ANGELA CARTER'S DUPLICITOUS DOLLS

Eliza Claudia FILIMON[1]

Abstract

Angela Carter's fiction offers readers an example of the way male fetishism transforms woman into an object, a toy seduced by other toys, a living doll. The majority of her tales take up the theme of fetishist entrapment in an attempt to make the forbidden voice heard, beyond the confines of rationality. The portrayal of the eccentric feminine takes shape in a new literary space populated with male and female protagonists. This study focuses on the most extreme female into doll transformation in two novels and various short stories by Angela Carter.

Keywords: Angela Carter, male fetishism, women, objects, living doll, eccentric femine.

The self can be described as a mixture of physical and psychological traits which change their meaning according to historical and cultural contexts. As a result, Angela Carter aims at subverting the traditional concept of a stable world and exposing its pattern of relations. Power operates as a set of negotiations between discourses. Foucault (1979) defines violence and sex as official forms of control in *Discipline and Punish*, raising the question of the difference between natural and constructed, which writers such as Angela Carter try to answer. She is constantly searching for modes of subverting the dominant order, in constructing her female characters.

The Gothic tradition plays a crucial part in her fictional play of sexual identity. Her postmodern celebration of the surface is overlapped with the Gothic space of fear and desire. The Gothic genre offers her the necessary framework, with its exaggerating clichés.

She uses the Gothic in various ways, mostly to parody its theatrics of horror, as she is famous for revisionary writing. But her use of the Gothic goes deeper than parodic rewriting. She gives some hint in the 'Afterword' to *Fireworks*:

> "Though it took me a long time to realise why I like them, I'd always been fond of Poe, and Hoffman.... The Gothic tradition in which Poe writes grandly ignores the value systems of our institutions; it deals entirely with the profane. Its great themes are incest and cannibalism.... Its style will tend to be ornate, unnatural - and thus operate against the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact.... It retains a singular moral function - that of provoking unease." (BB 456)

What is equally revealing is her subsequent comment: "We live in Gothic times" (ibid.). She describes in Gothic terms her experience of the cultural change after her return to England from Japan, and her description illuminates the lurid side of the contemporary world in which the familiar becomes strange and uncanny.

Critics have termed as an internal contradiction of Angela Carter's works her failure to give a coherent perspective to her characters, whose subjectivity becomes

[1] Assistant Prof. PhD, University of the West, Timisoara.

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

problematic. From an external perspective, Angela Carter appears unable to disengage from the attitude keeping women under domination. It seems, though, that this strand of criticism has neglected the contradictions at work in a single text, a feature typical of writing fiction, according to Bakhtin:

> "Instead of the virginal fullness and inexhaustibility of the object itself, the prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness. Along with the internal contradictions inside the object itself, the prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia surrounding the object" (1981:278).

In line with Laura Mulvey's definition of women as object of the male gaze, Leilah in *The Passion of New Eve* is glamorous, the sexual object on display, but also the black, threatening other. Although Evelyn gazes and she is just the object of his gaze, he has no access to her inner self. The more idealized her sexual image becomes, the darker her inner self: "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded or strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (1989:27).

Patricia Duncker calls her style Queer Gothic since her work "shares many themes and stylistic devices with the literature of the eighteenth century" (1996:58). She underlines the horrific setting that alienates the characters and sets them free from reality at the same time. The grotesque arises from the comic treatment of the subject matter, the combination of horror and ludicrous. The literary parody employed to illustrate gender stereotypes takes the shape of puppetry. For Angela Carter, as for Freud, the living doll stands for the ambiguity of beauty which includes both challenge and threat, but for her it also reflects the attitude towards women as objects in a male dominated culture. The passivity of the living doll feeds masculine fantasies but also deprives any carnal relationship of humanity. The automaton is a grotesque figure, a cross between a living creature and a puppet, an incongruous being that horrifies and amuses. The puppet represents the grotesque form of subordination. Melanie in *The Magic Toyshop* is forced into the role of a living puppet in her uncle's house, against her will, whereas Lady Purple, the oriental Venus, comes to life after draining her old puppeteer of life, and acts out of free will to further re-enact her script.

However, the puppet women are not entirely helpless. They possess a feminine power although they are owned by men. Linda Hutcheon describes this power as

> "subjectivity represented as something in process, never as fixed and never as autonomous, outside history. It is always a gendered subjectivity, rooted also in class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. And it is usually textual self-reflexivity that paradoxically calls these worldly particularities to out attention by foregrounding the unacknowledged politics behind the dominant representations of the self- and the other – in visual images or in narratives." (1985:39)

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

This new subjectivity must be read beyond the dominant representations, by adopting the postmodern stance that Hutcheon sees as "self-conscious, self-undermining …wholesale commitment to doubleness, or duplicity" (1985:1).

Fetishism figures prominently in Angela Carter's works. It is a feature targeted at redefining femininity through a critique of male fetishism, as found in the literary canon, and it has earned her Christina Britzolakis' comment: "she writes like an unabashed female fetishist" (1997:46). But Carter is at the same time famous for rewriting literary ancestors' texts. The two features are in fact intertwined, as Britzolakis again suggests:

> "Carter has characterized her stylistic excesses as a species of decadence: 'It's mannerist, you see: closing time in the gardens of the West.' This comment sits uneasily with her expressed belief in her fiction as an instrument of social change and intervention. But it does resonate with the attraction in her work towards the rhetoric and iconography of a prominent, largely male-authored strand of European literary history, which runs from the mid-nineteenth century through Baudelaire, Poe, Sade [sic], much of French symbolism, the Decadent writing of the *fin de siècle* and Surrealism. Carter's readings of these texts unerringly focus on their metaphorization of femininity in its most fetishized and spectacular forms". (1997:49)

Consequently, we see how women's fate is bound by fetishes: the Beast, in 'The Tiger's Bride', gives the heroine diamond earrings and a sable cloak in the hope to seduce her, the gloved Countess wearing a diamond brooch in 'The Snow Child' is "wrapped in the glittering pelts of black foxes; and she wore high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels, and spurs" (1996:193), while Lady Purple, the prostitute turned puppet turned woman again, is the sum of metonymic substitutes: glass rubies, mother of pearl, enamelled tin, clothes of "vibrating purple" (1996:49). Women are fetishised, turned into inert or living dolls, they are commodities, whose exchange value only matters, as Carter reminds us in the opening line of 'The Tiger's Bride': "My father lost me to The Beast at cards" (1996:51).

'The Erl-King' features an undefined heroine who is lured to her gilded cage by the music played by the Erl-King and, implicitly, by the fascination of the Romantics' image of woman, as suggested by the wealth of hidden quotations from Romantic poetry. The fateful attraction of poetry is indeed exemplified in the very image of the Erl-King and its magic flute.

While 'The Erl-King' is a warning against Romantic fetishising, its conclusion does not provide a clear way out of the prison of language. It sets off with the girl victim planning to kill her tormentor: "I shall take two huge handfuls of his rustling hair [...] and [...] I shall strangle him with them". Liberation seems within reach: "Then she will open all the cages and let the birds free; they will change back into young girls [...]" (EK 91), but already the victory is doubtful if we consider the ambiguous agent that results from the playful use of the pronouns. Neither 'I' nor 'she' will have the concluding word, and the personal victory song turns out to be only an impersonal, inhuman lament.

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

> "[...] she will string the old fiddle with five single strings of ash-brown hair. Then it will play discordant music without a hand touching it. The bow will dance over the new strings of its own accord and they will cry out: 'Mother, mother, you have murdered me!'" (EK 91)

The most pronounced puppet theme can be found in 'The Loves of Lady Purple' (1974), in which the title heroine, a vampiric marionette, comes to life under the manipulation of the male puppeteer. The uncanny experience is presented as a supernatural event of a doll being transformed into a woman but at the end of the story the supernatural turns ambiguously close to the familiar and becomes uncanny. The tale itself is a rewriting of several literary and psychoanalytical motifs: the fear of a doll coming to life because of its uncanny life-likeness, the threat of its necromantic power, the interchangeable lives of the doll and its creator, and the male fear of female sexuality. Whereas fear and desire are antonymous in Gothic fiction, and the object of disgust holds the hero/ine in enthrallment, these fears in the tale are bound up with a male desire to control the unrestrained female sexuality. The old Asiatic Professor displays an acute desire to define his self through the feared object, Lady Purple, with whom he lives in symbiosis. He creates his doll as a predatory whore enacting dramas of monstrous femininity, such as the show ""The Notorious Amours of Lady Purple"".

Lady Purple is very successful, so that she has "transcended the notion that she was dependent on his hands and appeared wholly real and yet entirely other" (1996:43). Not only is she the simulacra of the living, she becomes the simulacra of the dead. As she sadistically preys on her victims she illustrates a deadly, insatiable eroticism. She cannot be either living or dead, since the dead puppet can become alive at will. Lady Purple looks human, but she is a living dead: "although she was now manifestly a woman, young and extravagantly beautiful, the leprous whiteness of her face gave her the appearance of a corpse animated solely by demonic will" (1996:51). Once the puppet turns into a woman, she is no longer the object of desire, "she was not a true prostitute for she was the object on which men prostituted themselves" (1996:46).

> "The doll seduces and tortures men, squeezes them dry of money and dreams, and in taunting their desiccated manhood, forces them to watch her make love with a beggar for nothing, and moreover, she does all these compulsively out of a dry desire insatiable and unknowable to herself (LLP 46).

In her involuntary monstrosity she ends up "a marionette herself, herself her own replica" (LLP 47), so tells the ancient puppeteer his audience. The puppeteer plays with his doll's metamorphosis between puppet and woman; he claims his doll had once been a woman but now turned into a puppet, "the petrification of a universal whore," for "too much life had negated life itself" (1996:44): "she abrogated her humanity. She became nothing but wood and hair. She became a marionette herself, herself her own replica, the dead yet moving image of the shameless Oriental Venus." (LLP 44)

While monstrous metamorphosis is a recurrent theme in Gothic fiction, it is played

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

here by Angela Carter in a subversive manner. The same scenario of the doll's transfiguration is duplicated in the tale itself in a reversed way; Lady Purple is transfigured from a puppet to a woman and is doomed at the end of the story to re-enact the scenario instilled by the puppet master.

Apart from narrative self-referentiality, there is an intricate exchange of desire and identity implied in the reflexive structure. As Gothic fiction is a fictional discourse of the self in its fantasy world under siege by the Other, the Gothic monster is often an externalization of the self's fear of the threatening Other. Lady Purple, either a puppet or a woman, is always a monster in the Professor's scenario; in fantasizing her as metamorphosed from woman to puppet he has her under his control.

"In her permanent dormant state she is his sleeping beauty his kiss would not waken" (LLP 43). But his script goes awry; one night "[t]he sleeping wood had wakened" by his kiss (LLP 50) and turned from puppet to woman, and sucked him dry of blood and life. The doll becomes a woman, or an automaton. Or a woman with her sexualized body invariably starts as an automaton for she is awakened by his desire which becomes hers. Can she have an inherent desire of her own other than this dry desire that can never be satiated? The scene of her coming to life is a painful process in which the victim and victimizer exchange positions and desires. The exchange seems fantastic, but it produces an uncanny effect, because for the Professor it is the "return of the repressed" (1996:51), and for the doll it is a confirmation of her firm belief that she is authentic.

It seems that even Lady Purple's revenge is questionable. At the end of the story we see the puppet biting back and draining the puppeteer's blood.

"Lady Purple embodies both the vengeful vampire and the lifeless marionette. Yet in her determination to stalk into the village, she ultimately returns the horror genre to its own sick source. Lady Purple "might now perform the forms of life not so much by the skill of another as by her own desire that she did so" (LLP 51); but a paradox remains:

> "had the marionette all the time parodied the living or was she, now, living, to parody her own performance as a marionette? Although she was now manifestly a woman, young and beautiful, the leprous whiteness of her face gave her the appearance of a corpse animated solely by demonic will." (1996:51)

This paradox lies at the core of the feminist debate about femininity as masquerade, but it also reflects the shaping of characters in fiction. For what are characters if not puppets that reading somehow brings to life? The depiction of prostitutes as "mannequins of desire" can be seen to work as a *mise-en-abyme* of the art of building characters in fiction. Their stylised gestures make each one of them "as absolutely circumscribed as a figure in rhetoric" to become "a metaphysical abstraction of the female" (1996:50).

However, Carter's use of the fetish image here is tricky in that there is nothing extraordinary in the first metamorphosis, from woman to puppet, while the most dramatic moment is the reverse transformation into a vampiric woman, mediated by the

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

kiss of life:

> "Her kiss emanated from the dark country where desire is objectified and lives. She gained entry into the world by a mysterious loophole in its metaphysics and, during the kiss, she sucked his breath from his lungs so that her own bosom heaved with it"(1996:50)

His (the creator's) kiss becomes hers (the creature's). This is the paradox of whether a character results from the fetishising of reality or is a fetish returning to reality. Fantasy allows both, and Carter is thus implying that no fiction really comes to life without it.

In the later novels, sexuality and physical oppression are no longer confined to familiar settings, but are projected into exotic environments, such as the Siberian wilderness, the African coast, or a nightmarish America. The illnesses gnawing at contemporary life surface more clearly in a parodied reality, populated by beings on the margins: Fevvers, Eve/lyn, Desiderio.

Desiderio in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* is the bastard son of an Indian gypsy prostitute, an origin that gives him a unique and ironic minority standpoint in relation to his post-colonial home. The completion of his assignment to destroy Dr Hoffman's desire machines turns him into a hero, an honour that does not come cheap. The novel reflects the social structures with the various patterns of suffering the protagonist encounters in his journey. Sexuality is the prevailing medium of control and oppression. In keeping with many feminist critiques of psychoanalytic theory, Carter reveals the unconscious to be the repository of patriarchal values. The violent sexual images that make up Desiderio's unrepressed fantasies bear witness to the misogyny of Oedipally constituted sexuality. Through her expositions of the patriarchal structure of the unconscious, Carter establishes her position in the text as a moral pornographer, one who engages in "the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind" (2000:19).

Desiderio's journey to Dr. Hoffman's castle brings him first to a small seaport town, where he visits a circus peepshow tent on a bleak pier. The peepshow features "THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE WORLD IN THREE LIFELIKE DIMENSIONS" (IDM 42), a series of tableaux carved in wax that describe women in various violent, sexualized poses:

> "Exhibit Four: EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT THE NIGHT IS FOR Here, a wax figure of the headless body of a mutilated woman lay in a pool of painted blood. She wore only the remains of a pair of black stockings and a ripped suspender belt of shiny black rubber. Her arms stuck out stiffly on either side of her and once again I noticed the loving care with which the craftsmen who manufactured her had simulated the growth of underarm hair. The right breast had been partially segmented and hung open to reveal two surfaces of meat as bright and false as the plaster sirloins which hang in toy butcher's shops while her belly was covered with some kind of paint that always contrived to look wet and, from the paint, emerged the handle of an enormous knife which was kept always

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

a-quiver by the action (probably) of a spring. (IDM 46)

Carter's view of such uninhibited sexuality appears dark, as further illustrated in the description of the rest of the "Seven Wonders". As moral pornographer, Carter is concerned with interpreting how the heterosexual male gaze constructs the object of desire. In the universe of Dr. Hoffman, the object of desire is deconstructed through the act of gazing—that is, the image that Desiderio perceives is one whose content reveals the politics underlying its construction. The very title of the "Fourth Wonder" is significant: the phrase "Everyone knows what the night is for" has special resonance for the feminist political sphere. The night challenges women's autonomy, her wholeness—thus Desiderio's unrepressed desire constructs a woman whose wholeness has been irreparably violated: "her breast is sliced open. Her headlessness underscores her lack of subjectivity" (IDM 48).

As Desiderio proceeds through this landscape of unrepressed desire, we find that each chapter of his adventure centers around the brutal sexual subjugation of a woman or group of women. The "moral" of this succession of increasingly disturbing pornographic images and encounters seems to be that it is only our repressions that separate us from the dictates of a brutal patriarchal unconscious. The ambiguity in the text often makes it impossible for the reader to differentiate between the images of the pre-Hoffman reality and the products of the desire machine.

Each place Desiderio visits shows a negative model of femininity: Mary Anne of the Mansion of Midnight, the child-bride Aoi, the whores of the House of Anonymity, the women centaurs, and the main heroine Albertina. The kaleidoscopic image that emerges is indicative of the faults of a misogynist system. Mary Anne " had the waxen delicacy of a plant bed in a cupboard. She did not look as if blood flowed through her veins" (IDM 53), "her kiss was like a draught of cold water and yet immediately excited my desire for it was full of an anguished yearning" (IDM 56).

Desire is defined in ironic terms, firstly through the dissolution of the male/female binary. Albertina "The white evening dress of a Victorian romantic heroine rustled about Albertina's feet and clung like frost to her amber breasts…" (IDM 201)

The images of Mary Anne and Albertina recall the typical Victorian heroine, whose long white dress and pale complexion stand for passivity. However, Desiderio is attracted to the suffering figures, so that we are made aware of his morbid tastes even from Albertina's first appearance, which he recollects: "I would be visited by a young woman in a negligee…which clung about her but did not conceal her quite transparent flesh, so that the exquisite filigree of her skeleton was revealed quite clearly" (IDM 25).

This transparent female body is monstrous, yet luring, as it is not a symbol of the purity of the Victorian victim, but a reflection of the woman as object. By the end of the novel Albertina reverts the angel-of –the –house stereotype and turns into an 'avenging angel' (IDM 216) who tries to kill Desiderio. It is evident that this portrayal of the women as victims highlights male oppression, because Desiderio experiences a sense of guilt

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

combined with responsibility for the sadistic relation with Mary Anne and for the violent death of her and Abertina: "For it was I who killed her" (IDM 14), "I felt I was in some way instrumental to her death" (IDM 61).

The next grotesque step Desiderio takes is his engagement with Aoi, the child in the River people tribe. The child-bride Aoi "… planted wet, childish kisses on my cheeks and mouth" (IDM 82). She is an example of a sexually trained automaton, a product of customs that have shaped a system "theoretically matrilineal though in practice all decisions developed upon the father" (IDM 80). Like the Amazons, the girls in this tribe are having their genitals manipulated to ensure they perform best within their social context. In the society of the Amazons "…our womenfolk are entirely cold and respond only to cruelty and abuse" (IDM 161), while in that of the Centaurs "…the womenfolk were tattooed all over, even their faces, in order to cause them more suffering, for they believed women were born only to suffer." (IDM 172)

Desiderio's voice guides us into each universe and directs the interpretation of its codes. He is proud of his masculine role most of the time, but still notes the absurdity of Aoi's microcosm, or Mary Anne's status of a "programmed puppet with a floury face who was not the mistress of her own hands" (IDM 92). The sexual lure these women exercise is gradually uncovered as a consequence of paedophilia and incest.

In chapter five, "The Erotic Traveler," Desiderio is given a lift in the carriage of a man who turns out to be a Count of Lithuania. During their travels, the Count, whose autobiography is meant to be a grotesque exaggeration of the life and times of the Marquis De Sade, entertains his guest with exotic tales of sexual conquest, each more bizarre than the last. As the Count observes at the outset of his confessions,

> ""The universe itself is not a sufficiently capacious stage on which to mount the grand opera of my passions. From the cradle, I have been a blasphemous libertine, a blood-thirsty debauchee. I travel the world only to discover hitherto unknown methods of treating flesh"" (IDM 126).

The Count brings Desiderio to a whorehouse where, despite the house's name, "The House of Anonymity," they eventually find Albertina—Dr. Hoffman's daughter and the object of Desiderio's desire. Because Albertina has a strong presence both in the non-Hoffman reality of the novel and in Desiderio's unrepressed desires, she sustains the ambiguous nature of the reality status of the scenes in which she appears. Desiderio's description of the denizens of the House of Anonymity paints a grotesque picture of womanhood:

> "There were, perhaps, a dozen girls in the cages in the reception room and, posed inside, the girls towered above us like the goddesses of some forgotten theogeny locked up because they were too holy to be touched. Each was as circumscribed as a figure in rhetoric and you could not imagine they had names, for they had been reduced by the rigorous discipline of their vocation to the undifferentiated essence of the idea of the female. This ideational femaleness took amazingly different shapes though its nature was

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

> not that of Woman; when I examined them more closely, I saw that none of them were any longer, or might never have been, woman. All, without exception, passed beyond or did not enter the realm of simple humanity. They were sinister, abominable, inverted mutations, part clockwork, part vegetable and part brute." (IDM 132)

In *The Sadeian Woman* (2000), Carter describes the way in which the subjects of the pornographic text are at one and the same time both reduced to the level of graffiti images and elevated to the status of myth. In both cases, the female subject of pornography loses her identity and becomes a vessel that both contains and conveys the idea of feminine sexuality as constructed by the consumer of the pornographic text. In the scene described above, Desiderio discovers, through close examination of the prostitutes arrayed for the fulfilment of the Count's desires, that the women are not really women at all. They represent a grotesque articulation of female sexuality effected by patriarchal desire.

Carter's use of the combined figure of the automaton and the vampire to explore female sexual subjectivity under patriarchy can be seen in another tale 'The Lady of the House of Love' (1979). In the tale it is the female vampire who experiences her sexual life as an automaton. The beautiful vampire, the Countess, is the daughter of Count Nosferatu and the only heiress to the decrepit castle after the patriarch vampire is staked out by a priest of the Orthodox faith. But before his extermination, the father cried, "'Nosferatu is dead; long live Nosferatu!'" (1996:196); and he does live, through the daughter. Here we see one of the satirical twists Angela Carter makes of the conventional vampire script, as the father remains undead, haunting the daughter. The house the daughter inherits is a house of shadows, the ancestors watch and desire through the daughter's eyes from their portraits suspended in the family galleries and her bedroom. The woman vampire, a predator of men, enacts her desire as a puppet of the undead ancestors: "She herself is a haunted house. She does not possess herself; her ancestors sometimes come and peer out of the windows of her eyes and that is very frightening.... The beastly forebears on the walls condemn her to a perpetual repetition of their passions" (1996:197). In her haunted state she is like "a ventriloquist's doll," "a great, ingenious piece of clockwork" whose mechanism is "inexorably running down" and "would leave her lifeless" (1996:204) for she has no real sexual subjectivity. The fatal "queen of night" has no sexual autonomy because this "I" is "only an invention of darkness," an "I" which "vanish[es] in the morning light" (1996:205), an "I" whose ferocious desire is not just of the other but doubly so as it is the ghost of a ghost, the vampiric father. The woman vampire is offered mirrors which show her monstrous being. The mirror is first provided by the rational eye of the young British officer and then by the shattered dark glasses that make her bleed. The deconstruction of the woman-vampire's sexuality is to be conducted on two fronts.

The figure of the woman vampire has been a heavily invested site of cultural fears of female sexuality; women vampires in conventional vampire fictions connote aggressive female sexuality and excess, or reflect male fear of the threat of the New Woman as

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

conveyed in Bram Stoker's *Dracula.*. Carter's vampire story parodies the male-centred rational discourse with its exorcising power to show that this power is debilitating for women. The Countess stands for the dark space outside rational discourse, haunting men with her dark excess, while the young man, representing the Enlightenment rationality, exorcises her vampiric power with his rational eye. He sees but disbelieves what he sees, for the woman vampire is outside his belief system; what he sees instead is a sick girl confined to a morbid house awaiting his deliverance.

Secondly, the Countess' doll-like vampiric desire reveals the contradictory nature of feminine sexuality, voracious passivity. A shadowy figure in the house, the woman vampire haunts people with her presence. She is a Gothic captive figure, incarcerated in the castle surrounded by spiky roses (1996:195), sick with a vampiric desire for love. She is "the Sleeping Beauty in the wood" waiting for the bridegroom to bring her back to life with a kiss. Her passivity is her source of power, but her power is forever self-annihilating, because she falls victim to romance, which is ironically her rescue. Love reverses her predatory sexuality and sets her free from the monstrous sexual subject, which means death, and she dies in the forbidden self-reflection. But love is never an unproblematic thing in Carter's writing even when it is liberating. The woman vampire falls in love because it is scripted in her identity. She puts on her feminine identity as she puts on her mother's bridal gown, which is "the only dress she has" (1996:197), and she enacts her life with a script from the Tarot cards which prescribes her fate of love and death.

In Carter's fiction the female subject has a problematic relation with her own body, constructed as a body of the other, a doll's body. This is more the monster than the figure of the vampire woman in Carter's works. She wears her sexual identity on her flesh; the female monsters are already in women; their "monstrosity" is shown when the "natural" sexual performance breaks down and is experienced as uncanny, and the body comes to haunt the sexual subject as a thing scripted up for the performance.

The subversive power of Carter's gender performance has constantly come under criticism. Is it possible for the female subject to subvert the patriarchal discourse from an object position without mimicking it? The mirror in which she sees herself displayed, does not reflect a one-way master gaze from the outside, but a complicated visual exchange the subject participates in; and it is the way in which the female subject participates that determines whether her sexual posing is subversive or objectifying. The game of juggling with being can be liberating or self-effacing; the clowns in *Nights at the Circus* illustrate the latter case. They perform various farces of failed manhood in patriarchal terms. Among them, the master clown Buffo, once a great acrobat, now mimics a man who cannot even manage to walk without stumbling over small things, or a patriarch in "the Clown's Funeral," miming a deceased old man who simply would not fit into the coffin and lie dead, jumping out of it persistently to hang on to the living. The traumatic self-deconstruction of the male ego comes when the mock-patriarch Buffo, chasing in a farce after the "Human Chicken", played by Walser, with a castrating knife, is performing a

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

real self-dissolution ending in madness. Buffo's disintegration comes from his failed play of patriarchal image, the son failing to become the Father even when he is placed in the patriarchal position. Behind his mock-play of the failed manly image is nothing, still the play of the failed male image, this mocked face has become his face: "'am I this Buffo whom I have created?.… And what am I without my Buffo's face? Why, nobody at all. Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not-Buffo. An absence. A vacancy'" (IDM 122). He is permitted to play, but with the same patriarchal gaze that sees himself, and he plays the "terror" of man, the clown, and becomes a horror to himself.

Women's voices resound in *Nights at the Circus* as long monologues, associated with subversion and with women who are capable of taking control of their own lives.

An example of this is Mignon, whom Jordan (1994:192) describes as bearing an image of Marilyn Monroe. She is presented in a self-mocking attitude as "the Blonde as Clown", Haffenden describes Mignon as one who represents "Europe, the unfortunate, bedraggled orphan – Europe after the war – which is why she carries such a weight of literary and musical references on her frail shoulders" (IDM 87).

Mignon is a born singer and a battered circus wife. Her husband beats her "as though she were a carpet" (NC 115). When they give her a bath, Fevvers and Lizzie find that her skin is "mauvish, greenish, yellowish from beatings" and shows "marks of fresh bruises on fading bruises on faded bruises" (NC 129), which demonstrates how objectified she is by her husband. Palmer asserts that she suffers from the violence "which is rife in a male-dominated culture." (1987:198) Although the novel underscores the oppression of women, it does offer solutions. Mignon, for example, bolstered by encouragement from Fevvers and the musical influence of the Princess, acquires self-confidence and steps beyond her role as "a soiled glove" (NC 155). She pairs up with the Princess to initiate the dancing tigers act, in which the Princess plays the piano and Mignon sings. From simple beginnings, Mignon and the Princess develop a very special kind of friendship that cherishes "in loving privacy the music that was their language, in which they'd found the way to one another" (NC 168). Mignon is strengthened through the music and she believes they "have been brought together, here, as women and as lovers, solely to make" it (NC 275). Fevvers reacts to this by saying that "love, true love has utterly transformed her" (NC 276) in the sense that love has enabled Mignon to become an active subject and discard her vulnerable role as victim.

In the novel, Carter introduces a subversive notion of prostitution by portraying it a positive light. The physical description of the whorehouse is funny, and has a carnivalesque touch. The staircase of the house is described as ascending "with a flourish like, pardon me, a whore's bum" (NC 26) and its drawing room is said to be "snug as a groin" (NC 27). Fevvers further describes the house as having an "air of rectitude and propriety"(NC 26) and as "a place of privilege" in which "rational desires might be rationally gratified" (NC 26), and chooses adjectives that are generally reserved for officially approved institutions. Thus, the novel brings together high and low culture by destabilizing the conventional codes, and launches challenges to the existing rule and

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

order. Fevvers argues passionately that "no woman would turn her belly to the trade unless pricked by economic necessity" (NC 39) because poverty takes away one's choices. Marcus says that people should regard prostitutes "not as some alien and monstrous creature but as a fellow human being" (1964:5).

Nights at the Circus also tries to follow the progress of the prostitutes after they cease to continue their occupation. Most of them do not succumb to death or venereal disease, and some return back to a regular course of life like any 'good' woman. Walser admits that he has known many whores fine enough to be wives. Fevvers' body is a site inscribed with various discourses and social forces, ranging from the monstrous, the grotesque, to the fantastic. She works as an aerial artiste, making a spectacle of her winged body to an audience who wonders about the authenticity of her unusual body. To combat the objectifying male gaze that sees her body as a fetish, Fevvers poses as a fantastic creature playing, not only with her audience but with herself, the game of hesitancy between fact and fiction—"Is she fact or is she fiction?". While the danger of objectification is always there, she manages to escape from it through a parodic strategy. The assumption of identity, as Fevvers is sharply aware, is a "confidence trick," and the identity she assumes for her winged body is a New Woman, free to display her sexual subjectivity. As she laughs joyfully at the end of the novel, saying, "To think I really fooled you!" (NC 195), the "you" is not just Jack Walser her lover, but the reader, and also the gaze she is subject to.

Sexual subjectivity can be a play, a carnivalesque activity, as Fevvers has exhibited. Angela Carter's female characters cannot be defined as 'normal' according to social norms. She brings to the surface hysterical, obsessive, irrational, beastly women in order to explode the *feminine mystique*. But Carter has also cautioned about the subversive power of carnival for it is permitted play, a play with limits set. As carnival concludes, the mechanism of power becomes apparent, and Carter's postmodern play fades to the Gothic play of uncanny identity.

References:

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1982. 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics.' 1937-38. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Kenneth Brostrom (trans.). Michael. Holquist (ed.). Austin: U of Texas P. 84-254.

Carter, Angela. 1982. *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). London: Virago Press.

Carter, Angela. 1984. *Nights at the Circus* London: Vintage.

Carter, Angela. 1994. *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972). New York: Penguin Books.

Carter, Angela.1994. *Shadow Dance* (1966). London: Virago Press.

Carter, Angela. 1996. *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. London: Vintage.

Carter, Angela 'The Lady of the House of Love.' (1979) in *Burning Your Boats: The Collected Short Stories*. 1996. London: Vintage. Pp. 195-209.

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)

Carter, Angela 'The Loves of Lady Purple' (1974) in *Burning Your Boats: The Collected Short Stories*. 1996. London: Vintage.pp. 41-52.
Carter, Angela 'The Erl-King' (1979) in *Burning Your Boats: The Collected Short Stories*. 1996. London: Vintage.pp. 186-193.
Carter, Angela. 2000. *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979). London: Virago Press.
Duncker. Patricia. 1984. 'Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers', *Literature and History,* Spring. Vol. 10, No. 1 pp. 7, 11.
Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punish*. (trans.) Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage.
Hutcheon, Linda. 1985. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms*. London : Methuen.
Mulvey, Laura. 1989. *Visual and other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

BDD-A8129 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:27 UTC)