Section 5, "The De Ovandos"

Part 1, Section 5, "The De Ovandos" Summary

The narrative, which is now dealing with Mexico's revolutionary past, moves to the de Ovando family, the wealthiest feudal landowners in Mexico.

Political turmoil caused the family to relocate temporarily to New York City, and then to Paris (upon the death of the patriarch, Don Francisco). The matriarch, Dona Lorenza, is driven by the need to maintain the family's honor and aristocratic heritage, even though they are in exile. She impressed upon her tiny new grandson Benjamin the great heritage of his family, taking him to sleep amid the family portraits and teaching him of their many lands, honors, and conquests in the military and political sphere.

In 1935 they return to Mexico to find a changed land. Former palaces and stables have been torn down or turned into social centers, shops, and schools, new construction is shoddy and cheap, and the lordly feudal aristocratic class now has to work as clerks selling ties and blouses. The de Ovandos are forced to sell their gardens and stables, and even rent most of their house to a dress shop. Dona Lorenza retreats to a few rooms in the top floors, which she crams full of the furniture and objects d'art of a former glory, but she can never truly create a haven since "everything lost grandeur by compression" and the neon signs for beer blink outside her windows. Nevertheless, she remains convinced that the seismic political and economic shifts are merely temporary and that their glory will return one day.

These dreams are shattered when one day she is forced, for Benjamin's sake, to curry favor with Norma Robles, At Pimpenela's urging, they ask the rich banker's wife to dinner, aiming to secure a job for Benjamin at the Robles bank. Even a job at a bank is humiliating for her grandson, she thinks, as he was born to 'use bankers' and not to be one. When Lorenza de Ovanda sees Norma, whom she considers "an upstart, obnoxious... daughter of some sheepherder" arrive wearing the jewels and furs once reserved for her own class, she realizes that the pedestal she'd "believed was vacant, waiting for their return, turned out to be occupied...by vulgarity."

Part 1, Section 5, "The De Ovandos" Analysis

The novel is set in a crucial period of Mexican history, thirty years after the Revolutionary period which overthrew the system of feudal agrarianism and brought about social and economic reforms. All of the major characters are in some way reckoning with the aftermath of the revolution: deaths of family members, enormous changes in financial and social status, uncertain values, balancing economic growth against exploitation, and keeping true to Mexico's own cultural heritage in a time of destabilizing and rapid change. Mexico's cultural heritage is a mixed one, comprised of the native Indian population and the Spanish colonists who brought European norms of

speech, literature, dress, and education; hence it occupies what one character calls an "eccentric" position relative to the outside (that is, western European) world.

Like many of the book's "mestizo" characters of mixed parentage, Mexico's entire population is of mixed ethnic origins. While European culture had higher social prestige in Mexico's past, due to their wealth, education, and class traditions, precisely this belief in the superiority of the old European aristocracy comes under question in the book, by many characters. This contrast between European and indigenous culture also helps structure other, related oppositions, such as individualism versus solidarity, gain versus sacrifice, capitalism versus socialism, destiny versus duty, maternal versus paternal, light versus darkness, and famous versus anonymous.

Part 1, Section 6, "Federico Robles"

Part 1, Section 6, "Federico Robles" Summary

Robles is talking to Ixca about the changes from the feudal days to the new capitalist ones. The de Ovandos used to own the whole country, whereas he, Robles the millionaire, was once a peasant farmer's son.

His cousin Froilan tried to involve the family in the revolution to bring about redistribution of land. Froilan tells of a workers strike that began when a child died of overwork. The factory owners, who ran the only supply store available to the workers, refused them food for weeks. The starving workers tried subsisting from cacti, and even from their own fingernails and blood and flesh, but in the end they gave in and asked for food in exchange for resuming work. The company refused them food and laughed, at which point the workers attacked the store and then burned it down. Federal troops were called to execute all the workers, (those who resisted were shot as well); thousands of the striker's bodies were carried off by train and dumped in the sea.

Robles admits that the challenge of their era is to both build capital for the nation and simultaneously protect worker's rights. He tells his own story: as a youth he'd studied Latin for the theological schools, but when the revolution arrived he had to join up. His general gave him lessons in leadership and morality, so to speak, telling him that "balls is all it takes to handle these people" since they mistrust any other virtues.

The climax of his military service came in a battle against the notorious revolutionary fighter Pancho Villa himself, where Robles suddenly fought with a frenzy of murderous strength he'd never known before. With Villa defeated, marching into Mexico City under the victorious generals Carrranza and Obregon, Robles recounted, they all felt it was the right time to bring drastic changes to the country. Economic paralysis, lost prestige, lack of public order, banditry, all had to be ended by bringing about the rise of a new middle class, a new bourgeoisie. It hadn't been easy to build his fortune, which in turn enabled the middle class to prosper; it had taken him risk and political shrewdness and bravery. And he remains devoted to the grown of a strong middle class who can guarantee the grown of a hardworking, stable society; he praises the capitalists who helped end agrarian feudalism and the rule of the de Ovandos.

Robles's view is that private companies might as well make a fortune since their work promotes the overall good of the public, by creating jobs and an economic infrastructure. Like the robber barons of the 19th century, his philosophy is that his own success is also the country's, since he has helped to build the strong middle class on which Mexico's security and prestige depend. Having fought in the revolution on the Federal side, he learned to cooperate with and to personally profit from the prevailing political powers, no matter what they may be. He has no ethics or values except to build up the country and profit while doing so.

"Every revolution ends with a new privileged class," says Robles, and then gives an eloquent defense of the need for a free capitalist economy. A new plutocracy, like the de Ovandos, but his time it is based on hard work and achievement, rather than heredity and family; also the new capitalist plutocracy helps create millions of decent jobs and stable, necessary infrastructure for the country.

In his first confession to Ixca, he tells of his youth in the countryside. Robles" father, a farmer, had young male relatives (Froilan and his friend, Gervasio Pola) who tried to enlist him into fighting for the revolution. Froilan and Pola died together as revolutionary heroes executed by the Federal government, while Robles protected his own skin and fought only to avoid the wars altogether. At the end of the revolution, he begins building his fortune while the widows of his compatriots (for example, Rodrigo Pola's mother, Rosanna) struggle to survive alone, in spite of their poverty and solitude.

Indeed, even Robles has left behind a woman and child, although without knowing of it. Before the wars began, his own plan was to enter the seminary and become a priest. This plan came to an abrupt end when he spent part of his seminary training on the Zamacona hacienda (ranch) where he met the beautiful young Mercedes, daughter of his host family. He could not resist her and so his priestly aspirations came to a sudden halt when the couple was found together in their first sexual exploration.

Part 1, Section 6, "Federico Robles" Analysis

Robles personal history is given in detail in order to illustrate how he came to make the life choices so different than other men in the novel, like Gervasio Pola who died in prison for the worker's movement, or Ibarra who devoted himself fruitlessly to worker's rights.

Robles continually justifies his enormous fortune by claiming that he has helped to construct a solid middle class and a stable economy that Mexico so badly needed. If it wasn't him getting rich, it would necessarily be someone else, since building a strong economy depends on men with large amounts of capital. He claims to have only worked for the general good. Yet elsewhere in the novel, there are frequent clues that his rise to power involved assassinations of labor leaders and systematic exploitation of workers.

While the heroes Froilan and Pola were executed by the Federal government, Robles survived and began taking advantage of the contacts he'd made in the war to begin building his business empire. Like Gervasio Pola, it will turn out that Robles has also left behind a child, Manuel, of whom he knows nothing. The affair with Mercedes, daughter of his host family while he was a priest in training, resulted in a son whom he will never recognize as his own.

Part 1, Section 7, "Norma Larragoiti"

Part 1, Section 7, "Norma Larragoiti" Summary

Even as a teenager, Norma knew how to make men fall for her, and she wisely recognized that her looks were her chief asset in life, and used them to take her far. After an initial flirtation with a young poet, Rodrigo Pola, she decided she didn't want to be trapped in a life of poverty with him. Their kiss in a 'kitchen garden' later filled her with contempt, when she realized other men were able to take her to lavish haciendas (ranch estates). Vowing to not only own the finest luxuries that Mexico could offer, (gold and elegance) but also to be that very luxury, she ends up disowning her own mother (a dark skinned Indian woman) and devoting herself to marrying wealthy. Naturally she plans to be generous to them, after she's landed her millionaire. And inevitably this happens, once the well-known society beauty meets the young, ambitious Robles, and hints at all the ways that she can polish him culturally and advance him socially, for he has known only the worlds of the army and business. They marry, to their mutual benefit. Years later, they will have little interest in each other, except as great financial and social assets.

Norma also comes from poor roots (daughter of a sheep herder, as de Ovando say) but uses her extraordinary good looks to climb to the very top of the social ladder. Her main fear is, as most people perceive, that she might bear the child of the Robles, a bullet headed Indian. Their sexual relation is lukewarm, unlike that which Robles shares with a blind Indian woman named Hortesia, who is the only woman that really knows him.

Norma, as opposed to Hortensia, is a sun worshipper, a narcissistic beauty who wants to "be the best Mexico has to offer." Seeing herself as gold itself, Norma clearly symbolizes some ritualistic object suggestive of sacrificing.

Part 1, Section 7, "Norma Larragoiti" Analysis

Norma has used her beauty to advance herself in the social world by marrying Mexico's richest man, but money is not the only thing that matters in Mexico City. One must also have connections and preferably aristocratic ones. Norma therefore coddles the women in the de Ovando family, whose name alone carries social prestige, as they belong the oldest family of wealthy landowners in Mexico.

For her, love is a matter of the will and not of the heart, so that when she realizes that her first choice, Rodrigo Pola, cannot provide her with ranches and convertibles, she quickly decides to chase money instead. Rodrigo Pola never recovers from their initial short romance, though she reduces it to a few adolescent kisses stolen in a kitchen garden.

Part 1, Section 8, "Rodrigo Pola"

Part 1, Section 8, "Rodrigo Pola" Summary

Part One of the novel is taken up largely with setting the stage and exploring the lives of three major characters: Robles, Norma his wife, and Pola. This final section of Part One returns to the dialogue between Pola and Ixca as if it has been going on all this time. The conversation continues exactly where it left off previously (30 pages earlier), as they resume their discussion of Pola's childhood and family.

Rodrigo tells of the difficulty he had growing up without a father, always wondering what that heroic man was really like and if he, R, could live up to his name. As a child he lived alone with his mother, who was always exhausted from working two jobs to support them. Her opinion of his father is low: she resents him for deserting her before the child was born. Rodrigo watches her growing older and sadder over the years.

He never knew his own father, the hero shot in the Belen prison, and has only the shifting and fading memories of his mother to go by. She has begun to forget their initial love, due to the hardships of survival on her own with a young child. She longs for her son to replace his father and to see her with the same love that the absent father can no longer provide; but instead the child only seems to notice how she grows old and sad. Rather than embrace her, he spies on her with a detached eye. This critical failure to connect leaves the mother feeling unattractive, unloved, and alone; it leaves the son feeling like a spy, an onlooker, incapable of engaging with other people.

Curious to know more about his father, the young Pola once asked his mother if his father had been good to her. In a moment of bitterness and weakness, caused by her poverty and the absence of familial love, telling the child that the man was a coward who turned in his friends and abandoned him family, instead of returning home and supporting them. She wonders how different their lives could have been if he'd put their security before the revolution.

Pola's only friend as a young boy had been Roberto Regules, with whom he shared a private game based on magical code names for their religion class. Regules leaves after the discovery of their forbidden games gets both him and the religion instructor in trouble (he is a wealthy child and his parents have the teacher fired). Left without his friend, Rodrigo Pola resorts to staying home and reading all the time. When he goes off to law school, he joins a literary group and finally feels like he belongs somewhere. They have lengthy discussions of the meaning and place of poetry and the responsibilities of poets.

Pola as a young student spent most of his time skipping classes and writing a manuscript called "lavender verse", a book that he now looks back on with disdain. Eventually his mother came to his room, he tells Ixca, and found the manuscript. She is furious that he has wasted all his time indulging in writing since all these years she's

been slaving away to finance his legal studies. In answer to her disappointment at no longer being able to control him, he tells her "mama, I have my own destiny." Later he wonders if anyone indeed has the right to their own destiny, their own being, or if there is only responsibility

The next day he takes his manuscript to a publisher, not bothering to run it past his poetry friends. Hurt by his failure to show it to them, the group members criticize it and refuse to review it publicly. Rodrigo dealt with his renewed isolation by seeking love with Norma, who spurned him. The rest of his literary group stuck together and went on to fulfill their purpose.

Part 1, Section 8, "Rodrigo Pola" Analysis

The bitter scene between mother and son recounted in this part of the novel leads to permanent misunderstandings between mother and son. When he studied her to understand her feelings and her struggles, he did so from a careful distance, without offering much love or affection. Therefore, she felt him to be spying upon her, critically watching her age instead of playing the role of the man in the house who loved her. This scene gives us a momentary into their dysfunctional family relations, and demonstrates Pola's inability to connect on an emotional level with those who needed him. This failure to connect between mother and son helps explain why she took her revenge upon him later, telling him that his own father was a coward. By doing so, she betrays her original love for her husband Gervasio and her faith that her family indeed has an important destiny of it's own.

Rodrigo represents what the narrator presents as a typical Mexican conundrum: he does not understand his own origins. Since Pola failed to know his own father, or derive guidance from him, he remains confuses as to his own identity and purpose in the world.

He is unsure if he has a real destiny to know himself, and to write, or if he should simply take on the responsibilities of providing for his mother and earning a living.

He also perceives for the first time that his character failings are the same as those of the country at large, that is, he sees his defects quite clearly but cannot change himself.

Rodrigo Pola may be seen as symbolizing the desire of Mexicans to find their own national and ethnic identity in spite of having uncertain, mixed roots. As Mexico was dominated by a European colonial power for much of its early history, the citizens strive to imitate highly respected European norms of behavior, at the risk of forgetting their own traditions and deep connection to ancient Indian landscapes and religion. Just as Pola is unsure of his destiny and unable to correct his own character weaknesses, such is also the case for Mexico at large.

A sharp contrast then emerges between Rodrigo's father, Gervasio Pola, and Federico Robles. The former died with his countrymen in order to promote more just social relations, but had little effect; he might even be considered a failure as he didn't change

anything and his great escape led only to a dead end. ". The other, Robles, protected himself and built a fortune, even though he never knew his illegitimate child nor did he sincere loved his wife, but he is considered a great social and financial success, as he made such compromises to climb to the social and political heights.

Part 2, Section 1, "That Sunday..."

Part 2, Section 1, "That Sunday..." Summary

A Sunday morning opens with Norma dressing in her bedroom for a society wedding she must attend. Robles watching her reflects to himself that her face has become the generic "mask worn by all internationally styled models" and that she has, over the years, molded her face into that of a typical beauty, as founding an imagined print. He's not surprised by the change; quite the contrary, he's always regarded her as an idea, an image. Over the years she has merely conformed to his expectations and his will, he thinks.

Making love with her was a "ceremony as precise as the four quarters of a watch dial" he reflects, and compares her unfavorably with his Indian lover, a blind woman named Hortensia. Federico's true passion is aroused only by Hortensia, who recalls for him of the intensity and exhilaration he'd only otherwise known on the battlefield.

With Norma, the sort of love that demands a total surrender of one's singularity, in which two people "drop all defenses" and surrender all their "rottenness and vanity and power", remains impossible. Both are too vain, singular, and ambitious for that sort of self-surrender. On the other hand, their marriage is a perfect bargain whish both have fulfilled, and has resulted in a prestigious, secure, enviable position for them both.

Norma tells him of her dinner with the de Ovando women, and how she pitied their poverty. What would it be like to have it all and lose it, she wonders. Robles insists that if he lost his fortune one day, he'd rebuild it all the next. Reflecting on his position with her at his side, he takes delight in the feeling of power he has with her, that same feeling he first felt on the battlefield when he fought against Villa. He erases from his thoughts those women that he loved (Mercedes and hortensia) before he acquired Norma and the success and power that lured her in.

After the wedding, the guests gossip spitefully about their hosts and each other. Silvia Regules (wife of Robles" lawyer friend Roberto) and her group head for a bar. She meets Pimpenela de Ovando and lets her know that her husband managed to do them a little favor of returning some of their family lands. Rodrigo Pola is there, trying to charm a woman and failing so miserably that one of the older aristocratic beauties, Natasha comes over to give him advice. She tells him the fine difference between being "fatuous" and "impertinent" and gives him tips on how to socialize more easily. She complains that the nouveau rich have none of the taste or talent that the old aristocracy had, and that they waste their money on tacky mansions and have no idea what to do with their money.

They discuss why any of them chose to live in Mexico and Natasha insists that the country has people who are 'sweet, full of love and true ingenuousness...the truest in

their loves and hate and sadness and happiness" Rodrigo Pola understands that her message is like Ixca's, "choose your world and turn your back upon the cities of salt".

Part 2, Section 1, "That Sunday..." Analysis

Norma and Federico's relationship is examined for the farce that is truly is; their marriage is based on a social and financial bargain than one of love. She provided the social status and cultural polish that he badly needed, being an unsophisticated Indian soldier from a farm. He financed her decadent tastes and allowed her the leisure to cultivate her beauty and her connections. They married in order to advance socially, and to reach a certain place in the world; they have done so and this brings them both genuine satisfaction. The wedding Norma must attend is a typical boring social event she is obligated to attend, to keep up their position.

Nothing seems worse to them than to become as poor and helpless as the de Ovandos, hence they live in fear of losing their fortune.

This conversation between Norma and Robles foreshadows Robles's imminent downfall in the financial world. He will have to decide very soon if he truly wishes to rebuild his empire, or to pursue a different course of action.

Natasha's message to Rodrigo is that there is something genuine and worthy to be found only in Mexico and in the Mexican people. She offers him encouragement but it is unclear how he will discover the truths about his own country himself.

Part 2, Section 2, "Librado Ibarra"

Part 2, Section 2, "Librado Ibarra" Summary

Ixca goes to speak with Robles' business associate, Librado Ibarra. Ibarra has known Robles since they were young, and he claims that both of them had the same paths open to them after the revolution. Ibarra devoted himself to the revolutions ideals; labor reform, land reform, and education. He specialized in labor law, and worked as a school inspector, and as a civil servant. Eventually he found that the entire system was corrupt and that his efforts made little difference, while meanwhile Robles and his risky speculation was earning millions.

Ibarra grew tired of his bland middle class life, in which he performed the same meaningless routine repeatedly. "Every day the same useless work, the same us with the same wooden seats, the same little room, the same goddamn nothing to do after work except look for a woman or take in a foolish double feature...and at eight the next morning, marking up bits of paper again." So finally he called up the only person he knew in the new plutocracy, Robles, who gave him a job as an "associate".

In reality, his job was overseeing miserable workers in a factory with terrible work conditions, all of which was in violation of the law. When Ibarra was injured on the job by the defective machinery, he wasn't even entitled to compensation since he'd been hired as an associate, not as an employee. Showing a surprising lack of bitterness, Ibarra simply says that Robles is "on top" while he himself is "on bottom."

Part 2, Section 2, "Librado Ibarra" Analysis

Ibarra is a man who tried to follow the righteous path and had little success, similar to those martyrs of the revolution. By taking a realistic look at the way people truly rise to the top in the modern socio-economic world, the novel shows how following one's best, most noble intentions for helping society is very likely a recipe for failure.

Left powerless in his bureaucratic jobs, the idealistic Ibarra tries late in life to cross over to the side of Robles, by going to work for one of Robles' exploitative factories. However, when he is injured on the job, Robles has no mercy on him. Ibarra accepts this state of affairs as inevitable, for some reason. Is it because he knows the system too well, and realizes it can't be changed? Does he believe that Robles has no choice to exploit his staff, in order to stay on top? Ibarra's mediocre expectation from life and his social order seem symptomatic of a resignation to a social order which is too powerful for any individual to resist.

Part 2, Section 3, " Maceualli"

Part 2, Section 3, " Maceualli" Summary

The migrant worker Gabriel goes out on the town with some friends, Beto and Tuno. They all behave a more or less like thugs, getting into fights, going to a bullfight and urinating on the tourists. They all complain about the difficulty of finding steady work in Mexico City and their reluctance to push an ice cream cart. Tuno also takes on periodic work in the states while Beto is lucky enough to have a cab. All of them agree that having friends is more important than family or women.

That evening after the bullfight they go out to get drunk and find prostitutes. Beto ends up in a cheap zone where sparse rooms are rented nightly. Each room contains a plastic covered couch, a roll of toilet paper, and a bottle of disinfectant. Beto picks one and is surprised to find Gladys, his friend and former lover, in his. As they had grown tired of each other's bodies long ago, they merely talk all night long. Gladys mentions the vast number of those who are nameless, as compared with the famous people (the president, Robles, film stars, etc). She has a long dream or vision in which she describes many traditional motifs and scenes from ancient religion, one of which involves learning that "the sun had hunger too and that it was feeding us so that we could return it's swollen hot fruit to it"

Ixca in the next scene visits the widow Teodula, who seems also to be his mother (she calls him "my son" whenever she addresses him. Everything in her manner reflects how profoundly in tune she remains with the landscape and its ancient religious rituals. She lives in a very traditional fashion, in a hut with a dirt floor, serving him tortillas and chilis, and keeping her family jewels on her body at all times. The massive gold ornaments she wears are essential to her identity, she claims. They were put on her for her wedding day and she has never removed them. She wore them on her wedding night, and decorated her newborn children with them. Even so the jewelry doesn't belong to her, it is merely a symbol of her married life and of her place in the social order; it belongs not to her but to the order of things. Only when she came to the city did she realize people might want to steal the jewels.

Her husband and children are still precious in her memory, and have a tangible presence: she keeps their coffins in her basement. Ixca helps her to raise the caskets are brought up and to painted her husband's skull with his name, as she does periodically. She asks Ixca to bring flowers from the country for them, and then sits silently with her dead ones for a long time. When her son takes his leave, she asks him again when she will have her 'sacrifice" and he promises it will be soon.

Rosa Morales reluctantly leaves her sick son in order to go work all week long as a maid in Norma Robles's house. Rosa took this job after her cabdriver husband Juan died in a car wreck on the same day he and his family went to celebrate his good luck at

the races. On the bus, she wonders if she will find her son alive at the end of the week when she returns.

Gabriel stands in line for a job for which there are too many applicants, fails to find work, and then goes to a bar. A couple of men in suits come by to beat him up for unspecified reasons. He tells his mother how much easier it is to find work in the US, and wonders if he should stay there next time. She advises him, uselessly, to go to church and confess.

Part 2, Section 3, " Maceualli" Analysis

The novel's focus moves to the other end of town, where the less privileged citizens are found. The theme of namelessness and anonymity surfaces, as Gladys and her friend haphazardly pass a tranquil night in a forgotten corner of the city. As part of the anonymous mass herself, Gladys tends to be closer to the ancient signs and symbols of her country. She has not forgotten its traditions in an effort to become other than what she is, an Indian woman.

Ixca's visit to his mother shows us his own heritage, which is deeply engraved with the rituals and beliefs of the old pagan religion. The gold she wears, the attention she pays to the dead, and the food she serves all comes from a different world than the westernized one.

Ixca's mother places heavy demands upon him by asking for a sacrifice. While the purpose and symbolism of this sacrifice remains more or less unstated and mysterious, it seems clear that it is an effort to preserve respect for the old traditions which are everywhere in danger. In this sense, a great sacrifice will help preserve Mexican national identity, and perhaps even restore a sense of solidarity.

The situation in Mexico City grows increasing harder for all of Mexico's working class, and the novel's tension builds.

Part 2, Section 4, " Rosenda"

Part 2, Section 4, " Rosenda" Summary

Ixca goes to visit the Rosenda Pola, the dying mother of Rodrigo Pola, who tells him her entire life story just before she passes away. She tells him how much the city has changed; streets that were once small pastel-colored, and easy to understand have now turned to streets filled with riffraff and vomit. Her own life followed a similar course; her childhood days of dolls and candy ended when one day Gervasio Pola, an army colonel, rode up "ready with seduction on a black horse." Soon after their marriage, he left her alone and pregnant with Rodrigo. He was captured and put in Belen prison, while she endured an unhappy pregnancy alone, knitting baby clothes and worrying about him. Her family was always two, never three, she remarked: first her and Gervasio, then her and Rodrigo. She tried to replace the father's love with the son's, she confesses, and wanted to see her lost husband restored to her through him. Her son should be the continuation of her and Gervasio's destiny, she thought.

A few years later she finally learned from Captain Zamacona that her husband was shot in prison, in the company of his three comrades. She refuses to remarry, and instead takes on hard manual labor to support her child. The mother-son bond is broken one day when she notices Rodrigo Pola staring at her as she notices her aging own reflection in the window. Rosa interprets his stare as a critical one, and laments that he will never be the loving presence that her husband was, merely a critical one. Her whole life begins to turn sour: the city changes so much that she is alienated her own territory, she sinks into poverty and misses having anyone to love her. Though she knows in her heart that GP was good to her, during their brief time together, these memories are altered by her more recent pains and sorrows. She creates a new image of her husband, one that she can reproach for having chosen to die heroically for a cause rather than return to his own wife and child. She knows this is a form of lying to herself, but she begins to believe it nonetheless. If he'd come back, they'd be together and living like everyone else, she began to believe. Certain people even made millions in the period after the revolution, whereas she, the hero's wife, had nothing.

When he son finally asks he whether Gervasio was good to her, she tells him that his father was a coward who died in prison and betrayed his comrades. In doing so, she gives into the version of her story that she calls "the lie", the version in which she forgets her husbands initial goodness and his lasting bravery and solidarity with his men. She couldn't forgive her husband for not giving her either his love or the little she'd need to live decently, she admits.

Rodrigo Pola does not forgive her for this slander of his father, and withdraws both socially and from his mother. Their relation never heals, and she criticizes him heavily for his writing efforts, telling him he has no destiny, only duty. In fact, she wants to prevent him from getting ideas of following his destiny like his father did, and merely asks that her son not desert his own wife and child. When she criticizes his writing

efforts, she means only for him to remain safe. She remembers vowing to " teach him to search out the mighty and submit himself...so that they will not assassinate him against walls, and he will learn to give normal life to the woman he will choose." Rodrigo Pola never forgives her for her lack of support, and his relation to her becomes one of detachment and "abstract courtesy."

In reality, as she lays dying, she wishes her son could have had his own destiny and been the continuation of her and Gervasio's. She also realizes that she resents her husband not for failing to return to her, but for failing to summon her to be with him at his moment of death, and even to die with him.

Part 2, Section 4, " Rosenda" Analysis

The various poorer citizens in the novel continue to suffer terrible luck, which gives a growing urgency to Ixca's sense of having a mission to relieve their troubles somehow While his method of helping them remains quite irrational, even occult, it has something to do with the demand by his mother for a sacrifice.

A sacrifice of some sort, to the ancient gods, pays homage to the ancient Mexican gods to which the common people still seem to have a connection. It also involves listening to the people and empathizing with them. The idea of sacrifice, after all, is to give oneself up, or give up something that is precious to oneself. Normally a sacrifice means losing something of your possessions, or ego. By giving up something personally valuable, the ego, with its individuality and its accompanying separateness, is partially relinquished. This enables a greater sense of solidarity and empathy with others, an attitude clearly advocated by the author.

Pola's mother is one of the people whom Ixca comforts in death. He helps her by listening to her tragic tale of how she lost the happy memories of her marriage to Gervasio Pola and then love of her son. Her life has been a long journey filled only with the impossibility of finding peace, due to economic hardship. Her most precious memories of her husband were distorted in the end by her continual hardship, and she eventually begins to believe that her husband's own sacrifice (the ultimate one, his life) was not worth it.

On her deathbed, Rosanda Pola later laments that she can forgive Gervasio's leaving her, but could not accept that he chose to die without her and his son. It is as if she'd have preferred to be shot alongside him as his comrades-in-arms were, rather than continue to live without him. The sense of solidarity is considered so essential that it should continue even unto death. True love, true friendship, might even mean choosing to die alongside the person you love.

Part 2, Section 5, " Mexico in the Waters"

Part 2, Section 5, " Mexico in the Waters" Summary

Ixca arranges the funeral of Rosanda, and buries her in the rain. His mother, Teodula, finally delivers the news to Rodrigo Pola after a long search.

Rodrigo shows little emotion, and passes his time instead inspecting his own face to see what image he projects to the outside world. Does he project strength and self-certainty, or mere changeability, he wonders. He convinces himself that he deliberately makes a bad first impression in order to then prove to people how they were wrong about him, and how they failed to perceive his greatness. His silly behavior at the party, his failure as a writer, his accident with the gas in his room, were all just part of a superior strategy. In reality, his exclusion comes from his excessive talent, he tells himself, and all his failures are just ways to deceive people as to his real merit. Every failure leads him to try some other, different path, he thinks. Unfortunately, he just becomes the 'slave of his own game" of trying the contrary way, so that movement and escape are all he experiences. This is neither good nor evil, but it is living "remote from grace," he reflects.

Ixca, after a talk with his mother about Rodrigo Pola, meets little Jorges, made an orphan by his father's cab accident. When he tries to keep the boy with him for a moment, and give him food, the child bites his hand in fear and runs away. Ixca bites his own hand in the same place and tastes the blood from the wound. He gazes into the night sky and looks for a sign in the stars.

Ixca and Rodrigo Pola talk about the need for a connection to a larger power, using highly metaphorical language. Responsibility to one's own creation is essential, says Ixca, referring both creation in both a parental and a divine sense. If god is linked to creation, and creation contains evil, doesn't god then contain evil, asks Pola? Ixca tells him "if god is infinite good, Rodrigo, then he is also infinite evil; he is the perfect mirror of all that he created." Our destiny, he goes on, must fulfill itself in one of these two realities, he asserts.

Rodrigo, however, prefers his "faith of indifference." He refuses to accept or even understand Ixca's unspoken request that he could continue and complete his parents' tragic destiny by offering himself as the sort of "sacrifice". Ixca tells of a leper who leapt into the original fires of creation to sustain the flames, and was reborn as a star. Daily sacrifices are needed to sustain the sun's light, says Ixca, cryptically. He criticizes Pola for doing everything in half-measures, neither truly pursuing his ambitions of fame and love nor giving himself completely to a higher social cause.

Pola responds that his father didn't actually sacrifice himself nobly; rather, he seemed simply afraid of being left alone. Both his father and mother feared being left alone, and wanted to belong. He too, wants to belong; for him this means fame and success. Ixca

sees that Pola wants to be more like Robles, a man who wanted a 'safe quiet place in the center of a balanced and directed Mexican world". He stops trying to change Pola's ambitions and instead helps him to attain the more ordinary success that the writer wishes. He puts Pola in contact with movie producers who quickly provide him with mediocre and well-paying film contracts.

Part 2, Section 5, " Mexico in the Waters" Analysis

Significantly, Pola misses the chance to attend his mother's death or her funeral. This can be seen as a grave failure to connect with his own origins and history. They discuss both his mother and as always, his father. Thus the concern for origins, whether individual, national, or cosmic, resurfaces again. A certain sacred regard for origins is displayed in Ixca's highly metaphorical, philosophical speech to Pola.

Ixca and Pola discuss the question of human origins in two parallel dimensions: the creation of the world on the one hand, by a divine creator, and the creation of an individual life on the other, by a parent. Ixca focuses on whether or not this creator of life was good or not. This takes Rodrigo's personal question (whether his father was good to his mother) and places it on a larger level (we often ask if God can really be good, given the world as it is).

Ixca's efforts to convince Pola to change his life, and stop living for social appearance's sake, bring no results. He has been trying to convince the writer to find his own voice, and to carry on the spirit of the revolution in some meaningful way, so his father's death will not have been in vain. However, the poet cares only about his own individual failures at love and success. He is not ready to take on the role of representing and speaking for the authentic Mexican people. Nor is he ready to become the sacrifice that Ixca is seeking. He refuses to follow in his father's steps and give himself selflessly and without purpose to the people.

Ixca gives up on changing Rodrigo and decides to grant him the ordinary mediocre success that the poet seeks; he provides him with a career in b-movies. Again, Ixca shows himself to be more of a priest or shaman as the story goes on; he controls some aspects of people's destiny, appears to see into the hearts of people, manages to get them to tell him their deepest secrets, and has a keen feel for the suffering of the ordinary people.

After visiting Pola, Ixca grows more occult and shamanistic, seeking signs in the sky and experiencing first-hand the pains and fears of the people.

Part 2, Section 6, " The Eagle Being Animate"

Part 2, Section 6, " The Eagle Being Animate" Summary

Ixca goes to visit Robles, who is concluding another successful real estate deal. Robles will be dining that evening with Norma's friend, a young writer named MZ. Ixca tells Robles it is important to listen to the young, especially when one has no children. Robles meets Manuel that evening and they extensively debate Mexican culture and politics.

Manuel says Mexico must understand it's own history before it can move on, while Robles insists that nothing matters except making the nation sufficiently wealthy through capitalism. Manuel insists it is a mistake to follow the European and American models, and that Mexican leaders should satisfy the people's real wants, which cannot be reduced to merely having houses, cars, schools. Moving blindly towards capitalism when it is clearly not the ideal system for the Mexican people is misguided; Manuel can't accept that the revolution's main results had to be "the rise of a new privileged class, economic domination by the United States, and the paralyzing of all internal political life." Robles answers that they cannot understand each other on these things, but Manuel stresses the need to do so.

After the long meeting with Manuel, Robles visits his lover Hortensia Chacon, and reminisces about the battlefield of Celaya, regaining his strength.

Part 2, Section 6, " The Eagle Being Animate" Analysis

Later, in the novel it is revealed that Manuel Zamacona is in fact Robles's illegitimate son, so it is with a degree of knowing irony that Ixca tells Robles to listen to the young writer. Indeed, the words of the young man have a powerful impact on the older man by the end of the novel, and lead him to recover his own roots.

One can compare Pola's struggle to find his identity as a writer with Manuel Zamacona's relative success. Each is a writer and each has missed having any relationship with their fathers, due to some significant choice on the father's part. Yet Gervasio Pola chose to die for the revolution and for the laboring masses, while Robles chose to make a personal fortune by building up Mexico's economy.

There is some irony in the fact that the hero's son has had so little success, while the self-made millionaire's illegitimate offspring has managed to acquire an articulate and thoughtful worldview as well as moderate success as a writer. The son of the

businessman seems more able to cope with the difficult problem of defining Mexican identity than the son of the revolutionary martyr.

In a novel that places so much importance on legacy and origins, one should not take this symbolism too lightly; however, it is difficult to decipher. Is the author insinuating that the great sacrifices made by the revolutionary fighters were unrealistic in that they did not reconcile themselves with the new social order? Or is he claiming something quite different, that merely sacrificing oneself in the name of an idea is justified in the inspiration it provides to others? (One of the ideas entertained in the novel is that Mexico's heroes are also failures, that is, the cause they chose to die for perhaps is out of their reach, or does not come about).

Part 2, Section 7, " Pimpenela de Ovando"

Part 2, Section 7, " Pimpenela de Ovando" Summary

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the city, Pimpenela meets Ixca in a bar, but is quickly so offended by his rude manners that she leaves him and returns to her luxurious protective apartment full of elegant old furniture. She reflects on her youth, and how she always remained unmarried. Her family prevented her from pursuing her only love interest, a young lawyer named Roberto Regules, whom they considered too common. He ended up marrying his secretary Silvia, to Pimpenela's disappointment.

Part 2, Section 7, " Pimpenela de Ovando" Analysis

Pimpelina has remained an unmarried virgin for her whole life, in spite of being a desirable heiress. She simply cannot find anyone in the new world order who can meet her criteria of having money while also being sufficiently cultured background (she was forbidden to marry Roberto Regules as a young girl as he was from a lower social strata).

Part 2, Section 8, "Though I May Prick My Finger"

Part 2, Section 8, "Though I May Prick My Finger" Summary

Ixca dines with the Robles, and observes how Norma assists her husband in the dinner conversation, providing cultural tidbits to fill in his silences. Robles leaves them alone so he can go work, and their conversation becomes very intimate. Ixca asks Norma if she has gotten what she wanted from the marriage, in exchange for the social polish she gave to him. Serving him drinks, Norma admits she is a snob and takes pride in being the "finest that Mexico has to offer." Ixca tells her how much her social expertise has contributed to her husband's success, and begins to let himself be attracted to her. He throws his wine glass on the floor, then hers, and proceeds to seduce her. She realizes that he is unlike any man she's ever known, that she cannot dominate him or find in him any signs of the humility or gratitude that men usually show her.

She asks him to tell her "I love you" but knows he never will. He tells her that her husband has one thing she does not, which is "power and the knowledge how to use it." He knows she has never been happy with her husband physically, and has feared carrying a child as ugly as he.

Later on a tropical beach, Norma is with Ixca and reflecting that Ixca wants to "destroy" her. He demands everything and offers nothing, unlike the other men in her life. She'd like to break free from him but cannot.

Meanwhile, high society parties take place on the beach nearby. At the same time, Rodrigo Pola puts together his first script with the movie producers, who love his style of thinking and rush to carry out his hastily conceived, second-rate ideas.

At the beach, Ixca takes Norma out in a sailboat and gets them both caught in a fast-rising storm. His refusal to take down the sail causes the boat to capsize, and when Norma lunges for the life preserver, he repeatedly yanks it away from her. Near drowning, she fights him for it, and pushes his head underwater while she wrests it back and saves herself.

After the storm, she finds herself alone on the shore, alive and very much changed, psychologically. She runs to her house, dresses quickly and jumps into the convertible with a purse full of money. She goes to a random bar, daringly takes control of the dance floor. Confidently she orders a row of daiquiris, and then demands to be let aboard a gambling boat, singing and throwing money at anyone in her way.

Part 2, Section 8, "Though I May Prick My Finger" Analysis

Ixca's seduction of Norma remains ambiguously motivated; while he is attracted to her, he does not feel any love for her. Undoubtedly he has selected Norma to play the role of 'sacrifice' demanded by the occult figure Teodula. Norma has repeatedly been compared in the novel to "the best me has to offer." She aspired early on not to "just have the gold and the elegance, but ... myself to be gold and elegance!" Since ancient times, sacrifices have always been composed of a people's most valuable possessions, whether it be precious golden objects or living beings. Norma incarnates both of these.

Ixca's seduction transforms her. He is the first not to immediately fall in love with her; this permits her for the first time to be the lover, and not the beloved, so she truly desires a man for the first time. Yet when she asked him to love her, he responds by not only refusing but even tries to drown her! Instead of being hurt by this, Norma discovers a powerful will to fight and preserve herself from anyone who might harm her, even the man she loves. This strange experience sets her free and lets her be completely herself, unimpeded by any internal fears or doubts.

Part 2, Section 9, "Parting Of The Waters"

Part 2, Section 9, "Parting Of The Waters" Summary

Roberto Regules, Robles' traitorous lawyer, meets with his partners on the golf course. Based on a tip from Pimpenela, he has information to severely damage Federico Robles. He realizes that he did the right thing long ago, by marrying Silvia and not Pimpenela de Ovando, for there are no more different social classes anymore; there is only money. After a few phone calls and memos to investors, bankers, federal authorities and the Justice Department, he has orchestrated the downfall of Robles entire financial empire.

Ixca goes to his mother Teodula, and reports that their world is "dead indeed", since his last effort to give her sacrifice has failed. His mother reassures him that the earth has its own rhythms and that eventually "that woman" (Norma) will be swallowed by it. "Our gods walk abroad, invisible but alive" she insists, despite his skepticism. Pola escaped also, but there will be a sacrifice soon and she will look upon them in the last moments, to offer her jewels and to let them know they have been witnessed.

Hortensia tells her story, a long abusive marriage and escape from it. Robles has always been kind to her. Speaking in vaguely symbolic metaphors, she hopes that she will somehow be, in her dark blindness, a means for him to save himself. "What is it that I give him...is it darkness, the darkness where Federico Robles can find his light?"

Norma, made bold and self-certain by her brush with death, confronts her rivals and old antagonistic friendships. She stops hiding her lowly origins, freely admitting the "vulgar old woman" she used to pass off, as a servant was really her mother. She tells Pimpenela that aunt Lorenza de Ovando family is "just as much her servant" as her bedroom maid. Instead of hiding that her family used to work for the de Ovandos, she now tells them proudly that they are now her employees, and that what was on bottom is now on top. Pimpenela realizes that she will never again be able to call Norma and her husband common jungle savages as she has done all her life, and the her aristocratic reign is truly over.

Not knowing how else to ask for her favors, now that the ugly truth has to be faced, Pimpenela simply pleads with Norma for mercy.

To Rodrigo Pola, Norma finally takes pity on him and offers him a job with Federico. Socializing with him, however, no longer interests her, she tells him. He repeats the romantic, rather banal story of their first days of love, and she merely laughs at it. She never loved him, she tells, him but she could have if only he'd have tried to master her. Instead, he wanted to please himself with her and then skulk off alone. She started to want money but only because she was never offered anything else, she insists. Again

she offers him a job and a ride, and he thinks only of how much he'd loved her and only her. At least he has the satisfaction of driving away in his own car, he thinks. At that moment a newspaper boy announces the headlines, of a major new bankruptcy.

Robles in his office swears angrily that he will not be broken and that he will rebuild everything. Ixca mysteriously appears in order to observe his reaction. They arrange to meet in a nearby bar and on the way there Ixca runs into his friend Manuel, who he asks to join them. Manuel wonders if Robles character itself will change due to his fall.

Robles enters and not even the waiter gets out of his way; he is already a nobody. When they ask him is hardest to give up, he says he regrets giving up his power, not his money. He feels responsible for all the progress Mexico has made since the revolution, with his efficiency and willingness to do the dirty work, and sacrifice their dignity to build for Mexico's future.

Ixca tells his it is easy enough to let go everything when you have had it all, but to "give up everything without having anything" is far more difficult. They debate whether a god who died like a thief (that is, Jesus) would be as impressive as a thief who died like a god. Manuel claims that Jesus permitted every future thief to die like a god, that is, to be saved eternally. The anonymous, sacrificing ones also are the first to be saved. The only ones who cannot be saved are those who never die, but are always resurrected, like Lazarus in the bible.

Knowing he will always be saved, being trapped in life, as it were, Lazarus has nothing to win or lose, nothing to renounce and no way to be saved. Renouncing all one's worldly possession allows you to "tear away the skin of false individuality" and be covered in the "tears and naked blood of your fellow Mexicans", says Manuel. Without a genuine tie to a loved one, an individual cannot really admit that others are just as alive as oneself; this is the satanic, says Manuel.

While his companions speak, Robles drifts in his mind to a memory that has surfaced, that of his dealings with labor activist Feliciano Sanchez. As a young lawyer, Robles had been chosen to speak out against Sanchez, a powerful and charismatic labor rights activist. Robles in fact recommended the assassination of Sanchez, to quell the growing labor unrest that was starting to discouraged foreign investment. For his services, Robles received the first plots of land that would be the seeds of his future fortune.

Part 2, Section 9, "Parting Of The Waters" Analysis

Ixca's effort to kill Norma symbolizes his real aim: to eliminate the most prominent member of the new, wealthy westernized modern Mexico. One might read the struggle between Ixca and Norma as a battle between Mexico's old gods (Ixca and his mother) and the new gods (the wealthy jet set).

Norma, after having rescued herself, is stronger than ever. Indeed she is even able to finally tell the aristocrats, whose approval she has always sought, that they on the bottom now, her mere servants.. This marks the end of the era: the old feudal families

will have no more prestige from now on. Yet her supreme confidence is short-lived since it is based on a financial security that is on the point of crumbling away forever. Her husband and she are soon tested by the loss of everything they own. He will pass this test, while she will go up, literally, in flames. Whether her death changes anything, or satisfies the old gods, remains to be seen.

Initially Robles laments the loss of his power, and immediately plans to rebuild his empire. His memory of how he got his first large real estate deal reveals that he made extremely unethical choices to achieve his wealth, in spite of all his talk of helping the people he has worked against them systematically.

The discussion with his friends Ixca and Manuel Zamacona persuades Robles that the loss of his fortune is somehow his salvation in disguise. Their words lead him to his Indian roots and his mysterious blind Indian girlfriend, Hortensia. His salvation will lie in building real connections to other people, not in dominating them; after this happens he will recover his true face and self.

Part 2, Section 10, "The Skull of Independence"

Part 2, Section 10, "The Skull of Independence" Summary

That evening, an Independence Day celebration fills the city. Manuel drives to Acapulco for a holiday, but is shot dead randomly when he stops to ask strangers for a couple liters of gas. Rosa Morales's son Jorge dies and is placed in a small white coffin.

Robles ponders the times in his life he has failed his fellow men, by not aiding men like again of Froilan Reyero and Feliciano Sanchez. He speaks with Norma, whose only concern is of their impending poverty. He promises to rebuild his fortune and asks for her jewelry, but she refuses to give it to him. She screams at him, asking if she should become a dance-hall girl or seamstress. Torn between wanting to console her and to ignore her hysteria, he demands the jewelry and her loyalty. Norma claims to be married to her house and property, not to him. She threatens to leave him with the jewels and never return, and accuses him of using her just to help him belong to the right set of people in spite of his ethnicity. In a fit of rebellion against him, she mocks his lovemaking and claims she felt only disgust, as if he was a lizard, and not a man at all.

His fury and her laughter are the last sounds as he storms from the house. A candle falls over as he leaves and the house catches fire.

Rodrigo Pola discusses his new film with his producers and meets with great success. He is then presented to the elite social circle as a literary genius. The group that had previously shunned him now welcomes him. Natasha warns him that without money, and conformity to the system, nothing will go his way. Pleased with his reception, Rodrigo Pola grows bold enough to present himself to Pimpenela, passing himself off as one of those who suffered from the revolution's changes but who held on all the tighter to "real values". They are instantly seen as a couple, for now Rodrigo Pola has money and she can give him connections he needs.

Meanwhile, Gabriel and his friends celebrate in a local bar, drinking and listening to mariachi music. He is suddenly murdered by the same men that pursued him earlier. Across the city, Rosa Morales tells her neighbor Teodula that she can't go to work at Norma's because her child has died.

Teodula notes that "we are close now" and takes a bus to Norma's house, wearing all her gold jewelry. She arrives to find the Robles mansion going up in flames, and fights her way through the firemen to approach the house door. Staring into the burning door, she thanks her son aloud and throws her gold jewelry inside the smoke-filled home. She leaves, pleased that her hidden gods have returned to receive the sacrifice and gifts, at last.

Inside, Norma coughs and gropes for the key that would let her out of her burning home. Finding none, she is devoured by the fire.

Meanwhile, Ixca attends the funeral of Rosa Morales child, and prays an ancient prayer that he does "not know how to voice." His mother Teodula arrives and announces that the sacrifice has been completed and that they can all return to being what they really are, and stop pretending. Ixca says nothing about Norma, seems to not want to understand her. They pass the night with Rosa.

Part 2, Section 10, "The Skull of Independence" Analysis

Norma, unlike Robles, does not have the courage or resources to build a new life after the financial disaster. She is offended at the idea of working for a living. Instead, she becomes a true human sacrifice, as the house catches fire the night Robles leaves her locked in her room with her precious jewelry

As Norma's death approaches, more and more disasters happen to the poor of Mexico: Gabriel is murdered, Rosa's child dies, Rodrigo sells out to the cheap movie producers. It is as if the suffering of the people demands that a sacrifice be made to the old gods.

Teodula, who symbolizes the mysterious incarnation of an old Aztec god, has been waiting for just such a sacrifice. Intuiting the death of Norma, she shows up to add her own precious jewels to the fire. Throwing her precious jewelry into the flames is a form of sacrificing 'the best' she has to offer, just as the immolation of Norma is the end of 'the best' of Mexico's jet-setting golden girl. The struggle of the old order (Ixca and his mother, with their rituals and respect for history) has finally settled its grudge against the new order (Norma, Robles, and their western capitalist habits).

Part 2, Section 11, " Mercedes Zamacona"

Part 2, Section 11, " Mercedes Zamacona" Summary

The woman who was Robles's first love as a young teenager tells her story to Ixca. As a young girl, she'd been raised as a strict catholic, all the more so as her uncle is a priest. A beautiful young girl, she notices that whenever she walks in the fields of her hacienda, she draws all the desiring glances of the older men. Without understanding anything of what it means, she guiltily prays and repents of "that black staring." Daily she grows more aware of her sexuality and beauty, sure that something will soon happen to her. Soon her uncle brings home another young novitiate studying for the priesthood, Federico Robles. Young Robles looks at her constantly, even through cracks in the walls. For weeks this game of eye contact is played, until finally they meet in a dark sacristy below the church.

She gives herself to him, desiring that each will strengthen the other through the act. Unfortunately, they are immediately discovered and punished; Robles is sent away and she is thrown into disgrace and even sent out of the church. She remains proud, 'shining in her dishonor" and eager to have the child. No one helps her or attends her when she gives birth, and when she faints from exhaustion the baby is secretly taken away from her. After a search resulting in his recovery, she moves to Mexico city and raises the child, Manuel Zamacona, who will later be present in Federico's life as a challenging voice of dissent, and who brings him to a realization of how he should really use his powers.

While wandering around the city, Robles happens upon Gabriel's funeral. He goes from there to Hortensia, which proves to be the occasion for the conception of their first child.

Part 2, Section 11, " Mercedes Zamacona" Analysis

This section completes the story of how Federico Robles long ago abandoned one of his first loves, Mercedes, without even knowing that she bore him a son. Manuel Zamacona. Manuel later showed up in Federico's life as a challenging, dissenting voice that Robles had to reckon with. Unwittingly, Manuel brings his own father to a new realization of how he should really use power.

In his visit to Hortensia, there is foreshadowing about the next phase of Robles's life, in which he will abandon his empire-building ambitions and retire to the country with his new family and his first son. It is as if he has exchanged an empire and a barren marriage for an authentic, fruitful union with Hortensia. He is referred to as a "fallen eagle" in this section, but in reality he has found his authentic place and happiness.

Part 3, Section 1, " Betina Regules"

Part 3, Section 1, " Betina Regules" Summary

A pair of new characters enters the scene, as the narrative passes to the next generation. A promising young lawyer, Jamie Ceballos, attracts the attention of one Betina Regules, daughter of the famous businessman Roberto Regules (the same Regules who managed to bring down the Robles empire). Though Jaimie is a provincial and not of high social background, his brilliance and bright future draw him the interest of Betina, Mexico City's "golden girl." Jamie resembles Betina's father Roberto in many respects, as he is from the same region and background. They fall passionately in love in a romance reminiscent of that of Norma and Robles; he has the financial and legal wizardry while she provides the social connections.

Only on Sundays does Betina reveal her arrogant, superior character, disdaining the locals, putting on airs and name-dropping. Jaime is uncomfortable but understands he must learn such sophistication if he is to enter the business and social world of Mexico City. He finishes his dissertation (slightly under par due to his wandering attention) and then moves to be with her. As soon as he arrives, she starts remolding him to fit the norms of the capital, changing his dress and style. He is completely out of place in the social whirl at Bobo's, repeating himself stiffly and following Betina around helplessly. The group, in turn, passes judgment; "We've observed your future. That's he, isn't it?" Jamie is declared, " a true puff of nothing." Betina ends up in tears. Later she reconciles herself to her choice, and informs Jaime that her father has agreed to give them a new house and Jamie a job in his firm.

Part 3, Section 1, " Betina Regules" Analysis

History repeats itself as the next generation produces a couple that closely resembles the unhappy Robles couple. The chronic confrontation between European and Mexican ways, between city and country, ego and sacrifice, individuality and collectivity, will continue as long as new generations come onto the scene.

Part 3, Section 2, "Rodrigo Pola"

Part 3, Section 2, "Rodrigo Pola" Summary

Meanwhile, Rodrigo Pola is lecturing on the importance of simple, accessible films for the public, to whom he owes his success, even his "being". Such films should be "easy to be at ease with, yet with class". Yet all he really does is refurbish old classics like Romeo and Juliet with new twists, dressing them up in Mexican clothes and settings.

In the final scene, Rodrigo Pola is driving home from the party in his Jaguar when he stops at a light and happens upon Ixca, whom he hasn't seen in three years. Ixca has greatly changed; his face has 'collapsed' and he seems bitter, even drunk. Rodrigo Pola tells Ixca about his new success, and how he when he left his old apartment behind he did not take a single thing with him, not even his writings. A new life cancels out the old, says Ixca, but Rodrigo Pola is tired of the man's ideas, prescriptions, and empty mysteries. "You just park yourself on the side and watch the parade go by." he accuses Ixca of hiding his mother's death from him. Pola says that he is fed up with Ixca's advice.

They argue about Norma, and Rodrigo's jealousy erupts. For Ixca, Norma was a mere curiosity, but Pola claims to have loved her insanely. For he had to think of Norma each time he slept with, spoke to, or touched any other woman. "You never had to make dozens of bodies and faces without names take the place of Norma, you bastard," he cries to Ixca.

Ixca asks about Rodrigo's marriage to Pimpenela. She gives him names, social relations, class, and her virginity, says Rodrigo. In turn, he supplies her with money, housing, and security, but these things are not "his own". Pimpenela doesn't know who his is, and never really will, he claims. Rodrigo admits that still feels he's wasted his life and talents, since he failed to write great poetry, love Norma, or take away his mother's poverty.

Robles felt guilty about his wife's death, Ixca reports, but soon remarried and started cotton farming with his new wife (Hortensia) and son.

When Rodrigo Pola asks Ixca about his own life, the latter grows very agitated, and puts his foot on the accelerator so that the car speeds up out of Rodrigo's control. He can't even remember his own face anymore, he cries maniacally, or remember anything about the "terrible game...of forgotten rites and signs and dead words". He can't satisfy his 'mother' Teodula even after Norma's sacrificial death. After a bout of uncanny laughter, he lets off the accelerator. The car stops and he exits, melting into a fog.

Ixca becomes one with the city. His "stone-eagle, air-serpent" eyes take it all in: its voices, sounds, rooftops, skyscraper and domes, and all those who dwell in it. He speaks at length, in a fragmented, incantational style, about Mexico's ancient rites and

rituals, about sacrifices and anonymity, about the differences between those having everything and those having nothing. Without resolution or prescription, his final monologue evokes the tensions inherent in modern Mexico confronted with her mythic past, and recalls the days when the city was known as the place "where the air is clear".

Part 3, Section 2, "Rodrigo Pola" Analysis

Pola has failed to find a way to articulate the true character of either himself or his countrymen; he has sold out by providing clichys and western formulas that can be marketed as Mexican culture. He is not grateful for his new success, but continues to wish that he'd Ixca is disappointed and disgusted with his former protygy.

Pola seems trapped in making every woman substitute for Norma. He keeps putting her face on all his lovers; he can't be happy unless he possesses the woman who incarnates Mexico's ideal westernized face. His inability to find his own voice, his own identity, left him constantly unable to find his way in life; by pursuing one set of prescribed and conventional ideals (Norma, success, prestige) he lost the chance to find out who he might have been, and what he might have written.

Ironically, Ixca has been advocating just the opposite, that one finds one's real identity one must one lose one's face, one's mask, and try to become part of, and empathize with the group of real, nameless many that composes the real blood and soul of the nation.

Ixca leads an increasingly difficult and frustrating existence: although he appears to be a sort of shamanistic figure acting to restore harmony in Mexico's national spirit, he seems unable to effect any real change. Teodula, the personage who goads him on, is never satisfied. He has been relegated to the least important, most impoverished corners of the city, and nothing has changed or improved.

Robles has decided not to return to the business world after all, but to follow his heart and marry his Indian lover, Hortensia. He returns in the end to his roots, his family and farm life. Is this to say that his foray into the world of business affairs was somehow a wrong path? In all probability the solution is probably not so simple, for it is true that Robles provided the necessary capital and helped construct the jobs and infrastructure to maintain a stable political order.

Perhaps Robles simply needed to complete his life's journey by returning home to his roots, once his country no longer needed him as a builder of financial empire. Once he gave up his prominent place in society, of which he was so proud, he realized a very different form of happiness could be found in the arms of a simple peasant woman, on a farm. He no longer has to pretend to love Norma, who he fails to have real affection for

It is as if he is giving up a false element in his life, once he discovers he is just as much one of the people as anyone else. Instead of looking down on the human flea circus from above, he is now participating, communicating, and belonging to the Mexican people.

The novel begins and ends with a monologue by Ixca. His role as a divine protector of the city, or as an ancient god or shaman, has become more difficult for him to play by the end of the novel, as Mexico blindly rushes into modernizing for the future without looking back to her sacred origins.

Characters

Beto

Beto is a happy-go-lucky cabdriver and Gabriel's friend with a shady past: he spent some time in prison for "knocking off" someone.

Pierre Caseaux

The aging seducer of the upper class, Pierre (the fashionable translation of "Pedro") is a wealthy Epicurean fully aware of the power of his money and status. He frequently "updates" his relationships with always-younger, ambitious beauties.

Hortensia Chacon

Hortensia is another representative of the low social class; an illegitimate daughter of an Indian servant, the girl grows up with poverty and silence in the de Ovando household. Hortensia marries a clerk who gives in to alcoholism, prostitutes, and severe abuse of his silent wife due to his growing discontent with his job and social status. Hortensia finds a job as a typist and leaves him, taking the children along, but the husband blinds her in rage. Her employer Federico Robles visits her at the hospital; the two fall in love. Hortensia is similar to Ixca in her spiritual, wordless connection to the ancient past; her love redeems Federico.

Ixca Cienfuegos

The novel opens and ends with Ixca's narration, a poetic and poignant description of Mexico City's decadence. As a character, Ixca is not very clearly defined; however, he connects the narratives of the other main characters as he visits them and inquires about their life stories. Confident, handsome, mysterious, tall, dark, with black eyes and Indian features, Ixca comes from the spiritually rich background of the ancestral Mexico, embodied in the mystical character of his mother Teodula. His profession and social position is undefined: the jet set believes he is "the brain behind a great banker" as well as a "gigolo and a marijuana addict," but nobody really knows what he does.

Ixca reveals Mexico's social corruption, alienation, and misery in each class, as he asks various characters about their memories. His main agenda, however, is to find a blood sacrifice among the new Mexicans to appease the ancient Indian gods: Ixca tries to push his friend Rodrigo into committing suicide, throws his mistress Norma into the stormy sea, and brings about the political downfall of Norma's husband Federico Robles, one of the country's wealthiest and most powerful men. Ixca pursues the authentic, pre-Hispanic Mexico underneath the layer of the new culture; after Norma's

death, he obeys his mother and goes to live in poverty with her Indian widow neighbor; but after three years, he leaves and almost gets Rodrigo into a car crash.

Gabriel

Gabriel is a young man from the city's social underbelly, who illegally works in California during the year to support his family. He is the embodiment of ambition without a venue to succeed, searching for an escape from his circumstances through violence and various ways to make himself feel alive and free. He is killed by a street gang.

Charlotte Garcia

A self-proclaimed international society whore, Charlotte is a beautiful woman who spends her life in affairs with members of the world's jet set.

Gladys Garcia

Gladys is an aging Indian prostitute who appears at the beginning and the end of the novel, symbolizing the unchanging social hopelessness of the lowest class. She has one regular customer and the memory of another, the cabdriver Beto, with whom she had a personal relationship. After a night of work, Gladys retreats to church for spiritual recovery. She envies the *nouveau riches*.

Bobo Gutierrez

The host of the city's wildest jet-set parties, Bobo is a snobbish, flamboyant entertainer who gathers the *crmeè de la crmeè* at his fashionable house and always greets his guests□aristocrats, intellectuals, and "queers"□with the same exclamations.

Librado Ibarra

Librado was a law student and Robles's colleague who became the union attorney in his dream to reinvent Mexico after the revolution□but ended up in prison instead. Once released, Librado becomes an associate at Robles's factory where he works to keep afloat financially, but gets his foot caught in a machine and the company refuses to give him compensation. Librado knows a lot about Robles's criminal business schemes and con- fides in Ixca.

Junior

A representative example of the post-revolutionary generation, Junior is the son of the *nouveau riche*: a youth who has never earned a penny, but gets his wealth from his conservative father.

Norma Larragoiti de Robles

Norma is an ambitious, extremely beautiful woman in pursuit of wealth and status, who develops impeccable taste and personality to match her jet-set goals; she marries Federico Robles and trades her elegance and high-class skills for his money.

Norma's father, a small businessman, committed suicide when his business collapsed due to the post-revolutionary changes in the national economy. The mother sent Norma to live with her aunt and uncle in Mexico City, where the girl develops high social aspirations. A ruthless social climber, Norma tells her new friends that she also comes from an aristocratic family and throws away the pictures of her family, ashamed of their poverty and low class. She manages to handle occasional pangs of conscience, but the love affair with Ixca and the close encounter with death make her reexamine her life: she abandons the social roleplay with her aristocratic friends and defies Federico. Norma dies in the fire that marks her husband's social downfall.

Teodula Moctezuma

The embodiment of ancient mysticism, Teodula is a character who represents the eternal, mythological world under the rule of blood-thirsty Aztec gods, the spiritual and authentic Mexico before the Spanish conquests. She practices the old traditions, always wears her wedding jewelry, calmly awaits death because she believes in rebirth as the natural cycle of life, and performs death rituals on the skeletons of her husband and children that she keeps buried in her cellar. Ixca relies on her teachings and vows to find a human sacrifice for her, so that the ancient gods may be satisfied. After Norma's death, Teodula makes Ixca renounce the modern world and live with Rosa, her widow neighbor.

Rosa Morales

Rosa becomes a widow when her husband, cabdriver Juan Morales, dies in a car crash. They were returning from a lavish family dinner, a celebration of Juan's win of 800 pesos in a horse race; he plans to turn his life around, get a daytime shift, and spend more time with his family. After the tragedy, Rosa has to support the family and finds a job as a maid in Norma's household. Two of Rosa's children die shortly after.

Natasha

An aging beauty queen, St. Petersburg singer, and "the monarch of Mexico City's international set," Natasha is an occasional advisor to the incoming young women; she instructs them on using their sexuality and elegance to create a place for themselves at the top.

Dona Lorenza Ortiz de Ovando

Pimpinela's old aunt, Dona Lorenza, a member of the old aristocracy that sought exile in the United States and Europe during the turmoil of the revolution, stands as the epitome of the once-ruling decadent class now refusing to accept the changes. She continues to live by the same impossible standards, willing to die rather than join the lower social classes and work for a living. Dona Lorenza returns to Mexico impoverished with her grandson, a spineless, weak, and idiotic man in his twenties reared to live in the past with his grandmother. She is eternally bitter about the opportunistic class that succeeded her at the social peak.

Pichi

Pichi is a beautiful, shallow young woman, an example of "female meat on the market" trying to make it into the highest social class with her looks, meager education, and relationships with upperclass men.

Gervasio Pola

Gervasio is Rodrigo's father but they have never met. At the time of his wife's pregnancy, Gervasio was in the Belen war prison; he escaped with three other prisoners. In their search for a Zapata camp they could join, the fugitives separated; Gervasio was caught first and told his captors where to find his friends, because he didn't want to die alone.

Rodrigo Pola

Rodrigo is an unsuccessful, self-conscious poet who desperately hangs onto the high-class lifestyle. After his father's death in the revolution, Rodrigo grows up in poverty under the tentative eye of his controlling, clinging mother. During his school days, he befriends Roberto Regales who shows him the power of lies and manipulation in achieving one's goals. Shaken by the experience, Rodrigo turns to the idealistic world of poetry and finds a temporary niche among young existentialist poets at the university. However, after the publication of his first book of verses, he is expelled from the group. In the meantime, Rodrigo leaves home after a conflict with his mother, and falls in love

with the young Norma, who dates him for a while but rejects him for someone with more money and better prospects.

Rodrigo's self-pity and identity crisis are a reflection of his struggle between conformity and rebellion: he must choose between mastering the modern success of making money, or sticking to his old-fashioned principles and staying poor. Finally, he turns his back on existential ideals and starts to write movie scripts that achieve great commercial success. He marries an impoverished aristocrat, Pimpinela de Ovando, trading his money for her class, and fully joins the jet set.

Prince Vampa

Another cardboard figure in the makeup of the Mexican high class, Prince Vampa gains his prestigious position with lies and the right attitude: he is actually a cook. His success in the group testifies to the new jet set's need to "strengthen" its position with blue blood.

Betina Regules

Betina is the next generation of the Mexican top society; the rich and beautiful daughter of the attorney Regules, she falls in love with a poor poet and law student, Jaime. However, when she brings him to one of Bobo's parties, the other women advise the young girl that he is too provincial for her status and money. Betina's character shows that society doesn't change.

Roberto Regules

Roberto, a powerful lawyer, a political shark, and a social climber, manipulates everybody around him in order to maintain and improve his own social status. As a schoolboy, he destroys a teacher with false accusations; as an adult, he facilitates Robles's collapse and arranges to profit from it. Roberto marries his secretary Sylvia and gives her the prestige of upper-class living, but their marriage is a loveless one.

Federico Robles

An example of rags-to-riches success, Federico, a son of Indian peasants who worked on the land of Don Ignacio de Ovando, has vivid memories of the unbearable living conditions of the low class, the talk of strikes that eventually inspired the revolution, and the hardships and abuse his family had to endure. Young Federico was sent to live and study with the local priest, but was thrown out when the priest caught him sleeping with his niece, Mercedes Zamacona. He ends up joining one of the generals in the revolution and fighting his way across Mexico for years, witnessing countless atrocities of war, and learning about power. Federico becomes a war hero at the battle at Celaya.

In the country ripe for changes after the revolution, Federico enters the competitive field of bourgeois development. He studies law, becomes a provincial attorney, commits ruthless crimes for the post-revolution government, and manages to create great wealth and power through business machinations in a lawless economy, becoming a modern tycoon over night. Because he lacks class, he marries Norma to bring elegance and appropriate social status to his public life; but he finds love with his blind Indian mistress.

Sentimental and cruel at the same time, Federico believes in the self he had created through the revolution and rejects his Indian origins; but when his world crumbles, his identity takes a hard blow in a recognition of corruption. He withdraws from city life and capitalism, marries his mistress, and becomes a cotton farmer in northern Mexico.

Manuel Zamacona

A modern poet and brooding intellectual accepted into the high-class circles, Manuel is Federico Robles's illegitimate son; his writings and conversations exemplify the wave of intellectual identity crisis in the country plagued by social decay. Manuel preaches reverence before life and reconstruction of the Mexican culture; he questions the historical, cultural, and spiritual makeup of Europe, Mexico, and the United States, looking at the various layers of influence and mistakes made along the way. In a talk with Robles, Manuel questions the economic reforms made by entrepreneurs after the revolution, and the foreign models used to restructure the country ending up in thorough corruption. Manuel dies a senseless death at a bar, during the drunken celebration of Independence Day.

Rosenda Zubaran de Pola

Gervasio's wife and Rodrigo's mother, Rosenda is another person profoundly changed by the revolution: a spoiled and naive girl raised on milk candy, Rosenda marries the young colonel Gervasio and spends a year in a household with increasing social standing and wealth, as her husband prospers under President Madero. However, she becomes a widow within a year after the wedding and all the money disappears in the revolution. Pregnant, rejected by her family for losing everything because she married a soldier, Rosenda starts a new life with her son: she earns enough to sustain them and raises Rodrigo as a replacement for the husband who abandoned her. As the son grows, she becomes more depressed with her loss of youth and vitality, and jealous of his other contacts with the world. Upon finding Rodrigo's poetry, Rosenda tears it up and tells him that nobody can choose his or her own way of life, because the world is stronger than the individual. She dies wanting to see her estranged son once again.

Pimpinela de Ovando

One of the socially valuable remnants of Mexican aristocracy, Pimpinela brings blue-blood prestige to the *nouveau riches* (newly rich people) of the new Mexico. While the

revolution was gaining momentum, Pimpinela's father made sufficient changes, selling haciendas and buying real estate, to ensure a comfortable life for his family; however, the aristocratic lifestyle is forever changed after the revolution. Pimpinela's mother tries to protect the girl from the "mixing" at the top of the social ladder and takes her to Europe.

Upon her return to Mexico, Pimpinela longs to use her status for social connections; she offers the class granted by her company in exchange for financial and business favors, because the family funds are running low. She arranges a dinner to introduce her aged aunt and Norma, so that Norma's husband will give de Ovando's cousin a job at the bank. Eventually, Pimpinela marries Rodrigo, who solves all of her financial problems.

Themes

Culture Clash

One of the most powerful themes of *Where the Air Is Clear* is the sharp division between the social strata of 1950s Mexico City, along the fault lines of income and class, as well as race□with the indigenous Indians placed in the lowest rank, like the prostitute Gladys. Fuentes illustrates the conflict between the old and the new reigning members of the Mexican elite in several scenes, such as the dinner at the impoverished de Ovando household where the social climber Norma Robles meets the bitter aristocratic matriarch Lorenza de Ovando. The event is set up by Lorenza's cousin Pimpinela, an ambitious beauty struggling to retain her family's status and save them from starvation. Pimpinela is an example of the fully adapted social member, who willingly trades "class for cash" both in her marriage and at the salon parties. She asks the opportunist wife Norma Robles to use her husband's influence and get her company shares; as soon as she mentions dinner at her aunt's, Norma cannot "keep her eyes from shining." In turn, Pimpinela tells Lorenza that "an upstart, obnoxious, vulgar" married to "a savage from God knows what jungle" is coming to dinner, and it is necessary for the aunt to welcome her so that her grandson can get a job at the bank.

The old aristocrat's determination to show the *nouveau riche* her place fails, as "Norma, radiant, wrapped in mink and playing carelessly with her pearls, visibly affirmed the sense of security in this new world, of freedom and belonging, which had used to be [de Ovandos'] own feeling." After the dinner, Lorenza and Norma return to their social circles, competing to point out the flaws of the other: one criticizes the lack of grace and presumptuous airs of the "daughter of some sheepherder" who dared to take her place at the top of the hierarchy, and the other ridicules the aristocrat's refusal to accept well-deserved defeat. In the meantime, both fragments of the upper class live in denial: Lorenza awaits another revolution to restore her class because her grandson, Benjamin, has no skill beyond his aristocratic European grooming; while Norma tells her fashionable friends that her mother is actually an old servant, and her husband Federico hides his Indian heritage under expensive suits and white facial powder.

Fuentes also shows the sharp contrast between the peak and the bottom of Mexico City's social food chain in one of the book's first chapters, in which the narrative cuts back and forth from the lavish parties of the *nouveau riches* to the filthy slums inhabited by the poor. The lonely morning of the aging prostitute Gladys, after a night of work in a smoky nightclub, stands in stark opposition to the after-party morning of the jet set: some of its members are sleeping, and others preparing for another day of successful transactions (Norma is tanning and pampering herself, and Pimpinela is on the way to collect her shares at the bank). Every once in a while, the narrative jumps from the memories of its wealthy characters to descriptions of the usually nameless members of the poor or working classes, whose everyday activities appear as incredulously different and more burdensome than those of the recently arisen bourgeoisie.

The Supernatural

Part of the elusive identity of Fuentes's 1950s Mexico lies in the suppressed ancient past and the country's pre-Hispanic Indian heritage. The characters of Ixca Cienfuegos and his mother Teodula Moctezuma embody this past, its religion and spirituality, and bring a mysterious and supernatural element into the potpourri of the modern Mexican selfhood. Teodula at first appears to be praying to the Catholic Virgin Mary, but her words of worship, offering of her heart, and the skirt made of serpents show that her goddess is actually Coatlicue□the Aztec earth deity, who daily gives birth to the sun in the morning and swallows it in death in the evening. In Aztec representation, Coatlicue wears a necklace of human skulls and hands; she is a womb and a tomb at once, giving birth to death. Her son, the god of war, kills all of her other children as soon as he is born. Likewise, Teodula has lost all of her children, except Ixca□whom she sends out to find her a blood sacrifice that would redeem the suffering of her people. Deeply engaged in a death cult, Teodula performs rituals over the skeletons of her husband and children. She also calmly speaks of her own death and accepts it as a part the natural life cycle.

Ixca's monologues, at the beginning and the end of the novel, are full of invocations of ancient spirits as the only true and authentic powers over his land. His personality is mystical and undefined throughout the novel: there are speculations about his life and social position, but nobody knows for sure who he is or what he does. A symbolic embodiment of an ancient god of war, Ixca attempts to perform his duty on several occasions: for example, he tries to persuade Rodrigo to kill himself, and pushes Norma overboard into tempestuous waves. When Norma dies in a house fire witnessed by Teodula, the old woman tells her son that the sacrifice is completed and he withdraws from social life. Ixca's identity as a deadly entity appears in allusions: Rosa's son, frightened by Ixca's invitation to take him to eat, bites the man's hand and makes it bleed. The next time the boy is mentioned, he is dead and Rosa is preparing to bury him. When Ixca tastes his own "acrid [and] metallic" blood from the bitten hand, "his head swam with that taste; blood whirled in his ears like two breaths, united by an hour of terror." The boy might have been mysteriously poisoned by Ixca's blood, but the unspoken connection between events remains.

The character of Hortensia, Federico Robles' blind mistress of Indian origins, is another possible mythical embodiment: her connection with the world, especially with her lover, has some supernatural qualities. As opposed to the mysterious forces of Ixca and Teodula, Hortensia represents the nurturing, healing power of ancient Mexico; Federico goes to her to free himself from the pain of his everyday life at the social peak, and returns to her after he loses everything to start a happy and fulfilling life of redemption on a farm. Hortensia feels a certain affinity with Ixca, which further alludes to her possible mythical identity; she senses that they both "come from far away," can "understand without words," and have "faces that frighten us and carry us to the limits of passions, good and evil" and that would cause fear in others, "who would destroy us if we would show our true faces." Also, she speaks of her relationship with Federico as a union outside his social domain, the reality beyond "what life has made him," and

declares that "the world which at last will be Federico's and [hers] is right here" and will make itself known once Federico finds his "true face." Like Ixca, Hortensia appears to believe in a true Mexico under- neath the ruling modern one, waiting to emerge after the destruction of the cultural constructs; once that destruction happens in her lover's life, Hortensia embraces him and offers him a new, clean beginning.

Style

Symbolism

The narrative of *Where the Air Is Clear* contains an abundance of symbols, which serve to relate Aztec mythology and contemporary history into a new Mexican identity. Some of the symbols that connect the novel's themes of self as ancient and modern are jewelry, fire, and vision.

Two diametrically opposed characters who rely on jewelry as their symbol of status and self are Teodula and Norma. Teodula proudly wears her wedding jewelry and refuses to take it off, because it symbolizes the ancient life of the Aztec culture; her last name is a link with the Aztec emperor Moctezuma, who was killed by the Spanish conquistador Cortes. Teodula's persistence in wearing the elaborate jewels signifies that she hangs on to the famous lost treasure of Moctezuma, and expects revenge on the "newcomers." Only when she witnesses an apparent sacrifice of Norma's death in the flames, Teodula throws her jewels into the pyre. Ironically, the fire starts when Federico leaves his house in rage, crashing furniture and throwing burning candles on the floor, angered because Norma refuses to give him her jewelry to sell in a financial crisis. Like Teodula, Norma clings to her beliefs and her idea of self, as well as the jewelry as a visible statement of her status.

Another important symbol in the novel, fire is a recurring element in the Aztec mythology, most clearly evident in Ixca's name: his first name means "to roast," and his last "a thousand fires." Ixca's function is that of an avenger who would burn off the impurity in a sacrificial offering and let the true Mexican identity arise. The imagery of flames appears in many descriptions of the city's panorama, as well as in the imagery of the sun (another powerful Aztec element). The importance of fire as a symbol of self is here present in the name of the individual and his sense of social purpose; Ixca also often sees flames, real or imagined, and uses the imagery of fire to describe his visions of Mexico City.

Vision is a symbol of relation to the true Mexican identity: the contemporary world is often referred to as visible, while the mythological world of Mexico's past is difficult, if not impossible, to see. Ixca tries not to see anything clearly when he first arrives at Bobo's party, yet is himself described rather mystically as being "everywhere, but no one ever sees him." The mystical quality in the vision of Teodula and her son appears in their "visions" of the world and the future: Teodula apparently perceives the wishes of the Aztec gods, while Ixca can occasionally "see" his ancient land, like on "a corner where stone broke into shapes of flaming shafts and red skulls and still butterflies: a wall of snakes beneath the twin roofs of rain and fire." The insight into the authentic Mexico is granted only to those who look within, and allow themselves to "see" their memories: Hortensia's blindness gives her great spiritual "vision"—she can "see" the true Federico beyond his modern personality. Also, Federico can remember his old, real

self when he lets "the heavy curtains inside his eyes slowly rise and reveal the inner pupil of memory, liquid, pinpoint."

Magical Realism

Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier first used the term "magical realism" in the 1940s to describe the tendency of contemporary Latin American authors to use the elements of folklore, myth, and fantasy in descriptions of their everyday issues, especially to veil the political and historical problems of his day in mystical narration. An exemplary magical realist novel is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by the Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez; other writers in this tradition are the Brazilian Jorge Amado, the Argentines Julio Cortazar and Jorge Luis Borges, the Chilean Isabel Allende, and Fuentes. This generation of Latin American novelists usually focuses on the major theme of searching for epic and heroic universal "Truths" in their works; in the highly symbolic language and narrative shifts from the realistic to the mythological, these authors employ the fantastic in order to illuminate the mundane elements of life.

In *Where the Air Is Clear*, the lack of separation between 1950s Mexico and the mythology of Aztec gods is magical realism. Superstition or witchcraft is not sufficient, rather the fantastic notion that Ixca is the Aztec god of war trying to bring back the pantheon of Aztec gods to avenge their dethronement makes the novel a member of the magical realist genre.

Narrative

The fragmentary technique of Fuentes's writing style in *Where the Air Is Clear* is a modern device adopted from contemporary European and American authors, namely William Faulkner and James Joyce. Many critics have noted that the narrative defies time and space, as the plot flows from one setting and period to another; Fuentes thus presents the city as fluid, its community changing from day to day, but at the same time fragmented and divided across numerous boundaries of social signifiers. Fuentes stated that he wanted to create an affect of omniscient interdependence of all the elements of Mexico City: from its ancient past (Ixca's Aztec visions), to the revolution (memories of violence and change), to the modern day (the everyday lives in the social strata). The narration is thus given a collective voice, as all city's inhabitants become united in the social fabric of the text through unseen relations among characters, the time and space travel in the metamorphosing Mexico, and the rapid point-of-view changes. Chapters are named after characters whose memories give various perspectives and situate them in the history of Mexico. Manuel is Federico's son, though neither knows it; Federico's recollections flow from the street into a modern office building and link the top and the bottom of the society; and Lorenza's reality feeds on the country's aristocratic past. The narrative is especially fluid at the novel's end, as Ixca's voice blends with the voices of the whole city and envelops all of the elusive Mexican identity in its equally volatile structure, moving "over all the city's profiles, over broken dreams and conquests, over old summits of headfeathers and blood."

Historical Context

The Mexican Revolution

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 was a result of a long line of squelched rebellions in pursuit of independence without tyranny; most of the nineteenth century passed with the country wavering between democracy and dictatorship, with the population rising against the Spanish, the French, and its own rulers. Mexico was one of the few Latin American countries in which mestizos (people of mixed white and native blood) and natives actively participated in the struggle for independence. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mexico was under the thirty-year autocratic rule of Porfirio Diaz, who let foreign investors take control of much of his land, selling its resources for ridiculously low prices; he also stifled a few industrial strikes with violence. The Mexican Revolution erupted when Diaz was reelected to the presidency in 1910; by 1917, the fight had claimed about one million lives in a struggle, on the one hand, between the middle class and the Diaz government and, on the other, a grass-roots peasant revolt against the owner classes for a share of the wealth. Although the enemy was the same, the two groups did not agree on their revolutionary goals, which caused much confusion and prolonged the bloodshed in the race for political control.

The struggle began when the would-be opponent of Diaz, Francisco Indalecio Madero, called for nullification of the election; Diaz resigned and fled to France in 1911 because of the riots in Mexico City. Madero, who then assumed the presidency but did not make the expected reforms, was denounced by the peasants' revolts led by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. Madero was ousted and murdered in 1913 by General Victoriano Huerta, a corrupt dictator eventually driven from power. Zapata and Villa held the presidential seat for a year, until the bloody battle of Celaya in 1915 when Venustiano Carranza and Alvaro Obregon conquered the city and fullscale civil war erupted.

The revolution formally ended in February 1917 with a proclamation of a new constitution: it was a nationalistic, anticlerical document, consid ered the world's first socialist constitution, which allowed only one-term presidency, in order to prevent the possible Diaz-type dictatorship. It also gave government, rather than the Catholic Church, control over schools; provided for public ownership of land and resources; and ensured basic labor rights. Carranza became president in 1917, but political instability and fighting between various revolutionary groups continued throughout the next decade. The revolutionary hero Zapata was killed in 1919, and both Carranza and Obregon (president 1920-24) were assassinated in military coups.

In 1929, Mexico entered a period of political stability with the formation of an official government party that united most of the social groups that had participated in the revolution; since 1945, it has been called the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional□PRI). Although the business environment improved during the stable years, the mix of socialist leadership, foreign investment, and years of exploitation has had a damaging effect on the national economy.

Post-WWII Mexico

Economic reforms that took place after the Mexican Revolution allowed for the formation of a stable middle class. The leadership of Lazaro Cardenas (1934-40) aimed to realize the socialist goals of the revolution: he orchestrated massive land redistribution, helped establish strong labor unions, extended education to remote areas of the country, and nationalized foreign petroleum holdings, mostly U.S.-owned. Mexico and the U.S. reached a compensation agreement in 1944, when the two were WWII allies.

In the post-war years, the Latin American intellectual world burst forth with a powerful ideological sense of national identity; the "Boom" started once the native intellectuals returned from European universities and applied modern philosophical, literary, and artistic techniques, novelties, and approaches to the state of their countries. In the 1950s, the temporal setting of *Where the Air Is Clear*, Mexico was undergoing a post-revolutionary revival of national identity. In that and the following decade, the country's intellectuals□among them painter Diego Rivera and novelists Octavio Paz and Fuentes□also engaged in this attempt at redefining Mexican nationality. In 1958, when Fuentes' first novel was published, the issue of social class became important to the concept of national identity. Although the post-war years brought political stability, economic growth, and the formation of the middle classes, the country's poorest population still suffered a low standard of living which differed little from pre-Revolutionary times. The artists working in the tradition of magic realism also recalled their national past, the pre-European Latin America of distinct spirituality, and used it both as a contrast and as a supplement to the discussion of modernday social issues in their countries.

Literary Heritage

Mexcio City, founded on top of the ruins of the Aztec capital which the Spanish conquistadors dumped into the lake, became one cultural center of Spanish American dominion (Lima served as the other). Except for a few codices, the libraries of the Aztecs and the Mayans—when they were found— fueled huge bonfires conducted by the Spanish Inquisition. Any information that survived in oral or parchment form, therefore, formed a natural resistance to the colonial overlords.

With Spanish conquest, literature began appearing in the Spanish language about the Mexican Valley. Most notably, Bartolome de las Casas, a Dominican missionary, deplored the treatment of the indigenous at the hands of the Spaniards in *The Devastation of the Indies.* Bernal Diaz del Castillo wrote a three-volume history of the conquest between 1568 and 1580. The most influential writings of the colonial period were those composed by conquistadors in letters and reports back to Spain. These writings formed the basis of culture clash— the Spanish soldiers had no preparation for the sights they encountered in the Aztec capital and no way of understanding Aztec culture.

With the exception of Juan Ruiz de Alarcon y Mendoza who contributed to the Golden Age of Spanish Literature during the seventeenth century, Mexican literature was a vapid imitation of European forms. After the Spanish left, Mexico had to form its own national identity and actively looked to the arts and literature for help. This aid arrived with the Latin American Vanguard; the term is used to designate Latin American modernists who were inspired by late-nineteenth-century French literature. The Vanguard plus the European Avant-Garde would inspire "El Boom." These movements rejected traditional "imitative" literature and resuscitated indigenous culture (in part by visiting it in European museums) while performing the role of social critique.

A prominent figure from this period in Mexico was Peruvian Cesar Vallejo. In his *Human Poems* (1939), he investigated the Maya-Quiche myths. These sacred tales had been written down for the first time in the sixteenth century. Vallejo inspired sociopolitical consciousness among writers. Octavio Paz proved even more influential on Latin American literature but especially Mexican literature and identity. He shared Vallejo's theory of political being. He made his first mark on the literary world in the mid-1920s but it was his *Labyrinth of Solitude* that won him the greatest notoriety. This collection of essays described the Mexican character with all its pimples—it angered people but it inspired more honest and uniquely Latin American works of fiction.

Inspired by the European Avant-Garde as well as the Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges and Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes launched Latin American literature into the international spotlight and thereby instigated "El Boom." His first novel, *La región más transparente* (*Where the Air Is Clear*) of 1958, fabricated Mexico City using indigenous myths and showing all social classes. The success of this novel inspired other Latin American writers (many of whom had met in Europe) to cease imitation and answer Borges' demand that they create.

Critical Overview

Fuentes' debut novel has inspired much criticism with its experimental narrative technique, its combination of history, anthropology, sociology, music, and cinema, and its soul-felt critique of modern Mexico. Some critics recognized the author's imaginative and powerful style as revolutionary in Latin American literature, while others rebuked his storytelling strategies. In a review for the *New Yorker*, Anthony West writes of *Where the Air Is Clear*: "With the bravery of a young man, Senor Fuentes has cleared all ideas of what a novel ought to be from his mind and has decided, quite simply, to put what is it to be Mexican, and all of Mexico, in this book." West further praises the way Fuentes leaves the construction of his "social mosaic" to the reader, despite the author's being "not the most polished and assured of writers." On the other hand, Richard Gilman's article for *Commonweal* describes the novel as a poor "attempt to extricate a living imagination from the entombed, self-devouring realities of Mexican consciousness, forever mourning its sundered past, incessantly projecting its possible future shapes, and torn between its ill-defined authenticity and the directing pressure of more advanced societies." Gilman, after comparing the Mexican and Russian revolutions, further calls Fuentes "neither Turgenev nor a Dostoyevsky" and states that the form and the experience of the novel "don't hold together" in its passionate but stylistically ineffective narration.

However, the majority of criticism recognized the connection between Fuentes' work and the contemporary modern techniques, such as the visual processes employed by John Dos Passos in the *U.S.A. Trilogy* : in "The Guerilla Dandy," by Enrique Krauze, the novel is called "an important step in Mexican narrative [that] acclimatized the genre of the urban novel." Also, many critics have pointed out with Krauze the link between Fuentes and "that great actor of painting, Diego Rivera"□ another author of "immense texts and murals that proceed more by accumulation and schematic juxtaposition than by imaginative connection." According to the creative strengths in this comparison, "the best of Fuentes is in the verbal avalanche of his prose" and the almost cinematic composition of his narrative, cutting from one ambient to another in a thorough coverage of the life of Mexico City.

In his chapter in *Carlos Fuentes: A Critical View,* Luis Leal writes that the author follows the distinctive models of William Faulkner, Malcolm Lowry, and Miguel Angel Asturias□authors who utilize mythology in their fiction, "either as a form or theme in the context of the realistic novel." Fuentes elaborates on this model by applying the technique to write "creative history," Leal points out, in which history and myth keep the novel in equilibrium by balancing each other.

The readings and critical interpretations of the author's voice in his debut novel vary greatly. Saul Maloff, in *Saturday Review,* describes *Where the Air Is Clear* as impressive because Fuentes writes "always as an artist, never as an ideologist" about a socially dense scene "that is so often the undoing of the 'political' novelist." On the other hand, Fernanda Eberstadt calls the novel "marred by authorial selfindulgence and pretentiousness" that turns the work into "a highly self-conscious melange of advertising

slogans, refrains from popular songs, and overheard fragments of cocktail-party chitchat." However, she does praise the novel as energetic storytelling despite Fuentes' "efforts to smother it in affectation."

Other theoretical reviews focused on the philosophical concepts present within the novel's thematic motifs. In an article for *Comparative Literature*, Maarten van Delden writes that *Where the Air Is Clear* contains two main philosophical perspectives: first, a view of self derived "primarily from existentialist ideas found in the works of Andre Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus," and second, the view of self as part of the communal mythical past. The highly individualist existentialist self is "discontinuous, contingent, wholly unaffected by any kind of socio-cultural conditioning permanently separated from a stable and enduring core of meaning"; the other self, that of collective consciousness, "loses all vestiges of autonomy [and] the individual merges entirely with the communal past, specifically with Mexico's Aztec heritage." Van Delden points out certain similarities between Fuentes' novel and the works by existentialist authors; he also analyzes the two philosophical views as embodied in the novel's characters, specifically Ixca as the symbol of the communal self-identity and Rodrigo as the existentialist presence. By the end of the novel, both of these characters fail in finding themselves in their respective theoretical niches: Ixca rejects Teodula's domination and the imposed life with Rosa, while Rodrigo, after attempting to embrace an existentialist existence, finally gives into the world and its principles of operation and becomes a successful businessman.

Overall, the criticism of *Where the Air Is Clear* had pointed out the novel's controversial elements, placed the work in perspective of its influences, shown its effects on the development of Latin American and modern literature in general, and recognized Fuentes as a prominent figure in contemporary literature.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
- Critical Essay #7
- Critical Essay #8
- Critical Essay #9
- Critical Essay #10
- Critical Essay #11
- Critical Essay #12

Critical Essay #1

Hubbell, with an M.Litt from the University of Aberdeen, currently pursues a Ph.D. in history at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. In the following essay, he examines the narrative value of the characters of Where the Air Is Clear *and their symbolic representation of the various fragments of Mexican society in the 1950s.*

Many elements of Fuentes' writing style have been examined by various critics of *Where the Air Is Clear* , but the most prominent feature of the novel proves to be its characters. Fuentes makes the individual carriers of the story crucial to the plot, which relies on their memories and resulting actions; indeed, the characters' names are used as titles for most of the novel's chapters. Characters are thus labeled as necessary for the flow of the story, but on a deeper level, they also function as symbols for the many parts of the versatile and elusive identity of Mexico City. The symbolism of individual characters serves as an eloquent expression of Fuentes' view of his country's society.

The novel's main character and a thread that connects all the rest, Ixca Cienfuegos is a mysterious avenger of the Aztec gods: he causes destruction in the lives of other characters, in search of a blood sacrifice to appease the ancient deities. Ixca embodies pre-Columbian Mexico and claims that the past holds the key to the nation's authentic, original identity. However, even Ixca has individual problems with his own identity: he decidedly follows his mother's instructions and firmly believes in the ancient spirituality, to the extent that he withdraws to live in poverty with a widow once the sacrifice has been performed. However, Ixca goes through a crisis of faith at the novel's end: he reappears and almost gets himself and Rodrigo killed, shouting and laughing hysterically because his revenge obviously did not cause desired social changes. Ixca is enigmatic, confident, evasive, and difficult to define; other characters most often fear him on an intuitive level and one even compare him to an all-seeing god. He is anything and everything, from business adviser, to go-between, to gigolo; he makes friends, obtains their confessions and memories, and eventually betrays them, bringing about their ruin. Rosa's son escapes in panic when Ixca offers to buy him dinner; his mistress Norma is afraid of his cool temperament and disregard for the social factors that her life revolves around; and Junior tells his girlfriend Pichi: "Let's see, Cienfuegos, and be careful there. I'll keep him away from you," when they encounter Ixca at a party. Like the deeply buried ancient heritage of the bloodthirsty Aztec gods, Ixca too is to be feared by the descendants of the conquistadors. The scene in which his mother takes the coffins from her basement and paints the skeletons of Ixca's father and siblings in an ancient death ritual is all the more horrific for Ixca's calm acceptance of it; in fact, he seems to be perfectly comfortable only in that ceremonial setting.

Another way in which Ixca functions as a symbol of the pre-Hispanic Mexican culture is presented in his monologues: in the beginning of the book, he introduces himself as a somewhat universal inhabitant of Mexico City; throughout the book, he often serves as a channel for the memories of other characters, even when they refuse to talk to him (like Pimpinela and Mercedes); and at the novel's end, his monologue extends beyond his person to envelop all of the city's history, material and spiritual contents, and people,

in a surreal flow of words: "names which could be clotted with blood and gold, rounded names, pointed names, lights of stars, ink-mummied names, names dripping like drops of your unique mascara, that of your anonymity, face flesh hiding fleshed faces, the thousand faces, one mask Acamapichtli, Cortes, Sor Juana, Itzcoatl, Juarez, Tezozomoc, Gante, Ilhuicamina, Madero. . ." This all-inclusive narrative style speaks of another ancient concept, that of a collective voice of the city; Ixca represents the communal sense of self of the distant past. Ixca asks Rodrigo to choose between the then and the now by saying that alienation comes with modernization: "Over here you will be anonymous, a brother to everyone in solitude. Over there you will have your name, and in the crowd nobody will touch you, and you will not touch anybody."

Along with Ixca, the characters of his mother Teodula, the prostitute Gladys, and the blind Hortensia also symbolize the Aztec heritage. Teodula, completely immersed in the world of the past, believes wholeheartedly in the ancient world as everpresent and just waiting to reemerge and overthrow the false modern "gods" of the bourgeoisie. Gladys symbolizes the estranged heritage of the twentieth-century Aztec descendants, who live in poverty and envy the "new gods" of the city's jet set; she also signifies poverty, hopelessness, and fatalistic passivity. Hortensia, unlike Ixca and Teodula, represents the positive, accepting and nourishing qualities of the Mexican spiritual past; she does not cause Federico's downfall, but patiently awaits it and offers him redemption in her love.

Federico Robles, another major character who embodies a part of Mexican identity as a descendant of the indigenous Indians, rejects his origins and strives to become as modern as possible. After making important government connections during and after the Mexican revolution, Federico establishes himself as a successful businessman through unscrupulous machinations. Once he is catapulted to a prominent position, Federico does everything he can to affirm his new status: he marries Norma to give him elegance and class, has the business headquarters of his industrial empire in an ultramodern (and ultra-tall) building, wears silk ties and expensive suits, and even lightens his features with facial powder. Federico symbolizes the modern Mexico, which, in a desperate effort to distance itself from the origins of poverty and anonymity of peasant life, forgets that the revolution was fought for the freedom and empowerment of the lower classes. The hardships Federico had endured in his youth and during the revolution must be erased if he is to be fully accepted into the social elite; the aristocratic ideal in post-war Mexico still scrutinizes the selfmade individual. His character also embodies the corruption of modernization; however, Federico remains connected with his background in his relationship with Hortensia. The actual fragility of his social status, shown in the ease of his financial success and collapse, symbolizes the underlying instability of every social class in the new society.

Other characters in the *nouveau riches* group who reject Mexico's past and fully invest in the future are Federico's wife Norma, the attorney Roberto Regules, and most of the jet set of Bobo's parties. Norma also comes from a poor background, but manages to build herself up for life at the social peak. With her beauty, education, charm, and highclass manners, she manages to marry into the standing she desires, but her life feels empty. Roberto is a version of Federico without scruples, a political and

professional shark concerned only with maintaining his own status, increasing his own wealth, and keeping up appearances.

A character embodying the leftover Porfirian elite, Dona Lorenza is a haughty old lady living in expectations of a revolution that would put her class back on top. When Porfirio Diaz fled to Paris, the aristocratic class followed in exile to Europe and the United States, most of them losing all their possessions in Mexico due to socialist reforms. Lorenza's husband had enough foresight to maneuver out of this predicament, and maintain his family in wealth; but after his death, the next generation of de Ovandos brings about absolute financial collapse and they return to Mexico.

While her niece Pimpinela has managed to adapt to the circumstances and successfully trades "class for cash," Lorenza lives in denial of the new world around her: she raises her grandson exclusively as an aristocrat, without any useful skills, and tries to maintain her prestige when Norma (in her flashing mink and pearls) comes for dinner. The family of de Ovandos is dying out in alcoholism, loneliness, and sterility, except for Pimpinela who marries a *nouveau riche*. The character of Lorenza signifies the destructive lack of flexibility that ruins her social class, as it did their dictator.

Two characters represent the intellectual layer of new Mexico City: Rodrigo Pola, an unsuccessful poet turned successful screenplay writer, and Manuel Zamacona, also a poet and the novel's "intellectual spokesperson," who according to Wendy Faris in *Carlos Fuentes* presents "the ideas of Octavio Paz and other essayists of the post-revolutionary period." Indeed, Paz' *The Labyrinth of Solitude* serves as a kind of pre-text for *Where the Air Is Clear*.

Rodrigo embodies the self-doubt, identity crisis, and a social class in "conflict between conformity and rebellion," as stated by Maarten Van Delden in *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico, and Modernity*. His personality reflects the existentialist beliefs, then prevalent in France, that emphasized the themes of anxiety and superfluity and regarded the essence of human life as unchangeable by its social environment. The selfish individuality of Rodrigo's character shows in his desperate attempts to define his own uniqueness: he leaves his mother because he needs independence of thought, and walks away from the literary group at the university because he feels he has a different destiny. Although Ixca believes that Rodrigo has suicidal tendencies, the poet confesses to himself that he wants to live. Finally, Rodrigo does what is necessary for success: he throws away his existentialist ideals and makes a fortune writing movie scripts. Manuel, on the other hand, maintains his belief system and even manages to touch the conscience of Federico (Manuel does not know that Frederico is his father) in a discussion of the true effects of the revolution and the economic growth afterward. However, Manuel's senseless death symbolizes the fatalistic, destructive nature and future of the new Mexico. His literal and Rodrigo's intellectual death signify the failure of spiritual renewal through philosophical and artistic idealism.

Finally, the identity of the bottom social class exists in the character of Gabriel, a working-class son who spends most of the year in California, working illegally and earning just enough to support his family. Gabriel embodies the always-present anger of

the poor, looking for an outlet in drinking and violence. He is the representative of the working class who did not get a slice of the postrevolutionary rags-to-riches dream, like Federico and Norma. Also, like Gladys, Gabriel does not have a way to reach the upper classes except in absurd imitations of their behaviors: he brings his mother a blender from America, but forgets that there is no electricity in his house. In a conversation with a friend, Gabriel compares the inequality in the American social hierarchy to the immobile structure in Mexico: "So what if [Americans] don't let you in their crappy restaurant? You able to get in the Ambassador in Mexico City?" Gabriel wants to find a stable job in the city so he can earn a living and stay with his family, but dies trying. His destiny foreshadows that of Gladys, who cannot get a job at the store and is getting old for prostitution. Both characters embody the hopelessness of Mexico's lowest classes.

As Faris pointed out, Fuentes provides Alejo Carpentier with an urban geography of a Latin American city similar in universal resonance to James Joyce's Dublin through the infrastructure visible and invisible. She considers that the connections occur through characters; however, those connections happen under very precise conditions. Further, the interactions almost always fail to contribute to a sense of national identity sought after by the characters and the author himself. Divided by their beliefs, racial and social origins, philosophies and professions, the inhabitants of Fuentes' Mexico often fail to recognize what they all have in common: a pursuit of an authentic and welcoming city of freedom and honest opportunities for all, and□of course□plenty of clear air.

Source: Jeremy W. Hubbell, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Maarten Van Delden discusses Carlos Fuentes' treatment of the nature of self in his novel La region mas transparente*. Van Delden examines how Fuentes presents the self in two perspectives: on one hand being unaffected or formed by culture and on the other being directly tied to past, culture, and geography and how he seeks to resolve this seeming conflict.*

La Región Más Transparente (1958). Carlos Fuentes's first novel, oscillates between two different perspectives on the nature of the self and its relations to history and the community. On the one hand, the novel outlines a view of the self that derives primarily from existentialist ideas found in the works of André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. In this view, the self is discontinuous, contingent, wholly unaffected by any kind of socio-cultural conditioning, permanently separated from a stable and enduring core of meaning□and it is precisely for this reason that it possesses an absolute freedom to mold itself into constantly new shapes. On the other hand, the novel proposes a vision in which the self loses all its vestiges of autonomy; the individual merges entirely with the communal past, specifically with Mexico's Aztec heritage. This past is viewed as the origin and ground of an unalterable, culturally determined identity to which the self is inextricably attached. I will proceed to examine the conflict between these two views on a number of textual levels, after which I will conclude by arguing that the rather remarkable final section of the novel constitutes an attempt to resolve this conflict through the aesthetic embodiment of a concept of revolution. Fuentes expresses his vision of revolution by means of an inventive appropriation of the modernist technique of "spatial form." I will also show how the concept of revolution evolves in Fuentes's more recent work.

Toward the end of *La región más tranparente*, Manuel Zamacona, the novel's intellectual spokesman, is senselessly murdered by a man he has never seen before. Afterwards, the killer coolly states that he did not like the way Zamacona had looked at him. The incident is reminiscent of the *acte gratuit* motif as it appears in the works of Gide, Sartre, and Camus. Fuentes himself suggested a link with the existentialist tradition in a 1966 interview with Emir Rodríguez Monegal. In speaking of how the social and cultural realities of Mexico had somehow managed to anticipate certain artistic and philosophical currents in Europe and the United States, Fuentes made the following observation:

> Hay un existencialismo *avant la lettre*, y muy obvio. México es un país del instante. El mañana es totalmente improbable, peligroso: te pueden matar en una cantina, a la vuelta de una esquina, porque miraste feo, porque comiste un taco. Vives el hoy porque el mañana es improbable. ("Diálogo")

Fuentes's comment can be read as a gloss on the scene of Zamacona's death, which stands, then, as an illustration of the existentialist quality of Mexican life.

However, the existentialist act in *La región* is presented in a manner radically different from similar incidents in the works of Fuentes's French precursors. Lafcadio Wluiki's gratuitous murder of a complete stranger□whom he pushes out of a moving train□in Gide's *Les caves du Vatican* (1914) and Meursault's unmotivated killing of an Arab in Camus's *L'étranger* (1942) are by no means identical actions, but what they have in common is that in each case the perpetrator is at the center of the narrative. The events are related from Lafcadio's and Meursault's points of view. In Fuentes, on the other hand, the perspective is completely inverted: the victim is the protagonist and the killer remains a shadowy, indistinct figure on the margins of the narrative.

The symmetry of this inversion is reinforced by a number of other details connected with Lafcadio's *acte gratuit* in *Les caves du Vatican*. Even before he thrusts his victim out of the train, Lafcadio has been planning to leave Europe for what he calls "un nouveau monde," the islands of Java and Borneo. And as he begins to speculate on the possibility of committing this unusual crime, he reminds himself that, in any case, the next day he will be "en route pour les îles," and so will never be found out. In this way, my two projects, the gratuitous murder and the voyage to a faraway place, become linked together. Both are strategies for asserting one's freedom, for rejecting the old, oppressive ways of Europe. "'Que tout ce qui peut être soit!' C'est comme ça que je m'explique la Création. . . ," Lafcadio exclaims at one point, and throughout the novel he remains intent on demonstrating his love for what he calls "ce qui pourrait être. . . ." The desire to transgress all limits, to expand the realm of the possible, is expressed both in geographical terms, in the plan to flee to the East Indies, and in ethical terms, in the unmotivated murder of a stranger. Both projects are ways of affirming that one is bound by nothing. Or, as Camus put it in *L'homme révolté* (1951): "La théorie de l'acte gratuit couronne la revendication de la liberté absolue."

In *La región*, Natasha, an aging singer from St. Petersburg, alerts us to a difference between Mexico and Europe that speaks directly to this question of freedom and the transgression of limits:

Por lo menos a nosotros nos queda siempre eso: la posibilidad de s'enfuir de buscar el lá-bas. El Dorado fuera de nuestro continente. ¿Pero ustedes? Ustedes no, mon vieux, ustedes no tienen su là-bas, ya están en él, ya están en su límite. Yen él tienen que escoger, vero?

In Gide, the idea of the limit depends on a more fundamental conceptual division of the world into a center (Europe) and a periphery (the non-European parts of the globe). From the perspective of the center, the existence of the periphery guarantees the possibility of freedom and escape. From the periphery itself, however, things look very different. If one's existence is perceived as already being at the limit, then the possibility of further displacement is eliminated. The result is the undoing of the very concept of the limit, and the collapse of the chain of analogies whereby a writer such as Gide links the notion of the limit to the ideas of the escape to a new world, the *acte gratuit*, and freedom. This emerges very clearly in the case of Zamacona's death. Fuentes does not

use the incident to demonstrate the absolute nature of individual freedom. Instead, with the focus now on the victim, the scene evokes the old Latin American theme of a violent and hostile environment from which there is no escape. And even if we were to extract from this episode a different kind of existentialist motif□such as the notion of the absurd□such elements would exist in a state of tension with the larger narrative pattern into which the episode is absorbed. For Zamacona is only one of many of the novel's characters who suffer a violent death on Independence Day, and this juxtaposition of death and celebration is clearly designed to recall the ancient Aztec belief that human sacrifices are necessary to ensure the continuity of life. The series of deaths at the end of the novel hints at the persistence of these mythical patterns beneath the surface of modern Mexico and at the fragility of the individual in the face of such forces.

This reading of Zamacona's death is at odds with the interpretation Fuentes himself offers in the interview with Rodríguez Monegal, where he proposes that we regard it as evidence of the instantaneousness of Mexican life, and not, as I have just suggested, of the continued power of ancient cosmogonies beneath the country's veneer of modernity. In fact, Fuentes never wholly eliminates either of these two possible readings. Two details in the scene of Zamacona's death indicate how Fuentes tries to hold together these alternative interpretations. First, when Zamacona gets out from his car and approaches the cantina, he recites a line from Nerval to himself: "et c'est toujours la seule□ou c'est le seul moment. . .". Nerval's idea that each moment in time is unique anticipates the existentialist conception of time, in which every instant is a new creation, disconnected from past and future. This notion of temporality is a focal point of Sartre's well-known analysis of Camus's *L'étranger* . Sartre describes Meursault as a man for whom "Seul le présent compte, le concret" (*Situations, I*). He links this vision of time to Camus's absurdist world-view in which God is dead and death is everything: "La présence de la mort au bout de notre route a dissipé notre avenir en fumée, notre vie est 'sans lendemain,' c'est une succession de présents." Fuentes's use of the quotation from Nerval seems designed to allude to such ideas about time, and thus to prepare us for the sudden, inexplicable flare-up of violence that leaves Zamacona dead.

But if this leads to a view of Zamacona's death as an absurd, meaningless event, another feature of this episode suggests a quite different point of view: the emphasis on the eyes and on the act of seeing. Zamacona's killer, as I observed earlier, justifies his deed by saying that he did not like the way Zamacona had looked at him. Furthermore, the only mention of the murderer's appearance is of his eyes:

Uno de los hombres le dio la cara a Manuel Zamacona;
desprendido como un trompo de la barra de madera,
con los ojos redondos y sumergidos de canica, disparó
su pistola dos, tres, cinco veces sobre el cuerpo
de Zamacona.

The killer's submerged and marble-like eyes link him to the realm of the invisible, subsisting beneath the surface existence of Fuentes's Mexico. Invisibility is generally associated in *La región* with Mexico's origins in its pre-Hispanic past, a connection captured most vividly in the figure of Hortensia Chacón, the blind woman who leads the

powerful self-made banker Federico Robles back to his indigenous roots. Hortensia represents the beneficent side of the dark world beneath the country's semblance of progress and modernity. The killer, on the other hand, represents the violent, menacing side of this world: figuratively blind where Hortensia is literally so, this anonymous figure wishes to punish Zamacona for the look in his eyes, that is, for his location within the visible world of modern Mexico. Wanting to blind him as much as to kill him, he demonstrates the enduring power of Mexico's past.

There can be little doubt that the manner of Zamacona's death reveals the persistence of an atavistic violence lurking beneath the country's surface life. The question that remains unanswered, however, is whether this violence remains integrated with ancient cosmological rhythms, or whether it has lost its connection with ritual and has been expelled into a world of existential absurdity. This ambiguity is sustained in the development of the novel's plot after Zamacona's death.

It is difficult to ignore the connection between Ixca Cienfuegos's search, at his mother's behest, for a sacrificial victim with which to propitiate the gods, and the series of deaths that occur toward the end of the novel. But we can never be entirely sure that the sacrifices really are sacrifices, nor that they are responsible for a renewal of the life-cycle. Ixca's mother, Teódula Moctezuma, for her part, does not question the significance of these events. After Norma Larragoiti dies in the fire that burns down her house, Teódula tells Ixca that she believes the sacrifice has now been fulfilled, and that the normal course of life will be resumed. At the same moment, as if to confirm Teódula's vision of life's rebirth, the sun begins to rise.

Fuentes does not always represent this idea of cyclical return with such solemnity. While Part Two of the novel concludes with the destruction or downfall of many of the central characters, Part Three resumes three years later with the description of a young couple falling in love. But both Jaime Ceballos and Betina Régules have such stale and conventional natures that we inevitably sense an element of the parodic in this vision of life's regeneration. The effect is reinforced when the scene shifts again to a party hosted by Bobó Gutiérrez, whom we observe greeting his guests with the exact same words he had used approximately three years earlier, near the beginning of the novel: "¡Caros! Entren a aprehender las eternas verdades." Bobó's eternal truths are clearly a mockery. We recognize here not return and renewal, but paralysis and decay.

Fuentes leaves his readers suspended between a world ruled by profound mythological rhythms, and an alternative, modern world of drift and contingency. He never fully decides which of these two pictures is finally truer to the reality of Mexico. This same conflict shapes the meditation on identity and authenticity that receives novelistic form through the contrasting careers of Ixca Cienfuegos and Rodrigo Pola. Although two other characters, Federico Robles and Manuel Zamacona, are also central to the development of this theme, I shall focus on Ixca and Rodrigo, since their confrontation after Bobó's last party effectively brings the plot of the novel to a close, thus suggesting the importance of these two figures to Fuentes's articulation of the problem of subjectivity.

Rodrigo Pola is an emblematic modern personality□ a type toward the definition of which the existentialists made a significant contribution. Rodrigo's connection with this tradition of the modern self is clear from the first words he speaks. Into a discussion about the social function of art, he interjects the following observation: "No todos tenemos que ser el cochino hombre de la calle o, por oposición, *un homme révolté* . . . ." While Rodrigo appears to reject the opposition he posits here, these words in fact encapsulate the defining axis of his personality, a conflict between conformity and rebellion. The allusion to Camus is clearly meant to recall the existentialist emphasis on subjectivity, on the need for individuals to create their own values without reference to a realm of *a priori* truths or to society's received notions. Initially, Rodrigo's actions are guided by a similar search for authentic self-definition.

As he grows up, Rodrigo□who wants to be a writer□has to struggle against the oppressive demands of his mother, Rosenda, who, having lost her husband during the Mexican Revolution, cannot bear the thought of her son also escaping from her grip. The conflict between Rodrigo and his mother revolves around the question of who creates the self and thus has power over it. Rosenda wishes the moment in which she gave birth to her son to be prolonged forever. She wants always to be the mother, the child owing its existence to her alone. Rodrigo speaks with horror of "ese deseo de beberme entero, de apresarme entre sus piernas y estar siempre, hasta la consumación de nuestras tres vidas, dándome a luz sin descanso, en un larguísimo parto de noches y días y años . . . ." To this idea of the enduring power derived from the act of giving birth to a child, Rodrigo opposes a notion of figurative birth in which the self engenders itself: "me sentí. . . hijo, más que de mis padres, de mi propia, breve, sí, pero para mi única, incanjeable experiencia. . . ." In this, he appears to be heeding the existentialist exhortation to free oneself from all forms of external conditioning.

It is worth recalling, however, that there were different phases within the tradition of French existentialism. While the earlier work of Sartre and Camus tended to emphasize the absolute nature of individual freedom and favored the themes of anxiety, absurdity, and superfluousness, their later work sought to establish a more affirmative view of existentialist philosophy. In *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946), for example, Sartre sought to demonstrate that existentialism provides a philosophical basis for an attitude of engagement with the world and commitment to one's fellow human beings. Camus's *L'homme révolté* interprets the act of rebellion against an intolerable situation not as an individualistic gesture, but as a sign of the fundamental truth of human solidarity. Rebellion, according to Camus, is always potentially an act of selfsacrifice, and so implies the existence of values that transcend the individual. Camus himself regarded the shift in his work from a concern with the absurd to a concern with rebellion as the sign of a new focus on the group instead of the individual: "Dans l'expérience absurde, la souffrance est individuelle. A partir du mouvement de révolte, elle a conscience d'être collective, elle est l'aventure de tous" (*L'homme révolté*).

Rodrigo, by opposing "l'homme révolté" to man in the mass ("el cochino hombre de la calle"), evokes the more strictly individualistic side of existentialist thought. But in the course of the novel, Rodrigo's efforts to assert his own uniqueness become increasingly fruitless. This failure implies a critique of the early version of existentialism, with its one-

sided emphasis on self-creation and selfrenewal as the path to authentic selfhood, and its neglect of the social dimension of human life. Rodrigo's pursuit of a total freedom from all external constraints leads first to feelings of alienation and inauthenticity, and eventually to a complete turnaround, an unconditional surrender to society's norms of success.

In one episode, we see Rodrigo making faces at himself in the mirror, rapidly shifting expressions, "hasta sentir que su rostro y el reflejado eran dos, distintos, y tan alejados entre sí como la luna verdadera que nadie conoce y su reflejo quebrado en un estanque." This scene recalls a similar moment in *La nausée* where Roquentin studies his reflection in a mirror and is struck by the incomprehensible, alien appearance of his own face Fuentes's adaptation of this motif suggests a similar perspective on the impossibility of discovering a stable, continuous identity, and the consequent susceptibility of the self to being constantly remolded into new shapes. For a moment, Rodrigo seems to recoil from his performance; he feels an urge to sit down and write, to leave what he calls "una sola constancia verdadera." Ironically enough, the text he produces articulates a theory of the self as a mask, a form of play. Everything becomes arbitrary and gratuitous. The self is cast loose from any serious attachment, even from that most fundamental attachment, the body itself. Thus, Rodrigo is at one point led to assert that it is a matter of indifference whether one's face is, in actual fact, ugly or beautiful; the act of self-creation can apply even to one's physical appearance. The material world, even in its most primary manifestation, is fully subject to the individual will: "El problema consiste en saber cómo se imagina uno su propia cara. Que la cara sea, en realidad, espantosa o bella, no importa. Todo es imaginarse la propia cara interesante, fuerte, definida, o bien imaginarla ridícula, tonta y fea."

If the theory of the mask is initially designed to free the self from all forms of predetermination, then Rodrigo's radical application of this principle appears to produce the opposite result. Rodrigo himself eventually recognizes that the histrionic self-display into which he has fallen effectively obliterates the possibility of achieving genuine freedom; he admits that he has become a captive of his own game: "Se vuelve uno esclavo de su propio juego, el movimiento supera y condena a la persona que lo inició, y entonces sólo importa el movimiento; uno es llevado y traido por él, más que agente, elemento."

A few pages later, the description of a thunderstorm dramatizes the extent of Rodrigo's estrangement from the world:

La tormenta lo envolvía en una percusión líquida,
implacable. Arriba, el espacio se canjeaba a sí mismo
estruendos, luz sombría: todos los mitos y símbolos
fundados en la aparición de la naturaleza se
concentraban en el cielo potente, ensamblador de un
poderío oculto. Resonaba el firmamento con una
tristeza ajena a cualquier circunstancia: no gratuita,
sino suficiente.

Fuentes's conception of the natural world, as it emerges from this passage, has important implications for his view of the status of the perceiving subject. The storm's concentrated, implacable power, its relation to the deep, continuous rhythms of nature, and its aura of timelessness are at the farthest possible remove from the inconsequentiality and arbitrariness that define Rodrigo's relations to himself and to the world. The implications of this contrast for Fuentes's larger view of the self can perhaps be sensed most clearly through a comparison with certain passages in Sartre's *La nausée* that deal with the same issues.

Fuentes's use of the pathetic fallacy encourages a view of the realms of the human and the nonhuman as deeply interrelated. The reference to the sky's occult powers may appear to lift the natural world to a position that transcends the human, but it also implies that nature is pregnant with meanings that are of great consequence to human life. The use of the verb "envolver" defines the exact nature of the relationship: it is impossible to think of human beings as separate from the universe in which they live. Roquentin, in *La nausée,* recognizes this human inclination to search for connections between ourselves and the physical world, to treat it, for example, as a text waiting for its meaning to be unveiled. At one point he describes a priest walking along the seaside as he reads from his breviary: "Par instants il léve la téte et regarde la mer d'un air approbateur: la mer aussi est un bréviaire, elle parle de Dieu." But Roquentin furiously rejects this attempt at humanization: "La *vraie* mer est froide et noire, pleine de bêtes; elle rampe sous cette mince pellicule verte qui est faite pour tromper les gens." In *La nausée* the world of objects and natural processes does not envelop the human world in a transcendent, protective manner; instead, it is conceived as a realm of brute, unredeemable fact from which a lucid consciousness will recoil in horror.

If Rodrigo is a failed existentialist, part of the explanation may lie in the way Fuentes has stacked the deck against him. In a world where natural phenomena exude such a compelling and inscrutable sense of purpose and power, the individual can hardly presume to play God with his own existence. Fuentes has created a character with existentialist features, but has placed him in a setting entirely different from the kind that would have been envisioned by the existentialists themselves. As a result, the existentialist project is effectively invalidated.

Ixca Cienfuegos represents, on the level of character, the same mythical forces which Fuentes evokes through his description of the thunderstorm. Ixca, whose first name derives from the Nahuatl word for bake, or cook, and whose last name alludes to the original time in Aztec mythology when fires lit up the universe, is a shadowy yet central presence in the novel. One character compares him to God because of his seeming omnipresence. Ixca's search for a sacrificial victim is part of an attempt to reintegrate Mexican society into a sacred, cosmic order, and thus to overcome the kind of self-division and self-estrangement suffered by a typical product of the modern world such as Rodrigo. The contrast between the two men emerges clearly in the description of an early evening walk they take along the Paseo de la Reforma:

Rodrigo miraba como el polvo se acumulaba en los
zapatos amarillos. Se sentía consciente de todos sus

movimientos nerviosos. Y Cienfuegos como si no caminara, como si lo fuera empujando la leve brisa de verano, como si no tuviera esas piernas, esas manos que tanto estorbaban a Rodrigo.

While Rodrigo is severely afflicted with the modern disease of self-consciousness, Ixca is entirely at ease, in possession of an unfissured consciousness that exists in harmony with the natural world. Ixca does not search for an increasingly intense awareness of his own separateness from others. He is deeply at odds with the idea of a unique, individual personality waiting to be liberated from external oppression. Fuentes shows him in an intense, sometimes conflictive relationship with his mother, in which he submits to her wishes instead of rebelling, as Rodrigo does. Ixca advocates self-forgetfulness rather than self-regard: "Olvidarse de sí, clave de las felicidades, que es olvidarse de los demás; no liberarse a sí: sojuzgar a los demás." His vision ultimately evolves out of his belief in the absolute nature of the nation's origins, and the priority of these origins over the claims of contemporary individuals. Mexico, he claims, "es algo fijado para siempre, incapaz de evolución. Una roca inconmovible que todo lo tolera. Todos los limos pueden crecer sobre esa roca, pero la roca en sí no cambia, es la misma, para siempre." At one point, Ixca urges Rodrigo to choose between the two Mexicos, the ancient and the modern: "Acá serás anónimo, hermano de todos en la soledad. Allá tendrás tu nombre, y en la muchedumbre nadie te tocará, no tocarás a nadie." The possession of a name becomes an emblem of the barren, atomistic individualism that rules over the contemporary world. In the mythical world Ixca believes in, the individual is absorbed into a larger order of fraternal belonging.

Neither Rodrigo nor Ixca offers a satisfying solution to the problem of authenticity. Rodrigo's inner restlessness seems so gratuitous and selfindulgent that it comes as no surprise to see him eventually give up his rebellion against the world. If each new mask is the result of an arbitrary choice, then why not choose the mask that will bring success and prosperity? By the end of the novel, Rodrigo has become a successful writer of screenplays for the movie industry, a hack who has cynically mastered a simple formula for success.

But if Rodrigo's cult of individuality ultimately proves fruitless and self-defeating, Ixca's violent attack on the notion of a personal life does not seem much more appealing. His behavior becomes increasingly menacing, at times literally poisonous. We may note, for example, the terror he inspires in little Jorgito Morales when he meets him outside the Cathedral and offers to buy him some candy. In order to escape from Ixca's grip, Jorgito bites his hand, drawing blood. But the next time we see him, over a hundred pages later, the boy is dead. Since it is never clear that the regeneration Ixca is after actually takes place, we are left simply with the image of a man who goes around causing havoc in the lives of others. If Rodrigo's emptiness is that of a life lived without reference to the transcendent, then Ixca displays the perhaps more sinister emptiness of someone who has voided himself of all human emotions: "en realidad Ixca se sustentaba sobre un imenso vacío, un vacío en el que ni la piedad, ni el amor, ni siquiera el odio de los demás era admitido."

The final confrontation between Ixca and Rodrigo, three years after the main events of the novel, brings the plot to a close, and seems designed to show that while their respective destinies are diametrically opposed, they are equally stunted and unfulfilled. While Rodrigo scales the heights of social success, Ixca disappears from Mexico City altogether, living in obscurity with Rosa Morales, the cleaning lady, and her remaining children. On the surface, Rodrigo has been transformed into a new person, yet he is haunted by the past: "¿Crees que porque estoy aquí ya no estoy allá?. . . ¿Crees que una nueva vida destruye a la antigua, la cancela?" Ixca, on the other hand, while having apparently reconciled himself to the demands of the mythical past, now finds himself abandoned in the present, divided from the very past he thought he was embracing. He describes his condition in the same plaintive tones as Rodrigo:¿Crees que recuerdo mi propia cara? Mi vida comienza todos los días . . . y nunca tengo el recuerdo de lo que pasó antes . . . ."

Wendy Faris has drawn attention to Fuentes's fondness for the rhetorical figure of the chiasmus, which he employs not only at the level of individual sentences but also at the level of plot-structures. The paths followed by Rodrigo and Ixca trace a chiastic design. If at the beginning of the novel Rodrigo represents the present-oriented pole, and Ixca the past-oriented, then the final confrontation between the two men constitutes a complete reversal of this relationship. By the end of the novel, Rodrigo can no longer escape the past, while Ixca lives his life as though it were starting anew at every instant.

The result of this chiastic pattern is to lead the novel into an impasse. The plot of *La región* offers no clear resolution to the problems of authenticity and national identity which the novel articulates. Fuentes rejects the existentialist project of liberating the self from the past, of investing life with value simply through the agency of free individual choice, but he also rejects the attempt to provoke a return to the cultural origins of Mexico. Both these approaches to the problems of subjectivity and community are shown to be fruitless, even selfcancelling.

The novel, however, does not end with the conversation between Rodrigo and Ixca. After the two friends separate, the text undergoes a series of unusual transformations. Ixca gradually sheds his corporeality, and little by little absorbs the different facets of the surrounding city, until eventually he and the city become a single entity. In a subsequent transformation, Ixca becomes the characters of the novel itself, so that finally Ixca, the city, and the book become metaphors for one another, in an operation that may be understood as an attempt to lift the novel onto a plane distinct from ordinary narrativity. In a final transition, Ixca disappears into his own voice, but the voice that speaks in the novel's concluding chapter is one no longer tied to a particular space or time; it is a voice that aims to give a total and instantaneous vision of Mexico, as well as of the novel Fuentes has written about it. This final chapter, entitled "La región más transparente del aire," suggests an attempt to recapitulate and condense the novel; it is a mélange of densely metaphorical descriptions of the Mexican people, scenes from Mexican history, and echoes of the main narrative of the novel itself.

The guiding conception behind this remarkable novelistic flight is the attempt to escape from linear time, to propose and embody an alternative vision of temporality in which, as

Fuentes writes, "todo vive al mismo tiempo." Among writers of the present century, Fuentes clearly does not stand alone in his fascination with the break with linear time. For Octavio Paz, for example, the idea of a zone of pure time, beyond chronology, provides the very basis for his definition of poetry: "El poema es mediación: por gracia suya, el tiempo original, padre de los tiempos, encarna en un instante. La sucesión se convierte en presente puro, manantial que se alimenta a sí mismo y trasmuta al hombre" (*El arco y la lira*). In the area of the novel, one of the most influential codifications of the modernist aesthetic is Joseph Frank's 1945 essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature"; it centers precisely on this attempt to create forms that are not dependent on linear, chronological methods of organization. Frank's essay, particularly his discussion of the basic features of spatial form, and the type of content it conveys, clarifies Fuentes's relationship to modernist writing. It also contributes to an understanding of the function of the novel's final chapter, in which the techniques of spatial form are most emphatically deployed and appear to constitute an effort to escape from the impasse with which the actual plot of the novel concludes.

According to Frank, in the works of poets such as Eliot and Pound, and novelists such as Joyce, Proust, and Djuna Barnes, the normal temporal unfolding of the text is repeatedly interrupted, with the result that the unity of these works is no longer located in a continuous narrative progression, but in the reflexive references and cross-references relating different points in the text to one another. The reader, in reconstructing these patterns, must ignore the aspects of temporal flow and external reference that are fundamental to more conventional works of literature. The reconstructed patterns must be perceived simultaneously, as a configuration in space. Frank goes on to argue that the most important consequence of the deployment of spatial form in literature is the erasure of a sense of historical depth. Different moments in time become locked together in a timeless unity that evokes the world of myth rather than history.

Clearly, numerous objections could be made to the concept of spatial form, in particular to the term itself, which may seem inappropriately metaphorical. My interest here, however, is not in the accuracy of the term itself, but in the narrative techniques the term was designed to describe, and in the revolt against linear, progressive time implied by the use of these techniques.

Fuentes's attempt, in *La región,* to disrupt the straightforward temporal flow of the novel is not restricted to the final chapter. To the extent that the novel as a whole constitutes an attempt□along the lines of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1992) and John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925)□to recreate the life of a city within its pages, the rejection of a sequential organization of the text appears entirely fitting. What Frank would call the "spatializing" technique of the juxtaposition of unrelated textual fragments corresponds to the essentially spatial entity being represented. A typical instance of this technique occurs near the beginning of Fuentes's novel, where the narrator, in a decidedly small-scale imitation of the "Wandering Rocks" chapter of *Ulysses*, traces the simultaneous activities in different parts of the city of various characters on the morning after one of Bobó's parties. The revolt against linear time is also apparent in those moments in the text when past and present are conflated within the mind of an individual character. This

device is used most strikingly in the case of Federico Robles, who, as a firm believer in economic progress and a builder of post-Revolutionary Mexico, represents the attachment to the singularity of chronological time in one of its most powerful forms. Although he rejects the past, Robles nevertheless, at Ixca's urging, undertakes the perilous journey inward, and is eventually led to an almost Proustian apprehension of pure time freed from the habitual constraints of consecutiveness. In one scene, while making love to Hortensia, Robles bites the woman's hair, an act that suddenly evokes an image from the day he fought at the battle of Celaya during the Mexican Revolution, and bit the reins of his horse as he rode into the fray. The merging of past and present is underscored by the paratactic arrangement of the following two sentences: "Llano ensangrentado de Celaya. Cuerpo húmedo y abierto de Hortensia." Robles's vision is particularly significant since it seems to be at least partly responsi ble for his decision to abandon his public role as a powerful financier in the nation's capital and return to his obscure roots in the country. His decision constitutes an explicit rejection of the rigorously linear time of economic progress.

The important question is whether, as Frank would argue, the disruption of a continuous temporal progression within a narrative necessarily implies a return to the timeless world of myth. It seems doubtful, if only because it is not altogether clear why we should be locked into a binary opposition between history conceived purely in a linear fashion, on the one hand, and myth as the eternal repetition of the same, on the other. The question, then, is what purpose does Fuentes's use of these techniques serve? In answering, I want to focus in particular on the relationship between the main body of the narrative and the poetic finale with which it concludes. One of the most remarkable features of *La región* is that while most of the devices Frank enumerates in his article on spatial form are in evidence throughout the novel, they are most spectacularly exploited at the end, in a manner without real equivalent in the texts Frank discusses. This does not mean, however, that the reader is now truly transported into the realm of myth. I would suggest, instead, that the final section of the novel ought to be read as an attempt to lift the text onto a completely different level, in the hope of offering a resolution to the ambiguities with which the plot concludes. Since these ambiguities center on the opposition between the mythical and the existential views of life, it seems unlikely that such a resolution would take the form of a more determined affirmation of the mythical, a move that would simply eliminate one of the poles of the opposition.

We can begin measuring Fuentes's distance from the mythical approach by looking at the principal features of Frank's definition of myth. Frank quotes Mircea Eliade, who identifies myth as a realm of "eternal repetition," where time becomes "cosmic, cyclical and infinite" (*The Widening Gyre*). Frank discovers a similar emphasis on repetition and uniformity in the works of modernists such as Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, whose techniques of juxtaposition and allusion he believes underline the fundamental sameness of the human condition through the ages. Octavio Paz, in his discussion of the poetic technique of *simultaneísmo* (which we may regard as another term for spatial form), reaches a similar conclusion: he argues that Pound and Eliot developed their experimental poetic in order to "reconquistar la tradición de la Divina Comedia, es decir, la tradición de Occidente" (*Los hijos del limo*). Both projects, the return to myth and the recapture of tradition, are driven by a search for cultural coherence and identity.

Fuentes has frequently discussed the notion that different temporal planes may have a simultaneous existence, but he has a very different understanding of the implications of this fact. When he discusses "la simultaneidad de los tiempos mexicanos" ("Kierkegaard en la Zona Rosa") which he opposes to the linearity of European time, he does not mean that the juxtaposition of these different temporal levels would reveal an underlying continuity between the various phases of Mexican history. Nor is this the effect he pursues at the end of *La región*. The torrent of images, names, and historical episodes he unleashes here evokes a tumultuous, unrestrained multiplicity. In the same essay Fuentes writes that Mexican time "se divierte con nosotros, se revierte contra nosotros, se invierte en nosotros, se subvierte desde nosotros, se convierte en nombre nuestro." These verbs describe not continuity and coherence, but an unceasing process of metamorphosis. He argues that the simultaneous existence in Mexico of all historical levels results from a decision of the land and its people to maintain alive all of time, for the simple reason that "ningún tiempo se ha cumplido aún" Fuentes's Mexican past, in other words, is profoundly different from the past to which the Anglo-American modernists wished to return. It offers not the fullness of an established tradition, but a variety of unfinished projects. Fuentes attacks the proponents of modernization in Mexico, with their cult of the present and of progress, for having suppressed this feature of Mexican time. To return to the cultural and historical multiplicity of Mexico constitutes an act of liberation, a rebellion against the enslaving prejudices of modernity. Fuentes believes that such a rebellion in fact took place during the Mexican Revolution:

> Sólo la Revolución□y por eso, a pesar de todo, merece una R mayúscula□hizo presente todos los pasados de México. Lo hizo instantáneamente, como si supiera que no sobraría tiempo para esta fiesta de encarnaciones. ("Kierkegaard")

This view of the Mexican Revolution is explicitly expressed in *La región* by Manuel Zamacona, who declares at one point that "La Revolución nos descubre la totalidad de la historia de México," a statement that exactly replicates statements Fuentes has made elsewhere in his own name. It is an idea that can be traced to Octavio Paz, who in *El laberinto de la soledad* described the Mexican Revolution as "un movimiento tendiente a reconquistar nuestro pasado, asimilarlo y hacerlo vivo en el presente." My argument is that at the end of *La región,* Fuentes tries to reproduce on the aesthetic level this revolutionary resuscitation of Mexico's many-sided past. He creates a textual model of ferment, upheaval, and open-endedness. This vision of the simultaneous coexistence of all times overturns the linear approach to time represented by Rodrigo Pola, and by the new Mexican bourgeoisie's deification of progress. But the constant process of change and dispersal implied by this vision of time as "fiesta" also subverts the obsession with the unity and singularity of origins expressed in the figure of Ixca Cienfuegos. Fuentes's alternative is his concept of revolutionary time, a vision of simultaneity that promises freedom and possibility, but does not dispense with a strong sense of the shaping powers of the past. This paradoxical fusion of freedom and necessity, of futurity and pastness, is made possible by an ambiguity in the word "revolution" itself, which generally refers to a clean break with the past, a drastic change in the social order, but, in an older version of the word, which Fuentes clearly wants his readers to recall,

indicates a process of cyclical return. In the imaginative space Fuentes creates at the end of *La región*, these two meanings are held together in an ultimately utopian gesture.

A utopian vision of revolution has been a consistent element in Fuentes's work. In the 1980s, Fuentes has continued to discuss revolutions, in Mexico and elsewhere, in the same terms he used in the 1950s. In his 1983 Harvard commencement speech, for example, he declared that the Mexican Revolution had brought to light "the totality of our history and the possibility of a culture" (*Myself with Others*). He went on to connect the Mexican experience with that of other countries now passing through revolutionary phases:

> Paz himself, Diego Rivera and Carlos Chávez, Mariano Azuela and José Clemente Orozco, Juan Rulfo and Rufino Tamayo: we all work and exist because of the revolutionary experience of our country. How can we stand by as this experience is denied, through ignorance and arrogance, to other people, our brothers, in Central America and the Caribbean?

In *Gringo viejo* (1985), Fuentes once again explores his ideas about the Mexican Revolution. At one point in the novel, the soldiers in the rebel army of Pancho Villa occupy the mansion of a wealthy family that has fled the country. When the soldiers enter the ballroom, with its huge mirrors, they are astonished at the sight of their own reflections; for the first time in their lives they are seeing their own bodies in their entirety. In this way, the Revolution has finally allowed these men and women to discover who they really are. A similar notion is articulated in the broad opposition the narrative constructs between Mexico before and Mexico during the Revolution. Before the Revolution the country was merely an aggregate of static, isolated communities. The Revolution sets the country in motion; the people leave their villages and towns and finally begin to discover the common purpose that binds the nation together as a whole. The Revolution, in this view, constitutes an explosive moment of self-recognition in the nation's history.

Fuentes's most recent novel, *Cristóbal Nonato* (1987), however, reveals a distinct shift in perspective: revolutions, both past and present, are now seen in a far less sanguine light. The spirit of the Mexican Revolution is recreated in a mocking, though affectionate, manner in the figure of General Rigoberto Palomar, who owes his high military rank to a somewhat unusual feat: at the age of eighteen he was elevated in one stroke from trumpeter to general for having recovered the arm General Alvaro Obregón lost during the battle of Celaya. In the novel's present, at the age of ninety-one, General Palomar is the last survivor of the Revolution, in which he maintains an irrational faith premised on two contradictory assumptions: "1) la Revolución no había terminado y 2) la Revolución había triunfado y cumplido todas sus promesas." This discrediting of the concept of revolution takes on a less light-hearted form when it comes to a depiction of the revolutionary spirit of the late twentieth century. The embodiment of this spirit is Matamoros Moreno, whose leadership of the revolutionary forces of Mexico is both absurd, in that it grows out of the resentments of a frustrated writer, and somewhat

sinister, in that his name, the "Ayatollah," links him to a reactionary religious fanaticism. In this way, the belief in the possible emergence of a new, more benign, order is severely attenuated.

A final element in Fuentes's revised view of the nature of revolution consists of his rethinking the relationship between the erotic and the political. Wendy Faris has observed that in much of Fuentes's work "love and revolution are allied, the physical upheaval and implied freedom of eroticism often serving as analogues for social liberation, both moving us toward some kind of utopia" ("Desire and Power"). In *Cristóbal Nonato,* however, the personal and the political are no longer so easily reconciled; the relationship between these two di mensions of existence turns out to be fraught with difficulties. When young Angel Palomar abandons his wife in the middle of her pregnancy in order to pursue an infatuation with the vain and superficial daughter of one of Mexico's richest men, he manages to convince himself that he is doing it in order to keep alive his iconoclastic and rebellious spirit. He is, in other words, chasing Penny López for the right ideological reasons. But Angel is not entirely convinced by his own attempt at self-justification; he continues to be perplexed by "la contradicción entre sus ideas y su práctica" and he is finally unable to find the correct adjustment between his sex life and his politics: "Su sexualidad renaciente, era progresista o reaccionaria? Su actividad política, debía conducirlo a la monogamía o al harén?" The only possible conclusion is that these two realms are in some sense incommensurable: "ante un buen acostón se estrellan todas las ideologías." In this way, revolution, deprived of a clear basis in personal experience, becomes a far more complex, baf- fling and even improbable event. Whether *Cristóbal Nonato* signals a major shift in Fuentes's work it is too early to say. What is clear, however, is that it is precisely Fuentes's persistent engagement with the question of the interrelations between the private and the public, between the individual self and its historical circumstances, that constitutes his most powerful claim on our interest.

Source: Maarten Van Delden, "Myth, Contingency, and Revolution in Carlos Fuentes's La region mas transparente," in *Comparative Literature,* Vol. 43, No. 4, Fall, 1991, p. 326.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Sean French reviews Carlos Fuentes' novel The Old Gringo*, an historical fiction dramatizing the life of Ambrose Bierce and seeking to capture the history and breadth of his adopted country, Mexico.*

Ambrose Bierce was a misanthrope, a nihilist, and America's most celebrated journalist. At the end of his career he decided not to fade away. In 1913, a bitter and beaten seventy-one-year-old, he lit out for Mexico and disappeared. Rumour has it that he joined Pancho Villa's revolutionary army and died in action the following year. Where history stops, the novel can begin. Carlos Fuentes's *The Old Gringo* takes up Bierce's story from the moment he crosses the Rio Grande with a suitcase containing two of his own books, a copy of *Don Quixote* and a Colt .44.

Fuentes clearly has only the most perfunctory interest in creating a plausible version of what might have happened. The "old gringo" (Bierce is never named: it is only through hints, allusions or reading the dustjacket that we find out the truth) rides across the desert and stumbles on a revolutionary detachment in Chihuahua commanded by the self-styled General Tomás Arroyo. He has led a rising on the estate where he was born and brought up as a virtual slave. The landowners have fled, but Harriet Winslow, the prim American school-teacher they had hired, remains stubbornly behind. The general refuses to accept Bierce as a recruit until the old gringo demonstrates improbable skill with his revolver.

This novel is crammed with incident, much of it of the most melodramatic kind. We are told frequently that the old gringo has come to Mexico to die. He rides into battle with Arroyo's troops and performs acts of astonishing bravery, but he is not killed. Meanwhile Harriet Winslow is cured of her inhibitions in the course of a love affair with the virile General Arroyo. The tale reaches a predictably violent conclusion, and as in many a western only the woman survives to return to civilization.

But what is the book really about? Bierce wonders himself: "Was he here to die or to write a novel about a Mexican general and an old gringo and a Washington schoolteacher lost in the deserts of northern Mexico?" *The Old Gringo* is about Ambrose Bierce the man, but it also makes sophisticated use of his literary and political career. The form of the novel alludes to Bierce's celebrated short story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", about a Confederate soldier being hanged from a bridge during the American Civil War. He feels the rope break and the story details his escape and journey across country. Finally he reaches home, but as he runs towards his wife everything goes black and he dies, swinging from the bridge. The whole story has taken place in his mind at the moment of his death.

Fuentes hints that this novel may be taking place in similar fashion in Bierce's mind as he dies. To complicate matters; the story is also unfolding in the confused memory of Harriet Winslow, reliving the events many years later in her Washington, DC, walk-up apartment. He is in her dream, but she is in his dream as well.

For the Mexicans, their country is all too real, and there are vivid evocations in this book of desert, heat and smells. But Mexico is also present as a state of mind, a subject of fantasy. Harriet Winslow and Bierce both enter Mexico as carefully delineated representatives of imperialism, with disdain for this primitive, chaotic country in the United States' back yard. Much in *The Old Gringo* is muddy, even on a second reading, but the anti-Americanism is clear enough. As Bierce put it to Harriet, with the author's obvious approval,

> remember how we killed our Redskins and never had the courage to fornicate with the squaws and at least create a half-breed nation. We are caught in the business of forever killing people whose skin is of a different color. Mexico is the proof of what we could have been, so keep your eyes wide open.

This is a curious novel, alternately whimsical and immensely impressive. The vitality and virtuosity of Fuentes's narrative - in this superb translation, something like Jack London rewritten by Borges□are breathtaking. This is a story composed of fragments: moments of violence, passion or revelation, captured in memories and dreams. In other hands the effect could have been diffuse and boring, but Fuentes gives it the strange solidity of a fable. Yet much of the characterization□the demure schoolteacher, the macho rebel leader with "his uneasy sex, never restful"□is crude caricature. And the real subject of the novel, Mexico itself, which, we are told, redeems Bierce (compensating him "with a life: the life of his senses, awakened from lethargy by his proximity to death"), remains in the background.

It's only when one turns to Fuentes's first book, *Where the Air is Clear* (first published in 1960 but appearing now in English for the first time), that we see fully what Mexico means to him. And if *The Old Gringo* seems starved of characters, perhaps it's because Fuentes used a career's worth of them in his first novel, a prodigious attempt to give Mexico its *Comédie Humaine* and *Ulysses* between the covers of one book. He tells the story of family after family□bankers, revolutionaries, artists, prostitutes, socialites□and, with flamboyant dexterity, weaves them together. At the heart of the book are two young men, Ixca Cienfuegos and Rodrigo Pola, who are on a troubled quest to discover how they can live in this violent, impoverished country, a country which destroyed Rodrigo's father, Gervasio, a revolutionary, executed during the 1913 civil war (an event that obsesses Fuentes). Fuentes portrays much of his country with loathing: the squalor of Mexico City, the corruption, the political oppression. The novel's most troubling, complicated character is Federico Robles, once a revolutionary comrade of Gervasios's and now a successful banker. "Here there is only one choice", he tells the two young radicals, "we make the nation prosperous, or we starve." And if that means putting Mexico under the economic control of the United States, he is willing to pay that price.

Where the Air is Clear (again, in an excellent translation) lacks the formal discipline of *The Old Gringo*, but it is attempting something more diffi- cult and interesting, which is to embrace all sides of a country, ranging from the old Spanish Empire to the Aztec culture of the sun the Spanish found when they arrived, from capitalism to revolutionary

socialism: "Mexico is the only world radically cut off from Europe which has to accept the fatality of Europe's complete penetration and use the European words for both life and death, although the being of her life and faith are of a different language."

Of course, all this proves difficult to resolve and the novel ends in a sort of mystical trance of affirmation and reconciliation. It does have its moments of shrillness, over-insistence or sentimentality but is nevertheless a very exciting book, partly because it is written out of excitement for a great new subject. As one character puts it: "One does not explain Mexico. One believes in Mexico, with fury, with passion, and in alienation."

Source: Sean French, "Shouting from the Backyard," in *Times Literary Supplement,* July 4, 1986, p. 733.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, author Luis Leal reviews Carlos Fuentes' novel Where the Air is Clear *and his unique use of combining myth and fiction to create a synthesized biography of Mexico City.*

Gabriel García Márquez, in his Nobel lecture, stated that Latin American reality is a reality not of paper, "but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes creativity, full of sorrow and beauty. . . . Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable."

Latin American writers, truly more than any other group, have rendered those lives believable by means of their creative works, especially their novels. Alongside the names of García Márquez and other prominent Latin American authors we find that of Carlos Fuentes, whose novels have given us an inside picture of Mexico's reality, a picture which would be difficult to duplicate in history books, and which has not been duplicated by other writers. To accomplish this he has made use not only of history, but also of the living myths□ ancient and modern□that have had so much influence in shaping the nation's destiny. With these materials he has produced, under the guise of fiction, one of the most penetrating visions of Mexico and its inhabitants. This he has done in most of his works, but especially in the novels *Where the Air Is Clear, The Death of Artemio Cruz,* and, more recently, in *Distant Relations,* as well as in his collection of essays, *Tiempo mexicano* (*Mexican Time*).

García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes have been instrumental in perfecting a type of fiction that another Latin American Nobel prize winner, Miguel Angel Asturias, had made known earlier. Like Asturias, García Márquez and Fuentes have combined two narrative modes, the realistic (historical) and the mythical. As has been observed by Northrop Frye, the combination of these two dissimilar modes of fiction creates technical problems for making the narrative plausible. Latin American novelists, however, have been successful in solving this problem, which Frye calls *displacement*.

Carlos Fuentes has been successful in giving us a mythified vision of Mexican history. Although his fiction is essentially realistic, he has abandoned the traditional forms in order to embrace a new type of realism, a realism based on the utilization of mythical themes and structures combined with realistic characteres, scenes, and dialogues, as practiced by Juan Rulfo, García Márquez, and other contemporary writers.

In Fuentes the change has not been abrupt. The title of his first book, *Los días enmascarados* ("Masked Days"), published in 1954, already referred to the Aztec myth of the five days at the end of the year when time stopped in readiness for the new life, the rebirth, the eternal return. The relation between myth and reality is best expressed in his story "Chac Mool" a story inspired by an event that took place in 1952, an exhibition of Mexican art in Europe which included the statue of the prehispanic god of

rain, the god whose mere presence brought on a deluge of rain, according to the Mexican newspaper account read by Fuentes. In 1964, in an interview, he said that "the data from the sensational, journalistic account of the art exhibit focused my attention on a fact evident to all Mexicans: the living presence of old cosmological forms from a Mexico lost forever but which, nevertheless, refuses to die and manifests itself from time to time through a mystery, an apparition, a reflection."

In that short story Fuentes recreates the myth of the eternal return by the illusory transformation of a statue of a god, Chac Mool, which the protagonist has bought and placed in the basement of his house, where it comes back to life with the coming of the rains. The importance of the past upon the present is given expression by having the ancient god control its owner, finally driving him to suicide.

The novels of Fuentes, with some exceptions, can be considered as mythical approaches to history, or creative history. His success as a novelist is due in great part to this use of myth to interpret history, for history, as Ernst Cassirer has observed, is determined by the mythology of the people. "In the relation between myth and history," he wrote, "myth proves to be the primary, history the secondary and derived factor. It is not by its history that the mythology of a nation is determined, but, conversely, its history is determined by its mythology□or rather, the mythology of a people does not *determine* but *is* its fate, its destiny as decreed from the very beginning." This idea of the determination of the fate of a people from the very beginning appears in *Where the Air is Clear* and is expressed by one of the central characters, Ixca Cienfuegos, who symbolizes the mythical nature of Mexico City. He says, "Today is born of that very origin which, without knowing it, controls us, who have always lived within it."

In an interview Fuentes said that in *Where the Air Is Clear* he tried, among other things, to write a personal biography of Mexico City, "its silhouettes, its secrets, a city which I love and hate at the same time because in it are presented with the greatest brutality the miseries and hopes of all my country. I tried to produce a synthesis of presentday Mexico: conflicts, aspirations, rancors."

In the novel the miseries are described realistically, and the hopes and aspirations are projected into the future. The miseries are present day, the hopes are for a brighter tomorrow. These hopes he placed on the younger generation, who in 1951, the year in which most of the action in the novel takes place, was sweeping away the old remnants of the past in a search for better ways. He himself contributed with his literary works, in which he created a new language. Fuentes firmly believes in the importance of language in any interpretation of reality. The relationship between language and reality is, indeed, at the bottom of all his creations, for it is through language, he tells us, that Latin American reality has been distorted, "Much before television was invented," he wrote, "reality was already disguised by a false language. The Renaissance language of the Conquest hides the Medieval kernel of the colonizing enterprise, like the Laws of the Indies that of the *Encomienda*. The illuminist language of the Independence hide the remaining feudalism, and the positivist 19th century language of liberalism the sell-out to financial imperialism. . . . The language of the Revolution hides the reality of the counter revolution."

For us, *Where the Air Is Clear* is much more than a biography of Mexico City, an expose of its true reality, or the creation of a new language. It is a metaphor expressing the confrontation between two universal cultures, two different ways of life, those of the West and those of indigenous America. All the characters, all the scenes, all the dialogues, and the ideas, concepts, and opinions, all the imagery, all the motives, all the popular elements are nothing but examples of that struggle, a struggle that was the subject of the novel *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) by D. H. Lawrence.

Since Mexico was one of the first non-Western countries to receive the impact of the West, it became a laboratory for the study of the consequences of the conquest of one civilization by another. The historian Arnold Toynbee, expert in the study of this phenomenum, wrote in 1939, in his *A Study of History*, that in Mexico the movement of revolt had not been a reaction against the civilization of the West. The Mexicans, he said,

> have not been seeking to extricate themselves from the Western toils in which the civilization of their forebears was caught and bound, four hundred years ago, by Cortés and his fellow *conquistadores*. On the contrary, the Mexicans have been seeking in our generation to take a fabulous Western kingdom of Heaven by storm. . . . On this showing, we may pronounce that the *ci-devant* Central American civilization, as well as the *ci-devant* Andean civilization, has now been completely incorporated into our Western body social.

Fifteen years later, however, Toynbee modified his statement, as a result, we assume, of his visit to Mexico in 1953. He made the observation that the Indian culture had really not been absorbed by Western civilization. He wrote in 1954, "The Mexican Revolution of A.D. 1821, which might thus have appeared to have completed the incorporation of the Central American into the Western World, had been followed by the Revolution of A.D. 1910, in which the buried but hibernating indigenous society had suddenly bestirred itself, raised its head, and broken through the crust of culture deposited by officious Castilian hands on the grave into which the conquistadores had thrust a body that they believed themselves to have slain" (VII, 1954).

Among the intellectuals active in Mexico during the early fifties, the years when the action of *Where the Air is Clear* takes place and also when Toynbee was invited to address them on the subject of the relations between the West and the rest of the world, the nature of Mexican life and culture was a subject very much in vogue. Octavio Paz wrote at length about it in his seminal book, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the first edition of which appeared in 1950. Four years before Toynbee published his last remarks about Mexico, Paz had said, "The Revolution was a sudden immersion of Mexico in her own being, from which she brought back up, almost blindly, the essentials of a new kind of state. In addition, it was a return to the past, a reuniting of the ties broken by the Reform

and the Diaz dictatorship, a search for our own selves, and a return to the maternal womb."

Paz, however, went beyond Toynbee to postulate that there was now only one civilization. "All of today's civilizations," he says in his revised edition of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1959), "derive from that of the Western world, which has assimilated or crushed its rivals. . . . The contemporary crisis is not a struggle between two diverse cultures, as the conservatives would have us believe, but rather an internal quarrel in a civilization that no longer has any rivals, a civilization whose future is the future of the whole world." Toynbee's idea of conflict between different cultures and not Paz' concept of internal struggle within Western culture is the one presented by Fuentes in his novel.

No less important than the influence of Octavio Paz upon Fuentes' conception of the world in his novel was that of the intellectuals who in 1947- 1948 formed the group *Hiperión,* led by the philosopher Leopoldo Zea. The main preoccupation of these young thinkers was the definition of the psyche of the Mexican and the destiny of Mexico as a nation. The name *Hiperión* was selected because Hiperión, the child of heaven and earth, symbolized for them the study of Mexico's life and culture in the context of the universal and the concrete, the national and the Western. The group, which was active until 1952, is represented in the novel by Zamacona, whose tragic death is symbolic of the lack of communication between members of different social classes, as well as the disregard with which intellectuals are treated in Mexico.

In Fuentes' novel the most important characters that symbolize the struggle between Western and non-Western cultures are Federico Robles, his wife Norma, Manuel Zamacona, Rodrigo Pola, Ixca Cienfuegos, and his mother Teódula Moctezuma. Robles and Ixca represent the two extremes, Robles the total acceptance and Ixca the total rejection of Western culture. It is ironic that Robles, an old Indian revolutionary but now a prosperous and powerful industrialist, should be the representative of Western culture. This fact, from the perspective of narrative technique, is important because the author does not want to give a Manichean interpretation of Mexican reality by presenting all Indians as opposed to Western culture.

Robles is a realist and believes that Mexico's only way out is to adopt the West's economic system in order to raise the standard of living of the people by creating industry and a middle class. The creation of a stable middle class is essential, he says, because it is "the surest protection against tyranny and unrest." For him there is only one truth; he says, "We make the nation prosperous or we starve." He wants to forget Mexico's past and look to tomorrow. "Here in Mexico," he says to Zamacona, "we can't give ourselves the luxury of intellectualism. Here we have to look to the future." He rejects not only the past, but men of letters as well. "Poets," he says, "are of the past. . .the past is done with, forever." He stops at nothing to have what he calls progress, that is, material progress. He wants, like President Miguel Alemán, who was then ruling Mexico, to increase tourism and to attract foreign capital. To reach his goal, he says, he has the right "to stomp on whomever we care to."

At the other extreme we find Ixca Cienfuegos and his mother Teódula who, like Don Ramiro and Cipriano in *The Plumed Serpent*, want to substitute Western culture with the native cultures of Mexico. Unlike Robles, who thought that a stable middle class should predominate, Ixca and Teódula want the anonymous masses to prevail. Ixca tells Zamacona: "You think his [Robles'] cheap marketplace power which lacks all greatness is better than a power which at least had the imagination to ally itself with the great forces, permanent and inviolable, of the cosmos? With the sun itself?

Ixca's philosophy is based on the myth of the return to the origins, since everything, according to him, was determined at that moment. In Mexico, he says, nothing is indispensable, since sooner or later an anonymous secret force floods and transforms everything. "A force that is older than all our memories . . . the beginning, the origin. All the rest is masquerade. There, in our origin, Mexico still exists . . . And what Mexico is, is fixed forever, incapable of evolution."

Teódula Moctezuma, with her dead ancestors buried under the floor of her house, her magic jewelry, and her desire for a sacrifice to the gods in order to start a new cycle of life, also symbolizes Mexico's past, a mythical Mexico part of which still survives, and which still believes in rituals and in sacrifices as the only way for man to redeem himself. The Mexican people have been chosen by the gods to feed the sun and keep it moving so that mankind can survive. Without sacrifices this would be impossible. When Teódula achieves her goal of having a sacrifice□she believes that the death of Norma, Robles' wife, was caused by Ixca□she feels that her mission has been accomplished. As an offering to the gods she throws her jewelry into the fire where Norma's body is, and later says to Ixca: "Now we can return to being what we are, my son. Now we have no reason to pretend. You will come back to your own here, with me. . . . Each of us must be what he is, and you know it."

Ixca questions whether the present is better than the mythical past. In a confrontation between Ixca and Zamacona, who represents not the mythical but the historical past, as well as the present/ future, Ixca says:

> Salvation for the whole world depends upon this anonymous people who are at the world's center, the very navel of the star. Mexico's people, the only people who are contemporaneous with the world itself, the only ones who live with their teeth biting into the original breast. . . . Today is born of that very origin which, without knowing it, controls us, who have always lived within it.

During the dialogue, Ixca was thinking that if

> Mexicans are not saved, no one will be saved. If here in this land . . . the gift is not possible, the gift that is asked for, grace and love, then it is not possible

anywhere for anyone. Either Mexicans are saved, or not a single being in all creation is saved.

Zamacona, who stands for the individual, rejects the idea of sacrifice and insists on making every one who commits a crime responsible for his own actions. "For every Mexican who dies in vain, sacrified," he says, "there is another Mexican who is guilty; for this death not to have been in vain, someone must assume guilt for it. Guilt for every aborigine who was crushed, for every starving mother . . . But who will assume the guilt for Mexico, Ixca, who?"

The confrontation between Zamacona and Robles, unlike that with Ixca, is on a different level. The questions that preoccupy Robles, who is really Zamacona's father, a fact unknown to both, are not guilt and salvation, but the elimination of the remnants of the past which, according to Robles, only hinder Mexico's road to progress and prosperity. When Zamacona tells Robles that Mexico has always tried to imitate foreign models, Robles replies, "And what do you want friend? Shall we wear feathers and eat human flesh again?". Zamacona answers with a speech that constitutes the central message of the novel:

> That's exactly what I don't want, Licenciado. I want our sleep to lose those shadows. I want to understand what it means to wear feathers in order not to wear them and in order to be myself. I don't want us to take pleasure in mourning our past, but to penetrate the past and understand it, reduce it to reason, cancel what is dead, save what is living, and know at last what Mexico really is and what may be done with her.

The problem with Mexico, according to Zamacona, is that, since the Conquest, it has never been itself. In all aspects of life and culture the country has tried to imitate either the European or the American way of life. This idea was first examined by the Mexican philosopher Samuel Ramos, who in 1934, in his slender book, *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico,* for the first time dared to peek behind Mexico's mask. For him, the problem with the country was the tendency to imitate European culture superficially, without ever digesting it and making it a part of the national psyche. The solution for him, as for Zamacona and his group in the novel, was to adopt the best that Europe and the United States could offer, and integrate it with the best that the indigenous cultures had preserved. Zamacona tells Robles:

> We've always tried to imitate models that were foreign to us, to wear clothes that could not fit, to disguise our faces to conceal the fact that we are different, by definition different, with nothing in common with anyone . . . Don't you see Mexico wounding herself by trying to become Europe and the United States? . . . Everything, monarchy, reform, liberalism, centralism, has always been a mummery?

Zamacona's observation that Mexico is forever imitating foreign models sounds like an echo of Octavio Paz in his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, a copy of which Zamacona was carrying when he met Ixca and Robles. In that book, Paz summarizes the nature of Mexico's history and the Mexican's plight: his search for identity and his desire to end his isolation and once again participate in the events that shape the destiny of the world. Paz says:

> The history of Mexico is the history of a man seeking his parentage, his origins. He has been influenced at one time or another by France, Spain, the United States and the militant indigenists of his own country, and he crosses history like a jade comet, now and then giving off flashes of lightning. What is he pursuing in his eccentric course? He wants to go back beyond the catastrophe he suffered: he wants to be a sun again, to return to the center of that life from which he was seperated one day. (Was that day the Conquest? Independence?). Our solitude has the same roots as religious feelings. It is a form of orphanhood, an obscure awareness that we have been torn from the All, and an ardent search: a flight and a return, an effort to re-establish the bonds that unite us with the universe.

Paz wrote those words in 1950. Fuentes published his novel in 1958, and García Márquez gave expression to the same idea in 1966, in his famous novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The deaths of both Norma and Zamacona are interpreted as sacrifices. This revelation of the mythical nature of Mexican history is accomplished by the use of image and metaphor. The characters, the descriptions of the city, the action, and the plot are all expressed by uniting two worlds, that of the remote past and that of the present. The interaction between the characters representing each culture becomes the central technique of displacement. Mythical episodes are used by Fuentes to give his work a pure, literary quality. History and myth balance each other to give the novel equilibrium. The introduction, spoken by Ixca, offers the key to the structure of the novel. Mexico City, as the modern version of ancient Tenochtitlán, is the center of the world, El ombligo del mundo (the navel of the world), a sacred city. According to Mircea Eliade, the center "is pre-eminently the zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality."

The image of the eagle and the serpent, related to the myth of the founding of Mexico City, implies another myth: that Mexicans must forego Western civilization and return to their origins in order to survive. A similar myth is the one mentioned by Ixca regarding the creation of the sun. The god that became the sun was a humble god, a leprous god, "a leper, yes, a leper, who first leaped into the brazier of original creation in order to feed that flame. He was reborn, changed into a star. A motionless star. One sacrifice by itself, even one like that, isn't enough. Daily sacrifice is needed, daily feeding so that the sun

will give light, and in turn feed us." In the realistic world of the novel, the sacrificial victims. Norma, Zamacona, Feliciano Sánchez, Froilán Reyero, Gabriel, and the boy Jorge, come from all social classes and represent all philosophies.

The two solutions proposed to save Mexico, that is, the adoption of foreign models and the return to the origins, are rejected. Both Robles and Ixca Cienfuegos finally realize that they have been wrong and both lose faith in their ideas, Robles after losing his wife and all his material possessions, and Ixca after his mother's death. After he is bankrupt and disgraced, dethroned like an old king by a younger one, Robles begins to assume the guilt which Zamacona preaches. Thinking about what he had done to the labor leader Feliciano Sánchez and his employee Froilán Reyero, "two names that were a way of naming all the anonymous dead, enslaved starving, . . . Robles felt that the sadness and desolation of every Mexican life." Ixca also realizes that his mother was wrong. He tells Rodrigo Pola during the reckless car ride at the end of the novel, "It was all a terrible game, that's all, a game of forgotten rites and signs and dead words . . . she believed that Norma's death was a necessary sacrifice, and that once the sacrifice was given, we could return and bury ourselves in lives of poverty, mumble hysterical words over our [dead], play with humility!"

In the novel a relationship exists between the three ideological positions taken by Robles, who stands for material progress; Ixca, who stands for *indigenismo*; and Zamacona, who stands for a fusion of the two, and the three narrative elements, that of reality, myth, and prophecy. There is also a relationship of these ideological positions and the narrative elements to the concept of time. The present in the novel, Robles' Mexico, is a precise historical circumstance: the state of Mexican society in the year 1951; the past, Ixca's Mexico, is the mythical origin of the city; and the future, Zamacona's Mexico, the prophecy as to its destiny. Other characters in the novel also represent either the past, the present, or the future, and Fuentes' genius lies in his creation of characters who are symbolic of the social world in which they move, whether they live, culturally, in the mythical past, the realistic present, or the illusory future.

In his essay, *Cervantes o la critíca de la lectura* (*Cervantes or the Criticism of Reading*), Fuentes says that "Utopia is to become a reality not in the nihilistic storm that forces us to begin from zero every time, but in the fusion of the values we have received from the past with the values we are to create in the present." Also, that "the present in itself is not enough: to be a present in the full sense of the word requires a sense of the past and a capacity to imagine the future." This is precisely what Fuentes has done in his novels and short stories. In *Where the Air Is Clear* he has taken the mythical past of Mexico City, fused it with a reconstruction of life during the early fifties and, from this, projected a vision of the future through three characters, Robles, Ixca, and Zamacona. For Robles, Mexicans will not survive if the country is not industrialized. Ixca, on the other hand, believes that the world will be saved by the anonymous mass of Mexican people, and if Mexico cannot be saved, human beings can be saved. Zamacona believes that Mexico's salvation depends on grace, and love, and if grace and love are banished by the restoration of sacrifices or the pursuit of a materialistic way of life, the country is doomed.

Although *Where the Air Is Clear* reflects an experimental technique, Fuentes succeeded in creating a picture of Mexico City never before attempted by a novelist. He not only created a new language and preserved the secrets, the miseries, and the hopes of the City, but went beyond to dramatize the nature of the struggle between two cultures, Western and non-Western. Through dramatic interaction between the characters he was able to symbolize that struggle, a struggle which results in the rejection of both foreign and native models in favor of a synthesis of the two out of which will grow the Mexican culture of the future, a prophecy that is yet to be fulfilled.

Source: Luis Leal, "Realism, Myth, and Prophecy in Fuentes' Where the Air is Clear," in *Confluencia,* Vol. 1, No. 1, Fall, 1985, p. 75.

Critical Essay #5

In the following review, Richard M. Reeve deconstructs the unusually expansive period author Carlos Fuentes took to compose and rework his panoramic novel La región más transparente *and examines how Fuentes' detailed efforts allowed the book to retain its relevancy over several decades.*

It is the practice of some authors, especially poets, to rework and polish their writings over a period of many years while continuing to make additions and corrections to future editions. Not so with Carlos Fuentes, who seems to produce a literary work and to leave it immediately in the hands of the reader and critic, while moving on to his next endeavor. Thus the case of the composition and reworking of *La región más transparente* over a period of a quarter of a century is an anomaly worthy of close examination. It is relatively easy to establish the concluding date of this process, 1974, which saw the publication of the novel in the Aguilar edition of his *Obras completas* with its apparent final revisions. But my choice of 1949 as the year when Fuentes began the novel is much more arbitrary.

The inspiration for a panoramic novel about life in the modern metropolis no doubt arose in Carlos Fuentes' mind with his experiences as a child moving from one large city to another: Washington, D.C.; Rio de Janeiro; Santiago, Chile; Buenos Aires; and finally to Mexico City. Also, by the age of fifteen he had read John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*, marveling at its style and structure. The year 1949 is decisive, however, since it marks the beginning of Fuentes' active publishing career and includes among other key but little known writings a short story set in New York City and a series of articles about the cultural milieu of the Mexican capital. Finally, a later date in the mid-1950s might also be defended. With the publication of his collection of short stories, *Losdías enmascarados* (1954) Fuentes could dedicate himself in earnest to his novel, and indeed fragments of the work began appearing in magazines and newspapers in the years 1955 and 1956. Beginning in the fall of 1956, Fuentes, as the fortunate recipient of a fellowship from the Rockefeller-sponsored Centro Mexicano de Escritores, was able to devote himself full time to *La región más transparente*. The novel itself, after much speculation and controversy, finally appeared in the spring of 1958.

Critical Essay #6

Carlos' father, Rafael Fuentes Boettiger, embarked upon a long and distinguished career as a diplomat in the 1920s and served with every president of Mexico from the Revolution to the 1950s. The main action of *La región más transparente* transpires in the years 1951 and 1953, during the presidency of Miguel Alemán, Mexico's 58th president and the first civilian since Juárez to hold the office for a full term. Mexico was passing through a period of unprecedented change and growth. Alemán, who was known as the businessman's president, remains to this day the center of impassioned controversy, but during the fifties his dynamic personality and colossal enterprises seemed to bedazzle the multitude. Skyscrapers began dotting the skyline, the magnificent new campus of the National University rose up on a former lava bed, and North American tourists arrived in increasing numbers. Mexico was becoming more international with the influx of Spanish refugees in the late thirties and other European nationals in the forties.

During the decade of the fifties the country was governed in the main by two presidents named Adolfo: Ruiz Cortines and López Mateos. Fuentes has characterized them as belonging to the faceless center; neither radical like Cárdenas nor rightist like Alemán. *La región más transparente* was published in 1958, an election year. The 6th of July elections were characterized as the quietest in history; women voted for a president for the first time. López Mateos received 6,767,754 votes; Luis Alvarez, his PAN opponent, obtained 705,303, while Miguel Menéndez López, the presidential candidate for the Communist Party, received fewer write-in votes than comic actor Cantinflas.

Mexico's population continued to spiral at the astonishing and alarming rate of 3 percent annually. The capital city was estimated to have 5,448,218 inhabitants. Classroom and teacher shortages were so severe that only 41 percent of school-age children could attend school. Illiteracy was estimated at 50 percent.

In cultural achievements, 1958 saw increasing literary activity. It was labeled the year of the novel and *La región más transparente* the novel of the year. Poetry was less fortunate and only Octavio Paz's excellent *La estación violenta* mitigated a disastrous year for the genre. José Luis Martínez published the important but controversial *Antología del ensayo mexicano*. Critics lamented the decline of the theater in Mexico although attendance was higher than ever. Of the eighty plays presented during the year only twelve were written by Mexican playwrights. During 1958 Luis G. Basurto's *Cada quien su vida* would reach one thousand consecutive representations and actress Rita Macedo (Fuentes' fiancée) and Ernest Alonso combined to produce *Intermezzo* by Jean Giraudoux. Emmanuel Carballo counted forty-one books of fiction published in the country during 1958. He believed Fuentes to be the best of the new writers and Martín Luis Guzmán, who had just published *Muertes históricas*, to be the best of the veterans. Luis Spota's *Casi el paraíso* remained the best seller of the year with its third and fourth printings and a total of 21,000 copies in three years, a very sizable figure for a Latin American novel in those days.

Critical Essay #7

In contrast to many Mexican writers of the early part of this century, Carlos Fuentes did not grow up nor spend any appreciable time in the rural countryside. Those authors, most of whom were eventually drawn to the city (Azuela, Yáñez, Rulfo), had rural experiences from their childhood and youth to draw upon. Others (Martín Luis Guzmán) would live in the interior during the emotion-filled years of the Revolution and would often return to this unique occurrence in their fiction.

Not so with Fuentes, who in fact seldom resided in Mexico. By the time he was a teenager, he had spent more time in the United States than in any Latin country. At this crucial period of his life Fuentes was almost to the point of losing his native language, thus motivating his parents to send him to summer school in Mexico. Consequently Fuentes was above all a man with a vision of the big city, or rather of many big cities. He also enjoyed the unique advantage of being able to compare his own Mexican metropolis with most of the major ones in this hemisphere. This fascination with cities would burgeon until, not surprisingly, his first published writings would focus on the novelty of Mexico City, eventually culminating in his masterful portrait of the Mexican capital in his first novel.

Although Fuentes composed several unpublished works of fiction during his teenage years, his first known published short story, "Pastel rancio," appeared in the November 1949 issue of *Mañana*. Surprisingly, the piece is set in New York City rather than the Distrito Federal de México. Fuentes had visited Manhattan on numerous occasions and had sailed to South America from there in 1941. The main events of the story revolve around the disembarking of transoceanic passengers and would thus disqualify the nonport cities of Washington, D.C., and Mexico City that Fuentes might logically have chosen as his setting. The description of New York is brief□the principal action is the arrival of a displaced person from war-torn Europe. The European refugee will become a popular character in *La región más transparente* and again is prominent in *Cambio de piel* (1967). Even the Jewish race of the main character foreshadows protagonists in later works. The Jew is much less numerous in Mexico City than other major Latin American metropolises and seldom appears in Mexican fiction.

Carlos Fuentes did not publish another piece of fiction for five years, but the numerous essays which were beginning to appear anticipate topics of importance which would surface in his novel, still almost a decade away from publication. During the fall of 1949 José Pagés Llergo invited him to collaborate in the Mexican weekly *Hoy*. Fuentes had not yet turned twenty-one. His first article, "Fue al infierno de visita pero lo vio tan mal que decidió regresar a México," was not of a caliber to make Fuentes immortal. It consisted of an interview with Leonardo Alcalá who claimed to be the third incarnation of God. Even so, the statements on reincarnation would show up in later writings, and the setting, an impoverished "barrio" of Mexico City, is not too distant from that of the "pelado" group in *La región más transparente*. Other articles by Fuentes published in *Hoy* during the following months treated "basfumismo," existentialism, and the Mexican cinema, most of which we will examine in more detail in later sections.

The most important of these articles carried the long but significant title, "Descubriendo al México de 1950: México es la única gran ciudad mestiza que existe en el mundo." In spite of the piece's supreme importance in foreshadowing themes in Fuentes' first novel, it has surprisingly not yet been analyzed by the critics. The essay begins with the author labeling the Mexican capital a "metropolis and large village." Perhaps in his earlier residence in Argentina Fuentes recalled Lucio V. López using the term "la gran aldea" in a novel of the same title to refer to Buenos Aires. In any case it is a logical slogan for a city experiencing rapid growth and changing its character. Fuentes next focuses on the contrasts: "New and old city, beautiful and ugly owing to its decadence and newness." Another unique feature is the lack of ghettos. Next comes a comparison with other famous metropolitan centers in which Fuentes had lived: "Río de Janeiro has what God has given her, New York what man gave her, and Mexico has God, man and tourists." The theme of the unrelenting past which resurfaces to haunt the present is later developed in many of Fuentes' short stories and novels, but is anticipated in these lines from the essay: "Upon the pyramids still stinking with thick and black blood are raised the elaborate walls of the Cathedral; upon the vestibules and moldy patios are built the 'Pepe Bars"; who knows what will be constructed tomorrow. No one knows and no one cares. Variety makes everything more interesting."

Fuentes next passes to "México Abajo" and begins by listing a number of cantinas and brothels. One announces "English Spoken" and another "paint me red and blue and call me Superman." The latter phrase is used word for word in a cocktail party scene in the first novel. Another fascinating facet of the lower depths of Mexico City, according to Fuentes, is the enormous number of witches and wizards. A few names are given including that of Leonardo Alcalá, the New Messiah of Canal de Norte about whom Fuentes had previously written.

Several paragraphs are subsequently devoted to "Mexico Arriba," a class Fuentes knew much more intimately, as we shall see a bit later. Among the city's aristocracy he lists: "New rich, the pseudopopoffs and other social climbers." Each will be pictured in detail in his novel. He then asks the question: "And the aristocracy of the day before yesterday? They're the only ones who don't count; they make up the bourgeoisie of today." The same phrase appears almost intact in the novel, where, to the identical question asked by Príncipe Vampa, Charlotte García responds: "They're the only ones who don't count, at least not in Mexico, they're the petite bourgeoisie of today" (*Región*). A major percentage of the Mexican aristocracy is made up of foreigners: "A curious phenomenon on the Mexican social scene are the 'Internationals Incorporated'; false aristocratic titles, eccentric poses, people who don't do anything because it would take up too much of their time." The above-mentioned falsetitled gentry are extremely important and Fuentes referred in not too oblique a fashion to a recent scandal in Mexico City which would serve as novelistic material for both Fuentes and Luis Spota.

Fuentes further pictures his capital, Mexico City, as the "one place on earth so pliable, eccentric, and uncivilized that 'snobbism' and 'esnobismo' embrace fraternally." After a lengthy quotation from Eça de Queiroz, Fuentes concludes with "enough of the new 'grandezas mexicanas,'" recalling the famous poem by Balbuena which also is cited at a cocktail party in *La región más transparente*.

Now let us look briefly at nine short stories published between the years 1954 and 1956 containing themes which surface in the novel. "Pantera en jazz" was printed in the short-lived and littleknown magazine *Ideas de México*. It is practically unknown to the public and Fuentes has never chosen to include it in any of his anthologies. The plot follows a student who fears that a panther has found its way into his bathroom. Never willing to look and unable to call the police, the protagonist eventually loses his mind. Only a few months later Fuentes treats the subject in almost identical fashion in his famous short story "Chac Mool." In the latter instance the presence from the past which destroys modern man is a statue of a Mayan rain god. In the same *Los días enmascarados* anthology, published in November of 1954, the author repeats the theme in "Por boca de los dioses" and "Tlactocatzine, del Jardín de Flandes." In the first an Aztec goddess kills a contemporary Mexican and in the second it is the ghost of nineteenth-century Carlota of Hapsburg who accomplishes the deed. In each case they anticipate the semi-mythical figures of Ixca Cienfuegos and Teódula Moctezuma in *La región más transparente*. The latter is constantly pleading for her disciple to provide a sacrifice. Ixca will defend his philosophy of returning to the past to save Mexico in a spirited debate with intellectual Manuel Zamacona (spokesman for the future) and banker Federico Robles (man of the present).

The conflict between the present and the past so prominent in the above-cited stories is treated in a more universal fashion in the science fiction story "El que inventó la pólvora," also found in *Los días enmascarados*. Here modern technology is the villain which brings about the end of civilization. Another story in the volume, "Letanía de la orquídea," takes place in Panama. The dual worlds of Panama and the Canal Zone, which Fuentes had just visited in September 1954, personify the Spanish-and-English-speaking "aristocracy" of the "International Set" pictured in *La región más transparente,* but to a broader degree mirror the dual background of Fuentes himself. The final story in the volume is "En defensa de la Trigolibia," an essay-like work which has been little studied. Perhaps more than any of his early publications this brief linguistic *tour de force* demonstrates Fuentes' remarkable ear for language which can be observed in all of his writings.

In March and September of 1956, just two years before the appearance of *La región más transparente*, Fuentes issued two more stories which have not been collected in anthologies. The first, "El muñeco," follows the madness of Empress Carlota on her return to Europe in a vain attempt to save Maximilian's crumbling empire. Whole passages from the story describing the execution of the emperor and the embalming of his body are quoted verbatim in the final sixteen-page monologue which concludes the novel. "Trigo errante," the second story, has a setting in modern-day Israel and includes as protagonist Lazarus, who still remains alive after the miracle of his raising by Jesus. The themes of immortality and reincarnation so central to later novels such as *Cambio de piel* and *Cumpleaños* make a curious early appearance in *La región más transparente* . In a debate between Robles, Cienfuegos, and Zamacona, the role of Lazarus becomes pivotal in the latter's argument.

"The only one who can never be saved is he who is
resurrected, because he can neither commit crime nor

feel guilt. He has known death and come back from it."

"Lazarus?" said Cienfuegos.

"Lazarus. In the unconscious background of his spirit palpitates the conviction that every time he dies, he will be brought back to life. He may be grasping and treacherous, he may commit all crimes with the certainty that on the day of death he will return to commit new crimes. No one may hold him to account. Lazarus cannot die on earth. But he is dead forever in heaven. The resurrected man may not save himself because he cannot renounce anything, because he isn't free, because he can't sin." (*Región*)

Before concluding we should mention that as a student at the National University Carlos Fuentes was on the staff of the school's journal, *Revista de la Universidad de México*. In this capacity he wrote more than a dozen book and motion picture reviews. The book reviews help us to understand Fuentes' contemporaneous reading habits, but have little use for the purposes of this essay. Such is not the case of the motion picture reviews, which will be discussed in another section.

Critical Essay #8

Many events from Fuentes' personal life as a young man growing up in Mexico City at midcentury are no doubt reflected in *La región más transparente*. Some are known and a few can be deduced, but it is the broader panorama of the national intellectual, political and cultural scene which will now be our principal focus.

We have previously discussed the Alemán era in our introductory remarks and will not repeat these observations. Suffice it to say that the period represented a time of substantial change and growth which has seldom been duplicated in Mexican history. Carlos Fuentes' family belonged to the social and political elite. As a handsome, articulate, wealthy and extroverted organizer he was not simply a witness of the changing face of Mexico, but a participant in its inner circle. Two of his acquaintances, Pablo Palomino and Daniel Dueñas, have documented this period, and their articles plus occasional notices in the society pages furnish us with considerable information on these years. Carlos excelled in organizing parties, and his presence was particularly sought after at such gatherings where he was "a magnificent participant with his gaiety and facility for mimicry." Dueñas recalls: "We still recall him at Ricardo de Villar's house pretending to be an Uruguayan anarchist or interpreting oriental operas with a gong and showing only the whites of his eyes." His playful nature can be seen in other accounts of the time: "We all celebrated his success as a blind beggar wandering up and down Madero and San Juan de Letrán streets alongside Enrique Creel de la Barra." And a brief note from the society page of June 1949: "Carlitos Fuentes related his most recent nocturnal adventures and combats with cabdrivers. Doña Berta, his mother, is somewhat disturbed over the turbulent life of her precocious offspring." As a regular at the literary *tertulias* held at the home of Cristina Moya, Carlos played the role of the *enfant terrible* "reading short stories savoring of simultaneism, dadaism, and . . . snobbism" (Dueñas).

Perhaps Fuentes' most controversial and sensational activity at the time was his participation in the founding of an exclusive social circle called "Vasfumistas." Attempts were made at that period and in later years to give Vasfumismo (also spelled Basfumismo and Vhazfumismo) the status of a philosophical orientation similar to the European vanguard groups of the twenties and thirties, but in reality it was more of a tight-knit social group. Pablo Palomino recalls that they had viewed some silent film classics and decided to try something similar: "Something which was totally new, without any precedents." They possessed the means among themselves to produce the film; one of their close friends had practical filming experience, and they would be the actors. Later it was decided that Fuentes and Creel de la Barra would write a play rather than a film script. Ernesto de la Peña put forth a name for the group, "Basfumismo," which suggested also their slogan: "por el humo, al ser" ("through smoke to being").

Huge parties were held which were outstandingly successful; plans for the play and film were dropped for the time being. The society columns buzzed with rumors of their mysterious doings. Under the title of "Definición para el basfumismo" they were described as: "All geniuses, all frustrated, touched in the head but not locked up,

harmless crazies (except Valentín Saldaña, Ruggiero Asta and Carlitos Fuentes) plus more than a little extraordinary." Even Carlos published an article with the intriguing title of "¡Pero usted no sabe aún lo que es el basfumismo!" which instead of clarifying the issues only clouded them more.

Because of the exclusive nature of the group, jealous outsiders began spreading rumors about the practice of nefarious rites and prohibited cults. A wealthy owner of a bakery even contributed funds to help eradicate this social evil. Certain politicians anxious to exploit the basfumista publicity sought discussions with its members. But by the end of 1949 the movement had run its course; one of its members was married and Fuentes was on his way to Europe for graduate studies.

Although "Basfumismo" died a quiet death, its memory lingered on in later fiction. Many of the cocktail parties in *La región más transparente* would seem to be recreations of basfumista entertainments. Probably a good number of the fictional party goers were modeled on real people, and Bobo Gutiérrez, the irrepressible festivity organizer in the novel, is not too much different from Fuentes himself. Pablo Palomino, the previously mentioned chronicler of the movement and friend of Fuentes, has also left us a fictional view of the time in his little-known novel *Autopsia*.

Palomino's *Autopsia* precedes *La región más transparente* by almost three years, having been published in August of 1955. It had a small one-time printing of 1,000 copies and except for one known review the novel seems to have been (and continues to be) totally ignored. Although it is much briefer (164 pages) and less ambitious than Fuentes' novel, the two works share a number of characteristics. Both are urban novels set in contemporary Mexico City. One of Palomino's characters agonizes about having children in the Atomic Age. Another main character is a foreigner (Italian) living in Mexico and there is even a lesbian. Palomino presents several cocktail party scenes with snatches of conversation on a variety of political and cultural topics: those of Fuentes, however, are infinitely more dynamic and demonstrate a much greater artistic skill. The psychological insights in *Autopsia* are the traditional author-narrator interpretation while Fuentes makes greater use of the stream-of-consciousness technique. In one chapter Palomino has a character frequent the lower class night life of Mexico City anticipating in skeletal fashion Fuentes' more consummately drawn *pelado* sections. Both would appear to be based on basfumista nocturnal escapades of the two youthful authors.

On the intellectual-artistic scene only the writers- philosophers are in evidence in *La región más transparente*. Strangely enough, painters are missing as are actors and actresses. This is hard to explain since Fuentes' good friend and neighbor is none other than famed painter José Luis Cuevas, and his fiancée, Rita Macedo, had starred in Buñuel films. These fields of endeavor were certainly not unknown to Fuentes and would be used in later fiction.

Two groups of writers make their appearance in the novel, one led by Tomás Mediana and a looser grouping represented by, but not necessarily directed by, Manuel Zamacona. Mediana is not an active participant in *La región más transparente* but is

recalled in a flashback by Rodrigo Pola. Mediana's group flourished in the decades of the twenties and thirties. They wished to renovate Mexican literature by producing a new journal which would translate innovative European writers. Tomás subscribes to the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and wants Mexico to become acquainted with Proust. In many ways this group seems to describe the "Contemporáneos" movement which became active shortly before Fuentes' birth but some of whose members he would probably know through his father's government service (Torres Bodet) or in the journalistic field (Novo).

It is the second grouping of writers, which flourished in the late forties and early fifties, precisely the exact time period of *La región más transparente*, which most interests us. Its principal representative, Manuel Zamacona, is primarily a poet, a profession which banker Federico Robles considers a luxury in an underdeveloped country. Although Zamacona first appears in the novel at a cocktail party, it is the following day as Zamacona is writing an essay on Mexico that we come to know him. Fuentes actually includes the entire nine-page text of the essay! Among Zamacona's reading materials are *El laberinto de la soledad* and volumes by Guardini, Alfonso Reyes and Nerval. In one scene he has just returned from a series of formal discussions.

> A round-table discussion of Mexican literature. It is necessary to mention the serapes of Saltillo, was Franz Kafka the tool of Wall Street, is social literature anything more than the eternal triangle between two Stajanovitches and a tractor, if we are not the more universal the more Mexican we are, and vice versa, should we write like Marxists or like Buddhists. Many prescriptions, zero books. (*Región*)

In an interview, Fuentes has described Zamacona as a "composite portrait of many Mexican intellectuals. Many recognized themselves in him. They protested, they attacked me in the street, they tried to set my house on fire. So there must be some truth to the portrait. Because at the bottom, in the whole 'Mexicanist' movement, there was that redemptorist attitude."

To better comprehend the above statement it will be useful to review the intellectual climate in Mexico City during the early fifties. In the late forties there emerged the Grupo Filosófico Hiperión, headed by Leopoldo Zea and including in its membership Jorge Portilla, Joaquín Macgregor, Emilio Uranga, Luis Villoro, Ricardo Guerra, Salvador Reyes Nevares, and Fausto Vega. "Hiperión" was the name selected because it symbolized the union between heaven and earth and was to demonstrate the group's preoccupation with both universal and national answers to the dilemmas facing their country. Round table discussions and a series of more than a dozen publications followed in the next few years. The series entitled "México y lo Mexicano" consisted of studies by philosophers, historians, economists, sociologists, scientists, psychologists, and literary figures. Foreigners who had visited Mexico or written about it also contributed: Mariano Picón Salas, José Gaos and José Moreno Villas. One name strangely missing is that of Octavio Paz, who was apparently in Europe most of this time

although his famous *El laberinto de la soledad* was published in 1950. The following year *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* by Samuel Ramos, which first appeared in 1934, was reprinted in an inexpensive edition.

Another source of fictional material which Fuentes was to take from real life was the large foreign population which comprised both an important and a highly visible element of Mexican society, especially among the upper classes. They were labeled the "International Set," and as we have already seen, Fuentes alluded to them in his early essay on Mexico City. It seems somewhat strange that in spite of his long years of residence in the United States, Fuentes in interviews mentions no friends among this group and the only North Americans in his fiction tend to be caricatures of the simple-minded tourist or the money-grabbing businessman- investor.

The Spaniard, on the other hand, is viewed much differently. Mexico was profoundly affected by the Spanish Civil War, and its sympathies were so strongly in favor of the Republic that it has only recently renewed diplomatic relations with the post- Franco government. Refugees from the peninsula found a welcome home in Mexico, and Spanish intellectuals played significant roles in the university and the publishing world. Fuentes studied with one of these exiles, Manuel Martínez Pedroso, and paid homage to him in an article in the *Revista de la Universidad de México* in the summer of 1958. Pedroso, who translated *Das Kapital*, had been rector at the Universidad de Salamanca and *diputado* at the Cortes of 1936. Later he served the Republic in Warsaw and Moscow before coming to Mexico. Salvador Novo writes of the professor's fondness for Fuentes: "He also spoke to me about Carlos Fuentes of whom he is very fond, a paternal fondness. He is alarmed about the premature fervor of the Fondo publicists who are proclaiming him Mexico's best writer."

In *La región más transparente* Fuentes includes a sympathetic episode in which Spanish exiles recall their escape from Fascist Spain; the incident is brief and does not form a part of the novel's plot. Four years later Fuentes would return to the subject in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and follow Lorenzo Cruz on his idealistic crusade to Spain to carry on what he felt were his father's revolutionary goals.

A considerably more negative view is offered in *La región más transparente* of the exiled European nobility who come to Mexican shores. Among them: Contessa Aspacuccoli, Conde Lemini, Natasha, the Serbian Prince "Pinky," and Príncipe Vampa. At least one has bought his title, and even worse, another turns out to be a fraud. In real life Fuentes would often mingle with the nobility at their parties. A note from a society page in 1950 states: "Carlitos Fuentes invited everyone present to Prince Bernard of Holland's ball." Fuentes was not in the country in the fall of 1941 when King Carol, recently exiled from the throne of Romania, would arrive in Mexico with a female traveling companion and a reported $7,000,000 to "set up court." It was the social event of the year. Fuentes very definitely was in Mexico in 1949 for the much publicized Otto Wilhelm von Hohenzollern escapade. Otto, supposedly the little known son of the Kaiser by a second marriage, was feted by an adoring Mexican upper society, interviewed frequently and even invited to write a series of articles on the world situation for the weekly *Mañana*. The prince turned out to be the adventurer Rico David Tancous,

wanted by several governments including the U.S. for bigamy, false impersonation, and robbery.

Within a decade two best-selling novels in Mexico would treat the bogus prince theme□*La región más transparente* was one of them. The other was by journalist Luis Spota who authored many popular books based on current events. His novel, *Casi el paraíso*, used the imposter as the central character, and since the public saw it as a roman á clef, it was an immediate success, going through six editions in four years. Spota's prince turns out to be the illegitimate son of a poor Italian prostitute. Before he can wed the daughter of a Mexican millionaire he is discovered and arrested by Mexican immigration officials and the FBI.

For Fuentes the imposter prince becomes only a minor episode, who although discovered is not arrested. One character recalls the scandal:

"And what news is there of the imposter Vampa?" Charlotte raised a hand to her heart. "Ay! Don't remind me of that fatal blow. I don't know how to breathe afterward. Just think how he fooled us!"

Bobo's face wrinkled in pain. "His only title was to a pizza show in 'Frisco. He was a cook there."

"And we treated him as a blue blood! Don't remind me Bobo, I die of anger . . . and imagine, Pierre Caseaux gave him a job in his kitchen. Every time I eat there, I have the feeling the macaroni knows all my secrets."

Since Spota had already beaten Fuentes to the punch by two years it is an interesting speculation as to whether the latter might not have planned to do more with the episode. Both novels also share other similar characters: the party organizer, Charlotte García in *La región más transparente* and Carmen Pérez Mendiola in *Casi el paraiso*. Others are the wealthy bankers who have risen from poverty to power through their participation in the Revolution. Spota's Alonso Ronia states: "Thirty years ago I was out in the provinces plowing behind a team of mules." Fuentes' Federico Robles' father did the same on a plot of ground in Uruapan.

One final area of Mexican cultural life which Fuentes utilizes to create his fictional world is the Mexican motion picture industry. From his early youth Fuentes has been a fan of the cinema. Many of his characters talk about the movies and screen stars. His first wife, Rita Macedo, had worked in several Buñuel films, and *La región más transparente* is dedicated to her. Fuentes, himself, has written several admiring articles on Buñuel plus a review of the latter's *El ángel exterminador*. He is also the author of a number of film scripts, the most important being *Los caifanes*, which won a prize at Cannes, and *Pedro Páramo*, based on Juan Rulfo's famous novel. In 1953 and 1954 Fuentes

regularly reviewed films, among them *Beat the Devil* with Humphrey Bogart and Marlon Brando's *The Wild One*, for the *Revista de la Universidad de México*.

In *La región más transparente* Fuentes' vision of the Mexican motion picture industry is anything but favorable. In fact his presentation of the producers and script writers crosses the line to caricature. Rodrigo Pola, a frustrated poet, finally finds fame and fortune turning out potboiler scripts. What began as a daring treatment of social taboos is "adapted" by the producers to the public taste, to the actresses they already have in mind and to previously chosen sites□all combined with some religion and ranchero music! The delighted producers tell Pola to write up the script in the following week and two weeks later the film will be shot and completed. If all this seems too farcical we can only cite an article which appeared almost as if by coincidence in a Mexico City daily a few months after Fuentes' novel came out. In it Benito Alazraki, once the great hope of Mexico with prestigious films such as *Raices*, stated: "I prefer to make B movies and drive a Cadillac than artistic cinema and ride the city buses."

Critical Essay #9

Some three years before *La región más transparente* would appear in the bookstores of Mexico City, fragments of the novel were beginning to be published in local newspapers and maga zines. Some of the selections show only moderate stylistic changes from the 1958 version, but others contain major changes in characters and plots. These fragments furnish a most fascinating insight into the evolution of the novel before it reached its fi- nal form.

The earliest of the four known fragments was published in the March 28, 1955 issue of *Revista de la Universidad de México*. It is three pages long and carries the title "Los restos." The novel version in smaller format has a length of nine pages and is titled "Los de Ovando." Essentially they are of identical length with most of the changes consisting of stylistic polishing. All of the same characters appear and all carry the same names: Pimpinela de Ovando, Doña Lorenza, Juaquinito, Don Francisco, Fernanda, Benjamin, Norma Larragoiti, and Federico Robles. The selection follows the selfimposed exile of the wealthy de Ovando family with the fall of Porfirio Díaz and their subsequent return to Mexico City. Most of the changes are of the word substitution variety: for example: "tenía apuntados" becomes in the novel "estaban apuntados," "recámara" changes to "alcoba," "escenas pastoriles" later becomes "escenas bucólicas," "azotea alquilada" is modi- fied to "azotea arrendada," and "¿no?" is replaced by "¿verdad?" Federico Robles' bank is called "Banco Internacional de Crédito Industrial S.A." in the 1955 version, but in the novel it is "Banco de Ahorro Mexicano S.A." Another change throughout the novel version is the italicizing of several French words. One phrase eliminated from the novel describes the infantile Benjamín: "Luego se sentaba en el suelo a jugar al águila o sol; dos águilas, perdía y entonces quedaba prohibido comer postre."

Our next pre-novel fragment was published in the November-December 1955 issue of *Revista Mexicana de Literatura*, the second number of a journal Fuentes cofounded. Here the title is "La línea de la vida" ; in the novel it is the name of the principal character in the chapter, "Gervasio Pola." Once more the majority of the changes are word substitutions: "supurando" becomes in the novel "supurantes," "yo y Pedro" is reversed to "Pedro y yo," the same with "ya acercándose" to "acercándose ya," "el pino" to "un pino," and "a las llamas" to "al fuego." There are two examples of "las plantas" clarified to "las plantas del pie." Another expansion is "la madrugada" to "el principio de la madrugada." Other stylistic changes seen in the novel will be the use of italics to call attention to the occurrence of stream of consciousness.

Some significant additions can be noted toward the end of the episode. Whereas the federal officer in charge of the execution is simply called "el capitán rubio," in the novel he is named and described more fully: "Captain Zamacona, blond and slender, with a carefully waxed mustache." He will appear several more times in the book and his sister, Mercedes Zamacona, is the center of one of the main episodes. All of which seems to indicate that while Fuentes may have had his main episodes already in mind or on paper by 1955, he still was working out relationships between characters and

events. This is evident in another addition. In the fragment at the moment of Gervasio Pola's execution, he is thinking only of "mujeres" and "padres." In contrast, the novel includes the significant line: "to your wife, to your unknown son." This wife and unseen son also play major roles in the novel. One other new line in the final version is "¡Viva Madero!□gritó Froilán en el instante de la descarga." The 1955 fragment omits mention of the shot; only their falling to the ground is described.

The third novel fragment also appeared in Fuentes' journal *Revista Mexicana de Literatura*, this time in the sixth number dated July-August 1956. Both have the same title, "Maccualli," the Nahuatl word for commoners. The action follows a typical Sunday afternoon of several lower class "pelados" as they attend the bullfights and then visit some cantinas. The journal selection is shorter, omitting the first five and a half pages in which the pelados converse with Ixca Cienfuegos and the last five pages as one of them unexpectedly meets a former girlfriend in a brothel.

Of the four selections we are examining, this one is closest to the final 1958 rendering. "El domingo" changes to "El domingo siguiente," the cantina "Los amores de Cúpido" becomes Mexicanized to "Los amores de Cuauhtémoc," "tennis" is spelled "tenis," the same with "zipper" to "ziper," "¡Si quieres ver cogidas . . ." is finalized as "Si quieres cogidas . . . ," and "los expendios de libros pornográficos" is toned down to "puestos de revistas." Also the next-to-last line in the magazine version, which did not seem to make sense and was probably a typographical error, is removed from the novel.

"Calavera del quince" is the title of one of the chapters in *La región más transparente*; it is called the same in the final fragment we shall examine. Apparently it is the same selection which was printed in the June 26, 1955, Sunday supplement of *Novedades*, but I have been unable to examine it and have therefore used the version published by Emmanuel Carballo in his *Cuentos mexicanos modernos* (1956). Of all the four selections we have studied, this seems to differ the most from what eventually appeared in the novel. Each version contains about twenty scenes, but only half are duplicates. The anthology selection devotes considerable space to Tomás Mediana, who is dropped from the novel. The jailing of labor agitator, Feliciano Sánchez, also appears but in the novel is placed in the preceding chapter. A nameless Indian on a pilgrimage whose story is told in five short fragments receives but one paragraph in the novel version.

On the other hand, the novel account adds scenes of Robles working in his office, Zamacona taking leave of Cienfuegos, Bobo and the international set traveling to Cuernavaca, Zamacona's death, Robles recalling his childhood, Robles telling his wife that they are ruined, Teódula throwing her jewels into Robles' burning house, Ixca by Rosa Morales' side after the death of her son, and Teódula's statement to Ixca that his mission is completed. One final difference we will discuss in a moment is the changes of names given to three characters.

Perhaps the most striking alteration in the two accounts is the complete dropping of the character of Tomás Mediana. In the novel he never makes an appearance, but is part of Rodrigo Pola's past recalled in a conversation with Ixca. Mediana, as we have stated

earlier, was head of a writer's group which wanted to introduce the innovative European movements to Mexican readers. In the 1955 selection we see a more personal side of his character, and told from his point of view. His father has returned unexpectedly and is working as a humble waiter in a café. Tomás had hardly known him, was not even sure his parents had ever married, since his father was such a carefree Don Juan. For years he had told everyone that his father had died in France in the battle of the Marne. In later scenes Mediana reflects upon his literary career. It would appear likely that Fuentes had originally intended to make Tomás one of his major characters but in the end reduced his importance since the novel already included two other writers, Rodrigo Pola and Manuel Zamacona.

The scene describing the death of Doña Zenaida's son also shows considerable reworking. In the novel Ixca Cienfuegos stands by her side comforting her. Fuentes gives her the more mundane name of Rosa Morales, possibly in order not to distract from the high priestess of the primitive religion whom he dubs with the exotic sobriquet of Teódula Moctezuma. Rosa Morales is probably more fitting as a name symbolizing her plebeian status; her husband, a taxi driver, is Juan Morales.

The most interesting metamorphosis to observe in these two versions is that of the pelados. The novel follows four, maybe five. In the fragment there are only two and their names are changed; Fifo is called Gabriel in the novel, but there will also be a pelado by the name of Fifo. Nacho will be converted to Beto. In the novel Gabriel has worked as a bracero and frequently includes English words in his speech. The early account has him say: "Ya tan temprano" while Fuentes changes this in the novel to "ya tan erly." On the same page a phrase with the word "suit" is added (meaning "dulce" not "traje"). Fuentes in the novel also seems more intent on capturing their authentic slang usage: "para" becomes "pa'," "tomen de la botella" changes to "empínense la botella," and "no juegues con la muerte" is "hoy me la pela la mera muerte calaca." "Si no fuera por los amigos" changes to "Si no fuera por los cuates" and "¡Se me hace lo que el aire a Juárez!" becomes "le viene más guango que el aire a Juárez, mano." Several songs are changed in the two accounts. The words from the famous corrido by José A. Jiménez, "no vale nada, la vida, la vida no vale nada," are not found in *La región más transparente* but curiously enough surface in 1962 on the title page of *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*.

Probably the most interesting modification is what Fuentes has done with the violent murder of one of the pelados. In the early version an unknown "gordo" comes up to Fifo in a cantina and after stabbing him says: "A mí nadie me mira así" ("Nobody looks at me like that"). The novel has Gabriel (previously called Fifo in the fragment) stabbed by a "thin man with a slouch hat" who runs into the pelado unexpectedly. The murderer's words this time are "I told you, buddy, you wouldn't catch me twice . . . you can't treat me like this. . . ." However, the words "Nobody looks at me like that" are not forgotten but utilized earlier by Fuentes in the novel's chapter by a "marble-eyed man" when he unexpectedly stabs Manuel Zamacona, who has stopped in a small town for gasoline.

Critical Essay #10

La región más transparente appeared in the stores of Mexico City on Monday, April 7, 1958. The previous day Elena Poniatowska had published a lengthy interview with Fuentes in the Sunday cultural supplement of the newspaper *Novedades*. Apparently, she had read a pre-publication copy of the novel. Emmanuel Carballo writing eleven years later states that the book was published on the 29th of March. Most likely he was consulting the printing information on the last page of the novel. These are always estimates and may vary by several weeks or more. The date given by Poniatowska at the time of the event seems much more likely. Numerous reviews were printed in various Mexico City newspapers during the months of April, May, and June. Opinions vary on how quickly the novel sold out; some reports say a week, others suggest several months. A second printing is dated November 18, 1958. The April printing was 4,000 copies and the one in November numbered 5,000; both respectable amounts for the time. The November edition remained available for several years and was purchased by the author of this study in Mexico City in the summer of 1960. Of the Mexican novels of that period it seems likely that only *Casi el paraíso* had sold in greater numbers over a short span.

The title of the novel dates all the way back to 1917, coming from Alfonso Reyes' famous epigraph introducing a chapter of *Visión de Anáhuac*: "Viajero: has llegado a la región más transparente del aire." It is probable that at first Fuentes intended to use the whole phrase since that is the one given with the fragments published in 1955 and 1956. In the end, however, he dropped the last part, "del aire." No one would accuse Fuentes of plagiarizing his title; it had long since become a popular designation for the Valley of Mexico. The choice was a fortuitous one; it was easily identified with Mexico City, but offered intriguing possibilities for irony since the novel pictured the capital city as anything but clear and beautiful. Some confusion has arisen about the originality of the phrase with Alfonso Reyes. It seems that Rodolfo, his brother, had been quoted that it came from Alexander Humbolt's description of New Spain. Alfonso says that this is not the case; he had thought up the phrase himself.

The controversy surrounding *La región más transparente* did not begin in 1958, but actually several years earlier with the publication of the novel fragments. An anonymous note commenting on the "de Ovando" chapter suggested "if the whole resembles the sample, Carlos Fuentes without doubt will be recognized as one of Mexico's outstanding novelists." The "Línea de vida" episode in *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* produced four very favorable reviews. On the other hand, Fernando Benitez, director of the "México en la Cultura" supplement of *Novedades* was called on the carpet for printing some of the controversial material of the young novelist. One thing about Fuentes' writings, they were never ignored!

In the spring of 1958 there were complaints that *La región más transparente* was launched on the market as if it were a new laundry detergent, a comment almost identical to what had been said in 1954 about *Los días enmascarados*. As a matter of fact, there may have been considerable truth in the allegation. An anonymous note

about this time is typical of the abundance of publicity given the book: "They say that Emmanuel Carballo doesn't begin his television program anymore by greeting the public from the 'región más transparente del aire,' but rather from the 'región más Carlos-fuentes.'"

Most of the earlier reviewers were personally acquainted with Fuentes, and thus their prejudices either for or against him naturally come to the surface. Of approximately two dozen reviews published in the first few months, five were openly hostile, another dozen extremely laudatory and the rest fairly neutral. In somewhat of an understatement J. M. García Ascot portrayed *La región más transparente* as "a book which has produced some controversy." Enrique González Rojo observed, "This novel inaugurates, in our opinion, a new cycle in the twentieth century Mexican novel." José Emilio Pacheco commented enthusiastically: "Many of the pages of *La región más transparente* will go down in history as some of the finest prose writing ever produced in Mexico." Rafael Solana, an important author in his own right, believed that Fuentes may have been overly ambitious, "but the presence of a great writer can be detected in each page." For Luis Cardoza y Aragón it was "one of the most significant books published in Mexico in recent years."

On the other side of the coin, Arturo Martínez Cáceres was less than generous:

> The first impression that the novel produces is of a
> torpid, almost unnecessary, complexity. The influence
> of Faulkner, undigested let alone assimilated,
> can be detected, amen to some pseudomodernist techniques
> whose origin even the novice reader will
> immediately recognize as Proustian, Woolfian, Joycean
> and Huxlean; all of which give the book a respectable
> size which certainly is not the least of its defects.

Journalist Rubén Salazar Mallén, whose own novels in the forties were considered forerunners for their experimental techniques, called *La región más transparente* "nothing but a pastiche." This word would be widely repeated by future reviewers. He goes on to say: "Carlos Fuentes has made an ingenious transplant of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but he is thirty-five years late." He nevertheless felt that Fuentes had talent if he would close his ears to the blind adulation of friends. Salazar Mallén's review of *Las buenas conciencias* the following year was very positive.

One surprising source of negative criticism came from playwright and novelist Elena Garro, wife of Fuentes' good friend Octavio Paz. She had her doubts even about the book's genre:

> It is true that Fuentes piles on one apparent novelistic
> element after another; piling on words, names, actions;
> loading more images on top of the already
> inundated ones. Fuentes gets carried away: carried
> away with the sound of his portable Remington. He

beats on it so loud that the reader can't escape from the deafening noise of keys pounded on for hours on end. One must put the book aside, rest from the noise and the confusion which grow by the minute.

She concludes: "The evaluation of this book, in spite of the good laugh that it gave us, is tragic. It is a book by someone who has only partially found himself and who is struggling desperately to find others." As a result of her ferocious utterances she would be nicknamed "the claw" by the local writing community.

The most vicious attack on the novel did not surface until three years later and appeared in the letters to the editor of the Mexico City newspaper, *Excélsior*. Apparently it began as a protest against Fuentes and his colleagues who were accused of using the National University facilities, in particular the radio station, to disseminate Communist propaganda. Licenciado Eulogio Cervantes (the name is suspect!) accuses Fuentes of blatant plagiarism: "*La región más trasparente* is the product of a series of 'expropriations' as ferocious as those realized in Cuba by Castro." He calls the novel a "pastiche" using the techniques of Joyce, Dos Passos, Baroja and Cela, and adds, "We shouldn't condemn him for imitating Cela or Joice [*sic*], only for doing it so badly." Señor Cervantes then lists some sixty pages of the novel which are taken from Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad*, several major characters from Michael Valbeck's *Caídos del cielo* (*Headlong from Heaven* in its original English version), parts from Jorge Portillas' *Fenomenología del relajo* and Eunice Odio's long poem, *El tránsito del fuego*.

We have already discussed the portrayal of, but certainly not the plagiarism of, the Hiperión group Octavio Paz and other intellectuals of the early fifties who were concerned with defining Mexico's past, present, and future. Perhaps a few words are in order regarding Valbeck's *Headlong from Heaven*. This South African novel was translated into Spanish in the late 1950s and José Vázquez Amaral, reviewing *La región más transparente* for *Saturday Review*, first called attention to what he felt was a similarity between the two books. In reality the kinship is very superficial. Valbeck tells of a wealthy but ugly businessman married to a beautiful woman, a plot which has occurred hundreds of times in fiction and probably millions of times in real life. The rest of the novel develops along the lines of a "who done it." Finally, I have examined with considerable care Odio's long poem, *El tránsito del fuego*, and can find absolutely no points of comparison.

As might be expected, the reaction of fellow novelists, especially those outside of Mexico, tended to be very favorable. On September 7, 1958, Julio Cortázar sent congratulations from Paris and enclosed a lengthy and perceptive analysis of *La región más transparente* which is published in the Aguilar edition of Fuentes' *Obras completas*. While well aware that many of the allusions to Mexican customs and history passed over his head, he nonetheless saw many typical character types (Rodrigo Pola, Norma, Gabriel) which "are very similar to certain Argentine types which appear in Europe with considerable modification." On the negative side he found the introductory chapters slow moving and confused; also the characterization of the motion picture people as too "stereotyped and caricatured at the same time." The chapters on Gervasio Pola and

Rodrigo he believed to be particularly well done as were those on Robles and the pelados: "Your dialogues are real dialogues, not that strange product that so many novelists invent (I'm thinking of Mallea, for example); as if they had never spoken to their lover or even their banker."

The Cuban novelist and poet, José Lezama Lima, was equally laudatory: "I have read your novel *La región más transparente* and have found it powerful and desirable, vibrating in its symbols and masks." He admonishes Fuentes not to worry about those who try to find influences in every paragraph: "They found influences in Proust and Joyce; and they invented many others. But if we are found to have them . . . we must be beheaded." He concludes by observing: "I don't believe there have been written in Mexico, or in any other part of America, very many novels better than yours."

Writing from Uruguay Mario Benedetti concluded that *La región más transparente* offered an honest portrait of many Latin American problems. Upon the first reading of several of Fuentes' novels he had made critical notes in the margins, but: "the second time I decided to just enjoy each novel." Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa saw the novel as "a seething crowded mural of Mexico City, an attempt to capture in fiction all the layers of that pyramid from the indigenous base with its ceremonial rites to its pinnacle made up of a cosmopolitan and snobbish oligarchy whose appetites, fashions and impudences are borrowed from New York and Paris."

Of particular interest are Carlos Fuentes' own observations given in a variety of interviews over the years in which he has proffered his own analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of *La región más transparente*. In speaking to Luis Harss he called it, "A biography of a city . . . a synthesis of present day Mexico." To a French reporter he commented, "In my first novel I tried, among other things, to write a personal biography about that species of whale anchored in our high valley, Mexico City: its silhouettes, its secrets, a city which I love and hate at the same time because in it are presented with the greatest brutality the miseries and hopes of all my country. I tried to produce a synthesis of presentday Mexico: conflicts, aspirations, rancors."

Fuentes also answered Emmanuel Carballo in much the same vein: "It began as an elementary observation of Mexico City and the necessity of being a witness to what was happening to it. I wanted to offer a testimony of its life, rediscovered by the imagination." In a letter to the *Saturday Review* Carlos suggested: *"Where the Air Is Clear* is the first of a series of novels designed to give an extensive and interwoven panorama of Mexican life. It depicts the black part of Mexico, a Mexico that is now dying and being swept away by a vigorous younger generation."

In December 1958 during an interview with Elena Poniatowska, Fuentes was anxious to talk about his next novel, but agreed to comment a bit further on his first. Among the defects which he now perceived in *La región más transparente* were: "The incapacity of reducing to a unity an excess of material. Symbols piled upon characters without letting them evolve more naturally. Too many contortions, a continuous verbal exaltation which detracts from the rest of the novel, a lack of love, superficialities." In response to Poniatowska's assessment of the characters as almost caricatures, he answers: "But

they really are caricatures! It would have been a lie to give them human dimension. All these puppets of the cocktail parties, the Jockey Club, the International Set, showers and bankers conventions are cardboard paper-dolls. How can a newly arrived bourgeoisie be human?" Asked what he feels are the strengths of the novel, Fuentes answers: "Objectively, one thing. I swear that I wrote it from beginning to end with all the honesty I was capable of at that time. In any case, when I wrote *La región más transparente* I promised myself never to lie. I lived inside that world."

Critical Essay #11

The first reactions to *La región más transparente* from abroad came not from journalists, but from professors of Spanish literature who were working with the Spanish edition. In the fall of 1958 the first two reviews of the novel were published in the United States. George Wing, then a young professor at the University of California at Berkeley, wrote a short review in the fall issue of *Books Abroad*. He saw Fuentes as an angry young man who felt deeply "the betrayal of the ideals of the Revolution." Wing made comparisons with Dos Passos' writings and concluded by calling *La región más transparente* the best Mexican novel since *Al filo del agua*. In November of 1958 Jefferson Rea Spell, a long-time observer of the Latin American novel and professor at the University of Texas, published a brief review in *The Hispanic American Historical Review* in which he observed: "This novel, which reveals acquaintance with and sympathy for certain new techniques in fiction writing, will repay the effort expended in its reading."

The following year, Luis Andrés Murrillo produced for *Revista Iberoamericana* the most extensive review of the novel printed in the United States up to that time. He labeled the work "panorámicohistórico" and "realista-simbélico." After some perceptive comments on characterization and structure he concluded with these remarks on the style: "Many lines of the book are genuine prose poems. The final section in which the symbol-city comes together contains pages composed with extraordinary virtuosity." In the winter of 1964 University of Connecticut professor Robert G. Mead, Jr., a keen student of Latin American literature who follows the literary movements but also monitors the pub lishing industry and social environment, brought out the first of his two major studies on Carlos Fuentes. The earlier one in *Books Abroad* (1964) examined Fuentes as part of the contemporary Mexican scene. Mead had the advantage of five years of perspective and was thoroughly acquainted with the criticism on *La región más transparente* previously published in Mexico City. He saw the three types of reactions that the novel produced as a mirror of current Mexican literary criticism.

By the time Mead's article was in circulation the English translation of *La región más transparente* was out and many newspaper and magazine reviews had appeared in the U.S.A. No exact publication date of this version is known although the first review was printed in September 1960 with most of the others appearing in November and December of that year; a few followed in the early months of 1961.

The English title chosen was *Where the Air Is Clear*, the publisher was Ivan Obolensky in New York, and the translator was Sam Hileman. Hileman had first met Fuentes in Mexico City during the mid-1950s when the two enjoyed fellowships at the Centro Mexicano de Escritores. Hileman, himself a writer, lived in later years in Los Angeles where he did graduate work in English at U.C.L.A. During the next decade he subsequently translated three other novels by Fuentes: *Las buenas conciencias, La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and *Cambio de piel*. *Where the Air Is Clear* sold quite well in the bookstores. A second printing of the novel was made that same year and in 1971 Obolensky brought out a paperback edition under the Noonday label which is still available.

Where the Air Is Clear was reviewed by a variety of publications in the United States and Great Britain. Major newspapers in all sections of the country recognized it: in New York the *Times*, the *Herald Tribune*, and the *World Telegram and Sun*; in the Midwest the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Columbus Dispatch*, and the *Kansas City Star*; and elsewhere papers in San Francisco, St. Petersburg, Raleigh, Abilene, El Paso, and New Orleans. Magazines which reviewed the novel ranged from religious (*Catholic World*) to Marxist (*People's World, Mainstream*) in addition to such prestigious publications as the *New Yorker, Commonweal*, the *National Guardian*, and the *Saturday Review*.

Anthony West in the *New Yorker* and Selden Rodman in the *New York Times* were the most enthusiastic. Rodman had met Fuentes several years earlier in Mexico, although he did not mention the fact in his review. He saw the work as "the most ambitious and skillful novel to come out of Mexico in a long time, and by all odds the most 'modern.'" West also lauded the work while recognizing the "many errors of taste and simple beginner's mistakes." Speaking of Fuentes he observed: "he creates his people wholesale and marches them off by battalions, lavishly equipped with life stories, to take their place in his full-scale social panorama." He concluded: "If Señor Fuentes is not the most polished and assured writer, and if some of his episodes are coarsely imagined and hasty, he is at any rate endowed with the courage and the power to attempt and to achieve a really big thing."

On the more negative side are the observations of Richard Gilman in *Commonweal* and José Vázquez Amaral in the *Saturday Review*. While admiring some parts of the novel, Gilman observed: "But it doesn't really come off. The form and experience don't quite hold together. . . . It steps into a solipsistic world of manifestos, occult reveries, private myth-making and over-literary hymns to life that never attain the verbal originality and imaginative coherence that might justify them." Vázquez Amaral pointed out many possible influences and borrowings and saw the work as a roman á clef. (His attempts to identify the characters brought an angry letter from Fuentes which was published in a later number of the magazine.) His conclusion is that *Where the Air Is Clear* is an ambitious "pastiche," but does not give credit to Salazar Mallén who had used the word two years earlier. Vázquez Amaral is one of the few critics to mention the language of the translation which he feels is much too free. "It is not fair to quarrel with the translator's difficulties with slang. But it is hard to justify inaccurate interpretations of standard Spanish."

Perhaps a few words would be appropriate regarding the translation, especially since we have a unique situation in a contemporary work of the existence of two translations into English. Almost a year before the novel was published Lysander Kemp included an English version of a chapter in *Evergreen Review*. Interestingly enough, Kemp translated Fuentes' novelette, *Aura*, six years later.

Both translations are quite free; perhaps Kemp's reads a bit smoother, but Hileman may capture Fuentes' unique style better. Both take liberties in translating and both make mistakes. In the first paragraph of the "Gervasio Pola" chapter Hileman erroneously translates "botines de cuero" as "leather buttons," while Kemp omits to mention that Islas is "calvo." A page later the "puertas" of a garbage cart is called "cover" by Hileman.

He also expands "cúmulo de basura" to read, "rotted vegetables and excrement," while Kemp keeps it as "load of garbage." For "Gervasio, al pie de la sierra, aflojú los muslos," Hileman reads: "At the foot of the mountain, Gervasio dropped," and Kemp: "Gervasio slackened his pace at the foot of the sierra."

Through the years additional translations have been made of *La región más transparente*; into French (1964), Czech (1966), Polish (1972) and German (1973). The French edition done by Robert Marrast includes a prologue by Miguel Angel Asturias. Marrast also translated the French version of *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*. Also noteworthy in the French edition of *La región más transparente* is the inclusion of a chronology of Mexican history combined with events from the lives of characters in the novel. For example, under the date of 1909 we read in the first column that Federico Robles goes to live in Morelia with a priest; the second column states that Francisco I. Madero declares himself a candidate for president of Mexico. Another first is a list of characters in the novel. Some eight members of the de Ovando family are cataloged, seven Zamaconas, and three Polas. Other listings are: the Bourgeoisie, Foreigners, Intellectuals, Lower Class, and Revolutionaries. These listings and descriptions make reading the novel much less confusing, especially in the initial chapters when so many characters are introduced. Occasionally we are given background information that does not appear in the novel. Dardo Morratto is an Argentine writer, but we now discover (perhaps in jest) that he has been secretary to Victoria Ocampo and a proofreader for Jorge Luis Borges. Also for the first time we discover that Tomás Mediana, about whom we have spoken several times, dies tragically in 1950.

Critical Essay #12

In spite of the almost universal recognition of *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* as Fuentes' masterpiece and the publicity surrounding each new publication, *La región más transparente* continues to reach a substantial body of new and appreciative readers each year. At most recent count it had gone through more than a dozen Spanish printings and has been continually available in English.

Perhaps the most significant publishing event of the seventies regarding the book was its inclusion in the 1,414 page *Obras completas*, volume I, done by Aguilar in 1974. The pages have been reset in a sightly larger format which is easier to read, although each continues to contain thirty-six lines. The newer version also includes the useful "Cuadro Cronológico" and the list of "personajes" which had first appeared in the French edition.

There seems to be only a very slight revision of the text. A few typographical errors are corrected and most foreign words are now in italics ("blue-jeans," "Handicap," "claxon," "Jockey," "kaputt," "pedigree," "very fain"). A few words change: "hilos de gomina" (Fondo version) becomes "Hilo de gomina" (Aguilar version). A period does not end a paragraph of stream of consciousness in the Fondo edition, "profesa" (Fondo) is capitalized by Aguilar. The incorrect date, 1857, for the execution of Maximilian (Fondo) is printed in long form and corrected by Aguilar: "mil ochocientos sesenta y siete."

With the passage of time *La región más transparente* has grown in stature among the Mexican critics. The occasion of its fourth printing, exactly a decade after the first, produced an uncommonly large number of reviews, apparently by younger critics. The shock of technique and exposé had worn off and the book's style no longer seemed out of place in Latin American fiction. Several reviewers commented upon the volume's historical importance as a "novel which breaks barriers." Rigoberto Lasso Tizareño observed: "This novel in our opinion opens a new cycle in the Mexican novel of our century." Vilma Fuentes (no relation) stated: ". . . for a new generation different and far removed, *La región más transparente* is enlightening in its chaos, while it appears fantastic and unbelievable in its historical background. Fuentes' book has grown but not aged."

Perhaps Emmanuel Carballo, who collaborated with Fuentes in a number of literary activities in the fifties, has best summed up the novel's importance: "For me the most important event of that year (1958) was the publication of *La región más transparente*, a work which closes the cycle of the rural-provincial novel and opens that of the postrevolutionary and metropolitan novel, fiercely critical. With this book Carlos Fuentes is converted into the style dictator of Mexican prose."

Source: Richard M. Reeve, "The Making of *La region mas transparente*," in *Carlos Fuentes, A Critical View,* edited by Robert Brody and Charles Rossman, University of Texas Press, 1982, pp. 34-63.

Topics for Further Study

Do some research on Mexico's "Day of the Dead" celebration. What was the state of this celebration in the 1950s? How has it become intrinsic to national identity for all Mexicans?

Mexico City has one of the finest subway systems in the world. What were some of the challenges posed by its construction and how did the artifacts unearthed during construction help answer questions about Mexico's past?

Fuentes was very keen on astrology. Using evidence from the book, ascribe a sign of the zodiac to each of your favorite characters. Or, use the characters to create a pack of Tarot cards.

Given the title, *Where the Air Is Clear*, research the problems Mexico City faces today in terms of congestion, smog, and pollution. What can be done to provide clean air and water to every person in a city as populous as Mexico City?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: The U.S.S.R. beat the U.S. into space with the launching of Sputnik in 1957.

Today: Russia insists on maintaining the oldest orbiting space station in hopes that tourism will bring revenue to its space agency. Meanwhile, the U.S. has had to pay part of Russia's contribution to the International Space Station to keep work on schedule.

1950s: Six European nations form the European Economic Community (EEC). Between them, the nations abolish mutual tariffs and begin laying the groundwork for a Common Market.

Today: Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. form a free-trade zone, NAFTA. The European Union more than doubles the number of countries in the EEC, and has its own currency, bureaucracy, and the beginnings of an EU military organization that will be separate from NATO.

Mexico: In 1998, 27 percent of the Mexican population lived below the poverty line and 2.8 percent were unemployed. Its industrial sector remains a mix of outmoded and modern machinery. NAFTA has allowed exports to nearly double to the U.S. and Canada. Living standards are expected to keep rising. The accompanying positivism has hid many of the pitfalls□increased environmental problems and rampant consumerism.

United States: As the new century opens, the U.S. is enjoying its longest running boom economy, its lowest unemployment rates, budget surpluses, and almost zero inflation. Ironically, the U.S. has been unable to solve many of its growing infrastructure problems□crumbling public school buildings, overreliance on automobile transit, and a stockpile of nuclear waste.

Mexico: The Zapatistas rose against the Mexican government in 1994. They are Indians who are still waiting for government and land reforms. They received military attention but little has changed to alleviate their impoverishment.

United States: During the 1990s, various radical groups challenged the U.S. government. Unfortunately, the clash between U.S. authorities and a religious group in Waco, Texas led to unnecessary deaths. Other standoffs have ended peaceably. Unlike the Zapatistas, these groups were not united in a demand for rational reforms of government based on universal human rights accords.

What Do I Read Next?

Several of the short stories collected in Fuentes' first book, *Los Dias Enmascarados* (*The Masked Days*) of 1954, are direct antecedents to *Where the Air Is Clear*. Many of the stories in the 1954 work are accessible in English in *Burnt Water* (1980). These short stories introduce the theme of entrance by the ancient gods of the Aztec and Maya into contemporary society to protest material culture.

In what was dubbed the 'last novel of the Mexican revolution,' Fuentes intended to create a character who could embody Mexico. *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962) resulted from the effort. In this novel, Cruz lies on his deathbed as his legacy is created. Supposedly, Cruz was a good, ideal, and true revolutionary but in all honesty he was corrupt, a capitalist, and selfish. Considered Fuentes' finest novel, the work cynically views the aftermath of the Mexican revolutionary impulse.

The almost postmodern attempt at cultural synthesis, Fuentes' *Zona sagrada* (1967; translated as *Holy Place*) blends Aztec and Greek myth. Tlazolteotl, the Aztec goddess of carnal love and decay, meets Greek and Egyptian cultures for the first time.

Fuentes has authored a number of essays and historical works. Perhaps the most well-known of the latter category, *Buried Mirror*, accompanied a BBC documentary in 1990. The scope of the work covers all of Spanish-American history from cave drawings to current political wranglings but the illustrations are abundant. The theme of the work hinges on the idea that there exists a Hispanic culture and tradition of shared images and artistic works.

Octavio Paz had a tremendous impact on Fuentes' generation. For Fuentes' interests in the themes of national identity, Paz' 1950 work *El Laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*) was an invaluable touchstone. In this work, Paz explores the character of Mexico as an amalgam of politics, history, and myth. He also explored the tensions between the indigenous and the conquistadors; his social criticism earned him fame but also ill will from the rulers of Mexico.

The mysterious disappearance of famed American writer Ambrose Bierce in 1914, the time of revolution in Mexico, has been a subject of intrigue for Mexican and American audiences. Fuentes has postulated a marvelous explanation in his novel, *Gringo Viejo* (*The Old Gringo*).

The most recent novel by E. L. Doctorow accentuates the mythical status of New York City. In *City of God: A Novel* (2000), Doctorow shows the world an end-of-the-century portrait of the city that stops just short of magical realism. The theft of a crucifix and its discovery atop the Synagogue for Evolutionary Judaism and the subsequent loss of faith by the detective priest is just the beginning.

Raymond Leslie Williams, who has written numerous books and articles on literature, explains the evolution of attention on Latin American literature in *The Modern Latin-*

American Novel (1998). Williams, along with a chronology of important literary works since 1945, provides an overview of who knew who, where "El Boom" derived its inspiration and technique, and the positioning of important Latin American writers in terms of each other and their literary heritage.

Further Study

Cortazar, Julia, *Hopscotch*, translated by Gregory Rabassa, Pantheon Books, 1987.

Originally published as *Rayuela* in 1963, Cortazar's book of "El Boom" soon transcended his generation. The work is a rare example of the truly innovative surviving the moment of its publication. According to a plan Cortazar sets forth, the reader must arrange the pieces of this open-ended novel into a whole.

van Delden, Maarten, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico, and Modernity*, Vanderbilt University Press, 1998.

Van Delden discusses the various modernist philosophies reflected upon throughout Fuentes' fiction. These include Fuentes' use of existentialism as well as his utilization of theories of national identity construction.

Faris, Wendy, "The Development of a Collective Voice: *Where the Air Is Clear*," in *Carlos Fuentes*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1983.

Faris explores the ways in which Fuentes' *Where the Air Is Clear* builds communication between his characters through memory, myth, and personal and national identity.

Fuentes, Carlos, *A New Time for Mexico*, translated by Marina G. Gutman, University of California Press, 1997.

At the end of the twentieth century, Fuentes looks back on Mexico's history since the Mexican Revolution of 1910. From that moment of liberation, Fuentes argues, Mexico has stumbled along a path toward authoritarianism that resulted in the long rule of the PRI. This reflection includes Fuentes' conversation with the Zapatista spokesman, Subcommander Marcos.

Fuentes, Carlos, *The Crystal Frontier: A Novel in Nine Stories*, translated by Alfred J. Mac Adam and Alfred M. Adam, Farrar, Straus, 1997.

This recent work by Fuentes weaves together nine stories to show the state of tension and space that exists between Mexico and the U.S. The work is a meditation on border relations suggesting that crystalline walls, not razor wire, separate gringos and Mexicans.

This is a shame since the two are destined to live together.

Krauze, Enrique, *Mexico: Biography of Power: A History of Modern Mexico, 1810-1996*, translated by Hank Heifetz, Harperperennial Library, 1998.

This new history of Mexico uses the biographies of men who controlled or struggled for control of that nation during the past two centuries. The most interesting aspect of Krauze's work is his argument that the caudilloa leader had a tremendous influence on Mexican history. Men's fortunes rose and fell depending on their proper use of this role.

Poniatowska, Elena, *Massacre in Mexico*, translated by Helen R. Lane, University of Missouri Press, 1992.

Originally published as *La noche de Tlatelolco* in 1971 and containing an introduction by Octavio Paz, this work has been since claimed as a masterpiece of documentary work. Poniatowska recounts the events of the 1968 massacre using information gathered through interviews. The work and the author have created controversy on both sides of the political aisle ever since.

Reeve, Richard M., "The Making of *La region mas transparente*: 1949-1974," in *Carlos Fuentes, A Critical View*, edited by Robert Brody and Charles Rossman, University of Texas Press, 1982.

Fuentes' novel aroused some controversy for a number of years after publication because it seemed to describe real people and real events. Reeve discusses the making of the book as a reflection of the events of the time period and Fuentes' biography.

Silko, Leslie Marmon, *Almanac of the Dead: A Novel*, Penguin, 1992.

Partially responsible for the boom in fiction by indigenous people of the U.S., Silko's monster novel, *Almanac of the Dead,* follows magical realism more closely than *Ceremony* (1977). The novel centers on Tucson but involves illegal border crossing, drug dealing, prophecy, and the historical consciousness that the American Southwest is not American. In fact, the illegality of activities along the border merely continues 500 years of struggle against the European invaders.

Bibliography

Dwyer, John P., "Conversation with a Blue Novelist," in *Review*, Vol. 12, Fall, 1974, pp. 54-8.

Gilman, Richard, "The Self-Conscious Culture of Modern Mexico," in *Commonweal*, 1961, pp. 510-11.

Krauze, Enrique, "The Guerilla Dandy," in *The New Republic*, Vol. 198, No. 26, June 27, 1988, pp. 28-34, 36-38.

Leal, Luis, "History and Myth in the Narrative of Carlos Fuentes," in *Carlos Fuentes: A Critical View*, edited by Robert Brody and Charles Rossman, University of Texas Press, 1982, pp. 3-17.

Maloff, Saul, "Growing Pains of a Bourgeois," in *Saturday Review*, Vol. XLIV, No. 50, December 16, 1961, pp. 20-1.

van Delden, Maarten, "Myth, Contingency, and Revolution in Carlos Fuentes's *La region mas transparente*," in *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 4, Fall, 1991, pp. 326-45.

West, Anthony, "The Whole Life," in *the New Yorker*, March 4, 1961, pp. 123-25.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Literature of Developing Nations for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535