

Abstract

This paper questioned if *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman and *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* by Amiee Bender fit into the genre of magical realism through their use of identity exploration. Qualitative research was conducted where the qualities of magical realism were studied. The research scholars had done about the history and elements of magical realism were analyzed to reveal what magical realism was. By reading various sources of information about the main elements of magical realism it made it possible to define what elements a text needs to be considered magical realism. After defining the genre, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* and *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* were analyzed to reveal if they matched these genre elements. It was found that both *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* and *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* possessed many elements of magical realism. One of the main elements both texts included was the exploration of time, space, and identity.

Keywords: magical realism, identity, latin american literature, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, time, magic, faris, gaiman, bender

The Five Elements of Magical Realism and its Connection to Identity Exploration

Wendy B. Faris (2004) explained in her book, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, that the five main elements of magical realism are an irreducible element, inclusion of details that demonstrated a solid presence of a phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, the merging of different realms, and the exploration of time, space, and identity. *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* by Amiee Bender (2010) and *Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman (2013) utilized these five elements throughout their narratives. The exploration of time, space, and identity is one element both Gaiman (2013) and Bender (2010) utilized heavily. Don Latham (2007) discussed the use of magical realism in three young adult narratives and said the elements of magical realism allowed the adolescent narrators to explore their identities. Magical realism has been tied to the cultural identity of Latin American people as well, Andrés Hermida (2017) claimed in his TED talk, *Magical Realism: Embracing the Absurdity of Latin America*, that magical realism was a core part of Latin literature which was inspired by the absurdity present in their culture. Latin American stories that used magical realism have acted as reflections of cultural identity for decades (Hermida, 2017). When Latham (2007) discussed Faris's (2004) five elements of magical realism he said "Taken together, these characteristics function as subversive narrative elements, serving to question and destabilize the values and assumptions of the dominant, i.e., adult, society. In its emphasis on the fluidity of identity and the questioning of authority, magical realism proves to be a quintessentially "adolescent" mode..." (p. 2). Adolescence was a time where people questioned their identities (Latham 2007). Identity exploration is not only limited to adolescents, as many adult characters have explored their identity in magical realist texts (Faris, 2004). Magical realism used the five

elements to explore cultural and personal identities found between the mundane of everyday life and the supernatural world of uncertainty.

History

Magical Realism was an art movement before it was a literary genre and the five elements of magical realism were first utilized by Latin American authors after Franz Roh's book was released in 1925 (Zamora & Faris, 1995). The first mention of magical realism came much earlier in the 1700s (Asayesh, 2017). Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, otherwise known as Novalis, was a German philosopher and poet who was the first person to write about magical realism (Warnes, 2006). In 1798, Novalis suggested prophets should be referred to as "magischer idealist" or "magischer realist" and despite coining the term, Novalis never developed magical realism because he preferred the closely related concept of magical idealism (Warnes, 2006). The next mention of magical realism occurred in 1925 when Franz Roh published "Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism" (Asayesh, 2017). Roh believed his use of the word "magic" as opposed to "mystic" signified the idea that the unknown or magical elements in artwork hide in the represented world (Zamora & Faris, 1995). Roh's idea is similar to Faris' (2004) idea of the "irreducible element" or the parts of a story that could not be rationalized by a reader using real world logic. When Faris (2004) discussed the "irreducible element" found in magical realism she stated, "These irreducible elements are well assimilated into the realistic textual environment, rarely causing any comment by narrators or characters who model such an acceptance for their readers" (p. 8). While the ideas are similar, Roh and Faris (2004) were discussing two separate forms of magical realism because Roh focused on magical realism as an art movement (Asayesh 2017). Asayesh (2017) and Arargüç (2017) noted that Roh's ideas about magical realism could not be easily applied to literature, "Even if there are similarities between magical realism in

painting and in literature, they have different implications” (p. 29). It is clear to see that Roh’s ideas about magical realism as an art movement had an impact on magical realism in later years as both Faris (2004) and Roh heavily emphasized the natural inclusion of the magical elements in magical realism. Just a year after Roh published his thoughts on magical realism in 1925, Bontempelli published his thoughts and introduced magical realism to Italy (Asayesh, 2017). Bontempelli’s ideas about magical realism were influenced by Roh’s ideas and surrealism (Asayesh, 2017). After Bontempelli and Roh wrote about magical realism in the 1920s magical realism found its footing as a literary genre in Latin America (López-Calvo, 2014). Ignacio López-Calvo (2014) claimed French surrealism was a key inspiration to famous Latino authors of the 60s. Arturo Uslar-Pietri published a book in 1948 titled *Letras y hombres de Venezuela* [The Literature and Men of Venezuela], which was the first time the term magical realism was used in Latin America (Zamora & Faris, 1995). Miguel Ángel Asturias, Arturo Uslar-Pietri, and Alejo Carpentier were three prominent latino authors who wrote magical realist works and their work became incredibly popular worldwide (López-Calvo, 2014). The genre grew in popularity so much that by the 1980s it became cliché (López-Calvo, 2014). While magical realism found in Latin America works seems far removed from Europeans like Novalis, that is far from the truth. Warnes (2006) discussed the influence Novalis had on Asturias and Carpentier’s work who took a similar philosophical approach as Novalis.

Elements

The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* both feature settings that skillfully blend supernatural and mundane elements, demonstrating the five main aspects of magical realism. Faris’ (2004) five elements are the irreducible element, detailed descriptions of the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and the disruption of

time, space, and identity. The irreducible element found in the text would be the element a reader struggles to explain with logic available to them in the real world (Faris, 2004). In Gaiman's (2013) *Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the irreducible element is the Hempstock family and the various actions they are seen taking throughout the narrative (Hasanah et. al, 2021). The Hempstocks are frequently shown doing things completely out of the ordinary, an example being when Lettie creates a circle that protects the narrator from anything that wishes to harm him, including the Vultures (Gaiman, 2013). In the paper, "Magical Realism in Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*", Hasanah (2021) and their colleagues referenced the moment when Old Mrs. Hempstock uses her scissors to "snip out" the parts of time they don't want. This moment in the text is an example of the Hempstocks actions being unexplainable with logic (Hasanah et. al, 2021). Faris's next element of magical realism is detailed descriptions of the phenomenal world. Detailed descriptions of the phenomenal world was defined by Faris (2004) as, "The realism in magical realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory" (p. 14). These are the mundane elements present in the text. At the beginning of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the narrator described in great detail the clothes he wore to the funeral he had just attended (Gaiman 2013). The description of his attire and the winding Sussex road introduced the idea that these characters are in the real world (Hasanah et. al, 2021). The utilization of the mundane elements helped separate Gaiman's (2013) novel from fantasy books. The next element, unsettling doubts, is the hesitation a reader felt as a response to the irreducible element or the hesitation to accept the magical elements in a text (Faris, 2004). The narrator of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* experienced unsettling doubts along with the reader after first meeting the hempstocks (Hasanah et. al, 2021). In one of his first few interactions with Lettie he questioned if she was human (Gaiman, 2013). The narrator cannot believe the supernatural world

could be inhabited by humans like him so he questions if the Hempstocks are people. The next element is the merging of realms which Faris (2004) defines as the intersection of two worlds, “The magical realist vision thus exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions” (p. 21). The blending of the mundane and the supernatural means that mundane aspects found are realistic, to the point the inclusion of these more realistic aspects could become social commentary (Faris, 2004). In Bender’s (2010) novel *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* the merging of realms was present throughout the narrative. Rose, the protagonist, had the unique ability to taste emotions in the food she ate (Bender, 2010). Rose described the awful emotions she tasted in the lemon cake her mother made while at the same time described the normal flavors a person would encounter when eating a lemon cake (Bender, 2010). The section where Rose is eating this lemon cake blended the supernatural world with the mundane, everyday world. The last element is the disruption of time, space and identity which Faris (2004) described as the moments when the magical elements in a text mess with the characters’ and the audience’s perception of reality. Bender (2010) used Rose’s older brother, Joseph, throughout the narrative to disrupt space. Joseph had the special ability to turn himself into objects which he does frequently due to his struggle to connect with other people (Murtaza et. al, 2021). This power he held was revealed to the audience when Rose described the moment when she saw Joseph’s legs merging with the chair’s legs (Bender, 2010). Joseph is able to bend the rules of reality and space around him.

Connection to Identity

The five elements of magical realism have been used to merge the supernatural and mundane worlds which facilitated the exploration of personal identity. Latham (2007) analyzed three young adult novels that utilized elements of magical realism. In his analysis, Latham

(2007) noticed that magical realism was being used in these stories to facilitate identity exploration in the adolescent protagonists. Young adult novels are used as a means to help integrate adolescent children into adult society (Latham, 2007). The works of fiction discussed in this article all achieved identity exploration by using magical elements to subvert cultural norms which allowed adolescent characters to question the dominant society (Latham, 2007). Faris (2004) described one of the five main elements of magical realism being the disruption of time, space, and identity. In a similar manner to the three texts discussed by Latham (2007), other magical realistic texts demonstrated the characters in the stories questioning who they are. This questioning the characters experienced was usually a result of the magical events occurring around them (Faris, 2004). The supernatural elements included in magical realist texts disrupted the lives of the characters and allowed for those characters to question the society around them and their own personal identities (Faris, 2004).

The five elements of magical realism have been used in many Latin American texts to explore cultural identity and the effects of colonialism on culture. Magical realism, despite the magical elements, has acted as a reflection of the author's and the audience's reality and facilitated the exploration of cultural identities (Murtaza et. al, 2021). The merging of realms acts as a way to paint a clearer picture of reality to the audience (Murtaza et. al, 2021). Merging realms also acts as a way to mix traditional or ancient culture with modern culture (Faris, 2004). Hermida (2017) discussed the way magical realism reflects the cultural identity of the Latin American people. When he discussed famous Latino authors who utilized magical realism Hermida (2017) states, "...these writers focused on the absurdity and magic that lies within our Latin culture. They wrote stories which are all fascinating and irrational. Stories that could actually happen to people" (4:42). These Latin America works have demonstrated the idea Faris

(2004) discussed where magical elements in a story can reflect the cultural identity the author belongs to (Murtaza et. al, 2021). Faris (2004) also discussed the idea that magical realist texts in Latin America and other parts of the world were heavily influenced by colonialism. The colonized countries' literature reflected the effects colonialism had on their culture (Hermida, 2017). The popularity of magical realism in Latin America and the huge impact colonization had on Latin countries meant magical realism was used to represent the effects of colonization (Faris, 2004). Colonization has had a huge impact on the cultural identity of many Latin American people (Hermida, 2017). Magical realism dissected the impact colonization had and has even worked to reverse cultural colonization (Faris, 2004).

Explorations of Time, Space, and Identity

The Ocean at the End of the Lane utilized the five elements of magical realism that blended the mundane and supernatural world which allowed the narrator to explore and define his identity. Gaiman's (2013) novel, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, featured a middle aged narrator reflecting on his childhood after attending a funeral which unlocked a new perspective on his identity (Rata, 2017). Towards the beginning of the story, The narrator describes his experience of his memories "unlocking" as he drove down the lane and encountered the Hempstocks house (Gaiman, 2013). The recollection of memories helps define identity, however certain moments in a person's life could be buried deep within that person's subconscious (Rata, 2017). An interesting example of buried memories in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* was at the end when the narrator was recalling the cat that showed up at his house one day, "She had such unusual eyes. They made me think of the sea-side, and so I called her Ocean, and I could not have told you why" (Gaiman, 2013, p. 164). This cat is the kitten the narrator bonded with at the Hempstocks house and it's interesting the narrator named the cat after Lettie's ocean (Gaiman

2013). The narrator did not remember Lettie or her ocean but it is clear that on a subconscious level he made Lettie a part of his identity (Gaiman 2013). The narrator “unlocked” memories and gained a better understanding of his identity but Gaiman (2013) still showed the audience that the narrator always had the memories. Faris (2004) argued that magical realism introduced characters to supernatural situations that made them question their identity. Following the recollection of repressed memories, the narrator questioned if he remembered these memories correctly because he had separated these memories from his identity (Rata, 2017). The narrator questioned if he had changed as a result of these memories and if these memories were even true (Gaiman, 2013). Being immersed in the supernatural world after being in the mundane world for so long brought up the repressed memories of his childhood and caused him to ask himself who he was. He ultimately decided that he had not changed during his short visit to the Hempstocks house (Gaiman, 2013).

The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake utilized elements of magical realism to blend the supernatural and mundane worlds which helped facilitate the exploration of Rose and Joseph’s identities. Throughout Benders (2010) novel, she uses the magical powers of Rose and her brother, Joseph to represent their identities (Martaza et. al, 2021). Rose was miserable because she felt the emotions of other people when she ate food yet was unable to help alleviate the pain those people were feeling (Martaza et. al, 2021). At the beginning of the story, Rose revealed that she had always been the more social one between her and her brother (Bender, 2010). Her magical power she was given only reflected her personality which aligns with the idea Faris (2004) wrote about that magical realism is a tool used to reflect reality and the social issues in the real world. After the introduction of her power, Rose immediately showed concern for her mother’s emotional state (Bender, 2010). This reflected what she felt to be true about her

personality which was revealed when she was comparing herself to Joseph (Bender, 2010). One of the most unique ways identity is explored is through Bender's (2010) use of furniture to portray Joseph's lack of a sense of identity (Murtaza et. al, 2021). Rose discussed the fact her brother was always considered to be the smart one which alienated him from his peers (Bender, 2010). Towards the end of the novel, Joseph told Rose it was easier to be furniture than it was to be human (Bender, 2010). Joseph demonstrated that he never felt like he knew how to be a human. His power to turn into objects reflected his personality in the same way Rose's power reflected her personality. Faris (2004) claimed that the merging of the supernatural and the mundane in magical realist stories served to reflect and amplify reality. Supernatural events in a story allowed the audience to disconnect from reality but having these supernatural events mixed with the mundane forced audience members to question their own reality (Faris 2004). Rose and Joseph are normal people with magical abilities and the struggles they faced could reasonably happen in real life. When Rose cooked for herself, she tasted sorrow and a longing to be 8 again and this moment caused her to revamp her life because she realized she did not want to live like that (Bender 2010). Despite the magical element of being able to taste emotions in food, this was a very real realization many people have had. This moment matched Faris's (2004) ideas of magical realism being a tool to reflect the real world.

Conclusion

The five elements of magical realism were utilized in Gaiman's (2013) *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* and Bender's (2010) *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*. Both texts explored identity by taking readers on a journey between the supernatural world of uncertainty and the mundane of everyday life by using the five elements of magical realism. The five main characteristics of magical realism are an irreducible element, the phenomenal world, unsettling

doubts, the merging of realms, and the exploration of time, space, and identity (Faris, 2004). These elements are all utilized in *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* and *Ocean at the End of the Lane*. The elements of magical realism allowed for the young protagonists to explore their identities (Latham, 2007). The narrator in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* explored his childhood memories and dissected what he believed they revealed about him. Rose's personality was reflected by her powers and eventually began to define her as a person. Joseph's personality was also reflected by his power, and revealed to the audience that Joseph never felt like he fit in. It was easier to be an object than it was to be him. The connections magical realism has to personal and cultural identity are incredibly interesting. The supernatural elements found in magical realist texts reflected the people and cultures that made the stories (Faris, 2004). The protagonists lived experiences teetered on the edge of the fantastical and the mundane world, much like the transition from childhood to adulthood.

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