

Gazing upon a fictional ghost town: Juan Rulfo's Comala and the convergence of dark tourism and literary tourism.

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ABSTRACT

Overlooking the town of San Gabriel in Mexico stands a monument which attracts fans of Juan Rulfo's novel *Pedro Paramo*. San Gabriel inspired the creation of the fictional Comala, a deserted town haunted by past residents. The main objective of the paper was to explore, from the conceptual perspective of *lieux de imagination* (Reijnders, 2011) whether some fans of the novel imagine that San Gabriel is Comala. Furthermore, considering the dark characteristics of Comala, the possibility that specific visitors undergo thanatopsis was also examined. A qualitative approach to the research was deemed the appropriate methodology to answer the research questions and accomplish the overall aim, hence twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted over the course of two days at the monument. The findings demonstrated that all of the participants were attracted to San Gabriel (and the monument) because it was the childhood home of Rulfo and the inspiration for Comala, while the vast majority imagined that San Gabriel transformed into Comala. Meanwhile, a smaller but significant proportion of visitors underwent a thanatological experience. It was suggested that this experience was an example of Debordian dark tourism, hence signifying that the monument is a place in which literary tourism and dark tourism occasionally converge.

Nights around here are filled with ghosts. You should see all the spirits walking through the streets. As soon as it is dark they begin to come out (Rulfo, 2014, p. 67).

1. INTRODUCTION

On a hilltop overlooking the town of San Gabriel in Jalisco, Mexico, one can find the *Mirador Vine a Comala* (which translates as the observation deck/ vantage point 'I came to Comala'). It acts as a monument to Juan Rulfo's novel *Pedro Paramo*, which was published in 1955.



Figure 1: The *Mirador Vine a Comala* at San Gabriel.
Source: Noé Meza (2022).

As can be seen in figure 1, the monument consists of three brass statues depicting two men and a mule. The men appear to be in conversation and one of them is pointing towards the town scattered in the plain below. This is Abundio, a mule driver and the other statue is a man named Juan Preciado. It depicts the second scene from the novel in which Preciado is approaching the town of Comala in search of his father (Pedro Paramo), a powerful *cacique* who abandoned Preciado's mother before he was born. At this moment, just before he descends the hill to enter the town, he is unaware that the place where his mother grew up has irrevocably changed. In fact, it is now a ghost town populated by the lost souls of past inhabitants.

The monument forms part of *La Ruta Cultural Juan Rulfo*, a government-led literary tourism initiative, instigated in 2016, which aims to capitalise on the concept of imaginative heritage (see Reijnders, 2011) and develop tourism at several locations connected to Rulfo's life and work (Martinez Ibarra et al., 2021). San Gabriel, nestled below the hillside, was the childhood home of Rulfo and, according to various sources, it came to serve as the inspiration for the eerie setting of Comala (Perez, 2017; Villalvazo Blas, 1986). With this in mind, the question arises as to whether some visitors to the monument, specifically those literary tourists who have travelled to San Gabriel because they are fans of the author and his work, actually *imagine* that they are gazing upon the fictional Comala, rather than San Gabriel. In other words, could it be possible that certain visitors- those aware of the novel's intricate themes- mentally visualise the barren, haunted Comala when they look upon the otherwise ordinary-looking San Gabriel?

This would conform with the view of Reijnders (2011), who suggests that fans of an artist, novel or a movie *appropriate* the imaginary places constructed by the artist(s) and go in search of a physical reference; therefore, using *Pedro Paramo* as an example, fans of the novel would appropriate the fictional Comala and search for a physical reference, namely San Gabriel. On arrival, the monument acts as a facilitator, becoming a '*lieux d' imagination*' (place of imagination).

Furthermore, while the monument can be described as a literary tourism attraction, consideration must be given as to whether it could also fall under the umbrella of dark tourism, given Comala's dark associations. It is plausible that a percentage of the visitors that look upon San Gabriel and imagine Comala *also* undergo a thanatological experience (a reflective process during which the individual contemplates mortality), which Stone and Sharpley (2008) have linked with dark tourism sites. In this case, in the minds of visitors, San Gabriel transforms into an imaginary Comala, a town characterized by death, and this provokes the observer to pause for a while and ponder matters relating to mortality. From this perspective, the monument could be construed as a convergence of literary and dark tourism, with the town of San Gabriel becoming, for some, a literary- inspired dark tourism landscape.

While a connection between literary tourism and dark tourism has been mentioned in the literature (this will be discussed in more detail below) specific research on a merging of literary tourism and dark tourism stimulated by the imagination is sparse. This paper will help to fill this gap, adding to the theoretical understanding of this topic and encouraging new avenues of exploration.

1.1 Research questions

The questions guiding this research are:

- i. What specifically attracts literary tourists to the monument?
- ii. Do certain visitors use their imagination to *transform* San Gabriel into Comala?
- iii. During this process, do a number of visitors undergo a thanatological experience?
- iv. If thanatology is found to be occurring, could the experience be classified as a convergence of literary tourism and dark tourism?

1.2 Aim

This research seeks to empirically explore the proposition that there exists a link between the physical San Gabriel and the imaginary Comala in the perception of various literary tourists visiting the monument, which may ultimately lead to a thanatological experience for certain individuals. It will also consider whether this could be classified as a convergence of literary tourism and dark tourism, even though both the monument and San Gabriel do not contain any of the characteristics that are associated with dark tourism.

1.2.1 *Specific objectives*

- a) Provide a brief overview of the novel *Pedro Paramo*.
- b) Explore the connection between literary tourism and the imagination and the possible convergence with dark tourism.
- c) Apply Reijnder's (2011) model in order to establish a conceptual framework that can explain the process in which fans establish San Gabriel as a physical reference point for Comala and adopt the monument as a *lieux d'imagination* to facilitate an imaginary representation of Comala.
- d) Empirically establish whether visitors imagine that they are gazing upon Comala.
- e) Empirically establish whether certain visitors undergo a thanatological experience.
- f) Contemplate whether instances of thanatopsis can be labelled dark tourism.

1.3 Overview of Pedro Paramo

1.3.1 *Plot summary*

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a *detailed* summary of the convoluted, fragmented plot attached to *Pedro Paramo*. Here a brief account will be given to provide context for the reader unfamiliar to the novel. *Pedro Paramo* is a short novel that consists of a complex plot structure of interweaving passages that constantly changes character and even time periods. It is set in the town of Comala in the years following the Mexican Revolution and tells the tragic tale of several inhabitants, although it mostly concentrates on Juan Preciado and Pedro Paramo. Preciado's dying mother has asked him to visit Comala so as to confront Paramo, the father whom he has never met, and "make him pay [...] for all those years he put us out of his mind." (Rulfo, 2014, p. 1). On approaching the town, he becomes aware that the "beautiful green plain, tinged with the yellow of ripe corn" (Rulfo, 2014, p. 2) as described by his mother has now become a "sorry looking place" (Rulfo, 2014, p. 2) and his unease grows when Abundio, a muleteer who is guiding him into the valley, informs him that Pedro Paramo is also *his* father and that he actually died a number of years ago (the scene in figure 1).

The strangeness intensifies and after meeting several characters, "it becomes apparent that Juan is communicating with the spirits of dead people whose bodies are interred while their souls are condemned to roam the earth" (Sommers, 1968, p. 85). Comala is, in fact, a deserted ghost town, a place so utterly stifling and unbearable that Preciado is overcome by shock and dies. The reader becomes aware that he is now recounting his tale from a coffin he shares with a woman named Dorotea. At this moment "we are struck with the petrifying knowledge that they will lie there forever in that morbid embrace, alongside the corpses of others..." (Dorfman, 2018). It is here, in the coffin, that he listens to the whispers and murmurs of the dead souls and hears the story of Pedro Paramo and those whose lives he cruelly affected.

Paramo was a *cacique*, a tyrannical landowner who exploited the people of Comala to further his wealth and for his own sexual gratification. In spite of his power, he spends his final years broken when the only woman that he loved, Susana San Juan, becomes demented, rejects him and dies. In his depression, he allows Comala to fall into ruin and eventually he

is killed by Abundio the muleteer (his own son), when he refuses Abundio's plea for help with his wife's funeral expenses.

In summary, it is useful to imagine Comala as representing a grim purgatory, inhabited by the dead souls of those that once lived there, victims of a torn, patriarchal society in which injustice and hopelessness pervade. They are unable to receive absolution and rest in peace and thus live in eternal torment, reflecting, as will be discussed below, the emotional state of Comala's creator- Juan Rulfo.

2. LITERARY TOURISM AND THE IMAGINATION

A growing body of research explores the production and consumption of literary tourism (see Agarwal & Shaw, 2018; Cevik, 2020). It exists when people are drawn to a place that an author wrote about or is associated with (Busby & Klug, 2001). For example, literary 'pilgrims' search for a physical reference that connects them with a place that resides in their imagination (Robertson & Radford, 2009). Butler (1986) proposes four forms of literary tourism:

- (i) Homage to specific *locations*- the background from which the work originated.
- (ii) Places of significance- literary places that form the *setting* of novels.
- (iii) Areas that appealed to literary figures.
- (iv) Literature so popular that the area becomes a tourist destination.

San Gabriel is the *location* in which Rulfo spent his childhood and which ultimately influenced him to such an extent that it formed the geographical *setting* of *Pedro Paramo*. Over the years, fans have visited to pay homage, particularly during the annual Rulfo festival which has been celebrated in San Gabriel since 1987, and recently the area has been developed into an iconic literary tourism destination aided by the construction of the monument overlooking San Gabriel and various other Rulfo-related attractions. Butler's (1986) list has since been extended to include travel writing, nostalgia, and film-induced literary tourism (Busby & Shetliffe, 2013).

Brown (2016, p. 18) describes the literary tourist as a "dedicated scholar" with the "cultural capital to enjoy literary places". Moreover, Pocock (1992, p. 40) comments that such tourists "bring with them eyes already prepared to see", highlighting the role that the imagination plays in the blurring between the real world and that associated with the setting of the novel.

2.1 Dark tourism and the imagination

Just as the literary tourist is able to construct an imaginary landscape, the same is possible with the dark tourist. While those anticipating a trip to a dark tourism location sometimes imagine "what places of violence might smell or feel like" (Robb, 2009, p. 53), dark tourists can also utilise their imagination to enhance their experience *in situ*. For Robinson (2015; 206), visitors become "actors in their own imagined worlds" an experience which can be facilitated by the use of actors, costumes and cameras. This is linked to the concept of *lieux*

d'imagination mentioned in the introduction, which are places that “for certain groups in society, serve as physical points of reference to an imagined world. By visiting these locations and focusing on them, tourists are able to construct and subsequently cross a symbolic boundary between an ‘imagined’ and a ‘real’ world” (Reijnders (2010, p. 48). An example of this, although not related to dark tourism, is Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ in King's Cross Station, London which Milazzo and Santos (2022) propose is an everyday space that is transformed into a *lieux d'imagination* by the influx of Harry Potter fans that visit the location on a daily basis.

3. DARK TOURISM AND A CONVERGENCE WITH LITERARY TOURISM

Since Lennon and Foley (1996) coined the term ‘dark tourism’, there has been an abundance of research activity and mainstream interest in the act of visiting places where death and tragedy has occurred, or places with a connection to the macabre. Motivations to visit dark tourism sites range from a somewhat impish pleasure in experiencing the misfortune of others to a desire to gain thanatological security (Stone & Sharpley, 2008), described by Seaton (2018, p. 11) as “a surrogate form of memento mori ritual.” In spite of the various motivations to be found in the literature, this paper will follow Stone (2011, p. 27) who states that “the philosophical core of dark tourism is the concept of mortality”, thus focusing upon the concept of thanatology as the decisive factor when seeking to determine the existence of dark tourism.

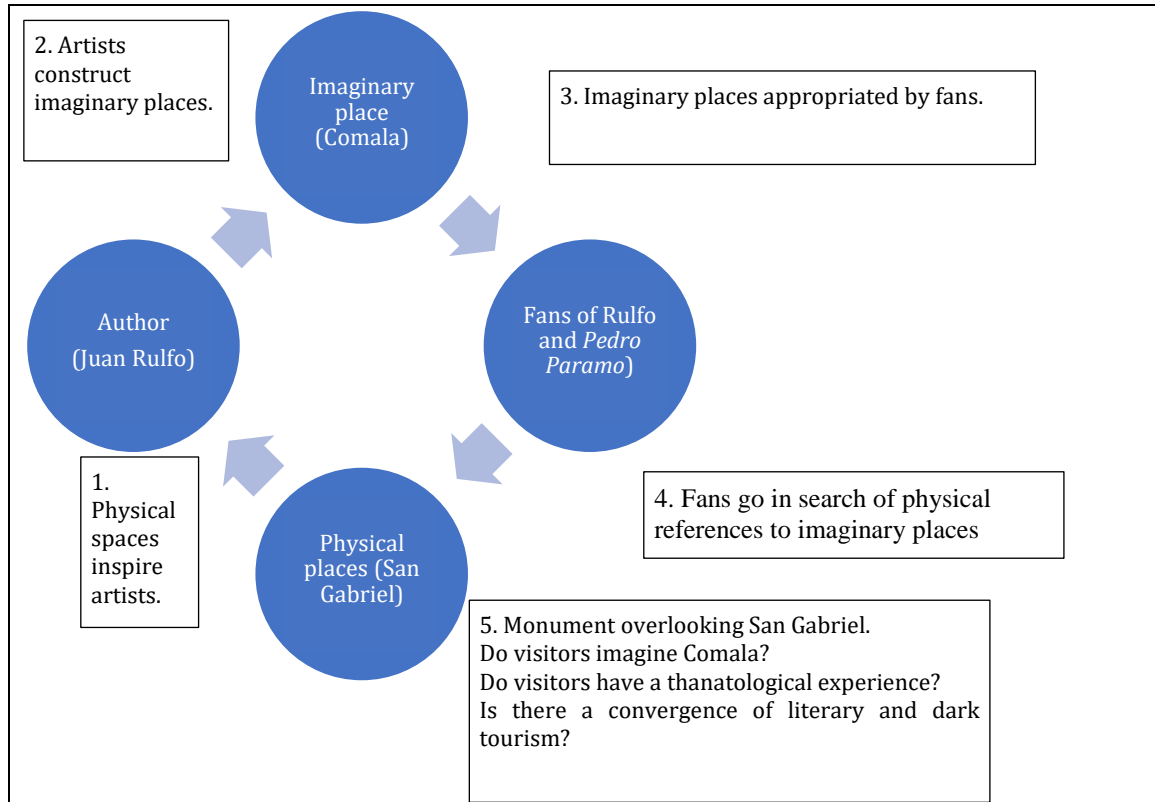
Various scholars have commented upon the convergence of literary tourism and dark tourism (Busby & Devereux, 2015; Stone, 2006; Walter, 2009). Stone (2006) suggests that fictional horror *can* provide a basis for dark tourism experiences, Walter (2009) insists that there are links between dark literature and travel, while Busby & Devereux (2015) use the Anne Frank house tourism attraction in Amsterdam to demonstrate how literature can serve to motivate dark tourism. An example related to *fictitious* horror, as opposed to the Anne Frank example which refers to an autobiographical literary work, is Dracula tourism in Romania (see Reijnders, 2011). In this case, fans of Stoker's novel visit Bran Castle in Transylvania and *imagine* that it is the Count's former abode. The experience relies completely on the imagination as Bran Castle becomes a *lieux d'imagination*, a gateway “to a common imaginary world” (Reijnders, 2011, p. 54) shared by fans of Dracula and the vampire genre.

4. REIJNDER'S FRAMEWORK

To illustrate the process, Reijnders (2011) proposes a two-way circular movement. To begin with, a real physical place inspires an artist to use his or her creative imagination to construct an imaginary place, which is then appropriated by fans who design for themselves an individual image of the story being told and the space in which it occurs. Some fans then decide to search for a physical reference to this imaginary world that accommodates with their imagination. Consequently, in the Dracula example, Bram Stoker was inspired by Transylvania- “a mysterious and undeveloped territory situated on the Eastern periphery of Europe: a land of superstitions and mysteries” (Lupu et al., 2017, p. 761) and thus created

the imaginary 'Dracula's Castle' in Transylvania. Many years later, the image of the Count's castle has been appropriated by fans who decide to use Bran Castle (the castle in Transylvania most similar to Stoker's description of Dracula's castle) to act as a physical reference to the castle that is depicted in the novel. The following section will discuss how the model could be applied to San Gabriel (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Reindjer's (2011) 'media tourism as part of a circular process' framework adapted to San Gabriel/ Comala.



4.1 Physical places

4.1.2 San Gabriel

Rulfo's memories of San Gabriel were essential to the creation of Comala. According to Reijnders (2011), artists are inspired by their knowledge of a particular place, while Mundell (2018, p. 3) claims that some use retrospective techniques, channelling "emotionally charged memories...to inject colour, verve, and verisimilitude into a fictional world". Rulfo was certainly knowledgeable of San Gabriel, having grown up in the town; indeed, various character names and place names from the novel correlate with the history and reality of San Gabriel. For example, Abundio, the mule driver, is apparently based on a man named Abundio Martinez who once lived in San Gabriel; meanwhile, a character named Damina Cisneros shares her name with a lady who once lived in the region. Interestingly, it appears likely that Pedro Paramo, the character, is based on a *cacique* named Pedro Samoro, who lived in the south of Jalisco during the post-revolution period (D. Barragan, personal

communication, November 29, 2020). Rulfo can also be said to have been left with 'emotionally charged memories' following a childhood in which he was "exposed to the bloody horrors of the Cristero Wars" (Boddy, 2016, p.1) and suffered the loss of several close family members, including his father. Certainly, the dark clouds of adversity which enveloped Rulfo as a boy in San Gabriel were later echoed in his writing, in particular the gloomy, oppressive environment that surrounds Comala. Meanwhile, the seed of Comala was further implanted when Rulfo re-visited San Gabriel years later as an adult. In his own words: "The people had left. But someone had thought of planting casuarinas in the town's streets. I was there one night: it is a town where the wind blows a lot, as it is at the foot of the Sierra Madre mountains. At night, the casuarinas howl. Then I understood that loneliness" (Aguirre Ordoñez, 2003, p. 15). The depressing childhood recollections were now coupled with the town's eerie sense of isolation, further compelling Rulfo to write about the town in an effort to exorcise his demons.

4.2 Author

4.2.1 Juan Rulfo

According to Brodman (2011, p. 50), Rulfo is "the greatest single exponent of the cult of death in Mexican literature, a fact that is hardly surprising if we consider the details of his personal history". Indeed, it does appear that the death of parents made Rulfo aware of the fragility of life and from a young age he found solace in books (Roffe, 2012). Nonetheless, his fatalistic attitude was difficult to extinguish, and this was reflected in an unusual attitude towards death. He was "connected with the afterlife, with a world that not everyone has access to. It's not that he spoke with the dead...but he had a particular perception of reality...even macabre stories he recounted without emphasis, thus making them take on a greater tragic dimension. Obsessed with death, he invoked it constantly, but not in rational terms: death was, rather, a feeling that inhabited him" (Roffe, 2012, Chapter 8, para 17). It was this preoccupation with death that led to the construction of the imaginary Comala.

4.3 Imaginary place

4.3.1 Comala

Roffe (2012) insists that Rulfo yearned for tranquillity, with the creation of Comala providing a means for introspection and release. Rulfo describes Comala as a purgatory, the hereafter state in which the deceased cannot achieve eternal rest (Alvarez, 1977). He even takes care to emphasize that the town is not actually in hell, but rather at the *boca del infierno* (mouth of hell). Meanwhile, his physical descriptions of Comala evoke an ominous, eerie landscape, befitting of a 'ghost town'. For example, on arriving Preciado notes the "airless heat" (Rulfo, 2014, p. 4) of the "hushed town" (Rulfo, 2014, p. 6) which was "nothing but empty houses, their empty doorways overgrown with weeds". (Rulfo, 2014, p. 6). The haunting ambience of Comala is exemplified when Susana's father advises against going to live there: "Some villages have the smell of misfortune. You can know them after one whiff of their stagnant air, stale and thin, like everything old. This is one of those villages, Susana" (Rulfo, 2014, p. 92). Space and time have ceased to exist (Roa Bastos, 1999); it is a village without hope, law, justice, or forgiveness that symbolizes the realities of rural social life in

Mexico during the years following the revolution, when Rulfo was a small child (Enciso & Pérez, 2003). Along with the unsettling description, the story of its inhabitants-unable to find inner peace (Anderson, 2012)- mirrors Rulfo's own struggle with his mental wellbeing. That is, the characters, like Rulfo, have also been impacted by the consequences of social disharmony and this has resulted in a perpetual state of anxiety, a restlessness that is difficult to quell.

4.4 Fans

4.4.1 *Fans of Rulfo and Pedro Paramo search for a physical reference for Comala*

On initial release, *Pedro Paramo* was given limited critical acclaim, yet it went on to receive numerous accolades. Gabriel Garcia Marquez (2014) proclaims in the novel's introduction that he was so impressed the first time he read it that he immediately returned to the first page to read it again and is now so familiar with the work that he can cite whole passages. Meanwhile, Martin (1998, p. 175) proclaims it as being "the most widely admired Mexican novel of the century". It was made into a movie in 1967, directed by Carlos Vela and over the years has become increasingly popular, especially in Latin America.

Since 1987, the local authorities of San Gabriel have organised a festival that takes place in May of each year that is dedicated to Rulfo and his work. The festival, which features readings, music and exhibitions, has grown in scale and stature since the year 2000 and it was during the 21st festival in 2018 that the monument was officially unveiled. It forms part of the government instigated Rulfo Magical Realism cultural tourism route which incorporates several reference points in the states of Colima and Jalisco, including an underground museum and house of culture. The monument has proven to be popular with approximately 30 to 40 visitors each day, 80% of visitors being fans of Rulfo, and not merely casual tourists (D. Barragan, personal communication, November 29, 2020).

4.5 Fans imagine Comala/ undergo a thanatological experience?

The concept of *lieux d' imagination* has been introduced to explain how certain locations, in this case the monument overlooking San Gabriel, can facilitate the imagination process. Meanwhile, the plausibility of a thanatological experience occurring- facilitated by this altered state of consciousness- is determined by the visitor's perception. The possibility exists that 'literary pilgrims' (Herbert, 2001), knowledgeable about Rulfo's work and having travelled with the aim of enriching their understanding, stand at the monument and gaze upon San Gabriel, thus being able "to see through the author's eyes the same landscape about which he wrote" and facilitating the "conjuring and projecting of real or imagined memories upon present experiences and landscapes" (Seaman, 2016, p. 24). It is suggested that an underlying motive for some of these pilgrims is that the experience gives them the opportunity to deliberate, at first hand, the principal theme of the novel, that of *death*, this very act prompting thanatological contemplation. This study seeks to explore this possibility, which, if found to occur, would present a convergence of literary tourism and dark tourism.

5. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was chosen as this provides an ontological and epistemological perspective that is suitable to meet the aims and objectives of the research; that is, an interpretivist approach which facilitates a subjective exploration into the experiences of literary tourists at the monument. As meaning, understanding and insight is sought in relation to the possible link between the concept of *lieux d'imagination* and a subsequent thanatological experience, this approach was necessary as it views the world as being composed of multiple realities which offer "multiple explanations or realities to explain a phenomenon rather than one causal relationship" (Jennings, 2010, p. 40). This was done by conducting twenty semi-structured interviews with literary tourists at the monument on the 10th and 11th of June, 2022.

Each potential participant was asked if he or she was visiting primarily as a result of an interest in Juan Rulfo and *Pedro Paramo*. If the answer was yes, the tourist was then asked if they would be willing to take part in an interview about their motivations for the visit and their experience. The questions were based on three themes: (i) the appropriation of imaginary places (the participant's reason for visiting the monument); (ii) *lieux d'imagination* (whether the experience included the imaginary transformation from San Gabriel to Comala); (iii) thanatology (if this experience triggered thanatopsis) and all of the interviews were conducted in Spanish. The data were transcribed and translated into English using the cross-language interviewing technique proposed by Lopez et al., (2008, p. 1729) which involves a process of translating and back-translating in order to avoid inconsistencies. This process was aided by the second researcher being of Mexican origin with Spanish being his native language. The data were analysed using the process of content analysis in order to identify the relevant themes and concepts.

6. RESULTS

6.1 The appropriation of imaginary places

As discussed previously, Reijnders (2011) believes that fans of literary work 'appropriate' places that are linked to the author, the novel, or both. In this case, fans of Rulfo or *Pedro Paramo* would thus be attracted to San Gabriel as the childhood home of Rulfo and the inspiration for Comala. To confirm this, the participants were asked why they decided to visit San Gabriel and the monument. All of the participants said that one of the reasons for the visit was because they wanted to see where Rulfo had lived.

"Juan Rulfo was born near here and lived here when he was a child. I have been here before and it makes me feel a closer bond to Juan." (Participant 11, personal communication, San Gabriel, 11 June, 2022).

Furthermore, all of the participants stated that they were visiting San Gabriel because they believe it was the place that inspired Rulfo to create Comala.

"It was here that inspired Rulfo when he was writing about the town of Comala in Pedro Paramo. I had to come and see this place because it is my favourite book of all time." (Participant 6, personal communication, San Gabriel, 10 June, 2022).

"I suppose I am a bit obsessed with Comala and I wanted to see the town which Juan Rulfo had in mind when he was writing about it." (Participant 10, personal communication, San Gabriel, 10 June, 2022).

Hence, it appears that Reijnder's (2011) premise that fans often search for a physical reference to an imaginary place is correct in this case. All of the participants agreed that they were visiting San Gabriel because it was once the once home of Rulfo, but it was the connection with Comala that appeared to be the prominent motivating factor.

6.2 Lieux d'imagination

According to Reijnders (2011), literary tourists adopt a physical point of reference, a *lieux d'imagination*, which enable them to cross the boundary to an imaginary world. In this case, the town of San Gabriel serves as a physical reference point for Comala, while it is suggested that the monument provides a vantage point from which to observe the town below and to facilitate the imaginary transformation from San Gabriel to Comala. In order to ascertain whether this is indeed happening at the monument, the participants were asked if they imagine that they are gazing upon Comala instead of San Gabriel. 16 of the participants answered yes.

"I know it is San Gabriel down there and right now, that is how I see it. Before though, when I first got here and I was excited, I looked down and thought to myself- there's Comala. It's hard to explain- it didn't physically change in my vision or anything magical, but I was imagining Comala." (Participant 9, personal communication, San Gabriel, 10 June, 2022).

"I wanted to come here and somehow experience Comala. I came to San Gabriel years ago before they made this monument but being able to stand here next to Preciado and Abundio, just like in the book, really helps me to drift away and imagine. It's better at dusk as the sun sets, that's a special moment to think." (Participant 15, personal communication, San Gabriel 11 June, 2022).

"I think of the descent of the protagonists, Abundio and Juan Preciado. I think of the ghost town that Rulfo describes and how, despite the years, it still retains that essence. Here I can let my imagination loose and enter Comala."

Therefore, just as Rulfo had created Comala from his imagination, shaped by childhood memory and experiences, many participants, when standing at the monument, were able to recreate their individual perception of Comala, each drawn from the pages of *Pedro Paramo* but nonetheless unique in nature. The four participants that did not 'imagine' Comala were not dismissive of the concept of *lieux d'imagination* but suggested that it did not apply to them.

"I understand what you mean but it does not happen for me. Maybe I lack imagination [laughs] but I just see the town of San Gabriel." (Participant 2, personal communication, San Gabriel, 10 June, 2022).

6.3 Thanatology

When the participants were asked whether they had undergone a thanatological experience, the answers were less conclusive. Six of the twenty participants agreed that when imaging Comala, they had paused to momentarily reflect upon mortality.

"Pedro Paramo is based on the theme of death. I look at this town below us and yes, I imagine it is Comala, which naturally makes me think of death. It is peaceful here and I did think about life and death." (Participant 18, personal communication, San Gabriel, 11 June, 2022).

"Being here for me gives me the chance to stop for a moment and reflect upon human frailty and matters of death. Not in a depressing way, in fact the opposite, it encourages me to live my life to the full." (Participant 7, personal communication, San Gabriel, 10 June, 2022.)

The general consensus among the other participants was that while many agreed with the monument being a *lieux d'imagination* that stimulated them to imagine Comala, it did not consciously provoke thanatological consideration. Nonetheless, it is important to note that a significant number of the participants did agree that they underwent a thanatological experience, thus confirming that thanatology is indeed occurring at the monument.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Reijnder's framework

The findings suggest that the literary tourism taking place at the monument in San Gabriel can be aligned to Reijnders (2011) framework. When creating Comala, Rulfo was inspired by San Gabriel. Later, fans of Rulfo- and in particular his novel *Pedro Paramo*- appropriate Comala and go in search of a physical reference, namely San Gabriel. The monument, constructed in 2017, serves as a *lieux d'imagination*, providing a context for the moment and a view of San Gabriel which triggers the imagination of a significant number of visitors, who imagine that they are looking at Comala, comparable to the tourists who visit Bran Castle and imagine that it becomes Castle Dracula. Whether the monument was constructed with the *lieux d'imagination* in mind, in a deliberate attempt to engage literary tourists in this manner, is open to question, yet the hillside location and the configuration of the statues certainly assists the process.

While the number of visitors that underwent a thanatological experience was just a quarter of those interviewed, these findings demonstrate that at least *some* visitors were experiencing what could be labelled a literary-inspired thanatopsis. With this clarified, it is necessary to consider whether this experience can reasonably be classified as dark tourism, when the monument and San Gabriel do not contain any features that would normally be associated with dark tourism.

7.2 Virtual dark tourism

It is first useful to discuss McDaniels (2018) conceptualization of *virtual* dark tourism, in which she proposes that reading a book, or watching a movie, which focuses upon a *dark journey* constitutes a form of *virtual* dark tourism. Thus, while a huge attraction of dark tourism is to be physically close to sites associated with atrocity, readers of fiction, or people viewing movies, are able to *travel* to imaginary places and times steeped in darkness and horror. *Pedro Paramo* falls into this category and conveys all the elements which McDaniel (2018) includes in her typology of virtual dark tourism:

- i- A created piece of work that replaces physical travel with simulated travel.
- ii- The consumer could be described as a tourist in an unknown environment.
- iii- Represents a place, which could be real or imagined, of death, destruction and suffering.
- iv- Encourages the consumer to contemplate matters related to death and suffering.

In this way, Juan Rulfo acts as a guide to the tombs of Comala, allowing the reader to bear witness to the historical testimonies and memoirs of the dead, in the same way that a dark tourist guide would chaperon a group of individuals through a *real* site of tragedy. In the novel, Rulfo opens the door to death's mysteries and terrors, encouraging the reader to reflect on mortality and what lies beyond one's final breath, just as a dark tourism site at the darker edge of the spectrum might facilitate thanatological thought processes. Similarly, Strielkowski (2013) discusses another form of dark virtual tourism that can be achieved by means of game apps on smartphones and tablets. They are based on the mystery, thriller and horror movie genres and feature a narrative, a map and a virtual tour of particular locations that have become popular due to a successful movie or series.

Nonetheless, Reijnders (2011) framework makes it evident that imaginary travel is not sufficient for those who feel the necessity to make *tangible* the themes that are *intangible* in the fiction that they read; that is, many seek a physical reference which stimulates them to enter a twilight zone between imagination and reality where they can find the answers to the questions provoked by a particular literary work. The monument at San Gabriel offers fans the means to satisfy their intellectual curiosity by providing a physical place where they can develop such thoughts. However, while this fits within the parameters of literary tourism, the monument is not a direct *presentation* of death and according to established scholarship (Ryan & Kohli, 2006) dark tourism needs to provide a *reality* for the imagination to play on.

7.3 Debordian dark tourism

Debordian dark tourism offers a lens from which to contemplate the situation in which certain tourists visit the monument and undergo thanatopsis, while others do not: "...dark tourism exists by way of deeply personalised responses to geographic places...so one visitor to a dark site may be indulging in dark tourism, while the person stood next to them is not, all depending upon each individual's perception of the situation." (Morten et al., 2018, p. 228). Debordian dark tourism "is an intrinsically personal process of meaning-making conducted in regular, non-heterotopic space, where dark associations emerge from a

private system of knowledge, memory, experience, culture and preconceptions... that might not be shared by other tourists inhabiting the same space.” (Morten et al., 2018, p. 250). This concept demonstrates that the perception of darkness is a personal response to a certain location, not necessarily shared by others- consequently, while one visitor to the monument may simply be enjoying the view of San Gabriel (or even imagine that they are gazing upon Comala), the next person could be in the midst of a deeply personal reflective process, akin to a dark tourism experience, even if that person is not aware of the convergence between literary and dark tourism.

Morten et al., (2018, p. 249) further discuss their proposition: “...dark tourism appears to exist between two opposing poles. Firstly, there are those well-defined packaged up sites of dark tourism (e.g., massacre sites, morbid museums or memorials to tragedy) at which it is almost impossible for a visitor not *to be doing* dark tourism. Secondly, there is a kind of free-range dark tourism, where the *darkness* is less explicit and those passing through the space may be so-called dark tourists are not, according to a very personal system of pre-conditioning, knowledge and perceptions.” This helps to erase the doubt that dark tourism could not realistically exist without the experience being located at a bona fide dark tourism site.

In fact, Morten et al., (2018, p. 249) continue to say that Debordian dark tourism is “a practice concerned with making meaning-with finding place in space-and seems to be at its most authentic in locations where the desired tourism experience is not already provided.” The authors point towards the possibility that dark tourism can occur without the need of a commodified site; indeed, it could even be a ‘purer’ experience if the place in which it occurs holds a great deal of meaning for the individual. If this is the case, the fact that the monument overlooking San Gabriel does not contain any of the defining characteristics of dark tourism becomes irrelevant as the awareness, empathy and imagination of the visitor provides the necessary conditions for Debordian dark tourism. As participant fifteen stated: “Here I can let my imagination loose and enter Comala”, hinting at an intrinsically personal encounter with the town and its inhabitants, which, despite its dark nature, is a hugely rewarding moment for those concerned.

8. CONCLUSION

It was suggested that literary tourists visiting the monument at San Gabriel might also be experiencing a form of dark tourism, albeit one shaped by the imagination. In order to explore this in more detail it was necessary to answer three questions. Firstly, do certain visitors, when gazing upon the town of San Gabriel from the vantage point of the monument, imagine that they are looking at Comala? Secondly, does this imaginary experience provoke thanatological experiences for some? Thirdly, if so, can it realistically be classified as a form of dark tourism, despite the location not containing the classical characteristics that are related to dark tourism sites?

A framework provided by Reijnder's (2011), which employs the concept of *lieux d'imagination*, provided an overall contextual perspective to the study, explaining the process of how fans of Rulfo and *Pedro Paramo* come to arrive at the monument and

undergo an experience that is based purely on the imagination. This perspective thus demonstrated how San Gabriel initially served as Rulfo's inspiration for Comala, then later fans of Rulfo and *Pedro Paramo*, searching for a physical reference point for Comala, identified San Gabriel as the most likely location. The research found that the monument serves to enhance the experience and acts as a facilitator for fans to use their imagination to temporarily transform San Gabriel into Comala. While literary tourists were visiting San Gabriel long before the construction of the monument in 2016, it is this new feature of the landscape that directly acts as a *lieux d'imagination* given its location and what it represents. Furthermore, a proportion of visitors subsequently underwent varying degrees of thanatological contemplation. What remained somewhat inconclusive, even when it was established that thanatology was occurring, was whether this could be labelled dark tourism. Virtual dark tourism was mentioned as *Pedro Paramo* fulfills the requisites of McDaniels (2018) typology, yet there remain efficacy concerns (Dawson, 2005).

It is the theoretical reasoning of Debordian dark tourism that tips the balance and justifies the experience of certain visitors to the monument as deserving inclusion under the dark tourism umbrella. These visitors could arguably be engaging in a form of metempsychosis (Seaton, 2002), stepping into the shoes of Preciado and venturing into Comala in the "realization of an earlier imaginary journey" (Reijnders, 2016, p. 673) taken when they initially read *Pedro Paramo*.

Of course, a limitation to this study is that Debordian dark tourism remains largely unexplored in an empirical sense. The concept was initially presented by Morten et al., (2018) and while it serves here as an explanation for the psychological experiences of visitors to the monument, more research needs to be conducted as it is a new paradigm which needs development. It would be interesting to revisit this study using a psychogeographical/ Debordian conceptual framework to consider the visitor experience, or indeed similar places where the concept may be applicable. A further limitation of this study was that the sample of participants was restricted to twenty individuals. A larger sample would have provided a larger, more accurate representation of the case in question yet given the time and resources available to the researchers it was not possible to do so.

It is suggested that further research could be conducted to explore the convergence of literary tourism and dark tourism in places in which a *lieux d'imagination* facilitates an imaginary connection with dark literary works. Meanwhile, this study decided that thanatological experiences would be used as the determining factor for the presence of dark tourism, but this could be broadened to include other experiences not specifically related to thanatology as there exist "multiple dimensions of experiences that tourist express when they encounter a dark tourist site" (Boateng et al., 2018, p. 109). Finally, it is vital that the role of imagination in dark tourism is explored in detail- in the words of Reijnders (2016, p. 687), whose work inspired this study: "...despite the fact that everyone has an imagination and that it is the imagination that seems to distinguish us from other life forms, scientific knowledge about this phenomenon seems to be markedly limited."

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