



## The Reign of Terror: An Overview of Miguel Angel Asturias's *The President*

In his novel "The President," Nobel Prize winning author Miguel Angel Asturias dove into the complex, political universe of a ruthless totalitarian regime. Asturias used strong figurative language and dream imagery to create a country plagued with corruption and oppression. Asturias reflected the voices of people whose fear was driven by legends and myths, and unearthed the physical and psychological effects of living under a dictatorship rule. Using general knowledge of dictatorship regimes and history of Latin American politics, one can better understand the impacts and consequences of current events in trying to prevent future instability.

The unfortunate death of Colonel Parrales Sorriente marked the beginning of the story on the Cathedral Porch. A beggar named Zany, also referred to as "the idiot," murdered Sorriente in retaliation for the harassment of his mother. Due to Zany's mental illness, the President did not believe that he could have been responsible for such a crime, which is why General Eusebio Canales and Abel Carvajal were blamed. In hopes of justifying the false accusations he orchestrated, the President called upon his confidential adviser, also known as "his favorite." Miguel Angel Face was sent to help General Canales escape before his arrest, securing a confession of guilt. With plans of his own, Miguel Angel Face reveals to Lucio Vasquez his plans of kidnapping General Canales's daughter, Camilla, at the Two Tavern. Genaro Rodas, a friend of Angel Face joins them. Zany was spotted leaving a bar as they were leaving the Two Tavern, and he was shot by Vasquez, to the horror of Rodas. Canales was able to escape the police while Angel Face retrieved Camilla, brought her to safety at the Two Tavern, and began to fall in love with her.

In hopes of saving Canales from getting arrested for the murder of Sorriente, Fedina de Rodas ran to the Canales house only to find him already gone. She entered the house when no one answered the door and was caught by the Judge Advocate. Arresting Fedina as an accomplice for the escape of Canales, they tortured and beat her for information about his whereabouts. The story returned to Angel Face who revealed his complex character as he struggled to remain loyal to the President while facing his desire to fulfill a higher moral purpose. Unable to find a home, Camilla's health steadily declined. Fedina de Rodas was sold to a brothel called the Sweet Enchantment after the charges were dropped. Fedina was an innocent victim of unjust suffering.

The lawyer Abel Carvajal, who had been accused of murdering Sorriente, sat in prison with a student and a sacristan. His wife pled for his safe return by visiting the President and Judge Advocate but was unsuccessful. Given the opportunity to read his indictment, Carvajal was unable to defend himself against false evidence and testimonies and was executed. After being advised that the sacrament of marriage was the only hope that could save Camilla, Angel Face decided to marry her. Canales died unexpectedly in the middle of planning an attack, under the impression that the President had attended his daughter's wedding. The President decided to run for re-election and gave Angel Face an important diplomatic mission sending him overseas. Betrayed by Major Farfan whom he once saved, Angel Face was intercepted by Major Farfan and arrested. He was beaten and became the unknown prisoner in cell number seventeen. Camilla, then pregnant, waited for him to write her and eventually fled to the countryside with her son, whom she named Miguel. The only thing that kept Angel Face alive in prison was the hope of seeing Camilla once again. He died under the impression that Camilla had become the President's mistress.

The story ended where it started. The Cathedral Porch was now destroyed and served as a home to the forgotten. The reign of terror and fear reduced the town to madness and utter chaos. Inspired by the dictatorship of Estrada Cabrera, the political regime and system of dictatorship that was used in Asturias's novel is easily comparable to totalitarianism. Under the control of a single political organization and the President, the citizens had no role in any decision-making. The stories and sentiments experienced by the characters alluded to the manipulation and control of the system. The government controlled the role of the media using principles such as the use of mass surveillance, regulation of free speech and criticism, and widespread fear to fuel a totalitarian regime. Coinciding with authoritarianism, the system tried to weaken civil society through use of the secret police, intimidation and murder, rumors, and forced silence. As a basic principle of authoritarianism, there was no rule of law in this imaginary country. Men ruled, specifically the President, who orchestrated all the corruption behind closed doors. The history of Latin America is comprised of a long struggle of oppression under various authoritarian, totalitarian, and dictatorship regimes. The oppression faced in Asturias's imaginary country portrays the domination and injustice that plagued Latin America for years and affected its culture.

Included in the cultural changes was the role of religion. The Roman Catholic Church was the dominant religion for nearly five centuries and still is today. The relationship between politics and religion are intertwined in Latin American history. Churches played a role in military conquests, and gained power and influence from their wealth. Although the Roman Catholic Church was never the main focus in the novel, Asturias's used the influence of the church in many different capacities. In everyday life, he referenced people attending mass at different times of the day and people saying prayers and singing hymns. The role of the church in

“The President” encompassed the theme of hope and love. Angel Face and Camilla decided to marry because they felt that the sacrament would be the only way to save her. Even in the deepest depths of despair, people were turning towards the Lord, the Virgin Mary and other religious and symbolic figures. The only real hope these people felt was the little hope gained through love.

As a dictator novel, Asturias’s writing was powerful and moving as he uncovered the details and perspectives of his characters. At times, I felt that there were too many minor roles which made it hard to keep track of all the different stories. Some of the characters were mentioned once, and never appeared again. Although we experienced the ruthlessness and corruption on a more personal level, the actions of the President and his regime were often unknown. It was clear that this novel focused on the physical and psychological affects of the people under a totalitarian regime, not the dictatorship itself. The theme of dream and reality states used throughout the novel effectively portrayed the confusion and chaos that affected the mental states of many people. Blurring the reality was often confusing at times, as the truth became unclear. Although I did not favor the way Asturias went back and forth between dream and reality states, it helped create the sense of confusion the ordinary citizens experienced daily. In amidst the confusion, the role of the executive was clear. Nothing was truth until the President said so himself, and his events and stories could not be repeated as the truth. It was this type of control and manipulation that led to the deaths of Canales and Angel Face.

The use of the “The President” was beneficial to this course as it identified the injustices and oppression faced by many people under a corrupt dictatorship system. Camilla and Fedina de Rodas were innocent victims whose suffering was unjust, and all the characters were victims of social injustice as their lives were somehow manipulated. Asturias captured the social and

cultural environment that included everyone in the social order from beggars, to wives, to government officials loyal to the President. The reign of terror that plagued many people contributed to the political and social framework of today's governments. Dictatorships, totalitarian, and authoritarian governments once ruled the majority of Latin America. They reflect the profound changes in the political philosophies that can influence our system today.