

Woodoo or Allegory? Toni Morrison's Magical Realism Walks a Thin Line Between Magic Reality and Mythical Folklore

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Abstract:

The chief focus of this paper is to explore the aesthetics and artistic leverage of magic realism, which are arguably deployed in the novels of the Nobel Prize winning African-American writer and thinker, Toni Morrison, who is quite frequently labelled a magic realist. My special concern is to ponder whether or why some of her writerly techniques and authorial strategies actually might have earned her the label of a magic realist author, and, by the same token, what is generally understood by the oft-quoted phrase “The Magical Realism of Toni Morrison.”

It is widely acknowledged that the term “magic realism” first appeared in the context of art, more particularly in the vocabulary of a German art critic Franz Roh, who used it to describe the work of post-Expressionist artists in the mid-1920s.

Since the 1950s and 1960s, the term magic realism has been increasingly associated with literature, more particularly with Latin American fiction, namely writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortazar, Jorge Luis Borges, but also Günter Grass, Salman Rushdie, John Fowles, or the Caribbean writer Derek Walcott. Unlike the definition of magic realism in art, i.e., looking for mysterious things inherent in everyday reality, magic realism in literature is perhaps best described by “amalgamation of reality and fantasy” (Hegerfeldt 2004) or, as Lori Chamberlein puts it, “writing that works both within and against the aesthetics of realism” (Chamberlein 1986:17). In other words, the basic prerequisite is almost seamless coexistence of the supernatural and natural, the fantastic and dream-like visions cohabiting alongside everyday events. Magical realism is frequently subsumed within a much larger, older and more vaguely defined genre of the Fantastic, where the critical consensus puts even classics such as Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, both of which clearly lend themselves to fantastic readings (Cornwell 2002).

At the outset let me briefly single out what is generally regarded as the essential sum of the most distinctive features of magical realism. It is very difficult to come to any clear-cut critical consensus as to which of these features should be regarded as definite and defining, perhaps because of the fact that the word realism itself has proved to be rather shifty and elusive over time. As a matter of fact, some critics would go as far as to say that the magic realist brand has become so diluted and abused over the past thirty years or so, that it has moved quite a bit from the original framework. For example, the writer and critic Bruce Holland Rogers argues that the term magical realism as employed today very often stands for prestigious and self-styled highbrow fantasy books for readers who take pride in not reading escapist literature (Rogers 2001:24).

The above indicates that trying to pin down some universally applicable and “binding” attributes of magic realism would prove a rather quixotic attempt. A much more reasonable and moderate choice is to give an overview of symptomatic features that tend to be most readily associated with this genre. Based on this groundwork, I would like to proceed with a review of several of Morrison’s novels in search of characters, situations or writerly approaches that might have earned the author the magic realist label.

The following two basic artistic maxims are most frequently associated with magic realism. Magic realism implies that disproportion is part of our reality too (Simpkins 1993:148) and ordinary life may also be the scene of the extraordinary (Mikics 1993:372). Both of these seem to suggest that magical realism is no less real than traditional realism. The intention behind this is to “show reality more truly with the marvellous aid of metaphor” (Merivale 1993:331).

In terms of distinctive features of this genre, it is generally held that magic realist fiction combines fantastic or dreamlike elements with reality (Soukhanov 1992), the recognizably realistic merges with the unexpected and the inexplicable, and it combines elements of dreams, fairy story, or mythology with the everyday (Drabble 2000). The fantastic elements tend to be left unexplained and the fantastic situation or event is treated realistically. A magic realist piece often leaves the readers uncertain as to which interpretation they should believe in – the magical or the realist interpretation. Magic realist works tend to produce detailed sensory input and are characterized by abundant use of symbols of imagery. They invert cause and effect, for instance, whereby a character may suffer before a tragedy occurs (*Wikipedia*). They draw upon the energies of fable, folk tale, and myth (Baldick 2004) or even incorporate legend or folklore (*Wikipedia*), which invade the realism and change the whole basis of the art (Harmon 1992:113).

Interestingly enough, purely magic elements (at least their traditional connotation) are generally not included as distinctive features of magic realism, or at least not singled out as a special item. By “magic” I do not mean the sorcery of the intellectually rather downplayed fantasy genre, but something I chose to call “voodoo,” which subsumes everything verging on black magic, root medicine, voodoo, wood magic, tree-worshipping, druidic rituals, but all of these in realistic settings (such as the pagan tree-worship found in John Steinbeck’s *To A God Unknown*). This category obviously walks a very thin line, because some of these elements are quite frequently deployed and occasionally misshapen by the fantasy genre.

Toni Morrison has repeatedly said that she does not aspire to be stigmatised as a magic realist, but since the general critical consensus does label her as one, it would be interesting to explore some aspects of her writing that might qualify as magic realist, to a varying degree. If we start by sifting through the previously mentioned general symptoms of magic realist fiction, Toni Morrison’s work definitely abounds in detailed sensory input and symbols and imagery; in addition to this some of her work does at times contain unexplained and inexplicable fantastic or dream-like elements and combines these with reality and, what is more, ostensibly treats these as normal.

I have come to choose four categories which I found to be verging on the magic realist attributes. These can be summarily labelled as 1. *rising from the dead* or *ghost-like appearances*, 2. *supernatural healing abilities*, 3. *divine guiding hand* or *supernatural assistance*, 4. *inexplicable oddities* and 5. *incorporated folklore or mythology*.

The category labelled “rising from the dead” denotes the seemingly supernatural reappearance of people deemed dead. Perhaps the most famous of Morrison’s characters of this type is Beloved, the haunting or haunted child from the book of the same name. Sethe Garner, a runaway slave, chooses to kill her baby-girl rather than give her back to the slave owner. When the child later rises from the dead, first in the shape of what could be called a poltergeist, then in the shape of a ghostly teenage girl, the first three interpretations that come to mind are that she has come to set the record straight, to reconcile, or to try to understand what reasons led her mother to do what she did.

It is clear that there is quite substantial leeway which would allow for interpretations that do not necessarily coincide with magic realist maxims. The re-appearance of Beloved does not have to be read as a ghostly embodiment of the murdered child, it can also be understood as a very vivid manifestation of Sethe’s psyche.

A careful close reading of the text reveals at least one “slippage” that goes decidedly against the principles of magic realism. The supernatural phenomenon may perhaps be realistically treated, yet the exorcism through which the local women eventually manage to get rid of Beloved makes it perfectly clear that she is indeed recognized as a spirit or an apparition, and dealt with in an appropriate manner. This does not necessarily violate the hermeneutic unity of the novel, yet it does collide with some of the previously outlined attributes of magic realism, namely the principle that the readers should be left at quandary as to whether they should believe the magical or the realist interpretation. The exorcism is extremely suggestive, which narrows down the potential for ambiguity on the part of the reader.

Another, perhaps slightly less palpable, dream-like reappearance takes place at the end of Morrison's 1998 novel, *Paradise*. The basic dynamics of the novel are grounded on the building tension between two adjacent universes: Ruby – a wholly black town in Oklahoma founded on rigid religious principles as a sort of refuge against the injustices which had previously been imposed (for generations) upon the eight founding families, and a nearby convent, which used to be run by nurses, but now provides asylum for a small community of ostentatiously independent “stray” women. When the unity of the town starts crumbling as a result of the emancipationist spirit of the 1960s and 70s, the bewildered founders of the town choose to save the communal coherence and unity by singling out and attacking a common enemy, the convent women, one of whom is definitely killed and another four are presumed dead.

The four missing women make a phantom appearance at the end of the book, when they arguably come to reconcile with their nearest and dearest. I say arguably, because, as I indicated earlier, there is not a universal critical consensus as to whether the four convent women actually died or not. Their bodies have not been found, but other parts of the book suggest they were shot at and fatally wounded. The most decisive argument in favour of magic realist interpretations springs from the manner in which these reconciliatory (or mainly reconciliatory) encounters are described. I will quote just one passage to demonstrate the dream-time quality of the reconciliatory comeback of one of the convent women – a mother who had previously compulsively run away from her family, after accidentally letting her twin babies die of suffocation in a car. This is the end-scene of her reunion with her daughter, who had previously been unforgiving and spiteful about the accident, but seems to have grown up to understand the predicament of her mother and come to terms with it.

Sally watched her mother disappear into the crowd. She ran her finger under her nose, then held the cheek that had been kissed. Did she give her the address? Where was she going? Did they pay? When did they pay the cashier? Sally touched her eyelids. One minute they were sopping biscuits; the next they were kissing in the street. (Morrison 1998:315)

This dream-time colouring is obviously very much in the magic realist vein, but the spare narrative logistics of the book prevents us from jumping to conclusions. I therefore consider this supernatural reappearance a liminal case which verges on magic realism. However, if we walk the line between the credible and the incredible, I tend to see *Beloved* as more legitimate as a magic realist piece, because the realist undertones and likely realistic explanations of *Beloved*'s reappearance are much less tenable than those of the four ghost convent women.

Another element that arguably falls within the previously defined “voodoo” category could denote supernatural healing abilities and herbal medicine that verges on black magic. This category can be quite aptly exemplified by two larger-than-life female characters, Consolata, one of the convent women, and Pilate, arguably the key female character of the 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*. Consolata Sosa could be regarded as the only rightful inhabitant of the convent, as she was one of the original nuns, after having been “rescued” from street life poverty in South America. Being a devout Catholic, she is both fascinated and abhorred by her own ability to help dying people by “stepping in” and basically re-igniting them back to life, for example the victim of a car accident in the following passage, who incidentally happens to be the son of her former rival in love:

Consolata looked at the body and without hesitation removed her glasses and focused on the trickles of red discolouring his hair. She stepped in. [...] Inside the boy she saw a pinpoint of light receding. Pulling up energy that felt like fear, she stared at it until it widened. Then more, more, so air could come seeping, at first, then rushing rushing in. Although it hurt like the devil to look at, she concentrated as if the lungs in need were her own [...] Scout opened his eyes, groaned and sat up. [...] Consolata turned her lips down and crossed herself, whispering, “Ave Maria, gratia plena.” The exhilaration was gone now and the thing seemed nasty to her. Like devilment. Like evil craft. (Morrison 1998:245)

The magic realist flavour of Consolata's god-given ability is not so much hampered as amplified by her Catholic remorse and self-flagellation, when she realizes she has been practicing magic. Moreover, it is important to realize that she may loath and demean her magic skills, yet she still does not make any serious attempt to explain the phenomenon, which therefore remains quite safe within the magic fold.

I would like to measure this magic ability against a slightly more credible example of "practising". Pilate in the *Song of Solomon* gives her brother a bewitching beverage that makes him make love to his wife, whom he banned from his bed as a punishment for her alleged incestuous relationship with her father (which is a false accusation, as far as we can deduce from the book). I think these two examples quite aptly demonstrate the boundaries of magic realism. The act of stepping in and re-igniting people to life as opposed to love beverages; the latter might work miracles, yet they are still too commonplace to make it onto the magic realist menu.

The interesting thing is that Morrison actually toys with daytime magic and practising it a number of times, but she frequently holds it for ridicule instead of inflating its status. A good example of this can be found in her 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*, whose main protagonist Pecola seeks the local palmist and interpreter of dreams, the name of Soaphead Church, and asks him to give her blue eyes, with the directness and credulity of a neglected child.

"What can I do for you, my child?" [...]

"My eyes."

"What about your eyes?"

"I want them blue."

Soaphead [...] thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. [...] For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles. (Morrison 1990:137-138)

The crucial point is that if it were not for this helpless verbal shrug and explicit resignation on the part of the self-styled magician, we might easily see the magic procedure which he subsequently prescribes for Pecola as perfectly compatible with magic realist doctrine. There is nothing in the book which would unambiguously disprove the success of the procedure, except for the fact that Pecola's newly attained beauty is later confirmed by her being raped by her own father.

This posits at least one distinctive dividing line between what may qualify as magic realism and what cannot. The ultimate difference resides in the fact that the magic phenomenon may be questioned, doubted, derided, feared, but it is not outwardly stripped off its magic cloak, so to speak, unlike the above extract from *The Bluest Eye*.

The Pilate character from the *Song of Solomon* could also serve as a very good example of what I chose to categorize as inexplicable oddity, in this particular case a missing navel. When she is confronted by some onlooker who accidentally discovers her deformity for the first time, she is completely unaware that there is anything wrong with it and asks a child's question, "What is it for?", to which she gets the riposte, "It is... It is for people who were born natural." (Morrison 1977:144). One may be reluctant to label this deformity as an offshoot of magic realism, but the only realistic medical explanation would be umbilical hernia, a rather rare affliction. However, the book is clearly not indicative of this particular deformity, as Pilate's stomach is described as "blind as a knee," which is a far cry from what umbilical hernias look like. Apart from its unarguable mysterious quality, the missing navel can also be seen as a metonymy of god-like status, which could be derived for example from the well-known religious controversy as to whether Adam and Eve could possibly be portrayed with navels, being the first and original progenitors of humankind. The missing navel on Pilate could then easily be understood as a rank of distinction, indicating her shamanic or even superhuman status. Indeed, some characters in the book seem to see her along these lines and regard the missing navel with disgust, but also with awe. To me, this case of inexplicable oddity definitely qualifies as a being within the magic realist fold, because there is simply no explanation available or even attempted.

Another rather liminal category within the magic realist framework which I will touch on briefly could be labelled divine guiding hand or supernatural assistance.

The previously mentioned founding fathers of Ruby – the wholly black town in Oklahoma, described in the novel *Paradise* – attempt to reconstruct the town without any difference from the original town of Haven created by the Old Fathers sixty years and two generations earlier, which has survived as a sort of founding mythology. Their redemptive pilgrimage to the new Promised Land has been kept alive by oral accounts, which describe it as being led by the supernatural assistance of a “walking man with a satchel”, who shows them the way and who only appears to Zechariah, or Big Papa, the ultimate patriarch of the migrating group. This also seems to fall within the realm of magic realism, since it is a fruitful combination of an inexplicable phenomenon (possibly a dream sequence) and a mythological paradigm, reminiscent of the canonical Judeo-Christian “guidance mechanisms” such as the burning bush or the leading tail of a comet leading the three wise men to Bethlehem. However, the phenomenon is only described in a very sketchy way, which makes it difficult to delve and expand on in more detail.

The last category I would like to explore is the incorporation of folklore or myth into a piece of fiction. Probably the best example of this is again found in *Song of Solomon*, where Morrison beautifully incorporated the Americanised African folk tale about flying people.

My great-granddaddy could fly! Goddam! [...] He didn't need no airplane. He just took off; got fed up. *All the way up!* [...] Lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew on home. (Morrison 1977: 331-332)

This emotional outburst of family pride comes from Macon Dead, the main male character of the novel *Song of Solomon* (Pilate's brother) and concerns his great-grandfather, Solomon or Sugarman, whose life story he manages to unearth in a totally unplanned search for his roots, which is in fact initially driven by material or even mercenary concerns. By following a completely different path, he stumbles across the information that his grandfather belonged to “flying African children” (Morrison 1977:325). When pressed for details, his informant says it was just a lie told by local folk, but then she goes on to elaborate on the details of how his grandfather was dropped by the great-grandfather when he realized his favourite son was too heavy for him to carry away in flight. In other words, Macon's informant paradoxically makes the information even more trustworthy and appetizing, because she starts by ridiculing the myth, but then tells the flying story as if it were firmly rooted in local historiography, and thereby inevitably lends it credence, involuntary as it might be.

As to the purport of this regenerated myth, Morrison herself said on more than one occasion that she did not mind people reading the story in terms of classical symbolism, in the vein of the Icarus myth, but that her principal driving motivation for incorporating the folk tale was the fact that it was so commonplace where she grew up. By incorporating it in a book of fiction, she simply dealt with the material which was part of the mythological currency of the community in which she grew up, or, to be more precise, in which her parents grew up. In her conversation with Thomas LeClair she made it very poignant, claiming that “people used to talk about it, it's in spiritual and gospels” (LeClair 1994: 122). We are therefore led to surmise that she consequently regarded it as a legitimate part of the cultural legacy and saw it fit to be used in her books, without necessarily questioning its credibility.

The origin of the tale is generally traced back to Yoruba mythology. The concept of flying away within the context of transatlantic slavery is described either literally as flying away from the yoke of bondage or as a euphemism for committing suicide (predominantly by jumping overboard during the Middle Passage from Africa on a slave ship). The literal reading of the myth of flying away from slavery with the help of a witch doctor or conjure man was particularly popular among isolated Sea Islands off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina; for them, the story symbolized a means of escaping the cruelties of slavery. The Sea Island folklore collection (put together in 1940 under the title of *Drums and Shadows*) actually contains twenty-seven variants of the Flying Africans legend.¹

Apart from the sole merit of incorporating mythology or folklore into fiction, the flying act can also be read in more symbolic or allegorical ways, for example as an allegory praising selflessness (as opposed to vanity) further developed in the story by the example of a peacock, whose vain and

¹ There are two very famous literary renditions of this topic, Julius Lester's *Black Folktales*, published in 1969, and Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly*. The subject is also quite extensively covered in *The Book of Negro Folklore* by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps.

heavy tail prevents them from flying. Another possible metaphorical reading is a step or leap into the unknown, which actually the main hero takes at the very end of the book.

However, no matter what kind of symbolism or allegorical meaning the reader might read in, the flying myth definitely lends itself to the magic realist claim, because the flying African folk tale is still far beyond what we find realistic in the traditional, rationalistic and exclusionary concept of the word. This is why I find this incorporation of a traditional legend to be perfectly compatible with the magic realist notional framework.

I have been rather eclectic in my choice of examples, but the overall objective was to outline the fundamental features of Morrison's work that make it go onto the magic realist library shelf. I am more interested in the liminal cases than the ones which are more prone to the magic realist claim by all applicable standards. By these I mean numerous very poignantly dream-like or eerie passages found for example in her novels *Tar Baby* or *Jazz*. However, it is safe to conclude that even many of the ambiguous borderline cases could "qualify" as magic realist, given the vast scope of possible connotations this comparatively new genre has acquired.

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