

The Colonel (In Gabriel Garcia Márquez' *No One Writes to the Colonel*) **Closed**

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.

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?