

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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"The Magic of Identity"

Napier, Susan J. "The Magic of Identity: Magic Realism in Modern Japanese Fiction." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke University Press, 1995.

As with the magic realism of Latin America, this Japanese rejection of realism has political overtones, and these overtones are perhaps even more complex than with Latin America, especially

for contemporary Japanese. Precisely because the dynamic of modernization has been played out apparently so successfully in Japan, the tension between what is Western/modern and what is Japanese is not necessarily expressed in terms of the duality of real vs. unreal. The problem is not only that the West has access to the language of the real, but that the Japanese themselves are participating in the creation of a new language of modernity,

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The history of fantasy and magic realism in Japan thus becomes almost a mirror image of Japan's relation with the West. In the period shortly after the opening of Japan to the West, the thorough identification of realism with Western culture meant that at the turn of the century a rejection of naturalism and realism in general could be a reactionary or at least conservative gesture, an affirmation of old values at the expense of the new imported ones. During the twenties and thirties, however, it could be argued that the use of fantasy was an escapist one, either to ignore or hide from the ominous political realities of the present. Since the war, the use of fantasy has clearly become a radical one, indicating a rejection, not necessarily of reality per se, but of the government and media-controlled vision of a rosy, harmonious society.

Overall, the most pervasive use of magic realism in modern Japanese literature has been as a means to search for Japanese identity, often through the process of recovering history by resuscitating myth (Ōe Kenzaburō, Izumi Kyōka, Inoue Hisashi) or in the image of a mysterious, marvelous woman who may represent old Japan as a maternal figure, forgiving those who have abandoned her (Kyōka) or of a virginal girl (Kawabata) whose purity suggests a lost innocence that can be restored only for a fleeting moment. Writers such as Abe Kōbō and, more subtly, Murakami Haruki show this search for identity only to underline its ultimate futility in visions of a grotesque and anonymous modern world.

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“Magical Realism and the Unconscious”

Strecher, Matthew C. “Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki.” *Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1999, pp. 263-298.

To speak of seeing or touching the “core identity” of the individual, of course, is to suggest a metaphysical process by which that inner mind can be accessed, and this forms one of the most recognizable trademarks in Murakami literature. In virtually all of his fiction, with the one notable exception of *Noruwei no mori*, a realistic narrative setting is created, then disrupted, sometimes mildly, sometimes violently, by the bizarre or the magical. As Yokoo Kazuhiro puts it, Murakami explores “how the world, our insignificant daily lives, might or might not change after introducing one tiny vibration.” It is for this reason that Murakami’s work seems to fall into the general category of “magical realism,” though one must exercise great care in distinguishing Murakami’s strain of magical realism from other more politicized forms of the genre.

In a very simple nutshell, magical realism is what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something “too strange to believe.” It is the underlying assumption that permits

Tita to pour her emotions into her cooking in *Like Water for Chocolate* and have her diners experience those emotions as they eat; it is the slight aberration of historical fact that allows Salman Rushdie's Saleem Sinai to claim in *Midnight's Children* that the history of India turns on major events in his life; it is the

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mechanism by which Mikage Sakurai and Tanabe Yūichi eat together in a shared dream in Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchen*. And, more to the point, it is the means by which Murakami Haruki shows his readers two "worlds"-- one conscious, the other unconscious-- and permits seamless crossover between them by characters who have become only memories, and by memories that reemerge from the mind to become new characters again.

As noted above, however, the concept of magical realism bears certain political and cultural specificities that should at least be addressed before applying the term to Murakami's work. For instance, there are those who claim that magical realism is a specifically Latin American idea, one that expresses the natural wonder felt by the people of Latin America toward their land as a "marvelous"-- yet real-- place. Others argue for a more politicized, but equally region-specific definition of magical realism as a postcolonial discourse that rejects traditional Euro-American emphasis on realism and positivism in favor of a worldview that permits the "magical" to coexist with the "real." [...]

Others problematize the linkage of magical realism with any other theory, political or otherwise. Luis Leal, for instance, suggests that we view magical realism as a worldview that may appear under various circumstances, using various methodologies or literary styles. He is suspicious of any attempt to appropriate the methodology of magical realism for political or artistic purposes.

Magical realism cannot be identified either with fantastic literature or with psychological literature, or with the surrealist or hermetic literature that [Julio] Ortega describes ... Magical realism is more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles, in closed or open structures ... In magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it.

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Leal's willingness to open up the field, to admit that virtually any form of literature or art may express itself as magical realist, is of some use to this discussion, for one may propose, using Leal's description of magical realism as technique or worldview, that the literature of Murakami Haruki merely uses the techniques of magical realism without necessarily involving itself in the various political attachments that Carpentier and Flores would insist upon. In short, Murakami's use of magical realism, while closely linked with the quest for identity, is not the least bit involved with the assertion of an identity. Put another way, magical realism in Murakami is used as a tool to seek a highly individualized, personal sense of identity in each person, rather than as a rejection of the thinking of one-time colonial powers or the assertion of a national (cultural) identity based on indigenous beliefs and ideologies. [...]

Murakami's model of the human mind is fairly uniform throughout his literature, his motifs and terminology largely unchanged in the past 20 years. In general it is presented as a uniformly coded division between the world of the light and that of the dark, the latter corresponding to the unconscious realm. Murakami envisions the inner world of the mind as dark, cold, and lifeless. At

times the unconscious is only symbolized, other times it is real. In *1973-nen no pinbōru* the protagonist enters an ice-cold, pitch-black warehouse, formerly a cold-storage facility for chickens, to reencounter Naoko, a girlfriend who died at the very end of the 1960s. In *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* the same protagonist reencounters his dead friend Rat, this time in a mountain villa, but again in total, freezing darkness. *Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārando* (1985; *Hard-boiled wonderland and the end of the world*) alternates its chapters between the conscious protagonist, who lives in daylight, and the unconscious one, who fears light, works at night, and must wear protective dark glasses when he goes out during the daytime. The protagonist of *Dansu dansu dansu* discovers a musty, dust-filled room in a deep corner of his mind, again, dark, gloomy, and filled with dust-covered memories that he cannot make sense of. Another room is filled with dusty skeletons, literally the skeletons of his past. And in *Nejimakidori kuronikuru* (1994-95; *Wind-up bird chronicle*), his unconscious is presented as an enormous, maze-like hotel, in which “Room 208” is the core, the center of his whole being. It is this center, the location of the core identity that concerns us here. Murakami himself uses the expression “black box” to describe this portion of his narrator’s unconscious. The expression first comes up in *Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārando*, when the protagonist is told by a scientist who has been tinkering with electrical circuits in his brain that the core consciousness is like the “black box” used to record flight data on aircraft: it contains all the information necessary to form the individual identity, but it is impervious to attempts to open it and observe its contents. This is identity.

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“The Cultural Milieu of Murakami Haruki”

Strecher, Matthew Carl. *Dances with Sheep: The Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki*. The University of Michigan Press, 2002.

The world for Murakami’s protagonists almost always takes on the characteristics and dimensions of “text,” of words, thus of interpretation and subjective perception. [...] If we may say that “reality” is always slightly off-center in the Murakami universe, we are forced to conclude that its eccentricity is always the result of its having been interpreted-- often unconsciously-- by the protagonist, the narrator, or the author himself. [...]

The conditions confronted in Murakami fiction are perhaps endemic to society, but always we perceive them in his work through the rarefied gaze of his retiring antiheroes, whose realities are equally individualized. Despite his passivity and self-enclosure, the Murakami protagonist does not merely watch the world “as it is”, he invents it, piece by piece, character by character. The world is itself a “text”-- *tada no kotoba*, or “just words,” as one of his protagonists expresses it-- and depends for its shape and structure on the protagonist’s interpretive strategies. It does not especially matter if the people and things he encounters are “external” to himself or generated from within his mind; he interprets, and therefore “constructs,” them all. Nothing escapes this textualization. This is why the notion of an external, autonomous “reality” that may be recreated in analogue, such as Barthes suggests above, is alien to the Murakami universe. [...]

At stake here is [...] the redeclaration of the individual subject. When the Murakami hero resuscitates a lost friend by recasting the memory of him into an image he can apprehend in the

“conscious” world, he commits an act of personal recovery, recouping lost memories, regaining elements of his own historical past.

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