

## Communist or Anti-Imperialist? The Personal Politics of Gabriel García Márquez

Lydia Nilsen

“The United States may be [my] enemy, but it’s a formidable adversary” (qtd. in Bell-Villada “Conversation”). This statement by Gabriel García Márquez offers a rare glimpse into the political philosophy of the author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Márquez’s novel is one of the most popular works ever published by a Latin American author, and its purpose has been debated fervently since its release. Many believe the book is a political and ideological statement, while other critics think of it as a humorous take on life in the quintessential Latin American town of Macondo. Macondo and its inhabitants are entirely fictional, but they are also a collage of characters inspired by García Márquez’s experiences (Ruch). Though the popularity of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has been widely attributed to its use of humor, its real purpose can be discovered in a study of Gabriel García Márquez’s political beliefs (Griffin 53). García Márquez has been known as a political activist ever since he gained fame for this novel. He has even been denied entry into the United States for some of his communist ties (Estorino). His views, however, are not clear, and the real question begs to be answered: is Gabriel García Márquez a true supporter of communism or a crusader against economic imperialism and military dictatorships? Upon exploration, one will understand that García Márquez does not fully embrace extreme leftist politics, but rather he only wishes to eradicate oppression of his Latin American people.

Gabriel García Márquez was born March 6, 1928, in Aracataca, Colombia. He was most influenced in childhood by his grandparents, Colonel Ricardo Márquez Mejía and Tranquilina Iguarán Cotes (Ruch). The Colonel was a liberal leader of the town and told young García Márquez stories of his personal struggles, influencing his grandson with his political philosophy. García Márquez himself considers his grandfather “my umbilical cord with history and reality” (Simons). His grandmother, Tranquilina, was a superstitious woman who told García Márquez fantastic myths about his heritage. She would tell her tales about the most unbelievable phenomena, but with a completely straight delivery. García Márquez would later credit her as the inspiration for his storytelling style, the “magical realism” found in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as well as in his other works (Ruch).

During his early education, García Márquez discovered Marxist and socialist theory taught by liberal teachers at boarding school in Zipaquirá, near Bogotá (Estorino). However, James Higgins believes García Márquez has always rejected “hard-line Marxist dogmatism” and his one flirtation with the official Communist party was extremely brief (35). He spent ten years at this school before moving on to National University with a major in law, where he studied for two years before abandoning his college education to pursue a career in journalism. While attending National University in 1948, he began to write for the liberal newspaper *El Universal*; this foray into journalism was his first of many throughout his literary career (Minta 38). At this time the leader of the Liberal party in Colombia, Gaitán, was assassinated; from 1949 to 1962, almost a quarter of a million Colombians would be slaughtered by the regime of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (Ruch). García Márquez left Colombia on assignment in 1955, but these events in his homeland greatly affected his ideas regarding militaristic countries (Higgins 34-35).

In 1959, García Márquez covered the Cuban Revolution for a newspaper based in Caracas. Following the revolution, he joined the Cuban news agency, Prensa Latina. He became friends with communist leader Fidel Castro, a fascinating relationship that has continued to the present day (Ruch). He moved to New York while working for the Cuban newspaper, but he became disillusioned by some of the maneuvers of Fidel Castro and his Communist party within Cuba and quit. García Márquez then moved on to Mexico City, where he continued with his

journalism and honed his novel writing skills; he eventually gained fame with the publishing of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967 (Estorino).

García Márquez was particularly influenced by his grandfather, who was a radical liberal by all accounts. He was also shaped by the unspeakable actions of the military dictators, such as General Pinilla during the 1950s. However, García Márquez's liberal leanings are mild compared to his vision of his native land of Latin America as a land free of domination by outside forces. "Superpowers and other outsiders have fought over us for centuries," he says (Simons). He wants to see Latin American countries develop themselves, not be victims of dictators like General Pinilla and imperialists like those in the United States. Around 1975, he even "helped found and support HABEAS, an organization dedicated to correcting the abuses of Latin American power and freeing political prisoners" (Ruch). The purpose of this party, founded by García Márquez while he was in Mexico City, was to help free political prisoners; in 1982, he even stood up against his friend Fidel Castro and helped liberate the poet Armando Valladares from a Cuban prison (Minta 63). García Márquez has tried to use the power of his popularity within Colombia to stop the militarist governments from oppressing Colombian citizens. Many people see his publicized friendship with Cuban communist leader Fidel Castro as a sign of his strict communist beliefs. However, this relationship is not indicative of García Márquez's politics in any way; in fact, he spent part of the 1970s working on a novel about the flaws of Castro's regime and life in Cuba. This book is yet to be published, as García Márquez is planning to wait until Cuba-U.S. relations improve (Ruch). Nevertheless, Maria Estorino claims that García Márquez believes in socialist democracy, especially as the best course of development for Latin America. This belief appears to derive from experiences with the cruelty of right-wing dictators in Latin America. García Márquez has developed his own image of the best system for his people from European examples of socialism, such as France, Sweden, and other Scandinavian countries. He carries distaste for capitalism that has its roots in the American economic imperialism he experienced secondhand through the stories of his grandparents. García Márquez holds certain ideological beliefs that lean to the left; however, he wants freedom from subjugation for Latin Americans before any type of communistic society.

Gabriel García Márquez is known to use his works of literature as a "vehicle for his political sentiments", and the same is true for his most acclaimed novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Simons). The novel was released in 1967 and is known as one of the most famous Latin American novels in literary history. It is famous for its entertaining depiction of Latin American culture. However, many events in the novel, a chronicle of one hundred years in the fictional town of Macondo, have clear political statements within them. The character of Colonel Aureliano Buendía, the banana strike and massacre, and the evolution of the town of Macondo itself all evoke real political situations that arose throughout the history of Colombia.

Colonel Aureliano Buendía is the single most influential character in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; he is present in some form or another from the first to the last chapter of the great novel (Wood 79). At first, he is a man driven to help the liberal cause in the civil war when he sees his father-in-law, after counting the ballots of a local election, replace some of the liberal votes with conservative ones. He then proclaims himself Colonel of the Liberal army, and proceeds to fight - and lose - dozens of battles against the conservative government. On one hand, it would appear the Marquez is sketching Aureliano as the quintessential liberal leader, a moral man who is motivated to fight against the violence of the conservative government. Marquez would undoubtedly support a man such as this in real life. His power grows, however, and eventually he becomes so self-important and ruthless that the critic Michael Wood describes him as a "Shakespearean tyrant, wishing a rival dead and then executing the eager lieutenant who

anticipates his wish" (82). Even though Aureliano gets involved in the war with good intentions, he gets "lost in the solitude of his immense power" (Marquez 181). Betraying his true feelings, Aureliano proclaims happily, "The important thing is that from now on we'll be fighting only for power" (183). Colonel Gerineldo Marquez is a close family friend of the Buendias and has this conversation with Aureliano in Chapter Seven of the novel:

"Tell me something old friend: why are you fighting?"

"What other reason could there be?" Colonel Gerineldo Marquez answered. "For the great Liberal party."

"You're lucky because you know why," he answered. "As far as I'm concerned, I've come to realize only just now that I'm fighting because of pride." (148-149)

Colonel Gerineldo Marquez later contradicts Aureliano during a treaty signing. Immediately, Aureliano orders him tried at the revolutionary court, where he is condemned to death. Only when Ursula intervenes and threatens her own son's life does Aureliano stop the execution. Much like the fictional Colonel Aureliano Buendia, the real-life conservative General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla would kill both his rivals and confidantes regularly. He would be in charge of a military that executed hundreds of thousands of Colombian "traitors" throughout the 1950s. Young Gabriel Garcia Marquez escaped Colombia in 1955, but he was an unfortunate witness to *la violencia*, as the era was called (Ruch). Marquez was undoubtedly influenced by Pinilla and other military dictators like him when developing the tyrannical personality of Colonel Aureliano Buendia.

Perhaps the most obvious connection between the world of Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the real world of Latin American history is the economic imperialism of the banana company and the violent banana strike massacre that followed it. In the novel, the banana company arrives, led by an American Mr. Brown, and proceeds to industrialize the town of Macondo; many real Latin American towns were modernized by foreigners in much the same way. People are given good jobs, the town becomes more technologically advanced, and the Americans, or "gringos," who own the company profit handsomely from the production of bananas. The inhabitants of Macondo do not fully accept the Americans, and Colonel Aureliano Buendia is almost prophetic in his humorous complaint: "Look at the mess we've got ourselves into, just because we invited a gringo to eat some bananas" (Marquez 246). Eventually, the banana company starts to take advantage of the workers, and the labor conditions force the townspeople to rise up in a strike, the absolute climax of the novel (Bell-Villada "Banana Strike" 128). This passage contains some of the most vivid descriptions of violence imaginable:

Swept down by the wave of bullets...the panic became a dragon's tail as one compact wave ran against another which was moving in the opposite direction, toward the other dragon's tail in the street across the way, where the machine guns were also firing without cease (Marquez 329).

Gene H. Bell-Villada, in his essay about the banana strike, describes this event: "It is a vivid and dramatic scene, packed with sociopolitical suspense, capped with sanguinary horror" (127). Garcia Márquez seems to have created the banana company and the banana strike massacre directly from the accounts he received from his fellow Colombians; he exaggerated, as he does often in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the actual dramatic scene as well as the official death count. The United Fruit Company operated in Colombia and held "de facto power in that region" of the country (Bell-Villada 133). In 1928, the communist organizers held a strike against the company, where reportedly hundreds were slain by the conservative government army who backed the United Fruit Company. Garcia Márquez has taken the liberty of increasing the hundreds dead to thousands in his novel, but the essential facts of the uprising remain surprisingly similar. This massacre was talked about often by his grandfather, who was an enthusiastic liberal supporter (Ruch). It was one

of the clearest examples of American economic imperialism and military oppression that had ever personally touched García Márquez. He later used his literary fame from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to fight the kinds of political problems that caused the banana strike massacre.

Gabriel García Márquez wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for many reasons. It is apparent that one of these reasons was to teach his readers about Latin American history and to make his political opinions known in the process. He wants to see his fellow countrymen fight against the dictators who repress them; he also wants imperialist countries, such as the United States, to abstain from setting up businesses in developing countries. García Márquez does not believe in communism, or even in socialist rhetoric (Ruch). His ideas respond to his own experiences and do not follow a particular policy; they “express themselves in reactions and sentiments rather than as a coherent doctrine” (Simons). García Márquez wants to see political change in Latin America – not necessarily violent – but a wave against the current of military dictatorship that has enveloped the continent as a whole for centuries. However, it seems that “his ultimate concern is the promotion of human rights and peaceful existence” (Estorino). It is evident that García Márquez uses the characters and events within his masterpiece novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to promote change for all the residents of his homeland.

#### Works Cited

- Bell-Villada, Gene H. “A Conversation with Gabriel García Márquez.” *Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude: A Casebook*. Ed. Gene H. Bell-Villada. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 17-24.
- “Banana Strike and Military Massacre: One Hundred Years of Solitude and What Happened in 1928.” *Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude: A Casebook*. Ed. Gene H. Bell-Villada. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 127-138.
- Estorino, Maria R. *Gabriel García Márquez and His Approach to History*. Loyola University. 1994. 13 Oct. 2005 <<http://www.loyno.edu/history/journal/1994-5/Estorino.htm>>.
- Franco, Jean. “The Limits of the Liberal Imagination: One Hundred Years of Solitude And Nostromo.” *Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude: A Casebook*. Ed. Gene H. Bell-Villada. New York: Oxford University Press, 91-108.
- Griffin, Clive. “The Humor of One Hundred Years of Solitude.” *Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude: a Casebook*. Ed. Gene H. Bell-Villada. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 53-66.
- Higgins, James. “Gabriel García Márquez: Cien Anos de Soledad.” *Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude: A Casebook*. Ed. Gene H. Bell-Villada. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 33-52.
- García Márquez, Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. New York: Harper Collins, 1998.
- Minta, Stephen. *García Márquez: Writer of Columbia*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.
- Rinco, Carlos. “Streams Out of Control: The Latin American Plot.” *Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude: A Casebook*. Ed. Gene H. Bell-Villada. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 153-172.
- Ruch, Allen B. “García Márquez - Biography.” 2 Jun. 2003. *The Modern Word*. 12 Oct. 2005 <[http://www.themodernword.com/gabo/gabo\\_biography.html](http://www.themodernword.com/gabo/gabo_biography.html)>.
- Simons, Marlise. “A Talk with Gabriel García Márquez.” *New York Times*. 5 Dec 1982. 13 Oct 2005. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/06/15/reviews/marquez-talk.html>>.
- Wood, Michael. “Aureliano’s Smile.” *Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude: A Casebook*. Ed. Gene H. Bell-Villada. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 79-90.

Zavala, Iris M. "One Hundred Years of Solitude as Chronicle of the Indies." *Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude: A Casebook*. Ed. Gene H. Bell-Villada. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 109-125.