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Magic Realism

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Magic Realism

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MAGIC REALISM

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A NOTE TO THE READER

Gale Study Guides are designed to be helpful by being informative, by removing tedious and unnecessary obstacles, and by pointing you toward further thought. They are also designed to be responsive to the changed conditions of reading literature which have arisen in the past fifteen or twenty years in schools, colleges, and universities. What are these conditions?

by Denis Donoghue,
Henry James Professor
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They are mainly imposed by Theory. There was a time when students read literature—and were instructed to read it—without a theory of reading or a theory of literature. Even a critic as far-reaching as William Empson seemed to play it by ear and to trust to his hunches. It was assumed that everybody knew what a work of literature was and what reading such a work entailed. Teachers tried to offer a persuasive interpretation of the work, and that was that. One interpretation might be more interesting than another, but both interpretations were in the same field of assumption and reference. These assumptions don't hold any longer. If we say that such-and-such a book is a work of literature, we have to explain what we hold a work of literature to be, why it is such, and how it has become such. No attribute of the book can be taken for granted. Theory asks not, primarily, what the book is or what it means or how it works but what are the conditions under which it has come into being. Those conditions are deemed to be social, political, economic, linguistic, formal—and perhaps most insistently, cultural. A novel, a play, or a poem is said to be a work of cultural production. What does that mean? It means that many diverse forces have come together to produce the book, not just the intention of an author.

One result of this emphasis is that the context of a work of literature is not deemed to be a static “background” or scene. In a celebrated essay called “The Historical Interpretation of Literature” (1941), Edmund Wilson assumed that “history” could be called upon to steady the work of literature, to curb its mobility, and to ground it in some value more ascertainable than the author's intention or the formal properties of

the work. History is no longer thought to provide such a ground. If there is a contemporary sense of history, it features rather the conviction—or the fear—that history itself is partly fictive. There are histories, but there is no single or stable History. A history of the French Revolution is not a sequence of characters and actions, transcribed. What or who is the real Julius Caesar? In the second chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses* Stephen Dedalus asks himself: "Had Pyrrhus not fallen by a beldam's hand in Argos or Julius Caesar not been knifed to death?" and in answer to himself he murmurs: "They are not to be thought away. Time has branded them and fettered they are lodged in the room of the infinite possibilities they have ousted." Yes: in some sense, yes. But it is hard to establish "Julius Caesar" as an entity independent of my sense of him, or your sense of him. Granted that he was knifed to death. But that is not enough to establish him or to remove from the image of him the taint of fictiveness. The philosopher E. M. Cioran asserted, in *Précis de décomposition* (1949), that "history is merely a procession of false Absolutes, a series of temples raised to pretexts, a degradation of the mind before the Improbable." We are not obliged to agree with Cioran, but we can't shrug off his skepticism or assume that we are free to invoke History, as Wilson did, without misgiving. The concept of History is, as we have been schooled to say, problematic. History may be everything that is the case, but the force of fictiveness in constituting it can't be ignored.

So a question arises: is literary history possible? If it is: is it necessary or desirable? Why do we talk about literary movements and schools, if the very concept of History is questionable? Was there ever such a thing, for instance, as Romanticism or Modernism?

There was, but not in any fixed or steady sense. Writers who live at a particular time often feel a certain commonality of purpose. They respond in similar ways to the conditions they face. They share, in some degree, a conviction of the expressive possibilities. The revolutionary writers are those few who intuit or divine, among those possibilities, the ones that clamor to be fulfilled. T. S. Eliot saw the possibility of putting fragments of verse together in a seemingly arbitrary or at least unofficial way which would make a rather esoteric kind of sense: the result was *The Waste Land*, a kind of poetry no other writer thought of writing. It soon began to emerge that *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, W. B. Yeats's *The Tower*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, and a few other poems had something in common—a distinctive sense of their time—despite their formal and rhetorical differences. The concept of Modernism seemed to be called for, to note similarities of purpose among such writers: Eliot, Pound, Valéry, Yeats, Rilke, Joyce, Proust. This does not mean that these writers thought

of themselves as associates. Pound and Eliot did, but not Eliot and Yeats. The concept of Modernism is a worthy one, provided we deal with it flexibly: it is not a place of residence for the writers it designates. Differences, then, persist and have to be acknowledged; but they are folded within a grand sense of “the modern spirit” or Modernism. So we can still use this word. It is more useful to think of a certain consanguinity of purpose among various writers than to assume that one writer is utterly separate from other writers.

So too with the concept of the author, another once-steady notion that has come into question. Of course Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson or F. Scott Fitzgerald or James Dickey wrote the book, but not in utter freedom or sky-blue autonomy. They had to deal with the exigencies of cultural performance: specifically, with questions of language, communication, ideology, audience, readership, money patronage, publishers, genre, literary form, the social forces issuing in taste. Not that any one of these was absolutely coercive. Pierre Bourdieu has maintained, in *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), that “a writer never reflects mechanically or rigorously the ideology which he represents, even if his sole intention is to represent it; perhaps because no ideology is sufficiently consistent to survive the test of figuration.” Otherwise put: the force of an ideology is not irresistible; it must yield in some degree—bend if not break—to the force of the language, the figures of speech and thought, which are entailed by writing in English, French, Greek, Latin, or another language. Total freedom is not available in the production of literature. Writers may proceed as if such freedom were available. They would be wise not to capitulate to the social, economic, or cultural forces at large. A certain measure of resistance is possible. Kenneth Burke maintained, in *Counter-Statement* (1931), that the motto of the imagination is: “When in Rome, do as the Greeks.” But it’s not quite as straightforward as that.

It is hoped that these *Gale Study Guides* will help you to negotiate these and other issues. They won’t tell you what to think about, say, *The Great Gatsby*, or dictate the limits of your experience in reading that book; but they will open up new possibilities.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>A Note to the Reader</i>	
<i>by Denis Donoghue</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x

MAGIC REALISM

HISTORY OF MAGIC REALISM IN LITERATURE	1
<i>Overview of Magic Realism</i>	1
<i>Magic Realism in History</i>	9
<i>The Evolution of Magic Realism</i>	17
REPRESENTATIVE WRITERS	23
MAGIC REALISM AND OTHER LITERARY MOVEMENTS	55
HALLMARK WORKS OF MAGIC REALISM	65
CRITICAL RESPONSE TO MAGIC REALISM	111
OTHER REPRESENTATIVE WORKS OF MAGIC REALISM	149
RESOURCES FOR STUDY OF MAGIC REALISM	157
<i>Study Questions</i>	159
<i>Literary Terms</i>	163
<i>Bibliography</i>	167
MASTER INDEX	171



THE HISTORY OF MAGIC REALISM IN LITERATURE

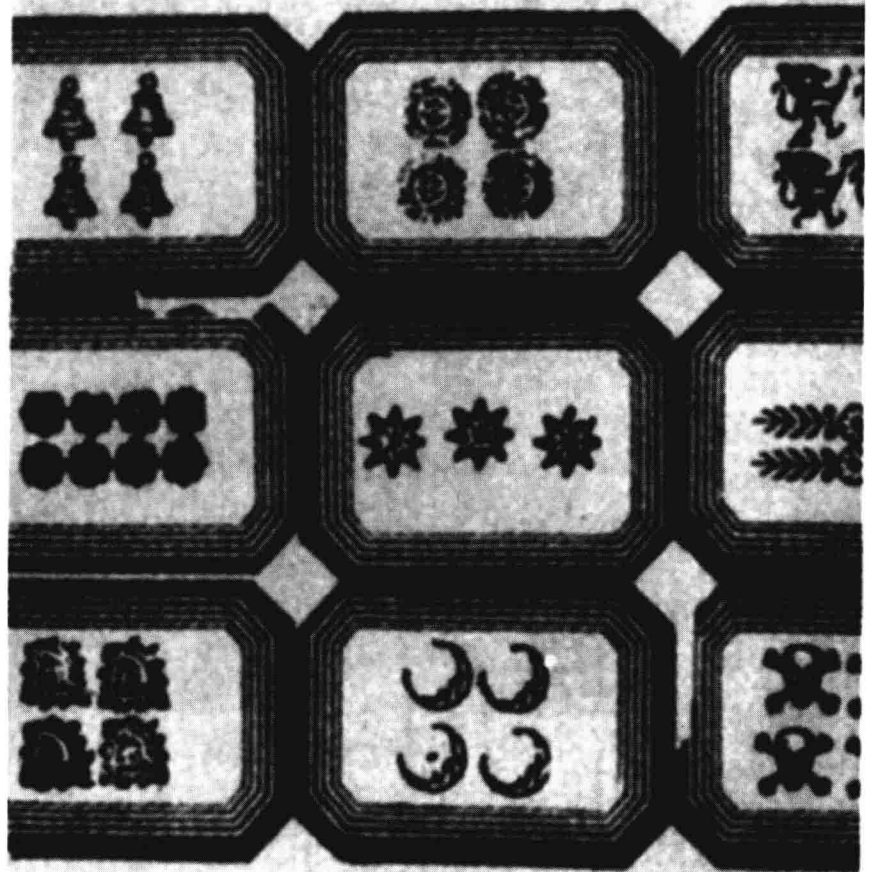
OVERVIEW OF MAGIC REALISM

Magic Realism: “[F]iction that does not distinguish between realistic and nonrealistic events, fiction in which the supernatural, the mythical, or the implausible are assimilated to the cognitive structure of reality without a perceptive break in the narrator’s or characters’ consciousness. Magical realism is a style associated with Latin American fiction especially in the 1960s and after.”¹

Magic realism is a fictional technique that combines fantasy with raw physical reality or social reality in a search for truth beyond that available from the surface of everyday life. The startling irony behind this technique is that only through the conjunction of the fantastic and the factual can truth fully emerge in literature. Critic Michael Wood in his study of Gabriel García Márquez’s novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad*, 1967; translated, 1970) describes how in magic realism “distortion stumbles on a truth.”² Wood points out that in magic realism “beliefs and metaphors become forms of fact, and . . . more ordinary facts become uncertain.”³

The author employing magic realism searches out a hidden potential in the natural world or in human actions, and often describes the commonplace as mysterious. Reality seems to be deformed, but the reader perceives essential truths as a result of this distortion. At such narrative moments there is a suspension of interest by the author in a psychological approach to character. The plot seems to be suspended in time, the better for the grotesque and the strange, the unexplained and the mysterious, to yield larger truths. The passage of time loses all relevance. Critic Luis Leal sums up the method of magic realism in his essay “Magical Realism in Spanish America”: “In magical realism key events have no logical or psychological explanation. The magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality (as the realists did) but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things.”⁴

GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ
CIEN AÑOS DE SOLEDAD



EDITORIAL SUDAMERICANA

Dust jacket for Gabriel García Márquez's 1967 novel, translated in 1970 as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

García Márquez, the Colombian Nobel Laureate and novelist, has distinguished his own earlier, more realistic work from the literature of magic realism. In an interview he called these earlier books “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.”⁵ His masterpiece, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is generally considered to be the foremost work of magic realism.

Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier concluded that magic realism is the natural patrimony of Latin America. His belief is that this literary device flows out of the continent of South America and of Central America with their melange of cultures, unique birds, flowers, and animals. Magic realism emerges from descriptions of people living, as García Márquez might put it, awash in nostalgia, in solitude and in isolation from the industrial urban sprawl of Europe and North America.

García Márquez subscribes to Carpentier's view that magic realism is a technique particular to Central and South America: “disproportion is part of our reality too. Our reality is in itself out of all proportion.”⁶ This, he argues, is why magic realism is so suited to writing set in Central and South America. García Márquez has referred to Latin America as “that boundless realm of haunted men and historic women.” It is, he insists, an “outsized reality,” which “nourishes a source of insatiable creativity,” and which may be contrasted with the more pallid “rational talents” of Europe. This magic is the hereditary legacy of the Latin American landscape, and cannot be transplanted: “Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable.”⁷

García Márquez's definition of reality, however, is a broad one:

... reality isn't limited to the price of tomatoes and eggs. Everyday life in Latin America proves that reality is full of the most extraordinary things. To make this point I usually cite the case of the American explorer F. W. Up de Graff who made an incredible journey through the Amazon jungle at the end of the last century and saw, among other things, a river with boiling water, and a place where the sound of the human voice brought on torrential rain. In Comodoro Rivadavia, in the extreme south of Argentina, winds from the South Pole swept a whole circus away and the next day fishermen caught the bodies of lions and giraffes in

their nets. . . . After I'd written *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a boy turned up in Barranquilla claiming to have a pig's tail. . . .⁸

Four examples from the novels of García Márquez help to define the technique of magic realism and illustrate how it works. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* a woman named Remedios the Beauty ascends to heaven clutching the bedsheets she had been folding in her hands. Such beauty, García Márquez suggests, cannot survive in this blemished world of lust and greed; Remedios escapes her endless chain of male admirers by voyaging to heaven, where her purity best belongs. Speaking of the novel in the matter-of-fact tone he cultivates, one he borrowed from his storytelling grandmother, García Márquez makes such a scene entirely believable:

I suddenly realized that I wasn't inventing anything at all but simply capturing and recounting a world of omens, premonitions, cures and superstitions that is authentically ours, truly Latin American. Remember those men in Colombia who get worms out of cows' ears by saying prayers, for example. Our day-to-day life in Latin America is full of this kind of thing.

I was able to write *One Hundred Years of Solitude* simply by looking at reality, our reality, without the limitations which rationalists and Stalinists through the ages have tried to impose on it to make it easier for them to understand.⁹

In another of García Márquez's masterpieces, *Love in the Time of Cholera* (*El amor en los tiempos del cólera*, 1985; translated, 1988), a parrot competes with a notable figure of the community, Dr. Juvenal Urbino, in intelligence, wit, and daring. Willfully, this parrot, whom the doctor loves "as if he were a human being," flies up into a mango tree and will not come down. The doctor, who has had a long day tending to the suicide of a close friend, is furious.

"You scoundrel," he shouted.

The parrot answered in an identical voice:

"You're even more of a scoundrel, Doctor."¹⁰

Like no other parrot, he can speak French, Spanish, and Latin. Moreover, he can sing the songs of the French cabaret singers Yvette Guilbert and Aristide Bruant, "in a woman's voice if they were hers, in a tenor's voice if they were his." He has learned "the Latin accompaniment to the Mass and selected passages from the Gospel according to St. Matthew," as well as "a working notion of the four arithmetic functions" (20).

That the parrot has only a “working” notion, rather than a full understanding, is not only humorous, but also creates believability. García Márquez suggests that he is being forthright in not claiming for the parrot talents he does not quite possess. Just as people love most those most recalcitrant, Dr. Urbino has “afforded him privileges that no one else in the family ever had, not even the children when they were young” (20). Yet, this is a real parrot with a yellow head and a black tongue.

Only through a parrot with traits no such creature could realistically possess can García Márquez dramatize the irrationality of the human species and its self-destructiveness. Willful and stubborn, self-destructive and mischievous, Dr. Urbino’s parrot is an emblem of mankind at its most irredeemable, and he causes the death of the person who loves him most. García Márquez has insisted that “a writer can try anything as long as he makes it believable.”

Not that all the animals who exemplify García Márquez’s magic realism are so cruel. In the short story “María Dos Prazeres,” Maria, an aging prostitute living in Barcelona, teaches Noi, her dog, to travel on Sundays by himself to the cemetery by memorizing the Ramblas bus route, and then to cry over her empty tomb. Testing his progress, one Sunday, Maria follows him. She spots Noi, “distant and serious among the Sunday flocks of children waiting for the traffic light to change at the Paseo de Gracia.”¹¹ By naming the specific street, García Márquez helps the reader believe that a dog can wait for a traffic light to change. Even at this magical moment, however, the reality of history surfaces in images of the Spanish Civil War. Along Noi’s route may be observed “the deep silences of the crippled war veterans tossing bread crumbs to pigeons” (107). The consequences of war are long-lasting. Maria even feels “the same repressed tension that preceded the days when the anarchists had taken over the streets” (107). The magic would lose its pathos were it not to coincide with, to illuminate, and to explore the real.

LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA



Gabriel
García Márquez

Dust jacket for the English translation of García Márquez’s 1985 novel, *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*

The term “magic realism” has been used so imprecisely as to rob it of most of its meaning. Even as this literary device grows out of the soil of the beleaguered South American continent, with its particular religion, culture, unique political grievances, and historical contradictions, critics have applied the term, in a meaningless way, to any example of the unreal or the fantastic in literature. Henry James has been called a magic realist, as has Eudora Welty, since they both wrote ghost stories. John Cheever, that astringent chronicler of the American upper-middle class, appears in a 1984 anthology called *Magical Realist Fiction* because in a story called “The Enormous Radio” he assigns a radio unusual powers.

Consider, instead, the use of magic realism by García Márquez in a fourth example. In *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (*El otoño del patriarca*, 1975; translated, 1976), the author wishes to comment on the history of exploitation of his country by the United States. The old general, the tyrant of the title, becomes sympathetic as he chooses to sell the very sea itself, the heart’s blood of his country, to America, carving it up into numbered pieces to do so. Better that, he reasons, than having the U.S. Marines land on his shores. Magic realism in this example frees the author of didacticism, of telling rather than showing; he can make a political point without preaching. He can dramatize larger, abstract ideas through the surprising conjunction of the real and the fantastic. Yet, García Márquez himself has pointed out that magic realism as a literary device is not license for any arbitrary distortion of reality for its own sake: “[Y]ou can’t invent or imagine just whatever you fancy because you run the risk not telling the truth. . . . Even the most seemingly arbitrary creation has its rules. You can throw away the fig leaf of rationalism only if you don’t then descend into total chaos and irrationality.”¹²

There is no justification for enlisting magic realism unless there is a larger truth which cannot be reached but for distortion of ordinary social realism. Magic realism at its best relies not upon flights of fantasy, but on the particular fusion of fact and fantasy in the service of a quest for meaning. García Márquez makes this clear in his short story, “Blacaman the Good, Vendor of Miracles”: “[L]adies and gentlemen . . . even though you have more than enough right not to believe me after suffering so long from my evil tricks as a deceiver and falsifier, I swear on the bones of my mother that this proof today is nothing from the other world, merely the humble truth. . . .”¹³ Thus, the master of magic realism addresses the reader befuddled by young girls ascending to heaven; parrots who stubbornly betray their owners by refusing to perform for company; priests, as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, who levitate—but

only upon drinking hot chocolate; or dogs who, lost in thought, wait patiently for traffic lights to change.

It should be noted as well that even in a story such as “Blacaman the Good, Vendor of Miracles,” in which García Márquez comments on his own use of magic in his narratives, he remains political: the strange hawker of “flasks of specifics and herbs of consolation” (113) dying of a snake bite in “Blacaman the Good, Vendor of Miracles” is observed by “a cruiser from the north that had been docked there for twenty years on a goodwill mission” (114). The men on the cruiser are American military personnel representing the United States, which is maintaining its murderous vise on Latin America while concealing its true motive behind the absurdity of philanthropy, the “goodwill mission.” Immediately, the gringos declare a quarantine “so that the snake poison wouldn’t get on board,” so little do they concern themselves with the welfare of those on whose behalf they have maintained for two decades their “goodwill mission.” Later in the story the U.S. Marines invade the country

under the pretext of exterminating yellow fever and were going about beheading every inveterate or eventual potter they found in their path, and not only the natives, out of precaution, but also the Chinese, for distraction, the Negroes, from habit, and the Hindus, because they were snake charmers, and then they wiped out the flora and fauna and all the mineral wealth they were able to because their specialists in our affairs had taught them that the people along the Caribbean had the ability to change their nature in order to confuse gringos. (117)

Magic realism, García Márquez suggests, arises out of the Latin American experience not only as a cultural inevitability but out of political necessity. Besieged by the military superiority of the neighbor from the north, survival demands that the Caribbean people develop an “ability to change their nature.” It is out of living beyond torture and misery that the narrator of “Blacaman the Good” becomes capable of miracles while considering himself “an artist.” His capacity for magic, however,

“Carpentier’s concept of the marvelous or of magic rests on an onto-theological assumption: the existence of a peculiar Latin American consciousness devoid of self-reflexiveness and inclined to faith; a consciousness that allows Latin Americans to live immersed in culture and to feel history not as a casual process that can be analyzed rationally and intellectually, but as destiny. From the perspective to which that mode of being aspires, fantasy ceases to be incongruous with reality in order for both of them to turn into a closed and spherical world without cracks or ironic detachment, glimpsed, as Carpentier says in the prologue to *The Kingdom of This World*, ‘by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a mode of borderline state.’”

Roberto González Echevarría

From *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 125–126.
