

Twentieth-Century  
Literary Criticism

TCLC

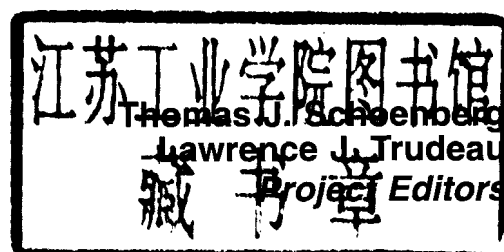
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Volume 184

# 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, Vol. 184

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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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Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Thomson 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.

### Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the author's actual name is given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the name of its author.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it originally appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- 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 Thomson Gale.

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A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in *TCLC* as well as other Literature Criticism series.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the numbers of the *TCLC* volumes in which their entries appear.

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.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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# Miguel Ángel Asturias

## 1899-1974

Guatemalan novelist, short story writer, playwright, poet, essayist, and journalist.

The following entry provides an overview of Asturias's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *CLC*, Volumes 3, 8, and 13.

### INTRODUCTION

Guatemalan writer and statesman Miguel Ángel Asturias is considered a significant literary figure in twentieth-century Latin American literature. Although he was a noted poet, playwright, and journalist, he is best known for his novels *El señor presidente* (1946; *The President*) and *Hombres de maíz* (1949; *Men of Maize*), which blend socialist political concerns with themes borrowed from Mayan mythology. Much of Asturias's work reflects his own impressions of the political climate under the dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera. He was also heavily influenced by traditional Mayan myth, as well as the Surrealist movement, and he became one of the earliest writers to employ "magic realism" techniques in his work. In 1967 Asturias won international attention when he became the first Latin American novelist to win the Nobel Prize. Critics have continued to explore the innovative poetic and narrative techniques in Asturias's work. Raymond Leslie Williams has asserted that "Asturias's modernist techniques—innovative language, multiple points of view, and the like—create a universal experience for his readers," noting that his "many accomplishments with fiction made him a leading figure in modernist writing in Latin America, an early practitioner of magic realism, and a truly universal novelist who bridged the gap between Borges and the writers of the generation of the Boom."

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Asturias was born 19 October 1899, in Guatemala City, Guatemala. His father, Ernesto Asturias, was a lawyer, and his mother, María Rosales de Asturias, was a teacher. A year before Asturias was born, the country was taken over by dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera. When Asturias's father refused to convict students protesting the totalitarian regime, he and his family were forced to leave the city for Salamá, a rural area in Gua-

temala. In 1908 Asturias's family moved back to Guatemala City, and there Miguel completed his secondary schooling. His interest in literature was first sparked when he met the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío at the Central National Institute for Boys. After graduating, Asturias attended the Universidad de San Carlos, where he studied law. As a student, he was politically active and helped to found the student Unionist Party, as well as the Universidad Popular de Guatemala, a program that provided free classes for the poor. Asturias gave weekly lectures there and taught grammar and reading.

In 1920 Estrada Cabrera was overthrown, and Asturias served as a court secretary at his trial. In 1923 Asturias graduated with a law degree. His thesis, written about the social problems of Guatemala, won a prize and was immediately published. After graduation Asturias helped found a newspaper, *Tiempos Nuevos*, in which he published articles criticizing the new militarist government. His political activity eventually led to a brief imprisonment during the presidency of the new dictator, José María Orellana. Asturias left the country, lived in London for a few months, and then moved to Paris. While in France, he studied Central American Indian culture at the Sorbonne with Georges Raynaud. He completed a dissertation on the Mayan religion and translated sacred Indian texts, including the *Popol-Vuh*, which told the creation myths of the Quiché Indians. Asturias was greatly influenced by the stories in the *Popol-Vuh* text, and he drew from that source to create some of his best-known works of fiction.

In Paris he was also exposed to the Surrealist and Dada literary movements, and he associated with some of the most influential writers of the time, including James Joyce, Paul Valéry, Miguel de Unamuno, Pablo Neruda, and André Breton. Asturias worked as a European correspondent for several Central American newspapers and published *Rayito de estrella* (1925), an avant-garde poetic work employing Surrealist techniques. After finishing his studies in Paris, Asturias traveled throughout Europe and the Near East. In 1930 *Leyendas de Guatemala*, his collection of stories based on Guatemalan folklore, was published.

When Asturias returned to Guatemala in 1933, he worked as a journalist, though he continued writing fiction. In 1939 he married Clemencia Amado, but they divorced in 1947. In 1942, Asturias was elected a deputy to the Guatemalan national congress, where he worked

for three years before joining the diplomatic service. Asturias enjoyed the relative freedom of his new career, in which he served at several ambassadorial posts in Mexico and Argentina until 1952. In 1946 he published *The President*, a novel that he had been working on for over twenty years. The book was well received, and in 1949 Asturias published his second novel, *Men of Maize*. While serving at his diplomatic post in Argentina, Asturias began working on the three novels that would later be known as the *Banana Trilogy*: *Viento fuerte* (1950; *Strong Wind*), *El papa verde* (1954; *The Green Pope*), and *Los ojos de los enterrados* (1960; *The Eyes of the Interred*). In 1954 Asturias lost his Guatemalan citizenship and was exiled for his previous involvement with the overthrown government in El Salvador. He continued publishing and working as a journalist. During his years of exile he published another novel, *Mulata de tal* (1963; *Mulata*), and his first collection of plays, *Teatro* (1964). Asturias's citizenship was finally restored in 1966 under the more moderate presidency of César Méndez Montenegro, and he was named an ambassador to France. His last novel, *Maladrón*, was published in 1969. Asturias died on 9 June 1974, in Madrid, and he was buried in France.

## MAJOR WORKS

*The President* is a novel adapted from a short story, "Los mendigos políticos," that Asturias wrote in 1922. The book deals primarily with the destructive psychological effects of a totalitarian government, and it draws a sharp contrast between urban life, which is politically and socially corrupt, and an idyllic rural existence. Although the novel takes place in an unnamed country, most scholars agree that it was inspired by Guatemala during Estrada Cabrera's dictatorship. The story begins with the murder of Colonel Parrales Sonriente in a plaza in the middle of town. The murder is committed by a beggar named Pelele, but the President, in an effort to use the killing to his own political advantage, gathers several military leaders and accuses them of the crime. As events unfold, Miguel Cara de Angel, one of the President's most trusted assistants, falls in love with Camila, the daughter of one of the accused. Cara de Angel and Camila marry, but their happiness is short-lived. Through the President's manipulations, Cara de Angel is sent away on a mission, where he is captured, imprisoned, and tortured. After Cara de Angel dies, Camila is forced to raise their son alone. Despite the prominence of political themes in the book, most critics consider it more than just a novel of social protest. It has been praised for its use of poetic devices, including rich imagery, alliteration, and wordplay. Surrealistic elements in the dream sequences, and the inclusion of myth, also distinguish the book from other works in the political-novel genre. In particular, the story emphasizes the mythic aspect of the title character by linking him

with a prominent deity of Quiché mythology, Tohil, who demanded human sacrifices for the gift of fire. Some critics have highlighted parallels between *The President* and the Babylonian myth of Ishtar and Tammuz. Asturias also explored the concept of *nahualism*—a belief that humans are capable of being transformed into animals—which commentators often associate with magic realism in the novel.

*Men of Maize* reflects Asturias's lifelong effort to create a novel in an authentic Latin American mode and voice, and it relies heavily on the Mayan mythology of the *Popol-Vuh*. The book employs an episodic formal structure, rather than a linear, plot-based narrative, and it has sometimes been categorized as a collection of short stories rather than a novel. One of the main themes of the book is the encroachment of modernization and commercialization on traditional cultures and beliefs. The story is told from the perspective of the *indiginistas*, or highland Indians of Guatemala, and chronicles their struggle with the *ladinos*—peasants descended from Spanish conquerors—over land use and farming of their most essential crop, corn. The *indiginistas* believe that corn is sacred because humankind was first made from corn. They use the land to grow only as much corn as they need; the *ladinos*, however, want to use the land to grow commercial corn crops. The *indiginistas* fear that if that land is exploited in this way, the earth will suffer and transfer that suffering to humankind. When the Indian leader, Gaspar Ilóm, is assassinated in the struggle between the two cultures, the *indiginistas* curse their enemies. The events that follow are blended together with Indian mythology. In addition to highlighting the socio-economic conflict between two cultures in *Men of Maize*, Asturias also commented on the origin and development of legend in the novel, as well as the synthesis of myth and reality in the modern world. Asturias relied heavily on poetic language in *Men of Maize* and included various dialects to more authentically represent the differences between the conflicting cultures.

Asturias once again addressed the problems associated with commercialism in the *Banana Trilogy*. In these books, the advance of capitalism threatens the existence of the Guatemalan people when the American Fruit Company takes over their land. *Strong Wind* and *The Green Pope*, illustrate the destructive effects of the Fruit Company's methods. The Guatemalan people experience economic hardship as the company destroys tropical forests to establish their banana fields. In *The Eyes of the Interred*, pressure builds and a violent outcome seems inevitable. However, Octavio Sansur, the protagonist of the book, presents a peaceful solution, and the Guatemalan people achieve some degree of victory over the American corporation by forming a labor union to protect their rights. Although Asturias incorporated some mythic elements into the *Banana Trilogy*, the nov-

els were not considered as formally innovative as his earlier work and have been mainly categorized as novels of social protest.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Asturias enjoyed popularity and success during his lifetime, particularly for his sympathetic treatment of indigenous cultures and his life-long concern for social issues. In addition to the Nobel Prize, he received the Prix du Meilleur Roman Estranger in 1952 for *The President* and the Lenin Peace Prize in 1966 for the *Banana Trilogy*. While critics often praised his work for its commitment to social causes and its innovative use of myth, legend, and surrealist techniques, some scholars found Asturias's novels deficient because they lacked cohesion and a definitive structure. For example, a number of commentators dismissed *Men of Maize* altogether because of its unconventional formal structure. In 1969, G. M. Martin defended the novel, however, and asserted that "to suggest that the novel is a failure simply because it does not conform to traditional criteria is to ignore the evidence of the whole course of twentieth-century literature, as well as the truism that unusual subject matter of necessity requires new formal procedures."

In recent scholarship, critics have continued to emphasize the complex relationship between myth and language in Asturias's work and to trace the elements of Expressionism, Surrealism, and Cubism in his fiction. Although his writings remain largely unread by audiences in the United States, their significance, according to many present-day scholars, extends beyond regional concerns to broader human issues. In his 1970 book, *Miguel Ángel Asturias*, Richard J. Callan argued that "within a framework of social reality or of Indian folklore" Asturias explored "universal truths, combining these spheres of interest in an original and surprising manner. Transcending philosophical fashions, he has linked his created universe with the dawn of history and his twentieth-century characters with myths from all cultures, and thereby demonstrated the immutability of human nature across the world and through the ages. He has accomplished this, not by running two kinds of meaning along parallel lines, but by showing the relationship between them. In other words, he has projected the temporal against the eternal, the local against the universal, and shown the timeless aspect of man's needs."

### PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Sociología guatemalteca: El problema social del indio* [*Guatemalan Sociology: The Social Problem of the Indian*] (essays) 1923

*Rayito de estrella* (poetry) 1925  
*La arquitectura de la vida nueva* (lectures) 1928  
*Leyendas de Guatemala* (legends) 1930  
*Émulo lipolidón, fantomima* (poetry) 1935  
*Sonetos* (poetry) 1936  
*Alclasán* (poetry) 1940  
*Anoche, 10 de marzo de 1543* (poetry) 1943  
*El señor presidente* [*The President*] (novel) 1946  
*Hombres de maíz* [*Men of Maize*] (novel) 1949  
*Poesía, sien de alondra* (poetry) 1949  
*\*Viento fuerte* [*Strong Wind*] (novel) 1950  
*\*El papa verde* [*The Green Pope*] (novel) 1954  
*Bolívar* (poetry) 1955  
*Soluna: Comedia prodigiosa en dos jornadas y un final* (play) 1955  
*Week-end en Guatemala* (short stories) 1956  
*La audiencia de los confines* (play) 1957  
*Nombre custodio, e imagen pasajera* (poetry) 1959  
*\*Los ojos de los enterrados* [*The Eyes of the Interred*] (novel) 1960  
*El alhajadito* [*The Bejeweled Boy*] (novel) 1961  
*Mulata de tal* [*Mulata*] (novel) 1963  
*Teatro* (plays) 1964  
*Clarivigilia primaveral* (poetry) 1965  
*El espejo de Lida Sal* [*The Mirror of Lida Sal: Tales Based on Mayan Myths and Guatemalan Legends*] (short stories) 1967  
*Comiendo en Hungría* [*Sentimental Journey around the Hungarian Cuisine; with Pablo Neruda*] (poems and sketches) 1969  
*Maladrón* (novel) 1969  
*America: Fabula de fabulas y otros ensayos* (essays) 1972  
*El hombre que lo tenía todo, todo, todo* (unfinished novel) 1981

\*These works are commonly referred to as the *Banana Trilogy*.

### CRITICISM

Richard J. Callan (essay date September 1967)

SOURCE: Callan, Richard J. "Babylonian Mythology in 'El señor presidente.'" *Hispania* 50, no. 3 (September 1967): 417-24.

[In the following essay, Callan examines the parallels between the Babylonian fertility myth of Tammuz and Ishtar and the plot of Asturias's novel *El señor presidente*.]

As one of the most distinguished and widely read novels of Miguel Angel Asturias, *El Señor Presidente* requires no introduction to the readers of *Hispania*, and a



bare plot outline will suffice to call the details to mind. It has to do with the abduction of Camila Canales by Miguel Cara de Angel, her sudden brush with death due to pneumonia, the birth of love between them, their short idyll and their final separation resulting from the President's disfavor. The romance unfolds concomitantly with atrocities perpetrated in the name of the dictator and their effect on a cross section of the citizenry. The historical implications of the novel are well known: the locale, Guatemala, 1916; the dictator, Estrada Cabrera.

The Maya mythology and folklore upon which Asturias bases much of his writing, is also quite evident in *El Señor Presidente*. The bloodthirsty dictator is compared to the rain god Tohil who demanded human sacrifice; the clamorous assent of the tribes is echoed by that of the presidential electioneers. There is an intended likeness drawn between the American businessman, Mr. Gengis, representing Washington's support of the strong man, and the priest-sorcerers without whom the god would not exist.<sup>1</sup> Further instances of Maya Indian beliefs can be adduced, such as the President's having a jaguar, *nahual*, although the novel has few characters who are properly speaking Indian.

It is the opinion of this study that there exist additional levels of meaning in the novel besides those mentioned which widen the scope of its significance and contribute to the literary appreciation of the author by throwing new light on his artistic genius.

First there is the level on which we witness a reenactment of the archetypal struggle between fertility and destruction. The conflict rages between the President, who embodies sterility and destruction, and his favorite, who moves steadily into a position wherein he impersonates the generative force of nature. His transformation is not deliberate. It results from the birth of true love in his hitherto barren heart, and he is too engrossed in his love to notice what is happening between him and the President. The latter, it is no surprise, identifies himself candidly with death: "la muerte ha sido y será siempre mi mejor aliada."<sup>2</sup> Miguel's love identifies him with life, for love leads to new life, to procreation.<sup>3</sup>

The metaphysical confrontation between these two men, between life and death, is epitomized in a sentence that paraphrases the Song of Songs: "A la muerte únicamente se le puede oponer el amor, porque ambos son igualmente fuertes" (p. 223). It is the key line of the fertility theme, and is spoken by Tícher, the English teacher and theosophist, who recommends marriage as the remedy to save the dying Camila. Only love can contend with death, he reasons, because only love is as strong; therefore, only an act of love by Miguel can save her. After the marriage Tícher solemnly recites a verse from Sonnet X, one of Shakespeare's progeny

sonnets: "Make thee another self for love of me." By following this advice, by perpetuating himself in his son, Miguel's love does vanquish death (i.e., the tyrant's destructiveness).

When he is arrested at the port of embarkation and beaten by Major Farfán, don Miguel expresses an unconscious awareness of his metaphysical triumph. "¡Pegue, no se detenga," he shouts defiantly, "no tenga miedo; que para eso soy hombre, y el fuele es arma de castrados!" (p. 282, emphasis added). The gibe reaches beyond Farfán to the President whom he represents; through his subaltern, the dictator strikes Miguel, but he strikes in vain for his blows are directed against nature's irrepressible creative force, and his only tools are death and destruction. Miguel has fulfilled his purpose by communicating life, and he now embodies, up to the moment he falls in the dung, the very principle which renders his antagonist impotent.

Only in this context can the President's monstrous revenge be satisfactorily explained. What, in fact, was Miguel's crime? He never lifted a finger against the tyrant, despite ample opportunity, such as the night the latter was helplessly drunk; yet a prolonged mental and physical torture was carefully prepared for him, whereas for men accused of plotting to overthrow and murder the President, the punishment was routine death. Miguel's crime was not to have turned against the dictator, but to have turned *away* from him. By turning away, his actions became positive. In saving Canales, in saving Farfán, in "saving" Camila by marrying her, he meant no harm to the President; what he intended was a positive thing, to give or prolong life. But although the President was not aimed at, he was hit in the recoil, for an increase of positive forces results in the decrease of destructive ones. By his transformation, Miguel was becoming more dangerous to the President than if he had merely turned into a personal enemy while remaining aligned with the same negative camp.

From fertility as a topic it is only a step to the fertility of mythology, which brings us to another level of meaning where the idea of procreation is further developed. Asturias' preoccupation with mythology is widely recognized, but it is understood to be confined to Maya mythology. It has not yet been recognized, to my knowledge, that he might also have woven other mythologies into the fabric of his works. Nevertheless, such is the case. An accumulation of details indicates that in *El Señor Presidente* he has portrayed the Babylonian fertility myth of Tammuz and Ishtar with twentieth-century characters.

It is particularly appropriate for Asturias to have juxtaposed Babylon, "the mother of harlots and abominations" (Rev. 17:15), traditionally symbolic of corruption and cruelty, with Guatemala or any other city in the