

A collection of reflections on the cultural context provided by the novel, General in His Labyrinth: a telling of General Simon Bolívar's final years.

The General in His Labyrinth

Simon Bolivar's perspective on South America's past is centered around his discontentment with the level at which the people's rights have been stripped away as a result of colonialism. As far as Bolivar is concerned, the South Americans have been stripped of their constitutionally promised rights; and this is a great injustice. As we see in the novel, the General in his Labyrinth, Bolivar is a very strong-headed man. When he believes that he has a probable resolution to the previously mentioned injustice -- independence -- he is relentless in trying to make this happen for South America.

When it comes to his perspective on how South America will be in the coming years, I believe that Bolivar would prefer a unified South America, possibly operating with a parent-country ruling, and the others following almost-religiously (similar to the British monarchy). Since he regards this as impossible, it seems that he is neither optimistic nor pessimistic about it but rather practical. He specifically says, near the end of his address, that he prefers a government that will succeed over one that will be perfect. What he means by *practical* are the types of governments that he imagines will likely be established, and last, in the countries in question. He is the most pessimistic about the government of New Granada, fearful that if they don't combine with Venezuela they will remain a non-centralized government and probably collapse. As for the others, Panama and Guatemala would be confederations and valuable connections of the four quarters of the globe. Colombia, he thinks, may be similar to the British government, with slight changes to make their government more of a republic than a monarchy. Overall, he holds high hopes for Colombia, Panama, and Guatemala for these reasons.

The General in His Labyrinth

Throughout his last journey, the General sort of relives his personal victories and losses. Each leg of the journey leads him to reflect on how his experience has changed since his "glory days." In my opinion, love, friendship, and the changes in the public's treatment of the general are the three elements that demonstrate how things have transformed since the height of his career. First, his memories of his love affairs take us back to times of peace and glory in their own ways; because when he comes back to reality, from these reflections, he notices how much more fondly women (and people in general) looked upon him then, as opposed to now. Next, the way that his true friends try to support and protect Bolivar highlights how disabled he has truly become, even though he doesn't like to be treated as a disabled person. Finally, some of Bolivar's sadness and distress comes from the way the public treats him. Through the different stops along the river, memories and stories of assassination attempts are told. These stories, coupled with Bolivar's reactions to how differently people treat him, now, reveal that many people in Venezuela don't view him as the heroic figure that they once did.

Not only have these things changed, the General's temperament has changed. We notice him gradually acknowledge that this is his final journey. Whereas in the beginning of the novel, we mostly saw him fighting back, and proving to people that he was not quite dying yet. He was more stubborn then, evident by his many outbursts and fits of hallucination (usually driven by mental distress over the countries' political circumstances). These have become less frequent. Overall, these encounters and reflections along the river reveal the General's true supporters and those who only supported him for personal gain during the height of his political career. Many people treat him with less respect, they have less regard for the things that they say around him. People used to revere him. And now, there are more who disrespect him openly than before.

Modern Cultural and Historical Application

The banana-related product that I find interesting is Banana Boat Sunscreen. In class we talked about how bananas were marketed at a product that could bring tropical, exotic experience into people's homes. For example, in the theatrical production about bananas, that we watched, the women were in clothing that reminded viewers of being in a tropical area. You could even say that the women's clothing were similar to what's be worn to the beach. That brings me to the Banana Boat sunscreen brand. It's fascinating that bananas seem to be symbolic of tropical areas and activities. I found that the brand got its name during banana trade in the 1920s/1930s. "Banana boats" were used to transport easily spoiled bananas to North America and Europe. There is a picture of banana leaves on the sunscreen bottles. Now, we hear "banana boat" and think of the beach not of the banana trade.