

A story of Latin American colonialism: life and death of José Arcadio Buendía

2nd essay to the course Nationalism and the Novel

“The overall pattern of Latin American history, both as a general design made up of various key events and eras, and in the presence of specific characters and incidents that seem to refer to real people and happenings” lurks according to Gonzalez-Echevarría in the background of numerous pieces of Latin American fiction (19). Arguments about validity of this Echevarría’s contention could be led. It, however, very much applies to the life of José Arcadio Buendía in Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Story of Arcadio’s life in many respects resembles the (hi)story of Latin American colonialism as a whole.

The beginning of José Arcadio’s story is a story of an ending. A violent ending of an innocent life. José Arcadio kills Prudencio Aguilar for an offence. Soon after the murder José Arcadio, however, sees Prudencio’s ghost. He tells it to leave; it doesn’t. Since Prudencio’s ghost does not seem to disappear, José Arcadio decides to leave himself, and ultimately founds Macondo. Another ending – ending of his old life in his birthplace is the best way to make away with the ghost, believes José Arcadio. The ghost of Prudencio, however, will *not* go away that way either – or to be accurate will *go away with* Arcadio. He will be in fact José Arcadio’s companion to his very last days. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is thus basically a book about forgetting the past because José Arcadio Buendía primarily settles Macondo to forget that he has killed Prudencio Aguilar (FREE Study Guide...). And the first aspect of the parallel between the story of Arcadio’s life and the story of Latin America as a whole reveals itself: José Arcadio is genuinely like a colonist on a leave from his former home who, however, unwillingly brings the home - in the presence of Prudencio’s ghost - with him to the new places that he discovers. Just like European colonists on their way from Europe (often unwillingly) brought with them to the New World “ghosts” (e.g. various repressive institutions, traditions etc.) from their European home.

Not only the legacy of colonist's own past but also the past the colonists had left to contemporary Latin America reveals itself in José Arcadio's story. After an exhausting journey through a bush Arcadio bumps into a wreck of a galleon – reminder of both the Spanish that years before came to Latin America and killed the indigenous peoples and the English who later attacked the Spanish (ibid.).

Yet another reminder of the past is the armor José Arcadio found in a riverbed at the end of his hunt for gold. This testimony of forgotten battles is found in a place which seems to be completely intact by man. The reader of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* thus together with José Arcadio discovers that we are almost never able to discover an entirely new place a place without history. The history may be buried under hosts of mud at the bottom of a riverbed as the armor, or hidden in a jungle as the wreck of the galleon. But once it may reveal itself to us and alter our very present: José Arcadio could no more hold a view of himself as undertaking an enterprise of discovering and creating something utterly new after the findings of the armor and the galleon.

To take the parallel to the level of whole Latin America, numerous moments of Latin American history may be barely remembered. Once they may, however, as the galleon or the armor did, suddenly arise (or be arisen) from the history. Consider for instance the Bolivarian nationalism of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez to take a striking example of a past becoming very present.¹

José Arcadio nevertheless did not find on his way to the new life only the old. His journey to Macondo as well as the exploration of surrounding area must have also been a real adventure, he was definitely experiencing something truly *new*. To continue with our parallel, his journeys must have been equally adventurous as the adventures of real colonists who came to the jungles of Latin America from Europe. And Arcadio not only shared with the colonists their adventures², he also had with them in common a kind of crazy curiosity, obsession with new discoveries. The resemblance of Arcadio's story with Latin American history is especially manifested in his painstaking search for gold, an obsession which was so typical for colonists who came to Latin America.

¹ For more detail see Hugo Chávez and Bolívar.

² Arcadio's fruitless search for sea which ended up in a place nearby swamp very much resembles Columbus's search for India which ended up in finding America.

In addition José Arcadio shares with the colonists both the adventures of *exploration* of the new and the effort to *build* something new. He is the one who planned the town of Macondo. And he planned it well: each house received the same amount of sun and had the same degree of accessibility to water and the almond trees planted in the time of foundation of Macondo endured through all the numerous historical storms that went through Macondo (Márquez 1998: 43). Some carefully constructed aspects of Arcadio's projects can thus be termed a good and durable legacy as well as some vestiges of colonial rule (like systems of infrastructure) can also be termed so.

Arcadio's activities, however, ended up not only in beneficial results: he wasted much (if not most) of his energy on foolish plans neglecting the important. "Instead of going around thinking about your crazy inventions, you should be worrying about your sons. Look at the state they're in, running wild just like donkeys." (ibid.: 31) Úrsula had to remind Arcadio of existence of his own sons at the time when the older Arcadio was already fourteen. José Arcadio wasted enormous time melting golden coins into a worthless scrap and then even more time only to get the gold back. The one who took care of Buendía's family house and organized most of its renovations was again Úrsula and not the father of the family Arcadio as we would have expected. José Arcadio Buendía in fact lived most of his life in the promises of the future and his fantasies rather than dealing with here and now.

We can read that at times

José Arcadio Buendía did not have a moment's rest. Fascinated by an immediate reality that came to be more fantastic than the vast universe of his imagination, he lost all interest in the alchemist's laboratory, put to rest the material that had become attenuated with moths of manipulation, and went back to being an enterprising man of earlier days when he had decided upon the layout of the streets and the location of the new houses so that no one would enjoy privileges that everyone did not have. (ibid: 42)

This, however, did not happen very often.

It is possible to say that José Arcadio's life was a life of a man constantly balancing on the edge between reality and fantasy and utopia, which again in a way resembles the story of colonists who came to Latin America. With dreams of an edenic New world in their mind they were at times

fascinated by the chimeras and projects of their imagination while being at other times absorbed by the “magic” of Latin American reality itself.

We can generally see that José Arcadio Buendía is an ultimately ambiguous character. Several other contradictions apart from the aforementioned opposition of his wild fantasy and sense for reality can be traced in his life. He for example, in spite of being the founder of the town, not long after its settling wants to move it somewhere else because its position no more seems convenient to him (ibid.: 13). Or he can be as well a harmless inventor hidden in his laboratory and as a stubborn and cruel man as when he kills Prudencio or basically rapes Úrsula.

A parallel between ambiguous and contradictory life and legacy of José Arcadio and equally ambiguous activity and legacy of colonial rule in Latin America once more offers itself. Both many evident mistakes made and advances achieved by José Arcadio as well as both many accomplishments and wrongs created by colonists can be cited. Few would, however, brand José Arcadio as a clearly positive or negative character. And the same ambiguity applies to the colonial rule.

No matter how the final assessment of the ambiguous legacy of José Arcadio’s life, or in the metaphorical level of the colonial rule, may turn out, what is nevertheless interesting is the fact, that the story of José Arcadio’s life ends as it begins: with the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar. The distinction between the “ghostly” and the “real” world is, however, far from being a clear one. Many passages of the book indicate that José Arcadio suffers from a mental disease – which he even himself admits – (ibid.: 92) and the phantoms he sees seem to be mere wanderings of an old insane man. The one who takes care of José Arcadio in his last days is obviously Úrsula, but for Arcadio Prudencio Aguilar was the only person “with whom he was able to have contact for a long time” (ibid.: 152), they were talking about fighting cocks and “it was Prudencio Aguilar who cleaned him, fed him, and brought him splendid news of an unknown person called Aureliano who was a colonel in the war.” (ibid.) The magical world of José Arcadio or virtually the whole novel is nevertheless definitely not solely a Márquez’s invention. It in fact very much reflects Colombian or Latin American *reality*. “The world Gabo writes about, the one they call magical realism, is actually real; it’s the one we live in,”

(Anderson: 11) says Mirtha Buelvas, a social psychologist from Barranquilla – a Colombian city where Márquez spent a part of his life and some of his relatives live. The belief in the supernatural world is present not only in José Arcadio's life or in the town of Macondo, but in the Latin America itself.

Independently on the *nature* of the character of Prudencio – be it real or ghostly – the fact is that he *is present* in Arcadio's life. And here we get back to the beginning: as was already said, although José Arcadio went to found Macondo basically to get rid of Prudencio, he *had not* left. Arcadio's future is inescapable. Márquez's storytelling is in a way deterministic – there is no way consequences of our decisions can be avoided. And a final parallel between Arcadio's story and the story of Latin American colonialism arises: some decisions as the destruction of indigenous Latin American civilizations by the colonists simply can never be taken back just like Arcadio's murder of Prudencio could have never been taken back.

Several examples of similarity between José Arcadio Beundía's life and the (hi)story of Latin American colonialism have been cited. We can read in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* about the vain attempts to get rid of ghosts “of the old life”, the balancing on the edge between reality and utopia, the great ambiguity of colonial legacy leaving behind both the beneficial and the futile, and the inescapability of the consequences of our late decisions. An overall pattern of Latin American history undeniably lurks in the background of Arcadio's story. Even though this pattern of Arcadio's life as well as of history of Latin America as a whole has been here so far presented to be a rather predestined one, it in fact contains much space for free choice: José Arcadio *could have* at many turning points decided differently, even when later constrained by his previous decisions he still had room to head off to different directions. The question is if we take advantage of the good and bad lessons hidden in José Arcadio Beundía's story.

Literature

Anderson, J.L. (1999): „The Power of Gabriel García Márquez“, *New Yorker*, September 27.

FREE Study Guide-100 Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez-CHAPTER ONE SUMMARY-Free Online Chapter Summary Book Notes Plot Synopsis Chapter Summary Notes Essay Book Report Themes, on-line text (<http://pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pm100Years11.asp>); checked 11.6.2007.

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Márquez, G., G. (1998): *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, New York, HarperCollins.