

# Spark of Magic Realism in Shakespeare

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**ABSTRACT** Magic realism is one of the most recent approaches in literary criticism. The researcher intends to explore the spark of magic realism in the works of William Shakespeare. The plays of Shakespeare are considered to be classics, praised and appreciated everywhere. Since no researcher has endeavored to find out magic realism in the plays of Shakespeare, this research paper would be original and inspiring to other research scholars. Shakespeare has been evaluated from different points of view by the different scholars. But nobody has ever tried to evaluate his works from the point of view of magic realism. Though Shakespeare belonged to the Elizabethan Age, the recent theories of criticism are also applicable to him. The researcher shall try to find out the elements of magic realism permeated in the plays of Shakespeare. The researcher confronts witches, ghost, madness, fairy atmosphere, and supernaturalism, while referring to the tragedies and comedies of Shakespeare, all these things contain the spark of magic realism in one way or other. This theory of magic realism did not exist in Elizabethan Age but it is noticeable in the plays of Shakespeare as well as in the plays of University Wits.

**KEYWORD** Magic Realism, Elizabethan Age, University Wits, Permeated, Supernaturalism.

## Introduction

There are many factors which led to the development of this movement. In post war Germany there was a great feeling of disillusionment on account of instability stemming from the defeat in the war. The intense emotionalism and experimentation of Expressionist movement, which had dominated the art in northern Europe for decades, had run its course. Many artists felt that the modernist movements had moved too far in the direction of abstraction. Therefore, they develop a realistic style portraying everyday life adding magic realistic touches. They also added dreamlike and fantastic elements to their art keeping them still within the realm of the possible.

Magic Realism spread from Germany to many other European countries and then it also spread in North America. In the realm of literary studies, this growing popularity of magic realism has attracted many scholars to this new way of judging literature. The scholars are likely to be confronted with a number of contradictory attitudes towards the term. Most of the critical terms in literature are borrowed from painting. It is marked by "a use of skill sharply defined, smoothly painted images of figures and objects depicted in some somewhat surrealist manners."

Magic Realism is an aesthetic style or narrative mode

in literature in which magical elements are blended into a realistic atmosphere in order to enhance a deeper understanding of reality. In other words, magic realism combines 'real and fantastic'. In Salman Rushdie's words, Magic Realism is the, "commingling of the improbable and the mundane" (Devi, 2011). Geoff Hancock explains this term as constituting the "conjunction of two worlds". Amaryll Chanady says that Magic Realism is an "amalgamation of a rational and an irrational world view." (Chanady, 1985). According to Franz Roh magic realism, "turned daily life into eerie form" Joachimides et al., (1985). Julian Birkett thinks of magic realism in the book Word Power:

*"What kind of realism is it when people float up into the sky, or fall from it without hurting themselves, or turn into strange beasts? It sounds less like realism than fantasy, something from The Arabian Nights or a computer game. But it would be wholly misleading to describe as fantasy such works as Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie, or The Tin Drum by Gunter Grass, or One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. And yet such strange events and transformations take place in these books, often describe as "magic realist" novels." (Birkett, 1998)*

The Movement of Magic Realism can be classified into four different periods as stated below:

The first period can be classified as *The Avant- Garde*

years in Europe when *Franz Roh* first used the term in his *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus* that appeared in 1925. The second period in the late 1940s when the related concepts *el realismo magico* or *Magic Realism* and *lo real maravilloso* or marvelous realism spread from Europe to America appropriated by *Arturo Uslar Pietri* and *Alejo Carpentier* as a meter to measure, compare and evaluate indigenous cultural art forms in the American style. The third period, which started in 1955, with the publication of the essay, *Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction* by *Angel Flores* which continues through 1960s. The fourth period, during which *Toni Morrison*, *Arturo Islas*, *Maxine Hong Kingston* and others tried to expand the magic realism in a significant way.

In order to clarify the term Magic Realism, the following definitions taken from various dictionaries will help a lot.

### According to Collins Dictionary

*"Magic realism is a style of writing or painting which sometimes describes dreams as though they were real, and real events as though they were dreams." (Summers, & Holmes, 2006).*

### According to Encyclopedia Britannica

*"A literary or artistic genre in which realistic narrative and naturalistic technique are combined with surreal elements of dream or fantasy." (Simpson & Weiner, 1989)*

### According to Study.com academy lessons

*"Magic Realism is defined as a literary genre in which fantastical things are treated not just as possible, but also as realistic." (Frank, 2018)*

### According to Thoughtco.com

*"Magic Realism, is an approach to literature that weaves fantasy and myth into everyday life." (Craven, 2018)*

### According to Mathew Stretcher

*"Magic Realism is what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something 'too strange to believe'." (Stretcher, 1999)*

### According to Encyclopedia of World literature in Twentieth Century

*"Magic Realism, like myth, also provides an essentially synthetic or totalizing way of depicting reality. It was firmly grounded in daily reality and expressed man's astonishment before the wonders of the real world, sands a vision of the fantastic feature of reality." (Serafin, 1999)*

### According to A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory

*"The mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic Or strange, skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine Narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories expressionistic and even surrealistic descriptions arcane erudition, the elements of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable." (Cuddon, 2013)*

Thus Magic Realism is a mixture of realistic and fantastic events. Not only that but it also includes dreams, myths, legends, fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic descriptions which have an element of surprise and sudden shock which are sometime inexplicable in words. Magic Realism is an aesthetic style in which magical elements are blended into realistic atmosphere in order to enhance deeper understanding of reality.

Magic Realism fills such a large place in literature, that no single definition can embrace its whole range. In a nut shell it can be said "If you can explain it then it is not magical realism."

From the study of the given definitions we can draw certain common characteristics of Magic Realism.

## 1. Non Human Characters

The introduction of non human characters in a play adds a charm of magic realism. For example, in Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Nick Bottom being unaware of his head being that of an Ass, adds magic realism to the play and creates riots of laughter among the audience.

## 2. Supernatural and Fantastic Elements

Another element of magic realism that we confront in the plays of Shakespeare is his introduction of supernatural elements. For example, *three witches in Macbeth*, play a pivotal role in the tragedy of Macbeth. They enkindle the seeds of ambition in Macbeth's mind and give false surety of his existence saying no born of woman shall ever defeat Macbeth. Similarly, in *Hamlet* the ghost of Hamlet's father is an example of supernatural element. The play begins with the appearance of ghost on the stage excites curiosity in the audience. Hamlet does not believe his uncle to be the murderer of his father till the ghost informs him about the reality and motivates him to take revenge on his uncle. As the ghost says to Hamlet,

*"I am thy father's spirit, Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night And for the day confined to fast in fires," (Shakespeare, 2017).*

We also come across the elements of magic realism in Shakespeare's *Othello*. When Brabantio hires murders in order to kill Othello, Othello speaks the following words and their swords remain in the scabbards. He Says,

*"Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them. Good signior, you shall more command with years Than with your weapons." (Hadfield, 2015)*

Here we find that commanding words of Othello make the hired murders passive. Othello's most important soliloquy uttered when he entered the bed chamber of Desdemona to strangle her is really fantastic. He made an analogy between the burning candle and the life of Desdemona. One can enkindle the light of candle again but no Prometheus heat can enkindle the light of Desdemona's life.

## 3. The sense of Mystery

The element of mystery juxtapose with reality, enhances magic realism in a play or a novel. Mystery is

something which is inexplicable in words. It takes the readers into another world of surrealism. We come across such mystery in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. When Macbeth encounters three witches, he is tempted to believe the prophecies made by the witches and acts accordingly. As make the following prophecies for Macbeth,

*"All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Glamis! All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Cawdor! All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" (Shakespeare, 2016).*

Hamlet's feigned madness also adds an element of mystery in the play. We really wonder was Hamlet really mad? Or he pretended to be a mad man remains a mystery. His beloved Ophelia returned all his gifts back to Hamlet thinking that he has gone mad. Thus Hamlet is doubly deceived by the fair sex. Firstly, his mother got married to his uncle who is the murder of her husband and secondly Ophelia cut off her relations with Hamlet which prompted him to say

*"Frailty! Thy name is woman." (Shakespeare, 2017)*

Another example of mystery in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is found in the grave diggers' scene. They did not know that they were digging their own graves. The conversation between the grave diggers is also full of mystery. They debate whether Ophelia who has committed suicide can be entitled to get a Christian burial. According to Christian belief a person who has committed suicide does not deserve a Christian burial. The inference regarding the skull is also mysterious. Hamlet and Horatio guess whose skull it would be. They think about the profession of the dead, looking at the skull. When Hamlet asked the grave digger whose grave he was digging. The grave digger replied that since he was digging the grave it was his own and then he added that the grave does not belong to a living entity, it belongs to the dead. This conversation leads to the readers to the world of mystery and wonder. We can further illustrate the sense of mystery, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in act one, scene second, the Soothsayer says, *"Beware the ides of March."* (Shakespeare et al., 2017) This is an indirect warning of the coming events.

#### 4. An Eerie Atmosphere

Eerie atmosphere is also one of the ingredients of magic realism. The word eerie denotes something strange and frightening or threatening. This eerie atmosphere is found in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, when Caesar finds his wife Calpurnia crying thrice in her sleep. As Caesar says,

*"Nor heaven nor earth have been at peace tonight. Thrice hath Calpurnia in her sleep cried out, 'Help, ho! They murder Caesar!' Who's within?"*

We also find eerie atmosphere in Calpurnia's dream, which is equally horrifying and threatening. As Calpurnia says,

*"Caesar, I stood on ceremonies, Yet now they fright me. There is one within, Besides the things that we have heard and seen, Recounts most horrid sights seen by the watch. A lioness hath whelped in the streets; And graves have yawn'd, and yielded up their dead; Fierce fiery warriors fight upon the clouds, In ranks and squadrons and right form of war, Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol; The noise of battle hurtled in the air, Horses did neigh and dying men did groan, And ghosts did*

*shriek and squeal about the streets. O Caesar! These things are beyond all use, And I do fear them."* (Schanzer et al., 1963)

Such eerie atmosphere is also found in Shakespeare's *Othello*, act five. The whole act is permeated with eerie atmosphere, which arouses our feelings of fear. When Othello finds his handkerchief gifted to Desdemona, lying in the bed chamber of Cassio, Othello becomes green with jealousy. He is determined to kill Desdemona so that she may not deceive others. He goes to bed chamber of Desdemona and asks her if she has committed any guilt or moral crime which she has not yet confessed. Othello without waiting for her answer says,

*"Well, do it, and be brief. I will walk by. I would not kill thy unprepared spirit. No, heavens forbend, I would not kill thy soul!" (Hadfield, 2015)*

Similarly, Desdemona feels great fear while looking at Othello's eyes. Othello's body language suggests that he is determined to kill her. As Desdemona reveals her fear saying,

*"And yet I fear you, for you're fatal then When your eyes roll so. Why I should fear I know not, Since guiltiness I know not. But yet I feel I fear." (Hadfield, 2015)*

Thus, the plays of Shakespeare contain eerie atmosphere which is conducive to arouse feeling of fear in the audience.

#### 5. An Extraordinary Event

An extraordinary event which cannot be explained rationally is also one of the elements of magic realism. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we come across the event of dropping flower juice in the eyes of Titania, the queen of fairies. When she opens her eyes, she falls in love with whatever she sees first. As Oberon says,

*"Having once this juice, I'll watch Titania when she is asleep And drop the liquor of it in her eyes. The next thing then she waking looks upon— Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull, On meddling monkey or on busy ape— She shall pursue it with the soul of love. And ere I take this charm from of her sight— As I can take it with another herb—"* (Shakespeare, 1986)

Another such event is found in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. When Juliet sees Romeo she falls in love with him at very first sight. She asks her maid to inquire whether the man is married or unmarried. If he be married her marriage bed will be her death bed. As Juliet says,

*"Go ask his name: if he be married. My grave is like to be my wedding bed."* (Shakespeare & Bryant, 1964).

Even in *A Midsummer Night's dream*, Oliver, brother of Orlando falls in love with Aliena at the very first sight which cannot be explained rationally.

We can cite another example of extraordinary event from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Macbeth is given a false surety by the three witches that no born of woman shall ever defeat him. But Macduff, who was snatched away untimely from the womb of his mother cannot be considered as born of woman. It was Macduff who prepares an army to defeat Macbeth.

## 5. Unreal becomes Real

One of the features of magic realism is that the unreal moments are presented in a way that they look real and convincing. A piece of art creates a willing suspension of disbelief so that illusionary things appear to be real and concrete. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the three Witches give false surety to Macbeth that he is safe till the Birnam woods come to the Dunsinane hill. It is a fact that the woods cannot move from one place to another. But the army led by Macduff is holding a branch of tree and it seems as if the Birnam wood is moving towards the Dunsinane hill. As witches say in *Macbeth*,

"Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are. Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill Shall come against him." (Shakespeare et al., 2008)

Even in *Romeo and Juliet*, we come across an event in which unreal thing seems to be real. Friar Lawrence gives potion to Juliet in order to make her unconscious for some time so that he can unite these two lovers in the graveyard. Juliet remains unconscious for forty-two hours and Romeo takes it for granted that Juliet is no more in this world. He drinks poison and ends his life.

Moreover, such unreal things are shown real in Shakespeare's play *King Lear*. King Lear wishes to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. He being egoist expects lip service from his daughters. He calls each daughter in turn and asks her how she would treat her old father. Regan and Gonerill make his sycophancy saying that they would bring the stars of heaven for him. But Cordelia who was sincere and loyal to her father does flatter him. She replies, "I will serve you according to my bonds no more no less." (Shakespeare, 2016) These words enraged King Lear and he divided his kingdom between Regan and Goneril. But later on the King Lear goes mad on account of inhuman treatment of his daughters. In his madness he realizes the injustice he did to Cordelia. In fact, madness is devoid of sanity but here King Lear becomes wise in his madness and realizes his error.

## 5. Realism

The plays of Shakespeare are classics, read everywhere but loved and admired by the British. His plays deal with just and lively image of human nature which is true in every age. His plays display psychological realism and that is why they appeal to the readers even today. Macbeth's overwhelming ambition, indecisiveness of Hamlet's nature, jealousy of Othello, King Lear's lack of judgment and egotism are the ingredients of human nature which remain the same in all nations and all times. This realism of Shakespeare's plays is found in all his tragedies and historical plays.

## Conclusion

In the end we may conclude that the plays of Shakespeare being classics, contain the ingredients of modern theories of criticism which did not exist in his time. Even then we can evaluate his plays with new approaches and theories developed in modern times. Magic Realism is a new critical approach which came in to being after the First World War.

The pioneers of this theory were *Franz Roh* and *Alejo Carpentier* who found magic realism in paintings. Generally, this theory of Magic Realism is applied in the evaluation of novels, paintings, cinemas but it has not been yet applied to the plays of Shakespeare so far. After a comprehensive study of Shakespeare from the point of view of Magic Realism it can be said to some extent that there are some features of Magic Realism embedded in the plays of Shakespeare. Therefore, this research paper shall be considered something new and original in the sphere of literary criticism.

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