

Love in the time of cholera: a reflection on magical realism



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“ Forever” (Marquez, 1988: 352). Thanks to this simple word — Florentino Ariza’s answer to the Riverboat captain’s question when asked how long he intends to keep the boat going — it is not hard to understand why many critics would label *Love in the time of Cholera* a love story of astonishing power. Ariza’s answer as the last line in the book and its placement as the conclusion to the tale make it, for less romantically inclined readers, all the more cringe-worthy. Even the story’s main plot points appear to have been lifted directly from a shallow romantic novel or even its film adaptation — a love triangle that survives the test of time, a protagonist who makes it his life’s work to make himself worthy of his beloved, an ending which is ultimately a happy one. The novel’s short length does nothing to discredit these accusations of frivolity either. Yet if one were to fully examine the novel, one would find that Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s hailed masterpiece is exactly that, a masterpiece.

Thus, this essay will attempt to prove the credibility of the novel as a work of postmodernism. This will be done by examining various excerpts from the book and identifying the use of magic realism within them. Special attention will also be paid to the main characters of the novel and how they amount to far more than simple mannequins placed in romantic scenes. Besides this, an explanation of the context of the novel and how Latin American literature differs from its North American counterpart will be explored.

Garcia Marquez’s penchant for magical realism is seen throughout the novel and elevates the story above the common romance tale. With regard to a definition, Stephen Slemon makes note of the term’s oxymoronic nature and how it is itself a conflict between two forces (Slemon, 1988: 11). When <https://assignbuster.com/love-in-the-time-of-cholera-a-reflection-on-magical-realism/>

magical realism is employed in fiction, the two opposing natures of the fantastic and the realistic prevent each other from coming to their full fruition. Although the very concept of a force that endures the test of over half a century (Ariza's supposed undying love for Fermina Daza) is already an abnormal concept, the magic realism of Marquez's writing can be found in the reactions of his characters to the concept. This is witnessed early on in the novel at the wake of Dr Urbino. Florentino Ariza arrives and, after many of the guests have left, approaches Fermina Daza and once again declares his undying love for her. Daza, without emotion, simply tells him Ariza to go away and not return. This hints at the heavy use of magic realism throughout the rest of the novel. What could have been a heartfelt reaction to the power of love (magic) is instead brought back down to earth through a very realistic reaction (realism). If the novel were any other romantic story, the episode would have had a far more positive outcome.

Magical realism once again makes itself known through one of the core themes of the novel - love as a disease. During his first experience with love and Fermina Daza, Ariza experiences severe physical pain and is taken to the doctor by his mother, Transito Ariza, for treatment. Due to the ongoing epidemic happening at the time, the doctor mistakes Ariza's ailments for Cholera, not heartache. Once again, an abnormal force is met with a very realistic reaction.

Yet these moments are only the tip of the proverbial iceberg in the case of the novel's use of magic realism. Ariza's quest to make himself worthy of Fermina Daza can be seen as the story's greatest example of the magical in the real world. Although his belief that he will remain sexually pure until he

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has made Fermina Daza his own is admirable, it is not feasible in daily life. People change, including him. His meeting with Rosalba aboard the riverboat is the catalyst of this change: this first encounter with sex is brief and far from intimate yet still manages to sow the seed in his mind that sex is a feasible way in which to vent his yearning for Daza. This single encounter might be excusable as a minor hiccup in his quest for love, yet Ariza goes on to have sexual relations with over six hundred women, including a family relation. Ariza's addiction to the "healing" power of sex shows that the purity of an enduring love is impossible in the real world. It also shows that Marquez's novel is far more (or in this case less) than just an astonishing love story. It is a study of the nature of humanity and the fickleness of man.

Ariza's quest itself is littered with moments full of magic realism. His quest to find a submerged shipwreck full of gold seems as if it were taken directly from the pages of Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Christo* (Dumas, 1844). Unfortunately, Ariza's quest does not meet the same positive outcome as that of Edmond Dantes. The search for gold does not end with fortune, or danger, or even death. Instead, it ends with Ariza realizing that he has been led on by his guide, Euclides, the entire time. His betrayal at the hands of a boy once again demonstrates how any fantastic elements, including sunken ships full of treasure, will meet a very rational and chilling reaction.

Garcia Marquez's use of magic realism outside of the reaches of love demonstrates how *Love in the Time of Cholera* is far more than just a love story. The episode of Doctor Urbino's death and his relationship with his prized parrot show how magic realism can be used in all spheres of life. The <https://assignbuster.com/love-in-the-time-of-cholera-a-reflection-on-magical-realism/>

event of Urbino's death is dripping with metaphor, in the way that his prized parrot stands as a representation of his wife as well. The parrot, like Fermina, came from a poor background but was raised up by the aristocracy to become a subject to behold. The doctor's words may at first seem cryptic when he declares to the parrot that he "finally understands" (Marquez, 1988). However, his words can be interpreted as if they were being spoken to his wife instead. Urbino finally understands that his time with Fermina has come to an end; although his love for her was good and honourable (for the most part), it is time for him to release her and allow her to experience the love of a man who has cradled it for her fifty-one years. The exit of the bird also speaks to Urbino's character and his devout following of the church. His parrot leaves the earth the same way his savior did. Moments of such dramatic magnitude do not seem fitting, or even necessary in a conventional love story.

If anything, it is Garcia Marquez's subtle writing of the three main characters that speaks of the novel's depth as a romance. Florentino Ariza's determination to do anything to win the hand of Fermina is admirable, yet ultimately twisted. But this strange determination is thinly veiled by Marquez imagining Ariza as a timid and sickly looking underdog. Indeed, he does go through all the motions that a love struck young man would go through in order to prove his love, but these motions transform him into a madman. In his quest for love, he becomes a rapist, a murderer, a pedophile as well as a man who passively longs for the death of his beloved's husband so that he may court her as his own. In a conventional love triangle, Doctor Urbino would be taken as the antagonistic, secondary love interest. Yet he is so

much more than that. Through him, Fermina Daza experiences all the highs and lows of a realistic marriage. Urbino does cheat on her and act cold towards her, but he also provides her with security, companionship, and a loving family. Urbino's two-sidedness distinguishes him from being just the "bad guy". In his old age he even becomes pitiable.

Moreover, Fermina Daza's role as the main female character does not necessarily make her a damsel in distress. Although the reader first meets her when she is a young impressionable girl, her time abroad transforms her into a woman who commands respect and harnesses an indomitable determination. Yet this strong façade masks a nurturing side which she shows to her children and relatives. There is a common strand in all three of the characters' dualities which speaks to the very nature of postmodernism – the deconstruction of the soul (Gregson, 2004: 41). By giving his characters more than one (opposing) layer, Garcia Marquez allows all three of them to distance themselves from a "stable core" (Gregson, 2004: 41).

Context is everything. It is through context that a reader can understand why Garcia Marquez's masterpiece is misinterpreted by North American audiences as simply an astonishing love story. It is also through context that the reader can rectify this assumption. In his Nobel Prize acceptance lecture, Garcia Marquez explains that Latin Americans and their literature are alienated by their "The interpretation of [their] reality through patterns not [their] own, [which serves] only to make [them] ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary." (Garcia Marquez, 1982). With this explanation in mind, one can see why readers in the rest of the world would make such a bland assumption. This, combined with the fact that a literary avant-garde

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movement (like magic realism) is often dismissed as “ unduly naïve”, paints a vivid picture of how the novel’s complexity could have been ignored (Hassan, 1987: 3). If anything, *Love in the Time of Cholera* stands as a lesson in understanding that one may be able to comprehend a story, but not necessarily understand it.

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