

The fantastic in dracula



The fantastic [...] lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from “reality” as it exists in the common opinion. 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. – Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 42

Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* belongs to all three genres mentioned by Todorov. The first few chapters exemplify the fantastic; but as the narrative progresses the characters try to realize the uncanny truth about the events overtaking them, events which ultimately give way to the marvelous. Chapter I is a fine example of the fantastic – the narrator is at a loss to make sense of his surroundings. He uses his Victorian wisdom to rationalize the events, but ultimately hesitation and bafflement obscure his rational thinking. Let’s pretend we don’t know what is going to happen in the subsequent chapters; let’s also pretend we have no knowledge of what the Count really is. I say “pretend” because pretension is necessary in order for us to share in the character’s fantastic observations of the incidents – from his journey from Bistritz through the Borgo Pass to the castle of Dracula. In Chapter I Jonathan is presented as a naïve narrator, putting every detail of the East and its customs in his journal; but there are moments when his unquestioning naïveté faces an eeriness that defies explanation. This results in an uncomfortable feeling of something that disturbs both Jonathan and the reader. For example, when

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the landlord's wife puts the rosary around his neck, he feels what Todorov calls "hesitation", the characteristic feeling of the fantastic: "Whether it is the old lady's fear, or the many ghostly traditions of this place, or the crucifix itself, I do not know, but I am not feeling nearly as easy in my mind as usual." We as naïve readers are equally unsure regarding the cause of this feeling of the fantastic. To create a sense of the fantastic the author often makes the central character ignorant of things the other characters know because it is through the character that we witness the events. But this is not dramatic irony in that dramatic irony requires the audience or reader to know more than the character does; in fantastic irony, on the other hand, the reader is just as ignorant as the character. Thus, on his journey from Bistritz to Borgo Pass, Jonathan's fellow passengers seem to know more about his impending fate than he or the reader does. Characteristically, no one tells him about the real danger of daring to meet Count Dracula. Their obscure gestures of warning, punctuated by their frequent acts of crossing themselves, only add to the fantastic nature of his journey. The fantastic is the major component of any thriller, literary or cinematic, and the ending of a thriller is either uncanny (weird but ultimately explainable by natural laws, as in Hitchcock's Psycho) or marvelous (out of the world and explained only by means of something more than simple human reason, as is the case with any decent horror flick). The fantastic arouses a feeling that numbs the faculty of drawing straight conclusions, and the characteristic expression associated with the visual fantastic is a gaping mouth. In the literary fantastic the character as well as the reader is made to wait with what Jonathan calls "a sick feeling of suspense" while various contradictory conclusions are drawn until the truth is revealed. This seemingly random

drawing of conclusions is reflected in the use of simile, a comparison between two distinctly different things by means of “ like”, “ as”, “ as if”, etc. (Interestingly, metaphor, which is a stronger, more direct comparison, is often employed by Van Helsing, a more knowledgeable character in Dracula). In Chapter I Jonathan’s hesitation about the true nature of the strange events becomes linguistically patent in his frequent uses of “ like” or “ as if” and their verbal equivalent, “ seem”. Todorov also says that the literature of the fantastic “ has still greater extension: this is the effacement of the limits between subject and object” (42). This in part is due to the phantasmagoric nature of the fantastic which all but dissolves the separation between the perceiving mind and the thing perceived for it is in dreams that we become what we see: “ I think I must have fallen asleep and kept dreaming of the incident, for it seemed to be repeated endlessly, and now looking back, it is like a sort of awful nightmare”. Throughout the journey Jonathan is in a kind of trance, and even his optical illusion of seeing the faint blue flame through the driver may well be attributed to this dissolving of the barrier between mind and matter. The fantastic generates a kind of compelling hallucination that urges the reader to read on. This is one of the many powers of the literary fantastic: instead of arousing a sense of loathing for the unexplained horror, it encourages the reader to enjoy the hallucinatory effects of the actual act of reading. This has obvious Freudian connotations explainable in terms of the self’s longing for the macabre. From a technical point of view however, this spell-binding effect is produced by the grimly romantic descriptions of nature, a nature which is no less human than the characters that populate it. Consider the following excerpt: Soon we were hemmed in with trees, which in places arched right over the roadway till we passed as

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through a tunnel. And again great frowning rocks guarded us boldly on either side. Though we were in shelter, we could hear the rising wind, for it moaned and whistled through the rocks, and the branches of the trees crashed together as we swept along. As we can see, nature is personified, described as acting like a human that both “ frowns” and “ guards[s] boldly”, and “ moans” and “ whistles” like a sick child. The fantastic, as Todorov observes, “ leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment” (42). The volatility of the fantastic is exemplified by the character’s gradual understanding – or at least an attempt at understanding – of the weirdness of her or his surroundings. The natural supernaturalism of the fantastic is substituted by the explainable supernaturalism of the uncanny or the accepted supernaturalism of the marvelous. In Chapter I this dissolution of the fantastic into the uncanny/marvelous is hinted at when Jonathan is overcome by an “ uncanny” fear that almost immobilizes him. He must now equip himself either to explain away this fear by his Victorian rationality or to subscribe to the beliefs of the superstitious peasants. Failing to do either would result in his loss of sanity. Works Cited Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1997. (All quotations are from Chapter I of this edition) Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Cornell University Press, 1975.