

Madness, Insanity and Despair in Quiroga

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ABSTRACT

This paper evidences the intrinsic relationship between five stories of Quiroga's collection *Cuentos* (Quiroga, 2017) and the reflection of madness, insanity and despair related to his life. The humanity and depth of his characters and his bond with nature are also briefly discussed, along with the emotional whirlwind of its figures. The tragic ending described in *El almohadón de plumas* and the derangement in *La gallina degollada* make it possible to observe the clear influence of the writer's life in his work and the constant presence of feelings portrayed in a motley way. The descriptions and environments displayed by the author, precise and naive at all times, allow the reader to create fairly clear and constant depictions of the scenarios that take place in the text. Furthermore, having experienced such profound feelings firsthand allows the author to express tragedy in his texts in such a way that it resonates with the readers. All of the abovementioned factors, among many others, make Horacio Quiroga one of the Spanish language greatest writers.

Keywords: insanity, despair, Quiroga, short story, Latin America.

Horacio Quiroga is one of the most renowned and read authors in Latin America. Born in Uruguay in 1878, he ended up taking his own life away by drinking a glass of cyanide. One would question what his motive was in his last letter to his friend Martínez Estrada, in 1937, he states: "I am going through a severe depression resulting from a decline in my poor state of health [...] In bed again, sick of reading and with a very cloudy horizon [...]"¹ (Estrada, 1995, p. 181). The famous writer confessed to his colleague Vicente Batistessa his feelings: he would anticipate cancer, thus creating a final chapter to his pain and despair resulting from his current sufferings and the ones to come.

It is worth noting Quiroga's particular and tortuous life, always surrounded by death and solitude, which finally led him to depression and, as mentioned already, to despair. The latter is defined by Søren Kierkegaard as "(...) the complete loss of hope, even that of dying." (Kierkegaard, 1984, p. 8), and has a strong influence over Quiroga's collection *Cuentos* [Short Stories] (Quiroga, 2017). Such a collection is a compilation of 24 stories, published in 1917, which portrays a clear reflection of the author's life experiences, his deepest emotions and the way in which he uses them as a guiding thread and common ground. For the purpose of analyzing these statements, let us take five of these stories as an example:

¹ Translator's Note: All the translations of citations by Susana I. Sevilla Beltrán, unless otherwise noted.

EL ALMOHADÓN DE PLUMAS [THE FEATHER PILLOW]

A short tale narrating the story of Alicia, a newly-wedded woman who hardly receives signs of affection from her husband, Jordán. The young woman becomes sick with a flu that insidiously drags her day after day until, one morning, she wakes up in a faint. Her condition worsens, as she starts experiencing hallucinations where she is following the call of death. Since the doctors are unable to find a diagnosis of her illness, she finally succumbs to the disease. The cause of death results to be a stealthy bird parasite inside the pillow over which she lied, in pain. A monster which “in five days with their nights had already drained Alicia” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 6).

When the doctors let her husband know “[...] ‘it is an inexplicable case... there is little we can do...’” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 5), it is possible that, for a short moment, he looks back and even reflects on his conduct towards his wife. He remembers his deep love for Alicia, aware that he will possibly not be able to demonstrate it ever again, and he reacts angrily: “‘That’s all I needed to hear!’ -Jordán groaned, drumming his fingers sharply on the table.” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 5).

Let us bear in mind that throughout Quiroga’s life, death was always by his side and was a recurring topic in his stories. Moreover, death is the only thing we, as human beings, cannot escape. Notwithstanding our race, age, beliefs, gender, social or economic status, we will all converge in it: [About Quiroga] His father, [...] died when a hunting rifle went off on him. Years later, his stepfather, who was suffering from a painful and incurable disease, committed suicide. Later, [...] when a shotgun he was carrying accidentally went off, he killed one of his most intimate friends at the time [...]. During his youth, two of his siblings died. Afterwards, [...] his first wife committed suicide, act which tragically put an end to her life but not to the misfortune that appeared to pursue Quiroga even beyond death. Two years after, Quiroga pushed his daughter Eglé towards suicide. (Lazo, 2017, pp. IX-X).

Apart from the aforementioned instant of rage experienced by Jordán, an instant of madness is also presented in Alicia’s case. Let us remember she suffered from “[...] hallucinations, vague images, at first floating in the air, then descending to floor level” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 4).

In her case, it is observed that: “One night, she suddenly stared at one single spot. After a while, she opened her mouth to scream, her nostrils and lips beaded with sweat. ‘Jordán! Jordán!’ she shrieked, rigid with fright, her eyes still fixed on the carpet.” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 4).

It is clearly visible how the young woman is baffled over her view of reality, as “amongst her most persistent hallucinations, there was an anthropoid on the carpet, poised on its fingers, staring at her” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 4). The assembly of all these thoughts result in the foregoing turbulent episode, which ends thanks to Jordán’s presence, soothing Alicia.

It might be the case that Quiroga, having lived an exceedingly mournful life as though it were a “[...] tragic long dream” (Monterroso, 1983, p. 2), experienced emotionally overwhelming times such as those previously mentioned by himself. All of this contributed to build his nature as: A man of complex connivance, sullen, intractable, heartrendingly aggressive for those who could not penetrate his innermost interiority; but, at the same time, capable and even in need of keenly feeling the warm emotions of friendship and love [...]. (Lazo, 2017, p. IX).

Moving forward on this analysis, the next story is:

LA INSOLACIÓN [SUNSTROKE]

The second short story in this collection recounts the “[...] fantastic story of Death, seen and foreseen by the dogs of the main character, who is not aware that he is about to die” (Crow, 1939, p. 37). The main character, Mister Jones (the Master), is a drunk boss who owns five fox-terriers: Old (a puppy), Milk (its father), Prince, Dick and Isondú. On a hot day, a silhouette appears before them, recognized by the youngest as their master. The rest of the dogs, however, make him aware that it is Death and start barking. Afterwards, the silhouette the puppy thought was his master vanishes, and Old’s friends tell him about their experiences: “[...] ‘when something is about to die, it [Death] lets itself be seen before’” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 9).

The next day, Death appears again, taking with her the horse of a *peón*²² who had been unsuccessfully looking for a screw. The dogs assume Death had settled for the hack. Nonetheless, when the Master himself goes to get the missing screw, the dogs, trusting everything is fine, accompany him and once more see Death on their way back. Finally, howling, they observe the encounter between Death and Mister Jones, who collapses and dies.

This short story shows, again, an overwhelming moment, in this case experienced by the animals. When the pack notices the presence of Death, they become rattled: “‘Death! Death!’-he howled [Old]. The rest of the pack had also seen it and were barking, with their hair standing on end. [...] They tucked their tails and ran sideways, howling” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 13).

Furthermore, it is also evidenced that Mister Jones is enraged because of the ineptitude of his *peón*, when he is not able to bring the screw, he had requested. In the text, such moment of rage is not explicitly narrated by Quiroga, but can be deduced in the following extract: “He blamed him with all rational logic, to which he [the *peón*] responded with evasive reasoning. [...] Mister Jones sent the *peón* back to the farm, the whip still on hand, to throw it at him shall he continue to hear his Jesuitical apologies” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 11).

Several paragraphs ahead, the following phrase supporting the previous statement can be read: “He [Mister Jones] withstood the sun like a *peón* and the stroll was a marvelous remedy against his bad mood” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 11).

In the author's work, characters and scenarios like the aforementioned are frequent, which come as a consequence of his “[...] first somber shocks and inclinations that left permanent marks in his mind and personality” (Crow, 1939, p. 37): “[...] such senseless deaths [in Quiroga’s life] will manifest in most of his work, where horror prevails, where strange, alcoholic, crazy or, what is worse, fully sane beings may appear alive at any moment, at the turn of every page. (Monterroso, 1983, p. 4).

All of the aforesaid features demonstrate Quiroga’s use of despair as a leitmotif for his storytelling, as is the case of the following text:

LA GALLINA DEGOLLADA [THE DECAPITATED CHICKEN]

A short story that, from a personal perspective, stands out from the other stories that are part of this analysis. It portrays well crafted characters with a wide range of emotions and

²² a field worker

psychological acumen which navigate through different feelings. They explore various nuances, from bursts of happiness to shattered souls, from unconditional love to deep grief and despair, all of which conform to a wonderful and, in the end, somber story, one of the common traits of the author.

This story is about the life of the Mazzini-Ferraz marriage and their “four idiot sons [...]” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 14). After three months of marriage, Mazzini and Berta decided to lead “[...] their tight-knit husband and wife love [...] toward a more vital future: a child” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 14). Their happiness only lasted for a few months, after which “[...] one night he [the child] shook with terrible convulsions and the next morning he could no longer recognize his parents” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 15). The child had lost “[...] his intelligence, soul and even his instinct [...]”; he remained a profound dribbling idiot, limp, forever dead on his mother's knees” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 15). The couple was absolutely devastated until, some months after, Berta gave birth again, bringing new life to the couple's dead hopes. Nonetheless, their child suffered from the same convulsions as their firstborn, becoming an idiot. Finally, “twins were born and bit by bit the process of the two older sons repeated itself.” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 16). The arguments between the couple began, blaming each other for their sons' state. Lastly, a girl was born: Bertita. Mazzini and Berta's unconditional love returned and their full focus went to their daughter, leaving behind the four idiots, who were neglected and disregarded. The girl turned four years old and the day after, her parents asked the maid servant to kill a chicken for lunchtime. The four sons watched stupefied while the maid bled the animal, until they were abruptly thrown out from the kitchen. Soon after, the couple went out with Bertita and, when her mother was greeting the neighbors across the street, the girl escaped quickly into the house. Her four brothers were concernedly staring at the bricks where the sun began to hide, as usual. It occurred to the girl to climb the wall to be able to see what was going on and, when she did, the four idiots seized her and decapitated her in the kitchen, just like the maid had done with the chicken in the morning. Their parents, thinking they had heard their daughter's voice, farewelled the neighbors and entered the house, where they discovered the big tragedy.

In this short story, one of the tensest episodes becomes evident in one of the several arguments between Mazzini y Berta: [...] ‘Yes, I heard you say something! Look, I don't know what you said but I swear I'd rather do anything before having a father like the one you had!’ [...] ‘Finally!’—he murmured between clenched teeth. ‘You finally said what you wanted to say, you snake!’ [...] (Quiroga, 2017, p. 18)

This situation goes on, “[...] becoming increasingly violent, until a wail from Bertita sealed their mouths forever” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 18). Afterwards, the reconciliation between the parents takes place, putting an end to the moment of despair of both characters.

Alternatively, the next passage makes it evident that Quiroga's life was not only composed of darkness and tragedy, being highly possible that he experienced the wonders of love and joy: [About the first son of the marriage] What could be the greatest joy for two lovers if not such honest devotion of their affection, already liberated from the vile selfishness depicted by a mutual, aimless love and, what is even worse for love itself, without conceivable hopes of being renewed? (Quiroga, 2017, p. 14).

As already seen in the previous analyses, “[...] his stories are linked by a common thread-most of them get a share of misfortune or ungratefulness.” But also: All of them encompass a deep sense of humanity, a grandeur, a virile love for things, for animals, for mankind, a love for life whose roots should probably be searched for in the turmoil of shots and cyanide, in those deaths Quiroga greeted on a daily basis. (Monterroso, 1983, p. 4).

In this story which, as mentioned already, includes a hurricane of emotions, another insanity moment is to be highlighted-Mazzini’s reaction when finding his daughter lifeless, torn apart, laying on a river of blood.

‘Bertita!’- Nobody answered. ‘Bertita!’- he raised even more his already upset voice. And the silence was so deathly for his forever terrified heart that his back froze with a terrible premonition. ‘My daughter! My daughter!’- he ran in despair to the back of the house but, while going through the kitchen, he saw a river of blood on the floor. He violently opened the door, which was ajar, and cried out in horror. (Quiroga, 2017, p. 20)

An extraordinary example of the amount of love and the importance that a daughter bears for her father and his rage and fright when learning she no longer belongs to this earthly world. These facts will certainly once more lead him to despair while the tragic loss of his daughter unchains strong delusional moments. Quiroga’s descriptions are stunningly accurate, allowing the reader to fully submerge in the characters’ emotions.

Let us now turn to the next-to-last story to be studied from this collection:

A LA DERIVA [ADRIFT]

This short story recounts a man’s struggle for survival when being bitten by a jararacussu. After being poisoned by the snake, he strolled to his ranch experiencing a burning thirst, and asked his wife to bring him *caña*³. He descended to the coast to get into his canoe, aiming towards Tacurú-Pacú, where he could receive medical attention. With “dismal energies, he was able to reach the middle of the river, where his numb hands dropped the paddle into the canoe [...]” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 22). The man started vomiting blood and his condition did not improve: his “entire leg, up to the middle of his thigh, was a distorted and stiff block, tearing his clothes apart” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 22). The pain was constant and the appalling dryness of his throat remained. When he finally was able to dock his canoe, he “staggered uphill through the trail” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 22), where he called out for his *Compadre* Alves, with whom he was in bad terms, asking for help. Having silence for an answer, he went back to his canoe, where his journey continued. Suddenly, when the sun was down, the man began to feel better: “His leg was barely in pain, his thirst was decreasing and his chest, already free from oppression, was opening with every slow inhalation” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 23). Then, the man began to have a “somnolence full of memories” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 23), and, finally, he stopped breathing.

Even when not explicitly mentioned by Quiroga, it is possible to assume the distress and anxiety experienced by the man when learning his life was vanishing with every passing second without being able to obtain medical assistance, nor rush to his destination.

³ T. N. In Latin America, the word *caña* translates to cane sugar. In this context, *caña* stands for a distilled spirit made from sugar cane juice.

Let us also remember that Quiroga was deeply connected and had a strong relationship with nature, also frequently portrayed in his stories. The writer was accepted as “photographer in the research expedition [...] sent to the region of the Ancient Jesuit Missions in the North of Argentina, in 1903” (Lazo, 2017, pp. X-XI). From that point on and as a result of being “in contact with such Nature, he enjoys the morbid fascination of danger and, by experiencing it, he discovers and cultivates the great topic of his literary work” (Lazo, 2017, p. XI).

[About Quiroga] This lean, ungraceful and obstinate man met mocking and praise, wealth and poverty, snakes, small and immense rivers, irrepressible ants and sweet poison, and he also met many men, either stuck in the city or in the jungle. But, most of all, he saw tragedy from up close. (Monterroso, 1983, p. 2).

By having all these experiences, the author is capable of faultlessly describing the merciless nature, with its most intrinsic peculiarities and, when capturing them in his work, he achieves the creation of an immersive environment that impacts on his characters’ mettle. That is the case of this short-story, where Quiroga sets forth the landscape through which our protagonist navigates during his journey:

The Parana flows through the bottom of an immense canyon whose walls, a hundred meters high, enclose the river in a lugubrious way. From the riverbank, bordered with black piles of basalt, the equally black forest rises. The endless somber wall encloses the front, the sides, and the back of the river that rushes into constant bubbles of muddy water. The landscape is fierce and deathly silent. At dusk, however, its calm and somber beauty develops a unique majesty. (Quiroga, 2017, pp. 22-23)

All of the above contributes to the mystery, strain, helplessness and insanity the writer puts before the reader. It seamlessly combines with the feelings of the main character and, finally, suggests the perfect opportunity for the end of his travels.

Similarly, it is time for this article’s journey to come to an end, with the last short-story to be analyzed:

EL ALAMBRE DE PÚAS [BARBED WIRE]

This story is, once more, recounted by animals: two horses. It describes the adventures of a *malacara*⁴ horse and his partner, a chestnut, when they run away from the paddock. The first one had discovered a way out from his captivity. The second one kept searching for the same, to no avail, while listening to the happy neighing of the fugitive who came every now and then to drink water. This scenario kept taking place “until that morning, when the old chestnut very easily found the trail—it was just in front of the *chilca*⁵ thicket, [...] he saw an ill-defined trail that led him in a perfect oblique line to the hill” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 24). Finally, the two buddies rejoined and spent their time leaving the tobacco plants “[...] bare of leaves up to the height where a horse’s neck could reach” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 25). They kept on walking until they came across a wire fence, over which they observed a high slash-and-burn meadow, a banana plantation and a new cultivated field. They followed the wire fence until they reached a tree that had fallen over

⁴ T.N. In horse-breeding contexts, *malacara* refers to horses which have a blaze.

⁵ *Chilca* or *chirca*, an endemic Southamerican plant species of the *Asteraceae* family.

the wires. They crossed it to inspect the new plantation upclose— weeds. They resumed their journey, happy to be free “until they turned on the edge of the hill and saw, beside the road, an unusual green area” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 26). It was grass, so the horses came close to the wire fence where they saw several cows at a distance. They “[...] were standing still, looking at the green paradise out of reach” (Quiroga, 2017). The horses asked them why they were not entering the area. The cows responded it was impossible for them... however, Barigüi the bull was able to do so. They told them he could walk across anything, including wire, either barbed or not. All of a sudden, the bull appeared before them. They all stepped aside and observed how the bull tried several times, without success, to move a wooden bar aside. However, some moments later, he achieved his task and the farmer came out with a stick, furious, trying to chase after the animal. The bull had entirely stumped on the farmer’s oats, who, angrily, went to pay a visit to the bull’s owner: Don Zaninski. The farmer threatened him by saying he would place a new barbed wire through which the bull would not be able to go through, at least not without serious harm. Next morning, the horses once more escaped from the paddock and went to see the new wire fence. They debated about whether Barigüi would be able to go through, the cows asserting he would. The bull arrived and got prepared to charge at the new obstacle that had been placed and, when he went through it “[...] his back and gut, deeply wounded from the chest to the hind-quarters, poured rivers of blood” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 33). The beast, after a moment, fell nearly lifeless to the grass, swamping it in red wine. When the owner came looking for his bull, he found it lying on the ground, barely alive, and finally decided to butcher him.

In this story, as in most of those selected for this article’s purpose, an episode of immense exasperation is observed when the farmer finds out that the bull had once more stumped on his oat’s crops, without his owner preventing his actions: “This is the last time, Don Zaninski, that I come before you to speak about your bull! He just ran over my oat’s crops. This cannot continue to happen!” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 29).

The man’s irritation is more than evident when learning his hard work had been ruined on the beast’s account. However, probably most of his rage results from Don Zaninski’s attitude when hearing what his animal had done: “Oh, bad bull! Me cannot! Me tie, bull escapes! Cow’s fault! Bull follows cow! [...] Bull goes through path! No limit! [...] Goes through everything! No barbed wire, no other wire stops bull! Bull goes through it all!” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 29).

The negligence of the man when it comes to his bull’s doing is also flagrant and, as Quiroga himself mentions, “Similar to the circumstances above, it is blatant that the evil Polish [Don Zaninski], laughing again at the animal’s pranks, pitied, if possible, his neighbor who was going to build a wire fence his bull would not be able to cross.” (Quiroga, 2017, p. 29).

Even in the stories starring animals, madness and despair reappears since, as noted throughout the article, Quiroga cannot detach from these subjects due to his attraction and proximity to them.

[About Quiroga’s suicide] It was the desperate act to be expected from a lugubrious, sensitive and sullen spirit, inevitably led by his life circumstances, his own sensitivity, and his immense unfulfilled love either to madness or to an insane disillusionment. These features gave him the imperious feeling of having to get rid of the chains of existence aiming to search for an eternal love in the afterlife. (Crow, 1939, pp. 44-45)

CONCLUSION

Bearing in mind all of the above, I consider that the common thread of madness and despair tying together all the stories of this review and most of the work and life of the writer become visible in a purer way. Moreover, after the review, I deem it possible to appreciate with a higher level of detail and esteem both the memoirs the author recounts in his short stories and the small details which are found in them, which manifest Quiroga's magnificence, not only as a storyteller, but as a writer. What is more, it is worth mentioning that, as the Uruguayan gained emotional maturity, his stories, intrinsically linked by madness, insanity and despair, equally portrayed such a process.

This author, always aggravated by tragedy and death, since he was an adolescent and until he committed suicide, forever materialized his feelings and thoughts in his work which, being brilliant and touching, grants the certainty it will continue to be read, studied, and appreciated by the generations to come.

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