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OUTLAW KNOT-MAKERS: CONTEXT, CULTURE, AND MAGIC REALISM

by

Edward A. Shannon

A Dissertation submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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Approved by

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Outlaw Knot-Makers is a study of recent Postmodernism, focusing on five works. I consider three novels--Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Chronicle of a Death Foretold, William Kennedy's Ironweed, and Toni Morrison's Beloved--and two autobiographies, Art Spiegelman's Maus and Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior. These works should most properly be considered Magic Realism. Most definitions of this genre emphasize the fantasy elements of Magic Realism, but I suggest fantasy is less important to the genre than both the historical elements of the texts and the specific relationship the works have with their ethnic, mythic, and folkloric source materials.

Magic Realism has its roots in the work of Franz Kafka and the fiction of Latin America, and a defining characteristic of Magic Realism is its anxious relationship with the folk material that gives it its form. While these works (and Magic Realism in general) seem to simply elevate a particular ethnic or religious American subculture, the texts are actually quite critical of their own subcultures. The surface narratives of Magic Realism do indeed criticize the larger culture in which the subculture exists, but Magic Realism also engages in a consistently ironic treatment of the core values and aesthetic conventions of the subcultures it treats.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Dissertation Advisor Keith Cushman

Committee Members [signatures]

6 November 1995

Date of acceptance by Committee

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APPENDIX. CONSENT FORM. 238

Long ago in China knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. There was one knot so complicated that it blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot, and the nobles could not order it anymore. If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker.

-- from Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts

Preface
Myth in Modernism, Postmodernism, and Magic Realism

One major characteristic of Modernism is its use of myth as a device for making social commentary. Specifically, when Modernists infuse myth into their work, their intention very often is to decry the decline of Western civilization. T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and "Gerontion," Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," Yeats's "The Second Coming," Joyce's Ulysses, and most of William Faulkner's major works employ myth and legend to delineate a deteriorating modern age in the grip of hopelessness and sterility.

Since Postmodernism defines itself--indeed finds its name--in its distance from Modernism, one should have no trouble separating the two literary movements. But the work of many Postmodern American novelists is just as mythic as that of High Modernists like Eliot and Faulkner. However, the Postmodern writers called Magic Realists incorporate myth into their work for strikingly different ends than did those Modernists who sought to somehow recoup the order that had seemingly left their world. These writers do not describe a world in decline (although the works often deal with horrific historical moments); Magic Realism uses myth and legend much more hopefully.

When Magic Realists use myth to inform their imaginative narratives (both fiction and non-fiction), the result is decidedly

different from that seen in a High Modern novel like Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom or Jean Toomer's Cane. This study focuses on several contemporary American writers who to one degree or another embrace Magic Realism: William Kennedy, Toni Morrison, Art Spiegelman, and Maxine Hong Kingston. These artists use myth not to delineate the fall of the West but--among other ends--to elevate ethnic subcultures within American culture. Their project is narrower in scope and of a different design then that of the Moderns.

In fact, some Magic Realists--like Morrison and Spiegelman--have been criticized for being overly simplistic and polemical in their elevation of "their" subcultures: these books are "politically correct," self-indulgent, and focused on righting past wrongs rather than on creating aesthetically acute texts or even recognizing the complexities of the political debates in which they engage. However, such criticism is itself too simplistic. Although the books examined here do elevate the subcultures they depict, they also do more.

While Modernism criticizes mainstream Western culture's failures, Magic Realism uses myth and fabulism to isolate sub-cultures and examine them from what may be called a "place of safety." That is, in these politically fragmented times, it may seem easier for a text to criticize a minority culture after demonstrating its unqualified allegiance to that same group by manipulating its myth systems and focusing on wrongs done to the

group in question. Latin American Magic Realists--like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, discussed in Chapter 2--gave American writers like Kennedy and Morrison a model of an "American" literature written in a non-Anglo-Saxon mythic context which could examine themes and peoples perhaps untouchable by writers outside the groups in question. Could a gentile have created Maus, which in comic book form presents that rarest of characters--fictional or otherwise--the unlikable Holocaust survivor? Could a white male gain a readership for a novel about a former slave who kills her own infant daughter? Would a novel about a group of Irish-American alcoholics and bums be accepted by Irish-Americans if the author's name was Spiegelman or Hong rather than Kennedy?

The fantasy elements of these narratives act in the same way. Fantasy, after all, has often been used in the service of strong social commentary. Witness Twain's Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, Ray Bradury's Fahrenheit 451, and the writing of the Soviet absurdists. As the race and ethnicity of these writers make their work palatable to those readers of the same ethnic group as the writer, the fantasy makes the commentary accessible to the outside reader who may otherwise feel threatened.

Still make no mistake, American Magic Realism is an aggressive literature which explores the most polarizing issues of our age: race, gender, ethnic, and religious difference. Often mistaken as simply a "feel good" fiction for the children of the oppressed, Magic Realism is in fact a literature of great aesthetic

achievement and great political subtlety, as I hope to demonstrate in this study.

To reveal these qualities, I examine several Magic Realist works: Garcia Marquez's Chronicle of a Death Foretold, Kennedy's Ironweed, Spiegelman's Maus, Morrison's Beloved. In my conclusion, I treat Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior, which demonstrates more than many of the other works both the personal and political aspects of Magic Realism. Though my selection of texts may seem odd--especially Maus--I have chosen works that emphasize the "Real" over the "Magic" to explore that often-overlooked dimension of this sub-genre.

Certainly, there is no shortage of contemporary novelists and short story writers using Magic Realism to one degree or another in their work. Lee Smith's Oral History, Tim O'Brien's Going After Cacciato, Charles Johnson's Middle Passage, W. P. Kinsella's Shoeless Joe (as well as his many short stories), and the novels of John Irving could fairly be called Magic Realist. Oscar Hijuelos chooses a Magic Realist voice for The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love, but he abandons the magic almost entirely. Donald Barthelme's The King manipulates Anglo-Saxon myths and folklore in a Magic Realist tradition while maintaining Barthelme's unique Postmodern voice. His treatment of mythic and historical figures like Arthur, Lancelot, Winston Churchill, and even Mark Twain is strikingly similar to Morrison's use of Lilith and Harriet Jacobs. Even works like Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo and D. M. Thomas's

The White Hotel resemble Magic Realism closely enough to merit consideration under such a rubric.

More to the point, the works I have chosen demonstrate a consistent Magic Realist attitude toward those various categories with which we human beings categorize ourselves. The Introduction will further explicate some of the ideas touched on in this Preface. Chapter 2 covers Chronicle not only because it is one of Marquez's less frequently discussed works, but also because it illuminates the role of magic relative to realism in Magic Realism. While One Hundred Years of Solitude and Autumn of the Patriarch are filled with more outrageous elements of fantasy, Chronicle shows that, as with the other works here, fantasy plays a supporting--not a dominant-- role in Magic Realism.

Chapter 3 examines William Kennedy's Ironweed. This novel best demonstrates the connection of these works to Latin-American sources, a topic on which Kennedy is quite candid. Also, Ironweed demonstrates the mutability of the term "myth" as I use it. Kennedy weaves classical mythic figures like the furies into his novel alongside Catholic figures like St. Francis and the Virgin Mary, as well as popular heroes like Ty Cobb. Chapter 4's Beloved may seem a more typical work of Magic Realism as its author--Toni Morrison, an African American woman--is "more marginal" than Kennedy. In fact, Morrison's ghost story reveals the importance of verisimilitude to Magic Realism, as her text manipulates history far more so than myth. The same is true of

Spiegelman's Maus, which I discuss in Chapter 5. Maus is not usually called Magic Realist, although it clearly belongs in that growing tradition. That it is autobiographical and a comic book not only further demonstrates Magic Realism's flexibility, but its visual nature serves as a unique tool to "illustrate" Magic Realism itself.

The conclusion more briefly investigates Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior and Tripmaster Monkey and Louise Erdrich's Tracks, all of which significantly continue the Magic Realist project in American literature. America's Magic Realism is a series of texts which grapple with our most bitter social questions, and which attempt neither to preach nor capitulate. Rather, these books wring from political and ethnic struggles an aesthetic form and literary sub-genre capable of great and varied expression. I hope this study demonstrates the complex achievement of Magic Realism in some small fashion.

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Chapter 1
Introduction
"the imaginative qualities of actual things": Defining Magic Realism

In my Preface I comment on the use of myth in Modernism and Postmodernism. This subject deserves further attention to clarify my use of myth in this study. A consideration of the divergent uses of mythic material in Modernism and Magic Realism illustrates not only the differences between the two, but also that Magic Realism is undeniably a product of a Postmodern era.

The premier work of American High Modernism, T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," incorporates such seemingly disparate elements as ancient vegetation myths; the Grail Legend; the androgynous prophet of Greek myth, Tiresius; and the Hindu Upanishads. Eliot here, as it was in his earlier poem, "Gerontion," argues that the Modern world has violated the cycle of life, death, and rebirth central to all of these mythic constructions. For Eliot, the Modern world has contented itself to end the cycle with death without striving for rebirth. Hence, "April is the cruelest month," for without rebirth (or the desire for rebirth) it is an empty season. Even when the poem leaves behind strictly mythic images and figures, it focuses on death and the denial of birth. This focus may take the form of a woman who talks matter-of-factly about "them pills I took" (line 159) to abort her child or the empty marriage

which has ended "in rats' alley/Where the Dead men lost their bones" (115-116) as in the "A Game of Chess" section of "The Waste Land." And, of course, one can hardly overlook the "mythic" and cyclical qualities of chess as an objective correlative.

Those Modernists who looked to more strictly American material for their art also imposed mythic structures on their work in order to express loss, especially some lost social order of the past. White Southern writers were particularly likely to look toward chivalric legend to express this loss. The clearest example would be the Agrarian poets Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom and, working with the same material with a more sophisticated hand, novelist William Faulkner. Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" overtly invokes chivalry as the speaker considers the fate of the fallen heroes of the Confederacy. Returning to their native soil, the dead bear silent witness to the decay of the system they defended and the "furious murmur of their chivalry" (line 73). We see here a dynamic not unlike Eliot's interrupted vegetation myths; these bodies, too, will not spiritually reinvigorate this land. Tate tells us in a note: "Those 'buried Caesars' will not bloom in the hyacinth but will only make saltier the sea" (line 11; 1162n). Similarly, Ransom's "Antique Harvesters" bemoans the loss of the Southern agrarian tradition. The "Harvesters" of the title cannot convince a new generation to abandon Northern industrialization and return to the land, which the poet mythologizes in decidedly chivalrous terms. Ransom immediately ties the antebellum South

to chivalry by describing the setting of the poem in terms of heraldry: the poem is set on the "banks sinister" of the Mississippi and the Ohio rivers, the borders of the Old South (in heraldry, the "bank sinister," refers to the left side of the shield). Later he calls the South "the Proud Lady" (line 36) and her fox hunting, aristocratic inhabitants the "archetypes of chivalry" (21). Of course, it is hard to read such a poem and not consider that Ransom conveniently omits that the economic realities of the Old South whose passing he mourns had more to do with the lash than the lance. Myth offers not only a means of celebrating and mourning the passing of a bygone age. For the Modern writer, the past often becomes mythic--a Lost Golden Age of order--to such an extent that essential realities of that past are sometimes conveniently omitted.

Faulkner likewise looks to a decaying South shrouded in myth, yet even as he mourns its passing, he seems willing to examine the mythology of the South with a more critical eye. Hardly a more "mythically aware" character exists in Faulkner's twentieth century South than Light in August's fallen preacher, Gail Hightower. His obsession with the heroic deeds of his grandfather during the Civil War is one of the lynchpins of the novel. However, to Faulkner, this myth is as empty as the modern world is to Eliot. Faulkner underscores Hightower's fall from man of God to itinerant sign painter (a crafter of empty words cast in bold colors) when the preacher lies in a vain attempt to save the doomed murderer,

Joe Christmas (himself a hollow, violent man carrying a name of mythic grandeur). Like other Modernists, Faulkner uses myth to illustrate loss, but Faulkner, it seems, has lost not only the past but the myths capable of sustaining that past. Thomas Sutpen, the patriarch of Absalom, Absalom more fully demonstrates Faulkner's ability to be critical of such mythic figures. In that novel, although Sutpen recreates himself into a mythic representative of the Southern aristocracy, he falls well short of the lofty expectations of such a figure. He achieves his stature through violence and tyranny, not grace and chivalry.

But Faulkner is the exception among Modern writers. Faulkner sees an impotence in the myths of order while Eliot, Ransom, and Tate see impotence in a the twentieth century's inability to sustain these myths. In this way, Faulkner--in some ways the most "American" of the American High Modern writers--presages the use of myth in Magic Realism.

Postmodernist Mythology: Order in Chaos

Frederic Jameson writes that Postmodernism's obsession with culture rivals the Romantics' concern with nature:

> Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which "culture" has become a veritable "second nature." (ix)

One might argue that such a view is fairly consistent with the Modernists' use of Myth in that the Modernists seem obsessed with the myths on which Western culture rests. However, there are telling differences. Comparing Jameson's comment to the ideas represented in Postmodern physics proves instructive. Specifically, theories of "Chaos" and Fractal mathematics are pertinent here, as these theories posit that Chaos is order:

> The shapes that can be produced on computers using fractal equations turn out to be the shapes that were previously found in nature and assumed to be completely random. The shapes of clouds, the shapes of coastlines, the distribution of stars, the distribution of blood vessels in the human body, the shape of smoke, the way that glass breaks, the way that fluids move--all of a sudden these things that we previously believed to be random suddenly turn out to be following precise fractal geometrical patterns. (Moore 102)

The Postmodernist, then, reevaluates culture (and Myth) the way Chaos science has reevaluated the physical universe:

> The things that had previously been considered by science to be negligible turbulence--just noise, stuff that could be ignored--suddenly turn out to be just as regular as a circle or a triangle or a square. (102)

Michael McGuire adds this definition: "A fractal looks the same over all ranges of scale. This is called 'self-similarity.' Self-similarity over limited ranges of scale is common in nature" (13). The concept of a natural, endless repetition is also common to the Magic Realists' world view.

There are more reasons to see Magic Realism as a thoroughly Postmodern sub-genre of literary expression. Raymond Federman, self-declared Postmodern novelist, declares that William Burroughs' 1959 Naked Lunch "possibly marks the beginning of the Postmodern era in America" (Federman 5).[1] Federman argues that Postmodernism is explicitly and implicitly political, postulating that the fragmentation of narrative and image in Postmodern fiction is a direct comment (and attack) on the use of often self-contradictory images by "state/establishment" power structures, epitomized by the Kennedy/Nixon presidential debates of 1960. Thus, the conservatism Federman sees growing in 1984 makes him "wonder if perhaps what has been known as Postmodernism may not have come to an end" (5).

Perhaps the post-1984 publication of such Magic Realist works as Beloved and Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book prove Federman wrong on this count. Regardless, his comments on Postmodern fiction and culture are illuminating to the study of Magic Realism. Federman defines Postmodern fiction as that fiction which:

> brings together fragments of that reality [of "the old ponderous and realistic novel of the 1950's"], remnants, even detritus, or what Donald Barthelme calls the American "dreck," and which Gilbert Sorrentino . . . defines as *the imaginative qualities of actual things. . . .* (7)

Federman further identifies Postmodern fiction as related to "New Journalism," which blurred the lines between "truth" and fiction, a line likewise blurred by the Magic Realist. Federman argues that Postmodern fiction largely articulates dissatisfaction with the truth as defined by electronic media. The aesthetic that drives Postmodern fiction is defined by a lifetime's exposure to the "truth" of television; such a definition, when applied to Magic Realism's concentration on ethnicity, folk culture, and the past is intriguing and indicates that simple definitions of Magic Realism which focus on use of fantasy elements alone are far too limited.

Conventional working definitions of Magic Realism, while indicative of the qualities of these fictions, are still unsatisfactory. <u>The Oxford Companion to English Literature</u>'s definition of Magic Realism focuses solely on fantasy:

> Magic realist novels and stories have, typically, a strong narrative drive, in which the recognizably realistic mingles with the unexpected and the inexplicable, and in which elements of dream, fairy-story, or mythology combine with the everyday, often in a mosaic or kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and recurrence. (607)

Joseph Benevento also cites Magic Realism's similarity to the genres of science fiction and fantasy (125-131). More significantly, Benevento says Magic Realism is content to leave the reader with a collage of images rather than a "meaning," in this way again identifying the sub-genre with Postmodernism.

Benevento traces Magic Realism to Kafka, who occupies a central place in this discussion of contemporary American fiction.

These definitions are fine as far as they go, but a working definition of this fiction should clarify its relationships with the fictions around it. Amaryll Chanady documents the literary history of Magic Realism, going further back than the Latin American writers, like Borges, most frequently associated with Magic Realism to Franz Roh's 1924 use of the term "Magic Realism" to describe Post-Expressionist European art which "depict[ed] the real world instead of distorting it in a fantastic manner" (49).[2]

Still, like most other critics, Chanady suggests that an understanding of Latin American writers like Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez is key to understanding Magic Realism:

> Reality [in Latin America] is so astonishing that the greatest difficulty encountered by Latin American authors is making the incredible seem believable to a reader unfamiliar with their world. (51)

In this light, we may wonder if we could describe even the reports of the first Europeans to visit the New World as "unknowingly" Magic Realist, or pre-Modern Postmodernism.

Geoff Hancock draws connections between Canadian Magic Realism and Latin American Magic Realism in that both are the results of a clash between the cultures of European colonists and Native American peoples. He discusses ethnicity, suggesting that

"Magic realism and 'primitive art' are connected" (34). Among its features are the following:

> exaggerated comic effects; hyperbole treated as fact; a labyrinthine awareness of other books; the use of fantasy to cast doubt on the nature of reality; an absurd re-creation of "history"; a meta-fictional awareness of the process of fiction making; a reminder of the mysteriousness of the literary imagination at work; a collective sense of folkloric past. (36)

Clearly, the Magic Realists, who infuse a Realistic/Naturalistic world with mythological presence, can accurately be seen as Postmodern writers. They do not keen for a lost world of order. Rather, they attempt to discern the order that is always present, although not always apparent: an order built upon certain cultural artifacts of the past, like myth. This perception of order, like much of Magic Realism, depends upon paradox; we must allow for the possibility that chaos signifies order. While the Modernists also use myth as a vehicle for the description of a lost world of order, the Magic Realists see myth as an avenue to further self-discovery.

Period Pieces

It makes sense then, that so many Magic Realists set their work in the past. They do not seek, though, a magic golden age as the Modernists did. These explorations of the past never take us to utopian settings. In fact, the reverse is true. All of William

Kennedy's Albany novels are period pieces (even The Ink Truck, although set in the present, includes a sequence in which its protagonist visits nineteenth century Albany). Maxine Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison both set novels, Tripmaster Monkey and Song of Solomon, in the politically turbulent 1960's, and Morrison's Beloved takes place in the latter days of slavery and shortly after emancipation. These novels reach to the past--both recent and remote--and all eschew "scientific reality" for folk traditions. But the "pasts" in these novels are not golden ages of order.

Without underestimating the considerable presence of bigotry in the contemporary United States, I hope I do not appear overly optimistic or simplistic when I suggest that the past experiences of Americans of non-Anglo heritage are going to be even more rife with violence and repression than are the stories of their modern-day progeny. And yet this past is where "hopeful" and "triumphant" Magic Realist novels are set. We should not be shocked that novelists choose to set their novels during times of conflict and tension like the Great Depression, Reconstruction, the Civil Rights era. After all, conflict is an essential element of fiction. Nor is it unusual for novelists to set their works in bygone days in order to secure a more objective tone and readership. However, in Magic Realism, so much of the thematic power of the story is wrapped in the search for a redeeming ethnic heritage--a highly subjective end. So sending the characters to settings in which such claims to heritage are cause enough for official suppression seems to

undercut the ability of these folk cultures to redeem themselves in anyway but spiritually. And as the Magic Realists are very much Realists, their suppressions and repressions are significant factors in all of these novels. The examples of brutality in these works are many: from the brutal slavemaster of Beloved to the violence of the American Legionnaires in the Hooverville of Ironweed to the Nazi concentration camps of Maus.

Karla Holloway says that Toni Morrison's novels have shown us that "the extreme of creativity is destruction" (New Dimensions 24). We can extrapolate this principal and apply it to American Magic Realism in general. The destruction we see of the hero seeking roots is no destruction at all, merely a catalystic, cataclysmic rebirth. In Song of Solomon the destruction is violent (or perhaps not, depending on your reading of the ambiguous conclusion). In Ironweed and Very Old Bones, and even Maus and The Woman Warrior this destruction takes the form of passive rebirth achieved through surrender and assimilation.

And yet, if this destruction is really just a rebirth, we are left with troubling unresolved images from our literary history, also reborn in Magic Realism. How much of the "Tragic Mulatto" of nineteenth and twentieth century Southern Literature is it fair to see in Whittman Ah Sing of Tripmaster Monkey (and Kingston herself in The Woman Warrior)? Although both are "full-blooded Chinese," both are torn between two worlds, belonging to both and neither. Do we detect in Morrison's characters like Pilate, Circe,

and Beloved, the exoticism Mrs. Osgood Mason commissioned from Zora Neale Hurston? Is it present in the very form and texture of all of Kingston's myth-infused prose? In Louise Erdrich's halfbreed Chippewa Indian Pauline Kashpaw, who embraces her whiteness to become a Catholic nun? Or is it merely a "primitivism," which Robert Coles and Diane Isaacs define as a quality which "functions as a critique of . . . essential weaknesses and injustices in Western civilization" (Coles 4)?

One answer to these questions is that the Magic Realists use a non-traditional aesthetic and mythology, not primarily concerned with precedents established in the canon of traditional American Literature, and this certainly seems to be the case. Interestingly enough, when we look at the works of several of these writers--each writing from a different ethnic perspective--we see a very similar dynamic: works set in the past about iconoclastic characters who either embrace their ethnic culture or are otherwise consistently identified with it via the inclusion of "magic" elements associated with that culture. These characters uniformly reach some sort of inner peace through their association with their heritage. However, some die upon achieving this peace, as in Song of Solomon, making the passing on of those cultural values a moot point. Others, having achieved this peace, abandon or at least "dilute" (through marriage or "translations") the culture that has redeemed them, as in Tripmaster Monkey and Very Old Bones.

In fact, I take my title--Outlaw Knot-Makers--from Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography, The Woman Warrior, to be discussed more fully in Chapter 6. This metaphor suggests that the Magic Realists' "weaving" of mythology creates an object of perplexing beauty, but at a price to the weaver. Kingston hints here at the duality of these books that I argue is essential to them: works that celebrate, criticize, and perhaps even mourn the passing of "ethnic" subcultures.

A Closing Word on Terminology

The term I have been using to describe these works, "Magic Realism," is problematic. In fact, some may argue that calling these books "Magic Realist" demeans them, suggesting that any non-Western or non-traditional spirituality is somehow "magic" or not valid. I have used the term in spite of this because it is the label most often affixed to these works and because it neatly focuses on the paradoxical aesthetics at work in the texts. However, before we continue, we might want to further consider our labels.

The short story writer Raymond Carver, by no means a Magic Realist, was widely called a "minimalist," although he rejected the term. He preferred to use the term "hyper-realism" (Gentry 206) to describe his stripped-down prose and poetry, texts devoid of what he termed the "fabulism and metafiction" (Gentry 207) we find in

Magic Realism. Carver wrote about the importance of saying "exactly what [he] wanted to say and nothing else . . . [of not using] 'literary' words or 'pseudo-poetic' language" (Carver, "Fires" 38).

Now, while it is hard to imagine a connection between the sparse prose of Carver and the ornate, image-laden work of the Magic Realists, we might borrow Carver's term and suggest that in Carver's "minimalism" and the Magic Realists' "fabulism" we have two divergent branches of "hyper-realism." The nineteenth century Realists were concerned, after all, not with the details they recorded but with the "unseen" reality these details revealed, be it the psychological probing of Henry James or the social commentary of Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, and William Dean Howells. Carver says,

> It's possible . . . to write about common things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things--a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring--with immense, even startling power. (Carver, "On Writing" 24)

The connections here between Carver, Kingston, Marquez, and the other Magic Realists may not be so far-fetched. As Edmund Smyth writes in his Introduction to <u>Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction</u>, Postmodernism "can be an all-encompassing term which includes several types of writing, from 'minimalism' to 'fabulism' and 'magic realism': Beckett can thus be made to rub

shoulders with Salman Rushdie" (13). Chanady also uses the term "hyper-realism" to describe Magic Realism in "The Origins and Development of Magic Realism in Latin American Fiction" (51). Hancock sees both "hyper-realism" (46) and surrealism as aspects of Magic Realism.

Nancy-Lou Patterson, writing about the visual arts, discusses a hyper-realism that attempts to capture every possible visual detail (as in Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's World") as a kind of Magic Realism which mystifies even with verisimilitude. She concludes:

> One can compare [Magic Realism] . . . to those moments when one sees the face of one's parent or spouse, not as the beloved other, but for a millisecond that encompasses a lifetime, as beings in themselves, beings with a separate existence revealed in the immediate moment with every wrinkle and hair encoded with meaning. (29)[3]

Is this not what we see then, in the Magic Realists? They write very realistic, detailed descriptions of the "real" world in which we live, yet they insist upon a greater meaning beneath the forks, curtains, chairs, stones, wrinkles, and hairs. Therefor, rather than being confined with the "magic" qualities of these fictions, we will often consider their "real" dimensions as well.

Finally, we should keep in mind that this sort of spiritual realism has existed for as long as American literature has. Emerson's "transparent eyeball," for instance, is as *real* as the ghost of Beloved or Cotton Mather's "Invisible World." Emerson and

Mather sought "real" dimensions of the world, and so do these writers. For the Magic Realists, the Magic is real, but the Real is also magic. While the term "hyper-realism" clearly is descriptive of many aspects of Magic Realism, it does not effectively demonstrate the difference between writers like Carver and Kennedy or the often paradoxical duality at work in Magic Realism.

Notes

1. This comment is particularly interesting, for in the gallows humor, fragmented narrative style and concern with ethnicity and isolation of the Beats we may see something of a connection with Magic Realism.

2. Another connection between Magic Realism and visual arts worth noting (besides Maus, of course) can be found in Raymond Williams' interview with Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in which Marquez reflects that his fiction demands a "poetization of space"--that is, recreating "real" spatial relationships in geography to suit a given fiction. Also, Marquez discusses the influence of nineteenth century travel illustrations on his work, especially Autumn of the Patriarch.

3. Patterson here recalls this chapter's title, taken from Raymond Federman's definition of Postmodernism (mentioned earlier in this chapter) as fiction dealing with "*the imaginative qualities of actual things . . .* " (7).

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Chapter 2
"the true social realism": The Roots of Magic Realism and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Chronicle of a Death Foretold

Any study of Magic Realism in American literature must consider its Latin-American roots and its most famous practitioner, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In my Preface, I stated that the novel I would be considering here, Chronicle of a Death Foretold, is neither his best-known nor his most "magical" work. However, the Magic of Magic Realism is often emphasized at the expense of other--Realist--qualities of the fiction, like its social commentary, its narrative strategies, its concern with history and perspective as well as with myth. Free from the overt fantasy of most of his other work, Chronicle of a Death Foretold affords a view of Magic Realism's roots unobstructed by the genre's more prominent and distracting features.

A Short Historical Note

Let us begin with a short history of the term "Magic Realism" and its application in Latin-American fiction. Jorge Luis Borges is cited by many not only as this century's preeminent Latin-American writer but as perhaps the earliest writer of what we now call Magic Realism. Harold Bloom goes so far as to call him

the "foremost inaugurator of modern [Latin-American] literature" (465).

However, as Chapter 1 points out, the term "Magic Realism" was first applied to a European art movement of 1920's Germany. Appropriately enough, Bloom, in his polemic jeremiad The Western Canon, has found Borges' Germanic roots in the work of Kafka (as have others), and Kafka's work has also been compared with Marquez's fiction. So, in our quest for the origins of what is too often considered an almost exclusively Latin-American form, we must look back over the ocean to Europe.[1]

Hannelore Hahn reports that the term "Magic Realism" was "conceived by the German art critic, Franz Roh, in the 1920's--[and] refers to the German post-Expressionistic Movement and is used to explain so-called 'fantastic' literature, i.e., poetic expression in symbols or metaphoric figures" (1). Amaryll Chanady also documents the history of Magic Realism as a literary form by going back to Roh's 1924 use of the term to describe post-Expressionist European art which "distinguished itself from Expressionism by depicting the real world instead of distorting it in a fantastic manner" (49).

But here we are more interested in the term's literary connotations than its actual origin. Joseph Benevento also traces Magic Realism back to Borges, whom he declares its first true practitioner, and--like Bloom--even further back to Kafka. He adds that Magical Realism is not "absurdist; instead [the] fiction redefines the real and what is probable" (128). In a familiar-

sounding definition, David Young and Keith Hollaman define Magic Realism as a

> hybrid that somehow manages to combine the "truthful" and "verifiable" aspects of realism with the "magical" effects we associate with myth, folklore, and tall story. (quoted in Benevento 125)

A gap exists between this literary use of the term and Roh's application of the term to visual arts. However, the visual arts model is important to consider as we examine literary Magic Realism, which is as concerned with the real as it is with the magic. Nancy-Lou Patterson points out that the modern conception of "realism" (particularly in visual arts) is basically that of the photograph, when in fact, the photograph does not accurately mimic human visual perception. In this respect, we have already redefined "real" as a distortion of "reality." My introduction's discussion of Raymond Carver suggested a similar relationship between literary hyper-realism and literary Magic Realism.

As for literary history, though, Borges is important not simply because of the fabulism or surrealism of his fiction. Indeed, the first use of the term "Magic Realism" as applied to fiction was in the context of a discussion of Borges. The term Magic Realism "has been used (in the first instance, perhaps, by Angel Flores in 1954) to characterize the work of Borges and writers who followed him" (quoted in Benevento 125). As Bloom rightly points out, Borges was a

> master of labyrinths and mirrors . . . a profound student of literary influence, and . . . a skeptic who cared more for imaginative literature than for religion or philosophy" (465).

So while other Latin-Americans, like Alejo Carpentier, Alicia Yanez Cossio, Jose de la Cuada, and Demitrio Aguilera-Maltra are Magic Realists, Borges comes closest to embodying its particulars. Geoff Hancock unconsciously invokes Borges in his very definition of Magic Realism, which includes the phrase "a labyrinthine awareness of other books" (36).

This "labyrinthine awareness" reminds us of Borges (and of Marquez's novel about Simon Bolivar, The General in his Labyrinth) but also calls us to examine the other literary forces working on Magic Realism. Morton Levitt suggests--and I agree with him--that at the heart of Magic Realism is not a fascination with the supernatural but an emphasis on perception:

> Magic Realism in the world of Garcia Marquez [can be] . . . as much linked to narrative technique--to the means of envisioning the world--as it is to the world itself. And that technique he adapts from the very different-seeming world of the European Modernists. (230)

Like Bloom and Hahn, Levitt traces Magic Realism back to Europe and to the Magic Realists' intertextual aesthetic.

In this chapter, I examine a work outside the American literary tradition. Chronicle of a Death Foretold is a novel by the Spanish-language novelist who, more even than Borges, was responsible for the synthesizing of European literary and artistic traditions and making them attractive to a generation of American

novelists and even American autobiographers. Magic Realism "redefines the limits of the fantasy story, integrating its premises into the most realistic depictions of life as it is" (Benevento 125), but it is more than fabulism, or "a collective sense of folkloric past" (Hancock 36). Magic Realism is also a form of narrative structure, a way of confronting the unreal in real terms, of capturing the "strangeness" that Bloom suggests is the hallmark of all great literature.

Putting the Real in Magic Realism: Beyond Fantasy

Kathleen McNerney writes, One Hundred Years of Solitude "represents . . . the history of Colombia and of Latin America; even of humanity, from genesis to apocalypse" (18). That Solitude has become almost synonymous with Magic Realism is no surprise, when one considers its imagery:

> A line of blood that winds its way through town to find the mother of the victim; a young woman assumed into heaven wrapped in expensive sheets; a man who disappears and another who returns from the dead. (McNerney 19)

However, in some ways, it is more instructive to look at another--less frequently discussed--Marquez novel to demonstrate some important precedents of Magic Realism as it is practiced by writers in the United States. These authors, like Marquez, often infuse the fantastic into their work. But these works are seldom received as generic fantasy novels, and are frequently praised or

dismissed as primarily works of social commentary. While very little of the "fantastic" appears in Chronicle, it is very much a work of Magic Realism and demonstrates that much of what occurs in Magic Realism has little to do with, or at least transcends, fantasy. An examination of this novel at this early stage of our study gives us a fuller definition of the term Magic Realism and a glimpse of how it will be adopted and adapted by American writers.

Chronicle of a Death Foretold as Magic Realism

Chronicle of a Death Foretold seems in many ways a straightforwardly realistic novel, in which all events are fundamentally explicable in natural terms and in which folk tales and tradition play no immediately discernible role. The short novel relates the story of the ritual murder of Santiago Nasar, who is accused (probably falsely) of deflowering the sister of two homicidal brothers before her marriage to an important aristocrat. The death of Nasar is a given in the novel. In fact, on the first page we learn not only that Nasar is dead, but also that the killing took place twenty-seven years before the action of the novel, which is structured rather like Citizen Kane. An old friend of Nasar, now a journalist, returns to his hometown and interviews witnesses to the crime as well as friends and associates of the killers and the victim.

What brings his friend back to examine the events of that fatal day is not merely his belief that his friend was innocent, but that

Nasar seemed to have been almost the only person in town who did not know that he was to be murdered by his friends the Vicario brothers that day. The unnamed narrator, who had himself been asleep when Santiago Nasar was killed, asks again and again why his friend was not warned of his impending doom. Mostly, the townspeople all seemed to have assumed that someone else had already told Nasar or that they had been misinformed: otherwise why would a condemned man stroll so casually through the streets? The implication of the novel is that the entire community shares the guilt for the murder.

So it is natural--in the light of the plot's explicability--to see Chronicle as something of a departure from Marquez's Magic Realism. However, in Chronicle, Marquez has not strayed quite so far from his Magic Realist roots as one might at first suspect. In fact, the "realist" qualities of Chronicle are more truly characteristic of Magic Realism than is the magic of One Hundred Years of Solitude. While most of Chronicle's action can indeed be explained in natural terms, still it retains--in unique form--some of the central devices of Magic Realist fiction: an emphasis on the role of ethnicity and folk tradition; a concentration on and distortion of the perception of time; a stoic narrative voice distanced from often grim and bizarre subject matter, sometimes ironically or even comically so; and the imposition of one world view upon another, more traditional (or "Western") one. Marquez accomplishes much of this through the use of a journalist-narrator (who was involved in the incident he recounts), as well as by

basing his novel on actual events. In fact, Marquez has said that while he is seen as a "writer of fantastic fiction . . . I'm a very realistic person and write what I believe is the true socialistic realism" (quoted in Levitt 231).[2]

Chronicle does not concentrate on the repression of minority groups as do many of the North American Magic Realist novels. While Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, Kingston's *Woman Warrior* and *Tripmaster Monkey* all deal with often violent racial tension and racist oppression, *Chronicle* contains very little of such matter. However, ethnic difference and the "outsider" do figure heavily in the novel. As his above comment implies, Marquez sees his fiction as overtly political. The two central events of the novel are both highly ritualistic folk customs: the wedding of Bayardo San Roman to Angela Vicario and the vendetta murder of Santiago Nasar by Angela's brothers Pedro and Pablo Vicario. Other ritualistic and folkloric elements abound. The novel certainly contains a "mythic"--Christian--dimension: "Santiago Nasar is a Christian figure who is sacrificed in order to save the family's and the town's honor" (Hahn 26). The visit of the Bishop on the morning Nasar is killed; the ghost of Yolanda Xius, who returns to Earth to "[recover] the knick-knacks of her happiness for her house of death" (*Chronicle* 100); the almost magical--and certainly spiritual--value of virginity, which leads to Nasar's death; and sundry other smaller events and remarks which punctuate the novel remind us that Marquez is still fundamentally interested in an examination of

the intersection between "empirical reality" and more intuitive folk traditions.

Also, it is hardly coincidental that two of the novel's principles are "outsiders" to the community in which the action takes place. In a sense, neither Bayardo San Roman nor Santiago Nasar belongs in the village where the first man's marriage necessitates the second man's death. San Roman, from his first appearance in the village "six months before the wedding" (27), is singled out by his appearance and shadowy personal history. His flamboyant dress identifies him, like Nasar, as a wealthy man:

> He arrived . . . with some saddlebags decorated with silver that matched the buckle of his belt and the rings on his boots. . . . [And he was] wearing a short jacket and very tight trousers, both of natural calfskin, and kid gloves of the same color. (27)

The lavish quality of the wedding Bayardo finances (after revealing his identity as the son of war hero General Petronio San Roman) further demonstrates his wealth. Nasar, in fact, spends most of the wedding computing its cost and ironically deciding, "That's what my wedding's going to be like. . . . Life will be too short for people to tell about it" (20).

Like San Roman, Nasar is both wealthy and--though a native--an outsider within the village. Nasar's family is not Native to the region but is a member of the "clannish, hardworking, and Catholic" Arab community, which "had settled at the beginning of the century in Caribbean towns" (93). After the murder, the only

reprisal the Vicario brothers fear is "some trick of the Turks" (92). This fear demonstrates that--while the novel never extensively comments on any systemic racial animosity--the Arabs see themselves as different from their Hispanic neighbors and vice versa. In addition, Nasar's wealth isolates him from the village, as does San Roman's:

> Not everybody loved Santiago Nasar. . . . Polo Carrillo, the owner of the electric plant, thought that [Santiago Nasar's] serenity wasn't innocence but cynicism. "He thought that his money made him untouchable," he told me. Fausta Lopez, his wife, commented: "Just like all Turks." (119-20)

This passage emphasizes both the qualities of Santiago Nasar present in Bayardo San Roman: he is wealthy and alien. While the parallels between Nasar and Roman are somewhat remarkable, they never approach the unreality of most Magic Realist works. However, as in Magic Realist novels by Marquez and others, the characterization in Chronicle focuses on difference and violence.

Time and Magic Realism in Chronicle of a Death Foretold

The narrative voice of Chronicle of a Death Foretold is also reminiscent of other Magic Realist fiction. The journalistic quality of the novel highlights the fact that Chronicle is a period piece and also disrupts the flow of linear time. These two qualities are consistent with much Magic Realist fiction. Chronicle, through the distancing effect of its journalist-

narrator's exploration of a story twenty-seven years after the fact, couples a consistently ironic and parodic tone with a plot of defeat and destruction.

Similarly, the North American Magic Realists, Kennedy, Kingston, Spiegelman, and Morrison, all set their fiction in the past. The tendency does not end with these figures: Charles Johnson's Middle Passage takes place from June to August 1830, deconstructing Melville as much as it does the slave narrative by returning a freed black to Africa, not in an escape attempt but in a slave run. Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo, which has strong affinities with these works, is set at the cusp of the twentieth century. And Marquez's own One Hundred Years of Solitude takes place in some fantastic yesterday when wandering Gypsies brought such wonders as ice to the uninitiated. Marquez's The Autumn of the Patriarch not only takes place at some indeterminate point in the past, like Chronicle of a Death Foretold, it also elongates time.

In Chronicle, our relationship with the past is complicated (or extended) via the use of a narrator at once distanced from the story of Nasar's death and through the setting of the novel in an uncertain era. We are told that when General Petronio San Roman, a wealthy and important national figure, arrives in the village, he rides in a "Model T Ford with official plates" (Chronicle 36). The General's vintage automobile and the narrator's comment that "German knives were no longer available because of the war" (Chronicle 67) are the sole indicators of the year of Nasar's death, and these clues only vaguely imply that it occurs sometime during

or after the First World War. However, such a conclusion is hardly certain. Raymond Williams describes such "holes" in Marquez's work:

> [one] of Garcia Marquez's basic techniques for the creation of ambiguity is the use of detailed particularity concerning irrelevant matters on the one hand, and vagueness about points of real importance. (136)

In his treatment of time, a major factor in the novel, Marquez demonstrates just such ambiguity. Williams further comments, "[contrary] to what has been announced in the title, this novel is not a chronicle" (137). Marquez's non-linear treatment of time proves Williams correct. What we learn in the first lines of the book is very much what we learn in the last lines: Santiago Nasar has been butchered. Indeed, the first chapter essentially tells the entire story of the murder of Nasar, a murder in which--in effect--the entire town collaborates. The rest of the novel adds details and motivation and serves to defer the story's moment of most intense action: the murder of Santiago Nasar. Marquez creates a contradictory time flow in the otherwise objectively "true" Chronicle. This fragmented, ambiguous treatment of time in a novel so "objectively real" identifies it as Magic Realist.

Journalism, Magic Realism, and Chronicle of a Death Foretold

The journalistic qualities of Chronicle of a Death Foretold further demonstrate that the term Magic Realism need not be relegated to those novels which indulge in narratives saturated with the fantastic. Chronicle, like all Magic Realism, superimposes one reality over another, blurring the "actual reality" with a sort of rhetorical or structural gauze. And as Edmund Smyth points out, even much of the "magic" in One Hundred Years of Solitude has to do with "reporting":

> One Hundred Years of Solitude . . . recounts the history of the small town of Macondo, not so much as it actually happened, but as its inhabitants experienced and interpreted it and as it was transmitted by popular oral tradition. Thus, when Remedios the beauty disappears, the narrative records the fact that outsiders were of the opinion that she had run off with a man and that the story of her ascent into heaven was an invention of her family to avoid scandal. But it is the family's version which the text privileges and recounts in full detail, for this account is entirely consistent with the cultural assumptions of an isolated rural people. . . . (97)

Marquez himself has said of his fiction that "he doesn't exaggerate or make things up" (McNerney xi). Marquez and Smyth point back to the centrality of perspective in Magic Realism, an issue raised by Nancy-Lou Patterson and others. Magic Realism generally imposes a folk perspective upon an objective reality. While Chronicle clearly does draw on the differences between the novel's Arab and

Hispanic communities, it does not emphasize ethnic or folk distinctions to the extent One Hundred Years of Solitude or the works of the North American Magic Realists do. Instead, the horrific death of Santiago Nasar is described through the "gauze" of journalistic objectivity. In a way, by superimposing a fictional construct upon an actual event, Marquez has essentially created his own folk tale.

Such a methodology is in keeping with the work of the North American Magic Realists. Kennedy's Legs and Morrison's Beloved are both based on historical events or characters. Song of Solomon incorporates significant historical events, like Guitar's mission to avenge "four little colored girls [who] had been blown out of a church" (Morrison, Solomon 174). Maus and Woman Warrior are both biographical and autobiographical.

Marquez likely chose his fictional perspective because he first became aware of the incident the novel is based on through his work as a journalist:

> [T]he impact of Chronicle of a Death Foretold is . . . heightened by our knowledge that the narrative is based on some true events close to the author. The original [murder] occurred on Monday, 22 January 1951, in the town of Sucre, where Garcia Marquez's family had been living for ten years. (Bell-Villada 189)

The original crime is very similar to the one in the novel. A young man is killed to avenge a new bride's soiled honor. Many people are aware of the crime beforehand, and many afterward doubt that the victim was the "despoiler" of the woman; regardless, his killers go

free in a short while. In fact, even smaller details, like Nasar's mother accidentally shutting him out of his home, ironically insuring his murder, are drawn from the actual event.

Marquez's narrative voice is thus distanced, in Chronicle, by the use of the journalist narrator. Similar distancing has been cited by Morton Levitt as a "working definition of Magic Realism in the world of Garcia Marquez" (230). One Hundred Years of Solitude includes, near its opening, an image of the founders of Macondo discovering, some four-days' march from the sea, a Spanish galleon:

> They do not question its provenance, and there is no rational, definitive voice here to explain it. What it evokes for its viewers is some other reality, a universe of timelessness and myth and the origins of the race, "protected from the vices of time and the habits of birds." (Levitt 230)

The essential qualities of Magic Realism, then, are not simply imaginative and fantastic. It focuses on the relationship between the fantastic and the realistic elements and the narrative voice which presents both. According to Levitt, this combination transforms a merely remarkable galleon into "a metaphor of a way of life that will as suddenly appear and--precisely with the century--as suddenly vanish":

> It offers resonances . . . far beyond those that a rational, external voice could conceivably provide: the "brick face" [as Marquez describes his narrative voice] of the narration is as important to the meaning of the metaphor as is the strange image itself. And we outsiders have little real trouble accepting them as real and not merely as "fantasy." (231)

As the North American texts are never quite so laden with supernatural elements as One Hundred Years of Solitude, moving our emphasis from fantasy to narrative voice is instructive. Paula Rabinowitz has pointed to a similarly objective voice--what she calls "reporting"--in the work of Morrison and Kingston. Rabinowitz politicizes this voice, citing the authors' "otherness" as women rather than as ethnic outsiders, while acknowledging their "multiple identities." Rabinowitz writes, "Ann Kaplan calls autobiography and reportage the 'natural forms' for women writers since, as outsiders, women cannot write a fiction of 'totality'" (30-31). This observation can easily be stretched to describe ethnic minorities within the white power structure, and even the outsiders of Marquez's novels, like Santiago Nasar of Chronicle of a Death Foretold. The "outsider" authors of Magic Realism engage in "reporting" of a kind by setting their fiction at moments of historical crisis: William Kennedy's Depression-era Irish, Maxine Hong Kingston's Vietnam-era hippies, and Toni Morrison's Reconstruction-era freedmen and women. While some of Rabinowitz's political arguments are debatable, she is essentially correct about the objective tone these writers employ. Like the narrator of Chronicle, they are reporters. The seemingly conflicting dimensions of a disinterested voice, fragmented timeline, and non-fictional--even personal--material brings to Chronicle the Postmodern unreality of Magic Realism, encouraging the reader to hope for some other ending than the one which has

been forecast since the first sentence, and has been reinforced innumerable times since.[3]

The "true" story recrafted as fiction in Chronicle ends up as a critique of folk tradition, just as most other Magic Realist texts become such critiques. Chronicle is essentially an indictment of the folk code which allows such ritualistic murders to occur, a system which made it possible for "the Vicario brothers . . . [to sit] drinking . . . and singing with Santiago Nasar five hours before killing him" (Chronicle 50). In fact, Marquez's research demonstrated to him, if he needed such a demonstration, just how common such killings were:

> Garcia Marquez did converse with the Chica brothers' [the real-life incarnation of the Vicario brothers] defense attorney. . . . [B]y that time [the attorney] was advanced in years and could scarcely remember the trial, which for him was just another honor-killing case--a far cry from the continued amazement that the learned and literate judge expresses (for us) in Chronicle. (Bell-Villada 191)

Chronicle is a biting attack on the machismo that allows such a "foretold death" to come to pass, and the interrupted time stream of the novel involves us in the criticism of this brutal system.

Conclusion: The Subjectivity of the (Un)Real

In his study of Chronicle of a Death Foretold, Gene H. Bell-Villada speaks to this thematic concern of the novel:

> [Marquez] brings off a poetical and quasi-"anthropological" reconstruction of a ritual murder, treats it with such dignified objectivity as to create from it a work of tragedy--but one that conveys its own moral critique as well. (191)

The use of the word "anthropological" again reminds us of the Magic Realist concern with ethnicity which Marquez brings to Chronicle, a work peculiar for its lack of "fantastic" elements as well as its continuity within the body of Magic Realist fiction. No flying carpets or immortal generals appear in Chronicle, making the novel seem much more "realist" than "magic." However, Marquez's subjective restructuring of time and his aggressive engagement with folk tradition are completely in keeping with the Magic Realist literary agenda.

In fact, it seems that it is the very "realistic" quality of the book that emphasizes the author's criticism of the cultural system which allows the occurance of such ritual murders as that of Santiago Nasar. By treating his subject matter in such an uncharacteristically "real" manner, Marquez makes a powerful statement. Chronicle deconstructs and reconstructs the Magic Realist aesthetic (or perhaps simply holds the magic in a prolonged tension with the real) in an attempt to attack a system which is itself self-destructive. Still, the presence of the ghost of Yolanda Xius and the surreal time order of the book mark it us undeniably Magic Realist novel. Marquez uses the tension between the real and magic worlds to comment on the ethnic and cultural tensions in the "real" world. And again, Marquez pursues his vision of a world

which is inexplicable even when it is explicable; the "fatal coincidences" (Marquez 11) of Nasar's death tax the imagination as much as any fantasy novel could.

We should also remind ourselves that while Bell-Villada uses the word "objectivity" to describe Marquez's novel, such a term is actually inappropriate. Marquez is as bound up in the actual events of the Chicas' crime as the narrator of Chronicle is in the Vicario brothers' act. The novel consistently tears away the facade of "objectivity" to reveal the subjectivity and self-interest of the townspeople who allow Nasar's murder to occur. It is only right that readers of the novel do the same to the book, written by a former inhabitant of the real town fictionalized in Chronicle.

More importantly, for our purposes, while Chronicle of a Death Foretold is by no means the "first" Magic Realist novel (in fact, it was published in this country in 1982, several years after Song of Solomon and more or less concurrent with other of the works discussed here), it displays a marked kinship with North American Magic Realism. In Marquez's earlier work we see the more obvious manifestations of Magic Realism: spider-women, vanishing oceans, winged men, and near-immortal Generals. Chronicle's use of non-fictional material certainly demonstrates a rhetorical and thematic affinity with the works to be explored in this study. Also, in Chronicle of a Death Foretold we see a subtler Magic Realism more in the vein of the American authors, whose "magic" is so often in the service of the "real," rather than vice versa.

Notes

1. Also, Bloom emphasizes the influence upon Borges of another English-language writer, Walt Whitman, whose rapturous imagery and rhetoric surely seem to have an echo in Marquez and the North American Magic Realists William Kennedy and Maxine Hong Kingston.

2. In fact, in an interview with Raymond Williams, Marquez discusses the effects of politics in his work. The United States government has placed restrictions on his entrance to this country. Marquez points out that while he is not allowed to travel freely in the States, his books--which contain all of his "subversive" or "political" ideas--are studied here more than anywhere else, confirming both the subversive nature of Magic Realist fiction and the postulation that our reality is far more surreal and fragmented than any fiction. See "The Visual Arts, the Poetization of Space and Writing: An Interview with Gabriel Garcia Marquez."

3. Similarly, we see the North Americans playing with their readers' knowledge. Consider, for instance, Kingston's Tripmaster Monkey. When--in the late 1960's--Whittman Ah Sing fantasizes about a better future for Asian-American actors, Kingston interrupts the narrative to remind the reader that no such "future" ever comes to pass. See Chapter 6 for a further discussion of this passage.

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Chapter 3
"Hell, it's all true": Destructive and Redemptive Myth in William Kennedy's Ironweed

William Kennedy's real-life journey from literary obscurity to fame mirrors the journey of his hero, the fallen baseball player and hobo Francis Phelan, and Kennedy clearly enjoys the parallel. After Ironweed won the National Book Critics Circle and Pulitzer Prizes in 1984, the previously obscure Kennedy was catapulted to grand literary status. In fact, Kennedy opened his acceptance speech to the National Book Critics Circle by addressing the growing "mythology" of his success:

> I am now as much awash in critical magnanimity as I was bathed two years ago in insolvent obscurity. The nature of this new status is extreme pleasure, but also part of it is residual bewilderment at the causes of the previous condition. I was once deeply resentful at the rejection of Ironweed--it was rejected thirteen times--but of course I am slowly coming out of that. As Ironweed's hero, Francis Phelan, says to the host of the man who had tried to cut off his feet with a meat cleaver, "I don't hold no grudges more'n five years. (Yellow Trolley 66)

Kennedy's identification with his underdog hero seems altogether appropriate, as Ironweed will be considered, like the other works in this study, in the context of its use of mythic structures and reinterpretations of mythic heroes.

Kennedy shares his vision of the viability of myth in a Postmodern world with Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Indeed, Kennedy inherited this vision from the Colombian fabulist. In an interview with Marquez (the first in the United States or United Kingdom to furnish biographical material on Marquez [Yellow Trolley 243n]), Kennedy asked Marquez about the yellow trolley he saw on the way to Marquez's hotel room. The American journalist was shocked to find out that no such trolleys had run in Barcelona in years, but that when they had, they were indeed yellow. Kennedy's account of the Colombian novelist's response to the incident reflects both authors' fiction: "To me . . . this is completely natural" (Yellow Trolley 4). Marquez then illustrated his position by telling Kennedy a story of how a repairman woke him and his wife to fix an ironing cord:

> My wife . . . from the bed says, "We don't have anything wrong with the iron here." The man asks, "Is this apartment two?" "No," I say, "upstairs." Later, my wife went to the iron and plugged it in and it burned up. This was a reversal. The man came before we knew it had to be fixed. This type of thing happens all the time. My wife has already forgotten it. (4)

These episodes illustrate the similarities between the two authors and reveal Kennedy's acknowledgment of his debt to the Latin-American writer. In fact, in a 1970 review Kennedy called One Hundred Years of Solitude "the first piece of literature since the Book of Genesis that should be required reading for the entire human race" (243). The trolley car and iron cord incidents, while

not involving myth, concern time and memory and the surreal, magic qualities of everyday life. In fact, both writers use myth most potently in their work when they submerge it beneath mundane, everyday events and concerns.

The many-layered use of myth in Ironweed and its street-level action may explain the book's thirteen rejections. Ironically, though, while the mythic elements are an obvious facet of the book (Francis's regular communication with the dead, for instance), Ironweed is one of the most "realistic" works discussed here. Kennedy's earthy prose and the novel's Depression era-setting anchor the book in the "real" even as its imagery becomes increasingly ethereal. But while the book is always clearly mythic in tone and structure, Kennedy's complex use of myth is deceptively simple. This chapter examines Kennedy's use of classical, Christian, literary, Celtic, and popular American myth and explores other areas in which this novel is perhaps less "simple" than it sometimes seems. Myth infuses the novel from the levels of imagery and tone to its thematic concerns to even simple questions of plot, such as whether or not Francis even survives the story.

Ironweed is a novel of ambiguities in which Francis finds both horror and salvation in his Catholic and Celtic heritages. Kennedy structures his novel of expiation and degradation on multiple myths by subverting not only traditional Catholic values and mythology but also his own subversion of those myths. Chivalric, paternalistic, Catholic perceptions of women are clearly in place: Sandra is a whore and Annie a Virgin. But Helen, who plays the

largest female role in the novel is less doctrinaire. Like Francis, she is willing to prostitute herself for shelter, but she is as fiercely "moral" and "chaste" in her own fashion as Francis is loyal in his. This is a novel filled with both redemptive and corrupt sexuality and Christianity. As Francis at one point remarks in as apt a summary of Kennedy's mythic vision as any in the novel, "Hell, it's all true. . . . Every stinkin' damn thing you can think of is true" (191).

Kennedy's vision in Ironweed incorporates elements of Marquez's Magic Realism of a simultaneously redemptive and destructive subculture. Kennedy merely transplants it to Irish-Catholic Albany as Marquez and Borges had previously transplanted Kafka's Yiddish traditions into their own Latin-American traditions. Kennedy's views on ethnicity, time, gender, and spirituality are informed by a worldview that accepts the inherent contradictions inherited from Marquez and the Latin-American Magic Realists. Ironweed, therefore, does not simply vindicate its particular subculture. It explores a cosmos built upon symbiotic contradictions: the spiritual and physical worlds exist simultaneously; heritage invigorates and destroys; an alcoholic child-killer is a warrior hero; whores are virgins and virgins whores. The novel's nostalgic tone may be one of the its great popular appeals, but its reading of the "real" world as equally spiritual and physical is hardly simplistic.

Rereading Misreadings

One area in which Kennedy's deceptive simplicity becomes apparent is Ironweed's time order, which is as complex as Marquez's in Chronicle of a Death Foretold. Obviously, the novel occurs on or about All Saints' Day, 1938; still there is some disagreement as to the particulars. David Black writes that "[t]he chronology of the narrative covers most of three days: Halloween, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day" (179). In the same journal six years later, Anya Taylor claims that in Ironweed Francis "relives his life *in one intense day* and forgives himself for it" (109--emphasis mine). Taylor repeats her error when she later places Ironweed in an Irish literary context: "On the *single day* of this novel Francis, like his predecessor on single Irish days, Leopold Bloom of Ulysses, inhabits a remarkably multiple consciousness" (110--emphasis mine). The Bloom connection is so potentially fruitful, one is almost inclined to wish Taylor were right, but alas, like Jack the hobo's chronology of Francis's mooching, "It's a little mixed up" (79).

At best, Taylor exaggerates the importance of All Saints' Day, the crucial day on which much of the decisive action of Ironweed takes place. But much of great importance in the novel also occurs on Halloween and All Souls' Day. A short chronology of the book follows. The story opens with Francis digging graves with Rudy on Halloween. That night Sandra dies, Helen sleeps in Finny's car, and Francis sleeps in the weeds. On the next day, All Saints' Day,

Francis works for Rosskam and returns in the evening to his home. Helen dies in Palombo's Hotel, and that night Francis witnesses and avenges Rudy's murder in the hobo camp. The following morning, the final day of the book, finds Francis returning to "seek sanctuary under the holy Phelan eaves" (225). Again, while much occurs on All Saint's Day, we can at least say that the Ulysses parallel is inaccurate.

Still, Taylor's error is somewhat fortuitous in that it exposes one of the many ambiguities in this novel that can so easily be misread as an unabashed testimonial for traditional family values: Francis makes an error, returns home, and finds forgiveness and peace in his gloriously Irish-Catholic hometown. But Ironweed's movement between the worlds of the supernatural and the naturalistic seems designed to disorient as well as "orient" the reader. In fact, Kennedy's intentionally ambiguous treatment of Francis's mythic heritage and faith may well have led to Taylor's misreading.

Another telling misreading in the recent criticism of Ironweed inadvertently illuminates Kennedy's strategy. In "Classical Myth in William Kennedy's Ironweed," Peter B. Clarke implies that Francis dies at the end of the novel:

> Kennedy clouds Francis's final actions with ambiguity. Does Francis, literally, return to "sanctuary under the holy Phelan eaves" . . . or does he create the closing, blissful scene in Annie's attic in his imagination only? Perhaps a bum . . . *can* move in with a respectable middle-class woman after a twenty-two-year absence, but Francis seems headed . . .

> for the "lemonade springs" where "bluebirds sing"--the Big Rock Candy Mountain, Rudy's paradise, hobo heaven. (182-83)

Clarke argues that one can read the ending as evidence that Francis has expiated his sins and is now ready to join "the great souls like Rudy Newton and Helen Archer" in eternity (183). Clarke couches this reading in ambiguity--it *may* be that Francis dies; Kennedy's shift to future tense in the final pages seems to suggest the possibility that Francis only "create[s] the closing blissful scene in Annie's attic": "It *would be* three-fifteen by the clock on the First Church when Francis headed south toward Palombo's Hotel. . . " (Kennedy 221--emphasis mine). But Francis does not invent this scene. Clarke wrote his essay in 1986, six years before Kennedy made clear, in his disappointing 1992 sequel to Ironweed, Very Old Bones, that Francis did remain in Albany for a time, only to leave and return again to die in 1943. One can hardly fault Clarke, though. He is right when he suggests that "Kennedy clouds Francis' final actions [in Ironweed] with ambiguity."

According to Taylor, when "Francis wanders into the area [where] the Phelans [are buried in St. Agnes's Cemetery] . . . miraculously, he can hear his dead mother, father, and son thinking" (109-110). Taylor again seems to have fallen prey to Kennedy's intentional ambiguity. In "The Franciscan Dimension of William Kennedy's Ironweed," Thomas Bulger, examining Francis's "spiritual blindness" (275), writes that in this early scene Francis is unaware of the spiritual world around him:

> What the narrative discovers is a dynamic spiritual cosmos that at the moment lies beyond the compass of Francis Phelan's sensibility. The full extent of this discrepancy between the cosmic perspective of the narrative and the local [perspective] of Francis becomes apparent when he goes to where his dead son, Gerald, is buried. Gerald's integration with the material world belies his father's unspoken conviction that death is conclusive. . . . (274)

Elsewhere, Edward C. Reilly correctly reports that "Gerald *silently* compels his father 'to perform his final acts of expiation for abandoning the family'" ("Dante's Purgatorio" 6--emphasis mine).[1] Indeed, it is essential to the novel that there be some magical elements forever beyond Francis's grasp; otherwise, all his visions could be written off as delirium tremens. Kennedy gives no indication in the opening scenes that Francis can see or hear his family in their graves. Yet nowhere else in the novel does Francis ever let a ghost's accusations go unchallenged, and no one but Francis ever responds at all to the dead.

In fact, the reality of the spiritual world in Ironweed (and the other novels treated here) is one of its strongest ties to the Magic Realism of Marquez. Kennedy does not practice the metafiction so prevalent in other postmodern American novels. Unlike John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme, or Ishmael Reed, Kennedy does not disrupt his text with a metafictional comment on the creative act. In Barth's Chimera, for instance, the genie of the Arabian Nights bears an uncanny resemblance to a certain Maryland novelist:

> a genie appeared from nowhere right there in [the] library-stacks. He didn't resemble anything in [Scheherazade's] bedtime stories: for one thing, he wasn't frightening, though he was strange-looking enough: a light skinned fellow of forty or so, smooth-shaven and bald as a roc's egg. His clothes were simple but outlandish; he was tall and healthy and pleasant enough in appearance, except for queer lenses that he wore in a frame over his eyes. (Barth 16)

Barth enters his own novel, already a complex web of speakers, narrators, and mythic structures. He then begins a running commentary on the nature of story-telling, the artifice of art, and the importance of decoding semiotic messages embedded in texts. As Barth repeatedly points out, "It's as if--as if the key to the treasure *is* the treasure " (16--emphasis Barth's). Raymond Federman comments on the deconstructive goals of such intrusive postmodern metafiction:

> In his novel Out, Ronald Sukenick [not the real author, but the mythical author-protagonist by that name] states:" I want to write a novel that changes like a cloud as it goes along." In my own novel Take It or Leave It, the narrator whose name is Federman replies to Sukenick: "I want to write a novel that cancels itself as it goes along." (Critifictions 10--bracketed material Federman's)

Elsewhere, Federman observes, such writers (himself included) seem "to be more concerned with the problems of writing their books . . . than . . . the problems of Man and the injustices of society" (Critifictions 5).

As in the novels of Federman and Barth, Kennedy's tone is sometimes disruptive, but to opposite ends. As with the other authors in this study, Kennedy's interests lie primarily in social, not aesthetic realms. And when a voice that seemingly must be his interrupts the narrative, the effect is somehow not disruptive; he is not commenting on "the problem of writing his book." Rather, these episodes serve to reify the magic world of the novel, as when the omniscient third-person narrator breaks into the narrative to ask Helen, "Oh Helen, you were on the radio, but where did it take you? What fate was it that kept you from the great heights that were yours by right of talent and education?" (56). The effect of these violations of the narrative is to strengthen the reader's belief in the world of the novel. As Helen takes her bows after singing at Oscar Reo's Gilded Cage, the narrator's voice almost melds with Helen's:

> Helen, you are like a blackbird, when the sun comes out for a little while. Helen, you are like a blackbird made sassy by the sun. But what will happen to you when the sun goes down again?
>
> I do thank you
> And I shall come again to sing for you.
> Oh sassy blackbird! Oh! (58)

Here, as when the narrator asks the novel's hero, "What would you give never to have left, Francis" (64), Francis's humanity and the novel's pathos are reinforced. These asides do not highlight Kennedy's artifice, cleverness, and postmodernism; rather, the compassionate, intimate tone of these and other similar "narrative

apostrophes" shore up the fictive illusion of Helen and Francis's existence; they do not disrupt and deconstruct the "waking dream" of the novel. If metafiction's intent is to disorient the reader and unmoor the reading experience, Kennedy's Magic Realism anchors his text in a plausible context to such an extent that the magic elements themselves serve to make the work more, not less, seamless. The closest parallel to Kennedy's tone (among my featured works) can be found in Maus. The reality of Maus's cartoon mice and cats is never questioned by any of the characters, except the narrator, Spiegelman himself. The effect there is the same as it is here: Spiegelman makes his comic strip world more real--not less--by disrupting its integrity.

Secular Mythologies

Among the magic elements which encoded Ironweed are two secular mythologies. In chapter one, Rudy asks Francis "what was all that talk about men from Mars last night?" (11), setting the novel not just on Halloween, but Halloween 1938, the day after Orson Welles's famous "War of the Worlds" broadcast.[2] This establishes Ironweed as a novel of the unreal, the spiritual, the absurd, and the impossible, or as Thomas Bulger writes, "this fictional world has a pervasive metaphysical order" (274).

Other references to Welles continue throughout the book. Helen reads a newspaper interview with an astronomer concerning

the difficulty a Martian "rocket-ship [would face] reaching earth" (128). When, after his sixteen-year exile, Francis greets his shocked wife Annie, he quips that he "Aint one of them fellas from Mars" (155). Even the time structure of Ironweed is intricately tied to myth, hallucination, and unreality. At the same time, setting the novel during this particular mythically potent week during the American Depression (itself a mythically rich era) firmly anchors Ironweed, just as Francis believes burial in St. Agnes Cemetery "[situates] a man in place and time" (13).

Beyond establishing the date of the action of the novel, the presence of Orson Welles mythically permeates Ironweed. Kennedy intentionally evokes Welles, perhaps the greatest and most admired artistic failure of twentieth century America. The Orson Welles evoked in Ironweed is a man at the instant of public disgrace--the scandal following "The War of the Worlds"--and on the verge of his greatest success, Citizen Kane. Kennedy's choice to set the novel on the days following the "War of the Worlds" broadcast and to refer so frequently to the event imbues the novel with an air of promise and failure from the very beginning. Charles Higham discusses the legendary quality of Welles's failure in his biography, Orson Welles: The Rise and Fall of an American Genius:

> The conventional view is that Welles was destroyed by Hollywood, which in its usual crassness drove him into exile and refused to give him a chance to make great movies that would have been a credit America. His downfall as the most important American film director has seldom been placed at his own door except by the industry itself. . . .

> It is an axiom in the commercial cinema that the central figure of any work must be a human being with whom the mass audience can identify. He or she has to be likable, attractive, desirable, even when capable of villainy; he or she must speak the language of the people. . . . Yet so relentlessly has Welles worked against the commercial grain that he has even dared to make the central figures of his films unsympathetic. . . .
>
> Some perverse streak of anticommercialism drove him; he was the brilliant architect of his own downfall, and it is impossible to avoid that truth today. (330-2)

Kennedy, a self-confessed "lifelong movie freak and erstwhile movie critic" (Yellow Trolley 390) and screenwriter of The Cotton Club and Ironweed, was certainly familiar with Welles's reputation when he decided to set the tale of Francis's return to grace on such an auspicious date in American cultural history.

A more important secular myth in Ironweed is, of course, baseball, perhaps twentieth century America's greatest mythic structure. Francis, a former professional ballplayer, frequently ruminates on his life in baseball. While it may sound a bit cliched, the goals of both baseball and Francis are the same: to return home. On the other hand, baseball also influences Francis's "compulsion to flight":

> the running of bases at the crack of a bat, the running from accusation, the running from the calumny of men and women, the running from family, from bondage, from destitution of spirit through ritualistic straightenings, the running finally, in a quest for pure flight as a fulfilling mannerism of the spirit. (Ironweed 75)

Like Kennedy's use of the other mythic systems in the novel--Welles's failure, Catholicism, Celticism, and classical myth--baseball is both bane and blessing to Francis.

As a professional ballplayer, Francis is immediately elevated to quasi-heroic status in the eyes of his friends, family (especially his grandson, Danny), and the reader. Considering baseball as myth, of course, is nothing new:

> Baseball has always been such a difficult game that those few who play it well and joyfully and gracefully--players such as [Babe] Ruth and Shoeless Joe Jackson and Willie Mays--are lifted by fans into the realm of myth. (Goldstein 960)

Francis has inhabited this mythic realm and moved through the pantheon of the gods, but even here, his experiences were not idyllic. When he passes on some of his baseball "heritage" to his grandson, it is not associated with the boy's hero, Babe Ruth, but with one of the most vicious, "nasty, [and] intensely calculating" (960) players in the sport's history: Ty Cobb. Francis tells his grandson upon presenting the boy with a ball signed by Cobb, "Mean guy, Cobb was, come in at me spikes up many a time. But you had to hand it to a man who played ball as good as he did. He was the best" (Ironweed 170). This exchange also inspires Francis to recall how he sometimes cheated during his career in baseball. Francis's comment on his less than sporting behavior reveals his own "intensely calculating" nature. After contemplating how and when his cheated, he compliments himself, calling his various underhanded tricks "Nifty" (174).

Baseball also plays a role in Francis's first murder and, consequently, his first flight from Albany. Harold Allen, the scab Francis kills in the 1901 trolley car strike, accuses Francis:

> you knew, even that early in your career, how accurate your throw could be. You were proud of that talent. It was what brought you out to the strike that day, and it was why you spent the morning hunting for stones the same weight as a baseball. You aimed at me to make yourself a hero. (145)

Allen also cites baseball as a symptom of Francis's disloyalty to his family, charging Francis with "abandoning his own family . . . every spring and summer . . . when baseball season started" (26).

Ironically, this baseball-inspired murder not only leads Francis into a life-long flight from himself, it also recreates him as a dramatic hero. Kennedy's fictional bard of Albany, playwright Edward Daugherty, bases his play, The Car Barns, on the trolley strikes and Francis's murder of Harold Allen. For a time, even Francis himself believes like "[the] playwright . . . [that the strikers were] . . . Divine Warriors, sparked by the socialistic gods who understood the historical Irish need for aid from on high" (206). Here another secular mythology parallels baseball in Francis's recreation as hero. Like Woody Guthrie, Joe Hill, and even John Henry, Francis becomes a myth of the laboring class and a hero of the union movement.

Baseball makes Francis Phelan who he is, and baseball begins and ends Francis's career in murder. When the American

Legionnaires raid the hobo camp at the end of the novel, Francis avenges Rudy's killing with the mighty swing of a club:

> Francis connected with a stroke that would have sent any pitch over any centerfield fence in any ball park anywhere, and he clearly heard and truly felt bones crack in the man's back. He watched with all but orgiastic pleasure as the breathless man twisted grotesquely and fell without a sound. (218)

Baseball, Francis's one true talent, is also responsible for (or linked to) some of the most profound violence in his life. It is no surprise that when the ghosts of his past arrive in Annie's backyard to watch Francis's reintegration with his family, they "[erect] a wooden structure that Francis . . . recognize[s] as bleachers" (172). Baseball played a key role in driving Francis from his family. The spectral bleachers seem an altogether fitting greeting for Francis upon his return.

Pagan Mythologies: Classical and Celtic

Baseball is not a traditional mythology; Kennedy also makes use of pre-Christian myth systems. Both classical and Celtic legend inform the structural and thematic concerns of Ironweed. Anya Taylor, while misreading some particulars of the novel, admirably ferrets out the many vestiges of Celtic legend in the novel. In fact, her "Ironweed, Alcohol, and Celtic Heroism" convincingly argues that Kennedy's use of alcohol is not simply a sign of Francis's weakness or guilt but of his "shamanism" (107).

Like Francis, "The shaman . . . desires to transcend the limits of time-bound, space-bound mortality, to imitate the arrow or the bird, to enter the spirit world through a soul-flight" (107). If Kennedy's use of alcohol is thus multi-faceted, both a signifier of Francis's inability to flourish in the modern world and a sign of his ties to an ancient world and culture, then this paradox is consistent with the other elements of his Magic Realism. Like Marquez in Chronicle of a Death Foretold and the other Magic Realists, Kennedy in Ironweed immerses himself in a subculture to both praise and criticize it. We will see the same dynamic at work in the work of Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston. Morrison's use of the slave narrative tradition and the mythic dimensions of infanticide in Beloved and Kingston's confrontation with the oral traditions of China in Woman Warrior both signal an ambiguous relationship with heritage.

Taylor points out that Halloween, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day are not just the Catholic holy days which "[celebrate] the dead and their continued presence among the living" (111). These days have much older connotations:

> Ironweed's Halloween has mythic Celtic overlays of *Samhain*, the celebration, later syncretized with the Christian festival, when the *Side* return from under their mounds to burn cities and castles. . . . The Celtic bonfires that customarily imitated and magically forestalled these attacks are reproduced in Ironweed in the numerous references to fire and, cataclysmically, in the finale, when the police torch the "jungle," where bums, drifters, and homeless families huddle. . . . *Samhain* marks one of the four annual festivals

> of Celtic ritual, the harvest, which is viewed both as a celebration of the dead and of new beginnings (111--emphasis Taylor's)

Kennedy's Halloween thus taps into two mythic systems, Christian and Celtic, and in both cases simultaneously embraces concepts of death and rebirth.

Taylor also identifies individual characters with Celtic figures who act as prefiguring "types." For example, she argues Edward and Martin Daugherty are father and son "Celtic bards" (118), who elevate Francis and his son Billy to heroic status with their writing: Edward with his play and Martin with his columns about Billy's involvement with a local political family. But this chapter need not detail her every connection between the world of Ironweed and Celtic myth. However, Kennedy clearly draws on this Celtic material. More importantly, he does not simply pay lip service to these myths. He incorporates them into the novel in the same paradoxical, deconstructive, Magic Realist manner as he does all the other mythic elements of his work.

Likewise, Kennedy employs classical myth both to structure his novel and to create character parallels. Many critics have pointed out the connections. Taylor comments on the connections between Ironweed and Ulysses and classical myth (110); she is no doubt thinking of Francis as an Odysseus-like wanderer returning to his Penelope. Peter P. Clarke's "Classical Myth in William Kennedy's Ironweed" maintains that Kennedy's "association between Francis . . . and classical heroes is reinforced by Kennedy's use of

language and imagery drawn from and suggestive of classical myth" (167), as with Ironweed's quest motif, for instance. Clarke also reads into Katrina, Kathryn, and Clara the qualities of Artemis: Katrina because she introduces Francis to wine, thereby facilitating his self-destruction; Francis's mother Kathryn (whom Francis calls "Queen Mama" [16]) because of her "perpetual [virginity]" (Clarke 169); and Clara for her association with the moon (Clarke 169-70).

Of course, Clarke is right when he says that the "clearest use of [classical] myth" (171) in Ironweed occurs when Francis witnesses the ghostly apparitions of the women of his life sitting in judgment over him in a flop house:

> The faces of all the women Francis had ever known changed with kaleidoscopic swiftness from one to the other . . . on the three female figures in the far corner. The trio sat on straight-backed chairs, witnesses all to the whole fabric of Francis' life. His mother was crocheting a Home Sweet Home sampler while Katrina measured off a bolt of new cloth and Helen snipped the ragged threads. Then they all became Annie. (202)

As Clarke points out, this clearly alludes to "the classical Moirai or Fates" (171).

As with the Celtic mythology, the uses of the classical models are many and varied in Ironweed. I do not wish to restate Clarke's very thorough argument but simply to establish that Kennedy uses such myths in the novel.[3] And, in keeping with Kennedy's Magic Realism, the use of myth here is, to an extent, deconstructive. As

Clarke says, "the power of Ironweed rests on Kennedy's ability to take . . . subhuman bums, transform them into heroes, and then reveal their basic humanity" (175).

Catholic Mythology I: Theology

Although popular culture, baseball, and pagan systems play key roles in Ironweed, the most significant mythology present is that of Francis's Catholic upbringing. The opening scene in St. Agnes's Cemetery underscores this element of the novel. In fact, Francis and Rudy's discussion of the exclusivity of St. Agnes's speaks to the power of myth, spirituality, and heritage to isolate communities:

> "I wonder who's under this [headstone]," Francis said.
> "Probably some Catholic," Rudy said.
> "Of course it's some Catholic . . . it's a Catholic Cemetery."
> "They let Protestants in sometimes," Rudy said.
> "They do like hell."
> "Sometimes they let Jews in too. And Indians." (5)

Knowing as we do that death is no impediment to social interaction in the world of Ironweed, this exclusionism is not without consequence for both the living and the dead. Of course, the novel takes place over the three-day span of Halloween, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day. These are important Christian Holy days, but more specifically, in Catholic tradition, All Saints' Day is, as Helen reminds Francis, "a holy day of obligation" (62) when

Catholics are "obliged to [attend] Mass. . . . [They must attend] either on [the] holy day itself or on the evening of the previous day" (quoted Hardon 245-46). Setting the novel on such a day emphasizes the theme of guilt, although such emphasis is hardly necessary. For Francis, every day is another day of obligation, if not a holy one. The pervasiveness of his debt to Annie and Gerald propels him though the novel. In fact, early on, Gerald delivers his mandate to Francis:

> Gerald, through an act of silent will, imposed on his father the pressing obligation to perform his final acts of expiation for abandoning the family. You will not know, the child silently said, what these acts are until you have performed them all. And after you have performed them you will not understand that they were expiatory any more than you have understood all the other expiation that has kept you in such prolonged humiliation. Then, when these final acts are complete, you will stop trying to die because of me. (19)

Obligation and guilt are central to Francis's experience of Catholicism, although Francis does his best to deny the influence of his faith on his life. Several times he qualifies his beliefs about Heaven and Hell, with the statement, "if they ever got such a place" (77). When Helen prods him about going to Mass, he responds in practical, physical terms: "That's tomorrow. What are we gonna do tonight? Where the hell am I gonna put you?" (62).

Perhaps the single most powerful image of the novel's "guilt complex" comes in the first chapter, when Francis's mother

disapprovingly observes him from her grave, as she eats weeds woven into crosses with "an insatiable revulsion" (2):

> With a furtive burst of energy she wove another cross from the shallow weeds above her and quickly swallowed it, but was disappointed by the taste. Weeds appealed to Kathryn Phelan in direct ratio to the length of their roots. The longer the weed, the more revulsive the cross. (9)

Kennedy's conception of this destructive guilt chillingly combines images of the mythic and supernatural with the language of addiction and self-punishment, mirroring Francis's own alcohol-laden journey.

However, it is something of a cliche to suggest that Irish-Catholics are guilt-ridden (especially Catholics who accidentally murder their infant sons). Andrew Greeley bluntly articulates the stereotype in his study of the Irish in America, That Most Distressful Nation: The Taming of the American Irish:

> The Irish are a cold, frustrated, sexless, repressed people with little emotional flexibility, and practically no capacity to give themselves in intimate relations. Emotions are kept under control by internal guilt feelings and external ridicule (104-5).

But Kennedy's exploration of Catholicism runs deeper than Francis's guilt. Like the other writers discussed in this study, Kennedy's relationship with his heritage is neither entirely comfortable nor entirely antagonistic. Thomas Bulger demonstrates that in Ironweed and his other novels, "Kennedy repeatedly relies on one of the great simple images from his formative days [at the Franciscan

Siena College]: Saint Francis, the poor man of Assisi" (270). One can identify in Kennedy's work the central tenets of Franciscan philosophy: "a mystic appreciation of nature; a life of caring and sharing for the unfortunate; humility in the pursuit of salvation; the sanctity of self-sacrifice" (270). Kennedy's incorporation of these life-affirming concepts, his allusive use of Dante's Purgatorio[4] as a structuring principle, and Francis's successful bid for absolution all play counter to the negative view of Irish-Catholic life that the novel's emphasis on alcoholism and guilt immediately offer. Indeed, even the alcohol that destroys Francis and leads to Gerald's death carries positive mythic connotations, as later sections of this chapter will argue.[5]

Bulger traces Franciscan elements in Kennedy's earlier novel, Legs, but believes "Ironweed provides the spiritual plane that is absent in Legs . . . [and that] Kennedy intends Francis Phelan to be regarded in the context of spiritual heroism" (273). Clearly, Ironweed draws substantially on Franciscan lore; the most telling example is the hero's name, Francis. Even the surname Phelan can be seen as a "sign of the novel's underlying Franciscanism" (273) by playing Phelan into "failing" and labeling the novel's hero a "Francis failing, or more suggestively, a failing (Saint) Francis" (273).[6]

More importantly, Bulger sees in the novel a vindication of this theology in Francis's "paradoxical Franciscanism" (273). In the course of his underworld existence, he

> accepts humility and poverty . . . helps the unfortunate and diseased . . . [and] recognizes the promptings of spiritual

> dictates above and beyond quotidian life. On the other hand, he continually runs away from the responsibilities required of a caring individual and succumbs to his baser desires. . . . (274)

Bulger avoids the charge that he is merely inserting Franciscan material into the broad context of poverty and theology in Ironweed. To support his contention that Kennedy specifically draws on Franciscan mythos and theology, Bulger cites not only Kennedy's early education in a Franciscan institution, but also Kennedy's use of such relatively obscure bits of lore as the "wolf of Gubbio" legend, which is

> widely glossed by Franciscan commentators as a prominent example of the power of Saint Francis' charity to assimilate even the most bestial and hostile of creatures into the spiritual community of Franciscanism. (272)

Marcus Gorman, the narrator of Legs, alludes to this legend when he reads from a prayer book to Jack "Legs" Diamond, "'I would make peace, Brother Wolf, between them and you'" (quoted in Bulger 272).

It is not necessary to dwell on other Franciscan elements of Kennedy's work here. Rather, we should remember that Ironweed is not simply a "Catholic" book because of its setting and characters but one dependent upon multiple levels of carefully crafted and manipulated mythical material. Even his use of the Franciscan material is multi-faceted. As Bulger says of such material in Legs:

> Kennedy's knowledge of Franciscan lore involves a close acquaintance with the major textual tradition. . . . [This] reveals Kennedy's willingness to use the paradigm of Saint

> Francis in a sophisticated manner. The image of Saint Francis operates interdependently on two fictional levels: in the area of character . . . and in the area of narrative consciousness. . . . (273)

In Ironweed, Kennedy incorporates equally diverse mythic dimensions; he draws on numerous mythical/cultural/supernatural traditions. While the myths of non-Christian spiritual systems figure prominently in the novel, the Purgatorio (very much a Catholic book, whose connections to this Catholic book will be discussed shortly) establishes yet another mythic/cultural mooring in Ironweed.

Catholic Mythology II: Adoration of the Virgin/Whore

A major Catholic influence in Ironweed which exemplifies Kennedy's ambiguous and fluid relationship with his material is the book's treatment of women. Several women play significant, related roles in the novel. Annie Phelan, Helen Archer, and Katrina Daugherty all have sexual relationships (consummated or otherwise) with Francis as wife, lover, or seducer, respectively.[7] Kennedy identifies Kathryn Phelan, Francis's mother and arguably the most influential woman in his life, entirely through her destructive, repressed, and repressive sexuality. Francis's favorite epithet for his cold mother (whom Francis assumes lies "with her back to" his father, even in the grave) is "Fishwife" (15).

In the novel, Francis magically "witnesses" his own conception and the "sacramental consummation" of his parents' marriage (98):

> Now, as her husband lifted her chemise over her head, the virginal mother of six recoiled with what Francis recognized for the first time to be spiritually induced terror, as visible in her eyes in 1879 as it was in the grave. Her skin was as fresh and pink as the taffeta lining of her coffin, but she was, in her youthfully rosy bloom, as lifeless as the the spun silk of her magenta burial dress. She has been dead all her life, Francis thought, and for the first time in years he felt pity for this woman, who had been spayed by self-neutered nuns and self-gelded priests. (98-9)

Francis' previous exposure to his parents' sexual nature has had a lasting effect on him. The violence and corruption of Ironweed's treatment of sex can be traced to Francis's first encounter with human sexuality:

> Because he was the firstborn, Francis' room was next to [his parents'], and so he heard their nocturnal rumblings for years; and he well knew how she perennially resisted her husband. When Michael would finally overcome her either by force of will or by taking their case to the priest, Francis would hear her gurgles of resentment, her moans of anguish, her eternal arguments about the sinfulness of all but generative couplings. (98)

His vision of his own conception makes Francis pity his mother, yet hitherto, he had not questioned his father's right to exert "force of will" over Kathryn. In fact, Francis blames his mother exclusively and hates her for her repressed and oppressive personality: "she hated the fact that people knew that she had committed intercourse in order to have children, a chagrin that was endlessly

satisfying to Francis all his life" (98). After magically witnessing his parents' wedding night, Francis reevaluates his mother, but never entirely loses his loathing of "the old battle-axe (sad, twisted, wrong-headed, pitiable woman)" (147).

The sort of sexual repression Kennedy describes here can be identified as Irish Catholic. Andrew Greeley, exploring the knotty question of Irish sexuality, cites John C. Messenger's sociological study of the men and women of Inis Baeg in Western Ireland's Aran Islands:

> The specific doctrinal tradition to which Ireland and the Irish countryman in particular has fallen heir is the Augustinian. . . . [It] lays greater emphasis on the weakness and evil to which human nature is prone as a result of original sin. . . . The tradition he inherits tends toward a certain historical and theological positivism in regard to the major truths and values of life, and, together with other historical factors, has led him to an intensified reliance upon the teaching power of the Church as voiced by the clergy. . . .
>
> And . . . although he is certain that man's bodily nature with its emotions is at root good, he is rather more suspicious of it and deals with it somewhat more severely. As a result, he inclines to a jaundiced view of sex and a generally ascetic outlook which places a high premium upon continence, penance and, in most spheres of life, on abstemiousness. (quoted Greeley 105)

Greeley, again bluntly but effectively, characterizes the Irish family revealed in this study: "the Irish family as studied by Messenger is cold, anxiety-ridden, repressive, and one of the most sexually naive of the world's societies" (101).

Ironweed mirrors Messenger's findings. By the time of the events depicted in the novel, Francis's violent, repressive, and destructive sexual life is over, as Francis admits to Rosskam the junk man:

> "So how do you like it?" Rosskam asked.
> "Like what?" Francis asked.
> "Sex business." Rosskam said. "Women stuff."
> "I don't think much about it anymore."
> "You bums, you do a lot of dirty stuff up the heinie, am I right?"
> "Some guys like it that way. Not me."
> "How do you like it?"
> "I don't like it anymore. . . . I'm over the hill."
> (94)

Ironweed's oppressive and corrupt sexuality is in keeping with the culture Kennedy has taken it upon himself to explore. However, Francis, and Kennedy himself, reserve a particular sexual niche for women.

The narrow sexual stereotyping of women in Ironweed even extends to minor characters like Sandra and Clara. Little is known of Sandra the hobo. Once she is dead, even her last name "don't make much difference," and, Kennedy reminds us, it "[n]ever did" (62). But we do know that she "was a whore before she was a bum" (31). When trying to mooch an evening's shelter from Jack and Clara, Francis immediately identifies Clara as a whore and also a monster:

> Francis knew Clara less than three weeks, but he could see the curve of her life: sexy kid likes the rewards, goes pro, gets

> restless, marries and makes kids, chucks that, pro again, sickens, but really sick, gettin' old gettin' ugly, locks onto Jack, turns monster. (78)

Much of this pattern of sexual corruption that infects the novel could be written off as a merely an extension of Kennedy's depiction of the foul living conditions of Ironweed's underclass. In fact, Francis comments on his own sexual mores, as well as Helen's: "Fornication was standard survival currency everywhere, was it not?" (89). Kennedy attacks traditional, patriarchal teachings about sex through Francis's pity for his mother's sexual brainwashing by "self-neutered nuns and self-gelded priests," and Helen's unique code of sexual honesty:

> [Helen's] attitude is: I flew through my years and I never let a man use me for money. I went Dutch lots of times. I would let them buy the drinks but that's because it's the man's place to buy [a woman a] drink. (136)

Also, Kennedy balances the many depictions of women as whores with Francis' and the male bum called Old Shoes' own whoring. When Helen sleeps with Finny for shelter, Francis is nonplused:

> He knew, though she had never told him, that she once had to fuck two strangers to be able to sleep in peace. Francis accepted this cuckoldry as readily as he accepted the onus of pulling the blanket off Clara and penetrating whatever dimensions of reek necessary to gain access to a bed. (89)

To make his living, Old Shoes used to steal cars and "peddle his ass" (219). At the same time, Kennedy is very traditional,

"Catholic," and patriarchal in his adoration of Annie, a woman unique in her ability to express her sexuality without the physical corruption associated with every other sexual episode in the book. From Rosskam mounting the "hot lady" atop "the ash cans" (95) to Francis's fiery vision of the consummation with Katrina that never was--"Smoke, not fire, killed her, just as the ashes and not the flames of her sensuality had finally smothered her desire" (111)--sexuality in Ironweed is always associated with ashes and dirt and rot. *Except* where Annie is concerned.

The sexual corruption that runs through the book is overpowering. In exchange for shelter, Francis knows that:

> In Finny's car, Helen would probably be pulling off Finny, or taking him in her mouth. Finny would b unequal to intercourse, and Helen would be too fat for a toss in the front seat. (89)

In her swollen belly there grows not a child but a tumor (she had once carried Francis's child, but that ended in miscarriage) (122). Almost every mention of sexuality in Ironweed is countered with an explicit description of physical corruption: Helen's tumor, Finny's car, Rosskam's ash cans, Clara's diarrhea. In Kennedy's Albany, sexuality is not healthy. Moreover, the women in this book--unlike the men--are *consistently* identified in terms of their sexual histories; and there seem to be few possible sexual identities for women to choose from: mother, virgin, or whore. Kennedy's exploration of the virgin-whore dichotomy is often critical of such double standards. But he is just as likely to buy into that double standard, especially in the case of Annie. Such

ideological vacillation, one of the novel's great strengths and legacies from the Latin-American Magic Realist tradition, here becomes problematic.

While Kennedy clearly includes his male characters in his sweeping sexual wasteland, the women of the novel--excepting Annie--seem to have been set aside for special condemnation: Clara and Sandra are whores; Helen has had a tragic, filthy sexual life; Katrina is slightly mad and adulterous; Kathryn is a "fishwife." It is also true that like Helen, Francis is willing to prostitute himself for shelter from the cold. However, the otherwise compassionate narrator seems unconcerned with Helen's own potential "cuckoldry," as he is for Francis's.

Although the sexuality of male characters is foul, it is usually more predatory and pathetic than "prostitutory." While working for Old Rosskam, Albany's absurdly potent ragman satyr, Francis discusses anal sex, infidelity, and his own impotence (Ironweed 94). Rosskam invites Francis to watch as he copulates with the "hot lady." Contemplating his own impotence, Francis explores his sexual past, remembering the excitement of watching neighbors in the old neighborhood, the Ryans, through their bedroom window. Accepting his own voyeuristic tendencies, Francis realizes that he did not "want a woman. . . [.] He wanted to watch the Ryans again, getting ready to go at it" (95). Francis approaches the cellar where Rosskam mounts the hot lady "on the ashcans, Rosskam's pants hanging from his shoes, on top of [the] lady with her dress up to her neck" (96). Their coupling is both pathetic and comic:

> "Oh boyoboy," Rosskam was saying, "Oh boyoboy."
> "Hey, I love it," said the hot lady. "Do I love it? Do I love it?"
> "You love it, said Rosskam. Oh boyoboy."
>
> "Gimme that stick," said the hot lady, "Gimme it, gimme it, gimme, gimme, gimme that stick." (96)

Not unexpectedly, the episode does not come close to giving Francis the "orgiastic pleasure" (218) that only violence seems to offer him, but it does act as a springboard for Francis's exploration of his own sexual development.

Earlier, I suggested that the sexual corruption in Ironweed was mostly consistent. *Almost* all the novel's sexual events are accompanied by imagery of excrement, dirt, blood, and death. *Almost* all the novel's characters enjoy an equally stigmatized sexuality, except Annie, the loving wife who remains faithful to Francis, a philandering drunk son-killer, for twenty-two years. She assures us that "It wasn't the religion" (161) that led her to remain faithful. All things considered, one is hard-pressed to take Annie at her word.

Catholic Mythology III: Annie the Virgin Whore

Again, Kennedy's characters are sexual pariahs, with the exception of Annie, who remains faithful to Francis in his twenty-two-year absence. "I only had one husband. I only had one man,"

she tells Francis when he returns. "I never even went to the pictures with anybody except neighbors or the family" (161). In a sense, by never seeking a new sexual life, Annie has regained her virginity, becoming the embodiment of the Virgin Mother of God.[8] Mary the Ever Virgin is central to Catholicism, especially as practiced in the twentieth century:

> Mary's place in the Catholic faith and piety grew immensely through the centuries, and Marian piety has also been one of the principle areas of development of doctrine in the Catholic Church in modern times. Two Marian years for the universal Church in one generation. Two major Marian shrines with millions of pilgrims annually from every part of the world--approved by the Church again in less than a century. Twelve papal encyclicals on the Rosary alone by four sovereign pontiffs. And a library of Marian literature that has no counterpart in all previous Catholic history. All these are some indication of what has been rightly called "The Age of Mary." (Hardon 45)

Central to Mary's role in Catholicism is her status as both "Mother of God" and "Ever Virgin." Annie embodies elements of both of these roles in Ironweed. She is not only the perfect mother and wife (she mourns her slain son without condemning the husband who killed him) but also perfectly sexual and perfectly pure at once.

Francis remembers the almost magical sexual moment that was his first kiss with Annie on Kibbee's lumber pile. Annie's kiss came from

> the brain and the heart and the crotch, and out of the hands on [his] hair, and out of those breasts that weren't all the way

> blown up yet, and out of the clutch [of] them arms . . . and out of time itself . . . and out of fingers . . . that run themselves around and over [Francis's] face and down [his] neck, and out of the grip . . . on her shoulders, especially the bones that come out of the middle of her back like angel wings, and out of them eyes that keep openin' and closin' to make sure that this is still goin' and still real and not just some . . . dream . . . and outa that tongue, holy shit that tongue, you gotta ask where she learned that because nobody ever did that that good except Katrina who was married and with a kid and had a right to know, but Annie, goddamn, Annie, where'd you pick that up. . . . (156)

Annie, the sexual idiot savant and virginal angel, we are assured, did not learn to kiss like that by "gidzeyin' heavy on this lumber pile regular" (156). Annie is simply the perfect (patriarchal) woman: motherly, faithful, sexually skilled, and sexually pure.

Even as Francis doubts Annie's virginity he stops himself, "No, no, no, I know you never, I always knew you never" (156). His rebuke is reminiscent of the church's response to "those few individuals who denied Mary's unimpaired virginity, [of whom] St. Basil (329-379 [A.D.]) wrote, 'The true friends of Christ do not tolerate hearing the Mother of God ever ceased to be a virgin'" (Hardon 49). The Church's dogmatic stance on Mary's virginity is not only an elevation of virginity, but also a condemnation of sexuality and other "unruly desires that are the heritage" (Hardon 48) of those who, unlike Mary, are tainted with original sin. Francis clearly shares this view, and so--to a degree--does Kennedy. Like Mary's exemption from original sin, Annie's

exemption from the imagery of rot and sexuality is unique. Several times, when Francis is confronted with a woman whose sexual behavior he finds offensive or who, like Helen, refuses to follow his orders, he bemoans the absence in his life of a "real woman" (214). His real woman is here, in Annie: a woman willing to take in her fugitive husband, the killer of her child, the man who condemned her to twenty-two cold, lonely years. In this novel of the walking dead and living hallucinations, this "real woman" is the least realistic character in sight.

Still, Annie serves her mythic purpose. The Catholic Mass begins with the recitation of the Penitential Rite, a prayer which reflects her role in the novel:

> I confess to Almighty God, that I have sinned through my own fault. In my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and what I have failed to do and I ask the the Blessed Mary, Ever Virgin, all the Angels and Saints, and you my Brothers and Sisters to pray for me the Lord our God.

Catholics must ask Mary to intercede on their behalf, if they wish to be forgiven. So too, must Francis confess first to Annie before he can forgive himself for having killed his son. And only after his confession can he return home to stay in Danny's "mighty nice little room" (227)

Kennedy's flip-flopping on sexuality--condemning the church for neutering Kathryn yet lavishing Annie with adoration for neutering herself--mirrors the Magic Realist aesthetic at work in this novel. More than simply a novel of guilt and condemnation,

Ironweed is the story of Francis's redemption, a redemption achieved through the same Catholic theology and tradition that drove Francis to go to war with himself for twenty-two years. The Catholic practice of ritualistic confession, the sacrament of Penance (originally called the "sacrament of peace" [Hardon 168]), hovers over Francis's return to Annie. For it is with Annie that Francis performs the "three acts [which] are required of the penitent, namely, contrition, confession, and satisfaction" (Hardon 169). True, Francis does not confess his sins "secretly to a priest" (Hardon 170) as the Church commands, but Francis's most important relationship with the Church is not as an institution of faith but as as a cultural force. As Kennedy himself points out in the film documentary "William Kennedy's Albany," "Francis didn't really believe in God, but he was raised Catholic, so it's problematic on how to define that. If he's a Catholic he believes in God whether he likes it or not." Catholicism is not something one chooses, as Kennedy sees it, but something which once experienced cannot be revoked.

Like the other works examined in this study, and indeed like the simultaneous existence of the worlds of spirit and flesh in Kennedy's novel, Ironweed allows for contradictions. While criticizing the subculture he explores, Kennedy elevates that subculture. His novel's voice is hardly that of Harold Bloom's "School of Resentment," composed of writers who "hate the idea of literature itself" (McMillin A11) and instead wish to "advance a a non-existent program for social change" (A24). In "William

Kennedy's Albany," Kennedy berates a St. Patrick's Day parade for its terrible corniness:

> It was a thing that I did not really want to be part of. And I decided to go back and reenter this. To reconstitute my memory and my possession of North Albany because what a writer is is a person who doesn't want to lose anything. You never want to lose anything in your life. And it's very silly. You know, all this incredible green: green beer, green tails, green hats, green hair, green everything.

But finally, Kennedy accepts his memory, silliness and all: "And I don't care whether it's silly or whether it's outre or whether it's vulgar. I don't care. It's what it is. It's what we've become as Irish people in this country." He attends the parade and celebrates his culture as it is rather than attempting to recreate a lost culture or pretend that his Irishness is somehow grander than the one he was born into.

Conclusion

This love/hate relationship between the past and present, between the living and the dead is at the core of Ironweed in particular and Magic Realism in general. In one of the novel's most bizarre and affecting scenes, we learn that Gerald is encased in his grave in a magical protective web which will not allow him to decompose:

> because his fate had been innocence and denial, Gerald had grown a protective web which deflected all moisture, all

> moles, rabbits, and other burrowing creatures. His web was woven of strands of vivid silver, an enveloping hammock of intricate, near-transparent weave. His body had not only been absolved of the need to decay, but in some respects--a full head of hair, for instance--it had grown to a completeness that was both natural and miraculous. (17)

This description is key to Kennedy's Magic Realist use of myth. An unobservant reader of Ironweed might conclude (as one who watches the film adaptation likely will) that the "unreal" qualities of the novel--the visitations from various ghosts, for instance--are the result of decades of alcoholism on Francis's senses. However, this scene, as with the descriptions of Francis's parents as they lie in their graves, cannot be read as a hallucination for the simple reason that Francis never sees Gerald. Nor does he see his mother as she "twitched nervously in her grave" and "wove crosses from the dead dandelions and other deep-rooted weeds" (1-2). Like Marquez, Kennedy documents a world of spiritual decay which has real, physical--if bizarre--manifestations.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how Kennedy adapts an Irish-American consciousness to Magic Realist concerns with expiation and the magical reality available to us. Later chapters will focus on particular myths and historical resonances at work in the novels. Here, I have not only examined Kennedy's novel but also pointed out the various Magic Realist paths to be considered when examining other works.

In my next chapter, I discuss Toni Morrison's similar project in Beloved, a novel built on an African-American consciousness. Morrison has chosen a more historical, less ecumenical mythology, but she has treated it in genuine Magic Realist fashion. Echoing Ironweed, Beloved is the story of a mother who kills her own infant, only to be haunted by that child. Both Ironweed and Beloved are built upon mythological underpinnings. Both are also ghost stories. However, where ghosts in traditional literature of the supernatural are figures of loss and revenge, in these novels they act as the protagonists' guides to reconciliation with the past--both "mythic" and personal pasts.

The two children even share similar deaths. Both murders are committed without malice. Indeed, in Morrison's novel the murder is intended as an act of love. Such killing love is a central thematic concern in all of the works analyzed here: the ritual murder for honor in Chronicle of a Death Foretold, the "loving" murder of infants and young children in Ironweed, Beloved, and Maus. Even Woman Warrior returns to this subject. It is as if Magic Realists cannot separate murder and birth, love and rejection. As Chronicle of a Death Foretold both sympathizes with and condemns those who perpetuate the ritualistic justice meted out against Santiago Nasar, Ironweed both attacks and celebrates the condition of being Irish Catholic in twentieth century America. Kennedy both rejects and embraces his heritage, suggesting that really no other choice--no other reality--exists. This is the

paradox of Magic Realism. We will encounter this paradox again shortly in Beloved.

NOTES

1. Whether or not Francis sees Gerald, clearly the boy has a powerful, magical pull on his father. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that there is a folk tradition among the Irish that the "little people" are in fact "the souls of unbaptized children" (Greeley, n, 71). Nowhere is it suggested that Gerald is unbaptized, although he is only thirteen days old when he dies. Regardless of the baptism question, the possible connection between this dead child, who has such a powerful effect on the waking world, and this folk belief that the spirits of babies can wield a similar force, is intriguing. Also intriguing is the possible intersection of two mythic systems--Celtic and Christian--in the person of Gerald.

2. On Oct. 30,1938, Orson Welles presented his famous radio dramatization of H. G. Wells' The War of the Worlds. The reaction was remarkable:

> It is estimated that some twelve percent of the radio audience heard the broadcast and that more than half of that number took it seriously. Indeed . . . the Mercury orchestra played the final chords at the conclusion of the show, the phone rang in the control room and the mayor of a midwestern city demanded to speak to Welles immediately. He yelled at him, "There are mobs in my streets! Women and children crowding my churches! Violence, looting, rioting! If this is some crummy joke, then I'm coming right to New York and beat you up!" (Higham 127)

Kennedy uses Welles's conflation of the real and the imaginary and The War of the World's effect on the nation not just to pinpoint his

story in time but to validate his thematic argument concerning the power of myth, culture, and old and fantastic stories.

3. One mythical parallel that Clarke has not made (nor has anyone else, so far as my reading goes) is that of Rosskam, the absurdly potent junkman, who serves as something of a Pan figure. Not only does he exhibit remarkable sexual prowess but also an ability to seduce women that--when we consider that we're talking about a seventy-one year old junk dealer--pushes the realms of credibility. Consider his exchange with Francis, who has admitted to being over the hill sexually:

> "I go over no hills. Four, five times a night I get it in with the old woman. And in the daylight, you never know." [Said Rosskam]
>
> "What's the daylight?" [Asked Francis]
>
> "Women. They ask for it. You go house to house, you get offers. This is not a new thing in the world." (94)

As Pan, Rosskam not only spreads his seed indiscriminately, he also inspires Francis to recall his erotic life.

4. Edward C. Reilly, among others, has noted the connections between the two works. His "Dante's Purgatorio and Kennedy's Ironweed: Journeys to Redemption" demonstrates that Dante's presence in Ironweed does not end with the novel's epigraph from the Purgatorio, "To course o'er better waters now hoists sail the little bark of my wit, leaving behind her a sea so cruel." Reilly argues that by the time the novel opens, "Phelan has metaphorically spent his time in Hell" and that

> [other] parallels . . . exist between the [Purgatorio] and Ironweed. Instead of opening on [Easter] Sunday morning, Ironweed begins on Halloween morning . . . and it ends on the day after All Saints' Day. The novel's three-day sequence loosely parallels . . . Dante's Comedia . . . [which] begins on Maundy Thursday evening and ends on Easter Sunday. Concomitantly, Dante is thirty-five when he becomes lost in the dark wood of error, and Phelan is thirty-six when he fatally drops Gerald; moreover, both . . . journeys move from the darkness of sin into the light of redemption. (5-6)

Reilly enumerates several other parallels between the works (communications with the dead, the centrality of confession) and clearly establishes the Purgatorio as a model for Ironweed's structure.

5. Alcohol clearly played a role in Gerald's death, regardless of Francis's claims. He tells his dead son, "I only had four beers after work that day [the day Francis dropped and killed his son]. It wasn't because I was drunk that I dropped you. Four beers and I didn't finish the fourth" (18-19).

6. Bulger cites a remark of Kennedy's to support the assertion:

> I went to school with people named Phelan. I guess maybe that unconsciously, the family was failing and I think I probably had an unconscious pun when I made the choice. I didn't realize [the name was a pun on "failing"] until much later on. (quoted Bulger 273)

7. Peter P. Clarke, in an unrelated argument, implies as much. Attempting to identify the classical "types" used in Ironweed, Clarke says:

> Most of the women in Ironweed are at one point or another depicted as goddesses. . . . Kennedy refers to Katrina as a naked goddess and to Francis as her Adonis. Herein lies the key to all the many goddesses in the book, for if Francis is Adonis, not only is Katrina Aphrodite or Venus, but several other mythological pairs are invoked as well. The story of Venus and Adonis is a "rendition of a recurrent theme: the Great Mother and her lover who dies as vegetation and comes back to life again." ("Classical Myth" 168)

Essentially, Clarke identifies the mythic roles of the women in Ironweed based on their sexual relationship with Francis/Adonis.

8. Clarke argues that there are, in fact, two mythical "perpetual virgins" in the novel. However, the other "virgin" is treated with far less respect than is Annie: Kathryn . . . is "Queen Mama" (Ironweed16) and a perpetual virgin like Artemis" (169). Clarke points to Kennedy's description of Kathryn as a "virginal mother of six" (Ironweed 98). Unfortunately, unlike Annie, Kathryn, the "Fishwife" (15), is not a perfect mother, and she therefore is lambasted for her repressed sexuality rather than lauded for it, as Annie is lauded for her return to virginity after she is abandoned by Francis.

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Chapter 4
"Uncalled-for Pride": Classical Myth and American History in Toni Morrison's Beloved

Like Ironweed, Toni Morrison's Beloved is a departure from the heavily fantastic Magic Realism of One Hundred Years of Solitude in that the novel is a text securely anchored in the real world. As Ironweed convincingly documents Depression-era Albany, Beloved accurately recreates life in post-bellum Ohio. However, although both emphasize the real, the two novels are clearly works of Magic Realism. In Beloved's attention to historical fact, Morrison both expands upon and departs from the Magic Realism of her earlier novel, Song of Solomon. Both Beloved and Song are set in the past and both address slavery, either directly or indirectly. Specifically, both novels are more concerned with the early days of emancipation than with slavery itself. However, Beloved diverts from the pattern established in Song of Solomon and moves away from the more overt Marquez influences on Song and toward a voice more identifiably American.

Like One Hundred Years of Solitude, Song of Solomon is a family saga. Song recounts the story of Milkman Dead, the grandson of an emancipated slave, and his search for a mythical cache of gold. Milkman never finds the gold, but with the help of his Aunt Pilate and the near-immortal slave Circe, he discovers

something of his family's history and even unlocks his own magical nature in the novel's enigmatic conclusion.

One Hundred Years of Solitude and Song of Solomon both rely heavily on supernatural events and characters. Song of Solomon features the navel-less Pilate and her mad, child-like daughter Hagar, the aged Circe, Solomon (or "Shalimar") the flying African, and Milkman, who himself may or may not learn to fly by the novel's end. Such fantastic elements as Pilate's ability to physically transform herself at will are found along the way. Milkman watches her become shorter as she supplicates to a white police officer (209). Even Robert Smith's elaborate suicide "flight" lends the novel on a surreal quality lacking in Beloved. Sanford Pinsker aptly describes Song of Solomon's Magic Realist qualities:

> [an] intermingling of the fantastic and the realistic . . . fragmentations of plot, the penchant for kaleidoscopic dissolves, the sheer dazzle of language that evokes fairy tale at one level and family chronicle at another. . . . (189)

Song clearly owes a powerful debt to Marquez, but Beloved in some ways departs from that influence. Although it is a tale of the supernatural, it is a much more traditional supernatural tale. Like Ironweed, it is a ghost story. While the world of Song is pervasively "magic," Beloved is essentially "real." All of the latter novel's supernatural elements emanate directly from the ghost of Beloved. Other key differences distinguish the two novels. Beloved centers on a family, but it is not quite a family saga. We encounter three generations of Sethe's family, but the first (Sethe's mother)

plays a minor role. What Sethe does not know about her mother is as significant as what she does know about her. Sethe learns some details about her birth, but she learns these not from her mother but from another source. She does not know her mother's name; she knows her only by an oblique symbol, "a circle and a cross burnt in the skin" (61). Finally, since Sethe's mother is an African, it is impossible for Sethe to learn more about her family's past.

While Song is primarily concerned with the recent past of the political and social events of the 1950's and 60's, Beloved is set more than a century earlier and strikingly revises a chapter of American history routinely under-examined in American popular culture and public education. Indeed, Morrison relies heavily on the narratives of fugitive slaves in Beloved, and while these texts have recently become widely read in critical circles, they hardly enjoy a large contemporary readership. In light of this distinction between Beloved and Morrison's previous great Magic Realist novel, this chapter will focus heavily on Morrison's source material and her grounding the novel in an "objectively real" world that may seem odd for a Magic Realist novel. But, like all Magic Realism, Beloved's world is filled with mythical significance and magical power. However, Beloved's Magic Realism engages just as fully the "real" world of history and folk culture.

Like other Magic Realist novels, Beloved engages, dismantles, demystifies (and remystifies) a historical crisis point. Marquez sets Chronicle of a Death Foretold between the wars, Kennedy

conjures up the Great Depression, and Spiegelman explores the Holocaust. Beloved faces the almost four hundred year-long "moment" of American chattel slavery and its aftermath. As her fellow Magic Realists do, Morrison adapts and explores not just the historical moment itself but the stories and traditions associated with it.

Beloved owes a debt to slave narrative traditions, especially the narrative of Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. It also has roots in Francis Harper's 1874 poem, "The Slave Mother," and the event which inspired both Harper's poem and Morrison's novel, the 1856 murder by fugitive slave Margaret Garner of her own child to spare the child a life in servitude. Morrison revises Garner's life (which will be recounted at length later in this chapter) and the slave narrative tradition, as well as the myths of motherhood which permeate the novel. Morrison's Magic Realism engages myth, folk, and popular traditions. It deconstructs and reconstructs these "texts," both oral and otherwise.

Jacky Martin succinctly explains the central role of myth in Beloved:

> Beloved is the wronged soul returned, but also--in a larger mythic context--the emblem of all the suffering endured by Black people [in America]. The archetype for Sethe's crime is the forced desertion by the mother on board the Middle Passage slave ship, and the desertion of the African mother-country. More generally, Beloved stands for the existential malaise implanted in the Black soul by decades of senseless

> oppression, a malaise at the same time disturbing and beloved. Cutting through all these planes of definition, the violent breach of nature created by Sethe's murder [of Beloved] results in the return of the dead daughter. (94)

Martin cannily observes that in Beloved myth and history are intimately linked. Indeed, this junction is as marked in this novel as in any work of Magic Realism. Therefore, the character Beloved is in some ways a less important component of Beloved's Magic Realism than are the very real historical figures Harriet Jacobs and Margaret Garner. The myth in Beloved as often as not operates on a metaphorical, figurative level rooted in the metaphorical play of the slave narratives, Jacobs's in particular.

Myth Revisited and Revised: Beloved's Magic

While a variety of conventional myths are at work in Beloved, a more subtle mythic presence in the novel can be traced to the slave narratives and their revisions of the codes of language and morality of white Southerners. A variety of conventional myths are employed in Beloved, but Morrison also uses mythic material derived from the narratives. Not only does the presence of these myths demonstrate the degree to which Beloved is mythically potent, but also they exemplify Morrison's Magic Realist penchant for ironic revision. The narratives responded to the white South's oppressive codes through their use of ironic figurative language.

These metaphorical improvisations are as significant as Morrison's most overtly Magic Realist inventions in Beloved. Even those elements of the novel which are not clearly fantastic share the ironic, revisionist relationship with myth and history we find elsewhere in Magic Realism.

In her "Metaphors of Mastery," Lucinda MacKethan argues that the slave narrators used three

> orders of metaphor that testify to, as well as shape, the slave's experience of grasping the "unknown" and mastering it: the metaphor of the . . . animal trickster figure, the metaphor of the word and of language to be used as . . . weapon, and . . . the metaphor of narrative order itself, of "design." (59)

Of special interest to our discussion are the animal metaphors, as well as one order of metaphor MacKethan does not mention: the "white man as God" metaphor promulgated by the Southern slaveocracy. Both these orders of metaphor speak to degrees of humanity, between slave and master. For slave owners, the white man as God metaphor recreated human beings as non-human, but fugitive slaves ironically adapted it to reclaim their humanity. To an extent, this metaphorical recreation and decreation of human beings has mythic connotations. These connotations are reinforced by the white as God metaphor found in the narratives and in Beloved. Morrison often engages this theme of "transformative humanity." Paul D, Sethe's erstwhile lover, uses the animal metaphor to remind her of her humanity when he informs Sethe,

upon discovering what she did to keep her child free, "You got two legs, Sethe, not four" (165).

Like Morrison, Harriet Jacobs uses these classes of images in her narrative, especially animal images and especially in ironic contexts, as in her comment that her mistress "hasn't so much feeling for her children as a cow has for its calf" (102). One of Beloved's most acute transformations of the narratives' animal images comes in the form of Mister, the ironically named rooster of Sethe's slave plantation home, Sweet Home. Paul D tells Sethe how he became "The last of the Sweet Home men" (72) when he was captured after a doomed escape attempt. His greatest shame is not simply having been captured and forced to endure "a bit in [his] mouth" (69), although the bit in itself is a dehumanizing experience redolent with animal imagery. Paul D is most ashamed at seeing Mister, the rooster whose "comb [was] as big as [a man's] hand and some kind of red" (72), witness his degradation. The rooster, a symbol of manhood, has usurped Paul D's manhood, and it is that usurpation which haunts him.

The white as God metaphor was an attempt by white Southerners to re-create themselves as supernatural figures who deserved the power they exercised over their slaves. The mythic implications of this metaphor obviously have a place in this discussion of Morrison's Magic Realism. The white supremacist vision of the slaveocracy saw the white race as spiritually and physically elevated over human beings with darker skin. This

skewed world view is reflected in that society's laws, customs, and language. Logically, it was also reflected in the voices of those opposed to this system, usually ironically (although sometimes not). Morrison is sensitive to the narratives' use of this order of metaphor and she adapts it in Beloved.

In fact, the "Mister" episode neatly reflects both animal and God metaphors. Mister's recreation as a "Man" and Paul D's simultaneous devolution to beast are an effect of the white as God metaphor, as we see in Paul D's explanation of his own frustration:

> Mister, he looked so . . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son a bitch couldn't even get out the shell hisself but he was still king and I was. . . .
>
> Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be eating a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub. (72)

As Paul D explains it, his humanity is transferred to Mister by Schoolteacher's brutality and Mr. Garner's ironic naming of the animal.

In Ironweed, William Kennedy adapts the elements of Catholicism most hurtful to Francis Phelan--guilt and sin--and transforms them into his redemption. Art Spiegelman's Maus translates anti-semitic symbol systems into metaphors of humanity. In the same way, Morrison inverts both the animal and white as God metaphors she gleaned from her readings of the slave

narratives. While Paul D is dehumanized by the experience of his humility before Mister, that very humiliation saves him from the consequences of the bit.

Sethe is surprised that Paul D was not driven mad from having been forced to endure being silenced with the iron bit:

> She already knew about it, had seen it time after time in the place before Sweet Home. Men, boys, little girls, women. The wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. Days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye.
>
> Sethe looked up into Paul D's eyes to see if there was any trace left in them. (71)

She finds nothing. The sight of Mister's freedom saves Paul D from madness, although he remains ambivalent as to whether being saved was worth the trouble. He says, "There's a way to put [the wildness] in there and there's a way to take it out. I know 'em both and I haven't figured out yet which is worse" (71). Like other Magic Realists, Morrison transforms brutalizing metaphors and myths into a kind of redemption: in this case, by playing them against each other.

While Morrison's attempt to find some use in the metaphorical transformations of slaveholding society is an adaptation of the Magic Realist convention of ironic reinterpretation, she also draws on the conventions of the slave narratives themselves. Her engagement of both myth and history, of turning destruction into victory, her very reading of the narratives is itself Magic Realist.

Morrison does not exactly invent her ironic voice so much as adapt it.

The language of slavery was a large part of the slave system's power, and an ironic response to it was part of most slave narratives. But not all slave narrators could master and discard it. Some of the more compliant narrators--like Josiah Henson, who believed himself to be the model of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom--use the slave owner's language unselfconsciously. Unlike Harriet Jacobs, who ironically and subversively encodes her narrative, Henson's codes are the slavemaster's own. In his 1858 narrative, Truth Stranger Than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life.[1] Henson extols the virtues of pain and positive identification of slaves with farm animals:

> The robust, physical health produced by a life of out-door labor, made our wounds heal up with as little inflammation as they do in the case of cattle. (39)

By accepting himself as less than human, Henson (or his ghost writer) elevates his owners to a more than human status and demonstrates how successful the slaveocracy was at re-creating and re-shaping human beings.

Henson's absorption of the slaveocracy's language and attendant beliefs also testify to Morrison's criticism that the narratives "offered no mention of [the slave narrators'] interior [lives]" ("Site" 110). Still, in the narrative of Jacobs, Morrison has

not only a narrator much closer to articulating an interior life but also a springboard to the mythic reconstructions of Magic Realism.

While Henson mimics the slavemaster's language, Harriet Jacobs never positively employs images of chattel. Rather, she places these metaphors into the mouths of angry slaves who are conscious of their oppression, revealing a linguistically sophisticated slave population, like that in Beloved. Likewise, Jacobs's use of supernatural imagery when representing masters is clearly ironic and derisive. When a white preacher uses the white as God metaphor, Jacobs comments only that she and her fellow slaves were "highly amused" (69). Here, as with the story of her Uncle Benjamin, Jacobs emphasizes that the slaves are aware of the linguistic games their masters play. While she admits that the local white Episcopal clergyman "had been sort of a god," she is careful to add "among the white slaveholders," not the slaves (71).[2]

Beloved reflects the same ironic consciousness that we see in Jacobs's ironic play with the white as God metaphor. Morrison uses her source material--here, the slaveocracy's mythology and Jacobs's reinterpretation of it--as the basis of a greater device: the reinterpretation of myth, particularly myths of motherhood and infanticide. Obviously, the myth of Medea--who kills her children to save them from slavery--resonates throughout Beloved.[3] This mythic echo is present both in Sethe and her own mother, who kills all the children conceived by white rapists. Sethe survives only

because her father was a black man who loved her mother. Nan, the crippled slave who cared for slave children, tells the young Sethe:

> She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. (62)

Sethe's mother murders her children (save Sethe, of course) as a response to the children's fathers, the white men who raped her over the years. Like Medea, her actions are a result of her desire for revenge. Sethe herself, who--like Margaret Garner--kills her daughter to spare her a lifetime in slavery, is a kind of Medea but with no sinister intent.[4]

Medea is a conniver, largely responsible for the danger her children face. Another model for Sethe, even more likely than Medea, is a Judeo-Christian mythic figure which Shirley A. Stave argues that Morrison has revised in Beloved: Lilith, Adam's first wife and long a figure in folklore.[5] Beloved's use of the myth of Lilith intersects, in at least one crucial point, with her reinterpretation of Jacobs's narrative. For Stave, Sethe the infant killer is a reincarnation of Lilith:

> According to the legend, God brings Lilith to Eden to curtail Adam's coupling with the animals; however, Lilith is dismayed by Adam's insistence on continually assuming the dominant position during lovemaking and flees from Eden . . . Lilith chooses demons as her sexual partners, bearing as a result of these couplings a hundred children a day, some of

> whom she eats. . . . Lilith comes to signify an aspect of the great Mother Goddess, both creator and destroyer of all life; despite the former attribute, however, culture has traditionally regarded Lilith simply as a demon, as one who must be feared. It is she, legend tells us, who drank the blood of Abel after his murder by his brother. (51)

Stave's analysis of Lilith's relationship with Sethe is compelling and accurate on all counts. Lilith, while human, eventually becomes--through folklore and tradition--superhuman. Like Sethe and Margaret Garner, Lilith operates on a moral level somehow beyond traditional codes. Her act is evil without evil intent; like the speaker in Gwendolyn Brooks's "the mother," who regrets the abortions she has had but who saw no alternative, Sethe even in her "deliberateness . . . was not deliberate" (line 21). Her infanticide buys a cruel freedom for her family, who would otherwise have lived in servitude.

When Morrison establishes Sethe as Lilith, brought in to stop the Adams of the Edenic Sweet Home from "fucking cows" (Beloved 11), she not only reminds us of the slave narratives' animal imagery, she also creates an ironic God-figure in the person of Sethe's and Sweet Home's owner, Mr. Garner. Like the God of the Old Testament, Mr. Garner "creates" a woman for his men to lie with. But unlike the Old Testament Creator, Garner is not omnipotent; his power does not extend beyond Sweet Home, and his "benevolent" treatment of his slaves ends with his death. In fact, if the African slave Sixo is correct, Mr. Garner is murdered by his

jealous neighbors because of his treatment of his slaves (Beloved 189): an ignoble end for an all-powerful figure.

This ironic "recasting" of Mr. Garner as God not only serves as a commentary on the slaveocracy's myth of white superiority and black subservience (and subhumanity), it continues Harriet Jacobs's ironic play on the myth of white superiority. In fact, Jacobs states that her father made the same "mistake" that finally costs Garner his life: he taught his children "to feel that they were human beings. This was blasphemous doctrine for a slave to teach; presumptuous in him, and dangerous to the masters" (10). Jacobs is aware of the supernatural pretensions of her masters, as her use of the word "blasphemous" indicates. Figurative language is crucial in the narratives, and their revisions mirror Beloved's.[6]

Yet another mythic presence in Beloved reflects upon the whites as God image used by Morrison and the narrators. This myth, that of the Earth Mother, is very old, although it has recently been popularized by the ubiquitous self-esteem movement. Morrison's use of the Earth Mother myth is wholly in keeping with the Magic Realist, paradoxical revision of myth in Kennedy's treatment of Catholicism. Maya Angelou deftly describes (and, like Morrison, parodies) this maternal myth:

> There are a few misguided wits who think they are being complimentary when they declare a woman is "too much." While it is admirable and desirable to be enough, only masochists want to be "too much." Being, claiming, or accepting the status allows others to heap responsibilities

> upon the back of the "too much" woman, who naturally is also referred to as "super." "Super Woman" and "Earth Mother."
>
> The flatterer, for that is what the speaker means to be, exposes himself as a manipulator who expects to ingratiate himself into "Earth Mother's" good graces, so that she will then take his burdens upon her and make his crooked ways straight. (39-40)

If Angelou is not discussing the martyred Baby Suggs of Beloved, who spends her final days using the "little energy left her for pondering color" (4), she may as well be. In both Baby Suggs and Sethe, Morrison considers myths of motherhood, "Earth-motherhood," and motherly love.[7]

Sethe is in need of salvation, one that must come from without as well as within. Her relationship with her newly-resurrected daughter is as significant as her love for Paul D and her apprenticeship with Baby Suggs. As in Ironweed, the confrontation with the past in Beloved is laid out in mythic, supernatural terms. But in both novels, the mythic structures are important in terms of personal growth and discovery, as if the myth Magic Realism attempts to shatter is that myths have lost their power.

In Beloved, Morrison borrows not only her characters and setting from the slave narratives, but also her worldview and her relationship to myth and language. Mr. Garner thinks he has the power of God--he can certainly control the lives of those in his Eden--but his power is limited. The "Earth mother," Baby Suggs, is destroyed by slavery and by the knowledge (or lack of knowledge)

she has of her children's fates. By casting Sethe as Lilith (a figure so powerful as to be excised from traditional Christianity and the Bible altogether), Morrison recoups for Sethe--arguably the least powerful of the residents of Sweet Home--the power of reproduction from the Garner-God and the defeated baby Suggs. The Lilith role provides for Sethe not only the power to reproduce but also the power of life and death over her children. Unlike Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-love is so fierce she can even destroy her own child, usurp the power of the near-satanic Schoolteacher (who is himself a quasi-mythic personification of utilitarian pragmatism and unfeeling science: a myth of mythlessness).

Infanticide in the Narratives

As do Kennedy, Marquez, Spiegelman, and Kingston, Morrison revises not only myth but also history. This hardly surprises; Magic Realism is a form engaged in both myth and history, as its name attests. As with the transformations of myth in other Magic Realist works, Beloved's revisions of history result in sometimes ambiguous ethical dilemmas. Lilith and Medea, two mythic figures infamous for killing their children, may seem far removed from Morrison's revised historical sources, the fugitive slave narratives. But in fact, the theme of infanticide runs throughout Harriet Jacobs's short autobiography; Incidents contains at least fourteen references to the solace of an early death, or to the deaths of

children, especially the "fortunate" deaths of children who are thus spared a life of servitude. Recounting the suffering during labor of a "slave girl" and the child conceived by a master, the girl's mother sighs, "The baby is dead, thank God; and I hope my poor child will soon be in heaven, too" (13). Jacobs comments on the scene, "The poor black woman had but the one child, whose eyes she saw closing in death, while she thanked God for taking her away from the greater bitterness of life" (14). Two generations are wiped out in an instant, "thankfully."

Later, Jacobs recalls a spiritual which celebrates an early death. Such an end spares the individual a life of sin and is more likely to lead to salvation:

> If I had died when I was young,
> Den how my stam'rin' tongue would have sung;
> But I am ole, and now I stand
> A narrow chance for to tread dat heavenly land.
> (70)

When Jacobs considers the possibility that Flint may one day sell her own children, she thinks, "I would rather see them killed than have them given up to his power" (80). In the same vein, we should consider the implications of the titles of the two chapters Jacobs devotes to the birth of her children: chapter XI, "The New Tie to Life," and chapter XIV, "Another Link to Life." These titles remind us that Jacobs is like Sethe, who when escaping Sweet Home was "[concerned] . . . for the life of her children's mother," not herself (30). Jacobs's children give her life a meaning it would not

otherwise have had. But the titles' phrasing tells another tale. Both "tie" and "link" remind us of the bondage of slavery. "Link," in particular, conjures ominous images of chains so often used in anti-slavery propaganda. The children are a blessing, but they are also a burden.

Jacobs's use of such language certainly does not amount to a "pro-infanticide" bias in her narrative, but it does constitute a powerful secondary theme in this narrative by a woman who seeks to regain her feminine and motherly "honor" in the eyes of her white audience (an honor she feels she lost under the sexual abuses of the slave system). Incidents is unique, after all, for its frankness in matters of sexual mores and the nature of motherhood. Jacobs's narrative also outlines a fairly explicit value system which considers how much power mothers may properly exercise over their children. Jacobs never condones an act of infanticide. In fact, the closest Jacobs comes to recording the outright murder of a child by its parent is hypothetical and does not even concern a slave child. She describes the case of a child born of a black male slave and the white woman who seduced him. Such a child, we are told, is "smothered, or sent where it is never seen by any who know its history" (52). While Jacobs reserves judgment and does not ask her readers to be sympathetically disposed toward a mother who kills her own child, she never denies that a mother should have such power, especially if that power will spare the child grave suffering.

Jacobs's comments reveal that dire conditions breed dire values. Evidence of such acculturation is present in other narratives as well as in Morrison's novel. Both Beloved and Josiah Henson's Truth Stranger than Fiction feature key scenes in which a young protagonist is given a lesson in the worth (or relative worthlessness) of human life--his or her own. Early in his narrative, Henson attacks the chattel slavery system by describing a slave-owner's bargain for the life of a small dying boy, the young Henson himself:

> Riley said he was afraid "the little devil would die," and he did not want to buy a "dead nigger;" but he agreed, finally, to pay a small sum for me in horse-shoeing if I lived, and nothing if I died. (14)

In this episode, Henson accuses the Southern slaveowner of barbarity. However, as he chooses an episode of his early youth, he also reveals the experiences upon which he formulated his own views of the human condition. Henson will soon adapt some of this language into his own discourse, and will begin to describe himself and his fellow slaves in a kind of marketplace jargon, as though this were appropriate for discussion of human beings.

Beloved features a similar scene, with similar repercussions on the main character: Nan's description to Sethe of her own conception and of her mother's killing of the other children she bore. Both Henson and Sethe learn some skewed lessons about the value of human life--lessons created by the slave system and by the slaves who had to survive there. However, there lived another

American slave who has a more intimate relationship with Beloved, and who in fact gives the novel its plot, dilemma, and main character.

Tragically, Margaret Garner, the prototypical Sethe, was not able to document her own story.

History Revisited and Revised

A reading of Beloved's historical revisions reveal that Morrison's immersion in the American past is as rich and textured as her reinventions of myth. As Margaret Garner's story is not generally known, it is necessary to establish some of the story's historical contexts. On Monday, January 28, 1856, a group of eight fugitive slaves arrived at the Cincinnati home of freedman Joe Kite. Soon the party was discovered by pursuers from Kentucky. The Cincinnati Enquirer of Tuesday January 29, 1856, provides the following account of what happened:

> Upon [hearing a] thundering at the door, Kite looked out the window , and at first agreed to admit them, but afterward refused to do so, and at this juncture, as they were about to force an entrance, Simon [a fugitive slave and Margaret Garner's father-in-law] fired from the window with a revolver . . . Upon this the door was burst in, when Simon fired three more shots at the party. . . . Mr. Gaines [one of the pursuers] seized him by the wrist and wrenched the pistol from his hand before he could shoot [again]. . . . But a deed of horror had been consummated, for weltering in its blood, the throat being cut from ear to ear and the head almost severed

> from the body, upon the floor lay one of the children of the younger couple [Robert, or "young Simon" and Margaret Garner], a girl three years old, while in a back room, crouched beneath the bed, two more of the children, boys of two and five years, were moaning, the one having received two gashes in its throat, the other a cut upon the head. As the party entered the room the mother [Margaret Garner] was seen wielding a heavy shovel, and before she could be secured she inflicted a heavy blow with it upon the face of the infant, which was lying on the floor. . . . (quoted in Wolff 113-114)

Like Morrison's explorations of moral subtleties and paradoxes of Sethe's act of infanticide, the Garner murder trial was not so easily resolved as one might assume:

> Cincinnati courts had consistently ruled that slaves who had been taken by their masters to live in the free state of Ohio were "emancipated" by virtue of their residence under the jurisdiction of that place. Even if they were subsequently returned into a slave state, they remained "liberated," and if they escaped, they could not lawfully be pursued and recaptured as "fugitive slaves." It was Margaret Garner's contention that "when . . . she was a girl, she was brought from Kentucky into the city of Cincinnati . . . to nurse Mary Gaines, daughter of . . . John Gaines." If this assertion could be substantiated, neither she nor her children could be reclaimed into slavery. Yet any victory would be dubious, for she would then have to stand trial for the murder of her daughter. Of the two options, Margaret Garner preferred to remain in Cincinnati so that her children could be free, even if it meant a murder trial. (Wolff 114-115)

Under the laws of the day, the children of slaves followed the condition of the mother, so the trial of Margaret Garner had to

determine not only the identity of the murderer but if a murder even took place. Had Garner killed a human being or merely destroyed the property of her master? These questions were never answered, however. During a break in the trial, Garner's owner took the family back to Kentucky with him. Neither he nor Garner herself ever returned for the verdict. After that,

> [nothing] remained but a local rumor: "It was reported that on her way down the river she sprang from the boat into the water with her babe in her arms; that when she rose she was seized by some of the boat hands and rescued, but that her child was drowned." (Wolff 117)

Knowledge of the Margaret Garner incident is obviously key to a complete reading of Beloved. Morrison even names Sethe's owner, and therefore Sethe herself, "Garner." Margaret Garner provides Morrison with a plot, but the details of Garner's horrific story also serve to illuminate some recent criticism of Morrison's novel. One criticism of the novel (and of other Magic Realist texts) is that Morrison "whines," that she wants her readers to sympathize with Sethe (and, by extension, all other African-Americans). She wants her white readers to feel guilty for the sins of the past. However, the facts of the Garner incident ironically reveal that Morrison has softened the tale: In Beloved, Sethe's murder of her daughter frees her surviving children and herself. When the vicious Schoolteacher sees the slaughtered child and the mad mother, he realizes "that there was nothing to claim. . . . [Sethe had] gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat her" (149). Margaret

Garner's master made no such distinctions. He refused to sell the family to sympathetic Northerners who wished to give them their freedom; he refused to let the courts decide the fate of his property. Instead, he spirited the Garners back into the slave system, which swallowed them up. As brutal as the incidents in Beloved seem, the historical model is much worse.

As compelling, however, as the Garner material is, Morrison discounts the importance of specific connections between her fiction and the Margaret Garner story. As she states in a 1987 interview, Morrison consciously decided to avoid too much historical "accuracy":

> I did not do much research on Margaret Garner other than the obvious stuff, because I wanted to invent her life, which is a way of saying I wanted to be accessible to anything the characters had to say about it. Recording her life as lived would not interest me and would not make me available to anything that might be pertinent. (quoted in Bender 132)[8]

Morrison's choice of improvising on history rather than simply documenting it is in keeping with the Magic Realist use of myth already discussed. It also makes for a fuller exploration of the ambiguous morality of Sethe's mercy-killing. Eileen Bender observes that

> one might have expected Morrison to have amassed reliable and well-documented information about that haunting historical "outlaw," a mother who killed her own child to save it from slavery, but who is condemned not for murder but for a "real crime: being a runaway slave." But . . . Morrison challenges

> our faith in the objective "truth" of historical fiction. Instead of making us comfortable with her authority, she suggests that she possesses no certain vision but has rather been possessed by her subject. (131-2)

The Margaret Garner incident and all its paradoxical undrawn conclusions about the value of life and the relationships between mother and child is clearly significant to the genesis of Morrison's novel. Still, in literary terms, the more significant spirit haunting the novel is that of Harriet Jacobs, whose legacy lends Morrison's novel neither the inspiration nor the plot that the Garner story supplies but instead a way of decoding and recoding language integral to the novel.

Harriet Jacobs's <u>Incidents</u> (ostensibly the life of "Linda Brent," as Jacobs recreates herself) is rich in acts of linguistic coding. Like the pseudonym she creates for herself, the very title of the narrative is an act of subtle recoding. Houston Baker writes that "[t]he appearance of the article 'a' in the title of the narrative implies that [Jacobs's experience in slavery] is defining in the life of <u>any</u> slave girl" (52). Such a move is profoundly in Jacobs's political interests, as she intends the narrative to serve as an indictment of all slavery, not just of the cruel Dr. Flint who pursues her with salacious intent throughout her narrative. <u>Incidents</u> is a crucial source of <u>Beloved</u>'s mythic material. It is also a source of the novel's figurative power.

Jacobs masters the slaveowner's language only to skillfully revise all of the Southern metaphors of slave-humanity and

master-humanity. Beloved, a novel that--more than anything--explores questions of humanity and dehumanization, owes a debt to Jacobs's narrative that can be traced in the reinventions of Morrison's novel. The use of "a" and the creation of "Linda Brent" as a symbol lessen Jacobs's own humanity even as she creates the humanity of those "slave girls" still in bondage--she becomes a case study, not an individual. Baker's observation of Jacobs's use of the article "a" speaks to the gulf between autobiography, which should create an individual, and the slave narrative, which must create a people. Like the story of Paul D and Mister the rooster, Jacobs's renaming of herself is an acknowledgment of the transformative powers of bondage.

Morrison addresses precisely this quality of the narratives in her novel. In an essay she wrote while still composing Beloved, Morrison meditates upon the importance of the slave narratives, particularly Jacobs's, which strips away the "veil" concealing the sexual abuses of chattel slavery. She states that her new novel, Beloved, will strip away another veil and to create for a fugitive slave like Jacobs an "interior life." Ironically her own narrative could not document this life:

> For me--a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman--the exercise [of writing] is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate." The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for historically we were seldom

> invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. ("Site" 110)

Beloved, then, fully engages Jacobs's narrative; it does not simply draw on its mythic underpinnings. Morrison "[fills] in the blanks that the slave narratives left--[she parts] the veil that was so frequently drawn" (113); one of the novel's goals is to invent that "interior life" which Jacobs kept behind the "veil." Creating this inner life finds Beloved struggling with the particulars of slavery's physical abuses (a subject many reviews and critical articles find insurmountably imposing, as if Morrison only wants to flaunt the suffering of her ancestors). But just as important, the novel also offers an intense focus on language and such basic human concerns as moral codes and our limited understanding of the nature of death. These concerns are addressed by Harriet Jacobs, who felt that recording her interior life was not as important as creating a model around which she could gather public sympathy. Morrison's addition of more prominent mythic dimensions, supernatural story elements, and an interior life for her narrator is, simply put, a Magic Realist reinterpretation Jacobs's narrative. It is an addition not unlike the "fleshing out" of the real murder story at the heart of Marquez's Chronicle.

Beloved and Incidents both focus on the metaphors of mastery and slavery. Jacobs's narrative is that of a linguistic trickster; she manipulates the metaphors of slavery and oppression to rename herself as well as all people of African descent on American soil.

Her goal is to foster political change. Of particular interest to Morrison the magic Realist are those metaphors with religious and supernatural connotations. Beloved holds this interest in common with all the works considered in this study. Beyond the level of figurative language, Beloved addresses questions of inter- and intra-cultural conflict of value judgments. Here Morrison reveals her goal of creating for her narrator an interior life that was denied her literary foremother, Harriet Jacobs. The life she creates is rich and tempestuous. While Stanley Crouch--who dismisses the novel as a poorly written "blackface Holocaust novel" (40)--is content to view Beloved simply as a ploy for sympathy, it is important to remember that Sethe is an outcast among her own kind for most of the novel. For Morrison, it is not simply a question of who suffers most, but what suffering is, what life is worth, and where we turn to for answers to these questions. Here--at the intersection between Margaret Garner and Harriet Jacobs, and Morrison's audience--Beloved's Magic Realism is most acute, powerful, and profound.

Magic Realism integrates the real and unreal; its emphasis on race and difference is likewise integrative. Writing on African-American Women writers, Karla Holloway postulates a theory of the "Plurisignant" text in an effort to distinguish the idea of multiple

> meanings from a text that is (simply) ambiguous. Rather than meaning either one or the other of these terms, a plurisignant

> text signals the *concurrent* presence of multiple as well as ambiguous meanings. ("Revision" 629n)

Essentially, the work of African-American Woman writers is inclusive of the aesthetic and sensibilities of both the dominant white male power structure and that of the "minority" to which the writer belongs. Clearly, such a voice is found in the Magic Realist novel. The plurisignant voice present in Beloved includes the nineteenth century voices of Margaret Garner and Harriet Jacobs, as well as the twentieth century voice of Toni Morrison. Morrison and Jacobs's revisions of the language of white slaveowners demonstrates that those voices are also audible in the novel. Also present are other voices which mediate the possibility of reading Beloved as merely an angry voicing of past injustices.

Brian Finney makes similar comments as he examines Beloved's time order. Finney separates the "*fabula* (the chronological ordering of events) and the *syuzhet* (the order in which the events are actually presented in the narrative)" (21). Finney's observations of Morrison's use of period setting further indicate the kind of ambiguity Holloway detects in Morrison's plurisignant voice:

> Sethe's first memory of Sweet Home . . . typifies the ambiguous hold that the past exercises over her; "although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled out before her in shameless beauty." (26-7)

Sethe's world, her past, and her memories enslave and horrify her, yet she finds them filled with beauty.

As we have seen in previous chapters, one of the qualities that separates the Magic Realist novel from other, more traditional, stories of the supernatural is its focus on race, gender, ethnicity, and other social issues. It is not just the ghost of Beloved that marks Beloved as a Magic Realist novel, but the work's social concerns. Most criticism of Beloved (pro and con) focuses on the novel's elevation of African-American culture and on the most obvious element of Magic Realism in the novel, the baby's ghost. But Morrison does much more. With the story of Sethe's ouster from the African-American community in Ohio, Morrison clearly attacks the community which should be absorbing Sethe and her values, as alien as those values may seem. The entire community shares Sethe's guilt. They all share "uncalled-for pride" (Beloved 137) which (in classical style) is responsible for the child's death as well as Sethe's exile. Morrison's Magic Realism is more than just a ghost and some red lights: it is a social commentary in the spirit of that seen in all the works this study addresses.

Language as Moral Compass: Beloved's Engagement of Incidents's Metaphors of Humanity

Some critics--and Crouch is among the most eloquent of these--have dismissed Morrison's novel as simply a "claim to

martyrdom" (38). He complains, "Blessed are the victims . . . for their suffering has illuminated them, and they shall lead us to the light, even as they provide magnets for our guilt" (Crouch 38). Morrison's use of such visceral material as slavery unnerves Crouch, who sees the novel as a so-called "politically correct" litany of whining. In a similar vein, Harold Bloom argues that

> Miss Morrison in Beloved . . . has gone wrong. She's taking her political responsibilities, her social and communitarian responsibilities, very seriously, and I think they are producing . . . [a] sort of a strange mock-up of Garcia Marquez, which she hasn't really got the power for. (quoted in McMillen A25)

Bloom assumes that Morrison attempts in Beloved to mimic Marquez. However, as I have noted, the novel actually departs from the Marquez model so prominently featured in Song of Solomon. Morrison still writes Magic Realism, but it is a Magic Realism based more heavily in the real than is Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, although not so far from that seen in Chronicle of a Death Foretold. Like Beloved, Chronicle dispenses with many of the fantastic elements of Solitude and Song.

Ultimately, Bloom's reading is reductive. Morrison's material is striking and politically potent, yes, but one could hardly expect a novel of freedmen (and freedwomen) to be a light-hearted romp. Beloved certainly catalogs wrongs inflicted upon African-Americans, an admirable aim in itself. But the novel does more than that. (If Morrison wished only to expose wrongs done to her

ancestors, why set the novel after rather than during slavery? Why not follow the Margaret Garner story more closely?)[9] Crouch ignores that Beloved is as much a novel of Sethe's betrayal of her daughter and Baby Suggs[10] and the free black community's (and Paul D's) betrayal of Sethe as it is a novel intended "to enter American slavery into the big time martyr ratings contest" (40). As such, Morrison's manipulations of language and convention are more subtle than these two critics give her credit for. Like Harriet Jacobs before her, Toni Morrison is interested not only in giving voice to "proceedings too terrible to relate" but also in examining our language and long-held assumptions of the human condition, regardless of race or heritage.

Readers like Crouch and Bloom remind us that Morrison's audience is as complex and multifaceted as was Jacobs's. A reading of the slave narratives' representations of both self and other must always accept the essentially schizophrenic nature of this discourse community, composed of truth-tellers often afraid to tell the truth and an audience sometimes desirous of change but always afraid to face its own guilt. This split-personality is often represented in both the historical naming of the slave narratives's "authors" and the figurative "naming" of the slave narratives's authors. Remember, Jacobs's audiences discounted the book for a century. The book remained a curiosity until Jean Fagan Yellin's recent scholarship verified so many of Jacobs's assertions.[11]

Incidents was dismissed in part because its sentimental qualities set it clearly outside the slave narrative genre. Its frank discussion of the abuse of women in slavery was a departure from the narratives of male fugitives. To many readers, it seemed more a sentimental novel than a slave narrative. In fact, like Beloved, the fugitive slave narratives expressed a wider array of viewpoints and ideas than some would care to admit. The narratives had the ability to revise the language of the system their authors and subjects escaped, although not all narrators exploited this opportunity. The revisions (or the lack thereof) in the narratives reveal speakers who all wished for personal freedom but who did not all share identical political views.

We see in the narratives that--although some would have it otherwise--American slavery is not simply a right and wrong political dilemma. In the gray reaches of history, Morrison's Magic Realism transforms the story of the historical figure named Margaret Garner. Morrison grants Margaret Garner (and Harriet Jacobs) the inner life that had never before been documented. The novel is not simply a cry of protest against an oppressive system long dead. Beloved is a meditation on the value of human life. Satya Mohanty writes that Beloved's readers

> ponder Sethe's insistent questions about the real meaning of freedom: "Freeing yourself [is] one thing . . . claiming ownership of that freed self [is] another." Sethe's hesitations (and Paul D's anger) outline the tangled and oblique forms in which our own ethical concerns take shape, our scruples develop. (109)

Perhaps the questions Mohanty refers to are what prompted Karen Fields to comment, in rather ironic terms, that Beloved is "no more about Afro-Americans in mid-nineteenth-century America than Romeo and Juliet is about Renaissance Veronese" (quoted in Stave 49). Unlike Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, which submerged the inner life of Harriet Jacobs beneath her pseudonymous veneer, Beloved is not just an attempt to prove that slavery was abusive and wrong. It is a work of fiction as much spiritual as political. Mohanty's "insistent questions" most accurately addressed in the context of the narratives Morrison revises and in the context of the myths with which she infuses those revised narratives.

Conclusion: Uncalled-for Pride

Morrison's evocation of Medea is important because Sethe--and even more fully, her mother--fits the role. Equally important to the novel's Magic Realism, with this classical myth Morrison reminds us that pride, or hubris, is a primary human emotion and a primary human failing. In the myth, the goddess Aphrodite chastises Medea for her "stubborn pride" (Hamilton 129) and jealousy of Jason. Elements of Greek tragedy in Beloved reinforce the importance of the role of classical myth in the novel; consider the chorus we have in the many ghostly voices at 124 Bluestone Road: "The people of broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black

girls who had lost their ribbons." As Beloved's Stamp Paid comments, "What a roaring" (181). Can we not also see the classical influence in the Deus ex Machina ending of the novel? Beloved, who seems to be pregnant, spurs Sethe into an attack on Edward Bodwin, the white man who established Baby Suggs in her home at 124. The ghost is rebuffed by the community and disappears.

Ella, Sethe's most vocal opponent in the black community, recognizes her own hubristic error. In fact, "It was Ella more than anyone who convinced the others that [Sethe's] rescue was in order" (256). Ella also "looked [Beloved] in the eye" (265), apparently forcing the ghost to flee. Finally, when Sethe goes mad and attacks Bodwin, Ella stops her from killing the only white man who can offer the black community of the novel anything but misery and whose murder "would have been the worst thing in the world" (265) for the community. Ella takes such a stand because when she arrives at 124 Bluestone Road to witness Beloved's last day of mortal life, she realizes that she is as guilty as Sethe:

> Ella had been beaten every way but down. She remembered the bottom teeth she had lost to the brake and the scars from the bell were thick as rope around her waist. She had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by the lowest yet. It lived five days never making a sound. The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working. . . . (259)

Indeed, Ella is more guilty than Sethe. Sethe kills her child--as Harriet Jacobs had considered doing--out of love. Ella kills her own out of hatred and fear of the child's color. Sethe's actions were extreme, but they were the culmination of what she had been taught by the community that later ostracized her. Ella, however, kills as the whites who enslaved her would--destroying their children to avoid shame. Remember, Jacobs recounts that even mixed blood children born to freedom in white families were "smothered" (52). Classical myth "roars" in Beloved, but it is classical pride, not classical murders, that should arrest our attention.

Even Baby Suggs, named "holy" for her benevolence and her spiritual strength, suffers if not from pride, then at least from a measure of egocentrism. Her relationship with her children can at least be considered ambivalent:

> What [Baby Suggs] called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. Twenty years [she lived with Halle]. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for *hearing* that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her--only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who had promised not to and did. That child she could not love and the rest she would not. (23)

Baby Suggs does not kill her children, of course. But like Sethe and Ella, she could be accused by the townspeople of rejecting her "natural" role of mother. From spite and out of a desire to avoid personal heartache, she withholds love from her children. Yet she never is taken to task for her behavior by her community. Nor do I suggest she should be. However, it is significant that while so many of the novel's characters are "guilty" of the same offense (or similar offenses), only Sethe is punished.[12] For Morrison and Ella and Stamp Paid, there is a greater sin than such murders: pride. Because of perceived pride and out of their own wounded pride, the townsfolk leave Sethe open to attack by Schoolteacher. Because of their own pride, they share in the responsibility for Beloved's death and resurrection. Sethe believes it is the town's fear of the ghost which keeps 124 empty (96), but the rejection of Sethe begins much earlier.

Morrison describes the feast Baby Suggs prepared in celebration of Sethe's escape from bondage in supernatural terms, comparing it to the miracle of the "[loaves] and fishes" (137). She also describes the anger of the freed slaves of the community who were shocked at her indulgence and jealous of her happiness: "124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much" (137). The shunning of Sethe has nothing to do with the ghost at 124; all the African-American characters in the novel are comfortable with the idea of ghosts. Morrison writes, "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some

dead Negro's grief" (5). It is not that Sethe killed her child; we have seen that Ella did the same. Sethe's neighbors avoid 124 because they know they are responsible for the tragedy that occurred there:

> nobody sent a fleet-footed son to cut 'cross a field soon as they saw the four horses in town hitched for watering while the riders asked questions. Not Ella, not John, not anybody ran down to Bluestone Road, to say some new whitefolks with the Look just rode in. (157)

Stamp Paid understands that the community suffers under a threat from within not without:

> Nobody warned them, and he'd always believed it wasn't the exhaustion from a long day's gorging [at Baby Suggs's celebration] that dulled them, but some other thing--like, well, meanness--that let them stand aside, or not pay attention, or tell themselves somebody else was probably bearing news already to the house on Bluestone Road where a pretty woman had been living for almost a month. (157)

Sethe embraces the values she was taught in her own subculture (a subculture suffering brutal oppression). Her punishment for remaining true to those values and to her love for her child is to be cast out of that same culture. Yes, the white culture that created chattel slavery is sharply condemned in <u>Beloved</u>; there is no surprise there. But Morrison's accusing finger is also pointed at the black community which will not accept Sethe on its (or her) own terms. Instead, her neighbors adopt the same values of the

white community: jealousy of personal possessions and family wealth, for instance. Like a character in Greek tragedy, the community must face the fact that while it sought to identify the "alien" threat to its happiness, the real flaw was inside themselves.

Like Maus, Beloved is a shocking account of brutality exacted upon a subculture long oppressed. The magical and supernatural elements in these works serve to reinforce themes exploring the paradoxical nature of ethnicity, of "race." Similarly, the Magic Realism in Beloved extends beyond the "colorful" and the "exotic." Beloved's ghost is not merely an attempt at creating a liberating Afrocentric mythology and spirituality. It is the ghost of vengeance: a child's vengeance against the mother who killed her, against the community who aided and abetted her in that act, as well as against the violent culture that shackled those mothers, those daughters, those fathers and sons who had come to live as freedmen on the edges of the white world on the banks of the Ohio River in the years after their first emancipation. This history infuses itself into the mythic content of the work more than in the other works discussed here. Perhaps this is an effect of Beloved's setting. Maus looks back over decades and generational barriers at the Holocaust, but in Beloved slavery is a recent memory, which cannot easily sifted out from the novel's mythic context.

Unlike Chronicle of a Death Foretold, Ironweed, Maus, and Woman Warrior, Beloved does not foreground the influence of Kafka.

Harold Bloom writes that for Kafka "[i]mpatience . . . was the only major sin, embracing all others" (448). Patience, then, for Bloom is central to Kafka's work: "Kafka, a self-professed New Kabbalist, took as his secret theurgical quest the project of making the God of the Jews a more patient person" (448). The conclusions of Chronicle of a Death Foretold, Ironweed, and Maus all emphasize patience. Chronicle's bureaucratic truth-seeking judge, like K. of Kafka's The Castle, never learns anything that he did not know before he began his inquiries. Ironweed ends with Francis merely contemplating another return home, leaving the reader with only the possibility of his return. Maus's conclusion, like the rest of the book, chronicles Spiegelman's inability to communicate with his father and to strike through the wall of history which separates them. Woman Warrior ends with Kingston assuming the legendary role of Ts'ai Yen, captured by barbarians and not yet rescued by her family. Beloved is by far the work most concerned with the "now" of the novel's conclusion. Paul D talks about having a child with Sethe, but the final action is the cataclysmic exorcism of the ghost which has haunted all the characters. There is no such exiling of the ghosts of the other texts: Santiago Nasar, Gerald Phelan, the exterminated mouse-Jews of the Holocaust, the echoes of Chinese myth never leave the imaginations of Marquez's unnamed narrator, Francis Phelan, Art Spiegelman or Maxine Hong Kingston.

Morrison's brief final chapter lays Beloved to rest; she is "disremembered" (275). Unlike the main characters of the other works we encounter here, Sethe is closest to fully integrating her experiences with her conception of self. As the novel ends, she solves her dilemma, which in the words of Satya P. Mohanty concerns the "real meaning of freedom: 'Freeing yourself [is] one thing . . . claiming ownership of that freed self [is] another'" (Mohanty 109). Paul D says as much in his final comment in the novel: "You are your best thing, Sethe. You are." And while her response, "Me? Me?" (273) indicates that she is still in the process of accepting this ownership, she is far closer to owning herself than any of the other characters mentioned here.

Notes

1. Henson claims that "[t]he natural tendency of slavery is to convert the . . . slave into the cringing, <u>false, and thieving</u> victim of tyranny" (15--emphasis mine). Here Henson, in a familiar criticism of slavery, points out that slaves will treat their masters "dishonestly," emphasizing the property/owner relationship that exists between slave and master. Later, when Henson discusses his execution of his master's financial matters, he feels he must apologize for appropriating food for his fellow slaves and points out that while he may have "stolen" his master's food, he "accounted, with the strictest honesty, for every dollar I received in the sale of property entrusted to me" (Henson 40). With these comments, Henson achieves several effects. His white readership, trained to see African-Americans as shiftless and dishonest, can identify Father Henson as a just and moral man who does not take dishonesty lightly. He steals not for himself or even for hungry people who need and deserve to be fed, but for "his [master's] people," an act "unequivocally for his [master's] own benefit" (40). Henson's respect for money, obviously an important American value, is never in question. In fact, Henson refuses to seek his freedom by running away (i.e., through dishonesty) until after his master cheats him out of the ability to purchase himself. He goes so far as to tell us he once believed that for a slave to run off "seemed like outright stealing" (52).

The language of Henson's narrative is laced with such economic meaning and marketplace connotations. However, it is impossible to know if this infusion of economics into his life's story is an effect of slavery or of his ghost writer, Samuel A. Eliot, "who was well-known for his *moderate* anti-slavery views" (Winks 120--emphasis mine).

2. Such irony is present when Jacobs records the words of the mistress of a slave dying in childbirth. Upon hearing the young slave woman's mother pray that her daughter and grandchild will soon be with God, the white woman summarily condemns both the girl and her dead infant to eternal damnation:

> "Heaven!" retorted the mistress, "There is no such place for such as her and her bastard."
>
> The poor mother turned away, sobbing. Her dying daughter called her, feebly, and as she bent over her, I heard her say, "Don't grieve so mother; God knows all about it; and HE will have mercy upon me. (14)

As one who is forced to revise her own identity, Jacobs refuses to let such presumptive recreating of self go unaddressed.

Another telling example of Jacobs's rejection of the white as God trope occurs when she records part of a spiritual:

> Old Satan is one busy ole man;
> He roles dem blocks in my way;
> But Jesus is my bosom friend;
> He rolls dem blocks away. (70)

In her notes to Jacobs's narrative, Jean Fagan Yellin reprints the lyrics to the closest equivalent spiritual she can track down. These are slightly different from Jacobs's version and include what may be read as a veiled reference to the white as God trope:

> Oh, Satan he came by my heart,
> Throw brickbats in de door,
> But *Master Jesus* come wid brush,
> Make cleaner dan before. (270--emphasis Yellin's)

Is this another example of Jacobs's rejection of the trope or simply the only version of the song Jacobs knew?

3. In Greek myth, Medea kills her children to protect them from a life of slavery and banishment after betraying Jason and murdering his betrothed:

> When Medea knew [she had killed Jason's bride] she turned her mind to one still more dreadful. There was no protection for her children, no help for them anywhere. A slave's life might be theirs, nothing more. (Hamilton 129)

Of course, in Euripides's play, Medea is a much more complex character who kills her children to revenge herself against their father, who has betrayed her. Euripides, of course, portrays her in such a way as to evoke audience sympathy for her terrible deed. In Beloved, this incarnation is much closer to both Sethe's mother and, later, Ella.

4. While Beloved's use of supernatural imagery may seem the novel's great departure from its slave narrative roots, that is not

exactly true. At least one narrative--although it is a captivity narrative and not a fugitive slave narrative--uses patently supernatural material extensively. The Confessions of Nat Turner, related to Thomas Gray in 1831, is easily as fantastic as Morrison's novel. (Turner even claims to be a reincarnated Christ, come to exact revenge and deliver his people.) However, like Marquez and other Magic Realists, Turner would certainly not consider the narrative a fantasy. Turner claims to have witnessed "lights in the sky" and seen "drops of blood on the corn" (Gray 5) which he interpreted as signs from God that he rise up in insurrection. Turner's confessions are highly fantastical. For instance, he has "no recollection whatever of learning the alphabet, but, to the astonishment of the family, one day [when Turner was a child], when a book was shown to me to keep me from crying, I began spelling the names of different objects" (3). Also, he knew that he was "intended for some great purpose . . . [because of] certain marks on [his] head and breast" (3).

Whatever the reasons for Turner's assertion that he was inspired by visions to act as a swift and terrible second coming--be it sincere religious faith, delusion, or subterfuge--his mysticism is a chilling element of the short document. Also, even as contemporary Magic Realists use the magical elements of their work toward political ends, so too does Thomas Gray. Gray's Turner is a lone madman, not the representative of angry enslaved millions. Gray's description of Turner as overcome with "gloomy

fanaticism" (Aptheker 165) and as having "a mind . . . perverted" (170) implies that the danger of another such uprising is not quite so likely as it would be if anger and revenge were indeed revealed as Turner's motives. After Turner was executed, "[s]ome one hundred Blacks who took no part in the revolt were slaughtered ruthlessly as the hysteria spread in Virginia" (162). Was Turner attempting to placate such fears by appearing less than sane thereby attempting to avoid such violence or has Gray simply attempted to calm the fears of whites by filtering Turner's voice through his own? Intentionally invoked or not, the mask motif appears to be at work here, rendering Turner's fury--to Gray at least--as indecipherable as "hieroglyphic characters and numbers" (167) Turner sees magically inscribed on the leaves in the woods.

5. Morrison has used the Lilith myth previously. Barbara Hill Rigney's Lilith's Daughters details the myth's function in The Bluest Eye and Sula, but Beloved, with its anti-pastoral, quasi-edenic Sweet home, manipulates the myth more fully than do these previous works.

6. Jacobs is not alone in her perceptiveness. Other slave narrators, like James Pennington, comment on the supernatural yearnings of white society. In The Fugitive Blacksmith, Pennington first uses the animal trickster image and then inverts the white as God image in one telling scene in which the Southern overseer is compared to a lion in a zoo leering hungrily through the bars at Pennington's helpless son (208). Lucinda MacKethan argues that Pennington

here creates a metaphor of himself as master in that "overseer and lion, figures of power, are made into cowardly bullies picking on the victim least capable of fighting back. [A] neat reversal" (MacKethan 60). To successfully escape from both the bondage of body and word, slave narrators had to understand and revise the metaphors and myths of humanity the white South had created. Beloved has its roots in these revisions and others like them.

7. Morrison's use of myth is often as ironic as Baby Suggs' feelings about color, which she called "something harmless in this world" (179). What, after all, has had a more destructive force in her life that color has? In fact, her dying advice to Denver concerned the evil of color: "there was no bad luck but white-people. 'They don't know when to stop'" (104). Here, she also reflects the "omnipotence" and omnipresence of whites. Baby Suggs' salvation is in merely an effect of light: color. But her salvation is empty. Such contradictory conclusions are, of course, the norm for a novel in which the greatest love a mother can show is the slitting of her daughter's throat.

8. David Hwang, in the Afterword to his Magic Realist drama, M Butterfly, makes a similar comment on his use of the true story on which his work was based :

> I suspected there was a play here [in the NY Times story of a French diplomat who believed the man he lived with was a woman]. I purposely refrained from further research, for I didn't want the "truth" to interfere with my own speculations. (94)

9. Crouch does have a point when he criticizes Morrison for avoiding any mention of the fact that African slaves were sold to white Europeans by Africans. However, this seems a point that need not be brought up in every discussion of slavery. It would seem particularly out of place in Beloved, which contains only a trace of an African voice in the figures of Nan and Sethe's enigmatic mother. (See Crouch 40.)

10. As this chapter will suggest that Beloved is significant tied to Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, it is worth asking if Baby Suggs is based on Harriet Jacobs's grandmother. Both are revered as women of great spiritual strength, and both are given "titles." Baby Suggs becomes "Baby Suggs, holy" while Jacobs's grandmother is the "good grandmother" (Jacobs 58 and elsewhere).

11. See Jean Fagan Yellin's Preface and Introduction to her 1987 edition of Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl for an account of the book's history and of Yellin's research.

12. Is Sethe an incarnation of the scapegoat, the beast which bore the sins of the entire community during the Hebrews' Exodus?

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Chapter 5
"it is not the mouse who is the thief but the mousehole": The Subversive Magic Realism of Art Spiegelman's Maus

Magic Realism has surely found a place in the American consciousness. President Bill Clinton has gone on record that his favorite book is One Hundred Years of Solitude, and both Ironweed and Beloved have achieved popular and critical success. Kennedy won a Pulitzer for his novel, and Morrison is now a Nobel Laureate. Even in the popular culture, Magic Realism has become a relatively well-known literary term. Popular "art house" films like Wings of Desire, Like Water for Chocolate, and A Walk in the Clouds have all been called Magic Realism, as has the television comedy/drama Northern Exposure, which enjoyed a five-year run.

These works deserve to be labeled Magic Realism to lesser or greater degrees because they all share two essential qualities of Magic Realism. One is an emphasis on ethnicity and the other is the manipulation of mythic and/or cultural materials, creating a focus on the ambiguous and ironic elements of those materials and the very nature of "ethnicity" itself: What does it mean to be an African-American, a Latin-American, a Native-American, an Irish-American? Magic Realism asks the same questions of other

definitions of culture and spirituality: What does it mean to be Catholic? To be Jewish?

Of all of the works treated in this study, surely the most unlikely is Art Spiegelman's Maus.[1] Not generally called Magic Realism, Maus is not a novel; it is not fiction; it is not even a conventional prose work. Still, Spiegelman's 1986 comic strip biography/autobiography and its 1991 sequel, Maus II in many ways demonstrates the manipulations of folk material and myth which define Magic Realism. In fact, Maus demonstrates these manipulations more clearly than the prose works mentioned above because the manipulations in Spiegelman's text are both structural and visual. Maus also testifies to the growing popularity of the Magic Realist genre outside traditional literary forms.

As Maus's Magic Realism pushes the genre in new directions, the book also challenges its comic book form. Maus's story is quite unlike any previously seen in comics[2]--yet the books are immediately recognizable as comic books. Maus is the story of Spiegelman's parents (Vladek and Anja), Jews who survived Auschwitz. It also chronicles the life of the younger Spiegelman as he interviews his father (Anja, we learn, committed suicide in 1968), in preparation for a comic book about his family's escape from the Nazi terror. The "survivor" in Maus I's subtitle, A Survivor's Tale, is obviously a reference to Vladek, who survives Auschwitz and his wife's suicide. But it also refers to Art, who, by

surviving the trauma of his youth, his mother's death, and his relationship with his "exasperating elderly father" Vladek (O'Sullivan 136), has become "the real survivor" (Maus II 44). Shifting between flashbacks of Vladek's life in the camps and his banal existence with his second wife in Rego Park, Brooklyn, Maus unfolds two unlikely narratives.

In most respects a "realistic" and thoroughly researched book, Maus is hardly "real" in one crucial aspect. Spiegelman has anthropomorphized his characters: the Jews are mice, the Nazis cats, the gentile Poles pigs, and so on. This one "rhetorical" decision is crucial, of course. With it, Spiegelman comments on the Holocaust in a manner which only the comic book can, transforming the reading experience Maus offers. The cat and mouse cartoon images filter our perceptions of the Holocaust and the Holocaust story filters our perception of the cat and mouse cartoon images. The rhetorical strategy and subject matter are seemingly inappropriately matched, yet they feed each other and create a single narrative which is, to say the least, unique. As comic strip artist, historian, and theoretician Will Eisner says, "Comic art is a form of impressionism" (5). Spiegelman has reacted to the conventions of the comic book genre by both giving in to and subverting a long tradition of talking animals with which his audience will be comfortable. But Spiegelman's tone is not so

far removed from Morrison's. The ghost story seems rather a poor device for examining chattel slavery, after all.

Magic Realist works succeed or fail in terms of their imagery and language and the extent to which their characters complete the journeys of spiritual discovery they begin. Marquez, Kennedy, and Morrison all strive, it is fair to say, for a passive Kafkaesque tone which heightens the immediacy and reality of their fantastic subject matter by not emphasizing its unreality. Language is also a key element in Maus, but we must expand our definitions of language to include Spiegelman's iconic cats, mice, and pigs. As Scott McCloud observes in his 1993 book, Understanding Comics:

> Most American . . . comic books . . . have long emphasized the *differences* between words and pictures. Writing and drawing are seen as *separate disciplines*, writers and artists as *separate breeds* . . . and "good" comics as those in which the *combination* of these very *different* forms of expression is thought to be harmonious. But just how "different" *are* they? Words, pictures and other icons are the *vocabulary* of the language called *comics*. (47--emphasis McCloud's) [see fig. 1][3]

And if Spiegelman does not work with myth *per se* in Maus, still he works with folk material in that his work is based in the cat and mouse formulas of innumerable comic strips and cartoons. It also aggressively bends the long-held assumptions readers take to the very form in which the text is "written," a form with its own long-held traditions and culture. The Holocaust does not qualify as

"mythic" material; it is, after all, an utterly, irrevocably real event. However, it is also perhaps the single event of the twentieth century that approaches "mythic" stature in terms of its far-reaching effects and the difficulty we have defining and interpreting its events.

Of course, such considerations bring to mind Elie Wiesel's comment that "[t]here is no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust, nor can there be" (quoted Witek 97). Wiesel wishes to avoid the perception of the Holocaust as anything but a real event. It is not a symbol; it is not a conceit or a metaphor. So while the Holocaust is most definitely not a myth, Spiegelman's decision to explore the humanity--not the heroism--of one of its victims, his father, demonstrates an awareness on the author's part of the mythic stature of this cataclysmic event and of those who found themselves caught up in it. Moreover, Spiegelman adapts some of the myths which grew up around and during the Holocaust. The cartoon images of <u>Maus</u> explicitly engage ethnicity and myth. One critic suggests that

> the bestiary ties Art and present-day Jews to the older generation in a way the words never could; it gives a hard, subverbal image to racial hatred. There's nothing abstract about cats and mice. (66)

More compelling are the comments of Israeli critic Hillel Halkin, who suggests literary and linguistic precedents for Spiegelman's visual images. For Halkin the mice of Kafka's

"Josephine the Singer; or, the Mouse Folk" were "clearly modeled on the Jews" (55). Further, he sees a clear ethnic history in the German noun *maus* :

> [in] the German language . . . the noun *Mauschel* means a "kike," and the verb *mauscheln*, to speak . . . with a Jewish accent. These two words, to be sure, derive from the Hebrew name Moshe, which in the German-Jewish pronunciation sounds like "Maushe," but German-speakers can hardly avoid associating them with *Maus* and its diminutive *Mauschen* . Theodor Herzl actually wrote a short essay called *Mauschel* in which, far from denying that the anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew had a basis in reality, he identified it with Jewish opponents of Zionism and railed against them: "Where the *Jew* feels pain or pride, *Mauschel's* face shows only miserable fright or a mocking grin. In hard times, the Jew stands tall, but *Mauschel* cringes even more ignominously," and so on. (55--emphasis Halkin's)

With his identification of Maus's forerunner "Josephine," Halkin reminds us that Spiegelman draws on the same traditions as Marquez. Of course, Spiegelman's relationship with Kafka as literary forefather is even more intimate. Unlike Marquez, Kennedy, and Morrison, he is not forced to "translate" Kafka's ironic story-telling motifs into a new ethnic milieu. He and Kafka (who was inspired by the humor of the Yiddish theater and Jewish folk traditions) both write about the Jewish experience in anti-semitic Europe.

Spiegelman adapts both "lowbrow" comics iconography and "language" and anti-semitic linguistic imagery. He also

reinterprets images and narrative strategies from Yiddish traditions, thus crafting a text which adapts, parodies, and "translates" destructive utterances into something new, powerful, and life-affirming: the consistent aim of Magic Realism.

Background: Comics (and Comix) History

To begin our discussion of Maus, some background is necessary. Much of Spiegelman's accomplishment in this text relies on his deconstruction of comic book convention and especially the traditional uses of the cat and mouse images on which his book depends. The American comic book has enjoyed an eventful and varied existence since its beginnings in the 1930s. During the Second World War, it was not unusual for a single issue of a comic book to sell over a million copies, many of which were sent to fighting men overseas. In the 1950's, the super-hero lost its stranglehold on the medium, and comics branched into other genres, vainly attempting to hold onto that adult audience it had attracted during the war. There were romance, detective, jungle, adventure, science fiction, and humor comics, but the comics most often identified with the era were the horror comics published by EC Comics.

While these comics showcased the talents of writers and draftsmen far superior to the cartoonists who produced the super-

hero comics of the 1940's, they are best remembered for the effect they had on the reactionary American public than for their contribution to culture. Particularly gruesome and violent, the EC comics became the focus of a McCarthy-era congressional review board which inspired the major comic book producers to create the "Comics Code Authority." This self-regulating editorial board enforced such remarkably restrictive guidelines that comic book artists and publishers had little choice but to return to more inoffensive material, thus ushering in the return of the super-hero as the dominant "product" of the comic book industry.[4] The super-hero has since held monolithic sway over the medium.

The last decade, however, has seen a quantum leap in the possible avenues of creative work available in comic book form. Small publishers have made significant inroads to a mass readership in the wake of the advances in format and marketing by DC and Marvel Comics. These two companies, the economic powerhouses of the comic book industry, deal almost exclusively in formulaic super-hero fare aimed at an adolescent male audience. If the general reading public is at all aware of these developments in the comic book form and industry, it is primarily through knowledge of sensational projects like an "adult" Batman story by cartoonist Frank Miller--The Dark Knight Returns--or the recent highly-publicized revision and subsequent "death" and inevitable resurrection of Superman.

While the alternative comics press has followed the mainstream comics in terms of production values and aggressive marketing strategies, Maus owes its aesthetic more to the undergrounds of the sixties than to "above-ground" comics like Batman and Superman. In brief, underground comix, as they are known, graphically and gleefully depicted violations of any and all sexual and social taboos. However, there is more to note of these sometimes tasteless, sometimes wonderfully passionate, cultural artifacts of a time when all that was sacred was fair game for rebellious American youth. Before we discuss Maus more fully, we must briefly describe the history and significance of the undergrounds, where "Spiegelman began his career as a comic book artist" (Witek 52):

> The [underground] comix creators cultivated an outlaw image, and their works systematically flung down and danced upon every American standard of good taste, artistic competence, political coherence, and sexual restraint; in so doing they created . . . [comics] of unparalleled vigor, virtuosity, and spontaneity--after the underground comix, the Comics Code would never be the same. (Witek 51)

However, economic forces soon led to the demise of the undergrounds as a vital artistic force. Tied as they were to the drug culture of the 1960's, the undergrounds lost major economic support when in "the middle 1970's . . . court decisions closed most of the drug paraphernalia shops" (Witek 51) where underground comix were sold.

But what is more significant here is the aesthetic of the undergrounds, for it is in this medium that Maus finds its genesis, one devoted to challenging official institutions. This "rebellious" quality that pushes the book into Magic Realist irony and parody:

> As the [word] "underground" . . . [suggests], the comix set themselves up in opposition to the dominant culture of the 1960's and 1970's, and much of their energy comes from their persistent efforts to offend the sensibilities of bourgeois America. The comics of the 1950's, with their gory horror and crime extravaganza, are as nothing, mere innocuous yarns of genteel taste and impeccable morality, compared with such underground classics as S. Clay Wilson's gross and hilarious "Captain Pissgums and His Pervert Pirates," Jim Osbourne's tale of drug-induced murder and disembowelment, "Kid Kill" . . . and Robert Crumb's nightmare/fantasy of castration in "The Adventures of R. Crumb Himself" from Tales of the Leather Nun. (Witek 52)

Spiegelman's early training was as a parodist. The comix form in which he worked thrives on parody. Like Kafka, he aimed to shock his readers, but he worked in a more broadly humorous mode. Actually, considering the nature of the undergrounds and of Kafka's fiction, the two were not so far from each other. At least Kafka shared the dark humor of the comix; as David Zane Mairowitz observes, "When Kafka read passages from The Trial out loud to his friends, he is reported to have laughed uncontrollably" (95). Finally, we should add that for most general readers, the

combination of comics and politics is likely to imply parody, as in newspaper editorial cartoons. Spiegelman is aware that most of his readers bring this and other preconceptions to his work.

In fact, every comic that attempts to do more than entertain teenage boys must somehow deal with what we can call two perceived "comic book genres." One is identified with fantasy, adolescent excess, garish illustration, and simplistic stories (most often super-hero revenge fantasies). The other is concerned with outrage for its own sake, identifying with the counterculture, and near-pornographic imagery. Subsequently, so-called "alternative" comics, aimed neither at the super-hero nor underground markets must exist both within and without the constraints of these "genres." Somehow they must challenge their readers's assumptions, which are reinforced by the very name of the form.

Underground Imagery and Magic Realism

Both the escapist material of the mainstream comics and the outrageous fare of the comix influence Spiegelman's immensely provocative and respectful book, which is at once intent on outraging its audience with its imagery while still remaining accessible to a wide readership beyond the comic specialty shop crowd. Still, Maus owes most of its power to the undergrounds and

even began as a short story in an underground comic; the book gains much of its power from its shocking, seemingly inappropriate use of cartoon imagery. Maus contains a good deal of outrage, irony, parody, and longing: all essential qualities of Magic Realism. Nowhere in the books do all of these ideas coalesce more than in the use of seemingly innocuous cartoon characters to tell the story of the Holocaust.

Spielgelman's cats and mice create a world as unreal as those inhabited by the ghosts of Ironweed and Beloved. However, the tone of the book--as is the case in all Magic Realism--is one of unquestioning realism. The magic of the book manifests itself uniquely--anthropomorphic cartoon animals--but it is treated just the same as are the ghosts of the novels of Marquez, Kennedy, and Morrison. Also, Maus, like its prose antecedents, explores ethnicity in a confrontational, not sacrosanct, manner. The main conflict of this work is not between Jews and Nazis but between Art Spielgelman and his father Vladek. The character most often portrayed in an unflattering light is not some Nazi Commandant but a Jewish Holocaust survivor. Kennedy writes about an Irish drunk and Morrison about a Black single mother who must be reminded that she has "two legs . . . not four" (Beloved 165) and who cannot care for her own children. Kingston's autobiography features exotic "Orientals." Spielgelman's hero is an elderly,

stingy Jewish father. If these writers seek sympathetic audiences, they hardly go about it in the simplest manner.

Spielgelman has commented on his use of cartoon symbolism, calling it "'a much more direct way of dealing with the material'" (quoted Witek 112). He implies that the artificiality and "inappropriateness" of the metaphor to such a weighty topic as the Holocaust is essential to its effectiveness. While his characters do indeed carry parodic qualities, he does not intend them humorously. Spiegelman's characters look like mice and cats, but they never refer to themselves as such.[5] In fact, his presentation of this other reality as wholly natural is the cornerstone of Magic Realism: Marquez's "stone-faced" storytelling.

Spielgelman's text repeatedly demonstrates this contradiction. For instance, when the two "mice," Vladek and Anja, are forced to hide in a rat-infested storage locker, Vladek comforts his wife by telling her that only mice--not rats--crawl over her feet (Maus I 147--[fig. 2]). How can these smaller mice exist in a world filled with human-mice? What begins as only a device to "effectively [present] the power relations between the Nazis and the Jews" (Witek 112) becomes a parodic subversion of the age-old comic book device, the "funny animal." The further Spiegelman manipulates his visual tool, the more it falls apart. To disguise themselves as Poles, for instance, the Jewish mice wear pig masks, fastened with bits of string. At the same time, of course,

Anja's tail flails about behind [fig. 3]. And of course, once the first three animal metaphors are established, there can be no turning back: American mutts, French frogs, British fish, even Swedish reindeer and a "Gypsy" moth populate the books.

Compounding this increasing burden on the animal metaphor is the inclusion of an earlier autobiographical story drawn by Art and discovered by Vladek in the course of Maus I. "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," which documents Spiegelman's reaction to his mother's suicide, was first published in an underground comic in 1973. Although Art, Vladek, and Anja all appear as human beings in the story [fig. 4], none of the "mice" of Maus notices that anything is amiss.[6] In fact, Spiegelman even includes a photograph of himself and his mother, just as elsewhere in the text he includes photographs of his brother and his father [figs. 5 and 6].[7]

Nowhere, however, do the metaphors fall apart more than in the early chapters of Maus II. Not surprisingly, these chapters are Maus's most parodic. "Mauschwitz," the first chapter of the second volume, begins with the mouse cartoonist "Art" sketching various animal incarnations of his wife Francoise, a French gentile who has converted to Judaism:

> [Art]: What kind of animal should I make you?
> [Francoise]: Huh? A mouse, of course!
> [A]: But you're French!
> [F]: Well [glancing at Art's sketchbook] . . . how about the bunny rabbit?

> [A]: Nah. Too sweet and gentle. . . . I mean the French in general. . . .
>
> [F]: Okay! But if you're a mouse, I ought to be a mouse too. I converted didn't I?
>
> [A]: I've got it! Panel one: my father is on his exercycle . . . I tell him I just married a frog . . . Panel two: he falls off his cycle in shock. So, you and I go to a Rabbi. He says a few magic words and ZAP! By the end of the page the frog has turned into a beautiful mouse! (Maus II 11-12)[8] [see fig. 7]

This scene may remind us of the shape-shifting Pilate of Song of Solomon. But these early chapters of Maus II also reveal Spiegelman's heightened self-consciousness. As does Maxine Hong Kingston in her Magic Realist autobiography, Woman Warrior, Spiegelman openly doubts his ability to communicate his tale. This self-conscious tone is used throughout Maus, as in the scenes in which Spiegelman appears as a human being wearing a "mouse mask" rather than as a "real" mouse, and in his inclusion of the "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" story. The book never overtly points to the unreality of the situations except through Spielgelman's style. The same could be said of Ironweed and Beloved. Kennedy's third person narrator occasionally addresses the novel's characters, and Morrison includes several beguiling sequences in her otherwise straightforwardly realist style, for instance, chapter 22's cryptic "middle passage" sequence narrated by Beloved herself. Magic Realists do not let the inhabitants of their fictional

universes comment on their fantastic worlds, but the narrative voice shows no such restraint.

As with other Magic Realist texts, this departure from "reality" does not disrupt the narrative. For instance, when in Beloved, Paul D first realizes that a spirit resides at 124 Bluestone Road, he acts as though he numbers hauntings among typical homeowner's headaches:

> Paul D . . . followed [Sethe] through the door straight into a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood.
>
> "You got company?" he whispered, frowning.
>
> "Off and on," said Sethe.
>
> "Good God." He backed out the door onto the porch. "What kind of evil you got in here?"
>
> "It's not evil, just sad. Come on. Just step through." (8)

Content with Sethe's assurance (and later, Denver's comment that the baby is not sad but "Lonely and rebuked" [13]) that the ghost is not evil, Paul D moves in and even performs an exorcism, as if such a rite were a matter-of-fact household chore.

Similarly, Francis Phelan is never much taken aback by the specters he encounters in Ironweed. He even engages in spirited conversation with the shades of his violent past, as in this exchange with the ghost of the scab trolley driver Francis had killed many years before:

> Why did you kill me? was the question Harold Allen's [ghost's] eyes put to Francis.
>
> "Didn't mean to kill you." Francis said.
>
> Was that why you threw that stone the size of a potato and broke open my skull? My brains flowed out and I died.
>
> "You deserved what you got. Scabs get what they ask for. I was right in what I did." (26)

In all these novels, as in Maus and Magic Realism in general, departures from rationality do not lead to disruptions in narrative flow. In the worlds of Magic Realist texts, characters accept without comment even the most extreme variations on reality.

Such variation occurs in Maus II's second chapter, "Auschwitz (Time Flies)," which opens with a passage which draws attention to and weakens Spiegelman's metaphor. As the chapter opens, we see Spiegelman, a human figure wearing a mouse mask, sitting at his drawing board, two small flies buzzing about his head. As he delivers the following soliloquy, the "camera" of the artist's point of view pulls further and further back, slowly revealing more and more background:

> [Panel one]: Vladek died of congestive heart failure on August 18,1982 . . . Francoise and I stayed with him in the Catskills back in August 1979.
>
> [Panel two]: Vladek started working as a tin man in Auschwitz in the spring of 1944 . . . I started working on this page at the very end of February 1987.

> [Panel three]: In May 1987 Francoise and I are expecting a baby . . . Between May 16,1944, and May 24,1944[,] over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz . . .
>
> [Panel four]: In September 1986, after 8 [sic] years of work, the first part of Maus was published. It was a critical and commercial success.
>
> [Panel five]: At least fifteen foreign editions are coming out. I've gotten [four] serious offers to turn my book into a T.V. special or movie (I don't wanna). In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.) Lately I've been feeling depressed. (Maus II 41) [fig. 8]

As the episode ends, we see that Spiegelman's drawing board sits atop the emaciated corpses of hundreds of "mouse-Jews." Over the next few pages, the human Spiegelman figure, still wearing his mouse mask, goes to visit his analyst, another camp survivor. Their session, during which the analyst (also wearing a mouse-mask) suggests that "[too] many books have already been written about the Holocaust" (Maus II 45), ends with this exchange:

> [Art]: Samuel Beckett once said: 'Every word is like an unnecessary strain on silence and nothingness.'
>
> [Analyst]: Yes.
>
> [Art]: On the other hand, he said it.
>
> [Analyst]: He was right. Maybe you can include it in your book. (Maus II 45)

Obviously, he does include it, illustrating the pointlessness not just of his book but of all language and any communication. At the same time, of course, we are reading perhaps the ultimate contradiction: a true story about intelligent mice who are not mice

at all, but humans systematically hunted down and exterminated not by cats, but by their fellow humans. In Maus, language fails not just because of the metaphor Spiegelman applies, but because of the utter impossibility of the truth being communicated. These two chapters--the only ones in which Spiegelman steps out from behind the "mouse-mask"--remind us with their titles ("Mauschwitz" and "Auschwitz") of the almost flippant nature of Spiegelman's metaphor.

Of course, such "inappropriateness" is a touchstone of Magic Realism. Beloved may be one of the most unrelentingly harrowing contemporary works concerning slavery, but it is also at heart a ghost story, as is Ironweed, another novel about infanticide. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's work, violent and bloody in the extreme, is also magic. The central metaphor of Maus draws attention to itself and breaks down under its own weight. As we have seen with other Magic Realists, the rhetorical strategy is aggressive, not passive. These authors do not want their readership uncritically lost in an illusion of reality. Instead, the "lightness" of the fantasy elements serve to dramatize, not belittle, the human horror of the narratives. In the case of Maus, the use of animals makes palatable a story that would simply be unreadable to many readers if the figures were human. Rather than demean the Holocaust, this strategy allows the horror to build slowly and even

subversively. Eventually the reader realizes, "My God, this is all real."

Spiegelman explains his work in an interview, responding to the criticism that Maus "would have had more impact if [he had] used people" instead of animals ("Art for Art's Sake" 98):

> These images are not my images. I borrowed [them] from the Germans. . . . These metaphors, which are meant to self-destruct in my book--and I think they do self-destruct--still have a residual force and still [get] people worked up over them. ("Art for Art's Sake" 98)

The "residual force" Spiegelman discusses here can only be fully exploited in the comics medium, for only in comics could the metaphor be presented so passively. Language itself simply cannot convey this dichotomy with the effectiveness of graphic images. Moreover, Spiegelman comments on the very qualities of Maus which identify it as a work of Magic Realism: These images are not of Spiegelman's own creation. He is interpreting an older world view. Magic Realism is obsessed with the past.

Spiegelman was not the first to connect the Nazis' identification of Jews and vermin with well-known cartoon mice. Spiegelman's epigraph from Maus II--taken from a mid-30's German newspaper article--speaks to the artist's (and the Nazis') awareness of the unique iconic qualities of comics:

> Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed. . . . Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honorable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the

> greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal. . . . Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross! (Maus II, title page).

Spiegelman and the Nazi propaganda machine both understood that iconic images of the comics can be voiceless but powerful.

But Spiegelman's use of his cartoon imagery does not simply indicate that he agrees with the Nazis that comics are an excellent medium for political propaganda. Nor does he use these images in the way Hillel Halkin suggests:

> It can be argued, no doubt, that in choosing to make his Jews mice . . . Spiegelman . . . was seeking to invest certain qualities that have been blamed in part for the fate of European Jewry--passivity, timidity, a sense of resigned fatalism, etc.--with a quiet life-accepting heroism. (55)

This naive, sentimental conception of imagery is far from an accurate reading of Maus. Consider that Spiegelman does not hide that "[t]hese images are not [his] images"; in fact, he freely admits, "I . . . borrowed [them] from the Germans" ("Art's Sake" 98). Of particular interest to our reading of this text is that these animal images are potent in terms of what the Nazis would call "racial" identification. Of course, the Nazis used the term "race" in a maddeningly simplistic, dangerous way. Jews, Poles, "Aryans," were all considered separate races. These groups of human beings were all assigned new characteristics. The Jews were vermin, the

Poles schwein, and even Americans were mixed-race mongrels. And "frog" has long been used as a derogatory term aimed at the French. Although some critics will disagree, Spiegelman is well aware of this dimension of his text. As with Kennedy's drunken Irishman, Spiegelman does not simply perpetuate earlier uses of his images, he adapts, revises, and parodies them.

Still, some of Spiegelman's harshest respondents have been those--both within and without the comics industry--who disapprove of his use of images created by the Nazis, however parodic his intentions may be. Like the other Magic Realists, Spiegelman has chosen divisive material which invites harsh criticism. Stanley Crouch dismisses Beloved as politically correct and historically naive; others read Maus as equally ineffective. However, Maus, like Beloved, is engaged in a complex analysis of heritage and ethnic identity that goes beyond mere victimhood. Often, its use of such inflammatory material has raised hackles.

Subjectivity and Imagery

Alternative comic book writer Harvey Pekar is one of the few comics writers to rival Spiegelman for public recognition (via his many appearances on David Letterman's talk shows). His annual American Splendor comics magazine is--like Maus--an autobiographical comic which portrays complex adult themes and

situations. However, Pekar is almost unique among professionals working in comics field in that he has repeatedly criticized Maus. He disapproves of Spiegelman's use of icons, particularly the depiction of Poles as pigs. In a 1986 review of Maus I he writes:

> Spiegelman diminishes his book's intensity and immediacy by representing humans as rather simply and inexpressively drawn animals--Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs. However, the animal metaphor is ineffective because this single element of fantasy is contradicted by Spiegelman's detailed realism. For instance he uses the real names of people and places; i.e., a mouse named Vladek Spiegelman lives in the Polish town of Sosnowiec, wears human clothing, and walks on two feet. (Pekar, "Maus" 54)

One might more readily expect such a comment from a reader unfamiliar with comics, but this initial criticism seems rather unremarkable as it focuses on the most disruptive element of the text. Pekar soon gets to the heart of his debate. His two major complaints about Maus concern ideas intrinsically tied up in Magic Realism: paradox, parody, ethnicity, and subjectivity. Discussing Spiegelman's use of animal imagery and his less than flattering portrayal of Vladek, Pekar writes:

> The animal metaphor also perpetuates ethnic stereotypes. Spiegelman generally portrays Jews as prey (mice) for the Germans (cats). *However*, he shows some Poles taking risks for Jews, yet he *insultingly* portrays all of them as pigs.
>
> Art's narrative sometimes rambles and bogs down, partly because he is preoccupied with making Vladek look bad. Using

> a subplot involving contemporary sequences is a good idea, but in them Art denounces his father as a petty cheapskate far more often than is necessary. This distracts from the Holocaust story, clamorously interfering with the elevated tone of Vladek's reminiscences. (55--emphasis mine)

Pekar has clearly taken personal offense at the use of the pig, a less noble animal, apparently than mice, cats, dogs, fish, or frogs. He is not alone. One Jewish critic commented, "I would be more offended by his imagery if I were a Pole" (Halkin 55).

Pekar does not, however, so strenuously object to the portrayal of Jews as mice. This animal image, to Pekar, seemingly carries no negative connotations and should only be understood in terms of power relations. Yet, as Spiegelman points out, while commenting on the difficulty he had acquiring a visa to visit Poland, these images are not so one-dimensional. Upon being called to the Polish counsel's office he was told, "You know, the Nazis called us *schwein.*" Spiegelman responded, "Yes, and they called us vermin" ("Art for Art's Sake" 98). And with its attack on Mickey Mouse, the Third Reich clearly has no problems connecting that anti-semitic image with cartoon mice. Additionally, Hillel Halkin's comments demonstrate that the conception of the Jew as "maus" is intricately woven into the German language.

More recently, the 1990 edition of American Splendor featured a comic strip in which Pekar twists the Maus icons into a bizarre but unmistakably hostile response to Spiegelman [see fig. 9]. His

article and his comic strip express two distinct complaints against Spiegelman. The first is that the icons of Maus are prejudicial and that the use of pigs as Poles is particularly derogatory. The second is that the "Vladek" in Maus is an unfair caricature that ridicules a man who is, actually, a hero.

I have suggested earlier that the solution to the first of these complaints lies in the parodic, paradoxical impulses of Magic Realism. Spiegelman consciously adapts bigoted images and works to destroy those images. In Maus II, for example, not only does Art the narrator appear as a human wearing a "mouse-mask," but there is at least one key scene demonstrating the random and uncertain nature of these images [see fig. 10]. In a reminiscence of Vladek's days in the camps, we have two possible "readings" of the inmate. In Vladek's flashback, the man is a Jew, a mouse, a fellow victim of the Nazis. In Art's imagination, he is German, a cat. Here the impossibility of completely reliable "racial" identification is made clear to the reader, although not to Art. A similar scene--one already discussed--appears in Maus I. When we see Anja's tail beneath her coat [again--fig. 2], Vladek explains, "you could see more easy she was Jewish" (Maus I 136). Here, as elsewhere, Vladek easily passes as a gentile. Apparently, he is less "mouse" and more "pig" than his wife. Spiegelman is playing to those readers who do not accept the animal images as well as those who

do. Ethnic caricatures do not work; they are not accurate. As Spiegelman said in an interview:

> Ultimately what the book's about is the commonality of human beings. It's crazy to divide things down along nationalistic or racial or religious lines. And that's the whole point, isn't it? ("Art's Sake" 98).

Even in the world of Maus, where human beings are separated into different species, even here, it is possible to mistake a Jew for a Pole or a German for a Jew. As even Pekar points out, Vladek is a *Polish Jew*; should he not then be drawn as a hybrid pig-mouse?

The second of Pekar's complaints also results from Spiegelman's experiment with subjectivity. He writes:

> Art discovers that his father, in a fit of depression, has destroyed Anja's diaries, written during the Holocaust, which Art wanted to use to get material for Maus. Art screams at Vladek for this, calling him "murderer." (57)

Pekar argues that this scene is yet another example of Spiegelman's implying that "Art is the hero of the book and Vladek the villain" (56). This disturbs Pekar:

> I see Art in Maus as a guy going after the big scoop who cares less about his father than his father does about him. Why is Art finally visiting Vladek after two years, though both live in the same city? . . . Art wants a story from him. . . . Art shows Vladek asking him to leave information about his bachelor lovelife out of Maus . . . Art promises he won't use it. But, surprise, it shows up in the book anyway. (56)

Pekar's observations seem damning unless we consider that he is not citing a few examples that Spiegelman let slip through, inadvertently revealing his true evil nature. These are *consistent* characterizations of Vladek as a stubborn old man and Art as selfish and spoiled. Perhaps the most shocking example of Spiegelman's critical presentation of himself occurs in Maus II and does not even directly concern Vladek. Art complains that he endured "sibling rivalry with a snapshot" (15) of his brother Richieu, who was poisoned by a relative who wished to protect the boy from the horrors of the camps. Art laments:

> The photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble. . . [.] It was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn't compete. They didn't talk about Richieu, but that photo was a kind of reproach. He'd have become a doctor, and married a nice Jewish girl . . . the creep. (15)

Is it conceivable Spiegelman did not realize that such comments made about the adorable boy whose photo adorns the dedicatory page of Maus II, the boy murdered out of love, would not horrify readers?

These presentations may be disturbing, but they seem to emphasize two fairly simple points. The first is that even common, non-heroic people were victims of the Holocaust. That seems a minor point, but one is hard-pressed to name the Holocaust text which features a "hero" as self-serving (and, ultimately, as sympathetic) as Vladek. With his "warts-and-all" depictions of his

parents, Spiegelman confronts popular (albeit unspoken) notions about survivors, one of which his analyst articulates in Maus II: "Then you think it's admirable to survive. Does that mean it's NOT admirable to NOT survive?" (45). Later he comments: "[I]t wasn't the BEST people who survived, nor did the best ones die. It was random" (45).

Like his observation on the sacrosanct qualities of survival, Spiegelman's depictions of his family highlight the subjectivity of this autobiographical text. As do the other Magic Realists, Spiegelman invites us to question his conclusions, his perceptions, and even his father's authority. However, such "debunking" of one's own text is by no means confined to non-fictional Magic Realist work. The short final chapter of Beloved is imbued with similar feeling. Punctuated with a refrain of willful forgetfulness ("It was not a story to pass on" [274] is repeated three times--with minor variations--in the space of two pages), the book ends with an almost magical call for forgetting:

> By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but the wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss. (275)

This tone is undercut by the last word of the novel: "Beloved" (275). Obviously, such an ending would be ironic in any book, especially

one whose major themes revolve around "rememory" (Morrison, Beloved 36).

In Maus, the subjective and ironic tone is not intended--it seems--to demean Vladek, as Pekar suggests. Rather, Spiegelman uses his tone to explore the mythology of survival (and of the Holocaust itself) in order to accentuate the common humanity of the dead, the survivors, and the generation that followed. Further, he emphasizes that the Nazi horror cut its swath randomly; it did not oppress only the heroic and the pathetic. As reviewer Craig Seligman observes, "the horror of Auschwitz isn't that it was visited on innocents but that it was visited on anybody" (66). And finally, it is perhaps here--at this point where Spiegelman explores myth, his heritage, his family, and himself--that Maus is most clearly revealed as a work of Magic Realism.

Passivity and Subjectivity in Comics

Still, Pekar is not alone in his argument that in comic strip form it is easy to see the individual Jews, Poles, Americans, etc. as representatives of their ethnic, national, or religious groups. Critic and artist Robert Grossman asks, "Isn't this the kind of group character assassination that has long been at the root of so much trouble?" (23). Hillel Halkin agrees and even sees the images as a flaw:

> But what is the point of such imagery? Is there really much to be gained in our understanding of how human beings behaved in the Holocaust by imagining them as animals? (55)

As I suggested in the introduction to this study, all Magic Realists face this problem. Toni Morrison, discussing African-American authors, poses the question succinctly in the preface to her Playing in the Dark: "What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one's own race. . . ?" (xii). In Maus's treatment of ethnic and religious identity, Spiegelman invites and aggressively confronts a similar dilemma. In his earlier versions of the work, the individual mice are much more distinct, and therefore less likely to be seen somehow as indicators of "Jewishness" [see fig. 11].

In his final text, however, Spiegelman has chosen to draw his characters less like individuals [see fig. 12]. Magic Realists simultaneously embrace "roots" and deny them; Spiegelman uses the comic strip format to simultaneously convey both the bigoted image and its antithesis. In fact, this ability to communicate two opposing ideas so subtly is one key advantage of the comic strip format.

Compare Spiegelman's treatment with, for example, Jay Cantor's 1987 novel, Krazy Kat, (a kind of prose sequel to George Herriman's classic comic strip) which documents the life of a quasi-human comic-strip cat:

> Seating herself as comfortably as she could (the table was closer to mouse size and her knees had to be scrunched beneath). . . . She brought her paw to her mouth to put some saliva on the soft rubbery grey pad. (6)

For Cantor to create anthropomorphized characters in prose, he must constantly remind us with his description that we are reading about "Kats" and mice. Since the illustrations in Maus are there to remind us of Spiegelman's metaphor, he can quietly work to deconstruct it and the Nazi philosophy which would encourage us to see some humans as more or less human than others.

Throughout his text, Spiegelman parodies this insufficiency of language. The illustrated grids of the comic book page are uniquely suited to explanation (Witek 115), and Spiegelman includes illustration after illustration in his text, to the point where the book often resembles a "how-to" manual for evading Nazis [fig. 13].

Comic books are an undeniably visual form, and Spiegelman's work in Maus is strikingly visual: the anthropomorphism, the stark blacks and whites, the arresting "title pages" that precede each chapter, the photographs all carry a visual excitement; however, he is also aware of the role language plays in his work. Much of Maus is not visual but verbal; Spiegelman is a writer as much as an illustrator, and his use of language in Maus cannot be overlooked as a component of his rhetorical strength. Using a variety of devices, Spiegelman manipulates the comics form with his language, through both its presence and its absence.

One of the clever touches regarding language use and the "invisible" nature of comics art in Maus is indicated in Spiegelman's handling of his father's dialect. Much of the narrative of Maus comes from transcriptions of interviews Spiegelman conducted with his father, a Polish immigrant who spoke in dialect. The inclusion of the dialect serves to individualize Vladek, who essentially looks just like all the other "mice" in the story. However, in the flashback sequences, Vladek has no trace of dialect--because, of course, in these episodes he is speaking in his native tongue. (A narrative technique pioneered in fiction in Henry Roth's Call it Sleep). Ordinarily, a comic book artist indicates that a character is speaking in a foreign language by encasing his or her statements in brackets or by adding a footnote of explanation at the bottom of a panel. With his device, Spiegelman reinforces the "passive" nature of the comic book form, with which the artist can explain so much so silently. This twist is, of course, a microcosm of the Magic Realist view of omnipresent myth: a force lingering in the background, but one that can be manipulated.

Conclusion: Maus as Magic Realism

This ironic rhetorical tone, use of myth and folklore, and heightened subjectivity all mark Maus not as an anti-Pole diatribe or public flogging of Spiegelman's father, but as a work of Magic

Realism. In his disparaging yet provocative review of Maus, Hillel Halkin cites a Talmudic proverb to shift the "blame" for Maus's success from the shoulders of Spiegelman to "the slumming pop-culture critics who have made more of [Maus] than it is or pretends to be" when he writes, "'it is not the mouse who is the thief but the mousehole'" (56). While this remark is intended to lay low Spiegelman's upstart comic book, Halkin actually points to the complex, parodic, and subversive uses of myth and imagery which account for the agenda of Maus.

Like the characters in Ironweed, Beloved, and Song of Solomon Art seeks salvation through myth, folk culture, and an examination not just of his own past but of his familial and ethnic past. As in these other works, redemptive myths can become destructive. In Maus, one myth so treated is that of the heroic survivor. Vladek's salvation ironically becomes Art's burden. More, Spiegelman argues that the perception of survivors as "special" or "better" is somehow dangerous and demeaning to the memories of those who did not survive. Spiegelman seems concerned that future generations will ask (as, indeed, at least one of my students did), "If a guy like this could escape, why didn't everyone else? Didn't they want it bad enough?" Through his parodic presentation of myth and folk culture, Maus presents an escape into "ethnic" culture by a narrator who must then flee from that culture: a quintessentially Magic Realist dilemma.

Obviously, the Magic Realist work which bears the closest resemblance to Maus is Maxine Hong Kingston's, The Woman Warrior, which is also an autobiography. Built around the "talk-story" tradition of Chinese-American culture, Woman Warrior, is an autobiography written in direct response to the author's parent. Like Spiegelman, Kingston seems intent upon making a parent (her mother) "look bad." And as in Spiegelman's work, that presentation is transformed into a much deeper understanding not just of the parent but of the child whose perceptions we share. Both works transcend the limitations of Modern objectivity by rejecting it out of hand. The reader of both books is encouraged to question the presentations of these parents as inherently biased. Such candor evokes greater, not less, sympathy from the reader.

But Maus shares more with mainstream Magic Realism than a depiction of a troubled childhood. The treatment of the world of shadows and ghosts in Maus--the world of anthropomorphic creatures--is treated with exactly the same mix of ironic subjectivity and reverence that we see in Ironweed and Woman Warrior. Like Beloved, Chronicle of a Death Foretold, and the other works of Magic Realism, Maus presents this unreal world to allow the reader to explore a mythic, folkloric, and historic past and to discover the relationship between these three seemingly disparate qualities the past holds. Maus is not Magic Realist simply because its unreal imagery is presented so realistically. Art's sometimes

contradictory relationship with his mythic, ethnic, familial, spiritual, and personal pasts mirrors the treatment of the past we see in all of the other works of this genre.

Art knows his father as an overbearing parent, a terrible skinflint, a cruel husband, and a dispassionately practical businessman. By listening to his father's stories and imagining his father's past, Art learns to see Vladek also as a product of his time and culture. Although these two realities--the personal and the historical--are unresolvably in conflict with each other, Art resolves them. As Maus II ends, Vladek sleepily whispers to Art, "I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now" (136). The last image on the page is Vladek's headstone. As he falls asleep, the world of the past and his dreams superimposes itself upon the waking world. Art, the survivor, is supplanted by Richieu, the murdered victim. This "rejection" of the living world--and his living son--transforms Vladek as well, for Art and for the reader.

The similarity between the fates of Richieu and Toni Morrison's Beloved are striking. Both are murdered out of love and necessity but are remembered in pain. Indeed, many Magic Realist works prominently feature the murders of children by parents (or in the case of Maus, close relatives). Sethe kills her Beloved. In Ironweed Francis kills his son. In Chronicle of a Death Foretold, Santiago Nasar is inadvertently "murdered" by his mother, who--

thinking her son is asleep in the house--locks him out in the street with his killers while trying to protect him.

Magic Realism is an examination of the "cultural baggage" we all carry; this may explain the recurrence of this motif. These authors value the cultural heritage they examine, but their examinations are never without criticism. To some extent, these deaths may serve as symbols of the weight of these characters' cultural burdens. Kafka asked, "what do I have in common with the Jews? I don't even have anything in common with myself" (Mairowitz 25), but he also called the Jewish ghetto in Prague, "my prison cell--my fortress" (17). In his final days, Kafka studied Hebrew and dreamed of emigrating to Palestine. Kafka rejected (but chronicled and preserved) his Judaism much as Spiegelman does his. Kennedy and Morrison's fiction reflect the same kind of relationships with different mythic pasts. The transformations of all these Magic Realist works share an "arm's length embrace" with the past, if you will. They are pulled toward a world of myth too unreal to disbelieve, where children can be (and sometimes should be) murdered but must never be forgotten.

Illustrations

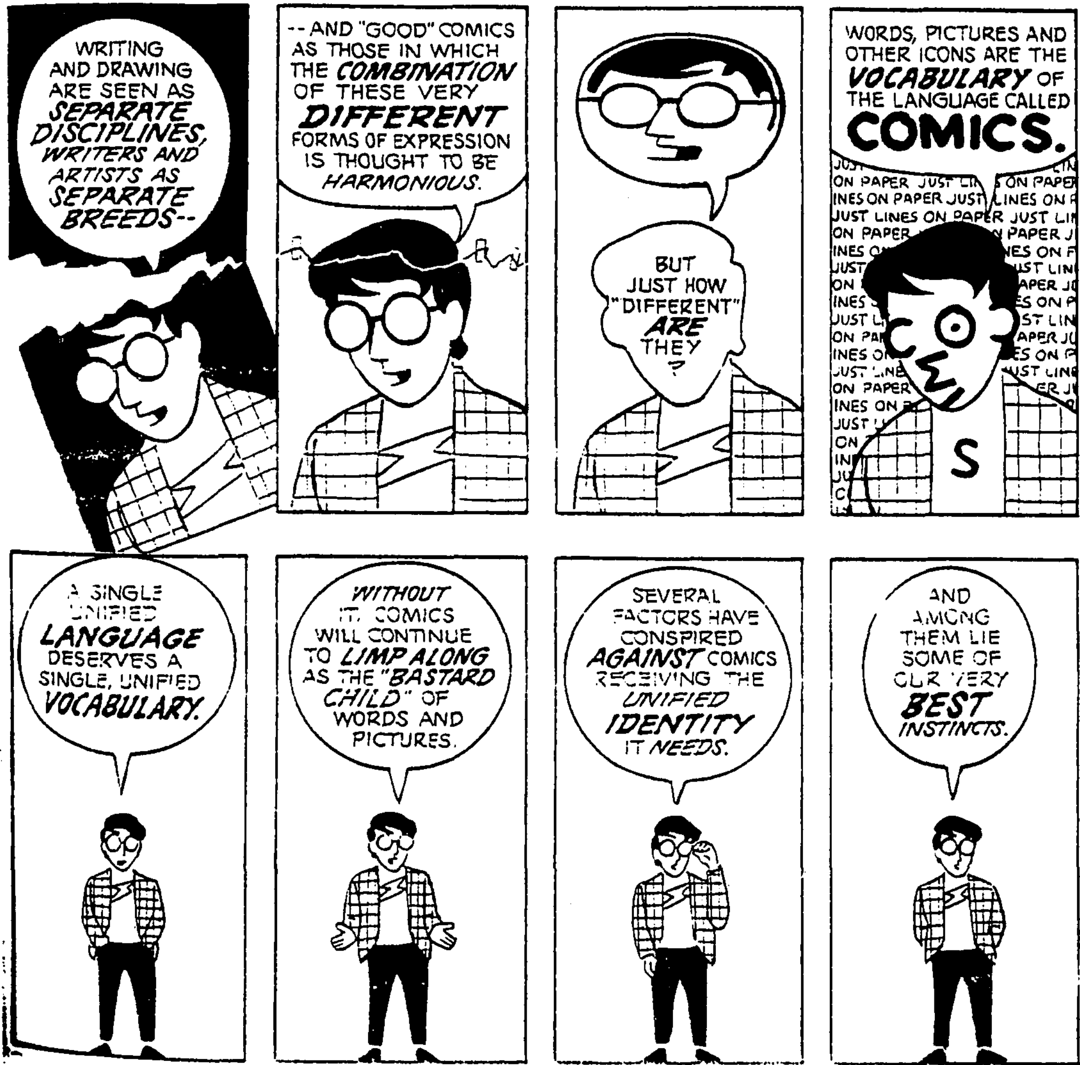


fig. 1 (McCloud 47)

fig. 2 (Maus I 147)

fig. 3 (Maus I 137)

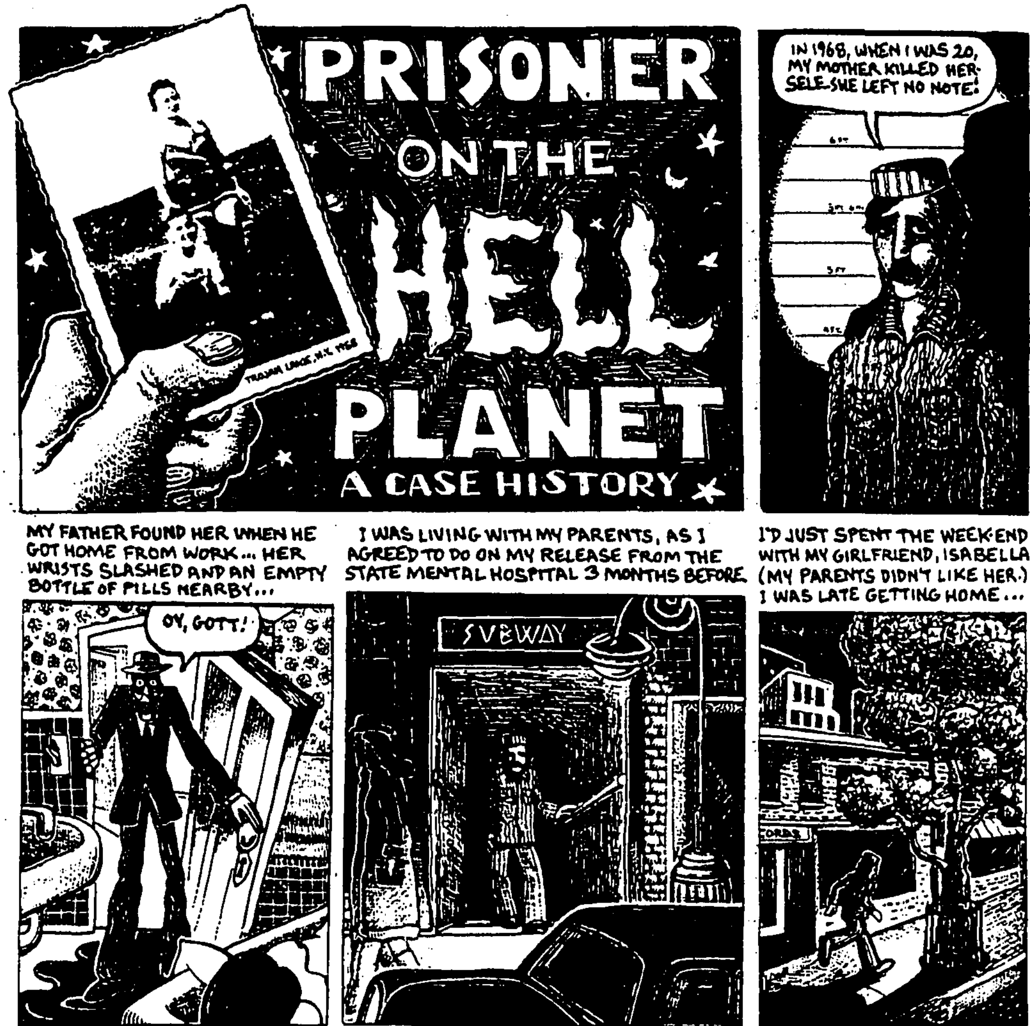


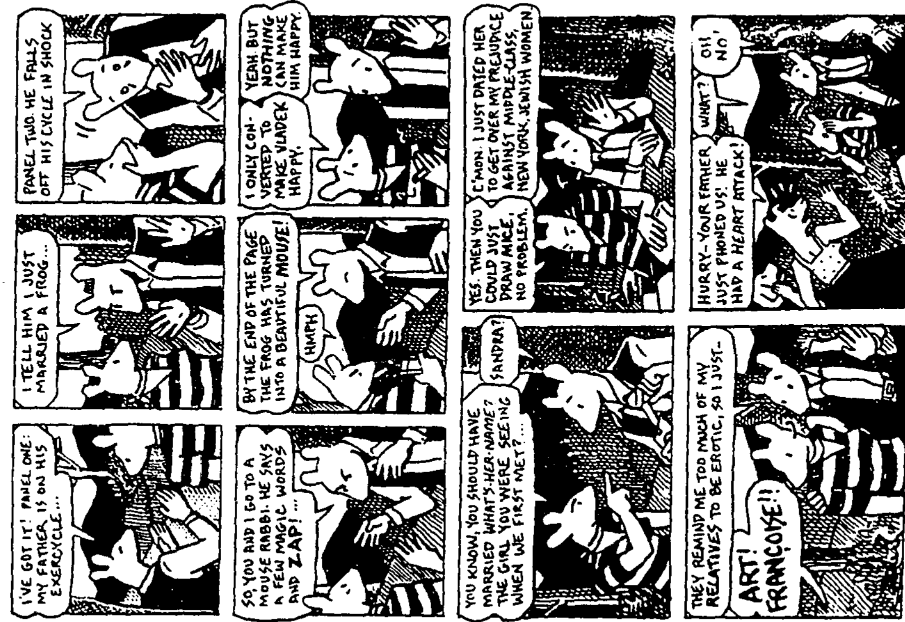
fig. 4 (Maus I 100)

FOR RICHIEU

AND FOR NADJA

fig. 5 (Maus II dedication page)

fig. 6 (Maus II 134)



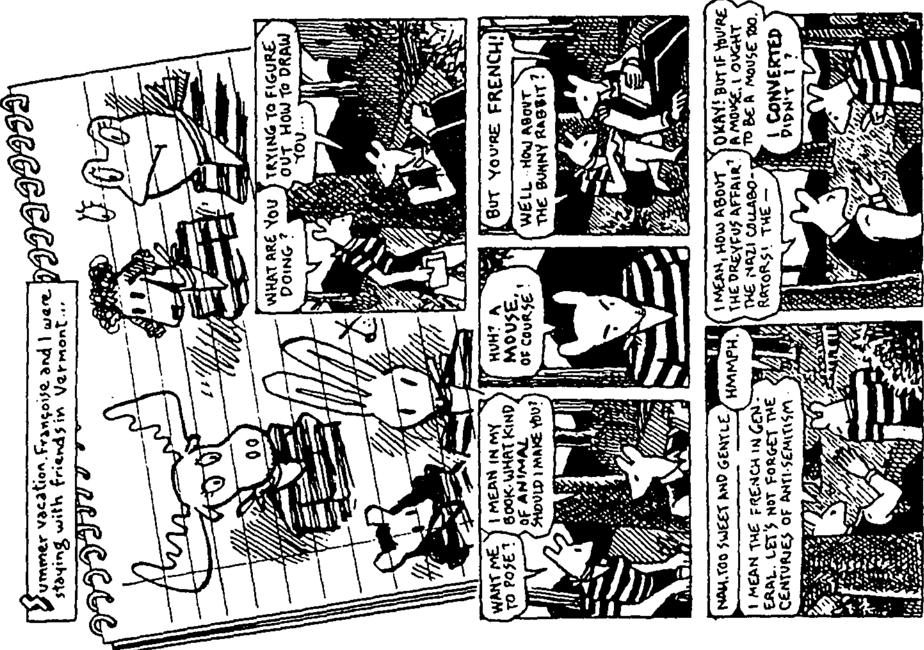


fig. 7 (Maus II 11-12)

fig. 8 (Maus II 41)

fig. 9 (Pekar, "The Man Who Came to Lunch" 1)

fig. 10 (Maus II 50)

fig. 11 (Witek 107)

fig. 12 (<u>Maus I</u> 113)

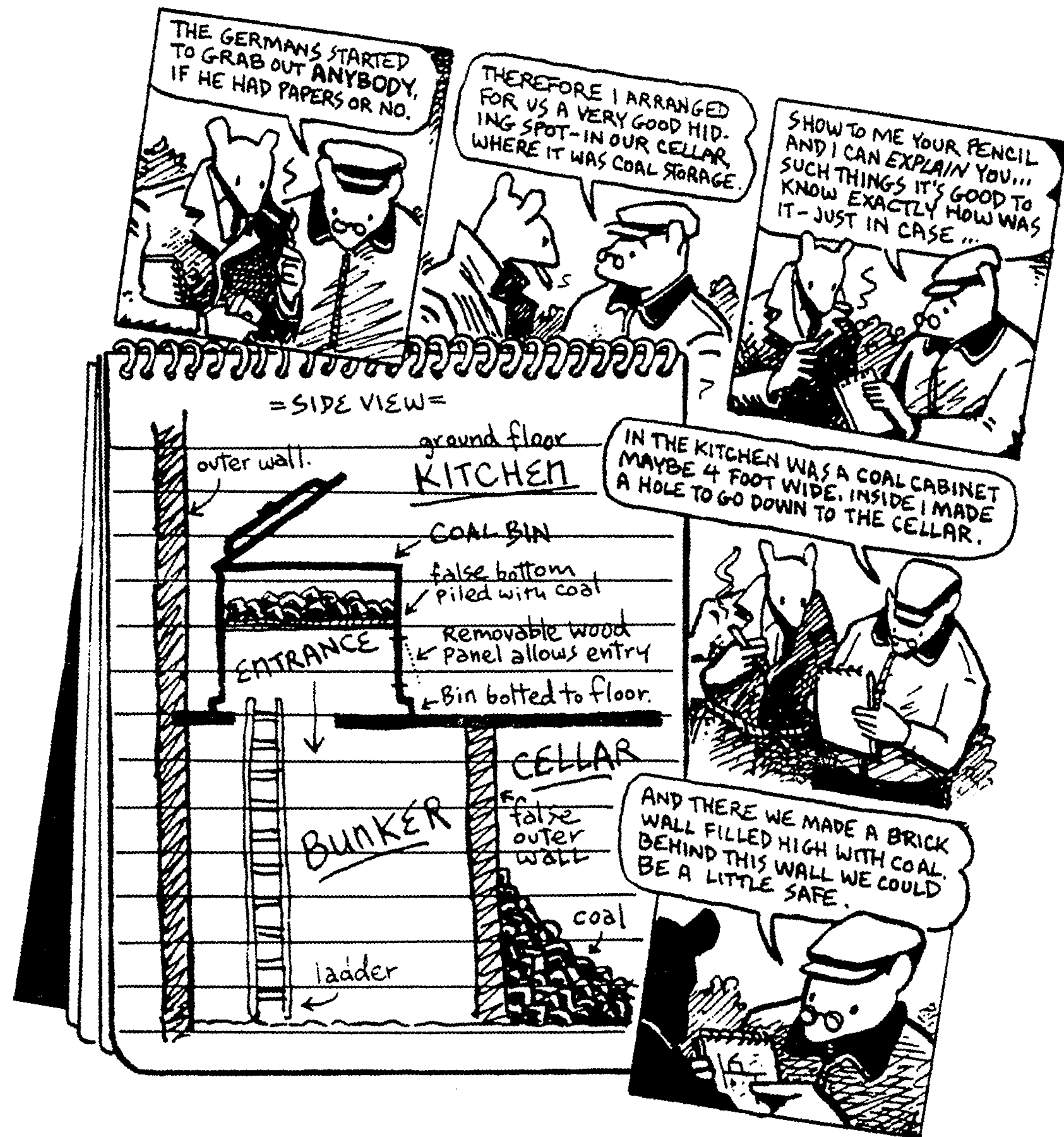


fig. 13 (Maus I 110)

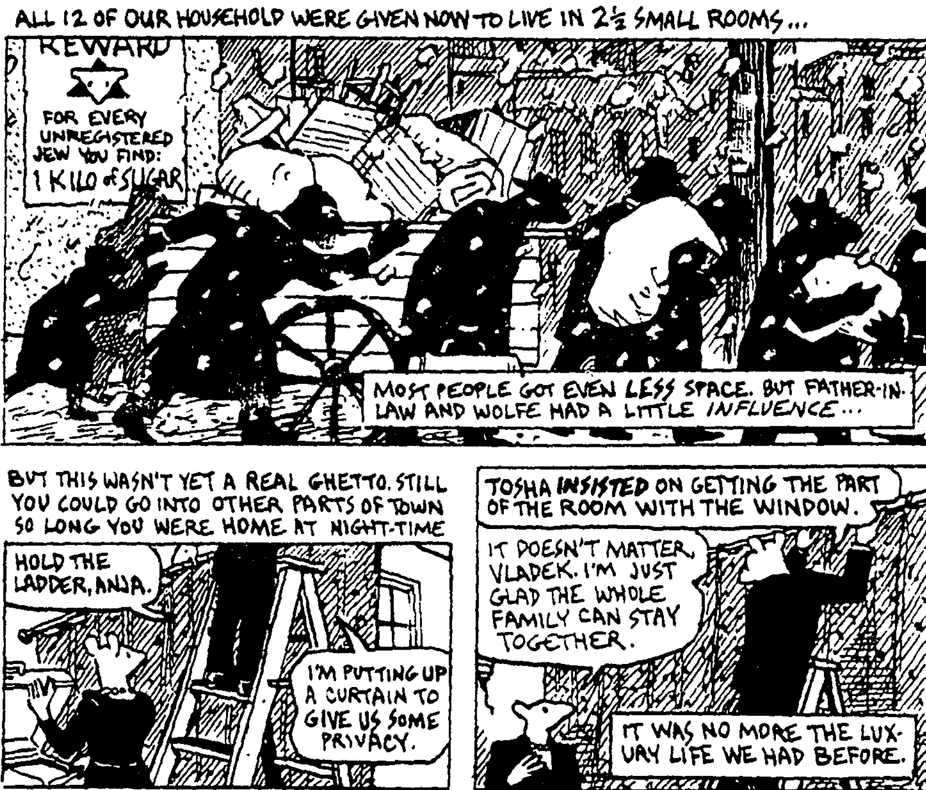


fig. 14 (Maus I 82)

Notes

1. Following the model of Witek in Comic Books as History, I will use the "generic" Maus to refer to both volumes and use Maus I and Maus II to refer to individual volumes.

2. This use of the term "comics" may seem unwieldy; however, this is the preferred usage of most comics professionals and readers. Scott McCloud defines "comics" in Understanding Comics: "Plural in form, used with a singular verb" (9).

3. McCloud's strip, in fact, proves its own point. Compare the strip to my summary. Have I captured it? How does one indicate even the varying levels of inflection McCloud achieves using boldface, capital letters, and expressive cartooning?

4. The self-imposed regulations of the Comics Code and the regulations developed in-house at various comic book companies were repressive in the extreme. Dick Giordano, at the time Vice President-Executive Editor of DC Comics says in an interview: "[DC] standards [from the late 60's] were so restrictive . . . including something like not using females in any leading roles" (Giordano 74).

5. In only one instance in Maus does this aspect of the self-conscious tone of Spiegelman's original "underground" Maus show through. On page 82 of Maus I a Jewish star on a Nazi propaganda leaflet is designed with a "mouse" face superimposed upon it [see

fig. 14]. As this is the only such incident in the book, one assumes it is an inadvertent holdover from Spielgelman's earlier work.

6. On the other hand, rather than accompany the "about the author" blurb on both books with a photo, Spiegelman instead drew a mouse at a drawing board, further complicating the metaphor.

7. In an interesting aside, Spiegelman points out on page 43, panel eight, the framed photograph of his "mouse-analyst's" pet cat, even labeling it as such. Not only is he having a laugh at his analyst's expense, but also he is again underlining the insupportable irony of the animal labels.

8. Ironically, like the characters--actual and fictional--of many other Magic Realist works (Woman Warrior among them), Art does not marry within his ethnic group. Is this evidence of a subtext of assimilation in Maus?

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Chapter 6
Conclusion
"It translated well": Magic Realism, a Fiction of Assimilation

I began my discussion of Maus by observing the recent visibility of Magic Realism in a variety of media: print, film, television, and of course, comics. As grim as Ironweed is, its tone is often wryly humorous. Maus's comic strip irony makes it easy to read; a quality enhanced by Art Spiegelman's characterization of himself. Obviously far from humorous, Beloved's focus on an important and often ignored chapter of African-American life made it welcome outside academic circles.

Much of Magic Realism's popularity is attributed to its poeticism and its uplifting, enlightening qualities. Certainly these qualities exist in most Magic Realism, reflecting a Postmodern acceptance of our fragmented world. However, Sanford Pinsker points to the peril of reducing this contemporary genre to poeticism:

> Generally speaking [calling Magic Realism "poetic"] means the reviewer, however much he or she liked the novel, was somewhat baffled about what, precisely, to say. (189)

Pinsker's ironic remark cuts to the heart of what makes Magic Realism both popular and compelling. Although Magic Realism can often appear an immediately accessible fiction of rebirth, it is seldom feel-good popular fiction. Like all literature, Magic Realism is about conflict; in the case of the works discussed in this study, these conflicts are not easily resolved. Obviously the gulf between real and unreal, myth and history, past and present are all major concerns of the Magic Realist. But these writers, as we have seen, also express a profound interest in the divisive issues of race and ethnicity. It also seems apparent that one of the defining qualities of Magic Realism is a rejection of a right/wrong us/them model of ethnic identity. While these works consistently focus on members of communities isolated by their race, ethnic heritage, or faith--by their otherness--they also feature characters whose conflicts are internal as well as external. These characters are at odds with their oppressors, themselves, and their own communities.

Ultimately, these works are about individuals achieving a kind of grace. Like characters in a Flannery O'Connor short story, the protagonists of Magic Realism must ask fundamental questions about who they are and why they perceive the world as they do. Also like O'Connor's characters, they live in a world not entirely like our own. The universe of Magic Realism is a place both mythic and mundane: the subterranean "neighborhood" of St. Agnes's

Cemetery and an Albany flophouse; the edenic/hellish Sweet Home and 124 Bluestone Road; the atavistic Mauschwitz and Rego Park. Though grounded in specific, controversial historical frameworks, these works move beyond simple social commentary. Magic Realism invokes myth and history as a conduit toward spiritual rebirth as much as--or more than--cultural reform.

The acquisition of salvation through myth is a staple of Magic Realist works, but such salvation is seldom made quite explicit. Just as the very myths which destroy can redeem, so the moments of salvation often seem the moments of greatest spiritual and physical destruction. Through the use of myth, Magic Realism concentrates on ethnicity and dramatizes a flight into that ethnicity by protagonists who are frequently persecuted by the homogeneous power structures in which these characters exist. These characters seek redemption by reasserting their "roots": the rediscovery of the mythic structures of their past, personal and ethnic.

Their flight results in a hybrid text which blends a "realistic" recreation of our world (as informed by a Realist/Naturalist aesthetic) and material informed by the folklore and folk traditions of the ethnic group depicted. This is true not only of the works I have discussed at length, but also of Magic Realism in general. Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon is a novel of the Civil Rights era which uses images of the flying African. Maxine Hong Kingston's

Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book is also a novel of the 1960's. Like her autobiography, The Woman Warrior: A Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, it is built around the "talk-story" tradition of Chinese culture. Louise Erdrich's Tracks grimly describes the turn-of-the-century end of Chippewa culture in North Dakota, but the novel also concerns the monstrous man in the lake and the life of Fleur Pillager, a shaman in decline. In Charles Johnson's Middle Passage, a freed slave returns to Africa, but instead of finding his own roots, he becomes an accomplice to the slave trade and destroys a living god. Larry Rudner's The Magic We Do Here features a Jewish child born in Poland before the war who miraculously has blond hair and blue eyes. He abandons his faith only to assume the impossible role of the living memory of his community. Ironically, only his otherness from his own community--from himself--lets him survive to recreate those memories. Lee Smith's Oral History chronicles the preservation of a haunted Appalachian hamlet. Unfortunately, this preservation is only possible through the crass commercialization of that mystical site. In Magic Realism, our roots are no easy escape route but rather labyrinthian passages of near-unresolvable conflicts.

Imagery and Plot in Conflict

The emotional "uplift" of Magic Realism comes at a price; the escape of these protagonists into folk wisdom, or roots, frequently results in the death of these characters, or some defeat so extreme as to reflect the marginalization of the ethnic group portrayed in the fictions. In this light, the use of folk culture in Magic Realism can be read as an empowerment of groups frequently ignored and belittled in canonical literary works. Or we can argue that folklore and myth in these works lead to a heightened isolation and a loss of power for these separated, isolated groups, regardless of the freeing power we perceive on a rhetorical/imagistic level. The freedom provided by the search for "roots" via folk culture in Magic Realism is and odd freedom. Frequently, these characters find only the freedom to accept the destruction of their folk culture and even the destruction of themselves. The concluding chapters of three novels--Song of Solomon, Ironweed, and Tripmaster Monkey--demonstrate this ambiguous rhetoric of triumph.

At the conclusion of Song of Solomon, Milkman Dead kneels over his lifeless Aunt Pilate, murdered by his best friend, the political reactionary Guitar. A bird swoops down on the corpse and makes off with "something shiny" (Morrison 340), the gold box which has held the scrap of paper bearing Pilate's name for all the decades since her father's death. As the bird symbolically becomes

Pilate, flying off into the natural world, Milkman realizes "why he loved [Pilate] so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (341), and this interlude of imagistic freedom ends. Next the novel's hero, Milkman Dead, confronts her killer, as Dead's own word, "life" (341), echoes from the hills:

> Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees--he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what [his ancestor] Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it. (341)

With these hopeful words, Morrison sends her self-absorbed hero to an ambiguous fate: to plummet to his death or worse, to die in "the killing arms of his brother." The novel's plot and optimistic rhetoric seem at odds in this crucial, climactic scene. Milkman the romantic struggles with Guitar the revolutionary; Morrison's violent conclusion undercuts her hopeful rhetoric. Of course, since Song is a work of Magic Realism, we can believe that Milkman does not simply take flight. At the same time, we realize that Guitar would shoot his friend in flight as surely as he would shoot him on the ground. In Magic Realism, after all, characters are seldom taken aback by such supernatural displays. Witness Francis Phelan's matter-of-fact conversations with the dead or Spiegelman's inter-species transformations.

Kennedy ends Ironweed with Francis taking the advice of the ghostly Strawberry Bill (at whose funeral Francis had been the lone attendee) and then returning to the home he abandoned some twenty-two years earlier. There he hides in a dark attic and awaits the day when he can move downstairs into his grandson's "mighty nice little room" (227). Again, as in the last scene from Solomon, the key image is of flight. Francis thinks of his attic refuge:

> You could get right up off'n that old cot and walk over to the back window of the attic and watch Jake Becker lettin' his pigeons loose. They flew up and around the whole damn neighborhood, round and round, flew in a big circle and got themselves all worked up, and then old Jake, he'd give 'em the whistle and they'd come back to the cages. Damnedest thing. (226)

Like Jake's birds, Francis will return to his coop. And like the birds, he will leave again, only to return to die in Very Old Bones, the most recent novel in his Kennedy's Albany cycle.[1] Francis's refuge is only temporary; his fear of the police and his guilt over the death of his son will not let him rest. And certainly, while Kennedy's and Morrison's descriptions of flight frequently imply Whitmanesque images of freedom, we must remember the kind of bird Kennedy chooses here: trained pigeons. Does this not undercut the spiritual growth Francis achieves?

In the final chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston's Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book--set in the early 1960's--Whittman Ah Sing (Kennedy and Kingston both seem drawn to Walt Whitman), after staging the epic play he's spent most of the novel writing, fantasizes a great future for Asian-American actors in Hollywood and the effect on the white Hollywood moguls and audiences of so many non-white faces on the big screen. Kingston, however, will not let her hero's dreams go unchallenged. Disrupting the novel's narrative flow, she tells Whittman and the reader:

> Poor Whittman Ah Sing. . . . It's going to get worse. . . . John Lone will play the title role in Iceman, a grunting, gesturing Neanderthal; his forehead built up . . . you won't recognize a Chinese-American of any kind under there. And when he gets to show his face in Year of the Dragon . . . [he] will have to have it broken on camera, and his eyes beaten shut. . . . The U.S. will lose the war in Viet Nam; then the Asian faces large on the screen will be shot, blown up, decapitated, bloodied, mutilated. No more tasteful off-camera deaths. We're going to have a president who has favorite movies rather than favorite books. (325)

After this scathing rebuttal to Whittman's 60's optimism, Kingston ends the novel with Whittman magically changed "into a pacifist" (340) who will hide underground (subverting the flying images of Morrison and Kennedy) or escape north with his white "paper-wife escort" (340) to avoid being drafted to Vietnam. This hopeful end note is more than just a little ironic when we consider Kingston's

satiric treatment of Whittman's optimism about the future earlier in the chapter. However, perhaps assimilation is a logical end for a Chinese-American actor named for the nineteenth century American poet who sang so hopefully of an inclusive nation of brothers and sisters.

The ironic theme of assimilation turns up frequently in Magic Realism. Kennedy's Very Old Bones turns on what the novel refers to as "The Good Neighbors," magical beings of Irish tradition. But the novel (which, echoing Ironweed, Beloved, and Maus, features an infant killed by its parent) ends with the youngest Phelan marrying a Cuban. Here and in Kingston's novel, assimilation seems as likely a means of escape as are "roots." Maus's Art Spiegelman marries a gentile, whose "species" he must somehow convert for his autobiographical comic strip. In her own Magic Realist autobiography, Kingston's name reminds us that she has married outside her "race." Louise Erdrich's Tracks ends on a hopeful note: a reunited Chippewa family has managed to evade the destructive power of the encroaching white world. However, the family is hodge-podge: none of its members are related and the youngest is herself half-white. The aged shaman Nanapush escapes the white world only by entering it. He becomes literate and makes the laws of this alien world work for him, but to do so he must sign his name on paper, something he had sworn never to do. Tracks also features a halfbreed girl who decides after a religious conversion that she

is white, suggesting the subjectivity and fluidity of race. Magic Realism chooses race and ethnicity as its objective correlative but views it not as a fixed biological or cultural determinant. Rather, these works cast ethnicity as a path to be chosen, denied, or even reinvented.

Signifying Realists?

The politics of Magic Realism are often as complex as the blinding outlawed knots of Kingston's autobiography. As these works most frequently deal with (and are written by) members of marginalized ethnic groups, the political dimensions of the works are even more complex and difficult to discuss. In essence, Magic Realists ask us, as Henry Louis Gates might say, to "read" race (and ethnicity). Regardless of the intentions of their authors, Magic Realist characters are likely to be perceived as types, representatives of their various ethnic groups even though they are all involved in journeys toward personal discovery.[2]

Gates's theories of African-American literature offer an explanation of Magic Realism's paradoxical use of myth. Gates argues that one of the cornerstones of African-American literary expression is signifying, which he defines as depending "upon the signifier *repeating* what someone else has said about a third person in order to *reverse* or *undermine* pretense or even one's

opinion about one's own status" (Gates, "Signifying Monkey" 289--emphasis Gates's). Gates claims therefore that parody is central to African-American literary traditions, citing such cultural examples as "playing the dozens" and improvisational jazz:

> [r]epeating a form and then inverting it through a process of variation is central to jazz--a stellar example is John Coltrane's rendition of 'My Favorite Things,' compared to Julie Andrews's vapid version. ("Signifying Monkey" 291).

While I do not suggest that Magic Realists are "signifying" as such, we may well detect in their use of myth a strong element of the parody which Gates sees in African-American literature. Such a connection makes sense when we consider that most of the Magic Realists are indeed drawing on and exploring non-Western traditions in order to comment upon, among other things, Western tradition. Self-consciousness of "difference" and an ironic/parodic intent account for much of the troubling use of myth we see in these works, as in their shocking use of infanticide as motif. Also, when we consider the overtly political and social subtexts of many of these novels, a parodic reading seems even more appropriate.

The Woman Warrior: Personal Quests and Public Statements

This study began with--and takes its title from--a quotation from Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior. I now return to her book as I make my final comments. Kingston's Magic Realist autobiography is almost unreadable as conventional autobiography; the book assaults most readers' notions not only of autobiography but of truth itself. My Introduction suggests that Magic Realism is a Postmodern sub-genre, especially in its use of myth. Obviously, Magic Realism is completely comfortable with the chaos and contradiction apparent in much of Postmodern culture. Magic Realism also adheres to a Postmodern politics: To quote the old feminist adage, "The personal is political." A political dimension--a repoliticizing of mythology--lies beneath the acts of personal discovery and expiation in Magic Realism.

Woman Warrior clearly makes the shift from Modern, "public political" mythology (of "The Waste Land" or "An Ode to the Confederate Dead") to the Magic Realist, "personal political" mythology. Kingston explores the social forces which she has seen shaping her life and which shapes her work. She transforms the most intimate of literary forms, the autobiography, into an extremely dense work which reaches far beyond personal concerns. Kingston's transformation of the autobiography into a series of

stories about magic warriors and bloated, drowned ghosts marks the work as Magic Realist. However, the book also includes a richer Magic Realist dimension. Like the other works discussed in this study, Woman Warrior strives to elevate a maligned subculture, here the Asian culture in America. Kingston argues that this subculture--her own--is worthy of preservation and admiration. At the same time, her imprecise communication with her mother (and by extension, her heritage) troubles Kingston and even paralyzes her, literally stealing her voice. Thus, Woman Warrior is Magic Realist in thematic as well as surface terms. Like Kennedy, Morrison, and Spiegelman, Kingston finds both salvation and damnation in the same mythic source.

However, Kingston's autobiography expands Magic Realism's political and thematic agenda beyond issues of racial, ethnic, and religious difference. Kingston confronts gender; indeed, Woman Warrior is often read as a primarily feminist text. Kingston's multiple thematic concerns fit neatly into her Magic Realist autobiography. In fact, Kingston's feminist views further complicate her text's relationship with its audience, and in Magic Realism this relationship is always key. Magic Realism's social criticisms are usually twofold, addressing issues at work both inside and outside the minority community addressed in the text.

Woman Warrior's relationship with its readership highlights Kingston's ambiguous feelings about her source material and mirrors the text/reader relationships in Ironweed, Beloved, and Maus. Like Kennedy, Morrison, and Spiegelman, Kingston must speak both to members of her ethnic group, who will recognize the source material (to a greater or lesser extent) as well as to a mainstream audience lacking familiarity with her mythic past. Kingston elevates her own ethnic culture, thus criticizing the dominant white culture, which sees Chinese-Americans as innately inferior. In fact, "[e]arly immigrants found their 'presence' annulled by legalized discrimination (for example, Orientals could not testify in court) and their contributions consigned to oblivion" (Cheung 10). At the same time, she criticizes her own culture for its sexism and "wages open warfare against Chinese patriarchy" (Cheung 80). The Magic Realist double attitude toward the author's own culture is clearer in Kingston's work than elsewhere for two reasons. Her book attacks a sexism all too familiar in white culture, thus making the territory familiar for non-Asian-American readers. Also, her autobiography is so aggressively personal that its criticisms of her family (and by extension Asian-American culture) readily call attention to themselves.

As familiar as some of its criticisms may be, Woman Warrior is unconventional, to say the least. Rather than inform the reader of her actual experience (age, date of birth, professional life, and

so on), Kingston documents her interior life. Specifically, Woman Warrior is an account of Kingston's history as a listener and teller of stories. The book begins with "No Name Woman," an account of Kingston's initiation into the adult world. Her mother tells her the story of an aunt in China who is forced to commit ritual suicide and be stripped of her identity as a result of having an illicit relationship outside her marriage. Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, tells the story as a sort of threatening "birds and bees" parable, whose explicit moral is "Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born" (5).

Later chapters follow the pattern established here. Kingston tells us a story--a myth, legend, or family anecdote--she has heard from her mother and also revises the story. The book's title is a reference to the legend of Fa Mu Lan, whom Kingston "becomes" through the retelling of the story in her chapter called "White Tigers." Kingston's revisions are so fanciful--so magical--that the reader is hard-pressed to determine when Kingston's version begins and Brave Orchid's ends. Indeed, even when we can determine what is original to the Brave Orchid version, it is hard to tell how much to trust her.

For instance, Brave Orchid tells Kingston that if she asks her father about the aunt in China who has lost her name, she will be told that no such aunt ever existed. Such a response would at once confirm the story and make it impossible for either Kingston or the

reader to verify the existence of the drowned aunt whose memory haunts Kingston. Woman Warrior explores truth, context, storytelling, myth, and legend. Sidonie Smith writes:

> Recognizing the inextricable relationship between an individual's sense of "self" and the community's stories of selfhood, Kingston self-consciously reads herself into existence through the stories her culture tells about women. (150-51)

Telling family stories marks Kingston as a rebel who may acknowledge but does not accept and approve of the codes of her family and culture. In Maus, Art Spiegelman promises his father not to tell a particular story of Vladek's younger days as a less than honorable lover. Of course, we are not only privy to Art's promise not to tell the story but also to the story itself. "No Name Woman" serves a similar purpose in Woman Warrior. Kingston seems to be doing her aunt a service, explaining that she was probably a rape victim and not an unfaithful wife. To her non-Asian-American audience, Kingston thus honors her aunt's memory. But Kingston herself believes in the afterlife of wandering, hungry ghosts the story depends upon. "No Name Woman" ends with the horrific image of the aunt's vengeful ghost seeking to silence Kingston and keep her shame a secret:

> My aunt haunts me--her ghost drawn to me because . . . I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes. I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning

> herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute. (16)

Kingston is indeed "telling on" her aunt, violating her mother's proscription against revealing the details of the tale.

Smith places Kingston's dual reaction in a feminist context and argues that Kingston rejects her mother's vision:

> The mother's cautionary tale at once affirms and seeks to cut off the daughter's kinship with a transgressive female relative and her unrepressed sexuality. Kingston . . . [reveals] later in the narrative that for a long time she accepted her mother's interpretation . . . thereby colluding in the perpetuation of both her own silencing and the erasure of the aunt's name. (153)

However, in writing the autobiography, Smith argues "Kingston resists identification with the mother . . . by . . . constituting her own interpretation of events" (153). Kingston rejects her mother's interpretation of events but simultaneously accepts Brave Orchid's strategy by becoming a storyteller herself. Thus, she satisfies her Chinese cultural background via storytelling and her American identity by suggesting in her retelling of the aunt's tragic tale a more democratic, pathetic version of the story than Brave Orchid could allow. Kingston's story of the "No Name Woman"

is not a warning about unrestrained female sexuality; it is a warning against unrestrained patriarchal power.

Kingston achieves this level of complexity in her pursuit of truth by exploiting the basic qualities of Magic Realism, which relies on race and ethnicity as an objective correlative and which seeks (and achieves) a mass audience. Such a sub-genre must, of necessity, appeal to an audience of readers both inside and outside the ethnic group depicted in the work at hand. Obviously, Woman Warrior's great appeal to the outsider is its so exotic imagery and myth. The book transports such readers to new, poetic, and mysterious territories. However, Woman Warrior must also speak to the insider audience, Chinese-Americans who will find Kingston's material anything but magic or exotic. Far from presenting a dilemma, this dual audience is anticipated by the Magic Realist, capable of communicating different political messages to different audiences.

Spiegelman, Morrison, and Kingston all protest the isolation of their ethnic group from the dominant society. Maus is nothing if not an attack on anti-semitism. Beloved is a stunningly cogent reading of America's brutally racist history. And Woman Warrior, through Kingston's fractured personal experience, attacks the alienation imposed upon her by the white society in which she has lived as an outsider. However, as Elaine Kim has observed about Woman Warrior, this persecution is hardly the book's main concern:

> The subtitle of the book is Memoirs of a Girlhood among the Ghosts [sic]. A number of white reviewers of the book focus a great deal more attention on Kingston's passing references to some whites as "Meter-Reader Ghosts" or "Five and Dime Ghosts" than Kingston herself does, perhaps because they are continually searching for their own counterparts in an unfamiliar Chinese American world. Kingston herself has said, however, that the "ghosts" in the subtitle are not simply white people but "shadowy figures from the past" or unanswered questions about unexplained actions of Chinese, whites, and Chinese in America. (200)

Like the other writers examined here, Kingston is not merely talking to the "other" in her audience.

Magic Realism is a fiction of dual thematic impulses. On the one hand, these writers want to document wrongs inflicted upon minority groups (although that is not always a primary concern, as Ironweed demonstrates). On the other hand, Magic Realists send a message--as critical as laudatory--to those members of their audience who share the writer's own ethnic/racial/national identity. Kingston makes her desire for such a readership explicit early on in Woman Warrior:

> Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese and what is the movies? (5-6)

Kingston's audience is as bifurcated as that of any of her fellow Magic Realists.

Beloved is a historical narrative that accuses and condemns white America. This surface narrative is clearly available to all readers and is, indeed, the only narrative many readers will identify. However, the mythic narrative present in Beloved has another agenda. Morrison clearly implicates the black community of the novel in the character of Ella, who murders her own child out of fear and spite and then ostracizes Sethe for her compassionate murder of Beloved. In the same way, Kingston's autobiography attacks both a white world which will not recognize her humanity and a Chinese-American culture which will not recognize her individuality. Kingston walks a fine line between betrayal of her family and the search for truth. Kathleen Kennedy and Deborah Morse write,

> Part of the pain of Woman Warrior is the daughter's betrayal of her mother. . . . Her daughter's narrative . . . reveals the secrets of her language and culture to a hostile audience--one that will call her knowledge "primitive," her power over ghosts "superstition" (quoted in Cheung 96)

Kingston recognizes both potential readings of her autobiography. Commenting on her mother's reaction to her writing career, Kingston indicates that she knows her family appears to be slighted in Woman Warrior: "She takes the world's praise of my

work at face value and assumes that she and our family come off well" (quoted in Cheung 96).

But one of Kingston's goals--as in the works of the other Magic Realists, but certainly not the Moderns--is the foregrounding of the subjectivity of all cultural artifacts, including the literary work itself, in this case, Woman Warrior. By emphasizing the subjectivity of her story (as in the "No Name Woman" chapter), Kingston forces the reader to question her authority even over her own life story. One of the book's most insightful chapters, "At the Western Palace," tells the story of an aunt driven mad by American culture. We join the aunt as she confronts her husband, who had long before left China for America but never returned for her, choosing instead to remain in the United States and marry an American woman. The forthright Brave Orchid convinces her sister Moon Orchid to confront her truant husband and demand her rights. According to Brave Orchid, these rights include not only living in her husband's house, but also claiming the second wife as a servant and the children of the American marriage as her own: "The children will go to their true mother--you. . . . That's the way it is with mothers and children" (125). All the journey secures is the uncle's continued financial support and complete emotional rejection.

Kingston tells the story with meticulous detail, even recounting long passages of dialogue, as one might expect in an autobiography. The next chapter opens, however, with this shocking

revelation: "What my brother actually said was, 'I drove Mom and Second Aunt to Los Angeles to see Aunt's husband who's got the other wife'" (164). To the reader's surprise, Kingston admits she was not present for the events she has recounted in such detail; rather, she learned of them second-hand. Still later, she reveals more:

> In fact, it wasn't me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he'd told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs. The hearer can carry it tucked away without it taking up much room. (164)

The story turns out to be third-hand. Surely this is the case with many anecdotes recounted in many autobiographies; what makes Woman Warrior unusual is that Kingston admits her duplicity. She confesses to being an "outlaw knot-maker" (164). Her connections between memory, personal narrative, and myth reinforce the mythic underpinnings of reality and the subjectivity of even the most "objective" truths. But this has been the goal of Woman Warrior. By opening her autobiography with "No Name Woman," Kingston shocks the reader out of complacency. Her autobiography does not begin "I am born." Instead, she tells us who she is by laying the groundwork of myth upon which she was raised. "This is my life story," she essentially begins, "but I'm not sure about all the facts, and I'm not really a major player in it."

"No Name Woman," our introduction to Kingston, is only obliquely about her. She has been so shaped by her mother's story of the unnamed aunt that the retelling of the brutal "birds and bees" warning (Kingston's first menstrual period is the occasion of this talk-story [5]) is our most appropriate introduction to Maxine Hong Kingston. The reader knows only that Kingston was told the story and that it played upon her imagination. In a sense, the same is true of the rest of the work. Elaine Kim writes:

> In Woman Warrior, the Chinese immigrant parents do not explain their behavior and practices to their children, who find themselves forced to learn about Chinese practices by trial and error. The American-born Chinese children lose interest in understanding Chinese traditions when their parents "get mad, evasive, and shut up if you ask." They begin to conclude that the immigrant Chinese "make up their customs as they go along." (200)

Most of the book explores Kingston's attempts to navigate the past and discover its effects upon her and how she should best "translate" her cultural heritage into her contemporary world. Indeed, even within her own subculture, Kingston finds she must translate. Rather than accept the tale of the No Name Woman as told, Kingston "tries to create from the silence-shrouded incident . . . a parable of heroic resistance" (Wong 192), attacking the Chinese patriarchy.

But her fullest autobiographical translation occurs in the last chapter, "A Song for A Barbarian Reed Pipe." Even the final line, "It translated well" (209), concerns an active, shaping participation with not only myth, but also orality and assimilation. In this chapter

> Kingston reinterprets the Chinese legend of Ts'ai Yen--a poet amid barbarians--and, as she has done with the stories about the no name aunt and the woman warrior, subverts the original moral. The legend describes a woman kidnapped by barbarians and forced to become a concubine and raise her children on unfamiliar soil. The Chinese version highlights her eventual return to the Han people. Kingston's version, by contrast, dramatizes interethnic harmony through the integration of disparate art forms. Connections between fatherland and mother tongue, and between parents and children, are made not by spatial return to the ancestral land but through articulating and listening. (Cheung 94)

As Brave Orchid's "talk-stories" indicate, Woman Warrior, like much Magic Realism, has strong roots in oral tradition. In chapter 2, I cite Edmund Smyth on the influence of orality in the Magic Realist fiction of Latin America. Smyth argues that Latin-American Magic Realism:

> extends the range of traditional realism . . . by re-creating modes of spoken speech, not for reasons of . . . authenticity, but to portray a society through the way in which it expresses itself orally. (97)

Smyth's account of Latin American Magic Realist fiction is also true of Kingston's Asian-American Magic Realist autobiography, which also privileges oral tradition.

In this way, Woman Warrior--as personal as it is--is profoundly political. One can hardly walk away from the book without recalling such phrases as "girls are maggots in the rice" and "beware fishing in the flood; you may catch a daughter." Kingston chronicles her oppressive upbringing. Significantly, she fears her nameless aunt, now a water-logged ghost damned to beg food for herself and her ghost daughter for eternity. But Kingston must "tell on" her to expose the sexist, patriarchal world of her youth. For Kingston, family concerns are political; cultural concerns are political. Woman Warrior is every bit as aggressively political as Native Son or The Grapes of Wrath, but more intimate than either (or even most other autobiographies). Kingston paradoxically and ironically achieves this greater politicizing through a greater focus on the personal, and she achieves greater intimacy by being less forthcoming as to which sections of her story are really "true." Indeed, she achieves greater intimacy by telling us as little as she can about Maxine Hong Kingston. Woman Warrior is, after all, the work of an outlaw knot-maker.

Kingston's goal is surely assimilation of a kind, although not the traditional variety. In Tripmaster Monkey, she ridicules simplistic traditional notions of assimilation. Whittman Ah Sing,

the poet-hero of the novel, stages an absurd play based on the lives of Chang and Eng Bunker, the famous "Siamese Twins." In the mid-nineteenth century this unlikely pair settled in South Carolina and took white brides. In the play, the twins are advised to assume a Japanese identity, one that American girls will find more attractive. Kingston writes, "He are baffled" (292), emphasizing their "twin" nature. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong suggests that Kingston's broad comedy in these sequences is almost cynical:

> The relief afforded by such zaniness is momentary--the sociohistorical forces that give rise to the racial shadow are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. . . . (114)

Certainly, the Chang and Eng sequence is absurd, relying on broad slapstick humor. In fact, it even appears in the chapter called "Bones and Jones," a title which obviously refers to minstrel traditions.

However, Wong may not be quite right about Kingston's tone. Simply abandoning identity is not the assimilation Kingston advocates, nor is such cultural amputation characteristic of assimilation as it has existed in the United States. Although many Americans pine for a group of immigrants who will surrender their heritage, religion, language, and pigmentation for American ways, there have never been such immigrants. Pizza, chop suey, hamburgers, frankfurters, bagels, Little Italys, and Chinatowns are

all products of assimilations past. And this is the assimilation that Kingston writes about: an assimilation that sees the nation adapting the ways of the immigrants as the immigrants adopt the ways of the nation. Salsa now outsells ketchup in the United States. While we debate making English the national language and barricading our borders, Americans have voted with their stomachs. Perhaps Wong is mistaken: zaniness may offer more than temporary relief.

In The Woman Warrior, Kingston's final vision of assimilation is complex. As I have noted, "A Song for A Barbarian Reed Pipe" ends with an image of "interethnic harmony through the integration of disparate art forms" (Cheung 94). Kingston's reinterpretation of the legend of Ts'ai Yen implies much about Kingston's views on translation and assimilation:

> If we stick with a conservative meaning of "translation," so that merit consists in close adherence to the original, then The Woman Warrior offers a poor--inaccurate--rendering of Chinese material. (Cheung 96)

But Kingston is more interested in adaptation than translation, and this definition does not fit her work. Kingston's decision to tell much of The Woman Warrior from the point of view of an angry, young, and confused girl reminds us that Kingston the author is always filtering, adapting, and translating not only her mother's

stories and the messages she receives from Western culture but even her own thoughts:

> By thus qualifying [young] Maxine's plaintive juvenile perspective with the tacit yet affirmative perspective of the adult writer, whose innovative ways of telling defy logic and rationalism, Kingston implicitly questions the Western values that the young narrator loudly endorses. (Cheung 98)

For Kingston, translation is an aggressive, personal assault on both culture and subculture, not a passive process whereby one tale submits to the language and syntax of another. Kingston bends both cultures to submit to her own voice. In this sense, Kingston's Magic Realism is Romantic as well as Postmodern, aggressive as well as passive, American as well as Chinese. In essence, it translates well.

Conclusion: Survival and Extinction

Knot-making is part and parcel of Magic Realism. Kingston's metaphor implies a text that is richly ornate and often deceptive and which causes the teller great pain. Paula Rabinowitz calls the language of Magic Realism "subversive" (39) in that it lets the author "[glory] in [his or] her multiple identity, attempting to create a truly cross-cultural literature" (39) while still "[expressing] the depths of rage at false history" (40). However,

Magic Realism moves well beyond the expression of rage toward a criticism of anger and an embrace of change.

Magic Realism traces some of its roots to Kafka's Prague early in this century. In his fiction, Kafka both embraced and fled from his heritage. He wrote in an era of great political upheaval and violence. Garcia Marquez and the Latin-American Magic Realists, writing during similarly dire political circumstances, adapted Kafka's deadpan tone and absurdist bent to explore their war-torn, violent continent. Kafka's influence is present as well in the work of the American writers who have followed Marquez. And like Kafka, these writers do not merely rage at the inequity of current social orders. Rather, they move into and through the historical moment toward the mythic underpinnings of their worlds. And just as they do not merely rage against prejudiced power structures, they do not merely praise pure ethnic pasts.

These works, whatever the ethnic identity which informs their imagery, share a rhetoric of triumph and aesthetic sensibilities that may predate (but certainly permeate) Postmodern--or even American--literature. It is a shared aesthetic of fragmentation *and* integration--not an either-or choice between destruction and redemption. It involves a fusing of the two, an aesthetic of unity and fragmentation, community and isolation, survival and extinction, even more perplexingly, survival *through* extinction. The ultimate American assimilation stories, these works immerse

themselves in the past and an "other" community even as their characters move toward the future and a reinvention of themselves as individuals. In "Rip Van Winkle," Washington Irving's classic American story of fantastic events and personal and national identity, Rip asks "does nobody know poor Rip Van Winkle[?]" (722). At this moment in a consummately American tale adapted from European folklore, Irving articulates one of the enduring questions of our national literature. Returning to his home a stranger, Rip wonders, "Does nobody here know Rip Van Winkle?" (721). Shocked at being forgotten after what he assumes is only one night, Rip exclaims,

> I'm not myself--I'm someone else . . . I was myself last night . . . and everything's changed--and I'm changed--and I can't tell what's my name or who I am! (721)

Essentially, Irving's confused hero asks, "Who am I and where do I belong in this nation and this community?" Rip finds peace as the town's (and metaphorically, the nation's) storyteller. Sharing his experiences in the real and magic worlds, Rip takes a place of honor in his community.

Magic Realism, for all its intricate patterns and its embrace of mythic and ethnic pasts, strives just like "Rip Van Winkle" toward assimilation of the self into the American community. Magic Realism, confronting late twentieth century America's many cultures, our many "Americas," asks the same questions Irving

asked in the early nineteenth century. Like Irving, the Magic Realists approach the question of our national identity ironically through an exploration of myth and legend. For the Magic Realists, the answer today, as in Irving's time, can be found in our shared (and disparate) mythic heritages. Magic Realism uses myth, folklore, and legend to solve Rip Van Winkle's dilemma. Answering that question, "Who are we?" means coming to grips with cultural diversity and cultural violence. The issues raised and explored in these works are crucial to our identity--and our future--as a nation.

Notes

1. Like Ironweed, Beloved, Maus, and Woman Warrior, this novel features a child killed by its guardian, in this case a mother who is exonerated of her crime. Similarly, Tracks includes the death of an infant. Although the child is not killed by a parent, its spirit plays a lasting role in the novel. See Chapter 5's discussion of infanticide in Magic Realism.

2. On the other hand, these characters may even be seen as abandoning their ethnic "family," as does Francis in Ironweed or as Art does in Maus.

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Appendix:
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