MEXICO AND MEXICANS IN THE FICTION OF STEINBECK, MORRIS, TRAVEN, AND PORTER

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MEXICO AND MEXICANS IN THE FICTION OF
STEINBECK, MORRIS, TRAVEN, AND PORTER

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Troubled times in the world today make it seem profitable and fitting that American students of literature scrutinize nearby friendly nations and the attitudes adopted toward them by eminent contemporary American authors. The United States, in answer to the challenge of communism, should recognize the need for a satisfactory relationship with its closest neighbors. A country of paramount importance by virtue of its location, if nothing else, is Mexico.

Long considered a backward country, Mexico has taken great strides forward in politics, business, and culture in the past fifty years. Contributing factors to Mexican success have been the Revolution of 1910, wise leadership by native Mexicans, sustained policies of reform by political leaders of different parties, renovation in business and industry, and friendship with the United States.\(^1\)

In the past the United States attitude to Mexico has sometimes been that of the patronizing big brother who would lend a hand when he felt it beneficial to do so.

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Such a policy often has done harm to the opinions the Mexicans have formed of their neighbor to the north and actually has accomplished very little in the way of aid which, when it arrived, usually came in the form of investment, tourism, and temporary employment of day laborers along the borders. The relationship has now changed: Mexican economy is on its feet and rapidly growing, a fact the Mexicans can point to with pride. The United States is likewise in a new situation that calls for greater markets for American business, and needs to explore the possibilities of much closer business ties with Mexico on a more equal basis.

There are also those who look forward to extending a more intimate type of exchange, an exchange of cultures between Mexico and the United States. For some time the world has been conscious of the priceless archeological treasures of the Aztec and the Mayan civilizations. Few realize, however, how these ancient cultures have left their imprint on the art forms of the Mexico of today. The architecture, sculpture, mosaics, and murals being produced now owe a great debt to Mexico’s Indian ancestors.

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3 Banco Nacional, Mexico 1963, pp. 34-42.
5 Ibid., p. 124.
Although long admired for plastic arts, Mexico has not been noted for its production of literature worthy of international attention, a lack which can perhaps be attributed to the relatively small number of well educated readers there.\(^6\) Under the circumstances very little significant interchange of literature and literary interest has taken place. No Mexican fiction, with the possible exception of *Los de Abajo*, by Mariano Azuela, has reached a wide audience in the United States.\(^7\)

There has been, however, a growing interest in the overall Mexican scene for the past several decades, particularly the sociological aspect. Mexico is a country with a rapidly growing population streaming into the cities full of new industries, and away from the poor rural areas and agriculture.\(^7\) Each government in Mexico since the Revolution has attempted a new distribution of land and introduced new methods of farming in an attempt to revive or sustain agricultural production.\(^8\) A satisfactory solution has yet to be reached, and many of the small farmers have given up their land to seek jobs offered by factories and industries in the cities. With industrialization, a middle class is


emerging to fill the wide gap between the very small upper
class and the very large lower class. Perhaps the most
impressive progress is being made in education as a result
of the secularization of the schools.

In a country predominately Catholic, a feeling of
rebellion has welled up against the Church. This attitude
has been fostered by Mexican Catholics and not by Protestants
or other minority religious groups. The Mexican people
have begun to harbor an anti-Catholic view partly because
in the past the Catholic Church was one of the largest
and richest landowners in Mexico, and its wealth contrasted
unfavorably with the extreme poverty of most of the people.

Another cause of anti-clericalism, perhaps the most
important, is the unique position that religion has had in
the life of the individual Mexican. To the female, religion
was and still is a public function which she must particip-
pate in actively all her life. The male, on the other
hand, considers religion a personal thing and for the most
part refrains from public demonstration. The markedly
feminine aspect of Mexican Catholicism has, in effect,
resulted in its growing subservience to the Mexican govern-
ment, in which few or no women participate. These forces

9Walter E. Masters, M. D., Mexico: Ancient and Modern

10Brandenburg, The Making of Modern Mexico, pp. 177-183.

11Ibid., pp. 176, 188.
are bringing about marked changes in the family structure of the Mexican people and have been of great interest to the small literary circle in Mexico and the subject of several literary productions.\(^{12}\)

The purpose of this study is to investigate what seem to be the principal attitudes of Americans toward Mexico and Mexicans as expressed by four contemporary American authors, and to point out and evaluate salient features in their respective treatment of the subject. John Steinbeck, Wright Morris, Bernard Traven, and Katherine Anne Porter have been selected because of their literary stature, because of their familiarity with Mexico and its people, and because of their extensive use of the Mexican scene. In addition, each author represents a somewhat different attitude from the others, but taken as a group these writers seem to cover the most important manifestations of present-day American orientation toward Mexico.

\(^{12}\)Howard F. Cline, *The United States and Mexico* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953), p. 64.
CHAPTER II

JOHN STEINBECK, PROPAGANDIST AND MORALIST

John Steinbeck, the most famous of the writers to be considered in this study, has written numerous works of fiction depicting the paisano or Spanish-American half-breed of the California coast around Monterey. In addition he has one long book of non-fiction, The Sea of Cortez, which deals with his experiences and observations collecting marine biological specimens in the Gulf of Lower California. He also wrote the script for a documentary film called The Forgotten Village, a study of Mexican life. This film, produced in 1941 near Mexico City, tells a story of the conflict between modern medicine and primitive superstition in a Mexican village. In 1952 Steinbeck wrote a screenplay entitled Viva Zapata, which depicted the life and times of the Mexican leader Zapata. It is evident, then, that Steinbeck has spent considerable time in Mexico and has taken a very active and specific interest in the country and its people. He has, however, only one book-length story concerned directly with Mexico and Mexicans,

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2 Ibid., p. 143.
The Pearl. It first appeared in Woman's Home Companion in 1945 and was later published in 1947 by Viking Press, long after Steinbeck's reputation as propagandist for the unwashed migrant workers had been established. The Pearl might validly be considered the only fictional product of Steinbeck's rather extended and serious observation of Mexico and the Mexicans.

But the reader who expects to find an extended or penetrating sociological study of Mexico and Mexicans will be disappointed. The Pearl has a simple, parabolic quality that makes it more like a biblical story of mankind rather than a scientific study of a Mexican village.

The plot of The Pearl is concerned with a poor Mexican pearl diver, Kino; Juana, his wife; and Coyotito, their young son. This family resides in the town of La Paz, at the southern tip of Baja California, but as a unit may be considered symbolic of any family in any locale in the world. A misfortune befalls them: a scorpion stings Coyotito, necessitating immediate medical attention. The local doctor will not take the case, because he cares only for those who can pay well for his services. Faced with the possibility of the death of Coyotito, Kino sets out to obtain enough pearls to pay for the cure. In a short time he finds the

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3Ibid., p. 111.
4Ibid., p. 112.
largest, most beautiful pearl that has ever been seen in that area. This super-pearl may be considered a symbol of all the wealth and power a man could wish for in his lifetime. To Kino it means life for his son, a chance for his son's education, a new home, and freedom from poverty; and the doctor, upon hearing about Kino's discovery, immediately offers his services.

Kino's good fortune, however, soon changes to bad. His life is placed in jeopardy by thieves who attempt to steal the pearl. He goes to La Paz to sell his dangerous property as soon as possible, but the greedy buyers, members of an organized monopoly, try to cheat him and offer only a fraction of what he knows the great pearl to be worth. He decides to take his find to another city; but before he can get started, robbers attack and burn his home. In self-defense, he kills one of the robbers.

Desperately Kino and his family flee to the mountains for refuge; from there they plan to journey to seek a new life based on what the pearl will bring. They are pursued, however, by three men--thieves armed to kill. Kino and his family manage to elude their pursuers throughout the day, but by nightfall their enemies are only a short distance away. Like a wild animal at bay, Kino turns and kills all three men in the darkness. During the struggle, however, Coyotito cries out, and one of the thieves fires at the sound. Kino's son is killed by the random bullet. Kino
and Juana, bearing the body of Coyotito, return to La Paz. They go once more to the seashore and Kino throws the evil pearl back into the waters.⁵

The obvious lesson of this simple tale is to avoid love for material things and values. Instead, one should live close to nature and the earth and treasure simple virtues of home, family, and friends which are within the reach of every man regardless of his economic status. This is a message to all mankind, perhaps particularly America, where material possessions tend to be over-stressed.⁶

Nevertheless certain qualities of Mexico, her people, her culture, and her institutions are presented by a writer who has observed them at first hand and with sympathy. First of all there is the simple life of the primitive peasant and his family. These are the underdogs, the "los de abajo" of Mexican society, the forgotten and downtrodden peon often viewed with scorn and lack of concern by his more fortunate countrymen. Steinbeck presents Kino and his family as typical Mexican peasants, displaying the qualities of their class. Kino, like most of the peasants in Mexico, is of predominantly Indian ancestry. Generation after generation his forbears have been intimately tied to the land, to the fishing village, or to the mine. They

have slaved to maintain a bare existence often on rocky, unfriendly soil, and until quite recently have received few of the benefits of the economic progress of their country. A people of simple needs, they have sustained themselves by doing without any modern comforts and by seeking their pleasure and purpose in life in such simple human relationships as are fostered by the close-knit family and village culture.

In the culture which Steinbeck describes, the husband is the head of the household, the worker outside the home, and the one who makes the family's decisions. The wife is the organizer and overseer of the home itself. She is expected to take care of the family's needs in the household and keep it running smoothly without undue expense or fuss. Adulthood comes quickly to Mexican peasants. They marry at an early age, and rather casually acquire the responsibilities and burdens of a growing family. Grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters, often all live in the same small hut or certainly in neighboring structures and form a close-knit group that stand together against a threatening world. Essentially, they are a people caught between an Indian past, which clung to the soil and nature, and a modern, industrialized world with its stress on mechanization and material benefits.

Steinbeck's portrayal of the child and his place in the group may be open to question. Tito, a year-old infant,
is the center of his parents' world; most of their action and emotion is motivated by him. They frequently sacrifice for him and look upon him as the future of the family. This child-centered attitude has not been remarked by sociological observers; in fact, somewhat the contrary. The Mexican peons love their children, but in a Catholic country where large families are the rule, intense preoccupation with children and their distant future is the exception rather than the rule.⁷

The Church is perhaps the most important social as well as spiritual force in the life of the Mexican peasants, for they have incorporated into the Catholic religion many superstitions and practices from their Indian ancestors.⁸ Kino has his personal Song of the Family, and Juana sings an ancient three-note song; both celebrate security and safety from harm. The appearance of the scorpion brings a "Song of Evil" into Kino's mind. Juana repeats an ancient spell of magic in an attempt to guard against this evil and also utters a hasty Hail Mary.⁹ She prays for a pearl to buy the doctor's aid and not for God's aid in the recovery of the child. These simple peasants seem to rely as much

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⁹Steinbeck, The Pearl, pp. 3-6.
on their ancient songs and magic as on the Christian God. The village priest, if he represents the Catholic Church in Mexico, thinks only of the repairs needed for the cathedral. Steinbeck puts it thus:

It came to the priest walking in his garden, and it put a thoughtful look in his eyes and a memory of certain repairs necessary to the church. He wondered what the pearl would be worth. And he wondered whether he had baptized Kino's baby, or married him for that matter.\(^\text{10}\)

The Church, since the days of the Spanish conquest, has treated the simple peasant like a little child. It took the peasants' land and money and gave them in exchange a God who did little for them. When the priest comes to visit, Kino senses the presence of evil and distrusts the advice the priest gives him. It is Juana who states that she and Kino will now be married in the Church; the priest nods approvingly, now that he can see a fee for the ceremony. In fact Juana seems much more conscious of her religion than Kino, who hides his thoughts.\(^\text{11}\)

The Church, to Steinbeck's Mexicans, is little more than a place where they must go for marriages, baptisms, and funerals. The village beggars crowd the steps, sure of gaining alms from the worshippers, who always take money with them to buy the necessary spiritual services.

Steinbeck, as might be expected, exhibits an even more hostile attitude toward the wealthy and educated Mexicans.

\(^{10}\text{Ibid.}, p. 28.\)

\(^{11}\text{Ibid.}, pp. 35-36.\)
of La Paz, pointing out particularly their dishonesty and greed. The village doctor is an example. He is a greedy, corrupt man who tends the rich and lets the poor help themselves. He travels abroad each year, and keeps a mistress, yet he will not pay a house call to a peasant's thatched hut. He regards the peasants as unwashed animals, not fit for human companionship or compassion. The following passage summarizes the class feeling in the relationship between the peons and their masters.

Kino hesitated a moment. This doctor was not of his people. This doctor was of a race which for nearly four hundred years had beaten and starved and robbed and despised Kino's race, and frightened it too, so that the indigene came humbly to the door. And as always when he came near to one of this race, Kino felt weak and afraid and angry at the same time. Rage and terror went together. He could kill the doctor more easily than he could talk to him for all of the doctor's race spoke to all of Kino's race as though they were simple animals.\textsuperscript{12}

The merchants and pearl buyers of La Paz represent Steinbeck's conception of typical Mexican business men and their dishonesty. They cynically exploit the poor Mexicans and show no more consideration for their own people than they might show for foreigners. The business people regard Kino's pearl as mostly theirs. At best they expect to unload on him cheap and useless merchandise at a large profit. The pearl buyers are all members of the same firm but practice deception by seeming to outbid each other in competitive

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 12.
bargaining. This secret monopoly forces the poor pearl
divers to accept the best of the unfair bids offered.

Steinbeck's portrayal of the countryside is perhaps
the most vivid and impressive quality of the book. His
keen observation of nature is evident in the amount of
detail he lavishes on the setting: the beauty of the hot
sun rising out of the ocean, the birds that nest in the
trees and fly out over the water and inland to the foothills,
the beaches of yellow sand that are abruptly ended at the
water's edge by the shells and algae, the teeming life that
is hidden beneath the oily surface of the water, the thatched
huts on the hillsides apart from the village nestled by the
water's edge, the distant mountains that beckon to the
traveler yet afford so little shelter from the burning
sun, the dangers of the wilds such as animals, poisonous
trees, and scarcity of water, and the sandy soil that is
fit only for ants and scorpions. Steinbeck makes the fierceness and beauty of nature reflect the fierceness and beauty of life as it is lived in even this remote corner of the
world.

In general Steinbeck's picture of Mexico and her people
is unscientific, oversimplified, and even somewhat senti-
mentalized. It can be argued that he had to fit his material
to the needs of his simple parable, but as a result he has
detracted from a certain sense of purity and truthfulness
inherent in the story. It is difficult to accept the premise
that the simple Mexican peasant represents all that is good and that everyone else around him is bad, that civilization is all bad and that the primitive life close to nature is all good. Steinbeck seems to have fallen into his familiar rut of sentimentalizing the poor. He admires the simple and poor migrant worker, the farmer, the paisano, or the Mexican peon with few material needs and empathy for nature. Steinbeck distrusts the luxury and wealth offered by modern civilization. Kino and his family turn their backs on the evils of commerce; they are the good down-to-earth people; all others leave something to be desired.

Thus, Steinbeck's emphasis on the universal meaning of his parable weakens his presentation of life in Mexico. As the story progresses, the reader is convinced that the center lies in the message of the parable, a message addressed to the materialistic culture of a whole era rather than to a place. Mexico and her people in this story have the charm of the remote and the little known—a slight flavor of local color but no real sociological significance.

Steinbeck's rendition of life in Mexico, in fact, leaves out too much and seems inaccurate, especially in not taking into account a renascence of learning and social awareness.


14French, John Steinbeck, p. 142.
in Mexico of the last forty or fifty years. The reader gains little insight into the social life of the Mexican people. Steinbeck has given instead a series of events not commonly experienced in a Mexican's life and, because of the rapid movement of these events, has left out the common problems and experiences of normal everyday life. 'In Mexico today there is a growing awareness of the need for education, both by the rich and the poor. 15 Mexicans have become aware of the wide gap between the social classes, and attempts are being made to bring about a better understanding between various classes; ways of upgrading standards of living for all classes are being sought; and perhaps most important of all, Mexico is striving for unity and nationalism for its people. 16

It may be that in the future they will need to be reminded of certain traditional values and simple virtues, such as the family unit and the closeness of nature which Steinbeck advocates; but for the present there are few who would agree with him that the Mexican peon does not need to widen his horizons.

15 Tannenbaum, Mexico: The Struggle for Peace and Bread, pp. 154-172.
16 Ibid., pp. 52-80.
CHAPTER III

WRIGHT MORRIS, TOURIST

In contrast to John Steinbeck's somewhat propagandistic approach to Mexico and his interest in the natural and the primitive, those stories of Wright Morris set in Mexico reflect primarily the viewpoint of the casual but interested tourist. Morris is a Midwesterner, born in Central City, Nebraska, in 1910. Like many other Midwesterners of the twentieth century he left his old-fashioned small town and went to Chicago to live. During this period, he set out to explore America (including Mexico), and in his travels gained material which he later used for his first novel, My Uncle Dudley (1942). Morris acquired an education at Pomona College, 1930-1933, and then journeyed to Europe.¹ At this time he had no idea of becoming a writer; but in 1934, while in Paris, he made the acquaintance of people interested in writing. He states, "It was the atmosphere and the writers that did it."²

It seems strange that Morris, an author of fifteen books and winner of the National Book Award in 1956 for


²Sam Bleufarb, "Point of View: An Interview with Wright Morris," Accent, XIX (Winter, 1959), 34.
The Field of Vision, should remain relatively unknown to the American reading public. He has won almost unanimous critical praise, he has never lacked for publishers, he has occupied chairs at various colleges, he has gone on paid trips abroad to produce travel articles; and yet only a few of his countrymen are actually listening to what he has to say, for he has never become so popular as many of his contemporaries in the new generation of novelists after Faulkner and Hemingway. 3

During his later career Morris has lived in various parts of the United States, and has now finally settled in Wayne, Pennsylvania. He thus joins a select group of 20th century American writers who have followed a course of flight and exile from their homeland, the Midwest. Such artists as Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Willa Cather all left early but remained rooted imaginatively in their homeland or returned to it in fiction at a later date. Morris's first five novels are set in the Middle West, but much of his later work has reflected in its setting his extensive travels—especially sojourns in Mexico. 4

The selection to be discussed in this study, Love Among the Cannibals, published in 1957, takes place in


California and in Mexico. This novel is perhaps basically a comedy of manners and morals. It might even be called a Hollywood production—tough, sexy, and cynical. It is told in the first person by Earl Horter, a middle-aged Hollywood bachelor and one half of the popular song writing team of Horter and Macgregor. Earl lives with Macgregor, his wartime buddy, who is also middle-aged and unmarried. These two characters have a kind of affectionate but manly and thoroughly respectable attachment which provides one really warm and believable human relationship in a book where not much else seems very well motivated. The boys, if one can call forty-year-old adolescents boys, are nevertheless vaguely dissatisfied with the sterile life they are leading, and Earl particularly is unhappy about the sea of clichés (both emotional and mental) into which they have submerged themselves in order to compose catchy tunes with banal words that will bemuse screaming teen-agers and the general mass of intellectually impoverished Americans. It is incredible that Morris as a critic of the American scene should identify himself completely or even in part with Horter, nor does he intend the reader to do likewise; yet many of Horter's observations have an irony and wit far

beyond the rather disagreeable cliché-ridden impression he gives at the onset. In fact, even at the end Horter remains something of a moral anomaly.

Anyway, Horter and Macgregor are under contract with a Hollywood studio to write a Latin-American musical. They spend their time on the beach soaking up sunshine and popular clichés. One day Mac meets Billie Harcum, a small blonde "canny belle" from Memphis who would like to become a torch singer. She is apparently meant to be typical of the scheming predatory female, who hides her dark purposes under cover of a career and an overly prudish and exaggerated but obviously cheap virtue in sexual matters. That night, at a party, Horter meets the statuesque and sensual Eva Baum, whom he calls "the Greek," because she resembles Venus de Milo. With almost no preliminaries he launches into a love affair with this uninhibited, amoral UCLA graduate student. The Greek, apparently meant to be contrasted with Billie Harcum, is gloriously de-glorified woman—unashamed, basic, uncalculating, cannibalistic, even animalistic. Horter, despite his age and somewhat jaded frame of mind, is completely swept away by his sudden and fiery love-making, which Eva's baby-sitting duties interfere with. He therefore persuades Mac, Billie, and the Greek to take an automobile trip to Mexico for two weeks; supposedly he and Mac will grab off some first hand atmosphere for writing a musical with a Mexican setting; also he looks forward to
escaping the phony world of Hollywood, and fleeing to a real
world of exotic, glamorous, languorous Mexico where his love
can proceed unfettered and unobserved by all who might dis-
approve.

He plans for the party to live in a friend's villa in
Acapulco, that charming tourist's paradise. When the travelers
arrive, they are somewhat surprised to find the villa only
partially completed and lacking conveniences either modern
or ancient. The place is a shell, as empty as all great
expectations. Their plush car (a gift from the movie studio)
they have abandoned in a ditch on the outskirts of the city;
later it is gradually and methodically stripped by the cour-
teous and delighted natives. The four tourists soon find
themselves completely dependent on the Mexican caretaker
and his family. Soon, also, a voracious and obliging Mexican
taxi driver comes to their assistance. They forget the
tiresome details of existing in a foreign land and devote
their time (as in California) to making love and lying on
the beaches. The musical has little place in this scheme.

Horter is more troubled by the possibility of losing his
girl friend when he finds that, in the nude, she has paddled
out to a yacht commanded by an elderly but lecherous
biologist. Also, the Greek (alias Eva) and Billie, being
exact opposites, do not like each other and a cat fight is
brewing. Operating as only a canny Southern Belle can, Billie
lures Mac into a marriage which brings on him an attack of
indigestion so acute that he passes out in agony. The Greek absconds with the biologist; but before departing she ties Billie to the bed and covers her pretty little body with the contents of a chamberpot. Horter is left with nothing but memories of a glamorous fortnight and the vague hope of a reunion with his roguish love. Mac and Billie set out wearily and resignedly upon such a shaky (and probably brief) married life as both Hollywood and America have become famous for.

Critics have said much about Morris's treatment of the Hollywood version of love and sex in this novel and his insight into the phony sentimentality which clothes much of America's attitude toward love and sex. However, Love Among the Cannibals has confused Morris's critics. Apparently they are not certain whether to accept the novel as serious comedy or mere comic entertainment. Morris's ardent admirers regard Love Among the Cannibals as a wry and humorous commentary on the American image of love and sex as glamorized and sentimentalized by Hollywood. They likewise contend that Morris regards love as an education, a freeing of psyche from the clichés that have ruled it.

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Others, who hold a skeptical viewpoint, feel that Morris has failed to define his problem clearly by setting up no acceptable standards as to the fundamentals that are left after love has supposedly stripped away all falseness. Love Among the Cannibals has not been ranked generally as one of Morris's better works such as The Works of Love (1952), Man and Boy (1951), The Deep Sleep (1953), The Huge Season (1954), The Field of Vision (1956), Ceremony in Lone Tree (1960), and Cause for Wonder (1964).

Before consideration of the Mexican elements and attitudes of Morris in Love Among the Cannibals, it is pertinent to remark that Morris has been an on-the-spot observer of the Mexican scene at least four times and possibly more. On one occasion he spent the fall and winter (1954) in Mexico, where he began The Field of Vision. In the winter of 1958 he lived in Mexico while working on Ceremony in Lone Tree. During the fall of 1959 he went back to Mexico to do a travel article for Holiday magazine. This article contains witty and poetic observations reminiscent of certain passages in Love Among the Cannibals. In the article, Morris tries to analyze the reasons for returning to Mexico and the appeal Mexico has for the tourist:

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11 Ibid., pp. 13-14.
Mexico had everything and one came for it. The spectacular vistas, the tropical beaches, the low hot country, the high cool country, the women of Guadalajara, the tequila of Jalisco, the bargains in leather, weaving and silver, the murals of Orozco and Rivera, the ruins of La Venta, Monte Alban, and Mitla, the fear of death by taxi and bottled water, the unexamined idols behind undiscovered altars. For this and then something one comes to Mexico—but is it why one comes back?

To find an answer to it is why I am back.

Morris goes on to point out the sights and incidents that for him represent Mexico and its interest: the young boy who scrubs away the polish on cars so that the dust and sunshine can have their enervating effect on intruders from the north; the slow tempo of life in the bush country; the contrasts between the old and new ways of life, between the barbaric and the gentle, between wealth and poverty, between scenery and people; the gusto of life seen not only through the eyes but breathed into the lungs and through pores of the skin.

The functional importance of Mexico in Morris's slender and rather banal story, though at once not obvious, is nonetheless undeniable. To the phony world of Hollywood, Mexico is a contrast and a lesson. In *Love Among the Cannibals*,

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13 Ibid., pp. 52-63.

14 In *The Field of Vision*, published one year before *Love Among the Cannibals*, Morris had also used a Mexican setting—specifically the bullring; but the interest in this novel is not directed in any way toward Mexico and its people. Marcus Klein, *After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century* (Cleveland and New York, 1964), p. 239.
Morris has presented a lively and true picture of Mexico as seen by the American tourist, preoccupied with personal concerns and bored by the attitudes and mores of his own culture. To him Mexico is a place one can escape tiresome, puritanical conventions and live in simple glamor, primitive maybe, but free of the clichés of a mass produced society. This search for reality or simplicity is, after all, what Morris seems to advocate for modern man in Love Among the Cannibals, a getting down to the fundamentals which, for some reason, can be best accomplished in another country where obnoxious social pressures are non-existent.

In presenting this attitude, Morris purposely or not has encompassed the emotional responses of many Americans who have visited Mexico or considered it a possibility for their vacation. Hortex, the narrator, reacts to scenes and incidents as a tourist. He in no way represents Morris's carefully reasoned, sociological observations. He and his party set out for Mexico lightheartedly oblivious to visas, vaccinations, and the like. The corruption of border officials, notorious in all but a few countries of the world, permits them to avoid a dilemma. Comments indicate a semi-humorous, sarcastic, and somewhat inappropriately puritanical disapproval of this official laxity.

15Augie March of Saul Bellow's The Adventures of Augie March did some roving in Mexico, but Bellow has little to say about Mexico or Mexicans per se.
Far to the south we could see the lights of Nogales, where we planned to cross the border, and Mac relied on the authorities to save him from himself. But they were very gracious. They made it inadvisable to observe the law. To have turned back would have been an insult to them and to Mexico. For a slight consideration we received our visas, the address of a man who would vaccinate the ladies, then we exchanged our dollars for pesos, and entered Mexico.

The first day in exotic, glamorous Mexico does not measure up to expectations of the junketeers. Their visions of romance and carefree pleasure are seriously but not fatally blighted when they contract dysentery—widely and affectionately known among Americans and Mexicans as "la turista." Horter wryly details their failure to observe warnings against the exotic fruits and vegetables of Mexico:

In the mountains near Guaymas an Indian woman sold Mac some pink bananas, with a sharp, wild flavor, along with cups of shaved ice sprinkled with syrup from Wildroot hair tonic bottles. That took care of me and Mac. That took care, I mean to say, of everything.

We ate the bananas, then sipped the ice the way you kiss girls in the white-slave fiction, knowing we would soon come down with something as a keepsake. And we did. Mac came down in Guaymas. Billie Harcum came down in Mazatlan. She had guessed it would happen, sooner, or later, and had brought with her a book by Norman Vincent Peale on the Practical Ways to Happier and Healthier Living. She read part of it to Mac, so he was sick longer than usual.

I put off coming down until the Greek, who was sick in Tepic, was on her way up. That was in Guadalajara, where I had looked forward to a wonderful night.17

17 Ibid., pp. 139-140.
When the travelers recover, they still look forward to soaking up some of the romantic atmosphere of Mexico. But what they actually get is a set of trumped up gimmicks made for the tourists. For example, during their overnight stop near Guadalajara, Horter observes a troubador strumming his guitar beneath a latticed window. This musician, tiring of unproductive labor, inquires whether Horter or his friends have any requests; thus his amorous vigil will result in something more solid than sweet sighs or warm glances. Horter suspects that solid financial fare was in his mind from the beginning.

Horter, on several occasions, faces acts of thievery and extortion practiced by Mexicans upon timorous tourists. These experiences agree with accounts that Americans bring back from south of the border and reinforce the comfortable American notion that all Mexicans are thieves. The first peccadillo involves their car, which Horter has to rescue from some native boys:

... in the dawn light I watched two little Indians take the hubcaps off our car, then sit on the fenders waiting for us... while I bargained with the boys about the hubcaps three or four others washed and polished the car, including in their fee, as one of them pointed out, the return of the hubcaps to the wheels.18

Made uneasy by this experience, they deem it wise to tip liberally the menials at their hotel for services unrendered or poorly rendered.

18 Ibid., pp. 144-145.
The major larceny takes place in Acapulco and involves again the car, which Horter has driven into a deep ditch crossing one of the main thoroughfares and has had to abandon. Before he and Mac have a chance the next day to salvage their luggage and set about repairs, thieves have begun dismantling the car by first removing the wheels; without wheels it will be going nowhere, and they partake at leisure. Señor Eroza, the caretaker of the unfinished villa which the group occupies, casually mentions this disastrous defalcation as a normal and expected occurrence, even inevitable. After all, what does a small incident like losing one's damaged car matter when unimaginably wealthy tourists come to a foreign country? Eroza's attitude seems to be "share and share alike": Mexicans share their country with tourists; so the tourists should expect to share what they have with Mexico. Horter is stunned but manages to achieve something of Señor Eroza's stoical acceptance:

"They have taken the wheels?" I said.
In Acapulco wheels were hard to find. Good wheels with wire spokes were perhaps in demand.... Desperation makes me calm. Indeed, they were in demand, I said. Where would I go to buy them?
...I became even calmer. "There is a reward," I said, "to the man who will sell me the wheels."
That did not surprise him (Señor Eroza). I could see that he considered it sensible. "When I go for the eggs," he said, "I will mention there is a reward."

..."As for the top--" he began.
"The top?" I echoed.
A hole had been cut in the top. With such a top, it was a mistake to lock the doors. They had gone through the top to see why the doors were locked. It being none of his business he had not looked through the hole himself.¹⁹

American readers who place cars above family, country, and even God, may find this passage excruciating; and Morris uses this car-worship to symbolize an interesting development. Horter's reported attitude on this matter shows an unexpected, un-American change. He suddenly begins to realize the car is no longer theirs; its real lack of import begins to dawn on him:

Mac said, "What'll they do with just the wheels?" "Sell them back to us," I answered. The moment I said it I knew they wouldn't. They would keep the wheels and add the car to them. The idea was so crazy, once it crossed my mind, I knew it was right. [italics mine].²⁰

Later, in the presence of the rightful owners, opportunists politely continue their work, and by the time Horter leaves Acapulco, they are reassembling their car, leaving off the inessentials that other strippers might covet. Thus the stripping of Horter's car suggests the stripping of his false values.

Another form of relief work is carried on by the helpful cab driver, Señor Carrillo. Experienced in the ways of tourists, he welcomes Horter and his party into his practiced hands, and fleeces them. They rely on Señor Carrillo to provide transportation and to bargain for their

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 168-169. ²⁰Ibid., p. 175.
food and drinks. Naturally, according to Señor Carillo, the wealthy tourists cannot bear the social onus of living like natives; so the shop owners get their share of the tourists' money as well as the major-domo.

The Eroza family, who tend the villa, evidently are more upstanding examples of the native populace. Horter notes especially their typically Mexican attitude toward modernization and sanitation. It is a "mañana" attitude. The unfinished building, unpaved streets, and ditches for the water pipes best express the "any day now" outlook on life. The villa, lent to Horter, is devoid of windows, electricity, showers, water, plumbing, and doors. The Erozás vow that any day now these things will come into being, just as the streets will be paved and water piped down from the mountains; but they seem content that what they have now will suffice as it has sufficed in the past. Horter describes the dirt and filth the Erozás live in, the broken-down bed infested with bugs, and the animals that share human dwellings.

Horter observes, with some wonder and a vague disquiet, that the Eroza family is a very stable unit. The Erozás possess for him a certain romantic appeal partially as a result of their name, which suggests the term "erotic." Horter sees the relationship between the husband and wife as an example of a primitive, fundamental type of sexual relationship which he thinks himself to be enjoying with the Greek. Señora Eroza reminds Horter of a primitive
goddess of love or perhaps a statue of the mother earth. She is as tall as the Greek, a massive, dark woman, a symbol of woman accepting womanhood, looming around ready to be penetrated. When Horter first arrived, Señora Eroza shows him to his room and stands with a lamp placed upon her head. On two other occasions she is described as an idol:

The massive Señora Eroza sat like an idol before her own house.  

Señora Eroza, a cigarette between her lips, her great bust strewn with ceremonial ashes, sat upright with the smallest of her brood wide-eyed in her lap.

Throughout Horter's stay at the house Señora Eroza is non-committal about what goes on among the tourists as if convinced that everyone has a right to pursue life and love in his own manner; she is satisfied with what she has, an attentive husband and a house full of children.

Señor Eroza is a tall, thin, rather debilitated Mexican, who appears older than his spouse. Perhaps his energies have been sapped by his attempts to satisfy the massive, mother-image, Señora Eroza; for their home is cluttered with children. He is more observant than his wife about what the tourists do and how they act. On at least one occasion he shows that he is not entirely unaffected by the immodesty of Horter and his consort.

21 Ibid., p. 162.  
22 Ibid., p. 216.
Still smiling, still holding the child, he turned from me to the house, bowed, and stopped smiling. I turned to see the Greek standing in the doorway, combing her hair. A celluloid dream of the tropics, she had slipped on her bra, her shorts, and put on the earrings with the green stones. She made quite an impression on us both, but on me it was favorable. Señor Eroza saw a woman who had failed to put on her clothes.

"Her clothes are wet," I said. "She went for a swim." A false smile on his face, he turned to gaze at the yard.  

It is never clear to Horter whether Eroza feels lust or mere shock when, on another occasion, he sees the Greek asleep on the bed in the nude, but Horter knows that Eroza brags of Yucatecan ancestry, which rather unaccountably gives him sanitary and moral claims not available to other Mexicans. His bragging about his country is reminiscent of most Americans.

He had the Yucatecan nose, and would keep it clean, but his eyes came from the islands and would lead to trouble.  

Horter puts his general impression thus:

while Señor Eroza talked he crouched like an Indian, his chin between his knees. With his long hooked beak he resembled a bird, one of the buzzards with his crown balding, shifting his weight from claw to claw as he perched on his post.  

The Eroza children play only a very minor role in the story. They run around half-clothed and are not bothered by seeing the Greek's perfectly tanned body in the nude, but are confused by Horter, whose buttocks are as pale as those of a dead man and rather formidable.

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23 Ibid., p. 169.  
24 Ibid., p. 216.  
25 Ibid., p. 216.
In this fictional treatment of Mexico and its inhabitants, Morris has utilized mainly the surface appearances that are often remarked by tourists. The country is not rendered in depth; Morris has no such intention. Since his novel deals with romance, both false and real, Morris makes his hero adopt a tourist's typically romantic attitude and expect the young lover singing to his love beneath her window. Mexico is the foreign country clothed in mystery and romance, yet Americans in Mexico are quick to notice physical discomfort and to compare Mexico invidiously with their own country. Morris, through Sorter, shows the basic distrust Americans have for an economy based on the bargaining system. He points out the American conviction that foreigners everywhere fleece the American tourist at every opportunity. Tipping in a foreign country is considered downright robbery, whereas at home it may be no worse than annoying. In emphasizing thievery in Mexico, Morris has perhaps been a bit extravagant. Mexicans have no North American monopoly on the art of taking what belongs rightfully to someone else.

The native Mexican family in *Love Among the Cannibals* receive only limited characterization. They are neither workers in the city nor farmers in the country. They occupy a level in between and are therefore difficult to place in the sociological structure of Mexico. Any information concerning them, sketchy as it is, is obtained only in brief encounters
between the tourists and the family who attempt to solve the tourists' problems. It could of course be argued that brief acquaintance does not foster deep insight into the family structure of a foreign people.

Morris's description of the scenery is less impressive than his treatment of people. Unlike most tourists, Hortex can see little (or at least he says little) of the picturesque Mexican countryside. He becomes only slightly lyrical about the beaches and light-ringed Acapulco bay at night, and scoots through the truly gorgeous scenery around Guadalajara and the Mexican mountains without so much as a word of appreciation. He carries no camera, and haunts no views.

Nevertheless, in his reaction to the people and their mores, Hortex presents a fairly accurate account of Mexico as seen by most American tourists. If the reader is willing to accept Mexico as a glamorous but uncomfortable, primitive-modern world the tourist envisions it to be, then one will have to agree that Morris has done it justice in Love Among the Cannibals.
CHAPTER IV

BERNARD TRAVEN, EXPATRIATE

Of the four novelists considered in this study, only Traven has chosen Mexico as his home and still lives there. The actual identity of this man has been a tantalizing mystery in literary circles for the past thirty years. Traven's aversion to publicity and his policy of silence concerning his life has given rise to various rumors and speculations about him. Some claim that he is actually Fred Marut, who was a member of the unsuccessful 1920 Bavarian revolt and escaped execution. Another theory is that Traven is Benrich Traven, a Scandinavian, who was in Berlin in 1920 and took part in an anarchist-syndicalist movement under Rudolf Rocker. Others believe that Traven

1 The Bavarian revolt was instigated by German communists who sought to set up a Republic of Soviets in place of the Hoffmann government recognized by the Weimar Republic. The revolt failed because the communists lacked the military power to combat government forces sent against them. Many Bavarians, guilty and innocent, were killed in the conflict. Erick Eyck, A History of the Weimar Republic, translated by Harlan P. Hanson and Robert G. L. Vaile (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 78-79.

2 It was a labor movement to bring the country under socialism and a rebellion against capitalists and militarism. The revolutionary forces were made up of workers who followed the leadership of Independents, Revolutionary Stewards, and Communists. The troops of the Republic put down the revolt. Rudolf Copar, Failure of a Revolution: Germany in 1918-1919, (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 197-215.
is a deserter from the United States navy or a Negro who fled
the United States to escape criminal prosecution. Specula-
tion has been rife: Traven is a leper who shuns society; he is a Communist spy; he is not just one writer but several
using his name; he is possibly a woman, a German, or even
a Mexican; he is any one of a number of missing persons.

Life and Time magazines have carried articles and photo-
graphs reportedly identifying Traven. The most widely
accepted opinion is that Traven is an American, born in the
Middle West (probably Chicago) in the 1890's or early 1900's,
of Swedish parents. He had very little formal education and
at a very early age probably went to sea and then settled
in Mexico. His true name is Bedrick Traven Torsvan or Bedrick
Traven Torsvan Torsvan. It is believed in Mexico that Traven
is the nom de plume of a restaurant owner in Acapulco whose
real name is Hal Groves. Mr. Groves admits to being Traven's
secretary and avers that Traven writes his works in English.

Strong opposition to the idea of Traven's identity as
an American has been led by German critics, who say that Traven

3Hubert Jannach, "The B. Traven Mystery," Books Abroad,
XXXV (Winter, 1961), 28.

4William W. Johnson, "Who is Bruno Traven," Life, XXII
(March 10, 1947), 13.

5"Traven, B.," Twentieth Century Authors, 1st sup.

is a German.

German critics, however, never doubted that Traven's works were written in German and that his background is German. A text [sic] analysis conclusively confirms their view. Traven's frame of reference is consistently German or European and his use of certain regionally limited words seems to indicate that he probably came from South Germany or from some German-speaking locality of former Austria-Hungary. His intimate familiarity with European postwar conditions is in marked contrast to his superficial knowledge of American life. When he uses English, it is most unidiomatic, . . . when the German works [Traven's works translated into German] contain jokes or sayings that do not lend themselves to translation, the American works conveniently omit them or render them literally, leaving the reader thoroughly perplexed.  

It is pointed out also that all of Traven's fifteen books were published first in Germany; for example, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was printed there in 1927, but the first American edition did not appear until 1934. Obviously the mystery of B. Traven has not been solved.

Traven's novels have been quite successful in Europe but have received scant notice in the United States. *The Death Ship: The Story of an American Sailor* (1934) sold 1,500,000 copies in Russia and 250,000 copies in Germany before it was banned by the Nazis. It has been translated into twenty different languages. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1935) was published in twelve countries, and has enjoyed a huge sale. In the United States, however, the total sales for both these novels up to 1938 did not amount

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8 Ibid., p. 29.
to more than 6,000 copies. Public apathy can perhaps be attributed to a lack of spurious bookjacket advertising, which Traven has expressly forbidden, as well as to a certain naturalistic harshness that repels the avid reader of adventure stories. Also the locale and characters may have little appeal for the city dweller, the sophisticate, or the prospective tourist.

Traven's books reveal him as a man who has lived long in remote areas of Mexico and who knows the natives well. The novel under consideration shows to advantage its author's unrefined but powerful technique and has been chosen for this study because of the notice bestowed upon both book and author as a result of an excellent movie production in 1948. Of even more import is the vivid, true-to-life rendition of Mexico and its people.

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre is above all an adventure story. It is morally and secondarily a modern re-telling of Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale"; and incidentally it is a rather violent indictment of the Roman Catholic Church. The action begins in Tampico, the oil boom town, at a time when the oil rush is beginning to subside. Prices are high and even Americans out of work are having to beg for money in order to eat. By law jobs must be given to the local natives first; then if there is an urgent need for extra

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labor, a gringo might be lucky enough to procure it. Dobbs is a down-and-out American laborer and adventurer, sleeping under the stars when he cannot pay for the dubious comfort of a cot in the vermin-ridden Oso Negro Hotel. Tiring of his drab existence, Dobbs sets out to look for work in the oil fields accompanied by another dispossessed American named Moulton. Their journey takes them into the jungle where fierce tigers abound, and on this trip they are joined by a native Indian who believes that the tigers will not harm white men and he will be safe as long as he travels with them. The Americans at first think the Indian is a lookout for bandits, but finally decide that he is harmless. Their journey proves to be futile, however, and they return once more to Tampico and part company.

A few days later, Dobbs finds work rigging an oil camp; Pat McCormick, the contractor, works his men from before dawn to nearly midnight so that he will save most of the money from the contract for himself and not pay very much to the workers. Curtin, a fellow American, works with Dobbs on this job. At the completion of the camp, the two men return to Tampico and have to waylay McCormick one day to force him to pay them all their money. Dobbs returns to the Oso Negro and finds three Americans talking about gold, always an intriguing topic to the moneyless bum. Howard, an old and irremediable prospector, is telling about his experiences, and his account of the legend of the Green Water Mine awakens Dobbs'
lust. Dobbs talks it over with Curtin, and they decide to join forces with Howard and go prospecting in the Sierra Madre. Howard is willing to invest $200 in the venture, but Dobbs and Curtin have practically nothing to contribute. Dobbs, however, wins a hundred pesos on a lottery ticket, and Curtin wires a friend in San Antonio who owes him a hundred dollars. He receives two hundred dollars instead. The next day the three Americans set out by train for Durango. They carefully search maps for unexplored regions, decide on a remote area of the Sierra Madre, and buy burros to carry their packs, which contain their tools and supplies. They disguise themselves as American hunters of game.

On the journey into the mountains, Dobbs and Curtin find out how hard it is to manage a pack train and to find traces of gold. Without the aid of the old prospector, Howard, the younger men are helpless. Finally, when it seems the mountains have become impenetrable, Howard tells them they have found gold, not a tremendous mother lode, but a place where they can earn a good living. The three Americans begin a labor which will last for nearly ten grueling months, labor so exhausting that many times Dobbs and Curtin are ready to give up. Howard, the good experienced prospector, acts as a referee to some of the quarrels that arise in camp. Howard warns them of the dangers of their project: it can turn partner against partner, and the most
difficult part of the whole business is to get back to civilization where gold acquires its value in the first place. Among the obstacles are bandits, racketeers, rural police, and government officials.

The hard work, the danger, and the nervous need for companionship convert these men into something like a human brotherhood. This occurrence is most important in changing the tale from an ordinary adventure story into an interesting psychological study of man, and thus lifts the account out of the ranks of mediocre fiction. Each man performs a certain portion of the work and at the end of each day the profit is split equally among the three men. They even share their past lives and their hopes for the future among themselves, thus revealing their strengths and their weaknesses as perhaps they could never have done in the civilized world they have fled. Howard understands human nature and concedes that only a socialistic arrangement will work in their situation. Curtin agrees, and a warm friendship grows up between him and Howard. Dobbs is the weakest of the three men, an incipient capitalist hungering for wealth and the cause of friction on several occasions at the mine. Thus Traven seems to suggest socialism as the cure for a world he believes corrupted by capitalism, and reinforces his idea by detailing what happens to Dobbs, a
capitalist, and at the end of the story displaying the
communal system which he believes (correctly or incorrectly)
to exist among the Indian natives and mestizos of the remote
Sierra Madres.

One day toward the end of the prospectors' stay in
the mountains, another American adventurer named Lacaud,
follows Curtin back to their camp from an Indian village
where Curtin trades for supplies. The three partners view
Lacaud with suspicion: Possibly he is an informer for the
government or emissary of a group of bandits. Lacaud knows
that the three Americans are not hunters, as Curtin has said.
The partners confer and decide to leave the site as soon
as possible. Lacaud persuades them to stay on another week,
convinced that he can find the big vein of gold on the moun-
tain. Bandits arrive, however, to ruin this plan. Lacaud
identifies them as notoriously cruel villains being desperately
sought by the government police. The bandits, proclaiming
Christ their patron, have mercilessly slaughtered people
in a train hold-up and then set fire to the train, killing
many others. The Americans know they cannot expect any
mercy from the bandits. They hold out against the siege
until a party of soldiers arrive and attack the bandits, who
scatter and flee across the foothills.

Howard, Curtin, and Dobbs dig up their hidden shares
of the gold, and leave Lacaud at the mine. They plan to go
by pack train to Durango and then to Tampico by rail. One evening at a camp on the trail, four Indians ask Howard to aid a small boy who has fallen in the water and bring him back to consciousness. Howard saves the boy, but the natives, in order to repay him, insist he live with them as an honored guest for several weeks. Curtin and Dobbs decide to go on with the gold, and the two promise Howard that they will put his share in the bank. The credibility of the story seems to weaken at this point. It is hard to believe that Howard would agree so readily to handing over his share of the gold after he has warned his partners on a number of occasions about how gold destroys all trust in other people. Howard, for no understandable or explored reason, violates his own advice and, by giving Curtin and Dobbs his share, precipitates the disastrous events that follow. With Howard and his earthy wisdom gone, Dobbs lets his greed get the better of him. He shoots Curtin twice and leaves him for dead in the wilderness. On arriving outside of Durango with the pack train, Dobbs turns off the highway to rest in the shade but finds the refuge holds three fugitive bandits. These robbers attack Dobbs for his donkeys, cut off his head, and bury him in a cornfield. They carelessly pour the gold dust on the ground, thinking it is sand used to make the skins weigh more and thus cheat the buyers. The bandits go to the mountains to sell the burros and furs at the first village they can find with
enough money to pay for them. The murderers, however, choose the wrong village to sell their stolen property. The mayor recognizes the burros and knows whom they belong to. He also knows that the clothes they are wearing belonged to one of the Americans. The villagers hold the bandits and send a party to look for Dobbs. They find Dobbs' body and return to tell what has happened. The mayor hands the desperadoes over to the Federal authorities, who conveniently shoot them on their trip back to their garrison.

In the meantime Curtin, badly wounded but not dead, has been found by a native and brought into a small village. Howard finds him there, and learns what happened. Then when Howard goes to see about their belongings, which are being held for the Americans, he finds the gold is gone for good. The tale ends with Howard and Curtin planning to stay among the natives and act as doctors to the sick, for Howard is regarded as a very important and distinguished man among the Indians.

Critics have been generous in their praise of Traven's The Treasure of the Sierra Madre. They point out that Traven has handled an old plot in such a fresh manner that it seems to be an original story.10 Nearly all commentators agree that The Treasure of the Sierra Madre is a highly entertaining

book, powerful, earnest in effect, clear and simple in style. At least one critic has declared the work to contain perhaps as deep an insight into Mexican psychology as one will find on the subject in any other modern work of fiction.

Two later novels by Traven, *The Bridge in the Jungle* (1938) and *The Rebellion of the Hanged* (1952), also exhibit Traven's understanding of the people of Mexico. *The Bridge in the Jungle* deals primarily with rural Indian natives and their manner of life in the remote jungle—their customs, their beliefs, their acceptance of hardship and death. The novel also touches upon the corrupting effect of American ideals and progress in this primitive region. The central incident is the accidental death of a young Indian boy, and Traven handles his subject with lyricism and skill.

*The Rebellion of the Hanged* portrays the Indian workers in a slave-labor lumber camp in southern Mexico. Traven paints a graphic picture of the cruelty the peons suffer before finally rising against their masters and repaying them in a horrible manner. The rebels eventually join the triumphant forces of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Traven

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13 Helen Neville, "The Noble Savage," *Nation*, CXLVII (August 6, 1938), 133.
dwells much on violence and torture, which he bluntly describes in gruesome detail—a trademark of his fiction. As a psychological study of native Mexicans, however, this novel seems too much oversimplified and macabre to be convincing.¹⁴

In *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Mexico and its people are definitely of secondary interest to both author and reader, yet in no other work does Traven's knowledge of the people and the country show to better advantage. First of all the reader receives an account of the experiences and attitudes of American adventurers in Mexico. Jobs are for the native Mexicans; and then, if any are left over, Americans have a chance. An American must be careful what type of profession he engages in or he will incur the hostility and scorn of Mexicans and countrymen alike. Mexico is for Mexicans; Americans live there at their own risk.

A white may sit on a bench on the plaza in rags, three-fourths starved; he may beg and humiliate himself before another white; he may even commit burglary or other crimes; for that the other whites will not loathe him; he will still be considered one of them. But should he happen to shine shoes in the street, or beg from a native anything but water, or carry around iced lemonade in buckets for sale by the glass, then he would sink below the lowest native and would die from starvation. No white would ever again give him a job, and the natives would consider him the most undesirable competitor.¹⁵


The lack of modern conveniences in Tampico is detailed with objectivity and understanding. In most respects the Oso Negro Hotel is worse than a Chicago flop-house. It offers only two cold showers, supplied by water venders in the street. The beds are so infested by bedbugs that the guests usually leave in two hours. Disposal of sewage is pretty much a matter of individual preference and ingenuity. The major income of the hotel comes from the dilapidated shacks in the patio where cots can be rented for one peso. As long as one pays he is entitled to protection from thieves, assault, and prying officials. Yet the girls who stay there are safer than in other fancier hotels that proclaim virtue and decency.

One of the most remarkable features of Traven's presentation of Mexico and Mexicans is his vitriolic attack on the Roman Catholic Church, which gets the blame for many deplorable occurrences and conditions. The cruelty of uneducated, semi-barbarous Indians comes from a religion which displays prominently the torments undergone by martyrs of the church and exalts a God that deals out punishment. The Inquisition in Mexico was even more cruel than that in Spain. Churchmen tortured Indians in order to get gold and silver. Forced labor in mines belonging to the church was a common practice, and other forms of extortion were often resorted to. It is no wonder
that bandits who attack the Americans in the Sierra Madre profess Jesus as their king and wear his medallion.

No better proof of what the Roman Catholic Church in these countries has done to the people could be found than the fact that the same men who cried: "Viva nuestro rey Cristo!" killed mercilessly and robbed for their own pockets men, women, and children who they knew were members of the same church, believing at the time that they were doing so to help their church and to please the Holy Virgin and the Pope. 16

It later becomes known that two priests are active members of the bandit group and have participated in many other hold-ups.

The governmental manner of dealing with bandits is heartless, but perhaps more efficient than American law enforcement. No time is wasted on finger-printing. The bandits are tracked to their villages or forest huts and shot. This method saves the government the cost of a trial. If a mistake occurs it is simply unfortunate. When a clash occurs between soldiers and bandits, neither side surrenders, for surrender usually means immediate death or torture. Captured bandits display an admirably stoical attitude typical of all North American aborigines.

Traven sees rural Mexicans as simple, shy, hospitable, polite, uneducated, superstitious, and basically honest people. The superstitious old Indian who accompanies Dobbs and Moulton to the oil fields believes that he will be safe

16 Ibid., p. 172.
from tigers and lions if he joins the two Americans. He believes that such animals eat only native Mexicans and leave Americans alone. The people who live in the village at the foot of the Sierra Madre are illiterate and unaware of the real purpose of the Americans in the mountains. They politely accept the story that the Americans are hunters seeking animal pelts; in fact, they are too polite to seek out the camp and spy on the visitors, for politeness is an unwritten law among the natives.

Traven takes note of the efforts of the new government to improve the lot of the lowly peons of the vast plateaus and mountains. The Americans enter a small mountain village on their journey back to Durango and find a health unit attempting to vaccinate the natives for smallpox. The villagers, however, have a deep fear of modern medicine and a distrust of the federal authorities who attempt to change their way of life. In desperation the health officers ask the three Americans to be vaccinated before the crowd and thus show the people that medicine does not hurt, that the government is only trying to aid the people. The villagers comply only after witnessing the vaccination of the Americans and observing that no harm results.

The hospitality of the Indians and their regard for foreigners is described on several occasions. When the Americans camp at a stream for a night's rest there suddenly appear four natives seeking Howard's help in reviving a
young Indian lad who has fallen in the water but remains unconscious. The Indians want Howard because they believe he must be clever, intelligent, and educated, since he is a foreigner. Howard wins even higher regard among the natives by successfully reviving the Indian boy. Afterwards the Indians insist on his staying several weeks as their honored guest. This is the only way they can show their gratitude and hospitality toward a man who has aided them and does not attempt to change their beliefs or way of life.

On another occasion which involves Curtin, the natives show their willingness to aid people in distress regardless of nationality. When Curtin is shot by Dobbs and left for dead, a native coal-burner discovers Curtin and at first thinks he is a tiger. On closer observation the worker sees that it is a white man nearly dead from exhaustion and bullet-wounds. Lazaro, the native, takes Curtin to his house, makes him as comfortable as possible, and sends Filomeno to fetch the great white doctor, Howard.

The natives are portrayed as honest and law-abiding people in the incident involving the capture of the three bandits who kill Dobbs, steal his clothes, and attempt to sell the American's burros. The mayor of this mountain community, Joaquín Escalona, recognizes the clothes the bandits are wearing and the burros they are trying to sell
at a suspiciously low price. The villagers aid their leader in capturing the desperadoes and send a party of men to discover Dobbs' trail to Durango and find out what has happened to him. The villagers locate the poorly dug grave containing Dobbs' body and return to their village to condemn the three murderers. Escalona then turns the bandits over to the federal authorities, who conveniently shoot them on the journey back to their garrison and claim they were trying to escape. The mayor, being an honest man, sends word to Howard that the bandits have been captured and that Howard can come to claim his property.

Even though Traven's feeling for the Mexican natives who appear in the story is essentially one of compassionate understanding, he does exhibit a humorous attitude toward the people on several occasions. Traven's description of Howard's duties as a doctor to the natives displays a mixture of humor and compassion.

A woman came to Howard to ask why she had lice when her neighbor had none. Nothing is easier to get rid of than lice. But with Indians and mestizos lice are as much a matter of course as fleas on dogs. They actually seem not to want to lose their lice....Howard said to the woman: "You have lice because you have good, healthy blood, which lice prefer to suck. Your neighbor has bad blood, so she has no lice. Lice are a clever lot and shun bad blood as your husband shuns bad tequila."

The woman was satisfied and decided to love and honor her lice as the best sign that she was a healthy woman. But five minutes later the other woman came, asking the doctor for medicine to improve her blood, which must be bad, for she had no lice. Howard did
as all other doctors do. He prescribed a medicine, which, to make business still better, he himself manufactured by cooking up grass, leaves, herbs, roots, which he was certain would not harm even a baby.17

Traven also takes due note of the corrupt petty officials often found in Mexico. He indicates that mayors, chiefs of police, army officers, and government clerks engage in various degrees of banditry, kidnapping, and other illegal practices. Fear of the corruption of Mexican officials is one reason why the Americans did not file a claim on their gold mine.

The foreign exploitation of the natural resources of Mexico and the influence of foreigners on the economy of the country is vividly presented. Mining companies and oil industries from Europe and America are eager to steal legal mining claims and procure oil land cheaply in order to amass more wealth. In the oilfields it is a common occurrence to find pools of oil standing on top of the ground because the companies do not worry about leaky pipes or drunken pumpmen; there is plenty of oil still in the ground. The oil towns are crowded with adventurers who dream of getting rich quick and with those who have accomplished their purpose and are looking for ways to spend their money. As a result, the natives raise the prices on all items for sale or rent, and inevitable establishments of iniquity appear overnight.

17Ibid., pp. 350-351.
Traven's description of the Mexican landscape is one of the most effective aspects of his writing. The land is cruel and rugged: the home of poisonous scorpions, snakes, and insects; the hideout for tigers and lions. The jungles are hot, steamy, and full of treacherous swamps inhabited by mosquitoes carrying malaria and yellow fever. The rocky mountains are beautiful, despite the dust, the floods, the heat during the day, the extreme cold at night, and the dangers of wildlife and bandits. The remote areas of Mexico are hostile, inhospitable, forbidding, lonely, and mysterious to the "greenhorn." It is a country which demands much and imposes mute acceptance upon those who live there.

The land and people in The Treasure of the Sierra Madre have an accurate, true-to-life quality not so notable in the other novels examined in this study. The author has undoubtedly lived in the remote Indian villages of Mexico and has shared their meagre existence. He understands the needs and drives of these people and appreciates the fierce, rugged, beautiful country which has shaped their lives. He grasps the essential dignity and humanity of the natives without overlooking their faults.

A close similarity exists between the plot of The Treasure of the Sierra Madre and The Pearl. In The Pearl, Kino and Juana desire the wealth they can gain from the sale of a huge pearl and so improve their way of life. Yet
they return to their former way of simple living when they
discover the worry and danger involved in the possession
of material wealth. The two prospectors, Howard and Curtin,
likewise turn to the simple life in *The Treasure of the
Sierra Madre*. Howard and Curtin want to become reasonably
rich and go back to their civilization as at least equals
with their countrymen. The Americans view life with the
natives as a sharing of everything one has with each other;
an idealized form of socialism. Kino and Juana, too,
resume their life as a sharing of their meagre existence
with their neighbors.

The most serious flaw in *The Treasure of the Sierra
Madre* lies in the didactic passages openly indicting the
Church. Traven seems to allow personal prejudice to color
his views on religion. He goes out of his way to show
the Catholic church responsible for many acts of cruelty
in Mexico in the past and the present, and dwells too
extensively on acts of violence as inspired by religion.
His rendition of the exploitation of Mexico by foreign
individuals as well as foreign companies and industries
is not very flattering to the exploiters, but perhaps
Traven is more nearly correct about this aspect.

The abundance of bandits in the novel does stretch
the credulity of the modern reader at times, but one should
remember that Mexico once suffered from many such outlaw
bands, and not too long ago. That the bandits Traven describes
belong to the people he wants to admire—the Indians and mestizos found in the rural villages and remote areas—involves him in long disquisitions on religion and morals. Traven's comments on corrupt officials in the government and military are not so hard to accept if one remembers that corruption is characteristic of most governments in the world, both past and present. On this matter Traven implies that corruption is more in the open in Mexico and perhaps easier to eliminate than in more complex societies such as the United States.

Without a doubt, the author of The Treasure of the Sierra Madre advocates a socialistic way of life and points out sympathetically the socialism he believes is inherent in the way the natives live. The two prospectors adopt socialism and Dobbs, the capitalist, dies. Traven's picture of Pat McCormick, the contractor, posing as a good Bolshevik comrade in order to hire his workers cheaply in a co-operative enterprise indicates Traven's distaste for capitalism.

Traven has rendered a true picture of Mexico and its people from the standpoint of one who has made Mexico his home and entered into the Mexican way of life. His unique understanding of the people, motives, and forces at work in Mexico makes Traven one of the best informed of the four American authors considered in this study. If the reader is
willing to overlook some of Traven's rather awkward prose and unnecessary indulgence in violence, he will be amply rewarded by reading The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.
KATHERINE ANNE PORTER, SOCIOLOGIST AND HUMANIST

Katherine Anne Porter is the most refined literary artist presented in this study. The three short stories, one novella, and a lengthy novel concerned with Mexico reveal Porter’s interest in politics, sociology, and a world in upheaval. Of equal importance is her insight into the country, its society, its culture, and its revolutionary spirit.

Katherine Anne Porter was born May 15, 1890, at Indian Creek, Texas. She was reared a Roman Catholic in Texas and Louisiana, and was educated in small convent schools in Louisiana. She spent some of her childhood in Mexico and returned there to live and work after serving as a newspaper reporter in Dallas and in Denver. She also traveled extensively in the United States and Europe, supporting herself by writing articles and reviews.¹ Her first published volume of fiction was a limited edition of a small group of short stories entitled Flowering Judas, in 1930. In 1935 this book

¹"Porter, Katherine Anne," Current Biography (New York, 1940).
was republished with several additional stories. The critical acclaim bestowed on Porter for her first effort has never subsided. She later published *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* (1944), *The Days Before* (1952), and *Ship of Fools* (1962). Her only book of non-fiction is the collection of essays and magazine articles entitled *The Days Before*. This book contains an important section on Mexico in which Porter reveals that her interest in the country began in her childhood and continues up to the present. Her intimate relationship with Mexicans in Texas and in Mexico, during the Madero revolution, awakened a warm feeling of sympathy within Porter for a people who are striving to achieve happiness and a sense of national pride. She writes about Mexico because she believes that it is an important part of herself and America. Porter's only novel, *Ship of Fools*, begins in Mexico. The book was popularized in 1965 by a Hollywood production under the same title.

2Ray B. West, Jr., *Katherine Anne Porter*, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writing, No. 28 (Minneapolis, 1963), p. 5.

Porter's total literary output has been relatively small, probably because she is reluctant to publish anything that does not meet her high standards. Some commentators regret that she has possibly sacrificed greatness in order to achieve perfection; but many praise her not only for her creativity as an artist, but also for her literary versatility as critic, essayist, journalist, authority on literary practice, and arbiter of literary taste. Among the honors she has received are a Guggenheim fellowship (1931), honorary degrees, selection to numerous literary boards, and guest lectureships at various colleges.


"*María Concepción*" tells the story of the murder of Juan de Dios Villegas' mistress, María Rosa, by Juan's wife, María Concepción, who kills in order to protect her marriage, her love, and her pride. The action takes place in a rural, primitive region of Mexico at a time of revolution, but the

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5 Ibid., p. 599.

6 "Porter, Katherine Anne," *Current Biography.*
little village is isolated from the conflict and the outside world. María Concepción is a proud woman who insisted on marrying Juan in the church rather than behind the church as is customary in her village of peons. Her pride and love are shaken one day when she spies on Juan making love to María Rosa, a young and beautiful beekeeper. Juan and María Rosa leave at once to join the revolutionary forces, and María Concepción remains in her village, embittered more than ever by the death of her child soon after Juan's betrayal. A year later Juan and María Rosa return, and Juan is caught and nearly executed for desertion of the army. Givens, an American archeologist and Juan's boss, saves Juan's life and warns him of María Concepción's quiet wrath and powerful inner strength. At this time María Rosa gives birth to a son, and Juan, drunk from celebrating the event, visits María Concepción. María Concepción, when she hears about the baby, leaves Juan and goes to María Rosa's hut. She enters and stabs María Rosa to death and returns home. Juan is shocked but attempts to save his wife from prison. The police fail to find the murderer because the villagers and Lupe, the old woman who lives with María Rosa, believes that justice has been done in this affair of the heart. María Concepción adopts María Rosa's child and reclaims her admiring husband.

"María Concepción" has been praised as a well documented picture of primitive Mexican life and a moving exploration.

7 Lodwick Hartley, "Katherine Anne Porter," Sewanee Review, XLVIII (April, 1940), 214.
of the theme of destruction.\textsuperscript{8} One critic remarks that in "María Concepción" Porter has come as close to a primitive view as it is possible for anyone to do except perhaps an anthropologist. Her highly developed sense of irony enables her to point up moral and social discrepancies with a sure touch.\textsuperscript{9}

Porter's villagers adhere to an ancient code. Most of the males work in a dilatory fashion under the direction of an American archeologist, Givens, who is unearthing an ancient buried city. The Indians fail to see any value in these old, worthless, and decayed artifacts the American is seeking. Why does he not buy from their brand new objects, they reason; their handicraft is new and shiny and usable. The art forms of the Indian natives evoke the past in the present, but the simple natives do not realize that their rich heritage of ancient Indian art charms the modern world.

The villagers hold on to their ancient superstitions and practices. They believe that Lupe, the old medicine woman, can cure their ailments by administering odd remedies compounded of bones, insects, and animal entrails. The people live in simple thatched huts, eat out of one community bowl, trudge miles to the market, and are satisfied if their young couples...
are married behind the church instead of inside it. The church to them is a modern influence, and Christianity is something to be wary of (except in María Concepción's case).

Givens and María Concepción are the aristocrats, the moderns, of the village. When María's husband, Juan, and María Rosa run off to join the revolution, the old women shrug their shoulders and accept the occurrence as natural. María Concepción, however, regards it a sin and an affront to her piety. In contrasting the attitudes of the villagers and of María Concepción, Porter reveals the wide gulf between accepted conduct in primitive societies and super-imposed Christian morals. The native women actually reprimand María Concepción for her peculiar behavior when Juan deserts her.

Afterward everyone noticed that María Concepción went oftener to church, and even seldom to the village to talk with the other women as they sat along the curb, nursing their babies and eating fruit, at the end of the market-day.

"She is wrong to take us for enemies," said old Soledad, who was a thinker and peace-maker. "All women have these troubles. Well, we should suffer together."10

In "María Concepción" Porter presents the revolution and its accompanying bloodshed as distasteful and unglamorous. The revolutionists are an unruly mob accompanied by their loose women. These latter cook, strip the dead of their

10 Katherine Anne Porter, Flowering Judas and Other Stories, 1st Modern Library ed. (New York, 1940), p.14
clothing and valuables, engage in minor fights with women from the opposing side, and make love with their particular men of the moment. The revolution is a fight to the death without quarter. Those who tire of the conflict and return home are shot by the governmental forces. Juan and María Rosa return to the village and Juan escapes his death sentence only because he is recognized as a valuable employee of the American, Givens. Yet Juan feels only contempt for the Captain who gives him back his life. The villagers congratulate Juan for his defiance of governmental authority and his contempt of the captain who allowed him to escape. The natives are hardened by a cruel life and deplore any signs of pity or sympathy in other people.

The concluding scene, which involves María Concepción, Juan, Lupe, the villagers, and the police, makes explicit the vast differences between primitive Mexican attitudes and those of the civilized western world. When the police question Lupe and the natives about the murder of María Rosa, they refuse to inform on María Concepción, even though they know that she committed the murder. They likewise accept María Concepción's adoption of María Rosa's child as the normal course of events.

The attitude of Givens, the American archeologist, toward the natives is that of the understanding father who is constantly rescuing his children from harm. Givens tries to get
them to mend their ways, but he is unsuccessful. Their conduct they consider proper; it is given who is suspect.

"That Tree" is a story about an American artist in Mexico, still trying to free himself from the suffocating influence of Protestantism. Porter, it will be recalled, was reared in the Roman Catholic faith, but she has more interest here in the artist than in a denunciation or praise of conflicting religious attitudes. Porter was instrumental in arranging the first exhibit of Mexican popular art north of the Mexican border, and in fact, went to Mexico for this purpose. 11

The main character in "That Tree" is an important journalist, a recognized authority on Latin-American revolutions, the author of a best seller, and above all a frustrated poet. His ambition in life is to lie under a tree and compose poetry. That is why he came to Mexico.

In the course of a conversation with a friend in a Mexican cafe, he reveals that his first wife, Miriam, a conventionally brought up middle-western girl, has been the source of his frustration. Before she arrived in Mexico, he had lived a romantic, carefree life, which included an Indian mistress who posed for painters. His way of life is changed by Miriam and her strait-laced ideas on sex and duty. She dislikes his artist friends, his poetry, and his choice of Mexico as

11 "Porter, Katherine Anne," Current Biography.
a place to live and work. After four years of marriage she leaves him. The journalist thanks Miriam for her departure because he then launches out on his career, still believing in the artists and their role in society, even when the work they do is not exactly concerned with art. After two unsuccessful marriages, he is planning to take Miriam back. The journalist remarks that she will have to accept things just as they were before, except that this time there will be no marriage. Porter leaves the impression that Miriam will once again dominate the relationship and that "that tree" will remain unoccupied.

Some reviewers see the story as an exploration of the conflict between male and female wills and temperament. Others find it an ironic comedy concerned with the plight of the commercial artist, or the artist who is bewildered by visions of material success and forsakes the standards of true art. The story is also an account of a shallow love affair, a type one sees commonly today because of American lionization of superficial success.

"That Tree" displays vividly certain facets of Mexican life and American attitudes toward Mexico. The American journalist, who considers himself an artist-poet, travels

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13 Mooney, The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter, p. 51.
14 West, Katherine Anne Porter, p. 9.
to Mexico in the first place because he believes the country's romantic atmosphere is conducive to artistic endeavor; it is a place where the artist can live a carefree life and enact without too much discomfort the popular conception that only through poverty and suffering can one gain true artistic insight and status.

Porter shows how American Protestantism stifles the artistic temperament. It is obvious that she detests Miriam and the attitudes Miriam displays toward Mexico. Miriam represents a whole class of Americans who come to Mexico, condemn out of hand what they do not understand, and leave the country confident that they know all there is to know about the people and culture. Miriam's Protestant conscience will not condone the free love the journalist has enjoyed with his Indian model. She condemns her husband and regards Mexican artists as bums, cheats, or gigolos. She is shocked to find that apparently Mexican girls learn early their reproductive function in life and willingly practice it. Miriam has been brought up to overvalue virginity, and she rejects what she sees or at least thinks she observes in Mexico. Miriam's prudery destroys the free and unashamed love the journalist had felt to be most natural in Mexico but lacking in America.

She let him know also that she believed their mutual sacrifice of virginity was the most important act of their marriage, and this sacred rite once achieved, the whole affair had descended to a pretty low place. She had a terrible phrase about "walking the chalk line" which she applied to all sorts of
situations. One walked, as never before, the chalk line in marriage; there seemed to be a chalk line drawn between them as they lay together....

Miriam thus conceives a great distaste for the Mexican way of life, for the country, and for the people. She thinks most Mexican appointments crude beyond bearing and is unable to fit into the everyday life of the city.

Miriam went on holding her nose when she went to the markets, trying to cook wholesome civilized American food over a charcoal brasier, and doing the washing in the patio over a stone tub with a cold water tap; and everything that had seemed so jolly and natural and inexpensive with the Indian girl was too damnifying and costly for words with Miriam. Her money melted away and they got nothing for it.

She would not have an Indian servant near her; they were dirty and besides how could she afford it?

Miriam's problem is both not knowing and not wanting to know the truth about a foreign culture—an impossibly smug provincialism.

In The Days Before, Porter expresses herself thus about Mexico and its art:

About three years ago [1920] I returned to Mexico, after a long absence, to study the renascence of Mexican art—a veritable rebirth, very conscious, very powerful, of a deeply racial and personal art. I was not won to it by any artificial influence; I recognized it at once as something very natural and acceptable, a feeling for art consanguine with my

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16 Ibid., p. 110.
own, unfolding in a revolution which returned to find its freedoms in profound and honorable sources. It would be difficult to explain in a very few words how the Mexicans have enriched their national life through the medium of their native arts. It is in everything they do and are.

...My stories are fragments, each one touching some phase of a versatile national temperament, which is a complication of simplicities; but I like best the quality of aesthetic magnificence, and, above all, the passion for individual expression without hypocrisy, which is the true genius of the race.  

"That Tree" contrasts, in a way, the artistic climate in the United States and Mexico, much to the advantage of Mexico.

"Flowering Judas" is a story about love, religion, and politics. Laura, the protagonist, is a strictly brought-up Roman Catholic. She is in Mexico to teach Mexican children English. Laura is a lovely woman who tries to conceal her beauty in modest attire. Her loveliness, however, is still evident, and she finds herself constantly having to ward off would-be Latin lovers. Although Laura regards illicit love a sin, she invites temptation in allowing Braggioni, a powerful communist revolutionary leader in Mexico, to court her. In addition, she unintentionally acquires the admiration of a young worker when she throws a rose to him at the conclusion of his singing performance beneath her window. Laura frequently endangers her life when she goes on errands for

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Braggioni to the prison and passes down dark streets to communist hide-outs. Laura cannot understand her growing confusion. When she sneaks into church to worship she cannot pray; she examines the altar and saints instead. Laura outwardly adheres to her early training, but her faith is gone. In a dream at the end of the story, she is awakened to the realization that she has lived a life of self-betrayal. She dreams of Eugenio—a revolutionist whom she delivered dope to while he was in prison, and who killed himself with an overdose—who represents Christ and offers her life after death. Laura refuses to go with Eugenio, and he offers her the flowers of the Judas tree, named after Christ's betrayer. Laura will continue to be trapped between her Christian upbringing and her hope for the revolution, which she does not fully understand but which she realizes to be hostile to some of her Christian concepts. In this dilemma she will remain incapable of dedicated love for a particular man or of love for humanity. She seems trapped hopelessly between the particular and general.

"Flowering Judas" is regarded as one of the best short stories Porter has written. It shows the troubled condition of modern man who must choose to follow either religion, secular life (here identified with Marxism), or love.18

18 Ray B. West, Jr., "Katherine Anne Porter: Symbol and Theme in 'Flowering Judas,'" Accent, VII (Spring, 1947), 165.
One critic comments that Porter sees an important link between individual hope and revolutionary betterment of mankind. In "Flowering Judas" the characters do wrong even though they intend the exact opposite; matters too often get beyond the control of high-minded idealists. Some commentators even maintain that "Flowering Judas" is the best example of politico-revolutionary psychology to be found in fiction today.

"Flowering Judas" contains important views on Mexico's political situation as it concerns the church and religion. Laura is attracted to Mexico by the vague hope of an exciting future in a romantic foreign country where revolutionists are seeking to bring about a new social order by force. She considers her past life empty because of her conformity to strict Christian mores. In America she has been required to worship openly and regularly with the conventional multitude. She finds to her disappointment that religion in Mexico is no better. Here, associated with atheistic revolutionaries, she has to sneak into church unobserved. The futility of the whole concept is symbolized for her by the empty church and shoddy altar. Porter says, in effect, that religion in Mexico is a meaningless observance, a weakness.


20 Young, "The Art of Katherine Anne Porter," p. 332.
deplored by the new order. One can accept Laura's views as those of the author.

In an essay, "The Mexican Trinity," Porter writes about the economic, political, and religious situation in Mexico. She observes that the people harbor ill feelings toward the church which has oppressed the peons and has taken their land. Foreign agitators have stirred up dissatisfied elements but have supplied no constructive program. Oil interests and their greed have made the land shortage even more acute.21

Laura, then, is Porter, physically, mentally, and emotionally. She is a Catholic; she is an attractive woman; she lives and works in Mexico during the Madero revolution; and she also displays an interest in Mexicans' growing pride in their country, although she is unable to help as much as she would like to.22

The amorous nature of the Mexicans is suggested by the men who are attracted to Laura's beauty. Braggioni, the revolutionist, spends each evening with her and woos her with songs he has written. A young worker sings beneath her window and follows her about the city. A captain attempts to make love to her when he and she are horseback riding near Cuernavaca. Laura's reputation for purity makes her particularly desirable.

22 Ibid., p. 240.
Porter brings out the often neglected truth that Mexico is almost as near a melting pot for European nationalities as is the United States. Braggioni is a mixture of Italian and Mayan; Laura is an American. Some of the political agitators are Polish and Roumanian. All of her stories emphasize an international flavor: "Hacienda" with its mixture of Americans, Russians, and Mexicans; Ship of Fools containing Germans, Swiss, Spanish, Mexicans, Americans, Cubans, and Swedes.

Porter regards the revolutionary movement in Mexico as disappointingly sordid—characterized by wretched intrigue, bribery, violence, misery, and death. Braggioni, the communist revolutionary leader, uses every low weapon and at the same time professes a deep love for humanity. He promises better conditions for all the poor, hungry, desperate people, but at heart he detests them. To him these people are only a means to power and wealth. Porter is sad and disturbed that the revolution has been brought to disrepute by greedy and heartless leadership such as that of Braggioni and his friends.

In "Flowering Judas" stoicism seems the only remedy for disappointment and disillusionment. Laura sees herself in danger of being raped or killed, but she continues in a kind of quiet despair. The prisoners in jail accept their fate and seek relief in dope. Braggioni’s wife, though she weeps in self-pity, accepts her husband back again. If Laura and
the others take positive stands, and rebel against their fate, then immediate death awaits them, as it occurs to Eugenio, a prisoner who takes an overdose of narcotics and frees himself of life's responsibilities and problems. The outlook is bleak, and the reasons for bleakness are convincingly present.

In "Hacienda," Porter's interest lies in examining the antiquated but crumbling Mexican social structure, with a side glance at foreign influences and contacts. The action takes place at a pulque hacienda which represents the past in the present. The estate has belonged to Don Genaro's family for centuries, and the method of producing pulque is unchanged. A foreign film company from Russia, financed by Americans in Hollywood, is making a documentary and using the hacienda for a segment of its production. The narrator in "Hacienda" is a woman writer, presumably the author. The central incident is the death of a young peasant girl who is shot by her brother, Justino. These two young Indians, belonging to the hacienda almost as slaves or retainers, are also the principal Indian characters in the film segment, and have actually acted out a scene in which a brother must kill his sister in a fit of passion. This internecine homicide, inspired by foreign intrusion, symbolically questions the role of capitalism and communism in Mexico. The story on the whole creates in the reader a sense of the confusion of values and motives, both social and political by all concerned.
The relationship between the aristocracy, the reformers, and the natives suffers from a lack of communication. In an article Porter comments upon the reticence of the Indians:

Consuelo at once "went Indian," as her employer defines that peculiar state of remoteness which is not sullenness nor melancholy, nor even hostility—simply a condition of notthereness to all approach. So long as it lasts, a mere foreigner might as well save his breath.23

The natives in "Hacienda" and in other stories by Porter seldom have much to say. The Indians endure their hard life with admirable stoicism, but it is evident that they are growing restless. Their quiescence, taken for granted by politicians and aristocrats, can no longer be counted upon; centuries of suffering and mistreatment have made docility itself a frightening reproach.

One critic calls "Hacienda" a satire on an aspect of these times: the need for self-importance in the absence of faith and love.24 Another claims that Porter has presented a realistic and unsentimentalized picture of life in contemporary Mexico.25 "Hacienda," to some, is a comedy of no-manners set in a land that still possesses some of the

23Ibid., pp. 246-247.


mannered vitality of its past. In general the story has been ranked below Porter's usual high performance.

Nevertheless, contemporary Mexican society is richly evoked in "Hacienda." Don Genaro and Doña Julia, the owners of the pulque hacienda, represent the landed aristocracy in Mexico: Julia is idle, ornamental, and as ridiculous as the Pekinese poodle she carries around her neck—totally ineffective either as a woman or a wife. Don Genaro catapults himself furiously but falsely into modernity with speed—fast cars, fast planes, fast women. His interest in the peons on his place is precisely that of a semi-benevolent slave owner. He cares more about the money he will pay to get Justino out of jail than he cares for Justino's sister or Justino's mental anguish, neither of which seems to cross his mind. His typical attitude is expressed by his wife discussing the deplorable shooting "accident":

Doña Julia turned her Pekinese over and rolled him back and forth on her lap. "He will forget everything, the minute it is over...his sister, everything," she said gently, looking at me with soft empty eyes. "They are animals. Nothing means anything to them. And," she added, "it is quite possible he may not come back."

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26 Nest, Katherine Anne Porter, p. 9.
27 Mooney, The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter, p. 10.
28 Porter, Flowering Judas, p. 275.
These aristocrats are the people who lead idle, foolish, luxurious lives off the slave labor of thin, ill-clothed, hungry, ignorant, sober natives—people so quiet, so uncomplaining, so brooding as to reproach and frighten the narrator, who has had nothing to do with their servitude and who hates the system and people who have brought it about.

Porter's treatment of the Mexican lower classes is, then, sympathetic. The peons at the hacienda continue to labor for their masters as they have done for centuries, but the agrarian revolutionists hover threateningly in the background. There is something mysterious about Don Genaro's Indians that haunts the observer who hears their quiet laughter at night.

Pigs grunted and rooted in the soft wallow near the washing fountain, where the women were still kneeling in the darkness, thumping wet cloth on the stones, chattering, laughing. All the women seemed to be laughing that night: long after midnight, the high bright sound sparkled again and again from the long row of peon quarters along the corral. . .Below in the vat-room a single voice sang suddenly a dozen notes of some rowdy song; and the women at the washing fountain were silenced for a moment, then tittered among themselves.

Porter does not neglect to indicate that the natives, nevertheless, are undergoing a change. The Indian boy who has the leading role in the film is an example:

29Ibid., p. 270.
He entered as if on the stage, followed by several of his hero-worshippers, underfed, shabby youths, living happily in reflected glory. To be an actor in the cinema was enough for him to capture them utterly; but he was already famous in his village, being a pugilist and a good one. Bullfighting is a little out of fashion; pugilism is the newest and smartest thing, and a really ambitious young man of the sporting set will, if God sends him the strength, take to boxing rather than to bulls. Fame added to fame had given this boy a brilliant air of self-confidence and he approached us, brows drawn together, with the easy self-possession of a man of the world accustomed to boarding trains and meeting his friends.

Porter's other description of the peasants makes it quite clear that even though Mexico has gone through a social and political upheaval, the seeds for further unrest and dissension can still be found in the relatively unchanged position of the Mexican peons.

The corruptness of government officials is mentioned frequently in "Hacienda." The local judge refuses to release Justino unless Don Genaro pays two thousand pesos. Don Genaro is furious. He threatens to go to Mexico City to see Velarde, the most powerful revolutionist in Mexico. Doña Julia very casually points out that even to Velarde Don Genaro will have to pay a large bribe for Justino's release. The Russian film company also finds itself entangled in governmental interference requiring all kinds of payment.

Porter's portrayal of the American business man in Mexico is particularly unflattering. Kennerly, the manager of the

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30 Ibid., p. 244.
movie, expresses the usual lack of patience toward primitive conditions which interfere with his desire for speed and efficiency. The trip on the train to the hacienda is also a nightmarish experience for him. He refuses to associate with dirty peons who travel second-class. He will not allow natives to touch his luggage or clothing, and he even carries bottles of beer and California oranges for his refreshment because he fears the possibility of disease and death if he should eat or drink anything bought from the natives.

Kennerly complains of the Mexican business people who have no regard for their word of honor or who lack knowledge concerning the value of time.

Through Betancourt, a Mexican adviser on the film, and Carlos Montaña, a writer of Mexican music, Porter points out the changes in Mexican art since the revolution of 1910. Carlos represents the old school; his music is a natural outflowing of the influence of the peasants and the old Mexican way of life. Betancourt, Mexican by birth but French by education, symbolizes the new order which has broken with local native values. Betancourt attacks Carlos' ideas, and aids in the slow destruction of Carlos' art and Carlos' stature as a respected artist. Porter's sympathy is quite obviously with the old.

The description of Mexico in "Hacienda" creates a haunting, gripping atmosphere that causes a subtle uneasiness in the mind of the reader. The crowded train, the stately
pyramids, the maguey fields, the Indians washing their clothes and themselves in the river, the naked children, the imposing hacienda set against the mountains, the peons working in the fields and loading wagons with pulque liquor, the impression of death to be found in the faces and postures of the native Indians—all these things together create bright troubled tenseness which seems to sum up Porter's impressions.

The Russians in the story appear to be without any past frame of reference. They coldly comment about the events in Mexico, but any human warmth or sympathy is totally lacking in their attitude. Porter certainly is neutral, if not antagonistic toward world communism to say the least, in insisting upon Russian detachment from the real human elements in the Mexican situation.

"Hacienda" is Porter's deepest look into Mexican society. Her description of a new social structure emerging in Mexico is penetrating and thought provoking. The atmosphere of change is made evident in her mention of the agrarian revolt—an unsuccessful attempt, to redistribute by force the land among the people of Mexico. Porter exposes Kennerly, the American business man, to her fine sense of irony. Americans like Kennerly create a public image in the minds of Mexicans that is a discredit to their country and a possible reason why America and Mexico do not enjoy a warmer friendship. Porter's picture of the Mexican landscape is as good as that of Steinbeck and Traven, and she accomplishes her description
in a more powerful and compact manner. Porter's pessimistic view of the Mexican scene, however, does not allow her to offer a remedy for the situation. She seems to know that there is no simple cure for the condition of either Mexican society or Western civilization.

Although the Mexican scene in *Ship of Fools*, Porter's long awaited novel, is explored in detail only at the beginning, it remains importantly in the background throughout, symbolizing a meagre and unsatisfactory past of defeated hopes and unrealized dreams. This novel seems to be a synthesis of all of its author's earlier themes: love, death, politics, sociology, man's inhumanity to man, religion, the artist in society, and revolution. The structure is so complex that a complete résumé is beyond the requirements of this study. Many voyagers embark on the German passenger ship *Vera* at Veracruz, Mexico, and travel to Bremerhaven, Germany, in August, 1931. The list includes Germans, Mexicans, Spanish gypsies, Americans, Cubans, a Swede, a Spanish political exile, and 876 Spanish workers deported from Cuba to the Canaries and various parts of Spain after the failure of the Cuban sugar market. The characters on board the ship are, in a sense, personifications of human emotions, exhibiting in various degrees and mixtures love, hate, prejudice, despair, boredom, lust, greed, friendship, malice, self-pity, pride, revenge, and brutality. The situations in which the characters find themselves involved
are similar to those faced in the lives of most people. The
interplay of emotion between characters constitutes the plot
and action. The time is important, since in August, 1931,
the United States was in a depression and unrest was
spreading into Mexico, Spain, and Germany.31 The troubled
atmosphere is reflected in the attitudes of the people on
the ship and serves as a prevision of the future world
conflict which affects harshly the feelings of the author.

The reception of Ship of Fools has been both good and
bad. Some critics believe that Ship of Fools should be
ranked with the best novels of the past century32 and praise
the book for displaying the author's finest qualities as a
writer.33 Other reviewers, however, suggest that, though
not a failure, it is not a masterpiece.34 Stanley Kauffmann
considers it a disappointment partially because of Porter's
constantly shifting emphasis from character to character, and
also because the author has failed to show any real character

31 Stanley Kauffmann, "Katherine Anne Porter's Crowning
32 Mark Schorer, "We're All on the Passenger List,"
33 Glenway Westcott, "Katherine Anne Porter: The
34 Granville Hicks, "Voyage of Life," Saturday Review,
XLV (March 31, 1962), 15.
development. "Miss Porter is writing of the 'majesty and terrible failure' of Western man, but all one can feel on finishing this book is that if this is Western man, it is high time that he failed and there is little majesty or terror in it."  

Porter's treatment of Mexico in *Ship of Fools*, though slight, is rather disturbing in its pervasive echoes. The opening action takes place in a drowsy, tropical port city, and memories of Mexico keep intruding upon the people on board ship. The description of Veracruz is very vivid. Tourists wander aimlessly in the heat or huddle suspiciously in bars. The citizens of the town are oily and polite on the surface but contemptuous in reality and determined to fleece the travelers of as much as possible. Food and services range from bad to unbearable. Corrupt officials enjoy sending distressed voyagers from office to office in a mad circle. The general impression is one of weariness, confusion, apathy, and corruption. And there are strong hints before the book is over that Veracruz, and by extension, Mexico itself, are as much microcosms as the ship.

The echoes of Mexico reverberate through the story. American artists on board revere and discuss various Mexican art forms, but their dreams re-enact bloody

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ritualistic cruelties they have heard about or seen depicted in famous violent paintings. The other passengers constantly recall their failures and disillusionments in the new world of Mexico, which they once thought so promising. The Mexican priests, Father Carza and Father Carillo, suggest the Inquisition. They conduct religious services for the wealthy but neglect the lowly and downtrodden. The Mexican political agitator being deported may symbolize the defeat of the revolution, but he also illustrates the hostile attitudes of Mexican rebels toward the Catholic church.

Porter makes clear in her major book-length fiction the barriers that exist between races, barriers that hamper communication and understanding. The harshness of her delineation of character and scene both at the first of the novel and later on board ship is the result of her impatience with the people and nations of the world who commingle but do not love or respect or even understand each other, who are enwrapped in petty self-interest.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

John Steinbeck, Wright Morris, Bernard Traven, and Katherine Anne Porter have thus exhibited a range of American attitudes or stances in their consideration of Mexico and its people: the moralist and propagandist, the interested tourist, the expatriate and incipient communist, the sociologist and humanist. Each of these authors has chosen Mexico as a locale to teach the lessons that can be learned from a primitive culture.

John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* is an over-simplified, sentimentalized appeal to man to turn his back on material wealth and submerge himself in a simple if not primitive existence. Steinbeck confines his study to a small Mexican fishing village, and his treatment of Mexico is obviously tailored to fit his parable on the dangers of modern materialism and the values of a simple life.

Wright Morris' novel *Love Among the Cannibals*, deals with Mexico from the viewpoint of the American tourist who visits the country to free himself from phony moral restraints and clichés promulgated by mass media entertainment in America. Morris abstains from direct political,
psychological, and sociological observations about Mexico and its people, but he does de-bunk some of the surface glamour, and in a witty way points up some of the ludicrous gaps between tourists' expectations and the real charm of the place.

Bernard Traven has come close to a naturalistic picture of Mexico and its people in three novels — The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, The Bridge in the Jungle, and The Rebellion of the Hanged. Traven, however, is guilty of distorting his view of Mexico because of his bias against the Catholic Church and his obvious interest in communistic ideology. In all three of his works dealing with Mexico, Traven shows great familiarity with primitive Indian types and their habitat. And he sympathizes openly with these lowly peons of the remote fastnesses in mountains and desert. Traven's lack of finesse and his penchant for violent action, however, tend to interfere with the reader's wholehearted acceptance of his stories and his point of view. He fails, also, to explore other important areas of Mexican culture such as native art, city life, and contemporary politics.

Katherine Anne Porter, the polished artist, covers the materials treated by the other authors in this study, plus some which they did not perceive or choose to treat. "María Concepción," "That Tree," "Flowering Judas," "Hacienda,"
and *Ship of Fools* reveal a major and perceptive interest in Mexican society, culture, psychology, politics, and religion. Her primitive Mexicans are as fully realized as those of Steinbeck and Traven; her knowledge of the Mexican political situation is far deeper than Traven's; her insight into modern Mexican society is more penetrating than that of the other authors in this study; her denunciation of the Catholic Church is more subtle than Traven's but just as devastating; her understanding of the psychology of the revolution is perhaps her strongest point; and she communicates the impact of the Mexican landscape in few words but with graphic effect. Yet one feels that somehow Porter's skimpy and somewhat inconclusive treatment of Mexico and Mexicans—three short stories, a novella, and a small part of a novel—does not live up to her splendid capabilities. There lingers a suspicion that here is a subject from which she too quickly turns away—perhaps because of the vast extent and complexity. She does just enough to excite tremendous admiration and interest but not enough to satisfy.

On the whole, then, it may be concluded that no completely satisfying fictional treatment has yet been made of Mexico by American fictionists. The rapidly growing popularity of Mexico as a haven for tourists, artists, expatriates, and retired businessmen will no doubt result some day in
novels and stories of greater scope and deeper insight and thereby contribute to a better understanding and friendship between the United States and Mexico.
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