

The role of the victim in the plays of Florencio Sánchez

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ABSTRACT

Florencio Sánchez was the first major playwright in Uruguay to treat themes relevant to his times and region. His prime concern was the portrayal of social-moral conflict in his society. His plays are divided into two main groups, those involved with rural life and those dealing with conflict in an urban setting. The urban plays expose the conflict seen in both poor and middle-class families and the rural ones expose the destruction of the family unit as old landowners are dispossessed of their land by unscrupulous speculators. This essay argues that although Sánchez's main concern was to denounce corruption in society and to expose the victimisation of the weak, he enriches the dramatic texture of his plays by making the victims active participants. The victim is always able to articulate his or her dilemma and is given a choice of action, even if this choice is one between two evils. Frequently the survival of the family is pitched against the survival or wellbeing of the individual. Three plays have been chosen, two urban plays, *En familia* and *La pobre gente* and one rural play, *Barraca abajo*. The final conclusion has to be that the greed and corruption in the system are indeed destroying family unity, but that there is strength and energy found among those victimised which in some way contributes to the effect of victimisation. In the end, the choice is made by the victim.

The issue of victimisation¹ has enormous potential on stage and is an excellent device for creating dramatic tension. Furthermore, if it is used as a tool to criticise society, it becomes invaluable, allowing the playwright to exploit to the full any contemporary social injustices and to portray social-moral conflict. This is particularly relevant to theatre of social thesis.

The theatre of Florencio Sánchez² is characterised by its preoccupation with social injustice, and the theme of victimisation appears in nearly all his plays. Giovanni Pontiero has expressed this tendency in Sánchez's work:

When Dardo Cúneo collected Sánchez's plays into a single volume, he classified them under two thematic headings - rural and urban. Roberto F. Giusti suggested an alternative plan by distinguishing between *costumbrista* plays which depicted local background and characters, and plays of social thesis. Both classifications are

unsatisfactory as descriptions; social thesis alone would describe his work. ([Sánchez 1972](#): 25)

Yet even though all of Sánchez's theatre is concerned with victimisation through social injustice, substantial differences in treatment can be detected between the urban and the rural plays. As a rough generalisation it could be said that in his urban plays he focuses either on the lower socio-economic elements or on the middle classes who are at risk of losing their social position. In these plays we find victims who have no apparent way out of their plight and who suffer with a certain degree of acceptance and resignation. The audience would be expected to give these victims unconditional sympathy while looking out for the well-deserved downfall of the victimiser. This victimiser can in turn be seen as a victim of society or of circumstances, who eases the burden by exploiting those more vulnerable than him or herself. This cowardly character seldom turns against those who are the oppressors, but rather sacrifices his or her dependants.

On the other hand, in the rural plays we find that although savage injustices are being denounced, Sánchez, in spite of his sympathy for the plight of the victim, presents victims that are much more active and often controversial. These rural victims do not take the injustices lying down, but rather protest loudly against their oppressors and issue their own threats in response. Furthermore, there is a hint from the playwright that up to a point they share responsibility for their plight, having actively pursued a self-destructive course of action and, in some cases, displayed a similarly callous treatment of their own dependants and inferiors. This situation creates a dilemma for the audience whose outpourings of sympathy cannot be simple and straightforward. The victims are complex, the situation, although ultimately hopeless, resists a simple analysis or obvious answer, and the play, overall, leaves an uncomfortable feeling of culpability in the audience. Nevertheless, Sánchez was very concerned with the destruction of the culture of the *campo* by ruthless opportunists, and he makes sure that although the victim might be plucky in confronting the forces of adversity and change, the choices are few, and invariably negative. The rural plays, more than the urban ones, are written with passion and commitment. With this in mind, one can ask whether Sanchez's work can be called merely theatre of thesis, or whether the action is individual rather than universal. [Freire \(1961\)](#) argues that only two of his plays can be seen as submitting to their central thesis:

Podríamos en un análisis minucioso de los dramas de Sánchez, reconocer por lo menos dos estructuras teatrales en este sentido del empleo de ideas-madres. Por un lado, tendríamos aquellas piezas en las cuales la idea aparece envuelta en la acción [...]; por otro lado, aquellas obras en las cuales la idea engendra la acción dramática, que aparece así como una puesta en acción o ilustración de aquella idea. (Freire 1961:41)

He points out that only *Nuestros hijos* and *Los derechos de la salud* can be considered thesis plays, where the action is driven by the main idea of the play, whereas in the others the thesis emerges from the action.

I will be looking at two of Sánchez's urban plays, *En familia* (1905) and *La pobre gente* (1904) and one rural play, *Barranca abajo* (1905), and will try to analyse how the victimiser exploits the position of supremacy in each one of them while teasing out the limitations of power and the role played by the victim in the act of victimisation.

La pobre gente is set in a poor district of Buenos Aires and focuses on a family that makes its living from sewing. The wife, Mónica, as well as the children, have to work to help the family finances. When things are good they even employ some of the local young women. Felipe, the husband, has apparently lost his job and tries to manage the sewing business, in the way that many of Sánchez's heroes do, by shouts and threats. Their daughter, Zulma, picks up the orders and delivers the clothing to the distributor.

From the beginning we can trace a chain of victimisation. Felipe sees himself as a victim as he has no work and feels that his family should be enlisted to support him in his misfortune. He is a victim of the system. Mónica has to put up with him and watch him obliging the children to work, either as messengers or servants in order to bring in the money he then spends on himself and his pleasures. He is unable to take on board the extent of the deprivations he is forcing on them. In turn, Mónica is tyrannical with the children, even if her actions cause her to suffer as a mother. This is illustrated in the scene where she sends Tita off to be a servant:

Mónica: ... Si se coloca, mañana Felipe le llevará sus ropitas... ¡Adiós!... (la besa)

Tita: ¿Y cuándo vendré a casa?

Mónica: No sé... Cuando le den permiso ... (emocionada) ¡Algún domingo! (Besándola de nuevo y tratando de disimular su emoción) ¡Adiós!...¡Pórtese bien!, mi queridita... (Se cubre el rostro con el delantal, dejando oír un sollozo).

([Sánchez 1952: 258](#))

When she can, she rebukes Felipe, indicating to him that their children sacrifice themselves to help support the family and especially his expensive habits: "Demasiado hacen para sacrificarse por vos" (Sánchez 1952: 57). However, the greatest of their worries is the inexplicable reduction in the work given to them by the distributor, don Bartolo. He returns clothing to be redone when it has no obvious flaws, and effectively stops sending in new orders. This, together with the apparent refusal of the younger children to work, will bring the family to ruin:

Felipe: Me parece que en vez de estarse lagrimando y con esos romanticismos, deberían pensar un poco, en lo que va a ser de nosotros... Si you tuviera trabajo, no sería nada... Pero fundido el taller, Juan Pedro sin conchavo, la Tita, hasta esa mocosa que se niega a trabajar; el montón de deudas que tenemos encima, y sobre todo la dificultad de encontrar costuras en esta época, no hallo, francamente, no hallo cómo remediar la situación ... En eso deberían haber pensado.

([Sanchez 1952: 268-9](#))

This speech, coming from the man of the house, in 1904, would have grated badly on the nerves of the audience, at a time when men took pride in being the sole breadwinners, and, even worse, from a man who obviously is making no effort to rectify the situation.

But worse is to come. Cuaterno, the young admirer of Zulma, hints at what might be the problem with the reduced orders. The manager at the distributors is pressuring Zulma to sleep with him and, if she doesn't, he threatens to block off all the work. When she refuses, he does just that.

The pressures, even coming from her weak mother, for her to give in to the man and save the family are constant. All their unhappiness, the father's drinking

binges, the fact that the mother has to wash clothes to pay the bills, are put down to Zulma's unwillingness to give in.

To give them some credit, they are partially in denial of don Bartolo's real intentions or at least they pretend that the evil intentions do not exist. So, when Bartolo confesses to Felipe that he did make improper advances, but that now all will be well, Felipe prefers to believe him:

Felipe: ... acabo de estar con él y todo se ha descubierto... Vos no tuviste la culpa de nada ... de nada. Así es que, hijita mía, te perdono ... ¡Y viva don Bartolo!... Resulta que fue él... que estaba con la luna y que vos también, y ahí no más la discutieron ... y por esto o lo otro le retiró las costuras ... El hombre no se imaginaba todo el mal que nos hacía; pero ayer ha sabido nuestra situación por una oficiala amiga suya ... amiga de esas ¿sabés? (Guiñando el ojo con picardía) y en seguida determinó buscarme... Bueno hemos charlado tomando unos copetines .. Total que me ofreció sacarme las máquinas del pío ... y me dijo que podrías ir el sábado a buscar tarea...

(Sánchez 1952: 276-7)

When Zulma reacts negatively to her father's orders, he adds sombrely: "...se les ofrece el plato y se ponen a probarle el gusto... Si cualquier gusto que tenga, lo mismo han de comerlo" (Sánchez 1952: 277).

To suit his own purposes, Felipe will follow this line of thought that there is no choice. But from the audience's point of view, a man who will let his daughter be ruined and, further, who will push her to her destruction, is the most abject villain. Mónica, symbolically, tries to leave the stage at this moment. That is the only response that she can make.

We find, however, that Zulma does have a choice, in fact she has two. One is that of suicide, which sends her family into a panic. "...hemos sido malos con ella..." (Sánchez 1952: 282). The other is to go away with Cuaterno. He now has money and makes her a respectable offer, giving her the option of going with him and being free of the family, a family which has effectively sacrificed her. But, there is a cultural implication here for Zulma as the family should traditionally come first and every member should be willing to sacrifice their own wellbeing for the sake of the whole. Thus, Zulma should not even hesitate. On the other hand, however, a father should never, for any reason, push his daughter into ruin. It will be up to the victim to resolve this dilemma.

And she does. Of her own free will, Zulma goes to collect the new orders from don Bartolo. And, as she comes back on stage, carrying the bundle of clothing, her response to her tearful family and to her brother's delighted cry is a funereal: "Aquí está... ¡La perdida! Sí ... ¡La perdida!" (Sánchez 1952: 283).

As stated above, Zulma's choice was between saving herself by going to live a respectable life with Cuaterno, or destroying herself and assuring the survival of her family. From the audience's point of view, one can say that such an unworthy family has no hope and, in spite of her sacrifice, will lurch into another crisis. However, the fact remains: Zulma made a choice.

In *En familia*, an urban play of the middle classes, we find a family in a similar situation. The father, Jorge, has lost all his money in failed investments and has taken to gaming, presumably to get the money back. The good life that he has always been accustomed to gives him the illusion of escape and he can keep pretending that at the next turn, or on the next race, he will gain everything back.

The daughters and younger son complain constantly about their straitened circumstances and the lack of food on the table, but insist on their public life and

image continuing as before. They also refuse to work because that does not fit in with their image of members of the leisured classes. The daughters must also keep up appearances in the hope of attracting suitable husbands. The son suffers from his nerves and so has an excuse for his laziness. He is, however, the only character who recognises his own and his family's unworthiness, and the falsity of their circumstances, as he says to his mother:

Eduardo: Mirá: aquí sólo hay dos personas dignas de lástima: nosotros. Vos porque tomás la vida en serio y nadie te lleva el apunte; yo, por esta vocación que tengo para el atorrantismo... Porque a mí no me la cuenta el médico... Yo no tengo neurastenia ni un corno, sino pereza pura...

(Sánchez 1952: 442)

Each member of the family is concerned with his or her own self interest to the exclusion of anything else, but they are each firmly convinced that the solution to their problems is someone else's responsibility. This leads to the disintegration of the family unit and as Emilia puts it: "cada vez nos queremos menos" (Sánchez 1952: 440).

It is into this dysfunctional family that Damián, the successful son, brings his small family unit: his loving wife Delfina.

It is clear to the audience, and to the mother, that there is nothing Damián can do to save this unnatural family, yet Damián is convinced that he can do it and he idealistically expects to enlist their cooperation. Thus, he becomes their saviour and simultaneously their tyrant by making them work. He even suggests that his father, who is planning to recover his fortune by betting on the horses, should take a labourer's job. But as Jorge puts it: "Pregúntales a la señora de Acuña y a las distinguidas señoritas de Acuña, si están dispuestas a cambiar la miseria vergonzosa de esta casa por la pobreza honorable de la habitación de un conventillo" (Sánchez 1952: 441). The only way of life they can accept is the life they know.

Like Zulma, Damián has a choice and like Zulma he will be a sacrificial lamb, or, as Delfina implies, he is a don Quijote. And he chooses to trust his father with the last of his money, money that the father, predictably, gambles away.

Yet, as indicated above, these victims accept their fate with relative passivity, considering it the sacrifice that one must make to keep the family unit intact even in the face of destruction. This is not quite the case in the rural family of don Zoilo in *Barranca abajo*. This family is even more dysfunctional than the other two, and the threat to their livelihood far better defined and infinitely more evil.

Don Zoilo is one of the last of the old style *criollos*, a status derived from the traditional gaucho, as shown by Santiago Rojas in speaking of the three outstanding figures in Sánchez's rural works (don Olegario from *M'hijo el doctor*, don Cantalicio from *La gringa* and don Zoilo from *Barranca abajo*):

No obstante la intención simbólica que orienta al creador, los tres criollos viejos no pierden en modo alguno su naturaleza humana en el acuñaamiento de la ya consabida expresión, se alzan en calidad de gauchos de "carne y hueso." La excelencia de Sánchez como dramaturgo se debe, en gran medida, a su habilidad para captar el atributo humano, a la eficacia con que emplea elementos americanos y regionales sin que pierdan autenticidad. (Rojas 1980: 6)

This old man, whom Rojas describes as showing 'el nivel del descenso arrollador y aniquilante del gaucho, de modo mucho más patético que el de los otros

dos criollos viejos' (Rojas 1980: 11), is being embezzled by men who are more sophisticated and astute than he is; and he has lost his land to them. He and his family are still living on his old *estancia*, but their time there is limited. Don Zoilo at first is not aware that his daughter, Prudencia, is being courted by the new owner of the land, don Juan Luis, and his sister by the local military captain, Gutiérrez. Don Luis has only allowed them to stay there because of his designs on Prudencia.

When Zoilo was trying to save his land, he used his sister's inheritance to bolster his failing finances and has now lost that as well. For this reason, he knows that he is fully responsible for their plight. His first appearance on stage is as a silent figure, holding a knife and, as René de Costa has pointed out, this silence is used to draw attention only to him:

Everything serves to draw attention to Zoilo. Not only does his unexpected silence alter the course of stage events, even his limited physical movements are used as attention-focusing devices. Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly, he uses a menacing prop in an odd way. The silent Zoilo takes out his knife and proceeds to scratch the ground with it. The mere physical presence of man and object serves a semiological function more potent and direct than any verbal sign (de Costa 1974: 29).

But there is another reason for this threatening silence and lack of physical movement as they turn into a forcefully expressed diatribe against the women of his family, accompanied by a free wielding of his whip, "ño rebenque"³. Zoilo's angry outburst is caused by the women's mistreatment of his favourite daughter, Robustiana, and by his discovery of their imminent flight to the house of don Luis, Prudencia's future lover.

Unlike the heads of the families in the other plays, don Zoilo does not bow down to his tormentors and when Luis and Gutiérrez come to visit (visit is the wrong word as the land already belongs to Luis), don Zoilo stands on his dignity and even issues threats:

Usted sabe que esta casa y este campo fueron míos, que los heredé de mi padre, y que habían sido de mis aguelos... que todas las vaquitas y ovejitas existentes en el campo, el pan de mis hijos, las crié y a fuerza de trabajo y sudores..... Un día ... déjeme hablar. Un día se les antojó a ustedes que el campo no era mío, sino de ustedes, metieron ese pleito de revindicación, yo me defendí, las cosas se enredaron ... amanecí sin campo, ni vacas, ni ovejas, ni techo para amparar a los míos. (Sánchez 1952: 198-9)

He is aware that he did not fight the right way to keep his land and that he used words rather than deeds in the way that his forefathers, the true gauchos, would have done.

¿Sabe lo que debí hacer? ¡Buscar a su padre, a los jueces, a los letrados, juntarlos a todos ustedes, ladrones, y coserles las tripas a puñaladas, pa escarmiento de bandoleros y saltiadores! (Sánchez 1952: 199)

Don Luis shows an inclination to compromise. He can afford to. But in his grief the old man is strong and imposing and hard to pacify. Here is where the audience would realise that he is indeed a tragic hero and that he has made mistakes that will cost him dearly. For example, he has lost the loyalty of the women in his family because he has never treated them with the respect that is due to one's family. We have seen him being harsh and violent towards them, never loving or affectionate. So, in consequence, they show no love or respect for him and are not willing to see how unfortunate he is. They turn against him as they cannot appreciate the magnitude of

his sacrifice. They believe that don Luis will marry Prudencia and give them the home that Zoilo was unable to provide. The audience and Zoilo know otherwise.

Here we have the reverse of *La pobre gente* where the father is pushing his daughter to ruin. Prudencia is unable to see the danger she is in, and her mother and aunt, as well as the sinister matchmaker Martiniana, urge her on for their own selfish reasons. Only her father knows the dishonour that awaits her.

Don Zoilo loses his will to fight following the death of the only member of his family who truly loved him, Robustiana, who, in spite of her name, dies of tuberculosis. By the end of the play they are living in Aniceto's house and are destitute. Don Zoilo, having allowed the women to go back to their old house under the wing of the wicked Luis and Gutiérrez, chooses to take his own life. Here we are not only seeing the destruction of an individual victim, but the end of the gaucho class. This can be appreciated if one traces the disappearance of the gaucho after the fencing in of the pampas and his domestication as he emerges as a small landowner towards the end of the nineteenth century. With the subsequent loss of his lands to ruthless and corrupt speculators like don Luis, every hint of the true man of the land is gone.

Before they leave, don Zoilo tries to make his peace with his family and probably with his own conscience as well, by accepting culpability: "Ustedes son las que deben perdonarme. La culpa es mía. No he sabido tratarlas como se merecían" (Sánchez 1952: 224-5).

Yet, this speech is not convincing and there is a hint that even don Zoilo does not believe it. Sánchez subtly lets us know that this is not the real Zoilo speaking as, immediately after this speech, he rejects the affection of his wife and pushes his family to their destruction. Furthermore, the act of suicide is not the way out for a man of the land, a descendant of the gauchos. A gaucho would always do his best to survive every situation and would rather die fighting than any other way, and certainly never by his own hand. Don Zoilo has become much more than himself, he has become a symbol of the disappearance of the gaucho.

The name of the play, *Barranca abajo* clearly indicates how the action of the play will develop, and tells us that the loss of everything is inevitable. But, we must remember that, in the end, don Zoilo had a choice. He could even now have taken the knife and died fighting; fighting for his land and family; or he could have given in and become an employee for don Luis. But he made his choice, just as the victims did in the other two plays.

The choice that Zoilo makes effectively destroys his family, thus becoming a gruesome reminder of the fate of the Argentinian and Uruguayan countryside. The other two plays showed the victim displaying solidarity with the family unit. Quixotic perhaps, but in solidarity with something greater than themselves. In this context we could look at the titles of the plays. The first two, slightly ironic, *La pobre gente* and *En familia*, present us with people who are overwhelmed by their individual tragedy, a tragedy which, even if it were widespread, would not destroy the fabric of society as in the devastating *Barranca abajo*. The fate of the other victim, Prudencia, who made her choice against her father's will, is left in the balance.

I have tried to show that in Sánchez's plays the role of the victim is a complex one. There are those whose fate is preventable but who, to suit themselves, portray their life as one of victimisation. These in turn victimise their dependants. The true victim, however, is the one who bears the responsibility for the fate of the family and who is put unwillingly in that position. In the case of the rural play, there was much

more at stake than just the family unit, and the victim, in spite of his pluck and defiance, is playing with the downfall of a whole class and the end of an era. Don Zoilo acted in the bravest way open to him.

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NOTES

¹ The definition of a victim is open to a range of interpretations. Dictionaries generally concur in giving the first definition as a "[l]iving creature sacrificed to a deity or in performing of religious rite" ([The Concise Oxford Dictionary](#), 1976: 1296). In a figurative sense the definition includes those who expose themselves to injury or risk in a fortuitous manner and those who are injured for the benefit of another and by another's actions (see, for example, the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy). The victims presented in the plays studied here belong to the third

category. Their injury or downfall will benefit another and they are aware of the situation.

² Florencio Sánchez (1875–1910), was the first major playwright in Uruguay to treat themes relevant to his times and region. Before the staging of his groundbreaking *M'hijo el doctor* on 13 August 1903, theatre life in Argentina and Uruguay had been active, but the most popular representations tended to be foreign plays put on by visiting companies, often in French, Italian or English. Local productions were marginal and dedicated to humble audiences. The usual fare consisted of either representations of the gaucho as folk hero, circus performances in mime or amateur groups. Ruth Richardson points out that some commentators have suggested that the staging of the gaucho play *Juan Moreira* in 1884 indicates the beginning of National Theatre (Richardson 1975: 41). However, *Juan Moreira* represents the traditional gaucho and lacks the realism and social comment that Sánchez brought to the Rioplatense stage. Sánchez took the gaucho out of folklore by presenting him as a complex human being. For more information on the importance of Sánchez in Latin American Theatre see: Brasselli at:

http://www.chasque.net:8081/relacion/0011/f_sanchez.htm

³ The presence of 'ño rebenque' on stage this early in the play could also have another semiological purpose in that don Zoilo sees himself as the victim both of his 'women' and of the men who are taking his land, yet, the aggressive knife in his hand tells a different story indicating to the audience that Zoilo also has the role of victimiser. This substitution of signs has been clearly expressed by Anne Ubersfeld: 'Advirtamos que el *apilamiento vertical* de los signos simultáneos en la representación permite un juego particularmente flexible sobre los ejes paradigmáticos y sintagmáticos; de ahí la posibilidad, en el teatro, de decir varias cosas a un tiempo.' (Ubersfeld, 1993:24)