

## CHARACTER AND PROTAGONIST IN ...AND THE EARTH DID NOT PART

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(Resumen)

El propósito es establecer la existencia de un personaje principal (muchacho que aparece en las dos historias que sirven de marco a la obra) y de un protagonista (pueblo Chicano) en ... *and the earth did not part* (Rivera, 1977). La justificación está en la dependencia del personaje principal con respecto al protagonista. Dado que el primero está en una etapa de formación, sin el protagonista no podría completar su propia identidad. El protagonista podría existir por sí mismo. Sin embargo, la presencia del muchacho coopera a dar unidad al conjunto de historias y anécdotas que tienen que ver con el pueblo Chicano, es decir con el protagonista.

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It has been suggested that in ... *and the earth did not part* (Rivera, 1977) there are two main characters: The boy that appears in the two stories (the first and the last one) that constitute the frame, and the Chicano people. The idea of a double character is certainly consistent with the structure of the work. However, a different classification of the boy and the Chicano people could be made. I intend to establish the view that in this work we can distinguish a main character (the boy in the two frame stories) and a protagonist (the Chicano people). Although these two concepts are frequently used as synonyms, they can have slight differences in meaning. In this paper I try to establish that there is a difference between 'protagonist' and 'main character', with the purpose that this new analysis can lead to a satisfactory explanation of ...*and the earth did not part*. It is believed that a 'main character' is one that is more important than others. Whereas, the 'protagonist' is the most important figure, a unique one, different in relevance from all the others, "The protagonist has come to be the equivalent of the hero" (Cuddin 1979, 537). Consequently, there could be several main characters in a novel, but probably there will be a single protagonist. This division fits with the two main topics mentioned by Olivares: "... cuyos temas centrales son la formación de un joven -*bildungsroman* - y el establecimiento del sentido de comunidad, y cuyo sujeto son los obreros migratorios chicanos, ..." (1991, 59). Given that the main character is not an autonomous entity that can work by himself, he needs the 'protagonist' to complete his own identity, to assimilate and understand everything around him. His dependence on the protagonist, and the implicit social criticism developed by Rivera is transmitted through the twelve stories and anecdotes found between the two frame stories. However, since the boy arrives at the realization of his own being by virtue of the experiences he threads together when everything coalesces in his own mind, distinguishing a main character and a protagonist makes sense and it is useful only in a formal study.

The discussion of the two frame stories will lead necessarily to the boy's search of identity and to the search of identity of the Chicano people. The introductory story "The lost year" provides the reader with what Rivera calls 'el conflicto'<sup>1</sup>. On reading this first story, at the very beginning, it is difficult to understand what is happening. We can not even distinguish whether this male character, whose name is never mentioned, is dreaming or thinking. The dominant factor in the description of this story is the vagueness: "asleep", "he could not be sure", "he could never find out who it was that was calling him, nor the reason why he was being called" (Rivera 1977, 2).<sup>2</sup> We also discover his fear, surprisingly coming from himself. It prevents him from completing the whole turn: "Once he stopped himself before completing the turn, and he became afraid" (2). We do not know who is calling him by name, a name that can not be heard by the reader and that he would forget, till "He found out that he had been calling himself" (2). It is through the boy's capacity to give form to the events of the preceding year, once he feels 'his other' calls urging him to encounter his identity, when 'the lost year' began. And with it his awareness. As Olivares says: "Through memory we encounter our own salvation. We discover that 'We are not alone,' but that rather, we carry in ourselves the history of all our people, our collective experience" (1985, 76). Through his memory he can recall the twelve stories and the anecdotes, and establish his own identity. These stories constitute the past of the main character, the central consciousness in ... *and the earth did not part*. They are not limited to what the boy has experienced, sometimes we read things he has heard from migrant workers, from a troubadour, from his relatives, etc., each different point of view contributing to his maturation process.

It will be in "Under the house" the frame story which sums up all the events and thoughts in ... *and the earth did not part* when the main character understands himself and that from which he had been alienated, his community (the protagonist). González-T focuses attention on how comprehension is achieved through an internal meditative discourse which José Ortega y Gasset calls *ensimismamiento*: "Comprehension is achieved in endophasia -the conversation we carry on inside [of] ourselves with ourselves, with its leaps of insight- innerspeak or inscape, where we relate one thing with another, while searching for some structure, order and symmetry in reality" (1989, 85). It is what the boy achieves when he hides and isolates himself underneath the house, "the symbolic womb" (González-T 1989, 88). There he realizes

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1. Olivares (1991, 57) talks about Rivera's ideas on how to write stories. He mentions Rivera's words: "Si no hay conflicto, no hay narración sino mera descripción. ... (Cuanto) más intrigante sea el conflicto, más se interesa el lector en el cuento. Existe en el hombre no sólo la necesidad vicaria de sentir a otro hombre en conflicto sino también la tendencia natural de querer saber la resolución de los conflictos."

2. From now on all the references to ...*and the earth did not part* will be given with the page number in brackets.

that he has not lost anything, as has been said in the first frame story, on the contrary he has discovered his own self and the Chicano people self. He now has the capacity of gathering everything that he has experienced and witnessed. Through this process he has gained a self identification, which is going to prevent him from being afraid of himself. It is going to allow him to come out from under the house as a man. As González-T states the person coming out is said to be a 'man' in order to highlight his new human side: "Children discover him under the house and one cries out that 'there's a man (not an animal) under the house' " (1989, 88). This closing story, where everything is brought together, is essential for joining the action and voices coming from the Chicano people with the thoughts and personal actions carried out by the main character. It unifies the whole set of stories and anecdotes, and it is where the reader gets the idea of having read a novel, " ... un conjunto orgánico que hace que la obra sea mucho más que una colección de cuentos" (Olivares 1991, 63).

The fact that the boy must isolate himself from his community to become one with his people could be considered as a contradiction. However, paradoxically it is only through the distance between himself and the Chicano people, a brilliant technique used by Rivera, that the boy can come back to them, and to feel himself as a member. It implies not a spatial distance, but a psychological one. He has to watch the migrants from outside, from this position he analyzes the factors oppressing his people. He does it, in the twelve different stories and in the preceding short anecdotes for each of these stories, being here where the 'protagonist', that is the Chicano people, is developed. The mind of the boy gives unity to a broad vision, whose actors are the Chicano people. Under this collective focus all characters found in this book share a common feature, the social class they belong to: working class. Since Rivera does not want one single person as his protagonist, developed characters are not found here. We sometimes know their names and a brief period of their lives. It is possible that one of the characters has appeared in other stories or anecdotes but we have no way of getting this information. However, sometimes we have the impression that we are dealing with a character that we have met before. This is the feeling one gets with the boy expelled from school, who can be the same one who lived with Don Laíto and Doña Bone for a short time. The same thing happens with the boy who appears in the two frame stories, and although not much is known about him, the reader gets the feeling that he is not only a witness. In fact, through the words a lady said in "Under the house" we have some hints that he might be the son of the woman who used to get sick when she went shopping downtown. In any case, I believe that the author has created this unsolvable ambiguity on purpose, so as to provide a familiar atmosphere to the reader. You get the feeling that you are reading things that happen or could happen to the same person or to any of the members of this community. In spite of not being fully developed, they are considered as real people, and not stereotypes. As the reader gives form to this fragmentation, he can get a complete image of the protagonist, of the Chicano people as a whole.

From his position (isolation) in the two frame stories, the boy reviews the problems his social network has in relationship with the Anglos, the dominant social

group. They are seen as superior: "Even the Anglos liked them; ...." (30), "Then I'll start making those Anglo girls" (111). And in their interactions with the Chicanos they behave as if they were superior: "Here she is ... these damn people, always stealing something, always stealing. I've been watching you all along. Let's have that bag." (93), "Hey Mex .... I don't like Mexicans because they steal. You hear me?" (19), "Look, I don't mind playing with you, but some old ladies told mama that Mexicans steal and now mama says not to bring you home anymore. You have to turn back." (122), etc. Although the hardest discovery to assimilate is watching his people oppressed, not from outside as it happens mainly with the Anglos, but from inside. Their traditions, religion, culture, etc. stop them from progressing:

... el racismo y la explotación contra el pueblo chicano no es el único muro que le impide caminar hacia el progreso. Desde la perspectiva del protagonista, el pueblo también se autooprime y se convierte en víctima de sí mismo mediante nociones retrógradas respecto a la religión y a la existencia del bien y del mal. (Rodríguez 1988, 132)

This discovery is what is really painful. Little by little the boy will draw the conclusion that if they are treated like beasts it is their own fault for not being able to humanize the system which traps them and because of the image they offer to the Anglos. It is obvious when the kid in "It is painful" is expelled from school. He explicitly blames his own people for their powerlessness and for their behaviour: "It's really the fault of those ladies. On Sundays they sit out in front of the chicken coops and clean one another of lice .... Father is right in saying they're like monkeys in a zoo" (17). I agree with Menton in the statement made about Rivera's attitude towards his own people: " ... Rivera avoids the manichean trap of idealizing the Chicano and vilifying the Anglo ... The Chicanos are deceived, robbed, and even killed by their own people" (1972, 112). Their current situation is not only due to the Anglos being unfair, since they have within their own people examples of evil: D. Laíto and Dña. Boni. On making this discovery, the boy grows further apart from his people. At a distance, considering the most sordid aspects, he recognizes that they are responsible for most of the things that happen to them. The chaos and the vile atmosphere portrayed reach their climax just in the middle of the novel, that is in the 5th, 6th, and 7th story, the ones devoted to the religious faith. Religion is one of the themes that appears frequently, and all these central stories talk about it. It seems to be a sacred topic for the old people, and even if they are leading a miserable life on earth without deserving it, they take the suffering as God's will. The necessity of having a strong religious belief indicates the tradition imposed on them, and maybe a lack of confidence. They rely on getting their reward after death, a reason to maintain their traditions and beliefs. In any case, religion helps them to bear the suffering of their daily lives. However, in these three stories the boy questions the existence of God, reaching the clear conclusion that the Devil does not exist and, of course, neither does God. After overcoming his fear,

a boy dares to call the Devil ("It was a silvery night", fifth story). When he does not get an answer he thinks for the first time of the possibility of the non existence of God: "All I want to know is whether or not the devil actually exists. And if he doesn't, then one can doubt the existence of ... no, I'd better not say it" (43). In "... And the earth did not part" (sixth story) a further step has been taken. The boy cannot understand why God allowed his aunt and uncle to be sick, as he cannot understand why his father and little brother have got sunstroke. He thinks this sickness is God's fault because he does not do anything to prevent this exploitation. Suddenly, there is a moment in which he explodes and begins to swear. The most significant thing about this fact is that the earth did not swallow him. Instead of that happening, he experimented a new and refreshing feeling:

But, although he didn't look down, he then felt himself walking on very solid ground; *it was harder than he had ever felt it ...* He was experiencing a peace that he had never known before. It seemed to him that he had completely detached himself from everything" (55)

He has become free from religion, nothing ties him now to his magical beliefs. He knows that he cannot blame God for his miserable life any more, but the men who oppress his people. In "First Holy Communion" (seventh story), after feeling the terror created on the religion topic by the nuns and after watching the tailor scene, a change is produced in the boy's religious faith. It is obvious in his thoughts: "Every few minutes I recalled the scene at the taylor[']s shop, and out there, by myself, I took delight in recalling it. I even forgot that I had lied to the priest" (65). His sexual awakensness means that he is going beyond the limits established by religion, being responsible for his own life and for his own decisions. Once he has the knowledge and understands the people in his community he comes close to them.

There is an apprenticeship from the opening story to the last one. The boy in the frame stories gets to know the world in a very hard way, through different stages. Reflecting, as pointed out before, his awareness by means of the transition from the exterior physical and social environment to the interior self of the Chicano. From the social oppression and the hostile ground and weather, to the interior questioning of their habits, religion, sex, etc. In relationship with this transition Morales says the following: "Según avanza la narrativa la violencia queda eliminada hasta que finalmente el foco de acción ya no es exterior sino que se transforma en una violencia interior, ..." (1990, 155). The first story ("The children were victims") shows a very violent atmosphere when the boss shoots the little boy in order to frighten him: "... ; but when he squeezed the trigger he saw the little boy with a hole through his head. He didn't even jump like the deer; he just fell into the water like a dirty rag and the water became saturated with blood ..." (7). The description, being even more brutal than the shot, is pathetic. Towards the end of the book physical violence gives way to psychological violence, reaching its highest point in the central stories and in the last one "When we arrive". This is the most collective story, with the thoughts of most of

the characters of ... *and the earth did not part*. There, they express through interior monologue their worries and hopes, as Kanellos says:

Thus, through monolog, Tomás Rivera has taken the reader to the most private and intimate realms of the Chicano mind. He has allowed the reader to hear the Chicano when he is alone with his thoughts and when he is alone with his gods. (1985, 64)

Their problems clearly come from lack of money. They would like to have a little bit more to buy a new bed, to pay their loans, to buy a car and so as not to have to travel like cattle any more, etc. However, this collective need for material goods leads them to the awareness, although they do not think about it, that they will never get anywhere. The psychological violence is produced through repetition. In the last story they repeat so many times as a choir "when we arrive, when we arrive ...." (115) to make themselves believe in this idea. In the deepest of their hearts they are convinced that they are not going anywhere, they have understood that they have not choice. Repetition is the narrative device used by Rivera to describe something they know for sure, when they would like to be in a different situation, as in "It is painful" the boy repeats to himself: "Sure, man, sure they did" (19), "Sure they did" (21), "Sure they did, ... of course they did. ...Sure it is." (23), etc. He does not want to believe it, but he is completely sure that he has been expelled from school. As it can be noticed here we progress to the interior psychology of the Chicano through the interior monologue (Kanellos 1985, 64), and through the narrative device of repetition.

As we have mentioned before, the stories and the anecdotes lead to an awareness in the main character. But on the one hand, the stories mainly deal with kids and teenagers, considering everything from their point of view. Through their actions, thoughts, suffering, etc. the boy completes his personal quest. On the other hand we have the anecdotes, that although they also help in the boy's personal quest, they do not mainly deal with young people's personal experience. They are very short pieces on the entire Chicano society, seen from that point of view of the adult world. In relationship with the anecdotes, Kanellos maintains that there is a very close connection between them and the Chicano theater. He says:

Some of the sketches or miniatures in ... *y no se lo tragó la tierra* are similar in format, content and language to Chicano theater *actos*. They are dramatic capsules that present typical scenes and archetypal characters of Chicano life with humor, pathos and social satire". (1985, 57)

They show the wisdom of the Chicano folk: skepticism (26), the grandfather who knows what life is (57), etc. When the children appear in these anecdotes they always show their naivety, as the one who tears a button off his shirt to give it to his teacher (66), or the one who went into the barbershop (37). This attitude contrasts with the adults' behaviour: " ... these son-of-bitches are going to cut your hair or I'll have

it out with them ... " (122). At the same time it does help the main character's maturation, his epiphany. The last anecdote preceding "Under the house" is essential to understand the creative process involved in it and in ... *and the earth did not part*. What Bartolo, the trobadour, has done is exactly the same as what the boy has been doing throughout the novel and specially in "Under the house". His effort to unify and give form to everything places him in a higher position, the creator: "The boy, thus, represents an author *en potencia*. Through memory, he can recreate these experiences as an adult and immortalize them in literary form" (Olivares 1985, 71). Under the influence of this trobadour, the boy comprehends he has to " ... read his poems out loud because the voice was the love seed in the dark." (116), an idea related to what he says afterwards: "I would like to see all these people together" (126). The boy has followed the process used by Bartolo, using the people in town as his characters, and through them he has created himself: "Upon recreating the experiences of his people, the youngster creates himself in his discovery. He arrives at a communion with the 'other' which is the collective humanity of his people" (Olivares 1985, 70). Having in mind the circular structure of this novel: year, human life cycle, seasons, migrant cycle of traveling, etc., the collective atmosphere, and especially Bartolo, one can imagine most of the characters having gone through this trobadour stage in their childhood.

The boy's role, as it has been traced, has the purpose of achieving the capacity of putting things together. Through him Rivera communicates with his people, achieving his role of being a "documentor" as appeared in an interview: "I see my role more as a documentor of that period of time when the migrant worker was living without any kind of protection" (Bruce-Novoa 1980, 149). The feeling we get of this unnamed place as being a hive is solved in the last frame story. When the boy, with his capacity for gathering and synthesizing, mentally puts in order all the different fragments concerning the Chicanos. However, most of the things the reader gets to know in ... *and the earth did not part* come from the twelve stories and anecdotes, from the things that happened to the Chicano: the protagonist. These two formal perspectives constitute an ingenious mechanism in the structure, appropriate to achieve Rivera's goal: his community. I believe that Rivera's main contribution to his people is " ... not a community organization or political solution" (González-T 1989, 88) but to describe things as they are through a person belonging to this social group, and in this way make the reader understand the Chicano people.

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