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Essentialist Concept of Sexuality in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*

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Abstract

This paper examines the novel *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) of Angela Carter*;* it focuses on the feminine elements in them and shows how these elements are worked out in the texture of this novel. It also expresses the effect of lore and its ideas over writing this novel. *The Magic Toyshop* expresses conflicts within the female regarding her own sexuality and identity. It specifically deals with female anxieties and conflicts from a female perspective. It is narrated through the focalizer of the fleeing, questing heroine, and focuses on her examination of family romances and secrets within an oppressive domestic space that is both monstrously other and oddly familiar.

Keywords: Feminine, Identity, Conflicts, Sexuality, Anxiety

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Angela Carter is a feminist writer, her fiction refers to that, and she accepted that designation. Carter likens her activity to the eighteenth century making of fictional societies that reflect on real society, and in her best work; Carter creates a rich concentrated exploration of human experience. She sees her intellectual progress as being a kind of decolonization through which she has re-examined the version of reality presented to her by a patriarchal society, and rejects it. Her novels demonstrate Carter's wish in the realm of surface, in the gathering of strong relations centred on making love, and in the hippie culture that has effected on appearance, art, and love affairs. Each novel goes in different direction; all share closeness to realism. All are set in South London and Bristol neighbourhood. They depict the bottom of the bohemian culture of the sixties with its full exhibited making love liberty, violence and selfishness.

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The novel, *The Magic Toyshop*, has female hero. In fact, Melanie the female protagonist of the *Magic Toyshop* is from wealthy middle-class backgrounds. Melanie becomes an orphan at the age of fifteen, bad circumstances of her parent's airplane crash forced her to move from her comfortable country location to an apartment in South London of her severe, abusive and rude uncle; she receives the worst treatment by her uncle, he forces her to live in most horrible conditions. In *The Magic Toyshop*, lore has its role in rewriting it as a feminine lore novel. It possesses fairytales qualities. Carter uses an eclectic assortment of material from myth, fairy tale and legend to tell a tale of patriarchal tyranny, narrated in the third person from the perspective of fifteen-year-old adolescent girl Melanie. When her wealthy parents are killed in a plane crash while travelling in America, her comfortable world comes to an end. Melanie and her younger brother and sister, Jonathon and Victoria, are sent from their country home to live with their Uncle Philip in South London. Philip is a clever toy maker with a passion for life-size puppets. He is also a miserly and tyrannical patriarch who controls every aspect of his household, Philip appears seldom in the novel and speaks only to utter criticism, issue orders, or narrate his puppet shows; however, his presence fills the house, and his dependents learn to control themselves in response to his absolute rules.

Philip's Irish wife, Margaret, is a dry woman who was struck dumb on her wedding day and communicates by means of chalkboards and writing notebooks. Like Melanie, Margaret is an orphan; her marriage to Philip is a means to provide a home for her brothers, Francie and Finn Jowles. Gentle Francie is the least affected by Philip's tyranny because he has some small means of economic independence in playing his cheating. Finn is the toy maker's trainee and a talented painter, but he judges Philip's irrational violence with his disrespect and is beaten because of it. When Finn tears the controls from one of Philip's dolls during a performance, Philip throws Finn from the flies and he crashes onto the stage. This is the beginning of war between the two, and it precipitate Philip's plan to have Melanie act

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with one of the dolls in a performance of "Leda and the Swan." Although he hardly acknowledges the children's presence in his house, forcing Melanie into the role of Leda is Philip's revenge on their dead father. He instructs Finn to train Melanie for the role, hoping, as Finn sees it, that her symbolic rape will be preceded by a real one. Melanie's father was a writer and represents, for Philip, the enemy "who uses toilet paper and fish knives" (152).

The Magic Toyshop reclaims a number of elements from the genre. The world 'reclaim' is used deliberately here, for the fairytale has been marginalized as a literary form. In *The Magic Toyshop,* Carter rediscovers its imaginative potential, especially for the feminist writer. The storyline of the novel itself is reminiscent of a fairy story. Its heroine, Melanie, her brother Jonathan and sister Victoria are orphaned; the death of their parents in a plane crash is linked in Melanie's mind to an act of transgression. Melanie secretly trying on her mother's wedding dress one night and the children are forced to live with a relative they hardly know who turns out to be an ogre. The stock fairytale motifs adapted by Carter include: the arduous journey the children travel from their comfortable home in the country to their uncle's toyshop in south London; the dumb mute their aunt in London has been stuck dumb on her wedding day; metamorphoses. Uncle Philip's evil is revealed gradually in the course of the narrative; and even the winged creature in the form of the swan puppet, which Philip makes for the show in which Melanie takes part.

The novel incorporates the reactionary element of the fairy story in the consequences that befall Melanie borrowing her mother's wedding dress. However, it also undermines this inscribed ideology by emphasizing what the misogynistic fairy stories suppressed, an adolescent girl's excitement about her body and the discovery of her emerging sexuality.

> …she would follow with her finger the elegant structure of her rib-cage, where the heart fluttered under the flesh like a bird under a blanket, and she would draw down the long line from breast-bone to navel (which was a mysterious cavern or

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grotto), and she would rasp her palms against her bud-wing shoulder-blades. (1)

The novels' concerns here with the female body and sexuality are typical of Anglo-American feminist art and literature of the late 1960s and early 1970s and it is important to place the zeal of such work, which from a later feminist perspective may appear intellectually a little crude, in the context of the times. Feminist artists and writers of the day were mounting a challenge to the way in which women's bodies were rendered invisible in art and culture other than as idealized objects in works produced by men within the tradition of the classic female nude. The focus of their challenge was this Western tradition's denial of women's experiences of their own bodies. In other words, they attacked the mythical sense of the integrity of the body and its boundaries in the representation of the female nude and drew attention to the internal bodily changes or bodily fluids, which regularly crossed those boundaries and subverted the body's sense of closure. Although this may seem like straining for effect to contemporary readers, Carter is following the feminist concerns of her day to challenge, and work against, traditions which reified the cosmetically finished surface of the female body and denied the abject matter of its interior, ironically in London, Uncle Philip tries to turn Melanie into a fetishised object as spectacle, a wooden marionette.

The way in which the wedding dress incident is structured appears to suggest a young girl's first experience of sex and the anxieties around it. The purring cat at the centre of the tree she is about to climb gives Melanie the confidence to step out of the wedding dress and become naked. In her nakedness, she feels vulnerable, pulling her hair around her for protection. The cat unexpectedly hurts her, the dress that she had parcelled up and placed in the tree is symbolically ripped and there is now blood on the hem. Melanie now feels "a new and final kind of nakedness, as if she had taken evens her own skin off" (21). Moreover, the season is the end of the summer, the end of childhood and 'innocence' and the moon, the female symbol to which menstruation is linked, is 'beginning to slide down the sky. Here, the

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lore plays its role in rewriting this novel as a feminine lore novel. According to Peach, *Angela Carter*,

> Carter rewrites the myth of the Garden of Eden of which we are reminded by the tree itself, clearly the Tree of Knowledge, by the reference to the shower of apples, and by an allusion to Eve's realization of her nakedness after eating the forbidden fruit - Melanie is horribly conscious of her own exposed nakedness. (78)

However, if the biblical imagery reminds us of Genesis, there are counter elements drawn from witchcraft, paganism and superstition - the cat is a well-known witch's familiar, Melanie crosses her fingers, and there are references to blackness, the night, blood and nakedness. They remind us of elements absent from the biblical version of the Adam and Eve story and the novel seems to be challenging a myth which endorses the inferiority of women to men.

An important aspect of the novel's revision of the Adam and Eve story is the female point of view, which stresses not only a developing sexuality, but the excitement, fears and phantasies to which sexuality gives rise and through which it not only finds expression but is explored and developed. Melanie's experience of nude tree climbing leads to injury and, quite literally, torment. Here the novel may be predicting more than what is in store for Melanie as a consequence of her parents' death and her enforced move to London. It may also be giving expression to centuries old fear of women: that their husband's may turn out to be monsters and wedded bliss proves a nightmare. Ironically, while much of the passage suggests the permanent loss of childhood Melanie has started her periods, decided to grow her hair long and has stopped wearing shorts, Melanie emotionally go back to childhood: "Please, God, let me get safe back to my own bed again." Particularly important to the novel's concern at this point with Melanie explicitly and all women implicitly is the tension

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between desire and restraint which causes a scream to swell up in Melanie's throat. The unexpressed scream, of course, becomes a symbol of the condition in which Melanie, and perhaps many women, will come to live.

In *The Magic Toyshop* is in the third person, but the focalisation is Melanie's. The contrast between the new home and the one she has left opens up a new space in which Melanie imagines, locates and develops an ideal: She is cast as an opposed protagonist. Even though Aunt Margaret, Francie and Finn love each other, making Melanie feel bitterly lonely and unloved, the flowers family becomes the parasitical creatures of fairy stories. Finn, for example, is described as "a tawny lion poised for the kill." Melanie does consciously what Zipes argues all readers of fairy stories do unwittingly. She translates the parasitical creatures of fairy stories into the socio-psychological conflicts, which separate her, and will continue to separate her, from the psychic ideal of the home. Finn comes to represent an "insolent, off-hand, terrifying maleness" and the threat that he poses is suggested when, in order to comb out her hair, he "ground out his cigarette on the window-ledge and laughed" (45). For all the differences between Finn and his uncle, the laugh and grounding gesture at this point blur the boundary between them. From the outset, *The Magic Toyshop* is concerned not only with the importance of phantasy but of ego disturbances within the psyche.

In the novel, the psyche is perceived as constructed within a wide system of relationships including familial, social, cultural and political forces. Some of these such as nature and sex; we tend to 'mythologise' and regard as if they are 'outside' of history and a particular social milieu. Desire and phantasy, especially, we tend to regard as 'universal' or 'archetypal,' ignoring the way in which these, too, are socially constructed. Many teenagers, for example, may identify with the lyrics of chart-topping pop songs because they appear to reflect their emotions, anxieties and frustrations, without realizing that these songs as part of popular culture contribute to the social construction of emotional identity, of gendered

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behaviour within relationships, and of desire itself. In her exploration of the different social roles and subjectivities available to women, Melanie not only challenges the notion of a singular female identity, but also demonstrates how women have to negotiate countless of received assumptions and social conventions.

Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* is engagements with a whole range of issues such as the social construction of female subjectivity, biological essentialism, twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory and violence. She has a particular preoccupation with what we have tended to regard as 'natural' rather than socially constructed - sexuality, desire, motherhood, and pain. It is a typical of Carter's philosophical enquiry that she places sadism in the context of an extended exploration of the sources of evil. She strikes a series of variations on different religious and political explanations. However, the evasiveness and nudism of Carter's feminism are treated satirically, her novels argue against the conventional assignment of gender roles and an essentialist concept of sexuality.

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