



Literary Dysfunction: Finding Truth Where There is no Meaning

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Throughout the study of literature and current theories, the study of how the author uses language and to what means, is crucial to understanding a text. What happens, however, when it is discovered that language lacks meaning and there is no definitive answer to why an author communicates what he does? If one looks at the numerous critical essays about Gabriel Garcia Marquez's The Autumn of the Patriarch, the various theories regarding language blur the discourse leading to multiple meaning and various truths. Literary scholars Jo Labanyi and Raymond Williams each explore how Marquez's use of language and narration establish the meaning of his text. While Jo Labanyi looks at the rhetoric Marquez uses to illustrate power, Raymond Williams uses a more technical approach to establish a relationship between compositional structure and meaning. Williams studies the language and the structure of the text to find humor and a sympathetic view of the patriarch, while Labanyi finds only fallibility and impotence. If one studies how these two critics have taken the same text, yet come to different conclusions about the meaning behind the words, one might imagine that Marquez's work is more about the dysfunctional nature of academia as opposed to Latin American governments.

In his essay "Language and Power in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*," Labanyi examines the relationship between language and power. Labanyi writes: "On the one hand, language is the patriarch's principal instrument of power. On the other, it is his increasing delegation of power to language that brings about his downfall. Garcia Marquez shows that language can undermine power as well as enforce it" (135). Labanyi implies that he will prove how language brings down the Patriarch. While he does occasionally refer to this, making many excellent points, his essay does not so much support his thesis as provide an opportunity to use literary jargon.

While his thesis implies that Labanyi will show how the patriarch loses power through language, his jargon-laden argument speaks more to the unreliability, and therefore, the lack of power of language itself. One of the ways Labanyi does this is in his exploration of the narrator:

What is more, the text is the product not of one unreliable intermediary narrator, but of a bewildering profusion of intermediary narrators, all of them unreliable. It is impossible to know at how many removes we are from the original version; all we know for sure is that the version we have is adulterated. (142-43)

The text itself is unreliable, and therefore, lacks power. When the reader cannot trust language, he is less likely to believe what a text says. Labanyi claims the reader does not know who is speaking, what the speaker knows, and to what extent the speaker knows what he does not know. This ambiguity amounts to textual, as well as verbal fallibility in both The Autumn of the Patriarch and Labanyi's critical essay.

To find the crux of this argument, however, one must first cut through convoluted and idiomatic writing. Labanyi is clearly the epitome of a Post-Modern Deconstructionist, cleverly using jargon such as "trace," and "mirror-image" throughout his writing. Labanyi writes: "The written word does not hold a mirror up to reality, but turns reality into a mirror-image. The image of the trace..." (140). This is clearly a deconstructionist reading of the novel, and therefore, makes one wonder if Labanyi's essay has any meaning at all, as all deconstructionists know language has no meaning.

If Labanyi is the ultimate in Post-Modernism, then Williams is the embodiment of New Criticism. William's reading of Marquez's novel is concerned with literary devices such as sentence structure to explain the meaning of the novel. Williams writes:

The transformation of this anecdotal material to the actual story of the text can be described by considering the novel's six chapters as a system of progressive apertures. That is, the first chapter is developed on the basis of an aperture, the second on another aperture, and so on. The qualifier "progressive" underlines the fact that the apertures occur at an earlier point in each of the six chapters. (151)

Williams literally breaks down each chapter into sentence structure as well as sentence length to determine what Marquez is trying to say.

The most difficult part of this essay is trying to figure out what Williams is trying to say. Williams spends several pages discussing the progressive nature of sentence length: "The fourth sentence expands to twenty-one lines. Throughout the next seven pages the length of the sentences varies, but remains approximately within the limits of the sentences on the first two pages, ranging from a few lines in length to a full page (thirty five lines in the text)" (156). Williams does note that "the progressive and precise manner of organizing the sentence length in correspondence with the opening of the original situation contributes to the formation of the narrative system Garcia Marquez constructs in this novel" (157), yet does not expound on this idea. Therefore, after a lengthy discussion about the progression of the sentence structure, one is still left wondering how this applies to Marquez's meaning in this text.

The focus of the paper abruptly turns from sentence structure and length to how Marquez narrates the story. Williams makes several references to narration:

An unidentified narrator...the narrative begins to open to other speakers...the narrator inside the story is relating details about the physical environment, and suddenly the narrative changes...the narrative has changed from pure narration to inferring a live dialogue...the narrator changes his scope...the voices continue to vary...(157-59, Emphasis added)

The reader of the essay can see that Williams provides several clues to the unreliability of the narrator, Labanyi's most valid argument. Williams feels that the narrative structure provides "a more complete characterization of the General" (161). While Labanyi sees the narration as evidence of the fallibility of power, Williams sees it as an illumination of the General's nature.

If one were to apply a formalist reading to Williams' essay, one would see that Williams is concerned about the anecdotal structure of progression. Throughout the text, Williams uses the word "anecdote," at least ten times, and in one paragraph, he uses it four times. He is also concerned with "progression," mentioned often, but especially in conjunction with "structure." One could see this as Williams' attempt to organize a circular novel that takes a great deal of concentration to study. But, in the spirit of literary discourse, one could also apply a psycho-analytical reading to his anal attempts at classification. When one also applies Freud to

Williams' reading, one sees that Williams is striving to sublimate his sexual desires, when one sees his multiple references to "apertures," another word for openings. Williams also makes frequent reference to "original situation," blatant code for original sin, only further underscoring his puritanical fear of sex.

While the two critics differ drastically in their interpretation of the novel, they are each able to find humor in what many consider to be a fairly disturbing story. Labanyi writes: "The episode with the three caravels of Columbus again provides the most amusing example of this ambiguous use of narrative voice, with the patriarch's informers slipping anachronistically into the language of Columbus's diary that ought to be reserved for the newly arrived conquistadors" (143). Of course, this incongruity could demonstrate Marquez's intent to parallel Columbus and American powers either in academia or dictatorship; however, in the Post-Modern world, language has no definitive meaning, so it must be amusingly ambiguous.

Williams is also able to find humor in The Autumn of the Patriarch through his careful examination of narration:

...he went into the bedroom, shut the three crossbars, the three bolts, the three locks, and with his fingertips he took off the pants he was wearing that were soaked in shit.) Until the narrator reveals the General's reactions in the last three words, the readers view has been exterior and similar to that of the people observing the General's reactions. The last three words provide the interior contrasting characterization of the General and thus create the humor. (163)

When one is only looking at the technical aspects of language, one might see humor, as opposed to the humanity, in a scene like that. Williams' explanation only underscores his fallacious reading of the text, while supporting the idea that the General represents academia as opposed to Latin-American dictatorship.

The fact that two critics have examined the narration of this novel, yet come to oppositional conclusions, only illustrates the dysfunctional nature of theory reinforcing Marquez's obvious intention to poke fun at literary theorists. Marquez writes: "so you see general the time comes for the roughest of us studs to turn into fairies, what a damned thing" (57). By using blatant homo-erotic imagery, Marquez is challenging Freudian theorists to analyze the gay aspects of Latin-American machismo. This is only further underscored by the fact that most of the men Marquez refers to wear uniforms, and the General was installed by the Marines, who are under the

Naval branch of the armed services, an obvious reference to The Village People.

Marquez is not limited to lambasting any one school of literary theory, as he takes great care to evenly distribute his disdain across all spectrums of the academy. Marquez takes on Marxist theorists in his many references to the General's mother, a former whore. Marquez writes:

Benediccion Alvarez was to live for many years lamenting poverty, fighting with the maids over bills from the market and even skipping lunch in order to economize, and no one dared reveal to her that she was one of the richest women in the land, that everything he accumulated from government business he put in her name (58)

It is in language such as this that Marquez's true genius is exposed, as a true Marxist is unsure as to whether or not he should criticize Alvarez for having maids, or applaud her for attempting to economize. In addition, Marquez is creating a battle between Marxist theorists and gender theorists who are appalled at the idea that a male is abusing his power over the female in such a way as to allow her to act poor when she is indeed rich. Marquez's true motive is found in the ending:

he was condemned not to know life except in reverse, condemned to decipher the seams and straighten the threads of the woof and warp of the tapestry of illusions of reality without suspecting even too late that the only livable life was one of show, the one we saw from this side which wasn't his general sir. (254)

It is in this moment that Marquez expresses the pity he feels toward academics who are so busy unraveling the lives of others that they do not make the time to live their own.

When one realizes that The Autumn of the Patriarch is so amusingly ambiguous as to be open to multiple anecdotal evidence regarding the progression of its structure, as well as its lack of obvious meaning, one can see that Marquez is criticizing not only Latin-American dictators, but also those who philosophize about the literature written about Latin-American dictators. When Marquez makes anachronistic anecdotal reference to Columbus while talking about the Marines, it becomes obvious that after many years of writing about the plight of the Latin-American poor, he has become frustrated that academia would rather argue over a New Critical approach versus a Deconstructionist approach, while dictators continue to kill boatloads of children.

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