Irony in Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop*: The patriarchal order as a case in point

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Abstract

*The Magic Toyshop* (1967) is Angela carter’s second novel which permitted her to win the John Llewellyn Rhys price. In her novel, Carter experiments with many Feminist postmodern techniques that deploy and, at the same time, ironically debunk the cultural, mythic and religious heritage, aiming to revisit the past with a critical goal. Her speculative and fictitious writing have made it possible for her to question the internalized bygone cultural traditions, through a critical angle. Though the instances of irony are numerous in the novel, carter has put a great emphasis on the comic revision of the male patriarchal order. The writer’s prior objective through evoking the male power is to parody and criticize it, rather than to sympathize with it. While it is accurately presented as a dominant force, patriarchal power is comically overturned in *The Magic Toyshop*. One prominent male character is Uncle Philip, whose task is of a highest importance, since he personifies the figure through whom carter subverts the patriarchal order. Throughout the book, Uncle Philip is conveyed as a god-like character who suffocates both his wife; Aunt Margaret and his niece; Melanie.

His toyshop, where he fashions his puppets and determines their fate, stands as a model for his tight control and sadistic demeanor with his female relatives. His dominance over his toys reflects his oppression of his own females. The writer embarks by conveying the premises of patriarchy, only to ironically parody them. By the end of the novel, Aunt Margaret unbridles herself and ironically subverts her husband’s male hegemony by committing incest. The same character, on whom male power is exercised, evinces the non-existence of her oppressor. Uncle Philip is depicted as a ridiculed, male character who fails to conceive his patriarchal role. His claimed patriarchal authority is defied and proved to be ironic.

Keywords: Irony- patriarchal power- fairy tales- intertexts- gender stereotypes
The Magic Toyshop is Angela Carter’s second novel, published in 1967 and won the John Llewellyn Rhys prize. In this book, the British writer experiments with a myriad of literary techniques in order to subvert the modern literary realism. She resorts to irony and parody to convey her ideological implication. In The Magic Toyshop “irony seemed […] to be structured as a miniature (semantic) version of parody’s (textual) doubling” (Hutcheon 4). One important ideology which she tackles is the patriarchal order. The writer’s main objective through the deployment of irony is to criticize male power rather than to sympathize with it. While it is accurately put forward as dominant force, patriarchal power is ironically overturned in The Magic Toyshop. “There is a curious gendering in the discourses about irony and its politics. […] it is figured as a Vampire-a feminine vampire” (Kierkegaard qtd in Hutcheon 8). One prominent male character is Uncle Philip whose task is of a highest importance, since he exemplifies the figure through whom Carter denigrates a whole ideology.

Throughout the book, Uncle Philip is conveyed as a god-like male who suffocates both his wife: Aunt Margaret and his niece: Melanie. He manages a toyshop, where he exercises an uninhibited power over the puppets he fashions, and extends this tight control to the females of his household. Actually, he treats them in a similar way to his marionettes. “[His] puppet plays […] dramatise a particular idea of womanhood” and the entire “workshop represents more than a family business: it doubles as a cultural site where the myths that sustain patriarchy are fabricated” (Gamble 39).

His toyshop, where he fashions puppets and determines their fate, stands as a model for his suffocating control and sadistic demeanor with his female relatives. His rule over his toys is evidence of his oppression of his family. The workshop is portrayed as a home in miniature, directed by the authoritarian male power. “As such, irony has been seen as “serious play,” as both “a rhetorical strategy and a political method” (Haraway 1990:191) that deconstructs and decenters patriarchal discourses” (Hutcheon 31-2). The writer starts by conveying the premises of patriarchy, intentionally to parody them.

We are informed from the beginning of the novel that “Not a word can [Aunt Margaret] speak[s] [due to] a terrible affliction; it came to her on her wedding day, like a curse. Her silence” (Carter 37). The coincidence of Aunt Margaret’s dumbness on her wedding day connotes her submission to her husband’s patriarchal realm. She ironically succumbs to his authority by displaying her silence. However, Uncle Philip who “likes, […] silent women” (Carter 63), ends by being mocked and cuckolded by his dumb wife. “So, the silencing of women’s voices is transformed into the willed silence of the “ironic and traditional feminine manner” (A.L.Rosenthal 1973:30 qtd.inHutcheon 32). Aunt Margaret unbridles herself and subverts her husband’s patriarchal order by committing incest. “Carter […] is writing out of a gender context that is still evolving and can be influenced, so it is important for her to stress that women can acquire enough power to change their lives. […] her focus is […] on profound transformations in her characters themselves” (Gregson 113).

The writer depicts to us Uncle Philip’s apparent successful patriarchal authority, only to unveil its invalidity. The husband’s tyrannical power, which triumphs to mute his wife, is
ironically overthrown by the end of the novel. The patriarchal figure who has “pulled [the] strings [of his females] as if [they] were his puppets” (Carter 152), is conveyed as a ridiculed male character that fails to conceive his role appropriately. Carter aims to render him “a parody-patriarch who rules over [a] shadow world” (Gamble 37). His patriarchal prerogative is sardonically defied; for his domination fell through extending to his female relatives.

Symbolically speaking, Uncle Philip’s fashioned swan, which is supposed to violate Melanie, is a “trope [for his] patriarchal power trip” (Jouve 154). It follows from this, that the swan, which is the incarnation of the patriarchal mythical figure of “almighty jove” (Carter 164), stands for the character of Uncle Philip who guides the lives of his nephews according to his will. “Carter’s clumsy swan is a joke on patriarchal myth makers who dress up the principle of male domination in grandiose poetry-but it is a serious joke” (Gamble 40). Through the introduction of the myth of Leda and The swan, Carter connotes that patriarchal power is also a mere culturally constructed myth. She brings the myth into play, with its cultural implications, to sarcastically criticize its illegitimacy. “This is the irony feminist theorists see as working to deprive “hegemonic culture […] of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities” (Butler qtd.inHutcheon 32).

At her arrival to her Uncle’s house, Melanie is informed by Finn: Aunt Margaret’s brother that she is forbidden from wearing trousers. “Trousers. One of your Uncle Philip’s ways. 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 if he sees her. He shouts her out into the street for a harlot” (Carter 62). Figuratively, trousers betoken maleness and signify patriarchal hegemony. This explains Uncle Philip’s attitude towards “a woman in trousers”, for he views them as a female empowering means. He refuses to be equal to females and decides to curb his female relatives. His restraint of the females of his family is accurately illustrated. To achieve her ironic goal, Carter shows Uncle Philip’s seemingly successful dominance, seeking to demolish it. During his absence, every member of the family gives free vent to his/her desire. Melanie wears trousers, as a way of male defiance, and offers Aunt Margaret her nice dress. Both females free themselves from all constraints and scornfully escape Uncle Philip’s patriarchal grip.

We can analyze the previously mentioned scene, as Aunt Margaret’s allegorical sexual empowerment which paves the way for her committing incest. She dares to confront her husband’s “patriarchal majesty” (73) and prepares the ground for its collapse. The very same character, on whom male power is exerted, encages herself and evinces the non-existence of her oppressor. Melanie and Aunt Margaret protest at being the “poor women pensioners [the] planets round [the] male sun” (Carter 140). They set themselves free and demonstrate that “[the] woman does […] exist” (Armstrong 268). Finn destroys the swan and buries it, with its ideological mythic suggestions, in the pleasure garden.

This particular Greek myth of Leda and The swan is deployed by Carter to ironically deconstruct its essence. The use of myths in The Magic Toyshop is a double edged weapon, for it helps the writer to wield a postmodern literary technique, which is magical realism, and to condemn the privileged patriarchal ideology. “This can be seen in feminist “revisionist
mythmaking” (Ostrikerqtd. in Hutcheon 32) and referred to by Carter as “demythologizing” (qtd.in Schmid 145). To clarify her label, She stresses that “[myths are] ideas, images, stories that we tend to take on trust without thinking what they really mean[…] because I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I’m in the demythologizing business” (CarterDay 3-4). What special about Carter’s dealing with Leda and The swan are her explicit textual adoption of the myth and her implicit spurning of its ideological features. Thus irony

happens in the space between (and including) the said and the unsaid; it needs both to happen. […] the “ironic” meaning is inclusive and relational: the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the other because they literally “interact” (burke 1969a:512) to create the real “ironic” meaning (Hutcheon 12).

In The Magic Toyshop, Melanie is empathized with the mythological figure of Leda. Uncle Philip subordinates and pressurizes her to be a puppet playing the role of Leda; While Finn is allocated the part of the swan. “The sky-god Jove (or Zeus)- the father of gods and men, the supreme ruler, the originator of law and order-rapes the mortal woman Leda, in the form of a swan-Uncle Philip has made a model of a swan and he has the thing mount Melanie as Leda” (Day25). Carter ironically uncovers the atrocious male demeanor which manipulates the female character. Though Melanie submits to the swan’s will, she ridicules it, striving to wreck its patriarchal greatness. She meditates that “[Uncle Philip ‘swan] was nothing like the wild, phallic bird of her imaginings. It was dumpy and homely eccentric. She nearly laughed” (Carter 165). This implies that Melanie mocks the male’s grandeur and undermines its superiority. In this case, we can discern the humorous aspect of irony.

“The attribution of mocking intent […] has often made theorists […] see all irony as characterized by “painful” laughter (Palante 1906:149 qtd. In Hutcheon 26). Carter’s ultimate objective through the deployment of Leda and The swan is “[to expose] myths and their oppressive potential, which she sees at work particularly in the field of gender relations” (Schmid145). By means of myths and their hidden ideological aspects, patriarchal societies stiffen their females and “turn [them] into puppets, deprives them of autonomous life” (Day 24). Uncle Philip, who stands as a perfect emblem of patriarchal dominance, metaphorically and literally speaking, transforms his niece into a puppet abiding by his orders. To quote Carter’s words “myths deal in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances. In no area is this more true than in that of relations between the sexes” (Carter qtd.in Schmid 145).

Myths are invented to perpetuate the patriarchal dominance and internalize it within the female consciousness. By designing his own Leda, Uncle Philip plans to tighten his grasp over Melanie. However, the latter ‘self-awareness of the patriarchal vileness and its unjustified existence, leads her to satirize it, for “[she] must not be afraid of the swan. It is all charades” (Carter 162). Although, she apparently surrenders to “[t]he feathery glory” (Watts 182), Melanie is aware of its fallacious mythic supremacy and works hard to bring its end.

Because patriarchy imposes itself as a norm, as unquestionable common sense, it requires in response this especially flagrant act of satirical defamiliarizing which loudly
proclaims that the patriarchal vision is responsible in fact, for degrading an innocent young girl into an object of use (Gregson 112).

Throughout the novel, Melanie is put forward to us as a victim female who endures enormously from patriarchal hatred and sounds to endorse her female submissiveness. By the close of the novel, her imagined ideal femininity comes to an end as “[s]he is now exposed to a misogyny which is the other side of her fantasies of female-submission” (Schmid 147). Her disillusionment reaches its climax with the Leda puppet show. She becomes conscious of her entrapment within a male dominated society which rejects gender equality. The almost raped Leda is on the verge of being overwhelmed by “the insignificant [swan] as dust” (Carter 16), which she acknowledges and laughs at.

Carter’s degrading description of the swan implicitly displays her ironic patriarchal judgment. “By describing this swan as being different from the majestic creature of older myths, Carter creates a comic contrast. Thus also undermining Uncle Philip’s claim to power” (Schmid 148). The writer distances myths from the internalized patriarchal conviction and dispossesses both of them from their assumed ideological influence. “[She] possesses a very high degree of theoretical reflection on the phenomenon of myth […] she shows that female submission and male domination are not natural and God-given-on the contrary-they are ‘man-made’” (Schmid 146). Carter makes recourse to myths to refute patriarchal hegemony over femaleness, by highlighting their cultural rootedness.

Apart from myths, the deployment of fairy tales illustrates a literary prerequisite in Carter’s ironic deconstruction of the male power. One prominent fairy tale in The Magic Toyshop is Charles Perrault’s “Bluebeard’s castle”. The writer relies heavily on this particular fairy tale as an intermittent intertext within the folds of her book. The main purpose behind its application is to unveil the voracious male power which is superimposed over the martyrized female character. Contrary to the traditional use of fairy tales which is meant to solidify male power, Carter’s postmodern employment of these stories tends to build a powerful and revenging female protagonist who satirizes the patriarchal realm and thwarts the unfair social system.

Carter heroine, sensible, sassy and resourceful, came along at the right time to help […] think about the difficult and necessary task of establishing strong female protagonists in a form that had traditionally provided its power fantasies in a distinctly gender-based fashion” (Kaveney 186).

Similarly to myths, the fairy tale motif qualifies the writer to uncover the unjustified male control over females. She applies these innocent childish stories and digs beneath their sexual and gendered implications to ironically prove their hidden male guidance. Women have internalized their submission as if it is natural, though it is ideologically and socially inflicted. In The Magic Toyshop, Melanie ironically identifies with Bluebeard’s wife.

She felt lonely and chilled, walking along the long, brown passages, past secret doors, shut tight. Bluebeard’s castle. Melanie felt a shudder of dread as she went by every door, in case it opened and something, some clockwork horror rolling hugely on small
wheels, some terrifying joke or hideous novelty emerge to put her courage to the test (Carter 82).

By comparing Uncle Philip’s house to Bluebeard’s castle, the writer subtly equates them. Studying both characters, a clear continuation and resemblance can be traced between them. Melanie feels the heavy loneliness and extreme cold due to her Uncle’s unaffectionate behavior. His extravagant control over his wife and niece affects the family mood badly. Subsequently, Melanie is led into hallucinations. She, unconsciously, identifies with Mrs. Bluebeard due to the tyrannical male power they undergo.

By implementing “Bluebeard’s Castle” as an intertext, Angela Carter emphasizes her implicated irony of the patriarchal system. She strives to subvert the male dominance and fortify her female characters by voicing them, within a male centered world. “Carter’s interest in the fairy tale stems, among other things, from her observation that women were the tellers and often the heroines” (Grass 80). Thus, Melanie is voiced to express the male danger, to which she is exposed.

Though, she appears to describe her emotional fear, Melanie views the whole situation from an ironic angle. At this level, the reader is invited to infer the writer’s ironic message because

Irony is an interpretive and intential move: it is the making or inferring of meaning in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and the unsaid. The move is usually triggered (and then directed) by conflictual textual or contextual evidence or by markers which are socially agreed upon. […] irony is the intential transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented (Hutcheon11).

From the depiction of the scene, we discern the vulnerable female circumstances compared with the dominant male power. However we have to dive in the fairy tale’s inferring meaning, to grasp its irony. The writer explicitly deploys fairy tales, only to implicitly repudiate their ideological and cultural orientations.

Fairy tales present Angela Carter with a range of subject matter for drawing out the beauty and violence in gender and sexual formations. In deconstructing the tales, Carter reveals the false universalizing inherent in many so-called master narratives of the western literary tradition (Brooker 1).

Much the same to Bluebeard who spreads his authority over the whole castle, Uncle Philip broadens his patriarchal power and stifles the females of the house. Via this particular example, Carter satirizes Uncle Philip’s patriarchal hegemony which culminates with failure, as it is the case with Bluebeard’s. “[P]atriarchal power [is] attacked, deconstructed, shown to be hollow or vulnerable in Angela Carter, whether [through] Uncle Philip or Bluebeard” (Jouve 155). In The Magic Toyshop, Melanie is empowered to articulate her secret fears which are caused by the dominant male institution. Through her identification with Mrs. Bluebeard, she bears the responsibility of all the victimized females. She embodies the female voice which is in quest for liberation. Melanie “takes control of her narrative, challenges the
“accepted fictions of femininity” [and] [...] sets out to bring down the edifice of patriarchal control” (Grass 80).

Carter thrives to wreck the gender stereotypes by unfolding the exercised male tyranny. Contrary to the traditional subordinated female characters, Carter’s heroine acts to unmask the identity of patriarchal order. She displays her sufferings under the masculine authority and reacts to deflate the cult that has always haunted her as a female character. She presents “a comic vision [of the patriarchal order] which focuses upon social constructs and opens them up to subversion, transformation and change” (Grass 81). Similar to the defeat of Bluebeard’s authority, Uncle Philip’s power would crumble as an emblem of male dominance. Ironically speaking, Uncle Philip’s house is caught by fire as a connotation of the collapse of his patriarchal influence.

To recapitulate, whether through the reference to myths or to fairy tales, Angela Carter succeeds to convey her postmodern feminist view about the ironic male power. Though, they seem to display obedience, her female characters ironically overturn the patriarchal realm and pay tribute to the subordinated women.
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