

Balthazar's marvelous afternoon essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Marquez's story about a poor carpenter and his magnificent birdcage has been the object of much critique and the presumed underlying connotations of this fable-like tale have been subjected to such detailed scrutiny as to border on the absurd. When reading stories of this caliber, we are faced with two possible ways of assessing them. The first is of course a simple critique, the end result of which can be categorized into various forms of likes and dislikes, without going into exhaustive analysis of the deeper meaning of the story.

The second form of assessment evaluates the story in light of any potential connotations, hidden implications or vague allusions that in some ways lend themselves to interpretation. In the realm of academia it is a tool used to awaken and sharpen the intellectual faculty of students, and while this in itself should not be assigned any disparaging censure, there are individuals who hold the opinion that in some instances, too much emphasis is put upon this form of literary assessment. The old saying: "Let sleeping dogs lie" may be applied to many great stories.

If it is pleasing to the inner bliss of the reader, leave it at that; don't try to analyze or interpret it for hidden implications. Balthazar's *Marvelous Afternoon* is one of those beguiling stories which may force a reader into a realm of deeper contemplation that often leads to different conclusions by different readers. Thus, an English speaking person reading the story translated from Spanish to English, may well arrive at different theories as to the deeper meaning of the story than a native Latin American, reading the same in Spanish, and whose knowledge and understanding of the environment outlined in the story, is superior.

Assuming the author has written the story with built-in deeper meanings, the following is an example of a potential interpretation of some of the possible underlying connotations. One of the first questions we may ask is why the main character in the story is called ' Balthazar', the name of one of the three biblical wise men. Is there some hidden reason for this? Highly unlikely. The name is common in many Latin countries, but the author may indeed have chosen this name for the sake of getting the reader to consider some possible connotation.

The same can be said about Ursula's derogatory comment to her unshaven common-law husband, calling him a " Capuchin", which of course is her way of likening him to a hairy faced South American monkey. There are no distinctly coherent patterns in the story except for the slightly disguised references to Balthazar's social standing in the town. As with any small town, the society is distinctly stratified according to position, wealth and education.

Balthazar is a poor carpenter whose social standing is on the lower rung of the steps leading to privilege and recognition. His only claim to fame is his life-long ability to make bird cages and his two-week long effort to make a cage of outstanding beauty and quality was the chisel he used to momentarily break the social barrier that separated him from the wealthy. He had made an object that was a piece of fine art, and highly desirable. By not selling it to the town's medical doctor, whose wife desired it, he shows that he had other intentions with his creation.

Instead, he went to Chepe Montiel, one of the wealthy people in the town, reputed to be somewhat tight with his money, and in doing so he enters the

realm of the Holy Grail, where he otherwise would never be invited. He may have predicted he would fail to sell the cage to Chepe on the pretense that his son Pepe had contracted for it, but it enabled him to present it as a gift to Pepe. This would clearly insult Chepe, who well could afford to buy it. Was this Balthazar's way of showing disdain for the rich people?

Did Chepe perceive he was being called a cheapskate? His little devious scheme to show the town folks that he could sell his cage to a person who was known to be somewhat of a tightwad nearly failed, was it not for Pepe's temper tantrum. Pepe was allowed to keep the cage, but Balthazar didn't get any money. His subsequent celebration in a bar became his "marvelous afternoon" during which he received a great deal of recognition for "selling" the cage. Balthazar ends up in a whore house, drunk and deliriously happy, perhaps for the first time in his mundane life.

He departed, leaving his watch behind to secure payment for the bill on the following day, only to pass out in the street and though quite aware of being robbed of his shoes, he chooses not to interrupt his happy dream. No self-respecting town in most Latin countries will be without one or several whore houses. They occupy quite a different social status than that perceived by someone not familiar with daily life in this part of the world. They are places to go and drink and although the girls are there for a price, they will often just entertain a patron at the table or not bother him at all if he just came to have a few drinks..

It would not be anything out of the ordinary for a local resident to end up in such a place, except in Balthazar's case, it was the first time he did so. The

story clearly shows that art has a powerful authority in society, but ownership of fine art is often the prerogative of the wealthy. Art is an envoy that carries many messages. The purpose of it is to convey meaning and it does so in numerous ways. It glorifies or chastises, it immortalizes or angers, it hails or rejects, it evokes sadness or ecstasy, it reflects the worst or best of humanity. The quintessence of an artist's life is recognition of his ability and works of art.

Had Balthazar merely given his cage, which he incidentally did not consider a work of art, to some ordinary person, he would not have received any recognition beyond mere gratitude and his life would have continued its monotonous doldrums. By his manipulative actions, he managed to gain a moment of glory in his life, albeit with negative financial rewards. The fact that some ladies, walking to church for the early mass, encounters Balthazar passed out in the street and walk past him, thinking he was dead, speaks volumes to this writer and awakens memories of similar experiences in Central America.

The above interpretation of the story may be completely individual or quite in consensus with other interpreting readers, but there are some aspects of the author's intention with the story that perhaps warrant further enquiry. Did he write it in a manner meant to provoke readers to analyze the significance of what he wrote? Did he deliberately create a story that would be a godsend for critical literary analyst? Did he write it in such a manner that it would provoke argumentative and diverse interpretations? Did the author himself interpret an event, either imaginary or real?

If so, are we not like Ion, when Socrates[1] said to him : “ So you are interpreters of interpreters”. Readers may analyze it to a point of absurdity, finding preposterous meanings in even the simplest words and hailing the authors story as intriguing, brilliant, a masterpiece of prose, while the author's objective in reality was far simpler. Is it possible that Marquez's intent was no more than describing the events of a day in the life of Balthazar, without any deeper meaning than that perceived through mere casual reading? The real aim and meaning of the story is known only to the author. We are merely interpreters of the interpreter.