

Gabriel García Márquez, Love in the Time of Cholera

Monthly Discussion Groups, pp. 3-163

1. The novel's title suggests its two central concerns: love and death. How is love represented in the novel's opening chapter?
 - How would you characterize the love between Juvenal Urbino and his wife, Fermina?
 - In Urbino's final words, "Only God knows how much I loved you," he uses the Spanish form of the past tense for completed events. Is Urbino speaking from the perspective of his imminent death, or is he remembering the love of his youth as something past? Is the relation between Urbino and Fermina in old age based on love, or merely loyalty and convenience?
 - How would you characterize the love between Jeremiah de Saint-Amour and his mixed-race lover?
 - Does the unnamed lover's concealment call into question Saint-Amour's love? Does his relationship match his name? Is his lover's assistance in his suicide an act of love?
 - Do their owners love the Great Dane, Mister Woodrow Wilson, and the polyglot parrot? Do the pets love their masters?
2. How does this opening chapter of the novel portray the inevitability of old age and death?
 - How do the two chess players, Urbino and Saint-Amour, differ as they confront the challenges of aging?
 - Do these deaths—Saint-Amour's planned suicide and Urbino's accident—match the lives they lived? their images of themselves? their images in society?
3. Juvenal Urbino is a very different kind of character than anyone I remember in One Hundred Years of Solitude. In what ways do we come to know him that are different from the characterizations in Márquez's earlier novel?
 - In what ways is he represented as a basically good man?
 - What are his limitations? his flaws? his blind spots?
4. The first chapter largely takes place on the last day of Urbino's life. How does this day contrast with what we are told in flashbacks about his previous 81 years of life?
 - What effect does Márquez achieve by making Urbino's last day such a complete disaster?
 - What effects are achieved by the interaction between present and past time in the narration of his last day?
 - What mysteries linger following the narration of this day's events? Mysteries about Saint-Amour? about Urbino and Fermina's marriage? about Fermina's past?
5. Why does Fermina refuse to allow the church, the city, or the state to hold public funerary events for her eminent husband?
 - What do we learn about Fermina in her response to Urbino's death?
 - How does her response amplify what we learned in the stories about bath soap and pee on the toilet seat?

6. The setting of this novel is quite different from magical Macondo. How does Márquez characterize the city in the first chapter?
 - What neighborhoods are described? in what detail?
 - What references allow us to locate the city in Colombia?
 - How is the city's social structure described?
 - How have history and geography molded the city into its current form?
 - What historical references allow us to locate, if roughly, the years of Urbino and Fermina's married life?

7. In the second and third chapters, Márquez presents two extended courtships of Fermina Daza.
 - What does the story of Florentino Ariza's courtship of Fermina suggest about the nature of his love? What is he in love with?
 - Biographers note that Florentino's courtship is, in part, based on stories of Márquez's own father's indefatigable pursuit of his mother (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Garc%C3%ADa_M%C3%A1rquez). Literary critics point out that the courtship also has literary antecedents (see "Florentino Ariza, Petrarch, and Dante"). Does this information enhance your reading of Florentino's courtship?
 - Does Márquez's humor lead the reader to pity Florentino or to dismiss him as a buffoon?
 - Why does Fermina participate in Florentino's clandestine courtship?
 - Why does Escolastica help Fermina and Florentino continue their relationship?
 - Why is Lorenzo Daza, Fermino's father, so opposed to Florentino's suit?
 - Why does Fermina suddenly reject Florentino's advances?
 - What does the story of Juvenal Urbino's courtship suggest about his love? Does this eminent young doctor love Fermina?
 - How do his courtship strategies differ from Florentino's? Why for so long do they fail to win over Fermina?
 - What role does Hildebranda play in Fermina's response to her suitors?
 - What role does Fermina's father play in Urbino's unsuccessful, then successful courtship?
 - What causes Fermina to yield eventually to Urbino's advances?

8. Both Fermina and Florentino experience their first sexual encounters on boats, but not, of course, with each other. Why does Márquez stage these encounters on boats?
 - Before these experiences, what have Florentino and Fermina learned about sexuality? From whom?
 - How do their early experiences of sexuality differ, and what does each discover from his/her first real sexual experience?
 - What tone does Márquez use to narrate Florentino's extensive sexual conquests, beginning with the widow Nazaret? To what end?
 - What seems to be the relation that Márquez is drawing between sex and love?

9. After reading chapters two and three of the novel, do you have a deeper understanding of Fermina's actions during the marital battle over bathroom soap narrated in the first chapter?
- Do her acceptance of Florentino's courtship and her early rejection of Urbino's courtship arise from similar aspects of her character?
 - What does her response to the visit from the mother superior of her old school suggest about her character?
 - How has Fermina managed to break through the barriers of class structure that excluded her father?
 - How do her decisions and actions compare and/or contrast to those of other female characters: Escolastica? Urbino's mother and sisters? Hildebranda? Tránsito Ariza?
10. The port city of the setting and the settlements along the river are plagued by epidemics of cholera.
- What do you make of the juxtaposition of descriptions of tropical lushness and rotting corpses during Florentino's river voyage?
 - What role do cholera epidemics play in the formation of Urbino's character?
 - How does Márquez relate cholera to love in this section of the novel?
11. As in One Hundred Years of Solitude, Márquez strategically includes references in Love in the Time of Cholera to Colombia's seemingly endless civil wars, to the coming of scientific and technological changes, to how business gets done, and to the history of Colombia's colonial past. For example,
- How does the sporadic fighting affect events as disparate as Lorenzo Daza's plans for Fermina and the sexual education of Florentino?
 - How and why is Urbino associated with the coming of modernity to Colombia?
 - What kind of businessmen are Lotario Thugut and Lorenzo Daza?
 - What traces of Colombia's colonial history remain in and around the city where the story takes place? Do Márquez's references to these traces confirm Faulkner's oft-quoted phrase: "The past is never dead. It's not even past"?
 - With what emphasis and with what tone does Márquez include these contextual references in the novel? What role do these references play in the development of his characters and their stories?