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Artículos

Subverting Children's Literature: A feminist Approach to Reading Angela Carter

Subvertir la literatura infantil: Un enfoque feminista para leer Angela Carter

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Abstract:

This article argues the importance of the short stories of Angela Carter to the field of children's literature and its current adaptations. It looks at two of her stories. The result is fiction building on some patterns of children's literature yet with a feminist tinge that questions the foundations of patriarchy. Her stories do not simply reverse patriarchy but subvert it from within. Sexual victimization and complicity in one's oppression might be harmful, Carter seems to argue, but equally harmful is the underlying sexual slant of the popular fairy tales told/taught to children and instilling patriarchal values.

Keywords: Angela Carter, children's literature, feminism and gender, patriarchal values, short fiction..

Resumen:

Este artículo argumenta la importancia de los cuentos de Angela Carter en el campo de la literatura infantil y sus adaptaciones actuales. Mira dos de sus historias. El resultado es que la ficción se basa en algunos patrones de literatura infantil, pero con un matiz feminista que cuestiona los fundamentos del patriarcado. Sus historias no solo revierten el patriarcado, sino que lo subvierten desde adentro. La victimización sexual y la complicidad en la opresión de uno pueden ser perjudiciales, parece argumentar Carter, pero igualmente perjudicial es la inclinación sexual subyacente de los populares cuentos de hadas contados / enseñados a los niños e inculcando valores patriarcales.

Palabras clave: Angela Carter, Feminismo y género, ficción corta, literatura infantil, valores patriarcales..

INTRODUCTION

Compared with conventional literature, children's literature remains culturally, critically, and intellectually underplayed. Moreover, its adaptations in adult literature have not been adequately researched. In the words of Hunt (2005b), children's books still generally elicit our critical engagement while being "blissfully free of the 'oughts': what we ought to think and say about them" (1). Nevertheless, the phrase itself, although fascinating, is somewhat loose and misleading. This literature is often written by male or female adults and is "a product of adult fantasies about what childhood is or should be" (Mason: 2012; Ikoma: 2017; Wisker: 2018). And although it is ideally about children and written for children, one can read, interpret, classify, and comment on the value of this literature. Moreover, readers can validate certain texts as belonging to this canon of children's literature in form or content. In addition, writers targeting adults might incorporate into their works content or elements suitable for children or young adults. Hence, Rudd (1992) concludes that the genre, by nature, remains a contested one:

Children's literature consists of texts that consciously or unconsciously address particular constructions of the child, or metaphorical equivalents in terms of character or situation (for example, animals, puppets, undersized or underprivileged grown-ups), the commonality being that such texts display an awareness of children's disempowered status (whether containing or controlling it, questioning or overturning it). Adults are as caught up in this discourse as children, engaging dialogically with it (writing/reading it), just as children themselves engage with many 'adult' discourses. But it is how these texts are read and used that will determine their success as 'children's literature'; how fruitfully they are seen to negotiate this hybrid or border country. (Hunt: 2005b).

In this regard, it can be argued that Angela Carter wrote figurative versions of children's literature or conscious imitations of this genre with certain twists. Her involvement with this genre should not be eclipsed, even if she did not directly write for children or young readers and even if she sarcastically treated this genre (Wu: 2017; Gemović: 2019).

Children's literature often involves stories written to be read and enjoyed by both children and (young) adults. This literature is also expected to instruct its readers and enhance their social and personal skills as well as sharpen their creativity and cultural knowledge (Crippen: 2012; Wisker: 2017). Hence, it is often assumed to be easy to read and to follow established, straightforward narration and involve suspense and happy endings. As put by Lukens (1991), "Stories are more directly told, with fewer digressions and more obvious relationships between characters and actions, or between characters themselves" (9). In other words, and in folk tales, in particular, characters are often flat or easily recognized (as good or bad). They are placed in fantastic situations that appeal to children and their rich imagination. Folk and fairy tales, in particular, can be educational, teaching through good or bad examples and instilling the ultimate value that "justice must be done" (Langfeldt: 1976). Moreover, children's literature intersects with theoretical principles used to interpret literary texts. For example, fairy tales and feminist criticism can have similar ends. Tyson (2006) argues that feminist criticism "examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (83). Fairy tales can "reinforce" dominant ideological structures, and the rewriting of such tales can "undermine" them. If fairy tales conform to or replicate certain ideologies like patriarchy, it follows that modifying such tales can accomplish a somewhat different task, not necessarily an opposite task but simply a different one with ideological underpinnings (Bustamante: 2017; Villalobos & Ramírez, 2018).

However, Carter follows yet subverts many of the readers' expectations regarding children's literature. Carter rewrites many traditional folk stories and fairy tales which are part of the canon of children's literature. She intentionally subverts such stories by interspersing them with features and explicit content not befitting children's literature. It is argued that Carter consciously does this so as to foreground the feminist potential and the ideological subtext of such stories. In this regard, Paugus (2013) contends that by taking away "everything homespun fairy tales have about them, the elements that tie those stories to our childhood, andstripping them down to bare bones," Carter "exposes the core of the traditional fairy tales" (37). In a piece entitled "Notes from the Front Line," Carter clarifies the revolutionary and liberating potential of re-reading familiar texts: "Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depend upon new readings of old texts" (Carter: 1983). Restating Carter's ideology, Seago (1999) points out that Carter revises fairy tales in such a way in which "the rigid constraints of the past are transgressed and open up ways for a new appreciation of a genre which has been severely criticised for its didactic function in socialising generations of girls (and boys) into constricting and stereotypical gender roles" (77). Seago (1999) emphasizes Carter's eagerness to teach and socialize the young generation of girls and boys to question traditional gender roles. As a result, such stories are to be presented to children or young adults with caution and after familiarizing readers with Carter's feminist and even overall postmodern approach evident in other novels and stories. If Carter's rewritings of fairy tales are to be taught to young readers, they might well be juxtaposed against the original tales for comparison and contrast. Carter's fiction should not only

enhance the critical abilities of young readers but also make them ponder her motivations and strategies in such postmodern retellings that employ parodic imitation and pastiche as strategies for imitating children's literature.

Carter exploits the simplifications, exaggerations, and contradictions inherent in children's literature, one obvious mishap being that it is the whims of adults that shape its depiction of children. According to critic Hurley (2011), children's literature communicates conceptually difficult (impossible) meanings:One of the aspects of children's literature that I have always found fascinating is its insubordinations: its sites of dissent or non-conforming children, its failures, its surprising circulations, its appropriations—even its misuses—and especially…its impossibilities. The stretch for impossibility makes for some of the best and unruly works of children's literature. (119)

METHODS

This mishap means that children's literature can have a deconstructive potential and subversive end. As for the relationship between children's literature and feminism, it is assumed that by the end of the twentieth century, "the lessons of feminist theory had been internalized, and critics were actively constructing a feminist tradition in children's literature". The field of children's literature has been open to interdisciplinary influence. Moreover, the practices of feminist theory of rereading old texts of new relevance, reclaiming marginalized writers and dismissed texts, and redirecting of feminist ideas to accommodate texts by subaltern groups like women of colour or other suppressed voices have all been adopted by children's literature studies. Hence, the relationship between gender studies and feminist theory is not exactly new. And the insights of feminism when it comes to rereading traditional texts and exposing patriarchal logic are legitimate and can also be applied to children's literature (Botescu-Sireţeanu: 2017; Hirst: 2018).

Few studies have tackled Carter's revision of fairy tales with a hands-on discussion of certain stories. An exception is Patricia Brooke's (2004) article in which she discussed revisionary fairy tales in two of Carter's stories, namely "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride," to explore Carter's exposition of "the false universalizing inherent in many so-called master narratives of the Western literary tradition" (67). In this article, however, we select alternative stories other than those examined by Brooke (2004), and we link patriarchy as a "grand narrative" to Carter's postmodern exploitation of children's literature and exposition of sexual politics. Preeti Bhatt's (2017) article "Feminist Reworking of Folk and Fairy Tales in Angela Carter's Short Stories" is a general attempt to offer a formalistic reading of Carter's stories, shedding light on narrative devices, diction, imagery, among others, in order to highlight Carter's questioning of "patriarchal narration" (68). Bhatt (2017) reads the stories of Carter's collection The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories published in 1979 and consisting of ten stories in total. Abbasoglu and Alban's (2018) recent article adopts a deconstructive stance on Carter's revision of traditional tales to argue that Carter "criticizes women's traditional role and the stereotypical women, sometimes by mocking, sometimes by empowering them exaggeratingly" (9). However,this article, like the Bhatt (2017) article, is mainly an overview of most of the stories Carter published in her collection The Bloody Chamber. Our article is more limited in scope and thus more empirical in nature, focusing on the sexual subtext of fairy tales and their projections and trajectories in two of Carter's short stories (Jegerstedt: 2019).

Since most recent articles on Carter tend to be overly theoretical and less practical, this article takes an alternative textual vision, closely reading two short stories and providing an applied aspect for the theory presented in the introductory part. For space considerations, the article discusses only two short stories rather than Carter's lengthy stories or novels or those less relevant stories. However, it is assumed that what applies to such stories also applies to other rewritings of fairy and folk tales Carter attempted. The fact that Crater has relied on and rewritten famous fairy tales may not be exactly new. For example, her most famous and most analyzed story "The Bloody Chamber" partially rewrites the "Bluebeard" French folktale by Perrault which tells the story of a rich man who marries and kills several wives before one of them survives. It also has parallels with the Eastern collection of folk tales One Thousand and One Nights (the Arabian Nights)

with the wife Scheherazade trying to avoid death at the hands of King Shahryar who previously murdered many wives. Carter's story "The Tiger's Bride" also rewrites the eighteenth century "Beauty and the Beast" fairy tale but transforms the female narrator into a beast as she accepts the tiger's love, a conscious revision of the beauty and the prince end of the famous fairy tale. However, practical illustrations of how and why Carter has done this rewriting remain rare and inadequate. This article is an attempt to fill this critical gap and be of help to both educators and literary critics. Unlike other Carter stories, the two stories selected here are very short and better fit the framework of children's literature. And compared with other Carter stories, they have received less critical attention. Our intervention lies in the selection of primary texts, tweaking them together, scrutinizing their ideologies, and problematizing their relationship to the genre of children's literature.

RESULTS

Critics have often observed that fairy tales "remind us of the possibilities of retellings and re-envisionings" (Weida: 2019). In fact, folk literature tolerates variations, adaptations, and revisions because in many cases it remains essentially an oral genre. And regardless of minor variations and multiple translations and transformations, the essential storyline often remains unchanged. For example, "Red Riding Hood" always makes the wolf an evil creature in contrast to the innocent and good-natured girl and her grandmother. "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty" also make the little girl innocent and good, and thus reward her with marriage to a prince or a handsome man. By contrast, Carter seems to make careful and pivotal changes to such fairy and folk tales. The changes she makes are substantial and goal-directed. At one level, Carter's inversion of familiar narratives "challenges the readers' expectations as they are forced to confront the damage being done to women" within our prevailing culture (Sawden: 2015). The next sections explore and substantiate such changes by looking at two practical examples. The two stories selected are very short and apparently simple, which might justify their categorization as children's literature. Moreover, they are less studied than Carter's more substantial works and more famous stories. In each case, we will see that Carter modifies the plot and characters of established fairy tales to achieve feminist ends of subverting patriarchy from within and questioning its basic premises (sexual or ideological).

The snow child: Pervert desires

In this section, we argue that Carter's modifications of some well-known fairy tales are mainly sexual in nature, which offers a real challenge for those who try to teach them as part of children's literature or discuss them as such. As Hurley (2011) points out, one perversion of children's literature includes "queer revisions of children's literature by and for adults. This burgeoning subgenre is explicitly and unapologetically sexual. It revises beloved childhood classics as reflections on pornography, pedophilia, sex work, and childhood sexualprecociousness" (126). Hurley (2011) calls the practice "writing back to children's literature" (126). Major fairy tales in the western tradition like "Sleeping Beauty", "Cinderella", and "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" rely on the innocent, beautiful, and young female figure as the model that girls should look up to and emulate. In traditional versions, sexual virtue becomes an important asset in such female figures. Moreover, they preach that evil, and jealous women get punished while good ones get rewarded through marriage to a young prince. Thus, fairy tales, and folk tales in general, enhance patriarchal ideologies on traditional gender roles and submissive females. They underlie sexual and gender-related overtones that require inspection. Carter's revision of such fairy tales projects those sexual overtones and subverts them. In fairy tales, women are reduced to the dichotomies of good/evil or pure/bad, which enhances common and negative gender stereotypes that depict women in terms of extremes without accounting for variation, depth, and difference.

In her story "The Snow Child," Carter builds on the famous folk tale "Snow White" to comment on the story of a count and his wife . The 19th-century well-known German fairy tale was published in the Brothers (Jacob and Wilhelm) Grimm (1857) collection of fairy tales early in the 19th century. Since then, it has

undergone many adaptations and revisions in media and literature. However, a basic opening part of the tale "Little Snow- White" numbered 53 goes as follows:

Once upon a time in midwinter, when the snowflakes were falling like feathers from heaven, a queen sat sewing at her window, which had a frame of black ebony wood. As she sewed, she looked up at the snow and pricked her finger with her needle. Three drops of blood fell into the snow. The red on the white looked so beautiful that she thought to herself, If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood in this frame.

Apparently, sewing is a traditional, domestic profession of women across ages and something many feminists have repeatedly objected to. On the other hand, the story underlies implicit sexual symbolism Carter seems to have parodied in her revision. The queen pricks her finger with a needle, causing blood to drip on snow, which suggests menstruation, penetration, or defloration. The queen's subsequent wish is granted, and she has such a child who is white like snow and who has red cheeks/lips and black hair. After that, the queen dies, and the stepmother takes over. It is the queen who desires a daughter with the features of snow-white before she dies in childbirth. "And so the little girl really did grow up; her skin was as white as snow, her cheeks as rosy as the blood, and her hair as black as ebony; and she was called Snowdrop" (E-Text 151). The king marries a wicked woman while Snow White grows to be fairer with time. Trying to get rid of Snow White, the wicked queen poisons her, but Snow White survives the wicked schemes of this stepmother. When sent by a servant to the wood, neither the animals nor the dwarfs do her any harm: "The poor Snowdrop wandered along through the wood in great fear, and the wild beasts roared about her, but none did her any harm" (E- Text 152). The dwarfs discover her in their cottage and are surprised by her beauty: "And they were very glad to see her, and took care not to wake her" (E-Text 152). A prince ultimately marries her. Hence, the girl's beauty and innocence are rewarded first in protection and ultimately, in marriage to a prince. Besides, the ideals of youth, beauty, and innocence are implicitly presented as the desired ones for all girls.

Carter (1986) uses such a motif from the fairy tale to write a counter-narrative to male patriarchal culture. Carter's story also begins in midwinter, but it is the husband, not the wife who desires such a child. The story begins this way:

Midwinter — invincible, immaculate. The Count and his wife go riding, he on a grey mare and she on ablack one, she wrapped in the glittering pelts of black foxes; and she wore high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels and spurs. Fresh snow fell on snow already fallen; when it ceased, the whole world was white. "I wish I had a girl as white as snow," says the Count. They ride on. They come to a hole in the snow; this hole is filled with blood. He says: "I wish I had a girl as red as blood." So they ride on again; here is a raven, perched on a bare bough. "I wish I had a girl as black as that bird's feathers." (para. 1)The Count's wish for a girl "as white as snow" and "as red as blood" and "as black as that bird's [raven's] feathers" is followed by the magically sudden appearance of a "stark naked" girl with white skin, red mouth,and black hair. The girl is sexually objectified in being naked and possessing the feminine ideals of beauty desired by patriarchal culture. This child of his desire (i.e. the Count's fantasy of the female ideal) makes the Countess jealous. She "hated" the beautiful girl. The story then begins to hint at a sexual move on the part of the Count: "The Count lifted her up and sat her in front of him on his saddle, but the Countess had only one thought: how shall I be rid of her?" (para. 2). The story degenerates into a display of sexual rivalry. Each time the Countess fails to get rid of the snow child, she loses one item of her luxurious clothes until she herself gets naked. Carter uses clothes to figure a shift in power relations and a move from agency to lack thereof. Picking a rose for the Countess, the girl "pricks her finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls" (para. 4). Thus, the girl is made a victim of a phallic symbol, the thorn. The next scene is shocking and sexually repulsive: "Weeping, the Count, got off his horse, unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl. The Countess reined in her stamping mare and watched him narrowly; he was soon finished" (para. 5). The girl then melts and disappears to the extent that nothing is left of her but a bloodstain, a feather, and a trace. In Carter's version, the girl bleeds and

dies. In a sense, and as a trace of life, she is reduced to an aborted child. She is neither rewarded with marriage nor saved by the Count as in the original story. The Countess disapproves of a relation with the girl while alive and only allows sexual intercourse with her after her death. The loss of innocence or virginity signalled by bleeding and pricking counters the rewards of virtue we witness in traditional fairy tales. And the sexual violation of the dead girl adds a necrophilic dimension to the story, something absolutely unexpected in a traditional fairy tale.

According to one critic, Carter uses "the language and conventions of pornography to rewrite the scripts for traditional gender archetypes" (Rubinson: 2000), i.e. the popular images of women in western myths and fairy tales like the virgin, the prostitute, and the mother. Such graphic sexuality undermines androcentric accounts of sexuality with the male being active and the female being passive (to the extent of death in this case). The girl suddenly disappears just as she appeared, and the Countess has clothed again, i.e. triumphant. In this regard, Bacchilega (1997) explains that any "shift in the Count's affection is immediately reflected in the relationship of the two women, whose socio-economic fortunes mirror each other in reverse - as the one gains, the other loses - and depend entirely on the Count's words" (37). When the husband gives his wife the rose, probably experiencing culpability for her complicity with sexual violence, she discards it, saying that "it bites" (para. 6). The Countess' refusal to the rose indicates her internal fears of facing the same destiny of the snow child; being a passive woman. However, in Carter's version, there are no magic mirrors and dwarfs. And the Snow Child is not rewarded by marriage to a prince. On the other hand, the Countess is not punished for her evil intentions. Hence, Carter consciously modifies the plot and characterization of fairy tales for certain ends. One goal is simply exposing the naïve belief in the romantic and gendered depiction of women in fairy tales. Another is exposing the sexual underpinnings of the traditional patriarchal fairy tale, which—although apparently innocent and modest as a children's literature genre—is still sexually charged.

In Carter's story, the man and his wife do harm the Snow Child, and even sexually violate her. In the fairytale, Snowdrop (or Snow White) is treated well by the dwarfs yet made to "keep all things in order, and cook and wash and knit and spin for them" (E-Text 153) in return for staying with them. Conventional gender roles are followed here. In Carter's story, sex with the Snow Child is made perverse and unnatural. The wife in Carter's story becomes like the spiteful envious queen (stepmother) who chokes with rage and dies when Snowdrop happily marries a prince and proves prettier than her. However, the Snow Child in Carter's story is not "rewarded" with marriage. Rather, she is sexually violated after death. Before her bleeding and death, she pricks her finger on a thorn, an act which can also be sexually symbolic and indicative of loss of virginity or the onset of menstruation. In fact, the whiteness of snow has always suggested purity and chastity against the sexual symbolism of the red colour of blood. Hence, Carter foregrounds and transforms the sexual symbolism of the traditional fairy tales.

In a fairytale-like "Sleeping Beauty," the motif of pricking Carter employs in her story is also used. The young princess pricks herself on a needle and sleeps for years before a handsome prince kisses her back to life and breaks the spell of the wicked fairy. In another fairy tale entitled "Snow-White and Rose-Red," bothsisters are rewarded in marriage once the bear kills a wicked dwarf and is metamorphosed into a prince. The prince and his brother marry the sisters, who accept traditional gender roles and live "happily" with their husbands ever after. Carter intentionally changes such an end not simply to oppose patriarchy but to make us ponder the foundations of male dominance over women. The Snow Child does not turn out to be a wicked fairy casting a curse on the Count or his wife because Carter wants to make her avoid stereotypical images of women in literature and culture, i.e. the good/evil girl; the angel in the house/the seductress; the greedy/selfless girl. Rather, the Count and his wife are allowed to construct her identity as they wish while she remains silent and passive. The wife sees in her a rival, and the husband sees in her an object of (sexual) desire or the surrogate incarnation of what he lacks.

That the girl simply disappears might indicate that she is an evasive category not abiding by their prejudiced constructions of her. It is the Count and his wife who conceive of the Snow Child in conventional and

even stereotypical terms, which comments on the pervasive ideologies shaping the images of women despite their will. Apparently, the Count and his wife are a childless couple, and the sudden appearance of the Snow Child might be the fulfilment of an adult sexual fantasy. Carter interrogates subconscious levels of male sexuality and the female psyche. Her terse account adds a level of ambivalence and complexity to the story. The perverted sexual behaviour of the Count shatters the ultimately accommodating and benevolent world of the fairy tale once the order is restored and spells or curses are broken. Carter might be suggesting that sexual violation is as bad as complacent sexual oppression under patriarchy and the covert sexual politics of traditional fairy tales. Contra, the happy ending of traditional fairy tales, the repulsively shocking end of Carter's story (necrophilia and sexual immolation), hints at the severity of both oppressive extremes.

CONCLUSIONS

Carter's subversive strategies in retelling folktales from the canon of children's literature assign women an authoritative role whereby they are able to achieve their goals regardless of the abusive norms of patriarchy. In "The Snow Child", the Countess's yearning to get rid of the girl is achieved rather than the Count's wish to have a beautiful girl. In "The Erl-King", the king is strangled by the heroine when she knows that the birds in his cage are originally girls. In each case, hence, the apparent patriarchal logic is somehow subverted or problematized. Carter modifies character depiction and storyline and unsettles gender relations to achieve (unconventional) feminist, anti-patriarchal ends. In each case, Carter exposes the sexual subtext of the fairy and folk tales. Patriarchal culture rewards virtue and conforming females and depicts women in bipolar terms without allowing for middle grounds. In "The Snow Child," Carter depicts an attractive yet submissive model of womanhood. In "The Erl-King," Carter displays a complacent yet ultimately rebellious model of womanhood. Direct sexual victimization and complicity in one's sexual oppression might be harmful. Indeed, Carter seems to argue, but equally harmful is the underlying sexual slant of the popular fairy tales often told/taught to children and instilling patriarchal values.

Carter's revision of the folk and fairy tales reveals the pitfalls of dominant gender ideologies and theprimacy of thinking "otherwise." Although Carter seems to be employed in postmodern ploys of revising and reworking existing fairy tales, i.e. in parody and imitation, she does that with a purpose and a careful scheme. She implies that the stable status quo of the fairy tale with order restored at the end and women saved or married happily ever after is only a sexual subtext aligned with patriarchy. On the other hand, that tacit form of sexual oppression might be as detrimental as the direct form of sexual violation we see in Carter's "The Snow Child" or the complicity of women in their oppression of the sort we see in "The Erl-King." Thus, Carter's recasting of the fairy tales, essentially a genre of children's literature, can be tweaked to serve feminist ends. Possibly, the popularity of those tales Carter rewrites makes her ironic stance more blatant and her critique of patriarchy more audacious. Carter's retelling of folktales restructures readers' minds, young and adult readersalike, to respond independently to literature, to evaluate their cultural heritage, and to acquire autonomous, perceptive personalities.

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