



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1989 Volume III: Family Ties in Latin American Fiction

Gabriel Garcia Márquez: A Latin American in Search of His Identity

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"In my beginning is my end. ... In my end is my beginning." These lines from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* illustrate one of the major themes in Latin American fiction, a search for, and a definition of, self. This quest is an important *leit motif* in Gabriel Garc'a Márquez's novels and short stories. I have chosen five of Garc'a Márquez' short stories, "Death Constant Beyond Love," "Tuesday Siesta," "One of These Days," "Balthazar's Marvelous Afternoon," and "Big Mama's Funeral" to form this unit.

The students for whom this unit is designed, are in a ninth grade Language Exploratory class. They spend twenty weeks learning conversational Spanish, as well as learning about the Spanishspeaking world. For the section on Latin America, we will spend five weeks reading the stories mentioned above and doing the classroom activities mentioned below. We will concentrate on the biographical information that Garc'a Márquez includes in his fiction, as well as information about Latin American culture and history, and the author's point of view concerning his culture.

As young teenagers, my students are searching for their identities. In the Ninth Grade, they study and explore the themes of "Who am I?" "Where have I come from?" and "Where am I going?" in their English and Social Studies classes. This unit helps to reinforce the ideas expressed in those classes. It also introduces another element into the students' exploration: a way of understanding another culture.

For Latin American writers, and especially Garc'a Márquez, the search for self is also a search for their own literary voice, separate from their ancestors and uniquely tied to their history.

As in other national literatures, literary tradition in Latin America moves toward an encounter with a self definition which might constitute the homecoming. ... Latin America's literary enterprise acquires a specificity by virtue of being the product of an especially problematic history. (Djelal Kadir, pp. 34)

The history of Latin America begins with its accidental discovery by Columbus in 1492, and continues with the subsequent colonies, revolutions, and forming of nations of the Twentieth Century. This history forms the foundation of the Latin American literary tradition, as well as Garc'a Márquez' works.

Latin America's history and its literary traditions are inextricably linked. Latin American authors use their art as a means of working through problems they encounter in their quest for a national and literary identity. This search is a long process which allows the authors the freedom to explore their native history and traditions, and to utilize artistic techniques to create a literature unique to Latin America.

García Márquez belongs unquestionably to the Latin American genre of literature. He explores his country's traditions, history, customs, superstitions, etc. to formulate his own style of writing.

His works are imbued with Colombian life. The reader of García Márquez' works gains an understanding of what it means to be Colombian. This understanding is a point of departure for learning about Latin America.

The search for one's identity takes many forms in Latin American literature and in García Márquez' works. My ninth grade Spanish students are searching for their identities, much like García Márquez in the stories we will read. This unit forges the connection of the search for self with the study of Spanish and the cultures of Spanish speaking people.

Summaries and Discussion of Stories

"Death Constant Beyond Love"

This is the story of Senator Onésimo Sánchez who is running for reelection. One of the towns in his district is Rosal del Virrey where the story takes place. The town earns its living by allowing smugglers' ships to dock there at night. During the day it is a dried up, useless place with not even one rose to justify its name.

The Senator, fortytwo years old, a metallurgical engineer, is married with six children. He has just learned that he has six months to live. He chooses to keep this information to himself and to continue living his life as he had been.

The Senator is very lonely. His campaign is planned and tightly controlled. He has no friends with him, just employees. His family is home. He is lonely, also, in facing death. The knowledge that he will die soon, fills him with anger and disdain, especially toward the poor people of the town who have come to hear him speak.

The campaign speech, memorized and rehearsed, contains many promises and election rhetoric. His employees set up scenery and props to help make the speech more plausible. Neither the Senator, nor the people are fooled by this show. They are not convinced that life will improve just because they will reelect the Senator, yet they all play the game.

Nelson Farina is a pharmacist who killed his first wife and was imprisoned on Devil's Island. He escaped, and married a Black woman with whom he had a daughter. They settled in Rosal del Virrey. His wife died of natural causes, soon after they arrived in the town, and he raised his daughter alone.

Ever since the Senator's first election campaign, Nelson Farina had asked the Senator to help him get a false identification card that would protect him from being sent back to Devil's Island. The Senator always refused, so this time Nelson refused to attend the speech ceremony.

After the speech, the Senator usually took a walk through the town to visit some of his constituents. People asked him for favors, and if he was so inclined, he granted them. He stopped at Nelson Farina's house and saw the pharmacist's daughter, Laura, for the first time. He was overwhelmed by her beauty.

That night, the Senator met with the leaders of the town to impress upon them the idea that his reelection

was in the best interests of the town. Laura Farina was waiting outside the room when the meeting broke up. The Senator saw her and invited her to come with him. They went to bed, though nothing happened sexually, the Senator agreed to help Laura's father.

The Senator and Laura never have sex. He dies six months later, alone, after a public scandal concerning this liaison.

"Death Constant Beyond Love" presents two important themes in Garc'a Márquez' works: isolation, and powerlessness. The town is isolated from other towns because of its poverty and the smuggling of contraband. The Senator is isolated because he has power and money, and because he does not live in the town of Rosal del Virrey. He is alone because neither his friends nor his family are with him on the campaign trail. He has refused to help the one person who might have saved him from isolation, Nelson Farina. His inability to consummate the union with Laura has further isolated him. The scandal and his death complete his aloneness.

Nelson Farina, too, is isolated from life because of his wife's murder and his escape from Devil's Island. His fear of being discovered sets him apart from human intercourse, except for the Senator. By sending his daughter to the Senator to "purchase" a false identity, he has excluded himself definitively from the town forever.

Laura Farina is alone too, as she is a pawn in her father's bid for freedom. By becoming involved in the scandal surrounding the Senator, she has been cut off—from the rest of the town entirely.

The theme of powerlessness in this story is linked to that of isolation. The town is powerless to save itself. It must rely on corrupt politicians and illegal smuggling to survive. Neither of its "saviors" come from within the town. The town cannot help itself so it must prostitute itself like Nelson and Laura. In the end, however, it probably will be destroyed by its failure to provide for itself.

The Senator is powerless in the face of death. All his wheeling and dealing abilities cannot help him in his ultimate confrontation. In addition, by not being able to unlock Laura's chastity belt, he is prevented from wielding his power over Laura and her father. He has been brought down to a common level. He is now a mortal instead of a god.

Nelson Farina is helpless in his search for freedom. He is and will always be a prisoner for going against humanity. By murdering his wife, escaping from his punishment, and by prostituting his daughter, he is doomed to remain in limbo.

Laura Farina is helpless because she must do what her father says. Whether she wants to or not, she must help her father. She must use her body to buy his freedom.

In "Death Constant Beyond Love" isolation and powerlessness highlight the human condition. Man is alone and helpless in the face of life and death. No solution is offered.

"Tuesday Siesta"

An old woman and her twelve year old daughter, both in mourning clothes, are riding through banana

plantations in the third class section of a train. It is extremely hot and the air is heavy. They get on the train at 11:00 a.m. and get off at 2:00 p.m. in a little town. While they are on the train, they eat their lunch. As they approach the town, they straighten their clothes and make themselves presentable.

It is siesta time in this town. Everything is closed, and people are home eating their lunches and taking naps. The mother and daughter walk in the shade of the buildings and trees, and soon arrive at their destination, the priest's home.

The woman scratches on the door until the housekeeper opens it. The mother insists on seeing the priest, even though it is siesta.

Finally the mother and her daughter are allowed to enter the house. The housekeeper is persuaded to get the priest. He says that they should come back at three. The woman refuses as the train leaves at 3:30 p.m. At last the priest comes out.

The mother wants the key to the cemetery to visit her son's grave. Her son is a thief who was killed in this town a week ago. The priest fills out the page in the key registry with the information the mother gives him.

The week before, the son, Carlos Centeno Ayala, had tried to break into a lonely widow's house. She was terrified, took an old gun, aimed it, fired, and killed the thief.

The priest asked the mother if she had tried to straighten out her son. Her answer was that he was a good man and did what he had to do to take care of his family. She accepted his being a thief because when he was a boxer, he was hurt very often. His pain was more hurtful to his mother than his stealing.

The priest gives them a key and the directions to Carlos' grave. He notices that people from the town have gathered outside his house. He tries to encourage the mother to go out the side door. She refuses. She takes her daughter's hand and goes out the way she came in.

"Tuesday Siesta" is a story about human dignity and self-esteem. Garc'a Márquez finds these qualities only in the poor. In the face of all obstacles, the woman insists on being treated as a human being, in spite of her class in society. She is not like some of the other characters we meet in other stories, who know their place and act accordingly. She transcends her condition to become an object of the reader's admiration.

"One of These Days"

Aurelio Escovar, a dentist, begins working very early in the morning. He has been working for a while when his son interrupts him and asks if he will pull the Mayor's tooth. At first he refuses. Then his son says that the Mayor knows he is there, so Aurelio agrees to pull his tooth.

The dentist examines the Mayor's tooth, and agrees to pull it—without anesthesia. He says that it must be done that way because the tooth is abscessed. In reality, he is punishing the Mayor for allowing twenty men to be killed. We are not told what happened, however.

When Aurelio is all finished, and the Mayor is ready to leave, he asks whether he should send the bill to the

Mayor personally or to the town. The Mayor replies that they are one and the same.

In "One of These Days" Garc'a Márquez presents a devastating picture of political conflict in a small town. Violence is an integral part of politics in Latin America, and in this story. In addition, violence begets violence.

The dentist's revenge, "a reaction of a bourgeois professional on behalf of the humble masses before the powerful mayor, is only a token, very momentary act. ... The institutional power structure, despite these moments of the mayor's vulnerability, remains intact: the mayor can still do whatever he wishes in the name of the government." (Raymond L. Williams, p. 53) In other words, the dentist's actions are of such little importance that no social changes will take place. The human condition remains intact.

"Balthazar's Marvelous Afternoon"@Text:Balthazar makes a beautiful bird cage for Chepe Montiel's son. Chepe is one of the rich men of the town. Balthazar spends a lot of time making the cage and he neglects his own carpentry work. His wife, Ursula, is upset with him and tells him to charge fifty pesos for the cage because it is worth that amount.

The news about the cage spreads throughout the town, and children and adults alike come to view the masterpiece. Everyone is in awe of Balthazar's work. The cage is elaborate and resembles a work of art rather than an ordinary birdcage.

The town doctor wants to buy the cage for his wife. Balthazar refuses as he made it for Chepe Montiel's son. He is honorable and his pride won't let him sell the cage to anyone else. The doctor tries a logical argument. The boy ordered a cage. He did not order one as beautiful as this one. Therefore Balthazar can sell the cage to the doctor and make another one for the boy. Balthazar refuses, again. The doctor leaves regretfully.

Chepe Montiel, the boy's father, has the reputation of being extremely rich. In reality, he is comfortable. He doesn't have to work hard to live the way he does. His wife is obsessed with death and spends a lot of time thinking about it.

Toward the end of siesta, Chepe's wife is awakened by the noise of many people in front of the house. Balthazar, freshly shaved and dressed in white, is standing there with the bird cage, surrounded by admirers. She allows Balthazar alone to enter.

When Chepe Montiel is told of the bird cage and sees it for himself, he is angry that Balthazar did a job without consulting him. He refuses to pay for Balthazar's work. Chepe Montiel, Chepe's son, throws himself on the floor and has a temper tantrum.

Balthazar approaches the boy and gives him the cage. The parents want Balthazar to take it back. He refuses because he made it for the boy. Chepe Montiel repeats that he will not pay for the cage. Balthazar says that it is all right as he made the cage as a gift for Chepe and did not expect to get paid for it.

As Balthazar leaves, he realizes that this event has taken on a great importance to others in the town. He goes to the pool hall where they celebrate and buy him beers (that he must pay for!). He gets drunk and talks wildly about the cage he built and others he will build for the rich people.

His wife waits for him to come home for dinner. But she waits in vain. He stays at the pool hall until very late at night. He has to pawn his watch to pay for the drinks and the juke box.

Balthazar leaves the pool hall and falls face down in the street. Someone steals his shoes while he is lying there. Women going to five o'clock Mass pass him without looking because they think he is dead.

Balthazar has his all too brief moment in the spotlight and ends up being an anonymous person with nothing to show for all his work except a hangover. His creation made him special. His flight of fancy made him unique. Not everyone can conceive an idea and bring it to fruition. This story is very humorous. There are funny situations and ironic outcomes. The humor in this story creates a bond between the author and the reader. Both are outside the story looking in and judging Balthazar and Ursula as well as the Montiel family. A more serious side to the story exists also. Garc'a Márquez, in my opinion, is making a comment on the worthiness of works of art. In this story, Balthazar's cage is unnecessarily elaborate. It is functional, but not practical. I think Garc'a Márquez is asking if art has a purpose, if indeed art is important.

The reader comes away from the story feeling that art is as necessary to man's life as food. They both nourish man—food feeds the body and art feeds the soul. Man is incomplete unless he has both food and art to satisfy two of his most basic needs.

"Big Mama's Funeral"

Big Mama, ninetytwo years old, the absolute dictator of the kingdom of Macondo, has died. And now that things have settled down (three and a half months later), her story will be told.

When Big Mama, weak from her illness, realizes that death is near, she proceeds to get her affairs in order: first her soul, then her earthly goods. She confesses to the priest, and now she is ready to distribute her wealth.

Everyone has been waiting for Big Mama's death. Food has been preserved. The peons are awaiting the news so that they can spread the word throughout the country. Her family, exhausted with the long vigil, is anticipating the event.

Big Mama, being an absolute dictator, has ruled her family with an iron fist. Marriages of family members took place only within the family, and incest was a usual occurrence. Only one of her nieces escaped this fate. She became a nun. In addition to incestuous procreation, the male members of the family had created an "entire bastard line " (*Big Mama's Funeral* , p. 55)

The town of Macondo had been dominated by Big Mama and her immediate family for two centuries. The town's name was based on Big Mama's last name whose origins were unknown.

Big Mama owned everything in this town: the water, rain, drought, roads, telegraph poles, leap years, heat waves, life and property. (*Big Mama's Funeral* , p. 155) No one thought she was a mortal being, but she was.

The doctor who takes care of Big Mama has arthritis so he has difficulty coming to her house. He tries every method he knows to help her, but nothing works. Finally, they send for the priest.

The priest has to be carried by ten men to Big Mama's bedroom. As he is being taken there, a bell announces the death watch to the townspeople. They gather in the plaza in front of Big Mama's house to wait for the news.

The crowds waiting in the plaza are reminiscent of past celebrations of Big Mama's birthday, where everyone from family members, legitimate and illegitimate, down to the peasants, enjoyed the festivities. Big Mama, then as now, ruled over events in the town.

There had been no celebrations for over twenty years because of family deaths and political instability. Thus, Big Mama's birthday festivities passed into legend.

Big Mama's legend began when her father died and passed his legacy to her. She was twentytwo at the time. She never married, nor did she have any children.

As Big Mama was receiving the last rites, she refused to open her fists for extreme unction. When her nieces tried to help the priest, she thought they were trying to steal her rings.

Big Mama took off a diamond ring and gave it to her youngest niece, Magdalena, who had renounced her heritage (Big Mama's estate), and joined the Church. This act ended a tradition.

Nicanor, Big Mama's nephew met alone with her to discuss her business affairs. During this meeting she told him how she wished her wake and funeral to be.

After confessing to the priest, Big Mama took communion in her family's presence. Then she dictated to a notary how she wanted her wealth distributed. She was like a feudal lord because her property was tended by tenant farmers who paid her rent. These payments prevented the State from taking her lands.

In Big Mama's will she parceled out all her belongings. It took three hours for this accounting. She then began to list her other possessions (i.e. territorial waters, national sovereignty, etc.), but she didn't finish this list. She let out a large belch and died.

The whole country was affected by Big Mama's death. Everything closed for the nine days of official mourning. The President of the country as well as all the governmental officials were profoundly affected by her death. (Especially because she used blackmail to control them!)

The Pope, himself, came to Big Mama's house to pay his respects. The funeral was postponed for months because of negotiations in the government about the President's attendance at the funeral. At last, the officials came to an agreement and the funeral could take place.

People came from everywhere to attend the funeral. It was a festive occasion. The pomp of the public ceremony hid the reality.

When Big Mama's body was taken out of the house, the family closed the doors and divided the house among the members. They were looking for treasures supposedly buried beneath the house. They were relieved that the ordeal was over.

The crowds outside were relieved also after the two weeks of ceremonies were over. They could live their lives as free human beings now.

The only thing that remained unfinished was for someone to tell this story so that future generations would learn the lesson. Garc'a Márquez has filled that gap.

The humor in this story is that of exaggeration. Garc'a Márquez uses the humor of the amounts of property owned by Big Mama as a comment on the idea of absolute dictatorship. A person who is a dictator likes to think of himself as owning real things, and, things that cannot be possessed, such as the sky, or the sea, or imagination. In reality, he owns nothing but is allowed to use public property in a trust from the common people.

The characterization of Big Mama is another example of humorous exaggeration. She is a physically large woman with tremendous breasts. She could have been an earth mother for the town, nurturing them in every way but she chose to exploit them instead.

Big Mama's life was full of excesses: what she ate and how much; what she owned; dictating to her family the ways they should live their lives, etc. She lived off of others and the fruits of their labor. The reader has the impression that her appetite was excessive in every area of her life.

Society, as it is presented in "Big Mama's Funeral" is traditional and hierarchical. Garc'a Márquez pokes fun at dictators by making the dictator in this story a woman who is not a typical Latin American woman. Power, its limits and its excesses, is depicted humorously and satirically.

The structure of society in 'Big Mama's Funeral' is a paradigm for certain sectors of Latin America and other parts of the world which are fundamentally medieval in some aspects. This story can thus be read as a burlesque depiction and implied condemnation of the privileged oligarchy. (Williams, p. 45)

Objectives and Strategies

Objective 1 To learn about Latin American history and culture.

After studying the geography, history, and general facts about Latin American countries, the students will read the five stories mentioned above. They will make lists of people, events, daily life, houses, clothes, customs, etc. that are represented in the stories. These activities could be done in small groups. Once the students have completed these tasks, a general, whole class discussion could take place using one category at a time. Ideas presented could be listed on the blackboard, copied by a secretary and saved for later activities.

Students could make charts based on the categories. They could also illustrate the objects in the categories through maps, drawings or paintings.

Objective 2 To learn about Latin American politics.

Politics are an important theme for Garc'a Márquez. Three of the stories mentioned above, "Death Constant Beyond Love," "One of These Days," and "Big Mama's Funeral," should be reread.

In small groups the students could compile lists of political acts, attitudes, and effects from the stories. These

lists will serve again as the basis of a class discussion.

In addition, students could write and perform skits based on their knowledge of Latin American politics. They could form their own ideas about how it is to live under a political system such as the ones described in the stories mentioned above.

Students could write essays about life, its benefits and detractions, under a political system such as the one described in "Big Mama's Funeral."

Another activity for students would be to have them make political posters for candidates running for office. They could write and perform a radio or television commercial for a political candidate.

Still another activity which will help students learn about Latin American politics would be to collect newspaper and magazine articles about political activities, events, or elections in Latin America. The students could present them to the class in oral or written summaries. They could make a bulletin board display or a booklet with these articles. Students could be assigned a particular country to follow in the news, which he or she could then report on to the class.

Objective 3 To understand life in Latin America.

Life in Latin America is very difficult. There is a large gap between the haves and the have nots. This fact is clearly evident in the stories used for this unit, particularly in "Tuesday Siesta."

Students could draw pictures of the different scenes in this story. They can depict the mother and daughter, the priest and his sister (the housekeeper), the train, the railroad station, the scenery outside the train window, the towns, the priest's house, the cemetery, etc.

Some students might want to write a newspaper article about the story, as impartial observers, or as interviewers of the mother, the priest, his housekeeper, the robbery victim, the daughter, or the crowd. Others might want to do a "live" interview or a "You Are There" program for television or radio, still others might want to do an in-depth, objective report of the event.

"Balthazar's Marvelous Afternoon" is another of the stories that can be used to help students understand about life in Latin America. After discussing the story, students could make a model of the birdcage either three-dimensionally or in a drawing.

Students could write a newspaper article about the cage. They could also write and act out skits about the building of the birdcage.

Objective 4 To learn about Gabriel Garc'a Márquez' life.

Students could research Garc'a Márquez' life using current reference books as well as some of the books listed in the Teacher Bibliography. They could then give oral reports on different aspects of his life and work. They could make a display of pictures and information about Garc'a Márquez.

Objective 5 To be able to extract, from selected stories by Garc'a Márquez, elements related to the search for identity.

In groups students will reread the five stories. They will make lists of words, phrases, quotations that will fit under the following categories: religion, food, clothing, houses, towns, occupations, attitudes, behaviors that illustrate a Latin American identity.

When these lists are completed, the students can, as a large group, compare and contrast their ideas about their own identities and Garc'a Márquez' ideas about a Latin American identity. The students can generalize their ideas to define an American identity of the United States and compare it to the Latin American idea.

Objective 6 To be able to identify the universal elements in Garc'a Márquez' stories. @Text: Using the lists mentioned in activities for achieving Objective 5, the teacher will guide students in finding those attitudes and behaviors which describe any person in any country. They will discuss the universality of life situations that are presented or suggested by Garc'a Márquez' stories.

Teacher Bibliography

Foster, David William and Virginia Ramos Foster, eds. *Modern Latin American Literature* Vol. 1 AL (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co.), 1975.

This volume is a useful compilation of critical articles on several Latin American authors. See pp. 374-391 on Garc'a Márquez.

Gallagher, D.P. *Modern Latin American Literature* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press), 1973.

A good critical work on Latin American writers. It gives a good overview of Nineteenth century Latin American literature. See pp. 144-163 for Garc'a Márquez.

Harss, Luis and Barbara Dohmann. *Into the Mainstream Conversations with Latin American Writers* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, Harper and Row Publishers), 1967.

Another perspective on Garc'a Márquez and his works. Other writers are included as well.

Janes, Regina. *Gabriel Garc'a Márquez Revolutions in Wonderland* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press), 1981.

An excellent study of Garc'a Márquez' work. All his stories and novels are discussed in detail.

Kadir, Djelal. *Questing Fictions Latin America's Family Romance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), *Theory and History of Literature* Vol. 32, 1986.

A difficult book to read, yet useful for a study of Latin American literature.

Minta, Stephen. *Gabriel Garc'a Márquez Writer of Colombia* (London: Jonathan Cape), 1987.

A detailed study of Garc'a Márquez and his work. A useful resource.

Schwartz Kessel. *A New History of Spanish American Fiction* Vol. II (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press), 1971.

A general survey of Latin American literature. Useful and interesting. See particularly pp. 140-145 about Garc'a Márquez.

Tittler, Jonathan. *Narrative Irony in the Contemporary Spanish American Novel* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), 1984.

A good reference for Latin American authors other than Garc'a Márquez. See the introduction pp. 1528 and the Epilogue pp. 186195 for discussions of interest.

Williams, Raymond L. *Gabriel Garc'a Márquez* (Boston: Twayne Publishers), 1984.

An excellent critical study. Good critiques of stories discussed in this unit.

Student Bibliography

Garc'a Márquez, Gabriel. *Innocent Erendira and Other Stories* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers), 1978.

Most of the stories contain sexual references which are not appropriate for teaching to high school students.

Garc'a Márquez, Gabriel. *No One Writes to the Colonel and Other Stories* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers), 1968.

This collection of short stories forms the basis of this unit. All of the stories are worthwhile and suitable for high school students. Much of Garc'a Márquez' philosophy is evident in these stories.

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