

The Grotesque: A Subversive Narrative Technique of Angela Carter

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Abstract

Angela Carter's subversive narrative techniques help her establish an authentic narrative atmosphere in which she is able to demythologise and dephilosophise traditional codes. Among these techniques, the grotesque is considered to be the most groundbreaking one through which Carter rejects the classical body concept. By the grotesque, Carter is able to represent her sense of parodic and ironic depiction of the female body whose perverse and subversive qualities demolish "an ideal woman-image." Therefore, it is possible to see the grotesque characteristics in Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. This study hereby explores the 'grotesque' as one of the major literary ways of the Carterian expression and explains how the ideal woman image is demolished when it passes through the filter of Carter's politics of the grotesque in her *The Passion of New Eve*.

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APA Citation

Ekmekçi, Ç. (2021). The grotesque: A subversive narrative technique of Angela Carter. *The Literacy Trek*, 7(2), 96-104. <https://doi.org/10.47216/literacytrek.797025>

This study has been extracted from the authors' dissertation entitled: "Body Politics in Angela Carter's Works", and it includes the literary and theoretical analyses scrutinised within the scope of the author's doctoral study.

Introduction

Angela Carter's subversive narrative techniques are literally used to deconstruct normative sexual roles and the traditional codes of gender which are set by patriarchy. In this respect, the grotesque, one of the seminal narrative techniques, is used to form the Carterian (related to Angela Carter or her doctrines) sense of body politics. The grotesque body rejects classical norms and gender identities. Benefiting from that, in her *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter reflects her subversive panorama in which the standardisation of the body in general and that of the female body in particular is destroyed. Carter's purpose, in her *The Passion of New Eve* is to ridicule the established gender politics and identities by demolishing accepted thoughts and values which are related to the ideal woman-image.

Keywords

Angela Carter, a subversive narrative technique, the grotesque, body, The Passion of New Eve.

Submission date

18.09.2020

Acceptance date

04.04.2021

Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) is considered to be her most overtly feminist novel. In her "Notes from the Front Line" (1998), Carter, by her own admission, states that "I wrote one anti-mythic novel in 1977, *The Passion of New Eve* -- I conceived it as a feminist tract about the social creation of femininity [...]" (1998, p. 27). *The Passion of New Eve* is also considered to be a work "to be read in the light of late twentieth-century theories of performative gender, transgender and queer theory" (Tonkin, 2012, p. 170), since it is possible to see gender transformation, which is foregrounded through the transvestism of Tristessa, and the gender metamorphosis of (Eve)lyn into New Eve.

Carter, in her *The Passion of New Eve*, represents the male fantasy and its ideal woman; however, she critiques the representation of ideal female model image in her work. As Nicola Pitchford asserts, "The Passion of New Eve simultaneously critiques existing, worn-out representations of women and these feminist efforts to create a new political iconography" (2002, p. 132). Thusly, in *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter also challenges the creation of the new female model which carries feminist endeavor to design a new female type. Based on that, Carter offers such new strategies as grotesque body characteristics, through which constructed traditional gender relations and identities are ruined.

Introduced into literary critiques, especially with Mikhail Bakhtin and his *Rabelais and His World* (1965), grotesque has been used in multiple disciplines. The term has been used in literature and has still been in use for literary critiques. Today, thanks to such writers as Carter, this term has been in use to represent gender identities and body politics in feminist ideology. In this regard, Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* is a feminist work that challenges the deteriorated gender relations and identities through the representation of Carter's body politics. In other words, Carter, in her acclaimed work, ruins the depiction of traditional gender codes. This paper looks at the representations of the grotesque body characteristics through which Carter ridicules the classical body form. Therefore, this paper proposes that grotesque body has a cultural form which possesses unstable and unfinished characteristics that deconstruct normative gender relations. In accordance with this view, the image of an ideal woman is destroyed in *The Passion of New Eve*. Based on that, Carter's work

offers and provides a variety of alternatives to see how the Carterian panorama of the grotesque can be reflected.

The Carterian sense of the grotesque

The literary term, grotesque, is used as one of the subversive narrative techniques in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. Carter parodies and criticises the patriarchal notions of femininity and the standardised female body in the patriarchal society within the help of grotesque bodies which carry the flaws and defects of male body in the guise of female body. As Heather L. Johnson puts it in her article entitled "Textualising the Double-gendered Body: Forms of the Grotesque in *The Passion of New Eve*" (2000), by using the grotesque, Carter ridicules the patriarchal norms by employing the characters "who impose a myopic perspective on the constitution of gender identity, while challenging traditional perspectives on gender and its boundaries" (2000, p. 133). It is, in other words, through the use of the grotesque that Carter challenges the established gender identities. Thus, it can be stated that Carter makes use of the grotesque as her political weapon since Carter's parodic strategy constructs her gender politics. As Anna Kerchy puts it in her *Body Texts in The Novels of Angela Carter: Writing From a Corporeographic Point of View* (2008): "[t]his is a strategy Carter's heroines adopt as they enact their near-historically over-played versions of femininity that turn out to be subversions. Through their hyper-feminizing self-stylizations they become women" (2008, p. 59). Thus, Carter's parodic repetitions pave the way for her political use of the grotesque. Kerchy also states that Carter's female characters have 'subversive femininity' through which they are able to show their hyper-feminine qualities. Therefore, she explains the Carterian *gender trouble* performed by (Eve)lyn and Tristessa in her "Bodies That Do Not Fit: Sexual Metamorphoses, Re-Embodied Identities and Cultural Crisis in Contemporary Transgender Memoirs" (2009) as follows:

"At the peak of the gender trouble, Eve/lyn and Tristessa perform a freakish parody of a wedding ceremony. The originally male, masculine Evelyn, surgically transformed into hyper-feminine Eve, is cross-dressed as a bridegroom, and thus becomes "a boy disguised as a girl and now disguised as a boy again" (132), who under the masculine mask wears another, irremovable mask of femininity hiding his authentic maleness. The transvestite Tristessa - whose performance of femininity as a cross-dresser's disguise becomes her nature - is stripped of the accessories of his faked femininity, to be exposed as biologically male, and, adding one more twist to gender bender, he is dressed in the drag of a bride." (Kerchy, 2009, p. 15)

As it is seen in the quotation above, the grotesque characteristics are attributed to both (Eve)lyn the New Eve and Tristessa the transvestite by the representations of both characters in the guise of female bodies. Both characters have their subversive feminine masks under which they hide their masculinity. By doing this, Carter deconstructs traditional gender identities. According to Kerchy, ‘deconstruction’ is considered one of the basic conditions for the Carterian grotesque body politics. As she puts it, “[t]he grotesque body is considered to be a cultural construction, an operation through which genders, identities and their narratives are constituted and deconstructed” (Kerchy, 2008, p. 36). Therefore, grotesque body is a product of cultural production in which genders and identities are re-shaped and re-formed.

Kari Lokke states in her article titled “Bluebeard and The Bloody Chamber: The Grotesque of Self-Assertion” (1988) that Carter’s grotesque “is more akin to the original, emancipatory Renaissance grotesque called “grotesque realism” by Bakhtin” (1988, p. 8). In grotesque realism, as Bakhtin puts it in his *Rabelais and His World* (1965), there is a reflection of “folk culture of humor” (1984, p. 24). Therefore, Bakhtin further states that there is an ongoing and inseparable relationship between grotesque and laughter. As he contends, “[e]xaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 303). Thusly, the exaggeration is considered to be one of the main characteristic features of the grotesque that initiates itself with satire. Therefore, for Bakhtin, “the grotesque is always satire. Where there is no satirical orientation there is no grotesque” (1984, p. 306).

According to Bakhtin, the grotesque starts especially “when the exaggeration reaches fantastic dimensions” (1984, p. 315). It is because of the fact that the grotesque reflects the continual transformation and the ongoing metamorphosis especially on bodies. In this respect, Carter’s depiction of the characters by means of grotesque body is shaped under the Bakhtinian sense of grotesque topography through which the Carterian characters perform their freakish body politics. Hence, Bakhtinian grotesque realism, which reflects the medieval scope, can be seen in *The Passion of New Eve*. Kerchy states that *The Passion of New Eve* “offers a gendered rewriting of the medieval *carnavalesque grotesque* topography and anatomy” (2008, p. 108). Thereby, Carter makes abundant use of such grotesque characteristics for her

satiric and parodic intentions to demolish the traditional descriptions of the body. In this regard, Bakhtin's theory on the grotesque can be applied to Carter's depiction of the subversive and perverse characteristics of the female body. Bakhtin contends that the grotesque body is "a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (1984, p. 317). This is a way of transgression of body for becoming. As Mary Russo also writes in her "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," the grotesque body "is the pen, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change," and hence, it is "opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek" (1988, p. 219).

Similarly, Carter's characters are changeable, unrestricted, dynamic and always ongoing, which shows the same characteristics as the Bakhtinian grotesque body unlike the classical body. Therefore, the Carterian grotesque body politics possess the same characteristics in common with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque-grotesque body principles because the Carterian heroines:

"mock and reject the classical body. They refuse to be transcendently monumental, disciplined, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and homogeneous. Instead they embrace all aspects of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque grotesque body, through gaining excessively ambiguous, changing, unfinished, irregular, heterogeneous, and over-all material embodiments [...]" (Kerchy, 2008, p. 34)

Thusly, Carter's subversive and defiant grotesque bodies challenge the traditional notions of the body by becoming and being in continual process.

The grotesque in *The Passion of New Eve*

In Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, the grotesque characteristics are performed especially by Tristessa and (Eve)lyn. Through the subversion of gender norms in Carter's work, it is seen that (Eve)lyn is transformed into New Eve, and it is also revealed that Tristessa (the transvestite) is, in fact, a transgender who has the male genital organ; but is female in form. As Carter tells Cagney Watts in an interview:

"Tristessa is a male projection of femininity, that's why she's doomed, her life is completely based on false premises. This character only had the notion of his idea of a woman before he set out to become one' (165). The shadow or 'projection' is therefore man-made- an artificial construct based on male ideas, or Forms" (qtd. in Yeandle, 2017, pp. 37-38).

Thus, Tristessa the transvestite sets out for a journey in his/her identity construction to become a fantastic woman. In doing this, Tristessa portrays the projection of male desire over the feminine body of his/her own. As Johnson contends, Tristessa “reproduces the relation of a male artist to an objectified female subject. He fetishizes parts of his body in a way accurately characteristic of the male transvestite” (1997, p. 172). Therefore, s/he becomes an object of desire for (Eve)lyn as an iconic Hollywood star. (Eve)lyn calls Tristessa “the perfect man’s woman” (Carter, 1982, p. 125), and asks himself ironically: “how could a real woman ever have been so much a woman as you?” (Carter, 1982, p. 125). Then, (Eve)lyn describes Tristessa as follows:

“[b]ut how beautiful she has been and was, Tristessa de St. Ange, billed as ‘The most beautiful woman in the world’, who executed her symbolic autobiography in arabesque of kitsch and hyperbole yet transcended the rhetoric of vulgarity by exemplifying it with a heroic lack of compromise [...] Tristessa. Enigma. Illusion. Woman? Ah!” (Carter, 1982, pp. 1-2).

Thusly, it is stated that “Tristessa’s performative femininity is constituted as a disillusioning illusion, a disturbingly omnipresent void, an all-embracing nothing, a vessel of emptiness” (Kerchy, 2008, p. 115). Tristessa’s grotesque body is shaped in a way that s/he is not biologically a woman, but a man; however, s/he is socio-culturally the most popular feminine icon as a transgender. According to Kerchy:

“[i]n Carter, the peak of the carnivalesque grotesque is constituted by the narratives’ closures. The ineradicably masculine, essentially feminized male-to-female transgender subject’s final fecundation by a harper-feminine transvestite male stages the peculiar carnivalesque logic of inside-out, turn-about and continual shifting, producing micro- and macrocosmic crisis.” (2008, p. 35)

It is under this panoramic grotesque atmosphere that Carter’s work is shaped in which Tristessa’s grotesque body characteristics occur. In other words, as it is pointed out, shifting and moving characteristics of masculinity and femininity are constituted in continual order through Tristessa’s performative-grotesque body.

On the other hand, when (Eve)lyn is transformed into ‘New Eve’ by the Mother in Beulah, s/he already knows that behind his/her female outlook and his/her female body; s/he has a male persona. However, the dilemma in (Eve)lyn is that having a female body and feminine characteristics do not necessarily mean that

(Eve)lyn is biologically a woman. That being so, this transformation is considered to be 'The Passion of (Eve)lyn'. (Eve)lyn says:

"I know nothing. I am a tabula erasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg. I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman's shape. Not a woman, no; both more and less than a real woman. Now I am a being as mythic and monstrous [...] Eve remains willfully in the state of innocence that precedes the fall. I had only one thought- I'm in the most ludicrous mess in the world!" (Carter, 1982, p. 79)

(Eve)lyn describes his/her new status though s/he cannot easily accept it. S/he realises his/her new becoming. S/he is in-between. Therefore, (Eve)lyn's transformation is related to the transgression of the body from one form to the other. It is somehow related to the 'death and birth.' In other words, it is the death of Evelyn; but the birth of New Eve. In this respect, it can be said that the images of mystical and magical death and birth are the characteristics of grotesque body. As Bakhtin puts it, "[t]he combination of death and birth is characteristic of the grotesque concept of the body and bodily life" (1984, p. 248). It is seen that the grotesque atmosphere of the birth of New Eve is related to the transformation. In this transformation, "[o]ne body offers its death, the other its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 322).

All in all, (Eve)lyn's magical transformation is expressed in such a way that the grotesque atmosphere arises by breaking the established codes of gender identities which carry the carnivalesque-grotesque features since they are formed under shifting momentum to develop complexities.

Conclusion

As a result, the characteristic features of the Carterian grotesque in (Eve)lyn and in Tristessa undermine the power and the authority of the established system of the patriarch and its normative and traditional gender codes. Moreover, throughout the narration, it is also possible to see the adaptation of physical aspects of (Eve)lyn's and Tristessa's bodies with the outside world they struggle to live in. Both (Eve)lyn and Tristessa are not born, but become women. Kerchy writes that "sex change operation is used as a part of a utopian feminist project to deconstruct patriarchal, phallogocentric myths, hierarchies and privileges, the binary essentialism of gender-representation" (2009, p. 14). The grotesque overthrows established gender codes and

sexuality and the grotesque bodies of both (Eve)lyn and Tristessa challenge the patriarchal notions of about gender and sexual characteristics. Therefore, Carter uses the grotesque characterisations by parodying, subverting and deconstructing the traditional roles defined for the female bodies.

To conclude, the grotesque is benefited in forming the Carterian sense of grotesque body characteristics whose subversive features demolish traditional and classical codes of patriarchy. Therefore, this paper has argued that Carter's grotesque characteristics in *The Passion of New Eve* are expressed in a way that she reflects and represents her sense of parodic and ironic depiction of the female body by demolishing "an ideal woman-image." In this respect, by the grotesque, Carter demolishes the notions of the ideal woman image by ridiculing the classical body form proposing that grotesque body has a cultural construction with changing, incomplete and transgressional characteristics that deconstruct normative gender relations in her *The Passion of New Eve*.

Notes on the contributor

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