

04

The fantasy of invulnerability in Rexina Vega's short story “A catedrática”

Aránzazu Calderón Puerta
Università di Torino

Abstract_ My objective in this work is to reflect on the resources that Galician author Rexina Vega employs in her story "A catedrática" to question the naturalised social order. Among others, the updating of a classic motif of the fantastic—metamorphosis— and the use of humour as a critical tool stand out. In the anthology *Las mil caras del monstruo*, Ana Casas defines this fantastic entity as "an impossible being that creates unease in the reader, not only because of its physical appearance but, above all, because of its psychological aspect" (2018). Based on this idea, I will focus in these pages on how monstrosity is combined with the use of humour to highlight the ideology that permeates daily life, in this specific case, in the academic world. To this end, I will combine theoretical approaches from non mimetic fiction studies, psychology, philosophy and a gender perspective. The fantastic monster, traditionally considered an entity linked to deviation from the norm in Vega's short story becomes a symbolic representation of normativity.

Keywords_ humour; literature of the uncanny; contemporary Galician short story; gender; Rexina Vega.

Contents_ 1. Introduction. Ideology and humour in the uncanny short stories by Galician women writers today. 2. The fantasy of invulnerability. 3. The integrated psychopath: capitalism and gender. 4. The functional use of other people. 5. The (critical) use of humour. 6. Conclusion. Acknowledgements. References.

A fantasía da invulnerabilidade no relato de Rexina Vega "A catedrática"

Resumo_ O noso obxectivo neste traballo é reflexionar sobre os recursos que a autora galega Rexina Vega emprega no seu relato "A catedrática" para problematizar a orde social naturalizada. Destacan, entre outros, a actualización dun motivo clásico do fantástico –a metamorfose– e o uso do humor como ferramenta crítica. Na antoloxía *Las mil caras del monstruo*, Ana Casas define esta entidade fantástica como "un ser imposible que xera inquietude no lector, non só pola súa aparencia física senón, sobre todo, pola súa vertente psicolóxica" (2018). Partindo desta idea, centrareime nestas páxinas en como a monstruosidade se combina co uso do humor para destacar a ideoloxía que impregna a vida cotiá, neste caso concreto, no ámbito académico. Para iso, combinarei enfoques teóricos procedentes dos estudos fantásticos, psicoloxía, filosofía e da perspectiva de xénero. O monstro fantástico, que tradicionalmente se considera unha entidade ligada á anomalía con respecto á norma, no caso que nos ocupa supón precisamente a súa representación simbólica.

Palabras chave_ humor; literatura do insólito; conto galego contemporáneo; xénero; Rexina Vega.

Sumario_ 1. Introducción. Ideoloxía e humor nos contos insólitos de escritoras galegas actuais. 2. A fantasía da invulnerabilidade. 3. O/A psicópata integrado/a: capitalismo e xénero. 4. O uso funcional do outro. 5. O uso (crítico) do humor. 6. Conclusión. Agradecementos. Referencias bibliográficas.

Humour is the "great questioner of immutable truths, of homogeneous thought, all of them so dangerous for freedom"

(Otxoa in Díaz Enamorado, 2014: 34)¹

1.

Introduction. Ideology and humour in the uncanny short stories by contemporary Galician women writers

The research work and activities carried out in recent years by the two main Spanish research groups on non-mimetic literature² show that we have been living for some time now a moment of creative explosion on the part of women writers on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean as far as "literature of the uncanny" in Spanish is concerned. For the purposes of this essay, I understand by "narratives of the uncanny" (narrativas de lo insólito)³ the non-realistic prose that encompasses such different modalities as fantastic literature, gothic literature, horror or science fiction, as well as the slippage and mutual contamination so frequent today between these sub-genres⁴.

Thanks to the research carried out by the two aforementioned academic groups and a wide body of scholarship on literature of the uncanny more generally, the potential of non-mimetic literature to highlight the ideological character of everyday life is now undeniable, despite the fact that non-realist aesthetics have been discredited for decades in the peninsular philological sphere for their (pre)supposedly poor aesthetic quality or for being (allegedly) oriented towards evasion of everyday problems (Gregori, 2015). Although their political potential has been amply demonstrated, not all unusual texts question hegemonic ideology, as Rosemary Jackson reminds us with regard to fantastic literature. In fact, some works reproduce this ideology. In her opinion, the fantastic only works in a subversive way when it disturbs the reader (Jackson, 1981: 23).

I will begin by defining the concept of "ideology" and how I propose its relation to the narrative of the uncanny. Although there are many concepts of ideology, for the purposes of this essay I will focus on the proposal put forward by Terry Eagleton, that is I understand ideology as the ways in which what we say and believe is connected to the power structure or power relations in the society in which we live (1998: 13). As Alfons Gregori (2015) has pointed out, literary texts critical of hegemonic ideology often include several significant layers, a fact linked to their frequent use to irony. They thus establish a network of meanings in which their value lies.

My aim in this essay is to reflect on the resources that the Galician author Rexina Vega uses in her short story "A catedrática" to problematise the naturalised social order. Particularly noteworthy are the updating of a classic motif of the fantastic - the metamorphosis - and the use of humour as a critical tool. In the anthology *Las mil caras del monstruo* Ana Casas defines this fantastic entity as an "impossible being that generates unease in the reader, not only because of its physical appearance but, above all, because of its psychological aspect" (2018). Starting from this idea, I will focus on how monstrosity is combined with the use of humour to highlight

1 All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

2 The Grupo de Estudios sobre lo Fantástico of the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (<http://www.lofantastico.com/>) and the Grupo de Estudios literarios y comparados de lo insólito y perspectivas de género of the Universidad de León (<https://geig.unileon.es/>).

3 A term widely used among critics specialising in non-mimetic literature (see, for example, the introduction to the anthology by López-Pellisa and Ruíz Garzón, 2019; the collective volumes Álvarez y Abello, 2015 and Álvarez Méndez, 2023 or the article by Boccuti, 2020).

4 Literary genres such as fantasy or magical realism, whose diegetic worlds are not governed by the rules of what we understand as 'real', would fall outside this conceptual umbrella of 'narratives of the uncanny' (see Roas, 2011).

the ideology that permeates everyday life, in this specific case the academic sphere. To this end, I will combine theoretical approaches from non mimetic literature studies, psychology, philosophy and the gender studies perspective.

My starting hypothesis is that the fantastic short story under analysis seeks to disturb the reader and at the same time amuse in order to sharpen our unease but also critical gaze, and it does so by placing at the centre of the plot an abject body that surprises but which, above all, makes us ask new questions about the social, cultural and political mechanisms of power of which we are all victims and reproducers at the same time.

Despite the importance of the short story as genre in the construction of the literary system in Galicia (Núñez Sabarís, 2023: 97), in contrast to the substantial production in Spanish and Catalan, there have been very few publications of non-mimetic stories in the Galician language in the last decade. In these texts it is often possible to find contaminations or radical metamorphoses of the female body in a clear turn towards the animal, the vegetable or the technological. Some examples are short stories by Emma Pedreira⁵ or Lara Dopazo Ruibal⁶ or in the short fiction analysed and interpreted here, "A catedrática" by Rexina Vega⁷. As in Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis", in many of these stories the physical transformation or the abject body of the female protagonist makes visible the naturalised power relations implicit in institutions such as family, university or marriage, as well as the violence linked to them.

2.

The fantasy of invulnerability

Rexina Rodríguez Vega is a writer, translator, literary critic and researcher in Galician literary studies⁸. In the 1990s she taught at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, and later became a lecturer in the Department of Spanish at the Universidade de Vigo. I am particularly interested in mentioning her facet as a teacher and researcher, biographical aspects that are thematised in the literary text under study, as we shall see.

The short story "A catedrática" begins with a magpie flying over a university campus in search of food. Initially, the narrative perspective focuses on the bird, but when it lands on a window sill, the focus moves to the person inside the office: the professor who gives the text its title. From that moment on, the internal focus gives us access to the way of thinking of this character.

From the very beginning, however, the narrative perspective is shown to be strongly ironic, as it reproduces with a clear distance the character's naturalisation of her own vile acts through an indirect discourse that we witness as readers. In this way, her particular way of understanding the world becomes visible:

«Mérito e capacidade», repítese, «mérito e capacidade». A vella catedrática abre as mans, revisa a súa manicura, o puído perfecto das unllas, a superficie lisa e brillante das súas *garras* dálle acougo, pero axiña repara nas manchas [...]. As mans, as súas mans dinlle que é xa vella, que xa non serve, que o seu mérito e capacidade declina [...]. *E iso, o declive, o devalar, a desaparición é algo que ela non pode asumir.* (Vega, 2022a: 426, emphasis my own)

5 Short stories such as "Follas", "Catwoman" and "A muller araña" in *Corazón e demais tripas* (Santiago de Compostela: Edicións Positivas, 2016) or "Ese lunar" in *Entre donas* (A Coruña: Baía Edicións, 2020).

6 *O axolotl e outros contos de bestas e auga* (Vigo: Galaxia, 2020) or *Contos gringos* (Vigo: Galaxia, 2024).

7 Included in *Fisterra: relato curto en Galicia*.

8 There are hardly any critical studies on Rexina Vega's literary work, and none specifically on the story analysed in this essay.

As we see already in this first fragment, the fantasy of invulnerability on the part of someone incapable of admitting the inevitable decadence that comes with the passing of the years is evident from the outset. This lack of acceptance of one's own limits is directly linked to a hyperbolically egocentric view of the world, accompanied by a grandiose sense of self-worth: "Como me van facer isto a min, a min, que son a máis preclara, a máis lista deste fato de incompetentes, nesta facultade de mediocres!" (Vega, 2022a: 427). The psychological profile of the character will become more concrete through her inner monologue throughout the story. This discourse activates intertextual and contextual irony as a distancing resource by means of a very successful "degree of distance of the women authors from the contents and social discourses that they "quote", becoming ventriloquists of other people's discourses" (Boccuti, 2020: 165)⁹.

However, it is not only the main character's words that define her. From the very first pages, we can also see that one of the aesthetic and humorous resources to which the author resorts is *animalisation*¹⁰ in a series of allusions to non-anthropological features scattered throughout the text whose presence prepares the reader for the final transformation of the protagonist into a giant insect, in the purest Kafkaesque style¹¹. A large insect that will be forcibly evicted from her office - which she steadfastly refuses to leave, despite her official retirement - thanks to the intervention of two security guards.

The female protagonist personalises to a large extent those morally invertebrate subjects on whom the social diagnosis Lola López Mondéjar¹² focuses in her essay *Invulnerables e invertebrados. Mutaciones antropológicas del sujeto contemporáneo*:

Each society produces a type of subjectivity that is better adapted than others to the regime of truth that defines it. Through complex mechanisms of socialisation, the majority of the individuals who make it up will construct themselves by identifying with the hegemonic identity proposed by each historical moment; an identity that will be the most in tune with and the most useful to the prevailing system of production. (López Mondéjar, 2022: 7)

The protagonist of this short story identifies fully and seamlessly with a system that responds to hyper-productive logics that, as Remedios Zafra (2025) reminds us, run the risk of normalising and alienating the workers. In line with this economic and cultural trend, late modernity tends to produce an individualistic and supposedly autonomous subjectivity, which takes as its model the invulnerability of youth (López Mondéjar, 2022: 35). A subject that denies all fragility, although in this case the character at the centre of the plot does not focus on the neoliberal imperative of individual happiness (Ahmed, 2010), but on professional success and the pleasure linked to the exercise –sadistic, admittedly– of power.

3.

The integrated psychopath: capitalism and gender

This is an example of the (joyful) reproduction of relations of domination and submission, in this case in the workplace, since the interpersonal sphere of the female professor –as it is recreated– is limited to the establishment of relations based on power and control:

9 The ideology in Eagleton's conception is thus captured in the characters' speeches.

10 An example of this is the claws in the fragment cited above.

11 Undoubtedly, a comparative study with Franz Kafka's short novel would be of great interest, but this would exceed the objectives of this essay and the space available for it. However, it is essential to mention this seminal work of European fantastic literature as a co-text.

12 The author is a psychoanalyst, clinical psychologist and author of short stories, novels and essays.

Ela, a man dura, a voz firme, o saber certo. Sen ela quen dará as labazadas que precisan todos eses maricallos e esas putas finas que a rodean, carentes de méritos e capacidade ningunha? Éntralle unha arcada de noxo, a miseria intelectual que a envolve e que sempre desprezou desta vez estalle gañando a partida. Debería telos suspendidos a todos. Ela, como unha Xoana de Arco coa espada flamíxera do seu boli vermello, calcando con forza o algarismo que certifica a ineptitude. Recoñece que poucas cousas hai no mundo que lle dean máis pracer que ese xesto de poder. Xebrar o gran palla, a mazá podre no cesto. Ela sabe, máis traballadora e máis lista ca ninguén (Vega, 2022a: 427, underline mine)

In the quoted fragment we can observe how a series of *traits characteristic of psychopathy* (Dujo López & Horcajo Gil, 2017) come together in the character: to the already mentioned egocentric vision and grandiose sense of self-worth is added a hostile and threatening perception of the people around her¹³. She absolutely despises everyone¹⁴, and only sees enemies –potential and real– in her surroundings. The exception to this rule are those who –like her– occupy positions of power, who only interest her as allies: “Non, non a van parar, ca!, ela sabe e ten amigos aínda máis poderosos ca ela. Sempre soubo rodearse dos mellores” (Vega, 2022a: 429).

The aging professor cannot conceive of any other way of interacting with others than hierarchically, by imposing her will, manipulating and instrumentalising those around her. This has to do with the fact that in the affective sphere, the psychopath has, on the one hand, low conditioning to punishment –he/she does not react to warnings and is often extremely risky in his/her actions– and, on the other hand, presents serious dysfunctions in the processing of emotional information (Dujo López & Horcajo Gil, 2017).

These traits are becoming so prevalent nowadays that some experts even hypothesise that it is possible to consider a pandemic of psychopathy in Western societies (Jáuregui Balenciaga, 2008), which could be explained with the hypothesis that there is a tendency for psychopathic values to prevail in contexts of neoliberalism. Why is this so? Because psychopaths are the individuals who are best suited to capitalism, the ones who succeed: “Their cunning and lack of scruples and morals help them to rise in their professions; being a psychopath has become an evolutionary advantage” (López Mondéjar, 225). A personality that should incite widespread societal rejection turns out, instead, to combine traits often valued in organisations, companies and institutions, which favours the psychopath’s professional success and his/her advancement to decision-making positions, as long as he or she is not unmasked.

This is exacerbated by the gender dimension in Vega's literary story. Here we find the adoption by the female protagonist of *patriarchal values* of domination, that is, identification with the values of competitiveness, autonomy, efficiency and rationality that in the binary socialisation of gender roles were traditionally considered as *masculine*¹⁵ (López Mondéjar, 230): “Ela, como a dona absoluta, como a señora feudal que só a morte pode dobregar, reclama a fidelidade do [sic] servos, a súa completa submisión, recórdalles que sen ela non son nada” (Vega, 2022a: 429-430)¹⁶. So not only does the character fail to practise feminist sisterhood, she also reproduces patriarchal violence.

13 “Resentment is a hallmark of the integrated psychopath, because it is an emotion that affects his/her ego, i.e. it is the product of his/her wounded narcissism. Resentment implies contempt for the offender” (Garrido 2024: 76).

14 This phenomenon is emphasised several times throughout the text.

15 Halberstam’s works on Female Masculinity focus on masculine women who have challenged and subverted gender norms, which is precisely the opposite of what happens with the protagonist of the short story analysed.

16 We can therefore say that even if the protagonist is not a positive feminine character, the story makes a feminist statement, which, as Carmen Rodríguez reminds us, can serve to promote “the fracturing of hegemonic discourse [...] by subverting archetypes and circumstances that are deeply entrenched in the social fabric [and] blurring categorical assertions” (Rodríguez Campo, p. 490, in press).

4.

The functional use of others

Ela é un *animal académico, unha femia alfa, unha abella raíña rodeada de obreiras* que naceron para ser mandadas, esfoladas ou engulidas polo seu *poder*. Sen ela, que non se recorda noutro lugar que na aula ou no despacho, sempre atenta a competir, a esforzarse pola décima máis na cualificación, polo gramo máis de poder, esta colmea desfarase. (Vega, 2022a: 427, underlined mine)

This new animalisation of the character¹⁷ is linked in this case to the parallelism between the functioning of the university and that of a honeycomb. Vega chooses a very specific term in Galician ("abella raíña") instead of the alternative ("abella mestra"), and she does so consciously, as she presents an ironic example of the syndrome of the same name. As is well known, the so-called "queen bee syndrome" refers to female leadership figures who occupy high positions thanks to having integrated well among powerful men, thus avoiding the so-called glass ceiling. These are women who attribute their professional success to their own merits and not to the paternalistic system whose mechanisms they take advantage of. They often become reproducers of these mechanisms discriminating women¹⁸. According to a study conducted in Spain, the "queen bee" sustains task-centred leadership, is goal-oriented in her work and attributes success to herself (García-Velasco Rubio, 2013). This compounds the cumulative logics of the technocapitalist system which –as Remedios Zafra reminds us– promote dynamics of acceleration and excess in the spheres linked to culture that can lead to alienation in many cultural agents, provoking anxiety, apathy and even detachment from the work they carry out. In the cultural sphere, which is strongly feminised¹⁹, more and more value is placed on production and quantity - increasing pace and visibility in professional work mediated by technology - to the detriment of quality and the pleasure of creating (Zafra, 2025).

In Zafra's work, she has also highlighted the current tendency to instrumentalise the enthusiasm of those working in the cultural sphere (Zafra, 2017), especially those in precarious situations. They are thus condemned to endure the abuse of superiors, on whom their professional advancement depends to a large extent. We see this articulated in the short story:

Rosario é profesora titular. Pasou moitos anos á espera. Cada mañá recollía a catedrática na súa casa para traela á universidade. Logo preparáballe un café. Facíalle fotocopias. Escribía artigos sobre conectores que a catedrática tamén firmaba [...] Rosario é dócil e ten medo. Iso gústalle á catedrática. Por iso, cando por fin saíu a súa praza, a catedrática levantou a [sic] polgar cara arriba. Non sen antes advertirla de que, en realidade, era unha imbécil. Por iso Rosario séntese unha imbécil, aínda que a praza sexa xa súa. (Vega, 2022a: 430)

In the same way, all the characters in the plot pay a price for their subordinate relationship to the abuser. They are all victims of a structural imbalance of power. This includes Clara, who "tivo que someterse á catedrática para sacar a súa praza. Tivo que facer concesións. Cousas que no lle pareceron divertidas. [...] Oda a catedrática. Agora, que xa ten a súa praza, borraría certos episodios do seu pasado" (Vega, 2022a: 432).

17 Animality is a characteristic resource in Rexina Vega's other literary works, as for example in the novel *Ninguén dorme* (2019) (see Garrido González "Narración extrema en *Ninguén Dorme* (2019) de Rexina Vega. O corpo da paria, o empoderamento e a violencia feminina", *Madrygal* 2020 23: 181-197).

18 Added to this is the fact that the psychopath is the most destructive leader (Garrido, 2024).

19 Zafra (2017) underlines the feminisation of this kind of work, linking precarious conditions to gender.

As Lola López Mondéjar observes, nowadays many individuals in Spain, deficiently subjectivised²⁰, make use of the other as an object. A functional use characteristic of patriarchal men subordinating women, and which today seems to extend without gender distinction, as "both [women and men] develop an imaginary narcissism²¹ that sustains an apparently seamless identity" (López Mondéjar, 2022: 219) or ethical doubts about one's own behaviour, as in the attitude of the aging professor:

Só es cuestión de atopar o flanco débil, o lugar por onde rompe, ela sabe, abofé que sabe diso, é una experta en furar e desfacer, toda a vida nos xulgados, contra todos, contra calquera. É por iso mesmo, por esa facultade litigante pola que lle teñen respecto, pola que lle teñen medo. (Vega, 2022a: 428).

Attacking, destroying, fighting: the protagonist seems to feed exclusively on the opportunities for violence that her status allows her. Vicente Garrido, a specialist in this type of pathology, states: "The psychopath has a very high self-esteem, a great narcissism, an enormous egocentrism and an omniscient feeling that everything is allowed" (2016: 38). His or her essential motivation is dominance, power, and if he or she manages to obtain a position that involves decision-making, tragedy awaits: they can dismember an entire team or bring a company to ruin (Garrido, 2024: 13, 136)²². In Vega's story this situation is illustrated in the image of the corridor of the university department, described as of "unha intensa cor amarela, a cor da ira, da envexa, dos celos, da traizón, da angustia, da ansiedade, da hipocrísia e do cinismo. Como o escenario dunha guerra, [...] este corredor departamental [...] segue a proxectar o sufrimento daqueles que o percorreron" (Vega, 2022a: 429).

5.

The (critical) use of humour²³

For this precise social portrait of a pathological profile, Vega masterfully combines two disruptive elements: fantastic literature and humour. As Anna Boccuti points out, the two facets

coincide [...] in the attempt to critique and redefine the real, understood as a set of cultural, social and moral norms that they both undermine through an unstable discourse: they incorporate the *doxa* in force in a given historical context and then disrupt it, thus revealing its inconsistency and the inconsistency of the order on which it is based. (Boccuti, 2018: 11)

The aim of this section is to analyse some of the humorous narrative elements present in the short story and the way in which they incorporate and problematise the *doxa*.

5. 1. As has already been pointed out by critics on several occasions (e.g. Roas, 2022: 21; Calderón Puerta, 2022), a frequent resource in contemporary "literature of the uncanny" is the *intensification of the everyday life*, a characteristic of the postmodern fantastic according to David Roas (2011). Indeed, in many of the contemporary Spanish-language texts in this genre, the inexplicable presence of the supernatural occurs in a context that is emphasised as mundane and anodyne, which intensifies the readers' amusement.

20 In Psychology, this concept refers to a person's inability to reflect on her/himself in an abstract way (López Mondéjar, 2022).

21 I understand that the authors mentioned here are referring to narcissism in the general sense of the term as it is commonly used in everyday language, not to the personality disorder that causes so much suffering in many psychotherapy patients.

22 With the consequent pleasure in precarious work of "finally finishing" (at the cost of "doing it any old way") as opposed to the pleasure of the process and the meaning of non-precarious creative/cultural work (Zafra, 2025).

23 Secondary school students read an excerpt from "A catedrática" during the event entitled "O pracer, a ledicia e a risa das mulleres" dedicated to women writers at the National Library of Spain in 2023. <https://www.edu.xunta.gal/biblioteca/blog/files/Textos%20D%C3%ADa%20das%20Escritoras.pdf>

Similarly, the plot of Vega's story is set on the university campus, a space easily recognisable to those who have frequented classrooms as students or are engaged in an academic career. The latter is traditionally considered in Western societies as a respected, solemn profession, exclusive to a cultured and therefore supposedly more sensitive elite. Nothing could be further from the truth: in "A catedrática" a very discouraging human panorama emerges. The Spanish academic world is coded in this short story as a strongly hierarchical system –largely inherited from Francoism– of a feudal nature, linked to a refined and bourgeois *status quo* (the female protagonist is presented as a "highly dignified teacher", with attributes such as stockings, a luxurious pearl necklace, expensive glasses, manicured nails...), whose dark side is a hostile environment, saturated with abusive relationships (including sexual abuse), mistreatment and exploitation of those who are particularly vulnerable or occupy the most unstable positions: only "tras un longo historial de humillacións" younger colleagues can aspire to the "ceo da praza fixa" (Vega, 2022a: 429). In the words of Rexina Vega herself, "[l]ike the army and the church, universities provide the conditions necessary for the systematic abuse of power" (Vega, 2022b: 6)²⁴. The story recounts the white-collar violence that prevails in an institution that tends to facilitate or overlook²⁵ it. It parodies not only the academic sphere itself, but also an easily recognisable *order of things* –that is, the values imposed by the neoliberal system– which, as already pointed out, tends to produce a certain type of subjectivity. As López Mondéjar (2022: 42) explains, individuals who identify with these values often develop symbiotic relationships with people and institutions²⁶. Thus, in the example at hand, the protagonist lives exclusively for her work, incapable of a personal life that goes beyond it, also perpetuated by the neoliberal academy: "non se recorda noutro lugar que na aula ou no despacho" (Vega, 2022a: 427).

This parody of university life is also based on *a mockery of the importance of research*, the foundation of the myth of knowledge and science in Western culture since the Renaissance. For example, it is claimed that one of the protagonist's colleagues is "especialista en conectores. Ela aínda non sabe ben o que é un «conector». [...] Malia non ter unha idea moi clara, mataría por un conector. É o seu campo de especialidade" (Vega, 2022a: 429). This ridicules academic staff by once again characterising them as egocentric.

5. 2. Another literary device is the *change in narrative perspective*, which allows the reader to move from the initial flight of the magpie to the perspective of the professor, and then visit each of the offices in the department one by one. This allows the readers to observe the established working relationships "from the outside", as well as the different reactions of colleagues to the announced eviction of the person occupying the highest position in the academic hierarchy. The contrast between the attitudes of the characters –who have *satirical names* and represent social types– but above all the way they are presented, is key to shaping the ironic tone of the text as a whole: a textual structure²⁷ consisting of capturing the initial portrait of a person with a specific profession and characteristics, and then reproducing it as part of a gallery of different characters, with approximately the same number of sentences and traits.

a) Rosario da Aurora, who the professor despises: "Rosario é dócil e ten medo. Iso gústalle á catedrática" (Vega, 2022a: 429);

b) Manuel Cabezón, faithful to the aging lady because "aínda non é profesor titular. [...] Por iso se ofrece [sic] á catedrática, que o despreza, para ser violento por ela" (Vega, 2022a: 431);

24 In this article in *Tempos Novos* magazine, the writer and researcher recalls the cases of abuse she witnessed during her studies.

25 In fact, the integrated psychopath only thrives if he/she has sufficient support in his/her work environment or from the authorities themselves (Garrido, 2024: 141). Furthermore, greater power leads to greater impunity.

26 For example, jihadist fanaticism or the relationship between an abuser and his wife.

27 According to the writer herself in a private email.

c) Xulio César, phonetics expert and perpetrator of sexual abuse: "Os fonemas si, sábeo todo dos fonemas. É o seu campo de especialidade. Por iso non dubida en ensinar as súas alumnas. Gústalle moito as súas alumnas. Todas. Máis, as máis débiles. Aquela nas que detecta medo" (Vega, 2022a: 431-432). He is the main enemy of the retiring professor, and is therefore delighted that she is leaving, as he will finally be able to "rule on his own".

d) Clara Demente, who, as an exception to the rule, does not take her work too seriously: "Non mataría pola semántica, o seu campo de especialidade" (Vega, 2022a: 432). She had to submit herself to the female professor to acquire her position, but was never afraid of her. In fact, she hates the aging lady.

The working environment recreated in this short story shows the precarious situation referred to by Zafra in her reflections: the evolutionary monitoring of so-called "scientific production"²⁸, technologically mediated identity metrics (continuous individual evaluation of publications to determine "research excellence"²⁹) and the concatenation of competitions with colleagues as rivals (Zafra, 2025). The consequence for those at the bottom of the academic pyramid is, in most cases, forced submission to individuals in power in order to try to escape the spiral of extreme precariousness as quickly as possible³⁰. Yet forcing others into submission ultimately comes at a price for those who exercise such (ab)use of power: in the fictional ending, all of the professor's colleagues abandon her in her moment of decline, in a "corredor escuro e cheo de portas tras as [sic] que se agochan os membros do seu querido departamento" (Vega, 2022a: 434). After her unexpected transformation, none of them will dare to come forward and defend her.

In short, the story seems to emphasise suffering as part of academic meritocracy, replicating the attitudes and mechanisms of the knowledge production machine, which generates bodies exhausted by capitalism.

5. 3. The last of the humorous devices I will mention is the *link* –presented in an ironic tone– *between language and power*, beginning with the protagonist's speech, who believes her own version of reality, which the reader perceives as completely distorted. Secondly, we find a mockery of legal language –the "serious language" *par excellence*– which during the woman's metamorphosis is progressively eroded until it becomes completely dehumanised (Vega, 2022a: 433-434). Furthermore, the protagonist's final transformation into a giant insect is linked to her loss of human language –her main weapon of attack– in a very close intertextual relationship with Kafka's short novel³¹: "Ela non pode contestar, apenas emitir un chío, un siseo inarticulado. Como é que non pode maldicir nin ameazar?" (Vega, 2022a: 434). Finally, in its circular structure, the story closes with the onomatopoeic animal sounds of the magpie devouring the insect at the beginning of the story, in a clear gesture of poetic justice, as if responding to the law of counterbalance (ley del contrapaso).

28 The name itself refers to the articulation of knowledge and understanding in economic terms.

29 It is rarely openly acknowledged that excellence is actually a privilege enjoyed by those who have the material conditions that allow them to combine teaching, research, administrative and care tasks. This became evident in Spain in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of gender inequalities.

30 In addition to the extreme vulnerability that characterises (and increasingly so) the early stages of an academic career, there is also (as Zafra points out) an excessive workload as a mechanism for social demobilisation.

31 Especially when it comes to the transformation process.

6.

Conclusion

The fantastic monster, traditionally considered an entity linked to deviation from the norm, in this case is simply a symbolic representation of that norm. The abject creature into which the protagonist is transformed arouses the reader's unease not so much because of her disgusting appearance, but above all because of her psychological profile. Some academic critics tend to consider that monsters and the fantastic seek to highlight the abnormality that characterises our everyday lives and which the force of the hegemonic tends to cover up (Álvarez Méndez, 2022; Rodríguez Campos, in press). However, in Vega's story, we find the opposite mechanism at work: both fantastic literature and humour reveal *the monstrosity of our normality*. Understanding the dynamics and motivations of this creature as an exemplary articulation of dominant values is exactly what makes it ominous. It thus becomes a useful figure for questioning the patterns with which we have normalised social experience (Álvarez Méndez, 2022: 148)³², but *not as an anomaly*.

This metamorphosis from human to animal can be interpreted, following the thinking of Mariola Pietrak (2025), as a way of rethinking of the cruel subject not as a "pathology" –that is, a deviation from the humanist model– but precisely as a product of such a conception of subjectivity, which *emerges* in an abject corporeality. A caricature of the hegemonic subject who, in our contemporary world, articulates and conceives of her/himself as egocentric, invulnerable, hyperproductive and unscrupulous, whose discourse is parodied thanks to the distance created by humour³³. Thus, the monstrosity presented in an ironic tone would fit in with the reflections of Natalia Álvarez Méndez, who states: "The mechanisms of humour combined with monsters lead to the destabilisation of dominant discourses, the liberation of the repressed, a critical reading of reality and the fracturing of the hierarchies with which we have ordered the world" (Álvarez Méndez, 2023: 87).

The combination of animality and black humour³⁴ that Vega employs undoubtedly serves to create a sense of strangeness in the reader. The animal perspective can even be read from a post-humanist point of view, that is, with the intention of decentring the human experience and breaking down hierarchies through the grotesque. The protagonist is not presented as a victim in the story, but rather as an oppressor and reproducer of systemic violence. However, the plot begins just as the value system on which her identity is based begins to crack. This breakdown begins precisely at the physical level: from her ageing hands to an inevitable transformation.

Among the many interpretations inspired by Kafka's short novel, one of the most popular has been to read the protagonist's metamorphosis as a symbol of otherness condemned by social norms. Indeed, following his physical transformation, Gregor Samsa finds it impossible to continue the routine that had been established and normalised up to that point. He therefore ceases to be capable of responding to the imperative of production. As a result, the son/brother is rejected not only because of his abject appearance, but above all for economic reasons: he goes from being the economic breadwinner of the family to being another mouth to feed. The productive social norm emerges when the body cannot respond to the economic imperative: the violence inherent in the capitalist system then becomes visible.

32 In the case at hand, we would be dealing with a monster produced by the system, the result of the hybridisation between *natural monstrous figures* (such as the serial killer, the stalker, etc.) and metamorphosis, a *universal topical monster*, according to the categories proposed by Carmen Rodríguez Campos (in press).

33 For Anna Boccuti, feminist irony often consists of "a critical and generally pejorative assessment of the parodied discourse" (Boccuti 2020: 60).

34 Black humour often creates "a lucid and critical image of human evil" (Greco 2017: 144).

In Rexina Vega's literary text, in contrast, the transformation of the protagonist represents, in my view, a literal embodiment of this dark side of the prevailing system. In other words, it symbolises the repulsiveness of a subjectivity resulting from the assimilation of a certain paradigm of values. Indeed, the female professor embodies what is usually considered a "successful subject" and, at the same time, a very bad person³⁵. It is striking that, unlike in Kafka's work, the transformation takes place in the final pages and not in the first lines of the text. Perhaps this is because the fictional plot seeks to portray the process and consequences of the character's professional and economic "achievements". Among other things, the lack of reaction and solidarity of her colleagues in the face of the professor's expulsion. This can be interpreted as evidence of the lack of ties between the professor and her colleagues, and/or their disinterest once the person leaves a position of power.

In conclusion, the literature of the uncanny should be considered not only a particular aesthetic expression, but also a cultural practice with great potential for gathering different social and political discourses, taking the pulse of the historical moment in which it is inscribed, especially in its combination with irony, a semantic and pragmatic trope, *linked both to the intertextual dimension and to the contextualised production and reception of texts*, that is, to their "intentionality" (Hutcheon, 2000: 55). Indeed, as I have attempted to demonstrate, "A catedrática" must be decoded not only on the basis of an intertextual reading with Franz Kafka's short novel, but above all in the current socio-economic context in Spain. This is yet another example of how, as Pietrak (2025) points out, certain cultural products expose the symbolic order to reveal horror as a custom.

35 In Spanish, there is an expression, "ser un mal bicho", which refers to someone who is really bad. Vega's story seems to be a literal embodiment of this expression.

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