

Magical realism and the supplementation of reality essay sample



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Introduction

Distinctly as a literary genre, magical realism may be seen as plagued by a dilemma arising from its use of various means of supplementation of realistic texts. Such a dilemma is evident if one considers that even though the texts within the genre may appear to overcome the limits of realism, the linguistic medium which these texts employ are based upon a linguistic medium which employs realism. In this sense, texts within the genre of magical realism may only partially employ the magical as a result of the inadequacies of language. Note, for example, that these texts may be said to displace the real through the use of textual apparitions. However, such textual apparitions also show the representational bind which hampers the success of such texts. Due to this, magical realists continuously fall short of their portrayal of the magical within such texts. In relation to such a problem, there is no clear demarcation of what may be considered as a text within the genre.

Introduced by Franz Roh during the 1920's, the term magical realism was originally meant to portray a "counter-movement" in art through which "the charm of the object was rediscovered" (84). Such an articulation of a new sensibility of art had a strong influence on Latin American writers [and later on other counter-cultural writers] who opted for the creation of a means for the expression of the marvelously real in their own culture. Before elucidating on the influence of the new form of sensibility introduced by Roh's conception of magical realism, it is essential to note Roh's conceptualization of magical realism as opposed to realism per se. Such a conceptualization [that of Roh's] will be the basis for the specification of <https://assignbuster.com/magical-realism-and-the-supplementation-of-reality-essay-sample/>

what may be considered as a part of the genre in this paper, the reason for this lies in Roh's conceptualization of magical realism as an artistic style which opts to counter realism.

As I reckon, by looking at the genre in such a way, it is thereby possible to go beyond the problem of defining literature within the aforementioned genre since such a specification enables what is generally considered [as a matter of consensus] to be a part of the said genre to be viewed in terms of their general family resemblance, which is that of presenting the rediscovered charm of the real [through the magically real] as a form of counter-movement to the real.

The differences between realism and magical realism could be presented in the following manner. Realism as opposed to magical realism uses (1) history as opposed to myth, (2) mimetic as opposed to the fantastic, (3) familiarization as opposed to defamiliarization, (4) empiricism as opposed to mysticism, (5) narration as opposed to meta-narration, (6) close-ridden as opposed to open-ended narratives, (7) naturalism as opposed to romanticism, (8) rationalization as opposed to imagination, and (9) effect as opposed to capability (Simpkins 141). Through the aforementioned oppositions, it is possible to envision the manner in which magical realism "turned daily life into eerie form" (Roh 84).

The aforementioned oppositions may be best understood in relation to Angel Flores' conception of the texts within the aforementioned genre. Flores notes that such texts do not "depend either on natural or physical laws" which defined the conception of "the real in Western cultures" (109). The rationale

behind this lies upon the social and political determination of the definition of reality within the texts within the genre since the texts within the genre portray “ a narrative...in which the relation between incident, characters, and settings could not be based upon or justified by their status within the physical world or their normal acceptance by bourgeoisie mentality” (Flores 109).

Such a portrayal of reality, however, has been privy to several criticisms one of which involves the lack of universal applicability of the style within the aforementioned genre. Compared to other forms of literary genres [e. g. fantastic, surrealism, psychologism] the means for classifying texts within the genre lack universal validity (Jameson 302).

Despite the various critical disagreements over the concept of magical realism, one element which does recur constantly throughout such texts which may thereby point as a unifying characteristic of such texts [other than its anti-realism style] is the awareness of the ineluctable lack in communication [a condition which prevents the merger of signifier and signified]. In this sense, texts within the aforementioned genre [or which are generally considered as a part of the aforementioned genre] may be seen as employing the magical as a means for complete signification. Perhaps the problem with this type of supplementation is really nothing more than that of an endeavor to increase the likelihood of complete signification through magical means.

In other words, such texts may be seen as employing the unreal construct to become real through a deceptive seeming hence Hegerfeldt perceives such

texts as portraying lies that tell the truth (7). Hegerfeldt notes that by “ ceaselessly drawing attention to its own constructedness [that being its own fictionality] without thereby invalidating itself, magic realist fiction self-consciously presents itself as ‘ lies that tell the truth’” (7). It is important to note that, “ the issue of the narrative’s internal reality is always relevant to the fantastic, with the result that the ‘ real’ is a notion which is under constant interrogation” (Jackson 36). The use of the “ real” [in the process of signification] enables the elimination of the difference between the construct and the object as it enables the reconstruction of reality.

In relation to this, this paper opts to supplement to such a conception of magical realism. Such a supplementation [as to the aforementioned unifying trend of texts belonging to the said genre] will be undertaken through the analysis of Jorge Luis Borges’ “ The Lottery in Babylon”, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s “ A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” and Salman Rushdie’s “ The Prophet’s Hair”. I will argue that the aforementioned texts despite their varying portrayals of magical realism are unified to the extent that such texts opt to enable complete signification of meaning through the use of the magical.

Borges: The Question of Objectivity in a Multifaceted Reality

This supplemental discourse can be clearly seen in the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Salman Rushdie in their works which may be considered as belonging to the aforementioned genre. Mainly resulting from his close ties to the fantastic, Jorge Luis Borges’ works have been generally credited as belonging to the said genre. Robert Scholes notes

that the “ opposition between language and reality, the unbridgeable gap between them, is fundamental to the Borgesian vision, and to much of modern epistemology and poetic theory” (9). Consider for example Borges’ “ The Lottery of Babylon”. In the aforementioned text, Borges showed the manner in which absolute randomness becomes absolute necessity. “ The Lottery of Babylon” portrays the manner in which a game of chance takes an increased power which enabled its definition and hence dictation of reality. In the short story, Borges portrays the manner in which the entire universe is determined by the Aleph. Reality within the text was literally defined by the element of chance.

More specifically, the story presents the plight of a man escaping the dangerous place run by an organization [The Company]. This organization has arranged a lottery that determines and delivers both punishments and rewards. The existence of this organization, however has become so secret and invisible that in the end it was no longer possible to differentiate the activities of the organization from that of destiny or chance. The man’s [narrators] desire to escape, within the text, was due to the indefiniteness of existence within the land. It is important to note that such indefiniteness is in itself apparent within the aforementioned text.

Consider for example the manner in which the premises and assumptions within the text are in continuous shift as the narrator presents the story. An example of this is evident if one considers that the illogical sequence of the lottery suggests a logical sequence as a result of the people’s unconditional submission to the lottery. Another aspect in which a paradox is evident within the text is further evident if one considers the manner in which the <https://assignbuster.com/magical-realism-and-the-supplementation-of-reality-essay-sample/>

lottery has merged with life to the point that it is indistinguishable from reality itself.

At one point, such an occurrence may be perceived and hence understood as constituting the manner of the social construction of reality. The lottery, an original social construct, has in the end become a “major element of reality” and has in fact become the primary mechanism for understanding the real. At the end of the story, the narrator hints that, as a result of the lottery, it is undecidable the lottery should be considered as the primary mechanism of the real or whether the real remains the primary mechanism that dictates their existence. He notes, “It makes no difference whether one affirms or denies the reality of the shadowy corporation, because Babylon is nothing but an infinite game of chance” (Borges 106).

Within the aforementioned text, it is evident that for Borges man’s lack of knowledge of phenomena and of their relation to time and place allows for the creation [or perception] of a multifaceted reality. This multiple reality eradicates objectivity. It is important to note that the importance of such [the presentation of the lack of objective reality within the text] is evident if one considers that a reality which lacks objectivity cannot serve as the basis for a universalizable system of ethics. Borges declines to rely on knowledge obtained from metaphysical interpretations. For Borges, all existing moral structures or codes are held voidable and their defenders are considered practitioners of the absurd. It is important to note that within the Babylonian world as portrayed in the lottery, the objectivity of the story itself is questionable since the narrator’s story [as well as his existence] may in itself be the result of the lottery.

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The stress here on the textual element of magic realism is not incidental. The textual element that enables the semiotic dysfunction may be seen as mirroring the limitations of language. Texts within magical realism, in this sense may be seen as supplementing not only the failures of the modern text but also the inadequacies of what is now called the postmodern condition which has led to new desires in textual generation, revaluations of textual properties, and a poetics of defamiliarization.

The goal of magical realism, in this sense, may be understood as enabling the refocusing on the backdrop of textual reality, its production, and function through the process of defamiliarizing it. As a result, the supplemental strategies used within such texts as portrayed in the aforementioned text by Borges may be seen as geared towards improving the realistic text. As Scholes notes, Borges' "fictions and inventions...move language toward reality, not away from it" (10). To move language into reality, in this sense, involves the utilization of language in order to accurately depict the various facets of reality.

Marquez: The Relation of the Mundane and the Magical

Like Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez employs a variety of supplemental strategies in an attempt to increase the significative force such texts seem to generate. Marquez maintains that "realism" 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" (115). For Marquez, a "realistic" text is neither hardly a satisfactory mode nor an accurate presentation of the thing in itself. This is apparent if one

considers that, a realistic text merely accounts for the habitual conception of reality [or what is “ real”] and in a sense thereby fails to account for the ineffable. The manner in which Marquez accounts for the ineffable is apparent in his “ A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”.

Generally, the story within the aforementioned text by Marquez is as follows. An ancient angel falls from heaven into the graces of Elisende and Pelayo who are perplexed at the idea of having an old man with wings in their midst. Puzzled about this occurrence, they consult Father Gonzaga who treats the celestial being with suspicion. After much debate, the angel becomes a carnival attraction. In the end, after being teased and harassed by the town folks, the angel recuperates and flies away remaining but “ an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea” (Marquez 218).

In the aforementioned text, magical realism is most evident in Marquez’s use of a mixture of various forms of myth with that of reality [e. g. myth of supernatural entities]. In addition to that, the aforementioned text utilized the fragmentation of narrative time in the sense that time in itself became a pervading theme within the text. Note for example the manner in which time progresses from the old man’s fall from that of his rise back to the heavens and how it is juxtaposed to the child as well as the community’s growth and development. Another manner in which magical realism is evident within the text is evident in the ambiguity of the plot itself as the theme is left open-ended hence no definite ending is given as to the state of the old man given in the story above. In relation to this, various themes may also be attributed to the text itself.

Within the text, for example, one may state that one of the things that Marquez opted to account for was the exploitation of the unknown. Consider for example the manner in which the old man was turned into a public [in fact a circus] spectacle despite the old man's refusal to communicate. At the most basic level, one may state that such a condition [the lack of uniform communication scheme between the old man and the townspeople] may be depicted as mirroring the lack of common ground with which the exploited individual stands in relation to his exploiters [in the sense that there is no common recognition of the notions of right and dignity as a result of the unaccounted background and hence ontology of the old man].

An important aspect, evident within the text, however [in relation to the development of time sequence] is evident if one considers that each new circle of the narrative starts its task anew to find out what is hidden in the event and to determine its importance. This involves the staging of a scene that includes other subjects, name bearers, and places [e. g. the old man juxtaposed to the circus and to Elisende and Pelayo's economic development]. In addition to that, by situating the story within a particular communal enclave, the story is textualized in a local artifact that is isolated from public space so that " things" can be embedded in it. What the endurance of this artifact and its contents evidences is the violence of the conflict created by the tension of desire there. The old man as the artifact, in this sense may be seen as mobilizing the mimetic power and illusion in order to conceal and protect the general occurrence in the lives of Elisende and Pelayo and the foundations of such events [e. g. economic development in the expense of the old man].

What characterizes Marquez's fiction is that it links with a massive unfolding of the unconscious' primary processes. Once experience has been made visible, objectivized, in narrative, any imaginary and affective contents encountered along the way can be used to describe things and ideas, opposites can be juxtaposed, and subjectivity's official boundaries can be tested and crossed. In the aforementioned text, for example, even if Marquez did not make any explicit reference to any form of spirits, the irreducible elements and the defocalized mode leads to the feeling which may be seen as resulting from the indeterminate and indefinable encounter of an entity that counters the real yet is completely fitted with the real in the text. In the text, for example even if Garcia presents the priest as engaging in the determination [and hence objectification and demystification] of the old man, the defocalized narrative along with the attributes of the old man [which includes the lice in his wings] validate the delicate undefinability of the old man's being. In this sense, the story thereby portrays the manner in which the mysterious combines with the ironic.

As opposed to Borges' style of presenting the multifaceted aspects of reality which thereby defies the specification of an objective reality, Marquez's form of magical realism involves the incorporation of the fantastic [e. g. the mystical] in relation to and in direct opposition to generally accepted categories [e. g. the old man with live filled wings]. The magical, in this sense, enables the supplementation of meaning as the magical opts to defy categorization or fixed and static conceptions of reality. In this sense, it is thereby possible to understand Marquez claims that "realism" is "a kind of premeditated literature that offers too static and exclusive a vision of reality"

and hence is unable to provide nor present an accurate presentation of the thing in itself (115).

Rushdie: Re-orientation of Beliefs

Salman Rushdie's "The Prophet's Hair" presents Rushdie's criticism of foundational beliefs [specifically that of religious beliefs]. In the

aforementioned text Rushdie presents a critique to the belief that "all religious beliefs (must necessarily) be protected from criticism" (324).

Rushdie argues that to do so is "absolutely wrong" since "to demand that belief systems...must be immunized from criticism, irreverence, satire, even scornful disparagement" leads to the failure to fully analyze the implications of a belief system (324). In a sense, protection of religious beliefs may be seen as the leading to the impediment of development, the occurrence of which is dependent upon the continuous correction and hence alteration of long held beliefs. Rushdie holds that "democracy can only advance through the clash of ideas (324). Such a clash, however, is prevented as one refuses to account for the validity of certain held beliefs and such is the case with religious beliefs.

In "The Prophet's Hair", Rushdie showed the manner in which the character Hashim's behavior changed due to religious reasons. The context of the aforementioned text mirrors the manner in which religious beliefs often serves as the foundation for holding other beliefs [e. g. ethical] which are ascribed universal validity. In relation to the Muslim religion, within "The Prophet's Hair", Muhammad is understood as the absolute model of Muslim existence hence Muhammad is attributed both god-like form, god-like

virtues, and a god-like existence and hence a strand of his hair is thereby treated with utmost reverence to the extent that it may be considered as the proof of his physical embodiment [and in a sense proof of his existence and henceforth reality]. Such an existence and the objectification of such leads to a distorted notion that such an objectification may offer validity towards certain fundamental beliefs. In Rushdie's text, the strand of Muhammad's hair leads to the destruction of the village. Such a destruction, however, may be attributed to the negative effects of dogmatic beliefs within a community.

In this case, it is apparent that Salman Rushdie's adherence to magical realism is evident more on the manner in which Rushdie emphasizes the haziness of foundational beliefs. In a sense, it is not so much as the representation of the magical facets within Rushdie's texts which may be perceived as mirroring his form of magical realism but the unsteady grounds in which he sets long held beliefs. Rushdie's form of magical realism, in this sense focuses more on the existence of a series of protagonists who set out on episodic adventures [e. g. for the achievement of wealth or religious enlightenment as is the case in the aforementioned story] not necessarily to achieve a form of disembodied enlightenment but more so to achieve awareness of the embodied self within the culture and history which one considers one's self to be a part of. In relation to this, Rushdie as a magical realist may thereby be seen as enabling realism in the sense the he uses "verisimilar conventions of language, paratextual codes, form, characterization, event, and plot in order to account for the real.

In the same manner that Borges' and Marquez's texts may be understood as enabling the supplementation of reality through a new mode of

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representation of reality through the utilization of the magical within the texts, Rushdie's method of supplementation appeals more to the political aspect involved in the process of supplementation. As opposed to Borges' emphasis on the presentation of a multifaceted reality [in Goodman's notion that of the presentation of "other possible world"] and Marquez's incorporation of the fantastic to sever the objectivity ascribed to various forms of categorization and hence specification of reality, Rushdie's text appeals to the political aspect which is related and in a sense deeply entwined with the adherence of a particular belief.

The difference of Rushdie's form of magical realism is further apparent if one considers that his narrative style lies outside that of textuality. Twentieth-century magic realism is always regarded as posing a challenge to realist conventions of uniform space and time and of verisimilitude. Since realism derives its authority by acknowledging a world of others whose perspective is dependent not on character but on relative position, Rushdie opts to critique the basis of such positions in their manner of perceiving reality.

Rushdie's method is can be seen as Elizabeth Ermath writes of the arbitrariness of point of view in realist narration. According to Ermath,

That arbitrariness suggests a potential equality among viewpoints. Because the realistic medium of experience is neutral, the same everywhere, there is a potential continuity between the vision of the spectator and the vision of all possible spectators in the same horizon. Any position would reveal the 'same' world with as much validity; and any person could take up the position of the implied spectator. The implied spectator's privilege, that is, depends

not upon qualitative distinctions between 'better' and 'worse' points of
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view, but rather upon quantitative distinctions, between more and less distance. It is a privilege available to anyone who is willing to travel. (20-21)

Conclusion

In a very simple nutshell, magical realism is what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something which may be understood as too strange to believe. It is the underlying assumption that permits the existence of a very old man with enormous wings in Marquez's text; the literary style which allows the existence of civilization ruled by the a lottery in Borges' short story; it is the slight aberration of historical fact that allows Rushdie to present a critical analysis of fundamental beliefs as he opines to present a vivid realistic form to the metaphysical influence of the prophet's hair.

Within this arena of uncertainty [that being the arena of reality], magic realism demonstrates its hopeful scheme to supplement the realistic text through a corrective gesture, a means to overcome the insufficiencies of realism as well as the language used to ground realism. Texts within the genre of magical realism, utilizes the imagination in order to supplement reality by heightening its distinctive elements through ideal imagination [the essence and not necessarily the vehicle].

It is important to note, however, that this supplementary act also reveals an implicit despair which lies in the use of language to convey reality. In other words, through the use of magical supplements, the linguistically determined text seems to span the difference between the signifier and the signified.

However, it cannot. As Scholes states, " reality is too subtle for realism to <https://assignbuster.com/magical-realism-and-the-supplementation-of-reality-essay-sample/>

catch it" hence " it cannot be transcribed directly. But by invention, by fabulation, we may open a way toward reality that will come as close to it as human ingenuity may come" (13).

Scholes' claim, however, betrays that very element which undermines such an assertion since attempts to signify can never overcome the deficiencies which any sign system presupposes. The magical realist's predilection toward the unreal may also reveal an awareness of the impossibility of successful signification [wherein successful signification involves the complete information transference] as magic is used to flaunt these same limitations. Hence, in relation to this Borges claims, " You who read me, are You sure of understanding my language?" (58).

Magic realism courts the inevitable problem of signification by offering the impression of success, a supplemental diversion which appears to bypass the limitations of the realistic text, evading its failures through the incorporation of imagination. Still, as neat as this sounds, perhaps it does not work. Discontent with the strictures of realism, magical realists such as Borges, Marquez, and Rushdie construct elaborate magical supplements which imply a purifying concern for textual generation.

Still, as Marquez, Borges, and Rushdie demonstrate, the use of magic is a self-conscious attempt to overcome significative loss, to bridge that space between the ideal and the achievable [which involves the removal of the bar between signifier and signified]. In this regard, texts within the aforementioned genre necessarily reveal their limits in the course of their operation. However, the magical text almost triumphs over its otherwise

crippling imperfections by commenting on its own questionable condition while simultaneously presenting itself. In this manner, magical texts reflect upon their own blind spots, generating a meta-critical discourse about their own indeterminate form.

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