



## **Existential Authenticity in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" and "Bon Voyage, Mr. President"**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper analyses two short stories, "Bon Voyage, Mr. President" and "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, using Heidegger's concept of authenticity. The paper argues that the characters in both stories, "Bon Voyage, Mr. President" and "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings", are driven by their old age and a heightened understanding of mortality. This understanding of death leads to a sense of authenticity as the characters are forced to confront the limitations of their existence and re-evaluate their priorities. Through an analysis of key scenes and character development, the paper demonstrates how the concept of authenticity is central to understanding these stories and the characters within them. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Heidegger's ideas provide a useful lens through which to interpret Marquez's work, highlighting the importance of authenticity in the human experience.

**Keywords: Authenticity, Death, Old Age, and Existentialism.**

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Existentialism is a philosophical school of thought that emerged in the twentieth century, primarily in response to the perceived crisis of meaning and purpose in human existence. At its core, existentialism emphasizes individual freedom, responsibility, and the subjective experience of existence. Existentialists argue that human beings are defined by their actions and choices, rather than by predetermined traits or external forces. They believe that

individuals have the capacity to create their own meaning and purpose in life through personal engagement and authentic living. Existentialism explores the profound questions of human existence, such as the nature of freedom, the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe, and the experience of anxiety and despair. Ultimately, existentialism invites individuals to confront the inherent uncertainties and complexities of existence and to embrace the challenge of living authentically in a world that lacks inherent meaning. Jean-Paul Sartre, an Existentialist, defines Existentialism thus: "Existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy. However, all these revolts have in common a stress on the individual and his subjectivity, and on the concrete conditions of his existence; they are all therefore opposed to any doctrine that sees in man a detached spirit or a pure object of contemplation" (315).

Authenticity is a central concept in existential philosophy. It refers to the idea that individuals have the capacity to create their own meaning and purpose in life, and that they should strive to live in accordance with their own values and beliefs, rather than conforming to external expectations or societal norms. In this sense, authenticity is closely related to the concept of freedom, as it suggests that individuals are free to choose their own path in life and to create their own values and goals. Steven Crowell explains, "Authenticity is one of the central concepts of existentialism. It refers to the idea that individuals should strive to be true to themselves and their own values, rather than conforming to societal norms or expectations" (1).

Authenticity is often contrasted with inauthenticity, which refers to a state of being in which individuals fail to live in accordance with their own values and beliefs. Inauthenticity can arise when individuals conform to external expectations or societal norms, rather than expressing their true selves. This can lead to feelings of alienation, emptiness, and despair, as individuals feel disconnected from their own inner truth and sense of purpose. Sebastian Gardner, in his essay, "Existentialism", points out, "The inauthentic being, in contrast, is one who conforms to the expectations of others or society, denying their own individuality and uniqueness in the process" (1). For existentialists, authenticity is a key component of a meaningful and fulfilling life. They argue that individuals who live authentically are more likely to experience a sense of purpose and fulfillment, as they are living in accordance with their own values and beliefs. However, living authentically can also be difficult, as it requires individuals to confront the uncertainties and complexities of existence and to take responsibility for their own lives.

In "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," the concept of authenticity is exhibited through the character of the old man himself. When the old man first arrives in the village, he is initially viewed with suspicion and fear, as the villagers do not understand his unusual appearance and abilities. However, the old man remains true to himself and his own nature, refusing to conform to the expectations or desires of others. Robert C. Solomon, in his article, "Existentialism", asserts, "Authenticity means being true to oneself" (16).

Sartre argues, "To be authentic is to be at once true to oneself and true to one's world. It is the condition of one's authenticity that one has to accept one's own reality. One must

accept one's dignity as a person and one's responsibility for one's actions" (Sartre, *Being* 395). Despite the villagers' attempts to exploit the old man for profit or entertainment, he maintains his own sense of dignity and purpose. He does not seek to please others or to conform to their expectations but instead remains true to his own values and beliefs. In this sense, the old man can be seen as a model of authenticity, as he embodies the existentialist ideal of living in accordance with one's own inner truth. Furthermore, the story can be interpreted as a critique of the inauthenticity of the villagers, who are more concerned with exploiting the old man for their own gain than with understanding or respecting him as an individual. By contrast, the old man's authenticity and refusal to conform to societal expectations serves as a reminder of the importance of individual freedom and self-expression in the face of social conformity and pressure.

In their book chapter, "The Psychology of Authenticity: Potential Benefits and Costs of Being Yourself," Hill and Williams explore the concept of authenticity and its implications on individual well-being. The authors define authenticity as "the degree to which one is being true to one's own personality, spirit, or character, despite external pressures or societal norms" (Hill 358). This definition suggests that authenticity involves a sense of personal agency and independence, as one strives to maintain their own sense of self despite external influences. However, the authors also note that authenticity can have both positive and negative consequences for individual well-being. On one hand, living authentically can lead to greater psychological health and a stronger sense of purpose and meaning in life. On the other hand, it can also be associated with social rejection and isolation, particularly when one's authentic self contradicts societal norms or expectations.

Firstly, his calm and dignified demeanor in the face of the villagers' hostility and suspicion suggests that he is comfortable with who he is and does not feel the need to change or adapt to the expectations of others. This is a key characteristic of authenticity, as individuals who are true to themselves are not swayed by external pressures or societal norms. Secondly, the old man's disinterest in performing tricks or entertaining the villagers demonstrates that he is not motivated by external rewards or validation. Instead, he is content to simply exist and observe the world around him. This indicates that he is driven by his own inner sense of purpose, rather than by external factors.

When the villagers first discover the old man, they assume that he must be a fallen angel or some other supernatural being. However, the old man never confirms or denies their assumptions. Instead, he simply allows the villagers to project their own beliefs and desires onto him, without compromising his own identity or beliefs. Throughout the story, the old man remains true to his own unique perspective and worldview. For example, when he observes the priest delivering a sermon on the evils of sin, he fails to understand the concept, as it does not align with his own experiences and beliefs. This demonstrates the old man's authenticity, as he is not swayed by external dogma or ideology, but instead relies on his own inner sense of truth.

When the old man is put on display for the villagers' entertainment, he refuses to perform for them. This demonstrates his refusal to compromise his own values and beliefs for

the sake of external validation or reward. Despite the fact that the villagers initially view him as a spectacle and a curiosity, the old man refuses to engage in any kind of self-promotion or self-aggrandizement. He remains humble and unassuming, suggesting that he is not motivated by ego or external validation, but by his own inner sense of purpose. When the old man falls ill, he does not attempt to hide or suppress his suffering. Instead, he allows himself to be vulnerable and to rely on the kindness of others for help and support. This demonstrates his authenticity and his willingness to be true to his own emotional experiences, rather than to hide or suppress them in order to conform to societal expectations. Despite the fact that the villagers try to impose their own beliefs and desires onto him, the old man remains true to his own unique perspective and identity. He never attempts to conform to their expectations or to compromise his own values and beliefs, suggesting that he is committed to living in accordance with his own inner truth.

Throughout "Bon Voyage, Mr. President," the character of the president demonstrates a growing sense of authenticity as he comes to terms with the consequences of his actions and begins to search for a new sense of identity and purpose. One example of the president's authenticity can be seen in his interactions with the other inhabitants of the island. Despite his former position of power, the president is forced to adjust to a life of relative obscurity and anonymity on the island. In this new context, he is forced to confront his own vulnerabilities and limitations, which serves as a catalyst for his growing self-awareness and authenticity. Furthermore, the president's willingness to acknowledge his past mistakes and take responsibility for his actions is another indication of his authenticity. When the president meets with his former mistress, he admits that he was wrong to have neglected her and their child, demonstrating a newfound sense of humility and self-awareness. In this scene, the president is able to acknowledge his own faults and take responsibility for his actions, which is a key characteristic of authentic individuals.

The president's decision to leave the island and return to his home country can also be seen as an indication of his authenticity. Despite the potential dangers that await him there, the president recognizes that his place is with his people, and that his return is necessary to right the wrongs of his past. In this way, the president's decision to return to his home country can be seen as a reflection of his authentic desire to make amends and to pursue a greater sense of purpose and meaning. The character of the president in "Bon Voyage, Mr. President" demonstrates a growing sense of authenticity and self-awareness as he confronts the consequences of his past actions and searches for a new sense of identity and purpose. Through his interactions with other characters and his willingness to take responsibility for his mistakes, the president exhibits key characteristics of authentic individuals, making his journey a compelling exploration of the human experience.

There are several incidents in the story that suggest the president is authentic. For example, when he first arrives on the island, he insists on meeting with the island's residents to listen to their concerns and grievances, showing that he genuinely cares about their well-being. Additionally, he demonstrates a willingness to learn and adapt to his new surroundings, even going so far as to help with the manual labor required to build his new home. Furthermore, as the story progresses, we see the president questioning his former way

of life and recognizing the harm that his obsession with power has caused to his personal life. He expresses remorse for the way he treated his family and loved ones and begins to take steps to make amends. This suggests that the president is committed to living an authentic life, one that is based on self-awareness and a willingness to take responsibility for his actions.

Finally, the fact that the president chooses to remain on the island and live a simple life, even after he is given the opportunity to return to his former position of power, is a powerful testament to his authenticity. By rejecting the trappings of wealth and influence and choosing to live a life of humility and simplicity, the president shows that he is committed to living a life that is true to his values and beliefs, even if it means sacrificing his former status and power. Authenticity, as defined by Martin Heidegger, is "the resolute projection of the self upon its ownmost potentiality-for-being" (33). In other words, authenticity is the act of choosing to live in accordance with one's own values and beliefs, rather than conforming to the expectations of others. The president in "Bon Voyage, Mr. President" can be seen as an authentic figure because he chooses to face his mortality and exile with courage and dignity. He does not try to hide from his fears or to deny his situation. Instead, he accepts his fate and chooses to live the rest of his life to the fullest.

The president's authenticity is also evident in his relationship with his doctor. The doctor is a symbol of the medical establishment, which represents the values of conformity and order. The president, however, refuses to conform to the doctor's expectations. He refuses to undergo surgery, even though it is the only way to save his life. Instead, he chooses to die on his own terms. The president faces his mortality with courage and dignity. When the president learns that he is dying, he does not despair. Instead, he accepts his fate and chooses to live the rest of his life to the fullest. He tells his doctor, "I have no fear of death. I have lived a long and full life, and I am ready to go" (Marquez 113). The president's courage and dignity in the face of death are a testament to his authenticity. He does not try to hide from his fears or to deny his situation. Instead, he faces his mortality head-on and chooses to live the rest of his life with courage and dignity. The president refuses to conform to the expectations of others. The president is not afraid to be different. He does not conform to the expectations of others. He chooses to live his life according to his own values. For example, the president refuses to undergo surgery, even though it is the only way to save his life. He tells his doctor, "I am not afraid of death. I am afraid of living like a cripple" (Marquez 113). The president's refusal to conform to the expectations of others is a testament to his authenticity. He does not let the expectations of others dictate his life. He chooses to live his life according to his own values, even if it means that he will die sooner.

The president is not afraid to take risks. The president knows that there is no guarantee of success, but he is willing to take risks in order to live a meaningful life. For example, the president decides to travel to Geneva for medical treatment, even though he knows that it is a long shot. He tells his doctor, "I have nothing to lose. I am willing to try anything" (Marquez 112). The president's willingness to take risks is a testament to his authenticity. He knows that there is no guarantee of success, but he is willing to take risks in order to live a meaningful life.

In conclusion, this research paper has explored the short stories "Bon Voyage, Mr. President" and "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" by Gabriel García Márquez through the lens of Heidegger's concept of authenticity. The analysis has revealed that the characters in both stories, the old man and the president, experience a heightened sense of mortality and the limitations of their existence due to their old age. This understanding of death leads them to confront their authentic selves and re-evaluate their priorities.

Through a careful examination of key scenes and character development, it has become evident that authenticity plays a crucial role in understanding these stories and the characters within them. The old man and the president are both driven to confront their mortality and grapple with their true selves, embracing their authenticity in the face of their inevitable demise. Heidegger's ideas on authenticity have provided a valuable framework for interpreting Márquez's work. By shedding light on the importance of confronting existential questions and embracing one's true nature, Heidegger's concepts have deepened our understanding of the human experience as depicted in these stories.

Generally, this research paper highlights the significance of authenticity as a central theme in Márquez's writing. The characters' journeys towards self-discovery and their struggles with mortality resonate with readers on a fundamental level. Through their experiences, we are reminded of the universal human desire to live authentically, even in the face of life's uncertainties and the inevitability of death. By applying Heidegger's concept of authenticity to the analysis of these stories, we gain a richer understanding of Márquez's exploration of the human condition. The paper concludes that authenticity serves as a guiding principle, urging individuals to embrace their true selves and find meaning and purpose in their limited time on Earth.

Thus, this research paper underscores the enduring relevance of Heidegger's ideas and demonstrates how they enrich our interpretation of Márquez's work. It encourages further exploration of the themes of authenticity and mortality in literature and invites readers to reflect on their journeys towards authenticity and the meaning they derive from their existence.

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