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| Rulfo, Juan Nepomuceno Carlos Pérez Vizcaíno (1917-1986) |
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| Juan Rulfo was a Mexican writer and photographer and is considered one of the most influential writers of Spanish-language literature in the modern age. His literary production is mainly limited to two brief works - a collection of short stories, *El Llano en llamas* (*The Burning Plain*), and a novel, *Pedro Páramo* - which sufficed to assign him a central place in world literature. Rulfo was a man of few words who in his writing attempted to fulfill his ideal of a literary style without ornament. His stories and novel are masterpieces of prose, considered ‘poetic prose’ by some, where direct descriptions are avoided and every word is calculated to depict environments, characters and actions by pure insinuation or allusion to elements that they lack.  Rulfo’s early life was marked by his father’s assassination in 1923 and his mother’s passing only a few years later, in 1927. At the age of 8, during the unrest caused by the Revolution and the anti-clerical measures that led to the Cristero war (1926-1929), Rulfo remembers having discovered his love for reading, when the town priest hid his library in his grandmother’s house, to save it from being confiscated by the revolutionary forces. |
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File: JuanRulfo.jpg  Figure 1 Juan Rulfo  Source: <http://literofilia.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Juan-Rulfo-600x300.jpg>  Rulfo’s early life was marked by his father’s assassination in 1923 and his mother’s passing only a few years later, in 1927. At the age of 8, during the unrest caused by the Revolution and the anti-clerical measures that led to the Cristero war (1926-1929), Rulfo remembers having discovered his love for reading, when the town priest hid his library in his grandmother’s house, to save it from being confiscated by the revolutionary forces. Here Rulfo came across, among others, the Scandinavian writers whom he often mentioned as his closest influence (H. Laxness, K. Hamsun, S. Lagerlöf, B. Björnson). These ‘sad and opaque’ authors provided Rulfo with the necessary physical and psychological environment to represent the life of the Mexican farmer.  As a writer, Rulfo was extremely self-critical and used to write and rewrite his texts many times only to finally discard them altogether. Very few texts survived this process and were handed in for publication, while many others remained unpublished or were destroyed. Rulfo published his first work in 1945, the short story ‘La vida no es muy seria en sus cosas’, which appeared in the journal *América*. In the following years, Rulfo published a series of other stories that were collected in the volume *The Burning Plain* (1953). In 1955, Rulfo published his first and only novel, *Pedro Páramo*, the fragmented tale of a deserted Mexican ghost-town and its tyrannical ‘cacique’, or land baron. By means of an intricate interplay of literary voices, Rulfo in this work generates an atmosphere of reality and illusion with characters hovering between life and death. This novel soon came to be considered one of the most innovative works of modern literature, and marked a clean break with the literary past in Mexico, where until then the regionalist novels of the Revolution had been the order of the day.  Despite his evident literary talent, Rulfo never considered himself a professional writer and always held other jobs, even quite distant from the literary field. His family expected him to go to Law school, but after only a few years at university, Rulfo abandoned his studies and decided to go to work. At the age of 18, he was hired as an agent at the immigrations office in Mexico City, where he was to identify illegal immigrants, a job which he qualified as rather unpleasant ‘detective work’. In 1947, he accepted a job in a private corporation, as a travelling salesman of car tires. He travelled all over Mexico, which gave him a chance to see the country and take photographs, another of his great passions. From 1963 and until the end of his life, Rulfo was employed at the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, in Mexico City, where he edited an important collection of ancient and contemporary Mexican anthropology. Since 1948 he had been married to Clara Aparicio Rulfo, with whom he had four children.  Rulfo looked towards Scandinavia and the European literary avant-gardes (Kafka, Joyce, Woolf) to renew the themes and strategies of his national literature and express the Mexican reality. His literary aim was also that of freeing Mexican literature from the yoke of Spanish influence. To him, the main reason for the lack of innovation in Mexican literature was the fact that it nourished itself solely on Spanish writers, whose world, mentality, rhetoric and pomposity were too distant from Mexican life and thought. Rulfo consciously sought to create more unsophisticated characters and write in a straightforward language, among other things by systematically avoiding the use of adjectives.  In his works, Rulfo explores central themes of his contemporary Mexican society, such as the Revolution, the Cristero war, the agrarian land reform, the destruction and isolation of life outside the big cities, the powerlessness of Mexican farmers and the geographical and existential distance of their lives with regards to the government and political system. But the true innovation of his writing is no doubt the linguistic and literary experimentation he embarked on: purifying literature by eliminating all ‘superfluous’ elements, both in linguistic and thematic terms.  In addition to his writings, Rulfo was also a very skilled photographer, and his photographs were published already during his lifetime. The relation between his photography and literary technique has often been noted, since Rulfo’s two main works have a strong visual quality and easily lend themselves to being translated into film, something attempted with several of his short stories as well as his novel. Rulfo also composed some texts directly for the cinema, such as “El despojo”, filmed in 1960 by Antonio Reynoso, and “La fórmula secreta”, filmed in 1964 by Rubén Gámez. However, although he was a great lover of the cinema and even acted in small parts in some Mexican films, Rulfo was never satisfied with any of the cinematic versions of his works. The cinema, in the end, turned out to be an inappropriate means to represent his intricate fictional worlds. Timeline 1917 Juan Rulfo is born in Sayula, Mexico.  1923 Rulfo’s father is killed.  1927 Death of his mother. Rulfo and his brother are sent to a boarding school in Guadalajara.  1936 Rulfo moves to Mexico City.  1941 Moves back to Guadalajara.  1945 Publishes his first short stories.  1946 Moves back to Mexico City to work for the tire company Goodrich Euzkadi.  1948 Marries Clara Aparicio Rulfo. Starts to travel around Mexico as a salesman and intensifies his activity as a photographer.  1949 For the first time, publishes 11 photographs in the journal *América*.  1953 Publishes the collection of 15 short stories, *El Llano en Llamas.*  1955 Publishes his novel, *Pedro Páramo.*  1957 Is awarded the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize for *Pedro Páramo.*  1970 Receives the National Prize for Literature.  1980 Publication of *El gallo de oro* (*The Golden Rooster*), a collection of some texts for the cinema and a short novel.  1983 Receives the Prince of Asturias Award.  1986 Dies in his home in Mexico City. List of WorksComplete Works *Toda la Obra*. *Edición crítica*. Madrid: ALLCA XX, Paris: UNESCO, Archivos. 1996. Individual Works *El Llano en llamas* (1953)  *Pedro Páramo* (1955)  *El gallo de oro y otros textos para cine* (1980) Filmatizations of Rulfo’s work *Talpa*, Alfredo B. Crevenna, 1955. (Based on *Talpa*)  *El gallo de oro*, Roberto Gavaldón, 1964. (Based on *El gallo de oro, The Golden Cock*)  *Pedro Páramo*, Carlos Velo, 1966.  *¿No oyes ladrar los perros?*, François Reichenbach, 1974. (Based on “No dogs bark”)  *Pedro Páramo: El hombre de La Media Luna*,José Bolaños, 1976.  *Pedro Páramo*, Salvador Sánchez, 1981.  *El imperio de la fortuna*, Arturo Ripstein, 1985. (Based on *The Golden Cock*)  *¡Diles que no me maten!*, Freddy Sisso, 1985 (Based on “Tell them not to kill me!”)  *Los confines*, Mitl Valdez, 1987. (Based on “Talpa”, “Tell them not to kill me!” and an extract from *Pedro Páramo*)  *Un pedazo de noche*, Roberto Rochín, 1995. (Based on “Un pedazo de noche”)  *Paso del Norte*, Roberto Rochín*,* 2002. (Based on “Paso del Norte”) Translations into English Juan Rulfo, *The Burning Plain and other stories*, translated by George D. Schade, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967.  Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, translated by Lysander Kemp, New York: Grove Press, 1959.  Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo,* translated by Margaret Sayers Peden with a foreword by Susan Sontag, New York: Grove Press, 1994. |
| Further reading:  (Roffé)  (Vital)  (Saladrigas) |