

**More Real Than Reality: Elements of Magic Realism in Folk and Fairy  
Tales and in Modern Literature**  
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**Overview**

I was not sure why, as I studied folk and fairy tales in my 2004 Pittsburgh Teacher Institute class, it began to strike me about half way through, that what I was reading reminded me of the Magic Realism in some of my favorite short stories and novels. Perhaps it was the need in the class to allow for imagination, although any good piece of literature pushes a reader into this. Perhaps it was a quote which came to mind, that I had written down years ago, from an interview Gabriel García Márquez had given. I've lost the documentation of the interview, but was able to pull up his statement.

The tone that I eventually used in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was based on the way my grandmother used to tell stories. She told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told them with complete naturalness...What was most important was the expression she had on her face. She did not change her expression at all when telling her stories and everyone was surprised. In previous attempts to write, I tried to tell the story without believing in it. I discovered that what I had to do was believe in them myself and write them with the same expression with which my grandmother did them: with a brick face.

From the oral tradition of his grandmother, from the stories of Colombia, came the writer who may not have begun the use of what came to be called Magic Realism in Latin American literature (Alejo Carpentier did that), but who certainly exploded and made popular the literature which came to be associated with it. There was the connection I had felt. I doubted that his books would have been the same without the tales told by the grandmother who raised him, but would probably have remained within the journalistic vein in which his writing

career began. So began my journey to find echoing elements from the very old writings, to modern ones.

Certainly, an additional push came in May, when my students, International Baccalaureate seniors and C.A.S. (Center for Advanced Studies, 'gifted' level students) sophomores, were given the opportunity to choose from a number of Latin American texts, for small group work. Those who opted for *Like Water for Chocolate* (Laura Esquivel), *The House of the Spirits* (Isabel Allende) or *Aura* (Carlos Fuentes), found themselves dealing with elements of Magic Realism. For some, this was their first encounter with such writing and it was a jolt. I realized that, steeped though they might be in *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Ring*, this was different for them.

There was, for some of them, the Westerners' reluctance to be sucked into something that was 'ridiculous'. They could read appreciatively a fairy tale, and be charmed. They could discuss with vigor the *Prisoner of Azkaban*, and Harry's problems, and the solutions he fought his way toward, because no one for a moment ever considered Hogwarts to be a real place, so that anything that went on there was perfectly reasonable. However, some balked, when faced with the realistic Mexican ranch in Esquivel's novel, where they found a couple in love consumed by real flames generated by their passion, or tears wept into the frosting of a wedding cake which produced such poignant memories in the guests that an entire reception could be overcome with sadness, longing, and finally, vomiting.

Such writing violates a number of the expected, linear, rise and falling action of so much of Western writing. It may experiment with time and place, twist a normal subject matter, as well as meld the everyday with the dream or nightmare. I believe that because in their own lives, whereas they may be religious, they are not accepting of a spirit world intermingling with their own reality. As with so many in the West, one can play with imagination, but then it is shaken off when it is time to come back to being 'grown up'. Hence combining the two, blurring what is easily acceptable as reality, with descriptions of what magical things can be seen within or growing from that everyday world is difficult.

Why I feel it important that students can read such works with pleasure, without the nagging feeling they are being duped, can be found in the words of Isabel Allende, niece of murdered Chilean president, Salvadore Allende.

Literature, good literature incorporates those elements of reality with the eye of the writer. The fiction writer is not reflecting facts; rather, he or she is recounting the impact of the facts....Because you can tell the story of the 'disappeared', for example, and you can say, look at everything they did—and write a book on the 'disappeared'...this type of account has less

impact through time than something that Ernesto Sábato or García Márquez can write, in which the disappeared acquire a mythological dimension and go on to be like the spirits of Juan Rulfo, who can go into the world and where one can go about the earth surrounded by these beings who are in limbo...that imagery gives such a phenomenal dimension to history that it allows literature to reflect what is happening much better than journalism. *The Autumn of the Patriarch* says so much more about a typical Latin American dictator than any chronicle that one can write about Pinochet. (Zapata-Whelan 2)

Since I want my students to be able to appreciate this expansion and clarification of history and reality, their own as well as that of the world's, it seems logical to begin with the folk and fairy tale and compare those pieces to their reasonable counterparts in works of Magic Realism. This is not to undervalue the earlier tales as stories in their own right, but rather to use them to enable students to work into the complexity of many of these other works, serving as preliminary reads and introductions. They can also facilitate discussion as clearer versions of how hyperbole and the expansion on reality serve to give the reader a fuller understanding of the meaning at the heart of plot and description.

## **Rationale**

Folk tales are of the people, some collectors feeling that the more they resemble the oral tradition from which they sprang, the better, the more authentic, the tale. This, however, can lead to a rather leaden read, and most are manipulated to give some variety to sentence structure and word choice. On the other hand, the fairy tale is a piece of literature, which while gathered from various communities and innumerable kinds of tellers, is edited into a story utilizing elements of fiction. It almost universally holds to a happy ending, where the folk tale has no qualms over a dead hero.

Perhaps a good place to begin, is with some of the elements of the folk and fairy tales, and then try to see how those aspects are reflected in the modern works of Magic Realism. In this way I would hope to acclimate students to the types of things they would find as they read contemporary works which experimented with form and time, echoing much from the older tales.

As these legends and stories came out of a distant world, they brought fears and questions with them, namely of death and ghosts. Sometimes these were the spirits of ancestors, or simply unquiet spirits. "To the animistic savage every death adds another ghost to the spirit world—a ghost able to revisit the living and possessed of supernatural powers for either good or evil." (Cox via Yearsley 5) Along with the fact that this demonstrates a fear of the unknown and the unseen, it

should be noted that the author who quotes “Mrs. Cox”, Macleod Yearsley, while extremely helpful as to the history of folklore, writes before the time of political correctness, and consistently uses terms such as that above: ‘savage, Red Indian, primitive, barbaric, ignorant classes, savage field of vision’, etc. The book, *The Folklore of Fairy-Tale*, was published in London in 1924, and was interesting additionally for Yearsley’s explanation as to why there is a dearth of original nursery tales in the British Isles:

“Evangelical Protestantism...has been more consistently and uncompromisingly severe in the suppression of gaiety in Britain than anywhere else in Europe”, allowing only for such biblical tales such as Noah, Jacob and Samson, “totally ignorant of the fact that these stories are themselves nothing but the folk-talks of an earlier race and possess variants among many other people.” (Yearsley 27)

While there are many ghosts in folk tales, few are found in fairy tales. Perhaps they were weeded out of major collections to make them suitable for impressionable young minds, as was the fate of so many tales, or perhaps they were, like the bulk of those with active heroines, simply excised by a world of male anthologizers and editors. (Ragan xxiii) In “Vasilisa the Beautiful”, a Russian folk tale, the dying mother gives the heroine a doll, which she is told, if she feeds and asks advice of, will help her in any situation. (Yolen 335) This doll behaves as the mother’s spirit, remaining after death. The same type of mother love is found in the German tale, “The Goose Girl”, though here the “old queen” mother, puts drops of blood on a handkerchief to “be of service to you on your way”. Unfortunately, the poor girl loses it in a stream as she is forced to trade places with the evil, maid-in-waiting. Nevertheless, her mother had also provided her with a talking, protector horse named Falada, who proves to be her salvation. (Yolen 254)

In fairy tales, many of the mothers are either absent, leaving little more than wistful memories, or they are the proverbial wicked stepmother. Few stepmothers are ever positive, loving forces. Folktales, however, seem to have more latitude where mothers are concerned, as in the story, “The Mirror of Matsyama: A Story of Old Japan”, where the dying mother leaves her daughter a mirror, rare and almost seeming magic to this rural region, telling her:

If, after I have ceased to be in this life, you are lonely and long to see me sometimes, then take out this mirror and in the clear and shining surface you will always see me—so will you be able to meet with me often and tell me all your heart; and though I shall not be able to speak, I shall understand and sympathise with you, whatever may happen to you in the future. (Ragan 210)

That so many mothers die, leaving children to cope, would seem to indicate that this is a universal fear. As is often the case in stories, this father remarried and the new wife became quickly jealous of the father's love for his daughter, partly by her own "twisted" heart, and partly because she feared the girl meant to kill her, since she seemed to spend her time cursing daily "an image" of the stepmother. Confronted by her father, the child confessed to gazing into the mirror, in which she knew she was seeing her mother, as she asked for guidance in the unhappy life in which she found herself. The stepmother having overheard all this, dropped to her knees in front of the girl and wept for forgiveness. "From this time on, the three lived together as happily as fish in water" and the stepmother heaped love and care on the girl. (Ragan 212)

Again, this change of heart is rare, since primarily the happy ending of the fairy tale results from punishment meted out, and the folk tale is unconcerned that endings are happy, though certainly they sometimes are. It should be pointed out that the fairy tales from Hans Christian Anderson's pen (he was not a collector) are often unhappy in their resolution. "The Little Mermaid" dies; "The Fir Tree" realizes too late that it should have been happy growing in the wood, and after one night of Christmas Eve glory, was tossed to grow old and then was burned. In addition, the two "Babes in the Wood", an English fairy tale I just came across, unlike Hansel and Gretel, never find their way out of the wood.

An example of the more prevalent version of a stepmother, although wholly unique in its presentation, is found within a modern story by Puerto Rican writer, Rosario Ferré, one who often utilizes elements of Magic Realism. Rosa, the seamstress and entrepreneur, excelled in business, and became, as she saw it, part of the aristocracy, by virtue of her marriage. Rosaura, the stepdaughter, was shy, quiet and lonely, made triply unhappy by the scorn heaped on her. Her happiest moments were when her father was near, and when she received from him her yearly birthday gift of a thick, "lavish, gold-bound storybook"—a gift which had Rosa consumed with envy and greed. She sold all the lovely linens and personal items of the mother, and even forced the sale of Lorenzo's [the father] precious, if crumbling sugarcane plantation, all to enlarge her dress shop, subtly titled, "The Fall of the Bastille". Suffice it to say that she dies, poisoned by the guava-colored ink in one of her stepdaughter's stories, which coincidentally begins exactly as does this one, "The Poisoned Story": "Rosaura lived in a house of many balconies."

While the character of Rosa is cleverly drawn, it is the narration which makes the story fascinating, and along with the magic ending (Rosaura has dreamed the book holds a poisoned story, though she has no idea which one), push the piece into the realm of Magic Realism. It alternates between an outside voice, dubbed "small-town" or "two-bit" writer, by Rosa, whose voice and point of view alternates and argues with that of the writer, who remains an unknown, simply

telling the story. The reader is forced out of the role of passive bystander, and into the position of trying to decide who speaks the truth, though from Rosa's words, we lean toward the writer for veracity, or perhaps only I did.

Rosa: I feel curiously numb, indifferent to what I'm reading...It's as though this wake [Lorenzo's] will never end.....

Writer: Rosa stood up horrified and stared at the blood-colored streaks of syrup that trickled slowly down her skirt...[guava-compote which the cheerful Rosaura had made for her father and spilled. She used her mother's recipe, and thought "she saw her mother waft in and out of the window...on guava-colored clouds."...]... When her soul came back to her, she began calling Rosaura names...shiftless!

Rosa: I knew something had been bothering me...The guava compote incident took place years ago." (Ferré 7)

The whole of it provides marvelous dialogue to bring out the true nature of this clever, conniving woman. Interesting also, is the book Lorenzo was writing, pertaining to the battle for Puerto Rican independence and the still continuing hope for that now, which Rosa quickly dismissed. This integrating of a political perspective into a work of literature, is a hallmark of Magic Realism, particularly in writing from Latin America.

While these examples of spirits and tokens from mothers, are not the modern concept of malevolent spirits to be dispelled ala *Ghostbusters*, they speak of life beyond death. In the Zuni legend of "The Spirit Wife", a loving warrior husband travels to the land of the dead with his wife, despite her admonition that "I am just leaving one life for another". He needs the magic intercession of a wise owl man to bring her from the lake-bottom where the spirit world lay, but then he loses her, as Orpheus did in an earlier tale, forgetting to follow the rule given him, as unable to restrain his passion, he touches her. "Shame, shame, shame." Hoots the owl man, mournfully. (Yolen 423)

This intercession by one with wisdom can also be seen in the training of Fa Mu Lan, in the Chinese folk tale, set as the chapter titled, "White Tigers", in Maxine Hong Kingston's novel, *Woman Warrior*, where an old couple take her in and train her so that "After six years the deer let me run beside them. I could jump twenty feet into the air from a standstill, leaping like a monkey over the hut." (Kingston 13) After fifteen years she went home, and before leaving for battle, to revenge her family, her parents carved on her back the whole history of their grievances. The old man and woman, who were sometimes young, doubtless were also spirits. The extremes of the training and of Fa Mu Lan's skills are good examples for readying students for these same elements in modern works.

Another story of death is the Italian folk tale, “One Night in Paradise”, where a groom is enticed to sample death’s Paradise, by his best man, who was called from the grave to stand with his best friend at his wedding. This cheerful, friendly ghost, eager to share his knowledge of the joys in the afterlife, helped into the grave, his friend, who has no trouble either entering or leaving Paradise. No mention was made, however, that time had no meaning in this place, so that when the groom remembered his bride and returned, he found a huge city and a Bishop with parish books that cited him as being lost 300 years before. He died as the Bishop asked the same question with which he queried his friend, “And you went to the next world? Tell me about it!” (Yolen 428)

Ghosts abound in literature of Magical Realism, as in the old folk tales. In Isabel Allende’s *House of Spirits*, the ghost of the antagonist’s sister, Férula, came into the dining room, after having been thrown from the house six years before, kissed her beloved sister-in-law, Clara, and then disappeared. Clara, known as the clairvoyant, declared that she knew she was dead. They found her, old and alone on her deathbed in a bare city apartment. Férula’s curse, put on her brother when he sent her away, caused the patriarch to literally shrink to a child’s size, after Clara’s death.

At the end of the book, when her granddaughter, Alba, was a political prisoner being tortured, on the verge of giving in to death, Clara’s spirit returned to aid her.

“With her white linen dress, her winter gloves, ...she looked exactly as she had when Alba was a child. Clara...brought the saving idea of writing in her mind, without pencil and paper...so that the world would know about this horror that was taking place parallel to the peaceful existence of those who did not want to know...that only blocks away...there were others...who live or die on the dark side.” (Allende 414)

She doesn’t give a magic doll, nor a physical token to keep her granddaughter safe from horror, but she gave an idea which Alba used to “bury herself so deeply in her story that she stopped eating, scratching herself, smelling herself..and overcame all her varied agonies.” Here, as was pointed to previously, there is the clear emphasis on political wrongs, found in so many of the works of Magic Realism.

As opposed to Clara’s benevolent spirit, *Like Water For Chocolate*, a book filled with aspects of Magic Realism, lays claim to a mother, bent on fault-finding and cruelty to a daughter who, being the youngest, was held a captive to the tradition that she must serve and aid her mother for life. Tita was kind, bright, a wonderful cook, and in love, but Mama Elena foiled that romance, marrying off Pedro to another daughter. Even after her death, she returned to berate Tita for her “shameless” behavior, but was finally dispelled when the magic words, “I

won't put up with you! I hate you, I've always hated you," are shouted. The ghost faded to a little light which "began to spin feverishly", flew out the window, broke an oil lamp on the patio and set on fire the hapless Pedro, who remained in love with Tita. A second ghost, the cook and surrogate mother, Nacha, also appeared, but to aid Tita in her final meeting with Pedro, lighting candles around the bed, when for the first time, they were alone on the ranch. It should be noted that food is a central focus, with a recipe given at the beginning of each chapter, and that much of the book's magic deals with cooking. (Esquivel 199, 243)

Perhaps after reading and discussing some of the earlier stories in which the spirit world is an accepted part of life, students will find it easier to suspend their own concepts of what is allowable, and come to terms with the idea that intense love or hate could retain a person's image before the lover or the victim. In a second novel by Allende, *Daughter of Fortune*, there is one clear element of Magic Realism, that of the ghost of Ling, who had been the wife of Tao Chi'en. Allende, in an interview, says of Magic Realism that it is comprised of "things that happen in fiction that wouldn't seem to happen in real life; but actually, if you pay attention, they happen often enough." She goes on to explain Ling's ghost in terms of Paula, her daughter who died. Her point is that elements of the imagination and of literature specifically, enrich and clarify 'reality'

Always, the only person who sees it, [ghost of Ling] is the Chinese man. And he has made a discipline of remembering her, which is the same that happens to me with my daughter, Paula...I do not want Paula's features to start to fade. And Tao Chi'en, like me, has his loved one permanently with him—it is not odd that he see her. In his culture, in the time that he lived, the idea of ghosts was ordinary...completely real. American characters...live in a reality different from that of Tao Chi'en. (Zapata-Whelan 2)

It is to be hoped that students could come to see that emotions can be communicated in indirect and powerful ways, and that to show, for example, what is done by quails in rose petal sauce or chilies in walnut sauce, as Esquivel does, is only a more intensely literate version of their own dinner, one family holiday, that tasted like sawdust from the tension and hatred in the air, and makes clearer our relationship to what we eat, and to our relationships with others.

To return for a moment to those early times, and to those feelings that man was at the mercy of the intangible powers of nature--these were emotions and fears which gave rise to the many creation stories, which are easily available, but which do not seem helpful to this paper. Beyond this, however, was a time when nature became alive for man, to the point that all of it was as he was, filled with life and possibilities for good and evil, a concept which later evolved into a pantheistic view of God in everything. Animism, reflecting this point of view that man was

dependent on the natural world, particularly on animals, represents another important element found in many folk and fairy tales.

“The Waiting Maid’s Parrot”, a Chinese tale, presents a marvelous bird who not only talks but thinks and feels, who acts as a matchmaker for his beautiful, young keeper, a waiting maid in the house of a great lord. The bird find a young, unmarried noble and conducts a romance by carrying messages, but is killed by “young toughs” who bring him down with a rock. Undaunted, he appears in a dream to the noble as a woman, revealing that his love had been a parrot in a previous lifetime, who because of her virtue, had been transformed into a human. Despite having been nearly beaten to death and buried alive, she hold onto life until her love finds her. (Yolan 90)

Certainly, the faithful talking horse Falada, who saved the Goose Girl, falls into this category, as does the English tale, “Puss in Boots”, with such a memorable animal helper that he was recently featured, with a satirical edge, in the film, *Shreck 2*. Here, the youngest of three sons received as his inheritance a cat, since the mill and the ass (useful for farming and definitely a gift of greater worth than the cat) had gone to the eldest and the second sons, respectively. This is an extremely common situation in folk and fairy tales, dealing with characters of both genders. Most of the time the youngest, who nearly always comes out successfully, has been treated with contempt by the others, or as here, comes out on the short end of gifts or inheritance. Perhaps here again, as with the previously discussed fear of loss and abandonment by parents, we are seeing fear, this time of weakness and being in the position of last and least, whether it is youngest, the poorest, or those aged and alone. Even given that three is the most often used magic number, the third child, the youngest in trouble or seen as a fool, happens too often not to be seen as important.

The cat left to the young man, for his part, asked only that he be given a bag and a pair of boots and that he would care for his master. Indeed, the cat’s shrewdness trick a king into thinking his master is a man of means, and thus entitled to the princess. Probably the most famous scene is in the ogre’s castle where Puss challenges him to demonstrate his skill at changing shapes by becoming something very tiny—like a mouse—whereupon the cat eats him. This leaves the castle free to become that of the Marquis of Carabas, which is the title afforded him by the cat. (Smith 256)

There is very little present in modern fiction of Magic Realism, of personified animals, helping with human problems. Perhaps the abundance of pets has diminished our ability to see them as purveyors of magic aid and cleverness. Few, outside of the Native American community hold to the idea of each person having an animal totem for guidance and protection, nor do many give thanks to the animal who gave up life to provide food. To an even greater degree than we

have a weakened connection to the spirit world, we have lost the respect for animals and nature as our allies with whom we are bound. The effect on our natural resources seems evident.

One modern story I discovered features only a dead cat, and a child who sees her entire family as animals, among them the mama-magpie who instructed the maid to give rat poison to her (Mary's) pregnant cat so as not to be bothered by kittens that were not even Angora. There is a glittering, wealthy sterility to the story, and an awful inhumanity to the family dinner:

“the distorted inferno of the zoo...daddy-pig, grandmother-owl” and Mary-queen, contemplating “that viscous liquid called vegetable”, who would “wear beautiful velvet and learn to play the beautiful piano, a beautiful melody, audible, only on the beautiful days when guests came, when the happy magpie shouted at the pit to be quiet...and her parrot-teacher transmitted to her every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, from five to six, by man” calendar...And at last dessert, swimming in the viscous ocean of melted sugar, chewed by the great jaws of the pig and hyena.” (Porzencanski 195)

“The Story of a Cat” is devoid of all that is natural, which leaves the child who witnesses death inches from the writhing animal, with no grounding. Says the maid to her, “There is a place at the bottom of the world, behind the mirror, where all the dead rest.” Mary runs, at the story's end, from the Virgin, her namesake, whom she sees coming down the street towards her, carrying a child with the face of a cat.

It should be noted that within this terrible tale, is the commentary on class distinctions, with the wealthy family above all that is real. Mary finds the housekeeper, who would tell her the truth. “Juana, on her knees, like a stout angel, soaping up the floors on which there are no tracks.” Initially afraid to ask her question, she replies that she wants nothing “(Nothing, slave of the vultures, nary a fairy, Mary, nary a fairy.) Nothing.” And later she runs from the Virgin, to “Juana the slave-fairy listening to the radio soap-opera”. The sections in parentheses seem to take Mary deeper into her own insights, (though the language her transcends that of a six year old) as when she sees church as an extension of privilege:

(...And the morning sermon extends out over the ...furious feathers of exclusive hats, and the knees, perfect for not having to scrub the floors of summer homes with poorly-paid female servants and heretics of the morning. And the dome...closes inexorably exactly at noon, when a portion of consumed morality spills across the marble entrance, and across the punctual excrement of their consciences.) (Porzencanski 197)

It seems to me that this story is a good example to enable students to see that the images of excess and exaggeration, of those elements impossible to have been 'real', present a stronger reality, and give voice to what for Mary were psychological truths. This, as I see it, is at the core of student resistance to works of Magic Realism. To use the previous stories of animal help and connection, makes stronger such a work as this where the absence of such a factor is at the core of its meaning.

Still another facet of the folk and fairy tale, alluded to briefly with the ogre in "Puss in Boots" is that of the shape-changer. These tales of metamorphosis, while sometimes using another human form, often deal with animals, with a shape, unlike that of ogre's voluntary mouse, forced on a person by virtue of an enchantment. A lovely French Tale is that of "The White Cat" (Yolan 95), which also incorporates the element mentioned previously, of three brothers. While the focus here is on the youngest, there is a pleasant and unusual camaraderie among all the brothers, with them eating and drinking together before and after each task set by their father, the king, whose evil courtiers had brought to his attention, the lie that his sons were ready to usurp his crown.

The youngest traveled to a lovely palace where he is overwhelmed by the gold and jewels on the entrance door and taken by twelve hands with torches through chamber after chamber to a fully set table where he is joined by "a small figure not a foot high...It had on a long black veil and was supported by two cats dressed in mourning with swords by their sides." He dwelt a year with the beautiful white cat, who gave him his goal, a little dog so tiny he was transported in an acorn. Two more goals saw the young man spending two more years with the white cat, and each year he was more in love with her than before. Finally, he trusted her enough to tearfully do her bidding, which was to cut off her head and tail. When he had done so, a beautiful queen stood before him. She had been a victim of her mother's longing for a luscious fruit which grew only behind the walls of a fairy, who finally gave up the fruit when she agreed to surrender the child she was carrying. This aspect of the story calls to mind the taboo in both the Land of the Dead and in Fairy Land, against eating anything found there, as Persephone surely found, when one taste of the pomegranate doomed her to the Underworld for half of each year.

Later, after the birth, the king denied the fairies, only to have a monstrous dragon destroy half his kingdom, causing him to finally acquiesce. The fairies raised and educated her as a princess, until she tried to escape, (having spied a handsome young man in the garden), whereupon the "Fairy Violent" rushed to her and placed her under the spell which the youngest prince had just lifted. Certainly, "The White Cat" has echoes for us of the imposed metamorphosis of the prince in "Beauty and the Beast", as well as of the enchantment suffered by "Sleeping Beauty."

Mexico gives to us an additional example of shape-changing, with “The Buzzard Husband”, a charming folktale of a lazy, good-for-nothing husband who felt he’d live a still easier life as a buzzard. (Bierhorst 307) So, with “the Lord’s” permission, they changed places, with the clothes sticking to one, and the shaken-off feathers sticking to the other. The new husband stank. “Why do you stink so? You reek!” said the wife. Still, he worked hard and provided for her better than ever the lazy man had done. Neighbors came to her. “Why don’t you want to admit it? Your husband turned into a buzzard.” When she confronted him, he replied with a “Who knows” and a “...what concern is that of ours”, professing his odor was due to the sweat of hard work. The wife agreed. “Oh, forget it...so long as you provide for me.” The lazy husband, seeking the rising fumes of the dead, mistook a forest fire for food and burned up.

Beginning with Franz Kafka’s Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis*, who woke one morning as a gigantic cockroach, there are numerous examples of such changes in the literature of Magic Realism. Gregor had been nothing very essential as a man, despite the fact that he provided for his parents and a sister; he was an annoyance to his family as a roach, and was easily forgotten when he died. It’s a devastating indictment of modern life.

“Axolotl” by Julio Cortázar, an extraordinary, experimental writer, sets up an unnamed character who visited the Paris aquarium and was drawn to a tank of axolotls, “the larval stage...of a salamander.” (Cortázar 4) Day after day he returned to the tank, crowded with these nearly immobile creatures. The infinite care with which he describes this lizard, is part of what makes Magic Realism so real, although here, Cortázar is all the while hinting at what is to come. “The axolotls huddled on the wretched narrow (only I can know how narrow) floor of moss and stone”...and the detail of the creatures’ eyes...“two orifices, like brooches, wholly of transparent gold, lacking any life but looking, letting themselves be penetrated by my look.” Again, the bizarre hint of what was to come as “Once in a while a foot would barely move, I saw the diminutive toes poise mildly on the moss. It’s that we don’t enjoy moving a lot, and the tank is so cramped.” Finally, “No transition and no surprise, I saw my face against the glass, I saw it on the outside of the tank, I saw it on the other side of the glass...I was an axolotl...He was outside the aquarium.” The terrible pronoun “he” as applied to himself and thinking, as an axolotl, “believing he’s making up a story, he’s going to write all this about axolotls.” Over time—slowly, as opposed to Gregor’s overnight transformation, this man leaves his body and enters that of the creature in the tank, finding communication with the axolotl next to him, whose “foot just grazed my face” and, looking into those gold eyes, “understood that he knew.” (Cortázar 9)

Finally, Rosario Ferré, whose “The Poisoned Story” was earlier discussed, has written a tragic story of coldness and greed. In “The Youngest Doll”, the prawns, which burrowed into the calf of a girl and were kept there for a lifetime by the doctor so he could continue earning a fee, become symbols of a diseased aristocracy. The doctor’s son, married the, now, old woman’s niece, who for him was nothing but an image to be kept on the porch, a trophy. The doll, one of many the aunt had made over the years, always the size of the girl, became the woman, or vice versa and the transformation was terrifyingly complete when “the frenzied antennae of all those prawns” poked through empty sockets from which the unfeeling husband had earlier pried the diamond eyes of the doll. Here is not only a story of a dying aristocracy, but of women stuck in the roles to which they were born. (Ferré 1)

In conclusion, to be able to ready students for reading about a spirit world, not merely ghosts, but as extensions of memory; to examine both mother-love and the absence of it, with the concomitant fear of abandonment or of the merciless outsider, often (but not necessarily) seen in the form of a stepmother; to confront fears as literature writes of being weak or young or old or an outsider; to discover political commentary and historical insights within a text; to be able to discern how metaphor can also be metamorphosis, with the change standing for something larger than the literal--all seem to me to be areas with which the folk and fairytale can aid a teacher. Utilizing these stories as earlier, simpler agents can, I believe, clarify these complex concepts for students, prior to working through experimental and/or much more erudite writings.

## **Objectives**

My objectives for this unit are quite simple. First of all, I would ask that students should become familiar with the folk and fairytales which provide a basis, or at least an addition, a flavor, for much of the writing of the so-called, Magic Realists; we have read already of Gabriel García Márquez’s acknowledged debt to his grandmother’s tales, and will see further, as students read and research, the legends of saints, Spanish romances, Hindu mythology, voodoo myths, religious customs, etc., depending on which writer is being scrutinized. It is also clear, conversely that elements of Magic Realism and the fantastic, appear in folk and fairytales, in simpler form, and students would be asked to recognize this.

In addition, students should, in the course of this unit, be able to read the works of Magic Realism with an ability to suspend American reluctance to believe. While this doesn’t preclude the initial beauty of feeling surprised by the elements within these stories, it does ask that, for a time, students try to overcome the cynicism engendered by much of our culture and the exorbitant media

coverage of such seemingly common events as pedophile priests, and teen murders. It would be asked that, along with the initial surprise, students are able to understand the synthesis of the real and the magical, which comes about through the writer's skill, as the unusual, the 'magical', is tucked so deeply into the happenings of the clearly 'real', that they must come to see it as a piece of that reality. This certainly is what happens to the couple onto whose beach is washed "The Very Old Man With Enormous Wings", as told in that story by García Márquez .

Finally, students would come to see in the experimental structure of many of these pieces, the writer's ability to convey meaning through nontraditional, nonlinear means.

We would be following the Communications for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, as found in Appendix A, with all those aspects applied to enable students to come to greater understanding, and to demonstrate what has been learned.

## **Strategies**

Students will read together, independently, and have read to them, five or six folk or fairy tales, to illustrate one particular facet, as in the type of tale or connections within them to Magic Realism, such as the presence of ghosts or spirits. Small group discussion would alternate with whole class discussion. We would also be charting those elements we find that seem to be part of Roe's original surrealistic idea of Magic Realism in literature.

Then, we will match three or four short stories or one novel to build on those aspects discovered in the tales. We will rely heavily on literary circles for these texts. With both the folk tales and the works of Magic Realism, we will lean on the skill of writing to help clarify and synthesize thoughts. One of the modes of writing to be used will be journaling, which allows for a personal reaction. 'Creative writing' (in essence, I believe all writing to be a 'creative' effort) will also be utilized as a way for students to attempt to model on and echo voices and strategies of craft; these most likely would include prose, poetry and plays. There would, certainly, also be analytical writing, to push students into a deeper understanding of what caused their own reactions. To accompany the analysis, students would be asked to research, in order to be able to learn more of what a writer has used from older literature and tales to enrich his/her writing.

There would also be a time to utilize a nonverbal approach to demonstrating understanding or to clarify a concept in question or issue under scrutiny. Art, or music, dance or drama could be used as a way to clarify an idea, an emotion, or a

fear. This could be seen as a type of coding the unknown or the unclear into an image or, of course, into a particular writing.

We would also use dramatization to try to involve students with their whole bodies, rather than merely mouths or fingers.

### **Classroom Activities**

I would initially have students immerse themselves in folktales which have as a central presence, a ghost or spirit. Among those used could be: “Vasilisa the Beautiful”, “The Goose Girl”, “The Mirror of Matsuyama: A Story of Old Japan”, “The Spirit Wife”, “One Night in Paradise”, “The Two Brothers”, (an ancient Egyptian piece which also allows for the separation of soul from body), and stories of Fa Mu Lan. Two or three of these would be read together, with one read by the teacher, to clarify the oral tradition of stories, per se. Then, given the nature of the class, I would like to have another student read aloud an additional story, after having a night to prepare. Discussion would be kept to a minimum until a larger number of these stories have been read, although this would not preclude allowing for the spontaneous reaction, or strong feeling. Again, depending on the class, a historical perspective on the worlds from which these stories sprang, may need to be used to accommodate conservative Christian strong beliefs that we are tampering with the world of the devil, which comes up with *Harry Potter*, or *The Lord of the Rings*. A teacher could always find biblical stories which incorporate some aspect of the spirit, including a rising from the dead.

At any rate, I would follow-up the readings with a full class discussion of cultural differences, variety within the spirit worlds, etc. Each night’s reading should be accompanied by a journal write to allow students to both give vent and keep track of issues they want to talk about.

Then, prior to reading stories of Magic Realism, I would take students to the computer lab to research the background of the term itself. They would look up Franz Roh and surrealism, finding examples of the art for which this critic developed the term and what aspects of the paintings caused him to do so. Then they would read, as homework, the essay of Alejo Carpentier and his direction toward literature, of the term *lo real maravilloso*. (This can be found in the Zamora text) The following day we would discuss the results of their research findings, with the teacher showing some of these prints as overheads. I would ask the students to apply in a 20 minute in-class essay, Carpentier’s thesis with Roh’s ideas. For homework, they would be asked to read a piece of Angel Flores essay, which actually popularized Carpentier’s ideas (also in Zamora text), with discussion of all three the next day.

We would then move into stories of Magic Realism which also use spirits. Again, the point here is not to have everyone believing in ghosts, but to allow students to see the worth of memory, to feel the literary effect that these ghosts have on the reader, to find the author's point in using them. At this point, I would begin with "Ferré's "The Poisoned Story", and its whiff of a spirit as Rosaura cooks. I would ask students, who had read the story as homework, to work in small groups of four or five, to discuss this, and to decide what effect the ghost, the setting of the old plantation, the gold-bound storybook and the split narrative all have in contributing to the overall meaning, which is??? I would take students back to the computer lab the next day, to get some background on Puerto Rico, and on the father's book and to write, for the next day, as though they were Lorenzo, but with a little more spunk and insight as to the diametrically opposed daughter he had raised, and 2<sup>nd</sup> wife he had married. There is much in this one story to illustrate the richness and complexity within these writings.

I would use this same enriching, immersion technique on several more short stories, illustrating and harking back to other folk tales, and then do one of the simpler novels together, with a different prompt to be written to each night. Possibly I would begin with *Like Water for Chocolate*, for seniors or mature juniors. A useful way to approach this might be to out-magic the novel and use as a prior vehicle, some of the stories from Rob Johnson's *Fantasmas: Supernatural Stories by Mexican American Writers*. This, coupled with another trip to the lab to dig for Mexican legends and folktales, (be sure they check out: *llorona*, *la lechuza* and *el diablo*) Then, after whole class sharing of findings, the Esquivel novel could be read. Students would chart the elements of magic (analytic) and journal their reactions (subjective) nightly. Three days of small group discussion should be sufficient, with two groups reporting each day on their discussions. A final project would be nonverbal, representing some insight they had gotten from the book.

I would then turn to separate novels, read and discussed in literary circles for about a week, using such diverse novels of Magic Realism as: *Going After Cacciato*-Tim O'Brian; *Geek Love*-Katherine Dunn; *The Bone People*—Keri Hulme; *The Unconsoled*-Kazuo Ishiguro; *Midnight's Children*-Salman Rushdie; *Beloved*-Toni Morrison. Following their discussions, each individual would be responsible for an analytical paper which included in some way, the elements found of older writings, fables, myths, etc, in their novels, and a group presentation for the class, taking some aspect of the work.

The unit would conclude with the class reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, prior to which we would be certain to have covered several of García Márquez's short stories, especially my favorites, "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings", and "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World".

## Bibliography for Teachers

Bierhorst, John. *Latin American Folktales: Stories from Hispanic and Indian Traditions*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2001.

This could very well be for students as well, as it is a truly interesting collection of folk tales.

Echevarría, Roberto González. *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

A scholarly text, detailing how literature relates to science, history and the legal system.

Galeano, Eduardo. *Memory of Fire: Century of the Wind*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.

Third book in a trilogy, covering the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Vignettes of history which brings history alive.

Smith, Jessie Willcox. *A Child's Book of Stories*. New Jersey: Dilithium Press, Ltd., Children's Classic Division. 1986.

A very nice collection of a variety of folk and fairytales. Smith is illustrator. No editor listed. May best be used as readings or oral storytelling.

Toelken, Barre. *The Dynamics of Folklore*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979.

More for the in-the-field collector of folklore, but still some fascinating ideas.

Warner, Marina. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996.

The huge, dense text, deconstructs the folk and fairytale, with an eye to elements of sexism.

Yearsley, Macleod. *The Folklore of Fairy-Tale*. London: Watts & Co., 1924.

A great, old text for analyzing and categorizing the old stories.

Zamora, Lois Parkinson. Wendy B. Faris, eds. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

A fantastic collection of various essays by scholars on aspects of Magical Realism and specific writings.

Zipes, Jack. *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Insightful discussion of fairytales, children, and the damage of Disney.

## Additional Resources for Teachers

<http://www.magicalrealism.com/authors/1.html>

This site gives basic ideas of writings of 100 + proponents of Magical Realism. A wonderful resource.

<http://www.angelfire.com/wa2/margin/nonficHillGGM.html>

A discussion of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which is an erudite revisiting of this extraordinary novel, on its 35 anniversary.

<http://www.angelfire.com/wa2/margin/Rowlan.html>

A discussion of “Cortázar’s Reality”. One of my favorite authors who can be hard to get a handle on.

<http://www.angelfire.com/wa2/margin/nonficSellmantypes.html>

Yes, both angelfire and margin are good places to go for insights into Magic Realism.

This piece, by an editor of *Margin*, works at deciding how to divide and typify Magic Realism writings. I found it helpful and will go back to it again.

<http://www.angelfire.com/wa2margin/nonficSLD1.html>

A really comprehensive discussion of Angela Carter’s novel *Wise Children*.

<http://www.angelfire.com/wa2margin/nonficSellmanFantasmas.html>

This deals with Rob Johnson and his book *Fantasmas: Supernatural Stories by Mexican American Writers*. Takes up the discussion which my unit did not, as to differences between Magic Realism and the Fantastic.

<http://www.utc.edu/Academic/English/booker/ishigure.html>

Dealing with a book I hope to use in the future, *The Unconsoled*.

<http://www.emory.edu/English/Bahri/Hulme.html>

Work on another book which would be wonderful to use, incorporating Maori myths, by a woman who lived both in that world and the Western. (*The Bone People* by Hulme)

[http://themodernword.com/borges/borges\\_works1.html](http://themodernword.com/borges/borges_works1.html)

Gives a leg up on some of Borges short stories.

<http://www.salon.com/june97magical970611.html>

by Albert Fuguet who is one of the McOndo writers, ie anti García Márquez’s Macondo, and anti Magic Realism. Keep in mind as he talks about the preconceptions leveled on Latin American writers, that he was raised in California for about ten years.

<http://web16.epnet.com>

(not the full address, but look for “This is the Real Story...Modern Revisions of Folktales) This gives a lot about folklore as well as being anti and revisions of them. Interesting.

## Bibliography for Students (and their teachers)

Allende, Isabel. *The House of the Spirits*. New York: Bantam Books. 1986.  
An epic, highly political story of a family.

Bombal, Maria Luisa. *The House of Mist - The Shrouded Woman*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.

In *The Shrouded Woman*, a corpse reviews her life; a look at upper class women and lives missing purpose and effect.

\_\_\_\_\_. *New Islands*. New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1982.  
Book of short stories, containing "The Tree".

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Ficciones*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1962.  
Essential Borges collection, containing his masterpiece, "The Garden of Forking Paths".

Correas de Zapata, Celia, ed. *Short Stories by Latin American Women: The Magic and the Real*. Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1990.  
While there is as much variety in this collection as in any anthology of mixed gender writing, this is a welcome publication in what had been a very male club.

Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber*. New York: Penguin Books, 1979.  
A funny, insightful work of revisionist fairytales.

Cortázar, Julio. *Blow-up and Other Stories*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1967.  
I love this author. "Blow-up", "Axolotl", "House Taken Over", --a host of wonderful stories by a master in experimental fiction. (or try his novel, *Hop Scotch*).

Echevarría, Roberto González. *Latin American Short Stories*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.  
A comprehensive collection of stories from colonial to contemporary times. Helpful bios before each story.

Esquivel, Laura. *Like Water for Chocolate*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.  
Magic and food, romance and family in turn-of-the-century Mexico. Each chapter begins with a recipe. Saga filled with magic

Ferré, Rosario. *The Youngest Doll*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.  
Wonderful collection from this Puerto Rican writer of experimental-magical-fiction; whatever you call it, these are good stories, with much to discuss about craft.

Fuentes, Carlos. *Aura*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965. Bilingual edition.  
Marvelous story where the 2<sup>nd</sup> person narrative pulls the reader into participation.

García Márquez, Gabriel. *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1976.

The story of a Caribbean tyrant. The book Isabel Allende refers to when discussing how much more clearly it makes the point of a dictator than would a simple journalistic effort.

\_\_\_\_\_. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.  
Thanks to Oprah's Book Club for bringing it back again. This large chronicle of life in Macondo, filled with elements of Magic Realism.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Innocent Eréndira and Other Stories*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978.

Early collection of his stories.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Collected Stories*. New York: Harper and Row, 1984.  
This has the best of the best from all the collections, including "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" and "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World".

Hong Kinston, Maxine. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage International Books, 1989.

The book is filled with the wonder and fears of being brought up in the midst of such living ghosts.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Mules and Men*. New York: Harper and Row, 1935.  
Fascinating collection (hers) from African-American oral tradition.

Ragan, Kathleen. *Fearless Girls, Wise Women & Beloved Sisters*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998

This is a wonderful collection for those who have tired of all the heroes and passive maidens waiting to be rescued. Ragan makes the case that these stories were always there, simply suppressed by anthologies and publishers who, by virtue of being male, were more interested in the heroes.

Rusdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. New York: Penguin Books, 1980  
Called the best book in 25 years. An infinitely good read, filled with sounds, smells and voices.

Yolen, Jane. *Favorite Folktales from around the World*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.

Wonderful, fat collection divided into types of tales, giving the source of each. Introduction is also helpful.

Young, David, Keith Hollaman, ed. *Magical Realist Fiction: An Anthology*. New York: Longman Inc., 1984.

The best anthology I found for fiction of Magic Realism. Each author has a tight, analytical bio before the pieces.

### **Appendix A Standards**

1. All students will use effective research and information management skills.
2. All students will read and use a variety of methods for understanding complex texts.
3. All students will respond orally and in writing to information and ideas.
4. All students will write for a variety of purposes and in various genre.
5. All students will analyze and make critical judgments, separating fact from opinion; discovering stereotypes, etc., hopefully before #3.
6. All students will work with other students to exchange information.
7. All students will listen to and understand complex oral messages, hopefully before they do anything else.
8. All students will make oral presentations and/or performances.

