

Magical Realism in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 'Chronicle of a Death Foretold'

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to study Gabriel Garcia Marquez's use of magical realism in his famous work, 'Chronicle of a Death Foretold'. The study explores the themes such as magical realism, its influences in Latin American literature and the elements of magical realism.

Key Words: Hybridity, Magical realism, Foreshadowing, Fantastic elements.

Leading up to the beginning of the twentieth century, social and aesthetic changes were already marking the passing traditional era. After the periods of rationality, in the aftermath of two world wars many writers and poets weaved their novels and poems by using the colourful threads of mythical, fantastic and dreamlike elements together with the somber threads of realism. Magical realism and surrealism are literary movements of that period which opposes the conventional portrayal of reality and produce their own understanding of human existence.

"Magischer Realismus" (Chamberline⁷) or magic realism was coined in Germany in the 1920s in relation to the painting of the Weimar Republic that tried to capture the mystery of life behind surface reality. 'Lo real maravilloso' or marvellous realism, was introduced in Latin America during the 1940s as an expression of the mixture of realist and magical views of life in the context of the differing cultures of Latin America expressed through its art and literature (Sims 22-33).

Magical Realism was introduced in the 1950s in relation to Latin American fiction, but has since been adopted as the main term used to refer to all narrative fiction that includes

magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative, whereby, the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence - admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism.

Ever since it was first used by Franz Roh who applied it to the art world in his book *NachExpressionismus: Magischer Realismus, Probleme der neuesten europaischen Malerei* published in 1925, the term 'magic realism' has appeared sporadically in some places to eventually disappear and resurge elsewhere (Zamora 15-16).

In magical realism, improbable, impossible or extraordinary occurrences are frequent. Some characters fly, levitate and communicate with the dead. Other characters are blessed with extra ordinary perception, such as the ability to see through objects or through other mediums or to predict the future. The idea of the resolution of the contradiction between the real and the supernatural in the magic realist text appears to be not only the most often cited characteristic of magical realism, but also its most distinguishing feature.

As a basis for investigating the nature and cultural work of magical realism, there are five primary characteristics of the mode. First the text contains an 'irreducible element' of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space and identity (Faris 7).

As a literary movement, magical realism played an important role in placing Latin American fiction on the international map in the 1960s. Latin American writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortazar and Carlos Fuentes used the elements of magical and fantasy in their works. It was after the publication of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in English, that the movement became an international phenomenon. Gabriel Marquez brand of magical realistic works gets the readership because of his unique ability of storytelling.

Born on March 6th, 1928, in the sleepy provincial town of Aracataca, Colombia, writer and journalist and the Nobel laureate, Garcia Marquez spent the first eight years of his life with his maternal grandparents, Colonel Nicolas Marquez and Tranquilina Iguaran de Marquez. Drawing on his own history and that of his family, town, and nation and reflecting the influence of writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel Angel Asturias, and Alejo Carpentier, his work focuses on the physical and moral travail of coastal Colombia, which is given universal meaning in his books.

The Chronicle of a Death Foretold is one of the famous novellas by Marques, published in 1981. It tells the story of the murder by Santiago Nasar, by the two Vicario brothers. The fictional world of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is pungent and memorable. In Marquez's world, reality constitutes both real and magical, and it is a fragile concept created by humans. Marquez reflects magical realism by exploring both natural and supernatural worlds and illustrating traces of the culture the characters have, which is Latin American.

However, the blend of supernatural and the mundane that is emblematic in magical realism can also be found in this novel.

The novel affirms the very nature of magical realism. It shows that in magical realism, “the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but an ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality” (Zamora 47). For instance there is a very ordinary looking incident. It is that of Purisima Del Carmen telling her daughters that if they comb their hair at night, they will slow down sea fares. And when the widower Xius told the mayor that “he’d seen a phosphorescent bird fluttering over his former home, and thought it was the soul of his wife” (84).

These incidents show the mentality of characters in the novel towards superstitions. The protagonist has inherited his sixth sense from his mother, Placida Linero. The statement in the novel, “[n]or did Santiago Nasr recognize the Omen” (2), not only reveals his superstition but also the common faith put in superstition. Marquez uses dreams and visions as a tool of magical realism. Dreams become breaking points at which the fantastical bubble up out of normal existence and seek to connect with other characters.

Dreams are the perfect candidate for such magical events. Not only must the magic come out of dreams because they are personal but also because they are unconscious. In Marquez’s novel, Santiago dreamed that “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” (1).

Santiago’s mother Placido “had a well-earned reputation as an accurate interpreter of other people’s dreams” (2). Santiago tells about his dream to his mother but she remembers later that she paid attention only to the part about the birds, which typically implies good health. Throughout the novel, the characters refer to visions they had that are related to Santiago’s impending death. Clotilde Armenta claims that, years after the murder of Santiago “[h]e already looked like a ghost” (13) when she saw him at dawn.

Foreshadowing or adumbrating is a literary device used to express the magical in the real. Here, the author hints at certain plot developments that, perhaps, will come to become true later in the story. In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* Marquez avoids typical way of foreshadowing but he tells exactly what is going to happen. The entire story builds on the foretelling of Santiago’s murder. The twins do not hide their plot; they tell everyone they meet about their plans. Each village person who hears about the scheme tells the next person.

But from the beginning to the end the author scatters the drops of foreshadowing in a special way. The atmosphere of the day on which Santiago is murdered foreshadows the arrival of some misfortunes. Most of the people agreed that “the weather was funeral, with a cloudy, low sky and the thick smell of still waters, and that at the moment of the misfortune a thin drizzle like the one Santiago Nasar had seen in his dream grove was falling” (3). The narrator’s sister Margot feels that “an angel pass[es] by” (17) her as she listens to Santiago’s plans for his wedding. The entire mood of the characters on the day on which Santiago is murdered and Santiago’s dream of soft rain foreshadows the tragic fate of his life.

Like all great magic realist works, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* also uses the vehicle of humour in an extraordinary way. The novel works on a rather serious theme, that of a murder. Intermixing of the humorous elements in such a serious subject is a risky job. But Marquez polishes this novel with his magical skill of handling dark-humor. In the last page it reveals in its most surprising form.

They were sitting down to breakfast when they saw Santiago Nasar enter, soaked in blood and carrying the roots of his entrails in his hands. Poncho Lanao told me: ‘what I’ll never forget was the terrible smell of shit.’ But Argenida Lanao, the oldest daughter, said that Santiago Nasar walked with his usual good bearing, measuring his steps well, and that his Saracen face with its headstrong ringlets was handsomer than ever. As he passed by the table he smiled at them and continued through the bedrooms to the rear door of the house. (122)

The whole passage is humorous because even though what described is the result of a brutal stabbing, it is humour here that adds to the incident a shadow of disbelief even to the characters in the scene. It draws a thought in our head that a man walks through his house holding his intestines in his hand and leaving a crimson trail on the floor, and his mother remembers the smell of it.

The fact that his handsome face is still noticeable even though he has been mortally stabbed three times is an exaggeration besides being very humorous. When the narrator says, “he stumbled on the last step, but he got up at once. He even took care to brush off the dirt that was stuck to his guts” (122), the reader feels a humorous spice in his mind; because not only did he have the energy to stand up but also had to spent time cleaning his insides. This episode clearly shows the humorous aspects of magical realism in the novel.

Fragmented time line and fragmented style is an important aspect of magical realism. The novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* does not follow the formula of a linear plot. It is told in a fragmented, non-chronological and repetitive manner which looks at the death from one vantage point at a time. It works like an inverted detective story where the standard way of unveiling the events that led to the crime along the way, is missing. The main plot is played out five times, once in each of the five chapters. And this information is given to a different individual in the community (Gonzalez 114). This allows for the story line to portray the idea of fragmentation, thus bringing in the idea of reality and fantasy.

One of the most outstanding features of the novel is the point of view that Marquez uses in telling the story. He narrates the story from the first person point of view of the unnamed son of Luisa Santiago and the brother of Margot, Luis Enrique and James. Having returned to the River village after being gone for twenty-seven years, the narrator tries to reconstruct the events of the day that ends in the murder of Santiago Nasar.

Typically, the first-person narrator gives his own point of view but does not know what other characters are thinking; ability usually reserved for the third person omniscient, or all knowing, point of view. The narrator tells the story in the first person, yet he also relates

everything everyone is thinking. In the *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Marquez experiments with the traditional forms and styles of narration and it rewards him with what he expects.

Hybridity is one of the many techniques and a primary feature that the magical realists use. Specifically, magical realism is illustrated in the in harmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural and western and indigenous. In the *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Marquez mixes the Arab Santiago with the Christian society. "From his father he learned at a very early age the manipulation of firearms, his love for horses, and the mastery of high-flying birds of prey" (6).

The writer uses the Arabic culture and the culture of the society that he belongs to merge completely in Santiago's character. The story takes place in a small Latin American river village of the coast of Caribbean islands. Once it was a busy centre for shipping and ocean-going ships. Here the river itself is a symbol of hybridity.

Authorial reticence is the "deliberate withholding of information and explanations about the disconcerting fictitious world" (Beatrice Chanady16). The narrator does not provide explanations about the accuracy or credibility of events described or views expressed by characters in the text. Further, the narrator is indifferent, a characteristic enhanced by this absence of explanation of fantastic events; the story proceeds with logical precision, as if nothing extraordinary took place. In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, like the readers the narrator is also unaware of the man who takes the virginity of Angela. From the beginning to the end the narrator tries to find out the real culprit. But the novel ends openly leaving that question unanswered.

Usually social criticism is wrapped up in a witty language and has a definite role in magical realism. Magical realism contains an "implicit criticism of society, particularly the elite" (Foster and Altamirand 194). When Bayardo bewitched Angela Vicario's family with his charm, "her parents and her older sisters with their husbands, gathered together in the parlor, imposed on her the obligation to marry a man whom she had barely seen." She only "dared hint at the inconvenience of a lack of love, but her mother demolished it with a single phrase: 'Love can be learned too'" (34). Marquez mocks at the nature of the common type women who are ready to give their daughters to a wealthy handsome man without understanding their daughter's heart.

The writer also pictures how wealthy society defeats the poor with the power of their money. When Angela tells Bayardo about widower Xius's house, "[t]hat very night Bayardo San Roman [goes] to the social club and [sits] down at the widower Xius's table to play a game of dominoes [and tells] Widower, I'll buy your house" (36). And with regular visits he finally buys Xius's heart with his countless money.

Irony is a witty form of usage used to convey insults or scorn, especially saying one thing but implying the opposite. When Marquez uses irony, he knows that he can bring humour by involving ironic elements in the novel's serious theme. Irony involves incongruity between what is expected and what occurs and one finds this evolving throughout the novel. There are a countless number of times when Santiago was warned of his death, the society around him failed to deliver the appropriate information to negate his inevitable death.

Everyone is anxious about Santiago's future. But at same time they did nothing serious to protect him.

The bizarre attitudes of the society are ironically portrayed in various events by the writer. In her wedding day Angela says "[m]y mother had taught me never to talk about money in front of other people" (42). Ironically Angela's mother wants her daughter to get married with a rich man, but she is told not to speak a word about money in public. This is a satirical stab that Marquez does on the society which is replicated in the novel. One can easily find the irony lies in the following lines.

We'd been together at Maria Alejandrina Cervantes' house until after three, when she herself sent the musicians away and turned out the lights in the dancing courtyard so that her pleasurable mulatto girls could get some rest . . . Maria Alejandrina Cervantes was the most elegant and the most tender woman I have ever known, and the most serviceable in bed, but she was also the strictest. She'd been born and reared here, and here she lived, in a house with open doors, with several rooms for rent and an enormous courtyard for dancing lit by lantern gourds bought in the Chinese bazaars of Paramaribo. (64-65)

In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* each character gives different images of Santiago's last minutes. Actually, the story takes place in an ordinary place. But the reader feels that he is in a fictional world. Everything seems to be crazy. This is because of the lack of credibility expressed by the characters.

The oblique reference to the god and religion is another notable aspect of the narration. The villagers in the novel are highly religious. Purisimadel Carmen, Angela's mother "looked like a nun" (30). When Santiago was killed he was wearing a white linen suit that he chose to wear because he was expecting to greet the visiting bishop. A tunic of white linen is the appropriate dress of priest in the Catholic Church. Jesus was dressed in a white tunic when he was taken as a prisoner by the Romans. At that moment he became a victim of cruelty. In Marquez's novel, Santiago is dressed white when he is killed. Like Jesus he becomes a victim of cruelty. On his dead body "Santiago had a deep stab in the right hand. The report says: "It looked like a stigma of the crucified Christ" (76). Angela Vicario's virginity also evidences the faith in religion.

The language that Marquez used in the novel is simple but witty and crispy. And it is at times, shocking, precise and full of descriptive narration. The description of Santiago's dead body is an apt example for this.

Seven of several wounds were fatal. The liver was almost sliced in pieces by two deep cuts on the anterior side. He had four incisions in the stomach, one of them so deep that it went completely through and destroyed the pancreas. He had six other lesser perforations in the transverse colon and multiple wounds in the small intestine. The only one he had in the back, at the level of the third lumbar vertebra, had perforated the right kidney. The abdominal cavity was filled with large clots of blood, and in the midst of the morass of gastric

contents appeared a medal of the Virgin of Carmel that Santiago Nasar had swallowed at the age of four. The thoracic cavity showed two perforations: one in the second right intercostals space that affected the lung and another quite close to the left armpit. He had six minor wounds on his arms and hands, and two horizontal cuts: one on the right thigh and the other in the abdominal muscles. He had a deep stab in the right hand. (76)

The whole plot of the novel is encapsulated in the opening sentence. “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” (1). Marquez distils the mixture of his imaginations, experience and creativity together and presents it through his mesmerizing language.

Like every magical realistic works *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* also conveys a sense of mystery. The sense of mystery helps the reader to read the work at a much-intensified level. Throughout the novel Marquez brings the elements of mystery. Even at the end of the novel neither the narrator nor the reader ever finds the mystery behind the murder of Santiago Nasar.

Pedro Vicario, the more forceful of the brothers, picked her up by the waist and sat her on the dining room table. 'All right, girl,' he said to her, trembling with rage, 'tell us who it was.' She only took the time necessary to say the name. She looked for it in the shadows, she found it at first sight among the many, many easily confused names from this world and the other, and she nailed it to the wall with her well-aimed dart, like a butterfly with no will whose sentence has always been written. 'Santiago Nasar,' she said. (47)

But the narrator fails to find the real man who took Angelo Vicario's virginity. When he asks her about the virginity matter, she firmly says that Santiago is the real culprit. But the narrator is not ready to believe this. So the novel ends up in a complete mystery.

It is also possible to read the book as a Kafkaesque love and crime story. The beginning of this book itself is a variation of the start of *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis*, both by Franz Kafka. Kafka, one of the strongest and most extraordinary story tellers in pioneering magical realism, has been influential on Gabriel Marquez for he says that it was the reading of *The Metamorphosis* that showed him “that it was possible to write in a different way” (Moore 21).

“Marquez in a new way [. . .] bypasses the traditional inadequate approaches through Latin American politics, history and Magical Realism” (Ortega blurb), that he portrays in the novel. He adorns *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* with an intelligent placing of all the elements of magical realism in proportion. That perhaps is the reason why *The Times*, considered this novel a work of high explosiveness, which has the proper stuff of Nobel Prize and called it an exceptional novel.

CONCLUSION

In many ways Garcia Marquez has fended off his critics and analysts by always doing what is right for him, often not even thinking about what is right for others. This trait of his

writing seems to have a touch of magic about it and yet it always rings so true and real that it is magical realism. It is not the magic that makes him a great writer; instead, it is the reality in its several dimensions that he manages to capture that establishes him as a great writer. As a concluding remark of this study, it would be apt to quote the words of Gregory Rabassa who recognizes this and writes that “He has returned to the roots of reality, which are the roots of the novel as it was conceived by Cervantes [. . .]. That is the nature of his ancient art” (Rabassa 14).

The novel through its use of magical realism serves a means to convey the atmosphere of a society in its particular historical setting. Whereas the characters and mysterious events described are often inexplicable and incredible, they bear symbolic relevance as far as the meanings which, on interpretation, sufficiently relate the historical context, social setting and popular superstitions of the community, yet avoiding the dry monotonous narrative style of the traditional annals of history.

In this respect, magical realism forms harmony, though it could sometimes be otherwise, between a reliable historical account and enigmatic beliefs in superstitions and otherworldly realms, which, considering the enduring popularity of the novel can justly be considered highly successful in entertaining the readers. Even though reality is an important theme in all of Marquez’s novels, his approach to it is not traditional. In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, he sprinkles the magic glitters on the face of reality. Using the elements of magical realism Marquez portrays a real tale of murder, fantastically.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s writing is highly evocative as that of William Faulkner, James Joyce and Jose Saramago. Written originally in Spanish the novel contains a beautiful blend of dark humour, journalistic descriptions, eroticism, mystery, anxiety, and so on, all perfectly coated with the Latin American brand of magical realism. It’s interweaving of imagination and reality, its freshness of ideas with its mixing of provisional and profound, combinatorial word play, the real and the surreal and its innovative narrative strategy together creates a new readership.

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