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The Conflict of Time: Tradition vs. Modernity in Love in the Time of Cholera

Rachel Smith
Wright State University

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Article #2

**The Conflict of Time: Tradition vs.
Modernity in *Love in the Time of Cholera***

RACHEL SMITH

CST 2310-01: Non-Western Literatures

Fall 2013

Dr. Alpana Sharma

Dr. Sharma notes that this essay exemplifies many of the course's learning outcomes for Elements 3 and 4 of the WSU Core, for Integrated Writing, and for Multicultural Competency. Rachel is attuned to historical and cultural facets of the non-western experience and pays careful attention to the multicultural components of Colombian culture. Her writing is succinct and fresh; she refers competently to secondary sources and uses MLA format admirably. She has good attention to detail, and the final draft is polished, primarily due to a great deal of pre-writing and drafting. The choice of Garcia Marquez's novel is similarly commendable, as it is a long text that requires much patience, love, and skill to unravel.

Time is a perpetual part of our lives; no matter what we do or where we go, time is there as our constant companion. The progression of time generally brings change and progress and creates a distinction between the traditional – the old ways – and the modern – the new ways. Although we use these labels to separate and categorize people, ideas, and events, the two terms are actually connected and constantly pulling in opposite directions. In the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, author Gabriel García Márquez establishes the cholera epidemic as a backdrop to the conflict between the forces of tradition and modernity as reflected in the actions and viewpoints of Florentino Ariza and Dr. Juvenal Urbino.

Love in the Time of Cholera takes place at the turn of the twentieth century when Colombia is beginning to embark on its track of modernization; however, even as the country pursues modernization and forges its own identity as a sovereign nation, the lingering Spanish traditions and heritage continue to have a strong presence. When the Spanish colonized Colombia, they brought elements of Spain with them, including the Roman Catholic faith, Spanish architecture, and design style; these traditions remain a part of the Colombian culture. The official language of Colombia is still Spanish, and a majority of the population is Roman Catholic (“Colombia”). Cartagena, the city in which most of the action in the novel occurs, provides a prime example of how tradition still persists amidst the ever-increasing modernity. The Arcade of the Scribes is a market area where products ranging from candy to disappearing ink to exotic condoms are sold. García Márquez notes that the place’s namesake “dated from colonial times, when the taciturn scribes in their vests and false cuffs first began to sit there, waiting for a poor man’s fee to write all kinds of documents” (100-01). Even though the Arcade becomes more of a market for commodities than for writing, the fact that the name endures pays tribute to the strength of tradition in Cartagena.

Like the city of Cartagena, Florentino Ariza clings to tradition despite the changes that occur around him. Raymond Leslie Williams, an expert in Latin American literature, describes Florentino as “a man who never embraces anything associated with modernity” and

“an anachronism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (108). Florentino is not a typical man in many respects. The reader is first alerted to this fact by a description of his physical appearance: “he wore a romantic, old-fashioned mustache with waxed tips...a dark suit with a vest, a silk bow tie and a celluloid collar, a felt hat, and a shiny black umbrella that he also used as a walking stick” (García Márquez 48). His style is very conservative and traditional, and he dresses in this way for most of his life. Florentino’s tendency toward the traditional is evident in his obsession with Fermina as well. For fifty-one years, Florentino clings to his love for Fermina; despite the many women he encounters, in his heart Florentino refuses to allow anyone to replace Fermina as his true love. His passion for Fermina acts as the focal point of his life, stopping time and progress until the moment he is once again able to court her. The magnitude of his love is so strong that it keeps him in Cartagena. He has the opportunity to work elsewhere with the telegraph company, but he decides to return to Cartagena to stay close to Fermina even though she has already married Dr. Urbino. In all ways, Florentino resists modernity as a cat resists water and instead opts to live in his traditional ways.

If Florentino is representative of the force of tradition, then Dr. Juvenal Urbino is the epitome of modernity. Urbino embraces and advocates progress. Unlike Florentino’s compulsion to stay in Cartagena, Urbino travels to Europe to complete his medical studies and find his direction. Urbino becomes an important and influential figure in Cartagena and offers a vision for starting the city on a path of modernization. García Márquez explains:

...they [Urbino’s friends in Cartagena] spent their lives proclaiming their proud origins, the historic merits of the city, the value of its relics, its heroism, its beauty, but they were blind to the decay of the years. Dr. Juvenal Urbino, on the other hand, loved it enough to see it with the eyes of truth. (111)

Urbino’s childhood is spent amidst the colonial grandeur of wealth and affluence; however, upon his return from medical school in

Paris, Urbino is dismayed to see how far his beloved city has slid during his absence. Urbino's drive toward modernity is thus ignited in part because the traditional city of his youth no longer exists in reality. With nothing left but exquisite memories, the only direction left for Urbino to go is forward. Urbino embraces this progressive attitude and leads Cartagena into the modern era by initiating reforms such as better sanitation measures. These strides toward modernization demonstrate Urbino's determination to reach a state of modernity, a place he views as the golden jewel of existence.

The traditional attitude of Florentino and the modern attitude of Urbino are manifest in their reactions to and involvement with the cholera epidemic. Both men are impacted by cholera. When Florentino falls madly in love, his symptoms match those of cholera; however, Florentino resigns himself to ride out the symptoms and refuses to seek relief or consolation in modern treatments. Cholera reappears in Florentino's life at the end of the novel during his riverboat cruise with Fermina. The captain of the riverboat flies the cholera flag to deter other ships from making contact, leaving Florentino and Fermina free to live out their love together. The riverboat is a traditional mode of transport in Colombia. Choosing a riverboat to fulfill his fantasy instead of a more modern form of transportation such as a hot air balloon or automobile signifies the triumph of tradition in Florentino's life, for his adherence to his values and traditional ways has finally helped him succeed in regaining Fermina's love.

While Florentino's experiences with cholera echo of a traditional path, Urbino's experiences with cholera scream of a modern approach. Urbino's life mission is to eradicate cholera as vindication for his father's death, and he makes the fulfillment of his mission the focal point of his life. This continual push toward progress is characteristic of Urbino's modern outlook. Not content to continue using old treatments and theories, Urbino practices modern techniques; his sights are always on the future and his anticipated success of eliminating cholera. Urbino earns recognition as the best doctor around; however, like the modernization he pursues, Urbino leaves the traditional elements of his life behind in

favor of modernity. One of the most blatant examples of Urbino's values is his relationship with Fermina. Urbino meets Fermina when he makes a house call to examine her for cholera, but he does not feel the traditional pang of love when meeting his future wife. García Márquez explains that, "...he took no notice of her flowering adolescence: he had eyes only for the slightest hint that she might be a victim of the plague" (117). Urbino's apparent indifference to Fermina matches his indifference to tradition, for Urbino's interest lies in the modern world and the future.

Florentino and Urbino are powerful representatives of tradition and modernity against the backdrop of a country beginning to modernize yet struggling against cholera, an old foe. Both men are affected at some level by tradition and modernity, but each character demonstrates a tendency toward one or the other. Whether moving forward or staying back, Dr. Urbino and Florentino are swept up into time's eternal march onward and the enduring conflict of tradition and modernity.

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