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English Literature A (HL)

Works in Translation Written Assignment

*Chronicle of a Death Foretold* – Gabriel Garcia Marquez

**Gender Opposition in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold***

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**Gender Opposition in ‘*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*’**

**PROMPT: How does the writer use relationship(s) between characters to develop important ideas/ themes?**

The treatment of women and gender opposition is explored in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novella, ‘*Chronicle of a Death Foretold’*. There are particular societal conventions that men and women abide to in this Catholic society. Women are controlled by the cult of virginity, which commands that they keep their ‘innocence’ until marriage. However, men abide to the cult of machismo and have to show aggression, including sexual. Societal conventions allow men to take their sexual anger out on those deemed ‘lowly’, such as those of mixed race. Marquez clearly identifies the differences of culture to someone from a liberal background to social conservatism. This novella gives the reader a greater perspective and understanding of cultures around the world, particularly traditional Roman Catholicism.

In this society there is a fascination with the cult of virginity, and the preservation of ‘innocence’ until marriage. When one does not comply with society’s expectations the consequences are brutal. Marquez portrays this through the character, Angela Vicario, when it is revealed she has lost her virginity before marriage. The reaction from her family is extreme and is shown by her mother ‘holding Angela’s hair with one hand and beating her with the other with such a rage’ (Garcia Marquez, p.47) that Angela ‘thought she was going to kill her’ (Garcia Marquez, p.47). This reaction shows the lowly position women are placed in this society, expressing freedom is punished in a savage manner. The violence reveals to the reader the way family feels towards such action. A woman cannot show independence by doing as she pleases, her family acts in a way that controls all aspects of her life. However, the reader can see that in this society, it is not the woman who decides the fate of her virginity, but the forceful aggression of a man. The reader can see from the nature of Vicario’s perpetrator, Santiago Nasar, he believes he can do as he pleases to any woman. Therefore the violence from the Vicario family is unwarranted, and society wrongly blames women, rather than men.

The cult of virginity is held in high regard in this society due to its religion, Roman Catholicism. Unlike other religions around the world, Catholicism venerates the Virgin Mary and places emphasis on the Immaculate Conception. It is no coincidence that Marquez has chosen to set the novella in a Catholic society in order to show the role of Mary. Catholics believe that Mary is ‘the beginning of redemption and the union of the divine nature and human nature.’(Catholic Mission. Catholic Veneration of the Virgin Mary) Showing the purity and innocence of one and the effect it can have on a culture. However, Marquez mocks this by using the character of Maria Alejandra Cervantes, the brothel owner. Maria is a form of Mary; this character is not pure like the Virgin Mary, though like Mary Magdalene, a prostitute in the New Testament. In this society they accept that it is appropriate for women to be oppressed by the cult of virginity, in order to please their religion and its values. Conversely it is accepted by society that men are allowed to lose their virginity before marriage. There is a double standard to how men and women are treated in terms of their religion and because their religion dominates much of their life, they apply this.

Marquez explores the cult of machismo in this novella in various scenarios. Men in this society must show aggression and be sexually superior to women. The reader can see that in this society it becomes a competition between males as to who can be more superior. Marquez identifies this through several characters in the novella, for instance Santiago Nasar. Nasar is seen in the community as a ‘womaniser’, but the reader can see his sexual nature is brutal and oppressive. This is shown early in the novella, through his attitude to his housemaid, Divina Flor. Nasar violently grabs her by the hand and says ‘The time has come for you to be tamed.’ (Garcia Marquez, 1981, p. 8) Marquez has used language such as ‘tamed’ to suggest that women in this society are like animals that need to be domesticated, in order to please the man. There is also a sexual connotation that this girl should lose her virginity, and suggests that the encounter is violent and not of her choice. Flor is not losing virginity for herself, but rather for Nasar’s pleasure.

The women that men are encouraged to release their sexual urges onto are local prostitutes. The brothel is controlled by Maria Alejandra Cervantes along with her ‘pleasurable mulatto girls’ (Garcia Marquez, p. 65)[[1]](#footnote-1). Marquez identifies the women as ‘mulatto’, showing a certain degree of racism towards some in this community. It is indicated that men are allowed to lose their virginity and continue to have sex with women that are considered ‘lower than them’. For instance, Santiago Nasar is a wealthy landowner, whereas Divina Flor is a housemaid, Nasar may believe that it is his right to take her virginity due to her place in society. This may be the same situation in relation to the prostitutes, who are of mixed race parentage, treated badly and almost ‘sub-human’ in some cultures. Men believe themselves to be superior to mixed race people. In the society which values purity of women and their behaviour, those that are not deemed to be ‘pure’, are the ones that are used as prostitutes.

Men may use race or social standing to their advantage in the cult of machismo. An example is Victoria Guzman, who reacts angrily when Nasar propositions her daughter, says ‘Let go of her whitey’ (Garcia Marquez, p. 8). The use of the word, ‘whitey’ suggests that she is of a different race or colour to Nasar. This relates back to the idea that men, in order to pursue the cult of machismo, use women of a ‘less superior’ standing to use to express and illustrate their sexual nature and aggression. This is reinforced by the example of Victoria Guzman and her relationship with Nasar’s late father, Ibrahim, as she was ‘seduced in the fullness of her adolescence.’(Garcia Marquez, p. 8) She was treated well by him when they were sexually involved, however ‘he brought her to the house when the affection was over.’(Garcia Marquez, 1981, p.8) It seems in this society women are only useful to men when they are young virgins. However, once purity has gone, they are useless to men’s satisfaction and pleasure and so are treated badly. Furthermore, once the gratification has worn, women are only ‘good’ for housework. Once they were only useful for sexual needs, then they become useful for domestic purposes.

The way Marquez develops the relationship between men and women, and their societal roles are similar to what is mirrored in reality. Around the world, there is a degree of misogyny and sexism directed towards women. The relationship of how men interact with women, and vice versa, is interpreted by Western society in various ways. When a man has had relationships with many different women, he is applauded for his sexual prowess and the amount of female ‘conquests’ he has. Whereas women are viewed as been ‘promiscuous’ and behaving in a way that is not in the confinements of their gender roles. As in Marquez’s novella, Western society has different expectations of how men and women behave sexually. It is acceptable for men to be promiscuous, but not for women. There is a modern cult of machismo, where men are judged and applauded for sexual prowess and conversely there is modern form of the cult of virginity where women are punished for expressing themselves sexually.

In this conservative society, there is a clear contrast between men and women, and the treatment they receive. Women are controlled by the cult of virginity and do not have independence. Conversely men have to adhere to the cult of machismo, showing aggression and an extreme sexual nature to women, creating little respect to women in society. The cults and social dynamics that are created are determined by societal factors. Catholicism demands for the preservation of virginity until marriage. The societal conventions discriminates those of mixed race parentage and allows for men to lose their virginities early and continue using women. Marquez mocks Catholicism and shows the reader the converse treatments of men and women. Marquez believes that men and women should be treated alike and so teaches the reader the importance of equal treatment, and not allowing for one gender to be favoured over the other.

**Bibliography:**

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Marquez, G G, (1982 [transl. 1981]). Chronicle of a Death Foretold (Jonathan Cape) 1st ed. London: Penguin.

1. Mulatto – A person from mixed race heritage [↑](#footnote-ref-1)