María dos Prazeres as a Metaphor: A Discourse on Gender and the Spanish Nation

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María dos Prazeres as a Metaphor: A Discourse on Gender and the Spanish Nation

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Louisiana State University
& Agricultural and Mechanical College
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
To my parents who always encouraged me to go the extra mile and pursue the honors program here at LSU.

To Dr. Carmela Mattza, whose guidance and support throughout this process has been truly wonderful.

To all my loved ones, thank you for consistently being in my corner.
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Introduction

In October of 1967, Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez found himself in Barcelona, Spain—escaping to the European country soon after the massive success of what would eventually become his *magnum opus*. Although *Cien años de soledad* had only been published a few months prior, the sheer demand for a bigger and better novel proved overwhelming for someone who wished to work as undisturbed as possible (Bell-Villada 56). Interestingly enough, Márquez found this peace and quiet in a country that had been under the thumb of an authoritarian dictator for almost four decades. With an extensive background of being involved in the political left, there truly could not have been a more peculiar choice in residency for the self-proclaimed Socialist (Mendoza & García Márquez 96). That being said, growing opposition to the dying tyrant and an existing love for the Catalan people were both reasons as to why he chose to move to the region. Subsequently, his residency in Barcelona and the experience of the end of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship deeply influenced the literary works he composed during this time period and for years to come.

Years before Gabriel García Márquez’s newfound fame and subsequent decision to move to Europe, he was a part of the literary collective known as the Barranquilla group. Described as a “weird bunch of literature-mad screwballs”, this group of exuberant young men undoubtedly had a tremendous influence on the long list of literary works that García Márquez would ultimately create in his lifetime (Mendoza & García Márquez 43). Perhaps the most influential of the group was one Don Ramon Vinyes, who acted as the young men’s mentor and had fled to Colombia following the defeat of the political-left government, the Second Republic (Mendoza & García Márquez 44). A Catalan native, Vinyes’ guidance and support during this formative
period for García Márquez proved so substantial in fact that the latter decided to repay him with a memorialization in the wise old Catalan from *Cien años de soledad*.

Before García Márquez became known for his beautifully intricate novels, he was a well-respected journalist and had become an established European correspondent by the mid 1950s (Bell-Villada 50). On behalf of the Colombian newspaper, *El Espectador*, his trips to cities such as Paris and Rome were well-documented but it wasn't until recently that a trip to Madrid during that time was uncovered. In letters exchanged between the young journalist and the editor of *El Espectador*, it was revealed that García Márquez had taken a trip to Madrid in 1955 and had asked to remain there as a foreign correspondent (Aunión). With this request combined with his long-lasting appreciation for the Spanish people, it was clear that the country had left quite an impression on the writer to which when the opportunity presented itself to move to Barcelona, of all places, he gladly accepted.

During the late 60s and early 70s, Barcelona was quickly becoming the epicenter for the growing opposition to the repressive political regime (Bell-Villada 56). The once thought invulnerable Francisco Franco was declining in health and the fear of what would become of the country once he finally passed was disseminating throughout the country. Amidst this political tension, Carmen Balcells, a literary agent from Barcelona, encouraged a number of Latin American writers, García Márquez included, to make the move to the Catalan capital (Benavides). Upon his arrival and observation of growing Anti-Francoist sentiment, Gabriel García Márquez used this atmosphere as continuing inspiration for one of his upcoming novels as well as a peculiar short story he would go on to introduce the world to decades later.

Before he moved to Barcelona, García Márquez had been continuously writing a novel detailing the gruesome death of a fictional Latin American dictator, of which he drew inspiration
from several real-life ones at the time (Mendoza and García Márquez 80). While any inspiration taken from the reign of Francisco Franco is not clearly present, there is irony in that this book, *El otoño del patriarca*, was published in 1975- the same year that the dictator died. Translated to “the autumn of the patriarch”\(^1\), García Márquez’s newest novel was a somber tale of a dictator’s fall from power and the reaction of his constituents upon news of his death. Apart from this thought-provoking novel, there were other literary works that the author developed during this time that more clearly convey his ability to masterfully weave political metaphors into his narratives.

In 1992, Gabriel García Márquez released a collection of short stories that he had written during his time living in various European cities throughout the 1970s and 80s. This collection, titled, *Doce cuentos peregrinos*, consists of various Latin American characters struggling with feelings of solitude and displacement after leaving their native country for a new life in Europe. Translated to “strange pilgrims”\(^2\), García Márquez had modeled the stories after newspaper clippings and deliberately drew from the cultural atmosphere of each city he was in (García Márquez x). *Doce cuentos peregrinos* is an incredibly insightful piece of work, once the inspiration of European social and political matters is considered. Of course, García Márquez gives us a wonderful demonstration of this as metaphors can be found intertwined in nearly every story.

A handful of the short stories in the collection captured the essence of political tension occurring in these countries but one in particular is characterized by a seemingly ordinary protagonist. But really, how ordinary can a seventy-six year old former sex worker and Anarchist revolutionary really be? Her name is María dos Prazeres and her remarkable story serves as a commentary on the journey to self-discovery and personal fulfillment in such a time of societal
conflict. In what ways is the character of María dos Prazeres a metaphor for not only the end of the Franciscan regime but also for society’s increasing distaste of women as they age? In this case, I shall define a metaphor as something being regarded as a representation or symbol of another concept, usually an unrelated one. This thesis is an effort to provide answers to this proposed question.

The story of María dos Prazeres is the seventh of these so-called strange pilgrim tales and is set during the backdrop of Francisco Franco’s regime. Introduced to the reader as a Brazilian mulatta who was forcefully brought to Barcelona in her youth, it is not difficult to see where the political and social metaphors will begin to come into play, once one has into consideration the political turmoil affecting Spain in the 20th century as I describe in chapter one. I’ll recount her story and character arc in chapter two, with brief anecdotes that further cement not just María’s use as a metaphor but the short story as a whole. In chapter three, the metaphor for Spain’s fear of the unknown following Franco’s death will be presented by establishing parallels in María’s story and the politics of Spain. The role of her gender and marginalized identities are further analyzed in chapter four where I argue that she represents a multitude of societal and cultural metaphors. Concluding remarks and a soft critique of García Márquez’s approach to writing this protagonist are discussed in chapter five. All this and more will help me show why I consider “María dos Prazeres” to be one of the most complex and engrossing works of Gabriel García Márquez.
Chapter 1

Spain’s political turmoil in the 20th century

In the decade before the Spanish Civil War and the fall of the Second Republic, Spain had undergone its fair share of revolving governments, with each one being quickly overpowered by the next (Snellgrove 24). In 1923, a military general by the name of Miguel Primo de Rivera took advantage of the unstable situation and promised Spain he would help regain social order and political reform, the latter of which he ultimately failed. (Payne 20-21). After losing the support of both the Spanish king and more importantly, his army, Rivera resigned from his position in 1930 but this left more problems than solutions (Snellgrove 25). Consequently, in the wake of the dictator’s departure, any rightist alternative was quickly rejected due to the considerable amount of Republican and left opposition (Payne 22). Soon afterwards, any hope that the Spanish monarchy could help regain sociopolitical order was diminished after King Alfonso was banished, punishment for allowing the government to fall into such an unstable environment. With both political powerhouses gone, the leaders of the second Spanish Republic were left to pick up the pieces and mold Spain into a country that was better than the one they had inherited (Snellgrove 25).

The leaders of the Second Republic truly had their work cut out for them as they stepped into a role that would ultimately receive backlash from both sides of the political spectrum. Their first monumental decision was to introduce a new Constitution which would grant suffrage to women, sever the country’s ties with the Catholic church and legalize divorce (Payne 61-63). Such progressive proposals were considered extremely controversial at the time and only served to further aggravate those on the political right and even parts of the center. Even leftists were left disappointed by this Constitution as it was believed that in an attempt to establish significant
societal reforms, the Second Republic had bitten off more than it could chew and subsequently polarized the issue on all sides. Therefore, while it guaranteed a wide range of civil liberties, it seemed as if Spanish society was simply not ready to accept the social reforms that the Second Republic’s 1931 Constitution proposed.

Enforcing policies that would alienate the moderates as well as declining to show support for Socialist beliefs were the two biggest reasons as to why the Second Republic quickly began to lose their political influence. In the 1933 elections, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español, or PSOE, party failed to win majority votes in the Spanish parliament and to their distress, the two most prominent right-leaning parties emerged victorious (Payne 179). Despite the lawful success of the CEDA and Radical Republican parties, bitter leftists began to conspire amongst themselves ways in which they could take back what they thought was rightfully theirs.

1.1 The Unraveling of the Republic and What Triggered the Civil War: The October Revolution of 1934

Reeling from the devastating loss in the 1933 election, the PSOE and other leftist coalitions began to discuss the feasibility of implementing a completely Socialist form of government (Bunk 17). Two options were discussed: either the democratic process of the Republic would allow for a gradual Socialist democracy to form or they would stage a revolt in order to demonstrate just how serious they took their politics. The need for a response was made more apparent as rural laborers began to grow hungry due to the increased unemployment rate that the conservative government was doing little to mend (Bunk 19). Serving as a tipping point for outraged leftists, the call to action was soon answered and thus began the series of events that would ultimately end in an all-out civil war.
At the height of the new year, tensions were insurmountable after Socialist groups began to attack community centers belonging to the two prominent Fascist groups in Spain: the Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista, or JONS, and the Falange Española, or FE (Bunk 23). This first altercation was critical in that a clear message was delivered: the Second Republic was failing to maintain political order, and the nation was quickly spiraling towards a dark path.

When the month of October began, cities such as Madrid and Barcelona began to experience sporadic and violent fighting, with the ensuing chaos causing disruption in the military order of Socialist groups in Madrid and near anarchy in Barcelona (Bunk 29). Despite feeling emboldened enough to begin a revolution, the leftist fighters consisting of Socialists and anarcho-syndicalists alike proved no match to the military forces brought in to squash the conflict. In fact, the same military general who was called in to repress the revolt was the same man who would end up in an unthinkable position of power not even two years later (Payne 214-15). Francisco Franco stepped into the role of military powerhouse at such a crucial point in this period of political instability and to his delight, the failed October revolution would only serve to remove all hope for political moderation and make the country more susceptible to an all-out civil war.

1.2 Preparation for the 1936 Election: The Rise of Fascism in Spain

The failed October revolution of 1934 was a catalyst for the eventual Civil War in that it severely swayed those once moderate political thinkers far to the right. In fact, more and more right-wing politicians were being introduced to the idea that Spain could only be improved by a group of “superior” men who would completely take over, perpetuating the notion that a dictatorship would help advance the country, not a democracy (Snellgrove 27). The two groups in particular that planted these seeds of authoritarian ideology were the aforementioned Juntas de
Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalista and the Falange Española. In 1934, they would merge to become the F.E. y los JONS, a group that undoubtedly embodied all the political ideals that the left were vehemently against. Jose Antonio Rivera, son of the displaced dictator, would soon rise to the task of gathering as much political support for the group as possible and encouraging a political rift within the Republic under the backdrop of the upcoming 1936 elections (Payne 178).

In an unexpected turn of events, the leftists of Spain came together in a united coalition known as the Popular Front and emerged victorious in the elections. Composed of Socialists and moderate-leftists alike, the Popular Front victory was a major upset in the eyes of the Falangist hopefuls who were left humiliated by their defeat. It did not take long for the 1936 elections to become stained with controversy as the aforementioned alliance system introduced much logistical confusion amidst their disgruntled opponents (Payne 273). This combined with the disbelief that the parliament would now be controlled by majority leftist politicians caused those on the other side of the political spectrum to spiral into a conspiracy of complete and utter government insurrection.

Shocked by the results of the recent election and fearful that Spain would perhaps even turn Communist, the enemies of the newly elected Popular Front declared revolution on July 18th of 1936 and thus began the Spanish Civil War (Snellgrove 28). Behind the driver’s seat of this military coup d'etat sat Francisco Franco once again, having already proved himself quite useful in violent insurrections. His political connections were proving handy as well since he was the one military commander who managed to secure crucial aid from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, thus cementing him as the unofficial leader of the united right coalition now dubbed the Nationalists (Payne 240). With the disorganization of the left and the sheer influence over the Spanish military, it didn’t take long for Franco to successfully declare himself the chief of state.
of Nationalist Spain in October of that same year, almost two years to his success in the Red Revolution of 1934.

1.3 Franco’s Influence on the Civil War

Much to his chagrin, complete control of Spain would prove quite hard for the new chief of state as pushback from leftist groups made itself clear, especially in the Catalonian capital of Barcelona. Three Spanish Anarchists, led by Buenaventura Durruti, had made their mark on the city with their ideologies inspiring those Catalonians to defend their hometown no matter what it took (Ealham 147). Unfortunately, many lives were lost during the inevitable capture of Barcelona but nothing could take away from the fact that they had managed to hold on to their independence for years, against all odds.

Madrid, being known as the “birthplace of Spanish socialism”, soon made its name in the pushback against the Nationalists and it became clear that the city was not willing to go down without a fight (Snellgrove 43). In fact, those military powers wishing to overtake the city could not even rely on the help of militia or Assault Guards, as their loyalty to the Republicans was unwavering. In response to the attempts at overtaking their city, cries of the phrase “¡No pasarán!” (They shall not pass!) echoed through the streets (Snellgrove 69). The call to action was received in tremendous droves, much thanks to Dolores Ibárruri, an unrelenting believer in communism and an extremely courageous woman who took to the radios to repeat her passionate pleas. These messages proved so impactful in fact, that it inspired an entire regiment of women to join their male counterparts in the fight for freedom (Snellgrove 69). This outright refusal of Madrid to fall to Fascist powers soon became apparent to both Franco and his soldiers and while it didn't make his job impossible, it most certainly made it considerably difficult.
While their efforts were certainly admirable, Madrid would unfortunately not be able to maintain resistance for too long due to a multitude of reasons. Firstly, the varying political ideology amongst the revolutionaries proved costly as clashes amongst leaders became common. While it was beneficial for the Anarchists, Socialists and Communists to work together, it seemed that few thought of the fact that in the case of victory, it wasn’t possible to have all three parties governing at once (Snellgrove 49). Secondly, it seemed that the disruption in military order that had plagued their militias in the October Revolution of 1934 once again manifested itself a mere two years later. Madrid’s Anarchist mindset that once proved useful was now contributing to their downfall as disordered killing and disorganization proved detrimental to the Republican rebels. In fact, the Durruti column, a group of rebels organized by Durruti himself, had tried to instill discipline within its ranks but to no avail (Bolloten 263). Adding salt to the wound was the unanticipated death of the anarcho-syndicalist in one of the opening sieges, thus contributing to the eventual failure of Madrid’s resistance. As one of the main leaders of the Anarchist movement up to that point, this proved to be an utterly disappointing blow to those fighting against the threat of authoritarianism.

Despite their growing disorganization, the Republican rebels’ refusal to back down after the first year infuriated Franco, who had expressed that he’d rather demolish the city than let it remain in the hands of his political opposition (Snellgrove 74). As a decorated and experienced military official, Franco oversaw his soldiers with clear intention and strict orders which undeniably served as a clear advantage on the battlefield. In the beginning of 1939, it became clear that Madrid, once a “lonely Republican island in a Nationalist sea” would fall to the same demise as Barcelona and the rest of Catalonia (Snellgrove 104). With the end in sight, the exhausted rebels could do nothing except watch in despair as the same Nationalists that they had
held back for almost three years penetrated their walls, chanting “They have passed, they have passed!”, a stark contrast to the rebellious chants years prior. (Snellgrove 106).

The fall of the remaining Republican strongholds in Madrid, marked the end of the Spanish Civil War. However, with a new military dictator and his authoritarian government lurking in the shadows, Spain had little to rejoice over. Francisco Franco, proudly declared victory over all of Spain in a radio speech on April 1st of 1939 and from then on began a four decade long ordeal of political, social and civil repression to the highest degree.

1.4 Franco’s Cruelty as Dictator

When Francisco Franco assumed the role of dictator of Spain, he was theoretically the highest form of authority in Europe, a feat that did not go unnoticed by him (Payne 310). To cement this newly established power, the Caudillo’s first move as supreme ruler of Spain was to build a strong authoritarian government that would be just as unchecked as he was. He sought to rekindle his country’s relationship with the Catholic church soon thereafter, a move that proved popular amongst hundreds of thousands of Catholic Spaniards (Payne 309). Another act of social order made under Franco’s rule was the expansion of the Seccion Femenina (Women’s Section), which was a conservative network established in the midst of the Civil War and was directed towards women whose ideology closely resembled those of fascism (Payne 301). While the group was never fully successful at indoctrinating Spanish women as a whole, it's clear message that family and children were the only goal in life and that women were inherently lesser than men was a glaring difference in how the Republicans had treated their women (Payne 303, 323-4).

While Franco was working to implement new, albeit questionable, initiatives to enrich his followers’ lives, he was also busy brutally striking down any opposition leftover from the war
and executing those he saw fit (Sieburth 18). If forced silence did not prove satisfactory to the dictator, he would encourage public humiliation and outright denial of basic civil liberties. One such example of cruelty under the Francoist regime was that towards women. If a woman did not wish to confine herself to the responsibility of raising a family, she was subsequently marked as “other” and any respectability that was once hers would be stripped away (Sieburth 149-150). Those women who suffered most under Franco’s rule were, unsurprisingly, Republican women. These individuals, left vulnerable in a postwar Spain, faced a nauseating amount of violence: from forcefully having their heads shaven and paraded around town, to being shamed for their lack of marriage and a family, these were all things that were endured by those deemed not respectable enough to join the Seccion Femenina (Sieburth 18, 150).

Despite Franco ruling with an iron fist for decades on end, political opposition still seeped through and made its presence very much known. Although the dictator was aware of the growing negativity surrounding him, the gravity of the situation failed to sink in until an oppositionary movement claimed the life of his right hand man. In 1973, an extreme left-wing terrorist group known as the ETA was thrust into the public eye after they successfully carried out the assassination of Luis Carrero Blanco, Franco’s chosen successor (Aizpeolea). This assassination orchestrated by the Basque separatist organization prompted a swift and severe punishment from the head of the state himself. Two years later in September of 1975, Franco ordered for the three terrorists involved to be put to death—marking the country’s last use of capital punishment following nation wide protests (“Three Spanish leftists sentenced to death”. However, it seemed as if not all hope was completely lost as prior to the death of Carrero Blanco, Franco had been nurturing an unlikely relationship with a certain royal family member who he
would eventually deem worthy enough to step up to the challenge of ruling over the country in place of his first choice.

1.5 The Need for a Successor to the Francoist Regime and the rise of King Juan Carlos I

Before the untimely demise of his right-hand man, Franco was notably reluctant in naming a successor. Be that as it may, it seemed the dictator was at least somewhat aware that he would eventually have to make a choice in who would succeed him upon his passing. Early on in his rule, Franco began to entertain the idea of allowing the displaced Spanish royal family a coveted spot back in the governing sphere. In 1947, Franco signed the Law of Succession which re-established the monarchy and in turn, piqued the interest of Don Juan de Borbón, son of exiled King Alfonso XIII (Powell 1, 10). In an effort to get in good relations with the Caudillo and perhaps secure his own succession to the throne, Don Juan promptly reached out to the dictator in order to come to an agreement. To his disappointment, however, it soon became clear that Juan Carlos, Don Juan’s son, was the one that was being groomed to become eventual King of Spain (Powell 26).

By taking the young prince under his wing, Francisco Franco had already begun planning for how well he could manipulate his potential successor into carrying on his legacy for years to come. From keeping a watchful eye on him to encouraging Juan Carlos to socialize with the ordinary Spanish people, Franco was doing everything in his power to ensure a mutual understanding of trust (Powell 21, 28). It was after the prince would publicly state his willingness to uphold the principles of Franco’s regime, that the latter’s confidence in him was sound enough to warrant an official nomination to become the king of Spain (Powell 38-9).

While it may have seemed obvious to the Caudillo that Juan Carlos would stop at nothing to enforce his authoritarian views, it was a completely different story behind closed doors. The
future king knew that when he rose to power, he would have to carefully ease his country into a modernized government, perhaps even a democratic monarchy (Powell 44). However, this doesn’t go to say that the young prince was completely free of anxiety in how to effectively bring about change. When Francisco Franco passed away in November of 1975, Juan Carlos officially became King Juan Carlos I of Spain, being sworn in in front of the Cortes, or Spanish Parliament, just a week later (Powell 81). His proclamation speech was rife with inclusive language appealing to those of broad political beliefs as well as the assurance that with his coronation, a “new phase of Spanish history” lay ahead of them (Powell 81). It was abundantly clear that the new monarch was doing his best to not step on any toes and acknowledge the need for improvements. With that in mind, the few remaining Francoist politicians in office surely could not have foreseen the next course of action of the brand-new ruler of Spain.

With a growing awareness of the need for democratic change within the country, King Juan Carlos began moving swiftly to do just that. As any newly elected king would, he began with a tour of a country and as self-aware as he was, he chose Catalonia to be the very first stop on the list, considering the region’s less-than-ideal initial reception to him (Powell 94). In an extremely notable move for civil liberties, the Cortes passed a bill that granted more political freedom since the beginning of the Civil War (Powell 102-3). The king also moved to oust one of the last remaining Francoist-era politicians after his failed performance as prime minister and subsequent unpopularity. In response to the growing acceptance of differing political views, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español was peeking its head from behind the curtain, looking to revamp and unite with other leftist coalitions. Having made the changes within the democratic process, the hopeful king turned to the PSOE and other leftist parties for help in peacefully transitioning to a democracy.
Much to his dismay, the king still sensed a reluctance of the PSOE, in particular, to accept the monarchy (Powell 123). In order to gain their support and at the advice of his new prime minister, Adolfo Suarez, the king moved to legalize the Partido Comunista de España just in time for the 1977 general elections. Aware of the possible backlash from right-leaning politicians and the military alike, King Juan Carlos I most surely felt relief when the decision proved successful in that both the Communists and Socialists eventually accepted the Spanish monarchy for what it was (Powell 127). Once Felipe Gonzalez, the leader of the PSOE, paid the king a house visit to discuss what could be done to better support his political party, it clearly signaled an endorsement by the monarchy and all but secured their future role in Spanish politics. King Juan Carlos I was preparing Spain for a complete transition to democracy and the 1977 elections were only poised to improve his standing with the public.

1.6 The Reemergence of Spanish Democracy

When the time came for the first democratic elections in over 40 years, the people of Spain came forth with their ballots held high and proud. A total of 81.2 percent of all eligible citizens put in their vote for who could better lead their country past the awkward state of political limbo (Powell 136). Just as the king and his prime minister had hoped for, the center-left party of the Unión de Centro Democrático (UCD) walked away victorious, having won majority seats in the parliament. Despite this victory, Suarez expressed disappointment in not being able to secure even more seats, having been overshadowed by the unassuming party they had emboldened in the first place: the PSOE (Powell 136). Serving as a pleasant surprise to many and a shock to the political right, the PSOE had now officially established itself as a future force to be reckoned with.
Sure enough, the PSOE would go on to gain more and more support much to the contentment of the king and the dismay of their political adversaries. Having long since deduced that the “consolidation of democracy necessitated the presence of a moderate Socialist party”, the Spanish monarch worked extremely hard to make sure that the political party was not straying too far to one end so as to further distress the already annoyed opposition (Powell 158). Unfortunately, it seemed the annoyance proved too much for them as talks of a military coup d'état in 1981 began to be spread. Becoming more self-aware of the disgruntledness of his political adversaries, Juan Carlos I took to addressing the nation in an effort to quell the growing tension (Powell 163).

Despite this call for peace, the king’s worst nightmares came true when he heard the news of a Nationalist military lieutenant who, alongside several hundred Civil Guards had burst into a political proceeding and taken multiple hostages (Powell, 1996, 168). Swift to act, the Spanish monarch denounced any coup d'état and announced that the crown would not tolerate any attempts to interrupt the democratic process that was approved by Spanish people. There wasn’t much fallout after this insurrection which reassured the king that while many older Spaniards were nostalgic for the ways of the Franciscan regime, the likelihood of actual pushback was very slim. And of course, in an effort to keep both sides of the conflict as sedated as possible, the king would go on to emphasize that he wanted no grudge to be held against the armed forces as a whole and that what occurred in February of 1981 was an isolated incident (Powell, 1996, 173).

When the 1982 elections came around, it seemed as if most everybody already knew which party would emerge victorious. Winning by a landslide (the biggest one in Spanish electoral history, in fact) was the party on everyone’s minds: the PSOE. Felipe Gonzalez, their new leader had successfully led his fellow Socialists to victory. While initially reluctant to allow
the Socialists too much power within the politics of Spain, at this point, the king had just been
overjoyed to see the citizens of his country come to a shared understanding of what was needed
to transition to a democracy. Considering how monumental this was for Spain’s history, it’s no
surprise that some historians consider the results of this election the actual point in which Spain
successfully became a democracy.

Because he had been such a certainty in Spaniards’ lives for several decades, Franco’s
death sent shockwaves throughout the country. Emotions such as fear and anxiety were
experienced on both sides of the political spectrum as citizens were left wondering how the
young prince would fulfill his sovereign duties. The fear of the unknown was something that the
majority of Spaniards were feeling at the time, both young and old. To put it simply, people had
no way of knowing if the incoming king would rule the country with an iron fist just as his
predecessor had, a thought that seemed truly terrifying to most. Experiencing this period of
political uncertainty for himself was Gabriel García Márquez, an author who was notorious for
using the reality around him as inspiration behind his stories and literary characters. Using the
tense atmosphere in Spain as his guide, García Márquez began crafting the story of María dos
Prazeres and ultimately presented a main character who was the perfect metaphor for Spain’s
collective fear of the changes that were to come.
Chapter 2

The Character of María dos Prazeres and her Quest for True Fulfillment

Before one can be given a summary of “María dos Prazeres”, it is important to acknowledge that the story does not have a linear narrative. There are many points in the story where it is not exactly clear if occurrences written right after one another are in chronological order or not. Despite this, García Márquez establishes the months in which certain things occur as well as the years that go by which helps to gather a rough timeline of the short story. Of course, both the setting and timeline for the story are no coincidence either as they are choices made by the author to further establish the protagonist as a parallel to Spain’s history. The exact connections made will be further analyzed in chapter three.

María dos Prazeres is introduced to the reader as a lively and eccentric old woman who, from the very beginning is depicted as hyper aware of her appearance, doing everything she can in order to feel beautiful and desirable to the men around her. It is revealed that María is not just any other elderly Spanish woman but is actually an immigrant from Brazil whose mulatta identity and faint Portuguese cadence are notable markers of hers. The term “mulatto” (female: mulatto) is a dated and offensive term used to indicate a person who has both Black and white ancestors, typically being the offspring of one Black parent and one white parent (“Mulatto Definition & Meaning”). For García Márquez to utilize this as part of her defining characteristics is a noteworthy decision and will be further analyzed in chapter four.

In the opening scene, we see María scramble to make herself look presentable before opening the door for a visitor, noting that she barely even had time to place a rather suggestive red rose behind her ear (García Márquez 90). She is even more self-conscious about her appearance when she opens the door and finds that the weathered looking salesman she expected...
is actually a meek young man, adding an additional feeling of shame about her disheveled look. It is after this abrupt surprise that we learn that María used to be a woman of the night, having serviced many men over the course of her life but rarely ever feeling ashamed due to her appearance (García Márquez 90). This first impression that we get of María dos Prazeres is that despite her efforts to feel young and beautiful, her advanced age is causing her to endure feelings of embarrassment and become brutally self aware that she is no longer the attractive sex worker she once was so many years ago.

María dos Prazeres is so ashamed of her appearance, in fact, that she briefly debates telling the young man to delay his entrance and allow her more time to freshen up and properly receive him into her home (García Márquez 90). However, she ultimately decides against this and begrudgingly welcomes him inside her outlandishly decorated apartment. The reason for the man’s home visit is revealed- after suffering from a dream where she envisions her own death, María is convinced that she will soon depart from this world and leave the beloved region of Catalonia thus prompting her to establish burial plans with a local undertaker (García Márquez 90). This leaves the young salesman quite bewildered, as María seems to have quite the vibrant persona: characterized by her fiery golden eyes and striking mulatto appearance. He becomes so confused, in fact, that he apologizes for mistakenly entering the wrong house, to which she responds: “Ojalá, pero la muerte no se equivoca” (García Márquez 92). María’s delivery of this line emphasizes her resignation about where her life is headed, feeling adamant that it will only be a matter of time before death knocks on her door to claim her soul.

The pair begin to discuss María’s funeral plans, and her recalling of the disastrous effects by the October downpours on the local graves in her native country of Brazil leaves her quite shaken as she reiterates her wish to not be buried anywhere where the rain will disturb her. A
certain cemetery by the name of Montjuich catches María’s eye as she remembers attending the burial of one Buenaventura Durruti and two other Anarchists whose lives had been claimed by the Civil War (García Márquez 92). Her wish to be buried by these fallen men establishes her as someone who was heavily involved in leftist politics, a fact that she doesn’t at all try to hide. Interestingly enough, the only reason why María is able to determine which graves belong to her friends is because someone dutifully writes their names down in the correct order using varying materials from lipstick to nail polish (García Márquez 92). Although she is unfortunately not able to secure a spot in that same cemetery, María still insists that she’s buried somewhere where she won’t be drowned, preferably underneath the shade of a summer tree and that her body not be moved after a few years to be discarded like trash.

The salesman soon comes to realize just how peculiar María is when her dog enters her apartment and begins to cry after his bad behavior elicits a stern reprimand in Portuguese from his owner (García Márquez 94). His incredulous response to the dog bursting in tears is unremarkable to María as she insists that Noi and all other dogs can do anything they’re told. We soon find out that the dog has not been trained to cry for nothing but rather, specifically to cry over María’s grave, so as to ensure that someone will be there to mourn her when she dies. This instance, coupled with her unfulfilled desire to be buried next to her friends’ graves, demonstrates María’s biggest fears which are dying alone and having nobody to mourn her when she has passed on.

It is revealed that María visits the resting place of Durruti and the two other Anarchists every single Sunday to pay her respects in the form of rewriting their names on their unmarked tombstones. Not only that but María uses her prized beauty supplies such as red lipstick, nail polish and even an eyebrow pencil to fill in the names that are being silenced (García Márquez 24).
Although they are always erased by the next morning, her desire to keep her friends’ memories alive never falters.

At this point in the story, an unknown amount of time passes and it is now the end of September and our protagonist encounters a man from her past known as the Count of Cardona (García Márquez 98). Upon the Count’s exclamation that he finds her more attractive now than when she was in her fifties, it is a clear indication that they have known each other for quite some time now. Following their reunion, they establish a routine where the Count visits her apartment from fall to spring and wanting to keep their love affair a secret, he always makes sure to park his distinguished automobile far away so that no one will recognize him (García Márquez 96).

After reconnecting with the Count, a year passes and it is now the next autumn. María’s fear surrounding her death only deepens as she comes to the conclusion that her time is rapidly approaching. Christmas time makes for a wonderful setting for the protagonist’s anxieties to come to a head and for her to suffer from her most vivid premonition of death yet. While reminiscing on the familiar tension from both the holiday crowds and the Anarchists storming the streets so long ago, María wakes up in a feverish sweat. After remembering the brutal slaying of a student who had dared to exclaim “Visca Catalunya Lliure”, dread sinks in and María begins to worry that everything around her is dying, herself included (García Márquez 100). Despite this pit of fear in her stomach, María resumes her meetings with the Count of Cardona once spring of the next year comes along. More details of their relationship are explored as it is revealed that the Count had saved her from an unsavory fate with the brothel she had been working at her entire adult life. Their somewhat odd friendship is severed that night, however, when they are both sitting in her kitchen and news of an execution approved by the dictator Francisco Franco is
announced (García Márquez 102). The Caudillo had the final say in ordering the execution of three Basque separatists, much to the Count’s delight and María’s horror. The former revels in this decision, applauding Franco as a just man, to which María snaps back and says that if she were to poison the food he’s about to eat, she would also be a “puta justa” (García Márquez 102). Understanding the message, the Count swiftly leaves her house and they never speak again.

In all her anxiety surrounding her seemingly impending death, María dos Prazeres sets off to make her routine visit to the cemetery and she runs into a little girl in her building’s escalator. “¿Te gustan los perros?” she asks the little girl, and to her pleasure, the girl enthusiastically answers “Me encantan” (García Márquez 103). We see then that María has established who will be Noi’s next caretaker, as she asks the young one to look after him if anything were to ever happen to her. Not only does the girl promise to take care of Noi and lead him to the cemetery to mourn but she also feels as if the little girl will naturally mourn her as well, fulfilling her dream of having someone by her side in the afterlife. However, despite her efforts in arranging how life will carry on after her passing, the book notes that the decision was unfortunately out of her hands at that point (García Márquez 103). Despite feeling genuine hope for having an actual human being mourn her passing, María’s dream is ultimately not completed. What got in the way of this dream was not old age or the delay of death but rather, life itself.

A bitter cold afternoon in November is when everything comes to a head as María is leaving the cemetery. After having just written the names out on the three tombstones, she is caught in a torrential downpour, alongside her beloved canine companion. To her dismay, nobody is paying attention to her pleas for a ride, that is, until a young and handsome curly-haired man slows to a stop and offers her his help (García Márquez 104-5). Despite Maria telling him that he’d be traveling quite a ways to her destination, he gladly accepts her as his
passenger and they take off. María, feeling intimidated by riding in such a luxurious and expensive car, makes a comment comparing the automobile to a transatlantic boat (García Márquez 104). In his response, the young driver states that the car they are traveling in is not actually his, a confession that does not quite surprise the now-soaked María (García Márquez 105).

Although they don’t speak for the rest of the ride, it does not stop the both of them from examining the other, a fact that makes María feel even more insecure about her soaked appearance and regret wearing the “deplorable abrigo de otoño” that she had not thought to change out of earlier that day. Despite her insistence that he only bring her as close as he can, he assures her that bringing her right to her door is no problem at all, even going so far as to park on the curb so as to avoid her getting anymore wet (García Márquez 105). As María exits the car, the driver looks at her with a longing gaze and asks if he should follow her inside, a request that certainly suggests that the young man is sexually attracted to his departing passenger. Calling his bluff, the elderly woman scoffs at his suggestion and asks him not to take her for the fool he might think she is. What follows is a tense stand-off between the two where he insists that he meant no harm and never meant to laugh at anybody, much less a woman like her (García Márquez 106). Unsure of how to react and skeptical of the stranger’s kindness towards her, María simply advises him to do whatever he wants, seemingly deciding at this point that the conversation is not worth whatever hassle will presumably follow.

María dos Prazeres disembarks from the vehicle, not expecting anything else to happen, much less two more footsteps exiting the car and following her to her door. It is at this moment that María comes to the realization that she had seriously misinterpreted the meaning of her dream and nothing is as it once seemed (García Márquez 106). Thus ends the short story of
María dos Prazeres. Gabriel García Márquez’s decision to make the story have such an open ending is incredibly intentional and allows for the reader to use their imagination to fill in the gaps. Perhaps the young man is a metaphor for Death himself who is trying to comfort and reassure María that passing over will not be as lonely as it may seem. Or maybe her debilitating fear of death is actually a representation of the fear that Spain had in the midst of their political transition? The following chapters of this thesis will offer my own interpretation on this ending as well as what each character represents and how they contribute to the various political and social metaphors found within the short story.
María dos Prazeres as a Metaphor

The incredibly riveting thing about the writing style of Gabriel García Márquez is that he was very well known for using the reality of the world around him to influence his literary works. As a matter of fact, in an interview with a close friend of his, García Márquez himself stated that every single line from his books are based in reality, no matter how outlandish they may seem (Mendoza & García Márquez 36). There are two main real-life phenomenons that are hidden in the character arc of María dos Prazeres: Spain’s transition to democracy and the inevitable deterioration of a woman’s self-image as she ages. Having written part of this short story in Barcelona during the final years of Franco’s regime, the political symbolism is inserted into nearly every page of the story. And as someone who was no stranger to writing about the effects of the patriarchy on modern women, (López-Mejía 140) it is clear that García Márquez was carefully crafting a second metaphor alongside the primary one. By building both metaphors around the final image of María hesitating to open her apartment door and embrace a new beginning, this short story delivers a completely different meaning based on which one metaphor is analyzed.

3.1 The Political Importance

Even at first glance, it is quite easy to see the abundance of political symbolism within the storytelling of “María dos Prazeres”. Important to note, despite the popularity of the genre at the time and García Márquez’s outspoken leftist beliefs, he was adamant in his refusal to write committed literature, that is, literature that pushes a certain political ideology (Mendoza & García Márquez 59). The result of this is a main character who shows variety in the historical figures and political parties that she represents within the confines of the story. As will soon be
discussed, María dos Prazeres acts as a symbol for both the good and bad during Spain’s era of societal friction.

3.2 Chronicle of a Death Foretold: Fear of death or something else more daunting?

The main theme of the short story and subsequently the most prevalent political metaphor is María’s debilitating fear of death and what will become of her once she dies. This same fear that María has of dying is akin to the same fear that Spain had when it came time to pick up the pieces after Francisco Franco’s death and eventually transition to a democracy (Powell 123). Even prior to the Caudillo’s death, the fear of what to come following his passing instilled dread within Spaniards of all political ideologies (Moss 324). Nobody knew whether Franco’s death would trigger a revolution for radicals on both sides or if everything would seamlessly transition into a monarchy led by the succeeding king. It was the fear of the unknown that had the most discernible grip on people’s spirits and it affected everyone – even fictional characters.

María’s fear can also be seen as an analogy for the apprehension felt by the PSOE when King Juan Carlos I ascended to the throne. María herself directly alludes to this general sense of societal disruption after waking up from a night terror about the persecution of her Anarchist group and lamenting that it feels like “everything” is dying with her (García Márquez 100). In order to stave off this fear, we see María harnessing her energy into her physical appearance. In fact, that unassuming red rose in the very first sentence of the story is actually the symbol for the Socialist party so María’s insistence to present herself with it has the same intentions as the resilience that the Spanish Socialists of the time had to exhibit during this period of uncertainty.

Just as mentioned, María’s fear is not confined to those who share her political beliefs but all sides of the political compass, as well. As we are aware, Franco was worried that his named successor, then-prince Juan Carlos, would not be able to successfully enforce his authoritarian
policies and eventually let all reminders of his government fade away into nothingness. One could say that his fear of death and the potential for a botched succession plagued his mind much in the same way that dying terrified María. Much like Franco’s fear that his legacy would die off, our protagonist is considerably afraid of having nobody left to grieve over her passing. Fear was a prevalent emotion throughout this time period of Spain and the author’s choice to have María encompass all aspects of it is a clear intention for making this story rife with political metaphors.

Both Francisco Franco and María dos Prazeres engaged in activities that in some way helped to quell their fears of death and what was to follow once they ceased to exist. María’s unique approach is seen in the training of her dog, Noi, to cry over her grave on a regular basis. This preventative action can directly be compared to Franco making Prince Juan Carlos pledge loyalty to both him and the principles of the Nationalist government (Powell 44). Both of these acts served as ways to delay the feelings of anxiety surrounding what was to come.

Another layer to this metaphor is that the word “Noi” is a direct translation for the Catalan term for boy (Carme Picallo 293). This undeniable metaphor for the ability to shape and mold men’s actions is not lost on the audience, being one of the more forthright literary devices set up by García Márquez. So, when María successfully demonstrates how easy it is to train Noi and all dogs in general, she is actually alluding to how easy it is to manipulate men into doing what is wanted of them. In a political context, Franco did everything he could to influence Juan Carlos’ thinking so that he would follow in his footsteps, treating him as Spain’s very own Noi. However, one stark contrast is that while María dos Prazeres was triumphant in getting at least one warm body to mourn her passing, the late Spanish dictator did not fare as well in his goal.

3.3 Political Activism with the Anarcho-syndicalists
Highlighting the anarchism in Catalonia at the time of the Civil War was an important political literary device used by the author as the short story clearly describes María as someone who wasn’t afraid to honor her fallen Anarchist friends. María, like so many other leftist women mourning the loss of their male companions, is left mourning those who Francoist society will otherwise not recognize and is seemingly doomed to be “forever isolated in a pain that the wider society refused to understand, much less share” (Sieburth 159). In a striking act of loyalty, María dos Prazeres refuses to let her friends’ tombstones go unmarked and she never misses the opportunity to give her loved ones their humanity back in a world that wants them gone. Having to work under the darkness of night and rely on the carelessness of the night guard, María outright refuses to neglect the man who once served as leader of the Anarchists a proper resting place. Despite losing her friends to a society that refused to acknowledge their existence, María actively rebels against the suppression and dutifully marks their names on their gravestones over and over, even when they’re always erased the very next morning.

María’s loyalty to the anarchism ideology proves so strong in fact, that she ends a long-lasting friendship over comments made about the execution of one of her own. After a routine visit with the Count of Cardona ends in him praising the Caudillo’s decision to end the lives of three political prisoners, María dos Prazeres is extremely distraught and her feelings of rage boil over in a fierce display of protection for the ones she loves. Although they are mentioned very briefly, these three executed prisoners are the book’s most intentional efforts to establish the fact that María is still living under the oppression of the Franciscan regime. In introducing these characters, García Márquez is making a clear reference to the last known executions during the Franciscan era when three Basque nationalists were killed following their involvement in an assassination plot (“Three Spanish leftists sentenced to death” 1). The Count’s
approval of this decision and María’s horror is the author’s way of showing us just where her heart lies and how firmly she stands with the Anarchists. This strict severance of ties with the Count is not only a confirmation of where she stands politically, but also symbolizes María cutting her ties with the past and electing to move forward past this trauma.

Another interesting point that must be mentioned is that María and the Count seem to have a mutually beneficial, albeit odd type of relationship that the two both acknowledge is quite strange (García Márquez 101). As stated before, the Count had rescued María from an unsavory situation with her old brothel and was able to give her a home where she could feel safe. Very similarly, Franco’s re-establishment of the monarchy in 1947 allowed for the exiled royal family to be welcomed back into Spanish society (Powell 10). Much like María and the Count, Franco and Juan Carlos I had an odd relationship as well, one that the latter never truly got a grasp on whether or not it was genuine or just for the sake of political stability.

Returning to the topic of her fallen Anarchist brethren, the same cemetery where they were laid to rest was the same one where María wished to be buried as well, so that she may forever lie by her beloved friends who left too soon. When she is told that this won’t be possible, a request that María absolutely refuses to rescind is a grave that would keep her away from the rain, her fear stemming from the downpours of October. While it may seem like a small detail at first, the aversion that María has to the rain has a much deeper meaning. These so-called “downpours of October” are actually a literary device used to symbolize the bloodshed drawn during the October Revolution of 1934. Gabriel García Márquez has María recall this awful rainstorm from a childhood experience in her native country but it is clear that it still heavily affects her. If she were to have dutifully taken after her fallen comrades, it is likely that Maria would have been alongside the militia and few armed women during the battles of that
revolution. While one must assume the amount of suffering and violence María would have seen while fighting in the leftist ranks, the imagery that the author presents certainly makes it easier to envision.

3.4 Political Changes on the Horizon

As the climax of the story approaches, it is noticeable that each aspect of the short story symbolizes a political counterpart applicable to the Spanish transition to democracy. When María dos Prazeres has the encounter with the little girl in her building elevator and asks her if she likes dogs, she is symbolizing Francisco Franco on his deathbed asking the soon-to-be king if he is ready to wield the ultimate power in influencing those around him and become the leader of Spain. A series of realizations dawn on both María and Franco seemingly at the same time, however. Although María is content with the little girl’s response, she doesn’t realize that this dream of hers will not come true, not because of old age or the fear of death, but because of life itself. Just as María’s dream of having someone to mourn her death is taken from her, so is Franco’s trust in his successor as the young prince’s true intentions surfaced.

Both of their dreams ultimately fail to see the light of day simply because the element of life gets in their way. The story’s open ending leads the reader to questions whether or not María died or is rather, embracing a new beginning. If we are to expand upon the notion that María’s fear of death is the same as Franco’s fear of his legacy faltering, then we can say that she has died with the Franciscan regime and that new beginning that awaits behind the closed door is democracy itself. Evidence for María’s apparent death symbolizing the death of Franquismo exists in the setting of the last scene. The ending takes place a few months after the execution of the three political prisoners in the year of 1975. It is made especially clear that the month is
November and thus we can conclude that María dos Prazeres meets her maker in November of 1975, the same time period that Franco himself passed away.

In an ideal world, everyone in Spain would have been wonderfully receptive to the idea of democracy making its return after spending the past thirty six years suspended in practice. And in María dos Prazeres’ ideal world, she would have been able to plan all aspects of her funeral with no restriction whatsoever. However, as you can expect, we will soon see that that was not the case in either context. As already stated, María was unable to secure a final resting spot in the coveted cemetery of Montjuich, where she would have been accompanying her beloved Durruti. This less than ideal situation forces María to come to terms that try as she might, she cannot guarantee herself a perfect funeral. This instance symbolizes the same frustration felt by King Juan Carlos I when despite thinking that democracy was perfectly poised to happen at the turn of the new decade, the unthinkable happens. The hostility from the politically right military in anticipation of the PSOE victory in the elections of 1982 struck fear into the heart of King Juan Carlos I and rightfully so. Similar to María’s disappointment that her funeral won’t be to her liking, the Spanish monarch comes to terms with the fact that Spain’s transition to democracy would have its falters as well. Despite the far-from-perfect transition to democracy and less than ideal funeral plans, both the king and María dos Prazeres would come to realize, while their journey may have faltered from the path at times, there was still a light at the end of the tunnel that had yet to be reached.

After one of her dutiful visits to the cemetery on a chilly November afternoon, María gets caught in the rain, an action that gravely upsets her for reasons already discussed. Although the rain is not that of an “October downpour”, the November rain still serves as a trigger for María because it symbolizes political discord and bloodshed. While not exactly as violent as the events
of the 1934 Revolution, the failed military insurrection of 1981 could serve as the imagery for
the political instability that affects María as she’s leaving the cemetery. It must be noted,
however, that Gabriel García Márquez wrote “María dos Prazeres” in 1979 and very well did not
have prior knowledge of the military uprising. That being said, there was a general knowledge of
terrorist groups that aimed to destabilize the new constitution and provoke the military into an
insurrection type event at the time (Powell 157). Because of this, the political context is most
definitely prevalent within her reaction to the rainfall and the message it conveys.

3.5 A Final Fateful Encounter

After finding herself desperately trying to flag down a ride, María is eventually noticed
by a kind-hearted stranger who bears a striking resemblance to King Juan Carlos. Interestingly
enough, the Spanish monarch had actually been known for his “fair curly hair that (ironically) all
everly women simply adore”. (Powell 21-22). When the handsome stranger nears María dos
Prazeres, he brushes off her comments that she is traveling quite far to her destination and opts to
not only take her all the way to her house but assist her in ways that weren’t initially required of
him, like parking on the curb to avoid her feet getting wet. Because of his physical description
and the additional measures to make her feel comfortable, one can make the argument that the
stranger symbolizes King Juan Carlos I and María symbolizes the PSOE, reluctant at first but
soon welcoming of his presence.

Another piece of evidence pointing to García Márquez’s intention of modeling the
mysterious driver after the king is that when the driver first welcomes her into his car, he states
that the vehicle is not actually his. As described in the story, the automobile he is driving is
reminiscent of a limousine, dipped in silver with automatic doors (García Márquez 104). The
stranger’s shy demeanor along with his calloused hands serves as a dead giveaway that he is not
the true owner of the car. Just as the young man is in possession of something that is clearly not
his, the similarities between him and the newly sworn in king are striking. King Juan Carlos I
was forced to initially accept the policies and principles of Franco’s government despite never
actually agreeing with them. Similar to the young man’s insistence in driving María home, the
Spanish monarch fully acknowledges the faults within the system that he intends to remedy and
successfully bring Spain to the destination of democracy.

After taking in the tense atmosphere inside the car, María suddenly remembers that she is
wearing an autumn coat that she forgot to take off, something she expresses outward
disappointment and shame towards. The correlation between the season of autumn and Franco
can clearly be stated here, not only because that was when he took his last breaths but also
because the author used this season to convey the repression of various dictators. This exemplary
allegory for the remaining Francoist supporters within the country encapsulates Spain’s desperate
desire to get rid of any residual effects from the Franciscan regime. As they’re finally
approaching her apartment by the end of the story, María dos Prazeres is caught off guard by the
driver’s request to accompany her inside. Her hesitancy and calling of his bluff is another
reference to the same reluctance that the PSOE had towards the king. What follows is a
will-they-won’t-they standoff and it is clear to see that María acts as a figure of speech for Spain
when the country first began to taunt the idea of democracy. Upon agreeing to allow him into her
home, María has accepted that she is still desirable despite her advanced age- thus recuperating
her sexuality and symbolizing the union of democracy that Spain had been so patiently waiting
for.

Ultimately, both María and Spain agree to this strange but oddly comforting presence into
their space, with the enigmatic stranger being physically welcomed into her home and
democracy successfully finding a home within the country of Spain. Therefore, the comparison can be made with the fear of death bringing forth an unexpected feeling of new beginnings and the successful transition of power following Francisco Franco’s own passing. After all, death can also be seen as the passing from one realm to the other, much like succeeding governments do following an election that has gone in their favor.

In true Gabriel García Márquez fashion, not everything is as it seems as one more discovery is yet to be made about this mysterious driver. His character serves as not only a metaphor for the rising Spanish King but also the physical manifestation of Death itself, María dos Prazeres’ biggest fear. To begin, our protagonist is vehemently afraid of aging as she worries of her own appearance and how society has already started treating her differently. Therefore, Death, or the stranger in this case, presents itself as a handsome, albeit rugged, young man who is respectful to elderly women such as herself. This clear antithesis to what María thought Death would look like leads her to dismiss the possibility that she is unknowingly being led to her death, that is until he proposes the idea of coming into her home and his true identity finally dawns on her. But is it really Death that is leading her away or perhaps someone else that would be the last person María would expect to turn up?

That is the beauty in the open ending of García Márquez’s short story as this sole character could symbolize a multitude of things, equally all as integral to the unraveling of the story’s intent. Whether it was his kindness towards her or perhaps the sexual tension at the peak of their encounter, these signs point to the man being a representation of Buenaventura Durruti himself, the only man that María had ever loved. The state of his laborer hands is the biggest piece of evidence in this comparison as well as his statement that the luxurious vehicle he is driving is not his. Durruti, the Anarchist revolutionary that he was, would most likely not have
been able to get his hands on such an expensive car, thus prompting his confession to María. For Durruti to not only come back into María’s life but also be willing to guide her into her new beginnings, it serves as a heartwarming ending that has María as shocked as the readers are. It seems as if he has heard her cries of longing for him and the wish to not die alone and like an angel from above, he has arrived to grant her one wish, even if it is in a form that she did not expect at all.

For being a character introduced at the end of the short story, this mysterious stranger surely made his impression on both María and the readers. His character is an amalgamation of several metaphors, ranging from a young king who is hesitant to govern other his country to the familiar presence of a lost loved one. One thing for certain, however, the existence of his character serves as a way for María dos Prazeres to sever ties with her past. Whether he is representing Spain’s transition to democracy or something as simple as death, María makes the conscious decision to open that door at the end of the story and leave her past behind. Although it’s not ever stated, her apparent death aligns with that of Francisco Franco and a new beginning is ushered in for both María and the country of Spain.

Thus concludes the extensive list of political metaphors found within the story of María dos Prazeres. Throughout her journey of self-discovery and slow realization that her premonition wasn’t all it seemed, we see María become a metaphorical vessel for the fear of political change, mourning life lost from civil war and unwavering political activism. Gabriel García Márquez’s choice in protagonist for this story is thought-provoking in and of itself since she encompasses so many marginalized characteristics that wouldn’t grant her so much as a second glance like her old age, sex worker and outspoken leftist. In the end, however, not even all these undesirable traits could hold her back from doing her part in helping usher in a new era for Spain.
Chapter 4

The Role of María’s Marginalized Identities

Exemplified by her open discussion about her sexual past, María dos Prazeres is a powerful female character who exerts strong will, loyalty and sexual liberty. So, it may not be surprising to infer that her story is not only a metaphor for Spain’s political triumph but also for an older woman’s journey to self-acceptance and self-love. Yet again, like the political metaphor already discussed, almost every aspect of María’s story pertains to the commentary that the author makes on how elderly women equate their body image to their self-worth (Slevin 1003). Adding to the challenge, her key characteristics like her mixed race, past in sex work and political activism all help propel her as an unlikely protagonist. María’s redemption arc in this secondary metaphor is yet again, not the fear of death but rather the gender-specific fear of losing male attention after becoming a certain age (Slevin 1015). By using gender stereotypes of society as well as the forced gender norms of Francoist Spain, García Márquez heavily comments on the emotions of aged women once they realize they are no longer deemed consumable for society.

4.1 The Inherent Struggle that Accompanies Aging Female Bodies

While “María dos Prazeres” is moreso a short story serving as a literary device for Spain’s transition to democracy, it is also a metaphor for how a woman’s self worth is directly tied to her appearance and sexual desireability. In older women, especially, societal pressure to avoid the effects of aging is exacerbated by the notion that their bodies no longer fit society’s “feminine ideal” (Slevin 1006). This stigmatization of their aged bodies results in older women feeling more concerned about their outward appearance and putting in more effort to look beautiful not only for themselves but for society as well. As they feel themselves slipping away from society’s acknowledgement, the feelings of distraught at no longer being able to yield male
attention manifest themselves in the older women population (Stalp et al. 341). Although she is a fictional character, María is not safe from these same insecurities regarding her age as she is guilty of pandering to society’s expectations of female beauty as well. Her low self-esteem about her aged appearance is also impacted by her history in sex work, where she was accustomed to being seen as more sexually appealing in her younger years and by a great number of men.

If we look at the story through this specific metaphorical lens, we can see that María is fearful of not only death but the changes of her body that accompany it. In fact, the fear of death in this analysis symbolizes the fear in elderly women that without male gratification, society deems them no longer valuable and their lives very well are not worth living. In the very beginning of the story, María hastily gets ready to receive whoever is at her door with her hair-rollers still in place and a red rose behind her ear (García Márquez 90). Historically, the red rose has been seen as a symbol for love and passion, so for María to frame her face with this specific flower speaks to her wish of still being seen as a seductive figure. Her self-consciousness gets the better of her when the visiting salesman asks her what she does for a living and her response is “Soy puta, hijo. ¿O es que ya no se me nota?” (García Márquez 95). The young man is rightfully embarrassed and is quickly ushered out the door by María, who despite laughing this interaction off soon begins to worry about her death, symbolizing the manifestation of her insecurities as a fear that her life will soon end.

An example of how much thought María puts into her appearance and the restoration of her sexuality is when she fills in the names of the unmarked graves at Montjuich with several items from her beauty kit. The deliberate choice of García Márquez to have María pining for Durruti and the other fallen Anarchists with symbols of her sexuality is incredibly sentimental, as she deeply wishes to feel their love once more. This imagery also conveys just how desperate
María is to be romantically involved with another man once again, as her heart is bursting at the seams with nostalgia (García Márquez 97). Because this nostalgia is such an intense feeling as well, it can be said that not only is María mourning the loss of Durruti but also the loss of her youth and beauty. To directly combat this, her use of beauty supplies to write on tombstones in public can be seen as her way to reclaim public space and once again be acknowledged as a woman deserving of male attention (Stalp et al. 341). Her using the items from her beauty kit is no surface-level matter because not only does it symbolize her repressed sexuality but it is another call to how elderly women are pressured to change their appearance through makeup and make themselves more pleasing to society.

Because of María dos Prazeres’ negative view of her aged body, it is not at all surprising that she believes she is being laughed at when the handsome stranger who brings her home at the end of the story makes a sexual advancement towards her. Her hesitancy to believe him to be sincere is due to the general subversive attitude that younger men have towards women as they age (Stalp et al. 340). Since men in general had stopped deeming her worthy due to her lack of sexual appeal, it is completely understandable that María refuses to believe a young, handsome man is being genuine with her. She believes this despite his acts of kindness, such as being willing to take her all the way to the destination despite it being quite far. Regardless, María’s suspicion at this unexpected tenderness speaks to the cycle of discrimination faced by elderly women, since society’s treatment of them declines as their age increases.

In this instance, María’s fear of death somewhat remains that since María’s self-worth is so dependent on what a man thinks of her that if she goes any longer without male attention, she feels as if she might die. Both of these fears are turned completely on their heads by the end of the story when the kind stranger outwardly expresses his sexual desire for her. Despite her initial
reluctance to let him inside, we see her apprehension slowly dissipate once he expresses his genuine feelings. Feeling so traumatized by the way that society no longer sees her a “true” woman, María leaves the choice up to him to see what he chooses. Once she hears him exit his vehicle and follow her inside, this serves as confirmation that she never fully lost her sexual desireability. The moment that María realizes that she is still considered attractive and society has not completely counted her out yet, this fear of hers completely goes away. Gleefully, the elderly woman takes this as a new lease on life and ends the story with a reclamation of her sexuality.

Although her fear of losing societal status demonstrated through male acceptance due to her advanced age is the main aspect to this specific story arc of María’s, it is also important to discuss other parts of her identity. While they do not necessarily add evidence to this second possible metaphor, they exist and add to the story in a truly remarkable way. Gabriel García Márquez’s careful selection of identifying factors can all be seen as societal undesirables but they only add to María’s personality and make her redemption arc all the more prevailing.

4.2 María dos Prazeres’ Involvement in Sex Work and Bodily Oppression

As a woman of the night, María has sold her body every night that she takes a stranger to bed, allowing them to take control and govern her body- physically and metaphorically. And of course, the author’s choice to make her a sex worker symbolizes how her body was under strict control of the Franciscan regime for upwards of fifty years, no longer being given the luxury to engage in the free love doctrine that she and other Anarchists of her time enjoyed so much. While the exact details of how decades of sex work affected her overall are not presented to us, we can still conclude that María had her fair share of bad experiences while in the line of work. A rather tragic part to María’s story is when she reveals that after being sold by her mother at
fourteen years old, she was passed onto a Turkish soldier who proceeded to rape and leave her in Spain with no money or belongings (García Márquez 101). Unfortunately, this devious act of violence against María is not the last, and serves as a painful reminder that trauma will have a considerable presence for the rest of her life.

García Márquez uses this act of physical sexual violence for two reasons: to establish María as a character whose body is routinely disrespected and to parallel the violence against Republican women of the time. In fact, Republican women were forced into prostitution after the deaths of their husbands and brothers left them in a financially destitute situation (Sieburth 150). On the other side of the issue, were women who chose to use their body for profit on their own terms. In order to prevent individuals from doing this, laws were passed by the Fascist government aimed at banning prostitution in 1956 (Ortiz Heras 77) and purposefully left those women seeking sexual liberation without a means to support themselves. By claiming the law was acting in the best interest of all women and stating that sex work was a direct opposition to natural law itself, it served as a slap in the face to not only María dos Prazeres but all the other women who used the sale of their bodies as their main source of income.

As it might be easy to imagine, women of the night were not treated with any type of dignity or respect due to the Franciscan regime’s strict religious values. In fact, a group known as “El Patronato de protección de la mujer” would patrol the streets at night, searching for any brothels or sex workers who were compromising the moral integrity of the city (Ortiz Heras 77). Despite Franciscan society’s obvious disapproval towards her lifestyle, María dos Prazeres still takes pride in her line of work, a testament to her strong will and defiance of society’s norms. In contrast, many of the sex workers in Spain who have been in prostitution for years on end because of financial necessity do not see their occupation as significant and therefore see no true
purpose to their lives (Rodríguez Martínez 78). This major difference in pride, or lack of, surrounding their work is an interesting point of contention which I will further analyze in the personal thoughts section.

4.3 María’s Political Activism: Going against the Political Ideology of Francoist Spain

As a strong-willed elderly woman who is open with her want to feel sexually attractive, the mounting evidence that María dos Prazeres’ character went against societal norms for women during the Franciscan regime is very present. While she fervently goes against the authoritarian government’s idea for the “pure” and “virginal” unmarried women, another form of protest she takes against them is her key involvement with the three players in Barcelona’s Anarchistic scene. Most notably, María fondly remembers taking to the streets after a particularly successful revolt (García Márquez 100). While it is never explicitly stated if María was physically fighting against the Nationalist enemies, she is clearly meant to symbolize those women who went against the grain and took up arms during the fight. Frustratingly, both sides of the political revolution barred women from actively participating and confined them to the role of a passive observer (Bunk 127). Such violent acts were only reserved for the men of the war, and if any women had taken on a direct role in the fighting, they would be stripped of their femininity and no longer be considered “real” women. Rest assured, some brave women did find themselves on the battlefield but unfortunately, their intention would be rewritten to fit the notion that they were defending the traditional idea of the home and the nuclear family. In fact, the only acceptable and highlighted reason for women fighting would be for protecting their husbands or their home (Bunk 127).

One such frustrating case was that of Aida Lafuente, a sixteen year old Communist girl who took up arms and died during the October Revolution of 1934 (Bunk 133). Although the
young girl was said to be fighting because of her passion for worker’s rights, her death was used as a political pawn and promoted the belief that women could only be fighting in order to defend their family. While she was revered as an icon of the Revolution, her intentions were publicly misconstrued just to obey the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable female behavior at the time (Bunk 146). Despite her lack of a husband or family due to her young age, that didn’t stop the media from painting her as a mother to those loved ones she left behind and a virginal role model for other Republican women (Bunk 133). Her own political group could not refrain themselves from confining her to the societally palatable gender norms of the time, something that is truly disappointing in hindsight. Even so, her bravery was not all pushed aside in favor for her intact purity for the equally as rebellious Dolores Ibárruri hailed her a hero and claimed that Lafuente had even had a premonition of her own death, vaguely comparing her to Christian martyrs (Bunk 135). Sound familiar?

Posthumously dubbed the “Red Rose of October”, Aida Lafuente was fortunate enough to retain her femininity at the sacrifice of her true intentions in rising up in the October Revolution. Although her favored side did not win the Civil War, the oppression of Francisco Franco’s regime did little to quiet the stories exchanged about this brave young woman (Bunk 163). Her femininity ultimately became one of the things most discussed about her, eventually being dubbed the “Red Rose” of the revolution, which one can argue is one of the most feminine symbols to exist. Perhaps it is fitting to think that women who fought in the revolution were not seen as worthy women but the minute they could find a way to mold your story into society’s expectations, they give you a nickname with the most feminine symbol of all.

The reason why this is important to María dos Prazeres’ character is that in some ways, she serves as an antithesis to Aida all the while being more alike than one might think. For
starters, their age difference and sexual history (or lack thereof) mark the biggest differences. While María represents the weathered elderly woman who society is actively trying to push away, Aida was the perfect martyr for Republican Spain- a young and beautiful woman representing the purity and idealization of women. Because of their differences, one could also theorize that María would be quite jealous of Aida, having not only retained her femininity by dying at a young age but also of the societal attention she is still receiving to this day.

Similarities between them are, of course, their political ideology and passion for the leftist troops in the Civil War. Just like María, Aida was also bestowed a metaphorical red rose-which can be interpreted as both the symbol for the PSOE or as a general symbol of beauty and passion. Another quite interesting and coincidental similarity is their premonitions of death. As Ibárruri said, Aida had supposedly predicted her own death, just as María had (Bunk 135). Whereas it is easy to say that, in the context of female self worth, María was fearful of no longer being seen as desirable, it is not quite as easy to pinpoint the symbolism of Aida’s premonition. Regardless, this was quite the interesting coincidence that added just another layer of symbolism to the story, whether it was intentional or not.

4.4 Rejecting Traditional Gender Roles

As it is made apparent by her living in solitude with nobody by her side except for her dog, María dos Prazeres is in her twilight years without a husband or family. Her decision to remain free of any maternal responsibilities is at the behest of Francoist Spain as they were very clear in their expectation for a woman to have only one goal: look after their family (Payne 325). Her status as an unmarried, sexually promiscuous and childless woman was the trifecta of horrors for the Christian traditionalists of the time. Although she does express insecurity about her aged appearance, we never hear of María lamenting about not having kids or a husband. Be
this as it may, if I were to interpret this as an outright rejection of the housewife and mother role, I would be sorely mistaken. I say this because while María’s loyalty to the values of Francoist Spain is notably absent, her unwavering love and nostalgia for Durruti and the Anarchist lifestyle takes its place in return. Perhaps María dos Prazeres is not opposed to having children but rather only opposed to the prospect of having children that will then belong to the dictatorship plaguing her nation. To what extent is her rejection of Francoist-era gender roles a secret display of her yearning to assume that role for those she wishes to avenge? One thing is for certain, María’s refusal to be a pawn in Franco’s game marks her as a symbol of resistance in the oppressive government of her time.

As one can quickly realize, being a woman in 20th century Spain (and even in present time) was extremely frustrating. From fearing public humiliation for their political beliefs to being forced to turn to sexual exploitation just to stay alive, being a woman on the wrong side of Francisco Franco’s political radar was practically seen as a death sentence during the first decade of his government. Not to mention the fact that you could fight for and even lose your life in the name of your political beliefs and your own supporters would falsely paint you as an innocent and gender-role conforming martyr for their cause. And for the women who felt sexually liberated enough to pursue sex work as their means of making a living, they were met with societal distaste and demeaning remarks from the same men who would solicit them under the secrecy of the night.

So, for our main protagonist to be a clear representation of the women who refused to confine to restrictive gender roles in every sense makes us wonder about García Márquez’s own perception of women who dared to step outside of line. Even more, what was his intention in making her refuse to birth children that would belong to the dictatorship? While this character
never existed in real life, the author created her for a very specific reason and as every aspect of
her identity is connected to these underlying metaphors. What’s more is that these marginalized
identities of hers are used in such a unique way that was atypical of characters like her.

Despite living with a past history of sex work and rebellious activism under her belt, the
two traits that were of most negative value in that society ultimately help project her forward.
Although these aspects of her character would theoretically have society strip her of her
femininity, which is a big concern of hers, María still prevails and carries herself with a divine
feminine energy- albeit a bit quirky at times. For Gabriel García Márquez to give these
marginalized characteristics to María dos Prazeres as well as make her extremely proud of her
identity symbolizes her refusal to be silenced by a repressive society and serves as a metaphor
for how women like her would soon no longer live in fear but rather be able to enjoy a better and
more tolerant nation. However, for a foreign and non-white immigrant such as María, perhaps
the nation would still treat her as the outsider she felt she was. This will be further explored in an
upcoming section.

4.5 Identity as a Mulatta Woman and Further Exploitation

While García Márquez talked of the general idea of Latin Americans in Europe for all of
the short stories in *Doce cuentos peregrinos*, he makes a deliberate decision to further establish
María as a woman of mixed race and Brazilian heritage. In fact, she is the only character in the
collection of short stories that is not a native Spanish speaker. Although briefly mentioned, these
two specific aspects of her identity add to the social significance of her character arc. From
implementing elements of colonization and stereotypes of Latin American women within the
story to using her race as an allegory for the sexualization of black women, the author was brief
but all the more meaningful with the mentions of this aspect of her person.
We first are made privy to María’s mixed race when she’s described as a slender mulatta with the disheveled look of a “loca fugitiva de las Américas” (García Márquez 91). This sly remark and insinuation that Latin Americans are uncivilized is worthy of an eyebrow raise, to say the least. Gabriel García Márquez’s choice to include a somewhat derogatory depiction of María’s nationality is not only meant to stay true to his collection’s common theme of foreigners in Spain but also to allude to how many Europeans think of Latin America as “barbaric” and themselves as “civilized” (Bell-Villada 140). To seemingly counter this ideology, García Márquez writes María as a darker-skinned foreigner who has occupied the land of Spain for the past fifty years which, in a way, serves as a tongue-in-cheek antithesis to colonization.

To further emphasize the foreignness and rough around the edges atmosphere that surrounds María’s ethnic and national identity is her slips of Portuguese when she is considerably upset. When her dog, Noi jumps onto the kitchen table and begins to bark, María quiets him down with a sharp “Baixa d’aci!” (García Márquez 94). Her previously mentioned use of Catalan spoken with a delicate “purity” pales in comparison to this brash use of her native tongue that is seemingly only coaxed out in feelings of high emotion. This detail’s deeper meaning is that in popular culture, Latin American women have typically been portrayed as hypersexual beings with short tempers (Vargas 121), no doubt what the author was attempting to exemplify here. Because María dos Prazeres is both Brazilian and a woman of mixed race, she faces even more criticism and is pushed deeper into social stratification.

A notable example of society’s negative impression of her is shown in a rather violent sexual act against María in her youth. Women in Latin America are unfortunately predisposed to experience a certain level of violence but black women in Brazil, specifically, suffer from violence at an increased rate due to the already existing sexism and the added layer of racism that
is prevalent throughout Brazilian society (Wilson 13). To portray this, García Márquez harnesses the unfortunate reality that is the sexualization and violence against women of color and conveys that through one tragic instance in the protagonist’s life.

In the story, we are told that María dos Prazeres was sold and sent away from her home of Brazil at the young age of fourteen, by none other than her mother (García Márquez 101). At sometime during that period, María was raped by a Turkish soldier and abandoned along the coast of Spain. This immediate act of sexual violence mirrors the reality of black women in Brazil who are oftentimes “dehumanized and imagined as prostitutes” so as to justify any violence taken against them (Wilson 13). While it is not said, one can infer that this Turkish soldier dehumanized María in his mind because there is absolutely zero justification for the rape of a fourteen year old girl who was just stripped from her home country.

Because this sexual assault is noted as the first sexual interaction that María experienced, it quite perfectly parallels the fact that black women have been exploited throughout history, especially in terms of their sexuality (Salisu & Dacus 3). Although María is a person of mixed black and white race, she still suffers the same violence that black women face due to her outward appearance. Her exploitation is further emphasized when she actually turns to sex work after having such a traumatic first sexual encounter. After essentially being sex trafficked and left impoverished in a foreign country, María seemingly has no choice but to turn to the same thing that brought her so much as a means for financial stability. And just like María, the main reason for black immigrant women to begin sex work in Spain is because of the financial necessity (Rodríguez Martínez 130). However, despite the urge to solicit oneself for money, María eventually finds it to be a sexually liberating feeling that brings her pride and joy, contrary to what other people in her position have felt like.
After essentially being forced to turn to sex work and committing years of bodily service, María is deemed “demasiado usada para los gustos modernos” (García Márquez 101). Suddenly, a man dubbed the Count of Cardona suddenly takes María under his wing. The Count, who we can only assume is a white Spainiard, takes pity on the down-on-her-luck María and so begins their peculiar relationship where in exchange for miscellaneous favors, she pays him back with sex (García Márquez 101). This unequal power dynamic where a man of royal nobility shows mercy to a weathered sex worker represents the trope of a damsel in distress and also alludes to the power that white men have historically had over women of color.

4.7 Brazilian and National Pride

Despite the mostly negative portrayals of María’s racial and ethnic identity, there exists one positive element within the story as well. The most notable one is when the familiar outline of the Brazil flag propped up on a trans-Atlantic boat appears flying in the air right before María discovers she has been successful in having Noi cry on command (García Márquez 99). By having these two events in succession, García Márquez seemingly associates the feeling of personal satisfaction and nationality. What also accompanies the image of the flag is a yearning for a letter written by someone who she left behind in her home country (García Márquez 99). This deep sentiment of longing is evidence that despite having distressing memories of Brazil, she still feels love and a twinge of pride for the place she used to call home.

As she recalls the journey from Brazil to Europe, one thing in particular stands out to her which was the boat that transported her across the Atlantic ocean. She makes a reference to this boat once again when she enters the luxurious vehicle of the handsome stranger who offers to bring her home. The comment she makes is nothing to overlook, of course, as it has implications that María is reliving that experience of the harsh journey to Spain. Perhaps she did, in fact, have
an inkling that that car ride was more monumental than she could imagine or maybe it was just a unique display of her national pride.

This sense of pride is felt not just by María dos Prazeres but by the actual author of the short story. In fact, Gabriel García Márquez was a firm believer in Latinos embracing their African heritage as much as their Spaniard side. He once even said that the Caribbean coast of Colombia (where he was from) and Brazil are the closest parts of Latin America to Africa, a country whose culture he spoke highly of and acknowledged its influence on the Caribbean culture he loved so much (Mendoza & García Márquez 51). It is reasonable to conclude that this sense of pride felt by the author is what influenced not just the brief moment of longing for the motherland but also the decision to make María a Brazilian immigrant in the first place.

4.8 Life as an Outsider

Now, to what extent does this culmination of her marginalized identities make her an outsider? Was María always meant to be an outsider or had the author wished to give her a moment of redemption where she could experience the feeling of a warm welcome and embrace? Perhaps, she was never meant to be an outsider at all! These answers lie in further discussion of the author’s purpose in the character’s portrayal and intended message with the short story itself.

Gabriel García Márquez wrote our main character with the apparent intention of sculpting her as the antithesis of the ideal Spainiard at the time. But who was the ideal Spainiard? As previously mentioned, both sides of the political spectrum were responsible in waging war over the other but due to Franco’s upper hand in the Civil War, those who considered themselves conservatives were offered more protection and fair treatment. Propaganda circulated during the time of the Civil War deliberately separated the country’s citizens into two groups of people: individuals who embodied the idea of a conservative society and those who wanted nothing of
the sort and were keen on disobeying society’s orders (Bunk 10). The politically conservative, religious and patriarchy-conforming individuals of Spain had virtually nothing to worry about when it came time for societal judgment but those who were not seen as morally intact were cruelly cast aside. This rift in society heavily affected those unfortunate souls, a category that María dos Prazeres undoubtedly fell into.

As previously discussed, María wasn’t an obedient housewife or a virginally pure and uncorrupted angel but rather, a brash woman who spewed obscenities and used her body to her own discretion. María was a member of Spanish society that the upper echelon tried desperately to sweep under the rug, comprising a part of the population that many wished to turn a blind eye to. She was an outspoken political adversary and a woman who once walked the streets in all her glory. Not to mention, her status as a foreign immigrant played a major part in her character’s marginalization as well. These creative decisions were not made by accident but rather as a way for the author to paint her as an incredible outsider in the space she was occupying.

This begs the question, then, does María ever overcome her status as an outsider? Was she always meant to lurk in society’s shadows or would she eventually be welcomed into a newly (and truly) tolerant nation? Truth be told, my answer may come at a surprise to the first-time reader. As we already know, María is meant to represent the stark contrast in between the two worlds of Franciscan society but her character also serves to garner criticism of the country she inhabits. I personally believe that García Márquez wrote this character not as a criticism of Spain as a whole but of Franco’s version of how and what the country should have looked like. With this in mind, the entire purpose of María’s character, having once represented the unwanted part of society that was anxious of change as well as the condemned parts of society, is flipped on its head and she’s revealed to be the exact opposite.
Using this stance, one comes to the conclusion that María dos Prazeres was never an outsider to begin with, but rather our very own role model in a fantasy world curated just for her. Therefore, the sheer amount of her undesirable traits work to make her not someone who deserves to be shunned, but rather, a fully realized citizen who lives life by her own accord. Why else would she have felt so emboldened to venture out and publicly express every unpopular belief, behavior and emotion? Her reclaiming of these traditionally deplorable characteristics as well as her representation of the political minority in Spain finally receiving a voice in King Juan Carlos I all contribute to my theory that María was never meant to be an outsider at all. Simply put, she just had not found the right conditions to come to this realization on her own and become a fully realized, personally fulfilled protagonist.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

“María dos Prazeres” by Gabriel García Márquez is honestly one of the most profound short stories that I have ever read, made clear by the two key metaphors I outlined above. Knowing the writing style of the author, I personally wouldn’t be surprised that upon another read, you could find yet another metaphor for the protagonist’s character development. That being said, any story has its imperfections and García’s choice in how he portrays the main protagonist is certainly not free of those flaws.

In the short story, María dos Prazeres is written as a fiercely loyal and radical woman who is still mourning the loss of her male companions decades after their passing. She recalls passionate nights where they stormed the streets, calling for the rights of all oppressed workers and those who dared to go against the military powerhouse. The fact that María makes a consistent effort to visit the cemetery where her comrades are buried and give them another voice is another way that her political activism is highlighted. However, while these actions of hers are admirable, there is something truly lacking within those details: a true self-serving motivation free of male influence.

While María’s loyalty and passion for those oppressed by the Civil War is demonstrated, the root cause of these actions can be traced back to the men in her life. Her consistency and refusal to stop mourning her friends and make their presence known is admirable because she is giving them a voice but who is giving María a voice? Why does her avid political loyalty stem from the personal relationship with a man from her past and why is it such an encompassing part of her day-to-day life? What separates her loyalty to a fallen man from her loyalty to her own
well-being? Although her actions are commendable, it is painfully noticeable that they are because of a man’s influence over her as opposed to her own personal will.

Another thing that confines María to the sexist belief that a woman’s actions are only driven by the men around her is that she is not noted as engaging in any physical violence during the nights where they would stomp the streets in the name of anarchism. This is quite similar to the story of Aida Lafuente whose intentions were actively omitted from the details of her death in the October Revolution of 1934. Aida’s reason for her fighting and the violence she participated in on the day of her death is repainted in order to minimize the threat that the female warrior had on gender roles (Bunk, 2007, 135). Society’s misogynistic modification of Aida’s character is paralleled by García Márquez’s choice to have all notable actions of María be because of a man. While we know that María certainly wasn’t fighting to protect the belief of a traditional family, the lack of evidence surrounding her physical involvement within the revolution is too substantial to ignore.

5.1 Counter-Intuitive Endings to Her Character Arc

A few points of contention that I personally have with the story stemmed from my analysis of the dismissal of older women’s self-worth due to their societal value decreasing. In my analysis of this allegory, I theorized that María is not just fearful of death in the physical world but in society’s eyes as well. Her character arc begins with the constant mourning of her loss of her sexuality and she becomes increasingly mentally distressed. Towards the climax, when she is approached by this attractive stranger and offered a ride, she deliberately tries to pushes him away solely based on the assumption that because of her older age, he will not find any reason to show her human decency, much less sexual interest. Instead of having María dos Prazeres successfully overcome these feelings of insecurity and low self-worth through finding
other ways in which she holds value, García Márquez gifts the protagonist with a resolution to her character arc that is quite counterintuitive.

At the very end of the story, María is overwhelmed with emotion when she realizes that the younger man is genuinely sexually interested in her, something that she had previously thought was simply not possible. It is at this moment that she exclaims that her vision was completely wrong and that it’s only a new era that is beginning, spearheaded by the rediscovery of her sexuality. However, I personally have quite a few issues with this ending. To construct a metaphor where a protagonist conveys the heaviness that is having society calculate your worth solely based on your sex appeal and then have the resolution be, “Congrats, you still have sex appeal!” is slightly rage-inducing. To reinforce the notion that a woman’s self-worth can be changed by the opinion of a man at the drop of a hat, is inherently sexist and is my biggest point of contention with this story. With this, I personally think that García Márquez’s choice to make the female lead character’s happiness be the result of a man’s actions is the most obvious sign that this short story was written by a man for men.

Another sign that María dos Prazeres was a character curated by a man is the way that her occupation as a sex worker is written. At the very beginning when it is first introduced, it is said that María has received “a tantos hombres a cualquier hora” (García Márquez 90). To use the word “receive” when talking of sexual intercourse between a cisgendered man and cisgendered woman adds to the sexist notion that during sex, women are “giving” a part of themselves. This is also paralleled at the end of the story when María physically welcomes the stranger into her house, with the house being a symbol for her body. It is also implied by this sentence that María has had sex with any man at any point in time, which of course, can be expected of any sex worker. However, I personally see the addition of “a cualquier hora” as an unnecessary detail that
only adds to the objectification of people in the line of work and the stereotype that they are expendable and not worth any personal consideration.

When it is said that María was violently raped by an older man as a teenager, it is dismissed as quickly as it was mentioned. Her turn to sex work is presented as a completely reasonable second step and María is denied the right to any mental healing after suffering such a traumatic event. What follows is the transactional relationship with the Count of Cardona which serves as a romanticization of her line of work: an occupation that has been proven to be extremely dangerous to those who partake in it. While it is clarified that their relationship is not a romantic one, for the Count to sweep María off her feet and remove her from the seedy brothel that she was working at pushes the misogynistic belief that if a woman is to wait long enough in whatever situation, a man will eventually come save her and bring new meaning to her life. The addition of this detail perpetuates the notion that a woman’s survival should completely and utterly depend on a man.

It is presented that her turn to sex work after this traumatic event is completely reasonable and even something that she eventually takes pride in. What I mostly did not appreciate was the lack of confrontation towards her trauma that María dos Prazeres exhibits. She is sexually taken advantage of when she was already in a vulnerable state and yet, she reclaims that activity and makes it her line of work. While I am accepting of sex workers proudly reclaiming their occupation despite societal distaste, I simply wish we could have seen more of María processing her trauma and truly enjoying sex work for what it is, not because of any repressed emotions or because it was the only viable option for her. Aside from the detail of her rape by the Turkish soldier, there is also no more notable instances of how dangerous it is to be a sex worker, much less one of mixed race. The unrealistic and romanticized portrayal of her past
job is, for me, another way in which the book faltered in being a truly progressive piece of literature.

With all of this being said, I do acknowledge that García Márquez’s intention of portraying María dos Prazeres as a headstrong feminist who goes against the grain of society is completely valid. As discussed, there are several aspects to María’s character that add to the subjugation of her body and spirit and yet, she prevails above it all to overcome the neurotic visions of her own death. Whether you see it as her being a symbol of an oppressed country embracing democracy or an older woman regaining her sense of sexuality, our unlikely protagonist is the recipient of a redemption arc. Through it all, María triumphs as a character who regains her sense of self and pulls herself out of the debilitating mindset that had plagued her thoughts.

5.2 Final Remarks

In more ways than one, “María dos Prazeres” is a product of its time. From using the frantic atmosphere of Barcelona in the late 60s and 70s to the prevalence of misogyny within his writings, Gabriel García Márquez produced an extremely complex narrative that introduces a new example of symbolism with every turn of the page. Considering that the story itself is not even twenty pages long, the writer’s talent must be acknowledged in this matter.

Against the backdrop of Francisco Franco’s repressive authoritarian government, our protagonist, María dos Prazeres, rises from the oppressive ashes to embark on a journey of self-discovery. A political metaphor is already in sight for María’s character arc and her journey’s curious ending with a symbolically profound twist establishes her as one of the most interesting characters in all of the works of García Márquez. Her status as a woman is tainted by her label of less worthy, whether it be for her refusal to conform to gender norms, her sexual
liberty or her skin color. Theoretically, the combination of disdained characteristics should all be reasons as to why her journey to self-discovery should be prevented from going any further. However, the author’s choice to have María overcome society’s preconceived notions of her and subsequently serve as the main vessel for the story’s political message is truly revolutionary.

María not only serves as a metaphor for the Spanish transition to democracy, but she also serves as a symbol for the nation itself. Her gender serves as a stark contrast to those who would typically represent something as important as a political era coming to an end but it is my belief that García Márquez steered away from a male protagonist for a reason. María dos Prazeres’ marginalized identities, from her gender to her race, are interesting enough but especially so when you consider that the author included them so as to draw more attention to her social significance. If this short story were to be led by a man, he would not suffer from the same trauma that makes María the symbol for the story’s message in the first place. Clearly put, this short story would not have the same significance if it were led by a man versus a woman, especially a woman of María’s caliber.

Our protagonist’s crippling fear of her own death which is triggered by a nightmare one night is the main plot point of the story and is also the biggest hurdle she must overcome. By obsessing over her funeral and the fear of what is to come once she exits the physical world, María dos Prazeres’ anxiety surrounding her death is a carefully crafted analogy for Spain’s transition to democracy following the death of Francisco Franco. In addition to the political symbolism, María also serves as a representation of the fading of self-worth felt by older women due to the perceived decreased value of their bodies. In a journey marked by uncertainty and distress, it is quite fitting that the fear of death that María was tormented by was misinterpreted by her from the beginning.
Maria dos Prazeres goes through truly traumatic events in order to fully realize the meaning of her story and what good is to come, despite her lack of optimism. From being sex trafficked as a young girl to losing all of her friends in a brutal civil war, María’s character is well-justified in giving up all hope of living a better life and anxiously waiting her death. Nonetheless, she persists and her willingness to welcome something unknown allows for her to fully develop as a character and acknowledge that perhaps, trauma can be more enlightening than one might think. In fact, the role that trauma plays in this narrative is to emphasize that it can make up a person's (or country’s) being but a deliberate decision must be made in order to come up stronger on the other end.

In an unexpected twist, it is revealed that María dos Prazeres was incorrect to assume that her death was imminent and all hope was lost. In actuality, death was not what was on the horizon but new life- democracy and self-worth even. María’s realization that a new hope was to come is akin to the same feeling of relief once the country of Spain realized that they were in good hands with a leader who wanted democracy just as much as they did. Meanwhile, the kind treatment and sexual advancements of a handsome young stranger reinvigorates her confidence in her sexuality, something that she was convinced was past its prime. These real-life issues being portrayed through the means of a weathered old woman who has all of society working against her is a story of resilience and strength through the most troubling times.

Gabriel García Márquez undoubtedly used every tool at his disposal when crafting this story, both from his personal experiences and from the rumblings of political anticipation in a country whose government was about to undergo the transformation of a century. With the sheer amount of socio-political metaphors infused within the story, the Colombian writer is not light-handed at all with the symbolism and hidden meanings. Perhaps his most important choice
of all, however, was choosing a protagonist whose unappealing features would have made her
the villain in any other story. Using a revolutionary and uplifting approach, however, García
Márquez executes the exact opposite and grants María dos Prazeres the honor of symbolizing
such a culturally-defining and inspiring message.
Footnotes


3. All citations of *Doce cuentos peregrinos* were taken from the first edition published by Vintage Español in 2006.
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