

”the handsomest
drowned man in the
world” by gabriel
garcia marquez
essay sample



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This short story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez is considered by many as a magical tale in the sense that the protagonist, albeit lifeless, opened the horizons for the villagers who were in contact with him.

The story begins when the children of a small village chanced upon an unfamiliar bulge in the sea. The children initially start playing with the corpse until other villagers see the dead man and spread the word throughout the village. The corpse is then carried into the village proper where it was taken care of by the women for its burial.

The arrival of this huge creature in the sleepy village fueled the imagination of its inhabitants, prompting them to create fantastic stories about the man who was washed ashore to their village. The dead man's physical structure was enough for the villagers to arrive at the assumption that he was an important figure in the place he came from. This can be noted from the author's description of the town's perception of the man:

... they noticed that the vegetation on him came from faraway oceans and deep water and that his clothes were in tatters, as if he had sailed through labyrinths of coral. They noticed too that he bore his death with pride, for he did not have the lonely look of other drowned men who came out of the sea or that haggard, needy look of men who drowned in rivers. ... when they finished cleaning him off did they become aware of the kind of man he was and it left them breathless...

Moreover, the women who tended to him also placed him in a god-like pedestal by thinking that the world seemed to change with this stranger's arrival. As the author writes " *it seemed to them that the wind had never*

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been so steady nor the sea so restless as on that night and they supposed that the change had something to do with the dead man... They thought that he would have had so much authority that he could have drawn fish out of the sea simply by calling their names and that he would have put so much work into his land that springs would have burst forth from among the rocks so that he would have been able to plant flowers on the cliffs.."

The woman also began to imagine how different their village might be if this man had actually lived amongst them. Marquez writes that the women "*thought that if that magnificent man had lived in the village, his house would have had the widest doors, the highest ceiling, and the strongest floor, his bedstead would have been made from a midship frame held together by iron bolts, and his wife would have been the happiest woman.*"

In addition, the women began to see what they may have been missing in their own husbands by merely looking at the man before them: "*they secretly compared him to their own men, thinking that for all their lives theirs were incapable of doing what he could do in one night, and they ended up dismissing them deep in their hearts as the weakest, meanest and most useless creatures on earth.*" This observation is testament to the age-old adage that one never really knows what one is missing until they find something or someone to compare it with. In this particular story, the arrival of this near-perfect human being awakens in them the realization that, despite their earlier contentment with their respective lives, there is still something far greater than what they have now.

Naturally, the arrival of the handsomest drowned man in the world spurred negative emotions in the hearts of the men of the village. The author makes it clear in the short story by writing: "*the men thought the fuss was only womanish frivolity. Fatigued because of the difficult nighttime inquiries, all they wanted was to get rid of the bother of the newcomer once and for all before the sun grew strong on that arid, windless day.*"

The importance by which the women of the village have given the stranger that was washed ashore is unparalleled in the sense that they even bothered to give him a name - a name that they felt was fitting for a man of his stature. They all agreed that he should only be called Esteban. The author writes: "*... most of them had only to take another look at him to see that he could not have any other name....*"

The women also became imaginative when it came to seeing how the man must have lived: "*they could see him in life, condemned to going through doors sideways, cracking his head on crossbeams, remaining on his feet during visits, not knowing what to do with his soft, pink, sea lion hands while the lady of the house looked for her most resistant chair and begged him, frightened to death, sit here, Esteban, please, and he, leaning against the wall, smiling, don't bother, ma'am, I'm fine where I am, his heels raw and his back roasted from having done the same thing so many times whenever he paid a visit, don't bother, ma'am, I'm fine where I am, just to avoid the embarrassment of breaking up the chair, and never knowing perhaps that the ones who said don't go, Esteban, at least wait till the coffee's ready, were the ones who later on would whisper the big boob finally left, how nice, the handsome fool has gone...*"

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As the day wore on, the villagers prepared for the dead stranger's burial at the sea. While the men wanted to get the business over and done with, the women clung to the dead man as if they were holding on to dear life itself:

"... the more they hurried, the more the women thought of ways to waste time. They walked about like startled hens, pecking with the sea charms on their breasts, some interfering on one side to put a scapular of the good wind on the drowned man..."

In the end, the funeral of the dead man can be considered as historic for the villagers as it became the *" most splendid funeral they could ever conceive of for an abandoned drowned man."* All the villagers, even the men who had initially envied the attention their wives lavished upon this lifeless stranger, became affected by the emotions and imaginations that have been stirred among them by this experience. The author writes: *"... men and women became aware for the first time of the desolation of their streets, the dryness of their courtyards, the narrowness of their dreams as they faced the splendor and beauty of their drowned man."*

The encounter with the dead stranger also changes their physical world in the sense that the villagers realize the need to make changes in their houses. The author writes *" t hat everything would be different from then on, that their houses would have wider doors, higher ceilings, and stronger floors so that Esteban's memory could go everywhere without bumping into beams...they were going to paint their house fronts gay colors to make Esteban's memory eternal and they were going to break their backs digging for springs among the stones and planting flowers on the cliffs so that in future years at dawn the passengers on great liners would awaken ... "*

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I find this short story very interesting because the author was able to convey a lot of emotions by using only a narrative style of story telling. The author was successful in making the readers feel how the presence of a dead man changed the world of the village where his corpse was washed ashore.

Marquez vividly described how a small fishing village on the edge of the sea, a rural peasant community of 20 poor houses, was transformed with the arrival of the handsomest drowned man in the world. The small village became can be deemed as a metaphor for a narrow diminished world in which this strange prodigious figure enters, where his size and beauty are a shock to their small and barren world.

The dead man in this story by Marquez can evidently be classified as a catalyst for the villagers. Without a doubt, his stature and beauty have a transforming effect on the villagers. He is a mythical figure-godlike in his size and beauty. A fantasy figure-the handsomest in the world. The presence of this figure exposes the poverty of their world, and expands their imagination. By the end of the experience with the handsomest drowned man, the villagers have undoubtedly undergone an imaginative transformation of their world. In a mystical and magical way, the villagers' encounter with the dead man opens them up to a world of beauty that they had not been able to imagine before. His mere presence in their lives, albeit lifeless, somehow made them understand that there is a world much bigger and much more beautiful than the one they are living in. Dealing with the handsomest drowned man in the world transforms the villager's consciousness that in the end, they have come to realize " *that everything would be different from then on...* " In fact, the story ends with an ecstatic

vision of the transformation of beauty: *the promontory of roses; where the wind is so peaceful; where the sun's so bright that the sunflowers don't know which way to turn; that's Esteban's village.*

Reference:

Marquez, 2006: The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World

Available at: <http://iws.ccccd.edu/jmiller/handsome.htm>

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