

THE UNDERDOGS

Mariano Azuela

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.

Story

The Underdogs (1915) is the classic fictional insight into the Mexican Revolution, which consumed the country from 1910-20, and left its institutions as profoundly changed as the French Revolution changed its culture. Azuela himself, a doctor actively involved in the conflict, offers in this novel one of the first critiques and commentaries on the revolution, and he does so through the small peephole of a band of revolutionaries.

Azuela tracks the committed life of a poor small-town farmer who opposes the oppressive political practices of the local leader, the *cacique*. Finding himself isolated and threatened, Demetrio, the farmer, has no choice but to leave his wife and children, and flee to join a rebel (revolutionary) group in the mountains; they are fighting the *federales*, the government, to overthrow the country.

In his first gunfire engagement, Demetrio is wounded in the leg, and must be transported to a nearby village for medical attention. While there he is nursed to wellness by Camilla, a woman who soon falls in love with another of the rebels, the intellectual young man named Luis, an idealist who has only recently joined the revolutionary movement, and who has had trouble surmounting the initial attitudes of the gang, who consider him an effete city slicker. Luis, however, does not return Camilla's affection, and she gradually falls in love with Demetrio.

During this period, and thanks to a number of military victories, Demetrio rises in authority and becomes a rebel general. In the course of this power surge, however, changes occur in the army of the rebels, whose behavior—raping women, robbing and murdering—comes increasingly to resemble the behavior of the government troops they are fighting. A couple of the rebels in particular—Whitey and La Pintada—exceed any norms of proper behavior, while Demetrio, no angel at all, remains more or less an idealist, true to the goals that brought him into the revolution.

Two years pass. The ordinary people of Mexico are tiring of the presence of military forces, and are losing their revolutionary spirit. Demetrio has no choice but to leave the army and go back to his farm home. In a crucial scene he is unable to answer his wife's question why he remained so long in the military. Part shame, part inability to answer this basic question? At the end of the narrative we learn that the *Federales* refuse to give up pursuing and wiping out the rebels. Demetrio joins a last resistance group, but is killed, while aiming at a Federal soldier, right in his own house where he began his forceful commitment to the struggle. The novel leaves us with a sense of the futility of the entire struggle, and of the fated condition of 'the underdogs' in Mexican society.

Azuela's overall viewpoint is dark. For a while we see Demetrio simply as a hardscrabble man of the people, and we like him. Our attention directs itself to Luis, who is a refined intellectual and sustains a noble (if rather effete) relation to the revolutionary movement. Gradually, though, we lose our respect for

the behavior of the *rebeldes*, and doubt whether they want much more than to loot houses and rape women.

Themes

Ideals There comes a moment, at the outset of a revolutionary movement, when ideals predominate, and men are willing to fight hard for what they believe in. What they believe in is, on the whole, the betterment of the majority. It is not long, however, before those ideals become tarnished, and the revolutionaries are fighting for themselves.

Idealism The presence and persistence of an idealist voice, in a revolutionary movement—I think of Luis—can be both disturbing and uplifting to the movement. Luis is at first teased by his rough fellow soldiers, but he becomes a beacon to them later. Idealism can inspire, and it can confuse a revolutionary movement.

Characters

Demetrio Macias is one of a rough band of locals, vigilantes, and rebels who get caught up in a life and death struggle against the Government troops under siege during the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1820). He was dragged into this struggle when his house was burned down by the Federales, and kept involved by the experiences he and his band encounter as they travel (pillage, harvest, rape) their way around rebel territories in central Mexico. Their struggle, loosely focused on opposition to President Huerta (d. 1916), becomes increasingly disorganized as problems internal to their structureless band destroy their morale. Demetrio finally makes it home, to wife and family and to death in a burst of gunfire.

Luis Is a young sophisticated 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 (at its best) its openness to men of good will, of whatever background.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

DEMETRIO MACIAS (determined)

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Parallels As a hard bitten but ultimately beaten 'hero' of the Mexican Revolution, Demetrio symbolizes the determined man of the early 20th century revolutionary explosions: in Mexico, Russia, Spain, in the East Block and Cuba, and soon China. Demetrio's struggles take us to the world of Che Guevara, whose *Guerilla Warfare* (1961) parallels the tough day by day fight of the Revolution; to the mindset of an original genius like Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), whose *Letters from Prison* inscribed his complex fidelity to the workers' Revolution; to Bukharin's *How it all Begun* (1937), a prison novel of his life as a revolutionary, and a vivid testimony to the brutality of Stalinism.

Illustrative moments

Attacked We first meet Demetrio in the course of an assault on his farmstead, by the Federales. We get a brief look at him—'tall, robust, with a reddish-brown face and beardless chin, he wore a shirt and pants of rough white cloth, a palm-leaf sombrero, and guaraches'—but not much more because this initial scene, like much of the book, depicts chaos and confusion. In the present assault scene Demetrio escapes into the night, leaving behind his family, his house, and his dog, who has just been shot dead by the intruders.

Formidable Demetrio is a formidable if simple character. The intruding band, at the outset of the above attack, moves in quickly on his family—sexually aggressive toward Demetrio's wife—but then, as they realize the guy is still there, they shrink back. 'Suddenly a white silhouette appeared in the darkened doorway. "Demetrio Macias"! the sergeant exclaimed taking some steps backward in fright.' 'Oh forgive us, friend! I didn't know it was you. Believe me, I respect the truly brave.' When the men vanish Demetrio sends his wife away, to his father's house. He knows violence will be following.

Despair Demetrio sent his wife and child to his father's house,' Her parting from Demetrio was sad and open-ended. 'At each peak, and on each ascent, Demetrio gazed upon the doleful silhouette of a woman bearing a child in her arms...When, after many hours of climbing, he looked back, he saw flames rising at the bottom of the canyon, near the river. It was his house on fire.' The cinematic vignette frames the whole frozen despair of the seat-of-the-pants revolutionary spasms the novel brilliantly interprets.

Shy Demetrio follows the course of skirmishes, escapes, and near capture, as he leads his band across the rocky Sierra of Central Mexico. Wherever the gang comes to rest they take what they can get, including the women. Demetrio is attractive to the women he meets, but as a basically faithful husband, and mountain tough, he is easily embarrassed by the ladies. 'Demetrio raised his eyes toward her. They looked each other in the eyes like two strange dogs sniffing one another in distrust. Demetrio wasn't able to keep up with the girl's furiously provocative gaze, and lowered his eyes.'

Empathetic The driving motive of the Revolution was the restoration of economic and social equality in a Mexico long paralyzed by Colonial social patterns, and by an absolute indifference to the peasant condition. Demetrio was solidary with this general grievance, though he was far from an intellectual or politically savvy individual. In an encounter with a lame peon he is characteristically empathetic. 'What is your daily pay, amigo?' 'Seventeen centavos, patron.' 'He complained bitterly about the patron, the rancho, and his damn luck.' 'You earn your pay alright, my hijo, Demetrio interrupted kindly.'

Discussion questions

Does Demetrio understand the politics and economics of the national change he is fighting for, or is he too far down on the totem pole of actors, to have a comprehensive view of his actions?

Is Demetrio himself a conservative, when it comes to life, habits, behavior, women? What are his own cultural roots?

Demetrio is clearly respected by many of the fighters from his region? What do they respect him for? Are they afraid of him, or is he a model for them?

LUIS CERVANTES (Conscientious)

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 intelligent—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'Étranger* (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?

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