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Magic Realism in Wise Children

Magical realism is a primarily Latin American literary movement from the 1960s onwards, which integrates realistic portrayals of the ordinary with elements of fantasy and myths. The result of this is a rich but disturbing world that appears at once to be very dreamlike. The term 'magical realism' was first used by German art critic, Franz Roh, who said it was a way of depicting 'the enigmas of reality' and literary critic Isabel Allende has said that 'in magic realism we find the transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal. It is predominantly an art of surprises. Time exists in a kind of fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality. Once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision.'

Many critics have associated Angela Carter's style of writing with magical realism, a term which refers to a writer portraying imaginary or improbable elements in a realistic, ordinary way. The novel conforms to the device of magical realism through the use of references and allusions to Shakespeare: there are five chapters, just as there are always five acts in a Shakespearean comedy; Dora and Nora live on *Bard Road*; art imitates life when Ranulph plays Othello, later catches his wife in bed with someone else and kills them and himself; also, Tiffany is a reflection of Ophelia, driven mad by love, when she has a breakdown on a live TV game show; there are disguises, twins, mistaken identities and love problems, all key elements of Shakespearean comedy. This kind of intertextuality is a subtle manifestation of magical realism. All the Shakespearean-style villainy, comic relief and intricate plot elements are revisioned and re-enacted in this other place, though they have been magically transformed into a new story, in a different time and with a fresh cast of vivid, lively characters.

Wise Children also conforms to magical realism because of its non-chronological sense of time, which is always fluid. Dora, the narrator, constantly jumps from the past back to the present and vice-versa. This often confuses the reader but always provides a smooth sense of rhythm and pace. Of course, the novel's main association with magical realism is

its many aspects and events which seem absurd, implausible and often extreme. There are so many twins and far too many coincidences and surprises that pop up throughout the novel. Also, the amount of incestual relationships being carried out seems very unlikely. Magical realism offers a view of the world that is not based on objective reality and natural order. However, it differs from fantasy as it is set in a normal world that includes an authentic portrayal of human life and society, but contains overtones of fiction and fantasy. Magical realism involves the union and challenging of opposites, and in the case of *Wise Children*, these opposites are life and death, past and present, high and low culture and legitimacy and illegitimacy. Indeed, plots in magical realist literature usually involve borders, change and mixing of two opposing ideas. There is certainly a border between the Hazards and the Chances, two families with very opposing views on life, but ultimately both families are thrown together and it is one character in particular, Perry, who provides a link between both families.

Perry is a key representative of magical realism and the carnivalesque in the novel. He is a magician and is always showing off with his unbelievably elaborate magic tricks (conjuring up a scarlet macaw from Melchior's crotch, for example). Indeed, the magical events aren't so much bizarre in *Wise Children*, I would describe them more as conjured magic tricks. Perry is always appearing from nowhere, looking unnaturally huge and appears at Melchior's 100th birthday party covered in hundreds of rare, Brazilian butterflies. If this seems too supernatural at first, we are soon brought down to earth when Dora mentions that a zookeeper came soon after with a net to recapture the beautiful insects. This is a perfect example of magical realism.

As mentioned before, magical realism has its dark and disturbing side, and this is apparent in *Wise Children*. When Saskia, Dora's enemy, is a little girl, she is seen savagely devouring the carcass of a roasted swan. Later in life, Saskia becomes a TV cook and seems to take sadistic pleasure in disembodiment of animals.

Magical realism is combined with carnivalesque literature in *Wise Children* to create a flamboyant, theatrical world within a humble, earthy reality. Both genres compliment each other in the novel, as both involve fantasy-like events and nightmarish imagery, and elaborate, rational explanations are used by Carter to encourage readers to suspend their disbelief, if only for a moment.