

How American Interpretation of other Faiths Change our Understanding of Reality and the Supernatural in Magical Realism

The genre of magical realism was established in the 1960's and 1970's after a large "boom" of Latin American fiction. These stories combined elements of the supernatural with reality. Later, the genre found its way into Asian-American and Native American literature with the same features. However, many of the magical elements in these stories have ties back to the old religions and practices of Latin American, Asian, and Native American cultures, leading the reader to question whether these are fictional stories or simply a reality different from their own.

Many aspects of modern day Christianity can be traced back to original Pagan practices or have magical associations. One main example is the idea of sacrifices and consuming something that serves as a replacement in said sacrifice. The sacrament of communion in the Christian church serves as a reminder of the sacrifice Jesus made for the world. At the last supper, he says, "Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:54). Depending on the branch of Christianity and if they believe in transubstantiation, when worshipers take communion, they believe the bread and wine not only represent Jesus's body and blood, but are converted into his body and blood. Other branches who do not believe in transubstantiation simply believe the bread and wine are symbols that serve as a reminder. In both cases, these practices can be traced back to pagan religions. The first being the most obvious with ritual sacrifice and consumption of body and blood but also in using symbolic replacements. To many outside of the Christian faith, this practice of

Communion is one that stands out as “absurd” or on par with what we commonly think of with paganism and witchcraft.

Just as those from the outside can look in on Christianity and see its practices as “magical” or “witchcraft”, the same happens with other cultures and faiths. As we live in a very Anglo-Christian world, especially in North America, it is easy for these values to seep into our subconscious even if we are not practicing Christians. This can be seen when looking at other, older, practices that predate English colonialism of the continent. One example of this is looking at ancient Mexican culture and religions. Aspects of the Aztec culture can still be seen in some of the ways the Mexican people worship. This is not saying that all Christians in Latin America have adapted ancient Aztec practices into their faith, but one can not ignore the implication in the novels mentioned later on.

According to Eugene Subbotsky in chapter 6 of his book *Magic and the Mind:*

Mechanisms, Functions, and Development of Magical Thinking and Behavior,

“Anthropological and ethnographic studies of Mexican culture and religion suggest that there exists a strong adherence to magical believes” (57). These supernatural beliefs are still common in modern Mexican communities and it “co-exists with the official Christian religious ideology” (Subbotsky 57). To those who are unfamiliar with the old traditions and how they integrate with Christianity in these areas, it would seem as if they were mixing magic and religion.

In a very similar way, without an understanding of Native American history and worship practices, seeing the interaction between faiths can seem strange. Vanessa Holford Diana addresses this in her essay “‘I am not a fairy tale’: Contextualizing Sioux Spirituality and Story Traditions of Susan Power’s *The Grass Dancer*”. She breaks down

the separation, or lack thereof, between reality and one's faith and poses the question: "how do we classify Native fiction that challenges Western concepts of the real?" (6).

These conversations are crucial elements to consider when one is reading stories that are categorized as magical realism. At its base, magical realism consists of the supernatural coinciding with the every day. This differs from fantasy as there is no world building or separation between worlds. However, after looking deeper, one notices that the "supernatural" elements in stories such as *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende, and *So Far From God* by Ana Castillo could be elements of a different culture's spirituality in contrast with the Christian world we are familiar with.

In *The House of the Spirits*, Allende tells the story of multiple generations in South America. While the novel focuses primarily on politics at the time, there is a constant underlying understanding that the character of Clara is clairvoyant and has been since she was young. At one point, she sees a family member dying and fears that she caused it when all she did was see it happen before it did. This concept of seeing the future, while not typically considered to be part of the Christian faith, is seen in many older Latin faiths and cultures.

So Far From God focuses on Chicano culture. In this novel, we see many supernatural events occur from a child coming back from the dead to having visions and healing abilities. The novel follows one family and its daughters through their lives which have been touched with the supernatural. Similar to *The House of the Spirits*, Castillo also discusses the politics of the time as well as the reclaiming of the female voice.

To the reader who is unfamiliar with customs and practices of cultures outside of Christian North America, these elements (having visions, speaking to the dead, healing,

etc.) are works of fiction, thus labeling them as “magical realism”: magic coinciding with reality. But where is the line between magic and religion, as religion is, “the most sophisticated, historically developed, and powerful example of magical reality,” (Subbotsky, 4). In fact, as stated above, many believe the concepts of magic and religion were once one in the same, but today, we have decided what can be associated with religion and what can not. Subbotsky differentiates between “Noninstitutionalized magical beliefs” (NIMBs) which are not connected to any “official” doctrine and “institutionalized magical beliefs” that are. The differences between the two are simply what society has deemed “religion” and “magic”. Many of the magical elements in Castillo and Allende’s novels fall under the NIMB category. Because of this, we interpret the events to be a work of fiction, and not reality, which is what Diana relates in her analysis of *The Grass Dancer*. As mentioned earlier, Diana asks the question: “How do we classify Native fiction that challenges Western concepts of the real?” (6). In Power’s own comments about her book, she does not claim *The Grass Dancer* to be magical realism. She says, “Given the culture I was raised in....this is actual reality to me. It might not be another culture’s reality but it is *not* a literary strategy for me,” (Diana, 7). This quote from Power sums up the central argument of this analysis: who, or what, determines reality and magic? Whose reality is correct, if there is a correct one?

In conclusion, the genre of magical realism is one that combines the supernatural alongside everyday reality. However, since the genre of magical realism originated with Latin American authors, one must ask themselves if what they are reading is magical reality or simply a manifestation of other faiths corresponding with their own.

Works Cited

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