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English 1302-001

Nov. 2, 20__

Magical Realism in: "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings"

The term "magical realism," according to Naomi Lindstrom in her book *Twentieth-Century Spanish American Fiction*, "is a handy and recognizable way of drawing attention to the fusion of realism with myth and fantasy" (98). While the exact definition is more open-ended, I will try to shed light on what the term requires as characteristics. While trying to grasp the meaning of magical realism, I was amazed how often it can be applied to works or events most people are familiar with. The stories of Edward Scissorhands, Pinocchio, even Santa Claus are more believable when looked at through the lens of magical realism. Does the story, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," by Gabriel Garcia Marquez similarly add meaning to his story through magical realism? Without question, core elements of magical realism are clearly used for unique effects within the story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings."

The first aspect of magical realism utilized by Marquez is he melds fantasy with ordinary realistic events giving plausibility to both. Shannin Schroeder, in her book *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas* explains this first aspect of magical realism, "The supernatural appears as normal as the daily events of ordinary life" (13). She contends that the magical elements of the story appear plain and familiar. For example, in the story the doctor who is examining the old man is most surprised by the rationality of his wings. The narrator explains: "They seemed so natural on that completely human organism that he couldn't understand why other men didn't have them too" (Marquez 223). The doctor sees the old man as entirely human,

so he's confused by the presence of the old man's wings. Likewise, when comparing the attention the old man garnered, the narrator speaks of: "a flying acrobat who buzzed over the crowd several times, but no one paid any attention to him because his wings were not those of an angel but, rather, those of a sidereal bat" (Marquez 221). The crowd ignores the flying acrobat because he's unimpressive. What is completely unrealistic—a man flying—is ignored as everyday by the crowd. Tom Faulkner, in his critique, "An Overview of a Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" agrees: "By combining factual and imaginative descriptions, and seeming to treat them with equal credibility, the author suggests that both 'ways of knowing' are valid." Another example of this combining can be seen at the beginning of the story when the storm was described as both: "the third day of rain" and, "The world had been sad since Tuesday" (Marquez 219). Each description is given equal credibility because of the passive, almost matter-of-fact way the story is narrated. These instances, along with others, show that blending realistic and magical events to give plausibility to both is a powerful tool of magical realism.

Second, Marquez influences the reader's point of view by being inconsistent and contradictory, another characteristic seen in magical realism. In the beginning of the story the old man is described as a, "nightmare," and a "rag-picker" (220). Descriptions such as these are not usually associated with how people imagine angels. These words influence the reader's ideas of angels to make the story's outlandishness acceptable. In the book *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Wendy Faris echoes this idea: "The reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory events—and hence experience some unsettling doubts" (171). She believes confusion arises when the reader encounters contradicting events or realities. Likewise, another example of inconsistency can be seen when Pelayo and Elisenda examine the old man, "They looked at him so long and so closely that [they] very soon overcame

their surprise and in the end found him familiar” (Marquez 220). Pelayo and Elisenda studied the old man for such a long time that they quickly conceded he was not astonishing but rather normal. “So long,” “very soon,” and “in the end” all are contradictory statements that don’t belong together, and cause confusion in the mind of the reader. I believe Marquez used these statements to deemphasize the relevance of time, so later he can signal the reader when time *is* relevant to the story. Oprah’s website substantiates this characteristic of magical realism by stating: “Contradictions, inconsistencies and ambiguities color the point of view” (Oprah). These contradictions become the norm and cause us to question our own perceptions and beliefs. One good example of a contradiction in the story is the wise neighbor character. She’s attributed to be wise, but her advice throughout the story suggest otherwise. The narrator concedes, “[she] knew everything about life and death,” but after recognizing the old man as an angel, the wise neighbor advises, “[angels] were the fugitive survivors of a celestial conspiracy” and should be clubbed to death (Marquez 220). The neighbor also proclaims, “[mothballs] were the food prescribed for angels” although he doesn’t eat them (221). The neighbor is accredited for being wise, but her suggestions of killing the angel and feeding him mothballs reveals she is rather stupid. I believe these examples show how Marquez utilized contradiction and inconsistency, a characteristic of magical realism, to cloud the reader’s perception.

Additionally, another characteristic of magical realism apparent in Marquez’s story is the use of transformations or metamorphosis. Wendy Faris, in her book *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* states that within magical realism, “Metamorphosis are a relatively common event” (178). She believes that transformations are an integral part of a story that fits magical realism. The most obvious transformation we see in the story is that of the old man. We are introduced to the old man, “lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts,

couldn't get up, impeded by his enormous wings" (Marquez 220). Later, the old man improves, sprouts new wings, and flies away after a time of, "dragging himself about here and there like a stray dying man" (223). In the beginning, the old man's wings are what keep him grounded, but by the end of the story he is finally able to regenerate new wings and fly away. Similarly, the story of the spider lady is another example of a metamorphosis. The narrator reveals, "A thunderclap rent the sky in two and through the crack came the lightning bolt of brimstone that changed her into a spider" (222). She was turned into a spider, by God's wrath, after being struck by lightning. Another example of a metamorphosis can be seen through the child growing up and thus, as a result, is the only correlation with time passing in the story, "When the child learned to walk they were careful that he not get too close to the chicken coop. [...] Before the child got his second teeth he'd gone inside the chicken coop to play. [...] [Later] when the child began school it had been some time since the sun and rain had caused the collapse of the chicken coop" (223). In this example of a metamorphosis, Marquez utilizes the child as a calendar to mark the passing of time. I believe Marquez's use of metamorphosis shows it is an integral characteristic of magical realism.

In conclusion, just like the story of Santa Claus, which we are encouraged to believe from the time we are born until we realize its deceit, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" follows the guidelines of a magical realism piece. We know the story is not true, yet we are drawn into believing it. By drawing us into a different sense of reality through these techniques of magical realism, we are drawn into seeing not just the events of the story differently but our own lives as well.

Works Cited

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