CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD BY GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ

(online study Material for SemVI)

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'Chronicle of a Death Foretold' came out in 1981 in its Spanish original after a gap of some six years in the literary career of Garcia Marquez. During these years, the author had been busy with politics, mainly Colombian politics, which resulted in all sorts of trouble for the man, even a threat to his life. In March, 1981, when he was in Bogota, Garcia Marquez received some information that the Colombian Government was trying to associate him with a guerrilla movement called M-19 and there was a secret plot to assassinate him. He fled the country in a hurry and took asylum in Mexico City. In such a turbulent political situation, the publication of Chronicle of a Death Foretold was a very significant event, more so because the book was an astounding success with two million copies being sold in a matter of a few weeks. The real-life incident, on which the novel was based, however, had taken place some thirty years before in 1951 when the political scenario of Colombia was much more disturbed, reeling under a prolonged period of bloodshed and massacre called La Violencia. Although exact dating is impossible, it is generally held that the large-scale violence started with the assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, an emerging popular leader of the Liberal Party, on April 9, 1948. So, the murder of Cayetano Gentile, a friend of Garcia Marquez, in 1951 in the small Colombian town of Sucre was no isolated incident of violence, although it was basically an honour killing. The death of Cayetano was no more than a symptom. The author here relates the honour killing to the general atmosphere of violence in the town as well as in the entire country. Garcia Marquez gives an account of his immediate reaction to the news of Cayetano’s murder: My immediate reaction was a reporter’s. I decided to travel to Sucre to write the story..... What interested me was no longer the crime itself but the literary theme of collective responsibility. Two things are quite evident in the above extract: in the first place, the acts of homicide were nothing uncommon or unnatural in Colombian towns at that point in time, and secondly, the two murderers of Santiago Nasar should not be burdened with the whole responsibility of the gruesome crime because they are the products and also the victims of the society they belong to. The entire community has to take the blame as it fosters such an attitude of machismo that makes it almost mandatory for the two brothers to take revenge upon the person charged with their sister’s deflowering. Notably, they try their best to get somebody to stop them as they continue to move about the town in a drunken state telling everybody that they are going to kill Santiago Nasar. But, surprisingly, nobody feels the necessity to stop them from committing such a heinous crime or to warn Santiago of his impending danger. Perhaps, the prevailing social code of machismo prevents the townsfolk to see the criminal side of the act as they take such honour killing for granted. Garcia Marquez says: Still, the truth oft is that I wasn’t really gripped by the subject until, after I’d chewed it over for many years, I discovered the vital ingredient - that the two murderers didn’t want to commit the crime and had tried their utmost to get somebody to prevent it, without success. This is the only really unique element in the drama, the rest is pretty commonplace in Latin America. It is this “unique element” marked by the author that keeps the action in the novel going and regulates the reader’s surprise as well as suspense. There is no suspense,
however, as to who commit the murder, but it is about how the murderers are finally able to accomplish the job. García Márquez takes pains to highlight the situations and little turns in action that could have averted the atrocious crime. Indeed, the readers seem to be itching their palms at some points in the text to do something, to prevent the murder, but at the next moment they feel that nothing can be done since it has already taken place. Given the nature of the subject matter, the title of the book, i.e. Chronicle of a Death Foretold has often been questioned. ‘Chronicle’ or ‘cronica’ in Spanish is an old method of recording some events or people in history, in which the story element is kept intact. In many Latin American countries, ‘Chronicle’ is a current and valid genre for conveying important events, which stands between journalism and literature. It is very much in vogue in Brazil and, in the U.S.A. as well some newspaper columns resemble this Latin American genre.

García Márquez’s Chronicle, however, makes a mockery of this form as it is, according to the author himself, “a sort of false novel and a false reportage”. We might add that García Márquez here deliberately breaks away from the traditional one-dimensional narrative in which the authority of any one voice is unequivocally established. In this novel, many versions of a single event or situation are juxtaposed by a non-committal narrator in order to blur the question of authority. This kind of narrative also foregrounds the unstable nature of journalistic or historical truth. García Márquez merits an important niche in the history of Spanish American belles lettres with his short stories and journalistic writings. His journalistic fervour helped him to lend authenticity to his stories. A reading of his journalistic writings during the initial period of his writing career shows a young twenty-year-old writer experimenting with a variety of styles, techniques and genres. The novels of the Boom period were self-conscious novels concerned with the repressive political regimes of Latin America, which manipulated language and truth for ideological ends. García Márquez has long been a political The characters in his novels are haunted by solitude, incest, war, ghosts and tormenting passions, characteristic of the spirit of the nation. García Márquez achieves a fusion of non-traditional art forms like myth, folktale, legend and linear history, inspired by the oral tales of his grandmother. His journalistic fervour helped him to lend authenticity to his stories. A reading of his journalistic writings during the initial period of his writing career shows a young twenty-year-old writer experimenting with a variety of styles, techniques and genres. They provide a sense of daily life in Colombia with many cultural and political events that give the sense of the times. Bert N. Pierce in his study of the journalistic writings of García Márquez believes that "all the themes of his later fiction, as well as many of his writing techniques, can be found in the news, stories, articles, commentaries, columns and reviews he produced for newspapers before he became well known as a writer of fiction" (64). In Chronicle of a Death Foretold (1981), García Márquez recounts the murder of a man for allegedly violating the law of honour. The novel questions the values of an entire community that sanctions the murder with its silent complicity in all its machismo, racism and violence. Magic in the sense of the unreal or the extraordinary is further toned down in the next novel, i.e. Chronicle of a Death Foretold (Cronica de una muerte anunciada). The world is more recognizably the world of Colombia guided by the dangerous ideals of machismo. In his conversation with his friend Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, García Márquez unequivocally declares that only in this book he was able to do exactly what he wanted to do. This novella is based on a real life incident that took place in the year 1951 in a small Colombian town named Sucre. Garza Márquez’s friend, Cayetano Gentile was killed by the two brothers of a young school teacher. The charge was that he had seduced their sister who could not prove her virginity on the wedding night and
consequently was thrown out by her husband. The writer recalls the genesis of the novel which was originally planned as a newspaper article in the first part of his autobiography, Living to Tell the Tale, in these terms. It seemed to me that the subject was eternal and I began to take statements from witnesses, until my mother discovered my hidden intentions and begged me not to write the article. At least while Cayetano’s mother, Dona Julieta Chimento, was alive, the most important of the reasons being that she was my mother’s comadre, because she had been godmother at the baptism of Herando, my brother number eight. Her statement - indispensable in a good article - was of great significance. ... No argument convinced my mother, however, and it seemed a lack of respect to write it without her permission. But after that not a day went by that I was not hounded by the desire to write the story, ... My mother remained firm in her determination to prevent this despite every argument, until thirty years after the drama, when she herself called me in Barcelona to give me the sad news that Julieta Chimento, Cayetano’s mother, had died without ever getting over the loss of her son. But this time, with her strong moral sense, my mother found no reasons to interfere with the article. ... The story with the title Chronicle of a Death Foretold was published two years later. The author has been able to transform the mere incident of a murder into a poetically conceived artistic creation capable of yielding aesthetic satisfaction even to the reader who does not know anything about the real life crime. Significantly, here he uses the first-person narrative very innovatively that shuffles different points of view held by different people from various classes of the society. This gives the author the scope to blur the difference between fact and fiction, never imposing his own point of view upon the ongoing action. Let us now turn to the so-called ‘magical’ elements in the text and see how this magic transforms itself into the social reality of Latin America. As always with any Garcia Marquez novel, the opening of Chronicle of a Death Foretold is a landmark in the history of the so-called detective genre:

On the day they were going to kill him, Santiago Nasar got up at five-thirty in the morning to wait for the boat the bishop was coming on. He’d dreamed he was going through a grove of timber trees where a gentle drizzle was falling, and for an instant he was happy in his dream, but when he awoke he felt completely spattered with bird shit. (Chronicle of a Death Foretold, p. 1)

At the very outset, Garcia Marquez straightaway states the major event of his drama and he uses it as a refrain at several points in the text. The absolute finality of the situation with no mystery about it completely reverses here the structure of a whodunit fiction. Time in this novel keeps on moving backward and forward with constantly shifting points of view, while the frame structure is maintained by the narrator persona. The plot inevitably leads to the climactic enactment of the act of murder, which is intentionally deferred up to the closing of the text. Who commit the murder is pretty clear from the beginning, namely, the two brothers, Pedro and Pablo, of the distressed bride Angela Vicario, who surprisingly keep on telling people that they are going to kill Santiago Nasar and strangely again, nobody stops them. But the two mysteries are never cleared in the text: why people do not warn Santiago beforehand, and whether he is really the culprit behind Angela Vicario’s loss of virginity.

Although magical elements are fewer in number here than in the other two novels already analyzed, the supernatural or the fantastic makes easy inroads into the daily lives of the characters in the text. Santiago Nasar’s mother, Placida Linero, has got good repute as an interpreter of other people’s dreams, “provided they were told her before eating”, ironically though, she grossly misinterprets her own son’s
Santiago Nasar is described to keep all the guns of his house in one place and hide the ammunitions in another far removed, because: It was a wise custom established by his father. The cook of Santiago Nasar’s household, Victoria Guzman and her daughter, Divina Flor do not warn him because they despise him a little for he has an intention of seducing the daughter. Moreover, Divina Flor seems out of her wits “when he grabbed her by the wrist with a hand that felt frozen and stony, like the hand of a dead man”, (p. 12) Clotide Armenia, the owner of the milk shop cum bar, too has the impression that “He already looked like a ghost”, (p. 13) The bishop’s visit which is a very important thing on the fateful morning, and which Santiago Nasar goes to see so eagerly, has been described by the author as a “fleeting illusion” as “the bishop began to make the sign of the cross in the air opposite the crowd on the pier, and he kept on doing it mechanically afterwards, without malice or inspiration...” (p. 16) These are actually the author’s literary devices of creating an atmosphere of apprehension and foreboding. Along with these portents of death, there is grim suggestion of violence because Santiago keeps heavy guns, even sleeps with a gun in his bed, and the household cook, Victoria Guzman, chops rabbits with a knife and threatens Santiago with the same knife. The bishop’s visit has been rightly termed a “fleeting illusion” (p. 16) by the author as he takes a dig at the snobbery and hypocrisy of some of the religious leaders. The bishop flatly ignores these sincere offerings and he does not care to get down from his boat as he thinks it much below his dignity. He simply floats by the village, mechanically blessing the petty mortals. Garda M&erquez is equally critical of the town priest, Father Carmen Amador, who is more worried about the bishop’s visit than about the life of a young man. Even after receiving the message from Clotide Armenta, he does not feel it necessary either to warn the man somehow or to inform the police. This kind of callousness only shows how little respect the author has for the religious leaders who preach compassion and fellow feeling, the qualities they themselves are devoid of. We may recall here the priest in One Hundred Years of Solitude, namely. Father Nicanor Reyna, who extracts money from the people by means of his tricks of levitation. Bayardo San Roman, who returns his bride Angela Vicario on the wedding night, has been given some magical charm. He arrived at the small town all of a sudden “looking for someone to marry”, (p. 25) Indeed, he sees his would-be wife in a half-awake state sitting in a rocking chair and tells the landlady of the bachelors’ boardinghouse to “remind me that I’m going to marry her”, (p. 28) Many strange things come to be said about the man who appears like a comet in the town until he brings his whole family there. His father is the special attraction for everybody. As for how he met his would-be wife, there exist many versions and the author never ascertains which one is correct. Bayardo San Roman’s father, General Petronio San Roman, a hero of the civil wars of the past century is said to have fought Colonel Aureliano Buendia. This kind of reference to the characters of his other novels (as Colonel Aureliano Buendia is the central male figure in One Hundred Years of Solitude) is an amusing technique often used by the author to give a sort of pseudo-historicity to his favourite creations. It is very strange the way Santiago Nasar calculates the cost of the wedding night and thereby gives the narrator a haunting memory: In the church he estimated that they’d set up floral decorations equal in cost to those for fourteen first-class funerals. Santiago Nasar had often told me that the smell of closed-in flowers had an immediate relation to death for him and that day he repeated it to me as we went into the church. “I don’t want any flowers at my funeral.” unusual, but it is a consciously employed literary device by the author to enhance the atmosphere of premonition. Indeed, his funeral takes place the very next day and the narrator has to see to it that there are no floral tributes. It is like King Oedipus in Sophocles’ tragedy, who out of his hubris abuses the prophet Teiresias...
for his blindness, little knowing that he will have to blind himself very soon when he discovers the
agonizing truth. It is worth noting here that Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex happens to be the most favourite
book of Garcia Marquez. In his relationships with women, Santiago Nasar appears rather frivolous. He
often visits the brothel of Maria Alejandrina Cervantes and plays silly tricks with the mulatto girls. It is
Santiago’s whimsical frivolity in his relationships with women that makes the accusations of Angela
Vicario believable to the townsfolk. Significantly, the epigraph of the novel, quoted from a poem by the
great medieval Spanish-Portuguese poet Gil Vicente, underlines the violent and predatory aspect of
love: (“the hunt for love/is haughty falconry”). The dogs of Santiago Nasar’s household behave strangely
once they get the smell of blood; Divina Flor cries out: “What they want is to eat his guts”. They are sent
off to a far away place, but they somehow return again howling fiercely, and then only Placida Linero,
the bereaved mother, orders them to be killed, (p. 73-74) Moreover, the manner in which the autopsy
report of Santiago is made cannot but be magical. Strangely again, a medal of the Virgin of Carmel that
the man swallowed at the age of four is found “in the midst of the morass of gastric contents”, (p. 75)
The smell of the murdered man gets stuck to everything and everybody around him. When Bayardo San
Roman leaves the town along with his family, the farmhouse bought from widower Xius begins to lose
all the valuable things one by one. The widower Xius happily thinks that it is his deceased wife who is
taking away the things that legitimately belonged to her. Finally, extraordinary is the way Bayardo San
Roman returns to his deserted wife Angela Vicario. He returns with all the two thousand letters that his
wife kept on writing unanswered for long seventeen years: “They were arranged by date in bundles tied
with colored ribbons, and all unopened”, (p. 96) The manner in which the autopsy is carried out is
magical in the sense that it defies all reason. We wonder how a mayor of a town can be so foolhardy as
to order autopsy to be performed by a priest who “had studied medicine and surgery at Salamanca, but
had entered the seminary before he was graduated, and even the mayor knew that his autopsy would
have no legal standing.” Santiago’s autopsy is also symptomatic of the sacrilegious treatment that the
corpses were subjected to in such small towns in Colombia during La Violencia. The case of finding a
medal of the Virgin of Carmel from within the stomach of Santiago strengthens the interpretation of
Santiago as a Christ figure. Perhaps this little token of goodness symbolizes the intangible goodness that
Santiago carries inside himself like a medal. Further, the stab wound in Santiago’s right hand resembles
one of the wounds of the crucified Christ. Even if Santiago took Angela’s virginity, the Vicarios make him a
sacrificial lamb, just as Christ was. The novel, however, ends with a meticulously depicted murder scene
that also has something unreal about it. It is strange how Santiago Nasar is able to get inside his house
and walk up to the kitchen with so many fatal wounds all over his body “in a state of hallucination,
holding his hanging intestines in his hands”, (p. 121). This might be an exaggeration on the author’s part,
but this is commensurate with his stature as a tragic hero. In the history of tragedy, the heroes have
often been shown to perform even tougher jobs to command respect and admiration from the
audience. In tune with this kind of an eerie atmosphere of the novel, the initial response of the reviewers
to it was one of awe and wonder. As this novel, apart from being a mock-detective story, has elements
of a moving tragedy, a hubristic portrayal of Santiago is quite natural on the author’s part. The author
holds the entire community responsible for the murder as it maintains a dangerous, outdated and
ludicrous code of honour. The setting comes alive with the details given about the people’s beliefs and
superstitions, age-old conventions and dead habits. The author’s indictment of such a society, especially
for its anachronistic cult of machismo, ultimately comes from a reformatory zeal which is often thwarted
and even throttled in real life by the reactions of the society and the state, but which, nevertheless, gets firmly encoded in the fictional reality of his works.