

ARTEMIO

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Artemio Cruz (In Carlos Fuentes' *The Death of Artemio Cruz*) **Unconscientious**

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).

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?