

Luis Cervantes (in Mariano Azuela, *The Underdogs*)

Conscientious

Overview *The Underdogs* is one of several novels written by the Mexican novelist Mariano Azuela (1873-1952). A doctor by profession, he was born one of seven siblings to a businessman who owned a small grocery store. He went to University in Guadalajara, the capital of his state, and there began serious writing, as well as his medical studies. Drawn to the political positions of President Madero (1911-1913), he joined (as a doctor) the army of Pancho Villa but when that army was defeated, Azuela was obliged to go into exile, in El Paso, Texas. Once back in Mexico, he moved with his wife to Mexico City, where he worked as a doctor and produced some two dozen novels.

Character Luis Cervantes is a young man with some medical training, who has, on those grounds, been conscripted into the Mexican Federales, during the Revolution. When we first meet him he is in the process of defecting to the rebels' side; he appears at a small rebel camp, which has formed under the leadership of Demetrio Macias, and says he wants to fight for the rebels. He is relatively hi falutin—educated, mannerly—in the rough team around Demetrio, but he eventually proves his reliability, and usefulness—by helping bind wounds—and in the end is an accepted player in the gang, as well as a close ally of Demetrio. His naivete, in supposing he could become a team player with Demetrio, pays off in the end.

Parallels Luis, a blend of aesthete/scholar with a guy who can survive in the dirt on the front lines, calls to mind a diverse set of vulnerable survivors. Edith Wharton's George Darrow, *The Reef* (1912), is the kind of guy who happens into complex social situations that swallow him up—and yet he muddles through and prevails. The same might be said, on the level of brilliant adolescence, for Holden Caulfield, in the *Catcher in the Rye* (1945); his self-awareness, and reckless intuition, keep him afloat on the high seas of adolescent mishaps—as Luis prevails even when kicked around. The supreme instance of a modern character wearing the armor of innocence might be Albert Camus' Stranger, in *L'Etranger* (1942), a paean to a guy for whom the created world is fascinating, fresh, and meaningless.

Illustrative moments

Beat Luis first appears at the camp, to which he has defected, in a beat up condition, 'a young man covered with dust, from his felt hat to the rough heels of his shoes. He had a fresh bloodstain on his pants, near one foot.' (He had been warningly shot by one of the camp guards, as he advanced.) He hastens to assure the team that he too is a 'revolutionary,' but they urge their guard to kill him. When he insists on seeing the jefe, he harvests a brutal slap in the face, ends up covered in blood.

Persecuted Demetrio enters the picture and establishes calm, while Luis bitterly complains at the treatment he has been receiving. Luis identifies himself and explains: 'I'm a medical student and a journalist. I was persecuted for having said something in favor of the revolutionaries. They captured me and I ended up in jail.' Luis uses a fancy word, 'coreligionist,' to explain what he is in relation to the rebels, and they laugh at him, mocking the very idea that the rebel cause has a 'goal' or 'aim.' Luis is defining himself off as an intellectual rebel, which isn't a popular role to play on this battlefield.

Enduring Demetrio tells his men to throw Luis in the pigsty for the night, until they can figure out what to do with him. 'Looking for the best place to lie down, he rested his battered bones on a pile of wet manure ...he reached out his arms and his trembling hand touched the coarse hair of a pig...' But after Demetrio's men become convinced, that Luis too is an underdog, they repent of

their harshness to him, and begin to value—even consult—him as an ally and an educated man, one who shared a ‘devious, unremitting, and mortal hatred of the upper classes, officials, and everyone who was a superior.’

Sympathetic Luis scored points by helping to heal Demetrio’s wounded and swollen leg, as well as by talking with the simplest guys in the troupe about their personal issues, or simply by praising people unused to praise. The guys liked to hear stories, and one afternoon were listening to ‘Venancio tell amusing episodes of *The Wandering Jew*.’ Some of the audience fell asleep, and snored, but Luis listened attentively, and at the end exclaimed: ‘Admirable! You have a beautiful talent!’ Venancio explains that his family was poor, and couldn’t support him in a career.

Discussion questions

What attracts Luis to the side of Demetrio and his rough fellow fighters?

What is it about Luis that makes him attractive to Demetrio and his group? How does he win their affection and respect?