

17.55, Introduction to Latin American Studies, Fall 2006
Prof. Chappell Lawson
Session 3: Class Discussion of *Big Mama's Funeral*

Introduction to *Big Mama's Funeral*

- **Macondo** is the site of Garcia Marquez's novels
 - a magical town in rural Colombia where outrageous facts meet mundane fantasies
 - Meant to be a microcosm of Latin America
- Story is supposed to be very funny

Big Mama is matriarch of Macondo; represents the past

- 92 years old (1492-1992?)
- virgin; no children; heirs are 9 nieces and nephews
 - oldest is Nicanor
 - One niece, Magdalena, renounces marriage for Church and gets a diamond ring but nothing else in the will
 - Lots of bastard children fathered by men
- Big Mama owns all the land; government pays her for citizens use of streets; no one in Macondo owns any land except her
- Receives and delivers votes of all living and dead in her domain
- Usury rights passed on to relatives
- Long justification of her rule ("immaterial possessions")
- She represents "Class over common people" and "traditional power over transitory authority"
- Unifying event in country and world as all join in effort to bury her
 - Effort is to "bury her", not to "pay respects" or "honor her"
- Priest: Father Anthony Isabel

Questions for class discussion

- Question #1: When does story take place?
- Question #2: What do you suppose Big Mama looked like? Three pictures: Afro-spiritist leader, Queen Victoria, Frida Khalo
- Question #3: Is Macondo a democracy?
- Question #4: Decentralization is often touted as a remedy for many of Latin America's ills. In democracy, idea is to locate government closer to the people and thus make it more accountable. Would decentralization work as a political strategy in this case?
- Question #5: What does Big Mama represent? What does her death represent?

Notes on these points

- Time ("living museum" quality to Macondo)
 - p. 162: Big Mama was 21 at the beginning of the century
 - Does it feel older?
 - How do people arrive? Boat? Plane? Etc.
 - Medical technologies used on Big Mama (seem so incredibly antiquated)
- Rule of law

- How does Nicanor go to fetch the notary? What would you do if you were the notary? How about if he asked you to sign something that perhaps was not strictly true?
- *Jus primae noctis* (p. 2) What is that?
- Property rights? (p. 155, 159-60) Corporatism (p. 3)
- p. 161 (to ensure the dominance of their line). Latifundium
- What are they doing as they all sit around Big Mama's corpse (p. 166). "reciprocal surveillance"
- How about the way they deal with the Constitution (p. 164: the "alchemists of the statutes". What is an alchemist?
- Class structure
 - Ruling class inter-married (p. 2)
 - Lots of bastard children
- Democracy
 - How does voting work in Macondo? p. 163.
 - President is a democrat? ("bemedalled officials" p. 163)
- Decentralization, local power structures, and civil society
 - What makes Macondo different from a small town in Vermont?
 - Caciquismo (Mexico), coronelismo (Brazil), bossism, big men (Haiti)
- Ethnicity
 - What was Big Mama's ethnic background?
 - Answer on p. 157. Or is that the answer?