Novel by Rómulo Gallegos

Rómulo Gallegos served his country as a teacher, Minister of Education, and briefly as President of the nation. As a writer, educator, and political figure, he epitomizes the struggle against tyranny in Latin America. Among his novels, *Doña Bárbara* (published in Spain in 1929) best represents his ideas and ideals. The conflict on the Venezuelan llanos (plains) between Santos Luzardo and Doña Barbara is a microcosmic re-enactment of Sarmiento’s archetypal struggle between civilization and barbarism. In Gallegos’s work, as in other Spanish American novels written around the same time, this basic dichotomy manifests itself in a series of duelling oppositions: urban versus rural, European (i.e. white) versus mestizo, rational thought versus superstition, progress versus tradition. Doña Barbara, the personification of the llanos, is one of the most memorable characters in all of Spanish American literature. From her base of operations at the ranch El Miedo (literally, “The Fear”) she exerts absolute control over her fiefdom by means of her sexuality, sorcery, and brute force. Santos Luzardo, on the other hand, is an idealized figure. Raised and educated in the city, he is the embodiment of Gallegos’s liberal agenda. His local efforts to preserve the decaying Altamira estate and bring the enlightened ways of the city to the benighted countryside mirror the novelist’s endeavors on the national level. Luzardo proposes to civilize the cacica (rural boss), Doña Barbara, and her illegitimate daughter, Marisela, just as he aims to restore order to the llanos. Along the way he falls victim to the spell of his adversary and the land itself, but eventually he prevails. Luzardo’s education of and subsequent marriage to Marisela is emblematic of national restoration and unification. Ironically, Gallegos’s nemesis, the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez, expressed great admiration for the novel. Failing to recognize himself in the portrayal of the tyrannical eponymous character, he was apparently unaware that the book’s subject matter was intended as a repudiation of his regime.

Gallegos wrote his next two novels, *Cantaclaro* and *Canaima* during his self-imposed exile in Spain. Both emphasize setting at the expense of other narrative elements. *Cantaclaro*, like *Doña Bárbara*, relates legends and superstitions, incorporates aspects of costumbrismo, and offers a poetic treatment of the landscape. Florentino, the roving singer of the title, seems a permanent fixture of the plains, inseparable from the environment of which he is a product. For *Canaima* Gallegos chooses a jungle setting in the Orinoco basin. Once again, he develops his narrative within the context of the “man versus nature” theme. Setting out from the city in search of adventure, the protagonist, Marcos Vargas ultimately enters the jungle and casts his lot with the Indians. The migration of his mestizo son back to the city reverses the path taken by Marcos, thereby signalling a victory for the forces of civilization. Both *Cantaclaro* and *Canaima* are characterized by folkloric and sociological content and a lack of structural unity. The novelist’s preoccupation with the problems of his country evidently outweighed his concern for narrativity.

In *Doña Bárbara* and other novels Gallegos utilizes many of the trappings of 19th-century Realism—linear narration, omniscient narrator, action scenes, lengthy descriptions, costumbrismo—but his style is poetic rather than strictly realistic. Although
he grew up under the influence of Rodó and Spanish American *Modernismo*, he eschewed the escapist tendencies of that earlier generation, focusing instead on his country’s geographical, social, and political realities. His novels paint a portrait of Venezuela’s rural regions—the plains, jungles, and mountains—with their distinctive flora, fauna, climate, customs, popular legends, and superstitions. Despite nature’s seductive and bewitching aspects, the environment proves to be an inhospitable zone that must be tamed. Frequently, the influence of the landscape is so powerful that setting overshadows character development and plot.

Gallegos’s characters often resemble mere idealizations, personifications, or caricatures, rather than flesh-and-blood individuals. Doña Barbara, for example, is frequently referred to as “la devoradora de hombres” (the Devourer of Men), and Dr Payara in *Cantaclaro* is known as “el diablo del Cunaviche” (the Devil of the Cunaviche). Name symbolism serves as a primary rhetorical device in his novels; in the final analysis, however, rather than contributing to character development, it actually hinders his efforts by causing readers to notice characters more for what they represent than for what they appear to be. Besides the two most obvious examples, the names of the antagonists in *Doña Bárbara*, other symbolic appellations from that novel include the moniker of Mister Danger, a transparent reference to the threats posed by North American imperialism, and the names of the two ranches, Altamira (High Sights) and El Miedo, neither of which leaves the reader with any doubt as to its significance.

From the standpoint of literary history Rómulo Gallegos is considered an icon of the regional novel, a sub-genre that was one of the mainstays of Spanish American literature for much of the first half of the 20th century. The destiny of the Venezuelan nation, its progress toward the future, is the real theme of his work and the ultimate meaning behind his allegories. The solutions to the country’s problems, as set forth in his novels, lie in education and racial and political unification. In his selection of autochthonous themes and materials as subjects worthy of literary treatment, Gallegos employs one of the defining characteristics of regionalism and contributes to the creation of a national identity.

MELVIN S. ARRINGTON, JR

**Editions**

First edition: *Doña Bárbara*, Barcelona: Araluce, 1929
Translation: *Doña Bárbara*, by Robert Malloy, Magnolia, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1948 [the most recent edition]

**Further Reading**

Bermúdez, Manuel (editor), *“Doña Bárbara” ante la crítica*, Caracas: Monte Avila, 1991
Manuel Gálvez 1882–1962

Argentine prose writer, dramatist and poet

As the author of novels like La maestra normal, 1914 [The Training College Teacher], El mal metafísico, 1916 [The Metaphysical 111], La sombra del convento, 1917 [The Shadow of the Convent] and Nacha Regules (1919), Manuel Gálvez has gained a reputation in Argentine literary circles for presenting the social problems of his country in a convincingly realistic manner. As early as 1916, in a letter to Julio Cejador, the young Gálvez was already confirming the ambitious literary project then in hand: “From now on I will write only novels. I have a vast plan, and I intend to reflect the multiple life of this complicated country of ours.” This prudent decision to devote his life to fiction, despite his talents in the field of poetry, drama (less so) and of course the essay, was to the benefit of Gálvez and his country. In 1910 he had already formulated in essay form, in El diario de Gabriel Quiroga [The Diary of Gabriel Quiroga], an examination of the key themes of Argentine history (federalism versus unitarianism, immigration, civilisation versus barbarism and Buenos Aires versus the provinces).

The fruits of the seeds sown in the early essays began to appear thematically in the fiction published in the second decade of the century. Following his designated scheme, Gálvez situated his first novel, La maestra normal, in La Rioja province, which he knew well from his school-inspector travels. His treatment of the love affair between the sentimental schoolteacher Rasalda and the visitor Solís from Buenos Aires, captures the time and place through the use of costumbrismo and Social Realism while also introducing something of the converse idealism which was to be a characteristic of Gálvez’s later novels. Despite the praise of Miguel de Unamuno, La maestra normal provoked opposition from supporters of the system then in use in teacher’s training colleges for primary school teachers, and generated much antipathy between the provinces and Buenos Aires. The capital was to be the setting of El mal metafísico, subtitled Vida romántica [A Romantic Life], a realistic treatment of a phase in Gálvez’s own life. Between 1900 and 1910 Gálvez lived many of the experiences of the sentimental poet, Carlos Riga, in a bohemian group of artists (easily identified) struggling against the philistinism and materialism of porteño or city society. Riga, an apathetic provincial youth destroyed by the cold city, is yet another symbol of the idealism and spiritual love manifest in Gálvez’s early novels, characterised as, and much praised for their Social Realism.

As promised in his 1916 plan, Gálvez placed his next novel, La sombra del convento in yet another part of the country, this time in the provincial city of Córdoba, noted for its