

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*: A Hermeneutic perspective.

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Abstract: Within the scope of the literary field, hermeneutics is applicable to disclose the subtle textual implications and the authorial ideological orientations. Attempting to analyze Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* from a hermeneutic perspective reveals the writer's intents behind the use of various literary techniques. Metamorphosis, for instance, is deployed to study the male and female animal sides. Carter makes recourse to this technique aiming at divulging the equal and natural human instincts regardless of the gender orientations. The males' transformation from a human shape to a wolf and vice versa connotes the animal side lurking beneath maleness. Carter rewrites the patriarchal fairy tales of Charles Perrault from a feminist postmodern angle in order to pay tribute to her female characters. Studying the story of *Red Ridding Hood*, we notice Carter's innovation that makes her story different from Perrault's original one. Her *Red Ridding Hood* character ensures her gender and sexual equality contrary to the traditional passive female who surrenders to the wolf's trap. Via the technique of metamorphosis, Carter conveys the postmodern gender equality.

Keys words: Feminist postmodernism- hermeneutics- metamorphosis- gender equality- sexual equality- animality

I. Introduction:

With the advent of the postmodern age new, conceptual theories are brought into reinterpretation and application. Hermeneutics as a field of analysis and interpretation goes back to the 17th century, when it was deployed as a tool to understand the bible and its theological implications. Later on the theory has gained more prominence by extending to the literary realm. With regards to the latter, hermeneutics has "to do with the way textual meaning is communicated. In literature the main impetus of hermeneutic theory comes out of the conflation of German 'Higher Criticism' of the bible and the Romantic period" (Cuddon 377). Hence, the initiation of literary hermeneutics opens a wide range of analysis and investigation within literature, as a whole, with the reader as an important contributor in semantic extraction.

As far as this article is concerned, it concentrates on a hermeneutic analysis of the use of metamorphosis in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. As a feminist postmodern writer, Carter makes recourse to the traditional stories that have been previously limited to the oral tradition and to some written fairy tales, mainly those composed by Charles Perrault in order to postmodernize them by altering their oriented ideological goals. Her collection of short stories unfolds copious revised fairy tales whose symbolic implications are far-reaching. As Herder and Schleiermacher, the German advocates of the hermeneutic trend insist: "[the] *linguistic* interpretation [of the work] needs to be complemented by a side of interpretation that focuses on authorial *psychology*, namely in order to make it possible to penetrate authorial individuality in conceptualization" (Forster 4). This view is highly substantial as far as this article is concerned, since any hermeneutic study of Carter's writing should take into consideration the writer's affiliation and ideological literary standpoint. Bearing in mind her feminist activism and search for female freedom and gender equality, any hermeneutic analysis should be grounded in the writer's literary agenda.

Hermeneutics in the literary [field] relates to a general theory of interpretation, to methods, procedures and principles involved in extracting meaning from texts. It has particular relevance to a reader's involvement in the creation of meaning. A text may have totally different meanings for different readers at different times. Thus, what readers bring to a text (knowledge, assumptions, cultural background, experience, insight, etc) affects their interpretations. A reader is in a position *to create the meaning of a text*. (Cuddon 377)

The reader or the critic's prior knowledge of the writer's literary orientation helps greatly in disentangling the hidden textual implications. Similarly, Carter's promulgated feminist agenda shapes the reader's analysis of her

works. "Hermeneutics covers all versions of interpretative process of written verbal and non-verbal communications." (Aloysius 3) Hence, the reader has to scrutinize the written language, as well as the unsaid which is subtly conveyed through the linguistic enigmas. The analyst pays attention to the excluded details that reveal the reasons behind their exclusion and divulge the political and cultural apparatus guiding the realm of writing. In this case, we can claim that hermeneutics "handle[s] the relationship between language and logic". (Aloysius 3) The reader creates the logical relationship between the text and its excluded components aiming to understand the powers controlling the techniques of writing. Though Carter's complete works are applicable to the hermeneutic theory, this article will concentrate on the investigation of metamorphosis, solely in her book *The Bloody Chamber* which unfolds copious instances of metamorphosis.

Notwithstanding the fact that it is an ancient literary strategy, Carter reuses metamorphosis via a postmodern scope to disclose the silenced discourses beneath the apparent hegemonic one. Her feminist postmodern deployment of metamorphosis differs from the traditional use in its implied ideological purpose. To start with, "narratives of metamorphosis, that is descriptions of the transformation of man or woman to animal, vegetable, or mineral in a rapid, radial and magical process, are the product of and pander to the popular imagination" (Burgass 131). These narratorial types have been considered as part of the cultural heritage, without thinking deeply and critically of their prior origin. Actually the deployment of metamorphosis discloses various obscured human realities that should be corrected in order to insure the principle of equality at all levels.

Carter's innovation lies at the level of fairy tales' transformations with metamorphosis as the main component. Maybe the prominent aspect of metamorphosis is the omnipresence of the werewolves within the book. Carter believes in the human constant alteration and continuous progress, as prerequisites to attain the human subjectivity. She stands against the division of the human behavior and views the latter as a mixture of humanity and animalism. To investigate the short story of "The werewolf," one can conclude that it is the mere rewriting of Perrault's Red Riding Hood. Although Perrault's story presents to the reader a female victim who is entrapped within the paws of the wolf, Carter exhibits an opposite version. Her heroine is a self-conscious female who is as daring as the wolf. "When she heard that freezing howl of a wolf, she dropped her gifts, seized her knife and turned on to the beast. [...] It went for her throat, as wolves do, but she made a great swipe at it with her father's knife and slashed off its right forepaw" (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 127).

The girl is metaphorically metamorphosed into the savage wolf by acquiring the male behavior, symbolized by her father's weapon, which serves her to defend her female being. Carter's Red Riding Hood bears the masculine demeanour and fights back the wolf. From a hermeneutic perspective, this fact can be explained by the writer's endeavour to empower her heroine and debunk the patriarchal myth which stigmatizes women as passive human beings. Carter's logical reasoning, as a feminist postmodern writer, differs greatly from Perrault's, as an emblem of the metaphysical thinking and an advocator of the patriarchal sovereignty. Hence, her revision of this particular male written fairy tale is very telling, seeing the deep implications of her transformed story.

Carter believes in deconstructing all the binary divisions which help to empower one masculine part over the second female one. Her transfiguration of the heroine into a symbolically wolfish girl can be considered as a backlash to Perrault's depiction of the same character as a passive and naive little girl. Hermeneutically speaking, the latter is strengthened to reveal her female potential which proves to be as equal as the male one. "Carter was obviously acquainted with the theories that deconstruct the concept of the essential self or soul and posit instead a subject in process. [She] foregrounds the intermediate stage in the process of metamorphosis from one state to another, thus deconstructing binary opposites and the principle of mutual exclusion." (Burgass 135)

This postmodern vision is at the heart of her writings, since her imposed gender equality yields the deconstruction of binarism at all levels. A thorough hermeneutic inspection of the short story leads to divulge the writer's aim via the rewriting of this fairy tale. Even though the female undergoes a metamorphic behaviour, her alteration is not as visible as it is the case with regards the wolf-hunter. Following her confrontation with the wolf, the girl "wrapped up [its] paw in the cloth in which her mother had packed the oatcakes and went on towards her grandmother's house" (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 127).

The girl keeps the wolf's paw as a proof of her female triumph but to her great surprise the animal organ turns to be her own grandmother's hand. To interpret this scene, the reader has to start from the writer's ideological background. The previously encountered wolf is, actually, the grandmother who stands for the female animal side. Hence, Carter attributes the wolfish characteristic to her females both metaphorically and literally. The girl fights ferociously the wolf who proves to be the metamorphosed grandmother. "But it was no longer a wolf's paw. It was a hand, chopped off at the wrist, a hand toughened with work and freckled with old age. There was a

wedding ring on the third finger and a wart on the index finger. But the wart, she knew it for her grandmother's hand." (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 127)

Though the grandmother acquires the animal side, which has been previously associated with maleness, she still bears the traces of the patriarchal hegemony symbolised by the "wedding ring" that clings to her hand. Carter alludes to the masculine repercussions on the female life. Following the recuperation of her female being, the grandmother goes back to her initial state of passivity and patriarchal entrapment. This is to show that "an amount of tigerishness is necessary for women, if they are to escape being victimized by men" (Atwood)

What Carter advances is the necessary coexistence of both the human side as well as the animal side within each human being regardless of his/her gendered pertinence. Her female characters bear the animal side as well as the human side. The heroine of "The Werewolf" is saved from being the sexual prey of the wolf, only following her adoption of the male aggressive behaviour. This hermeneutic deduction is openly announced by the writer as a warning for the female category. "To be the *object* of desire is to be defined in the passive case. To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case- that is, to be killed. This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman" (Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 88).

Carter satirizes the patriarchal traditional image of the perfect woman as passive and victimized. She incites her readers to escape this bygone female misjudgement and to adopt instead a heterogeneous behaviour which is passive and active, violent and ethic, human and animalist. The hermeneutic study of the grandmother's metamorphosis into a wolf reveals the feminist postmodern cutting with the old patriarchal dogmatic view of women as compliant creatures and their taking up, instead, the authentic human nature that is bestial and human equally. This conclusion takes us back to the cultural roots beneath the fairy tale female portrayal. Women have been denied a subjectivity and free will since they have been dominated by their superior males.

Thus, their depiction has been tightly linked to their secondary position compared with the males. The latter are ascribed the wolfishness aspect in contradistinction to women who embody the masculine prey. This equation is reversed by Carter, who advocates the gender equality and the female independent subjectivity. The female metamorphosis hints at the female aggressive potential which is equated to the males. Consequently, we deduce the writer's intent to deconstruct the principle of binarism with its inherently unjust divided pairs. This analysis leads us to mention the hermeneutic circle as an essential theme in the field of hermeneutics.

What we are trying to establish is a certain reading of text or expressions, and what we appeal to as our grounds for this reading can only be other readings. The circle can also be put in terms of part-whole relations: we are trying to establish a reading for the whole text, and for this we appeal to readings of its partial expressions; and yet because we are dealing with meaning, with making sense, where expressions only make sense or not in relation to others, the readings of partial expressions depend on those of others, and ultimately of the whole. (qtd in Mantzavinos 15)

The hermeneutic circle is applicable to Carter's deployment of metamorphosis, seeing the importance given to every single detail. The grandmother's ring, for instance, reveals to the reader Carter's criticism of the traditional conjugal life which is based on the subordination of women. This idea brings to the reader's mind the writer's other works, as a literary consolidation. The hermeneutic interpretive study functions within a vicious critical circle that guides the reader from one idea to another within the same semantic context.

Within the same book, *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter utilizes the very same motif of the werewolf to divulge her feminist satirical view of the fairy tales. "The Company of Wolves" is a short story which unfolds into other small ones. One main story is a postmodernized version of Red Riding Hood, in which the self-aware heroine "has her knife and [...] is afraid of nothing" (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 133). Carter's heroine is a precautious girl rather than an acquiescent one. Wandering within the confines of the forest, she seems aware of the surrounding danger. "When she heard the freezing howl of a distant wolf, her practised hand sprang to the handle of her knife, but then she heard a clattering among the brushwood and there sprang on to the path a fully clothed one, a very handsome young one" (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 134).

Perrault's original story is rewritten from a feminist postmodern angle. The wolf is changed into a handsome man alluding to the masculine bestial quality. Hence, maleness and wolfishness become interchangeable. The presence of the man instead of the wolf refers to the former's animalistic side. What's more, the girl is not afraid of his strange appearance; rather "they were laughing and joking like old friends" (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 134). Carter's innovation lies at the level of unveiling her heroine's courage and daring femaleness. When the man proposes to her a shorter road to her grandmother's house, the girl does not believe him. Her strong will controls her destiny and guides her to the right path. She knows that the hunter is a metamorphosed wolf and thus does not follow him. Carter's female character is a heroic and an independent girl who challenges the patriarchal internalized female image as a passive and easily manipulated being. She confronts the wolf-hunter and expresses her female determination to choose her own road to her grandmother's house. Added to that, the girl accepts the hunter's bet and makes her best to impose her female free will.

In this context, the hunter insists: "Shall we make a game of it? What will you give me if I get to your grandmother's house before you? What would you like? She asked disingenuously. A kiss." (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 135). The hunter's sexual connotations are conspicuous through his deal. The girl refuses to be the sexual male prey, rather; she reveals her sexual potency equally to the hunter's. "Carter's real innovation consists in foregrounding certain other aspects of the folk-tale, namely the sexual subtext which lurks behind modern sanitized version" (Burgass 136). Besides, she corrects the fairy tale image of women as passive sexual preys, for Carter's Red Riding hood is a sexually mature girl and "deliberately loses a wager with the hunter-wolf in order to forfeit a kiss to him. [Subsequently] she plays a willing part in the game of seduction." (Burgass 136). Through her rewriting of the fairy tale, Carter not only discloses the bestial characteristic of maleness but also attributes the same quality to the heroine who makes sure to impose her sexual freedom. From a hermeneutic view, the hunter-wolf is equated to the girl, since both of them are agents in the game of sexual seduction. Arriving at her grandmother's house, Red Riding Hood discovers her absence and her own entrapment by the wolf. She wanted her knife from her basket but she did not dare reach for it because his eyes were fixed upon her- huge eyes [...] No trace at all of the old woman except for a tuft of white hair that had caught in the bark of an unburned log. When the girl saw that, she knew she was in danger of death. (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 137)

Thus, the handsome hunter is metamorphosed into a wolf, symbolizing the male animal side. Carter's heroine is a self-conscious female and powerful enough to escape from his patriarchal trap. She makes her mind to impose her sexual subjectivity, contrary to Perrault's passive fairy tale child. She "went directly to the man with red eye [...] she stood up on tiptoe and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. [...] Every wolf in the world now howled a prothalamion outside the window as she freely gave the kiss she owed him" (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 138). Carter insists on the female freedom and free choice by presenting the audacious female sexuality. The female character eventuates to be as strong as the wolf itself, seeking her expertise at taming the hungry werewolf. She does not surrender to him or calls for help, as it is the case with the folk tale's girl; rather she dictates her own female vigour. "The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat" (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 138). She refuses to be the sexual victim and acts vigorously to manifest her independent female sexuality. Her unexpected courageous attitude enables her to overcome the wolf's bestiality and to remind him of his human level.

Studying the whole tale, one can discern the tight semantic relationship between the various literary aspects. Metamorphosis functions as a double-edged weapon, serving as a literary tool to lay bare the carnal nature of masculinity as well as the wild female facet. Besides, the author views the stage of metamorphosis as a substantial proceeding of the human evolution, rather than an end in itself. This idea is very essential as far as Carter's literary philosophy is concerned. "Carter's focus on the hybrid, or character in transition, rather than on the final stage of transformation [represents] her philosophical foundation to [the] treatment of metamorphosis" (Ferzoco and Gill qtd in Dente 7). The writer views metamorphosis as a means to achieve human progress and not as an end in itself. Through this fantastic transformation, the human being gets rid of one culturally-imposed subjectivity and steps towards achieving his/her innate and unmasked self. Following metamorphosis, human beings come to terms with their natural state of beings.

Besides, Carter endorses another consequential minor story which deals similarly with metamorphosis, but this time from a different feminist perspective. At this level, Carter deploys metamorphosis as a punishment for the male's unfaithfulness. The story depicts a community of werewolves who are transfigured due to the infidelity of a bridegroom on his wedding night. "A witch from up the valley once turned an entire wedding party into wolves because the groom had settled on another girl" (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 131). The collective metamorphosis is a mere penalization for the female humiliated and undermined situation. Via this particular metamorphic application, Carter aims to metaphorically revenge her female characters. What's enticing is the multifarious use of metamorphosis; so that it backs the writer's cherished agenda and conveys the text's multiple meanings. This leads us to acknowledge the hermeneutic tendency of the text. As Ernst Bloch proclaims: "The distinguishing of ideas produced metamorphoses" (qtd in Dente and Suvin). As a literary aspect, metamorphosis inherently lends itself to the hermeneutic investigation.

II. The Conclusion:

To conclude, Carter's deployment of metamorphosis can be interpreted from different perspectives, but most of them would deal with the female empowerment and exhibition of the animalistic human side. Through her werewolves' stories, she pays tribute to her female characters and debunks the metaphysical patriarchal ideology with its subordinated female image.

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