

## The Sacred and the Profane

*Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is impressive for the way it depicts a world in which religious seriousness commingles with out-and-out debauchery. Nearly every character in the novel moves freely between these two opposite poles of experience, poles that might be labeled as the “sacred” and the “profane.”

God seems to have left the village in which the novel takes place. The Bishop, whom everyone is eager to see on the morning of the murder, won't set foot in the town, choosing instead to pass by on his boat and deliver his blessing from afar. Everyone takes part in the wedding festivities; even the Narrator's sister, a nun, gets drunk. The Narrator has been frequenting a local brothel for his entire adult life. Santiago Nasar, though described as “peaceful” by the Narrator, gropes the teenaged Divina Flor whenever he gets the chance. Pedro Vicario returns from the military sporting a nasty case of gonorrhea.

And yet, most members of the community are deeply Catholic—as demonstrated by their enthusiasm over the Bishop's visit—and cling dearly to traditional ideals of purity and honor. As soon as Angela Vicario accuses Santiago Nasar of deflowering her, her brothers Pablo and Pedro Vicario set out to murder him as a matter of course: by their logic, he has stolen the honor of their sister, of their whole family, and so must repay them in blood. By that same token, a fair number of the townspeople accept Santiago's doom as a foregone conclusion: nothing can or should be done to save him. Angela Vicario's purity is seen by nearly everyone—including Angela herself—as a matter of life and death. The community's draconian values find fullest expression in the verdict delivered three years after the murder. Despite the gruesome and public nature of their crime, and despite the apparent innocence of their victim, the Vicario brothers are found innocent “by the thesis of homicide in legitimate defense of honor.”

It would seem, then, that the town is filled with hypocrites. Not one character in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is pure or particularly honorable—blood, sex, and excrement abound—and yet so many of the characters see purity and honor as akin to godliness. Of course, Márquez is up to something a bit more complicated than simply exposing the hypocrisy of his characters. More nearly he seems to suggest that the townspeople's devotion to sacred ideals is full of impossible hope, and is all the more tragic for that reason. Pedro and Pablo Vicario, hoping to abide by some abstract code of honor, end up committing murder—which is, at last, the most profane act of all.