

Christian Purgatory and Redemption in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*

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Eckert, Ken (2011) "Christian Purgatory and Redemption in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*"

ABSTRACT

Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* has been read as archetype, capitalist critique, or modernist surrealism. Its religious interpretations have generally seen the novel as pessimistic and its characters damned. However, the text gains clarity and religious meaning once Comala is understood as a Christian purgatory with an indeterminate geography, physicality, and time, and we realize that Juan arrives already physically dead. Some of the novel's characters spiritually stagnate or decline, as does Pedro Páramo and Rentería, but others are purified and attain self-understanding, as do Dorotea and Juan. Climactically, Susana's death and salvation affirms the purgatorial aspect of Comala as Páramo's defeat results in his dissolution and regeneration for the town's inhabitants.

Key Words: Rulfo, Pedro Páramo, Christian purgatory, modernist literature, death literature

INTRODUCTION

Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) begins with the confession, "I came to Comala because I had been told that my father, a man named Pedro Páramo, lived there" (3) / "Vine a Comala porque me dijeron que acá vivía mi padre, un tal Pedro Páramo" (9).¹ The original verb tense here, *vivía*, *lived*,

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1 All English references are from Juan Rulfo (1955), *Pedro Páramo*, Margaret Sayers Peden (trans.), 1994, New York: Grove Press. Corresponding Spanish references are from Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo, El llano en llamas y otros textos* (1989), Barcelona, España: Editorial Planeta S.A.; (1998), Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Planeta.

has significance. The sense of past living eerily bleeding into the present is introduced in the first sentence and sustained through the entire text. *Pedro Páramo* can be a difficult modernist work to interpret with its fragmented, non-sequential episodes and its noncommittal vagueness; the reader has no alternative to identifying with Juan Preciado, the novel's "reader-in-the-text" (D'Lugo 1987, 468-474) who is equally confused as he attempts to puzzle out the reality he perceives into meaningful order. The murkiness of the text's meaning has allowed critics to read the novel variously as a symbology of archetypes, as capitalist critique (see Williams 2007), as national allegory, or as experimental modernist surrealism. Sánchez even has the interesting idea that the novel might be understood mathematically as a series of fractal patterns (Sánchez 2003, 231-236).

Rulfo never privileged any one of these explanations and they can only be judged as competing or mutually supportive interpretations. I would like to hold the question of *Pedro Páramo*'s final or multiple meanings in abeyance, and examine one layer of signification in the text: Rulfo's rich use of religious symbolism, particularly that of purgatory and redemption. Comala's physical ambiguity, the spiritual amelioration or deterioration of the characters, and Susana's progress toward salvation form three symbolic and narrative streams in the novel informing this religious level of meaning. Criticism of *Pedro Páramo* has discussed its purgatory symbolism but has largely operated on two unproven suppositions, that Juan is a living person who dies in Comala, and that Comala is a sort of moribund twilight – a temporal, imprisoning stasis without hope of redemption. If we can be freed of the assumption that Juan or anyone else in the novel is physically alive at any point in the narrative and re-see Comala not as an end but as a stage upon which both spiritual decline and healing play out, the text will not only form a clearer complex of meanings but will provide a more optimistic message – the "vision of hope" that Bell (1966) sees in the novel.

COMALA AND PURGATORY

Many traditional Christians hold to some concept of a mediation point between heaven and hell where the soul may be purified of sin. In the medieval European church purgatory was often given a physical location (Dante depicts it as a mountain), but modern Catholicism interprets it as an abstract state of existence where the soul undergoes ameliorative suffering. Equally, while Comala, Sayula, and Contla are real places in Jalisco state, Rulfo never provides geographical specifics about the fictional Comala, keeping its physical existence ambiguous. The only directional index to

Comala is the equally mysterious Los Encuentros, a place of crossing or encounters (5). The narration repeatedly stresses that the way to Comala is always descending, and Juan and Abundio sink into “pure, airless heat” (5), whereas the actual Comala is cool, fertile, and at high elevation. A *comal* is a flat griddle for cooking tortillas, and Rulfo’s Comala is similarly heated by “the coals of the earth, at the very mouth of hell” (6). The qualification is important that Comala lays near hell but is *not* hell – “en la mera boca del infierno” (11-12)– and it remains unclear where or what exactly the town is. Abundio emphasizes that the inhabitants will be “happy to see someone after all the years no one’s come this way” (5), and his role as a guide who provides transport to people “from the other side of the world” (16) is suggestive of the ferryman Charon, who conducts souls to Hades. Noticeably, while some of the characters tell Juan that there are roads out of Comala, Eduviges only describes Abundio as someone who guides people *in* (15).

As purgatory is by definition a bridging destination, neither heaven nor hell, it lends itself to description as indistinct. In *The Great Divorce* (1946), C.S. Lewis depicts his fictional purgatory as a grey town “always in evening twilight” (13). Comala also employs the image pattern of seeming ambiguously locked in either dawn or twilight – is it night or day which will follow? Lack of clear illumination suggests the indeterminacy of Comala and the difficulty the characters experience in recognizing their circumstances. The text repeatedly notes “By now it was dark” (8), and after even seemingly brief incidents the narrator again points out the night (44), and dawn shifts immediately to a dark room and night again. Dusk and gloom are interspersed with pouring rain, further hindering visibility. Rain often has positive symbolism, but here it seems to blur both visual and auditory senses. For Juan the rain mixes with the sound of his mother crying (15) and obscures the imprecise voices on the street. Dove calls the novel “an experience with blindness” (98), and the analogy is not only abstract, as often the reader lacks essential details, but often literal: Juan cannot see with his eyes in the latter half of the novel while he is buried in the ground, and at this point the reader in turn experiences a sort of “misrecognition” upon realizing that Juan may have been addressing someone else the whole time – his grave-mate, Dorotea (Dove 2001, 99).

Juan’s hand meets “only empty space” (9) / *el aire* (15), and the town’s rather incorporeal state is further cemented by both his and the reader’s growing realization that all of the characters in Comala are dead. People appear and disappear, and speak to each other in their graves. In a key narrative shift, Juan muses that the air in his body “slipped through my fingers forever. I mean, forever” (57). Thomson argues that “the dead place

a burden on Juan Preciado to the extent that he cannot avoid being consumed by death itself' (2001, 127), and Bell suggests that Juan is alive at the beginning and waxes insane throughout the novel as a result of what he sees (1966, 241), finally dying from "fright" and the "murmuring" (58) / *miedo, murmullos* (65). Yet this is perhaps an overly literal reading of an especially dreamlike and poetic scene set in a non-earthly reality. It would also require that these otherwise self-absorbed individuals either conspire to ignore or do not see that Juan is flesh and blood, the first detail noticed in Dante's version of purgatory.²

A more logical construal is that Juan has not realized that he arrived in Comala *already dead*, just as Miguel Páramo does not know he is deceased after a violent riding accident and must be told by Eduvigis to "go, and rest in peace" (22). The reader is also informed that Abundio died previously at the beginning (16). Perhaps because Juan does not comprehend his state of death, upon nearing Comala he tells Abundio that he does not remember his baptism, eliciting a skeptical reply: "The hell you say!" (7) / "Váyase mucho al carajo!" (13). What seems a teasingly opaque moment, Juan's soliloquy on his 'death', may in fact reflect his darkened and limited understanding of himself as one of the "newer echoes" (43) joining Comala as a fellow spirit. The trope of a character unaware of his own earlier death, and the consequent shock to both the character and the audience, is employed elsewhere with the movie *The Sixth Sense* (1999) a recent example. Here the reader gradually becomes aware that Juan has no special status as an outsider from the living world but is equally dead. Rulfo himself noted that Juan arrives dead,³ a point unfairly dismissed by Thomson as "an interesting misreading of his own work" (2001, 125).

The alive/deceased ambiguity extends to the other characters. Most are indicated as having previously died, but are at times mistakenly called alive (51). Rulfo's Comala was perhaps influenced by his town of Luvina from his short story collection *El Llano en Llamas* (1953), in which a broken teacher laments his time in a town populated by moribund, deathly citizens where only an enervating, malevolent wind seems to have agency. Juan wonders how the women knew of his coming from his mother, and his question to Damiana, "Are you alive?" (43) is unanswered. The people of the town "speak, feel, remember, interact and do all things that living people do" (Boulossa 2006, 25-28) but are not living people. Juan meets a woman in a

2 The spirits are shocked by Dante when he casts a shadow (*Purg.* III.88-90). Alighieri Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Allen Mandelbaum(trans.), *Electronic Literature Foundation*, retrieved from http://www.divinecomedy.org/divine_comedy.html

3 Rulfo explains, "When Juan Preciado arrives in town with the muleteer he is already dead. Then, the town comes back to life once more. That has been my purpose, to give life to a dead town" (Quoted in Leal 1983, 75; Thomson 2001, 152).

long scarf, whose voice has “human overtones” (*bebras humanas*) and whose eyes “were the eyes of people who inhabit the earth” (8) and again the narrator stresses that the disappearing woman is *like* (*como*) a living human (D’Lugo 1987, 470). J. Lewis (2008) calls *Páramo* an especially morbid book, as “all of the living are dead,” but also vivifying in the sense that “all of the dead are still living”.

The progression of time in Comala is also unworldly. Critics have noted the non-sequentiality of the novel, claiming that perhaps Rulfo, an accomplished photographer, envisioned the text as episodic pictures – or that he was himself unable to order his story-fragments satisfactorily (Boulossa 2006, 26). The verb tenses “switch back and forth, past to present and back again, sometime in the space of a single paragraph, until time itself becomes senseless” (J. Lewis 2008). When *Pedro Páramo* is interpreted in terms of Christian symbolism this narrational problem is amended. Purgatory in its modern understanding is a state outside of the human experience of time as well as place, and so the sense of ambiguity and foreignness which Comala evokes echoes its flattened chronological reality. Rulfo refers to the novel as being set in a “simultaneous time which is a no-time” (Quoted in Peden 1994, viii). More than a *Ulysses*, compressed into one day, the novel rejects time entirely as an earthly concern (Cohn 1999, 173). Juan notes that “the church clock tolled the hours, hour after hour, hour after hour, as if time had been telescoped” (15), ironically unaware that time *has* collapsed; Eduvigis mentions that Juan’s mother “told me you would be coming” (10) but cannot comprehend the time of her earthly passing a week earlier.

Rulfo’s implicit suggestion of the no-time of purgatory also finds expression in the continual replaying of events. There does not seem to be a chronological division between the events of Comala’s past and Juan’s experience of them; they are re-enacted in front of him. Juan observes the gossiping women in the street who periodically reappear to comment on Páramo’s lovers, and witnesses the incestuous brother and sister endlessly repeating the same squabble (49). On his first night he hears the dying cries of Toribio Aldrete, who was hanged “a long time ago” (33) and whose echoes continue. Time is flattened into circularity as these sorrowful scenes and petty bickerings replay themselves perpetually in front of the newcomer. The circularity extends to the town as a whole, as Miguel Páramo’s horse continues to gallop through Comala to find its lost owner, continually re-experiencing its loss (21). To stretch the analogy, a *comal* is round and so lacks an end.

SALVATION AND TRANSITION

Although Juan never directly calls Comala purgatory, as does the teacher-narrator in “Luvina”, Rulfo’s association between the two in *Páramo* is at times strongly implicit. Dorotea is told to “Go rest a while more on earth” (61), or in the earth (*a la tierra*), and Juan reports that the voices ask him to “pray for us” (59), just as in Catholic tradition a soul’s time in purgatory may be shortened by the petitions of others. The residents of Comala also seem to have a transient quality reflecting that of the town. Some critics see the townspeople as hopeless and “condemned to fail” (Cohn 1999, 180), stressing the “fatalistic tone” (Thomson 2001, 121) of the novel, but evidently some leave. The saint’s instruction to Dorotea to wait “a while more” (*un poco más*) implies that something else will follow, and in turn she advises Juan to “think nice thoughts, because we’re going to be a long time here in the ground” (61). Comala is a “mediation point between damnation and salvation” (Thomson 2001, 124), and there are clues, however spiritually mysterious, that egress is possible. The incestuous sister gripes to Juan that her brother may not return as “That’s how they all do” (56). Damiana is surprised to hear that Eduviges is “still wandering like a lost soul” (33), implying an alternative. Tortillas are taken off the *comal* after they are prepared.

Because the trope of an outsider observing the afterworld is so common, from Gilgamesh to Aeneas to Dante, it has been expedient to label Juan as such; but Juan “came” (*vine*) to Comala, as opposed to “went” (*fui*)⁴, suggesting a sense of belonging. He arrives expected by the women and still remains in the village at the end of the novel. The fact that many seem fixed in Comala explains why some read the novel’s characters as “condemned to existing in a present moment which can never attain to fullness” (Sánchez 2003, 234). Yet purgatory offers not permanence but an opportunity for the soul to either purify or decline into hellishness⁵ – after the *comal*, most tortillas are fated to be eaten. If purgatory involves not only simple penance but also self-reflection, the incestuous sister has learned nothing, blaming her brother for having “made me his woman” (51) / “me hizo su mujer” (57-58), and wasting away in self-pitying narcissism. The brother equivalently seeks the oblivion of forgetfulness, chiding her “let me sleep” (49). Her claim that she has been there “forever” (*desde siempre*) is probably

4 Boixo (1993) notes that Rulfo used *fui* in early fragments of the story (Quoted in Thomson 2001, 121).

5 Catholic theology generally portrays purgatory as a progressional state toward heaven, but some church fathers suggest it contains the possibility of damnation. Augustine says inversely “non autem omnes ueniunt in sempiternas poenas, quae post illud iudicium sunt futurae” / “not all who suffer temporal pains after death will come to eternal punishments” (City of God 21:13).

untrue but likely accurate for her future as both already experience a form of hell. Similarly, Father Renteria's soul actively deteriorates. Near the beginning he struggles with conflicting emotions when he feels both loathing and *caritas* for Miguel Páramo's soul, but in an echo of his surname he self-corrupts into becoming Pedro Páramo's priest-for-rent. Later his mercenary tendencies lead him to process all spiritual transactions as cash ones, refusing Maria Dyada pardon for Eduviges because of her inability to pay (31). By the end his self-loathing has been transferred onto others; after being scolded by a father in Contla, Renteria viciously tells Dorotea that "you won't go to heaven now" (74).

Yet the dissipation of some souls in *Pedro Páramo* highlights the amendment of others. Some characters do cleanse themselves for grace, and reject Renteria's perfunctory services and enervating despair. Eduviges is written off as damned for her suicide, but she cheerfully claims to Juan that she will "catch up with your mother along one of the roads to eternity" (11). The second half of the novel, beginning with the shift of scene toward Juan's grave, has been interpreted as a regeneration of faith for the characters of Comala (Bell 1966, 243). An unnamed man who was tortured to death by Pedro Páramo gratefully says that "The heavens are bountiful" (79). Dorotea believes that she speaks for her body and not her soul. After having been told by Renteria she would "never know glory" (66) she "forgot about the sky" (65). Here Spanish *cielo* can denote both *sky* and *heaven* – "me olvidé del cielo" (72), but yet Dorotea serenely states that "heaven is right here" (66).

Juan's spiritual status is less certain. The more limited English criticism of *Pedro Páramo* does not seem to have asked: is he damned? If the novel's arc is at first downward, where Juan sinks into confusion and sensory deprivation, then in the second half his senses and understanding seem to greatly improve, as he can 'hear' the confessions of his grave-mates. Both Juan and Miguel Páramo hazily recall their last moments as smoke or "foamy clouds" (58), but Dorotea remembers in exact detail how she felt the severing of "the little thread of blood" (66) that connects her soul to her heart. Spiritual self-knowledge may form part of the soul's journey in Rulfo's vision of Comala. Juan never meets in person the father he came to see, and Rulfo perhaps intends the meaning that Juan remains innocent of Pedro's corrosive evil while still learning from it through witnessing its echoes being re-enacted in no-time. Juan grows increasingly meditative in the earth as he comes to question his past treatment of his mother, and even as his role in the narrative diminishes he grows from making confused queries to explaining events to Dorotea. If Juan in fact experiences a (second?) 'death' within Comala, it is a beneficial transition. As part of his spiritual education,

he moves from asking for help to giving it selflessly, cradling Dorotea protectively “in the hollow of [his] arms” (61) as they lay together in the ground.

SUSANA

Pedro Páramo’s nature may not be explicitly satanic, but his decline is both indexed by Comala’s deterioration and juxtaposed by Susana’s purity. Páramo has no pretense of faith, scornfully refusing to pay tithes and telling Justina “Don’t be silly” (110) / “No seas tonta” when the latter says that Susana must not be in God’s grace (Bell 1966, 244). His dismissive remark to his lawyer, Gerardo, to “Go with God” (102) / “Ve con Dios” (111), rather than *adiós* sounds as though he is asking both to depart, having no further use for either. Despite Susana’s claim that she only believes in hell (110), she is symbolically the opposite of Páramo. The latter is an earth archetype—his name can be etymologized as *rock* (*petros*) and *wasteland*—and in death he collapses to the ground like bricks (124), *pedras*. Young Pedro sits on the toilet while remembering flying a kite with Susana (12), suggesting his earth-bound nature (Cosgrove 1991, 85). Like the kite, Susana remains unreachable to him (85), as she exists in pure air and water, later exulting in how much she loves to swim, something Pedro cannot understand (96). Both properties are spiritual, alluding to water as baptismal and air as the Pentecostal vehicle of the holy spirit (Acts 2:2).

If the realization of Juan’s lifeless status forms the crux of the novel, Susana’s death forms its climax. If *Pedro Páramo* is hopeful and not bleak, such a reading depends on seeing her passing as a victory. Narratively and symbolically, she defeats Pedro Páramo and Rentería’s attempts to dominate her. The latter offers last rites at their most degraded, with loaded phrases urging damnation: “The joy in the eyes of God, which is the last, fleeting vision of those condemned to eternal suffering” (114); again there is reference to fading sight. Susana rejects the snaring and deadening words, saying “He sheltered me in His arms. He gave me love” (114). After Rentería’s final attempt to press judgment on her, “He is cruel in His judgment of sinners” (114), he is told to leave, as Susana is “at peace” (115), *tranquila* (123). Susana then dies having asserted her faith and free will against the fatalistic, bought priest as well as against Pedro Páramo/Satan, “who now stands defeated in the background” (Bell 1966, 244). Páramo’s life-long desire for Susana has been motivated more by emptiness than lust. His wish was “to have it all” (82), to consume her entirely or perhaps to acquire her powers of clarity; he pictures Susana “looking at me with your

aquamarine eyes" (12). Susana escapes to "God's immensity" where Páramo says he will forever be unable to "touch you or see you" (13), while he remains in darkening gloom.

With Susana's death the narrative accelerates toward dénouement, as her triumph breaks the torpid physical and chronological stasis of the town. A celebration erupts. The temporal purgatory is ending. After Pedro Páramo has been defied by Susana's faith and love, Comala also begins to disappear as a functioning space, matching Páramo's collapse as he abandons the town he previously subjugated. Reading Susana as a Christ-figure who defeats Pedro/Satan through her death is a tempting but unprovable speculation, and Rulfo never presented his novel as a Mexican *Paradise Lost*. Yet back down at the narrative plane of the text there are clues suggesting that Susana's death anticipates a new hope of rebirth. After an interminable cycle of dusk and darkness, Páramo "opened his eyes, where the pale light of dawn was reflected. Day was beginning" (118). This "light of restoration" (Bell 1966, 239) transforms Comala. Dorotea claims that she has seen Susana's death (115) as the fiesta grows in vigor: "There was no way to convince people that this was an occasion for mourning" (116). The final pages "form a rapid diminuendo leading to the crumbling of Pedro Páramo" (Bell 1966, 244). As the sun "tumb[le]s over things, giving them form once again" (123), it destroys the sleepy dimness—the *Media Luna*, half-moon—of Pedro Páramo's dominion. Páramo finally fades away into the same oblivion of rocks that make up the dying mass of Comala. The last passages of the novel describing his ruin take place contrasted against an image pattern of regeneration after his power is broken.

CONCLUSIONS

These readings all presume that *Pedro Páramo* is intended to make sense. Much like that other *Waste Land*, Pedro's Comala is a "heap of broken images" (Quoted in Cosgrove 1991, 79). The revolutionary episodes of the narrative tie it to a specific time period, and add thematic weight to the idea of historical or national allegory as well as the religious. Bell sees the end as symbolizing both "forward progress in time and new hope for Mexico" (239), and links have been drawn between the novel's events and the Cristero revolt of 1926-1929. Late in the novel Rulfo makes a brief reference to Carranza and Obregón as the villagers celebrate (117). Critics have also attempted to find pre-Hispanic religious meanings in the text, but the connection is less compelling; the Aztec hell had no moral significance (Sharman 2006, 139). The clearer parallel is to Christian or specifically

Catholic concepts of purgatory enacted in image and narrative patterns.

The ambiguous physical description of Comala and its unworldly and uncertain sense of time suggests a place where things happen as “suddenlys” (46), *derrepentes*, in a flattened no-time lacking human sequence. Many of the inhabitants inherit the nature of the town as they languish either in moribund stasis or dissipate like Comala’s “crumbling adobe” (43). The townspeople initially seem to disturb Juan, evoking the argument that the confusion drives him to death. Nevertheless, for Juan being haunted can be a “very particular way of knowing” (Gordon 1997). The reader’s realization that Juan is and was already dead can be a betrayal (D’Lugo 1987, 471), but also a progression toward sharing his understanding gained and experienced through seeing Susana’s triumph over Pedro and Renteria’s deadening grip. Susana may be Christ-*like*, or echoing her surname, she may pattern the Saint John who announces hope for the future (D’Lugo 1987, 471).

Understanding *Pedro Páramo* is not aided by Rulfo’s scattered limiting of clear detail. The reader may feel buried in the ground as well, attempting to parse and sort experiences either overheard, lived, or lived vicariously. The interweaving of the Juan Preciado and the Pedro Páramo storylines, with their abrupt jumps and breaks, suggests a stylistic experiment but may also reflect deeper and purposeful meanings. Recognizing the Christian layer of symbolism in the novel gives this indeterminacy some intelligence, as physical ambiguity, chronological simultaneity, and transient post-human spirits no longer imply the technique of magical realism but a vision of Comala as purgatory, where souls exist in an uncertain state leading to a final end but also to salvation. As Juan attempts to piece together a reality which is only dimly perceived, the audience identifies with him and shares this bewilderment; the readers “have assumed Juan’s curiosity as their own” (D’Lugo 1987, 471). By entering more intimately into this grey and unclear world and then seeing its transcendence, the reader also shares a joy that Juan is learning to understand in witnessing Susana follow “the path to Heaven; there, where the sky was beginning to glow with light” (118) / “el camino del cielo; por donde el cielo comenzaba a abrirse en luces” (127). In Spanish as well as English the image is poetic, liberating, and beautiful.

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