

Source Packet Three: Magical Realism

“Novel”

Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 9th ed, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1993.

The term **magic realism**, originally applied in the 1920s to a school of surrealist German painters, was later used to describe the prose fiction of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, as well as the work of writers such as Gabriel García Márquez in Colombia, Isabel Allende in Chile, Günter Grass in Germany, Italo Calvino in Italy, and John Fowles and Salman Rushdie in England. These writers weave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched *realism* in representing ordinary events and details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales. [...] [These] novels violate, in various ways, standard novelistic expectations by drastic-- and sometimes highly effective-- experiments with subject matter, form, style, temporal sequence, and fusions of the everyday, the fantastic, the mythical, and the nightmarish, in renderings that blur traditional distinctions between what is serious or trivial, horrible or ludicrous, tragic or comic.

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“Scheherazade’s Children”

Faris, Wendy B. “Scheherazade’s Children.” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke University Press, 1995.

To begin with, it is helpful to list the primary characteristics of magical realist fiction. We suggest five:

(1) The text contains an “irreducible element” of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them. In the terms of the text, magical things “really” do happen [...]

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Like the metaphors we shall see in a moment, which repeatedly call attention to themselves as metaphors, thus remaining partially unassimilated within the texture of the narrative, the magic in these texts refuses to be assimilated into their realism. Yet it also exists symbiotically in a foreign textual culture-- a disturbing element, a grain of sand in the oyster of that realism.

Irreducible magic often means disruption of the ordinary logic of cause and effect. [...] Even though we [i.e., the readers] may remain skeptical in the face of these [disruptions], the enormity of the historical events, the human suffering involved in them, and the dissatisfaction we feel at the traditional ways such phenomena have been integrated into cultural logic, cause us to question that logic as a result of these new fictional arrangements.

In the light of reversals of logic and irreducible elements of magic, the real as we know it may

be made to seem amazing or even ridiculous. This is often because the reactions of ordinary people to these magical events reveal behaviors that we recognize and that disturb us.

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(2) Descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world-- this is the realism in magical realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory, and it appears in several ways. Realistic descriptions create a fictional world that resembles the one we live in, in many instances by extensive use of detail. On the one hand, the attention to the sensory detail in this transformation represents continuation, a renewal of the realistic tradition. But on the other hand, since in magical realist fiction, in addition to magical events [...] or phenomena [...], the best magical realist fiction entices us with entrancing-- magic-- details, the magical nature of those details is a clear departure from realism. [...]

Our second point here has to do not with description but with reference. In many cases, in magical realist fictions, we witness an idiosyncratic

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recreation of historical events, but events grounded firmly in historical realities-- often alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts. [...] Historical anchoring is well demonstrated in what John Foster calls "felt history," whereby a character experiences historical forces bodily. This phenomenon is exaggerated and particularized in magical realist fictions. [...]

As we have suggested, the material world is present in all its detailed and concrete variety as it is in realism-- but with several differences, one of them being that objects may take on lives of their own and become magical in that way. [...] This materiality extends to word-objects as metaphors, and they too take on a special sort of textual life, reappearing over and over again until the weight of their verbal reality more than equals that of

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their referential function. [...] In taking this poetics of defamiliarization to its extreme, magical realism, as is often recognized, is a major legacy of Surrealism. However, in contrast to the magical images constructed by Surrealism out of ordinary objects, which aim to appear virtually unmotivated and thus programmatically resist interpretation, magical realist images, while projecting a similar initial aura of surprising craziness, tend to reveal their motivations-- psychological, social, emotional, political-- after some scrutiny. [...]

(3) The reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events -- and hence experiences some unsettling doubts. Much of magical realism is thus encompassed by Tzvetan Todorov's well-known formulation of the fantastic as existing during a story when a reader hesitates between the uncanny, where an event is explainable according to the laws of the natural universe as we know it, and the marvelous, which requires some alteration in those laws. But this is a difficult matter because many variations exist; this hesitation disturbs the irreducible element, which is not always so easily perceived as such. And some readers in some cultures will hesitate less than others. The reader's primary doubt in most cases is between understanding an

event as a character's hallucination or as a miracle.

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(4) We experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds. We might say, as H. P. Duerr does in his *Dreamtime*, that in many of these texts "perhaps you are aware that seeing takes place only if you smuggle yourself in between worlds, the world of ordinary people and that of the witches." The magical realist vision exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions. [...]

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(5) These fictions question received ideas about time, space, and identity. [...]As [literary and cultural critic] Fredric Jameson sets out the project of realism, one thing it achieves is "the emergence of a new space and a new temporality." Its spatial homogeneity abolishes the older forms of sacred space; likewise the newly measuring clock and measurable routine replace "older forms

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of ritual, sacred, or cyclical time." Even as we read Jameson's description, we sense the erosion of this program by magical realist texts-- and of course by other modern and postmodern ones as well. [...]

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Another list, of several secondary or accessory specifications, is helpful in building magical realist rooms in the postmodern house of fiction; this one is longer, more provisional, and serves less to distinguish magical realism from the rest of contemporary literature than to situate it within postmodernism and to furnish the rooms we've just constructed.

(1) Metafictional¹ dimensions are common in contemporary magical realism: the texts provide commentaries on themselves, often complete with occasional mises-en-abyme²-- those miniature emblematic textual self-portraits. Thus the magical power of fiction itself, the capacities of mind that make it possible, and the elements out of which it is made-- signs, images, metaphors, narrators, narratees -- may be foregrounded. [...]

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(2) The reader may experience a particular kind of verbal magic -- a closing of the gap between words and the world, or a demonstration of what we might call the linguistic nature of

¹ Metafiction is a literary strategy used self-consciously and systematically to draw attention to a work's status as a literary artifact. This can be overt (as in a narrative voice explicitly pointing out that the reader is reading a fictional account) or more subtle (such as stories that contain another work of fiction within itself, drawing attention to the fact that the main story is merely one narrative among many).

² Literally French for "placed into abyss," this refers to self-embedded repetitions of the larger whole, such as the play-within-a-play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that mirrors actions and themes of the play itself or paintings that depict the act of someone being painted.

experience. This magic happens when a metaphor is made real [...]

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(3) The narrative appears to the late- twentieth-century adult readers to which it is addressed as fresh, childlike, even primitive. Wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way, accepted -presumably-- as a child would accept them, without undue questioning or reflection; they thus achieve a kind of defamiliarization that appears to be natural or artless. [...]

(4) Repetition as a narrative principle, in conjunction with mirrors or their analogues used symbolically or structurally, creates a magic of shifting references. [...]

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Even images participate in this process. They return with an unusual and uncanny frequency, confusing further our received notions of similarity and difference. Interestingly enough, ghosts, which figure in many magical realist fictions, or people who seem ghostly, resemble two-sided mirrors, situated between the two worlds of life and death, and hence they serve to enlarge that space of intersection where magically real fictions exist.

A variation on this mirror phenomenon is the occurrence of reversals of various kinds-- plot-mirroring, so to speak. This is a common feature in all literature, of course, but in these texts it occurs with particular frequency and highlights the metaphysically revisionist agenda of magical realism. [...]

(5) Metamorphoses are a relatively common event (though not as common as one might think). They embody in the realm of organisms a collision of two different worlds. [...]

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(6) Many of these texts take a position that is antibureaucratic, and so they often use their magic against the established social order. [...]

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(7) In magical realist narrative, ancient systems of belief and local lore often underlie the text (more ghosts here). [...]

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(8) As Seymour Menton has pointed out, a Jungian rather than a Freudian perspective is common in magical realist texts; that is, the magic may be attributed to a mysterious sense of collective relatedness rather than to individual memories or dreams or visions. [...]

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(9) A carnivalesque spirit is common in this group of novels. Language is used extravagantly, expending its resources beyond its referential needs. [...]

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“Chapter Two: Delimiting the Terms”

Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magic(al) Realism*. Routledge, 2004.

Magic realism, magical realism and marvellous realism are highly disputed terms, not only due to their complicated history but also because they encompass many variants. Their wide scope means that they often appear to encroach on other genres and terms. Therefore, one of the best ways of reaching some form of definition is to establish to what they are related, and to what they are not related. In this chapter I will be delimiting the terms magic and magical realism (sometimes encapsulating both in the term magic(al) realism) by examining their relationships to other genres and terms such as realism, surrealism, allegory and the fantastic. As these terms and the critics referred to in this chapter are literary, I will consider magical realism solely in relation to narrative fiction. [...]

It follows that a definition of magic(al) realism relies upon the prior understanding of what is meant by ‘magic’ and what is meant by ‘realism’. ‘Magic’ is the less theorized term of the two, and contributes to the variety of definitions of magic(al) realism. In fact, each of the versions of magic(al) realism have differing meanings for the term ‘magic’; in magic realism ‘magic’ refers to the mystery of life: in marvellous and magical realism ‘magic’ refers to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science. The variety of

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magical occurrences in magic(al) realist writing includes ghosts, disappearances, miracles, extraordinary talents and strange atmospheres but does not include the magic as it is found in a magic show. Conjuring ‘magic’ is brought about by tricks that give the illusion that something extraordinary has happened, whereas in magic(al) realism it is assumed that something extraordinary really has happened.

When referring to magical realism as a narrative mode, it is essential to consider the relationship of ‘magical’ to ‘realism’ as it is understood in literary terms. ‘Realism’ is a much contested term, and none more so than when used in attempting to define magical realism. The term itself came into being through philosophical discussion in the mid-eighteenth century but is related to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle’s concept of mimesis. Realism as a term in relation to art and literature only came into common use in the mid-nineteenth century but has since become widely recognized. The critic Ian Watt explains the philosophical notion that ‘Modern realism ... begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his sense: it has origins in Descartes and Locke’ (1992: 89). By accepting that there is a reliable link between our senses and the world in which we live, realism assumes that ‘the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it’ (Watt 1992: 89). The idea of portraying real actions in art was first discussed by Aristotle who claimed that the act of imitating life, or mimesis, is a natural instinct of humans. Aristotle explains the ancient Greek belief that witnessing art is an essential way to learn about the universal truths of life. For this the art itself must appear to be real to the reader or viewer in depicting something that exists, has existed or could or should exist. In fact, Aristotle paved the way for what we now understand of the realism of fictional narratives. He claimed that it is better to convince the reader of the realism of something impossible rather than to be unconvincing about something that is true (Aristotle 1920: 91).

Realism is most often associated with the tradition of the novel as its expansive form, in contrast to shorter fiction, allows the writer to present many details that contribute to a realistic impression. The tradition of the novel has developed as a predominantly realistic form with notable deviations (such as the romance, the modernist or the magical realist novel). Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists such as Henry James wrote essays discussing this relationship between the novel

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and reality. James claimed the only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life' ([1934]1992: 43). His advice on novel writing was to create as realistic a version of recognizable life as possible in order to engage the interest and sympathy of the reader: the characters, the situation, which strike one as real will be those that touch and interest one most' (James 1992: 43). Catherine Belsey, calling this 'Classical Realism' notes that in the late nineteenth century the novel was expected to 'show' rather than 'tell' the reader an interpretation of reality (1980: 68).

However, twentieth century theories of realism in literature, including those by Henry James, emphasize the involvement of the imaginative process in literature so that, as David Grant explains, 'Here realism is achieved not by imitation, but by creation; a creation which, working with the raw materials of life, absolves these by the intercession of the imagination from mere factuality and translates them to a higher order' (1970: 15). In this understanding of realism it is the reader who constructs the sense of reality from the narrative rather than the text revealing the author's interpretation of reality to the reader. Importantly, as Watt notes, this form of realism emphasizes the importance of the narrative: 'the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it' (1992: 89). In this sense, as Catherine Belsey notes, the way in which the narrative is constructed is a key element to the construction of twentieth-century realism. She explains that: 'Realism is plausible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is (discursively) familiar' (1980: 47). This approach to literary realism is the most relevant to magical realism, as magical realism relies upon the presentation of real, imagined or magical elements as if they were real. The key to understanding how magical realism works is to understand the way in which the narrative is constructed in order to provide a realistic context for the magical events of the fiction. Magical realism therefore relies upon realism but only so that it can stretch what is acceptable as real to its limits. It is therefore related to realism but is a narrative mode distinct from it.

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“Globalization of Magical Realism”

Hart, Stephen M. and Wen-chin Ouyang. "Globalization of Magical Realism: New Politics of Aesthetics." *A Companion to Magical Realism*. Tamesis, 2005.

A similar blend of postcolonial rhetoric, magic and politics is evident in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991). In *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, Brenda Cooper shows how Okri was able to carve

a new African vision out of a genre which sprang from Latin America, and in *Ordinary Enchantments*, Wendy B. Fans points in particular to Azaro's mask-- which is so mysterious that the reader cannot tell whether it causes the visions Azaro subsequently experiences or 'forms part of them' (p. 11)-- as a classic hallmark of magical realism. *The Famished Road*, indeed, is full of that 'irreducible magic' which 'frequently disrupts the ordinary logic of cause and effect' (*Ordinary Enchantments*, p. 11). Azaro is, indeed, as slippery a narrator as Saleem in *Midnight's Children*. What is curious, though, about Okri's text is the fact that-- even while it fuses the magical with the real, and the animal with the human, the spiritual with the material, and the natural with the supernatural-- it never loses its political relevance. For Azaro's story is not only about the life of a young child who has spiritual sight; it also functions as an allegory of the trauma of Nigerian nationhood. As Ato Quayson has suggested: 'the abiku child is also meant to stand for the fractious postcolonial history of his native Nigeria'. While not a new association ('in this linking of a national history with the condition of the *abiku* Okri echoes a suggestion made by Wole Soyinka in *A Dance of Forests*, which was commissioned specifically to commemorate Independence in 1961'; Quayson, p. 227), Okri's re-working of the trope produces a powerful vision. The *abiku* child's disability (in the sense that his spiritual sight alienates him from 'normal' people on the compound), as much as the visually alarming disability of the spirits Azaro happens across in his travels or the regular customers at Madame Kyoto's restaurant ('spirits who had borrowed bits of human beings to partake of human reality', p. 161) operates as a metaphor of political disempowerment. To quote Quayson:

The presence of disabled people in postcolonial writing marks more than just the recognition of their obvious presence in the real world of postcolonial existence and the fact that in most cases national economies woefully fail to take care of them. It means much more than that. It

also marks the sense of a major problematic: which is nothing less than the difficult encounter with history itself. For colonialism may be said to have-been a major force of disabling the

colonized from taking their place in the flow of history other than in a position of stigmatized underprivilege. (Quayson, p. 228)

Indeed the magical-realist sheen of the style does not in itself deaden the political points that *The Famished Road* makes. The episode in Book II, chapter 4 when Azaro is bundled into a sack and taken off by some of Madame Koto's customers functions not only as an example of a mishap occurring on the soul's spiritual journey but also as an allegory of the kidnapping of the subaltern by the forces of reaction within society. As Azaro cries out: 'Politicians! Politicians are taking me away!' (p. 131). The evil of this political conspiracy is underlined in the following chapter when the Party of the Rich arrives-- with the collusion of the landlord of the compound-- handing out free milk in exchange for votes, and, in the process, poisoning the population (as the plague of vomiting which ensues vividly suggests). That the political, focalization of the text is from the vantage point of the poor is suggested by the fact that it is Azaro's father-- he 'supported the Party for the Poor' (p. 151)--

who discovers that the collective vomiting has been caused by the milk (p. 155). Azaro's father is a labourer who lives a life of drudgery, complaining about the heavy load he has to carry, 'his head, his back, his legs' (p. 149); as he comments: 'If you want to vote for the party that supports the poor, they give you the heaviest load. I am not much better than a donkey' (p. 96). He is the epitome of all the other workers who seem 'damned, or as if they were working out an abysmal slavery' (p. 170); Azaro sees him fall to the ground under the weight of his burdens (p. 176). The rebellion of the compound inhabitants and the subsequent repression is all the more effective by being presented through a child's eyes. The spirit world is shown, during the period of repression in which the photographer in particular is victimised, to be on the side of the oppressed: 'The dead were curiously on the side of the innocents' (p. 211). That the world of the spirit is not separate from the world of politics is made very clear in the closing stages of Okri's novel. The political struggle is echoed in the fight between the spirits: 'The Party of the Rich drew support from the spirits of the Western world' (p. 568). In *The Famished Road* Okri is able to combine in an arresting manner a vision of the supernatural with a sense of the real political problems faced by Africa today.

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“Locations of Magic(al) Realism”

Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magic(al) Realism*. Routledge, 2004.

On the African continent magical realism and postcolonialism have gone hand-in-hand particularly in West and South Africa. In West Africa, the Yoruba mythologies and beliefs in particular have provided material for other African writers such as Ben Okri and Amos Tutuola (1920-97). In addition to drawing on the western novel form and upon themes such as colonialism, religion and internationalism, West African magical realism often incorporates local influences to produce a cross-cultural literature that emulates the situation of many West Africans today. As the critic Brenda Cooper notes: 'African writers very often adhere to this animism, incorporate spirits, ancestors and talking animals, in stories, both adapted folktales and newly invented yarns, in order to express their passions, their aesthetics and their politics' (1998: 40). She claims that these stories are still prevalent due to the superficial influence on the local culture of colonialism in West Africa (Cooper 1998: 40). Because of this, although Okri is a British Nigerian who has lived in London for most of his life, his novel *The Famished Road* ([1991] 1992) is told predominantly from a West African perspective. The novel follows the struggles of an *abiku* child (a child attached both to the spirit world and the living world, who is born again only to die and return again) and the child's attempt to negotiate between the two forces from the living and the dead that seek to dominate him. The traditional West African mythological content and narrative perspective of the narrative lead some critics to question whether this is indeed a magical realist novel. The

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question of whether the mythological aspect is considered to be real or magical depends strongly on the cultural perspective of the reader. If the reader lives within a cultural context where magical

happenings of the type portrayed in the novel are considered to be a possible aspect of reality and not magical at all, then the reader may not recognize the magical realist element of the narrative. [...]

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The West African writer Ben Okri uses the Yoruba myths and belief systems from Nigeria to illustrate the effects of colonialism. His novel *The Famished Road*, in particular, is built around the Yoruba notion of the simultaneous coexistence and connections between the worlds of the living and the dead. According to Brenda Cooper the appearance of the dead in the realm of the living is a negative 'commentary on the health of the human condition' (1998: 50). In the setting of the novel, the poor state of the human condition reflects the disastrous consequences of colonization and of the corruption of post-independence politicians in Nigeria.

What is also remarkable about the use of magical realism by these writers is that they employ the mode not only because they wish to repeat folkloric mythologies from their cultural community, but because they wish to promote a greater depth of understanding of the present circumstances in which the texts were written.

“An Abiku Nation”

Can, Taner. *Magical Realism in Postcolonial British Fiction: History, Nation, and Narration*. Edited by Koray Melikoğlu. *Studies in English Literatures* vol. 19, 2015, pp. 5-309.

The *abiku*, as a metaphor for the nation, is also an explicit indication of the relationship between magical realism and postcolonial writing. In her article titled “Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative,” Elleke Boehmer explores the function of art as a means of giving voice to the silent or the silenced in postcolonial societies. For Boehmer, self-representation of “the colonial body” has become “one of the key distinguishing features of the postcolonial” since it serves as a counter-discourse to the colonizing powers which, in their authoritative rule, seized the sole right of representing the colonised masses in their political and literary narratives (“Transfiguring” 272). Boehmer observes that “in postcolonial nationalist discourses of the last number of decades, images of the scrutinized,

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scored subject body have become the focus of attempts at symbolic reversal and transfiguration. Representing its own silence, the colonized body speaks; uttering its wounds, it negates its muted condition” (272). In *The Famished Road*, Okri manages to combine the abiku myth with the political realities of postcolonial society through his magical realist writing. Azaro speaks for the nation. His will to live in the face of poverty and political oppression represents the nation’s determination to preserve its independent existence. African traditional beliefs that Okri draws from in order to create his magical realist vision include myths, folk tales and dreams, constantly shifting the boundaries between the established binaries. The deliberate ambiguity created in the text instils in the reader the possibility of seeing reality from a different point of view.

The evident conflation of the mythic and the realistic in *The Famished Road* does not only provide the necessary textual space for magical realism to flourish but also helps challenge the

Western concepts of identity and progress, as they are constantly destabilised. His use of magical realism, particularly his articulation of the abiku myth, also coincides with his view of African aesthetics, which he contends, “is bound to a way of looking at the world in more than three dimensions. It’s the aesthetic of possibilities, of labyrinths, of riddles [...] of paradoxes” (Wilkinson 87-88). Ben Okri employs magical realism in *The Famished Road* to reinvest in the Nigerian cultural heritage in order to generate a narrative that resists the mono-logical understanding of Western historiography.