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Lesson 6

Recognizing Emerging Leitmotifs

Objectives

- To identify, support, and evaluate evidence of leitmotifs within the novel
- To share ideas through a carousel lesson

Notes to the Teacher

The fastwrite exercise is designed to generate initial thinking about the major themes/leitmotifs, or recurring images and patterns, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Leitmotifs are central to all major works of literature from any given time. Some famous examples include the leitmotif of redemption and sin in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the recurring image of a haunted ghost (and indeed, being haunted in general) in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the potent image of a degenerative disease literally transforming a person into a hideous insect in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* presents several striking leitmotifs, including cyclical patterns, prophecy, illegitimacy, and fantasy.

Cyclical Patterns

The novel is written in the retrospective past and future, so events are sometimes foretold before they occur and sometimes after they have already happened. This style of writing inherently lends itself to this motif. The Buendías are essentially helpless to stop not only the repetition of names from generation to generation, but also the repetition of similar events. For instance, the madness of José Arcadio Buendía marks his son Colonel Aureliano Buendía, and though they are not exactly the same, they are both motivated by fear and desperation. Amaranta Úrsula is self-possessed like Úrsula and is undaunted by the decline of Macondo. Pilar Ternera supports the Buendía men just like Petra Cotes in a later generation. The parchment Melquíades wrote seals this sense of repetitive fate, for these characters will never be able to escape their destiny.

Prophecy

The Buendías are cursed from the start. The curse is ultimately fulfilled through the predicted incest that results in a child with a

pig's tail. The irony of the prophecy that permeates their lives is that they are incapable of making the predictions work to their advantage. They simply realize the truth and then accept it, generally without action. Also, even though those named Aureliano have a prophetic gift, their reticence, brooding, and solitude makes their clairvoyance seem less powerful than it might be.

Illegitimacy

The recurring leitmotif of illegitimacy is highlighted with the seventeen Aurelianos with their symbolic ashen crosses, but is extended through the vague sense of emotional distance that all the children in the novel seem to experience at one time or another. There is also the sense of illegitimacy that has to do with the fear of incest and how one situation perhaps leads to the other. This fear permeates the novel to such an extent that all the relationships are tainted with it, although some are unbeknownst to all parties, such as Pilar Ternera's quick-change with Santa Sofía de la Piedad so as not to commit incest with her secretly illegitimate son, Arcadio. This can symbolize, in a broader sense, the long-standing insecurity within Latin America, which has been made to feel a sort of inferiority complex when pitted against North America and Europe.

Fantasy

So much of the novel is resplendent with fantasy, it may be difficult to highlight particular elements. But there are fantastical episodes that suggest more than a parody of love, religion, government, and family. Consider José Arcadio Buendía's answer to the insomnia plague of simply labeling everything, Fernanda's delusions of being royalty, the murderous lies of the Banana company, Úrsula's denial of blindness, Remedios the Beauty driving men to their deaths, or Pilar Ternera's fortune telling. Each episode is a microcosm of a larger picture that forces the reader to stretch not only the imagination, but suspend judgment and acknowledge often painful truths. Essentially, fantasy functions in the novel to demonstrate that we can never know the complete details of any given situation for so

much is disguised, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unwittingly. Also, fantasy is an escape from pain that allows the suffering masses in *One Hundred Years* to live with some semblance of hope.

Students will have a chance to brainstorm ideas, which will later be deepened and supported. Initial questioning is intended to provoke thinking; specific responses and support are not necessary yet.

The carousel portion of the lesson requires large sheets of chart paper or newsprint and markers. Students will also need their reader-response logs to record their evaluation of the evidence used by their classmates. They should consider the value of their peers' opinions as they travel from one motif chart to another.

Procedure

1. Ask students to open their reader-response logs. Explain that they will have three different questions with two minutes to respond to each. Let them know that they should not lift their pens from the paper in the two minutes, nor should they be concerned with mechanics. They should just allow their thoughts to flow. Give students two minutes to answer the following questions.
 - a. What patterns of behavior are emerging among the characters and how are these recurring patterns affecting life in Macondo?
 - b. What events in Macondo, if any, have been prophesied with precision or at least seem likely to come true?
 - c. List the many ways fantasy plays a part in the characters' lives. Are these elements of fantasy ever ironic (e.g., when the author's purposeful use of exaggeration actually highlights an unobserved truth instead of just parodying life in the village)?
2. Identify one leitmotif at the top of each large sheet of chart paper. Write "Cyclical Patterns," "Prophecy," "Illegitimacy," or "Fantasy," using large letters. (Note: The predominant motifs of bravado and solitude will be discussed in other lessons at length, so it is not necessary to highlight them at this time.) Arrange the large sheets and markers in easily accessible areas of the classroom.
3. Divide students into groups and send each group to one of the various motif chart locations. Allow several minutes for the group to brainstorm and list textual evidence to support the leitmotif. Tell students to be very detailed and include page numbers whenever possible; they should interpret these motifs/themes in the broadest possible terms and include any and all ideas that could fall under each category.
4. Rotate the groups around the room, like a carousel, until each group has had a chance to add input to each of the motif charts. Students should not repeat what is already mentioned on the chart but rather add their original ideas, continuing to add to the list the previous group began, but with even deeper and broader examples of the leitmotif from the novel.
5. Discuss each motif chart after all groups have had a chance to include input. As each bit of evidence is mentioned, students should gauge whether they agree or disagree with it. This can be done in the form of a discussion and then noted in the reader-response log. See Notes to the Teacher for description of each leitmotif. In all likelihood, the discussion/debate will continue into another class period.
6. Distribute **Handout 13**, which gives students an opportunity to refine and synthesize what they have brainstormed and discussed about leitmotifs. If necessary, this handout can be completed as homework.
7. Assign section 13 in preparation for Lesson 7.

Detailing Leitmotifs

Directions: Using your notes from the carousel activity, reexamine and refine the evidence regarding each leitmotif. Organize the textual support from the most obvious to the most subtle. Include page numbers whenever possible and be very specific so that this handout can be useful later. Be sure to make note of any support that could fall under more than one leitmotif.

Leitmotif	Textual Support
Cyclical Patterns	
Prophecy	

Leitmotif	Textual Support
Illegitimacy	
Fantasy	