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) Metafictional[1] dimensions are common in contemporary magical realism: the texts provide commentaries on themselves, often complete with occasional mises-en-abyme[2]-- 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

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[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 Wart 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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"Magical Strategies"

Simpkins, Scott. "Magical Strategies: The Supplement of Realism." *Twentieth Century Literature* vol. 34, no. 2, 1988, pp. 140-154.

García Márquez employs a variety of supplemental strategies in an attempt to increase the significative force texts seem able to generate. In one of a series of interviews published as *The Fragrance of Guava*, he maintains that "realism" (he cites some of his realistic novels as examples) is

"a kind of premeditated literature that offers too static and exclusive a vision of reality. However good or bad they may be, they are books which finish on the last page."' A "realistic" text is hardly a satisfactory mode, much less an accurate presentation of the thing in itself, García Márquez

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contends, because "disproportion is part of our reality too. Our reality is in itself out of all proportion." In other words, García Márquez suggests that the magic text is, paradoxically, more realistic than a "realistic" text. And this realism is conjured up by a series of magical supplements-- such as those found in his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

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"Magical Realism: Style and Substance"

Hart, Stephen M. "Magical Realism: Style and Substance." *A Companion to Magical Realism*. Edited by Stephen M. Hart and Wen-Chin Ouyang, Tamesis, 2005.

Clearly *One Hundred Years of Solitude* expresses the same type of split-vision in evidence in Carpentier's novel but the realm of the magical is not locked up within the notion of an atavistic archive (namely, the Colombian equivalent of the Afro-Caribbean subaltern as portrayed in Carpentier's novel). It migrates depending on who the perceiver is; magical realism is born, the novel suggests, in the gap between the belief systems of two very different groups of people. What for the inhabitant of the 'First World' is magical (a woman who ascends to heaven, ghosts who return to earth, priests who can levitate, gypsies who can morph into a puddle of tar) is real and unremarkable for the inhabitant of the 'Third World'. To keep the symmetry, what for the inhabitant of the 'Third

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World' is magical (false teeth, magnets, films, trains, ice) is real and unremarkable for the inhabitant of the 'First World': 'Dazzled by so many and such marvellous inventions, the people of Macondo did not know where amazement began." García Márquez deliberately prevents the reader from taking up an outsider/insider or Us/Them attitude towards the world of the magical. By using one paradigm, and then reversing it, García Márquez makes sure that the reader is unable to escape from a sense of the world as containing a magical dimension. Macondo does not offer a place to which the reader can retreat, a world that is either just real or just magical. The realism of the real is permeated by magic just as the world of the magical is underpinned by the real.

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"Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier"

Mikics, David. "Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier: Nature, History, and the Caribbean Writer." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke University Press, 1995.

The Caribbean and Latin America mixing of cultures (African, European, Amerindian) can, then, become a source of invention whose energy derives from the conjunctions and cross-influences of radically different modes of thought and life. [...]

The symbiosis of folk and high culture, along with the mixing of African, European Asian, and Native American strains forms a central part of the magical realist aesthetic, as Carpentier suggests in his essays. The magical realist novel of exploration, Carpentier's *The Lost Steps* (*Los pasos perdidos*, 1953) or Harris' *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), relies on such a geographical and historical fact of coexistence: South America sets alongside one another the prefeudal jungle, the modern capitalist city, and the feudal countryside. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, too, the magical

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realist compression of fantasy and mimetic narrative in which, for example, ghosts are a low-key realist feature of the Buendía household, finds its basis, particularly in the novel's early chapters, in the coincidence of two drastically different cultures that most readers would expect to belong to different eras: a folkloric magic with, as García Márquez has acknowledged, African roots, and rationalist scientific investigation. Similarly, the involuted, often incestuously repetitive character of the Buendía generations in *Solitude* finds its basis in a simultaneity of historical and social epochs. Gypsies, necromancers, and the relics of Francis Drake take their place alongside United Fruit; and even Macondo's priest resorts to the pagan magic of levitation.

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"Sources of Magic Realism"

Simpkins, Scott. "Sources of Magic Realism/Supplements to Realism in contemporary Latin American Literature." *Magical Realism: Theory, History,Community*. Edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke University Press, 1995.

For someone who has said he would rather be a magician than a writer, García Márquez meets his desires half way by being both in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Despite the many magical events (flying carpets, living dead, accurate portents, telekinesis, etc.), García Márquez claims he "was able to write *One Hundred Years of Solitude* simply by looking at reality, our reality, without the limitations which rationalists or Stalinists through the ages have tried to impose on it to make it easier for them to understand" (Fragrance 59-60). In effect, he is arguing that the magical text operates virtually as a corrective to traditional tenets of mimesis, incorporating those unreal elements which in themselves antithetically ground reality.

One Hundred Years of Solitude offers numerous examples of magical supplementation amid the description of approximately a century in the history of one family, a genealogy which recounts fantastic occurrences as though they were quite commonplace. García Márquez discusses [...] decidedly realistic concern[s] through a magical layer, a supplemental strategy that may

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enchance, through its own theatricality, the force of an otherwise commonplace development, boosting its significative show in the process through a transcendent power.

To prevent an overwhelming sense of disbelief, magic realists present familiar things in unusual ways (flying carpets, Nabokovian butterflies, mass amnesia, and so on) to stress their innately magical properties. By doing this, magic realists use what the Russian Formalists called defarniliarization to radically emphasize common elements of reality, elements that are often present but have become virtually invisible because of their familiarity. And through a process of supplemental illusions, these textual strategies seem to produce a more realistic text.

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