

# Coming In or Going Out? Two Short Stories of Haunted Houses

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## Abstract

Tales about haunted houses are practically a subgenre in fantastic literature; attempting to find an explanation (if any is to be found) is the main topic of these stories. Two stories with haunted houses are compared and contrasted: “The Open Door” by Charlotte Riddell and “La casa tomada” by Julio Cortázar, taking into consideration the definition of “fantastic” and the “uncertainty” of the active reader by Tzvetan Todorov. The comparison and contrast between the stories will be discussed from three perspectives: the description of the houses, the movement toward the place, and the character of the protagonists. At the end, in both cases there is a change; however, the difference remains in the chances of the reader to solve the mystery.

**Key words:** haunted house, fantastic literature, Charlotte Riddell, Julio Cortázar

## Resumen

Las casas embrujadas son prácticamente un subgénero de la literatura fantástica; tratar de encontrar la explicación -si es que existe alguna- se convierte en el tema central de las historias. Este texto compara y contrasta dos cuentos con casas embrujadas: “The Open Door” de Charlotte Riddell y “La casa tomada” de Julio Cortázar y para hacerlo se basa en la teoría de “lo fantástico” y la incertidumbre del lector activo de Tzvetan Todorov desde tres perspectivas: la descripción de las casas, el movimiento hacia ellas y el carácter de los personajes. Al final, en ambos cuentos ocurre un cambio, pero la diferencia radica en las posibilidades que tiene el lector de resolver el misterio que habita las casas.

**Palabras claves:** casa embrujada, literatura fantástica, Charlotte Riddell, Julio Cortázar

**H** haunted houses seem to be a subgenre in fantastic literature. These houses are inhabited by an unexplained being: a ghost. Nevertheless, “a ghost” is not always the explanation, if there is any. Two stories with haunted houses will be addressed: “The Open Door” by Charlotte Riddell and “La casa tomada” by Julio Cortázar. In spite of being haunted, both stories have differences; this essay will emphasize the comparison and contrast between them; in order to do so, three topics will be discussed: the description of the houses, the movement toward these places, and the character of the protagonists.

### Some notes about fantastic literature

When the reader talks about fantastic literature, many fantastic elements are expected. In *Introducción a la literatura fantástica*, the literary critic Tzvetan Todorov defines the meaning of “fantastic.” According to this book, this kind of literature is impossible to explain by laws of the familiar world. The one who perceives this situation must choose between two possible solutions:

[...] se trata de una ilusión de los sentidos, de un producto de la imaginación y las leyes del mundo siguen siendo lo que son, o bien el acontecimiento se produjo realmente, es parte integrante de la realidad y entonces esa realidad está regida por leyes que desconocemos. (Todorov 24)

Therefore, the fantastic belongs to the dimension of uncertainty; besides, when the one experiencing the fantastic situation makes his/her decision, the fantastic touches the limits of the strange and the marvelous (“maravilloso” in the original translation). In other words, “lo fantástico es la vacilación experimentada por un ser que no conoce más que las leyes naturales, frente a un acontecimiento aparentemente sobrenatural” (Todorov 24).

In the chapter, when Todorov is trying to define the meaning of “the fantastic,” he assigns great importance to the reader. Hesitation experienced by the reader is one of the conditions of the fantastic because it is a way of reading reality. This definition is proposed in negative terms; reading the fantastic means not reading in poetic terms (with figures of speech that cannot be taken in a literal way), nor reading in an allegorical way (for instance, when animals talk in a fable).

Todorov summarizes the meaning of fantastic in the following way:

...[se necesita el] cumplimiento de tres condiciones. En primer lugar, es necesario que el texto obligue al lector a considerar el mundo de los personajes como un mundo de personas reales y a vacilar entre una explicación natural y una explicación sobrenatural de los acontecimientos evocados. Luego, esta vacilación puede ser también sentida por un personaje y, al mismo tiempo la vacilación está representada, se convierte en uno de los

temas de la obra [esta exigencia puede no cumplirse, pero en la mayoría de los ejemplos aparece]... Finalmente, es importante que el lector adopte una determinada actitud frente al texto: deberá rechazar tanto la interpretación alegórica como la interpretación poética. (Todorov 30)

In the previous quote, the use of the hesitation is highlighted; not only do the characters feel this unsafe ground, but the reader also faces this uncertainty. This is the same position stated by Julio Cortázar, one of the writers studied in this essay, who points out that one of the necessary elements for “the fantastic” is the disruption which alters an instant of the present. He also takes into consideration the active participation of the reader. Actually, Cortázar, quoting Coleridge, recalls this condition as “the suspension of disbelief”, which means the tacit contract between the text and the active reader.

### **Two Houses: both alike in ... haunting**

“The Open Door” by Charlotte Riddell and “La casa tomada” by Julio Cortázar present some coincidences and some differences. But first, let’s review the home’s description. “The Open Door” is the story of Theophilus (Phil) Edlyd who sees the possibility of gaining money by discovering why one of the doors of the Ladlow Hall stayed open for no reasonable explanation. The house is located uphill. The Hall is a “square, solid-looking, old-fashioned house, three stories high, with no basement; a flight of steps up to the principal entrance; four windows to the right door, four windows to the left; the whole building flanked and backed with tress” (Riddell 41). Once the character enters the house, he discovers that “the floor was of black and white marble. There were two fireplaces, fitted with dogs for burning wood; around the walls hung pictures, antlers, and horns, and in odd niches and corners stood groups of statues, and the figures of men in complete suits of armour” (Riddell 41). In Theophilus’s visit to the house, certain elements stand out: the staircases, corridors, and chambers. The character is looking for the enchanted door because the owner did not identify it previously.

On the other hand, the house in “La casa tomada” by Julio Cortázar is described in the following manner:

[...] el comedor, una sala con gobelinos, la biblioteca y tres dormitorios grandes quedaban en la parte más retirada, la que mira hacia Rodríguez Peña. Solamente un pasillo con su maciza puerta de roble aislaba esa parte del ala delantera donde había un baño, la cocina, nuestros dormitorios y el living central, al cual comunicaban los dormitorios y el pasillo. Se entraba a la casa por un zaguán con mayólica, y la puerta cancel daba al living. De manera que uno entraba por el zaguán, abría la cancel y pasaba al living; tenía a los lados las puertas de nuestros dormitorios, y al frente el pasillo que conducía a la parte más retirada; avanzando por el pasillo se franqueaba la puerta de roble y más allá empezaba el otro lado de la casa,

o bien se podía girar a la izquierda justamente antes de la puerta y seguir por un pasillo más estrecho que llevaba a la cocina y el baño. Cuando la puerta estaba abierta advertía uno que la casa era muy grande; si no, daba la impresión de un departamento de los que se edifican ahora, apenas para moverse. (Cortázar 14)

In this case, the house seems to decrease or shrink in size. After listening to a sound, the character says: “me tiré contra la puerta antes de que fuera demasiado tarde, la cerré de golpe apoyando el cuerpo; felizmente la llave estaba puesta de nuestro lado y además corrí el gran cerrojo para más seguridad” (Cortázar 15). Suddenly, the protagonist and his sister, Irene, lose space in the house. This is the main difference between these two houses: in Riddell’s house, there is a certain room that is sealed off; here the protagonist must stand on Miss Beatrice’s pony’s back to see what is inside. In Cortázar’s story, however, sounds make characters retreat into a smaller house. Nevertheless, the couple sees this situation as an advantage because it makes the cleaning activity easier.

### Coming In or Going Out? Crossing the Threshold

Both stories present a movement either into or out of the house. Riddell’s story presents a protagonist who goes into the house. In contrast, Cortázar’s story has two characters that must leave the house. Therefore, it is important to see the reasons for (not) being there, and the key point that connects both stories is the element of the door. According to Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant in their *Dictionary of Symbols*, doors:

[...] symbolize the scene of passing from one state to another, from one world to another, from the known to the unknown, from the light to darkness. Doors open upon the mysterious, but they have a dynamic psychological quality for they not only indicate a threshold but invite us to cross it. It is an invitation to a voyage into the beyond. (Chevalier 422)

Riddell’s story mentions the door in its title. Theophilus goes into the house to solve the mystery of the “open door;” solving the mystery represents a financial solution for him (especially because he was fired from his job). Finding a rational explanation, more rational than a mere ghost, is the reason for being and staying there: “Though feeling convinced that no human agency did or could keep the door open, I was certain that some living person had means of access to the house which *I* could not discover” (Riddell 53). At the end, he was right; a woman looking for the will of Lord Ladlow’s uncle was behind the mystery. In contrast, Cortázar’s story does not look for a rational explanation. The characters display the opposite movement; in other words, they leave the house. Doors are also important in this story, and shutting them symbolizes the loss of the house for the characters: “Me tiré contra la puerta antes de que fuera demasiado

tarde” (Cortázar 15); “Apreté el brazo de Irene y la hice correr conmigo hasta la puerta cancel” (Cortázar 19). Finally, “Antes de alejarnos tuve lástima, cerré bien la puerta de entrada y tiré la llave a la alcantarilla. No fuese que a algún pobre diablo se le ocurriera robar y se metiera en la casa, a esa hora y con la casa tomada” (Cortázar 20). The act of shutting the entrance door –as a final act of leaving the house and not letting anyone else get inside, not even thieves- highlights the importance of the door and the sense of loss of space and ownership. However, crossing the threshold also represents, in this second case, a certain freedom for this couple (the embrace of the waist of the sister suggests the idea). The title of this story is really ambiguous because it says that the house has been taken, but it does not say by whom or what.

By recalling Chevalier’s explanation of the symbol of the door, in both stories the door represents a significant change in the state of the characters. In the first case, solving the mystery (in spite of the wound) means an improvement in the financial life of Phil, as well as gaining the respect of his family and his family-in-law. “The Open Door” ends when the door is finally closed and the mystery of the murder is solved. In Cortázar’s story, the door is closed at the end too, but the mystery –for the reader- has just opened: who takes the house? For the characters, closing the door means getting rid of the family tradition and the usual activities, such as reading and weaving. Moreover, closing the door means opening a new life.

### **What to expect? It depends on the character**

Both texts in the analysis depict very different characters. Riddell’s story shows a 22 year-old boy who is willing to solve the mystery. He is described as an adventurous risk-taker. When he is talking to Lord Ladlow, this character rapidly recognizes this quality in Theophilus. Lord Ladlow says “If you are really not timid, stay on” (Riddell 50), and Phil stood there up to the end. Opposite to this enthusiastic character, Cortázar’s couple is extremely different. First, they are older: “Entramos en los cuarenta años con la inexpresada idea de que el nuestro, simple y silencioso matrimonio de hermanos, era necesaria clausura de la genealogía asentada por los bisabuelos en nuestra casa” (Cortázar 12). Second, they do not look for an explanation for the sounds; in fact, they take this “shrinking” of the house as a normal situation that they do not question. This shows the apathetic character of this couple and the contrast to Theophilus.

In addition, it is interesting to mention the relation to money and the family in both stories. Riddell’s protagonist is very young and vigorous. He hates his office job; when he sees the opportunity of the sovereigns, he does not hesitate to take on the risk. Therefore, the solution to the mystery is shown at the end of the story. Theophilus’s family has financial problems:

My father owned a small property in the country, but owing to the failure of some bank, I never could understand what bank, it had to be mortgaged;

then the interest was not paid, and the mortgages foreclosed, and we had nothing left save the half-pay of a major [...] we were always trying to do something quite beyond our means, and consequently debts accumulated, and creditors ruled us with rods of iron. (Riddell 30)

This easy-money opportunity was a tempting offer for him. At the end of the story, he marries Patty and owns a farm. Cortázar's couple is very different. Their money problem is solved: "todos los meses llegaba la plata de los campos y el dinero aumentaba" (Cortázar 13). Therefore, they do not need to worry about their financial situation. However, inheriting the house also seems to be a heavy burden. They liked the house because "guardaba los recuerdos de nuestros bisabuelos, el abuelo paterno, nuestros padres y toda la infancia" (Cortázar 11). Nevertheless, it is precisely these memories that weigh heavily on the couple; living there means not living their own life: "a veces llegamos a creer que era ella [la casa] la que no nos dejó casarnos. Irene rechazó dos pretendientes sin mayor motivo, a mí se me murió María Esther antes que llegáramos a comprometernos" (Cortázar 12). Taking care of the house, whether cleaning it or trying to preserve its memories and legacy, demands forgetting the outside world. Leaving the house actually presents the possibility of having a new life, free from their family's heavy weight. This is symbolized in the "quince mil pesos en el armario del dormitorio" (Cortázar 19) left by the protagonist in the house: a new life without the family support will start. In contrast to Theophilus who looks how to solve the mystery behind the haunting, this couple does not fight the intruders and does not solve the enigma. In fact, they are so passive that they leave the house, but the reader never finds out who invaded the home or what happened to the characters after their departure.

### **Another curious coincidence previous to the end**

Despite all the mentioned differences, both stories have something in common: the use of the senses in order to solve the mystery. In Riddell's story, the sense of the smell is extremely important. When Theophilus first entered the house, he smelled "the scent of the summer odours, the smell of the earth" (Riddell 45). Almost at the end, previous to the idea of how to solve the mystery, he smelled the fruit: "it had all the same faint odour" (Riddell 54). Instead of scent, Cortázar's story focuses on sound: "el sonido venía impreciso y sordo, como un volcarse de silla sobre la alfombra o un ahogado susurro de conversación. También lo oí, al mismo tiempo o un segundo después, en el fondo del pasillo que traía desde aquellas piezas hasta la puerta" (Cortázar 15). Again, noise is the signal to leave the house: "Los ruidos se oían más fuerte pero siempre sordos, a espaldas nuestras" (Cortázar 19). So, in the construction of the stories, the reader's senses are stimulated in order to provide these fantastic stories with a realistic quality.

## Final words

Todorov's theory of the fantastic helps to explain how in both stories uncertainty irrupts and interferes with the regular development of daily life. Riddell's story proposes a solution: the "supposed" ghost that is presented in the first paragraph of the story ends up being as greedy and real as any other human being; however, the appearance of the uplifted hand and the awful figure is not solved at the end, suggesting the ongoing presence of the supernatural. Cortázar's story does not end with a solution. The couple has the opportunity to live a life, but the reader does not experience a sense of closure; in fact, the door for interpretation opens when this couple exits the house. In both cases, an active reader -as Todorov's theory explained- is necessary. This reader must accept entering a dimension of uncertainty, along with the characters, in order to read and experience the story. Finally, both stories show that crossing the threshold suppose a change of state. "The Open Door", as its title suggests, opens an improvement in Theophilus' life. "La casa tomada" forces this couple to leave this house and to start a new life. However, the main difference in these haunted houses remains in the chances of the reader to solve the mystery.

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