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**Macondo: The History of a Fictitious Reality**

Oscar Wilde once said, “Anybody can make history; only a great man can write it.” In this quote, Wilde makes the conclusion that literature and history cannot be separated. In fact, he defines a true work of literature as a story that is so vivid that it makes the reader believe it truly occurred. There are few authors who exemplify this quality in writing better than Colombian author, Gabriél García Marquéz. In his works, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Marquéz further blurs the line between fiction and history by incorporating his own cultural traditions into a world seeped in magic and fantasy. While his stories seem entirely fantastical, they are based in his country and his family’s history. Furthermore, the root of his stories can be traced back to a single event, La Violencia, the ten-year period of civil war in Colombia. Marquéz spent the majority of his childhood living with his grandparents, and, as a result, was surrounded by the aftermath of the war. His grandfather, Colonel Meijia, a liberal veteran, eventually became the inspiration for the stern patriarch figure in both *Love in the Time in Cholera* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Through his grandmother’s stories, Marquéz was exposed to traditional Caribbean tales, especially those involving magic. From his grandparents’ stories, Marquéz also learned that reality can be more absurd than anything born out of imagination, especially in times of war. Filled with a sense of social duty, Marquéz moved to Bogota to begin his formal education, and eventually became a journalist. After being disillusioned by the corrupt state of Colombia and frustrated by his inability to do anything to change it, Marquéz switched back and forth from journalism and short stories, trying to find the right outlet to express the political nature of his country. Yet, after a visit back to his childhood home in Aracataca, Marquéz made an abrupt change to literature. He wrote everyday for eighteen months in a brothel, sold everything he owned, and nearly lost his family in the process. In his visit back to Aracataca, Marquéz came to the realization that nothing held more political or literary value than the fairy tales he had grown up with. These stories might have been fantastical, but they contained the pain and beauty of a thousand years of Latin American history. The final product, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, became an instant success throughout Latin America, contributing to the Latin American Boom a few years later. Marquez’s works resonated with the Latin American public because the fantastical elements allowed readers to confront their political reality while harkening back to a cultural identity that connected them all (Ruch). While often praised for his vivid imagination, Marquéz’s actual strength lies in his ability to infuse a magical storytelling of history with a journalistic tone and level of detail that both reflects the beautiful solitude of Latin American and exposes its diseased political state.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez first became a journalist due to a sense of moral and political responsibility. His father and grandfather had devoted their lives protesting against colonialism, only to end up fighting against their own country. To continue this tradition, Marquéz wanted to use his writing to expose the dishonest Colombian government. Ironically, however, his articles, and even his early short stories, were criticized for being too intellectual and detached. Then, on the day of the Bogotazo, after hearing the news that a political leader, Gaitan, was murdered in the streets, Marquez joined a mob in looting stores and burning buildings (Carvalho). From this moment, Marquez realized exactly how much his writing was disconnected from the reality of his situation. While Marquez’s writing does not have a specific political message that he wants readers to follow, he maintains this sense of political commitment and duty throughout his novels. This is perhaps most evident in his use of setting in *Love in the Time* of Cholera. The country of the story is only referred to as the “City of the Viceroys.” In literature, this setting is poignant because it conjures up an image of a sterile place without an identity- a country that has never bothered to take on a name or an urban area that is losing any sense of culture or history. Yet, when taking into account Marquez’s journalist background, the setting takes on another layer of meaning. The “City of Viceroys” can be yet another allusion to Colombia during the time of La Violencia. “City of Viceroys” implies a country led by representatives of a distant monarch, which was what was occurring during La Violencia. From this conclusion, the plague that attacks the City of Viceroys can also be an allegory for the chaos and disloyalty that ensued when the Conservatives returned to power in Colombia. It is also a reference to the spirit of revolution in all the nations in Latin America, from Brazil to Mexico, and how this spirit truly originated from centuries of oppressed life and class warfare (Hoyos).

While Marquez gained political knowledge and experience through his father and grandfather, it was not until he was an adult that he realized the literary value of the stories his grandmother told him. Going back to his hometown as an adult, he was able to see stories and history in the banana fields and the colored roofs of his house. In this moment, Marquez realized that his childhood experiences were more real and more in tune with the country than any news other article he could write (Ruch). In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Marquéz uses a situation of a priest to show the effect of colonization.

“…But no one paid any attention to him. They would answer him that they had been many years without a priest, arranging the business of their souls directly with God, and that they had lost the evil of original sin. He pleaded so much that he lost his voice. His bones began to fill with words.” (*One Hundred Years of Solitude* 82)

Marquéz uses personification and juxtaposition to not only respond to colonization, but also finally dig deeper into the human responses to colonization- making the comparison more effective and more relatable. By personifying the “bones” that “fill with words,” Marquéz is referring to an internal war that cannot be articulated. Instead, this is the plight of a spiritual man that cannot escape his own mortality. While he now feels more connected to the spiritual world than the world he currently lives in, his bones are, in a way, weighing him down and tethering him to the ground. In addition, the juxtaposition of “business” with “souls” shows how religion is being treated as a business transaction and how unnatural that is, especially in a country like Macondo that was built on religion. The cold, clinical tone that comes from words such as “business” and “directly,” also symbolizes the lack, or perhaps, loss, of human passion. Together, they represent the two responses to colonization. The priest is the part of the country that wants to hold on to their heritage, the liberals, the “freedom fighters.” However, the ubiquitous “they,” make up the mass of people that would rather turn a blind eye to numb the pain. Through the example of the fictional priest, Marquez successfully conveys the attitude of an entire nation during the 1960s.

Even though Gabriel Garcia Marquez is considered a pioneer of the genre of magic realism, this genre technically predates recorded history. This sense of realistic fantasy comes from the fact that the stories that Marquez’s grandmother, who he always affectionately refers to as his “Abuela,” passed down to him were all folk tales that were once a part of Caribbean oral history (Ruch). Many cultures around the world, particularly African and Eskimo people, have magic incorporated in their folk tales because these tales originated from a time where people believed in magic to explain the world around them (Pedoto). During his visit back to the Caribbean, Marquez noted that, “Caribbean reality itself resembles the wildest imagination (Ruch).” Therefore, in order to write about his childhood, he had no choice but to transfer the oral history that surrounded the country into literature, creating the genre of magic realism. However, he makes it a point to note that this style of writing was the only way to accurately portray the subject matter he found most interesting.

In an excerpt of one of Abuela’s stories, she mentions, “the electrician would always leave the house full of yellow butterflies.” Marquez claims that the style of magic realism can be defined by this quote (Bell-Villada 20). First of all, the tone of the sentence leaves no room for argument or denial. The use of the word “always” accomplishes this. This tone shows the reader that the author is so confident of this story that he presents it as fact. The other essential part of the excerpt lies in Abuela’s decision to use the word “yellow.” By adding this one detail, she adds an element of truth and beauty that can make even the most unbelievable stories feel undeniably human.

Marquez continues this practice in the flood scene in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

“It rained for four years, eleven months, and two days. There were periods of drizzle during which everyone put on his full dress and a convalescent look to celebrate the clearing, but the people soon grew accustomed to interpret the pauses as a sign of redoubled rain” (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*229)

The crucial detail in this part of the story is when Marquez specifies “four years, eleven months, and two days.” While the idea of constant rain for that period of time is strange, the exact number gives the narrator ethos and makes the entire situation more believable. The decision to use the number four also puts the flood in a biblical context, alluding back to the Old Testament, in which God flooded the world for forty nights. In addition, the way people respond to the drizzle first as an opportunity for greatness, but then as an unavoidable annoyance is also a very believable reaction as it highlights the basic human flaws of pride and selfishness.

In his later work, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Marquez uses magical realism as a way to alienate non-Spanish speaking readers.

“…She left the sheets to the mercy of the light as she watched Remedios the Beauty waving good-bye in the midst of the flapping sheets that rose up with her, abandoning with her the environment of beetles and dahlias and passing through the air with her as four o’clock in the afternoon came to an end, and they were lost forever with her in the upper atmosphere where not even the highest-flying birds of memory could reach her. The outsiders, of course, thought that Remedios the Beauty had finally succumbed to her irrevocable fate of a queen bee and that her family was trying to save her honor with that tale of levitation (*Love in the Time of Cholera* 30).”

The character of Remedios the Beauty only comes up briefly in the story, but is referenced often. By having her “wave goodbye,” Marquez deliberately makes her a representative of a friendly, innocent, yet perhaps weaker form of magic than the plague that occurs directly preceding this scene. This act of “waving” seems as if Marquez wants Remedios the Beauty to be a universal symbol of peace. However, the incorporation of beetles and dahlias points to a different argument. Beetles and dahlias give Remedios the Beauty an earthly aura. However, beetles and dahlias also have a unique meaning in Colombian culture as they represent a ritual dating back to Incan times- a ritual synonymous with human sacrifice (Aghaei). While Marquez could have used a symbol of sacrifice that is more universally sacrificed, such as the lamb, he chose to use certain culture codes as symbols. By doing this, he is finding a way to connect more deeply to his own heritage and create a link between those who understand the historical meaning behind this reference. On the other hand, the inclusion of these culture codes is exclusionary to the rest of the world. This is because, while Marquez’s works are celebrated in hundreds of nations, Marquez originally wrote these novels with one audience in mind- the Latin American audience. Before Marquez, many Latin American writers of the time, particularly in Cuba, were looking for Western validation for their works of art. (Aghaei) By deliberately making allusions that are lost to the Western reader, Marquez is also invoking a sense of patriotism by making the statement that Colombia no longer needs an outside source telling them what is acceptable and what is not.

Marquez’s focus on creating stories that have a historical and cultural impact specifically on Latin Americans is the reason why plagues are a recurrent theme in his novels. Sicknesses such as smallpox, brought by the Europeans during colonization, spread throughout Central and South America and resulted in entire tribes being wiped out. As a result, they were forced to submit to the Europeans. Marquez also notes that, “political violence in Colombia had the same metaphysics as the plague.” By this quote he is referring to the destructive and contagious quality of the plague, but also it’s ability to wipe out entire generations and history (Hoyos). This is clearly represented by the Insomnia Plague that occurs in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

“….Then she saw Rebecca in the rocker, sucking her finger and with her eyes lighted up in the darkness like those of a cat. Terrified, exhausted by her fate, Visitiación recognized in those eyes the symptoms of the sickness. It was the insomnia plague. Those who wanted to sleep, not from fatigue but because of nostalgia for dreams, tried all kinds of methods of exhausting themselves (*One Hundred Years of Solitude* 298).”

The imagery in this passage accurately reflects the mental state of Colombia, both after La Violencia and in modern times. By having Rebecca “sucking on her finger,” Marquez is making the argument that Colombia is, at its core, still a baby searching for its lost mother- the “mother” meaning the mother country that has been invaded. In addition, the concession rebuttal present in the last sentence, “not from fatigue, but because of nostalgia…” shows that Colombia is no longer physically weak. Instead, its pain is entirely emotional, as they cannot seem to embrace their heritage or leave their past behind, stuck in a limbo. It is ironic that Marquez uses insomnia as a plague, because insomnia is traditionally a very lonely affliction. People with insomnia have trouble with the fact that they spend the night alone while the rest of the world is asleep. Instead, the entire country has insomnia, unable to dream or remember the past (Bell).

Finally, Marquez ends *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with the destruction of Macondo and the line, “Because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on Earth.” Solitude is another theme that Marquez routinely touches upon in his literature. The diction Marquez employs such as “condemned” makes this last sentence a call to action for people in Latin America. While he agrees that their race has been “cursed” with misfortune, he is saying he also wants them to remember their past, break this cycle of destruction, and finally take a moment to sleep and heal.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez believes that a writer can be more powerful than the government, because they have the power to write history. Marquez is an example of this phenomenon. On December 6th, 1928, near the Ciénaga Train Station, innocent fruit farm workers under strike were killed by government troops. Around seven hundred fifty people are estimated to have died. This incident was conveniently left out of the textbooks for over fifty years. Now, government officials in the Congress of Colombia frequently mention this “banana massacre.” They know this now because Gabriel Garcia Marquez immortalized this massacre in his novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In his banana massacre scene, he exaggerated the death toll to be around three thousand. Now, reputable newspaper agencies in Colombia also frequently allude to the “the three thousand dead” when trying to provoke a feeling of distrust against the government (Bell). This proves Marquez’s theory that literature and journalism; literature and history; fiction and fact, are not as separate as one would like to think. Instead, they should build off of each other to create the story that the public believes and chooses to remember.

The history books leave out many events and often incorrectly reports the events they do cover. Gabriel Garcia Marquez has taken on the responsibility, in a way, by filling in the holes left behind with a magic and fantasy that breaks away from Western ideals of logic and returns back to the traditional, colorful method of Latin American storytelling- where yellow butterflies surround the house after an electrician visits and rain pours for four years, eleven months, and two days.

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