

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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MARIANO AZUELA

(1873-1952)

Works (major novels)

The Air Wheel, 1908
The Losers, 1908
The Winners, 1909
Bad Weed, 1909
Andres Perez, a Supporter of Madero, 1911
Without love, 1912
The Underdogs, 1915
The Bosses, 1917
The Flies, 1918
The Tribulations of a Decent Family, 1918
Comrade Pantoja, 1937
Regina Landa, 1939
The New Bourgeoisie, 1941
The Merchant Woman, 1944

Biography

Mariano Azuela was a Mexican doctor and author, best known for his accounts of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). He wrote criticism, novels, and plays, dealing with this national upheaval, which like the Russian Revolution, at same time, aimed to overthrow an archaic and unjust feudal culture. Azuela's work was influential in Mexico, and did much to attract attention to the revolutionary cause.

Apart from early writing of short satirical pieces—*Impressions of a student*, 1896—Azuela first began to publish novels in 1908—*Maria Luisa*; *The failures*—and in those early fictions he concentrated on the losers during the long period of rule by Porfirio Diaz, who controlled Mexico for three and a half decades, in the later 19th century, and who was only in 1911 driven into exile. Azuela's view of the Porfiriate dictatorship was bleak, and the characters he distributed, across those fictional landscapes, were victims of rough destiny. Azuela wrote actively throughout this political period: revolutionary themed novels, like *Andres Perez, maderista*, 1911, or *Without love*, 1912. His greatest work, which was concerned with the Revolution itself, culminates in the novel *Los de abajo* (*The Underdogs*), published in 1915. His later fictional work, continuing to appear until his death, and written as he continued to practice medicine in Mexico City, dealt largely with the corrupt and disorganized aftermath of the Revolution.

The life behind this active and creative existence began in 1873, in Lagos de Moreno, Mexico. Mariano's dad was a small farmer. At the age of fourteen Azuela was sent to a Catholic Seminary, but he tired of his religious studies and went to Guadalajara to study medicine. He got his M.D. in 1899, then went into practice, first in his home town, then in Mexico City. In 1900 he married, going on to create five sons and five daughters.

Like most younger intellectuals in Mexico, in the early 20th century, Azuela was strongly for change, and sick of the presence of Porfirio Diaz. In 1911 Azuela was given an important regional political role by President Madero, and after the assassination of Madero he joined various 'constitutionalist' forces working to restore law and order in the New Mexico. His efforts as a field doctor, at that time, gave him the material experience he needed, to write his finest novel, *The Underdogs*. He was enabled to write that work thanks to a stay in El Paso, Texas, when the counter revolutionary forces had temporarily retaken the Mexican government. The book, and Azuela's reputation, were only brought fully to light in 1924, when Azuela was finally seen as both a theorist and a journalist of the dramatic events of the war. The book plumbs not only the hard scrabble idealism of the regional revolutionaries, but discouraging indications that the plight of the losers would continue, even after the war, to keep them at the bottom.

Achievements

Realism. As a field doctor, serving with the anti-Porfirista forces, in the countryside of northern Mexico, Azuela had ample opportunity to observe the Mexican Revolutionary War up close. In his major novel, *The Underdogs*, Azuela picks up the dialogue of men fighting in guerilla war, the physical environments they had to endure in make-shift barracks or huts, and the local foods they ate. One might want to compare, to this kind of innovative realism, the work of the Goncourt brothers in France, who wandered the shop floors of factories, notebook in hand, taking down the dialogue of the workers.

Action. Writing initially as a journalist, Azuela acquired the habit of writing in a situation, taking notes on action, viewing oneself as part of the action. He achieves, in the course of his fictions, the kind of energy of action which was going on around him. The reader of *The Underdogs* feels him/herself part of that action, while it is being described.

History. Given the realistic action, which makes up the tenor of Azuela's best work, there is throughout the work of this novelist a strong sense that history is here being enacted. Is Azuela writing as an historian? He is not writing the object *history*, as classic historians like Gibbon or Michelet did, but he is laying before us the passage of time and events. Is he using imagination to create the sense of history? Or is he simply standing inside history as he writes? He is *being* an historian, rather than writing as an historian.

Complexity. Throughout his work, most of which circles around the Mexican Revolution, and the development of a new post-Revolutionary Mexico, Azuela clear-sightedly observes both the relief provided by Revolution, and the new social wrongs—corruption, venality, jealousy—that immediately arise, to befoul the New Mexico the Revolution had helped to make possible.

Themes

Nature. Azuela's world of journalistic fiction is a hard one, at its most unyielding as depicted in the nature that fills *The Underdogs*. Mountains are rocky--even to climb a hillside is exhausting; crevasses await the careless tread; scorching drought is a perpetual plague in the dry season, while torrential rains may spring up overnight, rendering the roads impassable. There is here none of the romanticism of nature which the European poetic tradition has familiarized us with.

Misbehavior. While s Azuela's sympathies are consistently with the revolution and its partisans, he is quick to observe that he same kinds of exploitation, looting, outright theft, fraud—occur on both sides of the political spectrum. When the Federales have been driven out of a town, and the Revolutionaries move in, nothing much changes. One group pillages as freely as the other.

Feelings. There are no gentle or romantic feelings, in the world of *The Underdogs*. Among the major players in Azuela's fictional world. Demetrio, the protagonist of *The Underdogs*, may experience moments of tenderness toward his wife, and she toward him, but under the pressures of poverty and extreme anxiety, these moments rapidly convert into new tensions and conflict. When the sensitive medical student, Luis, enters Demetrio's camp, the instinctive response is to view him as an effeminate city boy, and only his tough persistence wins him any respect.

Vengeance. Vengeance far outweighs loss, or even loyalty, in the shaping of the narrative of *the Underdogs*. At the outset, the Federales, hunting Demetrio on account of conflict he engaged in with a prosperous landowner, kill his dog. (It is from that point on that Demetrio heads for the hills, and starts to assemble his own fighting force.) When Luis Cervantes, the educated medical student from the city, begs entrance to the rebels' camp he is finally accepted; he is seeking vengeance against the Federales, who had initially rejected him as a recruit for their side.

Characters

In his novel *Los de Abajo*, *The Underdogs*, Mariano Azuela manages to characterize the quality of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). He does so by concentrating on a small band of anti-government rebels, who are fighting in the mountains, and who represent the insurgent guerilla force of the popular movement for a new government. Azuela, a strong partisan of the guerillas, and a medical doctor, played an active role in supporting the underdogs.

Two characters in Azuela's novel, **Luis** and **Demetrio**, interrelate deeply, at the same time giving us a sharp sense of the life inside a guerilla camp, where personal conflicts, tensions, and heroisms are forever being put to the test. Demetrio, the group leader, is tough and committed, a true guy of the people, devoted to his family but courageous in taking on front line fighting and deprived living conditions. Into the camp comes a sophisticated young medical student, whose ideals have led him to the revolution, but who is out of place with this tough bunch of *rebeldes*. Yet this condition of being out of place launches the deep text of this fine novel, because Azuela excels at showing the incorporation of Luis, who is tenacious and kind both, into the world of the hard-core fighters. The coming together and mutual understanding, of Luis and Demetrio, becomes Azuela's subtle way of talking about the flexibility of the revolution, and its openness to men of good will, of whatever background.

Azuela, an activist, doctor, and writer develops his own values, and clarifies his own politics, in this subtle novel.