



A year later, my grandfather died. He hocked up his last brown glob and departed for the other world. In the end, he couldn't even run a simple errand. I would take him a pack of Toscanos every once in a while. He'd cut the cigars in two or three pieces, with scissors, and chew them. He'd sit on the stoop and spit onto the sidewalk. Once he accidentally spit on the pants of a guy passing the house and I had to come out and defend him. Another time some city workers came out to tell us that we needed to keep the sidewalk more hygienic. So he moved to the kitchen door, which led to the back courtyard, and eventually the floor was covered with dark stains that were impossible to erase. He died in the afternoon, sitting in his chair, looking at the fig tree at the back. If they come for you tonight, saying there's someone very sick, don't open the door, he said. And then he died. When the funeral people came, around nine o'clock that night, they asked for a five thousand peso down payment. I didn't have it, and told them to wait till two in the morning. I actually didn't have a penny. I went to a casino and waited for someone to throw me a chip. No one did. So I leaned close to a guy who was winning thousands. I asked him to put me in for a thousand on his bet. That meant that on his bet of ten thousand, I was in for a thousand. If I lost, I had to pay him the thousand. If he won, he'd give me a thousand. Supposedly I had a thousand somewhere, in case the banker won. It was an impulsive move, because guys who are winning aren't usually in the mood for jokes. It was an impulsive move, and it paid off. After that it was as easy as riding a sled. Ten minutes later I had the money for the funeral service. I wouldn't have been at all interested in having my dead grandfather sitting at the kitchen door for months and months.

After that I was alone in the house. There was no rent to pay, because I owned the house, and the utilities and taxes were negligible. Once in a while I ate. Except for reading and playing, I didn't do anything. Eventually I started writing my essays.

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It got harder with each of the six essays, because I came up with them after different readings. Each one was inspired by the principal themes or the central characters of the texts I was reading. I gave myself completely to the reading, trying to find hidden connections in the things I read. The first one was the best, I think, because it came to me unexpectedly one afternoon and I wrote it in one sitting.

And the title, *Batman and Robin: Confusion of Feelings*, despite being taken in part from a Stefan Zweig novel, sums up, I think, the crux of the argument.

Professor Nietzsche and Clark Kent was the second one, and I think it is resented for making an overly simplistic analogy between two homonymous and famous characters of the modern imagination. But if it has any value, I think it has value in the observation I think is the most intelligent in the text: that a single fundamental ideology determined the construction of both myths.

I wrote *The magic realism of Lee Falk* because I was convinced that in Falk's world I had found the aesthetic basis for the modern Latin American novel. The other three essays can hardly be called that. They're brief notes, two-page commentaries that set up a theme almost without commentary. The first, *Flash Gordon and H. G. Wells*, is the best, I think. The other two aren't convincing. *Tarzan of the Apes: A theory of the noble savage*, is more a response to Jean Jacques than Rice Burroughs, because in my opinion the best ideas on the issue are already in Rousseau, and *The Ideological Evolution of Mickey Mouse*, I don't even really know why I wrote it. Notwithstanding Mickey's psychological density, I consider it a minor work, and the critic could only be interested in it as a point of view: the systematic expression of the liberal North American worldview. But I'll leave that to liberals to celebrate, if they want.

A year after my grandfather died, I started feeling lonely in the house, so I put an ad in the paper for a woman to clean and run errands. I hired a tiny little fourteen year-old, who came with her mother. They were from the coast, and I liked that, because I had spent my whole youth there. The mother was missing all her teeth, and she was so fat that she had to come in sideways. I sat her down on the sofa and the girl stayed next to her and kept her mouth shut, then I explained that I lived alone and I needed someone who would live in the house and pay monthly rent. The mother said that was exactly what she wanted; she said that the girl's things were at the bus stop and if we agreed on a wage she'd go get them herself. Eventually we decided on a number, with the condition that I write a letter to the village every two months telling her how the girl was doing. The girl went along to the station and came back an hour later. She had a package wrapped in pages from the newspaper. She was very thin and looked clean. She had started to develop and she stared at me in a way that I had to look away. ■