

Novel Choice Writing Assignment Five

DIRECTIONS AND DUE DATES: Find the selection for the novel you read and follow the directions for the writing prompt. It is due Monday 5/13, and will be recorded as a major grade. If you turn in the finished assignment early, there will be a small grade incentive (+3 points). If you miss the midnight deadline but turn in the assignment before eight hours have elapsed, there will be a small point deduction (-3 points). If you turn in the assignment between eight and twenty-four hours late there will be a larger point deduction (-10 points). If you turn in the assignment at any point after that, there will be a substantial point deduction (-20 points; this is a flat deduction, not a cumulative one based on the number of days late). If you turn in the essay late but do not want late points deducted, write an essay (using quotation from the novel) about one of the three selections for Novel Choice Writing Assignment #4 (the essay outlines) that we did not use in class for the timed writing.

***One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez**

Background and Writing Task

Critic James Higgins writes:

Despite its humor, the novel presents an essentially pessimistic view of man's condition. The novel's central theme, highlighted by the title, is human isolation. If, as we have seen, the solitude of the Buendías is directly linked to their egoism, it is so only in part, for it is too pervasive to be explained away so easily and appears, in fact, as an existential condition. Disfigured "forever and from the beginning of the world by the pox of solitude" (p. 469) that prevents all communication with others, the Buendías share a common condition that, paradoxically, isolates them from one another: "the unfathomable solitude which separated and united them at the same time" (p. 448). Rather than a family, the Buendías are a group of solitary individuals living together as strangers in the same house. As such, they personify the predicament of the human race. [...]

The world that the Buendías inhabit is one that fails to come up to the level of man's expectations, and their history is a catalog of "lost dreams." [...] For many of the characters, indeed, life becomes synonymous with suffering, and a recurring motif is withdrawal from the world in a symbolic retreat to the refuge of the womb. In *Cien años*, peace of mind is achieved only when the Buendías opt out of active emotional involvement in life. [...]

When Aureliano Babilonia finally succeeds in decoding the manuscript [...] the truth he comes face to face with is a disheartening one. For what he discovers is that the Buendías are no more than fictions created by Melquíades's imagination, that life is a dream, an illusion, that ultimately existence has no meaning. It is significant that that truth should be arrived at by the last of the Buendías, for it is, in effect, the worldview of the last representative of a worn-out, declining society whose perception of life becomes more and more disillusioned as its world collapses around it. The novel's ending, therefore, can be seen as an expression of the existential anguish of twentieth-century Western man.

Given the narrator's ironic distancing of himself from the version of Macondo's history that he is transmitting, it would seem that to some extent he is dissociating himself from the worldview conveyed by the novel and identifying bourgeois individualism as one of the root causes of Western man's existential anguish. Nonetheless, the novel also communicates a sense of the ultimately tragic nature of life, one that goes beyond the subjective perceptions of

the characters and resists explanation as the consequence of human failings, and the denouement would appear to express a view of the world held by the author himself. [...] Then again, the image of humanity projected in the novel is far from being entirely negative, for, despite their many failings, the Buendías come across as sympathetic characters and possess optimism-inspiring virtues: Jose Arcadia's heroic striving to triumph over circumstances; the tireless tenacity with which Úrsula struggles to keep the family going; Colonel Aureliano's stubborn refusal to be beaten, exemplified by his dying on his feet after urinating on the tree of life (p. 342). Last but not least, *Cien años* exuberant humor conveys a sense that, if life is tragic, it is also a great joke (46-50).

At the heart of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* lies a paradox. Life is both meaningless and unsatisfying (the degeneration of Macondo, the failure of progress, the death of idealism, the production of truth), yet the book seems to celebrate its characters the most when they explicitly reject these conclusions. There is, in other words, an ambivalence in García Márquez' view of the human condition, as he seems to argue for a pessimistic view of life even as his presentation of the character's struggles undercuts that point of view. Given this tension, then, write an essay that explores how BOTH of these ideas could be true in the novel, even though they seem to contradict.

Words of Advice

- There are essentially three ways of dealing with contradiction: one can leave the ideas unreconciled (**it is both *this* and *this***); one can conditionally reconcile them (**it is *this* under *these* conditions**); or one can synthesize them (**it is *both*, since the contradiction is more apparent than real**). Your task as a writer is to define which of these approaches best fits the particular circumstances.
- You should be synthesizing toward your view of what you believe García Márquez is arguing. This argument is a theme in the book.
- You should use both quotation and paraphrase, since you are both examining a pattern in the book and looking for specific instances that exemplify the pattern.
- Unless you are planning on writing a book, you should narrow your approach to one character or one sub-plot. That said, the essay must demonstrate a knowledge of the novel as a whole.
- You may refer to the selection from James Higgins' essay on the novel, but it is not necessary. If you do refer to it, cite it (give the page number as 46-50). Any quotation from the selection (not required) should be extremely selective, however, as your focus should be on the novel.

Works Cited

Higgins, James. "Gabriel García Márquez: *Cien años de soledad*." *Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude: A Casebook*. Ed. Gene H. Bell-Villada. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

***The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami**

Background and Writing Task

Critic Matthew Strecher write:

Identity for Murakami is always a combination of two primary elements: the conscious self- the person we know as ourselves in daily life; and the unconscious “other,” a mysterious alter ego who dwells in the depths of our unconscious. These two sides of our identity ideally share the task of identity formation, but perform different roles. The conscious self, as might be expected, encounters new situations and acts upon them, providing experiences to be processed by the unconscious “other;” the inner self, or “other,” then processes these experiences into memories, simultaneously creating links between the various other memories that are stored in the unconscious. In simple terms, the conscious self tells the unconscious other what it sees, and the unconscious “other” tells the conscious “self” what that means in light of previous experiences.

The relationship between these “sides” is a symbiotic one; both are necessary for the construction of a solid identity. The two are virtual opposites, yet neither can stand alone. Together, they form-- and then control-- what might be called the “core identity,” or “core consciousness,” of the individual. This “core” is the source of identity, the heart and soul of the individual. May Kasahara describes it as a kind of “heat source” that keeps us living: “Everybody’s born with some different thing at the core of their existence,” she tells Toru. “And that thing, whatever it is, becomes like a heat source that runs each person from the inside” (324).

This is the most important aspect of identity in Murakami, and lies at the heart of every movement and desire of the Murakami hero. That is to say, the recurring motif in Murakami fiction is the hero’s desire to come into contact with that “something” that lies at the core of his identity, to know more about it. At the same time, to come into contact with this “core” engenders a certain risk, for in so doing one threatens to influence, even alter, the essential nature of the thing, leaving one in doubt as to who one really is.

Fortunately for Murakami characters, that “core identity” is well protected, guarded by heavy walls within the mind. It is sometimes described by the author as a “black box,” something like the flight data recorder on modern aircraft. Armored against tampering, fire, and the force of impact in a crash, the black box is designed to retain its information regardless of what is done to it. Only when it is opened does it become corrupted.

Of course, it can always be removed from the aircraft. Once this is done, the machine from which it has been removed will no longer carry any record of where it has been, or what it has done (42-43).

At the heart of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* lies a paradox. In order to truly know oneself (one’s core identity), it is necessary to come in contact with the suppressed forces of unconscious desire (the Other World of Murakami’s novels and the characters who are split into halves or are otherwise incomplete-- lacking connection to some integral part of themselves); however, to experience the world from the point of view of the unconscious risks losing one’s core identity altogether (the many damaged characters who have been marred by this glimpse into the Id). There is, in other words, an ambivalence in Murakami’s views about self-knowledge, as it is both essential, but extremely dangerous, for the consequences of trying to attain it may leave characters in a worse position than if they had never encountered these hidden realms of the psyche. Given this tension, then, write an

essay that explores how the search for self-knowledge can be BOTH a positive good and a dangerous commodity.

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- You should be synthesizing toward your view of what you believe Murakami is arguing. This argument is a theme in the book.
- You should use both quotation and paraphrase, since you are both examining a pattern in the book and looking for specific instances that exemplify the pattern.
- Unless you are planning on writing a book, you should narrow your approach to one character or one sub-plot. That said, the essay must demonstrate a knowledge of the novel as a whole.
- You may refer to the selection from Matthew Strecher's book about the novel, but it is not necessary. If you do refer to it, cite it (give the page number as 42-43). Any quotation from the selection (not required) should be extremely selective, however, as your focus should be on the novel.

Works Cited

Strecher, Matthew. *Haruki Murakami's The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle: A Reader's Guide*. New York: Continuum, 2006.

***The Famished Road* by Ben Okri**

Background and Writing Task

Critic Mounira Soliman writes:

Okri deconstructs history and offers instead a progressive reading of the future that does not exclude the past but moves beyond it. In other words, Okri advocates history as a natural step toward a present and more importantly toward a future; and perhaps that is what he means when he describes the novel as “a flow of life.” It is important to note that Okri never denies history, as a matter of fact, but he explains that in our age in particular we have to try and change our pre-concepts of what we think is history, “to alter the way in which we perceive what is valid and what is valuable, different measures and different values” (Wilkinson 87). [...] Accordingly, Okri sees Nigeria as [...] a resilient abiku who has taken the tough decision to remain alive (it is important to note that Azaro willfully chooses life over death and is not forced to remain alive through the rituals which his parents undertake to sever his relationship with his spirit companions). The implication is that Nigeria too can be a resilient abiku but only if it transcends a history and a present of nothing but conflict. In [sequel to *The Famished Road*] *Infinite Riches*, Okri states this very clearly:

Old ways are dying.
We who live through turbulent mysteries
Do not know that a whole way is passing.
We do not know the things to come. (393)

But the reader is left in doubt if such a future is indeed viable. In his own way, Okri is aware that Africa is locked in a past that has informed a present out of which deliverance seems to be a far cry from what he advocates. There is a sense of resignation in

We go on living as if history is a dream.
The miracle is that we go on
Living and loving as best we can (393) (166).

At the heart of *The Famished Road* lies a paradox. In order to move forward, one must break with the past or else risk falling into endless repetitions of what has come before (the cycle of abiku rebirths, a plot structured around repetition and variation, the collapse of all politics into corruption and indifference to the people, a road that is never satisfied). On the other hand, the past is what lends individuals and institutions their identity, even as it gives the future meaning. There is, in other words, an ambivalence about the nature and possibility of progress, though the novel seems to argue that progress is not only desirable, but essential. Given this tension, then, write an essay that explores how Okri BOTH argues for the necessity of progress, even as he expresses real doubt about the ability to break from the past.

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apparent than real). Your task as a writer is to define which of these approaches best fits the particular circumstances.

- You should be synthesizing toward your view of what you believe Okri is arguing. This argument is a theme in the book.
- You should use both quotation and paraphrase, since you are both examining a pattern in the book and looking for specific instances that exemplify the pattern.
- Unless you are planning on writing a book, you should narrow your approach to one character or one sub-plot. That said, the essay must demonstrate a knowledge of the novel as a whole.
- You may refer to the selection from Mounira Soliman's essay on the novel, but it is not necessary. If you do refer to it, cite it (give the page number as 166). Any quotation from the selection (not required) should be extremely selective, however, as your focus should be on the novel.

Works Cited

Soliman, Mounira. "From Past to Present and Future: The Regenerative Spirit of the Abiku." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 24 (2004): 149-171.