Justifications of Questions for Comprehensive Exam

Magical realism is a genre of fiction that takes what seems realistic and makes it surreal, or, in plain terms, magical. Originating in the second half of the twentieth century, magical realism has become a popular genre of literature among scholars and casual readers. Many of the writers on this list, including Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Toni Morrison, Haruki Murakami, and Carmen Maria Machado, have won prestigious literary awards for their magical realist novels and stories, and many of the titles on this list have been adapted into films, including *Life of Pi*, which was nominated for eleven Academy Awards in 2012. These examples illustrate the popularity of magical realism as a genre.

This comprehensive exam explores the many aspects of magical realism. In my answers, I will examine the genre of magical realism, including what types of magic appear in the genre, with the hopes of understanding what magical realism is and how to write it, while also grappling with the question of who should be writing magical realism.

**1. Define magical realism as a genre. What are the main characteristics that make a story qualify as magical realism? What separates magical realism from “nonliterary” genres of fiction, such as speculative fiction? Why is this distinction important for magical realism as a genre?**

Magical realism, as a genre, is hard to define. This difficulty is partially due to the term lending itself to being misconstrued as simply a realistic story with a bit of magic present, which is the definition most people would give if you asked for it. However, the reality is the genre is much more complex than that, with the magic utilized in the stories following certain archetypes for explicit purposes. But, despite its fantastic elements, the realism stays within magical realist works. This persisting realism allows for the writers of magical realism to make running commentary on real world society and history through the inclusion of magic, while creating a tension between what is real and what is magical. There are also certain, albeit unspoken, rules which the magic in magical realism must follow that magical realist stories themselves set; these rules are important for staying within the conventions of the genre. According to Kelsey McKinney, one of these rules regards the origins of magic – the writers of magical realism often do not fully explain how the magic in magical realism works, in order to give the magic a feeling of normalcy. Other rules vary from text to text; for example, the magic in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* only interacts with children born on midnight on India’s Independence Day, and the magic in Isabell Allende’s *The House of Spirits* is only accessible by the women in the novel.

**2. In an interview given to William Kennedy of *The Atlantic* in 1973, *Gabriel* Garcia Marquez said, “Surrealism comes from the reality of Latin America.” How does the geographic origin of the writer play into the genre of magical realism? Why are its Latin American origins so important to the genre? Are there trends in content or style between magical realism writers from different regions?**

While magical realism undeniably originates in Latin America, the popularity of the genre has exponentially risen since the 1950s. Naturally, as more readers sought out magical realist works, more writers began to fill that demand, causing magical realism to spread far beyond its homeland, into India, North America, Great Britain, and beyond. This spread has led to intense debate over who is and is not permitted to write magical realism. Many foundational magical realist stories, such as Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, depict instances of colonization and political oppression in their home countries. Is the depiction of colonization and oppression a requirement for magical realism, or is following the conventions of the genre enough? For example, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is a non-Latin American text that heavily features instances of colonization and oppression of the Indian people and is widely considered to be a significant work of magical realism. Similarly, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* features a rejection of slavery, a form of US colonialism, and the oppression of Black Americans through other means. This question seeks to explore how geography plays into magical realism.

**3. How do works of magical realism utilize fluidity as a form of magic? How does this impermanence – of death, time, reality, etc. – manifest itself within these works and change the characters within? How and why is this fluidity essential to the distinctiveness of magical realism?**

One of the most common forms of magic in magical realism is a form that I have dubbed fluidity. That is, concepts and events that we in the real world would consider static and unchangeable are always shifting or changing. For example, people who die often do not stay dead, returning as living people or as ghosts, and time is frequently nonlinear, with characters seeing into the future or time looping in on itself. This question seeks to explore how this fluidity functions within works of magical realism – not just what the fluidity is, but why the fluidity is present and what it means for the texts. In particular, it is important to consider where in the story the fluidity takes place, as that often gives hints to its significance. For example, in Isabell Allende’s *The House of Spirits*, Clara’s clairvoyance disappears at several points in the novel, returning later at opportune times – why is that? How does fluidity function in other magical realist works?

**4. How does magical realism affect character perceptions? In other words, what do characters see or experience about their reality that they did not before they encountered the magic? What hidden truths are revealed, or vice versa? What do these realizations**, **or changes in perception, say about our own reality?**

Often, the magic in magical realist texts serves as a catalyst for change in the way the characters in the stories perceive their reality. This can be as simple as changing their minds on a particular issue or philosophy or go as far as inspiring the character to go to war. This question seeks to explore the ways magic induces these changes, and why these changes are important for the characters within that world. These changes are especially significant within the context of short stories, in which the protagonists’ first interaction with magic often serves as the inciting incident for those stories, though that is not magic’s only function. For example, in Daisy Johnson’s “The Lighthouse Keeper,” the protagonist’s world is changed after she spots a mysterious fish she cannot identify – a fish that does not exist in this world.

**5. How have the characteristics of magical realism changed, or not changed, over time? How does the magic – and the way the characters interact with the magic – differ from the foundational texts to the more contemporary? To what are those changes attributed?**

As with all literary genres, magical realism has evolved significantly since its inception in the mid-twentieth century. Not only have the archetypes of magic changed with a modern world, but the actual ways in which magic manifests within the story have changed as well. For example, the amount of magic that appears in these texts has decreased significantly over time. In the more foundational texts (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The House of Spirits*, *Midnight’s Children*), there tend to be several kinds of magic happening at once, with certain magic only appearing in the story one time and never again after that. More contemporary texts, on the other hand, tend to only feature one or two types of magic that persist throughout the story, with contemporary short stories usually only featuring one. These differences reveal a lot about the content and meaning of the story, as well as how the stories were crafted. There are many potential explanations for this evolution, one of which being twenty-first century texts are simply more focused on the story they are telling. For example, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* tells the story of a family across four generations, while a more contemporary text, such as Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, has a timeline that is significantly shorter and more focused, leaving less room for differing types of magic.