



Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences
Department of American Culture and Literature

**A STUDY OF MAGICAL REALISM
IN STEVEN MILLHAUSER'S, AIMEE BENDER'S,
KELLY LINK'S, AND KEVIN BROCKMEIER'S
SHORT STORIES**

Bülent AYYILDIZ

Ph.D. Dissertation

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KABUL VE ONAY

Bülent Ayyıldız tarafından hazırlanan “A STUDY OF MAGICAL REALISM IN STEVEN MILLHAUSER’S, AIMEE BENDER’S, KELLY LINK’S, AND KEVIN BROCKMEIER’S SHORT STORIES” başlıklı bu çalışma, 18.06.2021 tarihinde yapılan savunma sınavı sonucunda başarılı bulunarak jürimiz tarafından doktora tezi olarak kabul edilmiştir.

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ETİK BEYAN

Bu alıřmadaki bütn bilgi ve belgeleri akademik kurallar erevesinde elde ettiđimi, grsel, iřitsel ve yazılı tm bilgi ve sonuları bilimsel ahlak kurallarına uygun olarak sunduđumu, kullandıđım verilerde herhangi bir tahrifat yapmadıđımı, yararlandıđım kaynaklara bilimsel normlara uygun olarak atıfta bulunduđumu, tezimin kaynak gsterilen durumlar dıřında zgn olduđunu, Do. Dr. S. Bilge Mutluay etintař danıřmanlıđında tarafımdan retildiđini ve Hacettepe niversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstits Tez Yazım Ynergesine gre yazıldıđını beyan ederim.

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ABSTRACT

AYYILDIZ, Bülent. *A Study of Magical Realism in Steven Millhauser's, Aimee Bender's, Kelly Link's, and Kevin Brockmeier's Short Stories*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Ankara, 2021.

This dissertation analyzes Steven Millhauser's, Aimee Bender's, Kelly Link's, and Kevin Brockmeier's short stories in the light of magical realism. The short stories use magical realist and postmodern elements to create alternative depictions of the characters' troubles, pains, and resistances. Although magical realism, by definition, has been affiliated with non-Western and postcolonial literature, various fiction writers utilize the genre because its adaptable narrative structure elucidates the invisible, inexplicable, and ambiguous aspects and ordeals of modern-day life. The above-mentioned writers do not come from colonized or developing geographies and their adaptation of magical realism mirror lives in the Western society. Their stories incorporate magical, fantastic, science fictional, and postmodern elements to build a reconstructive narrative. Although poststructuralist ideas are traceable and signal deadlocks of language, identity, reality in these stories, the magical realist mode transforms genre fiction and postmodern elements to provide defamiliarized settings in which the relationship between truth and representation is reconfigured. These blended magical realist forms exceed the limitations of genre fiction and confined writing methods, which have been deployed by academic institutions and creative writing programs. The adaptation of magical realist narratives do not only transform conventional postmodernist writing methods and genre fictions, which have already been worn out, but also reformulate oral traditions of storytelling, fairy tales, and fables. Blending magical, science fictional, surrealist, and absurd elements help the writers to reconfigure conventional literary labels and explore alternative representations.

Key Words

Magical Realism, Postmodernism, Short Story, Steven Millhauser, Aimee Bender, Kelly Link, Kevin Brockmeier

ÖZET

AYYILDIZ, Bülent. *Steven Millhauser, Aimee Bender, Kelly Link ve Kevin Brockmeier'in Öykülerinde Büyülü Gerçekçilik*, Doktora Tezi, Ankara, 2021.

Bu tez, büyülu gerçekçilik ışığında, Steven Millhauser, Aimee Bender, Kelly Link ve Kevin Brockmeier'in öykülerini incelemektedir. Bu yazarlar öykülerinde karakterlerin sorunlarını, acılarını ve dirençlerini alternatif betimlemelerle belirlerken büyülu gerçekçi ve postmodern öğeler kullanmıştır. Büyülu gerçekçilik, tanım gereği, Batılı olmayan ve post-kolonyal edebiyatla özdeşleştirilse de, birçok kurmaca yazarı bu türden faydalanmaktadır çünkü uyarlamaya elverişli olan anlatı yapısı görünmeyeni, açıklanamayanı, modern hayatın zorluklarını ve muğlak yönlerini tanımlayabilmektedir. Söz konusu yazarlar sömürgeleşmiş ya da gelişmekte olan coğrafyalardan gelmemektedir ve kullandıkları büyülu gerçekçilik Batılı bir toplumunun yaşantısına ayna tutmaktadır. Yazarlar öykülerinde yapıcı bir anlatı kurgulamak için büyülu, fantastik, bilimkurgusal ve postmodern öğeleri bir araya getirmekten çekinmezler. Öykülerinde yapısökümcü düşüncelerin izleri, dilin, kimliğin ve gerçekliğin çıkmazları gözlemlense de büyülu gerçekçi anlatı, tür edebiyatını ve postmodern öğeleri dönüştürerek yadırgatılmış (defamiliarized) zaman ve mekanlar oluşturur ve bu alanlarda hakikat ve temsil arasındaki ilişki yeniden şekillendirilir. Büyülu gerçekçiliğin bu karma formları tür edebiyatı sınırlamalarının, akademik kurumların ve yaratıcı yazım programlarının bildik yazım yöntemlerinin ötesine geçer. Büyülu gerçekçi anlatı uyarlamaları uzun süredir kullanılagelen yıpranmış postmodern anlatıları ve tür edebiyatını dönüştürmekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda hikaye anlatıcılığının sözlü geleneğini, peri masallarını ve fablları da tekrar bir düzenlemeden geçirir. Büyülu, bilimkurgusal, gerçeküstücü ve absürt öğelerin harmanlanması yazarların alışlagelmiş edebi etiketleri yeniden şekillendirmesine ve alternatif temsiller keşfetmesine yardımcı olur.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Büyülu Gerçekçilik, Postmodernizm, Öykü, Steven Millhauser, Aimee Bender, Kelly Link, Kevin Brockmeier,

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INTRODUCTION

“Magic is the crown or nightmare of the law of cause and effect, not its contradiction.”

—Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*

Magical realism, generally associated with Latin American literature, has been a popular narrative device since it merges the real and the magical and consists of oxymoronic worldviews that stimulates an interaction between writing modes and techniques. Various writers from different literary backgrounds and various geographies have adapted magical realism to depict multicultural and ethnic perspectives and resist repressive ideologies and authorities. With the popularization of magical realism and adaptation in cross-cultural contexts from all over the world, varied forms and functions of the mode is observable. As a product of Latin American literature, magical realism was used to signify the vernacular voice of oppressed/colonized nations and minorities, now, this narrative form is implemented widely in writing to broaden the borders of fiction in depicting inexplicable events and the plight of the stranded selves.

The strict relationship between magical realism and post-colonial/ethnic/minor literature has been examined by various academics, but the influence of magical realism on non-ethnic American literature has been relatively less examined. Christopher Warnes’s *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*, Brenda Cooper’s *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, Jean-Pierre Durix’s *Mimesis, Genres and Post-Colonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism*, Jenni Adams’s *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature: Troping the Traumatic Real*, Lyn Di Iorio Sandin and Richard Perez’s *Moments of Magical Realism in U.S. Ethnic Literatures* are some of the prominent works that explore magical realism as a voice of oppressed nations and minorities. Moreover, studies that draw theoretical frames on magical realism such as *Magic(al) Realism* by Maggie Ann Bowers, *A Companion to Magical Realism* by Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* by Louis Parkinson Zamora, and Wendy B. Faris exemplify magical realist traits through ethnic fiction and writers from so-called “Third World” countries. Although global perspective of magical realism is mentioned in these

studies, the general view reflects an association with post-colonial literature. However, this study focuses on the functionality of magical realism in short stories that are not primarily concerned with ethnic and post-colonial literature.

In this dissertation, I will focus on North American short stories written by Steven Millhauser (1943-), Aimee Bender (1969-), Kelly Link (1969-), and Kevin Brockmeier (1972-). These writers intermingle fantastic and magical elements to exceed narrative limitations and their short stories reflect the characteristics of postmodernist and magical realist fiction. Although they use these elements and tools, they also diverge from the conventional understanding and objectives associated with magical realism and postmodernism. In this study, “magical” refers to elements that are extraordinary incidents, beings, and the reader is inured to their extraordinary nature. By mingling various elements such as myths and fairy tales, and borrowing from different genres, such as gothic and fantastic literature, these writers form eclectic narratives to reinterpret the function of unreal elements.

Currently, all four writers are active producers of fictional works. Their writing careers have started at the end of the 1990s, except for Millhauser, who has been writing for five decades. His first novel, *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954* by Jeffrey Cartwright was published in 1972 and his first short story collection, *In the Penny Arcade* was published in 1986. His other short story collections are *The Barnum Museum* (1990), *The Knife Thrower* (1998), *Dangerous Laughter: Thirteen Stories* (2008), *We Others: New and Selected Stories* (2011), and *Voices in the Night* (2015). Although Millhauser was enrolled in the graduate program of the English Department at Brown University, he did not finish his dissertation; instead he decided to complete his first novel (Lambert 30). Nevertheless, he pursued an academic career; in 1976, he started as a teaching assistant at Brown, and later became a faculty member of the English Department in Skidmore College for twenty-nine years until his retirement in 2017 (Ingersoll and Wagner-Martin 3). His novel, *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer* (1996), was awarded with the 1997 Pulitzer Prize, and *We Others* granted him The Story Prize in 2012. Millhauser has developed different writing styles and techniques over the years. His fictional works have been placed among the works of Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, and Italo Calvino and “his melding

of realism and fantasy has also been called ‘Magic Realism’” (Ingersoll and Wagner-Martin 5).

Aimee Bender’s first story collection *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, published in 1998, blends fairy tales with surreal and magical elements. Bender is a graduate of Master of Fine Arts from the creative writing program at University of California at Irvine and gives lectures and workshops on creative writing at the University of Southern California (Beglin 58). Her other short story collections *Willful Creatures* (2005) and *The Color Master* (2015) also display surreal and fantastic characteristics. Since she uses “anti-mimetic and unnatural characters” (79), Brian Richardson categorizes her writing as “unnatural narratives” which is defined as narratives that “employ anti-mimetic events, characters, frames, and/or narration—techniques that not merely elude but clearly violate the norms of realistic representation” (75).

Kelly Link’s first book, *4 Stories*, was published in 2000. Link received her MFA at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. She also taught creative writing at several Universities and workshops. Her stories received several prizes including Nebula and Hugo Awards. *Get in Trouble* was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2016 (“Kelly Link Biography”). Like Bender’s fiction, she blends fantasy, myth, and fairy tales in her short story collections; *Stranger Things Happen* (2001), *Magic for Beginners* (2005), and *Pretty Monsters* (2008). As the elements of horror turn into humor and absurdity, conventional functions of fantasy and magic are erased off through her narrative.

Kevin Brockmeier imbeds magical and fantastic elements into the routines of American life in his fiction. While some critics label his works as “magical,” his stories are classified in different categories. Emily Capettini, for instance, identifies him as a new fabulist (3). After receiving his MFA degree from the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1997, his short stories started to appear in various publications and his writing style has transgressed genre boundaries (Kokes). In his short story collections, *Things That Fall from the Sky* (2002), *The View from the Seventh Layer* (2008), and *The Ghost Variations: One Hundred Stories* (2021), he maintains his style of blending fairy tales and fantastic elements.

All four writers exploit the fragility of realism; fantastic and supernatural elements are fluidic in their writing style. In their fiction, “magical realism performs a wide and profound cultural and ideological work. It yanks us out of the comfortable complacency that assesses the real as an either-or kind of argument, placing us in an alternative intellectual landscape” (Benito, Manzanar, and Simal 3). While these writers reconfigure the borders, binary oppositions, conception of reality, and establish unusual story structures to reinscribe the conventional narratives of genres such as horror and fantasy, their depiction of magical realism, similar to its use in postcolonial and ethnic literatures, revolves around the marginalized selves. Yet, these writers differ from postcolonial and ethnic writers in terms of presenting the individual, culture, and identity because their stories are not necessarily based on collective narratives or do not represent a collective or ethnic identity, although various cultural elements from different geographies are incorporated. The fantastic realms and magical narratives are created through individualized myths and imagination. On the other hand, characteristics of post-structuralism and postmodern fiction are also visible in these writers’ short stories; meta-narrative, self-reflection, fabulation, fragmentation, and intertextuality are among commonly used elements. While these writers reflect ironic, absurd, transient, destabilized, and pessimistic aspects of characters, magical traits of the narratives affix a reversal effect. These short stories indicate a reconstructive process by going beyond the realistic representation rather than focusing on the dismantled meaning. The fictional characters deal with traumas and try to explore questions on identity and values, which often results in coming to terms with their handicaps and imperfections through a renegotiating process. This dissertation aims to explore how magical realism is transformed in American short fiction after the popularity of postmodernist fiction, starting in the 1990s. Although the examined short stories include an amalgamation of genre fictions and use the tools of postmodernism and magical realism, they also move beyond the confinements of pre-established narrative apparatuses in constituting a unique style of writing.

An overview of the definitions and progression of magical realism is necessary before delving into the connections between postmodernism and magical realism and how the above-mentioned writers formulate their writing styles. German art critic, Franz Roh used the term “magical realism” first in 1925, to refer to dimensions of post-

expressionism. According to Roh, expressionism embraces an exaggerated way of depiction, whereas the new painting distinguishes itself through the portrayal of ordinary objects. As he puts it, “Post-Expressionism offers us the miracle of existence in its imperturbable duration” (22). Rather than focusing on a fantastic emerging out of an external world, his objective is to paint everyday life objects, which are examined in “a new kind of action” (23). Realistic depiction, for him, is not copying but establishing reality in a new format (24). However, Roh’s definition of magical realism in painting does not exactly correspond to how the term is used in literature, because magical realism refers to a blend of fantastic and real elements. The term does not solely contain new depictions of real images, but also introduces unreal objects as if they are real. Meanwhile, definitions of magical realism within a literary context also vary from critic to critic. Besides Roh, Alejo Carpentier, Angel Flores, and Luis Leal also offer definitions that overlap but also contradict each other.

Carpentier formulates his own term and names it “lo real maravilloso Americano” (1949), which places magical realism as something peculiar to Latin America’s geography, inheritance and culture. For him, similar to Roh, the fantastic does not emerge from an unknown world; it already exists in Latin culture. He states, “I found the marvelous real at every turn . . . The marvelous real is found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates in the history of the continent” (87). He believes that the material needed for magical realism is embodied in the rituals and traditions of Latin America.

Angel Flores traces magical realism in Franz Kafka’s works since he intermingles the fantastic and real elements as an amalgamation. For him, 1935 was the turning point in Latin American literature and Jorge Luis Borges’ collection *A Universal History of Iniquity* (1935), published in the same year, is an example of this new phase of Latin American literature (113). Inspired by Kafka, Borges creates stories that treat fantastic elements as a part of reality. Although he does not come up with a distinctive definition of magical realism, the appliers of the mode “cling to reality as if to prevent ‘literature’ from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms. The narrative proceeds in well-prepared, increasingly intense steps,

which ultimately may lead to one great ambiguity or confusion” (116). Borges’s stories, which are influenced by the detective genre, also encompass suspense and turmoil.

However, Luis Leal disagrees with Flores and blames him for referring to authors who do not use magical realism. Similar to Carpentier, Leal associates magical realism with Latin American literature and explains the distinctive features of magical realism. For instance, he maintains that dream motifs are not included in this mode. Since the causes behind the events do not matter, the psychological analysis of the characters can be ignored. Also, for him, magical realism does not have aesthetic concerns (121). He says, “Magical realism is, more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles, in closed or open structures” (121). For him, the writer’s main concern is not to create fantastic or imaginary elements, but to resist reality through displaying the mystery within the nature of society and environment.

The definitions that connect magical realism to Latin America, and the popularity of the mode among Latin American writers, such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, and Laura Sepulveda, seems to verify “Latinness” as a characteristic of magical realism. Mythic elements and atavistic tales, which are commonly used in this mode, are also believed to represent colonized nations. As Stephen M. Hart suggests, “what for the inhabitant of the ‘First World’ is magical (a woman who ascends to heaven, ghosts who return to earth, priests who can levitate, gypsies who can morph into a puddle of tar) is real and unremarkable for the inhabitant of the ‘Third World’” (3). Combining local myths and legends with reality seemed corresponding to postcolonial literature, therefore, the mode takes its roots from a geographical or cultural stance, rather than a philosophical outlook.

Homi Bhabha considers magical realism as “the literary language of emergent the postcolonial World” (7) and the increasing popularity of magical realism among “postcolonial” writers such as Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri, and Amitrav Ghosh might add to the assumption that magical realism is a postcolonial form. Although it bloomed in Latin America and in “postcolonial” nations, non-Latin writers such as Angela Carter, Toni Morrison, and Haruki Murakami have also used magical realism in their works. As Hart claims, “In the 1980s magical realism became a genre formula,

transferable to scenarios that lacked the particular historical characteristics . . . was even adopted as a model by non-Latin American writers” (12). With the widespread popularity of magical realism, its various definitions are inclined to be more contradictory.

Fredric Jameson states that “The concept of magical realism raises many problems, both theoretical and historical” (“On Magic Realism in Film” 307), and it is hard to narrow down the definition to a specific common ground for the critics and writers. Furthermore, the wide terminology used for the fantasy genre and fantastic elements broadens the borders of a specific definition. The only explanation about the “fantastic,” which will be detailed in the chapters, comes from Tzvetan Todorov. Categorization of the fantastic as “the uncanny” and “the marvelous” does not strictly cover the entire “unreal” elements of literature. For instance, Flores displays Kafka’s *Metamorphoses* (1915) as a magical realist work, whereas Leal disagrees with her. In *Metamorphoses*, Gregor Samsa is terrified of transforming into an insect, but his parents do not find the metamorphoses unusual. Todorov says, “With Kafka, we are thus confronted with a generalized fantastic which swallows up the entire world of the book and the reader along with it” (174). The distinctions of magical realism and fantasy, as well as the genre’s relationship with postcolonial literature are still debatable issues.

Critics like Anne C. Hegerfeldt and Wendy B. Faris claim that magical realism has flowed into mainstream and gained an international recognition. Others like Amaryll Chanady, explored the matter further and contribute to a more “universal” definition of magical realism. Hegerfeldt writes, “to disconnect magic realism from postcolonial literatures is not to say that the mode is not essentially a postcolonial one. In challenging the rational-empirical world-view’s claim to hegemony and revaluing alternative modes of thought, magic realism pursues decidedly postcolonial aims” (303). Claiming a regional magical realism would be against the essence of magical realism, because it means to create a distinction between Western and non-Western views. For Hegerfeldt, magical realism is not peculiar to the “other,” but it exists in the cities and at the “very heart of the West itself” (303). Amaryll Chanady and Wendy B. Faris are able to frame distinctive features of the mode. For instance, Faris, rather than a regional or postcolonial definition, presents characteristics of magical realism. In her

essay, “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction,” she views magical realism as a kind of “replenishment” in postmodernism (163). In the essay, she discusses less “magical” works, which are not part of Latin American literature, but influenced by frontier writers such as Marquez. For example, Patrick Suskind’s *Perfume* (1985) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) include magical realist elements and these non-Latin writers prove that “geographical stylistics are problematic” (163).

Faris lists five characteristics of magical realism, which will be further examined in the first chapter. The first one is that the text consists of “irreducible elements of magic” (“Scheherazade’s Children” 167), which is neither rational nor explainable within the realm of science. In these texts magical elements are treated as real and they have always been considered real in the narrative. They remain as magical, “which repeatedly call attention to themselves as metaphors” (“Scheherazade’s Children” 168). Therefore, the magical does not thoroughly render into “reality.” However, these elements are not precisely magical either and unlike fantastic literature, magical realism is not a way of escaping reality (Leal 122).

Faris’s second point is related to the descriptions used in the text, which reflect a detailed mimetic world. Although the described world is familiar, the magical touch brings unusual aspects to the conventional description of our environment. The references to historical events and real places create a reality effect with a magical aura. For instance, a real object in the narrative becomes a magical device as seen in *Midnight’s Children* (1981), where a basket is used as a vehicle to travel from Bangladesh to Bombay (170). The function of everyday objects is rearranged and is converted to include magical qualities.

The third characteristic is similar to Todorov’s categorization of the fantastic; there is a hesitation when the reader encounters the magical event since the cause is unknown. The reader doubts whether the event is supernatural or related to the character’s psychological distortion. For Faris, this is debatable since the cultural background of the reader might affect the amount of uncertainty. Thus, the primary concern of understanding is between a hallucination and a miracle (“Scheherazade’s Children” 171). Faris gives an example from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. In the novel, the characters speculate whether the character Beloved is the reincarnation or ghost of the deceased

daughter or whether the characters are experiencing a bad dream (“Scheherazade’s Children” 171). From a cultural perspective, what is considered an irrational happening in a Western society might be a possible occurrence in a non-Western culture.

Another characteristic of magical realism is its ability to bring together two separate worlds, such as the world of the living and the dead. In the narratives, two worlds collide and the boundaries between them are either erased or transparent. Faris says, magical realism is “the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflect in both directions” (“Scheherazade’s Children” 172), and as a result, the border between reality and fiction is also punctured. Both the text and truth turn into questionable notions, an element which is shared by postmodernism and magical realism.

Lastly, texts using magical realism are able to explore concepts related to time, space, and identity. Time does not only reflect a relative notion, but also an untraceable dimension. The reader’s understanding of time and space is constantly undermined. Space is reframed through unusual habitats and constantly changing environments. The problem of identity is revealed when the characters give up being the person that they are supposed to be since their faces, voices or life span are repeatedly reversed and manipulated.

Magical realism has affinities with other literary tools such as defamiliarization and fabulation. Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky defines defamiliarization as an artistic technique and says, “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (11). Similarly, magical realists portray an unfamiliar reality to the reader. Rather than portraying the “magical” as an element to evoke emotions, the mundane, everyday tools become estranged and magical elements sustain a semblance of reality in magical realism.

Correspondingly, fabulation, a technique that relates fiction to fairy tales does not lean on conventional reality and the narration is structured in such a way that the text reflects

its textuality. Magical realists, especially Borges, follow a similar pattern. As Robert Scholes claims, “opposition between language and reality, the unbridgeable gap between them, is fundamental to the Borgesian vision, and to much of modern epistemology and poetic theory” (9). Along with fabulation, metafiction is adapted in these magical realist narratives. Metafiction highlights the fictionality of the text through reflecting the narrating process. In Patricia Waugh’s words, “Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). In Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1944) there is a non-linear and multilayered magical novel within the story. The novel does not have a fixed plot, but multiple variations at the same instant. The title of Borges’s story is also the title of the novel written by Ts’ui Pen in the story. While the narrator refers to this novel, in which the narrative is constantly “forked,” the story itself is forked and both narrations turn into a maze. The metafictional strategy includes magical elements in which Borges presents a self-reflexive text that reveals the inadequacy of language.

Whether magical realism started with postmodernism, or whether there is a hierarchy between the two narrative forms are ambiguous. To trace the intricate relationship between magical realism and postmodernism, both will be examined further. Magical realism is usually considered as a branch of postmodernism, or magical realism is accepted as postmodernism with magic. However, definitions and their concurrent directions and regional approaches are problematic. While postmodernism is considered as a more universal literary form, and often as the predecessor of magic realism, the definitions and borders are blurred. For instance, although magical realism has been labeled as the literature of colonized territories, this narrative mode has thrived in a much larger geography. During the twentieth century, writers from different parts of the world, such as Angela Carter, Joyce Carol Oates, Italo Calvino, and Haruki Murakami, have produced fictional works embedding magical realist elements, which proves that magical realism is not only peculiar to Latin American literature and that there are various examples in several cultures. Kumkum Sangari claims that nonmimetic narratives adapted by nonwestern authors, such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s and Salman Rushdie’s works, are different from modern and postmodern narratives in terms

of ideological and political dimensions (157). However, literary movements do not have clear boundaries since the predecessor of an established or canonized literary aesthetic can be transmitted into succeeding narrative modes. The seemingly opposite approach of a certain narrative trope also acknowledges its precursor in a creative manner. Postmodernism, supposedly emerged as a counter movement against modernism, carries similar traceable narrative techniques. As Wang Ning states it is “a main international current of literature and art after the waning of modernism, both continuous and discontinuous with modernism” (298). Accordingly, the emergence of postmodernism corresponds to the Latin American literary boom. John Barth’s prominent essay heralding postmodernism “The Literature of Exhaustion,” claims that some narrative forms and techniques are worn out and new innovative forms require “expertise and artistry” (66). As an example of such original works, he focuses on Borges’ stories such as the “Library of Babel,” which he finds “particularly pertinent to the literature of exhaustion” (75). In his later essay “Literature of Replenishment,” he names the postmodern authors among which are Julio Cortazar, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Italo Calvino, Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, whose works comprise of fantastic or mythic elements generally categorized under “magical realism.”

While Barth speculates about the current usage of the term “postmodernism,” he suggests, postmodernists benefit both from pre-modernists and modernists, but do not merely imitate them. As he states, “A worthy program for postmodernist fiction . . . is the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as premodernist and modernist modes of writing” (*The Friday Book* 203). There are historical and canonical roots maintained by postmodernists and for Barthes, “The ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and ‘contentism,’ pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction” (203). At this point, the definition of postmodernism corresponds with the definition of magical realism. In the essay “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction,” Faris suggests that magical realism is strongly interrelated to postmodern fiction. She names five characteristics of magical realism mentioned above, one of which is “[t]he magical realist vision exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions” (172). In magical realist works, two different worlds are merged together. Similarly, when

Barth claims that postmodern literature is deconstructing binary oppositions, he mentions Marquez's magical realist work, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), as an example. In his words, the novel is "the synthesis of straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, political passion and nonpolitical artistry, characterization and caricature, humor and terror" (204). Rather than heterogeneous worlds, boundaries between oxymoronic terms and formations are presented in the same milieu.

Faris mentions a common ground between postmodernism and magical realism. Metafictional texts, aiming to perplex the reader with "a particular kind of magic" that closes the "gap between words and the world" ("Scheherazade's Children" 176), existence of childish stories and caricaturized flat characters, and labyrinthine narratives that lead to no end are characteristics of both postmodernism and magical realism. Magical realists' ontological concerns with the text and language are similar to certain tendencies of postmodern literature. As Brian McHale defends, "the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 11). The very existence of entity turns into a debatable and speculative issue. For McHale, "typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 11), and the questions he raises are the same questions magical realists problematizes, such as "What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?" (11).

Theo L. D'haen explores magical realism in regard with postmodernism and displays the closeness between two narrative tendencies. As he puts it, "most commentators seem to agree that the very term 'postmodernism' originated in the 1930s in Latin America . . . and was reinvented or reused, covering different fields and carrying different meanings throughout 40s and 50s both in Europe and the United States" (193). He claims the features of postmodernism such as self-reflexivity, metafiction, eclecticism, multiplicity, discontinuity, intertextuality, parody, the erasure of boundaries might also be classified within magical realism (192-193).

In a world, where the boundary between fact and fiction becomes less visible, magical realists as well as postmodern fiction writers show that historiography and fictional

writing are similar, intricate, and mixed forms. Although there are critics who state that there are certain differences between historical and fictional writing, postmodern writers problematize the borders and use new techniques to validate their writings and question “history.” As postmodern critic Linda Hutcheon claims, “the theory and practice of postmodern art has shown ways of making the different, the off-center, into the vehicle for aesthetic and even political consciousness-raising” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 73). It is actually possible to replace “magical realism” with “postmodern” in her definition. Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, and Julio Cortazar are among those writers who use historiographic metafiction in their works to deal with the notion of “reality” and “history.”

In the twentieth century the trustworthiness of the form and the content it reflected became a matter of suspicion. Various philosophers from different fields questioned reality, language, knowledge, and history. Jacques Derrida concluded, “there is nothing out of the text” (158). The arbitrariness between signifier and signified, the problematic of thinking through of binary oppositions raised the idea of inadequacy in language, which meant language could not reflect the outer world but only the text and itself. Roland Barthes suggests that not the author but the texts speak since language “knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person,’ and this subject, void outside of the very utterance which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together’” (*Image-Music-Text* 145), thus, “The fact can only have a linguistic existence” (“The Discourse of History” 121). Through magical realism, the authenticity of facts and history become questionable notions; the magical elements do not reflect reality and criticize the strictness of reality that is dictated.

Foucault’s ideas about discontinuity also affect historical and chronological understanding. He disagrees with a continuous and organic historical approach since the idea of linear and coherent history is artificial. He claims that, “Be it historical, theoretical, or literary, discourse is always discontinuous yet held together by rules, albeit not transcendent rules (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 229). Linear history erases brakes, patches the cracks, which is a function of discourse. The truth is produced within a discourse and its authenticity depends on this discourse. Magical realist writers also question the reliability of facts created by discourses. Formal history is written

under the influence of ideologies and magical realism is able to reveal marginalized histories or create a collective memory that is silenced. P. Gabrielle Foreman explores Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1982) and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) in relation to magical realism, ontology and history, and says that "For these authors memory is grounded in the recuperation of the historical . . . [they] are animated by the desire to preserve pasts too often trivialized, built over or erased, and to pass them on" (285). Collective identity, the ignored history of slavery is explored in these narratives whereas these issues remain unnoticed in traditional forms.

Naturally, discontinuity and the gaps in history bring up questions about factuality. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Jean-François Lyotard claims, grand narratives fail while petite narratives construct their own versions of truths. He defines postmodern as "incredulity towards metanarratives," and this incredulity is caused by technological advancement because "scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power" (Lyotard 46). For Lyotard, powerfulness is associated with reality and sustaining technological advancement means sustaining "reality," which is used for scientific evidence to produce "truth" and rightness (47). Petite narratives question official history, institutional religion, and western ideology as foundational narratives. Latin American Literature can be viewed as a form of petite narrative that questions ideological and literary norms of western formations. George Yúdice, in "Postmodernity and Transnational Capitalism in Latin America," writes that "the heterogeneous character of Latin American social and cultural formations made it possible for discontinuous, alternative, and hybrid forms to emerge that challenged the hegemony of the grand recit of modernity. Even history fragments into a series of discontinuous formations that undermine the synchronicity of the space of the nation" (87). The postmodern condition includes markers for globalization and the resistance to it simultaneously, which creates a paradoxical situation. Linda Hutcheon foregrounds the dichotomy in the following manner: "postmodernism inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth century western world" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 11). Thus, it is hard to talk about a linear or chronological progress, and a mere dominant power, but a realm of grand narratives that are intervened and questioned constantly, which makes it hard to legitimize preexisting narratives.

Lois Parkinson Zamora claims magical realism distorts “modernity’s basis in progressive, linear history: they float free in time, not just here and now but then and there, eternal and everywhere” (“Magical Romance” 500). The possibility of reaching the truth requires to go beyond the mimetic world. For her, “Magical realist texts ask us to look beyond the limits of knowable,” through which “binarisms, rationalisms, and reductive materialisms of Western modernity” have to be rejected. From this perspective, magical realism could be considered a postmodernist device. Besides, magical realist perceptions might contribute to improve an ontological understanding of the West (“Magical Romance” 500).

Jean Baudrillard focuses on another aspect of the postmodern world, in which everything is just copies of other copies and it is impossible to know the real. Symbols and signs take the place of reality, and people live in a simulation. Being exposed to media images constantly, individuals start to perceive an imitation of reality, but this imitation neither thoroughly replaces the signified nor the referent. In this hyperreality, people are unable to make a distinction between the real and the representation. Such a world resembles the example in Borges’s fable; cartographers end up drawing a precise and detailed map of the empire which covers all the territories and thus, the map becomes the texture of the earth, where people dwell; lost in confusion between the construct and real. In this analogy, Baudrillard shows that hyperreal is the condition of living in a world generated by “models of a real without origin or reality” (1). Through metafiction, magic, unconventional reality and self-reflexivity magical realists, like postmodernists, explore this uncertainty. As John Thiem claims, magical realism has “extraordinary flexibility” in exceeding boundaries (244) and this enables it to foreground fictionality and reality through blending “possible but irreconcilable worlds” (244).

Because the concepts are reconfigured, and the borders of narrative genres are blurred, postmodern literature subverts conventional norms and master narratives to problematize truth and adapts metanarrative, self-reference, and intertextuality to question the reality. As Linda Hutcheon suggests, it “confront[s] and contest[s] any modernist discarding or recuperating of the past in the name of the future. It suggests no search for transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a reevaluation of and a dialogue

with the past in the light of the present” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 19). While doing this, postmodern narratives do not claim to be “real,” on the contrary, these narratives emphasize their fictionality;

Fiction does not mirror reality; nor does it reproduce it. It cannot. There is no pretense of simplistic mimesis in historiographic metafiction. Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality, and both the construction and the need for it are what are foregrounded in the postmodernist novel. (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 40)

In other words, postmodernism is not concerned with imitating the “real,” but creating its truth within the text and adding it to the world. Raymond Federman claims, “There is some truth in that cliché which says that ‘life is fiction,’ but not because it happens in the streets, but because reality as such does not exist, or rather exists only in its fictionalized version. The experience of life gains meaning only in its recounted form, in its verbalized version” (8). According to Linda Hutcheon, for instance, D.M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel* (1981), which uses magical realism, challenges “the realist novel’s concept of the subject, both in history and in fiction” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 173). The novel starts with letters written by Freud and Ferenczi, who are historical figures, plays with historical aspects of the Holocaust, and in the last chapter, the revival of dead people is depicted with an “as if real” perspective.

Rather than denying an external entity, postmodernism draws attention to the inability to reach the reality (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 119). Therefore, Barthes suggests that “it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is to reach, through a preliminary impersonality—which we can at no moment identify with the realistic novelist’s castration ‘objectivity’—that point where not ‘I’ but only language functions, ‘performs’” (*Image-Music-Text* 143). The text frees itself from any kind of discourse, including its author, and reaches an external existence by referring to its textuality and other texts, and it plays with signifiers to produce its own meaning. Magical realist elements seek meaning through dislocating conventional meanings of the words or images. A ghost, as a literary tool might be used to evoke emotions in the text such as anxiety and horror, but in magical realism its meaning is varied through reconstruction, and thus, such a device gains new meanings. Lyotard envisions postmodernism as a concept “that which searches for new presentations . . . in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (81). Accordingly, magical realist modes of narration seek

alternative worlds and texts to delineate “the unrepresentable,” but magical transformations provide similar devices adopted by postmodernism.

The intrusion of a metaphysical element or an environment, for Brian McHale, is not uncommon in postmodern literature. As he delineates, “postmodernist fiction has close affinities with the genre of the fantastic, much as it has affinities with the science-fiction genre, and it draws upon the fantastic for motifs and topoi much as it draws upon science fiction” (*Postmodernist Fiction* 74). Although he does not label Marquez’s novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as magical realist, he points out to the duality of the worlds, a fantastic and a mimetic world, in which the metaphysical elements are rendered into a “banalization of the fantastic” (*Postmodernist Fiction* 77). McHale claims that the main difference between modernist and postmodernist literature is that the former is interested in epistemological questions while the latter focuses on ontological problems. (*Postmodernist Fiction* xii). Through showing the contrast between “real” and fiction, mimetic and fantastic, the conventional understanding of reality, existence, and representation are challenged. For him, “This explains the general diffusion of fantastic ‘charge’ throughout postmodernist writing: a displaced effect of the fantastic persists wherever a dialogue springs up between different ontological realms or levels” (*Postmodernist Fiction* 83). If articulating ontological questions through different levels and realms is comprised in the definition of postmodern literature, magical realism could easily be considered as a postmodern form. In another essay published in 2013, McHale focuses on this similarity. According to his model, which is borrowed from Russian Formalists, a literary genre tries to find new techniques and innovative methods to get rid of its exhaustion “by shuffling the hierarchy of its features” (“Afterword: Reconstructing Postmodernism” 358). Therefore, modernism’s epistemological aspects are replaced with ontological exploration to replenish it. However, this difference does not mean that modernist and postmodernist literatures are thoroughly different from each other as stated earlier. Postmodernism stands against and benefits from modernism. A similar interaction between postmodernism and magical realism could be observed.

Kumkum Sangari suggests that “Western-centrism” is present in the definition of postmodernism. Although “postcolonial” literature or literary works from non-Western nations might be concerned with different histories and ideologies,

such nonmimetic, non-western modes also seem to lay themselves open to the academized procedures of a peculiarly western, historically singular, postmodern epistemology that universalizes the self-conscious dissolution of the bourgeois subject, with its now characteristic stance of self-irony, across both space and time. (157)

Placing Western literature and criticism in the center, and labeling the rest of literature as “third-world” creates the assumption that the West generates literary ideas and techniques, which is embraced and adapted by the non-Western world. In Sangari’s words, “[t]he expansive forms of the modern and the postmodern novel appear to stand in ever-polite readiness to recycle and accommodate other cultural content, whether Latin American or Indian” (157). Sangari’s view can be summed up as a criticism of the orientalist approach to literature, which Edward Said exemplifies through other cultural appearances in his influential work *Orientalism* (1978). Said also maintains that orientalism is a discourse, providing the West with an upper hand. Thus, displaying postmodernism as a distinct Western genre and denying the influence and contribution of other innovative forms—and especially magical realism—would produce insufficient and problematic explanations.

Another western explanation of placing magical realism as a variety or branch of postmodernism could also be reversed. Brian McHale apologetically redeems his former argument,

. . . the Boom in Latin American literature, associated with magical realism, actually predates the onset of postmodernism itself, or at any rate predates the use of the term in anything like its late twentieth-century sense. If the Boom dates, as it arguably does, from the early writings of Borges, Carpentier, Juan Rulfo, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Ernesto Sabato, and others in the ’40s and ’50s, and postmodernism only emerges in the ’60s (and acquires its name no earlier than the ’70s), then the magical realism that is a hallmark of the Boom cannot logically be regarded as a regional variety of postmodernism—if anything, the reverse: late in arriving on the scene, postmodernism might appear rather to be a regional variety of Boom writing! (“Afterword: Reconstructing Postmodernism” 361)

For McHale, regarding Latin American or Asian literary works as postmodern was a false assumption that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s: the innovative fiction of

Marquez, Cortazar, and Carpentier were considered as the global effect of postmodernism (“Afterwords: Reconstructing Postmodernism” 260). However, this assumption needs to be corrected or, at least, clarified (362). McHale suggests three facts to explain how postmodernism has gone global. The first reason is the global economy, which developed similar conditions around the world. The second is dissemination of ideas and trends through various ways, such as academic programs and translations. The third is similar to the idea of the literature of exhaustion, which has to do with reaching a final aesthetic that appears similar globally. Reciprocal exchange in different fields has created these conditions. As he puts it, “We might imagine these intra- and inter-regional cultural dialogues, not routed through Western metropolitan centers but occurring among the so-called “peripheries,” as a series of *calls and responses*” (“Afterwords: Reconstructing Postmodernism” 363). The third reason seems to prove that postmodernism did not necessarily emerge out of the West, but different mechanisms from different geographies interacting with each other produced the cultural formation. The “dialogic moment” is the new possibility that reasserts a globalized literature instead of single-sided interaction. The influence of the West on the East, or the First world on the Third world countries, is replaced by a more universal environment (“Afterwords: Reconstructing Postmodernism” 363).

Kumkum Sangari suggests a similar idea by stressing the uniqueness of marvelous realism. She points out the distinctive characteristics of postmodernism and marvelous realism through Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in “The Politics of the Possible.” For her,

Unlike Euro-American postmodern fiction, which directs attention to the abstract processes whereby meaning is either generated never found or is lost in the finding (for example, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*), the self-conscious textuality in Marquez's narratives is grounded in an overplus of meaning, a barely controlled semantic richness. The conscious technical complexity of the texts does not ask to be read as an effect either of the autonomy of language or text or even as a gesture toward the auto-referentiality of art. Rather, the narratives gesture toward the autonomy of the story in its *semantic* aspect: stories exist above and beyond the storytellers who relate them, the language in which they are told, and the narrative structures in which they are held; stories are as protean as the people who tell and retell them, remember and forget them, repeat or improvise them. (165)

Sangari claims that Marquez’s stories are meaningful with the notion of collectivity and the social space whereas Euro-American postmodern fiction negates the meaning and

directs the focus on the text itself. However, the reasons behind lack of meaning or collectivity in Euro-American fiction is not clear. The stories in Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972) might "exist inside a continuous social space within which they can be remodeled and recombined" as it also happens in Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The stories in *Invisible Cities* are narrated by Marco Polo to entertain Kublai Khan. When Kublai Khan asks him why he never mentions his hometown, Venice, Marco Polo answers, "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice" (86), which indicates a countless number of recombined stories recycling within an imagined society. These remodeled stories do not necessarily direct the reader to the text itself; rather shared fantastic elements and myths are created similar to Marquez's novel, which consist of a "transformative mode that has the capacity both to register and to engage critically with the present and to generate a new way of seeing" ("The Politics of the Possible" 162).

Although Sangari tries to draw clear lines between postmodern fiction and the marvelous real, at the end of her essay, as McHale suggests in his third point, she keeps reminding that there is an interactive and inseparable transaction between Euro-American and non-Western nations. Differences and similarities exist simultaneously:

The history of the West and the history of the non-West are by now irrevocably different and irrevocably shared. Both have shaped and been shaped by each other in specific and specifiable ways. The linear time of the West or the project of modernity did not simply mummify or overlay the indigenous times of colonized countries, but was itself open to alteration and reentered into discrete cultural combinations. Thus the history of Latin America is also the history of the West and informs its psychic and economic itinerary. The cultural projects of both the West and the non-West are implicated in a larger history. (185-186)

Accordingly, magical realist works such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* create their own version of reality and history by introducing fantastic elements in a mimetic world, where they are considered ordinary motifs of the created setting. Marquez's work consists of ideological, historical, and political elements that are created by the colonized and the colonizers, which implies different and oxymoronic layers within the fictional work. Hutcheon comments on *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and says, "[it] has often been discussed in exactly the contradictory terms that I think define postmodernism" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 5). Although a nation's peculiar background of history, ideology, and culture might create a distinctive narrative, it is

hard to differentiate the effects of intrusion of the late capitalism and petite-history of the place. Hutcheon is uncertain about the borders between the two spheres and writes, “I would agree and, in fact, argue that the increasing uniformization of mass culture is one of the totalizing forces that postmodernism exists to challenge. Challenge, but not deny. But it does seek to assert difference, not homogeneous identity” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 6). The ultimate effect of globalization, regression of culture and heterogeneous structures of non-Western literature are intermingled like matryoshka dolls creating complexity and stratum in Latin American fiction.

In her essay, “Territorialization of the New Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms,” Amaryll Chanady suggests three attitudes of colonized countries towards colonizers. The first one is to “demand autonomy and respect for their difference” and also “to claim their superiority” (133). The second alternative is “the rejection of intellectual paradigms considered inadequate in the context of Latin American society” and to create a notion of “mestizo America” (“Territorialization of the New Imaginary” 134). Ethnic identity is attributed to social circumstances and intellectual and social interactions with the West. The third alternative is to claim ultimate superiority; either the superiority of the colonizer or the colonized. In all these three alternatives, European intellectual paradigms are questioned or criticized. In other words, their stance and identity either leans for or against the Western canon, which means the influence of the West is inevitable. At the end of her discussion, Chanady arrives at a similar conclusion and writes,

the development of the literary modes associated with the neofantastic and magical realism that have emerged in the second half of the twentieth century in Latin America cannot be attributed by a naïve essentialist argument to the supposed marvelous reality of the continent or ascribed to the unidirectional flow of metropolitan influence. (“Territorialization of the New Imaginary” 141)

Western rationalism and local thinking, modernity and tradition, and various other conditions shape the modes of Latin American literature.

Theo L. D’haen, in his essay “Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers,” criticizes the privileged position of Euro/American-centrism. He says that both postmodernism and magical realism arose in the 1980s, and postmodernism was defined with new narrative techniques, such as parody,

intertextuality, metafiction etc., which are considered as poststructuralist tools (193). He claims that the works regarded as magical realist also accommodate these techniques and refers to Richard Todd's essay, in which Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), and D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981) are discussed. For Todd, although these works are labeled as magical realist, they gain this label "by way of the very same techniques usually singled out as marking postmodernism" (194). D'haen argues that magical realists like Garcia Marquez, Cortazar, Fuentes, and Donoso also use postmodern narrative techniques and criticizes McHale and Hutcheon for creating a "hierarchical relation" between magical realism and postmodernism. He questions the difference between postmodernism and magical realism since both forms use the same narrative techniques (194). As a distinguishing point, he asserts that being "ex-centric" is the prominent characteristic of magical realism and he defines ex-centric as

a voluntary act of breaking away from the discourse perceived as central to the line of technical experimentation starting with realism and running via naturalism and modernism to the kind of postmodernism Lernout assigned to his second group of authors, the "metafictionists" or "surfictionists" a la Beckett, Robbe-Grillet or Ricardou. (195)

The function of magical realism is to create a counter discourse against the hegemonic powers and the canon of Western literature, which is considered as "privileged centers of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender" (D'haen 195). Unprivileged, minor and marginal centers produce a type of literature, which attempts to dismantle the authority of "main" centers. However, he is not satisfied with his answer and writes, "Garcia Marquez himself frequently mentioned Faulkner as his example. The Southerner Faulkner is undoubtedly one of the most ex-centric, in the sense we have here given to that word, of American authors. Of late, of course, Faulkner has been claimed for postmodernism. Should we now also start calling him a magic realist?" (D'haen 201).

On the other hand, decentering meta-narratives, as mentioned above, is also a characteristic of postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon writes "the theory and practice of postmodern art has shown ways of making the different, the off-center, into the vehicle for aesthetic and even political consciousness-raising" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 73). Using similar narrative techniques and decentering do not adequately explain the

distinctions between postmodernism and magical realism. If ex-centering is a distinguishing point, literary works dealing with ex-centered minorities, not to mention ethnic minorities, queer literature, insanity, addiction, abnormality, and any other issues dealing with inequality and the hegemony of the ruling class should be considered as magical realist. If fantastic elements are required to categorize magical realist works, how could one categorize Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), in which Billy Pilgrim believes he was captured by aliens? Furthermore, this work is considered to have elements of science fiction, but what makes aliens—who are not scientifically proven and who can be categorized as fantastic creatures—an ingredient of science fiction? The self-reflexive characteristic of postmodern fiction, allows the author to create a fictional character who can have a subversive conversation with his/her author. In other words, a pile of words revives and gains consciousness and this is not considered fantastic or magical but postmodern.

At end of his discussion, D'haen does not come up with a precise conclusion and writes, "The exclusive attention given to Anglo-American modernism is in itself an indication of 'privileged center' discourse. In this respect, then, merely to talk of magic realism in relation to postmodernism is to contribute to decentering that privileged discourse" (203). Creating a subversive narrative is not only peculiar to magical realism since postmodern fiction does the same. However, D'haen suggests that magical realism might be a variety of postmodernism, but, evaluated in a context apart from the Anglo-American perspective, magical realism becomes a distinctive mode. Nevertheless, he does not clearly define what distinguishes magical realism from postmodernism.

In this context, closing gaps between postmodernism and magical realism enable reciprocal exchange. While magical realist works employ postmodern elements, postmodern fictions carry characteristics of magical realism. The privileging of postmodern techniques over magical realism has to do with the dominance of Anglo-American literary canon, which dominates the literary scene. Although the general assumption is that postmodern techniques are transmitted into magical realist modes, the critics believe that the relationship is interactive. Contemporary American fiction utilizes magical realism and presents these magical elements in the stories regardless of the presupposed geographical location of the genre. Steven Millhauser, Aimee, Kelly

Link, and Kevin Brockmeier's short stories in this study display that magical realist and fantastic elements are transmitted into the fictional works of Northern American literature. The analyzed short stories employ postmodern techniques and other literary tools, but also harbor the fantastic and magical realist modes.

In the following paragraphs, an overview of the decline of postmodern literature will be traced and the location of magical realism, its adaptation and reformulation in American literature will be explored. As mentioned above, Jean Baudrillard's, Jacques Derrida's, Jacques Lacan's, and Jean-François's ideas dominated the 1970s and 1980s and postmodern literature reached its peak at the same time. Through the 1990s postmodern literature became more and more popularized, lost its dynamics, and was embraced by mainstream literature as well as becoming a part of the curriculum in academia (Tsoulou 5). For Richard Bradford, "The New Postmodernists have become complicit with the cultural fabric which most would perceive as contemptible . . . their radicalism tends to be attuned to the demands of the market place" (23). The validity of postmodernist relativism and anti-elitism lost its reliability and especially after 9/11 the critics have searched for new representations in fictional works. Linda Hutcheon, who profoundly contributed to the definition of postmodernism, writes that "The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first century world" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 181). In "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust," Hassan writes that

Beyond postmodernism, beyond the evasions of poststructuralist theories and pieties of postcolonial studies, we need to discover new relations between selves and others, margins and centers, fragments and wholes—indeed, new relations between selves and selves, margins and margins, centers and centers—discover what I call a new, pragmatic and planetary civility. (204)

An increasing number of academic works suggest the end of postmodernism and the idea that a new system should be modulated, which reconstructs the relationship between representation and fiction. *Re-mapping Postmodernism: Contemporary American Women's Fiction* (2000) by Natalie Stillman-Webb, *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (2006) by Josh Toth, *Strange Changes: Cultural Transformation in U.S. Magical Realist Fiction* (2008) by Lisa Wnger Bro, *After: U.S. Literary Culture, 1989-Present* (2010) by Katie Ruth Muth,

Postmodern Materialism (2014) by Matthew Ryan Mullins, *Literature After Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies* (2014) by Irmtraud Hubert, *Metafiction and Cultural Production in Post-Postmodern American Fiction and Film* (2014) by Paul M. Hansen, *In Pursuit of the Real* (2015) by Timothy Rutzou, *The New Sincerity in American Literature* (2018) by Matthew J. Balliro, and *The Post-noir Novel: Pulp Genre, Alienation, and the Turn from Postmodernism in Contemporary American Fiction* (2020) by Kenneth Jude Lota are several academic studies that discuss the retreatment of real after postmodernism. The common point of these studies is their focus on realism as the distinctive feature of contemporary fiction. Realism is not used in the classical sense, but the discussions center around what has changed in the depiction of reality. Thus, terms like neo-realism, renewalism, spectacle realism, deep realism, hysterical realism, and minimal realism have been used interchangeably to define the characteristics of American fiction after postmodernism. For instance, Toth and Neil Brooks claims that postmodernism is passé because “its increasingly loud movement toward silence and/or the absolute denial of objective truth claims become dogmatic, institutionalized and programmatic. Thus recent critical and theoretical work . . . seems to highlight the past hegemony of high-postmodernism” (“Awake and Renewed” 7). For Toth, an act of renewalism is necessary. He uses the specter analogy inspired by Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, and argues that while postmodernism rejects reaching truth, mimesis, or referent, in the narrative modes that emerged after postmodernism there is a willingness to respect the specter’s spectrality (*The Passing of Postmodernism* 178-179). He refutes Lyotard’s famous definition of postmodernism in the following words and replaces it with “neo-realism”:

neo-realism seemingly escapes the dogmatism of postmodernism by explicitly embracing and deferring the possibility of the referent, of mimesis . . . neo-realism works to escape the postmodern tendency to make a grand narrative out of an “incredulity” to grand narratives. Neo-realism seems to . . . respect the necessity of an animating, yet impossible, ideal—so as to avoid being dangerously compelled to either insist upon the possibility that the spectral ideal can become real and in the flesh or to emphatically and repeatedly expose such an ideal as impossible. (*The Passing of Postmodernism* 206)

The ghost of postmodernism keeps haunting the preceding narratives, but these narratives employ new forms to deal with the ghost. In his conclusion, Toth gives an example from *Beloved*, which centers on a ghost-like character. For Toth, *Beloved* both

displays a ghost in the classical sense and a ghost that “embrace the ironic spectrality of the mimetic promise” (230), which is renewalist. Instead of refuting the “illusory ideals,” and emphasizing “ethics of perverse,” the ghost in the story underscores renewalist “ethics of indecision.” As Toth defines,

While the postmodern aesthetic can be defined by a need to expose the impossibility of the mimetic text—or, what amounts to the same thing, the messianic promise—the shift away from postmodern metafiction is marked by a pronounced realization that faith in (or a gamble on) the possibility of absolute certainty must necessarily haunt any claim or narrative act (even the claim that such faith is a dangerous ideological illusion). It is, in short, this overtly renewed faith in an impossible “project”—a revenant of the Enlightenment, as it were—that can be said to define the narrative forms associated with the current epistemic shift away from postmodernism. (*The Passing of Postmodernism* 178-179)

In Toth’s renewalism, the reality does not have to be in the form of mimetic. It might respect the ghost or the spectral, which means, unlike postmodernism, literature after postmodernism “embrace both the possibility and the impossibility of the specter.” Postmodern narratives present an elusive truth, which results in perplexity. Similarly, as Toth explains, the narrative of *Beloved*, returns repetitively to the slaughter of the child from various point of views to suggest “the impossibility of the certainly accurate narrative act” (*The Passing of Postmodernism* 230). On the other hand, the ghost becomes the essential reproducer of the narrative itself because the “impossible real,” the ghost, does not unfold itself in the narrative. Although Sethe tries to go on with her life, the ghost causes her to be stuck in-between. Toth defines this state as “ethics of indecision” and writes,

the text’s emphatic willingness to undergo “the ordeal of indecision” is mirrored by the impossible decision with which Sethe was faced: to kill her children or to let them be taken as slaves. As deplorable as her ultimate decision might appear prima facie, the fact that she makes a decision at all can be read as a clear endorsement of the ethical imperative animating the entire text: the ethical imperative that any decision (or narrative act) must endure both aspects of indecision, that any decision must, in short, respect both the possibility and the impossibility of the spectral promise. (*The Passing of Postmodernism* 231)

Similarly, the narrator’s reaction to the absence or the existence of the ghost does not reject the possibilities. Thus, magical realist characteristics show some parallelism with renewalist narrative strategies to reflect and reach a truth. The truth is not negated, but considered as a positive recognition of possibilities. This does not mean that the truth is

not problematic, but it means, literature after postmodernism, rather than struggling with the problems, looks at the extensions of possibilities beyond the truth.

Correspondingly, other critics, who have been searching for new terms to define the contemporary condition of literature, reexplore postmodern techniques. In the process of a seeking new theory, critics like Brian Attebery, Raoul Eshelman, Nicoline Timmer, Robert Rebein, and Alan Kirby have focused on the relationship between fiction and reality. As a general inclination, they suggest that postmodern devices are maintained in contemporary fiction, but a new aspect of realism has come into prominence. According to Irmtraud Huber this new kind of realism

does not revoke postmodernist claims about the power of discourse and the inaccessibility of the real, about the fragmentation of the subject and the impossibility of truth. Instead, it acknowledges them even while it asserts itself in spite of them. After postmodernism, we may find the ‘both/and’ (which postmodernism, thus a large critical consensus, has generally favoured over the modernist ‘either/or’) replaced by willful aesthetics of the ‘in spite of,’ or as Geoffrey Holsclaw suggests, an attitude of ‘true/but still.’ (6)

Although the literary works produced after postmodernism do not aim to deconstruct the meaning as poststructuralists did, postmodernist elements are not entirely eradicated. On the contrary, they still function and present the perplexity of reality and truth. Nevertheless, as a difference, by using the same tools, the writers try to preserve a constructive nature. Robert Rebein debates the validity of the term postmodernism. From McGurl’s similar point of view, Rebein blames academic institutions for creating a dysfunctional term called postmodernism. In his words,

From the beginning, its primary home was the university, a status that explains not only why metafiction in particular was often said to be fiction “of the academy, by the academy, and for the academy” but also why so many academics who clearly found it “disagreeable” felt called upon to support and defend it . . . Outside the English departments—and, indeed, even in “antithetical cells” within them, such as the creative writing programs—literary postmodernism was often seen as either ridiculous in its assumptions (all magic has fled from the world, it’s all been done before, etc.) or simply too limiting in its strictures. (6)

Rebein’s comment can be interpreted in terms of the effect of academies on literary aesthetic. Under the title of postmodernism, some standardized narrative methods are used to frame a limited literature and its criticism. After claiming the artificiality of postmodernism produced by academies, he discusses that realist tendency has always

been in American literature, but inevitably postmodern tendencies affected the conceptualization of it. As he puts it, “contemporary realist writers have absorbed postmodernism’s most lasting contributions and gone on to forge a new realism that is more or less traditional in its handling of character, reportorial in its depiction of milieu and time, but is at the same time self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis” (20). More or less postmodernist elements persist in contemporary literature. Robert L. McLaughlin, while exploring the agenda of post-postmodernism, points out to this tendency in literature, but he underscores the functionality of these elements. In his words, the post-postmodernist still continues to explore the limits and (im)possibility of language while trying to portray the experienced world; the post postmodernist

is less on self-conscious wordplay and the violation of narrative conventions and more on representing the world we all more or less share. Yet in presenting that world, this new fiction nevertheless has to show that it’s a world that we know through language and layers of representation; language, narrative, and the processes of representation are the only means we have to experience and know the world, ourselves, and our possibilities for being human. (66-67)

Furthermore, contemporary writers have adapted postmodern elements such as self-reflexivity, metanarrative, and irony to such an extent that it is not possible to speak of these tools as distinctive components of a movement, and academic criticism has already digested every aspect of postmodern literature. Nevertheless, the only tool of literature is language and language still reflects the ambiguities of meaning and contain former claims brought forward by assorted scopes of realism, modernism, and postmodernism while literature prevails as a critique of society. On account of this, McLaughlin states that language is the only means for portraying other possible realities:

Post-postmodernism seeks not to reify the cynicism, the disconnect, the atomized privacy of our society nor to escape or mask it (as much art, serious and pop, does) but, engaging the language-based nature of its operations, to make us newly aware of the reality that has been made for us and to remind us—because we live in a culture where we are encouraged to forget—that other realities are possible. (67)

Although, I do not fully claim that the examined writers in this study—Millhauser, Bender, Link, and Brockmeier—are post-postmodernist writers, in terms of reminding the reader the possibilities of other realities, their fictions contain similar narrative techniques. However, what is meant by “neo-realism” that succeeds postmodernism is

debatable. After experiencing the postmodern era, poststructuralism, and internet era, turning back to realism in the traditional sense is not possible and nobody can have such a claim. On the contrary, Josh Tote believes that the association of the end of postmodernism with variations of realism does not present a clear portrayal of contemporary literature. Although these contemporary writers may be more realistic than Raymond Carver's dirty realist fictions, focusing on the "the relationship they reestablish with a certain spectral inheritance, a spectral inheritance passed on by postmodernism" would be a more coherent definition (*The Passing of Postmodernism* 132). Writers and directors like Toni Morrison, David Foster Wallace, Maxine Hong Kingston, Dave Eggers, Wes Anderson, and Noah Baumbach use "narrative forms that renew the realist faith in mimesis while simultaneously deferring and frustrating that faith via the irony and stylistics of a now past, or passed, postmodernism. (*The Passing of Postmodernism* 132-33). With this in mind, fantastic and magical elements used with postmodern tools contribute to examine constructions of reality in a mimetic world.

The writers examined in this dissertation use fantastic elements along with postmodern narrative tools and the mode of magical realism, but their stories re-modify the outputs of these fantastic, magical and postmodern elements. Although modernist and postmodernist concerns still exist in their work, the problems of modern life, language, and search for a meaning are handled with a relatively optimistic perspective. Mainly, poststructuralist ideas are exposed with a reconstructive conceptualization. The celebrated multiplicity of postmodern boundaries gains a practical function and the unrealistic depictions of the mimetic world reflect rational portrayals of the characters. In other words, the complex perplexity of the characters is designated in a flamboyant world, where binary oppositions such as sanity/insanity, real/unreal, and credible/incredible point out to a salvation in characters' stranded conditions. Grand narratives fall apart and petite narratives occur, which produce different ideas and opinions, but they do not necessarily lead to solid alternatives. Although these ideas might be contradictory, they do not refute each other. In terms of practicality, they come into prominence as accredited substitutes. Through postmodern narrative tools, magical realist and fantastic elements existing in Millhauser, Bender, Link, and Brockmeier's short stories appear as a process of self-making and healing of the self. In this process, unlike postmodernism and postcolonial literature, the fictional works neither aim to

emphasize the collapse of grand narratives, nor to reach an ultimate truth, but they underscore the methods of operation to reconcile themselves with their own truth.

The short story as a genre also provides a convenient space for the presentation of the magical occurrences. As Charles E. May discusses the difference between the novel and the short story and highlights the capacity of the short story for the unconventional. He writes that “the novel . . . focuses on experience in the same conceptualized way. The short story, on the other hand, throws into doubt our idealizations of the ‘interchangeability of standpoints’ and the ‘congruence of relevance systems.’ In the short story we are presented with characters in their essential aloneness, not in their taken-for-granted social world” (333). For May, the short story is a break from daily life routines and it is a pause to see the implausible, epiphany, or sacred. Short stories, considered to be stemming from oral stories, have their roots in ancient oral storytelling and are inherited from mythological stories. Thus, the representation of reality has a deeper connotation in short stories. This is different than the reality based on experience. As May states short stories have the capacity for confronting the perceived reality:

The reality the short story presents us with is the reality of those sub-universes of the supernatural and the fable, which exist within the so-called “real” world of sense perception and conceptual abstraction. It presents moments in which we become aware of anxiety, loneliness, dread, concern, and thus find the safe, secure and systematic life we usually lead disrupted and momentarily destroyed. The short story is the most adequate form to confront us with reality as we perceive it in our most profound moments. (337-338)

Magical realist representations in short stories are also used in various narrative methods and have replenished themselves. Magical realist narratives are largely concordant with the short story that embeds “the sub-universes of the supernatural.” Although magical realist and postmodern narratives have been claimed to be fading, similar formerly used methods are still observable in the examined short stories of this dissertation. These elements will be helpful to display the progressive panorama of contemporary literature.

In the first chapter, I will present the defining features of magical realism. Although there are different definitions and debates about the characteristics of the mode, Amaryll Beatrice Chanady and Wendy B. Faris use similar terms in defining magical realism.

They do not come up with a clear definition, but they define distinctive features of magical realism. Chanady compares the mode to the fantastic, and explores what distinguishes magical realism. Faris comes up with five principles that might help to mark the borders of magical realism. However, she also expounds on the roots and the branches, which also reflect the pervasive effect of modernism and postmodernism on magical realism. As a common ground, these critics suggest that supernatural and natural elements should be included in the mode and should be presented in a coherent structure. Hence, it is natural to have an antinomy in the created world, which leads to unsettling doubts. However, “authorial reticence” may prevent the reader’s hesitations and emotional arousal. Finally, Faris suggests that magical realist texts induce the reader to reconsider perceived ideas on time, identity, and space. I will discuss Faris’s five principles, namely the irreducible element of magic, the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, two realms, and themes of distorted time, space, and identity, which the stories adhere to.

On the other hand, there are additional differences that reveal flexible borders of magical realism or the “post” state of magical realism. While collective structures such as colonized nations and other minorities seems to play a part in the emergence of magical realism, the representation of magical realism in the examined stories could be reduced to individual identities, which help to redefine their marginalized selves regardless of their collective identities. In these stories the authenticity or exoticism of magical realism, whether it is a Eurocentric or orientalist perspective, reveal indifferent representations. Rather than leading to a polarization, as it is traced in Latin American magical works, these representations depict a pluralization in American society. At the same time, through fantastic representations of a mimetic world, the characters in these stories find ways to depict who they are and who they are not, which compounds to a form of realism.

In the second chapter, I will analyze how the writers use postmodern narrative techniques, such as meta-narrative, self-reflexivity, historiographic metafiction, and the ontology of reality, because these elements are essential in the magical realist mode. The postmodern aspects aid the characters’ healing process, which might seem paradoxical. Yet, this convalescence, rather than reaching a final conclusion, is about

interpreting their truths or realities. The standard understanding of reality and the lack of language as a tool of self-expression force the characters to create new fictional/fantastic perspectives. In the age of “post-truth,” believing in a truth, which is supplied by emotions, is more important than the factual truth, and fiction provides a vast area to observe what the characters are and are not capable of achieving.

In the third chapter, the relationship between fantastic elements and genre fiction will be examined. McGurl suggests that postwar era creative writing programs are able to produce high-level “serious” literature that excludes genre fiction. As he puts it,

The absence of genre consciousness in the program makes it clear how, even as the rise of the creative writing program was related to the parallel rise of mass higher education, it did not take its cultural bearings from the consumption habits of the lower middle class, but rather from the modernist tradition as it had been institutionalized in and as the New Criticism. (306)

Educated mass readers were ready to read relatively complicated fictional works, but in time the boundary between high literary fiction and genre fiction was erased as exemplified by Joyce Carol Oates’s fiction (McGurl 308). For McGurl, “middlebrow fiction” is the intersection point of low and high literature. Günter Leypoldt interprets, “This segment was traditionally regulated by non-academic gatekeeping institutions (book clubs, The New York Times Book Review, or the Pulitzer Prize committee, for example), but it came under the school’s extending sphere of influence when television and film gradually ended the age of mass reading” (847). This expansion through genre fiction has been an embraced field where the writers are able to reflect their understanding of literary value. As Faris suggests, “magical realism reorients not only our habits of time and space but our sense of identity” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 25). This could be repeated for genre fiction, which does not mean sheer “entertainment,” but a narrative area where “multivocal nature of the narrative” and the characters’ “radical multiplicity” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 25) touch upon the problems of identity and culture. Thus, the fantastic elements in genre-based short fictions serve for the critical questioning of the self and re-interpreting it. Supplementing magical elements to postmodernist narratives and blurring the genre boundaries have contributed to present other dimensions of magical realism in representing troubles, pains, convalescence, individual experiences, and, to some extent, collective wounds of modern life. The access to reality and the portrayal of modern society have been reformulated and

recombined in these short stories. Fairy tales, myths, fantasy, and supernatural elements help to portray accurate modern-day life reflections rather than reframing or retelling traditional and archaic stories.

CHAPTER 1

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF MAGICAL REALISM

The problem, as I see it, isn't to choose between two opposed methods—the method of nineteenth-century realism, on the one hand, and the method, as if there were one, of modernism/fabulism on the other—but to write something that pays homage to whatever in the past is richest and most alive, while it sets forth on its own wayward journey.

—Steven Millhauser, “Steven Millhauser”

According to Wendy B. Faris, although magical realist works are produced successfully in Latin America, the genre is not limited to the mentioned geography. To present the widespread extension of magical realism in other parts of the world, she aims to draw a theoretical frame, which is “located at the intersection of modernism and postmodernism, engaging both sets of agendas and aesthetics” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 3). She suggests five main principles that characterize the mode of magical realism, which are also applicable to the short stories of Kelly Link, Kevin Brockmeier, Steven Millhauser, and Aimee Bender. Faris is inspired by Amaryll Beatrice Chanady's book, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* (1985). Chanady's definition of magical realism is marked with her comparison of the genre with the other fantastic genres. In her book, she collects distinctive features under three titles: the natural vs. the supernatural, antinomy, and the authorial reticence. Faris expands these distinctions into five titles, in which, the irreducible element of magic and the phenomenal world corresponds to Chanady's supernatural versus natural. Furthermore, Chanady's “antinomy” and “authorial reticence” is discussed under Faris's “merging worlds” and “unsettling doubts.”

These principles will be traced in selected eight short stories, namely; “The Wrong Grave” and “The Hortlak” by Link; “A Fable with Slips of White Paper” and “The Light through the Window” by Brockmeier; “Sons and Mothers” and “The Tower” by

Millhauser; “Marzipan” and “The Leading Man” by Bender. The principles Faris delineates operate in these stories, and their functionality has been expanded to modern-day concerns and urban centers where people struggle with financial problems and loneliness. As Faris suggests, these principles do not restrain the narrative to geography, or ethnicity. “Modern” settings and developed countries are new terrains where extraordinary events take place. Also, cultural backgrounds, or the tendency to believe in magical events in certain settings, become less deterministic in utilizing magical narratives. Magical realist elements correspond to estrangements in routine life; isolation, loneliness, depression, burdens of constructed gender, family, and social roles in society and reappear through bizarre and uncanny events, which reverse their functions from mysterious and horrifying to ordinary and healing. In this sense, the insertion of the magical in these stories also becomes a consolidation.

1.1. THE IRREDUCIBLE ELEMENT OF MAGIC

Faris defines the irreducible element of magic as “something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them” (“Scheherazade’s Children” 167), while Chanady suggests a similar definition, which has to do with “the occurrence of the supernatural, or anything that is contrary to conventional view of reality” (*Magical Realism and the Fantastic* 18). In the stories examined, when an impossible event that cannot be explained through the laws of physics occurs, the narrator cannot or does not explain how or why that event happened. The “magical” event is integrated into realistic portrayals and actions. In “The Wrong Grave,” a young man, Miles, decides to dig up his dead girlfriend’s (Bethany) grave to retrieve some of his poetry that was buried with her. When Miles uncovers the grave, a young girl’s ghost appears to tell him that she is not resting in peace. Unexpectedly, this ghost does not look like his girlfriend. She introduces herself as Gloria Palnik and asks Miles to write a poem for her and if he does not comply, she threatens to haunt him forever. After Miles runs away, the ghost visits her mother, Mrs. Baldwin, and reveals that she tricked Miles by faking her identity as Gloria Palnick.

When Miles digs his girlfriend’s grave, the ghost in the grave, talks to him in the following manner:

The wrong dead girl spoke first. “Knock knock,” she said.
 “What?” Miles said.
 “Knock knock,” the wrong dead girl said again.
 “Who’s there?” Miles said.
 “Gloria,” the wrong dead girl said.
 “Gloria Palnick. Who are you and what are you doing in my grave?”
 “This isn’t your grave,” Miles said, aware that he was arguing with a dead girl,
 and the wrong dead girl at that. (*Pretty Monsters* 10)

This dialogue between a dead girl and Miles, a living person, occurs as if this is a commonplace occurrence. The narrative mode presents this encounter as ordinary but the magical phenomenon is not disregarded, which indicates this is not a dream or a disoriented projection of the character. Miles is aware that he is talking to a dead person. Contrary to the horror genre, which aims to raise anxiety and terror both in the character and the reader, this specific narration has a reverse effect and it subverts the reader’s perception. Instead of using the elements of gothic narrative, the narrator presents a cynical ghost. She recites a knock-knock joke and later deceives Miles by faking her identity; both incidents decrease the expected horror or tension in the story. The neutral voice in the narrative contributes to the “naturalization” of the magical events, which will also be exemplified in other stories, especially in the categories of “unsettling doubts” and “two worlds.”

From a thematic perspective, the ghost is a primordial symbol of “the return of the repressed.” This Freudian term is both valid and invalid. The appearance of a ghost, again unlike horror fiction, does not aim to terrify Miles or the reader. Link’s ghosts and monsters are not monstrous or scary; on the contrary, they are sympathetic and soft spoken. The ghost returns as the embodiment of Miles’ guilt repression because his romanticized teenage love is not an affectionate and mature affair but a superficial relationship. His attempt to recover his poems from Bethany’s grave is sufficient proof of his feelings. From Bethany’s perspective, her return is not related to taking revenge, as observed in most ghost fictions. She is replenished as a cheerful and self-confident teenage girl. She is not only at peace with herself, but also with her ex-boyfriend and mother. Miles, now, reveals his true feelings and responses to this ghost. He tries to get rid of her later in front of the store and avoids her because he is ashamed of her (*Pretty Monsters* 13). On the other hand, Bethany does not feel any inferiority for her ghostly appearance, contrary to ghost stories where ghosts are uglier than their former look. She

smells like “a new car,” (2) and is “extremely pretty” (16). She is content with her appearance, and actually returns as a wiser and mentally mature woman. She apologizes to her mother for “wrecking the car,” and accepts that the relationship between her and Miles is over.

In Link’s other story, “The Hortlak,” Eric and Batu work in an all-night convenience store in Ausible Chasm, near the Canadian border. The store is constantly visited by zombies. Charley, who works at a dog-shelter where her duties include putting dogs to sleep with injections, occasionally stops by the store. Eric, jealous of Batu since he believes that Charley and Batu are close, tries to flirt with Charley while he tries to sell products to zombies that are introduced as the ordinary residents of the area. As the narrator states, “The zombies came in, and he was polite to them, and failed to understand what they wanted, and sometimes real people came in and bought candy or cigarettes or beer” (*Magic for Beginners* 26). Since such an occasion distorts the reader’s ordinary reading experience, “that irreducible grain increases the participation of readers, contributing to the postmodern proliferation of writerly texts, texts co-created by their readers” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 9). The reader sees a mimetically drawn world, but the reality in this world does not concur with the notion of reality in the reader’s mind. Thus, the reader experiences a fictional zone, in which cooperation is required. At the same time, the writer peels off the exoticism in fantastic characters because the intention is not to present a marvelous impression but to delineate a truth by extending the possibilities of fiction.

In Brockmeier’s “A Fable with Slips of White Paper,” a man accidentally buys God’s coat and in its pockets he finds slips of papers, which he discovers to be prayers. He tries to fulfill some of these prayers until he loses the coat. After losing the coat he finds a job as a cook for baking fortune cookies, in which he inserts prayers or poems. When the man wears the coat, he realizes that he is “able to detect the pressure of an incoming prayer before it even arrived” (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 263). As the title suggests, the story is more like a fable, it neither claims reality, nor fictionality, but presents an escape for the protagonist. Conventional fairy tales generally consist of a moral message, and Brian Attebery writes, “fairy tales have never hidden their construction and thus have never tried to fool the listener into mistaking poesis, or

making, for mimesis, the simple imitation of reality” (“*Stories about Stories*”). While the story reveals a subjective truth and consists of a message, the existence of the “supernatural” does not cause reaction in terms of an unbelievable occasion. On the other hand, since the story is not an oral but a narrative form, it reflects a reading experience. The metaphoric meaning of “If I were in your shoes,” converts to a literal meaning of “If I were in God’s coat.” For Chanady, seeking innovative forms in the narrative separates magical realism from fairy tales. In her words,

fairy tales cannot be considered magical realist because they adhere to relatively uniform plot structure, as Vladimir Propp demonstrated in 1928, an inevitable moral resolution of the Manichean conflict of the characters, and a classifiable number of motifs that have been catalogued by folklorists since the beginning of the century. (*Territorialization of the Imaginary* 129)

In the story, Brockmeier’s character does not arrive at a general moral conclusion, but he ends up working in a Chinese restaurant and writes fortunes embedded in cookies. Rather than creating a structure built on cultural beliefs, Brockmeier uses the irreducible elements of magic as a narrative form and this magic becomes a way of perceiving the self. As fantastic literature is seen as an escape from reality, magical elements also leave the door ajar for letting dreams come true. However, contrary to general belief that fantasy is escapist fiction, through telling this story the character encounters his own reality. At the end of the story, he is not stuck with the magical power of the coat, but embraces life as a manual laborer. Beauties, gratitude, and boredom of daily routines are reflected through a magical coat, but the magic coat does not serve as an element of escapist fiction, rather, it leads the character to his own reality, which is to struggle with his isolation and financial situation.

In Millhauser’s “Sons and Mothers” there is a long hesitation between the marvelous and the uncanny in which the reader tries to comprehend the nature of events. The story starts with the ordinary life of a son who longs to visit his mother and he finally does after many years. When they meet, there seems to be an “uncanny” tension between the son and the mother. The mother mentions that she cannot remember faces, which implies that she might have developed a mental disorder such as dementia or Alzheimer’s. The narrator describes his hometown and past memories in detail. The mother and son spend some time together though the mother acts as if she is alienated.

The house disappears at the end of the story, which indicates an encounter of living and deceased people.

The narrator does not explicitly state whether the magical element emerges out of the psychological state of the character or if the character is in a supernatural environment. Yet, towards the end of the story, he remarks, “When I reached the front hall I turned to look at the living room, which was no longer there” (*Voices in the Night* “Sons and Mothers”). The reader is left between hesitation and decisiveness in understanding the circumstances of the character. The author refrains from explaining the issue further. Throughout the story there is an implication that the mother might either be a ghost or an elderly person with dementia, and the narrator visits his hometown, which may or may not exist any longer. The story is told from the perspective of the son, who does not have a fulfilling life, and he longs for the good old days. He decides to visit his mother, but his confrontation with the past and memories turns out to be different than his expectations. This trip makes him realize that the past is elusive.

Magical elements generally lead characters to confront their problems, or help them to understand and accept their current situation. Apart from the individual matters, collective issues, as in Latin magical realist works, are reflected through the same defamiliarization of magical realism; when a society encounters something unusual or supernatural, awareness about their previous routines, failures, or injustices are triggered. In his story, “The Tower,” Millhauser presents the magical element as a tower that constantly grows and rises up in the sky. While the residents reformulate the city plan, they are concerned with the vertically growing tower. As the narrator states, “During the course of many generations the Tower grew higher and higher until one day it pierced the floor of heaven” (*Dangerous Laughter*). Other than the obvious reference to the Tower of Babel, the idea of growing carries various metaphors such as progress and modernization. People want to live in developed large cities, rather than provincial areas where opportunities are limited. Thus, the world created in the story is not thoroughly a fantastic place. There is a rational approach to this irreducible element of magic. People of the town calculate and try to build a stable city and they want to stop the growth, because progress and advancement do not necessarily bring relief, but create new problems: “Just as the problem of reaching the top of the Tower had led to a

number of unforeseen difficulties and confusions, so a host of purely technical problems had arisen during the long labor of construction” (*Dangerous Laughter* “The Tower”). The magical element does not entirely invalidate the rational mind or the laws of science, but they conjure up alternative images of a mimetic world that already exists. As observed in most of the stories, this story also does not reveal a clear conclusion because the focus is more on conceding to an expression, rather than reaching an ultimate truth.

When Chanady distinguishes magical realism from the fantastic, she writes, “while the implied author is educated according to our conventional norms of reason and logic, and can therefore recognize the supernatural as contrary to the laws of nature, he tries to accept the world view of a culture in order to describe it” (*Magical Realism and the Fantastic* 25). For her, the implied reader is one of the main concerns in drawing a line between the fantastic and magical realism. Although non-Western literature might be circulated in this category, a reader-oriented division seems as a restrictive criterion for magical realist works. On the other hand, the notion of “culture” might be confusing since it may be difficult to affiliate supernatural elements with certain cultures. Zombies, as an irreducible magical element, are not necessarily related to a specific culture and they are not necessarily an element of magical realism. Nevertheless, Chanady clarifies the difference between reality and supernatural as follows,

By presenting various different perceptions of reality, such as that of superstitious aborigines, hallucinating city dwellers and children with a vivid imagination, the narrator allows us to see dimensions of reality of which we are not normally aware. The supernatural, which is the product of an alien imagination, is juxtaposed with everyday reality in order to create a more complete picture of the world. The “amalgamation of realism and fantasy” is the means to an end, and this is the penetration of the mystery of reality. (*Magical Realism and the Fantastic* 27)

Although critics tend to label magical realism as a phenomenon of certain cultures, especially Latin America, the essential element of the literary mode depends on this “amalgamation of realism and fantasy.” In “The Light Through the Window,” Brockmeier narrates the story of a window cleaner with a routine cleaning job. His father and grandfather were also window cleaners. He lives an isolated life, thinking about how it would feel to be somebody else. He writes messages on the windows he cleans, but most of the time, nobody notices although they are present in the rooms. He

sees ghosts and visions through the windows. The magical in this story does not have cultural or superstitious roots but is presented mostly as a surrealist tendency. In the story, the narrator writes,

The light from past moments is not lost forever: every star, every city, every family and person sends each instant of its light into the measure of surrounding space—and though such rays disperse in all directions, there are forces that can draw them back together. Thus it was that the window cleaner was not wholly surprised when the next morning, in the dark of a coming storm, he saw from his platform a vision that was many years past. (*Things that Fall from the Sky* 261)

The irreducible element is made up in a fictional space, which sounds scientific but is not. Furthermore, the supernatural element does not have a concrete connection to a specific culture. To define the “magic” in magical realism Maggie Ann Bowers says, “in magic realism ‘magic’ refers to the mystery of life: in marvelous and magical realism ‘magic’ refers to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science” (*Magic(al) Realism* 19). Thus, not only cultural elements, oral tales, and myths are expansive materials of magical realist writers, but other methods of presenting the ordinary as awry or unusual, such as surrealism, could also be connected with the genre.

“The irreducible element of magic” reflect an “extraordinary” element that might be perplexing for the reader, but not for the characters. In other words, magical elements always modify the conventional perception, which makes magical realism akin to other art movements such as surrealism or expressionism. The fantastic, surreal, and magical have different characteristics, but they have comparable traits. Instead of solid borders, they are key components that realign genre boundaries. Surrealist tendencies, for instance, are more visible in Aimee Bender’s stories. In her story “Marzipan,” the narrator’s grandmother dies when a hole opens up in her father’s body. When they go to hospital, they find out that her mother is pregnant. She gives birth to her own mother, in other words, the narrator’s grandmother. At the end of the story, the characters eat marzipan which was from the grandmother’s funeral reception. The story begins as follows, “One week after his father died, my father woke up with a hole in his stomach. It wasn’t a small hole, some kind of mild break in the skin, it was a hole the size of a soccer ball and it went all the way through. You could now see behind him like he was

an enlarged peephole” (*The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* “Marzipan”). The doctor observes the hole, but does not find it surprising. Surrealist paintings attempt to explore a distortion in memory, psychology, or conscious and integrate these images into mimetic scenes. However, such elements are considered unreal while magical realism “is unified by the creation of a narrative in which magic is incorporated seamlessly into reality” (*Magic(al) Realism* 22). In Aimee Bender’s “The Leading Man,” the protagonist is born with fingers shaped like keys (*Willfull Creatures*). Except his right pinkie, nine of the fingers are keys to different doors and lockers and he tries to find which locks the keys open. Unlike surrealism, this abnormal body formation does not reveal the character’s unconscious through an abstract portrayal. Fingers like keys are accepted as a natural phenomenon. Although a surrealist depiction is presented in the story, the function of the depictions springs an irreducible element of magic.

Moreover, although they are often associated with enlightenment and rationalism, western societies are not deprived of “magical.” David K. Danow writes,

The geographical proximity of the jungle to the city elicits a related omnipresent sense of the closeness of the prehistoric past to modern life, of myth, or primordial thinking, to scientific thought. Yet that closeness, filtered through a creative human imagination nurtured on a mix of the traditions and beliefs of the native Indians, as well as those of the transplanted Africans and Europeans a frequently unbearable humid Caribbean atmosphere absorbed into that world of prolific cultural hybridization, allows for a seemingly inevitable portrayal of the fantastic as factual and realistic. (71)

Western societies consist of heterogenous belief systems, cultures, and dialecticism, in which science may not always be dominant. Individuals claiming to be rational and science oriented might harbor superstitions and believe in myths. Urban legends, aliens, paranormal events, and zombie stories emerge out of metropolises. Zombies, for example, are generally thought of as being part of West Indian and Haiti cultures. The word zombie might be derived from Indian term Jumbie (Ackerman and Gautier 467). However, there are various definitions for zombies and subtypes exist in different cultures such as African tribes (Ackerman and Gautier 479). In popular western culture, an evolved “zombie” figure exists in popular literature and visual arts including television series and films. Although zombies are regarded as fictional and beyond reason, there are Americans who believe in zombies and even consider a zombie

apocalypse plan (Sanders). Hegerfeldt points out a similar tendency as follows,

Magical thought can broadly be defined as the belief in, or the construction of, causal connections between particular events or items that are due to mystical forces beyond the human sphere. These connections are then used to explain events or to work toward a desired outcome. In the Western world, magical beliefs are frequently thought of as illogical and irrational. However, it has been argued that, within their cultural context, apparently irrational beliefs can seem quite rational. (31)

The irreducible element of magic does not have to be peculiar to non-Western cultures, on the contrary, magic, wizards, witches, and ghosts also existed in Western societies but advancement in technology, industrialization, and science diminished the existence of such beliefs. According to Keith Thomas, although there is a drastic decline in magic, Western societies did not entirely elude it. As an example, he refers to the presence of horoscopes and lucky mascots, and says “If magic is to be defined as the employment of ineffective techniques to allay anxiety when effective ones are not available, then we must recognize that no society will ever be free from it” (*Religion and The Decline of Magic* 801).

Notwithstanding, the genre of fantasy as fantastic literature and fantastic elements are sometimes criticized for disguising reality and the genre is incorrectly labeled as “escapist” literature. However, defamiliarization creates counter actualizations. The irreducible element of magic leads to a wider perspective of reality. As Faris states, “In the light of disruptions of cause and effect and irreducible elements of magic recounted with little or no comment, in conjunction with accounts of extraordinary but actual phenomena and events, the real as we know it may seem amazing or even ridiculous” (*Ordinary Enhancements* 11). In “The Wrong Grave,” Miles digs up his girlfriend’s grave because he is planning to apply to a poetry contest with the poetry he buried earlier in her grave. There is nothing magical about this wish, but the act of trying to dig the grave to retrieve the poems highlights an absurd behavior. The intended act does not fall under a reasonable act and does not comply with the enlightened mind of Western society. Thus, in magical realism, “reality’s outrageousness is often underscored because ordinary people react to magical events in recognizable and sometimes also in disturbing ways, a circumstance that normalizes the magical event but also defamiliarizes, underlines, or critiques extraordinary aspects of the real” (*Ordinary*

Enhancements 13).

The magical series of events in the story is more concerned about the living than the dead. The story exposes the mourning and bereavement period experienced by Miles and his dead girlfriend's mother, Mrs. Baldwin, although Miles seems to have adjusted better and he is already getting used to the absence of his girlfriend. The reality might be more shocking and absurd than the magical occurrence. As the narrator points out, "Then the thought came to Miles like the tolling of a large and leaden bell that Bethany was dead. This may sound strange, but in my experience it's strange and it's also just how it works. You wake up and you remember that the person you loved is dead. And then you think: really?" (*Pretty Monsters* 3). The resurrection of Bethany as a ghost and her interaction with her boyfriend and her mother raises questions about the concept of death and losing loved ones. People try to deal with their loss and try to understand the purpose of life. "The Wrong Grave" implies an existential absurdity, similar to Albert Camus's works in which humanitarian values and purposes are questioned. Although Miles used to feel compassionate about his girlfriend, he seems to have gotten over his burden and continues to live regardless of the fact that he lost his girlfriend and eventually, he does not even recognize his girlfriend after she appears as a ghost.

On the other hand, Mrs. Baldwin keeps waiting for her daughter even though she knows that she is deceased. The mother believes that her daughter will be resurrected some day and when she sees her daughter she says "I'll go with you. That's why you've come, isn't it? Because I'm dead too?" (*Pretty Monsters* 20). Mrs. Baldwin seeks a meaning in death to maintain her life, but the story suggests that living is as meaningless as death and both are coincidental events. Accordingly, Bethany explains the situation by saying, "No. Sorry. You're not dead. It's Miles's fault. He dug me up" (*Pretty Monsters* 20). Bethany dies in an accident, but the narrator creates alternative future stories, in which she is aligned with unorthodox life patterns: "Maybe she shaved her head and went on a pilgrimage to some remote lamasery and came back as a superhero with a dark past and some kick-ass martial-arts moves. Maybe she sent her mother postcards from time to time. Maybe she wrote them as part of her circus act, using the tips of her hair, dipping them into an inkwell" (*Pretty Monsters* 22). Predictions of how Bethany's afterlife unfolds diverges the story from traditional ghost stories. Mrs. Baldwin's expectations

and hopes are misleading, Miles does not present a portrayal of a devoted lover, and Bethany is not a ghost who is resurrected to take vengeance on somebody. However, the story reverberates on how life continues in its own “realistic” manner.

In “The Hortlak,” the narrator does not concentrate on the zombies but people coming from and going to Canada, who, according to the narrator, are strange:

Real people, the ones who weren't heading towards Canada or away from Canada, mostly had better things to do than drive out to the All-Night at 3 A.M. So real people, in a way, were even weirder, when they came in. Eric kept a close eye on the real people. Once a guy had pulled a gun on him—there was no way to understand that, but, on the other hand, you knew exactly what was going on. With the zombies, who knew? (*Magic for Beginners* 38)

A convenience store, which is in the middle of nowhere, becomes the setting for observing people from different cultural backgrounds and the customers might be experiencing “in-betweenness” since they are distanced from their homes.

Magical elements are related to the norms of societies and they have collective and individual aspects that can be examined scientifically. As Hegerfeldt puts it, “magical beliefs are relevant to everyday life; as social scientists have pointed out, magic can be said to ‘work’ insofar as it has very real effects indeed on a psychological and social level” (33). In Brockmeier’s short story, “A Fable with Slips of White Paper Spilling from the Pockets,” the described miracle reflects another common reality: People live in isolation, which leads to depression. The character starts to hear the prayers of other people; for example, a woman begs God to send someone for companionship. He hears prayers for little things, which he is able to accomplish without supernatural powers, and he offers coffee to the woman to console her (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 266). Brockmeier keeps exploring the theme of loneliness in metropolitan cities in his other story, “The Light through the Window.” The window cleaner suffers from loneliness; he does not have meaningful interactions with others. Although he tries to communicate with the people in the rooms he sees through the windows he cleans, people refrain from talking to him. He wonders “how it would feel to be in the thick of them, to be some other person, in a restaurant drinking with friends or in a bed with his arm around his lover” (*Things that Fall from the Sky* 185). The magical elements in the story are related to the character’s visions. The reader might interpret that he is

hallucinating due to his loneliness and the story does not clarify whether or not the protagonist is disillusioned since he literally sees his deceased father and grandfather through some of those windows.

Steven Millhauser also concentrates on the theme of loneliness through a mother and son relationship in his story “Sons and Mothers” (*Voices in the Night*). The protagonist contemplates about his personal history and wants to visit his mother, whom he had neglected due to his business. When he finally visits his hometown, he arrives at a familiar and yet, an unfamiliar place: “The old neighborhood unsettled me. Things had changed everywhere, it was only to be expected, yet everything had remained the same, as though change were nothing but a new way of revealing sameness” (*Voices in the Night* “Sons and Mothers”). He describes the changes in detail and feels distant from his past life. When he meets his mother, she exclaims “I know you,” which is an unusual reaction for a mother. Millhauser does not reveal the source of the “uncanny” or the supernatural directly. On one hand, the character longs for his past; on the other hand, the nostalgia irritates him. Similar to Link’s “The Wrong Grave,” the story shows how life goes on and how the characters have undergone a change under the projective of magical. When his mother asks him what he wants, he says “I wanted to see you,” but his inner voice says, “What did I want? I wanted everything to be the way it once was, I wanted family outings and birthday candles . . . I wanted not to be a polite middle-aged man standing in a dark living room, trying to see his mother’s face” (*Voices in the Night* “Sons and Mothers”). Millhauser’s narrative creates an ambiguous world. The comment “trying to see his mother’s face in the dark,” is ambiguous since it is not clear whether the darkness of the room is just a physical obstruction keeping him from seeing his mother clearly or whether the character is depressive and his visit to his old home is just an attempt to imagine his mother alive. Nevertheless, the narrative form and the uncanny atmosphere reveals the character’s desire to reconcile with his past as the story reveals from the very beginning.

In “The Tower,” there is a collective history of a city, in which, the city changes in size and the residents have to adapt to the change, which also leads to loneliness and isolation. The tower divides people into the ones who live below and the ones who live above others and keep moving upward as the tower rises upward. The tower points out

to the class distinction among people who continue to be more and more separated from each other as the tower keeps growing.

In “Marzipan” Aimee Bender refers to the strict relationship between mother and daughter. The woman giving birth to her own mother looks like an idiom, in which the metaphorical meaning is actualized in real life. As Hegerfeldth puts it, “Magic realist fiction addresses the traditional Western distinction between the literal and the figurative by rendering figures of speech oddly real on the level of the text: in magic realist fiction, metaphors become literally true” (56). While the father of the family has a hole in his stomach, the mother is pregnant with her mother. She cannot reconcile with her mother’s death. When the narrator, the daughter says to her mother “don’t die,” the mother answers, “I am not . . . but when I do . . . I want you to let me go” (*The Girl in Flammable Skirt* “Marzipan”).

Marzipan is in the focus of the story because Bender attributes an emotional meaning to foods. A similar theme is observed in her novel *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*. In the novel, when Rose eats a certain food, she senses the feeling of whoever cooked it. When she eats the lemon cake that her mother has cooked, she describes her feeling as follows, “I could absolutely taste the chocolate, but in drifts and traces, in an unfurling, or an opening, it seemed that my mouth was also filling with the taste of smallness, the sensation of shrinking, of upset, tasting a distance I somehow knew was connected to my mother” (10). In “Marzipan” there is an understanding of food, the marzipan. Eating becomes a way of nourishing emotions, and a way of filling a psychological emptiness. Hence, eating marzipan reflects the emotional connection between the narrator, the mother, and the grandmother. In the final scene of the story, when her mother does not eat her soup, the narrator asks if she can drink her soup and says “I pretend I was her while I ate it. I imagined I was doing the eating but she was getting nourished” (*The Girl in Flammable Skirt* “Marzipan”). Through eating, she is able to sympathize with her mother and share her pain.

Bender’s “The Leading Man” uses a similar formula, creating a literal meaning out of a real element. The boy born with fingers like keys has to find his way out. Although keys have a symbolic stance for destiny and talent, the story creates physical hands with fingers replaced by keys. Every key opens a different lock and every key leads the boy

to a different path in his life. But most of the time the keys open trivial things like the cafeteria door or his camp trunk, which indicates the randomness in life.

To sum up, the stories consist of irreducible elements of magic, which reflects certain realities about characters. Although magical elements are supposedly believed to be products of “primitive” beliefs, as an element of narrative, these magical occurrences are not peculiar to non-Western societies. Furthermore, magical elements unfold truths about characters struggling with problems of loneliness, isolation, grief, and the constraints of routine lives.

1.2. REALISTIC DESCRIPTIONS

In her second principle Faris suggests that blending magic with reality requires a lot of realistic descriptions. She writes, “descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world” (“Scheherazade’s Children” 169). As a distinguisher of magical realism from the fantastic, Chanady stresses the realist aspect of the narration and writes, “It is the presence of a realistic framework that constitutes the primary difference between magical realism and pure fantasy, such as that found in fairy tales. Not only is the story set in normal, contemporary world, but it also contains many realistic descriptions of man and society” (*Magical Realism and the Fantastic* 46). The depiction of an ordinary/mimetic environment is preserved in the narrative to acquire a balance between the real and magical. Brockmeier presents a city view with poetic descriptions and his actions and feelings are detailed to create a vivid scenery:

The glass of the city soon went orange with the evening sunlight. He listened to the horn blasts of passing traffic, watched a flight of martins darting from an alley, and was taken by a blaze of sudden energy. It was a hard flash of sickness and embarrassment and anger. He coiled his misting hose and cranked the winches of his platform, propelling it from the corner of the forty-second floor. Its rigging whistled and its planking creaked as he sailed from face to face of the building. Its side rail shook like a dowsing rod as he tumbled and dipped and ascended. (*Things that Fall from the Sky* 189)

This type of description lets the reader penetrate into a known, mimetic world and “this attention to sensory detail continues and renews the realistic tradition” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 14). Such type of narration also distinguishes magical realist fiction from the genre of fantasy, which does not necessarily have to take place in a world that is

familiar to the reader. However, Faris generally speaks of the magical realist mode used in novels. For her, to create a realistic impact, the given details might also be recreated pasts. She states that “If we focus on reference rather than on description, we may witness idiosyncratic recreations of historical events, but events grounded firmly in historical realities, often alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 15).

The detailed descriptions used in short stories are relatively less as the nature of the short story format reduces the use of details and long descriptions. There are no strong indications and descriptions of historical background. Nevertheless, the length of a short story is relative and short stories more or less apply the same characteristics. While Kelly Link’s and Steven Millhauser’s short stories are relatively longer, which sometimes extend to the size of a decent novella, Aimee Bender’s stories are more minimalistic. However, realistic aspects of the narratives are visible in most of the short stories. Furthermore, the realistic descriptions help the short story writers to reflect a certain kind of “truth,” which is perceived through magical elements. Within the frame of realistic description of the mimetic world, the stories reveal and construct their own truth. In “The Wrong Grave,” Miles becomes more aware of his girlfriend’s physical appearance, which he failed to pay attention to when she was alive. To point out Miles’ new consciousness, the narrator writes, “Miles had never noticed before, but Bethany’s ears were slightly lopsided. One was smaller and slightly higher up” (*Pretty Monsters* 2).

In the magical realist texts, the reader encounters unfamiliar events, stories, and objects, which are presented as a routine part of that particular world. For this reason, the narrator has to provide some details to the reader for creating a connection or recognition. Furthermore, there has to be a balance between the natural and supernatural in the narrative. Chanady writes,

If there is insufficient realistic detail, the story tends towards the fairy tale or other types of pure fantasy. If the supernatural does not constitute a coherent code, it is perceived as out of place or absurd, or as a dream of hallucination within a realistic narrative. A dream about the supernatural, narrated in the form of free indirect discourse within the framework of a realistic novel, does not transform the narrative into an example of magical realism. (*Magical Realism and the Fantastic* 57)

Millhauser gives concrete details of his hometown in long paragraphs. In “Sons and Mothers,” he points out every visual detail about his hometown, and writes passages such as, “But there was the old willow tree on the corner, there the black roof followed by the red roof, there the creosoted telephone poles with the numbers screwed into the wood, there the stucco house with the glider on the porch followed by the brown house with the two mailboxes and the two front doors” (*Voices in the Night*). However, behind this concrete description there is a twist that plays with the reader’s perception since the things he describes disappear suddenly. Magical realist texts employ realist descriptions, since they aim for a realistic context. Catherine Belsey says, “Realism is plausible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is (discursively) familiar” (*Critical Practice* 47). This “plausibility” conjoins the mimetic world with magical elements, which are aligned with ordinary objects of daily life. Thus, not only the setting, but also the unknown, magical objects, or miracles are described realistically. In “The Hortlak” Link describes the pajamas very intricately,

Batu’s pajama bottoms were silk. There were smiling hydrocephalic cartoon cats on them, and the cats carried children in their mouths. Either the children were mouse-sized, or the cats were bear-sized. The children were either screaming or laughing. Batu’s pajama top was red flannel, faded, with guillotines, and heads in baskets. (*Magic for Beginners* 28)

This description, although realistic, introduces a magical element. In the story, the designs of the pajamas are absorbed from other people’s dreams or diaries (*Magic for Beginners* 34). There is a mimetic ground to set the story and aspirate the reader into a familiar world and objects, while there is also an independent plane in the structure, which provides magical supplements. As Faris puts it, “the best magical realist fiction entices us with entrancing—magic—details, the magical nature of those details is a clear departure from realism. The detail is freed, in a sense, from a traditionally mimetic role to a greater extent than it has been before” (“Scheherazade’s Children” 169). In “A Fable with Slips of White Paper Spilling from the Pockets,” Brockmeier points out the details in the character’s magical coat as follows, “It had five compartments altogether: two front flap pockets, each of which lay over an angled hand-warmer pocket with the fleece almost completely worn away, as well as a small inside pocket above the left breast” (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 261). The description of an ordinary coat transgresses to the magical powers, and also the results of a bewildering event are

described in accordance with the phenomenal world. When the character reads the woman's mind and asks a related question, the woman does not find it odd. In "The Tower," when the tower rises above clouds, problems occur and the new scenery is described as follows,

When, therefore, the Tower was completed, it contained a considerable population who lived on nearly every level, in chambers varying from primitive caves to rich halls painted with red, black, and lapis-blue hunting scenes, above a thriving city that had already forgotten its earlier abandonment and decay. (*Dangerous Laughter* "The Tower")

Along with physical descriptions of the phenomenal world, daily routines and scenes are defined to capture a familiar scene for the reader. In "Marzipan," in which the father has a hole in his stomach, the narrator maintains such descriptions: "We sat down on the couch, curled together, my knees in a V on her thigh. Her side was warmer than usual from the sit-ups, even a little bit damp. She leaned her head against mine and we both stared ahead, at the closed drapes that were ivory, specked with brown" (*The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*). Exposure of the real and the magical occur on the same plane in the narrative and this produces a new fictional zone, in which there are no borders between natural and supernatural occurrences. In "The Leading Man," Bender narrates a description as follows,

He cried for a bit and tromped on some pansies as revenge and got so frustrated staring at the lock, such a simple piece of metal separating him from his palace of food and bed and TV and telephone, that he stuck the index finger of his right hand inside. It shoved deep into the lock, bumping around, trying to find a perfect spatial match. Nothing clicked. (*Willful Creatures*)

In the textual level, the narrator does not create a binary opposition between fantasy and reality. Fingers shaped like keys, for instance, are a part of ordinary life, but it is not in a coherent realm, which could only be described as realistic. To sum up, to create a make-believe atmosphere, writers use detailed descriptions in two ways; first, the mimetic world, routines and ordinary lives are depicted realistically. Secondly, the irreducible elements of magic are presented with details in appearance, but the writers do not expound on the reasons or causes of the irreducible elements.

1.3. UNSETTLING DOUBTS

According to the third characteristics suggested by Faris, “The reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events, and hence experience some unsettling doubts” (“Scheherazade’s Children” 171). Todorov offers a similar hesitation when he defines the fantastic. According to Todorov,

The text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader’s role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work . . . Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations. (*The Fantastic* 33)

Although, Todorov’s definition is restrictive, “hesitation” can be a starting point to discuss the nature of the genre. The hesitation in the fantastic accepts the law of the mimetic/rational world and treats it as a separate entity, whether it is marvelous or uncanny. On the other hand, in magical realism, the hesitation does not adhere to the laws of the known world as a central frame. In this regard, Todorov’s “hesitation,” the litmus paper of the fantastic, gains a different meaning in magical realism. According to Anne Hegerfeldth,

whereas fantastic literature employs hesitation to express anxiety about the validity of its rational-empirical world-view, magic realist fiction uses hesitation in order to actively question that world-view from a meta-level, suggesting that reality cannot be reduced to the empirically observable or rationally explicable, but that so-called fictions need to be taken into account as well. (*Lies that Tell the Truth* 90)

Thus, “hesitation” indulges various functions. Chanady, suggests a different explanation on hesitation by reevaluating it. She maintains,

A far more satisfactory term than hesitation, which is a reaction on the part of the reader to textual indications, is antinomy, or the simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes in the text. Since neither can be accepted in the presence of the other, the apparently supernatural phenomenon remains inexplicable. (*Magical Realism and the Fantastic* 12)

Rather than creating suspense throughout the reading, the antinomy embraces two different worlds simultaneously. Through neutralizing “hesitation,” for instance in the dialogue between Miles and his dead girlfriend in “The Wrong Grave” (*Pretty Monsters* 10), the text creates a kind of alienation, to which the reader does not know how to

respond.

In Todorov's hesitation concept, the reader pauses and questions the source of the unfamiliar event. If there is a reasonable explanation, such as a distorted mind, hallucinations, or psychological disorder of the characters, the situation is classified as "uncanny" or falls into another category, the marvelous, in which the events cannot be explained through known laws of science (Lem and Abernathy 229-230). Whereas, hesitation in the fantastic, aims to create an indecisive impulse, the antinomy of magical realism resolves procrastination through the narrative.

In magical realism, the cultural background of the reader might influence the duration of the hesitation (*Ordinary Enchantments* 17). Although this might be true to some extent, presenting the cultural background as a definer may not be conclusive. Since magical realism supposedly originated in Latin America, culture, tradition, myths, and oral tales tend to be underscored within the discussions of magical realism as a genre. For Chanady, however, these differences could be eradicated through authorial reticence. As she puts it,

The implied reader, who can distinguish between the natural and the supernatural on the basis of his education and cultural background, is asked to suspend this attitude in order to adopt the point of view of a person with a completely different perception of reality. He must allow himself to be carried away entirely, without questioning, by the alien world view presented by the text. It is necessary for him to accept the reality of the supernatural. (*The Fantastic and Magical Realism* 102)

Indeed, rather than authorial reticence, she elucidates on the similar function of willing suspension of disbelief, which is introduced by Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*. In *Lyrical Ballads* Coleridge refers of the supernatural and writes, "so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (Chapter XIV). The intention of willing suspension of disbelief is "to make supernatural characters and events in fiction seem as possible as nonsupernatural characters and events in fiction" (Kivy 100). In the light of this, the reader is already aware that s/he is entering into the boundaries of fiction and is eager to believe the ontological context of the fictional structure regardless of cultural or ethnic background. Chanady believes that authorial reticence makes a difference and leads the

reader to adapt into the two realms.

Nevertheless, the reader comes across contradictions in which hesitation is not eluded. The characters sometimes intuit the impossibility of the events. In “The Wrong Grave,” Miles considers the weakness of his situation, as “Bethany is never going to believe this but then, Bethany had never believed in anything like ghosts. She’d hardly believed in the school dress code. She definitely wouldn’t have believed in a dead girl who could float around on her hair like it was an anti-gravity device” (*Pretty Monsters* 14). On the other hand, he inures himself to the existence of a ghost in his girlfriend’s grave. When the narrator describes a scene from Bethany’s burial and points out Mrs. Baldwin’s odd words: “She patted Bethany’s hands, and said, ‘Well, good-bye, old girl. Don’t forget to send a postcard.’ Don’t ask me what she meant by this. Sometimes Bethany’s mother said strange things” (*Pretty Monsters* 4). The reader cannot be sure whether Mrs. Baldwin’s farewell to her deceased daughter has a literal meaning, but the text naturalizes such an occurrence.

The authorial reticence, for Chanady, also helps the text to maintain a balance between the rational and irrational. Moreover, this tone preserves the lack of the authorial opinion, which is a crucial method for magical realism. Chanady elucidates,

If the narrator stressed the exclusive validity of his rational worldview, he would relegate the supernatural to a secondary mode of being (the unreliable imagination of a character), and thus the juxtaposition of two mutually exclusive logical codes, which is essential to magical realism, would become a hierarchy. (*The Fantastic and the Magical Realism* 29-30)

In “The Hortlak,” the zombies do not appear when living people are in the shop and Charley is never seen around zombies (*Magic for Beginners* 26). This suggests that only Eric and Batu are able to see the zombies. The reader may be suspicious of the existence of zombies, but the narrator never states that the zombies are only visible for Eric and Batu. Furthermore, the ghosts of the dogs are invisible. When Eric asks Batu if he can see the ghost dogs in Charley’s car, he says “Don’t be ridiculous . . . You can’t see that kind of ghost. You smell them” (*Magic for Beginners* 30). The narrator states the clues, but does not give satisfactory explanations. Chanady suggests that giving less information about the nature of irreducible elements is part of magical realist narratives since “the unnatural is naturalized by commenting as little as possible on it” (*The*

Fantastic and Magical Realism 160).

The ontological basis of the world created in the story has a different paradigm. In the first level, the reader with a rational perspective would think that Batu might be lying. If the existence of ghosts were accepted with a suspension of disbelief, then the reader would believe that there are other types of ghosts visible to the naked eye. The narrative also talks about the existence of ghosts that are sensed through smell. The reliability of the narrator and the characters also create hesitation. When Eric insists on finding out the secret of the pajamas, Batu gives contradictory answers. In one occasion, he says, “My pajamas are experimental CIA pajamas . . . Like batteries. You’ve been charging them for me when you sleep. That’s all I can say right now” (*Magic for Beginners* 49), but he adds that zombies gave him the pajamas (*Magic for Beginners* 49). As Faris states, “we are often literally instructed by the text to hesitate. But even if we are not, we may hesitate, both in doubt because we are unsure about the nature of the events and in wonder, in awe, at their remarkable properties” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 19).

In “The Light through the Window” the character looks at the window and sees “two figures standing at his dressing chest. He recognized the first as his grandfather and the other, a small boy straining toward the light switch, as himself.” (*Things that Fall from the Sky* 265). His perception from the reflection of the window is questionable. The narrator points out the loneliness of the character, and the reader might perceive his vision as an outcome of his isolation. In the following quotation, the reader witnesses the character’s depression clearly: “All this time, as he watched the darkening of the world, the window cleaner thought about the farawayness of other lives, about the fraying wire that bound him to his wishes, about the kindnesses of people who were now no more than ghosts” (*Things that Fall from the Sky* 264). When the narrator says “the kindnesses of people who were now no more than ghosts,” the reader might consider the “ghosts” to be a metaphorical image about his losses, but the narrative tucks magical elements in and the validity of ghosts are evoked in the story. A similar hesitation is observed Millhauser’s “Sons and Mothers.” The narrator says, “If I didn’t get up at once from my father’s chair and return to the outside World, I would become part of the dying room” (“Sons and Mothers” *Voices in the Night*). “The dying room” might be a figure of speech referring to past time, but within the story, it is also possible

to interpret the “dying room” as a space that belongs to his mother’s ghost.

On the other hand, Faris and Brenda Cooper do not entirely agree with Chanady’s antinomy concept. Although antinomy, unlike hesitation, resolves the anxiety aroused in the reader, “the narrator’s acceptance of antinomy does not overcome our hesitation completely” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 20). For Cooper, authorial irony and authorial reticence should be mixed together to be a “defining feature of the magical text” (*Magical Realism in West African* 34). Hegerfeldt agrees on the function of the authorial reticence, but expostulates by saying, “magic realist texts do in fact engender a moment of hesitation—it merely has been relocated to the level of the reader” (*Lies that Tell the Truth* 55). Moreover, characters might show surprise or skepticism, which may trigger a similar response in the reader as Todorov describes (*Lies that Tell the Truth* 55). In some of the stories, the narrator explicitly remarks on the hesitation. In “A Fable with Slips of White Paper Spilling from the Pockets,” the narrator writes,

He wondered whether the prayers were something he had always subconsciously felt, he and everyone else in the world, stirring around between their bodies like invisible eddies, but which none of them had ever had the acuity to recognize for what they were, or whether he was able to perceive them only because he had happened to find the overcoat in the thrift store. He just didn’t know. (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 263-64).

Criticism emerges out of the contemplation of the rational mind and the existence of superstition. Also, the effects of magical elements could be evaluated with rational consciousness. In “The Tower,” the narrator explains concerns about the growing tower and says, “no one could deny for example, that the remarkable height of the Tower . . . was itself a concern, since those who lived on the plain below couldn’t possibly climb to the top within the short space of a lifetime” (*Dangerous Laughter*). The problems caused by the height of the tower affect the residents living in the area. Naturalization of the supernatural elements becomes part of the reasoning process, which reduces the duration of the hesitation.

Aimee Bender, rather than focusing on speculation, treats the antinomy without hesitation although she clearly states the magical element. In “Marzipan,” the narrator describes the medical diagnosis related to the hole in her father’s stomach as follows,

My parents went to the doctor the next day. The internist took an X ray and

proclaimed my father's inner organs intact. They went to the gastroenterologist. He said my father was digesting food in an arc, it was looping down the sides, sliding around the hole, and all his intestines were, although further crunched, still there and still functioning. (*The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*)

Rather than hesitation, the narrator presents a seemingly ordinary projection of the magical event. Hesitation, which is the main distinguisher in fantastic literature for Todorov, is not the only criteria in magical realism. As Anne Hegerfeldt puts it, "it would be more precise to say that magic realism blends elements of the marvelous, the supernatural, hyperbole and fabulation, improbable coincidences and the extraordinary with elements of literary realism" (51). In "The Leading Man" there is a fluid transition between the fantastic and the real when the narrator describes the character's key-shaped fingers. She states, "They were made of flesh, with nerves and pores, but of a tougher texture, more hardened and specific. As a child, the boy had a difficult time learning to hold a pen and use scissors, but he was resilient and figured out his own method fast enough" (*Willful Creatures* "The Leading Man"). As these examples demonstrate, the codes of the fantastic coexist with reality in magical realist stories.

1.4. TWO SEPARATE REALMS

In the fourth principle, Faris suggests that magical realist fictions merge two different worlds together ("Scheherazade's Children" 172). Those worlds create an oxymoron within fiction such as the real and magical, the visible and invisible, the traditional and modern. In the "Wrong Grave," the reader witnesses the merging of the world of the ghosts and the world of living people. The realm of the dead and living is separated in the experienced world. In the story, the realm of dead is brought into the realm of the living and as a result, a hybrid space is achieved. The dead girl is able to stare at Miles "thoughtfully" like a human being, but she is not able to blink, which suggests a continuing difference between two realms (*Pretty Monsters* 11). Creating two separate worlds and merging them may also create antinomies, from which the magical realist perspective is achieved. As Faris puts it,

the magical realist vision thus exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions. Ghosts and texts, or people and words that seem ghostly, inhabit these two-sided mirrors, many times situated between the two worlds of life and death; they enlarge that

space of intersection where a number of magically real fictions exist. (*Ordinary Enchantments* 21-22)

As a result, Faris suggests that the placement of two different worlds on the same plane leads to ontological questions, which also refers to Brian McHale's definition of postmodernism. Similarly, blurring the borders between worlds exist in magical realism and postmodernism. In "The Hortlak" the different realms of zombies and humans are blurred. While zombies signify a different realm, the way they are described also reflect today's society and habits. When Eric describes the living space occupied by Zombies, he says,

Zomburbia. They have everything down there. There's even supposed to be a drive-in movie theater down there, somewhere, that shows old black-and-white horror movies, all night long. Zombie churches with AA meetings for zombies, down in the basements, every Thursday night. (*Magic for Beginners* 31)

Providing a zombie world perspective reflects another aspect of social life. Such a magical world does not only create defamiliarization, but also prevents authoritative borders that might limit the narrative. As Stephen Slemon expounds,

a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences and silences. (409)

In "The Hortlak," if zombies are considered allegorically, the story might project a light on various issues such as immigration, poverty, and marginalization of ethnicities. Zombies look different, but they have similar concerns and lifestyles of the living people. Since the setting is an isolated place and the travelers who happen to use that route visit the shop, the "gap" between settlers and wanderers become more explicit.

In "The Light through the Window," the windows demarcate the border between two worlds. People from his past enlighten the alienated world of the protagonist. The contrast reveals both differences and similarities of the two worlds. The protagonist, lives a mundane and the vicious circle of life. But the ghosts of his father and grandfather bring some hope and rejuvenation for him. The ghost world functions to fill a gap in his life. For Hegerfeldth, "the many ghosts that appear in magic realist texts likewise can often be understood as the embodiment of memories or as personifications

of a nagging conscience” (56). The reader sees that the protagonist holds on to the memories of his family and he has to find a new world, other than the one that he knows. The narrator describes the encounter with the other world in the following manner:

When the light streamed like a beacon through the strokes in the mist, the window cleaner watched his own young eyes fill with recognition behind the glass, his own hand float slowly to his lips, his grandfather smile and ruffle his hair. And in the brisk night wind, as he stood on the platform heavy with sleep, he traced the light, and bowed his head, and saw written across his own drumming chest his name. (*Things that Fall from the Sky* 191)

The intrusion of ghosts into the mimetic world is also substantial in Millhauser’s stories. In his story “Sons and Mothers,” the mother and the son meet in his mother’s house in his hometown. However, the story does not draw an explicit border between the two worlds. Indeed, the narrator does not state anything about ghosts, but his descriptions implicitly reveal his hometown and his mother as belonging to the world of dead. The narrator’s explanations present an environment that is already gone.

Then I reached out to touch my mother, who was like someone lying on a couch, though she was standing upright before me. My hand came to rest on the lower part of her upper arm. It felt stiff as stick. My mother seemed to be hardening, here in the dark. In the black air, her wisps of hair seemed pressed to her skull, the skin of her face wax-pale. (*Voices in the Night* “Sons and Mothers”)

The passage describes a dream-like instance, however, magical realist fiction considers dreams as non-magical elements, also, the narrator explicitly states his dreaming state, which indicates that the passage above is not a dream, but a different zone in the mimetic world. It feels like his mother is lying on a couch, but at the same time she is standing in front of the narrator. Later on, he witnesses the sudden disappearance of his hometown. The described world of the story is neither related to a dream, nor to the borders of the known world. In Brockmeier’s fable, the narrator describes the disparity of the space between the divine and mortal as follows: “It was like the invisible resistance he remembered feeling when he tried to bring the common poles of two magnets together. The sensation was unmistakable. And it seemed that the stronger the force of the prayer, the greater the distance it was able to travel” (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 263). Thus, in both stories two separate worlds are brought together by the character’s experiences creating an alternate hybrid environment.

As the magical intrudes into the real world, it may have the function of dividing it and creating alternative worlds, which is a crucial function of magical realism. According to Faris, connecting different realms helps the reader to understand the ineffable (*Ordinary Enchantments* 88). In Millhauser's "The Tower," the magical element is the tower that grows vertically and reaches above the clouds. People living on the top floors of the tower become disconnected from those living below. The rumors and stories coming from above designate a heavenly life. Thus, "this combination of divinity and absurdity characterizes magical realism as it attempts to bridge the gap between ancient divinity and modern absurdity" (*Ordinary Enchantments* 88). People want to live on the top floors of the tower to have a comfortable life, although the existence of such a utopic land is debatable. As the narrator describes, "It soon became fashionable for merchant families and even skilled laborers to arrange for living quarters within the tower, far above the roofs of the temples and the royal palace, higher, it was said, than the dreams of young women fetching water from wells on rich blue summer afternoons" (*Voices in the Night* "The Tower"). The magical elements, if interpreted metaphorically, reveals the social structure of mimetic world. The living arrangements in the tower produce class distinctions and divide the society. The people living on the top of the tower are believed to possess mythic and magical mysteries. The structure becomes an allegory of heaven since the people living below can only dream about this world because of the improbability of reaching it within their life time.

The magical elements do not only create borders but also blur them. As the tower grows, the transition between different worlds and animosities shrink. The narrator comments on the climbers who try to reach the top, but fail: "Such people, and there were many, found themselves neither on earth nor in heaven, but in some in-between realm, in which it was easy to feel deprived of the pleasure of both places" (*Voices in the Night* "The Tower"). Magical elements may be able to blur narrative borders correspondingly. As Faris puts it, "[magical realism] also begins to erode the categories themselves because the link between empirically constructed perceptions of reality and realistically constructed fictional discourse means that to question one is to question the other" (*Ordinary Enchantments* 23).

In this light, Aimee Bender's "The Leading Man" may broaden the aspects of

interpretation. The character in the story does not know what to do with fingers shaped like keys, but as if in a coming-of-age story, he starts experimenting with them. As he tries to open new locks with his fingers, he experiences the randomness of life and grows in the process. Aimee Bender, in her interview with Julee Newberger comments on the story as follows: “I like the idea of someone born with something, who has to wrestle with it as a formative quality—as opposed to an adult who comes upon a skill or strangeness in adulthood. I mean, I find that interesting, too, but it seems like I gravitate more towards the discovery in childhood” (n.p.). As the keys turn into a quest for the character the story falls into a different category. In “Marzipan” magical elements, similarly, distinguishes childhood and adulthood. The narrator, who is a teenage girl, encounters unusual events and easily deals with them while the narrator’s mother cannot create a healthy relationship with her own mother and literally carries her mother within herself.

To sum up, magical and mimetic realms are merged together in the stories, which create antinomy and oxymoronic spaces. These spaces do not only present unknown and unfamiliar worlds, but also lead the reader to question the nature of the mimetic world. Thus, separate worlds are not just a matter of cultural conflict or belief systems, but the borders are reevaluated and the two realms enable the fictional work to mirror the social constructions that surround the characters.

1.5. TIME, SPACE, AND IDENTITY

According to Faris, magical realist fictions “disturb received ideas about time, space, and identity” (“Scheherazade’s Children” 173). To speak generally, since these three elements are necessary for all fictional works, it would not be wrong to assume that every fiction raises questions about time, space, and identity. Fiction often consists of conflicts, and as these conflicts play out, the characters and their identities change. Fictions take place at a certain time and a certain setting, which may alter the reader’s mind about time and space or bring new perspectives. Faris, herself, points out to the common roots between modernist and magical realist fiction on this issue. As she states: “Especially with regard to the questioning of time, space, and identity, it is possible to see how magical realism has its roots in modernism and its branches and leaves in

postmodernism, as it were” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 30). In other words, identity, time, and space have been examined in modernist and postmodernist literatures. Regarding the difference between modernist and magical realist literature, Faris maintains the following:

If we contrast magical realist presentations of space and time with modernist paradigms, we can see that in modernism, readers are brought into surreptitious contact, through, as Virginia Woolf expressed it, a kind of mental tunneling process within the discourse, with mythical, historical, or, most frequently, personal pasts—a depth of perception characteristic of modernism, whereas in magical realism, those temporal realms are brought to life in the referential realm of the text. (*Ordinary Enchantments* 30)

Although epistemological concerns of magical realism tend to be aligned with modernism and both types of literature use “mythical, historical and personal pasts,” the “referential realm of the text” leads to ontological questioning. According to Faris, individuality is one of the distinguishers of modernism and magical realism. Magical realist works reflect the concerns of colonized societies, but “individuality” does not necessarily appear as a distinction in Western-oriented magical realist works. For instance, along with Borges, Faris points out to Kafka as a precursor of magical realism, although his seminal work *Metamorphosis* is highly concerned with an individualist past (*Ordinary Enhancements* 40). She also suggests another distinction by saying that “the magical, irreducible elements in magical realism inherit modernism’s search beyond the rational into the unconscious, but they bring more than an individual’s hidden scenarios to the postmodern surface of the text” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 33). In other words, textual referentiality, which is provided through irreducible magical elements, covers both ontological and epistemological elements of time, space, and identity.

Fictional works might focus on any theme but magical realist texts process the distortion of time, space, and identity in the referential realm of the texts. Through hybridizing two different worlds, a third space, an amalgamated space of magic and real, which is homogenized, creates a different notion of space. This world does not negate realism or magic. Furthermore, “the propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among these worlds” (Zamora and Faris, “Introduction” 6). Thus, the fifth

characteristic Faris suggests about magical realism is very synonymous with the first principle, which is the use of irreducible magical elements. The fifth characteristic only reveals the thematic function of the first one. Moreover, she suggests that in the first principle, the irreducible elements reveal reality much more than realism itself (*Ordinary Enchantments* 13). In this regard, it is inevitable that these magical tendencies also reveal essential ideas about time, space, and identity. The key word is disturbance; magical realism enlightens new perspectives about human life through defamiliarization. The analyzed short stories are also concerned about received notions of time, space, and identity. Since magical realist texts present a subverting space, identity is also recontextualized. In Deleuzian ontology, there is a duality in life and “the real consists of the actual and the virtual” (Aldea 19), and the identity of a certain object shows differences depending on structures they exist in (Williams 1). From Deleuze’s theoretical perspective, “the magic appears as different because it is a divergent element in the otherwise convergent series of realism. It does not fit into a system of reality that follows empirical laws: it is divergent from the ‘domain’ of the ‘laws of nature’” (Aldea 34). The relationship between the actual and the virtual are reestablished, terms like identity, time, and space are also reestablished. Therefore, magical realism is able to question these notions by depending on the magic and the real at the same time.

As identity is strictly related to the perspective, the point of view as a narrative tool is critical for alternative representations. Mark McGurl states that New Criticism puts the “point of view” into the center of post-war literature and it is important to understand the “creative process” (*The Program Era* 133-134). However, after creative writing has become global, “point of view” has gained a different function. Through two examples, McGurl examines “the aspiration to self-transcendence built into the practices of creative writing, where the effort is, by self-reflection, to free oneself from the system of identities in which we all move, and to look upon it from a point of remove” (*The Program Era* 370), and he adds that “Here the project . . . is not to claim literary property rights in a certain domain of lived experience. It is rather to find a place to be who I am really not, a place to be free from the fixity of identity and to borrow the experiences of others.” (*The Program Era* 370). For McGurl, “therapeutic alienation” is provided by changing the point of view, to see the events, for instance, from the eyes of

an alien (*The Program Era* 387).

The writers examined employ magical elements as narrative techniques shaped in the practice of creative writing and as a method to reveal their creativity. They actualize “therapeutic alienation” through magical elements. Magical realist works of non-Western writers are generally considered as an identity search for colonized/ethnic societies, and unfolding collective histories, but in this case, Bender, Brockmeier, Link and Millhauser adapt magical realist elements “to be free from the fixity of identity and to borrow the experiences of others” (*The Program Era* 370). Although they are interested in exploring their identities, their works are less concerned with examining or discovering the truth about themselves. They do not necessarily struggle to be accepted by the majority or to become popular as they often deal with relative time and space.

The notion of time has been relative since Albert Einstein proved it, but magical realist works makes it possible to observe this relativity, or the “magic nature” of time. Time has personal and social aspects. Although a year consists of twelve months in Western calendars, which is an artificial system designed by humans, there are different variations and notions of time invented and circulated in various geographies. Nevertheless, “time” shows much more variations in fictional worlds. In “The Hortlak,” for instance, the calendar is personalized with Charley’s emotions. As it is stated, “Charley’s hatred was seasonal: in the months after Christmas, Christmas puppies started growing up. People got tired of trying to house-train them. All February, all March, Charley hated people. She hated people in December too, just for practice” (*Magic for Beginners* 29). Charley’s timetable is designed through her sarcastic reasoning. Since her job is to execute dogs, she loathes the increased execution periods. If there must be a human calendar for ordering jobs, there must be a calendar for dogs. When Eric and Charley talk about age, he asks, “How about in dog years? How old would you say I am in dog years?” (*Magic for Beginners* 45). However, this arrangement of months can also be reduced logically. Although a magical construction on time does not exist, there are reflections on the notion of time and arranging calendars. At the same time, there are indications that the lifespan of a character in the story is not ordinary. Eric does not know Charley’s age. He also does not know Batu’s age, with whom he has been sharing the work load in the store for a long time. Batu

says, “You know, since I started sleeping less, I think I’ve stopped getting older. I may be getting younger. You keep on getting a good night’s sleep, and we’re going to be the same age pretty soon” (*Magic for Beginners* 42). The reversal of the time is reflected here, rather than a health care advice. While Batu claims that he can be younger again, it seems that Eric follows a linear time span.

Brockmeier’s story “The Light through the Window” suggests that generations follow a circular time, along with the character’s entrapment in his asocial life. He cannot escape from the boundaries of his routine life, which causes an obsession with his past. He is not satisfied with his current circumstances and dreams of a family unit. The narrator talks about the character’s longing for an alternative life as follows:

The thought that he had never married or fathered children often filled him with a quiet sadness, and on Sunday afternoons, with little else to do, he imagined himself in one of the small, glistening motorcars on the street, driving across the river with his family. They would go to a carnival, perhaps, or a shopping mall, and the boys would fight with each other in the back seat, and he would feed them hot dogs and french fries until they were groggy and quiet. (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 185)

Three generations of men follow similar life patterns and perform the same profession; he takes on his grandfather’s job that was passed on to his father before him, but contrary to his family tradition, he does not have a family that he longs for. The ghosts reflected in the windows become means to escape his routine life, and these ghosts represent a space, in which time has stopped functioning. He either yearns for the old days in which he was with his parents, or for other circumstances he has not experienced. He does not live the present, but the past. When he looks at his split reflections on the window, he sees his family members “standing dimly beside him” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 185). Brockmeier’s “A Fable with Slips of White Paper,” also emphasizes the same theme. People are helpless in a circular time frame. They cannot escape from the boundaries of their circumstances. When the character finds the magical coat, he temporarily feels relieved from the stress of daily life: “It was already plain to him how much he was going to miss it. It had brought him little ease—that was true—but it had made his life incomparably richer, and he was not sure what he was going to do without it” (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 267). Finding the coat and possessing a magical trait separates the character from the constraints of time for a short while, but it also causes other worries. Nevertheless, his sense of time and the way

he sees himself change at the end and he becomes less concerned about the restrictions of life. Time is crystallized in Millhauser's "Sons and Mothers." He experiences an area, where everything has changed, but he wants to remember objects and people as they used to be. He wants to protect his old compassionate relationship with his mother but cannot preserve the past. Time has different variations in these narratives. As Gloria Jeanne Bodtorf Clark puts it,

Magical Realism is a highly elastic view of time. The reader finds that time in the text does not proceed as a sequential order of finely measured steps. It can appear as interminable as many lifetimes, as short as an instant, spiral forward or backward, or be suspended in order to accommodate the narrative. ("Big Mama" 82)

In Bender's "Marzipan," the notion of time is distorted as the mother gives birth to her own mother. In Millhauser's "The Tower" time span has different dimensions for people living above and down. Since the Tower has been in "existence for as long as anyone could remember" (*Dangerous Laughter*), the notion of time is deprived of its functionality. Millhauser points out that collective memory is delicate and people do not remember what happened, but they remember what they want. Similar to Latin American magical realist works, the story is drawn in an uncanny world, full of myths and rumors. Faris claims that, magical realist works tend to borrow from both modernist and postmodernist canons in terms of time, space, and identity. Referring to Brain McHale's distinctive features of ontological concerns, she sees the "postmodern branches" in magical realism, which will be explained in the second chapter of this thesis (*Ordinary Enchantments* 30-31). In her words,

the epistemological concerns, along with the mythic elements, the primitivism, the psychological interiors and depths, align magical realism with much of modernism; the ontological questions raised by the presence of magical events, and the confrontations between different worlds and discourses, together with the collective spirit and political pointedness of the writing, align it with postmodernism. (*Ordinary Enchantments* 32-33)

This reference reflects the relativity of time not only in magical realism but also in modernism and postmodernism. Her connection between modernism and magical realism is stated as, "the mythic patterns glimpsed behind modernism's realistic texts emerge as magical elements on its surface" (*Ordinary Enchantments* 33). It is not unusual to find a common ground between modernism and magical realism, since the

term “magical” realism is first used by the critic Franz Roh, for the evolution of expressionism, which occurred in the modernist movement. Magical realism also resembles surrealism to some extent, since both of them “challenged the tradition of realism, encouraging excursions into the surreal, beyond conscious reason into realms of dream, myth, the unconscious, and ‘primitive’ culture” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 34). Especially Western writers’ augmenting narrative variations are rooted in the surrealist canon and modernist writers such as Kafka and Gogol. Thus, individualist expansions of identity and space problems exist in these short stories. The characters’ alienation and isolation, as well as their in-betweenness in separate realms are explored through space and identity. In “The Hortlak,” the convenience store is located in an edge, where people have relatively marginal lives compared to urban centers. In this place, identity is associated with the unusual. Batu teaches Turkish to Charley and the reason for learning Turkish is justified through her wish to pass on as Turkish when she visits another place (*Magic for Beginners* 46). Instead of associating with a certain place, the convenient store in their case, they feel obliged to live there, neither as a local nor as a traveler. The narrator writes about Eric’s intention of leaving, “When Charley came, he would go with her. He would stay with Batu. Batu needed him. He would go with Charley. He would go and come back. He wouldn’t ever come back. He would send Batu postcards with bears on them” (*Magic for Beginners* 46). Indeed all of the characters want to leave to search for better conditions, but they are all stuck and isolated in their disconnected lives.

The longing for unknown places, magical landscapes, and being placed between two contrasting worlds are also observed in “The Tower.” In this dichotomy, people want to be somewhere else, and do not accept their current situation. As the narrator states, “But the vision of a new life in the upper world had always shone out as a promise, especially to families who had climbed higher in successive generations and were waiting for the news that heaven had at last been reached” (*Dangerous Laughter*). When Isabel Allende declares her presumption of the universality of magical realism, she says, “Magic realism is a literary device or a way of seeing in which there is space for the invisible forces that move the world: dreams, legends, myths, emotion, passion, history” (Allende). Regardless of projecting collective or individual dreams and myths, the third space created by the magical elements summon for a research beyond borders, where it

is possible to find common grounds. Brockmeier's character senses that "the space around him would take on a certain elasticity, as though thousands of tiny sinews were being summoned up out of the emptiness and drawn tight, and he would know, suddenly and without question, that someone was offering his yearning up to the air" (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 263). As a hybrid mode, magical realism borrows from various cultures and different traditions. However, the created hybrid space does not necessarily reflect indigenous and colonized cultures. Hybridity of magical realist spaces include narrative forms, individual pasts, and bridging different spheres.

In conclusion, since the term emerged, there have been various definitions of magical realism. Whether it is a mode or a genre, postcolonial or postmodern has been debated for a long time. Amaryll Chanady and Wendy B. Faris are among the most cited critics on the issue, and they are able to come up with relatively more precise, well-defined distinctive features of the term. Moreover, they examine the characteristics of magical realism from a broader and international perspective, rather than limiting the term to a specific geography. Faris draws parallels among magical realism, modernism, and postmodernism. Based on Chanady's the supernatural versus natural, antinomy, and the authorial reticence, Faris suggests that a magical realist work should consist of irreducible elements of magic, detailed description of phenomenal world, unsettling doubts and two realms. Faris adds up one more characteristic to Chanady's argument, which suggests that magical realist works reconsider time, space, and identity to disturb and often subvert essentialized ideas on these themes. There are still grey areas and conflicts on the suggested characteristics and several discrepancies among the critics. Nevertheless, the characteristics of magical realism delineated by Faris are applicable to the short stories, which, under the light of this analysis, could be defined as magical realist works.

Furthermore, magical realist elements elaborate on individual pasts and traumas in order to create a process in which the notion of "self" is revealed. Recent traumatic narratives may utilize magical realist methods. Traumatic events, including identity crisis, are dealt with dreams and in imagination. As Lyn Di Iorio Sandin writes, "If a traumatic event exceeds what can be expressed in a fact-based account, the traumatized individual can trust to dreams and imaginings that help flesh out what memory may resist"

(“Trauma, Magic, Geneology” 24-25). Once, magical realism reflected the wounds of traumatized collective identities of colonized nations, now, it contributes to understanding both transnational and individual traumas. Eugene Arva shows that magical representations have become prominent in relatively recent historical traumas such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Arva writes,

If the Latin-American Boom in mid-twentieth century admittedly gave magical realist fiction a “local habitation and a name,” twenty-first-century world literature and cinema have been thriving on its narrative versatility, intermediality, aesthetic appeal, and, probably most important, on its representational power, its uncanny ability to simulate and to recover the traumatic real. (“The Analogical Legacy” 237)

Representations of time, space, and identity in the age of digital technology are varied and have been expanded. Violence, terror, and other shocking images are transmitted in abundance. The images received daily, mostly through the television and the Internet, are not thoroughly reliable, and far from being unbiased, which have problematized the connection between reality and representation for a long time. Representing trauma through imagination or magic seems more valid and magical realist narratives have found a wider area to perform their potential in varied representations. These representations create perceptions to grasp the truth, instead of focusing on the realness of real and the problematic relationship between real and representation. The aporetic digital environment and bombardment of images on a daily basis have shifted the function of magical realism. As Alberto Fuguet suggests, magical realists now do not live in Macondo, Marquez’s fictional city, but they live in McOndo, which is a capitalist space full of commercials. Instead of stories that take place in tropical locations, Fuguet claims that McOndo is “a world of McDonald’s, Macintoshes and condos” (n.p.) and magical realism in the conventional sense has died. However, as presented, magical realist depictions are not eradicated, but adapted into new settings and forms in narratives.

CHAPTER 2

BEYOND POSTMODERNISM

[T]he seemingly new is old also, a palimpsest, a tapestry of which the actual threads have served before, or like the animal frame itself, every particle of which has already lived and died many times over. Nothing but the life-giving principle of cohesion is new; the new perspective, the resultant complexion, the expressiveness which familiar thoughts attain by novel juxtaposition. In other words, the *form* is new. But then, in the creation of philosophical literature, as in all other products of art, *form*, in the full signification of that word, is everything, and the mere matter is nothing.

—Water Pater, *Plato and Platonism*

Although the examined short fiction employ postmodern elements, these stories enforce reconciliation with meaning and truth through magical realist modes. Postmodern characteristics are presented through ontological questionings and the metafictional qualities of the text. These stories convey the postmodernist pessimist outlook on the functionality of language and meaning, but, at the same time, the intrusion of supernatural and extraordinary events reconvey postmodern aesthetics and escalate a narrative structure yielding to hopeful situations. Short stories like “A Game of Clue,” “History of a Disturbance,” “The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman,” and “Here at the Historical Society,” by Steven Millhauser; “Small Degrees,” by Kevin Brockmeier; “The Rememberer” and “Wordkeepers,” by Aimee Bender; “Some Zombie Contingency Plans” and “Pretty Monsters” by Kelly Link embody postmodern and fantastic elements and elucidate how postmodern elements facilitate alternative forms of transmission in fiction. Ihab Hassan in his essay, “The Question of Postmodernism,” makes a list about certain characteristics of postmodernism such as play, anarchy, indeterminacy, antinarrative, immanence, and deconstruction (34). I am aware that there are various definitions of postmodernism and it consists of various traits, in these stories I will focus on three elements of postmodernism; ontological questioning,

historiographic metafiction, and self-reflexivity. These tendencies in fiction have been transformed in time and alternative aspects have been sought. Hassan talks about this change, and says the world has responded to postmodern culture through its own change, and magical realism is among these responses, which he considers as “innovative realism” (“Beyond Postmodernism” 208). Again, similar to McHale’s and Sangari’s ideas about reciprocal interaction among various geographies, Hassan sees that the writers seek alternative representations of realism through which postmodern elements have also been reconsidered. Although the stories reveal traumatic experiences, they are also reinvigorating in terms of incorporating these postmodern elements together with magical and supernatural occurrences.

2.1. ONTOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

This section develops a critical approach on the stories through Brian McHale’s exploration of postmodernism. His remark; “the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological” has been used to define postmodern sensibilities (*Postmodernist Fiction* 10). For McHale, ontological dominance is the difference between postmodernism and modernism (*Postmodernist Fiction* xii). Fantastic literary genre also perceives a contrast between different ontological constructions (*Postmodernist Fiction* 16). McHale exemplifies his discussion through the movie *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and Carlos Fuentes’s *Cambio de piel*. Both works create a fantastic world with a subjective perspective; first one is reflected through the eyes of a mentally disturbed person, and similarly the latter is a recount of an asylum inmate. At the end of the stories, the ontological structure of the fantastic “collapses into an epistemological structure, that of the uncanny (in Todorov’s sense)” (*Postmodernist Fiction* 16). On the other hand, magical realist fictions preserve alternative ontologies in the same structure. Todorov’s fantastic is based on the realist representation generated by the Western rationality, in which a division between the marvelous and the uncanny is reasonable, but the magical realist works appear to destabilize this categorization.

Steven Millhauser writes postmodern stories with existentialist concerns and creates realistic and fantastic worlds. In “A Game of Clue,” he presents a board game “clue” in a realistic setting, yet, the story later skips onto a different layer; the board game itself.

Although the story reflects concerns about reality, absurdity, and existentialism, the events are not portrayed in a pessimistic mode. Millhauser presents the characters as players and avatars of the game at the same time. Before the narrator explains the rules of the game in a detailed and realistic manner. The tabletop where the board game stands is described elaborately: “The board lies not quite in the center of a green folding table, which shines with a dull gleam in the glow of two lights: the overhead porch light, encased in four squares of frosted glass, and the small red-shaded lamp attached to one of the porch walls” (*The Barnum Museum* “A Game of Clue”). The descriptions throughout the entire narration are meticulous but the realistic narrative also creates complex layers since Millhauser describes the playing pieces and actions realistically. While he describes the characters as a part of the board game, the actions in the game turn into extensions of real life.

The story has two plotlines: One is about the lives of the characters and the second is related to their roles and activities in the game “Clue.” Narrating both plots in realistic details obscures the line between reality and the game. The board game is presented as a story within a story, which leads to the questioning of the nature of reality. Since postmodernism is defined as “incredulity towards metanarratives,” (Lyotard xxiv) the game is a reflection of a petit narrative that refers to reality more than the characters do. In metafictional works, the author deconstructs reality and blends in fictionality, which leads to questions such as “whose reality is it?” One of the subtitles of the story is “Is it possible?” In this section the narrator presents the uncertainty of the events and writes “Is it likely that she? Is it possible that they? The Colonel, after all, has never seen her. He experiences women solely as a series of banal images; he transforms real flesh into figments of his imagination” (*The Barnum Museum* “A Game of Clue”).

Although the setting is a board game, it is not certain whether the author is revealing the Colonel’s inner thoughts. The unreliable narrative introduces the Colonel as a magician and says, “in that dark, unseeing gaze, women vanish. Miss Scarlet cannot have been present at the unlikely scene at the window seat, because the Colonel’s lovemaking is strictly solitary” (*The Barnum Museum* “A Game of Clue”). The author questions the existence of the event on an ontological rather than an epistemological level. At the same time, while the story introduces a game about finding clues and reaching the goal,

the story itself becomes a board game. The narrative of the game and real life is written in the same manner as the descriptions of the game moves into real life. The narrator describes the real home as if it is a part of the board game: “Rooms. The Ross house has eight rooms: a kitchen, living room, dining room, and study (formerly a play room) downstairs, three bedrooms upstairs, and an unheated bedroom (formerly a study) in the attic” (*The Barnum Museum* “A Game of Clue”). In such descriptions, life and the ontological zones come closer. David’s reaction to the superficiality of the board game is also an indication of life’s flatness. The narrator writes, “the flatness of the board startles him: it is a depthless world, devoid of shadow. There are no rooms, no doors, no secret passages, only the glare of the overhead light on the black lines, the yellow spaces. For a moment he wants to shout: is that all? Is that all?” When Jacob learns his father’s worsening health conditions he is mad at his family members and asks “Am I living in a bad novel?” (*The Barnum Museum* “A Game of Clue”).

The author intentionally leaves gaps and requires the readers to collect their own clues. As Earl G. Ingersoll and Linda Wagner-Martin locates,

[The story] has taken readers into the workshop of the storyteller and the craft of fiction. The “whodunit” framework of “Clue” reminds us of the detective story’s low status and its irresistible attraction . . . Shabby as the form and its gratification may seem, its power inheres in the wish that our lives could eventually promise the resolution and clarification represented by the answers to questions such as, who committed the crime and where/how was it done? (59)

The rules and the purpose of the game gradually become meaningless, since the characters start to rely on their own will, surpassing the fixed laws of the game, which can be perceived as a magical intrusion. It is true that the board game reflects doubts about real life, but at the same time it reflects the hopes of the players. Every player has anxieties about their life and future, but the game acts as a unifier for the family members. Marian feels like a “loser” and feels that her life is unsatisfactory. Her current boyfriend is “superficial or humorless,” and she is not content with her physical appearance. She eventually breaks up with her boyfriend, Robert, because her preoccupation with her family members annoys Robert. Marian is also mad at her brother’s, Jacob’s, uninvited girlfriend, Susan, because of her beauty and comfortable life. Jacob is mad at Susan for their recent argument and angry with his little brother David for remaining silent. On the other hand, Susan is anxious because she is not sure

whether Jacob really loves him. Jacob's annoyance with the people around him stems from his inability to write poems. He sees himself as an "embittered professor of English at a major university, at the unknown obstacle, at his daily defeated will" (*The Barnum Museum* "A Game of Clue"). David is dissatisfied with the game since there will be four players. His excessive love for his brother, Jacob, annoys and becomes a source of oppression for Jacob. As an adolescent, David was also under the influence of his sexual desires.

Despite the tense feelings among the group members, gathering around the board game unites them and brings hope as they experience nostalgia. In the attic, Samuel Ross, the father observes his children. When he realizes that his children are playing the game downstairs, he feels content thinking, "the family is together." David is the one who attributes a special meaning to the game and privileges it by researching its history. As the narrator puts it, "David has never known anyone who hasn't played Clue, and he imagines it as a misfortune, a childhood deprivation, as if he had been told that she had never eaten a piece of chocolate or visited an amusement park" (*The Barnum Museum* "A Game of Clue"). He goes to the library and researches the history of the game. He becomes a little disappointed when he learns that the game is not originally American, but British. Also, obviously he is the one who cannot draw a strict line between real life and the game. When Jacob asks about his father, David says he is fine but since he is preoccupied with the game, he associates his father with the avatars in the game. The narrator writes, "He knows that Mrs. Peacock did it, with either the revolver or the candlestick; his father is slumped in an armchair, a revolver at his feet, a red hole in his temple." In this regard, the game and the mimetic world reveals the fragmented minds of the characters. Jacob, while playing the game, remembers his childhood memories. He remembers when his mother brought David home for the first time. Jacob loves the baby, but he is startled when his mother says that he should take good care of his brother when they are no longer there. When Marian plays the game, her mind is occupied with her father. She is afraid of her father's death. Later she yearns for a new beginning, in which she will be more caring towards her mother and herself.

At the end of the game everybody greets David for his birthday. While the avatars in the game fade away and turn into a numb state, David projects a hopeful future for the players. As the narrator states,

David looks quickly at Susan, at Jacob, at Marian. His sister's hand is warm on his hand, his cheekbone still feels the pressure of Susan's lips, his brother's greeting sings in his ears. He would like to tell them that they can count on him, that he will take care of them, that everything will be all right: Jacob will be famous, Marian will be happy, Susan will marry Jacob, Dad will never die. He knows that the words are extravagant and says them only to himself. 'thank you,' David says. For a moment, it's as if everything is going to be all right. (*Barnum Museum* "A Game of Clue")

Although the reality of the mimetic world is questioned and the line between the real world and the game is blurred, the narrator presents the game as a unifier for the family members. David's wishes for his family members do not mean they will live happily ever after, but the story indicates a possibility of hopeful future although David also knows that "words are extravagant" (*Barnum Museum* "A Game of Clue").

Existentialist concerns, the impossibility of reaching the truth, and the self-reflexivity of the text reflect the characteristics of postmodern fiction. The author's gaps about facts and intermingling reality with the game display the language and the text as failed tools. However, this does not assert the fictionality of the text. What is narrated as a game might be a product of imagination or predictions about the characters' lives, but the existence of the Colonel as a magician might lead to a different interpretation of the board game in which the characters revive and their moves in the game might cause "real" effects on their lives.

Steven Millhauser reveals his poststructuralist concerns in "History of a Disturbance" more explicitly. A man narrates his story in which he gradually gives up believing in words and turns into a silent and asocial individual. He is obsessed with the idea that words do not correspond to real things; they are meaningless. When the narrator's wife says "What a wonderful day!" the meaning of the sentence is broken down. He feels disappointed and says "the day was less wonderful. The day—it's really indecent to speak of these things! But it's as if the day were composed of many separate and diverse presences—that bottle of soda tilted in the sand, that piece of blue-violet sky between the two dark pines, your green hand by the window—which suddenly were

blurred together by your words” (*Dangerous Laughter* “History of a Disturbance”). Simply, language is a failed tool, unable to transmit experience. The narrator starts to feel irritated and conveys his feelings as, “I felt that something vast and rich had been diminished somehow. I barely knew what you were talking about. I knew of course what you were talking about. But the words annoyed me” (*Dangerous Laughter* “History of a Disturbance”). Throughout the story, the narrator gradually loses his connection with language and words.

Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure examines language from the perspective of structuralism and claims that a preconceived connection between the signified and the referent does not exist, and “the sign is arbitrary” (67). Meaning is produced through binary oppositions. However, Derrida states “[t]he notion of the sign always implies within itself the distinction between signifier and signified, even if, as Saussure argues, they are distinguished simply as the two faces of one and the same leaf” (Derrida 11). Thus, according to Derrida the connection between the signifier and the signified can only be explained through “différance” because the signifier does not produce a fixed signified and the meaning is different and constantly deferred. In other words, signifier and signified are not necessarily tied to each other. Millhauser’s story exemplifies Derrida’s concept of language in situations of daily life.

The narrator of the story loses his faith in the reliability of language since language does not function properly. He is obsessed with corresponding the meanings of words but cannot find a proper solution. Language constantly creates divergent meanings. When the narrator’s wife asks, “Do you love me?” he starts to think of the lack of communication through words. He is not sure what this question exactly means because there are various interpretations. As he reasons,

Because they might have meant, Do you still love me as much as you once did even though I know you do, or Isn’t it wonderful to sit here and whisper together like teenagers on the dark porch, while people are in the bright living room, talking and laughing, or Do you feel this rush of tender feeling which is rising in me, as I sit here, on this porch, at night, in summer, at the Polinzanos’ barbecue, or Do you love everything I am and do, or only some things, and if so, which ones; and it seemed to me that that single word, “love,” was trying to compress within itself a multitude of meanings...” (*Dangerous Laughter* “History of a Disturbance”)

His uncomfortable attitude with words spreads to all areas in life. He cannot write a proper report at work or he cannot communicate with people because sentences fall apart. He feels irritated with his own words and starts to speak less (*Dangerous Laughter* “History of a Disturbance”). His disturbance reaches such an extent that he no longer believes his existence, which, for him, depends on the words. As the narrator states, “One evening I looked for a long time at my hand. Had I ever seen it before? I suppressed the word ‘hand,’ rid myself of everything but the act of concentration. It was no longer a hand, not a piece of flesh with nails, wrinkles, bits of reddish-blond hair. There was only a thing, not even that—only the place where my attention fell” (*Dangerous Laughter* “History of a Disturbance”).

As poststructuralists claim, language fails to preserve a coherent ontological world. On the other hand, the narrator does not bemoan the situation because he feels that there is a different existence, which language is not able to represent. After he contemplates over his hand, he sees a different entity, and says, “gradually I felt a loosening, a dissolution of the familiar . . . It began to flatten out, to melt into surrounding space, to attach itself to otherness. Then I was staring at my hand again . . . I could feel the words crawling over my hand like ants on a bone. But for a moment I had seen something else.” He discovers a different world when he peels off the words, letters, and signifiers. His obsession with the failure of language as a tool of expression leads him to a different plane. As the narrator puts it, “A group of words would detach themselves from speech and stand at mock attention, sticking out their chests, as if to say: Here we are! Who are you? It was as if some space had opened up, a little rift, between words and whatever they were supposed to be doing. I stumbled in that space, I fell” (*Dangerous Laughter* “History of a Disturbance”).

By rejecting language, he transforms his mimetic real and his failing communication conjures a different reality. He witnesses a naked world, which are not covered by words. As he explains his experience,

I recall one evening, it must have been a few weeks later, when I stepped from the darkened dining room into the brightly lit kitchen. I saw a whitish thing on the white kitchen table. In that instant the whitishness on the white table was mysterious, ungraspable. It seemed to spill onto the table like a fluid. I felt a rush of fear. A moment later everything changed. I recognized a cup, a simple white cup. The word pressed it into shape, severed it—as if with the blow of an ax—from

everything that surrounded it. There it was: a cup. I wondered what it was I'd seen before the word tightened about it. (*Dangerous Laughter* "History of a Disturbance")

Perceiving a world without words leads him to an improbable world, which is almost a magical metamorphosis. The narrator claims his sanity and normality, at the same time he claims that there is "a place without words," and through concentration, he believes he is going to reach that place." At this moment, his rhetoric shows parallelism with a Buddhist monk or a meditating person with a transcendental state of mind. The narrator himself sees this similarity and writes, "When a monk takes a vow of silence, he does so in order to shut out the world and devote himself exclusively to things of the spirit" (*Dangerous Laughter* "History of a Disturbance"). He also takes a vow of silence, because this is the only way to avoid language. Naturally he "shuts out the world," since he quits working and stops communicating with his wife because such commitments require the use of language. It seems like he moves toward self-destruction, however, he is highly pleased with his current situation and writes, "My vow of silence sought to renew the world, to make it appear before me in all its fullness. I knew that every element in the world—a cup, a tree, a day—was inexhaustible. Only the words that expressed it were vague or limited. Words harmed the world. They took something away from it and put themselves in its place" (*Dangerous Laughter* "History of a Disturbance").

The narrator seems to be in favor of poststructuralist philosophy and the idea that "there is nothing out of the text/language," but he reverses the destructive effect of this notion by imagining another dimension, where he does not need language. Language does not become a disturbance. He substitutes silence as the antithesis of language:

Sometimes I imagine that if we were very still we could hear, rising from the forests and oceans, the quiet laughter of animals, as they listen to us talk. And then, lovely touch, the invention of an afterlife, a noisy eternity filled with the racket of rejoicing angels. My own heaven would be an immense emptiness—a silence bright and hard as the blade of a sword. (*Dangerous Laughter* "History of a Disturbance")

At the end of the story, he redefines the world like a spiritual master. He trains himself to learn how to erase world-thoughts and he feels "a new world" rises around him. He reaches an ultimate point, where the world is not hidden by words. As he states, "I

become what I see. I am earth, I am air. I am all. My eyes are suns. My hair streams among galaxies. I am often tired. I am sometimes discouraged. I am always sure.” In this regard, the world is not a perplexing place for him anymore. He constructs himself without words. However, it is paradoxical that the narrator writes all these experiences with words. Although the narrator uses postmodern explanations in reflecting the restrictions of language, he is hopeful of reaching an alternative existence and communicates this through words. After all, in this chaotic world entrapped in meaningless interpretations filtered by language, silence provides escape and peace.

Writing, texts, and language naturally bring out the reflexive quality of a narrative. Kevin Brockmeier uses language as a reference to existence in his short story “Small Degrees.” The story narrates the life of a person who is interested in letters and typewriters is narrated in the story. The character, starting from his childhood, develops an obsessive enthusiasm in letters. When his mother asks him what he is writing, he answers “the letter n” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 118), to which his mother labels him a fool. During his adulthood, he specializes in foundry and produces letters from metals. He spends his entire life making letters for typewriters. During his retirement, he decides to design a typeface to capture his childhood memories by carving letters. He actually undertakes an impossible mission: “when his body began to unmake itself, he gave himself over to his vision” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 120). Instead of trying to remember his youth through words, letters, or photographs, he focuses on designing physical letters. The meaning produced by words, or the writing process preserves memories but he is interested in the physical appearance of the letters. As the narrator puts it,

He wanted to design a typeface that would recall his hours of childhood watching: m’s and n’s and commas that read as fluidly as the swaying of long grass in the wind; b’s and d’s, p’s and q’s, like lampposts reflected in a pool of water. He was willing to work gradually, assembling and reexamining each stroke of each character, the hairline of a V or the wedged bowls of a lowercase g, over a period of several days. This may seem a form of calculation, but it was in truth something closer to love, which is to say the reverse of calculation. (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 120)

Rather than the common approach to the letters, or considering them as elements of the linguistic system, he develops an unusual relationship with letters, and his motivation is described through love. He is not interested in the meaning of letters and, indeed, letters

do not have a meaning on their own. He spends too much time in his workshop and his indifference annoys his wife. She says, “You think that I’m nothing but time. But I’m not time . . . I’m something else” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 123). The notion of time seems problematic for the character. Deduced from his wife’s reaction, the character wants to capture a certain time as if it is a concrete substance. Hence, he aims to mold the time of his childhood in letter shapes. The man is not interested in any other type of activity, except molding letters. From a self-reflexive point of view, he is a character composed of letters, however, in an exceptional way, he is not interested in signifieds, but concentrates on symbolic parts (letters) of signifiers. The narrator describes the scene, in which the man sees his wife’s farewell note as follows, “The next morning there was an answer waiting for him on his desk, written in his wife’s hand: I love you, it read, but the word love had been crossed out and replaced with the word miss, which had been crossed out and replaced with an empty space, as though his wife had given up on the message altogether” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 123). The words correspond to some emotions and the character cannot define himself or his relationship without words. Thus, when he tries to remember a memory, an image from the past, he “could not help but moisten his brush and spread before himself a few leaves of paper, compelled to represent it” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 124). However, he sees letters in these drawings, and when he is not able to see the letters in the drawings, he has to “search his memory, a vision would come to him of the bruise-colored stain at his bedroom window” which is “an image like a snare, holding his thoughts close and tight” (125). At the end of the story the type founder loses his grip with reality and starts to yearn for his wife’s return. This imaginary wish causes him to exist in an imaginary reality and he gets rid of his type case (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 127).

It is an inherited characteristic of postmodernism that meaning is not in reality. As Terry Eagleton sums it up,

Because reality is inherently meaningless, the self can find no reflection of itself in reality, which is made out of a material utterly different from its own. It is thus not long before it comes like a castaway to doubt its own existence, deprived of anything outside itself which might confirm its identity. ‘Man’ is the sole source of meaning in the world; but the world has turned its back on such sense-making, thus rendering it arbitrary and gratuitous. And because there is no sense or logic in things, there is no predictability in them either. (74)

In postmodern literature, this pessimistic situation constantly haunts the characters, dragging them into nothingness. In “Small Degrees,” the character cannot find a meaning in reality but in his emotional and mental connection with letters. In this sense, this is not actually an imagery world, because he finds connection with the letters compared to the outer world. It is possible to draw a conclusion that the character gives up seeking a meaning both in reality and in letters. On the other hand, the end of the story could be interpreted as a magical event or as an impossible coincidence. The type founder finishes carving his letters, and the last letter is a capital “I,” which indicates that he finally comprehends himself as a whole. On his way to the foundry, when he sees a mother hushing her child, he realizes that he will never be able to accomplish his task. The scene is described as follows: “It was only when the type founder saw a mother lifting her baby from the carriage, heard her pat the space between his shoulders with a ‘hush-a’ and a ‘there, there,’ that he realized his mistake: it had something to do with aspiration, and neglect...” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 127). He realizes his mistake and before he gives the finished typewriter to the mother as an “alphabet blocks for the child,” he knows/predicts what awaits him at home. Coinciding with his sacrifice, his wife returns home. Searching for the meaning in the letters ends in failure and but helps him to experience an epiphany. Unlike the narrator in “The History of a Disturbance” the character in this story does not choose solitary seclusion, but both characters give up trying to find meaning in letters and words.

Aimee Bender uses magical events that lead to ontological and epistemological concerns. In her story, “The Rememberer,” the narrator wakes up and finds that her boyfriend experiences a “reverse evolution” (*The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*). She questions the existence of this world in an indifferent tone. In the last day of her boyfriend as a human being, she remembers him as a sad person who is desperate about the world. The narrator quotes his words as follows, “Annie, don’t you see? We’re all getting too smart. Our brains are just getting bigger and bigger, and the world dries up and dies when there’s too much thought and not enough heart” (*The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* “The Rememberer”). In her argument about what postmodern literature has led to, Nicoline Timmer says that the new generation of writers, who found themselves in the middle of postmodern narratives, have developed postmodern elements to “re-humanize the subject or self” (46). She traces “a new shift in the

dynamics of cultural pathology” in the works of David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Mark Danielewski. According to Timmer, their works represent how narrative forms have been re-structured on the “typical weariness with postmodern clichés and a readiness to say ‘goodbye’ to them” (15). In this narrative form, she argues, “the feeling” is not a subjective matter but “It works as a way to reach out . . . as a way to hypothesize a potential structure of a ‘we’ which revolves around the possibility of sharing feelings” (Timmer 46). There is a yearning for feeling connected and communication and a “‘what if’ mentality oozes from the post-postmodern novel, a ‘willingness to believe’ (for example in the form of a strategic naïveté, a suspension of disbelief, and taking a leap of faith)” (Timmer 359). In Bender’s story, the magical event leads the reader to ask the “what if” question: What if people do not privilege mind but instincts? The narrator criticizes the human mind for being overestimated. Rather than focusing on language, science, and progress the key word must be sentiments. Thus, the narrator writes, “sometimes before I put my one self to bed, I place my hands around my skull to see if it’s growing, and wonder what, of any use, would fill it if it did” (*The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* “The Rememberer”).

Bender focuses on a relationship based on words in her short story “Wordkeepers.” In the story, the narrator starts to forget words. The narrator, who has a “crisis of identity” in law school, changes his career and becomes a schoolteacher, which requires language eligibility. However, the narrator does not seem to be troubled with his recent disorder. Instead of finding the exact word for an object, he prefers to describe it. Language and words are broken for him, but he proves that the words could be replaced. For him, in modern life nobody has to be careful with words, which, for him and Susan, is a kind of reverse evolution. As they discuss the issue, he says “In some study, they say phones and computers are replacing our cerebral cortexes, externalizing our thoughts so that we do not need to think them” (*The Color Master* 156).

Nevertheless, his problem with recalling words causes him to realize that words are not as important as he used to believe: “With hand gestures, you can fill in a lot of gaps, and the words thing and stuff and -ness also help: patientness instead of patience, fastness instead of speed, honestness instead of honesty. With these choices, many words can be indicated, and pointing or gesticulating usually works” (*The Color Master* 153). In this

state of mind, the reader sees how the narrator and Susan maintain a relationship. Although Susan wants to be together with him, he refrains and worries about dating his neighbor. However, he is inconsistent. First, he states that “Susan and I have talked about dating since that one thing, but I have always said no. I’m not completely sure why” (*The Color Master* 158), but subsequently he admires her beauty (*The Color Master* 158). Then, he comes up with unsupported inferences as follows, “She ate the peanuts. She was flushed from the wine. She wanted to take off her clothes, I could feel it, the same way she was undressing peanuts, and I felt it as cruel then, how I didn’t want to do anything with her. Maybe cruel to both of us. But the truth is, I just felt like I had e-mail to check” (*The Color Master* 159). Although he thinks Susan is attracted to him, at the end, he visits her with a tray of chocolate and wine. When Susan asks why he brings these, he cannot give a proper answer and writes, “I was in the middle of her living room. I had had a plan, I knew that. But the rest of it had vanished” (*The Color Master* 160). Their actions are based on emotions and instincts, rather than rationality. Susan seems more careful with words and says “I just like the feeling of finding the right word in my mind and employing it. I get pleasure from that feeling. I prefer language to gesture” (*The Color Master* 159). However, she is not sure whether language is a gesture and says, “I suppose sex is all gesture,” but together they refute the idea and say it is not really a gesture, “not indicative at all” (*The Color Master* 159). The narrator looks for alternative ways such as gestures, made up words, and physical connection to compensate words.

In “The Rememberer,” re-adapting primitive communication and reverse evolution, through which the narrator’s boyfriend turns into a monkey, are repeated. In the story, the boyfriend does not want to communicate with words. He just likes to look into her eyes and the narrator writes “I didn’t miss human Ben right away; I wanted to meet the ape too, to take care of my lover like a son, a pet...” (*The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* “The Rememberer”). Imagination and dreaming seem the possible elements for expressing the self. For the boyfriend “there is no space for anything but dreaming,” and the magical reverse evolution promotes sharing feelings rather than acting rational. At some point, her boyfriend’s physical existence does not matter to her because she is capable of stimulating her imagination and she says, “I review my memories and make sure they’re still intact because if he’s not here, then it is my job to remember” (*The*

Girl in the Flammable Skirt “The Rememberer”). She wants to remember and be remembered, where she can find a reconciliation through imagining and dreaming. On the other hand, similar to “reverse evolution,” she wants to leave the burdens of words. It is true that she wants to remember, but she wants to replace memory with imagination. Both stories actually criticize the intellectual mind and highlight relying on instincts and imagination, which are easier in conceiving the world.

2.2. HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

The ontological questions continue in Millhauser’s story, “The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman.” Elaine Coleman suddenly disappears and nobody knows what happened. Her house was not broken into and there are no farewell notes. Witnesses are not thoroughly sure whether they really saw her. The narrator remembers her vaguely from his high school days and he contemplates about her appearance, hobbies and personality but never figures out who she really was. He thinks maybe she never existed. She may even be in the imagination of the entire neighborhood. This event leads to the question of authenticity and truth.

According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism, characterized by historiographic metafiction problematizes history. She writes that

Fiction does not mirror reality; nor does it reproduce it. It cannot. There is no pretense of simplistic mimesis in historiographic metafiction. Instead, fiction is offered as one of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality, and both the construction and the need for it are what are foregrounded in the postmodernist novel. (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 40)

Reality and authenticity take another level in postmodern fiction and reflects its own truth rather than claiming to be mimetic.

The narrator in the short story does not even refer to a historical event but to a woman, who supposedly lived in the same neighborhood. He does not search for clues to find out what happened to Coleman, but questions whether or not she existed. Everybody narrates a different story of her past. The witnesses are not sure of her existence and the narrator does not really remember her face. He writes, “Some of us recalled dimly an Elaine, an Elaine Coleman, in our high school, a young Elaine of fourteen or fifteen

years ago who had been in our classes, though none of us could remember her clearly or say where she sat or what she did. I myself seemed to recall an Elaine Coleman in English class, sophomore or junior year, a quiet girl, someone I hadn't paid much attention to" (*Dangerous Laughter* "The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman"). Photographs or other "solid" evidence do not assert her existence. The narrator tries to remember her high school years, but he cannot definitely testify whether or not he is making up these memories. They eventually find her key but the door is locked. He speculates about her disappearance thinking that there might be a second key, used by another person, and she might be kidnapped by the same person or she might have left the house through the window. However, all four windows were closed, which suggests an option that she left the house through the window of the second floor. Yet, "the bushes, grass, and leaves below the four windows showed no trace of disturbance, nor was there any evidence in the rooms to suggest a break-in" (*Dangerous Laughter* "The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman"). Neither witnesses nor the physical evidence clarify the existence of Elaine Coleman. Thus, the narrator beguiles the reader into trespassing into a magical zone. It is also unusual that not only the narrator but also the residents as well as her other classmates do not remember her.

Although it seems like the story rewrites the past of a missing person and presents a puzzled and fragmented portrait of Coleman, the narrator does not aim to rewrite history. Among the mystery and vagueness about Coleman, the narrator is doubtful of Coleman's identity and her physical appearance. However, his search unfolds a regret; he regrets not communicating and not taking interest in her life. He states, "though I couldn't help feeling it anyway, for it was as if I ought to have stopped and talked to her, warned her, saved her, done something" (*Dangerous Laughter* "The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman"). This regret resembles Timmer's idea of "yearning for communication" through a "what if" story. The narrator suddenly remembers his second encounter with Coleman. He saw her while he was walking with his friend Roger. Her basketball bounced off and he grabbed the ball and returned it to her. There was a moment of hesitation. As the narrator puts it, "What struck me, as I remembered that afternoon, was the moment of hesitation. It might have meant a number of things, such as 'Do you and Roger want to shoot a few?' . . . Roger glanced sharply at me and mouthed a silent 'No.' What troubled my memory was the sense that Elaine had seen

that look, that judgement” (*Dangerous Laughter* “The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman”). The narrator’s interest in the disappearance is not out of curiosity or desire to play the detective, but rather out of a guilty conscience. For him, the ignorance of society including himself prepared the disappearance.

The story is built on postmodern characteristics of questioning reality; even a person’s physical existence in the community becomes questionable although she was visible and observable, and her personal records were kept. The witnesses have relative physical descriptions of her and even her photographs appear to be different versions of “a single person no one had ever seen” (*Dangerous Laughter* “The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman”). Thus, history that is believed to be genuine because of objective records and evidence do not reflect any reality. However, the narrator, though he clearly endorses such claims, focuses his attention on the lack of communication among the people of the town. Her disappearance haunts the narrator. He resembles somebody in the theater to her but cannot confirm his suspicions and finally concludes, “Elaine Coleman did not disappear suddenly, as the police believed, but gradually, over the course of time” (*Dangerous Laughter* “The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman”). The narrator refutes the possibility of a rational disappearance and turns this magical event into a yearning for sharing and communication; the magical interpretation of the disappearance compensates for the narrator’s sense of guilt.

Millhauser problematizes history in his short story, “Here at the Historical Society.” The Historical Society views every object as a part of history. A cigarette pocket, a blue jean, or a piece of gum should be considered an object of history. For them there is no “now” or present, but the “new past.” History works as a never-ending scientific field. The authenticity of history, as postmodern historiographers discuss, is not based on facts but interpretations of these facts. Language, knowledge, and textuality prevent history from reflecting the truth. According to Roland Barthes, historical evidences are only inside the text and the historians come to conclusions via signifiers rather than collecting information. His purpose is to attribute positive meanings to an empty frame through signifiers (“The Discourse of History” 121). Barthes argues that as the text does not produce reality and the essence of the text is meaning rather than reality. History is a constructed rhetoric, in other words, it is an ideological elaboration. Historical discourse

is performative fiction. History writing can only reflect the signs but not the past (“The Discourse of History” 122).

Michel Foucault, on the other hand, claims that history takes shape through socio-cultural paradigms within a certain discourse. There is a certain correlation between power and knowledge. For him, “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (*Discipline and Punish* 27). Since knowledge is produced in a discourse, as time passes, knowledge changes along with the discourse. Foucault suggests a discrete history rather than a linear one because discourses are not cumulative but distinctive and isolated. In his analogy, when a branch of science chooses its object within the subject of discourse two things should be kept in mind: “the analysis of discursive events is in no way limited to such a field; and that the division of this field itself cannot be regarded either as definitive or as absolutely valid; it is no more than an initial approximation that must allow relations to appear that may erase the limits of this initial outline” (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 33). The interpretation of the object is affected by the discourse generated within. In addition, Hayden White claims that a historian creates a fictional plot under the influence of ideology and language and says,

The issue of ideology points to the fact that there is no value-neutral mode of employment, explanation, or even description of any field of events, whether imaginary or real, and suggests that the very use of language itself implies or entails a specific posture before the world which is ethical, ideological, or more generally political: not only all interpretation, but also all language is politically contaminated. (129)

In his story, Millhauser ironically delineates the impossibility of history writing. The Historical Society works endlessly to preserve history. In the narrator’s words, their goal is to “capture the past completely, in all its overwhelming variety and luminous, precise detail” (*Dangerous Laughter* “Here at the Historical Society”). However, depicting everything for the sake of authenticity makes the job harder. They try to preserve every detail including, “measurements, descriptions, digital photographs, and, wherever possible, samples of every stop sign, fire hydrant, and telephone pole in [the] town, every roof slope and chimney, every Monopoly piece and badminton racket, every cobweb in every corner of every attic” (*Dangerous Laughter* “Here at the

Historical Society”). They try to collect all information, but as time passes objects with historical value keep growing in number. Furthermore, their main concern is also questioned. History should not only be the history of contemporary people’s life, but also their Native American and Puritan ancestors. They have to categorize their history under distinctive titles. However, they eventually reject pursuing the idea and the narrator concludes that “the past you look for is a delusion, a dream composed of a fistful of images snatched at random from the fate that awaits all things” (*Dangerous Laughter* “Here at the Historical Society”). For them, history should be visible, however what is included or excluded in history is unclear. Thus, they are criticized for overlooking the past and being interested in meticulous details of contemporary life (*Dangerous Laughter* “Here at the Historical Society”). They can never reflect history thoroughly since everything changes constantly. The narrator comments on this aspect in the following manner: “Yet even as we record it, even as we reach out to touch it, we see it dissolving before our eyes, revealing a piece of the next past that has already replaced it. For we walk through a world no longer there, toward tomorrows that are only yesterdays” (*Dangerous Laughter* “Here at the Historical Society”).

Millhauser reflects a postmodernist approach to history through the absurd endeavor of an imaginary society. However, besides his ironic and skeptic deconstructive approach to history, he does not present a complete negation of the endeavor. In his story, there is a strong bond among the members of the Historical Society. The society is not established to prove the constructed nature of history, which eventually ends up in a blind alley. Their methodical approach is based on covering great amounts of data, which causes the aim to fail. They try to examine “every soup spoon and sugar maple, every design on the back of every deck of playing cards,” which sounds ridiculous. On the other hand, the narrator does not focus on any fruitful results but the Historical Society members’ enthusiasm. Indeed, their passion for collecting and classifying historical objects keeps them active. Although they are aware of the impossibility of reaching a satisfactory conclusion, they keep documenting because they need to catch up with the work. Thus, the work itself becomes a method of reconciliation. Although the scientific merit of their profession is questionable, fruitful consequences of their research is revealed as solidarity. The narrator explains eagerly,

It is principally through our exhibits that we connect most immediately with our visitors, who look to us for some sense, however confused and uncertain, of a common past. Even residents of Portuguese, Italian, and Slovakian descent whose roots in our town rarely go back before the mid-nineteenth century, are often to be found peering at the illustrations on our eighteenth-century china dinner plates or looking curiously at our display of Puritan costumes. (*Dangerous Laughter* “Here at the Historical Society”)

The improbability of such a society represents an element of fantasy. Indeed, they are blamed to be escaping from reality, “a flight from life” and the narrator’s sanity, as a passionate defender of this unreasonable society, is questionable. However, the narrator is aware that despite hard work, they will not be able to complete a thorough history. He writes that “even as we record it, even as we reach out to touch it, we see it dissolving before our eyes, revealing a piece of the next past that has already replaced it” (*Dangerous Laughter* “Here at the Historical Society”). Regardless of its futile scientific approach, the Historical Society provides hope for the members. As the narrator puts it, “the New Past gives us hope. It stands before us in a nearly unfaded richness . . . For us, the sun glinting on a piece of cellophane lying in a patch of roadside weeds speaks more eloquently than the history of Rome” (*Dangerous Laughter* “Here at the Historical Society”). Although the story reflects the similar concerns of postmodernists who produce questions about the authenticity of historiography, the fictitious institution is helpful in terms of providing hope. In this light, neither the pragmatic and cumulative methods of historiography nor its scientific contributions are able to bring an uplifting advancement for humanity. The Historical Society with its absurd or fantastic characteristics validates the fictionality of history writing with the empowerment of imagination.

2.3. SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Kelly Link’s stories follow the patterns of postmodern fiction. The discussion of language, self-reflexivity, and ambiguous plots exist in her stories. Through metafiction, she connects fictional, fantastic and mimetic worlds. Brian Attebery finds a parallelism between postmodernism and fantastic literature in terms of metafiction. As he puts it,

much contemporary fantasy shares with postmodernism its skepticism about totalizing systems of thought and narrative constructions of reality, but fantasy has other means of depicting the breakdown of such cultural masterplots . . . It does so

at the level of story rather than discourse. Instead of unreliable storytellers, it offers unlocatable worlds. Where a postmodern novel might deliberately withhold narrative closure, a fantasy can provide such closure and yet leave it on the other side of an impenetrable barrier. (191)

Link's stories cannot directly be categorized as fantastic. She does not create worlds separated from the mimetic world, but fantastic and magical elements are encountered in her stories. In her short story "Pretty Monsters" there are two loosely relevant stories that are embedded with metafictional elements. According to Patricia Waugh metafiction is a "term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). Throughout the story unordinary events occur; one story revolves around Clementine, who is in love with Cabell Meadows. The story displays improbable events; for example, whenever she encounters Cabell, he saves her life. From the very beginning of the story, Link creates an unrealistic atmosphere. When Clementine Cleary is introduced, she walks through the sea, but the setting is described as a half-dream sequence. The narrator writes, "How to explain the thing that she was doing? She was awake or she was dreaming. It was all the same impulse: to climb out of bed in the dark; to leave her house and ride her bike down to Hog Beach; to walk, without thinking, into the water" (*Pretty Monsters* 324).

Although Link suggests a dreamy atmosphere, the reader later finds out that Clementine's story is actually a fictional work read by the girls in the second story, in which, four girls kidnap another girl, Czigany. Through this metafictional play, Link blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. In both stories, there are irrelevant conversations about teenage life. At the final stage of the story, the narrator reveals that two sisters write both stories out of boredom. Since the stories have an "interest in the problem of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world," Link problematizes the reflection of mimetic and fictional worlds and "metafiction pursues such questions through its formal self-exploration" (Waugh 2). In her metafictional play, Link comes closer to the fantastic aspect of self-reflexivity. Brian Attebery directs a discerning question,

All this metafiction makes it nearly impossible to read any tale without seeing the half-transformed sources, the untold backstories, the sleight-of-hand diversions that produce both realism and fantasy. Every story becomes its own metacommentary,

every text an interactive and unbounded hypertext. As audiences are educated in postmodernity, the need for individual texts to deconstruct themselves grows less urgent: we have already been there and undone that. Granted the indeterminacy and self-reflexivity and ideological complicity of every text, what cultural work should contemporary fantasy seek to accomplish? (198)

In this light, Link's metafictional elements are not profound concerns, but pragmatic narrative elements rooted in the canon. Metafiction is not an experimental approach to her narrative since postmodern fiction used it to the extent of mediocrity. Link's metafiction opens up an area to diffuse the magical into the narrative. Although the narrator declares that the sisters make up the two stories, these sisters might be fictional or fantastic since they might be monsters. At the end, Link creates a third stratum for narration, which reflects the idea that "It is impossible to describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed" (Waugh 3). The narrator constantly changes the relation between the observer and the observed and strongly indicates that Clementine is a story read by Lee, which she defines as a love story (*Pretty Monsters* 357). The story itself and the stories within the story "carr[y] the more or less explicit message: 'this is make believe' or 'this is play'" (Waugh 35), which creates an increased self-consciousness on language, meaning, and the text and at the same time a mimetic world, where the magical is treated as a standard of the narrated story.

Creating ambiguous narrators also blurs the perspective of the observer. Link titles chapters with the letters L and C, which indicates two different narrators: As it is explained at the end, "Let's call the girl on the bed by an initial. L. Let's call the other girl C. They're sisters and they are also best friends, possibly because they don't have many opportunities to meet other girls their age" (*Pretty Monsters* 387). However, the chapter this explanation takes place is titled "L C," which implies another narrator. The narrator of the story is not clear and the contribution of the reader's interpretation is also mentioned. The narrator and the reader's roles are further complicated with the existence of fantastic/fictional conditions. Whether the characters are humans or monsters and whether the story has a happy ending are left to the perplexed reader.

Link uses metafiction to display that language is broken and the text does not reflect the mimetic world but creates its own meaning. Language's "relationship to the phenomenal world is highly complex, problematic and regulated by convention" (Waugh 3) and in the story this complex relationship is reflected through meaningless

conversations and disconnected events. When Clementine and Cabell meet, Clementine literally faces death, and her mother asks “Does that sound like a healthy relationship to you?” (*Pretty Monsters* 355). However, Clementine interprets this differently and says, “Every time we meet up he saves my life” (*Pretty Monsters* 355). Moreover, the lack of interpretation is only part of the uncommon and odd elements in the story. Clementine and Cabell’s love story ends in an ambiguous way. At the end, Cabell disappears for a long time and Clementine learns that “Cabell had married someone named Lenuta who lived in a castle that wasn’t very close to Râmnicu Vâlcea” (*Pretty Monsters* 380). Although she tries to track the couple, she either cannot find them or another fictional level is introduced: “In Clementine’s guidebook, there was no mention of a castle. The forest got a couple of paragraphs. It wasn’t clear which road they were looking for, and there were no signs” (*Pretty Monsters* 380). Since imagination and reality are intermingled, the possibility of reaching a conclusion is denied.

Link’s metafictional play collaborates with language on exploring the incoherence between text and meaning. Conversations among the characters are always irrelevant to their main concerns. Although four girls kidnap Czigany, which becomes an ordeal, they cannot accomplish their goal since they always talk about daily life and routine problems such as having a healthy diet or high school. At some level, the text reveals absurd dialogues like the following: “The goats are sneezing emphatically. ‘Bless you,’ Lee says. ‘Bless you bless you bless you too.’ Dodo grunts. ‘There must be a coyote out there.’ ‘A what?’ Lee says. ‘Your goats are allergic to coyotes?’ (*Pretty Monsters* 385). This absurdity is also reflected in another metafictional level, when Clementine and Cabell chat online under the nicknames of Truebaloo and Darlingsea. In this transcript of chatting, the words and sentences are turned into texting symbols such as “so r u coming home” (*Pretty Monsters* 356). The characters of the story chat with characters from another story, and the outcome is not a coherent dialogue. Clementine tries to talk to Cabell but this conversation is more like disconnected monologues. When Clementine informs Cabell about a newborn baby, she skips to another topic, which is about her dress, and she subsequently asks questions such as the following: “because it looked like something a mermaid would wear. but what i was wondering is do you think there really are mermaids? or vampires?” (*Pretty Monsters* 358). While the conversations do not make sense, Link tries to postpone the ending. She writes, “Lee

turns the page, but that's the end of the story about Clementine. Not an end at all" (*Pretty Monsters* 384). The complex relationship between language and the signified world is deliberately distorted. An ending is denied, since the text does not want to reflect a mimetic and meaningful world, but a multi-layered fictional representation.

On the other hand, an open-ended conclusion suggests a continuing story. Actually, the narrator keeps telling a story but does not want to reach an end. The story ends as follows, "There were two girls in a room. They were reading a book. Now there are two wolves. The window is open and the moon is in it. Look again, and the room is empty. The end of the story will have to wait" (*Pretty Monsters* 389). The ending for the story becomes a trivial point because the writing/reading process creates a meaning. The character, Clementine also keeps searching for meaning in the middle of nowhere both literally and metaphorically. She wants to believe that there is a purpose in her quest. Although the guidebook does not mention a castle, she finds one and she finds Cabell who saves her life several times. She is not sure about the purpose of her journey but she believes that it must mean something and says "I don't know . . . It's just that we're over here. It just seemed like maybe I'd run into him somehow. And you seemed like you were into it" (*Pretty Monsters* 382). She eventually runs into Cabell, who possibly had an accident and is in need of help. She believes that her actions, though she does not precisely know the outcomes, have a certain purpose and the accident scene vindicates her. As the narrator writes, "Here was Cabell, bloodied and unconscious and alive, and here she was to rescue him. This time she would rescue him. Whatever had happened, she was meant to be here" (*Pretty Monsters* 383). Metafictional elements provide a meaning, but also lead to different interpretations:

Whether or not this story has a happy ending depends, of course, on who is reading it. Whether you are a wolf or a girl. A girl or a monster or both. Not everyone in a story gets a happy ending. Not everyone who reads a story feels the same way about how it ends. And if you go back to the beginning and read it again, you may discover it isn't the same story you thought you'd read. Stories shift their shape. (*Pretty Monsters* 387-88)

The reader's experience and interpretation of the story does not necessarily have to deconstruct the text, on the contrary, multiple reading experiences are opportunities to construct new truths about the story. C and L discuss the characters after reading the story and L decides that it is ok to sympathize with characters even though they might

be villains and says “But I like Lee! And I kind of like Bad, too. Even if they are totally irresponsible. Even if they totally screw up Czigany’s life” (*Pretty Monsters* 389).

Link uses metafiction to show the magicalness of the text. While L is a character who reads a book, she suddenly turns into a wolverine. The narrator writes, “Thinking of goats, L begins to salivate uncontrollably. She licks her chops. Finds whiskers. How embarrassing. What would Lee think? But there is no Lee, of course, no stupid girl named Lee. No girl named Clementine. No unhappy endings for anyone. Not yet” (*Pretty Monsters* 389). In this metafictional shift the gap between fiction and the magical, where imagination plays an active role, is closed. For Wolfgang Iser fiction and imagination allow the self to see its reflection or to see the self as the other. It is active imagination that “enables the subject that would like to see itself as its own ground to unfold itself as the endless mirroring of itself” (193). This transgression of the self is possible through fiction since it has textual and imaginative referentiality. Link’s self-reflexive text unfolds the writing process, and monsters, narrators, or the endings are not about fiction, but about the self. The narrator does not narrate the story to reach a happy ending but narrates it for the sake of writing.

In Link’s story, “Some Zombie Contingency Plans,” the unreliable narrator, metafictional elements, and wordplays appear to reflect the fictionality of the text and lack of meaning. The story begins with a self-reflexive sentence, “this is a story about being lost in the woods” (*Magic for Beginners* 145). However, the story is not about being lost in the woods. It is about a man, Soap, who has been incarcerated for theft. Soap meets Carly at a party. When he introduces himself, he says his name is Will, but his name is not Soap either. He was also called Arthur before he was in prison. While he chats with Carly, the topic of the zombies appears irrelevantly. Whether he is talking about fictional zombies or not is unclear. Carly asks “You mean like horror movies?” the kid under the table replies instead of Soap, and says “The living dead” (*Magic for Beginners* 147) and the topic changes when Soap says that he has to call his father. The narrator turns to describing the woods he mentioned at the beginning: “A man is lost in the woods. He is running away from something. Under the trees, deep inside the woods, there is a house and beside the house is a graveyard. No one is in the house, and all the graves are empty too” (*Magic for Beginners* 147). Then, the narrator introduces Soap

again. The description of the woods is embedded into the text. Although it seems as if it was another written text, through the story it turns out that the narrator is actually describing a painting on the wall.

Link does not only play with forms but she constantly changes meaning in the text with wordplays and narrative forms. The narrator explains, “Art was why Soap was in prison” (*Magic for Beginners* 148). Although this is true, art was not the primary cause since Soap was accused of stealing one of Picasso’s paintings. In another wordplay, the narrator says, “Great art came out of great suffering. Soap had gone through a lot of shit because of art” (*Magic for Beginners* 149). Again, this remark is not related to working hard to create art. Link foregrounds the meaning in the text and creates an ambiguous narrative. One of these ambiguities is about zombies. Link does not clearly state whether zombies exist in the fictional world. Soap constantly talks about zombies as if they are real and compares them to other fantastic creatures. He states, “Zombies weren’t complicated. It wasn’t like werewolves or ghosts or vampires. Vampires, for example, were the middle/uppermiddle management of the supernatural world. Some people thought of vampires as rock stars, but really they were more like Martha Stewart” (*Magic for Beginners* 149). These remarks might be a comparison among fictional characters and do not prove zombies’ existence. However, in another occasion, he compares zombies to clowns, which might indicate they physically exist because he compares them to a referent in real world. He says, “There was something about clowns that was worse than zombies. Or maybe something that was the same. When you see a zombie, you want to laugh at first. When you see a clown, most people get a little nervous” (*Magic for Beginners* 150). He also mentions that his sister acted in a zombie movie, which refers to another fictive form (*Magic for Beginners* 152).

Reflecting on the fictional nature of zombies and talking about them as real creatures creates different layers in the text. It is not certain whether Soap uses zombies as a metaphor or if they really exist. Even if they physically exist, zombies are also mentioned as fictional characters. On the other hand, Soap’s psychological condition might be unstable or he might be under the effect of hypnotic drugs. The narrator states, “Will doesn’t use drugs anymore. It’s too much like being in a museum. It makes everything look like art, and makes everything feel like just before the zombies show

up” (*Magic for Beginners* 165). Physical or metaphorical, it is certain that zombies have an impact on Soap’s life. He even checks under the bed to see if there is a zombie there (*Magic for Beginners* 155). On the other hand, zombies do not appear physically in the story. All the evidence about the existence of zombies is verbal. It is reasonable to say that zombies do not physically exist. The narrator indicates that Soap’s imagination or distorted mind leads him to believe in zombies: “You could escape prison, but you couldn’t escape zombies. This was true in Soap’s dreams, just the way it was true in the movies. You couldn’t get any more true than that” (*Magic for Beginners* 151). Other characters do not believe in their existence, but this does not mean that he does not believe it. The narrator states, “According to Soap’s friend Mike, who was also in prison, people worried too much about zombies and not enough about icebergs. Even though icebergs were real” (*Magic for Beginners* 151).

Link’s metafictional elements do not allow the text to reflect a mimetic world. It has to be interpreted as a distinctive fictional world that produces its own meaning. The connection with fictional works is established in the following manner: “When Soap thinks about the zombies, he thinks about how there’s nowhere you can go that the zombies won’t find you. Even the fairy tales that Becka used to read to him. Ali Baba and the Forty Zombies. Open Zombie. Snow White and the Seven Tiny Zombies” (*Magic for Beginners* 159). Since both the narrator and the character Soap are unreliable, the idea of zombies could not be the result of Soap’s mental illness even if he has such a problem. The notion of zombies might be a result of the narrator’s misleading information. There is also an indication that woods, zombies, and icebergs might be a distorted interpretation of the painting. When Soap gets the painting out of his car, the narrator writes, “How can a painting of some flowers be so heavy? He leans it against the bed and hangs up the painting from the car. Water, iceberg, zombie, woods. How are you supposed to tell what it is?” (*Magic for Beginners* 166-167). This question might refer to the text itself or the painting. Similarly, when Foucault interprets Rene Magritte’s famous painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929), he points to the ambiguous relationship between the language and the referent. Magritte paints an image of a pipe with “this is not a pipe” written under it. As Foucault states, “What misleads us is the inevitability of connecting the text to the drawing (as the demonstrative pronoun, the meaning of the word pipe, and the likeness of the image all invite us to do

here)—and the impossibility of defining a perspective that would let us say that the assertion is true, false, or contradictory” (*This is Not a Pipe* 20). Thus, Link might be describing the images in a painting or an expressionistic interpretation of the painting through a story, or the text might be thoroughly irrelevant to the painting. Examining the text does not lead to an assertion, but raise ontological questions.

Although Foucault examines the relationship between the text and the painting, there is another level of textuality in the story, which is the unfixed and the unstable reflection of the narration. The nature of the fictional world and Soap’s name constantly change. At the end of the story, Soap claims there are zombies in the house and he has to take Leo, Carly’s brother, to a safe place (*Magic for Beginners* 167). When Leo asks if he is Wolverine, Soap says “That’s right . . . I am Wolverine” (*Magic for Beginners* 168). It is possible that Soap is trying to cheat Leo to easily kidnap him, but after the conversation, the narrator starts to call Soap as Wolverine, which refers to the unstable nature and truthfulness of the narration.

The narration keeps resisting interpretation, because the narrator indicates that the whole text might be an interpretation of Carly’s dream. She dreams that her family is proud of her. When she wakes up, “the first thing she sees—before she sees all the other things that are missing besides the oil painting of the woods that nobody lives in, nobody painted, and nobody stole—is the empty space on the wall in the bedroom above her parents’ bed” (*Magic for Beginners* 169). Did Carly see a dream under the effect of the painting or was she robbed by Soap? Although it is more possible that Soap was a sneaky burglar, intricate fictional, mimetic, dream-like, and fantastic layers prevent the text from revealing a single and authentic interpretation. Soap’s dream might be used as a reference to the ambiguous structure of the text. The narrator writes,

Sometimes Soap has this dream. He isn’t sure whether it’s a prison dream or a dream about art or a dream about zombies. Maybe it isn’t about any of those things. He dreams that he’s in a dark room. Sometimes it’s a small room, so small that he could stand in the middle of it and touch all of the walls. Sometimes it’s an enormous room and he could walk for hours. (*Magic for Beginners* 167)

Link creates complex plot lines, which decentralize the themes and content of the story. Link’s characters and readers are in a similar dark room, which shrinks and expands. As explained, “The room is utterly dark. There are people standing in the dark with him.

They stand up against the walls. If he puts his hand out, he'll touch them. Or: if he puts his hand out, there won't be anybody there" (*Magic for Beginners* 167). The text requires the readers to leave the safe zone of the mimetic world and challenges them to interpret an uncommon world composed of dreams, metaphors, fantasy, and reality at the same time.

Apart from a deconstructive reading of the story, there is also an aspect of fantasy, which is rooted in contemporary fantastic fiction. Instead of focusing on metafictional and unreliable narrative, and speculating about the existence of zombies, examining the fantastic elements for their pragmatic constitutive purposes would reveal a different interpretation. As Jacqueline Rose states, "there is no way of understanding political identities and destinies without letting fantasy into the frame" (4). Link's metafictional plays invite fiction, fantasy, magical, and textual to construct a stratum in which the real and fantastic are intermingled and thus do not function as entirely real or entirely fantastic. The story offers a magical area, where the fantastic is treated as the ordinary and where the reality is receded from the mimetic world. Soap's story is driven by zombies and zombie stories as he transcends himself into the fictional world. He easily identifies himself as Wolverine, and develops a referential reality to zombies. It does not mean he lives in a delusional world nor creates an alternative world for himself, and zombies are not a replacement for an absence. Because of the low life or unfortunate events he has experienced, his identity dispersion might be the cause of his imagination. Thus, elements of popular culture such as superheroes, zombie stories, and wolverine free him or enable him to withdraw from the interpellation of society. Contrary to magical realist works, in this story, the narrator does not follow a myth or come up with oral tales, but uses the fictional/imaginative material that surrounds the character. This is Soap's alternative way of dealing with his identity. He is a criminal and he is not proud of his life, but he has to face the truth. Therefore, the narrator at the very beginning says, "This is a story about being lost in the woods" (*Magic for Beginners* 145). Soap is lost and his method of handling himself is some "zombie contingency plan," which helps him to create his truth.

Ramon Saldivar states, "the representation of the Real and its constitutively associated states of fantasy comes with a specific set of formal requirements, introducing

amalgamations of novelistic form and generic styles that by virtue of their surface complexities inaugurate a new stage in the history of the novel” (“Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace” 594). Link’s characters use fictionality and popular culture fantasies and blend it with reality, which presents a mimetic world with a different reality. Therefore “Zombies did not discriminate” and “It turned out that everyone in the prison had a zombie contingency plan, once you asked them, just like everyone in prison had a prison escape plan, only nobody talked about those” (*Magic for Beginners* 150). Creating zombies is not an escape from reality, on the contrary, it is an approach to reality. The narrator reflects the magical on the mimetic so that the characters can transgress themselves to mediate between their truth and the truth outside.

Both of Link’s stories examined here borrow fantastic elements from popular culture and fiction. The characters are teenagers who are interested in such fiction, which Alan Kirby claims to be one of the characteristics of dominant cultural aesthetic that occurred after postmodernism. According to Alan Kirby, digimodernism is the new successor of postmodernism, in which “digital technology meets textuality and text is (re)formulated by the fingers and thumbs (the digits) clicking and keying and pressing in the positive act of partial or obscurely collective textual elaboration” (1). Kirby claims that “postmodernism’s insistence on locating an absolute break in all human experience between the disappeared past and the stranded present” is no more valid (1). What he labels as digimodern is a transition stage between postmodernism and the digitalized era. In this stage, the dominance of digital elements has reinforced the ideas of living in a simulated world or hyperreality, as in the analogy of Jean Baudrillard’s Disneyland, which suggests that the fictiveness of something provides a so-called reality in the outer world. Kirby, within changing domains of digital products, believes that popular culture has led to an infantilization. Through examples, he observes the increase in children targeted themes in movies, television, and music productions and the multiple children contented products. These movies, books, and songs may be based on children’s stories but they are not only for children. For example, Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings*, has become highly popular; and has popularized the novel. The film “embeds a shift from adventure to mythology, and consequently toward narratives that break out from realism’s bankruptcy and postmodernism’s antirealist impasse” (139). Similarly,

George Martin's fantasy epic *A Song of Ice and Fire*, has been popularized through its adaptation as *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), which has become a cultural zeitgeist. Consequently, this shift has to do with the aesthetics of digimodernism. Kirby suggests that the notion of reality has been replaced by the "apparently real." While postmodernism does not believe in a reality in the outer world, the apparently real,

seems to present no such predicament. It proffers what seems to be real . . . and that is all there is to it. The apparently real comes without self-consciousness, without irony or self-interrogation, and without signaling itself to the reader or viewer. Consequently, for anyone used to the refinement of postmodernism, the apparently real may seem intolerably "stupid": since the ontology of such texts seems to "go without saying," more astute minds may think they cry out for demystification, for a critique deconstructing their assumptions. (Kirby 140)

In this light, the "apparently real" is visible in Link's stories. She does not question the authenticity of the elements acknowledged by popular culture, and at this point, the "apparently real" concurs with a magical realist structure, where the mimetic embraces the fantastic as a mediocrity. Videogames, television programs, chatrooms, wolverines, and zombies are embedded in Link's stories and they are treated in the same level of reality. Kirby discusses that *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) has the aesthetic of the "apparent real" because it is filmed in a semi-documented manner and is reflected as a product of amateurs who have white and black footage. Kirby's following comment on the movie is also accurate for Link's stories: "its narrative concerns the apparent emergence into reality of what had previously been considered 'legends' and 'stories'; it depicts the gradual passage of what the students are investigating from the status of 'tale' to bizarre and enigmatic truth" (143). Apparently, Link's stories do not have any claim on being "based on true events," but in her narrative pattern textuality generates its own truth by reflecting fantastic/magical elements related to teenage popular culture.

To sum up, Steven Millhauser's, Kevin Brockmeier's, Aimee Bender's, and Kelly Link's short stories have postmodern elements and features. The stories display that while North American writers use fantastic and magical realistic elements, they construct their fiction through techniques of postmodern fiction such as unreliable narrative, metafiction, self-reflexivity, historiographic metafiction, irony, parody, and intertextuality, which raise questions about ontology, authenticity and the functionality of language. These elements reveal similar tendencies of postmodern fiction, where the

meaning is ambiguous and the characters are decentered. The characters are isolated, disconnected and the settings are fragmented. On the other hand, the critics—who contemplate on the circumstances of literature after postmodernism—claim that there is a transition in the context of contemporary fiction. Although the use of postmodern elements are still valid and postmodern concerns such as lack of communication, chaos, dysfunction, relativity, and ambiguity continue to exist, there is also a tendency toward reconstructing the fragmented. Also, the notion of reality has been in the focus and is thought to have an affective role in the succeeding narrative modes. Realism is not considered in the sense of a representation of a mimetic world, but it is alluded with incongruous elements of fantastic. In Millhauser's, Brockmeier's, Bender's, and Link's stories postmodern elements are evaluated with the transgression of magical and fantastic texture, which reorient the postmodernist routes. With the touch of magical elements, the characters try to generate hope, reconstruction, and reconciliation in a world of perplexity, dichotomy, and dissension.

CHAPTER 3

BLENDING BOUNDARIES

The vice president was under investigation; evidence suggested a series of secret dealings with malign spirits. A woman had given birth to half a dozen rabbits. A local gas station had been robbed by invisible men. Some cult had thrown all the infidels out of a popular pocket universe. Nothing new, in other words. The sky was always falling. U.S. 1 was bumper to bumper all the way to Plantation Key.

—Kelly Link, *Get in Trouble*

Magical Realism has a kinship to postmodern literature and this kinship allows the writers to play with the boundaries of various genres. This playfulness brings together so-called high art and low art closer. Any art product, which is ready to be consumed in popular culture, could be included in postmodern fiction. As Leo Zanderer puts it, “Postmodernism, by virtue of its acceptance of popular forms and values, includes everyone and everything. Its landscape is diverse, utilitarian, pluralistic, egalitarian—essentially democratic” (11). Thus, previously ignored or undervalued genres such as comics and science fiction have found their places reserved in postmodern literature. As explained before, magical realist works flow into all geographies; exposed to local and national elements and Americanized in the process. Elements of popular culture such as television series, zombie stories, and people struggling with isolation and alienation in urban centers are revealed in magical realist narratives. Once part of local and oral stories and histories, magical realist elements are adapted into genre fiction. Indeed, the rise of American genre fiction is not only fed by postmodern ideas that provide transparent borders, but also academic institutions that have produced certain manual-like formulations. Having academic and creative writing backgrounds, Kelly Link, Kevin Brockmeier, Steven Millhauser, and Aimee Bender do not limit themselves to a single genre pattern, but they exploit the postmodernist approach in blending boundaries and merging different genres.

3.1. ALTERNATIVE METHODS OUT OF CONVENTIONAL SYLLABUSESSES

Mark McGurl, in his book *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, argues that the augmentation of academic institutions and creative writing programs does not only lead to an increase in the number of writers, but also increases the effect of institutionalization on writing methodologies, categorizing literary genres, and shaping literary tastes and aesthetics. He explores how fiction writing has been shaped by writers who are affiliated with an academic program and analyzes the works of prominent names such as Vladimir Nabakov, Joyce Carol Oates, Raymond Carver, Philip Roth, N. Scott Momaday, Flannery O'Connor and Bharati Mukherjee, who either have an academic career or an MFA degree, which suggests that aesthetics in literature has, to a certain extent, been configured by these academic programs. As he puts it, "For better or worse, colleges and universities are now the central conservators of modernist literary value as such, and they are where most 'serious writers' (of which there is now an oversupply) and 'serious readers' (of which there can never be enough) are trained" (McGurl x).

Creative writing programs are not only affective on postwar literature, they are also influential in creating systematic modes. Rather than using terms like existentialism or postmodernism, which are commonly affiliated with the postwar era, McGurl divides the era into three "aesthetic formations," which are technomodernism, high cultural pluralism, and lower-middle-class modernism (32), and he focuses on institutions instead of contemporary critical theories. Technomodernism, more or less similar to postmodern literature, covers the experimental works related to information technology such as John Barth's, Thomas Pynchon's, and Robert Coover's fictional works. High cultural pluralism is used to categorize the works that reflect ethnic authenticity and cultural differences. These works are exemplified through Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and Louise Erdrich, who "speak from the point of view of one or another hyphenated population, synthesizing the particularity of the ethnic—or analogously marked—voice with the elevated idiom of literary modernism" (McGurl 57). The writers who thematize economic insecurity and class-consciousness are classified in lower-middle-class modernism. McGurl associates this with minimalism and Raymond Carver's works. All

these three categories are variants that lead the writer to create a self-expression (McGurl 49).

Meanwhile, McGurl underscores that methods suggested by academic writing schools have already become mainstream, and new techniques are employed to modify conventional methods. McGurl sees creative writing institutions as an American phenomenon but “Americanization” has become global (365). In this context, as a response to writing programs, writers seek ways of creating new forms for expressing themselves. Instead of focusing on finding one’s identity, the works focus on finding “a place to be who I am really not, a place to be free from the fixity of identity and to borrow the experiences of others” (370). McGurl claims that the transcended perspectives suggest new forms for delineating the self and gives Robert Olen Butler as an example for this method (397). Butler’s “transplanetary perspective” helps to alienate the character to expose the writers’ “yearning,” which is a key concept in this methodology (391). For McGurl, one of the main functions of creative writing could work to satisfy this “universal human ‘yearnings’—to be loved, to understand ourselves, to have our say” (397).

As a break from the routine methodology of creative writing programs, Butler suggests an alternative way, called “dreamstorming.” For Butler, “There’s a part of your mind you’ve been rewarded for all through school, and that is your literal memory” (19) and to exceed this limitation, dreamstorming will help the writer by “inviting the images of moment-to-moment experience through your unconscious,” which is “very much like an intensive daydream, but a daydream that you are and are not controlling” (31). Although this is not a total break from the rules of creative writing, it suggests a “freedom,” which falls into the limits of an autonomous instruction. Butler’s methodology will not be examined here, but this teaching might produce an answer to the question whether creative writing will “allow you to be who you are or to escape who you are?” (McGurl 370), and it suggests some methods, which adapts mixed genre elements to provide a wider expansion for new narrative forms. As an answer, McGurl writes “[t]o the extent that fiction is a means of escape from determination, then fictional characters have an obvious reason for being: they are the vehicles of a therapeutic alienation, a movement from identity to otherness” (370-71). By analyzing the alien character Desi in Butler’s

novel *Mr. Spaceman?*, McGurl suggests that Butler's teaching methods might be a mediator between the conventions of creative writing and the "creativity" of the writer. As he puts it,

In fact, the more we look at it, the more it might seem that Desi's literary listening techniques are best understood not in terms of teaching students to express themselves, but as a description of Butler's own distinctly methodical writing process. It stands to reason that in the Program Era, the era of the writer-teacher, these activities would blend, and Robert Olen Butler is perhaps the best contemporary example of a figure in whom they do. . . . Butler may be the writer in whom the long-held tension between the literary artist and the institution has likewise dissolved. (388)

Indeed, Butler's characters have the ability of bending the methodology of the creative writing program because they reflect postures or portrayals against the rationality of enlightenment¹ and against the curriculum of MFA. To provide such an alternative method, fantastic and science fictional elements are embedded in the narrative. In other words, while McGurl depicts Butler's teaching as a novelty to institutional training, he actually suggests a version of defamiliarization, which captures an alienated perspective to avoid the cage of rationality, as an underutilized form. At this point, magical realist elements intervene in the narrative to extend the mobility of the authors.

Fredric Jameson questions whether creative writing programs are an American invention and limited to the geography in his review of McGurl's argument. In the end he writes that,

Reflexive experimentation has probably long since been played out abroad, but there is one category in which Americans have begun to flag, and that is Faulknerian maximalism, whose interminable voices no longer seem tolerable without their Southern framework. Now, translated into something called 'magic realism,' this American speciality—whether adopted by Günter Grass or Salman Rushdie or the authors of the Latin American Boom—has been promoted into a genuinely global genre, and we glimpse, outside the confines of an American Program Era, the outlines of some wholly different world system of letters coming into being. ("Dirty Little Secret" 42)

¹ According to Isaiah Berlin the concept of Enlightenment presupposes that all questions can be answered and "[t]here is only one way of discovering these answers, and that is by the correct use of reason, deductively as in the mathematical sciences, inductively as in the sciences of nature" (*The Roots of Romanticism* 22).

Although Jameson's claim about the origin of magical realism as an American phenomenon is debatable, he underscores magical realism as the leading narrative tool of contemporary fiction. Magical realism might not be "outside the confines of an American Program Era" ("Dirty Little Secrets" 42). McGurl talks about magical realist tendencies in the works of Robert Olen Butler and Octavia Butler. Their science fictional works bring a disorienting perspective, which prefigures a schematic inclination. For McGurl, Butler's alien story, "presents the theft of maternal labor in the starkest of terms, and the sheer disgust of the humans for the reproductive practices of their alien overlords looks ahead to the same feelings represented in Morrison's *Beloved*" (396). Unusual or extraordinary perspective in Butler's stories is implanted by hybridization between humans and aliens, which McGurl calls "transplanetary perspective" (395). In other words, contemporary methods are about applying unusual perspectives with a certain defamiliarization. Neither the perspective of aliens nor humans, but a perspective that mixes aliens and humans would be an example. At the same time, regardless of the story or the perspective, the reader evaluates the story within a cultural frame. Correspondingly, fantastic elements, myths, and fairy tales are able to provide defamiliarized characters, unusual settings, and perspectives. They also share a network of cultural archive, in which the reader might recognize common stories of the community. It is possible to include magical realist elements in this category, since magical realism projects unusual perspectives of the real and goes beyond exhausted methods. A revival of magical realism in the conventional sense does not seem probable because what is already explored cannot be repeated if the writer is trying to come up with an original expression. A new kind of realism, which has been discussed as one of the characteristics of the literature after postmodernism, could blend magical realist elements to render a new orientation.

Postmodernism does not only decenter the idea of genre fiction, but also, unsettles affiliations regarding nations, ethnicities, and groups while questioning the idea of belonging. Butler's instructions on creative writing, which has certain parallels with magical realism, or with any other mode, which provides defamiliarized perspectives, present methods to reveal perplexed identities as they are. For Butler, good writing does not come from ideas and he wants the writer to stop using "garbage analytical reflex voice" (20). In other words, he tries to take a different direction than that of educational

institutions, which prescribe a certain kind of literary taste. McGurl modifies the analogy in the following manner:

To perform in the world is to say “I am,” and to say “I am” is the most essential motive of every human performance, no matter how mundane. As an exercise of the imagination, creative writing supplies a special effect of personal agency in that performance, a way of saying not only “I am” but “I am whoever I want to be,” which unfortunately I am not. (398)

Although, as McGurl points out that Butler sets an example in adapting new methods of creative writing, Butler’s instructions also lead to another type of systemization. I do not claim that Kelly Link, Kevin Brockmeier, Steven Millhauser, and Aimee Bender follow Butler’s methodology, but their works present new perspectives of realism via the magical. With their creative writing backgrounds, they adapt certain and common methods to break genre boundaries and diverge from typical objectives associated with magical realism and postmodernism. In contemporary fiction, this blend of genres resulted in different labels such as slipstream, the weird fiction, and speculative fiction. Although these categories are not distinctively definable, their general characteristics include fusing genre boundaries and containing fantastic, magical, surreal, and fabulist elements. According to Anna Russell and Jennifer Moloney, “The label slipstream encompasses writing that slips in and out of conventional genres, borrowing from science fiction, fantasy and horror. The approach, sometimes also called ‘fantastika,’ ‘interstitial’ and ‘the New Weird’ often feather the unexpected in with the ordinary...” (n.p.). Most of these labels and categories cover other literary fields, previously regarded as trivial. Yet, the potential possibilities of these previously overlooked fields have been rediscovered in terms of reflecting unexpected perspectives. Although the idea of “high literature” and “literary value” are dismissed from contemporary genre fiction, recent award-winning authors incorporating mystery, horror, or utopic fiction present the practical and literary value of genre-based fictions. When Ramon Salvador categorizes Juno Diaz’s novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), he writes, “the story of the dispossessed takes the form of what I call ‘historical fantasy’ and ‘speculative realism’ to signify the odd amalgam of historical novel, bildungsroman, postmagical realism, sci-fi, fantasy, and super-hero comic romance that structures the story of Oscar Wao” (577). Diaz’s work cannot be classified in conventional literary

categories, but the literary and aesthetic elevation in it underscores the influence of recent narratives.

Link, Brockmeier, Millhauser, and Bender are aware that genre boundaries are restrictive and bending them enables the reader to read and experience a permissive structure where the hierarchy between “high” and “low” literature is erased. Link’s “Most of My Friends are Two-Thirds Water” and “The Surfer,” Brockmeier’s “The Ceiling” and “The Human Soul as a Rube Goldberg Device: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Story,” Millhauser’s “The Wizard of West Orange” and “The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad” and Bender’s “The Devourings” and “Hymn” are stories that bend boundaries between genres and reform known methods in a functional manner. Kelly Link states how she tries to experiment with the conventional borders of genres and says, “I’m usually thinking about genre . . . Most of the stories in the new collection started out with me thinking things like: how can I tell a ghost story on a space ship? . . . what can I put into a story that disorders/disarranges/estranges a reader in lieu of the fantastic element?” (Interview by Sadye Teiser). She humorously answers a reader who expresses his confusion about her genre category. Link says, “I finally decided that everything I write was SF, whether or not it had science fiction in it. And I decided there are two things science fiction does: it takes things which are comfortable and familiar and makes them really strange, or else it takes things which are strange and impossible and finally makes them feel comfortable, to a certain extent” (“Making Strange” 6). She uses science fictional elements for defamiliarization, which is also substantial in magical realism. Her preferred keywords for her fiction are “strange and impossible.” Brockmeier does not want to restrict his works by genre labeling, on the contrary, he prefers to break presumptions. In his interview, he says, “It seems to me that genre only becomes a burden . . . I’m as guilty as anyone else of leaping to presumptions about certain books based on the earmarks of genre, and I have to struggle to remind myself that art can appear anywhere at all, and even the most rigid genres can grow blurry at the edges” (“Imagining My Way into the Truth”). As for Millhauser, walking on the border between the magical and the real serves a similar purpose: “The ordinary and the extra-ordinary keep turning into each other. The fantastic—taken seriously—is finally only another form of realism. Both are attempts at showing forth the real. Both are attempts at revelation” (Interview by Jim Shepard) The authors

deliberately play around the genre boundaries, which start as an exploration of new forms of writing and result in crossed and elusive borders.

Bender maintains, “stories do not need to have the same arc, the same progression of character, the same twenty-page Times-New-Roman beginning-middle-end movement. We can allow our writing to form its own shape” (“On the Making of Orchards”). In her instructions of creative writing classes Bender avoids being restrictive and sees her own fiction as eclectic (Beglin 65). She follows an instinctive path in her writing. In her words, “my general feeling about fiction is, you write what you can write on that given day. One day it might be realistic, and another day it might be magical. My own attraction to language is something that's kind of out of my hands. It's how it spits out onto the page. There is ultimately some freedom in that” (Beglin 65-66). The following sections will analyze how these writers’ narratives oscillate between various fictional genres to present reconsiderations of the relations between representation and reality.

3.2. REEVALUATION OF THE GENRE

China Mieville declared that discussing literary value of genre fiction is already a cliché and “generic tropes are infecting the mainstream” (n.p.). Cormac McCarthy, for instance, wrote a dystopic novel, *The Road*, which granted him the 2007 Pulitzer Prize. The winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize in literature, Kazuo Ishiguro wrote a fantasy novel *The Buried Giant* (2015) and the science fiction/dystopic novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Margaret Atwood, another awarded author who produces literary works of speculative, dystopian, and science fiction, comments on Ishiguro’s novel in the following manner: “Ishiguro likes to experiment with literary hybrids, and to hijack popular forms for his own ends, and to set his novels against tenebrous historical backdrops An Ishiguro novel is never about what it pretends to pretend to be about, and *Never Let Me Go* is true to form” (168). The increase in award winning authors who are interested in genre-based plots and the increase in categories or labels of fiction—though they do not seem sufficient enough to draw distinctive definitions—display that the eclectic structures descended from postmodernist literature are still effective. Furthermore, the borders between “high literature” and mainstream have become more

and more elusive, because creative writing institutions overemphasize academic and genre-based plots. (McGurl 30-31).

3.2.1. Kelly Link's Dissolved Science Fiction

The amalgamation of fantastic, speculative, and magical elements do not always fit into existing definitions, but its potential for reflecting literary value and for portraying an understanding of the human condition are recognized. As Jeff Vandermeer puts it,

Here, in what is actually our infancy of understanding the world—this era in which we think we are older than we are—it is cathartic to seek out and tell stories that do not seek to reconcile the illogical, the contradictory, and often instinctual way in which human beings perceive the world, but instead accentuate these elements as a way of showing us as we truly are. Unruly. Unruled. Superstitious. Absurd. Subject to a thousand destabilizing fears and hopes. (n.p.)

Magical realist, fantastic, absurd, or supernatural elements are applied widely in fiction and they present transitional functionality among literary classifications. In Kelly Link's stories, for instance, it is possible to view various literary techniques and elements borrowed from popular culture and literary genres such as fabulism, horror, speculative fiction, and science fiction. Her story collection, *Stranger Things Happen*, has similarities with popular television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. She rewrites myths and tales in her stories "Snow Travels with the Snow Queen" and "Shoe and Marriage" (*Stranger Things Happen*). "Stone Animals" (*Stranger Things Happen*) and "Monster" (*Pretty Monsters*) reformulate ghost stories in a distinctive way. Link blurs the boundaries and avoids formulating elaborate methods to create a homogeneous structure, which does not thoroughly fit in any distinctive genre. She uses elements of science fiction and her addition of aliens leads to various interpretations of her short story "Most of My Friends are Two-Thirds Water." The story focuses on the healing process of the narrator who has been estranged from the person she loves. The story can be summarized as a trauma narrative, but the events are not portrayed through a conventional love/grief plot. The narrator is unreliable; she constantly lies and corrects herself. Jak, the man she is in love with, has recently been divorced, and according to the narrator, he believes that some blond women are aliens. Dealing with grief and trauma gains ironic, absurd, and unusual aspects through conspiracies and science

fictional elements. For instance, blond women are suspected to be aliens, but this might also be the imaginative voice of the depressed narrator.

The story intermingles real and fictional worlds, not only through an unreliable or mentally disturbed narrator, but also through intertextual and metafictional elements. The title is borrowed from Philip K. Dick's story, and there are indications that aliens in the story are also fictional. Jak claims his blond neighbor might be an alien, however, the reliability of his remarks is questionable since he "keeps a journal in which he records the dreams he has about making love to his ex-girlfriend Nikki, who looks like Sandy Duncan" (*Stranger Things Happen* "Most of My Friends"). Moreover, whether or not the narrator provides dependable information is ambiguous. The dilemma starts when Jack calls the narrator and recites from the story. The narrator states, "Jak calls me with the first line of a story. Most of my friends are two-thirds water, he says, and I say that this doesn't surprise me" (*Stranger Things Happen* "Most of My Friends"). Although he quotes a fictional work, throughout the story, his claims are presented as if they are real. He claims a blond woman, who "was flickering under the street light like a light bulb," follows him and she looks like his ex-wife Nikki (*Stranger Things Happen* "Most of My Friends"). In another supposedly supernatural occasion, the narrator writes, "He got into an elevator with seven blond women who all looked like Sandy Duncan. They stopped talking when he got on and the elevator was so quiet he could hear them all breathing. . . . He says that all of their bosoms were rising and falling in unison like they had been running, like some sort of synchronized Olympic breast event" (*Stranger Things Happen* "Most of My Friends"). He also claims his neighbor is an alien and when he attempts to make love to her, he is surprised that "she was smooth down there like a Barbie doll. She didn't have a vagina" (*Stranger Things Happen* "Most of My Friends"). The narrator's remarks that "Jak says that New York is full of blond women who resemble Sandy Duncan and most of them are undoubtedly aliens, that this is some sort of invasion," (*Stranger Things Happen* "Most of My Friends"), might be an ironic reference to the abundance of blond women in urban centers. The popularity of this fashion turns every woman to become a copy of each other. Link reconceptualizes literary forms by blending science fictional elements with an absurd tone. The narrator suggests that gender roles are based on unreliable discourses, which create standardized and commercial-based gender definitions. The

narrator's grief deteriorates in a male-dominated society but she is healed through a supernatural zone.

The self-referentiality of the text does not only focus on that the events might be mere language games or fiction with references to artificiality of gender and identity. Susan J. Douglas, for example, discusses how songs, media, and popular culture have sexist and manipulative elements. In her words, "my generation grew up internalizing an endless film loop of fairy-tale princesses, beach bunnies, witches, flying nuns, bionic women, and beauty queens, a series of flickering images that urged us, since childhood, to be all these things all the time" (18). Since beauty norms are standardized by commercials, the story infers that these standards are not humane but alien; after she hears about alien blond women from Jak, she asks another man "if he's ever made love to a blond and if so did he notice anything unusual about her vagina" (*Stranger Things Happen* "Most of My Friends"). In reply, the man asks if this is one of those derogatory jokes about blond women. The narrator also gives examples of blond women jokes. When the narrator asks, "So what's your great idea for a sci-fi story," Jak replies, "Blond women are actually aliens." When the narrator does not find the idea suitable for a story, Jak claims this is not fiction but truth and he has proof. However, in the story, except Jak's verbal testimony, there is not any other indication that blond women are aliens. In the end, Link displays the contrast between reality and women's television images. While the narrator watches television, sitting on the couch and eating butterscotch out of the jar, "a commercial in which someone's hands dialing the number for a video calendar of exotic beauties," which do not indicate flowers but women (*Stranger Things Happen* "Most of My Friends"). The woman image represented on the TV and the male gaze on women are different than reality.

The narrator's unreliability is combined with her aim of writing short stories to gain acceptance from her father. Hence, the narrator's unreliability does not necessarily decenter her world, but she tries to find her own voice by making up lies and fictional worlds. Her father does not appreciate her writing, as she states, "I read a story I wrote a few years ago about a boy who learns how to fly. It doesn't make him happy. Afterwards my father tells me that I sure have a strange imagination" (*Stranger Things Happen* "Most of My Friends"). The wish to receive confirmation from an authoritative

male figure shows her internalization of patriarchy. Under the pressure of male dominancy, her pathetic situation might have caused her to create fictive events or tell lies to assure self-worth. Actually, she lives in her father's garage and when they work together in the textile business, she feels she is embarrassing her father: "My father and I pretended we didn't know each other. . . . I told my father that I was going to take a sabbatical from my sabbatical, just for a while. I was going to write a book. I think that he was relieved" (*Stranger Things Happen* "Most of My Friends"). The narrator and her father's emotionally distanced relationship is coupled with her unrequited love towards Jak.

As a result of her declining social and psychological state, she develops an obsession with blond women. She envies Jak's blond ex-wife and she tells the reader that Jak planned to go to Paris with Nikki, but since Nikki was abroad she and Jak went to Paris together. When the narrator asks "isn't it romantic," Jak answers "maybe we will meet someone" carelessly. Subsequently, the narrator confesses she has never gone to Paris with Jak. Even when she makes up stories, Jak is not interested in her. She describes one of her dreams as, "I dreamed that I was in Nikki's bridal party. Everyone was blond in my dream, the bridegroom, the best man, the mother of the bride, the flower girl, everyone looked like Sandy Duncan except for me" (*Stranger Things Happen* "Most of My Friends"). The dream can be interpreted as presenting her envy and obsession with blond women. Since she is the narrator, she might be manipulating the stories or events told by Jak. Dreams, stories, conspiracies, and lies all drag the reader into a fictional and imaginary zone, but in essence, she holds on to the narration; either as lies or fiction. Her perception of reality has to be filtered through a narrative process in order to reach reconciliation.

Aliens and other unusual events might be an expansion of the narrator's imagination and distorted psychology, but Kelly Link does not aim to manipulate the reader with an unreliable narrator, she projects a depressive woman who can cure herself through forms of fiction. Nevertheless, while she is watching television and waiting for Jak to call her, the narrator keeps manipulating the reader. She states with an indecisive tone, "I think about calling Jak and telling him that I am thinking of dyeing my hair. I think about telling him that this might not even be necessary, that when I wake up in the

mornings, I am finding blond hairs on my pillow. If I called him and told him this, I might be making it up; I might be telling the truth” (*Stranger Things Happen* “Most of My Friends”). In the story the unreliable narrator is not a deconstructive tool, but a mechanism for producing stories to face her fears and insecurities. The unreliable narrator, in a way, restores the narrator’s distorted thoughts about herself. The narrator knows that the problem is not related to being blond, but it is hard for her to accept the failure of her relationship; she is not trying to deceive the reader, on the contrary, she is reflecting the true nature of her desperate situation, which is too painful to narrate explicitly. If the reader tries to focus on authenticity or the accuracy of events, the text will be ineffective since postmodern fiction does not try to reflect the truth or mimetic world and fiction as “all fictional narrators are false in that they are imitations” (Rabinowitz 134). Rather, it is multiple layers of the fiction that creates a meaning. Link’s reflexive fictionality aims to reflect the troubled self image of the narrator, who is also about to lose her sense of reality.

The postmodern idea that the author is already dead and it is impossible to reach the truth or “reality,” is exploited to reveal confined women images. The narrator repeatedly mentions blond women whom she envies and admires, and she thinks that her problems will be solved if she dyes her hair. As Kathleen Wall suggests, “we need to re-think entirely our notion that unreliable narrators give an inaccurate version of events and that our task is to figure out ‘what really happened’” (37). Unreliability of the narrator in the story is related to facing reality, but this confrontation must happen gradually. Wall writes that the unreliable narrator “whose world view, predispositions, ignorance, or absent-mindedness determine in some way what he or she notices, and how he or she interprets certain situations” (22). Traumatic situations are not easy to face, and using imagination, delirium, unreliability does not have to imply an escape, on the contrary, it might be a process to explore the disturbed self. For Wall, unreliable narration helps the narrator see his or her deficiencies with saturation. Direct exposition of the traumatic event might be destructive, but delving into imagination and narration will lessen the drastic effect.

Link follows a similar pattern of unreliable narrative in another story titled “The Surfer.” A young soccer player, Adorno, is kidnapped by his father and taken to Costa

Rica during the flu pandemic. At the hangar of the airport they are taken in for a week-long quarantine. The setting takes place in a futuristic world, where Japan is the best at soccer, people are affected from the flu and an alien visit occurs. The narrative elements of magical realism, science fiction, dystopia, and Todorov's definition of the fantastic are reversed. Dream sequences and surrealist atmosphere intervene with the ordinary depiction of the supernatural, which lies at the core of magical realism. Science fictional elements do not introduce a new world but a world reflected through a child who is struggling to adapt to the adult world. Although there are dystopic and science fictional elements in the story, Adorno's point of view reflects a dream-like atmosphere, which raises questions about the authenticity of the events. The story starts as follows, "In the dream, I was being kidnapped by aliens. I was dreaming, and then I woke up" (*Pretty Monsters* 213), but when he wakes up and gets on the bus after the flight, he describes the environment as if the dream went on:

Everything outside the bus was saturated with color. The asphalt deep purplish brown. The sky such a thick, wet blue you expected it to come off on the bus and the buildings. A lizard the size of my forearm, posed like a hood ornament on the top of a dumpster, shining in the sun like it had been wrought of beaten silver, and its scales emeralds and topazes, gemstone parings. Off in the distance were bright feathery trees, some fancy skyscrapers, the kind you see on souvenir postcards, mountains on either side of us, cloud-colored, looking like special effects. I couldn't tell if it was the drugs my father had given me, or if this was just what Costa Rica looked like. (*Pretty Monsters* 217)

The colors used in the description, the thick sky, dumpsters, and lizards remind a nightmare-like, gloomy description. Nevertheless, he states that he may not be able to reflect an objective description of the outer world since he is sedated by drugs. The unreliable narrator disrupts the connection between the mimetic world and the fictional world of the story. After the narrator creates suspension about the world he describes, metafictional elements are introduced to reinforce the isolation of the character and to stress the fictionality of the text. The narrator accepts that he is under the effect of drugs and says, "I looked around the bus at the other passengers in their livid tropical prints and their blank, white, disposable masks, at the red filaments of stubble on my father's face, pushing out of his skin like pinprick worms. So okay. It was the drugs" (*Pretty Monsters* 217). Moreover, he accepts that the world he is encountering feels fictional. Link borrows a similar atmosphere from Philip K. Dick's novels—once more, her intertextual reference in the previous story—but she portrays a different kind of ironic

and absurd world. The narrator even refers directly to Dick's stories, as "I felt like someone in one of my father's Philip K. Dick paperback science fiction novels. Kidnapped? Check. In a strange environment and unable to trust the people that you ought to be able to rely on, say, your own father? Check. On some kind of hallucinogenic medication? Check. Any minute now I would realize that I was really a robot. Or God" (*Pretty Monsters* 217-218). Overall, blending various narrative techniques creates a new amalgamation of which components are not functional on their own. The story is neither science fiction nor horror story; it does not aim to create, in a conventional sense, a mystery through science fiction or create suspense through dream-like descriptions of the narrator. In other words, the new compound, structured on various genre elements, is not entirely like any of these distinctive genres. The blended nature of the story deprives the conventional reader-oriented responses and manipulates the practical functions of genre fiction. The character's struggle and initiation become the main focus. Adorno has lost his beloved mother and the events take place just before a profound soccer match, crucial for Adorno's soccer career (*Pretty Monsters* 214). He constantly mentions his interest in soccer and his deceased mother.

Feeling unsafe, Adorno's perception is perplexed, but this perplexity does not lead to the collapse of the meaning, on the contrary, Adorno tries to deal with his own reality. In this world, aliens have visited the world once, and they kidnapped a famous surfer, Hans Bliss who was admired by some and considered an "idiot" by others (*Pretty Monsters* 220) and ideological balances have changed. Costa Rica has become an important country and as one of the characters, Naomi, explains, "Everybody knows that American boyfriends and girlfriends only want one thing. Costa Rican citizenship" (*Pretty Monsters* 239). The main cause of the change has to do with aliens. When they kidnapped Hans Bliss, they transmitted their message through him. Link creates a parody of science fiction novels and rather than creating aliens as civilized creatures trying to invade the earth, she uses humor and irony via science fiction. Hans Bliss' kidnapping is commented on as follows, "I love the fact that he fell in love with some aliens who swooped down one stormy afternoon . . . and now he's going to wait for the rest of his life for them to come back, when clearly it was just some weird kind of one-night stand for them. It's just so sweet" (*Pretty Monsters* 220-21). Moreover, Hans Bliss is elected the world president (*Pretty Monsters* 220) and he declares that the aliens want

people to be happy, naked, vegetarian, and destroy all nuclear weapons (*Pretty Monsters* 235). Most people obey the message and start wandering around naked. Nakedness and sexual jokes are frequently encountered in the story, which implies Adorno's adolescence. During his quarantine period, he experiences communication problems with his father but he also tries to understand him.

In this dystopic atmosphere, Link plays with magical elements and genre boundaries through parody and humor. The narrator mentions a magical bottle, which provides two wishes. When his father tells the magical bottle story, he refuses to believe in the magical incidents. Yet, when he presents the genie in a bottle to Naomi, and Lara shakes the bottle, he warns her against it. He says, "How would you like to be shaken if you were an invisible genie who's been trapped in a bottle for hundreds of years?" (*Pretty Monsters* 270). Although magical elements are not accepted as part of the ordinary world presented in the story, the narrator could easily neutralize and parody magical elements, which contributes to the absurd tone of the story.

By neutralizing genre-based characteristics, the narrative focuses on Adorno's story. The aliens come and everybody goes out to see them, but Adorno stays at the hangar and he describes his alienation as follows, "Inside the hangar it was just me, a couple hundred horrible bats sleeping up in the roof, the remains of a petting zoo, and all of the rest of the mess we were leaving behind" (*Pretty Monsters* 275). He has to make a decision to adapt to society. He states, "I know that you're wondering why aliens show up and I'm still in here, in the empty hangar, doing nothing. I can't explain it to you. Maybe you can explain it to me. But I stood there feeling empty and lost and ashamed and alone until I heard my father's voice" (*Pretty Monsters* 275). For him the adult world is weird, but he chooses to grow up, and goes out to see the aliens, because he is eager to be a part of society and grow up. He implies his intention to beat Olivas as: "I smiled at Olivas and tucked his phone number into my shirt pocket. I was thinking, One day, I'll be better than you are. You won't get a thing past me. I'll know Spanish, too. So I'll know exactly what you're saying, and not just stand here looking like an idiot. I'll be six inches taller" (*Pretty Monsters* 273). The ironic and absurd tone in both of Link's stories conceal the dramatic pain in the characters. Science fictional and magical

elements provide a similar affect through enhancing absurd situations and subtly unleashing the characters' traumatic experiences.

3.2.2. Unidentified Objects and Metafictional Plays in Kevin Brockmeier's Fiction

Similar to Kelly Link's character Adorno, Kevin Brockmeier's short story, "The Ceiling" portrays a boy's traumatic experiences in the world of adults, which are revealed through uncanny and phenomenal events. Brockmeier uses supernatural and science fictional elements to give clues about the characters. In the story, a new substance or a planet appears in the sky in the shape of a ceiling. Several disasters occur in the city although whether or not these incidents are related to the unidentified space object is not known. On the other hand, it seems that the growing space object parallels the narrator's deteriorating marriage. When he first notices the oddness in the sky, he sits on the porch, drinking with his wife Melissa (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 103). He describes the oddness as damage on the moon, which "looked as if a window had been opened clean through the floor of the rock, presenting to view a stretch of empty space (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 103-104). He asks his wife if she has any idea about it. Melissa makes a "sudden noise, a deep, defeated little *oh*" (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 103), and replies, "My life is a mess" (104). While the narrator notices the unknown object in the sky, the reader notices Melissa's alienation. She does not really listen to her husband, simultaneously; the narrator does not read the signs about his wife's disconnectedness.

The object in the sky grows larger, people in the town debate about its size and growth (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 104) while side effects occur, which is supposed to be related to the object. For instance, birds and insects disappear (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 108). At the same time, the narrator sees his wife on the verge of a breakdown. He describes, "As for Melissa, she spent several weeks pacing the house from room to room. I watched her fall into a deep abstraction. She had cried into her pillow the night of Joshua's birthday, shrinking away from me beneath the blankets" (*Things that Fall from the Sky* 104-105). The next day, the narrator asks if she feels better and if she is worried about their son Joshua, but he is not able to understand the real problem. The

narrator cannot understand the problem accurately and while he is trying to mend his relationship, they grow apart. In another occasion, while they are sitting on the porch, Melissa silences him and says, “listen” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 106). The narrator hears singing insects but does not know what or why he is supposed to be listening to. Melissa delineates the irrelevance between them by asking “We’re not all that much alike, are we?” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 107).

When the narrator talks about the current situation of the sky object, which is called the ceiling, he says, people are not good at noticing things but easily getting used to them. In his words, “It occurred to me that if nothing were to change, if the ceiling were simply to hover where it was forever, we might come to forget that it was even there, charting for ourselves a new map of the night sky” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 110-111). As he utters his thoughts about the ceiling, he sees Mitch Nauman coming out of his house. At first, he does not suspect this as being strange, but later, it turns out that Melissa is having an affair with Nauman. The ceiling might be interpreted as a metaphor for the narrator’s failing relationship, however, the narrative clearly states that the whole town witnesses the ceiling.

While the narrator experiences this traumatic betrayal, the couple’s son, Joshua also experiences discomfort because of his parents’ dysfunctional relationship. An improbable event is intruded into the story when Joshua’s dream leads to his mother’s affair. The dream, in other words, unfolds the child’s repressed feelings and thoughts. Joshua tells his father about his dream, in which he drops his teddy bear in the grates (*Things that Fall from the Sky* 112). Then the narrator decides to take him to the grates. When he explains why he pursues a dream the narrator says, “I don’t know what we expected to discover there. Perhaps I was simply seized by a whim—the desire to be spoken to, the wish to be instructed by a dream” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 113). He does not rationalize but wants to follow his instincts. “To be instructed by a dream,” reminds us of times, when oracles and prophets used to foretell the future through dreams. When they go to the place where Joshua dropped his teddy bear in the dream, they see Melissa and Nauman at a restaurant and “their hands were cupped together” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 114). Although finding out about Melissa’s affair as a result of following Joshua’s dream might be a coincidence, the incident reflects cues

about a fantastic intrusion. There is not a clear statement about any connection between dreams and the ceiling, but the setting suggests there are odd effects of the object such as disappearing birds.

After the narrator finds about the betrayal, an apocalyptic tone starts to dominate the narrative; the unidentified sky object gets closer and closer, the buildings in the town starts to collapse, a little flood occurs after the collapse of the water tower, when people feel like “a tiny paper boat” and the entire town begins to collapse such as the billboards, lamps, chimneys and apartment buildings (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 115). Finally, the narrator’s house also collapses in front of the family’s eyes. The metaphoric collapse of the family is substituted with the physical collapse of the house. However, even in such a miserable situation, the narrator does not lose his hope. After the collapse, the narrator lies on the ground and grabs Melissa’s hand but nothing happens. He states, “I was waiting to feel her return my touch, and I felt at that moment, felt with all my heart, that I could wait the whole life of the world for such a thing, until the earth and the sky met and locked and the distance between them closed forever” (*Things That Fall from the Sky* 117). Although the narrative is expected to follow the plot of science fiction—with an unknown object appearing in the sky and effecting the environment—the story follows another direction. The narrator does not reveal the mystery of the object in the sky, the collapse, or the disappearance of the insects and birds; on the contrary, these events become a part of daily life. The story, as it generally happens in science fiction, is not concerned with the future of the world, but with a family that is on the verge of a separation. While the residents of the town witness mysterious or improbable events, the family members grow further apart and the unfolding supernatural events in the story reflect this crisis. The narrator’s realization about himself and his relationship is disclosed in strange occurrences, which resembles an alien-invasion or doomsday themed stories, but the narrative goes beyond genre-based clichés.

The ratio of genre elements vary in the stories examined in this chapter. In some stories supernatural elements dominate the narrative while some stories lean on more science fictional characteristics. In “The Human Soul as a Rube Goldberg Device: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Story,” Kevin Brockmeier, as the title suggests, creates a

metafictional play. The narrator lets the readers choose from which page to continue and there are different plot versions of the story. What the reader observes is the character's last few hours. The narrator states, "The technicians will lift you carefully into the sunlight, unwinding your memories like a long, thin thread. The process will not be perfect. Because you died so long ago, only the last few hours of your life will be recoverable—from the moment you returned the milk to the refrigerator to the moment the barbs of light finally flickered from your eyes" (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 147). The memories of the dead man are reflected in the choose-your-own-adventure story and they will be discovered "several thousand years before the human race develops a procedure to retrieve the memories of the dead from their bodies" (146). According to the narrator, the age the character lived in will be considered as a period of barbarism and terror (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 147). From that age only few memory reclamations are operated and the character's memory will be a distinctive one when it is exhibited in the museums. As stated in the story, "People will wait for hours to get a glimpse of you, some of them returning many times" (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 147), which indicates that the reader, just like the future visitors, are faced with the character's last memories.

The narrator uses other fictional worlds not only to create a self-reflexive text but also to bring together different layers of the world of fiction and fantasy. When the narrator mentions the childhood memories of the character, he talks about his fantasies of other worlds through a mirror gate. As it is stated, "This was one of your favorite fantasies when you were growing up: you would enter some small, ordinary-looking room—a closet or an attic, a coat room or a pantry—and inside you would find a door to a place where your life would be utterly transformed, like *Alice in Through the Looking-Glass* or the *Pevensie Children in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*" (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 169). Ironically his wish comes true in the future, and his memories are transformed to the future world, and this is the part where the magical overlaps with science fiction. His intrusion into the fantastic world starts with his death, which is described as follows, "You close your eyes and try to catch your breath. Your head is spinning. Your left arm has gone numb. You hear someone knocking on the door. 'I'll be done in just a minute,' you mean to say, but you can't find your voice to answer. The taste of copper fills your mouth. Your heart stops short. The door opens" (*The View*

from the Seventh Layer 169). As a metafictional play, the story progresses according to the reader's choice, and thematically the text reflects a science fictional world, where an average person's memories and dreams are extracted and turned into paths for the reader to choose their own adventure story.

The metafictional, intertextual, and self-reflexive construction of the story at the intersections of the genre leads the reader to ask the meaning of story writing. The narrator's opinion focuses on a conundrum for blurring genre boundaries. The text, on the other hand, is used as an extension for a manifesto of fiction. The character and the narrator inquire about the purpose of life and story writing. The text asks the reader: "If life is a bedtime story, then what kind of story is death . . . A horror story? A fairy tale? Or simply a mystery?" (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 112). Both life and death are likened to a fictional story, which show parallelisms with the structure of the story. Throughout the writing process, the narrator occasionally reminds the reader about the problematic categorization of fiction. The narrator compares books from different genres and points out the intersections of all bookshelf arrangements. The narrator says, "You have organized your books by genre, with all the science fiction in one area and all the mysteries in another, all the contemporary fiction over here and all the classics over there, with special recesses set aside for poetry and plays, criticism and nature writing, memoirs and graphic novels" (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 116). However, there is a little problem about the categorization of the book named *The Baron in the Trees* written by Italo Calvino. The narrator cannot be sure whether this book should be placed on "literary fiction" or "fantasies" or "historical fiction" shelf. The narrator shows that the difference between high literature and genre literature has been eradicated or there are not any differences. Of course, Calvino is viewed as a prominent author by the critics, but in the story, the narrator handles his book as an example of fantastic literature, which, contrary to general views, appeals to distinguished readers with refined literary tastes. The narrator compares *The Great Gatsby*, as an example of elevated literature, to *The Baron in the Trees*. Contrary to general assumption, he finds out that both books have literary value since they touch upon controversial themes of memory and identity. Through bringing the genres closer, the story removes the borders between highbrow and lowbrow.

Comments of comparing the experience of reading *The Great Gatsby* to *The Baron in the Trees* reflect another level of the text. Although the short story is self-reflexive and does not allow the reader to empathize with the character's alienation, the narrator states that the character finds novels like *The Baron in the Trees* engaging. Contrary to the nature of the text in this short story, the character participates in unconscious gestures as a result of his reading experience. The narrator indicates that the character does not expect to be thrilled by a fantastic book and comments on the book as follows, "a short, crystalline novel with all the grace and poetry of *The Great Gatsby*, but fantastic rather than realistic, and joyful in its elegies rather than plaintive. . . . You feel as if you have been immersed in life—both your own life and the particular lives of the book's characters—and that life, for all its misfortunes, is a pretty good place to be" (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 173).

The labyrinthine story becomes a contemplation on life and the meaning of literature, where both unite with the reflexive mode of the text. The narrator, while presenting the character's last hours, also narrates the character's memories and books. Although the narrator in the story admires "classic" literature, readers encounter a postmodern story, in which they have to choose the progression of the story. Through this contrast, the narrator, again, suggests that genre or the modes are not really important as long as fiction affects individuals. The character likens life to a Rube Goldberg device, which performs tasks in an indirect and complicated way, because life is also "an extremely complicated machine designed to carry out the extremely simple task of constructing your soul" (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 125). By creating a parallel narrative to a Rube Goldberg device, the border between life and genre fiction becomes elusive. When the narrator defines life as a Rube Goldberg device, he says, "because of the decisions you make and those that fate makes for you, until finally, with your dying breath, you emerge from the mouth of the machine and roll to a stop, as motionless as you were before you began, but scarred and colored and burnished now with the markings you will carry with you through an eternity" (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 125) The narrator seems content with experiencing life in this manner, although he mentions his regrets and sorrows. Nevertheless, an individual life becomes a story, or fiction, which adheres to the meaning of life. Returning to *The Baron in the Trees*, he comments as follows,

What most amazes you about the book is how rich it is, how sensitive to the constitution of its characters' souls, how beautiful and moving without being anguished or hopeless. It is certainly not blind to human suffering, featuring poverty, loss, aging, and death, but its mood is overwhelmingly one of celebration. There is a tenderness and a brio to the story. The writer extends his sympathies so widely that even the trees and the hills seem to sing with the joy of existence. (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 172)

In this light, just like the interpretation of the “unconventional” book, it could be interpreted that the complicated, cyclical, and pessimistic nature of the story actually has a positive meaning and the character in the story embraces the meaning of life. He is fond of fiction and he believes that “You want the story to become a part of you, folding itself into your skin and growing like a shoot grafted onto an orange tree” (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 151). While the essence of life is united with fiction, the character, despite his death at the end, realizes that his life was meaningful because his memories are placed within a story. This meaning is conveyed by referring to other genre fictions in a self-referential manner.

It seems to you that all the classic science fiction writers—or at least the best and most stirring ones: Ray Bradbury, Theodore Sturgeon, Arthur C. Clarke—practice literature as a form of nostalgia. With all their alien vessels and technological wonders, what they're really doing is running their stories through the gears of a consciousness that no longer quite belongs to them, casting their minds back to their own childhood, a time when the future seemed limitless and there were a million possible stories to be told. This is why their books contain such a strong current of melancholy tangled together with such a strong current of enthusiasm: they are gazing into the future as a way of recapturing the past. (*The View from the Seventh Layer* 116)

Brockmeier's metafictional story does not only enable the reader to participate actively in the story, but also uses its fictiveness as a simulation of reality. The construction of the science fiction story does not pursue a conventional aim since its reflective content, along with estrangement, exposes how genre fiction should be conceived. At least, as the quote suggests, the narrator takes an argumentative stand to delineate that science fiction is not only about machines, futuristic predictions, or entertaining the reader, but also about the human psyche, memory, and identity. The story itself reveals that thematic and technical aspects of the text do not have to be necessarily restricted to categorization and genre fiction could produce various interpretations about life and literature contrary to labeling them as escapist and popular fictions.

3.2.3. Magic, Myth, Technology, and Modern Life in Steven Millhauser's Stories

A similar theme that connects magic, fiction, and science is explored in Steven Millhauser's "The Wizard of West Orange," which has references to inventor Thomas Edison. By exploiting history and postmodern elements, this science fiction story creates a permeable texture where the reader witnesses a resemblance between magic and science. The story progresses along different genres and the metafictional elements, as in Brockmeier's story, are used to contemplate on history, identity, and memory. The Wizard and another scientist Kistenmacher experiment on a new invention, the haptograph, which is related to sense of touch by helping one to record the sense when something is touched and dreams feel real. Metafictional, intertextual, and ontological elements attribute a postmodern structure to the story about inventions and new gadgets. The story is narrated through the journals of a clerk working in the library. The reader has to rely on the journals as the only factual evidence, because they are the only source for transmitting the events. The narrator writes his observations on the Wizard and his apprentice's scientific researches and he takes notes on other books demanded by Kistenmacher. He names these scientific books, such as "Archaeology of the Skin, Warburton's Physiology of Animals. Greene and Wilson; Cutaneous Sensation, The Nervous System and the Mind, The Tactile Sphere, Leçons sur la Physiologie du Système Nerveux, Lezioni di Fisiologia Sperimentale, Sensation and Pain" (*Dangerous Laughter* "The Wizard of West Orange"). After writing the titles, he makes a metafictional remark, saying, "All these intertextual references to scientific writing as historical sources might lead the reader to question the authenticity of history writing" (*Dangerous Laughter* "The Wizard of West Orange"). Kistenmacher constantly searches for books for his experiment. He tries to persuade the narrator to believe in the possibility of the new invention, the haptograph. As he explains, "touch is the most important. The good Bishop Berkeley, in his *Theory of Vision*, maintains that the visual sense serves to anticipate the tangible" (*Dangerous Laughter* "The Wizard of West Orange"). Such quotations do not only parody history writing but also scientific narration. Giving various references to made-up science books problematizes the

authenticity of scientific methods. Nevertheless, the scientific experiments are only reflections of the narrator's memory and personal comments.

Ironically the master scientist is called the Wizard, who constantly over-works in his isolated room at the library. The story employs a pseudo-scientific language, but Millhauser also relates science to magic and points out the thin line between the genres of science fiction and fantasy. While the narrator tries to find cues about the new invention, he enters the storeroom and sees sketches of a glove "surrounded by several smaller sketches of what appeared to be electromagnets, with coils of wire about a core," under which the word "haptograph" is written (*Dangerous Laughter* "The Wizard of West Orange"). The haptograph creates tactile sensations, both experienced and not experienced (*Dangerous Laughter* "The Wizard of West Orange"). When the narrator wears the glove, he defines it as follows, "The excitement returns, even as I write these words. How to explain it? The activated current caused motor to turn cylinder on its shaft beneath the metal rods suspended from crossbar, which in turn caused silver points in lining of glove to move against my hand. Was aware at first of many small gentle pointed pressures" (*Dangerous Laughter* "The Wizard of West Orange"). The story reconstructs a "history," but it also inquires the nature of identity, of which memories and feelings compound, however, the story presents that emotions and memories are rooted in the nervous system, which could be manipulated by science, just like history might be manipulated by the chronicles.

The scientific rhetoric of the story creates "reliability," but the extent of experiment on the haptograph steps on the borders of the fantastic. Initially, the haptograph was aimed to create tactile sensations just like preserving voices on a phonograph. According to the narrator, "It is possible that every touch remains present in skin. These buried haptomemories capable of being reawakened through mechanical stimulation. Forgotten caresses: mother, lover. Feel of a shell on a beach, forty years ago. Memory-cylinders: a history of touches. Why not?" (*Dangerous Laughter* "The Wizard of West Orange"). Gradually, the narrator loses control and dreams about the capabilities of the invention rather than stating the facts. He starts to question the existence as follows: "Confused thoughts, sudden lucidities. Can sense a new world just out of reach. Obscured by old body. What if a stone is not a stone, a tree not a tree? Fire not fire? Face not face? What

then? New shapes, new touches: a world concealed. The haptograph pointing the way” (*Dangerous Laughter* “The Wizard of West Orange”). He starts to feel suspicious of the haptograph as his feelings might be an illusion or a trick played by the machine (*Dangerous Laughter* “The Wizard of West Orange”).

He realizes that the invention is able to create alternative worlds and free him from restrictions of his body. At the same time, he tries to broaden his experiences further, which he states as follows:

In old body, could hold out my hand and grasp a pencil, a paperweight. In new body, could hold out my hand and grasp an entire room with all its furniture, an entire town with its chimneys and saltshakers and streets and oak trees. But more than that—more than that. In new skin I was able to touch directly—at every point on my body—any object that presented itself to my mind: a stuffed bear from childhood, wing of a hawk in flight, grass in a remembered field. As though my skin were chock-full of touches, like memories in the brain, waiting for a chance to leap forth. (*Dangerous Laughter* “The Wizard of West Orange”)

Considering the self-reflexive structure of the text, it could be said that the experiment also reflects the textual meaning and the construction of fiction. Through fiction, whether science fictional or magical, the human experience can be manipulated or exploited. Moreover, the scientific truth that is supported with evidence gradually becomes more abstract and transforms into a myth with rumors after the invention is sabotaged and finally, the experiment is abandoned. The truth is reproduced through fictional “facts” and historiography. Science fails in understanding humans, their psyche, emotions, and senses, but fictional construction fill in the gaps. The story refutes the idea that genre fiction is for pleasure. Ironically, a man in the library assumes that the machine is a female-shaped invention used for men’s satisfaction (*Dangerous Laughter* “The Wizard of West Orange”). The narrator also starts to get suspicious of the existences of the invention and contemplates on it as follows, “No: no dream. Or say, a dream, certainly a dream, nothing but a dream, but only as all inventions are dreams: vivid and impalpable presences that haunt the mind’s chambers, escaping now and then into the place where they take on weight and cast shadows. The Wizard’s laboratory a dream-garden, presided over by a mage” (*Dangerous Laughter* “The Wizard of West Orange”). The narrator’s confusion might be a result of the haptograph’s effect, however, it is clear that the text emphasizes the unreachability of truth through science, and questions the reliability of inventions and emotions. If a

machine could pretend emotions and senses, “what is the way of knowing the truth or the feelings of the self” is one of the main questions in the story. As an answer, the story intermingles science and magic, reality and dream, fact and ambition. Mary Kinzie suggests Millhauser uses magic as an inherited narrative tool. She writes, “creating a new understanding of an existing work is understood by both Borges and Millhauser to be an act of magic” (“Succeeding Borges, Escaping Kafka” 119). The process of story writing and the creation of emotions and memories are reflected as the gears of same the machinery. Although reaching the ultimate truth about the self through inventions does not seem possible, the compounds of identity require imagination and representation that exceeds the physical world. Thus, blending magic and science also proves that answers do not have to be either magic or science, after all, both human psychology and inventions, as the narrator declares, depend on dreams. In other words, creativity and ambition, which are the roots of fiction writing, are also the essence of understanding self and others.

It is possible to incorporate various labels to fictional works that make use of magical elements in realistic settings. They are not only blended with science fictional or fantastic elements, but also with fabulism, which is a stimulus that reinvigorates magical realist characteristics. Through tales, myths, and fables, authors have a chance to reconceptualize conventional gender roles and identities. Leslie What’s definition of fabulism is as follows:

You might know Literary Fabulism as Slipstream . . . Magical Realism, Fabulist Fiction, Transrealism, New Weird, and Interstitial Fiction, or non-mimetic fiction . . . It is rooted in folk tale, religious belief, magic, surrealism, and superstition. Fabulist writing blends literary tropes with fantastic conceits, and in the process frees fiction from the limitations of realism. (7)

Magical realist tendencies serve as a catalyst for blending postmodern narrative techniques with fables and fairy tales. It is also possible to view magical realism as a rewriting of fantastic stories by adding authorial reticence and antinomy. Millhauser, for instance, rewrites *Alice in Wonderland* in his story “Free Fall to Wonderland” (*The Barnum Museum*). In the story, Alice keeps falling in a magical way, and the story tells what she experiences during this eternal fall. Millhauser also adapts classical tales rooted in *One Thousand and One Nights*. His story “The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad” is a modern version of “Sinbad the Sailor.”

In the story, there are two narrative paths that contain parallelisms with different paths of Sinbad stories. The narrator seeks the roots of the Sinbad stories and shows discrepancies between book translations. The readers follow both Sinbad's point of view and the narrator, who traces the Sinbad translations with the meticulousness of an academic. As Kinzie states Millhauser "blurs both the characters' focus and the focusability of the outer landscapes and events. And in these new stories Millhauser has accomplished a remarkable compression of the realistic with the fantastic, creating in effect his own subtle, clever, funny, breathtaking, and delightful mode of magical realism" (Kinzie 116). In this story, the narrators are also blurred to give the sense of an anonymous storyteller, since on one level; the story pretends to be an anonymous ancient story. The academic narrator speculates on the narrative point of view, saying that the Sinbad stories are narrated from the first-person point of view, however, the stories were supposed to be reported by Scheherazade, the narrator of *The Arabian Nights*. The narrator furthers this argument by asking: "In what sense therefore may we say that Sinbad narrates his voyages? Scheherazade, who reports his words, has a strong motive for her storytelling, which has nothing whatever to do with Sinbad and his storytelling. Perhaps she inserts words in his mouth that serve her own purposes" (*The Barnum Museum* "The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad"). Millhauser applies a similar method, and by switching narrators from the first-person view to the academic narrator's point of view, he affirms that words are inserted in Sinbad's mouth.

In the frame story, Sinbad's ship sinks and he finds himself on the shore, which, he later discovers, turns out to be his hometown. Yet, the story narrated by Sinbad presents various landscapes that look like compounds of his entire voyages. Sinbad, tired and hopeless, sees somebody, whom he perceives as himself. Unlike the fantastic and heroic voyages of fictionalized Sinbad, this Sinbad is depicted as a character with deficiencies. He says, "Then I repented of bringing destruction on myself by leaving my home and my friends and relations to seek adventures in strange lands; and as I looked about, presently I caught sight of a ring of iron lying in the mud and seaweed of the ocean floor" (*The Barnum Museum* "The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad").

Although Sinbad is a fearless adventurer, Millhauser reshapes the character by presenting his fragility and fictionality. He shows how a writer creates Sinbad and how

metaphorical meanings around this name are reconstructed. First of all, Millhauser points out that Sinbad is not a man of flesh and bones, but words. As the narrator states,

Although he can no longer reconstruct the history of each voyage, although he is no longer certain of the order of voyages, or of the order of adventures within each voyage, Sinbad can summon to mind, with sharp precision, entire adventures or parts of adventures, as well as isolated images that suddenly spring to enchanted life behind his eyelids, there in the warm shade of the orange tree, and so it comes about that within the seven voyages new voyages arise, which gradually replace the earlier voyages as the face of an old man replaces the face of a child. (*The Barnum Museum* “The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad”)

The Sinbad stories have evolved through the tradition of oral story telling, and the interpretations have changed with different translations. Millhauser’s story creates another version in which he does not speculate about the authenticity of other Sinbad stories since every storyteller, including Scheherazade, may omit or add some details “for the sake of shaping the tale effectively” (*The Barnum Museum* “The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad”). Fiction becomes a medium to convey and transpose truth in the stories. Thus, the narrator finds no difference between the characters Leopold Bloom and Sinbad, and writes “If Bloom is Ulysses, he is also Sinbad, setting forth on a voyage through the perilous seas of Dublin” (*The Barnum Museum* “The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad”). The archetypal hero/adventurer reveals certain features of the communities he is created, and thus, Millhauser depicts Sinbad in modern society; he is an old man who tries to remember his adventures, and question the meaning of life. In this sense, traditional heroes designated by fantastic experiences convey the archives of culturally shaped identities. Millhauser, by pretending to follow an earlier story line, adds the themes of an aging hero’s loneliness and eventual death in his story. When Sinbad returns to his hometown, he tries to communicate with the residents but nobody hears him. He assumes that he might have died when the ship sunk. As a common point of all the Sinbad stories, the narrator underscores his mortality and writes, “there are no voyages, only the worm-thick veins on the back of the hand. Only the heavy body, the laboring heart, blossoms rotting under the sun. Dead hour; his hands green corpses” (*The Barnum Museum* “The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad”). Millhauser tries to create a stable setting for the retired Sinbad resting under the shade of the orange tree but this Sinbad version also imagines another Sinbad who is constantly seeking adventures.

Throughout the story, the narrator displays that there are as many Sinbad characters as the Sinbad readers. As the narrator puts it,

Every reading of a text is limited and contingent: no two readings are alike. In this sense there are as many voyages as there are readers, as many voyages as there are readings. From an infinite number of possible readings, let us imagine one. It is a hot summer afternoon in southern Connecticut. Under the tall pines on the bank of the Housatonic, the shady picnic tables look down at the brown-green water. (*The Barnum Museum* "The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad")

In a contemporary setting, the narrator tells another Sinbad story in which Sinbad talks about his past adventures, expresses reconciliation in a tranquil atmosphere while having a picnic with his family. At the end, he says, "Then I distributed alms and largesse and clothed the widow and the orphan, and fell to feasting and making merry with my companions, and soon forgot the perils and hardships I had suffered; and I applied myself to all manner of joys and pleasures and delights" (*The Barnum Museum* "The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad"). Millhauser reconstructs a metafictional Sinbad tale and adds another reading to the infinite readings of Sinbad stories. Proliferating the stories and meanings demonstrate that fantastic and mythic stories are abundant in interpretation, even in modern life they maintain their consistency about a person's intrinsic qualities.

As quoted before, Brian Attebery questions the exasperation of metafictional plays and suggests that postmodernist elements have become familiar for the reader, but the contemporary function of fantasy requires new interpretations (198). Attebery seems exhausted of the postmodern techniques, multiple references and intertextuality. Postmodern techniques have been used a lot and have become worn out, but as an answer to his question, it could be said that contemporary fantastic or magical realist works might keep adopting the postmodern methods, and Link's, Brockmeier's, Millhauser's, and Bender's stories are not escapist in nature. They expand the ways of perceiving and representing reality and go beyond the confinements of used-up literary methods. Although it is possible to consider metafiction as a skeptical approach, Millhauser pretends to create the metafictional in the oral story telling methods such as *One Thousand and One Nights* and *Don Quixote*. He does not deconstruct the Sinbad image, but follows its roots and explores where he stands in today's society, which illustrates a connection rooted in ancient stories.

3.2.4. Aimee Bender's Reconstruction of Fairy Tales

Aimee Bender also recreates conventional fairy tales in her stories through absurd, surreal, and magical elements to depict human deficiencies and traumatic experiences. Bender's stories include fairy tale like characters, such as people with pumpkin or iron heads, deformed bodies, and key-shaped fingers. People with holes in their bodies, small people in birdcages treated as pets, women married to ogres and imps, and mermaids attending school combine contemporary aspects with surreal elements. As Jack Zipes puts it, "Bender has managed to transform the short story into an exquisite and terse narrative form that combines elements of the folk tale, magic realism, the grotesque, and the macabre and that ruptures readers' expectation. It is difficult to categorize her stories because they are so bizarre and so realistic at the same time" (*Relentless Progress* 130). Although Bender uses postmodern techniques, she does not simply create a postmodern parody to deconstruct gender, class, and conventional narratives. She projects the unconventional side of the characters by introducing the fantastic and supernatural elements to unfold the invisible or clouded planes of human's traumatic experiences. According to Jo Carney, the fairy tale elements in Bender's fiction provide a vision to understand "the emotional disconnection her characters experience in an overwhelming and absurd postmodern landscape" (222). Her recreation of fairy tales presents a peculiar world, which is neither a fairy tale nor mimetic but hybrid in nature.

The first sentences of "The Devourings" introduce the whimsicalness of the created world. She starts as follows, "The ogre's wife was a good woman. She was not an ogre, but she was ugly, by human standards, and she had married the ogre because he was strong and productive, and together they had made six small ogre children" (*The Color Master* 203). This introduction reflects the structure of the story instantly. The tone of the narrator and authorial reticence reserve the improbability of the supernatural scenery. Like fairy tales, the narrator does not give the details. The narrative pretends to be like a fairy tale and fable by withholding specific settings, the character's name or other information.

While the story gradually unfolds, it turns out that it is neither a fairy tale nor follows such a structure; instead the narration shifts into a self-quest. Although it is possible to interpret the ogre as metaphorically representing the male dominant society, Bender narrates a story of the cycle of human life and knowing one's self. The ogre's wife comes to the realization of her capabilities through "devourings." As a teenager, she was not well cared by her family. She leaves her hometown and finds an ogre, who can take good care of her, although she knows that ogres eat people. The ogre is portrayed as an indifferent husband, but he loves his wife. The wife feels fine and safe with him. The narrator explains, "Next to him, she felt herself so delicate. At school, she had been the roughest-skinned, the one with the drooping features, the one no one could ever imagine that way, in a bed. She did not care about not being pretty, but she wanted to be seen as a future woman, as one who could participate, and no high-school boy could take that leap" (*The Color Master* 204). Although she is happy with the ogre at the beginning, she cannot overcome the trauma of witnessing the ogre's devouring of their human children. The wife epitomizes main problems of being a woman, spouse, and a mother. Conventional social and family structures create a pressure on her even though she does not live in a social community. She had also opposed her family to get married with the ogre. As the narrator states, "last time she'd been home, before the devourings, everyone had lectured her on ogres and complicity and betrayal. She'd waved them off. He's a good one, she had said. She had not dared show pictures of her children" (*The Color Master* 208).

In her mourning state, she decides to start a journey on her own, where the conventional structures of fairy tales are distorted. Although her story shares similar patterns of fairy tales such as meeting a prince or experiencing supernatural events, her decision to leave home does not have an adventurous purpose. When she leaves, she says "I'd like to see something pretty, she said. Maybe a lake?" (*The Color Master* 208). During her trip she meets a handsome man, but an ogre kills him. She finds a letter in the handsome man's pocket, which was written by his wife. The narrator explains her feelings in the following manner:

Now she and the widow had something in common. Though loss did not pass from one person to another like a baton; it just formed a bigger and bigger pool of carriers. And, she thought, scratching the coarseness of the horse's mane, it did not

leave once lodged, did it, simply changed form and asked repeatedly for attention and care, as each year revealed a new knot to cry out and consider—smaller, sure, but never gone. (*The Color Master* 211-212)

Her trip becomes a means for discovering herself and she understands that she has to deal with her loss on her own. Before she leaves home, the ogre gives her a magical coat and a cake. When she experiences problems in her journey, she uses these, but later, she decides that she must rely on her own abilities to survive and she leaves the magical items behind. Her decision is narrated as; “she wrapped up the cloak and left it in another tree’s branches. She did not want help from magic. She did not want any more handouts” (*The Color Master* 217). Rather than using magic or resorting to a guide, she prefers to fight for her life “a little harder than this” (*The Color Master* 215). Unlike fairy tales, her quest does not carry her to a possible happy ending. As a weary and tired person, she returns to the ogre. She lives with him until her death. The narrator describes the rest of her days as follows, “It did not feel wrong . . . They ate their stew bowls together . . . at night, she climbed onto his chest to sleep . . . they took a few trips to a waterfall, and a glacier, and befriended an ogre . . . after many years, the woman died of natural causes” (*The Color Master* 221). Her return is not portrayed as a happy or a sad ending. When the wife dies, the story continues with the magical cake left behind during her journey. As she was leaving the cake, the wife had proclaimed, “you are to have your own adventure now” (*The Color Master* 216), and the cake literally has its own adventure. At first, it remains on the tree where birds feed on it but it magically replenishes itself. The experience of the cake is similar to the wife’s experience. The wife feeds her children and the cake wants to make birds happy by feeding them:

On the ground, the birds pecked it into nothing. It replenished. They pecked. It replenished. The cake wanted to satisfy the birds, so it made itself into a seeded type, and the birds went at it with new vigor. The cake replenished. . . . the birds that lived near the oak tree became fat and listless. They could hardly fly. . . . The cake had grown old. It had been made so many years ago, and it had been so many cakes in its time. I will never die, thought the cake to itself, in even simpler terms, as cakes did not have sophisticated use of language. (*The Color Master* 219-220)

The narrator, rather than presenting a magical happy ending, shows the vicious cycle of life with pressures. The wife tries to come to terms with her life by starting a journey. She wants to see what waits for her outside of her environment, but she accepts her life and tries to forget the grief left by her children’s absence. Although the ending might

seem as leading to a pessimistic dead-end, in which women struggle hopelessly to escape from male-dominated society, the wife succeeds in choosing her own path. The ending suggests that the natural cycle of life does not consist of happiness or tragedy; it is a blend of both forms. As the narrator puts it, “Only when the cake filled with light did it come over. The darkness, circling around the light, devouring the light. But the cake kept refilling, as we know. This is the spell of the cake. And the darkness, eating light, and again light, and again light, lifted” (*The Color Master* 224). In this sense, this story is not a conventional fairy tale. The heroine is not passive, the (handsome) prince is not a savior, and the heroine does not choose the convenient offerings in life. The story estranges the known world through magical elements and designates the cycle of life as a reality that carries the potential to be reconciled.

Struggling but also embracing the circumstances of life are visible in Bender’s other stories. Depicting distorted bodies are not only about estrangement but also about embracing the self. Bender presents the fantastic elements in a philosophical way, which raises questions about nature, inheritance, and body/identity relations. The chaotic panorama of world is revealed with these unusual depictions. In her story “Hymn” she projects a creation myth, in which the uncanny and harmony are united. In an anonymous town, babies are born with strange disabilities. Some of them are born as paper-made and glass-made while some of them are just “so bold” or “so tall.” There are also babies with no eyes, but highly sensitive to sounds. Creating an estranged creation myth in the contemporary world has obvious parallelism with tales and fables. According to Jack Zipes, “they [fairy tales] emanate from specific struggles to humanize bestial and barbaric forces, which have terrorized our minds and communities in concrete ways, threatening to destroy free will and human compassion. The fairy tale sets out to conquer this concrete terror through metaphors” (*Spells of Enchantment* xi). Bender’s simplistic narrative style reduces symbols and metaphors to a basic level. The story does not explain the psychological states and does not express characters’ feelings.

Bender’s postmodern stories do pretend to be fairy tales, but they borrow a stylistic pattern and functionality from the genre. Cristina Bacchilega describes fairy tales as follows, “What distinguishes the tale of magic or fairy tale as a genre is its effort to conceal its work systematically—to naturalize its artifice, to make everything so clear

that it works magic, no questions asked” (8). Bender keeps most of her stories as short and as simple as possible as if she wants to attribute anonymity to her stories. By recreating mythic stories, she actually gets rid of the magical dimension of the story. The wife in “The Devourings,” for instance, does not want to use magic because she does not want to define herself through magic. For postmodern retelling of fairy tales Bacchillega writes, “In the beginning, were stories—or better, people would tell enchanting stories. These stories might seem old and worthless, but performing their magic’s many tricks once more unleashes new powers which, in turn, can expose the magic as trickery and thus unmake its spells” (24). In “Hymn,” Bender reconfigures mythic narratives to reproduce the storytelling process and to explore a postmodern creation of contemporary society. Babies with disabilities or unusual body formations grow up and establish a peaceful and functional society because every unique bizarreness works for the benefit of the society. As the narrator puts it, “The son of glass was a doctor, and all could see inside his body while he worked on theirs. The daughter of paper was a scholar, and each book became a part of her wrist and arm and breast. The blond son lit the town for those months when electricity was no longer an option...” (*Willful Creatures* “Hymn”). This society with supernatural abilities projects a cosmopolite collectivity, where myths do not function but eventually the society can be labeled as mythic.

As magical realists do, Bender replaces the magical elements existing metaphorically in the language and considers them as daily realities. This is similar to using a proverb literally. For instance, the narrator writes “Ma? Why, Pa. That creature is your own flesh and blood. Even though it has neither flesh nor blood; still, it is yours” (*Willful Creatures* “Hymn”). The metaphoric saying “your flesh and blood,” becomes invalid while flesh and blood are replaced by paper and glass. As the ogre’s wife embraces her life cycle, the former generation, including their parents, disappears and the world falls into “sense and sorrow” (*Willful Creatures* “Hymn”), but they maintain their society by saying “this is our decision . . . bowing to each other” (*Willful Creatures* “Hymn”). Once in a year they come together and hold each other to replenish themselves. At the end of the story, the narrator recites words that are like a hymn and manifests the inevitable cycle of life as follows: “The combination of loss and abundance. The abundance that has no guilt. The loss that has no fix. The simple tiredness that is not

weary . . . I am the drying meadow . . . he is the fluctuating distance between mother and son . . . My genes, my love, are rubber bands and rope; make yourself a structure you can live inside. Amen” (*Willful Creatures* “Hymn”). The differences in generations and the distinctions do not prevent the stories from transforming and conveying the human conditions. Functionality of fairy tales and myths are transmitted to Bender’s postmodern stories but the narrative methods multiply the individual’s and/or society’s perception. Bender’s stories resist literary categorizations and refuse to be shaped by conventional norms or narratives. Her innovative reproduction of mythic and magical elements establishes a narrative through which abundance of personalities, cultures, and distinctions could be reflected.

Genre fictions have gained an importance in terms of literary value. As seen in recent award-winning genre fiction, its reputation has been reclaimed. The elevation of genre fiction is also partially related to how academic institutions and creative writing programs present alternative ways to reevaluate genre fictions. On the other hand, reconfiguring established writing methods help the writers to explore ways of self-discovered narratives as well as various literary labels for fictions that blend magical, science fictional, absurd, and surrealist elements. Structuring narrative methods, postmodern techniques, and combining magical elements result in various genre assortments. Unlike the postmodern outlook, reconstruction of fairy-tales and adopting narratives blended with science fictional and fantastic elements produce fictional works that present a quest of reconciliation and an initiation in embracing the self. Various narrative elements from different genres create blended distinct fictional forms that portray the process of dealing with traumatic experiences. Link, Brockmeier, Millhauser, and Bender adapt magical, fantastic, mythic, and science fictional elements to create unique story structures, which reveal a rehabilitative approach in reconstructing the meaning.

CONCLUSION

Magical realism emerged as a mode of writing in which fantasy and reality are intermingled. Although the term has various interpretations and definitions, there is a general tendency to associate magical realism with postcolonial literature and more specifically with Latin American literature because its subversive nature and in-betweenness provide useful tools for colonized countries to raise their voices against oppressions. Furthermore, Latin Americans' distinctive culture, traditions, beliefs, and myths rooted in indigenous societies are influential in writers' narratives and themes since they try to preserve regional and national identities. Hence, writing their own history, identity, and collective mind contradicts with the Western chronicles. What the Western colonizers consider rational was irrational for the colonized nations and vice versa. In this dichotomy, magical elements become practical and effective tools to establish a distinctive voice in cultural clashes between the colonizer and the colonized.

Although culture is generally considered a common tradition and shared values of a group of people, the ideological aspects could be used to direct and manipulate people's thoughts for the colonizers' benefit. Whether colonized or not, the ruling class dominates cultural media to serve for ideological power, as Antonio Gramsci argues in his explanation of "cultural hegemony" (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*). Representations and generating alternative representations are part of this ideological struggle. In Edward Said's interpretation, hegemony is related to post colonialism. He highlights hegemony as a set of hierarchal system and whoever holds the power, has the authority over others (*Culture and Imperialism* 8). As culture becomes more vulnerable to the impact of economy and politics with free market, capitalism, multinational companies, and technology, a more global culture, is created. In the past, magical realism was frequently associated with local literatures, but now, writers from different parts of the world has embraced the term it has become a global label.

From an ideological perspective, it is possible examine the double nature of magical realism; while reflecting habits and attitudes of oppressed nations, the magical portrayals shed light on dominant ideologies, often in a defiant manner. Culture,

ideology, and forces of globalization are entwined together. As Said states, “culture serves authority, and ultimately the nation state, not because it represses and coerces but because it is affirmative, positive, and persuasive. Culture is productive ... It is a historical force possessing its own configurations, ones that intertwine with those in the socio-economic sphere” (*The World, the Text, and the Critic* 171). The ideological and social contents of cultures are not easy to separate. Culture might serve for the benefit of ideology, but it is also part of a shared collective history, and a drive to produce values. The motivation behind culture is a mixture of ideology and natural norms that nourish humanist values such as democracy and freedom. Cultural and conventional methods that contradict the Western mind, such as magical realism, became crucial resistance modules. Moreover, magical realist works present two separate realms—mimetic and magical—, which provide a favorable ground for depicting the world of colonized and colonizer. As a result, magical realism has become a prominent literary mode associated with Latin American literature and has been celebrated as the proper mode of expression in these nations.

However, magical realism, embraced by various fiction writers from Western countries, has become an acclaimed literary mode among critics and publishers and has turned into a cultural commodity in popular culture. In fact, as the mode acquired fame, it turned into a marketing strategy, which has been criticized by writers and critics (Sdrigotti). On the other hand, this criticism did eradicate magical realist descriptions in culture industry. Due to its potential power of representation, magical realism still remains as a valid form of presentation in mainstream productions. Magical realism grants alternative ways of reflecting truth and creates defamiliarized perspectives to discover uncovered aspects of reality and human psyche. Also, its eclectic state enables the combination of various literary elements, and neighboring genres such as fabulation, slipstream, and fantasy, which are also labeled as magical realism at times. Indeed, magical realism, from the very beginning, exploited various genre patterns, but this has not been discussed much because the mode has generally been considered as a device of resistance for colonized nations, ethnic identities, minorities, and discriminations based on gender, color, and social status. Critics generally accept the idea that magical realism borrows elements from different genres and methods, but its function in contemporary

Western fiction, is relatively less examined except for postcolonial and feminist critical schools.

Indeed, from ancient fables, fairy tales, myths, and Biblical stories to contemporary horror, superhero movies, and vampire novels, the magical intrudes on culture, art, and society. Although, generally considered as an escape like fantasy genre, it is actually a way of understanding truth, which sometimes cannot be grasped through reasoning and mimetic representation. What is experienced in the fantastic and magical is open to interpretations from religious intensity to libidinal actions. As Tzvetan Todorov suggests, the fantastic either accounts for the marvelous or the uncanny. In the latter, the unknown or the mysterious element could be explained through modern science such as psychoanalysis and clinical trials. However, magical realism does not necessarily have to fit in either of these categories, as it resists unbearable truths, and reconfigures their reality. In this sense, magical elements turn into signifiers, which consist of intricate psychological traumas, catastrophes, or collective consciousness. Thus, both magical realism and fantasy entail a significant interpretation to understand what is hidden in human mind and why reality is distorted or reformed. Todd McGowan states,

The role of fantasy is to convert the subject's traumatic experience of lack into a more acceptable experience of loss in order to produce the illusion that there is somewhere a satisfying object of desire, that there is a world of things that language obscures and hints at. Hence, fantasy's fundamental deception consists in its constituting an image of originary plenitude that the subject has lost. By providing the subject with such an image (and the narrative that explains its loss), fantasy blinds the subject to its own situatedness within language and society. (199)

In a similar, but not the same manner, magical realism reveals traumatic experiences through elements that language and reality cannot reflect. Contrary to fantasy, magical realism captures the traumatic in mimetic world instead of isolating the self in the imaginary. Situating the magical in the mimetic is in the essence of magical realism, which differentiates it from fantasy. In both magical realism and fantasy “the subject can sustain its belief in a ‘real world’ beyond its present world,” but in fantasy a fantasmatic dimension distinguishes itself from the mimetic world whereas in magical realism two separate realms exist in the same world. Magical realism presents an alternative structure to provide a basis for its peculiar delineation, which is practical to use in contemporary fiction. Also, representation of traumatic events is brought forward

through defamiliarization. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris explain how magical realism exceeds regional borders and becomes an acclaimed mode. They write, “Contemporary magical realist writers self-consciously depart from the conventions of narrative realism to enter and amplify other (diverted) currents of Western literature that flow from the marvelous Greek pastoral and epic traditions to medieval dream visions to the romance and Gothic fictions of the past century” (“Introduction: Daiquiri Birds” 2).

Although magical realism in contemporary fiction does not function in the same manner as magical realism in colonized geographies, the narrative has similar tendencies in drawing from myths and stories of ancient times. Obviously, magical realist elements do not necessarily have to be rooted in myths and ancient stories, but these supply profound ingredients for magical realism. Myths are part of social culture and scholars explore communities through their themes as well as constructions. Traditions, problems, and memories of the communities are reflected through myths and mythical elements. For example, to unfold the hidden meanings in mythic elements, Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell focus on myths as reflectors of collective consciousness. Trying to display the origins and universal similarities of myths, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes examined language as a constructed communication tool. Mythical elements are still used to transmit various messages and cultural elements, but rather than revealing a reality, which lost its meaning in the postmodern age, they create fictional truths. Foucault claims it is impossible to reach the truth since knowledge is produced through discourses, which are set of systems and power relations that constitute their own “knowledge” (“The Order of Discourse”), but representing “a” truth through various imaginative representations such as magical realism and fantasy might be possible. Similarly, Roland Barthes examines modern myths and defines his notion of “myth” in *Mythologies*. As Riggan, the character from *Birdman* (2014) interprets his work, “The cultural work done in the past by gods and epic sagas is now done by laundry-detergent commercials and comic-strip character”. Barthes delineates how modern myths are created through political and social narratives and how these myths serve ideological powers. This might suggest that people are always depended on fantastic, imaginary, and mythic for representation; myths preserve their nature, but their forms are adjusted in the contemporary society. A similar comment can be made for magical realism.

Joseph Campbell's and Carl Jung's perspectives on myths clarify why colonized nations' writers adapt magical realist elements; they try to fortify the collective consciousness of their societies. On the other hand, modern myths in Western societies—especially science fictional elements, Jungian archetypes, popularized vampires and zombies—reflect the constructed myths such as nationalism, religion, and history. In addition, myths and magical elements do not only reflect collective traumas but also individual ones. In Western societies, which promote individualism, it would not be surprising that magical realist narratives would be concerned with individuals and marginalized selves. As Jeronimo Arellano puts it,

Because while magical realism itself may have come to its end, an interest in the marvelous and the fantastic persists in literary fiction written in the aftermath of the Boom's magical realism, but it is at this point where these forms also undergo a radical transformation...The new articulations of the marvelous in these narratives are forms grown out of the graveyards of magical realism. (170)

Separated from its political stance, magical realism is employed in American short stories, and hybridized with other genres, which experiments with new forms of subjectivity and representation. These stories blur boundaries of genre fiction, and reformulate postmodern, fantastic, and magical elements.

In the first chapter, to display the intrusion of magical realist traits, I applied five magical realist characteristics defined by Wendy Faris in selected eight short stories, namely; "The Wrong Grave" and "The Hortlak" by Kelly Link; "A Fable with Slips of White Paper" and "The Light through the Window" by Kevin Brockmeier; "Sons and Mothers" and "The Tower" by Steven Millhauser; "Marzipan" and "The Leading Man" by Aimee Bender. Faris develops her ideas on Amaryll Beatrice Chanady's work, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy*, which explores the distinguished characteristics of magical realism and the fantastic. Before Faris explains five primary characteristics of magical realist fictions, she explains why she includes Robert Pinget's story, *That Voice*, as an example although it is not considered a magical realist work. The story touches upon magical realist traits and "underscores ways in which magical realism is interwoven with many strands of contemporary fiction" ("Scheherazade's Children" 167). Similarly, although the examined authors may not be classified as magical realist from a conventional perspective, five primary characteristics—the irreducible element of magic, realistic

descriptions of a mimetic world, unsettling doubts, two separate realms, and questioning received ideas about time, space, and identity—are observed in their stories, which are “interwoven with many strands of contemporary fiction.” In the stories, the irreducible elements of magic are used to represent characters’ problems, traumatic experiences, and solutions. Although magical elements carry some characteristics of myths, fairy tales, and fabulation, the stories prove that magical does not necessarily have to be regional and indigenous. On the contrary, “as a mode that emphasizes the variable relationship between the rational and the irrational, magical realism is instrumental in each author’s rendering of the paradoxical forces operating in/on the city and its dwellers” (Stewart 492). In American short stories, the magical elements are transported to urban spaces and the writers explore different borders in their narratives.

In the stories, the phenomenal world is portrayed with detailed descriptions, but this is not as intense as in the novel form. Writers describe the characters’ daily routines, and their environment or the magic elements in a detailed way to create make-believe atmospheres. Since the short story form is more compact compared to a novel, every narrative detail becomes more significant in terms of revealing the magical and mimetic quality of the story.

The reader may experience unsettling doubts since the line between the magical and real is erased. The mimetic world is capable of displaying supernatural events and the characters may not be surprised by them since “miracles” or irrational events are a part of that mimetic world. Contrary to fantastic literature, magical realism does not create anxiety through hesitation, but raises questions about the nature of that world, and opens up different perspectives to observe conflicting settings. While Todorov categorizes the fantastic as the marvelous and the uncanny based on the causes of the supernatural events, magical realism is indifferent to the causes and incorporates the marvelous, the uncanny, and fabulation (Hegerfeldth 51). The reader views the moments of hesitation with canny eyes. Nevertheless, as a characteristic of magical realism, hesitation exist in the analyzed short stories.

For the fourth characteristic of magical realism, Faris identifies two separate realms that could be exemplified in the mentioned short stories. These worlds are often merged and in the antinomy and oxymoronic space, the defamiliarized environments lead the reader

to question their own space and premises. In other words, short stories and storytelling are used to unsettle modern routines. Eventually, people, objects, and all concrete and abstract notions are loaded with artificial meanings. Projecting two different realms reveal the artificiality of reality, because they reflect the artificial borders between genders, social classes, and hierarchies. Barthes states,

The petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other. If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself. In the petit-bourgeois universe, all the experiences of confrontation are reverberating, any otherness is reduced to sameness. The spectacle or the tribunal, which are both places where the Other threatens to appear in full view, become mirrors. This is because the Other is a scandal which threatens his essence. (*Mythologies* 152)

This passage aims interpret modern myths, but the explanation could be applied to the function of magical realism, because it reflects the confrontation between different worlds such as colonizer and colonized, rational and irrational, and magical and real. Merging the other with the ordinary, magical realism reflects dysfunctional and deficient parts of society and individuals.

Magical realist works also help the reader to see time, space, and identity in a defamiliarized manner. Distorted settings, miracles, and supernatural events decentralize known borders, realistic conventions and accustomed discourses. The narratives repeatedly question anticipated views on gender, society, and identity. This is one of the reasons why magical realism is associated with colonized nations. When Slavoj Žižek comments on ideologies, he says, “the task today is to resist state power by withdrawing from its scope, subtracting oneself from it, creating new spaces outside its control (*In Defense* 339). Magical realists open up new spaces in a literal sense, and this becomes an area to grasp a critical view against all the notions of genre fiction. As Alberto Fuguet claims, magical realist settings are not happening in Macondo, an isolated village unaware of consumerist culture. Magical realist works, now, are representing McOndo, an iconic city of capitalism, where people face different pains and struggles to survive.

In the second chapter, “A Game of Clue,” “History of a Disturbance,” “The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman,” and “Here at the Historical Society,” by Steven Millhauser; “Small Degrees,” by Kevin Brockmeier; “The Rememberer” and

“Wordkeepers,” by Aimee Bender; “Some Zombie Contingency Plans” and “Pretty Monsters” by Kelly Link are examined. These stories have apparent postmodernist tendencies and magical realism is often considered a subbranch of postmodernism. However, the postmodern narrative tools in these stories are transformed and serve different purposes, similar to the transformation of magical realism in other geographies. Once popular, postmodernist narratives—and its interaction with post-structuralist theories—gradually became mainstream and lost its initial dominance in the literary field. At the turn of the century, most critics declared postmodernism’s death. However, postmodernist elements are still used in contemporary fiction. Especially, ontological questions, historiographic metafiction, and self-reflexivity are visible in the stories. The above-mentioned occurrences are placed in close proximity with magical and fantastic elements, but compared to postmodern narratives, the deconstructive mode in these stories tend to be more reconstructive.

Among the critics claiming the end of postmodernism, David Foster Wallace talks about how the use of postmodern irony has become deconstructive and worn out. He states, “This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It’s critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony’s singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks” (67). Thus, postmodern irony is considered dysfunctional for narrative purposes. On the other hand, magical realism prefers to construct fiction on literal meanings rather than employing ironic and metaphoric stances. For instance, magical realism does not reflect the sentence “the pen is mightier than the sword,” as a metaphor, the pen becomes a mighty entity. In the above sentence, postmodernist rendering would mock the pen and would use it as a parody. In this regard, Wallace points out that magical realism has the capacity to restore the gap in postmodernism.

The ontological questions, historiographic metafiction, and self-reflexivity in the stories lead the characters to face their current states and accept themselves. However, postmodernism, in a general sense, is inclined to create black humor, disbelief, and meaninglessness. Jesus Benito Sánchez distinguishes postmodern metafiction from magical realism; while postmodernism “revels in the permanent failure of

representation to offer access to the real thing, . . . magical realist texts strive to retain a sense of the real and to reconstruct a feeling of order by filling in the gaps with magic” (74). Although postmodernist elements in the stories partially display poststructuralist tendencies such as the dysfunctionality of language, the impossibility of reaching truth, fragmentation, and disconnection, these elements are also transformed and they signal a reconstructive state in which the characters are able to generate meaning and hope out of their complicated lives.

In the third chapter, I examined how magical realist fiction is blended with other genre fictions. Since postmodernism already erased fictional borders, the literary value of the genre fiction is reconsidered. The difference between high and lowbrow tastes in literature is reconsidered and ignored genres such as horror novels and comics provide new aspects of representations. Magical realism, which was an eclectic form, expanded through popular genre fiction, and transformed itself with its inclusive nature. Link’s “Most of My Friends are Two-Thirds Water” and “The Surfer,” Brockmeier’s “The Ceiling” and *The Human Soul as a Rube Goldberg Device: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Story*,” Millhauser’s “The Wizard of West Orange” and “The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad,” and Bender’s “The Devourings” and “Hymn” exemplify how magical realist stories are interrelated with other genre fictions as they display a reconciling stance. In addition to the inclusive nature of magical realism, American academic institutions and creative writing programs started to promote a popularized form of writing where new methods and genre fiction trends intervened in the canonized methods. Academic interests and recent literary awards showed that genre fiction blended with imagination and fantastic elements are potentially powerful representations from various aspects.

Kelly Link, borrowing elements from different genres, creates a different narrative structure. Blending magic, ghosts, zombies, and science fiction with metafictional and intertextual elements creates settings with absurdist and surrealist tones, and provide situations in which the characters reveal their traumatic experiences. The stories have a defamiliarized effect because conventional genre elements are used out of their context. For example, a story of unrequited love is interwoven with alien invasion speculations (*Stranger Things Happen* “Most of My Friends”). When use of language, symbols, and

elements related to a certain genre are embedded in an unconventional plot or another genre, defamiliarization occurs. The physical and mental borders are reconsidered in this new unfamiliar realm. In other words, the dilemma and the conflicts in the stories are reconceived in an estranged setup.

Although science fiction is a relatively new genre compared to ancient stories, it is not irrelevant to magic and myths. Dystopia, utopia, and science fiction are not actually about the future of humanity. On the contrary, they are produced out of contemporary concerns, conflicts, and fantasies. The themes and elements in science fiction genre carry symbolic and metaphoric meanings. Roland Barthes discusses the significance of American wrestling and compares it to boxing. For him, wrestling is better and philosophic, because, contrary to boxing, the audience of wrestling does not really care about the winner, or does not watch to know who is winning the competition (*Mythologies* 14). Wrestling has a different significance as Barthes states: “It has already been noted that in America wrestling represents a sort of mythological fight between Good and Evil” (*Mythologies* 21). In this regard, traditional science fiction and superhero fiction might be considered modern myths concerned with contemporary issues rather than future. They reflect stereotypical characters; who are struggling between polarized good and evil. However, in the stories the narrative pattern is different; science fictional elements do not delineate competitions occurring between good and evil. On the contrary, science fictional elements are more concerned with minimal traits, familial relations, and characters as seen in Brockmeier’s “The Ceiling.” His examined stories use science fictional elements, but they provide a casual outlook on life, identity, and conflicts rather than presenting an “end of the world” plot.

In Millhauser’s “The Wizard of West Orange,” in which magic and science, wizard and scientist are reversed, the transition between the magical and science fictional is more visible. Through genre fiction elements and metafiction, Millhauser questions science fiction as a constructed discourse and inquires about the laws of physics that can actually be manipulated because facts can be reproduced and the human psyche tends to generate exceptional phenomena unexplainable by science. On the other hand, imagination, fantasy, and magic provide a tangible area for interpreting human nature.

Millhauser depicts a critical view on science fiction, and he preserves elements of history and oral storytelling in his story, "The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad." In the story, the characteristics of fabulation are observed, and traditional stories are retold. Aimee Bender follows a similar pattern in her retelling of fairy tales, which opens up multiple interpretations. As Joseph Campbell identifies in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, stories used in various myths follow similar patterns. His outline of the mythological hero's journey, the "monomyth," is based on Carl Jung's archetypes and collective unconscious that "appears to consist of mythological motifs or primordial images, for which the myths of all nations are its real exponents" (Jung 39). The pattern of the hero's journey might show cultural variations and differences, and the heroes might have different identities, but the fundamental set of elements in the narrative remains universal. Although his work focuses on ancient and mythic stories, the formula he suggests indicates the universality of storytelling and the repetitive characters of the myths in the world. The magical realist writers use the power of these universal stories to project them in the modern world. Millhauser's Sinbad reflects two different narratives; traditional and academic. Hence, as he questions the validity of Sinbad character that is traditionally represented as an adventurer, he also comments on concealed details, such as the character's loneliness, fears, and exhaustion. Magical in the fiction transposes a truth both about fiction and modern-day life.

Bender's reevaluation of fairy tales, magical elements, and fantasy "mobilizes and instrumentalizes the fantastic to form and celebrate spectacles that exist and have always existed—illusions of social relations of exploitation based on power" ("Why Fantasy Matters" 77). She underscores the absurd, surreal, and magical in conventional fairy tales and links them with the contemporary world to find recognition. Her characters' isolation and traumatic experiences are drawn in a fantastic space where a credible reconciliation is reserved. The magical intrusions blur the borders between genre fictions, children and adult fiction, as well as ancient and modern patterns. By reconfiguring universal tales, these writers create narratives that explore disrupted lives free from conventions.

Link, Brockmeier, Millhauser, and Bender regenerate the value of genre fiction by intermingling magical, fantastic, postmodern, and science fictional elements. These

story structures provide a reconstructive narrative, in which the meaning is restored. Dysfunctional family ties, disintegration, loneliness, and burden of modern life are conceived within the premises of magic, myth, fantastic, and fairy tale, which provide a defamiliarized and rehabilitative stance.

These writers form eclectic narratives to reinterpret the function of unreal elements. These narratives—often labeled with various literary names—mingle elements from different genres such as science fiction, gothic and fantastic literature, and reconfigure the borders of genre and binary oppositions. Indeed, the writers reformulate the conventional outlook of magical realism and the boundaries between the real and unreal. Whether or not a conscious choice, the narratives reflect a variety of magical realist elements in terms of their functionality and proportion. The writers do not repeat the canonized characteristics of magical realism, but they adapt the mode for its possibilities and variations of representation. Furthermore, their usages of postmodern elements do not necessarily associate them with poststructuralist ideas. The use of metafiction, self-reflexivity, and eclectic structures might be cues about the lack of meaning, dysfunctionality of language, constructed norms and reality, but through the use of magical and fantastic elements, these writers create a space and insert a reconstructive attitude that signals hope, reconciliation, and the reaffirmation of the self.

Studies on magical realism are dominantly conducted on the literature of colonized and non-Western nations. Especially ideological aspects, sense of nation, resistance, and gender problems are explored in these novels. However, the use of magical realism in short stories is a relatively less explored field. Condensed nature of short story requires a more compact depiction for magical worlds. Various narrative strategies fluctuating among stories by the same author might present an obstacle in discovering the magical realist tendencies in the short story genre. In other words, short story writers might be inconsistent with their narrative strategies, since every short story preserves its own quality. On the other hand, the carnivalesque nature of short stories suggests different possibilities about the multiplicity of narrative methods. The short story as a genre is a favorable form to explore momentary slices of life, subjective oppressions, personal traumas and epiphanies. When it is reviewed with magical and fantastic elements, short story fiction becomes capable of repelling constructed realities and unfolding the truth.

The short story is a fluid form because it embraces various narrative tools at the same time, and it is more mobilized and might be more practical to read, think and interpret. Relatively short and condensed form of short story is potentially more attractive for the reader. As Allan Pasco states, “The brief form of the short story imposes a different kind of economy, one that shuns amplification, redundancy, or even repetition if it is not camouflaged with utmost subtlety” (445). At the same time, the form conveys its power from traditional methods, which relies on storytelling used to generate myths, legends, allegories, and fantastic worlds. The collective consciousness of humanity is accumulated in every type of narrative, but especially in storytelling. As a modern narrative, the short story is not equivalent to storytelling, but it is still a valid form to transfer experience to other generations. Considering all these potentials of short story, the genre has an important role today in conveying magic and reality. For Pasco, “One of literature’s glories is in its authors’ apparently unending ability to devise new ways of presenting their reality. Certainly, the brevity of short stories has varying effects, all of which lead to understanding the importance of this central quality” (449-450). When the representative qualities of stories intermingle with magical realism, a powerful narrative form with problematic inter-connections among representation, reality, and storytelling emerges.

Magical realism has noteworthy contributions in contemporary American literature, because it is capable of projecting alternative representations and reconsidering the notion of reality. Apparently, as generations, geographies, and periods change understanding of literature changes and various perspectives on fiction are developed. Magical realism is not an exception and instead of remaining as a localized narrative in Latin America, it is diffused in world literature. When the concept of magical realism was first used in literature, the writers—labeled as magical realist now—were not aware of postmodern elements or poststructuralist approaches such as fragmented narrative or metafiction, or how these were later defined within postmodernism, but their magical narratives also opened up possibilities for the inclusion of these elements.

In today’s world, those writers who adapt magical realist elements are aware of postmodernism and its placement in literary criticism and scholarly discussions from various aspects. On the other hand, contemporary American magical realist writers did

not experience colonization in the sense of Latin American writers. Even the notion of the magical and fantastic is transformed because unprecedented technological advancements both produce and consume myths, fantasy and science fiction narratives besides superhero movies and graphic novels. Being exposed to images, visuals and narratives through the media overwhelm readers and writers to some extent. In this environment, writing about flying carpets and flaming dragons do not have the same purpose it once did. The nature of magical realism needs to be reconsidered not only for these reasons, but also for exploring the relationship between fiction and reality. Fictionality of magical realism helps the reader to see the fictionality of real. The generational change also implies that postmodernist narratives have changed. Postmodern elements still exist in contemporary short fiction, and there are some reformulations in their functionality because previous narrative tropes do not respond to contemporary writers' and readers' demands. Recent narratives employ alternatives and substitutions to postmodern elements. Other labels, such as post-postmodernism, metamodernism, or digimodernism, have replaced postmodernism. Confusion with labels and naming also exists with narratives incorporating science fictional and fantastic elements. Definitions such as slipstream, speculative fiction, new fabulism, renewalism, deep realism, or minimal realism signal that naming contemporary fiction is still problematic and in progress.

Blurring genre boundaries and the rise in genre fiction might be a possible result of seeking alternative representations because fictions that were considered to be "elevated" or "respectable" are either worn out or dysfunctional. Nevertheless, postmodernist elements such as self-reflexivity, metafiction, unreliable narrators, and parody are still notable, but they are incorporated and revised, and some of their functionalities are modified according to the needs of the zeitgeist. On one hand, blending genre boundaries is not a new trait of magical realism. As mentioned in the introduction, Jorge Luis Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths," which presents metafictional, playful, and self-reflexive characteristics, starts like a detective genre plot and later reflects parallel universes. However, the effects of magical realist narrative structures on contemporary fiction are not thoroughly explored. It is possible to claim that eclectic structures and unconventional representations exist in the nature of magical realism and these are helpful in discovering the reconstructive aspects. Because of these

various incarnations, magical realism is both included in and excluded from postmodernism. Fredric Jameson finds distinctive sides of magical realism and ostracizes it from postmodernism; the cultural logic of late capitalism is nothing more than a “blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” (*Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 17). In his essay “On Magical Realism in Film,” Jameson writes, “magic realism (now transferred to the realm of film) is to be grasped as a possible alternative to the narrative logic of contemporary postmodernism” (302). Although his notion of magical realism is close Franz Roh’s and Alejo Carpentier’s understanding of the mode, it draws attention to magical realism’s unconventional foundations and non-standard representations.

This study aims to project light on the themes of contemporary narrative methods and alternative representations through magical realist elements. As the critics and writers of the age seek new narrative forms, in a digital era—in which media, social media, communication and information tools have been shadowed by the reign “post-truth”—the relationship between reality and truth have become more elusive. Breaking pre-existing categories in literature, and generating visibility for the unrepresentable, impossible, and ineffable might lead to restoring the balance between representation and truth.

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Program: American Culture and Literature

Status: Ph.D. Combined MA/ Ph.D.

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