



Argentine gaucho and cattle.
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American cowboys branding a calf in fenced area. South Dakota, 1888.

Don Segundo Sombra and Argentina's Iconic Gaucho
By Terrie Nichols, Joyce W. Njau, and Cheryl Robinson

In a nation well known for its cattle industry, its great metropolis, its distinctive music, and its stunning natural beauty, Argentina reveres the gaucho, the Argentine equivalent of the American cowboy. From lowly beginnings as an outcast to indispensable worker on cattle ranches to national icon, the gaucho's rise to fame and mythic persona came through literature.

When the Spaniards, early in the sixteenth century, colonized the land that would become Argentina, they did what almost all colonizing forces did: they set up household with native inhabitants. Within a few years, mixed European-native children, called *mestizos* in Spanish, were playing in every village. The Spanish also brought herds of both cattle and horses to roam the vast grasslands of the pampas, which stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Andes Mountains. Although most gauchos were the mixed blood descendants of the early Spanish settlers and the local Indians, they were spurned by both groups, made outlaw by the Spanish colonizers, welcomed by no one but each other.

How then was this class of "lowlifes" elevated to the level of national icon? It was not from the effort of the nineteenth century Spanish elite who did not favor the gauchos, the illiterate, backward reminder of "Argentina's negative heritage." Nor was it due to the efforts of leaders of the early Argentine Republic such as Domingo Sarmiento, President of Argentina from 1868 to 1874, a strong voice of anti gaucho sentiments and author of *Facundo*, a book representing the gaucho as backward. Sarmiento stated that the pampas, instead of making the gaucho an independent and admirable character, actually led to the retardation of both his intellectual and moral abilities. It was the publication of José Hernández' epic poem, *Martín Fierro*, in 1872, that started to rehabilitate the gaucho image. The poem portrays the

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rural spaces of Argentina, especially the pampas, and is acknowledged as the pinnacle of “gauchesque” poetry by Argentine authors Leopoldo Lugones and Jorge Luis Borges. *Martín Fierro* started the iconization of the gaucho, but it was Ricardo Güiraldes’ *Don Segundo Sombra* that firmly established the gaucho as a national icon (Delaney 434-459).

Ricardo Güiraldes was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, February 13, 1886, second son of Manuel Güiraldes, a wealthy landowner, and Delores Goni, an aristocrat whose family had founded the village of San Antonio de Areco, the location of the Güiraldes family ranch, La Portena. Güiraldes’ early years spent in Europe, particularly France, would later influence his literary style. Nevertheless, it would be his years on La Portena that would form a fertile field for his most famous work, *Don Segundo Sombra*. Here is where Güiraldes would meet with the real Don Segundo, a man who sparked the admiration of the young Güiraldes and whose memory helped him create a novel focused on one of Argentina’s iconic heroes – the gaucho.

At fifteen, Güiraldes’ parents sent him to Buenos Aires for formal education. This apparently was a difficult change for the young Güiraldes. Steiner quotes him as saying he found “the classrooms dark and silent, like prisons” (Steiner 275). This was not surprising; Ricardo had been living in the country on his family ranch where the rhythms of ranch life and the open freedom of the pampas didn’t prepare him for the more rigid schedule of the city school he attended.

In 1910, at the age of twenty-four, his parents sent him to Paris, where he was “caught up in the dissolute pleasures of oat-sowing and was seduced by the lure of alcohol, drugs, and women” (Steiner 276). During this period, Ricardo had a vision of Argentina. He recorded the experience, saying that he saw an Argentina that was imitation and apprenticeship and submission, lacking in personality, save for the gaucho, standing tall, strong, and dignified (Steiner 276). Here we begin to see the nostalgic image of the gaucho materialize for Güiraldes through his memories of his early life at his beloved home, La Portena.

Serious about writing, Güiraldes returned to Argentina in 1912. He began publishing short stories and in 1915 paid to have his book

of poetry, *El Cencerro de Crystal*, published. This same year another book, *Cuentos de Sangre y de Muerte*, was published; neither book was publicly successful. Güiraldes would later say, “An absolute and multiple disaster...because of poking fun at *El Cencerro* no one bought *Cuentos*, so that at the end of a year I had sold seven copies” (Steiner 277). Though discouraged, Güiraldes continued to write and published a few books, including *Raucha*, which he described as “an autobiography of an inferior side of himself that had made him act foolishly” (Steiner 278).

Early in 1920, Güiraldes began work on *Don Segundo Sombra*. On a return trip to Europe, in 1922, he wrote nine chapters for this new project. However, back in Argentina he suspended work on *Don Segundo Sombra* for five years while he worked on other projects. He published two novels, *Rosaura* and *Xaimaca*, in 1922-1923; again, neither did well.

Following this latest disappointment, Güiraldes returned to the novel *Don Segundo Sombra* intent on finishing it. The book was published in 1926. He knew at this time that he was fatally ill with Hodgkin’s disease, and so this might be his last chance to produce an accepted work (Steiner 283). He did not expect a better reception for this book than he had received for his other works. In a letter to Larbaud, he wrote, “I’m waiting for my enemies, enemies for no reason to gratify me with their usual bray of hostility” (Steiner 284). This time Güiraldes was surprised at the novel’s reception. *Don Segundo Sombra* not only did well, it exceeded all of Güiraldes’ expectations, “The first edition of two thousand copies sold out in twenty days” (Steiner 284).

Güiraldes earlier works were a rehearsal for *Don Segundo Sombra*; many of his poems and short stories, as well as the novel *Raucha*, had been about gauchos or ranch life. According to Steiner, *Don Segundos* first emerges, “as a literary figure...in a short story, ‘Al rescoldo’... [where he] appears very much as he is later described in the novel: huge, strong, and usually silent. Stoic, self-confident, with a deep sense of calm, he had no fear, but is opposed to violence. And when he starts to tell a story, he suddenly becomes fluent and shows that he is a master story teller” (Steiner 280).

His heroic portrayal of the gaucho directly reflects Güiraldes' early years that exposed him to gauchos and their way of life. The stories, legends, superstitions, dances, and work skills of the gaucho fascinated the young Güiraldes. Steiner says Güiraldes "had ridden with them, had listened to them and had absorbed their ways" (Steiner 279). Even the gaucho's love for the pampas would become his love, indelibly marked upon his senses. "He identified with...its immensity and sense of freedom, and when he was there he felt he was an integral part of the world around him" (Steiner 280). The novel's vivid details of the pampas life and the different aspects of the gaucho led to its unanimous acceptance by both the intellectuals and the masses of Argentina as representative of the real gaucho. This could not have been possible without the experience at La Portena.

Ricardo Güiraldes lived long enough to realize his dream. Steiner writes that Güiraldes acknowledged freely that *Don Segundo Sombra* was his attempt to "reclaim for [himself] the title of literary disciple of the gaucho" (Steiner 279). He received the National Prize for Literature just days before his death. In a letter to his friend Larbaud, Güiraldes wrote: "They are applauding me constantly. I see nothing but smiles, which are so much a part of me that they are almost me. We have all written *Don Segundo Sombra*. It was in us and we feel happy that it's in print" (Steiner 284). On October 8, 1927, Ricardo Güiraldes died at the age of forty-one. His legacy lives on in the heroic image he gave the gaucho, an Argentine iconic image recognized worldwide.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century Argentina was in upheaval. The cities, especially Buenos Aires, were bulging with new immigrant populations. The leisurely provincialism that had characterized Argentina's century of independence was gone and an ardent nationalism was rising in its place. The vast spaces of the pampas were fenced and cattle ranching was no longer a matter of range round-ups but pastured herds raised for foreign markets; industrialism's market economy had overtaken the old Spanish feudal system of gentrified privilege. A new European literary bent for utopian literature was finding favor among the Argentine literati, and the gaucho, once a reviled breed of individuals considered worthless thieves and vagrants,

was emerging as the Argentine mythic icon, the heroic representative of all that was being lost to the rapidly changing social, political, and economic systems.

Don Segundo Sombra is a story of a popular hero, one understandable to all Argentines, one that relies on the heroized gaucho to freeze time and solidify national identity (Jitrik 214). It is a story that may be described in many ways.

Don Segundo Sombra may be called a visual narrative, a series of episodes on the pampas where time is displaced in favor of the immense space of the land. Francine Masiello, a scholar of Spanish literature, describes Güiraldes' strong visual elements in the novel as using "the panorama [to displace] time with its multiple and wondrous imagery, relocating the forces of history within a visual experience" (233). Descriptive passages such as, "Deeply I breathed the breath of the sleeping fields. The darkness lay serene; the Fireflies, like sparks of a roaring blaze, gladdened it. I let the silence enter me, And was stronger for it, and larger....Somewhere a cock crowed, awakening the reply of the *teros*; Single details of every day that showed the world's immensity" (49), richly paint the pampas so that the reader "sees" and "senses" the story as though he were with Fabio. With this level of poetic description throughout the novel, *Don Segundo Sombra* is powerfully visual.

Don Segundo may be called of a coming-of-age story: Fabio, the orphan, the novel's hero, runs away from his unsatisfying village life to a ranch and turns his life over to the "gone-native Britisher" squire, Don Jeremiah (26). The farmhands on the ranch tease and insult him, lead him, instruct him and finally befriend him. The young orphan is on a quest for self-knowledge, for attainment of equality, and for adulthood. He accepts the challenges, learns the lessons, and succeeds in becoming a "don" himself. Masiello views the novel similarly, stating, "Güiraldes organizes his text around the adventures of the adolescent runaway, Fabio" (Masiello 232). Focusing on the episodic style of the narrative again, Masiello asserts that "throughout the story, a hero-centered focus brings order to dispersed narration....reuniting adventures by one principal quest for self-knowledge" (Masiello 232).

Don Segundo might also be called a fable: poor orphan boy makes good through hard work and determination. Throughout the novel as Fabio acquires each new gaucho skill, he increases his moral fiber, he learns a lesson, and he moves forward to his next task. He gets in trouble, overcomes each obstacle, and remains loyal to his mentor and friend, Don Segundo. Fabio's path is nearly always forward, lessons are nearly always learned the first time; the novel presents Fabio's story in fable form.

Don Segundo may be called an allegory: Fabio stands for the best in all gauchos, Don Segundo stands for the best kind of *patrón* or mentor, and the many men of the ranches suggest the best and worst of the types of men working on the pampas, perhaps of all men. Masiello also sees the allegorical thread running through the story. She observes that not only does Güiraldes present a "catalogue of Argentine 'types' who inhabit the pampas in a remote turn-of-the-century setting, but also he proposes to recreate the logic belonging to that age" (Masiello 231).

It is in understanding *Don Segundo Sombra* as a rural utopian novel that all of these classifications come together: the visual narrative, the coming-of-age story, the fable, the allegory. The rural utopian novel depicts the simple economy of rural life and work as a moral framework for the harmonious relationships of man with nature and man with man (Stempel 115); and this "simple economy" resides in an idealized past. In the case of Argentina and Ricardo Güiraldes, the idealized past is the time before the large-scale social upheaval of agrarian reform and the entry of Argentina in the world market. This is a time within the author's memory lost to the trample of social and political changes.

Utopian narratives feature a symbolic golden age: *Don Segundo Sombra* is Güiraldes' response to the Argentine nostalgia for a simpler past and an "imagined past where the old values and ways of life still exist" (Sarlo 245). A novel written about this "imagined past" may incorporate the textual strategies of visually presenting a landscape as unchanging. As in a fable or an allegory, the people and places in the story present an indeterminate moral high point that has irrevocably passed. Güiraldes has nestled all these strategies into his novel of egalitarian pastoral harmony about the rhythms of a gaucho's work and

leisure. He then added the coming-of-age theme to illustrate how this bygone life worked.

Don Segundo Sombra is a novel of discrete adventures and events with little linking them together except the steady voice of Fabio. Fabio is on a quest to reinvent his life. After leaving his aunt's home, he represses his past, only intermittently recalling fragmentary or momentary memories (Masiello 235). He is fully immersed in his experiences. His reflections through most of the novel are tied to present-moment events. Güiraldes has portrayed Fabio as a part of the pampa's landscape and tied him to the earth the way a gaucho would have been. But the author cannot leave the telling of his story to this earthbound, itinerant, illiterate, character of Fabio. For the story to take on the utopian moral, emotional, and intellectual worthiness there must be another voice. This is the voice of one who sees the life of the pampas aesthetically and symbolically; that voice is Güiraldes'. The author weaves his poetic language into many of Fabio's exploits. Masiello has observed that Güiraldes is the "perceiving consciousness" in the novel, demonstrating "shifting control of the discourse between Fabio and the natural world" (Masiello 237).

The following passage illustrates Güiraldes' interviewing of the narrator's "perceiving consciousness" and Fabio's experience (the narrator's expressions are italicized):

"Above us the starred heaven was a single immense eye full of the shining sands of sleep. But every step drove a herd of agonies through each muscle of my body....By this time I could not tell whether the herd was one animal trying to be many, or many animals wanting to be one. The disjointed movement of the huge whole made me sick at my stomach; and if I looked down when my pony veered or turned its head, the earth seemed to heave like a shapeless fleshy mass.... Nobody paid the least attention to me. They were all watching the animals to make sure none strayed....The teros whispered as we passed and the little owls began to play hide and seek, calling to one another from their velvety throats...All of a sudden I realized that we were there! Close was the broad dark outline of buildings, and the trail swelled like a river flowing into a lake" (Güiraldes 69-70).

Güiraldes pulls the reader's mental eye to the huge vault of the night sky, then abruptly turns the reader's gaze to the ground and one physically exhausted gaucho following the herd, then lifts the reader's view to the treetops to watch the night birds' activities, and finally returns the reader to the ground and the end of the trail. Fabio is portrayed as one small living thing among the many on the pampas, but he does so in words that the character Fabio cannot speak.

The weaving of the narrative between the voice of Fabio and the voice of the narrator creates depth and texture in the novel. Fabio's voice is limited by lack of experience and lack of education, and is rooted in the concrete and material plane. The narrator's voice, Güiraldes' voice, depicts a region broader, richer, and more utopian than a gaucho would be able to describe. Güiraldes as narrator observes what Fabio cannot. He sweeps a metaphoric eye across the pampas and describes for the reader the world beyond Fabio's narrow vision.

The climb of the gaucho from his humble origins came through skillful, artful storytelling: first José Hernández' *Martín Fierro*, then Ricardo Güiraldes' *Don Segundo Sombra*. In the process of telling the gaucho's story, the authors and the stories became as legendary as the heroic gaucho; of these two stories, *Don Segundo Sombra*, has achieved the wider international recognition. Ricardo Güiraldes' story of a young gaucho gave the Argentine people three national heroes: the simple gaucho, made heroic through literature, Ricardo Güiraldes, the author for whom the gaucho was the inspiration for his finest work, and *Don Segundo Sombra*, the novel in whose pages the gaucho was firmly established as a national icon.

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