

Gabriel García Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude

Bi-monthly Discussion Groups, pp. 203-417

1. In “the lucidity of her old age,” Ursula reevaluates everything she ever thought about her son Colonel Aureliano Buendía: “He had fought so many wars not out of idealism . . . he had won and lost for the same reason: pure and sinful pride. She reached the conclusion that the son for whom she would have given her life was simply a man incapable of love.” Moreover, Ursula reevaluates the character of the daughter she had thought hard-hearted and bitter, coming to see Amaranta as torn between “measureless love and an invincible cowardice,” tormented by “irrational fear” (248-49).
 - What do you think of Úrsula’s reevaluation of her children?
 - What do the extended narratives of the deaths of Colonel Aureliano Buendía and Amaranta reveal about their characters?
2. Do the character traits of the twins, Aureliano Segundo and José Arcadio Segundo, match the traits of their respective namesakes, their grandfather José Arcadio and their great uncle, Colonel Aureliano Buendía? Or are their names a result of a final game of identity switching?
 - Regardless of name, do these twins repeat aspects of the Buendía family destiny?
 - José Arcadio Segundo tries to engineer a navigable river passage to the ocean and Aureliano Segundo becomes a fabulously wealthy and profligate landowner. How might their stories mirror aspects of Latin American history: the coming of modernity to the continent, the exploitation of its abundant natural resources?
3. One Hundred Years of Solitude chronicles the coming of technological change—from Melquíades’s magnets, telescopes, and cameras to the side-show of ice in the circus and the arrival of the telegraph, telephone, automobile, and cinema.
 - What happens in this novel when people with a largely mythic world view suddenly find themselves in a world in which technology has accelerated time, diminished space, and substituted the virtual for the actual?
 - Does the novel seem to make a judgement about technological change?
4. Although exaggerated, the story of the banana workers’ massacre, as witnessed by José Arcadio Segundo, is true; as is the story of its coverup.
 - How does this episode interpret the historical relation between Latin American governments and corporate interests of the U.S.A.?
 - How does the subsequent coverup of the massacre relate to the novel’s earlier episode of the plague of insomnia and the resulting plague of amnesia? What, suggests Márquez, are the costs of historical and familial amnesia?
5. During its one hundred years, the Buendía family drama has not infrequently been motivated by class aspirations and prejudices.
 - What does the story of the renovation of the family house and the arrival of Pietro Crespi with the pianola suggest about Úrsula’s class aspirations?

- How does the story of Fernanda del Carpio—her childhood, her crowning as queen of carnival, and her marriage to Aureliano Segundo—satirize class prejudices?
 - How is Meme the product of both Aureliano Segundo and Fernanda? Should we attribute the tragedy of her life to the Buendía family determinism or to the rigidity of class structures or to something else entirely?
6. We have read the stories of five generations of women connected to the Buendía family. Can we identify the kinds of agency available to the following women, as well as the limiting conditions of their lives?
- Úrsula
 - Amaranta, Rebecca, and Pilar Tenera
 - Santa Sofía de Piedad
 - Petra Cortes, Remedios la Bella, and Fernanda del Carpio
 - Meme
 - What might the stories of Remedios the Beauty and Meme suggest about the possibilities of women’s liberation in Macondo?
7. Despite the proliferation of back stories and elaborate explanations, One Hundred Years of Solitude includes tantalizing mysteries.
- Who shot José Arcadio and why does the rivulet of blood from his head wind its way to Úrsula in her kitchen?
 - Who persuaded Fernanda’s father to send her and her expensive entourage to Aureliano Segundo’s carnival? Who started the riot by shouting, “Long live the Liberal party! Long live Colonel Aureliano Buendía!”?
 - Who owns the gold left in the statue of Saint Joseph that Úrsula has hidden?
 - What might Melquíades’s manuscripts reveal?
 - Who killed Colonel Aureliano’s sons?
 - Which members of the Buendía family do not know the identity of, at least, one of their parents? And which members of the family are hidden away in forgotten rooms in the house, or elsewhere?
 - Why has Márquez included these loose ends in his sprawling, but otherwise straight forward narrative?
8. Márquez is the master of hilarious exaggeration: e.g. the stories of Aureliano Segundo’s eating contest with the Elephant, of the seventy two chamber pots for Meme’s visiting friends, of Remedios the Beauty’s unconscious potential to drive men mad, of the perpetrators’ machinations to conceal the banana massacre; and of Fernanda’s communications with invisible doctors.
- What effects does Márquez achieve, in addition to humor, by using this technique of extreme exaggeration?
9. Márquez said that the novella No One Writes to the Colonel was his best book, and that he had to write the novel One Hundred Years of Solitude to get people to read the novella.
- How does the novel, with its epic sweep, expand our understanding of the novella, with its tight focus on the plight of one impoverished old veteran and his wife?

10. When Márquez was almost 23, a law school dropout and a struggling writer, he accompanied his mother on a visit to Aracataca, where he had been raised by his grandparents. She needed him to help her sell the family home. Instead of what he remembered, Márquez found a run-down house in a desolate hamlet. Overwhelmed by waves of reminiscence, he was inspired to write a novel, which he originally entitled “La Casa” and later changed to One Hundred Years of Solitude. (See the following web site for a virtual tour of the house: <https://centrogabo.org/gabo/contemos-gabo/la-casa-de-gabriel-garcia-marquez-en-aracataca>.)
- How do the fortunes of the Buendía house embody the fortunes of the entire clan?
 - What threats to the house does each generation have to confront?
 - Which rooms of the house are significant in the family history? Which rooms of the house are open to society, which are sealed off from the outside world, when and why? How does the house participate in the family plague of solitude?
 - What role do the women of the Buendía family (either by birth or marriage) play in the fate of the house?
11. Of course, “house” can mean family lineage, as well as a living space. Greek tragedy often focuses on a cursed lineage, e.g. the fall of the House of Atreus dramatized in Aeschylus’s trilogy The Oresteia.
- Does One Hundred Years of Solitude resemble a Greek tragedy that could be titled the fall of the house of Buendía? Or is it more Biblical? Or do both literary traditions inform Márquez’s monumental novel?
 - For Mission Impossible Faulkner participants: Do you see any relation between Márquez’s novel and Faulkner’s two, family tragedies: the story of the decline of the Compsons told in The Sound and the Fury and the story of the rise and fall of the Sutpens told in Absalom, Absalom? We might think of comparing the endings of these novels.
12. Or would you classify One Hundred Years of Solitude as a dark comedy, instead of a tragedy?
- What are the funniest parts of the novel to you?
 - How would you characterize Márquez’s humor?
 - What makes Fernanda’s four-page (pp. 322-327) tirade so funny?
 - Úrsula fights a constant losing battle against the red ants. Do you find it comical or horrifying when, in the end, the ants drag Aureliano Babilonia’s pig-tailed son off to their nests? Do you find Fernanda’s prudery, which leads to miscommunications with the invisible doctors and eventually to her death, comical or horrific?
13. At the end of One Hundred Years of Solitude, time seems to collapse. As Aureliano Babilonia reads and understands Melquíades’s manuscript, “he began to decipher the instant that he was living, deciphering it as he lived it. Prophesying himself in the act of deciphering the last page of the parchments, as if he were looking into a speaking mirror” (416).

- How has the novel represented differing modes of understanding time: linear progress, cycles of repetition, and/or entropic decay? Which mode seems to triumph in the novel's ending?
 - Does fiction by its very nature collapse time, creating a space in which everything has always already happened, as in Melquíades's manuscript? (e.g. We use the convention of the historical present tense to describe events in a novel: "Ursula wears [not "wore"] a chastity belt because she fears [not "feared"] having a child with the tail of a pig.")
 - For Mission Impossible Woolf participants: Do you see any relation between the representation of time at the end of One Hundred Years of Solitude and at the end of Orlando?
14. How do you interpret the final sentence of the novel: Aureliano Babilonia comes to understand that he and Macondo "would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men . . . and that everything written on [the parchments] 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"?
- Why is the house of Buendía condemned "to one hundred years of solitude"?
 - How is the incest curse, which eventuates in a baby with the tail of a pig, related to the curse of solitude?
 - Why will no memory of the family and the town remain? How does this ending relate to the novel's earlier treatment of memory and forgetting? But this novel arose from Márquez's detailed memories of his childhood home, so is Macondo really "exiled from the memory of men"?
 - How does the novel's ending raise questions for humanity now? Will we get a second chance—to save the planet, to save our democracy, to . . . ?
15. Below is a simplistic schema of human interactions represented in the novel:
- Settled domestic family life
 - Nomadic wandering
 - Sexual passion
 - Politics and war
 - Commerce
- As an exercise in bringing the sprawling plot of this novel into focus, can you identify characters who dominate in each mode of interaction?
 - In every generation, where do each of these modes of interaction seem to lead?
 - Does the novel represent any modes of commerce that are not exploitative?
 - Might friendship (e.g. between Aureliano Segundo and Petra Cotes in old age and between Aureliano Babilonia and his friends who meet at the bookstore of the wise Catalán) offer an alternative to the excess, waste, futility, violence, and solitude that dominate human interaction in the novel?