

## REVIEW OF SHORT STORY *A VERY OLD MAN WITH ENORMOUS WINGS*

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**Gabriel García Márquez** was born in 1928 in the small town of Aracataca, situated in a tropical region of northern Colombia, between the mountains and the Caribbean Sea. He is widely credited with helping to popularize "magical realism," a genre "in which the fantastic and the realistic are combined in a richly composed world of imagination," as the Nobel committee described it upon awarding him the prize for literature in 1982.

Gabriel García Márquez *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* is an exemplary exploration of faith and the dichotomy of compassion and cruelty. The "angel" as mentioned in the title is seen in opposition to more consistent versions of angels, and in bringing him "down to earth" Marquez lets the reader view something supernatural through the lens of everyday ordinariness. The short story can be seen as a fable. Its subtitle--"A Tale for Children"--underscores its fairy tale format. The moral of the story could be that people wouldn't recognize a miracle even if they saw one. As patience pays off, appearances are deceptive.

The key to understanding this story is presented through the pitiful girl who has been transformed into a spider for disobeying her parents and sneaking out to a dance. The spider-girl requires little more than pity to earn the spectators' faith in her story, while the old man is persistently doubted, tormented, and seen as a repulsive abomination just because he does not have a compelling narrative to say.

The story portrays the paradoxes and fickleness of faith through its characters' interactions with the Old Man. In the short story, García Márquez makes use of several highly inventive diversions from the basic story line to make interpretation even more elusive. In these narrative diversions, the themes and techniques become inseparably intertwined. Although the angel is central to the story, and every event bears on him, his appearance, behaviour, identity, fate, or effects, the attention focused on the old man is frequently interrupted by shifts of focus to other characters who are sometimes named and described at length.

The magic begins with 'The world had been sad since Tuesday' personifying the world making the angel and spider girl much less out of place when the world itself has emotions. Along with magical realism, the story underscores sublimity as it has the power of forming great conceptions through words. Using sublimity, Márquez elevates the story above the ordinary through the portrayal of various characters and symbols.

There is a narrowness of vision that afflicts everyone from the wise neighbour woman, with her unthinking know-it-all ways, to the kindly Father Gonzaga, who is desperate for a procedure to follow, to the crowds of onlookers and pilgrims with their selfish concerns. But

Paleyo also doesn't bother to take care of the angel by dragging it to stay locked in the chicken coop with the hens. Elisenda too is more focused on keeping her kitchen and living room angel-free than on considering the odd beauty of her unwelcome guest. She, however, seems to have a moment of realization and almost of regret at the end of the story, when she watches the old man disappear from her life forever. Only after Pelayo and his wife Elisenda were blessed with their child not being sick anymore did he realize that he had done this angel wrong. Pelayo set the angel free so he could go at his will. Márquez suggests that most people live their lives unaware of their significance in the world.

The angel in Márquez short story acts as a foil which demonstrates the villager's dual-faceted relationship with organized religion. Central to Latin American culture is Catholicism. More deeply rooted in their culture, however, is the blurred line between the perception of fantasy and reality, resulting in a continued adherence to pagan beliefs, and a concomitant acceptance of Catholicism. The events surrounding the angel's captivity indicate that, when forced to choose between Catholicism's regimented and formal procedure, and their pagan instincts, the villagers favour the latter. The short story functions as a satirical piece that mocks both the Catholic Church and human nature in general. Márquez criticizes the church through Father Gonzaga's superiors in Rome, who seem to be in no hurry to discover the truth about the bedraggled, so-called angel. Instead, they ask Father Gonzaga to study the old man's unintelligible dialect to see whether it has any relation to Aramaic, the language of Jesus. They also ask Gonzaga to determine how many times the old man can fit on the head of a pin, another dig at Catholicism referencing an arcane medieval theory once thought to prove God's omnipotence. Their final conclusion that the old man with wings may in fact be a stranded Norwegian sailor only makes the church sound absurdly literal-minded and out of touch with even the most basic elements of reality. In the end, the church's wait-and-see tactic pays off when the old man simply flies away—a rib from García Márquez implying that the “wisdom” of the church has never really been needed at all.

The reader of the story occupies a position superior to that of its characters, who view odd persons as clowns and believe that their neighbours possess supernatural powers. This sense of superiority is important to the story's humour, but it is only a minor aspect of the reader's total response. More significant is the reader's attitude regarding the role of interpretation and invention. The reader appreciates invention in itself and learns to accept its privileged position in the story. The diversions from the main story line give invention precedence over action or closure. The reader approaches interpretation cautiously, as attributing symbolic values to either the old man or his mysterious disappearance will merely be acts of pointless interpretation. Thus, the Magical Realism of Márquez's style—a blurring of the division between the real and the fantastic—is used to underscore the notion (indeed, the seeming contradiction) that the irrational is a natural part of life and must be accepted on its own terms.

With a hint of irony, we read that the very objects that should have empowered this man to fly above the elements – his wings – instead hindered him and brought him no end of unwanted attention. Irony is part of the tone weaved throughout the story. We see it in the “wise old woman” who determined that the old man with wings was an angel ... and then suggested clubbing him to death. We see it in the wording that Marquez chose when he stated that the husband and wife “felt magnanimous” when they opted to set the angel afloat on a raft with enough food to last him a few days “and leave him to his fate on the high seas.”

Elisenda watches from the kitchen and we read that “she kept on watching until it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an

imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea.” Again, we are struck with the strange juxtaposition of her emotions against the clearly supernatural circumstances. Elisenda is watching an angel take flight – the same angel that provided her and her husband with enough money to build a two-story mansion – and she feels nothing but relief that this annoyance is gone from her life. At the end, just as in the beginning, a normal person is confronted with clearly abnormal and supernatural events, and fails to see it for the amazing happening that it is. Elisenda probably goes back to her work in the kitchen, never truly appreciating the miracle that entered her life unexpectedly and left just as abruptly.

With his use of magical realism, Marquez opens the door to some interesting questions and invites the reader to not only enter a place of imagination and mystery, but also to look into one’s own thoughts and actions and see how they measure up against the elements – normal and abnormal – of everyday life.

### **Reference**

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” *The Seagull Reader: Stories*. Joseph Kelly. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc: New York, 2008. Pp. 165-172