A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings Study Guide

A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings by Gabriel García Márquez

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Introduction

Written in 1968, "Un señor muy viejo con alas enormes" ("A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings") is typical of a style known as "magic realism," which is closely associated with its author, the Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez. This imaginative style combines realistic, everyday details with elements of fantasy, blurring the reader's usual distinctions between reality and magic. But unlike other works of the imagination such as fairy tales or folk legends, stories of magic realism lead to no clear morals or simple truths; they present a rich and vivid world of magical possibilities, while frustrating and complicating the reader's efforts to fix a definite meaning to events.

Very simply stated, this is the story of what happens when an angel comes to town. But while it is subtitled "A Tale for Children," it is by no means a simple story. The setting is no ordinary town, and its visitor is no ordinary angel-indeed, he may very well not be an angel at all. In most respects, he seems disappointingly ordinary and human, despite his extraordinary appearance. Because he contradicts their expectations, the characters we meet seem thoroughly incapable of understanding him; their conventional wisdom and superstitious beliefs lead them into absurd explanations for his sudden visit, and they treat him in a manner that seems cruel, unjust, and ignorant.

Magic realism has been a popular and influential form, attracting a wide readership and a great deal of interest from literary scholars. Drawing on the stories and legends of his rural South American childhood, as well as his study of the sophisticated techniques of modernist writers, Garcia Marquez creates a rich and suggestive fictional landscape that challenges traditional modes of thought and focuses the reader's attention on the difficult, elusive work of making sense of the world.

Author Biography

Gabriel Jose Garcia Marquez was born on March 6, 1928, in Aracataca, Colombia, a small town in a farming region near the Caribbean coast. His birth came just as this region entered a sudden economic decline after twenty years of relative prosperity. His father, an out-of-work telegraph operator, relocated, leaving young Gabriel to be raised by his grandparents for the first eight years of his life.

These early circumstances are significant, for they seem to have had a profound influence on the mature writer's work. Garcia Marquez has said that he had learned everything important in his life by the time he was eight years old, and that nothing in his writing is purely a product of "fantasy." As a boy, he delighted in his grandfather's storytelling, from which he heard local legends and history; from his grandmother and the other villagers, he absorbed a wealth of traditions, superstitions, and folk beliefs. Drawing heavily on such sources, Garcia Marquez has developed an imaginative style literary critics call "magic realism." Many of his stories, including the celebrated epic novel *Cien años de soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude* 1967), are set in a fictional village named "Macondo"- which seems to be based on Aracataca, and in some ways reflects the rich, confusing world of childhood as well. Like the unnamed villages in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" and "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World," Macondo seems to be half-real and half-mythical, a place where dreams and the supernatural are blended with the details of everyday life, and where the most extraordinary events are somehow accepted as "normal," even if they can't be adequately explained. Old men, like the winged gentleman in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," are frequent characters in Garcia Marquez's writing, leading critics to speculate that they may all be derived, in part, from the author's own grandfather.

Garcia Marquez rejoined his family in Bogota, moving from a tropical village to a cold city high in the Andes mountains; he graduated from high school in 1946, and entered the National University in Bogota as a law student in 1947. However, the following year marked the beginning of *la violencia,* a decade-long period of civil warfare in Colombia, which would disrupt his life in many ways. When violence in Bogota caused the university to close, Garcia Marquez transferred to the University of Cartagena (near Aracataca on the northern coast) to continue his law studies. While there he also took a job as a journalist and began to write fiction seriously. In 1950 he dropped out of law school and moved to nearby Barranquilla. He found newspaper work and joined a circle of local writers who admired the work of European and American modernist authors (including James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway), and who sought to apply their styles and techniques to Latin American settings and themes in their own writings. García Márquez has acknowledged the particular influence of Faulkner and Hemingway on his own early work, and critics often compare his fictional creation of "Macondo" to that of Yoknapatawpha County, the recurring setting for many of Faulkner's novels and short stories.

For fifteen years, Garcia Marquez made a modest living as a journalist and published several short stories. His first novella, *La hojarasca,* was published in 1955; it was

translated into English in 1972 as the title piece in *Leaf Storm and Other Stories,* which included a translation of the story "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World." That same year a Bogota newspaper, *El Espectador,* sent him to Switzerland as a correspondent, but the paper was soon shut down by the military government, stranding Garcia Marquez in Europe for several years in relative poverty. A second novel, *El colonel no tiene quien le escriba* (*No One Writes to the Colonel)* , was published in 1961, followed by a collection of short stories, *Los funerales de la Mamá Grande* (*Big Mama's Funeral*), in 1962. By this time, his writing had received some critical approval but had made very little impact outside of Colombia, and García Márquez apparently resolved not to write any more fiction. However, three years later he began working on *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* When it was published in April, 1967, it became an international sensation: after years of frustration, Garcia Marquez was an "overnight success." In the process, he not only found a vast audience for his own writing, but helped spark a boom-period for Latin American literature in general. Western critics took a new interest in the region and began to recognize the achievements of such writers as Julio Cortazar, Ernesto Sabato, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa-all of whom came to enjoy much wider readership than they had found before García Márquez's breakthrough. A second story collection, *La increíble y triste historia de la candida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada* (*The Incredible and Sad Story of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother*), which includes "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," was published in 1972. García Márquez's later novels include *El otoño del patriarca* (*The Autumn of the Patriarch,* 1975), *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold,* 1981), *El amor en los timepos del cólera (Love in the Time of Cholera,* 1985), and *El general en su laberinto* (*The General in His Labyrinth,* 1989). Among his many honors is the Nobel Prize for Literature, which he received in 1982.

Plot Summary

Arrival

The setting is an unnamed coastal village, at an unspecified time in the past. A long rainstorm has washed crabs up from the beach into Pelayo's house, creating an odor he thinks may be affecting his sick newborn child. Disposing of their carcasses, he sees a figure groaning on the ground in his courtyard; as he moves closer, he discovers it to be "an old man, a very old man, lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts, couldn't get up, impeded by his enormous wings." Staring at this pitiful "bird-man," Pelayo and his wife Elisenda begin to overcome their amazement, and even find him familiar, despite those mysterious wings. While they can't understand his language, he seems to have "a strong sailor's voice," and at first they decide he is a shipwrecked foreign sailor, somehow managing to overlook the need to explain his wings. But a neighbor soon "corrects" them, stating confi- dently that he is an angel. Assuming he is nothing but trouble, she advises them to kill him. Not having the heart for it, Pelayo instead locks the old man in his chicken coop, still planning to dispose of him, only now by setting him to sea on a raft. He and Elisenda wake the next morning to find a crowd of neighbors in the courtyard and a far more complicated situation on their hands; suddenly, "everyone knew that a flesh-and-blood angel was held captive in Pelayo's house."

Sensation

The villagers treat the old man like a "circus animal"; they toss him food and speculate about what should be done with him. Some think he should be made "mayor of the world," others want him to be a "five-star general in order to win all wars," and still others hope he will father a superrace of "winged wise men who could take charge of the universe." The village priest arrives to inspect the captive, and presumably to make a more reasoned judgment on his nature. Father Gonzaga suspects "an impostor" at once and finds the old man's pathetic appearance to be strongly at odds with the church's traditional image of heavenly messengers. Finding the old man smelly and decrepit, his battered wings infested with insects, and showing no knowledge of church etiquette, the priest concludes that "nothing about him measured up to the proud dignity of angels." Despite his skepticism, he refuses to give a definitive ruling on the old man, choosing instead to write letters to his church superiors and wait for a written verdict from scholars in the Vatican. In the meantime, he warns the villagers against reaching any rash conclusions.

But word of the "angel" has already traveled too far, drawing fantastic crowds and creating a carnival atmosphere; events unfold quickly, described in language that suggests the exaggerated, dreamlike world of fairy-tales.

Surrounded by all this hectic activity, the old man takes "no part in his own act," keeping to himself and tolerating the abuses and indignities of his treatment with a patience that seems to be "[h]is only supernatural virtue." Drawn by the crowds, traveling circuses and carnivals arrive in town- including one that provides formidable competition for the puzzling attraction of "a haughty angel who scarcely deigned to look at mortals."

Decline

The new sensation is "the spider-woman," whose fantastic nature includes none of the majesty we associate with angels; she represents a kind of "magic" familiar from fairy-tales and folk legends. When still a girl, she once disobeyed her parents by going dancing; later, on the way home, she was struck by lightning and changed into a giant tarantula, retaining her human head. As a spectacle, she appeals to the crowd in ways the old man cannot, and even charges a lower admission price. Signifi- cantly, she speaks to her visitors, explaining the meaning of her monstrous appearance; her sad story is easy to understand, and points to a clear moral (children should obey their parents), one her audience already believes to be true. In contrast, the old man does nothing to explain himself, teaches nothing, and doesn't even entertain people; rather than confirming their beliefs, his mysterious nature challenges all the expectations it creates. He does perform some miracles, but they are equally puzzling, seeming to be either practical jokes or the result of some "mental disorder." These disappointing miracles "had already ruined the angel's reputation, when the woman who had been changed into a spider finally crushed him completely." The crowds disappear from Pelayo and Elisenda's courtyard as suddenly as they had come, and the unexplained mystery of the "bird-man" is quickly forgotten.

Still, thanks to the now-departed paying customers, Pelayo and Elisenda are now wealthy. They rebuild their home as "a two-story mansion with balconies and gardens and high netting so that crabs wouldn't get in during the winter, and with iron bars on the windows so that angels wouldn't get in," and settle into a life of luxury. But the ruined chicken coop and its ancient captive remain; as the years pass, the couple's growing child plays in the courtyard with the old man, who stubbornly survives despite his infirmities and neglect. When a doctor comes to examine him, he is amazed that the old man is still alive, and also by "the logic of his wings," which seem so natural that the doctor wonders why everyone doesn't have them. Even the bird-man's mystery and wonder grow so familiar that he eventually becomes a simple nuisance: a disagreeable old man, "dragging himself about here and there," always underfoot. Elisenda seems to find him everywhere in the house, as if he were duplicating himself just to annoy her; at one point she grows so "exasperated and unhinged" she screams that she is living in a "hell full of angels." Finally the old man's health deteriorates even further, and he seems to be near death.

Departure

As winter gives way to the sunny days of spring, the old man's condition begins to improve. He seems to sense a change taking place in himself, and to know what it means. He tries to stay out of the family's sight, sitting motionless for days in the corner of the courtyard; at night, he quietly sings sailor's songs to himself. Stiff new feathers begin to grow from his wings, and one morning Elisenda sees him trying them out in the courtyard. His first efforts to fly are clumsy, consisting of "ungainly flapping that slipped on the light and couldn't get a grip on the air," but he finally manages to take off. Elisenda sighs with relief, "for herself and for him," as she watches him disappear, "no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea."

Summary

After three days of rain, the home of Pelayo and Elisenda is infested with a large number of crabs. The crabs are crawling in the house and in the muddy courtyard. The air stinks with the smell of rotting shellfish as Pelayo braves the mud to throw the invading crustaceans back into the sea. Walking across the courtyard in the gray muck, he can barely see what turns out to be a very old man lying in the mud. The old man's efforts to rise are thwarted by the fact that he is weighted down by large and muddy wings.

Pelayo is frightened and runs to get his wife who has been tending their sick child. Back in the courtyard, they assess the reality of the old man. He is poorly dressed, has only a few teeth, and he is almost bald. He has buzzard-like wings, only half-feathered and caked with mud. His appearance does little to suggest that he might once have had a grand or important presence. The couple stares at the old man for such a long time that he starts to become as familiar to them as a great-grandfather. When they speak to him, he answers in a language that they can't understand, though there is something about his speech that suggests he might be a sailor. They decide that he must be a poor castaway from a foreign ship wrecked in the storm. When they seek the opinion of their neighbor, a woman who is reputed to "know everything about life and death," she tells them the old man is an angel who must have been coming to take their sick child away, she says, but he was so old that he was unable to complete his mission in the face of the strong storm and was knocked to the ground.

By the next day, the whole neighborhood knows there is an angel at Pelayo and Elisenda's house. Because the woman who knows everything about life and death considers angels to be the "fugitive survivors of a celestial conspiracy," the people refrain from killing him. Pelayo, armed with a club, watches the old man from the kitchen window, and before going to bed , drags the old man out of the mud and locks him in the chicken coop.

The days of rain finally end that night, but Pelayo and Elisenda are still killing crabs in the house. After a little while, their child's health begins to improve; his fever breaks, and he asks for food. His recovery prompts them to feel charitable. They decide to put the old man on a raft with enough food and water for three days and send him to meet his fate upon the seas. However, when they go to the chicken coop in the morning to put this plan into action, they find the whole neighborhood is there. The crowd is teasing the old man through the wire of the coop without showing any reverence expected of people confronted with an angel. The people are throwing him things to eat through the fence as if he were an animal in the circus.

The priest, Father Gonzaga, arrives before seven that morning. By then the crowd is composed of people theorizing about the old man's future. Father Gonzaga is somewhat alarmed at the appearance of an angel in his neighborhood, and after consulting his catechism, decides to do a close-up examination of the creature in the chicken coop, who looks more like one of the hens than a supernatural being. Father

Gonzaga speaks to the old man in Latin and becomes suspicious when the man cannot understand God's language. The priest thinks the old man is much too human in appearance to meet his expectations of an angel. The old man is smelly, his wings are covered with parasites, and he has no dignity. Father Gonzaga remembers that the devil is known for using tricks to fool those on the path to salvation. Wings alone are not enough to define the creature as an angel, he reasons; after all, both hawks and airplanes have wings, but they have more differences than similarities. The priest decides to write a letter to the bishop, knowing that the bishop will write to his primate, and the primate will write to the Pope for a final determination of what to do about the old man in the hen house.

Word of the angel spreads, and crowds descend upon Pelayo's courtyard. There are so many people that military troops with bayonets are called to keep the mob from knocking down the house. Elisenda, who is tired of sweeping up after the unwanted visitors, decides to put up a fence around the yard and charge admission.

Curious people come from far away. The crowds include invalids seeking cures, a man who is unable to sleep because he hears noises from the stars, and a sleepwalker who gets up in the night to undo all the things he had accomplished during the day. It is tiring for Pelayo and Elisenda to collect the admission fee from all the onlookers, but they are happy because they have amassed a considerable amount of money in only a week, and the line of people waiting to enter the courtyard still stretches as far as they can see.

For his part, the angel takes no notice of all the activity. He is concerned with making himself more comfortable in his nest, which is very hot because of the oil lamps and holy candles placed near him. The crowd tries to make him eat mothballs because the wise neighbor woman says that is what angels eat. He refuses the mothballs, however, just as he refuses the lunches brought to him by penitents. Whether it is because he is an angel or just an old man, he eats only eggplant mush.

The one quality he possesses that appears to be supernatural is patience. No matter what the chickens or the crowds do to him, they cannot get a reaction from him. The only time he became upset I was when one of the visitors burned him with a branding iron. He had been sitting so long without moving they thought he was dead. At the touch of the iron, however, the old man awoke in a panic that was far from ordinary and began to rant in his strange language. There were tears in his eyes, and his flapping wings raised a storm of dust and chicken droppings.. The crowds are careful not to bother him after that. They realize that his passive demeanor is not a sign of relaxation, but represents a "cataclysm in repose."

Father Gonzaga waits for a final judgment from his superiors, but the mail from the Vatican is slow in coming. The Pope and his advisers do not share the priest's sense of urgency and spend their time studying whether the old man's language could be related to Aramaic, discussing whether or not he has a navel, and how many times he might fit on the head of a pin. They wonder if he isn't just an old Norwegian man with wings.

During this period, a traveling show comes to town. This show features a woman who has been transformed into a spider because she had been a disobedient daughter. The admission fee to see this woman is lower than that to see the angel, and people can ask her questions as well, so the crowds leave the old man in the chicken coop to focus their attention on the spider-woman. Those who pay see a tarantula as big as a ram with the head of a sad young girl. Her appearance is the least of her attraction, however. The real entertainment comes from hearing the creature relate details of her situation with sincerity and evident pain. According to her story, she had once sneaked out of her house to go to a dance without her parents' permission. On the way home, after dancing all night, she was hit with a bolt of lightning that changed her into a spider.

The crowds find this story and the demeanor of the spider-woman much more accessible than the haughty angel who will hardly look at them. Additionally, few miracles were attributed to the angel, and those that did occur were odd. For example, a blind man grew three new teeth instead of recovering his sight; a paralyzed person won the lottery, but did not regain the use of his legs; and a leper sprouted sunflowers from his sores rather than being cured. These kinds of miracles had already tarnished the angel's reputation by the time the spider-woman came to town. Then she cured Father Gonzaga of his insomnia and took the final bit of the community's attention away from the old man in the chicken coop. Pelayo and Elisenda's courtyard becomes as empty as it had been before the angel's appearance.

In spite of the change in circumstances, the couple is happy. They use the money they made from the admission fee to build a large two-story house with gardens and balconies and nets to keep the crabs out in the winter. The house also has iron bars on the windows to keep out angels. Elisenda buys stylish new shoes. The only part of the property left out of the renovations is the chicken coop, which receives only the minimum care needed to control the stench given off by the old man.

When their child becomes old enough to walk, Pelayo and Elisenda caution him to stay away from the chicken yard, but as time passes, they become more accustomed to the old man's presence. Soon, the child is playing inside the decaying chicken coop. The angel tolerates the child without giving him any special attention. Both the old man and the child contract chicken pox at the same time, and the doctor who comes to treat the child gives in to his desire to listen to the angel's heart with his stethoscope. The sounds he hears make him wonder how the old man is staying alive at all. What surprises him most is the completely natural logic of the old man's wings. The doctor wonders why all humans do not have them.

By the time the child starts school, the weathered chicken coop has collapsed, and the angel drags himself around the house like a dying man. Pelayo and Elisenda shoo him out of the bedroom with a broom only to have him reappear in the kitchen a moment later. They begin to suspect that he has been duplicated, since they seem to find him in so many places at once. Elisenda becomes increasingly upset at his presence in her house. She says she is living in a "hell full of angels."

As time goes on, the old man loses nearly all of his feathers. Pelayo throws a blanket over him and allows him to sleep in the shed. The couple notices that the angel has a fever during the nights, and in his delirium, he rattles on in his strange Norwegian-like language. They think he is going to die, and no one, not even the wise neighbor woman, can tell them what to do with a dead angel.

The old man survives the winter, however, and his condition seems to improve with the sunnier weather. He stays in a far corner of the courtyard for several days without moving. Then, in December, large and stiff feathers begin to appear on his wings. The old man wants no one to notice his new feathers or the fact that he is singing sea chanteys during the starry nights.

One day, while Elisenda is cutting up onions for lunch, she notices a strong wind blowing into the kitchen from the sea. Through the window, she can see the angel making his first, clumsy attempts to fly. His fingernails scrape the ground, and he almost knocks over the shed during his experimental flights. At last, he manages to gain altitude, and Elisenda is relieved for both of them as she watches him fly over the last houses in the village, becoming smaller and smaller until he is just a dot on the horizon and no longer an annoyance in her life.

Analysis

The author's use of magical realism is well suited to this tale about recognizing the miraculous in everyday life. Finding an angel in one's backyard is an appropriate metaphor for suggesting that life is full of surprises. Just like the characters Pelayo and Elisenda, the reader becomes accustomed to the nature of the old man as the story progresses. In a similar way, the reader passes through the stages of awe, mistrust, disappointment, and finally, annoyance at the inconvenience of having a supernatural being in the house. The reader becomes a member of the crowd making demands of the angel. Simply being miraculous is not enough, the story suggests.

A discussion of the language used in the story must acknowledge that it is a translation from the Spanish, but some observations can be made. The language is simple and direct, which encourages the reader to suspend disbelief, while its somewhat formal quality adds the religious connotations associated with any consideration of angels.

The story includes many references to the Western religious sensibility. The beginning phrase " After three days" evokes biblical passages. According to Christian tradition, it was on the third day that God named the earth and the sea and created fruit-bearing plants and trees. This claiming of space is suggested when Pelayo walks across the courtyard picking up the crabs that have washed ashore during the many preceding days of rain, which invokes the image of the biblical flood. With the discovery of the old man, Pelayo's life improves: his sick child returns to health, and the family becomes prosperous. These are the fruits of Pelayo's discovery.

The physical condition of the old man and his appearance as the waters recede suggest a "fallen angel." He is covered with mud, and his efforts to stand are impeded by his wings. The excessive weight of his wings in the courtyard represents the burden of his angel nature on earth. He is not adored or even respected because he does not fit what people commonly expect of a celestial being. His experience in the yard also symbolizes death and rebirth. In the beginning, his wings are like those of a buzzard, a bird associated with decay, but at the end of the story, he molts, regains his strength, and flies away.

The idea that people distrust miracles that do not conform to established rules; such as those set out by organized religions is illustrated through Father Gonzaga. The priest is willing to accept the old man as an angel until he discovers that he cannot understand the "language of God." The fact that the authorities representing God on earth -- the bishop, the primate, and officials in Rome -- focus on details rather than on the overall existence of an old man with wings can be read as the author's commentary on the state of institutionalized religion in general. He suggests that such institutions would not recognize a real miracle if one landed in their backyard.

The old man is the ultimate stranger. It is not only his wings that set him apart. He speaks a language so strange that it is labeled "Norwegian" by the villagers for whom Norway must represent the furthest reaches of human habitation, a land far to the north and alien to all they know.

The fickle nature of people in the village is shown in their treatment of the old man and their abandonment of him when a new "miracle" arrives in town. Their actions describe the short attention span of humankind, in general, and how people would rather be entertained than truly changed.

When the old man's miracles are odd rather than miraculous in an expected way, the people are quick to turn to another so-called miracle worker, the spider-woman. The spider-woman is easier for the people to understand than the old man. She was changed into a spider because she had broken the rules. The people can relate her experience to their own lives more easily than they can accept a cranky and aloof old angel who speaks Norwegian.

The author's style has worked its magic by this point in the story, since the reader is more than willing to accept the appearance of a spider-woman as a foil to the decrepit angel. Her appearance diminishes the status of the old man with wings. She appears more miraculous, at least on the surface, and is much more accessible overall. For the reader, however, the feeling that she is merely an act in the traveling carnival persists.

The passage of time is indicated by the aging of Pelayo and Elisenda's child and the decay of the chicken house. The couple becomes disenchanted with the old man over time. He is always underfoot, he is "too human," and he smells bad. His presence, which changed their lives and brought them prosperity, has become a burden to them. Elisenda is dismayed at living in a "hell full of angels." They are "too human" and compassionate to ignore him completely, however, and when he becomes sick, they

show him minimal kindnesses, such as giving him a blanket and letting him stay in the relative warmth of a shed.

The doctor who examines the angel is amazed that he is alive at all. The doctor is also amazed at the "logic" of the old man's wings and wonders why all men do not have them. With this statement, the author may be suggesting that what is really strange is that humans do not understand the close relationship of the natural and supernatural. The old man is consistently described as "too human." The doctor's observation represents the complimentary thought that humans are not very angelic.

The return of spring brings new life to the old angel. He grows new feathers and makes attempts to fly. This represents the resurrection of his angel-hood after his time weighted down on earth, as well as the biblical concept of resurrection after death. While his first efforts are clumsy and unsuccessful, he finally succeeds in flying off across the sea. Elisenda watches his departure with relief. She is no longer forced to deal with the inconvenient reality of the miracle that has improved their lives.

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The passage of time is indicated by the aging of Pelayo and Elisenda's child and the decay of the chicken house. The couple becomes disenchanted with the old man over time. He is always underfoot, he is "too human," and he smells bad. His presence, which changed their lives and brought them prosperity, has become a burden to them. Elisenda is dismayed at living in a "hell full of angels." They are "too human" and compassionate to ignore him completely, however, and when he becomes sick, they show him minimal kindnesses, such as giving him a blanket and letting him stay in the relative warmth of a shed.

The doctor who examines the angel is amazed that he is alive at all. The doctor is also amazed at the "logic" of the old man's wings and wonders why all men do not have them. With this statement, the author may be suggesting that what is really strange is that humans do not understand the close relationship of the natural and supernatural. The old man is consistently described as "too human." The doctor's observation represents the complimentary thought that humans are not very angelic.

The return of spring brings new life to the old angel. He grows new feathers and makes attempts to fly. This represents the resurrection of his angel-hood after his time weighted down on earth, as well as the biblical concept of resurrection after death. While his first efforts are clumsy and unsuccessful, he finally succeeds in flying off across the sea. Elisenda watches his departure with relief. She is no longer forced to deal with the inconvenient reality of the miracle that has improved their lives.

Characters

Bird-man

See Very old man with enormous wings

Elisenda

In her marriage to Pelayo, Elisenda takes an active part in decision-making. Her husband runs to get her as soon as he discovers the old man, and they try to make sense of him together, apparently sharing the same reactions. It is she who first conceives of charging the villagers admission to see the "angel," an idea which makes the couple wealthy. At the end of the story, she is the mistress of an impressive mansion, dressed in the finest fashions. Yet the old man seems to be a constant annoyance to her, a feeling that only intensifies over time. He is useless and infuriating to her, "dragging himself about here and there like a stray dying man"; she seems to be constantly shooing him out of her way. She eventually grows so "exasperated and unhinged" that she screams that she is living in a "hell full of angels." Elisenda is also the only witness to the old man's departure, watching silently from the kitchen window as he tries out his newly regrown wings. Her reaction as he disappears over the horizon shows a measure of sympathy for the "senile vulture," as well as her hope that her own life will return to normal: she lets out a sigh of relief "for herself, and for him."

Father Gonzaga

A former woodcutter, Father Gonzaga is the village priest whose religious training and standing in the community make him a moral and intellectual authority. Of all the characters, he seems uniquely qualified to pass judgment on the strange visitor and to determine whether he is really one of God's angels or "just a Norwegian with wings." However, his understanding of church doctrine leads him to no solid conclusions. He counsels the villagers to withhold their own judgment until he can receive a definitive answer from scholars in the Vatican. Father Gonzaga is never able to provide an explanation, and he loses sleep over the mystery until his parishioners eventually lose interest in the old man entirely.

Examining the angel-like creature, Father Gonzaga immediately suspects that he is "an impostor." The old man's unbearable odor, his derelict condition, and his undignified appearance all make him seem "much too human" to accept as a perfect immortal or member of a divine race. But rather than make a judgment from the evidence of his senses (and knowing that the devil likes to trick people with appearances), he applies a series of tests to the old man, presumably based on church teachings about the nature of angels. First, he greets the old man in Latin; the lack of a response is yet another suspicious sign, for it shows that the "angel" doesn't "understand the language of God or know how to greet His ministers." A series of letters from higher church authorities

results in further "tests" of divinity (Does the old man have a belly-button? Does his language seem related to the biblical dialect of Aramaic?) but fail to lead him to any final judgment. Unable to provide the answer that they seek from him, the Father can only warn his flock not to jump to any conclusions-a warning which they ignore with enthusiasm.

As a comic authority figure Father Gonzaga is open to a variety of interpretations. He is clearly ineffective in his role as a spiritual authority and as a source of wisdom and enlightenment. His superiors in the church hierarchy prove no more helpful and seem to be obsessed with obscure theological abstractions, such as how many angels can fit on the head of a pin. Such factors suggest at least a mildly satirical view of the Catholic Church and perhaps of organized religion in general. To some critics, Father Gonzaga's means of inquiry are also a parody of the scientific method, while his fruitless correspondence with church scholars reflects the uselessness of bureaucracies everywhere. And other critics even see a reflection of themselves-the figure of the cultural authority, whose profession makes him unwilling to admit the obvious limits of his understanding.

Old man

See Very old man with enormous wings

Pelayo

It is Pelayo, the town bailiff, who discovers the old man with wings struggling face down in the courtyard of his home after a storm. As the strange visitor begins to attract crowds, Pelayo and his wife, Elisenda, exhibit him as a carnival attraction. Though the old man proves to be only a temporary sensation, he creates a highly profitable windfall for the young couple. In "less than a week they had crammed their rooms with money" from paid admissions; they quickly earn enough to rebuild their house as a mansion and to live in luxury by village standards. Pelayo quits his job and sets up a rabbit warren on the edge of town, trading a minor administrative position for the leisurely life of a gamekeeping squire. While Pelayo's discovery of the winged being brings him great fortune, it also brings confusion and complication into his life. It is not the sort of luck he hopes to see repeated. When he and Elisenda design their new home, they are careful to include "iron bars on the windows so that angels wouldn't get in."

Spider-woman

The centerpiece of a traveling carnival, the "woman who had been changed into a spider for disobeying her parents" proves to be a more popular attraction than the old man, causing the villagers to lose interest in him and putting an end to Pelayo and Elisenda's profitable courtyard business. As a young girl, she had once gone dancing all night against her parents' wishes; later, while walking home, she was allegedly struck by lightning and transformed into "a frightful tarantula the size of a ram . . . with the head of

a sad maiden." Compared to the baffling old man, the spider-woman provides a far more satisfying spectacle. While she is at least as grotesque and fantastic as the "bird-man," she charges a lower admission price; more importantly, she is willing to communicate freely with her visitors, recounting her sad experience and inspiring sympathy for her fate. The "meaning" of her story is easy to grasp and teaches a clear moral lesson- one that confirms the villagers' conventional beliefs. In contrast, the old man makes no attempt to explain himself and seems to contradict all religious and folk beliefs about the nature of angels. His very existence raises disturbing questions, but he offers no reassuring answers.

Very old man with enormous wings

The old man is the story's central character and its central mystery. He is given no name but is precisely described in the title, which includes everything that can be said about him with any assurance: he is an extremely old man, in failing health, with all the frailties and limitations of human old age, and he has a huge pair of bird's wings growing from his back. We follow the other characters in their comic efforts to explain him, to assign some "meaning" to his sudden appearance, and finally to just put up with his annoying presence, but when he flies away at the story's end, the mystery remains.

The very idea of a "winged humanoid" evokes the image of angels, and most of the "wise" villagers quickly assume that he is an angel. But every- thing about him seems to contradict traditional stereotypes of heavenly power and immortal perfection. When Pelayo first finds him in the courtyard, apparently blown out of the sky by a strong rainstorm, his condition is pathetic: he lies "face down in the mud," "dressed like a ragpicker," and tangled in his half-plucked, bug-infested wings. The narrator tells us directly that this "pitiful condition of a drenched great-grandfather had taken away any sense of grandeur he might have had," and Father Gonzaga underscores the point later, when he observes that "nothing about him measured up to the proud dignity of angels." Nor do the villagers allow him any dignity or respect; throughout the story, they treat him "without the slightest reverence." He is displayed like a circus animal or sideshow freak; poked, plucked, and prodded; branded with a hot iron; pelted with stones and garbage; and held prisoner for years in a filthy, battered chicken coop, exposed to the elements. Though he is the source of the family's great fortune, Elisenda comes to find him an intolerable annoyance, becoming "exasperated and unhinged" by his presence. He is understandably "standoffish" toward people, tolerating only the company of the couple's young child, and the villagers come to think of him as "a haughty angel who scarcely deigned to look at mortals." Given his cruel captivity, the reader can only agree when the narrator observes that his "only supernatural virtue seemed to be patience." Even this virtue is later deprived of any otherworldly greatness; it becomes merely "the patience of a dog who had no illusions."

The old man is described in imagery of earthly poverty and human weakness, contradicting traditional heavenly stereotypes. Even the birds with which he is compared to are ignoble ones ("buzzard wings," "a huge decrepit hen," "a senile vulture"). Yet there is clearly something of the magical about him beyond his unexplained wings and

mysterious origin. He does, after all, perform miracles-but they, too, fail to satisfy expectations. The blind man's sight isn't restored, but he suddenly grows three new teeth; the leper's sores aren't cured, but sunflowers begin growing from them. These are "consolation miracles," which show "a certain mental disorder," as if senility had caused his magic powers to misfire. Alternately, they could be practical jokes, a form of "mocking fun" to avenge his abuse by the crowd. Their sick child recovers when Pelayo and Elisenda take in the old man, but this could be coincidence, or perhaps another case of failed magic (if, as the neighbor woman believes, he is an angel of death sent to take the baby). And, despite his obvious infirmities, he is possessed of a surprising inner strength. His health seems to be in irreversible decline throughout; a doctor's examination finds it "impossible for him to be alive," and very late in the story his death appears imminent. Yet with the coming of spring, after years of uselessness, his wings grow new feathers and regain their strength, allowing him to escape the village forever.

Although his wings make him a creature of the sky and he is clearly not at home on land, the old man also has some association with the sea. He comes from the sea (or at least from over it), washed up with a tide of crabs by a three-day storm; his first attempts to fly away are accompanied by "a wind that seemed to come from the high seas." Pelayo and Elisenda first take him for a foreign sailor (perhaps because they detect "a strong sailor's voice" in his incomprehensible speech), and an early plan called for him to be set out to sea on a raft with provisions. As his wings begin to regenerate, he sings "sea chanteys" under the stars. Critics disagree in their interpretations of this connection and in their judgments on its significance. But in García Márquez's other works, they often find the sea to be an important theme or symbol, both as a natural force of great power (equally capable of bringing rich gifts or terrible destruction), and as a force associated with the supernatural. Several of his stories include episodes where unusual strangers from the "outside world" appear in a small town and have a strong effect on its people. Very often, these remarkable visitors arrive by sea.

The old man is also connected in some way with Pelayo and Elisenda's child. The newborn is ill when he first appears, but quickly recovers when the "angel" takes up residence. The "wise neighbor woman" believes that he was sent to takes the child's life. Both the child and the old man come down with chicken pox at the same time, and the old man uncharacteristically allows the child to play with and around him, tolerating "ingenious infamies" with patience. But beyond these details, the connection or bond between the two is not developed.

Because the old man is a misunderstood outsider subjected to cruel mistreatment, he becomes primarily a figure of pity-a strange emotion for an "angel" to inspire. He has enough magical qualities to let the reader see him, at least potentially, as a figure of wonder, but his very human vulnerability keeps this from being much more than a suggestion. Finally, there is at least an equal suggestion of a potential "dark side." Pelayo's first impression is that of having seen a "nightmare," and the "mental disorder" of the old man's miracles suggests that his "magic powers" are uncontrollable, making him dangerous. When burned with a branding iron, his startled wing-flapping creates "a whirlwind of chicken dung and lunar dust," "a gale of panic that did not seem to be of this world." It is almost a moment of terror; when he calms down, the villagers regard

him with renewed caution and fear: "his passivity was not that of a hero taking his ease, but that of a cataclysm in repose." And though his visit brings truly miraculous results for Pelayo and Elisenda by making them fabulously wealthy, it also seems to be a frightful and unnerving experience for them. Elisenda comes to feel that she lives in "a hell full of angels," and when they design their dream home, the couple make sure to "angelproof" it with iron bars.

Themes

Doubt and Ambiguity

One of this story's difficult aspects is the sense of uncertainty it creates by leaving important facts unresolved and seeming to offer several possible interpretations for its events. The reader is never allowed to doubt that the old man and his strange wings are as "real" as anything else in the story; yet the reader can never be sure just what he is-a heavenly angel, a sad human who happens to have wings, or perhaps some other, unexplained possibility. This deliberate uncertainty can leave readers feeling a bit cheated-particularly in what seems to be a fairy tale. Stories are expected to have clear-cut meanings, and the author is expected to reveal them to the reader; if not, there is a tendency to feel he has failed in his storytelling, or that his audience has failed as readers. But in works of realism (and many other forms), ambiguity is often used as an intentional effect, to make a story seem less "storylike," and more like life itself. It reflects the understanding that real life is far more uncertain than the stories in books, and often forces readers to choose among several, equally possible explanations of events. As characters in daily life, readers seldom know "the whole story"-but it is traditional to expect writers to tie all tales neatly together for our understanding. While it complicates the task of the reader, the skillful, suggestive use of ambiguity is often admired by critics, and is usually considered to be one of the most appealing features of "magic realism."

Even in stories dealing with magic or the supernatural, there are rules a writer is expected to follow-for example, that there must always be a clear distinction between magical events and "normal" ones, and that the nature and significance of all characters is eventually made known to the reader. But as a magic realist, Garcia Marquez insists on breaking these rules as well. Without its fantastic elements, there is no story; yet the reader is never sure just how to take them, and how far to trust the narrator. Sometimes, he makes it obvious that the villagers' magical beliefs are in fact ridiculous delusions; but at other times, the reader seems expected to take logically impossible events at face value. The changing of a human into a giant spider, a man who can't sleep because "the noise of the stars" disturbs him-are these things that "really happened?" Can they be dismissed as mere hallucinations? Are they poetic images, meant to be interpreted on some level beyond their literal meaning? Like the old man with his miracles, Garcia Marquez may be suspected of having a kind of "mocking fun" with the reader, suggesting all sorts of miraculous possibilities, then stubbornly contradicting all the expectations he creates. In appreciating such a story, it may be necessary to limit one's reliance on clear meanings and moral lessons, and to be prepared to enjoy the sheer wealth of possibility and comic misunderstanding that is presented.

The Problem of Interpretation

One effect of ambiguity is to focus attention on the uncertain nature of all efforts to assign meaning to events. The troublesome nature of *interpretation* has been a matter of intense interest for literary critics in the years since this story was written- which may be one reason Garcia Marquez remains a popular subject of scholarly attention. Many theorists stress that all "readings" (whether of texts, or of life itself) are strongly influenced by their context, and by the specific interests and point of view of the person making the judgment. While one may detect such influence in the opinions of others, it usually operates unconsciously in the self; the assumptions behind one's own thinking are so familiar that one tends not to even recognize them as assumptions. Some critics go so far as to suggest that all explanations are actually *inventions,* and that "true meanings" can never be reliably determined. While one may not choose to embrace so extreme a position, the speculation serves as a reminder that confident pronouncements about the world are seldom, if ever, as rational or disinterested as one believes them to be. The villagers' quirky thought-patterns may be seen as a parody of this universal human tendency. They "talk themselves into" all kinds of wild speculations, clinging to irrational notions (such as the "fact" that mothballs are the proper food for angels) and leaping to impossible conclusions (for example, that the old man should be named "mayor of the world.") It seems that, once they get an idea into their heads, they willfully convince themselves of its truth and ignore any evidence to the contrary-unless a more appealing version of the truth comes along. Their folly is a kind of exaggerated ignorance, which Garcia Marquez uses consistently for comic effect; but in their unquestioning application of "conventional wisdom," and their stubborn faith in their own ideas, they reflect habits of mind that can be recognized in all cultures.

On another level, the author may be seen as placing the reader in much the same position- forcing the reader to accept interpretations that seem absurd, or to give up any hope of understanding events. In this sense, it might be said that the story's meaning lies in the manner it denies any clear meanings, complicating the reader's efforts to understand, and showing usual means of determining the truth in a strange, uncertain light. The context of literature may tempt one to "read into" these odd characters, looking for symbolic meanings and creatively-coded messages from the author. Nothing prevents the reader from doing so, but there are few clues or hints to help and no obvious way to confirm or deny any interpretation one may construct. The reader can't be sure if he is finding the story's meaning or making one up; he may even wonder if the story has a meaning at all. Garcia Marquez presents a rich mystery, which engages the reader's thinking and seems to "make sense" in the manner of fairy tales; then he leaves the reader to decide its meaning for himself. However one goes about the job, he is never allowed to escape the suspicion that he may, in his own way, wind up being as foolish and gullible as the villagers.

Style

Imagery

In establishing the character of the old man, Garcia Marquez plays against traditional stereotypes of angels. Angels are supernatural creatures and are expected them to be presented in images that convey grandeur, perfection, wisdom, and grace. By definition, angels are contrasted with humans; though they resemble humans physically, they are super-human in every conceivable way. But like Father Gonzaga, the reader's first response to the old man is likely to be that he is "much too human." Instead of presenting a majestic, aweinspiring figure, Garcia Marquez describes a creature with mortal weaknesses and senility ("a drenched great-grandfather"), in circumstances without any trace of reverence or dignity. While his feathered wings invite comparisons with birds, even this imagery is common and debased; he is "a senile vulture" or a "decrepit hen," not a soaring eagle or an elegant swan. While the villagers face the problem of understanding an apparent "angel" who fits none of their expectations for the type, the reader finds himself placed by the author in the same position.

Also unusual is the way Garcia Marquez combines different types of imagery. The opening line reveals that it is "the third day of rain," and a few lines later this information is repeated in another form: "The world had been sad since Tuesday." One is a direct statement of fact, which might appear in a weather report; the other is a poetic image, projecting human emotions onto the weather and individual feelings onto the entire world. Expressed in other terms, the reader accepts the first version as "real," while the second version (if taken at face value) is "magical," involving a logically-impossible connection between human feelings and the weather. Both attitudes are familiar to readers, who know to read a factual account in a rational, literal frame of mind, and to suspend disbelief in a more imaginative story, where descriptions are expected to be used for their creative, suggestive effects. But Garcia Marquez never allows the reader to settle comfortably into one attitude or the other; throughout the story, realistic and magical details are combined, seeming to suggest that both attitudes are valid, and that neither one is sufficient by itself.

Narration

The ambiguity within the story is reinforced by inconsistencies in the narrative voice. The narrator is, after all, the "person" presenting all this odd imagery to the reader, and readers habitually look to the narrator for clues to help find a proper interpretation. For example, when the narrator states that Father Gonzaga's letters to his church superiors "might have come and gone until the end of time" without reaching a conclusion, he confirms the reader's suspicion that the priest's approach is futile, despite his confident assurances to the crowd. Narrators don't just present facts; they also give direction as to "how to take" the information we receive

This narrator, however, seems to direct the reader all over the map and to be inconsistent in his own attitude to events. The villagers' wild ideas about the old man are often presented as obvious delusions, characterized as "frivolous" or "simple" by the narrator. But at other times, he seems no more skeptical than the villagers. For example, the story of the spider-woman seems far more fantastic than that of an old man with wings, but the narrator gives no suggestion that her transformation is particularly unusual and seems to expect the reader to accept this frankly "magical" event as if it presented no mystery at all. Though they are wise in ways the villagers are not, and see through the various fanciful interpretations of the visitor, readers come to feel that the narrator may not fully understand the old man himself. Such an unreliable storyteller makes a mystery even more mysterious, complicating efforts to fix a definite meaning to the tale.

Historical Context

The Lack of a Context

The time and place of this story are undetermined. The characters' names suggest a Spanishspeaking country, and a reference to airplanes indi indicates that we are somewhere in the twentieth century; but beyond these minor details, we seem to be in the "once-upon-a-time" world of fairy tales. The narrator tells of events in the past, using the phrase "in those times" in a manner common to myths and legends. These associations help prepare the reader for the story's "magical" elements by suggesting that this is not a factual history to be taken literally, but a tale of the imagination where the usual rules may be suspended.

Such an "undetermined" setting is common in Garcia Marquez's fiction. While he is often outspoken in his journalism and takes a public stand on many political issues, references to contemporary history in his fiction tend to be indirect and uncertain. Critics have tried to trace such connections (for example, by suggesting that a character in one of his novels is modeled on a certain South American dictator), but the author's decision to write in this manner indicates that such "messages" are not his primary concern. By its nature, the story is not tied to any particular time or place; like legends from a mythical golden age in the past, it calls our attention to timeless, universal themes, applying in a general way to all times and places.

The Context of Reception

While the story shows no direct evidence of historical context, it was, of course, written in a particular time and place. And like all artistic productions, its "success" has depended not only on its artistic merits, but on its ability to attract an audience and to gain acceptance from critics and scholars. Unlike the writing itself, the *reception* of a work involves factors largely outside the author's control, factors usually having much to do with historical and cultural context.

The extremes of popular and critical reception can be seen in the stereotype of the "starving artist," who works without reward for years then suddenly (perhaps only in death) receives widespread, long-overdue recognition. This is the "tragic genius," ahead of his time-"the world was not ready" for the work he produced. The type does not fit Garcia Marquez exactly, but he did labor in relative obscurity for many years, then suddenly became an international phenomenon: a best-selling author who was also praised by prominent intellectuals, even being heralded as the vanguard of a revolution in Latin American literature. Such sudden enthusiasm, for however deserving an artist, indicates that the world somehow was ready for Garcia Marquez in 1967, when the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* brought him instant fame, as well as intense scrutiny.

The Garcia Marquez "boom" was fueled by a number of developments, both in popular culture and in critical scholarship, which made it easier for many readers to embrace a work of "magic realism," and an author from a non-Western culture. The late 1960s are usually characterized as a period of intense cultural change, in which traditional values of all kinds were challenged, and alternative ways of living were widely explored. College campuses were a particular focus for this controversy, most famously in occasional violent confrontations between law enforcement and student political protesters. But it also found expression through passionate debates within the scholarly disciplines, debates in which the most basic assumptions were questioned, and apparently radical changes were given serious consideration. In literature departments, one result was an effort to expand the "canon"- the list of "classic" works (sometimes listed in an official document, sometimes found in the unspoken, shared assumptions of faculty members) whose study is traditionally considered to form the necessary basis of a liberal arts education. Critics charged that, with few if any exceptions, the canon had excluded women and people of color from the roll of "great authors," as well as writers from poor or working-class backgrounds and those from non- European cultures. Efforts to expand the canon, to include a more diverse blend of cultural voices among the works considered worthy of serious scholarship, have continued for over thirty years. Garcia Marquez can be seen as an early beneficiary of this trend; Latin American writers had long been neglected, and his work could be shown to include many of the elements critics had praised in European and North American works. He thus made an early "test case" for expanding the canon, an example of a non-Western writer who deserved to be honored on a level equal to his Western contemporaries. His recognition encouraged the "discovery" of many more Latin American authors and contributed to an explosion of scholarship on the region's literary heritage.

Finally, this story has a context within Garcia Marquez's own career. It was written in 1968, a year after his sudden fame. One interpretation of "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" sees it as an exaggerated, satirical account of his own experience with instant celebrity; or, in a more general way, as a commentary on the position of the creative artist in modern culture. In this reading, the "old man" is the artist, while his "wings" stand for transcendence, greatness, truth, beauty-whatever elusive qualities we think of as being valuable in art. The villagers, in turn, are "the public," who are greedy for whatever "magic" he might bring them- but who insist on having it on their own terms. Rather than accepting him as he is, with all his quirks and contradictions, they treat him as a carnival attraction and look for ways to profit from his odd celebrity. They misunderstand him completely, yet confidently "explain" him with wild, illogical speculations. And given a choice, they prefer the kind of magic offered by sensations like the spiderwoman- flashy and easy to understand, fitting in comfortably with their beliefs, presenting no awkward difficulties or mysteries. However "magical" they may be, such creatures as artists and angels just aren't made for everyday life; ultimately, they are an annoyance and an embarrassment to the rest of us. This is, of course, only one of many possible interpretations, for a story that seems designed to resist any single, clear explanation. But it does show another way in which context (cultural, historical, and personal) can find its way into a story which seems, on the surface, to have been written from no particular time or place.

Critical Overview

"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" was written in 1968, in the wake of its author's sudden fame. The story's timing has led some critics to suggest that it may, at least in part, be a comic treatment of Garcia Marquez's own experience as a writer, or an allegory for the condition of creative artists in general. In this reading, the old man represents the artist, and his experience in the village is a satirical account of the way a work is received by the public. While his wings mark him as extraordinary, in other ways he fails to meet the villagers' impossible expectations; and while they feel a need to account for him, this proves to be a difficult, complex, and uncertain task. Instead, they misinterpret him wildly, and abuse and exploit him as a carnival freak. By insisting on simple, dramatic "miracles" that fit comfortably with their beliefs, they give up all chance of understanding whatever "magic" he does possess and soon lose interest in him. However, it must be stressed that this is only one possible interpretation for this complex story. Other critics have argued that, however appealing, it is far too simple, "neat," and logical to fully u m e 6 3 3 1 account for a tale so rich in invention and suggestion; and even those who advance such a reading point out that is just one of several levels on which meaning can be found.

While Garcia Marquez's early short stories, written in the late 1940s and early 1950s, were generally considered unsuccessful for their overly self-conscious use of unconventional narrative techniques, his later stories employ many of the same narrative strategies that have made Garcia Marquez one of the twentieth century's most influential authors, prompting critics to compare him to the likes of William Faulkner and Franz Kafka.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

A freelance writer and copyeditor, Faulkner is pursuing an M.A. in English at Wayne State University. In the following essay, he explores the peculiar effects of magic realism as a literary style employed in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings."

The style of writing referred to as "magic realism" is marked by its imaginative content, vivid effects, and lingering mystery. In combining fantastic elements with realistic details, a writer like Garcia Marquez can create a fictional "world" where the miraculous and the everyday live side-by-side- where fact and illusion, science and folklore, history and dream, seem equally "real," and are often hard to distinguish. The form clearly allows writers to stretch the limits of possibility and to be richly inventive; however, it involves more than the creation of attractive fantasies. The village in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" may be appealing in some ways, but it is also a complex, difficult, even disturbing fantasy. Beyond imagination, the successful creation of such a world in the reader's mind requires skillful use of the same tools and techniques familiar in more conventional, less "magical" types of fiction. Garcia Marquez not only combines realistic details with fantastic ones, but seems to give them both equal weight, an equal claim to reality or truth in the reader's mind.

In the character of the "bird-man," we can see this style at work and experience the charming (but unsettling) effect it often has on readers. His mysterious nature is the story's central "problem," the source of its energy and tension. We know, of course, that human beings don't have wings; logi logically, such a character must be either a monster or a miracle-if he exists at all. Yet when the doctor examines the old man, what most impresses him is "the logic of his wings," which "seemed so natural on that completely human organism that he couldn't understand why other men didn't have them too." Logic and science insist that such a creature must be *supernatural,* but Garcia Marquez presents him as entirely "natural"; much like the doctor, once we've "seen" him, it's as if winged old men were common, even unremarkable, visitors. We see how, despite "the inconvenience of the wings," Pelayo and Elisenda "very soon overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar." As readers, we are guided to the same kind of acceptance. No one questions the old man's existence, or the reality of his wings, not even the narrator (except, perhaps, in the final line, when the old man becomes "an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea"). He may or may not be an angel, but he is unquestionably an old man with wings, as "real" as anyone else in the story.

Several techniques contribute to the old man's vivid "existence." Detailed sensory imagery is a standard means for writers to reinforce a character's "reality" to the reader, and Garcia Marquez not only makes us "see" the old man (right down to the "few faded hairs left on his bald skull" and the parasites picking through his ruined feathers), but also "smell" him, "feel" the texture of his wings, and "hear" his whistling heartbeat. The rich imagery also works to undermine supernatural stereotypes, contradicting our usual ideas about angels and denying the old man any of the heroic or exalted qualities we expect. He is described not only in human, earthly terms, but in terms of extreme weakness and poverty ("dressed like a ragpicker," "his pitiful condition of a drenched

great-grandfather"). When he is compared to birds, they are not exotic eagles or dazzling peacocks, but common species with less-than-noble reputations (his "buzzard wings," "a decrepit hen," "a senile vulture"). As Father Gonzaga observes (and by the author's design), "nothing about him measured up to the proud dignity of angels." He thus becomes real the more we see him as human, a creature closer to our own experience and understanding-not a shining, mythical being but a frail, suffering, even pathetic fellow, who happens to have a few physical quirks.

The problem Garcia Marquez presents us is not just "What if angels were real?" but "What if they were real, and nothing like we expect them to be?" He creates a tension between the old man's magical and human qualities, leaving us unable to fit the character into a comfortable mental category. The old man is far too human and decrepit to match our cultural image of angels: perfect, powerful, majestic, immortal. Nor does he appear to be a heavenly messenger, sent by God as a sign of momentous changes; his presence seems to be purely an accident of the weather, without purpose or meaning. Nonetheless, he certainly has his magical qualities, and is even credited with miracles (though, like everything else about him, they are disturbing, and fail to satisfy expectations). However miraculous his nature, origins, or abilities may be, he is stranded here, and relatively powerless-an exile from his former life, at the mercy of strangers. The villagers must somehow account for him, and because no one understands his language, he is unable (and apparently unwilling) to explain himself. Several possible interpretations arise, but most of them are clear ly absurd, telling us more about the villagers' superstitions and beliefs than about the old man's "true nature." They are rendered with playful humor, ensuring that the reader will appreciate the irrational and illusory basis of such "folk wisdom." Yet our "superior," conventional methods of logic and reason don't seem any more useful in reaching a secure explanation. The old man remains a stubborn, intriguing mystery, both magical and ordinary, impossible to decipher but undeniably *there.*

This uncertainty (or ambiguity) applies not just to the old man, but evidently to life itself, as it is lived in this timeless, nameless village. It seems to be a place where just about anything can happen (for example, a young woman can be changed into a spider for disobeying her parents)-or at least, it is a place where everyone is quite willing to believe such things happen and to act as though they do happen. This impression is partly a result of Garcia Marquez's use of narrative voice. For the most part, the story seems to be told by the standard "omniscient observer" of third person fiction-a narrator who knows all the necessary facts, and can be trusted to present them reliably. When such narration expresses an opinion, the reader tends to accept it as a correct interpretation. This narrator may seem to fit the type at first, but later appears to change his point of view, and even his opinions of events. The narrator seems to endorse the villagers' thinking at times (for example, reporting without comment that the old man has a "strong sailor's voice," even though we have no evidence for this assumption of Pelayo and Elisenda's), but at other times, he seems almost contemptuous of their irrational ideas. (A few lines later, when he describes how the couple "skipped over the inconvenience of the wings" and "quite intelligently" decided that he was nothing but a sailor, the intent seems to be strongly sarcastic.) We might entertain hope that Father Gonzaga's correspondence with church leaders will eventually produce an explanation-

until the narrator comments that those "meager letters might have come and gone until the end of time" without result. In such ways, readers come to rely on the narrator for clues about "how to take" elements in the story that may be unclear. But this narrator seems determined to be untrustworthy, and leaves us uncertain about important events. Without telling us how, he treats everything that happens as though it "makes sense." Though he is habitually ironic in his view of the "wise" villagers' beliefs, he describes the supernatural experience of the "spider-woman" in simple factual terms, seeming to accept it as readily as his characters do. Are we to conclude that this fantastic transformation from human to spider actually happened? Or that the narrator is now as deluded as the villagers? Or even that he is purposely lying to us? At such moments, the narration seems to parody the style of traditional fairy tales; as the label "magic realism" suggests, some elements of the story seem meant to be approached with the simplistic "logic" of fantasy, while others are depicted with all the complexity and imperfection that mark "real life."

Garcia Marquez not only combines realistic details with fantastic ones, but seems to give them both equal weight, an equal claim to "reality" or "truth" in the reader's mind. Dreamlike, poetic descriptions are presented matter-of-factly; like winged old men who fall from the sky, they are treated more as everyday realities than as bizarre impossibilities. When we learn that a character is deprived of sleep "because the noise of the stars disturbed him," it seems to be merely a symptom quoted from his medical chart, perhaps even a common cause of insomnia, not an obvious delusion or a feat of supernatural hearing. As in the similar case of the "poor woman who since childhood had been counting her heartbeats and had run out of numbers," the narrator gives no indication that any particular explanation is required, almost assuming that the reader will accept these odd riddles without question. Traditionally, we aren't meant to take such language literally (as a description of factual events), but poetically (or figuratively), as a creative key to some idea or state of mind, which we must interpret for ourselves. (The insomniac, for example, might be said to "really" be experiencing hallucinations due to mental illness, or perhaps a feeling of isolation and insignificance in the cosmos-but not actually listening to stars.) But here, such "magical" descriptions seem to be offered as straightforward accounts of "normal" (if rare and unusual) occurrences (his ears are sensitive, and those stars are just too loud!)-events whose "real meaning" need not, or cannot, be determined, but which must nonetheless be accepted as "real."

The mixture of different kinds of imagery, and different narrative attitudes, serves to heighten the reader's uncertainty. Realistic and magical descriptions are often combined, as if they are inseparable aspects of the same events. Thus, we are not only told that it is "the third day of rain," but also, a few lines later, that "[t]he world had been sad since Tuesday." By combining factual and imaginative descriptions, and seeming to treat them with equal credibility, the author suggests that both "ways of knowing" are valid, perhaps even necessary to achieving a balanced understanding. Magic seems to lie just beneath the surface of the story, waiting to break through, almost beyond the narrator's control. For example, a description of the old man's undignified captivity lingers over factual, everyday details (his diet of eggplant mush, the crowd tossing stones to get him to react, the hens pecking through his feathers); but the insects infesting his wings are suddenly described as "stellar parasites"-a poetic image, not a

"factual" one (at least until there is any evidence of insects living on stars). If we approach the story expecting to be charmed by a fairy tale, the factual descriptions seem "too real;" they spoil the "magical" effect we hope for, by allowing the unpleasant and inconvenient details of everyday life to intrude on our imaginative landscape. But if we read with a "realistic" frame of mind, looking for solid facts and logical explanations, the strange poetic images only frustrate us, and may cause us to question other apparent "facts." The magical touches may dazzle us, but they can also make us feel like the old man in his early efforts to fly: that we are "slip[ping] on the light," unable to "get a grip on the air." We must somehow accept the events our narrator presents (at least temporarily), in order to continue reading at all, and have any hope of making sense of the tale. But we are never sure whether to "accept" them as real events, mass hallucinations, symbolic stand-ins for some "other" story the author has in mind, or the unreal "magic" of legends and fairy tales. We cannot choose between reality and magic; Garcia Marquez insists on giving us both, even in the most minor details. When the startled bird-man suddenly flaps his wings, he creates a "whirlwind" in the courtyard, with a dustcloud composed of both (earthly) chicken dung and (heavenly) "lunar dust": even the dirt on the ground is shown to be both humble and marvelous at once.

Typical of the style, this story's tone seems both playful and serious. The striking images and sudden surprises stimulate the reader's senses and imagination, but also frustrate and complicate our efforts to fix a definite meaning to events. Works of magic realism are both praised and criticized for their "childlike wonder," their depiction of a world of almost-infinite possibilities, where the supernatural and the everyday take on the same vivid intensity. But they are not fairy tales or two-dimensional fantasies; they offer no clear lessons, simple events, or sharp distinctions between reality and magic. "Wondering" includes both delight and *confusion,* the struggle to comprehend experiences that challenge our understanding, and don't fit our accustomed map of reality. Far more things are possible in the world of magic realism, including miracles, contradictions, and logical impossibilities- but this also means that more *meanings* are possible, and that all meanings will be elusive and uncertain.

Source: Tom Faulkner, Overview of "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

Millington is Lecturer in Latin American Studies at the University of Nottingham, England. In the following excerpt, he provides an overview of the symmetrical structure of the stories in The Incredible and Sad Story of the Innocent Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother, *including "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," detailing the opening of each story with the arrival of an invading presence which causes widespread change in the life patterns of the characters, and the conclusion with a departure which completes the natural cycle. Millington also focuses on the narrative structure of the stories, which incorporates cultural knowledge frames and partial narrator authority to emphasize the relation between the narrative world and the actual world.*

I am going to begin with beginnings. Each story in [*The Incredible and Sad Story of the Innocent Evendira and her Heartless Grandmother* (*ISS*)] begins with an arrival-a space or a consciousness is invaded by an unknown presence. But the nature of the invading presence differs: in "Constant Death" and "Blacamán" it is human (Onésimo Sánchez and Blacamán respectively); in "Very Old Man" it is part-human (the bird-man); in "Drowned Man" it was formerly human (Esteban's corpse); in "Sea" and "Incredible Story" it is a natural phenomenon (the smell of roses and a wind respectively); and in "Last Journey" it is an object (the ghost ship). But in four of the stories the source of the invading presence is the same: in one way or another, the sea is associated with the arrival in "Very Old Man," "Sea," "Drowned Man" and "Last Journey," and in the first two of these the invading presence returns to the sea at the end. And in all of the stories the arrival has the same extraordinary effect-it becomes the focus of widespread, sometimes all absorbing, attention-and in each case the arrival represents the inception of a series of events that will occupy the remainder of the story. The effect of the arrival is to disrupt-it introduces instability into a preexistent situation, and that instability produces interest and also movement. The interest stimulated by the new arrival centres on a common reaction in several stories: the need to discover the meaning of the disruption. But the invading presence also seems to produce a release of energy in the characters and so to create a new pattern of life. In both respects the arrival is a beginning-a point of inception.

The fact that in certain stories the characters need to interpret the arrival, to establish the meaning of the invading presence, is a sign of the destabilizing character of the event. The diversity of the interpretations and the confusion felt is most graphically apparent in "Very Old Man." Here the desire to understand is powerful but the capacity to comprehend minimal: the bird-man is variously seen by the villagers as a nightmare, a shipwrecked sailor, an angel and a circus animal; and their confusion is shared by the chain of ecclesiastical interpreters extending up to the Vatican, which is notable for its failure to produce even a conjectural interpretation. The same overloading of interpretative skills is evident in "Drowned Man," where the desire to establish whether Esteban is human is simply swept aside by unquestioning awe in the face of his extraordinary beauty. In both of these cases (and in the other stories with inanimate invasions) the new arrival sets up no dialogue with the community that is invaded-the bird-man and Esteban simply arrive and are observed. They provide no self-

explanation, and that accounts, in part, for the disputes that arise as to their nature and even existence (examples of the latter are in "Sea" and "Last Journey"). In each case, the interpretations are attempts to accommodate the unknown within everyday frames of knowledge. Given the nature of the new arrivals, the interpretations are not surprising, though they are certainly not definitive either. They also provide a valuable means of assessing the workings of characters' minds, that is, their capacity for rational thought, and this factor is crucial for the reader's response, in potentially stimulating an ironic view of characters.

More important than the question of characters' interpretations is the new direction that their lives take. The change results from the instability that the new arrivals produce, since characters are stimulat- ed to undertake action, and action means change. It is not that any specific response is demanded, any inescapable action forced upon them, but that a field of possibility is opened up. . . . In "Very Old Man" the bird-man's arrival involves Pelayo and Elisenda willy nilly in trying to cope with the sheer physical problem of crowds of onlookers, and that problem leads to their financial triumph, the building of a luxurious house and a new job for Pelayo: life is transformed. . . .

The structure so far isolated, therefore, involves various kinds of invasion or arrival, which sometimes stimulate interpretation but which, above all, destabilize a preexistent situation and lead to the inception of new movement, new courses of action. And the remarkable feature of the new movement in ISS is that the individuals involved, who first perceive the intruding presence, are frequently joined by the whole community-a broad expansion takes place, which makes the disequilibrium a shared and festive event. There is a multiplication of interest which often extends beyond the bounds of the local population. The fair motif is central to this expansion. In "Very Old Man" the bird-man's arrival initially affects only Pelayo and Elisenda, but overnight there is a large influx of people from the neighbourhood and subsequently of huge crowds of people from far and wide who stretch in a line over the horizon waiting to see the prodigy. This influx brings with it a variety of fairground performers from around the Caribbean who temporarily trans form the community-life undergoes a process of carnivalization. . . .

This move into expansion and carnivalization amplifies the localized effects of new arrivals; it is a consistent structural motif throughout ISS, but there is no precise repetition of detail in each story; it is a general rhythm and developmental strategy. . . .

Given that some of the stories do not rely heavily on strong causal links to sustain forward movement, it is interesting to consider how endings are achieved. If there is little causal emphasis, what relation can an ending have with what precedes it? Is there any evidence to suggest that the endings in *ISS* act as points of culmination or resolution? And, if not, how does each story create a "sense of an ending"? The key factor here is departure. Most of the stories rely on departures to provide a "sense of an ending," that is to create an impression that a "natural" cycle has been completed: the departure terminates what the arrival inaugurated, which is something that readers can accept by drawing on cultural knowledge and without needing an explanation of how or why it came about. "Very Old Man" ends with the growth of the bird-man's feathers which creates the possibility of flight and departure. . . .

[The] ending of "Very Old Man" (not untypically) seems to be underdetermined; it is pointless to ask why the bird-man's feathers grow and why he flies away, since there is no cause other than the need to provide a narrative ending.

This type of ending leaves us with a global structure as a basis for most of the stories: arrival- reaction and expansion-departure. But the symmetry of this structure is deceptively attractive. It is deceptive because it provides a neat representation which fails to take into account an important aspect of the stories: their elusiveness. It is not that this structure is wrong, simply that it does not tell us enough. Above all, this pattern seems "closed," where the stories are teasingly "open" -that is, they are thematically reticent while foregrounding elements of a highly imaginative and problematic sort. There is a need, therefore, to question any simple, closed representation. One way to modify the neatness of the first representation is by looking at the reversals which contribute to the instability of the stories; and one way to begin trying to make sense of their openness-without reducing the stories to statements of what they are "about," which would impose closure from "outside"-is to examine the fair motif. . . .

The fair motif is, or accompanies, an intrusion into the narrative space in *ISS*-it constitutes or reinforces a radical disequilibrium in life patterns; in this way it represents a potential opening or transformation. And in that connection the fair motif can be examined in the light of what [Mikhail] Bakhtin [in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* translated by R. W. Rotsel, 1973] calls popular-festive forms or carnivals. Bakhtin's theorization is useful:

Carnival is a pageant without a stage and without a division into performers and spectators. In the carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated, it is, strictly speaking, not even played out; its participants live in it, they live according to its laws, as long as those laws are in force, i.e. they live a *carnivalistic life*. The carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its usual rut, it is to a degree "life turned inside out," "life the wrong way round" ("monde á l'envers").

The laws, prohibitions and restrictions which determine the system and order of normal, i.e. noncarnival, life are for the period of carnival suspended; above all, the hierarchical system and all the connected forms of fear, awe, piety, etiquette, etc. are suspended, i.e. everything that is determined by social-hierarchical inequality among people, or any other form of inequality, including age. . . . Carnival celebrates change itself, the very process of replaceability. . . .

The stress here is on newness, on the potential for change, on living in a radically different way from before, if only for the duration of the festivity. In that perspective the fairs or carnivals of *ISS* are recognizable as stimuli for change ("Sea" and "Very Old Man") or as ways of life ("Blacamán" and "Incredible Story").

But the key question is: "How much really changes or is transformed in ISS?" . . . In "Very Old Man" there is real transformation; the fair builds on and exceeds the arbitrary arrival of the bird-man and it helps Pelayo and Elisenda to gain new social status by

allowing them to earn money from the curiosity the bird-man is. Here the change outlasts the festivity. . . .

I will end by attempting to analyse the structure of the narrative space created in *ISS.* I want to suggest a way of understanding the kind of narrative world that exists in *ISS;* that is, by trying to establish the nature and consistency of the relations that hold between the actual world and the narrative world, I want to propose an analytical approach to the comprehension of the stories' narrative space.

In discussing the way all discourse is comprehended [in "Semantic macro-Structures and Knowledged Frames in Discourse Comprehension," in *Cognitive Processes in Comprehension,* ed. M. A. Just and P. A. Carpenter, 1977], Teun van Dijk has stressed the importance of knowledge frames. He defines these as follows:

Frames are knowledge representations about the "world" which enable us to perform such basic cognitive acts as perception, action, and language comprehension.

We propose that frames define units or chunks of concepts which are not essentially, but *typically,* related. Some intuitive examples may clarify this point. Conceptually, there is no immediate or essential relation between the concept of "table" and the concept of "cereal," nor between "soap" and "water," nor between "waitress" and "menu." They are distinct and do not presuppose each other. Yet, they are organized by the frames of "breakfast," "washing" and "restaurant," respectively. They usually denote certain normal courses of events or courses of actions involving several objects, persons, properties, relations, and facts. . . . It is in this sense that frames are higher-level organizing principles. They unify concepts of various types and at various levels of representation under the constraint of typicality and normality. . . . Frames . . . are conventional and general. Most members of a society or culture have approximately the same set of frames.

Van Dijk points out that these frames act as a crucial part of our horizon of expectation and comprehension in processing all discourse (including literature), and it is clear that they complement whatever conventions may hold within any specific discourse. The reliance of discourse on knowledge frames is evident in its capacity to be comprehended without recourse to totalizing explanation. Discourse is efficient and concise; it can elide information precisely because it can rely on triggering knowledge frames in its audience-it can rely on shared experience. This is a basic assumption which is operative in discourse processing by default; that is, unless there is any indication to the contrary, it seems that normal knowledge frames are operative.

This basic assumption is apparent in innumerable details of ISS: the reader can be relied upon to attach the appropriate frame to single actions that in global terms form part of, for instance, having breakfast, making love, or attempting murder. Similarly, global action need only be alluded to for a knowledge frame to fill it out: playing draughts, selling a patent medicine, attempting to corrupt a politician. These bits of knowledge are trivial because they correspond to a possible or actual world of

experience, and the input of information by the reader is, therefore, effortless, even unconscious, whatever the specific detail of the narrative.

But the key point is that much of the force of *ISS* derives from the deviation from knowledge frames. If one defines a "possible world" as one that is constructed and comprehended in terms of knowledge frames of the actual world (in specific combination or permutation), then it is evident that *ISS* constructs only partially possible worlds; it blurs or subverts the normal structures of the actual world. Some examples of blurring or subversive phenomena or actions which are "facts" within the stories will make the point more clearly. In "Very Old Man" the spider-woman has an explanation for her condition: she is not a fairground curiosity; her condition is real just as that of the bird-man himself is real, and this blurs the normal distinction between the fair ground and the real world. . . . In "Very Old Man," a cultural knowledge frame is subverted when it becomes obvious that the supposed angel displays only one feature characteristic of an angel: he has wings. Otherwise he is physically unimpressive, withdrawn, passive, fails to understand Latin and is ultimately a domestic nuisance. . . .

[Often] the knowledge frames of the actual world are indispensable in reading, but there are also significant deviations from or transgressions of this ensemble of structured knowledge. So, in part, ISS aligned with and, in part, sits athwart actual knowledge frames. And the area of discrepancy does sometimes extend to the conscious actions and the minds of characters. Not only is there no rational critique of events by characters from within the stories-that is a viewpoint potentially equivalent to that of the reader-but the characters frequently add to the number of deviations. . . .

In this way the narrative space seems rather idiosyncratic. And so a final question must be posed concerning the position of narrators. The narrators' position could theoretically provide a gauge of events or behaviour; it could align the global point of view with that of the reader and his/her knowledge frames; it could constitute an internal reference point of critical distance. In fact, the question of the narrators' position is quite complex. In the first place the authority and mediation of the narrators in ISS is more or less uniform. This is the case regardless of whether the narrator speaks with a first or a third person voice, though the latter is more common. . . . This authority and mediating power- plus the capacity to name and classify, and the control of chronological progress-doubtless create a certain consistency and clarity. But the question is to see how that authority and mediation are used. Do they carry out the task of distancing critique? The answer is that they do not. The narrators' authority is partial; it is used to register scenes and to fill in certain contextual gaps, but it is not used to justify, explain or question what the characters do or what phenomena are. . . . [The] narrators' silence, the lack of authoritative, rational discourse, is an important feature. The narrators do not rationalize; they do not analyse; they rather present events as if they were "simple facts," even if these "facts" deviate substantially from our knowledge frames. This is curious in so far as their authority seems to imply a capacity for rationalizing distance; but, in fact, the narrators' viewpoint is closer to the characters than to the reader. Very often the "seeing eye" of narration is that of one aligned with a character's viewpoint or with an amalgamation of characters' viewpoints. And this is hardly surprising since the narrative structure, the relations between narrative world and actual world, would be

inconsistent and simplified if the narrators cut through the complexities of the other features I have described. The gaps and uncertainties are crucial and exist in terms of the relation actual/narrative worlds. To have recourse to such labels as fairy stories or children's stories to describe *ISS* would be to seek security and closure by removing the stories into an unworldly, "purely literary" frame of reference (if such a concept is anything more than wishful thinking). The fissures in our knowledge frames that are created, and the consequent uncertainty potentially stimulated in our reading, are surely consistent with the basic thrust of the fair or carnival motif: namely, to open up and transform.

Source: Mark Millington, "Aspects of Narrative Structure in *The Incredible and Sad Story of the Innocent Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother" in Gabriel Garcia Marquez: New Readings,* edited by Bernard McGuirk and Richard Cardwell, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 117-33.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Gerlach examines "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" as a fantasy in which Garcia Marquez employs language, similes, and satire to both destroy and evoke an appropriate reaction to a mythic subject. Gerlach also offers his interpretation of the role of the narrator, asserting that the narrator uses two levels of distortion to contrast the human folly of the villagers with the more desirable traits (such as patience) of the old man

Is fantasy dependent on certain themes, and, if so, might these themes be exhausted? My own response to one story, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," a story in which theme and the atmosphere of a fantasy that emerges from the theme are, if anything, negatively correlated, leads me to suspect that fantasy is not closely tied to theme, so that fantasies may be created in any age, without reference to theme.

The story might best be described by starting at the end. At the conclusion, an old man flaps like a senile vulture away from the village where for years he has been held captive. The woman who has grudgingly taken care of him watches him open a furrow in the vegetable patch with his fingernails in his first attempt to rise. She sees him nearly knock down a shed with his "ungainly flapping." As he gains altitude and begins to disappear, she watches "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." George McMurray, in his recent study of Gabriel Garcia Marquez [*Gabriel Garcia Marquez,* 1977], focuses on this final image and concludes that for the reader (and the villagers) the story is a "cathartic destruction of antiquated myths." My own reaction was quite different: I had the prescribed catharsis, but I came away with my taste for myth and the supernatural intact. I could see how McMurray arrived at his conclusion, because this particular Icarus, with his "few faded hairs left on his bald skull" and the air of a "drenched great-grandfather," would hardly seem to inspire wonder. But I felt as if I had witnessed the beginning of a myth, not its end, and the story had evoked for me the sense of wonder and marvel that one associates with myth at its inception.

Whether the story is best designated as a myth or as a fantasy is another matter. Myths present "supernatural episodes as a means of interpreting natural events in an effort to make concrete and particular a special perception of man or a cosmic view," as [C. Hugh Holman, in his 1972] *A Handbook to Literature* would have it. The old man of Garcia Marquez's story does not stimulate the villagers to interpret anything. He is dropped into their existence unexplained, and leaves unexplained, clarifying nothing. It would be more accurate to consider the work a fantasy on the grounds that the story deals, to use the handbook's terms again, with an "incredible and unreal character." I will eventually apply a more contemporary definition of fantasy to the story, [Tzvetan] Todorov's definition [in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre,* trans. Richard Howard, 1973], but for the moment I prefer to pursue further the consequences of McMurray's approach. His view implies that the subject of myth, or, as I will have it, fantasy, determines our reactions. If the text parodies a mythic subject, then the reader

would appropriately respond, not with an elevated sense of wonder, but with amusement at the exposure of nonsense. Since the subject matter in Garcia Marquez's story does not diminish my own appreciation of the marvelous, I am left to conclude either that McMurray has misread the text or that the effect of a fantasy is not dependent on the subject. I have concluded that both propositions are true. McMurray has misrepresented the text, and, even so, something other than theme or subject matter creates what the reader responds to in a fantasy. "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" can be used to show that, as Todorov has predicted, the manner of telling, not the matter, creates the fantasy.

McMurray's points should first be dealt with in more detail. His interpretation is brief, but his argument is easily extended. Part of Garcia Marquez's strategy, as McMurray suggests, was undeniably to diminish the grandeur of this unearthly winged creature. Similes used to describe him do not even grant him human attributes: matched with the villagers who stood around his cage he looked "like a huge decrepit hen among fascinated chickens." Later it is said that he tolerates a child's "ingenious infamies with the patience of a dog who had no illusions." A complex simile, to be sure, for the narrator is saying not only that the old man is like a dog, but also that the dog with his patience and lack of illusions is like a human being. Nevertheless, the effect of the simile is to emphasize the analogy to an animal. The syntax of the sentence which reveals the old man's wings also diminishes rather than ennobles him. Pelayo, the man who found him, heard something moving and groaning in the courtyard that he had recently cleaned of crabs and the stench they left behind. Pelayo "had to go very close to see that it was an old man, a very old man, lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts, couldn't get up, impeded by his enormous wings." The long sentence, with its hesitations that duplicate in the reader the efforts of the old man, relegates the marvel of his wings to the terminal subordinate clause. Rhetorical decisions such as these have just as much effect on us as the content. It would seem that both the language and the content are pushing the reader in the direction that McMurray has outlined. The supernatural is described as something ordinary or, even more precisely, foul and repellent.

McMurray's analysis can be extended further. The narrator's motive in telling the story would seem to be satiric rather than inspirational. The credulity of mankind and greed-Pelayo's wife begins to charge admission to see the old man-are apparently the narrator's targets. The church is too, for the attempts of ecclesiastical bureaucrats to discover through correspondence with the resident priest whether or not the winged creature is an angel are bogged down by their desire to find out "if the prisoner had a navel, if his dialect had any connection with Aramaic, how many times he could fit on the head of a pin, or whether he wasn't just a Norwegian with wings." Furthermore, the narrator's exaggerated manner of description seems to undercut even further our response to the old man. When Pelayo and his wife Elisenda first speak to the old man, "he answered in an incomprehensible dialect with a strong sailor's voice." What it is that makes the voice sound like that of a sailor is not questioned by the narrator, who simply mirrors what is presumably the illogic of Pelayo and Elisenda. The narrator's complicity in this fabrication extends beyond mirroring. He notes that Pelayo and Elisenda "skipped over the inconvenience of the wings and quite intelligently concluded that he

was a lonely castaway." Since wings are certainly more than an "inconvenience," and the logical processes of Pelayo and Elisenda are therefore something less than intelligent, we have a narrator who, instead of striving to establish the credibility of this supernatural creature, is emphasizing the credulity of the villagers.

Similes that demean, satire, playful logic-it would seem that Garcia Marquez is not about to honor a myth. Yet none of these devices totally cancels out the mystery. The diminishing suggested by these devices does not represent all of the truth about the old man and his wings. However decrepit the old man is, he does renew himself. When he arrived he seemed close to death, and several years later a doctor listening to the old man's heart concludes that it is impossible for him to be alive; yet after his release from his cage and with the onset of sunny days, stiff feathers begin to grow on his wings. Although the narrator continues to denigrate, calling the new growth "scarecrow feathers" that look like "another misfortune of decrepitude," the feathers do allow the old man to fly away. Something about the old man is greater than the narrator's estimation of him.

Other devices that the narrator used to increase rather than decrease our respect for the old man also need to be considered. When compared to those around him the old man becomes the model of patience, trying the best he can to "get comfortable in his borrowed nest, befuddled by the hellish heat of the oil lamps and sacramental candles that had been placed along the wire." He refuses to eat the mothballs that one of the villagers thinks is the "food prescribed for angels," and subsists on eggplant mush. If he is "befuddled," that term has ironic value, for it is those that regard him who are confused.

Contrast with what seems to be even the sanest of mortals is illustrative. Father Gonzaga is the figure presented by the narrator as the most sane. He is not, as his parishioners are, ready to make the old man the mayor of the world or a "five-star general in order to win all wars," nor does he want to put him out to stud to create "a race of winged wise men who could take charge of the universe." Father Gonzaga "had been a robust woodcutter" and so by implication is more realistic. He soberly approaches the old man and says good morning in Latin. Father Gonzaga has "his first suspicion of an imposter" when he saw that the old man "did not understand the language of God or know how to greet His ministers," and it is at this point we realize that Father Gonzaga is the one who fails the test, not the old man. Father Gonzaga notices that "seen close up" the old man "was much too human," and so the priest warns his parishioners not to be taken in. In the light of Father Gonzaga's response, the comment that the old man is "too human" is particularly telling. Gonzaga's rationalism obscures his realization that although the winged gentleman may not meet doctrinal specifications, he still is miraculous. What begins to emerge is an image of the old man as someone possibly more human and reasonable than members of the wingless species.

The winged man's humanity is underlined by a foil the narrator creates-a woman who has been changed into a spider. Her presence distracts the villagers, and they cease to pay attention to the old man. Her exhibit costs less, and unlike the old man, she talks

about her affliction. Where the old man refused, she encourages responses, readily accepting meatballs tossed into her mouth. There is nothing ambiguous or submerged about our perception of her. The old man's wings were slowly revealed; we are told bluntly that this woman is "a frightful tarantula the size of a ram . . . with the head of a sad maiden." Though the narrator does not exaggerate the catalogue of her strangeness, she is in fact more grotesque than the old man.

The narrator's description of the villagers' response to her is familiar: once again the logic of the villagers is suspect; the crowd regards her a spectacle full of "human truth," a "fearful lesson." The facts of the lesson, however, are these: a lightning bolt of brimstone changed her form because she had been dancing all night without her parents' permission. The narrator's indirect exposure of the triviality of what the crowd considers a basic truth alters our response to the old man. We begin to admire more his silence and even his diet.

The way the villagers treat him is ultimately the best clue to how we should regard him. They poke, they prod, and at one point they burn him with a branding iron. Up until this point pain itself has seemed unreal. Those with ailments who come to be cured have only the most fanciful of afflictions, such as that of an old man "who couldn't sleep because the noise of the stars disturbed him" and that of "a poor woman who since childhood had been counting her heartbeats and had run out of numbers." But the old man with wings responds with true pain, ranting in his "hermetic language," tears in his eyes, flapping his wings to create "a whirlwind of chicken dung and lunar dust." The villagers take the old man as no more than a creature of fiction, hence not subject to pain. They may not see the old man's humanity, but the reader should.

What I hope is emerging is a more complete sense of the role of the narrator. His denigrations of the protagonist have been systematic but not exclusive. He distorts by alternately exaggerating and understating. What could be called the outer or secondary level of distortion is the product of the narrator's supposed sympathy with the viewpoint of the villagers. This level, whose function is basically satiric, leads the narrator to call wings "inconvenient" or to exaggerate the church's concern in terms of the medieval problem of calculating the number of angels on the head of a pin. The narrator takes the viewpoint of the villagers themselves, pretending to be alternately detached or supportive, but everywhere he exposes irrationality and superstition. Underneath this level, however, is another, an inner or primary level of distortion, which grows from one central fact-there is an old man with enormous wings. That conception embodies even in its grammatical form a paradox in the contrast between "old" and "enormous," for we would not expect anything so powerfully endowed to be so decrepit. Beyond this paradox is a kind of simplicity and unarguable solidity. The nature of the wings themselves does not change; what changes is our perception of their naturalness. By the end of the story, a doctor examines the old man and is surprised by "the logic of his wings," and the reader is prepared for a similar realization. These wings, as the doctor puts it, seem "so natural on that completely human organism that he couldn't understand why other men didn't have them too." This old man, with his muteness, his patience, is in some ways more human, more natural, and even more believable, than

anyone else in the story. The secondary level of distortion playfully exposes human folly; the primary level by contrast defines more desirable human traits.

At this point it is appropriate to define the genre of the work more precisely. The definition will allow us to see how the two levels of distortion work together to create the effects we associate with fantasy. Within the last few years, several critics, in particular W. R. Irwin [*The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy,* 1976], Eric S. Rabkin [*The Fantastic in Literature*, 1976], and Tzvetan Todorov, have attempted to describe fantasy as a genre. Of the three, Todorov's analysis provides the most instructive standards to apply to Garcia Marquez's story. The fit is not perfect; Todorov, I believe, concludes that "fantasy" narrowly defined is hardly being written anymore. But even the divergence between "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" and Todorov's principles is in itself enlightening.

Todorov assumes that, first, fantasies produce the effect of hesitation. The reader is never wholly sure whether he is confronting a supernatural event or something that can be rationally explained. If the reader is able to conclude the event is explicable solely on the supernatural level, the story belongs to another genre, the marvelous, and, if the reader chooses the rational explanation, the story falls into the genre of the "uncanny." Second, the reader usually participates in the story through the medium of a character who believes in reason and order, so that the reader experiences the hesitation through the character's eyes. Third, the reader must not be able to explain away the supernatural events by considering them allegorical or poetic. In this case the reader would conclude that the supernatural is merely a shorthand for an idea, hence not to be taken literally. One of the clues to allegory is that no one in the story takes an aberration to be unusual, and so there is no sense of hesitation.

In the case of the Garcia Marquez story, it is simpler to deal with the second point first. There is no character recounting for us his experiences. There is an implied narrator, and this narrator is a direct inversion of the sort of character that Todorov has posited. This is no rational human, but a creator of exaggerations. The hesitation that Todorov speaks of as his first point, then, derives in this story not from the doubts of a character, but from our doubts about what the narrator is saying. Todorov's analysis allows us to see the ingenuity of what Garcia Marquez has done. Garcia Marquez has taken what would normally be the index of normality, the village folk, and made them the greatest of exaggerators. The unreal character, in contrast, begins to appear normal and harmless. Garcia Marquez has managed to make his central contrary-to-fact situation, the old man with wings (what I have been calling the primary level of distortion), seems altogether more rational and ordinary than the villagers. Those who follow Rabkin's definition of fantasy should be pleased, for the effect that I have described is replete with what Rabkin calls 180-degree turns in perspective, the undermining of established expectations. As for the matter of allegory, it is possible that the wings themselves might be taken as allegorical evidence of the true dignity of man. What prevents us from taking the wings as allegory is the very insistence on the decrepitude of the old man, and elaboration of the reality of the wings, the "stellar parasites" in them. In the same way, the characters both are and are not taking the old man as unusual, so that the wings both are and are not allegorical. It is not that Garcia Marquez is making hash of

Todorov's categories. What he is doing by his exaggerations is creating the maximum doubt and hesitation about not only the supernatural but the natural as well.

We should now be able to reconsider some of the questions originally raised by McMurray's interpretation. Although it might be possible to contend that McMurray's reading of the text failed to take into account the double role of the narrator and the two levels of distortion, and hence he did not see the extent to which Garcia Marquez has shifted our sympathies toward the old man and located the antiquated, exhausted view in the perception of the villagers, such a view does not fully account for the energy of the story. Arriving at the truth of the story and feeling its impact do not automatically result from peeling off the secondary layer of distortion and getting at the primary. It is not possible to take either level as the ultimate truth. The positive values may seem to be vested in the primary level, for Garcia Marquez has made muteness and patience seem truly supernatural virtues, and by implication exaggeration the expression of human fallibility. But the center of the story is still an exaggeration. Men do not have wings. The process of distortion itself is the vehicle of our approach to the story. The very act of reading and interpreting the story rests not on muteness and patience, but on the appreciation of exaggeration. In reading the story the reader does not respond only to the truth of a particular idea, in the case of this story, for instance, the idea that there is an indestructible, winged aspect of man that can fly despite its own aging or the lack of appreciation from ordinary men. The story is a whole, not a set of levels, and what causes the reader to respond, in the terms that Todorov has established, is the reader's hesitation over what is real.

This hesitation is built up from the minutest details, as can be shown in one isolated segment, the ending. Even slight distortions in language are significant. The concluding phrase states that the old man "was no longer an annoyance in [Elisenda's] life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea." The antithesis of "annoyance" and "dot," contrasting an abstraction with something at least barely visible, might make us grammatically uncomfortable, but the mismatch reproduces the quality of the story itself. It is as if there were a rather easy flow between our feelings and the things we find about us, so that a thought might suddenly take a substance as real as our own, or just as suddenly disappear. The energy created by unusual phrases works in the same way. The idea of modifying "dot" by the adjective "imaginary" is plausible in that the dot may be so small that it is nearly imaginary, but the conjunction of the two terms is also implausible; it has something of the force of an oxymoron, for Elisenda is simultaneously seeing and merely imagining. "Imaginary" is also apt in that the old man is by our standards rightly considered imaginary. Structurally the close is effective because it complements the opening-the character was visually constructed piece by piece for us, and now visually recedes into nothingness. Viewed from one perspective, humankind is relieved of a burden. Viewed from another, a creature more perfect, more logical than man has achieved his freedom. The fact that the old man has escaped from the perspective of the characters means to the characters that he does not exist, he may be ignored. But we have seen him endure over a period of time and can imagine him perhaps going back to whatever imaginary place it is that he lives in, one that has as much validity to it as this imaginary town into which he has fallen.

The cluster of possibilities here matches the possibilities advanced in the rest of the story. Clusters such as this give the story its power and create the effects we identify with fantasy; the clusters work much the same way as the hesitation over the natural and the supernatural. Because the effect of the story, the sense in which it is a fantasy, is created by the treatment, not by the subject or theme, the number of fantasies that can still be written should be endless. At one time myths may have been man's way of imagining the unimaginable, but now, even though literal mythmaking is no longer used to explain the world around us, the sense of wonder that myth brings with it need not in consequence be abandoned. It does not matter that we cannot take the fanciful as literally as man might once have, nor does it matter that the subject of a myth is decrepit, toothless, and featherless. The sense of wonder that a myth or a fantasy evokes inheres not in the subject, but in the telling. Fantasy is more the how than the what.

Put in terms of Todorov's discussion, fantasy is created initially by something significantly contrary to the ordinary. The task of the reader is to naturalize, to recuperate, that is, to make intelligible, this break from the norms of the reader's experience. The most significant thing about the genre is that the break should not readily be bridged; the circuits must be kept open as long as possible. In Todorov's words, the hesitation must continue. What the reader ends up recuperating is ultimately the process, the broken circuit itself. It is not what the break is about, it is that there is a continuous break that makes a fantasy. Since fantasy is a process, not a result, its resources are endless, and it is in no way dependent on the fashion of the conventions it adapts.

The final matter to consider is the effect of parody in the genre. Does the parody of a myth or fantasy make the story a last gasp, as the Russian formalists have asserted in other cases, of a genre that is about to expire or assume a new form? I think not. Parody is not central to this story. The mention of stellar bugs and scratchings is only a way for the narrator to make the mystery of the old man more, not less, incredible. There are parodic elements, but this is not a parody as such. What one ultimately grasps in a fantasy is the potential of language to construct a world partly, but not wholly, like our own. Fantasy is the logical extension, the wings, of language itself. Literature in general and fantasy in particular are the magic which our customary language so dimly represents.

Source: John Gerlach, "The Logic of Wings: Garcia Marquez, Todorov, and the Endless Resources of Fantasy," in *Bridges to Fantasy,* George E. Slusser, Eric S. Rabkin, and Robert Scholes, eds., Southern Illinois University Press, 1982, pp. 121-29.

Adaptations

"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" was adapted, with some modifications, as a film with the same title in 1988, in a Spanish production directed by Fernando Birri. Starring Daisy Granados, Asdrubal Melendez, and Luis Alberto Ramiriz, the film is available with English subtitles on Fox/Lorber Home Video, Facets Multimedia, Inc., or from Ingram International Films.

Topics for Further Study

Look into other forms of "fantastic" literature, such as fairy tales, science fiction, mythology, superhero comics, or folk legends. Choose specific works of at least two different types and compare their styles and techniques to those of "magic realism" as represented by this story.

Compare the manner in which García Márquez treats the traditional idea of angels in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" with the way angels are represented or interpreted elsewhere, in some other work or media. Potential sources include feature films, television shows, religious or inspirational literature, and advertising.

Be an amateur "magic realist," loosely following the formula García Márquez employed for "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings." For this assignment, your "village" is any other story you have already studied; the "angel" will be another character you introduce from "outside" the story, chosen because he or she seems totally alien to the sense of the story as you have come to know it. It could be a character from outside literature: a pop culture celebrity, a representative from another time or culture-anyone who seems not to belong at all in the world constructed by the author of your story. Re-write or outline the story, incorporating the viewpoint of your new character and making the other characters respond to their ill-fitting new companion.

What Do I Read Next?

Readers who enjoy this story may wish to explore Garcia Marquez's other works. *Big Mama's Funeral* (1962) and *The Incredible and Sad Story of Innocent Erendira and Her Heartless Grandmother* (1972) are collections of short stories, many of which also embody principles of magic realism. The novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) depicts the marvelous village of Macondo through a complex history that spans three generations of the town's leading family. Here, as in *Love in the Time of Cholera* (written in 1985, and set in an unnamed town), Garcia Marquez creates a dreamlike, many-layered landscape, realized in far more detail than is possible for the village in this brief tale. To many critics, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* still represents the highest achievement of magic realism.

Labyrinths (1962) by Jorge Luis Borges is a collection of short fictions, essays, and "parables" that presents interesting parallels and contrasts to the style of Garcia Marquez. Borges is not strictly considered a "magic realist," having already achieved considerable recognition before Garcia Marquez's success; however, he does show many of the same influences and concerns, and indeed may have influenced the younger writer. Borges seems fascinated by paradox and the human thirst for meaning; through short, tightly structured narratives, he develops a variety of inventive contradictions, full of hidden insights and unexpected turns.

Since the appearance of Garcia Marquez's works, writers from many traditions have continued to test the boundaries of fantasy and reality, in innovative works that suggest the influence of magic realism, or at least seem to arise from similar sources and concerns. Among the many such works that employ an American setting are Max Apple's *The Oranging of America* (1976), a collection of modern fables that explores various aspects of "the American Dream" and its modern myths of success, and *Mumbo Jumbo* (1970) by Ishmael Reed, a satiric "HooDoo detective novel" that is also an ambitious, mythical reimagination of the history of Africans in America.

Readers might be interested in a novel which is quite similar in theme to "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings": that work of fiction is *The Wonderful Visit* (1895), by H. G. Wells, author of *The Time Machine, The Island of Dr. Moreau, The Invisible Man,* and other distinguished works of the imagination. The Wonderful Visit, which concerns the wounding and capture of an angel by rural English villagers, has been described by critic Kenneth Young as "an ironical study of life in the English countryside. . . . The satire- on ownership, on the ugliness of people's lives-is gentle, though there is a dark passage on 'the readiness of you Human Beings to inflict pain'."

Further Study

Bell-Villada, Gene H. *Garcia Marquez: The Man and His Work,* University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

Bell-Villada explores various aspects of Garcia Marquez's work, with chapters focusing on his short fiction, his early development as a writer, and his novels.

Williams, Raymond. *Gabriel Garcia Marquez,* Twayne Publishers, 1984.

A volume of criticism covering Garcia Marquez's career up to the time of its publication, including chapters analyzing each of his novels and most of the short stories. Williams also includes a biographical introduction, and a survey of the author's work as a journalist.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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