

Honor codes and ritual contrition



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Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is a relatively small book, yet it is open to countless interpretations as to the book's overall purpose. Here I will discuss two such interpretations: Isabel Alvarez-Borland's analysis sees the novella as asking why a senseless murder was allowed to occur; Carlos J. Alonso focuses on the point of the text being a ritual means for redemption. Both analyses are strongly argued and very conceivable, offering valuable insights into the text and developing meaningful interpretations. Isabel Alvarez-Borland's "From Mystery to Parody: (Re)Readings of Garcia Marquez's *Cronica de una muerte anunciada*" asks why the town allowed the murder to transpire when there was ample opportunity to stop it. The analysis blames the town's hypocritical honor codes for Santiago Nasar's death and indicts the townspeople for their complicity. In this society, the women must remain virgins until marriage or else they are considered defiled and damaged. The men, on the other hand, seem to do as they please with no social repercussions. They even solicit whores before and even after marriage. For example, the narrator declares of Maria Alejandrina Cervantes, the town whore, "It was she who did away with my generation's virginity" (Garcia Marquez 74). Indeed, in this view, the townspeople's mentality is to blame. This social code is a blatant double standard, strictly censoring the women's sexuality while the men go out and have promiscuous sex. In reality, Santiago is himself quite the womanizer, going around "nipping the bud of any wayward virgin who began showing up in those woods" (104). The town is so entrenched in these antiquated beliefs that the Vicario brothers are eventually absolved of the murder. The court accepts the argument that the murder was a necessary defense of honor, and after three years in prison, they are free men. The murder plot is

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known to almost everyone because the Vicario brothers make no secret of their plan. The town's knowledge of the murder plot is illustrated by the narrator's ironic comment, "There had never been a death more foretold" (57). The death is foretold to practically everyone except for Santiago himself. It seems absurd to think that the murder is allowed to take place, or that Santiago is not warned sooner, with such an abundance of foreknowledge. Pablo and Pedro Vicario feel so strongly bound by their society's honor codes that they kill a man. In fact, the reader gets the sense that the Vicario brothers do not even want to kill Santiago; they are just doing it because they feel duty bound to do so. They believe that their family's honor can only be redeemed through the public murder of Santiago. They cannot back down because the honor code binds them to a course of action. The amount of social pressure that is upon the boys can be seen in Prudencia Cotes's startling statement, "I knew what they were up to...and I didn't only agree, I never would have married [Pablo] if he hadn't done what a man should do" (72). The only way they can be stopped is by the people around them, but the townspeople fail to prevent the murder. The town accepts and lives by this honor code which allows murder to regain respect. By failing to stop the murder, every person has, to some extent, been an accomplice to the crime. Alvarez-Borland's analysis goes on to state that the last two sections of the story can be viewed as the author's condemnation of the townspeople. In the second to last section, the narrator describes the autopsy as a massacre, a murder after the murder. This coupled with the grisly depiction of the actual murder "can thus be viewed as a motivation for the reader to realize, with the implied author, the dire consequences of hypocritical honor codes" (Alvarez-Borland 221). Also, as the analysis points

out, the point of view changes from “ I” to “ we” in the fifth section, which “ can be taken as further evidence of the condemnation by the author of the narrator and the townspeople, thus presenting a scathing comment on the corruption of their moral values as well as their institutions” (221). The book reveals the town as it really is: ugly and dirty. In fact, after the crime that these antiquated honor codes have led to takes place, the entire town seems to fall apart. Filled with a collective guilt, the town is changed forever, perhaps symbolized by Bayardo San Roman’s house and car: “ The house began to crumble. The wedding car was falling apart by the door, and finally nothing remained except its weather-rotted carcass” (Garcia Marquez 100). Don Rogelio de la Flore dies at the shock of seeing how Santiago is murdered. Santiago’s former fiance, Flora Miguel, runs away with a lieutenant who then prostitutes her in a nearby town. Divina Flore, now overweight and faded, sits surrounded by her children from various fathers. Every person suffers a different fate, from death to insanity to that of the narrator, but it seems certain that the town has paid the price for their sins. While Alvarez-Borland’s analysis looks at *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* as a text that explores why the murder is allowed to happen, Carlos J. Alonso argues that the novella’s purpose is to reenact the murder as an attempt at redemption. In “ Writing and Ritual in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*” he asserts that the text is merely a means of recreating the crime, not understanding or accounting for it. The ritual reenactment of the offense “ is an attempt to endow the crime with the prescribed order of ceremony, thereby overcoming the centrifugal and fortuitous character of the original events” (Alonso 265). The townspeople feel a tension that they try to alleviate by calling the day’s events fate. They find themselves constantly “

trying to give order to the chain of many chance events that [have] made absurdity possible, and it [is] obvious that [they aren't] doing it from an urge to clear up mysteries but because none of [them can] go on living without an exact knowledge of the place and the mission assigned to [them] by fate" (Garcia Marquez 113). Calling it fate makes it easier to accept that a murder that could have and should have been prevented took place. It serves to lessen the guilt felt by the townspeople. The story, Alonso argues, is told simply for the cathartic nature of storytelling. The chronicle's purpose is the reliving of the murder in an attempt to relieve the town's and the narrator's tension and guilt. However, the very fact that the story is a ritual reenactment means that it can never serve as the instrument of redemption. With each reading and rereading of the story, the reader relives the murder. It is an endless cycle of violence that is never cleansed. In fact, Santiago is killed many times throughout the text. There is, of course, the grisly murder that appears at the end of the book, but Santiago Nasar also dies symbolically in his dreams. The night before his murder, for instance, Santiago's dream contains the unlucky omen of birds. His mother, who is an experienced interpreter of dreams, curiously misreads her son's warning, something she will never forgive herself for. Victoria Guzman also kills Santiago symbolically in the kitchen as she guts the rabbits, to Santiago's disgust, thereby foreshadowing his own disembowelment. Also, as mentioned above, the autopsy is a gruesome mess in which Santiago is butchered once more. With the continual act of murder after murder, the book can offer no contrition. The only information that is gained from reading the story is the same limited data that is available to the narrator. He does not uncover any more truly significant facts than the investigating

magistrate before him. He does not discover the truth about Santiago Nasar's guilt or innocence. It is clear that the reader must look beyond this for the true purpose of the story. It may be a condemnation of medieval traditions and beliefs, or it may be a pass at penitence. Perhaps it is a comment on the corollaries of murder or a dissertation on the psychology of mass complicity. The text is open to several different interpretations, and thus should be approached with an open mind.

Works Cited
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