

REPRESENTATIONS:

LOS DE ABAJO

BY MARIANO AZUELA

INTRODUCTION

The following is an Educator’s Guide to accompany the novel *Los de Abajo/The Underdogs*. Written by Mariano Azuela, it is one of the most famous novels of the Mexican Revolution and recognized by many as the first. The novel itself is readily available in both English and Spanish and can be found in its entirety online for free, which makes it accessible for most classrooms and students. Copies of the English and Spanish versions of the book are included in the appendix of this guide.

The Educator’s Guide includes:

- ↻ Background information on the author and the context of the novel.
- ↻ Guided reading questions organized by parts of the book and extended response writing prompts. These questions have been written to support the types of reading and critical thinking skills required in standardized reading comprehension tests.

In addition to the lesson plans and activities included here, lecture notes (which include an interactive visual that breaks down important themes in the novel) are available from the University of Cambridge through the following links:

- ↻ [Charting Revolution: Mariano Azuela, Los de abajo, 1915](#)
- ↻ [In-depth Essay Questions](#)

SUMMARY¹¹

Ten years after its publication in a small El Paso paper, *Los de Abajo/The Underdogs* achieved worldwide renown as the greatest novel of the Mexican Revolution. It tells the story of Demetrio Macías, a modest, peace-loving Indian who is forced to side with the rebels to save his family. In the course of battle, he becomes a compulsive militarist almost despite himself, and his courage leads to a generalship in Pancho Villa’s army. But as the rebels suffer defeat after defeat, Macías loses prestige and moral purpose at the hands of turncoats, camp followers, and the peasants who once loved him.

6 Compiled from publisher’s information found at <http://www.amazon.com> and <http://www.goodreads.com>.

The social conscience and bitter irony of Azuela's classic novel have earned him comparisons to Chekhov and Gorky. As Mexico continues to celebrate and struggle with the consequences of its great revolution, *Los de Abajo/The Underdogs* remains a powerful and insightful portrait of social upheaval.

In this deeply moving picture of the turmoil of the first great revolution of the twentieth century—the Mexican Revolution of 1910—Azuela depicts the anarchy and the idealism, the base human passions and the valor and nobility of the simple folk, and, most striking of all, the fascination of revolt—that peculiar love of revolution for revolution's sake that has characterized most of the social upheavals of the twentieth century. *Los de Abajo/The Underdogs* is considered “the only novel of the Revolution” and has been published in several languages and more than twenty-seven editions. Azuela's writing is sometimes racy and virile, sometimes poetic and subdued, but always in perfect accord with the mood and character of the story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mariano Azuela was born in Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco, Mexico in 1873. Studying medicine, he received his M.D. in 1899 and returned to Lagos in 1909 to continue his practice medicine. His writing career began in 1896 when he was published in a weekly newspaper. His first novel was published in 1911. Throughout the Revolution, Azuela wrote about the war and its impact on Mexico. Under President Francisco I. Madero he served as chief of political affairs in his hometown, Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco. After Madero's assassination, Azuela joined the Constitutionalist cause. He served as a field medic traveling with military leader Julián Medina who was one of Pancho Villa's followers. His experiences during this time provided the material for *Los de Abajo* (*The Underdogs*). In 1915 during Huerta's short period of triumph, Azuela was forced to emigrate to El Paso, Texas where he wrote *Los de Abajo*. It was first published in a small El Paso newspaper. Within ten years of this first publication, the novel achieved worldwide fame, often considered the greatest novel of the Mexican Revolution.

Azuela was fundamentally a moralist, and his disappointment with the Revolution soon began to manifest itself. He had fought for a better Mexico; but he saw that while the Revolution had corrected certain injustices, it had given rise to others equally deplorable. When he saw the self-servers and the unprincipled turning his hopes for the redemption of the underprivileged of his country into a ladder to serve their own ends, his disillusionment was deep and often bitter. His later novels are marred at times by a savage sarcasm.

During his later years, and until his death in 1952, he lived in Mexico City writing and practicing his profession among the poor. In 1917 Azuela returned to Mexico City where he continued writing and working as a doctor until his death in 1952.

CONTEXT OF LOS DE ABAJO/THE UNDERDOGS

It's important to note the context of *Los de Abajo/The Underdogs*. The Mexican Revolution took place across the country and over a ten year time period, but the novel is set specifically in five states of Central Mexico (Jalisco, Zacatecas, Aguas Caliente, Durango, and Nayarit) from 1913-1915. As with all literary works, the point of view of the author is significant. Through his own experiences with the Revolution, Azuela came to be quite frustrated, disillusioned, and ultimately disappointed with it. His novel reflects this. Many have argued that his novel points to the hopelessness and pointlessness of the Revolution. One way Azuela does this is through conveying a lack of progress or circular movement of the soldiers. Demetrio and his men end the story fighting in the same place the novel began. His novel also communicates the disconnect between the overarching politics of the Revolution and the individual reasons many soldiers joined to fight under a specific leader such as Villa, Zapata, Obregón or Carranza. While his novel demonstrates an important part of the Revolution, it is just that it one piece, one man's reflection of his experiences. It cannot be used to interpret the whole of the Revolution.

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

These questions have been divided by the parts and Roman numeral chapters of the novel. Page numbers have not been provided due to the various editions of the novel, and the different pagination of the online versions of the novel.

Part One

I

1. Describe the house Demetrio and his family live in.
2. How does Azuela describe Demetrio? Search the images provided at <http://fototeca.inah.gob.mx/fototeca/>. Do you see other men who would fit this description? What do the soldiers in these photos look like?
3. What do the arriving men do to Palomo, the Macias' dog? Why do you think they do this?
4. How does Azuela portray the Federales, Huerta's troops? Are these men you would want to be associated with? Why or why not?
5. Do you think Demetrio should have killed the men? Why doesn't he?
6. Did the Federales return? What did they do to the Macias' home?

II

1. How does Demetrio signal to his men?

III

1. Approximately how many Federales will Demetrio's men have to fight? Are they outnumbered?
2. How do Demetrio's men attack the Federales at the beginning of the battle? Is it effective?

3. Why does Demetrio want his men “shoot the ones below”? Do they listen? What happens?

IV

1. How many men does Demetrio lose in the battle? Where and how do they find these men?
2. What do the serranos say about the government soldiers (Federales)?

V

1. Who is Luis Cervantes? Where has he come from?
2. What does Demetrio decide to do with him?

VI

1. What difference did Luis Cervantes fail to appreciate? How is actually fighting in the revolution different from merely writing about it as a journalist?

VII

1. How does Demetrio plan to get Luis Cervantes to tell him the truth about his intentions?
2. How does Luis Cervantes describe the cause of the revolution? How does Pancracio respond? Do you think that the men fighting with Demetrio would describe their reasons for fighting in the same way that Luis Cervantes would?

VIII

1. Camila echoes the thoughts of the Federales that talked with Luis, saying that she’d heard about the revolutionaries who were “splendidly armed and mounted men, who get paid in pure silver pesos minted by Villa in Chihuahua.” Who do you think started this rumor? To whose benefit does it work?
2. Why does Camila think the revolutionaries, even if they’re bandits or “louse-ridden wretches” will defeat Huerta? Where does she get her information? Do you think this is a reliable way to get information? Think about the period of the revolution—is there any other way to get information?

IX

1. What remedy does Sena Pachita use on Demetrio?
2. Do the men pay much attention to Sena Fortunata’s story?

X

1. How does Luis Cervantes help Demetrio? How does this change Demetrio’s attitude toward Luis Cervantes?
2. What is the nickname the men give Luis Cervantes? What do you think it means?
3. How does Luis Cervantes smooth things over with Venancio?

XI

1. How do you think Camila feels about Luis Cervantes? Why? Do you think he returns these feelings? Explain.
2. Why do you think Luis Cervantes encourages Camila to be happy about Demetrio's feelings for her? Why do you think this upsets Camila?

XII

1. How does Anastasio attempt to distinguish himself from the other men fighting for Demetrio? What stories does he tell Luis Cervantes?
2. What news of the revolution do the men get from the travelers?
3. Who do the revolutionaries need to defeat at Zacatecas?

XIII

1. Why does Demetrio join the revolution and become an insurgent? How is this different from Luis Cervantes' reasons? What does Luis Cervantes appeal to when he speaks of the potential of the revolution? Think about whether he is appealing individual gain, or a gain for the whole country. Now, compare this to the reasons that Demetrio and his men are fighting.
2. What point is Luis Cervantes making about the revolution when he convinces Demetrio that they should join Natera before they fight Huerta's forces?

XIV

1. How would you describe the way that Luis Cervantes treats Camila? Based on this treatment and the advice he gives her, do you think he respects her? Explain.

XV

1. How does Camila's mother, Sena Agapita, deal with Camila's tears?
2. Compare how Camila feels the day the men leave with how Demetrio feels that day.
3. What was life like for the men before they began fighting? Think about what is revealed by the series of questions asked in this section.
4. Who do they come upon on the highway? What does this man tell them?

XVI

1. What suggestions does Luis Cervantes make to ensure that the attack is successful? What does he fear about the old man they met the day before? Does Demetrio heed any of the warnings or suggestions?
2. Are there more Federales than they expected? What happens when Demetrio and his men enter the small plaza?
3. Does the head of the Federales think the revolutionaries are much of a threat? How do you know? Think about the letter he drafts to his superior about the battle before it's even been fought.

XVII

1. Who is the old sergeant? Where did the revolutionaries meet him before?
2. The man who leads them through town has a brother who has been forced to fight for the Federales. The man wants to save his brother before the fighting begins. What happens to his brother?
3. Who wins the battle?

XVIII

1. How does Luis Cervantes help Demetrio in his meeting of General Natero?
2. How do the other men, including Natero and Demetrio, respond to Luis Cervantes toast? Why do you think this is? What is different about Luis Cervantes and his reasons for fighting that set him apart from the rest of the men?
3. When Luis Cervantes meets his old acquaintance Solis, how have Solis' opinions about the revolution change.
4. What do you think Solis means by the following: "The revolution is a hurricane, and the man who gives himself to her is not a man anymore, he is a miserable dry leaf swept by the wind."

XIX

1. Despite the fact that the revolutionaries' assault on Zacatecas had failed, why are all the men in such a good mood? What did they do on their way? How did they acquire so many of the objects they brought with them?

XX

1. How do the men talk about Pancho Villa? What kind of image or myth has developed around him based on the stories the men tell?
2. How do the descriptions of Villa's Northern troops differ from the state of the Southern troops?

XXI

1. How does Demetrio fight when they attack Zacatecas? What reputation does he earn in this battle?
2. What happens to Luis Cervantes' friend, Solis?
3. What does Solis' mean when he says, "My friend, what a disappointment, if we who offered all our enthusiasm, our very lives to overthrow a miserable assassin, instead turn out to be the builders of an enormous pedestal so that a hundred or two hundred thousand monsters of the same species can rise themselves. . . .A nation without ideals, a nation of tyrants!. . .All that blood spilled, and all in vain!"

Part Two

I

1. What kind of reputation does Demetrio have after Zacatecas?
2. What kind of person do you think Guero Margarito is? Why? Think about how he treats the waiter.
3. How do Demetrio and Montanes tell time, even though they have a watch?

II.

1. Where do Demetrio and his men intend to stay? Where does Pintada tell them they should stay? What is her reasoning? Think about what the Federales do when they go through a town. Does this make the revolutionaries any different?
2. What does Luis Cervantes hide in his pocket? Do you think his actions are in contradictions to the things he has said about the purpose of the revolution? Luis Cervantes says that the actions of the men in destroying the house discredits the revolution—do you think his stealing does as well? Why?

III.

1. Why do you think that Luis Cervantes is satisfied when he sees that Demetrio is attracted to his fiancé?
2. What do you think it is that Pintada wants most from the revolutionaries? Think about her actions? What do they accomplish?

IV.

1. What happened at the end of the party for Demetrio? Why does Luis Cervantes wake up bloody?
2. What did Pintada do for Luis Cervantes fiancé? Do you think she did it to help the fiancé, or because she has feelings for Demetrio?
3. Who stole the key to get into the girl's room?

V.

1. Why does Demetrio want to visit Don Monico? Think about the story that Demetrio tells Luis Cervantes about why he started fighting in the revolution.
2. Does Demetrio believe the women when they say they are alone and have no real weapons or money? What does he order his men to do? Who do they find?
3. Does Demetrio let anyone loot the cacique's house? What does he order them to do to the house? Why does he order this?

VI.

1. What does Luis Cervantes try to give Demetrio as his commission? Does Demetrio want it? How does Luis Cervantes try and get Demetrio to accept it.
2. What does Demetrio say he needs to be a happy man? What do you think Luis Cervantes wants?

3. Who does Luis Cervantes agree to bring to Demetrio?

VII.

1. What did Luis Cervantes do to get Camila to come with him? How does Camila respond when she realizes what has happened?
2. Who comes up with a plan to get Camila home?

VIII.

1. Who are the men ordered to fight now? What is their reaction?
2. What does Camila decide to do? How does Pintada respond?

IX.

1. What is Guero Margarito dragging behind him? Describe his treatment of the prisoner. What does this say about his character?
2. Why does Pintada threaten Camila?

X.

1. What does Demetrio realize as he watches the man who works for Pifanio?
2. Why do you think Demetrio becomes so sad during this visit?
3. What does Pintada do to try and upset Camila?

XI.

1. Where is it that the men long to go?
2. Why do you think Luis Cervantes wants to buy everything from Codorniz?
3. What do the soldiers do when they reach Tepatitlán?
4. Who intervenes for the old man who has had everything taken from him?

XII

1. What did Guero Margarito do to the old man when he came to request the bags of corn that Demetrio said he could have?
2. What message does Demetrio receive on the way to Cuquío? Where is he supposed to go? What is he supposed to do with his soldiers?
3. What does Demetrio ask Pintada to do? How does she respond? What do you think of the fact that they allow Guero Margarito to stay, despite his behavior, but they tell Pintada she must leave? Why do you think the two are treated differently?

XIII.

1. What does Demetrio ask Luis Cervantes about Aguascalientes? Do you think that Demetrio understands the politics of the revolution? Think in terms of the contrast between the bigger political picture and the individual reasons many of the soldiers are

fighting.

2. Why do you think the townspeople run from the soldiers? What stories do you think they've heard about these men?
3. What does Guero Margarito do when they enter "La Cosmopolita"? What happens to the waiter? Does Guero pay the bill? What kind of reputation do you think these men give the revolution?

XIV

1. What distinction do the men make about stealing and killing after hearing the woman begging on the train? What is the irony in Demetrio's men talking about stealing? What have they done in each town they went to?
2. Who does Demetrio go to in order to get advice?
3. What advice does Natero give Demetrio? How does he explain the current state of the revolution? Who is now fighting who?
4. Who is Demetrio going to fight for? Do you get the sense that it's really important to him?

Part Three

I.

1. What year is at the beginning of Part 3? How do you know this?
2. Where is Luis Cervantes now? What does Venancio ask him for?
3. What bothers the men still fighting? Have they beaten the Federales? Why are they still fighting?
4. What do the soldiers find when they come upon the serranos?

II.

1. What has happened to Villa at Celaya? Can Demetrio's soldiers believe this?
2. Who defeated Villa?
3. How does the following statement from Valderrama describe the Revolution from the point of the soldiers he fights with? "I love the Revolution like I love an erupting volcano! The volcano because it's a volcano, and the Revolution because it's the Revolution! . . . But what do I care what stones wind up on top or on the bottom after the cataclysm?" Think about this in terms of how many times the person Demetrio's soldiers are fighting for and against changes.

III.

1. Why do you think that Demetrio is sad? What can we infer from his request for the song "The Gravedigger"?

IV.

1. Who are most of Demetrio's soldiers now? Why are the men who have been with

Demetrio since the beginning getting frustrated by the men who now fill the ranks of the revolutionary armies?

V.

1. How is the soldiers' arrival in Juchipila different this time from at the beginning of the novel? Why do you think the townspeople no longer love any of the revolutionaries?
2. What has happened to all of the villages over the past year?

VI

1. Who does Demetrio finally see again? How has she changed?
2. How does Demetrio respond when his wife asks him why he keeps fighting? What do you think this means?

VII.

1. What is the irony of the last battle? Think about the battle at the beginning of the story where Demetrio's men defeat the Federales?
2. What do you think happens to Demetrio at the end of the story? Do you think he survives the battle?

REFLECTIVE WRITING QUESTIONS

1. Compare and contrast Demetrio Macias with Luis Cervantes. What do the two men have in common? How are they different? Who do you think was more loyal to the Revolution? Why?
2. What do you think of the end of *Los de Abajo/The Underdogs*? What do you think the end means? What point was Azuela making about the Revolution? Do you agree with him? How would you have ended the novel?
3. How is violence depicted in the novel? What role do you think violence plays, or what is the purpose of the portrayal of violence for Azuela? What point do you think he is trying to make in regards to violence and the Revolution?
4. How does Azuela portray class differences in the novel? Do you think this is significant?
5. Consider the various book covers provided on the follow page. Now that you have completed the novel, which cover do you think is the most appropriate for the story? Explain your choice.

