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### Discourse of Feministic Myth in Angela Carter's Shadow Dance

Abstract: This paper focuses on the feministic myth in Angela Carter's Shadow Dance and shows how these elements are worked out in the novel. Shadow Dance is of male protagonists but Carter here present women as victims, they center on erotic triangles that suggest Carter's ambivalence toward female characters, thus the male protagonists in this novel appear sensitive and torment, involved only secondarily and unsuccessfully with women but tied to showy, dandified, manic masculine change characters whose desire for violence cover their own sexually indefinite desires.

Keywords: myth, women, victims, masculine

Like every original writer, who tries to break a new path, Angela Carter invites a lot of criticism, both bricks and bouquets, from journalistic reviewers as well as from critics writing for literary anthologies. In her life-time, she is described as a fantasist, magic-realist and Gothic writer. She is also considered to be showing post-modernist feminist tendencies. She was sometimes harshly criticized for her frank expression of sexuality of men and women, for her very bold use of sex and violence in her dystopian romances. However, all the time she claims to be writing realistically about the socio-cultural milieu of Britain of the post-war period. She called herself a feminist, but invited displeasure of the feminist practicing critics. She was also criticized for male-impersonation in her early novels. Her life and experiences have considerably influenced her fiction. Carter herself believed that there is relation between life and art. *Shadow Dance* is one of her novels that myth has its fingerprints on it and is one of the femininistic myths of her rewritings. According to Linden Peach, Angela Carter,

Carter's novels frequently, explicitly and implicitly, refer to mythology, the bible, European and English literary works, Renaissance drama, fairy stories, European art, film especially Goddard and Bunuel, opera, ballet, music, and psychoanalytic and linguistic theory in *Shadow Dance*, when Morris enters the cellar of the house where his friend is to kill their woman friend, he is compared to a character in a nursery tale and to a protagonist in a Greek tragedy. (18)

*Shadow Dance* became one of the feminine mythical rewritings. According to Peach, "Shadow Dance is a complex, feminist and psychoanalytical exploration of post-1950s England" (29). *Shadow Dance* explores themes, images, and ideas. In fact, there are no much critical studies available about this novel; it appears that literary critics have ignored it. This novel seems regular. In spite of the bleakness of the novel's plot, however, the magic resides in what one reviewer called dark luxuriance of bizarre images. *Shadow Dance* is evidence of

Carter's characteristic concerns with the material world.

*Shadow Dance* is a novel filled disorderly with the imagery of junk and rubbish as is the seedy antique shop that serves as the novel's main setting. The owners, Morris Gray and Honeybuzzard, spend their time freeloading in abandoned and ruined houses for saleable leftovers. In the novel, both Morris and Honey are interested in the mutability of categories and values surrounding the reuse of things. What is discarded junk or rubbish in one context can be shifted to a new one, done up or combined creatively with other second-hand things, and achieve a new function or purpose: making money. Morris and Honey specialize in stealing Victoriana from derelict old houses, due for demolition, which they can then sell to American tourists in Morris's junk shop.

Morris is a failed painter who escapes from his dreary life with his wife Edna into fantasy or junk-sleep joy, "he loves to nose questingly among the abandoned detritus of other people's lives for oddments, fragments, and bits of this and that."(23-24). Honey gleams with sexual ambiguity and artificiality. He is a great performer, who slips in and out of various roles, from childlike innocent to sexual sadist. Playful and beautiful, manipulation and power are his favorite games, and he plays them with a combination, as his name would suggest, of charm and voraciousness. Morris, from whose point of view the novel is narrated, comments that for Honey "even sex was a joke, a savage one" (77). And Honey treats as a joke even the vilest of his actions, knifing and brutally disfiguring the face of his former lover, Ghislaine, who, in a passion, an excitement and a rage of self-abasement, continues to pursue him. Released from the hospital, she hovers on the fringes of people's sympathy and in Morris's nightmares. Only Honey seems careless about what he has done, although he is perversely amused by her letters of forgiveness, seeing in them an opportunity for further trouble and harm. Ghislaine's conversation with Morris begins the novel, but she is largely absent from the rest of it. The circumstances of her disfigurement remain a mystery, even though Morris,

who is certain that Honey was the performer, nonetheless finds Ghislaine far more frightening. Morris is so terrified of contact with her that he flees from even her imagined presence and, in doing so, admits his complicity in her attack. Blaming her for the failure of their one sexual liaison, he once handed her over to Honey, saying, "Take her and teach her a lesson" (34). The consequences of his "sort of joke" (37) multiply horribly, leading to suicide, despair, and finally Ghislaine's murders at Honey's hands.

The novel, *Shadow Dance*, paints men as angels or Christ figures, but women as suffering saints or objects to be consumed and used. It sounds that women are often associated with food: Emily is fruitcake, Ghislaine is sacramental wine, Edna and Emily cook, and the Struldbrug serves food in the cafe. Sexuality becomes a parody of communion, as the vampire motif associated with both Honey and Ghislaine implies. Honey finds religious images powerful; they provoke his increasing wickedness because they seem to permit his treatment of women. *Shadow Dance* seems to explore the social images that, most disturbingly, make women complicit in their own victimization. In later novels, Carter will portray women as strong enough to rise above oppression, but here she is documenting the various forms that oppression can take. Ghislaine's suffering concludes in her confession to Honey: "I've learned my lesson, I can't live without you, you are my master, do what you like with me" (69) Edna's more domestic masochism is described as Victorian, when "girls were gentle and meek... and laid their tender napes beneath a husband's booted foot" (45). Only Emily resists the pattern, despite finding herself pregnant with Honey's child. Emily is strong, practical, and self-possessed, although the novel suggests that these qualities result from androgyny: "one might almost have taken her for a boy dressed up as a girl" (67). On the other hand, Honey's increasing madness corresponds to his increased and stereotypical feminization. From irritable temper peevishness to carrying lipstick, he is compared to mad Ophelia after the murders Ghislaine, and he cradles the plaster Christ in his arms as if it were

a baby.

Woman can, in fact, be harmful to the union. Morris and Honey's dance in one of the abandoned houses ends, not because of Honey's "fierce embrace" (95), but because Morris, who has been calm into a dreamlike state, imagines that it is Ghislaine who sticks to him. In terror at this vision, he throws Honey away, and they flee the house because they feel it has asserted an evil will. It is Emily who calls the police, despite Morris's attempts to stop her, after she and Morris discover Ghislaine's body. Although Morris has abandoned his wife with ease and relief, he feels he cannot betray his friend, so he returns to the house and to Honey. Morris and Honey have a more than economic interest in trash; indeed, they enjoy themselves in the leavings of other people's lives. Moreover, there is an implied sinister indication to their hobby, because it generalizes to include their treatment of women, who are equally objects to be used and discarded. Morris gives Ghislaine to Honey, attempts to lead Edna into bed with Oscar, and is lastly reassured that his neglect has allowed Henry Glass Jo "inherit" (160) her. The painting he creates of "a decaying female form, dead, in a brown desert" (124) makes the connection clear, echoing Morris's association of Ghislaine with a Francis Bacon painting "of flesh as a disgusting symbol of the human condition" (20). The houses and Honey pillage are symbolic equivalents to the women in their lives because both are treated as dirtiness and decay. Once the excitement of the new find has been exhausted, the houses, like the women, are deserted to destruction.

Shadow Dance begins with a meeting between Morris, the novel's main character with his narrative voice, and Ghislaine, a beautiful girl, now badly disfigured by a scar which is "like a big, red crack across ice and might suddenly open up and swallow her into herself, screaming, herself into herself" (10). Morris, shocked by his guilt feelings of complicity in Ghislaine's wounding, the scar comes to represent a conceptual break between the past and the present; what Ghislaine is and what she is a beautiful girl, a white and golden girl, like

moon-light on daisies, a month ago. So he stared at her shattered beauty.

Essentially, therefore, where the camp parody of *Shadow Dance* falters badly is over its treatment of women, which could come as a nasty shock to any reader accustomed to thinking of Carter as a feminist writer. Although Carter appears to be trying to create a world in which you make your own rules unfettered by the traditions or moral assumptions of an outmoded past, it is a freedom that the text often seems only to extend to men. Furthermore, the treatment meted out to Ghislaine makes some kind of moral response to the text on the part of the reader unavoidable. It is in *Shadow Dance* that this bias is most disturbingly obvious, for this is a text in which women are resolutely denied the privilege of a narrative voice. By excluding them from the formation of discourse, they are rendered figments of a fevered male imagination, and become the targets of a disturbing blend of violence and eroticism.

Edna is not the only female in *Shadow Dance*, either, who resists the male impulse to reduce, belittle or damage women, for this text also contains characters who can be seen as the forerunner of the kind of subversive female figures who will assume increasing importance in Carter's later fiction. In *Angela Carter: Writer and Their Work Series*, Lorna Sage sees Honey's girlfriend Emily and the enigmatic, ever-cheerful cafe waitress known only as the Struldbrug as "spelling hope in the midst of the underworld of gloom" which *Shadow Dance* otherwise evokes. When she makes her first appearance in the narrative, complete with silver enamel fingernails, eclectic dress-sense and drugged white cat, Emily appears to be wholly part of Honey's world. However, while Honey might have chosen her for precisely that reason, there is far more to Emily than the role of supporting actor in his surreal personal drama. The epitome of solid, reasonable values as Sage observes, Emily is a matriarch-in-the-making-she sets about getting Honey's life organized according to her own accurate standards of cleanliness and order. Although she is momentarily transfigured by her

love for him, it does not affect her basic down-to-earth realism, for unlike Morris, who remains astonished by Honey's powerful mixture of glamour and danger to the end, Emily does not hesitate to inform the police when they discover Ghislaine's body.

Emily's matriarchal evil tendencies are echoed in the text by the figure of the Struldbrug; a name which evokes the immortal beings in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, who grow old, ugly and senile, but are denied the release of death but on a positive note, a term which signifies, perhaps, that one of the benefits of age is no longer being subject to the male habit of categorizing women according to their perceived desirability. For Morris, whose mother died in an air-raid during the War, the Struldbrug signifies protective and benevolent motherhood, and he is shocked when Honey unkindly renders her prostrate with fear when they came across her squat in the basement of the ruined house which is to become the scene of Honey's final descent into murderous insanity. The Struldbrug proves to be beyond his power, resurfacing alive and singing in the morning.

In *Shadow Dance*, the character most obviously regarded as a part-object by another character is Ghislaine. Before she is disfigured by Honey, Morris sees Ghislaine as an idealized phantasm: "She used to look like the sort of young girl one cannot imagine sitting on the lavatory or shaving her armpits or picking her nose" (2). After the disfigurement, he projects into her his guilt and horror at what Honey has done. He sees her as "the bride of Frankenstein" while his dislike of the pretentiousness of her name becomes a focus for what he now sees per phoniness (4). Morris's wife, Edna, also, sees Morris as a part-object. We learn that according to whom she is talking, she would describe Morris as either an antique dealer or a painter. These little pretensions are projections of her anxieties into him as he projected his own, far more serious, anxieties into Ghislaine.

The familiar virgin and whore ghost to which male representations reduce women are literally realized in Ghislaine's disfigured face. Initially in Morris's focalization, she has a

personality of different emotions and motivations. However, he thinks of her increasingly in terms of a dualism: as a young picture book girl or as a shocking, rude woman. The one image, like the one side of her face is soft and obedient, while the other is disturbing and uncomfortable. Her Janus face forces Morris to confront a contradiction', which is within both himself and the masculinised realization of women as social objects. If the novel presents us with any kind of realist narrative, it is one that is haunted like the main character by what is repressed. The aspect of Morris's awareness, although socially determined, which makes him an assistant in Ghislaine's disfigurement is revealed through his dreams and phantasies.

Carter's explorations of gender must, however, be understood in the context of the many different, contested positions that feminism has taken over the past thirty years. Her writings exist in contrapuntal relationship with feminism's constantly evolving and internally conflicted history, never simply representing any one position and never quite in step with anyone. She was typical of one strand of British feminism in her concern for the material conditions of women's lives. She remained all her life a socialist, aware of class and rejecting capitalism but unlike many writers with similar views she chose forms of the fantastical rather than realism as the medium for most of her explorations. Carter's lasting fascination with femininity as vision has until then been understood mainly in terms of a feminist critical project which identifies and rejects male-constructed images of women as a form of false consciousness.

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