

Puerto Rico: The Bite of a Prawn in a Patriarchal Society

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A patriarchal society is one in which men hold the highest position in society, and see women as the lesser important sex. In a patriarchy, men view themselves as the superior One and women become the Other, effectively stripping them of their individual identities and destroying their humanity (Beauvoir 25). Puerto Rico is one of these patriarchal societies, and women there have been treated as merely objects for men to own and display. Though in the last 50 years or so, a criticism of this system has developed, and prominent figures started to speak out against this mistreatment. One of these people is Rosario Ferré, a female Puerto Rican author who strove in her compositions to debunk the idealized perception of femininity, and the common patriarchal idea that women should be measured by their statuses in society. The goal of this project is to analyze fantastic literary themes and symbolism regarding the oppression of the women in one of Ferré's first short stories, "The Youngest Doll". To do this, I will first give a brief history of Puerto Rico's patriarchal culture, placing specific emphasis on the time period in which the short story was written (1976). Next, I will give a brief background of Rosario Ferré and a short summary of the story. Finally, I will use the remainder of the paper to discuss the different literary elements and symbolism that Ferré makes use of in her story, and talk about the ways in which these themes help Ferré to portray the injustices of female oppression in Puerto Rico.

Ever since first settled by Spain in 1493, Puerto Rico (named for its "rich ports") has been a patriarchy, and men have held all major positions in society. The island remained a province of Spain for over 400 years, until it became a territory of the United States under the Treaty of Paris in 1898 (Puerto Rico). During this time period, Puerto Rico was predominately agricultural, and their economy relied almost entirely on its sugar and tobacco crops. But in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an industrialization effort called "Operation Bootstrap" launched.

This plan included cheap labor and introduced new tax laws to attract American companies to the island. Many corporations quickly moved to the island, and created a sea of sweatshops employing thousands of Puerto Rican men, women, and children. All social classes were being effected, and not just economically. Puerto Ricans were being overworked, and overnight power dynamics on the island were being flipped as the wealth switched from aristocratic sugar and tobacco-producing families to the families of the foreign owned companies (World Literature 2). These men now holding the power were materialistic and superficial, and women were being valued solely by what they could contribute to a man's status in society.

This social atmosphere is the one in which Rosario Ferré wrote her short story "The Youngest Doll". Born in 1938 in Ponce, Puerto Rico, Ferré grew up in this time period and experienced first-hand the injustices that women were faced daily in this changing environment (González 2). Ferré was born to a family influential in business and politics, and her father, Luis Ferré was a pro-statehood governor of Puerto Rico from 1968-1972. When her mother died during her father's time in office, Ferré fulfilled the duties of first lady. Ferré received her primary education in Ponce, Puerto Rico, and then finished out her education at the University of Maryland in the United States. And although she spent this time in the U.S., Ferré was very passionate about chronicling and criticizing her own country's socio-political history, specifically where it related to undermining the conceptual idea of men as the "dominant" group. She had always been an activist in the feminist movement, and is known for often delving into women's issues and their perceived role in society. In nearly all of her stories and poems, Ferré's female characters are attempting to break free from the social structure that had been created by a male-dominated society. In her early life, Ferré was active in many literary journals

and magazines and even helped to found one herself, titled *Zona carga y descarga*. In 1976, Ferré published her first collection of short stories, titled “Papeles de Pandora”.

This entire collection of stories was written to represent Puerto Rican women’s roles in society, and this is where Ferré’s short story “The Youngest Doll” first appeared. In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman on Earth. She opened a box given to her by the gods that allowed all things good and bad to escape and spread throughout the world. But in her haste to close the lid, Pandora trapped hope inside the box. Much like in Pandora’s world, the worlds that Ferré creates inside of this collection of stories are ones where hope does not exist, especially for the female protagonists. Additionally, the Spanish word “papeles” found in the title of the collection can be taken to have many meanings, each one bolstering the theme of female oppression in the stories within. Often, “papeles” can be translated to “manuscripts”. This causes the entirety of the title to be translated to *Pandora’s Manuscripts*, which insinuates that Pandora herself has written the stories within the pages. This suggests a theme of woman as a creator, which is a parallel to the ideas of female oppression and insinuates that women can stimulate necessary change (Martín 2). Running parallel to that idea, “papeles” can also mean the dramatic roles that one is given to represent. When used in this context, *Papeles de Pandora* represents the social roles that women are forced to play in a patriarchal society.

As for “The Youngest Doll” specifically, although this story is only ten pages, Ferré manages to create a meaningful impact. In the beginning of the story, a maiden aunt who was once so beautiful gets bitten in the leg by a river prawn that “nestles there to grow”. This causes the maiden aunt to give up her hopes of getting married, so instead she spends her days making incredible, life-size dolls for each of her nieces. A doctor comes to visit the aunt once a month to inspect her leg, and one month brings his son with him to show him “the prawn that paid for his

education all these years”. While there, the youngest niece catches his eye, and he takes up visits to the aunt instead of his father in order to see and court her. Eventually, the two get married, and the aunt gives the youngest niece her last doll. The doctor takes the youngest niece and the doll into town to live with him, where he forces her to sit on the upstairs balcony every day so that others walking by may see how “he had married into high society”. Day by day, the youngest niece loses more and more of her humanity, until she is finally replaced in the last lines of the story by the doll itself (Ferré 7).

Like many of Ferré’s stories, this short story is a fantasy. Literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov defines the fantastic as a very fragile literary form where there is a moment of hesitation between belief and disbelief of the supernatural (Stanislaw 228). However, the fantastic only occupies this time period of uncertainty, and after an answer is chosen the novel leaves the fantastic and joins a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. Both the uncanny and the marvelous are similar in that they both take an object that is familiar and turn it into something entirely strange. The marvelous, however, does not require a response from the character, while the uncanny is characterized by that response. In “The Youngest Doll” we see this idea of the uncanny in the doll itself. In the beginning of the story, the dolls are a comforting thing that the maiden aunt and her nieces draw reassurance from. However, at the end of the story, the doll used as a replica of the adult character of the youngest niece no longer strikes a familiar chord in a reader, and instead is something terrifying. In this way, the uncanniness of the doll is now a symbol for the ways in which the women’s lives and all that they hold familiar has been ruined at the hands of men in society, just as the reader’s perception of the doll is.

Nearly all stories of the creation of portrays a masculine figure in the role of creator; in Christianity, God creates Eve while in Greek mythology, Zeus is responsible for putting Pandora

on Earth. Women are regarded throughout history not as creators, but as reproductive instruments. To be able to create is to have control over something, and being deprived the possibility of creating is another way that women are stripped of this power. In “The Youngest Doll”, however, Ferré subverts this idea and it is the maiden aunt, a woman, who is first cast in the role of creator (Ferré 4). The maiden aunt has been used and betrayed by men over and over in her life, yet it is this woman who has been made responsible for creating the “beloved” life-size dolls. The maiden aunt has been pushed to conform to what society wants, but creating the dolls is her way of resisting patriarchal control. The dolls are not just made, but “born”, which insinuates that she is actually creating living things. This further amplifies the idea of woman as a creator. For the maiden aunt’s family, the doll-making is a joyous occasion and a reason of reverence. But the aunt’s rebellion against society is relatively short-lived and she loses all control of her creations, as her youngest niece is held captive in the doll that was supposed to bring her comfort. In this way, men once again show the power that they have over the women in their lives.

A constant, reoccurring theme throughout the entirety of the story is the river prawn, In Puerto Rico, river prawn, or *chágara*, are a type of crustacean that are often fished from rivers and streams by locals. Ferré takes this common object, and uses it as a symbol of the men that are so quick to oppress the women around them. We first see this river prawn in relation to the aunt. As a young woman, she is beautiful and carefree, so she must be put back into her place in society in the form of the prawn’s bite. And instead of easily recovering from this wound, the rest of her life is ruined because of the scarring that she has. Additionally, the problem with the river prawn is what causes the doctor, a man who is just using her, to come into her life. The aunt forever remembers the ways in which she was ruined by men. This comes back later in the

novel when she is making the dolls for her nieces, and she makes sure to leave the eyes on the bottom of the same river where she was injured so that “they could learn to recognize the slightest stirring of the prawn’s antennae” (Ferré 5).

In this way, she is ensuring that the dolls, and in turn her nieces, will be able to know the dangers that men can bring them. When each niece leaves home with their last doll under their arms, they are leaving with what the maiden aunt hopes is the knowledge they need to know what threatens them. At the end of the story, when the youngest niece’s husband goes to check on her in bed, he sees “the frenzied antennae of all those prawns” coming from her eye sockets (the sockets that are empty because the husband stole the doll’s eyes in order to sell them). This is symbolic of the way that men are finally able to entirely destroy the youngest niece, from the inside out.

In Todorov’s studies on literature, he states that a major role of fantastic literature is that the entire story is written in a way that is meant to contribute to the climax at the end (Martín 6). This climax is meant to be almost like a game, and the author wins if they are able to leave the reader confused and thinking about the overall meaning of the story long after reading the closing words. It is at this point in a story when parts that might have seemed confusing earlier on finally feel as if they click into place. There are many different ways that a fantastical writer can play this game with their readers. But in the case of “The Youngest Doll” specifically, Ferré conveys her final message of the destructive impact of female oppression through her use of the “Double”. In literature, the Double is a literary device in which a character within a story is both paralleled and contrasted with another in order to denounce the structures of the established social order in an attempt to dissolve it at its very base. In “The Youngest Doll”, Ferré is using this idea of the Double in order to create a situation in which the patriarchal norm manipulates

women into believing that she controls the home, only to later find out that she has no true power at all.

To do this, Ferré creates a fantastic mirror of Doubles. First, the aunt serves as a double for Ferré herself, creating dolls for her nieces in much the same way that Ferré creates a story for readers. The aunt, Ferré's Double, has her own Double in the form of her youngest niece; both are women who are trapped within society's dictations.

The final Double in the story, the last doll, belongs to the youngest niece. This Double of the doll is perhaps the most special, for many reasons. Throughout the story, all of the dolls represent both a sense of safety and an act of rebellion for all of nieces. And as they all go off on their own, they are each given their own doll Double to help guide them on their journeys, including the youngest niece whom Ferré eventually places the entirety of the readers' focus on. Towards the end of the story, the husband of the youngest niece steals her doll's eyes in order to sell them, the eyes that are meant to help the youngest niece see what it is that threatens her. Without the eyes of the doll, the youngest niece herself loses sight of these dangers. And the moment she is robbed of this knowledge and struck ignorant to her plight is when she truly begins to lose her humanity at the hands of her husband. Finally, in the last sentences of the story, the lines of Double are crossed as the youngest niece actually becomes her beloved doll. This conversion of a living being into an inanimate object is symbolic of the power that men have over women.

Overall, Ferré does a wonderful job in her short story of calling attention to the injustices and oppression that women are facing in a patriarchal society. To do this, she creates an enthralling piece of literature that incorporates many fantastical themes and symbolism relating to women being treated as objects. And understanding more about the sociopolitical

environment in Puerto Rico at the time of the story as well as more about Rosario Ferré herself, it is both easier and much more meaningful to see how these literary elements are present in “The Youngest Doll”. The majority of the world still maintains this patriarchal society archetype where women are being treated as less than men, but more and more commonly there are people like Rosario Ferré who are willing to speak out against these injustices.

## Works Cited

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