

Normal Magic, Normalcy, and Explanation in Popular Fantasy and Magical Realism

It is intuitively clear that the genre of magical realism is distinct from a variety of superficially comparable genres. An important component of this intuition is the distinct nature of the effects of magical realism on the reader: One often has the impression that the narrative is not playing by the same rules or following the same conventions as other works with similar constellations of plot elements. In the present article, I will explore the basis of this distinctiveness by considering how the characteristics of magical realism apply to popular fantasy. In particular, I will argue that popular fantasy is similar to magical realism in that they both present fantasy elements as a normal part of the story world. A wide range of relationships between the story world and our own world can be found in popular fantasy works. However, in at least a few cases, fantasy elements are presented without explanation in a world that is recognizably our own, comparable to what is said to be found in magical realism. In contrast, popular fantasy seems to be uniformly different from magical realism in the apparent coherence that those elements have in the story world.

The starting point for the present analysis is the criteria proposed by Chanady (1985). She argued that magical realism is distinct from at least some other genres in that fantasy elements are presented as part of the real world and are interpreted as normal or uneventful by the narrator and story world characters. I refer to this as the characteristic of "normal magic." Further, she argued that works in the magical realist genre lack an explanation of the apparent discrepancy between the fantasy elements and the real world. The thesis of the present article, though, is that these properties can also be found in examples of popular fantasy. In order to make this point, it is necessary to be clear on what these criteria entail, and in particular, to delineate precisely

what is meant by the terms "normal real world" and "explanation." The first section of this article discusses these concepts. Following those comments, I describe three classes of examples of popular fantasy works with normal magic, that is, fantasy elements that are accepted as normal by the characters and narrator. The first involves magic in a distinct fantasy world, the second pertains to magic in the world of here and now, and the third concerns magic in an identifiable historical context. Finally, I discuss an alternative concept, coherence, which seems more relevant to the distinction between magical realism and popular fantasy.

Normalcy and Explanation

A critical argument is that some story worlds can be identified as "normal" in that they correspond to our world. It is important to note, though, that story worlds are generally fictional; thus, they do not correspond precisely to our world because the characters and events of that world did not occur in our world. Instead, the notion of normalcy applies at a more analogical level: Although the characters and events and perhaps even the setting do not really exist, one can expect the normal rules of logic and reason to prevail. However, any story world that contains fantasy elements cannot be normal in that sense by definition because those elements do not correspond to the rules of logic and reason. As a consequence, in order to discuss the normalcy of story worlds in fantasy and magical realism, one needs a less circular account of what would constitute a normal real world. Here, I use a more concrete sense of normalcy: A normal story world is one in which the setting and circumstances of the story world are recognizable and can be identified in the real world at least in kind. These circumstances and setting allow the reader to recognize the world as his or her own. In Chanady's (1985) terms, when fantasy elements are presented as occurring in the normal real world, an "antinomy" is created between two autonomous codes: the normal, realistic code (that does not permit magic to occur) and a fantastic code (that does support magical events). According to Chanady, that antinomy is "resolved" in magical realism because the narrator and character accept the fantasy elements as natural and uneventful. Below, I provide examples of popular fantasy in which the fantasy elements are also accepted as normal even though they occur in settings that correspond to our world.

In some cases, the existence of the fantasy elements is explained in a manner that provides some reconciliation between those elements with the

normalcy of the real world. I suggest that there are at least four different senses in which one might "explain" a fantastic or magical element. I refer to these as *description of mechanics*, *semblance of fantasy*, *semblance of reality*, and *pseudo-explanation*. I elaborate on each below.

Description of mechanics. One sense of explanation of an event is a description of its causes and effects. With respect to fantastic elements in a story, this would entail providing information about how those elements fit within the causal structure of the story world. In other words, an explanation in this sense would indicate how the magic "works," what its powers and limitations are, who can perform the magic and who cannot, and so on. There is generally a great deal of such information in popular fantasy. However, this kind of explanation seems removed from the arguments expressed by Chanady (1985). In her discussion of the fantastic and magical realism, an antinomy is created when fantasy elements are found in a story world that corresponds to normalcy and there is no explanation of the apparent discrepancy between the story world (where the fantasy elements are found) and our world (where they are not). A simple description of the magical mechanics typically would provide little information concerning this discrepancy. Indeed, it is quite common to find descriptions of mechanics in realist stories whenever the setting and circumstances are likely to be unfamiliar to the reader. A spy novel might provide detailed information about how clandestine contacts are arranged and conducted, a western novel might detail how life is conducted on the open range, and so on. For the same reasons, a fantasy novel will provide details about how magic operates in its particular story world. However, I argue that this sense of explanation is not what Chanady had in mind since it does not pertain to the discrepancy between the real and the story world. (At the conclusion of the paper, though, I will argue that descriptions of mechanics may be relevant to the notion of coherence, and that coherence may be critical in the distinction between magical realism and fantasy.)

Semblance of fantasy. The other senses of "explanation" pertain to the distinction between fantasy and reality. The most obvious way in which the two might be reconciled is to provide an indication in the narrative that the fantastic elements only seemed fantastic, and that there is a realistic account of those elements within the story world. A classic explanation of this sort can be found in *Alice in Wonderland* when Alice awakes from a dream. These kinds of works are sometimes referred to as "explained fantastic" or "pseudo-fantastic" (Todorov 1970). A similar kind of explanation occurs when events

are found only to appear to be magical and can be eventually be ascribed to more commonplace mechanisms. This is sometimes described as the "uncanny" (Todorov 1970). Although fantasy works with this kind of explanation can be found, my impression is that they are not overwhelmingly common.

Semblance of reality. A related but different kind of explanation that is much more common in popular fantasy is one in which the apparent correspondence between the reality of the story world and that of our world is undermined. In effect, the reader comes to understand that the story world may look like our world but it is not, really. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J. K. Rowling, the story opens in what appears to be a normal English household. However, it eventually becomes clear that in the story world, there is an entire society of magical beings that generally remain hidden from the larger, non-magical population. Thus, the seeming reality of the story world is only a front, and the bulk of the plot events actually take place in a fantasy world in which magic is possible and common. Other examples of this kind of explanation occur in Roger Zelazny's *Nine Princes in Amber* (discussed more fully below) and Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Mirror of Her Dreams*. In both of these novels, the apparent real world is explained as only one of several parallel worlds.

Pseudo-explanation. A pseudo-explanation is one in which the occurrence of fantasy elements is explained not in terms of the laws and principles of our own world, but in terms of the laws and principles of a different (fantasy) world. For example, in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the existence of the vampire is discussed as science and scholarly research:

... Then tell me — for I am student of the brain — how you accept the hypnotism and reject the thought reading. ... Can you tell me why men believe in all ages and places that there are some few who live on always if they be permit; that there are men and women who cannot die? We all know — because science has vouched for the fact — that there have been toads shut up in rocks for thousands of years, shut in one so small hole that only hold him since the youth of the world. (201-02)

However, the principles underlying such an explanation are not real, but rather a different kind of fantasy. Although those principles may be more palatable or plausible than simply assuming that vampires are a normal part of the story world, they do not comprise a scientific explanation in reality. A clear example of the fantastic nature of a pseudo-explanation is found in *Gate of life!* by C.

J. Cherryh. The work is to all intents and purposes a fantasy novel. However, the fantasy elements are in some sense explained in a prologue and various narrative comments by referring to a science-fiction world involving aliens, teleportation, and time travel. Pseudo-explanations are common in science fiction, in which entire scientific fields may be invented as explanations of the events of the story world. Although such "science" may be loosely tied to present knowledge, it is entirely fictional and cannot really explain how apparently magical events could occur.

As noted above, the last three kinds of explanations provide information about the apparent discrepancy between the story world and reality. Chanady (1985) used the term "authorial reticence" to describe the lack of such explanations and argued that explanations were generally not provided in magical realism. Ostensibly, part of the effect of magical realism on the reader is due to the reluctance of the narrator to provide information concerning the discrepancy between the (apparently magical) story world and the real world. Consistent with the view that the presence or absence of such explanations can distinguish magical realism from popular fantasy, many examples of fantasy have explanations of this discrepancy. However, these explanations may be of different types, and it is possible to find examples of normal magic without any explanations at all. (Some of these are discussed below.) Further, Bortolussi (this issue) has argued that some of these kinds of explanations can be found in magical realism as well. In any event, it is important to note that, with the exception of the semblance-of-fantasy account, none of these explanations really provides an account of how fantasy elements could occur in the real world; those elements do not occur in the real world so there is no way to explain them. Rather, these explanations provide a reconciliation *in the story world* between the fantasy elements and the normalcy of that world as presented by the narrator.

Normal Magic in Fantasy Worlds

As a starting point for examining normal magic and normalcy in popular fantasy, I consider the manner in which magic is presented in what might be thought of as prototypical fantasy works that are set in distinct fantasy world. In subsequent sections, I build on this analysis to consider the presentation of magic in worlds that are more like our own. In works set in a distinct fantasy world, explanations of the discrepancy between the fantastic elements and what is possible in reality are rare. Instead, readers are commonly presented

simply with a story world in which some form of magic is possible, and the events of the story unfold in that world. For example, the opening sentences of *The Farthest Shore* by Ursula K. Le Guin describe a setting in which magic is important:

In the Court of the Fountain the sun of March shone through young leaves of ash and elm, and water leapt and fell through shadow and clear light. About that roofless court stood four high walls of stone. Behind those were rooms and courts, passages, corridors, towers, and at last the heavy outmost walls of the Great House of Roke, which would stand any assault of war or earthquake or the sea itself, being built not only of stone, but of incontestable magic. For Roke is the Isle of the Wise, where the art magic is taught, and the Great House is the school and central place of wizardry; and the central place of the House is that small court far within the walls, where the fountain plays and the trees stand in rain or sun or starlight. (1)

The passage clearly describes a setting in which magic is possible and hints about some its properties: It can be taught, that it can be used for defense against war and natural disaster, that magic is stronger in some locales than others, and so on. The passage and many others throughout the book provide an elaborate description of how magic works. This is a description-of-mechanics type of explanation. However, that description does not constitute an explanation in the sense of elucidating why it is that magic is possible in the story world but not in our world. Thus, normal magic is presented without explanation in this work.

A classic example comes from J.R.R. Tolkien's prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*. An elaborate description of the fantasy creature "hobbit," is provided:

For they are a little people, smaller than Dwarves: less stout and stocky, that is, even when they are not actually much shorter. Their height is variable, ranging between two and four feet of our measure. ... they dressed in bright colours, being notably fond of yellow and green; but they seldom wore shoes, since their feet had tough leathery soles and were clad in a thick curling hair ... (2)

However, this description does not entail any account of how it is that hobbits exist in the story world but not in ours. In fact, the narrator suggests that hobbits in fact do exist in the present real world, but "... avoid us with dismay and are becoming hard to find" (1). This hints at, but does not really provide, a semblance-of-reality explanation because it suggests that the story world is

somehow connected to something like our world, but with some fantasy elements hidden or in remission. However, this connection is only tangential and never developed with any precision. The book also provides a detailed description of other fantasy elements that may be superficially familiar to the reader, such as dwarves, elves, and goblins. However, each of these elements is imbued with features that might be difficult to infer from knowledge of common folklore. For example, elves are tall and essentially immortal, dwarves have an innate distrust of elves, and so on. However, no explanation is provided for the discrepancy between these creatures and what is true in the real world or even true in traditional folklore. As these examples suggest, the characteristic of normal magic is typically found in prototypical fantasy works; magic is presented as the normal state of affairs by the narrator. Although detailed descriptions of mechanics are common, explanations of the relationship between the fantasy elements and the normal real world are often missing.

Normal Magic in a "Here-and-Now" Setting

It might be argued that these examples do not undermine the view that normal magic is a distinctive feature of magical realism precisely because the fantasy story world is not our world. That is, fantasy novels typically make it clear very early on that what is being described in the story is a world that is fundamentally different than ours. For example, the opening scene in *The Farthest Shore* takes place on the fictitious island Roke in a place called Earthsea; *The Lord of the Rings* begins in The Shire in Middle Earth; and so on. Sometimes maps are provided of the fantasy world in support of the distinction between our world and the story world. However, this is not inevitable, and it is possible to find instances in which the fantasy elements seem to be presented as part of the normal world. In such cases, it is quite possible as well that the fantasy elements are accepted as normal and uneventful.

The story "Green Magic" by Jack Vance provides a clear example in which commonplace magical events are accepted in a world that is recognizable as our own. The story opens with the protagonist discovering a journal that describes different forms of magic:

"The existence of disciplines concentric to the elementary magics must now be admitted without further controversy," wrote McIntyre. "Guided by a set of analogies from the white and black magics (to be detailed in due course), I have

delineated the basic extension of purple magic, as well as its corollary, Dynamic Nomism." (1)

Thus, the narrative depicts a setting in which various forms of magic are possible. Further, as the story develops, it becomes clear that magic is accepted as uneventful in the story world. The protagonist's reaction to the journal is initially disdainful: "So swiftly had the technical arts advanced that McIntyre's expositions, highly controversial sixty years before, now seemed pedantic and overly rigorous" (1). The protagonist's use of magic is nothing unusual in the story world: "He was adept in white magic, and had mastered the black art — occasionally he evoked a demon to liven a social gathering which otherwise threatened to become dull — but he had by no means illuminated every mystery of purple magic, which is the realm of Incarnate Symbols" (5). Although there are various indications that the protagonist is exceptional in his expertise, the fact that magic exists in the story world does not seem to be notable.

However, despite these indications of normal magic and its use, the world is recognizable as our own, with familiar technologies, social conventions, and locales. A tape recorder is used in an interview with a demon; a television camera is used to explore the realm of green magic; a pivotal conversation takes place in a "wall booth in a cocktail bar" (8); near the end of the story, the protagonist constructs a habitat in the Andes mountains; the final scene in the book takes place at a service station in South Dakota. The narrator in fact expressly indicates that the story world is our world: "The people of Earth had perceived the motion of their clocks. On this understanding, two hours had elapsed since Howard Fair had followed the green sprites from the bar" (10). Thus, the story depicts magic as a normal part of our world, without any explanation or even acknowledgement of the discrepancy with reality.

Another example is *Nine Princes in Amber* by Roger Zelazny. This example is interesting because the narration provides an explicit recognition that the magical elements do not correspond to what the reader expects in the real world, but these elements are eventually accepted as normal and unremarkable in kind. The story begins with all of the trappings of a realist novel: The protagonist awakes in a sanatorium with amnesia; he breaks out of the institution, and, using various clues, finds his way to his sister's residence. All of the events and trappings in the first part of the novel are consistent with the normal here and now: The sister lives in New York; people travel by taxi and Greyhound bus; the protagonist threatens to contact the AMA with

respect to his treatment at the sanatorium, and so on. When a few fantasy elements are introduced, the protagonist finds them unusual and remarkable. For example, when attacked the protagonist unexpectedly performs a feat of superhuman strength:

.. .I killed another in a manner which surprised me.

Suddenly, and without thinking, I picked up a huge overstuffed chair and hurled it perhaps thirty feet across the room. It broke the back of the man it struck.
(41)

Somewhat later, the protagonist's brother shows signs of being able to alter the nature of the world about them:

... as we drove along, all the sidewalks began to sparkle....

We kept driving, and I kept wondering what the hell was happening. The sky had grown a bit greenish, then shaded over into pink.

I bit my lip against the asking of questions. (45)

Although the reaction of the main character to these fantastic elements is somewhat muted, it is nonetheless one of surprise and puzzlement. However, the other central characters do not evince surprise as these elements are introduced. Further, they are eventually accepted by the main character as normal when he regains his memory. This resolution is hinted early on:

Amber.

... The word was charged with a might longing and a massive nostalgia. It had, wrapped up inside it, a sense of forsaken beauty, grand achievement, and a feeling of power that was terrible and almost ultimate. Somehow, the word belonged in my vocabulary. Somehow, I was part of it and it was a part of me. It was a place name, I knew then. It was the name of a place I once had known.
(31)

Later in the book, the fantasy elements are accepted as a matter of course. After walking the mystical "Pattern," the protagonist regains his memory of spending 400 years on Earth as a soldier of fortune and reacquires his knowledge of how to manipulate magically the world around him. In sum, then, the initial reaction of the main character clearly marks the fantasy

elements as discrepant with the real world, but the eventual resolution is that these fantasy elements are normal and unremarkable for the protagonist and the other central characters. These two examples together demonstrate that in popular fantasy, normal magic can be found in here-and-now settings. In *Nine Princes in Amber*, an explanation is provided for the discrepancy between the story world and normalcy (of the semblance-of-reality type), but in "Green Magic" there is no such explanation.

Normal Magic in a Historical Context

Another kind of connection between a fantasy story world and the real world can be made using historical settings. In this style of story, the story world is explicitly linked to a time and place in history. Thus, although the story world is not the "here and now," it is arguably still our world. A clear example of this is *The Dragon Waiting* by John M. Ford. The story takes place in a variety of explicitly identified historical settings: fifteenth-century Wales, Gaul, and Florence. The story revolves around identifiable historical figures and events: the Medicis of renaissance Italy; Richard III of England; Edward, Prince of Wales; and so on. Yet the story also includes the overtly fantastic elements of sorcerers and vampires. The fact that sorcerers are accepted as normal by the story world characters might be viewed as realistic since it is plausible to suppose that sorcerers and their magical abilities were consistent with the superstitious world view of the time. Vampires are a somewhat more complicated analytic puzzle since they are unlikely to have been part of the superstitious belief systems at that point in history. Of course, the story depends on the actual magical properties of both sorcerers and vampires, and so is a work of fantasy rather than historical fiction. However, all of those magical events are accepted as a normal part of the story world by both the narrator and the characters. No explanation of the discrepancy between the story world and the real (historical) world is offered in the narrative. (Interestingly, the author includes a "historical note" in which he notes that the story is a work of fiction that blends historical facts with overt fantasy elements. Although this is an explanation of sorts, it is really a kind of "meta-narrative" explanation and not really germane to the present discussion.) In sum, in works such as *The Dragon Waiting*, magic is presented as a normal part of the real world, albeit at an earlier point in history.

Orson Scott Card's *Seventh Son* provides a related example. In this case, the magic corresponds to the system of folklore and superstitions held in rural

eighteenth-century America, and the story makes use of hexes, charms, and curses. As in *The Dragon Waiting*, it is not surprising that the story world characters accept such events as normal since one can plausibly suppose that many people held such beliefs in the reality of that time. The book is fantasy because these elements actually exist in the story world, and the plot depends on their actual function rather than merely the characters' beliefs. There is also a clear sense in which the story world is intended to be linked to the reality of our world in that the time and place of the story is explicitly identified in the narrative. For example, the author provides maps of eastern America in which one can identify the locations of the story-world events relative to real cities (e.g., Boston, Philadelphia) and real geographical features (e.g., Lake Huron, the Appalachian mountains). However, in the story, the existence of the fantastic elements is assumed to have had significant effects on the history and society of the time. For example, "Appalachee" is depicted as an independent country, the Civil War did not take place, and so on. Thus, the story occupies a middle ground between works in which fantasy seems to take place in our world of the here and now (e.g., "Green Magic") and those in which the story world is clearly distinct from ours (e.g., *The Farthest Shore*). In general, the recognizable historical context of works such as *The Dragon Waiting* and *Seventh Son* should provide a strong cue that the logic and reason of our own world should apply; yet in these examples, the magic is presented as normal and without explanation.

The Function of Normal Magic in Popular Fantasy

The examples presented above document that normal magic is common in popular fantasy. However, the examples also demonstrate that there can be a wide range of relationships in such works between the story world and the real world. Sometimes the narrative may be set in a distinct fantasy world that may or may not be loosely tied to our world; sometimes it may be set in the here and now; and sometimes it may be set in an identifiable historical context. The discrepancy between the presence of magic in the story world and the lack of magic in our world may or may not be explained, and when it is, that explanation could be of several different types. Thus, it seems clear that neither the description of magic as present in the normal real world nor the lack or specific form of explanation can be used to distinguish popular fantasy consistently from magical realism.

Chanady (1985) argued that authorial reticence (i.e., the lack of an explanation of the discrepancy between the fantasy elements and the real world) plays a specific role in magical realist works. In particular, she argues that in magical realism, authorial reticence "... naturalizes the supernatural and the strange world view presented in the text. ... the supernatural is not explained away, but simply brought down to the level of reality..." (149). However, the examples presented here suggest that normal magic plays a similar role in popular fantasy. In all cases, the magic is presented as merely another element of the story world, and it is accepted as natural in the story world by the narrator, by the characters, and, presumably, by the reader. Indeed, popular fantasy works are rarely about the presence per se of fantasy elements; although the mechanics of the plot generally depend on magic in the story world, the theme and the interest value of the story typically hinge on other aspects of the narrative. For example, the initiating plot event in *The Farthest Shore* is the lack of magic in certain regions of the world; "Green Magic" revolves around the special characteristics of "green" magic but not those of magic in general; and both *The Dragon Waiting* and *Nine Princes in Amber* have the form of royal court intrigues involving the ascension to the throne. Thus, I would argue that in popular fantasy, just as in magical realism, the magic is "naturalized" and "brought down to the level of reality."

Apparent Coherence in Popular Fantasy and Magical Realism

An alternative analysis is that popular fantasy is apparently coherent, while magical realism is not. I hypothesize that the apparent coherence of popular fantasy derives from narrative suggestions that there may be general principles that might allow one to predict what fantastic elements are possible in the story world and what are not. Such general principles are often not stated explicitly in fantasy works, but there can be a wide range of textual cues that imply the existence of such principles. A critical cue, I argue, is the indication of limits on what magic can and cannot do. When such limits are found in the text, it suggests to the reader that there must be some systematic rules that govern the magic, and that as a consequence the magic is not arbitrary and capricious.

Statements of limits are easy to find in popular fantasy. The fact that magic requires training or study is one such limitation. This limitation is described almost from the first few pages in *The Farthest Shore* and "Green Magic." It is also found in the Harry Potter stories, *The Dragon Waiting*, and

Nine Princes in Amber. A related kind of limit is that magic can only be practiced by certain individuals who by their nature have special powers. This is found in virtually all of the examples I have considered in this article. A third kind of limit has to do with express indications of what cannot be accomplished with magic or of tradeoffs that might be necessary in the practice of magic. Such a tradeoff is explicitly stated in *The Dragon Waiting* when the wizard John Morton dies a horrible death: "'He did it to himself,' Hywel said. 'Sixty years of magic lies there, all caught up to its worker'" (344). A similar tradeoff is depicted in *The Farthest Shore* after Ged has performed a titanic feat:

"Let my lord be. He has saved us all, and doing so has spent his strength and maybe his life with it. Let him be!"

So Arren spoke, fiercely and with command. (192)

The statements of magical limitations in popular fantasy are typically incomplete in that the reader is unlikely to be able to predict with certainty what might be possible in the story world or how the limits might be overcome under various circumstances. For example, it would be impossible for the reader to have predicted the fates of John Morton and Ged on the basis of the preceding narrative. However, such tradeoffs and limitations do provide a strong cue that there could be a coherent system of rules in the story world that would suffice for such predictions. Similarly, the existence of magical training in the story world is almost inevitably tied to such a rule system, since such training is likely to involve the acquisition of those rules. Another type of cue that fantasy elements are coherent is the presence of detailed descriptions of mechanisms. Descriptions of mechanisms are not inevitably tied to coherence since, as described earlier, they may be found whenever the setting is likely to be unfamiliar to the reader. However, when there is a great deal of such description concerning fantasy elements, it can create the impression that the magic is orderly and follows coherent principles. A good example of this process is the Harry Potter series of books. Each book introduces a plethora of new magical creatures, powers, and relationships in a seemingly arbitrary and undisciplined manner. Some of these clearly have a humorous intent, while others seem designed merely to advance the plot in specific respects. However, each new element is introduced with a wealth of mechanistic description that aids the reader in ascribing all of the fantastic elements to a coherent set of principles.

In contrast to popular fantasy and as argued by Bortolussi (this issue), magical realist stories have little to indicate that the fantasy elements are causally coherent. In particular, there may be little in the way of limitations or mechanistic descriptions such as those found in popular fantasy. Instead, the magic may be connected thematically or metaphorically at the level of the narration. This form of cohesion may supplant or undermine the causal coherence of the fantasy elements in the story world. Consider, for example, the range of fantasy elements in *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel: When in despair, the protagonist Tita cries a stream of tears that flows down the stairs; when she is in a bad mood, the beans refuse to cook; in a love scene, phosphorescent sparks are generated that start a fire. These elements occur with little regularity in terms of causes and effects and often appear to be unique and unheralded. As a consequence, it is difficult to construe the fantasy elements as governed by a systematic set of principles in the story world. A substantial portion of the fantasy elements involve or are mediated by food or cooking. For example, the story opens with a reference to Tita's loud crying in the womb when onions are chopped; when the protagonist's tears become mixed in a wedding cake meringue, the guests who eat the cake fall to weeping over lost loves; a dish of quail in rose-petal sauce causes the diners to be overcome with passion. However, this mediation does not really constitute a mechanism or a magical limitation like those discussed previously. Unlike the examples of popular fantasy considered here, there is no indication of what kinds of effects are possible and what are not, there is no suggestion that training, practice, or identifiable capacities are required to produce those effects, and few causal details are provided. Instead, what may link many of the fantasy elements is that they seem to be metaphorical extensions of the character's emotions. Although this provides a degree of thematic cohesion to the fantasy elements, that cohesion is at the level of the narration and does little to illuminate the causal mechanisms operating in the story world.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed normalcy and explanation as they apply to popular fantasy. I have argued that in fantasy, magic and other fantasy elements are commonly accepted as a normal part of the story world by the characters and the narrator. Although fantasy often takes place in a fantasy world that is distinct from our own world, it is relatively easy to find examples that take place either in the here-and-now of our world or in an identifiable

historical context. When the story world is linked to our world, different kinds of explanations of the discrepancy might be offered by the narrative: The fantasy elements might only be a semblance, the reality of the story world might only be a semblance, or some form of pseudo-explanation might be offered. However, it is quite possible to find stories with no explanation of the discrepancy at all. Thus, I argue that the existence of normal magic and the particular type of explanation offered for the discrepancy between the story world and reality do not clearly distinguish popular fantasy from magical realism. Instead, the coherence of the fantasy elements seems much more salient. In popular fantasy, there are virtually always clear indications of the limits and nature of the fantasy elements and often a great deal of mechanistic description concerning the role of magic in the causal structure of the story world. Such indications may be largely missing from instances of magical realism.

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