

The Search for Satisfaction of Basic Human Needs: A Maslowian Reading of Juan Rulfo's *The Plain in Flames*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Juan Rulfo's short-story collection *The Plain in Flames*, first published in 1953, in terms of its presentation of characters' striving for need satisfaction. It emphasizes the importance of small glimpses of hope that motivate disenfranchised individuals to continue in their pursuit of need satisfaction regardless of unfortunate circumstances. In doing so, it uses the framework of need satisfaction provided by Abraham H. Maslow, especially in his 1954 work *Motivation and Personality*. After presenting the constant struggle for survival in *The Plain in Flames* and summarizing Maslow's theory of human motivation, the paper focuses particularly on the works "Paso del Norte," "Macario," and "Talpa" to illustrate the connection between hope and need satisfaction. It leads to the conclusion that the characters in *The Plain in Flames*, regardless of their particular circumstances, reveal the common tendency of humans to look for a small dose of hope in order to move forward.

Keywords

Hope, Motivation, Struggle, Survival

1. Introduction

Juan Rulfo's work is made up of people who live on the periphery of society in a land destroyed by the Mexican Revolution (roughly 1910-1920) and by the attempts at land reform stemming from it. Such a focus is hardly surprising since Rulfo himself personally witnessed and suffered from the revolution and its aftermath. He lost his parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents and wound up in an orphanage (Lyon, 1992; Russek, 2008). Fittingly, Rulfo himself claimed that

his work was simply a literary representation of personal experience (see Lyon, 1992). Aside from reflecting the personal difficulties that the human situation led the author himself to experience, the work reveals a hostile, arid environment (that of Jalisco, Mexico, the author's birthplace). In such an environment, human activity and nature seem largely to mirror one another (Bell, 2015). Dryness and excessive heat are associated with the violent tendencies of the characters who inhabit the region (as seen in Juvencio's killing of Don Lupe over grazing rights in "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!"). Natural disasters lead not only to the loss of property but also to family disaster (e.g., Tacha's inevitable turn to prostitution in "It's Because We're So Poor") and community disaster (e.g., drunken machete-wielding characters in "The Day of the Collapse"). Ultimately, then, due to the effects of the revolution and the harshness of the natural environment, Rulfo's characters may be said to live in a world of desolation, poverty, and desperation (Martín, 2001).

The Rulfian world briefly described above may be considered one in which characters struggle to satisfy basic needs in spite of seemingly being fated never to make any significant progress (De la Fuente, 1996; Polo García, 1975). At first glance, it may seem to be one in which characters' only hope lies in what may come to them after death, as De la Fuente (1996) argues. Indeed, the unnamed narrator of "Talpa" would seem to provide support for such an argument: "We'll rest by and by when we're dead" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 50). But as De la Fuente (1996) acknowledges, even rest after death is not guaranteed. The dead, in Rulfo's short novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955), continue existing in a supernatural fashion with the living and seem unable to escape their misfortunes. In the collection of short stories *The Plain in Flames* (1953), however, a work in which dealings with the supernatural are largely absent (Polo García, 1975), characters are left to search for need satisfaction within concrete human circumstances. Although these circumstances are never promising, they provide brief glimpses of hope that lead characters to make often-futile attempts to improve their desperate situations.

Since the characters of *The Plain in Flames*, all faced with a harsh human reality, strive to improve their circumstances in spite of having little possibility of success, it is fitting to ask what motivates their struggles. The work of Abraham H. Maslow, particularly his seminal work *Motivation and Personality* (1954), provides a useful framework in which to consider such a question. Maslow's work, based on the premise that individuals seek to fulfill needs in a hierarchical fashion, posits that the drive to satisfy an unfulfilled basic need may so occupy the individual that he/she cannot consider anything else. In describing the truly hungry individual, for example, Maslow (1954) stated the following: "All capacities are put into the service of hunger satisfaction, and the organization of these capacities is almost entirely determined by the one purpose of satisfying hunger" (p. 37). This paper seeks to explain the motivations of the characters of *The Plain in Flames* from a Maslowian perspective. It first illustrates the recurring theme of the struggle for survival in relation to signs of hope and provides back-

ground concerning Maslow's theory. It then employs the theory in a detailed focus on the works "Paso del Norte," "Macario," and "Talpa," all of which reveal the tendency of characters in the collection to be led by brief glimpses of hope to continue striving for need satisfaction.

2. Struggle for Survival, Presence of Hope in *The Plain in Flames*

That the world of *The Plain in Flames* is one in which characters struggle for survival is apparent throughout all the stories. The characters' resignation to the fate of being somewhat disinherited stands out. Yet, as Polo García (1975) notes, while the characters do not lose their sense of resignation, they continue to fight against the elements that stand in their way—that is, against nature, against people in similar circumstances, and against the social circumstances that seem to enchain them. Echoing this sentiment, Petrikowski Escobar (2019) argues that the stories reveal a certain overlap between hope and desperation. This glimpse of hope sparks characters to leave behind passivity and to take some sort of action, with tangible results always being unlikely (Lyon, 1973).

As mentioned above, characters in *The Plain in Flames* constantly struggle against an environment that seems to mirror their own unfortunate situations. Such a struggle is particularly evident in the opening story of the collection, "They Have Given Us the Land." In this story, the struggle stems from an unfortunate lot drawn in land reforms following the revolution. Four characters are guided by a government official to a barren plain, a place the narrator describes as a "hot griddle," a place without even "enough soil for the wind to raise a dust cloud" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 18). The official leaves them to their fate. As the four journey further and approach a village, they begin to sense more signs of life: They hear dogs barking and find that their footsteps cause dust to fly into the air and cover them, a finding that seems to be an improvement in circumstances. Though one character, Esteban, settles for such an arrangement, the other three are enchanted by even more signs of life further life ahead: "Above the river, over the green tops of the casuarinas, flocks of green *chachalacas* fly around" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 19, italics as in original). The narrator's final comment—"The land they've given us is farther up ahead" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 19)—reveals a clear sign of hope in desperation while giving no indication that a better life is really forthcoming.

While the opening story of *The Plain in Flames* depicts characters fated to struggle for survival due to forces out of their control (i.e., hostile nature), others depict characters who seem to be (or who, as narrators, present themselves to be) victims of an unfortunate choice between their own life and that of another. Such is the case in "Comadre Hill," a tale in which, again, the land reforms of the revolution come into play. The Torrico brothers, Remigio and Odilón, with whom the narrator claims to have been "always good friends, until just before they died" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 20), have received the parcel of land in Comadre Hill that contains the houses of the 60 residents, thus becoming the de facto

owners of the area. The narrator himself farms a plot in the Torricos' parcel. When Remigio is killed, Odilón visits the narrator's house and accuses him of the crime, which the narrator denies having committed. Odilón brandishes a machete, and the narrator suddenly feels "great faith" in the needle he is using to "mend a sack that was full of holes" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 24). After killing Odilón with the needle and disposing of the body, the narrator washes the "harvesting bag" used for the disposal because he will "need it very often" (Rulfo, 1953/2015). The washing of the "harvesting bag" because of its continued usefulness indicates that the narrator's "great faith" in the needle, while giving him hope for survival and ultimately allowing him to survive, has resulted in no real change in personal circumstances.

Survival for female characters in *The Plain in Flames* is particularly problematic as these characters' social existence is largely determined by men (De Diego, 1988). As Polo García (1975) notes, women in Rulfo's work usually lack any means of subsisting without the aid of men. Due to this dependence on men, Duffey (1996) fittingly argues that, in the patriarchal society presented in Rulfo's work, women are given only three options: virgin, mother, prostitute. The story "It's Because We're So Poor" illustrates these options clearly. The story presents the case of Tacha, a 12-year-old girl who has been given a cow intended to serve as a dowry. As a virgin (and with such a dowry), Tacha would supposedly be able to find a suitable husband and become a suitable mother. But when the cow is washed away in a flood, Tacha seems to be left with no choice but to follow in her older sisters' footsteps and become a prostitute. The brother/narrator foresees this situation when he consoles the crying Tacha over the loss of the cow: "Her two little breasts bob up and down, continually, as if they had suddenly begun to swell, bringing her ever closer to perdition" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 31). The death of the cow, then, has deprived Tacha of the first two options listed above and left her with only the third.

In short, though the Rulfian world in *The Plain in Flames* offers very little motive for optimism, it does occasionally provide motivation for something "better"—though these motivations seem rarely to materialize into anything real for the characters (see Duffey, 1996; García Peña, 2022).

3. Need Satisfaction: The Maslowian Perspective

Maslow (1943) first presented his theory of human motivation in an article aptly entitled "A Theory of Human Motivation." Yet it is his mammoth work *Motivation and Personality* (1954) that most clearly delineates his theory. In this work, Maslow presented basic human needs in hierarchical form: 1) physiological needs; 2) safety needs; 3) belongingness and love needs; 4) self-esteem needs; 5) self-actualization needs.

The first three needs, "deficiency needs," should be met for the individual to avoid "negative physiological and psychological consequences" (King-Hill, 2015: p. 54). Physiological needs refer to the body's basic attempt to maintain ho-

meostasis, “a normal state of the blood stream” (Maslow, 1954: p. 36). The individual, after all, needs to eat, breathe, drink, and rest in order to stay alive. Maslow (1954) also put the pure sex drive, when unaccompanied by the desire for love or companionship, within the realm of physiological needs (see also Poston, 2009). Only when the physiological needs are met rather consistently can the individual move to safety needs. These include “security; stability; dependency; protection; freedom from fear, from anxiety and chaos; need for structure, order, law, limits; strength in the protector” (Maslow, 1954: p. 39). The adoption of a religion is also attributed largely to safety needs as religion provides a sense of coherence and meaning to an individual’s existence. The last of the deficiency needs is the belongingness and love need. Once safety is secured, the individual “will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group or family, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal” (Maslow, 1954: p. 43). Maslow (1954) noted that, at the time of his writing, “very little scientific information” concerning this need was available. He therefore settled for examples related to tight-knit groups such as soldiers and rebel groups and to problems related to a lack of belongingness (e.g., children torn from their families).

Once the “deficiency needs” have been satisfied, the individual may advance to esteem needs. As Maslow (1954) noted, “All people in our society (with a few pathological exceptions) have a need or desire for a stable, firmly based, usually high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others” (p. 45). Maslow (1954) identified “two subsidiary sets” of esteem needs, the first dealing with one’s evaluation of himself/herself, the second with one’s feelings of self-worth in the eyes of others (p. 45). In the first case, the individual desires feelings of confidence and independence. In the second, he/she desires the respect of those around him/her. Once the individual feels that he/she is worthy on his/her own terms and in the eyes of others, he/she may turn to the final need: self-actualization. In pursuing self-actualization, the individual strives to do what he/she feels called to do. Maslow (1954) presented the matter with basic examples: “A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself” (p. 46). Self-actualization, then, consists of the individual’s pursuing what he/she feels compelled to do in an effort to work toward continually becoming himself/herself.

Though the needs are presented in hierarchical form, Maslow himself acknowledged that the hierarchy may be broken. Individual circumstances may alter the pattern. An individual who has at some point satisfied a lower-level need may experience a life change that leads him/her to a state in which he/she is no longer able to satisfy it. Maslow (1954) illustrated this point with the example of the tendency toward “acceptance of dictatorship or of military rule” when an individual feels that his/her safety needs are threatened (p. 43). In such cases, the individual who strives for a higher-order need such as self-actualization may regress to the lower-level of need of safety satisfaction. As Poston (2009) notes, “there are circumstances that affect each individual with regard to where he or

she stands in the hierarchy pyramid” (p. 353).

While Maslow’s 1954 needs hierarchy has been quite influential in addressing individuals’ circumstances (see [Poston, 2009](#)), it has not been without criticism. A principal objection to the framework is that it appears to be based on Western concepts of individualism. The focus of the framework is constantly oriented around the improvement of the self, not of the group ([Papaleontiou-Louca, Esmailnia, & Thoma, 2022](#)). In a collectivist culture, however, “identity is based on the social system as opposed to the individual” ([Gambrel & Cianci, 2003: p. 147](#), see also [King-Hill, 2015](#)). Given this focus on individual achievement, the framework may be viewed as overlooking not only cultural differences but also individuals’ sense of moral responsibility toward others—that is, as overlooking the type of responsibility that leads individuals to prioritize the greater good (see [Papaleontiou-Louca, Esmailnia, & Thoma, 2022](#)).

Maslow’s later work appears to respond to such shortcomings. His 1969 work “Various Meanings of Transcendence,” ([Maslow, 1969](#)) as a case in point, presents 35 possible instances of transcendence (some of which overlap). Among the 35 are the transcendence of ego and the transcendence that involves acceptance of the natural world as it is. In the first case, the individual takes on “tasks, causes, duties, responsibilities to others” (p. 58) while in the second he/she disregards the type of egotistical judgments that place nature at the service of him/herself. Clearly, then, as these two instances illustrate, Maslow’s later work moved beyond self-actualization as being purely a matter of promoting one’s own needs. The author reaches the following conclusion: “Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic level of human consciousness, behaving and relating...to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to nature, and to the cosmos” (p. 66).

4. Selected Works of *Rulfo’s The Plain in Flames* Viewed from a Maslowian Perspective

4.1. Rulfo’s “Paso del Norte” Viewed from a Maslowian Perspective

In the most basic reading, “Paso del Norte” is the classic story of the poor, disenfranchised Mexican migrant with the illusion of crossing the border (to the United States) in order to make money (see [Harss, 1965](#); [Villafuerte, 1992](#)). The plot is rather straightforward. A young, unnamed man (hereafter referred to as “the young man”), feeling that his father has intentionally not instructed him in the skills of selling fireworks and telling proverbs, feels that he has no choice but to look for possibilities elsewhere. He convinces his reluctant father to keep his wife and children while he goes to the United States to make enough money to return and set up his own business. The trip is a disaster: He works at the border without being paid and, after narrowly escaping gunshots and losing his companion to gunshots, returns home empty-handed only to find that his father, without consulting him, has sold his house and that his wife, Tránsito, has left him for a mule driver.

Viewed in Maslowian terms, the story reveals characters striving to fulfill physiological needs, safety needs, and belongingness and love needs. First, “Paso del Norte” depicts a character with a steadfast drive to satisfy the basic physiological need of food—and a clear motivation to take the drastic step of attempting to cross the border. Before leaving for the United States, the young man repeatedly tells his father about his hunger: He makes such comments as “We’re hungry, father” (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 93), “Now look where we ended up: we’re starving to death” (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 94), and “Like I said, last week we ate greens, and this week, well, not even that” (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 95). He talks in plural form (“we”); he states, “I love my children” (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 95). Such comments indicate that he is clearly aware of familial responsibilities. Still, he is bent on pursuing his goal of traveling to the United States to make money for food. His comments reflect Maslow’s (1954) description of the physiological need of food: “For the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry no other interests exist but food” (p. 37). The young man, then, in accordance with Maslowian theory, has in a time of dire hunger placed the need for food above all others and has justified to himself the temporary abandonment of his family. The decision is not without a driving force, however. In explaining the decision to his father, the narrator reveals his inspiration: “You saw, Carmelo came back rich.... So you see; you just need to go and come back. So I’m goin” (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 93).

Subsequent events in the story, viewed in Maslowian terms, also reveal a faint hope of satisfying needs. As mentioned above, the young man’s wife, Tránsito, runs off with a mule driver during the young man’s absence. She thus leaves her children with her father-in-law, a man who apparently has never been supportive of her. Also mentioned above is the young man’s use of the plural form “we” when talking about the extreme lack of food. It is safe to say, then, that Tránsito suffers from dire hunger just as her husband does. Hence, her leaving with the mule driver is not presented in the story as a sign of adulterous behavior but as a sign of the desire to satisfy basic needs. As Ortega Galindo (1994) points out, Tránsito is almost obligated to leave her husband. Her miserable circumstances seem to absolve her from any condemnation. In the patriarchal Rulfian world, the arrival of a man to replace her absent husband would appear to provide her with the only spark of hope available.

The young man, even after failing in his attempt to earn money for food during his journey, also seems to cling to a faint hope of satisfying needs. Upon returning home without the money that he expected to obtain in the United States and finding that his wife has left him, the young man asks his father where she has gone and receives a vague answer: “Over that way maybe. I wasn’t really paying attention” (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 99). Such an answer, however, is enough to inspire the young man. He responds, “Then I’ll be right back, I’m going to get her” (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 99). He thus once again abandons his children, probably to “roam the country like a soul in pain” (Harss, 1965: p. 307). His action, while revealing hope in a desperate situation, also reveals a break in the Maslowian needs hierarchy. As he has failed to secure any income in the United States,

there is no indication that the young man has come any closer to satisfying the physiological need of food. And his near-death experience during his journey to the United States along with his lack of stable employment would seem to highlight his lack of fulfillment of the need of safety, a need which, as mentioned previously, includes “security” and “stability” (Maslow, 1954: p. 39). Nevertheless, when he realizes that he has lost his wife, the need for belongingness and love seems to trump physiological needs and safety needs and to trump the needs of his children. This leap in terms of striving for need satisfaction would seem to reflect Poston’s (2009) observation that, at any point in time, an individual may “value an alternative aspect of the hierarchy pyramid in a way that is not parallel with Maslow’s model” (p. 352).

Though “Paso del Norte” does not directly refer to the post-revolutionary period in which Rulfo’s work takes place, it is not difficult to see how this socio-political background influences the unfolding of events. The young man, as mentioned above, does show some sense of moral responsibility in considering needs, opting at first to put migration to the United States above immediately caring for family in a desire to make money for himself and, it appears, for the future care of his family. Ultimately, however, due to their lack of opportunities and to their complete marginalization, characters opt for the more individualistic satisfaction of desires presented in Maslow’s original hierarchical framework. The absence of real moral responsibility is first present in the rather flippant responses of the young man’s father to the young man’s pleas for help, as seen in the following dialogue in which the young man speaks first:

Then you won’t take care of [my wife and children]?

Just leave them there, no one dies of hunger.

Tell me if you’ll take them on, I don’t want to leave without being sure.

How many are there?

Well, just three boys and two girls and your daughter-in-law, who’s like a teenager.

Screwing around again, you mean (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 95).

The father’s non-committal words of course foreshadow his later selling of the young man’s house. As has been seen, a certain abandonment of moral responsibility, one based on necessity, is also eventually present in the actions of the young man himself and in those of Tránsito in that they both leave behind their children perhaps never to return. It may be said, then, that the striving for transcendence described in Maslow’s later work is simply not an option for Rulfian characters in dire circumstances.

4.2. Rulfo’s “Macario” Viewed from a Maslowian Perspective

The story “Macario” paints a picture of a mentally deficient child who needs largely to create a world for himself since he is alienated from the world of others (see Arizmendi Domínguez, 2008; Duffey, 1996). His imagination, mixed with his unfortunate circumstances, leads him to an eventually unsuccessful

means of striving to satisfy basic needs. With both parents dead for reasons not provided in the story, living with his godmother and a cook named Felipa, the title character is controlled through fear. Both of his caretakers, making use of old-school Catholic superstitions, have firmly planted in him a fear of sin, of eternal perdition (see Lyon, 1992; Ortega Galindo, 1994). He is taught that only through blind obedience and through the interventions of his caretakers will he have any hope of escaping Hell and therefore of possibly reuniting with his parents (who are supposedly in Purgatory). He leaves the house rarely, mainly going to mass--where his godmother ties his hands to her shawl to ensure his good behavior. In the interior monologue that makes up the story, Macario quotes the priest's words at mass: "The road to good things is filled with light. The road to bad things is dark" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 56). Yet Macario himself chooses to remain in darkness out of fear that sin might find him. Even in his bedroom when he feels cockroaches on his body, he remains in darkness: "...I don't light the torch. I'm not going to let my sins catch me off guard with the torch lit up..." (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 56).

Again, a Maslowian analysis sheds light on Rulfo's work. As the preceding comments indicate, Macario is rather alienated from the outside world. Still, adjusting to the world that has been forced upon him by creating a new one, he has found a glimpse of hope that leads him to pursue the safety need. This glimpse of hope, oddly, comes in the form of Felipa's visits to his bedroom, visits during which she encourages him to suckle her breasts and then spends the night with him: "Every night Felipa would come to the room I sleep in, and would snuggle up to me, lying on top of me or a little to the side. Then she would take [her breasts] out so I could suck that sweet and warm milk that would come out in streams on my tongue" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 55). Given his young age and his mental deficiency, Macario does not associate Felipa's behavior with what De Diego (1998) refers to as a sexual relation. Rather, he associates it with a temporary dose of safety: "[Felipa] would always fall asleep next to me, until daybreak. And that helped me a lot; because then I didn't care about the cold or about any fear of being condemned to Hell if I died alone there on one of those nights..." (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 55).

The need of safety also appears symbolically in the story, first in relation to Macario's constant hunger, second in relation to the Catholic background in which Macario is raised. First, Macario's emphasis on his constant hunger is present throughout the story. Examples include the following:

That's why I love Felipa, because I'm always hungry and never full, not even after I eat her food. Even if people say you should be full after eating, I know I never get full, even if I eat everything they give me (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 54).

When [my godmother] calls me to eat, it's to give me my part of the food, and not like other people who invite me to eat with them, and then when I get near them, they throw rocks at me until I run away with no food or an-

othing. No, my godmother treats me well. That's why I'm happy in her house (Rulfo, 1953/2015: pp. 54-55).

The phrase "everything they give me" would seem to be key here. As Maslow (1954) notes, "the person who thinks he is hungry may actually be seeking more for comfort, or dependence, than for vitamins or proteins" (p. 36). As Macario is worried about securing safety (i.e., from the eternal perdition he is threatened with, from the outsiders who throw rocks at him), he seems to embrace receiving food from those who protect him. Macario himself notes that he and Felipa only receive "little piles" of food left over from the godmother's meal (Rulfo, 1953, 2015: p. 54). Still, he feels that he is well treated. Hence, food would appear to stand as a symbol of the provision of safety rather than of food itself.

Second, though De Diego (1998) views Felipa's suckling of Macario as a sexual matter (see above), the practice, odd as it may seem, also plays a symbolic role. In simplest terms, the practice of suckling a young one is naturally associated with a motherly role, a role that in itself involves the giving of protection (i.e., of satisfying the safety need—and, of course, of satisfying the physiological need of food). Yet one must also note that the story is centered around a harsh Catholic upbringing and is therefore replete with Catholic superstitions, one of which involves the giving of breast milk. As Jansen and Dresen (2012) observe, breast milk in the Catholic religion has been associated, over time, with "the milk of salvation" and with "the nourishment of God," two associations that stem from notions of the Virgin Mary giving breast milk not only to Jesus Christ but also to others in need (pp. 226, 228). As Macario views himself as a person "filled with demons" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 55), Felipa's enthusiastic offering of breast milk may be viewed not only as a sexual move but also as a motherly and purifying one.

Ultimately, the safe world that Macario has created for himself seems unlikely to end positively. The interior monologue starts and ends with Macario's sitting beside a sewer to catch frogs that would disturb his godmother's sleep if not killed. He notes that, if his godmother cannot sleep, "she'll ask one in the row of saints she has in her room to send devils after [him], so they can drag [him] straight to eternal damnation" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 57). He sees no frogs. With his limited mental ability, he trusts his godmother's words and therefore sees his safety threatened. Perhaps more importantly, the story ends with Macario no longer being able to enjoy the protective milk from Felipa. He states the following:

It's been a long time since she let me suck those mounds she has where we just have ribs, and where better milk than what my godmother gives us for lunch on Sundays comes out of her, if you know how to get it out of her... (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 55).

What I want the most is to try a few mouthfuls of Felipa's milk again, good and sweet milk like the honey that comes from under the hibiscus flowers (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 57).

One may assume, then, that Felipa is no longer able to suckle and that Macario therefore has now been denied his temporary moments of safety. Without this refuge, and with the perceived threat of “eternal damnation” if he fails to kill frogs, Macario simply states “I better go on talking” (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 57). His fate, in his mind, depends on his ability to stay awake long enough to kill the frogs that might disturb his godmother’s sleep and that might not ever appear.

As is the case in “Paso del Norte,” “Macario” seems indirectly to reveal the consequences of the socio-political circumstances surrounding Rulfo’s work. Doubtless, the unexplained absence of parents mirrors the author’s own loss of family due to the Revolution. More important is the distribution of food seen in the story. According to Torres Vergel (2022), the story serves “as an allegory of the domination of a dictatorship and the state of alienation suffered by the Mexican people during the period immediately preceding the Mexican Revolution” (p. 127), and the character Macario represents the state of the proletariat during the Revolution and in its aftermath, with food being available only in small amounts (see “little piles” above). Regardless of whether one wishes to view the story as a completely allegorical account, it does seem to reveal, once again, that the consequences of the Revolution have led to a rather individualistic focus on needs satisfaction. Aside from Felipa’s rather unconventional offering of protection, spiritual matters in the story serve as a means of manipulating Macario and of limiting his access to food, not as a means of promoting moral responsibility toward him.

4.3. Rulfo’s “Talpa” Viewed from a Maslowian Perspective

Of the three stories discussed here, Rulfo’s “Talpa” stands out as the most complex in terms of characters’ striving to satisfy needs. The story depicts three characters with needs that conflict—though the entire story is narrated through the voice of only one unnamed character who seems to be trying to explain his actions to himself (see Blancas Blancas, 2018). The story revolves around a journey, a common literary theme which, in the Christian, specifically Catholic tradition involves movement from a non-sacred place to a sacred place in search of healing (see Jiménez Chacón, 2018). The characters undertake a journey to Talpa, home of the shrine of the Virgin de Talpa (Fernández Poncela, 2012). Yet the motives of the characters reveal that Rulfo has turned the traditional Christian journey into its opposite, with only one of the three seeing the pilgrimage as a religious one, with purely personal, rather sinister need satisfaction as the motivation of the other two. Tanilo, the narrator’s brother, a man stricken with seemingly unhealable sores, truly strives for healing:

He’d been asking for someone to take him [to Talpa] for years. For years. Since that day when he woke up with purple blisters scattered around his arms and legs. When the blisters later turned into sores from which no blood came out but instead yellow stuff like copal gum oozed out like thick water” (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 47).

Tanilo's brother and wife (the narrator of the story and Natalia), however, have other motives:

Between the two of us, Natalia and I, we killed him. We took him to Talpa so he could die. And he died. We knew he wouldn't be able to withstand that long a trip; but, just the same, we took him, between the two of us we pushed him all the way, thinking we'd be done with him for good. That's what we did (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 46).

The narrator and Natalia, engaged in an adulterous relationship, feel that the riddance of Tanilo will provide them with the freedom to continue their relationship. The narrator notes that he and Natalia have "been together many times" but are always separated by Natalia's having to take care of her sore-ridden husband: "Tanilo's shadow always separated us: we felt his blistered hands getting between us, taking Natalia away so she would continue taking care of him. And it would always be that way while he was alive" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 47).

Viewed in Maslowian terms, the story reveals characters striving to meet physiological needs, safety needs, and love and affection needs. As is the case in other stories discussed here, occasional signs of hope lead characters to work toward satisfying these needs. Tanilo, the ailing cuckold on the verge of death from the start of the story, stands out as the only character whose needs are somewhat met—though they are met only partially and only through his death. Due to his seemingly unhealable sores, he strives to satisfy the most basic physiological need of staying alive. But he attributes his condition to past sins and thus strives to satisfy the safety need by earning redemption. Feeling that the Virgin of Talpa is his only hope, Tanilo takes various religious measures during the journey and sees religious symbols as his salvation (see Lyon, 1992): He wears scapulars; he ties his feet together; he blindfolds himself; he walks on his blistered kneecaps; he wishes to wear a crown of thorns (clearly in semblance of Jesus' biblical suffering). There is no sign that these efforts have any effect, however. Regardless of his efforts, Tanilo remains uncured and dies while listening to a priest praise the healing powers of the Virgin of Talpa. As Jiménez Chacón (2018) notes, Tanilo receives a miracle in that he is allowed an escape from an evil world that leaves him in pain, but what he wants is the miracle of being cured from his lamentable worldly condition.

In keeping with the tendency of Rulfo's work to depict women in their role of service to men (see De Diego, 1998), Natalia is described largely in terms of her body (see Ramírez, 2008). The narrator states the following: "I already knew what was inside Natalia. I knew something about her. I knew, for instance, that her round legs, hard and warm like stones in the noonday sun, had been alone for a long time" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 47). Left to take care of her ailing and apparently impotent husband, Natalia takes refuge in committing adultery with the narrator in an act that seemingly provides some form of relief from the pain of being only the caretaker of Tanilo. The narrator notes:

First the ocote pine would supply our light. Then we would let the ash die down and Natalia and I would seek out the shadow of something in order to hide from the lights in the sky. That's how we got closer to the solitude of the country, away from Tanilo's eyes, disappearing into the night. And that solitude would press us toward each other. It would put Natalia's body in my arms and she would find release in that. She would feel as if she were relaxing; she would forget so many things and then fall asleep, her body experiencing great relief (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 48).

Though such breaks from the monotony of caregiving seem to provide Natalia with a sense of relief (i.e., "safety" in Maslowian terms) (at least according to the narrator), and though they lead her to convince Tanilo to continue on what is sure to be a pilgrimage to his death, the inevitable death of Tanilo denies her the chance of satisfying what Maslow refers to as the belongingness and love need, the feeling of "the absence of friends, or a sweetheart, or a wife, or children" (Maslow, 1954: p. 43). She realizes that her entire existence is built on her role of loving and caring for Tanilo. As the narrator reports, "Now Natalia cries about him, maybe for him to see, wherever he is, all the remorse she bears on her soul" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 48). He goes on to say that "[a]ll that existed for her was her Tanilo, whom she had taken care of while he was alive and whom she had buried when he had to die" (p. 49). Aside from depriving her of belongingness and love, the death of Tanilo, ultimately, takes away the possibility of Natalia's finding safety in a purely sexual relationship with the narrator: "And from then on Natalia forgot me" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 49; see also Colón, 2008). Without the sense of belongingness afforded by Tanilo, without real affection for the narrator, she is left to return home and throw herself into her mother's arms in one final seeking of belongingness and love.

Unlike Tanilo and Natalia, the narrator of "Talpa" would seem to be largely driven by the desire to satisfy purely physiological needs. His description of Natalia in largely physical terms ("round legs, hard and warm like stones in the noonday sun") appears to indicate that his relationship with her is based on the need of sexual satisfaction, not on the need of companionship and love. As Colón (2008) notes, he is consumed by carnal desire and strives for nothing to get in the way of the satisfaction of this desire. This desire is strong enough to lead him to the scheme to kill to his own brother, a scheme he later seems unable to explain to himself (see Blancas Blancas, 2018). The narrator's striving to satisfy purely physiological needs is also seen in observations regarding his relationship with the natural environment. During the journey to Talpa, he notes that "[w]e had to wait till nighttime to rest from the sun and from the road's white light" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 49). And shortly afterward, he states the following:

Only sometimes, when we crossed some river, the dust was higher and clearer. We'd plunge our feverish and blackened heads into the green water, and for a moment blue smoke would come out of us all, like the steam that

comes out of your mouth when it's cold (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 49).

He concludes the commentary on the harsh environment with a simple summary remark: "We'll rest by and by when we're dead" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 50). Ultimately, glimpses of hope (i.e., the late-night escapades with Natalia out of sight of Tanilo, relief provided by nightfall or the crossing of a river) end up insufficient to provide the narrator with any final satisfaction of his physiological needs. Abandoned psychologically by Natalia, consumed by the guilt associated with the killing of his brother, he sees himself forever condemned to roam the world aimlessly, with only the relief of death coming to his aid. After returning home to Zenzontla, he states, "And I'm beginning to feel as if we hadn't gotten anywhere.... I don't know where to; but we'll need to keep on going..." (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 53). With needs unsatisfied, he can only look/hope for new territory.

Similar to "Paso del Norte" and "Macario," "Talpa leaves the reader to infer the connection between the story itself and the socio-political context in which it was written. In the case of "Talpa," the reader first finds the desolate environment (described above) in which characters are fated to live, an environment seemingly resulting from the fruitless post-Revolution land reforms (see *De la Fuente, 1996*). And it is within this environment that characters are confronted with the vanities of life. As *Pettit (2007)* notes, "Talpa" seems to serve as a literary manifestation of Octavio Paz's notion that, in Mexico, "[d]eath is a mirror that reflects the vain gesticulations of the living" (Paz, 1950/1961: p. 54). The only accomplishment in the story would have to be Tanilo's death, which, as mentioned above, provides him with relief from pain. But as the narrator notes, Tanilo "would have died anyway because he was due" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 47). On the other hand, the complete separation between the narrator and Natalia at the end of the story reveals that their entire scheme to kill Tanilo has been, for them, pointless (see *Pettit, 2007*). Finally, the gruesome image of Tanilo's burial reveals the trivial nature of death: The narrator refers to "the Tanilo we buried in the Talpa graveyard; the one Natalia and I threw earth and stones on so the animals from the hills wouldn't dig him up" (Rulfo, 1953/2015: p. 53). It may be inferred, then, that the circumstances of post-Revolutionary Mexico have created a situation of almost certainly unsatisfied needs, a situation in which individualist actions in life stand out as vain gestures that lead only to a trivial death.

5. Conclusion

López-Quñones (2013) argues that the works of Juan Rulfo are in some ways typified by the silence of the characters. This silence is understandable since characters often do not seem to be talking to anyone in particular but rather trying to discover themselves—as is especially evident in the stories "Macario" and "Talpa," both discussed here. Though "Paso del Norte," the first story elaborated upon here, does have dialogues, the complete disjunction between father and son would seem to suggest that the two are living in their own worlds and paying little attention to each other. Fittingly, the geographical worlds presented

in Rulfo's work seem to be presented largely as a reflection of the interior world of the characters who live in them (see [Martín, 2001](#)). The desolation along the road to Talpa, as a case in point, seems simply to reflect the desolation inside the narrator himself. Exploring the Rulfian interior world of *The Plain in Flames* (1953/2015), this paper has argued that the work of Abraham H. Maslow, as presented primarily in *Motivation and Personality* (1954), provides a useful framework for interpretation. Characters engaging in interior monologues to discuss their troubles, characters walking toward nowhere or predicting that they will walk toward nowhere, characters looking to find answers where no obvious answers are available—all these traits of Rulfo's work reveal individuals striving futilely to satisfy needs in a world in which one's own unfulfilled needs almost inevitably take precedence over those of others.

Ultimately, it may be said that the desolate environment presented in *The Plain in Flames* (1953/2015) represents not just the disenfranchised individuals of the works themselves but all disenfranchised individuals striving for something better without knowing exactly how to get it. And as mentioned repeatedly throughout this paper, the work of Maslow provides insights into why such individuals would continue their struggle even when the chances of success are limited. In his Nobel Prize speech, *The Solitude of Latin America*, [Gabriel García Márquez \(1982\)](#) described the Latin American situation as follows: “[I]n the face of oppression, pillage and abandonment, our reply is life. Neither floods nor plagues, nor famines nor cataclysms, nor even eternal war century after century have managed to reduce the tenacious advantage that life has over death.” The literary result of this tenacity is that characters in modern Latin American literature continuously struggle for life even in dire circumstances. From Florentino's quest to regain the love of Fermina in García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), to Mayta's struggle to bring about a more just world in Vargas Llosa's *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (1984), to the populace's efforts to survive under a corrupt dictator in Asturias' *El Señor Presidente* (1946)—the ongoing search for something better is seen. Due to the ubiquitous nature of such a theme, and due to the relevance of Maslow's work to an analysis of the theme, it is hoped that future studies of Latin American literature will build on the example provided here and make use of the hierarchy of needs as a framework of investigation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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