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Empowering the Oppressed in 20th Century Literature through Magical Realism

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One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin (Kafka 5)

Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*, begins with a horrible shock. The main character, Gregor, has changed overnight from a man into an oversized bug. However, Kafka presents Gregor's bizarre, mystical transformation as something entirely mundane. Although Gregor is overwhelmed with his physical self, the author does not express any surprise or shock on the character's behalf. Instead, Gregor thinks about all the things in his room that he has seen on countless occasions before this one: a magazine photo of a woman in a fur hat, the trickling rain, his monotonous career. Through his writing, Kafka penned the beginnings of a very particular type of literary style called "magical realism". His manner of highlighting fantastical happenings as commonplace occurrences inspired the Latin American writer, Jorge Luis Borges, who had translated Kafka's works, to follow a similar style of writing.

According to Angel Flores in "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction," magical realism, which rose to prominence in the 1940s and 50s, was the "transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal" (190). Perhaps author Gabriel García Márquez described it best when he said, "the unbridled imagination of the black African slaves got mixed up with the beliefs of the pre-Columbian natives and then with the fantasy of the Andalusian" (qtd. in Hart 116). When this amalgamation of beliefs all comes together in fiction, claims Flores, the reader is immediately enveloped in a world void of lineal time and full of the "inconceivable, freighted with dramatic suspense" (190). Kafka's opening line to *The Metamorphosis* is certainly inconceivable – it is literally impossible for the human body to transform itself into a giant bug. Magical realism is a unique style in that it introduces the reader to the inconceivable *as* reality. The reader seems able to accept these unusual occurrences as part of reality, because magical realism combines the two in such a way that they seem natural together. Kafka does not simply mention that Gregor is now a bug and then proceed to explain Gregor's shock. Instead, he allows Gregor to see what has happened to him and then slip directly back into the mundane thoughts of his everyday life.

Indeed, Flores's conception of magical realism as changing the common into the awesome is correct, but it is only half of the story. In his "Magical Realism in the Americas: Politicised Ghosts in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The House of the Spirits*, and *Beloved*," Stephen Hart uses Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as an example of the type of switching method one may come across in magical realism texts. He points out that while the inhabitants of the fictional town of Macondo do view what normal people would consider everyday items (ice, mirrors, telescopes, etc.) as otherworldly and strange, they also view what is typically considered strange (ghosts, levitation, etc.) as entirely normal (Hart 116). Flores seems to miss this half of magical realism in his description, because he specifically points out that the common transforms *into* the unreal, without acknowledging what is perhaps even more important in magical realism: that the unreal transforms into the common.

Magical realism is not without its critics. The understanding of the concept in general varies widely, from being exclusively descriptive of a type of visual art, to being a literary movement, style, or genre. For Flores, in a literary sense, "time exists in a kind of timeless

fluidity and the unreal happens as a part of reality" (191). Flores's understanding of magical realism is condensed into this short definition, which is indeed far more complicated than it originally appears. How could time exist at all in a timeless fluidity? Magical realism simply allows authors to play with time. Although many works of this type in general tell a linear story, the physical manifestations of memories, otherworldly happenings, and bizarre circumstances make the author able to tell a linear story in an irregular, sometimes sporadic, fashion. The reader of a magical realism novel does not lose his or her sense of time while engrossed in the tale. Instead, they see time as traveling along a circular path. At any point on the circle, one has access to all other times, memories, and moments and can jump to them at will. This is impossible in a regular, linear conception of time in which it passes and cannot be revisited once it is gone. Beyond this, magical realism encourages readers to understand reality as the characters in the book do. Strange or unusual things that happen are not actually strange or unusual. They are just as much a part of reality for the characters as any other everyday occurrence.

Magical realism has many dimensions, and its different interpretations seem virtually endless. One particular area that is important to address is what the use of magical elements as a part of reality does for the novel. Why do the authors include these levitating figures and clairvoyant minds? Is it purely for entertainment value, or is there a deeper reason embedded within the narrative? Hart writes in his article that, "The ghosts in these novels are the projection within an ideologically riven nation of a subaltern forced to 'disappear' as a result of lying (in both senses of the term) on the wrong side of the political, gender, or race line" (115). Indeed, as Hart seems to suggest, oppression manifests itself in the magical elements of these novels. While some magical occurrences are simply the physical manifestation of some sort of ideological subjugation or oppression, other magical occurrences serve as a means of relieving these "subalterns" of their metaphorical or literal chains. In order to demonstrate how the surreal elements of these novels affect victims of oppression, I will explore examples in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

The physical manifestation of oppression in magical realism novels is probably the easiest and most clear-cut portion of the proposed hypothesis to explore. Supernatural happenings or strange occurrences in these novels are almost always ideological oppressions taking physical form. For example, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar haunts José Arcadio Buendía and his wife Úrsula after Buendía kills him in a duel. Aguilar is not a random presence in Buendía's life, come to torment an innocent family. Instead, he is the victim of oppression. His spirit returns to haunt the family, but he does not mean them harm. Márquez writes of the ghost, "He was livid, a sad expression on his face, trying to cover the hole in his throat with a plug made of esparto grass. It did not bring on fear in [Úrsula], but pity" (22). If Prudencio haunted the family with the intention to frighten them, he would be a manifestation of revenge. However, this is not the case. He does not instill fear in Úrsula's heart but instead causes her to feel *pity*. Úrsula feels bad for Prudencio and the death he met at the hand of her husband, and his ghost is, therefore, a symbol of his oppressed life rather than his violent death.

Toni Morrison's magical realism novel, *Beloved*, is filled with oppression. Sethe is an ex-slave, and nearly everyone in her life has been a victim to the same subjugation of freedom that she faces. The oppression of all slaves is brought to the physical realm by the return of Sethe's dead daughter, Beloved, whom Sethe had murdered in order to protect her from a life of servitude. Beloved first haunts the home as a ghostly spirit without an actual body or form. The

inhabitants of 124 describe the ghost as anything from “spiteful,” to “rage,” to “just sad” (Morrison 3, 5, 10). The range in reactions to the ghost vary due to its varied behaviors – sometimes it shakes objects in the house, or knocks something over, or simply climbs up the stairs. The ghost is of a two-year-old girl, who eventually comes into the physical realm by taking on a body and invading Sethe’s home, yet she does so by invitation. Sethe allows herself to be the victim of physical and mental abuse from Beloved, because she feels overwhelmed by her infanticidal guilt. Beloved herself is a representation of the oppressed freedoms of slaves before and even after the Civil War. She did not die because Sethe was insane, but she was, like Prudencio Aguilar, robbed of her life. Unlike Prudencio, who died from a matter of pride, Beloved was murdered to protect her from what Sethe considered to be a worse fate: the life of a slave, torn from her freedom.

The ghostly apparitions that appear in these novels are not the only instances of magical occurrences accepted as reality. However, it is important to note that their presence is never considered to be rare or questionable. In *Beloved*, Paul D walks into 124 and immediately asks, “What kind of evil you got in here?” (Morrison 10). Sethe nonchalantly replies, “It’s not evil, just sad. Come on. Just step through” (10). Morrison follows this reply with a description of Sethe from Paul D’s point of view, but there is never any indication that he is shocked about a ghostly presence in her home. Instead, he wonders at her past and his, how they had both changed or not changed over the years. This intermingling of magic and reality, in which they become partners with one another, is a very similar style to that which Kafka uses in *The Metamorphosis*.

Although the supernatural happenings (frequently ghosts or apparitions, but not always) in magical realism novels are oftentimes visual symbols of oppression, they also seem to sometimes serve as means of alleviating, dispelling, or redeeming those means of coercion that held the characters back before. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, José Arcadio Segundo hides from a military officer that searches for him in the Melquíades room. José’s brother, Aureliano Segundo, and his mother, Santa Sofía de la Piedad, both see José sitting on the side of the bed. The military officer who has come to look for him, however, somehow completely overlooks him, as though he is invisible to anyone outside his family. Indeed, the military man, the figure of authority, the *oppressor*, is unable to see the man that he intends to oppress. Márquez deliberately uses this physical impossibility, the invisibility of a man to one person while others can see him clearly, as a way of combating the oppressive forces that mean the break down José Arcadio Segundo’s autonomy.

Stephen Hart writes, “[G]hosts often operate in magic-realist fiction as disembodied memorialisations of a trauma experienced by the subaltern, normally in the past” (118). This is indeed true in the case of Sethe’s experience with the ghost of her daughter in *Beloved*. For Hart, Beloved is far more than just the vengeful spirit of a young girl whose life was taken too soon. Beloved, “is also the projection of the repressed collective memory of a violated people,” who are, of course, the slaves of this time period (120). Beloved may not seem at first to combat any sort of oppression besides that of her own life. However, upon closer examination and building on Hart’s understanding of Beloved as representing a “repressed collective memory,” the girl’s physical presence, although impossible in what readers would consider reality but entirely possible in the world of *Beloved*, is actually a means of recollecting a repressed past. The subjugation of Sethe, all the slaves of Sweet Home, and indeed any slaves at all, is forced away from their memory by fear, shame, hate, and sadness. In such a way, they respond to their treatment as their masters would have them do so – by doing their work, emotionless, like

animals on a farm, without any questioning. Because Beloved takes the form of a young lady and enters into Sethe's house, she calls forth memories that Sethe had long forgotten but are inherently attached to the memory of her daughter. Indeed, Sethe had oppressed herself by banishing her harsh past, and she was at least able to come clean about what had happened with Beloved nearby.

Denver, Sethe's other daughter and her last remaining child, is also freed from a sort of oppression by the presence of Beloved. It is entirely impossible that Denver be able to speak to, play with, touch, and interact with her sister, because she had died at the age of two. However, Morrison allows the impossibility of such a thing to enter into Denver's life as a real, tangible reality. As Hart writes, "What is important about the supernatural as presented in *Beloved* is that it is a subalternised reality, that is, it is directly expressive of societal oppression" (121). Because the supernatural presence of Beloved is considered to be an expression of the oppression of slaves, Denver's ability to break away from her mother and sister at the end of the novel, her time with Miss Bodwin and the possibility of paying jobs and an education, represent her ability to overcome oppressive forces.

At the end of *Beloved*, Morrison writes, "By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there" (324). The spirits in these novels do not necessarily create solutions for oppressive situations, nor do those situations always manifest themselves in the form of a spirit. Magical realism includes all kinds of supernatural happenings and is certainly not limited to the presence of ghosts in a home. However, it is clear that oppression can oftentimes be closely linked with the author's deliberate use of magical elements. Perhaps magical realism authors include those unusual or unreal elements for the sole purpose of adding interest to a story. Or, perhaps Márquez intended to highlight the weight of a heavy conscience through the presence of Prudencio Aguilar's ghost. Perhaps Morrison wished to emphasize the brutality of a slave's life by the sheer destruction of Beloved's enraged spirit. Perhaps, like in the case of Gregor Samsa, the stark and harsh reality of oppressive forces, his mundane life as a salesman supporting his unappreciative family, is softened or heightened or, at the very least, affected by the inclusion of the impossible.

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