

THE WORLD OF THE FANTASTIC
AS A LITERARY GENRE. THE TRACE
OF A QUEST IN ANGELA CARTER'S
THE BLOODY CHAMBER

CARMEN MARTÍN SANTANA

Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

ABSTRACT

This paper takes as the point of departure the book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* written originally in French by Tzvetan Todorov in 1970. It deals, therefore, with the concept of the literary genres according to the Bulgarian author and, within them, the category of the fantastic, a genre in itself. Angela Carter with her work *The Bloody Chamber* will be analysed from this perspective, and we will try to discover if this collection of stories could be considered an example of the marvellous (spelt 'marvelous' in the English version translated by Richard Howard) and, consequently, a variety of the fantastic.

RESUMEN

Este artículo toma como punto de partida el libro *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* —traducido al español como *Introducción a la lite-*

ratura fantástica— escrito originalmente en francés por Tzvetan Todorov en 1970. Va a tratar, por lo tanto, el concepto de los géneros literarios desde el punto de vista del autor búlgaro y, en particular, la categoría de lo fantástico, para él un género en sí mismo. Angela Carter con su obra *The Bloody Chamber* será analizada desde esta perspectiva. Intentaremos descubrir si esta colección de historias pueden ser consideradas un ejemplo de lo maravilloso (*marvelous* en la versión inglesa traducida por Richard Howard) y, consecuentemente, una variedad de lo fantástico.

The fantastic as a literary genre owes its present state to Tzvetan Todorov —born in Bulgaria in 1939—, who set himself to the task of presenting a new angle to the topic, ending, in a way, with a controversial issue¹. Robert Scholes introduces the author in the book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*², where he mentions the most significant aspects of his academic and human life. Here he says that he considers the critic, more that a structuralist, very close to Poetics which —to justify its own existence according to Todorov— must be a science:

Though he has been called Mr. Structuralism, Todorov is a poetician first and a structuralist second, and the latter only in order to be the former. For him, the two terms are almost synonymous³.

He praises him as an exceptional figure within the movement due to his clarity in writing, a quality which is not always present in his structuralist colleagues.

It is important here to mention that the original in French appeared for the first time in 1970 with the title *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. However, this difference in designation has been marked by some critics, among them Neil Cornwell and Christine Brooke-Rose. The former comments that the English title is certainly fortunate:

Perhaps Todorov has much for which to thank his translator, Richard Howard. In any event, this discrepancy (...) must have been responsible

for Hutcheon, referring to the French edition of Todorov, being sufficiently terminologically misguided as to write (p.32): 'As Tzvetan Todorov has explained, fantasy literature [my emphasis - NC] is a hesitation or compromise between the empirically real and the totally imaginary' (whether one here wishes to blame Hutcheon, who certainly knows as a rule what she means by 'fantasy', or Todorov's French)⁴.

Brooke-Rose thinks that the title might be somewhat misleading as it promises a wider vision than the one the reader finally gets, breaking his/her initial expectations:

In all fairness, this is all he presumably set out to examine: his title in English is *The Fantastic -An Approach to a Literary Genre* (the French title —*Introduction à la littérature fantastique*— seems to make a larger claim until we come to this narrow definition). But in view of his strictures on Frye and his strong stand on theory, it is strange that his own theory should in the end be unable to predict theoretically possible developments⁵.

Todorov begins his research in the book offering an introduction to literary genres for the layman, because, as he says:

To study Balzac's *The Magic Skin* in the context of the fantastic as a genre is quite different from studying this book in and of itself, or in the canon of Balzac's works, or in that of contemporary literature. (3)

After posing some problems with the concept itself and devoting some time to Northrop Frye, he takes two books as examples of this genre, *Le Diable Amoureux* written by Cazotte and Jan Potocki's *Saragossa Manuscript*. Neil Barron says the following about the latter:

Much admired by the Russian writer Pushkin, *The Saragossa Manuscript* is a marvel of elegant storytelling that uses exotic settings to lure the reader into accepting impossible events. One of the true masterpieces of fantasy. (52)

On some occasions events happening in the real world cannot be explained in a rational way. When this happens, you can decide between two options: to think that everything has been a dream or a

hallucination, or to believe that that event has in fact happened and, therefore, there are laws unknown to the human being. It is in this last alternative where the genre finds its place: «The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event» (25).

However, this definition is not original because we can find similar definitions in writings from the nineteenth century. It is because of that that Todorov sets himself to the task of finding a different way to focus it, taking as the first condition of the fantastic the reader's hesitation. The fantastic requires, then, in order to be able to exist within the text, the fulfillment of three conditions—related to different aspects of the text—in which the reader takes an active role.

The first one, being situated at the *verbal* aspect of the text, asks the reader to take the characters as live beings, giving them human form, and to wonder between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events taking place. The second, linked to the syntactic and semantic aspect, needs this hesitation to be experienced by a character. The third one asks the reader to reject poetical and allegorical interpretations. The reader becomes, then, the most important element in the process:

At the story's end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous. (41)

Therefore, the fantastic is a genre, but rather than being an autonomous one, it is situated on the frontier of two other genres: the marvelous⁶ and the uncanny. Todorov mentions, however, that it could evaporate any moment. Some critics consider that this definition lacks precision and is ambiguous, but he argues that some

others also opt for this type of vague definition: «The classic definition of the *present*, for example, describes it as a pure limit between the past and the future»(42).

Two sub-genres also appear: the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvelous. We may represent these sub-divisions with this diagram:

uncanny / *fantastic-* / *fantastic-* / *marvelous*
uncanny *marvelous*

In the former sub-genre the events, which have been presented as supernatural throughout the history, receive a rational explanation at the end. As an example Todorov mentions *The Saragossa Manuscript*, in which the «miracles» are rationally explained at the end of the narrative. In the latter, however, the work is presented as fantastic and it ends up accepting the supernatural. These types of works are the closest to the pure fantastic «for the latter, by the very fact that it remains unexplained, unrationalized, suggests the existence of the supernatural»(52). He takes as an example *La Morte Amoureuse* by Théophile Gautier.

The two pure forms are now left to be explained: the uncanny and the marvelous. The uncanny is a vague concept, and it is not a clearly delimited genre, unlike the fantastic: «The uncanny realizes, as we see, only one of the conditions of the fantastic: the description of certain reactions, especially of fear»(47). The events can be explained logically, but they are extraordinary, surprising or unexpected, thus provoking in the reader a similar reaction to that of the fantastic. Dostoevsky's novels could be included in this category. Poe's tale *The Fall of the House of Usher* exemplifies a text in the frontier between the uncanny and the marvelous. The literature of horror in its pure state belongs to the uncanny. Todorov also enters a different field, mentioning Freud: «According to Freud, the sense of the uncanny is linked to the appearance of an image which origi-

nates in the childhood of the individual or a race (a hypothesis still to be verified)...»(47).

The marvelous, in the pure state, just as in the case of the uncanny, has no distinct limits. But, in this case, supernatural events do not provoke any particular reaction neither in the characters, nor in the implicit reader. Nevertheless, there are several types of narrative in which the supernatural is justified. These are: the hyperbolic marvelous, the exotic marvelous, the instrumental marvelous and the scientific marvelous.

Todorov maintains that we generally link the genre of the marvelous to that of the fairy tale:

But as a matter of fact, the fairy tale is only one of the varieties of the marvelous, and the supernatural events in fairy tales provoke no surprise: neither a hundred years' sleep, nor a talking wolf, nor the magical gifts of the fairies (to cite only a few elements in Perrault's tales). What distinguishes the fairy tale is a certain kind of writing, not the status of the supernatural. (54)

It is now when Angela Carter must be mentioned, because it is here where she belongs with her book *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* —a collection of short stories— published for the first time in England in 1979 by Victor Gollancz. Carter had translated for Gollancz some of Perrault's tales in 1977. Two years later, she decides to rewrite the fairy-tales of Perrault and Madame Leprince de Beaumont. One of them, «The Company of Wolves», was even adapted for the screen by Neil Jordan «in Company of Wolves» in 1984. Merja Makinen has pointed out the fact that some other works by Carter came out in the 'fantasy' series: «Both *Passion of New Eve* (1977) and *Bloody Chamber* (1979) initially came out under Gollancz's 'Fantasy' series, placing them within a specific genre»(7). But, precisely because Carter has rewritten them, they cannot be defined as fairy tales as such, and instead of being a variety of the marvelous, they could be taken as being closer to the uncanny as the events described in the narrative could provoke certain reactions in

the reader, especially that of fear. They have become a twentieth-century invention. Makinen expresses this idea with the following words:

*The tales in *The Bloody Chamber* still foreground the violence and the abuse, but the narrative itself provides an exuberant re-writing of the fairy-tales that actively engages the reader in a feminist deconstruction.*
(3)

Fairy tales are, then, according to Makinen, often seen as dealing with the 'uncanny': «the distorted fictions of the unconscious revisited through homely images -and beasts can easily stand for the projected desires, the drive for pleasure of women»(9).

There are ten tales in all and the myths are various. Carter begins with «The Bloody Chamber», based on the Bluebeard story. The Beauty and the Beast story is rewritten into two stories in the book: «The Courtship of Mr Lyon» and «The Tiger's Bride». Then we have «Puss-in-Boots»; Snow White with the title «The Snow Child», Sleeping Beauty as a Gothic vampire in «The Lady of the House of Love»; Red Riding Hood in «The Werewolf» and «The Company of Wolves» and «Wolf Alice», a tale that combines motifs from several of these. «The Earl-King» is somewhat different from the rest, adapted from Goethe's ballad.

Todorov understood fairy tales as a variety of the marvelous, and supernatural events provoke no reactions neither in the characters nor in the reader. That is why fairy tales or *Märchen* (the German word preferred by scholars to designate this genre) have become popular stories for children: taking place in a wonderland filled with *magic* and strange characters, they are believed by neither narrator nor audience. However, Carter changes not only the narrative but the intention, although the characters remain symbols. In doing so, they are addressed to an adult audience. For Patricia Dunker, Carter's method is quite deliberate: «the tales are rewritten as elaborate pieces of pure Gothic, in the manner of Poe» and the rew-

riting «is an exercise in making the mystery sexually explicit»(6). The reaction on the part of the reader is, then, unavoidable and certain. We could find a clear instance in the first story, «The Bloody Chamber»:

I was brought to my senses by the insistent shrilling of the telephone. He lay beside me, felled like an oak, breathing stertorously, as if he had been fighting with me. In the course of that one-sided struggle, I had seen his deathly composure shatter like a porcelain vase flung against a wall; I had heard him shriek and blaspheme at the orgasm; I had bled. And perhaps I had seen his face without its mask; and perhaps I had not. Yet I had been infinitely dishevelled by the loss of my virginity. (18)

There are also instances referring to the inner world of the mind, those impulses or emotional ideas that have been banished from the conscious mind but which continue to influence a person's behaviour. «The Snow Child» could be described as the most disturbing of the stories in the book as it deals with the Oedipal conflict between Mother and Daughter, and therefore it belongs to the realm of the uncanny, provoking, probably, not just one but several reactions in the reader. The child in the story is 'the child of his desire': «she was the child of his desire and the Countess hated her (...) The Countess had only one thought: how shall I be rid of her?»(92). According to Duncker Carter: «removes the supposedly comforting dénouement to the tale in which the mother is destroyed and the child successfully navigates the dangerous transition into sexual maturity»(7). There is also a ceremony of possession after the girl dies picking a rose for the Countess:

Weeping, the Count got off his horse, unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl. The Countess reined in her stamping mare and watched him narrowly; he was soon finished.

Then the girl began to melt. Soon there was nothing left of her but a feather a bird might have dropped; a bloodstain, like the trace of a fox's kill on the snow; and the rose she had pulled off the bush. (92)

Carter, in Duncker's opinion, in her version makes the Mother offer up the child «as her sexuality blossoms in the rose, to the Father's lust, which destroys her» (7).

We could continue to analyse every one of the stories as they all contain interesting features but, unfortunately, we run short of time. That task remains to be fulfilled.

Angela Carter has managed to create an original and masterful work of art in this book, and hence has contributed to the rewriting not only some literary pieces but also of literature itself. We have also seen how she has helped to reinterpret Todorov's theory of the fantastic, making it somewhat feeble. However, those two talented figures stand for their values. Angela Carter has become, and I take Margaret Atwood's words from her obituary in *The Observer*, a kind of Fairy Godmother. Maybe one day we will discover that she is one of the heroines in one of the stories!

NOTES

- 1 We cannot forget that there were two streams regarding the literary genres. Those who thought—following Benedetto Croce—that the genres did not exist, and those who were in favour of their existence. Nevertheless, the fantastic in its own was not seriously studied until Todorov published his book, immediately becoming the first consistent modern attempt to identify the fantastic as a genre.
- 2 This book, which has illuminated the field of the literary genres, has also received criticism from different authors. Christine Brooke-Rose is one of them. Rosemary Jackson considers that Psychoanalysis should be present in the work and, therefore, it is not complete in its views. Gary K. Wolke in *Fantasy Literature: A Reader's Guide* says the following: «Todorov's controversial hypothesis—that the 'fantastic' is defined by that hesitation the reader experiences before a work is resolved into either 'the uncanny' or 'the marvelous'—seems to define a literary genre of such narrow scope as to be almost useless as a critical tool» (387).
- 3 Quotation taken from the book *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, published by Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1975, although the first edition is from 1973, p. ix.
- 4 These words belong to Neil Cornwell in the article «Critical Approaches to the Literary Fantastic: Definitions, Genre, Import», *Essays in Poetics*, p. 21.

- 5 Christine Brooke-Rose wrote these words in the article «Historical Genres/Theoretical Genres: A Discussion of Todorov in the Fantastic», *New Literary History*.
- 6 Todorov has decided to use this spelling in the original text.

REFERENCES

- BARRON, Neil, ed.: *Fantasy Literature: A Reader's Guide*. New York: Garland, 1990.
- BROOKE-ROSE, Christine: «Historical Genres/Theoretical Genres: A Discussion of Todorov on the Fantastic.» *New Literary History* 1. Vol. VIII. Autumn 1976: 153.
- CARTER, Angela: *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.
- CORNWELL, Neil: «Critical Approaches to the Literary Fantastic: Definitions, Genre, Import.» *Essays in Poetics* 1. Vol.13. April 1988: 21.
- DUNCKER, Patricia: «Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's *Bloody Chambers*.» *Literature and History* 1. Vol.10. Spring 1984: 3-14.
- MAKINEN, Merja: «Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality.» *Feminist Review* 42 (Autumn 1992): 2-15.
- TODOROV, Tzvetan: *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1975.