

Disclaimer: This is a machine generated PDF of selected content from our databases. This functionality is provided solely for your convenience and is in no way intended to replace original scanned PDF. Neither Cengage Learning nor its licensors make any representations or warranties with respect to the machine generated PDF. The PDF is automatically generated "AS IS" and "AS AVAILABLE" and are not retained in our systems. CENGAGE LEARNING AND ITS LICENSORS SPECIFICALLY DISCLAIM ANY AND ALL EXPRESS OR IMPLIED WARRANTIES, INCLUDING WITHOUT LIMITATION, ANY WARRANTIES FOR AVAILABILITY, ACCURACY, TIMELINESS, COMPLETENESS, NON-INFRINGEMENT, MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. Your use of the machine generated PDF is subject to all use restrictions contained in The Cengage Learning Subscription and License Agreement and/or the Gale Literature Resource Center Terms and Conditions and by using the machine generated PDF functionality you agree to forgo any and all claims against Cengage Learning or its licensors for your use of the machine generated PDF functionality and any output derived therefrom.

Overview of "The Handsomest Drowned Man"

Author: Dean Rader

Date: 2000

From: Literature of Developing Nations for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Literature of Developing Nations(Vol. 1.)

Publisher: Gale

Document Type: Work overview; Critical essay

Length: 1,540 words

About this Work

Title: The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World (Short story)

Published: January 01, 1972

Genre: Short story

Author: Rabassa, Gregory

Occupation: American translator

Author: García Márquez, Gabriel

Occupation: Colombian writer

Other Names Used: García Márquez, Gabriel José; García Márquez, Gabriel José de la Concordia;

Full Text:

Rader has published widely in the field of American and Latin American art and literature. Taking as his point of departure the notion of identity, he discusses how Esteban and the villagers acquire new senses of identity in "The Handsomest Drowned Man."

Generally, folktales and myths are deeply concerned with issues of identity, and "**The Handsomest Drowned Man**" is no exception. Through tales and myths, a culture, a person, and sometimes even a place establishes a sense of identity through codes, practices, descriptions, and values. The Grimm Brothers' fairy tales are famous for evoking a sense of German identity; Native American tales almost always include indigenous animals and local natural landmarks; even early American folktales define what life and landscape were like for the colonists in burgeoning New England. In all of these cases, the stories carve out an identity that distinguishes them from other kinds of stories.

Perhaps, after reading this story, your life will mirror the lives of the residents of the Village of Esteban who believe that, at any moment, the essence of everything they believe in might rise out of the foamy seas or walk, like the happiest ghost in the world, through a doorway wide enough for a god.

García Márquez claims that he acquired his sense of the fantastic (what others have called "Magical Realism") from his grandmother's stories, which contained a series of unlikely events, but which she told with a deadpan realism. He has also remarked that he grew up in a small town (probably not unlike the village in the story) in which the only thing of importance was the past—that is, myths, history, memories. In "**The Handsomest Drowned Man**" García Márquez uses the death and subsequent "adoption" of Esteban not only to establish an identity for the village that finds him but also as how the village creates an identity for Esteban himself. Through this dual construction, García Márquez makes the construction of identity for the village and Esteban contingent on each other. Without the other, neither entity is able to claim any sense of identity.

The most obvious change in identity occurs within the village and the villagers. They become obsessed with making the village a place worthy of a man like Esteban, whom they have elevated to the level of mythic hero. The men become jealous of his immense size, both physically and imaginatively, and the women dream about what it must be like to have him as a guest. They compare him to their own husbands and find that the men cannot compare, just as their village before Esteban cannot compare to their village after Esteban's serendipitous arrival. In fact, one can divide the history of the village into two eras: B.E. (Before Esteban) and A.E. (After Esteban). Before Esteban, the villagers led lives of quiet desperation. They had no magic, no sense of purpose. They were a nameless, faceless, undistinguished village in need of something magical to transform their mere existence into life. After Esteban, everything is different. Rena Korb agrees, suggesting that the change in honor of Esteban is not simply for the moment but forevermore: "The lives of the villagers will continue to change over the next twenty-four hours and on into the future." Indeed, the villagers will paint their houses bright colors and plant flowers, and they will expand the doorways in their houses so Esteban's ghost can pass through with ease. They will keep his memory alive and perpetually remember that both God and Esteban chose their village for the delivery of Esteban into their lives (Esteban's watery arrival stands as a sort of mythical "birth" from the amniotic fluid of the sea, much like Aphrodite's). Passengers on ocean liners, who normally would cruise by the seaside village and think nothing of it

or its residents, will now smell the flowers, see the newly painted houses, and say to each other, that is the village of Esteban. In other words, the private love for Esteban is simultaneously transformed into a public determinant of identity. The village will always be known as Esteban's Village by those both inside and outside of it. According to Korb, this transformation gives their lives a sense of purpose as well as a sense of reputation: "by making their home a place good enough for Esteban, they are enriching themselves as well."

There are a number of cities around the world who achieve an identity because of individuals. Washington, D.C., is inscribed as the city of George Washington; Florence, Italy is the city of Dante and Michelangelo; Chicago has become linked with Michael Jordan and Oprah Winfrey. So, to suggest that a small town might develop a new personality because of an individual is not necessarily an unusual concept; however, what gives García Márquez's story its own sense of identity is how the villagers construct the identity of this dead man washed to their shores. When he is first discovered, he possesses nothing that might offer any clue to his identity. He has no papers, no identifying marks--nothing. But, after spending time with him, a woman comments that he has the face of one who is called "Esteban." From that moment forth, he could not be referred to by any other name. Additionally, the villagers begin to invent a life for him. They imagine his difficulty in visiting someone's house. They endow him with a graciousness commensurate with his stature. They wonder about how his back burned as he bent over in people's houses and how he would decline a chair out of fear of breaking it. Even though his destiny placed him at this village, the residents agree that even in death he feels shame for causing them so much trouble. No matter what horrendous or scandalous deeds the man may have committed in his life, in death he is transformed into a kind of patron saint (the reference to St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is no coincidence here) embodying the best human traits imaginable. Speculating about his adventures at sea, the villagers assemble a history for him from the scraps of their previously dormant imaginations. The great irony of the story is that in death, Esteban becomes a model on how to live life. Thus, as they invent an identity for Esteban, Esteban is busy inventing an identity for them. The same structure is at work in **"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings"**. In both texts, a kind of cultural symbiosis occurs in which a duality engenders two separate but connected identities.

Korb rightly notes that Esteban resembles various mythical characters, most notably Odysseus who, like Esteban, washed up on more than one shore on his ten-year trek back to Ithaca. For Odysseus, his homecoming is absolutely critical to the establishment of his identity as a hero, a man, a father, a husband, and a king. Furthermore, how Odysseus behaves in the poem serves as a model for behavior for Greek males. Without question, the poem situates Greek identity through the character of Odysseus. Similarly, Esteban's homecoming (to his own village) is necessary for the establishment of his identity and that of the town. And, as the *Odyssey* does with Greek identity, this story offers a possible glimpse at Latin-American identity. García Márquez wants to inscribe into the identity of Latin America an awareness for magic, imagination, and the unexplained. In both this story and **"A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings,"** García Márquez uses the micro to help create cultural identity on a macro level. To what degree is this village a metonym for Latin America itself? García Márquez has always associated the magical, the unexplained, the mystical, the miraculous with Latin American culture. Similarly, one of his main themes has always been the lengths to which Latin- American individuals and communities go to define their identities.

Finally, the story forces readers to wonder about their own identities. In Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Rilke ends the poem, a musing on the magic of transforming how one sees the world, with this famous line: "You must change your life." Can reading a poem or a short story change your life? Perhaps. Tales for children always have a moral. The moral of this story might be to expect the magical or to take advantage of the miraculous when it arrives on your doorstep. According to Raymond Williams, García Márquez's **"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings"** and **"The Handsomest Drowned Man"** are stories about how one interprets unexpected events in one's life: "Both stories demand that the reader approach interpretation--and the process of reading these stories--with an awareness of the problems of interpretation and the limits of one's strictly rational faculties." For Williams, these two texts turn the focus of the story away from the author and place it on the reader. Is the life of the reader like that of the villagers Before Esteban? Perhaps, after reading this story, your life will mirror the lives of the residents of the Village of Esteban who believe that, at any moment, the essence of everything they believe in might rise out of the foamy seas or walk, like the happiest ghost in the world, through a doorway wide enough for a god.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2000 Gale Group, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Rader, Dean. "Overview of 'The Handsomest Drowned Man'." *Literature of Developing Nations for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Literature of Developing Nations*, edited by Elizabeth Bellalouna, et al., vol. 1, Gale, 2000. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, https://link-gale-com.lib2.bmcc.cuny.edu/apps/doc/H1420031258/LitRC?u=cuny_mancc&sid=LitRC&xid=0151112d. Accessed 26 Jan. 2020.

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1420031258