

## The Feast of the Goat

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A highly acclaimed novel, often being compared with the very best of 20th century Latin American novels. Its subject is the corrupted tyrannical regime of the Dominican Republic and its downfall.

The chronology of the narrative is split. Initially this creates some confusion, as does the many very long names, which makes it hard to distinguish between as well as remembering the various actors of the plot; but in the end this disrupted temporal sequence turns out to be a masterly stroke, keeping up suspense, and allowing a multiple point of view. However, the initial pages read like a cheap thriller, replete with the standard tricks of the trade, among them the tired reference to so called telling details, but without the 'poetry' that makes it come alive. In fact one does not get a good feel for the Dominican Republic. What kind of place is it? References to Haiti, makes the suggestion that it is only a notch above. But of everyday misery there are few suggestions, only brief allusions to ragged shoeshine boys, as the gallery of characters all belong to the economical elite. Furthermore, although the action of the drama is taking place both in 1961 and thirty-five years later, there is no sense that the passage of time has changed the feel. But such things the author may take for granted, along with his intended readers, as obvious back-ground material; he surely is, like Kundera in his Czech novels, more concerned with abstract ideas than mere ambience.

The point of the novel is an analyzation of power and its corrupting influence, in spite of the best of intentions. After all Trujillo, who runs the one-man show, is referred to as the Benefactor. And did he not do great things for the country. Making the streets safe for walking, setting a stop to Haitian infiltration, securing an orderly society with definite economic progress, establishing the independence of the country. Surely those are great things, and the prize for some restriction of Human Rights certainly is not too outrageous a prize to be paid for such benefits? Or is it?

The deep question is how can a single man acquire such power? Trujillo is presented as charismatic, with a penetrating gaze, holding his subordinates in awe, each of them vying for his approval, and scheming among themselves for being blessed with his magnificence. A man like a succesful dictator needs to possess a number of virtues, chief among them a capacity for hard work and an instinctive intuition for the psychology of human actors, knowing exactly whom to play against the other. One of the techniques of ensuring loyalty is incrimination, being entangled in the dirty work, you become a hostage. A dictator also needs a vision. A man with a vision, and with the will and the energy to pursue it, can be a very dangerous man. (One is reminded of Nehru, who once wrote a letter warning about the danger of he becoming a dictator. A letter that perplexed the people around him, eventually deciding to treat it as a self-mocking joke.)

But a man with power, surrounded by meek subordinates, becomes infused with an inflated idea of himself. The only thing that threatens the bloated self-esteem is the

threat of old age, ill-health and death. In the case of Trujillo this involves not only his physical fitness (of which he is very proud) but also his sexual powers, the need of which to be constantly reconfirmed (not only due to the curse of an enlarged prostate and the involuntary, and hence humiliating. incontinence this causes) puts on him the onerous duty of deflowering young girls. What surely is meant to be seen as the high-light of the novel, the climax to which all the suspense has been building, the statutory rape, perpetrated by the Dictator himself on the novels protagonist - the gifted and succesful international lawyer Urania, at her tender age of fourteen, is clearly meant as an allegory of a country and a people being ravaged by a tyrant.

For all its apparent benefits, tyranny is eventually undercut by a developing narcissism, turning reality into a mere phantom of wish-fulfilment. In its wake there grows corruption, and the unbridled excesses of beneficiaries, more and more restricted to a narrowing family clan. In spite of the homage paid to and the admiration most certainly sincerely felt, even the most ardent supporters eventually become disaffected, some of them to the point of desperation. The thriller element of the novel is the ambush in the middle of the night of Trujillo speeding in his car to yet another rendez-vous with a young girl at his kitschy retreat. The assassination is succesful, as far as leaving the tyrant littered on the road, shred to pieces by a showering of bullets; but in the aftermath everything founders.

Why does it founder, and here we comes to the most powerful and painful part of the whole novel. The head of the Armed forces was supposed to have acted as soon as he saw the dead body. But he vacillates, letting the one opportunity after the other slip away, while desperately trying to rationalize his passivity, until it is too late. This is very painful to read, as you are able to sympathize. This weakness in not taking the plunge (so little was needed of him, everything was laid out for him) and performing a few decisive acts. This is in fact far more painful to read than anything else in the novel, including the sexual molestation of the protagonist as a young girl refered to above, or the horrendous torture he is later submitted to and described in graphic detail, or the hunting down of the assassins (sson to be hailed as heroes). All of that gripping and disgusting as it is, does however not touch you so deeply as the indecisiveness of the general, because in that indecisiveness you get to the existential core of constituting a moral human being, namely the need to take decisions, commit yourself to them and finally to act upon them.

In a way the story has a happy ending. Ironically the most submissive of all the actors, the poet and the puppet President, takes advantage of the constitutional legality of his position to act with skill and courage in the vaccum created by the death of the dictator. Slowly, imperceptively so, he steers the country upon a new course, a more democratic one, little by little shedding the trappigs and insignia of the old regime, including reverting back to original names for the capital and its main landmarks. Clearly this developement is possible only because of the incompetence and greedy corruption of the rest of the Trujillo clan, lacking the energy, the discipline, the vision and skill of its former head. But the timid poet makes one great concession, maybe from a realistic point of view inevitable, to let the sons and their cohorts have their cruel revenge on the perpetrators, the guilty as well as the totally innocent. It is a sad irony that those who have let the most blood and acted in the most outrageous way, are usually the ones who in the end get away with it, being for reasons of expediency rather bought off and marginalized than brought to

justice. But what in this world is not sacrificed for the sake of peace?

As initially remarked, the novel fails to give a sense of place, but this never being the major intention of the author, it should be forgiven. What is somewhat harder to forgive is the inability to infuse with life and individuality, the various actors of the drama, who barely transcend being mere cardboard figures. The sheer number of them, as well as their long and confusing names, probably makes this inevitable, but more seriously in the cases when quite a lot of descriptive energy is being applied to a few key characters the effect of it nevertheless ending up disappointing. As a major novelist the author should know that the delineation of a character is always done obliquely, when trying too hard, you will often fail miserably. This in particular applies to the character of the Dictator himself that only comes across as a caricature, whose eventual fate fails to move you. Ironically the one character who comes across as most alive, in spite of being treated almost peripherally, is the general who loses his nerve. This is because he is made to embody a basic human trait, namely indecision at a critical moment. And his very indecision thrown into relief by the specific situation, that of overthrow, to which the main work of the novel has been dedicated to, makes him come alive in a very general sense, freed from spuriously detailed descriptions. That general is neither good nor evil, but by not acting at the crucial moment he goes beyond both, finding himself in a vacuum, where time is no longer linear and temporal, but disjointed and incoherent. The chapter that describes his ordeal, is in my opinion, the high-light of the novel, elevating it from being merely competent one to one that will stay with you indefinitely.

Finally there is a difference between a historical and factual narrative and a fictionalized one. The latter invariably engages you more. A straight historical narrative becomes too often a mere chronology, documented from the outside, and thus at first encounter inexplicable to you. For all its flaws this historical novel is no exception, it whets your appetite, and encourages you to get the facts straight and seek out an actual historical record to supply a supporting skeleton to the flesh provided.