

World Literature Paper

**Free Will: An exploration of the extent of independence in Gabriel
García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold***

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Reflective Statement: Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

In our Interactive Oral, we discussed the ways in which both men and women were victims of imposed gender roles and the portrayal of characters' fates in the rigid, patriarchal, Latin American society of Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. During our discussion, we found examples of symbolism in the novella, analyzed the meaning and significance of the characters' names, and examined how religious names and symbols connected to the predestined fate of the characters.

Through our discussion, we determined how superstitious and religious symbols pointed towards the motif of fate. The sudden interruption of Santiago's peaceful dream and the brutal gutting of rabbits that morning foreshadowed his destiny – getting gutted by the Vicario brothers. We looked at Márquez's diction and use of imagery to foreshadow the inevitable murder and mentally transport the reader into this world, exemplified by the funereal weather and gloomy atmosphere that could only mean one thing – death.

From our discussion of Márquez's use of onomastics in the symbolic names of characters and their sealed fates, we established Biblical references in Santiago's name along with many others. Márquez uses numerous religious allusions throughout the novella to connect the characters' names to their destinies, exemplified by Santiago's murder, a symbolic allusion to the crucifixion of Jesus.

By discussing the specific roles of men and women in a Latin American context, we concluded that they were obliged to do what society demanded of them. Women were meant to either be mothers, or objects for the fulfillment of men's sexual desires. Men, on the other hand, were expected to adhere to the principles of machismo, familismo, and caballerismo, and behave like 'true men', exemplified by the killing of Santiago to restore Angela's lost honor. In this

patriarchal society's view, this honor killing was the 'right' thing to do. Whether the Vicario twins wanted to kill him or not was out of the question.

I think that the most useful part of our interactive oral was connecting discussed themes and events in the novella to the characters' pre-determined fates: what is destined to happen always happens. In Latin America, such instances of blood debt and honor killing were common. The rigidity of this society remained intact even after the brutal murder. People were merely terrified and shocked over the collective guilt of the entire town's crime. Márquez seems to criticize this extreme adherence to flawed social mores.

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It is often argued that, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (Universal). Such a statement suggests that the mere birth of a person into a society entitles them to certain rights and most importantly, freedom. Gabriel García Márquez explores the concept of freedom in the patriarchal society of the novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. The characters’ ability to make independent decisions is put into question as they are constantly influenced by its mores and expectations. A more extensive analysis of the factors affecting their choices exposes a lack of free will, with the characters constantly living under the surveillance of their community. The pre-established ideals and traditions are an absolute creed that, if not adhered to, results in severe consequences for the characters, like Angela Vicario, who deviate from their fixed roles in society. The town’s traditionalist nature, codes of honor, and expectations constantly influence the decisions of all the characters in the novella, mainly by imposing social constraints. The tumult of these figures, society’s high emphasis on the concept of honor, and the overpowering force of cultural codes render the characters powerless as they are unable to act independently.

The constraints placed on people’s lives in the society exposed in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* reveal the conservative mindset of the entire town. The social restrictions which the characters live under reflect the town’s inherent cultural doctrines. The cults of honor, image, virginity and gender roles are conspicuous in a town where a woman’s virginity and the reputation of her family hold greater significance than the woman herself. To maintain their family’s reputation and regain their sister’s honor, the woman’s brothers must publicly murder the alleged perpetrator, while no one in the entire town intervenes to stop the atrocious act.

Exploring the motives behind the characters’ actions and realizing their internal struggle reveals their lack of independence to the reader. Any attempt to deviate from social norms invites ruin on the individual as well as those attached to them. On the night of her wedding, Angela

Vicario must choose between feigning her virginity by “[giving] herself a drastic douche of alum water...and [staining] the sheet with Mercurochrome...” (Márquez 90) and revealing that she had been deflowered. Her mind is swarmed with chaotic emotions as she knows that her life itself will fall apart if her secret comes out. “[T]here was no public misfortune more shameful than for a woman to be jilted in her bridal gown” (Márquez 41). Angela has to agonize over her public image in addition to the immediate dilemma of Bayardo undressing her “openly in the lighted bedroom...” (Márquez 91). The turmoil escalates to the extent that she surrenders and ceases to hide her secret. “It was very easy...because I’d made up my mind to die” (Márquez 91). The agony that Angela endures results from society’s sacred view of virginity. After pursuing Angela despite her initial lack of interest, Bayardo San Román marries with “the illusion of buying happiness with the huge weight of his power and fortune” (Márquez 38), which ultimately leads to his doom. This event ruins him: he loses his wife and becomes a fat drunkard. Bayardo’s actions after the incident display his melancholy as he languishes over his loss and stained reputation in solitude. Along with his humiliation comes the abasement of many others, particularly the Vicario family. Yet, ironically, “[f]or the immense majority of people there was only one victim: Bayardo San Román....[T]he other actors in the tragedy had been fulfilling...their part of the destiny that life had assigned them....The only one who had lost everything was Bayardo...” (Márquez 83-84). Angela’s deviation from social norms results in not only her own ruin but also carries drastic consequences for those connected to her.

Honor plays such an essential role in the catastrophe that occurs in this flawed town that it becomes impossible for the characters to escape the invisible force of social expectations. The root of this entire catastrophe is the compulsion the Vicario brothers feel to uphold their family’s reputation in the town’s eyes. The Vicario brothers “had feigned a much more unforgiving

bloodthirstiness than really was true, to such an extreme...” (Márquez 49). Pedro and Pablo Vicario hesitate to kill Santiago, a friend with whom they drank and enjoyed their time at the wedding mere hours before. “[T]he Vicario brothers were not as eager to carry out the sentence as to find someone who would do them the favor of stopping them” (Márquez 57). They have to keep persuading each other to continue with the task. “[I]t hadn’t been easy for [Pablo] to convince his brother of their final resolve....[Pablo] put the knife in his hand and dragged him off almost by force in search of their sister’s lost honor” (Márquez 60-61). The Vicario brothers face several obstacles along the way that almost prevent them from carrying out their sentence. Colonel Lázaro Aponte takes their knives in Clotilde’s store, reprimanding them and reminding them: “[w]hat will the bishop say if he finds you in that state” (Márquez 56). They muster up the courage to carry on with their resolve because they are aware of the consequences of not doing so. “[Pedro] was also the one who considered his duty fulfilled when the mayor disarmed them, and then it was Pablo Vicario who assumed command” (Márquez 60). As Pablo says to his brother, “There’s no way out of this....It’s as if it had already happened” (Márquez 61). After they carry out their task, they burst into the parish house and surrender themselves. They admit that they “killed him openly...but [they’re] innocent....Before God and before men....It was a matter of honor” (Márquez 49). They cannot voluntarily succumb to the temptation of sparing Santiago because of the social factors which dictate their behavior.

The people in the novella cannot act and stop the tragedy due to the cultural mores that constrain them. The townspeople hesitate to stop Santiago’s murder because they believe that Pedro and Pablo must kill Santiago no matter what the circumstances. Pedro assumes Santiago to be “as good as dead” (Márquez 102) because the choice is not his to make, due to the rigid framework of their society. Some, like Prudencia Cotes even view it as the right thing to do: “I

didn't only agree, I never would have married him if he hadn't done what a man should do" (Márquez 62). Clotilde Armenta is one of the few who sees through the fog looming over the town and attempts to save the brothers by pressuring Colonel Aponte to detain them: "It's to spare those poor boys from the horrible duty that's fallen on them" (Márquez 57). It is as if an invisible force spread had spread over the entire town, repressing the people and ensuring that they docilely watch the incident unfold before their eyes. "He already had the face of a dead man" (Márquez 110). The characters all act as if they are puppets of fate, destined to do what has been written in the stars.

Pura Vicario is the embodiment of maternal perfection in the novella. Angela describes her mother as "devoted to the cult of her defects" (Márquez 92). Pura is so engrossed in living up to social expectations that people forget she even exists. "She devoted herself with such spirit of sacrifice to the care of her husband and the rearing of her children that at times one forgot she still existed" (Márquez 31). Inside the walls of their home, the Vicarios have recovered from the death of their middle daughter, but society compels them to express their grief in an exaggerated manner in public. Such is the extent of society's coercion to preserve their prestige that the family members "were still observing a mourning that was relaxed inside the house but rigorous on the street" (Márquez 31). Pura does nothing to intervene in her sons' decision as she knows that the murder must happen to protect the family's honor. The obligation of fulfilling social expectations becomes so overpowering that she doesn't think rationally and becomes a medium through which the system exerts its control over people.

In conclusion, it becomes evident that all the characters in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* are unable to make independent decisions. The chance events leading up to Santiago's murder, the codes of conduct, and fate, all determine the characters' choices. They all do what they must to fit into, and be accepted by, the watchful society. They do not want to be condemned as criminals for

neglecting the town's implicit laws. When they fail to meet these expectations, the consequences destroy not only them, but also the lives of those closest to them. The constant pressure to do what is "right" renders the characters powerless to decide, whether the choice is to kill, for Pedro and Pablo, or to lie, for Angela. The characters in the novella cannot freely make their own decisions.

Works Cited

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