

Death-ception: an
analysis of the
different layers of
death in one hundred
years ...



In the majority of literary works, death is fairly permanent condition and one that is not normal escaped. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* however, the act of dying and its resulting condition are more akin to lifestyle adjustments. Throughout the book, there are numerous examples of the dead communicating or affecting the lives of the living. For example, the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar visits José Arcadio Buendía shortly before the latter's mania sets in, and Melquíades himself is said to have died numerous times and yet persist in coming back to life (García Márquez 72, 77). This apparent tendency of the dead to remain on the earth in some fashion or other is seen time and time again, and reveals that death is neither absolute nor even binding in the world of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. However, there is a form of death that appears to be closer to what we in the actual world consider death to be; the trouble is that this form is mentioned only once in the book, and in a very off-hand manner at that. As stated above, the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar returns to visit José Arcadio Buendía, and in his reasons for returning is hidden a startling piece of information regarding death. Regarding Prudencio Aguilar's reasons for making the effort to return to the world of the living and speak with José Arcadio Buendía, Marquez writes:

" After many years of death, the yearning for the living was so intense, the need for company so pressing, so terrifying [was] the nearness of that other death which exists within death, that Prudencio Aguilar had ended up loving his worst enemy" (77).

This quotation has been given in full so as to provide as much context as possible for the meaning of death within death, as this is only place in the entire novel where the concept is addressed directly. However, despite this limited supply of information, there is still a great deal to examine and learn for this quotation. One of the first and most obvious interpretations of “ that other death which exists within death” is that it is something much more final and absolute than death in the traditional sense of no longer living (77). This theory is supported both by Prudencio Aguilar’s terror of the “ death... within death” and by his intense desire to avoid it (77). Given this, the “ other death which exists within death” (referred to henceforth as “ second death” or “ other death” for the sake of concision) must be something that spells true destruction or annihilation for the dead, something permanent enough to truly warrant the description “ death...within death.” Given these factors, one plausible interpretation of this extremely complex and ambiguous idea is that the second death is the state of being utterly forgotten, wiped from living memory, and no longer existing in any form on this earth. This idea is vindicated by Prudencio Aguilar’s descriptions, and also makes sense when analyzed alongside his terror, as being forgotten about does indeed represent a form true death, even for the dead. In this way, the “ other death which exists within death” described by Prudencio Aguilar seems to refer to the phenomenon in the book where a deceased character, who’s posthumous existence is predicated upon being remembered by the living, is forgotten by the people from his or her previous life, and as a result fades into less than nothing.

One of the factors that makes the Marquez's mention of the second death so complicated is the fact that it only appears in one location, and that this appearance is fairly tangential and slightly random seeming. As a result, it is necessary to examine the exact wording and phrasing of the passage in question before a detailed analysis of the idea can be made. The first and most obvious descriptor of the other death is its "terrifying" nature. While death in any form is generally assumed to be terrifying, there are certain contextual clues that shed more light on this particular strain of fear. First off, Prudencio Aguilar's level of fear regarding the second death can be seen in the way he uses the second death as justification. Rather than simply mention it, Aguilar states that his fear of the second death was intense enough to make him do the unthinkable: forgive and even love José Arcadio Buendía (77). This idea is shown clearly in the construction of the sentence; fear of the second death is listed as one of Prudencio Aguilar's main motivators.

In addition, the use of the words "ended up" in the following phrase suggests that Prudencio Aguilar's loving José Arcadio Buendía was not a decision made using logical reasoning and critical thought. Rather, the emotions and fears he had, especially regarding "that other death," were so intense that he was compelled inexorably towards the man he once despised, the man who killed him. Additionally, the other two seemingly distinct factors that motivate Prudencio Aguilar to return to José Arcadio Buendía (a yearning for the living and a need for company), seem more to be manifestations of the fear of the second death. Even without yet having a formal definition of the other death, it is quite clear from the context that

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such a death would move one even further away from the living, meaning that their connection and company can act as wards against the second death. In this way, it appears as though all three of Prudencio Aguilar's reasons for doing the unthinkable and forgiving his murderer are rooted in an intense and consuming fear of the second death. While this analysis may seem tangential or superfluous at first glance, it is quite necessary for understanding what the second death actually is, as Prudencio Aguilar's fear reveals a great deal regarding its specific nature. As a member of the dead, Prudencio Aguilar is beyond the physical harm of this world, thus anything that would scare him to this extent must be an ill that can harm the dead. With this in mind, out of the many different possible interpretations of the second death, one specifically begins to emerge: the idea that the second death or "death...within death" is the state of being forgotten about and abandoned. For Prudencio Aguilar and the other dead, this would truly be a form of death even more complete than the one they already endure.

Throughout the novel, there is the definite idea that the afterlife of the dead is contingent in some capacity upon the living. This is shown clearly by Prudencio's return to José Arcadio Buendía, something he would never do unless he needed something from the man. In this case, Prudencio Aguilar's need was to escape the second death, and, if interpreted as being forgotten, this means that by running to Buendía, Aguilar clearly indicates that the dead do depend on the living in some way for continued existence. While they do still appear to exist in some tangible form, the dead are tied inexorably to the memories of those who knew them, meaning that the only way for them to be truly destroyed is if the living forget about them. This is <https://assignbuster.com/death-ception-an-analysis-of-the-different-layers-of-death-in-one-hundred-years-on-solitude-and-the-ways-in-which-they-affect-characters-both-alive-and-deceased/>

the danger that Prudencio Aguilar is so frightened of, and it is this danger that motivates him to do the seemingly unthinkable and return to his most hated enemy, who still remembers him clearly and greets him as an old friend when he, Prudencio, arrives (77). This interpretation sheds new light on Prudencio Aguilar's obvious fear of the second death, and makes the entire reason for his return much more apparent. If his fear of the second death had grown this great that he would do what is clearly described as being nigh-on unthinkable for him in returning to José Arcadio Buendía and forgiving the man, then the second death must necessarily be drawing quite close to him. This is directly vindicated by the line where Aguilar states that the aspect of the second death that is most terrifying is its "nearness" (77). The natural question that this fact begets is "why is the second death so near at this exact moment?" The answer to this again becomes clear if the second death is interpreted as being forgotten. Just before Prudencio Aguilar's arrival, José Arcadio Buendía appeared to be in the middle of going mad. He is described as having "stopped eating... [And] stopped sleeping," as well as pacing the floors day and night, talking to himself non-stop (76). Thus, with such obvious signs of madness setting in, José Arcadio Buendía appears to be close to losing control of himself, and contained within that, losing control of his mind. This means that there becomes a fair chance that his memories too begin to fade away, meaning that Prudencio Aguilar, who has already been shown to be living on in some capacity in José Arcadio Buendía's memories, would be forgotten about. The convergence of so many different factors to one central conclusion—that the second death is essentially annihilation for the dead, occurring when those among the living

who remember them forget or die—is continued proof this theory’s veracity, as is José Arcadio Buendía’s reaction to it after spending the night talking with Prudencio Aguilar.

As soon as his conversation with Prudencio Aguilar ends in the morning, José Arcadio Buendía’s insanity appears to begin to set in for sure (77). This is shown quite clearly by his continuous insistence that it is Monday. In this madness, José Arcadio Buendía lays out several of his fears and grievances, the first of which appears to address the second death directly. After listing a long set of people who are dead and who he, José Arcadio Buendía, was close with, the man began to cry for them because they “ were now alone in death” (77). This sentiment fits perfectly with the idea of the second death being the state of being forgotten. The people José Arcadio Buendía lists (Prudencio Aguilar, Melquíades, Rebeca’s parents, etc.) were all people whom José Arcadio Buendía knew and would have remembered, and who would have continued to live on in his memory. Indeed, both Prudencio Aguilar and Melquíades appear to return to the earth in some capacity during José Arcadio Buendía’s lifetime, raising again the idea that their posthumous existence is connected to the memories of the people who knew them. In fact, José Arcadio Buendía specifically states that the people for whom he cries were “ all...those he could remember” but who would soon be alone in death (77). This idea fits perfectly with Prudencio Aguilar’s fear. The man returns to his most hated enemy because of his fear of the proximity of the second death, of being forgotten, and after talking with José Arcadio Buendía, the latter begins to share in the fear. José Arcadio Buendía starts to understand that it is by way of his existence, and specifically his memories of <https://assignbuster.com/death-ception-an-analysis-of-the-different-layers-of-death-in-one-hundred-years-on-solitude-and-the-ways-in-which-they-affect-characters-both-alive-and-deceased/>

the deceased that those people continue to exist. He also realizes that if he loses his mind and his memories, all the people he cared for who are dead will truly be lost forever to him. Because they exist not as physical beings in the world but rather as reflections of memories, when they are forgotten, nothing of them remains. Thus, if José Arcadio Buendía goes mad, Prudencio Aguilar will fade away into less than nothing. In this way, the being forgotten truly appears to be the ultimate way for the dead to vanish, a true “ death... within death” (77).

Death is one of the most common motifs in the books that comprise the literary canon, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is no exception. Throughout the entire story, the idea of death and of the dead is brought up time and time again, and is examined from many different angles. However, despite this reoccurring analysis and discussion of so-called “ conventional death,” there is a second kind that is mentioned only once in the entire novel: “ that other death which exists within death” as described by Prudencio Aguilar (77). While this idea is complicated enough on its own, it is made even more difficult to analyze and unravel by the fact that it only appears in one location and there is only mentioned tangentially and in relation to other ideas. The result of this is that it is very difficult to definitively prove what the second death is, which in and of itself may be a deliberately placed characteristic of the other death. However, by analyzing the context of the second death and the other locations where its appears to be referenced or mentioned, the theory that dying the second death is, for the dead, essentially being forgotten by those who knew you and thus fading away, becomes distinctly plausible. If this interpretation is used to analyze <https://assignbuster.com/death-ception-an-analysis-of-the-different-layers-of-death-in-one-hundred-years-on-solitude-and-the-ways-in-which-they-affect-characters-both-alive-and-deceased/>

the second death, then many different elements that were previously unclear not only begin to make sense, but also act as a further vindication of the theory that proved them. In this way, the worst fate that can befall a character in the novel appears not to be the violent and agonizing throws of life ending, but rather the quiet and pathetic annihilation of one's soul.