

It takes a village: the
role of provincialism
in chronicle of a
death foretold



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In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Gabriel García Márquez creates a set of characters who each represent a certain aspect of close-minded human nature as a whole. It is this style of character development that allows the reader to understand that, despite the fact that the two actual murderers of Santiago Nasar are Pedro and Pablo Vicario, each individual townspeople plays his or her own role in the murder. When looked at from afar, it becomes clear that Santiago is not murdered by Pedro and Pablo, but by the town as a collective being influenced heavily by provincialism.

On the morning of Santiago's impending death, the entire town is bustling with excitement because the bishop is coming. When the bishop finally comes, however, and all he does is stay on the boat, making the sign of the cross, and keeps "doing it mechanically...without malice or inspiration" (17), the townspeople feel slightly let down. When the author says later that this is only "a passing annoyance" (17), however, it becomes clear what this event reveals about the characters in the town and, by extension, human nature by and large. Based on general knowledge of Latin American culture as well as the preceding and subsequent events of the novel, the reader can conclude that the setting of the work is extremely Catholic. If the bishop who is highly respected but never directly involved in the townspeople's lives at all is taken as a symbol of Catholicism, this event uncovers the people's desire to cling onto old traditions simply because they are ingrained into society. Even though the bishop does not accept any of their gifts or even get off the boat for them, their annoyance just passes away and they continue to be as devout as they previously had been, for the sole reason that Catholicism is the way they know. This is an important element of the novel, because it can

be argued that Santiago is killed by the entire town due to its unwillingness to let go of tradition (in this case, the idea that a woman who does not remain a virgin until marriage is damaged) despite the changing times. Throughout the novel, Márquez develops a wealth of symbolism for the Catholic church, and the bishop is the most prominent and clearly defined facet of this.

Another aspect of Márquez's style that allows the reader insight into the author's view of humans as provincialists is the excuses his characters make when asked why they did not try to warn Santiago. In nearly every case, the character says something along the lines of, "It just didn't seem like they would do it," followed by some sort of oblique metaphor to support his or her belief. When the narrator asks two butchers if the fact that the Vicario brothers often slaughter animals shows a predisposition to kill, they respond first by saying that the Vicarios were just drunk and never meant to do harm, then by remarking, "When you sacrifice a steer you don't dare look into its eyes" (52). It is clear what this is meant to imply: that the Vicario twins are good people because even when they slaughter their own animals, it is morally difficult for them. However, a statement like this does not appear to be a very solid basis for the formation of an opinion regarding the loss of a man's life. Another similar instance is when Cristo Bedoya discusses warning Santiago with Victoria Guzmán. When Cristo says that the twins' remarks should not be taken lightly because they are drunk, she responds with, "That's just it...There's no drunk in the world who'll eat his own crap" (105). This is another metaphor that can be compared to the one about the steer, because it is clear that the implication is that the Vicarios will not live up to

their words. However, it is not completely relevant to or substantial in the situation, nor is it a solid foundation to come to a conclusion. The weak lingual structure of the metaphors used by these characters serves as a parallel to the flimsy groundwork of the morals of the provincial society and, consequently, the narrow mindset of the people who live in this society that ultimately kills Santiago Nasar.

The final scene in the novel, in which Santiago is finally murdered, ties together all these references to the traditions of the society and solidifies the reader's assumptions about Márquez's opinion regarding these traditions. When Santiago is killed, there are many striking resemblances to the crucifixion of Christ, which is ironic because most of the townspeople believe Santiago to be a sinner and are not likely to compare him to a figure as sacred and holy as Jesus himself. One similarity is the location: Jesus was crucified on a wooden cross, and Santiago is killed against a wooden door. Another is the method: Márquez makes sure to point out when Pedro's knife goes "through the palm of [Santiago's] right hand," (117) leaving a gash similar to the wounds Jesus suffered when nailed to the cross. Another is the characteristics of the victim: Santiago is wearing white, and the first few times he is stabbed the knife keeps "coming out clean...[without] a drop of blood" (118), and this indicates purity almost on a supernatural level that could be compared to that of Jesus. It is ironic that a murder so similar to the crucifixion, what is now considered a tragic event and something from which to learn, occurs in such a religious society. Not only does the parallelism incorporated into the final scene reveal the small-minded nature of the town's population, which is unable and unwilling to expand its beliefs in the

slightest, it also reveals its hypocrisy. They call themselves devout Catholics, yet they all collectively carry out a murder that could be considered, basically, a reenactment of the negative incident on which their entire religion is based.

Another point to be made about the novel's closing scene is the style with which it is narrated. It is very blunt and to the point, no embellishments necessary, and it is as if suddenly the book has become realtime, moving agonizingly slowly. After it seems that there is no chance that Santiago is still alive, he manages to rise again and walk around his house, through the neighbor's house, and finally back into his own kitchen. The final paragraph is narrated very flatly, and it hardly feels like an ending: " He stumbled on the last step, but he got up at once. ' He even took care to brush off the dirt that was stuck to his guts,' my Aunt Wene told me. Then he went into his house through the back door that had been open since six and fell on his face in the kitchen" (120). As he is walking around, slowly dying, he is completely alone. It is as if all the novel's preceding events have taken place with dramatic background music, but during the final scene, it is abruptly cut off, and all the reader is left with is the lonely thudding of Santiago's footsteps, carrying him to the bleak end of a life of hopeless isolation. Even when he passes by other people, they do not talk to him because they are " paralyzed with fright" (120). This emphasizes, again, the town's hypocrisy, not only with regards to religion but just toward life in general. Each character has participated in the murder, which was definitely a cooperative effort, and yet once it has been committed, all they have are excuses and guilt; God forbid anybody actually try to help Santiago in his time of need. It

is possible for them to make the excuse that before the murder, they did not believe it was actually going to happen, but what is their excuse afterward? Maybe he could not have been saved, but the fact that nobody is willing to acknowledge him, a Christ-like figure, when it really matters, shows that even though all the townspeople are Catholic, it is not the actual teachings of Jesus that shape them, but the provincial restrictions that religion has placed on their minds.

There are various stylistic and literary tools Márquez uses to achieve the final effect of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, including figurative language, characterization, narration, and symbolism, and when tied together, these tools produce a new meaning for the journalistic chronicle of the murder of Santiago Nasar. By creating a small town to serve as a microcosm for human nature, Márquez highlights his scorn for provincialism and how heavily it has affected society, and in so doing he warns the reader of the dangers of this narrow mindset.