Changing Due to Social Injustice: Gabriel García Márquez Finds Change

In Gabriel García Márquez’s “A Very Old Man with Wings,” the most important character transforms from a haggardly dressed old man with wings into a healthy angel that illustrates the Columbian author’s view on a mythical reality and social justice, resulting from the supernatural and his childhood. It’s not until the character experiences social injustice does he gain health and fly back home. Márquez’s uses his history and his Columbian culture to push this theme. Márquez’s works are heavily influenced by his background, history, and his culture.

The author’s background and his belief in the supernatural are intertwined to drive his idea of the power of change. Gabriel Márquez came from a traditional and poor Columbian family. Like most Colombians at the time, his family was going through a tough time and was forced to live with his grandparents: “All the seeds of his future work were planted in that house; stories of the civil war and the banana massacre, the courtship of his parents, the sturdy practicality of the superstitious matriarch, the comings and goings of aunts, great aunts, and his grandfather's illegitimate daughters” (Vijh 54). When with his grandparents, Márquez said: “‘There was a real dichotomy in me because, on one hand ... there was the world of my grandfather; a world of stark reality, of civil wars he told me about, since he had been a colonel in the last civil war. And then, on the other hand, there was the world of my grandmother, which was full of fantasy, completely outside of reality’” (Barco 280). But these good times of storytelling wouldn’t last with the passing of his grandfather, so he was sent to live with his
parents and enrolled in school. Then he entered law school where he began to read poetry and write short stories. Soon his health and studies started to decline until he read Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” which Márquez states that, “‘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’” (Vijh 60). Suddenly, he was reading everything and anything, but most importantly Faulkner. In fact, Faulkner was his inspiration for writing about his childhood and its mythical past. Yet, Márquez was struggling to form his vision: “His experiences and thoughts finally found form when he returned with his mother to his grandfather's house in Aracataca” (Vijn 60).

In “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”, the reader can establish that the main character (the angle) is poor, dying older man. More so he shows how people treated him wrong morally because of what he was. The state the other two characters found him in is evidence of this: “He was dressed like a rags-picker. 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” (Márquez 638). The old man is clearly in terrible health and feeble looking. Yet the people that take him in don’t help in any mean possible, in fact, they lock him up like a prisoner, “…before going to bed he dragged him out of the mud and locked him up with the hens in the wire chicken coop” (Márquez 638). That’s not even the worst part about the lack of morality these people have. In fact, they treated him like a zoo animal: “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 640). This proves the author’s point about social injustice. These people were more concerned with how the money they would make rather than helping this man back into health. Garcia, himself said that, “‘We, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet
too late to engage in the creation of a new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth”” (Shostak 890). As the story of the angel continues, the reader can see how the other two characters have no empathy toward him and how immoral they are. After getting upstaged by other strange acts, the two characters focus on the amount of money they have made, rather than giving the angel some relief to his pain and healing him. Although perceived as selfish, the two characters are not portrayed as abusive. They are trying to afford the medical care for their child and are struggling to come up with the money and the care. Yet, to Márquez they are morally corrupt and use an unjustified way to get what they need. Sickles wrote that the author “addresses social-political concerns in some way” (28). Márquez used his work to convey his political view, but it was subtle. Mostly, he wanted people to read his work and be able to use their imagination, but there are still the political issues that he wished that the reader will addresses: “Constant political discontent, national instability, and Colombian history and myths have shaped not only Garcia Márquez's ideology but also the grand scope and depth of his fiction” (Sickles and Stavans 28). Márquez shows the readers the greediness of the two characters so we can understand the social injustice and the lack of morality.

The character that was harmed the most is the angel. The angel innocuously showed up on the beach, possibly asking for aid. He was dressed in rags with injuries on his wings, in an almost death-like condition. The lack of communication due to a language barrier is an issue with the treatment of the angel, but he doesn’t do anything to help himself anyway: “He spent his time trying to get comfortable in his borrowed nest, befuddled by the hellish heat of the oil lamps and sacramental candles that had been placed along the wire” and “He was lying in the corner
drying his open wings in the sunlight among the fruit peels and breakfast leftovers that the early
erisers had thrown him” (Márquez 639 and 640). In an essay, Slomski relates how the needy come
to the angel in search of help and wellness: “the sick and the handicapped come to the old man in
search of cures” (1-2). It’s ironic that the Father came to see this angel and believes that he is
using carnival tricks because of the show that the angel is putting on by sitting in this chicken
coop while people pay to see him made the angel a carnival attraction. This emphasizes the
character’s unwillingness to help himself by giving up and the lifestyle around him beginning to
change. The old man was no longer an attraction and the two other characters no longer had to
worry about money, but the angel’s protection was crumbling down on him: “After their chicken
coop collapses, the old man moves into the couple’s home, where he becomes a nuisance”
(Slomski 1-2). The angel soon becomes a permeant resident at this house and begins popping up
everywhere: “He seemed to be in so many places at the same time that they grew to think that
he’d be duplicated, that he was reproducing himself all through the house, and the exasperated
and unhinged Elisenda shouted that it was awful living in that hell full of angels” (Márquez 642).

Then, the angel begins to gain strength and power to fly once again. Eventually he gained
enough altitude that he was able to fly over houses and into the horizon: “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” (Márquez 643).

In conclusion, the angel is only able to change and grow after he has experienced social
injustice that has a direct correlation with Márquez’s belief in social injustice affecting change
and growth. The author’s years of living with social injustice and his country’s social injustice
caused him to relate to his grandfather’s and grandmother’s tales of mysticism and war. Since he
viewed his own country and people as being treated unfair, it’s no wonder that he chose to subtly push his political standings into his work. The angel’s social injustice resulted in him becoming free after he had changed his unwillingness to heal and aid himself. Observing this change that the angel had caused the other two characters to live with their greediness and inconsideration. The author made sense of his mystic realism by giving the reader a mystic twist of his childhood and his political views in his story. Through this, Gabriel García Márquez managed to find a way to change social injustice and conveyed that no one had the right to choose the path for anyone else.
Works Cited


