
**THE AMUSINGLY TERRIFYING DISRUPTIVE INGREDIENTS
OF CARTER'S LIBERATING NETHER WORLD**

**OS LÚDICOS E AMEDRONTADORES INGREDIENTES
DISRUPTIVOS DO SUBMUNDO LIBERTADOR DE ANGELA CARTER**

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*We live in Gothic times*ⁱ
Angela Carter

ABSTRACT: By working within the postmodern aesthetics, the English writer Angela Carter concomitantly installs and undermines historical female Gothic in order to bring to the fore social opaque mechanisms that invariably work for the detriment of the female subject. In this way, Carter's postmodern female Gothic not only provides escape from the chains of gender, but of genre as well.

Keywords: Postmodernism; Gothic; Female subject.

RESUMO: Trabalhando dentro da estética pós-moderna, a escritora inglesa Angela Carter concomitantemente instala e subverte o gótico feminino histórico a fim de trazer à tona os mecanismos sociais opacos que invariavelmente funcionam para o detrimento do sujeito feminino. Deste modo, o gótico feminino pós-moderno de Carter não apenas provê escapatória dos grilhões do gênero (determinação sexual), mas também do gênero (categoria narrativa).

Palavras-chave: Pós-modernismo; Gótico; Sujeito feminino.

Famous for dialoguing with past texts and in the course of her narrative appropriating different genres in order to throw a critical eye on the construction of gender roles as well as to nourish reflection on the power of perpetuated modes of representation, Angela Carter does not let her readers down once she decides to legitimise historical female Gothic in *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*. Curiously enough, she does so only to eventually undermine it by means of her contemporary female Gothic writing. Different from the conventional close which reaffirms an apparent domestic harmony in which the female character ends up

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ensnared by the disempowering ‘Angel in the House’ myth or else punished and/or destroyed, Carter makes no room for such neat *denouements* which only reinforce the *status quo* and confirms the stereotyped symbols invariably related to the female subject. In short, “Carter uses Gothic settings, language and its paradoxes to expose social contradictions and the oppressions of socially constructed myths about gender and power relations which affect the ways we see ourselves in something” (WISKER, 2003, p. 5).

Despite undergoing several transformations from its inception in late eighteenth century to date, the Gothic tradition has always been permeated by a strong preoccupation with the powerful effects of representation on its readers (BOTTING, 1996). In point of fact, it can be seen as a cultural phenomenon which dwells upon the uncertainties and fears of quickly changing times by supplying the necessary imaginary space for the supernatural in such a manner that there takes place a concomitantly imitative and antithetical relationship with realism. It goes without saying that this intrinsic ambivalence, which gives way to discontinuity within continuity, along with a constant presence of the past, only reinforces its undeniable postmodern suitability.

In addition, Gothic literature’s labyrinthine and transgressive narrative, together with its excessive nature both in moral and formal terms, has always been seen as a ‘feminine’ form *vis-à-vis* the dominant discourse (FLEENOR, 1983). Of course, Carter is well aware of that, as Mr. Christian Rosencreutz’s analogy between terror and the female genital organ in *Nights at the Circus* clearly shows: “the female part, or absence, or atrocious hole, or dreadful chasm, the Abyss, Down Below, the vortex that sucks everything dreadfully down, down, down where Terror rules...” (CARTER, 1993a, p. 77).

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Carter has chosen to take part in the contemporary Gothic revival, which follows in the wake of postmodernism and feminism, and uses this genre to furnish a reading experience which opens the way for liberation from the patriarchal symbolic order through a social critique of its values and mores. Perhaps the best manner to analyse Carter’s appropriation and use of traditional Gothic fiction in her aforementioned last two novels is put Becker’s statement below to the test:

It is my argument that gothicism [sic] – or rather *neo-gothicism* [sic] [1970s-1990s] – will signal the emancipatory possibilities of postmodern culture: we live again in times that are sensible to gothic [sic] forms of emotion and representation. And it is my conviction that one of the secrets of the gothic’s [sic] persistent success is gender-related: it is so powerful because it is so feminine (BECKER, 1999, p. 2).

To begin with, the term ‘Gothic’ stems from the Goths, who partook in the destruction of the Roman Empire. Thereby, there could not be a better word to name the aesthetic movement which antagonises classic realism. Indeed, many of the staple components of the Gothic novel as it is known today had their starting point in Horace Walpole’s attempt to find the middle way between fantasy and reality in the mixing of medieval romance and realistic novelⁱⁱ (BOTTING, 1996), which was the very beginning of the tortuous ambivalence which typifies the genre and puts at work the inscription and subversion of boundaries between natural and supernatural, present and past, reason and emotion, unity and alternatives, to name but a few.

Needless to say, this ambivalence and the attack contemporary Gothic narrative promotes against the forms of representation patriarchy reproduces and their underpinning structures are the main points of contact with postmodernism. Likewise, this concomitant running parallel and counter to the dominant discourse which reflects the prevailing anxieties attendant on the vicissitudes of life in distressing times. With regard to this point, the uncertainties at the turn of the century in *Nights at the Circus* are much in tune with the turbulent 1960s which would prepare the ground for the Gothic revival: among other things, suffragettes fight for the franchise in a male-dominated culture and the brothel in which half-a-dozen mothers raise Fevvers hums with feminist activity in favour of the ‘New Woman’ⁱⁱⁱ who fights against conventional sexual divisions between domestic and social spheres (BOTTING, 1996): “[y]et we were all suffragists in that house; oh, Nelson was a one for “Votes for Women”, I can tell you!” (CARTER, 1993a, p. 38).

Funnily enough, the capacity of the Gothic style to provoke both emotions of terror or horror and laughter also testifies to this ambivalence. Since “power, repression and authority never speak in the language of laughter” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 308), the use of this device can only signal the Gothic’s rebellious refusal to submit to any sort of law or authority (BOTTING, 1996). In this respect, there appears to be no better example as the moment in which a terrified Fevvers wields her sword in order to defend herself and right after that cannot avoid laughing at Mr Rosencreutz’s astonishment to find out that she is not so vulnerable after all: “even in the midst of my consternation, I was tickled pink to see the poor old booby struck all of a heap to see his plans awry and he was as much put out when I laughed in his face as he was to see old Nelson’s plaything” (CARTER, 1993a, p. 83). Similarly, not even the terror of old age and its devastating effects, which once somehow defeats Ma Chance as the erstwhile young Chance sisters mock her “vast, sagging, wrinkled,

quivering” hag body (CARTER, 1993b, p. 94), prevents the stereotypical crone twins from attending Melchior’s birthday party thanks to empowering laughter:

I suffered the customary nasty shock when I spotted us both in the big gilt mirror at the top – two funny old girls, paint an inch thick, clothes sixty years too young, stars on their stockings and little wee skirts skimming theirs buttocks. Parodies. [...] we had to laugh at the spectacle we’d made of ourselves and, fortified by sisterly affection, strutted our stuff boldly into the ballroom (IBID, p. 197-98).

Thus, postmodernism and Gothicism thwart master narratives’ attempts to circumscribe meaning and pave the way for indeterminacy, a postmodern intellectual inevitability that produces alternative truths and a Gothic “narrative necessity, providing the essential possibilities of mystery and suspense” (SMITH, 1996, p. 7, 12).

Furthermore, Gothic aesthetics is also akin to that of postmodernism in what Hutcheon calls ‘the presence of the past’: an insistence to look back in time in a paradoxical interface between attraction and contempt, desire and suspicion (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 244; SMITH, 1996, p. 10). Actually, flashbacks are recurrent in both novels and sometimes they are interpolated in quite an unusual manner as when, in *Wise Children*, Dora stops her narrative with a conspicuous and abrupt “Freeze-frame”. This procedure aims at providing the reader with some background information on the Chance sisters’ personal history as well as giving an overview of how patriarchally-structured Hazard family has been callous to some of the female characters and even cripples some others who have crossed their way. Indeed, it is exactly this chronological narrative return which explains Tiffany’s plight, the first black in the Chance family who seems bound to end up in an Ophelia-like drowning. Only after that does Dora “[p]ress the button for ‘Play’” again (CARTER, 1993b, p. 40).

Interestingly, this chronological narrative return sometimes is not only indicated in temporal terms, but spatial as well, as Mulvey points out: “[t]he Gothic is, quite obviously, a genre of uncanny *mise-en-scènes*: ruins, tombs, labyrinthine underground passages give material visibility to the presence of the past, doubling up the way that the stories are actually set in past historical time” (MULVEY, 1996, p. 53). So much so that the very first impression Fevvers has as she arrives at Rosencreutz’s mansion is that she has gone back in history due to its appearance and surroundings: “I saw before me a mansion in the Gothic style, all ivied over, and, above the turrets, floated a fingernail moon with a star in its arms. Somewhere, a dog, howling. Around us, a secrecy of wooded hills” (CARTER, 1993a, p. 74).

In this way, simultaneously in accordance with the Foucauldian principle that “resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” and the postmodern contradictory practice “that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (FOUCAULT, 1993, p. 336; HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 243), Carter’s postmodern female Gothic fiction does inscribe historical female Gothic, but only to undercut it in the end (BECKER, 1999). Proof thereof is that Tiffany does not end up as the conventional victimised female character. Much on the contrary, she is eventually empowered to such an extent that not only does she upstage the whole Hazard family while she is at Melchior’s birthday party, but also turns down Tristram’s possibly entrapping marriage proposal in spite of his begging for her hand on his knees (CARTER, 1993b). Neither is Fevvers the typical victim for she manages to evade Rosencreutz’s “bizarre transaction” which boils down to an attempt to sacrifice her in order to fulfil his intent of prolonging his life as other patriarchs like Artepheus^{iv}, King David and Signor Guardi had somehow done before him^v (IBID, 1993a, p. 79, 82-83).

Effectively, one of traditional Gothic’s idiosyncratic features which Carter does not allow for in her fiction is the restoration of patriarchal order which only reasserts the maintenance of the current state of affairs and also confirms the veracity and efficacy of the cautionary strategies issued by every sort of patriarchal institution (BOTTING, 1996), as Wisker succinctly observes:

But the genre is also conventional in that, once it has exposed and dramatized our worst fears, it returns us to safety and order, reinforcing the status quo. [...] but only if we can spot what is threatening because it is different, or other. As such, the genre can also reinforce a kind of social xenophobia: anyone or anything out of the ordinary is suspect. But horror in the hands of more racial writers, such as Angela Carter, can question such simplistic responses, such essentially conservative, indeed blinkered, possibly tyrannical, repressive world views. In Carter’s hands, horror refuses to restore a limiting status quo (WISKER, 2003, p. 30).

Hence, Carter does make use of Gothic genre’s inherent subversive nature. However, her “novels are frequently subversions of the genre; themes and ideas first explored [...] in Gothic writing are re-examined, challenged and expanded” (PEACH, 1998, p. 28). Thereby, once Carter puts her social critique at work, she usually re-empowers her female characters in the aftermath of their ordeal. For this reason, after spending almost thirty years living as the invalid Wheelchair in the Chance sisters’ basement as a victim of the Hazard blood, Lady Atalanta Hazard, née Lynde, is finally back to the spotlights to turn the tables on the Hazards

by making a spectacular entrance at Melchior's birthday party and finishing him off before millions who watch the event on TV and learn that Melchior has been cheated on for Saskia and Imogen are not his children but Peregrine's (CARTER, 1993b).

Moreover, Carter calls into question the way the construction of the 'other' as a monster usually occurs, as she ironically does in a reverse manner in *Nights at the Circus* in order to show the arbitrary and unreliable basis of this process: "[s]ince they [the tribespeople] did not have a word for 'foreigner', they used the word for 'devil' [...] as the generic term for those round-eyed ones who soon began to pop up everywhere" (CARTER, 1993a, p. 253-54). In a similar vein, in the way Peregrine unmasks the "darling buds of May", Saskia and Imogen Hazard: "[t]hey're mine, Melchior, little monsters that they are" (IBID, 1993b, p. 216), and Wiltshire Wonder's perspective on the so-called 'normal' humankind: "I had known all these things from birth and grown accustomed to the monstrous ugliness of mankind" (IBID, 1993a, p. 67). At last, Carter keeps up to her word that she is in the demythologising business and does not let Fevvers be constructed as the traditional Gothic monstrous-feminine by Walser's patriarchal journalistic narrative: "Fevvers lassooed him with her narrative and dragged him along with her" (CARTER, 1983, p. 71; IBID, 1993a, p. 60; BECKER, 1999, p. 44). Even though she is half a bird, half a woman, and belongs to the ancient realm of myths which to a greater or lesser extent inform every single individual's everyday life, Fevvers 'reinvents' herself as she knows that "[a]s a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly, none" (CARTER, 1993a, p. 161).

All this need for mobility in cultural and formal terms brings immediately to mind two key words intrinsically related to the Gothic genre: 'excess' and 'escape'. In fact, postmodern feminist Gothic writing sets out to confront patriarchal attempts to enclose both genre and gender through excess that releases from cultural and ideological containment that not only reduces the female subject to powerlessness but also imposes boundaries which aim at crippling Gothic's political power (BECKER, 1999). By the same token, it is no coincidence that Fevvers is a giantess whose measures are far beyond the Victorian model of femininity in every way and whose "exceedingly long and abundant" "half hundredweight of hair" enables her to embody the contemporary feminist Gothic boundlessness, not to mention her empowering postmodern ambivalence as the "neither naked nor clothed" "Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species" (CARTER, 1993a, p. 81). In like manner, the Chance sisters are endowed with such an extravagant vivacity that excessive is *the* word to define the demolishing sex the sprightly septuagenarian

Dora and her centenarian uncle Peregrine have at Melchior's birthday party (CARTER, 1993b).

Thus far, it is already unquestionable that as opposed to realism's sense of order, propriety and reason, fantasy, imagination, emotion and havoc pervade Gothic fiction from beginning to the end in the undertaking of a somewhat antirealist process whose outcome is invariably the blurring of boundaries between the categories of the naturalised 'real' and the supernatural so that an erstwhile opaque reality can come to light. To put it simply, "[t]he Gothic is a distorting lens, a magnifying lens; but the shapes which we see through it have nonetheless a reality which cannot be apprehended in any other way" (PUNTER, 1996, p. 98).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that although Gothic writing undergoes its greatest change during the romantic period, which has to do with a greater concern towards aspects of interiority and individuality (BOTTING, 1996), that is not the sort of Gothic style that typifies Carter's narrative since a greater focus on aspects of the 'inner self' would much probably decrease the effectiveness of her efforts to debunk traditional patriarchal concepts and institutions which can be more easily grasped in palpable material reality somewhat common to all and on which her use of the supernatural relies. According to Armstrong:

Angela Carter [...] does not write from subjectivities and their centre of self. Hers is not the expressive mode, the inwardness of the feeling self. Instead she writes in a stylised, objectifying, external manner, as if all experience, whether observed or suffered, is self-consciously conceived of as *display*, a kind of rigorous, analytical, public self-projection which, by its nature, excludes private expression (ARMSTRONG, 1995, p. 269).

Carter states in the "Afterword" to *Fireworks* that "[t]he Gothic tradition in which Poe writes grandly ignores the value systems of our institutions; [...] It retains a singular moral function – that of provoking unease" (CARTER, 1987, p. 133). As it is clear, there is something missing in Carter's view and that is precisely the putting into doubt the 'truths' the symbolic order establishes as real, mainly concerning the female subject, and not only denouncing them, which she enacts by means of a three-fold strategy. First, she appropriates and enforces the familiar, the everyday experience, together with naturalised images of femininity. However, she does so to an excess so that familiarisation and defamiliarisation occur at once, which is exactly the moment in which Freud's *unheimlich* or uncanny takes place.

As Freud notes, the uncanny is related to that which frightens, arouses dread and has to do with feelings of repulsion and distress. Besides, it is also characterised, among other

things, by the involuntary repetition or recurrence of the same situation (FREUD, 1997). Therefore, what at first appears a down-to-earth interview for Walser turns out to be the starting point of the deconstruction of everything he might deem certain. For one thing, Big Ben strikes midnight three times in the course of the interview. For another, there is a moment in which he has the tortuous impression that for a while the room is taken out of its temporal continuum and held above the world (CARTER, 1993a), which is very much in line with Becker's standpoint that "narrative excesses – hyperbole, reversal, displacement in time and in space – defamiliarise the common power structures and open up a critical perspective" (BECKER, 1999, p. 30). What is more, given that Mary Russo claims that "[t]wins, after all, can be hilariously funny as well as disturbingly uncanny" (RUSSO, 1995, p. 120), what to make then of the proliferation of twins in *Wise Children*?

Furthermore, Carter leaves no room for doubting the supernatural. As a result, the imaginary enables her to furnish alternative worlds which do not conform to patriarchal symbolic order and provide liberation at the same time. Fevvers herself, for instance, is the embodiment of the uncanny in the sense that she is a subversive symbol to which has been given life:

This is that an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on (FREUD, 1997, p. 221).

This is nothing but the refamiliarisation of the supernatural that makes the uncanny possible and liberating in tandem. In addition, once Carter introduces this personification of an excessively antagonising symbol that Fevvers is, she also draws attention to how the iconographic supersedes the ontological in society in a gender-construction process reverse to that of Dracula, for example, who stands for the materialisation of ideas as much as Fevvers. In other words, Fevvers's construction occurs in a process opposed to that of the symbolic women patriarchy produces (NEUMEIER, 1996).

Moreover, by quoting Schelling, Freud finds that "[u]nheimlich' [or uncanny] is the name for everything that ought to have remained... secret and hidden but has come to light" (FREUD, 1997, p. 199, *author's emphasis*). As a matter of fact, this is exactly the sort of uncanniness that Carter brings to the fore and refamiliarises, for instance, in the museum of woman monsters whose very owner, Madame Schreck, "had some quality of the uncanny about her" in the first place (CARTER, 1993a, p. 58). Indeed, "Our Lady of Terror", alias the

“Living Skeleton”, is just the first on a list of “prodigies of nature” which subsumes: Fanny Four-Eyes, the Sleeping Beauty, Wiltshire Wonder, Albert/Albertina, Cobwebs and the mouthless black man Toussaint. All of them, except for Madame Schreck and Toussaint, cater to the most sordid and bizarre desires of those who would rather keep this “lumber room of femininity” and its dispossessed creatures unnoticed (CARTER, 1993a).

Back to temporal and spatial separation from the present as a strategy for social critique, it is also important to point out that these distancing strategies to which Carter so often has recourse in her defamiliarisation process endow her writing with a better and necessary critical distance, with the “exposure to the unfamiliar, whose symptoms were questions” (IBID, p. 254). That is why time is not linear in the novels, it develops in a maze of dizzying back and forths which time and again relocate contemporary flow of time to the past in such a way as to destabilise patriarchal social order (BOTTING, 1996).

As for space as a defamiliarising device, Carter uses the spatial ambivalence in *Wise Children* as a means of topographical metaphor from the outset by installing London’s right and wrong sides of the tracks, and makes it also clear through the existence of the underworld and overworld Londons in *Nights at the Circus*: “I was known to all the netherside of London as the Virgin Whore” (CARTER, 1993b, p. 1; IBID, 1993a, p. 55)^{vi}. Notwithstanding, Carter’s interest seems to be to a considerable extent in the appropriation of the sanctified home, the paradoxical place of protection which turns out to be a prison. After all this is a recurrent motif in Gothic literature since late eighteenth century, “[b]ut it is the failed home that appears on its pages, the place from which some (usually ‘fallen’ men) are locked out, and others (usually ‘innocent’ women) are locked in” (ELLIS, 1989, p. ix). In fact, as Gothic literature has always portrayed, the boundaries between inside and outside are quite blurred, which explains the contradiction that is the depiction of the enclosed space as a place of danger and imprisonment.

Of course, Carter takes hold of this convention and shows that being within does not necessarily mean safety as terror can be brought from without as Fevvers well attests once she goes through the experience of living as a prisoner and performing in Madame Schreck’s chamber of imaginary horrors, also known as “Down Below” or “The Abyss”: “there was no terror in the house our customers did not bring with them” (CARTER, 1993a, p. 61-62, 70). Furthermore, despite turning “a blind eye to the horrors of the outside” and being a place in which a harmonious sisterhood prevails, not even Ma Nelson’s brothel survives patriarchal terror, and as soon as its owner dies, Lizzie has to let in Nelson’s brother who promises to put

an end to the “security and companionship of the Academy” (IBID, p. 46). Likewise, Lady Atalanta Lynde’s home proves to be not enough to protect her from her own daughters Saskia and Imogen, cast in the very same patriarchal mould in which Melchior was, who not only rob her home and money, but are also much probably the ones responsible for her transformation into the crippled Wheelchair (CARTER, 1993b, p. 179). In this way, Carter parodies the myth of domesticity by showing that there is no such a thing as an absolute safe inside, but a disguised ideological purpose of circumscribing female space and agency (ELLIS, 1989).

Finally, remoteness is also the order of the day as it both defamiliarises and introduces another sort of dread, to wit the terrifyingly ominous wilderness which makes Fevvers’s courage fail in Siberia: “[o]utside the window, there slides past that unimaginable and deserted vastness [...]. Horrors! And, as on a cyclorama, this unnatural spectacle rolls past” (CARTER, 1993a, p. 197). Once isolated, *outside* the influence of the ‘civilised world’ and its mores, or as Fevvers puts it “where the hand of Man has badly wrought” (IBID), the protagonist finds herself in a desolate place which proves to be not only alienating but also full of menace. Effectively, after the train wreck caused by the blown up railway track, Lizzie loses Father Time and, to make matters worse, Fevvers and the survivors of the circus crew are kidnapped by outlaws, which ends up being doubly more frightening: “[f]orward, we went, deeper and deeper into an unknown terrain that was, at the same time, claustrophobic, due to the trees shutting us in, and agoraphobic, because of the enormous space which the trees filled” (CARTER, 1993a, p. 221, 226). Besides defamiliarising, maybe the purpose of this strategy is to show that the outside for the most part turns out to be as hazardous as the inside from which the heroine escapes. Hence, her safety cannot depend only on running away or waiting for some rescuing hero or enchanted prince, but first and foremost on struggling with the gender roles, the myth of fragility, imposed upon her.

Up to this point, it is crystal clear that reiteration with excess and an inevitable critical difference play an important role in the use Carter makes of her appropriation of the Gothic genre. Indeed, in one of the epigraphs to *Heroes and Villains* (1969) Carter quotes Fiedler’s concept that “[t]he Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limit of grotesqueness” (FIEDLER, 1960, p. 406). However, perhaps double-talking ironies are the most recurrent among the parodic methods Carter utilises in her postmodern female Gothic, which is not at all surprising once the good-humoured gendered critique they enable and the questions they raise are taken into account:

What is it about the situation of women that makes irony such a powerful rhetorical tool? Many feminist critics argue that the condition of marginality (with its attendant qualities of muteness and invisibility) has created in women a 'divided self, rooted in the authorised dualities' of culture. If so, then the 'splitting images' they create through their double-talking ironies are a means of problematising the humanist ideal (or illusion) of wholeness, as well as hierarchy and power. Contradiction, division, doubleness – these are the contesting elements that irony lets in by the front door (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 97).

In addition, Carter's readers can in this manner experience the pleasures of terror vicariously as they apprehend by means of the imaginary what most often goes on intransparent in the 'real' space and time: "[w]hen danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (BURKE, 1834, p. 48). Actually, the Gothic's ambivalence is also perceived in the influence it has over its readers who, in spite of the repulsion terror provokes, usually feel attracted to it (BOTTING, 1996). But this time Carter undermines the intent which underlies the warning strategies of the traditional Gothic and does not provide readers with the feeling that if they follow the rules and do not transgress social and aesthetic limits, there will be no problem in the end^{vii}, which only reasserts the values of society. That is to say, Carter does not supply her readers with 'neat endings', which is an efficient manner of casting doubt on the sort of security and stability the conventional Gothic offers.

To this end, Carter's heroines are also afflicted by every sort of fear and at times have to flee so that the show can go on. Nonetheless, *their* show goes on: they are endowed with such strength, self-assertiveness and self-possession that the myth of domesticity does not succeed in entrapping them. In brief, Carter's heroines are in overt opposition to the virtuous and sensitive, shy and retiring early Gothic heroines who, in spite of their deftness to evade the worst of predicaments, sometimes faced outside while experiencing exciting and adventurous freedom, invariably end up 'saved' and sent back to the prison-like domestic sphere and possibly marriage, or else receive punishment for their deviation in consonance with the stock traditional Gothic plot (PUNTER, 1996; MONTEIRO, 2004).

No wonder then Lizzie's repulsion for the institution of marriage (CARTER, 1993a, p. 21). Also, the Grand Duke's unsuccessful attempt to, to the sound of "uncanny harmonies", turn Fevvers into "[o]nly a bird in a gilded cage" (IBID, p. 184-93). In the same way, although sometimes life proves to be overly hard, "I sometimes wonder why we go on living", the septuagenarian and unmarried Chance sisters 'close' the novel exultantly singing

and dancing on the very same wrong side of the tracks despite being far from the patriarchal role model of family structure, but this time along with Gareth's little cherubs (CARTER, 1993b, p. 232).

With reference to the cruel and terrible Gothic villains, always endlessly resourceful so as to achieve their usually opaque evil ends, it is interesting to see how Carter plays with the conventions. For instance, this time the Gothic villain to usurp 'rightful heirs' is Ma Nelson's elder brother who expelled her from home when she was a girl and now sets out to "cleanse the temple of the ungodly" as he legally inherits his sister's brothel when she dies, and the orphaned daughters are a bunch of whores who used to be the intestate Ma Nelson's family in her "wholly female world". Nevertheless, neither the "demented Minister" nor his patriarchal God have the last laugh: "[w]hat say we give the good old girl [Ma Nelson] a funeral pyre like the pagan kings of old, and cheat the Reverend out of his inheritance, to boot!" (CARTER, 1993a, p. 49).

Similarly, Carter empowers Dora and Nora by associating them with Dracula, a powerful symbol which represents nothing less than the vampiric ambivalence and its relentless crossing of boundaries: past/present, animal/man, East/West, death/life. Thus, the twins travel to the New World on a "sacred mission": to take there earth from Stratford-upon-Avon within a bizarre vessel in the shape of a bust of William Shakespeare (just as Dracula carries earth from Transylvania) "so that Melchior could sprinkle it on the set of *The Dream* on the first day of the shoot" (CARTER, 1993b, p. 113). Here again, Carter has a good time in the demythologising business and desecrates the earth with Daisy's cat's urine, which is replaced with earth from a motel named after the legendary Forest of Arden^{viii}. Thereby, the Chance sisters' interference in the consecration of the grounds is consistent with the epidemic contagions from the past usually connected with vampires. So much so that Dora foresees: "This film is going to lose a fortune" (CARTER, 1993b, p. 129).

In short, as Neumeier concisely puts it: "Angela Carter's fictional exercises in Gothicism are very effective renditions of her theoretical statements on the nature of the genre which deals in exaggeration, distortion, in cliché images and symbols" (NEUMEIER, 1996, p. 148). By using exaggeration and shocking their readers, early Gothic writers wanted to draw attention to the invisible forces operating in society, convey the terrors underlying their everyday world, and portray the actual barbarity reproduced by the so-called 'civilised'. With respect to the female subject, though, home became and went on being a contradictory fortress since it presented a site for "resistance to an ideology that imprisons them even as it

posits a sphere of safety for them” (ELLIS, 1989, p. x). Today, contemporary female Gothic writing has a greater focus on the dreadful effects of powerlessness to which women are reduced by the perpetuation of homogenising and stereotypical images of femininity, as well as on the high price paid by the female subject for the ‘happy ending’ usually associated with imprisonment in the chains of marriage. In other words, the physical reality which lies behind these constructed and reproduced mythic images which aim at labelling those who do not conform as *unfeminine* and *unnatural* (MOI, 1985, p. 65).

Accordingly, Carter provides her Gothic fiction with escape and liberation from the fetters of gender and genre by, respectively, deconstructing traditional representations of womanhood and extending the limits of realism in order to fit those of the supernatural together with the blurring of genres so characteristic of her writing. By doing so, Carter manages to envisage the day on which all the women, New Women, will have wings just like Fevvers: “[t]he dolls’ house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed” (CARTER, 1993a, p. 285). However, in a very postmodern and *neo-Gothic* manner, as Becker calls it, Carter’s provocative politics does not at any moment offer new role models but only plays the part of a vehicle for social critique once it defamiliarises the ‘natural’ existence of established relations of power that for the most part have detrimental impact on women (BECKER, 1999). Eventually, the truth is that Carter’s heroines are strengthened to such an extent that “the seemingly adored but ultimately locked up, disempowered and sexually victimized ‘living doll’ escapes the domestic trap, celebrating her own identity and sexual power” (WISKER, 2003, p. 30), which not only signals postmodern deliverance, but also contemporary Gothicism’s intrinsic female nature.

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Notas

ⁱ CARTER, 1987, p. 133.

ⁱⁱ *The Castle of Otranto* (1765).

ⁱⁱⁱ The term 'New Woman' was coined by the novelist Sarah Grand in 1894 "to describe the new generation of women who sought independence and refused the traditional confines of marriage" (SANDERS, 2004, p. 26).

^{iv} A Renaissance tradition held that Artepheus had been born in the first or second century and died in the twelfth, thanks to having discovered the alchemical elixir that made it possible to prolong life. In his *Secret Book*, Artepheus indeed claims to be more than a thousand years old (REGIS, 2004, p. 15).

^v Mr Christian Rosencreutz's intent makes him fit perfectly into the category of the seeker after forbidden knowledge of eternal life who, along with the wanderer and the vampire, make up the three main symbolic figures of the Gothic work of the romantic poets. In addition, it is noteworthy that *Christian Rosenkreuz* is Rosicrucianism's alleged founder (PUNTER, 1996, p. 87, 118; SARRAUT, 1962, p. 558).

^{vi} The same occurs in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) (PUNTER, 1996, p. 192).

^{vii} Proof thereof is that even following patriarchal norms and rules, Lady Atalanta Hazard ends up as the crippled Wheelchair.

^{viii} "[A] former forested area in central England, Warwickshire, the scene of Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*. The forest, as such, no longer exists, although the district is still well wooded" (THE AMERICAN, 1968a, p. 102).

Recebido em: 28/02/2012

Aceito em: 18/03/2012