

Hubris and hamartia in Los de abajo by Mariano Azuela.

Hybris y hamartía en Los de abajo de Mariano Azuela.

DOI: 10.32870/sincronia.v30.n89.e0291

Jesús Santiago Said Ortega Camacho

Autonomous Metropolitan University.

(MEXICO)

CE: antonszandor999@outlook.comiD <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6323-0100>This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) International Licence.

Received: 14/08/2025 Reviewed: 10/11/2025 Approved: 04/12/2025

How to cite this article (APA):**In paragraph:**
(Ortega, 2026, p. _).**In reference list:**Ortega, J.S.S. (2026). *Hybris and hamartía* in Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo*. *Revista Sincronía*. 30(89). 142-174
DOI: 10.32870/sincronia.v30.n89.e0291**Abstract**

This study aims to analyse the manifestation of *hubris* and *hamartia* in the character Demetrio Macías from Mariano Azuela's novel *Los de abajo* (The Underprivileged) in order to demonstrate two hypotheses: a) the minimum hypothesis posits that Demetrio Macías is a complex character because he suffers from *hubris* and commits *hamartia*, which confirms that he is not a stereotypical character—as some critics of Azuela's novel claim—but rather a character who possesses the artistic qualities that, according to Aristotle, make a character "good", "appropriate", "similar" and "consistent". b) The maximum hypothesis puts forward the idea that the *hubris* manifested in Demetrio Macías, and contagiously reflected in certain characters, leads to his ultimate downfall and, as a result of this 'excess of character', the character's actions are pointless (or rather disproportionate). This last statement indicates, as a definitive postulate, that the novel was long classified as an ideologically "neutral" or "apolitical" work. However, it is the disproportionate actions—the effect of the *hubris* and *hamartia* manifested in the character and actions of the protagonist—that define the ambiguity in the novel's overall thesis.

Keywords: Hubris. Hamartia. Tragedy. Revolution.**Resumen**

Este estudio pretende analizar la manifestación de *hybris* y *hamartía* en el personaje Demetrio Macías de la novela *Los de abajo* de Mariano Azuela con el fin de demostrar dos hipótesis: a) la hipótesis de mínima plantea que Demetrio Macías es

un personaje complejo porque padece *hybris* y comete *hamartía*, lo cual confirma que él no es un personaje estereotipado –como afirman algunos críticos de esta novela de Azuela–, sino que es un personaje que presenta la propiedad artística de los caracteres por la cual, según Aristóteles, el personaje tiene que ser “bueno”, “apropiado”, “semejante” y “constante”. b) La hipótesis de máxima plantea la idea de que la *hybris* manifestada en Demetrio Macías, y reflejada contagiosamente en ciertos personajes, propicia su caída final y, como efecto de ese “exceso de carácter”, las acciones del personaje resultan sin propósito (o mejor dicho desproporcionadas). Esta última afirmación indica, como postulado definitivo, que la novela, durante mucho tiempo, fue catalogada como una obra ideológicamente “neutral” o “apolítica”. Sin embargo, son las acciones desproporcionadas –efecto de la *hybris* y *hamartía* que manifiesta el carácter y las acciones del protagonista– las que definen la ambigüedad en la tesis general de la novela.

Palabras clave: Hybris. Hamartía. Tragedia. Revolución.

For Nataly, with all my love

For this work, I use the 1920 version of the novel *Los de abajo* since, as documented in subsequent eclectic works, this version incorporates stylistic corrections made by the author without affecting the general structure of the work, while improving the literary quality of the text, the oral style, and the characterisation. Similarly, this edition allows for a more dynamic reading thanks to the author's final adjustments. However, beyond the stylistic aspects incorporated into the 1920 edition, some critics of this work claim that the corrections and adjustments made also reflect Azuela's social and historical point of view as a result of the momentous political situation Mexico was experiencing in 1915¹.

Víctor Díaz Arciniega, one of the most renowned academics for his work and assessment of Mariano Azuela's work, explains that the 1920 version of *Los de abajo* shows how the historical context experienced by the author directly affected the creation of the text and also gives the reasons why it is useful to compare the first version of *Los de abajo* from 1915 with that of 1920. "Moreover, the comparison between the two versions helps us to identify how, in 1915, the immediate lived experience generated *its* literary catharsis, as illustrated by the then risky exploration of a novel narrative technique." (Díaz, 2015, p. 45).

¹ See Víctor Díaz Arciniega, '*Los de abajo*, cien años después' ('*Those at the Bottom*, One Hundred Years Later'), in *Los de abajo* by Mariano Azuela (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2015), p. 10.

The apparent "origin" of *Los de abajo* takes place during a long expedition that Mariano Azuela experienced as a doctor, when he transported a wounded man named Manuel Caloca from Tepatitlán to Aguascalientes to operate on him (p. 12). Although this is an event external to the novel, most critics of this work assert that it is a relevant aspect of it (as will be seen later), not only because they want to find in this biographical event of the author a material cause that serves as an explanation for the creation of the novel, but also because they claim that it is a cause that contributed to the success that the novel enjoys today. However, it has been claimed that a series of events external to the work – including its revision in 1920 – contributed to its success and, in the same way, made it what it is today: a canonical novel of the Mexican Revolution.

In other words: we learned much later that the success of *Los de abajo* required, on the one hand, the author's profound yet discreet stylistic corrections for the second edition (1920) and, on the other, the passage of five years and the simultaneous coincidence of a change of government and a journalistic controversy to stimulate the appreciation and acceptance of the novel, to the point that it suddenly became the paradigm of the so-called Mexican Revolution novel. In the latter case, the ideological and historical potential of the novel contributed to its success and also detracted from the dissemination and recognition of the rest of Azuela's novels, particularly the avant-garde novels, which were even dismissed in the prologue to his *Complete Works* as 'hermetic'. (Díaz, 2011, p. 284)

According to Díaz Arciniega, the list of reasons for the work's success during Azuela's lifetime, as well as the novel's transformation into a 'paradigm' (canon) of Mexican Revolution literature, can be reduced to six: 1) Azuela's revision of his work in 1920, 2) the passage of five years, 3) the transition from the Obregón to the Calles government, 4) a journalistic controversy in 1925 involving Francisco Monterde, 5) the content of the work, and 6) the limited dissemination of Azuela's other works among Mexican readers. According to him, the sum of all these causes resulted in *Los de abajo* becoming a famous novel at the time. However, Jorge Ruffinelli asserts that the success of Azuela's work is fundamentally due to three individuals: Rafael López, who mentioned *Los de abajo* in an interview; Francisco Monterde, who generated controversy about it; and Gregorio Ortega, who promoted the work in Mexico, Madrid, and Paris. Nevertheless, Jorge Ruffinelli asserts that Mariano

Azuela's attempt to overcome the realist style in *Los de abajo* was a timid one². Contrary to what Díaz Arciniega claims, Ruffinelli indicates that the novel was not really that difficult to decipher, since by the early 20th century, readers had already been introduced to such daring authors as Proust, Joyce and Kafka. In Ruffinelli's opinion, the novel's success was due to a contextual factor, namely the Mexican state's need to "integrate works and writers into its system as a way of preventing (or neutralising) antagonism or criticism, the questioning of its order and the hierarchy of social and economic privileges implicit in that order" (Ruffinelli, 2011, pp. 52–53). In this regard, very favourable and influential reviews emerged, such as that by José Mancisidor, which determined its fame.

On the other hand, Díaz Arciniega, as well as Jorge Ruffinelli, attempt to explain why the first version of *Los de abajo* was not an immediate success. According to Díaz Arciniega, the first version failed for four reasons: 1) it was written on the fly, 2) the plot lacks a principle of causality, 3) it has a supposed "counterpoint" that readers at the time were unable to decipher, and 4) the edition did not undergo the necessary adjustments and corrections³. For his part, Jorge Ruffinelli argues that the first version of the novel failed due to alternative explanations such as the armed and chaotic context of the moment, the cultural centralism of Mexico City, social decomposition, and ignorance.

Well, it is not necessary to explain here why the first version of *Los de abajo* failed at the time; however, it is important for our study to explain why the work did succeed after a while. However, the reasons given by both Víctor Díaz Arciniega and Jorge Ruffinelli are neither necessary nor sufficient to determine the success of Azuela's work, much less to classify it as a canonical work of Mexican Revolution literature, since judgements of taste are not determined by factors unrelated to the work of art itself.

As we know, *Los de abajo* is Mariano Azuela's most important work. In addition to receiving the National Literature Prize, he was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949. However, as we have indicated, issues external to the novel are not sufficient and do not explain why the work is valuable. Incidentally, Harold Bloom, in his brilliant work *The Western Canon: The School and the Books of All Ages*, reflects on this type of statement, which suggests that literary works achieve

² Cf. Jorge Ruffinelli, "Los de abajo y sus contemporáneos. Mariano Azuela y los límites del liberalismo" (*The Underclass and Their Contemporaries: Mariano Azuela and the Limits of Liberalism*), in *Literatura Mexicana*. 1(1), (2011) pp. 41–64.

³ Cf. Víctor Díaz Arciniega, "On the Move: The Short Novels of Azuela," *Mexican Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 2, (2010a) p. 120.

success among the reading public and also form part of the canon due to profitable advertising and propaganda campaigns (statements such as those made by Jorge Ruffinelli when he affirmed the Mexican state's need to integrate works and writers into its system in order to prevent antagonism and criticism); However, such statements ultimately prove to be not only insufficient explanations, but also misplaced, since they are particularities that are totally unrelated to the work itself.

If we try to critically examine the causes listed by the above academics, we would find that they have implicitly questioned even Azuela's talent as an author and the inherent aesthetic quality of *Los de abajo* as a literary work. The answer to the question of why Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* was successful among readers at the time, is successful today, and will very likely continue to be successful throughout history, is reduced to a purely external explanation, as they ignore the aesthetic quality of the work in favour of a social disquisition, as if the work had achieved success by mere chance. Harold Bloom points out that, in each historical period, not all genres enjoy the same popularity, and some are relegated to oblivion. Bloom brilliantly explains that it is aesthetic choice that has always guided any secular aspect of the formation of the canon.

In the case of *Los de abajo*, as Jorge Ruffinelli (2011) mentions, the State adopted the historical discourse of the Mexican Revolution, thereby consolidating and legitimising Azuela's novel among Mexican society; however, this is not the real reason why *Los de abajo* is considered a canonical work today. It is Ruffinelli himself who quotes José Mancisidor when he acknowledges that the novelists of the Revolution come from Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo*⁴. In this statement, which Ruffinelli recovers, we find the approach to a true answer to the question of why Azuela's novel can be considered a canonical text of Mexican Revolution literature. Likewise, Ruffinelli, in his introduction to the critical edition of *Los de abajo* published in 1996, says the following: "*Los de abajo* has become a classic—within the various meanings pointed out by Henry Peyre in *Qué es el clasicismo*—a model of narrative, a book that is taught in classes, a landmark work within our culture, etc." (Ruffinelli, 1996, p. xxxi) And, although Ruffinelli attempts—and sometimes comes close—to answer the question correctly, he again falls into the trap of being swayed by the external aspects of the work, arguing that Azuela's novel is a canonical work because in it the author expressed his

⁴ Cf. J. Ruffinelli, 2011, p. 55.

"disappointments" with regard to the Mexican Revolution⁵. Furthermore, he asserts that *Los de abajo* became a canonical novel thanks to its content, that is, the themes it deals with.

It is important to note that this connection with everyday reality could have made his book a mere testimony, or a memoir, like those that abounded after the Revolution, but it was much more: it was and is a novel of great literary quality, which, because it is a novel and at the same time imbued with the events of its present, achieved the great appreciation it enjoys today. (p. xxxii).

The reality is that a canonical text is not determined by its commitment to the historical environment, nor by 'creating controversy'. It is determined by what Harold Bloom would call the "power of contamination" and because it transcends its era; in other words, a canonical text is one that serves as a model for the creation of new works, but also because it remains a text whose reading produces aesthetic enjoyment throughout the ages, regardless of the historical context or the type of society, and therefore the canonical work has a principle of selectivity. We read a canonical work such as *Los de abajo*, not with the aim of shaping our social, political, personal or moral values, because if that were the case, it would be a selfish reading, and the work, for its part, would be at the service of an ideology or any other type of spurious interest. We read and appreciate *The Underclass* because it is a work unlike any other and, therefore, it is a selective work.

In fact, a canon is conquered anxiety, just as every great literary work is the writer's conquered anxiety. The literary canon does not immerse us in culture; it does not free us from cultural anxiety. On the contrary, it confirms our cultural anxieties, although it helps to give them form and coherence. (Bloom, 1995, p. 535)

Los de abajo represents aesthetic power and authority. Mariano Azuela determined the canon of Mexican Revolution literature by building bridges between precursors and successors, such as Nellie Campobello, Rafael F. Muñoz, Martín Luis Guzmán, José Mancisidor, Agustín Yáñez, Francisco Rojas González, Francisco L. Urquiza, and authors such as Jorge Ibargüengoitia, José Revueltas, Juan Rulfo, Ángeles Mastretta, and Carlos Fuentes. Harold Bloom stated that great styles "are sufficient for canonicity, for they possess the power of contamination, and contamination is the practical test for

⁵ Cf. J. Ruffinelli. (1996). "Introduction by the coordinator," in *Los de abajo. Critical edition*. Madrid: ALLCA XX/Fondo de Cultura Económica, p. xxxi.

the formation of the canon" (1995, p. 531). And yet, most academics who devote their time to studying this novel by Azuela fall into the error of attributing aesthetic value to its content and even to the intentions of its author. For example, Ruffinelli, in the above quote, mentions that *Los de abajo* is "a novel of great literary quality," but never manages to explain why. The commonplace is the same. Whenever we want to discover the aesthetic value of *Los de abajo*, academic experts on the novel tell us the same thing: the work is a historical reflection and a moral questioning of the Mexican Revolution. But they never manage to give a clear explanation of this supposed relationship between the historical context and aesthetic value.

According to Víctor Díaz Arciniega, in the novel *Los de abajo*, Mariano Azuela managed to link his immediate reality with human drama. For this very reason, academics such as Ruffinelli have questioned the ideological and political reception of this work, asking whether *Los de abajo* is a 'reactionary' novel, while also wondering whether it faithfully represents the Mexican Revolution or whether it is in fact a partial and distorted portrait.

Regarding the statements made by various academics who assert that one of the qualities of *Los de abajo* is its historicity—that is, its vision of reality as total and impartial— we have, first of all, Jorge Ruffinelli, who speaks of the need to find in the novel a representative and explanatory "image" of that historical moment in Mexico, while reproaching the novel for not having proposed a "solution" to the social conflicts of the time⁶. Similarly, critics such as Seymour Menton, from an intertextual point of view, attribute to the work the quality of being susceptible to interpretation as – according to him – "the epic of the Mexican Revolution"⁷. Likewise, Mónica Mansour asserts that "the text is a

⁶ "In this sense, Azuela's proposal in *Los de abajo* was original, powerful and at the same time limited. Original and powerful because it referred with lively controversy to the still dramatic events of collective life; limited because his vision did not go beyond liberal principles, it did not go beyond proposing political vindication. His vision was not structural and structured, profound, or oriented towards the root causes. Azuela showed, like no writer before (or since), the emergence and powerful rise of the middle classes in Mexican life. He left behind intelligent and well-constructed novels on the contradictory problems of these classes. He castigated social habits from a very personal point of view, with honesty, but he never considered analysing or questioning the origins of those social problems that he could, however, lucidly describe. For this reason, he did not forge any understanding relationship with the people, particularly the humblest sectors, those who before the Revolution did not hold economic and political power in the country and who after the Revolution still did not manage to do so. Cf. Jorge Ruffinelli, "*Los de abajo* y sus contemporáneos. Mariano Azuela y los límites del liberalismo" (Those at the bottom and their contemporaries. Mariano Azuela and the limits of liberalism), 1996, p. 62.

⁷ "The key to understanding this organic structure is to interpret the novel as the epic of the Mexican Revolution and, in a way, the epic of the Mexican people in general. Although the action of the novel is explicitly set between 1913 and 1915, direct and indirect references to the indigenous roots of the Mexican people extend

kind of critical testimony to some aspects of the Mexican revolutionary process and, at the same time, represents an innovation in structure and language with respect to previous novels" (Mansour, 1996, p. 251). For his part, Díaz Arciniega attributes to Azuela's novel the quality of having a particular "historicity" because, in his opinion, the work does not show the revolutionaries from a heroic and self-sacrificing perspective, but rather recreates them from a completely human condition, with all their flaws and mistakes⁸. For him, the novel is a symbolic recreation of those historical circumstances.

The historical value of the novel is evident in its verisimilitude due to the quality of the recreation of the human and military conditions of that war; I repeat and emphasise that, with literary astuteness, Mariano Azuela wove this verisimilitude into a truthful timeline: 'almost' two years passed from the start of Demetrio's revolution and his men until they returned to Juchipila, and when they entered the village they heard the bells of the little church ringing, but not to celebrate their return, but to call the rosary. (Díaz, 2015, p. 29)

For Díaz Arciniega, the novel acquires value because its plot is plausible, that is, the time, space, and characterisation of the characters are consistent with the reality that Azuela experienced. In other words, in this academic's opinion, the most valuable quality of *Los de abajo* is the coherence it maintains between the novelistic narrative and the contextual framework that surrounded it. Therefore, viewing the work as a kind of historical record of the Mexican Revolution, Arciniega and Díaz suggest that the value of the text lies mainly in its usefulness for understanding the political situation in the country.

Los de abajo is a record of the war: first, the offensive against and defeat of the federal army, and then the armed conflict between enemy factions, both of which were revolutionary. The war disrupted all logical and moral conventions, the repercussions of which Azuela recreated literarily in his novel. (Díaz, 2015, p. 41)

the chronological limits of the novel and reinforce its mythical aspect. Descendants of the pre-Cortesian Indians, Demetrio Macías and his men are condemned to walk blindly through space and time." Cf. Seymour Menton, "Epic Textures of *Los de abajo*," 1996, p. 240.

⁸ Cf. V. Díaz Arciniega, '*Los de abajo*, cien años después', in M. Azuela, 2010b, p. 27.

This type of approach is called historicist⁹, which posits that any idea or event—in this case, a novel such as Azuela's—can only be understood within its historical context. However, we must not forget that the statements made in a literary work are not literally true, even if it is a historical novel such as *Los de abajo*, which attempts to provide supposed "information" about real events. This type of approach lacks rigour and its results cannot even be proven. We must therefore start from the premise that literature does not provide new knowledge; more precisely, it requires knowledge on the part of the reader in order to understand and appreciate a literary work. On this basis, we can raise two questions: 1. Is the historicist method of evaluation and analysis the correct one for understanding and evaluating a novel such as Azuela's? And 2. To what extent is historical and contextual knowledge of the novel *Los de abajo* necessary (or even unnecessary) in order to make judgements of taste about it?

Ruffinelli asserted that there is a need to find in the novel a representative and explanatory image of that historical moment in Mexico; however, this need he wishes to see is an imaginary one, since the time and space of any novel are not those of real life. Every literary work, no matter how naturalistic, is constructed according to certain artistic conventions. Consequently, Ruffinelli criticised the novel for not having analysed the origins of those social conflicts or forged any relationship with the most disadvantaged social classes, as if *Los de abajo* were a political science text or a communist manifesto. Similarly, Seymour Menton and Mónica Mansour assert that the novel is a historical testimony to the revolutionary process and, in Menton's case, even classify the novel as the 'epic of the Mexican people'. And although it is a fairly common statement in academia where literature is taught, such claims, despite being false, still enjoy widespread approval, which is why it is necessary to explain that no writer writes from scratch, as their vision is shaped by what they have experienced. In other words, such statements suggest that a literary work (as in the case of *Los de abajo*) is an impartial historical record of the revolutionary war process, as if the author were God rather than a human being. But, on the contrary, as a human being, he has limitations and, consequently, cannot include everything that happens in a society. Similarly, the writer is no different from other human beings in terms of subjectivity, for his view of the world is also contaminated by his personal interests, religious beliefs, political inclinations and superstitions, however impartial he tries to be when writing.

⁹ Cf. Mario Bunge, (2014), *Pseudociencia e ideología*, Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores.

Writers inevitably express their experience and overall concept of life, but it would be patently untrue to say that they express life in its entirety, or even the whole of life in a given era. It is a specific evaluative criterion to say that an author must give full expression to the life of their era, that they must be 'representative' of their century and their society. Furthermore, it goes without saying that the terms 'full' and 'representative' require a considerable amount of interpretation: in most social criticism, they seem to mean that the author should not ignore specific social situations (e.g. the miserable condition of the proletariat), or even that he should share with the critic an attitude and ideology that are exclusive to the latter. (Wellek & Warren, 1966, pp. 113–114)

Díaz Arciniega, for his part, observes in the novel a fictionalised representation of Mexico's revolutionary period; unfortunately, this is not an objective observation, but rather a value judgement, since it is an expectation based on a particular point of view, not on a literary necessity.

Finally, we can conclude that the historicist method is not appropriate for analysing *Los de abajo* because, as we have seen, some critics not only demand that the author address certain topics, but also that he think like them; in other words, they want the writer to have the same ideology as the critic, which is a rather restrictive criterion. Similarly, historical and contextual knowledge of the novel *The Lower Depths* is not necessary to make judgements of taste about it, since all literary works are partial and subjective expressions, not encyclopaedias of their time.

Continuing with the different types of assessment that critics have proposed for *Los de abajo*, we find Azuela's origins and intentions and, consequently, the thesis put forward by the novel.

Díaz Arciniega asserts that Azuela, in *Los de abajo*, departed from the structural norms of naturalist realism—that is, from a supposed principle of causality in the plot—and from the moralising objectives that were common in that aesthetic movement. This academic goes so far as to establish that Azuela sought this double departure because of what he calls a "vital impulse"¹⁰, which arose in him as a result of the events he experienced. The genetic criticism used by Díaz Arciniega considers the author's immediate experiences of his work to be relevant and valuable, as he believes that in this way he can observe the process of transformation of Mariano Azuela's "aesthetic consciousness".

¹⁰ V. Díaz Arciniega, (2011). "Azuela entre dos corrientes" (Azuela between two currents), in *Una selva infinita. La novela corta en México (1872-2011)* (An infinite jungle. The short novel in Mexico (1872-2011)), Mexico: National Autonomous University of Mexico/Foundation for Mexican Literature. p. 125.

Other academics, such as Seymour Menton, assert that Azuela's novel shares multiple textual similarities with Homer's *Iliad* precisely because "Azuela studied Greek during the 1890–1891 academic year at the Liceo de Varones de Guadalajara" (1996, p. 241). Another example of how critics have used the argument of origins is that of Mónica Mansour, who attributes Alberto Solís' opinions to the author.

Azuela explicitly identifies with the character of Alberto Solís who, based on his own experience, is in favour of the revolution in theory, principles and ideals, but is very pessimistic about its practical implementation; for this reason, he explains the almost automatic transformation of revolutionaries into "bandits" (as the anti-revolutionaries called them) but does not justify it. The ambiguity of Solís's position is, in fact, that of Azuela, both in the text and outside it: the author was proud that the novel was acclaimed by both the extreme right and the communists. (1996, p. 273)

This line of interpretation is most commonly used by Díaz Arciniega, who, despite not attributing the characters' thoughts so explicitly to the author – because he also does so, as will be seen later – asserts that Azuela was influenced by positivist doctrine and that this is why included in his novels a demand that novelists be part of the "people" and commit themselves to society so that they can recreate it from a "critical perspective" (2010, p. 13). Díaz Arciniega even quotes Mariano Azuela's words from a lecture to demonstrate that his ideological convictions and intentions coincide with the supposed themes of his novels¹¹.

In the prologue written by Díaz Arciniega for the commemorative edition of *Los de abajo*, he reaffirms that Mariano Azuela wrote this work with the explicit purpose of "evoking and valuing his experiences with the Villista popular army" (2015, p. 15). He also adds that the life stories he

¹¹ "As shown in the following pages based on his novels, in his 'talks' he addressed aspects whose significance in the personal (biographical) and social (cultural and literary) spheres he considered essential to highlight. In expressing them, he explicitly renounced confrontation and specified the tasks of the novelist as: a) the need to contribute to the construction of an idea of Mexico; b) the desirability of encouraging the consideration of the values – in their axiomatic dimension – prevailing in society, from the 'people' to political criticism and even literature, and c) the suggestion of fostering a spirit of responsibility, mainly in the moral sphere – in the areas of work, education and the family – and, consequently, promoting an 'authentic' and 'sincere' vision of reality." (Díaz, 2015, p. 13).

attributed to his characters come from his experience on that expedition, which took the author from Tepatitlán to Aguascalientes.

However, I believe that the human drama cannot be ignored, nor can the setting, soon to be classified as historical, be considered the novel's only quality, because the exceptional circumstances placed the novelist in equally exceptional material and psychological conditions, as illustrated by his characters in the novel: they suffer from the trauma of war, identical to that suffered by the writer, because, as he hinted at in his lectures: *everyone* was outside of... so much of their daily life! (Díaz, 2015, p. 17).

According to his words, the characters 'illustrate' the historical circumstances that Azuela suffered in the Villista ranks. This statement argues that it is logical to think that the characters in *Los de abajo* share similarities and opinions with their author as a result of the fact that, between 1914 and 1915, he lived, observed and recorded the war experience of that part of Mexico's history. In other words, Mariano Azuela was a witness and protagonist, as were his characters within the plot of the novel, of that historical moment in the nation's history. However, Díaz Arciniega asserts that Mariano Azuela joined the Villista faction because he wanted to learn first-hand about the events taking place in the Revolution in , which he later assimilated and managed to recreate in *Los de abajo* (2015, pp. 19–20). Developing this same idea, Díaz Arciniega states that "for decades, the aesthetic qualities of the novel have been overlooked in favour of attributing historiographical characteristics to it" (p. 20). His response to this problem is to suggest that there is a balance between "the plausible novelistic account of typical life stories, the direct or allusive description of moderately truthful episodes, and the enunciation of a balanced critical judgement of the men and events of the revolution" (p. 40). However, that observation that many readers and critics of *Los de abajo* have applied to the work—I am referring here to the fact that the novel seems to suggest an adverse view of the ideals and results of the Mexican Revolution—from Díaz Arciniega's perspective, once again, finds an answer in the origins of the novel itself: "But everything took on new meanings and significance as soon as he lived alongside the 'true revolutionaries': as those days and weeks passed, a reality as heartbreaking as it was unexpected, brought about by the revolution, was revealed before his eyes." (p. 41)

Even if Mariano Azuela's intentions were those described by his critics, one must ask how the author's intentions benefit his work. William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley (1946), in their

famous article entitled "The Intentional Fallacy"¹², "assert that if the writer did not state his intentions when writing his work, then trying to discover them in the work is a category mistake, since the literary work is not adequate evidence, and the critic must look outside the work for evidence of an intention that was not made effective in the literary text. (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946, p. 469) However, when the author himself has already referred to his intentions in writing the work (as is the case with Mariano Azuela in *Los de abajo*), then the critic is not saying anything new, but rather repeating what the author has already said about his work. Therefore, this type of literary criticism is completely sterile, as it offers no new perspective or proposes any other way of reading the work. For Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946), in a literary work we cannot differentiate which parts are intentional and which are not. The literary work is a meaningful whole that is handled in its entirety, since all its parts are relevant and nothing is excluded. "In this respect, poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention. These are more abstract than poetry." (Wimsatt, & Beardsley, 1946, p. 470, *own translation*) However, for Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946), the work is separate from its author, and although this type of literary criticism has been marginalised in universities in favour of others that, incidentally, have very little to do with "literature", the separation between work and author is and will continue to be a totally objective approach. René Wellek and Austin Warren asserted that the author's intention does not exhaust the meaning of a work of art, as it is not even equivalent to it. The literary work is autonomous.

The total meaning of a work of art cannot be defined simply in terms of the meaning it had for its author and his contemporaries. Rather, it is the result of a process of accumulation, that is, the history of its criticism by its many readers in many eras. It seems pointless and, strictly speaking, impossible to declare, as the followers of historical reconstructionism do, that this whole process is irrelevant and that all we have to do is go back to its origins. But when we set out to judge the past, it is simply impossible to stop being men of the 20th century: we cannot forget the associations of our own language, the new attitudes we have acquired, the repercussions and significance of past centuries. (Wellek & Warren, 1966, p. 52)

¹² See W. K. Wimsatt Jr & M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy", from *The Sewanee Review*. 54(3) (July – September, 1946), pp. 468 – 488.

If we were truly capable of reconstructing the meaning that *Los de abajo* had for its author and the readers of his time, all we would do is impoverish the work. All the academics we have cited in this work have understood Azuela's novel from its historical context, and none of them avoided referring to the author's intentions and biographical details related to his work, as if there were no possibility of new interpretations or simply reading *Los de abajo* as 21st-century readers. They only paid attention to external factors, that is, they simply interpreted *Los de abajo* in light of its social context and background, which turns their postulates into causal explanations, and this is because they reduced the work to its origins. However, the study of causes can never resolve problems of analysis and evaluation of a novel such as *Los de abajo*, since this novel forms a completely different relationship with the author's historical context. Although *Los de abajo* contains elements that can certainly be considered biographical, as Díaz Arciniega has demonstrated, such information is transformed into fiction within the work, which means that it loses all personal meaning and becomes material that integrates the novel.

Similarly, as we explained earlier, some academics attributed to Azuela certain ideas, feelings, and opinions of his characters Luis Cervantes and Alberto Solís, as if the relationship between the author's private life and his work were a mere cause-and-effect relationship, a simple copy of that episode of his life. It should be noted that all the academics who are experts in Azuela's work that we have cited so far referred to his intentions, his biography and his historical context as tools for understanding his work, implying that *Los de abajo* was purely and simply self-expression, a transcription of Azuela's personal feelings and experiences. However, *Los de abajo* is much more than that; it is not only (as Díaz Arciniega said) the "recreation" of experience or a mere biographical document of Mariano Azuela. Likewise, *Los de abajo* far exceeded the intentions Azuela may have had when writing it, and proof of this is its canonical *status*.

Well, we must now understand why *Los de abajo* is a valuable literary work. To do this, we have to understand its unique features. I would like to begin with the first and one of the most relevant characteristics, which is the narrative voice.

Many critics offer different opinions regarding this characteristic of the novel. They all agree that it is a heterodiegetic narrator, of course, but controversy arises when they try to determine what type of heterodiegetic narrator it is. On the one hand, Monica Mansour asserts that it is a heterodiegetic narrator of the omniscient subcategory: "Dialogues abound, but we also find direct

language on occasions when the narrator quotes the characters' thoughts verbatim and in quotation marks, expressed in the first person" (1996, p. 258). Mansour also asserts that the narrator's discourse sometimes presents value judgements, whether explicit or implicit, regarding the plot, as well as different points of view regarding certain characters. In short, the narrator, as perceived by Mónica Mansour, sometimes assumes the point of view of the characters and also his own. (1996, p. 260) According to her, the narrator uses different rhetorical devices to make descriptions. "These rhetorical devices are what determine the author's ideology throughout the novel, both in terms of ethics (political, socio-economic, moral) and aesthetics." (Mansour, 1996, p. 261) However, for Víctor Díaz Arciniega, in *Los de abajo* the narrator is "subtly" nullified, which, according to him, "shares and even cedes his place as such to the apparently isolated voices of his protagonists." (Díaz, 2015, p. 22). For Díaz Arciniega, the narrative voice does not make judgements nor is it an omniscient narrator, since in *Los de abajo* Azuela explored a new narrative technique, polyphony, which this academic defines as: "the articulated *sum* of different and simultaneous voices, that is, fragments of description and life stories that allow the reader to grasp an overall view; in turn, these voices displaced the voice of the omniscient narrator" (p. 30). For Díaz Arciniega, polyphony manifests itself in *Los de abajo* through the eruption of voices and the interplay of perspectives and ideologies.

Inevitably, I will be repetitive: in the face of the conventional narrative realism in use in 1915, Mariano Azuela took a remarkable risk: for the narrative voice, he practically abandoned the omniscient perspective, that artificial fictional entity that knows everything about everyone and tells everything. Instead of this type of narrator, he articulated the syncopation of a dissonant chorus of narrative voices that told *their* own life stories (always fragmented, atomised and synoptic) and showed *their* immediate experiences (the assessment and not the anecdote); some are concatenated, others are juxtaposed, and all are amalgamated into a novel polyphony that offers a broad vision of immediate reality as complex as it is contradictory; these are anonymous voices with their innumerable and fragmented life stories, plus a few anecdotes and episodes that the novelist "harvested" as scraps of loose notes. This mosaic is implicit in the subtitle "pictures and scenes of the revolution" that Azuela arranged within a flexible and fictional novelistic narrative that he synthesised and merged into the double plot of his novel. (pp. 41–42)

Díaz Arciniega notes that polyphony manifests itself when the characters give their opinions on certain events, while the narrator, despite being heterodiegetic, reserves his opinions regarding the plot that unfolds, in addition to maintaining an economy in terms of prosopography and ethopoeia. Días Arciniega also asserts that another concept of Mikhail Bakhtin, counterpoint, is manifested in this novel by Azuela. For him, counterpoint can be identified thanks to the statements made by the most eloquent characters in the novel regarding the revolutionary armed struggle:

[...] they are examples of the new realistic syntax of the narrative, whose versatility allowed Azuela to deploy the polyphonic chorus of those originally anonymous voices, and whose laxity allows for the emergence of incidental voices, such as Cervantes, Solís, or Valderrama, who display the valuable contrasts of critical counterpoint. (p. 44)

However, this "choir of narrative voices telling their own story" has no other function than to reinforce the very thesis that the novel attempts to convey, which is that the Revolution is *hamartia*. In other words, throughout the novel, the reader can discern a single idea: the revolutionary struggle emerges as a noble ideal, but in the course of events it becomes something banal and abject. But this view of the Revolution is uncomfortable and even intimidating for Mexican sensibilities, indoctrinated by the Mexican state, which seized control of the concept of Revolution years ago. I can assume that this is the reason why many academics want to see in the novel a somewhat ambiguous thesis of the revolution, when in reality it is too clear. *Los de abajo*, time and again, shows us that the Revolution is a tragic mistake, even though this statement is currently considered politically incorrect. Similarly, the multiplicity of voices that Díaz Arciniega refers to is not intended to contrast worldviews, as in a Dostoevsky novel.

Indeed, Dostoevsky's essential dialogism is by no means exhausted by the externally expressed dialogues of his heroes. *The polyphonic novel is entirely dialogical*. There are dialogical relationships between all the elements of the novelistic structure, that is, they oppose each other according to the rules of counterpoint. The fact is that dialogical relationships represent a much more extensive phenomenon than the relationships between the replies in a structurally expressed dialogue; they are an almost universal phenomenon that permeates all human discourse and all the connections and manifestations of human life, in general, everything that has meaning and significance (Bakhtin, 2012, p. 118).

For Bakhtin, life in Dostoevsky's work is dialogue, that is, a dialogical opposition. Unlike a monological novel, the dialogism in Dostoevsky's works is a counterpoint of worldviews. The characters are embodiments of ideas rather than ideas themselves. A character can not only disagree with another character's worldview, but can also influence it. Therefore, Bakhtin's definition of Dostoevsky's characters is that of self-awareness, because, unlike a monological hero who cannot help but be himself, Dostoevsky's hero can be shaped by the worldviews of the characters around him. The hero is the bearer of a discourse, not an object. The author does not speak about the hero, but rather speaks with him. Likewise, the narrator does not have the last word, because the hero is the ideologist, not the author. Therefore, polyphony is what contains these different worldviews that oppose and influence each other. However, in *Los de abajo* we do not see this dialogical opposition that Bakhtin postulates; on the contrary, we see that the novel affirms a single idea about the Revolution, and that idea has a negative connotation. Despite this, Díaz Arciniega contradicts himself by stating that this work presents polyphony and counterpoint, but at the same time he affirmed, as we saw earlier, that the novel is a historical reflection and a moral questioning of the Mexican Revolution, and also that Azuela as an author expressed himself through his characters:

The intensity of Mariano Azuela's intimate experience of war was so great that, within his unconscious process of artistic sublimation, he underwent a complex process: he blurred his identity as an author and, instead, merged and amalgamated with the multiple characters, hence the use of a narrative voice that was rarely omniscient and, instead, often derived from the diverse voices of the protagonists. This process benefited the verisimilitude, because that profoundly human experience allowed Azuela to better understand the reality of those men and of himself, and, simultaneously, by undertaking the literary recreation, he achieved a better historical representation. This dual quality coexists in the novelistic text as a unity, and thus transcends the reader, provoking a simultaneous intellectual and emotional effect. (Díaz, 2015, p. 45)

If *Los de abajo* were truly a polyphonic novel, then there would be no need for Mariano Azuela to 'merge' and 'amalgamate' with his characters, nor would he have the objective of gaining 'a better understanding of the reality of those men', much less of himself. Nor would the novel seek a 'better historical representation', nor would it seek to be a reflection and a moral questioning, since that is precisely what a thesis is. Something that characterises a polyphonic novel is precisely that it does

not put forward any thesis. On the contrary, it confronts the narrator's worldviews with those of the characters and the author himself. And that is precisely what does not happen in *Los de abajo*, since it is, neither more nor less, a monological novel, as its approach is very clear. The characters' worldviews, however different they may be, only serve to structure the general thesis: the Revolution became *hamartia*.

At this point, we return to a question that these academics asked themselves at the beginning: is *The Lower Ones* a reactionary or revolutionary novel? The truth is that these two political categories are valid if we read *The Lower Ones* politically. But since this novel is a literary work, we must read it for what it is, and that is from an aesthetic, not a political, perspective. Nevertheless, it is important to point out two characteristics of the work: 1) the narrator is omniscient heterodiegetic, and 2) the novel posits an adverse idea of the Revolution.

In the sixth chapter of the first part of the novel, we note that the narrator knows Luis Cervantes' emotions and even his past, as he indicates that Cervantes is "moved by the pain and misery of the dispossessed" (Díaz, 2015, p. 63). He also recounts when a soldier confessed to him his contempt for the federalists for separating him from his elderly mother, as well as his intention to join the Villistas (pp. 63–64). Another moment where we notice that the narrator is omniscient is when he describes Camila's feelings: "Camila felt something rise from her chest, something that reached her throat and formed a lump there" (p. 74).

Mónica Mansour indicates that the novel's central theme is "the degree of awareness of the cause of the Revolution, the motive and goal of the battles and deaths." (Mansour, 1996, p. 253) In addition, this academic asserts that the novel presents ideological ambiguities and that these are intentional, while others, according to her, may have been subconscious (p. 274). Beyond the arrogance of wanting to understand the author better than he could understand himself, we have already explained why it is characteristic of a non-literary reading to classify the novel as reactionary or revolutionary. nevertheless, Mansour concludes that the general thesis of the work is as follows: "The narrator's most important judgement, developed throughout the novel, is the criticism that those at the top always remain at the top and those at the bottom always remain at the bottom, with or without revolution" (p. 273).

Thus, we note that the novel *Los de abajo* is not polyphonic, as it does have a thesis in which both the narrator and the characters construct the same idea of Revolution throughout the plot: the

Revolution was *hamartia*, as it only turned a noble ideal into tragedy and its revolutionaries into abject beings. We see this illustrated in the twentieth chapter of the first part, which narrates the exploits of Francisco Villa; however, they also realise that Macías and Natera's men are fighting for a Villa they have never seen (Díaz, 2015, pp. 94–95). We also notice how the novel degrades the concept and ideal of Revolution with the character Luis Cervantes, who at the beginning of the work is genuinely convinced of the causes of the Revolution, but who in the end becomes a corrupt and deceitful character. In the same way, the novel suggests that the Revolution is a tragic destiny which, despite being destructive, contains tremendous beauty, and we see this statement in the character of Alberto Solís. In the twenty-first chapter of the first part, Solís is the one who most eloquently expounds the thesis of the work, as he delivers a soliloquy in which he describes the Revolution as a deceptive entity, capable of exploiting genuine ideals of vindication for the purpose of stealing, killing and turning men into tyrants (p. 97). Similarly, the novel illustrates the total indolence and lack of judgement of the caudillos, such as Demetrio Macías, who only takes part in the Revolution for entirely personal reasons and then for selfish interests. We see the same thing with Anastasio Montáñez, who wonders why they continue to fight, since they have already destroyed the federation (p. 133). The novel conveys this same idea of revolution when Valderrama declares his love for the revolution itself, not for a specific leader (p. 136). Upon returning to Juchipila, the narrative voice describes the desolation and disaster caused by the revolution. Even the local population is fed up. This scene clearly reflects an adverse thesis of the revolutionary struggle. Finally, another scenario that illustrates this thesis well is in the fourth chapter of the third part, when Valderrama recites a solemn prayer to Juchipila, which he describes as the cradle of martyrs and dreamers, whom he calls "the only good ones". But someone interrupts him: 'Because they didn't have time to be bad,' a former federal officer passing by brutally completes the sentence (p. 140).

However, when viewed from the perspective of its characters, the novel offers a profound insight into understanding *Los de abajo*. On the one hand, as Mónica Mansour observes, the characters are a "repertoire of archetypes" (1996, p. 262). This idea about the *ethos* of the characters is also developed by Díaz Arciniega, who argues that the characters are moral *types* (models representing a virtue or a vice), just the opposite of what we would think of a polyphonic novel, where the character is much more complex.

The same is true of the apparent loose ends in the story, represented by circumstantial characters, all of them moral *types* (from stereotypes to archetypes): Venancio, Luis Cervantes, Alberto Solís, and Valderrama represent a certain order of critical consciousness; Güero Margarito and La Pintada represent the perversion generated by war; Meco, Codorniz, and Montáñez represent rustic common sense, intrepid courage and bravery, and impeccable loyalty; and Demetrio Macías is the archetypal pinnacle of courage, honesty, kindness, and judgement (even in his acts of barbarism), hence his moral defeat, whose death is described as reaching the dimension of an emblem. (Díaz, 2015, p. 42)

It is from statements such as these that the interpretation of the characters in Azuela's novel becomes somewhat confusing, since for Díaz Arciniega the characters are stereotypes and, in the case of Demetrio Macías, he is an archetype of the hero. Just as he asserts that the characters are stereotypes, Díaz Arciniega explains that the plot of *Los de abajo* is melodramatic: "Within the visible spatial and temporal framework already mentioned, Mariano Azuela deployed the plot lines (melodrama and war) in keeping with the realism of the time." (p. 36) Although, to be more specific, this academic asserts that it is not so much the fact that the characters are stereotypes that gives the plot of *Los de abajo* its melodramatic overtones, but rather the theme of war that leads to this characteristic: "Of course, the intense war environment introduced the pathetic feature to the melodrama, as illustrated by Camila's death at the hands of La Pintada or the symbolic motive that led to the cacique Don Mónico..." (p. 37). For Díaz Arciniega, the melodramatic plot (which he never defines) has the function of "tying together human relationships" (p. 40). And, as we demonstrated earlier, Díaz Arciniega, although he affirms that this novel is polyphonic, also indicates that it deals with a thesis, which is an ethical and moral questioning, and for this Azuela used a melodramatic plot: "Melodrama is common in the rich tradition of the realist novel, such as that of Balzac and Zola. Like the French, the Mexican also intertwined the melodramatic plot with a thoughtful set of ethical and moral questions (some with notable political biases) subject to the immediate historical environment." (p. 37)

However, before moving forward with these issues, it is necessary to explain that melodrama emerged as a modern narrative form that attempts to make visible a moral universe that is no longer guaranteed by traditional institutions. Melodrama seeks to reveal and dramatise the hidden values that lie beneath the surface of reality, using stereotypes, which are fixed, exaggerated and easily

recognisable roles, such as the villain, the innocent victim, the redeemer or the hero. Stereotypes serve to make the immediate form of social conflicts visible and understandable; this means that stereotypes allow melodrama to show good and evil in clear and extreme ways, without ambiguity, in order to forcefully represent the moral struggle that is no longer guaranteed by traditional institutions¹³. However, despite the fact that this dramatic subgenre has a very precise definition, Díaz Arciniega believes he recognises other dramatic characteristics in *Los de abajo*, in addition to melodrama, such as the three Aristotelian unities, tragedy and anagnorisis.

Except for this characteristic of the hero, the dramatic functions of the protagonists conformed to the Aristotelian pattern of tragedy and fully complied with the unities of action, time, and space, which strengthened the internal cohesion of *Los de abajo*. Of course, the novel is not conceived or constructed to be performed on stage, but to be read as what it is: the novelistic recreation of the actions and emotions of a handful of protagonists and the intense human upheaval caused by war, including its ethical repercussions, and also, no less importantly, the subtle sublimation of Mariano Azuela's experience of 'disappointment' and 'failure' – as he described it – in the face of those men and circumstances that generated his literary catharsis. (p. 45)

In order to proceed in an organised manner with the analysis of the statement they made regarding Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo*, it is necessary to mention that Aristotle makes a comparison between tragedy and epic poetry¹⁴. On the one hand, Aristotle asserts that both share, through solemn language, the actions of valiant men (individuals better than ordinary men); however, they differ in style. There is also a discrepancy in terms of action, time, and place, as Aristotle recommends respecting the three unities. The first difference between tragedy and epic poetry has to do with the unity of action, since in tragedy a particular action must be related to the main action (one part must be perfectly related to the other in order to form a whole); on the contrary, epic poetry tends to narrate many actions of different heroes that are often unrelated to the main action. The second difference concerns proportion, which corresponds to the unity of space and time: the action of the epic can take place in several places, represent different actions, and its time is unlimited. Aristotle

¹³ Cf. P. Brooks. (1976). *The melodramatic imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

¹⁴ Cf. Aristotle. (2005). *Poetics*. (J. L. García Losquardo, trans.). Barcelona: Akal.

also explains that in the epic, an event of great proportions can be narrated, but in tragedy this should be avoided, as it would be an obstacle to its representation. It is recommended that it only be mentioned on stage. Proportion goes hand in hand with the length of the tragedy, and this is related to the unity of time: the work should not exceed a solar cycle; in the epic, time is not respected, but in the tragedy it is; it should not be too short, as we would be indifferent to it; nor should it be too long, as this would make it more difficult for us to remember the relationship between the first scenes and the last.

Recognising these differences, in *Los de abajo* these three Aristotelian unities do not exist at all, since, first of all, in terms of action, there is not only a single narrative line – if we establish this line of action in Demetrio Macías – but also the narrative lines of Luis Cervantes, Alberto Solís and Anastasio Montañez, among other characters. Similarly, in terms of unity of space, the novel sets the action in Juchipila, the mountains, Fresnillo, Zacatecas City, Aguascalientes, towns and roads in northern Jalisco, towns in southern Zacatecas State, and the dénouement takes place in a remote ravine. Finally, in terms of unity of time, the novel, which, in the words of Díaz Arciniega himself, has the quality of being plausible, has an internal time frame of approximately two years, which means that it in no way complies with the aforementioned Aristotelian unity. "In total, 'almost' two years passed within the literary time frame, in which some aspects of veracity are clear." (p. 24) However, this same academic asserts that in *Los de abajo*, Mariano Azuela attempted to recreate a modern tragedy.

Natural and sensitively intuitive, with that heart-rending and melodramatic accumulation of lives and that precise and agile formal structure, Mariano Azuela recreated the classical tragedy in a modernised way in his novel, because he clearly recovered the profound meaning that the revolution had for those men: the sudden alteration of the universal order, their own. (p. 44)

We note here a double contradiction that, in the end, damages Azuela's work, since, on the one hand, it is claimed that the novel has a melodramatic plot, given that the *ethos* of the characters and Azuela's intentions were aimed at moral and historical reflection, etc.; and on the other hand, they end up asserting that Azuela's novel is a recreation of a classical tragedy. Well, to respond to this contradiction, we must be rigorous, take literary concepts seriously and, above all, be intellectually

honest. For *Los de abajo* to be considered a novel with a tragic rather than melodramatic character, first of all, its characters should not be considered stereotypical, but quite the opposite; they should be characters with a complex and unpredictable *ethos*, since for catharsis to take place, the character must not be completely good or completely evil.

The misfortune of the perfect man is not tragic, but outrageous; that of the wicked man is considered just; the tragic man occupies an intermediate position: he is the one who simultaneously does good and evil, he is guilty and innocent at the same time. The protagonist's punishment is neither deserved nor undeserved misfortune, but both. (Spang, 2000, p. 156)

However, after classifying Demetrio Macías as the archetype of courage, heroism, and gallantry, Díaz Arciniega offers a new argument in which he attempts to mould the character into the category of a 'modern' tragic hero.

But Demetrio Macías is *not* a classical hero, but a modern one, corresponding to the degraded and anti-heroic world of those years of war (the Revolution and the First World War). Seen as he is, Demetrio breaks with the classical pattern: he does not belong to the celestial or mythical lineage, nor to the nobility; on the contrary, he is as rustic as everyone else in the village, and so are his actions, behaviour, knowledge and beliefs. (Díaz, 2015, p. 45)

This definition of a tragic hero focuses solely on his ancestry, but does so to the detriment of his functions, which are what best define him. Demetrio Macías is a tragic hero, but not for the reasons mentioned by Díaz Arciniega. One of the singularities of the character's personality is the word *hubris*, which we could understand to mean 'excess'. According to ancient Greek belief, anyone who was arrogant and challenged forces greater than themselves was considered impious and was therefore punished by the gods. In short, any individual who attempted to defy divine command had to be destroyed.

The genius of the author of the *Iliad* in placing Achilles' anger at the centre of the story makes him a tragic figure. The excess of his anger, which, when his request is rejected, becomes *hubris*, an offence to the gods, causes him his most bitter pain: the death of his most beloved person, his friend Patroclus. In this pain, his anger is extinguished and only the desire

for revenge remains. But revenge taken on Hector brings about, with a fateful chain of causes and effects, Achilles' own end. (Lesky, 2001, pp. 34–35)

Demetrio Macías' *hubris* is one of the most important aspects of the novel because it illustrates its tragic nature, showing how a character initially guided by ideals of justice ends up becoming just another instrument of the senseless violence that is the Revolution. Demetrio Macías is introduced at the beginning of the novel as a peasant who joins the Revolution after being persecuted by Don Mónico, the local cacique. His initial motivation is self-defence. At first, Demetrio Macías does not seek power or fortune; however, over time, Demetrio becomes a general. Unfortunately for him, this achievement is not accompanied by a moral rise. On the contrary, the more power he gains, the further he strays from his original principles. He himself seems confused, not knowing exactly what he is fighting for, until he begins to act with *hubris*. The essence of *hubris* can be understood as the commission of acts of intentional insult that deliberately inflict shame and dishonour on others. *Hubris* resides in the self-indulgent enjoyment of excess and a disposition of extreme confidence or presumption, as a result of which an individual fails to recognise the limitations and precariousness of the human condition¹⁵. We see the consequences of Demetrio Macías' *hubris* in the novel's dénouement, as Demetrio completely loses his way because of his own excesses.

In the first part of the novel, specifically in the second chapter, we see how Demetrio Macías was admired by his companions: "Long live Demetrio Macías!" they all shouted. (Díaz, 2015: 56). In the third chapter, it is mentioned that twenty-five men were the initial number who followed Demetrio as the leader of a small armed uprising. In these first chapters, Demetrio is in control of himself, as he is not yet dominated by *hubris* and acts with reason: "Demetrio continued to shoot and warn the others of the grave danger, but they did not heed his desperate voice until they felt the whistling of bullets on one of the flanks" (p. 57).

In the fourth chapter, a highly symbolic statement is made that will take on great relevance in the novel's dénouement. A woman expresses her gratitude to Demetrio and his men:

God bless you! May God help you and guide you on the right path! ... Now you are leaving; tomorrow we will also run, fleeing from conscription, persecuted by these damned

¹⁵ Cf. Douglas L. Cairns (1996). "Hybris, Dishonour and Thinking Big." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*. Volume 116. London: The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, pp. 1–32.

government officials, who have declared war on all of us poor people; who steal our pigs, our chickens and even the little corn we have to eat; who burn our houses and take our women, and who, finally, wherever they find one of us, they finish him off as if he were an evil dog (Díaz, 2015, p. 58).

Likewise, in that same chapter, a character from the village assures Anastasio Montáñez that they had chickens, eggs and a goat that had given birth, but the federales stole everything from them. Later, he reports: "Imagine... they even took Señá Nieves' little girl!" (p. 60). This is a key point in understanding the tragic nature of the character Demetrio Macías, as his transformation is a process of progressive moral decay amid confusion and violence, to the point of becoming his own enemy.

Similarly, Demetrio Macías, although not initially suffering from *hubris*, is ignorant of the purpose of his actions, as he has no defined ideal. He joins the revolutionary struggle because he is being persecuted; in other words, his participation in the Revolution arises from an instinctive reaction, not a political one. From the outset, the Revolution has no clear horizon for him beyond survival. Chapter five illustrates this aspect of the work very well, when Luis Cervantes is captured by Demetrio's men; Cervantes tries to explain to them that he is their fellow party member and tells them that he pursues "the same ideals" and defends the same cause as them. But Demetrio asks, 'What cause are we defending?' (p. 62). Demetrio's only ambitions in the early chapters of the first part of the novel are those of a selfless man who has not been corrupted by power and glory. 'Look, before the revolution, I had my land ready for sowing, and if it hadn't been for the clash with Don Mónico, the cacique of Moyahua, I would be in a great hurry right now, preparing the yoke for sowing' (p. 76).

But as Demetrio Macías wins battles, he also gains more men who follow him. They were no longer the twenty-five rebels from the beginning. Demetrio becomes a leader by accident, but he does not develop a political vision; he simply acts, allowing himself to be led by others, as when he tells Natera that he only obeys orders. Despite his high military rank, he never discovers the cause for which he is fighting. It is here that we see a tragic flaw or *hamartia* in this character. There is a contradiction in him: he has power without purpose. This flaw paves the way for his downfall. Despite being a self-sacrificing man, Demetrius ceases to be his own master and becomes a *hybristēs* the

moment he begins to acquire power. To be a *hybristēs* (someone who suffers from *hubris*), contempt for others must be based on a misconception of one's own worth.

This is easily interpreted as 'thinking big'; but as for the extravagant exaltation of one's own claim to honour, which arises from youth, existing good fortune, inexperience of failure and blind faith in continued success, it also clearly deserves the title of *hubris*. (Cairns, 1996, p. 14)¹⁶

It is from the eighteenth chapter of the first part that we first perceive an act of *hubris* by Demetrio Macías. After a revelry, an old prostitute and two recruits of 'Colonel' Macías are found murdered at dawn. Anastasio Montáñez reports the incident to Demetrio, who responds indifferently: "Psch!... Let them bury them" (Díaz, 2015, p. 91). Later, in the nineteenth chapter, the work tells us that it is no longer the federal troops who are plundering the villages. "They were called the sombrero-dudos. And the sombrero-dudos returned as cheerfully as they had marched off to battle days before, plundering every village, every farm, every ranch, and even the most miserable hut they found in their path." (p. 91)

The second part of the novel shows Demetrio Macías' acts of *hubris* more clearly and explicitly. In the first chapter of the second part, Margarito and several other soldiers of Demetrio boast about the deaths of people they murdered on a whim. Later, in the second chapter, Demetrio is promoted to general and a celebration is held in his honour, during which acts of violence become horrifying. Demetrio's men, along with a prostitute they call La Pintada, begin by looting the houses of the landowners; shortly afterwards, his men torture and murder anyone they find. Luis Cervantes, nicknamed 'Curro', tries to persuade Demetrio to impose order in the face of his troops' looting.

"General, look at the mischief the boys have done. Wouldn't it be better to stop them?"

"No, Curro... Poor things! It's the only pleasure they have left after putting their bellies in front of the bullets.

"Yes, my general, but at least don't let them do it here... Look, it discredits us, and what's worse, it discredits our cause..."

Demetrio fixed his hawk-like eyes on Luis Cervantes. He tapped his teeth with his fingernails and said:

¹⁶ Own translation

"Don't blush... Look, don't tell me! We already know that what's yours is yours, and what's mine is mine. You got the box, fine; I got the repeater watch. (pp. 102–103).

In the fifth chapter, Demetrio returns to Moyahua to take revenge on Don Mónico, the village chief. He storms his house, kills a young man who disobeys his orders, and burns down Don Mónico's house, but it is not clear in the novel whether he does so with Don Mónico and his family inside. Later, in chapter six, Demetrio attacks the Moyahua estate. Luis Cervantes offers him money and jewellery and tries to convince him to accept them. Demetrio explains that money does not motivate him, he is only satisfied with having enough for alcohol and women; his only ambition is Camila. Luis Cervantes, in order to satisfy his leader's desires, kidnaps Camila by deception in the seventh chapter. Later on, the cruelty of Demetrio's troops is manifested with accentuated harshness in the subsequent chapters. For example, in the eighth chapter of the second part, Pancraccio murders the church sacristan, mistaking him for a 'catrín'. In all these episodes, we no longer see the selfless and self-possessed character that Demetrio Macías once was. In these episodes, he is a proud and arrogant character, totally indifferent to suffering. We see this manifestation of his *hubris* in the ninth chapter of the second part, when he and his men attack churches along the way; Güero Margarito tortures a prisoner during the journey; La Pintada informs Demetrio of Güero's misdeeds, but Demetrio is completely indulgent in the situation.

The last, but most relevant, example of Demetrio Macías' *hubris* is found in the eleventh chapter of the second part. In this chapter, Demetrio's soldiers loot, and a man with nine children begs Demetrio to return the corn they stole from him. Demetrio refuses, but Pintada persuades him. Then that same man is tortured by Güero Margarito. This last example is very suggestive for the reader, as it is at this moment that we realise that Demetrio Macías has become the antagonist against whom he himself rebelled in the beginning.

Demetrio Macías' *hubris* is reflected in the idea that he is 'full of himself', that is, he 'became too big', which implies a process of change towards nothingness, a process that results in a condition of satiety in which Demetrio Macías exceeds his own standards (the reasons why he rebelled). This condition of excess of character arises from having had too much good fortune and led him to feel that his own pretensions were superior to those of others. His *hubris* arose from his good fortune and power. Power and good fortune intoxicated him with a desire for pleasure and blinded him.

"Indulging one's baser desires is *hubris* because it involves exalting oneself, and the lower part of oneself, over the much more important claims of reason, goodness, and the divine." (Cairns, 1996: 30, *own translation*) The behaviour we observe in the character Demetrio Macías is very complex, neither stereotypical nor archetypal, since he is a character who clearly displays an overestimation of himself, an inability to control his disruptive impulses within his personality, and a refusal to accept his rightful place as the self-sacrificing character he initially presented himself to be.

Now, Demetrio Macías is a character whose artistic portrayal of the characters gives the novel *Los de abajo* a tragic plot. The relationship of his *ethos* complies with Aristotle's triad of 'good', 'appropriate', 'similar' and 'constant'. By 'good' we mean the relationship with the change of fortune or peripeteia, in which it is not advisable for a good character to go from misfortune to happiness, as this would result in a banal work; nor is it advisable for a good character to go from happiness to misfortune, as this would be inhuman and contrary to the tragic effect (i.e., the outcome of the plot would be devoid of the 'terrible' and 'miserable', or fear and pity, which lead to the catharsis of the spectator). Nor is it advisable for the evil character to go from misfortune to happiness, as this would be contrary to the plot; nor should he go from happiness to misfortune, as this would be indifferent to the tragedy. However, Demetrio Macías fulfils the characteristics of *the ethos* of a tragic hero, since he is neither completely good nor completely evil. Secondly, the character of Demetrio is appropriate; by this we mean that Demetrio is a credible character in accordance with what he represents. He is a 20th-century Mexican peasant, with all his faults and virtues, his beliefs and customs, and he acts as such. Thirdly, his character is similar. By similar, we mean that Demetrio resembles a traditional model of a Mexican revolutionary, without this meaning that is a stereotypical or archetypal character. It simply means that Demetrio Macías behaves in accordance with what would be expected of someone who leads a rebel group, with all the peculiarities that this entails, such as his gender, social class, age and role. Fourthly and finally, Demetrio Macías is a consistent character, which means that he maintains a logical and uniform line of conduct throughout the work, in keeping with his character. Although his character gradually changes through *hubris*, the result of his good fortune and power, there is a clear and justified reason for this within the diegesis of the work. None of his actions are ever contradictory to his character without a credible internal motivation. Finally, there is the relationship between Demetrio Macías' *ethos* and the change of fortune or peripeteia he suffers in the novel's dénouement, in which *hamartia* is present. The term *hamartia* refers to a 'fault',

a human inability to recognise what is right and obtain a sure direction. It is also defined as the 'tragic error' caused by excess of character. *Hamartia* occurs when the tragic hero must choose between two situations, but both are good and bad at the same time, and both will lead to misfortune. However, he is forced to choose; therefore, the tragic hero loses his will. *Hamartia* has played a role in areas as diverse as Greek history and Renaissance drama, Hellenistic theology and Victorian fiction. Due to its importance in Greek philosophy and literary criticism, the term has been most influential in those later periods that consciously returned to the standards of antiquity, particularly the Renaissance and the 18th century. But even in modern times, the notion of *hamartia* is often useful for interpreting works of philosophy and literature. For Aristotle, the best type of tragic plot is one in which *hamartia* is recognised in time to be corrected (Aristotle, 2005, p. 1454a2-9). Aristotle's theory of *hamartia* can be applied to non-dramatic literature, even though it is a component of tragedy, since the essential elements of a tragic plot also appear in epic poetry.

In the case of Demetrio Macías, his moral status as a tragic hero lies in his error due to ignorance of particular circumstances, but his catastrophe is deserved. His excess is manifested in his blind adherence to violence, and his *hamartia* is his failure to question the goal of the Revolution in time. It is this concept that corrupts him, regardless of the fact that he was initially a noble character, since he lacked ethical guidance.

The function of *hamartia* in tragedy is to produce a misfortune that is just with respect to universal law but unjust with respect to particular circumstances, so that the resulting tragedy confirms our two seemingly irreconcilable convictions about the universe: that fortune operates unjustly and that justice governs our lives. (Van Dyke, 1983, pp. 181–182)¹⁷

Demetrio Macías never knows why he acts; he simply acts without purpose, which paves the way for his degradation. Violence becomes part of him, and revolution a way of life. Demetrio is not corrupt because he is evil, but because he never knew his actions. This is where his tragic character lies: his actions have no justification, even for himself. Demetrio Macías is a being without will who acts towards a fatal and inexorable destiny. In the end, he does not act as an autonomous individual, but as an empty object.

¹⁷ Own translation

The Aristotelian tragic hero violates universal law, but can be exonerated from a human perspective, and since Aristotle's ethical judgements are made, in effect, from a human perspective, the hero is in error but not guilty. His suffering is both undeserved and deserved, producing pity and fear, which are purified by understanding and acceptance. (pp. 186–187)¹⁸

Therefore, the political ambiguity of *Los de abajo* is not a defect, but the deliberate result of a tragic structure, since Demetrio Macías' *hamartia*, understood as his ignorance of the reason for his actions, makes him a character who manifests error and catastrophe itself. Being devoid of purpose with regard to his actions, Demetrio Macías prevents Manichean interpretations from being assigned to the work, such as the categories of "reactionary novel" or "revolutionary novel", and this is precisely what has led many critics to consider the novel an ambiguous thesis, more concerned with portraying moral and social decay than glorifying a political cause. As we demonstrate in this work, many academics have favoured a political reading of *Los de abajo* and have overlooked its structure and tragic nature. By focusing on the historical context, the author's intentions, and details unrelated to the work, they have overlooked the fact that the novel is built on an existential conflict (), which is the protagonist's *hamartia*, his ignorance of what he is fighting for, leading to his ultimate downfall. This tragic approach allows us to understand the work beyond the political, as a masterpiece of Mexican literature of the Revolution. The tragic element is one of the reasons for considering *Los de abajo* a canonical novel, for beyond its documentary or political value, the work achieves a universal dimension by showing human beings confronted with an inexorable destiny.

References

- Aristotle. (2005). *Poetics*. Barcelona: Akal.
- Bajtín, M. (2012). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Bloom, H. (1995). *The Western Canon: The School and the Books of All Ages*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Bunge, M. (2014). *Pseudoscience and ideology*. Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores.
- Brooks, P. (1976). *The melodramatic imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

¹⁸ Own translation

- Douglas L. C (1996). "Hybris, Dishonour and Thinking Big." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*. Volume 116. London: The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, pp. 1–32.
- Díaz, V. (2015). "Los de abajo, cien años después" (*Those at the bottom, one hundred years later*), in *Los de abajo*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Díaz, V. (2011). "Azuela entre dos corrientes" [Azuela between two currents], in *Una selva infinita. La novela corta en México (1872-2011)* [An infinite jungle. The short novel in Mexico (1872-2011)]. Pp. 273–289. Mexico: National Autonomous University of Mexico/Foundation for Mexican Literature.
- Díaz, V. (2010a). "On the Move: The Short Novels of Azuela." *Mexican Literature*. Vol. 21. No. 2. Pp. 113–134. Mexico: National Autonomous University of Mexico.
- Díaz, V. (2010b). "La crítica pertinaz" (The persistent critic), in *Doscientos años de narrativa mexicana* (Two hundred years of Mexican narrative). Vol. 2. Rafael Olea Franco (ed.) Mexico: El Colegio de México. Pp. 13–36.
- Mansour, M. (1996). "Cúspides inaccesibles" (Inaccessible Peaks), in *Los de abajo. Critical edition*. Madrid: ALLCA XX/Fondo de Cultura Económica, pp. 251–274.
- Menton, S. (1996). "Epic Textures of *Los de abajo*," in *Los de abajo. Critical edition*. Madrid: ALLCA XX/Fondo de Cultura Económica. Pp. 239–250.
- Ruffinelli, J. (2011). "*Los de abajo* y sus contemporáneos. Mariano Azuela y los límites del liberalismo" (*The Underclass and Their Contemporaries. Mariano Azuela and the Limits of Liberalism*). *Literatura Mexicana*, Vol. 1. No. 1. pp. 41–64. Mexico: National Autonomous University of Mexico.
- Ruffinelli, J. (1996). "Introduction by the coordinator," in *Los de abajo. Critical edition*. Madrid: ALLCA XX/Fondo de Cultura Económica. Pp. xxxi–xxxiii.
- Spang, K. (2000). *Literary Genres. Theory of Literature and Comparative Literature*. Madrid: Síntesis.
- Van Dyke, C, (1983). "The errors of good men: *Hamartia* in two Middle English poems" *Hamartia. The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition. Essays in honour of John M. Crosssett*, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press. pp. 171–191.
- Wellek, R and Warren, A. (1966). *Literary Theory*, London: Gredos.
- Wimsatt, W. K. & Beardsley, M. C. "The Intentional Fallacy", from *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (July – September, 1946), pp. 468 – 488