

Cultural context in scarlet letter and chronicles of a death foretold

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Context matters. Cultural context can affect the fundamental assumptions, beliefs, and aspirations that they bring to the reading of a text and in many novels this is the case. Context matters because it creates a relationship between the reader and the writer and it helps build meaning. Novels such as *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, written in 1850, and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, by Gabriel Márquez, written in 1981, both touch upon social differences in society and portray their main characters in a particular way based on their own lives and the way they see things. Both Hawthorne and Márquez's understanding of the world around them influenced how they developed their characters. Depending on the culture of the reader, text can be interpreted in different ways because of what the accepted cultural norms of their cultures are.

Nathaniel Hawthorne has made his view of puritanism very clear through his novels, including *The Scarlet Letter*. Born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts, Hawthorne was forced to live a life steeped in Puritan legacy. Hawthorne's great-great-grandfather John Hathorne was a judge who condemned people to die during the 1692 witch trials. Hawthorne was understandably ashamed of his ancestor and critical of Puritanism, its belief system, and its rigidity for persecution of non-Puritans. His criticism is evident in the characterization in *The Scarlet Letter*. Even though he has these ancestors, he has made it clear that he does not agree with their beliefs. Hawthorne even changed the spelling in his name, adding the 'w' so the link with Hathorne would not be as clear. The principles and practices of puritanism demanded reforms in doctrine, polity and worship, and greater strictness in religious discipline.

Hawthorne's objection to puritanism is shown through his writing. While the

Puritan community shows nothing but hatred towards Hester and Dimmesdale, Hawthorne shows compassion and sympathy, making his disagreement with this religion even more obvious. So as you can see, context influences writers like Hawthorne, and their stories. Without Hawthorne's background of living life in puritan society, his views of how horrible it is never would have been created nor would the book and characters like Hester Prynne have been. Hawthorne's grandfather being a cruel judge that punished people unfairly made Hawthorne feel pity towards these said people, hence his creation of Hester, whom throughout the book he shows compassion for, and whom he eventually turns into a strong character that held her head up against the puritan belief system and embraced their punishment. He represents puritans as evil and harsh, because that is how he spent his whole life viewing them.

The context of how he grew up influenced him and led to his creation of the *Scarlet Letter* and how he developed the characters in it. Part of how we understand a text is the setting, symbolism, plot, conflict, and other literary features. First, Hawthorne begins with discussing how judgemental the Puritans are of other religions and toward those being punished. In the first chapter of the *Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne uses grim imagery to describe the Puritans and their society. He throughout the novel makes puritan society seem dark and gloomy to show his discontent for it. He represents Hester Prynne as a woman who is way too harshly punished for her sin because he grew up watching his grandfather do the same thing to innocent people. He writes the plot as it is to make a statement about puritan society and its

negative elements. The symbolism of the actual scarlet letter is the most important way to show how harsh the puritans were. Hawthorne uses the scarlet letter to represent the judgement. Hester got for her sin. Eventually the A becomes a good thing to stand up to Puritan society because of how much Hawthorne hates it.

As for Gabriel Marquez, author of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, his life also influenced his writing and how he portrays his characters. Marquez grew up in the small town of Aracataca and he was born in 1927. He grew up under the care of his grandfather who was a pensioned colonel from the civil war at the beginning of the century. He grew up in the midst of Latin American culture that consisted of machismo, pride, honor, and catholicism. He lived as a child surrounded by war, death, and dysfunction which influenced him to write this novel the way he did. Catholicism is another part of the culture he grew up knowing. Catholic beliefs such as the prohibition of pre-marital sex and chastity are major ideals in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. He saw as a young child the ideals placed between men and women where men were seen as the only ones that could really get things done, and had to maintain a certain level of “ machismo” to keep up with their reputation. The central theme of machismo in the society of the novel reflects what Marquez saw in his own society and the fact that while Marquz grew up he saw how important honor was, this reflects the “ honor killings” seen in the book. If he had never experienced growing up in these conditions he would have never chosen to write his books with these terms. The context of his life is what shaped the characters in his book, made the Vicario brothers so obsessed

with honor, made Angela only valued for sex because that is all women were seen for, and why Santiago was made to be a dog to keep up his machismo. These certain values and nature of Columbian society were used to create an imminent connection to readers.

The literary features Marquez chooses to use demonstrate more in depth how he represents his characters and help readers to understand why he portrays things the way he does. Marquez criticizes his own society and finds flaws in it. One literary element he uses is symbolism. The priest from the novel goes against catholic preaching and accepts the idea of honor killings just because he is influenced by society. This represents symbolism, the symbolism of mob mentality, because they claim religion is so important to them but the priest values honor and murder over what a priest really should value. Another literary element he uses is theme. The central theme of machismo in the book reflects his own society where mostly males dominated. This is also linked with the theme of honor as seen in the honor killing of the innocent santiago just to protect someone else's honor. Another symbol is the way women are represented. The concept of machismo places emphasis on the male dominance over the female race where pre-marital sex was taboo for women but was very much encouraged for men to have. Marquez uses machismo to explore the double standards to male and female sexuality in Latin society as he saw as a child. He also uses honor killings as a symbol to preserve honor and pride. People in society were seen as nothing if they weren't honorable. Everyone in the village knew about the possibility but no one did anything. Marquez did not agree with this which is

why he displayed it this way. The pre marital sex is also a symbol of double standards between men and women. Angela lost her pride when she slept with a man before marriage which is why she had to hide it from her future husband and her brothers had to restore her pride by killing the man she slept with. Marquez reflects these flawed values of marriage he finds in his own society through the values seen in the novel.

In conclusion, context effects how a writer tells their stories and depending on the culture of the reader, text can be interpreted in different ways. Hawthorne and Marquez both would not have had these stories to tell if it wasn't for what influenced them.