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Magical Strategies and Reality of Latin America in Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings"



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Abstract

Gabriel García Márquez is a renowned Colombian novelist, short story writer, and a journalist. He is a Nobel Prize winner and one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. He revolutionized modern literature with his unique style of magical realism, blending the magical and the mundane, to reveal deeper truths about Latin American societies and history. Magical realism is a literary technique that combines realistic elements with supernatural, creating a world where impossible events coexist naturally with ordinary life. Márquez's literary discourse portrays Latin American society with its varied cultural features and complicated history. Latin America has endured political oppression and foreign economic exploitation, during and after colonialism. The process of colonialism left a legacy that deteriorated the social, religious, and cultural beliefs of the region and created a symbolic void among people. The themes in Marquez's works are deeply rooted in his concern for his society reflecting both the vulnerability and the resilience of Latin American communities. Beneath the layers of magic and myth lies a compassionate understanding of people caught in the relentless cycles of exploitation, oppression, and injustice. Gabriel García Márquez's short story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" serves as a brilliant exploration of callousness of Latin American people and highlights the absence of empathy by religious or political authority in the society. This paper aims to analyze how Márquez's narrative offers a critique of the corruption within the Roman Catholic Church in the story and highlights people's role in day-to-day matters in a post-colonial Latin America, during the second half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Magical Realism, Colonialism, Symbolic Void, Resilience

Introduction

Gabriel García Márquez widely regarded as one of the greatest Latin American writers of all times was born in the small coastal town of Aracataca, Colombia on March 6, 1927. His upbringing in this coastal town, dominated by banana plantations and marked by extreme economic inequality, profoundly shaped his literary voice. Growing up in such a region marked by violence, injustice, poverty, and suffering of ordinary people exposed him to harsh realities of third-world countries that became the central themes of his works. Márquez spent the first eight years of his life with his grandparents, who played a crucial role in shaping his literary imagination and narrative style. His grandfather, a retired colonel and a veteran in Colombia's civil wars exposed him to the stories of wars, politics, history, while his grandmother's tales of family events, filled with supernatural and fantastical details, shrouded in local folklores, ghost stories, and superstitions, introduced Márquez to the world of magic and realism that would later shape his literary vision. This interweaving of reality and folklore emerged as a distinctive feature of his literary works, and became the hallmark of his literary style.

García Márquez began his literary career as a journalist in Bogota before devoting himself to writing literature, and has written many acclaimed novels, short stories, and non-fiction works. He was awarded the world's most prestigious Nobel Prize in

Literature in 1982. Márquez is considered to be one of the most outstanding representatives of modern Latin American Literature who has not only addressed the most vital concerns of his society but wielded enormous influence on the world replicating Latin American culture and society. García Márquez's career as a fiction writer is generally acknowledged to have begun in 1955 with publication of his first collection of short stories, *Leaf Storm*, which included "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" and it first appeared in *New American Review*. Although the story is subtitled, "A Tale for Children", the characters and settings are fashioned to reveal true Latin America. Like most of the Latin American writers, Márquez is extraordinarily attached to his homeland and strongly committed to broadcast the problems of Latin America to the world. The story explores the themes of political exploitation, public ignorance, and emptiness of religious faith in society, all through the lens of Márquez's unique literary style.

Magical Realism and Latin American Literature

Márquez's literary narrative is inseminated with multiple layers of meanings, which come to light with his adept application of magical realism technique. As Dorfman (1991) mentions, "Garcia Marquez's famous 'style' is not something artificial, but emerges from the need to communicate in a new way" (Dorfman, 199, p. 20). Magical realism is a narrative technique that intermixes the ordinary events with the extraordinary treating supernatural as integral part of everyday life, as "[m]agical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction" (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 6). Through magical realism, García Márquez constructs a real world where elements of supernatural and magic coexist with real world encompassing religion, history and politics, as part of it. Superstitions are presented as essential component of Latin American experience. As Pelayo mentions, "to place García Márquez within the literary milieu (environment) of his time, the reader should take into consideration the Latin American tradition to which he conforms" (Marquez, 1972, p. 16).

The term "magical realism" was first coined in 1925 by Franz Roh, the German art critic in the art category (Zamora, 1995, p. 3). He introduced the term to describe a new form of the German post-expressionist paintings that combined realistic portrayal with surreal, dream-like elements (Bowers, 2004, p. 8). This genre, which emerged in Latin American literature in the middle of 20th century, offers a unique narrative approach that challenges the boundaries between reality and fantasy. The socio-historical conditions of 20th century Latin America were crucial in shaping the emergence and evolution of magical realism as a literary genre. The term was popularized in literature by the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, who redefined the term, applying it as a literary term in his works. A number of critics of Latin American literature have made significant contributions to the analysis and interpretation of magical realism, offering a range of insights that have deepened our understanding of this genre. Through the works of Latin American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, and Isabel Allende, the genre has challenged traditional distinctions between reality and fantasy, offering readers a profound understanding of the complexities of the Latin American experience.

Textual Analysis

“A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” is a quintessential example of magical realism that actually portrays Latin American political tendencies, Church’s corrupt authority; it reveals politicians and clergy’s callous behavior, and people’s superstitious attitude. This exploitation of Latin American people is exposed through the story of a bizarre creature “an old man with huge wings” who comes to the courtyard of poor Pelayo family. Throughout the story, Márquez offers a critical view of Latin American, particularly Colombian political and religious authority through a fictional town and judges the obliviousness of his people who not only lack logic but also demonstrate ignorance.

The story takes place in a small, rural town on a dark, rainy day, which adds to the overall miserable and bleak atmosphere of the town. This kind of setting is an indication that the townspeople themselves are poor, uneducated and oblivious to world outside their town. At the beginning of the story, the economic condition of Pelayo and Elisenda is very poor and they live in a house invaded by crabs during a rainstorm while their child is very sick. On the third day of rain, Pelayo was busy throwing dead crabs into the sea while Elisenda was taking care of the sick child. They thought that their newly born child had fever all night due to the smell. When Pelayo comes back, he discovers an old man with wings “lying face down in the mud” (Márquez, 1972, p. 105) in his courtyard. The man's wings are damaged and dirty, and he speaks an unintelligible language that no one can understand. They eventually called a supposedly wise neighbor woman who has her own ideas about angels. After seeing the old man, she called him the “angel” who had come for their child, but the heavy incessant rain knocked him down in the mud. Pelayo and the other people suspect that this old man is a fallen angel or a shipwrecked foreign sailor, but are skeptical in seeing him as a divine figure. Pelayo dragged him out of the mud and locked him up in an unsanitary environment with the hens in the chicken coop, where he becomes an attraction and a source of fascination for the town people. This indifference that the family and their neighbors show to the old man exhibit their failure to empathize with the old man. Through their actions, Márquez reveals humanity’s tendency to ostracize and exploit the unknown rather than express any compassion or understanding. Márquez skillfully employs the technique of magical realism by portraying the miraculous old man in a realistic context, treating the miraculous not as something unbelievable but as an accepted reality. By presenting the supernatural as mundane, Márquez draws attention to the complexities of the Latin American society, by criticizing how society responds to the extraordinary creature with selfishness, not with reverence and also how Father Gonzaga, the religious authority of the town, does the same. Their reaction exposes Colombian society’s failure to appreciate the extraordinary and understand the real as problematic.

García Márquez also explores the theme of economic exploitation in the story. The greedy attitudes of Pelayo and Elisenda are ironically portrayed in the story who exploit the old man for their own financial gain. When they discover the creature, the whole neighborhood gathers in their courtyard, Elisenda gets the idea to take advantage of the crowd’s interest and begins to charge five cents for each admission to see the angel. The story shares, “Elisenda, her spine all twisted from sweeping up so much marketplace trash, then got the idea of fencing in the yard and charging five cents admission to see the angel” (Márquez, 1972, p. 107). Márquez wants to show us

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the greed of the family and their abuse of power for selfish benefits. Pelayo and Elisenda's cavalier and exploitative attitude towards a supernatural creature is ultimately an indictment of cruelty and callousness of the society. Instead of treating the old man with respect and reverence, they treat the elderly angel as a profitable circus act and behave in a manner that places financial rewards above compassion despite his divinely origin. Their motivation is not on well-being of the old man, but on the wealth his presence can generate, and they prioritize their own personal benefit and comfort over kindness and empathy, emphasizing the selfishness of the humans.

This form of greed and inhuman act toward the old man make them rich and financially stable but it also indicates the condition of poor people in the town. Pelayo and Elisenda were very happy because, within less than a week, they had crammed their rooms with money. The old man's presence significantly impacts their lives by providing them an escape from their poverty into a life of prosperity and security. Their prosperity grows while the old man despite his extraordinary appearance remains confined to the coop and is mistreated. They feel the old man's presence a good omen as he brought prosperity for them, yet they continue to mistreat him which reveals their miserable condition which makes them cruel. Pelayo and Elisenda's mistreatment of the supernatural figure combines the magical and real, and serves as a picture of Latin American world. It shows how widespread poverty has made people exploitative for the monetary gains. Pelayo and Elisenda's transformation from poverty to wealth reflects their moral blindness. Márquez uses these two main characters to show societal practices and illustrate the callousness and cruelty towards the homeless, foreign creature. Instead of understanding the needs of the angel who brought them fortune, they prefer personal material gain and wealth as "Pelayo also set up a rabbit warren close to town and gave up his job as a bailiff for good, and Elisenda bought some satin pumps with heels and many dresses of iridescent silk" (Márquez, 1972, p. 109). The old man's suffering is a mere backdrop to their prosperity on which Pelayo and Elisenda perform their selfish pursuit of wealth and entertainment. At the end, Elisenda sighs with relief when she sees him in an awkward attempt to fly feeling relieved that this annoyance has gone from their life, "because then he was no longer a nuisance, but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea" (Márquez, 1972, p. 112). She never truly appreciates the old man's supernatural presence as extraordinary but exploits it to end their real-life misfortunes. However, the old man despite being mistreated displays incredible patience; "[h]is only supernatural virtue seemed to be patience" (Márquez, 1972, p. 108). The old man does not respond when the townspeople mistreat him, and keep him in a filthy chicken coop, as "[h]is prudence fell on sterile hearts" (Márquez, 1972, p. 107). This reaction causes the angel more harm and contributes to his suffering because it alienates him further from the townspeople. The angel's departure at the end serves as the larger purpose of setting an example of obliviousness of Latin American society to their problems and their inability to finding a long-lasting solution to this economic disparity.

Throughout the story "A very Old Man with Enormous Wings", Márquez exposes the paradoxes of a magical town and its realistic institutions, particularly the Church, by highlighting their behavior toward the old man. Father Gonzaga, the representative of Roman Catholic Church, is depicted as the religious authority in the community who acts as a local priest. Márquez elucidates the indifference of Roman Catholic Church towards Latin American people who are dominated by disloyal and unjust authorities.

Father Gonzaga comes to observe the old man and speaks to him in Latin, but the old man does not know “the language of God” (Márquez, 1972, p. 107) and is not familiar with the language of the world or its religious leaders. From this, Father Gonzaga doubts that the angel could not possibly be divine and assumes him to be “an imposter” (Márquez, 1972, p. 107). He is skeptical of the old man’s being as an angel and believes that he is a demon in disguise as “nothing about him measured up to the proud dignity of angel” (Márquez, 1972, p. 107). Father Gonzaga, being the representative of the Church, fails to protect the old man from the townspeople, when confronted with the practical manifestation of his beliefs. Father Gonzaga decides to send letters to the higher authorities of the Church in Rome, and wait for official clarification. This shows his dependance on external powers and intervention of foreign authority in Latin American affairs. Márquez is critical of the town priest who is more concerned about superior’s confirmation rather than dealing with such affairs himself, as Šnircová (2019) mentions, “[t]he local representative of the Church reacts with alarm and suspicion, seeing in the creature the possibility of devil’s carnival tricks and turns to Rome for help with the situation” (19). The prolonged official response from Rome signals the Church’s inability to respond to a situation that demands immediate guidance, showing their disinterestedness in “others” matters. The townspeople rather than waiting for official pronouncements rely on spectacle and superstition, exploiting him for entertainment and profit. This shows the indifference and even unresponsiveness of the religious leaders towards their societal issues, also marking a lack of compassion and empathy for their people.

The author here draws attention to the erratic nature of faith and the waning influence of religion in society, illustrating how institutional power can become hollow when it fails to act with moral responsibility. The blend of magic and realism in the story is a useful technique to criticize the nature of religious institution, showing how it impacts society and culture. Márquez exposes the townspeople’s lack of faith and decline of religious values. According to Márquez, the townspeople are superficially religious, but they lack the actual faith and understanding. When the angel falls to this particular town, they should be delighted by his heavenly presence, but they hit him with stones which shows their lack of spiritual values and genuine faith “even the most merciful threw stones at him, trying to get him to rise so they could see him standing” (Márquez, 1972, p. 109). By describing the apathetic citizens and unscrupulous religious institutions, Márquez satirizes the Catholic Church and its role to shape the whole town’s way of thinking in such a sterile way. Here Márquez exposes the hollowness of Catholic Church which ignores the principles of morality, revealing spiritual emptiness beneath its surface authority. Peoples’ religious beliefs cannot exist in this sterile land where the townspeople are faithless. These people have not only lost faith, but they have also turned materialistic, and lack spiritual values due to no strong presence of religion or political authority. Goodwin (2006) explains, “[t]he opinions of the villagers reveal an idealized view of religion as government; their treatment of the angel, however, betrays their reaction to rule by religious authorities” (128).

Throughout the story, Márquez employs magical realism to blur the lines between reality and fantasy. The old man’s enormous wings suggest that he is a divine being, an angel, and his humanly body is supernatural. His arrival in the town challenges the townspeople’s spiritual beliefs and perceptions, amid the problems of real life. Márquez portrays a society in which poverty, superstitions, violence, and ignorance

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became a part of people's life and physical depravities have been considered as acceptable norms. As a result, the townspeople find the angel a disappointment and treat him in a manner that seems unjust, cruel, and horrific. The author highlights how the people abandon the old man and reinforce his status as an outsider. Despite the old man's ability to perform miracles, the townspeople treat the old man like a "circus animal" which demonstrates their blind faith in miracles and supernatural creatures, but their economic mentality makes them sell his spiritual presence. They hit him with stones and burn him with sticks which shows their brutality and viciousness. The society tends to lack humanity because the angel contradicts their expectations and the townspeople seem thoroughly incapable of understanding him. Despite this, the old man reacts with patience and endurance throughout. His silent and patient reaction contrasts sharply with the selfish and exploitative behavior of the townspeople. Thus, Márquez critiques how the townspeople treat the extraordinary as ordinary and fail to recognize the miraculous when it appears in daily forms.

Conclusion

Márquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" gives a concentrated picture of the Latin American society characterized by exploitation, ignorance and violence. Márquez illustrates how society has gradually lost its deep religious and social values, and has become spiritually barren, obsessed with superficiality and material gains rather than empathy and morality. The response of townspeople to the angelic figure highlights the moral decay of the society that has forgotten to separate the fantastical and the real, due to their real-life conditions. Márquez uses their behavior to emphasize the ignorance inherent in Latin American society, and loss of spiritual values which is a product of the system they are exposed to, even today. Through the use of magical realism, Marquez highlights this tension between the sacred and the ordinary, showing that when the divine appears in their everyday life, they respond not with reverence but with selfishness and apathy, considering their everyday conditions. As in the story, instead of receiving spiritual insight, the people exploit the old man for their financial gain, and abandon him once he no longer serves their purpose. Despite the townspeople cruelty, the old man endures all the mistreatment silently and patiently symbolizing forgiveness and endurance. His treatment is reminiscent of the peoples' ignorance, showing a persistent deteriorating condition of Latin American societies. Through the story, Márquez urges readers to reflect on their own judgement, and stop relying on external forces who do not conform to their social expectations. Through its magical yet painful realism, the story's message remains powerful across generation that the real humanity lies in compassion and empathy, not in cruelty, selfishness, or exploitation. Thus, the story stands as a timeless reminder that empathy and mindfulness of the real and fantastical are vital for the growth of Latin American society.

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