One Hundred Years of Solitude: Theme of Memory and the Past

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a meditation on the history of an independent Colombia, merging several hundred years of events into an allegorical description of the evolution of Macondo. Pretty impressive feat, we must say. But there's more! At the same time, the novel emphasizes just how prone people are to either willfully or accidentally forgetting their past and their origins, usually with terrible and avoidable consequences. Because it's continuously being lost, time in the novel is cyclical and repetitive, as generation after generation is doomed to either repeat the mistakes of their ancestors or fall into spirals of ineffectual and pointless activity.

Questions About Memory and the Past

1. Which of the main characters makes the most effort to remember the past? José Arcadio Buendía, with his memory machine? José Arcadio Segundo, with the banana company massacre? Who does the most to escape or erase memory? Why?
2. Can you think of an instance where knowing about the past would have helped a character? For example, would it have helped Amaranta Úrsula and Aureliano (II) to know about the pig-tail-baby prediction? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think Melquíades doesn't share his predictions with the Buendía family?
4. Is this novel a good way to teach readers about Colombian history? Or does the novel assume that readers will have some knowledge of real-life events there before reading it? Is it necessary to know about the facts in order to really understand the novel?
One Hundred Years of Solitude: Theme of The Supernatural

Because *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a magical realist novel, the supernatural is a strong and ever-present element in its plotting and character development. It’s a force like the weather, or time: powerful, unstoppable, and beyond the control of most of the novel's characters. Magical effects usually highlight the emotional side of events, but their consequences are almost always negative and destructive. Even in those few instances where the supernatural seems to be beneficial, it almost always turns out to be a pact with the devil for the characters, who suffer immediate reversals of fortune.

Questions About The Supernatural

1. Can any of the supernatural events in Macondo be explained rationally through science? Do science and magic intersect in the world of the novel? (Hint: think about alchemy.)
2. Why are the gypsies shown bringing both real objects (magnets, old-timey cameras) and magical devices (flying carpets)?
3. Magical realism is a genre in which events that would be jaw-dropping in real life are presented as completely mundane and part of everyday experience. Are there events in Macondo that really are jaw-dropping for the town's inhabitants? How are they different from the kinds of things the reader finds incredible? What's the effect of having characters and readers react so differently?
4. Why the yellow butterflies? Why the invisible doctors? Pick one character with a specific supernatural characteristic, trait, or prop, and explain its significance to this character.
One Hundred Years of Solitude: Theme of Sex

In One Hundred Years of Solitude, sex is shown to be an overwhelming, usually irresistible desire. However inappropriate the object of sexual desire might be (say, your sister or aunt), the drive to consummate the relationship causes characters to cast off any moral or ethical considerations that might hold them back. It follows, moreover, that the sexual experience itself is a transformative sensation so full of physical, emotional, and psychic pleasure that it frequently causes characters to abandon plans and dreams in order to pursue a repeat encounter.

Questions About Sex

1. Compare the different brothels in the novel. How is Pilar Ternera's makeshift borrowed room different from Catarino's store? And how are these different from the brothel of girls who go to bed because of hunger? What does each place say about the people who visit it?
2. Are there any other desires as strong as sexual attraction in the novel? Why is this specific human urge described as unstoppable and completely uncontrollable? Why is it always a transcendent experience?
3. Why does no one ever have bad or awkward sex (even Aureliano Segundo at least finds Fernanda extremely desirable)? Does the way sexuality is presented in the novel make us more or less judgmental of the characters' sex lives? Is that good or bad? Why?
4. How is female sexuality different from male sexuality in the novel? Do men and women want sex in the same way? Does desire tend to be presented as equal? Is sexuality different between the genders depending on whether the sex is taboo or not? Marital or extramarital?
One Hundred Years of Solitude: Theme of Warfare

One Hundred Years of Solitude uses the real-life civil wars that plagued Colombia for decades as the basis for Colonel Aureliano Buendia's rebellion. It also uses the historically factual massacre of banana plantation workers by soldiers colluding with the United Fruit Company as the basis for the novel's massacre. This historical borrowing allows García Márquez to take a somewhat heavy-handed approach to war. War is branded, at best, as a pointless exercise for showing an unflagging commitment to a cause, and at worst the most brutal and savage kind of violence that humans can perpetrate against each other.

Questions About Warfare

1. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, there is a lot of tension between political and military power. Why is this? Who ultimately has control over the direction of the civil war? How do you know?
2. One of the unquestioned principles of the book is that war is inherently irrational and dehumanizing. (Check out how Colonel Aureliano Buendia is shown literally becoming less and less human the longer he fights.) Does the novel take any other clear moral stands?
3. How does political violence shape the way people perceive reality in the novel? How is Colonel Aureliano Buendía viewed during the civil war? After the war? How is the banana plantation viewed before and after the massacre? Why?
One Hundred Years of Solitude: Theme of Fate and Free Will

Novels can sometimes overwhelm readers with a steady and growing awareness that what we see on the page is only there because of the whims of the author, who could easily have made other choices. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* sidesteps this pitfall by creating a world in which free will almost doesn't exist, where fate controls the actions and histories of every major character. Every prophesy and fortune-telling come to pass, and no one can escape the pull of what the cards have in store for them.

Questions About Fate and Free Will

1. Do any characters besides Melquíades have free will in the novel? How can you tell? Is anyone ever able to avoid a predicted fate?
2. Think about the different ways prophesy and prediction come about in the novel, from Colonel Aureliano Buendía being clairvoyant as young boy, to Pilar Ternera's tarot cards, to the curse of Úrsula's mother, to the writings of Melquíades. How are these similar and different? Do some seem more serious or respectable than others? Why?
3. Is the idea that fate is set in stone and free will is mostly impossible to achieve a depressing one or a paradoxically liberating one in the novel? What does it say about the characters? About Macondo?
**One Hundred Years of Solitude: Theme of Wisdom and Knowledge**

Much like memory, wisdom and knowledge are shown to be cyclically lost and regained in the *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Each successive generation needs to be educated, which requires adults who care enough to facilitate that process. Then there's the willful decision to turn a blind eye to unpleasant facts. By the end of the novel, Macondo has tragically devolved into a state of ignorance, illustrated by the way people are once again fascinated by simple displays of magnets.

**Questions About Wisdom and Knowledge**

1. Does any character consider himself knowledgeable? Wise? Do they share or hoard their knowledge and wisdom? Why?
2. Who in the novel has rigid and inflexible beliefs that are meant to stand in place of knowledge? Whose knowledge and understanding are more shifting and flexible as new information filters in? Is one of these styles of thought shown to be superior to the other?
3. Which characters' understanding and reason changes during the course of the novel? How and under what influence?
One Hundred Years of Solitude: Theme of Perseverance

No Buendía in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* lacks for energy, and almost none is lazy. One of the novel's overarching themes is the way human activity can be the engine for development, progress, and productive creativity – the kind of perseverance that creates civilization out of nothing. But that same energy can fuel selfish, pointless, repetitive, and fundamentally useless obsessions – the kind of perseverance that nurtures a lifelong hatred or enforces unfair and immoral rules on the less powerful.

Questions About Perseverance

1. Where is the line between too little determination, healthy perseverance, and overreaching? Can you think of characters who fall into these three categories? How are they similar? Different?

2. Compare the characters that most embody perseverance in a positive way. How are Úrsula's dealings with the house different than Santa Sofía de la Piedad's? Visitación's? Are there different ways to display perseverance when accomplishing the same task?

3. Now compare the characters who most embody perseverance in a negative way. For instance, what do Amaranta's self-denial, Colonel Aureliano Buendía's gold fish, and Meme's muteness have in common? How are they different?
**One Hundred Years of Solitude: Theme of Love**

There are very few examples of real, unselfish, requited love in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that are not met with the almost instantaneous destruction of the lovers. Although in principle the novel values love and holds it in high regard, the emotional whirlpool of the family and the fundamentally doomed nature of each character conspire to undermine any loving relationship.

**Questions About Love**

1. What's the relationship between romantic love and sex in the novel? Does one depend on the other? Does romantic love exist without sex? Does sex exist without romantic love (however temporary)?
2. Think about parental and filial love in the novel. Are there examples of genuine love between parents and children? Between siblings?
3. Which is more valued in the novel, requited or unrequited love? How do you know?
One Hundred Years of Solitude: Theme of Death

One Hundred Years of Solitude's version of mortality varies depending on who is dying and who is left behind to mourn. Early on, the dead are an important part of the lives of the living: haunting them as ghosts or being dragged along as bones as a form of remembrance. But later – aside from Melquíades, who is somehow able to defeat death – the dying really do disappear forever, especially as they start dying by the thousands rather than individually. Death is shown to be a lonely, isolated condition. Although the dead long for the living, the living soon forget about the dead.

Questions About Death

1. Why is the afterlife described as lonely by the two ghosts we see: Melquíades and Prudencio Aguilar? Why do the dead miss the living? Why don't the living miss the dead? (Or do they?)
2. Why does the novel end with a mega-death scene? What would be different about the experience of the novel if any characters remained alive at the end?
3. Why is there so much importance placed on the difference between early Macondo, before anyone died, and Macondo after the dead begin to be buried? What are the differences?
4. Compare all the dead bodies we see in the book (Rebeca's parents' bones, Fernanda's father, José Arcadio Buendía, the train of corpses, etc.). How do the descriptions compare? Does it matter who is looking at the bodies, or how they died?
One Hundred Years of Solitude: Theme of Family

Family is a virtual prison in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Inherited family characteristics are inescapable. Family life lacks privacy or freedom. And family fate is shared by all relatives regardless of their own personal characteristics or actions. No one who leaves the family can ever really stay away, and those who come into the family from the outside are unable to bring any new perspectives or ideas. Family members are so locked in to the emotional psychodrama that even those human relationships meant to be expressed with non-relatives, like sexual love, are turned incestuous.

Questions About Family

1. Why does Remedios the Beauty die? How does her character fit in in relation to her siblings? With her parents? Does her death show us anything about them? Why or why not? How would the book be different if she didn't die?

2. Compare the relationships between fathers and daughters in the book. How are they different from each other? How are they different from mother-son relationships?

3. Why are there so many children being raised by people other than their birth parents in this novel? Do these caregivers interact with their children differently than biological parents?

4. Which personality traits can you trace down through the generations? Which are an improvement over existing genes? Which are worse?