

Magical Realism: Fascinating world of evolving imagery

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Abstract

A literary mode rather than a distinguishable genre, magical realism is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a so-called rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. It aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites; for instance, it challenges binary oppositions like life and death and the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present. According to Angel Flores, magical realism involves the fusion of the real and the fantastic, or as he claims, “an amalgamation of realism and fantasy.” The presence of the supernatural in magical realism is often connected to the primeval or magical “native” mentality, which exists in opposition to European rationality. According to Ray Verzasconi, as well as other critics, magical realism is “an expression of the New World reality which at once combines the rational elements of the European super-civilization, and the irrational elements of a primitive America.” Gonzalez Echchevarria believes that magical realism offers a world view that is not based on natural or physical laws nor objective reality. However, the fictional world is not separated from reality either.

Keywords: Touch, letters, Keats, sociability, solitude, beauty, temperature, interassimilation.

Introduction

The term “magical realism” was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art critic, who considered magical realism an art category. To him, it was a way of representing and responding to reality and pictorially depicting the enigmas of reality. In Latin America in the 1940s, magical realism was a way to express the realistic American mentality and create an autonomous style of literature. Yet, magical realism is not confined to Latin American literature alone, for many Latin American writers have influenced writers around the world, such as Indian writer Salman Rushdie and Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri.

Hybridity: Magical realists incorporate many techniques that have been linked to post-colonialism, with hybridity being a primary feature. Specifically, magical realism is illustrated in the inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural and Western and indigenous. The plots of magical realist works involve issues of borders, mixing, and change. Authors establish these plots to reveal a crucial purpose of magical realism: a more deep and true reality than conventional realist techniques would illustrate.

Irony Regarding Author's Perspective: The writer must have ironic distance from the magical world view for the realism not to be compromised. Simultaneously, the writer must strongly respect the magic, or else the magic dissolves into simple folk belief or complete fantasy, split from the real instead of synchronized with it. The term "magic" relates to the fact that the point of view that the text depicts explicitly is not adopted according to the implied world view of the author. As Echevarria notes, the act of distancing oneself from the beliefs held by a certain social group makes it impossible to be thought of as a representative of that society.

Authorial Reticence: Authorial reticence refers to the lack of clear opinions about the accuracy of events and the credibility of the world views expressed by the characters in the text. This technique promotes acceptance in magical realism. In magical realism, the simple act of explaining the supernatural would eradicate its position of equality regarding a person's conventional view of reality. Because it would then be less valid, the supernatural world would be discarded as false testimony.

Objective:

This paper intends to study magic realism as a tool for creativity and its continuing relevance to world of literature.

Origins

The term "magical realism" was first used by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a new style of European painting. These paintings, unlike Surrealist art works, were not interested in the fantastic. They portrayed vacant European cityscapes, creating a sense of mystery through stylised details and a sterile atmosphere. Such paintings are now more commonly known by other terms such as Hyperrealism or Metaphysical Painting. Magical realism, meanwhile, has become synonymous with literature. The label was first used in Latin America to describe the worldly and metaphysical fantasy of writers such as the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges and the European Franz Kafka. It's often said that the works of Colombian novelist and short-story writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez are quintessential examples of "magic realism": fiction that integrates elements of fantasy into otherwise realistic settings. In his 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which ambles through a century in the lives of one family in the enchanted Latin American hamlet of Macondo, magic carpets fly, ghosts haunt villagers, and trickles of blood from a killing climb stairs and turn corners to find the victim's mother in her kitchen. But the term came to be increasingly associated with a very different kind of writing – one tied to colonial histories and postcolonial politics. *Men of Maize* by the Guatemalan Nobel Laureate Miguel Angel Asturias, and *The Kingdom of This World* by the French-Cuban Alejo Carpentier, both published in 1949, are key novels in this nationalistic tradition. They represent the historical oppression of Indigenous and African people in Latin America by colonial forces, as well as portraying their mythological beliefs. These texts use magic to proclaim an independent identity for Latin America, although later magical realist novels typically use magic in more ironic or satirical ways.

Writing in the journal *Critical Inquiry* in 1986, the critic Fredric Jameson described the term itself as having a “strange seductiveness”. Certainly magical realist literature has proven appealing. The 1967 publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* – often referred to as the archetypal magic realist text – by the Colombian novelist and Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez triggered a “boom” in Latin American literature. By the 1980s, the book’s success had prompted a spate of magical realist novels internationally. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) won the 1981 Booker Prize and went on to be adapted for stage and screen. The *House of the Spirits* (1982), by the Chilean writer Isabel Allende, was a critically acclaimed bestseller and made into a film starring Meryl Streep. Beloved by Toni Morrison. Wikimedia Commons Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) – about the ex-slave living with her murdered child – won a Pulitzer Prize and was made into a film by Oprah Winfrey. Such critical and commercial success continued into the 1990s. Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991) – about the Nigerian abiku or spirit child – won the Booker Prize and inspired the lyrics to Radiohead’s *Street Spirit (Fade Out)*. Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) won the Booker too, launching the Indian writer’s career as a public intellectual. In Australia, Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* (1991) won the Miles Franklin Award, was made into a television miniseries as well as a play, and is still regularly nominated as a favourite Australian novel in national polls. As this list suggests, magical realist novels tend to come from the world’s geo-political margins. As such, they can be seen as offering readers a window into exotic worlds in which the marvellous might really exist. Isabel Allende in 2008. Wikimedia Commons Indeed, the authors of magical realist texts have often claimed that the magic in their books is real. García Márquez, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, claimed that the challenge for Latin American writers was to make their “outsized” world believable. It can come as a surprise to readers, then, that magical realist novels are fundamentally historical and political texts. It can also be surprising to discover that they are heavily ironic.

Fantasy

Prominent English-language fantasy writers have said that "magic realism" is only another name for fantasy fiction. Gene Wolfe said, "magic realism is fantasy written by people who speak Spanish," and Terry Pratchett said magic realism "is like a polite way of saying you write fantasy."

However, Amaryll Beatrice Chanady distinguishes magical realist literature from fantasy literature ("the fantastic") based on differences between three shared dimensions: the use of antinomy (the simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes), the inclusion of events that cannot be integrated into a logical framework, and the use of authorial reticence. In fantasy, the presence of the supernatural code is perceived as problematic, something that draws special attention—where in magical realism, the presence of the supernatural is accepted. In fantasy, authorial reticence creates a disturbing effect on the reader, it works to integrate the supernatural into the natural framework in magical realism. This integration is made possible in magical realism as the author presents the supernatural as being equally valid to the natural. There is no hierarchy between the two codes. The ghost of Melquíades in Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or the baby ghost in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* who visit or haunt the inhabitants of their previous residence are both presented by the narrator as ordinary occurrences; the reader, therefore, accepts the marvelous as normal and common.

To Dr. Clark Zlotchew, the differentiating factor between the fantastic and magical realism is that in fantastic literature, such as Kafka's story "The Metamorphosis," there is a hesitation experienced by the protagonist, implied author or reader in deciding whether to attribute natural or supernatural causes to an unsettling event, or between rational or irrational explanations. Fantastic literature has also been defined as a piece of narrative in which there is a constant faltering between belief and non-belief in the supernatural or extraordinary event.

In Leal's view, magical realism has a tropical (or llano [plains] or desert) context, but he says that the fiction of Julio Cortázar contains only "the fantastic," not magical realism. In Leal's view, "In fantastic literature—in Borges, for example—the writer creates new worlds, perhaps new planets. By contrast, writers like García Márquez, who use magical realism, don't create new worlds, but suggest the magical in our world." Even Cortázar's short story "Casa Tomada," about a brother and sister whose house is taken over by someone or something mysterious, for Leal is an example of the fantastic and not magical realism.

Realism

Realism is an attempt to create a depiction of actual life; a novel does not simply rely on what it presents but how it presents it. In this way, a realist narrative acts as framework by which the reader constructs a world using the raw materials of life. Understanding both realism and magical realism within the realm of a narrative mode is key to understanding both terms. Magical realism "...relies upon the presentation of real, imagined or magical elements as if they were real. It relies upon realism, but only so that it can stretch what is acceptable as real to its limits." As a simple point of comparison, Roh's differentiation between expressionism and post-expressionism as described in German Art in the 20th Century, may be applied to magic realism and realism. Realism pertains to the terms "history," "mimetic," "familiarization," "empiricism/logic," "narration," "closure-ridden/reductive naturalism," and "rationalization/cause and effect." On the other hand, magic realism encompasses the terms "myth/legend," "fantastic/supplementation," "defamiliarization," "mysticism/magic," "meta-narration," "open-ended/expansive romanticism," and "imagination/negative capability."

Surrealism

Surrealism is often confused with magical realism as they both explore illogical or non-realist aspects of humanity and existence. There is a strong historical connection between Franz Roh's concept of magic realism and surrealism, as well as the resulting influence on Carpentier's marvelous reality; however, important differences remain. Surrealism "is most distanced from magical realism [in that] the aspects that it explores are associated not with material reality but with the imagination and the mind, and in particular it attempts to express the 'inner life' and psychology of humans through art." It seeks to express the sub-conscious, unconscious, the repressed and inexpressible. Magical realism, on the other hand, rarely presents the extraordinary in the form of a dream or a psychological experience. "To do so," Bowers writes, "takes the magic of recognizable material reality and places it into the little understood world of the

Themes

The idea of terror overwhelms the possibility of rejuvenation in magical realism. Several prominent authoritarian figures, such as soldiers, police, and sadists all have the power to torture and kill. Time is another conspicuous theme, which is frequently displayed as cyclical instead of linear. What happens once is destined to happen again. Characters rarely, if ever, realize the promise of a better life. As a result, irony and paradox stay rooted in recurring social and political aspirations. Another particularly complex theme in magical realism is the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque is carnival's reflection in literature. The concept of carnival celebrates the body, the senses, and the relations between humans. "Carnival" refers to cultural manifestations that take place in different related forms in North and South America, Europe, and the Caribbean, often including particular language and dress, as well as the presence of a madman, fool, or clown. In addition, people organize and participate in dance, music, or theater. Latin American magical realists, for instance, explore the bright life-affirming side of the carnivalesque. The reality of revolution, and continual political upheaval in certain parts of the world, also relates to magical realism. Specifically, South America is characterized by the endless struggle for a political ideal.

"Magical realism" has become a debased term. When it first came into use to describe the work of certain Latin American writers, and then a small number of writers from many places in the world, it had a specific meaning that made it useful for critics. If someone made a list of recent magical realist works, there were certain characteristics that works on the list would share. The term also pointed to a particular array of techniques that writers could put to specialized use. Now the words have been applied so haphazardly that to call a work "magical realism" doesn't convey a very clear sense of what the work will be like. If a magazine editor these days asks for contributions that are magical realism, what she's really saying is that she wants contemporary fantasy written to a high literary standard---fantasy that readers who "don't read escapist literature" will happily read. It's a marketing label and an attempt to carve out a part of the prestige readership for speculative works. I don't object to using labels to make readers more comfortable, to draw them to work that they might otherwise unfairly dismiss. But by over-using the term, we've obscured a distinctive branch of literature. More importantly from my perspective, we've made it harder for new writers to discover the tools of magical realism as a distinct set allowing them to create work that portrays particular ways of looking at the world.

Magical realism : Objectivity

If writers read a hundred works labeled "magical realism," they will encounter such a hodgepodge that they may not recognize the minority of such works that are doing something different, something those writers may want to try themselves. So what is magical realism? It is, first of all, a branch of serious fiction, which is to say, it is not escapist. Let me be clear: I like escapist fiction, and some of what I write is escapism. I'm with C.S. Lewis when he observes that the only person who opposes escape is, by definition, a jailer. Entertainment, release, fun...these are all good reasons to read and to write. But serious fiction's task is not escape, but engagement. Serious fiction helps us to name our world and see our place in it. It conveys or explores truth. Any genre of fiction can get at truths, of course. Some science

fiction and fantasy do so, and are serious fiction. Some SF and fantasy are escapist. But magical realism is always serious, never escapist, because it is trying to convey the reality of one or several worldviews that actually exist, or have existed. Magical realism is a kind of realism, but one different from the realism that most of our culture now experiences. Science fiction and fantasy are always speculative. They are always positing that some aspect of objective reality were different. What if vampires were real? What if we could travel faster than light? Magical realism is not speculative and does not conduct thought experiments. Instead, it tells its stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality from the one we call objective. If there is a ghost in a story of magical realism, the ghost is not a fantasy element but a manifestation of the reality of people who believe in and have "real" experiences of ghosts. Magical realist fiction depicts the real world of people whose reality is different from ours. It's not a thought experiment. It's not speculation. Magical realism endeavors to show us the world through other eyes. When it works, as I think it does very well in, say, Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*, some readers will inhabit this other reality so thoroughly that the "unreal" elements of the story, such as witches, will seem frighteningly real long after the book is finished.

Examples of Magical Realism in the works of Marquez and Okri

Gabriel García Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude, 1967

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), Marquez incorporates many supernatural motifs like levitation and flying carpets. Marquez also creates, in the tradition of the grotesque carnival and supernatural realism, the character of Melquiades, who is an overweight gypsy with supernatural powers. His novel contains powerful images of paradoxical bodily disgust and celebration, ambivalent celebration and laughter, and the reconstruction of human shapes, all of which exemplify characteristics of magical realism. In this novel and others, Marquez utilizes ironic distance. Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) also incorporates several characteristics of magical realism. Specifically, examples of hybridity occur often. For instance, after the character Azaro wrongly believes a figure by the river to be the ferryman of the dead, he learns that she is in fact a hybrid woman, young in body but "with an old woman's face." The illustration is also a hybrid of ancient ritual and custom. Also, *The Famished Road* depicts the theme of political struggle and political corruption. The character Madame Koto is implied in the corruption of modern Nigerian politics. She encapsulates the new power herself, rather than its transgression, foreshadowing the country's civil war to come. Okri uses ironic distance in this novel as well.

LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE:MAGICAL REALISM

Up until the 1960's, Latin American literature was not very well-known. It certainly was not highly publicized or taught in many schools. In 1910, the Mexican Revolution "sharpened" [the] social awareness of nearly all [Hispanic] writers" resulting in the so-called "Boom" of Latin American literature (Englekirk 135). There is still some debate on the exact definition of what the Boom is and when it occurred, but most scholars agree that it occurred around the time of the Mexican Revolution and was caused by it. In this time of political upheaval, the purpose of art became to serve as a medium for "serious thought" and analysis and narratives of "purposeful action" (EngleKirk 135). Literature became,

among other things, used as a form of “artistic escape”, a violent and grotesque presentation of the misery of life, a means of targeting social problems and fascinated with the world of imagination (Englekirk 135). The use of myth, fantasy, humor and parody – heron referred to as magical realism – served as a shield between the writer and the dread-filled and hopeless reality. The literature written during this time, in this style, was broadly called modern or post modern literature (not to be confused with the art or literature of the same name from other countries). More specifically, literature expressing impossible and extraordinary events in an otherwise realistic narrative was termed “magical realism”. It is a term first used by German art critic Franz Roh, who compared the literary works to the magic realistic artwork of the time. There is controversy regarding the term magical realism because it is seen as a too-limiting term imposed on a post-colonial nation by its previous rulers. Some also feel that what is considered ‘magic’ by the outside Anglo-American or “western” critic is not viewed the same way by the native writers.

This way of writing is based on the “rational view of reality” versus the “acceptance of the supernatural” (Moore). Magical realism is usually associated with contemporary Latin American fiction but it is also seen in the writings of authors from different countries (Lodge 114). The unexplained fantasy in these works is used to depict “historical convulsions and ... wrenching personal upheavals” that can not be otherwise described adequately in a realistic fashion (Lodge 114). One of the best known magical realism novels is Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The best known magical realism short story author however, is Jorge Luis Borges. Although Latin American literature was predominantly written by males in the past, it is becoming more diverse now with the voices of females, homosexuals, and Jews.

Mexican Literature

One such voice is that of Mexican writer Laura Esquivel who wrote *Como Agua Para Chocolate*. First published in 1990, this novel has since been translated into thirty languages, won the American Booksellers Association’s ABBY award in 1994, and been made into a movie. The film version, with a screenplay by Esquivel, won 11 awards at the Ariel Awards of the Mexican Academy of Motion Pictures and is the largest grossing foreign film released in the United States (ethoschannel).

Como Agua Para Chocolate is set on a ranch in Mexico, during the time of the Mexican Revolution. It starts in 1910 and follows the lives of the members of the De la Garza family. Tita is the youngest girl in this Mexican family who, according to her family’s tradition, must live with and care for her mother until her mother’s death; she is not allowed to marry. Tita’s father dies at the time she is born, and Tita’s mother, Mama Elena, has transformed her grief from his passing into a bitter dislike towards Tita. It is later discovered that Tita’s father, Juan de la Garza, dies from a heart attack after hearing news of his wife’s adultery. This, however, does not change or soften Mama Elena’s attitude towards Tita. She is cold, commanding and controlling, not to mention abusive in her treatment of Tita; in Mama Elena’s mind, nothing Tita does is good enough and she communicates this attitude loudly and frequently. To escape

from her mother's constant nagging and verbal abuse, Tita spends her time in the kitchen with the maid Nacha, who teaches her how to cook the traditional foods. There are references made to Tita's place in the kitchen as she was born there – Mama Elena gave birth to Tita in the kitchen before her husband Juan de la Garza could call the midwife. Unfortunately for Tita, she falls in love with Pedro against her mother's commands. When Pedro asks for Tita's hand in marriage, Mama Elena tells him he may marry Rosaura instead. Pedro agrees, seeing no other way to be near Tita. It is my personal opinion that Pedro is a selfish individual who should have stayed out of Tita's life, allowing her the dignity of getting over him. Instead, she is constantly surrounded with the realization that Pedro is her sister's husband and will never belong to her.

Magical realism and irony

Both classical and contemporary magical realist texts tend to be clearly ironic in their representation of the magical as real. Famous examples include those already mentioned above: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Midnight's Children*. Contemporary instances include *Benang* (1999), by the Aboriginal Australian Kim Scott, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), by the Dominican-American Junot Díaz. First edition cover of the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. Wikimedia Commons These texts do not ask readers to believe that the fantastic is true. Instead, they invite readers to reflect on the significance of the outrageous events in relation to the outrageous crimes of history. For example, while the narrator of *Midnight's Children* comically swears that his tale "is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother's head truth," his fantastical journey mirrors and mocks India's corrupt path into independence. Similarly, when the Aboriginal narrator of *Benang* levitates, it is in the context of a novel that sarcastically documents Australian colonial policies about "uplifting" Aborigines. The irony and political edginess of magical realist texts are not recognised enough. Yet they are surely part of the peculiar frisson of this form of literature, which has had an extraordinary rise and is still going strong.

Conclusion

A literary mode rather than a distinguishable genre, magical realism aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites. For instance, it challenges polar opposites like life and death and the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present. Magical realism is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. According to Angel Flores, magical realism involves the fusion of the real and the fantastic, or as he claims, "an amalgamation of realism and fantasy". The presence of the supernatural in magical realism is often connected to the primeval or "magical" Indian mentality, which exists in conjunction with European rationality. According to Ray Verzasconi, as well as other critics, magical realism is "an expression of the New World reality which at once combines the rational elements of the European super-civilization, and the irrational elements of a primitive America." Gonzalez Echchevarria believes that magical realism offers a world view that is not based on natural or physical laws nor objective reality. However, the fictional world is not separated from reality either.

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