

# Illustrious feathers



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Simply by existing as a product of the human genome and becoming integrated into society, one unavoidably becomes aware of the fact that there is a wide range of good and bad that men and women are capable of. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings: A Tale for Children" portrays its events with little bias: while at first appearing to take a very negative spin on the truth, the harsh themes one observes as a reader stem solely from the actions and thoughts of each character. Through the theme of religion, this 1955 short story displays a false piety that many characters exhibit, by bringing to light the effects that the old man's wings have on the behavior of the surrounding people the author shows the public's insincerity, and through the remainder of the story he illustrates the common cruelty and selfishness that is acted upon so naturally.

Religion, as a general principle, brings a lot of joy into the lives of those who practice it; providing calculated responses to unanswerable questions, giving purpose and meaning to human existence, and allowing many to feel a much-yearned for sense of belonging through like-minded communities. However, this happy portrayal of this system of beliefs is not always pure: like any other dogma, religion holds dark secrets and brings about as much evil, if not more so, as it does good. "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" exhibits many of the negative qualities of Christianity in particular through subtle metaphors and, more prominently, the actions of religious figures.

A high amount of false piety is shown through the thoughts and actions of the main characters of "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings", particularly Pelayo, Elisenda, and Father Gonzaga. Throughout the story, the three appear to see themselves as magnanimous, completely ignorant to the

injustices they commit upon the old man. As early as their first instance with the winged stranger, they mindlessly disregarded the charity they later preach and instead turned to their faith for answers to their inquiries rather than its teachings in kindness. As the old man lay face down in the mud, clearly very old, ill, and perhaps even dead, his wings bring Pelayo and Elisenda, the inhabitants of the house, to forget the common courtesy of helping him up or at least seeing if he was alive. It is not until after they hear the verdict of a neighbor who supposedly knows everything there is to know about life and death – who tells them with confidence that he is an angel – that they even interact with him (Marquez, 1). After locking him up into the chicken coop, they invariably continue to feel altruistic when they decide that “ they did not have the heart to club him to death”, (1) when they speculate whether or not to generously “ put the angel on a raft with fresh water and provisions for three days and leave him to his fate on the high seas” (1), or when “ Pelayo threw a blanket over him and extended him the charity of letting him sleep in the shed” (4). Never do they stop to wonder why they should have needed to club him to death in the first place, or whether he, in his state, would survive without being swallowed by the sea, or whether he needs medical attention (they find him to have a fever only after allowing him to stay in the shed). Yet, through all of this, they hold true to their false sense of virtue, always consulting the knowledgeable neighbor or Father Gonzaga before making a decision, and on top of that, gaining monetarily from the crowds flocking to see the winged man without even passing a thought of repaying him in any way. This oblivious selfishness is, unfortunately, something that many humans display often around the world.

What is most shocking about this is not the behavior of Pelayo and Elisenda, which could be considered reasonably contemptible, but the response of Father Gonzaga to the circumstances. He who is devout by nature of his occupation still could not extend the courtesy that any person deserves. The bible teaches one to treat another the way he/she wishes to be treated, and even if the old man was not technically human, this principle extends past the barriers of species. As a priest, Father Gonzaga is expected to behave with dignity, kindness, and justice, yet immediately upon his arrival, he gives way to the same assumptions the rest of the people had come to, suspecting that he is an imposter when he does not speak the language of God, which should have been a sign of his angelicism. The priest, who in a way was the old man's only hope of achieving reasonable treatment and possibly some healthcare, provides no more affection than the rest. This behavior, in some ways, parallels the rigid denial that certain parts of the church illustrate towards those who stray from the norm. While the whole of Christianity is not conducted in this manner, there are some of this faith that do not accept differences as readily as others, and this theme is even more prominent in the time of the story's writing in 1955, an era that was partially characterized by its struggle to overcome racial prejudice, sexism, and other hierarchical issues.

An aspect of human nature, and therefore society, which has always been so and will continue indefinitely is all animals', particularly peoples', discomfort with unfamiliarity and differences. The dissimilarities amongst human beings and their consequential feelings of discomfort and fear have brought many to justify cruel behavior: Slavery and segregation was justified by the

thought that those with darker skin were of less importance, thus less deserving of respect; conquistadorial destruction of many cultures was justified because the traditions of differing communities were perceived to be of lesser value; etc. While not all of this behavior is quite so extreme or on such a large scale, differences in culture and what one is comfortable with ultimately shapes many everyday actions and decisions, whether or not we are aware of it. That is not to suggest that this is a credential of an evil-doer, since the discomfort one feels in an unfamiliar environment is totally natural, yet so many foolhardy interactions come of this aspect of human nature that do not end positively. Marquez excellently portrays this phenomenon with an accuracy that elicits a chronic pang of sympathy that lasts from first to final page through the community's treatment of the old man with wings.

The entirety of Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" is based on assumptions of the old man's differences from the public, the largest of them being that the man was an angel simply because of his feathered wings. Based on this hasty conclusion, every character, both major and minor, treats him with the precursory thought that he is a supernatural being. There is an odd period when he first arrives when onlookers "were making all kinds of conjectures concerning the captive's future" (1), but what is most strange about this is not that they feel the right to decide his fate, but that after they make suggestions that imply reverence such as "mayor of the world" and "five-star general in order to win all wars" (2), he receives not a grain of respect from a soul (not even from the chickens!). Then, later in the story, the public finds him easy to forget when a girl who had been transformed into an enormous tarantula comes to town: "A spectacle like

that, full of so much human truth and with such a fearful lesson, was bound to defeat without even trying that of a haughty angel who scarcely deigned to look at mortals” (3). The public appears to find her easier to empathize with, and although her form is much less human than the old man’s, whose only contradictory characteristic is his feathers, they treat her as being more human. Her story as the girl who was changed forever after disobeying her parents was easy for the public to sympathize with because, in their setting, this is something that could have happened to anyone. In the end, what really evokes the public’s respect, if only subconsciously, is the fact that she could speak their language. As someone they could not communicate with, the old man with the wings was easy to dissociate from the thoughts and feelings of a human, especially in combination with the conclusion that he was supernatural, much as it is easier for people to treat animals with less respect than their fellow humans.

On top of the religious facets of society as illustrated in the short story, there is a general air of cruelty and selfishness that is prominent throughout. Whether it is a cynic’s portrayal of the ways of the world or simply reflections of the author’s observations, the content of the story paints a very ugly picture of humans’ flaws. In addition to the manifestations of cruelty mentioned earlier in relation to religion and intolerance of variety, there are several more examples that seem to have behind them no real purpose other than general selfishness. Upon realizing that people were coming from all over to see their captive angel, it was easy to charge a small admission fee and still rack up a fortune for the household. “ Pelayo and Elisenda were happy with fatigue, for in less than a week they had crammed their rooms

with money” (2), yet as they improve all aspects of their lives as a family through their new-found fortune, they fail to think even for a moment about the possibility of using any of their fiscal gains to help the old man. It wasn’t until long after the spectators had ceased appearing on the property and just after the chicken coop collapsed that they realize the man is very ill, which, after the amount of time he’d already spent with the family, is rather appalling. Pelayo and Elisenda were so very enveloped in their own desires that they fail to notice or care about the state of the poor man. These two are not the only who treat him with neglect or brutality: “ the cripples pulled out feathers to touch their defective parts with, and even the most merciful threw stones at him, trying to get him to rise so they could see him standing” (2). They even burn him with a branding iron to see if he was still living. Everyone in his presence uses him to benefit themselves in some way, and it was surprising to read that the cripples, who are probably acquainted with misfortune, fell under that category, as well as those who were “ the most merciful”. The most horrific of all this malice is that, when they finally discover that the old man is sick and probably dying, the only reason they care is because not “ even the wise neighbor woman had been able to tell them what to do with dead angels” (4). It is human nature to put one’s self first because that is an essential for survival, but selfishness to this extent is both despicable and unfortunately common in society.

Despite the balance of benevolent and malicious aspects of society and those who conduct it, Gabriel Marquez’s “ A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings: A Tale for Children” very much highlights the parts that are particularly wicked. Through the well-intentioned institute of religion he

brings to the reader's attention a false piety that most of the characters exhibit, and by emphasizing the behavioral effects of stark differences between people (or creatures), he shows the intolerance that many found so natural, and in most of the remaining carefully chosen word of the story he displays the common cruelty and selfishness of every character. Perhaps the author's purpose in entitling the story a tale for children is a warning to the youth to beware of the nastiness of human.