

# The Theory of Ghosts and Gods: A Comparative Study of White Deer Plain and One Hundred Years of Solitude

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## Abstract:

Ghosts and gods, as well as life and death, are mentioned in social and literary issues in many countries around the world. The literature of different countries has different expressions of ghosts and gods, and the concept of life and death. This paper will take “One Hundred Years of Solitude” and “White Deer Plain” as examples to discuss the similarities and differences between the concepts of ghosts and gods, and the concept of life and death. The two literary works are from Latin America and China, respectively. The way in which the concepts of gods and ghosts, and the concepts of life and death, are expressed in the two literatures will be explored in this article. Analysis of the two books in this paper is a good illustration of the differences. This difference is reflected in the antagonistic attitude between humans and ghosts shown in White Deer Plain and the symbiotic relationship between humans and ghosts shown in One Hundred Years of Solitude. This is due to the different cultures of the two different countries and the different ways of looking at death. What they have in common is that the characters all show a sad attitude towards death. Death in different cultures signifies parting, exaggerating an atmosphere of sadness.

**Keywords:** Literature; Life and death; Ghosts; Comparative studies

## 1. Introduction

In the literature of magical realism, the concept of gods and ghosts frequently appears. Magical realism, a literary genre with significant global influence, emerged during the explosion of Latin American literature from the 1950s to the 1970s. ‘One Hundred Years of Solitude,’ a representative work of magical realism, profoundly impacted Latin American literary creation. It narrates the fate of seven generations of the Buendía family, culminating in their disappearance. In China, the modern literary work ‘White Deer Plain’ won the ‘Fourth Mao Dun Literature Award’ in 1997 authored by the renowned contemporary writer Chen Zhongshi. This book primarily depicts the story of two families, Bai and Lu, in Bailu Village. Both works exhibit magical realist elements, delving deeply into themes of ghosts, gods, life, and death.

Previously, scholars worldwide engaged in heated discussions concerning ghosts, gods, and the issue of life and death, with more extensive research in sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. In the literary domain, fewer studies focus on ghosts, gods, life, and death. However, in China, some scholars have explored this aspect, particularly within ethnic minority literature. Ethnic minority epics frequently mention gods, ghosts, and life and death. Dating back to the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the renowned Chinese think-

er Zhuangzi contemplated life and death. Over history, prominent ancient writers continued to explore this topic. Novels featuring ghosts and gods, like ‘Journey to the West,’ enjoyed popularity during certain periods. In Latin American countries and other regions, religious elements often permeate literature, reflecting the profound influence of Christianity and delving into questions about the existence of gods and ghosts, the afterlife, and the origins of life.

Inspired by magical realist literature, many writers began actively contemplating the relationship between life and death. Works by Western authors often depict dialogues between humans and ghosts, such as ‘Hamlet’ and ‘The Divine Comedy’.[1] Despite some mentions among Chinese scholars, there is a lack of systematic analysis of ghosts and gods in literature. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring the impact of cultural differences on perceptions of life and death.

The comparative analysis in this article will examine similarities and differences in the understanding of life and death within the two works, focusing on relevant plot elements. Character portrayal is also crucial, and this article will analyze and compare specific characters from each work. In exploring differences, the article will attempt to identify causes and influencing factors, considering cultural disparities.

## 2. A Brief Description of the Work of One Hundred Years of Solitude

“One Hundred Years of Solitude“ is a masterpiece by Márquez, one of the most important Colombian writers, and is recognized as a masterpiece of Latin American literature and a representative of Latin American magical realist literature[2]. „One Hundred Years of Solitude“ revolves around the town of Macondo and the rise and fall of the Buendía family. The Buendía family is a large family, and the book recounts seven generations of the Buendía family. It begins with the first generation being tied to a tree and ends with the last generation being eaten by ants. Based on the plot in the book, such as the way the characters die, the concept of ghosts and gods embodied in „One Hundred Years of Solitude“ represents the concept of ghosts and gods in the region. In „One Hundred Years of Solitude,“ the living and the ghost, life and death, do not present an absolute opposite.

In „One Hundred Years of Solitude,“ the death of the beautiful child Remedès is magical. Her death was not heavy but very light and calm, as if she had never belonged to this world, and death only made her return to the world that belonged to her. The cause of Remedès‘ death was rising lightly in the courtyard, with happiness and warmth[3]. The plot of this novel does not depict death as terrifying. On the contrary, life and death as shown in the plot are portrayed as two worlds. Remedès is out of place in the world of life; she travels to another world of death. For Remedès, death itself has no definite meaning, nor does it for those around her. In Latin American literature, death does not seem to particularly mean a painful parting of life and death. Rather, it is just a naturally occurring phenomenon, an inevitable process.

In addition to the death of the beautiful child Remedès, the death of Melchiades is also an important plot of the novel. Melchiades hovered several times between death and alive, and even came back from the dead. For Melchiades, death is something that can be crossed at will. The members of the Buendía family did not react much to his resurrection but only thought that he had returned from an adventure. When Melchiades actually died, the first generation of José Arcadio tried to use a special method to foreshadow and wait, hoping that he would defeat death again and return from the resurrection. [4]Although Melchiades did not come back to life, his death was not overshadowed by grief.

In addition, the scene in which the ghost of the first generation of José Arcadio and his enemy is seen standing in the courtyard after a duel with his enemy is also worth noting. Neither José nor his wife were terrified of ghosts, relaying them to each other in a calmer manner and tone. That’s one of the reasons why they decided to move to the small town of Macondo to build a new home. Interestingly, this

is not out of fear of this ghost but just unbearable, as if an annoying neighbor had moved in next door. After the first José killed his enemy, the depiction of the ghost of the enemy is not terrifying, but rather the ordinary appearance of this ghost in the courtyard [5]. This way of describing life and death is no longer a stark opposition. The living and the dead live next to each other, creating a wonderful balance.

The above three excerpts about death from „One Hundred Years of Solitude“ are classic and distinctive. Many of the characters in „One Hundred Years of Solitude“ are like this, saddening death, but not feeling that life and death are opposites. Death is not shrouded in a terrible haze.

## 3. A Brief Description of the Work of White Deer Plain

„White Deer Plain“ is a novel written by the writer Chen Zhongshi. The novel is based on Bailu Village in the Guanzhong region of Shaanxi Province as a microcosm and depicts the historical changes in China from the end of the Qing Dynasty to the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century by narrating the grievances and disputes between the two families surnamed Bai and Lu [6].

At the beginning of „White Deer Plain,“ Bai Jiaxuan, one of the main characters, sequentially married seven wives, all of whom died mysteriously [7]. The deaths of these women have caused a strong sense of unease among everyone. Other families feared Bai Jiaxuan and were reluctant to marry their daughters to him easily. The plot essence reflects people’s fear and avoidance of death. As the author, Chen Zhongshi aims to express the changes of the times and his reflection on traditional culture through his works. Therefore, most characters in his plot reflect local Chinese culture [8]. The portrayal of the death of Bai Jiaxuan’s wives not only amplifies the heavy and depressing atmosphere of the story but also reflects the fear and awe of death and ghosts and gods in traditional Chinese culture.

Concerning the deaths of Bai Jiaxuan’s wives, the article provides a description with Chinese characteristics. It suggests a metaphysical event has occurred, indicating that Bai Jiaxuan’s fate has hindered the fate of his wives. This expression involving ghosts and gods reflects the belief that people hold a reverent and cautious attitude towards them, believe in fate, and sometimes even rely on it.

Another striking scene is the death of Bai Jiaxuan’s father. Bai Jiaxuan’s father suffered from a peculiar disease, prompting Bai Jiaxuan to seek treatment from a renowned doctor. However, the disease remained uncured, and Bai Jiaxuan’s father passed away. The relevant description of this episode depicts the anguish Bai Jiaxuan’s father endured during his illness, casting a horrific shadow over his death and making it evident that it was a regrettable tragedy.

Though Chen Zhongshi blurs the boundaries between the living and the dead, the underworld and the human world, through magical descriptions, in order to illustrate the depths of human nature in the conflict between humans and ghosts and to reveal the tragedy of human nature and the suffering of life, the characters' attitude towards ghosts and gods remains negative and resistant.

#### 4. Comparison of the Two Works

The comparison of these two works from different cultural backgrounds reveals many similarities and differences. The descriptions of these two novels, both from the perspective of characters and from the perspective of the plot, reflect people's different views on life and death and ghosts.

The first can be started by examining the similarities between the two. Faced with death, which means parting, the characters in the novels are all saddened. Whether Bai Jixuan faced the death of his father or José faced the death of Melquiades, they all showed resistance and reluctance to varying degrees, wanting to redeem the departure of their relatives and friends. Regardless of the historical and cultural context, death is a symbol of separation. Parting is undesirable. Both novels use death to render tragedy. This emotional response to death is a commonality among humans [9].

The difference between the two novels in relation to life and death, ghosts, and gods lies in the way the characters recognize and deal with the concept of death itself. In the eyes of Latin American figures, death is a necessary way for human beings, a normal natural phenomenon. Death, while sad, heavy, and serious overall, is not terrifying. In a different way of thinking about death, death is terrifying. From the perspective of Chinese writers, in the eyes of Chinese characters, death itself means pain and the greatest tragedy [10].

There are many reasons for this difference. One reason for this is the difference in cultural traditions. Death is viewed differently in different cultures. Traditional Chinese culture believes that people become ghosts after death, and ghosts are evil and terrifying. In China's Shang Dynasty, people had begun to revere gods, ghosts, and nature, resulting in the popularity of Wuzhu culture. So death is also rendered with horror. In Latin American literature, ghosts are not terrible, but people still have obsessions after death, and they are neighbors who are not so harmonious with the living, more like a natural product, not much different from flowers and plants. Another reason for the difference is Chinese and Latin American different historical experiences of cultures. As people known, China and Latin American countries have suffered from foreign wars of aggression or colonial wars. However, China has

a special history of feudal dynasties and has experienced a special baptism of Confucian culture. Confucian culture pushed many different elements against the human side and deeply influenced the people of the Guanzhong region in China.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the two novels *White Deer Plain* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* have similarities and differences in the concept of gods and ghosts.

From the same point of view, both *White Deer Plain* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* show sadness for human death. The characters in the novel all express regret or have unacceptable emotions about death. This is due to the fact that in the face of death, it is human nature to generate fear and express rejection.

From different perspectives, as a Chinese literary work, *White Deer Plain's* view of ghosts and gods also has distinctive Chinese cultural characteristics. In *White Deer Plain*, the characters are avoidant of death. Man and ghost are opposites. But in *A hundred years of solitude*, death was seen as a normal phenomenon. People and ghosts have reached a state of harmonious symbiosis, and ghosts are like neighbors of the living.

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