

Ursa Corregidora: Quintessence of Trauma Drama
Yifan “Ronnie” Li

Literary representations of trauma lie on a spectrum bound by the characterizations of a progressive narrative and a traumatic narrative, as outlined by Alexander in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. In the case of Gayl Jones’s novel *Corregidora*, Ursa strives to reconcile her present status with her internal plagues as her life moves forward relentlessly, and her conflicts echo the dichotomies posed by Jeffrey Alexander and Roman Jakobson in their works on collective trauma and the principles of language, respectively. Brief moments of hopefulness in Ursa’s present conscience are disseminated in the novel, but the progression of *Corregidora* as a whole functions more in line with Alexander’s notion of a “tragic narrative,” relying on elements of metonymy instead of metaphor to govern the novel’s structure. Motifs like singing and shifts in narrative voice further complicate this distinction, with Ursa ultimately relinquishing her idea of “progress” to embody a more tragic outlook on her situation.

Jones’s novel commences with Ursa’s assertion that she “sang because it was something [she] had to do, but [her husband Mutt] would never understand that” (Jones, 3). The sentence immediately leads the reader to believe that Ursa, as foreshadowed here, will utilize singing as a means to resolve her family’s trauma. Nevertheless, the Freudian “repetition compulsion” that saturates this quote demonstrates the “acting out” of a past injustice and thus acts as an impediment to progress. Moreover, Ursa does not seem to understand completely why she has to sing; her straightforward yet uncertain attitude warrants further probing. In the following discussion, singing becomes an important tool for the protagonist, and its significance to her is gradually revealed as the novel progresses. Singing comes to serve as a compensatory outlet for Ursa’s emotions and simultaneously as validation for the novel’s performance as a “drama of eternal return” (Alexander 226).

Another important theme in the novel is that “making generations” signifies leaving “evidence to hold up against [the perpetrators of the trauma]” (Jones 14). In other words, offspring possess a consummate ability, through a direct relationship with their mothers, to pass on the bodily memory of past harm. It becomes apparent that Ursa’s loss of her uterus, after her husband Mutt pushes her down a flight of stairs, has destroyed her ability to “make generations” in addition to her overall trust in men. This is the first narrative shift in the novel; it is a heterodiegetic shift that recounts the story of Ursa’s Great Gram and of “old man” Corregidora, who produced many generations of children by incest. In a desperate attempt to counter the anguish accompanying the lost ability to “make generations,” Ursa resorts to language. Indeed, the power of words through song seems to compensate for her sterility: “It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than the memory” (Jones 11). Singing ostensibly functions as preservation for Ursa’s memories – an alternative outlet – when the physical option of producing generational memory has become unavailable.

In another shift of narrative voice, Ursa’s mother once again instructs her daughter to “make generations,” to “go on making them anyway,” despite the fact that she knows she cannot (Jones 41). The first sign of conflict seems to sprout in this homodiegetic shift, asking *how* Ursa will perpetuate her legacy, the legacy of

Corregidora, and utilize it as evidence against the perpetrators of her trauma. Actually, the internal conflict resonates with Alexander's dichotomy between the progressive and traumatic narratives in that both are concerned with how to make sense of the future. Ron Eyerman writes that in the progressive narrative framework, the "past was interpreted as a stepping-stone toward a brighter future," whereas a tragic narrative indicates, "the past was something to be redeemed through the future" (Alexander 91). Attempting to salvage the remnants of progression, Ursa listens to her mother's hope that "the ground and the sky [will] open up to ask them that question that's going to be ask" (Jones 41). She derives hope from Mama's words while keeping in mind that she cannot contribute to the opening of the ground and sky.

The conflict between progression and eternal regression plays out more dramatically as Jones offers the reader a glimpse, through a typographical shift, into Ursa's consciousness. In this segment, someone claiming to be Ursa's father says she is one of "Corregidora's women. Yes you are" (77). On a deeper, more unconscious level, Ursa feels inextricably tied to her legacy, one she cannot seem to escape, no matter how hard she pulls at her roots. She admits in conclusion, "I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age" (77). It is significant that this section is italicized because it hints that Ursa is compelled to re-experience her family's trauma indefinitely. The italics here, instead of shifting to another point of view, delve into Ursa's consciousness as she speaks reflectively and introspectively.

Indeed, the point of view in each italicized segment is unique and idiosyncratic, but that they appear at all symbolizes Ursa's tensions between arriving at a progressive or a tragic resolution. In the latter half of the novel, Ursa enters her unconscious once more through a fantasized dialogue with Mutt, her abusive former husband, in which she repeats "Naw" multiple times (Jones 98). This instance by itself illustrates that Ursa has not completely severed her ties to Mutt and overcome her "roots." Furthermore, it is a prime example of the "compulsion to repeat" discussed earlier, showing how Ursa is inexorably affected to repeat her past.

On a more holistic level, the aforementioned segment considers thoroughly the motif of "body memory," wherein the mind may forget a trauma, but the body remembers it through generations. Ursa despondently writes, "I can't forget. The space between my thighs. A well that never bleeds" (99), thereby affirming her susceptibility to this phenomenon. Certainly, her mental capacity for memory remains unaffected; rather, the torment endured by the bodies of her relatives has already been branded onto her conscience. The concept of body memory relates intricately to the construction of a tragic narrative because both are metonymically dominated. Jakobson writes that metonymy embodies the idea of "contiguity," in which "any sign is made up of constituent signs and/or occurs only in combination with other signs" (74). Although Ursa does not concern herself with these linguistic technicalities, it is clear that body memory in *Corregidora* exemplifies metonymy through its depiction of mothers and daughters as physically and naturally united. A child is the direct product of her mother and relies on the alimentations from her womb and her body after birth. The child, therefore, derives her existence from the flesh of her mother and demonstrates the highest order of Jakobsonian contiguity from the outset.

Despite occasionally doubting bodily memory, Ursa eventually learns to acknowledge its profound effects on her life. During Mama's narration of her own

plights, Ursa remembers wanting “to ask her if *their* past could really have had so much to do with her own” (Jones 111), insinuating that she still questions the importance of body memory. Soon afterwards, she comes to realize at the end of her talk that “[Mama] had *more* than learned [the memory] off by heart, though. It was as if their memory, the memory of all the Corregidora women, was her memory too, as strong with her as her own private memory, or almost as strong” (Jones 129). Finally, on her way home, Ursa realizes in a half-awake state what she had been doing all along when a stranger asks her, “Why do you keep fighting me? Or is it yourself you keep fighting?” (Jones 132). Although Ursa “never heard that man’s voice again,” she slowly begins to appreciate the value of that question as it relates to her own struggles of progress and waning doubts of the veracity of body memory. As the product of mothers who “made generations,” she comes to understand the true importance of generation-making, but she also comes to acknowledge her inability to propagate that lineage.

The conclusion of *Corregidora* ties together the many themes of the novel and helps gather all the loose ends into a coherent, meaningful, yet foreboding ending. There are three ways in which this ending demonstrates Ursa’s acceptance of her condition and confirms the overall novel as a “trauma drama” (Alexander 227). First, metonymy remains the dominant trope as Ursa finds herself alone with Mutt in a hotel room. She realizes, “It wasn’t the same room, but the same place. The same feel of the place” and does not know “how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora” (Jones 184). Her roots inevitably determine her future as tension accrues in her tone. Ursa feels Great Gram and Corregidora himself coursing through her body, not her mind, and her relations to the past quickly overwhelm her.

Second, the ending returns to the motif of singing as a sink for Ursa’s emotions. To the protagonist, blues music is a means to embrace her inner conflicts and emotions that can no longer be passed down along her generational line. The last scene with Mutt echoes Ursa’s statement earlier in the novel when she reflects on the meaning of her singing. The protagonist believes that her singing embodies “all those blues feelings...My voice felt like it was screaming. What do they say about pleasure mixed in the pain?” (Jones 50). The ineffable mix of “pleasure” and “pain” accurately describes Ursa’s troubled state of mind; however, at the end, she accepts the latter her dominant identity when she gives fellatio to Mutt. Ursa has previously denied giving oral sex to any man because the act physically curtails her voice and ability to sing her influential music. Since she utilizes song as an alternative to childbirth, Ursa’s final decision, in this sense, dismisses her aspirations for progress and symbolizes an acceptance of her sterility. By the same logic, under Ursa’s acceptance lies a tacit recognition of the importance of generation-making.

Finally, the repetition of “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you” and “Then you don’t want me” is redolent of an earlier instance of repetition in the novel. These lines elegantly parallel Ursa’s repetition of “Naw” in the first half (Jones 98). This Freudian compulsion to repeat hints at an unconscious desire to act out one’s traumas, a feature typical of the tragic narrative. Interestingly, though, the earlier instance is italicized, whereas the later one is not. The italics, then, emphasize Ursa’s inner struggle to banish the past from her mind, whereas their absence implies an ultimate acceptance of the fact that progress might not be within reach.

Overall, *Corregidora*'s literary tropes cause it to embody a traumatic narrative with moments of hopefulness, few and far in between. The typographical shifts, often but not necessarily indicative of shifts in narrative voice, highlight Ursa's internal conflicts as she struggles to maintain a forward-looking attitude in light of her past. Yet, the profound and pluripotent ending resolves as many conflicts as it engenders new ones. It points Ursa's life in a much more traumatic direction, dissolving any hopes of a progressive resolution. Gayl Jones's novel parallels the discourses of Jeffrey Alexander and Roman Jakobson, both of whom are largely concerned with the structure of narrative and the uses of language. To what extent the works of these scholars actually shaped this novel might never be known, but it is certain that Jones's character, Ursa Corregidora, will live plagued by eternal returns, in the shadows of uncertainty.

Works Cited

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