Abstract:

This paper aims at exploring various aspects of Todorovian construct of the concept of genre: Fantastic. An attempt is made to understand various constituents of this minor genre. Fantastic is receiving significant critical attention. This genre has its two neighbors: uncanny and marvelous. This paper also explores how genre depends on the connection between the texts rather than the limitations of internal structures. In this connection, Todorov suggests that individual texts can be described in terms of discrete internal structure andoutside influences and culture change can be reflected through genres. Far from being static, genres exist in the state of instability and flux and as far as their value is concerned, it is arbitrary and imposed from outside.

Key-words: fantastic, uncanny, marvelous, genre, fantasy

Introduction

Tzvetan Todorov has emerged as a major thinker in humanities. His area of work includes literary theory, philosophy, thought history, culture theory and in his recent writings he is more engaged with the problems of morality and ethics in daily life of common people.

In 1975 Tzvetan Todorov’s seminal and most original work The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre was published. Todorov conceptualizes the theoretical genre of the fantastic, a genre in which the hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation of some seemingly unnatural phenomena is never resolved: In a world which is indeed the reader's world, a real world, the one people know, a world without devils, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to the reader. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once the reader chooses one answer or the other, he/she leaves the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous.

If a natural solution is revealed, the text becomes a member of the neighboring genre of ‘the uncanny’. If a supernatural explanation must be accepted, the text belongs to the genre of ‘the marvelous’.
Definition

Todorov bases his definition on structural characteristics within the text, and the hesitation of the actual reader is of course not a structural characteristic. Todorov tries to solve this problem by assigning the hesitation to an implied reader:

The fantastic . . . implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated. It must be noted that we have in mind no actual reader, but the role of the reader implicit in the text (just as the narrator’s function is implicit in the text) (Todorov 31).

Todorov also adds two other conditions for a work to be considered part of the fantastic, one of which is optional and therefore not a condition. The optional condition is that one of the characters of the work experiences and represents the hesitation. The other is that ‘the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations.’ (33)

This rejection of allegorical readings seems to be something many theorists agree upon, while perhaps not quite adopting Todorov’s strictness. Christine Brooke-Rose takes up a more nuanced position in her book A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, especially of the Fantastic. Both J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis have been critical of allegorical readings of fantasy literature, although they have used other generic terms in their essays. They have also rejected allegorical readings of their own works on numerous occasions. It is ironic, however, that Todorov indirectly places the works of these two fantasists within the genre of the marvelous, in which allegorical readings are not only accepted, but also deemed necessary by Todorov, in order to reach a meaningful interpretation.

Where Todorov uses the term ‘poetic’ interpretation, other critics have used the term ‘metaphorical’ interpretation. The point, for Todorov at least, is that if the text is not understood as referential, as referring to some hypothetical reality, the hesitation between natural or supernatural reality disappears. The poetic interpretation removes the necessity of choosing between the natural and supernatural explanations and thus dissolves the ambiguity. As such it endangers the fantastic. If one does not view ‘the poetic’ as a strictly non-representative category, opposed to ‘the fictional’, this condition becomes confusing. In any case, it is only a continuation of the first condition of hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation.

What is most problematic about this condition is that Todorov makes a demand upon the actual reader. Todorov does not say that allegorical or poetic interpretations of the text must be impossible or improbable, but that the reader must reject them. The requested attitude of the reader cannot possibly apply to an implied reader, so once again Todorov is in conflict with his structuralist framework.

Because of the narrow definition of ‘the fantastic’, one in which the ambiguity has to be upheld throughout the book, there are naturally few texts which fit into Todorov’s genre. It is odd that Todorov’s supposedly best example, Henry James’ The Turn of the Screw, is only mentioned twice, and not analyzed in any detail. Todorov admittedly sees a problem with the narrowness of his genre definition, and in his further discussions he includes two hybrid genres as well, namely ‘the fantastic-uncanny’ and ‘the fantastic-marvelous’. In both these hybrids the ambiguity is maintained for most of the work, but in the end one or the other solution must be accepted. As Manlove writes:
In Todorov’s system, ‘the marvelous’ is the category most fully describing what I would call fantasy, although the pure fantastic would also be a part of it. Even some examples of what Todorov calls the uncanny could probably be read as fantasy works, if the element of fantasy, in Kathryn Hume’s sense of the word, is of real importance within the individual text. Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* is frequently labeled as a work of fantasy even though the whole story is set in a dream-frame, and thus can be said to have a natural explanation (Manlove 1999: 84).

What is of real importance here is that even when Todorov is forced to deal with the marvelous, he does not venture into a discussion of popular literature, or modern fantasy works. He discusses Poe, Kafka, Gogol, E.T.A. Hoffman, Maupassant, Dostoevsky, Henry James, and other more or less canonized authors, but central fantasy authors like C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, Lord Dunsany and William Morris are not even mentioned.

Another interesting point about Todorov’s theories is that he limits his genre’s existence to a relatively short period of time, claiming that it appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, and that the last satisfying example of the genre was written by Maupassant, who died in 1893 (Todorov 166). The Polish formalist scholar Ireneusz Opacki makes a very relevant point about the temporal boundaries of genre models.

**Todorov and other Critics**

The crucial difference between Opacki’s and Todorov’s temporal boundaries is that Opacki limits the model and not the genre. The genre has changed, but fantastic literature still exists. Whether or not Todorov was familiar with Opacki’s ideas, it seems obvious that his model would not be fit for a discussion of fantasy or fantastic literature outside his chosen period. Still, surprisingly many critics and theorists draw on his model or make adaptations of it in their studies of modern fantasy and fantastic literature.

Despite his claims of a scientific method, Todorov is surprisingly inconsistent. In his second chapter he states that ‘fairy tales can be stories of fear’. (Todorov 35) He further presents fairy tales as part of the genre of the marvelous. Thus one can say that fear can be part of the marvelous. Still, he later claims, in a discussion of Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’ that ‘the marvelous implies that we are plunged into a world whose laws are totally different from what they are in our own and in consequence that the supernatural events that occur are in no way disturbing.’ (171-172)

To say that supernatural events happening within a supernatural world cannot be disturbing, would be much the same as claiming that nothing happening within this world, according to the natural laws of this world, can be disturbing. What Todorov probably means is that the supernatural events would not be perceived as supernatural within the realm of the marvelous. This observation, however, ruins his point about ‘The Metamorphosis’ not being part of the genre of the marvelous, because the transformation of Gregor Samsa from human to enormous, insectoid creature is not perceived as supernatural by the other characters, but just accepted. Admittedly, they are disgusted and afraid when confronted with him, but only in a way that is similar to the feeling we would have if confronted with, let us say, a large spider. It is not a response to something supernatural.

José B. Monleón criticises Todorov for being inconsistent regarding his dismissal of fear as a definitional characteristic of fantastic literature. On the question of fear as a component of the fantastic, Todorov claims that:

It is surprising to find such judgements offered by serious critics. If we take their declarations literally – that the sentiment of fear must occur in the reader – we should have to conclude that a work’s genre...
depends on the *sang-froid* of its reader. Nor does the determination of the sentiment of fear in the *characters* offer a better opportunity to delimit the genre (Todorov 35).

Monleón responds to this by saying that ‘a similar argument could be made in relation to the “theory of hesitation” and the degree of “credulity” of the reader – whether implicit or not’ (Monleón 1990: 162). Todorov has two other objections to regarding fear as a defining characteristic of the fantastic. The first is that the fear of the reader is not a necessary condition, and the second is that fairy tales, a subgenre of the marvelous, can also be stories of fear. The fact that all of Todorov’s objections can be applied equally well to his own defining characteristics should help us question his theory. However, surprisingly many scholars are unwilling to give him up.

Rosemary Jackson is one theorist who adopts Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, and much of his theory, in her book *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*. However, her study is also based on Marxist and psychoanalytic theory. Her exploration of the subversive function of some particular type of fantasy opens up for new interpretations of many old classics. Further, from a Marxist point of view, the subversive quality functions as a purpose for, and a justification of, fantasy literature.

Jackson states that ‘like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by its social context . . . it cannot be understood in isolation from it,’ and Jackson’s ‘social’ context includes the political, economical and cultural context of the literary text (Jackson 3). Jackson argues that the consideration of this context is something that is missing in Todorov’s theory of the fantastic:

> In common with much structuralist criticism, Todorov’s *The Fantastic* fails to consider the social and political implications of literary forms. Its attention is confined to the effects of the text and the means of its operation. It does not move outwards again to relate the forms of literary texts to their cultural formation. It is in an attempt to suggest ways of remedying this that my study tries to extend Todorov’s investigation from being limited to the *poetics* of the fantastic into one aware of the *politics* of its form (Jackson 6).

Despite these good intentions and honorable goals Jackson’s study is problematic. She appropriates the terms fantasy and the fantastic for her own study at some places. At some places they are not synonymous. Her claims about the nature of low fantasy are made in the name of all fantasy literature. This leaves the fantasy works which do not fit her study in both a terminological and a theoretical vacuum. In other words, the major problem with her study is the appropriation of terminology, and not the theory itself, although some of her theoretical points can be discussed.

These statements may appear as paradoxical, because both Todorov and Jackson seem to be dismissing large parts of fantasy literature as ‘rather frivolous and foolish’ or, at best, not interesting. Todorov’s definition actually excludes secondary world fantasy, and thus excludes well known fantasy authors like J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Ursula K. LeGuin, and Terry Pratchett, to name only a few, from the genre. The will to enter new theoretical ground is praiseworthy, but Jackson’s narrow selection and treatment of actual texts is disappointing, while Todorov makes his definition so narrow that even he has trouble finding textual examples of the genre, and furthermore claims it ceased to exist, except as a historical genre, at the end of the nineteenth century.

Jackson does in fact discuss Charles Kingsley, William Morris, George MacDonald, Ursula Le Guin, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien under the heading ‘Victorian fantasy.’ The last three of these are of course not Victorian fantasists, but Jackson sees them as continuing the trends of the Victorian fantasy authors. She comes to the negative conclusion that the works of these authors all ‘function as conservative vehicles for social and instinctual repression
(Jackson 155). In other words they don’t suit Jackson’s own political views. In her introduction, Jackson explains that:

The best-selling fantasies by Kingsley, Lewis, Tolkien, Le Guin or Richard Adams are not discussed at great length. This is not simply through prejudice against their particular ideals, or through an attempt to recommend other texts as more ‘progressive’ in any easy way, but because they belong to that realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as fairy, or romance literature. The moral and religious allegories, parables and fables informing the stories of Kingsley and Tolkien move away from the unsettling implications which are found at the centre of the purely ‘fantastic’. (Jackson 9)

Jackson calls these works fantasies, but refuses to take them into account when she studies the workings of the genre. It seems to me that Jackson’s theories are only suitable for restricted parts of fantasy literature, and that this is the real reason for her evasive dismissal of the rest. What is really happening here is that her Marxist and psychoanalytical approach has gained prescriptive properties, and that anything that falls outside this approach is dismissed as bad or irrelevant literature. In this regard Jackson quotes Russ:

Fantasy embodies a ‘negative subjectivity’ – that is, fantasy is fantasy because it contravenes the real and violates it. The actual world is constantly present in fantasy by negation . . . fantasy is what could not have happened; i.e. what cannot happen, what cannot exist . . . the negative subjectivity, the cannot or could not, constitutes in fact the chief pleasure of fantasy. Fantasy violates the real, contravenes it, denies it, and insists on this denial throughout (Quoted in Jackson 22).

Russ’ last sentence in this quotation holds a very different definition of fantasy from that of Todorov and Jackson, although Jackson seems unaware of it. It says that fantasy, throughout, insists on the denial of the real. This means that the text consistently promotes what Todorov would have called a supernatural solution. Gone is the idea of hesitation or ambiguity as the central aspect of fantasy. High fantasy, or secondary-world fantasy is of course also connected to the real, through the author and the reader, the language and our ability to recognize the unreal, and sometimes also, within the text, through a portal or some other transportation device, but this relationship between real and unreal is much less explicit than in most of the fantasies discussed by Todorov and Jackson.

The book The Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic authored by Christine Brooke-Rose was published in 1981. Christine Brooke-Rose starts out with a philosophical explanation of the rhetoric of the real and the unreal. It is something that leads to an explanation of why society time and again grows more interested in the literature of the unreal. The gist of her argument is that when the empirical world around people becomes discredited and familiar forms collapse, they turn to the metaphysical and the ‘unreal’ for a stable basis in their lives. Thus, in times of great upheaval and change, there is an increased interest not only in religion and religious literature, but also in fantastic or unreal literature.

Rosemary Jackson tries to explain a development within the genre of fantasy towards the uncanny, Brooke-Rose tries to explain an increasing interest in literature of the unreal. Both base their explanations on larger societal tendencies. Todorov opts a different and pure theoretical attitude and sticks to the fantastic in ‘narrow’ sense. It is Brooke-Rose’s claim that in this modern age the real has become especially meaningless and the unreal is once again gaining a privileged position.

Colin Manlove is the critic who has come close to a comprehensive theory of fantasy literature, a theory which takes into the genre both the various types of high fantasy and the various types of low fantasy. He is apparently at quite a distance from the concept of the fantastic given by Todorov. Manlove’s writings are primarily focused on the genre of fantasy. In his Modern Fantasy: Five Studies, he made a division into several types of
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fantasy that is clearly different from each other. There are of course blurry lines between the subgenres, but large parts belong unambiguously to one specific subgenre. In the introduction to the already mentioned Modern Fantasy: Five Studies, Manlove states that: ‘A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms’ (Manlove 1975: 171)

The boundaries of the genre of fantasy must necessarily be rather vague and imprecise, but if genre is a tool for communicating with and interpreting the text, then it is the centre of the genre that must be identified and not the boundaries. Even a peripheral work stands in relation to the central norms of a genre, and is understood by its accordance to and divergence from those generic norms. Thus it is not really necessary to draw clear boundaries around a genre.

References


