

“BELIEVE IN THESE THINGS”: MAGICAL REALISM’S
POSTMODERN USE OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Magical realism has expanded from a genre squarely located within postcolonialism to one that includes many non-colonial, Western writers such as Karen Russell and Helen Oyeyemi. Using Russell's *Swamplandia!*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* as representative texts, this thesis extends Frederic Jameson's theory of "effacement" and Jean-François Lyotard's "postmodern condition" to investigate the spread of the magical realist genre and techniques beyond its postcolonial beginnings and into a postmodern means to insert an element of the unknown back into a scientifically bound, prosaic reality. These magical Realist authors create their effects largely by using the trappings of religions, specifically its language, symbols, and mindsets. Jameson and Lyotard, along with Brian McHale, and critics Lois Parkinson Zamora, Wendy B. Faris, and Amaryll Chanady, provide insightful ideas, theories, and platforms with which to critically study the origin and implications of this shift in the genre.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a certain irony in trying to prove the un-provable, to investigate the incorporeal, and to subject to scientific analysis a mystical experience. Yet that is precisely what any literary criticism of magical realism attempts to accomplish. To make an examination of something that resists definition. Within the bounds of magical realist texts, the Western concept of realism blends with a more ambiguous presence, the “magic” part of magical realism. Contemporary Western languages have no problems when describing the realistic elements within such texts, as these details adhere to the Western concept of reality in a post-Enlightenment, *i.e.* rational, worldview. Yet when attempting to describe the “magical” pieces, the vocabulary falls short of fully capturing the event. Those magical moments can more accurately be called ineffable, which means inexpressible or, perhaps even more precisely, unutterable. Essentially this means that whatever the author is trying to communicate to the reader is, quite literally, a thing that *cannot be verbally represented*.

Still, the author of a magical realist text wants to convey a certain circumstance in the narrative and must use the language available to communicate this episode to the reader. In order to impart the sense that something ineffable is happening in the text, magical realist authors resort to religious iconography, language, and allusion in their texts. The language of religion allows magical realist writers to infuse a sense of wonder and mystery into the narrative that rational scientific language will not permit. In her book, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical*

Realism and the Remystification of Narrative, Wendy B. Faris writes that magical realism constitutes a “remystification of narrative in the West,” a way of healing the fragmented nature of postmodernist texts and re-introducing the divine into narrative (3). However, I posit that magical realism is not actually attempting to insert a true sense of religion or the sacred into the narrative but is instead using the only language available, religious imagery and vocabulary, to express that which cannot be expressed, an ineffable moment or occurrence in the narrative.

As the title of Kenneth Reeds’s article, “Magical Realism: A Problem of Definition,” states, defining the genre of magical realism has been a challenge, but almost all scholars agree that the genre contains elements of the mystical and the fantastic. Not only has an academic definition been difficult, but even the literary classification of magical realism has been debated with some proposing it as a genre, others as a style, and still others arguing it is simply a mode of narrative (Upstone 153). Regardless of its shaky literary standing and fluid definition, the history of the term “magical realism” clearly originates in a 1925 essay by Franz Roh, a German art critic, to describe a return to Realism in painting, not literature, that simultaneously imbued the mundane with a “deeper meaning and reveal[ed] mysteries” that were inherent, yet often overlooked, within them (Roh 17–18). By 1927 the term had already migrated from German painting to Latin American literature due to Jose Ortega y Gasset’s translation of Roh’s article in his publication *Revista de Occidente* (Reeds 179).

Following this, Latin America embraced magical realism and transformed it into the genre that is recognizable today. As Irene Guenther states in her essay “Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts During the Weimar Republic,” “it is in Latin America that magical realism was primarily seized by literary criticism and... was transformed” from a term used for a style of visual art to a literary term (61). Thus, Latin America became the locus for the

development of the style, with the first wave of magical realists texts written by such well-known names as Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Since then, critics have come to use the phrase to describe what has become an international genre of literature in which the everyday, prosaic world contains elements of unexplainable, or magical, qualities whose origin or cause does not concern the characters within the fictional world. As Brian McHale states in *Postmodernist Fiction*, in magical realism “the fantastic become[s] banal... [and] the banal becomes fantastic” (77). According to Amaryll Chanady, “in magical realism the “magic” just *is*, it exists, and, therefore, is unquestioned (23–24). The magic element of magical realism is received in a plain, pragmatic manner by the characters in the tales and not as something special or a “power,” as would be found in fantasy novels. It is simply part of their version of what otherwise would be recognizably our “reality.”

This interweaving of magic and mundane is present in the nighttime, ghostly “boyfriends” of Ossie Bigtree in Karen Russell’s *Swamplandia!* (2011), and in the existence of the enigmatic, haunting imp TillyTilly in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* (2005). In each situation circumstances that would be questioned and queried in a realist novel are simply accepted and taken to be as real as the landscape around the characters. McHale describes this as a “dual ontology,” a world where the “the normal and the everyday” and “ the paranormal or supernatural” meet at a “contested boundary” which may, or may not, be present for the characters within the novel but certainly exists for the reader (73). Take for example a passage from the most renowned novel of the magical realist style, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s, *Cien anos de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) (1967), which demonstrates just how ordinary such ineffable events are viewed: Remedios the Beauty and her sister-in-law Fernanda are outside hanging laundry up to dry when Remedios pales and is raised into the air by a delicate wind,

floating up into the sky as she waves goodbye, “no sooner had Remedios the Beauty ascended to heaven in body and soul than the inconsiderate Fernanda was going about mumbling to herself because her sheets had been carried off” (Márquez 277). This quotation illustrates the hallmark juxtaposition of the mundane and the marvelous present in magical realist texts. A person has bodily risen to Heaven in the manner of Enoch and Elijah, without death, and instead of being amazed or terrified, the people of Macondo continue about their lives as if nothing extraordinary happened. One woman, Fernanda, is even complaining about minor inconveniences, such as her missing laundry. In a similar vein, Anne Hegerfelt notes that the mode of magical realism accentuates that reality is not a "given" and that group experience and perception, as well as individual, depends on social and cultural factors and beliefs (77). In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, House 124 is haunted by the vengeful spirit of Sethe's murdered baby and this haunting is accepted as fact because of a group consensus: “the women in the house knew it and so did the children” (3), of belief that the unseen presence of “some dead Negro's grief” exists in every house in the country, “pack[ing it] to its rafters” with ghosts (6). Thus the “realities” depicted in magical realist texts are a physicalization of the ineffable, those emotions and circumstances which are unutterable, especially modern, rationally based language.

In his article “Naturalizing the Supernatural: Faith, Irreverence and Magical Realism” Christopher Warnes claims that there are two tendencies concerning religion and realism in magical realism: the first is irreverence, an unmasking of the real in order to show its falsity and unreliability, the second is faith, by making the profane sacred and infusing the mundane with mysticism (9). Warnes's “faith” is not merely a living spirituality but faith in the ability of literature to depict multidimensional realities (10). Merrell calls this a "distorted religious symbolism" (11). Either way, it is the use of religious language and iconology to further a

purpose that is not precisely religious in intent. In this way, magical realism inserts elements of myth that underlie contemporary man's facade of "rationalism" into a seemingly "realist" narrative in order to express the ineffable (Merrell 11)

It has been well established by scholars, including Lois Parkinson Zamora, Wendy B. Faris, and, as she admits reluctantly, Elsa Linguanti, that magical realism is a genre within the postmodernist movement. Faris writes that "magical realism combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed" and, through its use of both real and mystical elements, the genre fragments the world in a blatantly postmodern sense (Zamora and Faris 163). This is in response to previous scholarly interpretations of magical realism as primarily, if not solely, a postcolonial style. What has traditionally marked magical realism as postcolonial discourse is its historical origins in areas marginalized by mainstream Western culture and the mode's subsequent "residuum of resistance toward the imperial center and its totalizing systems of generic classification" (Slemon 408). Stephen Slemon points out that such origins and practices need not exclude writers from the center itself yet immediately contradicts himself by also writing that "mainstream writers" are simply reusing the "'characteristic' literary and cultural forms of formerly colonized cultures (408). This approach ignores writers such as Kelly Link, Karen Russell, and Helen Oyeyemi who utilize Western mythologies or even original systems of the ineffable in addition, or in lieu of, previously colonized cultures. Like Faris, Hegerfelt observes that magical realism is not located solely in postcolonial literature, but through the "alternative modes of thought" utilized in the mode, it has "already on a more general level" shifted to include authors from the "center" who are attempting to convey more radical concepts and ideas (64).

Magical realism originating within Western fiction shows how marginalized approaches

to life are not exclusively the purview of postcolonial areas. These new approaches to magical realism identify it as a global or international mode implying that it is no longer, if indeed it ever solely was, a postcolonial mode (Hegerfelt 64). The fragmentations that coexist within a magical realist narrative display the multiple, simultaneous perspectives that some modern readers and authors feel best describes contemporary society. With its split sense of the world, magical realism falls nicely into the literary movement of postmodernism. In his article “Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers,” Theo L. D’haen, utilizing the works of several prominent theorists, lists several characteristics which define postmodern texts: “self-reflexiveness, metafiction, eclecticism, redundancy, multiplicity, discontinuity, intertextuality, parody, the dissolution of character and narrative, the erasure of boundaries, and the destabilization of the reader” (192–93). Looking at this list of qualities, it is obvious that magical realism sits firmly within the bounds of postmodernism, specifically sharing qualities of multiplicity, dissolution of character and narrative, erasure of boundaries, intertextuality, and eclecticism. The constant tension created by the real and not-real elements of the narrative create the sense of fragmentation that is the defining characteristic of postmodernism. Magical realist narratives create multi-narratives by default: “realist,” “magical,” and “magical realist” versions of each story occur simultaneously.

In his famous essay “Marvelous Real in America” (1949), Alejo Carpentier claims magical realism for America, though it clearly seems he means *Latin* America. In this article Carpentier bases this right of possession on the history of the lands of Latin America, its original, cyclical mythos, its subsequent colonization by European powers, and its, at the time, efforts to establish a new identity blending the two perspectives (84–88). His argument is compelling, yet magical realism has become much more than a genre that allows a particular group of peoples to

express their cultural heritage, which would make it a postcolonial genre, and has even grown beyond a specifically Latin American phenomenon. Romanticism and postmodernism both paved the way for the spread of magical realism by writing texts that led readers to expect something new and something that would dispute empiricism and its hold on conventional definitions of reality (Schroeder 47). As noted, the past few decades have seen a shift in the authorship of Magical Realist texts, moving from authors in those regions colonized by the West to authors in the Western tradition itself such as Karen Russell, Aimee Bender, and Angela Carter. Magical realism has therefore become an international genre, not only a postcolonial one, which often excludes those writers from the dominant Western culture. Many critics consider magical realism to be an international genre, which means that it has become a Western genre as well. More to the point, Chanady believes that magical realism requires a Western reader for the tension between the real and the ineffable in the writing to occur (24). Without the assumptions associated with the Western tradition of realism the reader would not feel the split between the real and not-real within the magical realist narrative. Schroeder points out that the postcolonial aspects of the genre allow the narrative to question traditional “centers” of Western culture as facades of stability (48).

Both the United States and Canada can be strong examples of these facades and magical realism allows authors to question the validity of these structures while moving the genre itself from purely postcolonial discourse to an international postmodern mode (48). This thesis will further investigate the underlying causes of the spread of the genre among writers falling within the dominant Western culture, positioning the genre as an actual transference of religious fervor and mysticism that is more akin to a “secular... transcendence” (Faris 65). Thus, while asserting that magical realism is, or has become, a Western or at least Westernized genre, this thesis

explores the use of the conventions of magical realism by writers to show how the genre has become a postmodern outlet for religious mysticism, specifically through its use of religious language and iconology.

According to Haifa Saud Alfaisal in *Religious Discourse in Postcolonial Studies*, “there has been doctrinal rejection of religious discourse that has become inherent in postcolonial studies” (258). This attitude of dismissal can be projected onto magical realism studies as well, though some critics, such as Wendy Faris, are attempting to bring religion back into the conversation. To understand why magical realist authors use religious iconology in their narratives it is useful to have a definition of religion, or the religious impulse, itself. In *Psychology and Religion*, Carl Jung proposes that religion “appears to... be a peculiar attitude of the human mind” in which the word religion is derived from “religio,” a “careful consideration and observation of certain dynamic factors, understood to be ‘powers,’ spirits, demons, gods, laws, ideals of whatever name man has given to such factors as he has found in his world powerful, dangerous or helpful enough to be taken into careful consideration, or grand, beautiful and meaningful enough to be devoutly adored and loved,” an after effect of the “experience of numinosum,” a “dynamic existence or effect not caused by an arbitrary act of will” or more plainly, an experience not initiated by the individual subject (Jung 4–6). Jung even describes this state of mind as putting humans in the position of victims of the experience rather than creators and controllers (4).

In his description, Jung is detailing a process in which a person encounters something sublime or indescribable or ineffable and must come to terms with it and therefor names it— god, demon, magic, etc. The human mind naturally wants to categorize objects and experiences in order to process them, see Immanuel Kant’s concept of *schema*, in which, though we humans can

never know the “thin-in-itself,” that is the full Truth of its essence, we can place it into a category that we do grasp and in this way come to an understanding about what we are perceiving (Leitch 406). Once a category is established, according to Jung, the mind finds other experiences to classify together. At this point the category of “religion” becomes codified into dogmas and creeds, rituals and imagery, instead of an originating, singular experience (Jung 6). After religion has reached this point, it has usually become a cultural touchstone, a set of references that can be utilized in contexts other than the original, in order to convey an abstract idea or emotion. This conception and understanding of religion is important to magical realism because the use of religious iconology saturates the mode. Magical realist authors, in their efforts to convey various concepts and ideas that are ineffable use religious iconology and its language to access a common understanding of the indescribable. They are reaching for the only words available to express those things still extant in society that empiricism and contemporary rationality cannot explain or describe.

Magical realism can be seen as a postmodern moment in which the old systems of religion, myth, and legend are tweaked, blended, and fragmented through the lens of contemporary society, destroying the previous sense of unity in the extant cultural metanarratives. Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, takes on the way Western society engages its world. In his foreword, to the 1984 edition, Fredric Jameson writes that Lyotard poses postmodernism “not as that which follows modernism and its particular legitimation crisis, but rather as a cyclical moment that returns before the emergence of ever *new* modernisms” (Lyotard xvi). Lyotard himself states: postmodernism is “the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts” (xxiii). Just as the “postmodern condition”

questions the authority of metanarratives, magical realism questions the authority of “realism.” Though Lyotard’s book discusses ideas expressed in the corporeal world in order to illustrate the “ideal” and the ideas driving the rationalism of “reality”, his observations apply as well to the fictional worlds created within magical realist texts. Both operate through the use of human perception and belief and both exhibit the fragmentation that is the most easily recognizable trait of the movement. Knowledge is the focus of attention in the cogitations outlined in *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard notes that knowledge has become a commodity, a product that can be produced, bought and sold, and consumed, and this practice causes it to lose its status as an end goal (4–5). Significantly, in the case of magical realism, this commodification perfectly describes the creation, sale and resale, and reading of the text, which allude to the aforementioned production, sale and purchase, and consumption of any commodity. While all texts could conceivably be described in this manner, for magical realism it is especially apt due to the true creation of an entire world within the bounds of the narrative.

Magical realism also plays by the three observations of Lyotard’s “*language games*” (10). The first is that their rules are not self-justifying, but are a contract between players, and for magical realism these would be the author and the reader (10). In reading a magical realist text, the reader tacitly agrees to have faith in the worldview as presented within the text itself. In a novel like Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the reader must accept that citizens in Macondo can collectively succumb to an “insomnia plague” that proceeds an intensive shared memory loss and finally ends by an unnamed beverage served to the founder of the town by a wandering gypsy who has returned for death out of loneliness (43–49).

The second observation notes that without rules there is no game, which means that every small move in the text changes the game and an utterance that completely ignores the rules does

not belong (Lyotard 10). Magical realist texts have a set of “rules” within themselves that cannot be violated else the whole narrative becomes suspect. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* presumes that all the children born between the stroke of midnight and one a.m. on the day of Indian independence are “endowed with features, talents, or faculties which can only be described as miraculous” (*Midnight’s Children* 224). Not a single child mentioned, who was born during that one hour, did not receive a supernatural gift. If Rushdie had placed such a character within the novel after establishing this fact, he would have broken the rules of Saleem’s India and invalidated the entire narrative. Therefore, such a child does not exist within the context of the novel.

Finally Lyotard writes, “every utterance should be thought of as a ‘move’ in a game,” that is, every word, space, jot and tittle on the page affects all the others (10). This means that every small detail has bearing on the perceptions created as the narrative progresses, a seemingly small matter may completely change the narrative. The description of Rosa the Beautiful in Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*, seems a minor detail despite its bizarreness, “Rosa was...like a porcelain doll, with green hair and yellow eyes...the most beautiful creature to be born on earth since the days of original sin” (4). Yet this rather minor character’s introduction reveals that something is different about the Trueba family and sets up the expectation that more strange occurrences will follow. The narrative needs the small setup or the other subsequent “magical” elements would feel false and sudden and could potentially alienate the reader. As the “magical” details build and layer themselves in a magical realist text a broader vision of the narrative’s “game” is revealed. Magical realism is therefore a textual language game in which the reader enters the text and agrees to play by the rules of the world as outlined by the author. The reader must then accept the actions as belonging within the narrative and follow the game as

the author makes small “moves” throughout. Within the bounds of this game the reader must be aware that every detail can potentially change all the others and the author must be aware that everything they write affects the reader’s perception of this hybrid world. Of course it could be argued that all books function in this manner, yet magical realism must have the contract established in order for the reader to fully engage with the text. In a text that creates a sense of dissonance with expectations of “realism” Lyotard’s language gameplay rules are essential.

Beginning in section six, “The Pragmatics of Narrative Knowledge,” Lyotard lays out his arguments for both the conflict and the accord of science and narrative. He notes “knowledge... is a question of competence” and it can cover a large array of methods; it should not be confused with science (18). Scientific knowledge is merely one kind of knowledge and “narrative” knowledge, that kind of information disseminated to a population via spoken or written word in the form of a tale; think of the warning to children not to trust strangers that is implicit in “Hansel and Gretel” and “Little Red Riding Hood” or the “be-careful-what-you-wish-for” lesson of “Snow White” and “Aladdin” (18–19). Since the Enlightenment, Western society has endorsed scientific knowledge over narrative knowledge, relegating the latter to the purview of developing societies (19). Yet Lyotard makes a case for the value, necessity, and veracity of the traditional, or customary, narrative form of knowledge.

Narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge, in more ways than one. First, the popular stories themselves recount what could be called positive or negative apprenticeships: in other words, the successes or failures greeting the hero’s undertakings. These successes or failures either bestow legitimacy upon social institutions (the function of myths), or represent positive or negative models (the successful or unsuccessful hero) of integration into established institutions (legends and tales). Thus the narrative allow the society in which they are told...to define its criteria of competence and ... to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it. (Lyotard 20)

Narration, in creating a system of defining competency, is a type of knowledge. After all, epics

and legends contain historical knowledge, parables and fairy tales contain moral knowledge, and all stories convey the value system of the culture in which they arise.

In seeming contrast to traditional, narrative knowledge stands the post-Enlightenment, scientific approach to knowledge. This approach carries the expectations of the speaker providing proof and refuting contradictory claims or stated differently, “as long as I can produce proof, it is permissible to think that reality is the way I say it is” (23–24). Following this basic statement Lyotard outlines a rather intricate map of the scientific processes. And then he proceeds to destroy the process of scientific knowledge with a fairly simple claim: “the Platonic discourse that inaugurates science is not scientific” (29). According to Lyotard’s theory, scientific knowledge itself must have narrative knowledge in order to exist. Someone, at some time, decided on the parameters of scientific knowledge and “*there is no other proof that the rules are good than the consensus extended to them by the experts*” (emphasis added, 29). This means that scientific knowledge is granted legitimacy by the very same practice of legitimation as narrative knowledge. Both types of knowledge are based on assumptions that are generally accepted by society, not on Truth. Take for instance, the example given by Floyd Merrell in “The Ideal World in Search of Its Reference: An Inquiry Into the Underlying Nature of Magical Realism,” here Merrell remarks upon the rewriting of scientific “truths” that occurred in the progression of the conception of the world from a perfect creation of God to the discovery of New World to the Copernican revolution, all of which forced people to alter their scientific and cultural world views and Truths (7).

Lyotard claims that narrative knowledge has experienced a resurgence in postmodernity as a way to bestow validity on the “new authorities,” indicating a return to pre-Enlightenment modes of understanding and learning (30). Likewise Merrell posits literature as a form of “tacit

knowing" which means that literature is governed by the same "epistemological paradigms... that govern the history of scientific and philosophic thought" (9). Magical realism illustrates this juxtaposition between science and narrative in its twined worlds that contain elements of the scientifically "real" and elements of the narrative ineffable "not-real." In magical realist texts scientific reason exists alongside narrative belief, without the two resolving into a cohesive whole. Hegerfelt observed "post-Enlightenment's marginalizing constructions are subverted when magic realist fiction confronts them with other tradition that envision these categories as states of privileged perception or even revelation" (72–73). Indeed, magical realist texts often seem to mock scientific thought, or at least its binary processes, such as when the band of gypsies who set up camp in Macondo every March to bring the outside world's new inventions to the people of the town demonstrate the power of magnets, a scientific item, but explain its function in non-scientific terminology, claiming that the "magical irons" speak to the soul of objects and convince them to move (Márquez 1). Within the tales scientific thought and discourse are used in two different ways: as characters who rely on it and are proven foolish for doing so and a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* approach to empiricism and rationalization in discourse (Hegerfelt 74–75). These texts suggest that a purely factual rendering of events, if even possible, would be unsatisfactory (74).

Frederic Jameson positions postmodern texts as a return of sorts to pre-Enlightenment narrative styles, though he places the demarcation in the nineteenth century with the advent of "realism" and not at the later moment I am asserting. According to Jameson's theory outlined in "The Realist Floor-Plan," the realism of the nineteenth century displaced the previous tradition by a process he terms "desacralization" and magical realism has in turn displaced nineteenth century realism (375). This "desacralization" is the "literary equivalent of what Deleuze and

Guattari call 'decoding': the secularization of the older sacred codes, the... organization of life and practices under the *ancien régime*". The process of stripping away sacredness can also be viewed by looking at the work of Lévi-Strauss and by comparing what is "primitive," or narrative, and what is "modern," or scientific, it can be extrapolated that magical realism conceivably elicits elements of myth that underlie contemporary man's facade of "rationalism" (Merrell 11). This process, in both instances, has been fueled by the Enlightenment *philosophes*' efforts to secularize and modernize in the name of science in order to overthrow the power previously held by the church and monarchies (Jameson 373). Like Lyotard, Jameson points out that the current demand for scientific "proof" is very recent and not all that reliable. The demand was created, and did not evolve. Jameson's own definition of "desacralization" illustrates this:

desacralization (what I shall call in moment the production of the referent and of daily life) is all to be seen as a production process in which the older forms and structures now serve as the *raw materials* worked over and transformed into the new system. The two moments of the *ancien régime* and the bourgeois market system are therefore here to be described as a synchronic coexistence, as a dialectical surcharge, in which old and new find themselves locked at every instant in a grisly cannibalization: the new drawing its vitality from the old and draining it off..." (Jameson 375)

The results of the process of desacralization are most obvious in the arts. Jameson claims that novels created "realism" in the same way that painters and their invention of perspective created the Renaissance city (374). They made a "new space of infinite divisibility, a space which knows no sacred centers" (378). Despite the fact that Jameson is describing the "realist" novel, this description aligns nicely with magical realism as well. Magical realism has no sacred center, no overarching system of organization. It borrows from too many religious and cultural and literary traditions to have a conventional "center." In magical realism, the not-real is first created then elevated to the status of authenticity by the novel's simple acceptance of the existence of the ineffable (Merrell 12). Falling back on Jameson's notion of "cannibalization,"

where "the new draw[s] its vitality from the old and drain[s] it off", it can be observed that magical realism cannibalizes religious language and iconology for non-traditional religious purposes (Jameson 375). Wendy B. Faris claims that magical realism is a reversal of "desacralization" but I believe that magical realism in fact extends Jameson's argument by "cannibalizing" both the *ancien regime* and "realism" and blending them into something new.

The novels in the following chapters illustrate the use of religious language and iconology to express the ineffable that modern, rational, scientific thought and explanation cannot capture. This indescribable element has become more and more necessary in literature as the mystical and magical impulses once found in religion have been leached out of much of modern everyday life. In *The Icarus Girl*, Helen Oyeyemi consistently utilizes religious iconology, specifically with reference to Christianity: Jess's aunt is cooking enough food for "a modern day Feeding of the Five Thousand," (67) when Jess and TillyTilly flip through a large edition of the Bible looking for "holy dread," (61) and after TillyTilly's transformation the descriptions of her as a "dark spirit" (171). In fact, TillyTilly's entire existence recalls religious tales of divine or demonic visitations. That she is only seen by and only speaks to Jess reminds the reader of similar stories such as Daniel in the Lion's den or the voices that Joan of Arc reportedly heard.

Likewise, Karen Russell alludes to religious experience when describing how the ghost of Louis, a former dredgeman in the swamp, possessed Ossie "the ghost had used her hands... to steer" (196). Ava, the main character of *Swamplandia!*, also has a quasi religious encounter. When wandering the swamp after escape from the evil Birdman, she comes across a desolate cabin and reflects on the story of Mama Weeds, a legendary figure who was murdered in the mired lands and is said to still roam about. Just after her observations, Ava is confronted with

Mama Weeds herself, a situation that can be read variously as a modern day raising of the dead or a reincarnation of the former woman herself. In all of the above instances, the juxtaposition of the mundane and the marvelous is apparent. In this way, magical realism is meeting the desires of a society trained to value scientific inquiry and explanation above all else. As postmodern society has fractured, what was once largely the affair of religion has become the subject of literature, and has found its strongest voice in the mode of magical realism.

CHAPTER II

AVA'S WORLD: INDESCRIBABLE EVENTS IN THE TEN THOUSAND ISLANDS

Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* is a traditional bildungsroman written in the magical realist mode. Ava Bigtree is the primary narrator and the general focus of the narrative, though it also discusses the coming of age of her two siblings, Osceola (Ossie) and Kiwi. The tale opens just after their mother has died of cancer and her death has completely disrupted life on Swamplandia!, the name of the island the family inhabits along with numerous alligators for their park, also called Swamplandia! Before her death their mother was the star of the gator wrestling show and her stunt of diving into and swimming through a pool filled with alligators was a key attraction for the park, she performed for "a thousand shows...for a thousand nights" (Russell 7). With her gone, the park goes into decline. So does the family. The patriarch, Chief Bigtree, is rudderless without her and all but neglects his children entirely, leaving them to scrounge the gift shop for food and assuming they can figure out how to accomplish various household tasks such as laundry. The oldest child, Kiwi, leaves for the mainland in a misguided attempt to find work and send his wages back home, not realizing how little he will actually earn. Eventually, the situation degrades to the point where no tourists are arriving on the daily ferry. After days with no tourist traffic Chief Bigtree leaves the children alone on the island in order to secure funds to keep the park open and his family fed and housed. Thus the adventures begin. Not long after the Chief leaves, Ossie, who has become obsessed with occult practices and is convinced she has ghosts as boyfriends, disappears in order to "marry" one of them in the

Underworld. Ava waits for a few days, hoping her sister will return. When Ossie stays missing, Ava takes off into the swamp in search of the Underworld accompanied by the mysterious Bird Man. Many magical, mysterious things happen before the family is reunited on the mainland.

The first observation of note is that the novel is narrated by Ava, in hindsight, using variously a first person or an omniscient third person point of view, though the reader is only informed of this at the end of the novel it is an appropriate place to begin an analysis because it highlights exactly how dependent the narrative is on the assumption that science cannot explain everything. An adult Ava, who has since moved to the mainland and presumably lost much of her naivete, is telling this story and, despite losing her childish ways, still insists in including the magical elements. The struggle to frame her narrative in scientifically “provable” facts is evident: “Now that I was fed and watered and sitting on bedsheets, that whole part of my journey seemed filmy, impossible” (Russell 313). Ava's mind tries to rationalize her experience, but she clearly returns to the fantastical version of events, as she has been narrating the entire story from a later time. Despite all her subsequent education and exposure to “normal” mainland life and all its empiricism, she still resorts to using religiously charged words and images to describe her experiences and those of her family, for instance, Ava describes the birth of a rare red alligator as a “miracle... of luck” and later buzzards are “disinterested angles” that swarm overhead, thus proving that the language of religion, and not science, is the form of expression for the ineffable. As Lyotard’s Postmodern Condition insists, science cannot tell the whole story; it demands a narrative in order to fill in the gaps in its knowledge. And that is just what Ava’s story does. It uses the language available in order to express the emotions and situations that are inexpressible.

Russell’s main sources for words and phrases to express the ineffable are the traditional Western cornerstones of Christianity and Greek and Roman mythology. This is no surprise as

she hails from a Western “center,” south Florida in the United States. Her prolific use of iconology is apparent once one begins to look for such references. The most obvious use, and one that occurs over and over again, is the comparison between a scientific, rational, post-Enlightenment worldview and one that has roots that reach back into history. In *Swamplandia!* the predominant rationalist perspective currently in vogue in Western society is held and expressed by Chief Bigtree and Kiwi. In response to Ava’s concern over Ossie’s fascination with an occult handbook called *The Spiritist’s Telegraph*, he remarks, "There's no such thing as heaven, no hell. That's a Christian fantasy. That's a very old fairy tale that your sister is reading" (Russell 21). The Chief is so far removed from any acceptance of the ineffable that he lumps any and all forms of mysticism or spirituality together and views the occult and Christianity as one pool of belief, implying that if a person can believe in one, than she may easily believe in another. However, though he seems to be refuting religious impulses, throughout the novel he makes several comments that utilize religious language and iconology to express an otherwise ineffable concept. For example, the Chief calls the asterisk, "the special punctuation that God gave us for neutralizing our lies" (28). It seems that despite a mocking of Christianity, he still invokes God as a final authority or permission-giver, displaying a sense of guilt, or sin, that one would not expect to exist without religion.

Kiwi follows in the Chief’s rational footsteps and each of his alternating chapters about his experiences on the mainland are jarring after the murky realities of the swamps. The reader feels the 'real' world is tedious, mundane, and wishes to return to the fantastical swamp called the Ten Thousand Islands, a name that evokes myth, legend, the supernatural and mystical. While stylistically adhering to a scientific approach in which each side presents information in order to facilitate a comparison between the two elements and subsequently reaches a final “truth,” this

binary system eloquently demonstrates Jameson's cannibalization in the magical realist text. In this instance the alternating chapters each cannibalize a specific style, scientific research for Kiwi and a more spiritual perspective for Ava, in order to portray each character's unique worldview. Ava's chapters are also examples of Jameson's desacralization by referencing the mundane prosaic world in terms of religious language and imbuing the plain surroundings with an aura of the ineffable.

Ossie and Ava represent the more mystical, vague, faith driven worldview. Ossie was "born snowy...with eyes that vibrated somewhere between maroon and violet" - an albino. This sets her obviously apart from the rest of the boisterous, hale Bigtree clan, including Ava. When she takes to 'playing Ouija every afternoon,' no one, including the reader, is surprised (21). Eventually her "hobby" progresses to a sort of "terrifying 'possession[]'" (34). On her sixteenth birthday, a convergence of modern coming of age and ancient fertility rites, Ossie disappears for the night (31). When she returns she tells Ava "that when she left our room at night she was going on 'dates' to meet... ghosts in the woods" (34). Ava calls Ossie's possessions "love spells" and describes one of them to Kiwi:

Ossie sucked in her breath and twisted in the yellow sheets, just like my fantasy picture of a hurricane being born. Then a ghost would enter her. I knew it, because I could see my sister disappearing, could feel the body next to me emptying of my Ossie and leaving me alone in the room. The ghost went moving through her, rolling into her hips, making Ossie do a jerky puppet dance under her blankets. (Russell 34)

In Kiwi's mind these are nothing more than sex dreams, though all he says to his younger sister is that Ossie likely having "good dreams." Chief Bigtree writes Ossie's actions off as being no more than a bad case of lovesickness saying only, "For a girl her age, that's like the common cold. A case of the sniffles...It'll pass" (38). The Chief compares Ossie's behavior, something he can't really explain, to something provable and curable, something with a sense of the rational.

But Ava still maintains a different opinion of the matter, despite her father's and brother's insistences that Ossie is just highly imaginative or going crazy. Ava notes, "Even in her trances, even while possessed, my sister was very shrewd... A fantasy would collapse like a wave against the rocks of her intelligence. Madness, as I understood it from books, meant a person who was open to the high white whine of *everything*" (157). Ava realizes that her sister must be experiencing something real because Ossie does not lose her intelligence in the midst of the chaos. But since her rationalist worldview does not have a word for what Ossie is really experiencing Ava uses the religious term "possession." For a while Ava is an intermediary between the two worlds, wanting to believe in both the worldview proposed by her sister and the one offered by her father and brother. She actually tries to believe in both simultaneously, but fails. Instead she must revert to the "postmodern condition" of fragmentation in order to process her experiences. Those things that can be explained by rational empiricism are explained following the rules of "reality" as science knows and demands. However, those experiences that do not fit within the purview of scientific understanding are explained using mystical, religious references to get as close as language can to describing the ineffable.

The magical elements of the story truly begin when Ossie tells Ava the story of her "boyfriend," Louis Thanksgiving. Louis is a ghost who has been haunting a dredge ship in the swamp since he and the rest of the crew were killed mysteriously. The story Ossie tells Ava has far too many historically accurate details for a merely boy-crazy, lonely teenaged girl to have invented.

The longer I thought about the Dredgeman's story, the more convinced I became that Louis was or had been real. How else could Ossie know about his death in such detail? My sister could memorize obituaries but tonight's performance had been different. She hadn't stuttered at all, she'd used words I thought she couldn't possibly know. And then there was her face as she told it--like a first-time listener... When the dredge wrecked, we'd been truly afraid. (Russell 118)

In admitting to belief in Louis Thanksgiving, Ava gives up the desire, or need, for pure, scientifically provable rationality. Her acceptance implies that Louis wasn't just a fabrication and makes the reader doubt what is real and what is not-real. Following this line of thought and using a scientific method, process of elimination, the reader too is left with the conclusion that Louis must be "real" because Ossie is able to communicate with him. Lyotard's declaration that science depends on the narrative as a form of justification is obvious in this instance. The only real evidence of Louis's existence is the story told through Ossie to Ava. It is anecdotal, *i.e.* narrative evidence, not scientific proof. In addition, Louis's story contains many religious references, from being "born dead" and then resurrected (101), to a prophecy spoken when he was entering the swamp that he would "go in there and never come out" (108), to a description of the swamps as "godawful...the valley of the shadow," an obvious reference to the biblical Valley of the Shadow of Death (109). Anytime a character is explaining something which science insists cannot happen or which cannot be proved, that character expresses the unknown, the ineffable, in religiously charged language.

One particular episode in Louis Thanksgiving's story demonstrates the sense of helplessness on the part of the characters when trying to describe an ineffable event using scientific language. At some point such efforts are abandoned.

In a scene that seemed as plausible and horrifying as Louis's worst dreams the [buzzards] descended on Gideon Tom and hooked the prongs of their talons into his skin; perhaps a dozen of them lifted him into the sky. Gid's body shrank into the cloudless expanse. The sky that day was a bright sapphire, better weather than they'd had in weeks; for a long time, the men could still see the shrinking pinpoint of Gid's black head. It was the only part of Gid that was not held by talons, and it lolled below his shoulders as if Gid were trying to work out a bad crick in his neck. (Russell 116)

As one of the other dredgeman on Louis's team says, "you saw a thing like that and you went

deep inward" (116). An event like that is unexplainable, ineffable. Why would birds suddenly carry off a full-grown man? The men on the team had "never seen a bird behave that way" and had no other way to describe what happened to their friend (116). This scene is a disturbingly macabre version of the Ascension, a tableau all too familiar from the Christian Bible. The naming of the character carried away is also heavily reliant on the Christian Bible. Here Russell has taken a religiously charged occurrence and twisted it for her own use, to convey the terror and fear of a uniquely bizarre event that has no logical explanation. She uses details that ground the scene in reality, the mention of the sky, the weather, the comparison of Gid's body as having a crick in his neck, yet rational language falls short and she must resort to allusion. This scene is a perfect illustration of Jameson's desacralization, wherein a situation must use both realism and the language of religion to describe the ineffable events that happen within the "real" postmodern world.

Those buzzards, "these... huge birds, black and wattled...with their wings folded [like] funeral umbrellas dripping rain" (115) in Louis's tale also make an appearance in Ava's present. The macabre birds first appear above the Louis's dredge ship that has come to rest in the swamp (78). It is no coincidence that buzzards flock to dead or nearly dead things; they hover near creatures that exist both on this world and beyond it. Russell places them in vicinity to the dredge ship to imply that the dredge is a ship of death floating on the River Styx. "The boat was always covered in twenty-odd buzzards, and mysteriously denuded of the swamp birds you usually saw out here." As Ava notes, the buzzards are unnatural, they are anathema to the rational, empirical world and according to science they should not be there (92). The buzzards function as a moment of effacement of the old ways of the swamp and the Bigtrees' previous existence by stripping away the old traditional comforts of the expected swamp birds and force Ava and Ossie to

acknowledge their difference. Yet they are still birds and they still fit part of the pattern, but they are warping it, twisting it into something new, yet something familiar—another instance of Jameson’s cannibalization. These buzzards herald both Ossie’s disappearance and the arrival of the Bird Man.

The Bird Man enters the story in Ava’s moment of weakness. Left all alone in the swamp she is looking for someone who can make things right again, someone who can reestablish the rational laws of her universe. The Bird Man does just the opposite. Ava observes, “a visit from a Bird Man was like a dark Christmas” (134). Here again is another reworked, desacralized, version of a Christian practice, like the ascension of Gideon Tom. The Bird Man also resembles the buzzards that haunt the entire story. Russell clothes him in a “coat [with] a layered ruff of black feathers” and he is scrawny and wrinkled (147). When he makes his bird call it sounds like “a single note, held in an amber suspension of time, like a charcoal drawing of Icarus falling” (129–30). The allusion to Icarus calls to mind both the tragic ending of the Greek myth and a reversal of the previous ascension of Gideon Tom. Russell has cannibalized her own work by reusing the elements of the ineffable in order to show the continuity in the strands of the ineffable that Ava is experiencing. Her religious references, both Christian and Pagan, imbue an emotional response and connection that a strict empirical explanation would not be able to convey.

Ava knows that Ossie has run off in search of the Underworld so she may be married to her ghost boyfriend Louis. When the Bird Man makes his appearance Ava, being a naive child who is looking for answers, tells the Bird Man about Ossie. He never questions her story; “belief didn't even come up” (149). The Bird Man accepts the ineffable and does not demand a scientific explanation for the events. In Chapter 11, titled “Ava goes to the Underworld,” Russell includes

an epigraphs from Dante's *The Inferno*, "Therefore, for your sake, I think it wise you follow me: I will be your guide..." (146). In this chapter the Bird Man agrees to take Ava to the Underworld led by the buzzards,"if I am the navigator. The buzzards are our stars. They're our map, kid. Nobody can get to the underworld without assistance, myself included" (159). Here again, the buzzards transform both the boat and the Bird Man into a mythical Charon poling his doomed craft down the Styx. It is Ava's belief that makes the ineffable tangible during her journey despite the inescapable fact that the journey takes place in the physical "real" world. She physically travels with the Bird Man through the swamp; it is not merely a dream or a fantasy, which would allow a rational reading of the situation. Instead, Russell blends both the pre-Enlightenment belief in a tangible, accessible, Underworld with the empiric reality of the environment. The Underworld is even given a physical location, preceded by the "riptides of the Dead" (155) in the part of the swamp called the "Black Woods" (150). Its entrance is called the Eye of the Needle (119) and Ava says, "The Eye had been described to me as a kind of Calusa Scylla and Charybdis" (235).

The Calusa were the original inhabitants of the Ten Thousand Islands and they built up mounds that led the way to the Underworld. It was "a gray channel cut between two twenty-acre islands made entirely of shells... the Calusa Indians constructed the mounds of clay and every kind of local shell" (119). Once more Russell blends various religious references in order to convey a sense of wonder, mystery, even foreboding. The religious iconology, Scylla, Charybdis, the Underworld, expresses strong emotions and the hallucinogenic feel of Ava's trip while keeping the reality of the physical locations. Russell is clearly utilizing desacralization, that "process which works the raw materials of the older mode of production (the religious mode and realism) over in the very moment in which the forms, practices, and daily life of the new mode of

production (magical realism) are being for the first time produced” (382, parenthesis added).

CHAPTER III

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO JESSAMY HARRISON?: AN INEFFABLE POSSESSION

In contrast to Russell's obviously Western centered narrative, Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* at first appears to be a postcolonial example of magical realism. A closer look however, reveals its solid, well-established, Western orientation. Though one set of Oyeyemi's religious references is of African origin, specifically Yoruba, those allusions are always more fully explained. For example, at her grandfather's home in Nigeria, Jess sees a painting of a strange long-armed woman in the Boys' Quarters whom she later identifies when her mother shows her picture of an *ibeji* statue, a totem made to appease Ibeji, the god of twins, and Jess realizes that "she had already seen one of these; a poorly done one, drawn with charcoal, not carved," in Nigeria (Oyeyemi 201). Oyeyemi assumes her reader will not understand the Yoruba references, yet the Western, Christian references and the allusions to Greek and Roman mythology are never explained. When Jess's aunt is preparing a meal her uncle remarks, "Are you sure you're not preparing for a modern-day Feeding of the Five Thousand?... You're only cooking for twenty people, you know!" but no further information is ever disclosed about the "Feeding of the Five Thousand" (65). These instances clearly indicate that Oyeyemi is writing from a more Western perspective, with Western readers in mind.

Like *Swamplandia!*, *The Icarus Girl* is a *bildungsroman* tale of a young girl searching for understanding and a way to cope with the world. Jessamy Harrison, known as "Jess," is the daughter of a white British man and a black Yoruba woman. Interestingly, Jess does not have the

expected identity crisis of being between cultures that would mark this novel as postcolonial. That privilege belongs to her mother, Sarah. She wants Jess to be more appreciative and knowledgeable of Nigeria, yet she chose to leave. She “ha[s] quietly ‘given up on organized religion’” yet allows her father to discuss both Christianity and the traditional Yoruba religion with Jess (61). Jess has a more basic problem, being easily overwhelmed by anger and stress, which result in “tantrums” (9). During these fits Jess screams, flails about, and often hums a sort of buzzing sound written as “*hmmmmmmmmzzzz*”(241). This noise is eerily similar to chanting or singing in religious practices - yogis’ mantras, Buddhist monks' chants, Christian nuns and monks singing. Jess’s spells are caused by her lack of ability to express herself, especially, her large emotions, and in her “tantrums” Jess is groping for any and all ways of expression, just as magical realism and postmodern society itself grasp for any mode in which to express themselves. Due to the fits, Sarah determines that Jess needs to reconnect with her African heritage, that perhaps her daughter is feeling torn between her English half and her African half and would benefit from a more intimate exposure to the latter in order to balance herself. So the Harrison family travels to Nigeria, Sarah’s childhood home. However, the trip to Nigeria is the beginning of Jess’s troubles and not the solution from which her mother was hoping, “it all STARTED in Nigeria” (7). It is in Nigeria that Jess meets and befriends a girl about her own age, Titiola, a name Jess cannot properly pronounce and reduces to TillyTilly. Jess and TillyTilly have lots of fun together but very quickly their relationship takes a bad turn. TillyTilly pushes Jess into rather malicious actions that scare and hurt others, but Jess convinces herself that these are just mischievous pranks. When the Harrisons depart for England, Jess tells TillyTilly goodbye, but TillyTilly says, “See you later, Jess” (80).

Once back in England, Jess resumes school but is utterly miserable. TillyTilly reappears,

claiming her family has “moved into the area” (95). She and Jess resume their shenanigans but this time the incidents become darker and tinged with malice, a teacher is injured, ad friend alienated, and Jess’s father Daniel is stricken with a mysteriousness, illness of ennui. After several horrific episodes Jess begins to be afraid of TillyTilly and starts to pull away. TillyTilly retaliates and possesses Jess in an attempt to become real. Finally, Jess finds the inner strength to fight back and uses advice given to her by her father and grandfather to drive TillyTilly out of her body forever. Throughout their friendship no one other than Jess can see or interact with TillyTilly leading to her parents’ conclusion that TillyTilly is Jess’s “imaginary friend” who exists to take the blame for Jess’s wrongdoings. Both Sarah and Daniel believe Jess has fragmented herself into pieces, unable to unite her two identities. Like Chief Bigtree and Kiwi, they are looking for a rational cause for their daughter’s behavior. But this is a magical realist text and there are not scientifically sound answers to everything within this worldview. Jess is not simply a postmodern, fragmented individual, she is a person haunted by and then possessed by a being that could be either an angel or a demon.

The character of TillyTilly is frequently associated with strong allusions to light, lending a sense of the heavenly to her. Yet those associations are quickly shown to be misleading. When TillyTilly is first introduced in the narrative she appears in a pool of light, or rather she blocks a pool of light. Jess is lying on the floor enjoying the warmth of the sunlight on her face when TillyTilly appears (46). To arrange later meetings TillyTilly tells Jess to "watch for a light" in the night in order to know that she is there (51). TillyTilly’s first malicious act in England is also preceded by an incident involving a light. Jess questions TillyTilly, "Did you do that thing with the passage light?" after the fixture has been mysteriously turned off (151). All of these strong associations between the presence of TillyTilly and light would seem to imply that TillyTilly in

an angel in the Christian sensibility. Yet TillyTilly's actions belie that sentiment. She frequently possesses Jess and wreaks havoc. When Jess tries to tell her family about TillyTilly in Nigeria, she physically cannot form the words. TillyTilly has possessed in in order to prevent Jess from revealing her presence: "...something was the matter with her tongue; it felt far too big for her mouth, and made flaccid, flapping movements against her bottom row of teeth and her lips. She realised that she was making her illness-singing sounds again" (170). In England Jess watches from a distance within her own body At one point Jess becomes aware of the possession, "TillyTilly, partially elevated in the dim light, was somehow operating her..." (302). Oyeyemi minutely describes one of the first true possessions in which TillyTilly wants to switch place with Jess, "only for a little, little while" (208):

It happened in the gap between the seconds... Tilly... grabbed her by the wrists, spinning her around in a manic, icy dance, then--
hop,
skip,
jumped inside her,
and Jess, screaming now,
(YOU SAID IT WOULDN'T HURT!)
had changed her mind, and she didn't want to be at all like TillyTilly. I was so cold inside that it was like heat like the searing of the coal, and there was no TillyTilly, just this bursting, bubbling hotness, and, and, she couldn't let this flame stay inside her because it had to be put out--But Jess wasn't there anymore.
(Oyeyemi 208-09)

TillyTilly's final goal in possessing Jess is gradually revealed; she wants to be *real*, "Time to swap!... I want to be alive, too!" (316). After one such possession, Jess is described as being "drained of energy and weak with fury" (236). TillyTilly is literally using up the "real" Jess in order to replace her, supplant her via a type of cannibalization. Her grandfather innately knows this, "Two hungry people should never make friends. If they do, they eat each other up. It is the same with one person who is hungry and another who is full: they cannot be real, real friends because the hungry one will eat the full one" (248). In order to fully explicate the situation, one

must view TillyTilly as an embodiment of the pre-Enlightenment approach to the world, an unexplainable, inexplicable, fearsome, powerful, uncontrollable force that is reasserting its presence in the contemporary world. Jameson's concept of literary cannibalization proceeds when Jess is able to take the strengths from TillyTilly and incorporate them into herself in order to overcome TillyTilly's desire for "realness."

With her associations with light and her vicious, vengeful behavior, TillyTilly fits the biblical descriptions given of Lucifer, the morning star, who was cast out of Heaven and now inhabits Hell: "Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light... yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit" (*The King James Bible*, 2 Corinthians 11:14, Isaiah 14:15). Like Lucifer, TillyTilly enters the narrative associated with light but this is quickly diminished. She also has access to the Underworld, or Hell, and it seems that is where she wishes to exile Jess.

TillyTilly's arms enfolded her from behind and pulled her

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and through the staircase, the carpet and the actual stair falling away beneath her feet as if she and Tilly were going underground in a lift that would ever stop descending. The scene changed to a sort of blanketing brown darkness, hollow and moist, and Jess's head was spinning and she was laughing and screaming at the same time... wherever they were, there was no room to sit up, There was a thick layer of the brown darkness above and she was lying on some more of it. She crumbled the stuff between her fingers and realised, with wonder and alarm, that it was earth... She began to find it harder to breathe the more she looked upwards to the compacted earth that lay only a few centimeters away from her nose... beginning to feel drowsier and drowsier... and it was dark down here. (Oyeyemi 152–53)

As the girls lie unmoving in the dark, Jess looks over at TillyTilly and sees her eyes glowing in the dark, "they were almost luminous" like a night creature's eyes, or a demon's or an angel's. Yet TillyTilly is surprised by the Fall "We fell. I don't know why" (153). This too connects to

Lucifer and his eviction from Heaven. Like Lucifer, TillyTilly expected to move upwards and instead is sent plummeting down. The next day Jess wants to try again but “I’d like to fly...like when we were falling yesterday, but only, like, upwards” (162). Jess wants to go up towards freedom, and Heaven, instead of confinement, restriction, and Hell. TillyTilly responds with a sinister, “Oh...I think you’ll do that; I think you’ll be a flier,” an indication that she wants Jess’s soul to depart from her body and “fly” onwards so she can leave her not-real existence (162).

Throughout the novel the number three is repeatedly used for emphasis and as a symbol of power. In the final moments of the narrative, Jess’s grandfather pleads with his daughter, “Believe in curses, believe in miracles, believe, believe, believe in these things even if you don’t see them happen” (320). The three “believes” are for emphasis but they reverberate elsewhere in the tale. The use of three is significant in Christian mythology, namely in reference to the concept of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit united in one entity. Oyeyemi’s narrative also utilizes the power of threes. When Jess scolds TillyTilly for “getting” her teacher, Miss Patel, TillyTilly reminds Jess that she requested that TillyTilly “get” the teacher, “Remember you said it to me three times: ‘Get her, get her, get her, TillyTilly!’” (198). The repetition of threes becomes significant again when Jess returns to Nigeria towards the end of the story. Jess’s grandfather calls her by her Yoruba name, Wuraola, three times. He makes sure that Jess knows this repetition is significant, asking her, “How many times did I call you?” and Jess replies, “Three?” to which her grandfather responds, “Three” (313). His emphasis underlies the importance that the number three plays in the novel. Oyeyemi writes that in Nigerian mythology, “twins are supposed to live in, um, three worlds: this one, the spirit world, and the Bush, which is a sort of wilderness of the mind...” and it turns out that Jess is a twin (Oyeyemi 200). While this reference appears to veer from the Western references, remember that Christianity also divides

the world into various sets of threes: Heaven, Earth, Hell and Heaven, Purgatory, Hell. Likewise, Greek and Roman mythology uses a system of threes to divide up the cosmos with Olympus, Earth, and Hades.

Scattered from end to end of Jess's friendship with TillyTilly there are the elements of the Christian practice of admission of sin, repentance of sin, salvation and deliverance. Jess is horrified when she realizes that she is to blame for TillyTilly's actions towards Miss Patel and performs an act of repentance that TillyTilly terms, "that cleansing thing with the coal" (198). This act is a desacralization of the incident from the Bible, which the girls have previously read about "in Isaiah, where he's made all clean when one of the angels touches his lips with the hot coal" (58). In this deed, Jess takes a religious ceremony and mimics it for profane purposes that only parrot the significance of the sacred rite. Immediately following this exploit, TillyTilly shows Jess a "black cup; some kind of chalice, even" and tempts Jess to look into it because she has, but Jess pushes it away in a gesture reminiscent of Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, to "let this cup pass from me" (*The King James Bible*, Matthew 26: 39). This moment is heavy with allusions to Christianity, the cup is black as sin, the temptation to engage in a behavior one inherently knows is wrong, and in the final instance, a fervent desire to be absolved of a responsibility that feels too overwhelming. The blatant references to Christianity sin and guilt do not end there though, after a particularly disturbing possession Jess's consciousness, or soul, returns to her body feeling violated and she prays, "(Dear God, please take my skin, take my feet, and my hips, because she's been in them and spoiled them and made them not work.) Then she knelt down and prayed to be free from TillyTilly" (Oyeyemi 213).

In *The Icarus Girl* Oyeyemi consistently uses the postmodern characteristic of fragmentation to highlight the instability in Jess's soul. Throughout the novel Jess's mother,

father, and society at large, try and force her to react to her emotions logically, rationally. But this is not the way Jess relates to the world. Jess more closely aligns with Lyotard's sense of the narrative as the underlying principle existence. In order to deal with the world Jess needs a different sort of coping mechanism than the method science offers. She needs to a way to express the ineffable. As discussed previously, language is vastly under-equipped to articulate such instances or things. The entire plotline pushes Jess towards this grasping of the real versus the not-real. Halfway through, she begins to actualize her thoughts, asking, "Is TillyTilly... real?" (164). As soon as Jess starts to question TillyTilly's existence in scientific terms, the rules of the gameplay change, as Lyotard predicted. "Jess couldn't find TillyTilly... [she] understood implicitly that this had something to do with her realising that Tilly wasn't real" (169). Trying to grasp the ineffable or make it adhere to the constraints of realism destroys it, as Jess learns in her interactions with TillyTilly. Every time Jess expresses doubt or questions TillyTilly's presence, TillyTilly vanishes, "Jess couldn't find TillyTilly... [she] understood implicitly that this had something to do with her realising that Tilly wasn't real" (169). And yet the concept of real versus not-real is still somewhat unresolved for Jess, "She would have to discuss the realness thing with TillyTilly... she couldn't even begin to think what she meant by 'not real'" (165). Her problem is, of course, that TillyTilly is ineffable, and therefore will not conform to the strictures that the "real" world imposes. In the end Jess must work out her own resolution to the problem. In extracting her sould from the clutches of TillyTilly's last possession Jess's method of getting back into her own skin and displacing TillyTilly "wasn't the right way, not the right way at all" (334). Jess is not following the old code by which TillyTilly functions; yet she isn't using a purely scientific method either. After all *is* there a scientific way to perform an exorcism on oneself? So Jess's process is not the old, traditional way or the new, modern way, but rather a

new way, a blend of the new and old. And “Jessamy Harrison woke up and up and up and up” rising at last to the heights she desired (334). She is now accomplished at cannibalizing both religious and scientific realms by taking the parts she needs to create her own worldview, which despite being fragmented, grants her the traditional knowledge bestowed by narrative, as described by Lyotard.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

It would be easy to dismiss the significance of the religious language and iconology in *Swamplandia!* and *The Icarus Girl*, to relegate them to the status of anomalies or isolated examples within the mode of magical realism, if not for the enormous amount of evidence from other novels within the style. Though this thesis focuses on novels that fall within the Western literary tradition, this trend is also apparent in those magical realist texts that fall into the broad category of postcolonial fiction as can be seen in the Marquez and Allende narratives mentioned below. In Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits*, the family dog, Barrabás, arrives on Holy Thursday and is looked after with a "missionary's care (18), a car wrecks because "the devil had taken charge of the machine" (121), and the matriarch Clara the Clairvoyant behaves with a "Buddhistic indifference" (113) when she deigns to leave her "Brahmanic refuge" (114). Clara daily writes in notebooks that "[bear] witness" to everyday events (Allende 177) and has experienced premonitions her entire life. In Biblical terms premonitions are called visions or prophecies. Moreover, as in *The Icarus Girl*, the number three shows up in Allende's tale when Clara takes under her wing three sisters known only as "the Mora sisters" who are never given first names but appear to function as one unit much as the Christian trinity is understood to operate (125). Additional use of religious phrasing is evident during Clara's husband's attempt to repair a rift in their marriage by initiating a seduction wearing an "ecclesiastical gown" (180). Finally, the couple's sons share the family car "solomonically," alternating days of possession

(211). In each case the religious phrase is used to imply a quality to a person or object that goes beyond the humdrum everyday plainness of scientific reality.

Further evidence of the trend of magical realist authors resorting to religious terminology and allusion can be found in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which begins with the Buendía family making a long exodus in search of a new promised homeland that will grant them an easier life. This closely mimics the flight of the Jews from Egypt in search of the Promised Land in the Old Testament of the Bible. Once settled in Macondo, their new home, the Buendías and their neighbors continue to experience ineffable things that only find expression via religious idioms and tropes. José Arcadio, son of the Buendía patriarch, feels "himself lifted up into the air toward a state of seraphic inspiration" upon the completion of his first joint sexual act, an obvious reference to the angelic order of the seraphs (Márquez 34). Another Buendía descendant, Aureliano, drinks and drinks until he levitates, though "he [does] not know exactly when he began to float," recalling the ascension of the Christ and the flight of angels (66). Similar to Clara the Clairvoyant, Aureliano also receives premonitions, the bittersweet gift shared by Cassandra and Tiresias of Greek mythology.

Even visitors to Macondo are described in religious terms. Francisco the Man, "an ancient vagabond," is so-called because he "once defeated the devil in a duel of improvisation" and he is nearing two hundred years old (50). An old family friend named Melquíades, who wanders through town from time to time bringing the newest innovations of 'science,' claims that "all things have a life of their own...it's simply a matter of waking up their souls" blending the methodology of science with the belief of religion (1-2). Later in the narrative, this same gypsy man dies but then returns from the grave because he "could not bear the solitude," bringing to mind the resurrections of both Lazarus and Jesus Christ himself (49). When a new priest comes

to town, he proves his holiness by a demonstration of “levitation by means of chocolate” (82). The man drinks chocolate as a form of communion and rises six inches off the floor. Several times Marquez introduces a character that tries to impose science on the fantastical occurrences in Macondo but each time, science is abandoned due to its inability to fully describe the situation. For example, Aureliano uselessly tries “to systemize his premonitions” but fails the visions “would come suddenly in a wave of supernatural lucidity, like an absolute and momentaneous conviction... on occasion they were so natural that he identified them as premonitions only after they had been fulfilled. Frequently they were nothing but ordinary bits of superstition” (125–26). In the face of the ineffable, Aureliano attempts to rationalize what is happening to him but science fails and he must simply have faith in his premonitions. Belief becomes a refuge when science does not have the answers a person needs or wants.

Another example of a novel that uses a religiously based lexicon to describe the ineffable helps to reinforce a pattern within the mode of magical realism. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* of course utilizes the religious references common in India, the setting of the novel. As with Oyejemi, the language and iconology associated with non-Western beliefs is frequently elaborated and explained for the reader. However, Rushdie himself writes in English and for a largely English-speaking audience. This is evident in his use of Western religious allusions without any additional textual information. Saleem Sinai, the main character and narrator or, as he states his “miracle-laden omniscience,” is introduced at the age of thirty-one and in disastrous health, his body “crumbling, overused” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 3). He is physically exhausted with trying to save his country’s people from themselves. Like Jesus Christ he has given of himself, bodily, to save people and like Christ Saleem sees himself as a “would-be-savior” (*Midnight’s Children* 502). The ages are also close enough to mention; Christ performs

his act of self-sacrifice at thirty-two and Saleem narrates his at thirty-one. It is also notable that Saleem begins the account thirty-two years prior to his birth with his grandfather, Aziz Aadam whose name is reminiscent of Adam, the first man in the Christian Bible. Other characters, too, have names derived from the Bible, specifically Mary Pereira, her love Joseph D'Costa, and Ramram Seth. Along with the etymology of names, certain events in the story point to a religious connection as well. Saleem's birth was "prophesied twice!" (*Midnight's Children* 126) and in that same year "comets were seen exploding" (*Midnight's Children* 155) in the sky, an incident resembling the appearance of the Star of Bethlehem that directed the Wise Men to Jesus. In this first year Saleem contracts "typhoid" and is cured by an antidote made from "diluted venom of the king cobra" thereby leaning early "of the ambiguity of snakes," an oblique allusion to the deceitful form Lucifer uses in Genesis in order to manipulate Eve (*Midnight's Children* 169).

Furthermore, Saleem "fights" snakes as a baby like the Greek myth of Hercules who fought snakes for his life as an infant. Though the antidote is helping him he still must not succumb to the snake's poison in order to live. Another mythological reference associated with two non-Christian Western traditions is Saleem's description of his mother's aging and especially of her affliction of corns. He tries to comfort her by "transform[ing] her into a silkie" saying "maybe you're a mermaid really, taking human form for the love of a man—so every step is like walking on razorblades" (*Midnight's Children* 179). The first remark, that he makes her a silkie is from Celtic mythology; selkies are seals that take human form but must eventually return to the water, and the mermaid description is from the original fable of *The Little Mermaid*. Both held the status of near religious belief in that they served the same function for people, framing something indefinable in terms of something understandable.

The ineffable simply cannot be elucidated in terms of scientific reality and this is the

dilemma that magical realism attempts to resolve. It is not that what is happening within magical realist texts *cannot* be happening in a “real” world situation, only that language does not currently have the vocabulary with which to describe the moment. Science, and its “show me” rationalism, will not create verbiage for those things it cannot prove, leaving no space to express that which defies description. From the literary analysis presented, it is evident that magical realist authors choose to rely on religious language and iconology in order to represent the existence of things that do not fit with or cannot be explained by the contemporary rationalist worldview. The narratives of magical realism “deconstruct the rational-scientific world view” (Hegerfelt 80) by showing “the prosaic truth of material objects mingled with the tumultuous reality of dreams and the laws of physics and logic did not always apply” (Allende 82). Salman Rushdie wrote about his need for this style of writing in a speech given *in absentia* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, declaring, “one reason for [his] attempt to develop a form of fiction in which the miraculous might coexist with the mundane was... [his] acceptance that notions of the sacred and the profane both needed to be explored, as far as possible without pre-judgement, in any honest literary portrait of the way we are” (Rushdie, “Is Nothing Sacred?: The Herbert Read Memorial Lecture” 4). This statement parallels Lyotard’s claims that science needs narrative in order to exist (29). In postmodern society one must have the presence of the other to fully be realized. Science cannot exist without the narrative that states the original set of rules and narrative, or belief, cannot exist without science with which to compare itself. In magical realism both are given space and legitimation within the same world in a way that is difficult to achieve in the ‘real’ world. Extending Jameson’s arguments of desacralization and applying it to magical realism demonstrates postmodern’s tendency to cannibalize both science and religion, the provable and the ineffable, in order to construct its worldview. While some

critics have contended that Magical Realism is a re-sacralizing, a healing, of the narrative in the West, I have argued that it is a cultural response to the idea that everything is rational and provable - not a healing so much as a safe space for uncertainty. And in a post-Enlightenment reality that uncertainty has no recourse for expression other than religious verbiage, images, and allusions.

This study of magical realism has led to a realization that the mode has not been widely examined outside of its historical and postcolonial roots. Though there are some intensive treatments of the style, notably *Magical Realism: Theory, History, and Community* edited by Lois Zamora Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris, this area of literature has many unexplored topics. AS with the two novels highlighted in this paper, child narrators seem to be a common occurrence in the genre. This may be because of the tradition that children see the magical elements in the world but gradually lose sight of such things as they age. However it may be that the oxymoronic blend of the real and the not-real is more palatable and believable to adult readers and that tendency is exploited by the authors of magical realist texts. A more obvious research topic is the positing of magical realism as postmodern society's myths or fairytales. The old stories can feel too simplistic and binary for the fragmented postmodern world. Magical realism itself is a fragmented narrative style that easily accommodates such a worldview allowing modern science and ancient myth to coexist. Finally, one more interesting element to investigate in magical realist texts is the nonlinear passage of time within the narratives. Frequently the past, present, and the future overlap in confounding ways that complicate the text. The implications of this are myriad but could include: yet another representation of the fragmenting of postmodern society, a non-Western concept of time, *i.e.* circular or simultaneous, or an understanding of time that is more grand - on a universal level that borders on divine

understanding.

Despite the large field available for further research, this thesis was intended as a beginning to grounding the genre more firmly in the literary canon. Magical realism is no longer a niche genre into which problematic texts are dropped. The fragmented worldview offered within magical realist narratives has become widespread and utilized by writers from the center and therefore the mode is much more Westernized. The postmodern world has embraced the juxtaposition of perspectives which magical realism employs to express its tales.

Notwithstanding our post-Enlightenment scientific-rationalist leanings, the experience of living in the 'real' world can sometimes defy logical explanation. As shown in the preceding chapters, the prose in these magically real texts appropriates the language and iconology of various religions in order to express the ineffable elements of the postmodern world.

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