

Deconstructing A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings

There are several theories drawn up in various ways in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's story, "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings." However, it seems that the strongest three theories that are depicted in the story that Marquez is trying to expand on are, Feminism, Marxism, and Deconstruction. The deconstruction theory serves as an umbrella over the whole story, but it is almost unavoidable to not refer to the feminist and Marxist roots as well in the process of deconstruction, specifically when discussing the penitent spider woman, and the monetary gain from the nuisance/lower class that is the "angel." Referring to deconstruction, specifically, the most important issue of this story is "identity," and what we as human beings do with that centered identity; not just in the obvious identity issues with our "angel," but also in the identity of religious leaders, and of men and women as well.

The most obvious identity issue that we have in "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings," is the old man himself. Our wise neighbor-lady who knows everything about life and death, automatically assumes that our old man is an angel. However, then we have our religious leader with his constructs of what an angel is supposed to be, who tells us that this man is not an angel because he does not recognize the language of God/Latin, he is "much too human"(2), and does not have the pride and dignity of what religious constructs have depicted an angel should have. Google's definition of angel is, "a spiritual being believed to act as an attendant, agent, or messenger of God, conveniently represented in human form with wings and a long robe." Other definitions of angels on Google came up with, "superior to humans in power, intelligence, beauty, kindness, and goodness."

The indeterminate nature and *freeplay* of the identity of the angel brings us back to the master of deconstruction himself, Jacques Derrida, who tells us that there is a center, in a sense, but that that center is elusive, that it is arbitrary.

...structurality of structure—although it has always been involved, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *freeplay* of the structure. No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself (Derrida 915).

While the Christianized, centered, constructed heavenly angel that we are comfortable with is supposed to perform great, awe-inspiring miracles, Marquez's angel performs ridiculous and silly miracles that do not make any sense. Oddly, the greatest miracle of all in this story, goes unnoticed as the child recovers almost immediately upon the angel's arrival. Not once in the story does Marquez blatantly exclaim that “the angel came and as a result the child got better.” Instead, Marquez quietly shows us with this underlying, entirely unacknowledged miracle, that the greatest miracles of all oftentimes go unnoticed, or are taken for granted. It is in this subtlety that this didactic message is delivered;

On the following day everyone knew that a flesh-and-blood angel was held captive in Pelayo's house. Against the judgment of the wise neighbor woman, for whom angels in those times were the fugitive survivors of a spiritual conspiracy, they did not have the heart to club him to death. Pelayo watched over him all afternoon from the kitchen, armed with his bailiff's club, and before going to bed he dragged him out of the mud and locked him up with the hens in the wire chicken coop. In the middle of the night, when the rain stopped, Pelayo and Elisenda were still killing crabs. A short time afterward the child woke up without a fever and with a desire to eat (Marquez 1).

While the identity of men and women come into question (especially that of women) in this story, the second greatest constructed identity is that of the priest, Father Gonzaga. In first describing Father Gonzaga, Marquez simply states that before becoming a priest, Father Gonzaga “had been a robust woodcutter” (1). Why does Marquez tell us this about Father Gonzaga? We are told this to show that before his study of the priesthood, Father Gonzaga was just as simple as the other onlookers. The

only reason he has a specific idea of an angel besides an otherwise arbitrary and indeterminate conclusion, is because of the religious constructs that he has aligned with—Father Gonzaga describes the angel as “alien to the impertinences of the world” (2), however, it seems that in Marquez's first remark about Father Gonzaga first being a robust woodcutter, is very telling that Father Gonzaga would have been just as alien to the impertinences of the world without his formal training in a religious construct. We are further shown the strength of arbitrariness in the religious constructs through the odd questions asked by Father Gonzaga's superiors.

Feminism and Marxism are two other theories that are clearly outlined in “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings,” and are almost unavoidable while analyzing this story and discussing deconstruction. In deconstructing the intent of specifically the spider woman, we find that the characters in the story, including the priest, are more comfortable with something, although ridiculous—a spider woman—a young woman being punished for not obeying her parents than an unexplainable phenomenon as a very old man with enormous wings. “Historically, Christianity has upheld the belief in the superiority of man, and inferiority of woman. St. Paul and Augustine restated their belief in the spiritual weakness and sensual nature of women” (David Cowles 216).

Therefore, the old man does not fit the constructs of any worldly concept, neither does a spider woman for that matter, but a young woman being *punished* for disobeying her parents, does; because although the old man with enormous wings, and the spider woman are both anomalies, the superiority of man is excruciatingly apparent in that the old man with enormous wings is what he is because that is what he is, and the inferiority of the young woman being *transformed* and *punished* for doing something *wrong*. It is then impossible to overlook the disgusting, but powerful underlying intentions of the young woman's only nourishment as meatballs being *charitably* thrown into her mouth, as an indication that women are only given strength to an otherwise weakness that is *woman*, through a superior/patriarchal society.

When referring to Marxism, the implications in the story are a little more obvious. The

monetary gain that Pelayo and Elisenda make off the nuisance living in their chicken coop, is so comparable to the working class in society and how, simply, the more money the rich make, the more of a nuisance the person or rather *thing* becomes.

In an ideal economy, workers actually consume the fruits of their own labors...or exchange such products for other goods and services of equal value. In an oppressive economy, workers are *alienated* from the full value of their labors because intermediaries, who do no work but who merely own capital, realize unearned profits from the labor of those who actually produce goods and services (Cowles 198).

Not only is the old man described subtly as “alien,” as a Marxist term, in theory in the story, but Marquez blatantly *states* through Father Gonzaga's eyes that the old man was, “Alien to the impertinences of the world” (2). We can also see Marxism in the assumption of an inevitable uprising from the working class, but of course in this case, the old man's reaction and the impact it makes when the people burn his side with a branding iron. The potential of an uprising is there, and so like the bourgeoisie have learned over the centuries, it is acceptable to continue treating people badly, so long as it is only as bad as how they are normally treated.

Simply, in conclusion, although looking at “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” through feminist and Marxist lenses are crucial to the story, a deconstructive lens is all encompassing. Specifically, through a deconstructive lens, we are shown that identity and social constructs are arbitrary and indeterminate. No matter how much weight some give to the “center”—it is faulty and will continuously disintegrate.

Works Cited

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