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The Fallacy of Time

by Lindsay Olsen

(Honors English 150)

The Assignment: Students were assigned to write a five-page paper that responded to one of seven prompts on Carlos Fuentes' "Aura."

You pull into the COD parking lot and look at your watch. It's 2:00. You're late for your honors seminar. Better hurry up. You run upstairs to room 3007 and open the door. The students and teacher give you a puzzled look, which you return to that sea of unfamiliar faces. "I'm sorry," you say looking towards the door, "I must have the wrong room." But you don't. You see the numbers – three zero zero seven. "Isn't today Thursday?" you ask looking at your watch, expecting it to answer. "Yes, now if you'll excuse us" the teacher says, slightly annoyed. You leave, but as you're shutting the door you hear, "OK class, did anyone watch President Nixon's speech last night?" Your heart skips a beat. "What's going on?" you mutter as you hurry into the bathroom. You look into the mirror and your heart stops completely, then races forward. It's you, but it can't be you. Your hair is graying. Your skin is wrinkled. It's like you've stepped into a completely different world. A world where time as you know it has been manipulated, destroyed. A world like – the one Carlos Fuentes creates in his novella "Aura."

When Felipe Montero crosses the threshold into Señora Consuelo's house, he too discovers a world where time as he knows it has no basis. He learns that time is a creation of man and cannot be trusted, and that the present and the future are dominated by the past.

When Felipe reads Señora Consuelo's advertisement in the paper, he is eager to apply for the job. He finds her house in "the old center of the city" (519). Before crossing the threshold, "[Felipe] give[s] a last look over [his] shoulder..." (519) – a last look at reality as he believes it to be. But the reality of time, as this historian knows it, is about to be proven as false as the existence of Señora Consuelo's young niece.

Throughout the novella, Felipe learns that time cannot be measured by the man-made clock. If man's clock were accurate, Aura would not live a lifetime in only three days. When Felipe first meets her, Aura is a girl of, he guesses, twenty, but when they convene in Aura's bedroom the next night, she seems to be a woman of forty (532). The following morning, Aura has aged even more. She temporarily hides her age from Felipe by covering her face with a green veil, but that evening he discovers the truth. He meets his lover in Señora Consuelo's room. She still has Aura's long black hair, but, Felipe discovers, she now has Consuelo's withered skin and "toothless gums" (539). Felipe then buries his head in what has suddenly become "Consuelo's silver-white hair" (539). Over the period of just a few days, Felipe's beautiful young Aura has aged before his eyes into a 109-year-old woman.

Felipe, too, appears to be aging. When he looks at the Llorente's old photographs, Felipe doesn't see Consuelo and the general. Instead he sees older versions of both Aura and himself. This is when he realizes the fallacy of time.

[He doesn't] look at [his] watch again, that useless object tediously measuring time in accordance with human vanity, those little hands marking out the long hours that were invented to disguise the real passage of time, which races with a mortal and insolent swiftness no clock could ever measure. A life, a century, fifty years: [he] can't imagine those lying measurements any longer, [he] can't hold that bodiless dust within [his] hands. (538)

It is in the love scene in Consuelo's bedroom where Felipe comes across the only measurer of time that he can trust. "[He hears] the breathing that keeps time with [his] own" (538). The woman in Consuelo's bed showed Felipe that time as he knows it cannot be trusted.

Therefore, it is only fitting that she be the keeper of true time.

In a tale where time is so completely manipulated, it is ironic that Felipe Montero is an historian. As Joseph Sommers explains in his book, *After the Storm*, “[he is] trained in the logic of ordering known facts into coherent larger expressions about man across time” (Sommers 179). As an historian, Felipe understands that time moves in a linear fashion. However, in the irrational world of Señora Consuelo, time proves to move in a circular manner. Consuelo and her husband married, aged, and the general eventually died. But through Aura and Felipe, the young lovers are together once again. Likewise, Aura comes into Consuelo’s world as a child, ages, disappears, but is then brought back again by the old woman. In Señora Consuelo’s world, history is lived and relived over and over again.

When Felipe comes to Señora Consuelo’s neighborhood, it is like he is stepping back in time, or rather, into a world where the past and the present coexist. The lower levels of the “old colonial mansions” (519) have all been “...converted into repair shops, jewelry shops, shoe stores, drugstores” (519). But as for the second stories,

Up there, everything is the same as it was. The jukeboxes don’t disturb them. The mercury streetlights don’t shine in. The cheap merchandise on sale along the street doesn’t have any effect on that upper level; on the baroque harmony of the carved stones; on the battered stone saints with pigeons clustering on their shoulders; on the latticed balconies, the copper gutters, the sandstone gargoyles, on the greenish curtains that darken the long windows, on that window from which someone draws back when you look at it. (519)

The “someone” who looks out the window, Felipe discovers, is in the house where he is headed – Señora Consuelo’s house.

The old woman’s house is dominated by the past. Inside it is filled with faded furniture, Gothic style carvings, an old-fashioned bathroom, archaic herbs, and General Llorente’s yellowed memoirs. The old house provides the basis for a theme that Fuentes uses throughout the novella – the domination of the past over the present.

The characters illustrate this theme nicely. There are, in essence, only two characters in the story – Aura/Consuelo and Felipe/General Llorente. Aura is the memory of Consuelo’s youth making them the same person, and Felipe is a reincarnated version of the dead general. The memories of the past lovers haunt the present, according to Joseph Sommers like “...a monster whose tentacles reach into present-day existence...” (179).

Felipe’s love of a woman who does not presently exist puts him at the mercy of the past, and he realizes this once he sees his own face on the general’s old photograph. But, Fuentes suggests, Felipe’s future is also controlled by the past. “[He buries] his face in the pillow, trying to keep the wind of the past from tearing away [his] own features, because [he doesn’t] want to lose them. [He] lie[s] there... waiting for what has to come, for what [he] can’t prevent” (538). Because of Felipe’s love for Aura, and his promise to love her even when she is old, he has no control over what will happen to him.

The interchangeability between past, present, and future is a theme Fuentes often explores in his fiction and in which he strongly believes. In “Travails with Time: An Interview with Carlos Fuentes” by Debra A. Castillo, Fuentes explains, “...the more you deal with time, you come to the conclusion that there is no time but the present. It is in the present that you remember the past; therefore, the past is in the present. And it is in the present that you desire; therefore, the future is in the present. All is present” (Fuentes interview). Fuentes also points out that “The present is the cause of the past in a novel...” (Fuentes interview), supporting the idea that Felipe cannot control what happens to him because of what happened in the past – he promised to love Aura forever, and is therefore at the mercy of the old woman.

Felipe Montero’s life will never be the same. He will never again lead a life of routine based on the man-made clock because through Aura, Consuelo has destroyed Felipe’s prior notions of time. And as long as Felipe loves Consuelo (which he promised will be forever), all of his days will be dominated by the past. They will be controlled by Consuelo’s memories of youth and love.

Fortunately, you made it to class alright today. Your life is still dictated by man's clock. But take caution. Should you look in the mirror one day to find an aged person staring back at you, remember this lesson which Fuentes teaches in "Aura." Man can make watches and write calendars, but he will never be able to control time. Time will always control man.

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