

# THE OLD GRINGO

## Carlos Fuentes

### 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).

### Story

Fuentes' novel is set during the period of the Pancho Villa uprising in 1915, and concerned the incursion of the United States into Northern Mexico, to avenge the Villa forces' attack on Columbus, New Mexico. The long-lasting Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) was the larger framework of the tale Fuentes spins, probably taking as its launching pad the life and some specific details of the life of the American writer Ambrose Bierce, who at age 71 left the States for Chihuahua Mexico in 1913, to join the Mexican revolutionary forces, and was never heard of again. The story is cloudy and romantic enough to support a narrative structure, but not so strict as to hamper the writer's account.

Fuentes' initial insight is into the psychology of the aging Bierce, a cynic, novelist, and poet, and an adventurer anxious to die with his boots on. Through the tale Bierce, the Old Gringo, is seen as one for whom crossing a border, in this case the border into the dangers of the Mexican Revolution, is a monumental act: 'I'm afraid that each of us carries the real frontier inside,' wrote Bierce, thinking probably of a kind of expiation he expected of himself as The Old Gringo, in crossing his nation's southern border into a country where life and death were at stake. We join Bierce's mind with fascination on the night before he crosses into Mexico from El Paso.

Shortly after crossing the border, the Old Gringo meets up with a detachment of Pancho Villa's troops, under the command of General Tomas Arroyo, who grew up as the son of servants who are now on a vengeance trip, against the hacienda owners in whose villas he once lived, in servitude. It is at one of these villas that the Old Gringo comes on an American schoolmistress, Harriet Winslow, who has been abandoned to fate, after the owners have fled. (She had been an Instructress for the family, before the Revolution began.) With the arrival of General Arroyo and his forces, with the Old Gringo along with them, Harriet Winslow finds herself plunged into a packed and unexpectedly intense interpersonal world.

The wrapping up phases of this novel, which lead eventually to the deaths of both the Gringo and General Arroyo, pass through many stages of both sexual complexity and diverse forms of personal reflection. Arroyo takes Harriet Winslow as his sexual prisoner, from the start. It is important to him, however, to know (feel, believe) that she enjoys his sexual advances. We are treated to many intricacies of the general's psycho-sexual need, and Harriet's ultimate concession that she takes pleasure in the guy's advances. These same time-periods, however, give the Old Gringo ample opportunity to reflect on the life that has brought him to that place; a life in which—though he had wanted it—he had never managed to settle down with a family. The author himself makes his presence felt, during these final developments of the narration. He is eager to portray the Mexico in which the Gringo finds himself, as a 'fatally stubborn land whose

only reality was the stubborn determination never to be anything but its eternal, miserable, chaotic self...'

## Themes

**Adventure.** The Old Gringo, the moving personality at the center of the novel, generates the constant mood of adventure which pervades the work. Though already in his seventies, the Gringo is determined to cross the border into the land to the south of his soul, and to die there. Once in Mexico he finds himself in the turmoil of Revolution, and (we have to assume) his death on Mexican revolutionary soil is some kind of desired realization for the man.

**Lust** The incursion of the Mexican army onto her otherwise abandoned hacienda, guarantees Harriet Winslow ample male attention. Her intricate relation with her 'master,' General Thomas Arroyo, turns on such fine points as whether she gets pleasure from sex with him, or whether he is willing to have sex with her.

## Characters

**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

**Harriet Winslow** is an American nanny-schoolteacher who has been teaching the children of a wealthy Mexican family. The hacienda, on which she has been living with these children, is taken over by Pancho Villa troops, and she is abandoned both to the Old Gringo, who falls in love with her (largely unsexually), and to General Arroyo, whose troops have occupied the hacienda.

## MAJOR CHARACTER

### THE OLD GRINGO (Open)

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**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

**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.

**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...’

**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.

**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?