

THE DEATH OF ARTEMIO CRUZ

Carlos Fuentes

Overview

Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012) was a prolific Mexican novelist, short story writer, and essayist, who played a crucial role in the development of the Latin American Boom, its twentieth century explosion of powerful literary creation. As a child of diplomats, Fuentes was born in Panama City, then traveled widely; throughout his life critically devoted to issues of socialist politics. Much of his adult life was spent in France, where he taught and wrote for many decades. He is especially known for his novels *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962) and *The Old Gringo* (1985).

Story

The Death of Artemio Cruz is a grand novel, sweeping up perspectives on modern Mexico through the lens of one powerful individual's life. As the idealistic young man soldier Cruz participates in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) which gave national expression to the growing worldwide sense, that the old orders of European society were defunct. Thus Artemio Cruz fought, as did many of his *compadres*, to manage a reasonable distribution of the land for the peasants, and a sharp limitation on the power of the Catholic Church.

As we get to know Cruz's life, we learn that, during the post-Revolutionary period of 'reorganization,' while Mexico was consuming itself in infighting and political squabbles, Cruz himself was blowing his moral stance, dirtying his hands with a variety of corrupt behaviors. During this period Cruz blackmails and betrays a fellow soldier, in order to insinuate himself into a wealthy landowning family; from this point on to his death, with which the novel itself opens, Cruz sets a course of unscrupulous financial dealings, through which he crushes corporate opponents, defrauds creditors, breaks apart families, and generally perverts all those standards of transparent social behavior for which the Mexican Revolution—and he as part of it—had fought. In the end his lust for money is the source of the death of his son.

The heart of the novel, which ultimately condemns the new social-economic-cultural world which follows the Revolution, takes us into the details of Cruz' cynical advances toward power and wealth. We learn that Cruz was himself the illegitimate son of a wealthy landowner, who was raised by his uncle—a man to whom he feels perhaps his only deep fidelity. It is after Lunero's death that Cruz joins the revolutionary forces, and falls in love—with a revolution-minded woman who is taken and hanged by the landholder forces.

Not long after that bitter loss, Cruz is imprisoned, along with an idealistic young officer, who confides, to Cruz, many personal details of his life and family. Cruz makes no effort to save the young man from execution, but rather, in fact, turns to his own advantage—in order to win the wealthy hand of the officer's sister—the information Bernal has given him. The loveless marriage undertaken by Cruz nets him enough fortune to buy a Mexico City newspaper, which gives him new power—publicity and advertisements—to promote what is his growing empire of business networks. He remains indifferent to the fate of his only son, whom he sends to manage the family estate, and who soon meets his death, after joining the anti-Fascists in Spain.

The vertiginous moral decline of Artemio Cruz, which is blended with his growth in capital worth, is throughout the novel highlighted by the style experiments with which Fuentes exposes us to the turbulent mind of this protagonist. It is in tracking the free ranging imagination, anxiety, and

desperation of Cruz, that Fuentes most daringly extends the range of his style play, opening out streams of consciousness, audacious metaphorical juxtapositions, and unexpected irony.

As the novel ends, Artemio is on his deathbed, surveying his past in fragments, a piece of the wreckage of his time.

Themes

Corruption. Fuentes takes us into the inner workings of ruthless financial ambition. Artemio Cruz will stop at nothing, including confidential information provided by a fellow prisoner, to advance his monetary, and in this instance matrimonial schemes. Fuentes takes every opportunity to show us, that the corruption of post-Revolutionary Mexico can be encapsulated in a single voracious individual.

Business. Fuentes depicts a business milieu in which the individual must be ruthless and narcissistic in order to succeed. Cruz puts personal interest before society's interest, and thus amasses a small network of businesses which feed on one another, and profit from the advertisement he himself can provide them in his own newspapers.

Characters

Gonzalo Bernal is the patrician, and innocent, young officer, co-prisoner with the young Artemio Cruz, who provides Artemio with personal information that will enable him to manipulate his upcoming marriage with Gonzalo's sister.

Artemio Cruz is the ruthlessly ambitious protagonist of this novel, which appears to imply that post-Revolutionary Mexican destiny is tied up with the spirit of reckless and unscrupulous adventurers.

Lorenzo is Artemio's son, who goes off to fight in the Spanish Civil War and is killed at the age of seventeen. This youngster sets out with the same idealism that in the past spurred, and then abandoned, his father.

MAJOR CHARACTER

Artemio Cruz (*Unconscientious*)

Character Artemio Cruz is from the start of this novel a dying man, who is reflecting back onto his on the whole greedy, sensual, and corrupt life. He recalls his early political idealism, his love of beautiful women, his lifelong pursuit of self-interest over loyalty or honor, and his ambivalent attitude toward the last rites of the Catholic Church. The reflection in question is shared among differing narrative positions—third and first person, with shadings of every kind of voice—from intimate childhood reverie to the headline-trumpeting impersonal media-voice of our time. Behind every voice is the drowning shadow of Artemio, who knows he is guilty of having wasted his life.

Parallels The ancient Greek model for the power of aging must be Homer's Priam, as in the *Iliad* he travels through the dusk, humbled, to ask Achilles for the body of Hector. Artemio, too, is sufficiently on the brink to be humbled by the retrospect of his own shaggy life; Oedipus at Colonus, then, would seem to offer an equally powerful model, for the power of extreme age to demand reflection. Shakespeare's King Lear offers a modern parallel for the dreadful passage from power into helpless confusion, in the last stage of life. For a parallel that catches the corruptness of a life which death is forcing into the light, a light Cruz is starting to see, take the dreadful example of Bulstrode the banker, in Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871). The long-hidden truth about his own corrupt past spills onto him at the height of his influence, and he is quickly reduced to an end of life condition.

Illustrative moments

Vegetative The novel opens with the immediate sensations of the dying man's penis against a cold catheter: 'I wake...the touch of that cold object against my penis awakens me. I did not know that at times one can urinate without knowing it.' From that intimate sensation on, the 'I' who speaks is submerged in a half-conscious sea of smells and muffled sounds and light-dark transitions, none of which adds up to more than vegetative awareness. 'I am this. This am I, old man with his face reflected in pieces by different-sized squares of glass...'

Reemerging The narrator emerges slowly from half-consciousness, into the immediate memory of the air taxi ride that took him from Hermosillo to what will be his final resting place in Mexico City. As the plane swings in for a landing, he makes one of his periodic efforts to summarize the life he has been: 'you will reflect that you have done so many cowardly things in your life that now courage has become easy...and you are the only one who leaves the bumpy biplane ride calm and unruffled.' This state of affairs is 'true, and almost universally true.'

Bribing The immediately recalled trip north, which had taken Artemio to Sonora, before his air taxi return to the Capitol, was a response to a 'local bribery need,' which typifies the kinds of dirty operations on which Artemio's whole 'career' has been built. He needed to pay off Sonoran associates who were going to see to it that tax collectors, processing the sending of dried fish to the capitol, would be free to skim their usual rake-off off the top of the prices set for the transported fish. This kind of bribery price/fixing deal was old hat to Artemio!

Unscrupulous While recounting the hectic pace of his first day back in the Capitol, after returning from Sonora, Artemio—dying but slowly regaining the memory of his own history—Artemio offers a mental purview of the multiple ways in which he had 'made his living': 'opportune' acquisitions of land, in time for new home construction areas; presidential 'interventions' on behalf of his own lucrative contractor jobs; timely purchase—thanks to the underground buzz—of mining stock; the manipulation of stock prices; service as front man in U.S. Mexican enterprises; purchase and revamping of failing newspapers.

Discussion questions

Is Artemio Cruz truly repentant, as he reflects on his life? Was he eager for the last rites of the Catholic Church—which he wanted as 'absolution' – or was he indifferent to the ultimate 'state of his soul'?

What kind of crook was Artemio? What did he want his ill-gotten money for? What did he do with his ill-gotten money?

What does Artemio remember of his own earlier 'political idealism'? How does he now evaluate that stage of his life?