

Discussion Handout: The Oxford Murders

Some Definitions of Magical Realism:

The marvelous real that I defend and that is our own marvelous real is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American. Here the strange is commonplace and always was commonplace. (Alejo Carpentier, *The Baroque and the Marvelous Real*. *Magical Realism*. Ed. Zamora and Faris, p. 102-104)

Once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision (Angel Flores, *Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction*. *Magical Realism*. Ed. Zamora and Faris, p. 113-116).

First it is the combination of reality and fantasy and second, it is the transformation of the real into the awesome and unreal, thirdly an art of surprises, one which creates a distorted concept of time and space, fourth a literature directed to an intellectual minority; characterized by a cold cerebral aloofness it does not cater to popular tastes, but rather to that of those sophisticated individuals instructed in aesthetic subtleties. (Erwin Dale Carter. *Magical Realism in Contemporary Argentine Fiction*. Ann Arbor: U Microfilms, 1969. p. 3-4)

Magical realism's most basic concern [is]--the nature and limits of the knowable. Magical realist texts ask us to look beyond the limits of the knowable. Magical realism is truly postmodern in its rejection of the binarisms, rationalisms, and reductive materialisms of Western modernity. (Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. And Latin American Fiction*. *Magical Realism*. Ed. Zamora and Faris, 498).

Student Led Discussion

1. 3 to 5 main topics of discussion –
 - a. Magical Realism –
 - i. **Math as assumed reality:**
 - ii. The contrived nature of the plot does not detract from the mathematical honesty of the narrative.
 - iii. To what extent is South American “magical realism” an expression of Gödel’s Theorem in the narrative? Meaning, although the situation might seem contrived and mystical, if we try and apply a “microscopic level” of analysis to Seldom’s eventual confession, is it possible that there are multiple logical interpretations for the ending of the novel?
 1. “Gödel showed that even at the most elementary of arithmetic there are propositions

that can neither be proved nor refuted...
propositions which no judge would be able to
declare true or false, guilty or innocent.”¹ –

Seldom, The Oxford Murders

2. Specifically relate math and human concepts of justice as an expression of a mathematical narrative reality. This view of justice might suggest the realistic expression of a possible outcome of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle.

iv. **Characters as expressions of principles -**

1. “This concern of the magical realists for the well-knit plot probably stems from their familiarity with detective stories, which Borges, Bioy Casares, Peyrou, and other magical realists have written, translated, or anthologized. Their mathematical precision and perspicacity may account for their strong aversion to all flabbiness, either stylistic or emotional.” – Page 192,
2. Might this explain the contrived nature of the plot structure? Even more so, are characters merely a direct expression of the mathematical reality of Martinez’s world?

v. **Challenges to the character’s as direct representation –**

1. Misogyny hidden under the guise of logical observations.
2. The protagonist’s apparent misogyny – his logical observations of people only become sensual when he is around women.
3. “Her eyes were particularly intriguing: they were a very beautiful deep blue, but they seemed more still than the rest of her features, as if reluctance to express emotion. She was wearing a long, loose peasant dress with a round neck, which didn’t give much away about her body than that she was thin, although looking more closely I saw hints that, luckily, she wasn’t thin all over. From the back, especially, she looked very huggable.” – He was obviously focusing on particular traits in Beth – Is his objective observation of her permissible considering his role as the “solution” to the ultimate narrative mystery?

vi. **Patterns as malleable processes with no definitive interpretation -**

1. Bring up the M<38 example – who could solve it?
2. In addition, when Beth’s aunt is found dead, we see how an Oxford reporter and our logical protagonist both approach the pathologist’s findings. Although the protagonist is

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ultimately hesitant to build a fantastical narrative around the limited clues found so far, the reporter is already cooking up a scandalous story about Beth's involvement in a murder over life insurance. Characters directly represent ideologies and approaches to a pattern.

2. **Question** - To what extent is South American "magical realism" an expression of Gödel's Theorem in the narrative? Meaning, although the situation might seem contrived and mystical, if we try and apply a "microscopic level" of analysis to Seldom's eventual confession, is it possible that there are multiple logical interpretations for the ending of the novel?
3. **Bibliography** –
 - a. Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. And Latin American Fiction*. *Magical Realism*. Ed. Zamora and Faris, 498.
 - b. Erwin Dale Carter. *Magical Realism in Contemporary Argentine Fiction*. Ann Arbor: U Microfilms, 1969. p. 3-4
4. **Mathematical Themes:**
 - a. Gödel's theorem
 - b. Andrew Wiles' proof of Fermat's Last Theorem
 - c. Elliptic curves
 - d. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle
 - e. Taniyama Conjecture
 - f. The Pythagorean Sect
 - g. Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mathematics