

“THE HANDSOMEST DROWNED MAN IN THE WORLD,”

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In this magical short story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the inhabitants of a village change after finding the body of a dead man on their shore. The villagers name this corpse Esteban, and through their empathy with it, realise the limitations of their own lives, and are thus inspired to improve themselves. Through Esteban, they find unity and become more than a village, a community. Marquez is one of the most important authors of the Magical Realism movement and this short story has all the hallmarks the genre. Magical realism concerns the overlap of the fantastical with reality; the occurrence of magic and myth in the day-to-day grind of living. The protagonists accept these elements into their lives, and the reader accepts them in the story through the use of a naturalistic tone.

At the beginning of the story, Marquez describes the village and, by extension, the villagers. The village has “twenty-odd wooden houses that had stone courtyards with no flowers”. The settlement itself is squeezed onto the tip of a “desertlike cape” upon which nothing grows and with so little land that the people must dispose of their dead by throwing them off the cliffs. This rocky, barren environment reflects the lives of the villagers. Their lives are dry, emotionally and spiritually barren and without real joy. Constricted, they seem to have lost sight of the concept of community. It feels as if the village is deeply asleep. It takes the arrival of Esteban to trigger their dreaming and ultimately, their awakening.

When the body washes up to the shore, none of the villagers are afraid or even disconcerted by his appearance. The children play with him with a naïvety and curiosity we might expect in those who do not yet live under the shadow of impending death. Their parents however, despite their age, are prepared to deal with the unusual.

This acceptance of the strange, the magical, is typical of magical realism and is so written by Marquez that we accept their attitude without question.

The women undergo the first change, the first awakening, while preparing the corpse for burial. Cleaning away the layers of debris, they are peeling back the layers of Esteban himself to reveal “the kind of man he was”. When they perceive his beauty, their immediate reaction is an awakening of dormant sexual feelings. At first, they cannot even process what they see as there is “no room for him in their imagination”. Esteban is the epitome of male virility and masculinity: he leaves them “breathless.” Seeing Esteban sparks their imaginations. They imagine Esteban living in their village, in a large house, calling forth the fish from the sea and calling forth the springs from among the rocks. He becomes to them a figure of magic, a god from the sea. He makes them end up “dismissing [their men] deep in their hearts as the weakest, meanest and most useless creatures on earth” and realising that they have long accepted far less than they should. While this would seem to be a negative effect on the villagers, in fact, it rather inspires them to expect more from their husbands. The dreams Esteban kindled, “the maze of fantasy” are interrupted only by the shift from passion to compassion.

Gazing upon the body, they begin the process of naming and understanding him. I think it is no coincidence that they name him Esteban, for St Stephen was the first Christian martyr and had a special concern for the needy. The need is mutual. While Esteban overtly needs them to prepare him for his funeral, the villagers need him more. He has sacrificed himself, martyred himself for their greater need.

They do not realise this however, and begin to pity the giant body, especially after they realise that he will have to be dragged to the cliffs because of his huge size. They imagine him being scorned for his size and cracking his head on the beams of houses too big to contain him. But in their dreamings, they know that despite his unhappiness, he did not react badly or with anything other than humility. He is better than they, but sad, and it evokes their pity. He is still special however: they even attribute supernatural reasons for his ill-made clothes disintegrating. His shirt buttons popped because of the “strength of his heart”. Even in death, his heart, the center of the loving compassion, is still strong enough to rip thread. In imagining and understanding Esteban, they reawaken their own compassion as the “first furrows of tears opened in their hearts”. His story reflects their own with his potential and pain; his loneliness reflects their own loneliness.

The men at first are not overwhelmed by Esteban. They are more concerned with the practicalities involved in trying to identify him and then with preparing to carry him to the cliffs. They do not understand the women’s fascination with Esteban and they are even a little envious of the attention they are lavishing upon him. They feel “mistrust in their livers” at this attention and it is only when they see the face of Esteban do they understand their wives’ concerns. Esteban is not a threat to them. They “see he was ashamed” at the trouble he has put them to. Even though they imagine Esteban describing his body as “[a] filthy piece of cold meat”, they are made to realise that the body is not important, truth, sincerity is. They are made to regret their unnecessary jealousy and to realise that as long as they have life, they should appreciate it. Esteban is perfect, the ideal of manhood, he is truth and sincerity beyond the mortal body, and as he affected the women to raise their expectations of life, he similarly compels the men to raise their own lives above the ordinary and petty.

Risen out of their sleep by Esteban, the people of the village begin to enrich the village to please the memory Esteban. In doing so, they really enrich their own lives. Rather than a mere village, they are united by love to truly become a community as “through him all the inhabitants of

the village became kinsmen”. Contemplating the return of Esteban “he could come back if he wished and whenever they wished” fires their determination to change. Where before there was barren stone, they are inspired to toil to dig springs and enable the flowering of roses; where there was pettiness, jealousy and spiritual blight, there is now the possibility of happiness and fulfilment. All the houses they build in the future are built for Esteban, more expansive than they could have been before. How could they be constrained by the “narrowness of their dreams” when they had known Esteban, the ideal?

It might at first appear peculiar that this profound change in the lives of the villagers comes, as it does, from the body of a dead stranger. But the magical nature of Esteban is signalled through the story. His emergence from the sea mirrors similar tales in South American and Greek myth. Although he has come from far away, it could be said that because he is a stranger to all the villages, to all the people around, that he has been born from the sea, that he has not existed before and exists only to redeem the villagers. Although we might also interpret the irony of a dead man bringing life as representative of the cycle of nature and life, it is hard also to ignore the analogy with another man, larger than life. In Christian mythology, Christ was born for others, and in his death brought renewed life and redemption. If Esteban is Christ, then perhaps the village is the world: as the villagers are redeemed by their interaction with him, so perhaps can the world be redeemed. But ultimately, Esteban does not force the change, but is rather a catalyst. The villagers needed to find the ability to change within themselves.

“The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” is a simple story, told in a naturalistic style but with considerable symbolic value. As the village is awoken from its sleep by this agent of change, so too can we all. If we look upon others with passion, with compassion, without jealousy; if we set our sights higher, we too can live in the village of roses, the world alive with possibility.