

A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings and Vocabulary

Section Objective:

- Make predictions
- Make inferences about character's motivations
- Synthesize ideas from different sources
- Connect literature and the news
- Distinguish fact from opinion
- Understand, analyze, and compare universal themes
- Compare themes across genres
- Understand word origins and word analogies
- Create semantic charts and understand multiple meaning words

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings"
(Paragraphs 1-8)

Introduction to the Reading

Although this story is rather short, we'll divide it almost in half for the two lessons; the first part ends with the phrase "cataclysm of repose."

Marquez grew up in the small town of Aracataca in Columbia, a tropical region between the mountains and the Caribbean Sea. His family lived with his grandparents until the age of eight, then they moved to the river port of Sucre. He studied law and became a journalist, spending many years in Rome, Paris, Mexico City, and Havana Cuba. His interest in literature came from the stories from the village that his grandfather Nicolas told him, and from reading American novelists (in French translation) when he was in Paris. For his extensive work as a novelist and short story writer, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982.

Gabriel García Márquez was the first Colombian and the fourth Latin American author to win a Nobel Prize for Literature.



Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Reading Skills

Since we've divided the story over two days, don't read ahead; rather, use the **power of your imagination** to **predict possible endings** for the story. List the various ways you envision the story continuing and ending.

The setting of the story occurs near the sea; although the sea itself is not described, the work that the couple must do implies the closeness. **List the details** that indicate their location near the sea. Because of the location, the couple believes that the old man is a castaway. **List the evidence** that leads them to that conclusion.

Both Pelayo and his wife Elisenda have different **motives** behind their action. **Explain** what motivates Pelayo first to seek advice from an "expert," then to reject that advice; **describe** his concerns and how he intended to help the creature, until the crowds arrived. When she sees the crowds, something different motivates Elisenda as she sees potential opportunities; **explain** these differences in motivation.

The crowds come to see the old man with various motivations, ranging from a having fun with him as a circus performer, others just curious, and a third group connecting him with healing, and a fourth with religious pilgrimage. List the **motivations** for each of these groups in coming to see the old man. Compare their reactions to the reactions of people in **news stories** who gather to view something new in their city or town.

Although we are reading a story, various characters in the story offer **opinions** or attempt to determine **facts**. For example, opinions come from three different groups: the simplest, the sterner minds, and the visionaries. List the **opinions** given by these three groups. In contrast to these opinions, others tried various tests to determine what the creature was. In particular, Father Gonzaga arranges various **tests to determine** if the old man is an angel. Explain these various ways others tried to **test the facts**.

Literary Skills

The story follows a common **universal theme of appearance vs. reality**. The old man is identified as an angel, yet his appearance does not seem to match that description. For this theme to work, the author assumes that you have some beginning association of meaning about angels. **List the associations** that come to mind when you hear the word *angel*; then **list the details** that seem to contradict that image.

People travel for various reasons, and making a *religious pilgrimage* is one of those reasons. In fact, taking a pilgrimage became the framework for an important early work in English Literature, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. **Examine** the reference to the pilgrims used in this story; **contrast** the approach of the pilgrims with those who come to see a visiting circus.

Vocabulary

Marquez uses a wide ranging vocabulary in the story. Although we are reading a translation from a Latin American author, we know that the author spent many years in foreign countries; such travel tends to broaden one's vocabulary. Additionally, words used in many European languages (such as English, French, and Spanish) trace their roots to common Greek and Latin sources. Examine the **Greek and Latin roots** in the words below to determine how they lead to a modern meaning for the words:

Conjecture – *com* (together) and *jacere* (throw)

Antiquarian – *antiquus* (former, ancient)

Hermetic – *Hermes*, god of science and art, especially for secret sciences, thus something “completely sealed” from common view

Cataclysm – *kata* (down) and *klysmos* (to wash)

Magnanimous — *magnus* (great) and *animus* (soul, spirit)

The description of the old man emphasizes his most unusual feature, his wings. **Examine the analogies** to various *birds* or to *flying animals* used to describe the creature, starting with *huge buzzard wings*. Discuss the appropriateness of the place where Pelayo holds him captive.

Although the neighbor woman (who knew everything about life and death) pronounced him an angel, his appearance seems quite different. Based on these two opposite viewpoints, **create two lists** of words used to describe aspects of the old man. In one column, start with the word *grandeur*, and list words with such high or important aspects used to describe the old man. In the other column, start with the words *ragpicker* and *pitiful* to list the negative words that describe him.

When Father Gonzaga tests the angel, he mentions writing a letter to his bishop, who will then write to his primate, who will then write to the Supreme Pontiff. The word *primate* often means a class of animals, a class that includes humans, apes, and monkeys. In this case, the word has a separate meaning. **Research the origin** of the word, then determine its specific meaning used in this particular context. Find another common word used to describe the *pontiff*.

In addition to the wings, the other dominant description is that he was “an old man, a very old man.” Use this opening phrase as the base line for a **semantic chart**. List the various **synonyms** used to describe the man, starting with *drenched great-grandfather*. Some of the words may not be familiar, so you may need to look up the meanings to recognize them as synonyms for *old*.

Specific vocabulary words: stupor, buzzard, castaway, conjectures, stud, impertinences, magnanimous, antiquarian, imposter, parasites, ingenuous, primates, unwary, prudence, sterile, sidereal bat, befuddled, sacramental, papal, penitents, proliferated, hermetic, cataclysm, repose