Magical Realism in Jesmyn Ward’s Sing, Unburied, Sing

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Fantastical Elements in the Novel

Ghost of Richie: The ghost of Richie shows up when they pick Michael up from Parchman. Only Jojo and Kayla can see the ghost, but Pop knew Richie when he was working as a boy. This provides further connection between Pop and the narrative. Jojo’s representation of the memory of the atrocities committed on young black men at places like Parchman prison. This fact that only Jojo and Kayla can see Richie, also indicates that other young people, like Leonie, are unaware of their past and are losing touch with their history.

Healing: Mam has knowledge of herbs and traditional medicines, and she also knows French derived voodoo at work in Ward’s novel. These practices connect Mam’s knowledge to the voodoo culture of New Orleans. Mam tries to teach Leonie the skill, but Leonie does not pay enough attention to learn it properly. This represents a disconnect between Leonie and her heritage that she tries to repair several times during the novel. She fails to make a connection for Jojo, but through Mam’s tutelage recites a litany to ease Mam’s death.

Animals: Jojo has a special connection to animals; he hears their voices in his head. Pop also has a connection with animals, mainly dogs. Jojo’s ability to understand animals links him to Pop in many ways in media studies research.

Does the lens of magical realism illuminate or limit the text of Sing, Unburied, Sing?

Is magical realism strictly a Latin American genre, or can it be expanded to include other cultures?

The Genre Limits the Novel

• African magic is different: Lydie Molloidou, writing about the genre of the African novel as a whole, cautions against designating them as magical realism. She maintains that the African novel derives from African sources. Toni Morrison, as quoted in A. Lobodziec’s article, agreed that the magic practiced by African-Americans is inherently different than that practiced by Latin American people. She explained that while Latin American people were still connected with their cultural and magical traditions, African-Americans had to create their own traditions.

• African sources should be acknowledged: James Mellis advocates for a new genre called African-based spiritual fiction. He specifically notes West African Yoruba and Haitian-derived voodoo at work in Ward’s novel. Molloidou argues that the African elements are more important to acknowledge because linking it to magical realism mutes the culturally unique origins.

• Magical realism does not fit it all: Lobodziec points out that not all of the magic in the texts can be explained by magical realism, which presents magic as an “unremarkable occurrence.” Lobodzieu uses examples from Beloved, but this applies to the culminating scene in Sing, Unburied, Sing as well. When Mam is dying, the veil is pulled back so that she sees Richie and Given, and as she cries out to them, Leonie is also affected by their presence which creates a “shooting [that] fills the room like a flood” (Ward 267). The event is far from “unremarkable” for Leonie and the whole family.

The Genre Illuminates the Novel

• Postcolonial Fiction: The strongest argument for including this novel under the genre of magical realism is that it carries a message of protest against Western structures of power associated with colonial rule. This definition of magical realism, supported by Wendy Faris and Stephen Slemon, shows how the use of folk tale and native myths destabilize traditional narrative forms and impose new native traditions. Although the novel has most often been applied to Latin American cultures, Faris argues that it applies to African-American traditions that were formed from enslaved people.

• Magic as Shared History: Mehri Razmi and Leyli Jamah show how the ghosts in Beloved and other similar novels create a connection to a shared cultural history. They call this “remembered history” rather than “taught history.” P. G. Obi argues that magical realism can provide a “bridge to tradition” through storytelling and reclaiming folklore. Toni Morrison feared that Beloved would be unpopular because “black people don’t want to remember” and her novel brought memories of slavery visciously to the surface. Ward uses her ghosts in the same way: Richie will not let Parchman forget about Parchman, and Given will not let Leonie forget about racial violence.

• African Magical Realism: Ato Quayson advocates for an expansion of the genre to include African origins and explains some of the distinctions between Latin American and African magical realism. African magical realism sometimes creates a separate realm for the fantastical but blurs the boundary between this and the real world. This is true in Ward’s novel, particularly at the end when Jojo finds himself full of ghosts and Kayla tries to “soothe” them to “go home” (Ward 254).

Conclusions

The term “magical realism,” on its own, cannot convey the power or impact of Sing, Unburied, Sing. However, an accurate assessment of one of the narrative devices Jesmyn Ward uses in her National Book Award winning work.

While magical realism is not the only device used in the book, it is a prominent element, and describing the novel this way helps readers and critics know what to expect as they read. The ghosts, in particular, are presented as being just as real and present as the living characters; even narrates a couple of chapters. However, this is not the only tradition present in the novel. There are some elements of the fantastical that do not align with the genre. The voodoo practices of the gris gris bag and the liturgy are cultural religious practices of Yoruba-derived Vodun, and to consider these to be elements of magical realism would be to devalue the voodoo tradition.

The genre of magical realism should ultimately be understood as broader than the Latin American tradition alone, and many critics advocate for this.

A complex novel such as this cannot be limited to one genre, and to do so would be an incomplete analysis. This is true of either magical realism or James Melisi’s concept of the African-based spiritual fiction genre. Therefore, it is most accurate to see the presence of both traditions in Sing, Unburied, Sing, and to acknowledge the genius of Jesmyn Ward in utilizing the full array of tools and traditions available to her.

References


