CHAPTER - III
PERUVIAN EPIC
(Conversation in the Cathedral)

More than a milestone in Vargas Llosa’s career, Conversacion en La Catedral (1969), translated as Conversation in the Cathedral (1975), is one of the great literary creations in the Spanish language. It is arguably the greatest novel about Peru ever written. Conversation in the Cathedral is the apogee of the first period of Vargas Llosa’s novelistic career and also marks the conclusion to the first phase of his career as a writer of narrative fiction.

The novel expresses the feelings of frustration and failure that a society experiences, when a political regime foments widespread corruption. The novel can be considered as the true culmination of his personal anguish for Peru. The final result is the portrayal of a multiple canvas of interlocking realities about Peruvian society. It is true, as Efrain Kristal in an article Four Reasons to Read Mario Vargas Llosa says:

One does not need to know anything about the details of Peruvian history to appreciate the genius of the novel’s literary construction or its moral dimensions—the intensifying anguish of a conflicted individual who does not know what to do about the human misery that surrounds him.
Vargas Llosa’s first novel, *The Time of the Hero* (1962) reveals the disastrous effects of an educational institution on adolescents, his second novel, *The Green House* (1966) deals with religious and economic effects on different social types, and his third novel, *The Conversation in the Cathedral* offers basically a political orientation. It is not predominantly a political novel, but a story of individual lives deeply affected by particular political and social circumstances. It is a more advanced novel than *The Green House* and it presents an overview of Peruvian society even greater in its sweep than the world of *The Green House*.

The novel probes Peruvian society from a political perspective. As such, it is the story of the Odría dictatorship from 1948 to 1956. But Wolfgang in *Masochism, Anyone?* claims:

> *Conversation* in my mind is not a political novel in the traditional sense, especially if we accept the ingredient of violence as a dimension of power. The novel is evidently a political fact, however: its very existence is a criticism of a past regime”. *(Center for Inter-American Relations, Inc, 15).*

Vargas Llosa has spoken of novels which, “despite political themes, are not political novels,” and maintains that he aspired to write such a novel with *Conversation in the Cathedral*. With this novel, Vargas Llosa consolidates his stand in the tradition of the great practitioners of the
nineteenth century novel, presenting the world as it appears to the senses. Mario Benedetti in Vargas Llosa and his Fertile Scandal (1967) considers Vargas Llosa’s literature to be “committed but not militant” (183). Jorge Lafforgue took a step further by claiming that Vargas Llosa’s novels are contradictory and deceitful.

This novel, Conversation in the Cathedral, shows how a Peruvian dictatorship in the 1950s not only determined but destroyed the lives of its citizens. Specifically the novel focuses on General Manuel Odria’s (1897-1974) dictatorship, which began in 1948 and lasted until 1956. That historical moment is recreated through a conversation – denoted in the novel’s title – between two men in a seedy downtown Lima bar called The Cathedral, which occurs several years later, in 1963. The complicated plot is set against the backdrop of Vargas Llosa’s experience as a university student during the dictatorship of Manuel Odria. Odria was the President of Peru from 1948 to 1956. Many in the Peruvian left considered his government to be a dictatorship. Corruption was rampant throughout his regime. It was even feared that his dictatorship would run indefinitely.

For Vargas Llosa, Odria’s dictatorship left an indelible mark on his generation. During this period he attended San Marcos University, the most important and respected higher-education institution in Lima, Peru, and participated in clandestine student political meetings to protest the
Odria regime. There he met people who later became characters in the novel. He also worked as a journalist for a Lima newspaper. As a reporter, he investigated crime cases that put him in direct contact with Lima’s dark side; a corrupt Mafia underworld of crime and prostitution. This experience, in addition to others, forms the basis of his third major novel, *Conversation in the Cathedral*. Just as his stay at Leoncio Prado Military Academy had yielded new insights into Peruvian reality, such experiences served to enlighten Vargas Llosa’s perception of Peru’s social environment. The novel was hailed at one point by Vargas Llosa as his most significant work. It marks a new level of artistic maturity for him and it represents the culmination of a writing style. For this novel, Vargas Llosa was confronted with the task of creating his fictional material from real models that were not just a single institution as in *The Time of the Hero* or an anonymous brothel as in *The Green House*, but an entire nation.

*Conversation in the Cathedral* is Latin America’s most complete and desolate picture of one of its great cities, Lima. More generally, the novel is an examination of the deep roots of corruption and failure in Peruvian politics and government during the 1950s. Vargas Llosa at one occasion tells Jose Miguel Oviedo that:
Odria’s dictatorship was quite different from others that were or are more violent. Its power was maintained through corruption, intrigue, compromise, and duplicity... It was a dictatorship that robbed our generation. There were no heroes, nor did it produce any martyrs, only lots of failures.

The reader becomes aware that the brutality of this regime spread through all of Peru.

As the title of the novel indicates, the plot develops around a conversation between Santiago Zavala and Ambrosio Pardo in a seedy downtown Lima bar called ‘The Cathedral’. Santiago is a rueful journalist and embittered son of a now deceased wealthy and influential businessman, Don Fermin. Ambrosio is a destitute black man from southern Peru, who once worked as a chauffeur for Santiago’s father and also for Cayo Bermudez - Minister of Security during the Odria regime.

In 1960s, Lima is under the thrall of an epidemic of rabies. Ambrosio is working at a dog pound where Santiago goes to claim his missing dog. Santiago is writing editorials attacking the sloth of the city administration’s handling of the stray dog problem as a crime reporter for the daily, *La Cronica*. He sets out in quest of his wife’s dog, which has been dragooned by dogcatchers anxious to earn their commission. It can be understood as part of the city’s response to his own editorials. The novel
actually begins in a “present” of the 1960s. Thirty-year old Santiago accidentally encounters Ambrosio at the city dog pound. They are surprised to see each other after so many years, and Santiago invites Ambrosio to have a drink with him at The Cathedral, where they spend the afternoon drowning their sorrows in beer and revive the past through sharing their memories. As they talk, Vargas Llosa adds many conversations and the voices of many other people who, directly or indirectly, have touched the lives of Santiago and Ambrosio and many other individuals during 1948 to the early 1960s.

The novel may be best described as an epic. What makes it to call this contemporary novel an epic, is the vastness which seems to encompass all aspects of Peruvian social life over an entire generation during the 1950s. Vargas Llosa analyzes the corrupting influence of the Manuel Odria dictatorship on all sectors of Peruvian society from 1948 to 1956. Within the context of Vargas Llosa’s work, at least, it is his Peruvian epic. There is nothing like a systematic division of narrative segments as in his earlier novels. Vargas Llosa originally planned to publish the four-part book as four separate volumes. The first edition in Spanish consisted of two separate volumes, each containing two parts of the novel. Later editions in Spanish as well as the English version have been printed in one volume. The novel is formally divided into four parts. In Part I, the reader learns
about Santiago’s adolescent years, his entry into the university, his time in jail due to Cayo Bermudez’s secret service activities, and his decision to leave home to find his own way in life. Part II focuses on Don Cayo, Ambrosio and Hortensia, alias the Muse, Cayo’s prostitute lesbian lover. Part III revolves around the description of political developments at the time, as Don Cayo and his government have lost in their final attempt to control Peru. It also deals with the journalistic world of Santiago, the murder of Hortensia, and the revelation of a sexual relationship between Ambrosio and Don Fermin. Part IV further develops certain personal relationships. It let looses all the long-awaited revelations. It portrays Santiago’s continual downward plunge toward mediocrity as he marries a person below his family’s social standing.

The plot itself is an important factor in this novel. Santiago’s father, Don Fermín Zavala, is a rich aristocratic entrepreneur who supports Odria and in return, receives important favors for his business enterprises. He also holds close ties with Cayo Bermudez, Minister of Security during the Odria regime, who is largely responsible for repressing the regime's political enemies. Santiago despises his father’s wrongdoings and grows increasingly uncomfortable with his privileged social status. He attends San Marcos, where he joins a clandestine Marxist cell. When the group is discovered by Odria’s secret police, Santiago and his comrades are
detained. But while the latter are punished, Santiago is freed in less than twenty-four hours because of his father's connections. Further enraged by the situation, Santiago abandons the paternal household, getting a job as a crime reporter for the daily, *La Cronica*. Through his job, he learns even more about the life of fear and violence that affects many Peruvians and becomes progressively skeptical about the society to which he belongs and his future in it.

During a conversation with Ambrosio in The Cathedral, Santiago learns of his father's sordid behavior behind public life. While leading a life of decency for the external world, Cayo Bermudez also keeps two whores: La Musa and Queta, for his entertainment and also to blackmail many of the upper-class men who support Odría. La Musa and Queta carry on a lesbian liaison that Cayo Bermudez enjoys as a voyeur. Don Fermín frequently attends the minister's parties. In course of time, Don Fermín elopes with Cayo Bermudez's childhood friend and chauffeur, Ambrosio. In reality Don Fermín is a well-known homosexual, and Ambrosio soon becomes his lover. Santiago learns of his father's true identity when he investigates La Musa's murder and hears Queta tell the authorities that La Musa was killed by Ambrosio to protect Don Fermín from being blackmailed.
Vargas Llosa depicts human violence, widespread corruption, and degradation at every level of Peru's institutional and social structure. Regardless of social class, however, all of the novel's characters lead an existence marked by defeat. As part of a system lacking any kind of basic values, Santiago is no exception. He too becomes the victim of a society that engenders only mediocrity and personal failure. The novel ends, as it had begun, in the "present" of the dialogue between Santiago and Ambrosio in The Cathedral. Almost all the pieces of narrative puzzle have fallen together by the conclusion of the novel. Part I is dominated by dialogue. The reader becomes acquainted with the characters and gets to know Peruvian reality primarily on the basis of what characters themselves say.

The original four-hour conversation between Santiago and Ambrosio in The Cathedral, leads to multiple associations and other dialogues in the past. Indeed, Santiago Zavala is the most fully developed character in the novel. Through the conversation, the reader begins to pick up his details beginning with the year of his graduation from high school, a university student, and ending when he is married; thirty years old as a journalist. The conversation includes the past lives of other characters too. The life of Ambrosio as chauffeur, bodyguard, and political thug during the Odria regime is presented in great detail. Other prominent characters
include Cayo Bermudez, Don Fermin, and Amalia, the Zavala family
servant who, after a stormy life with Trinidad Lopez, marries Ambrosio
and dies giving birth to his child.

The conversation, an attempt to reach an understanding between the
two men, fails. But it is important to both the characters. Particularly, for
Santiago, the conversation is a frustrating one to find answers to the
burning questions that he poses at the outset. He wants to understand why
Ambrosio loved his father, and Ambrosio wants to understand why
Santiago rebelled against Don Fermin. The conversation between them
does not lead to any mutual understanding. Santiago is unable to
comprehend why Ambrosio was his father’s lover or why he murdered to
protect him from Hortensia’s blackmail. Ambrosio is unable to understand
why Santiago rejected the man whom he loved. Ambrosio tried to explain
his thoughts to Santiago but he does not know how to express himself:
“Because he was son, Ambrosio says, so intelligent and such a gentleman
and so everything else”. (156)

Although Ambrosio cannot explain his submission to Don Fermin,
he does not hide the contempt he feels towards Santiago: “I want you to
know that you don’t deserve the father you had, I want you to know that.
You can go straight to shit hell, boy” (18). And while Santiago is able to
reconcile himself to the memory of his father, whom he comes to see as
another victim of the social and political system he despises, he is unable to understand why Ambrosio, a heterosexual man who belongs to the classes most exploited in Peru by men like his father, was willing to become his father’s lover.

When the conversation concludes, the reader comes to terms with a world that shattered the aspirations of both men. In the compassion that Santiago is able to feel for his late father, and in his failed attempt to arrive at some understanding with Ambrosio, the greatest theme of Vargas Llosa’s maturity as a writer had already emerged - the attempt to reconcile with other human beings after illusions have been lost. From this conversation, the reader learns about the past lives of both men, who obviously represent opposite ends of a highly stigmatized social hierarchy in Peru.

What separates Santiago and Ambrosio from other characters in the novel is that, both attempt to free themselves from the burden of repetition and reiteration. They both try to constitute their selves, first by refusing to become what their fathers are, and then by radically breaking with their fathers’ life-styles. It is in this initial stage, Santiago enters San Marcos University which represents the lower-class atmosphere, against the wishes of his father.
Jean Franco rightly argues in his article “Conversations and Confessions: Self and Character in The Fall and Conversation in the Cathedral” in Charles Rossman & Alan Warren Friedman’s edited book *Mario Vargas Llosa: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1978): “One event—Hortensia’s murder—decisively alters the future of the two men” (73). It is this act, which is the silent vacuum around which the conversation forms. After Hortensia’s murder, nothing is quite the same. Ambrosio is doomed to failure, returning to a marginal social status and confined to the dog pound. Santiago confronts his father’s scandalous homosexuality as both his shame and as a revelation. He refused to receive his father’s inheritance. In the end, the reader may conclude—as one critic has said—that the complexity here is the false complexity; nothing complex is happening, relatively simple events are being related as if they were part of a jigsaw puzzle.

An overview of the lives of four principal characters demonstrates what Jose Miguel Oviedo in *Mario Vargas Llosa: The Invention of a Reality* (1970) has called four models of frustration. The four frustrated characters are: Santiago, Don Cayo, Ambrosio, and Don Fermin. Santiago is unsatisfied with all the possible roles—as the son of an affluent businessman, as revolutionary, as bohemian, and, finally as humble local journalist. Oviedo sees him as a model of the typical Peruvian middle-class
person - An honest but insufficient breaking with the system, which doesn’t become either heroic or to be rejected but a fall into emptiness. Don Cayo ascends from virtual anonymity in his small town to a powerful position in Peru, only to eventually have his quest for power frustrated. Don Femin fails both as a father and entrepreneur. Ambrosio represents “degree zero” of the human possibilities that his social class has in Peru. His numerous jobs and failed business ventures lead him to his final fate, working in a dog pound. It is here he met Santiago, which leads to a four-hour conversation.

Complexly juxtaposed are a multitude of plot narratives of politicians, oligarchs, police, servants, laborers, prostitutes, and many others, who represent different fervent levels of social, racial, and economic degradation in Peruvian society. It is true as John S. Brushwood in an article on the novel comments: “There is certain temptation to go back and reread, because it creates a very satisfying feeling that now you really understand what was going on. The story comes together the way a good mystery reveals itself” (Kansas City Star, 8). The complex narrative structure is particularly striking when Vargas Llosa intertwines conversations and events on the same page that may be taking place simultaneously in different places, or that took place at different points in time.
The main theme of Vargas Llosa’s narrative fiction in the 1960s is the brutality of a corrupt, unjust, hypocritical, and frivolous society. The novel is a compelling literary statement about corruption in Latin America. It is also unsurpassed as a work of narrative fiction in its ability to explore how individuals, communities and even an entire social world can be undermined by the effects of corruption. As David Gallagher pointed out in a seminal essay published in 1973, “Conversation in the Cathedral is the culmination of Vargas Llosa’s literary explorations of Peru of the 1960s, in as much as ‘it finds a damning picture of a nation in which every individual is compromised or corrupted in one way or another’.

This novel shows how a Peruvian dictatorship in the 1950s not only determined but destroyed its citizens’ lives. It depicts a society torn by corruption and political strife. The novel shows that every level of society, from the upper-class to the downtrodden, is poisoned and debased by a corrupt, immoral, and evil system. Vargas Llosa claims that the intention of the novel is to reflect life in the 1950s under Odría's rule faithfully:

In this work I am attempting to reflect the social atmosphere of Peru during the eight-year rule of Odría; that mild but incredibly corrupt dictatorship that I experienced at first hand during my college years in Lima, and the mud of which—in one way or another—splattered all of us. But it is not a
political novel: rather it is the reflection on many levels (social, human, erotic, racial and political as well) of Peru during this period.

The victimization of an entire generation through political oppression is the main theme of the novel. In an interview by Elizbieta Sklodowska, Vargas Llosa said that it was an important period for his entire generation because during those eight years they passed from childhood to youth to adulthood:

We were marked by a dictatorship which was maybe less cruel than other Latin American dictatorships of the times, but probably much more corrupt. Corruption impregnated the whole life in Peru during those years. I wanted to write a novel about the way in which this corrupt system would infect everything, even the most remote activities from the political center.

The novel can be best interpreted in the light of Marxist literary criticism. The English literary critic and cultural theorist, Terry Eagleton (1943- ) in the Preface to his book Marxism and Literary Criticism (1976) writes: "Marxist criticism analyses literature in terms of the historical conditions which produce it; and it needs, similarly, to be aware of its own historical conditions" (i). K Siegel, in his Introduction to Modern Literary
Theory notes: "It is through the theories of class struggle, politics and economics that Marxist literary criticism emerged". He further says the thought behind Marxist Criticism is that, works of literature are mere products of history that can be analyzed by looking at the social and material conditions in which they were constructed.

Marxism has had an enormous impact on literary and cultural studies. Marxist criticism views literary works as reflections of the social institutions from which they originate. According to Marxists, even literature itself is a social institution and has a specific ideological function, based on the background and ideology of the author. Terry Eagleton further defines Marxist criticism this way:

Marxist criticism is not merely a ‘sociology of literature’, concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history. (2)

The narrative core of the novel, Conversation in the Cathedral, itself is set in a historical period of Odria’s regime. The back blurb of the novel reads: “Through a complicated web of secrets and historical references,
Mario Vargas Llosa analyzes the mental and moral mechanisms that govern power and the people behind it. More than a historic analysis, *Conversation in the Cathedral* is a groundbreaking novel that tackles identity as well as the role of a citizen and how a lack of personal freedom can forever scar a people and a nation. Even Vargas Llosa stated that the suffering of his characters in the novel is the result of a precise historical moment, and should not be interpreted as a general statement on the human condition.

When one examines the novel in having precise historical references, it takes back to General Odria's reign. Set in 1960s, when Santiago, in search of a lost dog, discovers Ambrosio - the novel takes the reader back to the eight years of Odria's presidency. At that time, Santiago and Ambrosio were young men on the verge of identifying their individuality and becoming independent of their families. Both have fathers who are closely connected to the corrupt regime. Don Fermin is deeply involved in deals with Cayo Bermudez. Ambrosio's father works as a member of a goon squad. Both Santiago and Ambrosio attempt to separate themselves from their family. They don't want to become mere repetitions of their fathers. Both come to recognize themselves as social failures.
The novel is set in a historical period that covers the political transition from the presidency of Manuel Odria (1948-1956) to the first presidential election of Fernando Belaunde Terry (1963). Many in the Peruvian left considered Odria’s government to be a dictatorship. Corruption was rampant throughout his regime. During the Odria dictatorship, Santiago despises his society. He is not optimistic when democracy is re-established in Peru because he sees the new regime merely as one more chapter in the vicissitudes of a corrupt society. This view coincides with Vargas Llosa’s own political position and with that of his friend Sebastian Salazar Bondy (1924–1964), one among the most important of Peruvian intellectuals, who nurtured and promoted Vargas Llosa’s early literary career. Bondy offered an analysis of Peru’s political situation on the eve of Belaunde’s electoral triumph. His comment can also be read as a note of political message to the novel: “We are on the eve of Peru’s presidential elections after years of dictatorship, and yet I know that elections do not bring about the radical solutions required to address Peru’s most pressing problems…” Bondy further says:

I certainly do not think that the elections will bring about the radical solutions that can address Peru’s most pressing problems. Whatever the result of the elections – even if they are not frustrated by some kind of military intervention – the Peruvian crisis will continue.
Santiago too abhors the dictatorship, but has no illusions that a true re-establishment of democracy through free and fair elections will better the situation of his country. He believes that Whether Peru is governed by dogmatists or by intellectuals is irrelevant; Peru will always be a screwed-up country; it began badly, and will end disastrously. Critics opine that Vargas Llosa’s attempt at reform is useless. Salazar Bondy’s argument that Vargas Llosa portrays Peru as an unjust and corrupt society that cannot be reformed seems to be true to some extent.

One of the central themes of *Conversation in the Cathedral* is the pitiful state of contemporary society in Peru, for which there is apparently no saving grace. In all of Vargas Llosa’s works one can find highly critical references to Peru. The reader finds profound investigation of life in all different and rigidly separated social strata of Peru. Lima is again used as the center of attention, besides several large cities and small towns. In general, Lima had long been an image of repression and confusion as internally corrupted like the Lima of Vargas Llosa’s *Conversation in the Cathedral*.

Though the novel is about a dictatorship, it does not give pride of place to the dictator. In the novel, Odria appears only once. From a Marxist perspective, it is not the individual in power, but the capitalist system that accounts for the corruption of a social world. The least attention given to
the personality of the dictator in the novel is, in keeping with Vargas Llosa's socialist conviction that, the main goal of a revolution is not the elimination of a dictator, but the elimination of capitalism.

Santiago chooses to enter San Marcos University against the wishes of his father, where all the aspirant classes of Peruvians seek the opportunity to improve their lot in life. There he makes friends with an activist communist group. These young people, the Cahuide group, have read Marx and many other socialist thinkers. They think that only a Marxist revolution will enable them and the majority of the Peruvians to capture the state, make “the revolution,” and set the nation once and for all on the road of development and justice. But Santiago acts as an activist only when guided by Aida, his lover. Much to his doubts on expelling him from the group, he was assigned in a minor role. When the Cahuide group is arrested, Santiago’s father takes the help of Cayo Bermudez, chief of secret police to get Santiago released. But his father’s gift of freedom is regarded by Santiago as the final affront by his family, and he decides to break openly with them. Santiago never makes any attempt to help them out of jail not to find out what happened to the group. He goes to live with his uncle who finds him a job.

In the novel, the rejection of a father who has succeeded through corruption becomes the focus of an exploration that reveals the corruption
of an entire social world. Lima at all levels is the stage for an endless struggle in the conflict between fathers and sons. The story of a young man, who has repudiated his father, sheds light on the failure of an entire society. Santiago’s rebellion begins with his decision to study at San Marcos. University life at San Marcos is described in great detail, and for the first occasion in any of Vargas Llosa’s works, the reader encounters portraits of life in several working class areas. Students and assassins, expensive farms and seedy bars, ministers and prostitutes are all to be found in this complex work.

Probably the most noticeable feature of Vargas Llosa’s description of Peruvian society is his excellent portrayal of the upper-middle class, the “gente decente” or “decent” people as he calls them, the society which he experienced at firsthand during his youth in Miraflores. Through the character Santiago, Vargas Llosa presents a finest portrayal of these elite.

Santiago’s story begins with his conflicts within his family. Unlike his brother – Sparky, and his sister – Tete, he is unwilling to accept the social values of his oligarchic family or the policies it supports. Against the wishes of his family, Santiago insists upon study at San Marcos, a university open to working-class students and associated with leftist ideologies. The wealthy, upper-class Zavala family are dismayed when their rebel son Santiago rejects the accepted career path of studying at the
Catholic University and opts instead to enroll at San Marcos, a state university, which in their eyes is “a nest of cholos” and “a nest of subversives”. Cholos are the people from Latin America who has both Spanish and Native American ancestors.

In the view of James Higgins in his examination of Lima, *Lima: A Cultural History* (2005), these quotations point to two defining features of San Marcos' history since the 1919 reform. On the one hand, the University became increasingly politicized with boycotts, strikes, public demonstrations and confrontations. While this meant that student activists often played an important role in campaigning on social issues and in resisting dictatorship, it also had the negative effect of causing serious disruption to teaching. Santiago becomes involved in politics with a group of student friends. Indeed his father warns him: “In San Marcos you didn’t study anything, Skinny, they just played politics, it was a nest of Apristas and Communists, all the grumblers in Peru gather together there” (61). These words voice a concern shared by many people, since the activities of the militants disrupted the education of fellow students who simply wanted to study and obtain a qualification.

His rebellion intensifies when he participates in the subversive activities of leftist groups which lead him to jail. When he allows his father to use his government contacts to release him from jail, Santiago
effectively breaks from the organized Left, who consider him a sellout to the dominant class. Santiago becomes isolated from his leftist friends, but he does not reconcile himself with his father, whom he shuns. Rather than listening to his father, he looks for work at the sensationalist tabloid newspaper where his uncle Clodomiro works as a journalist. His meeting with Clodomiro offers an important clue about his father’s social background. Here it is revealed that, Santiago’s father, who seems to be from a good family, is actually a man of humble origins who attained his present position through cunning means. Yet Clodomiro does not find fault with his brother and moreover he respects Fermin’s ambition to overcome their family’s low social status: “He always wanted to be somebody. Well, he got to be and you can’t reproach anyone for that.” (108)

Santiago’s parents tolerate their son’s journalist job as a passing fancy. Differences arose when he marries a woman of an inferior social class, who could have been hired as a household servant. This is one of the most moving scenes, probably representing the climax of Vargas Llosa's portrayal of the hypocrisy of the Zavala family. His mother is unable to hide her dislike for Ana, and she seems to regard her son’s marriage to a girl who, after all, is from an inferior social class, as a personal insult. She expresses her intense disappointment with Santiago:
Don't you realize, can't you see? How can I accept it, how can I see my son married to someone who could be his servant?"

(243)

Ana is the dark-skinned daughter of a mulatto woman, and is therefore unthinkable as the wife of Santiago. Santiago has become, from the point of view of his family and social class, a *cholo* (a peasant). He will not be able to participate in the reproduction of a social order with a wife from an inferior social rank.

In this social world, women solidify the bonds between powerful families through family ties. Marriage is also a way, as is the case with Santiago's father, to incorporate new players into the coteries of the ruling sector. Santiago rebelled against his social class, rejecting his family, and finds himself leading a mediocre life without any future. His decision to lead a mediocre life is sign of a corrupt social order. He is questioning the validity of this attitude - Does alienation from ethnic background, social class, and self necessarily lead to happiness? This is a fundamental question which Santiago never answers.

The lines that divide one social group from another are well defined in the novels of Vargas Llosa; particularly in *Conversation in the Cathedral*. The novel is set against the emigration of millions of indigenous peoples from the Andes to Peru's urban centers. This
population shift generated a complex human universe, improving the social rise of individuals such as Don Fermin. In a Reviewed work, *Mario Vargas Llosa: A Labyrinth of Solitude*, Joseph A. Feustle, Jr., comments on Vargas Llosa’s presentation of caste and class relationships. He describes the Whites - Zavalas in the novel, a class of shallow people, preoccupied with appearances and material possessions: “They are more worried that their son Santiago will associate with *cholos* (half-breeds) if he attends San Marcos University than with the quality of education that he will receive there”. (524)

Santiago’s brother Sparky, says that these *cholos* are shoeless, dirty, and infested with fleas. For example, Cayo Bermudez, the principle political figure in the novel, ascends to the position of Minister in the Odria Government but remains, success to contrary, a mere cholo for the white, well-to-do Senator Don Fermin Zavala. Joseph further says: “*Cholo, zambo, negro,* and *serrano* are pejoratives that are used not only to characterize a particular class of people but also to drive a wedge between them, to keep them at the proper distance and in their proper place” (524).

Ambrosio is also a victim of the oppression. After their four-hour conversation Santiago is concerned about what Ambrosio will do when his job in the dog pound would end. The pessimistic reply is: “He would work here and there... and after that here and there, and then, well, after that he
would have died, wasn’t that so, son?” (601) This serves to underscore Ambrosio’s plight. Through the novel, the feeling pervades that Ambrosio is a victim of circumstances because he is black Peruvian who must suffer the consequences of discrimination and oppression within a society which places more value on skin colour than on true worth.

Marxist theory explains such changes and developments in society as the result of opposition between the social classes. It is true, as Terry Eagleton remarked in the Preface to his book *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976) that: “Marxist criticism is part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies – the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times”. (ii)

Don Fermin Zavala represents the white upper class. He is driven into the underworld by his homosexual practices. Santiago assumes that his father is a man devoted to his family, but he feels that his family’s social position and respectability is shameful because Don Fermin’s wealth and social position depend on his prominence in a society, that excludes and exploits the masses. Don Fermin proposes a shady but lucrative business deal to the Peruvian head of national security.

Santiago is correct about his father’s corrupt political and business deals, but he does not suspect that his father is leading a tormented double life. While working as a journalist, Santiago’s learns of his father’s hidden
side. He is astonished to discover many details of his father's private life: he is a homosexual and is well known in criminal circles. Hortensia becomes a drug addict and a prostitute whose clients include politicians. Desperate for money, she blackmails Don Fermin, but Ambrosio, his chauffeur and homosexual lover, murders her. But it is only towards the end of the novel; Don Fermin finds out that Ambrosio murdered Hortensia to protect him from blackmail. Hortensia's murder is narrated in the second part of the novel, and Vargas Llosa discloses this surprising fact only at the end of the novel and then it becomes clear that Don Fermin did not order the execution.

When Santiago discovers the details of this father's private life, his anger towards him gradually fades. He sees his father as another victim of the system against which he had rebelled. The father's double life sheds light on the title of the novel. In this novel, criticism is found of what Vargas Llosa obviously regards as the essential ingredients of Peruvian society. The Church, for example, is heavily censured. Although at first glance, the title suggests a conversation in Cathedral, in reality, the conversation takes place in a seedy bar called The Cathedral, not too far from the actual Cathedral of Lima. In the novel, the Cathedral of Lima intermittently appears as a sad witness of Peru's social degradation. Indeed, the bar where Santiago and Ambrosio meet becomes their church.
For Santiago, religious piety in his country is a pathetic illusion. At one occasion, he tells Ambrosio “you’re closer to reality in a whorehouse than in a convent Ambrosio”. (110) Vargas Llosa makes it obvious that these ills permeate all levels of Peruvian society. But he says his purpose is not merely to condemn this particular social stratum, but rather to show that similar levels of corruption and selfishness are found in all levels of the nation's social structure.

David Gallagher in his seminal essay published in 1973, calls the novel as a literary investigation of a nation’s ‘original sin’, summed up in a question, the most quoted line from any Peruvian novel: “At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?” (3) Santiago wonders when his own life was ruined as he ponders on the misery and degradation of Peru. In this novel, the ruin of a nation and the ruin of myriad individual destinies are one and the same. As a young man he abandons a life of privilege to reject the social milieu of his father. Don Fermin is actually a self-made man from the lower middle classes who gained a measure of power through his willingness to participate in unlawful activities. Paralleling Fermin is Cayo Bermudez, the sleazy and brutal head of a secret police, who climbed up the social ladder through the use of ruthless force.

The first chapter of the novel sets the stage for the long conversation between Santiago and Ambrosio, which in the remainder of the text
becomes its content. The initial lines of the novel set the overall theme: lack of communication, failure, and alienation). The first scene describes Santiago as he leaves the newspaper building where he works, on his way home for lunch. From the doorway of *La Cronica*, he observes a 'gray midday'. A resounding question set forth by Santiago in the very first paragraph of the novel: “At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?” (3) re-appear throughout the novel. It can be understood and associated with three of the novel’s most fundamental characteristics. The first, “at what precise moment” points to the importance of time. The second important element is Peru itself - the novel will be a portrayal and questioning of an entire nation during a specific historical period. The third significant characteristic is suggested by the question mark at the end of the sentence.

The novel presents itself initially as a question to be solved. The reader’s task will involve attempting to solve a series of mysteries about character, plot and indeed what happened to Peru and when. Immediately, Santiago links the state of the country with the state of individuals, starting with himself: “He was like Peru, Zavalita was, he’d fucked himself up somewhere along the line. He thinks: when?” (3) Then he quickly adds: “Peru all fucked up, Carlitos all fucked up, everybody all fucked up. He thinks: there’s no solution” (3). His story during the rest of the book is a
search for the answer to “when” he, like Peru, had “fucked himself up,” and to why there is “no solution”. This shows the downcast depressed attitude of Santiago towards life. A feeling of hopelessness is communicated when he feels that “there is no solution”. Yet the reader is left with another question: To what there is no solution?

It is difficult to trace the answer even till the last page of the novel. Wolfgang A. Luchting in a critical essay *Masochism, Anyone?*, astutely notes: “Ultimately, because there is no definite answer, there is no “precise moment” either”. Throughout the narrative, Santiago searches for the specific moment when his own life and Peruvian society took a turn for the worst. The reader must decide who should be declared the protagonist of the novel. Besides Ambrosio and Cayo Bermudez as the center, Santiago might be considered, for his is the story of an individual “fucking-up” which represents Peru in the novel and, obviously, of much of Latin America, past or present.

*Conversation in the Cathedral* can be considered as a moral novel set in a political context. Santiago is incensed by the corruption of his society and is supportive of revolutionary solutions, but he has doubts about his ideologies and tactics of the leftist groups he knew: “The worst thing was to have doubts, Ambrosio, and the wonderful thing was to close your eyes and say God exists or God doesn’t exist and believe it” (99-100).
He laments his own doubts, but cannot avoid them. He says: “I knew that if everybody set himself to being intelligent and having his doubts, Peru would go on being fucked up forever” (139). Santiago's doubts and his inability to believe unquestioningly and to act on that affirmation, become a major theme in the novel.

An interior voice nags him about his failure to believe: “What had probably fucked you up was that lack of faith, Zavalita” (99). He even admits: “In prep school, at home, in the neighborhood, in the study group, in the Party, at La Cronica,” Santiago says, “My whole life spent doing things without believing, my whole life spent pretending” (101). He further says that his whole life is a lie, and that he doesn't believe in anything. He is frustrated because he does not feel comfortable with any of the political groups that share his hate for his father's social world: “But I hated those people, I still hate them,” Santiago said. “That's the only thing I am sure of Carlitos” (139). His father, who suffers the most from Santiago's disaffection, says: “Nobody can get along with you. Even if we treat you with love, you always give us a kick in the pants”. (74)

Even before coming to terms with the full dimensions of corruption in Peru, Santiago chooses social failure over success as a way to refuse his bourgeois family. Santiago's father is a respected member of Peruvian society, and as his eldest and favourite son, Santiago is expected to follow
suit. Instead, the young man becomes involved with radical groups whose aim is to promote a socialist revolution. He associates with people of a lower social milieu to distance himself from his father and from the productive activities of a class that he considers corrupt. He is convinced that social success depends on corruption, and he refuses to seek personal gain in a society that thrives on exploitation. Santiago does not regret his choice, even though he admits his life has been a failure: "In this country either you screw someone over, or you get screwed" (166). The phrase used by Santiago is the same one used by Jaguar in *The Time of the Hero*, as both characters inhabit the same moral world. The only difference is, while Jaguar wants to dominate in order to avoid being dominated, Santiago renounces his dominant position to avoid harming others.

Efrain Kristal in *Temptation of the Word: Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa* (1998) comments:

Some of the most memorable characters in Vargas Llosa’s earlier novels – like Santiago Zavala in *The Conversation in the Cathedral*, and Gamboa in *The Time of the Hero* are the ones who discover a contradiction between ethical code and an unjust society they are able to understand but unable to change. (66)
When faced with the opportunity to acquire power, these characters prefer to evade corruption by destroying their own personal aspirations while relinquishing the privileges offered by society. Jean Franco in *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (2002) considers that the answer to the question asked by the novel, “Who fucked up Peru?” lies in a “social body in which classes are bound together by a deadly network of favors and lies”. (12)

The Peruvian society that the reader sees in the novel is devastating. The predominant image of the nation is that of Peru as brothel. Cayo uses his entertainment privilege in a type of brothel, Hortensia’s home. According to Santiago’s vision of reality, Peru itself is a brothel. He explains to Ambrosio in *The Cathedral*: “Because you’re closer to reality in a whorehouse than in a convent, Ambrosio” (143). In a country where everyone seems to be reduced to prostitution, Fermin plays out a role of prostitute in his relationship with Ambrosio: “Let me be what I am, he says, let me be a whore, Ambrosio”. (57)

A society that reduces human existence to such debased levels can make individuals as different as Santiago and Don Cayo, surprisingly similar. Santiago’s conversation in *The Cathedral* leads him to the following realization: “And my whole life a lie, I don’t believe in anything” (101). He says this at the age of thirty, after losing his “purity”.
Don Cayo, more experienced in Peruvian life, is a cynic from the moment he arrives in Lima. Major Paredes says to him: “At first I thought you were posing as a cynic. Now I’m convinced you really are. You don’t believe in anything or anybody, Cayo” (242). When Don Cayo falls from power, he explains to Paredes: “I’m going to give you one good piece of advice. Don’t even trust your mother” (460). By the end, the two principal forces of the novel with totally different backgrounds and aspirations arrive at quite similar attitudes. Thus, individuals with different attitudes can turn surprisingly similar, in a debased society.

Vargas Llosa renders the essence of this depraved society by juxtaposing the world of sex and crime with the political realm. The perverted sexual roles of several characters reveal the personalized, individual sense of degradation that matches the more impersonal and collective view of an immoral and dissolute political system. Wolfgang in *Masochism, Anyone?* points out that [All] of Vargas Llosa's fiction is highly charged with sex: “The present novel deals with a wide variety of it; yet, sex is never used gratuitously”. (*Center for Inter-American Relations, Inc*, 15). He says that sexual corruption can be seen as a symbolization of the general corruption of the Peru. Vargas Llosa himself seems to say that Peru was a brothel at that time.
Few critics are of the view that, in Vargas Llosa’s fiction, sex is often the only satisfaction or fulfillment to be obtained any more. All other aspirations in Latin American lives either die or drag on in frustration and fear. Sara Castro-Klaren in *Understanding Mario Vargas Llosa* (1992) states:

> In this society everything divides and alienates its members: race separates, politics divides, kinship estranges, money distances, social position isolates. Only with sex, and only for an instant, can the characters feel sufficiently free to smile or laugh. (105)

The numerous examples of coarse language used to describe the state of Peruvian society indicate the deep frustration which the author feels on considering the reality of Peru. Most readers would agree with George R. McMurray’s conviction that the novel is “a powerful, dispassionate commentary on Peruvian – and Latin American reality, a tour de force that will strengthen the opinion of many critics that Vargas Llosa is one of today’s foremost writers of prose fiction” (84).

Suzanne Jull Levine in *New York Times Book Review* 23, writes that the novels written by Vargas Llosa during the 1960s are controversial: “Mario Vargas Llosa has begun a complete inventory of the political,
social, economic and cultural reality of Peru. This inventory is necessarily controversial" (7).

Abdul K. Bangura in *Mario Fenyo on the Third World: A Reader* (2002) talks about Vargas Llosa’s propagation of reality: “While he may be intent on changing reality, Vargas Llosa does not openly advocate anything, does not denounce oppression or injustice, directly or indirectly” (92).

The narrative style of the novel is extremely challenging to read. The novel’s structure is complex; but it basically tells two stories. The first, narrated chronologically is about the young Santiago who rejects his father’s world; and the second, is the story of his father’s double life. The novel’s structural complexity can be understood through a key image provided by Santiago’s emotional four-hour conversation. Dick Gerdes in his book *Mario Vargas Llosa* (1985) compares the narrative structure of the novel to a whirlwind. He says:

> The image of the whirlwind - as a current of air whirling violently in a spiral form around a more or less vertical axis and with a forward motion - helps the reader to visualize the way in which the novel’s narrative materials are organized. (97)
The whirlwind also calls to mind Santiago's life. The organization of the plot is technically schematic. This novel is the culmination of technical patterns that Vargas Llosa had mastered in his previous novels, *The Time of the Hero & The Green House*. Obviously, the reading of this monumental novel, *Conversation in the Cathedral* cannot be taken lightly. As one critic has suggested that the author could have responded that he does not undertake the writing lightly.

The novel is structured like a Chinese box in which almost all the action either takes place inside or becomes the subject of a long conversation between two of the characters in a bar. Chinese box is the technique of narrating one story within another, or within a frame. Vargas Llosa's own description of the Chinese box set-up would seem most applicable here. In the Chinese box, what one encounters inside the first large box are other boxes that merely duplicate and repeat the same design of the outer frame. The novel involves six simultaneous conversations within the original outer frame. When asked in an interview by Elizbieta Sklodowska, about the structure of this complex novel, Vargas Llosa replied:

I had at the beginning something completely disparate and chaotic – many characters, many episodes. I didn't know how to link them, to integrate them into a cohering structure. I
discovered that conversation could be the spine of the main river of this complicated world, a conversation in which other conversations would appear and end (*The Missouri Review*, 120).

Talking about the tense, Gregory Rabassa in *If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents* (2006) says: “Vargas Llosa has pulled off a temporal trick that will confuse the reader at first until he catches on to what’s up” (79). The conversation that starts the book is in the present tense as Zavala and Ambrosio begin to reminisce. Then time drifts into the past as they go back and what was past for the past then goes farther back. This technique does a superb job of time travel back and forth; but it is important not to get confused.

The novel serves as a model that allows for criticism of Peru and simultaneously opens the way for improvement and better future. Odria’s dictatorship is seen as a manifestation of contemporary Peruvian society’s deeply rooted ills. Critics consider this novel to be Vargas Llosa’s most pessimistic as well as his most deeply reflective text. Some critics have seen it as a culmination of modernist ideology as the character Santiago is portrayed to the most abject levels of depression, disenchantment, and cynicism. Philip Johnson rightly states:
The character of Santiago is complex and multifaceted; He is Vargas Llosa’s most complete expression of defeat and represents the total pessimism the author feels for Peru. (205)

Vargas Llosa himself has admitted that, with this novel he has reached the peak of his creativity, and that following this novel, he will not aspire to such immense literary efforts and will be more humble. He revisits some of his earlier themes with a touch of humour in the novels that follow his first phase of literary writing. The following chapter focuses on one such novel, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*.

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