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Introduction To Rulfo's Naming Techniques In Pedro Paramo

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The popular Mexican author, Juan Rulfo, published his novel, *Pedro Páramo*, in 1955. The work concerns the years following the Mexican Revolution of 1910 in the west-central region of the country, in the states of Jalisco and Colima. Rulfo is a native of this region and has used his first-hand experiences in his fiction. He also has an abiding interest in genealogy and in Mexican cultural history, which has added to his literary authenticity.

The area of Jalisco in which Rulfo lived and which he describes in his work is a discouraging place, harshly treated by the forces of nature. Various programs for the improvement of the region met with little success, and many people left to seek better conditions elsewhere. Rulfo thus presents his readers with one of several rural Mexicos, the one he knows best.
It is a forbidding place seemingly remote from modern life. Villages were being depopulated or abandoned. The Revolution and its promise of agrarian reform did not seem to benefit the area. Rulfo employs in his work his knowledge of the people of the region—Indians, poor mestizos, rural workers and peasants. He scrutinizes the psychology of Jaliscans, analyzes their climate of violence, employs their language and local color, studies their problems and shows the desolation of their isolated rural life, applying these specifics to the universal human condition.²

Rulfo's use of Mexican Indian myth, legend and language is seen throughout his novel. His naming techniques are also important in their contribution to the tone and content of the work. He uses a rather psychological onomastic approach, with emphasis on connotations. His names are often attributive, underscoring the personality traits of his characters.

The basic plot of the work concerns the life of Pedro Páramo, a powerful Mexican land baron, and the control he exerts over the town he virtually owns. The lives of all the characters in the novel are touched in various ways by Pedro Páramo. The plot is developed gradually through a series of flashbacks revealing the nostalgic memories of several of the characters. Throughout the work, naming techniques play an important role.
The setting for the novel _Pedro Páramo_ is the town of Comala, near the border between the states of Colima and Jalisco in west-central Mexico, in the vicinity of the towns of Colima, Sayula and Contla. Such place names do occur in Mexico, but Rulfo has fictionalized his locales. The name Comala is derived through the Mexican Indian (Aztec/Nahuatl) language:

Comala: _comatli_ = sobre el fuego (over the fire)

_ Comal_ = yermo, páramo (barren land).

According to the nostalgic recollections of some of the characters, Comala was once a rich, lush and fertile place but, as it gradually came under the domination of Pedro Páramo and fell victim to his rage, it became desolate and unproductive. Rulfo here may be criticizing the control of rich landowners, who stripped the once fertile Indian lands of Mexico and altered the landscape for their own profit.

The ranch which Pedro Páramo owns is called Media Luna (Half Moon); this suggests the shape of the scythe or machete used in farming. It also suggests the cusps of the moon, a shadowy area which does not really exist and which disappears when the moon grows full. It further connotes the idea of a place which is somehow unreal. Comala itself has this nebulous nature and a dual character; once a fertile Paradise, it has become a hot, barren and desolate Hell, inhabited by the dead and their memories. The reader gradually becomes aware of the
fact that Comala is indeed a "ghost town," literally and figuratively.

The title of the novel itself is the name of its protagonist, the Mexican patrón called Pedro Páramo. Rulfo had considered other titles for the work: "Una estrella junto a la luna" ("A star next to the moon") or "Los murmillos" ("The whispers, murmurs"). The latter is particularly appropriate, as it refers to the mutterings of the mysterious or deceased characters in the novel, the constant hum of background noises. But Rulfo finally decided to use the name of the principal character for the title of the novel, which gradually unfolds the life story of the protagonist.

The name Pedro Páramo is alliterative; I believe it is significant that Rulfo chose Pedro rather than several other possible first names, such as Paco, Pancho, Pablo or Pepe, which would have created a similar sound effect. The name Pedro Páramo is particularly appropriate to the personality of a powerful land baron:

Pedro -- piedra -- petra -- rock, stone, hardness (dual nature: reference to St. Peter -- sturdy, reliable, firm foundation)
Páramo -- páramo, yermo -- paramus -- high, bleak plain; deserted, barren land; wilderness; cold region; drizzle/blizzard.

This underscores the desolation suggested by the name of the town
Comala itself; the name of the protagonist becomes a symbol of the region and synonymous with the rancor, resentment, hatred, frustration and unsatisfied love which comprise the central theme of the work. It is ironic that although his name suggests barrenness, Pedro Páramo fathers many children, albeit haphazardly. As he ages, it is his emotional spirit which seems to turn ever more barren; this is mirrored by the decay of the town.

Indeed, Pedro Páramo and Comala become almost identical or interchangeable; the similarity in the meanings of the names is not accidental. The existence of Pedro Páramo is central to the work and to the town. Like Comala, the patrón has a dual nature. In flashbacks, we see him as a young boy affected by the deaths of his father and grandfather. We see his enjoying some of the natural beauties of the once lovely Comala. And we see him romantically and poetically involved with the only woman he ever really loved. However, when this woman left, Pedro turned his attention to control of his land and gradually became more and more powerful and ruthless. Years later, the woman returned, became a victim of insanity and eventually died. The town did not show proper respect at her death, in Pedro's opinion, and he determined to ignore the area and let it die. He thus abandoned his role of patrón, beneficial master of a productive region, and allowed Comala to become a wasteland. With the passage of time, both the town and Pedro Páramo lost their youthful
beauty, vigor and dreams.

The second major character in the novel is Pedro Páramo's only son through a legally recognized marriage. We do not learn his name until well into the story, since at first he appears only as "yo narrador" ("I, the narrator"). He is eventually identified as Juan Preciado, son of Pedro Páramo and Dolores Preciado. Although Dolores was legally married to Pedro, neither she nor her son used the family name of Páramo. Dolores left Pedro soon after the birth of their son, who was raised away from Comala. As she was dying years later, Dolores directed her son to return to Comala to claim his rightful inheritance from his father. This is how the novel actually begins -- with Juan Preciado on his journey in search of his father; all that we learn of Pedro Páramo is through the questioning Juan conducts among the people he meets, in his quest for his father.

The name of Juan Preciado has some interesting connotations. Juan (John) is a very common name, suggesting the average fellow or "everyman." Juan is only one of many sons engendered by Pedro Páramo, although he has the distinction of being recognized as legitimate. We should also note the fact that Juan is the name of the author himself; Rulfo was, at one point in his life, an orphan in search of his own family roots. Preciado means valued, precious, excellent. This is somewhat ironic, as neither Juan nor his mother was appreciated by Pedro Páramo; as we have noted, neither of them used the Páramo family name.
Dolores Preciado was a wealthy young woman of Comala who had inherited land from her father. She was delighted when the young, strong and handsome Pedro Paramo married her. She did not learn until later that he had done so only to gain control of her lands. His harsh attitude toward her eventually caused her to leave him, taking their son with her, to live with her sister in another town, where they were not really wanted either. The name Dolores means sorrows, often referring to those of a mother. Dolores' life was certainly full of grief and disappointments. She always used the name Preciado (valued) rather than Páramo (barren), although she was legally married to Pedro. Although she herself was never appreciated by her husband, it is significant that her memories of Comala are nostalgic, emphasizing the fertility of the area; she never saw it after it had become barren and desolate. It was her image of Comala that was impressed upon the mind of Juan Preciado, which contrasted so sharply with the Comala he eventually found and in which he died.

Another important character in the novel is Abundio Martinez. His last name is a very common one, in this case his mother's surname. His first name suggests abundance, which is appropriate because he is another of the many sons of Pedro Páramo, most of whom are engendered out of wedlock. Abundio is the first person Juan Preciado meets as he nears Comala, at a place significantly called "Los Encuentros".
("The Encounters, Meetings"). We learn from Abundio the description of Pedro Páramo as "un rencor vivo" = a living anger, rage. Abundio was a muleteer, one of the few people able to move freely in and out of Comala; he therefore served as a messenger. He apparently became deaf in later years. Abundio was happily married to a woman named Refugio la Cuca (Sweet Refuge), although they were very poor and had lost a child. Refugio eventually became very ill and died. The grief-stricken Abundio got drunk and then had the idea to go to his father, the patrón, to ask for money to bury his wife. Pedro had never recognized Abundio as his son and had never aided him. Once again, he refused to help. Abundio was desperate and enraged; he stabbed Pedro Páramo and was promptly arrested.

Pedro Páramo was, however, mortally wounded. He thought to himself that he was used to seeing some part of himself die every day, but now he knew he was truly dying. He received no aid from the men who had captured Abundio; only a servant was with him. He fell down against the ground without uttering a sound and crumbled to pieces as if he were a heap of stones (a reminiscent echo of his name). Abundio as representative of the common, neglected man of Mexico had destroyed the powerful, ungiving land baron who had exerted such domination over his life. This suggests the uprising of the Mexican people against the tyranny of the rich. Rulfo's sympathies are with
the poor, as he criticizes the Mexican Revolution for its failure to aid them adequately.

Miguel Páramo is another important character in the novel, another illegitimate son of Pedro Páramo. His mother died when he was an infant, after she had told the local priest that Pedro Páramo was the father of the child. The priest therefore brought the infant to Pedro Páramo and challenged him to accept his duty to raise the child. Pedro never denied the paternity and, wishing to prove that he could raise a child responsibly, he accepted the boy as his heir. Miguel Páramo grew to be the only son recognized by Pedro, who granted to him his every wish. He was a wild, uncontrollable youth who constantly chased after women. Miguel died one night when he fell from his horse while riding to a rendezvous. The horse was symbolically named Colorado (Red-colored), suggesting passion, blood and death.

The name Miguel (Michael) is rather ironic, with its biblical references to the archangel, a leader against the devil, one who is like God. This is in striking contrast to Miguel's own personality in the novel. It is interesting to note that the name of Pedro's father was Lucas Páramo; the first name suggests such biblical connotations as light, teacher, apostle, friend of Paul; but it is also related to the name Lucifer (Bringer of light), the proud, fallen angel who became a devil.
Rulfo seems to employ rather frequently this technique of names with an ironic or dual connotation.

Padre Rentería, another important character, was the local priest who brought the infant Miguel to Pedro Páramo. The name Rentería suggests productive land, property, rent or income. It may refer to the fact that the priest frequently overlooked the evils Pedro Páramo committed in Comala because of the financial contributions the landowner occasionally made to the church. Padre Rentería suffered in his conscience because he did not fulfill his moral or religious duties as best he might. He felt hatred for Miguel Páramo because the youth was rumored to have been the one who killed the priest's brother and violated his niece. When Miguel died, Padre Rentería at first refused to bless the body at the funeral. But then he felt guilty because he was the one who had turned the infant Miguel over to be raised by the evil Pedro; he had never tried to stop the landowner in his cruel ways. He had believed that Miguel would turn to evil because of the "bad blood" he had inherited from his father. Furthermore, Pedro offered a religious donation if the priest would bless his dead son. Padre Rentería represents the church which, in Rulfo's view, contributed to the problems of Mexico by not aiding the poor sufficiently, by amassing wealth, and by ignoring the evils of the rich.
One of the major characters we have not mentioned so far is Susana San Juan, the only woman Pedro Páramo ever loved. They were sweethearts in their childhood and early youth, but she left Comala with her father to live elsewhere after the death of her tubercular mother, who had been shunned by the townspeople. Susana married, was widowed and eventually returned in poverty to Comala with her father. Pedro still desired her and, wishing to gain control over her, secretly arranged for the murder of her father. Finally alone, Susana consented to marry Pedro, but it was soon evident that she was insane, ill and dying. Pedro was desperate, but he could do nothing to save her. After her death, as we have seen, he took his revenge by neglecting Comala and letting the region turn into a wasteland.

The name Susana means superior and suggests that Pedro held this woman above all others. But the name has other connotations. In the Bible, Susana was a woman who gave aid to Christ and the apostles--suggesting goodness, gentleness; but the name in Mexico can also refer to punishment by flagellation--suggesting cruelty, perhaps to oneself. Once again, Rulfo brings out a dual nature in his character. Susana can also refer to mining, and mines were significant in Susana's life. In her childhood, she was once lowered into a well or shaft by her father to search for missing gold coins. In later years, she lived for a time with her father in the mines of La Andrómeda. Juan Preciado
seemed to hear her speaking from her grave after he reached Comala. All of these are suggestions of the depths to which Susana's soul and mind had sunk after the tragedies of her life.

The man whom Susana had married and of whom she spoke so passionately was named Florencio, suggesting flowering, fertility. This name is in sharp contrast to that of her other husband, Pedro Paramo, who may even been involved in Florencio's death. Susana's father was named Bartolome (Bartholomew); biblically, this man was one of the disciples, who was martyred by being flayed to death, suggestive of one of the alternate meanings of Susana's own name. The name Bartolome also, however, has dual connotations; it may suggest one who is frank, open and honest; or it may suggest one who is lazy and gluttonous--all the aspects of the proverbial "fat man."14

The last name of San Juan which Susana always used means literally St. John. This can refer to a popular rural festival which is celebrated in the fields as a sort of "fertility rite" in honor of the saint; there is also a popular expression "hacer San Juan" meaning to quit or leave a job early. This could refer to the untimely deaths of both Susana and Bartolome San Juan.

This is a relatively short novel, yet it has an abundance of characters; there are a number of minor ones who appear briefly or who float in and out of the story. Some of the names
are very interesting and could be paronomastic in nature, underscoring Rulfo’s penchant for duality. For example, one of Pedro Páramo’s men, a leader of his fighting forces, is called Tilcuate, which is from the Aztec/Nahuatl:

\[
\text{Tilcuate} = \text{til (black)} + \text{coatl (snake)} = \text{Black Snake.}
\]

Rulfo uses other Indian-related words in his work, such as \text{tiliches (trinkets)} and \text{zopilote (hawk, buzzard).}\]

Dorotea la Cuarraca was a half-crazed woman who used to find girls for Miguel Páramo. Her first name suggests golden, but her last name connotes the croaking of frogs;\]
\text{this cuarreo may refer to her habit of crooning to her imaginary child.}

Other suggestive names of Rulfian characters include: Damiana Cisneros (swan/prostitute);\]
\text{such unusual names as Eduvigis Dyada, Gamaliel Villalpando; and such prophetic or classical/biblical names as Fausta, Donis, Justina, Inocencio, Isaiás, Jesús. There is considerable room for further study of Rulfo’s naming techniques in both the novel Pedro Páramo and in the collection of short stories El llano en llamas (The Burning Plain).}

All suggest Rulfo’s concern for the problems of Mexico, her dual nature (Indian mother/Spanish father) and her search for national identity.

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NOTES

1Juan Rulfo, Pedro Páramo (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, Colección Popular, décima reimpresión de 1969). All further references to the novel in this article will be to this tenth edition. The reader is advised that some different editions of the novel do not follow the same pagination.


3For additional information on the derivation of the name of the town Comala, its description and vicinity, see: Ricardo Estrada, "Los indicios de Pedro Páramo," Revista de la Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, LXV (enero-abril, 1965), pp. 72-75; and Enriqueta García de Miranda y Zaida Falcón de Gyves, Nuevo atlas porruá de la república mexicana (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1972), pp. 37, 52-53.


6. For more on Rulfo's youth, see: Harss and Dohmann, *op. cit.*


8. Ibid., p. 129.


10. Ibid., p. 1343.


14Corominas, *op. cit.*, p. 82.


16For a more thorough study of Indian vocabulary in Rulfo's work, see: Nila Gutiérrez Marrone, *El estilo de Juan Rulfo: estudio lingüístico* (New York: Bilingual Press, 1978). This study includes a glossary of Mexican regional terms, a lexical analysis of Mexicanisms, the uses of the diminutive, and the Nahuatl influence on the popular language of Mexico.
