

Classical Myth and National Ruin in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*

* *Translations, unless cited otherwise, are my own. I have leant heavily on published translations for style, and on my own for literal and contextual ones.*

Published in 1955, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* is widely considered one of the most significant pieces of Mexican, and, indeed, Latin American literature.¹ The novel spans the time of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, the brutal Mexican Revolution (1910-20), and the Cristero War (1926–29). It is frequently argued that its narrative is reflective of the immense socio-political disillusionment present in Mexico during the period.² The 1917 Constitution's promises of sweeping agrarian reform through the *ejido* system, which granted inhabitants usufruct rights to land, had largely stalled or failed, leaving economic and regional inequalities.³ Meanwhile, the persistence of *caciquismo*, a system of regional bosses with command over patronage resources and the ability to threaten rivals with physical violence, continued to control local populations.⁴

During this period, the nature of classical reception in Latin American literature changed considerably. For centuries, colonial education imposed Eurocentric classical ideas and a Eurocentric perspective of knowledge as symbols of prestige, usually in order to legitimise social superiority.⁵ However, Modernists began to repurpose classical archetypes.⁶ In *Pedro Páramo*, Rulfo adapts classical myths and structures, particularly epic and tragedy, in order to represent a hybridity of indigenous and European ideas.⁷ Amongst other means, this adaptation is seen through the novel's use of magical realism, a genre which encompasses mythical elements into realistic fiction.⁸ Coupled with Rulfo's confidence in freely inverting

¹ Jennifer L. Monti, "Madness, Parricide, and Incest: A Revision of Myths in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*," *Spanish and Portuguese Review*, vol. 3, 2017, <https://spanportreview.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/11-monti-vol-31.pdf>.

² Nasrullah Mambrol, "Analysis of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*," *Literary Theory and Criticism*, August 3, 2023, <https://literariness.org/2023/08/03/analysis-of-juan-rulfos-pedro-paramo/>.

³ Eric P. Perramond, "The Rise, Fall, and Reconfiguration of the Mexican 'Ejido,'" *Geographical Review* 98, no. 3 (2008): 356–71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40377336>.

⁴ Kevin J. Middlebrook, "Caciquismo and Democracy: Mexico and Beyond," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 28, no. 3 (2009): 411–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27734176>.

⁵ Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," 2000, <https://mronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/wanquijano.pdf>.

⁶ Germán Campos Muñoz, "Mythographers," in *The Classics in South America: Five Case Studies* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

⁷ Monti, "Madness, Parricide, and Incest: A Revision of Myths in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*."

⁸ "The Obscured Roots of Magical Realism | Department of English | University of Liverpool," University of Liverpool, n.d., <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/english/community/blog/posts/the-obscured-roots-of-magical-realism/>.

and adjusting classical legacy, this allows him to eschew the classical convention of Mexico's colonisers.

This essay will examine Rulfo's uses of katabasis, fatalistic prophecy, Atrean miasma, the tragic chorus, and the Venus/Aphrodite figure. These are the classical parallels which allow Rulfo to explore the unresolved violence of Mexico's past, and the corruption which continued to affect the nation.

Katabasis

The novel is structured around Juan Preciado's descent or katabasis into the ghost town of Comala at a time following the Mexican Revolution. As Juan travels down the mountain passes of rural Mexico, the landscape undergoes a transformation where the air becomes progressively thin and suffocating. Abundio, the muleteer who guides Juan into Comala, describes Comala in this way: "Aquello está sobre las brasas de la tierra, en la mera boca del Infierno. Con decirle que muchos de los que allí se mueren, al llegar al Infierno regresan por su cobija."⁹ ("That place sits on the burning embers of the earth, at the very mouth of Hell. They say many of those who die there and go to Hell come back to fetch their blankets.")¹⁰ This is reminiscent of Virgil's terrifying Underworld imagery in Aeneid Book 6, with its "flammas... torrentibus"¹¹ ("scorching flames") and "atris faucibus"¹² ("black jaws"). When Abundio disappears, leaving Juan at the edge of the town, Juan notes the absence of life in the town "sin ruidos"¹³ ("devoid of all sound")¹⁴. He is able only to hear "caer mis pisadas sobre las piedras redondas con que estaban empedradas las calles"¹⁵ ("my footsteps as they fell on the rounded stones that paved the streets")¹⁶. This again mimics Aeneid 6, where Aeneas walks through the vacant halls of Dis.¹⁷

This transition from the land of the living to that of the dead is facilitated by Abundio, who fulfils the same role as that of the classical psychopomp. He bears a strong resemblance to

⁹ Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo* (Ediciones Cátedra, 1983), 105.

¹⁰ Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, trans. Douglas J Weatherford (1983; repr., Profile Books, 2023), 3-4.

¹¹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.550.

¹² Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.240-241.

¹³ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 107.

¹⁴ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 5.

¹⁵ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 107.

¹⁶ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 5.

¹⁷ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.268-269.

Charon, who guides the deceased across the rivers of the Underworld. Just as Charon is a cold, indifferent character, Abundio speaks in a monotone manner and delivers cryptic warnings to Juan. This similarity hints at the fatal nature of Juan's quest, foreshadowing that his journey will be a descent toward his death.

Another significant classical feature of Rulfo's is the repeated emphasis on the downward trajectory of the journey. Juan says that they walked "cuesto abajo"¹⁸ ("downhill") and "bajamos cada vez más"¹⁹ ("we descended even farther").²⁰ The road to Comala "sube o baja según se va o se viene. Para el que va, sube; para el que viene, baja"²¹ ("rises or falls according to whether one's coming or going. For the person who's leaving, it rises; for the one who's coming, it falls.")²² This downhill slope is much like Virgil's warning through the Sibyl in Aeneid 6: "facilis descensus Averno...sed revocare gradum...hoc opus, hic labor est"²³ ("The descent into Avernus is easy...but to retrace one's steps...this is work, this is toil.")

In the classical tradition, such forms of katabasis serve as a defining trial for the epic hero: in Book 6 of the Aeneid, Aeneas travels through the Underworld to speak to his deceased father, Anchises, an encounter which reveals his destiny in the future founding of Rome,²⁴ and in Book 11 of Homer's Odyssey, Odysseus travels to the entrance of the Underworld to consult the prophet Tiresias, obtaining the wisdom required to achieve his *nostos*.²⁵ For a living soul in the ancient world, then, katabasis offered a path to enlightenment. In these classical precedents, however, the Underworld is only a liminal space. The hero enters, confronts the past, extracts knowledge vital to their journey, and then, quite crucially, leaves.

Rulfo inverts this trope to show the failure of classical tradition in a damaged post-revolutionary world. Though Juan's descent into Comala initially mimics classical entry to the Underworld, it results in his permanent entrapment. Far from the pleasant agrarian landscape that was promised by state rhetoric, whose idealised *ejidos* were only halfway executed,²⁶ Juan encounters a ghost town. It is made up of the same shades (*sombras/umbrae*)

¹⁸ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 104.

¹⁹ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 105.

²⁰ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 3.

²¹ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 104.

²² Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 2.

²³ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.126-129.

²⁴ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.679-892

²⁵ Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.90-149

²⁶ Perramond, "The Rise, Fall, and Reconfiguration of the Mexican 'Ejido,'" 356.

that are found in the classical depiction of the Underworld. Juan, overwhelmed by the "murmillos"²⁷ ("murmurs") of these shades, dies and becomes one of them. This shatters the classical paradigm of a triumphant return to the world of the living. It is possible to draw from this a political intention of Rulfo's, who, by denying Preciado his *nostos*, demonstrates that it is impossible to construct a 'homecoming' or to reconstruct a nation in this post-revolutionary Mexico, one which remains fractured socially and economically by the violence of war²⁸ and the authoritarianism of the *caciques* (local bosses).²⁹

Prophecy, Miasma, and Fatalism

Juan Preciado's journey is initiated by a promise to his dying mother. The novel opens with a strong sense of duty: "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. Le apreté sus manos en señal de que lo haría."³⁰ ("I came to Comala because I was told my father lived here, a man named Pedro Páramo. That's what my mother told me. And I promised her I'd come see him as soon as she died. I squeezed her hands as a sign I would.")³¹

This deathbed promise binds Juan to an inescapable and ultimately tragic trajectory, as he enters Comala only to discover that his father has already died, and in fact is met with death himself. In his essay entitled *Juan Rulfo, El Tiempo Del Mito*, the influential Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes argues that "Pedro Páramo es en cierto modo una telemaquia, la saga de la búsqueda y reunión con el padre"³² ("*Pedro Páramo* is in a way a telemachy, the saga of search and reunion with the father"). If *Pedro Páramo* can indeed be called a 'telemachy', as Fuentes believes, it is certainly a futile one. Telemachus' travels in the *Odyssey* attempt to preserve the political integrity of the Ithacan polis.³³ On the other hand, Juan arriving to a town of the dead suggests that a reclamation of Mexican political integrity is fundamentally impossible, because the structure of the nation has already been bureaucratised and ossified. Furthermore, comparing Juan's search to that of Telemachus erroneously makes Juan's

²⁷ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 156.

²⁸ Pamela K Starr, "The deep historical roots of Mexico's inequality and poverty," *Polity* (blog), n.d., <https://www.politybooks.com/blog-detail/the-deep-historical-roots-of-mexicos-inequality-and-poverty>.

²⁹ Middlebrook, "Caciquismo and Democracy: Mexico and Beyond."

³⁰ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 103.

³¹ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 1.

³² Carlos Fuentes and Claude Fell, *Toda la obra*, by Juan Rulfo, vol. 17 (Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes), 1992.

³³ Homer, *Odyssey*, Books 1-4.

motives seem benevolent and hopeful, since Telemachus searches for his father with zeal and a nostalgic fondness, inspired by a visit from Athene:

"ὄρνις δ' ὥς ἀνόπαια διέπτατο: τῷ δ' ἐνὶ θυμῷ
θῆκε μένος καὶ θάρσος, ὑπέμνησέν τέ ἑ πατρός
μᾶλλον ἔτ' ἢ τὸ πάροιθεν."³⁴

("[Athene] departed, flying upward like a bird; and in his heart she put strength and courage, and made him think of his father even more than before.")³⁵

However, the forceful mandate of Juan's mother, "exígele lo nuestro"³⁶ ("insist on what's ours")³⁷ and "el olvido en que nos tuvo, mi hijo, cóbraselo caro"³⁸ ("make him pay dearly, son, for the indifference he showed toward us")³⁹ likens Juan more to an Orestes, drawn back to his homeland by a demand for retribution. Through this classical quest of Juan's for vengeance, Rulfo is able to explore the unresolved cyclical violence present in post-revolutionary Mexico. Like Orestes, Juan returns to a land that has been changed and corrupted. Comala is a ghost town inhabited by spectral figures of its past, and Juan soon grows to learn of the atrocities previously committed by his father. It becomes clear that the whole town is morally and physically polluted.

In fact, the atmosphere of the town strikingly mirrors that of the House of Atreus of classical Athenian drama. In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, to take one of many examples, the captive Cassandra at Mycenae says that "φόνον δόμοι πνέουσιν"⁴⁰ ("the household breathes slaughter"), a place whose foundations are historically polluted, beginning with King Tantalus' butchering of his own son. This begets a chain of crimes that stain the household, which Aeschylus suggests corrupts the entirety of the country:

"βωμοὶ δ' αἰστοὶ καὶ θεῶν ἰδρύματα,
καὶ σπέρμα πάσης ἐξαπόλλυται χθονός."⁴¹

³⁴ Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.320-322.

³⁵ Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Augustus T. Murray, 1919, 27.

³⁶ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 103.

³⁷ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 1.

³⁸ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 103.

³⁹ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 1.

⁴⁰ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, line 1309.

⁴¹ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, lines 527-28.

("The shrines of her gods and the high altars, gone! -
and the seed of her wide earth he ground to bits.")⁴²

Rulfo transposes this classical paradigm onto Comala. The physical decay of the town, which has become arid and unbreathing, is the result of Pedro Páramo's hubris and his violent desire for revenge following the death of his father, Lucas Páramo, from an accidental gunshot at a wedding. In return, Pedro massacres all the attendees of the event, takes control of his father's estate (the Media Luna), and marries Dolores Preciado (Juan's mother) to seize her land and erase his family's debts. His accumulated land and wealth provide him with vast control over the local population, particularly as he uses his money to bribe and co-opt revolutionary forces that pass through the region, and his numerous rapes of the women of the town mean that he actually fathers a large number of its residents too.

This evil is inherited, and its primary vector is Miguel Páramo, Pedro's only acknowledged son. Miguel replicates his father's brutality: his life involves unbridled violence, rape, and murder, culminating in his premature death when he is thrown off his horse. When the local priest, Father Rentería, laments Miguel's death, he curses Pedro, saying that he "fue creciendo como una mala yerba"⁴³ ("grew like a weed") and "después estiró los brazos de su maldad con ese hijo que tuvo"⁴⁴ ("then he stretched out the arms of his wickedness towards that son of his"). Much like in the House of Atreus, this chain of depravity seems unstoppable. Miguel's ghostly horse continues to gallop through Comala, a manifestation of the corruption and violence that haunts the town.

It is not surprising to watch this spreading of wickedness or the tragedy unfold. From the very beginning, Rulfo uses the classical concept of *nomen omen*, an omen within the name (popularised by Plautus' *Persa*)⁴⁵, wherein the name of the absent patriarch, Pedro Páramo, serves as a prophecy that foreshadows the tragic outcome of Juan's journey. Pedro, derived from the Greek πέτρος (rock or stone), suggests an unfeeling, cold nature, and Páramo translates directly to a barren wasteland: the father whom Juan seeks is literally a 'stony wasteland'. Pedro's destiny seems to have been sealed at his birth, at least from a linguistic

⁴² Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Robert Fagles (Penguin Classics), 122.

⁴³ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 165.

⁴⁴ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 165.

⁴⁵ Elena Dzukeska, "Nomen est omen," *Systasis*, no. 5, 2019.

perspective: it is impossible for him not to turn what was once a fertile valley into a town of stone and suffering.

Fundamentally, Juan's search for his paternal origin can be seen as a search for the origin of Mexico's trauma. However, the trauma is so deeply embedded in the nation's history that he finds only the devastation wrought by it. This gives way to Rulfo's fatalistic thesis that it is impossible to escape the country's miasma; its inhabitants are trapped in a cycle of suffering. His description of this Atrean miasma acts as a historical critique of the *caciquismo* system that survived the Revolution. Illustrating Pedro's overwhelming power allows Rulfo to argue that the autocratic power structures of Mexico were not just ineffective but harmful. He demonstrates that the tyrant is not able to build a lasting *polis*, for tyrannical power is purely extractive and leaves behind a self-destructive *polis*. Thus Rulfo uses a classical parallel to effectively convey the profundity of the moral depravity that corrupted Mexico.

A Greek Chorus

The narration of *Pedro Páramo* is characterised by a fragmented, polyphonic voice. The text is composed of overlapping, disembodied voices of the souls in Comala's soil and unannounced shifts in perspective. Shortly before his death, Juan notes:

"Ruidos. Voces. Rumores. Canciones lejanas:

*Mi novia medio un pañuelo
con orillas de llorar...*

En falsete. Como si fueran mujeres las que cantaran."⁴⁶

("Sounds. Voices. Whisperings. Singing off in the distance.

*My girl gave me a tissue
With edges made for crying...*

In falsetto. As if it were women who were singing.")⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 144.

⁴⁷ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 44.

These murmurs perform an almost identical role to the chorus of Greek tragedy: they provide narrative context, expose the corruption of Pedro Páramo and the Church, and collectively they narrate Comala's downfall. There is, however, one substantial difference: in classical Greek tragedy, the chorus usually represents the voice of the citizens or the state, or of the moral status quo.⁴⁸ Classical choruses often stand safely at the periphery of the action as to comment on the downfalls of removed figures. Rulfo, however, subverts this convention by composing the chorus of the exploited peasants of Comala, who bore the economic consequences of the failed ejido land reforms. He thus boldly utilises and subverts classical convention to give voice to the voiceless of the Mexican Revolution.

The souls beneath the earth who narrate the story might be compared to the unburied dead of Greco-Roman mythology. Those denied proper funerary rites, such as Elpenor in the *Odyssey* or Palinurus in the *Aeneid*, are condemned to wander the Underworld without being able to cross the Styx to the afterlife.^{49, 50, 51} In Rulfo's Comala, this classical motif is adapted to reflect the failures of the Catholic Church during the Cristero War. For this, Rulfo employs Father Rentería, the corrupt local priest, who pardons the heinous crimes of Pedro Páramo in return for money, but refuses absolution to the impoverished. The dead of Comala are denied the necessary spiritual sacraments and become much like the classical *insepulti*, their souls "vagando por la tierra"⁵² ("wandering the earth").⁵³ Trapped, they are unable to ascend to Heaven or descend to Hell. They possess no agency to alter their condition and are locked in a structural wheel of suffering, which reflects the determinism of the classical (and especially tragic) perspective.⁵⁴

Existing outside of linear time, the dead possess an omniscience about the past. From their graves, they interrupt each other to describe their personal griefs and the "burdens of tradition and collective memory"⁵⁵ Together they reveal the systemic corruption of the town through their recollections. This allows the chorus of voices to act as something of a historical subconscious, as they force the reader to bear the trauma of the suppressed populace. Using

⁴⁸ August Wilhelm Von Schlegel and John Black, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, eBook, 2004, 67.

⁴⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.51-83

⁵⁰ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.365-384

⁵¹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.325-330.

⁵² Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 162.

⁵³ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 65.

⁵⁴ "Ancient Theories of Freedom and Determinism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy/Fall 2025 Edition)," November 19, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2025/entries/freedom-ancient/>.

⁵⁵ Lois Parkinson Zamora, *The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fiction of the Americas* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

this adaptation of the Greek chorus decentralises the narration of the novel. In this way, Rulfo strips the state or the hero of the right to narrate history, providing an authentic account of the violence that seized the country from a subaltern perspective.

Susana San Juan as Venus/Aphrodite

Interestingly, scholar Jennifer Monti argues that Susana San Juan, Pedro Páramo's love interest, embodies the classical figure of Venus/Aphrodite.⁵⁶ For Pedro Páramo, the delicate Susana is the singular vulnerability in his otherwise impenetrable ruthlessness. Susana is an idealised form of love that he spends his entire life attempting to possess. Rulfo depicts her as ethereal and other-worldly: "¿Pero cuál era el mundo de Susana San Juan? Ésa fue una de las cosas que Pedro Páramo nunca llegó a saber."⁵⁷ ("But to what world did Susana San Juan belong? That was one thing that Pedro Páramo was never able to figure out.")⁵⁸

Susana is a character linked to eroticism and, like Venus/Aphrodite across the ancient arts, is repeatedly described according to her nudity.⁵⁹ On the night before her death, for she experiences mental visions that prove fatal, Susana throws off her blankets in bed so that "su cuerpo se quedó desnudo, refrescado por el viento de la madrugada"⁶⁰ ("her body lay naked, cooled by the morning breeze").⁶¹ Some hours later, the priest Padre Rentería finds her "desnuda y dormida"⁶² ("naked and asleep"). As well as this, Pedro watches over her, observing "la desnudez de su cuerpo"⁶³ ("the nakedness of her body"), then moves closer to her and he "cubrió el cuerpo desnudo"⁶⁴ ("covered her naked body"). Monti also compares the description of Susana's hands "prendidas a su vientre como una concha protectora"⁶⁵ ("pressed against her belly like a protective shell") as she lies in bed to the depiction of Aphrodite in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*,⁶⁶ a fascinatingly similar image.

⁵⁶ Monti, "Madness, Parricide, and Incest: A Revision of Myths in Juan Rulfo's Pedro Páramo."

⁵⁷ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 189.

⁵⁸ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 94.

⁵⁹ Monti, "Madness, Parricide, and Incest: A Revision of Myths in Juan Rulfo's Pedro Páramo."

⁶⁰ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 195.

⁶¹ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 100.

⁶² Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 195.

⁶³ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 203.

⁶⁴ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 203.

⁶⁵ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 202.

⁶⁶ Monti, "Madness, Parricide, and Incest: A Revision of Myths in Juan Rulfo's Pedro Páramo."

Monti furthermore explores the mythological imagery with which Susana is associated, especially that of the sea and ocean foam. Consider Hesiod's description of Aphrodite's birth from the severed genitals of her father Uranus:

"μήδεα δ' ὥς τὸ πρῶτον ἀποτμήξας ἀδάμαντι
κάββαλ' ἀπ' ἡπείροιο πολυκλύστῳ ἐνὶ πόντῳ,
ὥς φέρετ' ἄμ' πέλαγος πουλὺν χρόνον, ἀμφὶ δὲ λευκὸς
ἄφρὸς ἀπ' ἀθανάτου χροὸς ὥρνυτο· τῷ δ' ἐνὶ κούρῃ
ἐθρέφθη."⁶⁷

("But the genitals, as after first severing them with the steel, he had cast them into the heaving sea from the continent, so kept drifting long time up and down the deep, and all around kept rising a white foam from the immortal flesh; and in it a maiden was nourished.")⁶⁸

It is clear that the imagery associated with the character of Susana San Juan finds echoes in that associated with Aphrodite, who was known as the 'foam-sprung goddess'. Susana recalls her memories of the ocean, persistently mentioning "foam": "el mar allí enfrente, lejano, dejando apenas restos de espuma en mis pies al subir de su marea"⁶⁹ ("the sea before me, distant, the rising tide leaving traces of foam on my feet")⁷⁰, "el mar... se desprendía de su espuma y se iba, limpio, con su agua verde, en ondas calladas"⁷¹ ("the sea... shed its foam and receded, clear, with its green water, in hushed waves"). And, as she is dying, she says "trago saliva espumosa"⁷² ("I swallow foaming saliva")⁷³. Monti argues that this is a detail that demonstrates the "strong linkage between the Greek myth and the character of Susana San Juan".⁷⁴

The character of Susana stands as one of the sole elements of beauty in the impoverished town of Comala. There are two potential conclusions that might be drawn from Rulfo's presentation of her goddess-like beauty and her eventual death: either that Rulfo wishes to demonstrate that beauty and harmony are unattainable in a land of tyranny, or that beauty and

⁶⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 188-192.

⁶⁸ Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Gregory Nagy, lines 188-192.

⁶⁹ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 189.

⁷⁰ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 95.

⁷¹ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 189.

⁷² Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 206.

⁷³ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 113.

⁷⁴ Monti, "Madness, Parricide, and Incest: A Revision of Myths in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*."

harmony are elusive, unconquerable forces, leaving a hope for the Mexico of the future. This ambiguity reveals the strength of Rulfo's classical imagery, which refuses a single resolution, thus allowing darkness and hope to co-exist.

Support for the first argument lies in the fact that the only way Susana escapes Pedro's domineering grasp is through death. She is freed from the rot that has encompassed the Media Luna, but only by retreating into memories and reminiscing the time she spent with her late love, Florencio. Her descent into delirium and her subsequent death demonstrate the incompatibility of pure beauty with the evil present in Comala. When she dies, the local church bells ring out, but the townspeople mistake the tolling for a celebration and descend into a profane fair of drinking and dancing. Disgusted by their indifference to his grief, Pedro crosses his arms and vows to starve the town to death: "Me cruzaré de brazos y Comala se morirá de hambre."⁷⁵ ("I will cross my arms and Comala will die of hunger.")⁷⁶ In this reading, Susana's death is the final blow to any remaining hope of renewal for the citizens of Mexico. Perhaps Rulfo suggests that under the weight of *caciquismo*, beauty cannot survive.

On the other hand, Susana's beauty is what ultimately dismantles Pedro's authoritative control and leads to his demise. Even as her mind decays, her internal monologues are filled with sensuous, liberating memories of the sea and her past lover. She ignores Pedro and refuses to submit to the emotional validation that he seeks, perhaps demonstrating that beauty and creativity are indestructible. Her death breaks Pedro entirely: he spends the rest of his life sitting in a chair outside the Media Luna and watching Comala fall into ruin. Rulfo writes that Pedro grew "acostumbrado a ver morir cada día alguno de sus pedazos"⁷⁷ ("accustomed to seeing a new part of his body die with each passing day")⁷⁸, and, in his final moments, he thinks of Susana, before he "dio un golpe seco contra la tierra y se fue desmoronando como si fuera un montón de piedras"⁷⁹ ("hit the ground with a hollow thud, crumbling as if he were a pile of rocks").⁸⁰ Although Pedro could conquer Comala materially, he is powerless against

⁷⁵ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 209.

⁷⁶ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 116.

⁷⁷ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 215.

⁷⁸ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 122.

⁷⁹ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1983, 216.

⁸⁰ Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 2023, 123.

an immortal Aphrodite-like force of beauty. In his collapse lies the possibility of a beautiful Mexico being reborn from the ruins of tyranny.

* * *

Rulfo's integration of classical structures thus serves many purposes. Firstly, it allows him to criticise Mexico's political trajectory following the Revolution. Through Juan's altered version of a classical katabasis, and the presentation of the Atrean miasma that haunts Comala which makes Juan's fate inescapable, Rulfo clearly depicts the detrimental nature of *caciquismo* as a power structure persistent in Mexico. Next, Rulfo's implementation of narrators akin to a Greek tragic chorus allows the working class, denied their owed land, to regain at least some agency through their collective narration of Comala's history. This strips the nation of its state-sponsored illusions of progress. More positively, Rulfo's use of Susana as a modern Aphrodite who causes Pedro Páramo's downfall suggests that Mexico can recover some of its indestructible beauty. And, finally, the manipulation of classical ideas allows Rulfo to dismantle the colonial boundary between Western and Latin American narrative. He demonstrates that the ruined Mexican town of Comala has the same enduring literary value as Troy or Mycenae. So, exploring the classical reception of *Pedro Páramo* suggests this: that by repurposing classical ideas, Rulfo is able to vividly depict the suffering of his people, thereby ensuring that the tragedies of Mexico's forgotten dead will echo forever alongside some of the greatest stories of the classical world.

Word count: 3831

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