

## An Explanation of the Fantastic and the Marvelous

### Gothic Literature, Prof. Sean Scanlan

From Tzvetan Todorov's The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre. Translated by Richard Howard. Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1975.

Todorov's definitions should help us make more sense of Gothic literature. If the Gothic is defined by transgressing boundaries or limits, then, by understanding how these terms work, we might gain a better understanding of the characteristics of the boundary between the natural and supernatural worlds.

**The Uncanny: closest to reality:** if a reader "decides that the laws of reality are being upheld and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny."

**The Fantastic: all about uncertainty:** "The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described" (32).

Explanation: Todorov here wants readers to be alert to the relation between the real and imaginary; it occupies the duration, or time spent, considering uncertainty. Readers perceive an uncanny or strange phenomenon which we can explain in two fashions, by types of natural causes or by supernatural causes. The possibility of a hesitation between the two creates the fantastic effect.

"Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus, the reader's role is—so to speak—entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it become one of the themes of the work—in the case of naïve reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character" (32).

Explanation: Todorov explains that "the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic," is "I nearly reached the point of believing." Further, it is either total faith or total incredulity that would lead the reader beyond the fantastic: "it is hesitation which sustains its life" (31).

"Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: she will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations" (32).

Explanation: If an animal speaks in a children's fable, readers do not doubt to think that this is an imaginary world, readers do not take it seriously; for this instance, is often an allegory. In addition, in poetry, a character might speak of wandering "lonely as a cloud" (William Wordsworth), but we do not worry that the poet might fall to his death.

**The Marvelous: not possible on Earth:** "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).

This narrative example may help. Suppose you enter your own room late at night, and, in nearly pitch dark conditions, you think that you see your sweatshirt on the back of your desk chair. But then you remember that are wearing your sweatshirt, and so it cannot be your sweatshirt; and just then, the sweatshirt seems to move like a cat—even though you do not own a cat. This moment of uncertainty is the fantastic. If you decide that the sweatshirt is really just your jeans and that they did not move—it was just a shadow—then the moment of the fantastic passes into the uncanny (reality). If, on the other hand, you decide that the spirit of Poe's black cat has become an actual, festering, blood crazed zombie cat sitting on the back of your chair—a smelly dead cat that is now alive and has arrived via a secret horcrux to torment your soul forever, then the moment of the fantastic has moved into the marvelous.

**Time:** Todorov also believes that the uncanny is related to the past, while the fantastic is related to the present (uncertainty and inability to decide), and the marvelous is related to the future.