Magic and Materialism
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Many contemporary novelists view their fiction as a means of challenging conventional norms and traditional systems of belief, and indeed their works often serve as a forum for upsetting a typically white, Anglo-Saxon status quo. As a greater polyphony of voices enter into the literary chorus -- with the inclusion of writers of African-American or Native American descent for example -- we are naturally exposed, as readers, to a much more diverse range of ideas and views of the world as a whole. Even modern society's most accepted beliefs, as well as its scientific understanding of the universe, are open to repeated debate and revision. These texts of contemporary American fiction, then, often force us to re-evaluate (or at least re-examine) the fundamental principles by which we live our lives.

Arthur C. Clarke once wrote that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." A number of contemporary authors, including Gloria Naylor, however, might amend this to read that "even sufficiently advanced technologies are meaningless without magic" -- that simply because something is unknown or unfamiliar, seemingly bizarre in our eyes, does not mean that it is unworthy of our consideration. Simply because a religious practice or system of belief has not traditionally been accepted by Western Anglo-centric thought, does not mean that these beliefs -- these creeds and practices, like voodoo or tribal medicine -- should *not* be accepted. Indeed, as many authors like Naylor seem to insist, it is only through the acceptance of magic in its varied forms -- in understanding, it would seem, why science does not hold all our answers -- that we can reach any real understanding of our world or ourselves.

For this reason, therefore, voodoo magic plays an integral role in Naylor's own novel *Mama Day*, and is indeed seen as an accepted fact by the inhabitants of Willow Springs. Miranda, or Mama Day, is herself both respected and feared for her powers; her father was the seventh son of a seventh son and her lineage can be (although rarely is) traced directly back to Sapphira Wade, a woman shrouded in mystery and magic -- "a true conjure woman," Naylor's unidentified narrator writes -- who "could walk through a lightning storm without being touched" and who first obtained the island for the slaves. Yet while the inhabitants of the island may view Mama Day's powers with either reverence or trepidation (or with both), they do not view them as impossible or as mere tricks, nor do they disbelieve her abilities merely because they fall outside of a quote-unquote "scientific" view of the world. For them, Naylor shows us, a connection to the supernatural is perfectly acceptable.

It is, in fact, only George who will not believe -- George, the outsider, the rational thinker -- the one man, perhaps, who represents the reader and who most certainly represents a society devoid of magic. It is he who refuses to understand when Mama Day says that "there are two ways anybody can go when they come to certain roads in life -- ain't about a right way or a wrong way -- just two ways." To him, her words are nothing but "mumbo-jumbo"; even at the end, before he dies, there is only one way that he will allow himself to see. He searches for answers, but he will not give her his hands -- the one thing she asks He will not give her his trust or his belief. He will not recognize, will not even *acknowledge*, any kernel of truth within her words. "...you're talking in a lot of metaphors," he tells her, but Miranda realizes (and by extension, perhaps so do we) that metaphors are "the stuff folks dreamed up when they was making a fantasy, while what she was talking about was *real*."

Both Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart* are full of magics of their own -- Native American rather than voodoo perhaps, but no less unconventional, no less challenging to modern beliefs. For Tayo, Silko's World War II veteran and former prisoner of war, solace cannot be found within the conventions of society, within the easy answers of alcohol or the Veteran's Hospital. None of these seeming answers, ultimately, matter, nor can any erase Tayo's pain or loss. What *does* matter, rather, is ceremony, ritual, a return to old values and traditions and a recognition of just "how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten." Progress, Silko seems to say, should not be equated to growth; the old must not be discarded with the advent of the new. To actually grow, Tayo must learn this; with the help of Old Betonie, the medicine man, he must recognize his umbilical connection to both the land and to his past.

Rather than simply accept society and the easy answers of science (or those at the bottom of a bottle), we must recognize and come to understand "the pattern, the way all the stories fit together -- the old stories, the war stories, their stories -- to become the story that was still being told."

Ritual and its magic are of paramount concern, as well, in Gerald Vizenor's novel *Bearheart*, as is a connection to one's ancestors and the stories of the past. For this reason, we learn of the Cedarfair lineage, traced back four generations and connected by men who "spoke with the trees....[and were] the breath and voice of this woodland" and could become bears or speak with clown crows. In many ways, Vizenor's novel is a condemnation of American society. In their travels -- what Vizenor calls a reversal of Manifest Destiny -- Proude and his companions view the ruins of white, ethnocentric, tree-killing society, while celebrating the Native American connection to, and worship of, the land. In reading *Bearheart*, we must re-evaluate our own society -- and in fact our view of Native Americans as a people altogether. We must understand, however paradoxical it might seem, that progress can cripple while return to tradition can encourage growth.

In this new, petroleum-wasted world envisioned in the novel, Vizenor writes, "oral traditions were honored. Families welcomed the good tellers of stories, the wandering historians of follies and tragedies....Facts and the need for facts had died with newspapers and politics....The telling was in the listening. When the sun had set travelers and moths were drawn to flames. Stories were told about fools and tricksters and human animals. Myths became the center of meaning again." Without myth, we are nothing, and a world that accepts science but denies myth must inevitably crumble.

Both William Kennedy's *Legs* and Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* also challenge the conventional norms of a materialist society, although in markedly different ways than any of the other texts above. In *Legs*, for example, we are not confronted with magic or ritual but simply with the idea that true happiness does not rest within the boundaries of traditional society, or that transgressing those boundaries does not necessarily lead to sorrow -- ideas that certainly comes across in much of contemporary American fiction.

"That empty afternoon, and that book, gave me the insight that my life was a stupendous bore," writes attorney Marcus Gorman, upon first entering the shadowy, but far more interesting, world of gangster Jack Diamond, "and that it could use a little Gargantuan dimension." Therefore, Gorman rather willingly rejects a law-abiding place in society, casting aside conventional norms with the sputtering fire of a machine gun ("my little moral collapse") and opting instead for "the dream that you could grow up in America and shoot your way to glory and riches." Perhaps this is the reason ultimately underlying Gorman's refusal to believe Jack ever really died, that in some way he lives on, years later when Gorman begins his memoir.
For Stephen Richards Rojack, the conventional American dream (in Norman Mailer's novel of the same name) holds little, if any allure. Indeed, Rojack seemingly only finds true liberation in the murder of his wife; in the instant of strangling her, he believes that

> "I had had a view of what was on the other side of the door, and heaven was there, some quiver of jeweled cities shining in the glow of a tropical dusk, and I thrust against the door once more and hardly felt her hand leave my shoulder....[and] my mind exploded in a fireworks of rockets, stars, and hurtling embers, the arm about her neck leaped against the whisper I could still feel murmuring in her throat....and I was through the door, hatred passing from me in wave after wave, illness as well, rot and pestilence, nausea, a bleak string of salts. I was floating...."

Ultimately this freedom, perverse as it may seem, is the only freedom Mailer's narrator (anti-hero?) desires. In that one instant of cruel and brutal action, he is blissfully happy.

In the end, Mailer presents no grand retribution for Rojack's crime; indeed, despite police inquiries, Rojack is not sentenced to prison. Rather, he envisions himself as "part of the new breed" and decides to travel to Guatemala and Yucatán. In this, Rojack is perhaps most akin to Twain's Huckleberry Finn who, at the end of his travels, decides to "light out for the territories." This kinship is perhaps strangely appropriate for a man who, in the act of murder, claims that he "had not felt so nice since I was twelve."

Clearly, in all these texts -- regardless of the consequences, or lack thereof, faced by the characters -- the status quo of modern American society is called into question. While I certainly do not agree with either Mailer or Kennedy's protagonists that true happiness lies in corruption or in transgressing societal laws -- in murder or in gangsterism -- and I find the lengths to which Rojack goes somewhat reprehensible, I would not claim that I found their arguments against society *silly*. Nor could I discredit the arguments made by Naylor, Silko or Vizenor; I cannot claim to believe in voodoo, ritualistic or shamanistic magic, but I would myself be a fool to disbelieve merely because I live within a traditional materialist, science-based society. If nothing else, these texts have posed important questions, forcing we, as readers, to re-examine the society in which we live. We need not agree with these authors to recognize the validity of their arguments, their right to express their beliefs. Only in admitting a multitude of voices to our literary chorus can we know which path to take.