

# A Literary Study of Magical Realism in *Hombres de Maíz*

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As a precursor of Magical Realism, Miguel Ángel Asturias uses bold narrative structure, fantastic skills and a style full of images, symbols and musical effects to endow *Hombres de Maíz* with an unmistakable singularity. As a literary study of this book from the perspective of Magical Realism, this paper aims to uncover in detail the presence of this literary formula in this novel, taking into consideration the contributions of this literary Nobel to Latin American literature and the domestic and foreign contexts of that time.

**Keywords:** Spanish literature, *Hombres de Maíz*, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Magical Realism, Latin American Literature

## Introduction

Latin America, in particular, Guatemala, is the place where the literary Nobel, Asturias, grew up. The place and environment where an author grew up inevitably condition his vision of the world and his mentality. To understand Magical Realism in the work of Asturias, firstly it is necessary to characterize its Guatemalan roots. The hidden forces, the imperceptible magical presences of nature, the extravagant elements, such as witchcraft, sorcery, native philosophy, and other aspects, were decisive in his way of thinking and writing. Thus, it forms a style of his own, in which all the exaggerations and hyperboles of Magical Realism are present.

## State of the Question

First, we will go to the origins of this term to see its evolution and its state of research:

[El Realismo Mágico fue una] expresión acuñada por Franz Roh en 1925 (en un libro traducido al español en 1927 bajo el título *Realismo Mágico. Postexpresionismo*) para designar un movimiento artístico alemán posterior al expresionismo. Dicha expresión fue recogida por el escritor venezolano Arturo Usler Pietri para referirse a un tipo de narrativa hispanoamericana que, superando el positivismo filosófico y los procedimientos del Realismo del siglo XIX, crea un nuevo realismo en el que se considera al hombre y su entorno inmersos en un mundo de fantasía y de misterio. Entre los novelistas más significativos de esta corriente del “Realismo Mágico” figuran M. A. Asturias, A. Carpentier, J. L. Borges, J. Rulfo, G. García Márquez, J. Cortázar, etc. (Calderón, 1996, pp. 904-905)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Author's translation: “[Magical Realism was an expression] coined by Franz Roh in 1925 (in a book translated into Spanish in 1927 under the title *Magical Realism. Post-expressionism*) to designate a Post-Expressionist German artistic movement. This expression was collected by the Venezuelan writer Arturo Usler Pietri to refer to a type of Latin American narrative that, overcoming the philosophical positivism and procedures of nineteenth-century Realism, creates a new realism in which man and his environment are considered immersed in a world of fantasy and mystery. Among the most significant novelists of this current of “Magical Realism” are M. A. Asturias, A. Carpentier, J. L. Borges, J. Rulfo, G. García Márquez, J. Cortázar, etc.”

In Latin America, after Arturo Usler Pietri, mentioned above, father of Magical and Marvelous Realism, we move on to the Marvelous Real American, a concept proposed by Carpentier in his fundamental essay *De lo real maravilloso americano* (1949). After Borge's illuminations on fantasy literature in the 40s, Irleamar Chiampi demonstrates the confusions contained in the formula of Magical Realism and manages to separate in the procedure of Carpentier the viable (a cultural concept about Latin America) and the unacceptable (the attribution of that wonder to the real American), offering a new proposal which consists in distinguishing accurately and at all levels of narrative discourse: the Marvelous, the Fantastic, and the Marvelous Realism.

### **The Formula “Magical Realism” in Miguel Ángel Asturias’s Novels**

When Asturias was in Paris, he maintained a close relationship with the Surrealists. Those two world wars proved that science, the artifacts that human beings themselves created, served for their own destruction. Surrealists understand that science is based on reason, which is the element that justifies wars, therefore they go in search of the irrational. The irrational are dreams, which are like phantasmas, they are magical things, and writers are given the task of writing what they dream. That is why the poems of surrealism arise what are sometimes incomprehensible because they are dreamlike symbols. All this generates a movement: surrealism. Asturias is in that world, where a plethora of artists are trying to break with the rational. It is the European world. Next, Asturias turns to the American world. And Guatemala is just the closest that Asturias has to start with. He looks for a way of talking about those people, mixes his particular experiences, his memories together with the decoding he makes of some Mayan codices, and finds there the raw material: the sustenance for what will later be his great work.

What is Magical Realism then? It would be possible to define the labels of “The Wonderful Real” and “Magical Realism” simply as “a European vision that sees the Latin American reality from the incomprehension of a real world, such as the American world, from which a wrong image is obtained since the times of the Conquest”. These labels can be applied to the proposals that Asturias is going to develop, that is why he dedicates himself to writing a novel impregnated with what they call magic, a myth that can serve as a theme to tell a story: *Hombres de Maíz*.

### **The Reality: The Basis and the Purpose**

#### **The Natural Environment**

The American “reality” is peculiar: the exuberance of the landscape, with its perennial greenery, the grandeur of its rivers, seas and lakes, and the idiosyncrasy of the people with their myths, customs, folklore and their esoteric world, etc. The American reality is mythical and magical. These amazing landscapes were irrational for Europeans, so the chroniclers told an infinity of extraordinary stories, for example that there were men with large ears, that there were villages of Amazons, that there were dogs that spoke, for example. All this, together with the chronicle, would constitute the fantastic part of Latin American literature, because it arose from the chronicles.

#### **The Social Environment**

What Asturias was experiencing at that time were political conflicts, dictatorships, governments without any legitimacy *de facto*, and more. Because of this social atmosphere of oppression and violence, Latin

American Magical Realism in *Hombres de Maíz* aims to express dissatisfaction with the social and governmental systems that prevail in the region. In particular, it positions itself against military power and the oligarchy. At the same time, Latin American scholars criticize the pessimistic aspects of traditional culture and express admiration for indigenous national culture. We also find a cult towards primitive desire and the most essential aspects of human beings.

### **The Literary Environment**

There is a traditional view that understands that Latin American thought has its roots abroad, and for a time many writers and critics were given over to the task of presenting proposals similar to European ones. For example, Latin Americans receive semiology, structuralism and other foreign, European currents. From there it is understood that Latin Americans have been deprived of authenticity. For this reason, Latin American critics begin to contemplate the literature of this region in a different way and to highlight their own identity.

Gerald Martin saw in Asturias someone who anticipates stylistic renewal: “el primero en aclarar con su obra la distinción entre la literatura latinoamericana europeizante en sus formas y contenidos, y una nueva literatura latinoamericana de intencionalidad tercermundista.”<sup>2</sup>.

### **The Magic: The Language and Exuberance of Literary Techniques**

In *Hombres de Maíz*, Asturias tells the story with artifices, and practically exhausts the linguistic, aesthetic resources and tools that a writer has, to tell a story. He puts into practice a narrative style that is concretized around the Indian, who reaches horizons of magic and unravels mysteries.

### **Symbolism**

Everyone knows that corn is the main food of the Indians of Guatemala. In Maya-Quiche mythology, man is either vegetable or animal. Both aspects can coexist in the same individual. The society is filtered by the myth until it reaches the food. Man was first made of mud, after wood. But in both ways it failed: only the corn man triumphed. Men are made of corn, which is alluded to a lot in the novel, as in the first chapter “Gaspar Ilóm”. The author says that Gaspar’s sweat is like “la humedad caliente de maíz chonete” (Asturias, 2014, p. 21)<sup>3</sup>. In the second chapter “Machojón”, “La mano del que violentamente quiebra la mata de maíz, para que la mazorca acabe de sazonar, es como la mano que parte en dos el sonido de la campana, para que madure el muerto” (Asturias, 2014, p. 47)<sup>4</sup>. There are Americans who confuse, without any limit, unreality with reality. As Unamuno says, “de lo legendario con la vida misma de los personajes”<sup>5</sup>. In the work *Hombres de maíz*, we can thus see his magical way of seeing the world, like the most primitive ecological thoughts.

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<sup>2</sup> Author’s translation: “the first to clarify with his work the distinction between Europeanizing Latin American literature in its forms and contents, and a new Latin American literature with the Third World intentionality.”

<sup>3</sup> Author’s translation: “the hot moisture of cob”. Original texts are here: “La Piojosa Grande manoteó bajo el cuerpo del Gaspar, bajo la humedad caliente de maíz chonete del Gaspar.”

<sup>4</sup> Author’s translation: “The hand of the one who violently breaks the corn bush, in order to that the cob finishes seasoning, is like the hand that splits in two the sound of the bell, so that the dead mature.”

<sup>5</sup> Author’s translation: “from the legendary with the same life of the characters.” Original texts are from an interview that is reproduced by Ricardo Trigueros, included in *Perfil en el aire, Cultura I*, 1955.

### The Simile and the Metaphor

In the novel, the earth is a metaphor for the female womb and the womb is therefore female. Therefore, the color of the breasts is the same as that of the rainy earth. The earth is a mother who suckles:

Pesaba la chiche para dar de mamar como la tierra mojada. Sí, la tierra era un gran pezón, un enorme seno al que estaban pegados todos los peones con hambre de cosecha, de leche con de verdad sabor a leche de mujer, a lo que saben las cañas de la milpa mordeíndolas tiernitas. (Asturias, 2014, pp. 37-38)<sup>6</sup>

As can be seen in this quote, the earth nourishes as a mother. Thus far comes the importance of food. The survival of the group is totally linked to this telluric dimension and to the cultivation of corn as a daily, festive and ceremonial food.

In addition, in the novel Uperto Tecún thinks that his *nana* is “un manojito de tuzas envuelto en trapos negros, con la cabeza blanca y ya casi sin dientes” (Asturias, 2014, p. 68).<sup>7</sup> There’s another simile to mock the greed of Spaniards: “En su imaginación saltaban, como en un surtidor, coladera en que el agua parece una risa, las pepitas y las arenas auríferas” (Asturias, 2014, p. 302).<sup>8</sup> In the novel there are so many innovative similes and metaphors.

### The Alienation of Time and Space

Those legends are linguistic and verbal worlds where Asturias tells a reality that sometimes seems incoherent, but in which many images and chaotic enumerations proliferate. The author places the events in a fluid succession. Another important aspect is the lack of spatial-temporal location in different episodes; place names absolutely do not give the impression of a strict geographical link. And there are no dates.

The plot of *Hombres de maíz* is also not linear. It is full of time jumps and evocations. For example, La Candelaria Reinoso continues to sell pork meat on the side of the road at the peak of María Tecún. But she never wants to leave her observatory, because she waits for Machojón. This fragment is repeated many times. The evocations constantly interrupt the present facts and connect the stories to lend structural unity to the novel and drive the advancement of the plot.

### Psychological Surrealism

Asturias is very good at creating terrible and mysterious atmospheres through magic. Asturias paints human fear with total vividness, mixing landscape and hallucination, reality and sensation. For example, in the following fragment where he talks about the colonel Chalo Godoy and the second lieutenant Secundino Musús, who ride horses passing “El Tembladero”, the psychological surrealism reaches the summit:

[El jefe y su ayudante] antes tan atentos a los cambios del camino, echaron de menos los huatales disueltos en lluvia de grillos y sustituidos por alfombras de pino seco, regueros que el brillo de la luna convertía en ríos navegables de miel blanca, a lo largo de laderas desnudas, rodeadas de piñales, jaulas de troncos en los que loqueaba otra vez el viento

<sup>6</sup> Author’s translation: “She weighed the mamma to suckle like the wet earth. Yes, the earth was a great nipple, a huge breast to which all the laborers were attached hungry for harvest, of milk with a real taste of women’s milk, which the sugarcane of the milpa bites tender.”

<sup>7</sup> Author’s translation: “a bunch of pocket mice wrapped in black rags, with a white head and almost without teeth”.

<sup>8</sup> Author’s translation: “In their imagination they jumped, as in a fountain, colander in which the water looks like a laugh, the gold nuggets and sands.”

enfurecido y saltaban las sombras de las ramas igual que fieras acoquinadas por el cuerear de los bejucos. (Asturias, 2014, p. 89)<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

Asturias recreates a magical environment starting from the technique of *Popol Vuh*, resorting to iteration, parallelism, in a synthetic expression that uses repetition to deepen the hidden dimensions and concepts, while the narrative is dialogue and description at the same time. This climate permeates everything that happens in the novel, where each action, even the most barbaric, assumes a mythical and sacred meaning. His masterpiece, *Hombres de maíz*, according to many, is the maximum expression of the cited Magical Realism and until this day, it is still taken as a reference within universal literature.

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<sup>9</sup> Author's translation: "[The chief and his assistant] before so attentive to the changes of the road, they missed the fields dissolved in rain of crickets and replaced by carpets of dry pine, trails that the brightness of the moon turned into navigable rivers of white honey, along bare slopes, surrounded by pines, cages of trunks in which the angry wind roared again and the shadows of the branches jumped like fierce scared of the whipping of the vines."