ContemporaryLiterary Criticism

CLC 328

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers





#### Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 328

Project Editor: Jeffrey W. Hunter
Editorial: Dana Ramel Barnes, Sara
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Content Conversion: Katrina Coach, Gwen Tucker

Indexing Services: Laurie Andriot Rights and Acquisitions: Leitha Etheridge-Sims

Composition and Electronic Capture: Gary Ouderslys

Manufacturing: Cynde Lentz Associate Product Manager: Marc Cormier

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# Contemporary Literary Criticism

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief Annotations explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent Author Interview accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of Further Reading appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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### Rosario Ferré 1938-

Puerto Rican novelist, short story writer, essayist, critic, poet, biographer, and translator.

The following entry presents an overview of Ferré's career through 2010. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 139.

#### INTRODUCTION

Ferré, one of Latin America's foremost women of letters, has made a career out of critiquing Puerto Rico's upper-class, conservative society into which she was born. She uses her storytelling gifts to examine issues of race, gender, politics, and culture and to advance feminist causes. She often does so by retelling her homeland's history in ways that challenge the intellectual underpinnings of the status quo. Ferré has written across multiple genres, from literary criticism and newspaper editorials to poetry and fiction, for adults and children, initially in Spanish but subsequently in English as well. Several of her works have been translated into various languages and published outside Puerto Rico and the U.S.

#### **BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION**

Rosario Ferré Ramírez de Arellano was born on September 28, 1938, in Ponce, Puerto Rico, into one of its wealthiest and most influential families. Her engineer father, the late Luis A. Ferré, served as the U.S. commonwealth's third elected governor from 1968 to 1972. Her mother, Lorenza Ramírez de Arellano, whose family owned sugarcane plantations, died in 1969 or 1970, and Ferré served in her place as First Lady until 1972. Although her father, the founder of the New Progressive Party, favored statehood for Puerto Rico, Ferré publicly advocated for independence in her youth but later became a statehood advocate. Ferré was introduced to myths and storytelling by a nanny her mother hired while mourning the death of Ferré's brother. Much later, Ferré would learn techniques of magic realism from Hispanic American scholars Mario Vargas Llosa and Angel Rama.

Ferré has been writing professionally since age fourteen, when she published articles in a Puerto Rican newspaper, El Dia Nueva (New Day). While working

on her master's degree in Puerto Rico, she and a cousin founded a literary journal called Zona de Carga y Descarga (The Loading Dock). It promoted Puerto Rican independence and showcased new writers, some of whom became prominent. Around 1974, Ferré won first prize in a short story contest sponsored by the Ateneo Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Athenaeum). Ferré's literary career began to flourish in 1976 when, at age thirty, she published a collection of short stories and poems written in Spanish, Papeles de Pandora (The Youngest Doll).

In addition to narrative fiction, much of which she has translated into English herself, Ferré has written satire, poetry, and a biography of her father. In 1992, she received the Liberatur Prix award from the Frankfurt Book Fair for *Kristallzucker*, the German translation of *Maldito amor* (1986; *Sweet Diamond Dust*). She won the Critics Choice Award in 1995 and was nominated for a National Book Award in 1996, both for *The House on the Lagoon* (1995). In 1997, she received an honorary doctorate from Brown University. Ferré received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2004.

Much of Ferré's education occurred in the United States. As a young teenager, she attended the Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Mass. She earned a bachelor's degree in English and French from Manhattan-ville College (near White Plains, N.Y.) in 1960 before returning to Puerto Rico to start her family. She earned a master's degree in Hispanic studies from the University of Puerto Rico circa 1985 and a doctorate in Latin American literature from the University of Maryland two years later.

Ferré is a professor of Latin American literature at the University of Puerto Rico. She has taught at Harvard and the University of California, Berkeley, and has also been a visiting professor at Rutgers and Johns Hopkins universities. She is a contributing editor for *The San Juan Star*, Puerto Rico's former Englishlanguage newspaper.

Ferré has three children—Rosario Lorenza, Benigno, and Luis Alfredo—with her first husband, business-man Benigno Trigo González, whom she married after completing her undergraduate studies. After their divorce, while pursuing her master's degree, she met and married her second husband, writer and Mexican

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literature professor José Aguilar Mora; they also divorced. Ferré is now married to architect Agustín Costa Quintano, whom she met in America while attending graduate school. They reside in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

#### MAJOR WORKS

Although she has written numerous short stories, essays, and poems, Ferré is generally best known outside her homeland as a novelist. Her focus and forte have been social criticism and satire, targeting the strictures of patriarchal politics and revisiting women's myths. Her novels often deal with Puerto Rico's national identity crisis as reflected in the ongoing debate over statehood versus sovereignty, a divisive issue within families as well as the populace in general. Family is a strong theme in much of Ferré's work, and she has begun several of her novels with genealogies, although this may be meant primarily to assist readers in keeping track of the myriad characters she is prone to create.

Set within a family of contrary mindsets, one of Ferré's most important novels, The House on the Lagoon was nominated for a National Book Award and is the first work Ferré wrote in English. This semiautobiographical novel-within-a-novel reveals itself gradually as readers discover it is a literal work in progress. Isabel, a well-to-do feminist independista, is fulfilling a personal ambition by secretly writing a novel based on her shared family history. It is discovered by her abusive husband, Quintín, a traditionalist who favors close ties with the U.S. He is repulsed by what he sees as too much disclosure and too little accuracy. He commences presenting a "truer" version of events, adding notes in the margins of her manuscript and eventually crafting his own interpretation. But whereas Quintín insists on strict adherence to historical facts, Isabel argues that she must embellish some facts, taking liberties with the actual truth in order to communicate a higher truth. The larger questions of who should write history and what constitutes a novel also come into play as the couple struggles with issues of race and class.

In a vein similar to *The House on the Lagoon* but on a much grander scale, *Eccentric Neighborhoods* (1998) is Ferré's second work composed in English. Ferré has stated that she wrote this memoir partly to come to terms with her mother's death. She said she was unable to write about it in her native language, needing the psychological separation that writing in a second language provided. *Eccentric Neighborhoods* is the sweeping saga of two very different families, the

aristocratic Santillanas and the opportunistic Vernets. The narrator, Elvira Vernet, is close to her father but never has fully resolved her relationship with her deceased mother, Clarissa. Clarissa is one of five Santillana sisters raised in luxury thanks to their prosperous sugar plantations. Clarissa embodies her family's complacency, relying on inspiration and beauty to sustain her. She and her sisters, each named for one of their mother's favorite literary heroines, set in motion their family's eventual downfall through a series of educational, romantic, and professional escapades. Elvira's father is one of the four Vernet brothers whose family is dominated by a patriarch. As their ice and cement businesses grow, they too endure a host of travails in the midst of the independence movement, suffering their share of tragedy. Here again, Ferré uses contrasting families and the difficult relationships within them as a metaphor for Puerto Rico's bifurcated national character and as an allegory for its struggle to understand its identity.

Flight of the Swan (2001), a historical novel, inspired by the Latin American tour of the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova, seeks to explore themes of art, sex, and politics. Set in 1917, the year of the Bolshevik Revolution, a touring Russian ballet troupe is stranded in Puerto Rico due to the political turmoil back home. The troupe's leader and star, Madame, and her charges face the possibility of becoming stateless persons if they continue performing. Puerto Rico is undergoing its own political upheaval, having recently come under U.S. control. Madame falls in love with a self-serving revolutionary half her age, a coupling deemed unwise by her servant and confidante, Masha, the story's primary narrator. She attempts to extricate Madame from this dangerous liaison despite carrying on a romance with a black shoemaker. The government's oppressive treatment of some of its citizens convinces Masha that she, too, is indeed a Bolshevik. Through Madame and Masha, Ferré extols the virtues of sacrifice for one's art and dedication to personal principle.

Notable among Ferré's short fiction is the novella Sweet Diamond Dust, which was originally published in Spanish as Maldito Amor, or "cursed love." A "land genre" parody, Sweet Diamond Dust is a critique of colonialism and the corrosive economic impact of American corporate hegemony on Puerto Rican economic and social life. Ferré illustrates these forces through the experiences of Don Julio, the proprietor of the Diamond Dust sugar mill who is put out of business when new banks finance huge sugar conglomerates, with which he cannot compete. He is contrasted with Titina, a poor maid who works in Don Julio's household. She cares only for her family, and his, and also loses everything in the end except her optimism.

Allegorical in its use of family to represent a nation, the book includes three additional stories about the protagonists' descendants.

Ferré follows these same lines in The Youngest Doll. the collection of stories that launched her career when originally published in Spanish as Papeles de Pandora in 1976. One of the updated fairy tales in the book is "Sleeping Beauty," a story told in an epistolary format using letters and news articles. A young ballerina is coerced by her father and the nun who runs her Catholic school into relinquishing her art because of its potential to corrupt and even condemn her. Instead, she marries a businessman who, after she gives birth to their son, may have killed her—the death is ruled an accident. Her father finds solace in having a new grandson to supplant his daughter, who is buried in an American-made designer wedding gown. Ferré uses other references to American culture to point up its materialism in this cautionary tale of oppression, overtly personal but symbolically political.

Over the years, Ferré has published almost a dozen collections of essays. Her first was Sitio a Eros (1980; Room for Eros), which contains thirteen mostly short pieces that she said were aimed primarily at young women. In "The Kindness of Wrath," however, she assails patriarchy and its censorship of female authors, arguing that many of their writings are responses to repression spawned by anger. In "The Authenticity of Women in Art," Ferré expands on this theme by identifying anger directed externally as producing works like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, while internal anger, or guilt, yields works like the poems of Sylvia Plath. She uses Plath to illustrate what she calls a composite force of light and darkness, shelter and selfdestruction that is a form of tyranny reinforced by patriarchy. Ferré compares it both to maternity and to cumulative female experience that can remove the life from women. More recently, in Las puertas de placer (2005), Ferré celebrates the triune nature of humanness, i.e., mind, body, and spirit. She maintains that there is no distinction between the way flesh and spirit engage the world. Ferré also defends political and linguistic freedom, espouses the philosophy of feminism, and discusses how literature has given her life meaning. In the oft-anthologized "La Cocina de las Escritura" ("The Writer's Kitchen"), Ferré uses cooking as a metaphor for writing and explains why she writes fiction.

Ferré published her first collection of poems, Fábulas de la garza desangrada, in 1982. In it she inverts and reinterprets several mythic tales involving heroic women—Antigone, Desdemona, Ariadne—to reflect a modern feminist viewpoint.

#### **CRITICAL RECEPTION**

Critics debate whether the scope of Ferré's work ends at feminism or extends beyond it, but most agree that she engages in polemical retellings of Puerto Rico's socio-political history, with an emphasis on women's roles. They see her purpose as challenging the fundamental concepts of those who have dominated Puerto Rican society, namely, male capitalists. She is noted for combining classical mythology and native folktales in her feminist variations on everyday life to provide Puerto Rican women a more accessible and less confining way of thinking about themselves. Her writing is credited with helping introduce and sustain feminism in Puerto Rico and open new avenues of exploration for women writers.

In many of Ferré's stories, things do not end well for her heroines. Plots are open-ended, motives are unclear, issues remain unresolved and women get hurt, or worse. As Bryan T. Scoular writes in his 2008 essay, "Over Our Dead Bodies," "It is as if . . . Ferré, by reflecting on the experiences of individual females, [is] inviting [her] readers to critically reconsider Edgar Allan Poe's disturbing dictum: 'the death of a beautiful woman is [. . .] the most poetical topic in the world." This graphically depicts the seriousness of the struggle Ferré is championing and the cold fact that change does not come easily, or cheaply.

A practitioner of magic realism, Ferré often has employed fragmented time sequences and multiple narrators, as in the stories in Sweet Diamond Dust and The Youngest Doll and the novel The House on the Lagoon. One critic, however, found the narrator Masha in Flight of the Swan to be ineffective, with the introduction of another narrator late in the story too abrupt. In telling her stories through more than one person, Ferré bolsters her argument that truth is subjective. She believes that truth may have more than one source, not just the one that imposes its version on others. In The House on the Lagoon, the Isabel and Quintín's conflict symbolizes the tug of war between the proponents of subjectivity and objectivity in the continual dialog over the nature of truth.

Stylistically, Ferré consistently is praised for the beauty and grace of her writing: her vividness, versatility, irony, and imagery and her lyrical, satiric voice. However, some critics find Ferré much more effective when writing in her native language than in English. The latter attempts have been described as pedestrian and prefabricated by some, although other critics laud her craftsmanship. Moreover, some critics fault Ferré for trying to do too much. A few of her novels, especially *Eccentric Neighborhoods*, have been cited for overcrowding, with commentators faulting an overabundance of characters and subplots to untangle.

Ferré is widely acknowledged by Latin American readers as the region's foremost female writer. Many of her stories and essays have appeared in regional and feminist journals, and critics have noted the intensity of her feminist thought. Yet she has struggled to gain similar recognition from English-speaking audiences, despite achieving success writing in, or translating into, English and being nominated for a prestigious U.S. award.

#### PRINCIPAL WORKS

Papeles de Pandora [The Youngest Doll] (short stories and poetry) 1976

Sitio a Eros: trece ensayos literarios (essays) 1980 Fábulas de la garza desangrada (poetry) 1982

El acomador: una lectura fantástica de Felisberto Hernández (criticism) 1986

Maldito amor [Sweet Diamond Dust] (novel and stories) 1986

El árbol y sus sombras (essays) 1989

El coloquio de las perras (essays) 1990

Las dos Venecias (short stories and poetry) 1992

Memorias de Ponce: Autobiografia de Luis A. Ferré [translator] (autobiography) 1992

The House on the Lagoon (novel) 1995; published as La Casa de la laguna, 1997

Eccentric Neighborhoods (memoir) 1998; published as Vecindarios eccentricos, 1999

A la sombra de tu nombre (essays) 2001

Flight of the Swan (novel) 2001; published as Vuelo del cisne, 2002

Language Duel/Duelo del lenguaje (poetry) 2003 Las puertas del placer (essays) 2005 Fisuras (poetry) 2006 Memoria (memoir) 2011

#### **CRITICISM**

#### Benigno Trigo (essay date 2003)

SOURCE: Trigo, Benigno. "The Mother Tongue." In *Bilingual Games: Some Literary Investigations*, edited by Doris Sommer, pp. 177-91. New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

[In the following essay, Trigo explores Ferré's use of writing in a non-native language as a detachment technique that enables her to explore painful or taboo subjects.]

Speaking another language is quite simply the minimum and primary condition for being alive.

-Julia Kristeva, Intimate Revolt

In an interview with the New York Times, Rosario Ferré says that she felt distant enough to explore the death of her mother in her writing only when she began to write in English. Before that, she says she found it impossible to deal with the subject because it was taboo in her native Spanish (Navarro 2). A year later she describes her novel Eccentric Neighborhoods, written in English, in the same terms. The novel is "an attempt to lay bare the relationships between mothers and daughters," an attempt, she says, to come to terms with the death of her mother in 1969 (Burch 31). In both interviews Rosario says that writing in English gives her a psychological distance that allows her to write about that loss. She describes writing in English "as if another person were writing" (Navarro 2). Writing in that other language makes her feel like a spectator, less vulnerable. She suggests that language is a contradictory boundary. On the one hand, it can be a distance between the writer and its subject. She compares English to a brush that mediates between the painter and the canvas. But language can also be a porous space of passage. Language, she says, meaning Spanish (her mother tongue), "is like your skin" (Navarro 2).

Rosario's reflections on writing, language, and loss raise three important questions. First, what makes writing about the loss of the mother difficult and even impossible for her? Why is writing about the death of the mother a taboo? Who or what makes it a taboo? Second, why is it so important and even necessary to write about that loss, to break that taboo? And third, what are the implications of breaking that taboo in another language? What does it mean that Rosario can write about the loss of her mother only by displacing her mother tongue, by losing her collective language, by shedding her own skin?

#### I. DIES IRAE

In her book of essays, Room for Eros (Sitio a Eros) published in 1980, Rosario listens for an echo of the wrath that haunts her own writing. It is a sound, a ferocity, a furious tone also found in the writings of other women writers, an irascible sound that recalls the Wrath of the Lord in Mozart's Requiem. Following Walter Benjamin's dictum, she aims "at the single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one" (Benjamin 76). Rosario translates into Spanish the wrath, fury, and irascibility of Mary Shelley, George Sand, and Virginia Woolf (among other women writers). She describes wrath both as a timeless nega-

tive light and as a spectrum of energies and wavelengths. She compares it to a constant radiation from an indefinite place that she sometimes locates outside, in the heavens, and at other times finds inside the body. She compares the radiation to both an ancestral universal force that gives birth to the stars, and to a fever that turns the body livid and eventually kills it.

The book is a collection of thirteen essays. They are for the most part brief pieces that Rosario has described as a series of exempla meant for young women (Coloquio, 108). The longest essay in the book, however, is an ambitious piece that reaches far beyond the "example." Entitled "The Kindness of Wrath" ("Las bondades de la ira"), it is a poetics of anger. In this polemical and unapologetic essay, Rosario demystifies women's writing, shattering the myths surrounding, imprisoning, and silencing its voice. She traces back the laws governing the irascible artistic creation of women writers like Sylvia Plath, Alfonsina Storni, and Delmira Agustini to an opaque acoustic and visual source: a phonographic negative, the inverse, the opposite, the other side of their own voice and light (Sitio a Eros, 99).

A negative placed on a positive, a silence imposed on a voice, these are Rosario's opaque and jarring images for the principle of writing. The origin and source of writing is an essential prohibition, a fundamental censorship, a primary exclusion, a terrifying negativity through which and against which voice, presence, light, and even joy express themselves. In her feminist essay, she identifies this primary censorship with the patriarchal order. She argues that the patriarchy builds myths around women writers like Sylvia Plath that are meant to tame and repress the threat contained in their writing. They are fortifications of the male self against the perceived threat of an other displaced outside its boundaries, and perhaps outside all boundaries. But male critics unwittingly unleash upon themselves the very forces they seek to keep outside their fortified egos by calling the work of women writers like Plath a hallucination, a hypnotic trance. By turning the irascible nature of their writing into the myth of the eternal feminine, male critics turn into monsters the forces they seek to silence and contain. Rosario reads Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein as one example of this return of the repressed as a repugnant, mutilated monster, a living cadaver that explosively incorporates the homicidal wrath produced by the prohibition, repression, and exclusion of women and their experiences from the patriarchal social order.

And yet this repression is but a more manageable form of a deeper, far more troubling experience. In the first essay of her collection, "The Authenticity of Women

in Art" ("La autenticidad de la mujer en el arte"), Rosario distinguishes between two fundamental problems that affect women: the problem of their external, material freedom, and the problem of their internal, psychological freedom. Of the two, Rosario finds that the second is by far the most difficult and dangerous. The internal problem is in turn divided into two parts: the psychological penalties or sanctions imposed by society on women through tradition and customs, and the penalties or sanctions women impose on themselves in the form of an anger turned inward, a terrifying guilt (Ferré 1980, 14).

In her book, Rosario argues that guilt is anger turned inward. The anger turned against the external forces that threaten material freedom produces cathartic works like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, works that sublimate the prohibitions into vociferous symbols of struggle aimed at unjust social forces. But the effect of the inwardly turned anger is the production of irascible works aimed at the self, which can eventually lead to suicide. Paradoxically, this anger turned inward can also be a form of liberation for Rosario, even if it doubles as an extreme form of self-repression.

Thus Rosario describes the paradoxical effect of Plath's poetry as exposing and creating both a shelter and a suicidal melancholia. She describes Plath's poems as photographs of the absence of light, comparing them to a projection, an x-ray, a negative, of Plath's feelings. These negatives reveal a composite force both developing and already inside of her. The negatives reveal this force with a paradoxical "meridian clarity," perfect poetic pitch, mastery of technique, and blinding phoenix-like light. This composite of negative and positive forces is the complex and profound origins of a tyranny, echoed and doubled by the patriarchal order. This tyranny is at times described as a vampire of light gradually substituting and sucking the light out of Plath. Indeed, Rosario explicitly compares it to the maternal experience, and more specifically to the newborn's involuntary end of the mother's private experience and internal freedom. At other times, this composite of light and darkness, of shelter and self-destruction, is compared to an ancestral force: the tyranny of the mother and of her maternal forebears, the cumulative experience of women.

#### II. LACRIMOSA

Rosario changes the tone of her voice to a minor key in her book *Fables of the Wounded Heron* (*Fábulas de la garza desangrada*), published in 1982. Composed as a negative (a metamorphosis) of the Requiem mass, *Fables of the Wounded Heron* seems rather an As-