

Are Novels Part of Our DNA?

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Why do some literary works become part of our cultural DNA, but others don't? By analyzing the case of García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, this essay argues that a cultural product becomes a classic when it is collectively imagined as meaningful over time and across cultural boundaries. This process, called meaningfulness, is grounded in everyday life.

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad,
Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that
distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.

Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Up until just a few months before the publication of García Márquez's classic *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in a late version of the opening sentence, the father of Aureliano Buendía did not take him to discover ice, but a camel. Yes, a camel. The sentence that readers, celebrities, and scholars have compared to the opening words of *In Search of Lost Time* and *Anna Karenina* and have praised as one of the best openers in the history of literature was in fact different. Yet the existence of such telling textual variants in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* remains unknown to most readers and researchers. Why do such variants matter?

At first sight, the textual variants of a literary work may seem an issue that interests just a small group of scholars, those willing to spend countless hours painstakingly comparing different versions of a text, often to arrive to seemingly anecdotic findings. But the exact wording matters, as shown by scholars of genetic editing (*critique génétique*); an approach concerned with reconstructing the transformations of a text from its genesis to publication.

For some books, *Madame Bovary* for example, it has been possible to fully reconstruct the textual variants. Flaubert left six drafts behind, and recently experts and readers joined forces to transcribe and make them available [online](#). Writers like García Márquez, on the contrary, preferred to leave no traces of the creative process. After receiving the first printed copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he burnt all his writing materials, including forty school notebooks of daily notes and diagrams. Instead, legends (some encouraged by the author himself) have replaced the real story behind the writing of the novel.

Nonetheless, important traces of the creation of the novel can be found, since media in five countries premiered up to seven chapters the year before its publication. They have not been studied systematically before, partly because finding these and other little known texts is a Quixotic task. Not only do they reveal that the camel became ice, but also that a key

character, Remedios the Beauty, had another name and clung to it until a latter version. Tellingly, hers was a name more spiritual than carnal: Rebeca of Assisi. The end, as memorable as the opening, was different too. Rather than having Macondo, the mythical town at the heart of the story, swept away by a biblical hurricane, the novel ended when the last Buendía, born with a pig's tail, committed suicide. García Márquez also suppressed specific information about Macondo, so that it could not be easily identified as a town in Colombia's Caribbean region, but instead had a broader, more general appeal to readers.

A detailed analysis of these genetic transformations of the text throws new light on the author's creative process and especially reveals how García Márquez received crucial feedback on the final manuscript from a transnational network of peers in several Latin American countries, the United States, and France. Yet a focus on genetic editing cannot adequately answer a vital question: why some lines, for instance Hamlet's "To be or not to be," become part of our cultural DNA, and other do not, like "Oh! Ill-fated bridge of the silv'ry Tay" by Scottish William McGonagall, popularly considered in his country the worst poet in [history](#).

Underneath the Shifting Sands of Meaning: Analyzing Meaningfulness

To tackle this question, over the past three decades social scientists have studied how the meanings of cultural objects are fabricated. Their research demonstrates that meanings are continuously contested and changeable. Indeed, to go back to the example of "To be or not to be," a history of modernity could be written by studying the shifting meanings of that passage from the early nineteenth century onwards. This is possible because few cultural objects have meanings as contingent as the classics. Yet, if meanings are so contested and unstable, how can people from different backgrounds and historical periods reach a collective agreement about what makes some cultural objects meaningful in the long run?

[Elsewhere](#), I have argued that the answer to this question must be found underneath the shifting sands of meaning. There must be a solid ground upon which it is possible to reconcile the multiplicity of meanings of a cultural object with the stability of its significance over time. Rather than reviving arguments about the "universal" value of cultural objects such as literary classics, my contribution is the study of meaningfulness—the process by which a cultural object is collectively imagined as meaningful over time and across national and cultural boundaries despite its changing meanings. This is a process grounded in everyday life.

Indeed, rare is the day individuals do not encounter references to memorable literary lines far from the written page—in TV commercials, on t-shirts, as the name of stores, etc. No less frequently, people refer to literary classics to make sense of events: eating certain foods can bring back to life dormant Proustian memories, a professional venture can be of Quixotic scale, a person's death can have Shakespearian resonance, a fire can be of Dantesque proportions and filling out a tax form can turn into a Kafkaesque nightmare.

One Hundred Years of Solitude and, its famous opening sentence, now participate of this process. The 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, one of the worst on record, occurred in the Macondo well, a prospect named after the legendary town in the novel. In Japan, a company manufactures an exclusive shōchū (a national alcoholic drink, like sake) named One Hundred Years of Solitude. Despite its contested and multiple meanings, the ascent of

Remedios the Beauty into heaven is a literary event that continues to inspire writers, artists, and musicians in the United States, Russia, Italy and Slovakia, among other countries.

Unmaking a Literary Legend: The Making of a Best Seller

In the case of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, legends add some extra difficulty to the task of understanding how the novel has become meaningful over time. One of these legends, well-known among many readers and scholars, concerns the opening sentence. In July 1965, García Márquez, then an obscure Colombian writer living in Mexico City, quit his job and responsibility as the breadwinner in a family of four after having an epiphany. A gazelle, he later claimed, crossed the road in front of his car when he and his family were heading towards Acapulco for a vacation. Upon the encounter with the animal, the beginning of a novel supposedly occurred to him.

According to this legend, García Márquez returned home immediately, where he kept himself confined for eighteenth months to write the novel that became *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, published in May 1967. The real story is no less fascinating, but quite different. Not only did a camel originally occupy the place of ice, but in fact a similar opening sentence already appeared in a journalistic piece García Márquez wrote in the 1950s. Contrary to the legend, it did not take him eighteen months but fifteen years to write the novel. He started it in 1950. In *Crónica*, a local Colombian magazine that lasted about a year, he published “The House of the Buendías (Sketch of a Novel).” He was twenty-three years old. The sketch already featured the novel’s hero, Colonel Aureliano Buendía, and the mythical town, Macondo.

For the next fifteen years, García Márquez made a living as a journalist in six countries, always carrying with him the growing manuscript of “The House.” One of these countries was the United States. In 1961, he was appointed chief of the New York headquarters of Prensa Latina, the official state news agency of Cuba founded after Castro’s revolution. But months later, afraid of political purges occurring in Cuba, García Márquez, the manuscript (by then 700 pages long), and his family left for Mexico City. To get there, they crossed the American South by bus, the land of one of García Márquez’s most admired writers and lasting influences: William Faulkner.

Not only Castro and Faulkner, but also the Rockefeller family and the CIA became part of the novel’s making. Upon arrival to Mexico City, García Márquez quit literature writing and took the risk of embarking on a career in script writing. But to support his family, he had to work for tabloid magazines and as a freelance publicist. His professional fate changed when his Colombian friend, writer Alvaro Mutis, put him in touch with *La Mafia*, an artistic group led by the well-connected Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes.

The group’s activities attracted the attention of William Styron, cofounder of *The Paris Review*, benefactor Rodman Rockefeller, American publisher Alfred Knopf and Spanish literary agent Carmen Balcells, whose agency soon represented writers José Donoso, Mario Vargas Llosa and Julio Cortázar. In the late 1960s, along with García Márquez and Fuentes, they became the stars of the rising international literary movement known as the Latin American Boom. In July 1965 Balcells offered García Márquez a contract to represent him, which included the first royalties for his three previous novels. That was his real epiphany. A

few days after signing the contract, having at hand the possibility of becoming a professional writer, he started the final version of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Three months before finishing the novel, García Márquez started promoting it. One third (seven chapters) was premiered by print media in five countries. Two of the chapters were featured in *Mundo Nuevo*. Published in Paris and sold in no less than twenty-four countries, this magazine was created in 1966 to promote Latin American Boom literature and was secretly funded by the CIA. Furthermore, García Márquez invested almost as much time in the pre-publication advertising campaign as in writing the final manuscript. He completed it between July 1965 and August 1966, and the campaign preceding its release lasted from May 1966 to May 1967. The campaign was a big success. The first edition sold out in barely two weeks and four editions went into print in less than a year.

From Best Seller to Classic

Soon after its publication the bestselling novel took on a life of its own. Praised for inventing a new genre, magical realism (which in fact was born in the 1940s), it went on to profoundly influence Latin American and later world literature. Now, almost fifty years later, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* not only stands as the most popular work of the Latin American Boom. It is also the most widely read work of fiction in Spanish after *Don Quixote*, to which readers and scholars have compared it since 1967.

Over the last four decades, the novel has entered the lives of millions, from ordinary readers to Hollywood filmmakers (William Friedkin's *Sorcerer* (1977) and Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* (2012)), music bands (Radiohead's *Banana Co.* (1995)), writers (Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, J.K. Rowling and Mo Yan), celebrities (Carolina Herrera and Oprah Winfrey) and statesmen (Bill Clinton and François Mitterrand). The adjective Macondian is now used in the Spanish language, just as Gargantuan and Kafkaesque are in others. Magical realism has become, for numerous readers, critics, and scholars, a "universal" genre, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is widely accepted as the genre's best incarnation.

As global reactions to García Márquez's death showed, the novel continues to elicit competing views on its value and on the meaning of key passages, events, and characters' actions. That is one of the distinctive features of classical literary works. They might not be widely read, but paradoxically they are present in collective life under various material and immaterial forms. Despite their multiple meanings, they remain meaningful. They become part of our cultural DNA.

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