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# Magical realism, freedom, and control in García Marquez, Millhauser, and Winterson

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MAGICAL REALISM, FREEDOM, AND CONTROL IN  
GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, MILLHAUSER, AND WINTERSON

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jennifer Lynne Tom  
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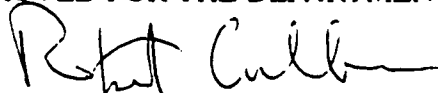
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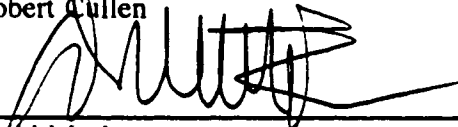
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## ABSTRACT

### MAGICAL REALISM, FREEDOM, AND CONTROL IN GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, MILLHAUSER, AND WINTERSON

by Jennifer Lynne Tom

This thesis addresses the topic of magical realism in the novels of Gabriel García Márquez, Steven Millhauser, and Jeanette Winterson. In magical realism, the improbable, impossible, or extraordinary appears frequently. However, this element of the extraordinary in the characters' lives—whether it appears in the form of an extraordinary ability, *or* the ability to view the world as extraordinary—greatly limits the characters' choices and freedom.

In Gabriel García Márquez's novel, One Hundred Years of Solitude, a family curse and a prophetic scroll cause the Buendía family to experience unparalleled loneliness and, ultimately, total extinction. In Steven Millhauser's Portrait of a Romantic and Edwin Mullhouse, and in Jeanette Winterson's Written on the Body, the narrators' hyperreal perceptions of the world lead directly to the novels' extraordinary conclusions—including suicide, murder, and madness. This thesis explores how the presence of magical realism in the texts influences the characters within the novels.



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## Introduction

In Gabriel García Márquez's novella, Chronicle of a Death Foretold, all the residents in a small town know that a young man, Santiago Nasar, will be murdered before the day is over. "There had never been a death more foretold," says the narrator (57). However, none of the townspeople bother to tell the intended victim and the scenario unfolds as everyone expects—Santiago Nasar dies after bleeding to death outside the front door of his own house.

Despite the fact that most of the events in Chronicle of a Death Foretold are realistic (they could actually occur), there is an atmosphere of the improbable—of coincidence, of serendipity, and of fate—which pervades the narrative and endows the novel with a fantastic, magical realist quality.

In magical realism (also known as "magic" realism), improbable, impossible, or extraordinary occurrences are frequent. Some characters fly, levitate, and communicate with the dead. Other characters are blessed (or cursed) with extraordinary perception, such as the ability to see through objects or to predict the future. However, this element of the extraordinary in the characters' lives—whether it comes in the form of a gift of an extraordinary ability, *or* the ability to view the everyday world as extraordinary—greatly limits the characters' choices and freedom. Consequently, although "anything" can happen in magical realism, it often appears that it *must* happen.

In Gabriel García Márquez's novel, One Hundred Years of Solitude, the magical realist elements in the story—a family curse and a mysterious, prophetic scroll—cause the Buendía family to experience unparalleled loneliness and, ultimately, total extinction. In Steven Millhauser's Portrait of a Romantic and Edwin Mullhouse, and in Jeanette Winterson's Written on the Body, the narrators' surreal perceptions of the world lead directly to the novels' extraordinary conclusions—which include suicide, murder, and

madness. This thesis explores the ways in which the presence of magical realism in the texts controls the fates of the characters within the four novels.

## **Chapter I: History and Definitions of Fantastic Literature and Magical Realism**

### History of the Fantastic

Certainly, literature has had “magical” or fantastic elements for centuries, perhaps since its earliest beginnings. Eric S. Rabkin, editor of Fantastic Worlds: Myths, Tales, and Stories, cites Ernst Cassirer’s 1925 essay, Language and Myth, which argues that the very origins of human language and of human myth were simultaneous. Rabkin illustrates:

Even today, we speak of casting a spell with words; the word *spell* itself comes from an Old High German word that means tale. If we can name something we may feel that much closer to controlling it. This obvious superstition has not died, though perhaps we rely on the magic of words less than people once did. Still, we ensure the fairness of choosing sides by saying, “Eeny, meeny, miney, mo”; we require that marriage be sanctified according to the proper formula of “With this ring I thee wed”; we admit and even welcome our community with all those who have lost love ones by saying, over a grave, “Rest in peace” (27).

Psychologists have argued that the fantastic element in literature is essential to mankind’s sense of well-being, offering a way of indulging the “illusion of central position,” (Rabkin 30) which is the illusion that we are the center of the universe. Rabkin argues that myths and fairy tales “project a universe that cares about individual humans and responds to their needs and desires” (30).

Akin to the illusion of central position is Freud’s idea of “the omnipotence of thought,” which is the fantasy that if one thinks of something, “it will come to pass” (Rabkin 30). The fantasy of the omnipotence of thought is another important element in folk tales, myths, and fairy tales. In the Grimm Brothers’ version of the story “Hansel and Grethel,” the children are abandoned in the woods because their stepmother does not want to feed or take care of them. After the children are captured by a witch who threatens to eat them, Grethel kills the witch, and the two children return home to their father. Fulfilling the concept of the omnipotence of thought, Grethel’s subconscious desire to supplant her “wicked” stepmother is realized, for the woman has died during the short time that the

children were gone. The father welcomes the children back into his home, where Gretel presumably undertakes the role of tending to hearth and home—the role her stepmother had stolen away from her.

Thus, fairy tales, folk tales, and myths—which Rabkin cites as the three primary sources of the fantastic in literature (27)—offer comfort to readers and listeners and support the illusion of central position and of the omnipotence of thought. But it is clear that not all fantastic literature supports this position. In fact, there has always been an alternate, darker side to fantastic literature—including the grotesque.

### The Grotesque

According to The Oxford English Dictionary, “grotesque” is derived from the Italian word “grottesca,” a term first used in the late 16th century to describe the paintings that were being unearthed in Roman ruins. Such paintings were typically murals of landscapes (Simpson and Weiner 873). Later, the term was broadened and also referred to paintings or sculptures which featured “portions of human and animal forms, fantastically combined and interwoven with foliage and flowers” (Simpson and Weiner 874). Wild, rugged landscapes and certain aspects of gothic and neo-gothic architecture (e.g., stone gargoyles) were also described as grotesques.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, the term grotesque was applied to comic representations of people (such as caricatures), and subsequently, to describe people with supposedly ludicrous or bizarre traits. Though the term was used for years to describe paintings, sculpture, landscapes, and people, writers and critics did not use the term to describe literature until the 19th century. The OED records Hazlitt’s use of the term in 1820, when he commented, “Our [British] literature . . . is Gothic and Grotesque” (Simpson and Weiner 874). And in 1888, the Pall Mall Gazette explained, “the grotesque is a branch of the fantastic” (Simpson and Weiner 874).

The grotesque in literature referred to fiction or poetry which had extravagant, wild, fantastic, or bizarre qualities. Edgar Allan Poe's 1840 volume of fantastic tales was called Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque. The volume includes the story "William Wilson" (about a man and the doppelgänger who haunts him) and "Berenice," which depicted one of Poe's favorite themes—premature burial—this time of a woman by her fiancé who is at first enchanted by her beauty but becomes both repulsed and obsessed with her subsequent illness and physical decline—especially her teeth, which he extracts while she is still alive in her tomb.

Hugh Holman and William Harmon's A Handbook to Literature explains that the modern concept of the grotesque in literature is connected with a loss of faith in both the cosmos and in society:

Modern critics use "the grotesque" to refer to special types of writing, to kinds of characters, and to subject matters. The interest in the grotesque is usually considered an outgrowth of interest in the irrational, distrust of any cosmic order, and frustration at humankind's lot in the universe. In this sense, grotesque is the merging of the comic and tragic, resulting from our loss of faith in the moral universe essential to tragedy and in a rational social order essential to comedy. Where nineteenth-century critics like Walter Bagehot saw the grotesque as a deplorable variation from the normal, Thomas Mann sees it as "the most genuine style" for the modern world and the "only guise in which the sublime may appear" now. Jorge Luis Borges echoed Mann's sentiment. Flannery O' Connor seems to mean the same thing when she the grotesque character "man forced to meet the extremes of his own nature" (220)

In The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque, David K. Danow explains that both grotesque realism and magical realism depict a carnivalesque, bizarre atmosphere; however, Danow makes a critical distinction between the two genres, explaining that magical realism is the comic side of the carnivalesque, while grotesque realism (a term not in wide usage) is the darker, tragic side. Further, he identifies magical realism primarily with South America and grotesque realism with Holocaust and post-Holocaust literature. Other critics also believe that magic realism is a primarily comic

genre; however, as this thesis will demonstrate, the lack of individual control over the “magical” in magical realism can indeed lead to tragic consequences.

#### Other Varieties of Fantastic Literature in the Modern Era

The term “fantastic literature” is a very comprehensive category. As stated before, Rabkin included myths, fairy tales, and folk tales as types of fantastic literature. But in the modern era, the definition has become somewhat narrower. Genres such as fantasy, science fiction, the fantastic (a narrower definition than that of fantastic literature, as offered by Jorge Luis Borges), and magical realism have recently been labeled as fantastic literature.

In the introduction to Black Water II, an anthology of fantastic fiction, Alberto Manguel makes a clear distinction between the fantastic and fantasy. “Unlike the literature of fantasy, in which the world itself—Narnia or Middle Earth—is unreal, fantastic literature finds its bearings in our own landscapes, our cities, our living-rooms, our beds, where suddenly something happens which demands not so much our belief as our lack of disbelief” (Manguel xix).

One distinction between fantasy and the modern fantastic (of which magic realism is a part) is the realistic setting of the fantastic. This element of the realistic—the “possible”—plays an important part in the story. One of the most important distinctions between magical realism and other types of fantastic literature is suggested by the term “magical realism” itself. In the genre, there is an emphasis on both the real world and normality—the realistic aspect—and on the magical—the impossible, improbable, or hyperreal aspect. Furthermore, both aspects are integral to the text.

David Lodge describes magical realism as fiction in which “marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative” (114). But the vast number of synonyms for magical realism frequently adds to the confusion when

defining magical realism. In discussing numerous variations of the term magical realism, Güenther lists the many similar terms:

Mutual affinities can be found in de Chirico's and Carrá's *metafisica* (metaphysical); German artists' *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity); Roh's *Magischer Realismus* (Magic Realism), *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness), and the *Geheimnis* (mystery, secret) behind the depicted world; the *fantastico* (fantastic) of Borges; the *Magisch-realisme* (Magical Realism) of Daisne, the magical realism of Flores, *lo real maravilloso americano* (the American marvelous real) of Carpentier; Bontempelli's "other dimension" in *realismo magico* (Magic Realism); Jünger's "magical background," "magical rationalism," and "stereoscopy"; and Kubin's "other side of reality." Despite the many similarities, divergences are numerous. (61-62)

These "divergences" are perhaps what cause some misunderstanding, but they also contribute to the diversity and originality of magical realist works.

#### Origins: Magical Realism in Art

The concept of magical realism was first applied to painting. The term "*magischer Realismus*" (Chamberlain 7) was first coined by artist Franz Roh in 1925, to describe a type of German painting which was characterized by "clear, cool, static, thinly-painted, sharp-focused images, frequently portraying the imaginary, the improbable, or the fantastic in a realistic or rational manner" (Drabble 347). In *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Euroäischen Malerei* (Post Expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Newest European Painting) Roh described how the technique was accomplished:

Magic realism is representational, tending, indeed, toward a sharp focus on objects to make them appear more than real. But the sharp focus does not necessarily serve the aims of representation; instead, it invests the object with a kind of magic aura, calling attention to the illusion of reality as in the paintings of Henri Rousseau and Giorgio de Chirico.<sup>1</sup> (Chamberlain 7)

Though Franz Roh's essay focused on art, specifically post-Expressionist painting, it had profound influence on other kinds of magical realist art and literature. In speaking



about the paintings of Carrá, de Chirico, Citroen, Schrimpf, and Mense, and contrasting them with Expressionists of the time, Roh describes the differences:

It seems to us that this fantastic dreamscape has completely vanished and that our real world re-emerges before our eyes, bathed in the clarity of a new day. We recognize this world, although now—not only because we have emerged from a dream—we look on it with new eyes. The religious and transcendental themes have largely disappeared in recent painting. In contrast, we are offered a new style that is thoroughly of this world, that celebrates the mundane. Instead of the mother of God, the purity of a shepherdess in the fields (Schrimpf). Instead of the remote horrors of hell, the inextinguishable horrors of our own time (Grosz and Dix). It feels as if that roughshod and frenetic transcendentalism, that devilish detour, that flight from the world have died and now an insatiable love for terrestrial things and a delight in their fragmented and limited nature has reawakened. (Roh 17)<sup>2</sup>

In other words, magical realist painters re-awakened in their audience an appreciation for the seemingly ordinary, and not just an appreciation for it, but a unique admiration of it, as if one were seeing something ordinary and commonplace for the first time and sensed the utter extraordinariness of it.

This concept of magical realism emigrated to Italy in 1927, mostly due to the publication of Massimo Bontempelli's article about "*realismo magico*" (magic realism) in the first four issues of his journal, 900 (published in both French and Italian)(Guenther 60). By the early 1940s, the movement had emigrated to the North American continent. The term "magic realists" was used in English in 1943 at an exhibit at the New York Museum of Modern Art, entitled "American Realists and Magic Realists" (Guenther 45).

### Magical Realism in Literature

The transformation of magical realism from one medium to another—from art to literature—is somewhat complex. Franz Roh devoted a few lines of Nach-  
*Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Euroäischen Malerei* to the subject of magical realism in literature, and Bontempelli's journal 900 discussed

magical realism in both literature and art. However, most discussion before 1949 on the subject of magical realism focused on post-Expressionist painting.

Then, in 1949, the term "*lo real maravilloso*" (the marvelous real) was coined by Alejo Carpentier, who was trying to find a way of "searching for a concept broad enough to accommodate both the events of everyday life and the fabulous nature of Latin American geography and history" (Cohen 602). Carpentier believed that "the marvelous real" was a way of incorporating all dimensions of the imagination to enrich the idea of what is "real." Like the European magical realists, Carpentier was influenced by the Surrealist movement; however, he believed that the difference between European and Latin American magical realism was the existence of "a state of disbelief" in the European magical realist school. In other words, the European variety of magical realism did not suppose a belief in the supernatural or uncanny. For Carpentier, the difference between European magical realism and Latin American *lo real maravilloso* is that the Latin American variety *does* presuppose such a belief in the supernatural, or at least, according to Carpentier, it should:

Those who do not believe in saints cannot heal themselves by the miracles of saints, nor can those who are not Quixotes enter, body and soul, into the world of Amadis of Gaul or Tirant lo Blanc. (Williamson, "Coming to Terms with Modernity," 84-85)

Meanwhile, Franz Roh's ideas on magical realist paintings were also exerting a great influence on European writers. German writer Ernst Jünger was interested in the techniques used in magical realist paintings, such as depicting the uncanny by using objective isolation, accentuation, and microscopic depiction; Jünger believed that the same effect could be produced in literature by using what he called "stereoscopy," which depicted a "profound sense of the minuscule uncovered through precise examination, and 'magic rationalism'" (Guenther 58).

Jünger in Germany and Johan Daisne in Belgium were among the first to experiment with magical realism in literature. Before encountering the term "magical

realism,” Daisne had written a novel called *De trap van steen en wolkenm* (1942) and used the term *fantastich-realistich* (fantastic realistic) in his text. In 1943, after reading about Bontempelli’s essays on magical realism, he subsequently used the term *Magisch-realisme* (Magical realism), presumably under Bontempelli’s influence (Guenther 60).

At approximately the same time, Jünger wrote about the concept of magical realism in “*Nationalismus und modernes Leben*” (Nationalism and Modern Life). He used the concept to describe the uncanny works of Austrian writer Alfred Kubin (who wrote primarily in the first decade of the 20th century) and W. E. Süskind (who wrote in the 1920s). Both of these writers had used techniques which were very similar to what was now being called magical realism. Süskind had written an article decades before which included the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) to describe literature and poetry that portrayed a “monstrous objectivity” where “the objects speak for themselves and the artist only gives his hand, his brush, his pen, his reflecting memory and conscience” (Guenther 59).

Due to the proliferation of essays on magical realism as well as experimental novels employing magical realist techniques, by the late 1940s and early 50s magical realism became an accepted term in Germany’s circles of literary criticism (Guenther 59).<sup>3</sup> Besides Jünger, the early 1950s saw many other practitioners of the form in German literature (Baldick, “Magic Realism” 128). George Emmanuel Saiko was perhaps the most prominent, coining the German phrase *magischer realismus* (magical realism) in the work *Die Wirklichkeit hat doppelten Boden, Gedanken zum magischer Realismus*, published in 1952 (Garland 776). Saiko’s novels included *Auf dem FloB* (published 1948, completed 1939) a novel of social decay filled with a sense of uncanniness and subtle psychology; and *Der Mann in Schilf* (1955), which was about what Saiko termed “inner disintegration” (Garland 776). His style was influenced by Freud’s works, and was quasi-surrealistic. In his body of work, which included novellas, short stories, and novels, “events are

subordinated to the responses of the characters and, especially, to the undercurrents directing the responses” (Garland 776).

The progression of magical realism from the late 1950s to the present is more difficult to follow; most critics believe the two paths began to diverge more fully. Though the contemporary variety of magical realism is the most recognizable to readers today, there are at least two distinct varieties of magical realism: the Roh<sup>4</sup> or classic variety and the Flores<sup>5</sup> or contemporary variety. Each of these varieties portrays the “anything”—the improbable and impossible—in a very different manner.

Roh’s idea of the hyperreal, influenced by the Surrealist movement, spawned art and literature which tended to present everyday objects, places, and experiences in ways which made them seem unusual, bizarre, or unfamiliar. Generally, these works do not deviate from quotidian “reality.” They usually do not include supernatural elements, though sometimes they imply or suggest the supernatural or include an element of the “impossible.” Frequently, they present “ordinary” life as very surreal or hyperreal (more than real). For example, commonplace, everyday objects and locations are made to seem strange, unfamiliar, and extraordinary. A familiar location or object might possess eerie, bizarre, and unfamiliar qualities—creating not necessarily an element of horror (though magical realism does not exclude this), but an atmosphere of differentness, which can blur the lines between the concept of reality—static, familiar, “correct,” and probable—and the concept of unreality—changing, unfamiliar, seemingly “wrong,” or improbable.

In contrast to Roh-style, contemporary magical realism (from this point on referred to as Flores-style magical realism) came to be more closely identified with Latin American writers. This variety is frequently influenced by native beliefs and legends and often features what could be deemed supernatural or paranormal events and other unexplained phenomena. In Flores-style magical realism, objects and events that would commonly be regarded as strange or supernatural (unreal) are made to seem possible or even

commonplace (real). For example, a character's physical ascendance to heaven (by levitation into the clouds and the "heavens" above) might be viewed as part of everyday life, and a natural consequence of that character's personality. In this case, the "magical" is assimilated into everyday life.

Consequently, in Flores-style magical realism, the impossible is effected largely due to supernatural intervention, to the suspension of the laws of physics, or to coincidence or serendipity. In Roh-style magical realism, the impossible does not always happen; the focus is on how the world can take on extraordinary qualities. There is generally more ambiguity in the Roh-style than in the Flores variety.

Though the tone and techniques used in Flores and Roh-style magical realism are quite different, both kinds have in common a concern with the extraordinary in life. In Flores-style, characters encounter curses and supernatural intervention; in Roh-style, they deal with the consequences of the hyperreal, distorted way in which they view the world.

Though the two branches of magical realism at first seemed to diverge along geographic lines, one European and one South American (and it should be noted that some critics still believe that they continue to do so), both types of magical realism are widely practiced today throughout the world.<sup>6</sup> Today, Gabriel García Márquez is the writer most identified with the genre of magical realism, but many writers use magical realist elements in their work.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, former or current writers who have used magical realist techniques are Thomas Pynchon (Gravity's Rainbow), Vladimir Nabokov (Ada or Ardor), William Faulkner (the short story collection, Go Down, Moses), Joyce Carol Oates (Haunted), Toni Morrison (Sulu, Song of Solomon and Beloved), Tennessee Williams ("Suddenly, Last Summer"), Maxine Hong Kingston (The Woman Warrior), Siri Husevedt (The Blindfold), and Steven Millhauser (Portrait of a Romantic, Edwin Mullhouse), as well as John Cheever and William Kennedy.

Canadian writers Margaret Atwood (The Handmaid's Tale, Wilderness Tips), and Alice Hoffman (Practical Magic) also use magical realist elements in their work, and several studies have been done on Canadian magical realism.<sup>8</sup> Many critical studies also exist on British magical realism,<sup>9</sup> whose practitioners include John Fowles (The Magus, The French Lieutenant's Woman), Salman Rushdie (Shame, The Satanic Verses), Angela Carter (Nights at the Circus), and Jeanette Winterson (The Passion, Written on the Body). Elsewhere in the world, Italo Calvino (If On a Winter's Night a Traveller) is an example of a magical realist writer in Italy, and Milan Kundera (The Unbearable Lightness of Being) in Czechoslovakia. Other current and former Latin American magical realists include Jorge Luis Borges (Labyrinths), Laura Esquivel (Like Water for Chocolate), Isabelle Allende (The House of Spirits), Carlos Fuentes (Aura), and Manuel Puig (Kiss of the Spider Woman).

The magical realist novels of the three authors chosen—Gabriel García Márquez, Jeanette Winterson, and Steven Millhauser—are quite different in plot, tone, and style, yet each explores a concept which is endlessly fascinating: individual freedom. This thesis explores the ways in which the presence of magical realism in each of the novels limits the characters' freedom and influences their lives and fates.

#### A Catalog of Magical Realist Techniques

William Spindler offers some useful distinctions between the techniques and effects which characterize magical realism. Spindler believes that the two primary historical distinctions in magical realism are the Flores and Roh styles, but he also extrapolates from A. B. Chanady's theories and defines three separate categories: metaphysical magical realism, anthropological magical realism, and ontological magical realism. These three categories correspond to alternate definitions of "magic."

Metaphysical magical realism is aligned with Roh's ideas of making the ordinary seem magical. Some examples can be found in the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, which are known for the "airless and static quality and eerie atmosphere of the scenes portrayed" (Spindler 79), as well as some of the short stories of Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges. Effects include "an uncanny atmosphere and the creation within the text of a disturbing impersonal presence, which remains implicit, very much as in Albert Camus' The Plague (1947), Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1902) or Henry James's The Turn of the Screw (1898)" (Spindler 79-80). This type of magical realism also includes "phenomena of the preternatural kind" (Spindler 80), including a man who can remember everything, as in Borges's "*Funes el memorioso*," and a man with a grossly overdeveloped sense of smell, as in Patrick Süskind's Perfume (1985)(80).

In works of anthropological magical realism, narrators "sometimes depicts events from a rational point of view (the "realist" component) and sometimes from that of a believer in magic (the "magical" element)" (Spindler 80). This type of magical realism is most often associated with Latin American fiction, and often refers to cultural myths and legends of a social or ethnic group. Spindler calls this the "most current and specific definition of Magical Realism" (80). Anthropological magical realism is primarily associated with Latin American fiction, including the fiction of Borges, Cortazar, Puig, Vargas Llosa, and García Márquez.

Spindler's third variety, ontological magical realism, "resolves antinomy without recourse to any particular cultural perspective . . . the supernatural is presented in a matter-of-fact way as if it did not contradict reason, and no explanations are offered for events in the text. There is no reference to the mythical imagination of pre-industrial communities" (82). Examples of ontological magical realism include Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis, where Gregor Samsa does not question how he is transformed into an insect, but accepts that he is one.

In this category, Spindler also includes literature which features unreliable narrators. In The Metamorphosis, Carpentier's "*Viaje a la semilla*," and many stories by Cortázar, Spindler concludes that the independent verification of the narrator's strange perceptions of the world identify the works as ontological magical realism:

This type of text can be interpreted sometimes at the psychological level, and the events seen as the product of the mind of a "disturbed" individual, as in Gogol's "Diary of a Madman." They should be regarded as magical realist however, for these "subjective" views are endorsed by the "objective" impersonal narrator, by other characters or by the realistic description of events that take place in a normal and plausible framework. Instead of having only a subjective reality, therefore, the unreal has an objective, ontological presence in the text. (82)

Spindler describes the Cortázar stories where antinomy is left unresolved for horrific effect as "Fantastic Literature" (83). As noted before, the term "fantastic literature" has been closely associated with, and even used interchangeably with, the term "magical realism." In particular, Jorge Luis Borges's definition of fantastic literature has been applied to magical realist literature. Borges cited four criteria for determining fantastic literature: "(1) contamination of reality by a dream; (2) a work of art within a work of art; (3) travel in time rather than in space; and (4) the presence of a doppelganger" (Olsen 16). He believed that at least one of these four must be present.

Although Spindler and Borges identify important techniques, neither provides a comprehensive list of magical realist techniques. Of the many literary techniques and conventions used in magical realism, eight common ones are listed below:

- 1) The presence of the supernatural—ghosts, zombies, messages from the dead, angelic interference, divine intervention, messages from God or the Devil. An example of divine intervention is a scene in One Hundred Years of Solitude in which a woman rises to heaven and is never seen again. Messages from the dead or appearances of supernatural beings are those which occur in otherwise "realistic" settings and texts (excluding ghost stories, in



which the tone and setting of the story identify it as such and in which the primary motivation of the author is to create feelings of horror).

2) The gift of enhanced or decreased perception. This is often used as a way to introduce the extraordinariness of a character in a novel. In Jeanette Winterson's The Passion, a priest named Patrick has extraordinary eyesight; in fact, he possesses an eye which can see for miles, even through buildings and other objects. At first he uses the extraordinary sense to spy on women, but when the government learns of his "gift," they forcibly enlist him in the army, despite the fact that he drinks too much and is rather peace-loving. Also, in Perfume, the protagonist uses his extraordinarily sensitive nose to become a master perfumer as well as a serial killer in France.

3) The distortion of nature, including animals which mimic or have qualities of humans, humans who have the personality of animals, animal magnetism, strange weather patterns. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, it rains continually for more than five years. Also in One Hundred Years of Solitude, Petra, a prostitute, conveys her tireless desire for sex to the animals on her farm, who in turn multiply with amazing rapidity and become so abundant that they are raffled off to the townspeople.

4) The suspension of the laws of physics, including distortions of gravity, spontaneous and unassisted flight, levitation. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, the residents of Macondo can levitate after drinking chocolate (sometimes regarded as food of the gods) because they are "pure" and free from original sin.

5) A climate of unreality or lies, including a wild distortion of truth (sometimes a part of a government cover-up), characters with paranoia, delusions, hallucinations, or distorted memories (with no apparent medical, psychological, or pharmacological cause); a blurring of lines between the real and the unreal, or the "real" and the fictional (metafiction). Jorge Luis Borges' fiction frequently has metafictional elements, and Kafka's The Castle and

The Trial depict characters caught in bizarre, extraordinary situations which seem to suggest the existence of conspiratorial organizations controlling individual lives.

6) The literalization of language, including the literalization of clichés, metaphors, other figures of speech. For example, the phrase “cry me a river” may become a reality, and a weeping woman may cry enough to cause a flood.

7) The distortion of time, including prolonged or eternal life, the past repeating itself, non-genetic traits passed from one generation to the next, time increasing or decreasing its rate, or extreme nostalgia. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, characters not only transmit genotypes and phenotypes to subsequent generations, but also personality traits and memories.

8) The presence of fate or destiny or the fulfillment of a prophecy or curse. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, the Buendía family curse condemns them to eternal solitude. Also in One Hundred Years of Solitude, the family’s hundred-year history is foretold in a mysterious scroll.

## Magical Realist Elements in the Four Novels

Gabriel García Márquez himself might not dispute that he writes magical realism, but would probably dispute most definitions of magical realism. In an interview with The Paris Review, he explained, “It always amuses me that the biggest praise for my work comes for the imagination while the truth is that there’s not a single line in all my work which does not have a basis in reality. The problem is that Caribbean reality resembles the wildest imagination” (Evory and Metzger 191). He also made similar comments in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, giving examples of improbable or disturbing realities: “in the past eleven years, twenty million Latin American children have died before their second birthday. Nearly one hundred and twenty thousand have disappeared as a consequence of repression. . . . A country created from all these Latin Americans in exile or enforced emigration would have a larger population than Norway”<sup>10</sup> (Conniff 167).

Gabriel García Márquez’s speech echoes Mario Vargas Llosa’s theories about Latin American literature: “We are still the victims in Latin America of what we could call ‘the revenge of the novel.’ We still have great difficulty in our countries in differentiating between fiction and reality” (Vargas Llosa 5). Despite Gabriel García Márquez’s claims that nothing that happens in his work is impossible or extraordinary, most people would claim that there are many “improbable” things which happen in the town of Macondo; these events are usually accepted and regarded as part of everyday life (often, part of their accepted fate) by Macondo’s residents.

One Hundred Years of Solitude is an excellent example of Flores-style magical realism. Magical and impossible occurrences pervade the novel. The residents of Macondo are pure (free from original sin) and can levitate twelve inches above the ground after drinking chocolate; one character, Remedios the Beauty, is literally too beautiful for this world and ascends to Heaven (though some cynical townspeople suspect she went to a brothel instead). Mermaid-like cetaceans with women’s faces and torsos swim in the

island's marshes. Weather is distorted; it rains continuously for five years on the island. And the most mysterious incident involves the fate of Macondo itself: the island disappears when a cyclone obliterates all traces of it from Earth.

Though both Gabriel García Márquez and Steven Millhauser use humor in their novels, Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954, by Jeffrey Cartwright, is quite different from One Hundred Years of Solitude in tone and style. While Gabriel García Márquez's novel frequently reads like a fable, with much hyperbole and happenstance, Millhauser's first novel derives its highly eclectic style from the narrator's exacting, precise descriptions of the childhood world.

Edwin Mullhouse is a novel masquerading as a literary biography, complete with a phony introductory note.<sup>11</sup> A satire which comments on the extraordinariness of childhood and the craft of the biographer, which in Edwin Mullhouse is to exert full control over his subject's life, the novel contains many traditionally comic moments, but also presents many darkly satirical events—up to and including murder.

As an example of the hyperreal variety of magical realism, the novel is filled with instances of normal childhood development, childhood games, common illnesses, and childhood crushes, but these are presented by Jeffrey, the biographer, in extraordinary detail. Jeffrey exhaustively lists the childhood games he played with Edwin, describes their strange friendships with other schoolchildren, and depicts their bizarre adventures to surreal locations like parks, beaches, and other neighborhood haunts. Repetition occurs frequently in the novel: Edwin and Jeffrey repeatedly play the same games and visit familiar places.

This extraordinary attention to detail accomplishes several things: 1) it makes the reader relive normal childhood feelings and experiences in great detail, yet perceive them in a new, extraordinary, "hyperreal" light—through a child's eyes. 2) It creates ambiguity by making Edwin seem by turns "normal" (because commonplace things happen to him) and

“extraordinary,” because of the way Jeffrey describes Edwin reacting to the commonplace (by becoming depressed, being romantically obsessed, and being driven by his genius to write the Great American Novel). It also makes Jeffrey, the biographer, instead of Edwin, the future “Great Novelist,” seem like the “genius” character in the novel for being able to make the “boring” and “normal” seem interesting. 3) It intersperses ordinary events (playing games, bike riding, passing notes in school, getting sick) with more rare and shocking events (police chasing and killing a gun-toting child, a girl nearly being driven insane by a friend, another girl dying in a fire, suicidal tendencies, murder).

The book is filled with comical passages; frequently the commonplace or normal is interspersed with the satirical and amusing: Edwin’s father reads to two-year old Edwin from Shakespeare, Joyce, and Dickens (Edwin’s favorite); Jeffrey catalogs three-year-old Edwin’s library, which includes books ranging from Thumbelina and Snow Red to The Immortal Moment: A Survey of English Literature from Beowulf to Joyce and The Pipe-Lover’s Guide to Real Smoking Enjoyment; Edwin makes every line of his love-poems to his would-be girlfriend Rose rhyme with her name: Dorn.

The style of Edwin Mullhouse provides a interesting contrast to the (purposely) overblown, highly Romantic, and darker style of Millhauser’s Portrait of a Romantic. In the latter novel, the narrator, Arthur Grumm, is a 29-year-old recounting his childhood. What makes Portrait of a Romantic different from other, more conventional coming-of-age stories is its feverish, hyperreal portrayal of middle-class American boyhood. The far-reaching boredom of Arthur and his friends is consistent with reality, for childhood is made up of long, boring periods, and yet the presentation of these “long, boring periods” in fiction give the novel its hallucinatory, dreamlike, magical realist qualities. As in Edwin Mullhouse, Millhauser’s narrators take great pains to describe events and objects in extraordinary detail.

One of the most extraordinary elements in Portrait of a Romantic is Millhauser's use of doppelgänger: in fact, he introduces three in the novel. The presence of this magical element is integral to the novel's outcome. Since Arthur's obsession with "Romanticism" typically leads him to experience and express extraordinary feelings, yet take very little action, his doppelgänger William finally acts when Arthur cannot.

Like Arthur Grumm, the narrator in Winterson's novel Written on the Body sees the world with distorted perceptions and appears to prefer fantasy over reality. The narrator, whose name and gender are never revealed, (the feminine pronoun will be used to describe her for the purpose of this thesis) is obsessed with texts and language. This obsession causes her to think and speak in metaphors, which she takes literally:

Sound waves travel at about 335 metres a second. That's about a fifth of a mile and Louise is perhaps two hundred miles away. If I shout now, she'll hear me in seventeen minutes or so. I have to leave a margin of error for the unexpected. She may be swimming under water. (135)

The narrator's obsession with language is a way to distance herself/himself from reality (and from being hurt). She has many affairs and treats lovers quite badly—as objects to use, not as real people with feelings. After the narrator falls in love with an extraordinary woman and discovers that the woman has cancer, her/his obsession with texts and language intrudes upon her reality even further until the differences between texts and reality (and reality and fantasy) seem arbitrary.

### Gabriel García Márquez

Latin America has a rich, but troubled, history: a history of wars, slavery, poverty, and political turmoil. For centuries, many countries used slave labor, particularly to work in the sugar cane fields and coffee plantations. Between 1518 and 1870, Spanish America imported over 1.5 million slaves from Africa—over 16 percent of the Atlantic slave trade—bringing them to places like Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and the Caribbean Islands (Skidmore

and Smith 21). In many cases, indigenous peoples in Latin America were also used for slave labor. Many were killed by the diseases brought by the Spanish, Portuguese, and the French in the 1500s-1800s.

Even though slavery was mostly eradicated by the late 19th century, many Latin American countries, including Cuba, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, have had long histories of dictatorships, repressive regimes, and military rule and have frequently used torture and execution to quell disturbances and to limit the freedom of speech of those who would criticize the government.

Latin America's geography, its turbulent political situation, and its socio-economic problems have exerted an unusually strong influence on Latin American literature. Given the above, that the ideas of freedom and individual control are important themes in magical realism is not surprising, but it is not only Latin America's history and its current political and social problems which are addressed in its literature, but also its rich history of myths, legends, and spirituality. In "Latin America: Fiction and Reality," Mario Vargas Llosa explains his belief that the history, politics, and the myths of Latin America added to its desire to embrace magical realism.

When much of Latin America was conquered by Spain, its indigenous population succumbed to diseases and murder, and its demographics changed due to the forced immigration of African slaves. The novel, which was forbidden in other Spanish colonies (because of the Inquisition, which thought the literary form dangerous) was also forbidden in the newly conquered Latin America. Mario Vargas Llosa argues that this form of repression led to "a world without novels, yes, but a world into which fiction had spread and contaminated practically everything: history, religion, poetry, science, art, speeches, journalism, and the daily habits of people" (Vargas Llosa 5).

El periquillo sarniento (The Itching Parrot), the first novel to be published after the ban was lifted, appeared in Mexico in 1816 after the wars for independence. A hundred

and forty years later, Latin America experienced a significant revitalization of the novel (referred to as the “Boom”). From the 1950s until today, authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Manuel Puig, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Isabelle Allende have helped continue the renewed interest in Latin American literature throughout the world. Today, Gabriel García Márquez is considered the most talented and most popular Latin American author.

Gabriel García Márquez was born in Aracataca, Colombia in 1928.<sup>12</sup> Before he published his first novel, he worked as a reporter for the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador* and as a foreign correspondent in Rome, Paris, Barcelona, Caracas, and New York. His most famous work, the novel *Cien Años de Soledad* (published in English as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), was published in 1967, but has since been translated into many languages. Thirty years and millions of copies later, it is still in print and still widely read.

García Márquez is the author of more than fifteen volumes of fiction, including several volumes of short stories, a volume of novellas, and many novels, including *El otoño del patriarca* (1975) (published in English as *The Autumn of the Patriarch*), and *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (1985) (published in English as *Love in the Time of Cholera*). García Márquez was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1982. He has continued writing to the present day, and is considered by most critics as the preeminent writer of magical realism (Cohen 366).

Two frequent themes in Gabriel García Márquez’s fiction are solitude and history. Critic William Rowe notes, “The majority of Márquez’s novels are written from a place where everything has already happened” (194). This is particularly important in a novel like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the last of the Buendía family line ends up translating an ancient scroll that tells everything that has happened to his family over the past century and predict his impending death.



Gabriel García Márquez's most famous contribution to the genre, One Hundred Years of Solitude, is a sprawling novel, spanning six generations and a century of life, love, death, war, and magic in the Buendía family in a fictional Caribbean village called Macondo. At the head of this strange family are José Arcadio Buendía and his wife Úrsula Iguarán. Both the Buendías and the village of Macondo which they founded seem enchanted. García Márquez incorporates sexuality, politics, the quest for truth and knowledge, and a family curse which haunts the Buendías until the last of the line dies, into this saga of family history in a mythical village. The magical realist elements in the story, particularly the curse and a mysterious prophecy written in an ancient language demonstrate that the family is helpless to create its own destiny.

Steven Millhauser

Steven Millhauser won the 1997 Pulitzer Prize for Literature for his novel Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer.<sup>13</sup> Millhauser's first novel, Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954, by Jeffrey Cartwright (1972), was awarded the French *Prix de Medicis* and received much critical acclaim. George Stade (The New York Times Book Review) called it "probably the best Nabokovian novel not written by the master himself" (quoted in McCaffery 469). Like Nabokov's Pale Fire, it is written in the form of a mock literary biography, but in Edwin Mullhouse, the "biographer" is a child, and the "subject" of the biography is a "genius"<sup>14</sup> child-novelist who (we are told in the beginning) mysteriously dies when he is 11 years old.

Millhauser's second novel, Portrait of a Romantic, which was published in 1977, has many of the same themes as Edwin Mullhouse, but its tone is darker and less satirical. Nine years later, in 1986, his third novel, From the Realm of Morpheus, and a volume of short stories, In the Penny Arcade, were published.<sup>15</sup> His subsequent collection of short stories, The Barnum Museum, came out in 1990; Little Kingdoms (three short novellas in

one volume) appeared in 1993 and Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer in 1997. In 1998, he published a volume of short stories entitled The Knife Thrower. In addition to the Pulitzer and the *Prix de Medicis*, Millhauser has also received the Lannan Award, was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner award, and was honored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Many of Millhauser's novels and short stories are like the German paintings described by Franz Roh which used hyperrealism (using techniques such as the miniature and an intensive, extraordinary attention to details) to make commonplace objects and situations seem magical and extraordinary.

Much of Millhauser's work deals with growing up in America. His novels and short stories are filled with troubled adolescents, doppelgängers, and literary allusions (with many allusions to Edgar Allen Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, and Vladimir Nabokov, as well as humorous or ironic distortions of their works). Much of his work features children, adolescents, writers, or artists as protagonists.

In Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954, by Jeffrey Cartwright the two central characters, Edwin and Jeffrey, believe that Edwin is doomed, doomed to live the strange and lonely life of a child-writer and to die young and "mysteriously." According to Jeffrey, who "writes" the story of Edwin's life, Edwin mysteriously has foreknowledge of his death, but decides to continue pursuing childlike games as well as writing the Great American Novel. When Edwin fulfills the "prophecy" by *pretending* to commit suicide, Jeffrey, disappointed that Edwin does not actually have any intention of really doing it, murders Edwin, making the "dying young" prophecy come true and making both Edwin's "life" and Jeffrey's "book" end poetically.

In Portrait of a Romantic, Arthur is plagued by a boredom so vast that it almost destroys him. He has a Romantic temperament; his nature is extremely fatalistic, and he views others as extensions of himself. As a child, he makes several half-hearted attempts

at suicide, performs blood-brothers ceremonies, and forms suicide pacts with friends until the day that one of these pacts ends in death. Thus—despite the novels' marked differences in tone, structure, and use of humor—in both novels, the narrators' distorted and fantastic perceptions lead them to conclusions which they believe must be fulfilled.

#### Jeanette Winterson

Jeanette Winterson was raised in Lancashire, England, by a family of Pentecostal Evangelists. Though her family expected her to be a missionary, she worked in the theater and then launched a career as a writer. Winterson won the prestigious Whitbread Award for her first novel, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1985), a story of a young girl growing up in Britain, raised by a repressive fundamentalist family. In this semi-autobiography, the heroine, Jeanette, questions the teachings of the church, her mother's world view, and the opinion that her love for another girl is "unnatural." There are fragments of folk tales and medieval tales dispersed throughout the novel.

Her second novel was Boating for Beginners (1986). Her third, The Passion (1987), won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, and her fourth, Sexing the Cherry (1989), enjoyed popular and critical success, as well as winning the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. A testimony to her talent and to her success, her subsequent novel, Written on the Body (1992), was translated into 16 languages. Other recent works include the novel Art and Lies (1994); Art Objects (1995), a work of nonfiction; and the novel Gut Symmetries (1997).

In Winterson's novel Written on the Body, the narrator (whose gender is never revealed) describes a series of love affairs with both men and women, and is intensely preoccupied with the biology of one of his/her lovers, a woman dying of cancer. Because of her/his fear of loss, the narrator attempts to turn the one real love of her/his life into an object even more than any of the other lovers she/he quickly abandoned. As Millhauser did

in Edwin Mullhouse and Portrait of a Romantic, Winterson uses hyperrealism to make the events in this novel extraordinary and also depicts how the narrator's distorted and hyperreal view of the world influences her actions and her relationships with others.

Thus, the presence of magical realism in each of the novels negatively affects the lives of the characters. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, the Buendía family curse and the "gift" of prophecy cause the family to suffer the same tragic fates yet still remain in loneliness and solitude. In Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954, by Jeffrey Cartwright, Jeffrey's desire to pen an engaging biography leads him to murder his subject, Edwin, because Edwin has outlived his usefulness and is no longer important. In Portrait of a Romantic, Arthur's romantic view of the world and of his friends as his doppelgängers lead him to what could be termed a suicide by proxy. And in Written on the Body, the narrator's obsession with language and texts comes at the expense of her relationships and of reality.

## Chapter II: Fate in One Hundred Years of Solitude

Critics frequently mention that One Hundred Years of Solitude is a very humorous novel—filled with satire, hyperbole, and amusing characters. In fact, as mentioned previously, magical realism has been called “a comic genre” by some critics.

Although magical realism can indeed invoke a carnivalesque atmosphere, much of the comic aspect of magical realism manifests as irony or dark satire, types of comedy frequently associated with tragedy. Critic Brian Conniff also points out that those who claim magical realism is a comic genre are oversimplifying the genre, and that there are really two facets of magical realism:

There is another side of “magical realism” just as there is another side of magic. Not only can the conjurer make rabbits and flowers and crazed revolutionaries appear instantly, but he can make them disappear, just as instantly. Although critics have not been quick to note [it], García Márquez also sensed this darker side of magical realism. (168)

In One Hundred Years of Solitude, there are many comic moments—for example, the repressed Fernanda will only have sex with her husband on a few predetermined days of the year and also believes that she can be cured with a psychic operation, and the ghost of the man José Arcadio Buendía murdered causes him more annoyance than fear—but, overwhelmingly, the tone of the novel is one of isolation, loneliness, and tragedy.

### “Magic” and Fate in Macondo

One Hundred Years of Solitude describes the history of Macondo and its inhabitants, focusing mainly on the six generations of the Buendía family. In the course of the century, the Buendías found the town of Macondo, have children, fall in love, fall victim to several plagues (an insomnia plague, an amnesia plague, a plague of rain which falls unceasingly for nearly five years, and a plague of dead birds) and experience political strife, violence, civil war, social unrest, and the insidious consequences of outside influences. Eventually, most of Macondo’s residents are murdered when they organize a

strike protesting the terrible working conditions of the Banana Company—the preeminent employer on the island. In the end, Macondo and its few remaining survivors (including the last three Buendías) are swept away by a hurricane, never to be seen or heard from again.

From the beginning, Macondo, founded by José and Úrsula Buendía, exists as a place where anything can happen. Among the amazing things which occur are levitation (first, by a priest trying to convince the townspeople of the existence of God and later, by the townspeople themselves); immortality; clairvoyance and other types of prophecies coming true; a plague which causes insomnia and resulting forgetfulness; rain which falls unceasingly for almost five years, a prostitute who owns livestock that multiplies so quickly she becomes rich by raffling them off to the townspeople; death by voodoo of one of the Buendía sons at the hands of his wife; and a dead man's trail of blood winding its way across town, into his mother's house, and stopping at her feet. In addition to all the amazing things that happen in Macondo, there are also many things which are viewed as extraordinary by the characters which we as readers know to be ordinary—namely, “fabulous” inventions introduced to José Arcadio Buendía and the other residents of Macondo, including ice, a magnet, a telescope, a magnifying glass, trains, and the cinema.

Thus “amazing” things can and do happen in Macondo; however, the amazing is not life-affirming, for the amazing produces dreadful consequences that cannot be stopped. In fact, everything in the novel—everything which happens to the Buendía family, including the destruction of the entire island—seems fated. Though all of the Buendías repeatedly try to escape the family curse and their troubled past, time and again, they repeat the same actions, have the same destructive emotions, and suffer the same loneliness and solitude as those that came before them.

The primary *causes* for the tragedy of the Buendías and of Macondo, however, are not so easily understood. Critics have long debated why the Buendías and the island are destroyed.

Brian Conniff believes that the history of Macondo is the history of an island paradise that is changed and corrupted by outside influences: first the gypsies, who periodically visit and bring the islanders objects—like ice, magnets, and telescopes; second, the arrival of more insidious inventions like locomotives, which bring with them more and more outsiders, until, finally, technology destroys the island and its residents. Thus, in Conniff's view, it is primarily external, non-supernatural influences that lead to Macondo's ruin.

Others, trying to determine the reasons for the Buendía family's destruction, have focused on certain unusual aspects in the creation and destruction of Macondo. Says Gene H. Bell-Villada, "Many a critic has taken note of the 'biblical' aspect of One Hundred Years of Solitude" (76). These critics point to Macondo's parallels to the Garden of Eden. Macondo is described as lush and paradisaical, its residents possess immortality and innocence, and everything there is so new it must be given a name. Further, when the residents are introduced to knowledge (foreigners and inventions), they lose both their innocence and their immortality. Bell-Villada says critics focus on the genesis and exodus of Macondo, the many plagues, incidents of incest, the long genealogy reminiscent of the Bible's "begats," and the long life spans of characters (e.g., Úrsula and Pilar). Further, as Brian Conniff and others suggest, the hurricane which destroys Macondo seems to symbolize the apocalypse prophesied in Revelations.

However, as Bell-Villada says, after examining these parallels closely, "In light of a full reading, we find that these attributed qualities are largely false (78). For example, the book of Revelations never mentions a hurricane. In fact, Bell-Villada suggests that

Revelations implies just the opposite—when the world ends, the air will be still because four angels will hold it back, “that no wind might blow on earth” (76).

Indeed, viewing Macondo and the Buendías as a symbol of Biblical creation and destruction subtracts from the novel’s power and its philosophical meaning. The Buendías’ inability to determine their own fate, their repetition of past mistakes, and their utter, inescapable solitude, has much in common with existentialist philosophy, which claims man does not have control over his existence and that the universe lacks inherent meaning; however, existentialism also declares that the universe is neither cruel nor helpful, but indifferent—and the Buendías’ world is not an indifferent one. In fact, the Buendía family’s unfortunate fate is influenced by “magic”: mysterious prophecy scrolls and ancient curses, as well as their belief in this magic.

A key component to this magic is the mysterious incest curse the Buendías suffer. Edwin Williamson believes that it is this incest curse which haunts the Buendías and condemns them and Macondo to their fate:

The working out of fatality is based on the Oedipal trap: incestuous desire is inherent to the Buendía family, and consummated incest is the ultimate crime, punishable by total destruction, not just of the guilty parties, but of their world. (“Magical Realism and the Theme of Incest” 197)

Though this author agrees with Williamson that the “curse” on the Buendías is a primary cause of their suffering, what they are condemned to, as the novel’s title implies, and what Williamson de-emphasizes, is not necessarily incest, but “one hundred years of solitude.” Bell-Villada agrees: “[Gabriel García Márquez] is among the most powerful writers of human solitude and isolation, of abandonment and loss, of the lonely battle for survival, of desolation and even ‘alienation.’ Few solitudes can compare with that of Aureliano Babilonia, friendless and bereaved, with total knowledge being his scant consolation as Macondo rushes to its end” (13). The true curse is the solitude that each member of the Buendía family feels as a result of the incest, its consequences, and the



inability to escape these consequences. This solitude commences when Úrsula's grandmother and José's grandfather flee their ancestral home in Riohacha and lasts until Amaranta Úrsula and José Arcadio consummate their incestuous desire and conceive a baby with a pig's tail.

Thus, despite García Márquez's use of satire and hyperbole in the novel, as well as many comic moments generated by the Buendías' naiveté, the history of the Buendía family is essentially tragic. Furthermore, their tragedy is not primarily one of extinction, as Williamson believes, but of a condemnation to solitude as well as their repeatedly failed attempts to escape it. Throughout the novel, it becomes apparent that the Buendías cannot escape from either their past or their future, and this failure to escape is mirrored in both the events presented in the novel as well as the construction of the novel itself.

### The Novel's Structure

The primary structure of the novel is a circle: One Hundred Years of Solitude ends where it begins. At the very end of the novel, Aureliano Buendía, the last of the Buendía line, finishes translating scrolls (after 10 years of attempts) given to patriarch José Arcadio Buendía by the gypsy Melquíades one hundred years earlier. The scrolls, written in Sanskrit, describe every major event that has happened to the Buendía family in the last century. The last paragraph of One Hundred Years of Solitude depicts Aureliano Babilonia shut up in his room, frantically deciphering the scrolls:

He began to decipher the instant he was living, deciphering it as he lived it, prophesying himself in the act of deciphering the last page of the parchments, as if he were looking into a speaking mirror. Then he skipped again to anticipate the predictions and ascertain the date and circumstances of his death. Before reaching the final line, however, he had already understood that he would never leave this room, for it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would be finished deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, for

aces condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth. (422)

The effect of the circular design of the novel is twofold: first, the fact that the family's history is foretold by the scrolls and that everything written in the scrolls actually happens suggests that this history is inescapable; second, the circular design of the entire novel as well as the many repetitions within the novel shows that nothing really changes. That nothing really changes is an important theme in the novel as well as in much of Gabriel García Márquez's work.

In addition to the novel's intriguing circular design, within the novel, time is frequently played for fast and loose. The narrative frequently skips backwards and forwards in time and employs flashbacks and foreshadowing. Further, actions are repeated by individual characters as well as generations of characters: José Arcadio attempts to decipher the scrolls and takes apart and puts together the same clocks. Colonel Aureliano Buendía melts down gold coins to fashion gold fish which he then exchanges for gold coins so he can repeat the process. Amaranta weaves and unweaves her death shroud and sews on and removes buttons from her garments.

More significant than this endless repetition of actions by individual characters, generations of characters also repeat the actions of those who came before them. When close to death, Úrsula catches herself repeating the same words as those before her:

When she said it she realized that she was giving the same reply that Colonel Aureliano Buendía had given in his death cell, and once again she shuddered with the evidence that time was not passing, as she had just admitted, but that it was turning in a circle. (341)

But the Buendías have a stronger bond than just shared sentiments. In real life, genes can determine physical characteristics, predispositions for diseases, and other biological and physiological factors, but in the Buendía family, they also transmit dispositions, compulsions, and inherited memories. This strange connection between generations means that the family is never acting alone: they have the same memories and

the same names, and some have even dreamed others' dreams. They also have many physical similarities which have strange consequences: when twins are born into the family, they are frequently confused with each other, but this confusion goes far beyond other people's misidentification of them: many of the residents of Macondo believe that the twins themselves have forgotten their own identities (which in fact they have) and they are eventually buried in the wrong graves. This sense of repetition is further demonstrated by Colonel Buendía, who fathers 17 sons. Even though each son has a different mother, all have the same "haunted" look as well as identical ash marks tattooed on their foreheads.

Beyond physical similarities and inherited memories, the Buendías also have similar names: many of the children are named with the names of their ancestors, but not simply as a tribute to previous generations. This repetition imparts a claustrophobic, inclusive atmosphere to the family and sets them more apart (in solitude) from those who are not family. Further, it makes both the readers and the novel's characters associate similarly named characters with each other; moreover, the family believe the new generation can correct past mistakes. For example, Aureliano and Amaranta Úrsula name their baby Aureliano so he'll "win thirty-two wars" (417) to make up for the thirty-two wars which were lost by his uncle, Colonel Aureliano. Of course, this does not happen.

The importance of names in the novel and their relation to the fate of the Buendía family can hardly be overstated. Edwin Williamson argues that names are what allow the past to be transmitted, as well as incest to be committed: "The definition of relationships through naming is crucial to incest prohibitions: without names the prohibition cannot operate, since mother, father, son, daughter etc., are a function of naming" ("Magical Realism and the Theme of Incest" 197).

In the Buendía family, the concepts of "mother, father, son, and daughter," are often confused; in fact, though they bear the name of one family member, many of the

Buendía children have mistaken ideas of who their fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, aunts, or uncles really are.

A great irony in the novel is that the characters have so many similarities—names, dispositions, physical characteristics, dreams, and behavior—yet each remains in solitude. This loneliness is perfectly symbolized by the first born child in Macondo—Aureliano Buendía, who is “incapable of love” (254). Though their loves, desires, and fates are intricately interwoven, essentially, all of the Buendías suffer alone.

### The Future

The Buendía’s interest in the future is almost as strong as their desire to escape the past, and is in fact, intimately related to it. Characters believe that by knowing the future, they can escape it. However, just as recognizing the family’s past patterns and past mistakes do not keep characters from making those mistakes again, the gift of prophecy does not mean the family can prevent the future.

Like the past repeating itself, the family’s concern with the future is demonstrated by characters’ thoughts and actions and also by the design of the novel itself. García Márquez frequently foreshadows the calamities that will happen to the Buendía family, further leading readers to believe that the Buendía family’s fate is inescapable, and many of his characters also have an impending sense of doom and fatalism. Further, the author introduces characters who can foretell the future, and characters who believe in prophecy and whose prophecies come true. Finally, the novel shows that “progress” is really an illusion.

Patriarch José Arcadio Buendía is fascinated with the future and with progress; however, he has a corresponding sense of finality and fatalism, for he senses that Macondo is destined to end after exactly 100 years. His fascination with progress is fueled by the alchemist-philosopher Melquíades, who beguiles the townspeople with objects that he

presents as magical. For example, Melquíades uses a magnetized ingot to pull the nails out of walls instead of for any useful purpose; José Arcadio Buendía becomes convinced he can use it to find gold in the ground and he buys the magnet for a large sum.

The other residents of Macondo also view the objects shown to them as magical. Moreover, they also have unreasonable expectations about what these objects can do: they do not see them as practical devices that can make life easier; instead, they interpret them in broad mythical and theological contexts. Melquíades, describing the telescope, explains: "Science has eliminated distance. . . . In a short time, man will be able to see what is happening in any place in the world without leaving his own house" (3).

José Arcadio Buendía's preoccupation with inventions, with the future, and with progress are not unusual; he has a philosophical inclination and a questioning mind; however, he believes that "science" can answer questions about philosophical and spiritual issues, and that it can radically alter his world by giving him ultimate knowledge: proof of the existence of God. José Arcadio Buendía's own experiments include a strange combination of the whimsical and the practical, and include a mechanical ballerina, a bear that walks on a tightrope, and an experiment attempting to make almond trees last forever. He abandons a project of "a pendulum machine that would help men fly" because "a pendulum can lift anything into the air but it could not lift itself" (80). He also tries to make a time machine, but it breaks. His obsession with change is so vast that he spend six hours a day examining things, "trying to find a difference from their appearance on the previous day in the hope of discovering in them some change that would reveal the passage of time" (80). José Arcadio Buendía's sense that things are destined to end badly seems to translate to his experiments. Instead of believing that things change because other things (the weather, gravity or people) change them, José Arcadio Buendía passively waits for change instead of actively trying to change things. Disillusioned with his experiments, and with the lack of "progress" in the natural world, he destroys his lab and his experiments. His

family and the townspeople, believing he is insane, tie José to a tree trunk, where he remains for the rest of his natural life, in considerable, unchanging, solitude.

But the Buendías' interest in the future goes far beyond love of inventions or progress. In fact, they try to know the future before it happens, by relying on various forms of extrasensory perception. Several of the Buendía family and their lovers have extraordinary talents. Aureliano, the first born child of José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula Iguarán, is born with his eyes open and weeping, a strange and ominous sign for the Buendías. They quickly realize he is clairvoyant, for as a child, he "sees" a pot fall off a table before it slides across the table and falls. Two of the town's prostitute/fortune tellers also have lives that are hopelessly entwined with the family's: Petra, whose prophecies always come true, is the lover of many Buendía men, as is Carmen, whose "inaccurate" reading of tarot cards causes the death of an innocent man. However, these extraordinary abilities do not help the Buendías prevent tragedies. As in García Márquez's novella, Chronicle of a Death Foretold, where everyone in a small town knows that Santiago Nasar is destined to die that day, no one can prevent the death from happening.

Likewise, none of the Buendía "prophets" can save the Buendías from their fate. Ironically, none of them realize that their future is wholly predetermined by the prophecy scrolls until the end of the novel; instead, they believe that what condemns their family is the mysterious incest curse.

### The Curse

The origins of the incest curse remain somewhat vague; it is unclear how the curse became imposed on the family. The story the Buendías pass from generation to generation is this: centuries before José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula Iguarán were born, the ancient city of Riohacha (the ancestral home of the Buendía and Iguarán families) was attacked by Sir Frances Drake. During the attack, two blood relations—a Buendía and an Iguarán—

consummated an incestuous relationship. For generations afterwards, the two families were drawn together through incestuous pairings, eventually culminating in the birth of a baby with a pig's tail to Úrsula's aunt and José Arcadio Buendía's uncle.

The incest curse alienates the Buendías in many ways. Úrsula's grandmother and José's grandfather flee their ancestral home of Riohacha to found the first Macondo (a kind of Edenic paradise) because of their fears about the curse. Generations later, Úrsula and José are forced to leave in part because of the ramifications of the curse: Úrsula will not make love with her husband José Arcadio Buendía because she knows they are cousins and believes she will bear a baby with the tail of a pig (or, as some of the family believe, she will bear an iguana). One of the men in town questions José Arcadio Buendía's masculinity because of Úrsula's virginity; enraged, José kills him and rapes Úrsula. Because of the murder, they leave town and José Arcadio Buendía founds the second Macondo.

Thus, from the beginning, the curse wreaks havoc in several ways; initially, it draws Úrsula and José together (because they are related) and later drives a wedge between husband and wife, and it (indirectly) causes José Arcadio Buendía to commit murder and to flee, alienating José and Úrsula from their history and their childhood home.

Ostensibly, the new Macondo is "a happy town," a town where, at least initially, no one dies. Though immortality at first seems like a blessing, it quickly becomes apparent that it, too, is a curse. The first physical manifestation of the past haunting the Buendías comes in the form of the ghost of the murdered man, Prudencio Aguilar. Though he is more of an annoyance than a threat, he is still a reminder of José's terrible deeds, and he comes to symbolize everything that the family tried to run away from but could not (the curse, the incestuous pairings, the first Macondo). This theme of the past haunting the present (literally, through the ghost and various other manifestations of the dead, and figuratively, through memories) runs throughout the novel.

## Consequences of the Curse

The incest curse causes a cycle of repetition, longing, and solitude. As stated before, the curse frightens Úrsula so much that she will not make love with José Arcadio Buendía for a year after marriage, fearing she will give birth to a deformed child because they are cousins:

Although their marriage was predicted from the time they came into the world, when they expressed their desire to be married their own relatives tried to stop it. They were afraid that these two healthy products of two races that had inbred over the centuries would suffer the shame of breeding iguana. (20)

As the passage states, the two families have inbred for centuries: everyone knows José and Úrsula would get married, despite the danger and the incestuous, forbidden aspect of it; indeed, they are compelled to marry precisely because of that. The Buendías know the supposed consequences of their actions but can not stop from performing them. Thus, not only does the family have a history of incest, but seemingly a genetic disposition for it.

Likewise, it seems that the Buendías are cursed in many other ways.<sup>16</sup> Aureliano weeps in his mother's womb and is clairvoyant. At 14, José Arcadio is so well-endowed that his mother Úrsula worries he will become promiscuous (and he does). Despite having different personalities (Aureliano Segundo is very promiscuous and José Arcadio Segundo is much more subdued, "marked with a tragic sign") the twins are frequently mistaken for each other. Townspeople believe that the twins do not even know who they are. In fact, when they die, they are mistakenly buried in each other's graves. And the seventeen sons of Colonel Buendía (each one by a different woman) have ash marks on their foreheads, branded when they were baptized. Each is killed by being shot through the ash mark.

The women in the novel also have strange characteristics which may be attributed to the curse: Amaranta Buendía is born "light and watery, like a newt, but all her parts were human" (31). The other Buendía women (both those who are born Buendías and those who marry into the family) are either frigid, asexual, or underdeveloped, which produces



strange and generally unhappy relationships, starting with Úrsula's refusal to consummate the marriage, continuing through subsequent generations.

The youth and underdevelopment of the female Buendías as well as the wives of the Buendía men causes many problems in their relationships. Colonel Aureliano falls in love with a young village girl, Remedios Moscote, whom he marries as soon as she reaches puberty, but she dies when she gets pregnant and contracts a severe infection. And men are enchanted with Remedios the Beauty, despite the fact that she is so young that she must be watched so she will not play in her own excrement. Despite her youth and helplessness, men desire her, believing she gives off a "fatal emanation" (240). One day while hanging laundry, she levitates and ascends into the clouds above, never to be seen again. By that time, the body count of men dying out of love for her is quite substantial.

Fear or asexuality amongst the Buendía women also causes much unhappiness. Aureliano Segundo commits adultery with Petra in part because his wife, Fernanda, will only have sex on a few predetermined days of the year. The affair produces José Arcadio, who is never told who his true mother is (a situation which nearly results in him sleeping with her years later). And Amaranta, who is so obsessed with preserving her virginity that she represses her sexuality, ends up sexually abusing her nephew. Many of the Buendía women (like Úrsula) fear sex because they are afraid of producing deformed babies.

As stated before, the fear of the incest curse both repels and attracts the José Arcadio Buendía. Time after time, though they try to avoid incestuous relationships, they seem to be drawn to them.

José Arcadio and his wife Rebeca indulge in what they consider semi-incestuous passion (she was an orphan, but raised as his sister). They eventually find out that they are *actually* blood relations—cousins, in fact—but a local priest declares they are not related at all and that they may marry. Aureliano José feels an incestuous passion for his aunt, Amaranta. Lastly, Mauricio Babilonia's son, Aureliano, falls in love with Amaranta

Úrsula, who he thinks is his sister, but is really his aunt; they make love; the resulting pregnancy produces a baby with the tail of a pig, fulfilling to the letter the family curse.

Possibly no other type of curse could inspire such deep, symbolic and destructive feelings for the Buendías. Because it is thought to cause psychological harm, widely-documented physical deformities, and the breakdown of normal relationships between family members, incest taboos exist in most cultures. With the Buendías' unique ties to one another (including their inherited memories and dreams) the fact that they are subjected to an incest curse which both attracts them to each other as well as promotes fear and repulsion keeps the family members in constant internal conflict and its resulting solitude. When Amaranta, pining for her nephew Aureliano José, concludes that she was "floundering in an autumnal passion, one that was dangerous and had no future," (147) we not only see that she is too old for her love affair, and too old for Aureliano José, but also that the incestuous relationship has no future because it involves, once again, the family's history repeating itself. With each incestuous relationship and its resulting offspring, it becomes more and more difficult not to fulfill the incest curse because, statistically, so many of the people on the island are related and because the family remains lonely, inclusive, and distrustful of strangers.

### **An Imaginary Reality**

The Buendías' desire to escape the past is further thwarted, and the hopelessness of this escape revealed, when Rebeca (a cousin of Úrsula's whom the Buendías adopt as their daughter) comes to town infected by an insomnia plague. Úrsula, who makes and sells candy animals to the town, unwittingly passes the plague to everyone who eats the candy, and those infected people eventually transmit it to everyone else in Macondo. When Úrsula makes a potion of herbs, they are able to dream, but only on their feet, and they see the dreams of others, not their own.

Beyond inducing insomnia, the plague also causes loss of memory until none of the townspeople can remember the names of things. To remedy the situation, Aureliano, who is one of the first to lose his memory, consults his (still-healthy) father as to the names of items and then labels each item with a card stating its name. Later, José Arcadio Buendía also adds the directions for using the items. Eventually, the Buendías place a sign on the road reminding them of the name of their own city, as well as a sign that says: “God Exists.” To further assist them, José Arcadio Buendía invents a “memory machine,” a kind of computer programmed with words and their definitions. Despite these clever ideas, the townspeople still believe the system is too difficult to follow:

In all the houses keys to memorizing objects and feelings had been written. But the system demanded so much vigilance and moral strength that many succumbed to the spell of an imaginary reality, one invented by themselves, which was less practical for them but more comforting. (49)

By inventing an imaginary reality and asking everyone to participate in this reality, the Buendías and the other townspeople are not controlling their surroundings; they are simply inventing another reality: a counterfeit one. The danger of such a comforting, yet inaccurate reality is brought home many years later, when the Banana Company creates another imaginary reality to cover up the murder of 3,408 striking workers.

### A Final Solitude

There is much yearning and unfulfilled desire in the novel, and there is much irony in the family’s solitude: each family member fears the same ancient incest curse, they frequently repeat each other’s actions, have each others’ names, and inherit and transmit traits of their ancestors, yet each one of the Buendías feels immense solitude.

The condemnation to solitude is best illustrated by a passage at the end of the novel when Aureliano Babilonia, the last adult male Buendía, suffers with the memory that the residents of Macondo were murdered and that the murders were covered up:

He went through the dusky and solitary streets, examining with scientific interest the inside of houses in ruin, the metal screens on the windows broken by rust and the dying birds, and the inhabitants bowed down by memories. He tried to reconstruct in his imagination the annihilated splendor of the old banana-company town, whose dry swimming pool was filled to the brim with rotting men's and women's shoes, and in the houses of which, destroyed by rye grass, he found the skeleton of a German Shepherd dog still tied to a ring by a steel chain and a telephone that was ringing, ringing, ringing until he picked it up and an anguished and distant woman spoke in English, and he said yes, that the strike was over, that three thousand dead people had been thrown into the sea, that the banana company had left, and that Macondo finally had peace after many years.  
(390)

The solitude felt by Aureliano Babilonia exists on several levels. He is alone as he aimlessly roams empty streets. More troubling, he has to suffer with the memories of the murders; he has to bear the guilt that he is the only one who was present at the mass killing who survived. Last, and by far the most terrifying prospect, he is the only person in Macondo who remembers the atrocities.

The significance of his being the only worker who survived the mass killing cannot be overstated, nor can the reason for his survival: in fact, he was almost killed but was rendered "invisible" to the murderers. The fact that the murderers could not see him not only seems like a cruel joke perpetrated by Fate, but also symbolizes the ultimate solitude. Just as his grandmother, Úrsula Iguarán, became invisible to others when she was no longer important to anyone, Aureliano Babilonia is so alone and unimportant that no one sees him: he has become nothing.

This heartbreaking scene is somewhat mitigated by what follows. When Aureliano Babilonia returns to his aunt Amaranta Úrsula after roaming the streets in a state of despair, they make love and conceive a baby with a pig's tail, fulfilling the curse to the letter. Thus, after the couple accept the curse, give into their desire, banish their solitude, and conceive the pig-tailed baby, they have fulfilled the family's fate, and subsequently, the island is swept away by a hurricane.

Despite the small measure of happiness Aureliano Babilonia and Amaranta Úrsula enjoy before their destruction, at the end of One Hundred Years of Solitude the reader is left with a fairly pessimistic message: that man does not control his own fate, and is subject to what could be deemed chance and the whims of the universe. However, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Gabriel García Márquez alluded to the novel, compared it to his beloved Latin America, and expressed a more optimistic view. He revealed his desire that Latin America will one day be, “a compelling utopia of life, where no one can decide for others even the way they die, where love will be true and happiness possible, and where races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will finally and forever have a second opportunity on earth” (McNerney 155-156).<sup>17</sup>

**Chapter III: Narrative Control and the Art of Disappearance in Steven Millhauser's Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954, by Jeffrey Cartwright**

Steven Millhauser's first novel, Edwin Mullhouse, is a darkly humorous satire on literature, the innocence of childhood, and the art of biography. Like Vladimir Nabokov's satirical novel Pale Fire, Edwin Mullhouse is a mock-biography. However, unlike in Pale Fire, in which the first section of the novel is the subject's long poem, and the second section is the biographer's critical commentary on the poem as well as biographical musings, the one element conspicuously missing from Edwin Mullhouse is the "subject's" own writing.

The novel, Edwin Mullhouse, is structured as a biography of Edwin, a "brilliant" eleven-year-old novelist who died mysteriously, written by his best friend, an eleven-and-a-half-year-old child named Jeffrey Cartwright. To lend further authenticity to the biography, Millhauser presents an introduction by "Walter Logan White," who claims he discovered the biography while browsing in a used book store and subsequently had it republished in a 1972 edition. Of course, Edwin Mullhouse, Jeffrey Cartwright, and Walter Logan White are all fictional characters in Millhauser's novel.

As in One Hundred Years of Solitude, where Úrsula Iguarán and Aureliano Buendía become invisible when they are no longer important to those around them, in Edwin Mullhouse, the title character is rendered "invisible" and eventually murdered by his biographer, when he outlives his importance in the biography.

#### Hyperrealism

The novel employs the techniques of hyperreal (Roh-style) magical realism and also adheres to William Spindler's definitions of both metaphysical and ontological magical realism—both in the presentation of the everyday as magical and the existence of a highly unreliable narrator whose words can be interpreted both metaphorically and literally. The

novel's narrator, Jeffrey Cartwright, tells the reader from the beginning of the biography that he wants to depict the extraordinary life of his friend Edwin and recount how Edwin came to write the Great American Novel and die mysteriously at the age of eleven. But Jeffrey's obsessive concern with presenting the extraordinariness of childhood only obscures Edwin—the "subject" of the biography; in fact, Jeffrey's hyperreal, surreal, and sinister presentation of childhood makes everything *but* Edwin seem extraordinary.

Ironically, Jeffrey believes that Edwin also attempts to make the everyday world seem extraordinary in his Great American Novel, Cartoons:

It will not have escaped the attention of the most imbecile reader that a significant feature of Cartoons is a quality that I call *scrupulous distortion*. No object in Edwin's novel, with the amusing exception of the ghost's wild drawings, matches a real object in the real world. But the reader, and Edwin too, must under no circumstances forget one simple fact: distortion implies that which is distorted. Edwin's book, far from portraying a world that has no connection whatsoever with the real world, is bound to the real world more tightly than a photograph. Oh, it is Edwin, it is. For by the method of scrupulous distortion, Edwin draws attention to things that have been rendered invisible by overmuch familiarity. (265)

If rendering the invisible visible again is what both Edwin and Jeffrey are attempting to do—Edwin in his novel and Jeffrey in his biography of Edwin—only Jeffrey gives this attempt a diabolical spin; ultimately, instead of rendering the invisible (Edwin) visible again, he renders Edwin invisible with overmuch familiarity.

Jeffrey accomplishes this conjuring trick in several ways: 1) He frequently presents Edwin as ghost-like or absent; 2) He minimizes Edwin's uniqueness in the biography as he simultaneously presents everything else (objects, places, other people—including himself) as being more extraordinary than Edwin; 3) He frequently foreshadows Edwin's death; and 4) He presents the "disappearance" or violent death of each of Edwin's friends before finally presenting Edwin's murder, making the murder seem less extraordinary and shocking.

## Narrative Control

As Timothy Dow Adams states in his essay on Edwin Mullhouse, “Unlike a straight fictional biography, the mock-biography makes a greater pretense at being non-fictional and places a greater emphasis on the supposed biographer, so that the focus of attention, as in dramatic monologue, is as much on what the biographer reveals accidentally about his own character as what he says about the ostensibly more important character of his subject” (207). As Adams points out, Jeffrey is not only the chronicler of Edwin’s life, but also lives next door to him, grows up with him, influences him, and interferes in almost every aspect of his life and death.

As Millhauser has “Walter Logan White” mention in his “introduction” to Jeffrey’s biography of Edwin, there are many similarities between Jeffrey and Edwin’s relationship and the (non-fictional of course) relationship between James Boswell and Samuel Johnson (viii); Boswell chronicled Johnson’s life in long, glorious (and sometimes not so glorious) detail. Claude Rawson, in an introduction to Boswell’s The Life of Samuel Johnson, discusses the ways in which Boswell manipulated those around him in order to obtain information about Johnson:

Boswell and the painter Mauritius Lowe prise out of Mrs. Desoulins some scraps of sexual information about Johnson. The account, it has been suggested, “could be a scene from Restoration comedy,” but. . . “in so far as the passage suggests careful plotting,” this plotting is not mainly “in the setting down of the episode, but in the instinctive management” of the real-life conversation. Once “Lowe and Boswell. . . perceived that there was lively information to be extracted from the lady” the scene developed its own situational momentum. There was something about Boswell both of the stage-manager and voyeur, as everyone knows. By voyeur, I don’t merely mean the prurience of this particular episode, or his bizarre predilection elsewhere, for example, for witnessing public hangings. I mean a capacity for entranced eyewitnessing quite apart from any sexual or necrological interests, which has both social and introspective manifestations: introspective, in those many passages in the journals in which Boswell sets himself up almost as a separate creature for himself to contemplate, sometimes in assumed roles of a literary kind, as the hero of a novel or play; and social, in the many scenes, in both the journals and the Life of Johnson, which he engineered, stimulated or viewed with a quite peculiar combination of witness and participant. (Rawson xiii)



Like Boswell, Jeffrey is voyeuristic, obsessive and exacting; he constantly focuses on his relationship to Edwin and also on the ways in which he is “a separate creature for himself to contemplate”; he also “engineers” situations as a combination of “witness and participant”; however, unlike Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language, Edwin’s “masterpiece” is a literary failure. As the reader is told in the introduction to the biography, Cartoons is doomed to obscurity, “published by some grotesque mistake as a children’s book” (viii-ix).

Also like Boswell, Jeffrey has a capacity for “entranced eyewitnessing”; his tone throughout the entire book can be compared to a child’s, for he has a way of constantly focusing on and repeating what is extraordinary about a situation; however, Jeffrey also has the manipulative language skills of an adult: He claims from the beginning that Edwin is an extraordinary genius, yet he frequently undermines this point he seeks to prove. For example, Edwin’s early language abilities are no different than someone else his age, and include “dam dam dam,” “kaloo,” and “aaaaaeeee (singing)” (17). Furthermore, as in the passage below, Jeffrey’s written description of his own enchantment over Edwin’s language skills is much more extraordinary than Edwin’s actual abilities:

How I long to convey to the adult reader his breathtaking combinations of the buzz and drool, his dribbles and drizzles, his bubbles and burbles— whole salivary sonatas enhanced by gushing crescendos and hissing fortissimi, gurgling glissandi and trickling pianissimi, streaming prestissimos, spouting arpeggios, those slurps and slops, drips and drops, those spluttering, splattering splurts of sputum and drippy splish-splashes of melodious spittle. Adult speech, Edwin used to say, is ridiculously exclusive. (17-18)

Early in the novel, it becomes clear that Jeffrey’s influence on Edwin is malicious. If we are to believe that all of Edwin’s life is truly a “story” in Jeffrey’s mind from the beginning, then, as in One Hundred Years of Solitude, it has already been written before it began (in this case it has been written as soon as Jeffrey decides to “write” it, which is long before Edwin’s death). Thus Edwin’s fate is sealed early on: his life, death, and every

aspect of it to be manipulated by best friend Jeffrey. Whatever makes for an engaging biography should be allowed.

### Rendering the Invisible Visible

Adams believes Jeffrey justifies his killing of Edwin for “artistic effect and to preserve a smooth ending” for the biography (205). Furthermore, Adams describes how Jeffrey makes himself seem more important than Edwin:

Because the biographer, Jeffrey, is a fictional character who narrates the story from his point of view, the reader is given direct access into the biographer’s mind at work, and the novel becomes not only Jeffrey’s biography of Edwin, but also Jeffrey’s autobiographical account of his [Jeffrey’s] childhood with Edwin, his decision to become Edwin’s biographer, and his struggles to impose order on Edwin’s life. (205)

However, Jeffrey goes far beyond “trying to impose order” on Edwin’s life; indeed, what Jeffrey is attempting to accomplish in the biography is to make himself look more intelligent and more extraordinary than Edwin and, especially, to present his murder of Edwin as justified because he is simply not as important to the story. Throughout the book, Jeffrey attempts to minimize Edwin, to make Edwin “appear” and then “vanish” as if Edwin were the assistant in a conjuring trick created by Jeffrey.

The idea of vanishing or disappearance is a common theme in magical realism. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, 3,408 Banana Factory workers in Macondo are killed, and their bodies packed into a train, taken to the peninsula, and thrown into the sea. Afterwards, the Banana Company representatives are able to convince the town that nothing of the sort ever happened:

Every time that Aureliano mentioned the matter, not only the proprietess but some people older than she would repudiate the myth of the workers hemmed in at the station and the train with two hundred cars loaded with dead people, and they would even insist that, after all, everything had been set forth in judicial documents and the primary-school textbooks: that the banana company had never existed. (396)

In reality, the U. S. Banana Company did exist, and a strike did occur, though the number of deaths is disputed (Bell-Villada 105); in One Hundred Years of Solitude, Gabriel García Márquez fictionalized the incident, using it as a metaphor for similar kinds of “disappearance” which happen frequently in Latin America.<sup>18</sup> Thousands of people there have “disappeared”; there is a term in Spanish, *los desaparecidos*, invented to describe the phenomena. These unfortunate people are most often victims of political regimes practicing censorship and government-authorized murder.

Examples of disappearance in magical realist fiction symbolize not only political repression, but also the “magical” aspects in magical realism; after all, illusion and disappearance are key components in the art of magic itself. In fact, the art of magic and of disappearance is a recurring theme in much of Millhauser’s fiction; In his award-winning story, “Eisenheim the Illusionist,” the narrator tells us how a young Eisenheim developed an interest in magic:

A chance encounter with a traveling magician is said to have been the cause of Eisenheim’s lifelong passion for magic. The story goes that one day, returning from school, the boy saw a man in black sitting under a plane tree. The man called him over and lazily, indifferently, removed from the boy’s ear first one coin and then another, and then a third, coin after coin, a whole handful of coins, which suddenly turned into a bunch of red roses. From the roses the man in black drew out a white billiard ball, which turned into a wooden flute that suddenly vanished. One version of the story adds that the man himself then vanished, along with the plane tree. Stories, like conjuring tricks, are invented because history is inadequate to our dreams, but in this case it is reasonable to suppose that the future master had been profoundly affected by some early experience of conjuring. (216-217)

Years later, the adult Eisenheim both enthralls and frightens a small Austrian village with his conjuring tricks. The tricks include both making children disappear (they later claim to have been to places alive with either fairies or demons) and later, producing objects and children out of thin air. He even creates a rival magician and later unmask himself as that very magician, until, finally, threatened with arrest, he makes himself slowly dissolve and disappear before the audience and is never seen again.

“Eisenheim the Illusionist” is an example of a more fantastic type—a magician willing others and himself to vanish. But in some novels, characters’ perceptions and thoughts may inadvertently cause the disappearance of others: In One Hundred Years of Solitude characters can disappear if no one remembers or cares about them anymore, as in the case of José Arcadio Buendía’s wife Úrsula, whom everyone assumes is dead (even though she is alive and in the same room) because they have forgotten about her. She is no longer important to the other characters, so she no longer exists for them.

Like Úrsula Iguarán, who vanishes when she is no longer important, Jeffrey feels he is justified in murdering Edwin because Edwin has outlived his usefulness and is of minimal importance to the biography.

#### An Absent Subject

Jeffrey clearly believes he is responsible for “creating” Edwin, and considers his *interpretation* of Edwin’s life more important than the life itself:

I take this opportunity to ask Edwin, wherever he is: isn’t it true that the biographer performs a function as nearly as great as, or precisely as great as, or actually greater by far than the function performed by the artist himself? For the artist creates the work of art, but the biographer, so to speak, creates the artist. Which is to say: without me, would you exist at all, Edwin? (102)

In fact, we learn from the introductory note that Jeffrey’s biography is considered more important than Edwin’s work, and has provoked lively discussion among literary critics. On the other hand, Edwin’s novel, which was “mistakenly” published as a children’s novel for ages 8-12, has remained “unreadable by children and unread by adults” (ix).

Ironically, even Jeffrey’s attempts to focus closely on Edwin seem to obscure him. He often presents Edwin as pale, sickly, or as hiding behind something; the reader is told that Edwin spends hours locked away in his room; and even when he is “present,” he is

“absent”: Edwin does not seem to be aware of what is going on around him, he has few social skills (Jeffrey gives Edwin’s gifts to Rose, the girl he likes, because Edwin is either too sick or too embarrassed to give them himself), and he often seems lost in thought.

Visual images of Edwin take on a similarly ghostly (hyperreal) air: when Jeffrey describes photographs of Edwin, they are always distorted: “In the bright light his pale face and neck seemed almost white against his dark hair and dark zippered jacket, as if he were a black-and-white photograph, slightly over-exposed” (9). Even Edwin’s favorite photo of himself is, according to Jeffrey, “technically one of the poorest” because it is overexposed (57). The overexposed quality of the photos makes Edwin seem all the more distorted and unreal.

### An Untimely Death

To reinforce the idea that Edwin is doomed, Jeffrey frequently foreshadows Edwin’s untimely end. Edwin is shown to be frequently sick, not only with common childhood diseases, but also with mysterious stomach pains and headaches. (Despite Jeffrey’s subsequent murder of Edwin, there is no textual evidence that he causes Edwin’s ailments.) Jeffrey attributes Edwin’s illnesses to character flaws—love-sickness, melancholy, obsession with his novel, or mental instability.

Even when Edwin is not physically ill, Jeffrey presents him as melancholy and fatalistic, especially when they talk of the future:

In one of our conversations Edwin said that I had saved his soul—he was always saying things like that—by making him think of his life as a biography, that is, a design with a beginning, middle, and end. Smiling, and pushing away the hot lamp where a trapped moth was stupidly beating its wings, I replied that strictly speaking his life could not be considered a design with a beginning, middle, and end until it had ended. Edwin did not answer, but looked away, frowning slightly over lenses that reflected the glowing lampshade; and by one of those curious tricks played on us by our senses, I seemed to hear, faintly in that prophetic silence, the sound of wings beating madly in his eyes. (102)

For Jeffrey, the message is clear: Edwin is “trapped” and he knows it, and seems, in fact, resigned to it, much as the characters in One Hundred Years of Solitude are resigned to their situation.

One of the most “literary” examples of Jeffrey’s foreshadowing occurs when Edwin’s friend, Arnold Hasselstrom, gives Edwin a Colt .25 as a gift. As Anton Chekov once remarked, if a gun is introduced in the first act, it must be fired in the second. Having been introduced in Chapter 2, Arnold’s gun is used by Jeffrey in Chapter 3 to kill Edwin.

A further example of foreshadowing occurs after Edwin finishes his novel and suddenly says to Jeffrey, “Jeffrey, suppose a person knew the day he would die” (278). After this shocking statement, Edwin tells Jeffrey he has decided to commit suicide on August 1, his eleventh birthday. Jeffrey calls himself “a most uncomfortable participant in this latest game of his” (279); however, Jeffrey confesses to his readers that Edwin’s suicide idea is a perfect conclusion to the biography and to Edwin’s life:

The three-part division of his life had already established itself in my mind, and it was emphatically clear to me that we had passed the middle of Part Three and were mere chapters, mere pages, from the tragic end. He had written this book [Cartoons]: now he must bow and depart: all else was in a manner superfluous. At times, I confess, I found myself thinking of Edwin as recently deceased. (281)

Jeffrey’s statement makes it clear to the reader that Edwin must die. Suicide would be a perfect ending to Edwin’s brief life.

#### Edwin’s “Friends”

Throughout the biography, Jeffrey describes Edwin’s (often bizarre) relationships with other children. Jeffrey’s presentation of them shows that they are more extraordinary than Edwin and makes him look more ordinary, more marginal by comparison. According to Jeffrey, each of these friendships has a negative and cumulative effect on Edwin, making him more melancholy and disillusioned.

When Edwin is five, Jeffrey meets Edwin's "double," Edward Penn, who suffers from a mysterious ailment that prohibits him from attending school. Jeffrey and Edwin visit Penn's house, which has a mysterious dank cellar room. In the cellar, Penn shows Edwin and Jeffrey his extensive comic collection and the intricate drawings of cartoon characters on the wall.

Similarities between Edwin and Edward abound. Jeffrey says that Edwin's own mother cannot pronounce his name and frequently calls her son Edward; both boys are obsessed with comics and cartoons, and they share a melancholy temperament. However, unlike in Millhauser's novel Portrait of a Romantic, where the doppelgängers have real significance for the protagonist, in Edwin Mullhouse, Jeffrey presents Edward to emphasize that Edwin is not so extraordinary; there is another boy just like him in the same town.

In fact, Edwin and Jeffrey's friendship with Edward does not last very long; it ends abruptly after Edward has his mother make excuses for why he can't play with them. Obsessed with his cartoons, Edward has no time for real friends (or the real world) anymore. The last time Jeffrey and Edwin see him, Jeffrey describes Edward Penn as a half-vanished Cheshire Cat; when Jeffrey peers into the basement, all he can see are the glowing buttons down the front of Edward's shirt and a lone button on his shirtcuff, "raised under an invisible wave" (93). This strange disappearing act, coupled with the fact that neither Jeffrey or Edwin ever speaks of seeing Edward again (though he lives nearby) suggests that Edward, the boy who was obsessed with cartoons, turned himself into a cartoon.

Next to his relationship with Jeffrey, the second most important relationship in Edwin's short life is his "love affair" with Rose Dorn. It begins in the second grade, when Edwin becomes melancholy and withdraws to his bedroom. Edwin's family worries that he has polio, but a physician says it is only fatigue and weakness; however, Edwin

confesses to Jeffrey that it is neither; rather, he is in love. Rose, the object of his passion, is a strange, pale girl with yellow pigtails. Rose's mother is reputedly a witch, and Rose loves to spend time in the forest, lives in a house with a foreboding tower, and has an eerie ability to influence others.

Jeffrey's presentation of Rose Dorn is heavily "fabulous" and "magical." Her connections with the forest, her witch-mother, and even her name allude to fairy tales like Hansel and Grethel, Little Red Cap, and Snow White and Rose Red, where two beautiful girls seem to be able to enchant nature—including birds, lambs, and a bear—the latter of which turns out to be a prince under a spell of an evil dwarf.

Thus, despite her blond hair and pigtails, Rose is not an average grade-school girl; according to Jeffrey, she leaves a trail of victims in her wake. Carol Stempel is Rose's first victim; after befriending her, Rose seems to cast a spell upon her. Carol's eyes follow Rose everywhere, and her attention to Rose and inattention to her current tasks cause several minor accidents, which Jeffrey presents as major calamities: a fall, a dropped watering can, and in general, inattentiveness to her schoolwork, even though she was once at the top of the class. Carol's strange connection to Rose is confirmed when a thunderstorm rages outside the classroom one day:

For a moment I thought a window had shattered. Only as the shock subsided did I realize that Rose Dorn was screaming. . . Mrs. Cadwallader vastly rose. But suddenly, as she made her way around the side of her desk, another shriek began. Across the room, hands pressed against her ears and face contorted, Carol Stempel howled in anguish while the boy beside her, leaning away, stared in troubled fascination.

A week later, Carol Stempel was moved to another second-grade class. I believe that saved her. (136)

Rose's ability to cast a spell over others sets her apart from the other, more "normal" grade-school children. Just as Edward Penn was extraordinary because of his obsessive love for drawing cartoons and his eventual transformation into a cartoon, so



Rose Dorn—like Rose Red—can command the children around her and, presumably, drive them mad.

What Rose does to Edwin, in Jeffrey's opinion, is even worse than what she did to Carol. She loves to humiliate him, to tease him, and (the worst!) to try to separate Jeffrey and Edwin. Beginning with Edwin's short illness and lasting through the romance, Jeffrey, though intensely jealous of Edwin's feelings for Rose, acts as a go-between so he can spy and further interfere in Edwin's life. Jeffrey gives Rose Edwin's childish gifts—mostly cereal-box prizes and gum-machine toys—including a compass ring, sugar candy, wax bottles, a plastic hot-dog and plastic teeth, blue tattoos, balsa airplanes, and a Japanese fan.

Lovesick Edwin loses himself and becomes someone who acts in concert with Rose, just as Carol Stempel did: "Her fits oppressed him; her relentlessness infected him; her habits obsessed him" (148). One fateful day, Edwin and Jeffrey follow her home and see her mother staring at them from the window:

As I followed his gaze to the upper windows I saw that one of them was open. Silent in her black dress, her long black hair falling onto the sill, she sat in the window and gazed down at Edwin. She said nothing at all, but as if she had shrieked a witches' curse he turned and began to run down the flagstone path. . . . I glanced back at the house, fearful that she would come flying out after him, but she continued to sit there, silently watching. And as I watched, one of the windows in the high hexagonal tower opened, and Rose Dorn leaned out. She was stark naked. Her pigtailed were undone, and her yellow hair streamed below the level of the windowsill.  
(156)

After this strange incident, Edwin becomes ill and falls even more under Rose's influence. Lovesick, he writes a series of love poems for Rose, including such lines as "Rose Dorn, Rose Dorn/I am forlorn/My heart is torn/by Rose, Rose Dorn" (160), which obviously do very little to forward Jeffrey's stated aims of making Edwin look like a literary genius. After Edwin partially recovers from his love-sickness, he returns to school. Shortly afterwards, Rose comes to class with most of her hair cut off, and a

strange light in her eyes. Two days later, she is dead, killed in a mysterious house fire. (Though there is no explicit textual evidence, the reader wonders whether Jeffrey was involved in the death).

Though the violence of Rose's death is strange enough, the precise manner in which Rose dies is even more significant. Real-world witches—the “witches” and “collaborators” in Salem Village during the witch trials—were hung, not burned. However, in most children's stories (e.g., Hansel and Gretel) the witches were burned. So the mysterious death of Edwin's friend is particularly apt—the girl-witch met the same fate as witches in children's stories—she was burned in a fire in her own house.

After Rose Dorn's death, Edwin becomes depressed and sick again, this time with a case of chickenpox, but Jeffrey believes that the illness is caused by evil Rose, who, in death, obsesses Edwin as much as she did in life:

She held him in her spell for six months, teasing and tormenting him without mercy. Of course she lost him in the end. God knows I hated her; God knows I once pitied her, may she rest in peace. She died horribly but dramatically, clamoring for attention even in her end; and her death spread through Edwin like an infection. (129)

Another malicious influence on Edwin is Arnold Hasselstrom, a transfer student with a perpetual frown and a violent temper. Jeffrey, who does not like any of Edwin's friends, hates Arnold with a passion. He attributes Jeffrey and Arnold's friendship only to the fact that opposites attract.

Arnold is another child who is far from “normal,” and in fact, resembles the child in the movie The Bad Seed. The Bad Seed kills a schoolmate so she can steal from her, and later kills a groundskeeper who finds evidence of the first murder. Eventually, the girl's mother discovers the terrible secret. After realizing that her daughter has no conscience and will undoubtedly murder again, she poisons her own daughter.

Like The Bad Seed, Arnold acts inappropriately and commits unprovoked violence. Edwin tries to teach Arnold to play Monopoly and to read books (both fairly normal grade-

school activities), but Arnold does not like these childish activities. Instead, he gives Edwin a box of rifle bullets and a Colt .25 automatic. In a typical childhood breakup, Arnold and Edwin's friendship ends when he borrows items but does not return them; left Edwin-less, Arnold becomes bored and starts fights, get kicked out of school, and finally gets into a fight with a fifth-grader appropriately named Weasel. After the fight, Arnold returns to his guardian's house and shoots him five times with a Colt .32 automatic. When the police find Arnold, he is shot and killed while aiming his gun at an officer. Edwin keeps a souvenir of the friendship: the gun Arnold gave him.

Consequently, all three of Edwin's friends are described as more extraordinary than Edwin, and all meet strange and untimely ends: Edward, obsessed with drawing cartoons, "becomes" a cartoon in his mysterious, dank cellar room; Rose, who has a witch for a mother and an uncanny ability to ability to "influence" and "cast a spell" on others, dies in a mysterious fire; and finally, police kill third-grader Arnold, after he inexplicably commits murder and then threatens the police with a weapon.

### A Literary Genius

Perhaps the biography's greatest "peculiarity" is that Edwin's writing—supposedly what made Edwin so extraordinary a child—is nearly absent in the biography. Once again, it is clear that Jeffrey intends this oversight.

Jeffrey divides the biography into the pre-literate, the literate, and the literary years. This division suggests that Jeffrey believes Edwin's writing is of significant importance; however, the way in which he presents (and omits) Edwin's literary works further shows that Edwin is not a genius and makes him appear unimportant.

As in other novels with controlling narrators—in particular in Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita, where Humbert Humbert's obsessive control over Lolita's depiction shows his distorted and unreliable view of her<sup>19</sup>—Jeffrey barely lets his "readers" experience Edwin's

“great masterpiece,” presenting only some 175 words of the novel. Other literary works that Jeffrey presents are some bad love poems (“Rose Dorn, Rose Dorn/I am forlorn,”) (160) which Jeffrey acknowledges are not a “masterpiece” and which he says he presents to show Edwin’s “despair,” not his genius (161); a tired valentine: “Roses are red. . .”; a single poem as a tribute to his dead friend Arnold, entitled “To A. H.,” and filled with cartoon and comic-book symbolism; a family newspaper, complete with news items and fictional stories, of which Jeffrey describes forty-one stories, but never directly quotes from any; and finally, Edwin’s “suicide” note, which Jeffrey claims he presents in its entirety. The writing presented by Jeffrey is not extraordinary, but mostly ordinary and child-like.

As for Edwin’s novel Cartoons, Jeffrey discusses quite extensively how the writing of it affects Edwin, specifically how it causes him to deteriorate mentally and physically. We are told Edwin spends most of his time in his room, obsessed with completing his novel. While immersed in his writing, Edwin suffers from stomach pains, headaches, and dizzy spells. Jeffrey attributes Edwin’s sickness to the problem of literary creation, but believes it is a psychological problem, not a physical one:

Is it possible that a work of art is born not out of strength but of weakness, of weakness trying to become strength, of weakness brought to such a pitch of frenzy that it becomes strength? . . . Unfortunately for the more romantic members of my readership, Edwin’s heartbreaking physical condition was a rather less endearing mental condition. A spirit of harsh contradiction began to prevail in him. He made cutting remarks about everyone and everything: he mocked little children, he railed at dogs, he lashed out against the wind. (252-253)

The ways in which Jeffrey describes Edwin’s illness and depression— “he mocked little children,” “he railed at dogs,”—mocks Edwin and minimizes his suffering. The description also makes Edwin seem weak and ineffectual, as when Jeffrey chides “he lashed out at the wind” (253).

Finally, the last Sunday in February, Edwin finishes Cartoons. It begins in typical cartoon fashion, with childlike, anthropomorphic images:

A white crescent moon, wearing a red nightcap that comes down to a long-lashed eye, snores in a blueblack-ink-colored sky above a twinkling town where the purple houses breathe in and out, in and out. . . . (260)

The rest of the novel, major themes, and its relationship to Edwin's life, are briefly discussed by Jeffrey, as "nothing less than a scrupulously distorted version of that life" (261). Edwin's novel is filled with ghosts, eerie toys, and plenty of primary-colored descriptions of the world. The protagonist in the novel is pursued by Death, who finally murders the hero by stabbing a knife in his throat. The novel ends with apocalyptic images of death; the hero's last moments are depicted by the following images that "appear in rapid succession in the protagonist's eyes":

Two steamships slowly sink, the spinning wheels of a slot machine stop at two skulls, a cash register rings up NO in one eye and SALE in the other, two whistling blimps explode into two mushroom clouds two black pussycats swallow two orange fish and remove from two black throats two clean white skeletons, two smiling divers plunge into two drained pools, two gray tombstones rise from two green mounds, and two winged heroes sit on two white clouds strumming two golden harps as two little circles close and That's All, Folks! Writes itself across each eye. (265)

The fact that the novel is a literary version of a cartoon further underscores the fact that Edwin is a child—a creative child, perhaps—yet not a literary genius and not extraordinary. Further, the parallels between Edwin's novel and Edwin's (soon to be ended) life are clear: both Edwin and his novel's protagonist are pursued by Death.

When Jeffrey questions Edwin about the meaning of Cartoons and about Edwin's views on life, Edwin comments that "life is useful . . . for the purposes of fiction" (276) and tells Jeffrey he wants to commit suicide.

As a kind of farewell, Jeffrey and Edwin begin a series of nighttime journeys to places they used to frequent: the forest that Rose Dorn frequented, Edward Penn's old yard, the library and the theater, their school classroom, White Beach, and an abandoned

amusement park. The night before his birthday, Edwin has a party, and plays pick-up-sticks; then he and Jeffrey go to his room. Finally, Edwin writes and edits his suicide note, the last line being, "I aspire to the condition of fiction" (296); however, the whole thing is a game to Edwin:

Calmly raising the gun to his right temple, whispered: "Bang, I'm dead," and fell backward on the bed with his eyes shut, clutching the silent gun. A moment later, his eyes opened and he said: "Now what?" In a split second I was leaning over him, gripping his gun-gripping hand; and I remember thinking, quite lucidly in the midst of a dreamy numbness, that the entry under "I Am Born" in MY STORY: A BABY RECORD allowed a certain leeway in the matter of seconds. (301)

Jeffrey shoots Edwin, slightly concerned that he might have missed Edwin's birth date and birth hour by a few seconds. The fact that Jeffrey did not understand that Edwin intended the mock suicide to be a joke seriously calls into question Jeffrey's analysis of Edwin and his judgments about Edwin's character and personality. What is now obvious to the reader (that Edwin is a fairly normal child) is what motivates Jeffrey to murder.

Jeffrey is present at the inquest, along with Edwin's suicide note and the copy of Huckleberry Finn which was going to be Jeffrey's birthday gift to Edwin.<sup>20</sup> The next September, after Edwin's parents move away, Jeffrey befriends another boy, an oil-painter named Paul, who invites him to see his "oil paintings of the creation of the universe, the cooling of the lava, the formation of the seas" (305). Jeffrey accomplished his goal of disposing of Edwin and now moves on. As "Walter Logan White" tells us in the introductory note to Jeffrey's biography of Edwin, "the search for Jeffrey Cartwright [presumably by the police as well as admiring scholars] continues. I, for one, hope they never find him" (viii).

Thus in Edwin Mullhouse, Jeffrey's insistence on presenting childhood in hyperreal, surreal, and even sinister ways makes everything about childhood seem extraordinary. By contrast, as Jeffrey presents Edwin slowly fading into the background, Edwin's death (a final disappearance) becomes the necessary conclusion to the biography.

#### **Chapter IV: The Doppelgänger in Steven Millhauser's Portrait of a Romantic**

Though numerous literary prize committees have recognized Steven Millhauser's contributions to literature (he has won the Lannan Award, the *Prix di Medicis*—the French equivalent of the Pulitzer, the World Fantasy Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for Literature) as yet, there are still only a small number of critical essays on Steven Millhauser's fiction.

In one of these essays, Mary Kinzie discusses Jorge Luis Borges's and Franz Kafka's influence on Millhauser's work. Moreover, she specifically acknowledges the magical realist angle in his work. Writes Kinzie (referring to Millhauser's volume of short stories, The Barnum Museum), "Millhauser has accomplished a remarkable compression of the realistic with the fantastic, creating in effect his own subtle, funny, breathtaking, and delightful mode of magical realism" (116). She continues, citing Millhauser's frequent use of the double, "The double has clearly fascinated Millhauser; he has explored the recesses of hero-worship and aversion among early adolescents drawn to one another and to an ethos of dread in his novels *Edwin Mullhouse* and *Portrait of a Romantic*" (117).

The term doppelgänger is German for "double walker." Though Webster's defines the term as "a ghostly counterpart of a living person," (Mish 376) the term is more aptly described by Carol Cohen as "an apparition that generally represents another side of a character's personality" (268). Cohen continues, "The Doppelgänger can personify one's demonic counterpart (as in E. T. A. Hoffman's The Devil's Elixirs, 1816), or an alter ego, as in Poe's "William Wilson" (1839). Frequently the appearance of the apparition presages imminent death" (268). This definition of the doppelgänger as an alter-ego and its connections to death are particularly apt when applied to Portrait of a Romantic. Millhauser consciously plays with the literary conventions of the doppelgänger in order to give the novel an element of the sinister and surreal. Furthermore, Millhauser expands upon the doppelgänger conventions, both by using multiple doppelgängers in the story and by

having one of the doppelgängers ultimately fulfill what the reader is lead to believe will be the protagonist's fate.

Three other key figures in Arthur's life appear in the novel—all of them his friends, and, as the likable but vastly self-absorbed Arthur firmly believes, extensions of himself: his “double” William Mainwaring, his “triple” Philip Schoolcraft, and his girlfriend, Eleanor.

The extent to which these characters mirror Arthur adds to the claustrophobic and surreal atmosphere of the novel. Typical of hyperreal magical realism, Portrait of a Romantic shows how events are influenced by a character's own consciousness. Millhauser uses Arthur's fascination with Romanticism to show that Arthur's experience in the world relies on deep, overwhelming emotions at the expense of actions. Furthermore, Millhauser uses the fictional technique of the doppelgänger to allow Arthur to finally act, if only by proxy.

Unlike in One Hundred Years of Solitude, where the lives of the Buendías are controlled by a mysterious curse, in Portrait of a Romantic, there is more ambiguity in the presentation of the “magical” or improbable. The novel uses many techniques of hyperrealism, including minute and precise descriptions of objects and people, a dreamlike or surrealistic atmosphere; and an overwhelming concern with making “ordinary” life seem extraordinary and fantastic. The narrator of Portrait of a Romantic filters the world through his own surrealistic, Romantic consciousness, and changes things irreparably because of it.

The protagonist, Arthur Grumm, is a twenty-nine-year-old retelling his fabulous adolescence, one in which he tried to live up to his Romantic potential. Older now, and disenchanted, living entirely in the past, he seems to feel that everything important that was meant to happen to him already occurred years ago. Arthur recounts events which occurred in his life from about age 6 to 17, focusing primarily on junior high and high school—his adolescence. What separates Portrait of a Romantic from other, more conventional



coming-of-age stories is its feverish, hyperreal portrayal of middle-class American boyhood. The far-reaching boredom of Arthur and his friends is often consistent with reality, for as Millhauser pointed out in an interview with Contemporary Authors, childhood is made up of long, boring periods (May 326), and yet the presentation of these “long, boring periods” gives the novel hallucinatory, dreamlike, surrealistic qualities.

## Boredom

Boredom and Romanticism are important themes in the novel, themes which Millhauser connected in an interview with Contemporary Authors: “First, contrary to popular belief, adolescence is not solely a series of cheerful antics alternating with somber bouts of self-discovery. It contains, as a matter of fact, a great deal of boredom. Second, the novel presumes to draw parallels between adolescence and romanticism, and boredom, properly understood, is the essence of the romantic temperament. Boredom is dissatisfaction with things as they are—it is an extreme form of refusal” (May 326).

Arthur’s deep dissatisfaction with the world appears early in the novel, although much of Arthur’s childhood could be called conventional or “normal.” Arthur has a typical mid-century American family with two parents: a dad whose hobbies are stamp collecting and mineralogy, and a mom “whose mission was nothing less than the maintenance of order in the universe” (7). Arthur attends a public school, but is frequently sick; he plays board games like Monopoly with friends, and he likes to read Poe and Stevenson. It is this precisely ordinariness which makes Arthur so dissatisfied:

I felt lost in a monstrous maze of boredom. And this was strange, really, for I suffered from no obvious lack of freedom. It was as if life itself were a restriction, a form of monstrous dullness from which there was no escape, except one. Of course I had not yet tasted the joys of love, whatever they were, but in advance I seemed to know they would not—and how I despair of making you understand, you smug ones, you smilers! And sometimes it

seemed to me that if only I were an artist, if only I could create a world superior to this world, which would annihilate it and replace it. (70)

The restrictions that Arthur despises are the boundaries of the “real” world (restrictions which are not placed upon fictional or artistic worlds). Arthur’s belief that life itself is a restriction from which the only escape is death or annihilation of the world influences both his perceptions and his actions throughout his adolescence. In an effort to relieve his vast boredom, he attempts to “annihilate and replace” the world in several ways: through Romanticism, through literature, and through fantasy (creating another world); when these attempts prove futile, he and his friends try to escape through death.

### Romanticism

Elements of “romance” permeate the novel. The term “Romanticism” was derived from the medieval romances, of which, not coincidentally, King Arthur was frequently the hero (Baldick, “Romanticism” 193-194). There are some medieval elements to Millhauser’s Arthur, besides his name; significantly, they are frequently clichéd or theatrical: his relationship to his girlfriend Eleanor (he fancies himself her protector; her bedroom in many ways resembles a castle’s tower; they make a pact and drink a tainted potion from pewter goblets); but these medieval elements are presented as one of the ways in which Arthur tries to escape from his boredom by indulging in fantasy. In reality, Arthur’s Romanticism adheres more to the late 18th and early 19th century definition of the term, including “emotional directness of personal experience. . . . emotional intensity, often taken to the extremes of rapture, nostalgia (for childhood or the past), horror, melancholy, or sentimentality” (Baldick, “Romanticism” 193).

Like a Romantic hero, Arthur is capable of emotional intensity and extreme rapture, and in fact intensely pursues these avenues. Fascinated with mystery and with feeling things deeply, he focuses on emotions at the expense of action.

As Camile Paglia explains, Romanticism is primarily concerned with feeling, and this concern with feeling can cause inaction. For example, in Walter Pater's Studies in the History of the Renaissance, which was written in the Victorian Era, but greatly infused with a Romantic consciousness—a work Paglia calls the “first classic of English aestheticism” (481)—Pater concluded with these words: “to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (481). Paglia speculates why Pater later became horrified when epicures misread his essay and engaged in what he considered licentious acts:

I think Pater's distress at misreadings of the 'Conclusion' came from his horror of action, sexual or otherwise. He withdrew the chapter [in the second edition] to preserve his spiritual identity, which resided in superpassivity of persona. An act connects person to person, or self to world. But for Pater neither the world nor other people can defeat “that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us.” (482)

Arthur's version of Romanticism, like Pater's, is passive. In fact, though he tries to escape from boredom, this escape often takes the form of reading or fantasy, two other “passive” activities. And when he cannot escape from boredom, he wallows in it: Arthur describes *ad nauseam* how he and his friend William repeatedly play Canasta, Checkers, Chess, Ghosts, Gin Rummy, Monopoly, Ping-Pong, Slavo, Scrabble, and Tic-tac-toe. But Arthur's purpose for repeatedly describing the same actions is not only to show their tedium, but also to show his fervent, if irrational, hope that once-boring activities will be different the next time around. Because of this belief that virtually static things will change (a trait he shares with José Arcadio Buendía in One Hundred Years of Solitude) he is fascinated with minutiae; when Arthur describes his girlfriend's surrealistic clockwork toy, a clown who juggles colored balls, the description in the novel continues for three pages before Arthur at last becomes convinced (with much disappointment) that the toy will not make a mistake—that it will not drop one of the colored balls. Arthur's fervent desire to find the extraordinary in the ordinary makes him believe that the normal, everyday, boring

world will suddenly change into something extraordinary. However, even Eleanor's improbable, magical toys are subject to certain "laws" of the universe—they must do only what they are designed to do.

### Annihilation and Creation

Arthur's oft-thwarted attempts at annihilation begin early in the novel. A sickly child, he has thoughts of suicide and a fascination with death. When he is still in grade school, his mother forbids him to die: "I had been fooling about in the medicine chest," he explains (9). Not discouraged by her request, he has thoughts of self-mutilation and decides to stick his finger into an old metal fan, hoping it will be severed by the blades. To Arthur's dismay, his finger stops the blades without injury. Soon after, he concocts a plan to commit suicide by throwing himself off his neighbor's second-floor balcony. While standing there, Arthur has an elaborately detailed vision of jumping, falling, and dying, but it is only his imagination. In fact, he never jumps.

Because of Arthur's inability to act (which in his case, means committing suicide) his childhood attempts at relief from boredom by annihilation fail miserably. When annihilation fails, he tries creation: Arthur's belief that life is an endless repetition is symbolically and literally represented in what could be called the ultimate redundancy: his doppelgängers. Typical of Millhauser's style,<sup>21</sup> the reader encounters not one, but three doppelgängers in the novel.

### William

Oddly, Arthur's extraordinary boredom with life is actually intensified when he begins the seventh grade and meets William Mainwaring, whom he calls his "double." William is even more like Arthur than Arthur himself; not surprisingly, his first name is the same as both the protagonist and his doppelgänger in Poe's short story "William Wilson,"

and Arthur even compares him to the literary character. Like William Wilson, William Mainwaring makes Arthur self-conscious and embarrasses him when he's near; moreover, William has a (somewhat mysterious) way of disappearing and then reappearing when it's least expected or convenient. At first, Arthur tries to counter the effect William has on him by overcompensating: by trying to outdo him in gym or by claiming superior knowledge (which he doesn't possess) about hobbies like mineralogy. More social than Arthur, William engages in many activities: the chess club, the science club, the photography club, and stamp collecting. All of these seem threatening to Arthur because they are too familiar; they are activities Arthur could or would do if he so desired.

William soon begins to supplant Arthur's own world in other and, Arthur believes, more menacing ways: he participates in family outings. To Arthur's dismay, his family loves William, who is polite, inquisitive, thoughtful, and far less moody than melancholy Arthur. One day, when the family journeys to an abandoned quarry pit to go rock climbing, Arthur takes a picture of his mother, father, and William together, and the transition seems complete:

William cried "Cheese!" and they were all off again, howling and shaking and weeping and rocking with laughter but always standing in place and clinging tightly to one another, like an animated monument, William with his arm around father's shoulder and father's arm around mother's shoulder—quite a happy little family, one could not help thinking. (49)

Soon these trips with William turn into weekly excursions, and Arthur feels more and more that William is supplanting him. That he fits so perfectly with Arthur's family disturbs Arthur. William is not only like Arthur; he is a better, more improved, more popular version of him.

After many months, William invites Arthur to his own house. In many ways, William's house is just the opposite of Arthur's; whereas Arthur's parents seem to always be home, William doesn't know where his mother is and his father isn't expected until evening. The scene is awkward: William has no games, not even a pack of cards, and his

chess set is at the Grumms's house. William shows Arthur his stamp collection and his accordion, but Arthur is not interested. The contrast between William's lively outings with Arthur's family and William's absent family is quite conspicuous; furthermore, William's house symbolically mirrors William's personality. Arthur frequently describes William as tentative in speech or action, silent and unmoving: "William said nothing, and sat without rocking, as if he were lost in thought, or as if he had no thoughts at all" (85). Like his house, he is maddeningly empty and (we come to learn) apt to fill this emptiness by adopting others' philosophies, moods, and actions.

As if to relieve their boredom by introducing a new participant, William and Arthur invite Arthur's cousin Marjorie to play with them. Arthur remembers Marjorie as an enigmatic temptress with whom he engaged in childhood games of doctor. However, his illusions about Marjorie soon shatter; now an adolescent, she is more interested in student council, cooking, and preparing for motherhood. She matured, and (Arthur seems to imply) maturing for a girl means preparing to take care of others, not indulging in games and fantasies, certainly not exploring the unknown. Arthur laments Marjorie's change; he abandons her to the adult world, as he will later do with his girlfriend Eleanor when she tries to become part of that world.

With Marjorie out of the picture, William and Arthur attempt to relieve boredom by going on "adventures" to places unknown. Arthur's reaction to these adventures suggests the reason for his supreme dissatisfaction with life:

Bored to death with our indoor life, for William too was becoming restless, we began to take long bicycle trips to unknown destinations. Starting early in the morning, before the air became heavy with its accumulation of light, we would strike out toward unknown parts. . . Each day we set off in a new direction. As we approached some familiar boundary I would feel a ripple of adventure that swelled to a toppling white-capped wave that crashed as we passed beyond, into undiscovered territory. And how I loved that sudden plunge into strangeness, when for a moment a wire fence, an attic window, a black puddle, a yellow hydrant all quivered with a mystery that quickly vanished, as when, in the morning, waking in an unfamiliar room, calmly and drowsily you open your eyes to a door, a

chair, a wall, a white curtain all threatening you with their strangeness, till recognition tames them. At first the simple passing of a boundary was enough, but soon we were less easily satisfied, and began to judge severely the new scenes we had passed among. In no time we had progressed from eager amateurs to jaded connoisseurs of Nature. (67)

Everything—even things that once seemed supremely strange and exciting—soon becomes just another object. As soon as the strange becomes familiar, it is no longer mysterious or interesting.

This philosophy is further demonstrated when one of Arthur and William's daily journeys leads them to a idyllic valley, where they pretend to be Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, characters from Arthur's favorite novel:

Sitting in that little Eden, bound in green brotherhood in the secret heart of a secret wilderness, I felt I could have been content to stay there forever. Indeed, anything less than forever would not have suited me at all. (70)

Predictably, Eden soon loses its fascination, and Arthur sighs: "To tell the truth, Nature is nice, but books are better" (70). Playing out the Huckleberry Finn fantasy is not as wonderful as reading about it, because real life can never compare to Arthur's imagination when he is reading fiction.

Reading enthalls both Arthur and William, but as Arthur's fantasy demonstrates, his love of literature only adds to his discontent. Besides Twain's Huckleberry Finn, Arthur's favorite authors are Stevenson and Poe, masters of adventure, mystery, and horror stories. Arthur's love of literature lends further support to his view that the *real* world is boring in the extreme. However, something terrible begins to happen to Arthur as he ages; like everything else in his world, even books lose their mysterious and alluring qualities:

Adult books bored me to death in the first two pages; and I began to wonder if I had reached an age for which no books were written. And perhaps it was simply that I longed for the remembered mystery of the vanished books of my childhood, rendered in language not for children. (126)

The “remembered mystery” is something that can never be recaptured. When Arthur reads children’s books he is bored, but adult novels trouble him with their hints of sex and the forbidden. The reader is lead to believe that Arthur will languish forever at that age for which “no books were written.” Immersed in adolescence, caught between childhood, when all the senses are most acute, and everything seems to be new, and the adult world, where nothing seems surprising or unrecognizable any longer, Arthur is in the most difficult of positions.

### Philip

In the eighth grade, Arthur meets his “triple” Philip, who “appears” in homeroom one October day; Arthur’s description of Philip’s appearance is mysterious. Arthur explains:

You would see him sitting quietly at his seat, looking as if he had dreamed himself into being, or looking as if he had not quite made up his mind to go that far, looking in fact as if he were not quite energetic enough to exist but not quite bored enough not to, and something in the manner of his stillness would begin to attract the teacher, who would suddenly turn on him with a sharp question, as if to reprimand him for interrupting the class” (93).

Arthur also draws parallels between Philip and William, describing Philip as “a languid and dreamy William with brooding, heavy lidded eyes” (91). Philip is dreamily insolent in school and frequently skips assignments with no excuse. As in One Hundred Years of Solitude, the character’s non-existence is reflected both by his own attitude and by other characters’ perceptions of him.

Arthur gets invited to Philip’s gothic house, meets his mother, and is introduced to the way that *she* escapes from the world:

A pale thin woman in a white dress half-sat half-lay against a lamplit corner. Her feet were tucked under a slanting couch-pillow and on the floor beside her lay two white sandals. . . . Upon her white stomach rested a blood-red book with the pages facing inward; a pale, slender hand, lax at the wrist, lay drooped over the cover. Bluish shadows lay beneath her closed eyes, and faintly in her forehead, as if the skin were translucent, you



could see the pale blue outline of a vein. "Mother," said Philip, in a neutral tone. Slowly her eyes opened, and for a moment she cast upon us a brooding heavy-lidded gaze. . .

"It's all right, Mother, he's. . . all right. Would you like me to fetch your pills mother?" "Yes, that would be nice, Philip, you may fetch, as you say, the blue ones in the brown bottle. . . ." (98)

This description of Philip's passive, heavily sedated mother demonstrates that boredom and disillusionment are not confined to adolescence and also provides an interesting contrast to the way in which Arthur and his friends deal with their boredom. Instead of resorting to alcohol or drugs (given the novel's probable 1950's-1960's setting, Philip's mother is probably on Valium or a similar sedative), Arthur resorts to creation and annihilation. He does not want to deaden the world; he wants to annihilate and replace it.

Given his mother's (and father's) absence and lack of concern about him, Philip has a lot of time to kill—time he often spends with Arthur. Philip is darker and moodier than William, and Arthur finds that he and Philip have many things in common. In fact, Arthur believes that Philip, like William, is another of his doppelgängers: his "triple" as Arthur calls him.

Like William and Arthur once did, Philip and Arthur talk of books. Not coincidentally, the favorite authors of Arthur's "triple" are the same as Arthur's—Poe and Stevenson. In fact, Philip is obsessed with Poe's works, and recites "The Masque of the Red Death" for Arthur. They agree to share books, and Philip speaks highly of Stevenson's story, "The Suicide Club," in the book New Arabian Nights.

But when Philip hands Arthur the volume, much to Arthur's surprise, there is a black revolver inside. Despite the gun, even Philip soon seems "unmysterious," until one day in his room he suggests a new game: Russian Roulette. Again, as in his suicide attempt on the porch, Arthur imagines that the bullet leaves the revolver and that he dies, but once again, it is only his imagination. However, this time Arthur places himself in real danger, for the "game" of Russian Roulette begins in earnest.

The relevance of placing the revolver in the Stevenson volume cannot be overlooked. In the story, those wishing to commit suicide apply to the Suicide Club, and, if accepted, they pay £40 to join. Each evening, the President of the club deals the cards to club members. Whoever receives the ace of clubs must kill whoever receives the ace of spades. All the murders are made to look like accidents so that no one will suspect what is really happening. However, it is not only the story's plot which makes it significant, but also the many characters that populate the story—among the suicidal club members are not only people who are distraught, penniless, or otherwise down on their luck, but also adolescents and Romantics who want to die because they are so bored with life.

William finally resurfaces and joins Arthur and Philip in game playing, but both boys keep him in the dark about the game of Russian Roulette. Incredibly, even Russian Roulette seems boring soon, so Philip suggests a suicide pact. After becoming blood brothers by drinking blood-tainted wine, Arthur and Philip set the date a week from the day of the pledge. Meanwhile, Arthur is troubled that no one at the school seems to notice when the day arrives:

It was an oppressively usual day of calm gray skies and thin winter light, of gray shadowless streets beneath motionless black branches, and as I passed along the yellow corridors with their rows of shiny green lockers or sat at my glossy desks in English and Math and American History, I could not understand why Philip and I were not the center of attention. How I loathed them all, those dull, cheerful people, who had no idea that Death was stalking among them. Pale and scornful, doomed and proud, He gazed upon them with his brooding heavy-lidded eyes. I felt that Philip and I were carrying among them a dangerous secret, which would explode in their smiling faces if they were not careful. At the same time I scrupulously avoided thinking about that secret, nor did Philip mention it as we strolled together, pale and doomed, on the cold, loud, indifferent playground.  
(141)

When evening arrives, each suspects that the other will change his mind:

He [Philip] said decisively, "The time has come." At once he held out the gun handle-first.

"What, I began," and started to smile, but my throat and forehead were aflame, I could not breathe, and scraping back in my chair I breathed out the words: "I thought. . ."

"What's wrong?" said Philip sharply. Scornfully he added: "You've changed your mind."

"Oh, my mind, but I thought. . ."

"You thought. . ."

"I thought that, you first. . ."

"Me first! Don't be a fool. How can I be certain that you. . ."

"But that's not fair!" I cried. "How do I know that you, that you. . ."

Our eyes met and jerked away. A horrible suspicion fluttered across my mind, flew out of the room, and flung itself madly against the dusty window. Frowning to himself, Philip continued to hold out the gun handle-first.

. . . After a while he let the gun fall from his fingers onto the bed. Then he lit a cigarette and lay down on his back, and bending an arm under his neck he blew out a long slow stream of swirling smoke. (120)

Neither boy trusts the other to go first, each fearing the other will back out of the bargain. Because of the mistrust and the botched suicide pact, Philip and Arthur's friendship ends. Soon after, Arthur dreams that William shoots him with the same revolver.

#### Eleanor

After starting high school, Arthur becomes intrigued by an empty desk in his classroom. Day after day, he becomes more obsessed by the absence of whoever once sat in that desk. By the time she finally does return to school, Arthur is already obsessed with Eleanor Schumann, who is a sickly girl, easily bruised, shy, and fragile. Again, as in the appearances of Philip and William, there is something magical and elusive about Eleanor—it is as if Arthur had dreamed her into being:

She was so often absent that absence seemed her element, from which she would emerge suddenly with dreamlike vividness—only to fade away again. I seemed to see her fixed in a pose: sitting motionless at her desk with her face turned toward the window. Her ankles were crossed and her hands rested lightly in her lap: the back of one hand in the palm of the other. Darkly her shoulders fell forward, giving her back a curve. The windowsill was at the level of her eyes, and her pale, mournful face was lifted slightly as she looked out at the gloomy sky with eyes narrowed against the light. . . . Often when she appeared she would seem deeply weary, drained of energy as her cheeks were drained of color. At such times her pallor, intensified by the blackness of her hair, had about it a touch of the ghastly.

And indeed there was something of the phantom about her; and secretly I called her The Phantom Eleanor. (174-175)

Though Arthur does not explicitly mention it this time (as he did when describing his double and triple William and Philip), Eleanor certainly fits the profile of Arthur's other doppelgängers. She could certainly be Arthur's "quadruple." Like Arthur, she shares a melancholy temperament, likes to indulge in fantasy, and is entranced by the extraordinary, though she is not as bored as Arthur. Most importantly, as with William and Philip, Arthur is *drawn* to Eleanor because she reminds him of himself; she makes Arthur recall his days when he was young and frequently sick. He falls deeply in love with her.

During one of her frequent bouts of sickness, Arthur visits Eleanor at her home. Like Philip's house (gothic) and William's house (empty), Eleanor's house also mirrors her mysterious personality. It is surrealistic to an extreme, and contains fantastic passages and rooms which are, in reality, much too vast to actually be contained within the house. Additionally, Eleanor's room contains very lifelike toys and dolls which seem to be projecting emotion, including the juggler who fascinates Arthur by throwing and catching primary-colored miniature balls.

As he did with Philip and William, Arthur frequently discusses literature with Eleanor. His favorite book is Huckleberry Finn, hers the Odyssey, but she also introduces Arthur to Edward Owen Whitelaw, whose surrealistic stories frustrate him. Arthur describes his reaction to one of Owen Whitelaw's stories: "It was if the esthetic intention of Edward Owen Whitelaw were to lead you to the verge of an overwhelming revelation and to abandon you there forever, on the verge" (206).

The protagonist in the Whitelaw story is terrified by objects which surround him, but the terror is not caused by "the objects themselves, but the fact that they are unfamiliar" (205-206). Arthur is disappointed with Edward Owen Whitelaw's fiction for the same

reasons he is disillusioned by many aspect of life: Arthur wants the mystery, the wonder, to be sustained—not abandoned.

Besides sharing literature, Arthur and Eleanor share a fantasy. Eleanor possesses a “secret room” which is entered through the closet in her bedroom. Beyond the secret room, there is a further secret recess that she calls “The Childhood Museum,” which contains a Victorian doll house, old and decaying and wondrous in its detail—as if it were a real house.

In the magical room, Arthur loses all track of time, but soon realizes that it is not just the room that disorients him so, but also Eleanor herself:

As I spent more and more time with Eleanor, I began to notice a subtle change in the Universe. It was not so much that a vagueness had come over things as that a partial dissolution had occurred, leaving edges of objects that had poked through a medium of mist. Mother had shrunk to a pair of eyebrows frowning over the tops of eyeglasses, father was a plump lamplit hand lying on the padded edge of an armchair. . . . It was not, as in some pleasant storybook, that I seemed to inhabit two different worlds, one a sunny and boring dayworld and the other a mysterious realm of night, rather it was as if Eleanor’s world were draining away the other world, leaving it pale and unsubstantial. (227)<sup>22</sup>

The fact that Arthur’s fantasy life encroaches further and further upon Arthur’s reality is significant. His fantasies with Eleanor seems to accomplish his goal of supplanting the world, for Eleanor herself seems to be supplanting his world. As his love for Eleanor consumes him, they spend more and more time together. In fact, they decide want to be together forever and decide to marry.

The marriage ceremony, of course, is a fantasy marriage, conducted in Eleanor’s secret room, The Childhood Museum. Conducting their marriage ceremony in The Childhood Museum symbolizes not only a pledge to be together forever, but also a pledge never to leave the wonder of childhood. Sensing this significance, Eleanor suggests a suicide pact, speaking longingly of Romeo and Juliet and Anthony and Cleopatra. Eleanor directs Arthur to pour a vial of amber liquid which she keeps in a colored bottle in her room

into a pewter snake-shaped goblet. She drinks first, and this time, Arthur follows through with the suicide pact, prompted by what he thinks is Eleanor's impending death. The drink renders them unconscious but does not kill them.

Afterwards, things have changed; although Arthur calls Eleanor his "dead bride," (242) and "unquiet ghost" (243) and indeed, she seems pale and wan as ever, she is soon bored with the fantasy; barely keeping up the pretense, they study German together, and Eleanor, who has not attended school at all during her convalescence, suddenly becomes curious about what is happening there. Eleanor gets progressively better and even returns to high school, which Arthur wants no part of:

I actively despised it all, since behind the rosy glow induced by manly imbibing of school spirit . . . I detected a sickening imitation of all that was most dull in so-called adult life. Eleanor, furious, said that only a person of low intelligence was "bored by everything." (245)

One afternoon, the pretense of the Childhood Museum marriage ceremony and the suicide pact fantasy is completely shattered: Arthur finds Eleanor sitting in her sun-filled room, a cool breeze blowing through the window. She's changed. Like Marjorie, who seemed to become a woman overnight, all Eleanor seems concerned about is catching up on her schoolwork and papers. But Arthur hasn't changed, and as much as Eleanor now loves the sunlight, Arthur craves the dark. Just as he abandoned Marjorie, he virtually abandons Eleanor. In many ways, she is no longer interesting because she has matured into the transparent "adult" world of cliché, responsibility, and obviousness. After Arthur is left with no friends, William reappears.

### William's Return

Like Poe's William Wilson, William Mainwaring seems to know with uncanny precision where and when to appear. But when William appears in Arthur's life again, William is quite changed from the amiable boy he used to be; he's terribly sullen and

withdrawn. He carries his present from Philip, The New Arabian Nights with the revolver inside, and the game of Russian Roulette begins again with Arthur and William.

One afternoon in October, William proposes a suicide pact. The two boys perform the same blood brothers ceremony as Philip and Arthur once did. In the meantime, they still play Monopoly and maintain the pretense of normality, but Arthur, confused, wanders through each day in a feverish, zombie-like state.

On the night of the proposed suicide, Arthur makes his way to William's house, to berate him for backing out of the plan, but William is not there. When Arthur returns to the darkness of his room, he sees William, lit by match-light.

They draw cards to see who will get the Ace of Spades and kill himself first. In a fever-state, Arthur rambles on, reassuring himself that he would actually have committed suicide first, had he drawn the Ace. He continues to reassure himself: "I feel strange, feverish, it's probably all a dream, yes that's it, a dream, I'll wake up soon, and then. . . and then. . . Somewhere a shot rang out" (316). William places the revolver against his head and fires, fulfilling the suicide pact that began with Arthur and Philip. Thus, William, who was the most malleable of Arthur's friends, was the one who finally acted, completing what Arthur tried to but could not bring himself to do.

The boy whom Arthur once feared was trying to supplant him, was, at last, the one who supplanted the world. Millhauser's use of the *doppelgänger*s in the novel allows Arthur to identify strongly with each one of his doubles; when William commits suicide, Arthur is committing suicide by proxy. Whether out of fear, relief, or the feeling that it is no longer necessary, because William fulfilled the pact, Arthur apparently feels no need to keep his end of the bargain—to kill himself too.

As evidence of this, the book ends with William's suicide. In so many ways, life stopped for Arthur and he therefore stops the book at this critical point. In fact, we find out nothing about what happened to Arthur in the intervening period between his adolescence

and the writing of the book, because he feels everything important that will happen has already happened to him. As for Arthur's triple and quadruple, Philip and Eleanor, we never read another word about them, for they no longer matter to him—they are aspects of Arthur which he has abandoned.

In the end, Arthur's hope of creating a new world which would supplant the real world has been realized (at the cost of William's life). Arthur has created a realm of memory, filled with his lingering fondness for and his memories of his fabulous adolescence. His Romantic nature allows him to perpetually recreate all the wondrous and terrible feelings he experienced in his adolescence—by living in the past and in his own mind.

Thus, Arthur's belief that life is an endless repetition as well as his fervent desire to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary leads him to see a world of duplicates—his doppelgängers. A decade later, despite his nostalgia for his adolescence, he has never entirely lost his connection with the real world. But in Jeanette Winterson's novel Written on the Body, the narrator's desire to hide from the "real" world and her/his obsession with the realm of words lead to a collapse of the barriers that separate the real from the textual.



## **Chapter V: Language, Obsession, and Control in Jeanette Winterson's Written on the Body**

In Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery, Jeanette Winterson discusses how the desire for realism in literature arose and became accepted into the mainstream:

It was the Victorians who introduced an entirely new criterion into their study of the arts; to what extent does the work correspond to actual life? This revolution in taste should not be underestimated and although it began to stir itself before Victoria ascended to the throne in 1837, Realism (not the Greek theory of Mimesis) is an idea that belongs with her surely as the fantasy of Empire. (28)

Winterson calls realism “an anti-art response” (42) because it stifles creativity. Using novelist Muriel Spark as an example, Winterson theorizes how Spark was limited by the period she was writing in. The 1940s and 1950s favored realism, and “Miss Spark does not want to be a Realist, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie should confirm that, and yet a Realist she has been, and what a pity” (42).

As for her own work, critics acknowledge that Winterson is definitely not a realist. Carol Anshaw claims that after her first novel, Jeanette Winterson “trampolined away from realism” (16). Peter Parker, editor of A Reader's Guide to the Twentieth-Century Novel, agrees: “After Oranges and Boating for Beginners (1986), she abandoned the comic novel to concentrate in both The Passion (1987) and Sexing the Cherry (1989) on blurring the lines between historical fact and fantastical storytelling” (601).

Indeed, Winterson's fiction is frequently a-realistic and experimental. Even her first novel, Oranges are Not the Only Fruit—which Anshaw and Parker claim is realistic—contains fragments of medieval and folk tales dispersed throughout the narrative. But Winterson's experimentation with magical realism began in earnest with her third novel, The Passion, which presents the often magical and ill-fated romance between a soldier and a prostitute in the enchanted city of Venice.

Winterson's fifth novel, Written on the Body, is more poetic and subdued than The Passion, with more ambiguity in the presentation of the magical and supernatural. In fact,

each of the three instances of supernatural-type elements (all involve possible ghosts or apparitions) is ambiguous.

However, what truly distinguishes the novel from “realistic” fiction and designates it as magical realist fiction are the unusual ways in which symbolism, metaphor, and other types of figurative language are presented in the novel—they are taken literally by the narrator. This literalization of symbolic language adheres to William Spindler’s definition of ontological magical realism—a work featuring a highly unreliable narrator whose words can be interpreted both metaphorically and literally. In the novel, language is a controlling presence in the narrator’s life; instead of merely describing thoughts and relationships, language becomes magically interwoven into the narrator’s perceptions and her reality. Operating almost tangibly, it threatens to undermine the narrator’s life and her sanity.

Winterson had used this technique—making the figurative or symbolic literal—earlier, in The Passion. When the novel’s heroine, Villanelle, falls in love with a married woman, she *literally* loses her heart—it is taken by her former lover and kept in a jar on a shelf in the woman’s house. Villanelle’s ill effects are limited to psychological ones; feeling no physical ramifications of this deed, she continues to exist. Indeed, she elicits help from her current lover Henri to retrieve her lost heart.

Gabriel García Márquez also uses the technique of making figurative language and phrases literal. In One Hundred Years of Solitude there is a character with a withered arm who once hit his parents; Latin Americans have a saying that if you raise your arm against your parents it will burn (Rowe 191).

In One Hundred Years of Solitude and The Passion, the literalization of figurative language is mostly tangential to the narrative, but it is infinitely more striking and more relevant in Written on the Body. Winterson frequently uses many allusions, symbols, and metaphors, not to make the novel more poetic, but to reveal the extent of the narrator’s

obsession with words and texts and to show that language undermines the narrator's ability to live in the real world.

Like Portrait of a Romantic and Edwin Mullhouse, Written on the Body is told from the first-person point of view, but the narrator never reveals her/his name or gender (as stated before, for the purpose of this discussion, the pronouns "she" and "herself" and the adjective "her" will be used to describe the narrator). The narrator also avoids physically describing herself, except occasionally as a literary character (sometimes a male, sometimes a female). The narrator's own ambiguity complements the ambiguity in the entire novel. This ambiguity creates a challenge for the reader, who must try to read between the lines to discover "the truth," by determining how much the narrator's obsession with language distorts the narrator's perceptions and the way the narrator portrays her life.

The narrator is a researcher/writer/translator whose profession has become an obsession. Spellbound by the power of words, their meanings, permutations, connotations, and allusions, she sees the world in a highly symbolic and metaphoric way. The narrator believes that words are what create love, what maintain it, and what (ultimately) destroy it, and applies this theory to relationships with her lovers. In fact, the narrator's obsession with language and with texts controls her thoughts and actions in many different ways: the narrator describes herself as literary characters or thinks of herself in those terms, and her relationships sometimes unfold like scenes from plays or novels. (Though the narrator claims she/he doesn't do this, the narrator's lovers think otherwise). Most strikingly, the narrator thinks and speaks in metaphors and believes in them as if they were real.

Though the narrator uses language and texts as a way of distancing herself from real life, of controlling her lovers, and of preventing herself from being hurt, as the novel

demonstrates, the narrator's obsession with language and texts ultimately is at the expense of reality, and of her relationships with others.

#### A Pattern of Failure

Though Written on the Body mainly focuses on the narrator's obsessive love affair with a married woman named Louise, the narrator also describes her numerous previous relationships. Early in the novel, the narrator asks a question of the reader: "Why is the measure of love loss?" (39) In fact, all of the narrator's relationships end in failure and loss (though some end more disastrously than others). Her long list of lovers include many married women; she believes the adultery is not immoral, because people commit adultery when they are disillusioned with the person they are with:

When I say "I will be true to you" I am drawing a quiet space beyond the reach of other desires. No-one can legislate love; it cannot be given orders or cajoled into service. Love belongs to itself, deaf to pleading and unmoved by violence. Love is not something you can negotiate. Love is the one thing stronger than desire and the only proper reason to resist temptation. . . . Adultery is as much about disillusionment as it is about sex. The charm didn't work. You paid all that money, ate the cake and it didn't work. It's not *your* fault is it? (77-78)

Though the narrator believes that her lovers are justified in their adultery, nonetheless, her relationships with her lovers are burdened with problems and—more often than not—they end badly. The narrator recounts how the affair with Bathsheba, a married woman, was shrouded in secrecy and lies:

We couldn't tell our friends. We couldn't tell hers because they were his too. We couldn't tell mine because she asked me not to do so. We sank lower and lower in our love-lined, lead-lined coffin. Telling the truth, she said, was a luxury we couldn't afford and so lying became a virtue, an economy we had to practise. Telling the truth was hurtful so lying became a good deed. (16)

Even the narrator's non-adulterous relationships are seriously exploitative—in particular, her relationship with Jacqueline, which the narrator essentially describes as prostitution:

I'd to lay a carpet in my new flat so a couple of friends came over to help. They brought Jacqueline. She was the mistress of one of them confidante of both. A sort of household pet. She traded sex and sympathy for £50 to tide her over the weekend and a square meal on Sunday. It was a civilized if brutal arrangement. (25)

Jacqueline works at the zoo, coaxing frightened animals out of their hiding places so that zoo visitors can enjoy them. The narrator comments, "She was good with parents, good with children, good with animals, good with disturbed things of every kind. She was good with me" (25).

Plainly, the narrator's relationship with Jacqueline is not one as detached as she first describes it; not surprisingly, Jacqueline has real feelings for her. When the narrator starts an affair with a married woman and Jacqueline discovers it, Jacqueline becomes enraged and vandalizes the narrator's house, removing away the toilet seat in the bathroom, taking a monkey wrench to the plumbing, and writing the narrator's shortcomings on the bathroom walls in black felt pen.

In fact, it is clear that the narrator's detachment when recounting her series of love affairs is a sign of wishful thinking and does not accurately reflect reality. The narrator's unreliability quickly becomes apparent in the novel. For example, though the narrator insists she is not unduly influenced by literary texts, this assertion is disputed by several lovers.

#### A Literary Life

The narrator's literary background clearly manifests itself in the novel. The narrator frequently alludes to literary works, even when she questions her own reliability: "Perhaps I have Emma Bovary's eyes or Jane Eyre's dress" (Emma's eyes and Jane's dress change inexplicably in the novels—due presumably to authorial lapses). The narrator also describes herself as a literary figure; primed and ready for a new conquest, the narrator depicts herself dramatically as "having Mercutio's swagger" (81).

Curiously, the narrator minimizes the influence of words on her psyche. Though the narrator claims she/he does not want to live out literature, the narrator's lovers know differently. One of them compares the narrator's life and many affairs to a Russian novel. And at the end of the narrator's disastrous affair with Jacqueline, Jacqueline writes her own name over and over on the narrator's bathroom walls. Like many of the narrator's other lovers, Jacqueline knows the importance of words to her, and is trying to leave the most lasting impression possible—to tell the narrator that she is part of her past and to make sure that the narrator will never forget her.

Likewise, at the end of their affair, Bathsheba torments the narrator by keeping the letters the narrator wrote her during their affair:

When we were over, I wanted my letters back, My copyright she said but her property. She had said the same about my body. Perhaps it was wrong to climb into her lumber-room and take back the last of myself. They were easy to find, stuffed into a large padded bag, bearing the message on an Oxfam label that they were to be returned to me in the event of her death. A nice touch; he would no doubt have read them but then she would not have been there to take the consequences. And would I have read them? Probably. A nice touch.

I took them into the garden and burned them one by one and I thought how easy it is to destroy the past and how difficult it is to forget it. (16-17)

The narrator is terribly upset when Bathsheba keeps the letters; she feels they are more than just words—they are a part of the narrator's body which only she has a right to keep or destroy. In fact, the gesture—destroying the letters—would only seem a vindictive, pointless gesture to most people after a love affair gone bad, but to the narrator it represents much more than simply burning a gift. Because she believes that words are what create love, what sustain it, and what can cause it to end (when harsh words are used or when the words stop flowing), the narrator actually believes that burning the words is not only burning a reminder of the love affair, but also destroying the feelings remaining and erasing the past.

## The Metaphors of Love

The narrator frequently speaks and thinks metaphorically. The metaphors for love which the narrator utilizes—banquets, knots, bonds, etc., are not new in the language of love; however, the literalness with which she takes them is. Though she claims, “Destiny is a worrying concept. I don’t want to be fated, I want to choose,” (91) it is clear that she has little choice because her obsession with language and metaphors signify that the narrator personifies love. Once personified, it is an irresistible force for the narrator, one which is impossible to fight.

The narrator’s lack of choice is demonstrated by the most prominent metaphor in the novel—what the narrator calls “written on the body.” Written on the body is the narrator’s metaphor for the language of love:

Articulacy of fingers, the language of the deaf and dumb, signing on the body body longing. Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my shoulders, referenced me with your mark. The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body. Your Morse code interferes with my heart beat. I had a steady heart before I met you, I relied upon it, it had seen active service and grown strong, Now you alter its pace with your own rhythm, you play upon me, drumming me taut.

Written on the Body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like Braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story. (89)

Essentially, written on the body describes the narrator’s sexual history and the accompanying psychological pain of all her failed relationships. In other words, even though the narrator wants to maintain a distance from her lovers, to maintain “civilized if brutal arrangements,” each one leaves his or her mark. Indeed, language is not simply written on the body, but written *into* it; body, code, and message merge. These marks, this history, this inescapable past, come back to trouble the narrator, not only at verbal, social, and psychological levels, but also on a physical level—through disease.

To the narrator's dismay, her ex-lover Jacqueline claims that she may have given the narrator a venereal disease (a present from Jacqueline's philandering ex-husband). The narrator is relieved when the test results come back negative, but as the nurse in the VD clinic advises her, she should be tested again in six months, because the behavior that caused the narrator to come in to the clinic for testing will increase her likelihood of contracting a disease in the future. Furthermore, despite the reprieve, it becomes evident that venereal disease is not the only consequence of the string of failed affairs. The psychological trauma is just as bad as any disease: in fact, the narrator claims ex-lover Bathsheba gave her the "emotional clap" (25).

Even though the lovers recognize the narrator's obsession with language and texts, none of them can penetrate this strange code written on her body. None of them, that is, until Louise. Amazingly, Louise can "read" the narrator "like a book" and decipher the code that is emblazoned on the narrator's body. The fact that Louise can decipher the narrator so quickly and completely amazes the narrator. She falls obsessively in love with Louise, but Louise, cautious after finding out about the narrator's sordid past, is afraid that the narrator's feelings for her will be as shallow and callous as her feelings for her previous lovers. Like Jay Gatsby who wishes that his girl, Daisy, had never been with anyone else before him, Louise wishes the narrator had had no previous lovers.

The narrator's past severely strains the relationship. After they make love for the first time, the narrator—feverish and worried about losing Louise—sees the faces of her past lovers staring at them. These figures, symbolically and literally, represent the past coming back to haunt the narrator.

### Fantasy and Reality

It is clear from the way that the narrator describes Louise that she is different than the narrator's previous lovers. The narrator recalls her first impressions of Louise in



fantastic terms: "If I were painting Louise I would paint her hair as a swarm of butterflies. A million Red Admirals in a halo of movement and light" (28-29). Later, she describes her as a literary heroine possessing a "dangerously electrical quality. . . . Superficially, she seemed serene, but beneath her control was a crackling power of the kind that makes me nervous when I pass pylons. She was more of a Victorian heroine than a modern woman. A heroine from a gothic novel, mistress of her house, yet capable of setting fire to it and fleeing in the night with one bag" (49).

But Louise is bothered by the narrator's past and her own infidelity. Louise tells her husband Elgin of the affair and tells the narrator not to visit until things can be sorted out. Without Louise, the narrator falls apart:

By morning I was home shivering and wretched. I welcomed the shivering since I hoped it might portend a fever. If I were delirious for a few days her leaving me might hurt less. With luck I might even die. "Men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love." Shakespeare was wrong, I was living proof of that. (95)

When the narrator tries to resume the translation work, she/he cannot focus on the illuminated manuscript. Seeing the ornate "L" at beginning the manuscript's page, all the narrator can think of is that the L means "love." Unable to concentrate, the narrator handcuffs herself to a chair and asks a guard to keep the key. Later, when the guard cannot be found, the chair is cut so the handcuff can be removed; the narrator is removed from the library, her ticket taken away for damaging library property. Lost, "feeling like a private investigator," she spends the night outside Louise's house staring through Louise's windows.

Thus, in a single day, the narrator's career has been taken away, and the words (in the form of the library and the texts) which helped the narrator create the alternate reality are taken away. The narrator's inability to translate and her obsession with identifying the "L" in the text with her love for Louise suggest that the reality of the narrator's love for Louise has supplanted what has in the past been her escape— words.

When Louise discovers that the narrator's love for her is real, she takes her back and the affair resumes. They live together, according to the narrator, in "great happiness" (99). Again, the narrator's descriptions of Louise as a gothic heroine and of their life together seem romanticized and idealized. One of the narrator's last memories of the relationship could be a scene from a Currier and Ives Print:

It was Christmas time and we had decorated the flat with garlands of holly and ivy woven from the woods. We had very little money; I had not been translating as much as I should have been and Louise could not resume work until the new year, she'd found a job teaching Art History. Nothing mattered to us. We were insultingly happy. We sang and played and walked for miles looking at buildings and watching people. A treasure had fallen into our hands and the treasure was each other.

Those days have a crystalline clearness to me now. Whichever way I hold them up to the light they refract a different color. Louise in her blue dress gathering fir cones in her skirt. Louise against the purple sky looking like a Pre-Raphaelite heroine. The young green of our life and the last yellow roses in November. The colours blur and I can only see her face. Then I hear her voice crisp and white, "I will never let you go." (99-100)

However, despite the reader's impressions that the narrator's descriptions of Louise are overly romanticized, this romanticism does not subtract from the fact that her relationship with Louise seems very "real," very present—the narrator's use of the terms "crystalline," and "crisp," and the extraordinary attention to color give the scene a sense of aliveness, as well as a sense that the narrator and Louise are living thoroughly in the moment.

Furthermore, during the narrator's blissful months with Louise, she is less obsessed with words and language. In fact, she tells the reader, "I had not been translating as much as I should have been" (99). Thus, though the narrator *can* translate (unlike the fiasco with the illuminated manuscript in the library) words—the narrator's primary escape—are no longer as important because the narrator has her reality with Louise.

But the lovely "Victorian Christmas" scene is short-lived. Louise's husband, Elgin, breaks the news to the narrator on Christmas Eve: Louise has chronic lymphocytic

leukemia. Her prognosis is 100 months, about eight and a quarter years; Louise has already survived two years with the cancer.

In fact, Louise's leukemia is incurable, but not always fatal in its milder forms. Chemotherapy to fight the progression of the cancer, antibiotics to fight infection, blood and platelet and immunoglobulins to boost the immune system—all these can help. It is not the cancer per se which kills its victims, but the cancer suppresses the immune system; death is usually the result of an infection, which the compromised immune system cannot fight off (Clayman 637). However, the narrator believes that Louise is going to die.

Despite the somewhat bleak prognosis, there does seem to be hope for Louise. In an ironic twist, Louise's husband Elgin is a doctor—a cancer researcher. His bargain with the narrator is simple: if Louise comes back to him, she will have access to the best cancer specialists in Switzerland. If she doesn't come back, she won't. The narrator accepts the bargain and leaves Louise so that Louise can receive the best treatment.

## Loss

Because the narrator believes that words create and sustain love, now that the narrator realizes that she has lost the presence—the reality of Louise—the narrator descends more into the realm of words and also takes them more literally than ever. Thus, the narrator tries to control her world through language when she cannot control it in fact. This descent into the realm of words is a desperate measure to hold onto Louise, whom the narrator fatalistically believes is lost forever.

The narrator's obsession with words influences the way she comes to understand her lover Louise's illness and how she deals with the loss of Louise. If words can sustain love, they can help her hold onto Louise. The narrator believes she can turn Louise into a text, something she is capable of analyzing, understanding, controlling, and possessing.

Indeed, after the narrator finds out about Louise's cancer, two notable things occur in the novel: 1) On a textual level, the book becomes divided into smaller chapters, the first few of which talk about parts of the body, how these body parts exist in Louise, and what memories they invoke in the narrator; and 2) the narrator's grip on the world and on reality becomes even more tenuous.

The narrator's desire to understand Louise's illness leads her an obsession with medical texts:

The next day, I cycled to the library but instead of going to the Russian section as I had intended, I went to the medical books. I became obsessed with anatomy. If I could not put Louise out of my mind I would drown myself in her. Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the suckling, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I crave. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognize her even when her body had long since fallen away.  
(111)

The narrator begins with Louise's thymus gland, bloodstream, then her eyes, nose, and mouth. The language she/he uses is a strange blend of the sexual and clinical. The narrator quotes passages from the medical textbooks about parts of the body: "For descriptive purposes the human body is separated into cavities. The cranial cavity contains the brain. Its boundaries are formed by the bones of the skull," (119) then describes the feelings that these body parts in Louise evoke in her:

Let me penetrate you. I am the archaeologist of tombs. I would devote my life to marking your passageways, the entrances and exits of that impressive mausoleum, your body. How tight and secret are the funnels and wells of youth and health. A wriggling finger can hardly detect the start of an ante-chamber, much less push through to the wide aqueous halls that hide womb, gut, and brain. . . . As I embalm you in my memory, the first thing I shall do is hook out your brain through your accommodating orifices. Now that I have lost you I cannot allow you to develop, you must be a photograph not a poem. (119)

The narrator's incessant preoccupation with archaeological metaphors and with death and burial are simply another way to exercise control. The narrator wants to "fix" Louise—not cure her, but make her unchanging. As the narrator explains, Louise must be

a photograph—fixed, objective—not a poem, because a poem involves complexity, symbolism, and can allow for many interpretations. A poem has a life of its own.

Five months after Louise leaves, the narrator suspends her studies of cancer and biology, realizing that the clinical, objective language of the medical texts does not help her/him accept the loss of Louise. Louise was a complex and wondrous woman, and this time, a text—a medical text—is not a substitute for her. It cannot displace her in the narrator's mind.

Trying a new approach, the narrator goes to physical locations that remind her of Louise's illness. The narrator visits the hospital so she can be near the cancer patients. The medical staff and the patients are puzzled by her behavior; Since the narrator does not have cancer, they do not understand her preoccupation.

Working at a bar because she cannot translate in this state of mind, the narrator decides to *physically* search for Louise after she/he hears a voice say, "You made a mistake" (153). At this point, about nine months after leaving Louise, the narrator visits Louise's husband Elgin and discovers that he and Louise are divorced and that he is seeing another woman. Elgin does not know where Louise is; she did not go to Switzerland for treatment.

Desperate, and dismayed that relinquishing Louise accomplished nothing (since Louise didn't go to Switzerland after all), the narrator tries to comfort herself by fantasizing about Louise:

In the night, the blackest part of the night, when the moon is low and the sun hasn't risen, I woke up convinced that Louise had gone away alone to die. My hands shook. I didn't want that. I preferred my other reality; Louise safe somewhere, forgetting about Elgin and about me. Perhaps with somebody else. That was the part of the dream I tried to wake out of. None the less it was better than the pain of her death. My equilibrium, such as it was, depended on her happiness. I had to have that story. I told it to myself every day and held it against my chest every night. It was my comforter. I built different houses for her, planted out her gardens. She was in the sun abroad, She was in Italy eating mussels by the sea. She had

a white villa that reflected in the lake. She wasn't sick and deserted in some rented room with thin curtains. She was well. Louise was well. (174)

The narrator's "story" about Louise is a pitiful fantasy, but helps to alleviate the pain of her loss; nonetheless, the narrator realizes that the text—the story the narrator invents about Louise—is not a replacement for Louise. Reality—the absence of Louise and the narrator's psychological pain and loneliness—keeps intruding.

The narrator begins to look for Louise in cemeteries, as well as in the places that the narrator and Louise used to visit. The narrator's current lover, Gail, an alcoholic older woman, realizes the magnitude of the narrator's feelings for Louise and encourages her to find Louise. But, as the narrator tells Gail, Louise seems to have vanished:

"Where did you look?"  
"All the places there were to look. She's gone."  
"People don't vanish."  
"Of course they do. She came out of the air and now she's returned to it. Wherever she is I can't go there." (189)

The narrator thinks of the Biblical passage, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it," then adds her/his own interpretation of why love dies—from neglect:

What then kills love? Only this: Neglect. Not to see you when you stand before me. Not to think of you in the little things. Not to make the road wide for you, the table spread for you. To choose you out of habit not desire, to pass the flower seller without a thought. To leave the dishes unwashed, the bed unmade, to ignore you in the mornings, make use of you at night. To crave another while pecking your cheek. To say your name without hearing it, to assume it is mine to call. (186-187)

This attitude is supremely different from the narrator's previous attitude—that when people became disillusioned with lovers, "when the charm wore off," when love died, adultery was inevitable. The narrator finally realizes that neglect, not disillusionment, kills love, and realizes that the choice she made for Louise (leaving her so she could get treatment) was not the narrator's choice to make. After these realizations, the narrator "sees" Louise:

From the kitchen door Louise's face. Paler, thinner, but her hair still mane-wide and the colour of blood. I put out my hand and felt her fingers, she took my fingers and put them in her mouth. The scar under the lip burned me. Am I stark mad? She's warm. (190)

This "vision" of Louise is ambiguous: what the narrator "sees" could be real, it could be a hallucination, or it could be a ghost (although the sense of "warmth" seems to repudiate that). But the fact that Louise seems to "appear" out of nowhere (that the narrator sees what she/he wants to see—the lost lover Louise) seems to suggest that the narrator is hallucinating.

More relevant than speculating on the reality or fantasy of this apparition, an analysis of the novel's last paragraph more clearly demonstrates that the narrator's grip on reality is now at its most tenuous:

This is where the story starts, in this threadbare room. The walls are exploding. The windows have turned into telescopes. Moon and stars are magnified in this room. The sun hangs over the mantelpiece. I reach out my hand and reach the corners of the world. The world is bundled up in this room. Beyond the door, where the river is, where the roads are, we shall be. We can take the world with us when we go and sling the sun under your arm. Hurry now, it's getting late. I don't know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields. (190)

The narrator's line "this is where the story starts," implies that *this* is what is of most importance: Louise and her relationship with Louise. But the most notable aspect of this passage is the narrator's abundant use of figurative language. The ways in which the narrator describes her/his relationship with Louise— "Moon and stars are magnified in this room," "the walls are exploding"—shows that Louise is no longer "a photograph, not a poem" she *is* a poem, lyrical, wondrous, and, the narrator clearly believes, *there*. Whether she is *really* there no longer matters to the narrator.

In the novel, the narrator has the gift of language and believes that words can help control others, to distance herself from others, and to avoid reality. After shifting between the pain of reality and the fantasy of words, the narrator abandons herself fully to the fantasy and the wonder of words. If she cannot have Louise, she will have Louise as a

poem. In the end, like Arthur in Portrait of a Romantic, who lives almost entirely in the past, the narrator gets some measure of happiness, but it seems to be at great cost: her sanity.



## **Conclusion**

Magical realism is a genre that is complex, subtle, and historically rich. Many magical realist authors use hyperrealism to make the ordinary seem extraordinary; others infuse their fiction with supernatural and fantastic elements. At times there is an identifiable external force (a curse, Fate) which shapes the outcome of the characters' lives; other times the characters' extraordinary way of looking at the world distorts their reality and their ability to interact in the society. In both types, the presence of magical realism significantly influences and shapes the characters' lives.

Magical realism deserves more critical attention. Much postmodern fiction that critics regard as "mainstream" actually has magical realist elements. The strange, hyperreal, fantastic, or supernatural elements in these texts are frequently overlooked, ignored, or misunderstood (for an example, see Appendix A for critical responses to Toni Morrison's magical realist novel Beloved). A keener awareness of the magical realist elements in these texts would allow for a richer, more complete interpretation.

## Endnotes

1. Quoted in translation by Lori Chamberlain.
2. Roh also describes Schottz, Spies, Borje, Herbin, Miró, Nebel, Huber, Grosz, Dix, Picasso, Davringhausen, and Galanis as magical realists (Faris 31). For specific examples of magical realist art, see de Chirico's "The Enigma of a Day," (1914), Christian Schad's "Portrait of Dr. Haustein," (1928), Otto Dix's "Match Seller I," (1920), and George Schrimp's "Landscape in the Bavarian Forest." (1933).
3. See "*Magischer Realismus*" in Aufbau and "*Über den 'Magischen Realismus'*" in the journal der heutigen deutscher Dichtung (1949) and Die Wirklichkeit hat doppelten Boden. Gedanken zum magischen realismus in der Literatur (1952).
4. Based upon the theories of Franz Roh.
5. Based upon the theories of Angel Flores.
6. Though many critics identify magical realism as a genre which is practiced primarily in North America, South America and Europe, many Asian and African writers, such as Kawabata Yasunari in Japan and Ben Okri in Nigeria, have magical realist elements in their novels. For an analysis of the magical realist elements in many different cultural traditions and texts, consult Magical Realism: Theory, History, and Community. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Duke UP, 1995.
7. Some writers who utilize Flores-style magical realist techniques are Toni Morrison (Sulu and Beloved), Steven Millhauser (Little Kingdoms), Salman Rushdie (The Satanic Verses), Manuel Puig (The Kiss of the Spider Woman), Laura Esquivel (Like Water for Chocolate), Angela Carter (Nights at the Circus), Isabelle Allende (The House of the Spirits), Patrick Süskind (Perfume), John Fowles (The Magus), and Margaret Atwood. Some writers who use Roh-style magical realist techniques include Jorge Luis Borges ("Labyrinths"), William S. Burroughs (Naked Lunch), Vladimir Nabokov (Pale Fire, Pnin), Carlos Fuentes (Aura), and Siri Hustvedt (The Blindfold).
8. See Hinchcliffe, Peter, and Ed Jewinski, eds. Magic Realism and Canadian Literature: Essays and Stories; Proc. of Conference on Magic Realist Writing in Can., Univ. of Waterloo/Wilfrid Laurier Univ., May, 1985. Waterloo: U. of Waterloo, 1986, and D'haen, Theo, "Timothy Findley: Magical Realism and the Canadian Postmodern." Multiple Voices: Recent Canadian Fiction. Ed. Delbaere, Jeanne. Sydney: Dangaroo, 1990.
9. See Todd, Richard, "Convention and Innovation in British Fiction 1981-1984: The Contemporaneity of Magic Realism." Convention and Innovation in Literature. Ed. Theo D'haen, Rainer Grubel, and Helmut Lethen. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1991.
10. Quoted from "The Solitude of Latin America: Nobel Address, 1982" (208-209).
11. This is reminiscent of "John Ray, Jr.'s" Preface to Vladimir Nabokov's novel, Lolita.
12. Some people, including Gabriel García Márquez's father, claim he was born in 1927.

13. The novel was also a finalist for the National Book Circle Award.
14. We are told by the narrator that his subject is an extraordinary genius; however, as I discuss in the thesis, the narrator's unreliability casts doubt on this assessment.
15. The stories within this volume were separately published in the years 1981-1985.
16. The Buendía's fear of bearing a baby with a pig's tail parallels the family curse in the E. F. Benson novel, The Inheritors. In the novel, each firstborn son has extreme physical abnormalities. When the family sees that the son in the current generation has no physical problems, they believe the curse is over. However, they do not realize until too late that the son is afflicted not physically, but psychologically—he has no emotions.
17. Quoted from "La soledad de Antioquia, Antioquia: Asociación de profesores, Universidad de Antioquia, 1982-83, pg 3-4 [unnumbered].
18. For an example of this phenomenon, read Gabriel García Márquez's News of a Kidnapping (New York: Knopf, 1997) which describes the kidnapping of 10 people (9 of them journalists) by a Columbian drug cartel who are trying to keep their leaders from being extradited to the United States.
19. Lolita's dialogue is rarely presented, but summarized by Humbert Humbert, except for a few inane comments—"Oh look, a squashed squirrel"—she is almost never quoted directly.
20. The choice of Huckleberry Finn is ironic because Huck Finn fakes his own death in the novel, as Edwin was simply going to fake his suicide. In a further parallel, Huck Finn has a double named Buck just as Edwin has his double, Edward.
21. In his fiction, Millhauser frequently presents complicated or exaggerated objects, such as multi-leveled underground buildings, pictures within pictures, objects within objects, or books within books. In the novel In the Realm of Morpheus, the narrator visits Morpheus's library; among books by real authors it includes a book by Sebastian Knight (a character in a Vladimir Nabokov novel) as well as Edwin Mullhouse.
22. This dissolution is reminiscent of Edward Penn's transformation into a cartoon in Edwin Mullhouse.

## Appendix A: Misidentification of the Fantastic

The “fantastic” element in literature is sometimes overlooked or mischaracterized. Too often, if a writer has a reputation as a “mainstream” author, the fantastic or magical realist element in the text is misunderstood.

When Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved (1984) was published, some critics were puzzled by novel’s supernatural angle. In the novel, which later won both the National Book Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Literature, a child murdered two decades before by her mother, Sethe, returns to live with her family. The ghostly Beloved serves as a constant reminder of Sethe’s terrible deed, and of the horrors of the slave trade and its ominous influence on the lives of those victimized by it. Everyone in the family sees and interacts with Beloved and eventually accepts the reality of her ghostly presence.

Beloved’s presence in the novel has been interpreted very differently by different readers. Ann Snitow, writing for “The Village Voice Literary Supplement,” complained that “half the important characters are dead in the novel’s present. . . . Though they appear in memory, they have no future” (26). But what Snitow found most detracted from the novel was the ghost, Beloved:

In the reading, the novel’s accomplishments seem driven to the periphery by Morrison’s key decision to be literal about her metaphor, to make the dead baby a character whose flesh-and-bone existence takes up a great deal of narrative space.

Symbolic thinking is one thing, magical thinking quite another. Morrison blurs the distinction in Beloved, stripping the real magic of its potency and the symbols of their poetry. Her undigested insistence on the magical keeps bringing this often beautiful novel to the earth. (28)

Snitow later retracted some of her comments about the novel, based on “some subsequent criticism” saying, “I criticized Morrison for writing a clunky ghost, but maybe the one taking that ghost too literally was myself. The ghost is a figment with the power to stop the action and contaminate the air. She is a projection of grief. We never get a chance

to love Beloved, and her name becomes a pure and bitter irony, an irony which tempers every bit of Morrison's romanticism" (26).

Whether one believes that Beloved is a metaphor or is "real" in the realm of the novel, Snitow's review and retraction illustrate one of the difficulties in interpreting fiction which is generally considered "mainstream" or "realistic" and yet incorporates magical and/or supernatural elements. Though Snitow slowly comes to realize that Morrison mixes both magic and realism in her narrative, Snitow never seems to recognize that Beloved is "magical realism," and this oversight affects her interpretation of the novel.

Margaret Atwood also reviewed Beloved, in "The New York Times Book Review." Atwood acknowledged and appreciated Morrison's use of the supernatural and folklore in Beloved, commenting that Morrison "blends a knowledge of folklore—for instance, in many traditions, the dead cannot return from the grave unless called, and it's the passions of the living that keep them alive—with a highly original treatment" (35). Yet Atwood seems defensive when she distinguishes the supernatural elements in Morrison's novel from "popular" supernatural novels:

The supernatural element is treated, not in an Amityville Horror, watch-me-make-your-flesh-creep mode, but with magnificent practicality, like the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw in Wuthering Heights. All the main characters in the book believe in ghosts, so it's merely natural for this one to be there. (33)

The fact that she does not want people to easily dismiss the supernatural element in the book suggests that Atwood recognizes the critic's and reader's possible inherent distrust or disrespect for such genres.

Like Atwood, Barbara Christian seemed to recognize and appreciate the importance of fantastic elements in Morrison's work, referring to Morrison's novels as "contemporary fables," and "works of fantastic earthy realism" (59). Perhaps what is most interesting about the three reviews is that none of the reviewers mentions the term "magical realism" in her review.

These reviews and interpretations of Morrison's novels show that the magical realist elements in author's works can be variously interpreted: they can even be interpreted in vastly different ways upon different readings by the same reader. The belief of the reader of the presence of magic in the novel affects his or her reading, and, as shown in Snitow's review, it can drastically affect the critical evaluation of a novel.

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