

ANNE L. WALSH
**CHAOS AND
COINCIDENCE
IN CONTEMPORARY
SPANISH FICTION**



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Chaos and Coincidence in Contemporary Spanish Fiction

The following chapters will investigate the relationship of a selection of fictional works that have appeared in Spain during the first ten years of the new millennium, specifically from 2001 to 2010, with a phenomenon which has been labelled 'chaos theory' or 'chaotics'. It is not intended to prove the scientific validity of this theory. Rather, following an explanation of certain elements that have become popularized, it will be shown how 'chaos' has become both a theme and a narratological device.

The notion of chaos has been present in society as long as there have been societies. For the early Egyptians, the world was surrounded by the waters of chaos, while the giant serpent, Apophis, dwelt in the underworld and represented the chaotic forces which had to be overcome each night so that the sun, the god Re, could be reborn. For the Greeks and Romans, chaos was the yawning void out of which the world evolved. Likewise, in Chinese mythology, chaos was the prequel to the binary order of yin and yang, male and female; heaven and earth, light and darkness. Chaos, then, has often been considered the precursor of order and, as such, something that is not bound by the laws of nature, or, at least, the Newtonian ones, for it is before or outside of nature. However, this notion has been questioned by scientists (particularly in the realms of physics and mathematics), with their findings leading to an interest by critical theorists. Chaos theory has been applied to various conditions, for, as James Gleick points out, 'Chaos breaks across the lines that separate scientific disciplines. Because it is a science of the global nature of systems, it has brought together thinkers from fields that had been widely separated'. Those fields include that of literary criticism, following from the impact of theories of chaos on popular imagination. Since the 1980s, in particular, evidence has been gathering that seems to prove the presence of chaos as a key ingredient in a post-modern world, both in its reality and in fictional portrayals of that reality. For post-modernists, chaos is inescapable and cyclical, an apt metaphor for twentieth-century ideas of the circularity of history, economics, environmental catastrophes and so on. Mention may only be made of the present European economic crisis to bring to mind images of bubbles bursting, with the consequent imagery of the circular nature of the global economy.

The impact in literary fields has been two-fold, at least. Chaos has been either used as an element of fiction or chaos theorists have approached fictional texts with the idea of applying their theory to uncover previously un-

remarked elements. The latter phenomenon has produced uneven and, as some have said, misguided results. For Pamela Gossin, the tendency to compare the two domains (literary criticism and chaos theory) is of little use unless it is followed by greater critical reflection, something that does not always ensue:

The most frequent use of chaos theory in literary criticism involves drawing a metaphoric comparison of some kind between specific aspects of the two domains [...]. The general concept of orderly disorder or 'order in chaos' finds ready literary analogues in writers who push the limits of language and sense (e.g. James Joyce) or emphasise the elusive nature of order and form (e.g. Herman Melville). However, such comparisons often remained too general to prove of lasting value, for there is little of inherent interest in showing significant similarities between chaos science and literature if the comparisons are not then put to further use or submitted to critical reflection.

Thus, the application of ideas of chaos to literature is not always a happy one. Nonetheless, it is an established critical approach with strong advocates. Bearing all the debate in mind, the aim of this study is to uncover the presence of chaos as a theme and to illustrate that in certain recent Spanish fictional texts, its presence indicates a desire to break out of the vicious circle of postmodern apathy and offer readers a renewed sense of purpose, with an underlying theme of solidarity, the ability to walk in the shoes of another, to bridge the gap with 'the other', as the only way forward. As such, it neither needs to verify nor disprove the science of chaos but, rather, to illustrate how changed popular notions of chaos come into focus within the chosen texts.