

A VERY OLD MAN WITH ENORMOUS WINGS

Based on the story by Gabriel García Márquez

On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross the courtyard and throw them into the sea. They thought the smell was making the baby sick. The sky was dark when Pelayo was coming back to the house. He could just see something moving and groaning in the rear of the courtyard. He went very close and saw that it was a very old man, lying face down. The man's enormous wings were stuck in the mud. **A**



Courtesy of the artist, Clifford Goodenough

Frightened, Pelayo ran to get his wife Elisenda. They both looked at the fallen body. He was dressed like a ragpicker. There were only a few hairs left on his head, and there were very few teeth in his mouth. His wings were covered in mud. Pelayo and Elisenda looked closely at him for a long time. When they finally spoke, he answered in a language they couldn't understand. So they ignored the wings and decided that he had probably come from some foreign ship wrecked by the storm. Still, they called in a neighbor who knew everything to see him. After one look, she could show them their mistake. **B**

"He's an angel," she told them. "He must have been coming for the child, but he is so old that the rain knocked him down." **C**

The next day everyone knew that an angel was in Pelayo's house. Against the judgment of the wise neighbor, they did not

"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" adapted from *Leaf Storm and Other Stories* by Gabriel García Márquez, translated by Gregory Rabassa. Copyright © 1971 by Gabriel García Márquez. Retold by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Reproduced by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. and electronic format by permission of Agencia Literaria Carmen Balcells, S.A. [NO WEB]

A HERE'S HOW

Reading Focus

I have underlined the details the author includes to help me see, smell, and feel the setting.

B YOUR TURN

Reading Focus

What are some details in lines 15–24 that help you imagine what the old man looks like?

C QUICK CHECK

What has happened in the story so far?

A **HERE'S HOW**

Literary Focus

The man with the wings seems to be an angel. I would expect people to treat an angel well. It is **ironic** that people treat him so badly.

B **LITERARY ANALYSIS**

Pause after line 41. Why do you think people have these reactions to the man with the wings?

C **HERE'S HOW**

Literary Focus

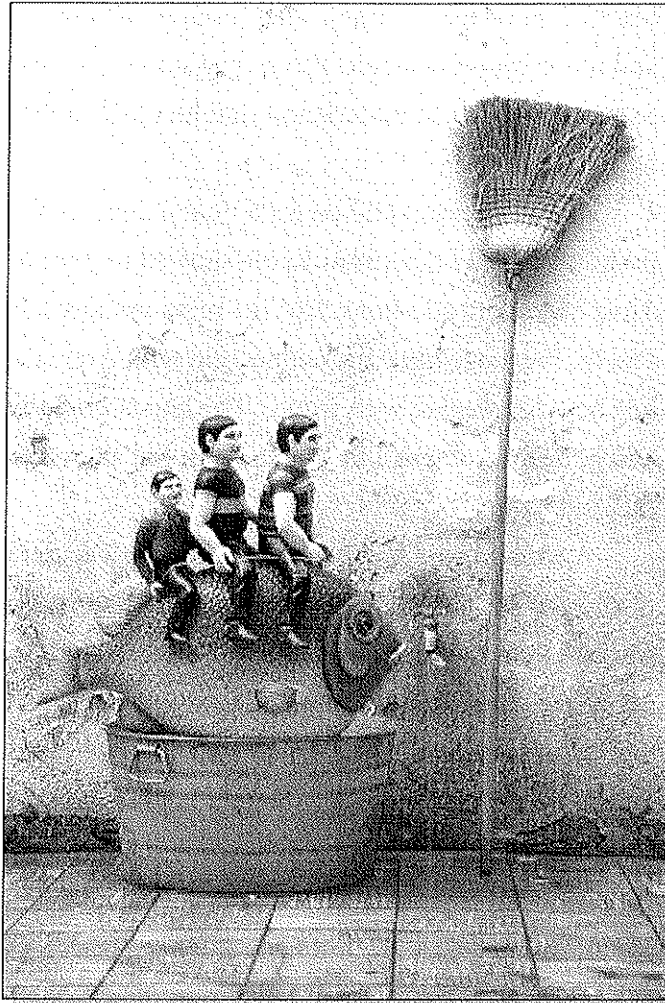
The setting of this story is very realistic. I can picture the town as a very real place and the characters as real people. However, the author introduces elements of **magic realism** with the descriptions of the "angel" and how the people view him. Father Gonzaga brings the story back into the real world, as he questions whether the old man is actually an angel.

30 have the heart to club him to death. That night, before going to bed, Pelayo dragged the old man out of the mud and locked him in the chicken coop. In the middle of the night, the child woke up without a fever. Then Pelayo and Elisenda felt generous. They decided to put the angel on a raft on the ocean with enough fresh water and food to last three days. But in the morning, they found the whole neighborhood in front of the chicken coop. People were tossing the angel things to eat as if he were a circus animal. **A**

Father Gonzaga arrived before seven o'clock. By that time, onlookers were making all kinds of guesses about the prisoner's future. Some people thought that he should be named mayor
40 of the world or a five-star general. Father Gonzaga entered the chicken coop to look closely at the pitiful man. **B**

The old man was lying in a corner drying his wings in the sunlight. He lifted his ancient eyes and murmured something when Father Gonzaga said good morning to him in Latin. The priest believed that the angel was a fake when he saw that the old man did not understand Latin. Then the priest noticed that the old man smelled of the outdoors. His feathers had been damaged by winds, and nothing about him seemed at all like an angel. Father Gonzaga left the chicken coop and warned the people
50 not to be too trusting. He reminded them that the devil often used tricks to confuse people. He argued that wings were not enough to recognize an angel. Still, he promised to write a letter to his bishop. The bishop would send the letter up the chain of command all the way to the Pope. **C**

The priest's warnings had little effect. The news of the angel spread so quickly that in a few hours the courtyard was as busy as a marketplace. Elisenda then got the idea of fencing in the yard and charging people five cents each to see the angel. Curious people came from far away. The most unfortunate and sick
60 people on earth came in search of health. There was a man who couldn't sleep because the noise of the stars disturbed him. There was a sleepwalker who got up at night to undo the things he had done while awake. And there were many others with less serious problems. Pelayo and Elisenda were happy. In less than a week



Art by Sergio Bustamante/Photograph © 2003 Clint Clemens

they had filled their rooms with money and the line of visitors still went on and on. **D**

70 The angel was the only one who took no part. He spent his time trying to get comfortable. At first they tried to make him eat mothballs, which the wise neighbor said were angel food. But he turned them down, just as he turned down the lunches that people brought him. They never found out whether it was because he was an angel or because he was an old man, but he ate nothing but eggplant mush. His only angelic virtue seemed to be patience. The hens pecked at him, and injured visitors pulled out feathers to touch their broken limbs with. Even kind people threw stones at him, trying to get him to stand up. Once they even burned his side with an iron. He awoke with a start, ranting in his mysterious language. **B** **F** With tears in his eyes, he flapped

D YOUR TURN

Literary Focus

Elisenda decides to charge people money to see the angel. Do you think this is ironic? Why?

E HERE'S HOW

Vocabulary

I am not sure what *ranting* means. Based on the context, it seems to mean "screaming or talking wildly." I checked my dictionary to be sure, and I was right.

F HERE'S HOW

Language Coach

A **suffix** is a word part that is added to the end of a word. A suffix can change a word's meaning. The word *mysterious* comes from the word *mystery* and has the suffix *-ous*.

A **HERE'S HOW**

Literary Focus

It is **ironic** that the people see an angel as “a disaster waiting to happen.” Angels are supposed to be good! I think the author is poking fun at the people who cannot see that.

B **YOUR TURN**

Literary Focus

Re-read lines 83–89. What is **ironic**, or unexpected, about the questions from Rome? How is the irony mocking?

C **YOUR TURN**

Vocabulary

Examine context clues to come up with a definition for *paralyzed*. Write your definition below.

D **YOUR TURN**

Literary Focus

The angel’s miracles are funny. How are they **ironic**—the opposite of what you might expect miracles to be?

80 his wings a couple of times. That brought on a whirlwind of dust and made everyone panic. From then on people were careful not to annoy him. Most understood that he was a disaster waiting to happen. **A**

Father Gonzaga waited for a final judgment about the prisoner. But the mail from Rome showed no sign of hurrying. They had many questions. Did the prisoner have a belly button? Did his language have any connection with Aramaic?¹ Might he just be a Norwegian with wings? The letters might have come and gone forever, but a fortunate event put an end to the priest’s difficulties. **B**

90 A woman who had been changed into a spider for having disobeyed her parents arrived in town. The admission to see her was less than the admission to see the angel. And people could ask her all kinds of questions and examine her up and down. She was a tarantula the size of a ram with the head of a sad girl. In a heartbreaking way, she told her sad story. A sight like that, with such a fearful lesson, was sure to defeat an angel who barely looked at people. Besides, the angel’s miracles showed a certain strangeness. A blind man didn’t get back his sight but grew three new teeth. A paralyzed man didn’t walk but almost
100 won the lottery. **C** Such miracles had already ruined the angel’s reputation. Then the woman who had been changed into a spider finally crushed him completely. **D**

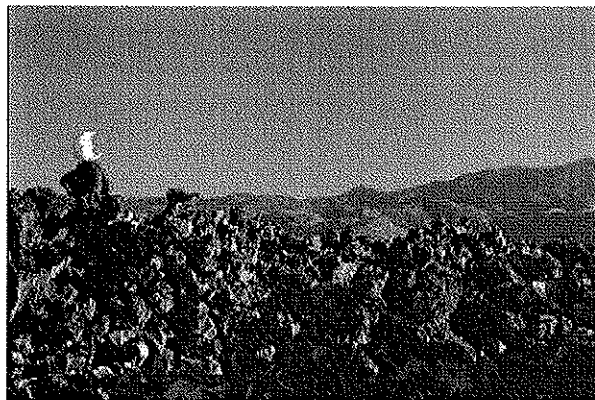
The owners of the house had no reason to be sad. With the money they saved they built a mansion with balconies and gardens and iron bars on the windows so that angels wouldn’t get in. Pelayo gave up his job, and Elisenda bought satin high-heeled shoes and silk dresses. The chicken coop was the only thing that didn’t receive any attention. If they washed it every so often, it was not out of respect to the angel. It was to drive away the terrible smell that still hung everywhere. When the child learned to walk, they were careful that he not get too close to the chicken
110 coop. But then they began to lose their fears and got used to the

1. Aramaic was a Middle Eastern language spoken by Jesus and his followers.

smell. Soon the child went inside the chicken coop to play. The angel was as standoffish with him as with other mortals, but he tolerated insults with the patience of a dog. **E** They both got chickenpox at the same time. The doctor who took care of the child couldn't resist the temptation to listen to the angel's heart. He found so much whistling there that it seemed impossible that he was alive. What surprised the doctor most, however, was the logic of his wings. They seemed so natural that he couldn't understand why other men didn't have them too.

120 By the time the child began school, the chicken coop had collapsed. The angel now dragged himself around like a dying man. He could scarcely eat. His eyes were so foggy that he bumped into things, and all his feathers were gone. Pelayo threw a blanket over him and let him sleep in the shed. Only then did they notice that he had a fever. They became alarmed, for they thought he was going to die. Not even the wise neighbor knew what to do with dead angels.

130 And yet he survived the winter, and seemed improved with the first sunny days. At the beginning of December some large, stiff feathers began to grow on his wings. He must have known the reason for the changes. He carefully made sure that no one noticed them. One morning a strong wind blew into the kitchen. Elisenda went to the window and saw the angel clumsily trying to fly. He managed to take off. Elisenda let out a sigh of relief when she saw him pass over the last houses. She kept watching until she couldn't see him. Then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot over the sea. **F** **G**



Art by Sergio Bustamante/Photograph 2003
Clint Clemens

E **HERE'S HOW**

Vocabulary

I am not sure what *standoffish* means. Based on how it is used, it sounds like it means the angel was unfriendly and not very interested in the people.

F **HERE'S HOW**

Vocabulary

I think an *annoyance* is something that is annoying and causes discomfort or trouble. It is ironic that Elisenda no longer sees the angel as annoying, since she had felt that way for the whole story.

G **YOUR TURN**

Literary Focus

Now that you have read the whole story, did you enjoy the author's use of **magic realism**? How did the author's use of elements of fantasy add to the story?
