

Madness, Parricide, and Incest: A Revision of Myths in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*

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Abstract: *Pedro Páramo* is oftentimes considered one of the most groundbreaking novels in Latin America. As a central part of the novel, critics have largely focused on the presence of classical, indigenous, and Nordic myths in Rulfo's production. However, there are two classical myths—the myth of Oedipus and the myth of the birth of Aphrodite/Venus—that I propose are present in *Pedro Páramo*, but that have received little or no attention from scholars. In this article, I will analyze these two myths and examine how Rulfo transformed them in order to adapt them to Mexico's revolutionary and post-revolutionary period.

Key Words: Pedro Páramo, Myth, Oedipus, Venus, Aphrodite, Parricide

Poemas y mitos coinciden en trasmutar el tiempo
en una categoría temporal especial,
un pasado siempre futuro
y siempre dispuesto a ser presente, a *presentarse*.
Octavio Paz, "Piedra de sol"

Juan Rulfo's 1955 masterpiece, *Pedro Páramo*, is oftentimes considered one of the most groundbreaking novels in Latin America.¹ Critics such as Manuel Durán felt compelled to divide Mexican narrative production of the twentieth century in two large groups, the first one called "A.J.R." (Antes de Juan Rulfo) and the second one "D.J.R." (Después de Juan Rulfo) (25), while Carlos Monsiváis considers that with Rulfo "culmina y se extingue una corriente novelística, y aparece la tradición que dispone, ya definitivamente, de un solo

1 In her essay "La ficción de Juan Rulfo," Norma Klahn thoroughly explains in what way Rulfo broke away from previous generations of writers—both in Europe and Latin America—to create something new that truly represented the Latin American situation at the time: "La novela realista sólo se podía dar en un mundo explicable. Después de Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Einstein, Fraser y dos guerras mundiales, el mundo se configura como conflictualidad. La visión de un nuevo mundo en crisis que los nuevos narradores buscaban aprehender, se manifiesta a través de la composición fragmentada de la obra y la desintegración del lenguaje tradicional" (420). Part of this innovation came to be through the novel of the Mexican Revolution, which "impuso la recreación literaria de la revolución [y] alteró la estructura de la obra, la composición de los personajes y su habla" (423).

autor, Rulfo” (280). The influence of Mexican texts such as *Los de abajo* (1915), *Cartucho* (1931), and *Al filo del agua* (1947), of European and North American Modernist authors like James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf, of Chilean author María Luisa Bombal,² and more, is evident in Rulfo’s work.³

Aside from adopting avant-garde literary techniques such as interior monologues, stream of consciousness, unreliable narrators, multiple points of view, and the lack of a linear and chronological narration, Rulfo also recuperates the element of myth, an essential tool for Modernist authors. According to T.S. Eliot, myth is used by Joyce in his *Ulysses* as “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177). In this article, I will analyze two classical myths present in *Pedro Páramo*: Oedipus, and the birth of Venus/Aphrodite. Despite the large corpus of work that deals with myth in *Pedro Páramo*, little attention has been devoted to a detailed analysis of the myth of Oedipus, and no critic (to my knowledge) has focused on how the myth of the birth of Venus/Aphrodite appears in the novel. Here, I propose that Rulfo transformed these myths and adapted them in order to fit them into Mexico’s revolutionary and post-revolutionary period.

In *The Catastrophe of Modernity* (2004), Patrick Dove dedicates a chapter to Rulfo’s novel, and specifically to the topics of transition and restitution present in the work. While praising Rulfo for having “helped bring to a close the naturalist aesthetic that dominated the first decades of the twentieth century” and for “definitively establish[ing] Latin America as a producer—and no longer merely a consumer—of universal literature,” (98) Dove mentions the links that critics have noticed between Rulfo’s novel and the classical aesthetical tradition. However, Dove warns his readers that the presence of classical culture in *Pedro Páramo* is “nearly the opposite from what one might expect” (100), since the chaotic world of post-revolutionary Mexico is incomparable to the worldly order desired by the Greeks. According to the critic, “these classical symbols attest to their inability... to heal the wounds and mend the rifts of history,” which, deconstructively, Dove applies to literature, as well (*ibid.*). Unlike what the aforementioned scholar proposes, I reject the idea that Rulfo included classical myths in this masterpiece to demonstrate their weaknesses and their insufficiency; rather, I view this appropriation and revision as a means to use the classical tradition in order to reflect Mexican (and Latin American) reality.

Several critics in the last few decades, such as Jorge Ruffinelli, Martin Lienhard, and Víctor Jiménez, point out the presence of indigenous myths and cultures in Rulfo, in addition to European influences.⁴ Friedhelm Schmidt, in his

2 See Ana Miramonte’s article, “Rulfo lector de Bombal.”

3 In his article, Martin Zerlang proposes that Rulfo’s work was also influenced by Scandinavian literature and myths.

4 See Jorge Ruffinelli’s book chapter, “Juan Rulfo, el hijo del desaliento.” See also Martin

article titled “Heterogeneidad y carnavalización en tres cuentos de Juan Rulfo,” states that in Rulfo’s work the separation between European and indigenous culture and religion is not as clear as one might assume. Despite centering his analysis on three of Rulfo’s short stories from *El Llano en llamas* (1953)—“Talpa,” “El día del derrumbe,” and “Luvina”—Schmidt informs his readers that the characteristics of these stories can be seen throughout the entirety of Rulfo’s literary production, and that they are visible “especialmente en la relación entre oralidad y escritura y en los diversos fragmentos de la mitología de los mexicas” (242). What Schmidt proposes is that

el conflicto entre los dos mundos confrontados en la conquista se ha convertido en un conflicto interiorizado en una sociedad o un ámbito cultural heterogéneo; los fragmentos de la mitología indígena aparecen incluso en un ámbito aparentemente homogéneo en los niveles cultural y religioso, en un espacio no indígena. (ibid.)

Although at first European culture was forcefully imposed onto the indigenous populations, in his *oeuvre* Rulfo brilliantly depicts the transcultural reality in Mexico by underlining the evergreen presence of the indigenous culture, and by revealing an appropriation and adaptation of the European tradition.

Other critics have studied a number of European myths that could have influenced Rulfo’s literary production. The influence of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, for instance, is a presence that appears repeatedly in *Pedro Páramo* and in a number of stories from *El Llano en llamas*.⁵ In one of his numerous articles on the subject, Hugo Rodríguez-Alcalá traces links between the two works and makes direct comparisons between Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatory*, and the fictional town of Comala. Comala is described as a place without air, situated “sobre las brasas de la tierra, en la mera boca del Infierno” (Rulfo 67). The town is populated by the ghosts of the inhabitants who are forever damned, or eternally waiting for a salvation that might never come. As Dorotea tragically reminds Juan Preciado from their grave, “Ya déjate de miedos. Nadie te puede dar ya miedo. Haz por pensar en cosas agradables porque vamos a estar mucho tiempo enterrados” (Rulfo 120). By subverting the narrative voice, the temporality, and the structure

Lienhard, “El substrato arcaico en *Pedro Páramo*: Quetzalcóatl y Tláloc,” as well as Víctor Jiménez, “Una estrella para la muerte y la vida,” where the author makes a possible connection between Venus (the morning star) and the god Quetzalcóatl.

5 One of the most complete comparative works on the two authors is an article by Hugo Rodríguez-Alcalá and Jean-Pierre Barricelli, titled “Dante and Rulfo: Beyond Time through Eternity.” For additional information, see a second essay by Rodríguez-Alcalá titled “El poema de Doloritas en *Pedro Páramo*,” where the scholar tries to prove that one of the novel’s characters, Dolores Preciado, speaks in verse, as if she were following Dante’s lead; as well as an essay by Jean Franco, “El viaje al país de los muertos,” which compares and contrasts scenes from Rulfo’s novel and Dante’s masterpiece.

of the narration, Rulfo erases the clear line that divides life and death. The power of speech, in fact, is now given to the dead.⁶

One cannot avoid mentioning the eternal topics of the search for the father (embodied by the myth of Telemachus, hopelessly searching for Ulysses), of the return to the motherland (as the tireless Odysseus demonstrates by traveling ten years in search of his beloved Ithaca), and of the descent into hell to converse with the dead (seen through the stories of Theseus, Orpheus, Hercules, and finally Dante). Each and every one of these epic journeys is palpable in Rulfo's novel, particularly through the character of Juan Preciado: he embodies Telemachus through his search for his father, Pedro Páramo; he is comparable to Odysseus, as he returns to his motherland, Comala, after being absent for many years; and he resembles the many mythical characters who descend into hell as he enters Comala and speaks to people who are already deceased. Despite the many similarities, Rulfo ultimately appropriates himself of, and alters, these classical and European myths to create a new Mexican (and Latin American) tragedy, one that speaks to his country's reality.

Dove refers to the presence of tragedy (in the Greek sense of the word) in *Pedro Páramo* as the "umbilical connection" between the world of modernity and tradition, or between the concepts of colonialism and nation-state (100). Although I agree with Dove on the importance that tragedy holds in Rulfo's novel, I also believe that the scholar fails at giving specific examples of works that could connect the classical and modern worlds.⁷ For instance, Dove suggests that the motor that sets the story in motion is Juan Preciado's trip to Comala in search of his (already dead) father, which allegorically, could also be interpreted as a search for the origin. However, he does not mention in which myths or tragedies this theme can be found.

6 This element does not solely appear in *Pedro Páramo*, but also in another one of Rulfo's short stories from *El Llano en llamas*, "Luvina," where, as Schmidt points out, "los habitantes parecen muertos. Son vagas sombras negras, casi fantásticas, con cuerpos esqueléticos. Su corporalidad se desvanece, y sólo se oye un susurro, cuando se mueven o cuando hablan" (237).

7 Rulfo's novel is permeated with elements that resonate with Ancient Greek tragedies. Aside from the adoption and reinterpretation of myth, from the tragic elements and the death of Juan Preciado, a third key element is the presence of the chorus, embodied by the people of Comala. Unlike what Dove proposes in his article—that Juan Preciado is the narrator of the novel—I believe that Rulfo creates a choral novel, defined as a work where elements and themes (such as characters, action, landscape) instead of existing in-and-of themselves, or of imposing themselves upon one other, tend to unite into a harmonious unity. It is through an eclecticism of voices that the reader discovers, one piece at a time, Comala's history and Pedro Páramo's story. Rulfo himself stresses the choral aspect of his novel in an interview with Joseph Sommers, where he states, "Se trata de una novela en que el personaje central es el pueblo. Hay que notar que algunos críticos toman como personaje central a Pedro Páramo. En realidad es el pueblo. Es un pueblo muerto donde no viven más que ánimas, donde todos los personajes están muertos, y aun quien narra está muerto" (Sommers and Rulfo 6).

One of the most well known myths that pivot around the theme of paternal search is the myth of Oedipus. Among the many versions of the myth, the most famous is perhaps the one presented by Sophocles in his two tragedies: *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Unlike what psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud stated in order to support his Oedipus Complex theory,⁸ the original version of the myth did not implicate an intrinsic hatred towards the father and incestuous love for the mother, but rather a series of unfortunate events dictated by ignorance. According to the myth, Oedipus was not aware that the man he killed on the road to Thebes was his father, nor that the queen of Thebes, whose hand he received in marriage, was his mother. The question that intrinsically follows, then, is: How does Rulfo insert a myth of parricide and incest into *Pedro Páramo*? How might he have tweaked it and adapted it to the Mexican reality of the post-revolutionary years?

In *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*, Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes states that unlike the naturalist and realist novels of the nineteenth century—which analyzed and portrayed reality from a moral or psychological point of view—the new generation of writers of the twentieth century breaks away from this socio-scientific way of observing reality:

Regresaron a las raíces poéticas de la literatura y a través del lenguaje y la escritura, y ya no merced a la intriga y la sicología, crearon una convención representativa de la realidad que pretende ser totalizante en cuanto inventa una segunda realidad, una realidad paralela, finalmente un espacio para lo real, a través de un mito en el que se puede reconocer tanto la mitad oculta, pero no por ello menos verdadera, de la vida, como el significado y la unidad del tiempo disperso. (19)

Though Dove treats myth and tragedy as sterile tools that connect antiquity and modernity, Fuentes believes that myths are not an anachronistic lens belonging to ancient generations, but rather a kaleidoscopic means to observe and depict the present, ultimately helping shed light on reality. For Fuentes, Rulfo was one of the first writers who used myths in a realist way—not to describe a removed or incomprehensible past, but rather to understand a complicated

⁸ See Sigmund Freud's chapter, titled "Twenty-First Lecture: General Theory of the Neuroses," in his work *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis: A Course of Twenty-Eight Lectures Delivered at the University of Vienna*. See also Freud's 1900 text, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where the idea of the Oedipus complex is first mentioned. A third compelling text, focused on the appropriation and adaptation of the myth of Oedipus in literature, is Bradley W. Buchanan's work entitled *Oedipus against Freud: Myth and the End(s) of Humanism in Twentieth-Century British Literature*. Although focusing on British literature, Buchanan underlines the universality and humanistic aspects of the aforementioned myth, while stating that "Oedipus's story has a much more interesting, complex, and critical relationship to the tradition of human knowledge than a straightforward Freudian view of its meaning would suggest" (4).

present. To use his words: “En *Pedro Páramo* [Rulfo procede] a la mitificación de las situaciones, los tipos y el lenguaje del campo mexicano, cerrando para siempre—y con llave de oro—la temática documental de la revolución” (*La nueva novela*, 16). When speaking about the myths present in Rulfo’s work, Fuentes mentions Oedipus and Jocasta, Ulysses and Thelemachus, Orpheus and Euridice, and Electra; however, like Dove, Fuentes also lacks an in-depth analysis of his analogies, which might remain obscure to anyone without a strong knowledge in mythology. While agreeing with Fuentes on the role of myth in twentieth-century literature, and on the use that Rulfo makes of it in his novel, I believe that a more detailed mythological analysis is in order.

Pedro Páramo opens with the narration of Juan Preciado, one of the main characters of the story, who decides to take a journey to Comala to grant his dying mother’s last wish: to find his father, Pedro Páramo, and make sure he pays for the oblivion in which he left her and their child throughout the years. His mother, Dolores Preciado, demanded, “No vayas a pedirle nada. Exígele lo nuestro. Lo que estuvo obligado a darme y nunca me dio... El olvido en que nos tuvo, mi hijo, cóbraselo caro” (65). Although she does not explicitly ask her son to take revenge over Pedro, the expression *cóbraselo caro* implies the possibility of a violent act. What the two characters do not know, however, is that Pedro Páramo is already dead. For Juan Preciado the search for the father figure, or the origin, therefore results in a double failure: not only does he discover that his father has died long before his arrival in Comala (which makes his trip void), he also loses his life during this journey because of the murmurs of the dead who permeate the village while waiting for their souls to be saved. Unlike Homer’s Ulysses, Juan Preciado cannot come full circle and return to his version of Ithaca, nor to his Penelope—incestuously embodied by his mother, Dolores. Instead, he dies in the process, and is forced to face the eternal consequences of his ineptitude. As Fuentes says:

Pedro Páramo es en cierto modo una telemaquia, la saga de la búsqueda y reunión con el padre. Pero como el padre está muerto... buscar al padre y reunirse con él es buscar a la muerte y reunirse con ella. Esta novela es la historia de la entrada de Juan Preciado al reino de la muerte, no porque encontró la suya, sino porque la muerte lo encontró a él. (“Rulfo” 829)

Juan Preciado’s search for his father, for *the* father, ends tragically. Symbolically, his defeat can be interpreted as the ultimate failure of the Mexican government’s promises during the post-revolutionary period.⁹

9 Rulfo’s criticism towards the failed promises of the Mexican Revolution are also evident in a number of short stories, such as “Nos han dado la tierra” (where he focuses on the issues of land redistribution), “Luvina” (which speaks about the failures of the education campaign), and “El día del derrumbe” (which deals with the corruption and violence of the new political class).

The two elements in *Pedro Páramo* that resonate with the myth of Oedipus are parricide and incest. When analyzing Juan Preciado's story and his in-existent relationship with his father, one realizes that the former could not have committed parricide because Pedro was already dead when Juan arrived to Comala. However, Pedro Páramo's death *was* an act of parricide, though it was committed by Juan's half-brother Abundio, who, curiously, is also the first person that Juan meets on his way to Comala. Unlike Sophocles' recount of the story, the reasons behind Pedro's death are neither unknown, nor accidental. On the contrary, Abundio's act of violence is dictated by revenge, the same revenge that Dolores implicitly implored Juan to carry out before expiring, but which her son was unable to conclude. Abundio's endeavor, aside from implementing a vengeance against a father who never cared for him, can also be interpreted as an act of desperation after facing the ultimate denial: the refusal by his father to give him a small sum of money to bury his dead wife, Remedios.

Although Rulfo does not explicitly describe the moment in which Abundio fatally stabs Pedro Páramo, he does illustrate the reactions by Pedro and his servant, Damiana, which led Abundio to behave violently:

Damiana Cisneros rezaba: "De las asechanzas del enemigo malo, libéranos, Señor." Y le apuntaba con las manos haciendo la señal de la cruz. Abundio Martínez vio a la mujer de los ojos azorados, poniéndole aquella cruz en frente, y se estremeció. Pensó que tal vez el demonio lo había seguido hasta allí, y se dio vuelta, esperando encontrarse con alguna mala figuración. Al no ver a nadie, repitió: "Vengo por una ayudita para enterrar a mi muerta." ... La cara de Pedro Páramo se escondió debajo de las cobijas como si se escondiera de la luz, mientras que los gritos de Damiana se oían salir más repetidos, atravesando los campos: "¡Están matando a don Pedro!" (175-176)

One of the details of the myth that has been modified in Rulfo's novel concerns the character of the murderer: although we are led to expect in the opening pages of the work that Pedro Páramo's assassin will be Juan Preciado, it is key that it is instead his half-brother Abundio, who is also Pedro's son. What makes this change so important, yet oxymoronically, so irrelevant, is that the paramount element in the act of parricide is not the name of the assassin, or the reason behind the murder, but rather his relation to Pedro Páramo. As Abundio states in the opening pages of the novel, "El caso es que nuestras madres nos malparieron en un petate aunque éramos hijos de Pedro Páramo" (68). This statement underlines the cacique's (numerous) affairs, as well as their misfortune for being his sons. Consequently, what captures the readers' attention is not that Pedro Páramo is dead, but that he was killed by one of his sons, who committed the crime to which another of Pedro's children (Juan Preciado) most likely

aspired. However, unlike what happens in the Greek tragedy, Pedro's, Juan's, and Abundio's destiny is not predetermined by the Fates; instead, it becomes a violent act carried out during a moment of blind rage. Moreover, Abundio's murderous actions appear to be justified (insofar as murder is justifiable), while Oedipus's parricide is not.

To better understand how the element of parricide that is key in the myth of Oedipus reflects post-revolutionary Mexico, one must take a closer look at Juan Preciado's and Abundio's relationship as brothers, which, although short, is quite tumultuous. One cannot forget that Abundio is the character that guides Juan Preciado to the doors of Comala/purgatory/hell, and that ultimately leads him to his death. The resentment that Abundio feels towards his half-brother (the only son of Pedro Páramo who was born from a legitimate marriage) is evident from the beginning, when Juan cracks an involuntary joke and Abundio reacts in an unfriendly manner:

[Abundio]: Y lo más chistoso es que él [Pedro] nos llevó a bautizar. Con que usted debe haber pasado lo mismo, ¿no?

[Juan]: No me acuerdo.

[Abundio]: ¡Váyase mucho al carajo! (69)

The tension between the two brothers escalates when the scene is recounted in which Abundio kills Pedro Páramo, as this action voids the promise that Juan made to his dying mother. Though the name of the assassin is not pivotal when analyzing the parricide itself, it acquires a newfound relevance when focusing on the aforementioned brotherly relationship. Though the murder of Pedro might initially unite Abundio and Juan in a common cause, Juan eventually loses his purpose, fails his mission, and dies. The broken relationship between brothers can be metaphorically read as the broken relationship among the Mexican people after the Revolution: Mexicans kept fighting against each other for years, making any sign of reconciliation a distant mirage. The alterations to the myth demonstrate the necessary changes made by Rulfo to appropriate the tale to Mexico's post-revolutionary period.

The theme of maternal incest, central to the story of Oedipus, also surfaces throughout the entirety of Rulfo's novel. However, unlike the father figure, totally embodied by Pedro Páramo, several women incarnate the figure of the mother, each in their unique and incomplete way. The first woman that appears in the narration is Juan Preciado's birth mother, Dolores Preciado, the character who, despite being on her deathbed, is able to move the strings that lead Juan to Comala. Juan remembers in the opening scene: "Vine a Comala porque me dijeron que acá vivía mi padre, un tal Pedro Páramo. *Mi madre me lo dijo*. Y yo le prometí que vendría a verlo en cuanto ella muriera" (65, italics

mine). Juan, without doubting his dying mother's last words, sets off for what will be (unbeknownst to him) a journey with no return. Notwithstanding the allegedly positive intentions that one could see behind Dolores's request—wanting her son to finally meet his father—she ultimately fails as a mother: by telling her son *exígele lo nuestro*, she focuses on materiality and revenge, and pushes her son to embark on a one-way voyage. Oppositely and naïvely, Juan is brought to Comala by his “illusion,” his hope of finally meeting his father (119).

Upon arrival in his birthplace, Juan makes the acquaintance of Eduviges Dyada, the woman who could have almost been his mother, as she recalls. Eduviges tells Juan that “el hijo de Dolores debió haber sido mío” (73) because on Dolores's wedding night the former—not the latter—is the one who made love to Pedro. She explains, “Dolores fue a decirme toda apurada que no podía. Que simplemente se le hacía imposible acostarse esta noche con Pedro Páramo. Era su noche de bodas” (79). The following morning, the two switch places again, and Pedro Páramo never becomes aware of the exchange. However, the following year, Dolores is the one who gives birth to a baby boy.

The third motherly figure that Juan Preciado encounters is Dorotea, the woman who took care of him as a child, before his mother abandoned Comala and Pedro Páramo forever, and who knew him “desde que abri[ó] los ojos” (94). Dorotea, in fact, took care of all of Pedro's young children (and in particular, of Miguel Páramo, the only son who was given Pedro's last name, and who was treated as family). Dorotea stays by Juan's side in death: they are buried together, able to recount their stories to one another while waiting or their souls to be saved. However, Juan's passing is unlike his father's. Juan is not killed by an irate child, but rather by the murmurs that fill the town of Comala and that scare him to death: “Eran voces de gente; pero no voces claras, sino secretas, como si me murmuraran algo al pasar, o como si zumbaran contra mis oídos” (118).

The scene in which Juan narrates his death to Dorotea from their joint grave, which begins in the 36th fragment of the novel, aside from being extremely ingenious from a narrative point of view (for it is only at this point of the story that the reader realizes that everything narrated up to that moment had already happened and was being narrated by Juan Preciado from his grave) also brings the myth of Oedipus full circle.¹⁰ Dorotea la Curraca, similarly to

10 The reasons for breaking away from the linearity, the clarity, and the omniscient narrators of previous novels are marvelously explained by Rulfo himself in an interview with Fernando Benítez. The Mexican author states, “Debo decirte que mi primera novela estaba escrita en secuencias, pero advertí que la vida no es una secuencia.... Había leído mucha literatura española y descubrí que el escritor llenaba los espacios desiertos con divagaciones y elucubraciones. Yo antes había hecho lo mismo y pensé que lo que contaban eran los hechos y no las intervenciones de autor, sus ensayos, su forma de pensar, y me reduje a eliminar el ensayo y a limitarme a los hechos, y para eso busqué a personajes muertos que no están dentro del

many of the women in the village, was never able to have children, although she was the only one “[a quien] le gusta[ban] los bebés” (121). Her mental instability and her strong desire for a child of her own led her to believe that the ball of wool that she carried with her was, in fact, her baby. Miguel Páramo describes Dorotea as “una que trae un molote en su rebozo y lo arrulla diciendo que es su crío,” to which Damiana Cisneros responds, “Parece ser que le sucedió alguna desgracia allá en sus tiempos; pero, como nunca habla, nadie sabe lo que le pasó. Vive de limosna” (122).¹¹

Despite the sadness provoked by Dorotea’s story, the detail that stands out is that she and Juan Preciado are buried together, side by side: the unfulfilled mother, and the lost son. She states: “Me enterraron en tu misma sepultura y cupe muy bien en el hueco de tus brazos. Aquí en este rincón donde me tienes ahora. Sólo se me ocurre que debería ser yo la que te tuviera abrazado a ti” (120). Dorotea’s words further resonate with Susana San Juan’s memory of her own mother. The other troubled character recalls, “Estoy acostada en la misma cama donde murió mi madre hace ya muchos años; sobre el mismo colchón; bajo la misma cobija negra con la cual nos envolvíamos las dos para dormir. Entonces yo dormía a su lado, en un lugarcito que ella me hacía *debajo de sus brazos*” (133, italics mine).

Similarly to what had happened throughout her life, Dorotea is denied the chance of fulfilling her motherly desires even after her death, primarily due to two reasons. First, Padre Rentería refuses to grant Dorotea salvation in the afterlife once he discovers that she was culpable of finding young women of whom Miguel Páramo could take advantage. In one of their final moments together, Padre Rentería tells Dorotea:

“¿Qué quieres que haga contigo, Dorotea? Juzgate tú misma. Ve si tú puedes perdonarte.” “Yo no, padre. Pero usted sí puede. Por eso vengo a verlo.” “¿Cuántas veces viniste aquí a pedirme que te mandara al Cielo cuando murieras? ¿Querías ver si allá encontrabas a tu hijo, no, Dorotea? Pues bien, no podrás ir ya más al Cielo. Pero que Dios te perdone.” (132)

The second reason is due to the way in which Dorotea and Juan Preciado’s bodies are arranged in their grave: she is the one who is placed in Juan’s arms, instead of he being placed in hers. This odd accommodation resonates with Oedipus’ story: after killing his father, he lies with his mother. Albeit with changes, Rulfo appears to recreate the disturbing detail recounted by Sophocles by placing the (deficient) son next to the (incomplete) mother, and

tiempo y del espacio” (14).

11 Although with the appropriate changes, Dorotea’s story could also resonate with the myth of *la Llorona*. For further information on this myth, see Ignacio Padilla’s essay, “Escarnio de la madrastra.”

perpetuating this eternal and metaphorical incest.¹² Once again, Rulfo adapts the classical myth to speak, in this case, about the post-revolutionary reality concerning the role of women.¹³

Tied to incest and to the revision of myths we also find the character of Susana San Juan, a complex and tormented young woman. Scholars have focused on Susana San Juan's character,¹⁴ as well as the fact that she is the only figure that, through her mental instability, and subsequently, her death, is able to escape from Pedro's chains. According to Carlos Fuentes,

Susana San Juana ama a un muerto: una muerta ama a un muerto. Y es ésta la puerta por donde Susana escapa del dominio de Pedro Páramo. Pues si el cacique tiene dominios, ella tiene demonios. [...] Loco amor de Pedro Páramo hacia Susana San Juan y loco amor de Susana San Juan hacia ese hombre de la muerte que es Florencio. Pero no loco amor de Susana y Pedro. ("Rulfo" 832)

In examining Susana San Juan, I wish to focus on one myth in particular: the birth of Venus/Aphrodite. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love) was born from the genitals of her father, Uranus, after they were viciously removed by his son Kronos, and thrown into the sea:

12 The theme of incest is not addressed solely metaphorically through Juan Preciado and his relationship with his mother(s). In fact, Rulfo inserts two incestuous siblings in the narration: Donis and his sister with no name, who, paradoxically, are also two of the few people who are still "alive" in the village of Comala. As Jean Franco points out, the two siblings "se creen vivos, pero describen su existencia como un 'desvivir'; parecen casados pero son hermano y hermana. Su casa tiene el techo roto—símbolo de la identidad fragmentada, de la ruptura radical en la visión del mundo. Saben vagamente que hay un camino que pasa por el techo roto, pero no tienen idea a dónde pueda conducir; tampoco conocen la dirección de los otros caminos.... La enigmática pareja de la casa en ruinas representa el *status* completo. Están encerrados en un círculo incestuoso pero representan la esterilidad y no la plenitud, la reducción de la experiencia al nivel de empobrecimiento" (769-770). The third possible incestuous relationship is that between the young Susana San Juan and her father, Bartolomé. Although there is no explicit mention of a sexual relation, the hints that Rulfo leaves throughout the novel (the constant tension between the two, the fact that Susana never refers to Bartolomé as her father, but rather addresses him by his first name) could lead the reader to interpret their kinship as an incestuous one. Despite neither of these relationships being described in detail throughout the novel, it is intriguing that the theme of incest keeps appearing within the text.

13 An example of women's peripheral role can be seen in literature, with Nellie Campobello being the only woman among the first generation of Mexican novelists of the revolution.

14 Douglas J. Weatherford, for instance, in his article "*Citizen Kane* y *Pedro Páramo*: un análisis comparativo" proposes that Rulfo's novel was possibly influenced (consciously or unconsciously) by Orson Welles's movie. Specifically, the scholar believes that the strongest relationship can be found between two female characters: Susan Alexander and Susana San Juan.

There spread a circle of white foam from the immortal flesh, and in it grew a girl, whose course first took her to holy Kythera, and from there she afterward made her way to sea-washed Cyprus and stepped ashore, a modest lovely Goddess, and about her light and slender feet the grass grew. (Hesiod 134)

Although Susana is neither a goddess, nor is she born from the sea, I believe that a connection between the Greek myth and Rulfo's character is quite possible.

If on the one hand, Aphrodite is the goddess of love and sexuality, Susana San Juan is the only character in the novel that is explicitly linked to eroticism on more than one occasion. While thinking of her mother's death, for instance, she recalls that during that year "en [sus] piernas comenzaba a crecer el vello entre las venas, y [sus] manos temblaban tibias al tocar [sus propios] senos" (134). Years later, on the same deathbed, after learning about her long-lost lover's death, Susana (imaginatively) exclaims:

Y lo que yo quiero de él es su cuerpo. Desnudo y caliente de amor; hirviendo de deseos; estrujando el temblor de mis senos y de mis brazos. Mi cuerpo transparente suspendido del suyo. Mi cuerpo liviano y suelto a sus fuerzas. ¿Qué haré ahora con mis labios sin su boca para llenarlos? ¿Qué haré de mis adoloridos labios? (156)

Finally, moments before her death, Susana hears voices (perhaps imagined due to her illness, perhaps belonging to Florencio himself) that say, "Tengo la boca llena de ti, de tu boca. Tus labios apretados, duros como si mordieran oprimidos mis labios..." (168).

The detail that further emphasized the depiction of Susana as an erotic character is that she is often described as naked. On her last night alive, Susana gets rid of her blankets, leaving "su cuerpo... *desnudo*, refrescado por el viento de la madrugada," and leading Padre Rentería to find her "*desnuda* y dormida" (157). Pedro also admires "la *desnudez* de su cuerpo que comenzó a retorcerse en convulsiones," before moving closer to the bed to cover "el cuerpo *desnudo*" (165, all italics mine). Nakedness also links Susana to her memory of the sea, where she could sit with her "piernas desdobladas," her "ojos cerrados," and her "brazos abiertos", waiting for the water to leave "restos de espuma en [sus] pies al subir de su marea..." (151).

Foam is another element that appears on several occasions in Susana's recollections: "El mar... se desprendía de su *espuma* y se iba" (151), and as she hears a voice as she is dying, it tells her, "Trago saliva *espumosa*; masticó terrones plagados de gusanos que se me anundan en la garganta y raspan la pared del paladar" (168, all italics mine). After all, Aphrodite was known as the "foam-born

goddess,” and Susana San Juan could be her reinterpretation. Eroticism, nakedness, the sea, foam, shells (Susana’s belly is described as a “concha protectora,” which resembles Sandro Botticelli’s masterpiece, *The Birth of Venus*) are all details that demonstrate the strong linkage between the Greek myth and the character of Susana San Juan.

The figure of the mother in the myth of Venus/Aphrodite and in the life of Susana San Juan is an additional element that unites the myth to the novel. Hesiod only mentions Venus’ father—a practice that in Greek mythology was more than common—which leads readers to believe that Venus, in fact, was solely the daughter of Uranus. Although Susana San Juan does have a mother, throughout the entirety of the novel, she functions as a ghostly figure and appears to be nothing but a distant memory, given her premature death when Susana was just a young girl. Susana recalls, “En febrero, cuando las mañanas estaban llenas de viento, de gorriones y de luz azul. Me acuerdo. Mi madre murió entonces” (143). The absence of this mother figure links Susana to Venus/Aphrodite. Both women are daughters of their fathers, Venus/Aphrodite due to her mythical birth from foamy waters, and Susana due to her mother’s death at a young age. Once again, as with the myth of Oedipus, it appears that Rulfo has molded Hesiod’s tale in order to adapt it to his novel.

How do the notions of parricide, incest, and the presence or lack of a motherly figure resonate with Mexico in its revolutionary and post-revolutionary period? Metaphorically, Pedro Páramo is a direct descendant of Cortés, the devil-like figure who conquered present-day Mexico, exterminated a large part of the indigenous communities, and, through his union with la Malinche, symbolically became the father of the entire Mexican population.¹⁵ After all, Pedro Páramo is a cacique, a powerful landowner who has also fathered (through rape or marriage) the majority of children in the village of Comala. The resonance with the historical figure of Cortés is undeniable, and as Fuentes states in his article, “¿Hacia qué cosa nos conducen todas ellas [las mujeres] junto con Juan Preciado? Hacia el portador del mito, el padre de la tribu, el ancestro maldito, Pedro Páramo fundador del Nuevo Mundo, el violador de las madres, el padre de toditos los hijos de la chingada” (832).¹⁶

15 The figure of la Malinche (also known as Malintzín, Marina, Doña Marina and la Chingada, among others) was, according to León Portillo, an Aztec woman from the city of Tetipac (13). A large number of texts have been written on the life and role of this legendary woman, both fictional and academic. Among others, see Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*; Rosario Castellanos, *Poesía no eres tú*; Maarten Van Delden, “How to Read la Malinche”; Elizabeth Rodríguez Kessler, “She’s the Dreamwork Inside Someone Else’s Skull: ‘La Malinche’ and the Battles Waged for Her Autonomy”; and Mary Louise Pratt, “Yo soy La Malinche: Chicana Writers and the Poetics of Ethnonationalism.”

16 Aside from comparing Pedro Páramo to Cortés, Fuentes also creates a second comparison with Machiavelli’s Prince. However, unlike what the Florentine politician recommended, Pedro Páramo does become subject to fortune’s changes, and is eventually destroyed by them.

Tied to the traumatic history of Spanish conquest is also the figure of the mother (or mothers) of Mexico. Historically, the great mother of Mexico is the Virgin of Guadalupe, although one cannot overlook the legendary and tainted figure of la Malinche, who, according to legend, gave herself to Cortés and gave birth to the new mestizo population. However, when analyzing these myths in relation to *Pedro Páramo*, one will soon notice that the Virgin and la Malinche are not central elements in the story. Rulfo himself states that in his novel some traditional values (such as religion) are no longer considered valid. Precisely for this reason, the characters of the novel suffer a traumatic change: “Su fe ha sido destruida. Ellos creyeron alguna vez en algo, los personajes de *Pedro Páramo*, aunque siguen siendo creyentes, en realidad su fe está deshabitada. No tienen un asidero, una cosa de dónde aferrarse” (Sommers and Rulfo 7).

Comala functions as a microcosm that represents a part of Mexican society before, during, and shortly after the Revolution. For instance, the plurality of mothers found in Mexican culture is also visible in *Pedro Páramo*. Although in the literary work the names of the mothers change (they no longer are the Virgin and la Malinche, but rather Dolores, Eduviges, and Dorotea) their failure (or impossibility) as mothers remains unchanged. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude* Octavio Paz dedicates a chapter to the figures of la Malinche and the Virgin of Guadalupe, explaining how both women incarnate motherly figures that are ultimately inadequate.¹⁷ If, on the one hand, the Virgin of Guadalupe is “la Madre virgen,” untouchable, sacred, and sexually undesirable, on the other hand la Malinche is “la Madre violada,” as her alias “la Chingada” informs us (77). As Paz states, la Malinche is not

una Madre de carne y hueso, sino una figura mítica. La Chingada es una de las representaciones mexicanas de la Maternidad, como la Llorona o la ‘sufrida madre mexicana’... La Chingada es la madre que ha sufrido, metafórica o realmente, la acción corrosiva e infamante implícita en el verbo que le da nombre. (68)

By sleeping with the enemy (Cortés), la Malinche becomes the negative motherly figure that dooms her descendants by making them “‘hijo[s] de la Chingada’,... el engendro de la violación, del rapto o de la burla” (Paz 72). In *Pedro Páramo* Rulfo explains why all the female characters are unsuited to be mothers. Even incest (which is certainly condemnable, but would at least perpetuate the idea of

As Fuentes writes, Pedro Páramo “tiene una falla secreta, un resquicio por donde las recetas del poder se desangran inútilmente. La fortuna de Pedro Páramo es una mujer, Susana San Juan, con la que soñó de niño, encerrado en el baño” (“Rulfo” 826-827).

17 In the fifth chapter of *El laberinto de la soledad*, entitled “De la independencia a la revolución,” Octavio Paz explains in detail the spontaneous and visceral aspects of the Mexican Revolution

mexicanidad) is deemed unsuccessful. Mexico, therefore, is represented as a chaotic country without a strong motherly figure. In other words, Mexico is *desmadrado*.

On the contrary, the father figure is one, present, and powerful. The tyrannical figure of Cortés is embodied by Pedro Páramo, a character who also represents stasis in Mexican society (from the years of the Spanish conquest to the novel's literary present). For Mexico to break away from its colonial past, and in order for it to live in a free and independent present, the figures of Cortés and Pedro Páramo must symbolically be destroyed. It is not by chance that part of Rulfo's novel takes place during the Mexican Revolution. However, unlike many of his predecessors, the author of *Pedro Páramo* does not focus on the battles or on the lives of the revolutionaries, but rather includes hints that place readers in a specific historical period: “¿Cuánto necesitan para hacer su revolución?” preguntó Pedro Páramo. “Tal vez yo pueda ayudarlos” (153).

The importance of the revolutionary background reaches its apex in the closing scene of the novel, when Abundio commits parricide. I have already touched upon the elements that make Oedipus' story different from Abundio's. I would now like to focus on Abundio's actions, which cause the physical death of Pedro Páramo, as well as the metaphorical death of despotism and tyranny embodied by the rich landowners. The outcome of Abundio's endeavor demonstrates why the killer's name or identity lacks importance: it would not have mattered if Juan Preciado, Miguel Páramo, or one of Pedro's other children had committed their father's murder. The key element is that Pedro (and despotism with him) dies because one of his sons kills him. The pivotal detail concerning Pedro Páramo's death is that it came from the inside, which shares similarities with the Revolution's spontaneous and visceral beginning.¹⁵ The village that Pedro himself left to rot after Susana's passing, by stating “Me cruzaré de brazos y Comala se morirá de hambre,” now becomes the cause of his death (171).

Throughout *Pedro Páramo*, Rulfo employs implicit and explicit references to myths, from classical, to Nordic, to indigenous, adapting them to the context in which and of which he wrote. Aside from the more traditional interpretations of Mexican history and society seen through the stories of la Malinche and Cortés, Rulfo engages with other myths and traditions to speak about Mexico after the revolution. This article has studied the topics of parricide, incest, madness, and brotherly hatred as seen through the lens of the classical myths of Oedipus and the birth of Venus/Aphrodite, by showing how Rulfo tweaked aspects of these myths in order to adapt them to Mexican society in the late 1920s. While all interpretations lead to a negative conclusion—Juan Preciado's failure is to be linked to the failed promises of the revolution; Abundio's parricide and troubled relationship with Juan represents the problematic situation that existed among the Mexican people after the conflict came to an end; the numerous failed mother figures reflect the role that women played (or, rather, did not play) in

the post-revolutionary years—the fascinating aspect of the novel is that it ends on what could be interpreted as a hopeful note.

Following Pedro's death (which supposedly happens in 1927, during the post-revolutionary years), Comala is once again blessed by rain. The compelling detail, however, is that rain does not begin to fall shortly after Pedro Páramo's death; rather, the reader encounters rain about halfway through the novel. Lacking linear narration and chronological order, the events narrated in the first part of the text actually occur after most of the ones recounted in the second part. Hence, when Dorotea tells Juan Preciado, from their tomb: "¿Oyes? Allá afuera está lloviendo. ¿No sientes el golpear de la lluvia?" readers realize that the characters are speaking in a time subsequent to Pedro Páramo's passing (120).

Aside from the sensational literary technique employed by Rulfo, the compelling fact is that rain is falling over Comala following Pedro's assassination. Comala (symbolizing Mexican society) after Pedro Páramo's death (symbolizing Mexico's post-revolutionary period) is finally granted a renaissance. Fuentes states that

Pedro Páramo es una novela extraordinaria [...] porque se genera a sí misma, como novela mítica, de la misma manera que el mito se genera verbalmente: del mutismo de la nada a la identificación con la palabra, de *mu* a *mythos* dentro del proceso colectivo que es indispensable a la gestación mítica, que nunca es un desarrollo individual." ("Rulfo" 827)

Despotism has been overthrown and killed from within, and motherless Mexico is given the opportunity of a revival. Myth, with its adaptations, is used as the means to grant this rebirth.

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