HiLL PUBLISHING

Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 2023, 7(11), 2291-2295
https://www. hillpublisher. com/journals/jhass/
ISSN Online: 2576-0548
ISSN Print: 2576-0556

Magical Realism in Louise Erdrich's "Fleur"

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How to cite this paper: Xinyi Deng. (2023) Magical Realism in Louise Erdrich's "Fleur". *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 7(11), 2291-2295.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2023.11.026

Received: October 30, 2023
Accepted: November 28, 2023
Published: December 25, 2023

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Abstract

Louise Erdrich, one of the most famous and industrious women writers of contemporary American Indian literature, is popular among readers and critics for her North Dakota Indian novels. *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, and *The Bingo Palace* constitute her tetralogy of Indian novels, reflecting the conflict and integration between the historical traditions of Indians and contemporary American society and culture. The short story "Fleur", included in her novel *Tracks*, depicts a mysterious Chippewa woman and her sufferings in the town of Argus. The purpose of this article is to analyze the use of magical realism in this short story, shedding new light on Erdrich's intention to intertwine magic and reality in her writing. This article argues that by incorporating supernatural elements in a realistic context, Erdrich reveals the cultural identity and sufferings of the Ojibwe people, depicts the conflict between the marginalized indigenous women and the white men, and presents her resistance against the dominant culture's authority.

Keywords

Louise Erdrich, magical realism, indigenous women, resistance

1. Introduction

Tracks has received critical attention primarily from the perspectives of postcolonial and feminist criticism. In *In Search of Authenticity*, Hasan (2019) argues from a poststructuralist perspective that *Tracks* breaks down "the hierarchical relationship between authoritative discourse and Native American narratives regarding cultural authenticity". Additionally, Ahmed (2020) exposes the parallelism between the patriarchal exploitation of women and nature in *Tracks*, recognizing Erdrich's efforts to "rearticulate women's identities/subjectivities". While elements of the supernatural are a feature of Erdrich's fiction, few critics have analyzed her novels from the perspective of magical realism. David Stirrup, for instance, does not mention this term in his collection of essays on Erdrich's work. Lorena Stookey (1999) claims that the marvelous events in Erdrich's fiction are drawn from her Ojibwa tradition, in which sense the designation of magical realism should be avoided. However, the simple conflation of the supernatural with Native American mythology fails to consider how supernatural elements are utilized in Erdrich's fiction. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of the story "Fleur" reveals that Erdrich's interweaving of magic and reality plays a role consistent with the "subversive qualities" of magical realism elaborated by Zamora and Faris. As they indicate, "[m]agical realist texts are subversive: their in-between-ness, they're all at onceness encourages resistance to nomological political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women" (Bowers, 2004).

This article particularly investigates Erdrich's use of magical realism in "Fleur" from three perspectives, arguing that it emphasizes the significance of traditional Ojibwe culture to the construction of Native American identity, presents the sufferings of indigenous people from colonial oppression and hegemonic discourse, and endows Fleur with the power of resistance, which both challenges the male's authority and colonial powers.

2. Use of Magical Realism in "Fleur"

2.1 The Employment of Mythologies

The use of mythologies is one of the remarkable features of magical realism. In an interview in 1985, Louise Erdrich once expressed her "fascination with the sacred stories of traditional Ojibwa culture", which she admitted, "have served as an aesthetic model for her fiction" (Gargano, 2006). For this reason, her works often include the mythical stories of Ojibwe culture. In "Fleur", Erdrich first incorporates the indigenous mythical story of Misshepeshu, embellishing the story with magical overtones. Misshepeshu, also known as 'underwater panther', is considered by Chippewa as the most powerful Manitou and an 'enemy' of young Native American women. In "Fleur", Misshepeshu is depicted as a monster with animal features living underwater, a 'collection' of natural elements. By connecting Fleur's drowning experience with him, Erdrich endows Fleur with magical power and provides an unrealistic explanation for the later events.

Alongside her relationship with Misshepeshu, another source of Fleur's magical power may be her Pillager family. Pillagers, as depicted by Nora Barry, are "people of power with the smile of a wolf and the clan markers on their graves of 'four crosshatched bears and a marten', who 'knew the secret ways to cure or kill', who are feared and respected by all, and who fight the encroachments of Euro-American culture" (Barry, 2000). All these features, which correspond to Fleur's wolf grin, her "[getting] herself into some half-forgotten medicine (Erdrich, 2007), as well as her bear cough and footprint, are based on Chippewa myths. By connecting Fleur with such a mysterious family in mythologies, Erdrich makes Fleur's man-like body and her ability to create a tornado seem 'reasonable' in readers' eyes. To round up, the incorporation of details drawn from tribal mythology helps to shape the ambiguous identity of Fleur while articulating the cultural identity of indigenous people.

2.2 Combination of Magical and Realistic Elements

The most outstanding characteristic of magical realism is the mingling of reality and magic. Based on the backdrop of Native Americans in the 1920s, Erdrich sets the story in a fictional town in North Dakota – Argus. To have a better understanding of this setting, it is necessary to review the conditions of American Indians at that time. As Mrak notes, *Tracks* "examines the effects of the Dawes Act, land appropriation, community disintegration, and the conversion of Native Americans to Christianity". The Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887, in particular, "dramatically disrupted the Native social structures and forced a transition into a capitalist and patriarchal social system" (Mrak, 2022). With the implementation of this Act, "strips most tribes of the bulk of their remaining land holdings and virtually obliterates their languages and cultures" (Seger, 2021). In "Fleur", Erdrich's reflection of this background can be found in many places. For example, Fleur leaves the reservation and comes to the town looking for a job, and Pauline's mixed heritage embodies the result of cultural collision. Additionally, the setting of the town that is a few miles away from the reservation reflects the assimilated measures of that period. The presence of railways and Catholic churches, one of the ways in which the colonists attempted to invade and assimilate the indigenous people, mirrors the real conditions of Native Americans in North Dakota at that time. By setting the story in such a realistic context, Erdrich both strengthens the authenticity of Argus's existence and enhances deceptiveness for the later magical happenings of the story.

Based on such a context, two events are the most magical in "Fleur". The first one is Fleur's superb skill of playing cards. Fleur had won 30 dollars in total, which means she had won 30 times in a row with exactly one dollar each time. This is a doubtful probability. The second magical event is the sudden change in the weather at the end of the story. By putting this sudden tornado right after Fleur's suffering, Erdrich makes it hard for readers to tell whether this tornado is an incarnation of Fleur seeking revenge.

2.3 Narrative Techniques

In "Fleur", the combination of orality tradition and homodiegetic narration helps to maximize the magical effect of the story, breaking down the distinction between magic and reality. As Ngom acknowledges, "postcolonial orality and literature, relying on memory, are used to produce a history that acknowledges the existence and vitality of the pre-colonial civilization of these communities" (Ngom, 2020). Erdrich incorporates the oral tradition in the first part of "Fleur". As the second paragraph indicates, all the drowning tales and Fleur's connection with the devil are told by Pauline's grandma. From the perspective of the story source, the oral tradition makes the story more mysterious,

as there is no documentary record to be verified. Moreover, the story includes traces of Chippewa cultural practices, which makes it hard to distinguish the part that is made up. If we jump out of the story and focus on the behavior of transcribing a storytelling event into a written text, we may see a new perspective. For one thing, it shows the regenerative capacity of the Chippewa storytelling tradition by incorporating marginalized narrative conventions. For another, as Clarke suggests, this behavior "transgresses the boundaries between traditional narratives and contemporary written narrative, present and relevant past – questioning and reinterpreting each in order to create new patterns from old elements" (Clark, 1992). Simply speaking, the transformation of the oral story into written text metaphorically presents the transformation of the Ojibwe tradition to dominant white culture, and the collision of the two embeds the aim of finding a way to survive in a changing world (ibid.).

After leaving an ambiguous impression through storytelling, the story is then presented in a homodiegetic narrative, with Pauline as the narrator. Pauline and Fleur, the two female figures, are in stark contrast in terms of appearance and competence, and it frustrates Pauline. Her hiding in the shadow embodies her inferiority complex, and because of this willingness to be invisible, she only has a limited view of the card game, which metaphorically implies her limited perspective on the later magical happenings. This limitedness is especially obvious when "I went stiff with fear and couldn't unlatch myself from the trestles or move at all" (Erdrich, 2007), while Fleur's scream filled outside. Here, Pauline's dislike of Fleur has turned into guilt, which greatly influences her interpretation of the tornado: "Then I heard a cry building in the wind, faint at first, a whistle and then a shrill scream that tore through the walls and gathered around me, spoke plain so I understood that I should move, put my arms out, and slam down the great iron bar that fits across the hasp and lock" (ibid.). Whether there is a "cry building" or it is just Pauline's imagination out of guilt or it is her excuse to exonerate herself remains uncertain. What can be certain is that Pauline's narration intentionally portrays Fleur as a magical figure, hiding the truth outside her perspective.

3. Effects of Magical Realism in "Fleur"

3.1 Representation of Cultural Tradition and Sufferings

Under the influence of settler colonialism, the voices of American Indians have been suppressed, and their images have been discredited by the mainstream media. As Porter (2005) reveals, America "set about attacking Indian tribalism and Indian values at their core" through legislation and the justification of the brutal boarding school. In this way, the authority hopes to infuse such a concept into the Indian generation: "wholesale abandonment of Indian ways would guarantee Indian's full incorporation into the mainstream of American society and the fulfillment of America's 'final promise' of compensation for the loss of Indian land" (ibid.). Also, by "[creating] a national mythology that consigned Indians to a 'savage' past" (ibid.), Americans vilified Indian images, which directly led to racial discrimination. Under such circumstances, magical realism that has developed in the context of Latin American culture and society becomes a powerful tool to make a voice. Different from Classicism, Romanticism, and Realism, magical realism has a more inclusive understanding of reality. As Nevil Stephen states, "[w]hile the post-colonialists consider realism as a hegemonic representation of the colonizer, magical realism provides scope for a powerful decolonizing project to imagine alternate histories. It offers voice to the marginalized and visibility to the non-canonical texts" (Stephen, 2015). In "Fleur", both the marginalized Chippewa cultural identities and their real sufferings covered by colonial powers gain visibility through magical realism.

As analyzed above, the elements of this story that seem magical to most readers are based on the history and culture of Native Americans. For Louise Erdrich, what she does in the story is nothing more than showing the objective reality of Native America, only in a way that incorporates their unique aesthetic features and regional culture. In other words, the oral storytelling tradition, as well as the indigenous mythology, mirrors Ojibwe's ways of knowing and establishing relationships, based on which develop their worldviews. By incorporating these elements in her story, Erdrich reveals the cultural traditions of indigenous people and the basis of their identity building, shaking the stereotypes established by the dominant culture.

Additionally, by creating conflicts between a Native American woman and three white men in a magical way, Erdrich magnifies the conflicts between men and women, mainstream and marginal cultures in reality. As noted previously, the setting of the story mirrors the real conditions of Native Americans. In this context, Pauline, a mixblood girl, is an embodiment of cultural integration; Fleur, a mysterious sexy woman, is the epitome of those Native American women who try to find a way to survive under the pressure from male and colonial powers. With a mixblood identity, Pauline is a representative of those normal indigenous women who are roughened by work and seldom

noticed by men. For her, there seems no meaning or hope in life because she doesn't have the consciousness to figure out what she wants. Although she has not been through what Fleur suffers, others' neglect of her is also a kind of violence and discrimination. Different from Pauline, Fleur is an independent woman. Her excellent performance at work and in card games leaves the impression that she knows exactly what she wants. However, such a woman still cannot escape the destiny of being sexualized and objectified, and her outperformance of men can hurt their self-esteem, thus putting herself at risk. In short, Erdrich skillfully reveals the predicament of indigenous women through the experiences of Pauline and Fleur.

3.2 Resistance Against Authority

As Maggie Bowers suggests, "[m]agical realism has become a popular narrative mode because it offers to the writer wishing to write against totalitarian regimes a means to attack the definitions and assumptions that support such systems (e.g. colonialism) by attacking the stability of the definitions upon which these systems rely" (Bowers, 2005). Erdrich also reveals her purpose in this regard in "Fleur", and the key to doing so lies in the breakdown of the boundary between the real and unreal.

To start with, the female images in "Fleur" challenge the long-established images of indigenous women in dominant literary texts. In most well-known American Indian literary works, the heroine would often be portrayed as a slender and mysterious woman who falls in love with a white man or a half-breed with obvious white features. Although Fleur remains the mysterious quality as the classic image of Indian women in other novels, she is different from them. With large and muscular hands and broad shoulders, Fleur is depicted as a typical laborer: "She could lift a haunch or carry a pole of sausages without stumbling" (Erdrich, 2007). Not just her, Fritzie, Pete's wife, is also a strong woman "who chain-smoked and handled the razor-edged knives with nerveless precision" (ibid.). Although she is not the protagonist of the story, her boldness and excellent competence in work are shown in this short depiction. Both of these two female images have achieved a breakthrough in strength – a typical male advantage.

Another breakthrough of the story to the traditional female images is intelligence, which can be seen in Fleur's superb skill of playing cards. As stated in the text, "Women didn't usually play with men" (ibid.3178), so when Fleur actively joined the game, the men were surprised. This premise implies the inferior status of women in a male-dominated society, which is also shown by Lily's reaction to Fleur's winning: "he couldn't believe […] that a woman could be smart enough to play cards" (ibid.). It is precisely based on the traditional concept that women will never surpass men that Lily and other men allow Fleur to join them.

While subverting the indigenous female images in the mainstream literary text, Erdrich also realizes her resistance against the male and dominant culture's authority through the 'tornado'. Given that Fleur has a mysterious connection with the devil, the sudden tornado at the end of the story is doubtlessly regarded as her revenge against the perpetrators. Although it is Pauline who locks them in the lockers, the deaths of these three men prove that the revenge is successful. Here, the plot itself is a resistance against the old-fashioned ending that indigenous women are victims or men's accessories. By blurring the line between magic and reality, Erdrich implicitly displays an alternative reality that is banned by males and the dominant culture. This is a resistance against absolute authority, as well as an expectation for the indigenous women under the pressure of assimilation and oppression.

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