

# The Labyrinth of 'The Liberator': Márquez's Historical Character in Freudian Light

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The historical novel by Gabriel García Márquez, *The General in His Labyrinth*, has given rise to lot of controversy as the author presents *El Libertador* (The Liberator) of the Americas as a dwindling man in the reclining frontier of his fate. The author presents a man of flesh and blood rather than a figure of reverence customarily done by historians as Simón Bolívar was a famous historical figure who shaped the history of Latin America by fighting innumerable wars and by ruling the Republic. This paper looks into the labyrinthine working of the General's mind from a Freudian point of view and aims to show the leading character of the novel, Simón Bolívar, the General who liberated Gran Colombia, as neurotic through signifying his whims, rituals, physical complaints, dreams and hallucination.

Simón Bolívar was one of South America's greatest generals. After Upper Peru became an independent state, it was named Bolivia in Bolívar's honor in 1825. Harvey L. Johnson notes, "His victories over the Spaniards won independence for Bolivia, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. He is called *El Libertador* (The Liberator) and the 'George Washington of South America'." Gabriel García Márquez decided to write about Bolívar after reading an unfinished novel about Bolívar by his friend Álvaro Mutis. The setting of Mutis' book – Bolívar's voyage down the Magdalena River in 1830 incited Márquez's drive to write about the great historical figure as he admits that the river interested him "more than the glories of the central character" (271). After two years of research that examined the extensive memoirs of Bolívar's Irish aide-de-camp, Daniel Florencio O'Leary, as well as numerous other historical documents, García Márquez published his novel about the last seven months of Bolívar's life (Márquez 271-74). In the epilogue to the novel, Márquez himself confesses,

“. . . I was not particularly troubled by the question of historical accuracy, since the last voyage along the river is the least documented period in Bolívar's life" (271). García Márquez believed that most of the information available on Bolívar was one-dimensional, "No one ever said in Bolívar's biographies that he sang or that he was constipated . . . but historians don't say these things because they think they are not important" (Plimpton 160). Breaking with the traditional heroic portrayal of *Bolívar El Libertador*, García Márquez depicts a pathetic protagonist, a prematurely aged man who is physically ill and mentally exhausted (Gertel 25). After substantiating the basis of the creative portrayal of this historical figure by Márquez, I will outline the plot of the novel and then take up an analysis from a psychoanalytic point of view to show how the author intentionally shapes an obsessional neurotic character.

The novel starts on May 8, 1830 in Santa Fe de Bogota as the General prepares to leave for the port of Cartagena de Indias, while the people he helped liberate scrawl graffiti against him. Though he wants to move out as soon as possible, the Vice President elect, General Domingo fails to arrange for his passport in time. Thus he leaves the town without his passport, with a few officials still loyal to him including José Palacios - the waiting attendant, a few clerks and dogs. The journey progresses through Honda, a voyage on a barge along the river passing Guaduas, reaching Barranca Nueva, through Mompox, Turbaco, Ávila, Cartagena, La Popa, Santa Marta. "The novel is a poignant portrayal of a man struggling with the downturn of his fortune" (Sinha). For instance, at the port of Mompox, the police stops him, fails to recognize him, and demands a passport, which he still does not have. He is finally recognized and escorted to the port. In Turbaco, he learns of petty political fights over the now vacant post of the president. He is further tormented by the irony that his friend-turned-assassin General Santander will now return from exile to be a presidential candidate. Very soon, he suffers another loss when his close friend Field Marshall Sucre is ambushed and assassinated in the power struggle, and he vomits blood after receiving the fatal news. General Rafael Urdaneta takes power and requests him to be the President of the Republic which he

refuses. He assumes a campaign to finally unite the conflicting region and leaves for Santa Marta from Cartagena, and becomes ill in Soledad. The General rides a mule into the last towns on his journey towards death. He ultimately dies in Santa Marta in poverty, never being actually able to leave the Americas and the people burn his belongings in fear of catching his illness.

A psychoanalytic study helps reveal the neurosis of the protagonist, the General. Before going into the symptoms or manifestations, I will locate the reasons for the psychological turmoil that the General goes through in *The General in his Labyrinth*. According to Freud in his essay "The Question of Lay Analysis":

A neurosis is thus the result of a conflict between the ego and the id, upon which the ego has embarked because, as careful investigation shows, it wishes at all costs to retain its adaptability in relation to the real external world. The disagreement is between the external world and the id; and it is because the ego, loyal to its inmost nature, takes sides with the external world that it becomes involved in a conflict with its id. (24)

The General's failed vision, dread, degraded status and loss of love cause the conflict between his ego and id. His last days are tuned with his shattered dream "of creating the largest country in the world: one nation, free and unified, from Mexico to Cape Horn" (48) when the former trusted comrades and friends force him to resign from the presidency of the Republic which leads the country to political unrest. He undergoes anxious apprehension at the thought of the return of his former friend Francisco de Paula Santander from exile in France who was accused of complicity in a plot to assassinate him in 1828 betraying his trust of deeming Santander as "my other self, and perhaps my better self" (52) in the past. He also suffers from the change of his status - coming down to the level of an ordinary citizen without a passport, the "larval antagonism" of the rabble, and "insults painted on convent walls" (39) against him. Finally, the last days are spent with the anxiety of the physical absence of love of his mistress

Manuela Sáenz who “loved him but was not going to follow him to his death” (6). Manuela Sáenz is a mother-figure, who always provided him the shelter by consistently being his paramour and comrade for eight long years since the death of his wife. “Only Manuela knew that his disinterest was not lack of awareness or fatalism, but rather the melancholy certainty that he would die in his bed, poor and naked and without the consolation of public gratitude” (8). The General’s neurosis is thus caused by repressing the overt understanding of the people of his political status, by undoing the nurtured dream of unifying the Americas, by receiving the shock at Santander’s return and by sensing a detachment from Manuela.

Thus the “real external world” forces the rise of a conflict which through a defensive process manifests itself into obsessional neurosis as Anna Freud sums up in her Introduction to Symptom-Formation,

. . . different combinations of defensive processes are at work in each of the different neuroses described by Freud. It is the choice and mixture of mechanisms which in hysteria (repression, conversion), phobia (flight, displacement, avoidance), *obsessional neurosis* (repression, reaction-formation, isolation, undoing), paranoia (projection) determine the form of symptom-formation. (Freud 538)

The whims, rituals, physical complaints, and dreams and hallucination of the General give reflection to his obsessional neurosis. If we simply look into the regular activities that the General carries out of conviction or superstition, for example, covering “his mouth with a handkerchief soaked in cologne” to protect himself against “abrupt exposure to the weather” (Márquez 32), he does so in an attempt to protect his vulnerable self from the outer vehement world. Minute details are attributed to his life by García Márquez, like the specificity of his morning rituals and aromatic baths, which José Palacios religiously prepares, to maneuver a better public appearance hiding his premature aging and deteriorating health. Ironically on the day of leaving Santa Fe de Bogota the General “officiated at the daily mass of his ablutions with more frenetic severity than usual, trying to purge his body and spirit of twenty years of fruitless wars and the

disillusionments of power" (5). The conflict is between the "real external world" and the id which is expressed through his whimsical acts. He is shown to be an impulsive man who decides not to write a single letter anymore and calls Fernando, his nephew cum clerk, at any hour of the day to draft an official letter or to read him from a book. He is a restless man who wants his decisions to be executed right away without any delay. He is a man of bad temper who calls his subordinates or comrades 'slippery bastard' and then makes up with them. One such incident happens at a card game of ombre. The General who starts losing after winning three times initially, is overcome by a pernicious cough, but proceeds with the game in a headstrong manner. The subordinate Colonel Wilson loses intentionally afterwards to improve the General's humor at the order of General Carreño. The rage at the card table is later manifested into a fever (63-66).

Freud's analysis of his case studies also shows that psychological problems are manifest overtly through physical pains or complaints; such as, weakness, disgust at the thought of eating, *tussis nervosa* (nervous cough), insomnia, period of somnambulism, paraphasia and more. "One way in which Freud reflected on the relation between physiology and psychology was through quantification, in the 'Project for a Scientific Psychology' (1895), where he aimed to unite physiology and psychology" (Surprenant 122-23). Similarly, the General's psychological problems are noticeable in his physical irregularities. The 46 year old General in García Márquez's novel is shown as having an "erratic appetite" (28) who suffers from insomnia. The author also shows "the clutches of delirium" described by the General "my crises of dementia" (10), "the strength that had been ravaged by the horror of his nightmares" (10), fevers, migraine pain, and "bouts of sluggishness" (47) every now and then. All the details about Bolívar's physical problems confirm the fact that he is suffering from neurosis caused by the inner turmoil, anxiety, delusion and disillusion. When Manuela Sáenz, the General's long-time lover, brings the news that Don Joaquín Mosquera was elected President of the Republic by unanimous vote, he becomes astonished at the fact that there was not a single vote for him at the

Congress. The official delegation of devoted deputies explains to him later that it has been done with a purpose to save his honor so that he does not appear as a loser in a bitter contest. Even after this clarification he takes the incident to heart. This instance of shame is followed by “a crisis of coughing that kept the manor house in a state of alarm until nightfall” (29) which ultimately makes him decide to leave the country for Europe. The disgust and shock at the betrayal as well as the pain at losing the position at the peak suffocates him mentally and physically. The common understanding about his illness goes like this and it is noticeable how his ‘madness’ (neurosis) is channeled through a total disinterest in the world around him:

They said his illness was a kind of *madness* caused by the mercurial desert sun. Then they said he was dying in Guayaquil, and later in Quito, of a gastric fever whose most alarming symptom was *lack of interest in the world* and *absolute spiritual calm*. No one ever learned the scientific basis for these reports, for he had always been opposed to medical science, and he diagnosed and treated himself according to Donostierre’s *La médecine a votre manière*, a French manual of home remedies that José Palacios carried wherever he went as an oracle for understanding and curing *any disturbance of body or soul*. (16-17)

The General appears in the novel as a man with a failed vision and reflection. He submerges himself in the lost glory, reaches the conclusion with the mass that he is extinct and finds no reason in fighting for his idealism any more. He becomes absolutely disillusioned and comments, “All that’s left for me is for them to throw me out with the garbage” when the ill Lorenzo Cárcamo, his old comrade, proposes to “start again from the beginning” (118). He points out bluntly to Montilla, when the latter suggests that Joaquín Mosquera is a failure as the President and the country looks forward to his coming back and reclaiming the power, by saying, “I don’t exist” (140-41). And again - “It was impossible to reconcile glory with the stench from the open sewers. The General sighed into Montilla’s ear, “What a price we’ve had to pay for an independence that’s not worth

shit!"" (170). One example of self-ridicule is presented when the entourage of the General rescues a German on their voyage along the river who prattled about numerous unbelievable incidents. The General at one point says to him, "I assure you you'll earn more money showing me in a cage as the biggest damn fool in history" (95). In addition, he names a stray dog, which is rescued and taken care of by his retinue, 'Bolívar' (100). This very man, Atwood reminds us, in the years 1811-24 "led the revolutionary armies of South America in a brilliant and grueling series of campaigns that swept the Spaniards from their former colonies" (1). All that is left for him during the last seven months of his life is to immerse in the nostalgia and become "intoxicated with glory" (17).

The resentment of the mass against him creates obsessional fury in the General's mind. He is called 'Skinny Shanks,' a nickname after the "madman famous for his theatrical uniforms" (27). In one such incident when he is walking without an escort, somebody hurls at him cow dung along with the insulting name and disappears. When the hidden guard comes out of the trees to punish the wrongdoer, to the surprise of José Palacios the General punishes the guard with severity by stripping him of his ranks with anger. Moreover, the premature aging which mysteriously reduces his height and weight causes obsessional neurosis. For example, even on the first night of his voyage, the people at Facataiva fail to recognize him while his aide-de-camp is constantly mistaken for the liberator. His deteriorating physical features: "the meager belly, the ribs pushing through the skin, the legs and arms reduced to mere bone, all of it enclosed in a hairless hide as pale as death except for the face" (182), examined by a local Cartagenan girl, "his scrawny ribs and rachitic legs" (74), "white thinning hair and that look of final turmoil" (82) foreshadow his imminent death giving release to all worldly snares and illusions. The General himself presages his own death by telling the Widow Benjumea in Mompox that he does not have "much time left for remembering" (107). "The only thing lacking is for me to die" (182), he comments to the Cartagenan girl who comes to please him. All with the final understanding

- "But I've become lost in a dream, searching for something that doesn't exist" (221).

The dream sequences in the novel are incorporated with particular intention to look inside the 'labyrinth' of the General. Freud in his essay "On Dreams" says that dream-thoughts are "withdrawn from consciousness till it emerges in distorted form in the dream-content" (125). He analyzes -

For I had been led to fresh conclusions on the subject of dreams by applying to them a new method of psychological investigation which had done excellent service in the solution of phobias, *obsessions* and delusions. . . . The numerous analogies that exist between dream-life and a great variety of conditions of psychical illness in waking life have been indeed been correctly observed by many medical investigators. . . . Phobias and obsessions are as alien to normal consciousness as dreams are to waking consciousness; their origin is as unknown to consciousness as that of dreams. (83)

The General's animosity towards and distrust of General Santander, who was involved in one of the assassination attempts against Bolívar, is evident in three dreams mentioned in the novel. As he reflects on the past, the General often thinks and dreams about his former friend; and in one he dreams that Santander is tearing pages from a book placed on his round belly and munching those as if he were a goat. In another Santander is covered with cockroaches. In the final dream Santander pulls out his own eyeballs as they obstruct his eating during a luncheon and places them on the table. José Palacios ironically comments that he "did not know when his master's dreams about General Santander were real and when they were imaginary" (Márquez 56). Surprenant comments, "The disproportion between the manifest and the latent content comes from the way in which each element of the manifest content triggers a host of associations in the dreamer, just as whole portions of life attach to neurotic symptoms" (88). The dreams if probed deeper reflect the General's foreshadowing of the betrayal of his friend. In the first dream the 'open book' that Santander



tears the page off and eats might stand for the constitution, which the General drew up for Bolivia and is one of his most important political pronouncements. Santander's relish in eating the leaves of the book represents how he diminished the long-cherished idea of a unified nation that Bolívar professed. The bizarre, gruesome and violent images of the other two dreams reflect the General's sense of righteousness in idealizing Santander's betrayal and dehumanizing him. The novel again and again echoes the General's sense of insecurity, fear and disbelief at the idea of Santander's return from banishment in Paris, and marks his obsession through these dreams. In Turbaco the General refuses to sleep in the bedroom prepared for him as he believes it to be the room of nightmares as he dreamt of a woman with illuminated hair tying a red ribbon around his neck in the past. The woman might represent all the women in his life causing the scandal that "nothing tempted him more than the enigma of a beautiful woman" (78). José Palacios, who constantly reminds him of the details of his past, counts 35 women in the General's life leaving the one-night birds. But "they all stayed behind" (154) as the General concludes not being able to tie the knot. Again in Turbaco he dreams of a boy calling his name and asking him if he loves the little man. The General's retinue stays a night in Puerto Real, where he claims that he sees a woman singing "*Tell me it's never too late to die of love*" during the night. His aides-de-camp and the watchman conduct a search, but they fail to find any woman in the vicinity. José Palacios in his review of the General's life never clarified whether the vision was "a dream, a hallucination, or an apparition" (99-100). This hallucinatory woman might represent the General's wife, María Teresa Rodríguez del Toro y Alayza, who had died, readers are told, in mysterious circumstances shortly after their marriage and sealed into oblivion. Therefore, the dreams take us through a psychological tour-de-unconscious labyrinth of the General.

*"The General in His Labyrinth* is a sad commentary on the ruthlessness of the political process. Bolívar changed history, but not as much as he would have liked. There are statues of 'The Liberator' all over Latin America, but in his own eyes he died defeated" (Atwood 4). This sense of final defeat,

disillusionment and death helps us catch the glimpse of the psychological labyrinth of the General in whose web he finally feels himself entangled and exclaims, "Damn it . . . How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!" (267).

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