

Angela Carter's The Magic Toyshop: A Cinderella Story Revisited

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ABSTRACT:

The charming world of fairy tales used to be, for many ages, the favorite world for readers of fiction. Until the moment, these magical tales, their adventurous journeys, and happy endings provide a vital source of enchanting entertainment. Throughout her literary career, Angela Carter (1940-1992), a contemporary British novelist and a short story writer, shows interest in the employment of fairy tales in her works, producing what is called modern fairy tales. Her rewriting of these tales rendered her a remarkable woman advocate who calls for women's legitimate rights and an appreciation and a recognition of their active position in societies, things that men enjoy and always receive. This paper tackles *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), Carter's second novel. It discusses the fate of its young heroine, Melanie, and her siblings, Jonathan and Victoria, who have become orphans by the death of their parents in a plane crash while in America. Melanie journeys from her middle-class luxurious house to Uncle Phillip's poor house located in South London. Like Cinderella, the orphan girl dreams of being a bride and marrying a handsome man while suffering under the oppression of a stepfather, Uncle Phillip. Unlike her, Melanie will be shocked to meet a different version of Prince Charming of her imagination.

Keywords: Fairy tales, deconstruction, marriage, passivity, beauty.

Melanie as a Modern Cinderella

In almost all fairy tales, the heroines are represented as beautiful girls, yet so helpless in face of injustice and oppression. The Cinderella story is one famous fairy tale that introduces a very beautiful young girl who has lost her caring father and lives after that with her wicked stepmother and stepsisters, who hate and despise her being attractive and beautiful and they are not. They deprive her of her father's riches and leave her to lead a very poor life of servitude. Cinderella is very desperate and has nothing to do to change the miserable life she lives. All her dreams center around Prince Charming, a very handsome and rich young man who stands for her only way of salvation from her sufferings. Eventually, and as a reward for her patience and goodness, Cinderella, with the help of a

magical fairy, meets the Prince against her stepmother's and stepsisters' attempts to prevent that. Both are married and live happily- ever- after.

Written in 1967, *The Magic Toyshop* is considered a modern fairy tale because of the many elements of the genre of fairy tales it has:

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 struck 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 (Peach 74).

The novel is “structured as a malevolent fairy tale” that depicts “a neurotic teenage girl, clever, bored and self-absorbed;” something which echoes Carter's girlhood (Gordon 89). The story of a beautiful young girl, moving from opulence and richness to poverty and despair to live with a stepmother/father, working hard and struggling until a rescuer comes, usually a handsome prince who probably takes her back to richness and luxury, echoes the Cinderella famous story. Melanie is introduced to readers as a little princess of a wealthy family who has the disastrous misfortune of losing her parents in an accident and becoming an orphan with a brother and a sister to look after. These references set the heroine as a traditional fairy tale's heroine, however, her destiny, mapped out by Carter, might be very different.

Like a fairy tales' princess, Melanie's journey starts with a transformation from early childhood to that of adolescence. At the end of summer, the end of innocence, when her parents were off to America, Melanie turns fifteen and, for the first time in her innocent life, starts discovering her adult body, which is “made of flesh and blood” (Carter 1). To discover one's physical body, made of blood and flesh, is to perceive his/her being a human, not a doll or a puppet. Melanie seems to awake from a passive sleeping state into an adult realization of herself:

For hours she stared at herself, naked, in the mirror of her wardrobe; 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 then she would writhe about, clasp herself, laughing, sometimes doing cart-wheels and handstands out of sheer exhilaration at the supple surprise of herself now she was no longer a little girl (1).

Melanie happily sees the reflection of her adult image in the mirror. Mirrors traditionally symbolize woman's self-imposed image; it does not reflect an individual identity, but the society's male desires and expectations. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar confirm that “the voice of the looking glass [is] the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules . . . [woman's] self-evaluation” (38). Thus, Carter's young heroine is unaware that while exploring her self-image reflected in the mirror, she is seeing the reflection of how a man perceives her: only passive beauty. ¹Cixous puts that further clear by arguing that a woman “has been made to see . . . [herself] on the basis of what man wants to see of her, which is to say, almost nothing” (68). So is Melanie, in a society ruled by patriarchy, she is made to think

only of how beautiful she gets and, eventually, how more passive she has become.

¹Hélène Cixous (1937–) is a famous French critic and theorist who was known for her social upheavals and protests to change the Western assumptions and thoughts regarding women (Habib 710).

In fact, the very idea of being beautiful to attract male figures has become a nightmare that haunts young maidens and make them more passive beauties. Melanie is a very future-fearing young girl, fearful of death, and of the danger of being unmarried: “ ‘well, I shall grow up. And get married. Oh, how awful if I don’t get married. I wish I was forty and it was all over and I knew what was going to happen to me’ ” (6). She always has fears, and always prays: “Please God, let me get married” (8). Thus, Melanie lives this phase of her life, at the age of fifteen, by imagining marriage and how does it feel to be married. She “used the net curtain as raw material for a series of nightgowns suitable for her wedding night which she designed upon herself.” She looks like a gift waiting for someone to buy; she is “giftwrapped for a phantom bridegroom taking a shower and cleaning his teeth in an extra-dimensional bathroom-of-the-future in honeymoon Cannes. Or Venice. Or Miami Beach . . . all this went on behind a locked door in her pastel, innocent bedroom” (Carter 2). There in front of her is Mrs. Rundle, the fat ugly housekeeper who:

adopted the married form by deed poll on her fiftieth birthday as her present to herself. She thought ‘Mrs’ gave a woman a touch of personal dignity as she grew older. Besides, she had always wanted to be married . . . She would sit, sometimes, in her warm fireside chair, at the private time when the children were all in bed, dreamily inventing the habits and behaviour of the husband she had never enjoyed until his very face formed wispily in the steam from her bed-time cup of tea and she greeted him familiarly (3).

This is the atmosphere in which Melanie’s awareness starts to grow: far away parents, ugly unmarried woman model, and lots of bread pudding to eat which she fears the most, thinking that eating too much of it would lead her to “grow fat and nobody ever love her and she would die virgin” (3).

Dominic Head demonstrates that the “celebration and exploration of [Melanie’s] newly awakened body” is one way of Carter’s deconstruction of traditional fairy tales (93). Head adds that “Where the fairy-tales of the brothers Grimm or Perrault suppress their subtext of sexuality, Carter makes the emerging sexuality of her fifteen-year-old protagonist Melanie the narrative’s driving force (92). However, this emerging sexuality, Peach argues, is not freely lived, it rather “fragments, and is threatened by, the social construction of women” and as the narrative develops, “readers become more aware than Melanie of the cultural history at her shoulder” (11).

One night when Melanie’s desire to marry reaches its peak and when she couldn’t sleep, she dares to get into her parents’ bedroom and inspect their wedding photograph. The photograph, the narrative makes it clear,

was “her mother’s best and most beautiful time . . . [the] fragment of her mother’s happy time,” but at the same time the “smiling and youthful mother was as if stabbed through the middle by the camera and caught forever under glass, like a butterfly in an exhibition case” (Carter 13). Gamble in her essay “Isn’t it Every Girl’s Dream to be Married in White?” explains that this photograph “may hint at immortality, but it is actually a coffin containing a corpse preserved for permanent display, an analogy Carter drives home with brutal, forensic directness.” Carter’s deconstructing task targets now the traditional view of marriage and the wedding dress itself. “While the positive, life-affirming symbolism of the wedding dress seems self-evident,” Gamble says, “for Carter it acts as the carrier for an alternative set of suppressed and antonymic meanings suggestive of death and contamination” (40). It is a shroud that covers a corpse. Gamble concludes that: “for women who allow themselves to be reduced to the level of an object, a ‘sexual thing’, the wedding dress really is a shroud, since its assumption signals the death of an autonomous female subjectivity” (42).

Similar to Cinderella whose struggle starts with her father’s death, Melanie’s struggle starts also with losing her parents in a plane accident. She becomes an orphan who is to take care of herself and two other siblings, a burden that she could never imagine before. Suddenly, she sees herself turning into “a little mother” and she is “no longer a free agent” (Carter, 31). Under her new responsibilities, Carter describes her as “a blind, earless fish in a sea of sedation, where there was no time or memory but only dreams” (28). Melanie’s true struggle starts in fact when she is taken to live under her uncle’s custody. Philip is a very rigid patriarchal puppeteer and a puppet-maker who loves and cherishes his non-living creations, his puppets and toys, over anyone else. The very poor condition of Philip’s house contrasts Melanie’s house and shocks her because she:

had grown up with the smell of money and did not recognise the way it permeated the air she breathed but she knew she was lucky to have a silver-backed hairbrush, a transistor radio of her own, and a jacket and skirt of stiff, satisfying, raw silk made by her mother’s dressmaker in which to go to church on Sundays (Carter 7).

Tonkin refers to Melanie’s journey as the one “into the Gothic realm of the unconscious, in which she comes face to face with violence, sexuality and incest, and is forced to confront her own abjection” (34). Kendra Slayton clarifies that the heroine’s painful transportation embodies moving “from a comfortable, middle-class, Edenic suburban home to a cramped, dark, and poor home in a south London wasteland” (2). London will prove to be a wasteland as Melanie will be living the hardest of her days and as Uncle Philip’s house will be destroyed eventually.

Philip objectifies his dumb wife, Aunt Margaret, whose silence “came to her on her wedding day, like a curse” (37). Her two brothers, Finn and France, are also oppressed by Philip’s patriarchy that never allows them freedom. The family members are always forced to attend and perform in Philip’s puppet show and Melanie joins them, she actually “slips into the

position of daughter to Philip” (Wyatt 555). That is the hardest time for her as she starts to live obediently as they do, hoping to meet the man of her dreams.

In Philip’s house, Melanie, and unlike Cinderella, does not meet a real prince charming, the one she always used to picture. She, instead, meets Finn, a very dirty poor man with whom her dreams are destroyed. The romantic fantasies that she used to have regarding the man of her dreams, which she makes out of books of poetry during summer, are placed in a sharp contrast with the reality of the current male, that is, Finn (Palmer 187). Far away from being prince charming, Finn is described as a dirty and a disgusting sort of a young man; he breathes so repulsively and “his toenails were long and curved, like the horns of a goat . . . [they] looked as if a knife would blunt on them and could not have been cut for months, possibly years (Carter 64). Carter describes him as a person who:

had put on the quality of maleness like a flamboyant cloak. He was a tawny lion poised for the kill— and was she the prey? She remembered the lover made up out of books and poems she had dreamed of all summer; he crumpled like the paper he was made of before this insolent, off-hand, terrifying maleness, filling the room with its reek. She hated it. But she could not take her eyes off him (45).

Portraying a very unpleasant poor man as Finn, Carter expresses her dissent to the fact that woman’s only activity in life is dreaming of a man. Not only that, but she also resents the idea of marriage as the happiest ending for women. In fact, Carter’s fiction in general, elucidates Sarah Gamble, “exposes the apparatus of power that underlines the institution of marriage.” For Carter, marriage is “a myth sold to women through the apparatus of romance, and the wedding dress the glamorous package in which they willingly ‘gift-wrap’ themselves to become a desirable object of exchange between men” (25). Carter in fact criticizes the way in which fairy tales romanticize marriage and, consequently, “perpetuate the patriarchal status quo” by convincing women that their subordination is “romantically desirable, indeed an inescapable fate” (Rowe 238). Therefore, fairy tales show many weddings and marriages, but rarely happy ones. This is, Marcia Lieberman contends, the truth with many tales. They “show so little of the marital life of the hero or heroine;” and few of them “show any part of the married life of young people, or even of old ones” (9). As a result, one of Carter’s aims, Katarína Labudová argues, is that to twist the endings of fairy tales and motivate her heroines “to avoid the traps of happy endings” (159).

Finn, to a certain degree, is Melanie’s parallel in relation to being a subject to Philip’s patriarchal authority. Instead of having him as a powerful handsome man who is supposed to rescue Melanie, Carter introduces both as victims of Philip’s powerful patriarchy which they are struggling to survive. She aims to change the fate of these victims by turning them into rebels. She subverts the traditional Cinderella story and revolutionizes its ending first by replacing the rich and powerful prince charming with Finn, a dirty and oppressed poor man with whom Melanie’s dreams come to an

end. And second, rather than having a happy-ever-after ending or simply portraying the married couple with a male dominant figure, she pictures the oppressed life of both genders under patriarchy. *The Magic Toyshop*, thus, “introduces Carter’s persistent interest in the way in which men as well as women may be negatively affected by patriarchy and seek to resist it” (23).

Carter, at the end, leaves readers free to decide Melanie and Finn’s fate as she depicts them running from Philip’s house at night, in the garden, meeting each other in “a wild surmise” (200). By this ending, Carter eschews the “conventions of fairy-tale,” and, consequently, “turns the resolution over to the interpretive work of the reader” (Head 93).

What Carter does is in fact offering readers a new perspective regarding fairy tale’s ending; she subverts the traditional concluding part of fairy tales by leaving the end of her story open to reader’s interpretations, which will very likely suggest a totally new generation whose catalysts of change are both male and female hand in hand. Finn and Melanie might develop a relationship and might not, however, if they will, then it would be an equal relationship based on love and understanding since both will not tolerate living in oppression once again. The genders of the new generation will perceive and live their relationships as equal and just as possible, refusing to adhere to patriarchal forces and social ideologies that constrained their lives long ago.

Conclusion

Carter has been presented as an influential writer whose concern is the contemporary society and its long-held traditions that force women to live obediently until someone marry them, something that portrays marriage as the only goal a woman can achieve. Fairy tales proved to be very rich in such images and implications that we were unable to see and perceive because of being obsessed by the social conventions that were the silent forces that govern the way we think. Reading the Cinderella story, for instance, we have never thought why Cinderella, while living under the oppressing wicked authority of her stepmother, is doing nothing but waiting to meet her Prince Charming, why she is so helpless that she cannot defy her weakness, and why she cannot set herself free as an individual.

Carter tried to show us the hidden aspects of fairy tales, to develop characters that can stand for themselves and make a revolution against those who objectify them rather than passively wait for a rescuing male figure. She introduced Melanie who, unlike Cinderella, meets a dirty unpleasant man whom she would not think to have as a lover at all. Carter depicts Finn as an oppressed male in need of rescue instead of a rescuing figure. She cleverly revolutionizes the way beautiful young girls perceive their social roles and goals. Rather than having her heroine asleep in the imaginative dreams of meeting a handsome prince, she awakens her to a very disgusting young man with whom a happy ending is unlikely to occur. Hence, Melanie, the Cinderella character, ends up as a free agent running in the garden, refusing to wear the magical wedding dress and to dance with Finn the concluding romantic dance.

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متجر الألعاب السحرية لـ أنجيلا كارتر: مراجعة لـ قصة سندريلا

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المُستخلص:

كان العالم السحري للحكايات الخيالية ولايزال هو العالم المفضل لقراء أدب الخيال. تعتبر هذه الحكايات، كونها مليئة بالمغامرات والنهايات السعيدة، مصدرًا حيويًا للمتعة الساحرة حتى هذه اللحظة. ابدت انجيلا كارتر (١٩٩٢-١٩٤٠) وهي روائية بريطانية معاصرة وكاتبة قصص قصيرة، خلال مسيرتها الادبية اهتمامها بترجمة العديد من الحكايات الخيالية بالاضافة الى كتابة الكثير منها، وهو ما يُعرف بالحكايات الخيالية الحديثة. ان احياها لتلك الحكايات جعل منها مؤيدة لقضايا المرأة حيث سعت جاهدة للمطالبة بالحقوق المشروعة للمرأة وتقدير واعتراف بمكانتها الفعالة في المجتمعات، وهي أشياء يستمتع بها الرجال ويتلقاها دائمًا. يتناول هذا البحث متجر الألعاب السحرية (١٩٦٧) ، الرواية الثانية لكارتر، ويناقش مصير البطلة الصغيرة، ميلاني، وإخوتها، جوناثان وفكتوريا، الذين أصبحوا أيتامًا عند وفاة والديهم في حادث تحطم طائرة أثناء وجودهم في أمريكا. تنتقل ميلاني من منزلها الفاخر من الطبقة المتوسطة إلى منزل العم فيليب الفقير الواقع في جنوب لندن. تحلم الفتاة اليتيمة، مثل سندريلا، بأن تكون عروسًا وتتزوج من رجل وسيم يخلصها من اضطهاد العم فيليب. ولكن على العكس من سندريلا، تصاب ميلاني بالصدمة عند مقابلتها لـ شخص مختلف عن الامير الوسيم التي اعتادت ان ترسمه في خيالها.