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Houses, Boats, and Hot-Air Balloons: The Role of Place in García Márquez's *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*

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In an essay published in 1956, American novelist Eudora Welty described place in narration as "one of the lesser angels that watch over the racing hand of fiction" (57). In the years that have transpired since Welty's eloquent definition, the real world, in the wake of Three-Mile Island, Chernobyl, the Exxon Valdez incident, vanishing Amazonian rainforests, and burning Kuwaiti oil fields, has become an increasingly inhospitable place. Given our greater concern nowadays for the man-made or the natural places that we actually inhabit, it seems logical that we likewise begin to look more closely at the physical contexts within works of literature. In his 1984 study, *The Role of Place in Literature*, Leonard Lutwack succinctly links such concerns:

> The great question is whether man can change his perception of himself in relation to his surroundings . . . an increased sensitivity to place seems to be required, a sensitivity inspired by aesthetic as well as ecological values, imaginative as well as functional needs (2).

While it is true that in some modern or post-modern novels the physical context may be minimal, in García Márquez's narrative it often has a sufficiently important influence to merit critical attention. A good case in point is *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*. García Márquez himself has concurred with the critical observation that the novel was written "con un estilo y tono que revelan la emulación o evocación de los textos del siglo diecinueve" (Snook 95).[1] As such, it represents a deliberate effort to evoke a sense of place in the past. My premise in this study is that place in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* not only provides an atmospheric setting for plot, but that spatial elements represent one of many controlling functions in the novel, a notion that is hinted at in the work's epigraph, a fragment of a poem attributed to Leandro Díaz: "en adelanto van estos lugares/ ya tienen su diosa coronada."

Although the precise location of the city in which most of the novel's action occurs is never explicitly stated, it has been identified as a compo-

site image of Cartagena de Indias, Santa Marta, Barranquilla, and other locations on the Caribbean coast (Fiddian 192). Within this loose general context, numerous specific public places are the scenes of important and sometimes recurring events in the novel. A preliminary discussion of four of these places and of some of the characters and actions associated with them provides a basis for examination of the premise of the significance of place in the novel.

The first of these places is "el parquecito de almendros," where Florentino spends innumerable hours of his youth in silent contemplation of Fermina Daza. Here, in front of her house, Fermina accepts Florentino's first letter, and subsequently accepts his marriage invitation. Years later, at an unhappy point in her actual marriage, roles are reversed, as Fermina now observes Florentino, who continues to visit the park: "una tarde invernal fue a cerrar el balcón antes de que se desempedrara la tormenta, y vio a Florentino en su escaño bajo los almendros del parquecito . . . [y] se atrevió a decirse que tal vez hubiera sido feliz con él . . ." (277-78). Later in her life, in the period immediately following her husband's death, she again evokes the memory of her childhood love, and associates it with this familiar place: "Entonces se atrevió a evocar . . . los tiempos ilusorios de aquel amor irreal . . . trataba de precisar cómo era el parquecito de entonces, los almendros rotos, el escaño donde él la amaba, porque nada de eso existía ya como entonces" (367).

Of equal interest is the "venerable y ruidoso" (23) Café de la Parroquia, where, as a young man, Juvenal Urbino "demoraba antes de volver a casa, y así perfeccionó su ajedrez con los cómplices de su suegro y con algunos refugiados del Caribe" (20). Lorenzo Daza, Fermina's father, was also seen here frequently, "jugando y tomando vino del barril con los asturianos del mercado público" (110). This café plays a more important role in the primary action of the novel when it serves as the scene of Lorenzo Daza's threat to shoot Florentino should he continue to court Fermina.

Another significant place in terms of incident and character interaction is the Portal de los Escribanos, where Fermina rejects Florentino upon return from her forced exile in Valledupar. Later in the novel she and her cousin Hildebranda are rescued at this same location by Doctor Juvenal, an incident that marks the beginning of a change in Fermina's attitude toward the physician, a change that leads eventually to her marriage to him. Finally, it is at the Portal de los Escribanos that Florentino, in his mature years, and as a respite from his job answering business letters in his uncle's shipping company, "pasaba sus horas libres . . . ayudando a los enamorados implumes a escribir sus esquelas perfumadas, para descargar el corazón de tantas palabras de amor que se le quedaban sin usar en los informes de la aduana (220)."

A fourth location, *el faro*, is visited only by one protagonist, but is charged with significance for him. Here Florentino "solía ir por las tardes a conversar con el farero sobre las incontables maravillas de la tierra y del agua que el farero sabía "(128). Florentino initially visits the lighthouse during his attempts to raise the treasure from the sunken galleon, during the period of Fermina's forced exile to Valledupar. The lighthouse "fue su lugar más amado . . . en ningún otro sitio diferente del faro vivió las horas más felices ni encontró un mejor consuelo para sus desdichas" (129). Years later, as he again awaits Fermina's return, "cuando ya tenía todo resuelto en los albores de la vejez . . . siguió yendo allí . . . porque era un sitio bueno para ser feliz" (230).

In each of these four cases, the places discussed help to provide us with a sense of narrative identity for individuals and groups of characters involved. Fermina's meditation overlooking the park, for example, provides us with insights on her state of mind at a crucial stage in her adult life, insights that contrast ironically with the innocent, romantic memories that she (and we) associated with this place during her youth. In similar fashion the revelation of Florentino's reactions to certain places, such as the lighthouse, provides insights on his psychological state over time. In other words, part of our perception of Fermina's and Florentino's identity is derived from the narrative description of each individual's responses to these and other places in the novel.

Secondly, patterns of characterologic movement through narrative time in the novel are linked to such places. The periodic intersection of characters at specific places (the park, the café), visits to the same places for different reasons by several different characters over time (the Portal, the café), or the cyclical return to familiar places (the park, the lighthouse) at different life stages of specific individuals (Florentino; Fermina) all serve to reinforce the structural and thematic notion of time as a cycle, or time as a series of stages, a repeated motif in this and other works by García Márquez.

Additionally, a sense of dramatic irony is created when certain antithetical events or actions occur at the same place. For the reader, the Portal de los Escribanos is a place of both rejection (Florentino) and acceptance (Juvenal). In his youth, Florentino admires Fermina from afar in the *parquecito*; in her mature years, it is Fermina who from afar admires Florentino in the park.

Finally, some of the aforementioned places serve double-duty as both symbolic and actual environments. The Freudian-phallic implications of the lighthouse, for example, are self-evident. Florentino's love for Fermina shines like a solitary lighthouse beacon in the darkness of his older years. Later in the novel, to extend the metaphor, Florentino's gentle "light," his

epistolary observations on love, life, and death, which he sends to Fermina, helps to guide her through the familial and societal tempests of the first two years of her widowhood.

A final observation with regard to the symbolic function of another location, the Café de la Parroquia, concerns the concept of "poetization"[2] of place by the writer. The actual Café de la Parroquia that served as the model for the fictional version in the novel exists not in the regions of Colombia described in the novel, but rather in Veracruz, Mexico. The author's penchant for the "poetization" of space, in this case, the transfer of this real place from its actual geographic location to a different, fictional location in the novel was discussed by García Márquez in an interview with critic Raymond Leslie Williams:

> WILLIAMS: The physical space in *Love in the Time of Cholera* seems to correspond largely to Cartagena, Colombia, but suddenly the Café de la Parroquia of Veracruz, Mexico, appears. I guess we need to talk about the poetization of space too.
> GARCIA MARQUEZ: Right. The Café de la Parroquia could be in Cartagena perfectly well. The fact that it isn't is purely incidental because all the conditions exist in Cartagena for it to be there . . . Cartagena still needs a café like the Café de la Parroquia in Veracruz, so I took the one from Veracruz, which I needed in Cartagena for my novel . . . How marvelous to have the freedom to be a writer who says, 'Well, I'm going to put the Café de la Parroquia where I want it to be.' (136-37).

For García Márquez, this "poetization" of space includes not only the poetic license that enables the transposition of a café from an actual geographical location to a different fictional location. It also includes employing locations from other fictional works written by other Spanish-American authors. We all recall that in *Cien años de soledad*, García Márquez transfers the character Colonel Gavilán from service in the Mexican Revolution in Carlos Fuentes's *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, to service under Colonel Buendía. Examples of such poetic appropriation from Fuentes's novel likewise include the appropriation of a place — the very same Café de la Parroquia, which is referred to in the sequence of *Artemio Cruz* dealing with the death of Artemio's son during the Spanish Civil War. In this scene from Fuentes's novel, Dolores, a Spanish resistance fighter and Lorenzo Cruz's lover, promises him that they will meet after the war is over: "Se verían en México, y él dijo que sí, en la plaza del puerto de Veracruz, bajo las arcadas, en el Café de la Parroquia. Tomarían café y comerían cangrejos" (239).

The linkage of place with character and plot, and the poetization of

place hinted at in the aforementioned examples perhaps find their most significant manifestations in the novel at three specific places: in the houses, boats, and hot-air balloons mentioned in the title of this study.

The final pages of the novel, for example, which narrate the journey of the aged Florentino and Fermina on the Magdalena river aboard the "Nueva Fidelidad," and which conclude with a physical act of love that consummates their second courtship, detail one of the most tender and evocative sections of the work. Nevertheless, there are two echoes or preludes of nautical sexual encounters much earlier in the work. As Doctor Urbino and Fermina leave for their European honeymoon, an intimate scene in which the marriage is consummated and Fermina loses her virginity takes place on board an ocean-going vessel. At almost precisely the same time, on another boat traveling the Magdalena river, Florentino, who is fleeing in part to forget about what is happening aboard the ocean liner, abruptly loses his own virginity when he is attacked and deflowered by a mysterious female fellow-passenger (188-89).

Florentino and Fermina thus undergo similar sexual experiences under widely differing and deliberately contrasting circumstances in a similar nautical location and at approximately the same time. Years later, they share a sexual experience, obviously, at the same nautical location. Here the notions of parallel, cyclical, antithetical and/or reciprocal actions all are accomplished at similar settings.

The recurring image of the house in García Márquez's works has been well-documented by the critics. Mario Vargas Llosa, in *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*, for example, notes that "la primera novela que García Márquez intentó escribir se iba a llamar, precisamente, *La casa* . . . Los abuelos vivían en una casa asombrosa, que él dice haber utilizado como modelo de la casa del coronel de *La hojarasca* y que sirvió también, probablemente, de prototipo a las otras mansiones de su mundo narrativo: . . . la casa de la Mamá Grande . . . y la de los Buendía" (22).[3] Houses are also ubiquitous components of *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*, and have multiple narrative functions. The homes of the three protagonists, Florentino, Juvenal, and Fermina, for example, are described in great detail in the novel, and each undergoes a change, a relocation, or a reconstruction that is linked to the changing fortunes of their inhabitants.

When Florentino begins his courtship of Fermina, he and his mother, Tránsito Ariza, dwell in a decrepit seventeenth-century building, "una media casa alquilada de la Calle de las Ventanas," (75) which they share with other boarders. When Fermina accepts his marriage proposal, Florentino and his mother begin negotiations "para tomar en alquiler toda la casa" (99). After Fermina has rejected him and married Juvenal, Florentino's "objeto único" (227) becomes "la recuperación de Fermina

Daza . . . y estaba tan seguro de lograrla tarde o temprano, que convenció a Tránsito Ariza de proseguir la restauración de la casa para que estuviera en estado de recibirla en cualquier momento en que ocurriera el milagro" (227). Significantly, we also learn that the purchase of the house and its restoration coincide with Florentino's rise to power in the shipping company, and that this success in turn contributes to a "restablecimiento momentáneo de la ciudad" (228).

At the time of her first encounter with Florentino, Fermina's home, like his home, is a dilapidated building described as "una casa en escombros," (100) and "una de las casas más antiguas, medio arruinada" (77). By the time she has her first encounter there with Juvenal, the house has received some significant improvements: "adentro había un orden de belleza y una luz atónita que parecía de otro mundo . . . había un rumor invisible de agua continua, macetas de claveles en las cornisas, y jaulas de pájaros raros en las arcadas" (155).

In like manner, Juvenal's home, after the death of his father and upon his own return from study in Europe, is described as being in a state of disrepair: "entró por el zaguán tenebroso y vio la fuente polvorienta del jardín interior, y la maraña de monte sin flores por donde andaban las iguanas, y se dio cuenta de que faltaban muchas losas de mármol, y que otras estaban rotas . . . " (143). Upon the death of his mother, Juvenal decides against renovation in favor of constructing a new house in a new neighborhood, a home that is later described as a "partenón de mármol rosado" (303), which is elegantly furnished with "muebles ingleses" (100).

In the text, numerous references to these houses reflect aspects of the characters who dwell in them, and they are also associated with their actual or desired interpersonal relationships. Florentino, for example, undertakes a renovation based upon a comparison of his own economic status with that of his lover, a status that is measured by the quality of her home. Florentino and Tránsito's rented half-home "era un espacio bueno para los dos pero insuficiente para una señorita . . . cuyo padre había restaurado hasta dejarla como nueva una casa en escombros mientras las familias de siete títulos se acostaban con el terror de que los techos de las mansiones se les desfondaran encima durante el sueño" (100). The experience of visiting another's home likewise has an effect on Dr. Urbino, whose near-mystical first impression of Fermina's restored house favorably prepares him for his first meeting with her: "estremecido por la certidumbre de la presencia física de Dios . . . pensó que una casa como aquella era inmune a la peste" (155). The mature Fermina's entry into her new home in La Manga is associated with a maturity, control, and contentedness that appear as traits in her character after her self-imposed exile to protest her husband's affair: "Entró en ella pisando firme, entró a mandar

. . . entró con el esposo recuperado, con el hijo bien criado, con la hija que nació a los cuatro meses del regreso . . ." (288).

Houses, like other locations in the novel, such as the aforementioned Portal de los Escribanos, also serve as focal points for repeated or parallel incidents in the novel. Florentino and Juvenal, we recall, both make the acquaintance of Fermina at her house in the course of performing duties associated with their professions: Florentino delivers a telegram, while Juvenal visits a sick patient. The long-range consequences of these first encounters that take place at the same location are significant for both men. It is in Fermina's house that Juvenal "conoció a la mujer con quien había de vivir hasta el día de su muerte" (156). The first sight of Fermina in her home is the origin in Florentino of "un cataclismo de amor que medio siglo después aún no había terminado" (78).

The importance of both houses and boats in providing a locus for the intersection of plot and character in the novel is perhaps most succinctly summarized in a brief dialogue between Florentino and Fermina near the end of the novel. After the death of Urbino, Fermina has become disaffected with her lifestyle, and Florentino suggests an option:

> Lo que quisiera es largarme de esta casa, caminando derecho, derecho, derecho y no volver más —dijo.
> —Vete en un buque —dijo Florentino.
> Fermina Daza lo miró pensativa.
> —Pues fíjate que podría ser —dijo (421).

Finally, the technique of "poetization of space," which was noted earlier in reference to the Café de la Parroquia, receives its most ambitious and surreal treatment in the section of the novel that relates the adventure of the trip by hot-air balloon to San Juan de la Ciénaga taken by Fermina and Juvenal as part of the festivities that celebrate the arrival of the new century. The reader's assumption, of course, is that the major portion of the action in the novel up to this point has transpired in Cartagena, and that it is from this location that the balloon takes off on its thirty-league air journey. The reader subsequently becomes perplexed when the first sight described from the air balloon is not the1900 version of Cartagena, but apparently, a ruined and abandoned Cartagena cityscape dating from the Colonial era:

> Desde el cielo, como las veía Dios, vieron las ruinas de la muy antigua y heroica ciudad de Cartagena de Indias, la más bella del mundo, abandonada de sus pobladores por el pánico del cólera ... Vieron las murallas intactas, la maleza de las calles, las fortificaciones devoradas por

> las trinitarias, los palacios de mármoles y altares de oro con sus virreyes podridos de peste dentro de las armaduras (296).

Garcia Márquez reiterates the "poetic" function of this literary sleight-of-hand — the only such incident in the novel, and an effect associated more with the author's novels of magical realism — in his interview with critic Raymond Williams:

> GARCIA MARQUEZ: Yes, but in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, I used a trick when they go up in a balloon and pass over the ruins of Cartagena . . . They see the old city of Cartagena abandoned. As an almost poetic image, it's beautiful, and the use of this image gives an idea of how things can be handled in literature.
> WILLIAMS: Once again, the poetization of space.
> GARCIA MARQUEZ: Exactly, and just when I have them convinced that this is Cartagena, then I take them through an abandoned Cartagena. It's a doubling of the city. Let's say it's the same city in two distinct periods, two different temporal spaces (138).

Such admission by the author of the conscious use of a specific technique, the "poetization of space," provides a clear indication of an overall awareness of the important role that place and space play in the novel in question.

An analysis of seven specific locations in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* reveals that place exercises an important controlling function in the novel. Characters' psychological associations with certain places over time reveal aspects of change or constancy in their personalities. Physical changes in places that characters inhabit frequently mirror changes in the inhabitants' psychological or social states. Characters periodically return to certain sites or intersect with other individuals at certain specific locations during the course of the novel. This "crossroads" function reinforces the thematic notion of cyclical time and creates dramatic irony by causing the reader to witness either parallel or contrasting events taking place at different time periods at common or similar locations. Finally, certain places in the novel achieve symbolic or "poetic" significance through the creation of a doubling effect. The vision of parallel versions of Cartagena from the vantage point of the hot-air ballon adds a surreal yet familiar Marquesian touch to an otherwise realistic novel. The creation of a fictional Café de la Parroquia, which mirrors both its actual Mexican geographic inspiration as well as its literary antecedent in Carlos Fuentes's *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, is reminiscent of similar self-conscious ploys in *Cien años de soledad* that include references within the novel to characters and incidents in works by other contemporary Latin American novelists.

In sum, although *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* presents the superficial image of a nineteenth-century novel, the subtle and varied uses of place in the work reveal the hand of a very modern master of the genre.

NOTES

1 See the author's statements to Françesc Arroyo in "El amor, la vejez, la muerte: un paseo con Gabriel García Márquez por la trama y la historia de su última novela."

2 For a thorough discussion of the poetic image and its relationship to place or space, see Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.

3 See Nina Scott, "Vital Space in the House of Buendía," for a discussion of the role of house in *Cien años de soledad*. For a different interpretation than my own of the role of place and the role of the house in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*, see Margaret Snook, "Lugar y espacio en *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*." Snook concludes that spatial images in the novel reflect social themes and that specific components of houses, such as windows and doors, have symbolic functions related to notions of social class.

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Una aproximación al vocabulario sociopolítico y religioso en el *Diccionario* de la Academia

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En este estudio deseo mostrar cómo las actitudes lingüísticas, sociales, culturales y religiosas de los redactores del *Diccionario* de la Academia han afectado, a través de las veinte ediciones de dicha obra, la redacción de las definiciones que dan para términos de carácter sociopolítico y religioso. Para mi estudio parto del supuesto de que los redactores de dicha obra, en cuanto miembros de una comunidad lingüística particular en un momento histórico particular, no hacen sino vertir en ella las actitudes u opiniones que a la comunidad toda, o al menos al grupo dominante, le merecían los objetos e ideas que se describían.

Abundan los ejemplos de definiciones de vocablos en que se transparentan los prejuicios socioculturales o religiosos de los redactores. A modo de ilustración, quisiera citar el siguiente artículo sacado del *Thesoro de la lengua española o castellana* (1611) de Sebastián de Covarrubias y Orozco:

> **TALMUD**. Libro perverso y ridículo, que los judíos, después de la dispersión suya, en la destrucción de Jerusalén, han compuesto, todo fabuloso y desatinado. ...

Al ser creada en 1713, la Real Academia Española recibió el encargo estatutario de "cultivar y fijar la pureza y elegancia de la lengua castellana" (*DA* xxiii) desembarazándola de palabras y frases consideradas indignas de una lengua que, en opinión de los académicos, había alcanzado el más alto grado de desarrollo. Cabría a los académicos, que se reclutarían entre los más destacados hombres de letras de su tiempo, desempeñar las funciones de árbitros supremos del uso.

La primera tarea que se propusieron los académicos fue la de preparar un diccionario normativo lo más completo posible. El resultado de sus esfuerzos fue la publicación de los seis tomos del *Diccionario de la lengua castellana*, entre 1726 y 1739, edición mejor conocida como el *Diccionario de Autoridades*.

El *Diccionario* vio dos nuevas ediciones durante el siglo XVIII, diez en