

Setting and Adversary: The Role of Nature in Horacio Quiroga's Jungle Tales

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Abstract: *Renowned as the founder of Latin American short stories, Horacio Quiroga is celebrated for his literary exploration of the relationship between man and nature. In his jungle tales, his meticulously precise descriptions depict a jungle world tainted by horror, illness, and suffering in which humanity is deeply immersed. In this context, nature serves both as the setting where characters interact and as the adversary with whom they struggle for survival. This paper seeks to examine the dual role of nature in these tales by analyzing the two functions it performs.*

Keywords: Horacio Quiroga, Jungle tale, Role of nature.

1. Introduction

Horacio Quiroga (1878-1937) is recognized as one of the founders of modern short fiction in Latin America (Jennifer 79). As a follower of the modernistic school founded by Rubén Darío, as well as admirer of Edgar Allan Poe and Guy de Maupassant, Quiroga was attracted to topics covering the most intriguing aspects of nature, often tinged with horror, disease, insanity and human suffering. More than thirty-five years of continuous and rather intense literary activity produced only some dozen published volumes, which almost without exception are based on nature that is rare, unusual, exotic. This choice is of great significance in regard both to the stories and to their writer. It determines the nature and atmosphere of the stories and is the common element which runs through all of the author's work. His jungle short stories, which are rooted in his experiences in Misiones, portray a jungle world rife with conflicts between man and nature—a theme that has marked Latin American literature since the Conquest (Abreu Mendoza 303).

Though nature as an expressive element of narrative is common in Latin American novels and short stories, Quiroga stands out for his vivid representation of life in the jungle and his unique style that intertwines realism and fantasy. In his famous study *La novela latinoamericana*, Carlos Fuentes identifies this Uruguayan author as a pivotal figure in “the transition from old naturalist and documentary literature to the new diversified, critical, and ambiguous novel” (Fuentes 24).

Since nature is a prominent element in Quiroga's works, numerous studies have been conducted on this subject. Many critics agree that Quiroga's successful depiction of nature and its relationship with man is largely attributed to his experiences in the jungles of Misiones. According to Quiroga's development as a writer (Monegal 11-13), it is during his time in Misiones that his literary production reaches maturity. However, there is some discrepancy about the role nature plays in his stories. Charles Param believes that Quiroga “used Nature only as a backdrop for the action, and the action as a means for the revelation or development of the character of his personages” (Param 428). On the other hand, Coester suggests, “Nature is really the chief personage in his stories. It is she who defeats man and beast in their struggle for survival” (428).

This paper will argue for the role of nature as both the backdrop in which the characters interact and the adversary they face. In other words, nature is not only the catalyst for the protagonists to reach their potential but also a world they are immersed in and an adversary they must constantly struggle with in order to survive. By closely examining the realistic descriptions of the Misiones landscape and the secularized perspective that dismisses the embellishments of Romantic and Modernist aesthetics, this discussion demonstrates that nature in Quiroga's work is not an abstract or decorative element. Instead, it is an active, multifaceted space that constitutes the essential survival setting and shapes the destiny and inner life of its inhabitants.

2. Nature as the Character's Backdrop

Quiroga's jungle stories form a system of interconnected short tales, with the living nature of the jungle as the central axis of the narratives. These elements of the jungle unite the stories, situating them within the same environment. In this sense, nature serves as the backdrop where the characters interact. However, unlike in other short stories where nature is merely a backdrop to add exoticism to the tale, Quiroga's descriptions are deeply rooted in his personal experiences, making the natural world a critical element of his storytelling. In these stories, the jungle constitutes the very environment in which the protagonists live and struggle: This role is supported, on the one hand, by the realistic description and, on the other, by the secular perspective of the storyteller. By describing frontier nature, Quiroga's narrative technique is distinct in that he transforms the jungle from a mere scenic backdrop into a dynamic, living environment that directly influences the fate of its characters, leaving an imprint of his own jungle exploration within his stories. He draws from the raw material of his own life, transferring his jungle experiences into his literary creation. At the same time, Quiroga pays more attention to the fate of the characters than to the sublime nature itself.

2.1 Realistic Description: Discovering Nature in Misiones

Quiroga's jungle stories are grounded in the realistic description of the jungle. These descriptions, rooted in reality, form the foundation of his jungle world. Readers are drawn into the fantasy of the work, often overlooking the practicality

of the materials that build it. As Zum Felde notes, "...the extraordinary, the mysterious, the magical, but within everyday reality, which is its uniqueness, remain the fundamental qualities of his jungle fictions" (Zum Felde 11). This assertion encapsulates the essence of Quiroga's approach: his portrayal of nature is deeply anchored in the tangible realities of the Misiones landscape.

Let us take *Drifting* as an example, a story that stands out for its realistic portrayal of the jungle, creating an almost documentary-like image. Quiroga writes:

The Paraná there cuts through the depths of a great ravine whose walls, a hundred meters high, enclose the river in funereal shadow. From the shores, bordered by black blocks of basalt, ascends the forest, also black. Ahead, as well as upstream, the eternal lugubrious ramparts darken the whirling muddy river, ceaselessly boiling and bubbling. The landscape is menacing, and a deathlike silence reigns. At dusk, nevertheless, its somber and quiet beauty assumes a unique majesty.

This passage exemplifies how detailed observations give the reader an almost tangible sense of the setting. The narrator, positioned in both a real and unreal plane, presents a mysterious space through almost documentary language, with an objective and truthful attitude. These precise and concrete descriptions, measuring the heights of cliffs and emphasizing the somber color palette, allow the reader to gain an almost exact vision of the captivating nature, making the reader a participant in experiencing the jungle not as a generalized idea of nature but as a real, lived environment that imposes both beauty and danger on its inhabitants.

Knowing a territory through experience, from a frontier area to which urban readers had no access, is a hallmark of the writer's style. In the jungle tales, Quiroga masterfully presents a mysterious and dangerous jungle world, one that might be unfamiliar to many readers but is an accurate reflection of his everyday reality in Misiones. Quiroga first encountered this area in 1903, after a failed attempt to find belonging in Paris, where he could not find his place. After several comings and goings, he ended up buying a farm in Misiones along the Paraná River, officially settling there. His literary exploration is directly linked to his life in the jungle, fueling his great passion and providing raw material. The direct encounters with the harsh and unpredictable realities of jungle life imbued his narratives with an experiential authenticity that many of his contemporaries lacked. It serves as the medium that creates the sense of exposure necessary for his artistic pursuit.

In 1959, the Argentine critic Noé Jitrik analyzed the two main schools of literary criticism regarding Quiroga—biographical and metaphysical interpretations—and concluded that Quiroga's originality lies in his "close connection with the disposition for experience" (Jitrik 113). By addressing the theme of nature, it becomes clear how the natural elements influenced Quiroga's life. His time amid lush vegetation was a powerful stimulus. This intimate knowledge of the landscape is not only reflected in the meticulous details of his prose but also in the emotional and psychological depth of his characters, whose fates are irrevocably intertwined with the

natural environment. Thus, nature in his stories comes to life because the jungle world is based on his daily life rather than being the product of mere inspiration or imagination. For example, when in *Anaconda*, the vipers who attend the congress of the snakes are described, thorough knowledge of their classification and habits is displayed:

It was there, consequently, where, in view of the imminence of the danger and presided over by the rattlesnake, the Congress of Vipers met. There were there, besides Lanceolada and Terrifica, the other yararas of the country: the little Coatiarita, Benjamin of the Family, with the reddish line of his sides and his particularly sharp head very evident. There negligently stretched out, as if it were a matter of anything except displaying for admiration the white and coffee-colored curves of its back against bands of salmon, lay the slender Neuwied, a model of beauty and who had preserved for itself the name of the scientist who had determined its species...

Some critics argue that Quiroga's depictions of the jungle are overly pessimistic or one-dimensional, suggesting that his portrayal might neglect the potentially harmonious aspects of nature. However, such critiques often rely on a Romanticized view of nature that emphasizes idealized beauty over harsh reality. In contrast, Quiroga's descriptions are purposefully unembellished, aiming instead to capture the dual nature of the jungle as both a source of life and a harbinger of death. By rejecting the notion of nature as an exclusively benevolent force, Quiroga's work challenges the reader to confront the raw truth of existence in an environment that is as unforgiving as it is magnificent.

2.2 Secularized Perspective: Nature Is Neither Beautiful nor Divine

Also noteworthy is the secularization of nature in Quiroga's works. Despite the prominence of nature in his stories, Quiroga often denies the experience of the sublime as conceptualized during Romanticism.

While many literary traditions, particularly those influenced by Romanticism and Modernism, have historically imbued nature with aesthetic or even divine qualities, Quiroga's work decisively rejects such interpretations. In his narratives, nature is portrayed in its bare, unvarnished form—devoid of any supernatural or elevated aesthetic dimensions. In the 19th century, explorers used adjectives like "colossal", "majestic" and "celestial" to associate the experience of Latin American nature with the sublime. Foundational figures such as Andrés Bello and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento perpetuated the sublime as the hegemonic lens through which Latin American landscapes were observed and written about (Abreu Mendoza 304).

This preference for formal perfection in describing nature is also a constant in modernist works. For instance, the Argentine modernist Leopoldo Lugones, who wrote about the Misiones jungle before Quiroga, emphasizes the aesthetic qualities of nature. His descriptions focus on form and the visual aspects of the plants (Escalante n.pag.). Similarly, in the poetry and narratives of Rubén Darío, nature is portrayed as a space devoted to art and beauty, aligning with modernism's desire for artistic autonomy.

In contrast to modernists who place art above nature, Quiroga does not present nature as a passive muse that stirs the imagination. Rather than being enchanted by the jungle, he actively pursues its harshness: he discovered and chose, against his own interests, a frontier world that exposed him to its raw realities. The narrator does not retreat but instead recreates the harshest, most gloomy aspects of nature. According to Escalante, Quiroga goes beyond the sublime as an aesthetic category: “The jungle of Misiones is not an object but a world in which man is immersed and which ultimately dominates him; there is no ‘aesthetic’ distance between man and it” (Escalante n.pag.). This distance is central to understanding the sublime in nature because it allows readers to be attracted to nature’s beauty without confronting its terror. In Quiroga’s narrative, however, there is no such buffer; man is exposed directly to the horror of nature.

In Quiroga’s jungle fictions, there is no room for the stylized aesthetics of Romanticism or Modernism, nor is there any divine presence. While Romantic and Modernist poets have long celebrated the aesthetic dimensions of nature, they often do so at the expense of acknowledging its inherent dangers. Quiroga’s work, by contrast, presents a more holistic view: one that recognizes that the same forces that create beauty can also be responsible for profound suffering and death. By refusing to indulge in a sanitized version of nature, Quiroga forces his readers to confront the harsh realities of life on the frontier, thereby deepening the narrative’s emotional and philosophical impact. Quiroga does not offer metaphysical explanations for nature; he does not invoke a divine force. Nature is not divine—it is simply nature. As exemplified in *Drifting*, one of Quiroga’s paradigm stories, the narrative does not end in Hades or the afterlife but with the mere physical cessation of a man’s breath.

3. Nature as the Adversary of the Character

Quiroga does not limit himself to presenting nature merely as a backdrop for the character. When addressing the relationship between man and nature, Quiroga emphasizes nature’s power and presents an unequal struggle that often ends in human defeat. Here, nature is not only a passive element of the setting; it is an active force that confronts characters with danger, unpredictability, and often, a fatal outcome. In his jungle tales, the omnipresence of the jungle suggests that nature itself exists as a co-protagonist alongside man. As Adreu Mendoza notes, “Nature is no longer an impressionistic fresco of nocturnal desolation but assumes a more active role throughout the narrative” (310). Straying, injury, misery, failure, hunger, death, animal attacks—all of these in Quiroga’s works suggest a confrontation between nature and man, much like the ancient Greek conflicts between man and fate. Natural forces not only form the elements of the backdrop but also test human will. In this sense, nature becomes the adversary that the protagonists must overcome in order to survive.

3.1 Unequal Struggle Between Nature and Man

While it is true that nature can offer resources and shelter, Quiroga’s focus remains on its overwhelming power to subdue and destroy. The selective emphasis on nature’s hostile aspects is not a distortion but a deliberate narrative

choice that reflects the harsh realities of frontier life. By concentrating on the moments of confrontation and the instances where human beings are rendered insignificant, Quiroga’s work provides a more honest and unromanticized account of the relationship between man and his environment. In these tales, nature is a relentless, combative force that challenges the protagonists’ mere existence, and they are not portrayed as conventional heroes, but rather as “outcasts”. They appear with a biological drive to survive in a world defined by basic tensions. The insignificance and fragility of the characters stand in stark contrast to the harsh and primitive forces of nature. Elements such as raging water currents, extreme climates like scorching heat, and dangerous wild animals like snakes highlight the limitations and vulnerability of human beings. As Jitrik observes, “For Quiroga, nature is harsh and combative. If man waited passively for it to provide ecstasy or the abyssal sensation of being, he would be devoured by vipers, or by giant ants, or by bugs and insects” (Jitrik 96). Different from writers such as Rubén Darío and Leopoldo Lugones, who often celebrate the aesthetic and transformative aspects of nature, Quiroga’s depiction is marked by a sense of fatalism. His characters are not exalted by nature’s beauty; rather, they are constantly reminded of their own fragility when confronted with its overwhelming forces. For this Uruguayan writer, nature is the chief character and man is a secondary one. Nature is inimical to man, relentless in its hostility. Man must struggle ceaselessly against it. The struggle between man and nature has something about it of the age-old struggle between good and evil. Man fights for progress and civilization, resisted by the elemental forces. Thus, the conflict is depicted as inherently unequal, where human frailty is starkly exposed against the vast, indifferent power of the jungle. Quiroga writes:

Now he was stretched out on the grass, resting on his right side just the way he liked. His mouth, which had flown open, had closed again. He was as he had wanted to be, his knees doubled and his left hand over his breast. Except that behind his forearm, immediately below his belt, the handle and half the blade of his machete protruded from his shirt; the remainder was not visible.

It is also important to note that Quiroga’s jungle does not always appear roaring and furious. On the contrary, it often deceives man with the illusion of stillness, giving him a false impression of being harmless. The stillness of the space and the limitless horizon make the character overlook the hidden dangers of nature. As Leonidas Morales notes, without hearing the dull heartbeat of threat, the character inhabits the jungle as though it were the vestibule to his death (74). This deceptive vulnerability of nature is evident in *La miel silvestre*: “The twilight and silent woods soon tired him. He had the exact impression—correct as it was—of a scene viewed during the day. From the bustling tropical life, there was only the frozen theater; no animal, no bird, not even a noise” (Quiroga, n.pag.). The protagonist thus underestimates the dangers of the jungle, emptying the honey from small beehives he finds, unaware that it will poison and kill him.

3.2 Definitive Defeat of Man

This emphasis on the power of nature reflects a key element of Quiroga’s storytelling: to tell a survival story whose outcome

is inevitably doomed. José Enrique Etcheverry points out that Quiroga “removes all abstract character: more than the theme of death, it is that of the man-who-is-dying, the passionate actor of his definitive fate” (269). Quiroga employs highly detailed descriptions that evoke the overwhelming power of the jungle. Nature suddenly unleashes the disaster that strikes the protagonist, and no matter how hard he tries to reject death, he is inevitably heading toward a fatal end. For instance, in the confrontation between Mister Jones and his dogs against the burning sun in *Sunstroke*, no matter how much effort Mister Jones exerts to resist the oppressive heat, or how the dogs bark to fend off the ghost of death, they are always defeated by the nature overwhelming:

Then the dogs understood that it was all over; their patrón continued to walk straight ahead like an automaton, oblivious to everything. Now the figure was upon him. The dogs lowered their tails and scurried sideways, still howling. A second passed and the encounter was effected. Mister Jones stopped dead, spun in a circle, and fell to the ground. The peons, who had seen him fall, hurriedly carried him to the house, but all the water in the world was useless; he died without regaining consciousness. (Quiroga, n.pag.)

Just as the heat is burning, so the cold is sometimes freezing, and also a threat against man’s life. The changes of temperature in one day are great, and men die of exposure in the night that follows a day of heat. In *El yaciyateré*, we are told that “In Misiones, with a summer storm, the temperature changes easily from 40 degrees to 15 degrees, and in a single quarter of an hour. No one gets sick because that’s the way the country is, but people die of the cold.”

The river, too, generally the Alto Parana, is a menace to man’s peace and safety. It is fair to say that in them the river has the importance that the horse has in the stories of the pampa. In flood it may wash away his wealth, upset his boat and kill him. When low, it hinders transport and travel. The vagaries of the river inspire the whole story of *In the Middle of the Night*. It tells how a young woman, carrying her husband, who had been stung by a ray, to help, rowed for twenty hours against the swollen Parana. She rowed until her hands “soaked her handles of the oars with blood and serous water” but saved her husband and became famous for her feat. Such language underscores the relentless and destructive nature of this element, suggesting that nature’s currents are capable of devouring life without any trace of mercy. It is more a resistance to the relentlessness of nature than a fight against it.

Another example that draws attention to man’s struggle with the river can be found in *Drifting*. Once bitten by a serpent, the protagonist, Paulino, embarks on a journey toward death, surrounded by nature that seems to present a funeral atmosphere. The Paraná River “plunges into incessant whirlpools of muddy water”; the river’s walls “enclose it mournfully”; the current “carried his canoe swiftly adrift,” and the landscape “reigned with a deathly silence” (Quiroga, n.pag.). The physical environment itself—characterized by seemingly tranquil yet deceptive stillness—contributes to the overall sense of vulnerability. This deceptive aspect is crucial in understanding the unequal nature of the struggle: while nature may at times appear benign, it conceals dangers that are lethal and insidious. Death arrives, but nothing changes in

nature. It seems to shine even more in this final moment of the character’s life: “The sky, to the west, opened now in a screen of gold,” “the jungle let fall upon the river its twilight coolness in penetrating scents of orange blossom and wild honey,” and “its gloomy and calm beauty takes on a unique majesty.” After devouring life, nature resumes its disguise, pretending to be beautiful and serene.

The definitive defeat of man by nature in Quiroga’s narratives echoes existential themes found in classical mythologies, where the struggle against nature becomes a metaphor for the human condition. Man’s confrontation with the jungle is akin to a struggle against fate itself—an inevitability that ultimately leads to his undoing. Yet, unlike the capricious gods of myth, the jungle in Quiroga’s tales operates without malice or favoritism. Its indifference is the very essence of its power, mirroring modern existentialist ideas about the absurdity of human struggle against an uncaring universe.

4. Conclusion

A true storyteller cannot help but be a creator of worlds. That world may be vast (as in the case of Balzac or Dickens), covering an entire society or reconstructing an era, but it can also be a confined world, one that reflects only a single aspect of reality. Horacio Quiroga belongs to the latter category. He creates a jungle world by revealing the conflict between man and nature. In Quiroga’s writings, nature is not a static backdrop; it is a dynamic adversary that continuously challenges the protagonist’s right to exist.

Through a realistic depiction of the Misiones jungle, Quiroga transforms nature into a vivid, almost tactile presence. The detailed environmental descriptions, supported by historical and ecological data, immerse the reader in a landscape scientifically verifiable. Moreover, the secularized view challenges established literary conventions, forcing a confrontation with the stark realities of life in an unpredictable and indifferent natural world. The realistic and secularized portrayal presents a jungle far away from the traditional idealized or divine landscape.

Nature ceases to be an image modified and corrected by art to be considered beautiful; instead, it is the everyday reality the characters must face. The relentless, indifferent force of the jungle confirms that human beings, in their quest for survival, are constantly pitted against an environment: it is not about spiritual self-realization; it is about physical survival. It is a force that embodies both the beauty and the brutality of existence—a duality that challenges the human spirit and underscores the inescapable reality of fate, revealing a complex interplay between the apparent calm and the underlying threat. The character’s struggle against these natural forces is not portrayed as an equal contest but rather as a battle where the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against human endeavor. The moments of definitive defeat underscore that human effort can never alter the predetermined course of destiny.

Therefore, Quiroga transforms the jungle into the very arena of survival, a setting where the struggle for life is constantly marked by the tension between human aspiration and the indomitable power of nature, which is not only constitutes the

environment in which the protagonists exist and survive, but it is also but a dynamic and omnipotent adversary they must overcome. In the duality of nature's role lies the irresistible allure of the jungle stories of this Uruguayan writer.

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