

Follow the Trail: The Handsomest Drowned Man in
the World, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

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0.1 Cultural Studies Path

The treatment of the chimerical as ordinary throughout *The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World* is key to understanding the story and its layers of possible meaning. Marquez's deadpan delivery of fantastic situations forces the audience not to treat the work literally. Instead the reader can view the story as an allegory, and from from this direction can extrapolate its intended meaning.

The juxtaposition of the ordinary with the fantastic puts the reader off balance, and makes he or she more receptive to the themes that run through the story. This can be seen by the meaning the inhabitants of "Esteban's Village" project onto the canvas of the corpse, creating a god and belief system that is perhaps not very unfamiliar. This window into the birth of a religion is facilitated by the level of abstraction Magical Realism provides.

In addition to supplying an effective vehicle for conveyance of a story and its themes, magically realistic styling throws the work of Marquez into a Latin American cultural context. It emphasizes and highlights the struggles of Latin American and Caribbean literature to be taken seriously in the face of its own colorful and sometimes fantastic history, as will be revealed through this "Follow the Trail".

In order to appreciate the full use and implementation of Magical Realism, it is important to understand some of the social and cultural context which influenced its primary employer in literature, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. A brief biography of Marquez can be found at the following link.

Marquez was born on March 6th, 1927 to parents Gabriel Eligio Garcia and Luisa Santiaga Marquez. He lived most of his childhood in a small town in Colombia, called Aracataca. Aracataca, its inhabitants and their stories, left a lasting impression on Marquez during his formative years that would later transfer to his writing.

The small South American town of Aracataca provided an abundance of raw material for many of Gabriel Marquezs later works, including functioning as a model for the fictional village of Macondo. Macondo functions as the centerpiece for his influential and famous novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This village is often compared to William Faulkners Yoknapatawpha County, from which many of Faulkners characters hail. Both places are backdrops from which their respective authors can draw cultural mythology to use in their stories, and provide the framework of social context they often require.

This is a Google Maps view of Aracataca, Colombia, alongside several photos of the town. Its remote location seems to embody rural living in

South America.

Marquez was raised in Aracataca by his maternal grandparents, after his parents moved to the city of Barranquilla to pursue work. His grandparents had a tremendous influence on Marquez, both being somewhat larger than life characters. His grandfather Nicolas Marquez, was a colonel who served on the leftist side in the 1,000 Days War, a Colombian civil war fought between conservatives and liberals.

[Click here](#) for reading about the 1,000 Days war, and [here](#) for information about the infamous Banana Massacres.

The strong moral and political convictions of his grandfather carried special weight with Marquez, especially as the Colonel (as his grandfather was known) was a skilled storyteller. Marquez was enthralled by these tales, and absorbed many of the viewpoints of his grandfather while listening to his stories of the heroism, war, and politics of Columbia[1]

Marquez's official political affiliations have been sometimes difficult to pin down. In an interview with Playboy in 1983 , Marquez stated that he does not affiliate himself with any particular political party[2]. However Marquez's book *El Olor de la Guayaba* (the Smell of the Guava Tree), he states that both "...good novels should be a poetic translation of reality", and also "...that humanity's destiny in the near future is socialism"[3]. In addition, his friendship with Cuban dictator Fidel Castro has been well documented, especially in the book, *Fidel and Gabo*[4]. These convictions certainly had roots in his formative days at the household of his grandparents.

The influence his grandparents had on Marquez can be seen in both his writing style as well as its social content. His grandmother had a particular manner of describing fantastic events in a nonchalant and reasonable tone, even as she spoke about ghosts and spirits in the house[5]. This method of describing surreal situations as matters of fact is reflected strongly in Magical Realism, the signature style of Marquez.

Another of Marquez's short stories which makes good use of magical realism is "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings", which can be found [here](#). Like "Handsome Drowned Man", this story has religious themes and expresses them through use of Magical Realism.

Marquez also read "A Thousand and One Nights" in his youth (*Fidel and Gabo*, p6), a collection of fantasy stories from the Middle East. This extensive collection of often mystical stories may have also influenced his implementation of magical realism throughout his career, combined with his grandmothers deadpan treatment of the mystic as the mundane.

The stories of "A Thousand and One Nights" can be found [here](#).

After his formative years in Aracataca, Marquez went on to study law at the University of Bogota, Colombia. He and his future comrade Fidel Castro were both studying in Bogota at the same time when rioting broke out in the streets due to the assassination of the popular Colombian opposition leader Jorge Gaitan. During the turbulence, Marquez attempted to save his writing and typewriter from the apartment he occupied, while the city burned and a wave of violence surged through the streets[6]

Fidel Castro gives an account of these events in his *La Novela de sus Recuerdos* (The Book of Memories).

“while I stood there watching, perplexed, the people dragged the assassin through the streets, mobs set fire to shops, offices, movie theaters and apartment buildings. Some people were hauling around pianos and armoires on wheels. Someone shattered glass. Others defaced signs and marquees. The most vocal unleashed their frustration by shouting from the street corners, garden terraces, and smoky buildings. The man vented his fury by attacking a typewriter, beating it, and then to save himself the laborious effort, he threw it up into the air, and it smashed to bits when it hit the pavement. As I spoke, Gabo (Gabriel Garcia Marquez) listened, probably confirming to himself the certainty that in Latin America and the Caribbean, writers dont have to make very much up, because reality is more interesting than anything you could imagine, and maybe the challenge is to make that incredible reality believable. As I was finishing telling my story, I knew that Gabo had been there too, and the coincidence was very telling, maybe we had run through the same streets and witnessed the same harrowing events, which had made me just one more character in that suddenly roiling mob. I asked the question with my usual dispassionate curiosity: and what were you doing during the Bogotazo? And he, calmly, entrenched within his vibrant, provocative, exceptional imagination, answered simply, smiling, ingenious with his natural use of metaphor: Fidel, I was the man with the typewriter”.[7]

A full translation of this passage can be found [here](#).

This passage showcases the quick wit of Marquez, but also demonstrates that Castro has a grasp of something that is central to Marquez’s implementation of magical realism and its relation to Latin American culture as a whole. It is the use of magical realism as an unconventional tool to bring order to a disorderly reality[8] associated with the often incredible and impossible mythology which comprises the history of Latin America. This struggle to bring credibility and validity to Latin American literature is explored more thoroughly here, by Brian Conniff in his analysis of some of the themes in the genre using Marquezs *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

After becoming disinterested in law school, Marquez took up journalism.

While he was working for the paper *El Heraldo*, in Barranquilla Colombia, he became a member of the group of philosophers and writers known as the Barranquilla Group. Membership to this group of intellectuals had a great deal of influence on Marquez and his writings. Through the group, he was introduced to the works of such authors as Virginia Woolfe and William Faulkner, who left lasting impressions on him[9]. More information can be found here on the Barranquilla Group.

From these roots the writing of Marquez evolved, making him one of the most prominent Latin American writers of all time, often credited with a large part of the Latin American Boom in the 1960s-1970s. This Boom was an explosion of Latin American literary labors.

The pre-Boom atmosphere towards literature in Latin America was one of traditionalism and responsibility, which was stifling to some. Further reading on the literary world of Latin America before the Boom can be found here.

The effect Marquez had on the attitude of Latin America towards its literature, as well as the perception of the world towards that literature, led to his reception of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982. His work has addressed and made moot any question of credibility of Latin America in literature. Stories like “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” have had a lasting impact on readers throughout the world, and have helped to shape the identity of a culture and instill pride in its people.

0.2 Literary Techniques Path

For this parody I adhered to the same basic plot structure of Marquez’s story “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World”, in order to highlight the amplification of style that I attempted to use. His technique of setting the fantastic and the mundane next to each other without much fanfare is very unusual already, so in order to enter the realm of parody I had to inflate the level of magical realism used. Also, I wanted to highlight the projection of belief that the villagers use in the actual story to give life to the corpse which washes up on into their town. I wanted the zombie to be sympathetic, like the corpse of Esteban was, and for the villagers to identify with it somehow and begin to fill in his past. It was this meaning making that was the driving force for Marquez’s original tale, and I wanted it to be centrally featured in my parody. Additionally, I attempted to implement his non traditional way of conveying thoughts and conversations. He infrequently uses quotation marks in the story, preferring to save them for emphasis. He also uses italics

for expressing thoughts that are communicated among the villagers. Much of his dialog is contained directly in the text of the story, with no punctuation delimiters marking its boundaries.

I dont know that Marquez would be especially pleased if he read my version of his story today. Indeed, it is rather tasteless. However, in a clumsy way I attempted to grab the most elemental portions of his technique and style and apply them in an exaggerated manner, in order to better observe them. I was not able to do it as skillfully nor as subtly as Marquez did with his “Handsomest Drowned Man in the World”, but I was able to explore magical realism (albeit in a heavy handed way) and found the experience to be extremely informative, as well as entertaining.

0.3 The Hungriest Drowned Man in the World

A parody, certainly not a tale for children

The children who watched the shape rising from the sea thought first it was a mermaid. It was only as the figure dragged itself out of the water and clumsily shambled up the beach did they see that it walked on two legs, and lacked a tail of any sort. Instead they saw that it was a dead man, encrusted with starfish and seaweed. They also soon learned that he was hungry.

He had been chewing on the children all afternoon, rummaging through entrails and spitting out sand, when someone happened to see him and raised the alarm in the village. The men who came to clean up the mess and drive him away sighed in disappointment as they threw their torches and watched them sputter against his wet, rubbery dead skin.

Thwarted, the men went back into town, grumbling and cursing the fickle sea. Yes it provided them with sustenance, they said to one another, but it also provided storms and sharks and now a hungry drowned man who did not have the decency to stay in the ocean and eat the fish he found there.

That night while the fastest men went to rally support from nearby villages, the women and the rest stayed behind to watch over their homes. They set out all the things they could use to defend the town, as well as several enormous pigs they planned on using to distract the hungry drowned man with. The pigs, survivors of an earlier diversion plan last year involving a sea serpent which had pestered the fishing grounds, were nonplussed by this development and grunted discontentedly.

As they watched him shuffle up towards the line of mean wooden cottages, the townsfolk threw rocks and heavy things to slow his advance. As the objects bounced off of his face and body they took pieces of coral and sea-

weed with them. It was in this manner that the face of the hungry drowned man was slowly revealed. The hungry man possessed a plain and gentle visage, one that would be noticed but not remembered. His eyes were full of compassion, and one villager remarked that they seemed to be apologetic. His eyes seemed to say, *Pardon me, and I'm terribly sorry about the mess, but you see, I'm so very hungry, and your brains really are the the only way to fill me up...*

That sentiment was very sweet they said to each other, as they hacked at him with fishing implements. He was certainly polite. They supposed, as they fought with wood axes and long poles, that walking along the ocean floor would make anyone hungry. The only regrettable thing was his choice of food. He would have been quite welcome otherwise, fish stench and all.

What a nice young man,, remarked one of the ladies as she stabbed him with a trowel. Flecks of coral sprayed off, but there was not much effect other than that. In fact, he did appear to be young, or was at least at the time of his death. The sea and all of its salt were known to have preservative powers, so perhaps his true age was not reflected in his kind, round face. He had probably walked for ages on the sea floor, just waiting to stroll up a sandy spit and onto dry land. They looked at each other, more than a little ashamed. It was not a very warm welcome they were providing this hungry, weary traveller.

As the night wore on, the people of the village began to hypothesize about the mans origins. Between shifts of flinging flaming oil lamps at the inexorably (and apologetically) shambling forward corpse, they remarked that he had the face of someone who would be called Hambriento. The moniker stuck. They thought, maybe he fell from a ship or was washed from the rocky shore of his homeland, where his parents and family had raised him to effect impeccable manners, even in the face of such adversity.

Many people of the village expressed their wish to visit such a land of well mannered people, and did they not notice a sweet earthy smell of tilled loam beneath the briny stench of drowning at sea? Such a place as he had come from must have excellent farmland in addition to well mannered inhabitants, a veritable paradise. Assuredly it was the drowning, death and long walk which made the man so ravenous for grey matter, not the nature of his native lands cuisine. The remaining pigs looked at the drowned man and the villagers, who wore wistful expressions of regret as they fought. With disgusted oinks they snuck off into the night, never to be heard from again.

Day broke upon the village and the courteous battle waged there. Genteel Hambriento had polished off the contents of several craniums, but still

looked rather peckish. When the auxiliaries from the other towns arrived, they came upon the a scene which perplexed them to no end. They saw that with each stone thrown, the villagers lobbed an apology. The air was thick with rock and remorse.

There was much, *what is going on here?* and, *why the long faces?* as well as a few, *where did the pigs go?* This continued until someone pointed at the hungry, dead, drowned man and said, Its just Hambriento. Can we not cut him a little slack? It was then that they all noticed his sad, contrite face and hangdog look (or maybe his neck was just broken). Hearts touched, they united with renewed vigor and purpose, and drove him gently to the cliffs where a deep crack cut black, wet rock.

It was over this precipice and into the hole below they managed to maneuver their soggy guest. Once Hambriento was safely in the crevice, the people of the village decreed that from this day forth all of those amongst them who should need to be rid of a troublesome cousin or relation could dispose of them in a manner which would also benefit the hungry Hambriento.

This seemed to be a satisfactory arrangement, as Hambriento ate quite well from then on. And ever after, as ships carrying passengers from far off places would happen through the waters near the village, crew and guests alike would waken to the a charnel stench and rush to the deck. There the captain would stand, bedecked in crosses, garlic, and all manner of protective and holy symbols. He would point to a distant spot on the horizon and whisper there, that speck in the ocean, this is as close as we dare go, and yes, you do hear that low moaning *braaaainssss* sound. Indeed, that is Hambrientos village. Let us speak of it no more.

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