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ENG 201 Sec. 0504

November 25th, 2020

Human Nature Through the Lens of Magical Realism

Magical realism is a genre in which the real world collides with the surreal and whimsical world of fantasy. The shining examples of this genre are found in two works of the renowned Columbian author, Gabriel García Márquez. In his story, “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World”, a grey island devoid of any true life and personality, is changed forever when the corpse of a beautiful large man washes up on shore, as their purpose in life is completely changed. In “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”, a fishing town is greeted by an old man with angel wings, prompting confusion and curiosity across the community. Márquez took inspiration from the myths, folklore and superstitions that he heard growing up as a child that were common in Latin America. These stories were often a tool to guide or make commentary on human behavior. Márquez uses that same ethos when writing these stories. In these two stories, Márquez uses magical realism to illustrate how significant events in our lives can bring out the very best, or the very worst, in human nature.

In “The Handsomest Drowned Man In The World”, the story opens to the island town. The narrator gives us a view of this small, plain and unremarkable town. The houses have no character, not even so much as plants to add a splash of color. The land to function on was not enough to sustain a happy, fulfilling life for anyone. But all of this changes when the drowned man washes up on shore. From the beginning, the women of the town are immediately enthralled

by this man's appearance and size, and become lost in his aura. But despite his unusual size, he's still very much human, a corpse at that. In the story, Marquez uses magical realism by contrasting the tall and beautiful figure of this man with the human reality of death. The narrator says: "Fascinated by his huge size and his beauty, the women then decided to make him some pants from a large piece of sail and a shirt from some bridal linen so that he could continue through his death with dignity" (Marquez, "Handsome Drowned Man" 2).

But the focus of the story is not so much the dead man, but the profound and immediate reaction of the town, and the villager's admiration goes beyond acknowledging his beauty. The women in this town begin to fantasize about his existence before his death. They unanimously assign him a name, Esteban, and imagine what life was like as a man of that size and beauty. Marquez writes: "They could see him in life, condemned to going through doors sideways, cracking his head on crossbeams, remaining on his feet during visits, not knowing what to do with his soft, pink, sea lion hands" (Marquez, Handsome Drowned Man 4). While the man is not alive to tell his story, the women in the village create a whole new life for him. They create a life filled with nuance, struggle and humility.

The men are initially dumbfounded as to why the women have become so attached to the man, but when they finally glance at the man with their own eyes, they immediately understand. The man was a part of their village. The narrator speaks about how they decide to make him a part of their town: "So when the men returned with the news that the drowned man was not from the neighboring villages either, the women felt an opening of jubilation in the midst of their tears. 'Praise the Lord,' they sighed, 'he's ours!'" (Marquez, "Handsome Drowned Man" 5). The entire village and the neighboring villages come together to exchange resources and flowers to send this man off properly, and they vow that their lives will not go back to the way it was

before. The narrator says: “They were going to paint their house fronts gay colors to make Esteban’s memory eternal and they were going to break their backs digging for springs among the stones and planting flowers on the cliffs so that in future years at dawn the passengers on great liners would awaken, suffocated by the smell of gardens on the high seas” (Marquez, “Handsomest Drowned Man” 8).

In an analysis entitled “Overview of “The Handsomest Drowned Man” by Dean Rader, he looks at what has changed after they find the dead man. He writes: “Before Esteban, the villagers led lives of quiet desperation. They had 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” (Rader). The village at the beginning of the story is a town without life or meaning, and at the end of the story, they’re spiritually attached to Esteban’s life, and all it essentially took was his fantastical body to wash up on shore.

In “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”, the narrator introduces Pelayo and Elisenda, who live in a town similar to the first story, very plain, quaint, and uneventful. The couple lives in poverty and their child is on the verge of dying. But suddenly, in the mud, Pelayo finds a weak old man. This is no ordinary man, however, for he has huge angel wings impeding him from moving. Once again, Marquez uses magical realism by taking an old man, without hair or a sufficient amount of teeth, and giving him godly angelic features. The arrival of the angel even cures the dying child. Once the town hears word of the old man, Pelayo and the rest of the town lock him in a chicken coop. What followed is a long period of abuse and exploitation from the neighborhood, egged on by Pelayo and Elisenda. The story continues: “They found the whole

neighborhood in front of the chicken coop having fun with the angel, without the slightest reverence, tossing him things to eat through the openings in the wire as if weren't a supernatural creature but a circus animal" (Marquez, *A Very Old Man* 2). While the dying angel is abused on a day to day basis, Pelayo and Elisenda reap the benefits by amassing a fortune large enough to upgrade their own house into a two story mansion, never contributing to better the conditions of the angel.

What's most striking is that the cycle of abuse and torture is only ended when the townsfolk find a new object of infatuation. The townsfolk find a girl turned into a fearful spider for disobeying her parents. The narrator says: "The admission to see her was not only less than the admission to see the angel, but people were permitted to ask her all manner of questions about her absurd state and to examine her up and down so that no one would ever doubt the truth of her horror" (Marquez, *A Very Old Man* 6). Suddenly once this new creature arrives, the townsfolk completely abandons the angel. They didn't take into account the dire straits they had left the angel in, rather their interest in the angel simply ceased to be almost immediately.

In an analysis by Regina Janes, she acknowledges the moral conflicts that involve the actions of the characters. She says: "Thereafter, the angel's story follows a simple trajectory through the townfolks' response to him. An initially brutal response to a stranger—club him to death, lock him in the chicken coop, put him on a raft with three-days' provisions—is replaced by celebrity, as others crowd to see him. Is he a supernatural creature or a circus animal?" (Janes). Overall, the arrival of the creature causes him to be oppressed, exploited, and maimed by the townsfolk.

While both of these stories have very similar settings and literary devices used, Marquez uses these literary devices to analyze how events in our lives can not only change people, but

bring out the best or the worst in them. In “the Handsomest Drowned Man in the World”, this event being the drowned man washing up on shore is met with curiosity, empathy, unity and solidarity among the community to give Esteban an identity, and a proper sendoff. In “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”, the main characters and the townsfolk immediately unleash a barrage of scorn onto the angel, cage him, treat him like a spectacle to gawk at, and abandon him when he no longer entertains them. The most important aspect of these stories, outside of the whimsical events that inspire, is human nature. On one hand, the town in “The Handsomest Drowned Man” forms an identity around this dead man, and forms a sense of community that had been severely lacking in their community. In a “Very Old Man” however, the community takes full advantage of the angel for their own personal gain. Essentially, they chew him up, and spit him right out. While they lie at opposite ends of the spectrum, empathy and selfishness, these stories are uniquely human.

Works Cited

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