

**POSSIBILITY AND CERTAINTY.
THE RHETORIC OF MAGICAL REALISM
IN *SLEEP* BY HARUKI MURAKAMI**

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Abstract

This paper is intended to exemplify, in a short story by Haruki Murakami, the unusual type of rhetoric modalizations that magical realism resorts to, in order to achieve its specific equilibrium between two levels and reality or two perspectives upon reality. We are particularly interested in seeing how the markers of certainty and those of suspicion are used in relation to two epistemic categories – the natural and the unnatural –, starting from the premise that magical realism cannot appeal to the canonical approach of the latter, as long as it aims at building a universe in which the logical conflict must dissolve into a re-assessed truth.

Keywords: Magical realism, Haruki Murakami, certainty, possibility, reality

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Although a genuinely fashionable label nowadays, magical realism is a literary concept still to be defined or at least nuanced. After a rather ambiguous theoretical start, on the European continent, at the early 20th century, the strange oxymoron moved to the American continent (especially due to the Latin American writers, assiduously attending at that time the European cultural circles) to get a much better-defined literary shape; from that moment on, its development was continuous and particularly profuse.¹

Our main focus in the present paper is related to the magical realist literary construction in terms of its specific rhetoric. We thus aim at highlighting a peculiarity that has already been defined and discussed in the theoretical framework of the concept, as regards the co-presence of two separate and apparently irreconcilable levels of reality in such fictional constructions. All these literary universes are original and unexpected ones if analysed from the perspective of their relation to the reader's expectations, due to the fact that they are always split worlds, worlds in which real and unreal, normal and abnormal, possible and impossible coexist and, what is more, are equally important and decisive in the plot. The interest of this construction lies not only in the availability it shows to what we might call the "impossible," but also in the way in which the *impossible* is included and dealt with in the text, that is with no intent to finally dismiss it by revealing some previously hidden truth. The acceptance (either totally serene and unproblematic, like in a good amount of the Latin American fictions, or partially problematized, but eventually not questioned, like in some of the European/Western examples of magical realism) of unnatural figures or phenomena² in a world otherwise very realistically described and easy to recognize makes this kind of literature different from other types of literary discourse. The main reason is obviously related to the rhetoric balance these fictions need to obtain in order not to be excluded from the sphere of realism to which, on the other hand, they are to pertain. While asserting things that are logically unacceptable, the narrators of such plots have to ensure the necessary reliable tone that would keep

¹ For a detailed presentation of how this cultural concept has evolved in the field of literature in particular, see, for instance, Chanady, "The Territorialization of the Imaginary"; or Scheel. *Réalisme magique*. We have attempted a review of the different phases this concept went through and of the definitions it acquired over time in "Revrăjirea lumii."

² What Faris would call an "irreducible element", that is "something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse" (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 7).

the whole construction together, and at the same time to avoid the temptation to dissolve it into an acceptable final realistic explanation³.

Though the reading of such an intriguing universe needs to put together all possible perspectives upon it, i.e. narratological, thematic, cultural ones, our present research is particularly focusing upon the rhetoric modalities it resorts to. We chose to exemplify the specificity of this disconcerting and at the same time persuasive writing with a short story by the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, *Sleep*. What we have in view is a compared analysis between the respective linguistic devices and semantic markers used to convey the idea of certainty by contrast with uncertainty, and that of normality by contrast with abnormality/strangeness.

The narrator in *Sleep* is a thirty-year old modern housewife who all of a sudden stops sleeping at night. Like many of Murakami's characters, she is a common person, with nothing to particularly differentiate her from the majority and willingly plunged into a mediocre life, but at the same time experiencing the unutterable tragic interior tearing that many of modern Japan's inhabitants would experience due to the cultural forced transformation Japan has imposed upon itself by westernization. Unlike in the case of Latin America, for instance – as Susan J. Napier noticed in her study about Japanese examples of magical realism –, where magical realism came as an expression of the opposition to the hegemonic western discourse and perspectives, magical realism in the case of Japan would rather illustrate the drama of self-compliance to a discourse and a perspective that was not its own. Therefore, “to many writers and intellectuals, modern Japanese culture is a culture whose identity has been warped and transmogrified, not by outside pressures so much as by its own response to outside pressures.”⁴ The whole construction of Murakami's story might be read in this key, just like it could be read in the key of a post-modern universal tragic comprehension of the individual's

³ The first theorist to problematize magical realism from a strict and comprehensive narrative perspective, beyond any other ideological implication, of this very complex type of literature was the Canadian researcher Amaryll Chanady, with her 1985 *Magic Realism and the Fantastic. Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy*. If most of the approaches of magical realism had considered it by then from a cultural perspective, necessarily narrowing the geographical-cultural scope, this seminal study brought forward the importance of magical realism in terms of narratological functions, focusing on how different narrative categories operate and are to be comprehended in such very specific dual/oppositional fictions.

⁴ Susan J. Napier, “The Magic of Identity”, 453.

incapacity to be aware of his/her own reality, while integrating it into an essential and meaningful reality of the whole.

At the moment she narrates, seventeen nights had passed without sleep and with no trace of fatigue for the narrator. This new rhythm of life, with no need to rest and nights spent alone reading, eating chocolate and drinking alcohol or driving around the city, with neither her husband or her son knowing anything about it, starts after a nightmare she cannot remember, followed by a very strange incident. While trying to regain her breath and to calm down after the dream that felt “ominous and terrifying”, she catches a glimpse of a presence at her feet; this turns out to be a little old and strange man dressed in black, who watches her with bloodshot eyes and without blinking, and who starts pouring water onto her feet from a porcelain pitcher. Horrified and incapable to utter a sound, she finally shouts a tremendous interior scream that makes the whole scene vanish away, but so does her capacity to sleep.

Two major areas seem to be defined, from the first reading, in the short story, which are demarcated by the line separating the state of consciousness/wakefulness from that of unconsciousness/sleep. The story basically relies on these two fundamental topoi, with their respective implications and consequences, coupled with another dichotomy, that between normality and abnormality. On the other hand, two different modalities to transmit information are also to be separated in the narrator’s writing. One is ranged in the low spectrum of certainty, i.e. in the area of doubtfulness or unlikeliness, while the other in the high spectrum, in the proximity of evidentiality and absolute certainty. The way in which the combinations between these axes are made, we will see, might make up a hermeneutical perspective upon the story.

The emergence of the unnatural in the narrative is characterized by lack of ambiguity: “I remember with perfect clarity that first night I lost the ability to sleep.”⁵ The clarity with which this strange event occurs in the narrator’s life seems to be a consequence of her own will, of her intentionality, considering the particular manner in which things get shapes and definition *only* at the very moment she focuses on them:

⁵ The edition we refer to all over the article is Haruki Murakami, *Sleep*, in *The Elephant Vanishes. Stories*. New York: Vintage eBooks. Vintage International, 1994, translated from the Japanese by Alfred Birnbaum and Jay Rubin, epub, no set pagination.

I strained to see the black shadow. The moment I tried to focus on it, the shadow began to assume a definite shape, as if it had been waiting for me to notice it. Its outline became distinct, and began to be filled with substance, and then with details. It was a gaunt old man wearing a skintight black shirt. [...] Now I saw that he was holding something – a tall, narrow, rounded thing that shone white. As I stared at this object wondering what it could be, it began to take on a definite shape, just as the shadow had earlier. It was a pitcher, an old-fashioned porcelain pitcher.

The transmission of information here is epistemically modalized with markers of certainty. Aware of the probability that she might be suspected of mixing dream and reality, given the moment when all this happens, she specifically mentions the distinction between the two, resorting to an epistemic verb and to repetitions:

This was no longer the dream, I knew. From that I had already awakened. (...) No, this was no dream. This was reality. And in reality an old man I had never seen before was standing at the foot of my bed.

Reality is a mental preoccupation for the narrator; she had reflected upon it on different occasions, essentially as being exterior to the essence of herself. Being part of reality, she is also something totally different from it, something more. So that when she looks at her face in the bathroom mirror, she feels that “Reality and I exist simultaneously at this present moment”. On the other hand, we can notice in her discourse after the strange episode an agglomeration of references to reality or to a ‘real’ perception of things. Going to the living room, she feels an urge for alcohol, which she used to drink before her marriage, just like she used to read a lot. She takes a mouthful of brandy: “The warmth spread from my throat to my stomach. The sensation felt tremendously *real*.” [author’s emphasis] All over the period of wakefulness, she actually gets back to different old habits, which she perceives as “more real” than the life she has now:

As I looked at the whitened flakes of chocolate from over a decade ago, I felt a tremendous urge to have *the real thing*. I wanted to eat chocolate while reading *Anna Karenina*, the way I did back then. I couldn’t bear to be denied it for another moment. [our emphasis]

When she looks in the mirror now, she realizes that she is pretty, and her discourse about it is marked by references to reality/objectivity again:

I sat down and looked at my face in the mirror for a good thirty minutes. I studied it from all angles, *objectively*. No, I had not been mistaken: I was *really* pretty. [our emphases]

Eventually, after a period during which she enjoys this new life, with nights spent all by herself, thinking about her past, and restoring her old habits, she seems to *reconcile* with reality, to rejoin the sphere of the real; but a distinction is made now between a reality that flows outside, changing everything, and a reality inside, essential and immutable:

I was expanding my life and it was wonderful. My hands weren't empty anymore. Here I was – alive, and I could feel it. It was *real*. I wasn't being consumed any longer. Or at least there was a part of me in existence that was not being consumed, and that was what gave me this intensely *real* feeling of being alive. A life without feeling might go on forever, but it would have no meaning at all. I saw that with *absolute clarity* now. [our emphases]

On the other hand, at a semantic level the content of her “real life” as a housewife is often characterized in terms of strangeness. She cannot, for instance, describe the face of her husband, unless by repeating that he is particularly strange-looking:

What makes his face so strange? I can't really say. It's not a handsome face, but it's not ugly either. Nor is it the kind that people would say has 'character.' Honestly, 'strange' is about all that fits. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say it has no distinguishing features. Still, there must be some element that *makes* his face have no distinguishing features, and if I could grasp whatever this is, I might be able to understand the strangeness of the whole.

Another occurrence of the term 'strange' is when she refers her present life to her life before marriage. She used to read very much when she was young, a

passionate and active reading that she gave up little by little when her housewife programme rescheduled her life:

Without noticing it, I had become accustomed in this way to a life without books. How *strange*, now that I think of it. Reading had been the center of my life when I was young” [our emphasis].

Reading now *Anna Karenina*, a book she had read and loved in the past, she realizes she cannot remember almost anything about it:

How *strange*. I must have been deeply moved at the time I first read it, but now there was nothing left. Without my noticing, the memories of all the shuddering, soaring emotions had slipped away and vanished. [our emphasis]

What we can conclude here is that strangeness mostly derives from every feeling –arising all of a sudden – of separation between her ego and her life. The *facts* that are not consistent with the *being* create in her mind the sensation of discord, of disharmony that eventually leads to seeing the whole situation as strange. But this way, a split also occurs within the concept of reality, as this is regarded now from two different standpoints. So, if a completely strange and logically unexplainable phenomenon brings forth awareness of reality, reality on the other hand, in its primary and incomplete acceptance, produces an uncomfortable feeling of strangeness. The uncanny, represented in Murakami’s story by an unnatural episode of permanent insomnia after the unexplainable visit from an unknown bizarre little man, is rendered in tones of certainty and is continuously related to a kind of re-definition of reality. The natural side of real life is, on the contrary, rendered in tones of doubt and irresoluteness, the narrator being unable to explain to herself why parts of her life are now the way they are. This unexpected association of tones eventually problematizes the concept of reality. The fact that the narrator is able to see reality in a different manner is due to her denoted, but also connoted, wakefulness – she gave up “sleep”, which now she finds “vulgar” (looking at her husband sleeping, she realizes that “there was something vulgar about the way his eyes were closed, the lids slack, covers made of faded human flesh. He looked like an absolute fool”) and she “expends” herself with actually one more life.

Her new awareness, her new capacity to “read” the world is also denoted and connoted at the same time in the many details we are provided with regard to her reading *Anna Karenina*. Tolstoy’s novel, whose heroine is intertextually connected to Murakami’s, is for the narrator the perfect support to exemplify her new understanding of the world, of its complexity and of its independence of action, going way beyond the will of its creator:

This enormous novel was full of revelations and riddles. Like a Chinese box, the world of the novel contained smaller worlds, and inside those were yet smaller worlds. Together, these worlds made up a single universe, and the universe waited there in the book to be discovered by the reader. The old me had been able to understand only the tiniest fragment of it, but the gaze of this new me could penetrate to the core with perfect understanding. I knew exactly what the great Tolstoy wanted to say, what he wanted the reader to get from his book; I could see how his message had organically crystallized as a novel, and what in the novel had surpassed the author himself.

This metafictional dimension of the short story opens an interesting door to the interpretation of the same concept of “reality”, whose meaning is necessarily related, this way, to the wide sphere of the “possible universes” that literature brings forward. The almost exclusively exterior and impermeable reality that the narrator perceived before her transformation into a permanent ‘insomniac’ thus turns, little by little, into a malleable substance, which she is part of, in her essential definition as a person. The new reality is not one that transcends or refuses consciousness, like for instance the Romantics would have wanted, on the contrary; the rejection of dream and, furthermore, of sleep, makes the story an example of counter-Romanticism. What the narrator is concerned with is a hyper-reality, we might say, in which no disconnection is allowed any more, as she decides after the scientific researches she makes on the topic of sleep:

If sleep is nothing more than a periodic repairing of the parts of me that are being worn away, I don’t want it any more. I don’t need it anymore. [...] I don’t want to be “repaired.” I will not sleep.

The new perspective upon reality is therefore opened by the narrator with an uncanny episode accompanied by markers of reliance, and with references to

her everyday life accompanied by markers of suspicion, to end with an acceptance of reality defined with markers of possibility. “The best thing to do with a hypothesis is to let it run any course it pleases” states the narrator at a given moment, weighing the ‘advantages’ and the ‘dangers’ of her new manner of living. Death itself, the narrator’s final topic of reflection before the intriguing and obscure end of the story, is regarded as an infinite, scaring and at the same time incredible *possibility*:

If the state of death was not to be a rest for us, then what was going to redeem this imperfect life of ours, so fraught with exhaustion? Finally, though, no one knows what death is like. They can only guess. [...] *Death can be anything at all.* [not our emphasis]

We might conclude that, like in many fictions that we can include in the category of magical realism, the whole spectrum of reliability is exemplified: natural and unnatural, normal and abnormal, certain and uncertain; but the natural associations are reversed – i.e. the natural/normal is associated with suspicion, while the unnatural/abnormal is associated with clarity in perception and understanding; everything pertaining to the sphere of the natural – family, daily routines – float in ambiguity, vagueness and distortion, under the sign of the *others*’ undisturbed sleep, while the unnatural is markedly characterized by clarity, evidence, structure, under the sign of the narrator’s permanent wakefulness. On the other hand, certainty is finely refined by the narrator all over her period of deep consciousness, being certain about the impossibility to be certain seeming to remain one of the few lessons of the reality we dispose of, for the moment, in our lives.

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