

Themes of death in the road to tamazunchale by ron arias

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Latino literature encompasses the themes of storytelling and finding a sense of identity in a changing world, centuries after European colonizers set foot on free lands that harbored an abundance of natural resources and culture in regions of Latin America. Chicano literature is a more specific interpretation of identity that pertains to Mexican-Americans of whom have a “ new sense of the awareness of historical and cultural independences in both northern and southern hemispheres of America” (Calderón & Saldivar 1991, p. 7). Amongst the stories of proclaimed writers in Chicano literature, they embody the prolific realities of unlikely characters that readers would normally view as supporting or minor characters.

For example, in Ron Arias’ critically acclaimed novel *The Road to Tamazunchale*, 2002 the reader is introduced to Don Fausto, an 80-year-old retired bookseller of whom lives in the barrio of Los Angeles and is in the wake of death. Surrounded by characters and faithful companions that disappear and reappear as the story progresses, Don Fausto ventures on numerous journeys that dive in and out of consciousness, space, and time; conveying the masterful genre of magical realism or according to Good Reads, a “ fiction genre in which magical elements blend to create a realistic atmosphere that accesses a deeper understanding of reality”. In *The Road to Tamazunchale*, assessing a deeper understanding of reality accompanied by the presence of death are the most prominent themes of the short novel. With the manifestation of the idea of new realities, Don Fausto lives in his dreams within each chapter with alternating perspectives of reality. However, the overlapping of illusion and reality is often conflicting for the reader to understand where Fausto is as of the moment a chapter ends

(either reality or dreaming). The relationship between a new reality, death, and illusion vs. reality juxtaposes itself in the way Fausto himself wants to live. From the beginning it is clear that Don Fausto does not fear death, but he does not welcome it either. In fact, he uses the idea of death as encouragement for him to pursue life as he perceives it in any way possible. The use of death as encouragement to live is truly fulfilling to witness in the novel.

More specifically in chapter one of *The Road to Tamazunchale*. The reader learns that Don Fausto was once a traveling bookseller and as a result of his poor health and the lack of book sales for the past few weeks, Fausto finally succumbs to the action of no longer working. As the chapter establishes in the present day: Now, years later, he felt as if his muscles were finally turning to worms, his lungs to leaves and his bones to petrified stone.

Suddenly the monstrous dread of dying seized his mind, his brain itched, and he trembled like a naked child in the snow. No! he shouted. It can't happen, it won't happen! As long as I breathe, it won't happen... (29) Don Fausto tries to assimilate to this new reality, a reality of final stages of aging where one would learn compassion and wisdom in the time death yearns to overcome him. However, Fausto desires to live. His statement, "...As long as I breathe, it won't happen..." signifies Fausto's will to survive until he can no longer defend himself against the void of death. Assimilating to a life one never imagines for themselves can be oftentimes distressing and difficult. In Fausto's new reality, he himself notices these problems as his body decays before his eyes in a moment where it is only him of whom observes these

changes; forcing the reader to question if what is happening is a simple fantasy where no one really knows or neglects to want to know about his severe transformations or if Fausto is living in a world in which he surrounded by those who refuse to acknowledge his decline in health? In chapter one of the novel Arias writes: Fausto lifted his arm and examined the purple splotches. Liver. Liver caused them. He tugged at the largest one, near the wrist. His fingertips raised the pouch of skin as if it were a small, wrinkled tent. He tugged harder, expecting the tissue to tear.

The skin drew tight at the elbow. Slowly it began to rip, peeling from the muscle. No blood [...] Fausto folded his feather light suit neatly in the meatless palm of one hand, closed his naked eyelids and waited for his niece. ‘Tío are you awake?’ Carmela leaned over the bed. (28) Apart from the eclectic imagery of the moment a piece of archaic skin is being removed, one must come to terms with the thought that Don Fausto’s time is almost coming to an end and he knows that. His awareness of the physiological transformation confirms this theory. However, Don Fausto’s teenage niece, Carmela of whom lives with him does not notice the change which compels Fausto to think that “she must be blind” for not observing an obvious change. Arias writes: She must be blind, she didn’t even notice. He unfolded the dry tissue, methodically spreading it on the bedcover, stretching the legs and arms their full length [...] Maybe she didn’t see because it was too dark. But my face? No hair...all bony. Next time I’ll give her my heart, and she’ll say, tío what’s this? Tío, don’t play games. Put it back. (28) Fausto becomes confused as to why his niece won’t notice the skin patch and playfully

suggests that he would give her his heart, insinuating that even then she would not notice anything and would think that it may be a joke. In just the first page of chapter one of *The Road to Tamazunchale*, it is evident that Fausto, is dying as a result of the change of skin and is straddling some kind of emphasis of fantasy and reality whilst living in a 'supposed' real world as a result of the reference to closed eyes and the simple recurring question, "are you awake?", alluding to dreams. Unlike having one's eyes open, Don Fausto is very much entwined in slumber. In many chapters, author Ron Arias makes it clear to the reader when Fausto is asleep. When he awakes is it more often than not that Fausto finds himself in a new reality in another region or time in his dreams. More specifically in chapter two of *The Road to Tamazunchale*, Don Fausto ventures on an imaginary voyage to Cuzco, Peru on a mission for a viceroy. On his expedition, he comes across a young woman of whom works as a prostitute who is the resemblance of his niece, Carmela.

Instead of Carmela however, her name is Ana. In a state of confusion and tired from the previous excursion, Fausto asks Ana if she may rub his temples and falls asleep on her lap. Arias continues: When he woke, Ana was sitting next to him on the wooden seat of a train. Fausto squinted at the sudden light. Through the window he could see a herd of dairy cows in the shade of a lone eucalyptus. Fausto then asks about his whereabouts to Ana: "What's this?" He asked. "A train." "I mean, where am I? Where are we going?" "You don't belong in Cuzco, I could see that. You even said so in your sleep. The trip shouldn't take too long, and I think you'll like it." (34-35)

As Fausto awakens from his slumber, it is evident that he himself does not know where he is. The most compelling portion of information is when Ana described the moment Fausto was talking in his sleep explaining the yearning to live beyond the life of Fausto. It remains is crucial for he, must continue forward to where his desire takes him. The constant reference to “are you awake?” is used time and time again to bring the aging-old-man back to reality even if it may not be ‘our’ reality. The question may not present in chapter two, it is however in chapter 3. Fausto awakens once again only to find himself in his home in Los Angeles. Ron Arias writes: [...] “Tío”, she whispered, “where are you?” She turned on the night table lamp and examined the bed. “Wake up”, she pleaded. [...] Carmela felt the form and pulled back the blankets. Fausto did not move [...] “Tío, why are you playing dead?” After a moment, Fausto opened his eyes. “I’m hungry,” he said in a tired voice. “You scared me. You weren’t asleep, were you?” “No, mijita. I thought was dead.” Fausto sat up. “It happens, you know. From one day to the next, poof! Al otro mundo.” (38) Arias expresses the idea that Fausto remains unaware as to why he ventures off to “al otro mundo”. However, he thinks of it as a norm in which he may not have control of.

To others in the reality that he lives in Los Angeles, it is unclear if Fausto is dead or alive; hence Carmela’s periodic question of “you weren’t asleep, were you?” or “are you awake?” Confirming life in *The Road to Tamazunchale* carries attention to the continuous themes of death in the realm of Fausto is active as he seeks to find Marcelino Huanca, a nomadic Bunuelian shepherd from Peru who plays a magical flute that becomes a

recurring symbolic sound for Fausto as the “ song of life” and ventures in his imaginations to the past, establishing his imminent death in the readers mind For Don Fausto, death is personified by the symbolic sounds of a flute played by a nomadic shepherd who is present to some. Or by the collective admiration for a corpse that resembles the immortalized beautiful specimen of Michelangelo’s David. Finally, the presence of Fausto’s late wife, Evangelina a. k. a Eva and the journey and arrival to Tamazunchale. As Fausto moves in out of time and space, death is near. All taking place in different times and places, the reader is transported through a labyrinth.

Works Cited:

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