Cobourg Collegiate Institute

ENG 4UI

Religious Symbolism in Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

Author:
Peter Kowalchuk-Reid

Supervisor:
Ms. C. Stone

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In *Chronicle of a death foretold* Gabriel Garcia Marquez relies on his reader's shared understanding of Christian and biblical themes. He creates biblical narratives, and then uses them for irony by ending these narratives in unexpected—and often disappointing— ways. He uses Christianity's two most widely known stories as the basis for the novel: the story of Genesis and the Passion of Christ. These two sections of the bible both offer a view into Colombian society at the time. By using the Bible as a basis for the novel, he is able to play upon reader's shared expectations. He uses the irony of biblical figures forced to deal with earthly problems as a way to criticise both the society he is writing about, and the religion that controls it.

The portrayal of Santiago Nasar as an analogue of Jesus of Nazareth is one of the novel's key images. Marquez creates similarities between the two men that are obvious, the most striking being that Santiago Nasar and Jesus both wear all white; a traditional sign of purity. The two men share the common cultural heritage of all Semites as "people of the book"[4, 3:113]. There are multiple allusions to Christ's passion in Santiago Nasar's murder. When Pablo and Pedro Vicario kill Santiago Nasar, they choose to use knives, this is significant because in Christianity the piercing of the body of Christ plays a major symbolic role. The placement of stab wounds through the hands, and that Santiago Nasar's hand was pinned to the wooden door all evoke images of Jesus being nailed through his hands to the cross. The detachment of the brothers echoes the detachment of the romans as they killed Jesus.

Both the passions of Christ and of Santiago Nasar contain miracles, for Jesus it was water pouring from the wound in his side, for Santiago Nasar it is that nothing at all would come out of his many wounds. All the time the brothers are stabbing him, Santiago Nasar remains composed, and silent: "He didn't cry out again" echoes Jesus' silence on the cross "he opened not his mouth"[2, Isaih 53:7]. After Santiago Nasar is stabbed, despite being riddled with wounds and holding in his own guts, he rises from the ground and is able to walk calmly around his house, speak to the narrator's aunt and go in through the back door before collapsing. This is Santiago Nasar's resurrection, he should have died long before , but he instead rises from the ground and walks calmly "with his usual good bearing, measuring his steps well," [1, pg. 120] After his resurrection he first speaks to a woman: Wenefrida Marquez, this is analogous to Jesus' first appearing to Mary Magdalene. By making Santiago Nasar so closely resemble Jesus, Marquez gives

us certain expectations for how his character should be treated. In a town so deeply Christian as Nasar's, we expect his treatment to be just and compassionate, as Christ taught.

After his death, the similarities between Jesus and Santiago Nasar are broken. When Jesus was killed his body was carefully prepared for burial by being anointed with herbs and wrapped in linen. The way Santiago Nasar's body is prepared comes as a surprise, we expect him to have a burial similar to that of Christ, but instead he is left in the care of an incompetent priest and student to be badly autopsied and stuffed with lime, left to sit in a hot room while the dogs beg for his guts. Marquez creates deep irony by showing the novel's Christ figure in such an undignified burial. Through this irony, the villagers are exposed as the hypocrites that they are, the godly people, who are willing to do anything for the Bishop, do nothing to stop the crucifixion of one of their own. Pablo and Pedro Vicario even go as far as to tell father Amador that they are innocent "Before God and before men", the irony being that they killed a man representing God in the form of a man and yet still claim they are innocent before both.

After their wedding, Marquez establishes Angela Vicario and Bayardo San Roman in a narrative that parallels the story of Adam an Eve. Angela mirrors Eve, Bayardo in turn mirrors Adam. Their house in a lush tropical setting is meant to evoke images of Eden. While Marquez strongly parallels Genesis, he does not replicate it. Unlike in the bible, — where God is ever-present — in *Chronicle of a death Foretold*, God is nowhere to be found. God isn't there to pass judgement or offer guidance. In his absence, Bayardo tries to act as God, using his wealth and influence in imitation of God's power. For the most part his imitation is successful, the villagers come to believe him capable of anything. [1, pg. 27]

In both couples the woman was brought into the story to please a man. Eve is fashioned of Adam's rib. Bayardo finds Angela Vicario, and buys her from her family. He chose a girl who was raised in a sheltered house. He wanted a sheltered wife because she will be easier to control. With no greater perspective to draw on, she is unable to realise the injustice of her oppression. [1, pg. 34]

In Genesis and *Chronicle of A Death Foretold* the God figure uses control of knowledge to place the woman beneath him. Both Eve and Angela are

kept ignorant, so as to limit their power. Angela is controlled through her sexuality, never allowed to learn the reality of sex, only ever being told old wives' tales. When Angela Vicario chooses to reveal her lost virginity to Bayardo, she is taking that power from him. She is choosing to assume the place of an equal. God is by nature jealous [2, Exodus 20:50] and will accept none as his equal. Just as God would not accept Eve as an equal, Bayardo cannot accept Angela as his. Colombian society taught him he should dominate his wife, and he believes it. This misguided belief causes him to destroy both his and Angela's lives. This is the tragedy of the story, because of the values instilled in him, — values intended to help married couples — both him and Angela are denied paradise.

Angela Vicario's life after her expulsion is reminiscent of the sentence given to Eve by God "and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.[2, Genesis 3:16]" Angela Vicario is ruled by desire for Bayardo San Roman, even after many years of separation she still writes to him with slavish devotion. These letters go unread ans unanswered. These letters are prayers to a god who has forsaken her.
Where her sentence breaks from the biblical narrative is when Adam and Eve are cast out, they are cast out together. When Angela Vicario is cast out, she is abandoned, by her husband, but not set free from his will. She remains imprisoned by social constructs, she is never allowed to marry again, and her life is deprived of any meaning beyond regret.

Angela Vicario's experience shows the influence of liberation and feminist theology that was then beginning to hold sway in south America, and the conflict that would create between the old guard of the church ans women seeking equality.[3] Marquez's retelling of the story of the garden questions some of the most important tenants of catholicism: original sin, and patriarchy within the family. The characters in the book are unable to overcome these ideas, but their experience leads the reader to question them. In his interpretation of the story, Marquez is progressive, for him the tragedy of being expelled from paradise is one, in which it is not woman who is to blame, but God.

The two testaments of the Christian bible, are the only universal references available to an author. The bible permeates western culture. The narratives in the bible are so often repeated in art, that they become tropes, so often repeated that we come to expect certain endings and certain morals to come out of them. Marquez is able to leverage these expectations by ending his

biblical allegories in ways that reflect the social reality of his day. He reset the story of the Passion of Christ to highlight the hypocrisy of those who profess their Christian values but would not act to save him, and CHANGE he reset the story of Genesis to highlight the hypocrisy of men in their interpretation of original sin.

References

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