

**“Among Mankind’s Deepest Needs”: Repetitive Grief and Intimate Isolation
in Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Gabriel Garcia
Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude***

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Abstract

Milan Kundera’s ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Being’ and Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s ‘One Hundred Years of Solitude’ are two novels which attempt deep and intimate investigations of the complex griefs - be it from death, from separation, from miscommunication, or otherwise - arising out of close human relationships. Whether they exist in 1960s Prague or the strange, timeless town of rural Macondo, the characters created by both of these authors tap into the universal conflict of existing within the confines of that grief - a grief which these characters experience within the two realms of the intimate, both interpersonally, in the closeness of their relationships, and intrapersonally, in the greater intimacy of their own isolation. In my thesis, I seek to examine how Kundera and Garcia Marquez have utilized cyclical structures, philosophizing narrators, and a touch - or perhaps more - of magical realism to explore how repetitive grief, born out of the isolation caused by relational shame, betrayal, and sacrifice, renders itself within the context of an intimate relationship. These instances of shame, betrayal, and sacrifice, in shaping both the nature of these unions and the understandings of the individuals involved, ultimately serve as a means of helping these characters recognize the value of their grief, and eventually manage to use it to achieve emotional productivity, relational growth, familial understanding, and even - in some cases - personal contentment.

Keywords: Cyclical Grief, Isolation, Relational Intimacy

1. Introduction

Human beings crave intimacy. It’s something we are born needing, taught to want as we grow up, and continue to crave, seek, and cherish for the rest of our lives. However, achieving such intimacy—in terms of what would normally be considered a happy, healthy, griefless relationship—is not always as simple as it sounds. Both Milan Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* attempt an examination of the breakdown of human intimacy. These novels evoke a similar perspective on the concept of grief—born out of relational instances of shame, sacrifice, and betrayal—as it arises in close relationships. Grief, in a relationship that is already isolated in its interpersonality, creates an even deeper isolation for the individual futilely seeking relational comfort in a struggling intimate attachment.

This is the case for nearly all of the characters of Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The novel focuses on the wayward intimacy of two quasi-couples, Tomas and Tereza and Sabina and Franz. Much of the novel explores the attempts of Tereza—a quiet waitress from Zurich—to escape the “vast concentration camp of bodies” that defined her mother’s world by marrying a philandering doctor by the name of Tomas, who ultimately enmeshes Tereza even further into the very terror she was seeking to escape (Kundera 47). Sabina, a painter with whom Tomas engages

in a contract of “erotic friendship,” struggles to find her place in a world of betrayals—namely those that she perpetrates against others—while Franz, a professor who worships the affair he had with the untameable painter, leaves his wife and takes up with a devoted student. Though Kundera’s contemplative style manages to inject a certain amount of humor into the characters’ various attempts to find happiness—or at least, avoid misery—in their respective relationships, the true depth of the grief that exists within them is undeniable.

The same could be said of the complex intimacies existing within the Buendia clan of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The novel follows a family born out of a wary marriage between cousins and a subsequent murder to maintain the honor of the patriarch, Jose Arcadio Buendia. This family subsists through multiple generations—with many members being given the same name—of minimal triumphs and countless egregious griefs, including death, betrayal, incest, insanity, civil war, and self-inflicted aloneness. The broad scope of this novel makes it difficult to fully examine the true depth of every grief that exists for every member of the Buendia clan, but I will seek to aptly investigate these griefs in the manner in which they inevitably cycle through the family, affecting not only specific members, but also the family narrative as a whole. Similarly to Kundera, Garcia Marquez utilizes his indelible sense of humor to bring a strange sense of clarity to the family’s often overwhelming tragedies.

In fact, both authors, in exploring the intimacy which exists on multiple levels—both in the isolation of the relationship itself, as well as in the further isolation of individuals recognizing their relationships’ failures—create a vastly complex and full-bodied picture of grief as it exists within the intimate relationship. Through the use of similar repetitive structures, philosophizing narrators, and excursions into the world of magical realism, both authors create a means of exploring the way in which grief, iterated cyclically and perpetually, shapes a close relationship and ultimately redefines the very nature of intimacy itself.

2. The Cyclical Iteration of Grief as an Overarching Narrative Structure

Grief, in the field of modern psychology, is often considered to be a process. However, grief as it is explored in these two novels cannot be easily described in such finite terms. The characters of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* find themselves locked in a cyclical iteration of that process, fully represented by the way in which Kundera and Garcia Marquez have chosen to structure their novels. According to author E.L. Doctorow, in his article “Four Characters Under Two Tyrannies: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*,” both Kundera and Garcia Marquez “know how to get ahead of [the] story and circle back to it and run it through again with a different emphasis” (29).

This overarching structure—repetitive and cyclical in itself—is, in many ways, how both authors approach and emphasize the grief on which they have based their novels. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* depends on Kundera’s atypical fascination with exploring the griefs of a typical romantic relationship in a nonlinear fashion to better grasp the full scope of the anguish that exists within these intimate attachments. To establish the structure of his novel and the grief which it explores as cyclical, Kundera begins with a philosophical pondering of the concept of eternal return, stating, “The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum” (3). Kundera manages to utilize the concept of eternal return in the way in which he compels each character to relive, repeat, and reevaluate (67). Nearly every event in the novel is explored multiple times and through multiple perspectives, serving to not only emphasize the repetitive structure of the novel, but also to repeatedly—and quite painfully—re-emphasize and reinforce the grief experienced by these characters.

Take, for example, Kundera’s description of how Tomas and Tereza first met, which he explores initially through Tomas’s perspective. Mere moments after Tereza travels from her hometown of Zurich to find Tomas in Prague, the two make love, after which Tereza immediately falls ill. After the physical fulfillment of their lust, Tomas first begins to recognize his desire for Tereza as something more than physical; Tomas feels as if she had been sent to him, like a child in a “bulrush basket that had been daubed with pitch,” and then, “all at once he fancied she had been with him for many years and was dying. He had a sudden clear feeling that he would not survive her death. He would lie down beside her and want to die with her” (Kundera 7).

In both describing Tereza as a child in a “bulrush basket” and in illuminating Tomas’s “feeling that he would not survive her death,” Kundera has made it clear that grief existed—and was perhaps essential—even at the beginning of their union (7). Their relationship, born out of Tereza’s desperation to escape the life she lived with her mother, was cemented in the grief Tomas felt at the moment of their love’s inception; Tomas, a man who had heretofore been engaged only in numerous contracts of “erotic friendship” felt the weight of that love, and of the inevitable and inescapable fact of his sudden understanding that, upon this woman’s death, he would “want to die with her” (7). For

Tomas, his love for Tereza, inherently at odds with his previously attachment-less lifestyle, is an inevitable burden—or, as Kundera would term it, a weight—and consequently, a grief.

However, Kundera's explication of that initial, combined moment of love and grief does not stop with Tomas's understanding of it. Keeping in line with the assertions made by Doctorow, and as a means of establishing his novel as repetitive under the umbrella of Nietzsche's concept of eternal return, Kundera then explores the same moment from Tereza's perspective, in which the instant of their initial union is imbued with a new sense of violence and desperation: "She kept her head fixed on the void of the ceiling. At times she twisted her head violently from side to side. When [her] scream died down, she fell asleep at his side, clutching his hand. She held his hand all night" (54). John Barnard notes the significance of this repetition in his article "*The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Repetition, Formal Structure, and Critique*," stating, "The resultant repetition of the same events differently perceived... [gives] them a thickness (indeed, weight) caused by re-imagining what had previously seemed the authoritative account" (68). Barnard's explication of Kundera's method of repeating the same events further emphasizes Kundera's focus on the concept of eternal return as a basis for Tomas and Tereza's relational grief.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* encompasses the cyclical structure—and grief structure—in much the same way as Kundera's novel. Almost the entirety of the novel is based off of a repetitive familial narrative. By explicating that narrative—and the way in which it influences the interactions between members of the Buendia clan—Garcia Marquez similarly perpetuates the Buendias' cyclical grief. Here again it is necessary to refer back to Doctorow's explication of the ability of either author "to get ahead of [the] story and circle back to it and run it through again with a different emphasis" (29). Rodica Grigore, author of "Truth, History, and Myth in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," agrees with Doctorow, stating, "all characters in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* tend to assert their reality (fictional or historic reality) by recurring to a prior fiction whose culmination they enact themselves" (54).

Grigore's analysis of Garcia Marquez's novel is wholly indicative of the way his characters experience their grief. This analysis of structure also sounds notably reminiscent of the way Kundera utilizes the concept of eternal return. The first sentence of the novel exemplifies Garcia Marquez's careful grief structure: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" (1). This opening sentence introduces one of Garcia Marquez's major characters and two separate plot-related events—both of which represent different strands of grief—which will not be fully explored until much later in the novel.

This stylistic method of subtly repeating references to certain events within the text is only one of the myriad ways in which Garcia Marquez manages to make the grief that is wholly pervasive within the novel feel even more persistent for his characters. Certainly, Garcia Marquez's choice to have the same names repeated over and over again for five generations—Jose Arcadio, Aureliano, Ursula, Remedios, Amaranta, and so on—further adds to the cyclicity of grief within the Buendia narrative, especially as these characters experience very similar miseries.

Take, for example, the struggles of Aureliano Segundo. Aureliano Segundo, perpetually revelling in the love of excess characteristic of nearly all the Aurelianos of the Buendia line, also echoes the misery of his predecessors through his relational grief. Aureliano's grief is repetitive partially because it is very similar to the misery experienced by a number of his family members—the same fruitless ambition as his great-grandfather Jose Arcadio Buendia, the same ambivalent self-absorption as his great-aunt Amaranta—but also because of his own inability to learn from the griefs which he instills within his intimate relationships. Aureliano Segundo, in seeking to please both his austere, virginal wife, Fernanda, and his passionate (albeit somewhat selfish) lover, Petra Cotes, inevitably fails to please either them or himself, ultimately enmeshing everyone involved into deeper intrapersonal isolation.

The grief in these particular romantic attachments is reminiscent of that which arises in Kundera's novel, with Tomas striving to please his devoted, monogamous wife, Tereza, while continually feeling the irrepressible need to sleep with other women. In much the same way, Aureliano Segundo does his best to satisfy the demanding Fernanda while simultaneously slipping back into Petra Cotes's passionate cycle of promiscuity.

3. Negativity as Positivity: Finding Contentment in Grief

Considering the countless instances of disturbing grief experienced by the characters of these two novels, it is hard to believe that, trapped as they are within the confines of their abysmal misery, they could ever achieve any sense of hope, much less contentment. However, the grief explored in these novels does offer each character some semblance of positivity. It can be argued that Kundera and Garcia Marquez attempt to make grief not only a force of destruction and misery, but also a force of emotional productivity, relational growth, and even contentment.

Tomas and Tereza, tired of their life in Prague, move to the country. Tomas knows that “he would have difficulty finding a new woman every week. It would mean an end to his erotic adventures,” and Tereza, sensing his reluctance to give up those adventures, worries that Tomas would quickly grow bored of her (Kundera 233). The two do experience some new griefs in their country life—the death of their beloved dog, Karenin, for example—but as they settle into a comfortable routine, happiness, peeking its way through the embedded structure of their symbiotic grief, appears: “[Tereza] was experiencing the same odd happiness and odd sadness as then. The sadness meant: we are at the last station. The happiness meant: we are together. The sadness was form, the happiness content. Happiness filled the space of sadness” (313).

This quote reveals the necessity of the grief through which they have long suffered, as well as how that grief eventually transpires into a means of contentment. The long cycle of misery and relational discomfort—or the “form” as Kundera describes it here—which these two endure gives Tereza the means to understanding the value of their union exactly as it is. Though new instances of grief continue to arise, Tereza is finally able to accept Tomas’s insistence that he is happy. Tereza, having long lived in a world of intimate shame, betrayal, and sacrifice, is finally able to utilize those critical griefs as an impetus for recognizing the surprising extent of their happiness (313).

It is harder to make the case for the Buendias’ contentment. The myriad of griefs they experience, generation after generation, seem too overwhelming to offer a silver lining. Still, even as the Buendias and their beloved town of Macondo rot away to ruin, the moments of deeply felt passion that they experience in the midst of their grief cannot be denied. The productivity of grief in this novel is established in the way this family perseveres, clinging to the hopeful vestiges of passion ignited in each of them. No character of this family exemplifies this strength of character quite like the family matriarch, Ursula Iguaran.

Ursula, who survives well past one-hundred, makes use of her grief: “Although she was already a hundred years old and on the point of going blind... she still had her physical dynamism, her integrity of character, and her mental balance... No one would be better able than she to shape the virtuous man who would restore the prestige of the family” (Garcia Marquez 188). This quote exemplifies the strength characteristic of the Buendias, even in the midst of their overwhelmingly tragic lives. Even when nearly at the point of death, and even when the family seemed condemned to anguish and ill-reputation, Ursula perseveres, determined to utilize “her physical dynamism [and] integrity of character” – traits provided by the grief of experience – to raise her great-great-grandson and continue in her role as the Buendia matriarch (188).

These novels ultimately prove that grief, though inescapable, is not all-consuming, and, in some cases, may even be necessary; as it is experienced by the characters of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, grief acts as a catalyst for perseverance. Though that perseverance may not always yield tangible results, as in the case of the Buendias, the simple fact of its existence is enough. In thoroughly examining grief as a cyclical and perpetual force inherent in nearly every kind of intimate attachment, both Milan Kundera and Gabriel Garcia Marquez are making the case for grief’s necessity as a critical factor in human intimacy. Grief is, in actuality—and echoing the words of Kundera—among mankind’s deepest needs. Though it is a force of negativity stemming out of innumerable devastations, grief, as shown by the characters of either novel, is not an end in and of itself, but rather a means of making sense, finding unexpected contentment, and keeping life—and love—going.

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