

Multiperspectivism and Narrative Complexity in Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Time of the Hero* and *The Feast of the Goat*

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Abstract: This article examines multiperspectivism and narrative complexity as defining structural and aesthetic principles in Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Time of the Hero* (1963) and *The Feast of the Goat* (2000). Using narratological frameworks of Gérard Genette, Mikhail Bakhtin and Mieke Bal, the study examines how Vargas Llosa employs polyphonic narration, variable focalisation and non-linear temporality to build a layered critique of authoritarian power and moral complicity. Through close comparative textual analysis, the article argues that the multi-perspectival technique is not an ornamental form but an ideological instrument. In refusing a single authoritative voice, both novels implicate the reader as an active interpreter of competing truths and enact, at the level of form, the instability of power and identity they thematise at the level of content. The results add to the academic discussion about the narrative poetics of Latin America and the politics of literary form.

Keywords: Vargas Llosa, multiperspectivism, narrative complexity, focalisation, polyphony, Latin American literature, *The Feast of the Goat*.

Introduction: Mario Vargas Llosa (b. 1936) stands as one of the foremost architects of the Latin American Boom, a literary movement that fundamentally transformed narrative fiction in the Spanish-speaking world during the 1960s. His debut novel, *The Time of the Hero* (*La ciudad y los perros*, 1963), set within the enclosed, violent world of Lima's Leoncio Prado Military Academy, announced a writer of extraordinary formal ambition: one willing to fracture chronology, multiply voices, and embed perspective within perspective in the service of acute social critique. Nearly four decades later, *The Feast of the Goat* (*La fiesta del chivo*, 2000) returned to this structurally complex mode to anatomise the final days of Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic through three interlocking narrative strands and a chorus of focalisers whose conflicting testimonies refuse the comfort of a single, stable truth.

The central question this article addresses is not merely what these novels say about military culture or political tyranny, but how they say it — and why the how

matters. Vargas Llosa's deployment of multiperspectivism, whereby narrative authority is distributed across several, often contradictory, points of view, is not ornamental. This study argues that it is the primary vehicle through which the novels' ethical and political meanings are produced and contested. When no single voice commands the narrative field, the reader is forced into an active, uncomfortable position: to weigh competing accounts and judge without the assistance of an authoritative narrator.

Despite the high number of scholarly works on Vargas Llosa's fiction, there are few comparative studies of multiperspectivism in his early and late career. Most of the existing analyses are either concerned with the formal mechanics of narrative innovation or the political content of individual novels, with little attempt to combine these two concerns under one umbrella. This study attempts to fill this lacuna by reading the two novels through contemporary narratology, proving that formal choices are inseparable from their ideological work.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Narratological Foundations

The theoretical backbone of this study draws on classical and post-classical narratology. Gérard Genette's distinctions between voice (who speaks?) and focalisation (who sees?) in *Narrative Discourse* (1980) provide indispensable analytical tools. His taxonomy of focalisation — zero, internal, and external — allows the analyst to track the shifting alignments between narrator and character-consciousness that characterise both novels. *The Time of the Hero* employs what Genette would identify as variable internal focalisation: narrative perspective migrates among several characters, granting access to different interior worlds while withholding a totalising view.

Mikhail Bakhtin's articulation of the idea of polyphony in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984) provides a complementary perspective. In the polyphonic novel the characters are real ideological independents: they are not the author's mouthpieces but subjects with fully articulated worldviews who carry on a genuine dialogue. The analysis is pushed further in Mieke Bal's *Narratology* (2017), which separates the focalizing subject from the focalized object — a division that is especially productive when thinking about how Trujillo is filtered through multiple focalizers in *The Feast of the Goat* without ever being given a fully interiorized view.

2.2 Prior Scholarship

José Miguel Oviedo's *Mario Vargas Llosa: La invención de una realidad* (1970) was among the first systematic analyses of the author's formal innovations, identifying the 'communicating vessels' technique — the superimposition of temporal planes — as a signature feature. Efraín Kristal's *Temptation of the Word* (1998) argues that formal complexity is consistently motivated by engagement with questions of individual freedom and political authority. On *The Feast of the Goat*, Roy Boland Osegueda (2002) reads the novel as counter-memory, while Claudia Ferman (2004) examines its gendered focalisation, noting that Urania Cabral's chapters function as a feminist corrective to the masculinist perspectives of the political and military plotlines. What remains underexplored is how the multi-perspectival architecture of the two novels relates to and complicates the techniques Vargas Llosa developed throughout his career.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Focalisation and the Distribution of Narrative Authority

The Time of the Hero organizes its narrative among four primary focalizing consciousnesses: Jaguar, Slave

(Ricardo Arana), Poet (Alberto Fernandez), and an unnamed first-person narrator whose identity is withheld until late in the novel. This structural revelation retrospectively destabilises the reader's understanding of everything preceding it. Within the closed world of the military academy, identity is itself a performance, a mask adopted for survival. The belated identification of the first-person narrator as Jaguar transforms the reader's relationship to the preceding narrative: passages that appeared to be objective third-person accounts are revealed as self-exculpating reconstructions. The effect makes the reader an unwitting collaborator in the narrator's act of self-concealment — a formal enactment of the moral complicity the novel thematises.

The Feast of the Goat employs a structurally explicit tri-focal arrangement. Three narrative strands alternate across the chapters: Urania Cabral's return to the Dominican Republic in 1996; the final day of Trujillo's life as experienced through his consciousness and his inner circle; and the perspective of the conspirators planning and executing his assassination. This tripartite structure creates complex temporal and perspectival counterpoint: the reader simultaneously inhabits past and present, perpetrators and victims, macropolitics and individual psychology. Crucially, Trujillo himself is never granted unmediated interiority. His thoughts are rendered through free indirect discourse, but always with a residual ironic distance — the author's refusal to fully inhabit the tyrant's subjectivity signals an ethical commitment embedded in the narrative architecture itself.

4.2 Temporal Complexity and the Politics of Anachrony

Both novels make extensive use of what Genette terms anachrony — displacement of narrative sequence from chronological order — as a structural principle rather than a local stylistic device. In *The Time of the Hero*, analepses are embedded within analepses, creating a *mise-en-abyme* of retrospection that makes it genuinely difficult on first reading to establish the chronological sequence of events. This narrative disorientation is not arbitrary: it mirrors the psychological condition of characters unable to escape traumatic histories that have formed them. The Slave's death is reported before its causes are fully understood; the reader must retrospectively construct the causal chain linking institutional violence, individual cowardice, and accidental betrayal.

In *The Feast of the Goat*, temporal anachrony serves a related but distinct function. The alternation between 1961 (Trujillo's assassination) and 1996 (Urania's return) creates a structural irony: the reader inhabits

the past knowing its outcome, while following a present-tense narrative whose protagonist is still discovering what happened. This double temporal positioning - knowing and not-knowing, remembering and discovering - enacts at the formal level the novel's argument about the long duration of traumatic history. The Dominican Republic of 1996 cannot be understood without 1961; the events of 1961 cannot be grasped without the perspective that only 1996 can provide. Temporal fragmentation is here not disorientation for its own sake but the formal analogue of traumatic memory itself.

4.3 Narrative Fragmentation as Ideological Critique

The most significant finding of this analysis is that multiperspectivism functions not merely as a formal feature but as a mode of ideological critique. In *The Time of the Hero*, the refusal of a single authoritative narrator structurally mirrors and counters the military academy's own ideology of command: an institution demanding a single, unquestioned voice of authority is anatomised through a narrative form that renders such authority impossible. Each character's perspective reveals what the others conceal; no single account is adequate to the events; truth is always a product of perspective and interest. The novel's form performs the argument its content advances.

In *The Feast of the Goat*, this structural argument extends to the political sphere. Dictatorship depends on the suppression of multiple perspectives: it enforces a single narrative of national history, a single truth about the leader. Vargas Llosa's multi-perspectival form is the aesthetic antithesis of this totalitarian impulse. By giving voice to conspirators, victims, survivors, and even, in a limited, irony-laden fashion, to Trujillo himself, the novel performs at the level of narrative structure the democratic plurality the dictatorship extinguished. Urania's narrative strand is particularly significant: her perspective introduces a gendered, private dimension to the history of Trujillismo that official records systematically excluded, and her testimony - fragmentary, traumatic, gradually disclosed - models both the difficulty and the necessity of speaking from the margins.

4.4 Comparative Synthesis

Comparing the two novels reveals both the consistency of Vargas Llosa's formal commitments and the development of his technique. *The Time of the Hero* is the more formally daring: its voices are harder to disentangle, its temporal architecture more labyrinthine, its withholding of information more aggressive. *The Feast of the Goat*, while structurally complex, is more legible - three strands are clearly differentiated, and the temporal counterpoint more

transparent. This shift may reflect the author's growing confidence that formal complexity need not require obscurity, or a calculated accommodation to a wider readership without sacrifice of structural ambition. What remains constant is the ethical and political use to which multiperspectivism is put: in both cases, the distribution of narrative authority across competing voices is a formal argument against the monological - against the institution that demands a single loyalty, the dictatorship that enforces a single truth.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that multiperspectivism and narrative complexity in *The Time of the Hero* and *The Feast of the Goat* are constitutive elements of the novels' ethical and political arguments rather than merely technical achievements. Through analysis of focalisation, temporal structure, and the ideological implications of narrative fragmentation, the study shows that Vargas Llosa's refusal of a single authoritative voice enacts, at the level of form, the critique of authoritarian power both novels pursue at the level of content. The comparative reading reveals a significant continuity in the author's formal practice alongside a discernible development toward greater structural legibility without sacrifice of perspectival complexity. These findings contribute to understanding how narrative form participates in ideological work and suggest productive directions for future research: a study of multiperspectivism across Vargas Llosa's middle-career novels - including *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969) and *The War of the End of the World* (1981) - would allow a fuller account of his narrative poetics; a cross-cultural comparison with García Márquez, Fuentes, and Cortázar would situate his innovations within the broader Latin American literary-historical context.

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