ABSTRACT

The distinctions between modernism and postmodernism have been located in their time of occurrence, their politics, and their aesthetics. In my dissertation, I propose another paradigm through which the transition from modernism to postmodernism can be traced: the shift from the mythical imagination to the magical imagination. That is, I argue that while modernism is informed by the mythical imagination, postmodernism is animated by the magical imagination. This distinction is especially apparent in the literary fiction of these two movements.

I explore the terms "myth" and "magic" through two approaches. In the first chapter, I discuss Jean Gebser's model of the structures of human consciousness. Gebser outlines four distinct structures that can be plotted along the history of humankind. Only one structure is dominant at any given time. Each structure also projects a particular kind of worldview. Of these structures, the "mental" structure is dominant now, and its overriding features are rationality and duality. The magical and mythical structures are now latent. The mythical worldview is marked by polarities; the magical worldview by fluidity and intermingling.

I propose that the modernist and postmodernist writers, being highly aware of the limitations of rationality, create a more vivid fictional reality by turning towards the worldviews offered by the latent structures. That is, they imaginatively configure the reality of their fictional worlds by using myth (in the case of the modernists), and magic (in the case of the postmodernists).
However, "myth" and "magic" are not terms exclusive to Gebser's model. Rather, these have had a long history in cultural, social, and philosophical theorizations—and this constitutes my second approach. In the second chapter, I focus on the cultural, social, and anthropological interpretations that have consolidated the categories of myth and magic. I focus on the intellectual expositions of James Frazer, Marcel Mauss, Bronislaw Malinowski, Mircea Eliade, among others, to sketch the journey of these two terms not only in academic discourse but also in socio-cultural contexts.

In the third chapter, I examine the defining features of modernism. The modernists' sense of imminent crisis, civilizational upheaval, and deep involvement with tradition compelled them to turn to myths for permanent forms and inviolable truths. The modernists not only referred directly to ancient myths and archetypes; they also created new mythologies, mythified contemporary reality, remythified ancient myths, and revived the cyclical time frame. In these ways, they displayed the mythical imagination.

The modernist mythical imagination provides the foil for the focus of my dissertation: postmodernism and its magical imagination. In the fourth chapter, I examine some of the most vital aspects of postmodernism: its skepticism of metanarratives and mythic truths, its deconstruction of the hierarchies naturalized in binary pairs, its notion of the text, and its ontological concerns in fiction. Through such theories, I support my claim that postmodernism finds itself reflecting the flux of the magical worldview. This is further consolidated through the literary mode of magical realism.
Magical realism, though once associated with a geographical context, is now an international mode of fiction. I propose that it be seen as a mode that creates space for the “ex-centric” from within any context. The mode employs magic to reconfigure our sense of realism, and to debate official histories and normative interpretations of historical events. Several features of magical realism mirror postmodernist fiction’s concerns.

The fifth chapter of the dissertation explores the magical realism-postmodernism nexus through an analysis of three novels: Janet Frame’s *The Carpathians* (1988), Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), and Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1999). Okri’s novel also allows a detour into magical realism’s connection to “cosmopolitan” postcolonial fiction.

Broadly, my aim in this dissertation is to examine the categories of myth and magic, associate the mythical imagination with modernism, and the magical imagination with postmodernism. I exemplify the mythical modernist imagination with texts such as *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, and the magical postmodernist imagination through the magical realist texts.