Reading Angela’s Scarlet Letters

One of the most common motifs in literature is the coming of age journey. It usually goes something like this: the young protagonist sets out on an adventure and as time goes on, he or she encounters numerous obstacles and grows into a both morally and mentally mature adult. However, while Angela Vicario certainly does undergo drastic character change throughout *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Gabriel García Márquez does not make it just another generic coming of age story. Angela’s character development is unique because the reasoning behind her character isn’t always obvious. From her submissiveness to her mother, to her inexplicable infatuation with Bayardo San Roman, to her own maturity, Angela’s character is influenced by a world of machismo, gender roles, and blatant sexism. What’s more, Márquez spins a coming of age character who is greatly influenced by the elusive concept of love. As a teenage girl still finding her way through the world around her, Angela Vicario’s underlying quest to discover and understand love is what makes her development even more complicated to analyze. It’s also what makes her progression from a compliant daughter, to a crazed outcast, to finally, her own independent woman, one that is especially unique, perplexing, and provoking.

Angela Vicario starts out as an obedient girl. Her mother, Pura Vicario, teaches Angela to be subservient while preparing her for marriage. This is where Angela begins to diverge. After learning that Bayardo San Roman, a wealthy, handsome, and powerful man, is planning on courting Angela, Pura decides that “a family dignified by modest means had no right to disdain that prize of destiny” (34). Angela, however, hates the idea of marrying someone she barely knows but ultimately complies with her mother’s wishes. The question here is why, exactly, does she comply so easily? Angela’s submissiveness to her mothermakes sense since she lives in a world where machismo is an attractive trait and castes hold a heavy presence over society. But Angela admits that Bayardo “seemed too much of a man” (34) and that she “detested conceited men” (29). The readers delve deeper into the text, they realize that Angela’s priority isn’t to follow societal expectations of machismo and caste, but rather, it is to please her mother. Márquez’s development of Angela is unique because he begins to incorporate Angela’s search for love right at the start of her character. Like any child, Angela strives for praise from her parents, most notably from her mother. But instead of offering Angela love, Pura beats fear into her. The narrator even notes that Angela “had a helpless air and a poverty of spirit… she seemed more destitute in the window of her house… making cloth flowers and singing songs about single women… (32). Yes, Angela could have been influenced somewhat by machismo and wealth, but her compliance to Pura is mostly expected because Angela will do anything if it means her mother will be pleased. Angela is ever the obedient and quiet daughter, and the absence of parental love and her hopefulness for that love are her biggest motivators. So when Pura dismisses Angela’s meek complaints with a cold “‘love can be learned’” (35), she simply obeys. Maybe Pura will love her for marrying Bayardo. By the time she marries him, however, Márquez is already writing, quite literally, the next chapter of her life.

After marrying Bayardo, he soon discovers that Angela’s not a virgin, and the disgraced ex-bride becomes an outcast. He returns her back home and for over the next ten years after the incident, Angela Vicario completely derails. The narrator reveals that Angela “spoke about her misfortune without any shame in order to cover up… the real one, that was burning her insides… that Bayardo San Roman had been in her life forever from the moment he brought her back home (91). The most confusing thing about Angela’s character during this time of her immense shame is her inexplicable sudden obsession over Bayardo. If Bayardo’s exaggerated masculinity and his brash behavior repulses Angela, then how can she fall for him the minute he returns her home? Perhaps it’s the fact that humans always desire what they can’t have. Angela realizes that Bayardo was the ‘what could be’ and the ‘what could’ve been’ in her life. Because of that, after she sees him leave the hotel for good, “she was reborn. ‘I went crazy over him… out of my mind’… Unable to get a moment’s rest, she wrote him the first letter (92-93). Angela’s love letters to Bayardo are the height of her insanity. Her letters outline the fact that he is simultaneously both the bane of Angela’s existence and the great love of her life. Márquez uses these letters to develop her character from the submissive daughter to an utter outcast, not just of society, but of her own family and everything she’s known. Angela deeply resents her mother for stealing her free will and hindering her quest for love. In fact, as Angela’s “life as a rejected wife continued on… when her mother went to bed she would stay in the room until dawn writing letters with no future” (93). However, regardless of why she suddenly falls for Bayardo and writes the letters, what’s important here is ultimately the fact that Angela wrote them. Her character is starting to experiment with her newfound freedom, no matter how crazy and how shameful. She’s breaking out of her cage and transforming into her own woman.

Angela’s final transition from her passionate insanity into her independent, calm demeanor is one that happens in the midst of an avalanche of feelings and emotions. During her last stage, she begins slip into insanity, writing impassioned letters to Bayardo. Márquez actually also uses the same letters as a segway into Angela’s gradual maturation. The narrator describes Angela as “so mature and witty that it was difficult to believe that she was the same person… she had nothing in common with the person who’d been obliged to marry without love at the age of twenty” (89). But how does she get to such a peaceful point in her life? As Márquez continues to write, readers discover that out of Angela’s downward spiral, a new woman is born, hardened and purified by the furnace of her past. Angela’s letters had grown more and more crazy, fueled by her transformation into “mistress of her own free will, and she became a virgin again just for [Bayardo], and she recognized no other authority than her own nor any other service than that of her obsession” (93). While Angela’s insanity is evident here, it’s important to note that she finally recognizes herself as a “mistress of her own free will” (93). Soon after that, Angela writes Bayardo “a feverish letter, twenty pages long, in which without shame she let out the bitter truths that she had carried… From then on she was no longer conscious of what she wrote nor to whom she was really writing… (94-95). There. That was the moment Angela finally matured. She’s no longer writing to Bayardo, she’s writing to herself. She’s done chasing after the love of her mother, after the “learned” (35) love of her fiance. She’s now chasing after the love of the independent, grown, free woman who stands in front of her. Angela writes Bayardo those love letters in an attempt to reach him, but instead she’s really looking for herself. The letters which start as an outlet for her insanity ended up bringing Angela closure, finally helping complete her evolution into an independent woman.

Angela Vicario’s dynamic character throughout *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is one that is confusing and inexplicable at times. While her change in demeanor from when she was a daughter to a outcast to a woman is easy to spot, it’s difficult to analyze all the underlying emotions, logic, and motives that ultimately factor into her development. Yet, despite the twists and turns that Márquez creates, Angela Vicario is arguably the most relatable character in the novel, but how does that make sense? Angela’s emotions are extremely bipolar and inexplicable. No one will truly know the exact reason as to why Angela suddenly becomes infatuated with Bayardo. In addition, when the suspicious narrator asks Angela if her alleged perpetrator was Santiago Nasar, she simply waves his question away. Angela is an enigma. But that’s exactly why she’s such an accurate reflection of a real coming of age story. Through Angela’s perplexing development from an obedient daughter to a hysterical outcast to finally a mature, independent woman, Márquez pulls bits of magical realism from the novel to show readers that aspects of it can exist in reality too. Nearly no one goes through a linear, straightforward path of growing up. Emotions are fickle things and they are often extremely controlling, leading to inexplicable patterns and actions, especially as one’s character begins to mature. At the end of the novel, readers realize that Angela is just another teenager, struggling to grow up, experiencing love, drama, and life for the first time. Therefore, Angela’s turbulent character is exactly what makes her so uniquely understandable. She’s relatable because so many watching her grow can’t truly relate to her pain, suffering, and innermost thoughts. And that is the ultimate tragedy of humanity, reflected by Angela Vicario and all her scarlet letters.

Works Cited

Márquez, Gabriel. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. 1982. Random House, Inc. New York