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### No One Writes to the Colonel

The novel *No One Writes to the Colonel* is written by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a Colombian writer and journalist. Recognized mainly for his novels and short stories, he also wrote narrative non-fiction, speeches, reports, film reviews and memoirs. He was part of the Latin American Boom group that included other writers such as Julio Cortazar, Octavio Paz, among others. In most of his books he talks about some themes such as loneliness, the imaginary town 'Macondo', which is Gabriel's hometown Aracataca, also in his stories talks about violence and culture. This story is about a colonel who fought his last battle in the civil war of Colombia and, since then, he has been waiting for his retirement pension for more than fifteen years. Every Friday he goes down to the village to wait for the letter that will change his fortune. The colonel lives with his wife in a house on the outskirts of the village. Their son Agustín died, leaving them a fighting rooster as their only inheritance, which, according to his wife, was the cause of his death. For the colonel the rooster represents, besides the pension that never arrives, the possible salvation to his

misery and the hopes of the whole town. The message that the author wants to expose to the reader is the situation that Colombia was going through in the 1950s, where the political, economic and social problems and the abandonment by the government of Colombia led to hunger, misery, guerrillas, and violence. The author shows us this reality through a series of facts, such as the curfew, censorship in the newspapers, clandestine cockfights, how hard the authorities were shown inside the town, etc. It also shows this reality through the misery in which the colonel and his wife lived, to the point of selling all their possessions to get a little food necessary for subsistence. The Colonel is waiting for a letter which is his pension for his years of service in the Colombian civil war better known as The War of a Thousand Days, "The Thousand Days' War was a Civil War fought in Colombia between the years of 1899 and 1902. The basic conflict behind the war was the conflict between liberals and conservatives, so it was an ideological war as opposed to a regional one, and it divided families and was fought all over the nation. After about 100,000 Colombians had died, both sides called a halt to the fighting" (Minster). The letter that never arrives also signifies the injustice of the state and the corruption of the government, which does not take into consideration the efforts and sacrifices that the Colonel represented for his country. This novel reflects on the loneliness, love and hope that the protagonist had despite the critical situations he was going through at home and the crisis the country of Colombia was facing. This novel has a main focus on the

situation that Colombia was going through in the 50's which is known as "La violencia."

In this novel Garcia Marquez touches on a subject from which his country of origin suffers, violence. " 'La Violencia' -concepto empleado para explicar la violenta confrontación fratricida desarrollada entre las décadas del cuarenta y sesenta del siglo XX, impulsada por el bipartidismo, la lucha entre colonos y terratenientes, y la aparición del bandolerismo" (Ibagon, p.47). At the beginning of the story we can see how the colonel is getting ready to go to a funeral, while he is getting ready, his wife makes a comment to him about his outfit and said that he looked like he was going to a "special event". So he says, "This burial is a special event, it's the first death from natural causes which we've had in many years" (p.12). Here we can see that for the colonel it is something special since this death was not due to aggression or any type of violence, which in those times was very common for a death to be due to violence. Also at the beginning of the novel the narrator makes a reference of the colonel and his reason for keeping the rooster and also to the death of his son, "He was sure that this argument justified his determination to keep the rooster, a legacy from their son who was shot down nine months before at the cock- fights for distributing clandestine literature" (p.20). The colonel's son was a messenger and shared information against the government when that was very punishable, there was no freedom of expression. He was another victim of the violence in Colombia. The curious thing is that after Agustin's death the colonel took his place since he had

nothing to lose and had nothing to do but go to the port with hopes of receiving his pension letter. Also, nobody was going to suspect him since he was a veteran and was just a poor old man. We can also see the violence in the roosters since there were clandestine fights and the colonel's rooster inherited by his son Agustin was the strongest of all, it was like the last hope for the colonel economically and for the people of a change of government, "They said the rooster didn't belong to us but to the whole town" (p.91). Another theme we can see is the injustice of the government in wartime, even if it is a civil war in the 50's we can see how the government has abandoned the people and its people. The precarious situation of the colonel and his wife is the consequence of years of neglect by a State that, instead of recognizing and granting the pensions they deserved and promised, abandons them. The protagonist, who has been waiting for fifteen years for his financial compensation for having participated in the civil war, must undergo an old age marked by tragedy and hunger.

In the novel, the fundamental axis that structures the colonel's life is the wait for his pension, delayed for more than fifteen years. For the protagonist, this represents a well-deserved payment for his commitment in the civil wars and, moreover, the only way he finds to live a dignified old age. Although the protagonist's social and historical life is monotonous and static as it revolves around this possibility of receiving the pension, there is nevertheless a hope for change, an illusion that things can improve. In this sense, the character's routine takes the form of a ritual;

for the colonel, repeating actions identically every week is a strategy of maintaining hope. For the protagonist, wishing for change is the most effective way to bring about change. Along with the colonel, other characters sustain the hope of changing the people and the world in which they live. Thus, Agustín's fellow militants continue to disseminate clandestine material, because they insist on changing a society oppressed by a violent regime, “ “Authoritative sources estimate that more than 200,000 persons lost their lives in the period between 1946 and 1964. The most spectacular aspect of the violence, however, was the extreme cruelty perpetrated on the victims, which has been a topic of continuing study for Colombians” (Britannica). In the novel, collective and individual destiny depend on hope and patience. The people and its members maintain hope despite the daily disappointments, because, at some point, they feel, something will happen. This hopeful future, although also uncertain, may be related to the arrival of the letter announcing the colonel's pension, the triumph of the rooster or the victory of the urban resistance. This faith that the hardships will be left behind encloses the possibility of improvement and overcoming. We can also say that another theme of this novel is dignity. Despite the poverty and misery that besiege the couple, the protagonist offers a noble image of himself. In this sense, *No One Writes to the Colonel* shows that, in the face of the state system's laxity, political violence and corruption, there are still ways to carry on with dignity in the face of suffering and injustice. At one point in the novel the wife complains to him about the letter not arriving and tells him, “One must have the

patience of an ox, as you do, to wait for a letter for fifteen years,” to which the colonel answers, “We have to wait our turn, our number is 1823” (p.37). Here we can see that the colonel does not lose his dignity in that the letter is going to reach such a point that he does not care what his wife tells him. There is also another point in the novel where the colonel and his wife have nothing to eat and he puts some stones in the pot so that the neighbors don't think they have nothing to eat. Finally, you can also see the dignity of the colonel at the end of the novel when he decides to keep the rooster because he realizes that the rooster is a representation for the people and is part of the community. Faced with the corrupt gestures of Don Sabas, willing to resell the animal and thus profit from the colonel's situation, the protagonist prefers to keep his image, even if it means perpetuating the misery he suffers.

In this novel we have some symbols that have a value for the characters. The first symbol is the rooster and it has a different value for some characters, for Agustin's parents it represents their relationship of parents to son but also for them it symbolizes an economic hope. For Agustin's friends it represents change, that is to say a hope that there will be a change in the government and in the people. Another symbol that we have in the story is the umbrella at the beginning of the novel. The umbrella represents the passing of time and the decadence that the colonel's family is going through. At the beginning of the novel, his wife observes that, of the old and elegant family umbrella, only the metallic ribs remain. Thus, it shows that time and

the precarious life of the family are capable of transforming an object as distinguished and valuable as an umbrella into a ruined, worthless piece, "The colonel, his wife, and their son Agustin - who was then eight - watched the show until the end, seated under the umbrella. Now Agustin was dead, and the bright satin material had been eaten away by the moths" (p.10). Another symbol that we can see and that is important is the pension letter. The letter symbolizes the colonel's hope that his pension will arrive. Despite the years without a reply, the protagonist trusts that the public institutions will finally manage to send him his well-deserved pension. This attitude exhibits a certain frankness, which shows him incapable of resignation or of actively taking action. In the novel, this symbol also functions as a critique of the government system and its inefficiency. Thus, the absence of the letter exhibits the unfulfilled promises of the State and the brutal consequences of this injustice. Another symbol I could see is the dead man at the beginning of the novel since he represents the first natural death in a long time, that is to say, not due to violence, that is why the colonel sees it as something important since the government had nothing to do with it.

No one writes to the colonel is an interesting story as it is a criticism by Gabriel Garcia Marquez of the Colombian government for the violence in the country. The context of this story is the war of the thousand days and the civil war in the 50's called "La violencia" .The violence that reigns in the town of the novel is

replicated within the colonel's family. Thus, the story of Agustín, the dead son of the protagonist and his wife, emerges in fragments; first, we know only that the boy died young, then, the narrator puts this death in context that he was shot nine months earlier for distributing clandestine information. This novel also touches on themes such as hope, dignity and injustice. This novel was very easy to read since the author uses simple sentences, also what is interesting to me is that he makes a reference to the book *100 Years of Solitude* when he mentions Colonel Aureliano Buendia since the main character served under Colonel Buendia's orders. *No One Writes to the Colonel* was a fun and interesting book to read even though it touched on sad topics such as the violence in the country of Colombia and the abandonment by the government, so far it is one of my favorite books.



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