

ELEMENTS OF THE *NOVELA NEGRA* IN ROSA MONTERO'S
TE TRATARÉ COMO A UNA REINA

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In recent years critical studies on the novels of the popular Spanish author Rosa Montero have proliferated. These wide-ranging studies have examined many of the principal elements of Montero's novels and, while divergent on numerous points, have almost unanimously underlined the female-centered perspective of her narrative. It is perhaps for this reason that one singular element of her repertoire has been neglected, that of the use of elements of the *novela negra* in her third novel, *Te trataré como a una reina* (1983). While several critics have signaled the presence of this element¹, the reasons behind the incursion of an admittedly feminist author into this traditionally masculinist genre have not been examined at length. From the perspective afforded by over a decade of distance, we shall see that the confluence of the second-wave women's movement, the boom of the *novela negra* on the Spanish literary scene, and the development of the feminist detective all contribute to an understanding of the role genre plays in the development of *Te trataré como a una reina*.

Before examining the influence of the *novela negra* on *Te trataré* it is necessary to clarify the use and limits of the term because, as Patricia Hart points out, «although this term was coined to talk about certain novels written in the United States, no such phrase exists in English» (*Spanish Sleuth*, 13), and its use has been asso-

¹ See for example Alborg, «Metaficción y feminismo en Rosa Montero», p. 71; Amell, «La novela negra y los narradores españoles actuales», p. 95; Brown, «Rosa Montero: From Journalist to Novelist», p. 251; or Colmeiro, *La novela policiaca: teoría e historia crítica*, p. 225.

ciated with almost any contemporary fiction that is centered around crime (An Introduction, 175). Although not unanimously, critics who deal with the delimitation and evolution of the Spanish *novela negra* tend to coincide with the principal critical tendency of differentiating between two important categories of crime fiction, the classical British-style detective novel² and the American hard-boiled school. The distinction between the two forms, quite frequently a point of contention among critics, in general terms can be viewed as both one of evolution and revolution; the hard-boiled novel which developed in the late twenties and thirties and whose principal spokesperson is generally considered by critics as being Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961), emerged from the conventions of the highly-formulaic, analytical British-style detective novel as a means of more adequately expressing the tumultuous social, political, and ethical changes in Western, and specifically American, society of the period between the two world wars. Thus while the hard-boiled school incorporates certain elements from its British-style counterpart, these elements are employed for radically different ends. The goal of the British-style detective novel is to create an enigma to be solved by the detective/reader through the use of deduction and reason, while in the hard-boiled novel the importance of the puzzle is decentered, moved to a secondary plane, and replaced by the detective's/reader's search for truth in an increasingly complex reality that Stefano Tani aptly describes as «no longer explained and constricted within the optimism and rationality of nineteenth-century positivism» (23).

To achieve these goals patent differences can be observed in elements such as plot, characterization, setting, and social attitude among others. In the hard-boiled novel characterization, setting, and social attitude take on primary importance while the tightly-woven, analytically-constructed plot of the British school detective novel often fades to the background. As Julian Symons signals, while in the British-style detective novel «only the detective is characterized in detail» (163), in the hard-boiled novel³ the characters are «the basis of the story. The lives of the characters are shown

² The British-style detective novel, whose roots are traced to the generally acknowledged initiator of the genre, the nineteenth-century American writer Poe, is thus commonly denominated because the conventions of the style were established by writers such as Doyle, Sayers, and van Dine.

³ Symons does not employ the terms British-style nor hard-boiled school but rather detective novel and crime novel correspondingly.

continuing after the crime, and often their subsequent behavior is important to the story's effect» (163). Similar transformations occur with setting, which frequently takes on an integral role, and social attitude. With regard to the latter, as numerous critics have signaled⁴, one of the frequent goals of the hard-boiled novel is the denouncement of social, political, and economic injustice and corruption from a perspective outside that of the official version, an element that marks a clear departure from the British-style detective novel which is generally considered conservative in its upholding of the law and order of the status quo⁵.

It is precisely the element of social realism that brings us to the Spanish *novela negra*. What *novela negra* authors such as Juan Madrid, Andreu Martín, and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán have consciously wished to emulate in the American hard-boiled novel is a perceived critique of contemporary reality from a stance that is frequently linked with a left of center political ideology. The word perceived is key because, as Hart so astutely notes:

a fundamental difference exists in what critics on either side of the Atlantic actually perceive these [hard-boiled] novels to be about. It seems that what European critics thought stood out most about the novels of Hammett, Chandler, Himes and their companions was really nothing to do with the murder-mystery aspects of these books, but rather what they felt to be a stark social realism... By contrast, American critics did not perceive these novels as being particularly outstanding novels of social realism. They noted first and foremost the entertainment and escape value of the books, and commented on the conventions used, and the introduction of mythical characters who appeared again and again, becoming stereotypes in novel and film. (14)

Because this is not the place for arguing the social realism of the hard-boiled novel, this study will employ the term *novela negra* following the reasoning of Hart that it is a more useful term in referring to a class of Spanish novels that emerged in the mid to late 1970's that adopted/adapted many conventions of the hard-boiled novel and that, as Hart and Javier Coma clearly point out,

⁴ See for example Amell (*Literatura*, 193), Symons (163), or Tani (22).

⁵ Jim Collins in *Uncommon Cultures* points out however that a number of these classical analytical detective novels do not always uphold conservative conventions.

consciously strove for a strong critical realism that would more accurately portray contemporary Spanish reality (Hart 15; Coma 15).

It is also due to the element of critical realism that the much commented «boom» of the Spanish *novela negra* did not occur until the transition to democracy⁶. Although there did exist a limited tradition of detective and crime novels in Spain since the late 1800's (Hart 163-168), it is the termination of the Franquist regime and the subsequent process of transition that provides the reason, opportunity, and incentive for the *novela negra*. As critics have noted, the Spanish *novela negra*, as in the case of the hard-boiled novel, emerges as a response to a period of intense political, economic, social, literary, and moral crisis⁷. The openly critical nature of this response, not possible during the Franco regime, linked with the conventions and the postmodern acceptance of an enormously popular genre convert the *novela negra* into a particularly adequate vehicle for communicating the practitioners' critical vision of contemporary Spain to a large group of readers.

The success of the *novela negra* during and following the transition can be easily observed in the substantial production and sales of novels in the genre, increased critical attention as evidenced by numerous articles, books, and special editions of literary journals, and the quickly growing number of Spanish authors who are venturing into the field. Clearly however, the degree to which these authors participate in the tendency varies greatly. Some, such as Juan Madrid and Andreu Martín, have dedicated themselves to the creation of a Spanish form of the genre; others, such as Eduardo Mendoza, Lourdes Ortiz, and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, have made one or numerous incursions into it; and still other writers have limited their participation to the incorporation of elements of the genre into their work as seen in Juan Benet, Juan Marsé, Marina Mayoral, and Antonio Muñoz Molina. Montero herself falls into the last category; although several of her novels employ an atmosphere, characters, or language that bring

⁶ See for example Amell (Literatura, 194); Colmeiro (211-214); Schaefer-Rodríguez (136-137).

⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the reasons for the period of crisis and its relationship to the development of the *novela negra* see Amell, «Literatura e ideología: el caso de la novela negra en la España actual», pp. 192-193; Colmeiro, *La novela policiaca*, pp. 211-213; and Preston, «Materialism and Serie Negra», pp. 11-13.

to mind certain elements of the *novela negra*, it is only *Te trataré* in which we find a grouping of specific conventions that clearly form part of the genre. Montero's use of these conventions, as we shall see, has a dual function; on one level the author employs them to create the veneer of a *novela negra*, and on another she then plays upon the expectations associated with the genre in order to drive home the message of the text.

One of the important components in the creation of a veneer of *novela negra* for *Te trataré* is the formal structure of the novel. As critics of detective fiction have signaled, the two essential elements of the genre are a crime and its investigation. *Te trataré* is archetypal of the genre in that it is formally structured around the occurrence of a crime. In a short abstract of a report published in the fictional magazine *El Criminal* that proceeds the first chapter of the novel, reporter Paco Mancebo presents his account of this crime that can be summarized as following: homicide police have arrested 46 year old nightclub singer Isabel López, better known as «La Bella», for her vicious attack on 49 year old bureaucrat Antonio Ortiz whom she bizarrely tortured then threw out a fourth-floor window for reasons unknown. Although at first not readily apparent, the narration that ensues is directly related to the crime. It is recounted in 28 short, quick-moving chapters, 27 of which in their entirety temporally precede the occurrence of the crime, and three transcripts of subsequent interviews with characters connected to the crime conducted by Paco Mancebo that are inserted at varying intervals in the novel.

Due to the primary function of the interviews⁸, the situating of the greatest portion of the action of the novel prior to the crime, and the fact that the identity of the criminal is known, the traditional crime investigation is evidently absent from *Te trataré*. However in a less normatively-restrictive consideration of the genre Colmeiro points out that it is not the mere presence of an investigation that defines the essence of detective fiction but rather that «el relato policiaco... debe ser, y presentarse como, un proceso de investigación para el lector» (77-78). In this sense *Te trataré* is

⁸ Although these interviews are understood to form part of an investigation by reporter Paco Mancebo their primary function is, as signaled by Gleen, to form a male discourse surrounding the two protagonists of the crime, Antonio and Isabel, that directly contrasts with the portrayal of these two in the principal narrative.

closely link to the *novela negra*; the process of investigation Montero instigates the reader to undertake is not to determine the identity of the criminal, but rather to determine the reasons that motivated the crime and ultimately the culpability of Bella.

The structural arrangement of the first chapters of the novel highlights the deductive effort necessary on the part of the reader to establish the relationships between the principal characters, events, and chronology of the novel. Because these early chapters each revolve around a different character (chapter one around Antonia, two Bella, and four Antonio), and the transition from one to another is abrupt and at first disconcerting, as evidenced by the passage from the description of Antonia in her domestic setting in chapter one to the presentation of Bella alongside her sordid clientele and coworkers in the bar *Desiré* in the following chapter, the connections between characters must initially be surmised by the reader.

Even more deceiving is the chronology of these chapters. The account of the crime that begins the novel states that Bella has been detained and leaves the impression that Antonio is dead. Chapter one does nothing to indicate that the subsequent events narrated are not proceeding chronologically, and in fact Montero even places what could be considered a false clue in the phrase «Antonio no había venido» (14). Chapter two continues and reinforces this equivocal sense of chronology by beginning with the sentence «—Está muerto— se asustó Bella» (25) which the reader immediately associates with the crime previously committed. Yet this chapter whose focus is Bella and does not mention the crime causes the reader to suspect that this narrative line is prior to the crime. However, this is not confirmed until chapter four by the appearance of an Antonio very much alive and well.

As previously noted, in the *novela negra* the puzzle factor, while present, is generally of secondary importance. This holds true in *Te trataré*. After the first five chapters, the framework of the narrative jigsaw has been assembled. However, the effects of this deduction-inducing structure are in place; the indication that *Te trataré* is linked to the *novela negra* has been insinuated and hence the reading convention associated with this genre, a close reading in which every element has a possible multiple significance, has been suggested.

That this close reading is imperative is evidenced by the struc-

ture of the narration that follows the initial chapters. Despite the fact that the crime and its subsequent «investigation» do not follow the common structural lines of the *novela negra*, they do play an important role in the novel. Through the placement of interviews at strategic points, the information conveyed within them, and the critical information they suppress, an opposition is set up between these interviews and the main body of narration due to the fact that each offers conflicting perspectives on the characters involved in the crime and the motivation for the latter. On one level this opposition stimulates a certain amount of intrigue, as one would expect of a *novela negra*; the reader is challenged to piece together and interpret the «correct» version of the characters and events. Equally importantly however the opposition between the two levels encourages a re-reading of the entire text because it is their interaction that almost the length of the novel deceptively insinuates, then finally reveals, the nature of Bella's crime, hence causing the reader to question both levels of narration.

Montero employs other elements of the *novela negra* in *Te trataré* that strengthen this impression. One of these that immediately stands out is the nature of the particular settings chosen for the story. As George Grella signals, typical of the genre are settings that depict «a tawdry world which conceals a shabby and depressing reality beneath its painted façade» (111). This is easily observed in the principal settings of the novel. What places as different as Bella's apartment, Antonio's office building, and the bar *Desiré* have in common is the feeling of decadence that permeates them; they physically convey a sense of illusions shattered by the reality of life. This is clearly evidenced in the description of Bella's apartment:

Veinte años atrás la casa era como una minúscula bombonera, un hogar coqueto y recargado que Bella forró pacientemente en raso, con bonitas cortinas de abalorios y cojines de seda carmesí. Pero eso era cuando Bella todavía creía que ser artista consistía en otra cosa... Desde entonces, las cortinas habían perdido muchas de sus cuentas de cristal y el terciopelo de las butacas se había llenado de polvo y peladuras (77).

It is the primary local of the novel however, the bar *Desiré*, that most calls to mind the ambiance of the *novela negra* which, as

Hart signals, depicts with a negative edge «the reality of life in the city, and the dangers that lurk there» (An Introduction, 178). A former prostitution club just on the fringes of the red-light district, the once solid local, now under a new owner who wanted to change the moral character of the club, has ironically slid into physical decay and attracts more often than not a questionable clientele. It is here, under the flickering neon light, the peeling walls, and the vomit stained carpet that a «select,» as Bella calls them, clientele crosses paths. This heterogeneous group ranges from drug addicts that shoot-up in the only functioning bathroom, incontinent old folk who wet themselves, to local menacing hoods from the neighboring red-light district. Their relationship to the bar is purely chance, attributable more to their own often mysterious, illegal, violent, or sexual activities than to the function of the bar itself.

Montero's description of the bar and its clientele highlights the degraded, miserable, and hopeless side of existence. Moreover, as is typical of the genre, the events that occur there also underline the proximity of violence that seethes just below daily mundane existence. In one instance, just as Bella is finishing her set, a live cat whose tail had been cruelly set on fire is thrown into the club where, its entire body now excruciatingly engulfed in flames, it is finally killed by the blows of a hammer. In another, the inexperience of a young girl who thoughtlessly leads on two drunken tough-guys in the bar turns into a life-threatening situation when one of the toughs pulls a knife on Bella as she tries to prevent the girl's forcible abduction. In this manner Montero envelopes the *Desiré* in an atmosphere of potential violence that, because the bar is structurally the central setting of the novel as it is the one place where all the principal characters come into contact, dominates and permeates by means of tone and character movement the rest of the novel, thus playing an integral role in its construction.

Another aspect of the influence of the *novela negra* can be observed at the level of character formulation. On the surface, the principal line-up of *Te trataré* appears to be rather stock *novela negra*: the aging night-club singer, the mysterious and hermetic *matón*, the sexually repressed spinster, the deviant and maniacal bureaucrat, the aspiring actress/vamp, and the morally and officially corrupt police detective. Typical of the genre, this heterogeneous mix of characters have in common the fact that they all are

marginalized to a greater or lesser extent by society proper, and their relationships with each other are linked in great part by frustrated desires, cruelty, and a predominance of violence, both verbal and physical. In reality though, Montero's complex and well-rounded characters only superficially resemble the often cardboard cut-out figures associated with the genre. Moreover, as do the authors of feminist detective fiction (Oliver, Paretsky, Wilson, etc.), Montero utilizes these standard characters with dual intentions; on one level they are employed to evoke typical stereotypes that, on another, are either ironically intensified or rebelliously subverted.

An example of the first can be clearly observed in the figure of police inspector García. As is common to the *novela negra*, this representative of law and order is corrupt. Case in point is that García does not arrest Antonio even though he knows that the latter is breaking the law. However, the specific slant of García's corruption is focused on more from a moral perspective than a professional one. This is illustrated by the only arrest that he makes during the course of the novel, that of Antonio's sister Antonia and her lover Damián. García, on his usual nightly round, spies the amorous couple in the park. Noticing that the adult couple are going beyond the usual adolescent kissing and touching, he does not immediately break-up the scene but rather takes voyeuristic pleasure from behind a tree. Moments later, unable to take personal responsibility for his own public masturbation, García lays the blame on Antonia and Damián:

Eran unos provocadores, esos tipos. Un peligro público, realmente. García se limpió con un puñado de hojas, a falta de pañuelo. Ahí, en mitad de la calle, los muy guarros. Afortunadamente era él quien les había pillado, pero podía haberles visto cualquier otra persona menos preparada... El inspector García salió de detrás del árbol revestido de toda su dignidad.

—¿No os da vergüenza, marranos? —atronó—. Policía. Quedáis detenidos por escándalo público. (200)

In this manner Montero ironically intensifies the moral bankruptcy of García, and by extension, the group that he represents.

In other cases though Montero subverts the usual role assigned by the *novela negra*. This is evident in the case of the protagonist, Bella. An aging, overweight, night-club singer in a seedy bar, Bella superficially conforms to the traditionally masculine parameters of

the woman as dangerous, destructive «other». (Reddy 99) Her language is direct, tough, and at times vulgar; she is sexually experienced, having had a number of lovers some of whom have been abusive, both physically and mentally; she associates with individuals from the lower walks of life; she holds the police in barely suppressed contempt; and she attempts to commit the most violent crime, murder. Montero however rebelliously defrauds the expectations generated by the «hard facts» of the character. Bella, we learn through a close reading, is a sensitive, caring, and in many ways ingenuous woman who is struggling to make sense of her life yet, is unable to, primarily because she is unable to come to terms with her role as a woman during a period in which the role itself is in transition. Unwilling to fulfill the myth-laden role of wife and mother for which she was educated under the Franco regime, Bella rejects as well the roles of spinster and of fallen woman assigned by this same ideology to those women who transgress the norms. Yet, because she has not consciously questioned her traditional education, she is unable to reconcile her experiences with another ideology that strongly emerges during the transition and that could possibly bring some meaning to her situation, that of feminism. Bella rejects what she believes to be the ideal of feminism, the independent woman who has no need of men («El mundo no estaba hecho para mujeres solas, reflexionó Bella, a pesar de todo lo que dijeran las feministas esas». *Te trataré* 31), yet she recognizes that it may be the man in one's life that poses the threat («pero, ¿quién te defiende luego de tu hombre?» *Te trataré* 319. Bella thus becomes an emblem of many of the women of her generation who, as in previous Montero novels, are caught-up in the struggle to meld their traditional education with the changing attitudes and expectations, highly influenced by the second-wave feminist movement, of post-Franco society.

As we have seen in regard to structure, setting, and characterization, Montero uses elements of the *novela negra* in *Te trataré* to create both a veneer of the genre and to play upon the reader expectations this generates. This is especially clear in the surprising twist inserted at the end of the novel. In the initial extract by Mancebo that begins the novel the reader is lead to believe that Antonio has been murdered by Bella. This is achieved in part through the deliberately misleading language employed by Man-

cebo in referring to Bella as «la asesina» (repeated three times), «la homicida» (repeated four times), and «la sanguinaria mujerzuela.» While Montero is clearly parodying the language employed by sensationalist journalists and thus Mancebo's descriptions are possibly suspect, the fact remains that it is the homicide police who are called to the scene, and, as noted significantly at the beginning and the end of the extract, Antonio is thrown from a fourth-floor window. This in combination with the subsequent already enumerated elements of the *novela negra* facilitates the assumption of murder as it is the most common structuring crime employed in the genre. Montero lets this assumption lie until the end of the story where its subversion is perfectly timed. In the third to last section, chapter 27, the devastating motivations for Bella's crime are finally revealed and the chapter ends in true cliffhanger style with Bella asking for Antonio's address then silently disappearing through the doorway of the *Desiré*. The reader fully expects that the narration has come full circle, that Bella's destination is Antonio's home where, as already established, the crime will occur. Thus, the interview that follows with a bitter and battered, but alive Antonio surprisingly reveals that the assumed and insinuated outcome of Bella's actions, murder, was defrauded.

The sense of deception provoked by the revelation that Antonio is alive points to another element that is directly associated with the *novela negra*, the issue of criminality. As Claudia Schaefer-Rodríguez notes:

the *novela negra* calls into question the idea of «crime» itself as well as the possibility of a «solution.» After the Franco era's denial, suppression, and manipulation of crime for its own ideological ends, the narratives in question rehistoricize and [make] relative the concept. «Criminality» is treated as a specific social phenomenon within boundaries of place and time, as opposed to an ahistorical category into which «official» criminality must fit (the ghetto, the economically marginal, etc.). [...] the *novela negra* implicitly seems to present crime as an index of frustration —the criminal's as much as the victim's—... (137)

This crucial relationship between the genre and crime may very well be one of the reasons the author chose to utilize it as a form of expression. *Te trataré*, although set in an unnamed city, is spe-

cifically urban and contemporary in nature. As the following crucial passage reveals, the crime that Bella commits is clearly triggered by multiple frustrations that have built up as a result of her aforementioned inability to fuse the affective expectations fostered by her traditional upbringing with her actual experiences and the realization that time to do so is inexorably slipping away:

Todo se daba a la vez, el pasado y el presente, la carta del Trompeta, el contoneo del macarra, las callosas caricias del Poco, el color de las baldosas de su casa. (234)

The legal result of Bella's crime also incorporates another element common to the *novela negra*, the question of private justice versus public discipline. Unlike the traditional detective novel that frequently aligned itself unquestioningly with the laws of society, the *novela negra* by examining the underside of crime, the motivations and the not «officially acceptable» justifications for it, tends quite often to implicate society, and not the «criminal» in the crime. As Coma points out, one of the key functions of the *novela negra* is to reveal the hidden truth surrounding the crime:

Del mismo modo, un delito deja de ser, por definición, la obra de un malvado al que debe extirparse de la sociedad; muy probablemente, parecen apuntar muchas de estas obras, lo enfermo es el cuerpo social y no su tumor. (45)

This, as just mentioned, is clearly observed in *Te trataré*, but from a feminist stance. Although in the eyes of patriarchal society and law Bella has officially committed a crime and is duly taken into custody, the feeling that emerges from the narration is that Bella is not the victimizer but rather the victim. She incarnates not only her own abuse and deception at the hands of men but also Antonia's, and those of women in general, thus making her attack on Antonio appear to be justifiable revenge considering what the latter, viewed as a representative of *mankind*, has made not only her, but other women as well, suffer due to his abuse of power based on a traditional position of authority.

However, the official outcome of this female rebellion is significant. In the *novela negra* the «criminal» is often not publicly disciplined, the crime is «permitted» by those in power as a safety valve to release some of the frustration that otherwise could accumulate and possibly be directed against the state (Schaefer-Rodríguez

138), or to avoid the investigation and inculpation of the truly guilty, once again those in power. Bella though does not escape public discipline; she is arrested due to the «eficaz acción» of the police, and her actions are misinterpreted and condemned by a male perspective and system of values evidenced in the abstract and the interviews.⁹ Based on Montero's previous work, this outcome is clearly not a reversion to upholding the paternalistic order, nor a discouragement of female rebellion, but rather a warning to women that transgressions against the established paternal order, while quite possibly delivering a high quotient of personal satisfaction, are not without risk of punishment in the public domain.

As we have seen, in *Te trataré* Montero, while evidently not constructing an identifiable *novela negra*, has certainly adopted numerous elements of the genre that she subsequently adapts to her own intentions. It is the nature of these intentions that relate *Te trataré* to the novels of the emerging countertradition of feminist detective fiction by writers such as Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky, and Barbara Wilson. What all of these writers have in common is, as Reddy remarks:

an essential subversiveness, with women writers borrowing familiar features of detective fiction in order to turn them upside down and inside out, exposing the genre's fundamental conservatism and challenging the reader to rethink his/her assumptions. (2)

It is the latter that points to the essence of Montero's intentions, the challenge to rethink assumptions. The author uses the structuring element of a crime to contrast masculine readings of the protagonist's motivations with a female centered reading suggested by the main body of the text. It is the friction between these contradictory readings that pushes the reader to examine his/her own interpretation.

Finally, it must be noted that the aforementioned issues are not the only social attitudes questioned in the novel, and although the protagonist is here employed as the primary example, the reflection of the social crisis that is the root of her frustrations is not limited to her character alone, it is present to some extent in all

⁹ For further analysis of a «masculine» reading of the novel see Kathleen Glenn, «Victimized by Misreading: Rosa Montero's *Te trataré como a una reina*».

the principal characters. For this reason, it is probable that Montero has chosen to utilize elements of the *novela negra* due in great part to the recognized social component of the genre, that as Schaefer-Rodríguez says, is especially adequate for reflecting «many of the diversities, ambiguities, and uncertainties of postmodern' civilization into which Spanish society 'transits' after 1975» (136-37). Apart from the genre's proven potential to broaden the general appeal of a novel to a large number readers, the author's intentions lie in the associated ability of the genre to convey a critical vision of contemporary reality in a format radically different from those of previous novels.

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