

CHARACTER TRANSFORMATION IN
DOÑA BÁRBARA AND EL SEÑOR PRESIDENTE

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A striking similarity in the relationship between Santos Luzardo and Marisela in *Doña Bárbara* and that between Miguel Cara de Angel and Camila Canales in *El Señor Presidente* can be seen in an analysis of the two novels. The main focus of this paper will be on these relationships, and the transformation in character undergone first by the women and the subsequent metamorphosis of the men which occurs as a result of the strong influence of the women.

Although the books were written at different times and in entirely different settings, the backgrounds of the novels and the authors' reasons for writing them are similar. *Doña Bárbara* was primarily written to show the problems of the rural areas of Venezuela, and to reveal the corruption and injustice which were prevalent under the regime of Juan Vicente Gómez, who governed in Venezuela from 1908-1935. The even more ruthless and barbaric dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera, who dominated Guatemalan politics from 1898 to 1920,¹ was one to the underlying motives which prompted Asturias to write his novel.

The protagonist of *Doña Bárbara*, Santos Luzardo, was born in the plains area of Venezuela, but was educated in Caracas, where he obtained a law degree. Upon his arrival home, he faces a struggle to repossess his lands, which had gradually been usurped by *doña Bárbara*, and to overcome his savage heritage. He discovers after a time that his efforts at imposing law and justice on the area have been futile; after he resorts to barbaric means, he is transformed by Marisela into a "civilized" man again.

El Señor Presidente is a novel of tyranny, a study of human emotions and reactions under a brutal dictatorship. In the midst of beggars, politicians and the military who throng the capital, Miguel Cara de Angel stands out as the favorite of the President. The novel traces his fall from grace, an ironic twist of the traditional story of Lucifer's fall from Paradise; the fall of the favorite is precipitated by his relationship with Camila Canales.

Because of their significant role in the transformation of the men, one must first study the education of and character change within Marisela and Camila. Fifteen years old at the start of the novel, their naivete is symbolized by their soft feminine names which represent delicate flowers. Marisela had been raised in a rural environment, in total isolation from the outside world, knowing only Lorenzo, her father, whose alcoholism had prevented his being a real father, and Mr. Danger. Because of Santos Luzardo, "la Bela Durmiente" is gradually transfigured from a barefoot, disheveled, almost animal-like creature into a beautiful and sensitive young woman, who learns to appreciate the

delicate nuances of life. When Santos sees her for the first time, he is dismayed by her filthy appearance, but he soon becomes aware of her underlying beauty. "Santos se detuvo a contemplarla. Bajo los delgados y grasientos harapos que se le adherían al cuerpo, la curva de la espalda y las líneas de las caderas y de los muslos eran de una belleza estatuaría. . ."² Unaware of her former surroundings, Marisela becomes cognizant of both her own beauty and that of the countryside. In a gesture symbolic of a spiritual as well as a physical baptism, Santos has her wash her face.

A similar awakening takes place in Camila. An unassuming naive girl, she is jolted into the real world by Cara de Angel. Like Marisela, she lacked a maternal figure and was neglected by her father, a general. To the real world she prefers the world portrayed in photographs, and in her childhood she chose to remain aloof and unemotional. "Desde la penumbra del cortinaje del terciopelo, oliendo a polvo, asomaba Camila sus ojos verdes al cristal de la tarde dominguera. Nada cambiaba la crueldad de sus pupilas de vidrio helado para ver desde su casa lo que pasaba en la calle."³ Unlike Marisela's gradual awakening into a beautiful world, Camila wakes up in the Tus-Tep bar, into an atmosphere of corruption and vice. The abruptness of the transition, within the chapter, between her childhood memories and the shadowy world of the Tus-Tep, indicates just how radical a change has been wrought in her life. Marisela is initially frightened by Santos; Cara de Angel appears to Camila as an evil and powerful man. Camila despairs about her father and fears her new surroundings, and Cara de Angel attempts to comfort her. Her tears represent her baptism just as the cleansing of Marisela's face awakened her to a new way of life. Camila's initiation into love is emphasized by a play on words: "Pero si ya pasó, si ya pasó. . . entredecía Cara de Angel al oído de Camila, que lloraba a mares. . ." (84).⁴

Just as Marisela and Camila share many attributes and undergo parallel awakenings, so Santos and Cara de Angel have many aspects in common. Their transformations are similar, both because of their inherent qualities and because of the women's influence. Within each man there is a conflict between good and evil; despite the fact that Santos' name implies saintliness and Cara de Angel's indicates an angelic nature, they both have qualities of evil which must be absolved by the women. Santos, the well-bred, educated urban man initially in his eagerness to try to shoot an alligator. Born in the plains, he still maintains the potential for violence beneath his civilized and sophisticated veneer. He is warned by Lorenzo, "Es necesario matar al centauro que todos los llaneros llevamos por dentro" (73-74), and he must struggle to control his savage instincts, which are part of his heritage. The foremost example of the savagery that exists within Santos' family is the killing of his brother Felix by his own father.

Cara de Angel is also presented in a dual light; he is referred to as "bello y malo como Satan;" within him lies the same conflict between good and evil that rages within Santos. He first appears when he comes to the rescue of Pelele. "El que hablaba era un angel: tez de dorado mármol, cabellos rubios, boca pequeña y aire de mujer en violento contraste con la negrura de sus ojos varoniles" (27). He frequently wears a black muffler partially obscuring his face, further accentuating his internal dichotomy. Like Santos' family history, his life as the President's favorite is given as the rationale for his evil behavior. Santos was influenced by witnessing crime and violence on the plains; Cara de Angel has observed the destructive forces of the government.

Prior to their first meeting with the women, there are indications of good instincts within the men. Santos is determined, despite the obstacles, to civilize and re-educate the people in the plains. Recognizing the problems inherent in this type of life, he feels it is his role to render justice and to impose rules on this lawless society. "Por una parte. . . el deseo de consagrarse a la obra patriótica, a la lucha contra el mal imperante, contra la naturaleza y el hombre, a la búsqueda de los remedios eficaces" (43).

The first appearance made by Cara de Angel also suggests his compassion. We see him in the role of the "good Samaritan" when he stops to help Pelele. "Cara de Angel, al ponerse en contacto en y tratar de salvar al Pelele, está simbólicamente tratando de redimir y salvar su humanidad podrida. . ."⁵

It is after these initial intimations of inherent goodness that the protagonists meet the women who will be so vital to them. In each case, the first encounter occurs under similar circumstances. The men are seeking the girls themselves. Santos feels protective as soon as he meets Marisela; at first sight of Camila, Cara de Angel is likewise struck by an overwhelming desire to save her from harm. The fact that the girls have been somewhat neglected by their fathers is significant because the men have to fill a void. This becomes particularly acute after the death of both fathers. Each father is an enemy of the ruling power: Lorenzo had been scorned by doña Bárbara and violently hates her; General Canales is an enemy of the President. These circumstances create a type of "damsel-in-distress" situation; chivalrous instincts are aroused in the men. A whole new set of emotions is unveiled. However, neither of the men is immediately aware of the fact that he is in love, and both prefer not to acknowledge it.

As we have seen, when Santos first meets Marisela, she is semi-savage and barbaric. A great deal of attention is paid to the taming of Marisela; there is a parallel drawn in one chapter between the taming of La Catira, a mare, and Santos' education of Marisela. This educational process is a major step in Santos' personal metamorphosis, because it is his first opportunity to perform a charitable act. This is further demonstrated by his taking Marisela into his home, to protect her from the brutal Mr. Danger, as well as teach her proper behavior.

Cara de Angel purportedly goes to General Canales' house to warn him to escape; however, he is actually involved in a potential assassination. He also plans to seduce Camila, but almost immediately his feelings for her cause him to change his plans. He arranges for the general to escape safely and seeks refuge for Camila. His protective instincts are further aroused when he witnesses the rejection by her relatives. He lies to her about them in order to shield her from being hurt. "Mentía por ternura, por querer ahorrarle hasta el último momento el dolor que ahora va a sufrir" (124). When Camila becomes deathly ill, he believes that if he performs merciful acts, God will allow her to recover; as with Santos, this is his first chance to perform a totally selfless act. He helps a woman who is searching for her son, and then surprises even himself by warning Major Farfán of an attempt on his life. "Al marcharse el mayor, Cara de Angel se tocó para saber si era el mismo que a tantos había empujado hacia la muerte, el que ahora, ante el azul infrangible de la mañana, empujaba a un hombre hacia la vida" (177).

Despite the rapid pace of transformation in the character of the men after their encounters with the women, the changes are difficult ones. Since she is the daughter of

doña Bárbara, and therefore not worthy of his affection, Santos does not consider Marisela as his equal; Marisela herself is aware of this disparity. Consequently he is torn between keeping her near him and sending her away to the city. Never having experienced love, he is frightened by and resists the prospect of falling in love. "Marisela, fruto de una unión inmoral y acasa heredera de las funestas condiciones paternas y maternas, no podía ser la mujer en quien pusiera su amor un hombre sensato. . ." (170). Santos finds himself at a crossroads between his good and evil instincts. At the same time that he is performing these compassionate acts, he is acquiring more of the lawless nature of the plainsman, and is aware of this internal dichotomy. The more time he spends in the region, the more his own violent impulses are aroused. His efforts to bring some semblance of justice into the area are thwarted by the combined deceptions of doña Bárbara and Ño Pernaleté. In retaliation for the murder of Carmelito, Santos orders the burning of the Mondragones' house, and he shoots one of the brothers who resists. This return to the way of his ancestors leads ultimately to the shooting of El Brujeador, sent by doña Bárbara to kill Santos. In the encounter it is El Brujeador who is murdered, and Santos believes himself responsible; that he in fact has fulfilled Lorenzo's prophecy.

Viene para Luzardo el momento en que se pregunta si su propia sangre no está determinado del mismo modo, y en que siente solo lo embriagador en la existencia de los jinetes y vengadores llaneros. Es el momento en que él, un segundo Hamlet, percibe la voz vengadora de su familia, parece inevitable como base para poderse sostener dentro de la vida pero que enreda también en acciones apasionadas y precipitadamente violentas.⁶

Like Santos, Cara de Angel deliberates about abandoning Camila. He already has enough humanity within him to feel guilty because his original intentions were unworthy of her. "Estoy cooperando a un crimen — se dijo —; a este hombre lo van a asesinar al salir de su casa.' Y en este supuesto, que a medida que le daba vueltas en la cabeza se le hacía más negro, alzarse con la hija de aquel moribundo le parecía odioso, repugnante, tanto como amable y simpático y grato de añadidura a su posible fuga" (70-71). In a sequence of tortured dreams, he agonizes over his love for Camila which he realizes is antithetical to his role as the President's favorite. "Su instinto le acusaba de estar en ese desosiego por no haber tomado a Camila por la fuerza" (142). In Chapter 38 the dual nature of Cara de Angel's personality is further emphasized by a scene of simultaneous creation and destruction. He makes love to Camila, and at the moment of climax, there is also presented a scene in which a chicken is brutally slain by a maid in another part of the house. The alternation of these scenes serves to underscore the difficulty of total renunciation of evil in Cara de Angel.

The final transformations are brought about by Camila and Marisela in parallel ways, when the protagonists begin to acknowledge their need for the women. In both cases there has been a reversal of roles. Santos was the original educator of Marisela and manages to save her from Mr. Danger; Cara de Angel brings Camila into the real world and tries to protect her and save her life. Now it is the women's turn to protect. Santos finds that he is leading the life of a typical plainsman; personal cleanliness and the condition of his house are unimportant. It is Marisela who forces him to heed these affairs again.

Ahora, por el contrario, después de las rudas faenas de ojeos y carreras, era necesario regresar con un ramo de flores sabaneras para la niña de la casa, cambiarse, quitarse el

áspero olor de caballo y de toro que traía adherido a la piel y sentarse a la mesa dando ejemplo de buenas modales. . . Así . . . Marisela le servía de defensa contra la adaptación a la rusticidad del medio. . . (114-115).

The next major indication of Marisela's role in the transformation of Santos comes when she learns of doña Bárbara's desire to practice witchcraft on Santos, and despite her superstitious fear, she confronts her mother face to face. Marisela accuses doña Bárbara of being a witch and a physical fight ensues, stopped only by the appearance of Santos. The final step in Marisela's salvation of Santos comes with the murder of El Brujeador. It is important to note that Santos' most violent actions, the shooting of the Mondragones and the burning of their house, and the attempted shooting of El Brujeador, all take place after Marisela has moved away from his house, an indication of how essential a role she plays for him. After the incident with El Brujeador, Santos finds Marisela at her father's deathbed. The revelation of her true feelings and tenderness greatly affects Santos' attitude towards her, and he confesses to his crime. Refusing to believe that Santos is capable of such an action, Marisela seeks an explanation. She recognizes the impossibility of Santos' actually being the person who did the killing, because of the location of the bullet, and further finds that it was actually Pajarote, and not Santos, who had fired the fatal shot. It is therefore through her newly-found awareness and sensitivity that Santos is redeemed.⁷ It is after this revelation that doña Bárbara decides to abandon the region, leaving everything to Marisela and freeing her to marry Santos. "Santos Luzardo y Marisela. . . son, respectiva y complementariamente, la empresa que hay que acometer, una y otra vez, y la esperanza que estamos obligados a acariciar, con incansable terquedad; la obligación de hoy para la sosegada contemplación de mañana."⁸ It is their union which will affect the future of the plains; it represents the joining of the favorable aspects of the city and the country. Education and the peaceful tactics of the civilized world, united with the humanitarian instincts and bravery of the plains, will presumably be engendered in the children of Santos and Marisela.

The same reversal of roles takes place in *El Señor Presidente*. After comforting Camila and trying to appease her worries about her father, Cara de Angel again returns to the President; still unable to break the link to evil. Gradually, however, Camila becomes vital for his existence; this is a counterpoint to the earlier suggestion that it was through his good deeds that she did not die. Their need for one another is emphasized by the interplay of their dreams — Camila's delirium is alternated with that of Cara de Angel in such a way that they become one and the same (pp. 178-184). Even then Cara de Angel remains torn by his love for Camila and his feeling that he still must serve the President. "Cara de Angel, llamado con gran prisa de la casa presidencial, indagó el estado de Camila, elasticidad de la mirada ansiosa, humanización del vidrio en los ojos, y como reptil cobarde enroscóse en la duda de si iba o no iba; el Señor Presidente o Camila, Camila o el Señor Presidente. . ." (220). Camila's tempering influence on Cara de Angel is apparent in their marriage; despite his strong desire for her, he waits until she is ready before consummating their relationship. As their love intensifies, Cara de Angel's position as favorite is swiftly diminished, and his downfall inexorably approaches. The next step parallels the episode in *Doña Bárbara* in which Marisela, despite her fear, confronts doña Bárbara and is rescued by Santos. In *El Señor Presidente*, Camila, overcoming her fright, braves a meeting with the President at a palace reception. Cara de Angel remains hidden

in order to protect her when the Presidente demands a meeting with only the women. Cara de Angel's break with the President has been finalized; his distrust is now manifest. The sensitivity of Marisela which revealed to Santos the truth of his crime, and which therefore redeemed him, is paralleled by the insight which Cara de Angel receives from Camila as to the true nature of the President. However, together with his rejection of everything that the President represents comes his destruction, and he is imprisoned. It is because of Camila's love that Cara de Angel is able to withstand the atrocities of the dungeon. Despite all the indignities, he refuses to surrender to despair. It is only after he is deceived into believing that Camila had betrayed him and become the President's mistress that he is totally destroyed. Just as Santos reverted to savagery when Marisela was away from him, now Cara de Angel yields to animalism when he believes that Camila has abandoned him. As seen in their delirium, Camila is Cara de Angel's "other", his alter ego; it is virtually impossible for him to go on living when she no longer exists as she was. Despite this pessimistic and tragic ending,⁹ Cara de Angel's redemption is now complete, since he has totally renounced his affiliation with the President. This salvation is apparent in his child, Miguelito,¹⁰ who will be raised in the country by Camila, and who represents the same hope for the future that the children of Santos and Marisela symbolize.

The similarities in the lives and relationships of the two couples is quite striking, and in both relationships it is the woman who, after being transformed herself, instills a greater sense of virtue within the man. Marisela saves Santos by recognizing the truth and Camila conquers her anguish at Cara de Angel's disappearance and musters all her strength in order to raise their son. In contact with such strength and goodness, the men must be redeemed. Santos Luzardo is softened by Marisela's gentle spirit, and Cara de Angel is transformed into a compassionate, noble man.

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NOTES

¹ *El Señor Presidente* was written over a long period of time, but because of political reasons was not published until 1946.

² Rómulo Gallegos, *Doña Bárbara*, 19th ed. (Buenos Aires: Compañía Editora Espasa-Calpe Argentina, 1962). All subsequent references are to this edition.

³ Miguel Angel Asturias, *El Señor Presidente*, 14th ed. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1970). All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁴ This play on words is also used in a previous chapter, in a reference to her first visit to the sea: "... el Océano Pacífico le lanzó una guantada líquida de agua clara. . . ¡Ah. . . mar! Ni ella ni su prima se dieron cuenta. Había pronunciado por primera vez el verbo 'amar' amenazando al mar" (80-81).

⁵ Enrique Arenas-Capiello, "El Señor Presidente y la concepción demoníaca del mundo," *Anuario de Filología* (Universidad de Zulia, Maracaibo), Año 6-7, Nos. 6-7 (1967-68), p. 288. The author continues his discussion by making an interesting analogy with Prometheus going against the will of Zeus, and says that Cara de Angel's downfall stems from his helping of Pelele.

⁶ Kurt Weis, "Rómulo Gallegos y su novela," *Revista Shell* (Caracas), 8, No. 34 (1960), 82.

⁷ Most critics are willing to exonerate Santos, but it should be noted however, as Dillwyn F. Ratcliff in *Venezuelan Prose Fiction* (New York: Instituto de las Españas, 1933), p. 261, has pointed out, that Santos is still not entirely free of guilt, since he did shoot at El Brujeador with intent to kill. Ratcliff states, "However, according to Gallegos and the trend in the novel, Santos is indeed redeemed."

⁸ Rómulo Gallegos, *Una posición en la vida* (México: Editorial Humanismo, 1954), p. 533.

⁹ Jack Himelblau, in "El Señor Presidente: Antecedents, Sources and Reality," *Hispanic Review*, 41 (Winter 1973), 69, points out the necessity of this ending: "Unless Asturias wished to submerge his work in melodrama and destroy the fabric of frustration, fear and despair which he had striven so hard to convey through-out the novel, he could not now afford a romantic ending. . ."

¹⁰ The idea of fertility and destruction is dealt with by Richard Callan in several articles and books, including "Babylonian Mythology in 'El Señor Presidente,'" *Hispania*, 50, (1967), 417-424, and *Miguel Angel Asturias* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970).