

Title

Redefining Epic and Novel through Rulfo's Pedro Páramo and Rivera's
Y no se lo tragó la tierra

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2rb2t137>

Journal

Mester, 22(2)

Author

López-Morín, José R.

Publication Date

1993

DOI

10.5070/M3222014255

Copyright Information

Copyright 1993 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Redefining Epic and Novel through Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and Rivera's *Y no se lo tragó la tierra*

Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* is a novel that exposes the reality of Mexican provincial life in Jalisco through the utilization of the hero archetype, popular beliefs, myths and the oral testimony of women.¹ In his experimental novel, Rulfo captures the collective voice of repressed souls lost in a town of floating spirits. Tomás Rivera's *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* is also a developing genre that redefines the reality of northern Mexican culture in the U.S. Southwest through the representation of migrant farmworker culture. Rivera transforms the life of the Mexican American into a Chicano narrative. Both novels reflect a more "truthful" picture of reality that transcends the boundaries of specific genres, such as the traditional epic and the realist novel. This essay will focus on the evolution of epic form, along with its utilization of the hero archetype, in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and Tomás Rivera's *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* in order to illustrate the development of the novel.

Traditionally, readers of literature have been conditioned to perceive the epic in a linear manner. This is due in large part to its formulaic structure. The construction of this long narrative poem has been to present a story in a logical, chronological, one-dimensional perspective in which the central characters can be easily identified. For example, the epic hero is presented as a larger-than-life figure whose actions are related to the survival of his people. Moreover, because of his morality and righteousness, a reward of happiness will await him in the end. In other words, based on a linear history, the uniqueness and destiny of each character will be determined by his ability to recognize and, most importantly, to act against oppressive circumstances that are present in daily life. Thus, the final result and purpose of the traditional epic, as Aden Hayes' states, "is to be of continuing use and inspiration to a people as they move forward in history, to be repeated down to the last generation of the tribe" (280).

More importantly, however, the origin of the epic is the oral tradition of myths

that belong to a distant legendary past (Frye 51). These traditional stories about gods, kings and heroes serve as a foundation for the creation of the world, and at times, its future destruction. Therefore, a property of the epic becomes the battleground of "commencement" and "honors," "firsts" and "bests," where a specific form of popular knowledge is accepted in many cases as the literal truth. Although these myths are filled with inconsistencies and absurdities, a central focus of the epic is to establish the legitimacy of man and his relationship with the universe. With this in mind, it becomes imperative for the establishment of a grand past for the world of the epic, a world that separates itself from contemporary reality.

It is this "sacred" past, however, as Mikhail M. Bakhtin states, that allows the epic to remain locked out and distant from the present:

The epic world is an utterly finished thing, not only as an authentic event of the distant past but also on its own terms and by its own standards; it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and value. This defines absolute epic distance.(17)

It is precisely this separation from and completeness with relation to contemporary reality that serve as a source of power for the epic's "absolute past." It will be impossible to change this relationship because of the boundaries and limitations the epic form has set for itself. These limitations imply a finished form for the epic as a genre.

In contrast, the novel as a developing genre is never complete for it changes according to social and historical circumstances.² The novel parodies, exposes and subverts the epic's own formal limitations: thus, it creates its own particular style, incorporating and reformulating other genres. For example, the traditional filial bonds of the epic world in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* collapse because the quest of the son Juan Preciado begins with the death of his mother and ends with the death of his father. In fact, the reader will understand that the story of the Preciados and the Páramos only demeans and debases every aspect of what an epic tale should represent. Its story line is chaotic, fragmented and confusing, where the reader must unite the scattered pieces of the narrative puzzle. Instead of communicating a message of bravery and hope, *Pedro Páramo* sends a message of death and despair. If the reader chooses the hero to be Juan Preciado, this character fails; he not only fails in his search for his father Pedro Páramo, he is eventually suffocated and succumbs to death like the rest of the characters. If the hero is presumed to be Pedro Páramo, the reader soon realizes that this character is only a self-absorbed tyrant who swallows every last breath of life and hope that the Comalan people possess. No matter how the novel is interpreted, the end result is failure: failure to act, to respond, to take charge of one's own destiny in life. Thus, the souls of the individuals are forced to live in a state of purgatory with an illusion of what could have been.

The Comalan people will be condemned for the rest of their lives for not allowing their true spirits to live while they were actually alive. Their spirits will eternally and hopelessly float in limbo, a state of nothingness, recalling the past, recalling what could have been if they would have taken control of their lives. Yet, it is what the story of *Pedro Páramo* negates that creates the allusion to an epic. Rulfo has actually created what should be termed a satiric prose epic.³ This method is achieved ingeniously by implied comparison or contrast. As often stated, one can only understand the darkness if light has been revealed; otherwise the darkness will only distort what is considered true and real. Rulfo's creation of darkness and despair in *Pedro Páramo* becomes more powerful and absolute of what has been considered, traditionally, the epic. In fact, every aspect of the epic in the plot falls to pieces, leaving only the skeletal structures to bear witness. Examples of this are evident throughout the novel, such as Susana San Juan's experience in a cave filled with bones and, here, Pedro Páramo's final moment:

Se apoyó en los brazos de Damiana Cisneros e hizo intento de caminar. Después de unos cuantos pasos cayó, suplicando por dentro; pero sin decir una sola palabra. Dio un golpe seco contra la tierra y se fue desmoronando como si fuera un montón de piedras. (159)

Viewed from this perspective, the reader is, therefore, forced to reconsider the traditional, imaginary style of the epic and its definitions. Rulfo's creation of Mexican reality is captured through the use of the archetype, oral tradition and the testimony of women. The reality of these traditional myths is a frightening account for the people of Comala, past and present. It is these oral beliefs that transform themselves into wailing spirits, and eventually into the metaphors of literature.

As stated by Jean Franco, this attitude presented by Rulfo is one where "environment still dominates human beings" (348). The escape for these people is an illusion; their path is already predetermined because the traditional myths that they live by dominate their daily lives and, eventually, their wandering souls. Nonetheless, these people continue to live by the deep-rooted Mexican myths that control and repress the Comalan people. First there is Pedro Páramo, the "macho," the corrupt landowner who sucks the life and blood of the people of Comala. Next, there is Miguel Páramo, one of Pedro's many children throughout the town, who embodies the worst passed down from a macho. Miguel is a ruthless man who abuses women, and is finally killed by his stallion, a symbolic representation of his masculinity. Finally, there is Dorotea who like the Comalan women except Susana San Juan feels unfulfilled as a woman unless she bears a child. Ironically, as Franco states, it is these traditional myths that live on, while all the people of Comala have passed away (350). Therefore, the reader must inevitably conclude that the actual book, in abstract terms, is a myth because the characters from beginning to end do not exist; they are all dead and they themselves represent a myth. In other words, all

of the characters in Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* are dead from the beginning of the book, including Juan Preciado who initiates one story (since there are actually two overlapping plots) with the search of his father. Thus, the memory of myths serves as a form of ideological manipulation and a constant reminder of how the Comalan people failed to question and criticize the validity of deep-rooted myths that repressed their true spirit.

These Mexican myths presented by Rulfo are challenged by the characters in Tomás Rivera's *Y no se lo tragó la tierra*. In fact, Rivera gained valuable insight from the works of Juan Rulfo, especially his *Llano en llamas* (1953). *Tierra* can also be considered a prose epic in that the theme imitates traditional epic form. Yet, *Tierra* also allows for the adaptation and redefinition of a social context; it is this repetition and reinterpretation of ideals within a given culture, through the actual format of an epic, that transforms this genre into a comic prose epic.⁴ This repetition of motifs implies that there can no longer exist any genres that remain pure. The genre must change and evolve because it becomes a parody. What *Tierra* presents to the reader is, according to Héctor Calderón, "a reformulation of the Mexican-mestizo cultural world into the beginning of a Chicano narrative tradition" (100). Moreover, as Calderón adds, through its natural unfolding and reformulation into narrative, the reader processes and comprehends the fragmented and developing culture of the Chicano in the United States:

...the role of the reader emerges from the gaps that must be filled in order to insure structural and thematic continuity. Thus the developing plot is explicitly based on a series of changing relationships. That the narrative supplies instructions for this process of understanding can be grasped from the last interpolated fragment and the final collective moment in which Rivera delivers his views on the social function of art as these inform the act of reading. (105)

The reader is able to participate in the actual reconstruction of the entire novel, according to his/her own development. This participation of the reader implies the obligation to consciously recreate the reality that has been presented. Similar to Cervantes' *Don Quijote* and Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, *Tierra* is a novel that reforms and critiques reality (Calderón 100-101). Therefore, the relationship of literature with society is vital and imperative to the imagination of the reader.

Tierra's structure is composed of fourteen titled *cuentos* and thirteen untitled *cuadros* with the first and the last *cuento* representing the framework for the entire novel.⁵ Within this framework, there are twelve *cuentos* or short stories, representing a calendar year, all united by the central story, "*Y no se lo tragó la tierra*." Also present throughout the narrative are the thirteen brief *cuadros* that frame each *cuento* and that also possess a sense of unity and a stream-of-consciousness for the reader. Most importantly, however, these archetypal stories describe life experi-

ences that discuss universal themes such as man and nature, alienation, love, betrayal, death, and a yearning for community. Unlike Rulfo's novel, the characters in *Tierra* have not been swallowed up by the earth and possess an adventurous spirit. In an interview with Juan Bruce-Novoa, Tomás Rivera stated that he wished to highlight forever the heroic quality of farmworkers in the Southwest:

I felt that I had to document the migrant worker para siempre [forever], para que no se olvidara ese espíritu tan fuerte de resistir y continuar under the worst conditions [so that their very strong spirit of endurance and will to go on under the worst of conditions should not be forgotten], because they were worse than slaves. El esclavo es una inversión [A slave is an investment], so you protect him to keep him working. A migrant worker? You owe him nothing. If he came to you, you gave him work and then just told him to leave. No investment. If he got sick, you got rid of him; you didn't have to take care of him. It was bad, labor camps and all that. (151)

Through this documentation, the reader is allowed to view the collective lives of migrant workers, of Mexican Americans, presented in a non-conventional epic style.

Moreover, if one is to apply the motif of the hero archetype, the unnamed migrant child, the central protagonist, stands alone as the epic hero projection of his working-class community of Mexican-Americans. This narrator/protagonist is not actually present in all of the stories; yet, it is his opening and concluding story underneath the house that allow the novel to have coherence and transcendence. It is during his "solitary confinement" that the unidentified child begins to piece together the fragmented, episodic, and puzzling experiences that have now shaped his new ideological formation as a young Chicano. This new level of critical consciousness attained by the protagonist has allowed him the freedom to question the validity of myths, truths and opinions that stand in the way of his future development:

Se sintió contento de pronto porque al pensar . . . se dio cuenta de que en realidad no había perdido nada. Había encontrado. Encontrar y reencontrar y juntar. Relacionar esto con esto, esto con aquello, todo con todo. Eso era. Eso era todo. Y le dio más gusto. (169)

This ideological and spiritual exploration is, ironically, a quality the characters of Rulfo failed to express (excluding Susana San Juan). By liberating himself of myths (like the myths of demons and gods) and traditional beliefs that continue to oppress his people, the young Chicano realizes that if "There is no devil. There is nothing"

(63). According to Ramón Saldivar, this revelation allows the child "to liquidate oppressive idols and to articulate the power of self-determination" (84). Again, this critical awareness is not achieved by the people of Comala. The protagonist in *Tierra* will now be the creator of his own destiny, and no longer will he utilize a system of religious beliefs that serve to justify his state of misery and oppressiveness.

It is throughout this allegorical year that *Tierra* reveals the initiation of heroism for the unnamed migrant child. The young Chicano undergoes a series of excruciating experiences that take him from ignorance and immaturity to a new level of social and spiritual awareness. Like the quest of the traditional epic hero, the protagonist experiences a metaphorical level of separation, transformation and return. In doing so, he develops a higher level of critical consciousness that allows the child the freedom to become an active agent of resistance against the forces of oppression. No longer will the environment, as in Comala, dominate and control the young Chicano. Where *Pedro Páramo* sends a cry of despair, *Tierra* offers a message of hope and heroism within the adventurous souls of its characters.

In Rulfo's novel the reader is able to view the demystification of what has traditionally been viewed as an epic through comparison. Rulfo has destroyed the sacred boundaries of the epic tradition and brought it closer to the grasp of reality. In *Pedro Páramo*, the reader is able to turn the epic upside down, expose it, play with it, and freely examine and experiment with its nature. Reality, therefore, must now be seen in a different light. Similarly, when the motifs of the epic are parodied, such as in *Tierra*, the reader must also recreate "reality" and the "natural" present in the past. This unconventional style forces the reader to examine the truthfulness and objectiveness of images presented in the past as "real." Thus, one is led to the question: Which are the images that present a truthful reflection of what constitutes the real? The fears, struggles and hopes within the characters of *Pedro Páramo* and *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* answer this final question for the reader.

José R. López-Morín

University of California, Los Angeles

NOTES

1. I make reference here to the motif or theme of the hero archetype, where the patterns of transformation and redemption are specific characteristics associated with the traditional interpretation of the epic hero. These heroic characteristics are highlighted when the plots of these tales utilize motifs, such as a quest or an initiation process, which serve as a testing ground for a code of heroic behavior. The archetype of the hero in *Pedro Páramo*, however, is subverted.

2. Although the term "novel" seems to be taken for granted when used for the classification or categorization of a "book," the term is still relatively difficult to define. To simply state that the novel is an extended work of fiction, written in prose does not completely convey the

true meaning of the word. I find it more practical comparing this unique genre with other fixed genres. For practical purposes, however, I will define the term novel from the vantage point that it mirrors contemporary reality with its diversity of speech, experience and constant prediction of a future. With this in mind, the novel reflects the tendency of a new world still in the making, and therefore, it cannot be classified as a finished process.

3. Frye describes satire as a critique of heroic narratives, as "a parody of romance" (223).

4. Like the plot of comedy, Rivera is concerned with integrating the individual, the family, and the group into society as a whole. See Frye on comedy (218).

5. To describe the brief, untitled fragments, Rivera used the Spanish term *cuadro*.

WORKS CITED

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Bruce-Novoa, Juan. *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980. 137-161.
- Calderón, Héctor. "The Novel and the Community of Readers: Rereading Tomás Rivera's *Y no se lo tragó la tierra*." *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*. Ed. Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. 97-113.
- Franco, Jean. *An Introduction to Spanish-American Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton University Press, 1957.
- Hayes, Aden. "Rulfo's Counter Epic: *Pedro Páramo* and the Stasis of History." *Journal of Spanish Studies Twentieth Century*. 7 (1979): 279-296.
- Rivera, Tomás. *Y no se lo tragó la tierra/ And the Earth Did Not Part*. Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, 1971.
- Rulfo, Juan. *Pedro Páramo*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955.
- Saldívar, Ramón. "Beyond Good and Evil: Utopian Dialectics in Tomás Rivera and Oscar Zeta Acosta." *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.