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## **Angela Carter and the Violent Distrust of Metanarratives**

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# Angela Carter and the Violent Distrust of Metanarratives

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## Abstract

In a world where meaning has been deconstructed and reconstructed, where centers have lost their hegemony and notions such as truth, knowledge or history have been rendered relative by the ongoing ontological enquiry of the postmodern ideology, it is baffling to remark that not only in literature, but also in other fields that make use of discourses, there has been a return to and a reconsideration of the narrative. Nowadays, one can easily observe the narrative drive that enlivens various discourses, from the medical one to the one used in the academe or in official governmental documents. Brian McHale has even referred to the „*narrative turn*” in literary theory which, according to him, seems to answer to the loss of the metaphysical (McHale 4).

## Keywords:

narrative turn, feminism, narrative dynamics,

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## The Proliferation of the Narrative

Literature itself has embarked on this recuperation of the narrative, featuring a growing number of fictions which, having abandoned the experimental urge, come back to the narrative that has a story.

It is interesting to note at this point Peter Brooks's discussion of what he calls „*the narrative impulse*” in his study „*Reading for the Plot*” (1984) where he claims that this is the primordial impulse of any human being, the one which differentiates us from other species and places us one link above in the evolutionary chain. Due to our capacity to speak and produce meaning, we are immediately drawn to telling stories:

„*The narrative impulse is as old as our oldest literature; myth and folktale appear to be stories we recount in order to explain and understand where no other form of explanation will work*”. (Brooks 3)

A proliferation of the narrative would in this case be the natural means through which humans would try to account for their experiences, an epistemological process of explaining and understanding as well as an ontological process of self-identification and self-recovery. In the context of the postmodern cultural phenomenon, the proliferation of the narrative also acquires therapeutic connotations, as it helps humans purge their traumatic experiences, make sense in a senseless and fragmented world, mend their fragmented identities.

On the other hand there seems to be a preference for the term narrative instead of novel lately, due to the highly problematic status of the novel as a literary form. According to numerous theorists, the novel is essentially anti-canonical, as it continuously goes against all literary norms and conventions, yet it has been canonized as a literary form. As a consequence, Wallace Martin for instance, prefers the term narrative which seems to better reflect what happens in contemporary literature, claiming that the novel is an unstable product, a shifting zone with no fixed nature. As a conclusion to his study on *Recent Theories of the Narrative*, Martin admits that „*the novel cannot be defined because its defined character is to be unlike a novel*.” (Martin 44)

In the case of contemporary novelists, the return to the narrative which tells a story has more to it than meets the eye. On one hand it translates the postmodern ontological concern with issues of the human being, and storytelling seems to perfectly fit the therapeutic necessities of the postmodern self, on the other it is used subversively as a means of rewriting and reconsidering older narratives. In this respect quite a number of postmodern writers have taken on to rewrite myths, fairytales, classical narratives, preserving the storyline but meaningfully altering crucial details.

This subversive aspect of the current proliferation of the narrative does actually translate the postmodern interrogation and challenge of the well-

established systems of thought which are exposed as illegitimate and abusive. In the case of feminine writing, this subversive aspect is enhanced by women's marginal status and marginalized discourses. A close investigation into the history of the various discourses that ground the Western culture and civilization reveals the exclusion of women as both the subjects and the producers of these discourses. Women's exclusion from history on account of their domestic status which has kept them away from the public arena is of common knowledge. Equally, this situation characterizes the history of literature as up to the end of the 19th century this was a male territory, with a few remarkable exceptions. Moreover, as subjects of literary representation, women have become the recipients of male perception and by consequence the category of Woman has come to be externally defined. Consequently, literature has represented women as men perceived them, contributing thus to their confinement within the limits of an identity that was not even theirs. Representations of women in literature vary insignificantly up to the turn of the 20th century. As Sally Alexander remarks, "*the tendency is to place women closer to nature and the animal world, distancing them from human law and knowledge*" (Alexander 42). Consequently, women are troped as voiceless, weak, primitive and irrational in permanent contrast with men who stands at the positive pole.

Starting with the second half of the 20th century and the end of World War II, a significantly increasing number of women have started to make claims to their own voices and discourses. Simone de Beauvoir's famous discourse on *The Second Sex* (1949) focused the public's attention on women's unfair marginal status and on their historical denigration and at the same time encouraged women to break away from the immanence that had been assigned to them by centuries of male discourse and to achieve their own transcendence. The feminist movement that followed was women's desperate attempt to define themselves and to escape the prison of male representation, overlooking the exclusionary and restrictive character of both definition and category. The 80s and the 90s witnessed women's growing awareness of the fact that they have to abandon male modes of enunciation which display a similar tendency to label, categorize and establish hierarchies in favour of a discourse of their own which critic Alice Jardine called *gynesis*.

Consequently, the growing number of contemporary women critics and writers reflects women's efforts to build a body of critical and fictional work which should support and legitimize their fundamental claim to a discourse of their own. An investigation into the contemporary fiction by women reveals therefore an intense preoccupation with women's capacity to voice their concerns, feelings, emotions, and their attempt to put their identities into discourse. An analysis of the discourses of both female characters/narrators and female authors proves to be extremely significant when investigating the various modes through which contemporary women writers choose to represent their

difference. Asserting a voice is crucial for women writers because creating a discourse of their own means having a particular vision of the world which entitles them to power as well.

In the case of contemporary British novelist Angela Carter, the proliferation of the narrative is definitely subversive, as her fiction engages in rewriting some of the crucial discourses through which patriarchy has imposed its authority and has legitimized its central position: myths, fairytales and even Shakespeare.

### **The traps of linear plot — the early novels**

Plot is the essential component of any narrative, of any story, as it actually transfers the narrative from a state of potentiality to one of actuality. As such, plot is first and foremost a dynamic mechanism which makes the narrative possible in its relationship with the others.

Drawing on Peter Brooks's illuminating study on the importance of plot and plotting in narratives, I would like to emphasize the fact that plot has to be seen as a sense-making device, one without which it would be impossible to read through a work of fiction. A narrative without a plot is hardly conceivable for that matter, precisely because the human mind is structured in such a way as to attempt to make sense of everything.

Brooks offers several definitions of plot which basically revolve around the same essential aspect of sense-making. For instance plot is defined as „*the very organizing line, the thread of design that makes narrative possible because finite and comprehensible*” (Brooks 10) or „*the structure of action in closed and legible wholes*” (Brooks 91). According to Brooks, plot is intimately connected to desire, that desire which is always present as the starting point of any narrative. There is desire for the end implicit in the beginning and Brooks builds on the Lacanian model of desire as born from the split between need and demand (Brooks 55).

Contextualizing the discussion within the frame of feminist narratology, plot emerges as one of the possible means through which women-writers can assert their difference and make claim to their own discourses. Defined as relying on desire which is the one actually giving the starting impulse to the unfolding of the narrative, plot might be seen as problematic by feminists for whom desire as an active principle is always male-originated, with women as mere recipients. According to Teresa de Lauretis, „*(male) desire generates narrative and it is at the heart of the versions of the only narrative plot: a hero's quest for fulfillment where woman is the reward*” (de Lauretis 262).

Consequently, feminist and feminine writings have tried to subvert the claims to authority made by the traditional plot and have consequently taken on to rewriting some of the founding narratives and therefore plots of traditional Western literature: myths, fairytales and even history. Moreover, some female

novelists have chosen to challenge the traditional concept of plot differently, by diverting from it and creating highly experimental novels. As Brian Richardson observes in his *Narrative Dynamics*, „notable novels written by women often fail to conform to expected casual progression [plot], but often take abrupt turns” (Richardson 68). There is yet another category of contemporary female novelists who have actually reinforced the traditional plot in what I consider to be the highest form of subversion.

In the 1960's, when the emerging cultural revolution was violently revising and reconfiguring well-established systems of thought and ideologies, the contemporary British writer Angela Carter started publishing her controversial fiction. With three novels published in the 1960s, *Shadow Dance* (1965), *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and *Several Perceptions* (1968), one would certainly expect some sort of contamination from the highly revolutionary attitude and experimental narrative devices that stormed through fiction writing at the time. Yet, Carter's early novels display baffling simple plots, plots that could be summarized in one sentence.

Her very first novel written while she was still living in Bristol, *Shadow Dance*, features a somewhat predictable love triangle, with two men and a woman sharing a bizarre and at times grotesque story of desire, violence and abnormality. The linear plot indulges readers to leave their guard down and plunge into this apparently unproblematic narrative without minding the traps that lure them into making wrong assumptions on this being one of those books one could read and understand, only to later forget and ignore.

Carter preserves the same plot pattern with her second, third and fourth novels, subversively setting out to create similar linear plots, very easy to follow and quite bound to be remembered due to their absent intricacy. One would therefore easily regard *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *Several Perceptions* (1968) and *Love* (1971) as simple stories which need no strenuous effort from the part of the reader in terms of making sense. In fact, it is precisely here I believe, that Carter's ingenious artfulness lies. By putting forward linear plots that require no further effort of decoding and deciphering, Carter actually lures the reader toward the story itself, rendering thus visible the connections between characters, the politics behind their relationships and eventually the huge difference between male and female. To this purpose too, her early novels make use of a minimal number of characters, which allows readers to notice for instance that female characters tend to be silent, that the huge amount of violence in these novels is women-directed, that women's discourses, if they exist, are peripheral and whispering.

*Love* replicates the same pattern of the love triangle and the same very simple linear plot which tells the story of two men and a woman and their itinerary through love, despair and death. In this novel, the female character is

completely silent, utters no discourse whatsoever and in the end commits suicide.

This clear line that Carter employs as a plot for her early novels does actually allow readers to notice the significant details and at the same time allows Carter to make very powerful gender-related statements. Her emerging feminist stand grows into fictional representation precisely as a result of these linear plots which emphasize the content rather than the form.

### **The spider-web plot or the compulsion of reading twice**

According to Peter Brooks, the postmodern novel introduces a difference at the level of the plot as well, challenging the traditional definition of plot as the meaningful and plausible selection of events that makes events into a story. The postmodern enquiry into the authenticity of totalizing and authoritative concepts and discourses translates at the level of narrative plot „as a greater explicitness in the abandonment of mimetic claims, a more overt staging of the narratives arbitrariness and lack of authority, a more open playfulness about fictionality” (Brooks 317). Thus, „plot has become an object of suspicion, but it is still necessary; life has to remain narratable”(Brooks 285).

Having reached her purpose of putting forward violent pleas for the reconsideration of women’s position and status by writing novels with simple, linear plots which tackled the issue of patriarchal legitimacy and authority, Angela Carter took a step further in deconstructing the tenets of the Western traditional line of thought and started experimenting with the plot. Her following novels, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), *The Passion of New Eve* (1979) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984) are designed on the paradigm of the spider-web plot.

As opposed to the simple linear plot, the spider-web plot as its name suggests, expands circularly in various directions, covering at once a huge number of temporal instances and spatial locations. Envisaged as the meeting point between temporality, spatiality and narrativity, plot is supposed to knot them together and deliver a comprehensible whole to the reader. In the case of the spider-web plot, readers find it extremely difficult to follow the immense expansion into time and space, were it not for the first person narrator, the speaking voice who, in this case, plays the part of the spider which supports its web.

Carter’s *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* features Desiderio, the first person homodiegetic narrator who is in a mock Quixotic search for perfect love. Written retrospectively in the form of memoirs, Carter’s novel starts by mocking at the very reliable and linear plot her first novels foregrounded:

*„So I must gather together all the confusion of experience and arrange it in order, just as it happened, beginning at the beginning”. (Carter 11)*

The subversive tone is directed towards the very claims to authority and verisimilitude of the traditional linear plot, which pretended to be mimetic of real life. Carter's *Desiderio* starts weaving his story circularly and in all directions, rendering it impossible for the reader to even attempt at a mere retelling of his story. The plot covers his adventures in various implausible worlds, where he remains the only recognizable and somewhat stable element of the narrative, the only one readers can rely on to exit the spider-web. Time and space are a source of anxiety as they prove to be result of the protagonists own fantasy. Actually, Carter's novel is a narrative of desire and its generative potential.

*The Passion of New Eve* replicates the pattern of the previous novel in what concerns plot design, as this is also conceived as a spider-web. With Eve/Evelyn playing the part of the spider, the narrative unfolds abundantly in time and space, covering implausible worlds. The first person homodiegetic, yet unreliable narrator, is the only one who holds the narrative together and prevents its explosion. Once again, readers are left with no choice but to rely on Eve/Evelyn, the double gendered narrator, in order to complete the sense-making process compulsory to understanding.

*Nights at the Circus* introduces a slight change as Carter abandons the first person narration in favour of a third person narrative. Not accidentally, the protagonist of Carter's novel is this time a woman who is subversively refused the privilege to tell her own story. In exchange, the narrative is focalized on her and consequently follows her picaresque adventures. Fevvers, the protagonist, is a winged aerialist and the main attraction of the circus she works for. The circus is of utmost importance for the plot as it creates the perfect excuse for a spider-web plot, incorporating the ideas of transience, travel and unreliability. In this case, Fevvers is the spider who weaves her web and her narrative during a circus tour around the world, allowing Carter to create unstable worlds and unreliable topologies.

The spider-web design of the plot appears therefore to be over productive with Angela Carter, its main purpose being in the first place the subversion of the logical sequencing of traditional plot. With Carter, it appears that **plotting** is the right word, not only as „*the activity of shaping the dynamic aspect of the narrative*” (Brooks XIII), but also as the wicked operation of scheming and conspiring to expose theuses and abuses of linear plot.



### The Swan Song: *Wise Children*

With *Wise Children* (1992), Angela Carter takes a step further in plot design and still working with the spider-web structure, she introduces subplots and embedded narratives, something she has not done before. Highly acclaimed by the critics and considered Carter's best novel, but being at the same time her last, *Wise Children* abandons the realm of the fantastic and of impossible worlds and enters the world of theatrical illusion and of the musical, continuing thus somehow the theme of the circus.

The novel represents the first person narrative of the only female narrator in Carter's entire fiction, musical actress Dora Chance, who, on the eve of her 70th birthday, looks back and recollects not only her lifestory, but also those of her twin sister and of her father, Sir Melchior Hazard, whose 100th birthday is as well. Dora Chance is a highly unreliable narrator, as she perpetually questions her capacity of remembering things and as she also enters foreign territories which do not belong to her and to which she does not have direct access. Carter creates thus a story about illegitimacy, mistaken identity, theatrical illusion and old age, where plot splits into a multitude of other peripheral subplots which cannot be accounted for by Dora's poor memory.

Everything in *Wise Children* is subversive, yet the harsh and violent tone of the previous novels is appeased into a more serene discourse which discusses life as a theatrical illusion where well-established concepts such as history, religion, fatherhood, cultural heritage and patriarchal authority are mere constructs for stage use.

Dora Chance holds together a maze of stories which she retells in the first person singular, although some are not even hers and had happened long before she was born. Thus, Carter performs the subversion of those patriarchal discourses written in the first person singular, such as autobiographies, which raise claims to authenticity and authority even if they are in the same position as Dora's narrative.

The plot expands over a period of 100 years, being the miniature history of a numerous theatrical family whose members engage in various minor subplots whose only connection to the main plot itself is Dora's narrative voice, which incorporates them into her narrative. These subplots do actually reinforce Carter's subversive operation of exposing the impossibility of any discourse and of history in particular to have direct access to indirectly experienced events. All discourses are thus exposed as very private narratives which share equal claims to authority and authenticity since eventually they are all fictions.

To conclude, it appears that Angela Carter's mastery of plot and plotting devices supports her subversive operation of questioning and challenging the central stance of patriarchal discourse, whose legitimacy is revealed as pure fiction. Since „*plot belongs to the readers competence, it animates the sense-making process,*

*it is a key component of the passion for meaning*" (Brooks 37), one can only read through Carter's plots and make their own sense.

### **A Gallery of Freaks - Constructing Characters/Narrators**

Many contemporary theorists have already proclaimed the death of the character, following Roland Barthes's example who pronounced the death of the author in his eponymous essay. The character is seen a construct which functions as the embodiment of discourse, in Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan's acceptance, „*a node in the verbal design*" (Rimmon-Kenan 33). The same contemporary theorist agrees that the „*construct called character can be seen as a tree-like hierarchical structure in which elements are assembled in categories of increasing integrative power*" (Rimmon-Kenan 37). Although mimetic theories equate characters with real people, their fictitious nature is enhanced by the fact that they are only made possible through an act of interpretation from the part of the reader. As Rimmon-Kenan admits, in the story, the *character is a construct put together by the reader*" *from various indications dispersed throughout the text*" (Rimmon-Kenan 36), which renders the act of reading and interpreting indispensable for the characters. We are confronted once again, as in the case of plots, with the compulsion of making sense which actually motivates the act of reading.

Characters are crucial to any narrative, as it is impossible to conceive of any action without agents. Many theorists seem to favour such terms as actors or agents instead of the classical character, as a result of their more encompassing semantics. And since „*as soon as there is language, there is a speaker who utters it*" (Bal 22), there are two types of speakers in any work of fiction: the narrators and the actors/characters. At times, they may overlap, when the narrator is also one of the characters, his degree of involvement in the action depending on the ideological statements the author wishes to voice. According to Mieke Bal, „*the narrator is the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts*" (Bal 19) and as such, he is in the privileged position of being the author's spokesperson. In his reference study on *The Dialogic Imagination*, the Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin explained that „*the speaking person in a novel is always an ideologue and his words are always ideologemes*" (Bakhtin 333).

Angela Carter's narrators and characters definitely point towards a very violent challenge of the very idea of norm, of all normative and canonized apparatuses that cast men and women into fixed stereotyped roles. Her fictional enquiry into the legitimacy of patriarchal ideology relies for its most part on the construction and discourse of her narrators and characters who share one similar feature: they are exhibits in a freak show.

According to critic Rosi Braidottis definition in *Mothers, Monsters and Machines*, "*the monster [the freak] is the bodily incarnation of difference from the basic*

*human norm; it is a deviant, an a-normaly; it is abnormal*"(Braidotti 63). As the Latin etymology of the term *monstrum* points out, malformed human beings have always been the object of display, subjected to the public gaze. The freak has been a cause of both fear and admiration and this is perhaps the reason for which there have always been such things as freak shows and circuses. Yet, for the same reason for which they are put on display, they are also put away. Society has always rejected freaks and has thrown them at its outskirts as the result of a profound inability to understand their nature. Paradoxically, thus, freaks and monsters are both strong and weak, admired and feared for their capacity of transgressing the norm.

**Beyond the crisis of representation: Angela Carter's bodily allegories and their relevance in the economy of the narrative: *The Bloody Chamber, The Passion of Ives &e, The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman, Nights at the Circus***

Theories of postmodernism widely insist on its non-mimetic quality, claiming that in terms of representation, postmodern art displays a highly innovative character which sometimes affects recognition and reception. These theories rely on the understanding of Aristotle's *mimesis* as a copy of reality, the faithful reproduction of life in art and as a consequence they proclaim postmodernism's failure to be mimetic in its relationship to the world, emphasizing the so-called *crisis of representation* as one of its key features.

In investigating Aristotle's coinage of *mimesis* in his study *Contingent Meanings: Postmodernist Fiction, Mimesis and the Reader* (1990), theorist Jerry A. Varsava attempts at demonstrating that postmodernist fiction is mimetic in its reflection of a significantly different reality: the present-day interrogation of values and truth. Starting from the assumption that Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* denotes something more than just a copy as it refers to processes of artistic construction and creation and relying on the relative quality of truth and value in our epoch, Varsava brings forward the mimetic feature of postmodern fiction which remains a representation of the present-day epistemological instability. Labelled as *private mimesis* by Varsava (52), this type of fictional representation, which is largely inaccessible to the reader as it insists on the writer's private cognitive and emotive perception of reality, challenges the proclaimed crisis of representation that critics announced with the advent of postmodernism.

As women writing about women, contemporary female novelists produce what Sally Robinson calls women's self-representation, a "*process by which subjects produce themselves as women within particular discursive contexts; it proceeds by a double movement: against normative constructions of Woman and toward new forms of representation that disrupt these normative constructions*" (Robinson 11).

As part of this process, the position that the female body occupies in the fictional discourse of contemporary female novelists is central, greatly due to the fact that the body bears the biological inscription which differentiates women from men. At this point, Judith Butler's study *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999) proves to be utterly relevant in the distinction it operates between sex as biological information carved on the body and gender as a culturally constructed artifice, „the repeated stylization of the body” (Butler 43). The body is viewed as the vehicle of both biological and cultural information as it represents the discursive arena of both sex and gender. As critic Jago Morrison remarks, „in thinking about gender and the body, ..., contemporary women's writing has been crucial in the development of new and radical perspectives... This interest in the complex relation between the body and culture has been a common feature of both theoretical and literary writing, as well as work which blurs the boundary between them” (Morrison 44).

This might be one of the reasons for which many contemporary British female novelists manifest a fascination with the female body as marker of the difference and with related concepts such as sexuality or gender identity, investigating through their fiction the covert possibilities of the bodily discourse. For many other feminists though, such as Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva, woman is outside representation, she can only exist negatively.

In Angela Carter's case, the discourse of the female body is much more extreme and violent as it translates a more radical and yet a much more subversive approach to the topic. Carter's novels fall into two essentially different categories when it comes to the discourse of the female body: the first includes her early novels, *Heroes and Villains* (1981), *The Magic Toyshop* (1981), *Shadow Dance* (1995), *Several Perceptions* (1995) *Love* (1988) and features the silent, obedient woman prototype, while the second gathers novels like *Nights at the Circus* (2003), *Wise Children*, *The Infernal Desire*, *Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1982), *The Passion of New Eve* (1982), foregrounding the freak-woman trope.

The *freak-woman trope* is used as an attack launched against the patriarchal canon, against the objectification of women by men and it functions as a topos of what Brian McHale calls the carnivalized literature (McHale 137). Carter's fiction exploits the transgressive potential of the female body by foregrounding interesting bodily allegories which concentrate around the freak trope and which are meant to subvert and parody the very idea of norm/canon.

As Jago Morrison very well notes in his investigation of contemporary fiction, „in fictional texts from the 1970s such as Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) there is huge amount of playful experimentation with body construction and alteration... for Carter, ..., it is important to consider the body not just as a given fact of life, but as a parchment on which dominant values are written” (Morrison 42-48). The anti-mythical figure of Mother that Carter foregrounds in *The Infernal Desire* *Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1982), *The Passion of New Eve* (1982) challenges the canonized

image of the protective, feminine, nurturing mother. Carter's Mothers are freak-women of huge physicality and immense appetite, women who perform rituals of violence and manifest a devouring sexuality and whose bodily appearance raises fear. To Carter, challenging canonized versions of women by undermining male constructions of female identity actually means deconstructing male objectification of women and the subversion is definitely directed towards the patriarchal norm which has initially consecrated such stereotypes.

The freak gallery that Carter's fiction puts on display is further enriched by her abhorrent yet extremely fascinating rewritings of traditional Western fairy-tales in a collection entitled *The Bloody Chamber* and issued in 1979, which is built around the figure of the *vampire woman*.

*Nights at the Circus* (1985) introduces another type of transgression of the body's limits, one that insists on its positive side, that which empowers and sets free. Fevvers, the female protagonist of the novel is an aerialist and awing-bearer who travels the world with a circus, turning her performance into the key-part of the show. The novel is set at the turn of the 20th century, inviting thus certain assumptions on Fevvers as a metaphorical character who might stand for the changing condition of women at the time. In a study of contemporary fiction by women, Sally Robinson argues that „*Nights at the Circus can be read as a feminist parody of the tendency in postmodernist theory to privilege what Linda Hutcheon calls the "ex-centric": the Other(s) of Western culture, who have, historically, had limited access to the place(s) of enunciation*” (Robinson 137).

That is why, perhaps, Fevvers stands at the center of the novel and everything revolves around her character and around her unusual physical features. Apart from the fact that she is winged, she is also an unusually massive woman who reminds of Rabelais's Gargantua. Her force and physical abnormality place her at the center of attention and of the narrative and therefore, according to Sally Robinson, „*Nights at the Circus is particularly concerned with enacting the contradictions between Woman as object of official narratives and women as subjects of self-narratives. The text enacts a conflict between the female protagonist's story and the story that a male reporter attempts to tell about her*” (Robinson 137).

As feminist critic Joanne M. Gass argues in an article on Carter's „*Nights at the Circus, Fevvers is defined by her body, by her outward appearance, just as the freaks and clowns are. As a freak, she has economic value; as a commodity, she is bought and sold by those who collect unique and exotic objects; she has no intrinsic value as a human being.*” (Gass 71)

The social statement that the novel makes, that Fevvers herself makes throughout the novel is that her difference does not consist in the fact that she is a woman, but in the fact that she is winged; she does not refuse to be objectified by the male gaze, on the contrary she chooses to remain part of the circus show and to display her physical abnormality as a sign of power, refusing thus to be reduced to the idea of Woman. Thus, the freak-trope functions as a

challenge of patriarchal constructions of women and to emphasize their transgressive nature and the futility of all attempts to categorize, label or confine them within rigid systems of thought, within restrictive sets of norms meant to regulate their bodies and experiences. The social patriarchal norm is once again defied and mocked at through the beautiful image of Fevvers who might be looked at as the herald of a new century and of course, a new millennium.

In *The Infernal Desire Machines...* excess parallels abnormality because, as one of the characters says at a certain point, „*the freak is the norm*” (Carter 111) here. The freak, as shown in the previous subchapter is by definition a deviation from the norm and it displays a transgressive character because it cannot be categorized. It escapes determination because there is no norm according to which it can be translated and made understandable or accessible and as a consequence it is feared and rejected on account of this inability to label it. The excessive number of freak-women that populate Carter’s novel completes the subversive operation that she performs on patriarchal norms and at the same time it echoes the more poignant freak figures introduced in *The Passion of New Eve*.

Both novels make use of several distinct categories of freaks, each taking a different step in the subversion of the very notion of norm. It is interesting to observe the very fine parallelism which exists in the display of these freak shows and to find out that almost each physically deviant character in one novel mirrors a similar counterpart in the other. As such, the above mentioned figure of Mother in *The Passion of new Eve* is echoed by an almost identical character in *The Infernal Desire Machines...*

The hermaphrodite and the transvestite foreground a sex-related deviation performing similar roles in challenging the gender category. Eve/Evelyn, the protagonist of *The Passion of New Eve*, moves with the help of plastic surgery from being a man to being a woman, while Tristessa, the famous female movie star is eventually exposed as a man dressed as woman; their ending up as a couple cunningly parodies the image of the original couple (Adam and Eve) and blurs gender differences.

The freak gallery is completed with the crippled, the disabled whose part in both novels, is performed, not surprisingly, by male figures. In this case, abnormality equals incompleteness and thus parody aims at the very core of patriarchy, revealing the incompleteness of the male perspective. Zero, the one-eyed, one-legged primitive Poet in *The Passion of New Eve* is paralleled by a more refined cripple: the Count in *The Infernal Desire Machines*.

It can be inferred that this taste for abnormality actually translates the transgressive character of Carter’s narratives; the fact that each and every individual in this gallery of freaks grotesquely mirrors and eventually subverts different aspects of patriarchal ideology accounts for such an aesthetics of the abnormal. As an allegory of the transgressive nature of the female body which

escapes definition and categorization, the freak trope underlines women's capacity to surpass stereotypical representations of women.

Several contemporary female writers have therefore fully exploited this extraordinary opportunity presented to them by the exploration of the freak trope. The insistence on the shouting discourse of the female freaks in their novels situates women in a position of power as creators of their own discourses. The violence of the freak discourse emerges as imperative in a world dominated by male-designed narratives.

Angela Carter's use of freak women is targeted against the patriarchal normative ideology. As she foregrounds circus women, vampire-women, freak-women who extract the very essence of patriarchy's master narratives only to later subvert and distort them, Angela Carter fictionalizes her ideological attack against the restrictive and exclusionary character of such discourses.

### **Identity construction and the anti-normative ideological statement**

Several postmodern theorists have revealed the intimate connection that exists between *difference* and *identity*. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, claims that in postmodernism, identity is defined precisely through difference (Hutcheon 135), whereas professor Mihaela Irimia, focusing on the same relationship, argues that difference is a guarantee of identity, being part of the refined mechanism of identity formation (Irimia 67). Professor Irimia calls it the *stimulating difference* exposing thus the constructive/progressive potential of the concept. In his recent study of difference, Mark Currie supports the same connection, explaining that „*the identity of things, people, places, groups, nations and cultures is constituted by the logics of both sameness and difference*” (Currie 3).

Referring to Ben Agger's statement in *Gender, Culture and Power: Towards a Feminist Postmodern Critical Theory*, „*to identify men as the enemy is already to decide in favour of a certain theory of male supremacy that is fatally flawed... I identify the enemy differently...in the hierarchization of value...*” (Agger 103).

Consequently, a logic which would equate Man with the enemy would be fatally flawed. The enemy was not the Man and what he stood for, but the intense colonization of thought by the traditional binary logic which was certainly reflected in the patriarchal institution as well. Consequently, women gradually discovered that they were not to fight men, they were to fight themselves, their own stereotypical representations which they were taught to learn and assume as such and then to pass on to their daughters. The operation of decolonizing the female does therefore involve discarding all those fixed and stereotypical roles that women have so long assumed as natural and trying to identify new means of expression for their true identities.

This is what feminist critic Alice Jardine calls *gynesis*, „*the transformation of woman and the feminine into verbs... the putting into discourse of women*” (Jardine 27). In

her study on the configurations of women and modernity, Jardine refers critically to our epistemological legacy, claiming that gynesis as defined above, as well as a proper discussion of sexual difference cannot be initiated from within the context of this legacy.

In practice, this proves to be extremely difficult because as the history of Western philosophical thought reveals, the roles women were forced into go back a very long time and moreover, they are claimed to transcend human intervention. Moira Gatens survey of Western philosophy<sup>1</sup> for instance, emphasizes the philosophers belief in the inherent inferior/negative quality of the Woman, starting way back with Plato and Aristotle for whom the woman only happened when something went wrong in the reproductive process, through Descartes and Rousseau and coming up to the 20th century. In a similar study entitled *The Man of Reason*, Genevieve Lloyd makes some relevant assumptions on the nature of truth and reason, which according to her, far from being unsexed and universal, are actually very different for men and women (Lloyd XVIII).

Moreover, a fair number of theorists have also revealed the heterogeneous character of the Woman category, all of them insisting on its diversity and pluralism as well as on the restrictive and exclusionary feature of the very notion of category. Judith Butler, for instance, launches a powerful attack against gender categories in her work *Gender Trouble* (1999), and against the category of women in particular, claiming that „*the insistence on the coherence and unity of this category has refused the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections where women are constructed*”(Butler, 19). Consequently, as a result of the reductive and restrictive nature of the Woman category which works to delimitate and close the very possibilities women are trying to explore, female identity requires the plural form *identities*, as the latter illustrates much more accurately the discourse of women nowadays.

As far as its relationship to the narrative is concerned, it is relevant to bring forward Mark Currie's observation that „*personal identity is not inside us; it is defined through difference and as narrative*” (Currie 17). To Currie, the *manufacture of identity is not a single originary occurrence, but a process of repetition in which the positionalities converge* (Currie 32).

The fictional work of contemporary British female novelists displays a profound concern with issues of identity and femaleness in a broad variety of sub-themes and types of discourses. Nevertheless, as highlighted in the introduction to this study, there is one main point of convergence that brings together all these discourses: the focus on difference. In this sense, Helene Cixous statement that „*feminine texts are texts that work on the difference*” (Toi 106) and the relationship she establishes between Derridas analysis of writing as difference on one hand and feminine writing on the other are particularly relevant.



As previously shown, Angela Carter's texts foreground female identity in various fictional representations which basically fall into two categories: the whispering woman who is typical of her early novels and the shouting woman or the freak woman who appears in her later fiction. Female identity as a fixed and immutable entity is mocked at in both cases, the whispering woman masquerading women's stereotypical representation, while the freak woman exaggerates the feminist ideal who conceives of women as Amazons.

Referring back to Mikhail Bakhtin's statement according to which all characters and narrators in a work of fiction are ideologues, since they voice the author's ideological standpoint, we may assume that Carter's identity construction is aimed at exposing all normative patterns related to gender identity as externally constructed and imposed by male-originated discourses such as history, religion or literature.

### **The discourse of the characters (1). Silent/whispering characters**

Having a voice and being therefore entitled to a discourse represent two essential sources of power and as shown above they were exclusively male attributes up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ensuring men's monopoly on knowledge. Foregrounding voiceless women, women who accept men's imperialistic domination and categorization becomes therefore a subversive device in the economy of the fiction written by contemporary women novelists. Set in contrast with shouting women, these whispering women masquerade women's lack of resistance to male ideological canonization.

With Angela Carter, the trope of the whispering/voiceless women acquires extreme connotations as it is closely connected to female sexuality. Carter's focus is the male configuration of female sexuality and women's objectification by men. Her earlier novels extensively parody these issues by foregrounding passive, voiceless female protagonists who display a huge potential for objectification. Novels such as *Shadow Dance* (1967), *The Magic Toyshop* (1968) and *Love* (1969) fictionalize the patriarchal constructs of femininity and femaleness by foregrounding women of marginal status (orphans, prostitutes) who are perceived as sexual toys by men. These whispering/voiceless protagonists of Carter's earlier novels are described as instrumental to men and consequently, their identities are merely male projections. Coextensively, their sexuality is seen as passive and latent, powerfully contrasting the female protagonists in Carter's later novels who stand at the other extreme: violent, aggressive and assertive. They illustrate what critic Sally Robinson called "*Carter's critique of desire as domination*" (Robinson 107) where women are subversively represented consistently with the male objectification of women. Their voicelessness silently precedes the violent

shouting of Carter's other women, completing thus her provocative challenge of norms and patterns.

### **The discourse of the characters (2). Shouting characters**

The previous discussion of the freak trope and the investigation of its significance to the feminine discourse has revealed the preoccupation that women writers manifest for women's potential to initiate and support a discourse from a stance of power. As an allegory of the transgressive nature of the female body which escapes definition and categorization, the freak trope underlines women's capacity to surpass stereotypical representations of women.

Rosi Braidotti's definition of the monster as „*a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-a-vis the norm, the monster has the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror*” (Braidotti 67) brings into focus an essential aspect to the present discussion of the freak: its visibility and its subsequent potential to make powerful statements. Despite its exclusion from central structures and its purposeful marginalization, the freak remains an entity whose abnormality paradoxically puts it into a central position at certain times and under certain circumstances. When institutionalized, the freak becomes the central object of display due to the visibility of its difference/deviation from the norm and consequently, its discourse far from being whispered is always shouted.

Several contemporary female writers have therefore fully exploited this extraordinary opportunity presented to them by the exploration of the freak trope. The insistence on the shouting discourse of the female freaks in their novels situates women in a position of power as creators of their own discourses. The violence of the freak discourse emerges as imperative in a world dominated by male-designed narratives.

As discussed in a previous subchapter which investigated the various representations of the female body in Angela Carter's fiction, her use of freak women is targeted against the patriarchal normative ideology. As she foregrounds circus women, vampire -women, freak-women who extract the very essence of patriarchal master narratives only to later subvert and distort them, Angela Carter fictionalizes her ideological attack against the restrictive and exclusionary character of such discourses.

Her collection of fairy-tales rewritings, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) is meaningfully structured around the vampire figure which fictionally supports Carter's subversive feeding on ancient, central discourses which she distorts and deforms. Carter's vampire protagonists empower themselves through their discourses of power: their huge appetite, their abnormally active sexuality, their capacity to become central to the narrative through a process of initiation and transformation.

As previously demonstrated, Carter's exploitation of the freak trope develops further in her novel *Nights at the Circus*, where right from the title the reader is warned that he is to enter a space where excess and abnormality have turned into the norm. The circus is actually a means to institutionalize the freak and to put it on display it for other peoples entertainment and awe. Next to the carnival, the circus functions as a therapeutic display of the potential transgression of norms that humans might undergo; whereas the carnival allows for a temporary cancellation of all rules and conventions, of all norms through the internal appropriation of a completely different identity (sexual, social, political, etc.), the circus and especially the freak show allow for an external contemplation of the Other, the Monster, the Freak. In this case, normal individuals contemplate in the freak their own possibility of transgressing the norm and this both frightens and inflames them.

As previously shown, Angela Carter's fiction does qualify for what Brian McHale defines as the postmodern carnivalized literature and her extensive use of freak-figures supports McHales statement that „*carnivalized literature has also absorbed directly from popular carnival practices their characteristic grotesque imagery of the human body: the inversion of the hierarchy of "upper" and "lower" parts of the body, the transgression of the bodys limits through grotesque excesses of ingestion, defecation and copulation, the dismemberment or "explosion" of the body, and so on*” (McHale 137).

Fevvers, Carter's winged aerialist fictionalizes women's potential to make themselves visible and heard, to acquire a position from where their discourses can be legitimized. Fevvers belongs to the circus, an institution which puts her on display not because she is a woman but because she is winged. Her willing acceptance of the fact that she is an object of display empowers her as a woman as she is in the position to make her voice be heard.

As Lizzie, Fevvers companion and fellow anarchist, tells her:

„*the baker can't make a loaf out of your privates, duckie, and that's all you'd have to offer him in exchange for a crust if nature hadn't made you the kind of spectacle people pay good money to see. All you can do to earn your living is to make a show of yourself. You're doomed to that. You must give pleasure to the eye, or else you're good for nothing. For you, it's always a symbolic exchange in the marketplace; you couldn't say you were engaged in productive labour, now, could you, girl?*” (Carter 185)

As mentioned before, Fevvers inhabits those marginal institutions of society--the whorehouse, the freak show, and the circus- all of them containing those elements that threaten to disrupt the social order and legitimate the exercise of power. Each of these institutions puts its inhabitants on display and turns them into commodity, to be bought or seen for entertainment and public consumption, safely confined behind walls or bars or within the carefully prescribed circle of the circus ring.

Joanna M. Gass admits in her investigation of Carter's novel that „*Nights at the Circus is a novel about the ways in which these dominant, frequently male-centered*

*discourses of power marginalize those whom society defines as freaks (madmen, clowns, the physically and mentally deformed, and, in particular, women) so that they may be contained and controlled because they are all possible sources of the chaotic disruption of established power” (Gass 71).*

To conclude, the analysis of Angela Carter’s fiction reveals that her extensive use of freaks, the foregrounding of abnormality and excess as norms is actually aimed at the very idea of power, norm, center. And since the norm she is interested in is undoubtedly the patriarchal norm, her challenge is definitely gender-related. If we are to consider once more Sally Robinsons words, *„the carnivalesque world of Carter’s text is not, as Linda Hutcheon suggests, simply “the pluralized and paradoxical metaphor for a decentered world where there is only ex-centricity” (Poetics, 61). „Rather, this marginalized world exists only in relation to the centers of cultural power” (Robinson 127).*

### **Who Speaks? The Discourse of Narrators and Author**

I believe that Mikhail Bakhtin’s considerations on the authorial instance of any work of fiction is the most suitable way to start this chapter which intends to investigate the ways in which the author and his alter-egos, the narrators, function in the economy of the narrative. In his *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin claimed that *„the author cannot be separated from the images and characters, since he is an indispensable part of them, only the image of the author can be separated from the images of the characters” (Bakhtin 116).* It follows then that the author is the most important instance in any narrative, since he actually originates the text and everything in the text does eventually refer back to him.

Yet, Roland Barthes’s proclamation of the death of the author has remained a landmark in the 20<sup>th</sup> century literary theory. Nevertheless, more and more theoreticians are currently involved in the recuperation of the author as the crucial instance in the production of the narrative. As a conclusion to her study *Invisible Suthor*, Christine Brooke-Rose for instance claims that *„the author is back and responsible for every sentence in the tex” (Brooke-Rose 131).* To Ruth Ginsburg and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, the author is doubly determined, *„both an agent responsible for the text and a position within it,..., a heterogeneous threshold conceptpointing both outside and inside”(Ginsburg, Rimmon-Kenan 70-72).* The author engages thus both into a relationship with the text and one with the readers reinforcing his mediating stance.

Mediation is also the key-word in the case of the narrator who facilitates the author-reader and text-reader relationships. Basically, the narrator is the agent who narrates, but literary theory has made apparently clear cut divisions within the narrator category, depending on narrator’s involvement in the narrative, their visibility or their reliability.

In her study *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan devises four different criteria according to which one can classify narrators. The narrative level, the extent of participation in the story, the degree of perceptibility and reliability become landmarks according to which one can characterize and identify narrators in a narrative text (Rimmon-Kenan 95-101).

In Angela Carter's case, gender seems to be fifth very important determinant when it comes to analyzing the narrating instance and attempt to construct an interpretation of its function inside the narrative. As mentioned above, Carter's early novels make use of extradiegetic narrators who are not involved in the narratives and are situated one level above the story they narrate. Moreover, there is complete silence as to who is the person telling the story, which makes the reader easily confuse author and narrator and even more, give in to the lures of omniscience, assuming that the narrator is completely reliable.

On the other hand, her later novels mark a shift in paradigm and make use of first person narrators who are situated both outside and inside the narrative, being thus both extradiegetic and diegetic. As both recollecting their past experiences and thus reflecting back to the past and being actually involved in their own stories as privileged characters, Carter's narrators are far from reliable, and yet readers have no other option but to trust them completely, as they provide the only stable coordinate in worlds that defy traditional logic and common sense.

As previously mentioned, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve* are problematic narratives especially due to the ongoing violation of all norms and codes and to the proliferation of the fantastic that leaves no chance to successful attempts of understanding them relying on the basic tools of traditional logic. Nevertheless, readers have to recuperate meaning and as shown above they engage in the sense-making process as soon as they start reading.

Consequently, Carter cunningly foregrounds her first person narrators as the only instances in the position to accelerate the sense-making mechanism. Yet, Carter's move from an unidentifiable third person extradiegetic narrator to first person intradiegetic male narrators is highly subversive, as it particularly points to the illegitimacy of male-originated discourses and to their inauthenticity, exposing them as fallacies. The protagonists narratives are actually private fantasies that go against all norms and conventions and which are highly unreliable.

As mentioned before, Carter's last novel, *Wise Children*, represents a further stage in her subversive attack against patriarchal ideology and discourses, as it foregrounds a female first person narrator who looks back at her own life, but also at the lives of other people that are beyond her epistemological possibilities, and who nevertheless engages in telling their stories and her own assuming an authoritative and superior stance. Mocking at her own poor

memory and doubting her own capacity of properly arranging the past events, Dora Chance actually voices Carter's distrust of any narratives claim to objectivity or authenticity. To her, all narratives are human constructs, fictions, and as such they can have similar claims to truth; consequently, Dora's narrative may be equated in Carter's view with that of history or myth.

### **The importance of focalization: who sees and who is seen?**

In narrative theory, focalization appears to be the most important element in the narrative, next to the narrating instance, as it provides readers with crucial information for the sense-making process. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan defines it as „*the angle of vision through which the story is filtered in the text and is verbally formulated by the narrator*” (Rimmon-Kenan 43). Similarly, Mieke Bal claims that „*narrator together with focalization determine what has been called narration*” (Bal 19).

As such, focalization provides important clues as to the authorial intention and quite meaningfully, I would say, as to the ideology behind the narrative. As we have mentioned above, any author is an ideologue (Bakhtin 333) and this proves to be utterly important in the case of female and feminist writers whose fiction does make ideological statements. To quote David Herman, „*focalization controls which events are revealed and in what sequence*” (Herman 54-5), being thus much more than the traditional point of view. In the light of the above said, focalization becomes crucial when analyzing the narrative discourse in feminine texts.

According to Rimmon-Kenan, there is a distinction between narrator and focalizer; the narrator's main task being to tell the story, while the focalizer's being to select the perspective and determine the focus; yet there are numerous instances when these two may overlap (Rimmon-Kenan 74). It is important to note that Rimmon-Kenan mentions that „*there is no difference between third person centre of consciousness (narrator) and first person retrospective narration, in both the focalizer is a character*” (Rimmon-Kenan 74).

In the case of Angela Carter's fiction, focalization is used to make ideological statements and this is valid for both her earlier novels and for her masterpieces. We have already mentioned that the earlier novels are different from the later in that they make use of third person narration, where the focalizer, i.e. the instance which sees, filters and selects is unmarked, making readers assume that they face an instance of omniscience. Traditionally, omniscience is perceived as reliable, as the narrator's involvement in the story is of zero degree and as such he is not susceptible of subjectively making a selection or expressing opinion. This does not happen in Angela Carter's narratives, especially due to focalization, which reveals plenty of information on the narrative's biased perspective and further on, on the marked ideological character of these novels.

In his reference study on *Narrative Discourse*, Gerard Genette makes quite a helpful distinction among various types of focalization, distinguishing between nonfocalized narratives or zero focalization, characteristic of the classical narrative, internal focalization where one or several characters help filter the narrative and external focalization where the hero performs in front of readers (Genette 189-190). Carter's novels display various instances of internal focalization, even though some of the earliest such as *Shadow Dance* or *Love* may be easily mistaken for examples of zero focalization, mainly due to the complete silence with regard to the narrating instance which raises false pretenses to omniscient objectivity.

Within the category of internal focalization, Genette operates a further distinction according to the number of focalizers that filter the events and organize the structure of the narrative proper. Consequently, he speaks of fixed, variable and multiple internal focalizations, all of them relying on the characters/narrators in a certain narrative (Genette 189-190). Quite meaningfully, Carter's first novels represent instances of variable internal focalization, featuring male focalizers who determine the sequence of events in the story. In *Shadow Dance*, focalization shifts from Huneybuzzard, the dark male figure of the novel to Morris, his best friend and alter-ego who functions as the positive pole. They both focus on their relationship to the same woman and to each other, offering thus different versions of the same events. Meaningfully again, the female protagonist does not benefit from the advantages of being a focalizing subject, as Carter only features her as the focalized object. The situation is familiar to feminist theories which insist on the dominant and colonizing character of the male gaze, which originates desire and the passive stance of the woman who is being looked at and who turns thus into an object of desire and a recipient of male colonizing ideology. Through focalization, Carter reiterates the theory of the male gaze and at the same time masquerades the politics of gender power.

The pattern is repeated in *Love* which features a similar triangle of love and deception where male characters are again the focalizers who take turns in reflecting on the same events and where the only female character, although constantly the object of focalization, is completely silent and inert, her only active impulse being her act of committing suicide.

Things change in *The Magic Toyshop* and in *Heroes and Villains*, where female characters start to take turns in the focalizing process. In this sense they compete with male characters and introduce thus a more powerful subversion of the traditional male perspective that actually grounds traditional Western thought.

Carter's later and more complex novels realize the shift to fixed internal focalization, where one character performs the part of the focalizer, discarding thus any pretense of the narrative to objectivity. The focalizers are in these

novels both narrator and protagonist, which leaves no room to reliability or impartiality. In *The Passion of New Eve*, the narrator/focalizer is the double gendered Eve/Evelyn, a man who artificially transforms into a woman and experiences thus both being the originator of the male gaze and its recipient. In an essay which discusses the novel, critic Alison Lee observes that „*Eve is narrating in retrospect, yet she is both the I and the not-I narrator...she is extrabeterodiegetic if she has indeed become a woman separate from Evelyn, but intrabomodiegetic if Evelyn is still part of Eve*” (Mezei 244). Since according to feminist critic Kathy Mezei, „*focalization or persistence of vision creates a political framework*” (Mezei 15) and „*women writers have been cognizant of the need to match their subject matter and subjectivity to an appropriate narrative*” (Mezei 7), it follows that Carter’s use of focalization strategies is definitely gender related.

In *Wise Children*, the focalizer agent is Dora Chance, a former musical actress who reflects back on her life but also on the lives of others and who represents the only fixed internal female focalizer in Carter’s fiction and unfortunately also the last. What is interesting is that Dora provides various versions of the same stories, as she admits that her memory is faulty and completely unreliable. She serves thus to illustrate Carter’s strong belief that there is no such thing as authentic narrative and that they all are to certain degrees fictions.

With respect to what is seen, focalizers share the same interest in gender related issues, with a particular focus on the politics of gender power. Gender relations are parodied and mocked at, being exposed as artificial and externally imposed and the stress falls on patriarchal ideology and its discourses which have helped inscribe the stereotypical roles assigned to men and women. Carter uses thus focalization to serve her subversive purposes and to expose once again, from a different perspective, the inadequacy of norms and patterns.

### **The reliable narrator –a fiction?**

Coined by Wayne C. Booth, the notion of reliable narrator refers to that situation in which the narrator speaks and acts consistently with the norms of the work (Booth 152) and of the implied author; contrastingly, unreliable narrators are considered those who violate these norms and distance themselves to various degrees from these systems of norms.

Carter’s narrators are all unreliable, but there are different degrees in their unreliability; as shown above, the early novels foreground third person narration in such away as it is impossible to determine who the narrator is. There are false pretenses to omniscience, as the narrators of these novels do have some access to the character’s minds and do share knowledge that is beyond a person’s natural means of obtaining it, yet there are many more instances when narrators are denied access to crucial information for the



narrative. The same narrators may be susceptible of reliability because of the marked lack of overt indications in the novels that they might hold back information or in any way manipulate the readers, but our previous discussion of Carter's use of focalization certainly discards this assumption.

In the case of Carter's later novels, narrator reliability is overtly denied as these novels feature first person narrators who are at the same time the protagonists of their own narratives. Obviously, Dora Chance's narrative in *Wise Children* is a mockery towards reliability, as the narrator herself comically alludes to her incapacity of remembering things and as a consequence she provides several versions of the same story; or, as she engages into narrating other people's stories to which she had no direct access. To continue, Desiderio's narrative in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* starts by deconstructing the very notion of reliable narrator, when he says „I must gather together all the confusion of experience and arrange it in order, just as it happened, beginning at the beginning.” (Carter 11)

According to a recent essay which discusses Carter's novel, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman attempts a subversion of narrative, on the grounds that narrative is it self ideological inform, even before we begin to consider its content,... , that narrative attempts to bind together and naturalize the disunited subject and that this attempt is made at the service of specific societal interests* (Punter 222). The novel's narrator, Desiderio, „is anagrammatically ambivalent: the name contains the desired I but also the desired O, and this encapsulates the problems of subjectivity which the text explores” (Punter 222). The narrator's reliability is thus discarded although this might leave the readers alone with a very ambiguous and subversive text that they have to decode and decipher.

Consequently, Carter's fiction exposes the fictitiousness of the reliable narrator as part of her ideological challenge of all norms and canons. In this case, the reliable narrator is perceived as pertaining to the classical male originated literary discourse and as such, it is attacked and subverted.

### **When the author is a wicked witch**

Various narratological theories have largely debated the status of the author, his position in narrative production and his impact on the narrative. Theorists have thus been able to differentiate among several facets of authorship, basically relying on the final product. Thus we speak of the producer of the narrative who should by no means be mistaken with the author, the producer of the text that encloses the narrative, whom theorists have decided to call *the implied author* and the real-life author who is described as *historical author*. Actually, all these distinctions refer to the same authorial stance which is behind the text and which may or may not be visible.

Wayne Booth claimed that „*even a novel in which no narrator is dramatized creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently pairing his fingernails. This implied author is always distinct from the real man... in so far as the novel does not directly refer to this author, there will be no distinction between him and the implied, undramatized narrator*” (Booth 147). Also according to Booth, authors have the privilege of privilege, i.e. they favour certain characters or events in connection with their final ideological and artistic goal (Booth 155). We have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that although Barthes announced the death of the author in the 1960s, according to contemporary theorists the author is back, alive and kicking, being responsible for everything in his text.

Angela Carter proves to be a wicked author, in that by hiding behind unmarked or, on the contrary, first person narrators, she plays wicked mind games with her readers. Some of her novels compulsorily require a repetitive reading, as readers find themselves unable to compose a meaningful whole as a result of the sense-making process. Carter plays with narrative devices and destabilizes meanings precisely as part of her subversive project to challenge totalizing versions and concepts of the narrative itself. Her use of narrative discourse, her character design, her uses and abuses of focalization and her choice of narrative agents are all meant to tease readers and to extract them from the comfortable position of being the mere recipients of the narrative. Readers are thus forced to become part of the writing process in the sense that they meet the writer halfway and produce their own interpretations of the narrative.

In a powerful study which discusses the nature of the reading process, Peter Rabinowitz defines reading as a „*conventional activity*” (Rabinowitz 27) in the sense that readers are supposed to decode a narrative relying on a set of conventions that are grounded in their previous knowledge. According to Rabinowitz, these conventions „*precede the text and make discovery possible*” (Rabinowitz 27) and „*they serve as a kind of assumed contract between author and reader; they specify the grounds on which the intended reading should take place*” (Rabinowitz 43). Carter breaks the contract precisely because her fictional work goes against the very idea of norm or rule which is subverted and exposed as artificial; consequently, although apparently her fiction does conform to some rules of narrative organization and to conventions related to genre, discourse or characterization, these are masqueraded and mocked at.

Hence it is worth mentioning that two years after Angela Carter’s death, in 1994, Lorna Sage began her most acclaimed tribute-book on Angela Carter, referring quite interestingly to her surprising collection of fairy-tales, *The Bloody Chamber*, and claiming that Carter had assumed in this book and not only, the role of fairy godmother and witch (Sage 5). Sage was actually alluding to Carter’s infamous subversive project of rewriting some of the most famous traditional

fairy-tales in ways that would suit her ideological challenge of master narratives and central discourses.

To conclude, it would be perhaps interesting to refer back to Rabinowitz's study and to one precise remark he makes about the author-reader relationship: „*authors can be quite specific about the acts of signification that they intend readers to perform; they rely on a set of unspoken agreements to get their readers to apply the correct rules of signification to texts*” (Rabinowitz 110). In Carter's case, the very idea of rule is undermined and there is no specification whatsoever about what readers should do with the text. Consequently, there is a multitude of possible significations of her texts and a plurality of fictional universes, all of them equally entitled to truthfulness as they are all human constructs.

### **The Reactionary-Revisionist Chronotope: The Treatment of Space and Time**

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan agreed in her study on Narrative Fiction that „time is not only a recurrent theme in a great deal of fiction, it is also a constituent factor of both story and text” (Rimmon-Kenan 44). On the other hand, Gerard Genette emphasized the importance of the spatial coordinate in narrative dynamics, claiming that „written narratives exist in space and as space, the time needed to consume them is the time needed for crossing it” (Genette 34). It follows then that both time and space are crucial to narrative construction in very many ways, as there are various versions of time and space, depending on how one chooses to contextualize them: the time and space of the text, of the story, etc.

A huge contribution to the treatment of space and time in fiction was Mikhail Bakhtin's coinage of the **chronotope**, defined as the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature (Bakhtin 15). According to Bakhtin, „the chronotope emerges as a centre for concretizing representation; all the novels abstract elements gravitate towards the chronotope” (Bakhtin 22). The chronotope is therefore one of the organizing principles of fictional discourse, one that encompasses both the spatial and the temporal coordinates that together create a specific matrix for the narrative itself.

In the case of Angela Carter's fiction, this matrix or pattern is best defined by subversive revision. Time and space are revisited and reshaped to fit the ideological statement of her novels. Both the temporal and the spatial dimensions undergo a process of defamiliarization that extracts them from the commonsense experience. Through her novels, Carter creates fantastic topologies and indeterminate time in order to undermine all claims to rational, logical chronology and to human mastery over space that traditional Western thought made.

### Mapping the unknown, reinventing space

Creating a dystopia (negative utopia) implies setting the narrative in a space and time that potential readers would perceive as much worse than their present situation. Moreover, the construction of a futuristic dystopia further requires the intensive use of the writer's imagination who finds himself/herself in the position of mapping the unknown.

Angela Carter has often been accused of a violent use of the imagination which has resulted in a provocative and extremely original body of fiction. Her use of fantasy as the dominant mode for her novels suggests her revisionist approach to reality which according to critic Nancy Walker, who explores the implications of irony and fantasy in the contemporary fiction by women, characterizes the fiction of writers who „launch a fundamental critique of the values of the culture they inhabit” (Walker 154).

Angela Carter's treatment of space is as original and as revolutionary as her entire body of work, as she designs alternative realities where nothing remains recognizable and where defamiliarization is complete. Space is deconstructed and reconstructed through the violent use of the imagination and the result qualifies as what Brian McHale, drawing on Foucault, calls *heterotopia*, the destroyal of the world's syntax (McHale 44).

Carter initiates the subversion of common sense space in her novel *Heroes and Villains* (1969) which unfolds in a post-catastrophic world, opposing the steel and concrete villages of the Professors to the savage jungle of the Barbarians. Space as we know it is destroyed prior to the beginning of the narrative, as apocalypse is in the past tense. For Carter, space signifies both politically and ideologically, as the space she creates mirrors the binary division between rational and irrational thought. Marianne, the female protagonist of the novel oscillates between the two extremes, as she is a Professor's daughter and becomes a Barbarian's woman. Throughout the novel, there are instances when Carter subversively pictures Marianne inside the household, taking care of domestic chores, yet she is eventually exposed as a woman to be feared. Carter's spatial construction „interrogates the binaries of self/other, body/mind, male/female, nature/ culture, passion/reason, or civilized/ barbarian, binaries informing patriarchal institutions and representations that serve to justify exploitation and domination of one group by another” (Karpinski 137). The binary is dissolved through Carter's introduction of the Out People, malformed hybrid creatures who inhabit *no place*. They are marginal to both the Professors and the Barbarians and as Eva Karpinski suggests in her analysis of Carter's *Heroes and Villains*, they are „associated with excrement, sores, leprosy, andpox, suggest leaking boundaries of the body. Their fantastic deformations, animal features, and mutant forms also confound the boundaries between human and nonhuman as well as those between the sexes” (Karpinski 137).

In fact, these marginal and transgressive creatures introduce subversion in a very interesting way, as they inhabit a space which remains invisible but is feared, being thus the promoters of Carter's fictional challenge of logically-constructed space. Karpinski argues that the Out People are politically and socially dangerous as they represent a permanent threat of contamination and at the same time they are the embodiment of the collapse of social order. Their insertion into the narrative translates Carter's critique of binary logic which is seen as the core of patriarchal ideology. Meaningfully, the novel's protagonist discovers that both the Professors and the Barbarians' spaces, although the beneficiary of a certain social order are male-dominated and as such they confine women to domestic roles. By way of contrast the in-between, the transgressive nowhere and everywhere of the Out People opens infinite possibilities and may be troped as feminine as it replicates the ambiguity of the female body.

The *Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* (1972) continues Carter's challenge of common sense space and binary logic. According to Cornel Bonca, „space and time have nothing to do with the spatiotemporal manifold most of us like to think we move around in” (Bonca 56). Space becomes the product of the protagonist's desires and as such it is in permanent transformation, constantly violating the logical boundaries: „the city [is] no longer the conscious production of humanity; it [has] become the arbitrary realm of dream” (Carter 270). Extensively exploiting the conventions of the science-fiction sub-genre, Carter launches an ideological critique against the abuses of logic and the wrongs of hierarchized systems.

Initially set somewhere in South America, the novel resists any recognition when it comes to spatial landmarks, illustrating thus what Jerry Varsava called *private mimesis*, a means of artistic representation characteristic to postmodern art which resists recognition. As the narrative progresses, Desiderio, the protagonist and narrator, generates endless unrecognizable worlds which are inhabited by odd, fantastic creatures that most of the times allude to mythical figures. Space is deconstructed and reconstructed numberless times and as a consequence it loses its essential attribute which allows people to refer to it: stability.

To conclude, it becomes evident that Carter's treatment of space has an ideological function as it subverts the stable character of the spatial dimension and supports the subversion of the binary system of thought which characterizes the Western logic.

### **Revising topologies, asserting the difference**

Beside creating entirely new territories which could fictionally support her narratives, Angela Carter is equally involved in revising already existing space as a reaction towards the traditional way of perceiving space as a fixed and

at the same time external, independent coordinate which would somehow objectively contribute to people's identity formation.

Some of her novels unfold in previously familiar spaces which are defamiliarized and then awarded with new attributes. For instance, *The Passion of New Eve* (1979) opposes an anarchic, chaotic and violent New York to a remote, equally violent and exclusively female Beulah. By foregrounding these spatial poles to support her narrative, Angela Carter returns to her attack of binary logic previously launched in *Heroes and Villains*. New York is built as the epitome of rational patriarchal thought and has nothing in common with the common knowledge city of today:

„It [New York] was . . . an alchemical city. It was chaos, dissolution, nigredo, night. Built on a grid like the harmonious cities of the Chinese Empire, planned, like those cities, in strict accord with the dictates of a doctrine of reason, the streets had been given numbers and not names out of a respect for pure function, had been designed in clean, abstract lines, discrete blocks, geometric intersections, to avoid just those vile repositories of the past, sewers of history, that poison the lives of European cities” {Carter 16}.

By way of contrast, the unknown territory of Beulah fetishizes the female body in its round shaped territory. The protagonist of the novel moves from one space to the other as the meaningfully suffers a change of sex, turning from man into woman. Both New York and Beulah are dystopic settings as neither of them provides a homely environment to the protagonist. In her construction of a *heterotopia*, Angela Carter deconstructs space through a process that McHale calls interpolation, „the introduction of an alien space within a familiar space” (McHale 72). Preserving the American setting and New York as a city, Carter introduces Beulah, a feminine imaginary space somewhere in the desert. Space destruction is realized through the same fictional operation of setting the narrative in the post-Armageddon world which obviously allows for the unlimited use of the imagination.

### **Recollecting the Future: Heroes and Villains, The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman, The Passion of New Eve**

The extreme critique of official male-written history is performed by those women writers who set their narratives in the future, avoiding thus already written records and allowing themselves complete fictional freedom. Not revisionist but extremely reactionary, this temporal displacement towards the future requires the intense use of the imagination and at the same time launches a powerful critique of all the present-day values and norms. This fictional move towards the future definitely originates from the utopia, which sought perfection in future worlds, yet it is entirely postmodern as it displays what Brian McHale calls a powerful *ontological dominant* (McHale10) in its investigation of essential problems of the human being. In its absorption of some topoi of science fiction

literature, the postmodern dystopia privileges the temporal displacement instead of spatial displacement and consequently foregrounds the future temporal coordinate as an extremely rewarding fictional area. Postmodern writers opt for the futuristic dystopia in their challenge of stable reference points and in their ontological interrogation of the world.

In their turn, contemporary women writers make use of the postmodern dystopia to a slightly different purpose; their fictional representation of possible futures evades already written versions of the past and at the same time explores a concept-free dimension which escapes colonization by male thought and therefore allows for great fictional freedom. Novels which are built on the paradigm of the futuristic dystopia also launch a subversive attack against the very concept of norm and canon, as future is a realm of infinite possibilities and not of certainties.

Angela Carter is one of the contemporary female writers whose extremely original fiction explores the infinite possibilities of the future in a manner that baffled male and female critics altogether. Her imagination set loose produced some of the most shocking yet rewarding British feminine novels of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which investigate profoundly the fictional possibilities of the fantastic genre. In her study *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women* (1990), critic Nancy Walker underlines the reactionary stance of the fantastic genre which most of the times provides an alternative to an already existent and contested reality promoting "*an imaginative recreation of experience*" (Walker 123). Drawing on Rosemary Jackson's study *Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion*, Brian McHale insists on the dialogical character of fantasy which performs an interrogation of the real, suspending both belief and disbelief and instauring a hesitation between the possible and the impossible. Moreover, the fantastic genre initiates a critique of existing norms and structures by providing alternative models and this is precisely what some of Carter's novels do.

The 1969 *Heroes and Villains* is a futuristic dystopia which foregrounds a post-apocalyptic world where people are strictly confined to certain categories: the Barbarians are those who have power, the Professors are those in possession of knowledge whereas the Out People are those who have neither. This rigid division of society transparently mocks at the perfect utopian society and at the same time subverts the notion of hierarchy from the very title. Carter's novel, which mirrors a chaotic and violent future where wars are endless, parodies the very concept of power, exposing its possible outcomes and proposing instead a version of non-hierarchical structures which allow people diversity and freedom. The novel brings into focus the immense flaws of the binary system of thought by foregrounding two essentially different social groups, the Professors (the Heroes) and the Barbarians (the Villains) and by insisting on the ongoing and endless violence generated between them by irreconcilable difference. As Eva

Karpinski points out in her analysis of the novel, „*the dystopian romance proves to be a suitable vehicle for Carters didactic allegory of the relationship between the sexes, an allegory, one might add, that uses the utopian ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in order to rewrite the myth of the Fall as it structures Western representations of the social order and sexual difference*” (Karpinski 137).

The dystopian vein is further developed in *The Infernal Desire Machine of Dr. Hoffman* (1972) which sketches some of the characters that will be central to Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* (1982). *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* is written in the vein of magic realism, completely dissolving the boundaries between reality and fantasy and creating a protean world of infinite possibilities. The narrative is the protagonists recollection of his past/future adventures and as such, it subsumes dream-like events that cannot be chronologically connected and that create a kaleidoscopic, psychedelic vision of the future. Desiderio, the novels male protagonist and narrator fictionalizes Carter’s distrust of grand narratives and of totalitarian, imperialistic systems of thought as he falls victim to his own persecution of Dr.Hoffmans irrational and surreal world. By opposing the Minister’s rational, scientific and colonial ideology to Dr. Hoffman’s liberating irrationality, Carter refers back to the pattern in *Heroes and Villains* and parodies the confinement promoted by a binary vision upon the world, as both the Minister and Dr. Hoffman „*are complicit in the same ideological agenda: they both position Man as an imperialist subject whose desire gives free reign to exploitation and domination*” as Sally Robinson notes (Christensen 63).

The *Passion of New Eve* is also a satire of the conventional utopia, mocking at utopias perfect patriarchal society and contrasting it with a dystopian, matriarchal world where women are both aggressors and victims. The novel foregrounds Evelyn/Eve, the double sexed narrator who is confronted to this world which polarizes opposing values and who literally witnesses the violence of such a binary division himself/herself. Through her protagonist, Carter interrogates the very category of gender which far from being fixed is exposed as unstable and mutable.

Feminist critic Lucy Sargisson concludes her analysis of Carter’s novel stating that „*The Passion of New Eve rejects all attempts to force ones vision of perfection on to the world; it refutes the ideal society and shows the results of utopia: chaos, violence destruction*” (Sargisson 23). As mentioned before, far from being a partisan of the restrictive binary ideology, Carter’s subversive attacks are launched precisely against this ideology which divides the world into two opposing halves. She therefore sets her futuristic dystopias in worlds constructed precisely on the pattern of the polar binary and *The Passion of New Eve* makes no exception as it opposes a patriarchal, phallic and imperial New York to a matriarchal, female-shaped, chaotic Beulah, a territory in the desert which is inhabited and ruled by women. Yet, New York is overtaken by crime, violence, chaos and anarchy, parodying the image of the perfect city, while Beulah presents no traces of



femininity as its inhabitants are trained in guerilla fighting and practise rituals of cruelty. Thus, Carter opposes form and content and exposes the fatal flaws of the binary logic which splits the world in two, leaving no chance to truce.

Consequently, Carter's violent recollections of the future emerge as witty allegories of the patriarchal mode of thinking as well as postmodern rewritings of a conventional patriarchal discourse, the utopia.

### **Intertextuality or Literary Vampirism? Subverting Master Narratives**

Intertextuality as part of the postmodern phenomenon comes to be defined differently by the two main perspectives that we have exposed at the beginning of the present study. The first identifies in it a means of destruction and deconstruction of the previous texts, values, norms, the perfect instrument of rejection and denial, a mechanism of pure subversion which functions to serve an entirely negative and destructive goal. By way of contrast, the narrowness of this viewpoint that is best represented by Ihab Hassan's famous lists of opposing features that allegedly represent modernism and postmodernism is counterbalanced by the broader vision of the second perspective that grounds the definition of intertextuality in Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of *dialogue* and *polyphony* as key features of today's fiction. Laurie Finke contextualizes Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia in the frame of feminist theory which is quite relevant to the present study, claiming that "*if patriarchy has created the illusion of monologic utterances monopolized by men, then feminists can dispel that illusion by appropriating the notion of heteroglossia, highlighting the dialogic nature of all discourse, insisting that those contested voices be heard*" (Finke 14). As such, intertextuality becomes a means of both foregrounding and interrogating previous texts, values and norms, a means of deconstruction and reconstruction, a positive and productive mechanism, an essential process in defining the rhetoric of postmodernism which according to Linda Hutcheon is one of both/and. In *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon refers to intertextuality as a reader-text relationship, characteristic to postmodern fiction, which has come to replace the previous author-text relationship, yet intertextuality can also be seen as a text-text relationship as it operates through the constant foregrounding of other texts and other voices, opening thus numberless new texts.

A relevant discussion of intertextuality should necessarily refer to both difference and sameness, both presence and absence of other texts as intertextuality rather interrogates than defines.

The case of Angela Carter is a special one and calls for minute investigation as it proves to be extremely rewarding when it comes to exploring the intertextuality issue. It is true that a key feature of postmodern fiction is feeding on other texts to an extent where connections are recognizable, and as

shown above, all definitions of postmodernism include *intertextuality* as a means of re-creation and subversion of older narratives, a technique which allows for a polemic dialogue with the past. Nevertheless, intertextuality is somewhat elitist as it unveils only to those experienced enough to seize it. The common reader fails in detecting it and thus restrains to the text, to one story, unable to read the other ones behind.

Perhaps this is the essential feature that differentiates intertextuality and what I have called *literary vampirism*. While the former is covert, the latter is strikingly overt, blindingly exposed to the eye, and therefore utterly shocking. Carter's texts are quite obviously vampire texts, as they extensively feed on essential texts such as fairy-tales, myths and even Shakespeare that they distort and recycle, but incompletely digest. Actually, this is perhaps one of Carter's greatest but simultaneously most terrible literary achievements: feeding on what is traditionally considered the stock of European popular culture in order to create monstrous mirrors of postmodern society, of what we have become lately.

In the case of Angela Carter, intertextuality or its stronger version that I have called literary vampirism operates through various literary proceedings; in performing the interrogation of the legitimacy of the patriarchal ideology Carter uses a technique that is somehow a melange of parody and pastiche yet neither of them. It qualifies as parody in as much as it starts from the awareness of a finite pre-existent material as Patricia Waugh (Waugh 152) claims, yet it is much more. It is pastiche in that, according to Friedrich Jameson, it no longer displays a belief in norms (Jameson 45). Carter's technique might also qualify as the collage/montage technique described by Gregory L. Ulmer in *The Object of Post Criticism* as the most revolutionary form of innovation in artistic representation and comprising four different stages: decoupage, preformed messages/materials, assemblage and discontinuity (Ulmer 84).

Certainly, the notion of literary vampirism can only be understood in the light of literal vampirism, therefore before going deeper into investigating the implications of the literary act, we should look into the literal meaning of the term *vampire*. As argued before, a vampire is commonly defined as a human form of being who possesses immortality and who essentially feeds on other humans through sucking their blood. What is relevant to our discussion in this definition is the stress placed on the mouth as the sole site of pleasure as well as survival and on feeding/eating as the act of ensuring eternal life. Referring to the re-creating ability which the act of vampirism presupposes, Rosemary Jackson states in her essay *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*:

„With each penetration and return to the unity of the imaginary, a new vampire is produced: further objects of desire are endlessly generated...” (Jackson 120).

Certainly, it has become common knowledge in literature and not only, that vampires are the invention of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic, whose

center-discourse seems to be degeneration as evolution reversed and compressed, as a reaction towards unity and humanism, with vampires as the instruments of a disintegrating process of human bodies.

Although annihilating the *pleasure principle* of escapism, Carter's stories concentrate surprisingly on pleasure itself; in this case, pleasure is strictly related to the body, though. Actually, this functions as just another mechanism of subversion, focusing on the physical aspect of pleasure in order to dislocate the authority of spiritual pleasure.

Enlarging the frame and moving from text to metatext, Carter allows traditional and seemingly innocent fairy-tales to contemplate their own potential for corruption in the intertextual mirror.

Consequently, we can say that Carter develops and subverts the link between the traditional perception of women as property and their objectification as flesh, as they are both the eaters and the eaten, perhaps as a reaction to the overall categorizations of women in literature:

„... *all the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses... Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods.*”(Carter 12).

As we have seen, the stress in these stories essentially falls on pleasure and desire as the anticipation of pleasure, because, as the Marquis in *The Bloody Chamber* wickedly observes, „*anticipation is the greatest part of pleasure*”(Carter 10). But what happens to the pleasure principle of reading? The very notion of fairy-tale includes that of escapism *in* the text, seeking pleasure within the story. Carter reverses this function of the tales, turning it into escapism *from* the text, pushing the reader to escape it as it provides no desirable alternative to real life.

At this point I would like to re-introduce the notion of *literary vampirism*, as well as Carter's own statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter, in order to support my claim that Carter herself is a literary vampire. The strong connection which exists between vampirism, eating and fairy-tales is located precisely at the oral level. If this is obvious for the first two elements of the enumeration, the latter is connected to it through its means of enactment. Fairy-tales are always told or read to children, as these are unable to read for themselves, turning thus the mouth into the sole object of providing pleasure. By choosing vampire-like characters for her own stories, Carter certainly aimed at deconstructing precisely the oral tradition as the basis of all patriarchal literature, feeding on the very traditional fairy-tales and releasing into the literary world new vampire-like stories.

We cannot overlook here the interpretations that psychoanalysis offers to the vampiric act as the most violent and extreme form of denying the "father" (male authority) as well as the most cruel act of human exploitation, since eventually vampirism is a cannibalistic practice. Psychoanalysts argue that vampirism would be somehow a reversal of Freud's *Oedipal complex*, as the

vampire first penetrates the victim (biting) and then extracts its vital content (sucking). The phallic canine biting restates patriarchal authority as it incorporates the vampire into a male/incubus (phallic) order, while the sucking establishes a close connection to the mother/succubus, integrating the vampire into the matriarchal order. Eventually vampires can only be suppressed through the insertion of the phallic stake, as a return to the rule of the father.

Carter's vampirism certainly asserts the subversion of patriarchy, as it "sucks"/extracts the content of patriarchal discourse (fairy-tales) and creates "monstrous", hideous but fascinating texts. The revolt against male discourse is wonderfully euphemized through this symbolic literary vampirism and Carter herself becomes thus the Lady in the House of Love, feeding on the attractive male literary body, re-inventing it. The *Marquis's* huge library in the title story can therefore be regarded as a *mise-en-abyme* of all male literature while the Bloody Chamber becomes the forbidden chamber of intertextuality, where Angela Carter performs the bloody decapitation/castration of the patriarchal discourse.

### **The use of parody and irony: *The Passion of New Eve, Nights at the Circus, Wise Children***

Both parody and irony are seen as dialogic modes which launch a productive yet subversive dialogue with prior realities. Parody insists on the dialogue between past and present forcing an interrogation of the former by opening a new text; according to Linda Hutcheon it is the postmodern perfect form (Hutcheon 7). In *Modes and Forms of Narrative Narcissism*, Hutcheon defines parody as „*the result of a conflict between realistic motivation and an aesthetic motivation which has become weak and obvious, resulting in the unmasking and defamiliarization of the system*” (Hutcheon 203). Moreover, Fredric Jameson underlines parody's deviant feature as it represents a move away from normality which also entails its transgressive character (Jameson 46). In a similar manner, irony focuses on the conflict between two possible realities as it forces a subversive revision of a prior reality. To Hutcheon, irony is the only way we can be serious today.

What appears to be utterly relevant to the present discussion of difference as transgressing binaries is parody's ability to avoid taking sides and giving sentences. As Patricia Waugh remarks in her *Theory of Parody*, „*the modern form [parody] does not always permit one of the texts to fare any better or worse than the other. It is in fact that they differ that parody emphasizes and indeed, dramatizes... It is the difference between parodic foreground and parodied background that is ironically played upon in works like this*” (Waugh 31). To Waugh, parody is "*repetition with difference*" (Waugh 32).

Contextualizing this discussion within the frame of feminist discourse and narratives, it is important to note that parody and irony have become

feminist alternatives, as critic Nancy Walker suggests in her study *Feminist Alternatives*, primarily due to their similar potential of interrogating and transgressing norms. As they all depend on certain centres and norms that they initially foreground to later challenge and subvert, they all reinforce a stimulating difference which opens rather than closes. Consequently, contemporary women writers often incorporate in their novels the parody and the irony as part of the subversive attack they launch against secularized institutions such as that of patriarchy and against the restrictive and exclusionary feature of all norms.

Angela Carter's fiction is unitary in its aggressive challenge of patriarchy and its central discourses. As previously discussed, Carter ostentatively foregrounds the marginal and the ex-centric whose discourses she privileges as part of her violent interrogation of norms artificial nature. The freak becomes the norm in most of her novels, which leads to a wicked subversion of high culture and its exponents (men and their normative discourses) and which favours the complexity and plurality of low culture. Carter's extensive use of what Brian McHale calls the topoi of *carnivalized literature* (McHale 173) has been largely discussed in this study, yet it is worth mentioning once more that carnival with all its elements is a recurrent trope in her fiction.

Carter's last novel, *Wise Children* (1992) fictionalizes the dichotomy between low and high culture as it features twins Dora and Nora Chance, former musical actresses and their alleged father, Sir Melchior Hazard, the perfect embodiment of patriarchy. The novel unfolds in the colourful and merry world of the musical, where identities are erased through cross-dressing and the confusion provoked by several pairs of twins. Dora and Nora Chance share the identity of the marginal (they are Sir Melchior's illegitimate daughters and they inhabit the promiscuous depths of the musical) which powerfully contrasts Sir Melchior's central stance, the epitome of patriarchy, Englishness and high culture. The identity of the marginal is gradually constructed through the mockery and subversion of the center, as Sir Melchior is exposed as a fraud, a womanizer and a failed actor and director. Patriarchy and its key discourses (religion, history, literature) are parodied and challenged through several male characters who function as the fictional representations of these discourses: Sir Melchior Hazard is a Shakespeare devoted fan and as such he engages into a parodic tour of Africa with the Bards plays, Gorgeous George alludes to England's religious patron Saint George and moreover he has the map of the British Empire carved onto his body.

Parody is present in Carter's other novels as well, underlining the same limitations and abuses of a normative and patterned vision of the world. As shown before, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve* are similar in their illustration of Carter's demythologizing operation as they launch the subversion of some of patriarchy's essential discourses. Carter's version of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve attacks the gender binary and

points to the harmful effects of such restrictive accounts, while her mockery of the mythical versions of women as Mother Earth is meant to expose the illegitimacy and artificiality of such patterned representations.

Nevertheless, as mentioned before, Carter's fiction is far from advocating the rule of the Woman; on the contrary, her attack is launched not against men themselves, but against their normative discourses, against the hierarchization of value and eventually against the very notion of norm.

**The violent use of the fantastic: *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman, The Passion of New Eve, Heroes and Villains***

According to critic Nancy Walker, fantasy is similar to irony in that they both „point to a contrast between different truths...fantasy by *imagining alternative patterns*” (Walker 23). In the context of contemporary feminine writing, fantasy as a literary mode may be seen as part of what Alice Jardine calls/*gynesis*, the putting of woman into discourse, as it *is primarily* used by contemporary female writers as a means of creating a totally new discourse which provides them with the opportunity of manifesting their difference.

In addition, Rosemary Jackson refers to fantasy as the literature of desire which seeks to supplement what is missing, what is absent (Jackson 69). Jackson's definition of fantasy echoes to a certain extent Derrida's definition of *differance* in its repetition of terms such as supplement and absence. In this respect, fantasy may be envisaged as one of the most expressive literary modes of representing the difference. In its construction of alternative realities, fantasy points to the incompleteness of the present reality and thus performs simultaneous operations of interrogating the authority of the existing reality and supplying alternatives to it.

In the discourse of the contemporary feminine writing, the use of fantasy points to a reconfiguration of both reality and language, because as an essentially verbal construct, when used by women, fantasy also challenges the phallogocentric language by first appropriating it and then altering and subverting it. At this point, Helene Cixous's statement about the necessity of a language of women which would replace the oppressive masculine one and which would take women outside male dominance in point of language is particularly relevant.

Moreover, in the context of feminine writing, fantasy appears as a „critique of existing norms and structures” (Walker 57), a literary form to represent women's difference.

The fiction of contemporary British writer Angela Carter represents an extreme version of fantasy as it benefits from a violent use of the imagination which is set to abolish all norms and hierarchical structures in its interrogation of patriarchal legitimacy. Carter's novels suspend both belief and disbelief in

their ontological challenge of authoritative discourses which are exposed as human constructs. Brian McHale's study of postmodernist fiction reveals the fact that through the extensive use of fantasy Angela Carter constructs what McHale calls *heterotopias*, heterogeneous worlds which undermine the syntax of both language and the present world, by juxtaposing, interpolating and superimposing different realities. As such, Carter's novels foreground some of the topoi of science fiction literature, especially spatial and temporal displacement.

*Heroes and Villains* (1969) is the novel where Carter actually experiments with the use of the fantastic for the first time and which, for this reason represents the blueprint of her following developments in the field. Constructed around the science-fiction topos of the post-Armageddon world, the novel foregrounds the shortcomings of a binary vision upon this world and the outcomes of this limited perspective. By opposing the Professors to the Barbarians, Carter opposes culture to nature, reason to the irrational while forcing a revision of the binary logic which has ruled Western thought for the past millenniums and exposing it as illegitimate and harmful. In her fantastic account, Carter subversively introduces a third category, the Out People, a marginal, excremental, ambiguous group of people of transgressive nature who function as the supplement which blows the binary. Although abhorrent and abominable, the Out People fictionalize Carter's distrust of binary differences and hierarchies.

The *Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) is constructed on the topos of the fantastic invasion and the subsequent rationalistic resistance, opposing the two poles of a consecrated binary, i.e. fantasy and reason. In doing so, Carter mocks at them both, as both are exposed as inoperable and abusive. The narrative challenges patriarchy's master narratives, reason, coherence, history, logic, even geography as it foregrounds several alternative worlds which are the product of the protagonist's desires. Similarly, *The Passion of New Eve* (1979) exposes the evils of hierarchical structures by imagining a masculine, violent and chaotic New York which it opposes to a feminine, equally violent and abusive Beulah. The fantastic operates here through a temporal leap forward, into the post-apocalyptic future and a parallel spatial displacement which forces a revision of the present-day American geography as it juxtaposes the imaginary Beulah to the existing New York. Moreover, New York is deconstructed through an operation of complete defamiliarization and misattribution which renders it unrecognizable. The fantastic adventures of the protagonist, the double-sexed Eve/Evelyn, allude to the topoi of the picaresque novel, suggesting thus the mandatory initiation process he/she must undergo.

In *Nights at the Circus* (1985) Angela Carter introduces what Brian McHale calls the *displaced fantastic*, the insertion of fantastic elements in a real-like context by foregrounding Fevvers, the winged aerialist of unreal physicality. The

winged woman functions as a parody towards the objectification of women and the fantastic element is introduced to provide an alternative to women's objectification by explaining that Fevvers' display in a circus show is due to her wings and not to her sex.

Fantasy is therefore the fictional device through which Angela Carter completes her subversive attack against patriarchal ideology and its imperialist discourses, launching possible alternatives to present reality.

### **Feeding on old myths: *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman, The Passion of New Eve, The Bloody Chamber***

To move on to the next focal point of this study, it is relevant to dwell upon what Carter herself admitted in *Notes from the Front Line*, namely that she was „...in the demythologising business and that myths were ...extraordinary) lies designed to make people unfree” (Carter 5); to enlarge, myths can be seen as the very basis of the patriarchal normative discourse, since they provide normative patterns and regulate experience. Being in the demythologizing business implies therefore setting people free, liberating them from the constraints of a patterned identity and this is precisely the task that *excess and abnormality*, two of Carter's favourite tropes, accomplish in her fiction.

Myths represent the very foundation of patriarchal discourse, since their function is to provide patterns, to explain and regulate experience, to legitimize the patriarchal ideology. More importantly, they cast men and women into stereotype roles by providing explanations for their origins and behaviour. As normative stories, myths are the focus of Carter's subversive fiction and she makes use of the same technique that I called literary vampirism to extract their latent content and to expose their illegitimacy.

It has to be noticed that in creating her own version of old myths, Carter directly connects excess to sexuality in an attempt to challenge the traditional male-regulated politics of gender power, because, as Jago Morrison explains in his investigation of contemporary fiction, „the primary focus of Carter's texts is the *Woman and the legacy of encrusted meanings and values which come to define her contours*” (Morrison 120). In this respect she attacks and finally deconstructs the very foundation of gender roles in Christian tradition: the biblical story of Adam and Eve.

Carter's New Eve (in *The Passion of New Eve*), initially Evelyn, does not live in the utopian garden of Eden, on the contrary the setting is a dystopic, futuristic, anarchic and excessive New York that he abandons to move to the desert. The sterile environment meaningfully contrasts the lush scenery of the Garden of Eden and subversively, it is the desert which witnesses the creation of New Eve through a series of plastic surgeries to which Evelyn is submitted by Mother, an anti-mythical figure that seizes him. Although apparently, Carter's



version of Eves creation does follow the original pattern - the new Eve is literally created from a man- it cunningly subverts and distorts it. The latest technology that turns Evelyn into Eve shapes an entirely artificial woman whose perfect physical appearance strikingly contrasts a crippled self:

*„...Evelyn, the first victim of her wild justice, trimmed with that knife to Eve, first child of her manufactory... For I am not natural, you know - even though, if you cut me, I will bleed” (Carter 50).*

This new Eve is neither a man nor a woman and is trapped within an ambiguous and fluid identity that suspends the gender category making it impossible to speak of gender boundaries or anything that has gender in it.

New Eves first male partner is Zero, a crippled man who has long abandoned speech although he claims to be a poet and listens to Wagner; he lives together with a harem of seven young women in the middle of the desert, loves guns and practises excessive violence, especially towards his so-called wives. As his eighth wife Eve is forced to join the harem for a while and obey its rules:

*„He was the first man I met when I became a woman. He raped me unceremoniously in the sand, in front of his ranch house” (Carter 86).*

Zero functions as the reversed image of Adam, he is the metaphor of nothingness, of nullity, as he himself admits at one point:

*„I am Zero. ... The lowest point; vanishing point; nullity. I am the freezing point in Centigrade and my wives experience the flame of my frigidity as passion” (Carter 102).*

Unlike the original Adam, Zero is infertile and although he benefits from the excessive sexual services of eight different partners, he cannot conceive and therefore would not be able to father the human race. Carter uses Zero’s infertility to undermine the biblical myth that has regulated the dynamics of gender roles and she directly connects it to the subversion of another crucial landmark in Western societies: the institution of *marriage*. Marriage is envisaged here as an artificial and ludicrous construct which has nothing to do with issues such as love, devotion or mutual respect. And it is again excess that completes subversion because Zero, the Poet, is not monogamous, he has eight different wives. The excessive number is meant to mock at the allegedly unique, sacred and pure character of the patriarchal institution of marriage. Zero imposes marriage on his women and he celebrates it with a ring whose replica is worn by all his eight wives; there is no original ring in this plural marriage, since there are no genuine feelings to represent. Carter’s subtle criticism towards this secular Christian institution, the monogamic marriage, where apparently women trade the rule of the Father for that of the Husband supports the larger subversive frame of the novel.

The biblical myth encounters the *Hollywoodian myth* when Eve meets Tristessa, a former female movie star, at present secluded in her glass residence. Evelyn has always been infatuated with Tristessa and her exposure as a transvestite parallels Eve's transformation in that they both transgress gender boundaries. Eventually, Tristessa and Eve/Evelyn end up as a pair where genders are impossible to tell apart, subverting thus the biblical image of the perfect couple.

On one hand, the figure of Tristessa, the movie queen, serves to reveal the immense artificiality and inauthenticity of Hollywoodian myths as manufactured stories used to manipulate people. On the other, it contributes to the general confusion and ambiguity as far as the notion of gender is concerned in this novel.

Bringing together the biblical story of Adam and Eve and the contemporary manufactured Hollywoodian myth leads to the exposure of all myths as artificial and manipulative stories. In this respect, the novel itself tries to give a definition of myth, when it refers to Zero authority:

*„But his myth depended on their conviction; a good-head, however shabby, needs believers to maintain his credibility. Their obedience ruled him”* (Carter 99).

To conclude, one must acknowledge the postmodern feature of Carter's feminism, which far from being a radical one actually goes against such narrow perspectives. In this respect I would like to bring forward Nancy Walker's statement which comes as a conclusion to her study on fantasy and irony as feminist alternatives:

*„the myths that serve our tradition are fatal because they cast men and women in impossible, fixed roles.. through ironic revision of mythology, women present traditional systems of power as destructive and propose various versions of non-hierarchical cultures”* (Walker 185).

Therefore, Carter does not challenge the patriarchal norm in order to legitimate the rule of the Woman; to her, the idea of Norm is a nonsense in itself because to her there is no external, absolute reality to account for one, or as she puts it in *The Sadeian Woman*, when she speaks of myths:

*„... mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity to that of the healing reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway”* (Carter 5). Or to quote Judith Butler, the very category of "women" is *„normative and exclusionary; the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections”* (Butler 19).

The Amazon community presented in *The Passion of New Eve*, an exclusively female society where women make excessive use of violence and guns (male attributes) is a very transparent attack against radical feminists and their belief that women can be self-sufficient. With Carter, everything is subversive; her novels engage in the exposure of notions such as gender or sex as illegitimate historical constructs which have been used by ideologies such as that of patriarchy to control and manipulate people. Nevertheless, as Aidan Day observes:

*„The rational understanding of non-essentialism does not lead her to relativism but to a ground from which judgment between views of the world can be mad”* (Day 130).

With her last novel, *Wise Children* (1992), Angela Carter refines her vampiric literary technique as she, subtly this time, alludes to the Shakespearean comedies in an exquisite piece of fiction that tackles issues such as illegitimacy, identity and of course the supremacy of patriarchy. *Wise Children* replicates the structure of Shakespeare’s comedies and ends with an unexpected and even unbelievable reconciliation of fathers and children, brothers and sisters through which, according to Beth Boehm, *„the comic world is made timeless by the spirit of love and reconciliation evident in its ending and the ending of Wise Children is Carter at her finesf”* (Boehm 137).

The focus of the novel is a theatrical family made up of several pairs of twins whose history spans over a century of illegitimate affairs, illegitimate children, of carnival and theatre. A century of private family history which of course parallels and mirrors a century of public history is funnily compressed within the course of a single day, as the narrator, Dora Chance, recollects the life of her unacknowledged father, Sir Melchior Hazard, whose 100th birthday is meaningfully, the day on which everything happens, the 23d of April, i.e. Shakespeare’s birthday, St. George’s celebration (the patron of England), Sir Melchior’s birthday and Dora and Nora’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. Thus, with a single move, Carter brings together centuries of patriarchal British imperialist tradition and puts them next to what Dora and Nora stand for: illegitimacy, low culture (they have been active in the music hall business), femaleness, in a single world, marginality. The rhetoric of both/and is once more present in the juxtaposition of some crucial landmarks of central imperialism-maleness, high culture, Britishness, patriarchy-and their marginal counterparts (femaleness, low culture, colonial mentalities) which reinforces Carter’s critique of a binary vision upon the world so well perpetuated by the patriarchal institutions. That is the reason for which a reading of Carter’s novels as heralding the rule of the Woman would be sheer nonsense since, as J. Butler notes in *Gender Trouble*, the very category of "women" is *„normative and exclusionary; the insistence upon the coherence and unity of*

*the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections”* (Butler 43).

The intertextual dimension refines in Carter’s last novel partly due to the fact that she chooses to echo texts which no longer belong to the stock of popular common knowledge and partly because she no longer opts for foregrounding striking similarities. With this last novel she makes the passage from literary vampirism to a softer and more elitist intertextuality that asks for an upgraded reader, one who is familiar with Shakespeare’s plays but at the same time is aware of issues such as Britishness, imperialism or high culture. The mockery is directed against them all as Carter cunningly deconstructs the very core of high culture represented here by Shakespeare’s patriarchal figure echoed by that of Melchior Hazard, reconstructing a world where low culture becomes central, where music hall takes over as Shakespearean theatrical companies tour Africa, where illegitimacy is at its best and all is well that ends well. Richly alluding to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Twelfth Night*, Carter’s *Wise Children* makes the apology of the carnivalesque as described by Mikhail Bakhtin and thus exposes the relative character of seemingly fixed notions. Thus, identities become fluid as Dora and Nora frequently switch clothes and partners and since the novel presents us with at least 4 pairs of twins, family bonds are more than once exposed as illegitimate and as a consequence nothing can be held true in the end. To consider Sally Robinsons statement, Carter’s novels share a similar capacity of presenting „*an epistemological revolution...in which cultures master narratives are losing their power and authority to master experience*” (Peach 78). And since the norm under investigation is undoubtedly the patriarchal norm, Carter’s challenge is definitely gender-related.

To conclude, it may be relevant to observe that the violence that Carter’s female characters display—the immensely cruel and exploiting vampiric act, the excessive aggressiveness of her freak-women, their outstanding verbal stamina—alludes to, parody and eventually subverts similar features that men have used to manipulate and control women throughout the centuries. In this sense it is interesting to refer to Hester Eisensteins study *Contemporary Feminist Thought* which makes reference to Susan Brownmiller’s *rape theory*. According to this theory rape benefits from a similar imperialist ideology like that of conquest, Brownmiller suggesting that rape has been the actual secret of patriarchy (Eisenstein 27). Carter’s women are either literally or metaphorically men-eaters and the stress on food and female extraordinarily aggressive sexuality does actually mock at male attributes, being thus a form of what Sally Robinson labels as *masquerade*.

### Conclusion: En-Gendering the Narrative

In an essay which discusses one of Angela Carter's novels, critic Alison Lee states that „Angela Carter's novels foreground problems of gender identification...she does so by making the violence of gender inscription on the body quite clear” (Lee 238). Lee's statement encapsulates two key notions in the description of Carter's fiction: on one hand **gender**, which is the focal point of her entire body of work, and on the other **violence**, which refers to the intensity which characterizes Carter's strategies in approaching the gender issue.

The previous analysis of Carter's fiction with its particular stress on narrative strategies has revealed that gender and violence are closely connected at the narrative level as well. Thus, Carter's narrative approach to gender issues proves to be an extremely violent one, starting from the various fictional representations of women as freaks or monsters and ending with the violent dismemberment of the traditional narrative which is initially mocked at and then completely destroyed.

Defined by Judith Butler as an externally constructed artifice, the repeated stylization of the body (Butler 43), gender surfaces in all Carter's novels, allowing us to claim that Carter performs an operation of en-gendering the narrative at all levels. In contrast with Jeanette Winterson's fiction, whose major concern is to erase gender difference and move beyond binary oppositions, Carter's fiction exacerbates the difference in order to unmask the tyranny of patriarchal ideology and the illegitimacy of its canonical discourses. Gender representation becomes thus part of the challenge that Angela Carter launches against the restrictive and exclusionary normative patterns that stand at the core of gender-related stereotypes.

Nevertheless, en-gendering the narrative does not advocate for the rule of the Woman which is illustratively mocked at by Carter by means of the Amazon community presented in *The Passion of New Eve*; on the contrary, it is a violent reaction against stereotypical representations of women by both women and men. The narrative strategies that she makes use of are meant to formally support her ideological battle against norms, hierarchies and patterns and only incidentally against men as the producers and perpetrators of traditional binary logic.

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