

NO ONE WRITES TO THE COLONEL

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Overview

Gabriel Garcia Márquez (1927-2014) was a Colombian novelist, short story writer, and journalist who established brilliant new literary potentials, 'magic realism' in particular, which spearheaded the vivid energy of 20th century Latin American literature. Beginning his career in law, he shifted to journalism, then gradually moved into the writing of fiction. He won the Nobel Prize in 1982, for *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), and used his reputation to enforce his political influence inside Colombia—where he was a beacon of liberalism, and a close friend of Fidel Castro.

Story

The historical setting, for this melancholy novella, is the period of Colombian history called *La Violencia*, a time of violence and general social malaise in Colombia (1948-1958), during which the Conservative and Liberal parties were fighting it out for dominance. The main figure is a retired veteran who was a Colonel in the Thousand Days' War, a Civil War which paralyzed Colombia at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Colonel and his wife live in a squalid backwater, governed by corrupt local officials, and have for fifteen years been waiting in vain to receive the pension due the colonel for military service in the Thousand Days' War. Unfortunately, the pension has not yet arrived, and this failure symbolizes all that is sad and neglected about the existence of the nation and of the colonel, who had served his nation well, 'delivering the funds for the civil war in two trunks roped to the back of a mule.' (The same failure also symbolizes the incompetence and unreliability of a Colombian government indifferent to its veterans, and unable to manage its own affairs.)

Despite his isolated and marginalized existence, the colonel walks to the harbor every day, and inquires of the postmaster whether his check has arrived. Everybody, including the starving and asthmatic wife of the colonel, is cynical about the future. Yet there is a tone of bleak humor pervading the conversations of all the little people of the town, the anonymous victims of a badly managed society.

The death of a young man from the village opens the novella. Agustin, the son of the colonel and his wife, is killed by soldiers, for 'distributing clandestine literature.' This death was of a certain advantage, to the Colonel and his wife, for they inherited, from Agustin, a rooster which the young man hired out for cockfighting. There is a problem, though, with this promising source of income. It is that in order to maintain the rooster in fighting condition, the Colonel and his wife need to feed the animal, but in fact the couple don't have enough money to feed both themselves and the rooster. They can't afford to starve, for the sake of feeding the animal.

This dilemma leads into the melancholy heart of the couple's daily existence. They are far too proud to let their fellow citizens know that they are starving. On the sly, they sell almost all of their personal possessions. The Colonel goes so far as to sell the rooster to a fellow veteran, who has become rich through dirty deals. By the end of the novella, however, the Colonel has decided against selling the rooster. It is his last hedge against true starvation. When his wife asks him what they will eat next, the Colonel replies 'the rooster.'

Homing in on modest individuals, in a modest and almost forgotten backwater, Garcia Marquez manages to speak critically about the dysfunction of his whole society. The heart of the problem

he isolates is this: no one in this typical Colombian hamlet is answerable for anything. A few are government employees, on the level of the postmaster. They are powerless and indifferent. The majority are too poor to have a voice. Only a few corrupt rich guys hang out in the hills, and they could care less. No one will ever write to the colonel.

Themes

Poverty. The village in which the Colonel and his wife live is without comforts or money, and its residents have little to buoy themselves with except dry humor and such 'entertainments' as cock fighting. We hear of the Colonel's veteran buddy, Sabas, who made a pile of money for himself through 'advantageous' political alliances. In his cynical way, the Colonel resists taking the dirty path to a better life.

Humor. A dry biting humor pervades the conversations among the fellow residents of the Colonel's village. While life is hard for everybody, it is still true that everybody is in the same situation. There is almost no income inequality, with the result that there is little room for envy or jealousy, and much room for communality of feelings.

Characters

The Colonel. The Colonel is a proud man, who has served his country well, then been forgotten by the government he served. He has been waiting fifteen years for his pension to be paid.

The Colonel's wife. The Colonel's wife is a long suffering asthmatic, worn down by a hard life of penury and near starvation. Like her husband she is proud and, almost against her better judgment, hopeful.

MAJOR CHARACTER

The Colonel (Closed)

Character The Colonel is an impoverished war veteran, from the Colombian 1000 days' war (1899-1902), in which a bitter fight between Conservative and Liberal parties, combined with a sharp fall in world coffee prices, produced a disastrous breakdown in civic society. The Colonel has been waiting 15 years for his pension, as a veteran of this war, and lives with his asthmatic wife in a small coastal town, where his two main activities are feeding his rooster—which will star in the next year's lucrative cock fight--and waiting for the launch which brings in the daily post—and on which there is never a letter for him. He is determined to receive the letter that never arrives.

Parallels Generic parallels to the grumpy and determined Colonel abound in world literature. Ancient Greek literature offers characters like Nestor, in the *Odyssey*, Philoktetes, in the play (409 B.C.) of that name by Sophocles, or the recusant countryman Dikaiopolis, in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (425 B.C.) as examples of the type. Each of these figures combines in himself resistance, stubbornness, and the view that his time in history is rotten. More recent parallels—without however the stress on contemporary political corruptness—might include Balzac's *Père Goriot*, from the novel (1835) of that name, The old man from Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), or even a recent (1993) film, like *Grumpy Old Man*, with Lemmon and Matthau, in which elderly guys, on the downside of history, grumble away the remains of their lives.

Illustrative moments

Self-denying When we first see the Colonel he is sitting in his kitchen cooking coffee. There is almost nothing left in the can, and he scrapes together enough to make just one cup—which he gives to his just waking wife, lying to her by saying that he has already had his cup. (He hasn't.

He is waiting for it.) For nearly sixty years—since the end of the last civil war—the Colonel had done nothing but wait. ‘October was one of the few things which arrived.’

Disciplined The Colonel is preoccupied with the rooster he keeps tied up in his house, and which is his investment—given him by his dead son. He will put the bird up for the next town cockfight, and make a certain percentage on the bird’s overall income. Plus he will himself bet on the bird. So having the bird in top shape is priority number one for the Colonel and his wife. ‘The Colonel attended to the rooster in spite of the fact that on Thursday he would have preferred to stay in his hammock.’ When his wife asks how the rooster is, the Colonel exclaims that the neighbor experts have pronounced the animal in top shape, ready to fight.

Patient The Colonel goes to the post office on every mail delivery day, hoping always either that his approved pension will have arrived, or that a notice of lottery winnings will have come through. He is always disappointed, as in wider fact are the hopes of the whole pretty miserable village, which has been abandoned by time and the government. ‘I wasn’t expecting anything,’ he lied to the Postmaster. He turned to the man with an entirely childish look. ‘No one writes to me.’ This phrase is the stamp of his tough minded patience, which expects nothing, least of all pity, but which keeps alive a small personal flame of hope.

Repressed The Colonel lives in an authoritarian state, as we learn from the way suitable movie choices are dictated to the town, or clandestine news sheets circulated, that contain the news the government would not permit to have printed in the papers. While the doctor examines his wife, the Colonel reads ‘a summary of the events in the country, mimeographed for clandestine circulation. ‘Revelations about the state of armed resistance in the interior of the country.’ When the Colonel finished reading he kept the papers to pass on to others. The underground was part of the hope the Colonel kept quietly interior to himself.

Discussion questions

What is Garcia Marquez’ attitude toward the Colonel? Does he view him as an offcast of history, without prospects; as a comedian; or as part of the stubborn persistence of the now powerless in society, who represent the subterranean power of mankind?

Is the Colonel hopeful about his prospects for recovering his pension?

How does Marquez view the society in which the Colonel lives? What particularly galls him about that society? Given the moribund setting in which the Colonel is living, of what special importance to him is the rooster?