Gabriel García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera*

In his novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez blends the lifelike and the dreamlike, using a style that is at once journalistic and poetic, to capture his real-life experiences from the colorful city of Cartagena and the fictional love affair between his protagonists, Fermina Daza and Florentino Ariza. Márquez’s own parents, who came from families of opposite political leanings and social spheres, yet managed to marry and have twelve children, inspired the star-crossed romance of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, although their real-life resolution was more traditionally happy than that of the novel (“Biography”).

Márquez, born in Colombia in 1927, was influenced by the contradictory experiences of his native land: like many Latin American countries, Colombia is known for its tropical beauty, its rich culture, and its violent history of dictators and revolutions (Sickels 19). Even as a child, Márquez was aware of the political turmoil and poverty surrounding him. Thus it is no surprise that *Love in the Time of Cholera* often blends the grotesque with the sublime, comparing obsessive love to disease and describing both with the same poeticism. Márquez’s love for stories was fed by his grandmother’s fantastical fables of “ghosts and the dead,” and by surreal works like Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, whose absurd premise of a protagonist suddenly becoming a cockroach left a profound impact on him. This narrative freedom he observed prompted him to reject traditional structures of plot and genre for a more fluid approach to both (Sickels 20).

Márquez’s trademark genre (which he is credited with establishing and popularizing) is magical realism, which blends realist and journalistic style traits with surreal, dreamlike elements. The mundane world might seem to take on fantastical qualities, or fantastical events might be recounted matter-of-factly, describing “bizarre and unsettling details of a story with a deadpan expression” (“Biography”). *Love in the Time of Cholera* is no exception, though it does
not fit into the genre as perfectly as Márquez’s other works. The elements of magical realism in this novel, according to the *New York Times* review that appeared shortly after the novel’s translation into English, are mostly found in “improbable events,” such as Dr. Urbino teaching his parrot to speak Latin and French, then dying trying to get it out of a tree, or disappointed lovers committing suicide by inhaling gold cyanide—this magic is “more muted, the flights of fancy more securely grounded in the mundane realities of ordinary life” than his other novels (Kakutani).

In keeping with Márquez’s preference for unconventional structure, the story is told out of order, beginning first with Dr. Juvenal Urbino’s home life as an elderly man, and his untimely death from a fall while trying to reach his runaway pet parrot. At his funeral, a man called Florentino Ariza approaches Dr. Urbino’s widow, Fermina Daza, and professes his “eternal fidelity and everlasting love,” which he has been harboring for her for over fifty years (50). Then the narrative delves into the past, showing how Florentino fell in love with Fermina from afar when they were teenagers, how he wooed her with secret love letters and violin serenades, and eventually persuaded her to accept a marriage proposal with his sheer doggedness. However, when Fermina has the chance to see Florentino face to face for the first time in years, she realizes she has been in love with fantasy, that their affair is immature and certainly not marriage material, and breaks off the engagement, marrying the wealthy, stoic Dr. Juvenal Urbino instead.

The heartbroken Florentino drowns his sorrows in an endless string of sexual escapades, some brief and some long, while Fermina appears the happy socialite from a distance. In reality, her married life is stable but threatened by boredom, an overly critical mother-in-law, and eventually Dr. Urbino’s infidelity. Florentino, in a Gatsby-like determination, vows to win his first love back somehow, to be worthy of her. This means, however, he must wait for Dr. Urbino
to die, so that he can comfort his widow. This brings the narrative back to the beginning, with Dr. Urbino’s untimely death and Florentino’s renewed declaration of love, which Fermina finds highly inappropriate, throwing him out of the house and sending him an angry letter. Eventually, however, this correspondence leads to a rekindling of their relationship, culminating in a river voyage during which they finally sleep together. Afraid of the scandal, Fermina asks the captain to raise the cholera flag so that no one else will board the ship, but this also means that no port will allow them to dock, condemning them to wander the river indefinitely.

Throughout the novel, Márquez uses direct dialogue extremely sparingly, often a simple, clipped sentence that stands alone between two long paragraphs to emphasize a quote that is particularly revealing or important. For example, when one of Florentino’s lovers, Sara Noriega, sees him looking at a picture of Fermina, she comments, “She’s a whore” (200). This startlingly brief sentence, standing apart from the lengthy blocks of text before and after, makes Sara’s judgment seem even more severe and uncompromising, yet matter-of-fact. This highly selective use of direct quotes—using far more summary in the narrative than scene—suggests that these events happened long ago and are being reflected upon, giving it a memoir-esque feel despite the omniscient narrator. It also evokes a journalistic approach, which suggests that events are being recorded as accurately as possible; in tandem with the more dreamlike quality of the prose and the peculiar events such as Dr. Urbino’s death-by-parrot, this novel subtly fits into Márquez’s signature magical realism genre.

Another of Márquez’s particular quirks is that he always refers to characters by their full names—Fermina Daza, Dr. Juvenal Urbino, Florentino Ariza—and never simply by their first. When the narration is following Florentino and revealing his thoughts, this has the effect of mimicking his own formal, worshipful adoration of Fermina: she deserves a full title because of
her importance, and so does anyone else connected with her. Even the lovers with whom he tries to distract himself over the years are referred to by their full names (if named at all), suggesting that every player in these events is of grave importance.

Márquez crafts his prose with enough care and elegance that it can be analyzed for its distinctive syntax and punctuation. We must keep in mind, however, that Márquez initially wrote the novel in Spanish, not English. In a speech addressing Márquez himself, the translator for *Love in the Time of Cholera* into English described the challenges involved in preserving style in a work, given that “no two languages…ever dovetail perfectly;” therefore a translation must “must be faithful to tone and intention, to meaning” when it is not possible to maintain words or syntax, which are “not transferable” (Grossman). Therefore any analysis of style on a micro level of the English translation must be treated cautiously, and before proceeding we must assume that all techniques of syntax and punctuation are representative of the *spirit* of Márquez’s writing, if not a perfect transliteration.

The majority of the sentences in this novel are long, leisurely, laden with commas that allow readers to catch their breaths without coming to a standstill—a mirror of the larger narrative structure with its long, meandering chapters. This gives a dreamy, literary flavor to his prose, more related to the “magical” side of magical realism. Sometimes, Márquez includes an unusual number of commas to segment a sentence, as in this passage from Juvenal Urbino’s wake:

At his side, in complete mourning, tremulous, hardly moving, but very much in control of herself, Fermina Daza received condolences with no great display of feeling until eleven the following morning, when she bade farewell to her husband from the portico, waving goodbye with a handkerchief. (46-47)
The commas create a seven-piece sentence, creating a reflective tone and mirroring Fermina’s need to pause and take in the situation of her husband’s death by fractions. The profusion of long sentences also carries the advantage of allowing any noticeably brief statements to stand out whenever emphasis is needed.

One of Márquez’s more journalistic techniques is his frequent use of the colon to visually draw readers’ attention. He takes advantage of the colon’s power as a “mark point” in a sentence, “with the text preceding it building to a revelation, and the text that follows living up to the promise” (Lukeman 92). As a punctuation mark, the colon is a visual indicator of “crossing a threshold,” which effectively breaks up the fluidity of the long sentences, allowing a distinction between buildup and payoff (Lukeman 92). For example, as Fermina stumbles across Florentino’s forgotten love letters tucked away in her trunk, “she realized that it was the second time that she had said those words in little more than a year, and for a moment she thought about Florentino Ariza, and even she was surprised at how removed he was from her life: poor man” (123). The two sections are purposely imbalanced, the clause after the colon so short and abrupt compared to the length before the colon that the phrase “poor man” feels as pathetic and pitiful as the words themselves imply.

Márquez uses—or omits—conjunctions in his long sentences very consciously. A conjunction between each element in a list can suggest “portent” or an “increase in rhetorical volume, conveying agitation on the narrator’s part” (Yagoda 67). Thus, when Márquez describes the women of the upper class as having “love affairs [that] were slow and difficult and were often disturbed by sinister omens, and life seemed interminable,” the endless, oppressive nature of their secluded lives is emphasized by the inserted conjunctions (17). On the other hand, conjunctions are omitted during Florentino Ariza’s initial perception of Lorenzo Daza, Fermina’s
father: “Everything about him was a testimony to crudeness: his ignoble belly, his emphatic speech, his lynx’s side-whiskers, his rough hands, the ring finger smothered by the opal setting” (80). Because this technique can “give a sense of integration, inevitability, and/or speed,” Márquez is allowing all these traits sink in as one connected image, all the parts supporting the impression of “crudeness” (Yagoda 67). Piling up four or more images in one sentence like this, especially without any conjunctions, often suggests “the human, emotional, diffuse, and inexplicable,” since readers typically expect lists to be made of three parts (Yagoda 67). Thus Márquez crafts sentences like this when wishes his audience to see the imperfection of his characters, their inability to be constrained by tradition or rules.

Often, Márquez employs all of these techniques at once, as in the following passage detailing the turning point in Fermina and Juvenal’s marital strife:

Then she summoned her last strength and obliged her husband to talk to her without evasion, to confront her, to argue with her, to cry with her in rage at the loss of paradise, until they heard the last rooster crow, and the light filtered in through the lace curtains of the palace, and the sun rose, and her husband, puffy with so much talk, exhausted with lack of sleep, his heart fortified with so much weeping, laced his shoes, tightened his belt, fastened everything that remained to him of his manhood, and told her yes, my love, they were going to look for the love they had lost in Europe: starting tomorrow and forever after. (212-213)

This sentence leaves the reader breathless with its increasing momentum, its relentless pileup of parallel clauses, building to the revelation signified by the colon: that their new life is beginning now, and they intend to hold onto it forever. The sentence itself is shaped like a story, with rising action, a climax, and a resolution.
While not as well-known as Márquez’s earlier novel One Hundred Years of Solitude, Love in the Time of Cholera is often considered “one of the 20th century’s great love stories in literature” (Giriharadas). Márquez uses many familiar elements—disappointed love, marital strife, lifelong obsession—yet the novel manages to transcend melodrama and become profound through the sheer power of Márquez’s style. His masterful blend of blunt journalism and flowery prose seduces the reader into accepting absurd, improbable events as not only plausible, but as a faithful representation of the human capacity for hope and longing.

Works Cited


