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## Angela Carter Demystified: The Employment of The Gothic in Angela Carter's Fiction

**Abstract:** One of the interesting aspects of Angela Carter's fiction, which she has used since her first novel *Shadow Dance* (1966), is the Gothic. Horrible castles, damsels in distress, dungeons, disguises, and vampires are just some Gothic elements which permeate her work. Sadism and Masochism are also elements in Gothic literature which govern the relationship between many of the above-mentioned characters. Carter is particularly interested in how such relationships can be dislocated and what they reveal about power structure in the modern society. In her late twentieth century fiction, Carter critically demonstrates the reversal of values and identifications that occur via the Gothic mode. Otherness, or to put it more precisely the relationship between self and other, takes center stage in her work. Sexual transgression, dark desires, and fantastic deviance subvert the restrictive orders of reason, utility and patriarchal morality.

**Key words:** Gothic literature, power structure, modern society, haunted mansion, otherness, rebellion and liberation.

### **Angela Carter Demystified: The Employment of the Gothic in Angela's Carter's Fiction**

Angela Carter (7 May 1940 – 16 February 1992), known for her employment of feminist tendencies, magical realism and science fiction works, has written novels, short stories and essays which defy categorization. A quick review of the criticism of Carter's work will reveal that they invite as many interpretations as there are schools of criticism in the late twentieth century. She can be called Foucaultian when she examines discourses of power in a male-dominated society. She is Bakhtinian when she integrates the carnivalesque and the grotesque in order to disrupt those discourses of power. When she explores class privilege and British imperialism and capitalism in her work, her Marxist tendencies are revealed. Last but not the least, she is a feminist when she challenges social structures of a patriarchal society which represses women. She is all of the above and not exactly any one of them.

One of the interesting aspects of Angela Carter's fiction, which she has used since her first novel *Shadow Dance*, is the Gothic. Horrible castles, damsels in distress, dungeons,

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disguises, and vampires are just some Gothic elements which permeate her work. In the foreword to *Fireworks*, she says “we live in Gothic times”. In fact, the revival of gothic elements in her work can be seen as part of the revival of marginalized subgenres of the past which have become to replace the dominant modes of modern discourse. As Fred Botting observes: “Marginalized genres have begun to prevail over their canonized counterparts” (285).

A quick glance at post-modern literature reveals how gothic figures and horror elements circulate with greater visibility to highlight the absence of strict, prohibitive mechanisms or a strong exclusionary force. In fact, the revival of some of these elements and genres can be attributed to the removal of boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ literature in the era following WWII. This view goes parallel with recent discussions of the development of the literary fantastic mode from the emergence of the Gothic in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century to the contemporary practice of postmodernism. The gothic and the fantastic have become the dominant novel in contemporary fiction. This new, revived form of Gothic novel is a sort of complex, multi-layered one marked by what characterizes post-modern novel: irony, parody, intertextuality, lack of boundaries between fact and fiction, and metafiction.

The theory of the grotesque, as advanced by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, opens a useful way to explore Carter’s fictions. As Betty Moss says: “Carter’s admiration for, appropriation of, and reinvention of wonder tales demonstrate her regard for the realms of the fantastic, a category intrinsically connected with the grotesque” (187). In essence, what links the grotesque in Carter’s work to the gothic tradition is its affinity with the fantasy, its ability to provoke unease, its relation to the concept of the uncanny, and grotesque’s potential to be used as a means of exploring fear and desire. Moss believes:

Since the gothic literary genre is inextricably bound to the grotesque for its effect, the unease that Carter designates as an effect of gothic literature can be validly understood as indicative of the ambivalence which, Bakhtin’s observes, is provoked by the grotesque (191).

Carter’s fiction is full of instances of such grotesque bodies which imply horror, chaos and lack of balance in gender relations in the modern and postmodern times. Of particular interest to this discussion is, of course, the idea of the ‘female grotesque’ in Angela Carter, and its relevance to desire and sexuality.

Indeed, Bakhtin has put forward his theory of the grotesque in his study of François Rabelais’ work. The main principle of the grotesque realism is degradation, the lowering of all that is abstract, spiritual, noble, and ideal to the material level. Bakhtin pinpoints two important subtexts: the first is carnival (carnivalesque) which he describes as a social institution, and the second is grotesque realism (grotesque body) which is defined as a literary mode. Bakhtin explains how the grotesque body is a celebration of the cycle of life: the grotesque body is a comic figure of profound ambivalence, thus its positive meaning is linked to birth and renewal and its negative meaning is linked to death and decay.

In her late twentieth century fiction, Angela Carter critically demonstrates the reversal of values and identifications that occur via the Gothic mode. Otherness, or to put it more precisely, the relationship between self and other, takes center stage in her work. Sexual transgression, dark desire, and fantastic deviance subvert the restrictive orders of reason, utility and patriarchal morality. Energy of rebellion and liberation, associated with the

sexual and political movements of the 1960s challenges aesthetic conventions and social taboos.

An investigation into Angela Carter's works reveals that she has applied Gothic elements (setting, plot, character and theme) in her writing since the beginning of her career. However, this is not to label her as a conventional Gothic writer aiming at nothing more than provoking horror as a form of escape literature. Hermione Lee as quoted in Sage and Lloyd has identified Carter with "a feminism which employs anti-patriarchal satire, Gothic fantasy and subversive rewriting of familiar myths and stories to embody alternative utopian recommendations for human behavior" (310).

There are numerous instances of recurrence of Gothic motifs in Carter's novels and short stories. Her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, has a slashing villain hero Honeybuzzard and a victim-heroine Ghislaine. These stock characters belonging to conventional Gothic novel reappear in other Carter works from Buzz, Lee and Annabel in *Love*, to the Marquis and his Bride in the title story of *The Bloody Chamber* to Mignon in *Nights at the Circus*. Sadism and Masochism are also the distinct elements in Gothic literature which govern the relationship between many of the above-mentioned characters. Carter is particularly interested in how such relationships can be dislocated and what they reveal about power structure in the modern society.

Another closely related Gothic factor in Carter's work is the Gothic setting of a haunted mansion. 'The Mansion of Midnight' in *Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* with its sleep-walking romantic heroine makes a typical Gothic scenario. In fact, suspense, anxiety and alertness of female characters as they are repressed physically and mentally by male characters link her writing to the Gothic mode. The ruins also make up another Gothic feature presented in some of Carter's writing. The old house where Marianne lives with the Barbarians in *Heroes and Villains* is burned and destroyed as they leave. The more or less grandiose houses of previous times are frequently burned up (*The Magic Toyshop*, *Nights at the Circus*, *Wise Children*) or a landslide engulfs the resting place ('The Acrobats of Desire', in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*).

Wandering heroines are part of female Gothic which repeatedly occurs in Carter: Marianne in *Heroes and Villains*, Eve in *The Passion of New Eve* and Fevvers in *Nights at Circus* are notable examples. A closely associated theme is that of entrapment and imprisonment: the threat of pursuit and following incarceration in prisons, circuses, brothels and even one's own imagination recur in *Nights at the Circus* and *Heroes and Villains*.

These limits, both physical and mental, and the safety or terror they offer are fully explored in Carter's fiction. Unease may be contained or where a character is and what he or she stands for can be unsettled. A further association is with Kafkaesque social and psychic anxieties, such as the dissolution of boundaries between different opposing situations. One example is 'the frightening become frightened'. In *Heroes and Villains*, Jewel wakes up screaming when he dreams that he is no more than the externalized fears of more civilized folks. A parallel to Jewel would be the patriarch puppet master in *The Magic Toyshop*. Both can be analogies for Carter's enthralled and mocking relation to modern Gothic.

The pastiche Gothic of *The Bloody Chamber* is a good example of how Carter uses the conventional elements of a gloomy castle, timid heroine (damsel in distress) and a rapacious monster only to subvert the expectation of the reader and the typical ending of

such plots. The young, tremulous bride goes to live with a wealthy marquis only to discover his sadistic tendencies and the fact that he has killed his three previous wives. After going through a series of fairy-tale like experiences, she is saved as the story ends in a parodic note: instead of the heroine being rescued by the stereotypical male hero, she is rescued by her mother. The heroine is rescued from the clutches of the manipulating, monster-like husband by a knight in armor, yet the usual fairy tale form is undone when the visor is lifted and the face of the mother is revealed. In sharp contrast to the expectations of readers in a male-dominated society, here the savior is a woman.

Botting observes that, "In turning over conventions and expectations, *The Bloody Chamber* exposes the artifice of social and symbolic meanings and refuses any preservation of credulity at a fictional level, significantly disrupting the credibility of the ideological framework in which any tale is given meaning" (286).

Undeniably, here, the Gothic goes hand in hand with postmodernism's incredulity towards the meta-narratives. All grand narratives of the past are destroyed. Figures of authority are rendered suspect. With their ghostly power demystified, the space of a single credible father-figure is left vacant, only to be filled with a host of fleeting specters of delegitimized, surrogate fathers. With the development of postmodernism after the Second World War, and the dissolution of grand narratives, marginalized genres have begun to prevail over their canonized counterparts. But this revival has been cleverly accompanied with a new perspective and new re-invention of the conventional features to match the current social, political, cultural and literary tendencies of the time. For instance, in the older versions of the Gothic fiction, the restoration of normative boundaries and revival of rational forms of being were celebrated in the violent climaxes of older tales of horror; however, in modern Gothic mode, with the destruction of the monsters and their evil power, new monstrous characters are now less often disgusting, frightening figures of animosity discarded in the return to the social and symbolic balance. Rather, they maintain a fascinating, attractive appeal: no longer objects of disgust or horror, monstrous others become sites of identification, sympathy, desire and self-recognition. Outcast characters once introduced as malevolent, deviant and disturbed are rendered more humane while the patriarchal, traditional systems that exclude them, come under question and sometimes harsh criticism. Such social orders are usually represented as terrifying and inhumane.

It can be said that Carter has used different old forms like gothic, grotesque, fairy tale and science fiction to explore different contemporary issues. According to Robert Eagleston: "She reworks and re-patterns the culture of the (mainly) European past in all its forms--literary and non-literary, elitist and popular, opera and pulp fiction, classical epics and movies, comic books and folklore-- and in this process of putting new wine in old bottles, she brings to light the old lies on which the new lies have been based" (195).

*Heroes and Villains* is a good example of how Carter combines and re-invents the gothic tradition and the science fiction to put forward her feminist views. Set in a ruined future (in contrast to gothic novels which are usually set in faraway past), it portrays a society sharply divided between two groups: the professors, the soldiers and the workers on the one hand and the savages on the other. Following the Gothic tradition, the heroine is the daughter of the professor (Marianne) who is confined to the ordered world of a white steel and concrete tower. Later on, she is redeemed from the castle of her father only to be subjected to the rule of two other patriarchal figures: Jewel and another professor. The story ends as Marianne overcomes all restraints and limitations imposed on her in a male-dominated

society. Here, we have the theme of the entrapped 'damsel in distress,' who unlike the Gothic and fairy tale tradition is redeemed by her own power. Marianne ends the story by this remark: "I will be the tiger lady and rule them with a rod of iron" (150).

*The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* takes up different conventions of the Gothic mode, the best example of which is the figures of the victim and the persecutor as known from classical gothic novels like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Desidero seeks the execution of Dr. Hoffman, but surprisingly this horrid mission is accompanied from the outset by the quest to win the hand of Hoffman's daughter Albertina. He is successful in his attempt to unite with Albertina, who ironically turns to play the role of the savior for Desidero. Once more, we see a reversal in the archetypal pattern of Gothic genre. Carter uses different forms of disguise, changing identities, splitting/multiplying personalities to shock the reader out of his expectations.

*The Magic Toyshop* tells the story of three orphaned siblings, Melanie, Jonathan and Victoria who are taken in by their uncle Philip Flower. The uncle lives with his mute wife and her two brothers in a gothic-like house. The Uncle's occupation, a puppeteer, sets the tone for a Gothic patriarchal figure that has full control over the lives of those who are at his mercy. A symbolic indication of such a power and control is the fact that his wife Margaret has lost her voice on their wedding day. As in any traditional gothic plot, the entrapped characters are redeemed at the end, but not by a rescuer from the outside, but as a result of the cooperation between siblings. Liberation of women is symbolized when, at the end, Margaret finds her voice to inform the children that Philip is returning. The burning of the house, caused by an accident, is highly reminiscent of *Rebecca*.

*Nights at the Circus* combines elements from the picaresque novel and the Gothic convention to explore another aspect of male-female relationship in the contemporary world. In telling the story of Fevvers, the woman who can fly, Carter continues telling the story of male designs on women. Here, there are no castles or dungeons, but the winged Fevvers is caught within the entrapment of the male gaze wherever she goes: the brothel, Madam Schreck's museum of women monsters or Rosencrantz mansion. The union of Fevvers and Walser at the end of the novel provides an uncertain, tentative solution for escape from the control exerted on women by men.

The above-mentioned themes, plots, characters and conventions were just short references to the re-invention and revival of the gothic mode in Angela Carter's Work. As demonstrated, an in-depth exploration of her fiction would further clarify the influence of this dominant 18th-century tradition on the works of Angela Carter as a postmodern feminist. In this context, the Gothic serves as an example of the re-emergence of the marginalized literary convention in post-modern fiction. In addition to highlighting the similarities of plot, theme and character between 18<sup>th</sup>-century Gothic romance and Carter's fiction, the reader can also discern how her writing deviates from such norms to defy the boundaries and limitations set by a patriarchal society on female psyche. Carter uses the potential of the gothic to explore the role of women in patriarchal societies: gothic settings, gothic characters and gothic themes are her vehicle of the investigation into gender relationships in the modern society. She especially emphasizes the situation of women and the dissatisfaction and isolation which is the result of the control exerted over them.

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