

Twentieth-Century  
Literary Criticism

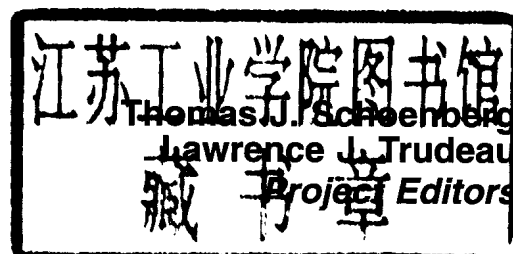
TCLC 217



Volume 217

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,  
from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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# Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

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# *The Underdogs*

Mariano Azuela

The following entry presents criticism of Azuela's novel *Los de abajo* (1916; *The Underdogs*). For discussion of Azuela's complete career, see *TCLC*, Volumes 3 and 145.

## INTRODUCTION

*The Underdogs*, by Mexican author Mariano Azuela, is regarded by many critics as the quintessential novel of the Mexican Revolution, as well as Azuela's greatest work of fiction. *The Underdogs* was based on the author's own experiences of the uprising while serving as physician in Pancho Villa's revolutionary forces. Often referred to as the founding "novel of the masses," *The Underdogs* features a protagonist from the rural lower class and successfully recreates the culture and popular speech of the Mexican peasant population, thereby expanding the range of Mexican literature. In addition to exploring the experiences of the popular classes, Azuela treats various themes related to the Revolution, including violence, greed, corruption, and freedom. The novel went largely unnoticed for ten years after its initial publication but was rediscovered in the 1920s. Since that time *The Underdogs* has become one of the most read and discussed novels of the Mexican literary canon, credited for reinventing the genre and inspiring subsequent generations of writers in that country. In her foreword to the 1962 English translation of the novel, Harriet de Onís declared that "in spite of the abundance of his subsequent writings, Azuela's fame rests on *The Underdogs*. It is not only that in it he gives us his vivid firsthand impressions of the Revolution long before any other writer had employed the theme, transmitting them with the intensity of the moment in which he experienced them, but also that he so quickly sensed the problems inherent in its triumph. The strength of the work lies in its terseness and rapidity; the characters live with indomitable vitality, and throughout the book one feels the pulsating breath of beings who are heroes, or at any rate can behave heroically, without being aware of it."

## PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

*The Underdogs* takes place in 1913, after Victoriano Huerta's rise to power in Mexico, and traces the life and career of Demetrio Macías, a poor young farmer

from Juchipila, Zacatecas. After Demetrio incites the hostility of Don Mónico, a cacique, or local tribal leader, his hut is burned by federal forces, and he and his family are forced to flee. He leads his wife and child to safety and then hides in the mountains along with over twenty other men, who are bound by their common hatred of Huerta's soldiers, the Federals.

Under Demetrio's leadership, the men ambush a group of Federals in Juchipila Canyon and nearly annihilate them. Demetrio is wounded in the fight, but his men carry him to safety. The rebels also take a prisoner from the battle, Luis Cervantes, a student of medicine who claims to have deserted the Federals. After healing Demetrio's battle wound, Cervantes convinces the revolutionaries that he sympathizes with their cause. He relates to Demetrio and the other men that the country's problems extend beyond their local concerns, convincing them to move north and join General Nátera's army. Demetrio joins Nátera in Fresnillo and is honored with the rank of Colonel. Along with Pancho Villa, he participates in the siege and capture of the city of Zacatecas, which is ultimately destroyed. Demetrio eventually becomes a general and people flock to join his ranks. He and his men set out in the direction of Juchipila, murdering and pillaging as they travel.

One of the tertiary characters of the novel, Camilla, is a girl of the peasant class who falls in love with Cervantes but is forced to become Demetrio's lover. She is eventually murdered by La Pintada, a jealous prostitute, who is in love with Demetrio. In the town of Moyahua, Demetrio burns down the house of his old rival, Don Mónico. As Demetrio's men become increasingly greedy and corrupt, the revolutionists split into two opposing factions: one group favors Villa and the other follows Venustiano Carranza, a rival leader of the Revolution.

Following a year-long break in the story, Demetrio and his men have returned to Juchipila. Demetrio receives a letter from Cervantes, in which it is revealed that he is practicing medicine in Texas. While marching through the region, Demetrio learns that Pancho Villa, his leader, has been defeated. They also discover that Juchipila has been robbed and burned. Demetrio reunites briefly with his wife, who asks him to stay at home and give up his life as a revolutionary. He soon leaves home again,

however, in pursuit of a band of *Carrancistas*, or followers of Venustiano Carranza. In the Juchipila Canyon, where he first demonstrated his power against the Federals two years before, Demetrio is trapped, defeated, and killed.

## MAJOR THEMES

One of the primary themes of *The Underdogs* is the corrupting influence of power. At the beginning of the novel Demetrio's concerns are relegated to the confines of his local environment. After Don Mónico and Demetrio clash at a bar, Don Mónico wrongfully accuses Demetrio of causing trouble and turns him into the Federals. Demetrio, forced out of his home, then fights against the Federals and, ultimately, succeeds against them. He and his men win the battle because they have intimate knowledge of the territory, but also, presumably, because they have a legitimate reason for going to war. Gradually, as Demetrio assumes more and more power, however, he loses touch with the concerns that prompted his initial revolutionary impulse.

While Demetrio more or less remains an admirable character throughout Azuela's novel, his men become greedier and more corrupt as the narrative progresses. As Don Mónico had previously pillaged and burned their lands, they in turn ravage territory and towns as they travel through the country. This corruption permeates all of the revolutionary forces, and eventually they become divided and war against each other. In the novel's final ironic turn, Demetrio's forces are defeated and killed in the same canyon where the rebel leader had first succeeded. Some critics maintain that this defeat underscores the moral demise of Demetrio and his men—the fact that they have strayed from their initial ideals and are therefore just as corrupt as the forces they fight against.

Luis Cervantes is often viewed as a particularly corrupting force in the novel. Depicted as an opportunist who aligns himself with the strongest side, he is the first to convince Demetrio to extend his revolutionary fight beyond his local village. While Demetrio and others fight, Cervantes keeps a safe distance from every battle, ensuring his own survival. Cervantes is also the one who forces Camilla and Demetrio together, which ultimately leads to Camilla's murder. At the end of the novel Cervantes's letter to Demetrio reveals that he is safely removed from the conflict, in Texas, while Demetrio and his forces face death in battle. Self-interest, therefore, guides his actions throughout the novel.

Azuela's view of the Mexican Revolution in *The Underdogs* is also considered an important theme for many scholars. The novel is traditionally thought to portray a pessimistic attitude toward the Revolution. According

to this interpretation, Azuela reveals the futility of the internal struggle in Mexico through the meteoric rise and fall of Demetrio's career as a rebel leader. The Revolution, which had originally promoted social justice, culminates in the corruption of the peasant class and the proliferation of violence.

For some critics Azuela's pessimistic view is also conveyed through the demise of several key figures, in addition to Demetrio. Camilla, a kind and generous peasant woman, is killed, while the conniving La Pintada survives, even after committing murder. Cervantes evades death in battle, while Alberto Solís dies a pointless death. Of Demetrio's men, Solís alone is an idealist and intellectual, who once clung to the loftier aims of the Revolution. He quickly becomes disillusioned, however, after witnessing the corruption and greed that permeates the various factions, and he begins to feel betrayed. During one of the rebels' drunken revelries, which he had railed against in the past, Solís is killed by a stray bullet fired into the air.

The futility of the Revolution is further reinforced, according to some critics, by the novel's formal structure—specifically its circular plot, which begins and ends in Juchipila Canyon and thus affirms that nothing changes. Indeed, some commentators have interpreted *The Underdogs* as a commentary on the dehumanizing effect of war and revolution. For these scholars, individuals of the struggling peasant class, in particular, have no real freedom and are helpless against the overwhelming social forces to which they are exposed. Likewise, the fates of characters such as Demetrio, Camilla, and Solís are preordained; they are destined to succumb to the corruption and violence of war. Several images in the novel confirm this reading. For instance, the image of a leaf blowing helplessly in the wind occurs at several points in the narrative. Additionally, when Demetrio briefly returns to his wife at the end of the novel, she asks him why he continues to fight. In response, he compares himself to a rock falling to the bottom of a ravine, incapable of stopping its fall.

Some commentators reject this determinist interpretation, however, and argue that *The Underdogs* depicts the Revolution as a moral failure. Therefore, the characters, rather than following a predestined path, have freedom and make choices, which affect the outcome of their lives. D. Bradley has maintained that through the experiences of Demetrio and his comrades, Azuela shows that “at the level of personal identity, the individual can redeem the situation, however desperate, by steadfastness of purpose and faithful compliance with obligations contracted and in so doing, like existential heroes *avant la lettre*, give meaning to the absurdity of the Revolutionary treadmill.”

As indicated in the title of the novel, the plight of the peasant class is another important theme in *The Under-*

dogs. Azuela was the first Mexican author of the twentieth century to highlight the struggles of the lower classes in his country, and he has often been praised for reinvigorating the novel form by faithfully treating the dialect, culture, and lifestyle of the Mexican peasant in this and other of his works. In *The Underdogs* Azuela depicts a sympathetic peasant protagonist and focuses as well on the concerns of his comrades and their experience of the Mexican Revolution.

While some critics have accused the author of presenting two-dimensional characters in the novel—for example, by depicting rural peasants, such as Demetrio and Camilla, as honorable and generous, while those of the urban class, such as Cervantes and La Pintada, as corrupt and manipulative—others note that, despite his bias towards the lower class, Azuela shows the peasants as essentially no different from others in their susceptibility to the violence, greed, and corruption of the Revolution. Indeed, many of Demetrio's men care nothing for revolutionary ideals but use the violent environment as an excuse to rape, pillage, and raze the land. Other characters, including Demetrio, use the Revolution to carry out personal vendettas.

Azuela's ambiguous treatment of all sides of the Revolution has led some scholars, such as J. Patrick Duffey, to maintain that the novel "reveals not only the social, economic, and political conflicts that led to the Mexican Revolution, but also the equally important battles that occurred between a predominantly oral culture, represented by Demetrio Macías and his men, on the one hand, and a small, elitist literate culture, represented by Luis Cervantes, Alberto Solís, and other characters, on the other." Duffey has concluded that "even when characters such as Demetrio and Luis are supposedly fighting on the same side, the influence of their respective orality and literacy eventually drives them apart."

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

After *The Underdogs* first appeared in 1916, it went largely ignored for nearly a decade. During the 1920s, however, the novel was rediscovered and quickly garnered critical praise for its formal innovations and fresh perspective on the internal conflicts of the Mexican people. Most of these early assessments lauded the book's realistic portrayal of war. In his 1929 review published in the *Nation*, Ernest Gruening asserted that "all the sordidness, all the baseness of these human dregs is shown faithfully, but wholly without propagandist purpose," in *The Underdogs*, concluding that the novel is "a record starkly realistic in its simplicity and unsparing truth."

Azuela's formal style was widely imitated by Mexican authors of the early twentieth century, and *The Underdogs* came to be regarded as the archetypal novel of the

Mexican Revolution. Critics have emphasized Azuela's unprecedented focus on the popular classes in the work, especially his authentic rendering of peasant speech and culture. Azuela has also been praised for employing a unique narrative style in the novel, featuring shifts in point of view and an episodic approach to the plot. For many, this formal structure perfectly matches the novel's chaotic subject matter: the Mexican Revolution. Jean Franco has asserted that *The Underdogs* "is, perhaps, the first example of a Spanish-American novel in which the subject matter imposed a new style and in which the author successfully fused structure and subject matter."

Questions regarding Azuela's formal decisions have continued to dominate critical discussions of *The Underdogs* in recent years. While some scholars have complained that the episodic style of the novel hinders the narrative and mars it as a work of art, others have argued that while it may appear chaotic on the surface, the novel actually maintains a cohesive structure. Critics often point to Azuela's use of foreshadowing, doubling, and the repetition of images and events as evidence of a unifying form in the novel, adding that the circular plot not only provides structure but contributes to the novel's thematic focus.

Other commentators have turned their attention to Azuela's themes and ideological stance toward the Mexican Revolution. Max Parra has questioned the novel's depiction of the motivations of the peasant class. Parra argues that *The Underdogs* incorporates "a complex and convincing version of peasant subjectivity into the national culture, a version acceptable primarily to the middle classes and the new intellectual elite" but at odds with the dominant view of the Revolution voiced by the narrator.

Despite the ongoing debate over the artistic merits of *The Underdogs*, most critics agree that the novel remains an important and influential work—one that broadened the range and scope of Mexican literature. As Joseph Sommers has averred, "since its belated recognition in 1924, *The Underdogs* (*Los de abajo*) has become widely accepted as a classic of twentieth-century Mexican letters. It is the first major novel of the Revolution, and remains to this day its most important."

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### PRINCIPAL WORKS

*María Luisa* (novel) 1907

*Los fracasados* (novel) 1908

*Mala yerba* [*Marcela: A Mexican Love Story*] (novel) 1909

- Andrés Pérez, maderista* (novel) 1911  
*Los de abajo* [*The Underdogs*] (novel) 1916  
*Los caciques* [*The Bosses*] (novel) 1917  
*Domitilo quiere ser diputado* (novel) 1918  
*Las moscas* [*The Flies*] (novel) 1918  
*Las tribulaciones de una familia decente* [*The Trials of a Respectable Family*] (novel) 1918  
*La malhora* (novel) 1923  
*El desquite* (novel) 1925  
 \**Los de abajo* (play) 1929  
*La luciérnaga* [*The Firefly*] (novel) 1932  
*Pedro Moreno, el insurgente* (novel) 1935  
 †*Del Llano Hermanos, S. en C.* (play) 1936  
*El camarada Pantoja* (novel) 1937  
*San Gabriel de Valdivias* (novel) 1938  
*Teatro: Los de abajo, El búho en la noche, Del Llano Hermanos* (plays) 1938  
*Regina Landa* (novel) 1939  
*Avanzada* (novel) 1940  
*Nueva burguesía* (novel) 1941  
*El padre don Agustín Rivera* (biography) 1942  
*La marchanta* (novel) 1944  
*La mujer domada* (novel) 1946  
*Cien años de novela mexicana* (criticism) 1947  
*Sendas perdidas* (novel) 1949  
*La maldición* (novel) 1955  
*Two Novels of Mexico: The Flies. The Bosses* (novels) 1956  
*Obras completas*. 3 vols. (novels, plays, and essays) 1958-60  
*Two Novels of the Mexican Revolution: The Trials of a Respectable Family and The Underdogs* (novels) 1963  
*Three Novels by Mariano Azuela* (novels) 1979  
*Correspondencia y otros documentos* (letters) 2000

\*This work is an adaptation of the novel by the same name.

†This work is an adaptation of the novel *Los caciques*.

## CRITICISM

### Enest Gruening (review date 4 December 1929)

SOURCE: Gruening, Enest. "Peons and Politicos." *Nation* 129, no. 3361 (4 December 1929): 689-90.

[In the following review of *The Underdogs*, Gruening praises Azuela's "starkly realistic" treatment of the Mexican Revolution and calls the novel "the most important human document" that came out of this event in Mexican history.]

The Mexican Revolution has been conspicuously devoid of literary self-expression. Francisco Madero, Jr., in 1908, wrote the equivalent of Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" in "La Sucesión Presidencial." It embodied the ideology under which the political revolution against the tyranny of Porfirio Díaz was launched. At about the same time the agrarian and more important phase of the revolution-to-be found an academic presentation in Andrés Molina Enríquez's "Los Grandes Problemas Nacionales." Both of these books were dogmatic and didactic presentations by educated men.

Then came the revolution. It swept the land with fire, inundated it with blood, seethed it in anguish. A proletarian revolt, an uprising of the profoundly oppressed, above all an ethnic impulse, it found its expression in purely characteristic folk-ways—arts and crafts, especially painting. The written word made its appearance only in the printed ballads, the *corridos*—sung by street troubadours and passing on endlessly from lip to lip—recording the gallant deeds of heroes, the cruel suffering of martyrs, the gruesome tragedies of an epoch of destruction.

An outstanding exception to this dearth of literary expression, however, was a slender volume entitled *Los de Abajo*, literally *Those of Underneath*, by Mariano Azuela, first published at El Paso in 1918 but not "recognized" as a work of art until its republication nine years later. A physician in Mexico City, Azuela was caught up in the revolutionary whirl. Graphic, terrible, true, his portrayal of what he saw is the most important human document that has come out of the Revolution. Some of the horrors have been depicted elsewhere, notably in Fr. Francis Clement Kelley's "The Book of Red and Yellow," a terrific indictment of the revolutionists of 1914-1915, and more recently in an extraordinarily able narrative of the Revolution, Martín Luis Guzmán's "El Aguila y La Serpiente." But in neither of these is found a presentation from the standpoint of the under dogs who both made and suffered the horrors of the Revolution. Father Kelley wrote in unsparing condemnation of the Revolution's leaders. Guzmán, one of them, while writing dispassionately, sees the Revolution through its leaders' eyes. Azuela writes of the peons who, equipped with machete and rifle, found release from a lifetime, indeed from generations, of oppression by reckless fighting, roving, killing. In this book all the sordidness, all the baseness of these human dregs is shown faithfully, but wholly without propagandist purpose. It is a record starkly realistic in its simplicity and unsparing truth. It is for the Mexican Revolution a work which combines the qualities of Zola's "La Débâcle" in relation to the Franco-Prussian War and a composite of such fiction as "Soldiers Three," "What Price Glory," "Sergeant Grischa," and "All Quiet on the Western Front" for the World War. No one can discourse on revolution from the ease and safety of an armchair who



has not seen and lived in an uprising of the masses in its naked brutality. Azuela supplies this picture for the ten years of violence that followed the fall of Porfirio Díaz.

Illustrations by the great Mexican artist José Clemente Orozco admirably preserve the spirit of the book. Orozco, like Azuela, was a participant in the bloody marches and countermarches over mesa and pueblo. Enrique Munguía, Jr., has performed creditably the task of rendering the almost untranslatable Mexican-Aztec *argot* into readable English.

**Arthur L. Owen (review date July 1931)**

SOURCE: Owen, Arthur L. "Mariano Azuela: *Los de abajo*." *Books Abroad* 5, no. 3 (July 1931): 264-65.

[In the following review of *The Underdogs*, signed "A. L. O." for Arthur L. Owen, the critic notes that while Azuela "tells a good, exciting story of war" in his novel, of more interest is his "serious and on the whole successful attempt to give the psychology of the revolution under Carranza and Villa."]

In his novel of the Mexican Revolution [*Los de abajo*] Señor Azuela has produced that very unusual thing—a best-seller which is at the same time of interest to the sophisticated reader. In the first place he tells a good, exciting story of war, battle, and sudden death, in which brave men "bite the dust" and the best marksman generally shoots his way through. The method is realistic, however, without super-heroes, romance, or sentimentality. More interesting than the story is the serious and on the whole successful attempt to give the psychology of the revolution under Carranza and Villa. It seems to be the case that not one in a hundred of the revolutionaries had even the most elementary conception of what he was fighting for. A peon oppressed by some local functionary, or cherishing any real or imaginary grievance, would betake himself to the nearest revolutionary nucleus. If he was lucky he received a rifle and a hat; at any rate he enjoyed the privilege of living off the country. He felt a certain definite loyalty to his immediate commander and learned to shout "¡Viva Villa!" with at least a semblance of enthusiasm. Beyond that the issues and implications of the struggle did not concern him. The more intelligent of the peons saw, in addition to the attractions of irresponsible life in the open, the economic advantage to themselves of unrestricted pillage when the "cause" was succeeding. Even the minor leaders had little idea of what it was all about and were in a ludicrous quandary as to what course to follow when Carranza and Villa fell out and they had to decide for one against the other. The only touch of idealism was to be found in the hazy, more or less mythical personality

which was evoked by mention of the name of Madero, dead five years before. An occasional intellectual was moved by abstract ideas of humanity to join the revolution. He was at first regarded with suspicion and hostility, and in the end became a disillusioned cynic.

**Jefferson Rea Spell (essay date 1944)**

SOURCE: Spell, Jefferson Rea. "Mariano Azuela, Portrayer of the Mexican Revolution." In *Contemporary Spanish-American Fiction*, pp. 64-100. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944.

[In the following excerpt, taken from a broader study of Azuela's work as a writer on the Mexican Revolution, Spell emphasizes the "poetic charm" of *The Underdogs*, noting that while the author treats his subject realistically and unsympathetically, "his creative imagination imparts to both character and incident a vividness transcending the mere realistic."]

The revolution that Francisco Madero set on foot in Mexico in 1910 loosed a force that ultimately brought about the complete disruption of the scheme of life that had prevailed there for more than three decades under the government of Porfirio Díaz, who rose to power through military prowess. In time, especially after the assassination of Madero, class hatred came to be the ruling spirit. Throughout the length and breadth of the land, the underprivileged, oppressed and crassly ignorant peasants, rose spontaneously against their wealthy and powerful masters. Moved by idealism and sympathy with the masses, a few men of education and vision attached themselves to revolutionary chieftains in one capacity or another, such as advisers or secretaries. Those of this type who possessed artistic temperaments were impelled, either while the struggle was in progress or later, to interpret the masses in general—for the most part of Indian blood—and particularly to justify the temper that had impelled them to rebel against the conditions under which they lived. While the most aesthetic interpretation of the spirit that moved the indigenous population is to be found in painting, that decade of revolution had a most stimulating effect on Mexican literature and contributed some of its most distinguishing characteristics.

It is prose in a wide variety of forms—history, biography, autobiography, personal memoirs, and fiction—rather than poetry that embodies the expression and influence of the revolution. But of all the writers inspired by that great social upheaval, the one of greatest scope in point of time is Mariano Azuela, whose successive works cover a period comparable to that of the memoirs of José Vasconcelos. His novels, conceived generally in the heat of conflict before the ultimate outcome is