

InsideOUT

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September SHOES

by
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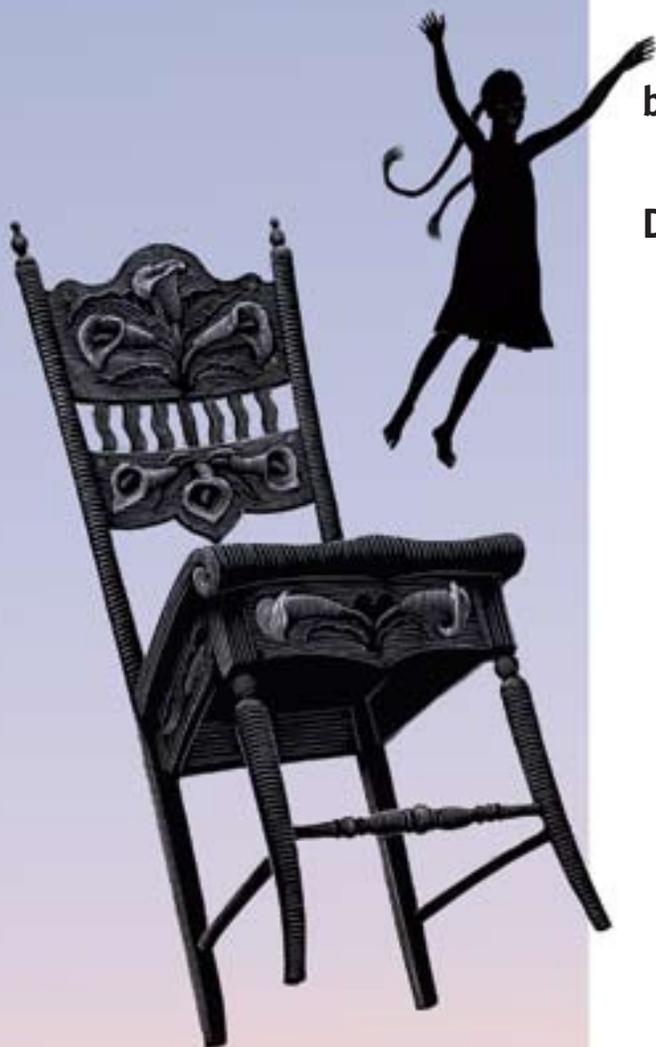


Illustration by Scott McKowen

Oh, it's a long, long while /
from May to December
But the days grow short /
when you reach September...

—Maxwell Anderson
(1888-1959). Knickerbocker Holiday
(1938), "September Song"

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Synopsis

Cuki lives in the bordertown of Dolores (meaning sorrow) and has a serious preoccupation with shoes, while Huilo, the caretaker of the cemetery, is preoccupied with carving the names of the dead in the legs of a big Red Chair. To this desert town return Dr. Alberto and Gail Cervantes for the funeral of Gail's Chinese Aunt Lily, who ran the best Chinese-Mexican restaurant in town. In this funny, touching play, all the characters must learn to forgive to reconnect with their roots, their families and to repair their broken lives.

CUKI: Our feet no longer felt the earth. We lost touch with it. My family left our village and moved down to the city. I never saw so many shoes there in my life. They never stopped moving. There were thousands and thousands of them just roaming the earth.

—September Shoes

Borders and Border PEOPLE

Ni de aqui ni de alla. (Neither from here nor from there).

—Lyrics to a song by Chavela Vargas

“**B**orderlanders [are] somehow singular in their history, outlook and behavior and their lifestyles deviate from the norms of central Mexico and the interior United States,” writes Oscar J. Martinez in the introduction to his book *Border People*.¹ As the play illustrates, there is substantial diversity but also cooperation and tolerance of ethnic and cultural differences.

Border people think of themselves as different from people of the interior because of their unique physical surroundings, ethnicity, culture and isolation. There is a certain duality in living on the border. In this kind of environment, border society manifests such extremes as conflict and accommodation, poverty and wealth, racial animosity and acceptance and cultural separation and fusion.

In Dolores we can witness separation in Huilo’s graveyard: the Mexicans and Chinese are buried there, but the Anglos are buried in Pitman. Alberto also recalls the discrimination he suffered as a Mexican child in school.

Hollywood has often portrayed the Mexican/ United States border people as deviant, degraded and disorderly. But, “new forms of cultural citizenship are in the making wherein Mexican communities forge binational and multistate networks and affiliations” states Rosa Linda Fergoso in *MeXicana Encounters*.² She points to the film *Lone Star* (directed by John Sayles, 1996) as one of those instances in American cinema where border towns are featured as a multicultural region and in which Chicanos are central players. *Lone Star* is set in Frontera (Border), Texas and is a combination Western,

mystery, thriller and romance. The plot details the story of Sheriff Sam Deed’s (Chris Cooper) investigation into skeletal remains found on the edge of town. The remains are believed to be those of Charley Wade (Kris Kristofferson), a racist and corrupt sheriff who disappeared in 1957. In the course of his investigation, Sam rekindles an interracial romance with his childhood sweetheart, Pilar (Elizabeth Pena). Pilar is a teacher who represents a new breed of history instructors; she refuses to buy into the traditional story of the Texas War for Independence. Instead, “she recounts the Texas conflict in terms of its profound ambivalences, in tales of complicity, resistance and domination.”³

Lone Star depicts the tensions between Texans and Tejanos, Anglos and African-Americans and Mexicans on both sides of the border. For example, Pilar’s mother Mercedes is a successful restaurant owner who calls the Border Patrol upon seeing Mexican immigrants run across her yard and requests an employee to speak English. Another Chicano, Jorge, is part of the town’s elite while Ray is a Tejano deputy who plans to run for sheriff in the next election with the support of local Anglos and Mexicans. In this respect, *Lone Star* is a picture of daily life with its conflicts and collaborations.

Despite Fergoso’s ambivalence towards the film because of its white masculine viewpoint, she would agree with Pilar’s final comment: “We start from scratch. Everything that went before, all that stuff, that history... Forget the Alamo.”⁴

Spanish Words and PHRASES

Estoy limpiando su cuarto – I am cleaning your room.

Todo esta bien. – All is well.

Siguele por favor. – Follow him/her, please.

Gracias – Thank you.

¿Como? – What?

No entiendo. – I don't understand.

¿Nos haces el favor de prender el aire acondicionado a lo alto? – Would you do (me) us the favor of turning the air conditioner to high?

Claro que sí – Of course.

Loco – crazy.

Tonto – foolish, stupid.

Vago – idle, loafing.

Mocosa – brat.

¡Cabezón! – stubborn!

No te vayas – Don't go.

¿Pardon Señor, es usted el guardian del cementerio? – Are you the guardian of the cemetery?

Cabron – ass-hole

Negra – black female; dear, darling.

Bueno pues – Well then.

¡Andale! – go!

Chamaco – youngster.

Trinidad – trinity.

¡Vamos muchachos! – Let's go, children!

Toma – (drinker) Have a drink or Drink or Take this

Deja mi familia – (abandoned my family.) Leave my family

¿Pa donde vamos? – Where are we going?

Flojo – lazy.

Tonto – stupid.

Tengo miedo – I am afraid.

Callate – Shut up.

Hacelo otra vez – Do it again.

Así – here, thus.

MAGIC *Realism*

When Alberto talks to his dead sister Ana, Gail to her deceased Aunt Lily and Cuki is visited by her late husband Juan, the playwright is using a literary device known as “magic realism.” Magic realism is characterized by a juxtaposition of apparently reliable realistic reportage and extravagant fantasy. It appears in a large body of spectacular fiction produced in South America after World War II, but has expanded world-wide.

While there is a playfulness to magic realism, its method was first conceived as a response to the nature of South American reality. In countries previously ruled by colonial dictators and subsequently negotiating independence with no long established institutions or freedoms, the fact that information can easily be manipulated makes truth a far more relative entity—relativism, which magic realism exploits through the merging of realism and fantasy. Truth is best viewed as a communal, collaborative construct, rather than in the integrity of individual perceptions. Such emphasis, implying the limitation of individual responsibility and the unpredictability of fate, makes magic realism an essentially comic genre.

In the theatre, magic realism is magic from the standpoint of the audience, but realistic from the standpoint of the characters in the world of the play. The characters may perceive a situation as bizarre but must deal with it as a real state. The audience, seeing all in the overview, is able to isolate elements and symbols; the characters are not. Magic realism allows symbolic reality to be brought to life. The invisible may be made visible and it becomes possible to transform the world and see glimpses of new possibilities.

In her book *Magic(al) Realism*, Maggie Ann Bowers says the term originated with the German art critic Franz Roh in the 1920s. He used the term to define a kind of painting that had a representation of mystical, non-material aspects to it. “For the new art, it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive

way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world.”¹ The era in which he wrote followed the German defeat in World War I, a time of political fragility, political violence and extreme economic difficulty.

Actually the movement of magic realism can be traced back to the 16th century Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes. His novel *Don Quixote* is a precursor of magic realism in the opposition of the mad, idealistic knight and his sane pragmatic squire, Sancho Panza. “Don Quixote’s belief in what he perceives is absolute but can be seen by his companion—and the reader—differently.”² Incidentally, Cervantes is the surname of Alberto and Gail in *September Shoes*, which suggests each of them sees things differently.

Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) is often thought of as the father of modern Latin American writing and of magic realism. In his *Universal History of Infamy* (1935), a collection of short fiction, he was influenced by the work of Franz Kafka, the Czechoslovakian writer whose story, *Metamorphosis*, is about a man awakening to find himself transformed into an insect.

The Columbian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the chief exponent of magic realism, sets the majority of his novels in a fictional town called Macondo on an isolated Caribbean coast. His *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, written in Mexico in 1967, is a family history full of quaint, nostalgic and horrific moments. For example, the birth of a baby with a tail is considered an everyday reality. As he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1982, Garcia Marquez explained how the tumultuous past and present of Latin America lends itself to magic realism “due to its ability to convey the unearthly tidings of Latin America.”³

Miguel Angel Asturias (1899-1974), a Guatemalan novelist, incorporates Mayan mythology and the history of oppression in his novel *Men of Maize* (1949). The plot reflects the Mayan story of the “rain woman” or “mother

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of maize” who is caught between the worlds of earth and sky. When the man finds his “rain woman” wife, he appears to be reunited with the earth (land) taken away from him by the colonists.

Isabel Allende is the first woman writer from Latin America to win renown as a magical realist. Her novel, *The House of the Spirits* (1982), is narrated by the granddaughter Alba and follows the stories of three generations of women and their working class lovers. Clara, Alba’s great aunt, reappears in the family house as a ghost to influence the next generation. “Clara’s spiritualism... simply represents happy times that are destroyed by natural and political cataclysms.”⁴ Isabel Allende, the goddaughter and cousin of ex-president Salvador Allende, experienced a time of dictatorship, civil unrest and police brutality under the government of Colonel Pinochet.

Laura Esquivel’s novel *Como Agua para Chocolate (Like Water for Chocolate)* (1989) is also written from a female perspective. Completed in Mexico, Esquivel begins each chapter with a food recipe taken from a monthly magazine. The novel proceeds from the recipe’s instructions and relates the tragic love affair of Tita, the cook, and her sister’s husband. Tita’s food communicates her emotions to such a degree that the people who eat it enact her emotions for her. For example, after consuming the wedding cake which Tita baked while suffering from unrequited love, the wedding guests suffer from “a wave of longing: the weeping was just the first symptom of a strange intoxication—an acute attack of pain and frustration that seized the guests and scattered them across the patio.”⁵ The narrative shows the domestic life of women who are rejected by their racist and socially ambitious families; the political world interrupts when the family is visited by soldiers who demand food and shelter in an interminable civil war. Another female novelist is Ana Castillo, a Chicana writer, whose book *So Far from God* (1993) includes aspects of Native American mythology such as the ability to change shape and take on the form of animals and characters who return from the dead.

The influence of magic realism has spread world wide. Salman Rushdie, an Indian novelist, used the technique in *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and *The Satanic Verses* (1988). The

African-American writer and Nobel Prize recipient, Toni Morrison employs the device in her works *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992). Maxine Hong Kingston, a Chinese-American novelist, utilized magic realism in her novel *The Woman Warrior: a Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. In addition, the American playwright Tony Kushner uses magic realism in his play *Angels in America*. Employing ghosts and angels, the play deals with the AIDS crisis in 1980s America.

In visual art, Frida Kahlo, symbolic of the nation of Mexico, exemplified how magic realism is an essential aspect of Latin America. The survivor of a bus accident, she was plagued by searing pain all her life; she also endured the infidelities of her mentor/husband, Diego Rivera. In her painting “Tree of Hope,” we see the figure of Kahlo sitting next to her own body on an operating table with the exposed scars of the operation on her back. Both Kahlo and her body are in the Mexican desert, surrounded by cracks in the earth that repeat the scars on her back. She is dressed in a Mexican dress with jewelry ornamented by surgical nodes. “The painting at once combines the images of Kahlo and Mexico and the conflicting states of being through which she lived.”⁶

To summarize, magic realism seems to arise when political repression and instability exist; when individuals emerge from war and its aftermath, and a national or personal crisis causes extreme suffering. It is non-judgmental, is open to any interpretation and allows diversity. Most importantly, it permits the past to merge with

“We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over.... The culture doesn’t encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past.”

—Toni Morrison

SHOES

CUKI: ...Primitive man... gave (shoes) magical powers in stories and myths. It's true. I read about it in Reader's Digest.

—September Shoes

Cuki is right. Numerous fairy tales feature shoes as a magical means of escape; as a device to trick devils, witches and robbers; and occasionally, as an instrument of death.

In *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, the stories deal with the subjection of a hero or heroine; happiness through human powers is always possible for those who have been wronged. In Jacob and Wilhelm's version of *Cinderella*, the poor girl is subjected to the demands and humiliations of the stepmother and her two daughters. But there is no fairy godmother; instead Cinderella asks her father for a tree branch which she plants on her mother's grave and waters with her tears. The branch grows into a tree, a home for numerous birds, whom Cinderella goes to when her stepmother refuses her permission to go to the ball. "Shiver and quiver, little tree/Silver and gold throw down over me," cries Cinderella and the birds provide her with gorgeous gowns and golden slippers, not glass ones.¹ However, there are more than 300 different versions of *Cinderella*, so if gold is not your thing, find another.

In *The Shoes that Were Danced to Pieces* (Grimm's version of *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*) twelve feckless females leave their beds each night to escape their domineering father and return with worn-out shoes. Their father, wracked with worry about where his girls are going (not to mention the expense

of replacing twelve pairs of shoes), engages a young soldier to follow them. The wily lad refuses to drink the cup of wine offered him, feigns sleep, and supplied with a cloak that renders him invisible, follows the princesses. He discovers they enter a deep cavern filled with trees that blossom with either silver, gold or diamonds; a clever lad, he picks a branch from each.

In this underground ballroom the girls dance the night away with (what else?) twelve handsome princes. The next morning father and soldier confront the girls with the tree branch evidence and they are forced to tell the truth. The moral of this story is: never lie to your parents and never do anything in excess.

The Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen (1805-75) was the son of a poor shoemaker, so it was inevitable that he would write a story titled *The Red Shoes*. Karen is a poor little waif in the village, but she is taken in by a very rich, but very blind Old Lady. When the shoemaker comes to their house, the Old Lady selects a pair of sensible black shoes, but Karen chooses a pair of scarlet slippers because she has become very vain with all her expensive new clothes and such. The Old Lady demands that Karen wear the black shoes to church, but the girl will not be persuaded, and since the Old Lady can't see, Karen wears her red ones. The parishioners do not take kindly to Karen's ostentatious manners; on the ride home, the Old Lady cautions Karen about her willful ways. One day there is a ball in the town and Karen finds the occasion to wear her scarlet slippers. At the ball, she begins to dance and dance and dance. In fact, she can't stop dancing and whirls and twirls her way through villages and forests and more villages. At the point of exhaustion she begs the executioner to do something; all he can do is amputate her legs at the knees and the feet in her shoes just continue dancing. Karen

Continued on next page

now walks on crutches and the moral of this story is: always obey your elders and never do anything in excess.

In *Puss in Boots* a cunning cat asks his master for a pair of boots which he will use to profit his owner and escape a life of poverty. The cat kills rabbits and partridges which he presents to the King. When he commands his master (now the Marquis of Carabas) to go wash in the river, the King fortuitously passes by and Puss cries out: "Help! Help! My Lord Marquis of Carabas is going to be drowned,"² Of course, the King halts the royal carriage, orders the guard to rescue the Marquis, while the prevaricating Puss tells His Majesty that rogues waylaid his master and his clothes. Naturally, the King gives him expensive finery to replace his stolen duds and, naturally the Princess is overwhelmed with love.

After a series of other feline pretexts, the Master winds up with the Princess and becomes heir to the throne, while the Puss becomes a great lord. The moral of this story? Get a cat!

Finally, we consider the story called the first American fairy tale, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum. "It has all the trappings of a classic: wicked witches, talking scarecrows, flying monkeys... and, of course, magic slippers."³ In Baum's book, the slippers were silver, but Metro Goldwyn Mayer insisted on changing them to ruby in order to show off its latest invention: Technicolor. However, after a series of adventures, Dorothy comes to the same recognition that Alberto and Gail do: "There's no place like home."

Symbolism in the PLAY

“Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem.”

(From shadows and symbols into the truth.)

—John Henry Cardinal Newman
(1801-1890),
His own epitaph at Edgbaston

When Cuki reflects on her girlhood she says she lived “on a mountaintop among the clouds.”¹ According to Jack Tresidder, author of *The Dictionary of Symbols*, clouds represent a place of revelation. But now Cuki and the other characters reside in the desert, once thought of as Nature’s mistake and obstacles to civilization. But Alberto speaks of the beauty of the desert in full bloom; even the Biblical prophet Isaiah wrote: “The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.” (Isaiah 35:1)

Besides a place of beauty, the desert is a site of revelation. According to Muslims and Christians, the desert is “a furnace that gave birth to both monotheistic religions.”² It is there that the characters come to some profound revelation about their lives and how to get on with them.

Cuki prefers to go barefoot and that is appropriate to her beliefs because the foot is that part of the body most closely associated with the earth, according to *The Herder Dictionary of Symbols*. She feels that when our feet no longer felt the earth, “kindness was forgotten and crime became rampant.”³

As Huilo etches the names of the dead into the legs of the big Red Chair, he refers to the great pyramids in the Egyptian desert built for the pharaohs. If we consider the chair as a throne, it is a symbol of power, stability and splendor where divinities come to sit; i.e., a resting place for the Lord. Furthermore, the color red is symbolic of life, energy, emotion, passion, vitality, health, strength and youth. Since the Chair sits so prominently near the graveyard, is it a symbol for the renewed life the dead will experience in Heaven? The answer, we believe, lies in your religious beliefs and faith in an afterlife.

“The Way of Heaven has no favorites

It is always with the good man.”

—Lao-tzu (c. 604---c. 531 BC)
The Way of Lao-tzu

Forgiveness

Let us forget and forgive injuries.

—Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616).
Don Quixote

Forgiveness has been described as a quality by which one ceases to feel resentment against another for a wrong he or she has committed. Forgiveness can be granted with or without the other asking for forgiveness. Some people believe that individuals can forgive themselves, that it is possible to forgive groups of people, or to be granted mercy by a higher power.

Forgiveness often is regarded as a religious value, but belief in a deity is not necessary. It can be motivated by love, philosophy, appreciation for the forgiveness of others, empathy or personal temperament. Even pure pragmatism can lead to forgiveness, as it is documented that those who forgive are generally more content than those who hold grudges.

In Christianity forgiveness is recognized as a spiritual gift that does not necessarily have any connection with material or financial forgiveness. One may spiritually forgive another, yet expect that the other should still make material of financial amends. In situations where amends are expected, the individuals involved usually find themselves in civil court.

In the last decades, forgiveness has also received attention from social psychologists. Although there is no consensual psychological definition of this concept in the research literature, many researchers assume that forgiveness is related to a pro-social change in interpersonal motivations towards those who have committed an offense. Specifically, three changes in

motivations are thought to occur when someone forgives an offender.

These are: 1. An increase in motivation to act in ways that benefit the offender or the relationship with the offender; 2. A decrease in motivation to take revenge on the offender, and 3. A decrease in motivation to avoid the offender.

Perhaps what the characters' experience in the play is not forgiveness, but acceptance.

In her book, *How Can I Forgive You?*, Dr. Janis Abrahms Spring observes that genuine forgiveness requires the involvement of the offender. Since Huilo can't remember his crime, "acceptance is the only honest and healthy response when the offender can't or won't apologize."¹ Acceptance allows the victim freedom in deciding how to survive and transcend the tragedy. With it the person is empowered to decide how to live the rest of life and come to terms with the past.

"He who doesn't accept the conditions of life sells his soul."

—Charles Baudelaire

Activities

In magical realism, the unreal happens as an extension of the real - taking the common to awesome, fusing fantasy and reality.

1. What are the magical elements in the play? What are the spiritual elements? Are they the same?
2. What are the characters reaction to them? Are the feelings of grief and guilt so overwhelming that reality can't encompass them?
3. What is your reaction?
4. How are magical elements presented?
5. How does the relationship between the real and the magical create atmosphere, mood?
6. Ask your students to think of example of magical realism in other arts forms...painting, sculpture, folklore, legends, science fiction, pop culture, advertising, music videos.
7. Think of other cultures where magical realism exist.
8. Write your own fairy tale. Use shoes, jewelry, furniture or some other inanimate object as an agent or metaphor for change.

Colorado Model Content Standards for Reading and Writing.

1. Students read and understand a variety of materials.
2. Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences.
3. Students write and speak using conventional grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.
4. Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.
5. Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources.
6. Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.

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