

# Reflection Statement

After dipping my toes into postmodernism's experimentation with form through Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, it all began when Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* introduced me to the joy of magical realism. Next came Haruki Murakami's *IQ84* and Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, anticipating the triad of authors whose ideas would furnish in abundance my major work. My first draft even mimicked this structure, flowing from García Márquez to Kundera. I would eventually choose other texts which better met my criteria of being characteristic of the author's style, conceptually broad and influential to the magical realist movement; I would eventually change the structure, finishing instead of beginning with García Márquez to improve the textual integrity of my critical response, after receiving feedback that it felt anticlimactic and overshadowed the remainder of the work. In the very beginning I had tried to write a short story from this impetus; I would switch form after realising that my analytical skills and the research which I had already begun conducting were better suited to a critical response. However, my writing remains a tribute to these authors, these novels, this movement.

I do provide an explanation for why magical realism seems so important to the human experience. I define the self as "the individual's conscious and unconscious perception of their inner self and of the outer world."<sup>37</sup> Because magical realism correlates to perception—through their shared qualities, their emphasis on subjectivity and emotions, and how they often feel uncertain, surreal, and even impossible—by appreciating magical realism we may come to a greater understanding of perception and thus the self. However, my major work, like this reflection, doesn't begin with my thesis. It first focuses on the life and writing of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne to foreground a crucial theme: the spirit of exploration is more important than any conclusions reached as its by-product. Reading Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* may have proved unnecessary to my final response. The inquisitive mindset which prompted me to read them? Indispensable.

My conceptual intent is existential exploration interfused with a literary analysis of how magical realism effectively conveys these ideas. However, as studying the magical realist novel has clearly taught me, form is integral in shaping meaning. As such, my two

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<sup>37</sup> All quotes without a given reference, as well as this one, are taken from my major work.

general intentions of exploration and insight apply to my form and language construction, as well as consideration of audience. The discursive quality of Montaigne's "essay" fosters exploration, and Michel Foucault's Structuralist text *Madness and Civilization* acts as a framework enabling insightful analysis. The journal *Philosophy and Literature*, published by John Hopkins University, would be an ideal audience for my major work, suiting both my concept by focusing on the intersection between philosophical ideas and literature, and the personal voice of my form by emphasising "clear, jargon-free prose."<sup>38</sup> Studying the stage 6 English courses, and especially the module *Texts and Human Experiences*, has spurred my investigation forward, inspiring me to research the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of human nature. I have now become a more proficient writer, accustomed to researching, revising, and to utilising form, structure and language features to convey my concept with the greatest efficacy.

The birthplace of the essay, Montaigne's *Essais*, invaluable taught me the ethos behind the form. His language is witty, self-aware and even self-deprecating, warning us that "it is not reasonable" we should read a book "so frivolous and vain."<sup>39</sup> My alternate fourth entry of the self, "Who knows, really?" tempers my work with a similar voice of jocular cynicism. However, this enjoyability belies Montaigne's mastery of manipulating form to explore ideas with "a hundred parts and a hundred faces."<sup>40</sup> The 1991 translator, M. A. Screech (except for retaining the traditional English title "Essays"), refers to Montaigne's writings as "assays." Similarly, I prefer to describe my work as an "essay" to stress the original meaning of the word, which is not a short, often persuasive, piece of writing, but rather an "attempt" or "effort" or "trial." Like Montaigne, I do not intend to venture beyond the limits of scepticism by offering any judgments as conclusive. I merely "essay to understand... the self;" I recognise its "amorphous, vast, uncertain nature." Nevertheless, by applying his judgement to a host of exempla, and ruminating, Montaigne forms a lucid understanding. This, too—for we both seek the self—is what I essay to reach, by borrowing his exploratory methods, using the exempla of Foucault and my magical realist novels as catalysts to expound aspects of a greater concept.

I realised that, while the essay would provide a lovely exterior for wrestling with my

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<sup>38</sup> See Hagberg, Gary "Philosophy and Literature." JHU Press.

<https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/philosophy-and-literature> (accessed August 17, 2019)

<sup>39</sup> Montaigne, Michel de, "The Complete Essays." M. A. Screech trans., (London: Penguin Books, 1991): lxiii

<sup>40</sup> Montaigne, "On Democritus and Heraclitus." From *The Complete Essays*: 338

ideas, to fully achieve my second goal of insight I would require a second approach, more befitting the complexity of literary analysis. Foucault's Structuralist text *Madness and Civilization* provided this model. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault seeks to understand madness by contextualising it in historical views, social systems, pathology and art, upholding the Structuralist view that concepts derive their meaning from their interactions with surrounding systems. Thus, to ultimately discern the interaction between magical realism and the self, I begin by defining the nature of the self and perception. As an extension of Structuralist ideas, my analysis develops a motif of position, talking of "beginning with the inner depths" and "travelling outwards." I describe Aureliano's childhood memories in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as forming a "central heavy cluster." This imagery seeks to enable visualisation of the interplay between concepts and their contextual surroundings.

Aside from Structuralism, an influential characteristic of *Madness and Civilization* was its division into nine distinct parts. This inspired me to structure my major work under six headings. This division allows me to vary my style as appropriate to the content: first I wander through many quotes to understand the self, then the follow three more typical literary analyses, and the last two conclude. Foucault additionally inspired me to draw from an eclectic pool of fiction and non-fiction literature—which is notably also true of Eugene L. Arva's *Writing the Vanishing Real*. His paper, which explores the link between magical realism and traumatic perception, was foundational to my concept; I have furthered his research by investigating additional qualities of perception (uncertainty and subjectivity, inter alia).

*Madness and Civilization* is a rich, information-dense book. It impressed me into initially copying its rigorously anti-didactic nature, eschewing conclusions and simplifications. Yet here consideration of audience took precedence. From feedback I realised that the intricacies of the topic necessitated providing the reader further direction to maintain readability. By improving topic sentences, adding in signposts ("The second spectre...") to orientate the reader and reinforce key points, by making inferences more explicit and varying sentence length with short incisive sentences ("Magical realism simulates life") I was able to make my thesis more accessible to the reader, thus maximising its impact. I still prioritise my goal of insight and retain as much complexity as reasonably possible, yet I attempt to reify all abstractions, using inclusive language, bringing everything down to a personal level, and seeking the practical conclusions which "we gain" and "we may infer" from my exploration. As such, the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, available from publishers John Hopkins University online or by print, is an ideal target audience for my

major work: it explores the nexus of philosophical and literary studies. Moreover, they share my value of communicating complicated ideas in a clear manner which successfully reaches the reader, discouraging unnecessary jargon and reminding us that “the most erudite and sophisticated writers in humanistic studies find fresh ways to argue their positions.”<sup>41</sup>

Undertaking my English Extension 2 major work concurrently with the stage 6 English courses has been a signal opportunity to push the limits of my affinity with English.

Analysing George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the English Advanced HSC Common Module *Texts and Human Experiences* emphasised that, despite the importance of contexts and values, an instrumental purpose of literature is how it expresses the human experience. The only place where Winston can freely express his ideas is in his diary. Then, the Party’s use of “Newspeak” to restrict thought made me wonder “How does manipulating form and language features affect the portrayal of the human condition?” which increased my interest in magical realism. In Module C, *The Craft of Writing*, we studied Orwell’s explication of these ideas in *Politics and the English Language*, and my skills writing an “essay” were improved when I realised that it shares many qualities with the modern discursive text. My skills and understanding were also improved by the existential concerns of T. S. Eliot’s poetry (module B) and Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (Extension 1, Worlds of Upheaval elective), and Romanticism’s focus on the individual and solitude in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (same elective). From these courses, I have improved my writing ability, familiarised myself with the processes of research, drafting and revision from feedback, and now better appreciate language’s form, purpose, mechanics, impact and aesthetics.

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<sup>41</sup> See the section on jargon at the end of the Philosophy and Literature style sheet, which may be downloaded via a link from: Hagberg, Gary, “Author Guidelines.” JHU Press. <https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/philosophy-and-literature/author-guidelines> (accessed August 18, 2019)

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