

A very old man with enormous wings essay



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The short story “ A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” by Gabriel García Márquez is a very beautifully weaved story showing much human nature despite the extraordinary circumstances in which it is set. Lyrically written, it is music to the brain, with a melody that is reminiscent of the old days and the folk tales that comes with it, wherein fantasy is reality and reality is fantasy. Coming from Columbia, Gabriel García Márquez was born 1928 in the small town of Aracataca and grew up with his grandmother.

He was initially studying law at a Jesuit school before becoming a journalist, and in 1954 was assigned to Rome and remained abroad in Europe since then (Nobel Prize). However he is most popular for his novels “ One Hundred Years of Solitude” (1967) and “ Love in the Time of Cholera” (1985). His outstanding works won him the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature. Capturing a tone similar to “ One Hundred Years of Solitude,” the short story “ A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” is about an angel who fell in Pelayo’s courtyard during the third day of rain. Pelayo who came out despite the rain to throw the crabs that kept pestering his home and his child sick, came back to find in the courtyard an old man “ lying face down in the mud” who couldn’t get up because of his enormous wings. At first Pelayo and his wife Elisenda concluded that the old man was a sailor from a ship that was wrecked by the unending rain, based on his unintelligible words in a sailor’s accent.

However, their neighbor, a “ wise” woman confirmed that the old man was an “ angel” after seeing his wings, which “ must have been coming for the child.” As expected, the angel’s presence became a spectacle, as can be seen in the many ironies during its course. The first irony of the short story is

the depiction of the angel. Angels in popular belief are ageless, with feminine looks and adorned with golden locks of hair.

They are spiritual beings. However, in the story, the angel is presented otherwise. Instead of a spiritual being, we are introduced to a very old man, in a very uncomfortable position, lying face down in the mud, “impeded by his enormous wings.” A total opposite of a typical angel, he is described in the story to have “only a few faded hairs left on his bald skull and very few teeth in his mouth, and his pitiful condition of a drenched great-grandfather took away the sense of grandeur he might have had.” Here we see an angel lacking any beauty that angels in popular culture usually have. His wings even have parasites living on it, much like a regular animal with feathers.

Nor do we see anything divine in him, as he is first and foremost a “man” as opposed to an angel that is intermediary to God and man. Even the doctor thought that the angel had a completely human form, and that all man should naturally have wings. The angel even had fever and chicken pox and almost died. People didn’t feel and treat him as divine.

He was locked up in Pelayo’s chicken coop and the people treated him “without the slightest reverence...as if he weren’t a supernatural creature but a circus animal.” The angel is even compared to a “huge decrepit hen among the fascinated chickens.” Pelayo and Elisenda, after noticing how people kept on crowding their homes, even started to charge five cents to the people who came to see the spectacle of the angel in the chicken coop, and got rich from it too. From the onset, he was treated as a circus

attraction. What was worse, when people got tired of the unresponsive angel, he started to lose his spectators.

All started to go to another circus attraction, the lonely maiden that turned into a spider. People do not treat the angel as something holy, or perhaps someone who brings good news. The “ wise” neighbor referred to angels as “ fugitive survivors of a celestial conspiracy.” If not for pity the town people would have clubbed him to death. Even the town priest, Father Gonzaga, was a victim of the irony, as he tried to talk to the angel in Latin which is believed to be the language of God. “ He did not understand the language of God or know how to greet His ministers....

nothing about him measured up to the proud dignity of angels.” Since the angel cannot understand Latin, he was dismissed as a “ Norwegian with wings.” The angel’s miracles were another representation of irony. As opposed to an angel who can cure diseases and make other miracles humanly impossible and inspiring, we can see miracles of comic proportions.

Not that he can’t perform miracles, he just continued to miss the spot. The blind man did not “ recover his sight but grew three new teeth.” The paralytic did not recover his ability to walk but “ almost won the lottery,” and the leper’s sores “ sprouted sunflowers.” The angel’s defective miracles became a source of mockery and “ ruined the angel’s reputation” as a circus attraction. Instead of being a source of joy and lightheartedness, the angel was a source of annoyance to Elisenda and Pelayo, that when the angel finally recovered the use of his wings and left them, Elisenda was relieved,

as if everything were finally going to be okay, as opposed to popular belief that everything will be okay when an angel appears, usually with good news.

However, the biggest irony of all is that the angel never participated in the entire spectacle, although he is the main attraction. He is indifferent to all that is happening in his surroundings, quiet in his chicken coop, even though it directly affects him. “The angel was the only one who took no part in his own act.” However, this irony also suggests the non-irony that he is different from them all, living in an entirely different dimension even though he is physically in the chicken coop. His supernatural nature made him immune to his environment, and even to his appearance. It is also notable how the core nature of an angel remained intact in him despite his failure to look and play the part of an angel.

Although his supernatural patience was described as not of a “hero taking his ease but that of a cataclysm in repose,” he was nonetheless close to children, like a normal angel would be. Because of his presence, Pelayo and Elisenda’s sick child was restored to health. In the years to come, they couldn’t even keep the child away from the angel. The child would keep on playing with the angel in the chicken coop and angel and the child even got chicken pox together. The angel was still “standoffish,” but he tolerated everything the child did. In a way, the angel was really the child’s guardian angel, there all through the kid’s childhood, only he wasn’t like other angels who would stay on as a child’s imaginary friend.

He was quite visible. When it was time to go, the angel was even trying to disguise his golden wings, although it looked like twigs from a scarecrow. To

further highlight the imperfection, the angel had a hard time gaining altitude. These ironies representative of Gabriel García Márquez' literary style, however, strengthen the themes found in the short story.

Gabriel García Márquez is known for his use of magical realism in his works, as seen in "One Hundred Years of Solitude," which is also used in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings." This implies the appearance of something magical in an otherwise normal setting. As a result, the supernatural is given the normal treatment. The effect is in itself magical.

Because of Gabriel García Márquez' use of magical realism, we see a very old angel that is in all aspects human, incapable of anything and is distinguished only by his wings. In magical realism, the supernatural is humanized, and as such, the angel was treated not as some divine, spiritual creature, but as a human creature. The use of magical realism in the treatment of the angel made it sound more like a melodious folk tale, and was also able to draw the central theme, which is people's skepticism and as well as people's habit of judging others by their appearance. The people doubt the angel's identity because he is too human to be an angel. Despite the wings they still have doubts because the angel failed to display the qualities of a typical angel.

As he was the complete opposite, even the Church failed to recognize him as an angel but concluded that he was a "Norwegian with wings." The angel was treated badly by the townspeople because of his appearance. He is very old, useless, and ugly, as described in the short story. But if he looked like a typical angel, ageless and beautiful, then everyone would be welcoming him

with open arms. Everyone would offer him food and shelter. But as he is the complete opposite, people pick on him and mocked him.

The best shelter he got on Pelayo and Elisenda's home was the shed.

Another prevalent theme in the short story is greed. When Elisenda saw how people crowded their home since the angel came, they started charging five cents. They took advantage of the spectacle and they got rich because of it. They used the angel to fill their small home with money, but because of their greed they did not even take a second look at the angel and his chicken coop.

They built a big house with gardens and Elisenda bought the best clothes, but the chicken coop remained the same. The angel remained helpless beside dung heap until without any repairs, and was not even invited to live inside the big house. All these themes and ironies are reminders of our human nature. This take on "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" not only shows how even in the most fantastical, magical things and circumstances, reality and human nature prevail, but how we tend to reject the things that we don't understand.