

The old Gringo (In Carlos Fuentes' *The old Gringo*) Open

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 The old gringo, of Fuentes' novel, is thought by many to be modeled on Ambrose Bierce, an American man of letters, who was alleged to have disappeared while fighting—as did 'the old gringo'—with Pancho Villa's forces in the Mexican Civil War. The *gringo*—that is *Yankee*—of Fuentes' novel is a man in his early seventies who is determined to live his life fully to the end, and who signs up with the rebels in the Mexican Civil War. While deployed with a rebel force, he becomes deeply involved both with a 'rebel general,' who dominates him, and with a young American girl, who has gone to Mexico to serve as a nanny and housekeeper. As a spiritual explorer, he takes what comes, to the very end.

Parallels Gandalf, in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), is a powerful wise hobbit, and a benchmark for lore-filled wisdom, not precisely the type of the old Gringo, though both figures are wise in their chance-taking. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1951) takes the Old Gringo's path into adventure, in one last heroic struggle to set his stamp on life, and to take home the huge marlin that in the end defeats him. Garcia Marquez' *Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) is a pitiless anatomy of the personality of a political autocrat in advanced age, and interfaces with the Gringo at one point; both guys have the blindered obsession of the old man refusing to settle comfortably into his senescence.

Illustrative moments

1 Histrionic Much is made of the border crossing into Mexico, by which the old Gringo symbolically steps into a new register of his late-in-life passion. Walking the streets of El Paso, before crossing the border, the gringo reflects on how clearly he 'wants to make life difficult for himself'; he takes a few books and a pistol, and sets off to buy an American horse which he can ride down to the rebel lines. (Naturally, the books he takes include *Don Quixote*.) 'I intend to be a good-looking corpse,' he reflects to himself, poised for a dramatic and risky end of life action.

2 Quester Reflecting on the internality of the experience of the frontier, the gringo crosses into Mexico at Ciudad Juarez, leaving behind the small town western main street of El Paso, a reminder of the 'modern world,' and entering, as a 'voluntary fugitive,' a new world. In his eyes 'were fused all the cities of gold, the expeditions that never returned, the lost priests, the nomadic and moribund tribes that had survived the epidemics of the Europeans.' 'On the horizon there was nothing but a line in the distance, where sky joined dry, dirty plain...'

3 Pausing The gringo stops briefly to rest at the home of a fat peasant who questions him on his destination. Leaving the man's modest shelter, and starting south, the gringo has the surprising sense—is it a fantasy?—that the woman of the house is watching as he goes, and longing for him. He tried to 'reject the comforting notion that his presence in another man's house might still provoke jealousy.' His quest, for all its end-stage rebel fighting tenor, is drenched in sexual longing, and will play out on the battlefield of erotics.

4 Spiritual As the gringo advances further into the desert, Fuentes gives us religious overtones to munch on: one feels the power of the desert heat and wind, which transforms the landscape into twisted and powerful meanings. 'The old gringo coughs...his breathing ebbs, as long ago the waters had drawn back from the earth to create the desert. In spite of everything, he says, "I am in control of my destiny."'"

This focused clarity will qualify him, not much later, for inclusion in the rebel army: after he has proven himself by the accuracy with which he can shoot a hole in a tossed coin.

Discussion questions

What impels the old Gringo to cross the border into Mexico, and to join forces with the Revolution?

What kind of attraction does the old Gringo feel for Harriett? Is it romantic or paternal?

The Gringo says that he 'wants to make life difficult for himself.' Why would he want to do that? What kind of conception has he, of the legacy he wants to leave behind him?