# NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN SELECTED FICTIONAL WORKS BY LUISA VALENZUELA

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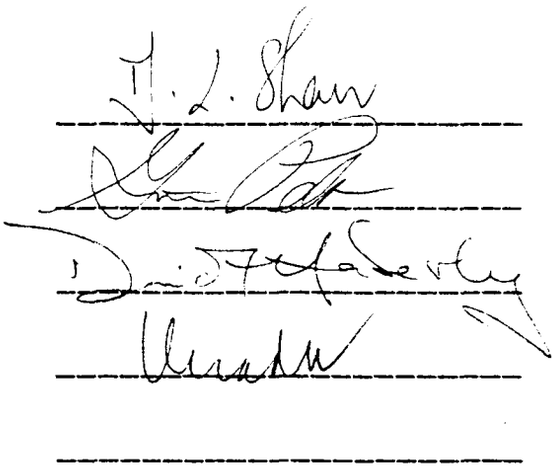

# Dissertation Abstract

Luisa Valenzuela's fiction has merited the attention of leading literary critics, and many of her novels and short stories have been translated into English. Apropos of the quality of Valenzuela's narrative technique, her name has been linked with Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez and many more. Yet, only two in-depth considerations of her works exist to date. Sharon Magnarelli's critical text, Reflections/Refractions: Reading Luisa Valenzuela, places an emphasis on Language; Juana María Cordones-Cook's study, Poética de transgresión en la novelística de Luisa Valenzuela, filters Valenzuela's fiction through the lense of post-structural theories of transgression. The present investigation, while not wholly different from the two existing critical studies, is a piece of straightforward criticism that re-examines from a new perspective several works previously analyzed by Magnarelli and Cordones-Cook and attempts to throw light on Valenzuela's latest two novels, recipients, as yet, of scant critical attention. Our objective is dual in purpose: 1) to indicate an existing relationship between the works considered within our study, and 2) to relate

these texts to earlier and later ones of a similar kind of intent. In regard to our first purpose, we demonstrate that Valenzuela's technique of portraying oppressor/victim relationships from a numer of different viewpoints results in narratives that are original both in terms of their creation of form and their expression of certain aspects of reality. Our approach is analytical, concentrating on plot structure, presentation of characters, and style. As to our second purpose, we touch upon Valenzuela's writing in relation to both Boom and Post-Boom writers, in the hope of shedding light on what the term Post-Boom might signify. Each of the five chapters of our study treats a particular work by Valenzuela, and the chapters are arranged chronologically, that is in order of the frist publishing date of their respective texts. The works to be included are as follows: Hay que sonreír, Cola de lagartija, Cambio de armas, Realidad nacional desde la cama, and Novela negra con argentinos.

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*To my father*

Jim Frank Cook

*and in memory of my mother*

Joy Fuson Cook

# INTRODUCTION

Luisa Valenzuela, one of Argentina's most highly regarded writers, shares many of her countrymen's concerns for the sinister arbitrary repression and absurd realities which are products of a dehumanized world. Valenzuela boasts a long careeer in literature and journalism which began at the age of seventeen when she was published in several leading Argentine newspapers and magazines: La Nación, Crisis, Atlántida, El Hogar, and Esto es. At age eighteen she wrote her first short story which was published in the magazine Ficción, and at twenty-one she wrote her first novel, Hay que sonreír. To date, her published works include five volumes of short stories: Los heréticos (1967), Aquí pasan cosas raras (1975), Libro que no muerde (1980), Cambio de armas (1983), Donde viven las águilas (1983), and Simetrías (1993); and six novels: Hay que sonreír (1966), El

gato eficaz (1972), Como en la guerra (1977), Cola de lagartija (1983), Realidad nacional desde la cama (1990), and Novela negra con argentinos (1990). During her distinguished career she has won the National Film Institute award for the script "Clara," based on her novel Hay que sonreír, traveled to Europe under invitation of the governments of Great Britain, France, Italy and Spain (1966), received a Fulbright Fellowship to participate in the International Writers Program at the University of Iowa (1969-1970), conducted writers' workshops at Universidad del Sur, Argentina, and traveled to Ottawa, Canada as a participant in the Inter-American Conference on Women Writers. In addition, she has conducted a creative writing workshop in Spanish at Columbia University, lectured at Northwestern University, the University of Wisconsin, Holy Cross College, and the Pan American Society of New England. She was a fellow of the Institute for the Humanities of New York University (1981-1982), a member of the Freedom to Write Committee of P.E.N. American Center (1982), a Guggenheim fellow, and taught Latin

American literature in the writing division of Columbia University (1983).

Valenzuela's works reflect not only the violent twenty-eight year period in Argentina's history which began with the exile of Juan Perón in 1955 and continued until human rights activist, Raúl Alfonsín was elected president in 1983, but also with the on-going social, economic, and political problems of the country.

Her narrative, which is primarily concerned with the plight of women and Latin American identity, is often characterized as revolutionary in nature due to its constant challenging of complacently accepted Western traditions. During Valenzuela's career as a novelist and writer of short stories, her writing has undergone a transformation in both tone and style. A careful examination of her works will reveal that she has moved from the realistic mode of fiction represented in Hay que sonreír (1996), through a period of radical experimentation that produced El gato eficaz (1972), a work technically reminiscent of Boom writing, to a transitional stage exemplified by Cola de lagartija (1983),

during the course of which she combines socio-political concerns with a literary pattern associated with the Boom. Works published from Cambio de armas (1982) on, while remaining somewhat experimental, fall rather clearly into the Post-Boom category, given their preoccupation with the socio-political aspects of present day Spanish America, their sense of a collective project including feminism, their use of popular forms such as the novela negra and their representation of the exile experience.

Luisa Valenzuela's fiction has merited the attention of leading literary critics, and many of her novels and short stories have been translated into English. Apropos the quality of Valenzuela's narrative technique, her name has been linked with Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez and many more. Yet, only two in-depth considerations of her works exist to date: Sharon Magnarelli's critical text, Reflections/Refractions: Reading Luisa Valenzuela, places an emphasis on language and frequently links the author's style to a mode of writing characteristic of Boom authors; Juana María Cordones-Cook's

study, Poética de transgresión en la novelística de Luisa Valenzuela, filters Valenzuela's fiction through the lense of post-structural theories of transgression. The present investigation, while not wholly different from the two existing critical studies, is a piece of straightforward criticism that re-examines from a new perspective several works previously analyzed by Magnarelli and Cordones-Cook and attempts to throw light on Valenzuela's latest two novels, recipients, as yet, of scant critical attention. Our objective is dual in purpose: 1) to indicate an existing relationship between the works considered within our study, and 2) to relate these texts to earlier and later ones of a similar kind or intent. In regard to our first purpose, we will seek to demonstrate that Valenzuela's technique of portraying oppressor/victim relationships from a number of different viewpoints results in narratives that are original both in terms of their creation of form and their expression of certain aspects of reality. Our approach will be analytical, concentrating on plot structure, presentation of characters, and style. As to our second purpose, we will

touch upon Valenzuela's writing in relation to both Boom and Post-Boom writers, in the hope of shedding light on what the term Post-Boom might signify. Each of the five chapters of our study treats a particular work by Valenzuela, and the chapters are arranged chronologically, that is, in order of the first publishing date of their respective texts. The works to be included are as follows: Chapter 1, Hay que sonreír; Chapter 2, Cola de lagartija; Chapter 3, Cambio de armas; Chapter 4, Realidad nacional desde la cama; and Chapter 5, Novela negra con argentinos. Clearly, this investigation does not pretend to embrace the totality of Luisa Valenzuela's work nor to carry out an exhaustive analysis of the novels and short stories treated. However, it is the first systematic and cohesive treatment of Valenzuela's narrative technique and thematics, considering that Magnarelli's book is basically a collection of the many articles that she has written on the author's work, and that Cordones-Cook's is dedicated to an investigation of post-structural theories of transgression, to a certain extent at the expense of analyses of Valenzuela's fiction. As such, it

is our hope that it will make a modest contribution to the growing corpus of Valenzuela criticism.

## Hay que sonreír

Hay que sonreír (1966) a tale of exploitation and victimization, denounces the assumption that females may be possessed by males throughout the stages of their lives as well as rejecting society's dictates which demand passivity and silence from its female members. The novel has been studied previously by Sharon Magnarelli and Amy Katz Kaminsky. Sharon Magnarelli's article, "From Hay que sonreír to Cambio de armas," designates the work as an attack on male domination (5). On a larger scale, her later study entitled "The Discourse of the Body in the Body of Discourse: Hay que sonreír" argues that the novel is a demonstration of phenomena--especially manipulative language--that oppress any arbitrarily chosen group of persons (5). Amy Katz Kaminsky's analysis, "Women Writing about Prostitutes: Amalia Jamilis

and Luisa Valenzuela," focuses on Jamilis' and Valenzuela's image of the prostitute as depicted in their respective works, Trabajos nocturnos and Hay que sonreír. Using these studies as a point of departure, the following analysis will attempt to offer further insight into a work which has to date received insufficient critical attention.

Hay que sonreír is the story of a child-like woman named Clara who departs penniless from her home in Tres Lomas to go to Buenos Aires. Having been abandoned by her father and lacking money for necessities, Clara turns to prostitution--almost accidentally--as a means of support. She has only two wishes in life: to visit the ocean, and to secure a job which will enable her to become important by "using her head."[1] Although these desires are hardly unreasonable, they are unattainable for Clara and eventually prove fatal. The reader of Hay que sonreír follows Clara as she is swept from one man's domination to another's. After leaving Tres Lomas, she becomes involved with Don Mario, a pimp who treats her paternalistically as he introduces her to prostitution. From Don Mario, she passes to Victor with his ill-founded conceit;

to Carlos, the man of her dreams who falls far short of her illusions; to Toño who spends her savings from prostitution on other women; and finally to Alejandro, a neurotic carnival magician who considers marriage to Clara to be evidence of his own debasement.

Throughout Hay que sonreír we perceive a fundamental preoccupation with two themes: 1) the abuse of power and 2) a lack of reaction on the part of the abused victim against the oppressor. In regard to the latter theme, the victim's repeated concessions lead to self-destruction and perpetuate the chain of abuses forged by those in power. These themes are so intimately linked throughout the work that it is difficult to discuss one without the other. The resulting dual thematic pattern underlies the work's plot development, narrative strategy, and character presentation. Similarly, we can relate to it the incorporation of various literary devices such as imagery and symbolism, alternation of time order and innovative use of language, all of which figure it forth.

The plot, though simple, is consciously constructed. Hay que sonreír consists of three clearly defined sections: "El cuerpo", "Transición", and "La cabeza." Both the shape of the work and the interrelationships of its sections are in keeping with Valenzuela's overall message about the injustices of the abusive uses of power and the inherent danger of resignation on the part of the victim. As observed by Sharon Magnarelli, the novel's divisions initially suggest movement in an upward direction, representative of Western society's tendency to view advancement as traveling away from ignoble physical elements and toward mental/spiritual fulfillment ("From Hay que sonreír..." 7). In Hay que sonreír, however, only the illusion of upward motion exists; close examination reveals that Valenzuela has manipulated the classic triad structure in order to develop a circular form and not an ascending one (the work begins and ends with episodes depicting Clara waiting for a man). The resultant negative commentary subverts rather than supports contemporary social hierarchies and in so doing intimates that these hierarchies are themselves agents of oppression.

It might be suggested that Valenzuela's tactic is designed to mirror at the structural level her thematic concern with abusive power, specifically the manipulative function of illusion and deception within a process of victimization. The circularity of Hay que sonreír also implicitly criticizes passive acceptance of arbitrary social hierarchies, given that the novel depicts the fall of a protagonist who never breaks out of the circle to challenge the exploitation and violence to which she is subjected.

The sections of Hay que sonreír trace the stages of the protagonist's downfall. Valenzuela's contraposition of body and head produces an ironic element which serves to further strengthen her attack on contemporary society: the progression from section to section not only creates an overall circular form, as mentioned above, but as the narrative ascends from body (Part I) to mind (Part III), it simultaneously narrates Clara's descent from a position of relative control over her life in the former to one of submission in the latter. "El cuerpo" begins as Clara awaits her boyfriend's arrival. As suggested by its title, the

focal point is Clara's body, with little attention given to other aspects of her person. Philosophically speaking, her head has been severed from her body and prefigures its physical loss. As Magnarelli has observed, throughout "El cuerpo", Clara is able to sustain a measure of control over her own future, offering her body as a medium of exchange when it is to her advantage to do so ("Discourse..." 18).

In "Transición," Clara's body still successfully attracts men; however, once she finally captures her ideal lover, she finds that he is inferior to her preconceived idealization of him. It is shortly thereafter--about mid-way through Part II--that Clara meets a fortune teller to whom she begins to relinquish her autonomy. For the first time, she defers to a man the decision of ending one relationship and beginning another. By simply accepting the fortune-teller's domination, Clara embarks upon a path that will lead to a state of powerlessness and subsequent death.

In Part III," La cabeza," Clara's self-responsibility continues to erode as the reader is eventually returned to the novel's initial situation. In this final section, Clara

follows the fortune teller, who has promised her a job using her head. She hopes that this will be her long anticipated opportunity and is disappointed to find herself the object of a circus act in which her head appears to be severed from her body by means of tricks and mirrors. As in the beginning of the novel, Clara is found waiting for a man; in this instance, what she awaits is her death at the hands of the fortune-teller. All the while comparing him to a god who determines his followers' fates, the protagonist reminds herself that she must smile obediently in the face of the violence about to be perpetrated against her. Once more she is viewed as a head without a body, but the separation is now a physical one. By virtue of the progression of sections, the reader of Hay que sonreír initially is led to expect that the body will be denied, and as a result a spiritual awakening will follow; however, the ironic conclusion of the text ultimately exposes the illusion behind the apparent ascent.

The selection and distribution of episodes within the principal sections of Hay que sonreír draws attention to the

merciless process in which Clara is trapped. The work contains the protagonist's life story, which is presented via episodes depicting personal relationships between her and a series of men. In each instance, Clara's attraction to a particular male is based on the possibility of escape that he offers from an adverse or dull reality. Manipulative techniques employed by the males in Clara's life, together with the protagonist's characteristic failure to free herself from the oppressive cycle are stressed. Also, Clara is repeatedly stripped of material belongings as well as personal identity, the result of which is dehumanization, at first metaphorical and finally in a literal sense. In as much as the episodes develop the work's thematic concern of victimization and non-reaction, each is necessary and significant.

The distribution of episodes within Hay que sonreír also accounts for the novel's shape and, in part, for its consistent tempo. As commented earlier, the episodes of "El cuerpo" and those of the first half of "La transición" portray Clara as exercising a degree of control over her life

--she determines the appropriate time to begin and terminate relationships. An alteration in the predominance of her limited power occurs mid-way through "La transición," which is also the novel's midpoint, when Clara allows Alejandro to determine when she will change lovers: "Lo pensé mucho, y ahora estoy decidido. Te vas a venir conmigo para siempre. Ya es demasiado tarde para decir que no" (117). Subsequent episodes trace Clara's fall to a state of total subjugation. By centering the work in this way, Valenzuela vividly contrasts the relatively self-determined Clara with Clara as victim. The moment of alteration and the subsequent decline of Clara's control additionally aid in maintaining the novel's tempo; during the first half of Hay que sonreír, Clara never increases her power sufficiently to represent a threat to the counterforce of Alejandro, thus the uncontested disintegration of the protagonist's control proceeds swiftly throughout the episodes of the second half of the work.

A correspondence between chapter length and main episodes is also important to the consistent rhythm of Hay que sonreír and manifests thematic intent as well. Chapter

three of "El cuerpo," the longest chapter of Part I, establishes Clara's identity as a self-commanded character. Clara, of her own accord, enters into and quits relationships with Victor, Don Mario, Toño, and Carlos. In contrast, the crucial event of "La transición"--Clara permits Alejandro to decide that she will live with him--occurs at the end of a short chapter of four pages. The placement of the pivotal episode at the close of a brief chapter underscores its central role in depicting Clara's fate. In "La cabeza", Valenzuela returns to a technique of emphasis in the section's longest chapter, in this case chapter four, in order to draw forth her concern of the victim's lack of reaction to oppression. Here Clara is portrayed at her most passive, and frequently makes concessions to Alejandro. A relationship between passive behavior and self-destruction is suggested when Clara purchases a straight razor as a gift for Alejandro. It can be argued that this episode implicates Clara in her own downfall given that she selects the weapon to be used in her own murder and presents it to her assasin.

Valenzuela presents the episodes of Hay que sonreír via a combination of third person omniscient narration and interior monologue. The sections of omniscient narration include straight narrative, approximately thirty three percent; the novel's remaining sixty seven percent is devoted to interior monologue. In order to understand the significance of these components and the commentary that they offer, it is necessary to examine the make-up of each.

The freedom inherent to an omniscient vantage point is vital to Valenzuela's depiction of the physical and emotional environments in Hay que sonreír. By adopting an omniscient viewpoint, Valenzuela is able to insert information and statements of thematic intent at will, and she is also afforded access to her characters' thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, sections of omniscient narration are bound by neither time nor place and they are free to shift from the exterior world to the inner selves of a number of characters. Those portions which are devoted to scene-setting, most frequently straight narrative, create the oppressive sense of confinement which surrounds Clara, as well as the distorted

realities which would seem to offer the protagonist a means of escape. Valenzuela has created the novel's set descriptions in such a manner that they appear to arise from Clara's actions or what she sees, for example:

> El fin de semana hubiera podido resultar maravilloso. En el fondo era mucho mejor estar fuera de la carpa, bajo el techo que formaba alero, que adentro cocinándose de calor. Además podía ver toda la vida de la feria, los colores y el movimiento. Miraba a todos lados, asombrada, y veía los globos y las calesitas que daban vueltas cargadas de chicos (189).

As a consequence, they do not represent independent and interruptive scenic descriptions. In regard to the interior emotional lives of Clara and the men with whom she is involved, descriptions and narration of events portray Clara as a confused young woman who is unable to make the social and behavioral codes around her coincide with her own personal logic and desires. The men in her life are characterized by their obsession with acquiring absolute control over Clara's existence.

Dialogues constitute another important source of narrative information in Hay que sonreír due to their formative role in the work's depiction of victim/victimizer relationships. After careful analysis, it might be argued that their structure and content underscore language's potential as a weapon of oppression. Language types within dialogue portions suggest relationships between only two categories of persons, those who exercise power and those who are its victims. The majority of dialogues involve only Clara and her lovers; however, conversations between other characters do occur---for instance; Clara and Monona, Clara and a youth named Bumps, Clara and the fat woman Chola, and Clara and Alejandro's partner, Marcovecchio. All of the dialogues, regardless of participants, deal in one way or another with issues of power and control. Language exhibited by male characters tends to be authoritative (judgements, commands, insults, insinuations), for example: "¡Mismo precio tu abuela! A esta hora cada minuto que pasa lo estoy pagando. Levantate a las buenas, o te levanto yo..."(20)./"Salí, nena. El cuento del novio es más viejo

que Matusalem. Si lo que andás buscando es un macho, venite conmigo que soy de lo mejorcito que hay en la plaza"(25)./"Ya sé el trabajo que te viene bien a vos, que no sabés hacer nada. Es un trabajo de no hacer nada, especial para incapaces como vos "(161)./"¿Ah? ¿Porque ahora la señora tiene pudores? ¿La señora se olvida que ha sido puta en su juventud" (188)?/ "Hay que sonreír, pedazo de imbécil. Hay que sonreír" (190)./"Por mí podés ir sola hasta el carajo" (193). That of female characters, as exemplified by Clara, is marked by fantasy: "¿Estamos en el mar, entonces, estamos en el mar? ... ¿Me va a llevar a conocer el mar" (43-44)?/"Estaba contenta, se acordaba de canciones, el desconocido le había dicho que le conseguiría trabajo en una ciudad lejana, en una casa muy bien, frente a un parque. Especial para ella..."(54)./ "Y si te consigo mucho papel plateado me van a dejar ver tú árbol" (130)?/"En cambio las cañitas voladoras se encienden y vuelan como una estrella de esas que se caen. Si uno quiere puede pedir tres deseos (136)."/"Tan lindos los espejos, y todo para mí. Ocho

espejos brillantes y tan bien cortados. Ocho grandes espejos para taparme nada más que a mí..."(163).

A significant aspect of dialogue portions, and one which speaks directly to the thematic concern of the victim's lack of response against the oppressor, is the protagonist's subjection to a series of language manipulations that result in her confusion, isolation, and eventual loss of autonomy. Conversations between Clara and male characters conform to a certain strategy in which the purpose of language is to acquire power and subsequently impose it, rather than to convey information. First, male characters practice three tactics that lead Clara to question reality as she knows it: 1) conflicting speech and actions, 2) language inappropropriate to a role, and 3) incomplete or incorrect information. Examples are Don Mario's offer to protect Clara as a father while he simultaneously fondles her (98-101), a policeman with the voice of a hoodlum (102), Toño's failure to mention an affair with the upstairs neighbor (120), and Carlos' imaginary wealthly girl friend (160). Next, the protagonist's boyfriends isolate her within the ensuing

equivocal environments by silencing her. They accomplish this either via unceasing talk which precludes Clara's voicing her desires and opinions, or by invalidating Clara's thoughts and actions. While it is primarily Victor who is guilty of using the first ploy (for instance, his harangue about an afternoon spent with "un cripto-comunista, cualquier cosa..." [56]), all of Clara's lover's make use of the latter. At this stage in the process, Clara's loss of autonomy is effected; in order to express contempt for Clara and to subsequently gain control of her behavior, male characters frequently abandon spoken language and employ a "silent treatment". Testimony to the efficacy of such a strategy is that when Clara's boyfriends ignore her, she defers to their wishes so as to reestablish a line of communication, forsaking personal desires in the meantime. Consider the following situations in which Clara sacrifices autonomy of action for the purpose of preserving existing conditions:

1) She sacrifices a comfortable night's rest due to her fear of annoying the taciturn Alejandro:

Clara se acordó de su indiferencia cuando estaba sobre el pedestal y trató de imitarlo, de asimilarse a él, de completarlo. El sueño le venía por bocanadas.... Ella persistía en su esfuerzo por no moverse y aunque la cara se le contraía y le dolía el sueño acababa por vencerla y se volvía a dormir por unos minutos"(116).

2) Clara gives up her wish to see the decorations at Parque Retiro in order to reestablish communication with Alejandro:

A la mañana siguiente le pidió a Alejandro que la llevara al Parque Retiro para ver los preparativos de Navidad....

-No quiero que vengas al Parque Retiro y eso es todo.

Quiso acariciarle la frente pero él se dio vuelta con un movimiento de hombros y sin contestar quedó acostado con la cara contra la pared, en su postura favorita.

-Perdoname, no quería hacerte enojar. Sólo quería acompañarte, pero si a vos no te gusta no importa, no te

voy a hablar más de eso. Sé bueno, perdóname y dame un besito... (138-39).

Sections of internal monologue dispersed throughout the third person narrative trace the consequences of language manipulations in regard to Clara's perception of reality and her autonomy of action. Here, Valenzuela permits glimpses of the protagonist's internal emotional experience as she proceeds from an initial state of awareness and autonomous behavior to a final stage of submission to domination, undergoing a period of vacilation in the interim. In Part I, Clara is conscious of the unpleasant reality which surrounds her and is aware that her collaboration with it is motivated by economics. We recognize her awareness as Victor's duplicitous nature fails to deceive Clara and she is cognizant that his speech is incongruous with his conduct: "Y ese Víctor, que me hizo venir antes de las ocho para evitar el gentío.... Eso que yo ya debería conocerlo: se la pasa hablando de tranquilidad y aspira lo que dice como si fuera el humo de un cigarillo fino, pero nada de tranquilidad" (11). Similarly, Don Mario unsuccessfully poses as

proprietor of the hotel in which Clara works: "...y la luz que entró de golpe la trajo una vez más a la realidad, es decir, como siempre sucede, a la desilusión. Otra que el patrón. El hombre que se había acostado con ella no debía ni siquiera ser importante en el hotel..." (21). Nor does Clara believe Toño's claim that he is investing Clara's money in stocks: "Al diablo con lo de las acciones...(47)". Likewise, consider the following lines that accent Clara's dissatisfaction with her life by means of juxtaposing the protagonist's emotional pain with the physical discomfort of her aching feet and the hard wall on which she rests:

> ...Tener a alguien a quien esperar durante horas es un cambio, pero no un avance propiamente dicho. Lo mejor de todo es hacerse esperar, como las señoras. Un día, quién sabe también me llegue el turno a mí. Por ahora el reborde de la pared es duro, y angosto, y los pies me siguen doliendo (24).

During Part I, Clara perceives that economics will preclude her pursuing either an independent life style or marriage.

Thus she chooses prostitution as a viable option, for example:

> ¿De qué cuernos puede servir la libertad cuando uno está solo y sin plata? si apenas tenía unas monedas que quedaban en el fondo de su cartera, las que se habían escondido en el forro, las monedas olvidadas que nadie quiere (55).

and

> Ni vale la pena perder el tiempo soñando. Nadie se va a querer casar conmigo, nunca; para eso hay que negarse, andarse de recato. Y yo ya no estoy para estos trotes....
>
> Así que te llamás don Mario. Así que soy tu preciosa. Y me traés el desayuno. No está del todo mal (21).

It has been mentioned earlier that Part II of Hay que sonreír, "La transición," narrates the period of time during which Clara surrenders her position of control. Appropriately, it is there that third person narration and interior monologue reveals Clara's turmoil as she fluctuates

between awareness and resolute action on the one hand, and failure to understand and confusion on the other. It is not surprising that Clara's perception of reality becomes distorted following her repeated subjection to the various cunning manipulations depicted in Part I. In the first section of Part II we learn that Clara is already perceiving her situation more positively than we might realistically expect; in attempting to justify her relationship with Victor, we are informed that her thoughts are as follows: "...era generoso con ella, le daba casa y comida y no le pedía nada o casi nada. Y algo la debía querer, si no tenía por qué aguantarla" (68). The tone for Clara's decline is thus set early on in Part II. Subsequent interior monologue suggests her to be confused, attracted by the lure of illusion, and subservient. Clara's confusion is evident in her following thoughts that arise in response to Carlos' dissimilar words and actions: "Ella se preguntó por qué no la besaba ya que la quería. El amor debe ser algo extraño que todavía no descubrí"(91). Frequently when her disillusionment with unpleasant realities proves unbearable---

for example, with Alejandro's rancorous nature---the seductive appeal of illusion offers Clara refuge:

> Alejandro no quiere que lo vea cuando brilla entre humos misteriosos, como a mí más me gusta. Cuando lo tengo al lado mío siempre entorno los párpados y me lo imagino sobre su pedestal, tan lejos y a salvo. Y ahora no me deja ir más y quiere que me olvide. No importa, si cierro los ojos con fuerza hasta que me duelan puedo grabar allí su figura para siempre (122).

It follows that Clara will act less autonomously as a consequence of her confusion and growing lack of awareness. This tendency is particularly manifest in interior monologue addressing her obsession with carnival fortunes purchased from Alejandro. The passages of monologue that immediately follow suggest that Clara has yielded control of her life to Alejandro by relying on his destinies to chart her future:

> Qué estupendo poder de indiferencia. Tengo que guardar con cuidado el papel amarillo en el fondo de mi

> cartera.... Yo sé que en la vida todo está fijado de antemano...(105).

and

> Tres destinos, y voy a tener que elegir sin conocerlos (106).

The lack of interior monologue in section six of Part II is just as significant in regard to Clara's loss of autonomy. It is at the close of section five of Part II, the work's pivotal moment, that Clara defers to Alejandro, granting to him the decision of ending her relationship with Victor. A section of four pages with no mention of the protagonist's viewpoint follows. It might be argued that Valenzuela's use of silence at this crucial point constitutes a more appropriate commentary than would lines of monologue given that the thematic concern of a silent, non-reacting protagonist can now be reinforced at a structural level.

Those portions of Part II's interior monologue that portray Clara as aware deal with her eventual recognition of Don Anselmo's true intentions and of the fact that her freedom and happiness are linked to her economic

independence. Clara admits to herself twice in Part II that Don Anselmo has fallen short of her expectations: 1) "Don Anselmo en el fondo era como todos los hombres, sin sensibilidad..."(143), and 2) "Desgraciado, degenerado, le decía Clara para adentros. Tomarme por una "cualquiera"(149). The fact that Clara considers money to be the solution to her predicament is evident in her following reflection: "No hay que ser sórdida, con la plata se consigue todo, hasta un poco de tranquilidad (84)". Clara realizes by the close of Part II, however, that her attempts to placate Alejandro and thereby reestablish communication with him have resulted in her loss of self respect and autonomy: "Ahora en cambio ajena a todos, la esposa del mago, una cualquiera "(156).

The interior monologue portions of Part III reveal the serious consequences of the protagonist's loss of autonomy. By this point in the novel, Clara has become so locked into the manipulative process of which she is the victim, that self-deception is her only solace, for example:

> Tan lindos los espejos, y todo para mí. Ocho espejos brillantes y tan bien cortados. Ocho grandes espejos para taparme nada más que a mí... Vamos a tener un lugar en un parque de diversiones de verdad, gracias a mí, de esos que andan como un circo por todo el mundo. Vamos a poder estar con gente alegre, gente que se ríe, por fin. Ya nadie me va a poder obligar a no ir a la kermesse porque la kermesse soy yo. Y de ciudad en ciudad un día llegaremos al mar... (164).

As her inmost thoughts reveal, Clara recognizes that staying with Alejandro will preclude her future happiness. Yet, because she is so accustomed to the refuge of illusion, she turns to memories in order to restore her state of well being, and as a result, fails to act: "Quiero arrancarme de Alejandro, correr. Volver allí frente a la entrada lateral del Parque Retiro donde puedo rumiar mis recuerdos y quizás espiar ese poco de felicidad que viví alguna vez..."(176). When Clara finally succeeds in summoning the courage to break with Alejandro (actually planning his murder), her gravest error is to hesitate in taking the action. The protagonist's

thoughts during the final moments of her life poignantly indicate that she never manages to comprehend the consequences of her inaction---that the death that awaits her could have been averted had she earlier fled Alejandro's oppression:

> Es mi destino, después de todo. No vale la pena escapar, ya, ni gritar ni defenderme. Voy a ser la cabeza sin cuerpo, sin trucos ni espejos. Y mi cabeza va a estar sobre una mesa de verdad bajo la que va a pasar Alejandro con el cuerpo negro y peludo de Asmodeo (196).

We perceive that by means of an intricate blend of first and third person narrations, Valenzuela examines Clara's reality from different viewpoints. In so doing she demystifies the oppressor/victimizer relationship and reveals the complex pattern of oppression to which Clara falls victim.

The exposition of Hay que sonreír, sections 1-3 of Part I, is further testimony to the care with which Valenzuela has shaped the novel. Here flashbacks consisting of Clara's memories along with scenes of the narrative present serve as

background information, introduce the work's themes and prepare future lines of action. Since Hay que sonreír begins by plunging in medias res, the protagonist's recollections are necessary to inform the reader of several important past occurences: 1) Clara's forced departure from home by her father in order that he pursue an affair with the butcher's wife, 2) the protagonist's unpretentious and child-like nature upon arriving in Buenos Aires, 3) an encounter with a sailor who has never gone to sea, followed by Clara's unintended entry into prostitution and 4) glimpses of Clara's relationships with Don Mario, Carlos, Toño and Victor. The overall effect of these memories upon the reader is an impression of the protagonist as a vulnerable and disillusioned young woman who has been denied moments of self-affirmation. Throughout the exposition Valenzuela juxtaposes scenes from the narrative present portraying Clara idly waiting for Victor with flashbacks that are the protagonist's recollections of previous oppressive relationships. This technique highlights the themes of abusive power and a lack of reaction on the part of the victim, as well as preparing

lines of action that will lead to crucial moments later in the work. For example, Clara's involvement in a series of abusive relationships in which her resolve is seen to gradually weaken permits the reader to accept the protagonist's later attraction and subservience to Alejandro at a crucial moment in the novel. Similarly, the significance of Clara's passively waiting for Victor during Part I is fully appreciated at the novel's close when she postpones Alejandro's murder until sunrise. The reader learns that failure to act eventually costs Clara her life.

Section five of Part III constitutes the novel's conclusion. Here, Valenzuela's use of irony and ambiguity make very clear her warning concerning the inevitable consequence of failure to react to oppression. As section five begins, Clara is riding the train in route to Mar del Plata. Interior monologue reveals that Clara is disgusted with Alejandro's infidelities and considering breaking off with him. It appears for a short time that Clara might succeed in intervening to improve her situation: "Estoy atada, de pies y manos y cabeza. Como si éste fuera mi

destino; pero no lo es, eso sí que no, voy a pelear hasta que reviente para que no lo sea, para cambiarlo todo, una vez más" (192). Similarly, after arriving at Mar del Plata and sneaking out of the hotel in order to go the sea, Clara reflects: " Otro sórdido hotel como todos. Ya no puedo correr, y Alejandro me va a alcanzar y mi destino va a ser vivir siempre encerrada en un hotel, y dentro del hotel la carpa, y dentro de la carpa la caja, y yo metida ahí adentro de todo eso, acorralada por cajas y carpas y hoteles, porque firmé" (193). Instead of continuing to the sea, Clara first decides to change her situation so that she might later go there, unbound and free. Unfortunately, her proneness to hesitate recurs and decides her fate; as mentioned, Clara's failure to immediately murder Alejandro provides the latter an opportunity to steal away the murder weapon. It bears repeating that the irony of Alejandro's murdering Clara with the razor that she has purchased as his birthday gift might be interpreted as an indication that Clara has collaborated in her oppression by failing to act. As Magnarelli has noted, further ironic comment on her passive nature is that

in cutting Clara's throat, Alejandro is engraving the docile smile that he frequently demands of her ("The Discourse of the Body..." 27).

The ambiguous final scene also adds to the conclusion's effectiveness. Alejandro's aggression toward Clara, coupled with the protagonist's (and the text's) closing line, "Hay que sonreír", suggests two equally suitable conclusions, each of which reinforces Valenzuela's concerns. Since Valenzuela stops short of narrating Clara's death, the work is open-ended, leaving the reader to assume that Clara either loses her life in a literal sense, or that she will be metaphorically dead, as a result of succumbing to Alejandro's domination. Alternative endings, in addition to the previously described ironic commentary in section five of Part II, act together in the novel's conclusion to clarify Valenzuela's warnings concerning abusive power and passiveness.

The characters of Hay que sonreír also deftly project Valenzuela's theme of abusive power and a lack of response to

oppression. The cast of characters can be divided into three categories, each of which encases an important aspect of the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy around which the work is structured: 1) the protagonist Clara, 2) the males who pass through Clara's life, and 3) a noticeably small number of females with whom the protagonist associates. A key question regarding the novel's protagonist is why Valenzuela has chosen a prostitute to be the work's leading character. It might be argued that she has done so because she understands that a prostitute exemplifies woman as "other," existing only for the male, and not for herself or other women. As Simone de Beauvoir has noted in The Second Sex, men wish a prostitute to be the projection of their fantasies. Consequently, a fixed definition of role is non-existent for the prostitute, given that male customers will define her, according to whatever feminine type they may desire.[2]

In Hay que sonreír, Clara as prostitute exemplifies the passive silent woman who allows herself to be defined by a male (either her father, pimp, boyfriend or husband). Because Clara resigns herself to societal expectations and

accepts her lot in life, she is unable to advance to a better state. Instead, her character develops in the direction of a downward spiral, with stops along the way that represent missed opportunities for Clara to escape her plight. Lest it be assumed that Valenzuela is unsympathetic toward the protagonist, it should be noted that the intervals which offer Clara a possibility of escape are short lapses of time that occur between lovers, and that the alternatives presented her are generally relationships with different men. On the single occasion when Clara does attempt to find a different line of work, she meets with failure:

> Estaba contenta, se acordaba de canciones, el desconocido le había dicho que le conseguiría trabajo en una ciudad lejana, en una casa muy bien, frente a un parque. Especial para ella, le había dicho, quizá fuera de niñera porque los chicos le gustaban. Los podría llevar al parque de enfrente, siempre añoraba los bosques desde la época de Carlos, desde aquella noche que había estado con él.
>
> Cuando llegó la mujer ya se había ido... (53-54).

It can be said that Valenzuela recognizes how limited are the occasions for autonomous female action, seeing that Clara fails to find work outside of prostitution, and that her single opportunity to do so arises via the recommendation of a male. Nevertheless, the author's insistence that women must behave autonomously is underscored by the fact that Clara is sacrificed at the close of the novel. Unfortunately the protagonist is never able to turn away from exclusively male defined roles and thereby interrupt the process which eventually ends in her death.

The male characters of Hay que sonreír are carefully drawn so as to embody the theme of abusive power. By clustering Clara's father, customers, and various lovers into part I, Valenzuela infixes the earlier noted cycle of oppression, seeing that these characters repeatedly maltreat the protagonist. After Clara relinquishes control over her life to Alejandro (Part III) he then becomes the oppressor and carries out the role with an almost agonizing slowness. Valenzuela's juxtaposition of Clara's successive victimization and Alejandro's deliberate carrying out of the

same exposes, by way of contrast, a subtle oppressive phenomenon frequently undetected in "real life." It also bears noting that the three principal characters with whom Clara is involved are assigned names that signify power: 1) Victor, a variation of the Spanish word vitor, a triumphal pageant, 2) Toño, from Antony, a character created by Dumas (father), seductor and assassin, prototype of romantic hero, fatal and satanic (Perez-Rioja 70), and 3) Alejandro, the great historical figure (Perez -Rioja 55).

Besides pointing out the manifestation of an oppressive mind set, Valenzuela also asks why it occurs. She sensitively addresses the issue through the character Chichón, Alejandro's young neighbor; however, it is never completely resolved. Chichón is the eldest of several brothers and sisters and is at an age when his behavior alternates between child-like innocence on the one hand, and macho conduct reminiscent of Clara's boyfriend on the other. For example, during the youth's first encounter with Clara, he finds it necessary to demonstrate a superior attitude when she returns a broom and feather duster: "El pibe pareció

ofendido y le pasó los implementos a su hermanita: 'Estas son cosas de mujeres -dijo...'"(129). At this point, he also asks Clara if she is carrying cigarettes; however, it is soon revealed that he does not intend to smoke, but rather use the packages' silver foil for Christmas decorations. Chichón's conflicting attitudes continue during dialogs between him and Clara when he initially expresses contempt for Christmas festivities and then later presses Clara to bring dolls, stars and rockets to be used in decorating the tree.

If it is presumed that Chichón's unaffected child-like behavior is instinctive, it follows that his displays of machismo are feigned in order to mask an innate nature that he perceives as inadequate. By means of one brief reference, Valenzuela indicates Chichón's father as the source of his son's feelings of inferiority and also the boy's model for a sometimes exaggerated assertion of masculinity. As Clara and Chichón admire the Christmas tree that is in the courtyard and enthusiastically anticipate the next day's Christmas celebration, the youth's father threatens violence unless the boy returns home immediately:

"...y Chichón tuvo que salir corriendo porque su padre lo está llamando y amenazaba con ir a buscarlo con el cinturón de cuero si no obedecía "(141). The harsh words and threat of punishment that are associated with the child's pleasure over Christmas celebrations imply condemnation of his genuine inclinations and also provide him a model for language that censures. It can be argued that by incorporating the character of Chichón into Hay que sonreír, Valenzuela suggests that males in Western society similarly may be entrapped in a process that exacts socialized and rigidified sexual roles. Here, Valenzuela would appear to charge Western society with the task of unmasking the political violence exercised by institutions that appear neutral, but in reality suppress and subjugate.

The minor female characters of Hay que sonreír further represent Valenzuela's preoccupation with a male-defined concept of the feminine, and in addition, they shed light upon an accompanying absence of female camaraderie. Throughout the novel, Clara interacts with only two women, Monona and Chola. Monona is a prostitute who frequents the

club where Clara's lover Carlos performs. Her mania is to belong to Cacho, a combination boyfriend-pimp, and she is an example par excellence of women who turn to men for identity and the fulfillment of dreams. Her reliance on Cacho has extended even to her name: "En cambio mirame a mí, el Cacho me puso María Magdalena. La historia es vieja, una de las putas más importantes del mundo.... Lo de Monona también lo inventó el Cacho." (81). Later we can detect her further dependence upon him when she explains to Clara how she manages to visit the ocean: "Sólo quería saber cómo tenés que portarte bien para que el Cacho te lleve a Mar del Plata."/"Tengo que conseguirle por lo menos tres lucas, claro" (97). Also, it is significant that Monona's motive for pursuing the protagonist's acquaintance is suspect, given that her intention is to embarass Carlos with the revelation that the rich lady he claims to be seeing is in reality a prostitute.

Chola Pedrazzi, Clara's fellow circus worker, is one of the protagonist's few contacts during the latter's career as an Aztec Flower. The two women unfortunately are at cross-

purposes throughout their acquaintance and consequently never become friends. Chola's chief interest during their first meeting is eating; nevertheless, she manages to dominate the conversation. Clara, for her part, is initially self-absorbed and unresponsive. When the two women are later reunited, they continue to fail at meaningful communication; for example:

> -Llámeme Chola, no más, como todo el mundo. Acá uno tiene que conocerse a la fuerza. ¿Qué tal, le gusta su carpa?
>
> -Sí, es muy bonita -tomando la servilleta y sin saber si debía desplegarla o no.
>
> -Tiene razón, como carpa no está nada mal. Pero vístase livianito, porque si no se va a morir de calor ahí adentro. Y le dio la espalda para ponerse a hablar con su otro vecino olvidándola por completo durante el resto del almuerzo.
>
> Clara quedó distraída sin tener dónde posar la vista...(181).

Briefly mentioned female characters who further reflect

a lack of positive fellowship among women are Clara's mother who is absent when her daughter is forced to leave home, the butcher's wife and an unidentified blonde who seduce the protagonist's father and husband respectively, and the "femenina muralla" (156) of gossiping girls who deter Clara from entering a bakery. Via the novel's repertoire of female characters, Valenzuela appears to suggest that women who strive to comply with a male-defined feminine find themselves alienated from one another and consequently unable to participate in a nurturing female camaraderie.[3] The protagonist herself verbalizes such a concern when she comments the nature of her loneliness:

> La soledad es así, no molesta tanto por la falta de compañía como por esa imposibilidad de hacer mil pequeñas cosas que uno tiene ganas y que sólo se justifican en grupo: hamacarse de noche en una plaza, mirar una partida de billar, sentarse con las piernas colgando en el vacío. Quizá más que tanto correr tras los hombres, hubiera sido mejor conseguirme unas cuantas

amigas, gente alegre, de esas con las que una se puede reir (177).

Certainly Luisa Valenzuela's application of concepts associated with psycholinguistics further carries forth her development of the novel's theme. Immediately drawn into the narrative, the reader of Hay que sonreír might question how readers interest is so rapidly aroused and then successfully sustained until the novel's conclusion. The answer in part lies in Valenzuela's use of symbolic commentary, particularly gestures, which are so much a factor of daily human experience, and deceptive images. Gestures enact or depict ideas through patterns of movement. Although usually concurrent with the spoken word, they may somewhat precede verbal expression (McNeill 211-12), and they exhibit a meaning "relevant to the concurrent sentence meaning" (ibid.). Since these non-verbal signs form an integral part of daily life, their meaning is quickly accessible to readers, offering them an immediate indication of plot, characterization, theme, etc. At times they actually surpass the verbal mode in their ability to convey a message. Hay

<u>que sonreír</u> opens with a metaphoric gesticulation--Clara scratching her right leg with her left foot--that exhibits an image of the abstract concept of resignation:

> Qué opio esperar. Con el pie izquierdo se rascó la pierna derecha en un gesto que quería decir resignación. Se llamaba Clara y ya estaba harta. También, a quién se le ocurre ponerse zapatos nuevos para esperar, y citarse en un lugar donde no se puede estar sentado (11).

It can be argued that Clara's gesture of scratching her leg complements the remainder of the passage where the protagonist accepts as inevitable Victor's lateness and that she must wait for him. Considered in this light, Valenzuela's incorporation of a metaphoric gesture in the novel's opening lines serves well to introduce her thematic concern with the inherent dangers of passive behavior.

The concept of deception leads to the second type of symbolic commentary used by the author: deceptive images. Here Valenzuela uses symbols at visual and deeper metaphoric levels in order to comment upon victim/victimizer relationships. While it has been previously argued that

Clara's lack of reaction against her oppressors precipitates her downfall, it might also be suggested that her choice of male companionship is likewise ruinous. Even though the protagonist's possibilities for autonomous action are limited, we might still question her involvement with abusive types, either customers or lovers. Presumably, Clara recognizes the unlikelihood of independently realizing her desire to visit the ocean; and so we might suggest that she selects male companions based on the help that they appear to offer toward this end. Ultimately deceptive symbols introduced at the onset of each of Clara's affairs function as dramatic signifiers that convey a great deal about Clara's initial attraction to a lover. Noteworthy is Clara's first encounter with Victor. He invites her to leave the subway tunnel and look at the stars; unfortunately, when they go outside they face a starless sky:

> -A mí tampoco me gustan los túneles; vayamos afuera, a ver las estrellas.
>
> Clara sonrió con amargura. Alguien le tendía una mano y debía aceptarla: es tan difícil rechazar la

> ayuda. Subieron juntos por la escalera mecánica y se encontraron frente a un cielo opaco y sucio donde no brillaba ninguna estrella (30).

During the course of Clara and Victor's relationship, the latter continues to be associated with the Three Marys and the Southern Cross, the same stars that failed to appear on the night of their first encounter. At a visual level, Valenzuela's image of twinkling stars that fail to appear anticipates what happens in the story--Victor fails to arrive on cue:

> ...y aunque en lo alto la Cruz del Sur todavía no había aparecido ella tenía los ojos fijos en el punto exacto en que se escondía y trataba de no moverse ni pensar para poder descubrirla.
>
> Con esa confusa sensación de cansancio que da la espera, lo esperaba todo. Con decir que hasta lo esperaba a Víctor...sin demasiadas esperanzas, es verdad... (12).

Also illustrative:

> La Cruz de Sur apareció por fin manchando el cielo y Clara ya no encontró excusa para seguir mirando hacia arriba, recordando su pasado. Sólo faltaba Víctor (19).

The emphasis at this level is on the stars and Victor's failure to appear as expected; i.e. deception. Valenzuela subsequenty takes the reader from this stage of viewing only the superficial symbolism to a deeper level, where the image of twinkling stars embodies the idea of the seductive appeal of illusion, and in so doing discloses the reason for Clara's involvement with abusive men. It can be argued that Valenzuela's use of deceptive images--in this instance, twinkling stars--at both the visual and metaphoric levels, explains the deceptive role that illusion plays in a process of victimization. Lest her warning go unheeded, Valenzuela continues the technique of identifying Clara's boyfriends with images that appear to represent the possibility of escape to a better life: a young soldier's shining medals, Don Mario's pretense of owning the hotel that Clara frequents, Toño's glittering sports car, Carlos and a grove

of protective trees, and last but not least, Alejandro's jeweled headress and accompanying cloud of multi-colored smoke:

> Dos conscriptos se fueron arrimando del brazo de una muchacha, luego un hombre más y una señora gorda con un chico que llevaba un globo. Clara también se acercó y vio en lo alto del pedestal a un hombre joven, sentado con los brazos y las piezas cruzadas. Mientras tanto el otro seguía ponderando los méritos del swami-recién-llegado-de-la-India-Milenaria que estaba allí, estático, lanzando los reflejos del enorme rubí engarzado en su turbante.
>
> ... El del turbante tomó un cilindro y con movimientos pausados, casi litúrgicos, echó adentro un polvo que provocó un estallido y del cilindro salieron humos azules y rojos convirtiéndolo alternativamente en ángel y en demonio (104).

Thus a strong component of Valenzuela's argument regarding the abuse of power is her use of imagery to complement her narrative in the same manner that she employs gesture as

anticipating speech. It can be argued that to a large degree the use of these, a part of everyday life, quickly draws the reader into the plot and sustains his or her interest throughout the novel.

As previously mentioned, Valenzuela's alteration of time order gives rise to a circular plot structure that in turn reinforces the novel's thematic concerns. It is equally significant that this technique creates internal patterns of circularity between the work's opening and the first lines of Part I, section IV. Hay que sonreír begins in the present as Clara waits for Victor. Flashbacks to the protagonist's earliest days in Buenos Aires follow, and at the beginning of Part I, section II, the reader is returned to Clara waiting for Victor. This same circular pattern incorporating flashbacks is repeated between sections II and III of Part I, and likewise between Part I, sections III and IV. When the reader views time as advancing in Parts II and III respectively, the protagonist's failure to evolve psychologically becomes evident. Proof of Clara's failure to mature is her repetition of self-destructive behavior

previously depicted in the flaskbacks of Part I, "El cuerpo".

Flashbacks are not Valenzuela's sole means of alternating time order so as to emphasize thematic concerns. She also literally turns back the clock's hands, and in so doing launches an attack on Western society's penchant for dominating time. This maneuver is accomplished via an experiment undertaken by Clara for the purpose of delaying her birthday. At this point, it should be emphasized that the circular time of sections I-III of "El cuerpo" is counterclockwise in direction, due to repeated ventures into the past. This backward circular motion along with its message of futility is echoed in Clara's effort to delay turning a year older. The episode begins with the protagonist's attempt to stop time by refusing to wind her watch; she is soon bored with its motionless hands, however, and goes back to winding it. To abate her anger at her approaching birthday, Clara decides to move the hands back each time that they move more quickly than she desires. The counterclockwise direction of movement that Clara is trying

to impose upon time--already mentioned as the overall direction of movement in what constitutes the exposition--is repeated in the image of the revolving door that Clara enters on her way into the hotel where she has rented a room for the night. For three days Clara continues moving back the hands of her watch, but the experiment with time nevertheless meets an abrupt end. After having gained only two days on her encroaching birthday she realizes that her experiment has failed when she looks outside and sees that the town is celebrating Liberation Day, May 25, also her birthday. While the backward circular direction of time can be related to the protagonist's entrapment in, and failure to break with a cycle of oppression, the time experiment also renders an attack on modern society's desire to control time and correlating phobias that women have toward aging and, more specifically, their aging bodies.

In summary, Hay que sonreír represents the point of departure for the rest of Valenzuela's fictional work. At the same time, it prefigures her concern with narrative technique as well as with purely thematic concerns. We shall

see that her subsequent novels and short stories are marked by a continued preoccupation with the dynamics of victim-oppressor relationships, and that these relationships are explored by means of a rich variety of technical devices.

## Cola de lagartija

Cola de lagartija is a profoundly disturbing novel which suggests multiple readings of a political and social nature: on the one hand, the text offers an unsettling portrait of José López Rega, Isabel Peron's sinister minister of social welfare; on the other, it presents a challenge to the predetermined order of male discourse. Since it first appeared, Cola de lagartija has been the subject of a number of critical studies which recognize the novel's important socio-political message; few, however, have addressed the work's structural coherence and impact which render it one of the most compelling Latin American novels written in recent years. Sharon Magnarelli's studies, "Cola de lagartija:

Discourse Denatured," "Discourse and Gender in Cola de lagartija: Tracing/Eracing the Difference(s)," and "Framing Power in Luisa Valenzuela's Cola de lagartija and Isabel Allende's Casa de los espíritus," focus on the text's undermining of language. Martha Paley Francescato's article, "Cola de lagartija: Látigo de la palabra y la triple P," examines Valenzuela's deconstruction of male discourse within Cola de lagartija, and Marie-Lise Gazarian Gautier considers the work's narrative structure in "The Sorcerer and Luisa Valenzuela: Double Narrators of the Novel/Biography, Myth/History." Building upon these analyses, the present study of Cola de lagartija will attempt to illustrate how the novel's multiple readings are intelligibly and meaningfully expressed via Valenzuela's careful mixture of thesis and imagery within a highly complex structure; so much so that the form of the book underlines part of its content.

Cola de lagartija has been described as a roman à clef based on the life of José Lopez Rega. Using an allegorical format, the work portrays the obsessive imperialism of Lopez Rega, named El Brujo. It is set in Argentina in the 1970's

and reflects the political terrorism of those years. Throughout the novel, El Brujo devotes himself to writing his autobiography, capturing the Capivaris, and giving birth to an incarnation of himself by impregnating his third testicle. There is, however, another story related in Cola de lagartija; a character named Luisa Valenzuela is attempting to write the biography of El Brujo, and she shares the problems encountered in this endeavor as well as her anxiety over the political atrocities of the 1970's.

As Cola de lagartija develops, we perceive a preoccupation with the same themes underlying Hay que sonreír: the abuse of power and a lack of reaction against the oppressor. In regard to these concerns, Valenzuela notes that she wrote Cola de lagartija for "only one purpose: to try to understand" (Garfield 78). She explains that she is unable to comprehend how the Argentine people allowed themselves to become victims of the military governments that ruled their country for so many years.[4] As we proceed in our analysis, we will relate the work's dual thematic pattern to

its plot development, narrative strategy and character development.

The elaborate plot is divided into three parts all of which contain what will later be recognized as Luisa Valenzuela's trademarks--magical power, political commentary, male/female conflicts, circular time, and violence. The first section, "El Uno," presents the hermaphrodite protagonist, El Brujo, who is his own biographer. In addition, the reader is also introduced to those that surround the protagonist: his aide-de-camp, La Garza; Estrella, El Brujo's third testicle (actually his female reproductive organ that he also considers to be his sister); La Muerta, Eva Perón; and the Generalísimo who is La Muerta's husband, Juan Perón. In the novel's second part, "D*OS," Valenzuela appears as a character in her own novel, a woman author who is writing El Brujo's life story. This section is chiefly concerned with El Brujo's rise to power and preparations for his metamorphosis, whereby his body will change into that of Estrella and subsequently give birth. A battle between narrators ensues in this section as

Valenzuela, in her role as both character and author of the protagonist's biography, expresses the fear that her text will be nullified by El Brujo's work because he has the advantage of being male and presumably the superior narrator. Part three, "Tres?," functions as an epilogue in which El Brujo's metamorphosis, pregnancy and death are narrated. As the novel mysteriously progresses, an underlying question of section three emerges: who presently controls the text? For at this point neither El Brujo nor (the fictional) Valenzuela are presented as the narrators. At the close of section two, Valenzuela's friend, Alfredo Navoni, had suggested that she kill El Brujo by refusing to create him. She followed his advice and abandoned the biography.

Within the plurilinear plot of Cola de lagartija there are essentially two main groups of episodes, those reporting El Brujo's rise to power, his fall, his plans to return to power and his death, as well as episodes concerning the character Luisa Valenzuela and her struggle for freedom of expression. Both groups, however, draw attention to the cruelty, oppression and turmoil of the post-Perón years.

Just as in Hay que sonreír there is an emphatic plea for intervention on the part of the victim in the victimization process, so in Cola de lagartija Valenzuela urges opposition to oppressive environments through the exercise of free will.

The episodes of "El Uno" which concern El Brujo deal with the protagonist's childhood and rise to power. Here manipulative techniques, not entirely unlike those of Clara's lovers in Hay que sonreír, are employed by El Brujo in order to expand his power, either personal or political. El Brujo himself confesses to being adept at deception at an early age: "...desde mi nacimiento supe el inapreciable arte de la simulación y el mimetismo (11)." In Cola de lagartija, however, Valenzuela changes her vantage point, now examining the victimization process by focusing on the oppressor rather than the victim.

As "El Uno" advances, El Brujo is portrayed as a totally malevolent figure whose power is attributed in part to his above mentioned mastery of deception and in part to his complicity with the central government. Evidence of El Brujo's malevolence are his pride in having caused his

mother's death at his birth, witnessing and not intervening in the brutal rape and murder of his stepmother, the torture and sacrifice of innocent victims in payment for Eulogio's pronouncement that El Brujo possessed three testicles, selling narcotics, and serving the Perón goverment as the minister who is responsible for repression and torture. While El Brujo's continuance in power in spite of his evil nature can be ascribed to deception of others, he is clearly not guilty of self-deception:

> Soy invisible por dos razones a cual más meritoria:
>
> -sé camuflarme bajo sus propias narices
>
> -me he vuelto imprescindible para los que imparten las órdenes (17).

In addition, episodes of "El Uno" depict El Brujo as using dehumanization as an effective tool of oppression, a practice previously pointed out in regard to the male characters of Hay que sonreír. In order to humiliate his victims El Brujo strips them of their belongings and names, and treats them as animals; as a consequence they fail to rally and protest their treatment. Examples of this behavior

are El Brujo's stripping of the young girls that surround him, naming his aide La Garza and later demanding that he bark like a dog, and addressing the Machi, his teacher, as an old soup bone.

The episodes of D*OS carry forward the story of El Brujo's rise to power while simultaneously introducing the text's literary concerns and incorporating analyses of the political situation in Argentina. Those events dealing with El Brujo's ascension to power continue to develop the process of oppression as set down in "El Uno." First, by means of elaborate trickery, the protagonist rallies public support by duping the members of the cult of La Muerta (Eva Perón) into believing that he is the medium for her spirit. Passing himself off as such, he also profits financially by availing himself of the relics left at her altar. Next, El Brujo holds a masquerade ball for the feigned purpose of celebrating the near completion of his new home, a pyramid, all the while hoping to solidify government support by impressing the national press secretary. Upon arriving at the party, each guest is presented with a mask which is the

replica of El Brujo's face; during the festivities the Machi is sacrificed and subsequently turned into bouillon to be served the guests. While those invited were expecting a masked ball, no one could have anticipated the evening's finale, at which time each guest would pick up a heavy club and break the mask of the person next to him. It might be argued that the episode of the masquerade ball is representative of the oppressive political situation in Argentina during the seventies--the violence carried out at the level of the central government spread rapidly to the civilian population by virtue of a contagious lust for power, just as El Brujo's torture of the Machi is mirrored in the guest's behavior at the party's end. The closing remarks of the narrator's account of the masquerade ball are in keeping with this premise:

> Nunca se supo quién fue el primero en tomar un garrote y romperle la máscara al de al lado, pero resultó un gesto contagioso y al rato todos blandían palos y se daban de garrotazos tratando de romper máscaras a diestra y

siniestra, defendiendo la propia. Quizá porque todos querían ser el único, El Brujo...(186).

At a later point in D*OS, El Brujo further expands his power base by annexing his neighbors, the Capivarians, into his kingdom. El Brujo's relentless efforts to bring the region of Capivari under his dominion are the subject of numerous episodes which highlight the protagonist's campaign of cruelty and oppression carrried out against his new victims. After the dismemberment of the town mayor, threats of closing the dam's sluice gates and thereby drying up crops, and the torture of an uncooperative workman at the dam, the Capivarians, of their own accord, request annexation. A parallel could possiblly be drawn between Clara of Hay que sonreír and the Capivarians. After being subjected by her lovers to a series of abuses, Clara waits stunned and motionless as Alejandro prepares to kill her; similarly the Capivarians react to El Brujo's oppression by praising him and requesting annexation into his kingdom. Thus it might be argued that episodes dealing with the Capivarians reinforce the theory that victims of oppression can unknowingly

participate in their own victimization.[5] The Capivarians not only accept annexation, but in addition, send an envoy to request favors from El Brujo, actually believing that he might complete a promise. In so doing they invite further abuse from El Brujo and also become potential agents of his oppression should their requests be approved, thereby placing them in El Brujo's debt. Episodes of Cola de lagartija which describe El Brujo's rise to power, such as those concerning the masquerade ball and the annexation of Capivari, effectively convey the surreal character of Argentine politics during the seventies and demonstrate, in part, how the Argentine people became victims of the regimes that ruled their country during that period.

The remainder of "D*OS" develops the text's literary concerns, interspersed with commentary about the political situation in Argentina. In the sections which focus on Valenzuela and writing, Luisa Valenzuela shares her inmost thoughts as a writer, revealing the political pressures under which Argentine writers found themselves forced to create, as well as the less subtle environment of gender-related

censorship. A number of episodes in the work's second section are openly dedicated to governmentally imposed censorship. Here, criticism of El Brujo's oligarchic regime is forbidden, and when it does occur, investigations into its sources provoke a veritable psychosis throughout the population. Accordingly, censors, at times operating indiscrimately, become one of El Brujo's most powerful weapons. This phenomenon can be observed in events dealing with La Voz del Pueblo de Capivari's unfavorable account of El Brujo's masked ball. In retaliation for labeling the celebration scandalous, the newspaper's publisher who is also the town's mayor is murdered, the newspaper is seized by El Brujo, and a search is undertaken for the article's author, an unidentified horseman dressed in black. The protagonist affirms the usefulness of indiscriminate attacks in the following passage: "Más vale pegar a ciegas pero pegar con saña que tratar de adivinar tras las máscaras (235)." After expropriation, the Capivarians' newspaper is instrumental in the disemination of El Brujo's propaganda. Also, foreign news is barred following an unflattering photo of the

protagonist in Le Monde; foreseeably, its photographer becomes the object of another government campaign. As a result of El Brujo's constraints, La Voz begins to feature only articles about the occult--"Prof. ABDALA profundo conocedor de los secretos de ciencias ocultas," "Talisman Gratis (194)." Other newspapers, likewise, fail to report the news. By means of episodes dealing with political thought-control, Valenzuela conveys the terror and widespread disfunction of free-expression which either silenced writers, subjected them to self-censorship, or obliged them to emigrate and create in an alien atmosphere. In like manner publishers, editors, and book-sellers opted for non-controversial American best-sellers or local love stories in the face of possible sanctions. [6]

Some episodes in "D*OS" which deal with the character Luisa Valenzuela's struggle for control of the text also suggest gender-related censorship. As we saw, Luisa Valenzuela enters the text as a character who is writing the biography of El Brujo. A battle between narrators ensues as Valenzuela and El Brujo are placed in direct competition with

one another. For a period of time it appears that El Brujo will be victorious and Valenzuela expresses this fear when she concedes El Brujo's advantage in being male and thus considered the better creator:

> Porque ahora sé que él también está escribiendo una novela que se superpone a ésta y es capaz de anularla (139).

> Y yo tengo que seguir narrando lo que sé o lo que creo saber al respecto a pesar de que él siempre me llevará ventaja porque no sólo sabe más sino que inventa mejor. El muy maldito (160).

It might be argued that in this context El Brujo represents the power of male discourse which strives to subordinate female literary achievement to male contributions.

Closely related to Valenzuela's struggle for control of the text, several episodes in "D*OS" reveal an interaction of author/protagonist, protagonist/author. Valenzuela as El Brujo's biographer explores this phenomenon and in so doing sheds light on the creative process. In addition, she destablizes our conception of what an author is and leads us

to question whether truth can be purely and objectively known. Early on in "D*OS" the reader learns that El Brujo as a character of Valenzuela's text is taking control of the author's life:

> Ni hacer mi obra puedo, ahora, ni escribirla tampoco, ni mantener mis contactos con cierto embajador para lograr por fin el asilo de algunos (140).

El Brujo having first invaded the author's realm, the reverse soon occurs when Valenzuela envisions the ending of the protagonist's masked ball:

> A cada invitado, a medida que llega, se le irá entregando una máscara de terracota con rostro de animal, algo a mitad de camino entre la repulsión y la belleza. Un desfile satánico. Y después, mucho después, vendrá la verdadera orgía. Entonces se repartirán garrotes entre los invitados y al ritmo de los timbales empezará la danza. No un baile cualquiera, no: Un baile con finalidades destructivas. Cada invitado con su garrote deberá romper al menos una máscara de barro como si fuera una tinaja, y como la

> máscara va colcada sobre el rostro del otro quién sabe quién le rompe la máscara a quién y con suerte la cara y ahí no más empiezan las represalias.
>
> Faltan varias noches para la aparición de la luna, y yo ya imagino esta danza de las furias mientras se está con la máscara puesta. Después de rota no solo queda el gran desenmascaramiento, queda también, agazapado, el anhelo de venganza (144).

When the omniscient narrator later recounts the violent finale of El Brujo's party, it becomes evident that Valenzuela's imaginings have been realized and that her influence in turn has crossed over into the protagonist's realm (155-56).

Several episodes of D*OS continue the interplay between author and protagonist. As the following excerpts illustrate, on occasion Valenzuela complains that El Brujo as protagonist has assumed a life independent of the living presence she attempts to portray in her biography, and that consequently, her personal life as well as her writing are often directed by this new entity:

1) Ahora puedo seguir escribiendo es decir puedo seguir desatendiendo sin demasiada culpa mis otros compromisos, atendiendo tan solo--a como dé lugar--las prioridades más perentorias (159).

2) Cierto es que el Brujo ha crecido, se ha agrandado en estos meses que llevo de escritura. Ha tejido su vastísima red y ahora está en todas partes pero no es obra mía, más bien este despliegue de fuerzas me complica tremendamente la biografía. El está en todas partes y tengo que seguirlo por los más tenebrosos vericuetos (179).

3) ¡La pucha! esta biografía se me está saliendo de madre, el Brujo cobra más y más vida propia y ya no puedo tomarlo a la ligera (199).

On the other hand, El Brujo's daily existence, in particular his health is marked by the influence of his biographer; Valenzuela and others eager for El Brujo's downfall seek aid from the Umbanda people, practitioners of Black Magic, in

hopes that the latter's spells will weaken the dictator's power. The first suggestion that Valenzuela's venture into the occult might prove effective occurs by virtue of the juxtaposition of an episode narrating a Black Magic ceremony with one relating the details of the masked ball, including El Brujo's state of collapse at the celebration's close. Since the purpose of the Umbanda ceremony was to counter El Brujo's strength, its adjacency to the protagonist's illness suggests a cause-effect relationship between the two. El Brujo's reaction upon learning that his enemies are in possession of his photograph indicates that he is cognizant of their intentions: "Fotitos a mí. ¿Qué pueden hacerme con mis fotos? ¿Pueden señalar mi imagen con el dedo, clavarle alfileres (236)?" At a later point Valenzuela plainly credits the Umbanda ceremonies with a lessening of El Brujo's power: "Ha copado un pueblo y sus habitantes no lo toman para nada en serio. Parece que nuestros rituales de Umbanda están

dando resultado (238)." El Brujo finally recognizes his enemies' offensive as a menace which he must crush:

> He ordenado que se requisen todos los aparatos fotográficos que pueden encontrarse en mis dominios y alrededores aunque sé de la inutilidad de este operativo. Así como me pueden enfocar con un lente 2.8 pueden muy bien hacerlo con una mira más o menos telescópica. Me tiene sin cuidado. Me cago en las armas y me cago en los venenos. La fotografía es una forma más sútil de asesinato; con las fotos pueden hacerme un trabajo de magia y ellos tienen mis fotos (242).

The interplay between author and protagonist as presented in episodes of D*OS blurrs the boundaries between fiction and reality, thus bringing into question the function of an author and of literature in general. Early on--following the protagonist's first invasion into authorial territory--Valenzuela as El Brujo's biographer questions the function of a novelist: "Un novelista no está en el mundo para hacer el bien sino para intentar saber y transmitir lo sabido o para inventar y transmitir lo intuido (144)." Subsequent to

another of El Brujo's incursions, she goes so far as to reveal misgivings concerning literature's ability to bring about social change:

> Me muevo, sigo escribiendo con desilusión creciente y también con cierto asco. Asco hasta conmigo, por farsante, por creer que la literatura va a salvarnos, por dudar de que la literatura va a salvarnos; todas estas contradicciones. Un vómito (121).

Disappointed over her failure to sufficiently control El Brujo's biography so as to represent his full horror, Valenzuela closes D*OS with an acknowledgment of the impossibility of completely knowing truth or faithfully representing it via narrative:

> Y ahora me doy cuenta de que no sé nada, no puedo saber nada y me estuve engañando todo el tiempo, creí que era necesario mantener viva la memoria como arma de defensa y de esclarecimiento. Ahora me temo todo lo contrario, temo que el nombrar genere (245).

Her final appearance as El Brujo's biographer reinforces her misgivings concerning the effectiveness of narration as a

means of intervention and change; having failed via writing to halt the dictator's rise to power, she abandons her function as author with the intent of silencing El Brujo by ceasing to write him:

> En esta sencilla ceremonia hago abandono de la pluma con la que en otras sencillas ceremonias anotaba. Ya ves. Somos parecidos: yo también amo tener mi gravitación en los otros. Callando ahora creo poder acallarte. Borrándome del mapa pretendo borrarte a vos. Sin mi biografía es como si no tuvieras vida. Chau, Brujo, felice morte...(245-46).

It might be argued that in the above passages Valenzuela also implies that if truth cannot be completely represented, it is possible for the lie--i.e. the entrance of El Brujo's distortions into her sphere as author--to become part of "truth" that she is attempting to reveal. By ceasing to write about El Brujo, Valenzuela hopes not only to avoid half-truths, but also to halt the intrusion of lies into what her countrymen will presume to be fact.

The episodes of "Tres?" round out Cola de lagartija by tracing El Brujo's metamorphosis, pregnancy and death. Here the protagonist succeeds in transforming his body into the female shape of his sister Estrella, thereafter impregnating himself. As he is about to give birth, however, El Brujo explodes, thus reemphasizing the prologue's prophecy which predicted the flowing of a river of blood followed by twenty years of peace. As in "El Uno" and "D*OS," episodes of "Tres?" similarly have both political and social implications.

Some of the episodes treating El Brujo's metamorphosis and pregnancy offer a consideration of absolute power and its inherent narcissism. As "Tres?" progresses, El Brujo considers the implications of refusing to give birth, choosing instead to keep the child within himself: by continuing in a period of gestation, he would be father, mother and child, self-sufficient and omnipotent:

> ...y pronto seré madrepadrehijo y ya nadie podrá sustituirme. No habrá más presidentes, no habrá más generales ¿acaso no es ésto lo que muchos desean? Habré

yo, solo yo y Yo, y no sé si he de permitirle apartarse de mí o si lo retendré para siempre en mi entraña (277).

The narcissism inherent in absolute power is indicated in episodes that deal with El Brujo's preoccupation with his reflection seen in the mirrored walls of his pyramid and in an episode concerning the lagoon's surface that delivers the first glance of his new female form. At the close of "D*OS," El Brujo attempts to spread his image by covering the walls of his pyramid with mirrors (242-43). At a later point ("¿Tres?" 236), when he is preparing to travel to the marshes for the purpose of transforming his body into a female form, El Brujo attempts to capture and preserve his masculine image by covering the pyramid walls with white blankets and cloths. It could be argued that El Brujo's attempt to spread his image via mirrors represents the desire on the part of tyrannical dictators--or oppressors at any level--to invade every facet of existence. On a different level of meaning, we might suggest that El Brujo's attempt to prevent his image's escape may be viewed as sexually significant in that it is symbolic of patriarchal societies that attempt to

preserve male-oriented narrative restraints.

Eventually El Brujo leaves his pyramid and instructs his aide to accompany him to the shore of a lagoon to begin sculpting a new female form over his masculine body, using clay from the shallow lake bed. Here again episodes reveal the dictator's self-absorption with his own image, and via association with Narcissus, prepare us for El Brujo's death at the end of the novel:

> La superficie de la laguna es un espejo más pero él no piensa por ahora en la remodelación de su pirámide. Esta laguna es un espejo bruñido que en lugar de reflejar su imagen se la traga. Para transformarla en el fondo, para devolverlo convertida en otra y éste es en verdad el motivo del viaje (259).

A consideration of the treatment of silence within the work's last section is in order before proceeding to episodes depicting El Brujo's death. While no mention of silence is made straight-out, it might be argued that it is the propelling agent of "Tres?" when we consider that the absence of Valenzuela's narration as El Brujo's biographer allows the

protagonist to move forward unopposed in his campaign of oppression and terror. Similar to Alfredo Navoni's instructions to Valenzuela in D*OS with respect to the necessity of reading "between the lines": ("Es hora de que aprendamos a leer entre lineas [198]"), it is important for readers of Cola de lagartija to follow his advice so as to uncover one of the work's principal concerns--a need for reaction on the part of the victim against oppression. As Clara's downfall (Hay que sonreír) might have been avoided had she protested her treatment, Valenzuela's biography in like manner might have curtailed El Brujo's stream of atrocities. Valenzuela's paradoxical use of silence within Cola de lagartija effectively draws attention to this major thematic interest by suggesting an ironic reversal. On the one hand, silence in the face of oppression is to be renounced; on the other, the biographer's self-imposed censorship is the agent by which the argument is advanced.

The episodes of "Tres?" that lead up to and depict El Brujo's death continue to reinforce Valenzuela's appeal for resistance to oppression and, in addition, suggest that

narration may offer a means of intervention on behalf of the victims of tyranny. Clearly, the last proposal represents an evolution in thought when compared to the skepticism regarding narrative's effectiveness as expressed at the close of "D*OS". At the novel's close, El Brujo, equating perfection and omnipotence, believes that in his pregnant female form he has finally achieved the long sought state of absolute power, now existing as mother, father and child in one being. His refusal to give birth to the developed embryo in order to preserve his perfect state constitutes the establishment of an absolute. Apropos of Valenzuela's denial of absolutes, the overdue embryo becomes so gigantic that El Brujo's body is no longer able to support his lust for power and thus bursts. Similarly as self absorption killed Narcissus who drowned pining away for his self-image, likewise El Brujo's love of his own pregnant female form brings about his downfall at the hands of the narrator. Valenzuela's implication is that resistance to change breeds stagnation which results in death. Thus El Brujo's death gives evidence of the author's belief in change as life's

only constant and may foretell the destiny of any system which loathes renovation. It can be argued that El Brujo's death rendered at the hands of the narrator suggests that language may constitute an effective weapon in an attack on absolute power. Language is similarly not an absolute, given that the ambiguity of the written word combined with a desire for flexibility and renovation prevent the formation of unconditional truths.

As we have seen, the episodes of Cola de lagartija develop Valenzuela's preoccupation with abusive power and a lack of reaction to oppression. Equally, the arrangement of these episodes within the novel further reinforces the latter concern. At first glance, the direction of the episodes' development seems to produce a work that is circular in form; however, a closer consideration contradicts this appearance. It can be argued that the work's shape is spiral rather than circular because of a small, yet significant, difference between a prediction contained in the prologue and the actual manner in which the action of the first episode unfolds. We might suggest in turn that the spiral form objectifies

Valenzuela's insistence on reaction to oppression. The opening pages of Cola de lagartija contain a prologue in which is transcribed El Brujo's prophecy that at some future date a river of blood will flow:

> Correrá un
> (quién pudiera alcanzarlo)
> Correrá un río de sangre
> (seré yo quien abra las compuertas)
> río de sangre
> (fluir constante de mi permanencia en ésta)
> de sangre
> (¡eso sé que me gusta!)
> (sangre, rojo color de lo suntuoso, acompañándome
> siempre, siempre para ador(n)arme)
> Y
> ¡basta! la conjunción copulativa me da asco
> y Vendrán Veinte Años de Paz (6).

Throughout the course of the novel, El Brujo periodically refers back to his prediction, thus leading the reader to anticipate its fulfillment; for example: "Correrá un río de

sangre...(136,235)"/"El río de sangre sin saltos..."(249). When the last episode arrives, however, the prophecy's river of blood is reduced to a thread: "un hilo rojo..."(301). This difference could be interpreted as a sign that the blood of El Brujo was shed in lieu of the foretold massacre. If so, the implied intervention would have been accomplished via the narrator's killing of El Brujo, and "un hilo rojo" would refer to the protagonist's blood lost as a consequence of his refusal to give birth. When viewed in this light, the form of the work would be that of an upward spiral rather than as circular. The last proposal clearly carries a more positive connotation and would be in keeping with Valenzuela's call for reaction against oppression.

Given the distribution of its episodes, the tempo of Cola de lagartija remains consistent. As we know, the episodes of "El Uno" depict El Brujo's rise to power, during which time the protagonist exercises control over those around him. The conflict between El Brujo and Valenzuela is set up within "D*OS," and the struggle between their forces is subsequently highlighted midway through the work (pp.147-

56) by means of the juxtaposition of the Umbanda ceremony (representative of Valenzuela's power) with El Brujo's masked ball. The first suggestion of a reversal of powers occurs at this point. As noted, El Brujo's illness at the party's end suggests that the spells cast against him may have proven effective; this occurrence in turn implies a possible reversal in power for both El Brujo and Valenzuela. The actual alternation in the relative predominance of El Brujo's force over Valenzuela's occurs in "Tres?" where several episodes trace the unraveling of the protagonist's power. First, the reader is informed that the central government has begun to ignore the protagonist in hopes of isolating and consequently weakening him:

> Cerrados en nosotros mismos, reciclándonos, nada afectarnos, ni siquiera la aparente indiferencia del gobierno central que ahora pretende ningunearnos y ya no envía sus consultantes. Pretenden aislarnos, ignorarnos, sin saber que es éso lo que precisamente buscamos ahora...(251).

Later, La Garza alerts El Brujo as to the threat of a popular

uprising, a warning which goes unheeded:

-El General Durañona manda decir que el Proceso de Reorg

-¡Qué no venga a interrumpirme! El único proceso es éste de generación al que me he abocado.

-Pero resulta que en Fabricaciones Milit

-Solo hay una fabricación: la del Hijo Sublimo.

-Es que se avecina un levantamie

-¡Levantamiento! Levantamiento será el mío cuando yo lo disponga, cuando me alce de pie por encima de todos (287).

The fact that El Brujo's power has fallen away completely is apparent when La Garza attempts to round up followers of La Muerta so that they might worship the protagonist in his "madrepadrehijo (277)" form. Upon arriving at La Muerta's shrine, La Garza learns from a cleaning woman that the cult is now illegal and that all followers either have been murdered or vanished:

-Vieja loca. No entiende usted nada de desorden sagrado. ¿Dónde se metió todo el mundo?

> -Todo el mundo soy yo, ahora ¿no ve? ¿0 acaso cree que me los barre a todos? Deben de haber vuelto a sus casas. Los que pudieron, claro. Los otros me temo que estarán tapizando el río, sirviéndole de alimento al bagre que se come cualquier porquería. Cierta tarde entró la tropa tocando a degüello y agarraron a todos los que pudieron. A muchos se los llevaron y no los volvimos a ver. Tienen esa costumbre (294).

La Garza thus is forced to return to El Brujo's pyramid alone and in darkness, rather than triumphantly leading an adoring parade, as anticipated.

It can be argued that while "¿Tres?" is primarily concerned with tracing El Brujo's downfall, the novel's final section also charts a rise to a position of predominance for Luisa Valenzuela and her allies Alfredo Navoni and El Caboclo de Mar. During the decline of El Brujo's force in "¿Tres?", reader interest in regard to the fate of the protagonist's enemies is sustained by means of intermittent and indirect mention of them. (This technique also helps to maintain a consistent tempo throughout "¿Tres?", given that these

allusions are placed at regular intervals throughout the section.) Although at this point Valenzuela has ceased to narrate the protagonist's life history, the various references within "¿Tres?" to her and her colleagues indicate their continued collaboration with the effort to overthrow El Brujo.

References that chart the rise of the force represented by Valenzuela fall into two categories: 1) those that relate El Brujo's death to the magic of the Numbanda people, the Machi, and 730 Arrugas, and 2) those that mention the mysterious actions in Capivari of Valenzuela, Navoni and El Caboclo de Mar. Clearly the two categories are not unrelated if we recall that Valenzuela and Alfredo Navoni previously appealed to the Umbanda people for assistance from the world of the occult in regard to removing El Brujo from power. The first reference linking El Brujo's death with magical rites describes the phenomenon of the mysterious appearance in the Capivarian newspaper of articles written by an unidentified author on the subject of hormone injections, including recipes which the protagonist decides to follow carefully:

A la espera de la idea que aflorará muy pronto sigo cuidadosamente las recetas que sin querer me brinda mi periódico. Acaba de aparecer, por ejemplo, un artículo sobre las hormonas sintéticas. Científicos alemanes opinan que las hormonas sintéticas ingeridas por la madre producen niños con alto grado de agresividad social. ¡Qué buena noticia! No es que un hijo mío corra el riesgo de salir demasiado pacífico, pero más vale optar por lo seguro. He encargado varias gruesas de ampollas de Dietilstilbestrol, DES para los íntimos, y ya he empezado a inyectármelas. Algunas se las refriego a Estrella para que absorba la hormona por los poros y se vuelva a su vez agresiva, predispuesta.

DES es ahora mi aliado, como lo es también el Porgino Estradiol, otro de los compuestos que mi diario me brindó en bandeja, sin quererlo.

Alguien anda por ahí dándole las respuestas y alentándolo en su empresa pero él no quiere enterarse. Le gustan los cómplices, y este aparente aliado que semana tras semana va abriéndole las puertas de las

transformaciones es casi como hermano que conoce y estimula su secreto. Son aparentemente informaciones sueltas que aparecen en La Voz, pero él sabe que le están dirigidas personal e inequívocamente. No las pueden estar seleccionando ninguno de los tres redactores que él ha hecho traer de la otra capital y que solo responden a sus directivas. Ni ninguna otra persona que tenga al periódico. ¿Entonces quién (256)?

When El Brujo experiences hallucinations following a series of hormone injections the relationship between the injections and the protagonist's delirium might be deemed cause-effect. Also, the inexplicable appearance in La Voz of the articles concerning hormone therapy might conceivably be credited to the workings of the Umbanda people.

Next, a series of episodes report on 730 Arrugas, a witch and onetime counselor to El Brujo, who for unspecified reasons is traveling to Capivari. Mention is made as to her special powers when she is first sighted advancing through the jungle: "Con los ojos puestos tan solo donde pueden poner la bala, los hombres de la Zona 3 permiten que se les escurra

una, dos, tres cuatro cinco seis la 730 Arrugas. La vieja de los poderes" (264). Later in her journey, 730 Arrugas restricts herself to a diet of only mushrooms. It could be argued that a relationship is established at this point between 730 Arrugas and the Machi mushroom witch--730 Arrugas may represent the reincarnation of the Machi who at her death by sacrifice swore to avenge her murder by haunting El Brujo:

> -No voy a permitir que te mastiquen, le había prometido a la Machi antes de ultimarla.
>
> -Aunque lo permitas, aunque quieras, no me vas a convertir en mierda. Yo voy a estar donde no estoy y también en otras partes: te vas a acordar de mí (151).

Soon after arriving at Capivari, 730 Arrugas incites the townspeople's anger when she informs them that El Brujo has betrayed their trust by stealing relics placed at the Shrine of La Muerta; she bases her charge on the fact that she has seen her wedding dress--her offering to La Muerta--woven into the white cloth that is to cover the inside of El Brujo's pyramid (270). When 730 Arrugas insists upon recovering the relic and subsequently offers to replace the missing

material, the question can be put as to whether the substitute cloth possesses evil properties, thereby converting it into an agent that would execute the Machi's curse. Considered in this light, we suggest that it is impossible to rule out the Machi's curse as a contributing factor to El Brujo's downfall.

Reports concerning Luisa Valenzuela, Alfredo Navoni, and El Caboclo de Mar are interwoven into the narrative of "¿Tres?" alongside references to magic and the world of the occult. The first indication that El Brujo's surroundings are vulnerable to infiltration occurs by means of an indirect reference to El Caboclo de Mar ("un hombre corpulento, de blanco"), Alfredo Navoni ("otro alto que parece haberse integrado a su máscara blanca como una capucha"), and Luisa Valenzuela ("una mujer de pelo ensortijado, negro"), all of whom have set out together by boat en route to Capivari (264). The trio is next cited in Capivari's main square sewing the cloth which will cover the inner walls of El Brujo's pyramid. At a later point they are reported as advancing through the jungle alongside 730 Arrugas. We might

argue that the juxtaposition of references concerning Valenzuela, Navoni and El Caboclo de Mar with others related to 730 Arrugas indicates a relationship between these characters based on their common mission--to overthrow El Brujo. A subsequent mention of Valenzuela and her colleagues returns them to the town square where they contribute their own clothing to El Brujo's wall covering; eventually they are selected to hang the cloth inside the pyramid.

It becomes evident that Valenzuela, Navoni, and El Caboclo de Mar have acquired support for their cause when the Capivarians refuse to divulge the identities and whereabouts of the three. If we consider the townspeople's response to a question posed them during interrogation by the envoy pursuing Valenzuela and her friends, it can be suggested that El Brujo's enemies have again altered the wall covering of the protagonist's pyramid: "Sí, cosimos unas telas blancas. No, no eran mortajas. No, sin ningún fin político. No les pintamos inscripciones "(279). The implication that death shrouds (mortajas) were woven into the covering might further indicate Capivarian collaboration with those resisting El

Brujo's persecution. Thus, a close reading of "¿Tres?"-- one including the activities of El Brujo's enemies as well as those of the protagonist--sheds light upon the consolidation of a counterforce to El Brujo's power. We should also observe that Valenzuela's technique of using intermittent and indirect references to chart the rise of said resistance could be perceived as mirroring at a formal level the covert actions of underground opposition movements in Argentina during the seventies.

Valenzuela is a careful craftsman, and her management of Cola de lagartija's exposition, as well as her development of the novel's body and conclusion are testimony to the precision with which she shapes her works. Part I, "El Uno," comprises the work's exposition. It is presented via a combination of first and third person narrations, the latter consisting of straight narrative and dialogue. Accounts of El Brujo's present activities as well as important information pertaining to the protagonist's childhood are accomplished by the first and third person narrative segments. Here, flashbacks and narrations in the past are

employed. Excerpts of conversations between El Brujo's enemies provide the reader yet another vantage point for considering the protagonist. In addition, the setting for the exposition alternates between El Brujo's dwelling places--the marshes and his castle in the Tacurú--and his enemies' camp in the capital. Characters presented by first and third person narrations include Estrella, Eva Perón, Juan Perón, El Brujo's mother Eulalia, Don Ciriaco, Doña Rosa, Eulogio, La Garza, and the Machi. Valenzuela, Navoni, El Caboclo de Mar, and the Numbanda people are introduced via the dialogues between El Brujo's enemies. Hence, Valenzuela's technique of including a variety of narrative viewpoints and settings serves two purposes: 1) it supplies biographical information concerning El Brujo, and 2) it helps to establish the conflicting forces embodied in the work by introducing the characters as belonging to two distinct political groups.

The main development of Cola de lagartija, i.e. El Brujo's force on the rise, follows naturally. As previously mentioned, El Brujo's power begins to unravel following Valenzuela's refusal at the close of D*OS to continue writing

the protagonist's biography, thus fixing this point as the narrative's dramatic climax. "¿Tres?" can be considered as the conclusion, and the denouement included here is a logical outgrowth of the section's two narrative strands. It is important to note that Valenzuela's characteristic open ending is achieved by virtue of the conclusion's double stranded narrative. Segments of "¿Tres?" which concern El Brujo's pregnancy and related decision to keep the embryo within himself lead the reader to conclude that the protagonist's death comes as a result of his desire for absolute power. On the other hand, an account of covert activities carried out by El Brujo's enemies suggests that his death is brought about by magical ceremonies and spells performed by El Caboclo de Mar, the Machi and 730 Arrugas.

While the above conclusions of Cola de lagartija are logical, Valenzuela's use of irony and ambiguity preclude a foreseen ending. In order to appreciate the ironic element at work in the catastrophe of El Brujo's exploding, it is necessary to recall that the river of blood prophesied in the work's prologue and thereafter mentioned throughout the work

is reduced in the conclusion to a single thread of the protagonist's blood. Also, Valenzuela's technique in "¿Tres?" of reporting on El Brujo's enemies, by means of indirect references scattered throughout sections of principal narration describing El Brujo's activities, introduces elements of ambiguity which in turn create a puzzle to be solved by the reader as he progresses through the text. Thus, early anticipation of the work's ending is avoided.

We should remark, however, that El Brujo's death does not mark the end of "¿Tres?"; instead, the section, and work, close in a moment of anticlimax when El Caboclo de Mar warns against assuming that the protagonist's death signifies an end to tyranny:

> -¡oh gloriosa! por fin sabremos de la paz. Los veinte años de paz que promete la profecía.
>
> El hombre de blanco sacudió la cabeza
>
> -Lo dudo mucho. Las tiranías ya no vienen como antes. Ahora tienen piezas de repuesto. Un presidente cae y otro ya está listo para reemplazarlo. Generales

> no nos faltan. Además, este hilo no puede ser el tan mentado río de sangre, porque entonces en lugar de veinte años nos tocarían apenas veinte minutitos de paz (302).

Valenzuela's choice to end her work in this manner, along with the alternative explanations she provides for El Brujo's death, further clarify her warnings concerning abusive power and passiveness. Although El Brujo's death indicates that his claims to absolute power have been undermined, the above section of text nevertheless warns that the older structure of the protagonist's regime might be replaced with an equally arbitrary one.

As was the case in Hay que sonreír, the characters of Cola de lagartija likewise project Valenzuela's theme of abusive power and a need for response to oppression. Here, the characters can be divided into two categories, each of which represents a key aspect of the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy present in the work: 1) El Brujo and characters that surround him, and 2) Valenzuela and others who oppose El Brujo's tyranny. An important difference exists, however,

between Clara of Hay que sonreír and some of El Brujo's victims in Cola de lagartija in as much as Valenzuela and her colleagues clearly react in order to counter El Brujo's tyranny.

In Cola de lagartija, El Brujo embodies the theme of abusive power. Throughout the novel, his only desire is to impregnate Estrella, have his own child and subsequently dominate the world. As earlier commented, El Brujo expands his power by employing manipulative techniques similar to those of Clara's lovers in Hay que sonreír. Repeatedly he subjects his victims to a process of oppression that includes isolation, dehumanization and a distortion of one's perception of reality. Scattered over the novel are references to the isolation suffered by El Brujo's victims. For example, the Machi is removed from her Aracaunian shrine and imprisoned in a cave where she is forced to serve as guardian of El Brujo's mushrooms (71,72). Also, segments of first person narration related by the character Valenzuela contain several allusions to the phenomenon of desaparecidos. For instance, early in D*OS she indicates that people are

being kidnapped and that her friend Navoni is at risk of being apprehended: "Ahí viene Navoni, por suerte. Es un alivio verlo llegar en estos tiempos, confirmar que todavía están vivos..." (141). Other references to Navoni's situation occur in "D*OS" (147, 148, 150), and at a later point Valenzuela indicates that kidnapping has become one of the government's weapons of terror: "Si mi paralisis fuese al menos un poco contagiosa pero no, yo me detengo y los otros siguen implacables, hurgando en los rincones, haciendo desaparecer a la gente... " (244). Previous mention has been made of El Brujo's dehumanizing practice of robbing his victims of personal belongings and identities (i.e. stripping the young women who live in the Tacurú of their clothes and renaming his aide). The protagonist succeeds in distorting his victims perception of reality by engaging in campaigns of misinformation (43), and barring foreign news (75).

The characters surrounding El Brujo--La Garza, Estrella, La Muerta and El Generalísimo--are passive individuals. La Garza, his aide, is a eunuch and thus a complement to El Brujo who possesses both male and female reproductive organs.

Estrella functions as his voice of moderation, a feminine force which represses his excesses, as pointed out by Martha Paley Francescato (876). La Muerta (Eva Perón) and El Generalísimo (Juan Perón) are both deceased and therefore unable to intervene on their own behalves, thus permitting El Brujo's manipulation of their followers. For this reason, La Muerta and El Generalísimo constitute an important source of the protagonist's power.

Whereas El Brujo is the embodiment of abusive power, Valenzuela and other characters who resist the protagonist's cruelty represent the text's advocacy of reaction against oppression. Characters intervening in the process of oppression to which they are subjected may in turn be divided into two subgroups: 1) Valenzuela and Alfredo Navoni, representatives of Western society who initially employ traditional methods of resistance against El Brujo, but later explore less conventional (i.e. non-Western) approaches and 2) El Caboclo de Mar, the Umbanda people, and the Machi/730 Arrugas, all of whom are practitioners of occult sciences and therefore atypical of Western beliefs. Unsuccessful in their

initial attempts to overthrow El Brujo, Valenzuela and Navoni join forces with the Numbanda people and their priest El Caboclo de Mar for the purpose of opposing El Brujo's cruelty in kind. Early in the novel it is revealed that El Brujo is a formidable enemy due to his knowledge of occult sciences: "No debemos olvidar que ese hombre es un vidente, que maneja las ciencas ocultas (43)." Soon after enlisting the aid of El Caboclo de Mar, Valenzuela as El Brujo's biographer expresses her hope that the Numbanda rituals will counter El Brujo's witchcraft:

> "Está bien, está bien. Ya lo pensé, simila similibus curantur; si nos atacan por el lado de la irracionalidad, contraatacaremos por el mismo flanco. No hay que desdeñar nunca el enemigo. Pero conste que ésta no es nuestra habitual forma de activar. Puedes proceder, no más "(81).

The juxtaposition within Cola de lagartija of groups of characters possessing contrasting visions of reality is significant for two reasons: 1) the technique is in keeping with the author's effort to invalidate claims to absolutes,

and 2) we might argue that it suggests a point of contact with the writings of Julio Cortázar. With regard to the first rationale, during an interview conducted by Evelyn Picón Garfield, Valenzuela discusses at length her belief that neither she nor any other individual is in possession of absolute truths or definitive answers to society's problems. Rather, truth is a question of perspective, and one's interpretation of it is dependent upon his/her vantage point. During the interview, Valenzuela states that since a total vision is humanly impossible, claims to absolutes are precluded and fragmentation frequently results. In her attempt to redefine modern life's "absolutes," Valenzuela urges convergence of viewpoints as opposed to an absoluteness of one opinion, and she attempts to present circumstances in a manner that will elicit a variety of plausible interpretations, a more harmonious outcome subsequently resulting from the incorporation of multiple contexts (Garfield, 143-64).

Valenzuela's technique in Cola de lagartija of juxtaposing groups of characters with contrasting views of

reality illustrates at a structural level the above concerns. Both sets of characters attempt via different strategies to overthrow El Brujo; however, only by joining forces--i.e. coalescence of opposites--do they achieve their common goal. Their collaborative effort can be seen to exemplify Valenzuela's appeal for convergence of viewpoints. If we consider the work's previously discussed ambiguous conclusion, we might argue that the technique of juxtaposing contrasting groups of characters does not proclaim the superiority of one, but rather suggests that neither perception of reality is absolutely adequate. Given that the protagonist is eventually removed from power, it can be argued that Valenzuela's concentration is on the proximity of their visions of reality and essentially optimistic.

The writings of Julio Cortázar and Luisa Valenzuela both belong to a class of contemporary works in which the harmonious and logical vision of reality is replaced by a more complex interpretation. Given that an overriding theme of dissatisfaction with the human condition within Western civilization is shared by Cortázar and Valenzuela, it is not

surprising that their works exhibit stylistic similarities. Cortázar's narrative production is characterized by a constant search for authenticity; however, the rational thought processes by which man perceives reality are frequently encountered as a barrier to the discovery of a more genuine world. Cortázar believes that an alternative, marvelous reality is concealed beneath daily reality, the latter being a distortion produced by years of Western culture. It might be considered that the transgressive behaviors depicted in his writings offer at least a temporary means of piercing the barrier of rational thought. Margery Safir argues convincingly that these extreme actions are the catalysts of Cortázar's pursuits (84). Transgression often appears in Cortázar's works at the pivotal point when the protagonist has arrived at the juncture of different levels of consciousness; the violation has a liberating potential in as much as it allows the character to transcend his present state of awareness. Since Cortázar wishes to return to prominence a world devoid of false, artificial dualism, the

quests and accompanying transgressions may be considered to be restorative.

Valenzuela's technique of dividing the characters of Cola de lagartija into two groups according to their vision of reality--traditional and nontraditional--might be seen to represent a point of contact with Julio Cortázar's juxtaposition of daily and marvelous realities. It should be noted, however, that Valenzuela has adapted the technique in Cola de lagartija so to express her particular concerns; whereas the concept of transgression makes it possible for Cortázar's unique vision to surface, Valenzuela introduces the notion of coalescence of opposites in her search for truth. We have already suggested that Valenzuela projects an essentially positive outlook via coalescence. If this is the case, Cortazar's use of transgression might be considered more "barrier conscious" (crossing over one barrier in order to reject what has been left behind) and therefore pessimistic by contrast.

Just as in Hay que sonreír, imagery and symbolism within Cola de lagartija serves to immediately attract and

subsequently sustain reader response in addition to carrying forth development of the novel's theme. Both the visual and auditory senses of the reader are engaged in the work's opening paragraph due to its juxtaposition of an image of crawling ants and references to musical instruments:

> Desde mi más tierna infancia el acordión me despierta esta especie de hormigueo y es como si perdiera el norte pero gana la calma. La flauta en cambio no, la flauta me pone alerta. Y no hablemos de tambores, los tambores son algo bien distinto y haré sonar tambores a lo largo y lo ancho de mi vida--cuando no recurra al bombo, cuando no recurra al bombo y eso sí que será esplendoroso (10).

The above technique evokes a visceral response from the reader. Given that the opening passage consists of first person narration on the part of El Brujo, reader opinion as to the protagonist is swayed early on. Should the reader initially question the protagonist's unworldly state, a chain-like repetition throughout "El Uno" of similar nonverbal signifiers referring to El Brujo will help to clarify the

issue. For example, on pages 11,12 and 13, El Brujo's aberrant attraction to ants is further brought to light as the protagonist describes via first person narration the pleasure that he derives from sitting on anthills. On pages 30 and 34, the sound of flutes is again called forth, as are drumbeats on pages 19, 25 and 70. According to Cirlot, ants were utilized in soothsaying and also symbolize the pettiness of living things (14). The basic meaning of the flute corresponds to erotic or funereal anguish, while the drum is a vehicle for magic (Cirlot 85, 105). Thus, Valenzuela's use of ants, flutes and drums for the purpose of introducing El Brujo is in keeping with the work's thematic concerns, and due to the disturbing connotations associated with these nonverbal signifiers, reader opinion concerning El Brujo will be unfavorable by the close of "El Uno."

Similarly, as the text of Cola de lagartija has dual interpretations, much of the symbolism employed by Valenzuela represents the qualities of omnipotence and self-absorption which have significance at both political and sexual levels. For instance the various manifestations of the number three

throughout the text suggests the completeness, self-sufficiency and flawlessness of that number. With three testicles, one of which is female in gender, El Brujo is whole within himself and capable of existing without relation to anything else. Regarded in this light he has political significance as a dictator endowed with absolute power who prohibits dissension, while on a sexual level he is symbolic of the power of male discourse which precludes the contribution of manuscripts not conforming to its restraints. It is also appropriate that El Brujo should live within a pyramid, enforce his power through "La Triple P," an organization of parapolice, and be protected by a trio named "La Triple E." In addition, the novel is divided into three parts. As previously mentioned, Valenzuela's use of mirrors and water relates to the narcissism inherent in absolute power at either the political or sexual levels.

Before closing, we should glance at Valenzuela's use of humor within the text of Cola de lagartija. In an interview conducted by Marie-Lise Gazarian Gautier, Valenzuela comments the importance of humor in her works:

> Humor allowed me to break the barriers of censorship in more than one way, because not only was I evading the censors, wherever they were, I was forcing the readers to read me. Otherwise, he would have put the book down. The main reason for having a sense of humor in writing is to allow oneself to say things that otherwise one wouldn't dare even acknowledge. But they suddenly came out through jokes (Gazarian Gautier 315).

We might also suggest that Valenzuela's decision to portray the post-Perón years via allegory rather than realistic narration provided her the critical distance to evaluate what would have otherwise been too painful to consider.

Humor in Cola de lagartija occurs at the levels of presentation of character and language. A look at individual instances of humor within the text will demonstrate the manner in which political and reader censorship is evaded and critical distance achieved. A few examples must suffice. First, Valenzuela's decision to choose as a protagonist a witch doctor with three testicles rather than specifically naming José López Rega creates

sufficient ambiguity so as to protect both author and work from political censors. In addition, situating El Brujo as protagonist instead of López Rega allows the reader to contemplate the atrocities perpetrated by the latter. While on one hand the novel's protagonist symbolizes the terror associated with the post-Perón years up until the election of Alfonsín, on the other he is sporadically converted into a comic figure by virtue of exaggeration--he is seen as a witch doctor, lives in both an underground castle and pyramid, enjoys sitting in anthills, boils his former teacher down to a broth, etc. The reader's response to El Brujo as a result of the above technique is at once a shudder of horror and a laugh which brings partial relief. However, we should not mistake the humor of Cola de lagartija for black comedy in which the wit is either mordant or pervaded by a kind of sour despair (nothing can be done, so we might as well laugh). Rather, the twofold purpose of Valenzuela's humor is to place us as readers at an adequate distance to be able to contemplate the abuses while simultaneously disturbing us enough to make us react against the oppressive environment

depicted within the work. Viewed in this light, Valenzuela's use of humor within de Cola de lagartija is in keeping with her thematic concern that calls for a response to oppressive conditions.

Another example of humorous presentation of character that allows Valenzuela to evade political and reader censorship is the Machi's reappearance as the character 730 Arrugas, after having been earlier sacrificed and boiled. In this case, the protection provided by ambiguity results from there being no allusions made to specific incidents of torture. Due to the possibility of a humorous association being drawn between the character's later name and the manner in which she was sacrificed, (i.e. wrinkles having resulted from being boiled), the reader similarly is able to distance him-/herself so as to contemplate the painful reality behind the allegory--that tortures indeed were inflicted and kidnappings and murders committed during the period of Argentine history in question.

A similar technique of distancing via humor involves Valenzuela's trivialization and debunking of language

customarily associated with terror. For example, the term parallel army was identified at that time with squads that went about the country perpetrating atrocities against Argentine citizens. Yet, in the following passage Valenzuela manages to make the phrase less potent when she follows it with her own term of parallel colonel. In addition, it is further defused by the proximity of the noun nonsense:

> Ahora que por fin he logrado constituir mi ejército paralelo impartiré orden de arresto para el proprietario del pasquín
>
> -¿Arresto domiciliario, Señor?
>
> -¿Cómo se le ocurre tamaña insensatez, colonel paralelo (183)?

Here, Valenzuela has again used humor in the service of neutralizing a volatile situation sufficiently so as to permit its examination.

While the area of humor within Cola de lagartija is vast and requires separate treatment outside this thesis, it is clear that Valenzuela's decision to utilize it in her approach to the post-Perón years was crucial to the

publication of the novel in that it helped the work escape the censors. We might also suggest that the author's techniques for applying humor account to a large extent for the powerful impressions left upon the reader.

In summary, then, Cola de lagartija reveals Luisa Valenzuela's continuing concern with absolute and arbitrary power. While the novel shares thematic interests as well as a variety of techniques in common with Hay que sonreír, the author's experimentation with form has resulted in a high degree of plurality, a quality characteristic of her later works. Cola de lagartija is a text which frequently jolts the reader, reflecting the author's desire for reaction against oppression. Her demand for the questioning of existing conditions is achieved to a degree by the use of ambiguity which in turn produces a variety of levels of interpretation. One final issue remains to be mentioned, however. Cola de lagartija occupies a place of special importance within the over-all evolution of Valenzuela's fiction because it is here that we begin to see a transition in her work from an outlook and a set of techniques which

show the influence of the Boom to a mode of writing which places her squarely in the Post-Boom. Without pressing this issue too far at this point, we should argue that the highly ambiguous presentation of reality, the preoccupation with the act and function of writing itself and the heavy demands which Cola de lagartija makes on the reader seem to look back to the literary pattern associated with the Boom, as broadly defined e.g. by Shaw and Duncan amongst others. On the other hand, the overt involvement with the politico-social situation in Argentina, the emphasis on certain elements of feminist outlook and the ultimate optimism we have posited, seem to look forward to Cambio de armas which falls rather clearly into the Post-Boom category.

## Cambio de armas

Cambio de armas is a collection of five narratives dealing with male/female relationships and politics. In spite of a gap of sixteen years between the publications of Hay que sonreír and that of Cambio de armas, Valenzuela continues to emphasize in the later work her concerns over victimization at personal and political levels and the inherent dangers of not reacting against oppression. Critics evaluating the work frequently focus upon the female protagonists of the stories; for example, both Mary Lusky Friedman (12) and Brett Harvey (21) comment that in Cambio de armas, Valenzuela reveals how living in a repressive society sabotages interpersonal ties. As Friedman observes, " Other

Weapons is a book that testifies to the difficulty of forging, in politically distressed times, sustaining personal relationships" (12). In a similar vein, Sharon Magnarelli's article entitled "Signifying Desire in Cambio de armas" characterizes the work as an examination of the problematics of desire, and distinguishes between erotic desire which is thought to be mutual and political desire which seeks to ursurp or appropriate what is perceived as other (201). Building upon the existing criticism, especially Magnarelli's, we shall postulate a system of repression encoded within Cambio de armas and discuss its role in regard to the victim's confusion of the above mentioned categories of desire. Before proceeding to analyses of individual narratives, we should note that the work in its entirety manifests an admirable thematic coherence. The collection is governed by the author's characteristic preoccupation with repression. In Cambio de armas, Valenzuela once again shifts her vantage point so as to further expose the problem; whereas her earlier studies of it focus upon the victim (Clara, Hay que sonreír) and the oppressor (El Brujo, Cola de

lagartija), attention here turns to the victimization process itself. A thematic progression can be perceived given that protagonist awareness heightens with each narrative as we advance through the collection.

"Cuarta versión"

"Cuarta versión," the first of five stories which constitute Cambio de armas examines literary, political and social structures. At first glance, "Cuarta versión" appears to be a love story between the protagonist, Bella, and Pedro, the ambassador. Against this simple plot, however, Valenzuela develops the work's other more significant motives. The story opens as Bella is attempting to reorganize and subsequently transcribe a vast number of written pages which concern events of her own life. Hers is, in fact, the fourth effort to complete this endeavor, hence the title, "Cuarta versión." Bella is an actress who at the outset of her own narration is politically inactive. After making Pedro's acquaintance, her naïveté vanishes as she participates in aiding political exiles who are sheltering

within Pedro's embassy in hopes of securing political asylum. Persecution which results from Bella's complicity with the ambassador forces her to flee her country, and her role in the sequence of events finally leads to her death. The elaborate plurilinear narrative structure of "Cuarta versión" again illustrates Valenzuela's craftsmanship. The plot is divided into fifteen episodes throughout which one narrative chain recounts Bella's affair with Pedro, while the other thrusts the story's literary concerns upon the reader; the latter is usually contained in italicized paragraphs that alternate with Bella's narration of her involvement with Pedro.

The collection's concerns with the abuse of power and a lack of reaction against the oppressor govern the selection of its episodes and the direction of their development. In this instance, however, the author underscores an admonition that is only subtly indicated in Hay que sonreír; the oppressed victim's reaction must stem from authentic motivation as opposed to compliance with another's will. The episodes of "Cuarta versión" reveal a system of victimization

that occurs on individual, political and literary planes. Similar to the processes observed earlier in Hay que sonreír and Cola de lagartija, the oppressed at all three levels of "Cuarta versión" experience a loss of autonomy as a consequence of their subjection to the manipulative techniques of oppressors. As will be expanded at a later point, episodes concerning Bella's relationship with Pedro can be compared to those depicting Clara's self-destructive love affairs in Hay que sonreír which focused attention on the the interplay of power in the male-female relationships. At a political level, the refugees hiding within Pedro's embassy and the desaparecidos mentioned in Cola de lagartija must confront similarly repressive regimes. At a literary level, Bella in the role of narrator encounters the problem of male-oriented language earlier faced by Valenzuela in Cola de lagartija.

The story's first three sections comprise its opening. Here the theme and principal characters are introduced and the tone and setting established. Gaps in background information are underscored in the exposition of "Cuarta

versión," a practice contrary to more traditional introductions that report on events occurring before the narrative's action. Valenzuela opens the story by writing about the exercise of writing. Bella as narrator and protagonist calls attention to two problems confronted by writers: the ordering of information before putting it down on paper and the task of determining which facts are crucial and which should be discarded:

> Hay cantidad de páginas escritas, una historia que nunca puede ser narrada por demasiado real, asfixiante. Agobiadora. Leo y releo estas páginas sueltas y a veces al azar reconstruye el orden. Me topo con múltiples principios. Los estudio, descarto y recupero y trato de ubicarlos en el sitio adecuado en un furioso intento de rearmar el rompecabeza (3).

Tío Ramón, a second character related to the story's literary concerns, is also introduced in Bella's opening lines: "Momentos de realidad que de alguna forma yo también he vivido y por eso mismo también a mí me asfixian, ahogada como me encuentro ahora en este mar de papeles y de falsas

identificaciones. Hermanada sobre todo con el tío que no existe " (3). Early on, the pattern is established of alternating italicized paragraphs that carry the story's literary interests with others of regular script that narrate Bella's involvement with Pedro. Segments of regular script within the exposition present the protagonist's friends Mara and Aldo, as well as the ambassador. In regard to the story's principal theme, Valenzuela immediately addresses the question of authentic motivation when, early in the exposition, she portrays Bella and Mara engaged solely in activities designed to fulfill their respective romantic interests. This path of action ultimately leads Bella to relinquish control of her own destiny, as we shall see.

Just as she had used confining spaces to aid the development of theme in Hay que sonreír, Valenzuela here presents episodes involving Bella and the ambassador as occuring indoors and at night; usually during, immediately preceeding, or after a party. It might be suggested that the somber tone created by enclosed spaces and darkness, coupled with the festive party moods assist Valenzuela in depicting

Argentine reality during the post-Perón years when a specious semblance of normalcy at surface level masked the darker truth of political oppression, including torture and murder.

As we move into the body of the tale, sections IV-XIII, we are immediately informed that the ambassador's wife has not accompanied her husband to Aldo's party. Valenzuela's description of the host's home reinforces our suspicions that Bella's romantic fantasies concerning Pedro might be realized: "Noche fácil para lograrlo, en el jardín algo selvático de Aldo, al resplandor de esas brasas que en la enorme parrilla iban haciendo chisporrotear una carne de la que se desprendían efluvios despertadores de apetitos varios " (18). Bella and Pedro's romance is charted within these sections, including scenes of courtship at various parties, their physical relationship, and Bella's participation in politics. What stands out is the system of oppression to which the protagonist is subjected. Bella is seduced by a love relationship but does not sufficiently focus on the power relationships implied in it. For Pedro, Bella is little more than a political pawn:

> Bella ya convertida para Pedro en la encarnación de ese país al que necesitaba aferrase, con el que no quería romper relaciones diplomáticas si llegaba la ordén telefónica. Pedro reteniendo a Bella, mágicamente conquistándola para que en otro plano no se plantee el fracaso de sus gestiones oficiales (26).

Throughout the body of "Cuarta versión" we see Bella being subjected to a series of manipulations not unlike those experienced by Clara at the hands of her lovers. Early in section IV, Valenzuela includes an episode during which Pedro corners Bella and leads her away from others to dance. It might be suggested that the ambassador's maneuvers on the dance floor foreshadow his subsequent behavior regarding his relationship with Bella, for here he isolates Bella from friends, subjects her to conflicting speech and action, silences her, and eventually controls her movements. The stages in the process are as follows:

1) Bella isolated by Pedro:

> Un baile mezclado con rondas y risas y nudos que Pedro aprovechó para irla arrinconando a Bella, separándola de

los demás con pasitos de samba...(19).

2) Bella subjected to Pedro's conflicting speech and actions:

Hablaba mientras bailaba, con movimientos de mano recalcaba las palabras y Bella trataba de atender más a esas manos que a esos labios. El decía por ejemplo tantas cosas que quisiera hacer y no puedo, pero las manos apilaban elementos invisibles, juntaban, acariciaban, las manos sí podían y Bella se preguntaba dónde estaría la verdad y optaba por creer en los gestos (19).

3) Bella silenced by Pedro's monologue:

Pero el monólogo de Pedro ya bogaba por otros derroteros...y Bella no quería abrir la boca para que él pudiera seguir hablando...(19).

4) Bella's movement's controlled by Pedro:

Mientras, la iba guiando--a veces de frente como empujándola--hasta el rincón más remoto del jardín donde la hiedra cubría los árboles más altos.

Del todo arrinconada, Bella cesó de manearse (19). Moreover, just as Bella fails to interrupt Pedro's monologue during the above episode until she has been completely cornered and is standing still, so in "real life" the protagonist is implicated as partially responsible for her fate, having constantly deferred to the ambassador's wishes throughout their love affair.

The following episodes within the body of "Cuarta versión" depict Bella enduring manipulations similar to those performed by Pedro in the dance scene mentioned above. For example, during the first days of their courtship, Pedro detains Bella in his home for hours, even though she has expressed a desire to leave (26-27). Also, after Bella and Pedro have made love for the first time, Bella is described as suffocating beneath Pedro's body and unable to rise and go home (31). Bella perceives an inconsistency in Pedro's action and speech when he abandons her soon after having situated her in his own country and professed his great affection for her (42-43). Pedro silences Bella when he ignores her, thus driving additional distance between the two

and further isolating her (39). Also, just as Clara failed to respond quickly to oppression, episodes in the body of "Cuarta versión" depict Bella continually submitting to Pedro's wishes. Possibly, like Clara, she hopes to ensure continued communication with her lover. For example, it is because of Pedro that Bella involves herself in politics, which in turn leads to her persecution by authorities. Moreover, it is Pedro who determines that Bella will flee her country under the guise of a theatrical tour. Valenzuela underscores the significance of the latter episode, which also includes the first love scene between Bella and the ambassador, by placing it exactly midway through the tale. As we shall see, it is here that Bella's fortunes begin to decline, the suggestion being that Bella's loss of authenticity provokes her downfall.

One may wish to argue that in regard to awareness Bella has evolved farther than Clara of Hay que sonreír, given that the former's involvement in politics leads to her death. Yet if Bella's initial decision to act is carefully examined, we find that it stems from her desire to be with Pedro rather

than from a genuine political or ideological commitment: "Si Pedro estuviera alejado de la diplomacia, si fuese un tipo cualquiera con el que se podía estar sin necesidad de enredarse en situaciones políticas y hasta protocolares..." (51). In her article "Cuarta versión: Subversion and Narrative Weaponry," Magnarelli suggests that Bella breaks out of the fairy tale princess stereotype when she participates in politics, and that in so doing she begins to take an active role in shaping her own destiny (178). [7] We should argue, however, that Bella's political activity is not self-defining, in that it is the product of an erotic relationship. As an actress Bella's professional roles are created by others; by the same token, her political role is in large part defined by Pedro.

At the end of "Cuarta versión," section XV, the author presents the reader with a concern previously expressed in Cola de lagartija: that of male discourse predominant over female. Throughout "Cuarta versión," Bella has been the narrator of Valenzuela's text; however, she is ultimately replaced by the male narration of Pedro passing on what has

been told him previously by Tío Ramón: "Cuando mi tío Ramón conoció a una actriz llamada Bella...( 63). Thus by a switch of narrators, once again Luisa Valenzuela questions the pre-eminence of male discourse in that Tío Ramón, as an entity of fiction, is an unreliable narrator.

The narrative's conclusion begins as Bella and Pedro greet their guests at a party held before the ambassador returns to his country for good. For the occasion, Bella has invited political refugees seeking safe haven in Pedro's embassy. When the party is interrupted by government authorities, Bella is shot and the story ends in anti-climax as the protagonist falls in slow-motion to the ground. At this point, Pedro, too weak to hold her, follows her descent and begins to narrate Bella's life story in the manner described above. Thus, in perfect circularity, the reader is returned to the opening situation and setting--Bella's story narrated amid a party atmosphere. The anticlimactic structure of the conclusion together with the story's circular form reflect Valenzuela's concern that the reactions of the oppressed must be authentic. As Bella's roles during

her lifetime were created by others, so in death she becomes yet another fictitious creation.

In closing, it is important to note two aspects of "Cuarta versión" in regard to its relationship to other works of similar intention. On the one hand, it can be suggested that as a "self-aware" narrative it attempts to solve the Post-Boom's problem of getting back to Spanish American referentiality without giving up the Boom's stress on the fictionality of every attempt to describe reality. Secondly, in a very Post-Boom way it links together love and political activism, thus reversing the Boom's tendency to deny love a serious role. Valenzuela's perspective concerning love and political involvement is very different, however, from that of Isabel Allende; whereas Valenzuela alerts us to the dangers of confusing erotic and political desire, Allende, in her earlier novels, perceives love to be a dynamic force which propels people into the political arena.

"La palabra asesino"

"La palabra asesino" describes the relationship between the female protagonist "ella" and the murderer to whom she is attracted. Valenzuela characteristically presents an oppressor-victim relationship; in this instance she focuses her attention upon the attraction that agents of oppression hold for us. The story has been the subject of several critical studies. Barbara Pauler Fulks, in 1988, identifies its theme as "the quest for self-knowledge or identity situated in language for a gendered subject" (180). In that same year, Sharon Magnarelli includes an analysis of the narrative in Reflections/Refractions; Reading Luisa Valenzuela. Magnarelli's study likewise concentrates on the story's language as she investigates "the degree to which we assume the structures which surround us in spite of how prejudicial they may be to us"(195). In his forthcoming article, "The Narrative Strategy of 'La palabra asesino'", Donald L. Shaw looks at the tale in terms of its narrative strategy and calls in question Fulk's feminist reading. Our

intention here is to focus upon Valenzuela's narrative technique as it pertains to her presentation of a self-aware protagonist and to its ideological commentary that suggests a connection between eroticism and victimization.

"La palabra asesino" is divided into nine subsections, the first three of which comprise its exposition. Valenzuela opens the story with a prefiguration of its theme--a quest for identity--by failing to articulate the protagonist's name, thereby requiring the reader to undertake a search for unknown data. Immediately following the narrative's first word, "Ella," the theme is clearly stated: "... merodea por la vida en busca de una respuesta" (67). Next, the protagonist is introduced, and her considerable self-awareness is made apparent. Shaw points out that she is presented "exclusively in terms of her mind-set," and that the vocabulary in the initial paragraph establishes her as extremely analytical and mindful of the possibility that her search for an answer may bring about painful consequences (2). A consideration of the nature of desire follows the first paragraph's description of "ella's " intellectual

curiosity. It could be argued that Valenzuela's juxtaposition of curiosity and desire indicate a link between the two.

The second segment of exposition introduces the assassin who is the object of "ella's" desire and describes the early stages of their affair. As the murderer's troubled past is revealed along with the protagonist's continued attraction to him in spite of his revelation, we are reminded of Valenzuela's remark to Marie-Lise Gazarian Gautier concerning the dark side of human nature: "The deep unspeakable thing is what you don't dare say, because it is your own dark side relating to other dark sides" (316). In this section, a description of "ella" and her lover can be related to the author's preceding remark. Here, the couple gaze intently into one another's eyes without speaking:

> Otras cosas también le dijo en ese primer encuentro, después de haberse mirado demasiado intensamente si nos atenemos a las normas sociales en vigencia. Ojo a ojo, un mirar hacia dentro que ambos tuvieron el coraje de sostener sin agachadas. Pero sin desafíos. Un

reconocimiento mutuo (68).

When we examine the order of topics covered thus far in the exposition--intellectual curiosity, desire, the dark part of all nature--an indication emerges as to what the story is about. In subsection three, after having entered into a sexual relationship with the murderer, "ella" abruptly leaves in order to avoid falling victim to her own desire. At this point, Valenzuela suggests a connection between eroticism and victimization when she explains that "ella" flees so as not to be swallowed by her fascination:

> Por eso acepta el encuentro y enseguida se aleja. Moción que parece pertenecer al dominio masculino: fascinarse por un cuerpo y salir corriendo antes de que la fascinación ejerza sus presiones. Todas de ella, estas sensaciones, femeninas por lo tanto y por eso ella, quizá para que la fascinación no se la trague, emprende un viaje en pos de otros horizontes (68).

It might be suggested, however, that the author is not telling us to exclude erotic desire from our lives, but rather warning that desire can easily slip into an oppressive

structure.[8] The exposition closes as "Ella" withdraws in order to intellectualize her feelings for the assassin, followed by the narrator's warning that the protagonist's efforts to account for her lover's behavior are doomed.

The forces in conflict within "La palabra asesino" are not those of "ella" versus her murderous lover, as we might first expect. Instead, Valenzuela situates the struggle within the psyche of the story's protagonist; one force is represented by her desire to explain that aspect of her lover which allows him to kill; the other, by an underlying necessity to admit that she has fallen in love with a cold-blooded murderer. The selection and distribution of episodes within "La palabra asesino" portray "ella's" efforts to comprehend her confused relationship with an assassin. The story's pivotal moment occurs half-way through the narrative, at the center of subsection five, the story's longest. As Shaw notes, the protagonist at this point asks herself the key question: "¿Cambia ahora la belleza cuando la belleza ha andado por ahí destruyendo la perfección de los otros?"(74). In contrast to the development of works treated in previous

chapters of this study, episodes within "La palabra asesino" do not depict an entire process of oppression, but instead focus on those moments when erotic desire, at times intertwined with oppressive desire, assumes the pattern of the latter.

The shape of "La Palabra asesino" is symmetrical around its pivotal moment: episodes of the story's first half prepare for the revelation that "ella's" lover is an assassin, while those of the second half present her contradictory responses to it, concluding as she acknowledges her love for the murderer. The protagonist's first reaction is an effort to distance herself from the horror of her discovery by searching for a moral justification for the killings. Her second is to defamiliarize the murders by considering them in terms of the destruction of beauty rather than life. Two key episodes separate "ella's" attempts to distance herself from the murders. The first is a reference to Somocista children who had been trained to rape and torture. These children accepted their surrounding violent culture as the norm. If this example is applied to "ella's" situation, we perceive the

possibility of her becoming reconciled to her lover's oppressive behavior. The reference to Nicaraguan children is in turn followed by paragraphs that relate the assassin's interior self. Valenzuela's concern regarding the necessity for authentic response is addressed when the protagonist cautions her lover not to try to understand himself through her. Given that at this point "ella" is still seeking herself through contact with him, the irony of her remark underscores the author's call for authentic response. Via these episodes Valenzuela again accentuates that we are vulnerable to oppression because of the relative ease with which we absorb our environment and its structures. In addition to addressing authorial concerns, these paragraphs also resolve the problem of sustaining a constant tempo in a psychological study; Shaw observes that they separate the protagonist's successive responses one from another "so as to create the impression of an unhurried psychological evolution (9)."

The story's conclusion--"ella's" recognition that she loves an assassin--is prepared in stages. First, as the protagonist pursues a process of self-analysis she

acknowledges the word asesino internally, as yet unable to utter it aloud. Next, self-interrogations on her part concerning why she is attracted to the killer reveal that she, too, possesses a dark side. When we learn that perhaps she loves him because he is a murderer we realize that she, likewise, is tempted by violence: "Al asesino ella lo quiere y lo que es peor quizá también por asesino lo quiere, ahora. ...A partir de esta noche ¿quién podrá restituirla esta intensidad provocada no tanto por el amor como la inminencia del desastre (78)." "Ella" gains further insight into her attraction to cruelty and violence when marks on her lover's back reveal to her a repressed sadism in herself:

> En la noche de marras, de amarras, ella le descubrió al llegar a la cama esas estrías profundas en la espalda radiante. Las relegó al olvido al poco rato, cuando comprendió que no eran las marcas de un látigo en rituales sádicos como había temido sino simples impresiones de arrugas de la funda de sofá. El íntimo terror y desagrado ante esas marcas que al principio parecían inconfesables, el posterior alivio, ahora la

> recuperación de esa sospecha para preguntarse por qué él despertaba siempre en ella las asociaciones más inquietadoras (80).

In addition, "ella's" masochistic pleasure in her situation is highlighted by the juxtaposition of her description of fantasies concerning torture techniques learned by her lover when he was in Vietnam with her admission of the pleasure that he brings her in bed. In the latter paragraph, "ella" depicts herself as assuming positions identical to those of the victims in her fantasies, thus establishing a link between the two sections of text, and by extension between violence and erotic pleasure. The narrative's climax occurs when "ella" finally ceases to repress the conscious realization that she is in love with a murderer and screams out, "asesino" (83). Surely this is the answer to her earlier posed question: "¿Cuál será el movimiento que libera" (82)? By ending the story in the above manner and at its climax, Valenzuela emphasizes one final time the importance of externalizing the multiple structures of desire and examining their link to oppression.

Before closing, a brief consideration of the narrative's relation to the other stories in Cambio de armas and to works of similar intent written by other Spanish American authors is merited. When compared to the various protagonists presented in Cambio de armas, we see "ella" as a woman who has awakened from lethargy to subsequently achieve a considerable degree of self-sufficiency. Via her open acknowledgement of love for an assassin she becomes an active agent who is far more capable than Bella ("Cuarta versión") of controlling her destiny. Valenzuela's commentary, placed throughout "ella's" self-interrogations, that we must avoid accepting the violence of a culture as normal is reminiscent of a point the author depicts in other victim-oppressor relationships when victims believe the misinformation relayed by their oppressors. Interestingly, "Ella's" lover marks a point of departure for Valenzuela in that he too is self-reflective, and thereby lends the story universal significance. It is precisely this element of the story's structure that leads Shaw to question Barbara Fulk's argument

that the narrative's quest for knowledge is related exclusively to its female protagonist.

A relationship between "La palabra asesino" and works written by other Spanish American authors is perceived as "ella" explores her situation. First, Valenzuela's focalization on the dark side of nature is similar to that of Sábato in El Túnel and in Sobre héroes y tumbas. Secondly, the contiguousness of contrasing mind-sets that occurs as a result of "ella's" attraction to a murderer suggests the juxtaposition of different levels of consciousness present throughout Cortázar's works. Whereas liberation is achieved in Cortázar's works via transgression, Valenzuela insists that the protagonist of "La palabra asesino" look inward in order to free herself. In as much as "ella" is forced during her process of self-reflection to acknowledge the antagonist's mind-set as well as her own, it might be suggested that Valenzuela's plurality is more extensive than Cortázar's and thus allows for greater flexibility in regard to the attainment of truth.[9] In this aspect, her vision

could be perceived as more hopeful. "La palabra asesino" also brings to mind Borges' "Emma Zunz" where a <u>situación límite</u> is examined so as to indicate the protagonist's growing self-awareness.

In conclusion, "La palabra asesino" is a paramount example of Luisa Valenzuela's concern over the problematics of desire. As she exposes our obscure relationship with oppression, she characteristically charges us not to adopt the structures of the repressive reality surrounding us, but rather to turn inward in order to bring to consciousness elements that preclude our autonomous behavior. The story's ending is open in that we never learn whether "ella's" relationship with her lover survives. What closes the story on a satisfying and positive note is that the protagonist manages to externalize the root of her oppression in order to view her situation more realistically.

"Ceremonias de rechazo"

To date, "Ceremonias de rechazo" has been treated solely by Sharon Magnarelli in <u>Reflections/Refractions; Reading</u>

Valenzuela. In this brief yet illuminating analysis, Magnarelli notes that the protagonist has "internalized the external" and views the story as an "exorcism to eliminate the masks she wears, to re-create or discover 'una cara nueva, dichosa' [96]" (196). The intention of our investigation is to expand on Magnarelli's commentary by considering the story in relation to its narrative strategy, particularly with respect to Valenzuela's technique of representing at a formal level the several stages of the protagonist's search for identity.

"Ceremonias de rechazo" underscores Valenzuela's call for reaction against repression. As Amanda, the story's protagonist, endeavors to free herself psychologically from her lover, el Coyote, by means of ritualistic ceremonies, we as readers see her pass from a pliable and lethargic state to a more self-aware and active one. The tale's monolinear plot is divided into four sections, each of which represents a stage in the protagonist's evolution. The exposition, Part I, begins with a protagonist who waits, like Clara of Hay que sonreír. What is important is that Valenzuela privileges

announcement of theme first by equating the act of waiting with death and then by dramatizing Amanda's awakening consciousness: "Siendo el esperar sentada la forma más muerta de la espera muerta, siendo el esperar la forma estimulante de muerte..." (87)/"...Amanda logra por fin arrancarse de la espera quieta y pone su ansiedad en movimiento " (87). In Parts II and III, we build our understanding of the protagonist by following the process through which she endeavors to free herself from the dependence and subordination on which her relationship with the Coyote is based. As the narrative's conclusion, Part IV, will show, its protagonist not only awakens, as was the case in "La palabra asesino," but in addition, she achieves the highest degree of autonomy as yet manifested by the collection's female characters.

As mentioned above, the story's opening announces its theme by first warning of the inherent dangers of passive behavior and then juxtaposing the protagonist's motion (i.e. action) as an antidote to passiveness. Next, Valenzuela begins to explore Amanda's situation, and after presenting

her as waiting, the author reveals that Amanda shares "ella's" ("La palabra asesino") fascination with oppression and its agents: "Para la buena causa, dice él, mientras los amigos le soplan a Amanda, Cuidado, puede ser un delator, puede ser cana, y Amanda a veces le huele la traición en un abrazo y no por eso rechaza el tal abrazo, quizá todo lo contrario "(88). Here again Valenzuela suggests a link between victimization and erotic pleasure.

While the initial paragraph establishes the protagonist as a character who is beginning a process of awakening, personal information is witheld--her age, social position, physical appearance. Instead, the exposition concentrates reader attention on el Coyote's behavior, specifically on his failure to return when promised, and Amanda's reaction to it. Valenzuela's manner of introducing the progagonist is fitting, given that at this point the latter views herself as an object to be possessed, rather than the subject of an existence: "Discá de una buena vez los números que sepan abrir las puertas para ir a jugar. Jugar conmigo, bolastristes, escondidas a las que se te da por jugar con

demasiada frecuencia" (89). Amanda manages in Part I to drag herself from passively awaiting el Coyote's return; however, at this point she does not attempt to either change or break off their oppressive relationship. Instead, she performs a ritualistic ceremony for the purpose of hastening his return, at the close of which, Valenzuela utilizes imagery of lights and jewels to represent el Coyote's broken promises that frequently deceive the credulous protagonist: "Es decir que de nuevo Amanda chupada por el vórtice de las promesas incumplidas, esas deslumbrantes alhajas que el Coyote traza en el aire y que poco después se diluyen como luces de Bengala" (90). This technique is reminiscent of that used in Hay que sonreír for the purpose of indicating deception carried out by Clara's lovers.

The exposition closes with a paragraph that suggests the narrative's future direction; Valenzuela follows the sentence above cited with Amanda's recognition that the ritual of candles, wax, and fire has not only failed to produce the desired result, but smeared her tile floor as well. In other words, her efforts to continue a relationship with el Coyote

are futile and destructive:

> Y para eso ella ha encendido las velas, maldito sea, para invocar más luces de Bengala, más fuegitos artificiales, maldito sea, y el pentáculo embadurnando el buen piso de baldosas en procura de algo que durará lo que duran estos mismos hechizos porque Amanda ya les está zapateando encima, apagando las velas, conteniendo apenas las ganas de darle una buena patada al teléfono para mandarlo bien lejos, donde se merece (90).

The act of extinguishing candles ironically initiates a process, described in sections II and III, through which Amanda deepens her own self-awareness. After she is depicted in the exposition as passing through degrees of self-determination already experienced by the collection's earlier protagonists, the body of the tale (Parts II and III) charts the remainder of her struggle for autonomy.

Valenzuela divides the process into two stages. The first concerns Amanda's decision to leave el Coyote. The author justifies her protagonist's choice by presenting instances of her subjection to a system of repression

resulting from her association with him. Like many of Valenzuela's heroines, Amanda has to bear with the conflict between the speech and the action of her boyfriend and, as a consequence, allows herself to be silenced.[10] For instance, when el Coyote reappears after an unexplained absence, his caresses are followed by verbalized reprimands and a gaze which is "impenetrable, hermética, con la mirada fuera de la órbita de Amanda" (91). As might be expected, the effect on Amanda of this treatment is that she concentrates solely on his embrace and thus decides to forgive his disappearance: "Pero Amanda ya ha decidido perdonar, una vez más gracias al simple milagro de un abrazo ha decidido perdonar y no provocarlo demasiado al coyotesco Coyote" (91). El Coyote succeeds in isolating and finally silencing Amanda when he either evades or offers incomplete responses to all of her questions concerning his whereabouts, activities and intentions. Once again he mixes caresses with language that is intended to silence, and Valenzuela notes that Amanda continues to miss the inconsistency of her boyfriend's words and actions:

> Amanda trata de indagar algo sobre el Coyote, quiere una reiteración de sus promesas, quiere aclaraciones--después de tantos meses de estar junto--sobre su vida y obra, quiere saber más sobre la organización a la que él sólo alude de pasada y pretende--sobretodo--compartir sus inquietudes y al que él domina sus peligros. Y el Coyote como de costumbre responde con frases truncas, se distrae en el camino, cambia de tema, insinúa, entrega y quita sin dejarse ir por ningún resquicio de palabras. Trasmitiendo eso sí atravéz de sus dedos todos los mensajes que Amanda quiere recibir y recibe sin preocuparse si allá en las remotas regiones cerebrales, los mensajes que parecen tan sabios en la piel pierden toda consistencia (92).

The third time that Amanda experiences el Coyote's silencing tactics she is less vulnerable. Finally she reacts with anger when the Coyote breaks his promise to return home with her after dining at a Chinese restaurant. During this

episode he attributes his erratic behavior to political problems, but Amanda is resolute in the face of his argument, and turns to leave. Valenzuela, however, does not portray the protagonist as seizing the initiative from this point on; on the contrary, after Amanda has left el Coyote and walked for a short distance, she circles the block with the intent of making-up. Her anger completely subsides when she encounters him, at which point he walks directly into a flower shop and buys her a red rose to ensure her forgiveness. The story's pivotal point occurs at the juxtaposition of el Coyote's presentation of the rose to Amanda with the latter's reaction of a chaste kiss followed by a shout of farewell--"Adiós (para siempre)" (94). Significantly, it occurs exactly mid-way through the narration, and the protagonist's fortunes rise continually thereafter. The various stages through which Amanda passes before she finally leaves el Coyote suggest that self-awareness is achieved by degrees rather than by a single step across a boundary line.

As in the case of "Palabra asesino," "Ceremonias de

rechazo" is symmetrical around its pivotal point, and the second half of the story deals with Amanda's recovery of autonomous behavior. From the pivotal moment on, rites of exorcism postpone the success of the protagonist's project. Part III, the second part of Amanda's process of self-awareness, deals with her eliminating the false identities assumed during her relationship with el Coyote. In this regard, it is important to note that the concessions Amanda makes to el Coyote in Parts I and II are frequently followed by reference to her supressed emotions. For example, we might consider the protagonist's true feelings concerning her lover's unexplained disappearance:

> Dejar que los acontecimientos según su curso natural aunque la naturaleza de ella a veces se encabrite y se rebele. Hay caballos sueltos dentro de la naturaleza de Amanda y no todos han sido domados. Pero en presencia del Coyote los potros suelen no manifestarse, los potros aparecerán después cuando él haya partido (91).

Section III, itself, is subdivided thus reinforcing the claim that self-knowledge is achieved by degrees. The first

stage involves the use of two beauty masks; the first, which proves unsuccessful, is intended to erase the loneliness from Amanda's face, the second is an application of colored cold creams for the purpose of creating joyful features on her face. The second subdivision of Part III is a bath of purification during which the protagonist hopes to cleanse herself both of el Coyote and the person that she has become as a result of their relationship. As Magnarelli points out, Amanda wishes "to cleanse herself of the being created by her desire for el Coyote" (197).

What yet remains to be achieved in the protagonist's project of self-discovery is the subject of the story's conclusion. Here Valenzuela is not concerned with Amanda's freeing herself from el Coyote's influence, but instead with the person that she will become thereafter. The first stage of the concluding process is when Amanda throws the rose given to her by el Coyote into the water. For the occasion she dresses in white and is compared both to Dante's Beatriz and a nurse: "A las tres cuadras descubre: toda de blanco vestida, como en el soneto del Dante, pero no tanto la

suspirada Beatriz, no, más bien con pinta de enfermera" (99). Both comparisons are fitting at this point given that by performing this simple ritual she hopes to both shed inauthentic behaviors adapted so as to conform to the Coyote's idealization of her and to heal herself:

> -Ma sí. Si lo que quiero es curarme.
>
> Curarme, ojo, no emponzoñarme, no pincharme con espina de rosa como establece la romántica tradición decimónica, no sucumbir a la trampa literaria más de lo necesario, más de lo que una ya sucumbe por el hecho por demás literario de estar viva (99).

By throwing el Coyote's rose into the river Amanda clearly intends to mark the end of her existence as another's creation. Valenzuela's choice of a rose is likewise appropriate in that a single rose is a symbol of completion (Cirlot 263) and of the dawn (Perez-Rioja 374); when the protagonist throws the rose into the water we witness the completion of one cycle--Amanda as a creation of el Coyote--and the beginning of another--a more self-aware Amanda.

The second stage of the conclusion depicts the

protagonist's first autonomous action and testifies to the success of her search for identity. Here she introduces her own plant into a terrace garden which had been cultivated solely by el Coyote. The story ends on an exhuberant note as she stands singing and spraying herself with a hose purchased and installed by her lover. Magnarelli observes that this scene indicates that the protagonist has taken back the liquids el Coyote has stolen from her (197). We should note, nevertheless, that although Amanda has achieved a marked degree of autonomy, her process of self-discovery is not yet completed since she remains indirectly dependent upon her lover for the source of her rejuvenation, the above mentioned water hose.

In closing, we might ask at what point can we say that the protagonist has completed her project of self-discovery. The story's final scene, described above, supplies the answer to our question: a process of self-discovery is on-going and thus never ending. While levels of relative self-awareness are attained, a call for proceeding further is always indicated. Valenzuela's technique of dividing the body and

conclusion of the narrative into stages that represent Amanda's search for identity reflect this postulate at a formal level.

"De noche soy tu caballo"

"De noche soy tu caballo" also presents a love relationship in which a female protagonist falls victim to oppression as a result of an affair with a political activist. In this instance, the confusion over erotic and oppressive desire is implicit in the conflicting interpretations offered by the protagonist and her lover for the words of the narrative's title, also the title of a Brazilian love song.

Victimization as a consequence of the problematics of desire is this monolinear narrative's theme. Its plot, which relates the unnamed protagonist's romantic encounter with her lover Beto, and the former's ensuing imprisonment, can be divided into three principal sections: 1) Beto's visit, 2) the protagonist's arrest and interrogation by the police, and 3) her escape into fantasy for the purpose of

protecting both herself and Beto. In the opening of "De noche soy tu caballo," Valenzuela once again presents us with a protagonist who has been waiting. In this case, we are told that she has lost contact with her boyfriend who is assumed to be either fighting, hiding or dead. The author's opening strategy is to create suspense--reader attention is immediately grasped in the first sentence by a doorbell ring that serves as a secret code, followed by the unexpected appearance of the protagonist's boyfriend:

> Sonaron tres timbrazos cortos y uno largo. Era la señal, y me levanté con disgusto y con un poco de miedo; podían ser ellos o no ser, podría tratarse de una trampa, a estas malditas horas de la noche. Abrí la puerta esperando cualquier cosa menos encontrarme cara a cara nada menos que con él, finalmente (105).

Thereafter Valenzuela privileges announcement of theme, using for the purpose introductions to the central figure and her boyfriend in terms of their respective mind sets. Here it is intimated that Beto views his relationship with the protagonist as primarily physical, whereas she, on the other

hand, is involved at an emotional level:

> Después me tomó en sus brazos sin decir una palabra, sin siquiera apretarme demasiado pero dejando que toda la emoción del reencuentro se le desbordara, diciéndome tantas cosas con el simple hecho de tenerme apretada entre sus brazos y de irme besando lentamente. Creo que nunca les había tenido demasiada confianza a las palabras y allí estaba tan silencioso como siempre, transmitiéndome cosas en formas de caricias (105).

and,

> Y pude decirle Hola casi sin sorpresa a pesar de todos esos meses sin saber nada de él, pude decirle
> te hacía peleando en el norte
> te hacía preso
> te hacía en la clandestinidad
> te hacía torturado y muerto
> te hacía teorizando revolución en otro país.
> Una forma como cualquiera de decirle que lo hacía, que no había dejado de pensar en él ni me había sentido traicionada. Y él, tan endemoniadamente precavido

siempre, tan señor de sus actos...(106).

The exposition, then, presents the tale as a conflict of viewpoints, and the method to be employed is that of developing each position so as to shed light upon the role of systematic repression with respect to the victim's confusion of political and erotic (i.e. mutual) desire. The oppressive environment in which the central character finds herself is familiar. Like many of Valenzuela's protagonists, she is isolated within a confining space--at this point, her bedroom, with guards at the door. She is subsequently silenced by her boyfriend who refuses to respond to her questions regarding his absence, claiming that she is safer not knowing: "Cállate, chiquita ¿de qué te sirve saber en qué anduve? Ni siquiera te conviene" (106). After various unsuccessful attempts to uncover the motive for Beto's disappearance, the protagonist accepts that she is better off ignorant of his activities and thus ceases her interrogation. It can be argued that her perception of reality is distorted as a result of her unawareness.

The story's pivotal moment arrives at the close of

section one, its physical center. At this point, Beto plays a recording of "De noche soy tu caballo." Significantly, the rather abstract psychogical commentary of the exposition is concretized when Valenzuela applies it to a specific situation: the female character and Beto interpret the song's title according to each partners individual perception of their love affair. First, the protagonist explains its significance emotionally and psychologically, suggesting a spiritual link with her lover, as also noted by Magnarelli (198): "Es un canto de santo, como en la macumba. Una persona en trance dice que es el caballo del espíritu que la posee, es su montura (107). Beto's explanation, however, is clearly physiological: "si de noche sos mi caballo es porque yo te monto, así, y así, y solo de eso se trata" (107). Valenzuela's selection of an oneiric horse reinforces the dual interpretations of the title, bearing in mind that it represents both the libido and creative psychic energy (Perez-Rioja 104).

The protagonist's victimization at the hands of government officials immediately follows her reunion with

Beto. What stands out is the similarity of the experiences. As we shall see, the same process of repression revealed in the erotic love relationship now repeats itself at the political level. First, the central character's perception of reality is distorted by the government's false claim that Beto has been murdered. Next, she is sequestered within a jail cell, and when her answers to official queries concerning her lover's disappearance prove unacceptable, she is silenced. As is the case in several of Valenzuela's works, a moment arrives when the protagonist might escape; however, due to her confused state resulting from the repressive tactics of both her boyfriend and government authorities, she hesitates and thus seals her fate as a victim. The central character might have escaped following the call informing her of Beto's death. At this point she realizes that she has been duped into admitting that she has recently seen her lover; but rather than fleeing she stands motionless and waits to be aprehended: "¿Diez, quince minutos? ¿Cuánto tiempo me habré quedado mirando el teléfono como estúpida hasta que cayó la policía? No me la esperaba

pero claro, sí ¿cómo podía no esperármela?"(108). Valenzuela's technique of introducing via a ringing phone the section of narrative treating the protagonist's arrest prompts us to recall the ringing doorbell that announces Beto's visit at the story's opening. It might be suggested that here the author utilizes parallelism so as to imply at a formal level a relationship between erotic relationships and patriarchal sociopolitical structures.

As "De noche soy tu caballo" nears its end, the protagonist begins to confuse reality and dream, decreeing that her rendezvous with Beto was the product of her imagination: "Mi sueño de la noche anterior en el que Beto estaba allí conmigo y nos amábamos. Lo había soñado, soñado todo, estaba profundamente convencida de haberlo soñado con lujo de detalles y hasta en colores "(108). Magnarelli suggests that the female character's motive for escaping into the world of dreams is twofold: 1) to shield herself from the terror of her surrounding reality and 2) to protect Beto from the police who are interested only in tangible facts ("Signifying Desire..." 198). As the protagonist describes

the various methods of torture to which she is being subjected, we are reminded of an interview during which Valenzuela speaks of the high price to be paid for a Freudian type negation in which one refuses to acknowledge an unpleasant reality in order to avoid the pain of confronting it. We do not wish to suggest that the author faults the central character for escaping into fantasy so as to survive sessions of torture, but rather, her message is that an earlier and more accurate assessment by the protagonist concerning her relationship with Beto might have saved her. The swift and steady decline of the central character's fortunes following the pivotal moment serves to magnify the urgency of this message.

If we consider the narrative's central character in relation to the other protagonists in the collection, it might be argued that her situation is the most tragic presented thus far, given that she is doomed not only by her failure to perceive the true nature of Beto's feelings, but through the courage of action of her decision to protect him, as well. Moreover, this tragic impulse is underscored when

Valenzuela frames the protagonist's dignity and courage in the face of defeat on the one hand with her acknowledgement that she has been abandoned by Beto and on the other with her decision to protect him by willing him out of existence and into the world of her dreams:

> Hace meses que no sé nada de él, lo perdí, me abandonó, no sé nada de él desde hace meses, se me escapó, se metió bajo la tierra, qué sé yo, se fue con otra, está en otro país, qué sé yo, me abandonó, lo odio, no sé nada. (Y quémenme no más con cigarillos, y patéenme todo lo que quieran, y amenacen, no más, y métanme un ratón para que me coma por dentro, y arránquenme las uñas y hagan lo que quieran. ¿Voy a inventar por eso? ¿Voy a decirles que estuvo acá cuando hace mil años que se me fue para siempre?
>
> No voy a andar contándoles mis sueños, ¿eso qué importa? Al llamado Beto hace más de seis meses que no lo veo, y yo lo amaba. Desapareció, el hombre. Sólo me encuentro con él en sueños y son muy malos sueños que suelen transformarse en pesadillas (109).

"De noche soy tu caballo" is also important for the manner in which its realistic style is offset by the introduction of fantasy. Valenzuela's use of elipses at the close of the tale's pivotal episode and at the beginning of the next segment, which narrates the phone call alleging that the protagonist's lover has been murdered, causes the reader to momentarily question reality as s/he knows it and to entertain the possibility that Beto's visit was a supernatural event. During this brief interlude, it might be suggested that the reader enters the realm of the fantastic as described by Todorov in The Fantasic. In agreement with Todorov's definition of the fantastic, we as readers hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of Beto's visit and reject the conclusion that the event should be taken in an allegorical or poetic/representative sense. One of the functions of the second half of the story is to return the reader to reality as s/he knows it. Valenzuela accomplishes this task in two stages. First, she suggests that when the central character claims her lover's return to have been only a life-like dream it is because she was the

victim of an illusion of the senses, thus situating the event within the uncanny. This argument, as we have mentioned, is adopted as a means of protection from the authorities. Thereafter, the reader is set down amid the protagonist's frightening reality which is now controlled by torturers. At this point she recognizes that Beto has abandoned her and that the punishment destined for him will now fall on her. The horror underlying this truth is emphasized when she decrees her intent to will out of existence the bottle of rum and the Gal Costa record lying in her apartment, both offering testimony to her lover's visit. As Magnarelli points out, the protagonist needs to confuse reality and dream once she is imprisoned (199); thus the admission that she has been forsaken by Beto occurs within the context of her claim that his visit was the product of her imagination. Valenzuela's technique of temporarily subverting reality from within the narrative's realistic structure might seem similar to techniques used by Cortázar. One important difference, however, should be noted; in "De noche soy tu caballo" there is no search undertaken for transcendence.

Instead, Valenzuela returns the reader to daily reality so as to seek solutions relevant to the problems facing modern society. Oddly enough, in this sense the narrative can be said to be intranscendent, this being one of a rather long list of Post-Boom characteristics provided by Antonio Skármeta in his essay "Tendencias en la más nueva narrativa hispanoamericana".

In concluding, it might be argued that "De noche soy tu caballo" also attempts to solve the Post-Boom's problem of returning to a more realistic fiction following the critique to which realism was subjected by Boom writers. Valenzuela's introduction of the fantastic and the uncanny into an otherwise realistic style addresses the Boom's criticism of our ability to perceive reality and carries her technique beyond old-style realism. Moreover, the author sets out to resolve Boom writers'doubts regarding language's ability to express daily reality when she structures the pivotal moment around the characters' conflicting interpretations of the narrative's title.

"Cambio de armas"

"Cambio de armas " describes an apparent love relationship between its protagonist Laura and a military man. As we subsequently discover, the central character is a terrorist who has earlier attempted to assassinate the man with whom she presently lives. The story has been discussed in some detail with regard to its language by Marta Morello-Frosch, Sharon Magnarelli, and Debra Castillo. Our intention here is to concentrate upon its narrative strategy, especially with respect to the evolution of the its protagonist. As we shall see, the central character of "Cambio de armas" manages, via the recovery of memories, to both interrupt and emerge from the systematic oppression to which she has been subjected, thus making her the collection's most decisive protagonist.

What we first notice about the opening of "Cambio de armas" is that Valenzuela again privileges the theme of <u>una búsqueda</u>; immediately we are told that the protagonist has undertaken a search at the level of language in order to find

the appropriate words for several referents that she wishes to express: "Lo que sí la tiene bastante preocupada es el otro, esa capacidad suya para aplicarle el nombre exacto a cada cosa y recibir una taza de té cuando dice quiero... "(105). Further descriptions within the initial paragraph, such as "desnuda de recuerdos" and "vive en cero absoluto," establish her as an individual who has lost her memory of lived experience as well as her ability to use language. Significantly, a fear of her own desire lurks behind the protagonist's curiosity concerning words and their referents: "... (y ese quiero también la desconcierta, ese acto de voluntad) cuando dice quiero una taza de té " (113).[11]

After introducing the story's theme and protagonist, the exposition then depicts a victim-oppressor sequence that is similar to those present in many of Valenzuela's other works. First, we learn that the seemingly innocuous apartment in which the protagonist lives is in reality a prison since she is locked inside and thus completely isolated from the outside world. Having been stripped of memories and the ability to use language, her mind is reduced to its

hypothetical primary blank state. Her captor-husband is also introduced, and like other antagonists in Valenzuela's stories, his actions are conflicting. For example, he strokes Laura's shoulders and arms in an effort to calm her even though he is her jailer and the primary source of her traumatized state. It is important to note that Laura has already been subjected to an advanced stage of systematic oppression and mind control at the narrative's beginning. Testimony to the effectiveness of the process is that she cannot bring herself to try the keys that might free her, although they are within her reach. It has been remarked by Morello-Frosch that the keys are a trick set (83); however, at this point it is impossible to be certain. We might suggest a more significant fact to be that Laura's perception of reality has become so distorted as a consequence of her treatment at the hands of her captor that she passively awaits his return and the prospect of further abuse, rather than attempting an escape. Valenzuela's juxtaposition at the close of the exposition of a reference regarding pain suffered by the protagonist and her husband's concern that

subconscious. As we might expect, these asociations operate in an unusual manner given that their referents are lived experiences stored within the subconscious. Valenzuela's technique here is to establish a pattern whereby objects encountered by the protagonist in her daily life provoke her recollection of several instances when she was tortured, notwithstanding that she has been drugged so to forget them. First, a wedding photograph in which the central character's empty gaze is in marked contrast to her husband's triumphant expression leads her to suspect that his oppressive embraces are prompted by hate rather than affection:

> Pero intuye que las asperezas existen sobre todo cuando él (¿Juan, Martín, Ricardo, Hugo?) la aprieta demasiado fuerte, más un estrujón de odio que un abrazo de amor o al menos de deseo, y ella sospecha que hay algo detrás de todo eso pero la sospecha no es siquiera un pensamiento elaborado, sólo un detalle que se le cruza por la cabeza y después nada (117).

Next, a wardrobe mirror reveals a scar on the protagonist's back. As a result, she recalls the word <u>azotada</u> which in

turn provokes a physical reaction on her part, suggesting that in the past she has been the victim of physical abuse:

> Una cicatriz espesa, muy notable al tacto, como fresca aunque ya esté bien cerrada y no le duela. ¿Cómo habrá llegado ese costurón a esa espalda que parece haber sufrido tanto? Una espalda azotada. Y la palabra azotada, que tan lindo suena si no se le analiza, le da piel de gallina (119).

A memory from her recent past concerning a plant iniates a series of recollections, one of which is a conversation between her husband and Martina, during which it is revealed that the protagonist is being drugged in order to forget her past:

> -¿Y para qué querrá una planta?
>
> -Vaya una a saber. Para regarla, para verla crecer. Quizá extrañe el campo.
>
> -No me gusta que extrañe nada, no le hace bien. ¿Tomó todos los medicamentos? Tampoco tiene por qué estar pensando en el campo...(121).

Mirrors in which Laura is forced to view herself and her male

captor during his sadistic acts of possession yield up images that allude to earlier experiences when she was tortured by him. Laura, however, is as yet unable to reconstruct the events in the form of specific memories: "¡Abrí los ojos, puta! y es como si la destrozara, como si la mordiera por dentro--quizá la mordió--ese grito como si él le estuviera retorciendo el brazo hasta rompérselo, como si le estuviera pateando la cabeza...(123).

As the narrative's pivotal moment approaches, a door knob which the protagonist's captor carries in his pocket is associated first with "un arma para apretar en el puño y pegar la trombada"(124), and later with "un arma por la calle, una bomba de tiempo, él caminando por la calle cuando explota la bomba de tiempo que lo estaba esperando" (125). Here we see that Laura is not only approaching the recollection of specific incidences of torture, but she is on the verge of remembering the act of terrorism which lead to her capture. The pivotal moment arrives when visitors specifically mention to her the bomb scene that resulted in her colleague's death and her subsequent imprisonment. Here,

at the story's midpoint, she imagines that she is looking at her captor through the sight of a rifle. That he is her target is implied by the fact that he is criss-crossed by the sight. Appropriately, this episode serves not only as a reference to an event in the protagonist's past, but it foreshadows the narrative's climax as well.

Laura's reactions regarding allusions to torture become more intense from this point forward, and as a consequence she withdraws into a personal inner well so as to escape the pain she believes will accompany a discovery of the truth about her past. Ironically, this inner voyage first leads to the reservoir of the memories she is attempting to avoid, and when combined with a last minute revelation, liberates her.

Valenzuela's problem at this point is how to bring about the climax. Instead of describing a situation in which a female protagonist progresses through several stages of self-investigation until resistence breaks down and she no longer represses her problem, this narrative presents a central character who continually avoids analysis of both her present and past circumstances. For instance, when voices at close

range speak of a recent uprising, she makes no attempt to understand their message, although they bring news which bears directly upon her prisoner status:

> Algo inusitado ese timbre que no cesa, alguien que desesperadamente quiere hacerse oír y entonces él se dirige cauteloso a la puerta para ver qué pasa y ella puro nervio, toda alerta, oye las voces de los otros sin tratar de comprenderlas (140).

Likewise, she remains firm in her resolve not to stir up old memories: "A veces quisiera meter la mano en sus secretos y hurgar un poquito, pero no, nada de eso, más vale dejarlos como están: en un agua estancada de profundidad insondable" (141).

By virtue of the last minute complication of an uprising, Valenzuela brings the truth painfully forth from Laura's dark inner well. Her captor suffers a downward turn in fortune at this point, and as his final act of domination, he forces on her the truth about her captivity. Although her desire is to remain ignorant of this knowledge, the psycological pressure that has built up because of her

efforts to ignore it becomes unbearable. As a consequence, the series of references to her past suddenly acquire their appropriate meanings. Here, one final object, a revolver that was in her purse when she was arrested, returns Laura's history to her, and she recalls being apprehended and tortured until she experienced a total loss of memory. The story, however, does not end here. If it did, it would be impossible to view Laura as the collection's most aware and independent protagonist given that her self-knowledge would have been imposed by her captor, and no autonomous effort would have been exerted on her part. In the story's last paragraph, the protagonist successfully emerges from her catatonic state and awakens completely, a first for the central characters of "Cambio de armas," when she asserts herself by resuming the act which was interrupted by her arrest.

At the story's close, we perceive a similarity in the respective situations of Laura and Bella of "Cuarta versión", for both eventuallly become the product of unreliable male narrations. As we have mentioned, this occurs for Bella when

Pedro relates a version of her life previously told him by his fictitous uncle Ramón. Similarly, at the end of "Cambio de armas," Laura's captor tells her the story of her past, but appropriates it as his story about her. Regarded in this light, it can be argued that both protagonists represent variations of women created and charted by men. Debra Castillo notes that in such instances, the narrator acknowledges only attributes that are of his own creation. Valenzuela writes the following concerning this practice, "Women are on the uncharted face of the phallus, that which has not yet been named. Men are on the safe side, the 'civilized' face, where each thing and sentiment and behavior has its own name ("The Other Face" 243 ). It is noteworthy that in contrast to "Cuarta versión" in which Bella is shot by a soldier and then swoons to her death, no shot is fired within the text of "Cambio de armas". Rather, the story ends when Laura raises the weapon and takes aim. The figures of the protagonist and her captor remain frozen at the story's close and their confrontation does not end (Castillo 135). Thus, the story should be considered a call to action, and

not a utopic vision of liberation, especially since Laura has regained her past only via her captor and in his words. In order to appreciate the challenge that awaits the protagonist, and by extension women writers, in their struggle against the power of preimposed language, we return to Valenzuela's above cited essay. Here, the author's further remarks indicate her skepticism as to the possibility of faithfully relating female experience via traditional language: "Women are forced to use these names and so, finally, express men's ideologies "(243).

In the final analysis, we can say that Cambio de armas, in typical Post-Boom fashion, moves Valenzuela closer to direct political committment. Two facts, however, are noteworthy in regard to classification of the work: 1) it exhibits a sophisticated approach to language, and 2) while its story lines are less complicated than that of Cola de lagartija, it nevertheless contains technical innovations reminiscent of the Boom's tradition of experimentation. Thus, it might be suggested that the collection demonstrates on a small scale one of the problems faced by critics who

attempt to characterize the Post-Boom: how to achieve a convincing description of the movement which does justice both to its originality and to its surviving links with the immediately preceding pattern of narrative.

## Realidad nacional desde la cama

Realidad nacional desde la cama (1990), a work initially commissioned as theater but eventually published as prose, again sets forth Luisa Valenzuela's concerns of aggression and passivity. To date, the work has received very little critical attention. María Esther Vasquez' review of the novel appears in La nación of Buenos Aires, December 2 1990, and two years later Juanamaría Cordones-Cook's interview with the author in regards to Realidad nacional desde la cama as well as Novela negra con Argentinos, is published in Letras Femeninas, volume XVIII, 1992. Both Vasquez and Cordones-Cook shed light upon the novel's close relationship to drama, but given the format of their respective contributions, neither presents an in-depth analysis of the novel. Nor does Sharon Magnarelli, who in her article entitled "The Spectacle

of Reality in Luisa Valenzuela's Realidad nacional desde la cama" (1993) concentrates on the theatrical elements present within the work.

Realidad nacional desde la cama narrates the story of La Señora, a woman who has gone to a country club in order to relax, meditate and discover her reason for returning from abroad to her native country. Although she wishes to go into seclusion, the surrounding national reality of looting, inflation and subversive activity, in addition to memories of earlier years in her native land, invade her privacy. All of the action occurs in or around the protagonist's bed, hence the novel's title, Realidad nacional desde la cama. The novel's narrative structure is plurilinear; one narrative strand traces the protagonist's process of self-analysis, while another relates the ongoing conflict between the townspeople who live near the club and the local military. We can also consider the work to be biographical up to a point, given that like the protagonist, Luisa Valenzuela returned to Argentina in 1989, following ten years of self-exile. In addition, Valenzuela also had a nightmare upon

returning, and in a way which is similar to La Señora's response, was content because she had dreamed in Spanish. As Realidad nacional desde la cama develops, we once again perceive a preoccupation with abusive power and a lack of reaction to it. Here, in accordance with her call for standing up against oppression, Valenzuela underlines the impossibility of escape via isolation. While her intention in writing Cola de lagartija was to understand how the Argentine people allowed themselves to become victims of oppressive military governments, in Realidad nacional desde la cama one of her aims certainly is to alert her countrymen as to the danger of again falling victim to an oppressive regime. She already hinted of such a risk at the close of Cola de lagartija when the Caboclo del Mar observes that as one dictator falls, another is ready to replace him, there being no shortage of generals.

The plot is divided into twenty episodes all of which contain political commentary mixed with humor, in addition to Valenzuela's characteristic preoccupation with desire, eroticism, metamorphosis and power. Also, as we have

mentioned, the development of the action is frequently conceived in dramatic rather than narrative terms, thus lending the work a theatrical character. In A Poetics of Postmodernism Linda Hutcheon discusses the contemporary debate about boundaries of artistic conventions and notes that the borders between literary genres are becoming increasingly fluid (9-12). While Hutcheon's emphasis is upon the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, it might be suggested that Realidad nacional desde la cama further blurrs the distinction between art and life by transgressing the boundaries of three genres; fiction, non-fiction since the work is partially biographical, and theater.

Episodes that trace the protagonist's evolution away from passivity towards becoming a more committed individual draw attention to the process of repression to which she is subjected. Similar to principal characters in Valenzuela's other works, La Señora finds herself in seemingly innocuous surroundings that are far more threatening than they appear. Although she initially believes that she has come to a friend's suite at a country club, she later learns that the

club and grounds have been converted into a military base. Here, Valenzuela calls to mind buildings such as the school in Silvia Portnoy's The Little Schoolhouse which were transformed into jails and torture chambers during the years of military dictatorships in Argentina. It might be argued that via this technique Valenzuela warns from the outset that, regardless of outward appearances, vestiges of structures which previously fostered oppression in Argentina remain partially intact.

Once within the ambiguous atmosphere of the country club, La Señora is frustrated and confused by María, the maid, whose actions and speech toward her illustrate a pattern of conflict. For example, María insists that the protagonist leave the apartment to swim or play tennis immediately after having expressed her support of her plan to rest in bed for a few days (15). Also, Maria from time to time expresses a desire to serve the protagonist and then proceeds to do the opposite of what has been asked. This occurs frequently in regard to the opening of the bedroom curtains; when La Señora asks María to open them, the

latter's eagernes to please is followed by her refusal to meet La Señora's request (15). Such treatment is not unlike that received by Valenzuela's other protagonists at the hands of their oppressors. As the process continues, we observe María to be as adept a tricktster as El Brujo of Cola de lagartija. At one point, it is revealed that María has become involved in the military's covert effort to regain control of the town, and she takes it upon herself to prevent La Señora from discovering the maneuvers going on outside. Accordingly, she censors information coming into the protagonist's rooms by prohibiting all newspapers (14), and by monopolizing the television's remote control (16).

As a result, the protagonist's perception of reality becomes distorted; she falls into a state of symbolic passivity and aboulia expressed by the fact that she finds it increasingly difficult to get out of bed: "Ha caído en un manicomio, si tuviera fuerzas agarraría sus petates y se volvería a la ciudad. Qué lindo tener fuerzas, se acuerda la señora" (19). That she eventually covers her ears in order to avoid hearing what occurs outside (44) and asks that the

curtains remain closed so as to be isolated from the "national reality" unfolding outside her window speaks to the success of the strategy: "El viento parece haber entordado las puertas vidiera, pero la señora quisiera que le corran las cortinas que la aíslan, la protejan, la separen" (45). In addition, the protagonist is depicted as relinquishing her autonomy when she defers to others her decision to leave: "Esto es demasiado, piensa, mañana mismo me voy, si puedo, si logro componerme, si salgo de la cama, si puedo ir más allá de esta idiota escupidera que la idiota de María se ha olvidado de vaciar. Mañana mismo me voy, si puedo. Si me dejan" (44). Once again Valenzuela appears to suggest that the ambiguous relationship between victims and their oppressors is due in part to the ease with which we submit and internalize the structures that surround us, however injurious they may be. We should comment, however, that María, is not the only character to carry out repressive tactics against the protagonist; one of Major Vento's primary functions within the novel is to silence La Señora, and he does so very effectively by ignoring her presence or by using

language which reflects his contempt toward her. For example, at one point he conducts maneuvers in her room in complete disregard of her privacy (36). On other occasions he verbally silences her by forbidding her to speak; "Cállese la boca" (29).

Episodes which trace the conflict between the townspeople and the military carry forward the author's concern with regard to the problematic nature of desire. Within this narrative strand the townspeople clamor to enter the country club/military base and to that end undertake to oust their previous oppressors via covert operations. Some of the missions are carried out beneath the protagonist's bed, and others occur openly but involve espionage on the part of Doctor Alfredi, the médico/taxista. Valenzuela represents the townspeople as poor, hungry and resentful of the military's lifestyle. When we observe the former stealing food as they sneak in and out of La Señora's room, we are reminded of Los invasores, by Egon Wolff. The parallel with Wolff's play is particularly evident when an unidentified hand appearing from under the protagonist's bed

steals cookies from her plate. Like Valenzuela, Wolff is concerned to explore the relationship between oppressors and oppressed, without taking sides with the latter. Whereas Wolff emphasizes the ignobility and folly of Meyer, his factory-owning representative of the upper class, Valenzuela uses absurdist parody of military behavior and speech to descredit the army representatives. Where the real similarity between the attitudes of the two writers is made evident, however, is in their refusal to idealize the oppressed working class. Unlike Skarmeta in La insurrección or Allende in De amor y de sombra, who paint a conventionalized picture of an oppressed group who react with dignity and even heroism, both Wolff and Valenzuela present the under-class in a highly ambiguous way, avoiding any suggestion that a simple solution to social conflicts exists. We should, however, note an important difference between their works; Realidad nacional desde la cama is not a story told in the narrative frame of a dream. In contrast to Los invasores, Valenzuela's work operates within the sphere of reality, although various episodes possess an oneiric

quality. The importance of this difference should not be overlooked, for here again we see Valenzuela, in a very Post-Boom fashion, directly addressing a specific socio-political aspect of present day Latin America, yet at the same time retaining a significant tie to the Boom by virtue of an occasional use of forms of illogicality that cause us to question reality; for example, the already mentioned activity under the Señora's bed and a later episode when soldiers being viewed on the protagonist's television screen actually emerge from the set and join the crowd assembled in her bedroom.

Valenzuela portrays the military as elitist and detached from reality. Members of the military are convinced that the government has lost control of the popular uprising occuring outside their quarters; thus, amid the Señora's efforts to motivate herself to leave, and the townspeople's preparations to take over the club, they make ready to storm the town and restore peace. Characters such as a deserter and a civilian who infiltrates the country club indicate instability within the military, which in turn implies that any military threat

in regard to the townspeople's well-being is remote. Yet at the novel's close we learn that the military has left the country club in the direction of the town and will apparently encounter little resistance to their coup attempt since the townspeople at the same time have deserted the town in order to concentrate their efforts on leveling the barrier which shut them out of the club. In this final episode, Valenzuela emphasizes that transgressing barriers is not always liberating; in their zeal to enter the club, the townspeople leave their town undefended and vulnerable to military occupation and, by extension, themselves to repression since the downed wires can easily be raised so as to imprison them.

The fundamental question to be posed at this point is: to what can we attribute such reversals? Does Valenzuela suggest that Fate, the Gods, or some masochistic death wish is to blame? For an explanation it is helpful to recall her concern as to the enigmatic nature of desire. Within episodes developing the townspeople/military conflict Valenzuela continues to externalize the multiple structures of desire as well as their link to oppression. In earlier

works Valenzuela has underscored the ease with which we assume the structures that surround us and then accept them as the norm. In Realidad nacional desde la cama she goes on to suggest that these same structures at times dictate our desires. Such being the case, it might be argued that decades of oppressive military regimes still bear upon the townspeople's conduct, and that consequently the latter's eagerness to retake the country club is driven by the military's presence there as opposed to genuine desire or any intrinsic value of the club. Here, Valenzuela is not depicting the chance convergence of two desires on one object, but rather mimetic desire which eventually turns into violence when the townspeople risk their newly won freedom for the sole purpose of ousting the military. Regarded in this light, it might be argued that Valenzuela indicates a degree of victim culpability stemming from the townspeople's lack of authentic motivation.

The theatrical character of Realidad nacional desde la cama is immediately noticeable given that its exposition, section 1, resembles an individual scene of a drama, with its

own curtain scene. Here, Valenzuela skillfully manages to inform us of events that have occurred prior to the novel's action, introduces the theme, and presents principal characters in such a way as to establish the townspeople/military conflict without holding up the work's tempo and without recourse to obvious devices of narrative. In addition, humor and ambiguity are employed so as to immediately set the novel's ironic tone. Realidad nacional desde la cama opens with a statement of theme, followed by an explanation of La Señora's presence at the country club. This is accomplished via a combination of first and third person narrations; segments in first person communicate the work's major concerns, whereas those in third person explain events leading up to the protagonist's arrival. In addition, the conflicting forces of the local military versus the townspeople, as well as the novel's ambiguous setting are quickly established in the opening paragraph: "Sin sospechar la superposición de planos, sin saber nada del campamento militar o de la villa miseria, una mujer ha ido a buscar refugio en un cierto alejado club de campo" (7). Opening

paragraphs also bear Valenzuela's trademark concerns: the need for self-awareness, passivity versus action, and a preoccupation with the relationship of economy and desire:

> Nací bajo el signo de Pregunta como otros bajo Capricornio o Leo. No por eso estoy más predispuesta que otros a la duda o al autocuestionamiento, pero conozco a fondo la verdadera ambivalencia. Tengo mi ascendente en Ojos, un signo dual, como Tetas o Testis o Twin Towers. Pero la gente de Tetas es pasiva y nutricia, la de Testis afirmativa a ultranza, la de Twin Towers—regida por Mercurio—tiene un acertado sentido comercial. Me gustaría tener un poco de todas estas cualidades, por así llamarlas; me gustaría pero no tanto, un poquito, tal vez, cuando las necesite (7).

As mentioned, instances of humor and ambiguity which lend the novel its ironic tone are included in the exposition. Here, as in Cola de lagartija, humor operates both at the level of situation and at the verbal level. Its overall purpose is to provide the critical distance necessary to evaluate the confusing and painful period of Argentine

history following the overthrow of the oligarchic regimes of the seventies and eighties. The work's situation is intrinsically humorous by virtue of Valenzuela's exaggeration of a state with which most readers can identify; here, we confront a protagonist whose lethargy approaches physical as well as emotional paralysis. La Señora's condition is suggested in her first dealings with María:

> Carla le había dicho que María la iba a atender bien, no le había aclarado ni quién era María, a ella no le interesó nada del ser sino del estar y por eso casi ni se había dirigido a María al llegar, ni le había dicho su nombre ni le había hecho pedido alguno. María por lo tanto la llama Señora, y ella se siente bien como Señora, en la cama, sin ganas de moverse (10).

Valenzuela's use of language in the opening paragraphs immediately signals the reader that she will treat serious thematic concerns from a playful distance; as seen in an earlier quotation, she refers to the theme of passivity versus action as "Tetas o Tesis" and to that of the relationship between economy and desire as a consideration of

people who are in her words type "Twin Towers" and ruled by Mercury, the Roman god of trade and commerce (7). In addition, she ironically addresses the importance of insight and self-analysis with respect to the determination of an individual's fate when she states in astrological terms that her ascending sign is in "Ojos" and that she was born under "el signo de Pregunta" rather than that of Capricorn or Leo (7). At a later point in our investigation further consideration will be given to other instances of humor within the novel.

The multiple meanings that may be given to the word campo are the chief cause of ambiguity within the exposition; due to its association with the countryside as well as with the military, it is uncertain whether La Señora is visiting a military camp or a country club. The kind of ambiguity that results from the capacity of campo to suggest two senses equally suitable to the work's context leads the reader to simultaneously contemplate two different issues: 1) the power of the Argentine military after defeat of their oligarchic regimes, and 2) ecomomic problems in Argentina which stem

from the disparity between economic classes.

Valenzuela closes the first episode in a theatrical manner. Having given the setting, introduced the protagonist as well as the forces in conflict, and supplied other facts necessary to the understanding of the work, the section ends as night is falling. When La Señora is overcome by sleep in the quiet and darkness of her room, we can imagine stage lights fading to signal a scene's end.

The main development of the work flows naturally. Section II also resembles an individual dramatic scene. Here María is introduced as the novel's chief antagonist, and we see La Señora continuing through successive stages of conflict with her about whether or not the former should go out. The episode ends in climax when María goes out of the room; she shuts the door behind her, thus leaving La Señora effectively silenced. If presented as theater, the scene would close with the protagonist left in mid-sentence:

> Y antes de que la señora le pida que abra del todo el ventanal o alguna otra cosa igualmente insensata, toma su escoba y sale apuradísima, cerrando la puerta de

entrada tras de sí.

¡El médico!, le grita la señora, pero ya es tarde. La mucama se ha ido (21).

In section 9, preparations are made for a shift in the relative predominance of the work's dramatically conceived forces at both collective and personal levels. Alfredi, a spy for the townspeople, is introduced at this point. As we shall see, it is by his persuasion that the army surrenders its weapons and that La Señora finally gets up from her bed. The novel's pivotal moment comes appropriately midway through the text, Section 11, p.57, when again we glimpse the unidentified hand that emerges from under the protagonist's bed to steal her food. The shape of the novel is symmetrical around this section given that the first half presents the townspeople as potential victims of the military and La Señora as lethargic and unaware of activities occuring around her. The second half of the work deals with the protagonist's growing self-awareness and her solidarity with the townspeople in their struggle with the military, culminating at the end with the military's defeat and La

Señora's re-entrance into society. Also, at this point our attention is immediately called to the failing Argentine economy, the theme of this section. Via episodes concerning María's purchase of medialunas and their subsequent theft by the above mentioned hand, we learn of skyrocketing prices which result from hyperinflation and of inflation's effect on the poor. It is noteworthy that in the already cited Vásquez interview, Valenzuela stresses the importance of hyperinflation to an interpretation of the novel (2).

The novel's climax coincides with the military's defeat and the protagonist's re-entrance into society. These resolutions occur in three stages and are brought about when Alfredi returns disguised as a soldier. For the occasion, he wears the uniform of the draftee stripped the previous night, plus camouflage make-up and a few tin medals:

> En realidad es Alfredi en otro de sus avatares,....
> Pero para los demás, se espera, conservará el anonimato tras el profuso embetunado de la cara.... Luce un uniforme evidentemente rejuntado; el kepi, la camisa y el pantalón de fajina que les fueron quitados al

> imaginaria la noche anterior, con agregados de charreteras y galones falsos, muy ostentosos. Algunas medallas también, de lata, aunque en conjunto todo lo suficientemente serio como para no parecer disfrazado (100).

The added braids and tin medals above are a reminder of the ease with which the trappings associated with authority both attract and deceive. First, during a TV broadcast of the army marching on the town, Alfredi manages, by means of unexplained powers, to coax the troops from behind the TV screen and into the La Señora's room, leaving only Major Vento at the site of the planned attack. Next, he persuades the military to exchange their guns for food. His final accomplishment is to coax La Señora out of bed, and this deed, likewise, occurs in stages. First, after removing his military disguise so as to establish that he has not joined sides with the enemy, Alfredi persuades the protagonist to dance with him on top of the bed. He subsequently tricks her into leaving her bed by sweeping her to the ground as they dance a tango. It might be suggested that at this point

Valenzuela again challenges the reader to question any offer for easy solutions, granted the ambiguous nature of Alfredi's power; as we recall, victory over the military is not yet sealed since Major Vento remains at large and as a consequence, a threat to the town's newly won freedom. Accordingly, it can be argued that Valenzuela is calling for a cautious approach to recovery, given the progressive structure of the climactic episodes.

Valenzuela does not end the work at this point, however. Instead, she chooses to close with the protagonist's anticlimactic response to the town's merrymaking, and in so doing further emphasizes her warning concerning a "quick fix" for problems facing contemporary Latin America:

> -¡El club ya es nuestro! se oye la voz de él, zapateando sobre las armas.
>
> -¿Y el país? pregunta ella, la muy realista (106).

The characters of Realidad nacional desde la cama can be divided into two categories, each of which corresponds to one of the work's conflicting forces. From time to time we are informed at a collective level as to the activities of the

townspeople and the military. In addition, individual supporters of each group are introduced; Alfredi, Patri and La Señora side with the townspeople, whereas Major Vento, María and Lucho back the military. As mentioned earlier, Valenzuela refuses to idealize the townspeople. It is true that she portrays them in a positive light in regard to their resoluteness and solidarity as they press toward their goal. For example, she wittily portrays their singleness of purpose in an episode describing their preparation of an "olla popular":

> Un reflector barre la zona del otro lado de la alambrada, lo que antes era campo yermo y casuchas y ahora se ha convertido en un hervidero humano. Los militares no pueden hacer nada, la villa se encuentra fuera de su jurisdicción, pero seguramente observan con creciente inquietud el progreso de lo que parecería ser una olla popular.
>
> Es una olla popular. Hay quienes aportan un paquete de arroz, otro de fideos, algunas latas de verduras, cubos de caldo. Todos tiene algo que agregar

a la enorme marmita hirviente y están contentos pero traten de mantenerse en calma, no sea cosa que los del otro lado invaden y les coman la comida.... ( 33,34).

Nevertheless, numerous other episodes depict bizarre and freakish behavior on their part and, in turn, indicate a divergence from desireable norms of harmony and balance. The townspeoples' activities beneath the protagonist's bed, including the theft of her food, fall into this category. Their cruelty toward a sentry and their violent reaction to an anonymous caller who interrupts their victory celebration with threats of revenge are similarly disturbing. It is noteworthy that the townspeople's treatment of the sentry mirrors the earlier violence of the military toward Lucho; in sections 8 and 9, soldiers strip Lucho and place him in a well (43,50), whereas in section 10, the townspeople strip the sentry and leave him at the wire fence (51,52). It might be suggested that in juxtaposing these episodes, Valenzuela continues to dramatize the ease with which we assume the structures that surround us, regardless of their harmful nature.

At the same time that the townspeople are portrayed as

acting with resolve, the military is depicted as dull-witted and lacking seriousness of purpose. In the final section, Valenzuela indicates that the rank and file have enlisted for economic security as opposed to any allegience to an ideal. Below, we see Alfredi easily tricking them into defecting to the enemy's side so as to share in the townspeople's meal:

> -¡Soldados! ¡Al rancho! A comer, soldados, brama entonces el coronel (?) Alfredi. ¡Depositen sus armas! conmina, señalando la cama donde la señora se ha acurrucado hasta desaparecer, casi.
>
> Los soldados, avidísimos, hambreados, dejan con todo apuro las armas largas sobre la cama. No quieren lastre a la hora de los bifes. Y salen corriendo por el ventanal hacia un humo de parrillada que viene desde la villa (miseria).
>
> No parecen asombrarse los soldados en su estampida de que haya desaparecido la alambrada, cortada muy probablemente por las hordas de vándalos anónimos....Los soldados no están como para registrar cambios en el terreno: sólo pueden responder al llamado de las

tripas...(102).

Slapstick maneuvers in preparation for an attack on the town also present the military in a negative light; for instance, the army resorts to substituting golf carts for tanks and greens for bunkers:

> -Los tanques, si señor, reitera el mayor. Los que utilizamos para ejercicios de zafarrancho en los bunkers.
>
> La sola mención entusiasma al edecán.
>
> -En los bunkers, los greens. ¡en el hoyo 19!
>
> Los soldados, atentos a la menor de las órdenes del mayor, para ellos como un deseo, salen corriendo en busca de los tanques usados en las maniobras y retornan al rato con los caddy-carts, carritos de golf a motor de apariencia inofensiva (85).

Several other episodes reinforce Valenzuela's disparaging portrait of the Argentine military; for example, the town's reaction to their camouflage uniforms (84), and the many derogatory names shouted at the soldiers--"aves de rapiña,

animales de presa" (76), "dalmatas, perros manchados, sarnosos" (98).

La Señora, who is the protagonist and first character introduced, is eventually counted among the townspeople's sympathizers. Like many of Valenzuela's other protagonists, she finds herself in a situation which is seemingly impossible to flee. From the outset, she embodies the theme of activity versus passivity. Interestingly, Valenzuela presents the latter in a positive as well as negative light. In Cordones-Cook's 1990 interview with the author, Valenzuela comments that on one hand the work criticizes La Señora's passiveness, given the utter impossibility of ignoring the national reality that she (Valenzuela) confronted upon her return to Argentina. On the other hand, however, she states that La Señora's behavior might be considered a virtue when compared to the army's activity of supressing the popular movement, especially since the protagonist is constantly and coherently evaluating the circumstances which surround her. (Cordones-Cook, "Luisa Valenzuela habla" 122).

During the course of the novel, La Señora evolves along an upward spiral path from a state of shock and inertness to a position of solidarity with the townspeople. Several stops along the way which mark her progress are her intuitive decision not to follow Major Vento's orders (42), her sympathy with Lucho (44), and her desire to feel a greater solidarity with the town (73). As is the case with many of Valenzuela's protagonists, La Señora's recovery is facilitated by a second party, in this case Alfredi. The fact, however, that he relies on trickery in order to get the protagonist out of bed, as well as the fact that his true identity is never established cast doubt on his reliability. La Señora's questions as to his identity, as well as her hesitancy to join in the town's celebration indicate that she finds his role as liberator problematic, and in turn that she is skeptical of quick or simplistic solutions to her country's present difficulties. This being so, it might be argued that she represents the most heightened state of awareness as yet demonstrated by Valenzuela's

protagonists; especially since we do not know what happens to the protagonist at the end of "Cambio de armas", and here we do.

In considering Alfredi, it is an understatement to say that he is a disturbingly ambiguous character. As we have mentioned, he is Valenzuela's medium for delivering her admonition concerning promises of instant remedies for Argentina's current problems. At another level, however, he serves as a vehicle for symbolic commentary on the professional middle class, an area of the middle class hard hit by Argentina's troubled economic circumstances. In the first nineteen sections of Realidad nacional desde la cama we know Alfredi only as the médico/taxista who periodically visits La Señora for the purpose of curing her "mal del sauce" (49). Upon learning that he drives a taxi in addition to practicing medicine, we speculate that his income as a physician is inadequate. By means of Alfredi's several shifts in identity, Valenzuela deftly addresses the downsizing and pauperization of the middle class and their accompanying loss of moral fiber. Central to this issue is

the fact that Alfredi slides into the relatively non-productive, parasitic function of a taxista and gives up middle class standards at one and the same time. The free and easy attitude which he adopts when he changes into a taxi-driver, accompanied by his use of a lower register of language, is an example of this attitude:

> -Si me enfermo vos me curás. Para eso sos médico.
>
> Pero Alfredi ya está calzándose la camisa a cuadros que quedó sobre la silla.
>
> -Médico ahora, no, flaca, no te confundás. Ahora tengo que rajar. La gorra se la cala requintada. Tengo que ir a laburar el taxi, se digna aclararle a la señora, ¿o te creés que me rasco todo el día, que puedo pasarme el tiempo en pendejadas? Levántate, me pica el bagre, haceme el feca (53).

It seems that, via Alfredi, Valenzuela is criticizing the middle class for failing to perform its proper sociological function; it should be within the middle class that Argentina's fledgling democracy takes root, and it should be possible to rely on them to serve as society's

anchor during the crisis in question. When the moral crunch comes, however, they are found wanting, as exemplified by the three stage pattern-- medico/ taxista/general--in which Alfredi reveals himself to play a corrupt and ambiguous role.

Valenzuela extends her commentary on the working classes to an individual level via limited appearances by and allusions to a character named Patri, whom we first glimpse approaching the wire barricade in order to call out to her brother, Lucho, a recent draftee. At this point, Patri's vulnerability and innocence are stressed as she rashly attempts to communicate with her brother, with no thought as to the consequences: "Patricia, Patri, llama alguien a la muchacha, pero ella imprudente va hacia la alambrada y a su vez empieza a llamar, con un poquito de angustia. Lucho, llama la muchacha, Lucho, vení a jugar conmigo" (34). Here, Valenzuela's portrait of the working classes also emphasizes their close family ties. Major Vento, however, makes plain the military's disregard for family relationships when Lucho later expresses his desire to communicate with Patri:

El mayor, como ya quedó establecido, no tiene corazón para los temas de familia. Se indigna.

—Usted es un soldado al servicio de la Nación. No tiene hermana, tiene sólo una madre, ¡la Patria! No se insubordine, soldado. ¡Cuerpo a tierra (38)!

Here, Valenzuela's wordplay with Patri/Patria emphasizes the vast difference in priority of values between draftees from the working classes on the one hand and the military officers on the other. Accordingly, we begin to understand that military service is a very alien experience to Lucho and his fellow inductees.

Hunger provoked by hyperinflation, including its effect on the townspeople, is another subject of episodes involving Patri. First, we learn from Lucho that Patri has gone without food for extended periods of time: "Yo le quité las medialunas. Le di dos a mi hermana, pobrecita Patri, hacía tres días que no comían en la villa hasta que llegó usted. Debería de estar contenta" (73). A fuller extent of the townspeople's hunger is dramatized when they prepare to

divide up and eat a soldier's horse that has recently died from exhaustion. The insults hurled by the soldiers as well as Lucho's shouts urging Patri to take the choicest portions point up hunger's dehumanizing effect:

> -Sí, el del caballo, claro. Dicen que la carne de caballo es muy nutritiva. El caballo de los milicos que cayó muerto ¿no lo oyó? Ya deben de estar carneándolo nuestros muchachos. Estaban preparados, algunos hasta tenían facón. ¡Cachá el lomo, Patri...!
>
> En el campo de golf, los señores militares están opinando a los gritos: "¡Aves de rapiña! ¡Animales de presa!" "Carroñeros", les gritan a los de la villa y tratan de reprimirlos a los culatazos, pero la acción de los desguasadores es incontenible...(75-76).

Patri's overzealous behavior in the work's final episode approaches the violence earlier demonstrated by members of the military. At the novel's close, she prevents La Señora from answering a persistently ringing phone by pulling it from its plug and tossing it to her friends who proceed to destroy it by beating it with their rifles:

-Voy a contestar después de todo. No quiero hacerme nunca más la avestruz, quiero saber....

El teléfono sigue sonando, ajeno a la algarabía general....

La Señora se dirige por fin a atender. Una muchacha de la villa, Patri, aparentemente, le gana de mano y lo arranca del enchufe. Es un teléfono moderno, redondo y Patri se lo tira a sus compañeros como si fuera una pelota de goma.

¡Ay! grita la voz desde el teléfono. Y es lo último que grita, porque la pelota vuela entre los villeros. Algunos le pegan con las culatas de los rifles... (105).

This episode, for which Patri serves as catalyst, underscores not only unseemly behavior on the part of the townspeople; it sugggests, as well, that in failing to identify the caller they ignore the danger that still exists beyond the confines of the country club. Valenzuela strengthens her indictment by juxtaposing the protagonist's

refusal to behave as an ostrich with its head buried in the sand and Patri's unplugging of the phone.

Major Vento as the novel's embodiment of oppressive power is Valenzuela's medium for exploring man's capicity for cruelty. In her endeavor to understand the sociopolitical events in Argentina during the late 1970's and early 1980's she relates Vento's repressive and sometimes violent actions to the terror and violence in her homeland during the period in question. We have mentioned previously that he carries out repressive tactics against the protagonist; however, Lucho is frequently the victim of his unprovoked humiliation and torture as well. For instance, early in the novel Major Vento insists that the draftee approach him crawling on his elbows: "-¡Esta gentuza, se indigna el mayor Vento.... Que se presente cuerpo a tierra, arrastrándose sobre los codos" (37). Lucho is also forced to play leap frog around the major's living quarters, and at a later point Vento forces him to drink a goblet filled with bull's blood:

> El asco tiene su razón de ser. El mayor le ha ofrecido al soldadito el copón de viscoso contenido, lo ha

> elevado cual cáliz o como proponiendo un brindis y ha ordenado-¡Beba! Y el pobre Lucho, conscripto por imposición constitucional y por tierna mayoría de edad, ha bebido, apenas un sorbo, y ha escupido, casi vomitado, manchando de color repugnante la clara moquette (41).

As punishment for failing to drink the goblet of blood, Vento orders Lucho stripped and placed in a well the height and width of a man. These episodes reveal that the major considers Lucho and his kind to be subhuman individuals, and in turn suggest that his contempt enables him to behave cruelly towards them. It should not be overlooked that Vento himself describes a three step process of oppression carried out by the military against their victims that is remarkably similar to the repressive tactics which we have noted throughout the body of Valenzuela's work: "Nuestra misíon es actuar con presteza para desmoralizar, desorganizar y destruir al enemigo" (80). It might be argued that instances of silencing and ignoring the victim fit within the military's stage of <u>desmoralizar</u>; that <u>desorganizar</u> is

equivalent to what we have described as the victim's subsequent state of confusion; and that destruir el ememigo represents the final stages of the process, at which point the passive victim is too stunned to react.

Vento is interesting, however, not only for understanding the process by which power is gained via the spread of teror. He also provides Valenzuela with an opportunity to postulate how individuals can carry out random acts of violence against their fellow human beings. When we see Lucho subjected to instances of dehumanizing treatment and mind control we suspect that anyone experiencing such abuse for extended periods of time, perhaps Vento himself, might be desensitized sufficiently to commit atrocities of the kind perpetrated in Argentina during the late 1970's and early 1980's. When contrasted with the coronel in "Cambio de armas" Vento is seen as less systematic, more random, more parodic but very dangerous.

Valenzuela's characterization of María continues to undermine the cliché that seeing is believing. Similar to Alfredi, María maintains multiple roles throughout the novel:

on the one hand, she is employed as a housekeeper for the protagonist's friend Carla; on the other, she is a corporal in the military. Given that these roles are constantly set in opposition, Valenzuela seems to be saying that María's multiple subject positions contribute to a previously noted conflict in her speech and actions toward La Señora. In addition, María represents the author's preoccupation with an absence of comradeship among women, a concern previously expressed via Monona in Hay que sonreír. Significantly, La Señora and María never engage in a friendly conversation, although the latter is the only female character with whom the protagonist interacts.

Since reality for Valenzuela is inherently composite, it follows that her message concerning "la realidad nacional" of Argentina will not be totally negative. In this regard, it might be suggested that Lucho, and by extension, other members of the working class, offer a glimmer of hope for the future, given that Lucho is the the only character with whom the protagonist interacts whose actions are not undermined by his/her words or vice-versa. During conversations with

Major Vento and La Señora, Lucho establishes that he is completing obligatory military service, and that he is ignorant of the military's goals: "-Acabo de, cumplir 18, años, mi padre me dice, 'hacete hombre', mi madre, me dice 'no escuchés, a tu padre', mi hermana menor, Patri, me dice 'vení, a jugar conmigo'.... Al servicio, militar me, llaman. Y AQUI ESTOY "(23)./ "-Yo no sé nada de todo eso. Yo estoy haciendo el servicio militar obligatorio, no se nos permite preocuparnos por esos detalles" (74). In fact, as we have mentioned, his allegiance to family members surpasses any loyalty to the armed forces. Lucho might be considered the novel's nost dynamic character, since for a time he blindly follows Vento's orders that are aimed at his downfall and then later deserts of his own accord; after being placed in a small well as punishment for failing to drink a goblet filled with bull's blood, Lucho digs himself out via trenches that lead to the protagonist's bedroom. In addition, his escape testifies to his resoluteness and tenacity. These same qualities, as well as solidarity among members of the working poor, are later exhibited by his fellow villagers when they

come upon him bound with handcuffs "crucifixion style" to the wire fence, in punishment for desertion. At this point they disguise him as a scarecrow, thereby protecting him from insects and the next day's sun. We must repeat, however, that it would be a mistake to fail to notice that Valenzuela neither serves up an idealized depiction of Argentina's working classes nor posits easy solutions to her homeland's socio-economic problems.

Two important features of Realidad nacional desde la cama which we have briefly mentioned remain for further discussion: 1) the purpose and nature of humor within the novel, and 2) the work's theatrical element. Their presence is key in situating it within the Post-Boom. Earlier, we established that the novel's humor functions at both the level of situation and of word, thereby creating a playful distance from which to treat serious concerns, similar to the technique we observed in Cola de lagartija. This is a particularly important aspect since it is another instance of Valenzuela adapting an earlier form or technique for the purpose of conveying her particular vision. In The Dialogic

Imagination, Bakhtin cites serio-comical genres as being "the first authentic and essential step in the evolution of the novel as the genre of becoming," due to the fact that they represent the first time contemporary reality serves as subject (22). Especially significant for Bakhtin is the fact that there is no epic distance in these genres, but rather that contemporary reality provides the point of view. He credits the demolishing of epic distance to their comical nature; according to Bakhtin, "it is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical distance" (23). Certainly Valenzuela utilizes humor to these ends, but in another ironic and very significant way, she turns this function of humor back upon itself, in a manner of speaking, thereby distancing painful realities so as to facilitate examining them.

As regards the classification of humor within Realidad nacional desde la cama, it would be a mistake to classify it simply as an example of black humor and the grotesque. While we agree that instances of humor within the novel exhibit many of the same characteristics as black humor

and the grotesque, it is important to note that Valenzuela has adapted her representations so as to posit a more hopeful vision. More specifically, it might be suggested that in combining the comic with the tragic, her emphasis on the latter is minimized, and that her use of humor is not an outgrowth of interest in the irrational or a distrust of any cosmic order. Rather, she has found black humor and the grotesque to be modes of writing that are relatively compatible with the spirit of her work and amenable to adaptation.

The theatrical character of the work has been mentioned in connection with its structure; however, its appropriateness à propos the author's call for reaction against oppression should not go unnoticed. Interestingly, Valenzuela serendipitously came upon the novela-teatro form by virtue that she was first commissioned to write the piece as theater, but it was her subsequent craftsmanship that produced a unique theatricality suitable for exposing the deceptive nature of repressive systems. Here, theater serves well to caution readers against mistaking the fictional for

the real, since repeatedly what is seen is artistic creation disguised as "reality". For example, the country club setting is actually a military base; La Señora as the metaphoric audience views a television broadcast of a peaceful and prosperous Argentina; and the character that claims to have rescued the country from the military moves between the roles of doctor, psychiatrist, colonel and taxi driver, never establishing his true identity. Clearly, Valenzuela's message to us is that in spite of what is projected, Argentina's poverty as well as her problems with the military have not disappeared, contrary to the assuredness with which Alfredi speaks at the close of the work.

In summary, we can say that the fundamental message of Realidad nacional desde la cama is that reality is not only plural, but theatrical as well. As Valenzuela continues in her attempt to understand how her countrymen fell victim to the oppressive military governments of the seventies and eighties, she simultaneously warns against a recurrence of the tragic events of those years. As we have seen in earlier

works, she emphasizes the plural nature of reality; in addition, however, she cautions that one must carefully distinguish between visions that are more or less authentic and others that are pure masquerade. Several factors situate the novel within a Post-Boom mode of writing: 1) consideration of a very specific sociopolitical problem, 2) concern for the experience of the exile, as well as a search for national identity, 3) shortness (105 pages), which could be considered a reaction to the Boom, 4) use of colloquial, Latin American language (for example, in the case of Alfredi), and 5) novela-teatro form which results from crossing of genre boundaries. It bears repeating, however, that the work's theatrical character is achieved via adaptations of earlier forms, and that this fact, in turn, suggests a relationship to preceding patterns of narrative.

## Novela negra con argentinos

Novela negra con argentinos (1990), a detective story lacking both motive and background, has been the subject of only one critical study to date; in an interview with the author, Juana María Cordones-Cook poses questions focusing on the work's theatrical character. Building on this interview, the purpose of the present investigation is to demonstrate how Valenzuela has interwoven the genres of theatre and novel in order to further develop her concerns regarding oppressor-victim relationships, going so far as to postulate that in an endless cycle of oppression, victims seeking revenge risk lapsing into the role of victimizer. As we shall see, in Novela negra con argentinos, Valenzuela considers the consequences for agents of oppression in

addition to emphasizing the effects of repressive systems on their victims.

Novela negra con argentinos narrates the struggle of its two protagonists, Augustín Palant and Roberta Aguilar, to understand the nature and motive of the former's crime. The novel, which is set in New York, opens as Augustín closes the door upon the scene of a murder which he has just committed; thus it is never a traditional "who done it," for at least this much we know from the outset. The work is concerned, instead, with the more complicated question of why Augustín killed a woman with whom he was about to make love. He himself has no idea of what motivated him to murder the actress Edwina Irving, and soon he forgets even her name. In addition, we the readers are supplied with limited information leading up to the act, thus casting us as co-detectives in the search to explain his seemingly gratuitous crime. We know that the story involves two Argentine writers, Augustín and Roberta. The latter, a practitioner of "writing with the body," advocates living passionately in order to create. Following her advice, Augustín ventures

into a dark region of the city in search of adventure. Here, an unknown man gives him a free theater ticket for an off-off Broadway performance. After the show, Augustín goes backstage and introduces himself to one of the actresses. Later, he accompanies her to her apartment, and once inside, pulls out a gun which he had bought earlier that day and shoots her. The remainder of the work is dedicated to the two writers' search for a motive. Augustín suffers tremendous guilt and fear, whereas Roberta feels simultaneously intrigued and trapped by the situation. Efforts to solve the mystery lead its characters to an erotic torture chamber, homeless shelters, fairyland-like lofts, and the deathbed of a renown choreographer. Throughout the course of the novel, Valenzuela poses a host of unsettling questions: Are we all potential oppressors? Are we all potential victims? How can our fascination with, and appetite for, violence be explained? To what extent are we all accomplices to violence and torture? As we shall see, in Novela negra con argentinos, there are no definitive answers. Nevertheless, Valenzuela relates Augustín's crime

and the protagonists' search for a motive to the sociopolitical events in Argentina during the late 1970's and 1980's and the subsequent attempt to understand the terror and violence of those years.

The selection and distribution of episodes within the novel draw attention to the dynamics of oppressor-victim relationships and specifically address the possibility that every individual has the potential to be both aggressor and victim. Whereas in many of Valenzuela's earlier works repressive systems are exposed via episodes involving characters that neatly conform to either a victim or victimizer role, here a single character frequently portrays both parts. An example of this technique is the suggestion that Agustín may have been a political prisoner, as illustrated by his fear of anyone in hooded clothing, contrasted with the fact that he murders Edwina. What remains constant throughout the novel, however, is the process to which the oppressed are subjected. In comformity with patterns observed in Valenzuela's earlier works, victims here are also isolated, silenced, confused by misinformation

communicated by their oppressors, and stripped of personal belongings and identity. Valenzuela continues to press for reaction to oppressive systems via autonomous action. As we shall see, the protagonists of Novela negra con argentinos to some degree eventually embrace this behavior.

Thus, it is impossible to trace the stages of the text's repressive system by concentrating on a specific character, since characters do not belong exclusively to either victim or oppressor categories. Instead, evidence of its presence is dispersed among individuals who vacilate between victim and oppressor roles. For example, three instances of victims isolated either by their oppressors or voluntarily are: 1) Agustín walking Edwina home and subsequently visiting her alone, 2) Roberta locking the former in her apartment, and 3) Roberta seeking the refuge of a closet in order to escape Agustín's mistreatment. Roberta is frequently silenced by Agustín when they are hiding in her apartment from the authorities, for example:

> -¿Te acordás de nuestra pieza de teatro, la muy notata?

-No me hablés.

-¿Te acordás del amor?

-No me hablés.

Throughout the first part of the novel, we see that Roberta is confused and manipulated by Agustín's lie that he has murdered a man, not a woman. For his part, Agustín is stripped of his personal property and identity when Roberta dresses him in her clothes, shears his head, and renames him "Magú". Magú is presumably from the almost blind cartoon character Mr. Magoo. This identification is significant in that it returns us to the novel's political subtext and the question as to whether or not atrocities occured in Argentina in the seventies and early eighties if there are no "official" eye witness reports. Also, Edwina is quickly renamed Vic. Dehumanization in Agustín's case is at a metaphorical level; however, the result for Edwina is quite literal.

Accordingly, the work moves in two directions at once. On the one hand, small circular patterns are indicated throughout the text; such as movement from death to death

(Edwina's to Edouard's), cauldron scene to cauldron scene (Edwina's theatrical role as a cook to the cauldron scene at Lara's loft), and S&M parlor to S&M parlor (Roberta's and Agustín's separate visits to Ava Taurel's). On the other hand, vertical motion such as episodes depicting Augustín tumbling down steps, Hector Bravo climbing them, and Roberta's fall on the ice suggest the interplay of a second dynamic force. The combination of circular and vertical movement recalls the spiral shapes of several of the author's earlier works; however, in Novela negra con argentinos, the plot structure is more complicated. It might be suggested that the image of the spider's web, which appears at several points in the work, is an appropriate metaphor for the novel's shape; as a spiral net converging towards a central point, it effectively expresses the text's vision of modern reality's capacity to trap us in continual cycles of repression.

The four major sections of Novela negra con argentinos draw attention to the central characters' efforts to explain Agustín's irrational crime. If we examine the

sections in relation to the traditional detective novel it is clear that Valenzuela has titled the work ironically, since, as we have mentioned, nothing is ever discovered by the "detective" protagonists.[12] Interestingly, much of what they witness during their search, as well as their own actions, could be considered to be theater rather than reality, and as a result the boundaries between the two are blurred in a manner similar to that observed in Realidad nacional desde la cama. Regarded in this light, the text also undermines the detective novel's confidence in observed reality.

Parts I and II of Novela negra con argentinos narrate Augustín's crime and the first phase of the protaganists' search for an explanation to it. At this point, Augustín is fraught with guilt and fear as he probes his own conscience to understand why he murdered Edwina. Roberta's reaction is one of both intrigue and entrapment. The theme that life is a play and we are its characters arises in Part I, which also functions as the work's exposition. Here, we learn that Augustín meets the victim at the theater. In an effort to hide Agustín from the

authorities, Roberta disguises him, thus assigning him a new role, and in a sympathetic gesture, she transforms herself to the extent that she is almost unidentifiable. Two of Roberta's artist friends are also introduced in Part I: Bill who sells vintage clothing and theatrical costumes and Ava Taurel, who runs a theater of torture where clients seeking and delighting in pain willingly play the role of victims.

The brevity of Part II, sixteen pages, when contrasted to the novel's other three sections (each fifty plus pages in length) indicates its significance regarding the plot's development. Part II consists of five short sub-sections which in their entirety reveal a pattern of alternating isolation and discovery, and close with Roberta's decision to emerge from hiding. In the first sub-section, we see Agustín and Roberta not only isolated within her apartment, but alienated from one another, as well. At this point, Agustín refuses every effort on Roberta's part to communicate. In sub-section two, Roberta discovers that Agustín has murdered a woman, and not a man, as he has claimed all along:

-Fue sin querer. No tengo la culpa de haberla matado.

-¿Cómo?

-Me habías dicho que era un hombre.

-Te había dicho. Y te mentí... (107-08).

Reacting to his lie, Roberta shuts herself in her closet so as to find the necessary time and space to think:

> Empezó a sentir frío, se metió en su walk-in closet a buscar un chal o algo, tiró de la cuerdita para encender la luz y vio todo ese desorden que la configuraba, volvió a tirar de la cuerda, cerró la puerta y en la oscuridad se hizo un nido entre suéteres y buzos, pantalones, mantas, chales y un viejo sacón de piel que estaban tirados en el piso (108).

During sub-section three Roberta lies buried in her closet; however, here the emphasis is on Agustín's mental state, specifically his need for forgiveness. In addition, he recalls the practice of forced labor in the cement factories in Argentina and the <u>desaparecidos.</u> Sub-section four focuses on Roberta inside the protective, womb-like atmosphere of the

closet where eventually she reaches the conclusion that violence can stem from our efforts to suppress fear:

> ...Si es así, si el miedo no me viene de fuera, me digo puedo decirme digo Esta Soy Yo: mi miedo. Mi miedo es parte de mí y no hay de qué asustarse. Agustín. Agustín, este miedo que es parte de uno es el peor de los miedos. Puede hacerte matar este miedo al querer suprimirlo a él, el miedo (111).

In sub-section 5, Roberta emerges and informs Agustín that the time has come to leave her apartment and re-enter reality: "Magú, lo llamó Roberta cuanto estuvo listo el café, quiero decir Agustín, Agustín Palant, es hora de que toquemos tierra firme" (112). It is significant that, at this point Roberta resumes addressing Agustín by his given name rather than as "Magú."

In Part III, the couple's search for a motive carries them into surreal regions of the city. During visits to a homeless shelter and Ava Taurel's S&M Parlor, as well as during late night wanderings through snow-covered streets, the two finally conclude that Agustín must continue in his

search alone. Novela negra con argentinos can be visualized structurally by identifying the plot's pivotal moment, which appropriately occurs at the beginning of Part III, sub-section one, also the novel's midpoint. Here, Roberta and Agustín emerge from the former's apartment: "Vamos saliendo despacito. Vení, vamos avanzando, un pie después del otro, vamos con cuidado como si no nos quedara más remedio, como si sólo pudiéramos ir hacia delante. Así. Te tomo de la mano y seguimos" (115). As frequently the case in Valenzuela's works, the shape of the novel is symmetrical around this point. The first half of the work narrates the murder of Edwina by Agustín and the protagonists' first reaction to it, which is to hide together in Roberta's apartment. The second half deals with their individual responses to the crime. As previously mentioned, both protagonists agree by the end of Part III that Agustín must proceed alone in search for a motive. First, Roberta acknowledges that she has allowed herself to be caught up in someone else's desperation: "¿Le tenés miedo? y ella se dio cuenta de que sí, le tenía miedo pánico, pero no a Agustín

sino a su propia falta de sensaciones, ... al haberse dejado arrastrar por una desesperación ajena (159)." Agustín thereafter decides that he must leave Roberta and care for himself:

> Debía reaprender a arreglárselas solo en la ciudad. En el mundo. Nadie podía ayudarlo...ni siquiera Roberta que en materia de darle una mano había exagerado de lo lindo y se había propuesto darle el codo.... Volvería a casa de ella a darle las gracias y decirle que no necesitaba más su sacrificio, de ahora en adelante él se las arreglaría solito y perdón por haberla molestado...(165).

It would be a mistake to overlook a horror story contained in sub-section two of Part III, for it addresses the issue of the interplay of victim/victimizer roles. It is related to Agustín by Roberta, and occurs on a stormy night in an abandoned house. Two men taking refuge on the ground floor begin hearing noises which they attempt to attribute to the storm outside. They soon learn, however, that the danger posed is from within: " No. No es el viento. Es la mujer

asesinada que camina por el piso de arriba con un hacha en la mano. Tiene la masa encefálica al aire, alguien la mató de un hachazo en la cabeza y ella está buscando venganza" (125). The fact that the murdered woman seeking revenge was once a victim is significant: given that she is a victimizer from the viewpoint of the two men below, Valenzuela appears to suggest that vengance can convert victims into victimizers and vice-versa.

So far, the pattern of the novel has been prelude, discovery, crisis. In Part IV, we witness Roberta and Agustín's respective evolutions toward more autonomous behavior. As a consequence, we are provided with a heightened understanding of aggression, passsiveness and complicity. A convincing motive for Agustín's crime, however, is never uncovered, and the expectations of readers seeking tidy solutions are left unsatisfied. The first three sub-sections of Part IV occur during a party at a loft belonging to Roberta's friend, Lara. The setting is an aberrant fairyland reminiscent of Ionesco's Theater of the Absurd. The first episode opens with an ascent in an

elevator, thereby reintroducing the novel's subtext of the events in Argentina in the 1970's. For at this point, Agustín is reminded of the "Mine-Shaft" in Argentina and the instances of torture that occured there (170). Immediately juxtaposed is Roberta and Agustín's entrance into Lara's loft, where we learn that the former's artist friends are pursued by dangers of a different sort--AIDS, insanity, and drugs. Towards the close of sub-section three, Roberta and Agustín again travel in the elevator to visit Edouard, an old ballet master who is close to death. This episode serves as an opportunity for Agustín and Roberta to separate and begin their respective evolutions towards an understanding of their roles in Edwina's murder and the subsequent cover-up; i.e. Agustín as perpetrator and Roberta as accomplice. At the beginning of sub-section four, Agustín attempts to leave Edouard's apartment alone. In the process he literally falls into the rooms that belong to Hector Bravo. Given that this scene signals the beginning of Agustín's independent efforts to understand the motive for his crime, it is appropiately represented as a journey through a birth canal:

> Tras un cortinado descubre lo que sin saber estaba buscando: el paso a otras latitudes. Como ya nada le sorprende, como estaba siguiendo una huella hecha de sonido, le bastó con apartar los drapeados, atravesar un vano de puerta sin puerta y bajar unos escalones para encontrarse en un salón de paredes blancas, bien iluminado, con plantas y muebles claros y otros elementos del vivir normalmente (192).

At a later point, Bravo explains that he purposely built the entrance into his apartment in this manner:

> Cuando abrimos ese paso al otro loft, totalmente ilegal, se comprende, quise que el pasillo fuera como un pasaje, un conducto para el nacimiento. Te das cuenta, se viene de las sombras a la luz, de lo oscuro a lo claro-y me esmeré como loco para que aquí todo fuera lo más claro posible (194).

The remaining episodes of Part IV alternate between presentations of Agustín at Hector-Bravo's and Roberta at Ava Taurel's and the apartment of her friend and lover, Bill. Sub-sections five, six, eight, ten, and twelve chart

Agustin's progress toward a more autonomous mode of behavior, while five, seven, nine, eleven and thirteen chart that of Roberta. Episodes concerning Agustín are centered around the consideration of several instances of death. First, Hector Bravo speaks with Agustín regarding Edouard's death and the loss of his friend Jack to AIDS. Bravo then convinces Agustín to talk about what is bothering him, which of course is Edwina's murder:

> Metido en palabras que tienen lugar y tiempo propios, Agustín Palant va largando su historia. No la teje ni la borda; la deja correr como agüita de manantial, pura en el sentido de no contaminada ni por la censura interna ni por la autocompasión, el terror o la tristeza.... Por vez primera pudo Agustín contarlo todo sin temor a herir susceptibilidades y más importante aún, sin temor a herirse a si mismo. Que este Héctor Bravo hiciera de la información lo que quisiese. Por su parte él, Agustín Palant, ya estaba del todo hecho y entregdo en la información misma y nada de lo que viniera después podría importarle.

Un único resquemor lo asaltó hacia el final del relato. Y no fue miedo a la delación o la denuncia, sino a la duda de aquél que con tanta maldita serenidad estaba allí escuchándolo.

-¿Acaso no me creés? ¿No creés te acabo de contar la verdad?

Via his uncensored confession, Agustín begins to acquire a degree of perspective as regards his crime. It might be argued that the relief he experiences after confessing can be interpreted at a political level as an affirmation that the revelation of atrocities committed in Argentina during the late 1970's and early 1980's was an essential first step in that country's recovery. Although a motive is never identified during Agustín's discussions with Hector Bravo, the name of a woman that Agustín knew in Argentina surfaces, and along with it, the possibility that the key to his actions may lie buried in his past:

-Pensá qué hubo en tu pasado.

-Nada.... Nada, cuando unos vinieron a pedirme ayuda y no pude hacer nada ¿qué querés que hiciera? si

ni les creía del todo, ni siquiera cuando María Inés.

-¿María Inés?

-No importa. No me importa lo que me dijo, ni siquiera sé dónde se fue, no me acuerdo de ella. Yo no sé nada, sólo sé escribir (220-21).

Given that the issue of doubt has bearing for interpretations made at both the individual and political levels, it is important to note that the above quotations stress the importance of believing that a crime has indeed been committed. Perhaps Agustín's fear that Hector Bravo will not believe his confession stems from the former having doubted María Inés' reports concerning the atrocities committed by the Argentine authorities. It might be suggested that his refusal to believe the Argentine government capable of such crimes was founded on his assumption that he, himself, was incapable of violence. Here, Valenzuela stresses the urgent need for each individual to recognize his or her potential for violence. Accordingly, the receptions of Argentina's history and Agustín's confession become as important as their telling; in order to avert further violence it is not only

essential that their respective narrations surface, they must be believed, as well.

Episodes charting Roberta's progress towards a higher state of self-awareness first depict her as still preoccupied with Agustín's search for the motive of his crime:

> -Me dijo que estaba con un tal Héctor Bravo y ahora estoy más preocupada que antes.
>
> -Let go. Tenés que aprender a cortar el cordón umbilical, dejalo que vaya por su lado (197).

Similarly, she visits Ava Taurel's so as to secure Agustín's manuscripts, which she hopes hold a clue to the mystery. When Roberta finally succeeds in detaching herself from Agustin's dilemma she immediately begins an affair with her friend Bill. Unfortunately, their romance also evolves into a repressive pattern. For example, when Bill paints Roberta's portrait, he exerts control over her body:

> Si no me engaño y no te levantés, quedate quieta aunque sea un ratito más, esperá que pesco bien ese ángulo de la nariz, así, un poco más de costado, así, que cambia la sombra, ...(198).

and,

> A ver, sacá el brazo, dejame darme vuelta, así, poné la cabeza acá, qué bueno . ... Mujer, quedate quieta. No te levantés, me vas a tirar al suelo (199).

At a later point he attempts to define what is important for Roberta's life in terms of his own desires:

> Me gusta tu propuesta de vivir en la tienda y olvidarme de tanta hoja garrapateada. Tengo la horrible impresión de que no voy a poder escribir nunca más.
>
> Por mí. Por lo mucho que leo.

In subsection 11, Roberta is enclosed in the back room of Bill's apartment. Significantly, she is completely silent as he continues to paint her portrait. In the course of this episodes, she is converted into his creation and referred to as a mannequin: "Roberta maniquí. Siente la necesidad de quedarse al abrigo, inmóvil para siempre... "(224). This period marks a crucial point in Roberta's process of growing self-awareness, however, since during this time she recognizes the trap into which she is about to fall and acknowledges her desire to escape it.

As Novela negra con argentinos nears its end, Roberta seems to be deliberately freeing herself from Bill's influence as well as from her involvement in Agustín's search for a motive to his crime. First, she arranges for Agustín's manuscripts to be returned by Lara, rather than delivering them in person. Thereafter, Laura hints that Roberta may soon end her relationship with Bill when she suggests that Agustín should continue calling Roberta's apartment: "¿Dónde anda Roberta? La llamo y no contesta, ni siquiera tiene conectada la máquina."/"Insistí. Insistí. Me huelo que un día de estos vuelve a su casa" (228-29). Clearly, the conclusion of Novela negra con argentinos indicates that Roberta recognizes the need to look inward for self-knowledge. At the novel's close, Agustín phones Roberta at Bill's apartment in order to share the good news that he has finally been able to "bury his dead," i.e. put the matter of Edwina's murder behind him. When Bill relays Agustín's message, Roberta responds by quoting part of a line from Act I, Part II of Zorilla's Don Juan Tenorio: "Los muertos que vos matáis..." (232). When Bill is unable to complete the

line, Roberta supplies a rejoinder: "Los muertos que vos matáis son fruto de otros crímenes, ajenos" (232). Her reply is significant at a personal level as a further indication of her autonomy, for not only does she refuse to wait for her thought to be completed by her lover, but her response is inventive as well. Thus, it might be argued that the novel is ultimately optimistic at the personal level, given that at its close both protagonists are moving toward autonomous patterns of behavior after having accepted that self-discovery through another human being is impossible. Although we do not know whether their relationship will survive, a chance for them to resolve their differences is left open. Roberta's response also has significance at the political level since it underscores the text's premise that in a continual environment of oppression victims seeking revenge risk slipping into oppressor roles. Accordingly, "the dead you kill" represent victims who have lapsed into the role of avenger and consequently threaten their simultaneous victim/victimizer. As we recall, Roberta's horror story concerning the woman in the attic with her

encephalitic matter exposed offers a similar metaphor for Argentina.

In Novela negra con argentinos Valenzuela deviates from her customary presentation of characters in which the majority fall neatly into categories of either oppressors or victims and thereby project her concern with abusive power and a need for a response to it. Here, as we have remarked, many characters vacilate between victim and oppressor roles. This technique is in keeping with the novel's supposition that violence is cyclical in nature as well as with its darker implication that we all have the capacity to assume both roles. When regarded in this light, it can be suggested that Valenzuela is urging us at both the personal and political level to be less judgemental and to consider all sides of controversial issues since opposing arguments frequently represent opposite sides of the same coin. It can be persuasively argued that this position represents an ideological shift on the author's part away from an emphasis on reaction and towards a call for mediation and compromise. Accordingly, binary oppositions that form the base of

traditional categories in Western society become nonpertinent. As observed earlier, Valenzuela's presentation of Roberta, Agustín and Bill adheres to such a model. Similarly, females are portrayed as dominant figures at Ava Taurel's torture parlor where male executives tired of being the boss go to be dominated by women.

What perpetuates the cycle of violence in Novela negra con argentinos? In order to answer this key question, we must first identify the cause of the text's several role reversals. Valenzuela suggests that Agustín was driven to murder in part because he was attempting to conform to Roberta's wishes that he write with his body, and in part by a desire to avenge his suffering as a victim of oppression while in Argentina. Similarly, Roberta is perceived as Agustin's victim when she deserts her own writing and focuses, instead, on the latter's search for a motive. She is propelled into victimizer and victim roles with Agustín and Bill respectively when she attempts to wreak vengeance upon the former for having involved her in his search. Thus, in short we can say that the protagonists' lack of authentic

desire, a trait common to many of Valenzuela's central characters, fuels their lapses into victim and victimizer roles. We should not find this suprising, for although the author modifies her technique of character presentation in Novela negra con argentinos so as to underscore a need for turning away from vengeance, she remains true to her conviction that one's actions should stem from authentic motivation.

We have previously discussed the theatrical character of Realidad nacional desde la cama in regard to the novel's call for reaction against oppression. In Novela negra con argentinos theatricality again inserts itself in the development of the work's concerns. In response to a question posed during the Cordones-Cook interview as to the possibility of a relationship between Novela negra con argentinos and the idea of "el gran teatro del mundo", Valenzuela replies that she perceives life as theater: "... es que yo creo que la vida es un teatro. ... Siempre estamos de alguna manera en escena, entramos y salimos de escena. Pero, no porque salimos de escena y estamos en algo que no es

la escena, sino porque entramos en otra escena" (120). We have mentioned that the author depicts several forms of theatre within the novel, such as Ionesco's theater of the absurd as well as Artaud's theater of cruelty. Indeed, all of these aid in figuring forth the themes that life is theatre in which we each play a variety of roles in our everyday lives, and that each of us has the capacity to represent the role of oppressor.[13] During the surreal performance given at Edouard's loft, Valenzuela continues to underscore both the theatrical character of reality and the distinction between witnessing and knowing. At this point, the moribund Edouard is placed in a mobile casket that is subsequently manuevered behind a screen so to give an appearance that the dancemaster, himself, is performing:

> Sí, como metido en ese féretro ambulante, vertical, que los muchachos (una obra de amor, iba diciendo Glenn) que los muchachos le fabricaron para crearle un simulacro de actuación con sólo estar allí sentado, masculando la letra do Mon ami Pierrot haciendo como quien canta y

blandiendo o sacudiendo una rosa medio machita,

fláccida, y todos aplaudíamos (188).

It might be suggested that the text at this point poses the question of how or if we can verify the reality underlying the drama of life. In turn, this issue leads us to the political subtext, specifically the manner by which atrocities committed during the Dirty War were covered-up by governmental assurances that nothing illegal occured.

Certainly Luisa Valenzuela's use of scatological elements further carries forth her development of the work's theme. Is her penchant for such references in Novela negra con argentinos merely play and nose-thumbing antics on her part? We would suggest they are not, and that her decision to include them is a transgressive and antipatriarchal act consistent with her notion of the coalesence of opposites in her search for truth. As noted earlier, implicit in the author's claims that we are all potential victimizers, and that victims enacting vengeance may lapse into oppressor roles is a call for thoughtful investigation of opposing viewpoints so as to locate common ground on which to

reconcile differences. It might be suggested that towards this end, Valenzuela employs scatalogical references in an effort to pierce the barriers of one of the last taboos, the bathroom. As Dieter and Jacqueline Rollfinke note in their study on the role of scatology in modern German literature, "For readers and theatergoers, the bedroom is chic, but the bathroom is still in dubious taste" (3). In our contemporary society of increasingly relaxed moral standards and explicit language, the secretions of the human body may represent one of the last taboos.

Valenzuela's technique of juxtaposing scenes containing scatological elements with others that depict threatening aspects of modern reality suggests that the taboo associated with execrement and other body fluids allows us to vent our horror and disgust at various displeasing symptoms of society's ills without fully addressing their causes. In Violence and the Sacred, Rene Girard argues that taboos exist for the purpose of preventing violence. Accordingly, in Novela negra con argentinos Valenzuela proceeds to suggest that what taboos may frequently protect from destruction are

our social and political myths. The author's attempt to shock the reader in this manner could be interpreted as a reaction to society's nonchalance toward its problems.

Two episodes mentioning scatological elements depict Agustín's violent physical reaction to having murdered Edwina. First, his response upon contemplating the horror of his deed is described:

> Para escaparle a la pesadilla se tiró de la cama y gateó hasta el baño. Abrió las dos canillas, se metió en cuatro patas bajo la ducha primero helada y después hirviente. Al principio sin sensación de temperatura, rígido, poco a poco fue aflojando el cuerpo bajo el agua ya tibia, dejándolo descargarse allí en la bañera. De él manó un olor pestilente y quedó como muerto pero ya alivianado, sumergido eu propia mierda, su orina y su semen, inmerso en eso que el correr del agua iba limpiando, reviviéndolo. Tuvo sed, supo que le volvían los reclamos del cuerpo y abrió la boca bien grande, cara al cielo, para que el agua de la ducha también le lavara las entrañas (31-32).

The scene is revisited when Roberta returns for Agustín's clothes and the gun that he used in the crime:

> Primero fue el hedor. El espantoso olor de esa habitación, como una presencia en la penumbra, algo sólido, palpable. Tuvo que obligarse a cerrar la puerta a sus espaldas para no dejar que el olor se escurriera por los pasillos avisando a todos del desastre.
>
> Después tuvo que atravesar la inmundicia, como quien se deja lamer por las lenguas más abyectas, para llegar hasta la ventana. Corrió o más bien arrancó las cortinas y abrió las dos hojas. Que algo de la llamada realidad, el aire, desaloje las miasmas. ...
>
> Las tripas de Agustín se habían dado vuelta como un guante, allí mismo: su física desesperación estaba a la vista, al olfato, al tacto (41).

These two episodes evoke a much stronger response on the part of the reader than does the description of Edwina's murder. In the above instances it can be argued that Valenzuela is utilizing scatological elements to point out modern insensitivity. This technique is observed again when the two

protagonists visit a homeless shelter. Here, they are repulsed by the vomit and stench that surround them, but not by the hopelessness of the shelter's inhabitants: "Me pregunto qué hacemos en este rincón sobre este largo banco de madera contra esta larga mesa de madera toda escupida y volcada y vomitada, todo aquí tan hediondo y nosotros ya sin olfato alguno, impregnados del olor a la nada que nos rodea como un aura" (123). At a later point when Agustín visits Ava Taurel in order to retreive his manuscript, the receptionist encourages him to surrender to his fantasies and sprinkle the blank pages of his manuscript with either his own feces or blood:

> Déjese llevar por sus fantasías, hombre, actúelas, después las fantasías se lo agradecen y vienen a visitarlo cuando usted las necesita. No más páginas en blanco, salpíquelas con su propia sangre. ¿O quizá prefiere una enema? Ava es una excelente enfermera. Se pondrá el delantal, le revisará los oídos, la boca, los ojos, todos los orficios, le pondrá la enema con toda imaginación y con esmero (138).

Does Valenzuela invoke scatological references here for the simple purpose of poking fun at the technique of writing with the body? Surely her motivation is far less innocent given that the novel's political subtext of Argentina's desaparecidos underlies the episodes depicting Ava Taurel's clients who themselves elect to be tortured. It might be suggested that much of the beauty and wealth of Novela negra con argentinos rests upon Valenzuela's exploration of a realm of imagery often ignored. Certainly touching upon topics which are ostensibly taboo has allowed her to dramatically render her theme.

When placed in relation to the rest of Valenzuela's works, Novela negra con argentinos marks a divergence from her trademark call for reaction to oppression towards a desire for reconciliation. Also, it is important to note that its protagonists evolve further than her other central characters in respect to authentically motivated behavior. For this reason, the novel can be seen as relatively hopeful, despite its treatment of death and violence. Accordingly, similarities that exist between "La palabra asesino" of

Cambio de armas and Novela negra con argentinos suggest that the evolution of the protagonists' behavior in the latter is a continuation of a process that was interrupted at the close of "La palabra asesino". As will be recalled, in both works a murderer and his lover are cast as central characters who are each undertaking a process of self-examination; however, the earlier piece closes when Ella admits that she has fallen in love with a murderer. Another characteristic that Novela negra con argentinos shares in common with Valenzuela's earlier works, especially Realidad nacional desde la cama, is its theatricality. We should note, nevertheless, that Valenzuela has rather surreptiously woven theatrical elements into the text of Novela negra con argentinos, as opposed to having conceived its action in dramatic terms, as was the case with Realidad nacional desde la cama.

On several occasions it has been observed that Valenzuela's works to date do not conform to a mode of writing typical of any one canon. Nevertheless, Novela negra con argentinos manifests many qualities that are characteristic of Post-Boom novels. With this work,

Valenzuela appears to line up with writers such as Skarmeta, Allende and Giardinelli, given that she emphasizes a specific sociopolitical problem, conducts a search for both individual and national identities, and parodies an already existing genre. We would like to suggest, however, that her refusal to idealize the oppressed and the accompanying implication that there are no simple solutions to social conflicts continue to distinguish her from many representatives of Post-Boom writing.

# CONCLUSION

The works that have been considered in this investigation are marked by Luisa Valenzuela's overriding preoccupation with victimization in a dehumanized world. Absolute political power, "machista" societies, and language itself are targeted as the culprits of oppression, and in a unique and systematic manner Valenzuela goes about attacking these evils. As we have seen, her exploration of victim-oppressor relationships via a wealth of technical devices has resulted in works that are highly original in regard to their form, as well as to their expression of certain aspects of reality. Hay que sonreír, a social melodrama which reveals the cruel reality experienced by many women in Spanish America, announces the author's concern with both narrative technique and thematic interests. Here, Valenzuela's

emphasis is on the abuse of power and an accompanying lack of reaction on the part of the abused victim against the oppressor. As she narrates the protagonist's life story by means of episodes depicting the latter's relationships with a series of men, Valenzuela sets down the framework for a process of oppression which will be developed more fully in many of her later works. Early testimony in regard to Valenzuela's ability to mirror thematic concerns at a structural level is provided by her creation in Hay que sonreír of a form which suggests both upward and circular motion so to indicate the function of illusion and deception within a process of victimization. Content and structure of the work's dialogues, as well as the use of flashback, irony and ambiguity, and symbolic commentary are further evidence of the narrative skill that she possessed as a young novelist.

The second text in our investigation, Cola de lagartija, occupies a pivotal place in Luisa Valenzuela's career. Having passed through a period of radical experimentation that produced El gato eficaz, Valenzuela enters a

transitional stage in Cola de lagartija, where she combines socio-political concerns with a literary pattern associated with the Boom. When studied in regard to the evolution of the author's fiction, it is at this point that we begin to see a transition from an outlook and set of techniques that show an influence of the Boom to a mode of writing that situates her in the Post-Boom. It bears repeating that the novel's highly ambiguous presentation of reality, its preoccupation with the act and function of writing, and the heavy demands which it makes upon the reader look back to a literary pattern associated with the Boom. Yet, whereas Cola de lagartija unequivocally exhibits linguistic and narratorial experimentation associated with the Boom, it might be argued that it also heads in what can be distinguished as a Post-Boom direction, given its thrust of overt involvement with the socio-political situation in Argentina as well as its emphasis on certain aspects of feminist viewpoint and its ultimate optimism.

The characteristics which we present as relevant to the work's transitional character also permit it to address a

problem raised by the Post-Boom. That is to say, how is a return to old style realism possible after the Boom has attacked our ability to perceive reality as well as the possibility of ever expressing it via language. It might be suggested that Cola de lagartija attempts to solve this dilemma by returning to Spanish American referentiality on the one hand, while on the other continuing to react creatively against old style realism.

Cambio de armas moves Valenzuela closer to a direct political committment. With this novel she also reverses the Boom's tendency to deny love a serious role, given that many of the stories link together love and political activism. Nevertheless, Valenzuela's continued dedication to technical experimentation as well as her sophisticated approach to language once more carry her technique beyond traditional style realism. The following are examples of her efforts within Cambio de armas to address the Post-Boom's problem of returning to a more realistic fiction subsequent to the Boom's critique of realism: 1) an emphasis in "Cuarta versión" of the fictionality of every attempt to describe

reality, 2) the technique of juxtaposing contrasting mind sets in "La palabra asesino", 3) the introduction of the fantastic and the uncanny into the otherwise realistic style of "De noche soy tu caballo", and 4) the use of ambiguity throughout the collection of stories.

In 1990, after a silence of seven years, Luisa Valenzuela published two novels: Realidad nacional desde la cama and Novela negra con argentinos. As we have indicated, her goals in the former are to understand how her countrymen fell vicitim to years of repressive military dictatorship and to caution against a recurrence of the tragedy. While the work exhibits many characteristics of Post-Boom writing, it also attacks our ability to perceive reality and the possibility of expressing it via language. Here, Valenzuela's continued dedication to technical experimentation is crucial to her interrogation of reality. Also noteworthy is her refusal to idealize the victimized townspeople, which in turn suggests a degree of culpability on their part.

In Novela negra con argentinos, Luisa Valenzuela continues to explore the dynamics of victim-oppressor relationships. Here, as we have seen, she presents characters who vacilate between victim and oppressor roles, thereby implying that violence is cyclical and that we each are capable of playing oppressor as well as victim roles. Valenzuela's manner of character presentation, her incorporation of several forms of theater into the work, her use of scatological references, and the work's overall shape are but a few examples of innovations introduced in Novela negra con argentinos. Significantly, Valenzuela's presentation of characters is accompanied by a shift in emphasis from her customary call for reaction against oppression to a warning regarding the pitfalls of revenge, including a plea for reconciliation of opposing viewpoints. It might be suggested that in this regard her position has become less radical.

When we relate these works to earlier and later ones of a similar intent, it is apparent that Luisa Valenzuela's texts do not fit neatly into any one period or canon.

Several factors situate her within a Post-Boom mode of writing: 1) consideration of specific sociopolitical problems, 2) representation of the exile experience, 3) shorter works, 4) a use of colloquial language, 5) an emphasis on certain elements of feminist outlook, and 6) the positing of an ultimately optimistic outlook. As remarked earlier, however, Valenzuela has refrained from returning to old style realism, choosing instead to continue the Boom's tradition of technical renewal. In this respect, she seems to echo the Borgesian notion that we may not be programmed to understand the laws by which the world operates. Also, her belief that there are no easy answers to society's problems is in comformity with the Boom's problematization of reality. Surely, underlying Valenzuela's dedication to experimentation is an awareness that new forms are necessary in order to express her very unique vision of the human condition.

# NOTES

1. Clara's goal of seeing the ocean suggests a need to free herself from oppresive restraints. The ocean, ever-changing and thus constantly purifying itself, would lend itself as a symbol signaling a stagnant society's need for renewal and reassessment.

2. Prostitutes are generally viewed as victims because their bodies are at the disposal of their customers; however, they, themselves, have relinquished their control.

3. In Talking Back, Debra Castillo follows a similar train of thought when she discusses how the exploitation on the part of married middle class women in Latin America towards the women maids who serve them ensures the preservation of a class-gender system. Here she accuses wives, who frequently deploy the rhetoric of feminism, of acting in bad faith, since they only use it (feminist rhetoric) to their advantage, and ignore the exploitation going on in their own homes (13).

4. Although Valenzuela's novels and short stories stem from particular circumstances of brutality in her own country, they also have a wider applicability; for example, the Guatemalan government's torture of members of its Indian populations, or the abuses of power by Chile's military government.

5. In Anti-Oedipus, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that the love of or acquiescence to power is a problem of desire, and not ideology. Individuals desire their own repression when their libidos are cathected to powerful and destructive emotional sources or demagogic leaders, rather than to political groups, ideologies and values which promote their interests.

6. In her article, "Omnipresencia de la censura," Reina Roffé describes this twenty eight year interval during which repressive elements silenced creativity and the uncritical works which filled the void functioned as official propaganda and brainwashing.

7.In an endnote accompanying her article, "'Cuarta versión': Subversion and Narrative Weaponry," Sharon Magnarelli points out

illusions to other fairytales such as "Peter and the Wolf", "Hansel and Gretel". "Snow White" and "Cinderella".

8. Julia Kristeva considers a relationship between desire and a process of victimization in Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abiection. In Kristeva's words, " from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign, it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. ... It is a brutish suffering that 'I' puts to the father's account: I endure it, for I imagine that such is the desire of the other. ... There is nothing like abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (5).

9. In The Will to Power, Nietzche argues that a multiplicity of perspectives provides a richer approach to phenomena than a single perspective: "That the value of the world lies in our interpretation ... that every elevation of man brings with it the overcoming of narrower interpretations; that every strenghtening and increase of power opens up new perspectives and means believing in new horizons—this idea permeates my writings" (330).

10. For a disscussion of the sadistic potential of a language built on agency see Elizabeth Scarry's The Body in Pain.

11. In Talking Back, Debra Castillo discusses the problematics of desire in regards to the protagonist of "Cambio de armas".

12. For a consideration of the use of popular genres in postmodern fiction, see Stefano Tani, The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction, and Theo D'Haen, "Popular Genre Conventions in Postmodern Fiction: The Case of the Western", in Exploring Postmodernism, ed. Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema.

13. Artaud states in The Theater and its Double that the goal of his theater is to expose the latent cruelty which he believes resides in all individuals. (31).

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