

How Can “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”
Possibly Be for Children?

By George Vedder

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" is undoubtedly a work of magical realism. According to Lee A. Daniel in his article "Realismo Mágico," magical realism is defined as nothing more than its name implies—simply: "realism, but with the aid of magic" (Daniel 129). The story takes place in a typical town inhabited by typical people with typical problems, to which arrives the *magical* element: our "Very Old Man with Enormous Wings." Through an abnormal narrative, unjust character interactions, and the title of the story itself (a reference to the characters' assumptions of the angel), Marquez pushes his perspectives on religion, abuse, and hypocrisy, specifically in South America. I figured that I fully understood Marquez's intention until, during discussion surrounding Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Professor Frank Brevik pointed out a peculiar subheading in the story's title. It's a tale for children. How is this possible? With such complex, real-world themes and lessons, what is a child supposed to take away from this story? The answer lies in those who read out loud on the foot of their children's beds each night, passing the tale down from generation to generation. The impact of "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" is not only meant for the children of South America. It is meant for the parents that raise them.

The pitfalls of Latin Catholicism are a clearly controversial topic in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings." An essential figure in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's story that pushes these themes of judgement and hypocrisy is Father Gonzaga. He arrives on the scene of the angel shortly after its arrival, and, as soon as his Catholic values are validated, he naively labels himself as correct without any real interpretation. Instead of accepting that this is what his fellow Catholics have been looking for, he writes the being off as insignificant. Through Gonzaga, Marquez jabs at the Latin Church for its lack of values and at Roman Catholicism for their inadequacy. He writes, "Father Gonzaga held back the crowd's frivolity with formulas of

maidservant inspiration while awaiting the arrival of a final judgment on the nature of the captive. But the mail from Rome showed no sense of urgency. They spent their time finding out if the prisoner had a navel, if his dialect had any connection with Aramaic, how many times he could fit on the head of a pin, or whether he wasn't just a Norwegian with wings" (Marquez). Christian views such as "loving thy neighbor as thyself" are very often misguided in the Catholic practice, especially at the top of religious hierarchy. Father Gonzaga is clearly an embodiment of what Marquez views as these religious corruptions in Latin America. Gonzaga, like some priests and bishops, actively goes against Christian values in his treatment of the winged "angel". Rather than any form of welcome, he extends a hand of quick judgements that wholly reflect the Latin Church's closed-minded tendencies and apparent self-absorption. Especially in the region of Columbia, the Latin American form of Catholicism has become increasingly more strict, retrogressive, and hypocritical (Kearney 2). This affects how the parents of Latin America will raise their children. Latin Catholic families are in the front row of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's intended audience for "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings". Marquez worries that young citizens of South America will be raised under a form of Catholicism that pushes for conformity and unrealistic values that should not be held in the modern era. Even at the time of this story in 1955, progressive thinkers like Marquez pushed for more open mindedness in their communities. Marquez recognized that at the core of these corrupt values were mothers and fathers. Edgar Crown, a student of Colombian literature, states, "That land, where peace and respect was once breathed, is currently suffering a horrendous metamorphosis. In Latin American countries, there are far too few parents who inculcate values into their children, generating disrespect and exploitation among population. Parents' behaviors also contribute to this problem by providing an erroneous example to children" (Crown 1). This decline of integrity in Latin American value

systems is not something that children should be expected to pick up on in “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”. Instead, these messages direct themselves towards the guardians of these children who could instill these corrupt religious traits within them.

Missteps in general South American values are just as integrated in “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” as those of Latin Catholicism. Religion is undoubtedly a factor in these values, but so is *familismo* (family), and most notably in the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *respeto* (respect). In an article for the *National Library of Medicine*, “Incorporating the Cultural Value of Respeto into a Framework of Latino Parenting,” Esther Calzada, Yenny Fernandez, and Dharma Cortes explore the pros and pitfalls of Latina mothers’ attempts to instill *respeto* in their children. They write, “The cultural value of *respeto* emphasizes obedience and dictates that children should be highly considerate of adults and should not interrupt or argue. More generally, *respeto* relates to “knowing the level of courtesy and decorum required in a given situation in relation to other people of a particular age, sex and social status...for mothers, [*respeto*] is the primary focus of child rearing” (Calzada *et al.* 3). Through the narrative of “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”, Marquez points out the flaw in some applications of *respeto*. This belief is portrayed vividly in a sort of fight scene between the angel and a “frightful tarantula woman” who was brought into town as a carnival attraction, much like the “Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” has been turned into. At this point in the story, Marquez takes a break from the current action in the town and focuses on the background of this spider-woman. “What was most heartrending, however, was not her outlandish shape but the sincere affliction with which she recounted the details of her misfortune. While still practically a child she had sneaked out of her parents’ house to go to a dance, and while she was coming back through the woods after having danced all night without permission, a fearful thunderclap rent the sky in two

and through the crack came the lightning bolt of brimstone that changed her into a spider. Her only nourishment came from the meatballs that charitable souls chose to toss into her mouth.” In this brief flashback, Marquez tells a satirical tale of punishment that reflects the tales that Latin American parents would use to scare their children. This subtle insertion addresses the parents directly with the ridiculousness of these types of parental warnings that use *respeto* as a weapon of conformity. He portrays the use of this weapon even further later in the scene after the angel is defeated. Marquez writes, “Those consolation miracles, which were more like mocking fun, had already ruined the angel’s reputation when the woman who had been changed into a spider finally crushed him completely. That was how Father Gonzaga was cured forever of his insomnia and Pelayo’s courtyard went back to being as empty as during the time it had rained for three days and crabs walked through the bedrooms” (Marquez). Once again, Father Gonzaga is used as a medium for reflecting on corrupt South American values. The townspeople all practice *respeto* in following Gonzaga’s footsteps as he entirely dismisses the possibility that this angel is anything more than a decrepit man. The value of *respeto* in “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” is in no way portrayed positively. Instead, it is used as the backbone for Marquez’s argument regarding the inadequacies in basic values taught by Latin culture.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” is, in fact, a tale for children. It takes on the voice of a traditional fairy tale and includes fantastical elements that are likely to appeal to a young Latin American audience. However, it is not expected that these children pick up on every message that Marquez lays down at their feet. Marquez discusses religious hypocrisy and real-world morality, concepts that children are not yet keen to. Rather, the parents of these children are encouraged to raise them in such a way that these messages will become a part of their lives. Parents, according to “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”,

should leave behind the over traditionalized values of Catholicism and *respeto*, and instead focus their parenting mindset on what will give their children a strong moral integrity. This moral integrity is at the root of every story in the genre of magical realism. Much like *Aesop's Fables* or other works with a moral tone, magical realism uses its abnormal subject matter to push a specific theme of righteousness. Writers like Marquez focus their hyperrealities on what might encourage their readers to improve upon themselves, not to be magical, but to be empathetic and morally sound.

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