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Not Just One, Many: Emasculation, Foreign Impositions, and the Crisis of Masculinity in Máximo Soto Hall's *El problema* (1899)

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Máximo Soto Hall's 1899 novel *El problema* raises several debates: Is this Costa Rica's first novel, despite the fact that Soto Hall was originally from Guatemala? Is this the first anti-imperialist novel in Latin America? Is this novel anti-imperialist at all, or is it pro-Yankee?[1] Literary critic Álvaro Quesada Soto approaches these questions with a lighthearted one of his own: "¿No será la ambigüedad parte misma de un problema ideológico-discursivo que genera y da título al texto?" ("Aporías" 126). Quesada Soto refers, in part, to the ideological crisis facing Costa Rica in the novel, where the viability of the oligarchy's political and economic liberalism comes into question as a sound representation of the nation since the adopted discourses are foreign—European and North American—and have not been adequately adapted to the Central American context. The central problem of the novel for Quesada Soto thus treats the difficulty of creating a national identity when faced with a colonial past and a neocolonial present, which leads to the question of whether or not autonomous, national states could exist in Central America at the time and, if so, if they could have their own voices despite employing foreign discourses (126-30). While most critics of the novel concentrate on these ideas, I propose an alternative reading of the text's political allegory, one that moves beyond the simplistic parallel between the protagonist Julio's sexual impotence and the external ideological discourses shaping Costa Rica's concept of nation. I argue that the crisis of masculinity evident throughout the novel is, rather, a reaffirmation of the institution of marriage, an attempt to regain control over women at a time when modernity was extending freedoms beyond traditional gender roles. The dominant masculinity in the novel, interpreted here as a "masculinidad viril" that demands a departure from, and an oppositional positioning to, all qualities that are considered "feminine" (including Julio's romantic sensibility), may be understood as a symptom of and reaction to the broader structural weakening of patriarchal society.[2] My specific focus on marriage throughout the novel is twofold: marriage perpetuates women as objects within the economy of symbolic goods and a strategic matrimony likewise ensures the transmission and continuation (via inheritance) of male power and privilege (Bourdieu 47-48). As such, we observe how dominant notions of masculinity are constantly being renegotiated in tandem with ever-changing social circumstances such as national independence or, in this case,

modernization, a process that consequently repositions (male) social subjects and necessitates ideological pivoting in order to perpetuate patriarchal power structures (Peluffo 7).

While other critics touch upon these gender-related ideas, none develops them to any significant extent.[3] Álvaro Quesada Soto mentions that eroticized allegories in the novel mirror its ideological discourse ("Aporías" 136-37), Verónica Ríos Quesada speaks to the "metáfora del deseo" between Julio and Emma ("Pasados" np), Seymour Menton claims that the "trama amorosa" is what makes this work a novel (and not just an ideological treatise) (125), and Ana Patricia Rodríguez speaks to misogynist discourse and Julio's emasculation in the text (241). These romantic references have, however, only garnered the briefest of mentions, including some that appear only as footnotes. My work examines and develops these notions much further, offering an interpretation of the novel that focuses less explicitly on its determinist vision of nationalism and, more so, on how it proposes to confront the crisis of masculinity and the deterioration of patriarchy at the turn of the century while minimizing the impact of political uncertainty.[4] Soto Hall's work thus contributed to the ongoing cultural debates in Costa Rica at the time, primarily between Carlos Gagini, who supported the creation and promotion of a national culture through the arts, and Ricardo Fernández Guardia, who believed that the way forward was cosmopolitanism and European admiration.[5]

In *El problema*, these various discourses converge when we meet the young Costa Rican protagonist, Julio, who completed his studies in France where he fell in love with Margarita, a woman of Costa Rican and Spanish descent. In a then-futuristic 1928, Julio returns to Costa Rica and finds that the United States has built a transoceanic canal in Nicaragua and has effectively placed Central America under U.S. cultural, social, and economic tutelage. Julio's father and uncle are both owners of industry, leaving Julio as the only character who truly opposes such radical foreign impositions in his home country. Julio soon meets Emma, his Costa Rican-American cousin, and falls in love with her. Still emotionally bound to Margarita, his fiancée, neither romantic relationship advances, especially after the arrival of Mr. Crissey, an American businessman with ties to the railroad and steamboat industries. Crissey ultimately proposes to and marries Emma, thus forcing Julio's romantic life to flounder. Feeling emasculated and powerless, Julio commits suicide by riding his horse into the very train that whisks the newlyweds off on the same day that Central America is officially annexed to the United States.

The insistence upon marriage that I perceive in the novel, as observed through Julio and Mr. Crissey, tentatively offers women the illusion of progress, most notably through the promise of social mobility and shared power. Nevertheless, marriage in *El problema* ultimately provides men with stability and a sense of masculine accomplishment. Mr. Crissey, after speaking about his many business ventures, concedes that one achievement in particular has eluded him: "—Me falta la mayor de todas. Y cuando se le preguntó cuál era, dijo sonriendo sin apartar los ojos de Emma. —La del matrimonio" (139). He goes on to convince Emma that his hard work has earned them both a secure future, asking her to make a home with him so he may finally rest: "He logrado hacerme un porvenir y se lo ofrezco, he trabajado mucho y necesito descanso: es hora ya de que forme un hogar. ¿Qué piensa Ud? ¿Me

ayudaría á formarlo?" (146). Such an equation of marriage with masculine fulfillment appears in other Costa Rican novels contemporaneous with *El problema*, including Joaquín García Monge's *El Moto* (1900), with José Blas, and Carlos Gagini's *La caída del águila* (1920), with Roberto Mora. The fixation on marriage at the turn of the century as another manly venture likely served to feed the sense of control that men sought during a time when feelings of social castration were growing due to the (mis)perception of suffering from a "virilidad amputada" as women were leaving the domestic sphere in greater numbers (Chaves, *Cibeles* 12).

Despite the futuristic nature of the novel, a generic quality that most frequently offers fresh ways of conceiving of society, the work instead fantasizes about a conservative, idyllic past, one that Ríos Quesada terms a "pasado señorial," which serves as a defense mechanism against the (male) anxieties that modernity was producing ("Pasados" np).[6] This keen admiration of patriarchal masculinities of the past paired with a certain desperation to regain social footing means that the futuristic nature of the novel is of significant importance. The novel's projection of the future effectively affirms that regardless of whether Central America is annexed to the United States or not, men can—and will—still wield social control by remaining dominant over women. As a result, this social and ideological reassurance aimed at male readers may be read on par with the anti-imperialist vs. pro-Yankee debate that has surrounded *El problema* for so long, especially if we consider the narrative ambiguity that mirrors the indeterminate nature of Central America's political future before the United States. Though Central America's potential lot as a colony or territory of the United States was, in large part, out of their hands (having just witnessed the very recent 1898 U.S. acquisition of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines), social control was well within reach via the perpetuation of (now outdated) social structures.

Despite Soto Hall's Guatemalan origins, he comingled with the *Generación del Olimpo*, a group of Costa Rican writers publishing largely in the period immediately preceding the turn of the 20th century who shared intimate ties to the liberal, coffee plantation-owning oligarchy nicknamed *El Olimpo*. As such, his novel *El problema* is generally considered to be a product of this intellectual and ideological circle. Not surprisingly, the works of fiction produced by these writers tended to favor the oligarchy's liberal ideology, one that developed the concept of national identity as nostalgically-oriented towards a patriarchal past where lower class citizens and many members of society, including women, were reduced to object status (Quesada Soto, "Identidad" 213-17).[7] This accounts for the notable absence of such voices in *El problema*, where Julio, his father Teodoro, his uncle Tomás, and, of course, the American Mr. Crissey, have voices that dominate the fictional dialogues. For the *Olimpo* generation, promoting the nuclear family was essential "como garantía de integridad moral e identidad nacional," which translated into a narrative dynamic whose "conflictos eróticos reproducen así las relaciones (económicas, políticas y sociales) asimétricas, que garantizan poder e impunidad a los miembros de los grupos dominantes y condenan a la servidumbre y el desamparo a los subordinados" (Quesada Soto, "Identidad" 230-32). Such an ideological deployment of literary works, as well as other forms of art, in the second half of the 19th century served to reinforce the patriarchy, thereby converting much artistic production into sites of contention for the superiority of men and, naturally, the inferiority of women. These gender wars were thus largely fought "on the battlefield of words and images" (Dijkstra vii).

Though the subsequent *Generación del Repertorio Americano* made efforts in Costa Rica to give voice to society's marginalized members, the notion of patriarchy remained strong moving into the 20th century: "El desarrollo de este nuevo tipo de relaciones dialógicas [a la Bajtín] se encuentra sin embargo restringido, en un mundo donde la tradición patriarcal ejerce aún un alto grado de dominio" (Quesada Soto, "Identidad" 229). Along these lines, Gagini's *La caída del águila*, published two decades after *El problema*, follows the ingenious military and diplomatic strategies and incredible inventions of Roberto Mora, a Costa Rican who overthrows the United States and imperialism around the world. Despite such a monumental political and social achievement, we the readers are never privy to the messages of praise he subsequently receives from nations and individuals; rather, we much more closely follow the romantic interest he has had for the American Fanny, a former acquaintance and his current prisoner, who ultimately concedes to marry him. The development of their romance thus signals how Roberto is incomplete and unfulfilled as a man until he secures an adequate wife, one concrete way to perpetuate the established gender hierarchies of the time. As is readily observable, the preoccupation with ongoing male control lies, albeit subconsciously, at the heart of many turn-of-the-century Central American texts.

The women characters in Soto Hall's novel, especially Emma and Margarita, therefore serve to legitimate and uphold the liberal, patriarchal ideology of the Costa Rican *Olimpo* oligarchy. This role was certainly not new, for women had held such a social position for decades since the inception of women's educational institutions. Education, like marriage, had provided an illusion of progress: "si recibía educación era porque su medio o su familia le exigían una preparación para sus futuras funciones de esposa y madre" (Silva 77). Emma's education, for example, was one of practicality and utility, given the "sangre sajona" that she carries in her veins (137). Her education is, unsurprisingly, one specific aspect of her character that Crissey directly cites when flattering her most praiseworthy qualities: "—Yo no he tenido tiempo – añadió Mr. Crissey – ú ocasión de fijarme en las mujeres. Pero, es el caso que desde que llegué á ésta [Emma], la fisonomía de Ud. me llamó la atención. Su carácter, su inteligencia, su educación, me gustan" (146). Women were thus charged with the task to maintain the nation's identity by raising their children within the extant social norms, valuing in particular the patriarchal family structure that formed society's foundation (Silva 75-76). However, as Julio's uncle Tomás asserts, the social and moral education that men have received has been lacking, which made for bad husbands that, in turn, allowed North Americans to come and marry their women while dominating Central America socially and economically:

> Nunca dimos importancia al hogar, no se nos educaba para él. Los hombres de nuestra raza fueron siempre malos maridos. Yo recuerdo que cuando era joven, mis contemporáneas se desvivían por los extranjeros, sobre todo por los sajones. Lo que más venía al país eran americanos y los americanos acabaron por ser ídolos. Se casaron con nuestras mejores mujeres y en la sociedad concluyó también por dominar la raza. (97-98)

I read this remark in the novel as one that, at its core, attacks the responsibility of women as custodians of the nation's future while simultaneously questioning women's morality and sense of loyalty to both their nation and their men. It would seem, then, that a reining in of

women with a firmer hand is called for in the novel, one that undoubtedly implicates a traditionally virile notion of masculinity predicated on strength and violence in order to carry out the task. Within this comment, we can also identify an impetus to reinforce the ideological formation of women as being inferior to men, most notably through well-established social institutions such as the educational system, marriage, and the nuclear family. Such social and literary manipulation of women consequently granted patriarchal power when external factors relating to modernity were primarily perceived as unstoppable and, without a doubt, harmful to long-standing notions of the dominant masculinity.

These discourses, as we might imagine, ultimately culminated in the convergence of masculinity and citizenship. The confluence of hegemonic masculinity with the notions of citizenship and national belonging oftentimes allows the dominant concept of masculinity to remain unchallenged, a dynamic that is constantly reinforced as other masculinities (such as Julio's sentimentalism) are necessarily compared, and found inferior, to the hegemonic construct (Nagel 247). In this way, I argue that Soto Hall not only dialogues with citizenship, masculinity, and the concept of national identity, he has a direct hand in the definition of all three. This is especially so if we consider that the majority of literate readers at the time were male and upper class, those who constituted the ruling elite that "determined how states would be run and how nations would be defined" (Rodríguez 19-20). The notable reinforcement of patriarchal social structures as a way to diminish feelings of impotence thus falls onto eager ears and eyes. Reading Soto Hall's fictional work in this way challenges literary preconceptions of the novel such as those of critic Klaus Meyer-Minnemann, who claimed that *El problema* only continues to draw critical interest due to its status as the first anti-imperialist novel (170).

Soto Hall's *fin-de-siècle* work intertwines elements of both romanticism and *modernismo* as it at once looks towards the idyllic past and the exoticized future, explores cultural and national independence, incorporates sentimental elements like the notion of impossible love, and challenges modernity's effect on masculinity. Within the broader Spanish American literary panorama of the time, it is not surprising to identify the convergence of more than one major stylistic tendency as in *El problema*, especially considering the prominence that these two literary movements continued to hold into the first decades of the 20th century (Jrade 6). Jorge Isaac's *María* (1867) undoubtedly remained an influential work for novelists like Soto Hall in the late 19th century, with echoes between Efraín and María contributing to our reading of the emasculated Julio and his cousin Emma's romance (or lack thereof). Likewise, modernist prose informs much of Soto Hall's narrative aesthetic, calling to mind such works as Rubén Darío's short stories and Manuel Díaz Rodríguez's novels *Ídolos rotos* (1901) and *Sangre patricia* (1902). At the same time, realism, with proponents such as Alberto Blest Gana, continued to maintain a strong presence throughout the continent during the last decades of the 1800s. Other novels contemporary to Soto Hall's *El problema* similarly reflect such a diverse array of literary influences, such as Eugenio Cambaceres's *Sin rumbo* (1885) and Armando Chirveches's *La candidatura de Rojas* (1909), works that merge narrative styles and characteristics and that extend their aesthetic reach to include naturalism, decadentism, realism, and *costumbrismo*.[8] The skillful combination of various narrative tendencies served to offer a distinctly rich novelistic production at the turn of the century that

permitted the exploration of new aesthetic, social, and ideological territory, as Regina Crespo points out when analyzing the broad array of ideologies found within the narratives of this literary period (258).

While Soto Hall "vivió la época modernista, admiraba a los modernistas, [y] se dejaba influir por ellos," he could not identify entirely with this style "por su temperamento [. . .] y además, se daba cuenta de sus defectos lo mismo que de sus valores" (Menton 115). Nudging the text towards its romantic precursors, then, we may recall the contributions of literary critic Doris Sommer, who argues that foundational fictions like *El problema* seek a certain coherence within their narratives that aims to bring together those of differing ideologies "as lovers destined to desire each other" (*Foundational* 24). This process reveals itself in the novel when Costa Rica is wed to the United States, both figuratively and literally, for Emma marries Mr. Crissey on the same day that all of Central America is annexed to the United States, a monumental occurrence that takes place without protest since it is now merely a formality, as Julio's cousin Santiago points out: "Si la anexión no será más que una fórmula. [. . .] Conviene dar el paso definitivo. ¿No te parece?" (34). Yet despite the open discussion of love and desire throughout the novel, I believe that *El problema* does not intend to liberate sexuality, but rather "controlarla mejor, justificar tutelas, crear nuevos espacios y léxicos para las anomalías, todo ello con vistas a la reproducción del sistema cultural" (Chaves, *Cibeles* 30). In other words, the novel ostensibly supports the notion of progress, both technological and social, yet imposes a markedly patriarchal discourse upon the reader and the fictional women characters. Although literary critic Rodrigo Quesada Monge refers to Soto Hall's characters from a political perspective when he asserts that they are not entirely human, but rather hypotheses regarding superficial and individual roles in society, we may also apply this notion of character types to the gender-based distinctions in the novel (47).

Such a narrative strategy becomes much more evident if we dialogue with the literary archetypes that José Ricardo Chaves develops in his study *Los hijos de Cibeles: Cultura y sexualidad en la literatura de fin del siglo XIX* (1997), where Emma may be read as a *femme fatale*, Margarita as a *mujer frágil*, and Julio as a melancholic hero. This trifecta of archetypes, which oftentimes appears together as it does in *El problema*, functions synergistically to produce the melancholic hero's destiny. The development and formation of these archetypes, asserts Chaves, has much to do with modernity, a time when the sphere of power for women was expanding beyond the control that men traditionally had over the domestic realm; the crisis of masculinity and the destabilization of patriarchy were thereby deepening given the perception that economic and bureaucratic struggles were not as "masculine" as military battles of the past, further "feminizing" men and contributing to their social castration (*Cibeles* 126). The novel subtly places these issues at its center despite the overt focus on the political future of the Central American isthmus, for such questions of masculinity were meant to be widely disseminated, especially if we consider the notably regional, Central American nature of the text. That is, Costa Rica receives infrequent specific mention as the novel's setting (Ríos Quesada, "Pasados" np) and Costa Rican vocabulary and regionalisms are avoided within the narrative's language (Rodríguez 34), not to mention the fact that Soto Hall was a Guatemalan with family ties to other nearby nations, such as Honduras (where his brother, Marco Aurelio Soto, was president from 1876-1883). The regional nature of the novel thus speaks to a broader, more collective sense of urgency regarding the perceived

breakdown of patriarchal power, a process that the novel marks as one requiring an immediate reversal through the implementation of such strategies as marriage and virile masculinities, among others, as I have been maintaining.

Although Chaves asserts that the *femme fatale* typically devours the *mujer frágil* and dominates the melancholic hero, I suggest that the woman who has the most significant bearing on Julio's emasculation and impotence (in its various manifestations) is actually the fragile Margarita. Margarita is described as a "figura novelesca" for her beauty and dedication to the arts (40), yet she is also intellectually dependent and malleable in the hands of stronger male characters (59). These characteristics are compounded by her being "una neurasténica hasta el límite del histerismo," a condition that ultimately bestows upon her a weak and sickly demeanor (60). These sentimentally derived characteristics make her, according to the novel, "la encarnación de su raza," referring to the "raza latina," the term that the work consistently uses to refer to Costa Ricans and Latin Americans broadly (60). Margarita's malleability provides Julio with a sense of power that he openly admits to enjoying due to the pride that molding her and toying with her soul gives him: "Julio gozaba con la ductilidad de Margarita. Enorgullecíalo que su inteligencia jugara con el alma de aquella mujer, como las olas encrespadas juegan con un esquife. Estaba satisfecho de imprimir forma á aquella planta nueva" (63). This man-handling, in addition to the flower-like condition to which Margarita's name alludes, serves to objectify her as Julio envisions himself caring delicately for her.[9] Such an image of woman as flower comes from the idea of the "monja doméstica," an idea that blends notions of virginity, celibacy, and religious iconography with those of mother and spouse (Chaves, *Cibeles* 49). During the latter half of the 19th century, the household nun was oftentimes forced to face an inner conflict where she had to determine if she was indeed morally pure or if she had succumbed to worldly desire. This dualistic conflict led, in many artistic representations, to "deleterious effects upon the physical condition of the household nun," as we are able to observe with Margarita's notable fragility (Dijkstra 23). For Julio and society broadly, however, this may have been considered a masculine victory, for the minimized sex drive attributed to the household nun tended to lift the "heavy burden of male potency" from men's shoulders, thus eliminating any sort of "domestic competition" so that their efforts could be focused elsewhere, such as in business and their own financial economies (68). Likewise, the perpetuation of the image of woman as the "monja doméstica" or the "ángel del hogar," as Peluffo and Sánchez Prado remind us, reflected an image that bore significant weight in the public arena, yet it was one that was much more a desire than a reality (10). In this way, Soto Hall's work reinvigorates nostalgic patriarchal stereotypes as a strategy to further institutionalize traditional gender roles and the public imaginary that fed them.

Julio's forced departure from Europe, however, definitively ruptures his romance with the fragile Margarita.[10] His absence and eventual abandonment increases Margarita's neuroticism and hysteria while also condemning her to a life of celibacy: "Aquella mujer temía que Julio no volviese, y viendo á sus hermanas siempre aburridas y malhumoradas por el celibato, sentía ella todo el horror del solterismo" (65). This reproductive death of sorts for Margarita, who will impossibly become a mother, may be read with a certain cynicism, for in late-19th-century Latin American narratives there frequently existed a "gusto sádico [que] anida en el ojo masculino que se complace en mirar el sufrimiento de la mujer, gozo compensatorio de

una virilidad en crisis de identidad ante el creciente trastocamiento de roles" (Chaves, *Cibeles* 52). This sadistic pleasure, as we have already observed, is expressed through Julio's pride when manipulating Margarita. Nevertheless, Margarita, in turn and despite her physical distance from Julio, brings about his romantic downfall with Emma. Although Julio declares his love for his Costa Rican-American cousin, she refuses to reciprocate until Margarita and Julio have ended their relationship, which of course does not happen before Emma marries Mr. Crissey. Julio, constantly fearing his pending betrayal of Margarita, finds himself repeatedly taking refuge in her image, whether it be an admiration of her photograph (40) or an attempt to paint her portrait as a means of distraction (156). Even though Julio struggles more and more to feel empathy and love for Margarita, he still imagines himself as her savior, a shelter for his fragile flower: "renació con más fuerza en su corazón el recuerdo de Margarita, toda debilidad, toda timidez, acogida a él, como el arbusto que busca arrimo junto al duro tronco que le salve de las lluvias y los huracanes" (66). Margarita, whose love for Julio has not diminished despite a reduced epistolary correspondence, has transformed herself from afar into a silent, ever-devoted victim. This emotional debt that has been forced upon Julio's conscience grants her power, yet, under the auspices of patriarchy, simultaneously converts her into a maleficent obstacle for masculine domination (Bourdieu 32). In this way, the fragile woman exerts control over the protagonist because he cannot stop thinking about her while feeling morally committed to her (Chaves, *Cibeles* 68); he is, after all, engaged to her. Julio's powerlessness to act can be equated with a forced sexual impotence, for he will neither marry nor reproduce with either woman, resulting in the absolute demise of his social status and masculinity due to his inability to control his destiny through marriage. In my reading of this relationship, Julio, who allows traditional gender and power dynamics to be upset, contributes to the weakening of the patriarchy and is therefore cast further into the role of social outcast; he may thus be read as a character that undermines the desired revitalization of male-dominated society. As a result, his actions and state of being bring the collapse of the patriarchal system ever nearer, a grave concern that no other male character in the novel exacerbates.

Emma, the *femme fatale*, is, unlike Margarita, a strong woman represented by her voluptuous beauty, her independence, and her exoticism thanks to her American mother. Emma's striking physical presence, in addition to her seductive charm, leads Julio to eventually declare her as superior: "Qué diferencia entre ella y Margarita. Esta tan práctica, tan serena, tan poco sugestionable, tan superior. La otra tan delicada, tan enfermiza, tan impresionable, tan imperfecta en una palabra" (108). Emma is also principled, for she rejects Julio's advances knowing that he has a fiancée. Most importantly, though, she is a woman made for motherhood:

> Sus caderas eran redondas y su pecho erecto y sólido; la sangre ardiente que circulaba por sus venas, tenía de vivo púrpura sus mejillas y parecía querer saltar por sus labios; la mata negra de sus cabellos ondeaba sobre su frente y en torno de su cuello de mármol; una recia musculatura se adivinaba bajo su blanca y transparente piel de raso. Todo en ella demostraba un gran temperamento, una gran naturaleza, una mujer hecha para la maternidad, molde soberbio para la procreación. (29)

Emma, who possesses a serene and practical demeanor and not one of hysteria and desperation like Margarita, makes it seem as if Julio's own desires naturally lead him to self-destruction (108-09). I suggest, however, that Emma continually leads Julio on by telling him they must wait to be together. This consequently leaves Julio with hope, thereby reinforcing his solitude and, naturally, his celibacy while calling attention to the fact that he is impotent to alter his destiny and is simply at the mercy of both a strong and a fragile woman. Read allegorically, we may interpret Central America's future and Costa Rica's national identity as clearly not lying with Europe (Margarita); rather, there exists a certain admiration for the United States (Emma) despite Costa Rica's (Julio) hesitation to make any definitive choices. Like Costa Rica, then, Julio's inability to control his own destiny (and the women closest to him) signals his subjugation to external, male power, thus leading to his emasculation by way of his feminization, submissiveness, and supposed inferiority.

Emma, who is described frequently as "varonil," is a character that I read as one who assumes the social status that Julio cannot obtain, a status ostensibly acquired through her marriage with the wealthy Mr. Crissey. The consistent descriptions of Emma as "tan varonil" (66), "una mujer varonil" (70), and with eyes having "varonil intensidad" (127), point towards the then extant fear that social equality meant the masculinization of women and, subsequently, the feminization of men, ideas that became intimately connected to cultural decadence (Chaves, *Cibeles* 41-42).[11] Emma thereby exacerbates the limits and stresses the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine, thus further provoking the crisis of masculinity, that is, until she can be reined in through marriage (162). As such, and while we only witness the happy newlyweds at the novel's close, I do not foresee Emma's marriage as one that bodes well for her future nor one that will provide the independence and power she may have expected; instead, the married woman most often effectively became "una menor de edad de por vida," reduced to dependent property of her husband, in this case, Mr. Crissey, as a means of restoring a masculinity believed to have been lost and a patriarchy thought to have been undermined by women's increased social and economic activity in the public sphere (Piettre qtd. in Chaves, *Cibeles* 40). Likewise, Emma's description as ready for reproduction qualifies her for one of the only activities fit for women at the time: motherhood (Dijkstra 74). Despite these social and personal restrictions within the institution of marriage, Emma exudes confidence that this is the proper decision to be made. Unlike Margarita and Julio, Emma is, on the surface, disinterested in marriage, a sign of her submission to and keen awareness of her gender role in society: "una vez más [Julio] enorgulleciose de ser el complemento, parte de la vida, de una virgen digna de ser amada [. . .] tan varonil, tan suficiente por sí misma para la lucha de la vida, tan poco preocupada del matrimonio" (66). Emma's apparent acts of cognition, as Bourdieu would argue, are really acts of recognition of her expected gender role rather than independent and autonomous decisions (13). It would seem that her future as mother and wife is effectively guaranteed given her physical beauty in addition to her Anglo-Saxon genes and utilitarian education that serve to increase her ideological attractiveness; she is fit for male selection, able to mother children, and ready to reproduce the nation's liberal identity within her family. Margarita, on the other hand, has become desperate and untrusting in the face of Julio's absence, for her entire upbringing and education has also prepared her for one thing: a dependent matrimony. Her insistence upon a union with Julio, however, reveals notable character weaknesses while reinforcing her hysterical and sickly demeanor, giving way to a degradation of her body that makes her less

apt for motherhood while also calling into question her ability to successfully perform the other roles that her gender demands: "Había en ella una gran degeneración. Su padre la engendró ya viejo y gastado; su madre la concibió, agobiada por la nostalgia, herida de muerte por una suprema laxitud" (65). Julio, like Margarita, eschews his expected gender role: "El tenía el apasionamiento en la palabra y la impotencia en la acción. Era capaz de sentir, pero no de hacer" (90-91). I suggest that what results from Emma's marriage, then, is a recognition of how gender roles ensure success and maintain a natural order within society. Margarita and Julio, the two social outcasts unprepared for reproduction, thus remain tortured and celibate, victims of the patriarchy and the dominant notion of virile masculinity.

Throughout the novel, Julio slowly comes to realize that, if he is to survive and maintain any semblance of his masculinity, he must abandon the weak, infantile, and sickly Margarita. Even though he adopts a misogynistic attitude, one where he had hoped to lift Margarita's spirits "hasta hacerla superior á todas las mujeres, lo cual para él, en el fondo, no era mucho, ya que el sexo femenino no le merecía el menor aprecio" (63), Julio still recognizes that he is a poor representative of his "Latin race." Though he can offer words and express his thoughts poetically, he is incapable of acting and, therefore, of fulfilling his intimate desires. Likewise, Julio's sentimental being and artistic proclivity, where he feels his "corazón oprimido y romp[e] a llorar" (181) and whose painted portrait of Margarita transforms subconsciously into a representation of Emma (156), are designed to feminize him. As Chaves reminds us, the melancholic hero "se identifica con el artista o, al menos, con un hombre de exquisita sensibilidad" (*Cibeles* 36). Julio thus faces a threat to what may be considered his evolutionary masculinity, where environmental and social circumstances, in addition to female sexual scarcity, combine to undermine his virility (Goodman 1). We come to realize that his demise, then, has a certain naturalness to it, just like the fate of Costa Rica and Central America. As cultural critic Quesada Soto describes this circumstance, there is an element of social Darwinism at work here, one of biological determinism (*La formación* 214). This is so because, outside the social norms of masculinity, Julio can only end up as an outcast: "el héroe melancólico acaba loco o muerto, en cualquier caso, fuera del orden social" (Chaves, *Cibeles* 123). Julio is bested by Mr. Crissey and must be completely removed from society as a result, discarded just like Margarita. We find similar circumstances in García Monge's *El Moto*, where José Blas, a poet and poor laborer, realizes that his love, Cundila, has already married after he recuperates from a serious accident. The only solution for José Blas and his decimated masculinity is to disappear by leaving town forever. Along these lines, evolutionary masculinity, when compared to the modern economy, may be understood as a structure of wealth and debt, where strength, health, and protective capacity become equated with masculinity, where "reproduction is the only path toward economic solvency" (Goodman 7). Crissey, who possesses these traits, unsurprisingly finds success in marriage, for it is precisely this institution that guarantees his manhood and elevated social status, voids that his successful businesses alone cannot fill: "Any doubt regarding the quality or legitimacy of a hero's masculinity is cancelled by the domesticating act of marriage" (Sommer, "Irresistible" 88).

Although this may all be read as punishment for Julio's rejection of the North American presence, values, and annexation within the novel, I argue that we must also read Julio's situation as an example of how, if men allowed women to gain social status and power, they

would be doomed to lose their own, traditionally male privileges. And without this power over women, life is not worth living. Julio rides his horse directly into the newlyweds' train, at once a metaphor for how American ingenuity will crush the "weaker race" and a powerful reminder of the belief that men outside the bounds of marriage merely perpetuate the crisis of masculinity and contribute to the deterioration of the patriarchy:

> El encuentro fué inevitable. Caballo y caballero, arrojados por la gran mole de hierro, rodaron juntos sobre las bruñidas cintas de los rieles. Después, entre el traquetear de los carros, los suspiros del vapor y el metálico ruido de las ruedas, se oyó un crujir de huesos, y el ahogado relincho de un caballo, mientras el tren con su cortejo magnífico, arrastrando á una pareja feliz, pulverizaba al último representante de una raza caballeresca y gloriosa. (165-66)

Despite the significant evidence throughout the novel that supports a fatalistic and deterministic stance indicative of support for U.S. influence in the Central American isthmus, what becomes clear through an analysis of the romantic relationships that I have analyzed here is that the only winner is Mr. Crissey. Margarita remains celibate, Julio is dead, and Emma has been tamed into marriage. However, as I have been arguing, the novel makes claims regarding the institution of marriage in particular, wholeheartedly reaffirming it as the most viable way for men to regain control over women, revitalize the patriarchy, and confront the crisis of masculinity that was becoming ever more complicated due to competing visions of manliness arriving from overseas. Those men who are unable to attract and domesticate their significant others through the social construct of marriage are not afforded a place in society as men, and rather become feminized to the point of uselessness (read: castrated), hence Julio's suicide and consequent disposal from society. In simplistic fashion, then, it seems that Soto Hall "quiso eliminar a su más crítico y sensible personaje, porque le planteaba el problema de que la realidad ficticia podía, eventualmente, quedarse corta ante la realidad de verdad que tal personaje podía forjar" (Quesada Monge 58). Though Quesada Monge has anti-imperialist and other ideological ideas in mind, such an affirmation undoubtedly applies to the formation and development of the ideas of man and woman in the novel, for the possibility of the existence of a revised masculinity is entirely eliminated from the novel with Julio's death.

Though Julio's suicide may arguably be interpreted ideologically as either "una realidad inevitable" for Central America's annexation to the United States or as one meant to "generar las defensas necesarias para evitar que ese fuera el futuro," the underlying notion of hegemonic masculinity remains (Quesada Soto, "Aporías" 132).[12] Soto Hall, who does not confront machismo in a critical fashion, instead advances an implicit condemnation of what the novel constructs as "the feminine," including such characteristics as being expressive of emotions, having passion, feeling empathy, and being prone to the arts. We find that the notion of social Darwinism is being thoroughly manipulated in the novel to propose that the purportedly neurotic, weak, and celibate Margaritas remain sterile, the stronger and virile Emmas be domesticated and readied for reproduction, and the melancholic Julios die off. In this way, the novel further historicizes and naturalizes gender differences, consequently perpetuating masculine power within society; that is, we identify the "socialization of the

biological and the biologicization of the social" (Bourdieu 3). The futuristic nature of the novel may thus be read as a bet on this vision of the future, one that ensures the continued reproduction of the social structures and patriarchal gender dynamics of the time.

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Notes

[1] Many critics, including Seymour Menton, have affirmed that this work is Latin America's first anti-imperialist novel: "A Máximo Soto-Hall le toca la distinción de haber escrito la primera novela anti-imperialista, *El problema* (1899)" (124). For a more complete discussion of critics who support, as well as those who challenge, this interpretation, see Iván Molina Jiménez's "La polémica de *El problema* (1899), de Máximo Soto Hall."

[2] The succinct description provided here of "masculinidad viril" has its roots in Ana Peluffo and Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado's discussion of critic Michael Kimmel's work on dominant masculinities, especially as the notion pertains to late-19th- and early-20th-century Latin American imaginaries (13).

[3] Iván Molina Jiménez, when discussing critical texts written on *El problema*, does not identify a single author who treats themes other than (anti-)imperialism or the concept of race at length (150-53).

[4] Though *El problema* has been interpreted both as anti-imperialist and pro-United States, my interpretation most closely coincides with literary critic Ana Patricia Rodríguez, who situates the novel between an anglophilia and an anglophobia (40). Within this middle ground, I share Verónica Ríos Quesada's perspective, who reads the novel as one that tends to close off the possibility of national development ("Pasados" np). My reading of the novel is thus one that allows it to be read as supportive of Costa Rican nationalism on the surface while promoting a U.S.-facing cosmopolitanism at its core.

[5] Mario Oliva Medina points out the inherently polemical nature of *El problema*, noting how it was interpreted both as an imperialist and an anti-imperialist novel upon publication (despite the vocabulary of the time not employing the term "anti-imperialist" as such) and, once again, as it stirred a similar debate in 1992 upon re-publication (162-63). In this way, Soto Hall's work has maintained a presence that most other late-19th-century Costa Rican fictional works have not (167).

[6] José Ricardo Chaves also speaks to the presence of nostalgia for lost power in many turn-of-the-century Latin American literary works (*Cibeles* 128).

[7] The lack of voices from the poor, the marginalized, and the working-class, in other words, the people, tends to challenge the concept of the novel as being anti-imperialist, for these voices are fundamental to such discourses (Quesada Monge 48).

[8] Literary critic Ana Patricia Rodríguez affirms that the broader continental literary tendency around the turn of the century that saw the blending of *costumbrismo*, romanticism, naturalism, realism, and *modernismo* was likewise occurring throughout Central America as well (25). Speaking further to the fluidity of the novel's style, Marguerite C. Suárez-Murias classifies the novel as realist and, especially due to Julio's melodramatic suicide, romantic (215).

[9] When Emma and Julio, upon his return to Costa Rica, take their first stroll together through the nature surrounding their home, among other flowering plants, "se veían coronamientos de margaritas y violetas" (70). In this way, Margarita essentially keeps watch over (and contributes guilt to) Julio's life despite such a significant physical distance. Similarly, Emma, the *femme fatale*, when later consumed by thoughts of Mr. Crissey, spends her time "mordiendo el tallo de una rosa, ó deshojando una margarita" (143) as she forgets about Julio, symbolically destroying both of his romantic interests at once.

[10] Verónica Ríos Quesada suggests that Julio's father, Teodoro, may have demanded his (unexplained) return to Costa Rica from France in order to sever the relationship between Margarita and Julio, a tactic that would be quite similar to the one observed with Efraín in *María* by Jorge Isaacs ("Pasados" np).

[11] As Chaves points out elsewhere, this process was occurring throughout the 19th century: "La evolución del personaje masculino romántico es contraria a la del femenino: mientras ellas se fortalecen y van de menos a más, ellos se debilitan y van de más a menos. En los términos de la época, las mujeres se masculinizaban mientras que los hombres se feminizaban" ("Vampirismo" 29).

[12] Both of these interpretations, albeit radically opposite, speak to the cultural tendencies at the time revolving around natural selection, sociology, positivism, and the ideal of progress (Ríos Quesada, "El impacto" 47), not to mention the belief in the natural order of rule by men.

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