

A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings

Posted on March 14, 2019

Introduction

Gabriel García Márquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" tells the story of a mysterious winged man who appears in the muddy courtyard of Pelayo and Elisenda after several days of rain. Although the creature possesses enormous wings, he does not resemble the glorious angels typically portrayed in religious art and literature. He is extremely old, weak, dirty, nearly bald, and unable to communicate with the people who discover him. His arrival creates curiosity throughout the village, but it does not inspire lasting compassion, spiritual reflection, or moral improvement. Instead, the villagers imprison, examine, ridicule, injure, and commercially exploit him.

García Márquez was a Colombian novelist, short-story writer, and journalist who received the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature. His fiction is closely associated with magical realism, a literary mode in which extraordinary events are narrated as ordinary parts of everyday reality. The Nobel Prize's biographical record identifies *Leaf Storm and Other Stories*, translated by Gregory Rabassa, among García Márquez's major English-language publications.

The old man is clearly the central figure of the story, but describing him as a dynamic character is not entirely accurate. A dynamic character undergoes a significant internal transformation in attitude, personality, or moral understanding. The old man does not display such a change. He remains largely silent, patient, mysterious, and emotionally distant throughout the narrative. Although his physical condition improves and he eventually flies away, the story gives little evidence that his beliefs or personality have changed.

The old man is better understood as a static but symbolic catalyst. His arrival causes the other characters to reveal their values, prejudices, greed, curiosity, cruelty, and limited faith. He does not drive the story through deliberate choices or extensive dialogue. Instead, his presence creates the circumstances through which the moral weaknesses of Pelayo, Elisenda, Father Gonzaga, and the villagers become visible.

Through the old man's appearance, suffering, silence, and eventual escape, García Márquez examines how human beings respond to people and experiences they cannot understand. The story suggests that people often fail to recognize wonder when it appears in an unfamiliar form. They may judge others according to physical appearance, exploit vulnerability for financial gain, or reject anything that does not fit their established beliefs. The old man therefore represents more than a possible angel. He symbolizes the misunderstood outsider, the suffering stranger, the exploited body, and the mystery that human institutions cannot fully explain.

The Arrival of the Old Man

The story begins after several days of heavy rain. Pelayo and Elisenda's courtyard has become muddy, their house is filled with crabs, and their infant is ill. The gloomy setting creates an atmosphere of sickness, decay, and discomfort before the supernatural event occurs.

While removing crabs from the house, Pelayo notices the old man lying face down in the mud. The man is struggling to rise because his enormous wings have become trapped in the wet ground. Pelayo calls Elisenda, and the couple studies the stranger. They are surprised by his wings, but his weak and ordinary appearance quickly reduces their sense of wonder.

The contrast between the old man's wings and his physical condition is central to his characterization. Wings conventionally suggest freedom, transcendence, spirituality, and closeness to heaven. The old man's body, however, suggests age, disease, poverty, and human vulnerability. He does not arrive surrounded by light or accompanied by heavenly music. He falls into a dirty courtyard among crabs, mud, and household waste.

This combination of the supernatural and the unpleasant prevents readers from interpreting him according to familiar religious expectations. He may be an angel, but he does not look like the type of angel the villagers expect to see. García Márquez therefore asks whether people can recognize the sacred when it appears in an unattractive or inconvenient form.

The Old Man as a Static Character and Narrative Catalyst

The original analysis identifies the old man as a dynamic character because the events of the story occur around him. However, centrality and change are not the same. A character may be essential to the plot without experiencing a meaningful internal transformation.

The old man's basic qualities remain consistent. He is physically vulnerable, unable or unwilling to communicate clearly, resistant to the villagers' attempts to control him, and extraordinarily patient. He does not become more generous, selfish, courageous, or morally aware. His condition changes from weakness to sufficient strength for flight, but this is primarily a physical recovery.

His narrative importance comes from the reactions he provokes in others. Pelayo and Elisenda reveal their greed by charging admission to see him. The neighbour woman reveals her dependence on superstition by confidently identifying him as an angel and recommending his death. Father Gonzaga exposes the limitations of institutional religion by judging the possible angel according to formal tests. The villagers demonstrate cruelty by treating him as an object of entertainment.

Lois Parkinson Zamora argues that magical-realist characters are sometimes deliberately given

limited psychological individuality because they function within broader cultural and political structures. Instead of focusing entirely on a character's private inner life, magical realism may use figures who carry archetypal or allegorical meanings.

This critical approach helps explain the old man's lack of conventional development. García Márquez does not provide his name, history, thoughts, or clear destination. His identity depends largely on how other people classify and treat him. He becomes an angel, foreign sailor, spectacle, burden, invalid, or strange animal according to the observer. His lack of a fixed identity makes him more effective as a symbol of the unknown and the socially excluded.

Magical Realism and the Ordinary Supernatural

The story is a powerful example of magical realism because the narrator presents an impossible creature within an otherwise recognizable domestic setting. The appearance of a winged man is extraordinary, yet the narrative voice describes him with the same practical attention given to the rain, crabs, illness, mud, and chicken coop.

The narrator does not stop to prove that a human being with wings can exist. The question is not whether the wings are physically possible. Instead, the story focuses on how people respond after the winged man appears.

Greer Watson distinguishes magical realism from other forms of fantasy by examining the assumptions about reality that a story asks its readers to accept. In magical realism, the supernatural is often incorporated into the ordinary world without requiring an elaborate explanation or a separate magical universe (Watson, 2000).

The villagers also accept the physical reality of the wings relatively quickly. Their disagreement concerns what the old man is rather than whether he exists. The neighbour woman calls him an angel, Pelayo and Elisenda initially consider him a shipwrecked foreigner, and Father Gonzaga looks for evidence that would confirm or reject his supernatural identity.

This narrative strategy directs attention away from scientific possibility and toward moral behaviour. Readers are not primarily asked to solve the old man's identity. They are asked to judge the society that confronts him.

The story's matter-of-fact tone also makes the villagers' cruelty more disturbing. If the narrator had described every act with emotional outrage, readers might be told exactly how to respond. Instead, García Márquez presents exploitation and violence almost casually. The calm narration forces readers to recognize the horror beneath apparently ordinary behaviour.

Physical Appearance and the Failure of Recognition

The old man's unattractive body shapes nearly every response to him. He is old, wet, poorly dressed, and physically exhausted. His wings are large but damaged, dirty, and missing feathers. Rather than confirming his divine nature, his body creates doubt.

The villagers appear to believe that a heavenly being should possess youth, beauty, strength, cleanliness, and majesty. Because the old man displays weakness and decay, they struggle to associate him with the sacred. Their judgment exposes a tendency to confuse goodness with attractive appearance.

This mistake has broader social implications. Human beings often evaluate strangers according to clothing, health, age, language, nationality, disability, or economic position. Someone who appears poor or physically different may be treated as less intelligent, trustworthy, or valuable. The old man becomes a literary representation of individuals whose humanity is ignored because they do not fit socially approved standards.

His age is especially important. The villagers do not respect him as an elder. Instead, they interpret his frailty as evidence that he can be controlled. His wings make him unusual enough to attract attention, while his weakness makes him easy to imprison.

The story therefore overturns the conventional image of power. The old man may possess supernatural origins, but he enters the village in a powerless condition. His inability to protect himself becomes a test of the villagers' morality. They fail that test because they respond to vulnerability with exploitation rather than care.

Language, Foreignness, and Otherness

When Pelayo and Elisenda attempt to speak to the old man, he responds in a language they do not understand. His unfamiliar speech increases the distance between him and the villagers.

Instead of making a sustained effort to communicate, the couple interprets his language through assumptions. They decide that his voice sounds like that of a sailor and imagine that he may be a survivor of a foreign shipwreck. The neighbour woman offers a different explanation, identifying him immediately as an angel.

Both responses reveal the human desire to classify the unfamiliar quickly. The villagers are uncomfortable with uncertainty, so they assign the old man an identity before understanding him. Their labels allow them to avoid recognizing him as a person with needs, memories, and intentions of his own.

The old man's foreign speech can also represent the experience of immigrants, displaced people, refugees, and cultural outsiders. A person who cannot communicate in the dominant language may be treated as unintelligent or suspicious. Language difference becomes an excuse for exclusion.

The villagers speak about the old man constantly, but they rarely speak with him in a meaningful way. He becomes the subject of rumours, religious theories, entertainment, and commercial decisions without participating in those discussions. Others construct his identity for him.

This treatment demonstrates how marginalization works. A community does not need to understand an outsider before making decisions about that person. It may first deny the outsider a voice and then use the resulting silence as evidence that the outsider is not fully human.

Pelayo and Elisenda's Exploitation of the Old Man

Pelayo and Elisenda initially respond to the old man with fear and uncertainty. They do not follow the neighbour woman's recommendation to kill him, but their decision to imprison him in the chicken coop is hardly compassionate.

The chicken coop reduces the old man from a possible heavenly messenger to something resembling livestock. His placement among chickens encourages the villagers to view him as an animal rather than a person. The wire enclosure separates spectators from the suffering body and makes cruelty appear safe.

When large crowds arrive, Pelayo and Elisenda recognize that they can profit from the old man. Elisenda begins charging admission, turning the courtyard into a commercial attraction. The couple earns enough money to improve its living conditions and construct a larger house.

Their prosperity depends directly on the old man's captivity. They benefit from his difference, weakness, and inability to escape. Although they eventually become wealthy, there is little evidence that wealth produces gratitude or moral reflection.

Elisenda becomes increasingly irritated by the old man's continuing presence. Once the crowds disappear and the income ends, she no longer sees him as valuable. He becomes an inconvenience moving around the property.

The couple's behaviour illustrates commodification, the process of turning a person or experience into something that can be bought and sold. The old man is valuable to Pelayo and Elisenda only while customers are willing to pay to see him.

García Márquez's criticism extends beyond one greedy family. Modern societies frequently commercialize suffering, physical difference, private tragedy, and personal humiliation. News, social media, entertainment, and tourism can turn vulnerable people into spectacles. Audiences may observe suffering intensely without accepting responsibility for relieving it.

The Villagers as Spectators

The villagers respond to the old man as consumers rather than compassionate human beings. They come to see him, touch him, feed him unsuitable food, test his reactions, and demand miracles. Their interest is not based on concern for his well-being.

Some visitors ask for cures or personal benefits. Their attention is transactional. They are interested in what the old man can do for them rather than what they should do for him.

When he fails to perform miracles according to their expectations, they become impatient. One person burns him with a hot iron to determine whether he is still alive. His pain becomes another form of entertainment.

The old man endures these abuses “with the patience of a dog” (García Márquez, 2012, p. 109). This brief comparison emphasizes both his endurance and his dehumanization. The villagers treat him not as a sacred visitor or even an ordinary human being but as an animal whose suffering requires no moral response.

Crowd behaviour also weakens individual responsibility. A person may commit an act within a group that would feel unacceptable in private. Because everyone is watching, touching, and mocking the old man, cruelty becomes normalized.

No major character firmly defends him. The absence of an effective moral witness is one of the story’s most troubling features. The community contains curiosity, superstition, religious authority, and economic ambition, but it lacks sustained compassion.

Father Gonzaga and Institutional Religion

Father Gonzaga represents the formal religious response to the old man. As a Catholic priest, he might be expected to recognize an angel or defend a vulnerable creature from abuse. Instead, he approaches the situation cautiously and bureaucratically.

He attempts to speak to the old man in Latin, apparently assuming that an angel should understand the official language of the Church. When the old man does not respond appropriately, Father Gonzaga becomes suspicious.

He also judges the stranger’s physical condition. The old man smells unpleasant and does not display the dignity that Gonzaga associates with angels. Rather than allowing the encounter to challenge his expectations, the priest treats the failure to meet those expectations as evidence against the old man.

Father Gonzaga then writes to higher religious authorities and waits for an official determination. The

questions reportedly considered by the Church are detached from the old man's immediate suffering. Institutional investigation replaces practical mercy.

The story does not simply claim that religion is false. Instead, it questions religious systems that become so concerned with categories, procedures, and appearances that they fail to respond ethically to the person directly before them.

The old man's identity remains uncertain, but Father Gonzaga does not need proof of divinity to recognize that he is vulnerable. Even an ordinary foreign sailor trapped in mud and imprisoned in a chicken coop would deserve food, shelter, safety, and humane treatment.

The moral failure therefore occurs before the theological question is answered. The villagers ask whether the old man is an angel when they should first ask how a suffering being should be treated.

The Spider Woman and the Desire for Simple Explanations

The public eventually loses interest in the old man when a travelling attraction arrives: a woman who has been transformed into a giant spider. Her story is easier for the villagers to understand. She explains that she disobeyed her parents and was punished.

Unlike the old man, the spider woman speaks the villagers' language and provides a clear moral lesson. Her condition has an identifiable cause, and she can answer questions about it.

The old man offers no such explanation. He does not confirm that he is an angel, explain where he came from, or provide an easily understood lesson. His presence remains mysterious.

The villagers prefer the spider woman because she turns the supernatural into a familiar story of wrongdoing and punishment. Her experience reassures them that the universe is morally predictable. Disobedience leads to punishment, while obedience presumably leads to safety.

The old man threatens this certainty. His suffering does not appear to be deserved, and his identity cannot be settled. He may represent grace, innocence, age, foreignness, or supernatural mystery, but no interpretation fully explains him.

The shift in public attention also exposes the shallowness of the villagers' curiosity. They do not leave the old man because they have gained wisdom. They leave because a more understandable and entertaining attraction appears.

Patience as the Old Man's Defining Quality

The old man rarely speaks or acts aggressively. His most important characteristic is his ability to endure.

His patience should not necessarily be interpreted as weakness. The villagers control his physical environment, but they do not gain control over his inner identity. He never performs for them willingly, confirms their theories, or becomes the creature they want him to be.

His silence frustrates the community because it denies them access to his meaning. He remains mysterious despite their inspections and abuse.

Patience also gives him a form of moral superiority. Pelayo, Elisenda, the priest, and the villagers reveal selfishness and impatience, while the old man survives without becoming like them.

At the same time, readers should be cautious about romanticizing his suffering. The fact that he endures cruelty does not make the cruelty acceptable. García Márquez's depiction of patience may suggest spiritual strength, but it also reveals how easily societies expect vulnerable people to endure conditions that should never have been imposed on them.

The Symbolism of the Wings

The wings are the story's most obvious symbol, but their meaning is deliberately unstable. They may suggest angelic identity, spiritual freedom, imagination, difference, burden, or the possibility of escape.

At the beginning, the wings trap the old man in the mud. What should enable flight instead contributes to his helplessness. His extraordinary quality becomes a disadvantage because his body is too weak to use it.

For the villagers, the wings make him profitable but not respected. They attract attention while also marking him as abnormal. His difference becomes the basis of both his fame and his persecution.

Vera Kutzinski's discussion of the "logic of wings" emphasizes how wings create speculation rather than settling identity. The physical fact of the wings generates competing cultural stories about what the stranger might be (Kutzinski, 1985).

The wings therefore symbolize the difficulty of interpreting difference. The same feature can be understood as divine evidence, biological abnormality, entertainment, or inconvenience. Meaning comes not only from the wings themselves but from the assumptions brought by each observer.

By the end of the story, the wings finally perform their expected function. They carry the old man

beyond the reach of Pelayo, Elisenda, and the village. What once trapped him becomes the means of his liberation.

The Old Man's Flight and the Meaning of the Ending

After a long period of illness and weakness, the old man begins to recover. New feathers grow, and he makes repeated efforts to fly. His early attempts are awkward, but he eventually rises into the air and disappears over the horizon.

The flight provides the story's clearest transformation, but it remains physical and symbolic rather than psychological. The old man does not explain what he has learned or forgive those who abused him. He simply escapes.

Elisenda watches him leave and experiences relief because he is no longer a problem in her life. Her reaction reveals that she has not undergone meaningful moral development. She does not express regret for imprisoning or exploiting him. The wealth created through his suffering remains with her family.

The ending is therefore both hopeful and troubling. It is hopeful because the old man survives and regains his freedom. The villagers fail to destroy him or define him permanently. His flight suggests endurance, liberation, and transcendence.

However, the community remains morally unchanged. No one is held accountable, and the old man's departure does not produce public repentance. Pelayo and Elisenda keep the material rewards of exploitation.

The conclusion denies readers a simple moral resolution. Justice comes through the victim's escape, not through the transformation of the oppressors. García Márquez may be suggesting that societies often fail to learn from the wonders and suffering placed before them.

Ambiguity and the Refusal to Explain

The story never confirms exactly what the old man is. The neighbour woman may be correct that he is an angel, but she is not presented as an entirely reliable authority. Father Gonzaga doubts his angelic identity, but his tests are limited and superficial. Medical examination confirms that the wings appear naturally connected to his body, yet this finding does not explain his origin.

The narrator preserves uncertainty until the end. This ambiguity is not a weakness in the story. It is one of its central techniques.

If García Márquez confirmed that the old man was an angel, the story could be reduced to a lesson about failing to recognize a divine visitor. If he confirmed that the man was an unusual human being, the story could become a more straightforward condemnation of discrimination.

By refusing to settle the question, García Márquez creates a wider ethical challenge. The old man deserves humane treatment regardless of whether he is heavenly, human, or something else entirely.

Compassion that depends on proof of supernatural importance is not genuine compassion. A person should not need to be an angel before society recognizes that imprisonment, humiliation, and physical abuse are wrong.

The Central Themes Revealed Through the Old Man

The old man connects the story's major themes:

Theme	How the Old Man Reveals It
Otherness	His body, language, and unknown origin make him an outsider
Exploitation	Pelayo and Elisenda profit from displaying him
Religious uncertainty	Father Gonzaga cannot classify him through institutional tests
Cruelty	The villagers mock, injure, and neglect him
Appearance and judgment	His weak body prevents people from seeing him as majestic
Commercialization	His suffering becomes paid entertainment
Patience	He survives abuse without surrendering his identity
Freedom	His recovered wings eventually carry him away
Ambiguity	His true nature is never conclusively explained

The old man embodies these themes without delivering speeches about them. His body and

treatment become the language through which the story communicates its moral concerns.

Conclusion

The very old man with enormous wings is the central character of García Márquez's story, but he is not dynamic in the conventional literary sense. He undergoes physical recovery, yet the narrative does not show a major transformation in his personality, beliefs, or moral outlook. He is more accurately described as a static, symbolic catalyst whose mysterious presence reveals the values of everyone around him.

Pelayo and Elisenda demonstrate greed by imprisoning and displaying him for money. The villagers show how curiosity can become cruelty when a suffering person is treated as entertainment. Father Gonzaga reveals the limitations of religious authority when institutional classification becomes more important than mercy. The spider woman demonstrates the public's preference for simple moral explanations over unresolved mystery.

The old man's enormous wings make him extraordinary, but his age, illness, dirt, and silence prevent the villagers from recognizing his possible sacredness. Their response shows how easily people associate value with beauty, familiarity, usefulness, and social approval. Those who appear weak, foreign, disabled, poor, or different may be denied dignity even when their humanity is evident.

The old man's endurance gives him a quiet strength. He survives the chicken coop, the crowds, neglect, illness, and physical abuse. His eventual flight represents freedom from a community that could neither understand nor respect him. Yet the ending does not offer complete justice. Pelayo and Elisenda remain wealthy, the villagers do not repent, and Elisenda is mainly relieved that the old man has left.

García Márquez ultimately refuses to tell readers whether the old man is truly an angel. This uncertainty strengthens the story's ethical message. Humane treatment should not depend on proving that a stranger is divine, useful, respectable, or familiar. The old man's suffering matters even when his identity remains unknown.

Through magical realism, irony, grotesque imagery, and ambiguity, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" challenges readers to reconsider how they respond to difference and vulnerability. The most important question is not whether the old man is an angel. It is whether the people who encounter him behave like moral human beings. Their failure to do so makes the story a lasting criticism of greed, prejudice, superficial faith, and the human tendency to turn mystery and suffering into spectacle.

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