
Old Men with Wings: One Look at Teaching Magical Realism through Gabriel García Márquez

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In literature, magical realism uses a backdrop of realistic elements with instances of the magical in order to portray an unconventional reality to the reader. Writers often use magical realism to portray events that many of their readers may not understand as reality, but are a part of the writers' cultural or political experience. For example, Native American writers occasionally use magical realism to show the power of nature or of a trickster figure. The African American writer Toni Morrison often uses magical realism to show the spiritual power of women in her novels. The focus of my essay will be teaching students magical realism within the context of Latin American culture in terms of the Columbian writer, Gabriel García Márquez.

When teaching magical realism, let your students know that one of the purposes of magical realism is to force the reader to use the idea of "suspension of disbelief." One way of breaking into discussions of magical realism would be to ask students questions like, "Do you have different versions of reality, and if so, why?" Looking at writing from another culture opens a reader's eye to the unfamiliar, where magical realism exists. What we may define as magical or mystical could be interpreted as very real to someone else; we may only view the particular reality as a type of amplified or "magical" reality. From this description magical realism does have a sense of tangible real-

ity within its background, though that reality tends to have aspects that morph into something one could consider unreal. In this way, it can be said that magical realism attempts to improve upon realism in literature to create a new synthesis of literary understanding.

With this essay, I will provide a way for upper level high school students to understand magical realism by juxtaposing it with the genre of surrealism in order to show the differences between the two movements. I shall place magical realism within the context of Latin America, particularly through the work of Márquez. I shall use Márquez's short stories to provide a way for students and teachers to apply this knowledge of Latin American magical realism. This application will also be outlined within a lesson plan, which I have included at the end of this essay and refer to throughout the paper. This lesson plan functions merely as one way to instruct students in magical realism within the Latin American context, so it should by no means be taken as a definitive example.

Magical Realism and Surrealism

When teaching the magically real, it is important your students do not confuse magical realism with surrealistic literature, which I incorporate in my lesson plan (see appendix). The genres of magical realism and surrealism may be perceived as similar, though there are distinct differences. The *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* defines surrealism in fiction as a convention that “expresses the irrational, the unconscious, especially the unconscious that manifests itself through dreams” (Murfin and Ray 468). Much of what defines surrealism originated and reached its peak with the French symbolist poets and the Dada movement during the 1920s and 1930s and therefore has been mostly confined to these areas.¹

However, magical realism has been around in many cultures and contexts much longer and can be seen in the literature of Native Americans, African Americans, and Latin Americans. To give students a definition of magical realism, the *Bedford*

Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms describes magical realism through the following characteristics:

[magical realism is] a quasi-surrealistic art form ... mixture of realistic and fantastic elements. Realistic details and esoteric knowledge are intertwined with dreamlike sequences, abrupt chronological shifts, and complex, tangled plots. Magic realists also frequently incorporate fairy tales and myths into their works. (Murfin and Ray 242)

From this definition, you may notice that a number of different characteristics surface within the context of the magically real. For every culture magical realism is a bit different because the history of every culture is different. Therefore, when you and your students look into the magical realism of Latin America through the work of Gabriel García Márquez, you should look at magical realism from the Columbian and Latin American perspectives.

Magical Realism: A Brief History

Before discussing magical realist Latin American writing, I incorporate a day on my lesson plan where I look at magical realism in a historical and cultural context (see appendix). From this perspective, the term magical realism seems as elusive as the device it represents—but is it?

According to Scott Simpkins' essay "Magical Strategies: The Supplement of Realism," the German writer "Franz Roh first introduced the term magical realism into artistic discourse in the mid-1920s through the German phrase *magischer realismus*" (Simpkins 141). Roh described this as a "counter movement in art through which the charm of the object was rediscovered" (Roh 70). Roh outlined magical realism in a way that opposed it with realism: "history is the basis for realistic writing whereas in magical realism myth and legend takes over where history leaves off" (Simpkins 141). Magical realism undoubtedly had an influence upon Latin American fiction since the cultures within Latin America are heavily influenced by superstition and myth, which they interpret as a kind of history. The definition of magical

realism originated by Roh would later spark the minds of Latin American writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez: “[magical realism] had a strong influence on Latin American writers searching for a suitable means to express the marvelous reality unique to their own culture” (Simpkins 142).

The Magically Real of Latin America

As descendants from tribes like the Mayans, Incans, Aztecs, and other native groups, Latin Americans have juxtaposed the mythological beliefs of the past into the advancing reality of the present. A good overview of the culture of Márquez’s Columbia in terms of the magically real is discussed in a video titled “Gabriel García Márquez: Magic and Reality,” which discusses two of his major works: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Autumn of the Patriarch*. This video would be an excellent resource to introduce students to how Márquez interprets the magically real (see appendix). The video also provides a good opening for working with students to further uncover how magical realism functions within the work of Márquez. The video will further the ability of students to place the magical realist elements within the framework of Columbian culture. Briefly introducing students to the political issues within Columbia can open other ways of interpreting the work of Márquez.

For example, one important political influence within Márquez’s work the film discusses is the problems of poor Columbian workers within the United Fruit Company. In 1928, because of the company’s harsh labor policies coupled with little pay the workers began a strike. Gene H. Bell-Villada writes in his book *García Márquez: The Man and his Work* that “the strike [was led] by thirty-two thousand field workers [and] drew massive occupation and bloody repression by the Columbian military (who, evidence suggests, were in the pay of the United Fruit Company)” (Bell-Villada 32). To this day, there exist no adequate reports as to how many of the Columbian workers were murdered in the time frame of the strike, but the episode caused major problems within the coastal towns of Columbia,

including the town of Márquez's birth. Because of this bloodshed and turmoil that struck his birthplace, Márquez has incorporated the incident, and others like it, within his fiction, and the example of the United Fruit Company strike can be followed within Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Another source of information beneficial to students would be to discuss the influences of African slaves on Latin American belief systems. When African slaves arrived in Columbia, they carried with them their own religious beliefs and ceremonies that Columbians have incorporated into their own culture. The Africans were also an imaginative people, carrying rituals and beliefs with surrealistic qualities. Their legends and myths became juxtaposed with established pre-established Columbian and other Latin American countries' belief systems. This meshing of cultures becomes evident in the Argentine novelist Luisa Valenzuela's novel *The Lizard's Tail*, where Latin American reality becomes superimposed with surrealism. Valenzuela shows her characters discussing the obsession with Eva Peron, particularly through the character of the Sorcerer—a nickname for an advisor of Juan Peron and later for his second wife during her administration in the 1970s. This demented individual believed he was capable of magic and miracles, and he was known for his elusiveness and brutal methods of torture. The novel recounts the political turmoil and civilian obsession with Evita, or "the Dead Woman." Though Valenzuela's novel isn't magical realist as much as it is surrealist, literary elements within the text speak toward the influences Africans had upon the Latin American people.

Though magical realism has been prominent in traditional Latin American writing, the boom novel can be seen as inaugurating a deeper understanding of the magically real. Shannin Schroeder writes that "Latin American literature often addresses the impossibility for Latin Americans of situating themselves in a specific historical moment" (20). A discussion of Márquez's works could start with this quote. A disruption of linear time occurs frequently within the works of Gabriel García Márquez. One of the best examples of the of the uprooting of time from its

chronological associations occurs within the story “Monologue of Isabel Watching it Rain in Macondo:”

On Wednesday noon it still hadn't finished dawning. And before three o'clock in the afternoon night had come on completely, ahead of time and sickly, with the same slow, monotonous, and pitiless rhythm of the rain in the courtyard. It was a premature dusk, soft and lugubrious ... (Márquez 93)

Though Isabel tells us that she believes it is Wednesday at noon, the sun has not finished rising. Later on, Isabel claims that the sky darkens like that of night in the middle of the afternoon keeping in rhythm with the rain. What does this mean? Has time gotten away from Isabel, or is she correct in her estimations? At the end of the story, Isabel claims that she did lose track of time as she states she was in a place where “senses lost their value” (Márquez 96). Isabel's assertion introduces one of the concepts that magical realism thrives on. Her senses have become confused and, as a result, she loses the concept of time.

In a second Márquez story, “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” the image of time is again confused:

The world had been sad since Tuesday. Sea and sky were a single ash gray thing ... The light was so weak at noon that when Pelayo was coming back to the house after throwing away crabs, it was hard for him to see what it was that was moving and groaning in the rear of the courtyard. (Márquez 203)

Here, a sky during a rainstorm is again described as an “ash gray thing,” which defamiliarizes the sky. And at noon, the sky is dark like night as Pelayo can barely see the thing that is “moving and groaning” so close to him (Márquez 203).

These examples, as well as many others that can be found in Márquez's work, will help to demonstrate to students how Márquez does not place events within a historical framework, as Schroeder asserts when she makes the statement that Latin American writers do not place happenings within true historical time. In other words, nothing is dependent upon time as we ex-

perience it each day through the clock or the calendar.

Gabriel García Márquez as Literary Magician

As I indicate in my lesson plan, a good way to lead into discussion of Márquez's short fiction is to give a short biography on Márquez to show where he found inspiration (see appendix). An important resource Márquez used for developing his stories came out of what he remembered from growing up with his grandmother, Tranquilina Iguarán Cotes, and grandfather, Colonel Nicolás Ricardo Márquez Mejía. Through his grandparents, Gabriel García Márquez became well acquainted with the legends of his Columbian ancestry. His grandfather and grandmother were great storytellers. His grandfather focused on stories of a realistic nature; however, Márquez's grandmother often told him stories filled with the magical elements that permeate Márquez's fiction today.

In fact, some of Márquez's stories are transformed versions of stories his grandmother told him. Márquez's imaginary city of Macondo is based upon cities in Columbia, particularly that of his birthplace Aracataca, a banana town.² The people inside Macondo are based upon people he knew or people that appeared within his grandmother's stories. Perhaps these influences help to explain Márquez's realistic characters inside unrealistic occurrences. In the short story "Monologue of Isabel Watching it Rain in Macondo," Márquez demonstrates the astonishment of Isabel as she watches her family react to the rain that doesn't stop for what seems to be an entire week. As Isabel leaves church, she notices it has begun raining:

After Mass, before we women had time to find the catches on our parasols, a thick dark wind blew, which with one broad, round swirl swept away the dust and hard tinder of May. Someone next to me said: 'It's a water wind.' And I knew it even before then ... Then it rained. And the sky was a gray, jellyfish substance that flapped its wings a hand away from our heads. (Márquez 89)

For Isabel, the sky becomes a living thing capable of movement and almost of touch: a “jellyfish ... that flapped its wings away from our heads.” The sky has become animal-like so that with one of its wings it may touch the onlookers below in Macondo. Also, the rain being described as a “water wind” is also interesting to note as it describes a blending of natural elements. We may ask ourselves, what exactly is a water wind? It is a thing of the imagination, like the sky becoming a “jellyfish substance.” The context of the sky and rain is real, but the way these two elements are portrayed takes their reality and makes it something new and imaginative.

Márquez’s magical realism exists not only within the forces of nature but also through strange appearances of people or creatures. This occurs in the strange appearance of a man with wings who many believe is a sort of angel or perhaps, as is comically described by some, “a Norwegian with enormous wings” (Márquez 207). This stranger to Macondo, and perhaps to the world itself, gives title to the story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” detailing how Pelayo and his wife come across a man who seems to have fallen from the sky during another rainstorm. Many magical elements exist with this story, and the subtitle of the tale is “a tale for children,” which leads the reader to assume that this story is mainly just a fairy tale. But is it?

Though “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” is introduced as a tale for children, there exist deeper meanings within the story as some of the magical elements hold a political force. For example, after Pelayo has placed the man with wings within the chicken coop, it is discovered the stranger does not speak any known language, though people speculate it may be Latin. Márquez’ investing the old man with an unknown language gives credence toward a political reading of the text. Much of Márquez’s work has been influenced by the political climate of Columbia. In Columbia, there are two major opposing parties: the liberals and the conservatives. Furthermore, Márquez has labeled himself a *costeño*, one of a group of people who are “racially mixed, verbally outgoing, and superstitious. They are descendents of pirates and smugglers, with a mixture

of black slaves” (Ruch 1). In “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” the issue of racial difference is apparent and Márquez is making a political statement through the strange, winged man. The winged man represents himself as an outsider, but someone who is of the culture and yet separate from it.

Considering the arrival of the African slaves, and the fact that the *costeños* are part of this subgroup, Márquez could be making a statement on how Columbia has changed. And since Márquez aligns himself with the *costeños*, the winged man could be interpreted as being Márquez himself, just with the veneer of magical realism. Just like the winged man, Márquez aligns himself with a group composed of different races and criminals such as pirates, and he comes across as an outsider. The winged man isn't only an instance of the magically real. He also represents political beliefs covered in a vision of the magical. Therefore, magical realism isn't only consistent with fairy tale-like qualities; it also expresses political and cultural values. In this sense, magical realism via Márquez can, and should, be interpreted in a variety of contexts, such as through the political.

Another reading of the language of the old man exists within a religious context. Because the people of Macondo believe the language to be Latin, they feel he may be an angel, and therefore capable of miracles. People come to him with problems like “being unable to sleep because of the noise of the stars” (Márquez 206). However, none of these people who come to the winged man are healed. In one instance, the leper who came to the winged man to rid himself of leprosy instead has his “sores sprout sunflowers” (Márquez 208).

Because of the failure of the miracles, the people of Macondo forget the winged man. They have moved on to another spectacle: a girl who has undergone a metamorphosis into a spider, which is surely a nod towards “The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka. In discussion of the spider girl, it may be beneficial to give a synopsis of “The Metamorphosis” because it was a huge influence on the writing of Márquez. It was partially Kafka's story that persuaded Márquez to become a writer in the first place as Gloria Bodtorf-Clark states in her book *A Synergy*

of Styles: Art and Artifact in Gabriel García Márquez:

A borrowed copy of Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" caused a metamorphosis in the life of young García-Márquez. At a very young age, seventeen, he realized the power of the written word which he has pursued ever since, through the writings of journalism and literature. (112)

Meanwhile, the winged man continues to live, though many in Macondo have forgotten him except for Pelayo, his wife, and the town's doctor. Through the observations of the doctor, a reader uncovers other magical qualities of the winged man, such as his having a heart that does not beat but makes a "faint whistling," and the doctor also hears what he describes to be "noises in his kidneys" (Márquez 209). The doctor also marvels that the wings appear surprisingly natural on the man's body. Márquez shows that what we believe is unnatural can instead appear natural to someone else, or perhaps even to ourselves if we were to take the time to really look at the spectacle.

Anyone who has not finished the story might ask what happens to the winged man. The answer is that he disappears as magically as he appeared, and the only witness to this departure is Pelayo's wife, who, at the very end of the story, describes the winged man flying away as "an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea" (Márquez 210). This final scene in Gabriel García Márquez's story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" is a good way of showing what magical realism does and is within Latin American fiction. Describing the man with enormous wings as an "imaginary dot" makes one wonder if the very old man with enormous wings was real to begin with.

But to the characters in Macondo, the old winged man was very real. Surely the next time any one of us steps outside into the rain, there will not be a man with wings hovering, cold and wet, behind the nearest tree. In our neat, rational, and literal world of reality, we believe we will never encounter a stranger with a winged back speaking incoherent language to us. But Márquez, like his stories, steps outside reality's neat box to ask

us how we really know if our beliefs will transform into our reality. After all, we haven't stepped outside into that cold drizzle yet.³

Notes

1. See http://www.moma.org/collection/printable_view.php?object_id=79018 for a reproduction of Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory."

2. Source: Allen B. Ruch http://www.themodernword.com/gabo/gabo_biography.html.

3. See Melquiades in Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, p. 25-26, 55, 74.

Appendix

Lesson Plan for Teaching Latin American Magical Realism Using Gabriel García Márquez's Short Stories

Objective

This lesson plan is structured to assist in teaching elements of magical realism within the context of Latin America through stories by Gabriel García Márquez.

Learning Outcomes

- Identify magical realism through comparisons with realism and other genres.
- Identify and discuss the literary elements within magical realism of Latin America. Students will also be able to identify certain aspects of the Latin American/Columbian culture via Márquez's work.
- Have students demonstrate understanding of magical realism through exercises. (handouts)

Materials and Resources

- Handout on elements and examples of magical realism

- Copies of the stories *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* and *Monologue of Isabel Watching it Rain in Macondo* by Gabriel García Márquez

Recommended materials and resources

- *Gabriel García Márquez: Magic and Reality* VHS ISBN 978-0-89113-546-3 (about 60 minutes)
- Map of Latin America
- Map of Columbia

Day One

Start the introduction to the lesson by giving a short overview of magical realism. Also, to prepare for further discussions, it would be helpful to give a short introduction to the geography and culture of Latin America using aids such as maps.

In discussing magical realism, find an example of a piece of magical realist writing. This can be from Márquez, Borges, or anyone you choose.

In-class exercise:

Ask your students what they notice about this piece of writing. Refer back to the handout on magical realism compared to realism. As an exercise, have the students point out differences they notice.

Day Two

Discuss magical realism in Latin America in terms of its uniqueness in regards to its reliance on superstition, myth, and elements of time. Also, a good idea would be to contrast magical realism with other genres such as surrealistic fiction and/or science fiction or any other genre of your choice.

In-class exercise:

It would be helpful to hand out examples of magical realism and surrealist fiction and have students identify each in groups. Discuss results as a class and reasons for findings.

Day Three

Present the video on Gabriel García Márquez and magical realism. The video is approximately 60 minutes, but if you wish to shorten the length in order to answer questions/give more information, please do so. Only about 30 minutes is relevant to

this lesson plan. If you choose to do this latter route, make sure to cover important parts of the film and answer questions. If not, you will do this during the next class period.

In-class exercise:

Have your students do a writing prompt on what they understand to be magical realism from the video.

Day Four

Give a short introduction on Gabriel García Márquez. Be sure to describe resources where he acquired ideas for his stories. Also, assign one or two Márquez short stories.

I have incorporated the following into my paper in order to provide examples and discussions:

- *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*
- *Monologue of Isabel Watching it Rain in Macondo*

Day Five

Discuss the assigned story or stories. Have your students fill out the handout on where they find magical realism within the text in class (may be done individually or in groups. I prefer they do this individually as it allows for each student to actually pick out something from their own reading and interpretation.). As a class, discuss reasons why they feel each case is relevant.

In-class exercise:

Assign your students a writing prompt on where they find magical realism within Márquez's work and why.

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