

Generations in Las Trampas del Azar and Historia de una Escalera

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Resumen

La confrontación entre generaciones es un tema común en el teatro de Antonio Buero Vallejo. Este tema recibe un tratamiento similar en *Historia de una maestra* y *Las trampas del azar*. Las dos obras presentan una estructura dramática que sitúa la acción en varios marcos temporales que abarcan treinta años. Este trabajo examina la relación entre estructura y contenido en estas obras que juntas proporcionan una vista panorámica de la España del siglo XX entre 1919 y los años noventa. Estudiando las dos obras juntas ganamos un entendimiento de los cambios en el papel de la mujer y en las cuestiones sociales y políticas de la sociedad española. Las preocupaciones económicas de la Gran Depresión y los años de posguerra ceden a las cuestiones sociales más contemporáneas como el medio ambiente y la paz global. Aunque la transición de dictadura a democracia permite al dramaturgo expresar más abiertamente los problemas en *Las trampas del azar*, el mensaje principal de las dos obras es igual. Los problemas sociales nacen de la naturaleza humana y por eso se pueden solucionar solo con el cambio consciente del individuo. El mensaje de esperanza se encuentra cuando los personajes se dan cuenta que necesitan cambiarse a sí mismos antes de poder mejorar el mundo.

Palabras clave: Antonio Buero Vallejo, *Historia de una escalera*, *Trampas del azar*, estructura dramática

Abstract

The confrontation between generations is a common theme in the theater of Antonio Buero Vallejo. This theme receives a similar treatment in *Historia de una escalera* and *Las trampas del azar*. Both present a dramatic structure that sets the action in multiple time frames spanning a thirty-year period. This paper examines the relationship between structure and content in these two works which together provide a panoramic view of 20th Century Spain from 1919 to the 1990's. By studying these two plays together, we are able to gain an understanding of the developing role of women in Spanish society and of the changing social and political concerns. Early preoccupation with economic survival in the depression and post-war years gives way to more contemporary social issues such as environmental protection and world peace. Although the change from dictatorship to democracy allows the playwright to deal more openly with many issues in the latter play, the transcending message remains constant. Societal problems are rooted in individual human nature and therefore must be addressed through conscious change on an individual level. Buero's message of hope is found in his characters' realization that they must change themselves before they can make the world a better place.

Key words: Buero Vallejo, *Trampas del azar*, *Historia de una escalera*, dramatic structure

The confrontation between generations is a common theme in the theater of Antonio Buero Vallejo, from his earliest plays of the 40's and 50's, such as *Historia de una escalera* and *Las cartas boca abajo*, to his post-Franco works, including *Diálogo secreto* and *Música cercana*. This theme receives a similarly unique treatment in *Historia de una escalera*, Buero's first play, and *Las trampas del azar*, one of his last works. Both plays present a dramatic structure that sets the action in multiple time frames spanning a thirty-year period. Dramatic structure is a fundamental part of Buero's theater, as Martha Halsey has noted:

Text and social context form a dialectical unity in Buero's theater, as do dramatic structure and the world view that informs it. It is by studying the relationship between Buero's ideas and the particular structure he gives to the particular content he chooses to bring to the stage that we can most deeply appreciate his dramatic art in its totality. Buero reproduces social phenomena but structures them in accord with his own viewpoint, which means that he creates, and not just reflects, social meaning. However, the resonance of his tragedies obviously depends upon his art, for the social is communicated through the aesthetic (7).

Given the symbiotic relationship between form and content in Buero's theater, it is no surprise that a similarity in structure reflects a relationship in content as well.

This paper examines the relationship between structure and content in *Historia de una escalera* and *Las trampas del azar*. Specifically, I will look at Buero's portrayal of the two different 30-year periods in Spain's history focusing on the socio-economic problems of the characters and the role of women. Finally,

I will discuss Buero's message about generational conflict and youthful ideals, and how the message of each play can be informed by an understanding of the other work.

Historia de una escalera, which premiered in 1949, portrays three generations of residents of a Madrid apartment building, with the entire action of the play set around the stairway. In Act I, Fernando dreams of marrying Carmina, becoming an architect, and moving up in the world through his own efforts. Ten years later, in Act II, we see that instead of marrying Carmina, Fernando has married Elvira for economic security. Carmina, whose father has just died, agrees to marry Urbano for the same reason. Twenty years later, in the final act, these characters are the embittered, disillusioned parents of a new generation of idealistic young people. Fernando's son and Carmina's daughter repeat the same hopes and dreams for the future that their parents expressed thirty years earlier.

Las trampas del azar, which premiered in 1994, also portrays the conflict between generations living in the same building in Madrid spanning a 30 year period. Armando is the wealthy owner of a laboratory favored by "el Caudillo". Lisardo, a chemist in his employ and a former subordinate of Armando's in Franco's army, has just moved into an apartment in the same building. His son, Gabriel, has been dating Armando's daughter, Matilde. Armando opposes their relationship, in part because Gabriel took Matilde to a student demonstration. In spite of parental opposition, Gabriel wants to marry Matilde, although his motives are unclear. While he initially appears to love her, his obvious revulsion when she reveals the disfigurement on her back calls his feelings into question. Furthermore, although Matilde does not know it, the accident which disfigured her as a child was caused by Gabriel. Perhaps he marries her out of guilt and pity, perhaps at the same time, as her father fears, he wants to gain control of her fortune.

These are questions their son, Gabi, tries to answer 30 years later. Gabi distrusts his father because the laboratory, which Gabriel now runs, is directly involved in weapons production and in the intentional violation of environmental protection regulations. Gabriel's unethical management practices lead Gabi to question his father's motives for marrying Matilde, especially in light of Matilde's evident unhappiness. Through a series of coincidences, Gabi and his girlfriend Patricia discover that Gabriel threw the shingle that broke the streetlight that cut Matilde's back, thus causing her a lifetime of suffering. Gabi wants to punish his father by forcing him to confess his secret guilt to Matilde, but his relentless questioning causes Gabriel to have a heart attack. In the end, Patricia warns that Gabi is in danger of becoming as ruthless and uncaring as his father.

While many other Buero plays deal with generational conflicts and youthful ideals, *Historia de una escalera* and *Las trampas del azar* are the only ones that show us the characters at more than one point in time. Ten and twenty years elapse between the three acts of *Historia de una escalera*, with the final act in "nuestra época". Although the play is timeless in many ways, when Buero wrote it he was envisioning the period between 1919 and 1949. Written at the height of Franco's political oppression, the play avoids any mention of the Civil War, focusing instead on economic problems and the lack of opportunities for the working class. Through the repetition of character names and the speeches made by like-named characters, Buero shows us that many things have remained constant between 1919 and 1949. People still dream of romance and success, of marrying their one true love and moving up the socio-economic ladder. On the other hand, the dreams Fernando and Carmina speak of in the first act are never realized, thus casting doubt on the ability of their children to succeed where their parents failed.

As in *Historia de una escalera*, 30 years elapse between the beginning and end of *Las trampas del azar*. The first part takes place in the late fifties, judging from the references to the technocrats, the student demonstrations, and the growth of the Spanish economy. According to Virtudes Serrano in her introduction to *Trampas*, "No precisa el dramaturgo fechas, pero introduce suficientes indicios para reconocer la época, por ejemplo las referencias a la incorporación de España a la política mundial; a la manifestación estudiantil en la que muere un joven, que recuerda las agitaciones universitarias de febrero de 1956; a la llegada de los tecnócratas, cuyo primer gobierno fue nombrado en 1957; o a la recuperación de la economía española, que se produce de manera creciente a lo largo de esa década (18)." This 30-year period also includes a transition in government, from the Franco dictatorship to the present democracy. One notable difference between this play and Buero's first is that he makes specific references to the government, and even to the Civil War, that were not possible before.

Another difference between the two plays is that *Las trampas del azar* portrays families in the upper classes, Nationalist veterans who benefited from their connections to Franco. Nevertheless, money is still a concern for Armando, who worries about fortune hunters courting his daughter. The children of both generations, first Gabriel and later his son Gabi, still want to improve on the previous generation. Though the focus is no longer on economic survival, as it is in *Historia de una escalera*, the characters are still concerned as young men with making the world a better place. When confronted by his father about taking Matilde to a student demonstration, Gabriel defends himself with accusations against their fathers:

GABRIEL.--[E]lla tiene que saber de cuántas cosas sois capaces vosotros.... De mantener al país en la ignorancia, la opresión y el aislamiento.

LISARDO.--¿Aislamiento,
cuando el mundo entero nos
ha aceptado ya?

GABRIEL.--Tal vez porque
también sois capaces de
montar fábricas... y
laboratorios... para la
defensa. ¡Y para vuestras
ventas! (77-78)

As the previous dialog indicates, the emphasis in the generational conflict is on the youthful ideal of ethical responsibility vs. the preoccupation of the older generation with material gain. Young Gabriel, and later his son Gabi, both criticize their fathers for profiting from business practices and dealings that could be detrimental to society as a whole. For example, Gabi, Matilde and Gabriel each receive a leaflet depicting the pollution caused by the laboratory. When Gabriel tries to dismiss it as a false accusation, Gabi issues the reminder, "Recuerdo que te echaron una multa. Pero aunque te pongan otra, supongo que siempre será modesta si se compara con las ganancias (110)." Their conversation in this scene is an echo of the one cited above between Gabriel and his father, except this time Gabriel is the accused rather than the accuser.

As in *Historia de una escalera*, Buero uses the repetition of first names and similar speeches in order to call attention to parallels between father and son as young men. Another means the playwright uses to further emphasize these parallels is to have the same actors play the roles of older and younger generations in the two time periods. Thus the actor that plays young Gabriel also portrays Gabi, the actress cast as young Matilde is also Patricia, Lisardo and the mature Gabriel are played by the same actor, as are Adoración and the mature Matilde. Buero calls attention to this device by having the characters remark on the physical resemblance between Patricia and Matilde and between Gabi and his father.

Since *Historia de una escalera* and *Las trampas del azar* were written nearly fifty years apart and their action spans

most of this century, taken together they afford us a unique opportunity to examine the changing role of women in Spanish society. Even though this is not the primary theme of either play, the structure of *Las trampas del azar*, in particular, invites comparison and draws attention to the contrast in the female characters in the different time periods. In the earlier play, the female characters are economically dependent on the men in their lives, and this status does not change during the 30 years the play covers. In the opening scene, Doña Asunción is unable to pay her light bill because her son does not earn enough money. She is forced to accept the charity of her neighbor, Don Manuel, in order to keep her electricity from being cut off. At the beginning of Act II, Carmina's father has just died and her mother is worried about what will become of her unmarried daughter. "Sólo quisiera dejar a esta hija... con un hombre de bien..., antes de morirme (392)." She also expresses her concern for their mutual fate, now that they are left without a man to support them: "¿Qué va a ser de nosotros, Dios mío? ¿Y de esta niña? -¡Ay, Paca! ¿Qué va a ser de mi Carmina? (393)." The solution to their problem comes in the form of Urbano, who offers to marry Carmina and promises to take care of her mother as well.

Elvira's father is successful, so she does not have the same financial problems as her neighbors. However, there is no question of her ever running her father's business, so she tries to persuade him to hire Fernando, whom she loves: "Es muy fácil, papá. Tú lo que necesitas no es un yerno rico, sino un muchacho emprendedor que lleve adelante el negocio. Pues, sacas a Fernando de la papelería y le colocas, ¡con un buen sueldo!, en tu agencia (57)." Unfortunately, Elvira's plan fails. Although Don Manuel does hire Fernando, he does not turn out to be the enterprising young man she thought him to be, and ten years later she finds herself unhappy in her marriage and struggling economically. She says to Fernando, "¿Cuándo vas a

decidirte a ganar más dinero? Ya ves que así no podemos vivir. (*Pausa.*) ¡Claro, el señor contaba con el suegro! Pues el suegro se acabó, hijo. Y no se te acaba la mujer, no sé por qué (81)." If it had been more common for women to have a career, perhaps Elvira would have been able to retain more control of her father's business and would not now find herself trapped in this unhappy situation.

Rosa is also unlucky in love. She defies her parents in order to go out with Pepe, who, according to Urbano, is nothing more than a pimp who lives off the women he forces into prostitution. In Act II we see that Rosa now lives with Pepe, who thinks she should contribute her share of the money. "Ya te he dicho que la obligación de traer dinero a casa es tan tuya como mía (83)." Rosa's parents have shunned her, even though her sister Trini insists that she has resisted prostituting herself for Pepe. In Act III Rosa has finally left Pepe. She and her sister Trini reflect on their lives, concluding that, whatever path they choose, all women end up in the same depressing situation:

ROSA.--Todas las mujeres somos iguales en el fondo.

TRINI.--Sí... Tú has sido el escándalo de la familia, y yo, la víctima. Tú quisiste vivir tu vida, y yo me dediqué a la de los demás. Te juntaste con un hombre, y yo sólo conozco el olor de los de la casa... Ya ves: al final hemos venido a fracasar de igual manera (110).

Each woman in *Historia de una escalera* approaches life a bit differently, but they are all basically powerless and dependent on the men in their lives. To the extent that these men (like Don Manuel and Urbano) are good to them, they are happy. If they make poor choices in love, as did Elvira and Rosa, there seems to be little escape for them. We can conclude from these "slices of life" that women in the first half of this century had little opportunity for personal

fulfillment except through marriage and motherhood. If these roles failed to provide fulfillment, women were destined to suffer, powerless to change their situation.

Las trampas del azar begins in the late 50's. There has been very little change for women since the end of *Historia de una escalera*. Matilde's father, who is rich, wonders what will become of his laboratory if his daughter does not marry: "[E]lla dice a veces que no se casará. Para mí, un desastre. Porque todo lo mío, el laboratorio, mis negocios, serán un día suyos, y necesitaría a su lado a un hombre inteligente y eficaz... Los muchachos que la han galanteado no le gustan, y a mí tampoco (69)." As with Elvira, her father does not consider the possibility that Matilde herself could run the laboratory; she needs to find a husband capable of managing her fortune for her. She is also convinced that her disfigurement makes her undesirable: "Para amar y desear a una mujer, al hombre tiene que gustarle su cuerpo (94)." When Gabriel suggests they live together without getting married, Matilde is unable to face the scandal they would cause, the same scandal and social rejection Rosa experienced when she moved in with Pepe.

The 30 years that transpire between the two time periods in *Las trampas del azar* saw revolutionary changes in the role of women all over the western world, changes that are reflected in the contrast between the two generations in Part II. Patricia has a career of her own as a successful designer and an identity apart from the man in her life. She and Gabi live together in the same building as Gabriel and Matilde, who remark that times have changed and their son is able to do what Matilde would not dare to do thirty years earlier.

The differences between Matilde and Patricia are even more fundamental than the opportunities afforded Patricia through her career and sexual freedom. Matilde, like many women of her generation, was raised to be passive and dependent. Her father worries about

Gabriel corrupting her by taking her to a demonstration. The implication is that she is incapable of independent thought. Her father clearly loves her, but he only sees her as a helpless creature who needs to be taken care of. Matilde sees herself in the same light. She is handicapped, not by her disfigurement itself, but by the belief that a woman with an imperfect body is worthless. She deals with her feelings of inferiority by retreating from the world, by avoiding social contact as much as possible. Patricia, on the other hand, is an equal partner with Gabi. An independent thinker, she doesn't hesitate to criticize Gabi when she believes he is wrong. She is the voice of reason, humanity and ethical responsibility in the escalating confrontation between Gabi and his father. In her overview of Buero's female characters, Magda Ruggeri Marchetti observes that Buero often uses the family situation as a microcosm of societal problems:

En efecto, los males sociales denunciados por Buero Vallejo encuentran, a menudo, situaciones paralelas en la familia, en la que la mujer juega un papel arbitral determinante. Se superan estos males sólo aceptando las propias verdades íntimas, por duras que éstas sean, y sólo a través de esta aceptación y de esta consciencia plena se llega a la serenidad (37).

Marchetti's analysis is exemplified in the final scene between Patricia and Gabi when Patricia says, "Estoy pensando en que de poco sirve intentar el arreglo de este mundo atroz si a la vez no aprendemos a ver claro en nosotros mismos. Es lo que tú le pides a tu padre. ¿Te lo pides a ti? (136)"

Patricia is clearly the character who conveys the author's message at the end of the play, the message that Gabi, who claims to be idealistic and to pursue truth, can be just as ruthless as his father, when she says to Gabi, "Tú ya has sido hoy tan impaciente como tu padre y has tirado tu

teja (136)." Since there are so many other similarities between father and son, history is likely to repeat itself. Gabriel was a rebellious idealist as a young man, but was corrupted by power and money. The same thing could easily happen to Gabi. "Tu padre creyó ser un rebelde. Tú crees ser un rebelde, pero mañana heredarás el laboratorio. ¿No podrá el laboratorio contigo como pudo con él? (137)" As an outsider, Patricia is a somewhat more objective observer who is able to provide some perspective on the situation. She is also the character who raises the personal situation to a more philosophical level, "Gabi..., ¿qué es todo esto? Todas estas oscuras jugarretas del azar... Como si él se riese de nosotros... Creíamos poder razonarlo todo y él nos demuestra lo ciegos que estamos... (138)"

Their discussion of "el azar" leads into the final surrealistic scene in which Gabriel's spirit appears to be leaving this world. In their last conversation, the violinist who plays next to the streetlight that Gabriel broke as a child reveals to Gabriel the true symbolism of the streetlight. As a child's cry is heard, Gabriel says, "¡No es ella quien llora! ¿No es un niño?" Salustiano replies, "O una niña. A miles de ellas las han violado. Incontables niños y niñas de esta última guerra. Siempre las hay. Mientras haya laboratorios como el suyo... habrá guerras. . . . Puede que haya soñado con farolas rotas... para no soñar con muertos (140-41)." This final scene links the personal tragedy caused by Gabriel's selfish act as a child to the social tragedy perpetuated by his laboratory. By rationalizing the first injury he caused as a child, Gabriel began the process that was to lead to his success as an entrepreneur as well as to his ultimate responsibility for contributing to the deaths of countless people through his role in weapons production. The two Schubert pieces played by the violinist throughout the play, *Impaciencia* and *La Trucha*, serve as symbols of Gabriel's personality, both his impatience and his determination to overcome obstacles. Paradoxically, these

characteristics are the cause of both his business success and his personal and moral failure.

Historia de una escalera ends with the same ambiguity with regard to the future. Will the characters repeat the mistakes of their parents, or will they succeed where their parents have failed? Fernando's speech to Carmina is full of hope, but the hope is mitigated by the fact that his father made the same speech to her mother 30 years earlier, and none of his dreams were realized. Halsey interprets this ending in the following manner:

The cyclical sense of the tragedy is seen at the end, when the young Fernando speaks of his dreams for the future in virtually the same words used by his father thirty years earlier. These words make explicit the probability that the son will spend his life going up and down a stairway that leads nowhere--which does not mean that he is not responsible for his success or failure. If he remains mired in poverty, it is largely because he chooses to; his inability to escape is brought about not only by his socio-economic circumstances but by his own errors (72-73).

Nevertheless, as Patricia states at the end of *Las trampas del azar*, it is possible for the children to learn from the mistakes of their parents. Individuals must accept the responsibility for their own actions and the repercussions of their actions within their families as well as within society as a whole.

Historia de una escalera and *Las trampas del azar* provide a panoramic view of 20th Century Spain from 1919 to the 1990's. By studying these two plays together, we are able to gain an understanding of the developing role of

women in Spanish society and of the changing social and political concerns. Early preoccupation with economic survival in the depression and post-war years gives way to more contemporary social issues such as environmental protection and world peace. Although the change from dictatorship to democracy allows the playwright to deal more openly and concretely with many issues in the latter play, the transcending message remains the same. There will always be conflicts between generations; the younger generation will criticize their parents and try to succeed where they think their parents have failed. They will also encounter the same obstacles within themselves and may or may not be more successful than their parents. Societal problems, whether economic, social or ethical, find their roots in individual human nature and therefore must be addressed through conscious change on an individual level. Buero's message of hope can be found in his characters' realization that they must change themselves before they can hope to make the world a better place. The fact that Buero chose to use a structure in *Las trampas del azar* with a striking resemblance to the one he used in his first play indicates that he feels the message bears repeating for a new generation of theater-goers.

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