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Know Thy Stranger

In his short stories “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” and “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” Gabriel Garcia Marquez tells two different tales of strangers entering a community. In one story, a drowned body of a dead man washes ashore and transforms the lives of the villagers. In another story, a winged old man suddenly appears in the courtyard of a couple’s home and fascinates the residents of that town. Both stories detail how the lives of the villagers become entangled with the newcomers, but they differ in certain elements, including how the outsiders are treated by the townspeople due to their perceived value. In both stories, the lives of the villagers are forever changed because of the newcomers. Critics and analysts of Garcia Marquez’s works note that a pervading theme in these stories is one of identity. The strangers disrupt or change the lives of the villagers, and a consequence of the stranger’s arrival is a change to the identity of both the strangers and the villagers themselves.

Garcia Marquez depicts two different ways that outsiders can be treated in their new communities due to their perceived importance and humanity. Though the children initially treat the drowned man as a play object, the women are the first to show care for him. They clean and dress him and give him the name Esteban. They recognize something familiar in Esteban and imagine what he would be like as a fellow villager. “They thought that if that magnificent man had lived in the village, his house would have had the widest doors, the highest ceiling, ...and his

wife would have been the happiest woman” (Garcia Marquez, “The Handsomest Drowned Man”). The men are initially aloof towards Esteban, but they soon embrace him as they imagine the apologetic, humble personality Esteban might have. These projections of what Esteban might have been like show that the villagers place importance on understanding Esteban’s identity. Though none of their suppositions can be confirmed, they nevertheless agree on a common identity for Esteban. As they welcome and celebrate Esteban in their community, the villagers themselves adopt a new identity as one that welcomes castaways. Dean Rader notes in his critique of the story, “Thus, as they invent an identity for Esteban, Esteban is busy inventing an identity for them” (Rader 2).

Compared to the drowned man, the old winged man is not welcomed by his community, though they, too, are curious to know who the winged man is. A couple, Pelayo and Elisenda, finds the old man and locks him in a wire cage outside. Like Esteban to his villagers, the old man’s identity is a mystery, but unlike Esteban, he begets little respect. “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... as if [he] weren’t a supernatural creature but a circus animal” (Garcia Marquez, “A Very Old Man”). All residents of the town are quick to opine on who they believe the old man is and what place he should have in society. Isabel Henao notes in her analysis of Garcia Marquez’s work that the town is preoccupied with labeling the old man as having a particular origin or place in society, stating “it becomes important for the characters in the story to identify him and give him a story with a past in order to find him familiar” (Henao 11). The old man is put through many tests to determine if he is an angel. Not being able to agree on a common identity for the old man does not stop the couple, their neighbors, and the town’s spiritual leaders from taking advantage of the old man for his perceived healing powers. The

couple even charges a fee for others to gawk at the old winged man. However, the town's interest in seeing the old man dwindles with the arrival of another supernatural being, a woman who had mostly been turned into a spider. This spider-woman can communicate with the villagers. Henao notes, "The ability to pinpoint her story and receive her narrative makes her a better attraction to the people, showing how much they value identity and a past" (Henao 14).

The towns in both stories undergo a physical change because of the strangers. The villagers throw Esteban a funeral and change who they are to celebrate his memory. "...They also knew that everything would be different from then on, that their houses would have wider doors, higher ceilings, ...so that Esteban's memory could go everywhere" (Garcia Marquez, "The Handsomest Drowned Man"). The villagers plant flowers in honor of Esteban to make their community a more welcoming place. The villagers adopt a new identity centered on Esteban; "the private love for Esteban is simultaneously transformed into a public determinant of identity" (Rader 1). The winged old man also changes Elisenda's and Pelayo's lives. Using the money from charging admission to see the old winged man, they are able to build an extravagant house. In fact, they modify their house to ensure that others like the old winged man do not grace their doorstep again. "With the money they saved they built a two-story mansion, ...and with iron bars on the windows so that angels wouldn't get in" (Garcia Marquez, "A Very Old Man"). After the winged old man leaves, one presumes that Elisenda and Pelayo return to their lives without acknowledgment or gratitude for the ways in which the old man changed their fortune.

Analysts of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's work have observed that the themes he employs are often reminiscent of Latin America's cultural identity and its susceptibility to outside influence. Laurence Porter notes, "For Garcia Marquez, the ultimate referent of both fantasy and political militancy is real: it is the ...Latin American history of factional strife and of

exploitation, both by dictators within and imperialists without” (Porter 198). The identity of a town is influenced as Esteban enters the community. After the town’s physical transformation, there is no remnant of what the town used to be prior to Esteban’s arrival. Henao states, “The people who lived before will not be remembered; the only person remembered, in fact, will be [Esteban]. ...[The townspeople] are complicit in allowing him to change the way they live... in this case, the narrator again is the only one aware of the changes and the way life used to be” (Henao 30). The consequence of gaining Esteban’s identity is the loss of the village’s old one. Compared to Esteban, the winged old man’s arrival and departure do not come with total erasure of the town’s identity. Instead, the erasure is of the old lives of the couple, who were previously poverty-stricken. The couple is forever changed because of their exploitation and commodification of the winged old man. With the old man’s departure, the couple feels no sense of loss for the old man or for their lives before the old man.

Through two different stories, Garcia Marquez describes very different reactions that a community can have to strangers. Whether a stranger is welcomed and accepted by a group depends on his perceived value and familiarity. A change in a community’s receptiveness requires a willingness to be open and prohibits exploitation. Nevertheless, Garcia Marquez profoundly demonstrates that whether an outsider is welcome or not, outsiders have the strange ability to permanently change the community they newly inhabit. This change is not just a physical or superficial one, but it can also be at the core of a group’s or town’s identity.

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