

a very old man with enormous wings

summary and analysis

A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings is a short story written by Gabriel García Márquez that explores themes of human curiosity, society's treatment of the unusual, and the nature of faith and belief. Set in a small coastal town, the narrative revolves around the arrival of an old man with enormous wings, who is interpreted by the townspeople as an angel. However, rather than reverence, the old man is met with exploitation, indifference, and ultimately, neglect. This article will provide a detailed summary and analysis of the story, highlighting its rich symbolism, themes, and the author's masterful use of magical realism.

Summary of the Story

Setting and Initial Encounter

The story begins with the discovery of an old man with enormous wings who appears in the backyard of Pelayo and Elisenda, a couple living in a small seaside village. The pair initially finds him in a dilapidated state, resembling a "drowned man" with his wings bedraggled and stained. The old man's appearance is met with curiosity and fear by the townspeople, who soon gather around to witness this peculiar sight.

The Town's Reaction

As the news of the old man spreads, various townsfolk come to see him. Some believe he is an angel, while others suspect he is a harbinger of misfortune. The couple, rather than offering compassion, decides to capitalize on the old man's presence by charging admission to see him. This decision marks the beginning of the old man's exploitation, where he becomes a spectacle rather than an object of reverence.

The Old Man's Condition

Despite the attention, the old man is treated poorly. He is kept in a chicken coop, subjected to the whims and curiosity of the townspeople. They poke and prod at him, showing little regard for his dignity or well-being. He grows ill from the neglect and harsh treatment, yet he maintains a sense of stoicism throughout his suffering.

The Arrival of the Spider Woman

In a twist of fate, a woman with a spider-like body arrives, claiming to be a true freak of nature. The townspeople quickly lose interest in the old man, who is no longer seen as extraordinary when compared to the spider woman. This shift highlights the fickle nature of public interest and the ease with which human beings can dehumanize others in favor of new spectacles.

The Old Man's Departure

As time passes, the old man begins to recover. One day, he takes flight and soars into the sky,

leaving behind the town that had both revered and reviled him. His departure raises questions about the nature of belief and the way society treats those who are different or misunderstood.

Analysis of Themes

1. Magical Realism

Gabriel García Márquez is known for his use of magical realism, a literary style that incorporates fantastical elements into a realistic setting. In "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," the old man's wings serve as a symbol of both wonder and absurdity. The townspeople's reactions to him reflect their inability to comprehend the extraordinary, leading to a blend of reverence, exploitation, and ultimate indifference.

2. Human Nature and Exploitation

The story critiques human nature, particularly the tendency to exploit those who are vulnerable or different. Pelayo and Elisenda's decision to profit from the old man's presence exemplifies a broader societal trend of commodifying the unusual. The townspeople's initial curiosity quickly devolves into a spectacle, revealing a lack of empathy and understanding.

3. Faith and Belief

The old man's ambiguous nature raises questions about faith and belief systems. While some view him as an angel, others dismiss him as a mere curiosity. This divide illustrates the complexity of belief—how it can bring hope to some while leading to neglect or exploitation of others. The townspeople's inability to recognize the old man's humanity reflects a broader commentary on the nature of faith.

4. Isolation and Loneliness

Throughout the story, the old man experiences profound isolation. Despite being the center of attention, he is treated as an outsider, confined to a chicken coop and subjected to ridicule. This theme resonates with the experiences of many individuals who feel alienated in society.

Symbolism in the Story

1. The Wings

The old man's enormous wings are the most significant symbol in the story. They represent both his otherness and the potential for transcendence. While they should evoke awe and reverence, the townspeople instead respond with fear and exploitation. The wings can also symbolize the burdens of existence, as they become a source of both wonder and suffering for the old man.

2. The Chicken Coop

The chicken coop serves as a symbol of confinement and dehumanization. The old man's

imprisonment reflects how society often restricts those who are different, reducing them to mere objects of curiosity. The coop signifies the limitations placed on individuals who do not conform to societal norms.

3. The Spider Woman

The arrival of the spider woman shifts the townspeople's focus away from the old man, symbolizing the superficial nature of human interest. The spider woman's grotesque appearance and the fascination it generates serve as a commentary on society's appetite for the bizarre. Her presence amplifies the old man's vulnerability and the fleeting nature of public fascination.

Character Analysis

1. The Old Man

The old man is a complex character who embodies the themes of the story. His initial helplessness contrasts sharply with the eventual revelation of his strength when he takes flight. He represents the marginalized individuals in society—those who are misunderstood and mistreated. His endurance in the face of exploitation highlights the resilience of those who remain hopeful despite adversity.

2. Pelayo and Elisenda

Pelayo and Elisenda are emblematic of society's flawed nature. Their initial compassion quickly turns to opportunism as they exploit the old man's presence for financial gain. Their character arc illustrates the duality of human nature—capable of both kindness and cruelty. By the end of the story, their indifference and eventual dismissal of the old man reflect a broader societal tendency to overlook the extraordinary.

3. The Townspeople

The townspeople serve as a collective character, representing society's response to the unfamiliar. Their varying reactions—ranging from awe to ridicule—depict the complexities of human nature. They embody the desire for spectacle, often at the expense of empathy and understanding. This group dynamic highlights societal attitudes towards those who do not conform.

Conclusion

A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings is a poignant exploration of human nature, belief, and the treatment of the extraordinary. Gabriel García Márquez masterfully uses magical realism to craft a narrative that invites readers to reflect on their perceptions of the unusual and the often cruel realities faced by those who exist outside societal norms. Through the old man's story, readers are prompted to consider their own responses to the unfamiliar and the ways in which society can both uplift and exploit. The story remains a timeless commentary on the human condition, urging a deeper understanding of empathy and acceptance.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings'?

The main theme revolves around the coexistence of the ordinary and the extraordinary, and how society often reacts to what it does not understand, as shown through the villagers' treatment of the old man.

How does Gabriel Garcia Marquez use magical realism in the story?

Marquez employs magical realism by introducing the miraculous figure of the old man with wings into a mundane setting, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, which highlights the villagers' varying perceptions of the supernatural.

What does the old man symbolize in the story?

The old man symbolizes the marginalized and the misunderstood, representing how society often fails to recognize the value of those who are different or who do not conform to societal norms.

What role do the villagers play in the narrative?

The villagers serve as a collective character that embodies human curiosity and cruelty, showcasing how people can exploit and dehumanize others when faced with the unfamiliar.

How does the ending of the story contribute to its overall message?

The ending, where the old man eventually flies away, reinforces the idea of liberation and the rejection of societal constraints, suggesting that true understanding and acceptance can only come through individual empathy and compassion.

What narrative techniques does Marquez use to enhance the story's impact?

Marquez uses vivid imagery, rich symbolism, and a non-linear narrative to create a surreal atmosphere, drawing readers into the emotional and philosophical depths of the story while challenging their perceptions of reality.

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