

*A (Solitary) Place For Fantasy in Reality*900 words
Record #12

Reality is composed of a rather tenuous fabric in the catalogue of fantasy novels we have explored this semester. The majority of this catalogue introduces a protagonist whose life is grounded somewhat firmly in the real world, but who also happens to encounter the fantastic. Unlike fantastic novels in which the protagonist is placed in a world that is wholly fantastic (that is, a world in which all characters acknowledge and accept the fantastic as being normal), fantastic novels set in reality require that measures be in place to preserve the laws of reality for the characters living outside of the protagonist's experiences. Were reality-based characters introduced to the concepts of the fantastic without the first-hand experience of the protagonist, the combination of ignorance and unfamiliarity would ultimately result in chaos. Thus, protagonists whose lives are set in reality must journey into or explore the fantastic alone (or in the company of fantastic creatures). Furthermore, to truly ensure the preservation of reality, once such protagonists return to reality, his or her experiences must easily lend themselves to realistic explanations.

In Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, for instance, the story is introduced with dreamy, rhyming verses that echo that of a child's lullaby or nighttime prayer in both form and content. The "three tongues" announce that, "In fancy they pursue / The dream-child moving through a land / Of wonders wild and new, / In friendly chat with bird or beast— / And half believe it true" (no page). This verse encourages the reader to view Alice's journey to Wonderland as "a curious dream" before she even chases after the white rabbit (117). Thus, though the reader is never told that Alice has fallen asleep and begun dreaming, he or she is conditioned to fit her trip to Wonderland into a realistic framework. Dreams are, of course, a

solitary activity as well, and so there is no way for Alice's sister to confirm or deny the actuality of Alice's experience with the fantastic. As a result, her sister does not have to confront or make sense of the fantastic; she is simply left to close her eyes and "half [believe] herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality" (117).

Similarly, in Marge Piercy's Woman On the Edge of Time, the reader is also set up to view the protagonist's journey into the fantastic through a realistic lens – that lens being Connie's diagnosis of schizophrenia. The hallucinations that result from schizophrenia are, like dreaming, entirely solitary experiences. Therefore, it is a convenient fact that there is "Nobody around" when Luciente appears to Connie (32). Her diagnosis, drug use, and solitary experiences with Luciente encourage the reader and the present-day characters around her to attribute her journey into the fantastic as solely a manifestation of her mental illness and habits – nothing more. In fact, if it were not for Connie's mental illness, Piercy's work would be an entirely different novel. The realistic explanation for Connie's experiences deters the introduction of superfluous complications in her already conflict-ridden world.

Tita's experience with the fantastic in Laura Esquivel's Like Water For Chocolate is slightly different than that of Alice and Connie, but the overall circumstances are deeply similar. Tita's journey into the fantastic does not involve a trip to another land – instead, it is based on her emotions. Because she is forbidden to fully express her emotions until after Mama Elena and Rosaura's deaths, her journey into the fantastic is solitary. For instance, Tita experiences temporary blindness after seeing her sister's white wedding sheet; a sheet that causes her to think of a white church which she had never entered, "without dreaming of the day she would enter it on the arm of a man" (34). In the privacy afforded by the kitchen and Nacha's twin soul, Tita

sheds a few tears for herself into the meringue icing. However, once she leaves this privacy for Pedro and Rosaura's wedding, she "[makes] sure her face [does] not reveal the slightest emotion" (36). Nacha's death keeps Tita's tears a secret, and the fantastic events that result from her emotions are explained by what her mother sees as a realistic, malicious act – adding an emetic to the wedding cake for revenge. Nacha and Pedro are, at times, privy to Tita's experiences with the fantastic because they drift in and out of being on the same emotional wavelength as she. Her experiences remain private, however, because Nacha has no desire to harm Tita (even in her death), and because Pedro is not allowed to openly express his feelings either.

Like Milo from The Phantom Tollbooth, who flops into his chair after school, looking for something interesting to do, protagonists based in realistic settings encounter the fantastic by themselves. In such cases, protagonists' fantastic experiences tend to be manifestations of their own desires for change in their lives. Alice seeks relief from her sleepy boredom; Connie seeks relief from her loneliness and isolation; and Tita seeks relief from her forbidden feelings about Pedro and her mother's control. All three protagonists find this relief, but the convenient, realistic explanations afforded by their solitary experiences allow them to return to an unshaken reality. Whether reality is a desirable place to return to seems to vary, but the fantastic can, at the very least, offer temporary respite.