Recounting the themes of desire in Márquez’ Memories of My Melancholy Whores

Melodie J Rodgers, Georgia State University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/melodierodgers/2/
Gabriel García Márquez’ *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* is a novella surrounding the events of a 90-year-old man’s request to a madam of prostitutes. The narrator’s opening sentence states, "The year I turned ninety, I wanted to give myself the gift of a night of wild love with an adolescent virgin.” (García Márquez, 1) Despite the fact that the title of this García Márquez masterpiece reeks of a text whose sole purpose is to satisfy prurient interests, the real forbidden fruit lives inside the underlying themes of desire within this seemingly simple story. Once one gets past the taboo, García Márquez illuminates how desire is central to humanity’s core need for love and renewal of spirit.

One of the many themes of desire that García Márquez explores is serendipitous love. In *Melancholy Whores*, the anonymous narrator seeks assistance of brothel owner, Rosa Cabarcas, to find him a virgin prostitute to have sex with for his 90th birthday. The novella reveals that our narrator is no stranger to prostitutes. In fact, “by his own account, he had slept with and paid 514 different women for sex by the age of fifty. His life is one without marriage, children, fortune, or love.” (Vorda, 123) When he finally meets this hand-picked virgin of 14 years of age, he finds her drugged with valerian root and unconscious. However, the narrator becomes enchanted by her beauty and angelic state. García Márquez writes, “I went into the room, my heart in confusion, and saw the girl sleeping in the enormous bed for hire, as naked and helpless as the day she was born…She lay on her side, facing the door, illuminated from the ceiling by an intense light that spared no detail. I sat down to contemplate her from the edge of the bed, my five senses under a spell.” (García Márquez, 25) Within this quote, it is apparent that our main
character’s unexpected infatuation has placed him in a state of divine ecstasy. For when he first walks upon her, it is not his male part that is guiding his emotions, rather, it is his heart that is overwhelmed by the very sight of her resting like an angel. Hence, the narrator is intoxicated by her innocence. In addition, as the young virgin prostitute continues to sleep, he relishes her every movement while studying her naked body as an artist would observe an unfinished nude statue in dusk’s light. García Márquez also writes, “Her newborn breasts still seemed like a boy’s, but they appeared full to bursting with secret energy that was ready to explode. The best part of her body were her large, silent-stepping feet with toes as long as sensitive fingers.” (García Márquez, 26) Here, the anonymous main character describes his desire of the young virgin from limb to limb, reveling in his unaccustomed attachment to the girl.

Moreover, in the Oxonian Review article The Nonagenarian and the Nymphette, Glen Goodman writes:

"On the edge of pornography, García Márquez wrenches us back into the benignly erotic: rather than sleep with the unconscious girl, the narrator watches her attentively, overcome by her innocence and beauty. Night after night he returns to Rosa Cabarcas’s bordello to lie next to the girl he christens Delgadina…Although no longer drugged, Delgadina sleeps—or pretends to sleep—through each encounter, interacting with the narrator only through body language.” (Goodman)

Ironically, from medieval Spain to modern-day Latin America, one of the most popular Spanish ballads is "Delgadina." Acclaimed Spanish ballad scholar, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, stated that this Spanish ballad "is found wherever the Spanish language is spoken” and expressed his belief that "'Delgadina' is without a doubt the most widely known romance in Spain and America" (Herrera-Sobek, 91,106) The summary of the ballad:

"'Delgadina' tells the story of a young woman who resists her father's incestuous advances. For this, she is locked up and denied anything to drink while she is fed only salty foods. The Father desires the daughter sexually. She refuses. The abundant scholarship on the ballad tends to treat it as a literal reflection of the horrors of father-daughter incest and, in particular, of the absolute power of the father in the Hispanic
family structure but no one to date has offered a convincing explanation of just why this ballad has enjoyed so many centuries of popularity. Delgadina is the youngest of three daughters of the king, and in some versions she wears provocative clothing, including a "transparent dress." In many versions of the ballad, there is some dispute over who is to blame for the father's attempt to make Delgadina his mistress. Often it is Delgadina who is blamed by her sisters or her mother. In one verse, after Delgadina begs her mother in vain for a jug of water, the mother responds, "Get away Delgadina, get away you evil bitch / because of you here I am seven years a wronged wife." In another version, a Sephardic one, the mother replies, "Get thee thence, Jewish beast! Get thee down, cruel beast: On thy account these seven years I have lived unhappy in marriage." It is important to note that this ballad is typically sung by women to other women. Thus, it is clearly very much a women's song. The daughter fantasizes that her father is not happy with her mother but would prefer her instead… the girl is jealous of her mother and thinks, "My father really prefers me to my mother and would like to put me in her place and over my elder sisters" (Dundes, 390)

From the summary of the ballad, “Delgadina”, one becomes aware of the connections that it has with García Márquez’ Memories of My Melancholy Whores. Both García Márquez’ narrator and the father of “Delgadina”, desire a daughter figure for hopes of a sexual relationship. Although García Márquez’ narrator is not the actual father of the young girl he calls Delgadina, there still remains a huge age difference between them that makes their interaction quite creepy to many readers. Yet, it is clear that what is found within the narrator of Melancholy Whores is love…a rather serendipitous discovery for the man used to being void of love due to monetary exchanges for sex among the prostitutes and other casual encounters that he controlled.

In addition, these feelings of love provoked the narrator to name the girl, Delgadina, (which was not her name) when he first attempts to make love to the virgin prostitute. The narrator confessed, as the young girl lay sleeping:

“I succumbed to an unforeseen temptation and tried to separate her legs with my knee. On the first two attempts, she resisted with tensed thighs. I sang into her ear: Angels surround the bed of Delgadina…Delgadina, my heart, I pleaded, filled with longing. Delgadina. She gave me a sorrowful moan, escaped my thighs, turned her back, and curled up like a snail in its shell. The valerian potion must have been as effective for me as for her, because nothing happened, not to her, not to anybody. But I didn’t care I asked...
Clearly, within this quote one can assume that the narrator has discovered a desire that had not existed with the other prostitutes that had been in his life. Although the arrangement with this virgin was supposed to have a sexual outcome, it seems that the result of finding an unexpected love interest was quite satisfying for him. However, what is also revealed in this passage is the narrator’s lack of confidence which seems to be connected to his overall self-image.

Another theme of desire that García Márquez focuses on is rebirth. In Melancholy Whores, one discovers that the narrator believes himself to be physically ugly and procured the young girl to renew his spirit. Márquez writes:

“I don’t have to say so because people can see it from leagues away: I’m ugly, shy, and anachronistic. But by dint of not wanting to be those things I have pretended to be just the opposite. Until today, when I have resolved to tell of my own free will just what I’m like, if only to ease my consciousness. I have begun with my unusual call to Rosa Cabarcas because, seen from the vantage point of today, that was the beginning of a new life at an age when most mortals have already died.” (Márquez, 4)

Within this passage, the narrator admits to having a negative self-image but he desired to play the facade of the confident male. By participating in this behavior, one can assume that having a negative self-image can possibly shape a man’s sexuality. Also, in this same passage, the narrator believes that sex with an adolescent virgin would allow him to be reborn at 90 years old. Hence, it seemed as if we wanted to relive a sexual experience that he either had and/or had never experienced.

However, in order to truly understand the sexual behavior of García Márquez’ narrator, one must first become familiar with the concept of sex scripts, a sociological tool used to assess sexual behavior. Sex script researchers William Simon and John H. Gagnon explained:

“Sex scripts are a metaphor for conceptualizing the production of behavior within social life. Most of social life most of the time must operate under the guidance of an operating syntax, much as language is a precondition for speech. For behavior to occur, something
resembling scripting must occur on three distinct levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts.” (Gagnon and William, 1)

The first level of scripting that must be examined is the concept of cultural scenarios. They have been defined as “instructional guides that exist at the level of collective life.” In Memories of My Melancholy Whores, the narrator reveals that the first person he had sexual intercourse with was an older prostitute who sexually assaulted him when he was 11 years old. García Márquez writes, “She threw me face-up on her bed for four, removed my trousers in a masterful maneuver, and straddled me, but the icy terror that drenched my body kept me from receiving her like a man.” (García Márquez, 110) In this quote, the older prostitute character represents an instructional guide for the anonymous narrator because she is the one that introduces him to the act of sex. However, his introduction of sex can be considered rape, and having one’s innocence taken in this way distorted and set a standard for the narrator’s future cultural scenarios that involved sexual activity.

In addition, the second level of scripting, the interpersonal level, is “a process that transforms the social actor from being exclusively an actor to being a partial script writer or adapter shaping the materials of relevant cultural scenarios into scripts for behavior in particular contexts.” (Gagnon and William, 1) García Márquez’ narrator overcomes the “icy terror” of being raped by accepting the act as a rite of passage into manhood and goes back to visit the same prostitute, to adapt to the complexities of his newly found sexuality. The narrator confesses:

That night, sleepless in my bed at home because the shame of the assault, my longing to see her again would not allow me to sleep more than an hour. But the next morning I woke her, weeping aloud with crazed love that lasted until it was carried away without mercy by the violent wind of real life. Her name was Castorina and she was the queen of the house.” (García Márquez’, 111)
Hence, by revisiting Castorina, the narrator is adapting to his sexual assault by molding a sexual relationship that makes him a paying client, in control of his first of many prostitutes.

Lastly, the third level of scripting is called intrapsychic scripting. “This level is the symbolic reorganization of reality in ways to more fully realize the actor’s many layered and sometimes voiced wishes.” (Gagnon and William, 1) In *Melancholy Whores*, one learns that the anonymous narrator wants to make sure that his Delgadina is well provided after his death and wants Rosa Cabarcas to assist in this endeavor. However, the bordello owner has another idea in mind. Márquez writes:

“Rosa Cabarcas said: Let’s make an old people’s bet, signed before a notary: whoever survives keeps everything that belongs to the other one. No because if I die, everything has to be for her. It amounts to the same thing, said Rosa Cavarcas, I take care of the girl and then I leave her everything, what’s yours and what’s mine; I don’t have anybody else in the world. Do you think she’ll agree? ‘Ah, my sad scholar, it’s all right for you to be old but not an asshole,’ said Rosa Cabarcas, weak with laughter. ‘That poor creature’s head over heels in love with you.’” (García Márquez’, 115)

By making sure that his Delgadina is given property and the rest of his meager earnings, the narrator wishes to remain loyal to the girl even after he dies. He is also treating their relationship as one would a marriage. Hence, his reorganization of reality, to a place of enduring nurturing and loyalty, works quite beautifully for the man who was “without marriage, children, fortune, or love.” (Vorda, 123) Therefore, the narrator’s desire for renewal of spirit was evident, due to his connection with the virgin within a sphere void of sex; rather, he was focused on reliving the experience of piety and a virginal discovery of serendipitous love.
In conclusion, the themes of desire presented within *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* are connected to very fundamental human needs: love and renewal. When García Márquez’ narrator arranges to sleep with a 14-year-old girl for his birthday, believing he is buying just another prostitute to control, he finds love unexpectedly, a love reborn from his own traumatized sense of sexuality. The sexual assault during his childhood altered his sexual scripts, resulting in a burden of a negative self-image throughout the text. Desire was the primary way the narrator accessed his own hidden youth and sense of divine love. The concepts of sexual scripting assisted in understanding the complexities behind desires and sexual behaviors, showing that wholesome intent can be cloaked behind taboo. Love and the desire for a renewal of spirit, not prurient interests, shape the intentions of the narrator in this timeless novella.


