

feminism, fiction, Politics:

Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967)



lecture Overview:

- **feminist criticism in the 1960s**
- **Defining feminist fiction**
- **Revolutionary writing: feminist fiction in the 1960s**
- **The feminist politics of *The Magic Toyshop***

feminist criticism in the 1960s

- On screen: new 'kind' of woman with Emma Steele in *The Avengers*, and in *From Russia With Love* with Tatiana Romanova
- Their depictions owed great deal to male fantasies, but still represented radical break with passive cinematic women of 1950s
- Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1979): revealed how Western images of women and the feminine are entrenched with stereotypes (passivity, asexuality, etc.) in art and culture
- Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969): relationship between men and women must be understood as a deeply-embedded power structure with political implications (i.e. sexual politics)
- Patriarchal society works to give men supremacy through a variety of hidden means (social and politics systems work to maintain inequality)
- Male cultural dominance is dependent on the control of female sexuality (legitimacy of the family = power and wealth through inheritance)
- Literature constructs women as virgins or whores to reinforce the values of patriarchal society: the good woman is rewarded (marriage), the bad punished (death)

Defining feminist fiction

- Literature as tool of patriarchal ideology, recreating sexual inequalities and cementing the patriarchal values of society (also devaluing of female-authored literature)
- Phallogocentric criticism: focused on exposing patterns of male dominance and concealed repressive attitudes to women in men's writing
- Literature can do this by instilling moral codes: what is (un)acceptable behaviour (dichotomised visions of women as either virgin/ angel/ mother or whore/ seductress/ witch)
- Analysing canonical works to expose their latent gender values became important part of feminist criticism
- Literature can be seen as a tool of patriarchal ideology, recreating sexual inequalities and cementing the patriarchal values of society
- What makes feminist fiction?

(1) "How would a reader recognize an example of feminist imaginative writing or feminist literary criticism? ... Can we say that a tradition of women's writing is a tradition of feminist writing? Or ... can we at least establish that the writing of declared feminists must be feminist? In short, is authorial intention everything? Alternatively, does the feminism lie in the interpretation; could feminists agree on a definitive list of books that are more open than others to a feminist reading? Perhaps the nature of the readership is key."

**Mary Eagleton, "Towards Definitions of Feminist Writing",
Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader (2011)**

- Literature as one of the most powerful means of expressing experiences for which no previous or suitable representations exist

- In the 1960s, we also find a new wave of feminist fiction emerging that deals with female experience and oppression, including issues such as abortion, female sexual pleasure, etc.
- These texts also create new, alternative role models for women – models which are no longer silent domestic goddesses but women with careers and sexual appetites who live in a society that prohibits them from owning and taking control of their bodies
- Feminist scholarship also recovered and attached critical value to women's writing (cf. vast range of women writers discussed and listed in Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own*)
- Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (1962): protagonist and writer Anna Wulf records her life in four separate notebooks, one for each aspect of her life, and tries to tie them together in one golden notebook; narrative combines themes such as the threat of nuclear war with women's struggles in the areas of work, sex, love, maternity, and politics.

(2) "The novels of the 1960s, particularly Doris Lessing's powerful *The Golden Notebook*, began to point out, in a variety of notes of disillusionment and betrayal, that the 'free women' were not so free after all. Lessing's free women are helpless creatures, still locked into dependency upon men."

Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), p.298

- Margaret Drabble, *The Millstone* (1965): Rosamund Stacey, Cambridge graduate, is a virgin but pretends to friends that she is having a sexual relationship with two men. Rosamund falls pregnant when she loses her virginity. Faced with having the baby, then giving it up for adoption and carrying on with her academic career, or having an abortion, Rosamund decides to keep the pregnancy from the child's father, has the child and brings it up on her own.
- Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (1969): Marian moves from living a sane, structured and consumer-oriented life to perceiving her body and her self as separate entities. After her engagement, she begins to assign human qualities to food and finds herself unable to eat.

(3) "Atwood brings food and eating (or not-eating) into direct relationship with gender and cultural politics, using food and its activities to problematise assumed gender roles of the late 1960s and 1970s urban Canada. She emphasises the predatory nature of appetite and perhaps more importantly the protest signalled by its lack. IN doing so her body invests the body with interpretive capacities in excess of its cultural definition, allowing physical recognition and a refusal of oppressive definitions. In other words, the body is given its own, subversive, voice."

Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2000), p.95

The feminist politics of Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*

- Angela Carter (1940-1992) was a prolific writer and journalist who studied English at Bristol University
- Writing characterized by fantasy, the grotesque, and fairytales (we see the beginnings of this in *The Magic Toyshop*)
- Feminist, but always ahead of the debates of her day (cf. *The Sadeian Woman*)

- Representations of marriage: the first marriage we're explicitly shown is one in which the wife is literally silenced by her husband (Margaret only communicates via various boards on which she writes and has lost her voice on her wedding night)
- Melanie experiences her first ever kiss with Finn (whom she doesn't find very attractive at first); her reaction to this experience:

(4) "Is there something wrong with me that I felt such a blankness? And after that it seemed so horrible, is there something even more wrong with me because I thought it was so horrible? Or was it because it was Finn who kissed her and not a man like the men in whose arms she had imagined herself when she used to imagine things like that, in the past? And now she would never be able to imagine them again because she would think of Finn's wet kisses."

Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (London: Virago, 1981), p.107

- So Carter self-consciously destroys any romance that may have been attached to such a scene and indeed destroys the very idea of romance
- Romance is not something which is perceived by the person being kissed, but something that is constructed by onlookers – as we can see when Melanie wishes that someone was watching them
- Melanie breaks out of the role of the passive female by pushing Finn away when he tries to stick his tongue in her mouth
- Heterosexual marriage which usually forms the very centre of romance stories is also challenged radically
- Towards the end of the novel, we find out that Margaret is having an incestuous affair with her brother, Francie, right under her husband's nose, and this relationship subverts the romantic bond that is supposed to exist between man and wife
- So this relationship – which breaks so many taboos – threatens the patriarchal order that is established and upheld via the traditional, nuclear family with the male at its head
- Uncle Philip is the patriarchal master of the household – he is likened to thunder, he is violent towards Finn, and marriage to him has literally silenced his wife
- Margaret is silent – without a voice – and obeys her husband's whims and wishes unquestioningly, functioning as the passive, domestic ideal we meet in so many romances and myths; she's a mannequin, a toy, to him, like those he manufactures and sells in his shop
- Marriage literally constrains and traps her:

(5) "Uncle Philip broke the armour off a pink battalion of shrimps and ate them steadily while gazing at her with expressionless satisfaction, apparently deriving a certain pleasure from her discomfort or even finding that the sight of it improved his appetite."

Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, pp.112-3

- So not only has made her wedding gift of a necklace that constrains her natural movement but he also takes pleasure from observing the effect it has on her
- Carter returns Margaret's voice to her the day she manages to flee from Philip, when 'Struck dumb on her wedding day, she found her old voice again the day she was freed' (p.197)

- Uncle Philip also functions as a personification of patriarchy which rules the world
- Imperial patriarchal rule is represented by his rule over his Irish brothers-in-law
- He dominates the Jowles as the English, historically, dominated Ireland.
- It is Philip's patriarchal power that turns all people who are subservient to him into puppets, depriving them of an autonomous life, whether they are male or female
- Carter addresses not only the effect of patriarchy on women but also on men
- Melanie pauses a couple of times in the novel and observes how she can feel she is starting to behave like an automaton in the house
- How Philip likes his women is made explicit by Finn in a warning he gives to Melanie early on:

(6) "He can't abide a woman in trousers. He won't have a woman in the shop if she's got trousers on her and he sees her. He shouts her out into the street for a harlot." ... "Is there anything else like that I ought to know about him?" "No make-up, mind. And only speak when you're spoken to. He likes, you know, silent women."

Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, pp.62-3

- Key about these circumstances is that they are the result of patriarchy; they are the result of a society in which women are forced to be subservient to men, and in which men rule
- That is, these roles are just that, they are roles; they are not natural, they are not inherent in women or in men; they are constructions of a society which wants to maintain a patriarchal structure which assigns power to men, not to women
- Carter develops this idea of roles and women's performance of them – their performance of femininity – even more in later texts
- Carter argues that women are required to be impersonators: they act out a certain kind of femininity that is desired by men, but not natural
- Their make-up is their mask, in this case, and in *The Magic Toyshop* it is Uncle Philip who literally and figuratively manufactures those masks
- These masks are challenged also by what is called "the gaze"
- Repeatedly in the novel, Carter challenges the idea that women are there to be looked at – passive objects to be gazed at – and men are the ones who do the gazing (cf. the keyhole in Melanie's room)
- Arguably, feminist politics of the novel are ambiguous, as Melanie runs away with Finn:

(7) "As is typical of woman in a patriarchal society, [Melanie] is pressured to seek refuge from one man in the arms of another."

Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (1989), p.187

- As in many of our texts, Melanie's identity as an adolescent is key
- Adolescence is when her identity is shaped, when she rebels against the identities she is presented with (cf. references to Queen Victoria, e.g. broken statue in the park)
- Melanie eventually seems to escape her aunt's fate (though we can't be sure)

- Adolescent narrator lends herself to an investigation – this time a gendered one – into the process of becoming a woman, and ideas of female identity and rebellion
- *The Magic Toyshop* reminds us also that these categories of identity – age, class, and gender – are inherently connected with one another – Melanie’s gendered experience is very different when she lives in her middle-class home to when she arrives in the city
- Sexual liberation was not universal, and Carter highlights this in *The Magic Toyshop*