Teaching *The Old Gringo* through the Mexican Revolution and Ambrose Bierce

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At 199 pages, Carlos Fuentes' *Gringo Viejo* (*The Old Gringo*) seems a light read, but the novel is deceptively simple and lures the reader in with a false sense of ease. As you peel back the layers of the onion, the complexities become exposed. These complexities are more easily discovered with a basic background of the Mexican Revolution and a study of Ambrose Bierce and his writing.

In the novel, Fuentes portrays Ambrose Bierce (the old gringo for whom the novel is named) as a man seeking his death at the hands of Pancho Villa. Bierce actively joins a band of militants, fights by their side, and pursues every avenue with the hope that it will lead him to Villa—who will in turn end his life. Though Bierce does not succeed in finding Villa, he does in fact give his life to the revolution at the hand of General Tomas Arroyo. Why would a man seek his death in such a way? It is difficult to say, unless the reader knows a little more about Ambrose Bierce.

Toward the end of his life, Bierce did in fact write (in letters) that he planned to travel to Mexico. He alluded to wanting to fight in the Mexican Revolution, and he also stated his desire to meet and be killed by Pancho Villa. For this reason, it is essential to read letters that Bierce wrote during the end of his life. In particular, the letter Bierce wrote to his niece on October 1, 1913, should be read in conjunction with the novel: "if you hear

of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags please know that I think that a pretty good way to depart this life … to be a Gringo in Mexico—ah, that is euthanasia!" (Joshi and Schultz 243). This quote appears almost verbatim in *The Old Gringo*: "he also said that to be stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags was a pretty good way to depart this life … 'it beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs'" (7). Later, the other part of the quote appears as well: "'To be a gringo in Mexico … Ah, that is euthanasia.' That's what the old gringo said" (9). Of all the letters, this one concretely connects the historical record and Fuentes' fictional account.

Because the truth is no one knows exactly what happened to Bierce, what Fuentes attempts to do in *The Old Gringo*, then, is to tell one possibility—the one that seems most likely, based on the historical evidence—of Bierce's disappearance. In life, Bierce was a man fascinated with mystery, and he wrote several books devoted to mysterious disappearances. If the reader is to believe Fuentes' story, then they also believe Bierce's own words in his letters. But, Bierce's fixation with mysterious disappearances, his bitterness, and his disdain for the comfortable lifestyle in Washington D.C. call to question the authenticity of his own words. That Bierce ends his life this way is ironic because Bierce began his career as a journalist and as a soldier.

As a soldier, Bierce became the longest serving and highest ranking American author as he served several tours of duty during the American Civil War. He fought in many battles which then served as fodder for his literary career. Since his character in Fuentes' book is a soldier, many comparisons can be made between his military career and the actions within the book. While it is not necessary to understand every battle he was part of, it is important to note that he fought in the Civil War and served several tours of duty. This is especially important because his experiences on the battlefield greatly influenced his writing, and the horrors he was exposed to increased his sourness.

As a journalist, Bierce worked primarily for William Randolph Hearst. Hearst was a news mogul and also owned a great deal of land in Mexico and several large haciendas. This

last piece of information is important to Fuentes' novel because one of the key disputes of the Mexican Revolution is the concept of redistribution of land, and Hearst would have done anything to prevent that from coming to pass. As such, Hearst is a direct path into the Mexican Revolution for Bierce and for readers of Fuentes' novel.

Hearst also figures into another possibility of Bierce's disappearance. Though Bierce worked for Hearst, Bierce despised him and spent some of his final days writing an expose on Hearst and his practices as a news mogul. This expose was never released out of respect for Hearst's mother, for whom Bierce had a great deal of respect. Before Bierce disappeared, he left the manuscript in safekeeping at a hotel in Texas. When people with Bierce's estate went to claim the manuscript, it was nowhere to be found. As a result, some theorists link Hearst with Bierce's disappearance. This possibility is not explored directly in *The Old Gringo*, but what is explicitly demonstrated is the power of wealthy landowners in Mexico and the hatred felt toward them by Pancho Villa's soldiers.

Hearst's companies were also responsible for publishing much of Bierce's short fiction, and, similar to Fuentes, Bierce also had a career as a writer of fiction and poetry. His first published piece of poetry is "The Basilica" and it appears in *The Californian* in September 21, 1867. While Bierce's poetry is interesting, and it may be surprising to students that a journalist was also a poet and fiction writer, it may be more difficult to make connections between that poetry and *The Old Gringo* than Bierce's prose. Depending on the class in which this is being taught, Bierce's poetry may be an excellent opportunity to expose students to American poetry. However, my focus was on his short fiction.

Primary among these texts is "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Echoes of this short story, published in 1890, can be seen throughout *The Old Gringo*. Comparisons between Peyton Farquhar's (from "Owl Creek Bridge") prolonged moment of death (as Bierce suspends reality to explore Farquhar's life) is not dissimilar to Fuentes' representation of Bierce's pro-

longed hunt for death—and his reflections on his life along the way. Likewise, both the Old Gringo (the character) and Farquhar are soldiers at the end of their lives.

Another short story that offers similar themes to "Owl Creek Bridge" is "Horseman in the Sky." Students should not have any difficulty comparing the two short stories, and in doing so it will help them get a feel for Bierce's style. Also there is an image in the third section that is very similar to a scene from the early part of *The Old Gringo*: "Straight upright sat the rider … his long hair streamed upward, waving like a plume … [the officer] filled with amazement and terror by this apparition of a horseman in the sky … was overcome by the intensity of his emotions; his legs failed him and he fell" (8). Compare the above image to Fuentes' description of the Old Gringo's (the character) assault on the Mexican revolutionaries: "They saw him coming, but the truth was, they didn't believe it … he wasn't like them, he was an avenging white devil, he had eyes that only God in the churches had, his Stetson flew off and they saw revealed the image of God the Father" (55). Again, "Horseman in the Sky" contains the similar themes of war, death, and a touch of the supernatural.

Finally, several entries from *The Devil's Dictionary* should be explored. The following entries seem most revealing about Bierce's world view, and offer a glimpse inside his mind: alone ("In bad company"), apologize ("To lay the foundation for a future offense"), battle ("A method of untying with the teeth a political knot that would not yield to the tongue"), happiness ("An agreeable sensation arising from contemplating the misery of another"), history ("An account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools"), patriot ("One to whom the interests of a part seem superior to those of the whole. The dupe of statesmen and the tool of conquerors"), truthful ("An ingenious compound of desirability and appearance…"), vote ("The instrument and symbol of a freeman's power to make a fool of himself and a wreck of his country"), war ("A by-product of the arts of peace. The most menacing political condition is a period

of international amity"), and white ("Black"). Each entry serves multiple purposes. First, they give the reader a glimpse inside Bierce's mind (and also the mind of Fuentes' character). Second, since the entries were a reoccurring column in the newspaper, it gives students an idea of what kind of content newspapers contained in the 19th century. And third, while there are many other short and long stories that could be used to make connections to *The Old Gringo*, the above pieces offer a survey of Bierce's style and the diversity of his work. With this brief investigation of Bierce's work out of the way, the next necessary step is to look at the Mexican Revolution.

There are many different aspects to the Mexican Revolution, but for the purposes of this course, students will gain insight through the exploration of four major revolutionaries: Carranza, Diaz, Villa, and Zapata. Excellent books have been written on each of these historical figures, and what follows below is a quick synopsis of their background, what they stood for, and what they accomplished in their lifetime. This is not to suggest that these are the only worthwhile people involved in the Mexican Revolution, but these four have been selected in an attempt to simplify it for students. Depending on the size of the class, other members of Revolution could be incorporated as well—for example, Huerta, Madero, Obregon, and Orozco.

The following information is taken from three texts: *The Making of Modern Mexico* by Frank Brandenburg; *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution* by Hector Aguilar Camin and Lorenzo Meyer; and *Mexico: the End of the Revolution* by Donald C. Hodges and Ross Gandy (the last two are brief but thorough accounts of the revolution and the key players involved; they offer excellent side-by-side comparisons of them as well).

Porfirio Diaz (1830-1915) ruled Mexico from 1876 until 1911 with only a few short breaks. Interestingly enough, he was a mestizo, of Spanish and Mixtec background. But, most importantly, historians mark the end of Diaz's regime as the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. Diaz had a strict "no reelection" policy, meaning that presidents could not serve back to back terms in office. Initially, he followed this policy when

he allowed Manuel Gonzales to take charge (Gonzales was essentially a Diaz pawn). After a short period, Diaz took power again and conveniently overlooked that policy, stating that Mexico was not ready to govern itself. His regime was marked with corruption, rigged votes, and fear tactics. During his time, the economy soared, but civil liberties paid the price. Investments with the US brought money to Mexico, but the peasant class saw little of this influx. Instead, it benefited the rich. Diaz was the primary target of Villa, Zapata, and others.

Between Diaz and Carranza (1859-1920) there were other rulers, but Carranza was the next major governmental official attempting to institute major changes. He was born in Cuatro Ciénegas in northeastern Mexico and his government lasted from 1915 until 1920. He was very well-educated and highly intelligent. His government stood for an independent court system, greater decentralization of power, and land reform; but these changes were seen as being too modest, and so Villa and Zapata fought against Carranza's government. During his time, his government did in fact institute many of its reforms, and even drafted an early version of the Mexican Constitution. Unfortunately, as with most in power, corruption did abound in his government. He also placed a bounty on Zapata's head, which led to Zapata's death.

Pancho Villa (1878-1923) was born Doroteo Arango Arámbula in north-central Mexico in San Juan del Río, Durango. Villa received very little education, and he relied on his quick wits to stay alive. When his father died, Villa became a sharecropper to support his mother. He became an outlaw at the age of sixteen when he shot a man that raped his twelve year-old sister; Villa then fled from authorities and hid in the hills. He would be involved with the revolution until 1920, when Obregon signed a peace treaty with him, and Villa retired. He was killed in 1923 when his car was sprayed with bullets. Villa fought for land reforms and against the hacienda owners. He also saw the corruption of the Diaz campaign and sought to dethrone him. After Diaz fled, Villa focused his efforts on the Huerta dictatorship. Villa's revolutionaries were famous for overcoming enor-

mous odds and winning unlikely victories. He was also responsible for one of the first attacks on US soil by a foreign country. Villa attacked and killed eighteen Americans in Columbus, New Mexico, at which point the US sent soldiers marching through Mexico in an attempt to find and kill him.

Fighting on the side of Villa was Zapata (1879-1919), who was born in the central Mexico town of Anenecuilco. He was raised by a wealthy family and later joined forces with Madero to overthrow Diaz in 1910. One year later, he split with Madero and fought to overthrow him as well. While Villa fought primarily in the north, Zapata focused his efforts in the south. "Tierra y libertad" (land and liberty) was his rallying call and he believed that only through ownership of land would Mexicans ever achieve freedom. Zapata succeeded in overthrowing Diaz, but he could not convince Madero of the importance of land reform. He went on to write about these demands in Plan de Ayala, in which Zapata denounced Madero's presidency, announced Pascual Orozco as the leader of the revolution, proclaimed that the land belonged to all the inhabitants of Mexico and not the hacienda owners, and proclaimed the agrarian foundation of the revolution. Much of Zapata's plan was instituted by Carranza when he took charge—but not to the extent that Zapata wished them to be.

The above gloss of the major players involved in the Mexican Revolution only scratches the surface, but it does provide background on which students can build upon when reading *The Old Gringo*.

There are many ways to bring together Ambrose Bierce and his works and the Mexican Revolution; one such way is how Fuentes presents the story of *The Old Gringo*. Bierce's past as a soldier made him familiar with combat, his journalistic career kept him abreast of world events, and his mysterious disappearance creates the opportunity for Fuentes to suggest, what if? And so, Bierce is the perfect gateway for readers into the Mexican Revolution. The Civil War soldier, bored with life in cushy D.C., sets off for the battlefields of Mexico; it sounds too unrealistic to be believed, and yet it could be true. Truth is often

stranger than fiction, and Fuentes finds that blurry line in the real life character of Ambrose Bierce.

Ambrose Bierce and *The Old Gringo* offer the opportunity to expose students to history—both American and Mexican—and the idea that there might be more to history than words on a page. Fuentes, in a 1979 interview, addresses this very issue:

> I would like to see History relativized as much as Literature is relativized, and not become an absolute. History's absolutism depends for its existence on one thing: the elimination of Tragedy. Tragedy is the great relativizer, the great poetical strength of all Literature … but the modern World and modern history have depended very much on the expulsion of Tragedy from their realm … History wishes not to recognize that in the world of Tragedy, in the world of conflicting values, there are no guilty parties. (Tittler 51)

The Old Gringo is Fuentes' attempt to restore the tragedy to history and express this notion of there not being any guilty parties. In the novel, Fuentes portrays Ambrose Bierce as a man seeking his death at the hands of Pancho Villa—who ultimately dies, but fails in his mission. This is not the way the modern media would spin the story. Instead, it is likely the headline would run: "American Slain by Mexican" or "American Author Gunned Down by Terrorists South of the Border." Fuentes simply offers the headline *The Old Gringo*. With the former, blame is assigned—as Fuentes points out, there are "guilty parties." With the latter it suggests a more complex, more ambiguous picture where no blame is assigned.

The fuller picture is what Fuentes offers in the text of *The Old Gringo*, and what educators can offer to their students. Ambrose Bierce is a man of mystery whose history is not fully understood. His disappearance in 1913 or 1914 has never been solved. Fuentes picks up on one possible answer to the riddle and explores the idea in the course of the novel, but he does more than that as well. He also paints a vivid image of what the Mexican Revolution was like—chaotic and disordered—and what the relations between Mexico and the US were like as well—just as

unsettled and unsure. To help students gain a fuller appreciation of the novel and the circumstances portrayed within, it is important to address several aspects of the history.

To appreciate the craft and gain a better insight into the message of the novel, it is essential to utilize other texts. The Old Gringo is a compilation of different texts. The characters are each a text; the setting is a text (you can read the land, find it on a map, explore the topography, look at the border); the history of Mexico and of the US is a text that can be read; the history of relations between these two countries is a text that tells the story of shifting borders and war and can be read; and of course the novel is literally a text that can be read in many ways.

It is very important to understand Ambrose Bierce as he is the main character of the novel. Who was he? What was he famous for? What happened to him? Why did Fuentes choose him, of all people, as the protagonist of his novel? As another character in the novel, and it is truly a character in the novel, the Mexican Revolution is just as important to understand. What was it? When did it end? Who was involved? To attempt to answer these questions, readers must first unpack the texts surrounding both person and event. Then, with a better understanding of the characters within the novel, readers can then make sense of Fuentes' *The Old Gringo* and discover the blurry line between reality and fiction. Furthermore, students might even be able to see themselves in this novel.

The Old Gringo is an opportunity to learn about American and Mexican history. The novel also is a chance to investigate the difference between fact and fiction, and to see if Fuentes is right when he suggests that he "would like to see History relativized as much as Literature is relativized, and not become an absolute." To accomplish these goals, it is essential to open a dialogue between students about these topics; and *The Old Gringo* is the perfect candidate to start the debate.

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