

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

CARLOS FUENTES

(1928-2012)

Works

Novels

Where the Air is Clear, 1958

The Death of Artemio Cruz, 1962

A Change of Skin, 1967

Terra Nostra, 1975

The Old Gringo, 1985

The Campaign, 1992

The Eagle's Throne, 2002

Happy Families, 2006

Destiny and Desire, 2008

Vlad, 2010

Short story collections

Chac Mool and other stories, 1973

Burnt waters, 1983

Constancia and other stories for virgins, 1990

Two educations, 1991

The orange tree, 1994

Biography

Carlos Fuentes was born in Panama City, Panama, in 1928; his father was a Mexican diplomat. As a youngster, Carlos was frequently on the move with his parents, to one Latin American capital after another. From 1934-1940 Fuentes' dad was posted to the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C. There Carlos attended English language school, and became proficient in English. He also became interested in writing, and started publishing a journal, which he distributed on his city block.

Fuentes' interest in politics dates from the end of his years in Washington. In 1938 Mexico nationalized all foreign gas and oil holdings, arousing strong resistance in the United States. In 1940 the Fuentes family was transferred to Santiago de Chile, where, in part through his fascination with the poetry of Pablo Neruda, Fuentes developed a strong interest in Socialism. Shortly after that Fuentes began living in Mexico City, and studying law at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). He also found himself involved actively in journalism, and spent some time studying international relations in Geneva. In 1957 he was made director of cultural relations at the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs.

In 1958 Fuentes published his first genuine novel, *Where the Air is clear*, and decided from that time on to devote himself to fiction. In 1959 he moved to Cuba, where he wrote articles and essays supporting the Cuban Revolution. He also married, the first of two marriages, the Mexican actress Rita Macedo. That marriage ended in divorce. His second marriage, to the journalist Silvia Lemus, lasted until his death.

From 1975-77 Fuentes served as Mexico's Ambassador to France, a position he resigned in protest against the appointment of Diaz Ordaz's appointment as Ambassador to Spain. During the seventies and eighties, as his fiction and public stance added steadily to his recognition, Fuentes was active both in writing—this was the moment for his best fiction and short stories—and in public presentations, both as visiting Professor at many prestigious universities, and as public friend of any number of distinguished

writers and thinkers. He was at the center of a major feud with the Nobel Prize winning poet, Octavio Paz, who shed doubt on the legitimacy of Fuentes' Mexican nationality. (He was born in Panama.) This international flap, with Paz, inevitably projects our minds forward to the later North American political debate over President Barack Obama's citizenship.

Fuentes had three children, of whom only one survived him. Carlos himself died in May, 2012, of a massive hemorrhage.

Achievements

Synoptic. Thanks to his American education, his wide travels, and his native critical sense, Carlos Fuentes earned the reputation for a wide and objective view of the world. (He traded world perspective notions regularly, with American—and other-- intellectuals, political figures, and writers.) He addressed the top western Universities, on the issues of a new, and more sensitive, society. He was at the same time a spokesperson for Latin America—no small concept—as a whole.

Aging. In two texts particularly, *The Old Gringo* and *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, we face directly into aspects of the psychology of aging. Fuentes achieves an empathy, and descriptive inwardness, which enables him to think and express from inside these two portraits of aging sensibility. The Old Gringo still has a taste for adventure, in this case the dusty thin soiled plain of northern Mexico, heading south from El Paso. But it is an attenuated sense. Artemio Cruz, still a greedy lecher, cannot let go of this profound personality trait, but his failing hormones gradually release him into resignation.

Corruption. Artemio Cruz is Fuentes' supreme portrait of the venial oldster, with behind him a background in which he has blithely screwed everybody who blocked his path, and woven a deep path of corruption through his rivals, until he has squeezed every possible drop of money or sexual pleasure he can, from a society which every available resource has been stolen from, to feed the dirtiest of capitalism's desires.

Selfhood. Fuentes's master effort in the novel, as he saw it, was the *Terra Nostra* text (1975)—loosely akin to the ambitions of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—in which he attempts to portray the consciousness of the Latin American mind from the earliest times on. Fuentes challenges the Latin American intellect to take fully conscious possession of itself, in this daring reconstruction of a world: compare a more recent effort, limited to the foundations of 'South America'; Charles Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*, 2005.

Themes

Globalism. Carlos Fuentes was brought up an internationalist, in a Mexican diplomatic family, spent much of his adult life among internationalist intellectuals, lectured often at the most prestigious western universities, and throughout his life viewed his own country objectively, as one of the many national families occupying the globe. Fuentes was, one would have to say, a cosmopolitan in the grand 18th century sense, a man of the world. His work is pervaded by the qualities of this globalism.

Borders. While cosmopolitan, Fuentes's work is regularly marked by his sense of the distinctive characters of separate polities, and by the borders where their differences meet. A good example of this sensitivity is the border experience swamping the Old Gringo, in the novel of his name, as he prepares to cross from Texas into Mexico, to begin his journey to join the rebels. He is intensely aware of the charged atmosphere with every step he makes toward the crossing into a new culture.

Socialism. Support for socialist humanism, as he calls it, is a prominent feature of Fuentes' thought and imagination. His long term admiration of Castro's Cuban experiment eventually came to conflict and break between Fuentes and the Cubans. However Fuentes remained faithful to the ideals of social equity, and to the overall purposes of the Mexican Revolution. Artemio Cruz, into whom Fuentes saw so deeply, represented all the vices that make a socialist corrective essential.

Fall. Globalist, and internationalist, Fuentes remains deeply insightful when it comes to the natural viciousness of man in society. Artemio Cruz begins his fictive career life as an idealist, dreaming—as does the Old Gringo—of a new world in which co-operation will be the governing force in society. Greed, lust, and indifference to others eventually lead Cruz in another direction, and make of him at the end a frightened misfit in time, abandoned by god and man.

Characters

The two examples before us, **Artemio Cruz** and **The Old Gringo**—in *The Death of Artemio Cruz* and *The Old Gringo*—target older men, one (the Gringo) heading into a Revolutionary War (the Mexican Revolution) for which he thinks he would be happy to sacrifice his life, the other reflecting from his deathbed on his life of ambition, as a master of dirty business tricks, and as a selfish hedonist. The two fictional characters have it in common that they are both trying to complete the narrative of their lives in a way that is satisfying to them.

Artemio Cruz first speaks to us from his death bed, as he is being flown back to Mexico City in a medivac helicopter. He has come from the north of the country, has been engaged in one of his dirty business deals, and is in the midst of a confession, as though to the whole world, of the unscrupulous and ultimately unrewarding life he has led. We learn that he has been a ruthless manipulator of deals, who would do anything he could to seduce another man's wife, or to elbow a competitor out of a large land deal.

The **Old Gringo** is an American writer, adventurer, and political ideologist who longs to complete his life with style, and to serve what he considers a good cause. By joining the rebel Mexican army in the field, by falling in love with an American volunteer, by coming to understand the world view of the rebels, he enriches his life.

Fuentes models his tales to the life; he is no moralist. In doing so he succeeds in making a point no moralist would scorn, that serving a cause makes for a better death than fighting like a dog, to ensure your share of the pie.