

# DOES A THREAD OF MAGICAL REALISM PERVADE RODERICK WALCOTT'S *MALFINIS*?

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Leader: I heard it all before  
A murder most foul  
The pan with two hands and a human heart  
A knotted mahaut rope (drum)  
The cap found near the house (drum)  
The small coffin in a hammock  
Carried by four men  
To Castries from Gros Islet (drum)  
Its not news to me.

(Leader turns to leave)

(p. 324)<sup>1</sup>

333

## Opening Statement

Robert Scholes proffers the term 'metafiction', to refer to a range of novels which seem to violate "standard novelistic expectations by drastic and sometimes highly effective experiments with subject matter, form, style, temporal sequence and fusions of the everyday, the fantastic, the mythical and the nightmarish, in renderings that blur traditional distinctions between what is serious or trivial, horrible or ludicrous, tragic or comic" (quoted in Ruch & Sellman, 2003). Magical realism, subsumed under this broader heading, is said to incorporate magical devices and/or magic in general within a believable (realist) story, without any disruption of the logic of the story. In general, magical realism has been associated with the prose fiction of writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Marquez, Gunter Grass and John Fowles. To dare to propose the little known St. Lucian play 'Malfinis' by deceased playwright Roderick Walcott (twin brother of Dr. Derek Walcott) may therefore seem preposterous. Members of the jury, I beg to defer. An analysis of 'Malfinis' begs the question: Does a thread of magical realism pervade Roderick Walcott's 'Malfinis'?

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from the Caribbean Rhythms version of the play; the reference for that publication was not readily available.

### ***Motion in limine***

Magical realism has been described as a ‘postcolonial hangover’ in an apparent desire by ‘White’ to marginalize the fiction of “Other”. Some see magical realism as a *passé* literary trend while others have deemed the term too limiting to be considered a serious genre in itself. The polemics of these opposing views have led some to equate magical realism with fantasy, where a new universe is introduced to the reader, with its laws (natural as well as artificial), its regularities, its objects, its people and its forces. This fantastic world is described as a world which is completely different from ours, or which has enough differences so that the reader cannot understand it fully if it is not explained to him/her.

### **The evidence**

Magic realism, although sometimes confused with or labeled as fantastic literature, is a genre which is characterized by “the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, bizarre and skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic description, arcane erudition, the elements of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable”.<sup>2</sup> Foreman writes that “magical realism, unlike the fantastic or the surreal, presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected” (P. Gabrielle Foreman, quoted in Ríos, 1999). Leal continues in this vein, arguing that magical realism “confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts... [it] does not try to copy the surrounding reality... but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things” (Luis Leal, quoted in Ríos, 1999).

Leal’s arguments are supported by a number of other researchers of the genre who postulate that “the goal of magical realism is to combine the realistic with the fanciful in order to yield a singularly... unexpected richness of reality” which to proponents of this genre is “no less real than traditional realism”. Magic realism is said to be profuse with “images and narratives from religions, spirituality and metaphysical traditions; myth, folk tale, magic tales and traditions abound... [while] characters of the story consider magic as some usual possibility of their world. Its occurrences might be rare or even almost forgotten, but magic is nonetheless as serious a topic in these fictions as chemistry or quantum physics in our world” (quoted in Ríos, 1999). Simpkins encapsulates these arguments succinctly when he posits that Garcia Marquez seems to hold the view that “the magic text is, paradoxically, more realistic than the realist text” (Scott Simpkins, quoted in Ríos, 1999). Bearing Marquez’s summation in mind, but digressing from the traditionally held view that magic realism is a Latin American phenomenon, can ‘Malfinis’ be considered a true example of this genre?

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<sup>2</sup> See “A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory”.

‘Malfinis’ (creole term for chicken hawk) or ‘The Heart of the Child’ reenacts the trial (in purgatory) of four men brought to justice for the hideous murder of a young boy, Rupert Mapp, which was said to have taken place in the village of Monchy, St. Lucia between 1902 and 1904. The action unfolds simultaneously in different settings. On the one hand, the Chorus recounts for us the trial in purgatory of the macabre event that took place previously on earth:

Chorus

Just near the junction of two roads  
You’ll find Monchy; (guitar)  
In the old days, a sugar mill  
Like Roseau, Cul de Sac; (pause)  
Here, in a clearing, near an old thatched hut  
Beneath a samaan tree  
Lay the poor body of Rupert Mapp  
For one whole week-already decomposed,  
It had not heart, its hands cut off,  
The amputation by some skillful hand;  
Not a bone was scraped or injured at the breast:  
While there, inside the hut,  
The heart and hands  
Lay covered in a cooking pan! (p. 325)

335

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Here, there is no place for innocence until proven guilty; the audience becomes the jury, and pronounces an inevitable verdict on a horrible deed even before it hears the accused.

On the other hand, a flashback transposes the audience to earth, and we hear and see the perpetrators in real time as they plan and carry out the murder. The Chorus fills us in on the impetus of the act:

Chorus

First man: The house you see there covered with mud and branches belongs to him, St. Luce Leon. He is the owner of small property, a sugar mill at Monchy. He cannot read nor write. For many years he has not been in the best of health. He has sacrificed his body and the best years of his life in hard work, but life has not rewarded him, and business is not good. In his trouble and affliction he sends for a friend of his childhood, a man called Montoute Edmond, (guitar), a butcher at Monchy. This Montoute is a gardeur, a man who dabbles in herbs and potions, one who can see very far (p. 325-326).

For Caribbean peoples of African descent, the consultation with a ‘gardeur’<sup>3</sup> or obeah man/woman, is a known and accepted occurrence even among the highly religious, as it is believed that he/she has the ability to transform the lives of those who seek his/her help. Ismond states that:

“According to the general belief, individuals who practice obeah engage in various evil and mysterious activities by virtue of certain powers they receive from the Devil. They use these powers mainly to work harm against their enemies, or for purposes of worldly gain. To secure these powers, they have made a pact with the Devil - which means, effectively, that their souls are contracted to him. In a play entitled *Malfinis* (1966), Roderick Walcott deals with the authentic case of three malefactors who set out to fulfill such a pact by tearing out the heart of a child live.” (Ismond, 1987: 32)

Montoute boasts his superior (supernatural) powers when he tells St. Luce:

I know many things, my friend. What I cannot understand is why men must suffer poverty in this world, when all they need to gain riches is gain a little knowledge, and learn to exercise the power of their will. I have all this in my book, St. Luce. It is there for all who want to see, to leave this suffering and this misery (p. 328).

Montoute goes on to remind St. Luce:

Remember when we was small, St. Luce? How before every crop there was talk of making sure the harvest was good and some would dance while others would pray (328).

St. Luce, now reminiscing, responds:

Yes, they said the mill must have the body of a boy before crop, to make the harvest good (drum). They say it up to now... (p. 328)

To which Montoute retorts:

Not the body, St. Luce... (p. 328)

At which point the Chorus chimes in:

But the heart of a child! (cymbals) (p. 328)

St. Luce’s ignorance in these matters relative to the learned Montoute is revealed when he asks incredulously:

Is that so? (p. 328)

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<sup>3</sup> In Creole, the word is spelt “gadè”.

And is informed by Montoute:

No, not the body. The body is to cut. The heart and hands is what you use. The head you must bury under the mill (p. 328).

Montoute, sympathizing with St. Luce's plight, states:

It is a thing that worry me all my life, St. Luce, and the book give me the answer-it is this-for your sugar mill to prosper, you must find the sacrifice (p. 329).

St. Luce, faced with the reality of the abrahamic sacrifice to be performed for the sake of his prosperity and clearly shaken, asks Montoute:

Do you mean – a boy, Montoute? (p. 329)

To which the learned 'gardeur' responds with finality:

It is the only way (guitar). (p. 329)

And outlines his plan:

I have thought of this night for a long time. There is first the question of securing the boy...it will be useless to look for one ...in any part of this island for that matter. There would be too much talk of a missing child. Now, I already write to a man I know in Barbados, and he tell me such a boy is available, with no one to take care of him, about 12 to 13 years of age... (p.329).

Prior to imparting this information however, Montoute admonishes St. Luce:

Very well my friend. Now what I am going to say to you, I never tell anyone in my whole life before- so you must guard this secret with your life. There have powers stronger than us outside this world who will bear witness to our testimony, and we will be indebted to them as long as we live. Swear to me that this will be between us only you hear? (p. 329)

It is a warning that epitomizes the intertwining of time and space such that "time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality" (Angel Flores, quoted in Ríos, 1999). The repercussions of not heeding this ominous warning are felt later when it becomes necessary to invite others to be part of the dastardly deed, to the end that the secret is no longer held between Montoute and St. Luce only and the Devil draws his bloody ransom.

## Closing argument

Ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, I thank you for your patience in sifting through the evidence presented in this literary trial. The question still remains: is there perhaps a thread of magical realism in Roderick Walcott's 'Malfinis'? The media in St. Lucia reported the crime as a true case, as with Gabriel García Márquez's 'Chronicle of a Death Foretold'. The perpetrators were tried and hung for their horrible deed. Yet, the trial on earth left many questions unanswered, as each man told a different tale against the other. In purgatory, the 'Leader' who prosecutes the case, reports to the transient court that the "men had their separate trials, were executed on a common scaffold, [and] their bodies buried in the same grave behind cold prison walls" (p. 357). He reveals that the "malefactors had been summoned from their place of expiation, to stand before the mirror of their minds "to ease the burden of their troubled souls". The purgatorial trial finds justification in the fact that "there were more bones to be dug":

The Purpose for the Deed  
The lies of Mutilators  
The action of the Crime  
And the Testimony of One (p. 354).

Purgatory reveals the Testimony of the blind man who did not testify on earth for fear of his life, having lost his eyes at the hands of the 'malefactors' who he came upon carrying out the hideous crime and who he claimed dug out his eyes on recognizing that there was a witness. The Leader questions the veracity of the old man's testimony in purgatory and seemingly enraged by his damning revelations, curses him:

May you be damned forever for giving testimony before this court! (p. 357)

He then speaks to the seeming uselessness of the proceedings of the kangaroo court:

Oh no my friends, this case should never have been called, these bones should never have been dug. Let us return them to their place of burial, and let the malefactors linger here, in their original place (p. 357).

On being questioned about his own identity, he unmask himself as the ghost of Montoute Edmond, and in a macabre twist to a trial he saw as a caricature of justice, presents the "heart of a child" which had never been found on earth, to a cacophony of cymbals, the gasping of the Chorus and the screams of the old man.

Members of the Jury, does the trial in purgatory reflect our real world? Does the trial set out to "confront reality in an effort to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts..."? Might Roderick Walcott's 'Malfinis' now exhumed, be considered for a comprehensive autopsy? Can it be said that a thread of magical realism pervades the play? The prosecution rests its case.

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