Discuss the representation of marginality in ANY TWO OR MORE urban texts.

Situated in periods of considerable transformation and upheaval, Roberto Arlt’s El Juguete Rabioso and Carlos Fuentes’s Agua Quemada present the theme of marginality as an extremely important but ambivalent one. This ambivalence stems from the intensely polemical socio-historical situation at the times during which these novels are written. El Juguete Rabioso is set against the chaotic background of Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century. Argentina in the 1920s ranked among the five or six most successful nations in the world and, according to all standard indicators, Argentina’s education level, access to health care and decent housing, and quality of life compared favourably with that of England, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Furthermore, the city’s spectacular economic development attracted immigrants from all over the world, and it seemed that the path to prosperity had finally appeared. The fact, however, that an extensive amount of shantytowns were built on the city’s margins and remained there through to the 1950s, debunks this myth of economic prosperity. Arlt follows the plight of a poverty-stricken and frustrated youth who is shunned from society and is consequently drawn to gangs and a life of petty crime. By contrast, Fuentes explores the theme of marginality in the context of a violently scarred political history that goes back to the bloody Mexican Revolution of 1910. Although the Revolution, after several years of bloodshed, instituted a political regime which brought nearly six decades of relative political and social stability, the turmoil of the Revolutionary period itself profoundly affected Mexican society. Fuentes powerfully demonstrates how the influence of the Revolution can be felt right up to the present day, through characters that live on the margins of reality because they are so caught up in the past.

The theme of marginality is represented through Silvio in El Juguete Rabioso and his ‘lucha por la vida’. Silvio learns throughout the novel that he is unable to succeed in society, primarily due to the fact that he is often judged on what he has, rather than what he can offer or whom he is. Society has reduced him to the status of object and has condemned him to a miserable life of unemployment and Arlt traces his attempts to transcend this marginality. He rebels against the economic limitations of his class firstly through robbery, secondly through employment, and finally through invention and literature. This is evident in the first chapter of the novel, whereby Silvio and his companions carry out a rather comical robbery in a library. Theft allows Silvio and his friends to attain freedom from alienation and to temporarily live en société:

Así vivíamos días de sin par emoción, gozando del dinero de los ladrecitos, aquel dinero que tenía para nosotros un valor especial y hasta parecía hablarnos con expresivo lenguaje (p.105)

The mention of ‘expresivo lenguaje’ is significant in that theft almost expresses an existential desire to assert one’s being. The impossibility of living a comfortable life in modern society drives Silvio towards transgression as a form of transcendence. As he is unable to sustain an identity within a capitalist society, he asserts his existence through immoral acts and the rejection of traditional values. Hence marginality leads to a desire for immortality, which ironically leads to the path of self-destruction, which is perceptible through his suicide attempt.

Silvio also tries to integrate himself into society through various forms of employment, which paradoxically serve to expose the corrupt dealings and arbitrariness of the society that has excluded...
him. For instance, when he works for Don Gaetano, Silvio sees in his boss everything that he does not want to become; “Una sensación de asco empezó a encajar mi vida dentro de aquel antro...” (p.154) Furthermore, his hopes are dashed when he approaches a wealthy businessman who promises to employ him but who humiliates him by shouting at him and throwing him out. This induces contempt in him towards the upper classes:

Tenía la sensación de que mi espíritu se estaba ensuciando, de que la lepra de esagente me agrietaba la piel del espíritu, para excavar ahí sus cavernas oscuras. (p.156)

This disillusionment inspires his final attempt at integration, enrolling at the Escuela Militar. However, he fails again: not because he is incapable of the work, but because he is far too knowledgeable: ‘aquí no necesitamos personas inteligentes, sino brutos para el trabajo’ (p.178). He learns that he is shunned both as a poverty-stricken individual and as an intelligent one. It is perhaps this consciousness that drives Silvio to betray Rengo in the final chapter, despite the fact that Rengo recognises his talents. Crucially, his decision to inform the architect of ‘el plan Rengo’ is necessary to destroy his old self:

Hay momentos en nuestra vida en que tenemos necesidad... de destruir para siempre la vida de un hombre...

Silvio is therefore re-born as an anti-hero: ‘seré hermoso como Judas Iscariote’.

Marginality is also presented as a form of escapism in the sense that Silvio exiles himself from a society that has left him profoundly disillusioned and invents his own system and life outside it. He does this through recourse to literature, dreams, and invention, hence artifice. Throughout the novel Silvio imitates certain modes of literature; for instance, he begins the novel by stating that from a young age he revelled in ‘las deleites de la literatura bandoleresca’. This love for literature is furthermore imitated in his life, which is perceptible in the Escuela Militar whereby he assumes the role of Rocambole with ‘HYPERLINK "https://camtools.cam.ac.uk/portal/tool/ea3ffa56-5164-4221-a767-b1c93963748?pagename=%2fsite%2f399da45e-94e4-48b8-8235-078f6e1c3d39%2fun&action=view&panel=Main&realm=%2fsite%2f399da45e-94e4-48b8-8235-078f6e1c3d39" una? sonrisa canalla’ and an ‘actitud heroica’. Books for him represent a series of alternative lives from the everyday miserable life he endures, but also importantly offer a sense of hope for the future. Silvio also dreams of fame and models himself on various literary and revolutionary figures:

Yo podría ser un inventor como Edison, un general como Napoléon, un poeta como Baudelaire, un demonio como Rocambole (p.171)

Silvio eventually confuses the distinction between literature and reality and his marginalised life becomes almost a fiction in itself.

In Agua Quemada one is able to discern more brutal and violent forms of marginality. In ‘Estos Fueron los Palacios’, marginality at the hands of the Church is manifested powerfully. This is evident in the scene in which Manuela and the dogs are violently expelled from the cathedral, with priests
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grotesquely beating them with crucifixes to the approval of the faithful middle class. This may also be perceptible in ‘El Día de los Madres’, for the mere word ‘madres’ in title can signify ‘misfortune’ and ‘beatings’ in Mexican Spanish. The individuals marginalized in this story seem to be women; both Clotilde and Evangelina are deceased and remain spiritually absent from the house:

...no hay ningún recuerdo, ni siquiera una foto de mi madre. Ella murió cuando yo tenía cinco años, no la recuerdo. (p.57)

It is the absence and alienation of these two women that enables the men to live together and also allows them to express their masculinity. This is also perceptible in the narration of this story, as it is essentially from a male perspective. The darker side to this is that the reader learns that, Agustín, who is faced with inheriting his father’s ‘violencia impune’ and is unable to forgive Evangelina’s ‘irritante innocencia’, strangles his wife to triumph over his father and consequently uses his wealth to assure his impunity;

El parte médico dijo que tu mamá había muerto atragantada con un pedazo de carne...esas cosas se arreglan fáciles. (p.73)

Thus, women are marginalised in order to exercise a grotesque male rivalry and to gain power.

In ‘El Hijo de Andrés Aparicio’, Bernabé gains a sense of power by watching Carreón’s cruel treatment of his wife. Bernabé himself is alienated from society through, firstly, living in a squatter camp on the margins of Mexico City, and secondly, through the death of his father. This absence has a destructive effect on his life and leaves him impotent in terms of language; ‘las palabras le costaron mucho...sobre todo porque ya no recordó la voz de su padre’ (p.119). Bernabé is drawn in from alienation into a fascist group led by the very man that destroyed his family. However, this does not bridge the absence and lack of identity that he feels. He has a surname but no father to substantiate it. The marginality of Bernabé can be traced from a young age, as he leaves school at the age of twelve, and this continues as he grows up and earns a living cleaning windows on the city streets. Here he is poignantly exposed to a vast consumerist society, which leaves him startled:

...ganoso de todo lo que empezó a hablarle, otra vez las cabronas palabras, no hubo manera de escaparse de ellas diciéndole cómprame, tenme, me necesitas. (p.129)

Just as society is indispensable to the survival of Silvio in El Juguete Rabioso, Bernabé is aware that he needs the very society that has caused his alienation. This is the fundamental ambivalence in the representation of marginality in these texts: on the one hand, the characters despise the root cause of their alienation, but paradoxically they need to integrate themselves into this society in order to maintain their existence.

Moreover, Bernabé’s family past has contributed to his marginality, and this can also be applied to other characters in Agua Quemada, who live on the margins of reality because they are so anchored in the past. For instance, in ‘El Día de los Madres’, violence in the past dictates the future and is repeated across generations, and thus marginalises the characters from any sense of rupture. The mere title of ‘Estos Fueron las Palacios’ clearly demonstrates an obsession with the past, and indeed,
the story surrounds a crippled Luisito who remembers the past grandeur of the palace, which has been converted to accommodate twelve families. His desire to recapture the past through memory, books, photographs, and letters occupies his existence. Hence, these characters have alienated themselves from a reality that is all too harsh.

Overall, marginality in these texts is represented through the plight of various characters. In El Juguete Rabioso Silvio lives on the margins of society paradoxically due to both his unemployment and consequently his intelligence. Similarly, in Agua Quemada women seem to be cast out of family memory or are ‘exterminated’ in order to allow a victory in the grotesque male rivalry of Vergara, Agustín and Plutarco. Ironically, the very absence of these men also results in the marginality of Bernabé. This frustrating marginality has a destructive effect on the characters; in Silvio it leads to recourse to literature, then to a tragic self-exile through his suicide attempt, and finally self-invention in the form of an anti-hero. By contrast, in Agua Quemada the effects are far more violent and destructive.