

The River's Rhetoric: Water as a Symbol of Freedom, Escape, and Redemption” which “Unpacks Water's Symbolic Meaning in the Context of Slavery”

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Water has become a potent symbol of freedom, escape, and redemption in the slave context of magical realist literature, forming a powerful metaphor for the uneasy and often fraught relationship between identity, culture, and community. Amidst the cruelties of slavery, water emerges as a liberating power, providing a means of escape, a source of spiritual renewal, and a representation of redemption. Magical realist narratives present water as an agent for the escape of enslaved people, often appearing as an ethereal pathway to freedom. Such is the case of the Ohio River in Morrison's *"Beloved,"* which acts as a supernatural barrier between slavery and freedom, the waters of which possess the power to wash away memories and redeem those who are able to cross it. The river's waters are therefore endowed with the enchanted force capable of cleansing the marks of slavery and imparting a new life to those who dare cross its path. Again, in *"Kindred,"* water is an instrument carrying the character, Dana, back in time to deal with the intricacies of slavery. Water here also represents freedom, as it gives an outlet to Dana from slavery's cruelties and also an opportunity to connect with her ancestors. In *"Sing, Unburied, Sing,"* written by Jesmyn Ward, while waters peel the skin of a slave, they incorporate healing and redemption against the Mississippi River background. Its water seems to contain mystical properties as it soothes the aches of the past and proffers hope and renewal to the weary. More or less in all these renderings, water is used to symbolize freedom, escape, and redemption, becoming almost a metaphor for the extremely complex yet often tumultuous crossroads of identity, culture, and community shaped by slavery. The magical realist manipulation of water in these renderings permits the interrogation of the highly differentiated manners in which enslaved people and their descendants have carried on with the complexities of slavery in a highly charged arena. Through the supernaturalism attached to water, human experiences are presented in such a way as to foreground their complexities and intricacies, providing a vivid and detailed space for an exploration of the many aspects of water as a symbol of freedom, escape, and redemption, within the context of slavery. The water's symbolism of freedom, escape, and redemption also puts forth, in a magical realist tradition, a compelling testament to the resilient spirit of humankind, a message of hope and strength amid the trials of oppression and adversity. Water in magical realism is often portrayed with wonderful properties: crossing the extremely thin borders of reality and taking a life of its own. Exceptionally often, stories describe water as having healing and protective powers or as being a transporting agent. These supernatural attributes serve to intensify the symbolic value that water has in these stories, allowing it to be a significant metaphor of human experience.

Through magical realism in literature, writers can experience the intricate aspects of human life in a highly realistic yet fantastical way. This literary practice allows authors to weave a story in a new narrative voice that blends the ordinary with the extraordinary, thereby creating a rich reading experience. In magical realism, the seeming supernatural properties of water are then amplified and made to bear more weight to symbolize and metaphorize in much more human terms. Water becomes the most profound metaphor for human experience. It was most often described as a symbol of life-the bearer of death and rebirth. The almost supernatural qualities of water emphasize its importance to human experience. Water plays a supernal quality in many magical realist narratives; it is presented as something that can support dualistic realities; through such potent symbolism, water escapes from the shackles of the past to herald a future hope and renewal. This is further demonstrated in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *"The Water Dancer,"* where water fits into the narrative as a supernatural agency that shields from the atrocities of slavery. Water has a mystical quality to fill its prosaic binary-escape from the stringent realities of the world. Water, in the magical realist tradition, becomes a powerful symbol

endowed with ethereal properties whereby the line between the ordinary and the extraordinary can be traversed. One can easily study this symbolism from the perspective of water being involved in healing, protecting, and transporting characters: The fluidity of water is mimicked by the emotional or spiritual transformations of characters along their trajectories. Water in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* becomes more than a physical element. Water becomes a force that deeply influences and alters the human experience. This idea of water being endowed with supernatural abilities also strongly resonates throughout Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Water Dancer*, where water is critical in exploring memory, escape, and the trauma associated with enslavement. Instead, in *The Water Dancer*, water will abstractly and tangibly transport people while healing the historical trauma inflicted by the very existence of slavery.

In the magical realistic pluralistic world, water carries the two primitive meanings of life and death, growth and destruction. These movement assignments take water out of its usual confines and stretch it across existence so that it may be connected with the individual's deeper self or the physical world. One of the top expressions of supernatural qualities would be the flood that devastated the town of Macondo, which, besides forming a city-new kind of disaster, would also serve to symbolize the renewal of "circular returns to purification." That is not just a thing that will happen to the natural environment but will occur, in a process of transformation, when what is old will be washed away and possibilities will emerge for people living in this town. Just like this, in *The Water Dancer*, water speaks in the language of memory and the past. Hiram Walker, the main character, realizes that he can profit by taking himself to any time or place through water-this gift that comes from the conduction of memories and experiences of one's ancestors. What should be considered were the escape from physical repression and way across states of time and space. Water means in this story antagonism to slavery, i.e. it forms a channel to freedom through which Hiram might transcend the brutalities of slavery to connect with the stories of his ancestors who, too, used water in resistance. Water acts like magic in healing even in *The Water Dancer*, as it becomes a physical as well as emotional healing mechanism for Hiram. Hiram could reach the memories of his family more or less, but also heal his ruptured fragments of self. Water here allows one to recapture spiritual and emotional restoration, indicating that healing is also a matter of coming to terms with his and collective trauma. Such a magical healing quality of water plays the same role in other magical realist works in that it helps characters recover parts of themselves they have long suppressed or forgotten. For example, water in *Like Water for Chocolate* is tied so intimately to the emotional life of characters that it literally becomes the medium of translation for their feelings into such things as healing or rupture, depending on the way they use it. Similarly, in *The Water Dancer*, the restorative properties of water emphasize the importance of memory and connection to overcome the injuries brought by slavery.

Another important element in the narratives of magical realism and precisely *The Water Dancer* is water's act of protecting. In certain magical realist works, water, as an agent of protection, gives characters shelter from danger. In *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende, water is accessible to Clara for the protection of her loved ones against danger, often providing a shield against others with powers she could not contend with. Water becomes a protection for Hiram, contrarily, in *The Water Dancer*, in safeguarding him from escaping physical danger and metaphorically providing protection from the psychological burden imposed by slavery. Water thus embodies resilience; it allows them to rise above what immediately confronts them and creates for them a haven, whether by means of physical escape or simply through providing comfort for their hearts and souls.

Supernatural transport is, perhaps, one of the most remarkable things that have taken place in *The Water Dancer*. It reflects the exterior and physical boundaries one can cross through water; that theme of liberation and search for freedom all appear in Hiram's consciousness. Every experience Hiram had with water relates closely with the myth about the Underground Railroad because it essentially represented one of the most critical escape routes for many enslaved people to freedom. Water represents both a physical escape route but equally, and significantly, a symbol of hope and liberation. The supernatural powers of water in *The Water Dancer* translate more broadly into generic themes of resistance and memory. In a world determined to render invisible or regulate the histories of enslaved people, water becomes a form of reclamation-an avenue for Hiram and others to cross into their ancestral pasts and know what was all too frequently hidden

from them. It is beyond a metaphor of escape along physical lines, but of the spiritual journey through which the oppressed reclaim themselves and their histories. Supernatural features of water signify the working of time and space; however, they equally represent the indomitable spirit of man who will never succumb to the most overwhelming conditions.

Water becomes a very complex and rich symbol in the context of slavery: escape, healing, spiritual renewal, and reclaiming one's identity. In his book *The Water Dancer*, Ta-Nehisi Coates makes it clear that water both literally enables escape from slavery and figuratively delivers a psychological and spiritual transformation that goes with the quest for freedom. He uses this water, through Hiram Walker, the novel's protagonist endowed with the supernatural capacity to "conduct" water, as both an actual and figurative power to exit slavery. This application of water belongs to the magical realism paradigm in which the natural world and the supernatural exist together, and the seemingly fantastically unreal is grounded in the deeply felt, experienced emotional histories of the oppressed. Through water as a metaphor for redemption, Coates, therefore, depicts the way people and communities, held hostage by the forces of a system, could reclaim their inheritance, history, and humanity in the search for freedom from physical escape. Another narrative linked to water is the redemptive power of water. It represents a means of physical escape on one level. Historically, water has played a big role in slavery, since rivers, lakes, and oceans were often paths toward freedom for enslaved people who risked their lives to escape to the North or to other places free from bondage. The Underground Railroad itself used rivers and waterways as a means to liberty. In the context of the novel, Hiram's supernatural ability to control water becomes a means of both physical and metaphorical liberation, as through Hiram's "conduction" of water, he is carried across the very literal borders of slavery, similar to how waterways were once used to ferry enslaved people to freedom. In the moment when Hiram is using his power for the first time to escape, the water symbolizes yet again a passage to freedom: "Water moved like memory, from one place to another, bringing with it all the old things, the things forgotten, the things wanted." Water here is not just a way of crossing spatial borders; it is also a cauldron of memories—memories of escape, memories of trauma, and memories of long-desired freedom. The duality accords well with the redemptive function of water as an escape route that leads toward the fundamental realization of the past.

Water, in addition, symbolizes the reclamation of memory, identity, and ancestral knowledge forged in the crucible of redemption. One of the greatest thefts of slavery from the enslaved was the theft of personal history and cultural heritage. Enslaved people were frequently plucked away from their families, stripped of their names, and robbed of their personal histories. In *The Water Dancer*, Hiram's ability to "conduct" water directly corresponds to his ability to recall the memories of his ancestors, linking him back to the past for a better understanding of self and identity. Through the water, he touches the emotional and spiritual legacy of those who came before him and fought for freedom. At the moment of conducting water, he begins to visualize his parents' faces, his ancestors' faces, and the pain and struggle they endured. At an important moment, Hiram says, "The water came into me and I saw the faces of my mother and father, saw their pain and their fight, saw them lift their heads and leave behind what they could." This realization is powerful because, through this water, Hiram is not just reclaiming his family's history but also tying himself into the much larger community of resistance. In this metaphor, the water becomes a bridge that sends Hiram through time and space in order to access his ancestor's memories, thus linking him to all those who suffered and fought for freedom before him. In his emotional and spiritual reclamation, this memory reclamation is pivotal as it helps him understand his own place in a long line of those who resisted slavery. This type of water use coincides with the magical realism concept that leads one to believe that illusions and magic existed in a mundane world. The supernatural qualities of the water would not be completely disassociated from actuality, as they are quite rooted within the emotional and extendable realities of the enslaved people. Thus, Hiram's magical ability to take water is illusory but comes from the lived experiences of slavery. Water's meaning for escape, rebirth, and transmutation are not in themselves mythological; Hiram's miraculous powers enlarge the understanding of these meanings. The simultaneous employment of the ordinary and extraordinary into one magical real picture is perhaps one of the shadows of magic realism, where the supernatural becomes instruments for search-and-dig of much buried historical and emotional truths. For example, Hiram's ability to cross the physical limitations of slavery through the manipulation of water is used to symbolize how those who are oppressed may metaphorically break free from their chains of trauma, reclaim personal agency, and seek spiritual redemption. Therefore, the magical realism of the novel serves not

only to intensify the palines of water as a symbol but also makes it real that it is intangible, the process of liberation as much physical as psychological.

Not only does water have redemptive power, but it also heals from individual trauma to collective trauma as well. Deep scars marked in the memory of the victims, slavery left devastating physical violence but also great emotional and psychological scars. The novel portrays the enslaved as needing to engage with that past trauma while seeking to become free. Water works, in this setting, as a cleansing force through which individuals may free emotional bondage wrought by slavery. Hiram, for example, finds his moments of release of emotion and psychological healing in such encounters with water. He thus learns to harness the power he has gained over water and begins the process of releasing the burdens of shame, guilt, and fear implanted in him from the experiences of enslavement. Water's fluidity-and ability to change and renew itself-matches Hiram's healing process wherein he learns to confront his past with the trauma of his enslavement. The image of water is one with which Hiram can emotionally cleanse himself so that he can purge the load of his past while moving forward toward a future that stands for freedom and self-realization.

Water is the very symbol of collective emancipation in *The Water Dancer*. Being enslaved persons, why would they have fought for freedom alone? Water in the novel summarizes the interconnections of experiences within the enslaved community. Water stands for both a means of escape and renewal; it is not just a tool for Hiram's own freedom but a common pool of resources linking him back into the larger quest of liberation. Redemption in this novel is rarely defined as just the individual salvation of a person; rather it is concerned with the broader context of community salvation. The water theme emphasizes that deliverance is never a solitary act but must be for the good of the collective. With Hiram's gift of water, he often aids the escape of others, especially fellow enslaved people. Thus, water becomes a communal force, embodying the collective struggle and redemption of all who seek freedom. In postcolonial theory, discussions about slavery and freedom tend to gather around considerations of how colonial powers violated the humanity of indigenous peoples, depriving them of agency, cultural heritage, and ties to the land. Postcolonial thinkers, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Homi K. Bhabha, have examined how colonialism and its effects engender a persistent struggle for identity, self-determination, and liberation. One potent means whereby this struggle finds representation in literature is the counter-narration set against canonical narratives of slavery and freedom, particularly within the context of magical realism. The coexistence of elements of the fantastical with the everyday within magical realist literature often symbolizes resistance, liberation, and the reclaiming of agency. In these stories, water serves as a subversive way to challenge and undermine conventional notions of slavery and freedom, reimagining water not only as a means of escape but also as a means to think differently about personal and communal freedom.

Water represents life, newness, and, indeed, all things liberating on one hand, and it is equally haunting with thoughts of colonial subjugation, inhuman exploitation, and destruction of cultures on the other hand. In postcolonial settings, the contradictory relationship between water and the oppressed opens up a rich contradictory space for thought. Water is a precious source of nature that nurtures all life but has also been misused to suppress life. Colonial powers had control over every little trickle of water to suit their purpose. Rivers, oceans, and waterways became their highways of trade and tools of domination. Water became an avenue for escaping both symbolically and literally for enslaved peoples but could also be a stage for violence and death. In magical realist texts, water goes beyond being a mere physical element into an archetype of resistance, memory, and change. This, in turn, engulfs and subverts traditional understandings of freedom with a more complex and multidimensional notion of what it means to be free. One of the most prominent ways in which water undermines the traditional narratives of slavery and freedom in magical realist literature is by undermining the linear and conventional notions of time and space. Slavery and the post-colonial period are often told as a linear historical process, wherein the enslaved are represented as passive victims of historical circumstance liberated either in one moment of emancipation or revolt.

In postcolonial magical realist texts, water becomes a liquid symbol that vacates those immutable ideas of freedom as a linear and temporary occurrence. To enact this liquid conception of freedom, the characters flow along the temporal manipulation of water through a transgression of the restrictions imposed upon them by history as set forth in the linear and conventional narratives of oppression. Resistance and reclamation of agency in oppression have become prime motives of postcolonial theory. Water becomes the tool of resistance and allows the enslaved to defy and undermine the

foreign systems set up by colonialism to get rid of the enslaved persons' humanity in *The Water Dancer*. The ability to manipulate water would then be a measure that serves to control one's environment and thus shape one's destiny. Freedom is, therefore, not a stagnant state but rather an active process of ongoing resistance, reclamation, and transformation, as the novel clearly shows. By weaponizing water to great effect in popular discourse, Coates reimagines freedom as an always ongoing, ever-changing struggle intimately linked to an individual or collective past, present, and future. The use of water in postcolonial magical realist literature subverts the established narrative of slavery and freedom. Water in *The Water Dancer* works as a force for change that can help characters bypass the straightjacket of history and geography, recover identities, and cure psychological effects of slavery. Through magical realism, the water becomes a nice descriptive metaphor of memory, resistance, and liberation, thus allowing freedom to be expressed more multilayered and heuristic. In this way Coates and his co-postcolonial writers engage conventional slavery and freedom narratives by presenting freedom not as a one-time event, but as an ongoing intergenerational struggle for self-determination and cultural renewal. The symbolic power of water is used to make these narratives transgress the real and the magical, and thus produce transformative discourses about the complexities of slavery's legacy and the ceaseless strife for freedom. This further emphasizes water's connections to freedom and redemption, conveyed through African American spirituals, songs of enslaved African Americans carrying often clandestine connotations relayed through coded references to escape and even liberation. Water in the spirituals represents an understanding of this element as a literal and spiritual conduit to freedom. The songs were indeed forms of resistance and resilience, but their lyrics often transfix hope and resistance even to coded information on the Underground Railroad. Often in their definition to travel to liberty spiritual and physical, water is frequently interpreted in many African America's spirituals. "Wade in the Water" is perhaps the most quoted and remembered spiritual with respect to the Underground Railroad. It talks about wading in water to prevent slave catchers from tracking escapees, and its repetitive refrain encourages them to wade in the water. Just like that, the mention of the water in the song talks about the physical crossing of the rivers and the spiritual journey towards emancipation. The cleansing might remove the signs of slavery through the water, serving as an opening to freedom. Water stands for a journey toward spiritual and physical freedom in many African American spirituals. One of the most popular Underground Railroad spirituals is "Wade in the Water." The song advises those escaping to "wade in the water," a repetitive refrain, so that slave catchers would lose their scent. In this song, imagery of water stands for both the literal crossing of rivers and the spiritual journey to liberty. The water acts as an agent of cleansing, removing all traces of slavery and opening safe passage into freedom. It expresses the desire for transition coming to prevail between civil life and spiritual life through water in many African American spirituals. It is one of the most noted Underground Railroad spirituals that say, "Wade in the water." The song advises escapees, therefore, to "wade in the water," which is so repetitive to the ear that the slave catchers get thrown off the trail. This song paints engaging imagery through water: literal crossing of rivers and more figuratively, even a journey that leads to freedom. In addition, the water becomes the cleansing agent that washes away all traces of slavery and now allows safe passage into freedom. The song "Steal Away to Jesus" is built upon the symbolism of water representing an escape into freedom with words such as "Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus, I ain't got long to stay here." The reference to "Jesus" brings not only the idea of physical escape but also spiritual one into His embrace of salvation. The sacredness of water and its association with spiritual redemption all hark back to biblical accounts of deliverance--the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea through which they were to be emancipated from slavery in Egypt. The symbolism of water in African American spirituals does not pertain simply to freedom from physical bonds; it also conjures up restoration of a spiritual and emotional kind. It stood, for many enslaved people, not for freedom from physical shackles but the promise of dignity, community, and a life of personal autonomy. Situating itself somewhere within the realm of freedom, water is, therefore, an essence of slavery and the Underground Railroad. The very rivers, lakes, and oceans--which served as barriers to freedom--became channels to liberation, therefore presenting the convoluted and oftentimes perilous course of escape. Water, as represented in African American spirituals, is not just a physical crossing to freedom; it is spiritual and emotional freedom ever wished for by the enslaved. Thus, African American literature and history also tell of the role of water in the Underground Railroad and spirituals--to further demonstrate how water became a tool to obstruct the system through resistance, escape, and the claiming of identity. Water has come to symbolize not an individual road to redemption but a struggle toward a collective claim for justice and freedom.