LOCATING THE SUPERNATURAL: A COMPARISON OF MAGICAL REALISM AND FANTASY FICTION

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Abstract

Magical realism and fantasy fiction share the quality of treating the magical and supernatural elements quite favorably. However, there are certain differences in how it each employs those supernatural elements. This study suggests that the main difference in employing the supernatural elements in these genres is the fact that while in magical realism the supernatural is possible in our contemporary world and accepted as a mundane part of reality, in fantasy fiction the supernatural is trapped in completely make-belief worlds with no reference to our world. It is argued that the setting of the stories, in terms of both location and time, is quite significant in determining how the supernatural is presented in those specific ways. Explaining the typical patterns of the choice of setting with examples from renowned examples of both genres, the difference between magical realism and fantasy fiction is thoroughly examined. Questioning the reason for this difference in the treatment of the supernatural, this study also tackles the question whether where these genres have originated and continue to be produced is influential. Accordingly, it also looks at the underlying cultural and socioeconomic reasons that prompt the writers to use the supernatural in their fiction in these specific ways in addition to the different stages of capitalism in the countries and societies from which these two genres of fiction mainly emerge.

Keywords: Magical Realism, Fantasy Fiction, The Supernatural in Literature, J.R.R. Tolkien, Gabriel García Márquez.

1. Introduction

This study examines two different approaches to the use of the supernatural in the world of fiction, namely fantasy fiction and magical realism, both of which have been firmly established in the global literary scene during the second half of the twentieth century. The reason why this work singles out these two genres that use supernatural elements is the fact that neither of them casts the supernatural in an unfavorable light. Out-of-this-world happenings take place amply in both of them, yet these incidents are never met (neither by the reader nor by the characters) with the fear of the unknown or with the surprise that usually accompanies typical stories of unearthly happenings as usually happens in gothic/horror fiction. Neither is there any scientific explanation for the supernatural and improbable incidents in these imaginary worlds as is the case with science-fiction. However, this similarity in their positive (or neutral) approach to the supernatural is most probably the only one they share. Although there are several differences between these genres including structural and narrative differences as well as the content-based ones, this essay focuses on the treatment of the supernatural elements. It suggests that the main difference in employing the supernatural elements in these genres is the fact that while in magical realism the supernatural is possible in our contemporary world and accepted as a mundane part of reality, in fantasy fiction the supernatural is trapped in completely make-belief worlds with no reference to our world. It is argued that the setting of the stories, in terms of both location and time, is quite significant in determining how the supernatural is presented in those specific ways. Explaining the typical patterns of the choice of setting with examples from renowned examples of both genres, the difference between magical realism and fantasy fiction is laid bare. Questioning the reason for this difference in the treatment of the supernatural, this study also tackles the question whether where these genres have originated and continue to be produced is influential. Accordingly, it also looks at the underlying cultural and socioeconomic reasons that prompt the writers to use the supernatural in their fiction in these specific ways in addition to the different stages of capitalism in the countries and societies from which these two genres of fiction mainly emerge.

A quick examination of the history of the supernatural in the Western fictional world explains a great deal about why magical realism and fantasy fiction are important as genres that treat supernatural without giving it negative implications. What appears to be quite interesting in this history is the coincidence of the rise

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of capitalism (specifically industrial capitalism) with the "decline of magic" as Keith Thomas puts it. Thomas, in his *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*, examines the popular beliefs in the supernatural and magic in England during 1500-1700, and suggests that in early modern England, the belief in the existence of the supernatural was mainstream, and not marginal. He also suggests that this mainstream way of thinking changed with the spread of Protestantism as well as the scientific advancements that came up with rational explanations to the events that were formerly attributed to magic. It is possible to see the effects of this change in the production of literary works as well. The rise of capitalism can also be added to the list that reinforced "decline of magic" in early modern England. The use of supernatural in Western literary tradition starting with ancient myths, legends, and epics, and persisting in various genres (not excluding Shakespeare's plays), slowly comes to a halt with the rise of capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and this dry spell is reinforced with the Enlightenment period in the eighteenth century. When the supernatural emerges in fiction again towards the end of the eighteenth century, it is no longer in its previous form as normalized and accepted phenomena. The new rising literary genre of the time, "the novel" would be known for its realism, so rich in details that its realism showed journalistic qualities. On the other hand, as a reaction to the Enlightenment period and its rationalism as well as the rise of industrial capitalism, the Romantic period witnessed the creation of fiction with supernatural elements in it. E. J. Clery in his *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* maps out the "emergence of the supernatural into fiction," and points out to the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) as the first example of this revival of supernatural in literature (Clery, 1995: 1). Undoubtedly, it is no coincidence that *The Castle of Otranto* is widely considered to be the first example of gothic fiction. Thus, it is not far-fetched to argue that supernatural reenters into the fictional world through the genre of the gothic, and as such it is transformed into something dark, unknown, and fearsome in this new genre, making the break from supernatural literature of two hundred years ago even more visible. Clery suggests that now highly accepted gothic novels of the late eighteenth century were not readily recognized at the time: "The year 1800 announces the end of one particular struggle over the boundaries of fictional representation and the beginning of an era of acceptance. The ever-increasing proliferation of supernatural fictions through the next two centuries still shows no signs of slackening in the last years of the twentieth century" (Clery, 1995: 2). Clery is right in his assessment that during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the supernatural appeared more frequently in fiction, and with the popularity of writers like William Morris, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. G. Wells, and Lord Dunsany, the fantasy genre started to be established.

2. Fantasy Fiction

What the popular fantasy novels of the twentieth century introduced was a notion of the supernatural not associated with fear of the unknown. It is also only after the second half of the twentieth century that fantasy fiction started to enjoy a critical success, and has been accepted as a literary genre. Brian Stablefort in his introduction to *The A to Z of Fantasy Literature* explains that "the notion of 'fantasy' as a literary genre is so recent. Before 1969, the description 'fantasy,' with respect to literary works, was usually only applied to a variety of children's fiction, the implication being that the folly of fantasizing was something that adults ought put away with other childish things" (Stablefort, 2009: xxxvii). The fact that fantasy fiction was starting to be respected and accepted as a literary genre in its own around mid-twentieth century can also be affirmed with the establishment of three of the most prestigious awards for fantasy fiction, Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards, which have been presented since 1953, 1966, and 1975 respectively.

Popularity of fantasy novels like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series and C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* have certainly helped establish this genre in which the writers introduced new worlds full of wizards, spells, giants, ghosts, and magical animals. And these "new worlds" were literally new. The setting for these stories was neither our world nor our contemporary time. Tolkien created Middle-earth with its various races, languages, and rules while Lewis's Pevensie children had to leave this world through a magical wardrobe to reach Narnia, where magic and mythical beasts abound. Starting with Tolkien and Lewis, most Anglo-American fantasy writers like Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip Pullman, George R. R. Martin, and Terry Goodkind have chosen to locate their magical lands outside of our world, and mostly in a time reminiscent of the Middle Ages. This decision to create what Tolkien calls a "Secondary World which your mind can enter" can be considered as one of the most important qualities that defines the fantasy as a literary genre (Tolkien, 1964: 36). Another largely accepted definition of fantasy emphasizing the same quality is Manlove's:

> A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or *impossible worlds*, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms. (Manlove, 1975: 1)

With both Tolkien's "Secondary World" and "impossible worlds" in Manlove's definition, it becomes clear that many writers and critics entertain the idea that there needs to be another world for the supernatural to exist, which is indicative of their rationalist worldview that suggests the supernatural is not possible in our world. In the same vein, Lin Carter, after suggesting that the essence of fantasy stories can be summed up in just one word, in "magic," explains the necessity to create settings for that magic to be possible:

> In the real world in which we live, magic does not work. A fantasy is a story set in a milieu that includes magic as an integral part of the natural world. Since we have yet to find a place among the laws of physics for magic powers, such tales imply—in fact such tales require—the construction of an invented milieu. To compose a fantasy, an author must construct a literary universe in which magic works. (Carter, 1973: 7)

Lin Carter's compelling argument for the need for a different world than ours for the magic to happen reveals the underlying binary way of thinking according to which magic and supernatural have to be excluded from our world as it does not represent the reality of our physical world. This paper argues that this necessity felt by the writers to construct invented worlds in which magic and the supernatural can become ordinary is the main difference that sets fantasy fiction apart from magical realism. This insistence on creating a different world and time in which magic can exist manifests the underlying notion that there is no place for magic and supernatural existence in our contemporary world, not even in a fictional representation of it.

3. Magical Realism

Magical realism stands apart from fantasy novels in its lack of this effort to keep magical and/or the supernatural separate from the ordinary world we live in as it does not bother to create a different setting –a location and time- for magic to happen. Having emerged in the second half of the twentieth century in Latin America first with the novels of Alejo Carpentier, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende, magical realism introduces the supernatural and magic to our real world. Angel Flores defines magical realism simply as "the amalgamation of realism and fantasy" (Flores, 1995: 121). Zamora and Faris, on the other hand, state that in magical realism

> [T]he supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing. (Zamora and Faris, 1995: 3).

Magical realist texts naturalize the supernatural simply by not drawing any attention to it as something out of the ordinary. Nor do the characters feel the need to hide things that seem extraordinary to the rational eye. Thus, there is no need for a different world with a new set of rules so that extraordinary things can happen. In magical realism, it already happens in our contemporary world and time.

To explain more clearly how this approach to the supernatural works in magical realist fiction, a look at the most celebrated example of magical realism will prove necessary: Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). The novel takes place in Macondo, a city located in Colombia; and during one hundred years and through six generations of Buendia family, the reader witnesses the history of Macondo and its people, from its foundation as a small village to the time it turns into a big metropolitan city. Thus, it can be said that Macondo holds a mirror to the history of Latin America (and specifically Colombia). What makes this novel one of the primary examples of magical realism is that strange things happen in Macondo: an insomnia plague affects the whole town; rain does not stop for years; yellow flowers falls from the sky to mark the passing of Macondo's founding patriarch; Remedios the Beauty ascends the sky in daylight while folding laundry. However, Macondo's residents seem oblivious to these extraordinary phenomena. No one in the novel seems to stop and question these strange incidents; these happenings are never registered as supernatural, or as out of the ordinary. Although supernatural happenings are profuse in both *The Lord of the Rings* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* —and equally impossible from a rational perspective—the reader is often more inclined to believe in the possibility of those in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This is because, as Salman Rushdie suggests, in García Márquez's world;

> impossible things happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun. It would be a mistake to think of Marquez's literary universe as an invented, self-referential, closed system. He is not writing about Middle-earth, but about the one we all inhabit. Macondo exists. That is its magic. (Rushdie, 1991: 302)

This comparison of Salman Rushdie's between Tolkien's Middle-earth and García Márquez's Macondo –both fictional settings- also demonstrates the main difference between magical realism and fantasy fiction in a larger context. The fact that supernatural events could happen in Macondo without creating any surprise or drawing any attention to their strangeness and without the need to transport all these supernatural phenomena to a separate universe —as is the case with most fantasy novels— gives us a clear idea about how magical realism is different in its treatment of the supernatural content.

4. Magical Realism vs. Fantasy Fiction: Why They Emerge Where They Emerge

The underlying reason for this main difference between magical realism and fantasy fiction in terms of their treatment of setting, and an influential one at that, can be traced back to the locations these two genres has originated and continue to be produced. It probably would not be a stretch to state that fantasy fiction in its modern fictional form, mostly as novels, mainly emerges from the Western world while magical realism has its origins in Latin America as well as the postcolonial and developing world. Thus, an analysis of these two literary genres and the differences between them reflects the particular cultural and socioeconomic characteristics of the societies they come from. This paper argues that at the basis of explaining these differences are the different stages of capitalism present in the countries and societies from which these two genres of fiction mainly emerge. By contrasting the fantasy novels that emerge from the most advanced capitalist countries in Anglo-American tradition and the magical realist novels from the postcolonial and developing world around the world, it is possible to show how these different stages of economic production produce various belief systems and perceptions of the supernatural and influence the way writers create their imaginary worlds and regulate the extraordinary elements in those worlds.

An important but mostly overlooked writer, Haitian Jacques Stephen Alexis refers to the qualities of magical realism that is directly connected to the mode of economic production of the country/community (in his case Haiti) that produces magical realist stories. Alexis contrasts the more developed modern societies to "the under-developed populations of the world," and in this comparison, he draws attention to the results of industrial capitalism, which he thinks is the main reason that modernized capitalist countries are coming short of legends. He states that;

> Modern life with its stern rates of production, with its concentration of great masses of men into industrial armies, caught up in the frenzy of Taylorism, with its inadequate leisure, and its context of mechanized life, hampers and slows down the production of legends and a living folk lore. (Alexis, 1995: 194)

For Alexis, the developing or underdeveloped nations of the world have a higher chance of creating magical realist stories simply because capitalism and its unnatural ways of living have not caught up with these people yet.

Among many writers who refer to the compatibility between magical realism and the postcolonial world, one is Homi Bhabha who defines magical realism as "the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world" (Bhabha, 1990: 6). On the other hand, there are few writers that support Alexis's focus on the economic mode of production as a determining factor in magical realism. Another scholar who has a similar discussion to that of Alexis is Fredric Jameson who suggests that the content of magical realism rests on "coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features" (Jameson, 1986: 311). In a similar vein, Brenda Cooper also focuses on the transitionary nature of magical realism which she also thinks is shaped by the mingling of emerging capitalism with the older pre-capitalist modes. She suggests that ;

> Magical realism thrives on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity. Such zones occur where burgeoning capitalist development mingles with older pre-capitalist modes in postcolonial societies, and where there is the syncretizing of cultures as creolized communities are created. (Cooper, 1998: 15)

I find this emphasis on economic mode of production and the representations of it in fiction quite an interesting point to understand not only how magical realism uses the supernatural elements but also how in fantasy fiction it is used in different ways.

What Alexis points out perhaps can be more clearly seen in the typical choice of the writers of magical realism and fantasy fiction in their treatment of the temporal side of the setting in their stories. This is because when a writer chooses to set his or her story also determines the economic mode of production available in that chosen time. To be able to formulate this difference between fantasy and magical realism more clearly, it might be necessary to examine the renowned examples of these two genres and how the economic mode of production is represented in these novels. First, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* can be examined more in detail as Tolkien influenced a generation of writers that came after him with his Middle-earth. Tolkien's Middle-earth overflowing with magical objects, people with extraordinary powers and supernatural occurrences is a different world with its own races, physical rules, and even a different ontology. Middle-earth is nothing like our world and everything that happens in this narrative is within the rules of its own setting although it creates a contrast to ours. It is also important to note that the world created for this novel (a complete world with its own history and different languages and cultures for people of different races) is a world quite reminiscent of Medieval Europe in the sense that there is limited technological progress and economic mode of production mainly represents a pre-modern and pre-capitalist age. In this sense, qualities of the period in Tolkien's created universe supports Jameson's idea that "the landscape of fantasy, with its dungeons and magicians, its dragons and hand-

to-hand combat, is an essentially medieval one, or better still and more comprehensively, a pre-modern one" (Jameson, 2002: 274). This pre-modernity also means there is no mass production, either. Every object in Middle-earth is handmade; some of them have their own history and even a will of their own—the notorious ring being the prime example. The only instance of mechanization and mass production is when Saruman the Wizard starts creating an army of *orcs* that will serve him and Sauron, the Dark Lord. He creates thousands of misshapen brutal creatures with more animalistic qualities than human as he destructs the nature around him, particularly a very ancient forest. Treebeard, an ancient tree shepherd that can talk and walk and who eventually saves his forest from the destructive power of Saruman, comments that "[Saruman] has a mind of metal and wheels" (Tolkien, 2004: 616). Thus, it can be understood that the only example of mass production in the novel is utterly associated with evil. Of course, the only way for Tolkien to be able to create such a magical world was to situate it in a seemingly pre-capitalist world. The advancement of technology depends on the progress of science, which eventually becomes contradictory to the extraordinary nature of this world. It is this contradiction that lacks in *The Lord of the Rings* and most of other fantasy novels.

Another quite popular example of fantasy fiction that I want to refer to is J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. While many fantasy novels follow Tolkien's example of creating a new imaginary world for the magic to be possible, Rowling sets the story in our contemporary world, so magic does exist in this world and now, yet there are rigid rules keeping the magical world hidden from the non-magical one. Rowling even has a name for the non-magical part of this world; it is called "muggle." The clear-cut distinction of our *muggle* world and magical world is highly emphasized throughout the series; these two worlds never come together and create a coherent (or chaotic) reality, and it is only the magical world the reader has access to in this series; the problems of our *muggle* world do not matter. Furthermore, the magic world is heavily regulated with rules as much as our world, if not more. I think the Ministry of Magic is a prime example of this. Politics and diplomacy are a great part of this magical world, with the Minister of Magic acting as the highest authority figure. Later in the series, specifically in the fifth book *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the Ministry of Magic gets infiltrated and becomes the main way of monitoring the wizarding community for Dark Lord Voldemort's purposes by using certain uses of magic. Though it seems very exciting to us *muggle* readers, the magical world can be tedious: for instance, there are witches and wizards stuck in dead-end boring jobs in the Ministry of Magic. One such person, Ron's father Mr. Weasley, is an admirer of our *muggle* world and he is at a loss for words in the face of technological wonders like television, cars, and planes. It is clear in this sense that what Rowling creates is almost a magical parallel universe where the rules are different but still there. Thus, it is possible to conclude there is no contradiction resulting from the magical and supernatural happenings. In fact, Rowling's imaginary world is the secret and magical equivalent of our own world. In the series, the reader is more than once reminded that two worlds were not always separate: it is only in 1692 that International Confederation of Wizards declared "The International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy" deciding that the magical world should go into hiding and the magic should not be performed in front of *muggles* (Rowling, 2007: 318). There is certainly a reference here to Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692 and 1693. However, it is also obvious after seventeenth century, with the unhindered rise of scientific developments and capitalism, it would not be possible to create a universe in which the magical and supernatural coexisted with the reality of an advanced capitalist environment. In other words, without this international secrecy rule, it would not be possible for Rowling to situate her novels in our temporal and spatial world.

From these two examples of fantasy fiction, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* series, I want to move towards magical realism once more and explain how the magic of Middle-earth and Hogwarts constitutes a different plane than magical realist novels like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). Being one of the most famous representatives of magical realism, *Midnight's Children* borrows a lot from Latin American magical realist writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende. Following their example, Rushdie sets his story in our contemporary world complete with its capitalism and imperialism, yet there is space for magic, prophecies, and humans with super powers in this world. Having been born at the exact time India gains its independence from Britain (thus, being one of many children of midnight with extraordinary powers), the story of Saleem and his family is intertwined with the political and historical events of first India, and then Pakistan and Bangladesh as these countries come into being. The spatial and temporal setting of Rushdie's novel, as it is the case with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, allows for the depiction of reality of these developing countries with different levels of their capitalist economies in which various modes of economic production can be seen. Registering the story of Saleem's family also becomes recording the history of the India's transition from colonialism to independence and then the various struggles it had inside and outside the country. In fact, the

novel contains so many historical details about events that happened in the last century in the Indian subcontinent that Rushdie himself explains that *Midnight's Children* is considered to be "pretty realistic, almost a history book" by Indian readers ("Introduction", *Midnight's Children*, xiii). He also adds that while Indian reader is more inclined to prioritize the historical and political content of the novel, the Western reader usually perceives the novel as fantasy. The fact that there is so much disparity among the readers from different parts of the world in describing a work of fiction also gives us a clear idea about how the supernatural elements and the possibility of their reality is perceived by different readers from different parts of the world. In *Midnight's Children*, like in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the supernatural does not have rules and regulations; it is arbitrary, chaotic and familiar in its chaos.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be suggested that the nature of supernatural elements in magical realist fiction and fantasy fiction is different due to different treatment of the setting in these fictional worlds, in terms of both time and location. Whereas the writers of fantasy fiction typically locates the story in a different world than our own and usually in a premodern temporal setting, magical realist writers mostly set their stories in our own contemporary world and time. When considered together with the fact that these different genres tend to emerge from different parts of the world, there might be drawn parallels between the choice of setting by these writers and the level of economic/capitalist development in the countries they are from. It can be proposed that the reason for such different ways of employing the supernatural and magical in these two different genres is mainly because these specific writers are shaped by the socioeconomic systems they come from or write about. And those socioeconomic qualities are ultimately shaped by the economic mode of production in a given country, by how advanced capitalism is in a specific place. It is argued in this study that developing and unevenly developed societies in which various mode of productions exist rather than one are more inclined to produce literary works like magical realism, which represents a transition and a fusion between the magical and the real, traditional and modern, old and new, storytelling and novel. In the same vein, fantasy fiction and the rigidity of its separation of the supernatural from our rational world can be seen as a product of highly capitalist society.

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