



## Juan Perez Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*: A Microcosm of the Mexican Revolution's Aftermath

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to revisit Juan Perez Rulfo's "Pedro Paramo" through a sociological perspective. As one of the most studied Latin-American novels, Pedro Paramo's magic realism makes it difficult for students and teachers of literature to understand the story. With this paper, the author aims to give a glimpse of understanding of the novel and hopes for a deeper appreciation of Latin-American novels.*

**Keywords:** Pedro Paramo, Latin-American Literature, Sociological Approach, Magic Realism, Juan Perez Rulfo.

### Introduction

Man is not only shaped by his own hands, he is also shaped by the people around him, i.e. his and their decisions, indecisions, actions and inactions, inhibitions, and spontaneities, and so on. These things will make a man realize what he should, could and would do in the course of his life. However, what if these people were more than "significant" in a man's life? What if these people would cause even a man's own downfall? This is the case in the novel written by Juan Perez Rulfo entitled *Pedro Páramo*<sup>1</sup>.

In the novel, one sees that a single man's influence in the lives of the entire town would change the course of history. This influence even drove the town into its spiritual and financial decadence. Yet, while reading the novel and even after reading it, one continues to ask beyond the story of a ghost town; beyond the flashback of the prosperous town: what does the novel mean? Why does it have to be written in such a manner? Who is Pedro Páramo? What does he represent? Are there any socio-political underpinnings presented in the novel?

### The Microcosm of the Mexican Revolution's Aftermath

*Pedro Páramo* seems to be a microcosm of Mexico after the revolution ended in 1924 which started in 1910. To be able to understand some, if not most, of the ambiguities found in the novel, one should look into the social context of *Pedro Páramo*. The novel is set just after the revolution, making the dryness and barrenness of the town more credible-for in any war or revolution, the obvious aftereffects are destruction, hunger, and death<sup>2</sup>. The novel however was not set directly at the frontlines of these aftereffects. It is set in a far-flung area which may be

the last place that a revolution may reach. Yet still, the dullness, emptiness and fear can still be seen in this ghost town.

In addition, Pedro Páramo, to whom the novel is entitled, is noticeably and uninterestingly the main character. Yet, he does not have all the traits that a hero should have-making him the antihero of the novel. Nonetheless, everything that has happened in the novel is based on his actions, or non-actions. He is the metaphor for the elite who have the money and power to make the world go round, so to speak. Being the metaphor for those persons, Rulfo sees to it that his name should be meaningful: *Pedro*, which means rock<sup>3</sup> and *Páramo*, which means high plateau and barren heat<sup>4</sup>. Relating his name to his role in the novel, he is an elite member of the society, the supposed foundation of their community which happens to be weak and shallow. Like the elite in the society where there exists a revolution, the elite shall be and should be (whether the revolutionist like it or not) the leaders if victory is to be achieved. However, most elite would never allow this to happen, i.e. to gamble in leading a revolution in favor of the revolutionists, for the elite would always want to preserve their status quo-and that what had happened in the novel when a number of armed men have gone to the mansion of Pedro Páramo: he enticed the armed men with financial and military support, for his own good.

In the Marxist perspective<sup>5</sup>, *Pedro Páramo* seems to be ambiguous as well. On one hand, the novel can be *anti-Marxism* in the sense that without the capitalist, the people would also suffer the consequences. Like what happened to Comala, when Pedro Paramo decides to cross his arms and do nothing. The town starves to death economically and spiritually. On the other hand, the novel may be *pro-Marxism* in the sense that a revolution against the rich and the powerful is present.

However, based on the number of instances and situations which show that there exists a tension against the rich and the poor, it is safe to say that the novel is indeed *pro-Marxism*. Rulfo may have desired to show that his novel is anti-capitalist, yet he, probably, did not notice that he has implied a negative notion of an aftereffect of a society without the class struggle. It may have been good for a society without a class struggle, yet, why does the town need to die sadly and bitterly with the loss of the evil, rich man from Comala? Is it because it is an implication that the revolutionaries are after a political rebellion and not a social revolution?

Looking back at the context of the novel, Pedro Páramo may stand for the long-time dictator Porfirio Díaz who was ousted in 1911 during the Mexican Revolution<sup>6</sup>. The desire for more power, more landholdings and more money may be the common denominators for all dictators. However, in the presidency of other politicians, one sees that the various desires of these presidents made them not so different with Díaz, and most especially Pedro Páramo. They all share the same desires, making Páramo the symbol of all the evils in these politicians.

With the changes of the heads of the state, which is also felt in the novel, one even sees that the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929)<sup>7</sup>, a religiously motivated civil war, is depicted in the novel. When Father Renteria goes “out in the hills” to fight, the reference is the Cristero Rebellion which started due to President Calles’ constitutional provisions which limited the power of the Catholic Church. With this war, one sees that the first casualties are the innocent ones. People have died without receiving the last sacraments. This may be a subtle attack to the Catholic Church due to some priests who do not live by what they preach. Undeniably, many of the events and turning points in the novel are shaped by historical events in Mexico.

### **Social Decadence in *Pedro Páramo***

Social decadence is also presented in the novel. Incest, adultery and murder are the recurring sins in the novel. These social problems may have been prevalent during the era of the revolution but conspicuously, ones committing these crimes are the rich. This issue of social decadence in the upper class is also the recurring theme in the works of Filipino writers such as Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero<sup>8</sup>, F. Sionil Jose<sup>9</sup>, and the likes. However, in the novel, these social issues seem to be the very air that the evil ones breathe—this maybe a manner of saying the level or degree of evilness these characters in the novel have (or the Mexican people, at that time, have).

### **The Apparent and Concealed Themes in *Pedro Páramo***

It is clear enough that the town of Comala is a ghost town. However, the novel is so obscure that reading it once will make the reader question his own understanding of the story. What does the novel mean? What does Rulfo wants to say? These are

the questions that one may ask after reading the story. The novel, not thinking of the social context, is mind-boggling itself. At times, it is even spooky. However, if a formalist would look at the novel, seeing the manner of narrating the events as the matter or looking at the medium as the message, or simply taking the form as the substance, the novel shows several themes and subject matters.

Confusion and ambiguity are the probable themes of the novel. As Paredes pointed out in his essay “Confusion, the Critics, and the Ambiguities in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*”<sup>10</sup>. As one reads the novel, one is confused who is speaking, narrating the story. Everything started with Juan and the story ended with Pedro dying. Even asking who is alive and dead while reading the dialogues does not only make the reader have goose bumps but makes the reader question the credibility of the one speaking in the story. Confusion is indeed achieved with this method of storytelling. But why use this kind of narration? It is most probably to show the “state of things” at the time of great political turmoil in Mexico. Chaos brings confusion to anyone, and discovering that the backdrop of the story is the Mexican Revolution makes the confusion “unambiguous.”

Fear is another theme. Why make a ghost town out of Comala? To show that fear envelopes the Mexican people during the revolution. Even Juan Preciado died of fear—that was how fearsome Mexico was (Comala as the microcosm).

Hidden beneath these “negative” themes is a positive one, one that even Pandora was able to save—hope. It is however difficult to dig up this kind of theme for everyone seems frightened, confused, and lost. However, hope is with everyone in the novel. Hope is the encouraging factor for everyone to achieve what they desire. The story began with the hope of Dolores for Juan to get what properly belongs to her son; the hope of Juan to finally see his father; and finally, the hope of Pedro that Susana would love him someday. Unfortunately, none of these hopes ever came true. Still at least, at the moment of reading the novel, there existed those hopes.

### **Conclusion**

The magic realism used in the novel does not only confuse the readers of this work but also serves as a way of showing the deeper meaning of the novel. The confusions, fears and hopes seen in the novel do not just appear for art’s sake but to serve as a social tool in showing what the Mexican people have felt during the historical revolutions in their country. However, instead of being obvious in his attack, the writer makes the novel seem to be just an ordinary abstract experimental novel at first reading. Besides, many critics have considered this novel one of the canons of Latin-American literature making it indeed meaningful than what it conveys on the surface. Though very confusing and ambiguous in the beginning, the novel is not just magical but very realistic in portraying the “man” and his powers over his fellow men.

As for the man, Pedro Páramo is not based on imagination. He is real. He is everywhere: at school, at work, and even in the government offices. A purely evil man exists not only in the *tele-novellas* that the Latin-Americans have influenced us with but this kind of man indeed lives among us. This is the man who can manipulate our lives; he who can do anything to us just because he can; he who can let our dreams go to waste; he who can say the simplest words that would destroy our resolves-that man's name is Pedro Páramo. Have you seen him lately?

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