No One Writes to the Colonel and Other Stories Study Guide

No One Writes to the Colonel and Other Stories by Gabriel García Márquez

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The first piece of writing in this collection is the novella (long short story) “No One Writes to the Colonel.” The title character, whose name is never given (neither is that of his wife) is a retired officer in the rebel army who, like many of his fellow officers in the past, has been waiting for years for a pension, promised in return for his giving up his revolutionary fight. The general fills his days, and his life in general with hope. His first hope is that long-promised / long-delayed pension payments will arrive: every Friday, much to the cynical amusement of the postmaster, the colonel checks on the mail, and in spite of being disappointed every time, he (the colonel) continues his routine. The colonel’s second hope is that the cockfighting rooster, left behind by his dead son, will win its next tournament and provide the colonel and his wife with some desperately needed income. Meanwhile, the colonel’s long-suffering wife struggles with illness, frustration with what she sees as her husband’s obstinacy (particularly about the rooster), and her own increasingly desperate efforts to give them both some kind of life in the face of looming poverty and oppression. Eventually, circumstances conspire to lead the colonel to choose the rooster’s well-being over that of his wife, with the result that when she asks what they will eat while the rooster is eating real food, he tells her that they will eat “shit.”

This story is followed by several other stories of varying lengths. Shorter stories include “Tuesday Siesta” (in which a woman and her daughter interrupt a priest’s siesta by asking to see the grave of the woman’s criminal son) and “Artificial Roses” (in which a woman who makes artificial flowers is challenged to face reality by both her blind grandmother and the departure of an important man in her life). Two other stories fall into this length-defined category: “One of These Days” (in which a quiet dentist has an opportunity to take painful revenge on the man whom he believes was / is responsible for the deaths of several men in the town) and “Balthazar’s Marvelous Afternoon” (in which a craftsman convinces himself that a failed sale is, in fact, a compliment).

Somewhat longer stories in the collection include “There Are No Thieves in This Town” (the story of a young, would-be criminal whose theft of a trio of billiard balls lands several people in trouble); “One Day After Saturday” (in which the lives of three frustrated people, including an elderly priest, are thrown into confusion and uncertainty by, among other things, the unexplained appearance of a large number of dead birds); and “Montiel’s Widow” (which tells the story of how a once-wealthy woman realizes how little is left of and in her life following the death of her manipulative, corrupt husband).

The final story in the collection gives its title to the second half of the book. “Big Mama’s Funeral” is the darkly comic, somewhat satirical story of the death and funeral of a powerful figure in organized crime. The story describes, in some detail, how Big Mama controlled the final days of her life; how she came to be such a powerful figure in the first place; how the various levels of government in her region responded to her death; and how, in the aftermath of her extravagant funeral, life continued as if she had never been alive at all.

No One Writes to the Colonel, Part 1

Summary

Pages 1 – 19. The colonel prepares to attend a funeral. As he's dressing his wife, an invalid with asthma, repeatedly talks about the dead man who, she imagines, is himself talking to Agustin, her and the colonel's dead son, killed in a political rebellion. Before he leaves, the colonel moves the rooster tied to the foot of his bed into the kitchen, where he feeds it.

On his way to the church where the funeral is to be held, the colonel stops in at the home of the dead man, where he feels oppressed by the crowds and passes on his condolences to the widow, who wails out her grief. On his way to the church, the colonel meets his friend Sabas, who asks about the rooster. Later, as the Mayor shouts his disapproval of the passing funeral procession, the colonel reminds Sabas that because of the current military situation and the country being under martial law, funerals cannot pass by the police barracks, adding that the dead man was a musician, not a rebel. After the funeral, the colonel and Sabas return to their respective homes, Sabas noticing how out of sorts the colonel is and the colonel commenting on how he feels as if there are animals in his gut. Before he goes home, the colonel buys some corn for the rooster.

Over the next few days, the asthma attack being endured by the colonel's wife continues. Meanwhile, the colonel takes care of the rooster and plays host to a group of his son's friends, eager to see the rooster and assess its condition for an upcoming cockfight. Meanwhile, conversation between the colonel and his wife touches on how difficult their financial circumstances are: "We are the orphans of our son," his wife reminds the colonel.

On Friday, as he always does, the colonel makes a trip to see if he has any mail. He goes first to the dock, where the mail boat is unloaded, and then follows the postmaster back to the distribution point, where he (the colonel) watches closely to see if anything has arrived for him. While there, he chats passingly with the doctor, there to collect his newspapers. Eventually the doctor leaves (after lending the colonel a couple of papers to read, the colonel commenting on how it seems there's no hope for elections) and the colonel follows shortly afterwards, having received no mail. "No one writes to him," he says to the postmaster. That night, the colonel talks in his sleep, experiencing delirium as the result of a dream about "an Englishman disguised as a tiger."

The next day, the doctor checks in on the colonel's wife. On his way in, the doctor hands the colonel an envelope with news about what he knows the colonel will think is more important – the state of the rebellion (which isn't good). The doctor finishes his examination, commenting on the good health of the colonel's wife. The colonel offers to return the envelope to the doctor, but the doctor tells him to keep it, also saying that he (the colonel) doesn't owe him any payment for the visit now, but when the rooster wins

its next fight, the doctor will send “a fat bill.” The colonel takes the envelope to his son’s friends, narration revealing that the colonel, Agustin, and his friends were all “partisans” (i.e. rebels).

That afternoon, the colonel’s wife sews together bits of fabric for some new clothes. The colonel returns, and the two of them realize they have to make a choice: use the last of the money from the sale of their son’s sewing machine to buy corn for the rooster, or buy themselves some food. The colonel’s wife eventually (and reluctantly) agrees with her husband decides that the priority should be the rooster, even though she wonders how they’ll manage.

Analysis

This first section introduces the novella’s key narrative elements: its protagonist (the colonel, determined that his hopes for a better future are realized); one of the narrative’s antagonists (the colonel’s wife, who opposes her husband’s goals and dreams); the essential situation (the colonel is waiting for long-promised pension income to arrive); a key plot element (the presence and promise of the rooster); and the story’s essential conflict (feed the family, or feed the rooster).

As it introduces all these elements, the narrative also introduces the story’s key themes, which are also themes of the collection as a whole. The most notable of these is the exploration of Two Sides of Hope: specifically, the positive side (in which characters have a belief in better things) and the negative side (in which that belief has, over time, evolved into a delusion and/or a desperation). As the narrative progresses, it makes clear just how far the colonel’s dreams and hopes have shaded over into dangerously falseness. Other themes introduced here relate to the Presence and Power of Oppression (the colonel and his wife live an environment, referred to by Sabas, in which oppression, rebellion against that oppression, and the consequences of that rebellion are defining qualities of day to day life); Namelessness (neither the colonel nor his wife are given names, ever – see “Themes – Namelessness” and also “Discussion Question 1”); and the Aftermath of Death. Here the death in question is that of the colonel’s son Agustin (a death that seems to have a great deal of impact on both protagonist and antagonist) and of the unnamed individual whose funeral the colonel is attending (a death that seems to have less effect, but which is nonetheless an important catalyst for the action).

Other important elements include the appearance of the Mayor (the first of several appearances throughout the collection of a character referred to as “the Mayor,” who may or may not be the same person but who all share a certain impatience and self-righteousness with this Mayor); the envelope given to the colonel by the doctor (which foreshadows other envelopes with similar content given to the colonel later in the story); and the doctor’s reference to an impending bill, which adds pressure to the colonel’s need for both his pension checks and a successful cockfight for the rooster. Finally, there is the reference to the fact that the colonel’s quest for mail always takes place on Friday. This foreshadows / relates to a story later in the collection in which a character

with similarly high (and unrealistic) hopes takes action to realize those hopes on a Friday.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the author chose to give the son of the colonel and his wife a name, while leaving the parents without?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does the wife's way of making clothes evoke / reinforce the narrative themes introduced here?

Discussion Question 3

Keeping in mind that Agustin was a rebel, what does the colonel mean when he says that he and his wife are "orphans" of their son?

Vocabulary

earthen, assertion, sinister, ceaselessly, pendulum, asthmatic, tulle, naphthalene, transcendent, translucent, articulated (adj.), vitality, formalin, whitewash, proprietor, condolences, perceive, plait, contemplate, quaver (v.), persecution, cortege, disconsolate, expansive, countenance (n.), fanatic, enthusiastic, legacy, clandestine, desolate, fugitive, labyrinth, dentition, indolent, habitual, accordance, chronological, impenetrable, besiege, concentric, innards, delirious, sinewy, immaculate, glower, dosage, decipher, composure, cicada

No One Writes to the Colonel, Part 2

Summary

Pages 19 – 34 Time passes. The colonel's wife continues to sew patchy clothes for herself and her husband; she also does her hair, and cuts his (making him look about 20 years younger); and Agustin's friends become increasingly excited about the rooster's chances of winning the cockfight. Nevertheless, the colonel and his wife become increasingly worried about income, having virtually run out of things to sell. The colonel continues to reassure his wife that when the mail comes, it will bring money: but again, when the colonel waits for the mail on Friday (listening, as always, to the doctor's comments about the current political situation), there is nothing for him.

Narration, describing the conversations between the colonel and both his wife and his lawyer, then reveals the exact nature of the mail that the colonel is waiting for. For 15 years, ever since his participation in an act of revolution ended, the colonel has been waiting for a promised pension, negotiated as part of the truce bringing an end to the revolution. There have been, it seems, so many changes in presidents, cabinet ministers, and bureaucracies that, the lawyer says, it's becoming increasingly difficult to even know whether the colonel's application has been received. When the colonel reveals his intention to find a new lawyer, in the hope that his application will be processed more quickly, the lawyer tells him that all the necessary documents are in the government's files, and so much has changed since they were submitted that it will be impossible to retrieve them. He also tells the colonel that if the documents are retrieved, the application process will have to start anew. "It doesn't matter," the colonel says. "If you wait for the big things, you can wait for the little ones."

The colonel, with his wife's approval and support, prepares and sends a letter to the government, once again asking for his pension. Meanwhile, he and his wife eat less and less, and are also unable to feed the rooster. Time continues to pass: the colonel's wife becomes ill again, the doctor takes care of her again, and the colonel continues to feel tension in his guts. Eventually, his wife tells him to sell the rooster, saying that they need to eat more than they need to honor Agustin's memory by keeping it. The colonel insists on keeping the rooster, and his wife eventually concedes, saying they'll sell their clock, instead. The colonel is reluctant to do so, but ultimately agrees.

The colonel takes the clock to a friend that he and his wife believe will give them a good price. When he arrives, he finds that Agustin's friends are there. He learns from them that Agustin has written, his letter containing the same revolution-oriented content as it usually does. As he puts the letter in his pocket, he finds himself unable to tell the truth about wanting to sell the clock, instead handing it over to be "repaired" (even though it doesn't need repair). As it's being repaired, it chimes, causing a neighbor woman to shout that they should be quiet: "Agustin's year isn't up yet." When the clock is returned to the colonel, he is told that no payment is due: "In January, the rooster will pay for it." The colonel uses that as an excuse to reveal his desire to get rid of the rooster, but the

friends convince him to keep it, reminding him that it's important that he and not anyone else "put Agustin's rooster into the ring." The colonel acknowledges that, and eventually agrees to let the friends take over the care and feeding of the rooster.

Analysis

This section intensifies the narrative action (desperation for income building in the colonel and his wife; pressure from various sources on the rooster to succeed in the cockfight), and deepens several themes (the sense of Living with Oppression continues, as does the sense that the colonel's dreams and hopes are edging closer and closer to delusion). Meanwhile, a particularly intriguing new element, important both narratively and thematically, is introduced: the appearance of the letters from Agustin. This is important on several levels. First, it adds questions to the reader's mind as to whether Agustin is actually dead: if he is, then how is it possible that the colonel is receiving letters? If he isn't, why do the colonel and Agustin's friends let the world believe he is? The second level of significance to this development is that it can be seen as thematically exploring the concept and theme of Magic and Mystery – specifically, the idea (as discussed in "Themes") that seemingly magical things can, in the style of writing known as "magic realism," exist in a so-called realistic scenario. If Agustin is truly dead, then the letters really do show up by non-realistic means … if, that is, they are not forged by Agustin's friends in order to manipulate the colonel. See "Discussion Question 1."

Also in terms of references to Agustin: the reference to the year being up can be seen as referring to an official / formal year of mourning his death, while it's beginning to become clear that the rooster is not only a metaphor for the colonel's hope, it's also a metaphor for hope associated with the revolution. In particular, the insistence that Agustin's rooster continue to fight can be seen as symbolically representing the friends' desire to continue to fight the revolution in the name of the martyred Agustin. This can then be seen as yet another facet of the rooster's metaphoric relationship to the novella's thematic consideration of the Two Sides of Hope.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the true nature of the letters from Agustin?

Discussion Question 2

What events / conversations in this section represent and/or develop the theme of living within oppression?

Discussion Question 3

Clocks are often included in literature as literal and/or metaphoric references to time. In what ways might the clock in this story evoke and/or represent the relationship between the story's events / characters and time?

Vocabulary

capacity, proliferate, continual, impel, decisive, swelter, allocation, ingratitude, indemnity, battalion, futile, studious, asterisk, deluge, curfew, queasy, relapse, momentary, torpor, complicity, superfluous, chagrin

No One Writes to the Colonel, Part 3

Summary

Pages 34 – 54 On a rainy Friday, the colonel stops in at Sabas' house on his way to check the mail, and learns that Sabas thinks the colonel could get 900 pesos for the rooster. Excited by the possibility, the colonel goes to collect his mail, but the postmaster again tells him there is none. When the colonel tells him the mail was supposed to come that day "for sure," the postman says that "the only thing that comes for sure is death."

Back at home, the colonel notices that his wife is preoccupied: she tells him she hasn't yet paid a call on the family of the dead man (Part 1), and later that night, goes out to do just that. While she's there, the colonel goes walking through the town, eventually arriving home convinced that she got back before he did. After waiting a while, she finally arrives, saying she'd investigated the possibility of selling their wedding rings, but no luck, and has also had no luck investigating the possibility of selling any of their other possessions either. She comments that she's tired of pretending that they have money, and angrily tells the colonel that they can't live on dignity. Later, as the colonel recalls the circumstances of his participation in the revolution, he realizes that it's taken him "half a century" to understand that the deals he made in the revolution's aftermath were useless, and resolves to sell the rooster.

The next day, the colonel is forced to wait for hours while the busy Sabas takes care of business. When they finally meet, he reveals his intention to Sabas, who promises to come back and have a conversation about the rooster. When Sabas goes back to work, instead of waiting the colonel goes home for lunch, and finds that his wife has bought a full meal on credit, intending to pay for it with the proceeds of the sale of the rooster. The colonel goes back to again see Sabas, who is being treated by the doctor. The colonel is disappointed to learn that the most that Sabas can offer him is 400 pesos: because the political / military climate is so tense, he can't afford any more. Nevertheless, the colonel accepts a small deposit and leaves with the doctor, who tells him that Sabas will doubtlessly sell the rooster for more than he paid for it.

The colonel takes the money to the pool hall, where he finds one of Agustin's friends; gives him some bad gambling advice; and receives another letter from Agustin. Almost immediately after receiving it, he his confronted by a pair of military officers. Nervous about being caught with a letter from Agustin in his possession, the colonel bluffs his way out of the situation, and is released.

Analysis

The novella's thematic exploration of the Aftermath of Death, first introduced in relation to the reactions of various characters to the death of Agustin (see "Discussion Question

1”), surfaces again, albeit glancingly, in the comments of the postmaster and his reference to death being the only absolutely sure thing in life. There is also the sense that the comment is also a facet of the novel’s thematic interest in two sides of hope, in that the reference to death can be seen as (cynically?) suggesting that because death is inevitable, there is no reason to hope for anything. The comment, in turn, can be seen as foreshadowing events later in the story in which the colonel’s hope for success with the rooster – at least, the more delusional, unreasonable hope that has evolved in him – appears to die, as he decides it’s finally time to sell it.

Other important elements in this section include references to the novella’s thematic interest in the Two Sides of Hope (specifically: the colonel’s hope for a good price for the rooster – the loss of some of that hope when he realizes both that he will get less for the rooster than he anticipated, and that Sabas, whom he thought was a good friend, is actually a user); and the appearance of another letter from Agustin. This is important for a couple of reasons: it reintroduces the question of whether Agustin is actually dead (and therefore reintroduces / develops the story’s, and the collection’s, thematic interest in magic and mystery); and, for a moment, ups the stakes / pressure on the colonel even more. Interestingly, this brief moment of potential conflict remains underdeveloped in the rest of the story: little, if any, danger from the letter(s) reappears. One final noteworthy point: the choice of the colonel’s wife to buy a good meal for them both, deeply ironic foreshadowing of the moment at the end of the story when the colonel suggests what they will actually end up eating.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss and contrast the reactions of various characters to the death of Agustin. Your considerations should include, but not be limited to, the colonel; his wife; and Agustin’s friends.

Discussion Question 2

How does the theme of living under oppression manifest in this section?

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe Sabas' contention that the decrease in the money he'll pay for the rooster is truly the result of oppression-related circumstances? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

parasol, disarray, sacrilege, guttural, strident, authoritative, barter, luminous, affectation, pretense, recrimination, solidify, dissuade, voluminous, catastrophe, perplexity, impervious, mambo, articulate

No One Writes to the Colonel, Part 4

Summary

Pages 52 – 62. The colonel awakes one Friday and prepares the rooster's breakfast. His wife angrily reacts to the attention he's paying it, and then starts making plans to plant some roses … but, shortly afterwards, decides there's not really a point.

The colonel's weekly journey to check for mail is interrupted first by the arrival of a circus (which distracts him) and then by the sounds of a cockfight, which draw him closer to the pit where the fight is taking place. There he is surprised to see his rooster, nervous and shaking, with fighting barbs on its ankles. The colonel watches as the rooster defends himself from the attacks of its opponent, never actually attacking. At the conclusion of the fight, as the crowd is responding to the rooster's victory with wild excitement, the colonel fights his way to the side of the pit, grabs his rooster, and heads for home, completely forgetting the mail. Along the way he notices the shouting of the people of the town, all excited by the sight of the victorious rooster. "For a long time," narration comments, "the town had lain in a sort of stupor, ravaged by ten years of history. That afternoon – another Friday without a letter – the people had awakened." He recalls a similar feeling: watching a political rally at his home.

Back at the house, his wife tearfully reveals that Agustin's friends came and took the rooster by force. She again becomes furious at the attention the colonel pays to the rooster instead of her, and becomes even more so when he tells her not only that he thinks they did the right thing (see "Quote 4"), and that he plans not only to keep the rooster, but pay Sabas back the advance and take everything back that had been purchased with that advance. After making sure the rooster is comfortable, the colonel and his wife go to bed. They are, however, unable to sleep: both are thinking about the future. The colonel is confident that the rooster will continue to fight and win, and eventually earn them a lot of money: his wife, however, feels that she is dying and is deeply concerned about how they're going to live / eat until the final fight in the current tournament, and beyond that fight if the rooster loses. The colonel repeatedly reassures her that everything, including his pension, will turn out fine. She angrily refuses to believe him, narration describing his belief that life had made her hard, and how "the death of her son had not wrung a single tear out of her." The colonel announces his intention to try and sell the rest of their possessions: successful sales, he says, will provide them with money to buy food until the final fight. His wife asks insistently what he thinks they will eat if their possessions don't sell.

"It had taken the colonel seventy-five years … to reach this moment. He felt sure, explicit, invincible at the moment when he replied: 'Shit.'"

Analysis

The key moment in this section, and indeed in the entire novella, is its final line – in fact, it's final word, the first so-called "curse" word in the story and one of only a few in the entire collection. The word and the idea are not necessarily included to suggest that the colonel believes that he and his wife will literally eat shit – although given the colonel's obsessive believe in the income-generating powers of the rooster, things might very well end up that way. The implications of the word go even deeper, particularly when juxtaposed with narration's comment that it had taken him 75 years to be able to say it: the implication is that the colonel has come to believe, as the result of the various circumstances and struggles he has endured, that life is shit, and that until the rooster wins, he and his wife will continue to eat life's metaphorical shit (i.e. misery, suffering, grief, and deprivations). What's particularly interesting to note is how narration portrays him as, essentially, having an experience of personal empowerment as a result of coming to this conclusion: there is a strange sense of freedom, it seems, in the colonel's realization that life is awful, a sense that becomes even more ironic when that freedom clearly exists, at least for the colonel, within the context of oppression. This, in turn, leads to the idea that the final word of the section is also connected to the novella's thematically central interest in exactly that situation.

Meanwhile, the reference to the excitement of the town in the aftermath of the fight functions on a few levels. First, it is another manifestation of the power of hope, explored throughout the narrative and here defined as the hope that there is victory and triumph somewhere in life, even in the face of the oppression experienced by the people of the town. Second, it deepens the previously discussed sense of parallel between the hope, in Agustin's friends, for the triumph of the rooster and their hope for / belief in the power of the revolution. Finally, there is a foreshadowing of an incident in another story in the collection in which a character experiences his actions as affecting the entire town – see "Big Mama's Funeral, Part 2."

A word about the cockfight: traditionally, roosters engaged in cockfighting are armed with small, but very sharp, spurs that are attached to their ankles. Since roosters use their feet to fight, these spurs become dangerous weapons. The specific reference here to the spurs, and to the colonel's precious rooster being put into the cockfighting ring, metaphorically suggest the desperation and violence of the colonel's now fully delusional hope, a very dark manifestation of the entire collection's thematic exploration of such hope. Meanwhile, the brief reference to the presence of a circus can be seen as a foreshadowing / echoing of the cockfight, since both events are defined, to one degree or another, by the exploitation of animals.

Discussion Question 1

How do the wife's idea to plant roses, and her subsequent decision not to, metaphorically relate to and/or manifest the novella's thematic interest in two sides of hope?

Discussion Question 2

How is it significant that the narrative makes specific reference to the colonel completely forgetting about checking to see if he's had any mail in the aftermath of the rooster's win in the cockfight?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways do the colonel's thoughts about his wife's experience of life contrast to his own beliefs and experiences? How do his thoughts about his wife relate to the novella's thematic interest in the two sides of hope?

Vocabulary

cubicle, clarity, placid, verify, pidgin, clamor, turbulent, ovation, frenetic, disproportion, disdain, spiel, scrupulous, resonance, contort, conciliatory, viscous, plover, reprove, rectify, superstitious, fluent, implacable, explicit

Big Mama's Funeral, Part 1

Summary

Tuesday Siesta – The woman and her daughter take a hot, lonely train journey across a landscape that is, in places, parched by drought. When they arrive at their destination, they find that the town they are visiting is in the middle of its afternoon siesta. They make their way to the priest's house, where the woman insists, firmly but politely, that she and the girl be allowed to see the priest. The woman who opened the door goes to fetch him, narration commenting that the two are clearly brother and sister. The first woman asks the priest for directions to the cemetery, explaining that she is there to visit the grave of her son, Carlos Centeno, whom she identifies as the thief who was shot and killed the previous week while committing a robbery. After narration briefly describes the events of the night in question (identifying the shooter as a lonely woman named Rebecca), the priest gives the woman the keys to the cemetery, and also directions. When he goes to show her out, both the priest and his sister realize the house is being watched by the citizens of the town. The priest suggests to the woman that she wait until sundown, when it's both cooler and less obvious. The woman says she and the girl will be fine, and leaves.

One of These Days – The quiet routine of dentist Aurelio Escovar is interrupted by the arrival of the Mayor, who is announced by Aurelio's son and who, speaking through'[/ the son, insists upon having a tooth pulled. He threatens Aurelio with shooting if he (Aurelio) doesn't perform the procedure immediately, and Aurelio tells him to come on in – "shoot me," he says. The Mayor comes in, obviously suffering. Aurelio takes a look at his tooth, and says that it has to be done without anesthetic. The Mayor unhappily agrees, and Aurelio prepares for the procedure. As he's settling in to begin, he tells the Mayor "Now you'll pay for our twenty dead men." The Mayor endures the procedure stoically, shedding only a few tears. After the job has been done, and as the Mayor is leaving, Aurelio asks to whom should he send the bill, to the Mayor or to the town. The Mayor says "it's the same damn thing."

Analysis

The first point to note about these brief stories is that once again, the narrative explores its theme of Namelessness – in this case, the namelessness of almost all the characters, with the exception of the two characters involved in the robbery (see "Discussion Question 1"). By contrast, the name given to the victim of the robbery (Rebecca) is significant, in that the same name, and possibly the same character, appears in a later story in the collection, "One Day After Saturday." Another repeated character shows up in the second story in this section: once again, there is a character called "The Mayor," and while this character seems to have certain characteristics in common with other characters also called "The Mayor" (including, interestingly enough, another character in "One Day After Saturday"), there is ultimately no absolute certainty

they are in fact the same person. It may be, in fact, that there being more than one "mayor" suggests that the figure is used as an archetype of selfish insensitivity and/or of being a puppet of larger, cultural, societal corruption.

Sub-themes in these two stories have to do with the idea of the transcendent power of a mother's love in "Tuesday Siesta" (perhaps an echo of the mother love in "No One Writes …"; perhaps an ironic foreshadowing of the very dark kind of mother "love" on evidence in "Big Mama's Funeral"), and the idea of revenge in "One of these Days." The title of this story offers a possible hint of another layer to this theme: the idea that an opportunity for revenge will come along "one of these days," and that Aurelio is taking advantage of just such an opportunity to take revenge on a man that he clearly blames for a very painful circumstance … so, he (the Mayor) is going to experience a painful circumstance of his own.

Here it's important to note that the narrative never makes it clear how the 20 men referred to Aurelio died. Within the context of the collection as a whole, however, and more specifically within its narrative and thematic considerations of both oppression (specifically military / political oppression) and of those fighting it, it's possible to see the 20 dead men as having been, like the colonel's son, partisans or revolutionaries. Again, however, this is a contextual inference that has no basis in presented narrative fact.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the two people involved in the crime are the only characters given names in "Tuesday Siesta"?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think the removal of the tooth really had to be done without anesthetic, or was Aurelio lying? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What does the Mayor mean when, in response to Aurelio's question about the bill, he (the Mayor) says "It's the same damn thing"?

Vocabulary

symmetrical, interminable, plantation, locomotive, cassock, conscientious, serenity, outlying, drowsy, siesta, permeate, primitive, scrutinize, rummage (v.), galvanized (adj.), pious, inscrutable, pensive, tranquil, ceramic, anesthesia, abscess, spittoon

Big Mama's Funeral, Part 2

Summary

There Are No Thieves in This Town – 20 year-old Damaso returns to the room he shares with his pregnant mid-30s wife Ana after committing a robbery at the pool hall. All he came away with, though, was a trio of billiard balls, which Ana says are virtually useless. They discuss the robbery for the rest of the evening, Damaso revealing that it was his first attempt at thievery.

The next day, the town is full of rumors about what happened. Ana tells Damaso to stay quietly at home while she goes out to discover what the town is saying. She learns that according to the owner, two hundred pesos were also taken. She also hears comments that "there are no thieves in this town." When she confronts Damaso about this, Damaso convinces her that there was only twenty five cents in a drawer with the balls. Ana also refers to the police suspicions of a stranger, who apparently arrived at the docks on Thursday.

After preparing for 3 hours to go out, Damaso goes out to a movie, and is present when a large "Negro" is arrested. When he gets home, he finds that Ana has already heard the news, and is feeling sympathetic for the wrongly arrested "Negro." The next day, Damaso makes his way to the pool hall, where he talks sympathetically with the owner, Roque, who reveals that no evidence of the crime was found on or with the Negro. When he goes home, Damaso reveals to Ana that he has formulated a plan: he will go from town to town, stealing the billiard balls in one and selling them in the next. As he fantasizes about all the things he'll do with the money he believes he'll make, Ana tries, unsuccessfully, to talk some sense into him. The next morning, Damaso spends the day in the pool hall, the evening in the dance hall, and the night with a prostitute / single mother he met there. The woman tells him that a friend of hers gave the "Negro" an alibi, but the police didn't accept it, and the "Negro" is to be sent away.

Down at the docks to watch the "Negro's" departure, Damaso runs into Ana. The two of them watch as the "Negro," chained and obviously recently beaten, is put on a boat. Ana comments sympathetically, and Damaso angrily tells her to be quiet. Afterwards, he goes back down to the pool hall and helps Roque clean up. When he returns home, Ana asks him to feel the moving child in her belly, but his reaction is not enthusiastic. For the rest of the week, he goes out early and comes home late, narration describing how, early in their relationship, he followed the same pattern; how Ana tried to get him to stop; and how he beat her. At the end of the week, Damaso announces that he wants to move on, saying he hates the town. An argument over whether he should have taken the balls results in Damaso confessing a sense of guilt ("Without wanting to, we hurt the whole town.") and making plans to return the balls. He mentions the possibility of their return to Roque, but he still believes the crime was committed by the "Negro," and says it would take a miracle for the money and the balls to be returned.

Frustrated and confused, Damaso goes out to the dance hall, where he gets into a fight and later spends time with another prostitute. Back home, he and Ana get into another fight, this one resulting in Damaso again assaulting his wife. Ana tries to convince him to let her put the balls back, saying that because she's pregnant, she wouldn't be put in jail. Damaso refuses to listen, convinced the return of the balls is his responsibility. He throws her to the ground and storms out. As concerned neighbors call to Ana, Damaso lingers in the hall, waiting for her to call him back. When she doesn't, he heads for the pool hall.

Damaso breaks back into the hall and is preparing to put the balls back when he is confronted by Roque, armed with an iron bar. Damaso confesses what he's there to do and what he did at first, insisting that there was no cash in the drawer. Roque says there was, insisting that they were going to be taken "out of [Damaso's] hide, not so much for being a thief as for being a fool."

Analysis

The primary point to note about this one-story section is its thematic exploration of the Two Sides of Hope. In the same way as the colonel in "No One Writes …" experiences genuine hope that has crossed the vague line into delusion, Damaso's idealized (and probably very foolish) plan for a series of billiard ball-related crimes crosses that same vague line. The difference between the two characters is that for his part, Damaso comes to understand what a bad idea it actually is, coming face to face with the broader reality of the situation. (For further consideration of the contrast between the husband/wife relationships in these two stories, see "Discussion Question 2")

In addition to the exploration of the collection's thematic interest in hope (see "Discussion Question 2"), and the implied exploration of the theme of Living under Oppression, sub-themes in this section have to do with betrayal of the innocent (i.e. the "Negro," Ana, perhaps even Ana's baby); women's struggle to survive physical abuse (Ana's reaction to Domaso – to stay in spite of being abused – is arguably a common factor in the lives of many abused women); and a whiff of three entwined forms of discrimination in the disbelief of the Negro's alibi … racism, sexism (i.e. the witness is a woman), and classism (i.e. the woman who gave the alibi was, the narrative implies, a prostitute).

One final noteworthy element about this story (other than its deeply ironic title, which suggests that the citizens of the town have, at the very least, a seriously deluded idea of what's going on within the town's boundaries) is its final moments. Here, as in other stories in the collection ("No One Writes …" being the most notable example to this point), the final line adds an unexpected twist and/or meaning to both what has gone before, and what the reader has come to believe about what has gone before. In this case, there is the sense that with the twist ending, Roque is telling Domaso that he was a fool to come back, and therefore should be punished. The thematic suggestion of this moment is that once someone has gotten away with something that s/he shouldn't have done (as Domaso does, despite his too-late attack of conscience), they should keep

their mouths shut and reap the benefits of their actions, however ill-gained they might be.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think there really was 200 pesos in the pool hall, and that Domaso really did steal them? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What is the difference between the way Domaso responds to Ana in this story and the way the colonel responds to his wife in “No One Writes …”?

Discussion Question 3

Given what Roque says to Domaso in the story's final moments, do you think Domaso do the right thing in taking the billiard balls back to the pool hall? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

rancor, chemise, contralto, efficiency, contradictory, rotund, agility, convalesce, ferocious, clientele, ominous, falsetto, contagious, judicious, divert, intricate, sheen, lucidity, stupefy, precaution, plaintive, impassive, detonation, sediment

Big Mama's Funeral, Part 3

Summary

Balthazar's Marvelous Afternoon – After two weeks of work, carpenter Balthazar finally completes a beautiful birdcage. His patient wife Ursula tells him to clean himself up. Meanwhile, word of the cage's beauty spreads, and soon Dr. Giraldo learns of it. He comes to take a look, discovers that the cage is perfect for his wife (who loves birds and hates cats), and tries to buy it. Balthazar tells him it was made for someone else. Ursula tries to convince him to sell this one and make another, but Balthazar refuses. Dr. Giraldo goes away, disappointed. Shortly afterwards, Balthazar takes the cage to the home of Jose Montiel, for whom he made the cage. Both Montiel (interrupted while taking a bath) and his wife are surprised, and call for their son Pepe who, it turns out, actually ordered the cage without his father's permission or agreement. Montiel tells Balthazar to take the cage back, and Pepe has a tantrum. Balthazar insists upon leaving the cage and goes, ignoring the shouts of the furious Montiel, who vows to never pay Balthazar a cent. That afternoon at the pool hall, Balthazar enjoys the congratulations of other people of the town who rejoice in the beauty of the cage, and in the fact that he got payment out of Montiel, which people say never happens. Balthazar says nothing about receiving no money; lets himself get plied with drink, and increasingly more drunk; and eventually passes out on the street, his dinner at home going cold and his shoes being stolen. But, narration comments, "he didn't want to abandon the happiest dream of his life. The women who passed on their way to five o'clock Mass didn't dare look at him, thinking he was dead."

Montiel's Widow – After the sudden death of Jose Montiel (which, much to the surprise of everyone but his widow, came from natural causes), Senora Montiel withdraws into private, frustrated, lonely grief. Her son (for whom Senor Montiel had found an important diplomatic position) and her daughters (now living in France) send long telegrams of condolence, but do not come to the funeral. Neither do many people in the town, narration describing the reasons why: Senor Montiel sympathized with the military leaders of the once-democratic country, assisting the government (and the Mayor) in its purges of undesirables and making a great deal of money in the process … money that Mr. Carmichael, the executor of Senor Montiel's will, eventually tells Senora Montiel, is gone. Deep in despair, Senora Montiel's mood is lightened by letters from her daughters, one of which describes how slaughtered pigs are garlanded with flowers in butcher shop windows. "At the end of the letter," narration comments, "a hand different from her daughters' had added 'Imagine! They put the biggest and prettiest carnation in the pig's ass." That night, as Senora Montiel is trying to pray, she has a vision of Big Mama on the patio. Senora Montiel asks "When am I going to die?" Big Mama tells her "When the tiredness begins in your arm."

Analysis

The first point to note is that these two stories are tied together more closely than any of the other stories in the collection, a connection that is made all the more apparent because of their juxtaposition, one with the other. That connection, however, goes beyond the fact that Senor and Senora Montiel appear in both: there is a thematic connection as well.

On one level, it seems that each of these stories explores a different primary theme of the collection: "… Marvelous Afternoon" vividly explores the Two Sides of Hope (showing, as it reaches its conclusion, that Balthazar has either allowed himself to become deluded or made himself deluded about how positive an experience his "sale" of the cage to Montiel was): "… Widow", with similar vividness, explores the aftermath of death in its moving, almost pathetic exploration of how Senora Montiel finds herself bereft of almost everything that had defined her life after her husband passes away. On further consideration, however, it seems that "…Widow" similarly explores the idea of hope, but from a slightly different perspective: Senora Montiel quickly loses all hope for a good / new life following the death of her (admittedly horrible) husband, a loss made all the more vivid by the fact that Balthazar clings to his so desperately.

Meanwhile, there are other points to note about parallels between stories other than these two: once again, a character identified as "The Mayor" makes an appearance, and once again it's not clear whether this is the same person as others identified in other stories as "the Mayor"; and, at the end of "…Widow", there is a reference to Big Mama, a character whose controlling influence on the life of her country, and on the individual lives of the people who live here, is detailed in the final story of the collection, a detailing foreshadowed here in Senora Montiel's dream.

Other points to note: this is one of the few sections in the book in which all the significant characters are given names (see "Discussion Question 1"); how the apparent death of Balthazar in the one story foreshadows the actual death of the man who cheated him in the next story; the vivid and almost comical image of the flower in the dead pig (see "Discussion Question 3"), and the reference to someone other than her daughter putting that comment at the end of the letter (which suggests that the daughter was too polite to make the comment, perhaps not wanting to hurt her mother's feelings); and how the author once again leaves the reader hanging at the end of a story with his mysterious, almost head-shakingly odd comment by the vision of Big Mama, a comment that, perhaps like so many incidents in life, keeps its meaning hidden. This is, perhaps, the sub-theme explored in this particular story: that sometimes, there are just no explanations. The echo here is of the fact that there is no explanation for the disappearance of Senor Montiel's money: the foreshadowing here is of events in the following story, for which there is likewise no explanation offered.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the author chose to give these particular characters names, when he didn't give names to so many others?

Discussion Question 2

In what way is the collection's thematic exploration of the struggle to live under oppression developed in this section?

Discussion Question 3

In what way does the image of the pig and the flower relate to the exploration of the two sides of hope in "Montiel's Widow"?

Vocabulary

bristly, incoherency, resonant, energetic, decorous, candor, argumentative, pathetic, guttural, quirt, crucifix, consular, lacerate, innumerable, hacienda, diligent, bunions, atmospheric, reprisal, mausoleum, liquidate, massacre, expulsion, consolidate, heifer, evasive

Big Mama's Funeral, Part 4

Summary

One Day after Saturday – Elderly widow Rebecca (the woman whose home was broken into in "Tuesday Siesta"?) discovers that the screens in her windows have been torn. Believing it's because she's been burgled, she visits the Mayor to make a complaint, only to discover that he too is repairing his screens – the consequence, he says, of dead birds falling from the sky. Rebecca goes home, and discovers that there are dead birds in her house. Embarrassed by not making the connection, she goes for a walk in "the brightness of an impending August," smelling the "strong and penetrating stench of dead birds" everywhere.

Rebecca is not alone in not having noticed all the dead birds. Parish priest Father Anthony Isabel, in his early 90s and considered mostly ineffectual by the people of the town, has also been finding dead birds, but hasn't really paid too much attention to them. On his weekly Friday visit to the train station, however, he comes across yet another one, and realizes there is something going on that he needs to be paying attention to. His contemplations about the birds intersect with contemplations of a new sermon and memories of his time at theological college, all of which are vague and unengaging: narration comments that "for himself, it would have been a surprise to discover that he was dead … when he found the third, however, he came back to life a little."

One Saturday, "nine days after the dead birds began to fall", Father Anthony Isabel visits Rebecca. He has found a bird that is near death and wants her help to bring it back. She helps reluctantly and so slowly that by the time she returns with water (during which time Father Anthony Isabel has recalled the political shooting of a cousin of the colonel) the bird has died. Rebecca's unsympathetic reaction leads the priest to describe her as "hard," and he leaves, realizing as he goes that it's probably the Hand of God is at work. Later that day, he again goes to the train station, feeling the heat of the day and the area more than ever as he recalls, yet again, another day from his youth, this one in which the news of a woman's death upset one of his teachers. The combination of circumstances coincides with what he believes is a vision of "The Wandering Jew," a vision that inspires him so intently that he rushes home and misses seeing who arrives on the train: a quiet and very hungry young man who, upon seeing a priest at the station, theorizes that there's also someplace where he can get some food and hops off the train.

Narration then follows the young man as he finds a hotel; has a meal; has an uncomfortable, teasing interaction with both the hotel proprietress and a girl in the hotel lounge (who jokes about the young man being frightened away by all the dead birds); recalls his childhood curiosity about life; and considers his relationship with his invalid mother, whose retirement papers (he is shocked to realize) he left behind on the train. That night, he sleeps in a badly decorated room while Father Anthony Isabel has a

sleepless night recovering from giving a woman final unction and rehearsing his sermon for the next morning.

When morning comes, Father Anthony Isabel falls out of bed and, for a moment, believes he has died: but then he revives himself and goes to the church, which is empty as usual (the town long since having stopped believing that he has anything worthwhile to say), except for the young man from the train, desperate for comfort in the aftermath of his mistake and curious about the priest whom the proprietress of the hotel has said is crazy. Father Anthony Isabel notices the young man and preaches his sermon directly and passionately to him. Meanwhile, Rebecca hears from her maid that word is spreading that Father Anthony Isabel has lost his mind, and along with the rest of the town, heads to the church, where she and everyone else hears Father Anthony Isabel preaching about the monstrous "Wandering Jew." At first excited to see so many people there, Father Anthony Isabel soon realizes, with dismay, that they are not attracted to his words, but to the spectacle of his apparent madness. Nevertheless, he continues with the service, telling his assistant to take the offering. At first, he tells the assistant that it's for the expulsion of "The Wandering Jew," but when he sees the assistant's terrified confusion, Father Anthony Isabel says it's for "the boy alone at the beginning, and you tell him that it's from the priest, and that he should buy a new hat."

Analysis

This story is one of two in the collection in which the theme of Magic and Mystery is most vividly developed – in this case, through the appearance of the dead birds. The narrative never explains what kind of birds they are, what killed them, or whether they appear anywhere else but in this particular town: they are simply part of an event that appears somewhat magical in an otherwise realistic set of circumstances, an example of the literary technique known as "magic realism" (see "Themes – Magic and Mystery").

The other story in the collection in which magic realism is most apparently utilized (hence also developing the theme of magic and mystery) is "No One Writes to the Colonel," in which the title character receives letters from his son who, the reader is told, is actually dead. The fact that both stories deploy magic realism is far from the only parallel between the two stories: there are substantial parallels between the experiences of the two central characters, the colonel and Father Anthony Isabel. There are also parallels with a third character in the collection: Domaso, in "There Are No Thieves …" For further consideration of this aspect of the collection, see "Homework Help 2."

Meanwhile, this story is particularly notable for its various manifestations of Christian narrative. The fact that Father Anthony Isabel's hopeful trips to the train station take place on Friday, making that day almost sacred to him, can be seen as a metaphoric echo of the circumstances of Good Friday, a sacred day in Christian practice (the day Christ was crucified). A related point is Father Anthony Isabel's attempt to revive (resurrect?) the seemingly dead bird, which can be seen as an echo of a central element of Christian theology and practice: the veneration of Christ's "resurrection"

following his death on the cross. It could even be argued that the fact that Father Anthony Isabel is described as coming back to life after finding the third bird is also an echo of the Christ story: Christ himself “came back to life” after three days of death. Finally, there is the reference to “The Wandering Jew,” a legendary character whose story (see “Symbols / Symbolism”) ties closely with that of Christ without it actually appearing in the Bible.

There are several other noteworthy elements in this section. First, there are the references to recurring characters: Rebecca (who seems to be the same Rebecca who appeared earlier in “Tuesday Siesta”) and the Mayor (who, again, may or may not be the same person as the other “mayors” referred to in the collection – his attitude certainly seems to fit with that of the Mayor in, for example, “One of These Days”). There is also the reference to Father Anthony Isabel’s giving a woman “final unction” (a Christian rite in which a dying person is blessed by a priest), a foreshadowing of an event in the following story (“Big Mama’s Funeral”) in which the Father is portrayed as doing the same thing to Big Mama, who may in fact be the woman referred to here (hence creating a link between the two stories).

Then there is the portrayal of the boy, whose presence in the story evokes the collection’s thematic emphasis on Namelessness and whose presence is the trigger for the exploration, through Father Anthony Isabel’s reaction to his presence, of the collection’s thematic interest in the Two sides of Hope (the boy’s presence feeding both the Father’s genuine hope and the delusion that that hope has become). The collection’s theme exploring the Aftermath of Death is developed in several ways: obviously through the presence of the dead birds, but also in Father Anthony Isabel’s dreams. At the same time, the emphasis on death is counterpointed / juxtaposed with the boy’s encounters in the hotel: both the proprietress and the girl are vividly portrayed as being full of life.

Finally, and once again, the last moments of the story are another example of how the author concludes his stories with images, lines, or actions that seem unconnected to the matters at hand, but which in fact can be seen as evoking the randomness of life and, in this case, the sense that Father Anthony Isabel has finally left behind the world of his delusions (as represented by his new obsession with The Wandering Jew) and has come face to face with reality – specifically, the boy’s decrepit hat.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the metaphorical connection between the dead birds and the situation of Father Anthony Isabel? Of the unnamed boy? Of Rebecca?

Discussion Question 2

What does the narrative mean when it suggests that Father Anthony Isabel is “dead”?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the boy's problems with his mother's papers echo the situation of Father Anthony Isabel? What do the situations of both characters say about their respective experiences of trying to function in reality?

Vocabulary

arduous, creole, bestial, disconcert, absorption, solemnity, ornate, gratuitous, sacristy, habitual, prestige, decipher, breviary, credence, appreciable, soutane, taciturn, profusion, concupiscent, episcopate, piety, luxurious, implacable, repugnance, prodigious, diaphanous, annotation, imperceptible, unction, gramophone, proprietress, excrement, insolent, collaborate, rudimentary, miasmic, solidity, prostrate, raucous, expiation, commiseration, olfactory, nocturnal, frivolous, multitude, malediction, tabernacle, acolyte

Big Mama's Funeral, Part 5

Summary

Artificial Roses – Early one Friday morning, Mina prepares to go to mass to take the First Friday communion. She is upset, however, because the sleeves of her dress are missing. When she finds out that her blind grandmother washed them, Mina tries to dry them, but they're too wet. She tries to dry them, but then finds that time is too short for her to wait. She puts them on wet and goes, but comes back a few minutes later, going straight to the toilet. When she's finished, she sits with some coffee, not going to Mass at all but unable to drink the coffee because she is so angrily tearful – or tearfully angry. As her grandmother listens closely, Mina goes into her room, takes some letters from a secret chest in her armoire, and flushes them down the toilet.

Later, Mina and her assistant (who has brought a box of dead mice, caught overnight at the church) work on creating artificial roses for the house-front business that Mina runs. As they talk and work, Mina says "He went away." Then, when the assistant reacts in shock and asks what now, Mina says "Now nothing." Shortly afterwards, the assistant leaves. Mina taunts her grandmother with the sound of the dead mice as they're shaken in their box. As Mina returns from flushing the mice down the toilet, her grandmother tells her she shouldn't "confess with strangers"; comments that Mina went to the bathroom more than usual that morning; suggests that Mina didn't go to Mass because on the way, she found "someone was waiting" who caused her "some disappointment"; and wants to know what Mina kept in the secret chest. When Mina says she should go look for herself, her grandmother comments that she can't look down the toilet, and then asks again what Mina did in there. Mina says she "went to take a shit." Her grandmother comments that it would be easier to believe her if she hadn't just sworn for the first time in her hearing. Mina's mother appears with some completed artificial roses just as Mina's grandmother says she (Mina) is crazy, but "you haven't thought of sending me to the madhouse so long as I don't start throwing stones."

Analysis

This relatively short story, one of the most compact in the collection, is packed with elements of meaning. There are several elements that connect this story with others in the collection (including the references to Friday, which connects this story with those of the colonel and Father Anthony Isabel, and various thematic elements); the references to death (both literal and metaphorical, developing the collection's thematic interest in dealing with the aftermath of death); and the metaphoric connection between flowers (universal symbols of hope and beauty) and the fact that the flowers in this story are artificial (representing, on one level, the artificiality of Mina's now-dead hopes for a quality relationship with "he" and, therefore, the collection's thematic interest in the two sides of hope).

Then there is the irony of a blind person being able to “see” truths that sighted characters can’t, or won’t; there are the references to Christian faith (specifically to Catholic faith, in the grandmother’s reference to “confessing,” an important element of Catholic religious practice); and the reference to “throwing stones.” Here the symbolism might be regarded as somewhat obscure: it seems to be a reference to the adage that “People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones,” a saying that refers to the idea that people with their own problems shouldn’t be too quick to criticize how other people handle theirs. In this case, the implication of Mina’s grandmother (easily one of the most intriguing characters in the collection) is that Mina herself is, in some ways, mad (insane) which is why she hasn’t sent her grandmother away: Mina recognizes that she and her grandmother are, in some ways, kindred spirits, and if the grandmother is sent away, Mina should be as well.

Discussion Question 1

Who do you think “he” is?

Discussion Question 2

How do you think Mina’s actions with the letters reflect other aspects of her situation?

Discussion Question 3

How do you respond to the grandmother’s suggestion of why Mina didn’t follow through on her plans to go to mass? What do you think is the relationship between Mina’s decision and other elements of the story?

Vocabulary

ensconce, idyllic, shirr, armoire, annals, pontiff, commotion, poultice, delirium, rattan, notary, peon, culmination, matriarchal, rigidity, sacramental, procreation, novitiate, imminence, homage, premonition, hacienda, doleful, suppository, canopy, tumultuous, complicity, jubilation, diadem, cambric, medieval, tacit, liturgical, dint, pertain, enumerate, periodic

Big Mama's Funeral, Part 6

Summary

The story begins with references to how life is about to return to normal following the death of “Big Mama, absolute sovereign of the Kingdom of Macondo.” The narrative then moves into the past to describe the events before, during, and after her death: the decades-old control Big Mama had over her family and the wider community; her relationship with Father Anthony Isabel (who have her the last rites); the tension with which her death was awaited; and the ceremonial adulation within which she lived her life, inheriting her father’s power at the age of 22. Narration describes how, 72 years later, Big Mama became progressively more weak and more ill; how she carefully, and with great detail, distributed her property and gave orders for how life was to proceed after she died; and how she began to list all the intangible aspects of life that she wanted to continue (“the right of appeal … free elections, beauty queens … liberal ladies … the purity of the language, setting a good example … statements of political support”) but died before the list could be completed (see “Quote 12”).

Narration then describes the intensity and widespread presence of news of her death; how political and military conflicts in Macondo came to an end in the aftermath of her passing (partly because Big Mama had managed to befriend, and fund, both sides); and how plans for the funeral became stalled when the question arose of whether the President of the Republic could actually attend. Even the Pope, narration reveals, was freer to go the funeral – and he does, traveling from his home in Italy only to wait in the sweltering heat of Macondo for several days while the decision was made. Eventually, the government agrees that the President can go, and plans for the funeral proceed quickly. Narration describes how people from all walks of life attend the funeral (including those who had been waiting for 60 years for their veterans’ pensions); how its pomp and ceremony prevented the public from noticing, among other things, the buzzards circling over the funeral procession or how quickly Big Mama’s family dismantled her house; and how, once the funeral was actually finished, the nation collectively sighed with relief. Narration concludes with references to how life could now be freer, and to how the story of the funeral should be told quickly, as soon the garbage left behind in its wake will be swept up.

Analysis

This is the one story in which the collection’s thematic interest in the Aftermath of Death is explored in its most vivid form. The references to life returning to normal at the beginning of the story bookend the references at the end of the story to how things related to Big Mama’s funeral get swept away, combining to suggest that even a life as seemingly significant as Big Mama’s, as defined by the descriptions of both the life and the death between those bookending references, is ultimately transitory, temporary, and in the bigger scheme of life, ultimately irrelevant. The narrative goes even further,

suggesting that all the fuss and complications associated with death are self-important and, again, ultimately meaningless. They, like the remnants of both life and death, are swept away once that life and that death are over with. In this sense, the story can be seen as being satire, a form of humor in which aspects of a particular character or situation are exaggerated in order to reveal how absurd they actually are. In this case, the descriptions of the fuss made of the death / funeral (including the attendance of the Pope and the uncertainty of the President) can be seen as satirical: a very, very big deal is made of an event that is ultimately not a big deal at all … everybody dies, and in the end, everybody's life is swept away in exactly the same manner.

Other important elements in this section: the giving of a name to the locale in which this story takes place (a counterpoint to the collection's thematic interest in Namelessness); the appearances of characters from other stories (including Father Anthony Isabel, the Mayor, and the colonel) which, in turn, suggests that the stories in which they appear also take place in the Kingdom of Macondo; and the powerful irony of a domineering crime boss like Big Mama taking such a keen interest in the so-called finer things in life.

Discussion Question 1

Buzzards have a reputation for being carrion feeders: that is, animals that feed on dead and decaying flesh. What is the metaphoric significance of the reference to the buzzards here?

Discussion Question 2

How does the family's dismantling of Big Mama's home reflect and/or manifest the collection's thematic interest in the aftermath of death?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways is the collection's thematic exploration of living under oppression explored in this story?

Vocabulary

dominance, abundant, dilapidated, veneration, sultry, malarial, consternation, personage, abnegation, suffrage, transitory, canonry, sinecure, viceroy, coterie, posthumous, alchemist, hermeneutics, syllogism, rarefy, vocation, prestigious, aseptic, cadaver, adduce, pontifical, torpid, daguerreotype, promontory, resonant, parapet, palisade, reciprocal, prerogative, mottled, dappled, centenarian, imperturbable, filigree, inaugurate, resplendent, covetous, catafalque, pestilential, dithyramb, plinth

Characters

The Colonel

The colonel is the central character in the longest story of the collection – “No One Writes to the Colonel.” He is also referred to, in passing, in another of the longer stories, “Big Mama’s Funeral.” There are several important points to note about the colonel: he is never actually named (which is one manifestation of the collection’s thematic interest in Namelessness – see “Themes / Motifs”); his life is in many ways dependent upon routine (i.e. his weekly expeditions to see if he has received his mail) and upon his plans for his late son’s rooster (both of which are among the collection’s key explorations of the central theme of hope); and he is the first of many characters in the collection whose existence is defined primarily by circumstance and situation (also a thematic element of the collection – in this case, Living within Oppression).

As an individual (as opposed to an embodiment of various themes), the colonel is a complicated person: simultaneously devoted to his wife and dismissive of her concerns (particularly when it comes to choosing between her and the rooster), simultaneously fastidious (particularly when it comes to shaving) and slovenly (out of necessity, since circumstances don’t allow for new and/or well-kept clothes and shoes); and simultaneously realistic (when it comes to the reality of his situation) and idealistic (when it comes to the possibilities for changing that reality).

It could be argued that in many ways, the colonel is the so-called “thematic father” of many of the other characters in the collection. So many of his characteristics, his circumstances, and his choices are echoed by other characters in other stories. Specific aspects of his identity may vary, to a degree: the colonel has an ill wife, is pinning his hopes on income from a rooster, and has a son who may or may not be dead. But at his core, in terms of his goals, dreams, and fundamental aspects of his inner life, he is not so different from the central characters of the other stories in the collection.

Father Anthony Isabel

This character is one of the central characters in another of the longer stories, “One Day after Sunday.” He is also referred to, glancingly, in “Big Mama’s Funeral,” where he is referred to as the priest who gave Big Mama last rites and extreme unction: it’s very possible, in fact, given the author’s tendency to interrelate characters and stories, that the latter is the “extreme unction” that narration refers to him doing in “One Day after Sunday.” In any case, Father Anthony Isabel is portrayed as quite old (in his early nineties), not terribly well respected, prone to what seems to be flights of imagination, and not terribly intelligent. There is a sense, glimpsed in “Big Mama’s Funeral” and explored in greater depth in “One Day after Sunday,” that he is slipping into senility and/or dementia, an aspect of his situation and/or identity that calls into question his capacity for clear, rational thought and accuracy of perception. This last is particularly

important, given that much of the action in the later part of “One Day …” is defined by what he says was a vision of “The Wandering Jew” (see “Symbol / Object”).

Big Mama

Big Mama is the third major character in the collection, appearing in another of the longer stories (“Big Mama’s Funeral”) and showing up briefly in “Montiel’s Widow” (in a dream of the title character). The most important thing to note about Big Mama is that in the story that bears her name, she is dead, her life being described in flashback: she may or may not be dead in “Montiel’s Widow,” given that her appearance in that story is in a vision. “Montiel’s Widow” contains no information about why Big Mama, of all people, should appear in such a way to Senora Montiel. “Big Mama’s Funeral,” however, supplies that information: she was, it seems, a dominant figure in organized crime, in politics, and in the economic life of the “kingdom” she rules (not to mention the completely controlling matriarch of her complicated, extended family). In retrospect, then, her presence in “Montiel’s Widow” can be explained as a manifestation / externalization of Senora Montiel’s need for guidance and direction (if one is being tactful) or control (if one is referring more to the way Big Mama lived her life).

Jose Montiel

Senor Montiel appears in two stories: as a secondary character in “Balthazar’s Marvelous Afternoon,” who almost succeeds in making Balthazar’s afternoon much less marvelous; and as a dead character in “Montiel’s Widow,” a story about the struggle of his wife to survive in the aftermath of his death. In both stories, Montiel is portrayed as selfish, angry, judgmental, and vindictive: an opportunist and manipulator who, in all likelihood, was in cahoots (for lack of a better term) with Big Mama.

Senora Montiel

Like her husband, Senora Montiel appears in two stories: as a secondary, and mostly ineffectual, character in “Balthazar’s Marvelous Afternoon” (in which she attempts to withstand her husband’s withering, autocratic domination); and as the primary character in “Montiel’s Widow,” the story of her struggle to come to terms with life, her feelings, and her situation in the (much relieved, but very confusing) aftermath of her husband’s death. The story of Senora Montiel is one of the key elements in the collection’s thematic consideration of Death.

The Mayor

The Mayor appears in passing in several stories (including “No One Writes to the Colonel” and “One Day After Sunday”), and is a central character in “One of these Days” (it’s important to note that it’s not explicitly clear anywhere in the collection that the various references to “The Mayor” are, in fact, to the same actual person: on the other

hand, neither is it made clear that they are NOT). Throughout the collection, the Mayor is consistently portrayed as short-tempered, a bit power crazy, and rather controlling. He is developed in somewhat greater depth in “One of these Days” in which he, being faced with the removal of a wisdom tooth without anesthetic, becomes somewhat vulnerable and even a little pathetic. That changes, however, when dentist Aurelio tells him the pain he (the Mayor) is about to suffer is payback for 20 men whose deaths, it seems, the Mayor is at least partially responsible. This, in turn, suggests that he, perhaps like Jose Montiel, was to some degree connected to Big Mama and/or the military government (although nowhere in the collection is this made explicitly clear).

Rebecca

The lonely, elderly, widowed Rebecca appears briefly in two stories. She is referred to in “Tuesday Siesta” as the woman who shot the central character’s son (who was, apparently attempting to rob her house); and, later, she appears in “One Day before Sunday,” as one of three characters (the Mayor and Father Anthony Isabel being the other two) being troubled by the sudden, awkward appearance of dead birds in the town. Rebecca is portrayed in both stories as being strong-willed and determined to keep her home both clean and safe. In “One Day …”, she is portrayed as also being narrow minded, rigid, and judgmental, particularly of the Mayor and Father Anthony Isabel.

The Colonel’s Wife ("No One Writes to the Colonel")

The Colonel's wife, unnamed like her husband, appears only in this one story. She is a sickly, troubled, volatile woman: suffering from asthma, constantly concerned about how her household is going to survive, and frequently veering back and forth between hope (that the rooster's success as a cock-fighter will be everything her husband and son anticipated), resentment (that the rooster gets so much attention), and impatience (for the rooster to either be sold, or taken away and killed for food).

The Dead Man ("No One Writes to the Colonel")

The before, during, and after of this unnamed musician's funeral is the focus of the action in the early part of this short story. His identity is significant because, as the colonel suggests, the dead man was a musician and not a rebel, but his funeral is viewed as that of a rebel. In that sense, what happens to the dead man can be seen as a venue through which the narrative can reveal the sort of oppression under which the colonel and the rest of his community live.

Agustin ("No One Writes to the Colonel")

Agustin is the son of the colonel and his wife. He is portrayed as being a tailor (as evidenced by his sewing machine, left in the possession of his parents after his death)

and as a member of the rebellion (the implication being that he was shot for being so). On occasion, the narrative raises the question of whether he is actually dead: he is initially referred to as such, but later, the colonel is handed letters that Agustin's friends say are from Agustin himself. This may be a reference to Agustin's death being a lie (perhaps he is in hiding?) or it may be a reference to the deployment of magic realism in the writing of the collection (see "Style - Language and Meaning").

Sabas ("No One Writes to the Colonel")

Sabas is the colonel's friend and confidante. He plays a key role in advising the colonel on what to do with the rooster and with his wife.

The Doctor ("No One Writes to the Colonel")

The unnamed doctor attends to the colonel's sickly wife. The doctor likes to make the occasional joke, is generally both pragmatic and positive, but is also, at times, exasperated with the colonel's lack of attention to reality.

The Postmaster ("No One Writes to the Colonel")

The postmaster collects the mail and sorts it in the post office. As such, he is very familiar with (and weary of) the colonel's weekly visits in search of his long sought piece of mail and advises him, without actually saying so, to give up hope.

The Lawyer ("No One Writes to the Colonel")

The colonel's lawyer is yet another character who tries to discourage the colonel. Engaged by the colonel several decades previously, in the hope that he (the lawyer) could expedite the processing of the colonel's application for a pension, the lawyer responds to the colonel's insistence that something be done by telling him that success is unlikely because of all the bureaucratic, political maneuverings that have changed the system from which the colonel is trying to get his money.

The Woman ("Tuesday Siesta")

This unnamed character comes to an unnamed town in search of the grave of her son, shot (by Rebecca - see above) while in the act of committing a robbery. The woman is portrayed as politely determined and loving - a good mother.

The Daughter ("Tuesday Siesta")

This character is the young daughter of the above-referenced woman in search of her son. The daughter is outspoken and un-cautious, in the way of children, but as such reveals truths about the dead man that might have otherwise gone unsaid.

Carlos Centeno ("Tuesday Siesta")

Carlos is the son of the above-referenced woman. He was shot dead while committing a robbery, and has since been buried in the town's cemetery. He is significant because unlike his mother and sister, and the priest who gives them directions to find him, Carlos is given a name. As such, he is an interesting element in the collection's thematic interest in Nameless-ness.

Aurelio Escovar ("One of these Days")

Aurelio is the dentist who pulls out the Mayor's troublesome wisdom tooth. He is portrayed as not being terribly compassionate towards the Mayor, or all that interested in helping him: Aurelio blames the Mayor for the deaths of 20 men, and suggests that the pain the Mayor is about to experience is payback for those deaths.

Damaso ("No Thieves in This Town")

Twenty-ish Domaso is one of the central characters in this story. A thief in the very earliest stages of his "career," he is reckless, violent, and volatile, portrayed as being insensitive to the needs and vulnerabilities of his wife (Ana - see below) and also quite naive about the realities of his situation in the aftermath of the theft.

Ana ("No Thieves in This Town")

Ana is Domaso's wife. She is described as being several years older than him; pregnant; and as unable to help herself from confronting him, even when she knows that such a confrontation will probably result in violence towards her. She is perhaps strangely agreeable to his means of making a living (i.e. theft), but there is a sense of desperation about their life and circumstances that makes this more understandable.

Roque ("No Thieves in This Town")

Roque is the owner of the pool hall that is robbed by Domaso. Roque is a pragmatic businessman, accepting both what has happened to him as a result of the robbery and of what he needs to do to keep his business open. At the same time, he is unafraid of confronting the truth when it reveals itself to him, and shows no remorse when Domaso reveals the truth of his involvement in the theft.

The Negro ("No Thieves in This Town")

This unnamed character is made the scapegoat for the theft committed by Domaso. The "Negro" is suspected and captured because he is a stranger, and is beaten, convicted of the crime, and sent away. His suffering is the trigger for Domaso to have a change of heart, and return the stolen billiard balls.

Balthazar ("Balthazar's Marvelous Afternoon")

The well-meaning craftsman Balthazar (whose actual job is never explicitly / clearly defined) is the central character in the story that bears his name. His generosity of spirit and joy in life are a contrast to the selfishness of the story's antagonist (Jose Montiel - see above) and, in many ways, to the attitudes and actions of many of the other characters in the collection.

Ursula ("Balthazar's Marvelous Afternoon")

Ursula is Balthazar's practical, earthy wife. Proud of her husband's accomplishments and integrity, she is nevertheless realistic enough to know that he should get a good deal for his work whenever he can, but understands when he chooses, instead, to behave with integrity and do as he promised to do.

Dr. Giraldo ("Balthazar's Marvelous Afternoon")

Dr. Giraldo is a visitor to the home of Balthazar and Ursula, and the first person to express an interest in Balthazar's cage. His enthusiasm for it is dampened when he learns that Balthazar already knows what he's going to do with it, but he (the doctor) is gracious in his loss.

Pepe ("Balthazar's Marvelous Afternoon")

Young Pepe is the son of Jose and Senora Montiel, and Balthazar's real client. The boy throws a tantrum when his tyrannical father says he can't have the cage, which may or may not play a role in Balthazar's decision to forgo payment for his work and give Pepe the cage anyway.

The Young Man on the Train ("One Day after Saturday")

The unnamed young man, traveling through town on a train to do some administrative work for his mother, is distracted from his mission by the prospect of food, and later by the attentions of a young woman. Stranded in town without the papers he needs to

complete his work, he takes refuge in the church, where he is a congregation of one listening to the sermon of the increasingly demented Father Anthony Isabel.

Mina ("Artificial Roses")

The central character of this story is a young woman recently troubled by the loss of a mysterious "he" who just left. Mina has a confrontational relationship with her wise, insightful grandmother, who causes Mina to look at parts of herself she doesn't necessarily want to see.

Mina's Grandmother ("Artificial Roses")

Mina's grandmother is blind, but is nonetheless able to see clearly and perceptively into the life and heart of her granddaughter. Wise, sharp-tongued, and somewhat relentless, she speaks truths to Mina that Mina doesn't really want to hear.

Trinidad ("Artificial Roses")

Trinidad is Mina's assistant, helping her make the artificial roses she sells out of her home. Trinidad is also Mina's confidante, and receives the news that "he" has left with compassion but also with detachment.

Mina's Mother ("Artificial Roses")

Mina's mother tries half-heartedly to mediate between Mina and her grandmother, but seems distracted by her own life and concerns. She is an ineffectual, less powerful presence in the face of the two strong wills who share the house with her.

Nicanor ("Big Mama's Funeral")

Nicanor is Big Mama's well-armed oldest nephew, who keeps the rest of the family in order in the aftermath of Big Mama's death. He is in charge of implementing all of Big Mama's plans for her her funeral.

The President of Macondo ("Big Mama's Funeral")

The leader of the country in which Big Mama built her organized crime empire holds up the chain of events leading to Big Mama's funeral by being uncertain of whether he is intended / allowed to intend. Eventually, it is determined that he can and should go, and the funeral proceeds.

The Pope ("Big Mama's Funeral")

Big Mama's power and reputation are so expansive and influential that even the Pop is called upon to attend her funeral. He is treated like any other member of the family, and is ultimately glad when he is permitted to leave.

Symbols and Symbolism

Friday

Several times throughout the collection, important events take place on Friday - or, more specifically, characters follow routines that center on Friday. Two examples: every Friday, the colonel goes on an expedition to collect his eternally missing mail; and every Friday, Father Anthony Isabel goes to the train station to watch for new arrivals. There is, in this parallel, a sense that for these two characters at least, Fridays are part of their clinging to hope that something in their lives might change - in other words, an aspect of one of the collection's central themes.

The Colonel's Umbrella ("No One Writes to the Colonel")

At the beginning of the story, the colonels umbrella is torn and tattered, a symbol of the life he is living and of the hopes he has for that life to be improved. Later, he is offered the change to take shelter under an umbrella in better repair, but forgoes it: a representation of how he remains determined to hold onto his unreasonable hope, even in the face of a more realistic option.

The Colonel's Rooster ("No One Writes to the Colonel")

The rooster kept by the colonel and his wife was left to them by their son, Agustin. The rooster has the reputation of being a powerful fighter, and it is upon the rooster's success in that field that the colonel (and to a lesser degree his wife) pin the hopes for their future - meaning that the rooster can be seen as symbolizing / representing hope, both its positive and negative sides.

The Letter from the Government ("No One Writes to the Colonel")

This letter, which never actually comes, is the focus of the colonel's hopes for a better life. The letter, he believes, will bring him his long-awaited pension, and make his uncomfortable life easier to bear. This letter is another symbol of false hope in the story, and as such is also a manifestation of the collection's thematic interest in both sides of hope.

Agustin's Letters ("No One Writes to the Colonel")

The narrative of this short story suggests in its earliest paragraphs that the son of the colonel and his wife is dead. Later in the story, however, the colonel is given what he is told are letters from his son, which may or may not be real.

The Mayor's Tooth ("One of these Days")

The extremely painful abscessed tooth of the Mayor is the catalyst / trigger for the confrontation between the Mayor and dentist Aurelio. The latter clearly harbors resentment towards the Mayor, and uses the occasion of the Mayor needing his tooth removed to take out some (frustrations? anger?) on him.

Domaso's Billiard Balls ("No Thieves in this Town")

Young thief Domaso steals three billiard balls from a local pool hall. Their disappearance causes a great deal of trouble both in Damaso's home / life and in the life of the man accused of stealing them. Eventually, Damaso has an attack of conscience and tries to return the balls, but gets caught and as a result, faces an uncertain future. The billiard balls represent lost hope: Damaso's plans to use the balls as the beginning of a new and improved means of earning a living disappear, and he is left with virtually nothing.

Balthasar's Cage ("Balthazar's Marvelous Afternoon")

The spacious, beautiful but practical birdcage created by craftsman Balthazar is the catalyst for intense conflict within the bickering, volatile Montiel family. It is also the catalyst for feelings of intense joy and relief in Balthazar, whose efforts to release / celebrate those feelings eventually result in his collapse in the street, and in his being perceived as dead.

Dead Birds ("One Day after Saturday")

The events, confrontations, and surprises in this short story are all triggered, to one degree or another, by the unexpected and unexplained appearance of increasing numbers of dead birds. They, like the rooster referenced above, represent hope - but unlike the rooster, they represent hope that has died.

The Wandering Jew ("One Day after Saturday")

The Wandering Jew is the name given to the legendary figure of a Jewish man who ridiculed Jesus Christ while he (Jesus) was on his way to his crucifixion, and who was subsequently cursed to wander the world, alone and immortal, until Jesus' second

coming. The Wandering Jew appears in many stories and legends, and is referred to in "One Day after Saturday" as a vision experienced by Father Anthony Isabel.

Mina's Roses ("Artificial Roses")

Mina, the central character in this story, makes and sells artificial roses, complete with thorny artificial stems. Within the overall context of the collection's thematic exploration of the nature of hope, and within the story itself (in which Mina's undefined hopes seem to have been dashed by the departure of an unnamed man in her life), these flowers can be seen as symbolizing / metaphorically representing artificial hope.

Settings

South America

The stories are all set in Central / South America (the actual location is never specified). Several aspects of life in this part of the world play key roles in the various stories: the area's deep roots in Latin culture; the area's tendency towards intense heat; its pervasive history of military influence on politics; and the tendency of writers who live and work there to employ the technique of magic realism in their work (see "Themes - Magic and Mystery").

Macondo

The fictional South American town of Macondo is the setting for one of the collection's longer short stories, "Big Mama's Funeral." By implication, and because several characters from other stories appear in this story (particularly the colonel and Father Anthony Isabel), there is the sense that many of the other stories also take place in Macondo.

Small Towns

In many cases, the communities in which the stories are set are not identified either by name or by implication: there is no indication anywhere in the text of where "Mina," for example, is set. Nevertheless, there is a sense of smallness about the worlds in which the action of these pieces unfolds - a sense of tight-knit community and close awareness of others that adds a degree of pressure to the experiences of the characters.

Dictatorship

Most, if not all, of the stories in the collection are set within the cultural / political context of military government, or of dictatorship. Sometimes it's referred to directly, sometimes indirectly, but in almost all cases, there is a feel of oppression, of lingering / simmering violence and corruption, and of characters feeling neither safe or respected as individuals or as a community. This, in turn, shapes a feeling of fear and desperation that pervades a number of the stories, situations, and lives portrayed in the book.

Near Poverty

An aspect of the stories' settings related to the above-mentioned sense of dictatorship has to do with the sense that most, if not all, the characters live in circumstances of near (or actual) poverty. Here again there is a sense of desperation and of fear as several

characters in several stories struggle within the boundaries of a situation in which they don't know whether they'll have enough to eat. The one possible exception to this is "Big Mama's Funeral," in which there are references to Big Mama being in control of a vast amount of wealth that may, or may not, make its way down to the poor people whose lives she controls.

Themes and Motifs

The Presence of Oppression

The experience of living within the circumstances of economic, political, or cultural oppression – or rather, of struggling to live within such circumstances – is common to every story in the collection, albeit to varying degrees. The sense of such challenging circumstances is stronger in stories like “No One Writes …” (in which circumstance is a defining component and / or motivator of the action) and “There Are No Thieves ...” (in which there is a very clear sense that Domaso does what he does, or makes his living the way he does, as a result of being forced to live in impoverished circumstances). On the other hand, the sense / spirit of oppression is less overtly present in stories like “One Day …”, “Artificial Roses”, and “…Marvelous Afternoon,” in which there are only passing hints of the oppression within which the characters are struggling to survive. Ultimately, because there is both a factual connection between so many of the stories (established through the presence of characters in more than one piece) and a sense of geographic connection (all the stories take place in the same part of the world, and probably in the same community), there is a strong feeling of circumstantial connection between the characters and their situations as well.

This oppression seems to manifest in several ways: characters (such as the colonel, and the Negro in “There Are No Thieves …) are physically and morally oppressed / controlled / manipulated by those in power; characters (such as Domaso in “There Are No Thieves …” and possibly Mina in “Artificial Roses”) are oppressed by what seems to be the poverty into which they are calculatedly and/or purposefully placed by the powers that be; and, perhaps most notably, there is the sense that large, anonymous numbers of citizens are oppressed by those, like Big Mama in “Big Mama’s Funeral” who simply want power and control.

This main theme has several different facets, some of which form important sub-themes, discussed below.

Namelessness

Several of the characters in the various stories are never identified by name. The most important of these is the colonel in “No One Writes …”, whose title / rank is never even capitalized, as it would be in most other written situations, simply as an indication of the respect such an individual of such rank deserves. Therein lies what seems to be the main reason for the lack of names for many of the characters: to portray them as not worthy of the respect afforded a sense of individual identity as represented by a name. This, in turn, is a fundamental, common manifestation of oppression, as discussed above: in the stories as in life, those being oppressed are not regarded as human beings. Here again, the predominant example is the colonel who is, it seems, treated / viewed by everyone around him (perhaps even his wife, but most particularly the

government with which he is trying to communicate) as nothing more than a now-empty title, a hollow rank – no longer a person, but a symbol of his own long-forgotten past and empty present. Other characters whose situations are similar to that of the colonel include the Negro in “There Are No Thieves” (oppressed by the need of local authorities for a scapegoat, and by the fear of the local community of strangers) and the boy in “One Day After Saturday” (whose initial circumstances – having to take care of paperwork for his invalid mother – are defined by the needs of political bureaucracies)

Other characters who remain unnamed throughout the stories in which they appear include the woman and her daughter in “Tuesday Siesta”; the Mayor (who appears in several stories and who may, or may not, be the same person in all of them); and Mina’s grandmother in “Artificial Roses”. There is the sense that these characters are nameless for reasons that are similar to those for the colonel’s namelessness, but are ultimately slightly different. Like the colonel, they lack identity because their circumstances / situations are being controlled by outside forces / situations: the mother and daughter by the actions of their son / brother (who is, interestingly, identified by name); the Mayor (by his position); and Mina’s grandmother (defined by her relationship to the central character rather than by her own identity). Unlike the colonel, the Negro, and the boy, however, their lack of identity has less to do with being regarded by those outside forces (i.e. by outside oppressors) as disposable non-entities.

The Two Sides of Hope

Another sub-theme of the collection’s primary thematic consideration of life under oppression is its parallel consideration of Two Sides of Hope. Those two sides, in turn, could be defined as simple optimism (that life in general, or specific events in particular, will turn out for the best, or as desired) and as optimism that has become delusional. The line between the two is blurry and indistinct in much of the collection, and it often becomes difficult to tell on which side of the line the characters and their experiences fall.

Some characters are easier to define, in terms of their positioning in relation to this theme, than others. The colonel, for example, seems quite clearly to have slipped over the line from optimism into delusion, as he has convinced himself that even after decades of waiting, he will be recognized for his value and compensated for his service. Another vividly delusional character is Balthazar in “… Marvelous Afternoon,” who is portrayed as putting a great deal of effort and money into deluding himself that the emotionally violent misunderstanding that has left him much poorer than he hoped is, in fact, an event to be rejoiced. Domaso in “There Are No Thieves …” seems to be straddling the line: on the one hand, he seems to have no illusions about the dangers of his situation (i.e. engaging in robbery), but on the other hand, his idea for a string of profit-making similar robberies, not to mention his enthusiasm for that idea, tips rapidly into delusion that, when it becomes clear that that’s what has happened, quickly turns sour, bitter, and violent.

The third main manifestation of hope in the collection appears in “Montiel’s Widow,” as the hope in Senora Montiel that life after her husband’s death will be much improved is quickly dashed by the reality that he left behind. She barely gets a chance to hope, let alone for her hope to become a delusion, before her hopes are dashed. It may be, in fact, that there is a thematic connection here between Senora Montiel and Mina in “Artificial Flowers,” whose relatively undefined hopes seem to be dashed by the disappearance of the man referred to only as “he” (perhaps they are the same person – the tendency of the author to put characters from one story into another suggests this possibility). In any case, there is, in turn, perhaps symbolic value in the fact that Mina makes and sells artificial flowers instead of growing and selling real ones – false flowers may equal false hope.

Magic and Mystery

The author of this collection is one of several South / Central American authors who often write in a style commonly referred to as “magic realism.” In this style events, characters, and situations are portrayed in such a way as to defy so-called “real world” logic, being perceivable and/or portrayed as magic. The distinction must be made between this style of writing and the style employed in books like the “Harry Potter” series, in which magic exists in a parallel world: such stories have realistic elements, but are primarily defined by their being placed within the realm of fantasy, which is different from the situation here. For instance, in the “Harry Potter” series, realism makes appearances in a magical world: in magic realism, the opposite is the case.

There are two primary examples of magic realism being used as a narrative device in this collection. The first is in “No One Writes to the Colonel,” in which the letters the colonel receives from his dead son (Agustin) can be seen as appearing in the narrative by magic. Granted, there is potentially another side to this coin: that Agustin is not, in fact, dead, but because he is a rebel (a “partisan”), he is in hiding, and his letters are his only means of communicating with his father. On a certain level, this idea makes sense, but then raises the question of why neither the colonel nor Agustin, if he is alive, communicates with the colonel’s wife / Agustin’s mother, who is clearly more upset about Agustin’s death than his father. The letters appearing by “magic," on the other hand, require no such logical thought: they are just there, adding complication to the plot and layers to the story’s thematic exploration of hope.

The second primary example of magic realism in the collection shows up in “One Day after Saturday”: specifically, in the appearances of the dead birds. Here again, there may be a logical, real world explanation for these appearances: the narrative doesn’t supply one, though, which doesn’t necessarily suggest that such an explanation doesn’t exist, but rather that the author’s intent seems to be to keep the dead birds unexplained – arguably an appropriate choice in which one of the primary characters is a priest, and one of the story’s key elements has to do with questions of faith. That’s the thing about magic realism – the unexplained often becomes a trigger / catalyst for explorations / manifestations of other elements. In this case, it may be that the presence of the dead

birds is a facet of the collection's final remaining primary theme: its consideration of death and its aftermath.

The Aftermath of Death

Death is powerfully present in several of the stories, both literal death (i.e. the end of a life) and metaphorical death (i.e. the end of a belief or value or hope).

Literal deaths show up in "No One Writes …" (the death of the colonel's son); "Tuesday Siesta", (the death of the unnamed woman's criminal son); "Montiel's Widow" (the death of corrupt businessman Jose Montiel); and, most significantly, in "Big Mama's Funeral" (the death of female crime boss Big Mama). In each of these stories, the aftermath of death is of particular interest: the struggle to live up to the goals and ideals of the dead son in "No One Writes …" and the power of a mother's love in the aftermath of the death of her son in "Tuesday Siesta" (note the juxtaposition of two very different sorts of sons each loved with primarily similar devotion by both sets of parents). Then there is the struggle of Senora Montiel to reclaim her own life from the long shadow of her husband's existence, a struggle that contrasts those of the colonel and the mother (in that neither seems to want to move on, in the way that Montiel's widow does). Finally, "Big Mama's Funeral" is almost entirely taken up, plot wise and theme wise, with considerations of the logistics, the politics, and the cultural revisions following the death of the seemingly all-powerful Big Mama.

Then there are the metaphorical deaths, the spiritual deaths – the deaths of something other than the body in a variety of individuals. These include the death of idealism and dreams in both primary characters (Domaso and Ana) in "There Are No Thieves …"; the death of purpose faced by Father Anthony Isabel in "One Day after Saturday," a death he either completely fails to acknowledge or is completely unable / unwilling to acknowledge; and the death of something (love? hope? a relationship?) in "Artificial Flowers," referred to in Mina's reference to a man having left her life.

One last noteworthy reference to death in the collection: the dead birds in "One Day After Sunday" which, in their unexplained appearance and telling effect on the lives of the characters, resonate symbolically with all the other unexpected, transformative deaths in the collection.

Styles

Point of View

Each story in the collection is told from the third person point of view – or, more specifically, from one of its variations.

Several stories are told from the third person limited point of view - that is, with subjective narration that excavates the thoughts, actions, and experiences of a central character or protagonist. That central point of view shifts from story to story – in “No One Writes …” the central character is the colonel; in “One of these Days” it is dentist Aurelio; in “… Marvelous Afternoon” it is playful craftsman Balthazar; in “Montiel’s Widow” it is the widow herself; in “Artificial Roses”, it is troubled protagonist Mina. In each of these stories, there are occasional diversions into the inner perspectives of one character or another: ultimately, though, the primary narrative perspective is that of the protagonist.

Another variation on the third person point of view deployed in the collection is the third person omniscient point of view that looks into the perspectives of more than one character with similar depth and perception. The primary examples of this point of view are “There are no Thieves …” (which splits point of view between married couple Domaso and Ana) and “One Day after Saturday” (which shifts point of view between its three main characters).

The final variation on third person point of view that is deployed in the collection is one that might be described as third person objective, a point of view that simply recounts facts and/or describes events without going into the thoughts, interpretations, or insights of any one character. Examples of this technique are “Tuesday Siesta” (which describes the journey of the mother and daughter and their encounters with both the town and the priest) in a way that doesn’t go into any sort of emotional depth / detail; and “Big Mama’s Funeral,” which is almost journalistic (albeit of the satirical sort) in the way it reports on events and the people involved without offering much, if anything, in the way of interpretation. It offers commentary that occasionally tends towards the comic, but offers no analysis / insight, the way other variations on third person point of view do.

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about this collection is that it is a translation from the original Spanish. This means that there is the possibility that certain nuances, certain subtleties, certain stylistic and/or narrative elements may have been transformed in ways that don’t necessarily correspond with complete accuracy to the author’s original intent. That said, there is the very clear sense that the translator has made a significant, notable effort to capture as much of the flavor of the original as possible: there are certain turns of phrase, certain incidents, and certain details that seem, throughout the collection, to

have a flavor and/or sensibility directly connected to an authorial, stylistic perspective. These are so vivid and so apparent that a reader might be reasonable to wonder, again given that the piece is a translation, whether there might be more in the original.

The final point to note about language and meaning is there are several occasions in which important elements are unexplained. Some of these are related to the fact that several of the characters, in several of the stories, are nameless (see “Themes – Namelessness”). Some are related to the author’s deployment of “magic realism” (see “Themes – Magic and Mystery”), in which seemingly illogical events are treated, by character and author alike, as commonplace or normal. Others, however, are clear, deliberate omissions: the most apparent example occurs in “Artificial Roses”, in which Mina refers to a “he” who “went away” but whose identity is never specifically defined. Is “he” a husband? A lover? A brother? A father? The juxtaposition of “he” with roses, albeit artificial ones, suggests some kind of romantic / intimate relationship, but again, there is no specific identity given. In any case, this lack of information draws the reader more fully and more thoroughly into the story, engaging him or her in an active wondering about what is meant, or what the missing piece of information is. The reader is engaged in putting together clues, literal or implied or both, in order to discern his / her individual version of meaning.

Structure

In terms of structure, the primary point to note is that the book is a collection of short stores, some of which (“No One Writes …”, “One Day after Saturday,” “Big Mama’s Funeral”) are much longer than others (“Artificial Roses,” for example, is only a few pages long: “No One Writes …” is more than 60). The second point to note is that the stories are divided into two groups: the first consists solely of one story, “No One Writes to the Colonel,” while all the other stories are collected under the heading “Big Mama’s Funeral.” The point must be made that there are few literal connections between either the events of the stories or the characters: the titling of the second part of the collection should not be taken to suggest that the short stories are in fact a novel. What is suggested is a certain thematic connection, a thematic relationship, that may or may not be tied to the fact that there are connections between several of the characters in these stories, connections that lead many of them, directly or indirectly, into relationship with “Big Mama’s Funeral.”

All that said, each of the stories has its own internal sense of structure that is primarily linear: in most cases, the progression of the story moves forward, from beginning through middle to end; from action to reaction into new action; from event A through event B into event C and so on, each narrative line building towards a climax. Some of the stories are more plot driven / event driven than others. “There Are No Thieves …” and “One Day After Saturday” are relatively plotty pieces, as is “No One Writes …”: on the other hand, “Artificial Flowers,” “Montiel’s Widow,” and “Tuesday Siesta” are less about plot, about the interrelation of event and reaction, and more about descriptions / evocations of a particular set of circumstances. There are actions, but the meaning of the stories is not defined by those actions as much as through explorations of character

and situation. Either way, plot driven story or character driven story, there is a sense of build towards some kind of climax, whether it's plot driven, emotion / character driven, theme driven, or image driven.

Quotes

The colonel went to the tailor shop to take the clandestine letter to Agustin's companions. It was his only refuge ever since his co-partisans had been killed or exiled from town and he had been converted into a man with no other occupation than waiting for the mail every Friday.
-- Narration (No One Writes to the Colonel, Part 1)

Importance: In this paragraph, the story drops its first real hint that the colonel and his dead son were both involved in acts of rebellion against the government. It also establishes the colonel's routine, increasingly significant as the narrative progresses, of checking his mail every Friday.

To the Europeans, South America is a man with a mustache, a guitar, and a gun," the doctor said, laughing over his newspaper. "They don't understand the problem.
-- The Doctor (No One Writes to the Colonel, Part 2)

Importance: In this quote, the doctor - who seems to be equal parts cynic and realist - defines a key aspect of the situation in the country in which he and the colonel live ... the fact that those in the more powerful and more wealthy part of the world dismiss *their* part of the world.

The colonel acknowledged that forty years of shared living, of shared hunger, of shared suffering, had not been enough for him to come to know his wife. He felt that something had also grown old in their love.
-- Narration (No One Writes to the Colonel, Part 3)

Importance: This marks the first time in the story that the colonel seems to think of his wife as his wife, and not as the ill woman who helps him stay clothed.

There was a frenetic explosion of applause and shouting. The colonel noticed the disproportion between the enthusiasm of the applause and the intensity of the fight. It seemed to him a farce to which - voluntarily and consciously - the roosters had also lent themselves.
-- Narration (No One Writes to the Colonel - Part 4)

Importance: Here, narration comments on the colonel's experience of / insight into the audience's reaction to the cockfight into which his rooster has been thrown. The metaphoric implication is that he himself is like the rooster - thrown into a situation to which he is not entirely committed, but in which he has to survive.

Every mouthful I ate those days tasted of the beatings my son got on Saturday nights.
-- The Woman (Big Mama's Funeral - Tuesday Siesta)

Importance: In this quote, the mother of a dead thief indicates how difficult it was to raise him, particularly when he was boxing.

Three months before, when he had turned twenty, the line of his mustache, cared for not only with a secret sense of sacrifice but also with a certain tenderness, had added a touch of maturity to his pockmarked face. Since then he had felt like an adult. But this morning, with the memories of the night before floating in the swamp of his headache, he could not find where to begin to live.
-- Narration (Big Mama's Funeral - No Thieves ...)

Importance: Here narration describes the sense of confusion and uncertainty in Damaso in the aftermath of the robbery at the pool hall, in which he took part.

The magazine covers which she herself had cut out and pasted to the walls until they were completely covered with pictures of movie stars were faded and colorless. She had lost count of the men who, from being looked at so much from the bed, had disappeared gradually and taken those colors with them."
-- Narration (Big Mama's Funeral - There Are No Thieves ...)

Importance: This quote metaphorically describes the deep sense of loneliness in Ana's life, and in her home.

Since before the political slaughter began, she had spent the sad October mornings in front of the window in her room, sympathizing with the dead and thinking that if God had not rested on Sunday He would have had time to finish the world properly. 'He should have used that day to tie up a few of the loose ends," she used to say. 'After all, He had all eternity to rest." The only difference, after the death of her husband, was that then she had a concrete reason for harboring such dark thoughts.
-- Narration (Big Mama's Funeral - Montiel's Widow)

Importance: As is the case with many other moments in the collection, the violent political / military context of the action is glanced at in passing, but is no less vivid or impactful because of the brevity with which it's glimpsed.

...he realized the prodigious truth which had surrounded him since the beginning of the week. Right there, while the widow watched him leave the house with a menacing gesture and the dead bird in his hands, he witnessed the marvelous revelation that a rain of dead birds was falling over the town, and that he, the minister of God, the chosen one, who had known happiness when it had not been hot, had forgotten entirely about the Apocalypse.
-- Narration (Big Mama's Funeral - One Day After Saturday)

Importance: Narration describes the realization that occurs to the notoriously vague Father Anthony Isabel in the aftermath of the waves of dead birds washing over the town: there are probable Biblical implications in what is going on.

He haardly heard the clear and fluent melody which flowed from a spring dormant in his soul ever since the beginning of the world. He had the confused certainty that his words were flowing forth precisely, opportunely, exactly, in the expected order and place. He felt a warm vapor pressing his innards. But he also knew that his spirit was free of

vanity, and that the feeling of pleasure which paralyzed his senses was not pride or defiance or vanity but, rather, the pure rejoicing of his spirit in Our Lord.
-- Narration (Big Mama's Funeral - One Day after Saturday)

Importance: This quote describes the transcendent connection between body, idea, and spirit as Father Anthony Isabel preaches the best sermon of his life, realizing (at least in his own mind) the purpose for which he believes he was put on earth.

This is, for all the world's unbelievers, the true account of Big Mama, absolute sovereign of the Kingdom of Macondo, who lived for ninety-two years, and died in the odor of sanctity one Tuesday last September, and whose funeral was attended by the Pope.
-- Narration (Big Mama's Funeral - Big Mama's Funeral)

Importance: This paragraph opens the final, title story of the collection. Its language is slightly exaggerated, perhaps somewhat satirical in the importance it gives to Big Mama's life and death, importance which the narrative, almost literally, sweeps away.

She didn't manage to finish. The laborious enumeration cut off her last breath. Drowning in the pandemonium of abstract formulas which for two centuries had constituted the moral justification of the family's power, Big Mama emitted a loud belch and expired.
-- Narration (Big Mama's Funeral - Big Mama's Funeral)

Importance: This quote ironically juxtaposes the sense of super-human power associated with Big Mama with the all-too human image of her belching, and then dying. Here again, the metaphorical sense of the moment is that even as great a life as Big Mama's was ends with the ignominy and dismissiveness of death.

The only thing left then was for someone to lean a stool against the doorway to tell this story, lesson and example for future generations, so that not one of the world's disbelievers would be left who did not know the story of Big Mama, because tomorrow, Wednesday, the garbage men will come and will sweep up the garbage from her funeral, forever and ever.
-- Narration (Big Mama's Funeral - Big Mama's Funeral)

Importance: The final lines of the story, and of the collection, illustrate one of the book's central thematic ironies - that no matter what happens in an earthly life, eventually and ultimately it will all get swept away.