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La Gallina Degollada Summary

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Unveiling the Horror: A Detailed La Gallina Degollada Summary

Horacio Quiroga's "*La Gallina Degollada*" (The Decapitated Chicken) stands as one of the most unsettling and masterfully crafted short stories in Latin American literature. First published in 1909 as part of his seminal collection *Cuentos de amor de locura y de muerte* (Stories of Love, Madness, and Death), this narrative has haunted readers for over a century with its chilling portrayal of familial tragedy, mental degeneration, and the terrifying unpredictability of human violence. For anyone seeking a comprehensive **La Gallina Degollada summary**, this article will delve into every layer of the story, from its harrowing plot to its profound thematic depth, while exploring why Quiroga's tale remains a cornerstone of Gothic and psychological horror.

The story opens a window into the lives of a once-happy couple, Mazzini and Berta, whose world gradually crumbles under the weight of a terrible genetic curse. This **La Gallina Degollada summary**will guide you through the narrative's devastating progression, examining how Quiroga uses stark realism, symbolic imagery, and relentless pacing to create a sense of inescapable doom. Whether you are a student analyzing the text or a reader drawn to dark literature, understanding this story requires a close look at its characters, its structure, and the raw emotions it evokes.

The Author Behind the Nightmare: Horacio Quiroga

Before diving into the plot, it is essential to understand the mind that conceived such a grim tale. Horacio Quiroga (1878–1937) was a Uruguayan playwright, poet, and short story writer, often regarded as the master of the Latin American short story. His life was marked by a series of tragic events that profoundly influenced his writing. His father died in a hunting accident when Quiroga was just an infant. His stepfather later committed suicide. His first wife, Ana María Cires, died by suicide after a period of intense suffering. Quiroga himself would eventually take his own life after being diagnosed with cancer.

This biographical context is crucial for any **La Gallina Degollada summary**because Quiroga's work is saturated with themes of death, madness, illness, and the fragility of the human mind. He was a devoted admirer of Edgar Allan Poe, and the American writer's influence is palpable in Quiroga's fascination with psychological collapse and the macabre. Quiroga believed that the short story should be a powerful, concentrated experience, and he famously advised writers to "cut off the head" of any unnecessary prologue or description—a piece of advice that resonates eerily with the title of this very story. His own life, steeped in tragedy, gave him a unique lens through which to view the darkness that can fester within a family home.

A Comprehensive La Gallina Degollada Summary: The Plot Unfolds

The Promise of a Happy Beginning

The narrative begins with Mazzini and Berta, a young couple deeply in love. Their early life together is idyllic, filled with the joy of a new marriage and the promise of a growing family. However, this happiness is short-lived.

Their first child, a boy, is born seemingly healthy. Yet, when he is eighteen months old, he suffers a violent convulsion—a seizure that leaves him mentally and physically disabled. This tragedy marks the beginning of a relentless pattern. One by one, their next three children are born, and each one experiences the same fate: a severe fever or convulsion at around eighteen months, leaving them with profound intellectual disabilities and a lack of motor control.

Any thorough **La Gallina Degollada summary**must emphasize the crushing weight of this repetition. The parents are trapped in a cycle of hope and despair. With each new pregnancy, they pray for a healthy child, only to watch their hopes shatter as the same illness takes hold. The four boys grow up as a strange, silent group. They are described as drooling, nearly mute, with limbs that do not function properly. They spend their days staring blankly at the walls, sitting on the terrace, or engaging in simple, repetitive movements. They are not entirely unresponsive, but their intelligence is severely limited, and their presence dominates the household with a heavy, suffocating silence.

The All-Consuming Obsession for a Healthy Child

As the years pass, Mazzini and Berta's love for each other curdles into resentment. They begin to blame one another for the children's condition. The doctor suggests that the illness is hereditary, related to Berta's family, which ignites a smoldering anger in Mazzini. Berta, in turn, feels immense guilt and shame. Their home, once a sanctuary of love, becomes a prison of mutual accusation and quiet despair. The couple's primary focus shifts entirely away from the four boys they have. Instead, they become consumed by a single, desperate wish: to have a normal, healthy child.

This obsession is the emotional core of any **La Gallina Degollada summary**. The boys are no longer seen as their children but as living reminders of their failure and tragedy. The parents neglect them emotionally, leaving them in the care of servants while they sink deeper into their shared grief. The house begins to feel like a tomb, and the boys exist in a state of silent exclusion. The couple's conversations are hollow, their life devoid of warmth, and their only remaining connection is the shared pain of their situation and the obsessive hope for a different outcome.

The Arrival of Bertita: A False Dawn

Finally, after years of suffering, the couple has a fifth child—a girl. She is healthy. She develops normally, hitting every milestone without incident. Mazzini and Berta are overwhelmed with relief and joy. They name her Bertita, a diminutive of Berta, and she becomes the center of their universe. They dote on her constantly, showering her with attention and affection that they never gave to their four sons. The girl is vibrant, intelligent, and beautiful, a beacon of light in a house shrouded in gloom.

The four brothers watch this from the periphery. They are curious about their sister, but their understanding is limited. They follow her around the house with slow, heavy steps. They gaze at her with a strange, vacant intensity. The parents, however, are too absorbed in their happiness to notice the growing fascination of their sons. This is a critical point in this **La Gallina Degollada summary**—the seeds of the tragic climax are being planted through neglect and a failure to perceive the latent danger within their own home.

The Horrific Climax: The Decapitated Chicken

One afternoon, the maid is in the kitchen preparing a chicken for the evening meal. She takes a live chicken, places its head on the chopping block, and with a single, sharp blow, decapitates it. The chicken's body convulses violently, flapping its wings and running around the yard in a grotesque dance of death. The four boys, who have come to the kitchen door, watch this with rapt, horrifying attention. They have never seen anything like this. The flapping, the spurting blood, the sudden stillness—it imprints itself on their minds with terrifying clarity.

Suddenly, the maid realizes she is late for an errand and goes out, leaving the dead chicken and the boys unsupervised. At that moment, Berta calls for Bertita to come and get her a glass of water. The little girl, full of

energy, runs through the house. She passes by the kitchen door. The four brothers see her. In their simple, disordered minds, the image of the flapping, decapitated chicken merges with the sight of their moving sister. They look at each other, and a silent understanding passes between them.

What follows is the most devastating part of any **La Gallina Degollada summary**. The four brothers, acting in unison, grab Bertita. They carry her into the kitchen. One of them holds her down on the same chopping block where the chicken was just killed. Another grabs the knife. With a grim, mechanical efficiency, they mimic the action they just witnessed. They decapitate their baby sister. Berta hears a strange sound, a muffled cry, and runs to the kitchen. She finds her daughter lying on the floor, her head severed, as her four sons stand around her, still twitching and flapping their own arms, imitating the death throes of the chicken.

The story ends with Mazzini and Berta arriving at the scene, frozen in utter horror. There is no heroism, no last-minute rescue, and no explanation. Only the horrific, senseless act of violence committed by children who could not comprehend the consequences of their actions.

Key Characters in This La Gallina Degollada Summary

Mazzini and Berta: The Parents

Mazzini and Berta are not villains, but they are deeply flawed. Their tragedy is one of obsessive love and profound neglect. Their inability to accept their children's condition and their fixation on having a "normal" child blinds them to the reality of the danger they have created. They isolate their sons emotionally, treating them as objects of shame rather than as human beings. This **La Gallina Degollada summary**highlights how their moral failure—their decision to love one child above the others—creates the very conditions for the tragedy. They are victims of fate, but they are also architects of their own destruction.

The Four Brothers: Silent Agents of Chaos

The brothers are a fascinating and tragic element of the story. They are not evil in a conventional sense. They are children with severe intellectual disabilities who cannot understand the world around them. The story emphasizes their idiotic laughter, their vacant stares, and their slow, clumsy movements. They act on pure instinct and imitation. The key to understanding their role in this **La Gallina Degollada summary**is recognizing that they are not capable of moral reasoning. They see an action—the decapitation of the chicken—and they repeat it. They are a force of nature, a blind, mechanical response to a stimulus. They represent the horrifying consequences of unchecked genetics and profound neglect.

Bertita: The Innocent Victim

Bertita is the symbol of hope that turns into a symbol of ultimate loss. She is lively, healthy, and adored. Her presence illuminates the darkness of the house, but it also attracts the attention of her brothers. Her fate is sealed not by her own actions but by the accumulated tragedy of her family's history and the momentary, fatal curiosity of her siblings. In this **La Gallina Degollada summary**, she represents the fragility of innocence in a world governed by cruel and senseless forces.

Major Themes and Symbolism

Madness and Heredity

Quiroga was deeply interested in the scientific ideas of his time, particularly theories of heredity and degeneration. The story reflects a deterministic view of the world: the children are doomed from birth by a genetic curse. The parents' attempt to escape this curse only tightens its grip. The madness in the story is not just intellectual disability; it is the emotional and psychological breakdown of the parents themselves. The theme suggests that a form of madness pervades the entire family, manifesting in different ways. Any serious **La Gallina Degollada summary** must address this theme of inescapable fate.

The Horror of the Ordinary

One of Quiroga's greatest achievements is making horror feel mundane. The setting is a simple, middle-class home. The actions are ordinary: cooking a meal, asking for a glass of water, playing in the yard. The horror erupts from within this banality. There is no ghost, no monster, and no supernatural force. The enemy is the family itself, living out a tragedy in the most ordinary of settings. This makes the story

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