

Gender roles in chronicle of a death foretold



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In Garcia Marquez's novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, the different roles of men and women in this 1950's Latin American society are prominently displayed by various characters. The named perpetrator of a young bride is murdered to save the honor of the woman and her family. Apparently, in Colombia during the 1950's, men were expected to take care of the family and protect family dignity, while women were brought up to marry and maintain the household. In this novel, Garcia Marquez uses his characters as tools to display the cultural gender roles within the *Chronicle*.

The men depicted by Garcia Marquez are expected to uphold the honor of the family no matter what the cost. With this premise in mind, Garcia Marquez created the Vicario twins, the brothers of Angela. Garcia Marquez stresses the theme of "twins" with the Vicario brothers to convey a duality motif. This double-sided sense deals with the fact that there are two brothers (twins), yet also has a deeper meaning; the boys have two ways of thinking about the murder. On the one hand, they believe killing Santiago is necessary to redeem their family's honor. On the other, the Vicario brothers don't really want to murder Santiago; the gravity of the situation (determined by their cultural norms) practically forces them to. Clotilde remarks, "She was certain that the Vicario brothers were not as eager to carry out the sentence as to find someone who would do them the favor of stopping them" (Marquez 57). The boys attempt to avoid killing Santiago on numerous occasions, first announcing at the market that they were actually going to perform the murder (a ploy that could lead to the murder's prevention). They also conveniently tell twenty two people about their plan. Despite their struggle, upholding their sister's honor is more important than

going to jail for murder. The Vicarios are mainly concerned with matters of family reputation, while Pablo's girlfriend and the other members of society are concerned with being associated with them. Pedro Vicario, "the more forceful of the brothers" (28), almost refuses to go through with the plan to kill Santiago. Pablo, surprisingly, steps up to the plate and convinces his brother to go along with the plan: "So he put the knife in his hand and dragged him off almost by force to search for their sister's lost honour" (49). This shows that cultural norms come even before the emotional welfare of the twins. In precisely this manner, Garcia Marquez uses the Vicario brothers to exemplify the expectation of men to uphold honor in this society.

Garcia Marquez also employs various other male characters to put into effect the theme of men being dominant over women. One of the most relevant characters here is Santiago Nasar, the protagonist of the story. Though we never truly discover whether or not Santiago is guilty of deflowering Angela, his reputation doesn't do much to help his case. Santiago is known for his pushy passes at the young women of the village, including Divina Flor. Divina's name is symbolic for her purity, which can be juxtaposed sharply against Santiago's aggressive sexuality. In fact, Santiago's sexual advances towards the women demonstrate the normality of men using women as objects in this society. Another important character in light of this theme is Bayardo San Roman. Bayardo practically forces Angela to marry him when the two don't even know each other. He buys her love with expensive things, but doesn't take the time to actually get to appreciate her; he thinks that his money and good looks will be enough. This maneuvering shows how men

expected women to only want to marry them because of wealth and looks, once again demonstrating a woman's expectation of marriage.

There are other respects in which Garcia Marquez draws on the Vicario family as the primary example of gender roles. Angela Vicario is possibly the character in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* who most clearly demonstrates the expectations on women in the community. Angela's name literally means "angel", a fact which is extremely ironic in light of her situation. However, Angela's name isn't simply a contradiction of her real self; it also reflects on the expectations of the people around her. The villagers assume that Angela is pure and angelic; one of the most important values in this society is virginity. Women were expected to remain chaste until marriage, and this sacred idea held a crucial place in this town. The prime example of the importance of virginity was Angela's discretion. Angela Vicario's name symbolizes the expected gender role placed on young women in the society of the *Chronicle*. Garcia Marquez also uses Pura Vicario to develop this theme. Pura has a social obligation to look after her daughter, and make sure that her household follows the rules of society. Her name is symbolic as well, and means "pure." Naturally, Pura's frustration and anger towards Angela could be based on the importance of purity to her.

Garcia Marquez utilizes various other, somewhat more minor female characters to exemplify the theme of female virtue and its social importance. One other character of interest here is Prudencia Cotes. Prudencia's name means cautious, a quality which can definitely be applicable in her situation. Prudencia declares during the narrator's interview: "I never would have married him if he hadn't done what a man should do" (62). Prudencia's very

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name suggests that her belief is considered wise, shrewd, and good judgement by the people of the town. This further emphasizes this society's muddled value of upholding honor. It also further demonstrates the expectation of men to uphold honor. A final woman character who exemplifies cultural gender roles is Clotilde Armenta. Clotilde shares ownership of a milk shop with her husband. By day, milk is the main product of the shop. Garcia Marquez uses milk to symbolize female nurturing; Clotilde watches over the twins in a way, telling them not to kill Santiago in front of the bishop, and confiding in the Colonel that neither of the boys really wants to commit the murder. By night, the milk shop turns into a bar, with alcohol being the main product. Alcohol generally symbolizes violence and turmoil, and is known as a "man's drink". Clotilde's shop symbolizes the contrast between men and women in this society. A third female character employed is Divina Flor, whose name actually means "Divine Flower". Divina is another example of the expectations of society upon women; she is pure and chaste and rejects Santiago Nasar's aggressive advances. Through the use of female characters, Garcia Marquez demonstrates the cultural gender roles placed on women.

In almost every culture, a series of basic gender roles have influenced the lives of everyday people since youth; in some cultures, these rules are as concrete as law. Garcia Marquez's depicted culture exemplifies traditional roles of cooking, cleaning, and child-raising that have been carried out by women in similar societies in the past. In this society and time, a woman's main role is to become a wife; "Women were reared to be married" (27). Women also have other traditional roles in the Chronicle. The narrator

describes these roles when speaking of Angela and her sisters: “ They knew how to do screen embroidery, sew by machine, weave bone lace, wash and iron, make artificial flowers and fancy candy, and write engagement announcements” (27). Despite the traditional gender roles in this novel, there is also an example of a more interesting role that isn’t as prevalent in this society. Angela and her sisters belong to the “ Cult of Death”, which involves “ sitting up with the ill, comforting the dying, and enshrouding the dead” (28). It is said that none of the other girls in the village participate in this so called cult. This demonstrates Angela’s deviation from the cultural traditions, foreshadowing how she breaks the sacred rule of remaining a virgin later on in the novel.

Garcia Marquez utilizes the characters of his book to portray traditional and cultural gender roles in this Colombian society. He uses the Vicario twins to display the role of men to uphold honor, Angela and Pura to demonstrate the expectations placed on women, Santiago and Bayardo to describe male dominance, and Clotilde, Prudencia, and Divina to put to use the theme of females in this society. Through his use of name symbolism and motifs, Garcia Marquez is also able to employ the gender role theme (duality motif, milk symbolizing female nurturing). Thus, Garcia Marquez meshes together characters and symbolism to create a society in which the most important value is the distinguished gender roles of males and females.