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Required Citation

Alvarez-Borland. "An Approach Using History, Myth, and Metafiction" in *Approaches to Teaching García Márquez' One Hundred Years of Solitude*. MLA Series on Teaching World Masterpieces. New York : MLA, 1990, pp.89-97.

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An Approach Using History, Myth, and Metafiction

Isabel Alvarez Borland

When asked by an interviewer to describe the essence of his novel, García Márquez replied, “*One Hundred Years of Solitude* is not a history of Latin America, it is a metaphor for Latin America” (Dreifus 74). The author’s words affirm his awareness of having created a fiction that is simultaneously historical and mythical. In teaching *One Hundred Years*, I focus on the text’s polarities so that students will think about the novel in its historical, mythical, and metafictional dimensions.

As history, the text functions as a metaphor for Latin America in which the perils of the Buendía family represent a scathing commentary on centuries of colonialism, civil war, and political chaos. As myth, the Buendía saga, with its juxtaposition of imagined and real events, speaks of the inadequacy of documentary history and the importance of oral history: the superstitions, dreams, and imaginations of the Macondians. As metafiction, Melquíades’s manuscripts retell the story of the Buendía family as a tale meant to be reread and retold. The metaplot also allows students to reflect on the elusive boundaries that separate art from life and to question the uncertainties of their own reality. The jolting effect of the last chapter, with its awareness of the text as text, allows students to conceive of *One Hundred Years* as a work that simultaneously partakes in aesthetics, philosophy, and social consciousness.

I teach *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the Department of Modern Languages at Holy Cross College as part of an advanced undergraduate offering in modern Spanish American narrative. The heterogeneity and the complexity of the novel demand an organized plan of what will be covered in class. Since I have only six class periods in which to discuss this text, I have to carefully choose the episodes and segments for discussion. After trying different approaches, I have decided that the best way to present this text to undergraduates is to devote each class to one chapter or segment that is representative of the specific topic considered. The topics discussed are announced in handouts ahead of time. Usually, two students present the chapter to be addressed in class, and then discussion is turned over to the rest of the group. In addition, students are assigned another segment or chapter that is not discussed in class to analyze on their own, relating the segment to the text’s main social and aesthetic themes. I encourage the students to be creative in their approach, to base their papers on their own ideas, and to avoid repeating class notes unless the notes have a direct application to the chapter they have chosen.

Because our objective is to uncover the interaction between the historical, mythical, and metafictional aspects of the text, the teacher must do some preparatory reading. While the role of myth and history in *One Hundred Years* has been widely researched, the following articles are the basis of my

approach to the teaching of the text: Carlos Fuentes's "García Márquez: La segunda lectura" in his *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* and Roberto González Echevarría's "Cien años de soledad: The Novel as Myth and Archive." Although written from different perspectives, both studies identify history, myth, and metafiction as central to the understanding of *One Hundred Years* and illuminate the polar tensions present in the novel. The books by Raymond L. Williams and Stephen Minta and the collection edited by Bernard McGuirk and Richard Cardwell provide useful background on García Márquez. In addition, I strongly suggest that teachers, as well as students, review the *New York Times* clippings of the year in which García Márquez won the Nobel prize (1982) and that they read at least one comprehensive interview with the author, such as Rita Guibert's interview in *Seven Voices*.

A general introduction to the concept of metafiction is Robert Alter's *Partial Magic* and Michel Foucault's essay on Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, which discusses metafiction from a visual perspective. Since the preceding three weeks of the course are spent studying metafictional stories by Jorge Luis Borges ("El aleph," "El tema del traidor y del héroe") and by Julio Cortázar ("La noche bocarriba," "Las babas del diablo"), the students are exposed to self-reflexive writing by the time they read *One Hundred Years*. During those first weeks, I bring in complementary visual works, such as M. C. Escher's *Drawing Hands*, Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, and Picasso's versions of Velázquez's *Meninas* to study the presence of the author in the text and the role of the intertext within the metafictional work. Finally, the dichotomy of history versus fiction is treated by Hayden White in "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" in his *Tropics of Discourse* and by Mario Vargas Llosa in a brief article, "Is Fiction the Art of Lying?"

The following plan summarizes what is covered during the six periods allotted to the teaching of *One Hundred Years* (two class meetings a week).

Introduction

I begin by locating the novel in literary history and by referring to the literary conventions of the writers who, along with García Márquez, revolutionized Latin American prose during the 1960s (the so-called generation of the boom); it is in this context that *One Hundred Years* takes on its meaning. A useful introductory exercise is to read together "The Solitude of Latin America," García Márquez's 1982 Nobel Prize address. Next, as preparation for our approach to the novel, I ask my students to consider the differences between history and myth and to formulate their own definitions of both. Finally, we set out our reading goals for *One Hundred Years*. The students must follow the linear plot (the story of the town and of the family) and the metaplot (the writing and the eventual deciphering of the manuscripts by the various family members). By following the linear plot—which we divide into four main sections: the foundation, the war years, the Amer-

ican intervention, and Macondo's last days—the students become aware of the historical and the mythical aspects of the book and the difficulty of separating one dimension from the other. The novel's literary subtext is crucial to our interpretation and must be considered simultaneously with the linear plot. I ask the students to pay special attention to Melquíades and to the episodes about the translation of the manuscripts, since both have central roles in our aesthetic reading of the text. I advise the students to think of the novel as a text that questions itself and the reader by means of myth, history, and metafiction and to be aware that few answers are given to the questions posed by the narrative. In fact, García Márquez elicits reader responses through suggestion and challenge, not pontification. The students, as active participants in the process of reading, must formulate some answers. To further prepare the students, I show outside class *Gabriel García Márquez: La magia de lo real*, a documentary on how the Colombian region is recreated in the fictional world of *One Hundred Years*.

At the end of this first class, I hand out a list of chapters and the days on which they will be discussed. Since *One Hundred Years* is composed of twenty unnumbered segments, I usually ask the students to read four segments for each class, even if during our class time we limit ourselves to discussing only one segment in detail. Ideally, the students have read the entire book before we begin our discussion, and specific chapters are reread according to our reading plan.

Foundation of Macondo: Segments 1–4

This class's main objective is a thorough discussion of the novel's initial chapter; we study its process (artistic elaboration), as well as its product (the events that make up the story). We concentrate our analysis on García Márquez's treatment of some well-known biblical and classical myths. I remind the students that myths in García Márquez's text question the cultural identity of the Latin American and become a mirror of the society he depicts. However, García Márquez has written a novel in which no single myth or mythology prevails. By using both classical and biblical traditions, he has endowed his work with a mythical character. Finally, we review the role of myths as stories whose main concern is the discovery of origins, and we dwell on the universal quality of myths as they reveal aspects of human behavior and allow us to understand ourselves better.

We single out passages illustrating the biblical overtones in the description of Macondo's foundation and the role of incest and violence in the foundation of the town—that is, the story of Prudencio Aguilar. The gypsies, their inventions, and the relation between myth and imagination conclude this introduction to the text's mythical essence.

I remind the students that the mythical dimension in *One Hundred Years* is inseparable from the historical dimension and that for pedagogical purposes

I have chosen to isolate these essential components of the novel's fictional world. If time permits, a couple of enthusiastic students select their favorite passages from these initial segments and explain how the passages illustrate García Márquez's handling of a particular myth.

Macondo, Society, and the War Years: Segments 5–9

Just as the initial chapters provided a fine introduction to the book's mythical character, the next four segments are a transition to the historical chapters in the text. The fifth segment deals with García Márquez's relation to the institutions that shape Latin American society. In it García Márquez asks readers to question their beliefs about Macondo's institutions, the church and town government. We examine Father Nicanor Reyna, Apolinar Moscote, and Dr. Alirio Noguera in their symbolic roles as representatives of societal institutions. Finally, José Arcadio's ruling of Macondo during the war years can be used to discuss García Márquez's view of the futility of armed conflicts.

The advent of organized religion in Macondo is marked by the appearance of Father Nicanor Reyna. Seeing that the Macondians have no religion, Father Reyna decides to stay to spread what he thinks are Christian values. However, the reader learns that his main interest is the building of a cathedral, "the largest in the world, with life-size saints and stained-glass windows on the sides, so that people would come from Rome to honor God in the center of impiety" (85). Father Reyna's obsession with collecting money to build his church rounds off García Márquez's ironic portrait of organized faith and its goals.

Similarly, the arrival of Apolinar Moscote marks the beginning of politics and corruption in Macondo's local government. The residents fight with each other, and a bitter battle ensues between Liberals and Conservatives. Governments and politics are depicted as a fabrication made for the convenience of those in control. A confused Aureliano joins the Liberals, not really knowing what they stand for but knowing that he does not like the actions of the Conservatives. War is declared, and yet no one can define the causes of the conflict. Dr. Noguera, the town's doctor, is a further example of the deterioration of civic principles: his plans for the assassination of every Conservative family are his way of ending the evils of Conservatism.

Years of the American Intervention: Segments 10–15

Segments 10–15 lead to a discussion of García Márquez's relation to history. Can *One Hundred Years* be read as a historical account of Latin America during the years between 1850 and 1950? Can the text be divided into historical stages, with segments allotted to the years of the Spanish coloni-

zation, the wars of independence, the American intervention, and the present? I ask the students to reflect on the changes between the Macondo of the foundation years and the Macondo of the war years. Has there been any real progress?

To illustrate the basic heterogeneity of the novel, I contrast the goals of historical writing and mythical writing. If myth is equated with fiction—that is, with writing not concerned with a faithful depiction of reality—historical writing is its opposite, as the goals of the historian are to remain faithful to events as much as possible. If mythical writing is cyclical, historical writing strives to become a chronological, linear account of events. But I remind the students that both historical writing and mythical writing in *One Hundred Years* are inevitably concerned with the power of language and its misuse or misinterpretation.

Segment 15 shows the use of language to manipulate others into acquiescence at both the mythical level and the historical level. The chapter connects the historical wars of the previous section with the mythical decline of the final section, and it moves the novel toward its conclusion by introducing the last Aureliano and bringing the focus back to the parchments and to the novel's metafictional dimension. The segment can be divided into two parts: the mythical story of Meme and Mauricio Babilonia and the historical account of the great strike.

During the first part of this segment, Fernanda's response to Meme's affair; her mistreatment of her grandson, Aureliano Babilonia; and her correspondence with the "invisible doctors" show her manner of manipulating language in order to distort reality. In the second portion of the chapter, which describes the workers' massacre during the great strike, historical reality is either distorted or masked through language. The reader participates in the violent gathering with José Arcadio Segundo, rides out of Macondo, and arrives back in Macondo with him. After the massacre of several hundred people by government troops, José Arcadio Segundo encounters several distortions of reality similar to those created by Fernanda. When he seeks help, he is told: "There haven't been any dead here. . . . Since the time of your uncle, the colonel, nothing has happened in Macondo" (285). In addition, an official proclamation to the nation states that "the workers . . . had returned home in peaceful groups" (286). Finally, military officers state: "You must have been dreaming. . . . Nothing has happened in Macondo, nothing has ever happened, and nothing ever will happen. This is a happy town" (287).

Segment 15 demands a detailed stylistic analysis, for it contains rich, vivid metaphors of the crowd scenes during the shooting in Macondo. Moreover, the changing settings and the different styles of language in this segment allow students to experience the bewilderment of José Arcadio Segundo as a victim of the misuse of language.

If time permits, key episodes from segments 9–14—such as the ascension

of Remedios the Beauty to heaven, the mythical powers of Petra Cotes, and the unusual aura of Mauricio Babilonia—can be analyzed to point out the relation between myth and the much-debated critical term magical realism.

Metafictional Chapters: Segments 16–20

The last five segments of the text bring it to a close and unfold the enigma of Melquíades's manuscripts. From the beginning, Melquíades is an enigmatic figure in the novel. His prophetic powers, his penchant for transmutations and transformations, and his passion for alchemy and its promise of immortality present a character at once mythical and literary.

This is a good time to review references to the manuscripts found in previous segments and to reconstruct the text's metafictional subtext. A review of the encounters of the Buendía family with Melquíades's manuscripts shows the importance of embedded readers and writers as crucial aspects of the book. The despotic Arcadio's first encounter with the manuscripts, Aureliano Segundo's futile attempts to decipher their code, and the eventual deciphering of the code by Aureliano Babilonia are all episodes that underscore the importance of reading and translation as forms of literary re-creation. As Robert Alter and others have stated, in reflexive fiction the reader must contemplate simultaneously the frame and what is represented inside the frame. Thus, metafiction implies a meditation on the nature of the medium in which the work presents itself. The students now know that they are immersed in the story or plot of *One Hundred Years* and are simultaneously aware of the power of this text as literature.

Because the events of the final segment are sweeping and powerful, I prepare the students for the novel's conclusion by analyzing the penultimate segment in detail. By this time the decay of the family and the town has reached a point where there is no turning back, the characters can no longer see reality, the process of involution through incest comes full circle. On her return to Macondo, Amaranta Ursula, sustained by her nostalgic view of the Macondo of earlier times, cannot see the decay prevalent in the house and in the town. Even though Aureliano causes the family to come to an end through his incestuous relationship with Amaranta Ursula he alone has the potential to reverse the long process of decay. In Melquíades's manuscripts, he holds the key to the future. If the manuscripts could be read—and Aureliano is close to deciphering them—the future would be known, and any potential wrongs could be averted. Aureliano knows the importance of the manuscripts, for he speaks to Amaranta Ursula of “the necessity of deciphering the predictions so that they would not defeat themselves” (360). The activity the manuscripts warned about, incest, caused him to turn away from the documents—in effect, eliminating the last possibility that could have saved the family.

Not knowing how to interpret reality's clues has been a constant through-

out this text. As we indicated in segment 15, the government officials changed history when they denied that a massacre had ever taken place. They distorted reality, but later generations, brought up to believe these distortions, accepted them as truth (359). Similarly, Aureliano and Amaranta Ursula should have opened their eyes beyond their isolated existence to see the truth of their situation, but they were no more at fault than were Ursula and Jose Arcadio one hundred years earlier.

I ask the students to write a short paper in response to the events contained in the last segment of the text. Since the last chapter of *One Hundred Years* is an unsettling experience, these papers ensure the students' grappling with the text's reflexivity and encourage them to think about how metafiction relates to history and myth.

Conclusion

The sixth class is devoted to a close reading of the last pages of *One Hundred Years*, using as a point of departure the papers assigned in the previous class. We begin by briefly reviewing the final events: Amaranta Ursula dies after the birth of her child, Aureliano wanders in grief through the ruins of Macondo, the baby is eaten by the ants, and the manuscripts are finally deciphered. As Melquíades had announced to Aureliano Segundo, the manuscripts could be understood only when they had reached one hundred years. By now it is evident that the manuscripts contain the story of the family—that is, the novel itself. After seeing the remains of his child as “a dry and bloated bag of skin,” Aureliano remembers the prophetic line: “The first of the line is tied to a tree and the last is being eaten by the ants” (381). It is now that Melquíades's code is revealed to Aureliano as he realizes that his own destiny is also found in the manuscripts: “Aureliano . . . 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” (383).

The text's awareness of itself as literature becomes a key to the understanding of the mythic-historical essence of the novel. Metafiction forces readers into an awareness of writing and of the process of making a text as it simultaneously challenges them to an understanding of themselves. Seen in this manner, the metaplot synthesizes the seemingly opposite historic and mythical dimensions of the text.

Can *One Hundred Years* be at once a mythical novel and a historical novel? García Márquez tells us yes; in fact, only through these two dimensions can we apprehend the Latin American reality. Historical writing is a recording of the past and implies self-understanding through the remembering of that past. Myths, by contrast, allow self-understanding through the telling of tales that seek to explain who we are. The Buendía family's story is recorded for posterity as history but is cast in the language of myth

and preserved as literature through the manuscripts of Melquíades. Melquíades's manuscripts become a lesson in how to read; many generations of the Buendía family do not know how to interpret his writings, their past, and thus are unable to gain control of their destinies.

In *One Hundred Years* metafiction challenges the reader to an understanding of the story of Latin America as it is told through myth and through the myths of history. The manuscripts as metafictional documents become a literary metaphor of what the mythical and the historical dimensions of the text have already told us: only in self-understanding can we meet the challenge of the Latin American predicament. Thus, Melquíades's manuscripts retell the story of the Buendía family as a story meant to be reread, examined, and retold. A metafictional reading of García Márquez's novel makes students better readers of literature in general and gives them an opportunity to see themselves in the mirror of Melquíades's manuscripts.