Wholly Real and Yet Entirely Other: Monstrous Marionettes in Angela Carter

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In Sigmund Freud’s pivotal 1919 essay ‘The Uncanny’, the uncanny is partly defined as ‘the feeling that arises when there is an intellectual uncertainty about the border line between the lifeless and the living.’\(^1\) In this essay Freud outlined eight uncanny tropes, amongst them: inanimate objects mistaken as animate, the ‘double’ and confusion between reality and imagination. Freud reasoned that the term ‘uncanny’ ‘belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread […] the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, and so it commonly merges with what arouses fear in general.’\(^2\) This feeling of the uncanny is encompassed within the utilisation of lifeless forms in literature, and is often central to their depiction. As an archetype of the Gothic body, or an abnormal ‘other’, the puppet is abhuman. A term which Kelly Hurley defines as being ‘a not-quite-human subject, characterised by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other.’\(^3\) As part object, part being, a distortion of the norm which disrupts categorisation, it exists in-between states. Puppets replicate the human aesthetic, yet their expressions are frequently fixed and they are unable to move without human operation. Writers have capitalised on their eerie nature, creating narratives which transgress bodily borders, where toys come to life.

This paper will consider depictions of puppetry present within Angela Carter’s 1967 novel The Magic Toyshop and her 1974 short story ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’. It will discuss notions of the performing body and consider the puppet’s fluid corporeal identity and ability to alter in form. It will highlight Carter’s success at manipulating both the human and lifeless figure and determine the importance of the uncanny in these depictions. Within these wayward narratives Carter portrays the puppet, often concurrently, as a living entity and lifeless artefact, part human, part object. These monstrous marionettes embody the sinister uncanny nature of a performing object, eliciting fears surrounding the manipulated, mutilated and mutated body. The distinctly Gothic atmosphere of Carter’s fiction provides a perfect backdrop for

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manipulations of the body, self and identity; it is through her portrayal of puppets that these sinister theatrical illusions are shaped.

*The Magic Toyshop* abounds with fantastically grotesque imagery, the puppet figure is central to this narrative which skilfully intertwines issues of class, gender, incest, tyranny, and sexuality. After the death of their parents Melanie and her two younger siblings, Jonathon and Victoria, are uprooted from a life of rural comfort to one of urban poverty when they are sent to live with their toymaker Uncle, Philip and his wife Margaret in his ominous toyshop. In this wonderfully sinister puppet-world, the boundaries of performance and reality, effect and affect, blur. Carter employs magical realism to transform the orphaned Melanie’s tale into something altogether more disturbing, part twisted bildungsroman, part gothic fairy tale.

In Philip, Carter portrays a grotesquely exaggerated form of patriarchy. As Sarah Gamble states, “while his artificial marionettes are life-size, his family are reduced to the status of playthings, tied to his whims by strings of fear, obligation and economic dependence.” He denies his wretched extended family autonomy, his patriarchal power transforms his subservient underlings into mere puppets. In *The Magic Toyshop*, the female characters are impersonators of normative femininity, they characterise masculine desires. Early on in the narrative Margaret’s brother Finn instructs Melanie about Philip’s demands: ‘he can’t abide a woman in trousers […] no make-up mind. And only speak when you’re spoken to. He likes, you know, silent women.’ In his workshop Philip constructs compliant creations, lifeless marionettes which he manipulates into movement; in the domestic space the women are likewise forced to submit to his carefully constructed model of femininity. Margaret is the archetypal silent female. Literally rendered mute on the day of their wedding, she is to Philip little more than a mannequin, a puppet, reminiscent of those he constructs. She functions as the passive, domestic feminine ideal, economically dependent on Philip, his domestic slave, yet given eloquent means of expression through her volatile position as caring mother. Symbolically, at the novel’s ending when Philip’s patriarchy is overthrown, her voice returns.

As part object, part being, a distortion of the norm which disrupts categorisation, the puppet exists in-between states. Wolfgang Kayser defines the grotesque as ‘the distortion of all ingredients, the fusion of different realms, the co-existence of beautiful, bizarre, ghastly and

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repulsive. The puppet figure and thus those created by Philip within The Magic Toyshop embody this distortion in its entirety. Philip’s marionettes function as a form of the grotesque, his workshop overflows with ‘partially assembled puppets, hanged and dismembered, on the walls,’ these disjointed bodies are excessive in their artificiality. Melanie is frightened of their ‘carved and severed limbs,’ of the ‘partially assembled puppets of all sizes, some almost as tall as Melanie herself; blind-eyed puppets, some armless, some legless, some naked, some clothed, all with a strange liveliness as they dangled unfinished from their hooks.’ The uncanny nature of these created beings is apparent; they are frightening in their replication of humanity and sinister in their lifelessness. Melanie notices a puppet with an eerie resemblance to herself, a ‘fallen doll in white satin and tulle’ mirroring her previous bridal attire. She observes that her artificial double had ‘fallen flat down as if someone had got tired of her in the middle of playing with her, dropped her and wandered off.’ This discovery foreshadows the fate that awaits her, manipulated by Philip in a revised performance of Leda and the Swan, she is forced to perform his ritualised, perfectly prescribed image of passive femininity.

Melanie performs her roles at Philip’s instigation; in a conventionally feminine guise she is alternately nymph, bride and innocent child, her final role is the reverse of the romantic personae as she becomes metaphorically a victim of rape. Through this sexualised performance, Philip transforms Melanie into a fetishized object, a desired spectacle. The novel, and indeed performance, reaches its climax as Philip ‘resenting her because she was not a puppet’ positions Melanie as victim, his swan puppet enacting the rape of Leda, Melanie’s current guise. This brutal act of masculine fantasy evidently highlights the revocation or denial of the prospect of feminine desire. Melanie as female, is rendered passive, controlled by this puppet-master, her sexual identity rebuffed, she is literally and metaphorically altered into the doll of Philip’s imaginings.

Regardless of the performative nature of this rape, and her laughter when first seeing the ‘dumpy and homely and eccentric’ swan, Melanie is genuinely frightened. She finds herself

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8 Ibid., p. 66.
9 Ibid., p. 67.
10 Ibid., p. 67.
11 Ibid., p. 67.
12 Ibid., p. 144.
13 Ibid., p. 165.
‘wrenched from her own personality; watching this whole fantasy from another place; and, in this staged fantasy, anything was possible. Even, disturbingly, that the swan, the mocked up swan, might assume reality and rape this girl in a blizzard of white feathers,’\(^{14}\) Melanie reduced to an object cannot tell actuality from imaginary, unable to correlate ‘this girl’\(^{15}\) with herself. She is rendered immobile, consumed by fear, she is unable to fight the obscene swan which had mounted her. Here, Carter expertly employs magical realism manipulating gender roles, crossing the boundaries between object and person, and furthermore traversing the limits of species.

‘The Loves of Lady Purple’, a short story from Carter’s 1974 collection entitled Fireworks, draws upon her experience of living in Japan from 1969 to 1971. Illustrative of Carter’s move to a more overt postmodernist form of fiction during this period, Fireworks consists of narratives which rework notions of meaning, truth and interpretation, disrupting the reader’s perceptions these tales merge fact and fiction, blurring boundaries between the two. Gamble terms ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ a ‘gothic fable of a life-size marionette who under the godlike manipulations of her puppet-master nightly re-enacts the monstrous career of Lady Purple, a courtesan who took to murdering her lovers before eventually becoming consumed by her own sexual veracity,’\(^{16}\) turning irrevocably into a marionette, transgressing from a human form to a lifeless state. A multitude of typical motifs of the gothic genre combine in the figure of Lady Purple the ‘Queen of Night’\(^{17}\) for she is concurrently unearthly vampire, flesh-eating zombie and monstrous marionette. This nightly dramatization purports to be fiction, myth and history, complicated further by the bodily manipulator, the Professor’s assertion that his marionette is this Lady Purple. This alteration from human to inhuman would transgress bodily borders; in ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ theatrical illusion is utilised to construct a puppet who is concurrently passive object and murderous femme fatale; thus rejecting established traits of the self.

The elderly male Professor, master of marionettes, manipulates this figure who ‘did not seem so much a cunningly simulated woman as a monstrous goddess, at once preposterous and magnificent, who transcended the notion she was dependent on his hands and appeared wholly


\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 166.


real and yet entirely other.' This life-size feminine beauty, replica of the sexual courtesan, juxtaposes two states of being, an uncanny figure frail in form and humanity. Yet she ‘was nothing but a curious structure until the Professor touched her strings,’ she is only brought to a lifelike state by the hands of her male manipulator.

‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ is an overtly theatrical narrative which continuously highlights its own artificiality. The Professor in his position as puppet-master is said to be ‘always dusted with a little darkness. In direct relation to his skill he propagates the most bewildering enigmas for, the more lifelike his marionettes, the more godlike his manipulations and the more radical the symbiosis between inarticulate doll and articulating fingers.’ As Gina Wisker states, through her performance the marionette Lady Purple, ‘fills the silences of the men who manipulate her limbs, while she herself is literally voiceless,’ hers is an abject female body only able to communicate through male agency. Lifeless after each sexualised theatrical display, her female body is the subject on which her male manipulators express their erotic desires and supressed fears.

The professor entices his audience each night with ‘his claim that Lady Purple is eventually transformed into the very marionette who nightly re-enacts the story which is, in fact, her own.’ Her concluding spectacular transformation is from manipulated object to vampire. This ‘image of irresistible evil,’ an archetypal gothic figure, exemplifies all that fascinates and disgusts her spectators. The Professor, infatuated with his marionette, kisses her; as she gains ‘entry into the world by a mysterious loophole in its metaphysics,’ she transforms from puppet to ‘hot, wet, palpitating flesh,’ A hybrid of wood and body, this newly created being is an uncanny figure. Lady Purple in vampire form, drains the blood from her former master, then makes her way to the nearest brothel, ‘like a homing pigeon, out of logical necessity.’

Despite her escape she is destined to continue her part in these erotic fantasies, trapped in her

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20 Ibid., p. 23.
24 Ibid., p. 36.
25 Ibid., p. 36.
26 Ibid., p. 38.
predetermined role of deadly whore, manipulated by the strings of male pornographic adoration.

‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ centres then on the ambiguity of this puppet, whether ‘she was renewed or newly born, returning to life or becoming alive, awakening from a dream or coalescing into the form of a fantasy generated in her wooden skull by the mere repetition so many times of the same invariable actions.’\(^{27}\) Her form, whether lifeless or living, puppet or human, or somewhere in between is extraneous; for as Gamble argues ‘Lady Purple’s rapacious desires lock her into a savage cycle of endless replication and self-destruction.’\(^{28}\) Within The Magic Toyshop and ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ Carter’s puppets exemplify the uncanny, where terror arises from the familiar and yet concealed, and evoke both fear and desire in the living. The Magic Toyshop and ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ utilise replication and repetition, abound with scenes of brutality and grotesquery and play wholly and persistently with Freud’s notion of the uncanny. In Carter’s fiction several subservient females are reduced to a marionette-like state controlled by tyrannical puppet-masters, others break free of their strings altering in form to something arguably more inhuman.

The closing narrative of ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ poses the question: ‘had the marionette all the time parodied the living or was she, now living, to parody her own performance as a marionette?’\(^{29}\) Carter’s literary depictions of puppets distort the limits of reality, fantasy, human, object; her creations are much more than just curious structures. They are spectacular theatrical illusions, grotesque in their excess, skilled at manipulating desires. Within these narratives Carter deftly amalgamates the macabre and the comic, the mythic and the everyday, creating narratives which transgress conventional boundaries, which entertain and frighten, and where the undead awaken. As Wisker comments, Carter’s fictional world is ‘bizarre, unnerving, highly charged, powerfully erotic, and yet it is also domestic and every day,’\(^{30}\) in it the supernatural threat passes from the unknown to the domestic and the monstrous is made to be at home.


Fred Botting observes that ‘throughout Gothic fiction terror and horror have depended on things not being what they seem.’ These lifeless forms are the embodiment of this; they rebuff categorisation, subsisting in the intermediary. In literature the puppet is neither human nor object, animated by language, concurrently set in a lifeless state. Carter’s depictions of puppets align with Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject as something that ‘disturbs identity, system, order […] [that] does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.’ Puppets are disturbingly unkillable for they occupy that liminal space between life and death. Continuously revised, altered and modified, as incomplete doubles of human life, objects of external manufacture and operation, they possess a grotesquely dead-alive charm. These childhood toys have been absorbed by the gothic genre, influencing our ideas of innocence. This is the stuff of childhood nightmares, lifeless bodies now animated, suspended between human and inhuman states, inducing fear, and characterising horror.

Works Cited


ANGELA CARTER (1940 - 1992) (Full name Angela Olive Carter) English novelist, short story writer, nonfiction writer, scriptwriter, and author of children's books. Source for information on Carter, Angela (1940 - 1992): Gothic Literature: A Gale Critical Companion dictionary.Â Such critics argue that because Carter rewrote the tales within their original structures, she robbed her protagonists of any real sense of choice and actually perpetuated patriarchal precepts. Feminist critics, however, have embraced what they characterize as Carter's unwavering honesty and commitment to her social and political standards in her works. Angela Olive Carter (later Pearce) (née Stalker; 7 May 1940 â€“ 16 February 1992), who published under the name Angela Carter, was an English novelist, short story writer, poet, and journalist, known for her feminist, magical realism, and picaresque works. She is best known for her book The Bloody Chamber, which was published in 1979. In 2008, The Times ranked Carter tenth in their list of “The 50 greatest British writers since 1945”. In 2012, Nights at the Circus was selected as the best ever winner of The Countess wants fresh meat. When she was a little girl, she was like a fox and contented herself entirely with baby rabbits that squeaked piteously as she bit into their necks with a nauseated voluptuousness, with voles and field-mice that palpitated for a bare moment between her embroidress's fingers. But now she is a woman, she must have men.Â He has the special quality of virginity, most and least ambiguous of states: ignorance, yet at the same time, power in potentia, and, furthermore, unknowingness, which is not the same as ignorance. He is more than he knows--and has about him, besides, the special glamour of that generation for whom history has already prepared a special, exemplary fate in the trenches of France.