

One Hundred Years of Solitude: The Only Mystery

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In Gabriel García Márquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the seemingly omniscient narrator puzzles over the death of José Arcadio:

One September afternoon, with the threat of a storm, he [José Arcadio] returned home earlier than usual. He greeted Rebeca in the dining room, tied the dogs up in the courtyard, hung the rabbits up in the kitchen to be salted later, and went to the bedroom to change his clothes. Rebeca later declared that when her husband went into the bedroom she was locked in the bathroom and did not hear anything. It was a difficult version to believe, but there was no other more plausible, and no one could think of any motive for Rebeca to murder the man who had made her happy. That was perhaps the only mystery that was never cleared up in Macondo. As soon as José Arcadio closed the bedroom door the sound of a pistol shot echoed through the house.¹

Suicide is a possibility here, given details such as the strong smell of burned gunpowder on the corpse, "the thread of blood . . . out of the right ear," and "no wound on his body," but this explanation is improbable, not only due to José Arcadio's healthy animalism but also due to the inability to "locate the weapon" (p. 130). Those with a motive to kill José Arcadio are numerous, and include the neighboring peasants who must have resented his seizure of their land, and unknown political authorities who must have wanted him dead because he had intervened to save a dangerous rebel, his brother, from the firing squad. However, circumstance and setting—José Arcadio "had just taken off" his leggings in the bedroom (p. 130)—suggest intimacy, implicate Rebeca whose deafness is not credible. (A century later she will aim an antiquated pistol at Aureliano Triste, nearly reenacting the murder of her husband.) The mystery of José Arcadio's death thus becomes a character riddle, not the question of who but why. As Philip Rahv comments on Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, detection is "not of the criminal . . . but of . . . motive."²

To understand why Rebeca would "murder the man who had made her happy" it is necessary to recognize the duality of her character—contradictions that reflect an entire continent. When she arrives at the town of Macondo as a girl of eleven, carrying the bones of her parents in a bag, Rebeca exemplifies the condition of burdened solitude that defines the novel. Orphaned, consigned to strangers, she initially refuses to speak: "They even began to think that she was a deaf-mute until the Indians asked her in their language if she wanted some water and she moved her eyes as if she recognized them and said yes with her head," (p. 48). Her earliest communication, and affinity, in this context of displacement and loss is with the Indians. Later, it will be revealed that she "spoke Spanish with as much fluency as the Indian language" (p. 49). Rebeca's appearance echoes her linguistic conflict:

¹ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Avon, 1971), p. 129.

² Philip Rahv, "Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*," *Dostoevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. René Wellek (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 20.

"She wore a diagonally striped dress that had been dyed black, worn by use, and a pair of scaly patent leather boots. Her hair was held behind her ears with bows of black ribbon. She wore a scapular with the images worn away by sweat, and on her right wrist the fang of a carnivorous animal mounted on a backing of copper as an amulet against the evil eye," (p. 47). The juxtaposition of a fang with a scapular³ indicates the cultural tensions inherent in Rebeca. An ostensible Christianity clashes with indigenous magical beliefs. Correlated with this opposition of European and Indian is a conflict between sophisticated ("patent leather boots," "striped dress," and "bows") and primitive ("sweat," "fang," and "animal"). Rebeca personifies the duality of South-American history.

In what is almost a parody of the "civilizing" forces that sought to transform a continent, Márquez describes how the Buendía family tie Rebeca up, make her swallow bitter medicine on an empty stomach, and add whipping to the treatment in order to stop her "vice of eating earth" (p. 49). The harsh acculturation seems effective because her primitive craving for damp earth becomes transfigured into a vision of European elegance: ". . . Rebeca dreamed that a man who looked very much like her, dressed in white linen and with his shirt collar closed by a gold button, was bringing her a bouquet of roses," (p. 51). This idealized figure, an image of her dead father, then appears in Macondo; "Pietro Crespi was young and blond, the most handsome and well-mannered man who had ever been seen in Macondo, so scrupulous in his dress that in spite of the suffocating heat he would work in his brocade vest and heavy coat of dark cloth," (p. 64). For Rebeca, Crespi's arrival is the actualization of a dream, at once Freudian and Quixotic. Crespi (Sp. *crespo* — curly; artificial) represents cosmopolitan values, arriving "with the Viennese furniture, the Bohemian crystal, the table service from the Indies Company, the tablecloths from Holland," and Márquez, by referring to Crespi as "the Italian" (p. 65), alludes obliquely to another traveler mentioned frequently in the novel, Columbus: both men bring European notions of civilization to a "primitive" continent. The contradictions of Rebeca's character, and her experiences, correlate with this mythological antithesis. Her dream of becoming married to Crespi awaits the completion of a new church, the paramount symbol of European colonization of South America. However, events, particularly the death of Remedios,⁴ postpone forever her union to this figure of refined elegance. Her yearning for Crespi has become Quixotic in this "city of mirrors" (p. 383). The despair of Rebeca, who reverts to pica, eating the earth once more, personifies the historical disillusionment of a continent.

In an urge corresponding to "her ancestral appetite, the taste of primary minerals, the unbridled satisfaction of what was the original food" (p. 67), Rebeca finds crude sexual satisfaction "in the steaming marsh" (p. 95) of José Arcadio's hammock. Her gratification in each case is primordial, a defiance of civilization: in Freudian terms, the return of the repressed. The idealized Crespi becomes "a sugary dandy next to that protomale whose volcanic breathing could be heard all over the house" (p. 94). However, once José Arcadio satiates her physical needs, Rebeca returns to her embroidery, a symbolic renewal of her yearning for images of refinement. A sense of guilt accompanies her fleshly pleasures: ". . . it was discovered that she was writing letters to the Bishop, whom she claimed as a first cousin" (p. 131). Another passage shows indirectly the murderous hatred that Rebeca (or her

³ The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines scapular as "an article of devotion composed of two small squares of woollen cloth, fastened together by strings passing over the shoulders, and worn as a badge of affiliation to the religious order which presents it."

⁴ The dead Remedios provides Amaranta (whose name ironically encapsulates frustrations in love that cause her vengeful jealousy of Rebeca) with an unforeseen "remedy."

superego) ultimately felt towards José Arcadio's animalism: ". . . her only companion was a pitiless servant woman who killed dogs and cats and any tiny animal that got into the house" (p. 206). Thus, within Rebeca's schismatic identity lies an explanation for the mysterious death of the man who "made her happy." Her embittered solitude, shaped by self-contradictions that are destructive, exemplify perhaps a mysterious punishment endured historically by the continent.