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A Rain to Remember: How Magical Realism Reclaims Forgotten History

In the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, author Gabriel García Márquez expertly uses magical realism to explore the harsh reality of colonialism in rural communities. The exploration of this idea can be found in a nearly five-year-long rainstorm in the fictional town of Macondo that washes away the wrongdoings of colonialists. The novel begins with the formation of Macondo and explores over one hundred years of the town's growth through the eyes of the founders, the Buendia family. The town grows slowly and peacefully except for family drama until a series of civil wars and industrial inventions cause Macondo to be discovered by outsiders. Soon after, a large company from North America colonizes Macondo, exploits its land and labor, and murders most of its residents. The fictional story resembles a historical event called the Banana Massacre, which takes place in Columbia, Márquez's home country, in the year 1928 where residents are murdered for standing up against an American-owned banana company. In the telling of the fictional events that take place in Macondo, I argue that Márquez uses characteristics of magical realism, later explored by Wendy B. Faris in "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction," to point to the reality of colonialism and its negative impacts on rural communities in an effort to reclaim it from forgotten history.

Placing Márquez's novel in the genre of magical realism is easy as it uses many of the characteristics described by Faris. However, two particular characteristics stand out: the use of extensive details that refer to historical events that are often not authorized accounts, and an object that takes on a life of its own. First, Márquez details the events of the "banana plague" (Solitude 229) and the massacre that ensues. In his account, he uses such extensive detail that it is impossible not to recognize the historical reference if you are familiar with the official account as well as feel its importance. Moreover, the long rain that comes next is detailed as lasting for "four years, eleven months, and two days" (Solitude 315) pointing to its importance as well. In an interview with Peter Stone of *The Paris Review* in 1981, Márquez says "If you say that there are elephants flying in the sky, people are not going to believe you. But if you say that there are four hundred and twenty-five elephants flying in the sky, people will probably believe you." (Stone) which reveals, once again, that his use of extensive details in the novel is purposeful. He wants to ensure that the events are seen as especially important and to be believed.

When Márquez extends the rain in Macondo for an improbable amount of time it becomes important to the story as an "element of magic" (Faris 167) or an object of magic, which leads to the secondary magical characteristic we pull from Faris. In the book, Faris says "word-objects ... take on a special sort of textual life" (Faris 170) or an object takes on a life of its own. The rain, now a magical being christened "the banana company hurricane" (Solitude 331), begins to commit destructive acts around the town. For example, it ruins the funeral of a respected colonel, drowns animals, and silences the remaining residents by trapping them in their homes. But, more importantly, it "seemed to have ... blown away" (Solitude 330) most traces of the colonizers and the massacre. In a way, the rain's destruction of Macondo brings to mind the expression "insult to injury" because it is unleashed by Mr. Brown, the banana company

superintendent, who, in order to wash away his wrongdoings, also destroys the few positive benefits brought to the town such as the banana farm and the company's installations. To further the idea of a "washing away" of wrongdoings, Márquez describes the mission of the soldiers who were left behind after the banana company's staff and their families had gone. For an estimated six months, under the guise of emergency services, the soldiers brainwash the town's remaining residents or kill the ones who still remember the massacre in an effort to wash it from history. When the residents "finally accepted" the "official version" (Solitude 309) the soldiers are gone as are the traces of the events that took place in Macondo.

To fully understand how the use of the two aforementioned characteristics of magical realism reclaim the history of colonialism and its negative effects, we must briefly go back to the beginning when Márquez tells of an outsider who arrives in Macondo named Mr. Herbert. Mr. Herbert is hyper-focused on the bananas produced in Macondo. So much so that he can eat an abnormal number of bananas. Mr. Herbert is described as being "in the captive-balloon business" (Solitude 225) which brings back to mind Faris's additional description of extensive details as being anchored to historical events. In the book, she claims that history is "the weight that tethers the balloon of magic, as if to warn against too great of lightness of magical being" (Faris 170) and in much the same way, this is how Márquez warns us that Mr. Herbert and his large appetite, although somewhat magical is not as light-hearted as we may think. His arrival is a warning of the terrible events to come. Additionally, Márquez's emphasizes the naïveté of rural communities and how they can easily become exploited when Mr. Herbert is later described as not allowing anyone to "guess his intentions" (Solitude 226) or his secret agenda for Macondo despite his obvious methodical interest. To further this idea of naïveté, Márquez points out that the residents

are still unaware of what is happening over a year later despite the colonizers creating “colossal” (Solitude 227) changes to the town without asking for permission.

To understand Márquez’s motivation for reclaiming the history of colonialist destruction in rural communities, one has to look no further than his 1982 lecture “The Solitude of Latin America” where he not only tells of the lustful history of exploration in general but points out its effects in his homeland of Latin America. In the lecture, in true Márquez style, he details the tragic history of Latin America caused by gold lust, European soldiers of fortune, and colonization. But more importantly, he states that his country has “not had a moment’s rest” (Lecture 134) from turbulent times, and despite their rich culture, their lives have yet to be rendered as “believable” (Lecture 135) or seen as a people with their own well-earned history worth remembering. He continues to say that “in spite of this ... we respond with life” (Lecture 136) meaning his people refuse to be forgotten and they refuse to have their history washed away. He wraps up his speech with a wish for a world where “no one will be able to decide for others how they will die ... and where the races of the condemned will have at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth” which points directly back to the importance of the novel where his characters did not get either opportunity.

Unfortunately, the lessons of Márquez’s novel and speech did not take hold. In modern-day Latin America, Canadian imperialism wreaks destruction in rural towns, much like the banana company in Macondo. In the article “Imperialism and Resistance: Canadian Mining Companies in Latin America,” Todd Gordon and Jeffery R. Webber describe, in detail, the devastation caused by modern-day Canadian mining companies through their imperialistic endeavors, which easily bring back to mind the historical Banana Massacre and Macondo’s banana plague. They also explain how Canadian mining companies play “a central role in its

development” (Canadian 80) with little oversight and that “human rights organizations and trade unionist ... reported their concerns over Canadian companies’ complicity in atrocities carried out in the mining industry” (Canadian 79) yet little has changed. One can almost envision Canada’s “decrepit lawyers dressed in black” (Solitude 301) arriving in Columbia to magically wash away their wrongdoings. Gordon and Webber go on to explain that the “dispossession of land and resources” (Canadian 77) is the most brutal and violent in Columbia, Márquez’s home country. Furthermore, they list in numeric detail, the number of non-combatant deaths, massacres, and forced disappearances of the Columbian people since the mining companies arrived. While Gordon and Webber are focused on their conclusion, that emancipation in Latin America can only be achieved through mass movements of resistance, their desire to bring the issue to light so that Columbia and other Latin American countries can reclaim their land and identity could also be a slight nod to Macondo and Márquez.

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Márquez uses several characteristics of magical realism that are later analyzed by Faris. The most notable characteristics of Faris found in the novel are the use of extensive detail to reclaim an unauthorized account of a historical event and an object that takes on a life of its own. When Márquez combines the extensive details of the banana plague and massacre with the improbable long rain that takes on a life of its own, he points to their importance and believability by saying this happened and it should be remembered. He reinforces this idea later in his Nobel Lecture when he tells the history of exploration and exploitation since the day of Magellan and how it is still going on at the time he gives the lecture in 1982. Unfortunately, current history finds that these colonialism-style atrocities are still happening, and the worst cases are taking place in Márquez’s homeland of Latin America. Sadly, the continuation of the Banana Massacre, now under the guise of mining,

was known to Márquez before he died in 2014. In his absence, so he may get a “moment’s rest,” (Lecture 136) we must, with each long rain, remember the magic of his tale. Only then, will his history be reclaimed through our commitment to hold it close in our collective memory and his “opposite utopia,” (Lecture 136) with love and happiness for everyone, be possible.

Works Cited

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