

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

**FERMINA**

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**Fermina Daza** (in Gabriel Garcia Márquez' *Love in the Time of Cholera*) **Conscientious**

**Overview** Gabriel Garcia Marquez (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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

**Character** Fermina Daza is the lifetime counterpart to the male lover/protagonist, Florentino Ariza. Their connection dates to their teen years in the same city, and lasts until they finally rediscover one another in their seventies, after she has been married for fifty years to another man, and he has worked his way through hundreds of affairs. Fermina is from the start sensitive, properly flirtatious—in the Latin American cultural sense—and for a while even a mainstream high fashion *madre de familia*—but in the end she is faithful to the eccentric and semi-inspired *imaginativo*, with whom she first found passion. She cares profoundly for her childhood sweet heart, and is unable to forget him.

**Parallels** Penelope, in Homer's *Odyssey*, acquaints us with a model of ancient Greek womanly patience, a patience full of strategies for warding off the suitors who are trying to replace her husband. (At the other end of the Trojan struggle we can add Hecuba or Andromache, two wives, of Trojan leaders, who are battered by destiny.) Portia, in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (1596), excels in such womanly virtues as patience and good judgment. For a woman tried by difficult marriage, and patient in the course of its painful ups and downs, cf. Dorothea, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871).

**Illustrative moments**

**Sexual** It took some time before Fermina grew into her sexuality. 'In Valledupar,' when her father first sent her away from Florentino, she 'began to realize at last why the roosters chase the hens...she was initiated into solitary love...sprawling on the bathroom floor, her hair loose, smoking her first mule drivers' cigarette...' At the same time, though, she still dreaded the sacrifice of her virginity, which 'she knew was about to seal her separation from her family, and her entrance into marriage.' During her wedding ceremony she wore a smile 'that seemed painted on with white lead...a poor attempt at disguising the-- terror of a virgin bride.'

**Modish** In Paris, on her marital voyage there with Dr. Urbino, Fermina exercised her unique taste on purchases of hats, shoes, clothes artfully chosen from second hand shops—she at once hated *haute couture*—and brought home extravaganzas of private taste which startled her fellow bourgeoisie in Colombia. 'She brought back everything that had been used in the past twenty years to change the appearance of hats'—birds, cherries, crests of peacocks, tailfeathers of Asiatic roosters, entire pheasants. It was seeing her in her finery that determined Florentino that 'Dr. Urbino had to die,' so that he could inherit this gorgeous fleshly prize.

**Frustration** Fermina came increasingly to feel trapped in the perfect happiness Dr. Urbino had designed for her. 'If anything vexed her, it was the perpetual chain of daily meals. For they not only had to be served on time; they had to be perfect, and they had to be just what he wanted to eat, without his having to be asked...At the mere hint of a doubt, he would push aside his plate and say: 'this meal has been prepared without love.' In the course of years spent in this kind of

caring but monotonous marital routine, Fermina rediscovered that taste for drama and surprise which were at the root of her lasting fascination with Florentino.

**Faithful** At many stages in her developing existence, Fermina encountered Florentino, in fact so frequently, and with so little alertness, that 'more than once, in sheer distraction, she forgot to greet him.' He was growing in business respectability, and off and on Fermina would not even connect him to 'the languid adolescent who would sit and sigh for her under the gusts of yellow leaves in the Park of the Evangelists...' Their old flame, however, remained bright in the realm of writing letters, where once again they exchanged their innermost thoughts with one another. On the page, she cared for him just as she always had.

### **Discussion questions**

**What was the nature of Fermina's love for Urbino? Did it develop in stages? Did she ever forget Florentino, in the course of her marriage to Urbino?**

Is Fermina the kind of person who would naturally be attracted to a brilliant marginal like Florentino? Was theirs, after all, a marriage made in heaven?

What was the lifegiving source of peace for Fermina? Where did she go for strength and self-control?