Theme, Characterization and Structure in *Los invasores*

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Since it first appeared, Egon Wolff's *Los invasores* has been the subject of a number of critical studies which recognize the play's important socio-political message, but show little agreement with respect to the author's success in communicating it.[1] An examination of the work from the standpoint of Wolff's psychological portrayal of its main character reveals a thematic preoccupation which, although it encompasses political ideology, is fundamentally rooted in the ethical implications of Christian charity.[2] Such a reading also renders discernible a greater degree of organizational coherence in the play than hitherto acknowledged. The purpose of this paper is to examine the development of this theme as it relates to characterization and structure.

The divergence of opinion concerning the message and aesthetic integrity of *Los invasores* can be explained, in great measure, by the author's structuring of the plot around the dichotomy between dream and reality. While it it true that contemporary plays can "often be seen both as reality and as dream, as natural and as hallucinatory at one and the same time,"[3] the thematic implications of a work may be quite different if it is regarded exclusively as one or the other. Except for its political statement, the dream element in *Los invasores* as it relates to theme has generally been overlooked. Even when the dream's aesthetic importance is recognized, the play is typically construed as political allegory: "The message, meanwhile, is a warning to the wealthy that the poor have the capacity to rise up and overthrow existing governments, and that such an upheaval is inevitable if the wealthy continue to reject or distort this reality by ignoring the plight of the oppressed."[4]

The opening scene of the play, in which Meyer and his wife engage in a brief conversation after returning from a party, is usually regarded as "reality." The couple having retired, a transition in the plot occurs when a pane of glass is shattered and a hand extends into the house. The remainder of Act I and most of Act II portray, in a surrealistic fashion (changing identities, contradictions, con-

fusing dialogue, unconventional dress), the intrusion into Meyer's home of China and the *harapientos*, and the subjection of his family to a series of physical and psychological abuses. Because of the implausible and at times irrational nature of what transpires during this confrontation, it appears that the action occurs on the oneiric level. This impression is reinforced when Meyer awakens screaming and we, along with him, are ostensibly brought back to reality.

When the final dialogue is concluded, again a window pane is broken and a hand appears. Since it earlier signaled the entrance of the *harapientos* into Meyer's home and privileged world, the hand now seems to portend a metamorphosis of dream into reality, thereby dramatizing the play's revolutionary theme. However, another interpretation is possible.

In "Egon Wolff's *Los invasores*: A Play within a Dream,"[5] Leon Lyday cites textual evidence such as the unnatural dialogue of the opening scene, the contradiction in the timing of an incident involving the burning of Bobby's jacket, and the reappearance of the hand, to theorize persuasively that the play may be considered a dream within a dream. Consequently, the scenes prior to and following Meyer's nightmare would pertain to at least one oneiric level, and the invasion to another.

From the standpoint of political allegory and as a presage of plot development, the opening scene has several functions. It establishes that Meyer and his wife belong to the upper socio-economic class, suggests the tenuousness of their privileged status, and alludes to the destitute wandering in the streets, and therefore to their imminent invasion.

If, on the other hand, all that is said and all that transpires in *Los invasores* is dream, then this initial scene may also be examined in terms of Wolff's psychological portrayal of Meyer. Accordingly, comments made by the latter's wife, Pietá, and subsequently by other characters, can be said to mirror *his* subconscious. On this premise, it is significant to note that in the conversation between Meyer and Pietá, the terms "*libre*," "*eterno*," "*invulnerabilidad*," and "*inviolable*" are associated with him. They, together with his unfinished utterance "Puedo. . .", suggest a sense of strength and security that transcends economic considerations and an obliviousness to human frailty and mortality.

As the conversation continues, the secure self-image is seen to be subconsciously threatened on several fronts. First, despite what Meyer may project to others, he is aware of his advancing age and, implicitly, of his mortality: "Me haces olvidar que envejezco."[6] Second, there is a recognition of the existence of God and of man's accountability for his actions in Pietá's affirmation: "Creo en la justicia divina" (p. 85). Third, and most important, is the sense of guilt manifest in Meyer's description of two nuns' solicitation of a donation from him:[7]

> Ayer en la tarde estuvieron unas Monjas de la Caridad en mi oficina y les hice un cheque por una suma desmesurada; por poco hipoteco la fábrica a su favor. . . . He estado pensando mucho sobre eso, desde ayer. . . . ¿Qué me impulsó a ello? (p. 86)

This statement is psychologically revealing because it indicates Meyer's need to make retribution for something in his past. The reference to "Monjas de la Caridad" links his guilt with religion and recalls the earlier reference to divine

justice. Also, from the standpoint of the play's structure, it is in this passage that Wolff introduces the theme of Christian charity.

It is clear from this opening scene that Meyer's dream is the consequence of a complex, multidimensional conflict. That conflict embraces his apparent failure to temper his actions by ethical considerations, his realization that divine justice will someday hold him responsible for his still unspecified misdeeds, and the apprehension he experiences due to a sense of moral and religious guilt.

With the entrance of China and the *harapientos*, Meyer's nightmare and the main action of the play commence. The ruthless manner in which the poor proceed effectively to destroy the life style of the Meyer family is the basis for socio-political interpretations of the play. However, in the context of the play's organizational unity, it is important to note that the religious element introduced in Meyer's conversation with his wife not only reappears but has an increasingly significant function within the nightmare sequence.

It has been suggested, for example, that the incongruous disparity between the rags China wears and his "cuello blanco y tieso, inmaculadamente limpio" is a visual sign of the initiation of the dream-reality.[8] This is consistent with the external structure of the play outlined above, and indicative of Wolff's control of stage technique. However, given the matrix of Christianity into which the author has placed Meyer, China's collar may also be considered symbolic of his occasional role within the dream as a priest figure. As such, it underscores the religious character of Meyer's guilt and foreshadows the confession motif that will become important in Act II.

Equally important, China's tattered clothing and his first words: "Un pan . . . Un pedazo de pan . . . Un pedazo de pan, ¡por amor de Dios!" (p. 89), recall the previous allusion to charity. Meyer's response—"Fuera de esta casa"—contrasts with the exaggerated generosity he exhibited when confronted by the two nuns and reveals him to be a callous hypocrite whose actions belie his Christian facade.

Wolff's employment of Christianity as a structural motif is also evident in several comments China directs at Meyer in the course of the first *cuadro*. Referring to the wealthy class's indifference to the poor, China observes: "Es una bendición que, de vez en cuando, derramen algo sobre nosotros . . . los irresponsables" (p. 94). Describing Mariscal, another *harapiento*, he notes: "No sabe que la riqueza es una especie de . . . martirio" (p. 96). When Meyer attempts to explain and justify his wealth, China exclaims, "¡Cada maldito centavo lo ahorró con santa paciencia!" (p. 96). Finally, when Meyer verbally dissociates himself from the rich, China comments: "Tremendo sacrificio. Siempre le estoy diciendo a Toletole: 'estos ricos llevan su cruz'" (p. 108). This ironic use of the associative terms *bendición*, *martirio*, *santa*, and *cruz* is further evidence of the role religion plays in Meyer's guilt. Also, it strengthens Wolff's characterization of him as a man whose actions are antithetical to his supposed Christianity.

In the second cuadro of Act I, the play's external plot unfolds as the other members of Meyer's family come into violent confrontation with the invaders. Correspondingly, the theme of social injustice is developed through references to the lamentable condition of the lower class and the indifference of the wealthy to their plight. At the same time, Meyer's internal struggle evolves in a manner which parallels closely that of the first *cuadro*. First, we recall Meyer's positive

self-image when he arrogantly comments: "Pero yo, al menos, tengo mi conciencia limpia" (p. 108). Second, he again demonstrates himself to be a hypocrite. On the one hand, he attempts to persuade his wife to treat the invaders with Christian charity:

> Además desde un punto de vista cristiano . . . . merecen nuestros cuidados, ¿no te parece? . . . . ¿Dónde vamos con ese pesimismo, mujer? . . . . Un poco más de buena fe. . . . ¿No perteneces tú a una docena de instituciones de caridad? ¿Qué caridad les enseñan en esas instituciones? (p. 109)

Yet on the other, he cynically states to China: "Cristo se dejó clavar en vano. El hombre no ama a su prójimo; eso es pasto para las ovejas, lo que importa a la postre es: talento . . . agallas . . . materia gris" (p. 108).

Additionally, we are reminded of the themes of divine justice and guilt when Meyer, having witnessed the invader's violent treatment of his son and daughter, cries out: "¡Oh Dios mío, ten piedad de mi familia!" (p. 114). Finally, when China describes Benito Juárez, another *harapiento*, allusion is again made to the concept of charity:

> En sus grandes brazos, los niños se duermen como en una cuna. . . . Mientras hace así, canta canciones. . . . Suavemente, delicadamente, se pone a entonar canciones. . . . Canciones tontas. . . . Canciones ilusas. . . . *Canciones que hablan de la bondad entre los hombre* [emphasis added] (p. 114).

In Act II, the social conflict is intensified as the revolutionary ideals of the poor are put into practice, among them the education of the illiterate, the communal working of the fields, and the melting down of precious metals for the production of tools. Simultaneously, and with increasingly greater drama, Meyer's psychological crisis moves toward its finalization. We are reminded of this internal struggle when Meyer addresses China as Mirelis, as he had done in Act I, and then in a manner consistent with his earlier characterization, reaffirms his sense of power: "Puedo aguantar mucho, más de lo que tú crees. . . . Arrasarán toda la ciudad, pero yo podré seguir aquí, firme como un roble" (p. 123). Also, Meyer's enumeration of his acts of "generosity" toward his employees is reminiscent of Wolff's previous portrayal of him as a hypocrite: "Les he dado salario y ellos han comido. . . . Una vez tomé a los 200 con sus críos y paquetes y los trasladé a la playa. . . . Esa es mi creación: ¡hacer vidas!" (p. 124).

As Meyer concludes his self-aggrandizing speech, he asks China (Mirelis) why he continues to stay in his house. The response, "Esperamos . . . que llegue el momento," marks the return to the ideas of guilt and confession introduced in Act I. From this point on, the socio-political theme of *Los invasores* is subordinated to the ethical-religious one. In this connection, China reassumes his priestly role as he provokes and is witness to Meyer's baring of his soul: "Hable usted. A usted le toca ahora. . . . Yo escucharé" (p. 125).

In the rapidly moving and somewhat chaotic ending to the main dream sequence, Meyer's guilty conscience is externalized as those people affected by his unchristian actions parade before the spectator. The two nuns reappear as workers fired by Meyer for their unattractiveness. El Cojo becomes Miguel Santana, an

elderly employee who died while working in Meyer's factory, evidently as a consequence of not being allowed to rest. Toletole returns as a destitute widow of whom Meyer had taken advantage by purchasing her home for a meager sum. She, in turn, is followed by Alí Babá. He first becomes a young worker falsely accused of stealing and fired by Meyer, and then is identified simultaneously with Meyer's dead partner and the latter's brother, who Meyer fears will seek vengeance for his death. The identification of these individuals with characters who earlier appear in the dream is another indication of Wolff's mastery of technique to achieve structural unity.

Perhaps the most dramatic aspect of this scene is Meyer's struggle to admit (confess) his role in his partner's death. At one point during the objectification of Meyer's conscience, the latter addresses China as Mirelis and accepts partial blame: "¿Quieres que confiese? Sí, maté a tu hermano. Pero no toda la culpa es mía. Tu hermano llegó a mí con los ojos bien abiertos. Lo vencí de igual a igual" (p. 130). In his unconscious dream state, Meyer realizes the inadequacy of this admission, but cannot bring himself to accept fully his responsibility. Consequently, he implores China to accuse him openly: "¡Dime! . . . . ¡Yo maté a Mirelis! . . . . ¡Dime!" (p. 131).

With great dramatic intuition, Wolff forces Meyer over the barrier that separates him from completion of his confession and from the cathartic purgation of his conscience (and subconscious), by directing that the house lights be extinguished and a chorus recite the following passage:

> Adán y Eva tuvieron a Caín y Abel. . . .
> Caín engendró a Irad y de Irad se multiplicaron hasta Matusael. . . .
> Matusael engendró a Henoc y de Henoc adelante, la raza humana comenzó a rebalsar. . . .
> Y cuando Noé engendró a Sem, Cam y Jafet, la raza humana ya era masa. . . .
> Porque los hijos de Jafet fueron Gomer, Magog y Madai. . . .
> Y Javen y Tubal. . . .
> Y Mosoc y Tiras y Asanes. . . .
> Y Rifat y Eliza y Tarsis . . . .
> Y Gus y Fut y Mesraim. . . .
> Y cada uno de ellos tuvieron miles de hijos, y la tierra se pobló de rostros. . . .
> Tuvieron millones de hijos cada uno, y la tierra se pobló de miserias. . . . (pp. 131-132)

Thus reminded of his place in the human cosmos as a descendant of Adam and, like him, a creation of a superior being to whom he is responsible, Meyer awakens crying out: "¡Basta . . . . Basta! . . . . ¡Yo lo maté! . . . . ¡Yo lo maté!" (p. 132). In this manner, Meyer finally confronts and responds to his latent guilt feelings. Moreover, in completing his "confession," he achieves a degree of honesty and authenticity absent from his conscious life.

If viewed as dream, therefore, *Los invasores* is essentially a psychological play in which a complex internal crisis is dramatically externalized. That crisis is inextricably linked to the moral and religious guilt arising from Meyer's unethical

treatment of others and a subconscious realization that, in the context of his Christian beliefs, he will be held responsible for his actions. From an aesthetic point of view, the dream element and the motif of Christianity which has been incorporated into it, are the principal unifying elements of play, and serve to render comprehensible otherwise ambiguous passages and characters. Considering a) direct and veiled references to Christianity throughout the play, b) the parallel development of Meyer's character in the two *cuadros* of Act I, c) the confession motif and China's function with respect to it and d) the interchanging roles of characters, it can be affirmed that Egon Wolff has not only given his play structural coherence, but he has successfully met the challenge of intelligibly and meaningfully expressing the chaotic world of the subconscious.

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Notes

1. For Margaret S. Peden, the play's meaning is clear: "*Los invasores* explores the inevitable destruction of a bourgeoisie indifferent to the social conditions surrounding it" ["Three Plays of Egon Wolff," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 3/1 (Fall 1969), 31]. Antonio Skármeta notes the work's complexity and encounters ambiguity: "En *Los invasores*, la sucesión dramática se corporiza en la ambigüedad de un transcurso psíquico-real-onírico, pero la recolección significativa final, el decantamiento en un mensaje distinto, queda entregada a los espectadores en final abierto" ["La burguesía invadida: I. Egon Wolff," *Revista Chilena de Literatura*, 4 (1971), 96-97]. Finally, Donald L. Shaw singles out the manner in which the ideological message is presented as a fundamental weakness: "The play is neither a successful piece of propaganda nor a genuine drama of ideas. Failure to present the invaders in a positive light prevents it from achieving the former category while the crudity of its attack on the bourgeois groups removes it from the latter" ["René Marqués' *La muerte no entrará en Palacio*: An Analysis," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 2/1 (Fall 1968), 33].

2. In "*Los invasores:* Egon Wolff y la responsabilidad social del artista católico," *Hispanófila*, 55 (Septiembre 1975), 87-97, Hernán Vidal calls attention to the play's important ethical message and its relation to Christianity.

3. Martin Esslin, "The Theater of the Absurd Reconsidered," in *Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), p. 187.

4. Leon Lyday, "Egon Wolff's *Los invasores*: A Play Within a Dream," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 6/1 (Fall 1972), 19.

5. Lyday, pp. 19-26.

6. Ruth S. Lamb (ed.), *Three Contemporary Latin-American Plays* (Lexington, Mass.: Xerox College Publishing, 1971), p. 84. All quotations are from this edition. Page numbers will be given in parenthesis following the quotation.

7. In the article cited, Leon Lyday calls attention to the guilt theme: "Meyer's feeling of guilt over the murder of his partner and his fear of revenge for this murder appear, in fact, to be the underlying causes for the nightmare he is experiencing." Lyday, p. 22.

8. "The striking contrast between the carnation and stiff white collar he is wearing and the rags which make up the rest of his attire is the first concrete manifestation of the disjointedness which gradually comes to pervade the entire work, and this contrast, thus, seems to be launching the dream-reality." Lyday, p. 23.