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### Márquez: Death as Transformation

In a 1991 interview with *The New York Times*, Gabriel García Márquez remarked that death for him will occur on “the day [he’s] not working,” summarizing the inevitable quality of death as the end of life (Cohen). In portraying his own death this way, Márquez sows a similar sense of magical realism into the meaning of his writing as he does within the communities that confront death in his stories. That is, beyond the superficial notion of death, life is supernaturally able to persist through what it has left behind. The manner in which the people closest to death are able to reflect upon it offers commentary into death as a means for the living to contemplate the meaning of life. Márquez’s use of death allows the departed to function beyond their physical selves, serving as the context to which communities confront and reinvent themselves through their acknowledgment of the dead. In his short works “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” and “Chronicle of a Death Foretold,” Gabriel García Márquez establishes a process of acceptance and transformation that societies encounter in their reflection on death and the deceased.

The death of Esteban, the protagonist in “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World”, acts as the means by which the villagers in the story undergo a process of renewal and transformation. They begin with a supernatural acknowledgment of Esteban’s body upon discovering him, believing initially that perhaps his “ability to keep on growing after death was [merely a] part of the nature of certain drowned men” (Márquez, “Handsomest” 1). Parallel to

this appearance of physical growth, Márquez begins to instill a growing spirituality in the manner of influence Esteban will come to have on the villagers. Indeed, not long after uncovering his body, the villagers had become so “breathless” at the sight of him, his very presence had left “no room for him in their imagination” (2). Suspending our belief, the reader identifies Esteban as, from the words of the critic Gabrielle Bellot, “a fantastical [corpse] imbued with life...despite being dead” (Bellot).

In their attempt to personify him, the villagers seek connection to a stranger who is becoming more meaningful to them than any of them could have been to themselves. They claim for instance that although Esteban must have “bore his death with pride,” they are equally certain that his “huge body [had] bothered him even after death,” eulogizing a man that nobody had actually ever known (Márquez, “Handsome” 2, 4). And yet, even among “the most mistrustful” of men, the villagers could not help but to accept that “there was so much truth in [Esteban’s] manner” (6). Accounting for Márquez’s use of “truth,” the reader can identify the point at which death begins to gradually allow the villagers to transcend their own mundane perceptions of themselves and the world around them.

Change in the villagers’ perception of Esteban, as though he had been one of them, expands into a change in the perception of the villagers themselves. “As they faced the splendor and beauty of *their* drowned man,” an innocuous moment of seeming to possess him, the villagers “for the first time...became aware...of the desolation of their streets, the dryness of their courtyards,” and most pointedly, “the narrowness of their dreams” (7). In Márquez’s slow burn of emptiness, the villagers become painfully aware of the bubble they have subjected themselves to. To break away from living within this self-imposed cycle of ignorance would thus require a shift in the village itself.

“[Knowing] that everything would be different from then on,” the village initiated its own reconstruction, allowing for “wider doors, higher ceilings, and stronger floors” before “going to paint their house fronts gay colors to make Esteban’s memory eternal” (8). This self-transformation, cultivated from a newly enlightened village, brings onto itself a new universal identity. In “future years,” this identity would not only come to represent a wide recognition of “Esteban’s village,” but a manifestation of the universal itself (8). Symbolic of this idea of the universal, Márquez closes with a great and decorated “captain,” who can claim Esteban’s village “in fourteen languages,” cementing in this characterization the villagers’ overcoming of themselves (8).

In “Chronicle of a Death Foretold,” the reader reconstructs the death of Santiago Nasar through the perspectives of a society firmly rooted in a violent and misguided concept of honor. After recognizing Nasar’s death as a murder, the reader questions the motive of the Vicario brothers and the community itself, specifically in their reluctance to save Santiago given that the “reasons were understood down to the smallest detail” (Márquez, “Chronicle” 35). We discover motive through the recollection of Father Amador in recalling Pedro Vicario’s seeking of him after the murder; Pedro admits, “we killed [Santiago] openly...but we’re innocent...it was a matter of honour” (29). Thus, the reader will come to characterize Márquez’s use of “honour” as a twisting fluctuation between two distinct modes of it: violence as revenge and retribution, an adequate defense against a charge of murder and the role of the community in its silent acknowledgment of the violence that surrounds them. At the behest of this duality in honor, we find justification in “the investigating [magistrate’s]” depiction of the town as its own “open wound;” one that can find its healing however through a reflection on the circumstances surrounding Santiago’s murder (58). Healing, its own process of acknowledging death, requires

the community to confront the perceptions they hold on themselves, especially since Nasar's death in particular "had never been...more foretold" (30).

The narrator, a nameless investigator presumably Márquez himself, suggests that Santiago Nasar "died without understanding his death", resting onto its witnesses and by extension, the audience, the task of giving explanation to it (59). Among subtle differences in the society's idea of justice, similarities arise in the people's reluctance to prevent Nasar's death. Placida Linero, for example, Santiago's own mother, "had locked [her] door at the last moment," turning away from her son's murder "but with the passage of time...freed herself from blame" (57). In contrast to Placida, Cristo Bedoya, a friend of Santiago's, implies a long-lasting shame that followed his failure to warn Santiago of the Vicario brothers' plan: "If I'd known how to shoot a revolver, Santiago Nasar would be alive today" (64). In the court, a symbolic and institutionalized form of honor and justice, the reader acknowledges that Nasar's "very behavior during his last hours was overwhelming proof of his innocence" and that not "a single clue" points to him having "been the cause of the wrong" (58, 59). In his last moment of life, Santiago's "reaction was not one of panic, as has so often been said, but rather the bewilderment of innocence" (59).

With this in mind, the reader can't help but to think that the community had to have also been aware of "the twins' simple nature," that is, an "[incapability] of resisting...insult" (59). Ultimately, death itself places the community at odds with its own perception of it. These conflicting perspectives, an interrelated mix of violence, honor, and the role of the community become the lasting remnants of Santiago Nasar's legacy, represented only through the memories of those still confronting his murder. In this sense, Nasar's death does serve as the platform to which his community can achieve a greater sense of themselves and their views on *honorable*

violence. Similar to Esteban's villagers, the community as a whole would require a total change in order to effect a change in the perceptions of its people, elevating them to a more enlightened status. However, Márquez implies by the end of "Chronicle of a Death Foretold" that the community will only continue to struggle internally until they can distance themselves from the narrowness of their beliefs and fully consider the community's collective role and responsibility in Nasar's death.

Of all that Latin American culture has brought to the United States, Márquez points to the "Latin way of loving and of dying" as the most meaningful influence "above all" (Cohen). Claiming that Latin Americans are "always more shocked by death" than most, he unequivocally associates death as connected to their "passion for life" (Cohen). Therefore, "shock" is but a reflection on the Latin belief that life doesn't necessarily end when one dies. Márquez correctly presumed that he would no longer be working on the day of his death; indeed, his actual death in April 2014 was a "shocking" loss for the literary world. Yet, his writings, and the characters born from it, come to represent a continuation in the "passion" that Márquez had for life itself. In other words, his death parallels death as it functions in his writing. As if he were Esteban of "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" or Santiago of "Chronicle of a Death Foretold," Gabriel García Márquez is able to supernaturally persist on after his death, allowing the living to reflect on the work that remains in his place.

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