

Chapter Four

Dissolving the Boundary:

The Subversive Function of the Fantastic

I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode.

--Angela Carter, "Notes From the Front Line"

In the first part of *The Magic Toyshop*, the issue is involved in the setting and plots of reality while the unreal is interwoven periodically. With the progress of the plots, when the patriarchal force becomes more and more overwhelming, the elements of the unreal become increasingly obvious. After the killing of the swan, the boldness of carnival takes over and subverts the established order with a festival manner.

I. The Hesitation of the Real and the Unreal

Todorov specifies that hesitation is the major characteristic of the fantastic. A literary text has to create a world akin to the realistic world which the reader lives in; at the same time, the text has some extraordinary phenomena whereby the reader wanders between a natural or supernatural explanation. This hesitation can also be experienced by a character, in which case the reader will identify himself with the character and thus the sense of hesitation will be reinforced. In the novel, the setting is in southern London, the scenery is a working-class family, and characters are realistic.

Throughout the novel, there is no appearance of unusual magic performance. Even so, Carter constructs a world of hesitation not only for the protagonist but the reader.

When Melanie first gets to the toyshop, she is often scared by the vivid toys and specimens: “a number of stuffed birds [...] were disconcertingly lifelike and for a moment Melanie thought they were real” (*The Magic Toyshop* 41). In the living room, a painting of the white bull terrier is such an incredible verisimilitude that Melanie doubts whether the dog in the painting switches identities to the real dog from time to time: “as if it were a guard-dog [...] on the constant *qui vive* [who lives] behind its glass eyes, taking turn and turn about with the real housedog, and the basket of flowers was stuck in its mouth in an attempt to disarm, an accessory borrowed to lend it a harmless look” (60). Then, a “real cuckoo” or precisely a stuffed real cuckoo flying out of the clock startles Melanie, which is such a “deliberate eccentricity” (60). Melanie’s sense of reality is confused and bewildered by those toys and puppets. She is thrown into an eccentric world which she is not familiar with at all: “Nothing was ordinary, nothing was expected” (60).

The sense of bewilderment is increased day by day, until Melanie cannot distinguish what is real from unreal. One day on the stair Melanie is startled by the dog’s “uncanny quality of whiteness, like Moby Dick,” and she wonders, “Which dog is it, the real one or the painted one?” (83) Living among those vivid puppets, Melanie’s sense of reality is weakened. There are real birds made into toys; there are artificial puppets so much like real human beings. In the last scene of the novel, when Philip is trying to burn down the house, the white dog runs fast out from the house. “Did it or did it not carry a basket of flowers in its mouth?” Melanie doubts curiously

(198). The most puzzling experience happens when Melanie alone sorts dining utensils in the kitchen. In the dresser drawer, there is a girl's delicate hand cut from the root, which is not a simple image of hallucination but a clear image with specific details: "[...] a soft-looking, plump little hand with pretty, tapering fingers the nails of which tinted with a faint, pearly lacquer. There was a thin sliver ring of the type small girls wear on the fourth finger" (*The Magic Toyshop* 118). Melanie is greatly frightened. Although Francie later comments that it is an illusion which is caused by Melanie's distress of losing her parents, Melanie is still certain that she sees a hand in the drawer. There is no explanation but only plenty of assumptions of what Melanie witnesses. Neither Melanie nor the reader can be sure about the answer of it.

II. Love and Carnival: Destroying the Symbol of Patriarchal Violence

Under Philip's patriarchal pressure upon the household, the members of the family still find their ways through in different means. First of all, love is what holds them together to face the predicament. The Jowles show their love toward each other without disguise and bashfulness: "They loved one another and did not care who knew it. Their love was almost palpable in the small room, warm as the fire, strong and soothing as sweet tea" (*The Magic Toyshop* 43). It is due to the abundance of love that can support their will to live in that toyshop.

At night, when Philip is not in the house, the Jowles have their special amusement in the kitchen. Aunt Margaret plays the ebony flute; Francie plays the violin. Even the white dog joins in the performance, beating the ground with its tail rhythmically. Aunt Margaret is stunningly beautiful and at ease. Her hair is "loose and

hung on her shoulders, a burning bush” (50), her smile is like an angel, and her eyes are “stars” (52). There is no word needed between Margaret and Francie: “They looked at each other, exchanging some meaning without words” (*The Magic Toyshop* 51). As for Finn, he plays a pair of spoons with fingers, not quite fluently. When sickened by his lousiness, Finn dances instead, and “[n]ot a note of music was without its corresponding motion of his eloquent and lively feet” (52). With this kind of carnivalesque delight, the Jowles act and move lively according to their own will: “these three had blended together as if it was the easiest thing in the world, forming a new, three headed animal taking comfortably to itself through Francie’s hands and Aunt Margaret’s lips and fingers and Finn’s feet (76). They are such an “entity” which is “warm as wool” to resist the cold-blooded Philip (76).

The night when Melanie faints for the sight of the girl’s hand in the drawer, she is awakened by the gentle Francie, who checks the drawer and takes care of her. Aunt Margaret is very concerned about Melanie, and although she cannot verbally express her feeling, Margaret caresses Melanie with love just like a mother does to her child. Francie and Margaret form a “single arch of living substance raised up over her [Melanie], beneath she could sleep in safety” (122). Together with Finn, they are “three angels” watching over Melanie: “All the red people lighting a bonfire for her, to brighten away the wolves and tigers of this dreadful forest in which she lived” (122). This passage echoes William Blake’s poem in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, “The Tyger,” in which the dreadful tiger hides in the “forests of the night” (2). Melanie leaves the easeful life of innocence behind and begins to experience the wary life in the toyshop, where Uncle Philip is the tiger, lurking around to find his

victims. From that day on, Melanie loves her three angels whole-heartedly. She has entered the Jowles' "charmed circle" (123). Whenever she has time, Melanie helps Aunt Margaret to mend the clothes and Francie to polish his shoes. At Christmas time, Melanie prepares a little bottle of perfume for Aunt Margaret, and decides that she will polish Francie's shoes everyday in the following year. However, Melanie cannot do anything for Finn, because since the day he is cruelly beaten by Philip, Finn has lost all of his liveliness and spirit, who is numb as a doll until he stands up for Melanie at the end of the novel.

Lucie Armitt argues that Finn is a duplicate of Philip, that they not only "share a phonetic similarity of names" but also "share a fascination with women as spectacular commodity" (*Contemporary Women's Fiction* 211). Nevertheless, although Finn is more or less influenced by Philip's authoritative direction, he represents one of the new species of the gender roles in becoming, the "New Man" in Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (281). In *Nights at the Circus*, Walser is originally a traditional man who fits the social criterion of "the male," but when he encounters Fevvers, an aerialist who is famous for the pair of wings on her back, his perception of the real and unreal is completely challenged and subverted to the extreme. Walser can neither categorize Fevvers as an "ordinary" woman nor can he make sure that Fevvers is truly a "bird." Following the circuit with the circus, Walser gradually changes into a New Man, who transgresses the boundary of the orthodox conventions with Fevvers, who stands for the unconventional and anti-archetypal woman in a society. This kind of process of becoming typifies Finn's progress towards a new place besides the role given by patriarchy.

Overruled by Philip's overwhelming authority, Finn manages to break through with his carnivalesque laughter. He is pounded by Philip because of being late three minutes for breakfast, yet Finn laughs to diminish Philip's authority: "[...] Finn slipping back and forth like an eel, a laughing eel, for he kept on laughing" (*The Magic Toyshop* 69). In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin manifests that laughter is one of the most important concepts of carnival. Laughter's "basis [...] gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety" (7). In medieval and Renaissance, carnival is a festival for the common people to utter their voices in their vulgar language and to celebrate the state of equality among various classes of social hierarchy and religion. The laughter is anti-authority, anti-sacredness, and anti-despotism. Finn's laughter embodies the spirit of carnival, resisting Philip's tyranny. "Why did he grin so much, showing his discoloured teeth?" Melanie wonders (*The Magic Toyshop* 72). In the gloomy and weighty atmosphere, Finn laughs to decrease the pressure of Philip's rage. The carnival laughter is "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (*Rabelais and His World* 11-12). The rebel quality of carnival laughter serves as a means to confront Philip.

At the night when Melanie is symbolically raped by Philip's swan, Finn decides to use Margaret's axe to chop up the swan. "[...] It was easy," Finn says (*The Magic Toyshop* 171). The swan is not scary for its own sake, but for the power endowed. It represents Philip's authority as a father in a family, or rather the patriarchal domination in a society.

'It covered you,' said Finn. 'It rode you. I did it partly for your sake,

because it rode you.’ [...]

‘Besides, Philip Flower loved it so.’

‘It was a ludicrous thing, the swan,’ she [Melanie] said. ‘But so much work went into it.’

‘He put himself into it. That is why it had to go. Oh, I’m weary.’ (174)

Finn kills the swan for the violence it demonstrates, because what is behind it is actually Philip, and the swan is what Philip treasures and enjoys playing. The swan symbolizes the system which runs behind the patriarchy, the ideology which is set and reinforced by the male, which particularly dictates that the male imposes their ideology upon the entire human race. What Finn means by the sentence, “[h]e put himself into it,” has double meanings. One is the meaning according to the commonly-used grammar, that Philip has devoted himself into the production of the swan. The other is that Philip literally puts himself into the swan, and that he puts his spirit into the swan and transforms into that swan, like Jupiter in the story of mythology. The swan epitomizes the symbolic order.

What Carter manages to do is to reveal all those myths and the devices within those myths, because what she believes is “that all the myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice” (71). She remarks that she is in the “demythologizing business” (71). One of the myths in the novel which Carter demythologizes is the story of “Leda and the Swan.” Carter comments that she finds a lot of “raw material in the lumber room of the Western European imagination” for her constant topic of writing on sexuality (*Notes* 72). Carter uses the word “imagination” here negatively.

So I feel free to loot and rummage in an official past, *specifically a literary past*, [...]. This past, for me, has important decorative, ornamental functions; further, it is a vast *repository of outmoded lies*, where you can check out what lies used to be à la mode and find the old lies on which new lies have been based. (Notes 74)
(emphases added)

The Western European literature is almost entirely built by the so-called “imagination” of the male, and the system of patriarchy results in the silence of the female, causing the female’s voice to be all muffled. Sally Robinson concludes that the “overall effect” of Carter’s works is to “drive a wedge between Woman and women, between male-centered metaphysical representations of Woman and the feminine, and women’s multiplicitous and heterogeneous self-representations” (77). Robinson uses the single and capitalized “Woman” to indicate what the male imagines a woman should be, the femininity which fits in the male’s agenda, and uses the multiple women to approve the difference and dissimilitude of each woman. Those “lies” composed by patriarchy dominate women for thousands of year; moreover, there are new lies fabricated still. The swan is the symbol of the aggregation of Western European literature, which is just what Melanie describes it as a “ludicrous” thing but been put “so much work” into (174).

Andrzej Gasiorek proclaims that Carter is significant because she “walks the tightrope between carnivalesque fantasy and rational critique” (126). Not only does Carter create the realm of the fantastic for pleasure and liberation, but also for the critique of the real world. Therefore, Finn’s act of destroying the swan is such a

defiant act against the power of phallus, which is exactly what Carter does in her business of demythologizing: “Finn, the enormity of it!’ ‘It is a gesture.’ (171)” Finn is the only character, who finally determines to subvert Philip’s domination by killing the symbol of phallus. One part of the swan is particularly difficult to be destroyed.

[...] And the swan’s neck refused to be chopped up [...]. It kept sticking itself out of my rain coat when I buttoned it up to hide it and it kept peering around while I was carrying it, [...]. It must have looked, to a passer-by, as if I was indecently exposing myself and kept feeling to see if my fly was done up. (*The Magic Toyshop* 173)

In this passage, the swan’s neck keeps jutting out, as if it is Finn’s phallus.

Significantly, Finn, being a man, was symbolically castrating himself, who is at the same time deprived of the privilege at the control center. He does not choose to inherit Philip’s position as a father and the phallus. Not only does Finn stand up for Melanie’s sake but for his own sake, because he does not like the entire system of patriarchy.

Besides, he cannot ignore the inequality like Jonathon does: “‘Ah, but it was a pleasure to destroy the swan.’ (173)” Jack Zipes summarizes the functions in Propp’s study, and one of the basic motifs of the fairy tale is that the villain is “punished or the inimical forces are vanquished (4),” which is the climax of the story. In the fairy tale, the villain is meant to be defeated eventually and the “initial misfortune or lack is liquidated” (Propp 53). Zipes draws parallels between the force or “enchantment” and “petrification,” and between the broken spell and “emancipation” (6). Only when the spell is broken can there be emancipation.

Finn chooses to bury the remains of the swan in the pleasure garden where is

the ashes of National Exposition of 1852, because Finn feels that “somehow it seemed best of all to bury it in the pleasure garden” (*The Magic Toyshop* 173). In the pleasure garden, there lies the statue of early middle-age Queen Victoria and various statues of “[d]ryads, slave girls, busts of great men, great men on horse (102),” which are characters in the myth, stories, and great men in legends. The pleasure garden represents history, what Carter calls the “repository of outmoded lies;” and each of those statues signifies the fabricated legend, the “outmoded” lie made to be believed and internalized by the people (*Notes* 74). Thus, the swan, the symbol of phallus, suits such a despairing place which “smells of rotten mortality” (102). Carter asserts that “I / we [women] are *not the slave of the history* that enslaved our ancestors” (74) (emphases added). History is composed by the male ideology, in which women are excluded. Women’s voices are therefore marginalized and disregarded, enslaved by history which reinforces the patriarchal symbolic system.

The next morning when the swan is gone and Philip and Jonathon go out to a gathering of model boat lovers, the house is filled with the atmosphere of joyfulness and carnival. There is “such festivity” in the kitchen, even bacon dances in the pan “for joy,” and toast burns “with a merry flame” (*The Magic Toyshop* 183). In this casual atmosphere, Finn announces that he is going to sit on Philip’s chair, in which Finn looks like the “Lord of Misrule” (183). Finn’s act of sitting on Philip’s seat / throne infers one of the major plots of carnival: the act of crowning and decrowning. Jackson points out that the menippea is “conceptually linked with the notion of carnival” (15). Carnival is the specific example of the menippea. Bakhtin notes in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* notes that the “primary carnivalistic act is the *mock*

crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king” (124). The official authority and political hierarchy of the society are subverted in the process.

Crowning / decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the *joyful relativity* of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position. (124)

Carnival emphasizes the fluidity and changeability, praises the vitality, and opposes the forces of convention and institution. By the act of crowning and decrowning, the institutional authority is pulled down from the high social position and the common people have the chance to be the king. The social order is neglected or intentionally subverted, forming a condition of up-side-down.

After sitting in Philip’s chair and announcing to the family members that he has dismembered the swan, Finn then takes the cup of Philip, on which is the word “Father,” and smashes it. Finn discards the law of Father and thus there is no longer limitation and fear in their hearts. Everyone breaks into laughter. Francie starts to laugh “hugely, rolling in his chair,” and he laughs “until the tears came seeping down his rough cheeks” (*The Magic Toyshop* 184). Aunt Margaret finally relaxes herself, and “for the first time [...], she seemed to be examining the possibility of her own tomorrow,” having her own freedom (184). When washing the dishes, they play with the soap and make it a “soap-sud carnival” (185).

[...] Melanie had never seen the brothers laugh so much. Francie sagged, a partially demolished tower, hooting and hiccupping over the sink.

Finn rolled on the floor, holding his stomach. Victoria caught the

infection and went berserk, nearly stumbling off Aunt Margaret's lap with mirth. (185)

They are all free from the symbolic order, growing spiritual strength. Melanie takes out and wears her trousers, which is forbidden by Philip. Margaret no longer wears the grey dress and the silver necklace, which makes her uncomfortable and restrained, and puts on the pearl necklace and a green dress given as a gift from Melanie instead. Then they start to play the music: "She [Margaret] was on the top branch of a happy tree, playing the flute with Francie, and Victoria stumbled on the floor. Downstairs, the shop lay in its Christmas Eve disorder, [...] the kitchen brimmed over joy" (192).

They drink beers, dance, sing, and play. Disregarding all the rules and laws, they do not repress their wills and desires anymore. Aunt Margaret and Francie embrace each other with love, not the love of families but lovers. Incest is always a taboo in the cultural realm. However, in the festival carnival, Bakhtin manifests that "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and form the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions," and that "[c]arnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal" (*Rabelais* 10). Because the laws are suspended, Margaret and Francie can show their true affection and become what they want to be; at the same time, the wise white dog gazes at them "uncensoriously" (*The Magic Toyshop* 194). As for Carter, the best adjective for her attitude toward the issue of the taboo of the incest and all of the restrictions and boundaries is exactly "uncensorious."

[...] she [Melanie] could see a charred stick in fireplace, [...]. She found herself gazing at it as if it were the most significant object she had ever

seen, as if it might start talking to her of past and present and future and
*a grand concept of them all as a whole in which incest had an explicable
 place.* (196) (emphases added)

The taboo of incest is defined and executed by the culture, and the culture, just like history, is defined and constituted by the patriarchy. Carter tries to inspect and undermine the prohibitions set by the law of the Father, finding a broader view beyond all the boundaries.

III. Rewriting and Retelling: The Strategy of Parody

Carter does not write to echo what has been said, but uses literary conventions as bases, altering them and then elaborating on her focuses instead. Therefore, Rod Mengham notes that Carter has the “impulse to challenge traditional forms and methods of narration” (4). The rebel characteristic of Carter is widely acknowledged by critics. As Robert Eaglestone points out, “her writing / retelling is always subversive” (198). Carter’s strategy is not limited to the subversion of plots on the surface, but fundamentally the subversion of narrative techniques and literary forms as a whole. *The Magic Toyshop* is full of parodies of stories of mythology, the fairy tale, the Bible, and the genre of romance.

A parody contains the characteristics of Viktor Shklovsky’s “defamiliarization,” a way of reconstructing perspective by “exposing and revealing” the literary tradition and canon, and of “laying bare the device,” which is the means of self-consciously achieving defamiliarization (Waugh 65). In *The Magic Toyshop*, Carter utilizes numerous conventions, and one of which is the genre of romance. Flora Alexander

specifically indicates that Carter's strategy is "to write lavishly within the discourse of romance" but in the meanwhile "to undermine this discourse with words which destabilise the romance mode" (71-72). In the first chapter, Melanie leaves with romantic expectations of her future; specifically speaking, she craves for the romance of love and an attractive husband. Nevertheless, her dream is broken after her parent's death, for in the toyshop, Melanie's hope for a "fancy" future can never be realized (*The Magic Toyshop* 7). In chapter three, Melanie wakes up in the room of rose wallpaper, which makes her resemble the princess of the fairy tale, the sleeping beauty. However, her prince charming is the vulgar and dirty Finn, who is "not a man like the men in whose arms she had imagined herself" (107).

The fairy tale, to which this novel belongs, has also what Zipes calls the "[l]iberating [p]otential" of contemporary fairy tale. At the same time, Susan Sellers emphasizes the "balance between the retaining of familiar elements and the introduction of the new" (14). This fusion of the familiar and the new is exactly what Patricia Waugh defines as metafictional parody, which "offers both innovation and familiarity through the individual reworking and undermining of familiar convention" (12). While the familiarity provides a sense of security to the reader, the innovation provides a sense of novelty.

The most significant characteristic of parody is that it is "double-edged," for it is "either destructive or as critically evaluative and breaking out into new creative possibilities" (Waugh 64-5). For Carter, both descriptions can be correspondingly true. In the allusion of "The Leda and Swan," by parodying the phallic swan in the mythology to be only an absurd paper-cut marionette, Carter demonstrates that the

symbol of patriarchy is not what women is afraid of but the act of violence, rape. She even proceeds to a critique of Bible, the major and earliest resource and foundation of patriarchy. *The Magic Toyshop* is precisely a parody of the Garden of Eden, where human has to obey God's will in any circumstances. Philip Flower is the ruthless god not only in his puppet theater but also in the household. During an interview, Carter specifies that "the toyshop itself should be a secularized Eden: that's what lay behind the malign fairy tale I wrote" (Haffenden 80). When Philip returns from the gathering of model boat lovers, he finds out the love between Margaret and Francie. He sets a fire, intending to burn all of them. At this time, Margaret finally regains her voice: "Struck dumb on her wedding day, she found her old voice again the day she was freed" (*The Magic Toyshop* 197). At the end, Melanie and Finn find that there are only two of them sitting in the garden with nothing left: "At night, in the garden, they faced each other in a wild surmise" (200). They are expelled from Eden, which Carter recognizes as "the Fortunate Fall" (Haffenden 80). Even though it is a fortunate fall so that they can break away from fear and pressure, what waits in front of them is not a promising future.

In *When Dreams Came True*, Zipes declares that "[r]arely do wonder tales [fairy tale] end unhappily" and that "[t]he success of the protagonist usually leads to (a) marriage; (b) the acquisition of money; (c) survival and wisdom; (d) any combination of the first three" (4). Not like the ending of any typical fairy tale with happy ending, *The Magic Toyshop* ends with the sense of uncertainty and desolation. In this case, marriage may be obtained but no fortune, and wisdom is still in the pursuit. Carter again parodies the genre of the fairy tale. In *The Magic Toyshop*, Carter

has an “extreme self-consciousness” about her devices, and she is not afraid of “laying bare” those tricks in front of the readers (Waugh 2). Through those metafictional techniques, Carter constructs a parodic discourse in contrast to the grand-narrative of patriarchy.