

A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

Márquez grew up in Aracataca, Colombia, raised by his maternal grandparents. His grandfather, nicknamed “the Colonel,” was an excellent storyteller and had a big impact on Márquez. After studying law (but not graduating), Márquez began a difficult but rewarding career in journalism, covering La Violencia in Colombia, but also working further afield in Paris and New York. He worked on his fiction alongside his journalism, publishing *The Leaf Storm* in 1955 and *In Evil Hour* in 1962. In 1967, he published his masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which was both widely read and critically acclaimed. In 1982, Márquez was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, making him the fourth Latin American at the time to receive the honor. In his later years, Márquez divided his time between Mexico City, Havana, and Paris, continuing to write the short stories, novels and non-fiction that brought him great acclaim. After being diagnosed with cancer in 1999, Márquez battled with poor health before eventually succumbing to pneumonia in 2014. Juan Manuel Santos, the President of Colombia, called Márquez “the greatest Colombian who ever lived.”

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The fable-like quality of “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” means that the historical and geographical setting is deliberately left relatively undefined. Various critics see it as a comment on La Violencia (the bloody Colombian civil war of the 1940s and 1950s) or the Holocaust, as the story examines the ease with which cruelty can occur in the most mundane places. Much of Márquez’s work relates to La Violencia, which was a civil war between the Colombian Conservative Party and the Colombian Liberal Party, estimated to have cost the lives of some 200,000 people. The fighting took part largely in rural areas, with political leaders and police encouraging impoverished supporters of the Conservative Party to seize land from peasant Liberals. Censorship and reprisals against press reports were common, making Márquez’s initial profession as a journalist all the more challenging and vital.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

This story is an example of magic realism, a writing style for which Márquez is renowned, which combines fantastical elements with the everyday. Other great works of magic realism include Márquez’s own *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), and Mark

Helprin’s *Winter’s Tale* (1983). There is a long tradition in literature of combining fantasy and realism, and the magic realist mode is indebted to works as varied as Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), and Nikolai Gogol’s *The Nose*. This particular story has close parallels with Franz Kafka’s [The Metamorphosis](#), in which Gregor Samsa is turned into a giant insect and is subsequently misunderstood and mistreated by those around him. Describing the influence of Kafka’s story on his writing, Márquez said “When I read the [first] line I thought to myself that I didn’t know anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known, I would have started writing a long time ago.” Márquez is one of the pre-eminent authors of the 20th Century, and he is often listed alongside Jorge Luis Borges as one of the greatest Latin American authors of all time. Márquez also acknowledged that the works of American and European authors had a great influence on him, particularly those of Hemingway, Faulkner, Twain, and Melville from America, and Dickens, Tolstoy, Proust, Kafka, and Virginia Woolf from Europe. Márquez considered it important for an author to know his or her context, once saying “I cannot imagine how anyone could even think of writing a novel without having at least a vague of idea of the 10,000 years of literature that have gone before.”

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings: A Tale for Children
- **Where Written:** Bogotá
- **When Published:** 1955
- **Literary Period:** 20th Century Latin American Fiction
- **Genre:** Short Fiction / Magic Realism
- **Setting:** A small, nondescript town on the coast of South America
- **Climax:** The old man eventually regains strength and flies away
- **Antagonist:** Pelayo, Elisando, and the town inhabitants
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient



PLOT SUMMARY

During a nasty storm, Pelayo finds a weak and straggly old man in his courtyard. The man has enormous [wings](#), but he speaks an incomprehensible dialect and looks pathetic, so Pelayo and his wife, Elisenda, assume that the man is a shipwrecked sailor. To confirm their hunch, they ask the seemingly wise old neighbor lady about the man, and she tells them he’s an angel and suggests that they club him to death. Instead, Pelayo

imprisons the angel in the chicken coop. Pelayo and Elisenda's child is sick with a fever, but he begins to improve now that the angel is there.

Word quickly gets out about the angelic old man, and the townspeople gather to satisfy their curiosity and perhaps receive a miracle. They do not know quite what to think. Father Gonzaga, the local priest, arrives to try to solve the mystery, but because the angel is dirty and does not speak Latin (the official "language of God"), Father Gonzaga does not believe him to be a *proper* angel. He warns the townspeople against "carnival tricks" and writes to the Catholic authorities for advice.

Despite the priest's warnings, more and more people come to see the angel, and Elisenda has the idea to start charging them admission. The angel is such a popular attraction that he makes Pelayo and Elisenda wealthy. The angel, meanwhile, festers in his own filth. The people gawk at him, taunt him, and pull his feathers, but he only responds with supernatural patience, not once lashing out at them. They even brand him with a hot iron to see if he is still alive. Meanwhile, the church authorities replying to Father Gonzaga are more concerned with superficial questions like how many times the angel might fit on the head of a pin.

Before long, a new attraction arrives in town: "a frightful tarantula the size of a ram and with the head of a sad maiden." The townspeople find the spider woman more relatable than the old man because she speaks the same language as they do, so she can tell a recognizable and moralistic story about who she is and how she became so odd. Her popularity quickly eclipses the angel, whose odd miracles—helping a blind man grow new teeth, or making sunflowers sprout from a leper's wounds—are simply not miraculous enough for the townspeople. Father Gonzaga is able to let go of the issue now that the general populace is no longer interested.

By this point, Pelayo and Elisenda have amassed enough money to buy a much bigger house. Pelayo quits his job, and Elisenda buys herself some fancy clothes. The child's health continues to improve, and he sometimes goes into the chicken coop to play near the angel. A doctor comes, but he also cannot explain the angel's nature.

The child is now strong enough to go to school. The angel goes "dragging" himself about the house like "a stray dying man," much to the annoyance of Pelayo and Elisenda. His wings are balding and thin.

As time passes, the old man's condition improves and his feathers return. One day, Elisenda is cooking in the kitchen and notices him trying to fly. Though his attempts are clumsy, eventually he manages to gain altitude and soars over the horizon. Elisenda lets out a sigh of relief, partly for the angel, but mostly for herself—he is "no longer an annoyance in her life."



CHARACTERS

The Old Man (the Angel) – The protagonist of the story, the angel is an old, disheveled man with enormous [wings](#) who finds himself facedown in the mud of Pelayo's courtyard at the beginning of the story. Presumably coming to take Pelayo's sick child to heaven, the angel is knocked down in the storm and then held captive in Pelayo's chicken coop for years. The angel speaks a strange dialect, so he can't explain himself to the locals, and his pathetic, mangy appearance makes him a target for their derision. He's treated like a "circus animal," as Pelayo and his wife Elisenda keep him captive and charge admission for locals to see him. Since everyone expects the angel to perform traditional miracles, the strange miracles he *does* perform don't impress anyone: the blind man grows three new teeth instead of regaining his sight, and the paralytic "nearly" wins the lottery instead of becoming able to walk. However, the story obliquely implies that the angel's presence was responsible for the sick child being healed, which raises the question of whether the angel is deliberately not performing the miracles that the cruel townspeople expect. Once the locals are tired of the angel, he lives a sorry existence, maltreated, ignored, and considered only a nuisance. Despite his terrible treatment, the old man never lashes out at anyone; he bears his suffering with patience and grace from start to finish. In the end, he regains his strength and flies away without anybody in the town ever recognizing that his presence was a miracle. That the angel's appearance—besides his wings—was so banal and pathetic suggests that the sacred and mundane coexist seamlessly, and that miracles are embedded in the fabric of everyday life, if only people had the attention and openness to notice.

Pelayo – Pelayo, a married man with a newborn son who lives in a rundown seaside town, finds the old man with enormous [wings](#) in his courtyard. Instead of finding the man's presence miraculous, Pelayo assumes that he's a shipwrecked sailor. Once the neighbor corrects him, he locks the angel in his chicken coop, abusing the man and charging locals admission to gawk at and even physically abuse him. From the admission fees, Pelayo experiences a change in economic fortune: he quits his job as a bailiff in order to set up a rabbit warren and he and Elisenda build a two-story mansion. Despite this change in status, Pelayo doesn't meaningfully change as a person: he is the same, simple, bitter man at the end that he was at the beginning. Although he does not have many redeeming features, Pelayo does provide the necessities of life for his wife and child, and (in a way that is not especially caring or charitable) to the old man.

Elisenda – Elisenda is Pelayo's wife. She is ordinary and concerned primarily with getting by. When Pelayo finds the old man in the courtyard, Elisenda is the one who comes up with the idea to charge admission to see the angel, and she's not

contented with their new wealth, even when she and Pelayo make enough money for a new house. In fact, she sees the old man/angel as a nuisance, letting out “a sigh of relief, for her and for him” when he eventually regains his strength enough to fly away. Elisenda shows herself to be shallow: she never shows the angel any respect nor seems particularly bothered about the health of her child. In fact, her happiest moment in the story is probably when the admission money she and Pelayo have accumulated allows her to buy “some satin pumps with high heels and many dresses of iridescent silk, the kind worn on Sunday by the most desirable women in those times.”

The Neighbor Woman – When Elisenda and Pelayo find the old man, they go to the old lady next door for advice. While she has a reputation for being wise, she comes across cruel and petty and somewhat silly in her beliefs. She *does* recognize that the old man might be an angel, but she says that angels are “fugitive survivors of a celestial conspiracy” and therefore they should “club him to death.”

The Child – Pelayo and Elisenda’s newborn son is very ill before the angel arrives, but he makes a full recovery by the end of the story. He is the only character who doesn’t treat the angel with disdain, because he is too young and innocent to take social cues from his cruel community. In fact, he is quite happy to go inside the chicken coop to play. It seems like the child and the angel are somehow linked, as shown by them contracting chicken pox together. The child has no voice in the story, but the reader must consider to what extent his recovery to full strength is related to the angel’s visit.

Father Gonzaga – Father Gonzaga is the hapless priest who is brought in to examine the angel. The priest, as a religious figure, should be charitable and empathetic towards the wretched angel, but he instead warns the townspeople against recognizing the old man as angel. Through the character of Father Gonzaga, Márquez satirizes of the Catholic church, suggesting that the church is more occupied with bureaucracy and internal wrangling than with the work of charity and spreading empathy: “They spent their time finding out if the prisoner had a navel,” Márquez writes of church officials, “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.” Instead of doing his duty towards the angel, Father Gonzaga is relieved when the attention dies down and he no longer has to think about the angel at all.

The Spider Woman – This minor character has the body of a (very large) tarantula and the head of a fair maiden. She has a simple tale to tell of family tragedy, and because the townspeople recognize themselves in her more than in the angel, she becomes by far the more popular attraction in town. Even though she is physically less humanlike than the angel, her moral tale is easily digestible: “A spectacle like that, full of so much human truth and with such a fearful lesson, was bound to defeat without even trying that of a haughty angel who scarcely

deigned to look at mortals.” This shows that the townspeople prefer what is familiar but outwardly exotic (the spider woman) to what is truly otherworldly and mysterious (the angel).



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE SACRED AND THE MUNDANE

“A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” is the story of a decaying angel who falls to earth and is kept in a backyard chicken coop by a family who is annoyed by his presence. Márquez’s characters do not consider the angel’s arrival to be miraculous or even remarkable. Instead, they accept the supernatural aspect of the angel’s presence without question, focusing instead on what the angel can do for them and concluding, ultimately, that he is unimpressive. Márquez’s portrayal of an angel as an utterly mundane aspect of everyday life—a being the characters mistreat and disregard due to their perception that his strangeness is banal—suggests that the sacred is inseparable from the mundane, and that failures of human perception are to blame for everyday life not seeming miraculous.

From the beginning of the story, Márquez gives the sense that the townspeople perceive their everyday lives as being dreary. For example, he immediately describes the stench of rotting crabs pervading the town and the relentless rains they’re experiencing. From the rains, Márquez extrapolates that the “world had been sad,” which suggests that the dreary conditions have permeated the townspeople’s sense of their entire world.

While the townspeople seem desperate for an interruption to their mundane lives, the angel’s arrival—despite being mysterious and supernatural—is not the interruption they wanted. The townspeople find the angel a disappointment because he is “much too human.” Instead of resembling exalted depictions of angels in religious art, this angel is dressed “like a ragpicker” and his “pitiful condition of a drenched great-grandfather took away any sense of grandeur he might have had.” Furthermore, the angel has parasites, his wings are fraying, and he smells bad—he doesn’t distract the townspeople from their everyday lives, but rather reminds them of the very tedium and shabbiness they wish to forget. The more the angel has in common with the townspeople, therefore, the less they are able to treat him with compassion or reverence. Because of this, they relegate him to a dreadful existence of living in filth in the chicken coop and subsisting on scraps.

In spite of the townspeople's conviction that the angel is nothing special, Márquez hints that this visiting creature is sacred and sublime. His apparent ability to perform miracles is what most distinguishes him from humans, but the miracles that he performs either go unnoticed or unappreciated by the townspeople. "The few miracles attributed to the angel showed a certain mental disorder," Márquez writes in the sneering voice of the townspeople, "like the blind man who didn't recover his sight but grew three new teeth, or the paralytic who didn't get to walk but almost won the lottery, and the leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers." While the townspeople wanted miracles that would change their lives, the angel's miracles seem simply to remind them that their lives are already extraordinary. Márquez suggests that rather than feeling awed by their proximity to a miracle, the townspeople felt mocked by these "consolation miracles," since they were not the miracles that the people wanted or expected.

Even the angel's sole traditional miracle goes unappreciated. Pelayo and Elisenda's child is gripped by a dire fever at the story's opening. While the couple had assumed at first that the angel was coming to take the ailing child (presumably to the afterlife), the angel's arrival coincides with the child's sudden recovery. Instead of connecting the two events, however, Pelayo and Elisenda assume that the angel is utterly ineffectual, which hints that it's their inability to perceive miracles—rather than the absence of the miraculous in their lives—that plagues them.

Since the angel isn't giving the townspeople what they want, they quickly move on to a more interesting distraction: the spider woman. Ironically, though, the spider woman is much more mundane than the angel; the townspeople seem to like her better simply because her miraculousness is easier to comprehend. For example, she combines traditionally frightening elements (a spider body) with beautiful ones (the head of a maiden), which makes her presence titillating and sensational, rather than confounding and pathetic. She also speaks the same language as the townspeople (unlike the angel, whose speech is utterly foreign), which makes her more accessible to them. Furthermore, the meaning of her existence is clear, since it fits tidily into human moral narratives. This contrasts the mysterious angel, whose existence cannot be explained and whose value the townspeople find difficult to locate. The fact that the townspeople love the spider woman but find the angel revolting and disappointing indicates that, even though they profess to find their lives mundane (and even though they profess to be disappointed in the angel because he is too human), they are not imaginative or perceptive enough to appreciate what is truly extraordinary. When confronted with a being that is mysterious, supernatural, and exotic, they are not excited or awed; instead, they seem to prefer the spider woman, who is a dressed-up version of the lives they already have. In this way, the story suggests that recognizing the

miraculous in the everyday is a matter of perception and imagination, but most people simply lack the ability to see extraordinary things, even—and especially—when those things are right in front of them.



PATIENCE, EMPATHY, AND CRUELTY

Instead of treating the angel with reverence or sympathy, the townspeople are cruel to him; they keep him in wretched conditions, hurt him in order to rouse him into more entertaining behavior, and exploit his suffering by turning him into a ticketed spectacle. While the townspeople's behavior towards the angel is unambiguously cruel, Márquez does not suggest that this is because they are singularly bad people. Instead, he shows how an accumulation of small transgressions—beginning with a failure to empathize—can precipitate a once unthinkable moral decline. From the beginning of the story, the townspeople "other" the angel, or perceive him as being fundamentally different from them, which shows their lack of empathy. Pelayo and Elisenda initially believe that he is a foreign sailor, for example, which (at least in their mind) justifies Pelayo keeping the angel under armed guard in the filth of the chicken coop. As the story progresses, the characters' lack of empathy leads to outright violence. For instance, the townspeople, who have flocked to the chicken coop wanting to see something miraculous, provoke the angel cruelly: they pluck feathers from his [wings](#), throw stones, and even burn him with an iron in order to make him do something exciting. This behavior, which would be obviously abhorrent if done to a human, demonstrates the extent to which they have othered the angel, and it also shows how group psychology can normalize behaviors that would usually be considered immoral.

The townspeople's othering of the angel leads them not just to violence, but also to exploitation when Elisenda begins charging admission to see the angel's wretched existence in the chicken coop. At first, the angel is a popular attraction: "in less than a week [Pelayo and Elisenda] had crammed their rooms with money and the line of pilgrims waiting their turn to enter still reached beyond the horizon." However, none of these people ever raises questions about whether it's appropriate to profit off of or be entertained by the angel's suffering, or whether his terrible conditions are cruel. Instead, they see him "as if he weren't a supernatural creature but a circus animal." This is true even of the priest, Father Gonzaga, who should be the angel's protector.

Indeed, the spectacle comes to an end not because anybody stands up for the angel, but rather because a new spectacle—the spider woman—is deemed more exciting, and the townspeople no longer want to pay to see the angel. "A spectacle like that," Márquez writes of the spider woman, "full of so much human truth and with such a fearful lesson, was bound to defeat without even trying that of a haughty angel

who scarcely deigned to look at mortals.” This quote suggests that the townspeople justify their exploitation and subsequent abandonment of the angel on the grounds that it’s the “haughty” angel, not them, who is behaving immorally. Again, this shows a lack of empathy, as the angel is clearly not haughty; instead, he seems pathetic and wretched. Furthermore, it’s absurd to suggest that he should respect the people torturing him, and it’s not even clear that he knows that’s what they want from him.

Although the townspeople sarcastically believe that the angel’s “only supernatural virtue seemed to be patience,” the angel’s patience actually makes him the most virtuous character in the story. The angel never lashes out at Pelayo, Elisanda, or the public, even though they treat him so terribly—he bears their maltreatment with stoic grace, while they can’t even be bothered to continue exploiting him once a more exciting spectacle comes to town. Márquez, then, seems to connect patience with the miraculous, suggesting that it is the impatience of modern life that disables people’s ability to perceive the extraordinary in the everyday. The Bible notes that “lack of patience can cause you to miss blessings,” and Márquez shows this to be literally true. Not only does the impatience of the townspeople cause them to miss the lessons that the angel could teach them about the extraordinary nature of their lives, but also the angel’s patience is what gives him the ultimate blessing: after suffering patiently, the angel finally regains his strength and flies away.



FAITH, RELIGION, AND MORALITY

In “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings,” religion is a hollow set of habits, rather than a genuine moral framework. When the angel falls to earth, he finds himself among Christians who should be delighted by the heavenly miracle of his existence. However, since the angel does not match their preconceptions of what an angel should look like or do, nobody treats him with either reverence or kindness. Instead of taking care of him or even having sympathy for his wretched condition, the townspeople either want something from him or see him as a curiosity. Even Father Gonzaga, the priest, fails to help the angel or recognize that he is sacred; instead, the priest gets distracted by sending letters to church authorities. In this way, Márquez suggests that genuine faith is easily perverted. While these characters are superficially religious, they lack actual faith, hope, or charity.

The angel is obviously a religious figure; though his wings are not in their best condition, he is still a supernatural creature that should amaze the townspeople and earn their respect. However, even though the townspeople understand that he is an angel, his pitiful appearance and odd behavior put off everyone who meets him. While the angel embodies the very wretchedness and destitution that Jesus says should be met with kindness and charity, the townspeople are so out of touch

with their religion that they fail to carry out its basic principles. Furthermore, the angel’s presence also clearly evokes Hebrews 13:2: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” That is, practice the virtues of charity and kindness to everyone you encounter, because some of those people may be angels. The townspeople are in a situation in which they *know* that they are entertaining an angel—he’s not even in disguise—and they *still* fail to display any generosity of spirit. This shows how ineffective and shallow religion has become in this town. People consider themselves faithful, while behaving selfishly and even cruelly towards an angel.

Márquez suggests that the townspeople’s lack of genuine faith might be due to the Catholic church setting a poor example, as he satirizes the Church’s greed and pettiness. The exploitation of the angel is a clear comment on the money-making side of organized religion, as charging admission to see an angel is like charging to witness a holy relic or the discredited practice of selling indulgences (false promises to spare the purchaser time in purgatory in exchange for financial contributions to the Church). Furthermore, Márquez depicts Church officials as being too concerned with petty technical issues to understand that the angel is a genuine divine miracle who needs protection. Rather than helping (or even sympathizing with) the angel, the local priest, Father Gonzaga, examines the angel and determines (bizarrely, considering that this is a winged man) that the angel couldn’t possibly be divine. His criteria for this determination are strange: the angel’s failure to speak Latin or know how to properly greet a minister raise Gonzaga’s suspicions, and the angel’s “much too human” appearance confirms that he does not “measure up to the proud dignity of angels.” In light of the verse from Hebrews, which suggests that angels might often hide among humans, these do not seem like Biblically-coherent reasons to discredit the angel. Furthermore, Gonzaga suggests that the angel might actually be a “carnival trick” that the devil was using to “confuse the unwary,” and he notes that the wings are meaningless in determining the angel’s nature, since both hawks and airplanes have wings. Considering that this is a man with huge wings—one widely accepted to be an angel—these arguments seem like sophistry.

Father Gonzaga’s failure to understand the angel or treat him kindly does not make him a rogue representative of a Church that is respectable and faithful overall; when he writes to Church officials for a second opinion, their reaction is equally flummoxing. While Father Gonzaga hopes that the Vatican will tell them once and for all whether this is really an angel, the letters he receives 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.” Clearly, Church officials are missing the

forest for the trees: instead of delighting in the appearance of an angel, they have found themselves mired in arcane scholarly and taxonomical questions that have no relation to genuine faith. No wonder the townspeople have no sense of charity or empathy—their religious leaders are petty and insular, unable to recognize clear miracles or condemn the cruel treatment of the angel.

The Vatican's inability to act in the face of the townspeople's injustice towards the angel parallels the Church's frequently slow response to social change in the real world: on issues of gender equality, for example, the Catholic church has remained more traditional than many other religious institutions that opened leadership positions to women. Márquez, therefore, depicts the Catholic church as being out of touch with the problems of its followers and indifferent to the morality it ostensibly espouses, while the story's Catholics—without role models in their religious leaders—are shown to be cruel and selfish, despite their professed faith.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in [blue text](#) throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



WINGS

When the disheveled old man appears in the mud of Pelayo and Elisenda's courtyard, he is in the "pitiful condition of a drenched great-grandfather," and his scraggly "buzzard wings" are the only outward marker that he is anything but a pathetic, rundown man. These wings—which mark him as an angel—symbolize the coexistence of the sacred and the mundane, suggesting that miracles are not wholly out of the ordinary, but are instead inextricable from everyday life. To underscore this point, Márquez describes the angel's wings as unimpressive: they're "strewn with parasites" and "dirty and half-plucked." They seem not to be angelic wings, but rather wings that belong on Earth—the wings of a "sidereal bat" or even, as the doctor suggests, wings that might naturally belong to a human. These wings, and the man to whom they belong, seem so ordinary to the townspeople that they are unable to recognize that the angel's presence is a miracle, and instead they abuse, exploit, and ignore him, feeling miffed to be cheated out of a proper experience of the supernatural. The ordinary appearance of the clearly-extraordinary wings suggests that miracles are not necessarily obvious or otherworldly; instead, things that are miraculous are all around, and—like the townspeople's failure to recognize the angel's significance—it's only people's outrageous expectations and inattention that blinds them to the miracles in their everyday lives.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Collected Stories* published in 1984.

A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings Quotes

●● On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross his drenched courtyard and throw them into the sea, because the newborn child had a temperature all night and they thought it was due to the stench. The world had been sad since Tuesday.

Related Characters: Pelayo, The Child

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 217


Explanation and Analysis

This quote conjures a sense of decay and sickness, suggesting to the reader that all is not well in this coastal town. There are so many crabs everywhere that it's like an invasion, and this contributes to the dismal, self-pitying mindset that Pelayo and the other characters show throughout the story. The fact that Márquez says "the world" had been sad (rather than "the town," or "Pelayo and his family") is significant. It suggests that the characters of the story have a small-minded, insular mentality (to them, there is no world beyond their immediate surroundings), and that they believe that their suffering is so important that it characterizes the whole world. The reader also learns of the child's sickness here, which is an important plot point returned to quite subtly throughout the story.

●● He had to go very close to see that it was an old man, a very old man, lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts, couldn't get up, impeded by his enormous wings.

Related Characters: The Old Man (the Angel) , Pelayo

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

Márquez deliberately places the sacred—the winged man—in the midst of the mundane, here represented by the mud. This is a comingling that will persist throughout the story. The nature of the angel is unclear, as he is not as majestic and powerful as the townspeople (or even the reader) might expect. In fact, the wings’ size and weight restrict the old man, rather than granting him the freedom to quickly return to the skies. This quote sets up the main questions of the story: is this a man, an angel, or something in between—and what should be done with him? By placing the angel in the mud, Márquez is literally bringing the idea of the miraculous down to earth, forcing readers to confront their assumption that the miraculous and supernatural should be wholly and obviously separate from the everyday.

●● He was dressed like a ragpicker. There were only a few faded hairs left on his bald skull and very few teeth in his mouth, and his pitiful condition of a drenched great-grandfather took away any sense of grandeur he might have had. His huge buzzard wings, dirty and half-plucked, were forever entangled in the mud. They looked at him so long and so closely that Pelayo and Elisenda very soon overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar. Then they dared speak to him, and he answered in an incomprehensible dialect with a strong sailor’s voice. That was how they skipped over the inconvenience of the wings and quite intelligently concluded that he was a lonely castaway from some foreign ship wrecked by the storm.

Related Characters: The Old Man (the Angel) , Pelayo, Elisenda

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis


Pelayo and Elisenda take a closer look at the angel, trying to figure him out. As far as they can tell, nothing about him matches up to their expectations of angels—he’s far too raggedy and unclean. And besides, he can’t speak their language! If he had a proper halo and looked more pure then perhaps they would react more positively towards him, but his dirtiness and decrepitude remind them of their own existence in this mundane town. The fact that they find him “familiar” simply means that they don’t feel a reverence

towards him—he is not enough like them for them to feel empathetic towards him, and he is not supernatural enough for them to be in awe. Because of this, the angel is both literally and figuratively stuck—he is an unsolvable problem that needs containing.

●● Father Gonzaga went into the chicken coop and said good morning to him in Latin. The parish priest had his first suspicion of an imposter when he saw that he did not understand the language of God or know how to greet His ministers. Then he noticed that seen close up he was much too human: he had an unbearable smell of the outdoors, the back side of his wings was strewn with parasites and his main feathers had been mistreated by terrestrial winds, and nothing about him measured up to the proud dignity of angels.

Related Characters: The Old Man (the Angel) , Father Gonzaga

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 219


Explanation and Analysis

Christian tradition says that people should not “neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2). That is, treat everyone with kindness and empathy because you never know who they might be. Father Gonzaga goes against this principle, being more concerned with investigating whether the angel is authentic or not. Again, the angel is made into an “other” because he does not speak the “proper” language of God (Latin), and Father Gonzaga can’t believe that a true angel would smell and look so bad. Furthermore, Father Gonzaga’s arrogance is apparent in his dismay that the man doesn’t greet him, a minister, with the proper respect—presumably, it is the minister who should be showing respect to the angel, not the other way around. By taking this uncaring attitude, the priest uses his position of leadership not to further the true causes and beliefs of his religion, but instead to strengthen and legitimise the townspeople’s lack of compassion towards the angel. Father Gonzaga is disbelieving of the angel because he does not perceive in him the dignity that he expects of the miraculous, and in doing so, he actually further denies the angel any shred of dignity at all.

☝ The curious came from far away. A traveling carnival arrived with a flying acrobat who buzzed over the crowd several times, but no one paid any attention to him because his wings were not those of an angel but, rather, those of a sidereal bat.

Related Characters: The Old Man (the Angel)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 220


Explanation and Analysis

Despite Father Gonzaga’s warnings, people travel from all over to see the angel. They perceive him as exotic and mysterious but, as this quote shows, their attention is not based on the angel’s status as a messenger from god, but rather on the physical curiosity of his wings. The fact that a carnival comes to town, too, shows that this is a superficial world in which attention is a kind of currency. Again, Márquez writes with humor: the acrobats buzzing over the crowd are engaged in a kind of flight, cruelly mocking the angel’s inability to take to the skies and return home. Overall, this serves to reinforce the idea that the angel’s presence is merely entertainment to the townspeople, who don’t perceive him as genuinely significant.

☝ Especially during the first days, when the hens pecked at him, searching for the stellar parasites that proliferated in his wings, and the cripples pulled out feathers to touch their defective parts with, and even the most merciful threw stones at him, trying to get him to rise so they could see him standing. The only time they succeeded in arousing him was when they burned his side with an iron for branding steers, for he had been motionless for so many hours that they thought he was dead. He awoke with a start, ranting in his hermetic language and with tears in his eyes, and he flapped his wings a couple of times, which brought on a whirlwind of chicken dung and lunar dust and a gale of panic that did not seem to be of this world.

Related Characters: The Old Man (the Angel)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

Everybody wants something from the angel (even the hens!), and no-one stops to consider his needs. He is consistently mistreated, but he bears this pain with remarkable patience, mostly lying dormant and never lashing out at the humans torturing him. In one sense, this is because he is physically weak—but it’s important to consider that this is also an embodiment of a virtuous kind of empathy (patience and empathy are, of course, supposed to be vital traits of a Christian life). The fact that the angel doesn’t lash out at the pecking hens, or the people plucking his feathers, shows that he doesn’t consider violence to be a good course of action. Instead, he reacts to the disappointing behavior of the townspeople with sadness, perhaps weeping for the lack of kindness within humanity. When the townspeople’s provocations eventually prove too much for him to bear, he shows a glimpse of his majestic power by flapping his wings and scaring the onlookers. Márquez makes subtly clear that the angel truly is miraculous and otherworldly by describing his “stellar parasites” and the “lunar dust” he kicks up, adjective/noun combinations that emphasize the extraordinary aspects of mundane things.

☝ A spectacle like that, full of so much human truth and with such a fearful lesson, was bound to defeat without even trying that of a haughty angel who scarcely deigned to look at mortals. Besides, the few miracles attributed to the angel showed a certain mental disorder, like the blind man who didn’t recover his sight but grew three new teeth, or the paralytic who didn’t get to walk but almost won the lottery, and the leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers. 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.

Related Characters: The Old Man (the Angel) , The Spider Woman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

The angel is displaying inhuman powers here: he made an adult man grow new teeth, and a leper’s sores grew flowers. However, instead of seeing this as proof of his otherworldly nature, the townspeople feel shortchanged—even

mocked—as these “consolation miracles” aren’t the ones they want. Instead of miracles that will change their lives, they get miracles that show them how strange their lives already are, and clearly they are not open to seeing the miraculous in the everyday. It’s noteworthy, too, that the townspeople describe the angel as “haughty” and “mocking,” which are characterizations that don’t seem to apply to this humble, wretched creature. Instead, they themselves are haughty and mocking as they disdain the angel for his odd miracles and torture him before forgetting him entirely.

This passage also shows that the townspeople are superficial and capricious, with short attention spans. They get invested in the spider woman’s story, more so than the angel’s, because it is relayed to them in a way that is simple to understand. She is able to speak the same language as the onlookers, and has a clear moral to her story. The angel, on the other hand, offers them no clear meaning, instead conjuring these magical but ultimately useless miracles.

At first, when the child learned to walk, they were careful that he not get too close to the chicken coop. But then they began to lose their fears and got used to the smell, and before they child got his second teeth he’d gone inside the chicken coop to play, where the wires were falling apart. The angel was no less standoffish with him than with the other mortals, but he tolerated the most ingenious infamies with the patience of a dog who had no illusions.

Related Characters: The Old Man (the Angel) , The Child

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

Márquez subtly implies that there is a close relationship between the child and the angel: their health is linked, and they are not afraid of each other (though the angel generally treats the child the same as he does anyone else). Although it is not spelled out clearly for the reader, there is a strong chance that the angel’s “work” in coming to earth was to heal the child back to full strength—a genuine miracle of the sort that the townspeople should (but don’t) recognize.

Because the child has not yet been fully shaped by society, he does not treat the angel with the same disdain as everyone else. This demonstrates that these attitudes are learned, and that if the people could be more child-like—less

afraid and more imaginative—they would be able to better perceive the miraculous.

The doctor who took care of the child couldn’t resist the temptation to listen to the angel’s heart, and he found so much whistling in the heart and so many sounds in his kidneys that it seemed impossible for him to be alive. What surprised him most, however, was the logic of his wings. They seemed so natural on that completely human organism that he couldn’t understand why other men didn’t have them too.

Related Characters: The Old Man (the Angel)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

Like Father Gonzaga earlier in the story, the visiting doctor doesn’t do much to help the angel, despite that his professional responsibility is to heal. In fact, he examines the angel more out of curiosity than concern and does nothing to remedy his wretched condition. The physiology of the angel baffles him: how can this creature be so natural, and why don’t other men have wings? This reinforces the idea that the angel’s mistreatment comes down to the townspeople’s simultaneous inability to empathize with something otherworldly and see the miraculous in something that reminds them so much of themselves. Doctors are sources of knowledge who embody mankind’s ideas of reason and logic, but this doctor—like the priest—has no wisdom to give.

He remained motionless for several days in the farthest corner of the courtyard, where no one would see him, and at the beginning of December some large, stiff feathers began to grow on his wings, the feathers of a scarecrow, which looked more like another misfortune of decrepitude. But he must have known the reason for those changes, for he was quite careful that no one should notice them, that no one should hear the sea chanteys that he sometimes sang under the stars.

Related Characters: The Old Man (the Angel)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 224


Explanation and Analysis

As the angel regains his strength, his mood improves. He keeps himself to himself, as if he has to guard his recovery and can sense that soon he will be able to return home. His wellbeing is clearly linked to his wings, and as the feathers begin to return, his prospects improve. Sea chanteys are traditionally associated with the folklore of maritime communities, and often take epic journeys as their subject matter. The angel, then, is singing the music of his spirit—he knows that a change is coming. It is also worth noting that it is only now that the child is completely strong and well that the angel's transformation takes place. This suggests that the angel has a strong connection to, and even a kind of physical empathy for the child—after all, the angel's own physical condition mirrors the child's throughout the story.

💬 Elisenda let out a sigh of relief, for herself and for him, when she watched him pass over the last houses, holding himself up in some way with the risky flapping of a senile vulture. She kept watching him even when she was through cutting the onions and she kept on watching until it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea.

Related Characters: The Old Man (the Angel) , Elisenda

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

Elisenda is going about her usual daily business, doing the mundane but important work of preparing food. Even though she now lives in a much bigger house, has nice clothes, and, most importantly, a healthy child, she still doesn't feel any gratitude towards the angel. He has only ever been an inconvenience to her, like a cockroach infestation (or even an invasion of crabs). While stories often end with a resolution of the central conflict, the point of this ending is that, in reality, nothing has changed in any of the characters' ways of life. They haven't learned any lessons or changed anything about their moral framework, and the reader gets the sense that life will continue beyond the story's end exactly as it was at the beginning. Márquez provokes the reader to question whose responsibility this is, and why there has been such a failure of empathy towards the angel. Moreover, as the angel regains his freedom through flight (again showing the symbolic importance of his wings), the sense of mystery remains for the reader. Nobody knows exactly why the old man landed in this small community, whether it was an accident or a deliberate mission, and it is up to the reader to draw the links between the events that have taken place. In this sense, then, the reader is asked to do the work that the townspeople failed to do—to be considerate towards the angel, to create mental space for the mysterious, and to examine the function of empathy in society.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A VERY OLD MAN WITH ENORMOUS WINGS

For days, “the world had been sad”: Pelayo’s newborn has a fever, crabs are infesting the house, the stench of rotting shellfish is in the air, and they’ve had three days of rain. When Pelayo goes to toss the rotting crab carcasses into the sea to calm the stench, he sees something “moving and groaning” in his courtyard. It’s an old man, face-down in the mud, who has enormous [wings](#).

Pelayo finds his wife Elisenda and together they examine the man: he’s “dressed like a ragpicker,” nearly bald, with few teeth—he’s in the “pitiful condition” of a “drenched great-grandfather,” which diminishes “any sense of grandeur he might have had.” His “buzzard [wings](#)” are “dirty” and “half-plucked,” and once Pelayo and Elisenda overcome their surprise, they find the man quite “familiar.”

Pelayo and Elisenda try to speak to the man, but he responds in an “incomprehensible dialect” with a voice that sounds like a sailor’s. Disregarding his [wings](#), they conclude that he’s a shipwrecked foreign sailor, but they consult their wise neighbor to be sure. The neighbor tells them their “mistake”: the man is an angel who must have been “coming for the child” when he was knocked down by the storm.

While the neighbor believes that they should club the angel to death because angels are “fugitive survivors of a celestial conspiracy,” Pelayo and Elisenda don’t “have the heart” for that. Instead, Pelayo carries the club and watches the angel through the window all day, then locks him in the chicken coop before bedtime.

Márquez instantly presents the reader with a drab town in which the inhabitants lead mundane lives without much aim or ambition. There is a strong sense of sickness and decay. With the appearance of the winged old man, suddenly there is an event that might shake the town out of its stupor. Márquez places the miraculous right in the middle of the mundane, giving the sense that miracles might not be wholly extraordinary. This is a good example of the magic realism technique, when an author places a fantastical element within a realistic setting.



Though the old man has his wings, his other attributes don’t match what Pelayo and Elisenda expect an angel to be like. He seems too familiar and human to be angel, even if he does have extraordinary wings on his back. These wings are dirty and threadbare, again making him different from the majesty and purity traditionally associated with angels. Because of this, they find him confusing and difficult to appreciate.



The angel cannot speak the same language as Pelayo and Elisenda, which strengthens their sense that he is an “other” from a foreign land. That the angel was probably coming to take the sick child to heaven is a very important aspect of the story that Márquez deliberately underplays, mimicking the way in which the characters fail to notice that the angel might come to have more effect on the sick child than they realize.



Instead of trying to take good care of the angel, or thinking that perhaps he is there to help them, Pelayo and Elisenda watch over the angel with the threat of violence. They imprison him because they don’t understand him, which is the opposite of how Christianity tells its followers to treat those in need.



A few hours later, the sick child's appetite returns and this good fortune makes Pelayo and Elisenda feel "magnanimous": they decide that the next day they will put the angel on a raft and push him out to sea. However, in the morning they find all their neighbors crowded around the chicken coop having a blast. They're tossing food scraps into the cage "as if he weren't a supernatural being but a circus animal."

The child begins to make a miraculous recovery, yet nobody attributes this to the angel, showing that the townspeople aren't noticing what's going on in front of their eyes. Pelayo and Elisenda's plan to push the angel out to sea doesn't really come from kindness; it's just the best way to get rid of the angel without actually having to kill him. The spectacle of the angel is too tempting and rare a thing to hold back the town's inhabitants, and they are no better at kindness and empathy than Pelayo and Elisenda. They want entertainment, and at this moment the angel is the most entertaining thing in town.



By 7pm that evening, the local priest, Father Gonzaga, arrives. By now, all kinds of wild theories about the angel are being put forward by the townspeople, including that he should be made "mayor of the world." Father Gonzaga, determined to figure out what the nature of the old man is, examines him closely and tries to speak with him in Latin. The priest decides that, despite his wings, the old man is not an authentic angel, and he warns the townspeople about being fooled by circus tricks. He also writes to his own church authorities for further guidance.

The reader might expect the local priest to help the angel, but instead he proves to be utterly ineffectual. He is too wrapped up in the bureaucracy of his church and in determining whether the angel is "authentic" to appreciate that there is an angel before him. Father Gonzaga is supposed to be a representative of his religion, but when confronted with a physical manifestation of his beliefs, he does not know how to handle it. In fact, he causes the angel more harm than good by likening him to a circus act, further emphasizing his "otherness." With religious leaders like that, it's almost understandable that the townspeople can't find much sympathy for the angel.



Father Gonzaga's warnings fall on deaf ears. People flock in such numbers to see the strange angelic creature that troops with bayonets have to come to disperse the crowd. Elisenda, frustrated with cleaning up the trash left by the crowd, has the idea to fence in the yard and start charging people five cents to see the angel.

Greed takes over Elisenda as she senses an opportunity to make some quick money. She has displayed little moral fiber so far, and is corrupted by the chance to generate an easy income. In a way, this income is another of the angel's "miracles," though no-one acknowledges this or makes an effort to treat him better. All of the detritus left behind by the crowd—and the angel's own filth—further contrasts the sacred with the mundane: they are literally lying side by side. Márquez is making a wider point, too, suggesting that religious ideas themselves are frequently corrupted by individuals looking for financial gain (for example, the selling of "holy" relics to members of the public).



People travel from all around to get a glimpse of the angel. A carnival comes along, trying to capitalize on the crowd that has gathered, but they aren't entertaining enough to distract from the angel. All sorts of people come to see the angel hoping for a miracle, including a woman who "since childhood has been counting her heartbeats and had run out of numbers" and "a sleep walker who got up at night to undo the things he had done while awake." Pelayo and Elisenda make a lot of money from charging admission fees: they stuff their rooms full of cash as the crowd queues beyond the horizon.

The crowd only grows bigger and bigger as other entertainers come from all around trying to capitalize on the size of the captive audience. People make pilgrimages from far away to seek a miracle from the angel. Meanwhile the money keeps rolling in for Pelayo and Elisenda. In all of the above, it's always people wanting something from the angel—they never ask themselves what they can do for him.



Amidst all this commotion, the angel doesn't pay attention to the crowds. He is just trying to get comfortable in his imprisonment, confused by the oil lamps and candles placed near him and by the strange food the crowd tries to feed him (including mothballs). The only thing he'll eat is "eggplant mush." He bears everything with remarkable patience: hens peck at him, cripples pull out his feathers hoping they have magical properties, and people throw stones at him. When all of these fail to rouse the angel, they even brand him with a hot iron to check if he's still alive. The angel, understandably, is very distressed—he tearfully rants at the townspeople in his incomprehensible language, flapping his wings and causing filth and dust to go everywhere. After this, the townspeople get scared and are more hesitant to approach him.

Around this time, a spectacular new carnival attraction arrives in town: a woman who has been changed into a spider. She still has her normal head, but her body is that of a ram-sized tarantula. She recounts her tragic tale to the public, telling them that she was punished for sneaking out of her parents' house at a young age to go to a dance. She becomes a much more popular spectacle than the angel, because a "spectacle like that is full of so much human truth and with such a fearful lesson, bound to defeat without even trying a haughty angel who scarcely deigns to look at mortals."

Meanwhile, the angel annoys the public through his "consolation miracles": a blind man grows three new teeth, a paralytic "nearly" wins the lottery, and the sores of a leper sprout sunflowers. Between the townspeople's annoyance at the angel and their distraction by the spider-woman, they stop paying much attention to the winged old man. At long last, Father Gonzaga can get a proper night's sleep again without worrying about whether the old man is an angel or not. Pelayo's courtyard goes back to being as empty as it ever was.

Pelayo and Elisenda are not upset that the crowds have died down—they've made enough money in that short time to build a big new house. It has balconies and gardens and, more importantly, iron bars and netting to keep crabs or angels from getting in. Pelayo quits his job to set up a rabbit warren. Elisenda treats herself to luxurious shoes and dresses, "the kind worn by the most desirable women in those times." Of course, "the chicken coop was the only thing that didn't receive any attention." Sometimes Pelayo and Elisenda wash it down, but only because the "dungheap stench" gets so bad. Pelayo and Elisenda's child has grown strong and learned to walk. Although his parents didn't let him at first, he often plays in the chicken coop near the angel. The angel tolerates the child with the same stoic grace as he did the townspeople—"the patience of a dog who had no illusions."

Despite the stress they place him under, the angel never shows any aggression towards the townspeople. He is an incredible embodiment of patience, which is an important idea in the Christian faith. The townspeople, however, show no patience at all, expecting entertainment and miraculous favors from the angel. In this way, the angel holds up a mirror to the society in which he temporarily inhabits. Unfortunately, though, nobody is looking in the mirror; they can't see beyond their own individual desires. When the townspeople finally manage to raise the temper of the angel, the sheer force with which he flaps his wings frightens them, reminding them (and the reader) of the power of the unknown.



Despite all the attention thrust upon the angel, the reader is quickly reminded how fickle and superficial that kind of attention can be. Now that the townspeople have been somewhat frightened by the angel, the tale of the young woman is a much more appealing prospect. She is more relatable because, despite her huge spider body, she can speak their language and has a simple moral message. The angel is too mysterious, and accordingly the townspeople start to lose interest in him as quickly as they had found it.



The angel's miracles don't impress the townspeople: they are too bizarre and the townspeople interpret them as mocking. As the attention dies down, Father Gonzaga is no longer needed to make sense of the situation. After all of the commotion, it is clear that nobody in the town has learned anything from the angel, and nothing of the town's mundanity has changed.



Though they have transcended the poverty they were in at the start of the story, Pelayo and Elisenda are still more interested in treating themselves well than in improving the lot of the angel. Elisenda adorns herself with symbols of wealth, and Pelayo gives up his work to begin looking after rabbits—ironic, since his care for the angel has been so woeful. Even if he is a supernatural creature, the angel can't help it if the conditions of his captivity make him unhygienic and malodorous, but this "dungheap stench" is the only thing that makes Pelayo and Elisenda clean his coop. The child, who is too young to be truly greedy or superficial, shows no fear of the angel, demonstrating that the townspeople's attitude towards him is learned behavior. Though the angel shows no particular liking for the child, he continues to behave with virtuous patience.



Both the angel and the child come down with a case of the chicken pox. A doctor comes to check on them and he is baffled by the angel; he takes a curious listen to the angel's heart, finding so much whistling there and bizarre sounds in his kidneys that "it seemed impossible for [the angel] to be alive." The angel's [wings](#) seem so natural to the doctor that he can't understand why people don't normally grow them.

The child is, once again, in good health and starts attending school. Over time, the sun and the rain have caused the chicken coop to collapse. Now the angel drags himself from room to room in the house "like a stray dying man." Though Pelayo and Elisenda drive him out of one room, he quickly reappears in another. Elisenda grows exasperated and shouts that "it's awful living in that hell full of angels." The angel's condition deteriorates: he doesn't eat much, he suffers from bad vision, and his [wings](#) are barely there anymore. One night, Pelayo throws a blanket over the angel and lets him sleep in the shed before noticing the angel has a temperature and is speaking in tongues. Pelayo and Elisenda assume he is going to die, and they worry about what do with a dead angel.

But the angel survives the winter, and as the days get sunnier his strength improves. Feathers reappear on his [wings](#), and, though he still keeps to himself, he seems less depressed. He even starts singing sea shanties under the stars. One morning, while Elisenda is cutting onions in the kitchen, she notices the old man making clumsy attempts at flight. Though it looks unlikely that he will succeed in taking to the air, eventually he manages to do so, and flies off beyond the horizon. As he does so, Elisenda lets out a sigh of relief—partly for him, but mostly for her. The angel is no longer "an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea".

By having the angel and the child contract chicken pox at the same time, Márquez further suggests to the reader that they are more closely linked than anybody else in the story comes to realize. The doctor represents mankind's depth of knowledge and logic—but even he can't make any sense of the angel. In fact, the angel's actual physiology seems perfectly natural to the doctor, further raising the question of why the townspeople proved unable to treat him with any degree of empathy. Paradoxically, the angel is too close to being human to seem truly otherworldly, and too otherworldly to seem worthy of empathy.



Pelayo and Elisenda's child is now fully healthy, but his parents barely acknowledge his recovery and certainly don't attribute it to the angel. Elisenda's complaint that she lives in a "hell full of angels" is a funny statement—angels come from heaven, not hell. By saying this, she highlights how little she has learned from the experience, even though she now has plenty of money and a healthy child. Though the angel's physical being is deteriorating, the patience with which he continues to bear his condition suggests that this is actually the end of his cycle of recovery.



Against all odds, the angel's physical and mental well-being is improving. In singing beneath the stars, he is beginning to use his energy for more than just mere survival, and this implies that he knows a change in his circumstances is coming. The way in which he departs the town is important. Elisenda is making food in the kitchen (an everyday activity) as he finally manages to take flight. Elisenda is not moved by the incredible sight of the old man taking to the skies: she is too stuck in her ways, and too narrow in her perceptions, to care. In fact, she is glad for his departure, feeling that he will no longer irritate her or cause her to have to question her life. At this point in the story, given that nobody has learned anything useful from the experience, it is evident that the angel's meaning (for the reader) is generated by how little he means on the ground to the story's characters. Though he has served his purpose (if, indeed, his task was to save the child), the townspeople have given him nothing in return, and they go back to life exactly as it was before the angel.



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