



The surreal in Julio Cortázar's Cosmopolitan Works and Gabriel García Márquez's Provincial World

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Many factors must be considered when analyzing a story, notably the context in which it was written. The setting of a story can also be used as a segue to understand the deeper meaning and the potential commentary being made by the author. When studying the Colombian 1982 Nobel Literature Prize winner, novelist, and journalist Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014) or Argentinean novelist and short-story writer Julio Cortázar (1914-1984), the context of the Latin American boom is essential.

The experimental and modernist works produced during the 1960s and 1970s reached global- most notably European- prominence and explored societal commentary and criticism, with a novel approach to the description and qualification of reality. Following the inhuman atrocities of World War II, emerging literary styles that confronted the banality and absurdity of society and daily life such as surrealism, fiction, existentialism, magical realism started to emerge.

Gabriel García Márquez is most attributed with the concretization of magical realism, taking impossible and fantastical events and seamlessly incorporating them into truth-like writing without questioning the absurdity of the situation or treating it as "magical." García Márquez wrote within the context of small towns and villages, with an emphasis on closed-off local worlds where deeply rooted Latin-American traditions and ways of life were kept untouched. His stories serve as societal commentaries and criticisms, bringing to light the small life, violence, and hypocrisy in rural and local Colombian towns. On the other hand, Cortázar's writing is more frequently associated with surrealism, studied more within the context of cosmopolitan literature because of his recurring Parisian setting or his reflection of Buenos

Aires, precipitated by his move to France in 1951. Both García Márquez and Cortázar exemplify the Latin American boom's search for reality through

fiction, with the former using magical realism as a medium to study provincial and more closed-off Latin American communities, and the latter's works adopt a broader surrealism of the cosmopolitan reality of the 20th century.

Gabriel García Márquez centers many of his stories around magical realism to examine communities more generally, using fantastic elements to highlight his commentary. Seamlessly incorporating magical elements into his stories, without characters blinking at the improbability of the mythical elements of the story, is the essence of magical realism. García Márquez's life was parallel to the many political upheavals of the 20th century, notably the Cuban and Mexican revolutions, with which he was strongly associated. The use of magical realism in his numerous works such as the short story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" (1955) and novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) serves as a medium for his own political commentary.

In her paper "Of Hybrids and Other Fusions," Rodríguez-Vivaldi (2016) examines the creation of new ways of expression in Latin America during the Latin American boom, looking at the two different reactions to the political and social commotion of the time. The first manifested in "A cosmopolitan trend toward taking artistic innovation and experimentation that became the avant-garde," which "paralleled some international (mostly European) styles in vogue" (Rodríguez-Vivaldi, 2016, p.150). This description could be used to characterize popular styles of the time such as modernism, existentialism, absurdism, and surrealism, which is why Rodríguez-Vivaldi refers to this reaction as the collective "isms," popular in Europe with writers including Sartre, Ionesco, Camus, Kafka, and Proust. This trend was also prominent in the Latin American boom with writers such as Cortázar, whose writing exemplifies this movement owing to the time he spent in France under the influence of 20th century European literature styles.





Meanwhile, García Márquez's writing better fits the second description offered by Rodríguez-Vivaldi, which is the "search for Panamerican or national identity as the true alternative for Latin American art that evolved into a social, ideological, and nativist art." (Rodríguez-Vivaldi, 2016, p. 150). This corresponds to a style less influenced by Europe's modernism but instead delves into authentic Latin American stories focusing on the continent's culture and history. Gabriel García Márquez is more strongly associated with magical realism because it is a literary style that was not derived from the prominent styles of Europe at the time, and he focused more on cultural and provincial aspects of his culture rather than a cosmopolitan one.

Magical realism can be found in the vast majority of García Márquez's work, notably in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," published as a short children's in the journal *Casa de las Américas*. This story recounts the tale of a couple, Pelayo and Elisenda, who find what appears to be a fallen angel in their backyard and proceed to exploit its presence by having inhabitants of their small coastal town visit him for divine guidance. They charge for admission and progressively treat the angel like an animal in their yard, especially as he loses popularity when a "spider-woman" becomes the town's biggest attraction. The angel, often described like an old man, regains strength to fly away at the end of the story, to Pelayo and Elisenda's satisfaction. This short story differs from García Márquez's other works because of the sheer amount of magical realism incorporated in it, surpassing the subtlety of the style in his other writings. The presence of an angel falling in the backyard of a provincial town is a first mystical event, however, the author counters the improbability of this with the characters' reactions, initially of stupor but quickly "overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar" ("Very Old Man," García Márquez, 2005, p. 218). The absurdity of the angel is continued with his description, which counters what one would expect an angel to look like. Rather than a majestic arrival, the angel is found "lying face down in the mud [...] who, in spite of tremendous efforts, couldn't get up" (p. 217). By countering what is expected even from a magical being, there is an element of reality that is entailed when the true nature of something is more disappointing or less magical than one would expect.

Instead of the angel being gracious and beautiful, the rough, "old man" description brings it closer to reality. García Márquez uses precise descriptions and details, further making the magical seem real when a divine creature so closely resembles a "human", especially an unattractive, parasite-covered, and filthy one ("Very Old Man" 219). García Márquez uses this as a platform for his commentary of a society that takes advantage of the weak. When the old man was advantageous and lucrative to the impoverished couple, they exploited it and treated it like a circus animal. However, as soon as the interest in the angel waned, it became a burden to them and was more severely mistreated. "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" is exemplary of García Márquez's use of magical realism and his focus on smaller Latin American communities, by tying to the divine or mystical to draw a reflection of provincial character's interactions with it.

Magical realism is a commentary on society; García Márquez's choice of confining this story to a small coastal town, similarly to his novel *Chronicles of a Death Foretold* (1981), is what allows the commentary to strike. In *Chronicles*, Santiago Nasar is murdered by the Vicario twins, the brothers of Angela Vicario, who claims Nasar took her virginity, costing her an advantageous marriage. As the title suggests, Nasar's death is predicted, everyone living in the small Colombian town knew about the young man's impending murder, but no one chose to act on it or prevent it from happening, underscoring the absurdity of the situation and a lack of sense of responsibility. The public knowledge that the Vicario brothers are waiting to slaughter Nasar travels quickly across the town, yet he is still killed. As in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," the society that this behavior is allowed in is closely analyzed and criticized by García Márquez; *Chronicles* outlines the dangers of "machismo," lack of proactiveness and involvement to help another, especially one who is revealed as an innocent and well-doing citizen. Meanwhile, the exploitation of the old man in the short story is only able to happen because of how small the community is. In the context of a big city, the themes of taking advantage of the vulnerable and the role of divine presence would take quite different forms. García Márquez studies the individual within society, using "petri-dish" communities of the





worlds he creates that allow him to push through his commentary.

Julio Cortázar also uses certain mythical aspects in his stories. However, the surrealist style of his work resides in the absurdity of his storytelling to explore human nature and the purpose of existence. This aligns with the surrealism or absurdism, “isms” identified by Ana María Rodríguez-Vivaldi in reaction to the Latin American Boom, especially within cosmopolitan settings (150). Julio Cortázar’s used more cosmopolitan approaches to his stories, especially during his time spent in Paris and Buenos Aires, where some of his works such as *Rayuela* (1963) and “Casa Tomada” are set. In his book *En Busca Del Unicornio: Los Cuentos de Julio Cortázar*, Jaime Alazraki explores the definition of the mythical and fantastical aspects of Cortázar’s writing and quotes the author explaining that “Casi todos los cuentos que he escrito pertenecen al género llamado fantástico por falta de mejor nombre” (“Almost all of the stories that I have written belong to the fantastic genre” (Cortázar, as cited in Alazraki, 1983, p. 27). Cortázar self-categorizes in this genre, explaining that “me lanza a escribir como la única manera de cruzar ciertos límites, de instalarme en el territorio de lo otro” (it launches to write as the only way to cross certain limits, to settle in the territory of the other” 27). This otro is often mentioned by the author, and gives context to his intentions when writing a story. By writing about an absurd situation and crossing a certain threshold of reality or logic, Cortázar was able to reflect on human behavior and the curious nature of life within a larger and higher society. Alazraki defines this otro as “una nueva postulación de la realidad, de una nueva percepción del mundo” (“A new postulate of reality, of a new perception of the world” 28). Cortázar, like García Márquez, used a new lens to comment on the world and man within society.

Julio Cortázar’s intentions of finding a deeper meaning to life are manifested in his 1963 innovative novel *Rayuela*. The novel recounts the story of Horacio Oliveira, a writer living in Paris with his Uruguayan mistress La Maga and his club of ex-pats called The Serpent Club. After complications with his mistress’ son Rocamadour, Oliveira sets back off to Buenos Aires where he works odd jobs, including keeper of a circus cat and attendant at an insane asylum.

The structure of the novel’s chapters was groundbreaking- they could be read in sequence or at random- a reflection of Cortázar philosophical and reflective commentary. The novel contained much less of a mystical aspect, but when taking a closer look at each character’s behavior, the absurdity of the mundane is made abundantly clear. Oliveira’s character narrates certain parts of the story, one where he explains that “this whole A B C of my life was a painful bit of stupidity, because it was based solely on a dialectical pattern, on the choice of what could be called nonconduct rather than conduct, on faddish indecency instead of social decency” (Cortázar, 1966, p.12). This character’s narration bridges the author’s thoughts on society, which is riddled with questions about how one should behave but does not impact the world. Oliveira spends the whole story seeking bigger meaning to his life, moving continents, looking for love in La Maga and then confusing his affection for his mistress with that of his friend’s wife. Living in the bustling cities of Paris and Buenos Aires further this insignificance of life, as they belittle the character and accentuate how small the consequences of his decisions are.

In addition, Cortázar searched for the meaning in existence within everyday routine. As Ilan Stavans explains in his journal article “Justice to Julio Cortázar,” the short-story writer plunges into how to tie in “the surreal into daily life”, which would help him with finding “the peculiar and bizarre in the routine - to intertwine dreams and reality.” (Stavans, 1996, p.11). Emphasizing this repetitive aspect of life highlights the absurdity of existence and even adds slight humor to Cortázar’s works that countered the dark meaning behind his writing. Oliveira’s character describes how “La Maga was putting up her hair, taking it down, putting it up again.” (Cortázar, 1966, p. 12) as part of the description of his surroundings, a common description in this novel, that highlights the absurdity of everyday life. La Maga’s fixation on her looks becomes part of her routine, but something that seems so important to her is merely an absurd and repetitive aspect of reality. By combining the mundane with the surreal narration of his stories, Cortázar questions the logic behind human behavior within society and reflects on the absurdity of the importance that each individual attaches to their insignificant life.





Rayuela, despite its complex storyline, recollects the story of a man seeking philosophical meaning. However, in either order of reading, the reader is left with a sense of ambiguity with the ending. There is no true closure for Horacio Oliveira, and therefore no true progression in finding purpose. Using a cosmopolitan backdrop to this helps accentuate the sense of deception and loneliness of human reality, as even though Oliveira is constantly surrounded and accompanied, he still feels the need to seek something greater than himself or question his insignificant reality.

Iris Pearson states clearly in her article comparing the use of Paris in 20th century works that Cortázar responds “to an ongoing disillusionment with the promised land of Paris by reconfiguring the city as a site of continued search, and they do so through discontinuous, fragmented forms, promoting episodic narratives whose pieces must be carefully navigated by the reader.” (Pearson, 2021, p.89) The city of Paris is yet another component of the story used to confuse and highlight the absurdity of our reality. Putting characters in a setting where their story truly has no impact on the lives of others is most easily done in a city, where everyone lives their lives in parallel without necessarily knowing what their neighbor is doing, a stark contrast to García Márquez’s small Latin American towns. Cortázar’s centers his characters on their thoughts to extract a greater meaning out of his stories, whereas García Márquez studies his characters within the context of a smaller society.

In summary, Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez both seek a greater human reality in their works and do so by using surreal and fantastical literary styles. However, the authors differ in how they incorporate the surreal or absurd in their work, and the context in which they do so. García Márquez focuses on smaller closed-off Latin American communities in works such as *Chronicles of a Death Foretold* and “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” in which he highlights interactions of mystical or divine beings with provincial societies. The seamless incorporation of the mystical is magical realism, strongly associated with this author, can be attributed to his 1982 Nobel Prize win. The defined Latin American identity García Márquez created echoed across the world and caught

European attention. By contrast, while Latin American, Julio Cortázar contributed to the popular European movements of absurdism and surrealism, with a focus on the individual and their inner thoughts. Set in large cosmopolitan cities like Paris and Buenos Aires, Cortázar showed the insignificance of individual decisions, and how each of his characters have little to no impact on their surroundings relative to the bustling environment in which they live.

Considering Cortázar’s proximity to many recognized 20th century writers, it would be expected that he be eligible for the Nobel Literature Prize, especially with the Nobel Academy’s eurocentrism. Perhaps his “loss” can be attributed to the fact that he mainly wrote short stories, and novels are preferred. Both Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez shaped the Latin American Boom, as well as the literary styles who became the voice of the second half of the 20th century. But for the time, García Márquez had a more distinct take on a defining unique Latin American style, one that was less cosmopolitan and, in effect, less European.

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