100 Years of Solitude Part 1: Crash Course Literature 306

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=YWNcCs__vQg
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/YWNcCs__vQg

John: Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and you and I are about to experience One Hundred Years of Solitude. Together, I guess. Which isn't really Solitude.

John From the Past: Mr. Green, Mr. Green...I don't get it. You know, there's so many things that happen in that book that, like, can't happen.

John: Indeed, Me From The Past, that's the kind of searing revelation I've come to expect from you. But there's a reason William Kennedy, in The New York Times Book Review, called One Hundred Years of Solitude, "the first piece of literature since the Book of Genesis that should be required reading for the entire human race" Which, I have to say, is a bit hyperbolic, both toward One Hundred Years of Solitude, and toward the Book of Genesis. and then there's the Chilean poet and Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda, who called it, "the greatest revelation in the Spanish language since Don Quixote of Cervantes." This novel is a work of magic. And not just because there's lots of magic in it.

[Theme Music]

So, Gabriel García Márquez sets his novel in the fictional Colombian town of Macondo, founded by the illustrious and inbred Buendía family. From its inception, Macondo is cut off from the external world. Gypsies passing through introduce fabulous 'inventions' from the outside — including telescopes, false teeth, flying carpets and ice. And the novel relates the history of town's incestuous founders, José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula Iguarán, and six generations of their descendents. It chronicles the lives and loves of these Buendías as they endure civic uprisings and civil wars; invasions from ants and North Americans; strikes, massacres, and plagues; and — perhaps most devastatingly — their own tragic nostalgia.

And this is also one of those families who uses the same names over and over, which can be a little confusing for readers, and it doesn't help clear things up that the characters also share personality traits. The Aurelianos tend to be "withdrawn, but with lucid minds" while the José Arcadios tend to be "impulsive and enterprising." This repetition of names and traits gets at an important idea in the book, which is that the boundaries of individual identity can be unclear. Like, these characters' are repeating their ancestor's mistakes over and over, which suggests that human nature may not change much over time.

One Hundred Years of Solitude is also a masterpiece of experimental fiction, because it blends the imaginary and the magical to present perspectives that are often missing from written history. Gabriel Garcia Marquez took voices and storytelling traditions that, traditionally, hadn't been associated with great art, and showed that they could be awfully great.

But speaking of magic and time, Garcia Marquez jumps around in time a lot in the book, starting with the very first sentence: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" So there are a lot of different times in that sentence, right? I mean, Garcia Marquez is describing the Colonel's future act of remembering as having already taken place. And just like a map-maker represents disparate spaces as seen from a single vantage point, Gabriel García Márquez is showing the reader the past, present, and the future simultaneously.

Later, this will happen again and again in the novel. In fact, if you want to keep score, the phrase, "Many years later" appears 9 times in the English translation. Its truncated version, "years later," appears 11 times. "Months later" 14 times; "weeks later," 5; "days later," 13; "hours later," 2; "minutes later," 1; and "later" (on its own), 83 times. And García Márquez follows each of these "laters" with a scene that his narrator recounts while using the past tense.

And this doesn't just emphasize the connection between past, present, and future: it undermines the ideas that linear narratives are the only narratives that make sense. In that opening line, it'd be logical to assume that the colonel remembered discovering ice right before he was shot and killed. But, spoiler alert: that doesn't happen. So, so much for foreshadowing. I realize that so far we've only discussed the first sentence of the book, but if I could just pause on it for one more moment, it also reveals another big theme of the novel: how individual perspectives influence the idea of history.

Let me just read it one more time, you know, because Thought Café made that nice graphic, and also it just has a nice sound to it. "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice." Discover is a funny word there, I mean, I guess discover can mean "Become aware of." But we often use it to mean, you know, "Be the first to find or observe." The colonel no more "discovered" ice than Columbus "discovered" America.

History is constructed by those who have the privilege of naming. And in a later passage, Gabriel García Márquez makes it clear that these "namers" can be wrong. Although the colonel's father pronounces ice to be "the great invention of our time," we, of course, know that ice is neither a product of human invention nor confined to the temporal existence of humanity. I mean, ice predated humans by like, literally most time.

But since the past is colored by the memories of those who record it, it can often be laced with fantasy. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, Gabriel García Márquez mixes mundane descriptions of real-world people, and places, and events with fantastical tales of supernatural beings, and places, and actions. In the Lit Crit game, we call this "magical realism."

So back In 1949, the Cuban novelist, Alejo Carpentier, began to experiment with what he called, "lo real maravilloso." Marvelous realism in English. And literary critics have argued that integrating the "logic" of the visible world with magical elements provides a way for writers from colonized parts of the world to make sense of multiple realities: It allows writers to tell stories from the perspectives of both the colonizers and those of the colonized. And Latin America has produced a lot of magical realist writers, including: Isabel Allende (from Chile), Jorge Amado (from Brazil), Miguel Ángel Asturias Rosales (from Guatamala), Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortazar (from Argentina), and Arturo Uslar-Pietri (from Venezuela), among many others.

Works of magical realism do away with a lot of the stuff readers expect from novels. All that stodgy stuff like exposition, and linear time structure, and certainty. They're all out the window. And their narrators often describe fantastical elements in a matter-of-fact tone. And by situating these fantastical elements in a real-world setting, they kind of subvert existing power structures, and also remind us, as readers, that we have a role in creating meaning. Right? A novel that you read exists primarily, for you at least, in your mind.

And right in the first line, García Márquez undermines the notion of linear time, and also certain conventions of exposition. And as for the rest of all that stuff, his narrator describes fantastical events, personality traits, and paranormal or mythological beings as if they're normal throughout the novel. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

For instance, there's a plague of insomnia, whose most terrifying symptom is, "...not the impossibility of sleeping, for the body did not feel any fatigue at all, but its inexorable evolution toward a more critical manifestation: a loss of memory" there's the "light rain of tiny yellow flowers" that falls after José Arcadio Buendía dies, and which "covered the roofs and blocked the doors and smothered the animals who slept outdoors." The deluge, which begins after a massacre and lasts for nearly 5 years, uproots banana groves and leaves the town "in ruins."

And Fantastical characters inhabit Macondo including: Melquíades, the "taciturn Armenian" gypsy, who haunts the Buendía family "because he could not bear the solitude of death" and Rebecca, who "liked to eat the damp earth of the courtyard and the cake of whitewash that she picked off the walls with her nails" Father Nicanor, offers "undeniable proof of the infinite power of God" by repeating demonstrations of "levitation by means of chocolate" And then there's José Arcadio Buendía who, "during his prolonged stay under the chestnut tree... developed the faculty of being able to increase his weight at will" Ursula, upon losing her eyesight, cultivates such clairvoyance that, "for the first time she saw clearly the truths that her busy life in former times had prevented her from seeing."

The narrator describes fantastical events and characters in a matter-of-fact tone. I mean, consider the "thread of blood," which defies convention, logic, and gravity. After leaving the gunshot wound in José Arcadio's head, this thread of blood runs through the map of Macondo and through the Buendía house.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So this straightforward tone the narrator uses to talk about violence continues throughout the novel. There's the "electrified chicken yard" that surrounds the banana company's compound, the "hired assassins" that guard its gates, the silence that occurs before soldiers open fire on 3000 men, women, and children. This method of normalizing violence is in many ways a powerful critique of colonial (and post-colonial) power structures, which we'll talk about next week. But for now, I just wanna go back to how Garcia Marquez reminds the reader of their role in creating meaning.

So, García Márquez includes in the novel a piece of "enigmatic literature" — the predictions that Melquíades, the dead gypsy, has written in Sanskrit on crumbling parchments. Melquíades couldn't bear the solitude of death and so returned to the Buendía's house. Here he wrote prophecies which, "when read aloud were like encyclicals being chanted." But he refused to translate the meaning of these prophecies. And he explained to one of the Aurelianos, "No one must know [the parchments'] meaning until he has reached one hundred years of age."

We later learn that this "one hundred years" doesn't refer to the lifespan of individuals, though. Instead, it refers to the parchments themselves. Melquíades explains that it is only when the "parchments become one hundred years old" that they can "be deciphered." But Aureliano still wants to read them. So, desperate to decipher the text, he learns to translate from Sanskrit into Spanish. And when he discovers that the parchments contain "predictions in coded lines of poetry" he comes up with a complicated system to decode them.

And this decoding is further complicated by the fact that Melquíades has not arranged the story, "in the order of man's conventional time, but had concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant." Which is precisely, of course, the book that we are reading! We, too, are reading a translated book that's filled with poetry — one that describes fantastical events and defies conventional notions of time.

But there's a significant difference between Aureliano's reading process and ours. As Aureliano nears the end of the parchments, the wind outside turns into a "biblical hurricane" that will wipe out Macondo, its inhabitants, and their memories. There is no hope of Aureliano ever acting on what he learns. This information "...was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth."

But of course, my copy of One Hundred Years of Solitude did not self-destruct when I reached the last line. There was no hurricane. And unlike Aureliano, I survived reading. And this surviving, while definitely advisable, presents some ethical questions: I mean, if history is as provisional as Gabriel Garcia Marquez argues, how should we respond to history in general? Is it even possible to fight the collective amnesia and narrow storytelling that allows human beings to make the same mistakes, generation after generation? Is it possible for human beings to resist the trap of nostalgia that so often keeps us from moving forward?

Yeah, I don't know. I mean, another thing about 100 Years of Solitude that makes it different and special is that it's not, at least in a traditional sense, hopeful. Instead, it endeavors to tell the kinds of truths that so-called realism can't touch. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

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