

Social Isolation, Loneliness and the Experience of Old Age in *No One Writes to the Colonel* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

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Article Received: 12/03/2026

Article Accepted: 19/04/2026

Published Online: 20/04/2026

DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.04.367

Abstract.

This paper examines *No One Writes to the Colonel* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez as a significant literary exploration of old age and its associated challenges. It argues that old age in the novel is not merely a biological condition but a transformation of identity marked by a shift from agency to powerlessness. The text highlights the loss of economic stability and the experience of social isolation, particularly within the lower strata of society. Focusing on the figure of the Colonel, who spends his later years waiting for recognition of his past service, the study reveals how prolonged waiting becomes a defining feature of his existence. The novel also exposes the failure of state mechanisms, especially in addressing the needs of the elderly thereby intensifying their marginalization. Using a gerontological perspective, this paper analyses the social, economic and emotional dimensions of aging as represented in the text. It ultimately demonstrates that old age is constructed as a condition shaped by deprivation, neglect and invisibility.

Keywords: Aging, Loneliness, Social Isolation, State Neglect, Poverty

Gerontology and Literature

In recent years literary studies have increasingly focused on aging as a vital area recognizing its intricate ties to social, economic and psychological factors. Rather than viewing aging solely as a biological process, scholars now consider it a phenomenon shaped by cultural norms, economic realities and institutional frameworks. Within literature the experiences of older adults are depicted in ways that highlight issues such as

marginalization, invisibility, and vulnerability. Consequently the ways in which aging intersects with challenges like poverty, isolation and social exclusion have become central themes in modern literary criticism. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novella *No One Writes to the Colonel* powerfully explores these themes through its depiction of an elderly protagonist enduring prolonged anticipation and scarcity. The story follows the Colonel, a retired military officer. His life is defined by the endless wait for his pension, a promised acknowledgment of his service that never arrives. The Colonel's days are shaped by financial struggle. Much critical attention has focused on the novel's political subtext and nuanced critique of bureaucratic inefficiency. Its treatment of aging as a major theme has been comparatively overlooked. This oversight presents an opportunity to interpret the narrative through a gerontological lens. It emphasizes the social and emotional realities faced by the elderly people. The novel demonstrates that aging is influenced not only by advancing years but also by enduring social inequalities that render older individuals marginalized and powerless.

As an interdisciplinary field gerontology studies the experiences and processes of ageing. It takes into account social, psychological and economic aspects in addition to biological changes. In order to investigate how texts depict the lived reality of old age, literary studies have recently been more involved with this field. This method, sometimes known as literary gerontology stresses that ageing is a socially created experience. It is influenced by institutional structures. It also includes cultural norms and material circumstances rather than just a natural or inevitable process. From a gerontological standpoint, ageing is often linked to social invisibility, marginalisation and loss of agency. Individuals' economic independence and social participation often erode as they age. That usually results in isolation and exclusion. These factors are not only personal; they are profoundly rooted in larger socioeconomic institutions. Thus, ageing must be viewed as a condition influenced by structural inequities, particularly in situations when state support and social security measures are insufficient or missing. Literature is an effective medium for investigating these aspects of ageing because it captures both the exterior environment and the internal experiences of elderly people. Literary writings use narrative, characterisation and thematic development to show how ageing links with concerns like poverty, loneliness and neglect. In this way, literary gerontology provides for a more nuanced view of old age. It shows how it is a complicated and diverse experience, rather than just a biological period of life. When this paradigm is applied to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *No One Writes to the Colonel* the Colonel becomes a symbol of the aged subject

who is marginalised. His protracted wait, financial difficulties and social exclusion serve as examples of how both individual circumstances and institutional indifference influence ageing. Thus it depicts old age as a state characterised by deprivation and invisibility. It also shows endurance within an unsupportive socio-political framework.

Waiting in old Age

In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *No One Writes to the Colonel* the Colonel's experience with old age highlights the unpleasant nature of protracted waiting. The Colonel's existence is defined by an unfulfilled expectation, since he has "done nothing else but wait" for nearly sixty years (Marquez 01). This phrase not only illustrates the length of his anticipation but also demonstrates how waiting becomes the major organising force of his existence. Instead of going toward resolution, time stops, locking the Colonel in a never-ending cycle of hope and despair. From a gerontological standpoint, this protracted waiting represents more than just a particular situation. It shows how old age might turn into a time of temporal stagnation. The Colonel's everyday existence is shaped by his expectation of receiving his pension, which is a postponed promise, but its on-going postponement just serves to increase his helplessness. In this way, waiting functions as a psychological and socio-political state. That mirrors the institutional systems' general disregard for the elderly people. His feeling of purpose is undermined by the lack of closure which also reduces his existence to passive endurance. Additionally, the monotony and emptiness that define the Colonel's advanced age are highlighted by the repeated nature of waiting. There is no growth in his life and every day just prolongs the same unfulfilled anticipation. As the Colonel cannot change his situation and must instead rely on an uncertain future, this temporal suspension emphasises the degradation of agency. As a result, the novel depicts ageing as a state of suspended time in which life is continuously anticipated rather than lived.

Social Isolation and Loneliness

Loneliness and social isolation play a major role in the Colonel's experience of ageing. The Colonel's condition which is characterised by a lack of meaningful communication and recognition reveals a deeper emotional and social separation than simple physical isolation. His honest statement, "No one writes to me" beautifully captures this reality (Marquez 15). In addition to the absence of correspondence, the statement captures the Colonel's wider erasure from institutional and social networks. According to gerontological studies, communication serves as an essential indicator of social belonging

and its absence frequently causes older people to feel invisible. The silence that surrounds him, where the anticipated delivery of letters becomes a gauge of his social significance, exacerbates the Colonel's loneliness. His lack of communication indicates a breakdown in the person's relationship with the greater community, making him socially obsolete. This illness is a reflection of a larger trend in which older people are progressively shut out of social interactions, which causes psychological fragility and emotional disengagement.

Furthermore, the Colonel's seclusion is physically reinforced rather than purely personal. His reliance on outside approval through the expected letter illustrates how institutional indifference adds to his marginalisation. The lack of interpersonal communication is mirrored by the state's lack of responsiveness. The result is a multifaceted sense of isolation that spans both the public and private domains. As a result, rather than being a product of personal choice, loneliness in the novel is revealed as a lived experience. The work portrays old age as a stage characterised by severe social detachment, where a loss of identity and belonging results from a breakdown in communication. The Colonel's story demonstrates how loneliness in old age is profoundly ingrained in societal institutions rather than just being an emotional problem.

Isolation and State Neglect

The character of Colonel is being used by Marquez as a potent symbol of official indifference interweaved with ageing weaknesses. The Colonel's protracted pension wait is more than just an administrative hold-up. It is a persistent state of abandonment that illustrates how governmental institutions have failed to fulfil their responsibilities. A bureaucratic silence that progressively erases his social and political identity shapes his life. Despite having served the country in the past, the Colonel is denied dignity, respect and financial stability as he ages. This sharp contrast between prior assistance and current disregard draws attention to the state's exploitative practices, which elevate people in times of need. In this situation, ageing and dispossession become inextricably linked. The assumption that old age frequently involves marginalisation in systems driven by utility and productivity is reinforced by the Colonel's physical deterioration and his waning significance within the socio-political structure.

The collective aspect of this neglect is captured in the quote, "All my comrades died waiting for the mail" (Marquez 60). It demonstrates that the Colonel's experience is not a singular disaster but rather a component of a larger trend that impacts a whole

generation of veterans. The expression ‘died waiting’ is especially important since it turns waiting into a deadly state. The state’s inaction directly adds to people’s misery and demise rather than just causing them trouble. In this way, neglect functions as a type of structural violence in which injury is caused by extended indifference rather than direct aggression. Furthermore, rather than being solely personal the Colonel’s seclusion is profoundly political. He is cut off from institutional support networks. He is left out of the national narrative. His achievements are overlooked. He is no longer visible to the general public. The lack of communication or the missing letter is a potent emblem of broken promises. It also shows the ineffective administration. By denying recognition and resources the state uses its silence as a control device to hold onto power. Additionally, the novella places this neglect in the larger framework of political repression and censorship. The Colonel’s isolation is exacerbated by the fact that he lives in a society that restricts information and controls communication. The missing or delayed mail is a part of a wider system that restricts access to justice and information. Waiting becomes both an economic and political condition formed by authoritarian mechanisms that deprive people of their rights.

From a Marxist perspective the Colonel represents an oppressed individual neglected by the state. The government values power more than the welfare of its people. The pension ought to serve as a kind of social security. But it turns into an unfulfilled promise highlighting the inconsistencies in the system. However, a postcolonial interpretation shows how the Colonel’s situation is exacerbated by institutional inefficiencies and the legacy of political instability. Instead of acting as a guardian the state seems as an aloof and inattentive force. The Colonel’s perseverance contains a subtle form of resistance in spite of this overwhelming indifference. Even if it seems pointless, his persistent expectation of the letter shows that he is hesitant to fully give up his claim to justice. In this way, waiting turns into a protest against erasure. Even in the face of institutional apathy the Colonel maintains his presence and his entitlement to respect by holding out. The Colonel’s story illustrates how state neglect may make old age more difficult and turn it into a time of loneliness, sorrow and invisibility. Through him, the novella provides a powerful critique of institutions that break their promises leaving people to suffer. “You can't eat hope” (Marquez 90) is a striking statement that brings the story to a hard existential realisation. It highlights the disconnect between material need and emotional resilience. Hope provides the Colonel psychological support. But it is insufficient to deal with the realities of famine, poverty and physical deterioration.

The Colonel's predicament illustrates an existential conflict in which perseverance and meaning endure in the face of material security. A deeper dedication to dignity and self-worth is suggested by his determination to give up hope, even in the face of its failure to sustain him. The remark also contains a cruel irony; his agony is prolonged by the same hope that keeps him going. These contradictions become more noticeable as one ages and the body deteriorates. Marquez portrays survival as a precarious, frequently agonising balancing act between belief and reality, in which people persevere despite life's circumstances providing little hope for respite.

Conclusion

Gabriel Garcia Marquez offers a profoundly poignant examination of ageing, neglect, and human perseverance in *No One Writes to the Colonel*. The novella depicts old age as a state characterised by deprivation and invisibility. The Colonel's story illustrates how ageing, poverty and institutional apathy combine to create a place of suffering influenced by outside factors. The examination of state negligence shows that the Colonel's situation is systemic rather than just personal. His never-ending pension wait is a reflection of a larger government failing in which accountability is replaced by bureaucratic quiet.

This collective tragedy is summed up in the line "All my comrades died waiting for the mail" which highlights how the Colonel's predicament is shared by a generation that the state has declared obsolete. In this way the novella exposes the fundamental injustices ingrained in political structures. It criticises the systems that take advantage of people during their productive years and forsake them in old age. The work also emphasises the existential and psychological aspects of surviving. Despite several setbacks, the Colonel's unflinching optimism serves as both a source of strength and a sign of his weakness. Instead of romanticising hope, Marquez portrays it as a delicate system that keeps life going even when it is unable to bring about concrete alleviation. The novella also emphasises how waiting and time have shaped the Colonel's life. Waiting becomes a defining condition that undermines agency while maintaining purpose since his existence is organised around an unmet expectation. A larger existential reality in which fulfilment is elusive and significance is postponed is reflected in this temporal standstill. However, the Colonel's tenacity defies total hopelessness, implying that people can maintain their dignity through perseverance. By highlighting how old age is socially created and frequently marginalised, the addition of gerontological ideas enhances our understanding of the Colonel's position.

The Colonel's lack of visibility within the socio-political hierarchy is consistent with larger trends in which older people are shut out of recognition and power structures. Thus, Marquez challenges traditional ideas that distinguish between structural conditions and individual experience. He portrays ageing as a complex interaction of biological, social and political forces. In the end *No One Writes to the Colonel* is a potent critique of a society in which survival turns into a silent act of resistance and justice is perpetually postponed. The Colonel's story is about more than just waiting for a letter. It is about trying to keep one's dignity when one is not acknowledged. The novella highlights the human cost of apathy. It also shows the perseverance of those who keep waiting, even when the promised future never comes.

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