

May 2010

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### Recommended Citation

Fagundo, Nicholas (2010) "Days of War, Nights of Love: Love & Politics in the Time of Cholera,"  
*Mountaineer Undergraduate Research Review*. Vol. 2 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/murr/vol2/iss1/4>

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# DAYS OF WAR, NIGHTS OF LOVE: LOVE & POLITICS IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA

## Nicholas Fagundo

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Kayode Ogunfolabi for his invaluable advice, input and assistance on this project and Elizabeth Godown for her brilliant help with peer editing.

## Days of War, Nights of Love

Upon first reading, *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* may seem to be nothing more than a romantic story of unrequited love, drawing on the tropes of nineteenth century Romantic literature, realist fiction techniques and pastoral imagery. However, the thin, sentimental veneer of the novel masks an unsettling and contradictory message about the very ideals that it seems to endorse. Beneath the excessively poetic language, the typically Marquezian, lavish descriptions, and the nature of the unrequited love story itself, lies a strong undercurrent of political unrest and social unease. Whereas the façade of the novel presents itself as universal and timeless in a typically nineteenth century fashion, its theoretical substance is inherently bound to specific historical contexts and problems. That is to say, there are two contradictory levels at work here. One would have the reader believe that there is nothing more than what is being presented on the manifest level—the power of love to transcend time and social boundaries, that love is timeless, classless, ahistorical and apolitical, and that love prevails over all obstacles. The other level, a latent one, insists that love is inexorably contingent on time and place – that love is indeed historical, cultural as well as very politically charged. Brinda Bose (1998, 65) identifies a similar paradox when analyzing Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Bose writes that “[although] it would be fairly simple to dismiss the beautifully written erotic passages of [*The God of Small Things*] as necessary ingredients of marketability... it would be more worthwhile to examine them for their ideological implication.”

García Márquez's *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* also needs to be read beyond its romantic tendencies and analyzed for its political, cultural, and social implications. Indeed, the novel does make a potent commentary on those of “us entering the twenty-first cen-

tury supposedly enlightened on psychological, social, and environmental issues,” by showing us the pitfalls and dangers of our march towards progress (Columbus 1992, 91). Problems with social mobility are also tackled because “the theme of love allows the representation of two different cultural orders” and the conflicts involved in the movement between classes (Moraña 2001, 3). Despite the various political, ideological, and socioeconomical studies of García Márquez and *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*, no work has been published that asks why it specifically employs the tropes of the romance novel in an attempt to inform and challenge our political and social consciousness. As enlightening as it may be, attempting to separate the romantic from the social and detach the sentimental from the political would overlook the novel's multiple and simultaneous projects. When put into conversation with each other, it becomes apparent that love, even in its most romantic, sentimentalized forms, informs politics and that politics has a direct influence on expressions of love. In short, we can examine the politics of love, or the “sexual politics,” of this novel. We can see the connections the novel makes between love and politics, the ways in which politics enter the bedroom and vice versa.

Reconciling political and literary goals seems to be an ongoing project in García Márquez's oeuvre. In a 1984 essay, a year before *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* would be published in Spanish and four years before the English translation, Regina Janes (1999) examines the ways in which García Márquez blends Colombian politics with his idiosyncratic writing style. Accordingly, she divides his works into two periods. In his earlier works, politics are either “allegorized or serve as an indistinct backdrop.” This is in contrast to his later works such as *Cien años de soledad* and *El otoño del patriarca* in which “the political serves as an organizing principle” (Janes 1999, 126). Following Janes (1999), it would seem that *El amor...* is a return to earlier works when politics and history were used as tools for some other ends—used more as setting and plot devices than as fundamental elements of the novel. Indeed, there are but fleeting references to the ongoing civil war, the country's political situation or the characters' political affiliations. These insubstantial references to politics might lead readers to overlook these qualities as secondary to the novel's focus on the “revival of the ‘for-

gotten art of telling stories” (Moraña 2001, 27). However, although the novel does not directly place a strong emphasis on the political elements of the novel, politics do not merely comprise an “indistinct backdrop” in the novel. Throughout the action of the novel, we are constantly reminded of the characters’ contingency on their historical, social and political contexts. Florentino’s ability to court Fermina, to spend the rest of his life pining over her and to find some fleeting comfort through his numerous libertine affairs are enabled only because he, as the son of an unmarried woman, “escaped military service during the bloodiest period of [the] wars” (Marquez 1985, 170). So it seems that *El amor* marks a new stage in García Márquez’s (1985) use of politics. While not explicitly central, politics and history nevertheless crucially underpin the novel’s thematic substance. They are located somewhere in-between. They not only affect the novel’s transpiring action, providing the framework for the characters to interact, but they also directly provide the reader with insight into the characters’ motives, circumstances and contexts.

This is not to say that political ideologies should be read as peripheral and marginal to the plot. As Claudette Kemper Columbus (1999, 91) notes in her essay “Faint Echoes and Faded Reflections: Love and Justice in the Time of Cholera”, “[m]any readers read *Love* with the comfortable conviction that García Márquez is a ‘magical realist’ and forget that he is an open partisan of the far left.” *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* does contain strong latent themes of social, political, and cultural strife. There are forces at work that not only allow the events in the plot to unfold as they do, that in essence provide a zeitgeist within which the characters act, but also serve as an indirect critique of certain ideologies. It is easy for the passive reader to be enthralled by the overly maudlin, romantic elements—Florentino’s unrequited, yet undying love for Fermina, the numerous references to classical romantic poetry, and the novel’s overall fixation with the idea of timelessness. These characteristics, though essential to the novel, may cause the reader to overlook certain aspects that expose García Márquez’s (1985) “far left” convictions about political, cultural and socioeconomic problems.

Accordingly, the novel appears to work on two separate levels that seem to be uninformed of each other. On the surface is the hyper-romanticized style that is concerned with themes of love, timelessness, and emotions. It is the aesthetic level, where the main plot, setting and character development take place. This level is stagnant; that is, it is restrained by its inherent tenets of universality from forming any workable critiques outside of itself. It is self-interested and directly targets the reader’s pathos. Consequently, because of its sentimental nature, it does not invite a strong, politically charged

criticism. The other level is actively aware of cultural failings, socioeconomical discrepancies, and political strife. Concealed under the guise of poetic language lie the social maladies that give the former level its working backdrop. This level concerns itself with problems of class mobility, class conflict, tradition, modernity and political unrest. The latter level, in fact, works contrary to the former. It serves as a mode of critique and analysis of the events transpiring throughout the course of the novel. Columbus (1992) notes these two levels working simultaneously within the novel and appropriately asserts that there are two types of readers of the novel. The “sentimental reader” reads the novel for its surface value, with little or no consideration for its context, historical, political, or otherwise (Columbus 1992, 91-92). The “suspicious reader,” to whom her essay is addressed, is called to question the novel’s apparent lack of interest in its historical situation (Columbus 1992, 91-92).

Columbus (1992) argues that it is satire that allows these contradictory messages to act together. Like Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, “*Love in the Time of Cholera* can be read as an exemplar of high satire in chronicle form” (Columbus 1992, 89). However, due to the claims and styles of the two satires, readers are more likely to overlook *El amor*’s satire of romanticism and sentimentalism than Swift’s ‘solution’ to 18th century Ireland’s economic situation. García Márquez (1985) takes certain tropes of the 19th century romantic and realist novels and adapts them to fit his needs. In a sense, *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* marks for García Márquez “un retorno intencionado al realismo del siglo XIX” (Beltrán 1997, 225) [an intentional return to the realism of the 19th century<sup>2</sup>]. “La sobreabundancia de detalles, la discursividad y una estructura episódica y dispersa” (Beltrán 1997, 225-6) [The over abundance of details, discursivity and an episodic and disperse structure] all point toward a parroting of the realist and romantic traditions. However, *El amor* is more than just “parodia irónica” [ironic parody] of these traditions (Beltrán 1997, 228). There is a marked difference between parody and satire: “although high satire draws on tropes of irony, such as unspoken meaning that opposes the manifest level, unlike irony, high satire aims for social change” (Columbus 1992, 89).

Although Columbus (1992) approaches a radical political reading of *El amor*, her final analysis shows the novel to be something of a universal warning against political and cultural passiveness or the dangers of sentimentalism. However, she fails to take into account the cultural milieu of the novel and accordingly her reading is ultimately limited by her understanding of politics. She continues to demonstrate that the novel’s “lack of social change contain[s] satiric ferocity” (Columbus 1992, 90). She argues that the satiric elements of the nov-

el hold a mirror to those who would read the novel as a sentimental tale. Those readers who are content reading the novel as simply romantic inevitably ignore the characters' political apathy and its consequences. Their 'timelessness' is not read for its "destructive social consequences," rather, it is read as the characters want it to be read, as romantic. Inevitably, all the characters become "lost in misreadings" (Columbus 1992, 98). However, are the two major aspects of this novel, the romantic and the critical, necessarily antithetical? Must a critical reading dismiss the romantic elements as overly sentimental and contrary to the novel's latent, political message? If these questions are answered in the affirmative, then another question needs to be asked: why a romance novel? What could be gained and what is being challenged by a satire of the romance novel instead of a historical, chronicle, or expository novel, which seem to be García Márquez's preferred writing style?

If we are to read *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* as containing a political message, we need to take into consideration how its aesthetic level informs the theoretical level. Contrary to Columbus' thesis, the novel does contain constructive elements that are politically, historically and socially aware. This is easy to overlook because the novel does privilege "love politics" over "meeting room politics." It invokes a history that is lived rather than studied. Its social awareness is demarcated precisely. Different characters represent varying levels of political awareness and involvement; some characters represent the antitheses of the social and political climate in which they find themselves and others their champions. However, when taken as a fragmented whole the novel does, in fact, provide us with a politics of sex and love that is constructive and viable. To be precise, if we read the novel not only for its representations of a recreated world, but also for the silences, the cracks and the contradictions which form it, the politics of sex and love become all the more relevant and profound.

Contrary to previous readings that take its 'love politics' as negative, destructive or, at best, apathetic,<sup>3</sup> I wish to suggest a positive reading. Without ignoring certain aspects of the novel that might suggest that the characters' different loves are opposite to constructive, admirable politics, there can still be found "viable (rather than die-able)" politics (Bose 1998, 59) in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*. It is dangerous for the 'sentimental reader' to be drawn into the story's overly romantic aspects. To ignore that certain characters contribute to a climate of political apathy is to ignore the political and cultural climate of the novel—after all, disengagement from politics is just as consequential a political statement as any other. Instead of reading the main characters' lack of involved, productive interest in the political climate of their times as politically and socially detached, this

essay will examine how each of the characters respond to political turmoil and cultural change through their romantic choices.

### Understanding the Politics of Love

How is a reading of love as politics justifiable? In the opening paragraph to his monograph *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Fredrick Jameson (1981, 17) openly argues for the "priority of the political interpretation of literary text" and considers all other modes of analysis, be they psychoanalytic, structural, historical, to be auxiliary. Drawing from theorists and philosophers such as Marx, Deleuze and Foucault, Jameson (1981, 20) locates political motivations in the center of all literary analysis, "that everything is 'in the last analysis' political." Though some critics have focused on García Márquez's use of politics in the novel (see Columbus 1992, above), their analyses seem to be overly cursory in their understanding of the political. *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* is often read politically only in the instances of the novel that explicitly mention political conflict. These readings ignore the ideologies that are constantly at work behind the plot, giving meaning to the characters' actions. While these readings are as politically charged and as critical of injustice and harmful marginalization as they should be, they almost inevitably read the novel as being politically negative at its core. That is they focus on problems of class mobility, modernization, and political indifference and they quickly point out the places where the novel is, in some aspect or another, critical of or oblivious to these standard issues of a Marxist, political reading.

However, if we are to take *everything* as political, indifference—or as I will argue, a certain brand of nihilism—cannot simply be disregarded as apathetic and must be examined for its political implications within its specific context. For, indeed, what critics overlook is that an aversion to politics is a comment on those politics and on the culture as a whole. Likewise, political inaction is tantamount to a kind of political action. An action has no inherent meaning, to suggest otherwise would ignore the basic concepts of linguistics. An action of any sort gains its meaning from the culture that produces it. A nihilistic view on cultural and political involvement does not always entail politically destructive or negative results. For those reasons, the definition of politics must be expanded from a narrow view of the liberal-conservative spectrum to account for the specific cultural milieu that produces the acting subject.

Here I will be working with the Foucaultian axiom that "everything is political." Even in the simplest or the seemingly most innocent of actions, political ide-

ologies are at play, shaping both the motives of the actors and the reader's understanding of these behaviors. Love, sex, and desire are no exceptions to the politicized world. To understand the politics of love, politics need to be understood not as "that relatively narrow and exclusive world of meetings, chairmen, and parties" but rather as "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (Millett 1970, 29). Politics are dethroned and brought into the world of daily material interactions. The Enlightenment notion of the individual, along with its weighty connections to innate liberty, freedom, and independence, is abandoned for the model of a cultural subject. The subject's desires, identity, and actions are shaped by its cultural context. Only once the Enlightenment view of the individual is abandoned can politics be found to be the constructing and motivating force behind every action. Namely, everything is in relation to politics.

This understanding of the cultural subject lends itself easily to the projects of subversive thinkers who wish to examine how identities are constructed in relation to and subsequently repressed and manipulated by the dominant ideological power structures. Working within the framework of a classical Marxist interpretation, Rosemary Hennessy (2000) expands the notion of politics to include the formation of sexuality in her book *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. In a nuanced and informed manner, Hennessy (2000) disputes Neo-Marxist and Post-Marxist analyses of the diverse forms of sexual expression and sexual identity formation. These expand Marxist readings of cultural construction to include counter-narratives from a diverse array of marginalized cultural Others including women, oppressed ethnicities and nationalities, and 'perverse' sexual orientations. Feminism, Postcolonialism, Queer Studies and Racial Studies are all heavily indebted to Neo-Marxist systems of analysis. Hennessy (2000) claims that while these dissident theories have made visible, material advances in the way we conceive of the ways which identities—for Hennessy, sexual identities specifically—are formed, they are fundamentally capitalistic at their core. "Insofar as their counter-narratives put forward an alternative that de-links the interests of particular social groups from the larger collective that they are part of, they tend to promote political projects that keep the structures of capitalism invisible" (Hennessy 2000, 8). Her final reading, then, ties sexuality inexorably to the political-economic context. With this in mind, we will be able to further explore the different connections between love and politics presented in the novel.

### Politics, Love and *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*

The plot of *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* revolves around a love triangle that takes half a decade to unfold. Though, however different the three characters are, they are inexorably bound to one another—three sides to the same triangle. Florentino Ariza and Dr. Juvenal Urbino are bound through their love interest, Fermina Daza. They are "victims of the same fate and shared the hazards of a common passion" (Márquez 1985, 191). Each of these characters represents different levels of political engagement, cultural involvement, and socioeconomic standing. Each has their own love politics that is informed by these factors. The novel is set during a time of cultural change and political unrest in the unnamed Caribbean country. It takes place at the turn of the twentieth century when the country was starting to modernize. Across the culture's ideological landscape, modernity, and tradition are in a constant dispute over cultural values, meanings, and beliefs. Inevitably, the country's government chooses modernity and those who held on to the traditional beliefs and customs were increasingly marginalized. The characters are inevitably products of this and respond to it with varying consequences. A character's choice to accept or reject a certain belief, or even to acknowledge it at all, reflects different position within a culture's ideological debate.

Urbino, Fermina, and Florentino represent varying levels of political engagement and social status, not to mention different attitudes towards romance and sexuality. Dr. Juvenal Urbino is an upper class doctor during an extended period of cholera outbreaks. His profession puts him in the precarious situation of endorsing the more socially constructive aspects of European modernity, such as extending medical care to lower class citizens, and destructive ones, such as destabilizing the authority of traditional culture. Fermina Daza, his wife, is a part of a social class the modernizing country had hitherto not experienced. She comes from a lower class, traditional background and becomes upwardly mobile when she marries Dr. Urbino. To the embarrassment of her husband, she never completely sheds her traditional attitudes and beliefs. Florentino Ariza's social position is not easily defined by his socioeconomic status. He places his own personal politics, as sentimental and maudlin as they may be, over those of the society. With the one exception of his unyielding love for Fermina, his worldview is nihilistic. Not unlike Dr. Urbino's espousal of modernity, Florentino's beliefs and actions have both constructive and destructive outcomes.

Analyzing Florentino's and Dr. Urbino's opposite personal politics in the hopes to make a qualifying judgment on them seems to be an insurmountable quandary. Besides demanding some sort of objective, quali-

fying criterion, this question still takes politics in their most literal sense. It presupposes that any of the character's actions would be able to stop the homogenizing, adamant march of progress. Inevitably Dr. Urbino, for all his blind sightedness as a member of a changing, transforming culture, yields the more socially positive results. Despite his indifference towards the changing political landscape that is becoming increasingly more repressive towards (especially female) sexuality, working class struggles, and local culture and traditions, his involvement with social projects saves lives and promotes physical well being. Conversely, Florentino's personal politics yield politically and ecologically negative and sometimes even devastating consequences. At the same time Florentino's politics also generate radical cultural effects that serve to destabilize the dominant cultural and societal force of modernism. Therefore, the question is not which character's personal beliefs are better or which are more productive for society as a whole. This irresponsible question can only restrict our reading of the novel to an incomplete critique. It forces us to make condemnatory choices that do not treat the novel's simultaneous levels. The more worthwhile and maybe the more answerable question is: How do each character's actions *comment* on and *reflect* the society they live in? Only after this is addressed can the full effect of their actions be analyzed.

### Love in the Time of Nihilism

Florentino Ariza, the novel's main protagonist, throws the entire cultural debate into disarray through a nihilistic and self-centered worldview that prohibits him from taking an active role in society. The novel "reveals cultural and ideological heterogeneity to be the characteristics of social development" (Moraña 2001, 9). Florentino is culturally and ideologically rebellious. He serves as the focal point for readers to understand the context of the novel not because of his representative qualities but for his negative ones. Florentino is a mirror held up to society, at once inverse and passive—inverse in the sense that his personal convictions serve to turn his culture's beliefs back on themselves and passive because his convictions are so naturalized within himself that he does not realize his rebelliousness. Nihilism allows Florentino to distance himself from the ever-modernizing society without simply contradicting the values that modernity propagates. His personal choices point out absurdities within the culture by refusing to accept them as legitimate.

When viewed solely for his effects on political and cultural occurrences, Florentino is misleadingly read as apathetic. He shies away from any conflict with

authorities, be they liberal or conservative, in the same way he shies away from any direct encounter with Fermina. However, Brinda Bose (1998, 60) notes that "one's personal politics is often an extension of, but always greater than, one's positioning—left, right, centre or beyond—and a politics of desire, even if merely proclaiming "the erotic as Truth," could certainly be considered as viable a politics as any other." Florentino's lack of direct political engagement calls for a new perspective on the issue. It can be read as a different kind of politics, one that is fighting against the dominant culture's expectation of participation in the Liberal/Conservative binary. That is, by adopting a worldview that does not recognize the dominant discourse, Florentino does not fully comprehend the political repercussions of his choices. This had led to him being read as politically unengaged, when in fact, his choice to remain politically indifferent is purposeful removal from the political context. His isolation brings into focus and comments on society's drive for political engagement.

Florentino's personal politics use sentimentalized, romantic love to destabilize cultural meanings and beliefs. For instance, Florentino's obsession with out-of-date, Colombian romantic poetry, "those half-baked endearments taken from the Spanish romantics" (Márquez 1985, 75), can be seen as an act of cultural rebellion from his 'modernizing' country. In his unintentional insolence toward conventional authority, Florentino essentially deconstructs the existing power structures. For example, at the beginning of his courtship of Fermina, at a time in the history of his country when the city was torn by a raging civil war, Florentino clearly demonstrates his personal politics during a confrontation with national authorities:

In August of that year a new civil war, one of the many that had been devastating the country for over half a century, threatened to spread, and the government imposed martial law and a six o'clock curfew in the provinces along the Caribbean coast. Although some disturbances had already occurred, and the troops had committed all kinds of retaliatory abuses, Florentino Ariza was so befuddled that he was unaware of the state of the world, and a military patrol surprised him one dawn as he disturbed the chastity of the dead with his amorous provocations. By some miracle he escaped summary execution after he was accused of being a spy who sent messages in the key of G to the Liberal ships marauding in nearby waters.

"What the hell do you mean, a spy?" said Florentino Ariza. "I'm nothing but a poor lover." (Márquez 1985, 70-71)

Florentino's political positioning is neither Conservative nor Liberal. His one true political commitment is as a

“poor lover.” By identifying himself as such, he destabilizes authority. When confronted by a representative of larger power structures—the conservative government and the civil war itself—Florentino is placed in a double bind. He is indirectly forced to choose a side, in this case either Liberal or Conservative. To identify as a Liberal would be to rebel against the dominant force in an attempt to overturn it, to destroy it and to take power from it. In Florentino’s case, to do so would result in an inevitable execution. On the other hand, to identify as Conservative, to align with the immediately present power figure, would be an attempt to strategically manipulate the power structure against itself for his benefit. However, in recognizing the power structure as legitimate, both choices are supportive of the same power. They are different sides to the same coin. Florentino’s nihilistically romantic preoccupation blinds him from taking an active, participatory role in the political and cultural happenings of his time. He refuses to be subjugated by authority. By placing his personal romantic preoccupation above authority he renders that authority illegitimate. In the end, the befuddled authorities have no choice but to let Florentino go.

Florentino’s nihilism and preoccupation with romantic endeavors allows him to make insightful commentary on his culture. On his first trip with the riverboat company he would one day come to own, Florentino sees several cadavers floating by in the murky waters of the river. Upon observing them, the only thought Florentino has is that their pungent stench “contaminated his memory of Fermina” (Márquez 1985, 142). The seemingly ‘relevant’ questions of whether they are the result of cholera or war, where they came from or why they are floating lifelessly down the river do not preoccupy his mind in the least. While this morose romanticization may seem politically apathetic, in fact, this is an instance when his nihilistic romanticism frees him from thinking completely in terms of the cultural milieu. “No one ever knew if they were victims of the cholera or the war” (Marquez 1985, 142). In relating this event to Fermina, instead of the cultural events that might have caused them, he affirms that his personal politics of love are of higher importance than cultural events. In creating this narcissistic hierarchy, he again highlights the interplay of authority, cultural progression and modernity that float unnoticed with the cadavers. As Moraña notes: “Cholera, violence, and modernization form a representational triad...in the novel” (Moraña 2001, 5). Florentino’s nihilism and politics of love stand in direct ideological opposition to this triad. By deconstructing authority, his love politics brings this triad into view and exposes its inconsistencies.

## Medicine, Marriage and Modernity

Beyond acting as the typical, passionless antagonist in the romance novel, Dr. Urbino shows the pitfalls of modernity’s march towards progress by almost perfectly mimicking modernity to the point of demonstrating its inconsistencies and flaws. Just as his parrot that “has progressed beyond mere imitation” (Columbus 1992, 93), Urbino can be read as mimicking the Europeans he reads about in the fashionable books he has shipped to him from Paris. And just as the parrot, which in its imitation learned to speak Spanish, French, and Latin as well, if not better, than its master, caused the accidental death of Dr. Urbino, Dr. Urbino in turn serves to show how modernity inevitably causes its own downfall (Márquez 1985).

The symptoms of cholera and the ‘symptoms’ of love are the prevalent themes in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*. Indeed the themes themselves are treated as realistically and metaphorically similar. As García Márquez imagines them in the novel, the ‘symptoms’ of a person under the spell of love are nearly identical to the physical effects of deadly cholera. As a man of medicine, dedicated to bringing the latest medical advances even to those neighborhoods that are, in his own demeaning words, the “death trap of the poor,” Dr. Juvenal Urbino serves as the antithesis to the themes of love and cholera in a both realistic and metaphorical manner (Márquez 1985, 16). In the novel, both love and cholera represent “the vulnerability of a social order,” which, as an adherent to that cultural order, he seeks to implement and uphold (Moraña 2001, 3). His goal as a doctor is to expel the deadly disease from all socioeconomic levels of his society. As a solemn, European-educated and, hence, progressive man of high reputation and social standing, his place in society is to act as representative of all ideas and manners modern and progressive. For Dr. Urbino, included in this is a complete denunciation of the romanticism and sentimentalism associated with the uneducated and irrational. “Passion becomes a disease—cholera, most notably—that it is his passion to eradicate” (Mattessich 2008, 341). His educated worldview causes him to view every event, including ones with obviously negative political overtones, in a cold, calculated manner, usually informed only by medicine and a supposedly ‘liberal’ political view. For instance, on an historical trip in a balloon across the country, marking the turn of the century, Dr. Urbino and Fermina observe dead bodies scattered across a banana plantation. Dr. Urbino remarks with his usual lack of irony or insight that “it must be a very special form of cholera, because every single corpse has received the coup de grace through the back of the neck” (Márquez 1985, 226-227).

It may seem at first that Dr. Urbino is directly involved with constructive and oftentimes progressive

social projects. Throughout his distinguished career as the city's foremost physician, he is responsible for "the drastic new methods" used to prevent cholera (Márquez 1985, 43). He is the founder of a Medical Society, the center for the Arts and the restoration of various theaters throughout the city. In addition, he is involved with the Patriotic Junta, a group "composed of politically disinterested influential citizens who urged government and local businesses to adopt progressive ideas that were too daring for the time" (Márquez 1985, 43). However, despite his apparently liberal and progressive notions of society, his view of politics is just as disengaged as Florentino's, though in a wholly different manner. He is nevertheless supportive of a repressive, immobile social order, one that is systematic to modernity. For Dr. Urbino, a confessed supporter of the Liberal party, "a Liberal president was exactly the same as a Conservative president, but not as well dressed" (Márquez 1985, 35). Moreover, Dr. Urbino contradicts the ideas of a progressive, democratic society of which he feigns to be a patron. Essentially, what holds the most sway in politics is one's "merits of lineage" (Márquez 1985, 35). The irony in Dr. Urbino's political stance is that, even though he holds himself to be a progressive, his flawless mimicry of old European bourgeois mentality and tradition illustrates their very faults. There is further irony when Florentino's and Dr. Urbino's passive politics are compared. Both Florentino's nihilistic views on the happenings around him and Dr. Urbino's ultra-bourgeois indifference amount to the same—nothing.

In his search for modernity and progressive values, Dr. Urbino instead ends up becoming something of a reflection himself. His indifference prevents him from examining the city, his personality or the absurdity of his political values. In their places are reflections and fantasies that feign towards modernity but end up a self-parody. As a result of his bourgeois worldview, he is prevented from seeing the material realities of the city in which he lives. Although his work fighting cholera and his various civic duties bring him in contact with lower class citizens, representative of the majority population, his conception of the city does not reflect the existing material realities. Rather, it is a "narcissist falsification and misinterpretation/unintentional truth-telling" (Columbus 1992, 99) that is symptomatic of his vaguely bourgeois 'progressive' views. As is widespread among the elite bourgeois in colonized areas, Dr. Urbino is obsessed with everything European. His politics and social behavior are considered overly regal and pomp by other members of the elite within the city. "He was perhaps the last member of the great families who still knelt when the Archbishop's carriage drove by" (Márquez 1985, 44). In stark contrast to most houses in the city, Dr. Urbino's house, located in the "district for the *nouvelle*

*riches* at the beginning of the century" (Márquez 1985, 18), is decorated with "original English pieces from the late nineteenth century" and "Turkish rugs purchased at the World's Fair in Paris" (Márquez 1985, 18-19). Dr. Urbino equates Europe with progress, rationality, safety, and modernity. In contrast, his own city "[stands] unchanging on the edge of time" (Márquez 1985, 16). For Dr. Urbino, the entire city, "which the young Juvenal Urbino tended to idealize in his Parisian melancholy, was an illusion of memory" (Márquez 1985, 17). He does not truly participate in the city. As a man of high social standing in the city with considerable social power, he is able to manipulate the social and civil projects mentioned in the previous paragraph to suit this illusion.

Indeed, "Dr. Urbino functions within the novel as the flag bearer of ideas and values associated with modernization" (Moraña 2001, 4). His views on marriage and gender roles are no exception. In contrast to Florentino's over romanticized view, Dr. Urbino's love politics conceive of marriage as a superficial necessity within the modernized world. Essentially, Dr. Urbino's marriage is an opposition to the romantic ideal. "He loves Fermina conceptually, for being his wife and the mother of his children" (Pelayo 2001, 8). Through various trips to Europe, the couple attempt to escape the miseries of a loveless love, a marriage for marriage's sake. Inevitably, though, they return to their home city where they are forced to adopt a strict adherence to a daily routine based on normative gender roles. Fermina and Dr. Urbino's marriage is the accumulation of socio-economic and cultural mores that permitted them to share separate personal lives in the silence of the same bed. This routine is broken only once. One year, on Fermina's birthday, attempts Dr. Urbino took over the domestic duties. It ends in disaster and the realization that the foundations of their marriage rest on habit, conforming to the traditional gender roles. Without these performances and routines, their conjugal life can no longer function.

Dr. Urbino also serves as a point of comparison and contrast to Florentino. Where Florentino is removed, Dr. Urbino is engaged. Where Florentino holds illusory, hyper-romanticized views, Dr. Urbino holds illusory, hyper-rationalized views. An interesting contrast between Florentino and Dr. Urbino can be seen through their first encounter with Fermina. After weeks of admiring Fermina from a safe, yet noticeable distance, Florentino asks Fermina to accept a letter. After she accepts it, he returns home and succumbs to chill spells, vomiting and "the pale perspiration of a dying man" (Márquez 1985, 62)—the same symptoms of cholera. When Fermina's father forbids Florentino any contact with his daughter, Fermina falls into a state of similar lovesickness. This prompts her father to call Dr. Urbino, believing her ill-



ness to be cholera. In contrast to Florentino's hyper-adulation of Fermina from the moment he set eyes on her until their final reunion, Dr. Urbino admits "he experienced no emotion when he met the woman with whom he would live until the day of his death" (117).

### Fermina's Dissent

As envisioned in her monograph *Profit and Pleasure*, Rosemary Hennessy (2000, 224) sees the need for a new set of revolutionary love politics that "begin with human needs and in the process politicize capitalism." Here, Hennessy (2000) creates a new approach toward forming love politics that use love as a subversive political tool. We have seen how Florentino's love politics undermines dominant authority and helps to illustrate what that authority is. But, his love politics do seem to be too self-centered; they approach the 'politicizing' capitalism, but remain a symbolic act. Dr. Urbino's love politics, too, politicize modernity, but they do so in a sycophantic, rather than revolutionary, manner. Only in Fermina do we find love politics that address both aspects of Hennessy's revolutionary love politics.

Fermina's place in the novel balances precariously between the two main male characters. On the one hand, her marriage to Dr. Urbino provides her with an opportunity to rise in social status from the daughter of a merchant to a socialite and an important member of the city's cultural elite. Judging from the lack of social mobility throughout the novel, this chance would most likely not have been available to her were it not for her father and Dr. Urbino arranging a marriage. On the other hand, her connection to Florentino as the object of his youthful obsession and of his lifelong romantic desires, not only gives the novel its overarching plot structure, but it solidifies her position as inner-class. She is the object of the bourgeois aspirations of her father, who wishes to "turn his daughter into a great lady" (Márquez 1985, 100), and of Dr. Urbino, who, as we have seen, uses Fermina to project his desires and ideals of modernity. Though she does ascend in social ranking, Fermina is, nevertheless, inexorably linked to her upbringing in the lower class. She simultaneously performs within the cultural elite but can still "understand the code of anachronistic popular romanticism that is closely linked to national tradition" (Moraña 2001, 7). This allows her to also serve as the object of an 'undying' love for Florentino. For critics such as Columbus that read Florentino's obsession with romanticism and apathy towards politics as negative, Fermina is attributed some degree of responsibility for the "absence of social change" (Columbus 1992, 90) in the novel. It is "Fermina's absence [that] has destructive social consequences" (Columbus, 1992, 96).

It would seem that Fermina is yet another example of an objectified woman, constantly controlled by the dominant patriarchal society. Patriarchy is certainly present in modernity, as represented by Dr. Urbino, but Florentino's romantic idealization and objectification are also culpable for a male-centered worldview. However, she steadfastly refuses to be controlled by either her place in society as a woman or by her upwardly mobile social position. To her husband's dismay, she never fully integrates herself into the dominant social structure she marries into; though her socioeconomic position changes, her manners, beliefs, and habits do not. In fact, she does not feel at ease in her place as part of the elite. She expresses her contempt for the bourgeois lifestyle that involves lavish customs such as "setting the banquet table everyday with the embroidered tablecloths, silver service, and funeral candelabra so that five phantoms could dine on *café con leche* and crullers" (Márquez 1985, 207).

Her revolutionary love politics, then, come from functioning within the dominant social structure, while retaining her outsider's perspective as a both a woman and a member of the lower class. She poignantly and accurately defines her husband as "a poor devil made bold by the social weight of his family names" (Márquez 1985, 207). Only through her participation in and distance from the elitist culture is she able to understand her husband and the social order he is a part of as such. She is able to see that Dr. Urbino, as an accurate representation of modernity, holds contradictory beliefs. Despite his professed liberal position, Fermina is able to discern that "he perfectly exemplifies the conservatism of the class he initially rebelled against, with all its anti-modern parochialism and close mindedness intact" (Mattessich 2008, 341). Her dual position as a member of the affluent upper class while still holding the memory of her childhood as a member of the working class also allows her to make insights into the nature of capitalism itself—satisfying Hennessy's hope of politicizing capitalism. Upon the death of her husband, she performs a "ritual of eradication" (Márquez 1985, 280). She burns everything that reminds her of her deceased husband: "the most expensive and elegant clothes seen in the city since the last century, the finest shoes, the hats that resembled him more than his portraits" (Márquez 1985, 281), etc. When she starts to clear the rest of the house for a second bonfire she hesitates and says "It is a sin to burn this...when so many people do not even have enough to eat" (Márquez 1985, 301). Her social conscious, a result of her origins, counteracts the bourgeois mentality she is surrounded by during her marriage. Her choices, first to burn most of the possessions her husband left her and second to refuse to burn the possessions, are symbolic of the predicament in which she finds herself. She wishes

to be part of the dominant structure but still retain her identity apart from it. Her revolutionary love politics allow her to do this. Finally, it is her choice to reunite with Florentino after her husband's death that affirms her autonomy and vindicates her love politics.

### A Final Word on Love and Politics

"And how long do you think we can keep this goddamn coming and going?" [the Captain] asked .

Florentino Ariza had kept his answer ready for fifty-three years, seven months and eleven days and nights. 'Forever,' he said." (Márquez 1985, 348)

Thus, *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* ends—with the same romantic tone constant throughout the novel and the same contradictory meaning beneath. It would seem nothing has changed as the two lovers sail down the long river of time, united in their old age after half a century of waiting and compromising. They raise the yellow cholera flag to prevent any disturbances on their voyage into "forever." It is the same river that Florentino traveled once in his youth with the riverboat company that he now owns. However, it is not the same river Florentino once knew. While he was busy with his numerous liaisons and pining over an unrequited love long past, his neglect to take an interest in his business allowed the entire jungle surrounding the river to be destroyed. By forming his personal politics centered on an undying, romantic love, and by refusing to engage in cultural discourse, he hindered himself from making material statements, as opposed to abstract or purely ideological statements, on the changing culture.

By the end of the novel, the love politics have drastically changed. Somewhere between Florentino and Fermina's reunion and their voyage into "forever," is a vital metamorphosis. This change occurred on both levels of the novel, the manifest and the latent. The novel's manifest level transforms both aesthetically and thematically. The desolate scenery that Florentino and Fermina observe on their last trip stands in radical contrast to the picturesque scenery described on Florentino's first voyage as a lovesick youth, trying to escape the city of his unrequited love. The riverbanks, the natural life along the river, and even the river itself have transformed into something unrecognizable. They have become a surrealist landscape, void of life, nature and meaning. In true romantic fashion, on his first trip everything on the river is a projection of Florentino. The turbulent waters of the river reflect Florentino's troubled inner state. Dawn breaking over the scenic "deserted pasturelands and misty swamps" (Márquez 1985, 140)

are, for our narcissistic protagonist, yet another proof of unending love. By the end of the novel, the sublime magic of the tropical forest is replaced with "banks that meandered between arid sandbars stretching to the horizon" (Márquez 1985, 331)—a river cutting through a desert seemingly without end. The troubled waters have not become tame and serene to reflect the old age of the protagonists, as one might expect in a cliched romance novel. Instead they have become surrealistic, almost mechanistic waters that "gleamed like metal under the merciless sun" (Márquez 1985, 331).

Underneath this lies the ever-present political message of the novel. Florentino's negligence as the head of the company caused a complete ecological disaster. "The alligators ate the last butterfly and the maternal manatees were gone, the parrots, the monkeys, the villages were gone: everything was gone" (Márquez 1985, 337). However, in spite of the complete river's destruction, we are ironically comforted by the Captain who says that "there's no problem...in a few years we'll ride the dry riverbed in luxury automobiles" (Márquez 1985, 337). Modernity and capitalism have triumphed over tradition and nature. At the end of the novel, the romantic notion of two aged lovers sailing into forever is contradicted by the horrifying consequences of their actions.

Despite these consequences, the ending, complete with a private boat and full private symphony, follows the romantic trope perfectly. The two lovers are reunited, on a note of "forever," after half a century's wait. But coming from Florentino—who could not write a business letter without sounding romantic and who sold his expertise of writing love letters at the local market place—the response, indifferent to the inevitable passing of time, should be no surprise. The novel ends, in some strange ways, with the lovers sailing into forever and away from the ravished landscape. Florentino has not changed his romantic worldview at all. He refuses to accept that political and cultural forces have any power over him. His nihilistic attitude prevents him from seeing the political and cultural realities. At the end of the novel, the fundamental issue is Florentino's continued blindness to his own destruction, despite its obviousness. Instead of rebelling against the dominant cultural forces, he fails to understand the consequences of his actions. The two lovers, united at last, seem to be victorious—after all, their goal was to overcome the political and cultural authorities and be together. But the novel's final tone is not, in fact, a romantic one. The dominating oppressive cultural forces eventually triumph over the subtle symbolic opposition Fermina and Florentino pose. Despite Florentino's deconstruction of authority and Fermina's revolutionary love politics, the characters' lack of engagement with the real, rather

than the romanticized, abstract or illusory, world seems to have inevitably negative consequences. Yet, their symbolic opposition still refuses to admit this as defeat. Their seeming defeat is negated by their devotion to romanticism, escaping from the tangible consequences of the imposition of a political and cultural reality.

Trying to reconcile a deeply rooted romanticism with an analysis of politics has presented several conundrums. Most important is the problem of love itself. Different forms of love politics are more than simply over-romanticized, sentimental ideals that carry a cumbersome burden of negative political consequences and implications. Necessary to such a reading is a radical understanding of love politics informed by the cultural surroundings in which they are produced and performed. In Florentino's case, placing one's personal, romantic interest above those of a culture and stubbornly refusing to acknowledge its changing, supposedly progressive values has radical effects. The authorities, both real and metaphorical, that Florentino faces can respond to resistance but not to indifference. In Dr. Urbino, we see mimicry of modernized values, holding them so rigid that they become a self-parody. Fermina presents the readers with an escape from modernity and patriarchy through her revolutionary love politics. Ultimately, as Wendy B. Faris (1992, 132) notes, the end of *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* shows us that "love can triumph over time, but not over history or political reality." While the romantic story of *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* comes to a complete, fulfilling and contented conclusion, the ideological level is left confused and ambiguous. Though the two lovers reunite at last, the underlying question of the politics of love is left lingering. With the end of the novel offering no overt resolution between these two conflicting levels, what has happened to the notion of the politics of love?

Finally, in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* Gabriel García Márquez presents romanticism as a two edged sword. It has the potential to free those that employ it from dominant political and cultural forces. Conversely, the romanticist must be aware that this detachment has real repercussions. Just as Florentino's political indifference is a commentary on politics themselves, the novel's lack of resolution is a commentary on the resolutions that the novel could have had. The novel does not have a purely romantic ending, as critics such as Moraña (2001) and Pelayo (2001) suggest. The reader cannot ignore the political consequences of Florentino's lack of involvement and romantic isolation. Conversely, the novel's ending is not one that declares love and romanticism a lost cause, as Columbus (1992) and Mattessich (2008) believe. Even though the two lovers are painfully blind to the destruction around them, they do, after all, reunite in full romantic fashion. As they sail away from

the repercussions of their actions, Florentino boldly affirms his intention to remain in his romantic idealism and escape from the surrounding political and ecological destruction forever.

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## NOTES

1. For discussions of how *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* relates to the Romance novel see: Faris (1992), Beltrán Almería (1997), Columbus (1992) and Pelayo (2001).
2. All translations of journal articles are my own.
3. See: Mattessich (2008), Columbus (1992), Moraña (1990) respectively.