The Reappropriation of the Victorian in the Novels of Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter

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DECLARATION

I certify that the work contained in this thesis, or any part of it, has not been accepted in substance for any previous degree awarded to me, and is not concurrently being submitted for any degree other than that of 'Doctor of Philosophy' being studied at the University of Greenwich. I also declare that this work is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise identified by references and that the contents are not the outcome of any form of research misconduct.

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ABSTRACT

In their novels, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood display more influence from Victorian literature than may be immediately apparent. While they have both written historical novels that have been embraced by Neo-Victorian studies, the influence of the literature of the nineteenth century goes beyond these works, with the theme of the 'Victorian' being a recurring motif even in novels with contemporary or science fiction settings. This can be argued as being due to the importance of the Victorian period in the development of both the novel and modern society, and both authors use and subvert the patterns and motifs of Victorian literature to comment on how traditional Victorian values (or what modern society believes to be so) continue to affect the contemporary world despite not necessarily commenting on the Victorians themselves. This thesis will demonstrate how the two writers make use of nineteenth-century and Edwardian themes in their novels, even those that have no outward appearance of being 'Neo-Victorian'. Atwood makes use of nineteenth-century Gothic to explore both personal and Canadian national identity in her novels, from the *fin de siècle* patterned invasion narratives of *Surfacing* and *The Robber Bride* and the dissection of Gothic romances in *Lady Oracle* to the considerations of history and the narrative form in *The Blind Assassin*. Carter also uses nineteenth-century literary forms and allusions to explore concerns of modern life; Victorian portrayals of madness form the bases of *Several Perceptions* and *Love*, turn-of-the-century conceptions of childhood inform *The Magic Toyshop*, and Gothic romantic fantasies are critiqued in *Heroes and Villains* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffmann*, while *Wise Children* follows the decline of the British empire and its impact on the culture.

CONTENTS

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And probably more people who I'm forgetting and will remember the second it's too late to change this.

Note: List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this thesis for in-text citations to Margaret Atwood's* and Angela Carter's works:

Atwood

Surfacing	*Surf.*
'The Journals of Susanna Moodie'	*JoSM*
Lady Oracle	*LO*
The Handmaid's Tale	*HT*
The Robber Bride	*RB*
Alias Grace	*AG*
The Blind Assassin	*BA*
Eating Fire	*EF*
Survival	*Surv.*
Strange Things	*ST*
In Other Worlds	*OW*

Carter

The Magic Toyshop	*MT*
Several Perceptions	*SP*
Heroes and Villains	*HV*
Love	*Love*
The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman	*DH*
The Passion of New Eve	*NE*
Nights at the Circus	*NC*
Wise Children	*WC*
The Sadeian Woman	*SW*
Nothing Sacred	*NS*
Expletives Deleted	*ED*
The Curious Room	*CR*

* With the exception of Margaret Atwood's 1998 essay 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction' and a 2015 interview from *The New York Times*.

Introduction

> 'There are times when reality becomes too complex for Oral Communication,' says the computer in Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 movie, *Alphaville*, 'but Legend gives it a form by which it pervades the whole world.' *Jane Eyre* has this quality of legend and, like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, has proved infinitely translatable into other media: stage, screen, radio. As a child, I first encountered *Jane Eyre* in a comic-strip version. The text easily secretes other versions of itself.
>
> *ED*, 162-163

Victorian literature has had a profound impact on modern storytelling, producing countless volumes that are still read to this day. The influence of nineteenth-century literature on more recent writing can be discerned in both the very conscious rejection of its forms and styles, as in the case of modernism, and in the engagement with its themes and ideas, as seen in Neo-Victorian literature.

This dissertation will look at the novels of two modern women writers whose works are not always associated with the Neo-Victorian, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood, who both began writing in the 1960s. Although their works are typically entirely original, but they often function as collages of elements from earlier work. While this composite of motifs is common in Neo-Victorian fiction, Atwood and Carter go further than most, creating works that often outwardly appear to have little to do with the earlier works that, I argue, seem to have influenced them. With this I hope to expand on the concept of the Neo-Victorian as defined by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, by positing that, more than responding to earlier work, they are expanding upon it and creating something new from the sum of their parts.

It will examine how the tropes and ideas of the Victorian period form an important but often overlooked element in their work, showing a different influence to the now almost standard Neo-Victorian literary form and demonstrating that definitions of the Neo-Victorian have perhaps been overly narrow in their scope. With the shifting place of women in the world in the latter half of the twentieth century, many women writers came to use the language, styles and themes of Victorian literature to skewer modern society while not necessarily appearing 'Victorian' in aesthetic. With its roots in the perceived ubiquity of Victorian cultural heritage, this approach reveals and contests the continuing influence of the Victorian on contemporary society. Both Carter and Atwood have written novels that can be

viewed as 'Neo-Victorian'; in particular *Nights at the Circus* and *Alias Grace*, which fit comfortably within the genre, with their focus on disenfranchised women of the period, their critique of the perceived hypocrisy of society, their exploration of its underbelly, and their implicit commentary on how all this reflects on contemporary life. I posit however that the Victorian influence on the fiction of Atwood and Carter extends far beyond these works and into those that would not typically be deemed Neo-Victorian. Works by Carter and Atwood that do not take place in the Victorian period nevertheless make extensive use of Victorian motifs, novel structure and themes, often include allusions to Victorian texts, and in this thesis I will consider how they continue to influence the characters (and readers) of these texts, even in contemporary or futuristic environs. Examining these works helps illustrate how women writing in the latter half of the twentieth century[1] saw their Victorian inheritance effecting and affecting the modern world, and the influence Victorian culture and thinking still had (and in some ways continue to have) on the world. While I use the term 'Victorian', this is not strictly accurate to the aims of the thesis. While much of what I discuss may fall under the umbrella of 'Victorian', the term would appear to preclude other nineteenth-century literature, such as the oft influential work of Georgian author Jane Austen, when in fact this dissertation more broadly looks at the literature and culture of the long nineteenth century, and includes works that don't originate from within the British Empire (in particular those by American authors) and as such are not strictly 'Victorian'. Similarly the conception of 'the Victorian' used in this thesis includes works from the Edwardian period as well as the period immediately preceding the Great War; the overt Victorian influence over western culture largely continuing until such a time. Some of these works referenced, such as *Anne of Green Gables*, are still set within the nineteenth century, while others, such as *Pygmalion*, are not but are concerned with its legacy.

This introduction outlines the Victorian literary legacy and reactions thereto, focusing on the Modernist outright rejection of the Victorian, and the emergence of Neo-Victorian literature (and studies), and reflects on these in relation to Carter's and Atwood's fiction. It will also outline and explain relevant theories regarding women's writing which form the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis, with particular reference to Virginia Woolf's writings on the subject and those of the modern

[1] At time of writing, Margaret Atwood is still a highly active presence in literature, having published seven novels, three short story collections, three children's books, five non-fiction works, a poetry

Anglophone Feminist tradition and *l'écriture féminine*. Finally, it briefly introduces some examples and key issues regarding the Neo-Victorianism evident in both Carter's and Atwood's oeuvres in order to set the context for the more developed discussions in the proceeding chapters.

Carter and Atwood are two highly influential women writers whose first novels were published in the 1960s. They have long been popular authors for study; Lorna Sage notes in her introduction to *Flesh and the Mirror* that she was "told by the President of the British Academy […] that last year alone – 1992-3 – there were more than forty applicants wanting to do doctorates on Carter, making her by far the most fashionable twentieth-century topic" (Sage, 2007b, 21-22); Atwood meanwhile has conferences and journals dedicated to her work.[2] While they are generally viewed as postmodern authors, they were both influenced heavily by the Victorian novel, which they examine and exploit in their works. This thesis examines the extent to which Victorian patterns of narrative, and other forms from the period, are present in their works. It will argue that many of their novels exhibit Neo-Victorian techniques and concerns, even when not exploring Victorian themes; it will however suggest that their novels belong in a different tradition to many other works that are labelled Neo-Victorian.

Victorian Literature and the emergence of Neo-Victorian Studies

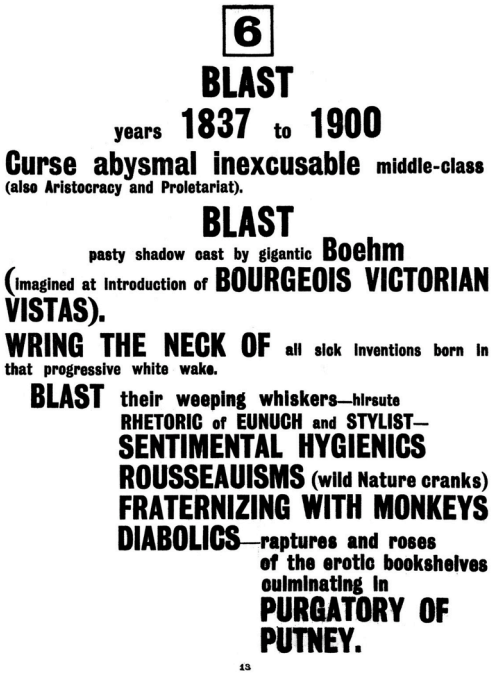
While the novel had existed prior to the Victorian period, the form came to dominate literature by the end of the nineteenth century, with Victorian authors such as Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and the Brontë sisters, among others, remaining widely read and highly influential today. Victorian authors such as these helped change the standing of the novel as an art form, turning it from a perceived inherently poor relation to other forms of literature to something more respectable.[3] This allowed

[2] See 'The Margaret Atwood Society' (http://atwoodsociety.org/).

[3] The Oxford English Dictionary's examples give very different takes on the novel from 1766, 1859 and 1871 which give evidence as to how the format developed:

> **1766** [James] Fordyce *Serm[ons] to [Young] Wom[en]* (1767) I. iv. 148 There seem to me…very few, in the style of Novel, that you can read with safety. **1859** [David] Masson *Brit[ish] Novelists [and their styles]* i. 2 The Novel, at its highest, is a prose Epic. **1871** *Spectator* 22 April 484 England has hardly received the honour she deserves as the birthplace of the modern novel.
>
> Simpson *et al*, 564

early twentieth-century critics such as Bakhtin to proclaim it the supreme form of writing.[4] The word 'Victorian' comes loaded with cultural implications that can often seem distant from the modern world; fiction often challenged this, though not always. The contexts in which nineteenth-century novels were written were often forgotten until recently; for example, contemporary criticism of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* is highly concerned with the question of slavery, initially prompted by Edward Said in his 1994 work *Culture and Imperialism*, though the topic is only briefly touched upon in the novel itself. As a result of the novel's dominance of cultural memory of the Victorian age, it was common in literature written after 1901 to push back against the Victorian novel, and by extension the Victorian. For example, the inaugural issue of *Blast*, a seminal journal of the Modernist movement, offers its opinion in its manifesto:


6

BLAST

years 1837 to 1900

Curse abysmal inexcusable middle-class
(also Aristocracy and Proletariat).

BLAST

pasty shadow cast by gigantic Boehm
(imagined at introduction of BOURGEOIS VICTORIAN VISTAS).

WRING THE NECK OF all sick inventions born in that progressive white wake.

BLAST their weeping whiskers—hirsute
RHETORIC of EUNUCH and STYLIST—
SENTIMENTAL HYGIENICS
ROUSSEAUISMS (wild Nature cranks)
FRATERNIZING WITH MONKEYS
DIABOLICS—raptures and roses
of the erotic bookshelves
culminating in
PURGATORY OF
PUTNEY.

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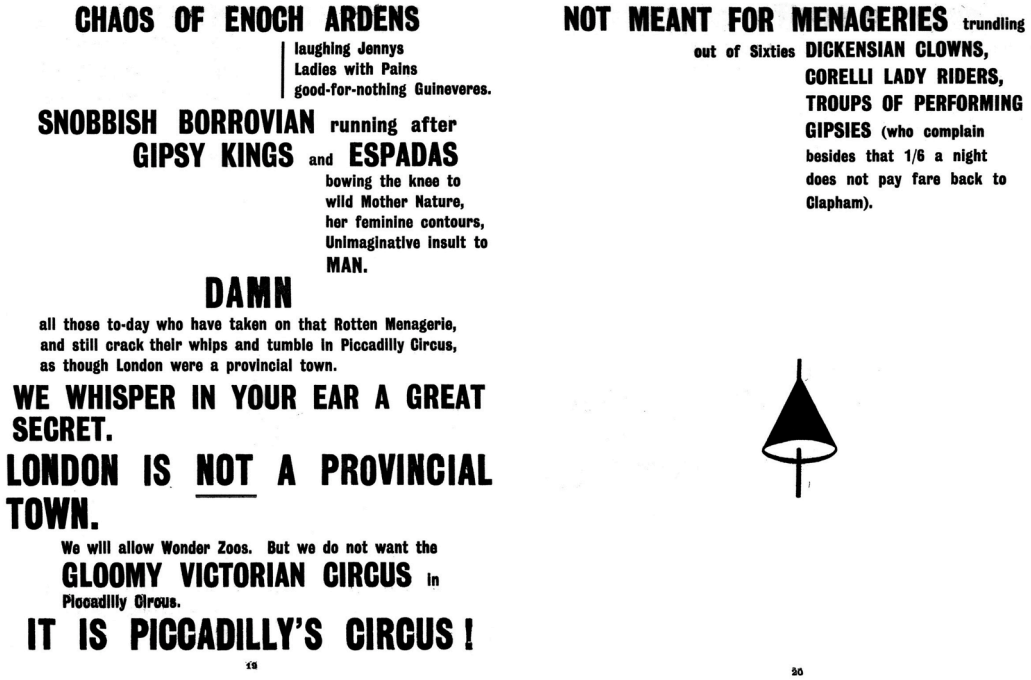
[4] "[The novel is superior to epic poetry as the novel is] plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review." (Bakhtin, 39)



Lewis, 18-20

Blast posits that the Victorian age was one of bourgeois decadence and false sentimentality that does not reflect reality, and as such should be opposed. Modernist anti-Victorianism was accomplished through a variety of means, such as by consciously avoiding the tropes of its literature (as seen in the work of writers such as Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, or James Joyce) or by revisiting or even rewriting them for a new age (as seen in the works of D.H. Lawrence and Evelyn Waugh). The idea of revisiting the Victorian novel is a common trait in 'Neo-Victorian' fiction, defined by Dana Schiller in 1997 as fiction that is "at once characteristic of post-modernism and imbued with a historicity reminiscent of the nineteenth century novel" (Schiller, 538). Neo-Victorian texts often tell a Victorian-themed narrative through the eyes of someone ignored or in some way undesirable during the actual period. In addition to this, the 'Neo-Victorian' also includes works that adopt the forms and tropes of Victorian literature, but forgo the explicit Victoriana usually associated with the age. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn posit that Neo-Victorian fiction "must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" and that it should create "spaces of intellectual exchange, fundamentally concerned […] with the ontological and epistemological roots of the *now* through an historical awareness of *then*" (Heilmann & Llewellyn, 4, emphasis in original); that is, despite the Victorian setting, a Neo-

Victorian novel is self-consciously, if at times obscurely, written from a modern perspective.

Studying the Neo-Victorian *as* Neo-Victorian is a relatively new field of English studies. There have been many novels that have retroactively been deemed Neo-Victorian, for instance Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) are deemed progenitors of the movement, as a result of their metafictional qualities, their intertextual play and their dissection of its subject matter, which have been influential in the development of Neo-Victorian literature; "it was only really with Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) that a conscious articulation of the desire to re-write, re-vision and challenge the nineteenth-century's assumptions and dominance came about" (Heilmann and Llewellyn, 8). The recognition of the Neo-Victorian as a field of study occurred around the turn of the twenty-first century, with the publication of works such as John Kucich's and Dianne F. Sadoff's collection *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (2000), Tatjana Jukić's 'From worlds to words and the other way around: the Victorian inheritance in the postmodern British novel' (2000), and Christian Gutleben's *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Trend and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001). Since then, Neo-Victorian studies has expanded rapidly, with its own literary journal, multiple conferences, and numerous essays and books, including entire series, such as Rodopi's multi part 'Neo-Victorian Series' which examines Neo-Victorianism's overlaps with an array of other topics, such as its use in modern Gothic fiction or family sagas, as well as its relationship with concepts such as postcolonialism and feminist theory. Interest in the movement has exploded over the past thirty years, especially following the publication of *Possession* (1990), A.S. Byatt's award-winning novel about a hidden love affair between two Victorian poets mirrored by a pair of present day scholars who are researching the earlier writers[5].

[5] *Possession*'s far-reaching influence seems not to have escaped attention; it appears to be a partial influence on Angela Carter's mock awards bait novel, a pastiche of various trends in 1980s Booker winners, which amongst other things seems to lampoon *Possession*'s historical period-hopping combination of romance and academia. The introduction to *The Curious Room*, a 1996 collection of her dramatic works, dates this anecdote at three months before her death in February 1992 (*CR*, vii):

> In the midst of her [cancer] treatment, she [Carter] concocted a riposte to the Booker, which expressed her comic contempt for much of the fiction flying around the place. Once more missing from the shortlist for the prize, she had, she noted, failed to get the sympathy vote. So she would write a long novel featuring a philosophy don, his

The resulting literature has itself helped define the movement and solidify its structure, though at the same time giving way to a variety of clichés that have arisen from this:

> Although there are doubtless still many untold tales of the nineteenth century to be written and many of its silenced voices made to speak, […] it must also be admitted that certain neo-Victorian perspectives – the nineteenth-century fallen woman, medium, or homosexual, for instance – have become rather over-used, tired, and hackneyed, to the point where it becomes difficult to view them as embodiments of an ethics of alterity.
>
> Kohlke & Gutleben, 2010, 22-23[6]

Given the breadth of what constitutes the Neo-Victorian, and by extension Neo-Victorian studies, it is important to limit our focus. This dissertation will focus strictly on Atwood and Carter as feminist authors; it will examine their backgrounds, and how these relate to their treatment of the Victorian; and it will also consider the period in which they were writing. Additionally however we have recurring themes to consider, such as gender and identity, with both authors interested in the idea of 'performance', for instance. For the interest of focus, I shall limit what of their *oeuvres* will be looked at mostly to their novels, except where it seems pertinent to discuss other media. On account of Atwood's continued output, I have limited this to her twentieth century works, with the latest novel looked at in detail being 2000's *The Blind Assassin*. This is partly due to her later novels either having a more pronounced speculative fiction element (the *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013), *The Heart Goes Last* (2015)) or being commissions based on pre-eighteenth-century literature (*The Penelopiad* (2005), *Hag-Seed* (2016), based on Homer's *Odyssey* (c.700 BC) and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (c.1610) respectively), but it also serves to limit the two authors to a similar time frame.

We should first consider the nebulous nature of Neo-Victorianism itself however. Most of those who have tried to define the Neo-Victorian agree that not all

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> mistress and time travelling. It would be called 'The Owl of Minerva' – and she knew it would win.
>
> Clapp, 95-96

[6] Kohlke and Gutleben however note that part of the reason for these perspectives' seeming ubiquity is due to the overlap in interest between Neo-Victorian criticism and feminist and queer approaches to literature. They also acknowledge that this is somewhat of a simplification that ignores certain key differences within these criteria; for example, while Neo-Victorian fiction (and commentary thereon) concerning lesbianism, such as that written by Sarah Waters, is quite commonplace, the equivalent for male homosexuality is considerably less so (Kohlke & Gutleben, 2010, 23).

contemporary literature with a Victorian period setting qualifies as Neo-Victorian, else the denotation would be a redundant label for a subsection of historical fiction; as Heilmann and Llewellyn demonstrate, it is generally agreed that Neo-Victorian fiction should have a self-reflexivity that could be lacking from straightforward historical fiction. Citing Heilmann and Llewellyn's famous definition, Elizabeth Ho says that "critics have agreed that a certain meta-critical apparatus or self-reflexivity regarding the adaptation of the Victorians are requirements for a text to be considered Neo-Victorian, setting it apart as '*more* than historical fiction set in the nineteenth century'" (Ho, 4); but the extent that this is considered necessary by critics can vary considerably. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Possession* are both viewed as key texts in the movement's development, but the former is more ostentatious in its use of postmodern forms and narrative self-awareness, often directly critiquing the Victorian age, than the latter which is more subtle in its postmodernity. Byatt's novel furthermore does not wholly take place in the Victorian era; the majority of *Possession* has an unambiguously contemporary setting, even if the concerns of the narrative are inextricably tied to the past, further highlighting the divide between Neo-Victorian fiction and Victorian period pieces, while at the same time underlining its own Neo-Victorian qualities. Arguably then, the Neo-Victorian novel is ultimately concerned with 'our' relationship with the past. Heilmann and Llewellyn also note that "not all narratives published between 1837 and 1901 are Victorian" (Heilmann & Llewellyn, 6); that is, not all fiction from the Victorian period is concerned with 'Victorian' values, at least not as we see them, nor can it be said to adhere to the typical conventions of its time. The reverse is also true; narratives set between those years are not necessarily Neo-Victorian; as Elizabeth Ho comments, this "allows [Heilmann and Llewellyn] a generous amount of slippage" (Ho, 9) so arguments can be made for a wide variety of fiction being 'Neo-Victorian', only some more abstractly than others. *Possession* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are forthcoming in their Victorian influence, but others can be more subtle in how they use it. For instance, the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), and the novel upon which it is loosely based, *Q&A* (2005), have been discussed in the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* as being a rewriting of Dickens' *Oliver Twist*.[7] This variation in the definition and interpretation of Neo-Victorianism is a subject that will be examined further in

[7] See Tanushree Ghosh's '"Yet we believe his triumph might surely be ours": The Dickensian Liberalism of *Slumdog Millionaire*', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 8:1.

later chapters; this thesis will also demonstrate that Victorian texts can be a central influence on novels which are not set in the period 1837-1901.

The explosion of interest in Neo-Victorian writing as a form can perhaps be attributed in part to *Possession*'s considerable success, both commercially and critically (it won the Booker prize in 1990, Byatt's first short-listing for the award, beating shortlist mainstays such as Beryl Bainbridge and Penelope Fitzgerald).[8] However Louisa Hadley posits another reason: in the 1980s, the then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher attempted to associate the Conservative party's values with that of the Victorians; and so Neo-Victorian literature from the '80s onwards should be viewed "within the context of Margaret Thatcher's political appropriation of the Victorians" (Hadley, 3). In other words, Neo-Victorianism is less about the Victorians themselves as it is about the modern perception of them. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben discuss the politics inherent in writing a Neo-Victorian novel:

> 'Doing' history, whether in theoretical or literal terms, is *always* political, since it constitutes a form of public discourse, disseminating implicit ideological judgements as to what is – and is not – worth recording and remembering *as* history in the first place, thereby determining the shape of the past for the future.
>
> Kohlke & Gutleben, 2010, 8

History, whether in academic texts or in the popular conception, is in itself a construct rather than an objective truth. This perception of a link between conservatism and the Victorians did not occur in a vacuum emerging only when Margaret Thatcher declared it so. The idea of the 'Victorian' had persisted for much of the twentieth century, due to how the actual Victorians chose to present themselves in their cultural artefacts. The Victorian novel in some ways functions as their own epitaph; our 'memory' of the Victorians is formed in part by their writings. The Neo-Victorian novel cannot truly recapture Victorianism; as a product of the modern day, it is unlikely to ever provide a wholly accurate image of the past. Indeed Heilmann and Llewellyn describe Neo-Victorian novels as providing "simulations of the 'real'" (Heilmann & Llewellyn, 145). The artifice involved in it is a key to its operation; the

[8] In addition to *Possession*, the 1990 Booker Prize shortlist contained Beryl Bainbridge's and Brian Moore's third nominations, Penelope Fitzgerald's fourth, and Mordecai Richler's second. It also featured the lone shortlisting for Irish author John McGahern. Fitzgerald had previously won in 1979.

Despite being the most frequently shortlisted author (with a total of five nominations), Bainbridge never won the prize. A special award was given posthumously in 2011.

Victorians that exist in popular consciousness are constructs, thus inevitably so should be responses to these constructs. Kohlke and Gutleben however, while acknowledging that the narratives are "essentially performative" (Kohlke & Gutleben, 2010, 28), consider that caution should be taken when addressing these 'secret histories' that make up Neo-Victorian literature: "[f]ictionalising trauma can also lead to sensationalism, exhibitionism, garishness, trivialisation, cynicism, coarseness or obscenity, which raises the delicate question of the ethical value of the very forms of literature" (Kohlke & Gutleben, 2010, 23).

Helen Davies suggests that part of the idea inherent in Neo-Victorian literature is that of talking back, not simply in the sense that it is a response to the Victorian, but taking into account other implications of the phrase, such as that of children and their parents (Davies, 2012, 1). It suggests agency on the part of the figure being spoken to: a child can speak back to a parent, and the parent in turn can rebut the child. However the problem with this line of reasoning, as Davies demonstrates, is that the Victorians are fundamentally unable to reply, assuming that the Victorians that are being spoken back to existed in the first place; they are merely ciphers. In her 2012 work *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction – Passionate Puppets* Davies likens the relationship more to that of ventriloquists and their dummies; "ventriloquism represents the lack of an independent authorial voice; Neo-Victorianism can only produce inferior 'copies' of the Victorian 'original'" (Davies, 2012, 17). As the dummy is under the control of the ventriloquist, their exchange is a charade and so too is the Neo-Victorian author under the control of the Victorians, following their proverbial script; "[i]t is a truism to suggest that neo-Victorian is not 'original' in the sense that it necessarily depends on a prior script of Victorian texts and discourses" (Davies, 2012, 34). This assumes the 'Victorians' spoken about here are themselves real, rather than the aforementioned constructs, born more often than not of literature. Neo-Victorian works surely puppet the Victorians just as much as the other way around, as Davies notes: "at times the 'script' that neo-Victorianism repeats is one of its own invention", resulting in it "'talking to itself' as opposed to entering into any sense of dialogue with the past" (Davies, 2012, 34). This construction seems in danger of falling foul of an idea that Davies later acknowledges: treating the Victorians as a "monolithic signifier of a stable set of cultural values" (Davies, 2012, 95).

A less problematic use of the metaphor Davies posits is in the illustration of power versus powerlessness; Neo-Victorianism popularly gives voice to the disenfranchised, but it is of course not their *actual* voice. Such uses of proverbial ventriloquism can be for good or ill; developing Christine Ferguson's critique of the 2001 film adaptation of *From Hell*,[9] Davies comments that "[t]he most vicious silencing of female murder victims is further perpetrated by patriarchal, misogynist accounts of their stories; the women are figured as puppets to be manipulated and ventriloquized by neo-Victorian discourses" (Davies, 2012, 19). The puppet is not real, but a performer, used to portray what its operator wants. In this context, the puppet's stand-in is acting to the script desired, though whether the script is that of the (Neo-Victorian) author or the (ostensibly Victorian) society, or both, is unclear. This raises the issue of identity politics and the idea of gender-as-performance; the dummy figure only does what it does because it has to, not of free will. Both Carter's and Atwood's *oeuvres* focus heavily on questions of identity and how it is created and controlled. It is thus useful to consider how their novels might be seen to feature the concepts Davies discusses, particularly in relation to Carter, whose work focuses consistently on the idea of artifice.

The Neo-Victorian and the Empire

Elizabeth Ho's 2012 work *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*, as the title may suggest, focuses on Victorian imperialism and colonialism and how they have influenced the world at large, making particular note of the perceived revival of interest in Victoriana in recent years, citing a wide variety of media, including film, comics, games, music, and fashion, in addition to novels. While postcolonialism is not intended to be a primary focus of this thesis, Ho's work provides some useful background insights, especially in its detailed examination of Margaret Atwood's writings on Victorian heritage, both hers and Canada's as a whole, aiding our understanding of the context in which Atwood writes. In considering the disparate nature of the sources in which the influence can be seen, she posits that "neo-Victorianism is a deliberate misreading, reconstruction or staged return to the

[9] Directed by the Hughes Brothers, *From Hell* loosely adapts the comic by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, which was originally serialized between 1989 and 1998. Both the film and the original comic concern the 'Jack the Ripper' murders of 1888.

nineteenth century in and for the present across genres and media" (Ho, 5). This does not seem an unreasonable assertion, especially given Neo-Victorianism's fondness for providing a voice for those who were voiceless in 'real' Victorian society; a level of artifice would be required. If we had access to such voices, these projects would perhaps not be required; as we generally do not however, they must be (re)constructed from what we do know or that we can discern in retrospect about that earlier period.

However Ho's main interest is in the postcolonial applications of Neo-Victorianism. The former colonies' memories of the era are quite different from the homegrown variety. I do not intend to look deeply into the nature of postcolonialism in this thesis, however given the nature of the subject, as well as the inclusion of Atwood, a writer from a commonwealth nation, it seems wise to consider what has been said on the subject, especially what Ho has to say about Canada.

Neo-Victorianism's interest in giving voice to those without one makes it a popular movement to combine with postcolonialism. The Victorian era is, as Ho notes in her introduction, commonly viewed as when the British Empire was at its height.

> I argue that "the Victorian" […] has become a powerful shorthand for empire in the contemporary imagination […]. Regardless of the actual history or the complexities of historiography, we […] remember or misremember the nineteenth century as the apex of the British imperial project. […] I contend that the return to the Victorian in the present offers a highly visible, highly aestheticized code for confronting empire again and anew; it is a site within which the memory of empire can be replayed and played out.
>
> Ho, 5

Following this train of thought, it seems logical for postcolonial writers to use the Neo-Victorian mode to address concerns with the past, especially given the latter's interest in combining its period setting with more modern values. As Ho notes "the study of Neo-Victorianism has been dominated by its literary resonances with the formal aesthetics and political aims of postmodernism" (Ho, 5-6). This does allow a rather large remit of fiction for Ho to consider, which is not without its problems. One example of an issue it presents is in her treatment of the use of Victoriana in Japanese popular culture, in which Kaoru Mori's quite meticulously researched *Eikoku Koi*

Monogatari Emma[10] (2002-2008) and Yana Toboso's Gothic fantasy *Kuroshitsuji*[11] (2006-) appear directly next to each other in the same sentence, despite the connection between them being quite tenuous. On the other side of the argument however, Ho discusses A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), one of the most influential novels in Neo-Victorian studies, and how it addresses (or rather dismisses) any concerns other than those of the 'true' Victorian. Ho posits Shusila Patel, host of a talk show, to be "the novel's only postcolonial character" (Ho, 20),[12] who is dismissed and arguably vilified for daring to question the overall importance of the letters at the centre of the novel's conflict, leaving Professor Blackadder to lament "why do the English always have to apologise?" (Byatt, 1990, 433). As a consequence, Ho claims that "access to post-colonial experience must be mediated by different literatures – for example, the 'modern American literature' and the 'post-colonial English' of Shushila Patel's education – and different phenomenologies of time and memory other than those lovingly celebrated in Byatt's novel" (Ho, 20-21).

Feminist Literary Criticism

Postcolonialism is not however the focus of Byatt's novel. Instead she is more interested in gender, and a large part of the novel ponders the 'worthiness' of the two fictional writers, especially the female half of the pairing, 'Christabel Lamotte', whose work is supposed to be esoteric and hard to understand in form, and (maybe as a result) popular amongst scholars for its style, especially Feminist scholars, as a result of its seemingly uniquely feminine symbolism; "LaMotte wrote this long and very convoluted poem about Melusina's story […] It's an odd affair – tragedy and romance and symbolism rampant all over it, a kind of dream-world full of strange beasts and hidden meanings and a really weird sexuality or sensuality. The feminists

[10] Popularly translated as '*Emma – A Victorian Romance*'; the title in question is a Japanese comic set in the 1890s which was serialised in the alternative anthology '*Gekkan* Comic Beam' (Enterbrain; 1995–). It tells the story of a son of the landed gentry who falls in love with his retired former governess' maid, and the various characters' struggles with duty, class, etc. CMX published an English translated version between 2006 and 2009 as simply *Emma*. A new translation was published by Yen Press between 2015 and 2016.

[11] A Japanese comic serialised in the anthology '*Gekkan* GFantasy' (Square Enix, 1993–). The story concerns a youth who engages a demonic butler's services to find his parents' murderers in exchange for his soul. Yen Press, in 2009, began publishing an English translation under the translated title '*Black Butler*'.

[12] One can argue the semantics of this statement, as the novel's 'villain' is from America, another former colony, and as such, one could argue, 'postcolonial'.

are crazy about it. They say it expresses women's impotent desire" (Byatt, 1990, 33). Byatt has previously been near dismissive of feminist literary criticism and the increased centrality of female poets in the canon:

> Literary scholarship has treated women unfairly for many generations. But some of the attempts by feminist critics to put this right have caused two things to happen that I don't like: one is that a lot of women students read nothing but writing by women – and I think one should always read writing by both sexes – and another is that they are discovering not very good writers and saying these are our forebears, we must say they were very good writers. It is no good, I think, trying to claim that Elizabeth Barrett Browning is anywhere near as good a poet as Robert [Browning]. It distorts our literary judgment to be driven into a corner and to have to do that.
>
> Wachtel, 85

Despite Byatt's reservations, it is clear that the 'rediscovery' of various female poets has had an effect on literary studies, especially regarding the ideas of influence and literary inheritance. The very concept of whether one can define and identify writing as either men's or women's remains a question that looms large over literary criticism. One of the most famous and influential women writers and scholars of the early twentieth century was Virginia Woolf, whose ideas on women's writing are the basis for the influence-based branch of feminist literary criticism spearheaded by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, which I will discuss later in the chapter. Woolf famously commented on the dichotomy between men's and women's writing in her essay *A Room of One's Own*, asking if the written word was developed by men, can women truly use it for their own literary aims. Woolf seems unconvinced as to its usefulness for women's purposes:

> All the great novelists like Thackeray and Dickens and Balzac have written a natural prose, […] taking their own tint without ceasing to be common property. They based it in the sentence that was current at the time. [It] ran something like this perhaps: 'The grandeur of their works was an argument with them, not to stop short, but to proceed. They could have no higher excitement or satisfaction than in the exercise of their art and endless generations of truth and beauty. Success prompts to exertion; and habit facilitates success.' That is a man's sentence; behind it one can see Johnson, Gibbon and the rest.
>
> It was a sentence that was unsuited for a woman's use.
>
> Woolf, 69

While Woolf attempts to define traditional masculine style, her definition of its female counterpart is a lot more vague; she imagines an apparently fictitious novel, 'Life's Adventure', by the equally fictitious 'Mary Carmichael' (purported to be a reference to Marie Stopes's novel, *Love's Creation*, which was published under the same pen name in a time frame similar to that which Woolf describes),[13] and speculates that 'Carmichael' is "afraid of being called 'sentimental' perhaps; or remembers that women's writing has been called flowery and so provides a superfluity of thorns; but until I have read a scene with some care, I cannot be sure whether she is being herself or someone else" (Woolf, 73), thereby commenting on popular impressions of women's writing. If one were to accept this common supposed knowledge that women's writing is 'flowery', we can assume that Woolf either does not believe this or, at the very least, cannot see why this should inherently be a 'bad' thing, thereby challenging perceptions; the self-penned 'example' of a man's sentence she provides is in itself almost impenetrably baroque (the flaw inherent in this argument however is that the sentence *is* self-penned). If women cannot wield the masculine pen with finesse, why therefore should they look to men for guidance? Instead "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (Woolf, 69), and with that Woolf makes one of the most influential remarks in Anglophone feminist criticism; a comment upon which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's highly influential critical work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*, first published in 1979, is founded. Despite some similarities, this branch of criticism is distinct from *l'écriture feminine*, which looks at women's writing as ideally developing entirely separately from more traditional 'phallocentric' writing and which, as another major theory in feminist literary criticism, I will discuss in more detail later in the introduction.

This idea of returning to the writing of earlier women authors can be read in relation to Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* which was first published in 1973, and brought ideas of influence in literature to prominence in literary studies. Bloom argues that "[p]oetic history […] is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to

[13] Woolf claims the novel by 'Mary Carmichael' to have been 'published in this very month of October', that is October 1928, and that it 'seems to be her first book' (Woolf, 72); Michèle Barrett's liner notes in the Penguin Classics edition expound upon Woolf's comment with the following: '*Mary Carmichael*: in 1928 Marie Stopes, (pioneer of birth control) published a novel entitled *Love's Creation* under the name Marie Carmichael' (Woolf, 112). It was Stopes' sole novel and has a vaguely similar scenario to that which Woolf outlines.

clear imaginative space for themselves" (Bloom, 5); all 'strong' poetry is inherently a response to what comes before. The 'anxiety' of the title stems from the poet's concerns regarding originality and the seemingly futile struggle to 'surpass' their precursor;[14] we are often told that "good writers borrow, great writers steal",[15] but "self-appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness, for what strong maker desires the realization that he has failed to create himself[?]" (Bloom, 5). Bloom's work is concerned with poetry, in particular "with strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors" (Bloom, 5), which for Bloom's purposes means poets already safely located in the western canon. As such, his study is inevitably predominantly male, with male poets owing debts to earlier male poets. Bloom has little interest in any discussion of gender (or most other perspectives).

If we were to accept the argument that men's writing is implicitly patrilineal, each new male author's work based on a mimicry and then finally a misreading of the writing of a man who came before, then it perhaps logically follows that women's writing would be matrilineal; but if women's writing has been side-lined in literary history until recently, then the question obviously arises as to who women can look to as their literary parentage. Woolf dismisses a variety of her forebears' literary stylings, reckoning that they, regardless of how impressive their creative minds, committed atrocities with their mishandling of the male sentence, and that they are either too apologetic or aggressive about their gender:

[14] Bloom's major exception is Shakespeare for a variety of reasons, however "[t]he main cause is that Shakespeare's prime precursor was Marlowe, a poet very much smaller than his inheritor" (Bloom, 11); because Shakespeare was, in Bloom's esteem, a better poet than Marlowe, he must therefore have been able to overcome this anxiety with relative ease. This also highlights an issue with Bloom's text; a tendency for subjective opinion to be stated in a manner that can be inferred as it being treated as objective fact.

[15] This idiom has been attributed to assorted individuals, though it appears to be a corruption of a quotation from an essay by T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) on the poetry of Philip Massinger (1583-1640):

> One of the surest of tests [of a poet's skill] is the way in which a poet borrows. **Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal;** bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest.
>
> T.S. Eliot, 105-106, emphasis added

> [The 19th century woman writer] was admitting that she was 'only a woman', or protesting that she was 'as good as a man'. She met that criticism as her temperament dictated, with docility and diffidence, or with anger and emphasis. It does not matter which it was; she was thinking of something other than the thing itself. Down comes her book upon our heads. There was a flaw at the centre of it. […] She had altered her values in deference to the opinion of others.
>
> Woolf, 67

The notion that women writers should look to their metaphorical mothers was a prominent one, predating Woolf, and this is exemplified in it functioning as the principal metaphor of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Aurora Leigh' (1856).[16] This concept was elaborated further in Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's defining work of feminist literary criticism *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Gilbert and Gubar run with the notion even further than Woolf; if a woman is imitating the writing of her literary fore*father*s, then is it truly a woman writing? Furthermore the question remains as to whether the relationship between a writer and their influence is inherently antagonistic. The central argument of this thesis is that this influence, specifically the influence of Victorian writers, can be used for regenerative ends, creating new works seemingly made of 'whole cloth' from previous works, as is evident in the work of Carter and Atwood.

In addition to following on from Woolf, this is also a continuation of Bloom's idea that a poet may be inspired to follow the model of another poet's work, though the resulting work may be derivative and thus 'weaker' than the original, thus the 'anxiety'. Gilbert and Gubar's 'anxiety of authorship' combines this with gender politics; even if women writers overcome the anxiety that Bloom outlines, they also have to struggle with their precursors' approach to gender. This is only so far as men's writing is concerned however; while it seems contradictory to purpose, seeking out foremothers is encouraged:

> Frequently, moreover, she [the female writer] can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.
>
> Gilbert & Gubar, 49, emphasis in original

[16] A long form poem written in blank verse, concerning a lady poet (the eponymous Aurora Leigh) and her quest to become a 'true' artist; a recurring element is her attempts to connect with her late mother whom she never knew.

Gilbert and Gubar suggest that women's writing is a revolt against 'patriarchal literary authority', but this presumes that revolution is the only way to approach said authority, and also that these revolutionary tendencies should be inherent in women's writing. One could easily conclude that the only course of action is to separate women's writing entirely from men's writing, and that women should, in their writing, avoid engaging with the aforementioned 'patriarchal literary authority' against which they are rebelling, which runs contrary to conventional reason. While, as Gilbert and Gubar say, the woman writer's biggest battle is perhaps "not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*" (Gilbert & Gubar, 49, emphasis in original), this could, when taken to its logical conclusion, create the inverse problem. The encouragement of a dichotomy between the literary genders seems ill advised, especially in light of changes in the dynamics of gender relations over the past century.

Elaine Showalter argues for a more expansive women's writing, at the same time as acknowledging the reasons for its occasionally euphemistic nature. Rather than limiting oneself further linguistically, one should expand one's range and embrace it.

> The appropriate task for feminist criticism […] is to concentrate on women's access to […] the ideological and cultural determinants of expression. The problem in not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism, or circumlocution.
>
> Showalter, 255

Indeed Woolf latterly states in 'A Room of One's Own' that the most viable course of action would likely be to ignore gender altogether and not to consciously be a gender, or a single one at least. It should be noted that around the same time as this essay was published, so too was *Orlando*, Woolf's novel which chronicles the exploits of the eponymous hero(ine) across time and gender. As humanity requires the intermingling of men and women to survive, so, posits Woolf, does literature. In the end, if we are to think of literary influence in terms of the family, it will consist of both fathers and mothers; while it may seem innate to follow in the footsteps of the same gendered parent, focusing too heavily on one's own gender is not the key to 'good' writing ("It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-

womanly. […] And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death" (Woolf, 94)). This thesis will show that Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter are influenced by both male and female authors from the Victorian age, both in their novels which directly discuss matters Victorian, as well as books which are seemingly unconnected with the age.

Women, Authorship, and the Novel

Carter and Atwood have each written in various forms and genres – essays, short stories, journalism, among others – but are best known as novelists, and this thesis is concerned largely with their novels. The novel is arguably the spiritual home, so to speak, of women's writing; a view perhaps supported by Woolf who once commented of Jane Austen that "[t]he novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands", as by the time of her writing "all the older forms of literature were […] set" (Woolf, 70). The novel, a relatively young literary form, has had a long history of female authorship. Indeed a work sometimes cited as the first novel,[17] *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), was written by a woman (or possibly, by some scholars' theories, several)[18] in the eleventh century. The earliest incarnations of the form in English during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a great influence from a trio of women, Aphra Behn (c.1640-1689), Delarivier Manley (d.1724), Eliza Haywood (c.1693-1756), who came to be referred to as the 'fair triumvirate of wit',[19] and some of the most enduringly popular works of fiction from the nineteenth century are those of Austen, whose novels are probably more familiar to the modern reader than those of many of her male contemporaries. It is hardly incidental that Austen is but the third literary figure, behind Shakespeare and Dickens, to appear on the Bank of England's notes, such is her importance to the British cultural establishment. George Eliot

[17] Claims of *Genji Monogatari*'s status as the first novel are fairly vague and not unanimous. *Publishers' Weekly* note that it is "[w]idely recognized as the world's first novel" (Murasaki, ii) as do Penguin on the cover of their 2001 translation, however the more conservative tend to include a qualifier, such as it being "the oldest full-length novel in existence" (Murasaki, i) or that it "must be the oldest novel still widely recognised today as a masterpiece" (Tyler, xii).

[18] *Genji Monogatari* is known to be at least partly written by 'Murasaki Shikibu', a lady-in-waiting to the Empress Shōshi, although this is a pseudonym, as was customary for women at the time; her real name has yet to be confirmed. Due to stylistic differences as the novel progresses, it is often theorised that later chapters were written by a different author, the most frequently cited candidate being her daughter (Tyler, xvii-xviii).

[19] The term was coined by Rev. James Sterling in a dedication to Haywood's *Secret Histories, Novels, and Poems* (1724).

discussed women's suitability to the novelistic form in her anonymous 1856 essay in the *Westminster Review*, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', saying that "women can produce novels not only fine, but among the very finest – novels, too, that have a precious speciality, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experience' and that 'no educational restrictions can shut women out from the materials of fiction, and there is no species of art which is so free from rigid requirements" (G. Eliot, 320).

Eliot's idea that "women can produce novels […] among the very finest" of the medium has a defensive inference (possibly as a result of the presumably predominantly male readership of the *Westminster Review*, in which it first appeared, and also as it functions as a manifesto for Eliot's superiority) that can seem problematic; Virginia Woolf's criticism of women's writing, quoted earlier, was the tendency to write as if to say that they were "only women" or "as good as a man" (Woolf, 67), rather than writing honestly and unashamedly. In Woolf's eyes, only Jane Austen and Emily Brontë escape this criticism; they, she says, "wrote as women write, not as men write" (Woolf, 68). As Michèle Barrett comments, it would be short-sighted, given Woolf's *oeuvre*, to assume that her notion of men's and women's writing is so simple as women write in one manner and men in another, but rather that "it is more likely that she would emphasize the different experiences that give rise to what is written" (Barrett, 111). Indeed Woolf passes comment on the isolated nature of these previous women authors, noting that they were "without more experience of life than could enter the house of a respectable clergyman" and that "[h]ad Tolstoi [*sic*] lived at the priory in seclusion […], he could scarcely […] have written *War and Peace*" (Woolf, 64). It would seem that the ability to wield the 'male' pen is less to do with gender *per se* and more to do with the experience(s) of those who wield it.

As we progress through the nineteenth century and towards the present day, avenues once closed to women have been gradually opening up (Woolf herself notes that simple things to her, such as going to a shop for lunch unescorted, would have been unthinkable in Austen's day (Woolf, 62)), and as a result the experiences of women are perhaps not so inherently distinct. The settings of Austen's novels are constrained by the restrictions imposed on women and generally concern country life and estates, with women (and their perspectives) at their narrative centre, perhaps reflective of her own circumstances. Indeed the compliment Woolf pays to Austen is somewhat backhanded, as she posits that "perhaps it was the nature of Jane Austen not to want what she had not" and that "her gift and her circumstance matched each

other perfectly" (Woolf, 62), while doubting the same of Charlotte Brontë, one of her supposed misusers of the male phrase.

The influence of the Brontë sisters on Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter will be one of the main concerns of this thesis, and as such it makes sense to dwell on them in relation to the idea of experience and influence. While novels such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* are frequently discussed in relation to the lives of their authors, the works are not in fact constrained by the restrictions of the Brontës' own lives, but feature broader topics and venture into less quintessentially 'feminine' topics than the novels of, for instance, Austen.[20] The question arises as to what differentiates the writings of Charlotte and Emily, whose best known works are both Gothicised Romances. In the latter's *Wuthering Heights*, the action takes place entirely within the environs of the eponymous estate and also Thrushcross Grange, and any details from the 'world of men' are largely omitted; the history of Heathcliff, such as how he makes his fortune, is left quite vague. In contrast, *Jane Eyre* goes into more detail about how Rochester came to be who he is and why he does what he does.

Woolf nonetheless laments that the gender dichotomy favours men's writing over women's, because the former represents the status quo and is thus more respected by the (overwhelmingly male) establishment. Over fifty years later, at the time of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the notion of women writing 'serious' literature had become a lot more accepted, but the distinction remained, at least for some. Gilbert and Gubar are quite breezy on the matter: "The son of many fathers, today's male writer feels hopelessly belated; the daughter of too few mothers, today's female writer feels that she is helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitively emerging" (Gilbert & Gubar, 50). This appears somewhat dismissive of how literature developed over the course of the century, as this thesis will demonstrate; not simply of male authors who ventured down more experimental routes, but also of women who wrote in response to and who were often inspired by, the nineteenth-century literature that they were inevitably brought up on. The twentieth century was a time of great change for the novel; the Modernists famously reacted to the Victorian novel by creating a form that was its conscious antithesis; the sweeping *bildungsroman*

[20] Curiously, Charlotte Brontë's critique, and subsequent refusal to allow republication of, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), written by her late sister, Anne, during the former's lifetime was that Anne was lacking the life experience to write about the novel's subject matter (A. Brontë, viii). It is often presumed that an inspiration for said topic was their brother's descent into alcoholism (A. Brontë, xxviii-xxix).

replaced with smaller, more intimate portraits of the characters' lives. For Modernists, a person's life is surely not so devoid of consequence as for the entirety to be compressed into a few hundred pages (see for example, the minutiae of a single day in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Marcel Proust's seven volume *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) (1913-1927)). While the more idiosyncratic styles of Woolf, Proust and Joyce were eventually overtaken by a more traditionally structured variety exhibited by authors such as Evelyn Waugh, the shift towards a more intimate focus, both in terms of psychology and worldliness, endured.

Gender and the Canon in the Later Twentieth Century

The developments that 'modern' literature took over the twentieth century are very preoccupied with the efforts of men. Just as the pre-1900 literary canon was, and still is, dominated by works of white men, it could easily be argued that so too are the canons of the new literary movements that arose in the latter half of the twentieth century. Major mid-century literary groups and movements such as the Beats in America and the 'Angry Young Men' in Britain tended to differentiate themselves further from the 'traditional' mould of fiction, either by embracing counterculture in the case of the former, whose work included pieces such as Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* (1957) and William S. Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* (1959), or gritty realism in the case of the latter, most famously seen in the play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) by John Osborne. The two aforementioned groups' work was deemed by some contemporary audiences to be a radical departure from existing literature[21], and had a

[21] Many contemporary reviews of *Look Back in Anger* seem filled with disdain, with critics such as Ivor Brown, reviewing the play for the BBC, claiming that he "felt angry because it wasted [his] time" and Milton Shulman, for the Evening Standard, commenting that "[n]othing is so comforting to the young as the opportunity to feel sorry for themselves" (Ellis, 2003). Despite its mostly vitriolic reception, it was defended most famously by Kenneth Tynan, who argued that many critics were acting under false assumption that the audience is supposed to wholly sympathise with the play's lead; "Jimmy is simply and abundantly alive; that rarest of dramatic phenomena, the act of original creation, has taken place; and those who carp were better silent"; and praised it for portraying attitudes that were then utterly alien to the stage.

> All the qualities are there, qualities one had despaired of ever seeing on the stage - the drift towards anarchy, the instinctive leftishness, the automatic rejection of 'official' attitudes, the surrealist sense of humour […], the casual promiscuity, the sense of lacking a crusade worth fighting for and, underlying all these, the determination that no one who does shall go unmourned.
>
> Tynan, 1956

far-reaching influence on the landscape; their disaffection acting as a precursor to postmodernism. In this light, it seems short sighted to label men's fiction as stagnant and old fashioned, as Gilbert and Gubar did; these groups were predominantly male, or at least were to observers. Suffice to say, there were women taking part in these movements; the style associated with the 'angry young men' is evident in *A Taste of Honey* by Shelagh Delaney, one of the more enduringly popular British plays of the 1950s. However even the more major women of the Beat movement, such as Joyce Johnson and Joanne Kyger, tend to be relegated to footnote or (perhaps worse) 'muse' status. While men's writing was not, in fact, stagnant, these new movements still saw women marginalized.

Feminist Rewriting

On the other side of Gilbert's and Gubar's claim that women's writing is new and daring compared to its old fashioned masculine counterpart, there existed (and indeed *exist*) women writers who directly engage with their Victorian inheritance. The classic example might be the proverbial afterlife of *Jane Eyre*, which has proven to have an enduring popularity and to be an inspiration for many women writers. Angela Carter noted the novel's reach, declaring it amongst the "enormously influential, sub-literary texts" that "discussed in images those aspects for which words could not, yet, be found" (*ED*, 162). She goes on to compare its narrative to legend in its ubiquity:

> *Jane Eyre* has this quality of legend and, like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, has proved infinitely translatable into other media: stage, screen, radio. As a child, I first encountered *Jane Eyre* in a comic-strip version. The text easily secretes other versions of itself.
>
> *ED*, 162-163

This connects with the idea of women seeking female literary forebears, whether consciously or unconsciously, although Charlotte Brontë might have to be forgiven for writing as a man both figuratively (according to Woolf) and literally (in the guise of 'Currer Bell', albeit in the supposed autobiography of a female character). Carter

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Meanwhile, regarding the Beat Generation, Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' (1956) and William S. Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch*, two seminal works of the movement, both found themselves at the centre of obscenity trials (Judson, 1997).

claims that certain texts, including Brontë's, gain a mythic status that endures beyond themselves, and capture the imagination in some way that makes them easy to see and to adapt. This technique of rewriting is a standard reference point within women's writing (as suggested, in fact, by the title of Gilbert's and Gubar's work). Particularly famous examples include Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), which opens rather than ends with the heroine's marriage to the wealthy widower only for her to be haunted by the presence of his eponymous late first wife, and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which follows a thinly veiled first Mrs Rochester and her descent into madness at the hand of her husband; these two also represent two different forms of response, with the former being based on the framework of Brontë's book but avoiding direct reference and the latter doing the precise opposite. Carter had her own proposed rendition of *Jane Eyre* that she was working on at the time of her death, a summary of which is presented in Susanna Clapp's *A Card From Angela Carter* and Edmund Gordon's *The Invention of Angela Carter*. Titled 'Adela: A Romance', it starts with the popular interpretation that Mr Rochester's ward, Adèle (here 'Adela'), is in fact his illegitimate child; from here, it follows the girl through adolescence. Having been taught "many things" (Clapp, 29) by her finishing school's headmistress, Adela determines to seduce her guardian, unaware of the true nature of their relationship. She is caught in the act by Jane, and so flees to France to find her estranged mother. The two get caught up in assorted historical events; her mother becomes a heroine of the Communards and finds herself a martyr, and Adela is imprisoned. Jane manages to rescue her and takes her home, where Rochester acknowledges their kinship, and Adela declares she would rather be known as her mother's daughter; it is ambiguous from the summary whether she's referring to her step-mother or her birth mother (or more likely both). Carter admitted to playing tricks with the period setting, "but, then it *is* a novel…" (Clapp, 29-30).

While we cannot know how the finished 'Adela' might have been (though she reportedly told her editor that it would be "around 50,000 words" and "very sulphurous and over-the-top, more in the style of "The Bloody Chamber" [sic] but with some laughs" (Gordon, 404), from just this much we can get a basic idea of how Carter engages with *Jane Eyre* and the period in general. Much like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the source is kept somewhat at arm's length; its influence is obvious, but the

names and times are played with[22]. However the tale outlined here is still very much a piece of narrative fiction, quite different from Rhys' more fragmented, Modernist take on Brontë's story, with fewer apparent ambiguities.

Not restricted to female authors, there are also examples of women rewriting male-penned literature of the era. An infamous example is the notorious *L'Histoire d'O.* (*The Story of O.*), first published in 1954 pseudonymously, over which debate raged regarding the gender of its author. Angela Carter wrote of it her 1975 essay 'Lorenzo the Closet Queen':

> A piece of comment I once read about that monstrous book, *The Story of C.* [*sic*], suggested that only a woman could have written it because of some curious metaphor about, I think, curlers, somewhere in the book. The commentators [*sic*], a French intellectual, probably a member of the Académie Française and God knows what else besides, said this sartorial detail could only have been documented 'by a woman', because it was uniquely revelatory of a woman's eye.
>
> Such, then, was the opinion of this Frenchman, whose name I forget;[23] but it seemed to me that *The Story of O.* bore all the stigmata of male consciousness, not least in that details about clothes are just the sort of thing a man would put into a book if he wanted the book to read as

[22] As noted, the main character of Carter's proposed novel is called 'Adela' rather than the 'Adèle' of the original *Jane Eyre*, much as *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s heroine is introduced as 'Antoinette Cosway' rather than 'Bertha Mason'.

Jane Eyre is implicitly set during the reign of George III; in the opening of volume I chapter XI, it is noted that the inn in which Jane stays has portraits of the aforementioned king and 'the Prince of Wales' on its walls (C. Brontë, 93). While we could assume the latter portrait is of the future Edward VII (b.1841, seven years before the novel's original publication), given its accompanying portrait, it seems more likely that it would be of George IV, the Prince Regent. George III's reign ended in January 1820, thereby suggesting that the events of the novel take place before then. *Wide Sargasso Sea* opens with a discussion of the reportedly recent Slavery Abolition Act 1833, which came into effect the following year. A later section of the novel mentions it being 1839 (Rhys, 29). The references to the Paris communes in Carter's synopsis place *Adela* in 1871.

[23] The French critic is presumably Jean Paulhan, who has an essay on the work which is appended to the book. The offending section is, one assumes, the following:

> I have very little doubt but that you [the author] are a woman. What makes me sure is not so much the details you delight in employing – green satin dresses, wasp-waist bodices, multiple petticoats, a ringlet of hair caught in a curler – as this: upon the same day René abandons her to further torments, O keeps her wits sufficiently about her to observe that her lover's slippers have got scuffed and frayed, that a new pair must be bought for him. Such a thing, such a detail seems almost unimaginable to me – a man would never have fancied such a thing. Would not at any rate have dared mention it.
>
> Paulhan, 271-272

However, despite the implications of the essay, Paulhan was well aware of the author's gender, being as he was the lover for whom the story was written, as well as the person who encouraged her to have it published.

> though it had been written by a woman. Cleland uses much the same device in *Fanny Hill*.
>
> *NS*, 207-208

In 1994, the author of *The Story of O.* revealed her true identity in an interview and turned out indeed to be a woman, the French journalist and woman of letters Dominique Aury, who wrote it when challenged by her lover that no woman could write in the style of the Marquis de Sade.[24] Given her impassioned defence of De Sade, Angela Carter's above comments become somewhat ironic in retrospect. At the same time however, she says "[a]ll the same, many women writers do themselves pretend to be female impersonators; look at Jean Rhys and Edna O'Brien, whose scars glorify the sex that wounded them" (*NS*, 208). Carter herself, early in her career, tended to do the opposite. As I will discuss, many of her early novels feature a male focal character; not necessarily as a first person narrator, but always at the centre of the piece, invariably blithely contributing to the suffering of others.

Écriture Féminine

Over the course of the twentieth century, the world developed in ways it is doubtful earlier women writers could have predicted. With the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's crucial feminist text, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*), in 1949, the so-called 'second wave' of feminism came to the forefront in the latter half of the century. In the context of literature, this resulted in many more novels and stories by women that discuss not only the place of women in the world, but also the rejection of the places ascribed to them. It also helped lead to the foundations of modern feminist literary criticism, which can broadly be divided into the 'French'[25] and Anglophone traditions. The writings of Francophone critics were influential in the development of

[24] "By the early 1950s, Aury was worried that [Paulhan's] attention might be shifting. Well aware of his liking for erotic literature (he had written a preface to de Sade's 120 Days of Sodom), she said she thought she could do something similar. Paulhan was dismissive: erotica wasn't a thing women were capable of. In the footage, licensed by Rapaport to show in her documentary, she explained: 'I wrote it alone, for him, to interest him, to please him, to occupy him. I wasn't young, nor particularly pretty. I needed something which might interest a man like him.'" (Bedell, 2004)

[25] As Susan Watkins notes in her introduction to the subject, 'French' is a questionable label for this brand of feminist literary criticism for a variety of reasons. While their critiques are written in French, none of the three main influential critics in its development (Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva) are natively French, and their work is "not in anyway representative of mainstream feminist political activity or thinking in France" (Watkins, 96).

l'Écriture Féminine,[26] which has a great interest in language and its valorisation of masculinity. This is not dissimilar to Woolf's comments regarding masculine writing and the varying responses to it from women writers quoted earlier. Importantly, and in distinction to the Anglo-American approach, *écriture féminine* aligns its concept of women's writing with that of the body: Hélène Cixous wrote in her defining 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975): "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal" (Cixous, 875). If the writing that it's in opposition to is phallocentric, i.e. concerned with the male anatomy (or a specific part thereof; this is in the Freudian sense, the phallus in question is a symbol of masculine power and thought); women's writing would in that case be concerned with the female anatomy, or rather what it symbolises and represents. In the case of Cixous, Susan Watkins posits that "[h]er strategy is to deploy stereotypically feminine imagery repetitiously and with humour so that it acquires subversive qualities: the subversive qualities inherent in the instability of language itself" (Watkins, 101).

The key defining texts of the movement make heavy use of yonic symbolism in its description, which has left some with the impression that *l'écriture féminine* is based in ideas of gender essentialism; Watkins notes that many of the examples of "subversive women's writing" referenced by Cixous and Julia Kristeva in their essays on the subject are in fact written by men, such as Jean Genet, the Marquis de Sade, and Samuel Beckett, a fact that seemingly appears to her as contradictory and problematic. However the basis of Cixous' *l'écriture féminine* relies on the very notion of gender as construct, with a focus on "pre-Oedipal qualities of voice, rhythm, touch, when child and mother were one" (P. Morris, 133); that is, at one point in time, male and female were entirely the same, and as such acts as a common reference point for both men and women. It is on this the *l'écriture féminine* is based, and thus it is achievable by both men and women. A fundamental part of the concept is that the 'masculine' plane of thought is too a construct, and as such is not inextricably linked to men. To wit, *l'écriture féminine* is a 'natural' approach to women's writing, and is fundamentally inherent, though not necessarily tapped, in all writers. Pam Morris comments: "[t]he refusal of unitary meaning or of single identity, the attempt to bring

[26] Literally 'feminine writing'.

language close to the bodily materiality of emotion and to capture in syntax the rhythm of libidinal drive would be seen by Cixous, I think, as a part of feminine writing practice" (P. Morris, 123). This stands distinct from the model that gained traction in the Anglophone sphere which suggests that humanity does not have an inbuilt reference point for women's writing and so women must develop their own literary history by looking to the past.

If we are to look at how Carter and Atwood have been influenced by their Victorian forebears, the 'nurture model' appears a more appropriate avenue for study. However, there are points in this investigation when it seems most appropriate to consider the text in light of *l'écriture féminine*, particularly in regard to Carter and *Nights at the Circus*. This approach to women's writing may be most useful in relation to questions of style, for instance, while the heritage approach may be more useful when considering how works of earlier writers and periods may have been adapted.

Victorian Influence in Post 1960

Given the prevalence of the Victorians in the literary canon, it is perhaps inevitable that influences would seep even into works that are supposedly modern: A.S. Byatt and Margaret Drabble wear the influence of the Victorians on their sleeves even if their works are often removed in time and space from the Victorian era, while authors such as Sarah Waters use the Victorian era to examine issues, and groups of people, which existed at the time but which were barely, if ever, discussed in the literature of the period. This return to more formally structured literature is not simply a recreation. The social changes in the 1960s and 1970s were at odds with traditionally held cultural mores, and in this instance in particular, the second wave of feminism challenged the still lingering Victorian 'ideal' of a woman (of course, it isn't strictly fair to blame the Victorians entirely for that image, it having its roots in earlier periods of European history). Margaret Drabble reflected in 2011 on the changes that were taking place:

> In terms of the literary history, I was becoming aware in the 1960s that the woman's novel, always strong in England, was moving in new directions, driven by a changing educational system and changing opportunities. The courtship novel of Fanny Burney and Jane Austen was giving way to the post-courtship novel of marital conflict and professional ambitions. Feminist criticism was slowly bringing our attention to the fact that nearly all the great women writers of the past were childless. Elizabeth Gaskell […] was an exception, and so was the undervalued Mary Shelley. […] My contemporaries and I were working in a strong female tradition, but in an age of double values and contradictory expectations, and you can see the stress in Sylvia Plath, Doris Lessing, Edna O'Brien and Nell Dunn, whose work I was discovering at this time – though I hadn't read any of them when I first embarked on writing fiction. My living role models then were Angus Wilson and Saul Bellow.
>
> Drabble, 2011

Women were, and perhaps still are, stifled by the dichotomy between liberation and tradition. The essence of Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965) is in the heroine's failure to conform to either, or rather her success in conforming to neither. Free love was essentially a man's game, and women were expected to put up with their desires as they had always done; damn the consequences.

Thesis Overview

Following this introduction, the chapters in the initial part of the dissertation will examine the works of Margaret Atwood in a largely chronological order, starting with her second published novel, *Surfacing*, and culminating in *The Blind Assassin* for which she won the Booker Prize in 2000. Certain parts of Atwood's oeuvre are popular areas of study in Neo-Victorian criticism; not least, *Alias Grace*, thanks to its explicitly Victorian setting and focus on marginal figures. Contending however that there is more Victorian influence present in her work than might first appear, I intend to examine the tropes at play in her other novels as well, such as the Gothic patterning of *Lady Oracle* or the family saga of *The Blind Assassin*, and how Atwood uses the ideas of Victorian inheritance to examine the modern world. Atwood's flexibility as an author allows her to explore a wide variety of themes, but I shall look at what ties them together, as well as her relationship with Canadian identity and its intrinsic ties to Victoria's empire.

The chapters in the second part of this thesis will undertake a similar treatment of Angela Carter's work; starting with the urban fantasy of *The Magic Toyshop*, following through to the bizarre family saga of her final completed novel, *Wise Children*; and looking at the apparent influence of the Victorian on her writing. This will help in charting the development of her work. Her later works, especially *Nights at the Circus*, have been embraced by Neo-Victorian theorists on account of their use of period setting to tell stories about people of the sort typically overlooked by Victorian literature. However, her early work also makes active use of the motifs of Victoriana, even without the explicit setting, especially those of the Gothic, with their oppressive atmosphere and lingering sense of menace and madness (while the Gothic as a literary style predates the Victorian period, dating as it does to the 1700s, arguably the tropes of the movement became more mainstream and widespread over the course of the nineteenth century). The three novels that have come to be known as her 'Bristol trilogy' forgo any of the implicit or explicit supernatural elements typically associated with her work, instead focusing on the 1960s 'provincial bohemia' she identified with amidst the crumbling (both figurative and literal) nineteenth-century structures, while later work manages to work these anxieties into a more fantastical framework.

1. Margaret Atwood and the Victorians

Introduction: Margaret Atwood and Canadian History

It is not only British novels that interact directly with their nineteenth-century forebears. As we have already seen in my brief discussion of Elizabeth Ho's work, Victorian (and earlier) attitudes had far reaching consequences globally, and so too did the literature of the time. Britain exported itself (or imposed itself) across the globe and in places such as Oceania and the Americas did not so much subjugate the local populace as displace it. Despite the withdrawal of British rule, former colonies such as Australia and New Zealand, and the United States and Canada, are still ultimately ruled by the colonisers rather than those who were colonised, unlike places such as India, where rule returned to the indigenous populations (or rather their descendants). This ultimately created an identity crisis for these places; the indigenous culture is alien, but the colonial culture is detached. This section of my thesis will identify the presence of Victorian literature and culture in selected novels by Margaret Atwood, focusing not only on their potentially generative possibilities but also on their presence as representations of an age which is, in Canadian memory, still largely associated with colonial power.

Exploring the multiple identities of former colonial countries is one of the recurring themes of postcolonial fiction. As Elizabeth Ho points out, this is borne largely of the Victorian age, in popular consciousness if not actuality:

> "[T]he Victorian" […] has become a powerful shorthand for empire in the contemporary imagination […]. Regardless of the actual history or the complexities of historiography, we […] remember or misremember the nineteenth century as the apex of the British imperial project.
>
> Ho, 5

History is more malleable than one might assume; Elodie Rousselot highlights Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in this regard: "[t]he narrative quality of history, and the degree of manipulation involved in the history writing process, are vividly depicted throughout the novel, especially in the 'Historical Notes' at the end of the narrative, where historians end up questioning the authenticity of the manuscript entitled 'The Handmaid's Tale' (that is, the very narrative of the novel)" (Rousselot,

8). As a result of these memories (or 'memories') however, the Victorian holds an odd mystique not simply in Britain, but across much of the world; with the empire came the culture, and with that the literature. It intermingled with the indigenous cultures in places such as India and Hong Kong; yet in places such as Canada, the European heritage is more dominant, leading to the question of how they are distinct as entities. Rousselot posits that "Canada's postcolonial status is [an] important concern in Atwood's work, one which greatly affected her during her formative years" (Rousselot, 7).

> [Atwood's] contribution to the establishment of a national consciousness for Canada is visible in her attempt to address the specificity of Canadian experience and the importance of the "local" (in terms of place and people) in the definition of that experience. This has also meant resisting the cultural hierarchy in place at the time and its dismissal of the idea of "Canadian literature". For these reasons, Atwood has often been seen as a nationalist author, and she has spoken on numerous occasions in the defence of Canada's values in the face of a "post-imperialist" Great Britain and "neo-imperialist" America.
>
> Rousselot, 7-8

Canada is caught between its historical connection to Europe and its geographical connection to the United States of America, leading to debate as to its own identity. The question of culture is one that seems to have lingered in the Canadian consciousness for a long time, and is one that never seems to be closer to an answer; we could jest that the quest for a Canadian identity is an identity unto itself. Margaret Atwood discusses the issue at length in *Strange Things* (1995), a collection of lectures on the tropes of Canadian literature she gave in Oxford the early 1990s. She defends her choices of topic in the introduction:

> I was interviewed by a young man from Canada who was studying at Oxford. He told me that he had a friend – also Canadian – who was concerned about the subject-matter I was discussing. This friend felt that I should not be talking about the North, or the wilderness, or snow, or bears, or cannibalism, or any of that. He felt that these were things of the past, and that I would give the English the wrong idea about how most Canadians were spending their time these days. What then – I asked – did this young man think I should be discussing? 'The literature of urban life,' was the reply. I said I thought that the English had quite a lot of urban life themselves, and that they didn't need to hear about it from me. I failed to say that the right idea could often be right from a sociological point of view, but was not necessarily right from a literary one. Given the choice

> between a morning spent in the doughnut shop and a little cannibalism, which would you take – to read about, that is? Alice Munro of course could handily work in both – but as a rule?
>
> *ST*, 5

The things that signify Canada and seem to make it unique are potential sources of embarrassment, but one assumes that these concepts came from somewhere, and indeed in recent years they have been officially celebrated in a semi-ironic manner, for instance in the closing ceremony of the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. The mystery of what exactly an identity *is* is one with which Atwood's literature seems especially occupied.

The identity crisis of Canada arguably has its roots in the Victorian period; it has the influence of its parent country (or perhaps countries, given the presence of Quebec), but is disconnected from them, quite literally, by an ocean. The competing influence has long been the United States to the south, which given its proximity has a more immediate pull, even if not always desired.

Like so much however, colonialism was essentially a man's game, with women pulled along by their husbands or fathers. The romantic allure of the North would, one assumes, generally be lost on these women, for whom it may have instead represented isolation and further hardship, and thus had to attempt to make the best of a bad situation. Given the limited opportunities historically available to women, it would seem it was hard to romanticise the life of a female settler. Susanna Moodie, the proverbial *grande dame* of Canadian fiction,[27] is a recurring figure in Atwood's work. As Elizabeth Ho notes:

> Atwood writes that Moodie "claims to be an ardent Canadian patriot while all the time she is standing back from the country and criticizing it as though she were a detached observer, a stranger". This pathological sense of belonging, Atwood continues, is "perhaps…the way we still live;" and she suggests that the postcolonial Anglo-Canadian experience is the "paranoid schizophrenia" which comes from the belief that "we are all immigrants to this place even if we are born here".
>
> Ho, 87

[27] Susanna Moodie (1803-1885) was an English author who emigrated with her family to Canada in the 1830s, where she wrote assorted novels and memoirs.

While Atwood frequently seems quite critical of Moodie, the nineteenth-century forebear nonetheless inhabits a peculiar place in her development, as well as that of Canada. Moodie underwent all the (perhaps clichéd) hardships of settlement, and resisted the stereotypical 'allures' of Canada, and yet she became irrevocably linked to the country despite seeming in many ways to despise it. She eventually left the countryside in favour of the city, but what happened in the former lingered on in her memory and in her written works.

Elodie Rousselot comments on Atwood's apparent dissatisfaction with Moodie's work, the novelist apparently finding that "[t]he prose was discursive and ornamental and the books had little shape" (Rousselot, 39). However, as Rousselot argues, this enables Atwood to act as a mirror to Moodie:

> Atwood shows the necessity of celebrating Canada on its own terms, rather than having it judged on European criteria, as she feels Moodie did in the past. For that purpose, she places a strong emphasis on what she recognises to be Canadian specifities, such as the important role played by the wilderness, Canadians' perpetual immigrant status, and the complex relations between Canada's diverse ethnic groups.
>
> Rousselot, 41

That isn't to say that Atwood does not engage with Canada's relationship with Europe; however in doing so she does not set up 'European-ness' as being the standard against which Canadian culture should be judged. It is perhaps for this reason that Atwood, when engaging directly with the past, tends not to rewrite previous fictions *per se*, with the exception of *The Penelopiad* and *Hag-Seed*,[28] but aside from these commissioned, short rewrites, in her fiction she prefers to rewrite fact, or at least non-fiction. Rather than rewriting Moodie's work, for example, she rewrites her life (and death, and beyond) in the form of poetry in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), a rewriting of a nineteenth-century woman *with* a voice in contrast to the more common Neo-Victorian voicing of the previously voiceless. Fact and mythology become borderline indistinguishable in time; perhaps cutting out the middle man and mythologizing the past regardless is one way to develop a cultural

[28] *The Penelopiad* is a 2005 novel written by Atwood as part of Canongate's 'Myth Series'; a range comprising of classical myths rewritten by contemporary authors. *The Penelopiad* concerns the life of Penelope, wife of Odysseus, and how events in Ithaca transpired during her husband's absence in *the Iliad* and *Odyssey*. *Hag-Seed* is a 2016 novel, set in the present day and with the Prospero figure now a wronged theatre director, written for a Hogarth Press series of rewritings of Shakespeare for the four-hundredth anniversary of the playwright's death.

history, and if the past is inherently inescapable then perhaps rewriting it is the best defence. Atwood does comment in *Strange Things* (1995) on Canadians' propensity for self-delusion, typified by the Franklin expedition which was quickly rewritten to gloss over the more mercenary reasons for its partaking.[29] If the exploits of men can be mythologized then doing the same to women is clearly of political significance. Franklin himself disappeared and his remains are, at time of writing, yet to be found, contributing further to the mystique surrounding him and to the vague terror of the 'Great Northern' aspect of Canadian identity. As Atwood writes:

> As we know from other stories of mysterious vanishings at sea, those vanished have an odd quality of continued existence. Because Franklin was never really 'found', he continues to live on as a haunting presence; certainly in Canadian literature.
>
> *ST*, 19

However, 'ghosts' of the sort spoken of here haunt Atwood's work, and perhaps Canada itself, more generally. From a European mindset, the stranger and more sordid elements of Canadian history somehow lend themselves well to a mythology, but one that serves to create a further disconnect between it and Europe. The relationship between Canada and Britain, as mentioned earlier, is somewhat peculiar among former parts of the empire in that it is one of but a handful where the descendants of European colonisers are the group in power rather than the disenfranchised original inhabitants. This obviously should not be taken as Canada and other former settlement colonies not being 'postcolonial'; they have developed beyond simply being colonies of the British; however given their placement as 'civilised' white Europeans (or perhaps 'Europeans'), their antecedents were spared the bulk of the cruelties and indignities that many countries' citizens faced at the hands of imperialism. Indeed, Canada was depicted in some nineteenth-century novels as something akin to a promised land – see, for instance, the conclusion of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, where the titular character emigrates to Canada with the former factory worker, Jem

[29] The intent of the Franklin expedition was to find the 'Northwest Passage', a potential shipping route over the north of Canada to connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, which would be more efficient than having to detour south around Argentina. Roald Amundsen made the first successful sailing of the passage between 1903 and 1906, however the area's often shallow waters and the seasonal inconsistency of the ice floe made the route he took too impractical to be a major shipping route. With the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914, the search for a shipping route became largely moot, although the thinning of the ice pack in recent times has once again opened its viability to question.

Wilson, and there the newlyweds discover the space and happiness so lacking in their native Manchester, and the narrator shares in their newfound joy:

> I see a long, low, wooden house, with room enough and to spare. The old primeval trees are felled and gone for many a mile around; one alone remains to overshadow the gable-end of the cottage. There is a garden around the dwelling, and far beyond that stretches an orchard. The glory of an Indian summer is over all, making the heart leap at the sight of its gorgeous beauty.
>
> Gaskell, Chap.XXXVIII

This is just one of many instances (as Edward Said, among others, has noted) of British nineteenth-century fiction depicting the colonies as affording hope and regeneration, and (maybe as a result) ignoring the suffering of the indigenous population. As Atwood herself acknowledges, she is unqualified to talk with authority about the experience of the First Nations people, as a middle-class white woman, so her writing does not fall quite so comfortably into what would typically be associated with postcolonial fiction. The historic disenfranchisement of women is after all quite different from the disenfranchisement based on race, and putting words into the mouths of people of the past is a fraught enough enterprise without factoring in further deviations from one's own experience.

It is difficult however to point to literary comparisons from countries with similar histories of colonial inheritance; the concept of the white man being out of place, torn between the new and old worlds, seems to be a peculiarly Canadian phenomenon, despite not being unique in its status as a postcolonial country born from European settlement (indeed such history is shared by fellow Commonwealth nations, Australia and New Zealand, as well as Canada's nearest neighbour, the United States). That is not to say that such themes are unheard of in other postcolonial literatures; Australian Gothic, for example, invariably contrasts the (post)colonial society with the natural world. Consider Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), wherein the European has been forcibly stamped onto the Australian bush:

> Why this particular stretch of flat sparsely wooded country, a few miles out of the village of Macedon crouching at the foot of the mount, had been selected as a suitable building site, nobody will ever know. The insignificant creek that meandered in a series of shallow pools down the

> slope at the rear of the then acre property offered little inducement as a setting for an Italianate mansion; not the occasional glimpses, through a screen of stringy-barked eucalyptus, of the misty summit of Mount Macedon rising to the east on the opposite side of the road. However, built it was, and of solid Castlemaine stone, to withstand the ravages of time.
>
> Lindsay, 2

However perhaps the easiest comparison for illustrating the postcolonials torn between the old and new worlds would be to return to Jean Rhys, whose characters typically share her own colonial background and as such are separate from the Europeans surrounding them, although this comparison presents difficulties; colonialism for Rhys, as a Dominican Creole, has far different connotations to those evident in Canada. The increased settlement of Canada in the nineteenth century is rooted in the displacement of various groups, such as the Irish during the famine or the Scots following the Highland Clearances. It was seen as a convenient and promising new location in contrast to the plantations of the West Indies. Given the comparative lateness of the diaspora, the visibility of the Victorian in Canadian literature should perhaps not be too great a surprise, even if the national trauma appears quite the inverse of what might be expected. Canada abandoned, so to speak, by its proverbial mother rather than having one foisted upon it. Such a metaphor can be extended to the odd nature of its identity with it partly wishing to embrace its European origins and partly wishing to define itself as entirely separate. Modern Canada was born of empire, and its statehood was created under the reign of Victoria; thus the Victorians are its main association with its European ancestry.[30] As Elizabeth Ho notes:

> [T]he return to the Victorian in the present offers a highly visible, highly aestheticized code for confronting empire again and anew; it is a site within which the memory of empire can be replayed and played out.
>
> Ho, 5

[30] The queen herself stars in a famous apocryphal story of the nation's early days, which contends that the then minor settlement of Ottawa was declared the capital of the newly minted dominion by her sticking a pin into the map at random, as opposed to the more prosaic reason of it being approximately half way between Toronto and Québec City, the respective capitals of English and French Canada.

The crux of much of Atwood's work is that the past shapes who we are, what we do, how we react; this is the case not just for the individual, but also for culture.

> I think that's part of the interest for writers and readers of Canadian historical fiction now: by taking a long hard look backwards, we place ourselves.
>
> Atwood, 1998b, 1512

Even when not directly engaging with the Victorian, these themes recur throughout her work. The peculiarities of the identity prevalent in her work naturally tie into this. The clearest example of this is *Alias Grace*, a fictitious account of the case of the nineteenth-century murderess Grace Marks, in which the setting of the novel makes it an obvious candidate for Neo-Victorian scholars. However I contend that many of the themes present in *Alias Grace* are present in much of her other work, and that those themes are rooted very much in a Victorian inheritance.

This is not simply in the colonial sense, but the literary sense as well. If we take the earlier comments on influence, that literary influence is ultimately inescapable, then the mystery of identity can be framed from a similar standpoint. It is not for nothing that the protagonist of Atwood's *Lady Oracle* writes Gothic Romances; they are a window into an imperial Europe that never was, the view filtered through the idealised concept the empire disseminated about itself.

More than simply exporting its people throughout the globe, empires export their culture; their art, their technology, their attitudes; and so inevitably British Victorianism and its art, technology and attitudes saw their way to Canada. The 'mystery' of women's writing, it stands to reason then, would also make its way abroad, and so it intermingles with the narratives that develop natively. With the past being hard to escape, it would follow that the implications of Victorian literature would have an impact on Atwood's writing.

Atwood, Identity, and Nineteenth-Century Form

Stylistically Atwood often veers quite far from the appearance of the Victorian mode with her interest in the limits of the narrator being a recognisably postmodern concern. One such example would be *The Blind Assassin*. It may not be immediately

obvious due to its non-standard structure, but it is ultimately a traditional *bildungsroman*, charting the development of the heroine in a more linear way than it may initially appear. Unlike a *bildungsroman* of the Victorian era though, John Mullan comments that "Atwood's narrator does not have consistent recall. There are novels, like […] *Jane Eyre*, that simply require us to suspend disbelief about the narrator's memory, but *The Blind Assassin* does not" (Mullan). Iris Chase's first person narrative relies on the fact that she can't know for certain how events she wasn't present for played out, having to rely on other people's accounts which may or may not be accurate. She can have suspicions and opinions on these accounts, but the exact definitive truth can never be known to her. Nor indeed should we treat her accounts as definitive; she is not a perfect authorial voice after all, but a player in the story who makes assumptions and forms opinions on what transpires. The format of the older Iris recounting her story also imitates the *bildungsroman* style; with the older Iris, a character in her own right, narrating, we see how events shape her as a person with retrospect and hindsight, highlighting the development of her identity.

While the earlier *The Edible Woman* (1969), Atwood's first published novel, features the theme of a woman's struggle for identity, it has neither particularly strong nationalistic nor metafictional themes. Atwood commented that its heroine "hardly has a past at all" (Bader, 195). In terms of its literary antecedents, Atwood compares it more to an eighteenth-century comedy than to nineteenth-century work:

> In your standard 18th-century comedy you have a young couple faced with difficulty in the form of somebody who embodies the restrictive forces of society, and they trick or overcome this difficulty and end up getting married. The same thing happens in *The Edible Woman* except the wrong person gets married. And the person who embodies the restrictive forces of society is in fact the person Marian gets engaged to. In a standard comedy, he would be the defiant hero. As it is, he and the restrictive society are blended into one, and the comedy solution would be a tragic solution for Marian.
>
> Gibson, 10

While this marks a definitive beginning to Atwood's interest in identity, *The Edible Woman* is very much concerned with its heroine's identity in the now. There is little broader questioning of how she came to be, unlike later novels which delve into what helped shape the characters; their youths, their hobbies, what culture they consume.

In this first section of the thesis, I will be looking at a selection of Margaret Atwood's work, focusing primarily on her novels. The first chapter will look at *Surfacing* and consider how it uses the motifs of horror and Gothic in order to convey its ideas about the crises of national (i.e. Canadian) and personal identity. In particular, it shall look at the novel in relation to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Following on from this, the next chapter will look at *Lady Oracle* and *The Robber Bride*, both of which similarly use Gothic imagery, the former that of early nineteenth-century Gothic and the latter of the *fin de siècle*. The question of 'national identity' in these texts is however more in the background than that of *Surfacing*, instead foregrounding the personal and asking who the protagonists are and who they want to be. They also however consider Canada's relationship with the Old World; either as a place of great Romance, seen in *Lady Oracle*'s fascination with 'The Lady of Shalott', or dangerous invasion, as evidenced by *The Robber Bride*'s use of vampire imagery regarding its European anti-heroine.

Alias Grace is the focus of the third chapter. The chapter will look predominantly at the question of reliability of narration, particularly in relation to *Wuthering Heights*. It will also look briefly at Atwood's earlier poetry cycle, 'The Journals of Susanna Moodie'; Moodie's account of the Grace Marks case serves as a jumping off point for much of Atwood's own work on the matter, including a teleplay and a stage adaptation thereof. The poetry cycle helps introduce Atwood's approach to the subject of Canada's colonial period.

The section closes with a discussion of *The Blind Assassin*, which won the Booker prize in 2000. The chapter will consider the nature of the novel's narration and compare with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* which similarly features a woman looking back at her own life. It will also look at the afterlife of the Victorian period in early twentieth-century Canada, with particular consideration of architecture. This structure will help chart the development of Atwood's recurring theme of identity and how it relates to Canada's Victorian inheritance.

2. *Surfacing*

Atwood's second published novel, *Surfacing* (1972), deals most directly with Canada as a concept, and as such is an appropriate place to begin. In this chapter, I will consider the novel and its use of Gothic and tropes from ghost stories to convey the sense of angst, personal and national, generated by one's sense of identity, or lack of sense. Due to the novel's apparent allusions to novels such as *Dracula* and *The Beetle* in its idea of an insidious yet personified sickness perverting cultural mores, I will look at how Atwood uses this idea to discuss Canadian identity. I will also compare its use of ghosts with the supernatural in *Wuthering Heights*, which Atwood mentions as an example of the variety of 'ghost story' she wished to write, as well as the psychological angst of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. This will demonstrate how classic depictions of turmoil and hauntings assist in Atwood's commentary on personal and national identity.

Surfacing tells the story of an unnamed woman, through first person perspective, who returns to her family's cabin in rural Québec in order to investigate the apparent disappearance of her father. With her lover and friends in tow, she finds the place completely deserted, and in the isolated environment she becomes overwhelmed with memories, paranoia, and despair as the others playact a stereotyped idea of the rural life. She comes to believe that her father is in actuality stalking them from within the woods, having gone feral as a result of the environs and a reaction to the encroaching destructive influence from America. While it turns out her father fell in the lake and drowned, she maintains this belief and hides from the rest of the group when it is time to leave, in order to herself give in to nature.

Despite its contemporary late-1960s/early-1970s setting, the novel's focus on the Canadian wilderness harkens back to the early days of Canadian colonial literature, which embraced the association of Canada with the natural world. The heroine's father sought to live, along with his family, a traditional rustic life in the north, away from modern society. This is later echoed in Atwood's *Strange Things*, wherein Atwood notes with regards to women amongst Canadian settlers that "the women of the first wave [of immigration] were not in the North woods of their own volition.

They were dragged there because circumstances and fate – namely their husbands – dragged them there" (*ST*, 117).

Urban society in *Surfacing* is typified by the Anglophones, or rather what the characters derisively refer to as 'Americans'. The term 'American' comes to be used as an epithet for a certain type of person; the interlopers coming and destroying the wilderness without a care, regardless of where they actually come from. The two presumed 'Americans' the protagonist encounters are revealed to be from Ontario, and apparently made the same assumption about her party's nationality.

> But they'd killed the heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we're turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference. […] If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them, I was saying, you speak their language, a language is everything you do.
>
> *Surf*, 165

The disease comes from the south (quite literally: "the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south" (*Surf*, 3)), just as 'civilised' Britain is under threat from malevolent supernatural forces from the east in novels such as *Dracula* (1897). The relationship however is inverted; the society of Canada under threat is their frontier history, one of hardship, survival and wildness, with the threat coming from modernity and supposed civilisation.

Despite the parallels, *Surfacing* has more in common with ghost stories than with *Dracula*. Atwood claims it to have "elements of the mystery story and the ghost story" (Sandler, 21). The outside force is more abstract than a literal monster infiltrating, and the supposed preternatural elements are suggested as intrinsically native to Canada and the environment rather than to some foreign 'other'. Atwood claims:

> It was indeed my intention to write a ghost story—a venerable narrative form, and one of which I have always been fond. There are several kinds of ghost stories—ones in which the ghost haunts a place, but has no particular relationship to any given individual who may stumble into that place (you get haunted because you're there, not because of anything you did […]); ones in which the ghost returns to an individual because of a past

> relationship […]; and more modern ones, in which the ghost is really a split-off fragment of the protagonist's psyche. […] In the very best kind of ghost story, all three elements are present—place, past relationship, and psyche fragment. See, for instance, the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*.
>
> I wished to write a ghost story with all three elements, but without writing a genre-limited "ghost story." That is, I wanted the ghosts to be an element in [*Surfacing*] but not the whole point of it.
>
> Stone, 204-205

The ghost in *Wuthering Heights* is similarly peculiar; Catherine's ghost appears for a short scene near the beginning of the novel, wherein she asks to be let in through the window, and is not directly witnessed for its remainder. Few would describe Brontë's novel as being a 'ghost story' at its core, with the ghost's function in the narrative largely being to prompt the considerably less supernatural history of Heathcliff and the Earnshaws, which encapsulates the majority of the book. The idea that the ghost itself is dreamt rather that real is suggested immediately; while staying in Catherine's room, Lockwood finds her name written and suffixed with various surnames, and upon the ghost giving her name, he wonders "why did I think of *Linton*? I had read *Earnshaw* twenty more times for Linton" (E. Brontë, 25). The fact that the ghost does profess to be 'Catherine Linton' rather than 'Earnshaw' however, when Lockwood has encountered the latter name more, suggests that it is potentially a true haunting. Further implications of the ghost appear later in the novel; Heathcliff is found dead with the window open, echoing the ghost's entreaties to be let in from the window, as well as a child professing to see "Heathcliff and a woman" (E. Brontë, 336) under a nab (Nelly dismisses them here as a figment of his imagination).

While similarly incidental, the ghosts in *Surfacing* take the opposite approach. Though they are not seen until the climax of the novel, the heroine seems to always be acutely aware of them; even then considering her precarious mental state, we have to question whether they are 'real' or not. No one else feels anything untoward or witnesses anything strange, though she feels this is obliviousness on their part.

However, the haunting becomes more prevalent the closer that the protagonist comes to the truth of the matter. Some of her prevailing memories in the first part of the novel are false; the marriage, the child, the drowning; none of them are real, but are products of trauma. As she comes to remember this, her connection to the conventional 'reality' of the modern world, exemplified by her 'marriage', becomes more tenuous.

There are two spirits that the protagonist directly witnesses; those of her mother and father, though not at the same time. They both are rather ambiguous as to their *raisons d'être*, and neither appears to see or interact with her, nor do they have much interest in or aptitude for things outside of the natural world. They are never witnessed within the cabin or its garden, as these are where man has interfered with nature; "now his own fence excludes him, as logic excludes love" (*Surf*, 243). Assuming, of course, that they are even real:

> When I go to the fence the footprints are there, side by side in the mud. My breath quickens, it was true, I saw it. But the prints are too small, they have toes; I place my feet in them and find they are my own.
>
> *Surf*, 244

While Atwood highlights the supernatural element of *Wuthering Heights* in discussing her intentions for the novel, in its use of trauma and isolation, it bears more direct comparison with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' (1892). Gilman's story has different concerns overall (it is more purely focussed on the notion of hysteria rather than considerations of identity) but it makes use of the similar idea of a woman confined and isolated who begins to experience a sense of paranoia and dread as potentially paranormal events arise.

The protagonist of Gilman's story, confined to a room, becomes obsessed with its eponymous wallpaper, despite finding it repulsive and (at least initially) wishing to get away from it. Similarly, Atwood's heroine is largely reluctant in her venture, but becomes engrossed by the woods. While she is ultimately there by choice (unlike Gilman's protagonist, who is confined at her husband's behest), there is an irresistible thrall that leads her to be unable to leave, and which the others, she believes, would not and must not understand. As the yellow wallpaper supposedly becomes a world unto itself, wherein a spectral woman (latterly women) are imprisoned and abused, the woods in *Surfacing* become the home of spirits, wild and untamed, but also associated with the colour yellow:

> He turns towards me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone.
>
> I'm not frightened, it's too dangerous for me to be frightened of it; it gazes at me for a time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes, depthless but ambient as the eyes of animals seen at night in the car headlights.

> Reflectors. It does not approve or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself.
>
> Then its head swings away with an awkward, almost crippled motion: I do not interest it, I am part of the landscape, I could be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock.
>
> I see now that although it isn't my father it is what my father has become. I knew he wasn't dead.
>
> *Surf*, 243

To look too far into the abyss is to go mad. Gilman's protagonist becomes the woman in the wallpaper; "'I've got out at last,' said I, 'in spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'" (Gilman, 26). The parents in *Surfacing* come to be an intrinsic part of the forest with the heroine abandoning her humanity to become a beast as part of the novel's climax.

What Gilman's wallpaper represents is a malefic force; the heroine literally sees within the pattern women being imprisoned and abused, tying into her own isolation by her husband and sister-in-law; the woods are more amoral, such is nature. The protagonist wrecks, but fails to destroy, the cabin (the evidence of encroaching civilisation), but tries not to attack nature. The woods may be amoral, but the city is malevolent: "back to the city and the pervasive menace, the Americans. They exist, they're advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied" (*Surf*, 247). The heroine ultimately returns to humanity, resolving to not be a passive victim, but her path remains ambiguous: "I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though my feet do not move yet" (*Surf*, 251).

While not the start of Atwood's interest in the nature of identity (as stated earlier, one can see the start of such concerns in *The Edible Woman*), *Surfacing* helps solidify how she approaches the topic, in addition to broadening it from a focus on a (perhaps universal) self to how identity can be seen to affect Canada as a whole. Specifically however it focuses on how the colonial past of Canada serves to inform the present, as well as the great national question of what serves to make Canada a distinct entity from its immediate neighbour, the United States. In doing so, Atwood uses the imagery of Victorian Gothic and horror fiction to accentuate the sense of illness-at-ease present in both the heroine's trauma and the national crisis of identity. Atwood

would return to the Gothic as a means of exploring national and personal identity in later novels.

3. The Individual Canadian in History – *Lady Oracle* & *The Robber Bride*

While *Surfacing* foregrounds concerns surrounding Canadian identity in relation to the heroine's own identity crisis, elsewhere Atwood's considerations of women's identities look more directly from a historical and fictional context. This is not to say they are exclusive on this front; the heroine of *Lady Oracle*'s own Canadian-ness, while not a crux of the plot in the same way as *Surfacing*'s is, is nonetheless an important facet of her character that helps inform her ideas of, and relationship with, the world, especially of Europe.

In this chapter, we will look at *Lady Oracle* (1976) and the later *The Robber Bride* (1993), two novels that are concerned with both the identities of their female characters as well as their relationships with history and the 'old world', with both making extensive use of Gothic trappings as well as (anti-) heroines who create their own histories and identities. Beginning with the former, I will show how Atwood alludes to and parodies nineteenth-century portrayals of women in the arts, with references to Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' as well as the tropes of Gothic fiction. This will also be linked to *Anne of Green Gables* and the idea of the unattainability of these Victorian ideals of beauty by Atwood's later (Canadian) heroines.

I will also consider *The Robber Bride* from the perspective of Victorian Gothic, though the later novel leans more on themes from *fin de siècle* fiction than the early-to-mid nineteenth-century images seen in *Lady Oracle*. In particular, I will consider the novel's use of vampiric imagery with relation to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

Lady Oracle, in which Canada goes to Europe

Lady Oracle is Atwood's third published novel. It makes extensive use of parody, particularly of the Gothic, but it also considers the art made available to young girls and how this may shape their perception and expectations. This section of my thesis will consider the novel in relation primarily to two sustained literary allusions it contains, to the Victorian poem 'The Lady of Shalott' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and the Edwardian (and Canadian) novel *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery (which itself alludes to the 'Lady of Shalott' story, albeit to a different Tennysonian telling of it). It will demonstrate the ways in which Atwood's novel draws on these

two works and their discussion of gender relations, and how they might have influenced the ideas, and imagined literary works, of Atwood's protagonist Joan Foster. It will also discuss the relation of literature and 'real life' with regard to the supposed 'unreality' of Gothic plots, especially their treatment of their female characters, as well as the effect of such plots on their readers and, indeed, creators.

The novel chronicles the life and death of its protagonist, Joan Foster, and her struggles with personal identity, family and love, as well as her writing career. The novel opens with her death, or rather 'death', as she has in fact faked it, and is hiding out in Italy, before elucidating the situation to this point. From her relationship with her emotionally manipulative mother and her childhood woes, the novel carries on into her love affairs. This serves as a springboard to her secret career in writing Gothic romances. As a result of her chequered love life and her romantic fantasies, she finds herself having dalliances with various political groups and artistic movements, leading up to the wherefore of her 'demise'. Due to her involvement with these groups, she makes great attempts to keep her various lives (the radical's wife, the writer of romantic fiction, the feminist poet) all separate from one another. When it would seem she has been found out, she decides the only course of action is to start afresh, though starting yet another life proves more difficult than expected.

An important part of the narrative is Joan's literary life. The character is supposed to have a (secret) line in fiction writing, and this is reflected in her points of reference. Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' in particular is referenced numerous times throughout the story, a fact that has not escaped critical notice. In a chapter considering various modern writers' responses to the poem in the mid to late twentieth century, John Morton notes that:

> In *Lady Oracle* we again see a figure who corresponds to the Lady of Shalott given a voice, able to tell more of her story than Tennyson's Lady or indeed Lancelot, while still adhering to some of the original poem's narrative. The affinity between Foster and the Lady is underlined in her attempt at automatic writing, which she conducts sitting 'in front of a mirror, with a paper and pencil and a lighted candle, and then… Well, these words would sort of be given to me.'
>
> J. Morton, 186-187

Between a miserable childhood and a barrage of ideas about femininity, Joan comes to live her life as if she were the heroine of a fantasy akin to her novels; "I really

wanted, then, to have someone, anyone, say that I had a lovely face, even if I had to turn into a corpse in a barge-bottom first" (*LO*, 143). This very much intentional on Atwood's part – she claims that the character "is attempting to act out a romantic myth we're all handed as women in a non-romantic world" (Hammond, 64), a myth that Joan, by her own admission, helps perpetuate. Joan's expectations for life are very much informed by the culture that she consumes, and also creates; she does after all make ends meet by writing period Gothic romances. The juxtaposition between fantasy and reality provides an important insight into the mind-set of the novel's protagonist. The questions of who she is, and who she wants to be, are ones that recur throughout the novel as she takes on many different guises and roles. Her propensity for assuming roles becomes apparent early on, with her decision to dye her hair as part of attempt to go incognito:

> I decided I'd have to do something about my hair. It was evidence, its length and color had been a sort of trademark. Every newspaper clipping, friendly or hostile, had mentioned it, in fact a lot of space had been devoted to it: hair in the female was regarded as more important than either talent or the lack of it. […] *Prose-poetess* Joan Foster *looked impressively Junoesque in her flowing red hair and green robe; unfortunately she was largely inaudible* … (The Globe and Mail)
>
> *LO*, 14

While there is focus on her outward appearance however, her actual character is not something that is recognisable; seen here where she cuts a figure of an artist, a writer, and empowered woman, but remains literally unheard. This is representative of the vague nature of her 'self' through the course of the novel. Joan has many identities (for instance in the above quotation she is the acclaimed 'prose-poetess') and plays many parts, but her 'true' self is something she tries very hard to keep hidden; unseen and, indeed, unheard.

Amongst the things she chooses to keep hidden is her aforementioned line of work writing Gothic romances. She is of the belief that her husband Arthur (an academic and a political radical) and his peers would disapprove: "When I first met [Arthur] he talked a lot about wanting a woman whose mind he could respect, and I knew if he found out I'd written *The Secret of Morgrave Manor* he wouldn't respect mine" (*LO*, 33-34). Respectability, or the appearance thereof, is paramount. Joan professes to be effectively addicted to writing her Gothic fantasies, despite also

reckoning that they "exploit the masses, corrupt by distracting, and perpetuate degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted" (*LO*, 34), and a large part of Atwood's decision to have her lead have a penchant for Gothic romances is due to these apparent traits of the genre:

> I'm not sure where it began, but the central character is a writer of Gothic romances partly because I've always wondered what it was about these books that appealed—do so many women think of themselves as menaced on all sides, and of their husbands as potential murderers? And what about that "Mad Wife" left over from *Jane Eyre*? Are these our secret plots?
>
> Oates, 44

The novels that Joan writes are escapist; she makes that point soon after her writing is introduced ("[Arthur] wouldn't have been able to understand in the least the desire, the pure quintessential need of my readers for escape, a thing I myself understood only too well." (*LO*, 34)); but Atwood's questions still linger. Margery Fee comments in *The Fat Lady Dances: Margaret Atwood's* Lady Oracle (1993) that "women find them appealing because these novels first arouse fears common to most women, then proceed to calm them" (Fee, 58), as well as noting that at their historic peak, Gothic novels were popular among "middle-class women on the verge of marriage" (Fee, 63). Edina Szalay posits that despite the genre's ostensible lack of realism, "the Gothic clichés of womanhood reveal real-life expectations based on social consensus" (Szalay, 219). She continues:

> [Tania] Modelski argues that the Female Gothic can be best described as a "paranoid text" whose heroine's main fear is rooted in feeling possessed by the spirits of other women from out of the past, i.e. generations of women whose tragic fate of madness, death, or physical assault the heroine tries desperately to escape.
>
> Szalay, 217

The stories thus have a debt to narratives such as 'Beauty and the Beast'; the reader of yore need not worry about her inevitable nuptials, for while you may be married to a man who seems strange and your new life may seem a terrifying prospect, you can rest assured by the conclusions to these narratives that it will all work out favourably in the end. Fee states that the traditional Gothic heroine will either marry "a rich and handsome aristocrat, often the same man who seemed to threaten her at the novel's beginning" or "already married, she goes through a period of terrible fear that her

husband is really a villain, to find, in the end, that he is the hero he was always supposed to be" (Fee, 58). Through its focus on popular narratives, this ignores Atwood's conflation of Gothic romances with *Jane Eyre*, and specifically its 'Mad Wife'; one of the most enduring pieces of fiction penned by a woman in terms of its influence, as this thesis has already demonstrated. This conflation is not unique to Atwood however, as Joanna Russ wrote in her 1973 essay 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic' that "Modern Gothics resemble […] a crossbreed of *Jane Eyre* and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and most of them advertise themselves as 'in the Du Maurier tradition,' 'in the Gothic tradition of *Rebecca*,' and so on" (Russ, 666). The principal male character of *Jane Eyre*, Mr Rochester, keeps his apparently insane first wife locked in the attic with a (not particularly attentive) nurse, all the while courting, and proceeding to try and marry, other women. While the situation is inevitably worked out by the end of the novel (the wife sets fire to the house and kills herself while her attendant is in a drunken stupor, Rochester is rendered a temporarily blind invalid as a result of the blaze, and Jane returns to nurse him back to health), the notion that Rochester is now forever reformed and 'safe' feels somewhat dubious, as hinted at in the title to John Sutherland's 1997 book *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy?* Atwood also has doubts, noting that "[t]he question is at what point does the orphan turn into the mad wife?" (Hammond, 64). If the love interest can discard one wife, it stands to reason he can discard another.

In this regard, Atwood seems to be indirectly referencing Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). While, as aforementioned, there were prior prose re-workings of *Jane Eyre*, perhaps the most famous of which is Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), Rhys' novel not only alludes to Brontë's novel and characters, but also puts the focus squarely on the 'mad wife'. It considers the question of who she is and how she came to be the 'mad wife'; the original novel simply suggesting her madness to be congenital. Rhys recasts the creole heiress as a tragic figure; an outcast in her homeland and unloved by her husband, her mental state deteriorates. In her focus on the figure of the 'Mad Wife', Atwood demonstrates that her thinking on Victorian women's writing is along the same lines as that of Gilbert and Gubar, whose *Madwoman in the Attic* was published three years after *Lady Oracle*.

Atwood's own heroine has a similar issue as Rhys' Antoinette Cosway with being out of place. While *Lady Oracle* does not address the subject of race so much as

nationality, the notion that the heroine does not fit in either at home or abroad is posited. Joan's strained relationships too echo those central to Rhys' novel. Atwood even appears to make a sly reference to *Wide Sargasso Sea* during a scene from Joan's marriage; early on, a lack of a sink results in them having to do the washing up in the bathtub:

> This meant that during baths, which we took together, with me soaping Arthur's back, his ribs sticking out like Death's in a medieval woodcut, we would often be surprised by the odd noodle or pea, floating in the soap scum like an escaped fragment of Sargasso Sea. I felt it added a welcome touch of the tropics to those otherwise polar bathrooms but Arthur didn't like it. Although he denied it, he had a thing about germs.
>
> *LO*, 208-209

Joan's husband, unlike Rhys' unnamed version of Rochester, is not wilfully antagonistic to her. Rather he, and most other men in the novel, is more blithe and seemingly ignorant in his apparent mistreatment of his wife; a more mundane version of what Russ calls the 'Shadow-male':[31] "a man invariably represented as gentle, protective, responsible, quiet, humorous, tender, and calm. The Shadow-male either wants to marry the Heroine or has […] actually married her. This personage is revealed as a murderer [or] as an insane mass-murderer of a whole string of previous wives" (Russ, 669), thereby requiring the heroine to be rescued by the hero.[32] Arthur does not seem to be aware that he is belittling his wife; ironic considering the women's liberation movement is one of his *causes célèbres*. For instance, his attempts to have her spend less on clothes involves insulting her, rather than simply stating his actual concerns:

[31] Russ gives names to the stock characters of the modern Gothic romance. Most of these are fairly self-explanatory, such as the 'Heroine' or 'the Other Woman'. Her terminology for the male characters is a bit less obvious, with the apparently kind but secretly villainous Shadow-male standing in contrast to the dark and brooding yet romantic 'Super-male'.

[32] Incidentally this type that Russ identifies is somewhat at odds with the genre's apparent self-identification with *Rebecca*, wherein not only is the man whom heroine marries at the start of the book is the same one she's married to at the end, but this is despite of him actually having murdered his previous wife and faked her suicide.

This however is not quite true of the well-known 1940 film version, in which she apparently does commit suicide, but does so in a manner to lead her husband into thinking he killed her in a bid to make him suffer; this change being due to contemporary American film censorship standards which forbade, amongst other things, showing people getting away with crime.

> Arthur had a strange relationship with my clothes. He didn't like me spending money on them because he thought we couldn't afford it, so at first he said they clashed with my hair or they made me look fat. Later, when he took up Women's Liberation for flagellation purposes, he tried to tell me I shouldn't want to have clothes like that, I was playing into the hands of the exploiters.
>
> *LO*, 22-23

Joan, for her part, does not seem to be particularly aware of this either, being too wrapped up in conspiracy theories to see the comparatively low-key truth of his (mis)treatment of her. If she suspects him of anything, it is that he is a real-world version of a man from one of her books; he must be scheming to destroy her (either out of villainy or of love), and surely has a hand in the problems that befall her. Prank calls, dead animals, threatening letters, blackmail; they must all be connected and someone must be the mastermind behind it all: "[i]t had to be a single person, with a plan, a plot that had some end in view" (*LO*, 292). And so her suspicion turns on her unassuming husband, not for his actual, quiet transgressions, but for bombastic fantasy ones.

Despite being aware of the fundamentally ridiculous nature of her plots, Joan reads the world in the same way as she approaches one of her books; everything is grandiose and dramatic, or at least it should be. The reality of the world in which she exists is mundane. As Atwood comments: "the hypothesis of the book, insofar as there is one, is: what happens to someone who lives in the "real" world but does it as though this "other" world is the real one?" (Oates, 44-45). Calling to mind a pre-Victorian nineteenth-century novel, a point of comparison made on this front by both Fee and Ellen Williams[33] is Catherine Morland, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818). Austen's heroine has consumed much Gothic fiction and becomes convinced that General Tilney has murdered or imprisoned his wife in the eponymous house's unused wing. His actual sinister designs are far more prosaic, with him instead assuming her to be exceedingly wealthy and plotting to match her with his second son as a result, before casting her out upon learning that she is not. As

[33] In *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman*, McWilliams comments:

> True to a near relative with an active imagination, Catherine Morland in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), the conventions of Joan's romances […] are frequently interrupted or reined in by reality and so Rapunzel's balcony is reimagined as modern, concrete, and inhospitable to the rescue fantasies that she has been exposed to and nurtures from a young age.
>
> McWilliams, 2009, 86

such, Catherine's suspicions are not based in reality, though ultimately she is correct to feel that something is untrustworthy about the General. As Fee notes while comparing *Lady Oracle* with *Northanger Abbey*:

> [B]oth novels reveal that it is not enough simply to discard fantasies derived from literature as false; this is to neglect the understanding that comes through the emotions that drive the Gothic novel. Catherine is correct to feel that the General is not trustworthy; Joan is correct when she senses that her mother and Arthur do not love her very well. Somehow, the complex connections between fantasy, art, and the real world must be carefully worked out. Neither Catherine nor Joan are well served by their wholesale attempts to see life through the simplistic structure of the Gothic plot. But at least they are using their imaginations to interpret the world; if they add reason to their imaginations, they will, both Austen and Atwood imply, be far better able to confront life's complexities.
>
> Fee, 66-67

In the case of *Northanger Abbey*, the General's second son is also the primary love interest whom she naturally marries at the end of the novel, initially against the wishes of the General (he comes to accept it upon learning that she is comfortably well-off, despite not being as wealthy as he had originally anticipated). Joan's fate is rather more ambiguous. Her husband was not actively conspiring against her, a fact that she has to realise on her own rather than through any outside intervention given (she is in the novel's present, isolated and alone in Italy). It appears she does recognise this, as in the denouement she claims that she "won't write any more Costume Gothics" (*LO*, 345) as she "think[s] they were bad for [her]" (*LO*, 345). However she also says "I keep thinking I should learn some lesson from all of this" (*LO*, 345), suggesting that she doesn't actually know what the lesson in question is (this is common to more recent interventions in the form, such as Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, at whose conclusion we are told that Nick Guest, its protagonist, "felt he himself had learned nothing new" (Hollinghurst, 2004, 471)). There is also an important difference between Catherine and Joan, in the fact that the former is merely a consumer, but the latter is a producer of these texts. McWilliams considers the odd nature of Joan's relationship with both the novels that she produces and the culture she consumes:

> While most discussions of [*Lady Oracle*] focus on the fictions Joan writes and interpret the fictions that come to define her own life as nets of entrapment or a necessary duplicitous alternative for the woman writer, it is also possible to read Joan's engagement with other narratives, whether that of Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" or her costume gothics, as a series of textual choices – rather than being a victim of those fictions, Joan effectively exploits them for her purpose and the appearance of victimhood serves as a useful disguise in the process.
>
> McWilliams, 2009, 84-85

Joan freely admits that she is part of a problem by "perpetuat[ing] degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted" (*LO*, 34), but she is nonetheless using them to engage with the world, and to survive. In using them to create an identity (or rather 'identities'), she diffuses them and turns them into something more useful.

While *Northanger Abbey* is a popular comparison, we might also note a similarity to a canonical work of Canadian literature, L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), its titular character another red-haired fantasist. Atwood explicitly links *Lady Oracle* to Montgomery's novel in interview, particularly the early episodes revolving around Joan's childhood fantasies and her relationships with other girls:

> **Interviewers:** Sometimes, in fact, you rework that material, rework situations, as is the case with Marlene in *Lady Oracle*, who seems to be a precursor of Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*.
> **Atwood:** In *Lady Oracle*, though, that's the sideshow. In *Cat's Eye*, it's the seminal incident. The harassment of Elaine by Cordelia, and the subsequent fallout, is the subject of the book. That book is about nasty relationships among little girls, which have not been treated very much in fiction for adults. In *Lady Oracle* it's done as a comic turn, much as it is in *Anne of Green Gables* with Josie Pye, and much as it is with many of those Enid Blyton schoolgirl novels in which bad little girls are ultimately deflated and conquered. In *Anne of Green Gables* you have Diana, who is always good, and Josie Pye, who is always bad. In reality, they were probably the same person, sometimes good, sometimes bad. No one is all good or all bad.
>
> Meyer and O'Riordan, 158-159

The section of *Lady Oracle* referred to here concerns Joan's time in the Brownies, a junior version of the Girl Scouts, and her torment by a trio of local girls (Marlene, Elizabeth and Lynne) with whom she is expected to travel to troop meetings. Elizabeth ranks highest amongst their sub-group, and Marlene and Lynne vie for her

attention "in more or less sinister ways" (*LO*, 56). Joan, as the weakest (being as she is younger, fat, and quick to tears), is safely at the bottom of the pecking order and as such on the receiving end of much of their cruelty. The chapter culminates in them tying her to a post and leaving her "for the bad man" (*LO*, 62), a flasher who apparently stalks the ravine on the way to the streetcar. In the end, a man, presumed to be the one about whom all the girls have been warned, rescues her.

Atwood invokes *Anne of Green Gables* in how the episode plays out in *Lady Oracle*, though while all three of the girls are antagonistic (the 'Josie Pye', as she suggests), there is no real Diana analogue. This strand is developed further in the later *Cat's Eye* (1988), which similarly follows its protagonist from childhood, but with a much greater focus on female relationships. Elaine, the novel's central character, is haunted by memories of Cordelia, a girl who was simultaneously her friend and her nemesis.[34] In *Lady Oracle*, Joan views her trauma at the hands of the other girls to be a defining moment of her life. The belated punchline comes towards the novel's end, when on account of her husband's social circle Joan is reunited with the nefarious Marlene. Panicked that aspects of her life that she has endeavoured to keep hidden will now come to light, Joan instead finds out that Marlene doesn't remember her at all.

Anne, like Joan, longs to live the life of a romantic heroine in a world that is not especially romantic. Anne's fantasies are less dark; unlike Joan, she does not have any particular attachment to the Gothic mode, but more generally to romance. Her attitude becomes readily clear as she imagines more dramatic names for the various locales of Avonlea, and attempts to create a new name for herself.

> 'Well, don't cry any more. We're not going to turn you out of doors tonight. You'll have to stay here until we investigate this affair. What's your name?'
>
> The child hesitated for a moment.
>
> 'Will you please call me Cordelia?' she said eagerly.

[34] The choice of names is interesting. 'Elaine' and 'Cordelia' are both identities that Anne Shirley attempts to take on; the latter in name, the former in deed. 'Cordelia' is the name that Anne would love to have, and tries to convince the Cuthberts into calling her such. Similarly 'Elaine' (or 'the Lady of Shalott') is another identity that Anne attempts to adopt. This reinforces the parallel between *Cat's Eye*'s two central figures; 'Cordelia' and 'Elaine' are both facets of Anne Shirley, and Cordelia and Elaine are both reflective of each other.

> '*Call* you Cordelia! Is that your name?'
> 'No-o-o, it's not exactly my name, but I would love to be called Cordelia. It's a perfectly elegant name.'
>
> Montgomery, 1908, 33-34, emphasis in original

Anne adores the trappings of literature and seeks to apply them to her everyday life, though this is not necessarily wise. A memorable episode involves Anne and her friends attempting to re-enact 'Lancelot and Elaine', having studied the poem at school.[35]

> It was Anne's idea that they dramatize Elaine. They had studied Tennyson's poem in the school the preceding winter, the Superintendent of Education having prescribed it in the English course for the Prince Edward Island Schools. They had analysed and parsed it and torn it to pieces in general until it was a wonder there was any meaning left in it for them, but at least the fair lily maid and Lancelot and Guinevere and King Arthur had become very real people to them, and Anne was devoured by secret regret that she had not been born in Camelot. Those days, she said, were so much more romantic than the present.
>
> Montgomery, 1908, 307

This escapade ends in danger; Anne, as Elaine, is floated into the lake on a dory, which proceeds to spring a leak. The episode, she professes, will "cure [her] of being too romantic" (Montgomery, 1908, 315). In Atwood's novel, Joan studies Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shalott' at school; the poem recounts the same story as 'Lancelot and Elaine' (1859), albeit in a shorter form. Though she and her friends do not attempt to literally recreate it for themselves (not least because she is lacking in friends), the poem forms a key part of her development, albeit the inverse of Anne's. While it is ostensibly the end of Anne's romanticism, it forms part of the core of Joan's. "[T]he Lady of Shalott floating down a winding river in a boat" (*LO*, 143) is amongst the things she dreams of in her life; the lady is a perfect beauty even in death ("She has a lovely face;/God in his mercy lend her grace" (Tennyson, 83)); and the image is one that she takes with her on her trip to England. Of course, the world promised by art and literature no longer exists, assuming it ever did, and Joan is left disappointed. She thus decides to lose herself in worlds of her own creation. The

[35] John Morton points out that while "Television and film adaptations of Montgomery's book usually have Anne reciting 'The Lady of Shalott', and the less widely-known 'Lancelot and Elaine' is a long poem to give to primary schoolchildren, but the comments of the girls as they prepare to launch Anne off down a river in their 'dramatizing' of the poem seem to indicate that the latter was indeed studied at Anne's school" (J. Morton, 64).

"castles and ladies" (*LO*, 143) that failed to await her in London instead find a home in her novels. It is an ironic inversion of Atwood's thoughts on early Canadian colonialism, with the English settlers' "heads filled with diluted Burke and Wordsworth, encountering lots of Nature" (*Surv*, 46) only to be disappointed with the reality. Coral Ann Howells comments on this in her essay 'Margaret Atwood's Gothic Designs in *Lady Oracle* and *The Robber Bride*: Blurring Borders between Canada and Europe':

> In *Lady Oracle* Atwood is addressing a mainly colonial Canadian readership back in the mid 1970s in the heyday of Canadian cultural nationalism where the protagonist […] responds to Europe like a colonial, seeing it as a place of romance and escape from real life, only to find that she is irredeemably Canadian.
>
> Howells, 43

While not directly related to her adventures with Tennyson however, Joan, like Anne, has a major turning point in her life involving a boat, a lake, and a near death experience. While Anne pretends to be a "lily maid" (Montgomery, 1908, 305) on the lake, which unintentionally almost results in her death, Joan engineers a boat accident on Lake Ontario in order to fake her own death. The actual event does not run entirely according to plan; her intention to deliberately fall off the boat does not come to fruition as she is instead hit by the sail. The end result for her is the same; she falls in the water, albeit less prepared for this than she might have been, and proceeds with the plan. Her accomplices however become panicked, believing that she might actually be drowning, though Joan is oblivious: "Marlene was yelling, "Oh, my God," very authentically, as if I really had fallen overboard and was drowning" (*LO*, 303), she says, ignoring the fact that that is essentially what has happened. Again here we note Atwood's interest in performance and its role in shaping 'reality'.

In Montgomery's novel, Anne is rescued by Gilbert Blythe, the most popular boy in the school with whom she has an entirely one-sided animosity and who later comes to be her love interest,[36] despite not resembling the typically romanticised lover of her dreams (this phantom lover is described in *Anne of the Island* (1915) as

[36] While the thread of Gilbert as love interest is present in the original *Anne of Green Gables* (though the major step in their relationship is simply Anne coming to count him as a friend), it is developed further in its sequels. A plot line in *Anne of the Island* involves Gilbert proposing, resulting in Anne re-evaluating their relationship; partially on account of valuing their current relationship and partly due to his not fitting her romantic ideal. They wed in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917), with some later books featuring them as parents.

"[t]all and handsome and distinguished looking – dark, melancholy, inscrutable eyes – melting, musical, sympathetic voice" (Montgomery, 1915, 229)). Joan, for her part, is not rescued. As far as the world is apparently concerned, she has drowned, and so she flees to Italy, setting up the novel's framing device as a retrospective. As she gets caught up in this self-reflection, she sends a message, half-jokingly, to Arthur to rescue her. He doesn't, because she realises she sent the message using surface mail (*LO*, 345) and so it won't have arrived. This is another inadvertent disappointment in Arthur, despite his apparent adherence to an image of the sort of hero Joan (and Anne) desires, even if once more her desire for European romanticism has been thwarted.

> He was wearing a black crew-neck sweater, which I found quite dashing. A melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes, idealistic and doomed, sort of like Lord Byron, whose biography I had just been skimming. We finished collecting the pamphlets, I fell in love, and we went for a drink at the nearest pub. […] I would've preferred it if he'd had a British accent; unfortunately he was only a Canadian, like me, but I overlooked this defect.
>
> *LO*, 165

While Joan apparently has visions of Lord Byron, the prominent Romantic figure who was said to be "mad, bad and dangerous to know",[37] instead of anything particularly Arthurian, John Morton notes that her husband is called 'Arthur' (J. Morton, 186). While this is another allusion to Tennyson's poem, this Arthur ultimately falls short of the dashing Arthurian hero. It is difficult to even link him with the Arthurian figures Joan idolises, as even on their first meeting he appears largely ineffectual. Their first encounter involves her falling on top of him, and he admits that his campaigning isn't "doing any good" (*LO*, 164). She interprets this as part of his being a "melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes," and decides she loves him regardless. This somewhat echoes Anne's experience: "I thought I must be in love because he was my dark-eyed ideal" (Montgomery, 1915, 315).

Joan's signature red hair and her attempts to be rid of it are another link to Anne. Montgomery's character's hair is deemed enough of a trait that certain

[37] This description of Byron is credited to Lady Caroline Lamb, one of the poet's many lovers.

translations rename the book to mention it,[38] though in the novel, her red hair is a point of consternation for the protagonist. A chapter pertains to her attempts to rid herself of it and allow her to become the sort of heroine she desires (red hair, she feels, is inappropriate for a romantic heroine). In this episode, she impulsively purchases hair dye from a peddler with the intent of turning her hair black ("In a trice I saw myself with beautiful raven black hair and the temptation was irresistible" (Montgomery, 1908, 301)), as has been a dream from the opening:

> I can imagine that I have a beautiful rose-leaf complexion and lovely starry violet eyes. But I *cannot* imagine that red hair away. I do my best. I think to myself, "Now my hair is a glorious black, black as the raven's wing." But all the time I *know* it is just plain red, and it breaks my heart. It will be my lifelong sorrow.
>
> Montgomery, 1908, 23

Instead the dye turns her hair green, and being unable to wash the dye out, it is decided that the only course of action is to have it shorn. This is echoed in *Lady Oracle* in Joan's attempts to create her new identity by ridding herself of her trademark locks, though these attempts to recreate herself are somewhat less blatant in their link to her seeing herself as a romantic heroine. She makes a mess of her hair with nail scissors ("I tried shaping what remained, but it got shorter and shorter, though no less uneven, until I saw that I'd cropped my head like a concentration camp inmate's" (*LO*, 14)). She then proceeds to dye it the supposed colour of "a soft, glowing chestnut, autumn-kissed, laced with sunlight and sprinkled with sparking highlights" (*LO*, 183) in order to evade detection by whatever villains are after her. The dyeing at least appears more successful than Anne's in terms of being in the vague region of the promised colour, though the results are still not as advertised: "I'd dyed my hair the day after I'd gone to Rome, and it was now mud brown. It had none of the promised sparkling highlights. In fact it looked terrible." (*LO*, 311-312) Anne's desire to see herself as a romantic heroine is a recurring theme throughout *Anne of Green Gables*, as it is for Joan in *Lady Oracle*. However while Anne has a cursory awareness that the real world is not so romantic and so is aware that she is playing pretend, Joan clings to her fantasy, desperately applying it to reality.

[38] *Anne dai Capelli Rossi* in Italian, *Akage no An* in Japanese, and *Ppalgan Meoli Aen* in Korean all translate roughly to 'Red-Haired Anne'; also the Vietnamese *Anne tóc đỏ dưới Chái nhà xanh* translates approximately as "Anne Red Hair under Green House".

While in Italy and recounting her story, Joan is also at work on a novel, the luridly titled *Stalked by Love*. The premise is intended to be formulaic; the heroine is a penniless orphan of noble blood, summoned to a great house by an inscrutable man, much to the ire of his haughty wife. The wife should end up "mad or dead, or both" (*LO*, 319), as Joan reckons is the case in all her books. The characters of the wife, Felicia, and the heroine, Charlotte, seem to be reflective of who Joan is, and who she wants to be. However over the course of writing, she finds her sympathies shift, as Fee observes:

> When Joan finds out she has to let Felicia live at the end of *Stalked by Love*, it seems clear that Joan is starting to find Gothic thinking unsatisfactory. Like Joan, Felicia is redheaded, passionate, messy, and (at least in one version) fat. Killing her off is a form of self-loathing, as Joan has begun to realize.
>
> Fee, 68

Hair colour here is again linked to feminine ideals and realities. Charlotte, the pure virtuous heroine, fits in well with Joan's planned revision of herself: "a sensible girl, warm, honest and confident, with soft green eyes, regular habits and glowing chestnut hair" (*LO*, 184). Unfortunately, she is also quite dull, with Joan growing tired of "her intact virtue and tidy ways" (*LO*, 319). Near the end of the novel, Joan washes out the brown hair dye that she has used, professing that she "no longer cared" (*LO*, 334). Charlotte is a cipher, Joan admits as much herself, saying early in the novel that: "The heroines of my books were mere stand-ins: their features were never clearly defined, their faces were putty which each reader could reshape into her own, adding a little beauty" (*LO*, 34-35). The heroine is whoever the person viewing her wants her to be, which ties into the many different identities Joan adopts; who she appears to be differs depending on who the person observing her is, but this leaves the problem of who the real Joan is – if indeed there is one.

It is clear that one of Atwood's principal focuses in writing *Lady Oracle* was to consider the relationship between creator and creation, specifically with reference to Gothic texts, so often read by women but whose female characters are frequently powerless and even abused. In referring more or less directly, too, to 'The Lady of Shalott' and (less directly) to *Anne of Green Gables*, *Lady Oracle* demonstrates the continuing power of nineteenth-century constructions of gender on readers whose

own lives are fairly remote from not only the Victorian period but also the much more archaic setting of Tennyson's poem.

The Robber Bride, in which Europe goes to Canada

1993's *The Robber Bride* sees a return to the Gothic pastiche that characterised *Lady Oracle*. This is not to say however that it is a pastiche of the same variety of Gothic as the earlier novel. While *Lady Oracle* concerns itself with the central idea of the Gothic romance, harkening back to works from the earlier half of the nineteenth century, *The Robber Bride* makes more reference to *fin de siècle* novels of the kind typified by works such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887). While Atwood in interview makes explicit reference to Haggard's novel as a source of inspiration, many critiques seem more to note the vampiric imagery present in the text thereby linking it to *Dracula*.[39] To what end these parallels play out depends on the critic; the most popular theories include commentary on Canada's place in European (post)colonialism, espoused by critics such as Coral Ann Howell[40] and Donna L. Potts,[41] or the nature of the contemporary feminist movement, a view put forth by Ann Heilmann[42] and Fiona Tolan.[43] Obviously these views are not inherently mutually exclusive, and for the purposes of this section I will be mainly considering how Atwood uses the imagery in question.

The plot of the novel concerns three women; Tony, Roz, and Charis; and their encounters with a fourth, Zenia. Zenia previously befriended each of them, and proceeded to have a sexual relationship with their partners. This becomes a bonding experience for the women. Zenia is later killed in an explosion in Lebanon five years

[39] Howells, C.A. 1995. 'Margaret Atwood's Gothic Designs in *Lady Oracle* and *The Robber Bride*: Blurring Borders between Canada and Europe', *European Perspectives on English-Canadian Literature*, 8, pp.43-49.
Perrakis, P.S. 1997. 'Atwood's *The Robber Bride*: The Vampire as Intersubjective Catalyst', *Mosaic*, 30(3), pp.151-168.
Morton, S. 1999. 'Postcolonial Gothic and the New World Disorder: Crossing Boundaries of Space/Time in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*', *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 14(1), pp. 99-114.
Tolan, F. 2007. 'Sucking the Blood Out of Second Wave Feminism – Post-Feminist Vampirism in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*', *Gothic Studies*, 9(2), pp.45-57.

[40] Howells, C.A. 1995. 'Margaret Atwood's Gothic Designs in *Lady Oracle* and *The Robber Bride*: Blurring Borders between Canada and Europe', *European Perspectives on English-Canadian Literature*, 8, pp.43-49.

[41] Potts, D.L. 1999. '"The Old Maps are Dissolving": Intertextuality and Identity in Atwood's *The Robber Bride*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 18(2), pp.281-298.

[42] Heilmann, A. 2002. 'The Devil Herself? Fantasy, Female Identity and the Villainess Fatale in *The Robber Bride*', *Contributions to the Study of Popular Culture*, 73, pp.171-182.

[43] Tolan, F. 2007. 'Sucking the Blood Out of Second Wave Feminism – Post-Feminist Vampirism in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*', *Gothic Studies*, 9(2), pp.45-57.

prior the action of the novel.[44] Or so it seems, until she turns up in the present day, alive and well. The novel looks at how Zenia worked her way into the women's lives and to what end, leading up to a meeting in the present and yet another death of Zenia, who falls from a balcony in mysterious (and unexplained) circumstances.

The title refers to the Grimms' fairy tale, 'The Robber Bridegroom',[45] which concerns a young woman betrothed to an apparently wealthy man by her father. The man in question is revealed to be a cannibal and a thief, who apparently plots to ensnare her by demanding she visit his home in the woods.

> This had scarcely happened when the godless band came home. They were dragging with them another maiden. They were drunk and paid no attention to her screams and sobs.
>
> They gave her wine to drink, three glasses full, one glass of white, one glass of red, and one glass of yellow, which caused her heart to break. Then they ripped off her fine clothes, laid her on a table, chopped her beautiful body in pieces and sprinkled salt on it.
>
> Grimm, 1857, 'The Robber Bridegroom'

Zenia the Invader

Zenia plays the part of Atwood's eponymous bride, who, inverting the gender roles of the Grimms' original tale, manipulates her way into others' lives and seduces (or metaphorically speaking 'devours') their men. However the nature of Zenia is more complex than simply that. Zenia is an invader; it has been noted that what we know about her is reminiscent of works such as *Dracula*. Coral Ann Howell commented that "*The Robber Bride* is […] structured around the adventures of a 'demonic woman' who has come all the way from central Europe" (Howell, 46) to the New World (Toronto specifically) and this is an idea central to the novel. Vampires being as they are a folkloric concept, of course, predate *Dracula*, and in terms of literature appear prominently not only in Romantic period works but also earlier eighteenth-century literature. However it is *Dracula* that appears to have entered popular

[44] Approximately 1985; the novel opens on "October 23, 1990" (*RB*, 4) and closes on "November 11, 1991" (*RB*, 558).

[45] The version by the Brothers Grimm is known in English as 'The Robber Bridegroom'. As reference is made to the children being read "those authentic fairy tales […], not a word changed, all the pecked-out eyes and cooked bodies and hanged corpses and red-hot nails intact" (*RB*, 351) we can presume that this is the version Atwood is referencing. As the Grimms were folklorists and their fairy tales are versions of existing folk tales, there are of course variants of the story that predate theirs.

consciousness as the archetypal vampire story, perhaps partially due to the character's cinematic life; Tod Browning's 1931 film featuring Béla Lugosi becoming a stock image of 'the vampire' in the public imagination despite bearing little resemblance to the character as described in the book;[46] and it is Dracula that foregrounds the vampire as a metaphor for foreign 'invaders'. Earlier English language works such as J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), John William Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1816) and James Malcolm Rymer's and Thomas Peckett Prest's *Varney the Vampire* (1847) do not put any such emphasis on the vampire characters' foreignness; indeed Polidori's Lord Ruthven and the eponymous Varney are themselves supposed to be British. One could make an argument for the titular Carmilla representing a corrupting (or 'corrupting') foreign force, although Britain does not figure greatly into the novella's narrative which takes place in Austria; the heroine, despite her English expatriate father, claims that "she never saw England" (Le Fanu, 5).

The specifics regarding Zenia cannot be pinned down (everyone receives a radically different version of her origin), but the idea that she is from Europe is a constant. 'Europe' is however a nebulous concept, and where in Europe varies wildly (she claims to be Russian, Romanian, German and Greek throughout the course of the novel). The assumption that she does actually come from Europe is perhaps flawed and it may instead simply be that the tales she tells are all Eurocentric for reasons of drama and romanticism. All of her supposed histories rely on tragedy and trauma, and pitch their melodrama just right so as to appeal to their target audience. These stories, more than being lies, are fantasies that people can buy into; Zenia has (supposedly) faced many hardships and stands strong and defiant.

> Look into any women's magazine, and you'll see a lot of vampy ads, especially for lingerie and perfume. The idea that such things are just male projections being imposed on women implies that women are zombies and idiots, with no minds of their own. The fact is that such images represent power. It may not be a kind of power you approve of, but it's power all the same.
>
> Bader, 198

[46] The film incidentally is based more closely on the 1924 stage adaptation than the original book, which made numerous changes, removing certain characters and changing the roles of others (Dr Seward, for example, is now the father of Harker's fiancée rather than one of Lucy's suitors) to the source material presumably for ease of staging for the most part, though some seem to serve less obvious purpose; Lucy and Mina are transposed, with the former being Jonathan Harker's fiancée and the latter Dracula's victim (the film reverts this change).

Even if she hasn't faced the hardships she claims, she nevertheless exerts the power to bend reality into something that benefits her. Atwood noted that amongst readers there had "been a surprising amount of sympathy for Zenia and identification with her" (Bader, 198). At the same time, it is important to recognise that she is the 'other', the outside force that disrupts and has devastating effects on the central trio's lives.

Ann Heilmann calls attention to the ephemeral nature of Zenia in her essay 'The Devil Herself? Fantasy, Female Identity and the Villainess Fatale in *The Robber Bride*' (2002). The questions surrounding her identity and motives are never answered in the novel, and Heilmann contemplates that she may not be constrained by 'real world' logic:

> The Gothic indeterminacy of Zenia's motives, origins and real identity (her ghostly intangibility signalled by her lack of a surname) and even the unverifiability of her actual bodily presence beyond and outside of her interactions with the three women act as metaphors for the instability of phallocentric logic and its binaries. As the embodiment of all that is repressed in society and the self, Zenia pries open the unconscious of each of the three women, yet herself remains always out of reach and inaccessible: not so much "gone forever" (as in "My Darling Clementine", Tony's memory of her drowned mother) as never really there in the first place, or only ever on the side of the psychic mirror.
>
> Heilmann, 175

Heilmann omits that, in addition to the three women and their lovers, Roz's son also has a run-in with Zenia, and the editor of Roz's magazine is present for one session of recounting her escapades, thereby suggesting that she does indeed have a verifiable bodily presence; but the point of her otherworldly nature is an interesting one. Zenia, like a vampire, requires invitation, her appearance changing every time she arrives. By the novel's climax, she is able to disregard time itself in presenting very different portraits of her life within the space of a few hours. However, while Zenia wreaks havoc, the reader is never in a position to understand her motives in doing so, and the timing of her appearances is always conveniently at a key point in the love lives of her marks (this includes that of Roz's son). Reflecting her lack of concrete identity, Zenia is not so much a person as an apparition, and as such does not have to be constrained by the conventional rules of (wo)man.

The vampiric nature of Zenia is made apparent from her first appearance; back from the dead supposedly, she strikes a glamorous figure, but nevertheless the novel manages to hint at her connections to Stoker's Count:

> She looks, as always, like a photo, a high-fashion photo done with hot light so that all the freckles and wrinkles are bleached out and only the basic features remain: in her case, the full red-purple mouth, disdainful and sad; the huge deep eyes, the finely arched eyebrows, the high cheekbones tinged with terracotta. And her hair, a dense cloud of it, blown around her head by the imperceptible wind that accompanies her everywhere, moulding her clothes against her body, fitfully moving the dark tendrils around her forehead, filling the air near her with the sound of rustling.
>
> […] It's true she's as beautiful as ever; but now Tony can detect a slight powdery dullness, like the bloom on a grape – a slight contracting of the pores, a shrinkage, as if some of the juice has been sucked out from under her skin.
>
> *RB*, 38-39

The "red-purple mouth" naturally calls attention to her (metaphorical) haematophagy with its bloody colour; Dracula similarly has "remarkable ruddiness" in his lips (Stoker, 28). However the focus on her hair is particularly interesting, as Dracula in the novel is notable for his hirsuteness. Dracula's hair is both plentiful and wild in a way that suggests his beastliness ("His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose, and with bushy hair that seemed to curl of its own profusion" (Stoker, 28)). Zenia is near perfectly coiffured; her eyebrows are "finely arched" and her hair, for all its being "blown around" by an "imperceptible wind", appears to be deliberately arranged so as to accentuate her beauty. The Count is animalistic, with his profuse hair (including "hairs in the centre of the palm"), "sharp white teeth" and long nails "cut to a sharp point" resembling claws (Stoker, 28). This is further accentuated by the suggestion that he literally turns into various animals, such as dogs, wolves, and (most famously) bats. In contrast to the Count's ugliness, Zenia has immense, appealing beauty. It appeals to the same sense of Old World glamour that is supposedly lacking in Canadian life as do the Gothic romances in *Lady Oracle* and, as I will go on to discuss, the house's elaborate décor in *The Blind Assassin*. She is the embodiment of a pining for something that never truly existed. To that end, her ephemeral nature makes sense; by representing something that is in essence a collective dream of society, she cannot be wholly corporeal herself. She apparently does not even necessarily have to be human either; Atwood's later short revisiting of

the characters, 'I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth' (2012), alleges Zenia's return in the guise of a dog. Despite criticism's focus on the novel's parallels with Dracula, one can also compare Zenia's captivating beauty to that of Carmilla, who is described as "the most beautiful creature" (Le Fanu, 32), "slender and wonderfully graceful" with "large, dark and lustrous" eyes and "rich very dark brown" hair which is "magnificently thick and long" (Le Fanu, 34), replete with a "smiling melancholy" (Le Fanu, 35).

As a character driven by her instinct and a force of nature, Atwood in interview linked Zenia to a long line of female characters; the stock *femmes fatales* "that haunted the second half of the nineteenth century, not only in literature but in art—the Pre-Raphaelites, art nouveau—and opera […], and ballet" (Bader, 197-198), thus explaining her beauty over Dracula's ugliness. She is transparently dangerous and inherently fascinating, and she can live her life in ways Tony, Charis and Roz can only dream of; she is both what they despise and what they want to be:

> Zenia is threatening not because she is European but because she represents a return of the repressed; she appeals directly to women's deepest fears and desires, just as she reflects fantasies of femininity from which women suffer as well as men.
>
> Howell, 47

In the case of *Dracula*, the vampire women, in particular Lucy, fill the niche of seductive beauty that the *femme fatale* typifies. Lucy, starting off as a seeming naïf, succumbs to her desires as she nears death and demands "in a soft voluptuous voice" never before "heard from her lips" (Stoker, 194) to be kissed by her fiancé. This being a far cry from the woman who cries having to see "a poor fellow, who you know loves you honestly, going away and looking all broken-hearted" (Stoker, 74). She returns after death, apparently more beautiful and seductive, not mention destructive, than ever, with reports saying that "even Ellen Terry[47] could not be so winningly attractive" (Stoker, 213).

Zenia's own lack of inhibition when it comes to following her desires is the key as it is the thing that causes fascination and alarm amongst other women; this mirrors

[47] Ellen Terry (1847-1928) was a pre-eminent actress in the Victorian period who gathered particular acclaim in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century for her Shakespearean roles.

reactions to the vampire Lucy, but also has echoes again of *Carmilla*, wherein Laura experiences conflicting feelings for the eponymous vampire:

> I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust. […] I was conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence. This I know is paradox, but I can make no other attempt to explain the feeling.
>
> Le Fanu, 37

The hold that Zenia has on the other characters is probably more important than her ostensible European-ness, however her 'histories' evoke a similar dream of the old world to the Gothic romances seen in *Lady Oracle*. Her life is full of intrigue and suffering, or at least it seems that way to the observer; the real Zenia is never truly revealed. She might have been a prostitute, a gypsy, or a Jew in Nazi Germany, but she always overcomes adversity (supposedly, anyway). These fit in well with their respective targets who seek to identify with what Zenia's selling, allowing her to make her move.

Just as Dracula came from the east to corrupt Victorian morals, so does Zenia come from Europe to wreak havoc with modern social mores. To what end Atwood has her do so is a subject that is often examined in critiques of the novel. For instance, Coral Anne Howell links it to the idea of Canada's increasing place on the world stage:

> Atwood's emphasis is no longer on Canada's separateness from the global community – politically, ecologically, or culturally – but on a common threat and on a common currency of Gothic narrative conventions which may be taken out to figure social and personal neuroses.
>
> Howell, 44

If we assume Zenia to represent Europe, then the novel is thus an examination of Canada's relationship with its ancestry and is thus thoroughly postcolonial. This ties in with the idea of Zenia being emblematic of the women's repressed desires, hopes and fears.

Zenia the Liberated

Fiona Tolan meanwhile takes a different tack and considers *The Robber Bride* to be about the relationship between second- and third-wave feminisms. The 'robbed' women exist in a state of camaraderie; they are always diplomatic with each other as part of the proverbial sisterhood. Zenia disregards such notions and is perfectly willing to use women as well as men to reach her goals:

> If Tony, Roz and Charis in *The Robber Bride* represent second wave feminism, and thus the 'New Victorians' of postfeminist argument, then their figuring of Zenia as a vampire can be read in terms of the same conservative anxiety with which the Victorians met Dracula.
>
> Tolan, 50

The 'New Victorians' to which Tolan alludes is a reference to a critical work by Rene Denfeld, written in 1995, that argues that feminism had (or has) become bogged down by "moral and spiritual crusade[s]" (Denfeld, 5) that were irrelevant to women's lives, or at least had become so by the 1990s. As such, Denfeld posits that that particular incarnation of feminism can be seen as analogous to the Victorians in its interest in good moral fortitude, and in *The Robber Bride* it is this that Zenia represents an attack upon.

Zenia however is also seductive in how she works her way into the main trio's lives. The women are willingly taken in by her glamour and her displays, because she represents who they long to be. Her stories are always indicative of who she's telling them to. Tony gets a story wherein she is the illegitimate daughter of a penniless Russian aristocrat who was displaced after the revolution and forced into prostitution to military men, and does the same to her daughter; this ties into Tony's own issues with her late overbearing mother, as well as her interest in historical conflicts.

When giving her history to Charis, Zenia recasts herself as the child of a Finnish communist and a "Roumanian gypsy" [sic; the novel is consistent in its use of the archaic 'Roumania' as opposed to the standard 'Romania'. This is perhaps another allusion to *Dracula* wherein the former spelling is used] (*RB*, 322) with powers of clairvoyance; the former dead due to war, the latter due to local superstition and hysteria revolving around the Roma people. Zenia naturally sees (supposedly) the end result of the locals' assault on her mother, a scarcely recognizable corpse. This

relating to Charis' interest in the occult along with her own family history of persecution (reference is made to the Fenian raids), as well as her relationships with her earthy grandmother and her mentally ill mother whom her aunt has committed and dies lobotomized.

In Roz's version, Zenia is of Jewish descent and born in Berlin as the Second World War hits; her family is captured except for her infant self, who is hidden by being suspended in a blanket on the washing line. Her gentile aunt flees the country with the baby via the black market, specifically the services of Roz's father. This plays into Roz's own mixed heritage and Jewish identity, as well as, of course, her feelings towards her father.

In each of these stories, Zenia has come through these past hardships and survived largely unscathed; she is the embodiment of the women's dreams. She is the confident and sexual woman that Tony wants to be. She, frail and ill, is someone for Charis to look after. She is glamorous yet wily as Roz desires to be. At the same time however, she embodies the ultimate vapidity of all these dreams; Tony's Zenia has little academic interest, Charis' has little spiritual interest, and Roz's no real interest in empowerment.

Note that these survivor narratives are the histories she gives to the female characters. At a certain point, Tony brings the subject of Zenia up to her partner who has a very different take on the matter, involving her having been molested as a child by a Greek Orthodox priest but no one would believe her due to it being a "very religious community" rendering her "frigid" (*RB*, 488):

> Tony could just see white-knight West, dutifully huffing and puffing away, giving it his best shot, trying to save Zenia from the evil spell cast by the wicked non-existent Greek Orthodox priest, with Zenia having the time of her life. Probably she told him she was faking orgasm to please him.
>
> *RB*, 489

In this, Zenia is the maiden in need of rescue, her 'virtue' compromised through no action of her own, thereby filling a very different fantasy to those she presents to the female characters; the passive victim as opposed to the defiant survivor. In the case of the women however, they do attain what they want following the previous time Zenia took her leave from their lives, at least to some degree; Tony gets her man and her

intellectual pursuits, Charis gets her daughter, Roz gets control of her business empire. Yet Zenia remains their image of their ideal selves, prompting a revival and examination of these feelings upon her return. As Howell notes:

> Atwood uses the Gothic villainess to highlight the way fantasy works, as fantasies of desirable femininity come back to haunt these women in the early 1990s.
>
> Howell, 47

The men of the novel are the weaker parties in their relationships, and all are desiring of something more; Mitch has designs on Roz's business, Billy essentially wants no responsibility, West wants to be the dashing hero rescuing the fair maiden; but none of the women are able (or perhaps willing) to afford them such things. They are thus convenient marks for Zenia, allowing for them to be stolen away and corrupted, and perhaps ultimately have the life drained from them, either metaphorically (as happens to Billy) or literally (Mitch). West's and Tony's relationship survives, and noticeably his desire is the only one that is not entirely selfish.

In this sense, his place in the novel is somewhat comparable to that of Mina's in *Dracula*. Mina finds herself the lone survivor of the eponymous Count's victims, and her ambitions are ultimately in the service of her husband rather than self-advancement ("I have been working very hard lately, because I want to keep up with Jonathan's studies, and I have been practicing shorthand very assiduously. When we are married I shall be able to be useful" (Stoker, 70)). Of course, West's dream is ultimately still a power fantasy rather than a wholly selfless enterprise.

Carol A. Senf, in her 1988 work *The Vampire in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*, notes that as part of the sexual imagery associated with the vampires in *Dracula* there is a critique of the burgeoning 'New Woman' of the period: "[Stoker] has his heroines choose the traditional roles of marriage and motherhood instead of sexual liberation. In fact, he is so horrified at sexual openness that he choses the female vampire as a shocking metaphor of the new liberated woman" (Senf, 64). While the focus here is on the sexual liberation side of the 'New Woman' phenomenon, being as it was one of the more scandalous elements and as such an easy target when decrying the movement's degeneracy, 'New Women' were in fact seeking roles outside of the ones traditionally ascribed to them by society. *Dracula*'s Mina has some superficial resemblance to the New Woman archetype, but it is not for

her own benefit and she settles into a traditional wife-and-mother role following her marriage. The inversion in *The Robber Bride* is that the men who fall prey to Zenia are seeking traditional male roles that are supposedly denied to them in their current relationships and this is what proves their downfall. While their partners have power over them, Zenia holds the most power of all.

While the earlier *Lady Oracle* contends with the Canadian heroine chasing after the vision of the outside world, in *The Robber Bride* the imagined world comes to Canada. Both serve to highlight the conflict between this romantic idea of the world and the reality. As such, they could easily both be seen as Neo-Victorian texts, in their critique of outdated ways of understanding the world; the focus in both is of the continuing presence of the Victorian in the present day.

4. *Alias Grace*

Given her position as a Canadian novelist, Margaret Atwood, perhaps obviously, frequently writes about the Canadian experience. This is perhaps most evident in *Surfacing*, which grapples directly with the concept of Canada and what makes it distinct from elsewhere (in particular, the United States). Other novels, such as *Lady Oracle* and *The Robber Bride*, include considerations of the country's relationship to the old world, with modern Canada being born out of historic European colonialism. However while Canada has significant historical links to the United Kingdom on account of its erstwhile status as a colony and its membership of the Commonwealth, the Canadian experience and relationship to the nineteenth century vary from those of the British. In this section, I will look at *Alias Grace* (1996), Atwood's novel that most explicitly considers the nineteenth century. First however I will briefly look at Atwood's poetry cycle, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), which consider the eponymous writer who is one of the pioneers of Canadian literature and whose recounting of the story of Grace Marks served as inspiration for multiple of Atwood's works. After this, I will look at *Alias Grace*'s unreliable narrator and compare it with a Victorian antecedent, the (theoretically) unreliable narrator of *Wuthering Heights*, seeing how Atwood uses these ideas to question the underlying idea of reliability of narration as well as the role that gender bias might play into these assumptions of trustworthiness.

Moodie, Atwood, and Grace Marks

As previously discussed in the introduction to this section of the thesis, a recurring angst present in Canadian literature concerns identity. Canada, as we know it today, was formed by the confederation of the erstwhile French and British colonies into a single entity, producing two competing influences within the country itself, but the two parent nations are cut off from the colony by the Atlantic. Additionally, the country directly borders the United States, which inevitably has an influence, desired or not, due to its proximity, as well as the First Nations people and the concept of the frontier. The question of identity however is vague, and Canadians can, and do, ponder who they are as a whole, and who they are specifically, as well as who they

are historically and who they are geographically. Many permutations of this question are considered in Atwood's *Alias Grace*.

Atwood notes in *Strange Things* (1995) that Canada has a strong tradition of women in the arts, although she says the prominence of women writers has been somewhat exaggerated; the early days of colonisation were marketed with ideas of the frontier and the wilds. Early female settlers were presumably dragged along by "circumstances and fate – namely their husbands" (*ST*, 117). She categorises early women writers in Canada[48] into three groups: "the tourist, the coper, and something we might call 'dismayed'" (*ST*, 118), exemplified by Anna Jameson, Catherine Parr Traill, and Susanna Moodie respectively.

Jameson ventured into the bush, and published her observations in 1838; however she was a well-to-do woman, the wife of the attorney general. Her trips were fully catered and she had attendants to deal with any hard labour that might have arisen, and having had her fill of nature she was "free to go back to Europe when she got tired of it, and of her husband, which she did" (*ST*, 118). Traill and Moodie were less affluent and had to actively adapt to life in the Canadian bush. The women were sisters, but although they both wrote of their experiences, they dealt with the subject in rather different ways. Traill tended to write pragmatically of the frontier life; discussing recipes, furnishings, etc. Moodie wrote instead in a more Gothicised style, full of imagery and metaphor.

Voicing the Past through Poetry: *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

In 1970, Atwood published a cycle of poetry entitled *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* wherein she looks at events from Moodie's life (and beyond) with a particular examination of the hardships faced as an early Canadian settler. Moodie was born in England, in Suffolk, in 1803, and emigrated to Canada with her husband and daughter in 1832. While she had written works prior (including during her life in England), she is best known for her 1852 work, *Roughing It in the Bush: or, Forest Life in Canada*. Written for an international audience, Moodie's book chronicled her life in Canada and portrayed the experience with considerable hardship. Atwood commented on

[48] Atwood makes the distinction here with 'Canadian women writers' "because none of these women grew up in Canada; but then neither did a lot of people who have written about the country" (*ST*, 117).

Moodie's experience in her 1972 book *Survival: a Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*:

> Towards the middle of the [nineteenth-]century Nature's personality underwent a change; she remained a female deity, but she became redder in tooth and claw as Darwinism infiltrated literature. However, most of the English immigrants were by that time safely in Canada, their heads filled with diluted Burke and Wordsworth, encountering lots of Nature. If Wordsworth was right, Canada ought to have been the Great Good Place. At first, complaining about the bogs and mosquitoes must have been like criticizing the authority of the Bible.
>
> *Surv*, 46

Moodie, Atwood posits, must have had considerable difficulty maintaining such 'faith' when "Nature fails time and time again to come through for her" (*Surv*, 47). As a result, she winds up with a peculiar love/hate relationship with Canada.

In her poems, Atwood considers the events of Moodie's life and how they affected her. The cycle begins with her disembarking at Quebec, alighting to a desolate landscape, continuing to her death and beyond. The poems consider both the difficulties that arose from being an early settler in Canada from a female perspective and how Canada the European colony was formed, as well as the impact the colonial experience had on modern Canada (circa 1970). Written entirely from the perspective of Moodie, Atwood imagines her sense of alienation in the new world. The bush is a place of isolation and loneliness as the Moodies appear to become increasingly estranged.

> At noon he will
> return; or it may be
> only my idea of him
> I will find returning
> With him hiding behind it.
>
> *JoSM*, 58

As one might tell from the above extract, Atwood does not use a form, such as the Browningesque dramatic monologue popular in the mid-nineteenth century, of the sort with which Moodie herself would have been familiar. Instead Atwood voices her using short sentences with breaks in unnatural-seeming places, in verse which owes

more to early twentieth-century poets such as H.D.[49] This serves to emphasise the sense of malaise that pervades the work. Ironically however it is after the return to 'civilisation' that events take a darker and more violent tone, as later poems consider the deaths of her children, a retrospective on the war of 1837, and the killing of a black man by a mob.

A memoir of Moodie's that appears to have particularly piqued Atwood's interest is her recollection of seeing the (alleged) murderess Grace Marks; once at the penitentiary, another time at the asylum. The latter of these is alluded to in the poem 'Visit to Toronto, with Companions':[50]

> On the second floor there were
> women crouching, thrashing,
> tearing off their clothes, screaming;
> to us they paid little attention.
>
> *JoSM*, 78

In 1843, Grace Marks and James McDermott were convicted for the murder of their employer, Thomas Kinnear, and were suspected of murdering his housekeeper and apparent lover, Nancy Montgomery (as they were judged guilty of the former and sentenced to death, the authorities did not bother trying them for the latter). Marks' sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, although she was later pardoned, following which she left for the United States at which point records regarding her end. Her story is one that Atwood has returned to several times throughout her career; she had written a teleplay on the murders, 'The Servant Girl', for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1974,[51] as well as an unproduced stage play. Both of these are based heavily on the version of events written by Susanna Moodie (published in her memoir *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush* (1853))[52]. *Alias Grace*

[49] 'H.D.' was the *nom de plume* of American born poet Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961).

[50] Although Marks is not explicitly mentioned in the poem, Atwood comments in the notes at the end of *Alias Grace* that "[s]hortly after she saw Grace in the penitentiary, Susanna Moodie encountered her in the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, where she was confined to the violent ward. Moodie's first-hand observations are generally trustworthy, so if she reports a shrieking, capering Grace, that is no doubt what she saw" (*AG*, 538-539). The vignette of the 'violent ward' in *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* makes explicit mention of Marks, "no longer sad and despairing, but lighted up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like merriment" (Moodie, Chap.XV), and so we can assume that this is what Atwood is alluding to in the poem.

[51] Broadcast at 9pm EST on 28/02/1974 as part of the *The Play's the Thing* strand.

[52] Note that Moodie's writings were intended for an international (primarily British) audience rather than a Canadian one; to this end, she includes a summary of the crime, stating "As many of my

however views Moodie's account much more sceptically, and in her postscript Atwood notes that while "Moodie's first-hand observations are generally trustworthy", her "retelling of the murder is a third-hand account" and that "Moodie can't resist the potential for literary melodrama" (*AG*, 538). While Moodie identifies Marks as the "prime mover" (*AG*, 538), she also includes outright fabrication.[53] In 2013's *Re-Writing Women into Canadian History: Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert***,** Elodie Rousselot points out a peculiarity in both sides of the argument surrounding Marks' potential guilt; both her defenders and her prosecutors relied heavily on stereotypes and assumptions about women to make their case:

> [Grace's] lawyer drew on popular ideas of feminine innocence to argue that Grace would have been unable to plot the murders. […] This also had the effect of shifting the blame more fully onto McDermott […]. The novel exploits this gender imbalance in refusing to reveal whether those nineteenth-century ideas of feminine innocence were rightly placed in Grace's case. […] [T]he novel manipulates and challenges contemporary views about nineteenth-century gender discrimination by presenting such discrimination from an unexpected vantage point.
>
> Rousselot, 92

Grace's sentence is commuted because she, as a woman, could not possibly engineer such a horrific crime. Her relative 'innocence' is predicated on the myth of the inherent purity and virtue of women. While discussing *The Robber Bride*, Atwood outlined the problem with such thinking, and perhaps coincidentally how it links to the time period of the Kinnear murders:

> The idea that women are nicer, "gooder," and better-behaved than men is really a mid-nineteenth-century one. If all women really were like that, they wouldn't have inspired so much literature telling them that that was the way they *ought* to be. Pedestals do place one higher up, but there isn't a lot of room on them to move around. Define women as all together innocent, and you define them as potential victims—you limit their roles in literature to suffering and running away. Also if women are good by nature, they have no free will. The power to act must include the power to act badly.
>
> Bader, 197

English readers may never have heard even the name of this remarkable criminal, it may not be uninteresting to them to give a brief sketch of the events which placed her here" (Moodie).

[53] Atwood highlights a particular scene in Moodie's account: "[T]he cutting of Nancy's body into four quarters is not only pure invention but pure Harrison Ainsworth" (*AG*, 538).

Though these comments were made in an interview at the time when *The Robber Bride* was published, they have a very clear implication for the form and concerns of *Alias Grace*, which Atwood would have been thinking about, if not working on, at the time. On the other side, there is the idea that Grace must surely have plotted the murder of Nancy because she was jealous of her fineries and her relationship with their master (with whom Grace was supposedly smitten) despite being of similar social class, and manipulated McDermott into assisting her, who proceeded to kill Kinnear in order to prevent him from taking any action. Her supposed guilt is based on generic negative feminine stereotypes such as jealousy and, of course, is centred on a man.

The story appears to have struck a chord with Atwood, as in addition to her poems, the teleplay and the stage script, she later explored the topic in some depth via the novel *Alias Grace*.

Alias Grace – (Neo-)Victorianism and (Post-)Modernism

Alias Grace is Atwood's tenth published novel. It considers the case of Grace Marks and the Kinnear/Montgomery murders, and the question as to Marks' actual role in the murders; was she an active party or an accessory? While Atwood considers the question, she is less concerned with the actual answer; it is at this point unknowable, and perhaps unimportant to modern understanding whether this woman did in fact murder her employer.

The novel picks up towards the end of her imprisonment; the seemingly benign Grace becomes the subject of a young (and fictional) alienist, Simon Jordan, who attempts to dig into her past. Grace is willing to humour him, but at the centre of the narrative is the question of the veracity of her storytelling.

Atwood herself comments that *Alias Grace* is not truly a 'Victorian' novel; despite its period setting, it is very much a product of late twentieth-century literary styles and ideas rather than a recreation of the nineteenth-century form:

> In my fiction, Grace too – whatever else she is – is a story-teller, with strong motives to narrate, but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives. … In a Victorian novel, Grace would say, 'Now it all comes back to me'; but as *Alias Grace* is not a Victorian novel, she does not say that; and if she did, would we – any longer – believe her?'
>
> Atwood, 1998b, 1515

The novel uses multiple perspectives, each with their own limitations. The idea of the overtly 'unreliable narrator' is uncommon in the Victorian novel, but came into fashion in postmodernist literature in the latter half of the twentieth century with novels such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). That is not to say that concept is not used in earlier work. The narrator of *Vanity Fair* (1848) openly omits some of the more scandalous parts of anti-heroine Becky Sharp's story, declaring "when Becky is out of the way, be sure she is not particularly well employed, and that the less that is said about her doings is in fact the better" (Thackeray, 621). Another noteworthy early example is Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) which made, at the time, controversial use of unreliable narration; the narrator is revealed to have been the murderer and has been obfuscating his role.

Alias Grace demonstrates the issue of narrative uncertainty directly: the text includes Grace's internal monologue (including the story that she tells Jordan), which is rendered in the first person; a third person perspective following Jordan; and numerous epistles and articles, both real and fictionalised. Switching between different perspectives is not unknown in Victorian (or indeed earlier) fiction; two well-known examples are Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868). Emily Brontë makes use of three narrators over the course of *Wuthering Heights*; the frequency with which they recur in the novel serves to disorientate the reader with the apparent intended effect of causing the reader to consider whether events should be accepted or not.

Grace's internal monologue is not written in the manner of a Victorian novel; that she is actively crafting a narrative is highlighted from the off when she says of the murders: "[t]his is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story" (*AG*, 7). We note that she only says that this is what she told Jordan, not that this is what transpired; from the start she presents herself to the reader as a narrator who chooses what to she is going to tell.

The reader is privy to her thoughts, but they are in no way an absolute reflection of what is transpiring. Grace thinks things that she admits she would never say aloud, and openly admits she might lie in her retelling of past events; further to which, her narration has numerous holes where there are gaps in her knowledge. Glaser notes:

> [Grace] tell[s] [her] story in covert and artistically modified ways: [she] change[s] the known or official versions of [her life] through the suppression and omission of some aspects, the obfuscation of other parts, and an inclination to allusiveness.
>
> Glaser, 97

We should also make note of the tense in which it is written; the novel, including Grace's first person narrative, is presented in the present tense as opposed to being a past tense reflection seen in most Victorian fiction written from the first person perspective. Unlike, by way of example, Dickens' eponymous David Copperfield, Grace is only aware of what has transpired at that point in the narrative and not of any events that may occur later (though, of course, Atwood is), and even then she is limited by her situation, being as she is an inmate of the Kingston Penitentiary.

She openly admits that she'll weave her history as told to the doctor for dramatic effect, the results of which may or may not be accurate to the actual events. During one of her first interactions with Jordan, she claims that "perhaps [she] will tell [him] lies" (*AG*, 46), and we are alerted in the novel that what is presented as fact may not necessarily be so; the Rev. Verringer, one of Grace's (fictional) defenders, suggests that Moodie's "colourful" (*AG*, 90) account of the case is influenced by her fondness for Dickens. When Jordan brings up Moodie's assertion that Grace claimed Nancy's "two bloodshot and blazing eyes were following her around" (*AG*, 220), Verringer retorts that he "seem[s] to recall a similar pair of eyes in [*Oliver Twist*], also belonging to a dead female called Nancy" (*AG*, 222).

> '[…] Nevertheless, one cannot quibble with Mrs. Moodie's morals. But I am sure you take my meaning. Mrs. Moodie is a literary lady, and like all such, and indeed like the sex in general, she is inclined to –'
>
> 'Embroider,' says Simon.
>
> 'Precisely,' says Reverend Verringer.
>
> *AG*, 223

This exchange is echoed by Grace in a quite literal fashion. She might not literally embroider, but she does engage herself in sewing a quilt during her sessions with Dr Jordan. This ties in with Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, wherein the women of the first floor of the asylum sit sewing: "they looked at us sadly, gently, / answered questions" (*JoSM*, 78). This also has broader links to the association of women sewing with the construction of narrative; in *The Odyssey*, a story that Atwood would later revisit,[54] Penelope maintains literal control over her life through her weaving and unpicking of a shroud.

While Moodie's rendition of the narrative is posited within the novel as Dickensian, when Grace gives her 'own' version of her history, a more logical Victorian antecedent is Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*. Unlike Grace, Nelly is not among the central figures in the story, but questions do arise as to the reliability of her narration. Her version of events is never directly questioned in Brontë's novel; for most events she describes, there is no alternative narrative presented to counter her own; but she is also oddly aware of events to which she logically shouldn't be privy. The question of *Wuthering Heights*' narration is further complicated by the framing device of Lockwood; while the bulk of the novel is told, ostensibly, through Nelly's perspective, her narrative is apparently being reported by him. How faithful then is his representation of Nelly's representation of the story? Is Nelly distorting events, and is Lockwood distorting them further? The question arises as to whether there is an awareness of this potential flaw in the storytelling, both within the narrative itself and without. Lockwood seems content to take Nelly's story at face value, however whether or not the reader does, or indeed is meant to, is open to debate.

Unlike Nelly in *Wuthering Heights* however, Grace is the central figure of *Alias Grace* and played some role in the events that transpired, and there are many different views within the novel as to what that role could have been. Grace, for her part, avoids alluding to events of which she shouldn't be aware. Whether this is because she is indeed unaware is open to question; her internal monologue includes references that it seems likely she should not know given her probable education, so it seems feasible she would have the nous to be aware if she knows something that should be

[54] *The Penelopiad* (2005) is a telling of Homer's *Odyssey* from the perspective of Odysseus' wife, Penelope. The novel was commissioned as part of Scottish publisher Canongate's *The Myths* series that deals in assorted mythological tales rewritten by contemporary authors. Atwood's novel served as one of the series' inaugural titles, alongside Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* (which concerns Atlas and Heracles) and Karen Armstrong's *A Short History of Myth*.

kept quiet. When Jordan's introduction to himself includes the claim to have been "going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it" (*AG*, 42-43), she immediately recognises it as a quotation from the Book of Job[55] and that it means "[Jordan] has come to test [her]" (*AG*, 43); "But I don't say this. I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practised" (*AG*, 43). While Nelly's narration is filtered through Lockwood's, Grace is keen to keep full control of hers.

The side of the narrative focussing on Jordan is told, as mentioned, via the third person. Like Grace's sections however, it is written in the present tense, and it is capable of presenting Jordan's thoughts, but not those of others. It as a result has a similar feel of detachment, however while we are openly invited to question Grace, the potential inaccuracies of Jordan's narrative are never actively commented on, giving the impression, perhaps because of its precedents in Victorian literature among other forms of writing, that it is definitive, though it becomes apparent that it is not when it is contrasted with Grace's. The 'definitive' nature of his narration is linked with his maleness; in the logic of the world of the novel, which is of course being questioned throughout, his rendition of events is ostensibly inherently more trustworthy than a woman's, as highlighted by the aforementioned claim that "the [female] sex in general [...] is inclined to" (*AG*, 223) weave and 'embroider' stories. He is after all setting out to write up the definitive version of Grace's case and to cure her supposed hysteria; a form of madness etymologically linked to femaleness.[56]

The supposed trustworthiness of his narration overlooks that he makes assumptions about characters based on tenuous evidence; it seems they are instead projections of his own subconscious thoughts. His first meeting with Rev. Verringer has him come to the conclusion that the man must be in love with Grace, why else "his indignation, his fervour, his assiduousness, his laborious petitions and committees; and above all, his desire to believe her innocent"? (*AG*, 91). A man has to have an ulterior motive to aiding a woman. His studies of alienism serve largely to allow him to feel a sense of superiority, but they also serve to highlight his misogyny.

[55] The line appears in Job twice, firstly at 1:7 and later at 2:2. It is rendered in the King James Bible as: "And the LORD said unto Satan, From whence comest thou? And Satan answered the LORD, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it" (The Bible, Job, 1:7).

[56] The Oxford English Dictionary gives the etymology of 'hysteria' as "formed as abstract [substantive] to HYSTERIC"; itself from Greek, meaning "belonging to the womb, suffering in the womb". Hysteria, it goes on to state, "was originally thought to be due to a disturbance of the uterus and its functions". (Simpson *et al*, vol.VII, 586).

Rousselot links Dora, his landlady's maid, to Freud's infamous case study of the same name[57]; "Dora's "scowling" expression and "sense of disapproving outrage," the signs of resistance to Dr. Jordan, if only on a domestic level, could be echoing the professional frustration the real Dora caused nineteenth-century psychoanalyst Dr. Freud" (Rousselot, 97). Ironically she is one of the few women whom he fails to sexualise. The scene in which he attempts to do so reveals his attitude towards women, reducing them to commodity. For Dora's part, he might not be successful in envisioning her as a prostitute, but she is nonetheless likened to an object.

> [Jordan] tried to imagine [Dora] as a prostitute – he often plays this private mental game with various women he encounters – but he can't picture any man actually paying for her services. It would be like paying to be run over by a wagon, and would be, like that experience, a distinct threat to the health.
>
> *AG*, 65-66

Dora wears her disdain for Jordan on her sleeve, and he returns in kind (or vice versa), but more polite (and attractive; he makes much of how unappealing Dora is) women are by his reckoning desiring of him. This may or may not be true; he portrays his landlady and the governor's daughters as having an unwanted interest in him romantically and sexually, but the reader only truly has his word to go on.

This is again reminiscent of a narrator of *Wuthering Heights*, this time Lockwood. Much like how Lockwood hails from the more cosmopolitan south rather than that novel's Yorkshire moors, Jordan is too an outsider, being as he is from America, a burgeoning superpower and more cosmopolitan than Toronto, but still backward by Jordan's standards ("As for society, I must report that there are pretty girls here as elsewhere, albeit dressed in the Paris fashions of three years ago, which is to say the New York fashions of two" (*AG*, 61)). Lockwood, for his part, is a poor judge of character, his impression of Heathcliff being that the latter's moroseness (of which he says "some people might suspect [as being due to] a degree of under-bred pride", though he instinctually believes it's "nothing of the sort" (E. Brontë, 5)) is due to "an aversion to showy displays of feeling – to manifestations of mutual kindliness"

[57] 'Dora' (a pseudonym) was a patient treated by Freud for hysteria, and among his first published case studies. Reportedly a friend of her father made advances on her, whereupon she slapped him. She claimed that said friend's wife was her father's mistress, and that her father was trying to pawn her off in exchange. Freud posited that she was repressing desires for her father, the friend, and even the mistress. She broke off the therapy.

and that he would "love and hate, equally under cover" (E. Brontë, 5-6). The novel proceeds to completely undermine this impression of him. Atwood is seldom so forward in highlighting the problems with Jordan's impressions. Jordan is, of course, a much more active participant in the narrative than Lockwood is; he plays a major part in the core story, and comes into it from a position of power. He has, or so it seems, the ultimate decision regarding Grace's fate. The largely impotent Lockwood is blind to the contempt in which he is held by the denizens of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, and to the lack of power he has over them; he is unable even to convince Nelly to serve dinner at a time he'd prefer, stating that he dines "between twelve and one o'clock" because she "could not, or would not comprehend my request that I might be served at five" (Bronte, 8). While Jordan also enjoys trouble with the help, he is nevertheless a respectable figure being as he is a foreign doctor (and eligible bachelor), and as such is a potentially dangerous figure, at least so far as Grace is concerned.

Obviously his perception of Grace is skewed, as evidenced by her practiced "stupid look" (AG, 43) and his tendency to see only what she wants him to, which may not necessarily be what he wants to, much as Lockwood only apparently sees what Nelly wants him to. This is shown literally in Jordan's first encounter with Grace; he initially sees her as if "a nun in a cloister, a maiden in a towered dungeon, awaiting the next day's burning at the stake, or else the last-minute champion come to rescue her" with a "timorous hunch of the shoulders", arms tight to her "thin body", "long wisps of auburn hair escaping" from her cap, and eyes "enormous in the pale face and dilated with fear, or with mute pleading", all of which he categorises as "as it should be" (*AG*, 68). We might notice here that the two roles he ascribes; the "nun in a cloister," and imprisoned maiden awaiting either rescue or immolation, are somewhat contradictory images. A cloistered nun would, one assumes, typically be in such a scenario of her own free will and not necessarily desirous of 'rescue'. When she steps out of the light, she immediately cuts a different figure: "straighter, taller, more self-possessed" with "less escaped hair than he [Jordan] thought" and her eyes "frankly assessing him […] as if she were contemplating the subject of some unexplained experiment; as if it were he, and not she, who was under scrutiny" (*AG*, 68). As the 'hero', he should be beyond judgement, but Grace assesses him anyway (as indeed will the reader who is privy to his thoughts).

Note that in Jordan's initial glimpse of her wherein he sees her as a maiden in need of saving, Grace is illuminated by the window light. The second, more ambiguous (and accurate) image comes after she steps out of the light, not the other way around. It suits Jordan's objectives for her to be a passive and victimised figure; he does after all intend to make a name for himself by writing up the definitive version of her case, along with how he 'cured' her; to this end, he is 'blinded by the light', as it were. While, as a rule, the only other perspective we see is that of Grace, it does not seem a stretch that his perceptions of the other characters, the women in particular, are similarly coloured by expectation and bias.

The dynamic of Jordan and Grace could be compared to that of Walser and Fevvers from Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, at least initially. The male characters seek to define the absolute versions of the female characters for their own gain, however the women refuse to relinquish control of their own narratives, at least in the long term. At the climax of *Alias Grace*, Grace is (supposedly) hypnotised in a bid to reveal the seemingly repressed memories of her crime, only to be seemingly possessed by the ghost of her former friend Mary Whitney who herself confesses to the crime, having taken over Grace's body at the time of the murders. The veracity of this event is left ambiguous, although given the rapid shift in tone it presents,[58] it seems a reasonable assertion that this is all a charade and Grace is in fact entirely in control. Regardless, the event spells the end of Jordan and Grace's association. By the end of the novel, Jordan has been injured in the American Civil War, the trauma having a deleterious result for his experiences in Canada and leaving him to the machinations of his overbearing mother. Grace meanwhile is eventually released, and leaves for the United States; the novel closes with her making a quilt from material (i.e. her memories) accrued over the course of her story.

> But three of the triangles in my Tree [of Paradise] will be different. One will be white, from the petticoat I still have that was Mary Whitney's; one will be faded yellowish, from the prison night-dress I begged as a keepsake when I left there. And the third will be a pale cotton, a pink and white floral, cut from the dress of Nancy's that she had on the first day I

[58] While superstitions recur throughout the novel, such as the notion of "open[ing] the window to let out the soul" (*AG*, 139) upon death, and the Hallowe'en custom of throwing an apple peel over one's shoulder "[a]nd it will spell out the initial of the man you will marry, and tonight you will dream about him" (*AG*, 191-192), other than the climactic séance there is nothing definitively supernatural in the book. However, consider as well that the results of the apple peel prove accurate, suggesting that the preternatural does exist within the world of the novel.

> was at Mr. Kinnear's, and that I wore on the ferry to Lewiston, when I was running away.
>
> I will embroider around each one of them with red feather stitching, to blend them in as part of the pattern.
>
> And so we will all be together.
>
> *AG*, 534

This linking of personal narrative with identity and history is one that recurs in Atwood's work. *Alias Grace* is, at time of writing, her only novel set actually within the Victorian period, but the use of storytelling as a means of relating to one's history is present in many of her novels, from early works such as *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle* through to *The Blind Assassin* and beyond.

5. *The Blind Assassin*

First published in 2000, *the Blind Assassin* is the final book by Atwood which I will be looking at chronologically, as well as arguably the most immediately well received, winning as it did that year's Booker prize. This chapter demonstrates the ways in which *The Blind Assassin* alludes to the work of the Brontës, and the ways in which it discusses the Canadian legacy of the Victorian age more generally through the architecture of the family home, Avilion. This acts as a counterpoint to the novel's twentieth-century setting. Consequently the chapter looks at how this spectre of the nineteenth century serves to inform the novel, despite the 'action' taking place in the more modernist interwar era.

The novel tells the story of Iris Chase, an octogenarian woman and daughter of a once prominent family of industrialists; and the story of her family, in particular her younger sister, Laura, who died in debatably suspicious circumstances shortly after the end of the Second World War. In the interwar period, Iris is forced to marry Richard Griffen, an influential rival of her father's, in order to secure the family's financial future. Both she and her sister however are smitten with a local communist agitator and writer, Alex Thomas. This history is related by the older woman, contrasting the safe mundanity of the modern world with the oft-sinister decadence of the interbellum, interspersed with newspaper clippings and extracts from the eponymous '*The Blind Assassin*', a novel ostensibly written by Laura that seemingly reveals the truths of their lives, in particular a secret affair with an author. However, the book is really written by Iris, chronicling her affair with the two sisters' paramour. He is killed during the war, seemingly influencing Laura's suicide. After her death, Iris finds that her husband had been molesting Laura, and publishes the novel in her sister's name in a bid to drive him to despair.

For our purposes, we need not look too closely at the novel within the novel (or the novel within that). The titular '*Blind Assassin*' is, appropriate to the time period that it was ostensibly written, more influenced by modernist trends, between the intimate and highly sexualised nature of its narrative and its oblique structure (complete with its two characters being simply named 'he' and 'she'). Instead I will focus on the 'real world' narrative supplied by the two outermost layers of the text, which favours a somewhat more traditional structural mode.

Looking at the style of the novel, we can compare its first person history to *Jane Eyre*, arguably one of the most defining female narratives in English literature. Indeed *The Blind Assassin* contains a seeming allusion to one of *Jane Eyre*'s most (in)famous plot points: the 'madwoman in the attic'. While this has entered common parlance in literary criticism, popularised by Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's earlier discussed book of criticism, in the case of Atwood's novel, Iris' husband has a dark secret not in a previous wife but in his sister-in-law. More literally, there is a sequence wherein Iris and Laura stow their beloved Alex in the attic of their house in a bid to protect him. Beyond the Gothic aesthetic however, *Jane Eyre* is also of note with regard to *The Blind Assassin* for its innovation in first person narrative. Brontë's novel is typically very careful to limit Jane's understanding to her own experience; she only ever reports what either she sees for herself or what she has explicitly been told by others. Compare this to Nelly Dean's narrative in *Wuthering Heights*, which is filled with details that are spoken of authoritatively but of which it seems unlikely that she should have any first-hand knowledge of whatsoever.[59] John Mullan, in a series of articles on *The Blind Assassin* for *The Guardian*, explicitly names *Jane Eyre* as a point of comparison: "Jane Eyre, supposedly writing years afterwards, recalls pages of precise and passionate dialogue with Mr Rochester. Doubt her record and the fiction crumbles" (Mullan). He goes on to state that "Atwood's narrator does not have consistent recall. There are novels, like […] *Jane Eyre*, that simply require us to suspend disbelief about the narrator's memory, but *The Blind Assassin* does not" (Mullan).

The narrative supplied by Iris Chase follows a similar pattern to Jane's; the novel's perspective is truly first person, with her knowledge being limited by both her own experience and by what she is told by other characters. Unlike Jane however, Iris tends to be on the receiving end of misinformation; if the other characters wish Jane to be kept in the dark about something, they will typically omit it entirely, whereas other characters in Atwood's novel are perfectly willing to deceive Iris in order to prevent her from seeing the truth. This is oftentimes not entirely successful; she

[59] Even if we accept her role as confidante, it feels unlikely that Nelly, as a servant, would be allowed to talk to Catherine as she does at several points in the novel, especially considering the latter's temperament. For example, when discussing a potential marriage to Edgar Linton, Nelly says to her mistress "[t]o be sure, considering the exhibition you performed in his presence this afternoon, I might say it would be wise to refuse him – since he asked you after that, he must either be hopelessly stupid, or a venturesome fool" (E. Brontë, 78).

frequently has suspicions as to the veracity of what she is told, but typically lacks the opportunity or will to press the issue.

> I fretted and fretted about Laura. I turned Winifred's story about her this way and that, looking at it from every angle. I couldn't quite believe it, but I couldn't disbelieve it either.
>
> *BA*, 538

The other key structural difference is in how the story is reported. While both Brontë's and Atwood's stories are written from the perspective of the protagonist looking back on past events, *Jane Eyre*'s narrative is strictly linear, with later events seemingly never directly colouring Jane's recollections, despite their being clearly described from an adult perspective. This is not true of Iris, whose experiences and later knowledge are reflected in the tale she weaves, foreshadowing events that occur later in the story. Beyond which, the said story is framed by her modern life, a sharp contrast to the one that she once led, serving the reader some intrigue as to how her world changed so dramatically, going as she does from a debutante and society wife to a lonely and comparatively poor old woman. It should be noted that Iris' story is, within the conceit of the novel, written with the assumption that it will be read; her thoughts are addressed to someone, although she is not necessarily aware of this throughout. *Jane Eyre* famously features the line "Reader, I married him" (C. Brontë, 448) as part of its conclusion, as well as "[y]ou have not quite forgotten little Adèle, have you, reader?" (C. Brontë, 450), addressing the audience directly. *The Blind Assassin* too addresses its reader, however the imagined reader is not the one literally reading the novel, but rather Iris' estranged granddaughter. Why indeed should Iris wish to reveal her personal narrative except to such a person? The *real* reader is irrelevant to Iris; the conceit that she is addressing them, seen in *Jane Eyre*, is abandoned, or rather proven false. Iris has very specific (though perhaps not entirely accurate even within the world of the novel; her granddaughter was taken by Iris' sister-in-law, Winifred, in 1975 and they have had little interaction) ideas about who her reader is, whereas Jane's is but a featureless audience surrogate.

The chronicle of the Chase sisters' early life takes a somewhat Gothicised approach. While the novel doesn't present itself as overtly Gothic, it has been identified as a

"Gothic tale" (Wisker, 2012, 138)[60] and the stylistic trappings are present in what we see of Avilion, the family's increasingly neglected abode, which falls apart in synchronicity with the Chases and their fortunes. In effect isolated from the world in a big house with little guidance, theirs is a free run of their own imagination and fantasy,[61] as they, Laura especially, come to their own conclusions about the world in which they exist, only for it to be gradually taken away from them.

> It isn't a particularly elegant house, but it was once thought imposing in its way – a merchant's place, with a curved driveway leading to it, a stumpy Gothic turret, and a wide semi circular spooled verandah overlooking the two rivers, where tea was served to ladies in flowered hats during the languid summer afternoons at the century's turn. […]
>
> There was a vast dim dining room with William Morris wallpaper, the Strawberry Thief design, and a chandelier entwined with bronze water-lilies, and three high stained-glass windows, shipped in from England, showing episodes from the story of Tristan and Iseult (the proffering of the love potion, in a red ruby cup; the lovers, Tristan on one knee, Iseult yearning over him with her yellow hair cascading – hard to render in glass, a little too much like a melting broom; Iseult alone, dejected, in purple draperies, a harp nearby).
>
> *BA*, 72-73

The house is very much a composite of latter-day Victorian stylistic ideals, constructed to the plans of the sisters' late grandmother, the daughter of an established but since penniless Quebecois family, married off to the nouveau riche Chases with the expectation she would "refine this money, like oil" (*BA*, 74). Much therefore is made of culture; "people believed, then, that Culture could make you better – a better person. They believed it could uplift you, or the women believed it. They hadn't yet seen Hitler at the opera house" (*BA*, 73-74).

The house is as such littered with classically themed paraphernalia juxtaposed with then more contemporary objects, as reflected by the dining room's scenes from

[60] In particular, by Sharon Rose Wilson in her 2008 essay 'Fairy tales, myths, and magic photographs in Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*' (in: Appleton, S. ed. 2008. *Once Upon A Time: Myth, Fairy Tales and Legends in Margaret Atwood's Writing*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. pp.74-114.), but also Helena Hytinnen ('The dead are in the hands of the living: memory haunting storytelling in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*'. 2006. In: J. Moss & T. Kozakwich. ed. 2006. *Margaret Atwood: The Open Eye*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press. pp.373-383.) and Karen F. Stein ('A left-handed story: *The Blind Assassin*'. 2003. In: S.R. Wilson. ed. 2003. *Textual Assassinations*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. pp.135-153.) also comment on the Gothic nature of the novel.

[61] The situation of the Chase family perhaps echoes the Brontë siblings' close knit and isolated nature, which gave rise to the fantasy land of 'Gondal' in their juvenilia.

'Tristan and Iseult', traced to the twelfth century, and the 'Strawberry Thief', first exhibited in 1883. The Victorian age was a great one for 'rediscovering' classical figures; indeed in the mid-nineteenth century, Tristan and Iseult were the subject of poems by Tennyson and Arnold, among others, and famously an opera by Wagner.[62]

The story of Tristan and Iseult concerns a knight and a maiden, respectively. The former is tasked with escorting the latter from Ireland to wed the King of Cornwall, however along the way they ingest a love potion (the circumstances behind this turn of events vary depending on the version). While Iseult marries the king, she and Tristan carry on their love affair. Eventually the King finds out, and seeks to punish them. The pair attempt to escape, however peace is made when Tristan agrees to return Iseult to her husband and leave the country.

Popular Victorian usage of the tale conflates it with the Arthurian legends, tying to the house's moniker; itself, we are informed, derived from Tennyson's rendition of '*Morte d'Arthur*' (*BA*, 76). This is also an emblem of the house's place in the world; Avilion, or Avalon, is final resting place of Arthur and where his legend, and era, draws to a close.

> Avilion was completed in 1889, and christened by Adelia. She took the name from Tennyson:
>
> > The island-valley of Avilion;
> > Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
> > Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
> > Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns
> > And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea, …
>
> She had this quotation printed on the left-hand inner side of her Christmas cards. (Tennyson was somewhat out of date, by English standards – Oscar Wilde was on the ascendant then, at least among the younger set – but then, everything in Port Ticonderoga was somewhat out of date.)
>
> *BA*, 76

The Avilion of *The Blind Assassin* is a relic of the high Victorian era, purportedly anachronistic by the time of its completion, a fact only compounded by its namesake; a proverbial mausoleum for both its denizens and its period. It is outright stated (or rather theorised by Iris) that the name "signifies how hopelessly in exile she [Adelia]

[62] Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* premiered in 1865, though it is based on a twelfth century German rendition of the tale by Gottfried von Strassburg rather than the version by Sir Thomas Mallory (dating from the fifteenth century) which formed the basis for contemporary English works.

considered herself to be: she might be able to call into being by sheer force of will some shoddy facsimile of a happy isle, but it would never be the real thing" (*BA*, 77). It is also a fantasy of old world class and decadence of which the family know little, with the house's first generation never leaving the town (Iris' grandfather presumed due to class division, and her grandmother refusing to do so without him), and the second retreating thereto following upheaval.

> There was […] a library with a marble Medusa over the fireplace – the nineteenth-century type of Medusa, with a lovely impervious gaze, the snakes writhing up and out of her head like anguished thoughts. The mantelpiece was French: a different one had been ordered, something with Dionysus and vines, but the Medusa came instead, and France was a long way send it back, and so they used that one.
>
> *BA*, 73

Iris' recollections of the house's décor also serve as our introduction to the library, the sisters' preferred getaway and centre of learning, such as it is. It is here that their half-hearted education takes place, steeped in Victoriana with Iris only mentioning a single item that post-dates 1900: John McCrae's 1915 poem, 'In Flanders Fields'; a popular piece from the Great War, from the perspective of the dead encouraging the living to continue to fight the good fight; a last bit of Victorian romanticism, before the Chases' hopes are crushed (as was public perception of the Great War, with the senselessness of it coming to the forefront of artistic consciousness during what came to be known as the Modernist movement).

The pieces that kit out the library, to which the reader is made privy, fall generally into two categories with some overlap: histories and isolation; and Iris' selected reading material as a youth serves to not only foreshadow events, but encapsulate some of the themes of the novel. With history having apparently ended in 1915 so far as the Chase family are concerned, these histories are naturally from the perspective of the Victorians. Iris reads histories by Thomas Babington Macaulay and William H. Prescott,[63] highly respectable reading for the nineteenth-century gentleman. Iris suspects that her grandfather never actually read any of these however; the books are rather part of her grandmother's furnishings and "were only

[63] The novel refers to "Macaulay's histories" and "*The Conquest of Mexico* and *The Conquest of Peru*" (*BA*, 188). Given what we know of the library, we can presume 'Macaulay' to be Lord Macaulay and the latter two books to be Prescott's *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843) and *A History of the Conquest of Peru* (1847).

[her] idea of what he ought to have read" (*BA*, 188). It plays into an idea of image; there is an impression of respectability and Imperial values rather than them necessarily being present.

However the library's collection also features a variety of emotive (if morbid) poetry, which reflect the feelings of the characters and later plot developments. One of the most famous of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) is quoted directly; "*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways*" (*BA*, 189, formatting in text). While the famous opening lines of this sonnet, the forty-third in the collection, are all that are quoted, we should make note of the remainder of the poem:

> How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
> I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
> My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
> For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
> I love thee to the level of everyday's
> Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
> I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
> I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
> I love thee with the passion put to use
> In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
> I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
> With my lost saints, —I love thee with the breath,
> Smiles, tears, of all my life! —and, if God choose,
> I shall but love thee better after death.
>
> Browning, 62

In the context of the novel, this could be read as a foreshadowing of Iris' (future at this point in the narrative) affair with Alex Thomas or her relationship with Laura, or indeed both given the complex nature of their love triangle. Certainly the claim that "I shall but love thee better after death" is particularly foretelling, as both of Iris' beloveds meet their ends long before her,[64] but the lines about "men striving for Right" and "turn[ing] from Praise" are also suggestive of her marriage, or rather the antithesis thereof, with her husband Richard being a social-climbing war profiteer.

The library exhibits some out of place characteristics. The marble Medusa, a tragic figure by the time of her supposed installation, while perhaps more appropriate

[64] The obituary for Iris at the end of the novel is dated "May 29, 1999" (*BA*, 633), with her death being said to have been "last Wednesday [meaning either the 19th or the 26th] at the age of 83". Laura's death at 25 was reportedly "May 18, 1945" (*BA*, 6), with Alex Thomas' death being six months prior (*BA*, 595).

for a library than the originally intended god of wine, is an odd figure to be seen as presiding over the library. That she was not intended to be there, and was placed there for convenience, is indicative of the house's gradual decline, yet her tale has implications for the story of the novel. In the tradition of Ovid, Medusa, a beautiful maiden, was (upon being caught being raped by Poseidon in her temple) cursed by Athena to be so terrible to behold as to petrify those who catch her sight; a punishment deemed by Perseus to be just. By the nineteenth century, interpretation had become more sympathetic to her plight. Thus Medusa is a character punished for being the victim. As this applies to the Chase sisters, the offence that isn't an offence is, of course, Laura's treatment by her brother-in-law. Winifred, his sister and resident great woman behind the great man, handles the affair and tidies up the loose ends; suffice to say, as far as she's concerned, her brother is "pure as the driven" (*BA*, 617); while Iris is oblivious.

In contrast to the quintessential Gothic manor of nineteenth-century fiction then, Avilion is something of a safe haven, though let us consider the perspective of the story. Iris grew up and spent a large portion of her life at the house. This marks a distinct contrast from the portrayal of Gothic manor houses in actual Victorian fiction. In Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the heroine arrives at Thornfield as an adult and an outsider; the latter house must surely seem entirely normal to longer-term inhabitants like Adèle or perhaps even Mrs Fairfax.

Not that that is necessarily all that meaningful in the scheme of things; Jane's miserable upbringing at Gateshead Hall is in suitably Gothic environs, but the house itself is typically threatening. Is this because it is not 'her' house, but rather that of the Reeds? The house is perhaps perfectly amicable to them.

> Returning, I had to cross before the looking-glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality; and the strange figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie's evening stories represented as coming out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travellers.
>
> C. Brontë, 14

Also consider how the houses meet their ends. Thornfield is destroyed outright in a fire. Avilion gradually gutted by interlopers piece by piece in the name of modernity

until its final fate: sold off to become a retirement home. The primary reason for its downfall is simply the passage of time.

> "What a charming house," said Winifred Griffen Prior with an arranged smile, as we walked into the dining room. "It's so – so well preserved! What amazing stained glass windows - how *fin de siècle*! It must be like living in a museum!"
>
> What she meant was *outmoded*. I felt humiliated: I'd always thought those windows were quite fine. But I could see that Winifred's judgement was the judgement of the outside world – the world that knew such things and passed sentence accordingly, that world I'd been so desperately longing to join. I could see now how unfit I was for it. How countrified, how raw.
>
> "They are particularly fine examples," said Richard, "of a certain period. The panelling is also of high quality." Despite his pedantry and condescending tone, I felt grateful to him: it didn't occur to me he was taking inventory. He knew a tottering regime when he saw one: he knew we were up for auction, or soon would be.
>
> *BA*, 226-227

Ruin is somehow Avilion's natural state, and paradoxically when it ceases to be in ruin, it is in fact *ruined* (Iris imagines it: "it reeks no doubt of baby powder and sour urine and day-old boiled potatoes" (*BA*, 72). The phenomenon of passing time is hardly unique however, affecting as it does the Griffens' Toronto home to such a degree that Iris doesn't "at first recognize it" (*BA*, 361), although once it was the very model of the modern aesthetic:

> The house was dark on the outside, festooned with ivy, its tall, narrow windows turned inward. The key was under the mat, the front hall smelled of chemicals. Winifred had been redecorating during our absence, and the work was not quite finished: there were painters' cloths down still in the front rooms, where they'd stripped off the old Victorian wallpaper. The new colours were pearly, pale – the colours of luxurious indifference, of cool detachment. Cirrus clouds tinged by a faint sunset, drifting high above the vulgar intensities of birds and flowers and such. This was the setting proposed for me, the rarefied air I was to waft around in.
>
> Reenie would be scornful of this interior – of its gleaming emptiness, its pallor. *This whole place looks like a bathroom*. But at the same time she would be frightened by it, as I was. I called up Grandmother Adelia: she'd know what to do. She'd recognize the new-money attempt to make an impression; she'd be polite, but dismissive. *My, it's certainly modern*, she might say.
>
> *BA*, 373-374

The Toronto house is a built on as much a fantasy as Avilion. While the latter is themed around old world decadence, the former is around new world efficiency; however this new ideal is not for Winifred and Richard, or rather it is not new to them, but is created for the purpose of foisting it off on Iris. The nigh colourless and featureless void of it is obviously to counterpoint Avilion's clutter, but is also indicative of the shifts in attitude afoot; by now the 1930s, the romantic notions of the Victorians have long since given way to a harsher, more cynical world, springing in no small part from the war. Iris is too young in actuality to remember the Victorian period, noting even that "even at the time [she] knew it [Avilion], the shabbiness was already setting in" (*BA*, 72), but having spent her life ensconced in her grandmother's faded dream, all she truly knows of the world and her place in it is formed from this idealised memory that is not exactly hers to begin with.

In the present, the fashionable Toronto house becomes its antithesis. If the inversion of Avilion is the sterile nursing home, it then follows that its pristine counterpart should become a wreck; its proverbial guts lying smashed in a skip on the driveway (*BA*, 362), with nature, once apparently conquered, winning out once more.

> It was still angular and graceless, squinty-windowed, ponderous, a dense brown like stewed tea, but ivy had grown up over the walls. […]
>
> Richard was against ivy. There had been some when we'd first moved in, but he'd pulled it down. It ate away at the brickwork, he said; it got into the chimneys, it encouraged rodents.
>
> *BA*, 361

Unfortunately for this house, its lack of character results in a lack of love, and presumably vice versa. Despite its sorry state; looking "unowned, transient, like a picture in a real-estate flyer" (*BA*, 363); it musters no feeling or emotion in Iris whatsoever, not even negative. The house was to reflect who the Griffens are and who they wanted her to be, for better or ill, but it is but a commodity. Ironically then, the Gothic manor of the Chases, with its room for secrets as well as dust, represents a friendlier space.

Having been shortlisted for the Booker prize multiple times,[65] *The Blind Assassin* was the novel that finally won Atwood the award in 2000. It is in some ways a culmination of her previous novels, combining various elements honed therein to form a new whole. Striking however is the use of Victorian memorabilia in its world building, with the dichotomy between the old and the new, and the disconnect between the Americas and Europe and how it serves to inform (and confuse) the characters.

Margaret Atwood's novels are deeply concerned with identity, but also with its composition. The nineteenth-century inheritance of Canadian culture has had a deep impact on the national sense of self. To this end, Atwood in her writing seeks to address how the past informs both the identity of the individual and of the nation. This arises in *Surfacing* and its heroine who is haunted by memories of her family and gripped with dread over her identity as a Canadian as distinct from an American. By using traditional horror and Gothic motifs it can convey both the national and individual psyches. *Lady Oracle* and *The Robber Bride* similarly use Gothic imagery to explore both personal and national identity, questioning who the protagonists are and who they want to be, as well as Canada's broader relationship with Europe and its history.

Alias Grace and *The Blind Assassin* continue this interest in Canada's relationship with its own history; the former with an actual historical event, and the latter with a fictional one nevertheless grounded in actual events. These novels consider directly the nature of colonial Canada and its continued influence. They also ask questions about unreliable narration and the subjective nature of history and storytelling. These two novels, *Alias Grace* in particular, have the historical focus and meta-fictional qualities associated with Neo-Victorian fiction, though we must note that the spectre of the Victorian era and the subjectivity of history and perception are recurring themes throughout Atwood's work. While the Victorian era itself is the focal point of Neo-Victorianism, one must be aware that the nineteenth century cast a long shadow over the twentieth century and, seemingly, beyond, as my discussion of

[65] Prior to *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood had been nominated in 1986, 1989 and 1996 for *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye* and *Alias Grace*, respectively. She was also shortlisted in 2003 for *Oryx and Crake*.

the influence of Victorian literature on the work of Angela Carter will further demonstrate.

6. Angela Carter and the Victorians

> Angela Carter. What an inexhaustible source of strange details and worldly wisdom she was. How instructive, how fundamentally helpful. How like the white-haired fairy godmother you always wished you had.
>
> Atwood, 2015

Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood were close contemporaries. Both born near the beginning of the Second World War, they both published their debut novels in the latter part of the 1960s. Despite very different backgrounds (Atwood is the daughter of Canadian academics, while Carter had a more working-class British upbringing) they never the less share many similarities in their work, such as an interest in the subjective nature of history, identity and experience, and their works share much in the ways of influence and how they make use of their literary forebears. Atwood's above comment however, linking Carter to a fairy godmother, suggests that, despite being of similar ages, Carter was an important influence on her work. This respect would appear to have been mutual; many editions of *The Handmaid's Tale*, perhaps Atwood's best known novel, feature a quote from Carter on the cover declaring it to be "both a superlative exercise in science fiction and a profoundly felt moral story" (*HT*, outside back cover). A uniting factor is their apparent interest in Victorian cultural inheritance, though Carter typically responds to this inheritance in a broader manner than the highly focussed approach of Atwood.

Much of Angela Carter's fiction acts as a self-professed response to earlier literature. Her short novel *Love* (1971) was openly based on Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* (1816); Carter said "I was seized with the desire to write a kind of modern-day, demotic version of *Adolphe*, although I doubt anybody could spot the similarity after I'd macerated the whole thing in triple-distilled essence of English provincial life" (*Love*, 111). She generally engaged directly with literary figures in her short fiction, with writers such as Edgar Allen Poe and Charles Baudelaire appearing as subjects (in these instances, 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allen Poe' and 'Black Venus'), however she usually restricted such explicit engagement with literary forebears to shorter works, with her novels being less overt in how they explore the topic.

Beyond specific responses to individual writers and novels however, much of Carter's work can be viewed more generally as encompassing a variety of responses to her predecessors. Her novels are somewhat curious however, eschewing the

naturalist tendencies of Drabble and Byatt *et al*, in favour of a more heightened sense of reality. Her work has been described as 'Gothic' or 'Magical Realist',[66] though Carter herself declared that as far as she was concerned, her early novels were entirely true to *characters* in her life:

> It didn't give exactly mimetic copies of people I knew, but it was absolutely as real as the milieu I was familiar with.
>
> Haffenden, 80

The characters' travails with their own callous natures are at once real and fantastical; a concept that is not far removed from much nineteenth-century literature, as I will discuss in more detail in later chapters. Criticism of Angela Carter naturally tends to examine her work through a feminist framework, as well as from the perspectives of folklore and Neo-Victorianism, but often overlooks the connections between these viewpoints, and also frequently focuses more on her later work wherein these interests become a lot more pronounced (for instance, her short story collection *The Bloody Chamber*). Carter herself claimed that her fiction "is very often a kind of literary criticism" (Haffenden, 79). The aforementioned rewritings and the mooted 'Adela', her take on *Jane Eyre*, are self-evidently commentaries on the work of various authors and styles of fiction, but literature can also pass comment on matters that it does not overtly refer to, and Carter's work is often concerned with the past and how it shapes, consciously and unconsciously, the present. Her writing is typically densely packed, and bears the influence of her wide range of cultural interests. It is invariably filled with references to artefacts of different stripes; high literature and 'trash fiction',

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[66] Marc O'Day opined that "[w]e have become too used to characterising Angela Carter's fiction by the shorthand label 'magical realism'. The term began to be applied to her writing, apparently with the author's blessing, in the early 1980s, and it took a firm hold with the publication of *Nights at the Circus* in 1984. Later, in some tributes and reassessments after her death, it was retrospectively applied to the whole of her *oeuvre* from the sixties onwards." (O'Day, 43) He refers in particular to John Haffenden in his interview with Carter (Haffenden, J. 1985. 'Angela Carter', in: *Novelists in Interview*. London: Methuen, pp.76-96) and John Bayley's 1992 retrospective for *The New York Review of Books*. (Bayley, J. 1992. 'Fighting for the Crown', *The New York Review of Books*, 23 April, pp.9-11).

While O'Day is particularly dismissive of the use of the term to describe her early work, which he says "actually invite readings in terms of quite traditional literary realism" (O'Day, 43), we might note that in the Haffenden interview, Haffenden comments that "[*r*]*eviews of* Nights at the Circus *have sometimes seemed to suggest that what is now known as 'magic realism' has been almost a fresh departure for you, whereas in fact you've been using that mode for going on twenty years*", to which Carter responds "Obviously I think so too. […] But this is bound to happen: I haven't had a novel out for a long time. And also everybody is doing it now. I am older than Salman Rushdie and I've been around longer, but memories are short" (Haffenden, 81), thereby suggesting that so far as she was concerned these novels are in the same basic mode as her later work.

Shakespeare and music hall, arthouse cinema and wish fulfilment cinema, class and camp. She furthermore travelled extensively, broadening her frame of reference even wider. It was inevitable that this would be reflected in her writing. The juxtaposition of low and high culture is important in her works; despite her exploitation of this dichotomy, Carter was well aware that the lines dividing these ostensibly mutually exclusive ideas are paper thin, if they exist at all. It is worth remembering that much 'classic' literature from the Georgian age was deemed disposable and lacking in artistic merit to their contemporary public, and Shakespeare's plays typically enjoy scenes of bawdy humour amidst the action.

In the second part of this thesis, I will be looking at a variety of Angela Carter's novels. The first chapter will look at *The Magic Toyshop* and consider its relation to Victorian and Edwardian girls' literature, in particular Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*. From there, I will look at the novels that have come to be known as Carter's 'Bristol trilogy', with a primary focus on *Several Perceptions* and *Love*; these novels (along with the earlier *Shadow Dance*) are linked by an apparent setting, but also by a preoccupation with madness. To this end, both novels are considered with their dominant intertexts; in the case of the former, *Dracula* and the *Alice* books, and in the latter's case, the works of Edgar Allen Poe.

Following on from the Gothic motifs that dominate the previous chapter, the next will look at *Heroes and Villains*, as well as *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, two of Carter's early science fantasy novels, through the lens of the Gothic, with a particular focus on the novels of the Brontë sisters. Her later fantasies, *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus*, form the basis of the following chapter wherein I will consider the nature of performance in these novels and how they use and subvert traditional ideas of femininity. The latter part of the thesis will close with a look at Carter's final completed novel, *Wise Children*; an adjunct to the previous chapter regarding performance, but also a consideration of the novel's discussion of the decline of the British Empire and colonialism. Utilising this chapter structure, this thesis will not only chart the development of her work, but also the variations on themes and motifs that she employed.

7. *The Magic Toyshop*

The Magic Toyshop (1967) is Carter's second novel and arguably the most popular of her early works. One of the earliest books to be republished as part of Virago Press' fledgling Modern Classics series in the 1981[67], it has remained consistently in print ever since. It also has the distinction of being one of the few works of Carter's to receive a film adaptation.[68]

Of all of Carter's novels, *The Magic Toyshop* is perhaps the most 'traditional', with the most obvious debt to Victorian and Edwardian literature. Within the opening pages are direct references to R.D. Blackmore's *Lorna Doone* (1869) and D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), novels with which it has obvious thematic parallels, such as the sexually charged interclass relationship between Melanie and Finn, and the embittered uncle Philip's designs on the heroine. However the story itself is, in terms of tone and structure, far more reminiscent of turn-of-the-century girls' literature, which is the primary focus of this chapter.

In this section, I shall be looking at a selection of girls' fiction, in particular Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905) and *The Secret Garden* (1911), and seeing how Carter makes use of recurring themes and motifs therefrom, in addition to the aforementioned structural similarities, in *The Magic Toyshop*. I argue that Carter's novel is in essence a rewrite of these traditional girls' stories for a modern, adult audience in order to highlight how they shape and effect views of femininity.

[67] The imprint was launched in 1978 with a reprint of Antonia White's *Frost in May* (1933). The imprint features a numbering of the books in order of (re)publication; *The Magic Toyshop*'s being no. 56.

[68] The film, directed by David Wheatley, was produced in 1987, a few years after the better known film adaptation of *The Company of Wolves* (1984). Like the earlier film, Carter herself adapted the script, and also like the earlier film, takes considerable liberties with the original text, featuring many more overtly fantastical sequences. One major example is the ending, which now specifically takes place on Bonfire Night rather than over Christmas; in the film, Margaret disappears into a painting, taking Victoria with her, while Philip's climactic battle with Francie leads him to the puppet theatre. There, the puppets appear to come to life and ambush him. He is turned into a doll, and Francie proceeds to use him as the Guy on the local bonfire before vanishing into the ether (as Margaret's ghostly voice beckons) while Finn and Melanie look on. This differs considerably from the novel's ending wherein a fight is suggested, but not actually shown; Finn and Melanie escape over the rooftops, while Philip in his rage sets the house on fire. The shop is thus destroyed, with the fates of the family remaining ambiguous.

Upon the death of her parents, of causes generally not dwelt upon (the suggestion is a plane crash), the now penniless Melanie is shipped off to live with her estranged uncle and his family, far from her previous charmed life ("Melanie had grown up with the smell of money and did not recognise the way it permeated the air she breathed" (*MT*, 7)). Her uncle rules his family, consisting of his wife (who was struck dumb on her wedding day) and her two brothers, with an iron fist. His only real love is his toys; in particular his array of life-sized puppets with which he stages elaborate shows for the family's benefit (attendance of these performances is compulsory). The younger of his brothers-in-law, Finn, works as his apprentice, but this comes to an abrupt end when he breaks one of the puppets during the performance. Philip decides that, in lieu of a second puppeteer, next time he will use Melanie in the show, wherein they will re-enact 'Leda and the Swan'. She thus finds herself molested in front of an audience by a wooden swan manipulated by her uncle. Following the performance, Philip leaves for a convention, and Finn destroys the puppet swan. With this, he upsets the apparent power balance of the house and the family rebels against Philip's tyranny. Upon his return a struggle ensues; Finn and Melanie escape over the rooftops, while Philip burns the house down, intent on taking everyone with it.

Critical Views of *The Magic Toyshop*

Given the novel's status as one of Carter's more readily available and accessible works, there is naturally a considerable amount of criticism that exists on it. On the matter of Neo-Victorianism, Sarah Gamble offers an essay that views the book through such a lens. 'Monarchs and Patriarchs: Angela Carter's Recreation of the Victorian Family in *The Magic Toyshop*', in *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics* (2011; the second in Rodopi's 'Neo-Victorian series') puts the focus squarely on the socio-political aspects of Neo-Victorianism in the novel, stating that it is "not explicitly modelled on nineteenth-century intertexts" (Gamble, 2011, 246). She also touches on the book's Gothic elements, suggesting that the decaying Victoriana present throughout is a comment "that the Victorian age is 'history' that has never quite become 'past', and is thus suspended perpetually on the point of return" (Gamble, 2011, 255). Gamble here makes particular note both of the

"reproduction of 'The Light of the World'" (*MT*, 44) hanging in Melanie's bedroom[69] and the broken statue of Queen Victoria that resides in the ruined pleasure gardens and that appears to move. Victorianism is the dark secret, the madness that threatens to resurface and consume everyone. As such, Gamble looks closely at the patriarchal element the novel's antagonist represents and the fragility of this image; it only takes one act of rebellion to bring down the proverbial house of cards. Furthermore, she goes on to link this discussion of the patriarchy to "the 'Home Rule' movement that dominated Anglo/Irish politics in the late nineteenth-century", saying "[l]ike Ireland, the world of the toyshop is a disputed space, in which the subordinate class, or race, is striving to resist English tyranny" (Gamble, 2011, 251), which she likens to the culture clash between the English and Irish characters within the novel.

> The Nineteenth-century allusions in the novel thus work to disrupt any simplistic rendition of the Victorian period as one in which social, sexual and racial identities were homogenised and controlled by a central patriarchal authority. Instead, Carter draws attention to the cracks, inconsistencies and disjunctions in nineteenth-century discourse and culture, a century in which women began successfully to resist the 'angel in the house' ideology, and nations commenced to assert their independence from the forces of Empire.
>
> Gamble, 2011, 252

This appears to be the only prominent work considering the novel from a Neo-Victorian standpoint, though considerations of the Gothic element of the novel exist; such as Andrew Hock Soon Ng's *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives – The House as Subject* (2015) which looks particularly at the eponymous toyshop. There also exist examinations of the communication in the novel: for instance, Isobel Fraile's 'The Silent Woman: Silence as Subversion in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*' posits that the characters, particularly Margaret, act against their repression rather than acquiescing by obeying the letter of the law but not necessarily the spirit, saying that "[w]hile Uncle Philip can talk and shout as much as he pleases, the other characters are portrayed as 'humming', 'whispering', 'murmuring', or, in the case of Aunt Margaret, 'chalking'" (Fraile, 241).

[69] 'The Light of the World' is a circa 1853 painting by William Holman Hunt, which depicts Jesus of Nazareth carrying a lantern and knocking on a closed door, contrasted against a dark wooded background. Gamble notes that: "[t]he painting was reproduced so frequently that it became a ubiquitous presence in Victorian culture; George P. Landow comments that 'many took it to be the single most important contemporary portrayal of Christ'" (Gamble, 259).

These elements are certainly present in the novel; the Gothic, the postcolonial, the subversion of patriarchy within its frame; it appears to overlook that *The Magic Toyshop* is also a coming-of-age story, with its heroine coming to learn over the course of the novel about both the world and herself.

The Young Edwardian Heroine

If one didn't know better, the initial set up (orphaned girl left with a cruel guardian and change in status) could very easily be mistaken for an imitator of one of Frances Hodgson Burnett's works,[70] especially *A Little Princess* (1905). This would appear intentional. Not only does it underscore the idea of Melanie's progression from childhood to adulthood, but similar to how Atwood's *Lady Oracle* evokes ideas of literature often used to impart some sort of good morals upon young girls; explicitly 'The Lady of Shalott', but more abstractly *Anne of Green Gables*; before turning it on its head, so too does Carter with Burnett's tales of children in difficult circumstances reforming the world through their good moral fibre (or the development thereof). However Melanie isn't poor would-be martyred Sara Crewe, for all the DNA they share. Melanie's tale is not one of karma; she doesn't learn the wonders of a good work ethic, or of kindness, or any such thing, and nor is she rewarded in a manner that effectively restores the status quo while leaving a good Christian moral imparted in her (and the reader's) subconscious. Her parents are dead, their money is gone, and no matter how much Melanie suffers, it won't change those two facts, and indeed it doesn't. Not only does she not regain her lost fortune, the climax of the book results in her losing what little material possessions she has remaining, and yet this does not matter. As a result of her travails, she discovers aspects of her identity hitherto unknown to her, and regardless of whether these parts serve her for good or ill (ambiguous as they are), this is viewed as more important.

Burnett's *A Little Princess* is a surprisingly materialistic story. While it tries to play up the heroine as being mostly above such earthly concepts, her suffering is tied to her poor financial state, and is only relieved when her status is restored at the end

[70] Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924) was an Anglo-American author. Though not exclusively a children's author, she is best remembered for her novels aimed at a younger audience; in particular, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886), *A Little Princess* (1905), and *The Secret Garden* (1911). These best-known titles are largely didactic, with waifish children with a deficit of parents being rewarded for virtuous living.

of the story; in the opening chapters, while a child of wealth, she is effectively untouchable. The basic suffering of Sara, along with most other characters who suffer over the course of the narrative, is that of the poor and downtrodden; without money she is left at the mercy of her cruel headmistress whom she offended (inadvertently, of course) during her period of wealth, who proceeds to try and crush her spirit for her own gain. While this is in marked contrast to *The Magic Toyshop*; the financial side of Melanie's predicament is largely secondary; while she loses her wealth, this is not entirely relevant to the turn the story takes. Instead the novel favours not only having the heroine's growth be more spiritual, but the rewards as well. Her erstwhile status does form a part of the offense Philip takes with her, although only as part of a larger whole. It would be fairer to say that it is overall her very existence, quite literally; a liberal middle-class product at odds with his conservative working-class world view. The toyshop is founded on traditional pre-1914 values which are also the source of Melanie's repression.[71]

It is of note in *The Magic Toyshop* that while spoiled and doted on, Melanie's suffering and humiliation in the name of self-discovery begins within the very first chapter, before her parents' deaths and before being transported to the eponymous shop, and in fact contains one of the most iconic scenes of the novel, in which Melanie walks through the garden in the dead of night, clad in her mother's wedding dress.

> Eternity, [Miss Brown] said, was like space in that it went on and on and on with God somewhere in it […]. How lonely God must be, thought Melanie when she was seven. When she was fifteen, she stood lost in eternity wearing a crazy dress, watching the immense sky.
>
> Which was too big for her, as the dress had been. She was too young for it. The loneliness seized her by the throat and suddenly she could not bear it. She panicked. She was lost in this alien loneliness and terror crashed into the garden, and she was defenceless against it, drunk as she was on black wine.
>
> Sobbing, she broke into a sudden run, stumbling over her skirts. Too much, too soon. She had to get back to the front-door and closed-in, cosy, indoors darkness and the smell of human beings. Branches, menacing tore her hair and thrashed her face. The grass wove itself into ankle-turning-

[71] The world of the toyshop is however also one of whimsy, where she discovers herself, apart from the clean cut homogeny of her previous existence. In this way we can liken it to an inverted *The Secret Garden*. Instead of the listless youth being relocated to the country and discovering the wonders of nature and the taming of it, she is relocated to the city and sees the beauty of the manmade and the dilapidated.

> traps for her feet. The garden turned against Melanie when she became afraid of it.
>
> *MT*, 18

The garden begins as a romantic image, one with "trees laden to the plimsoll-line with a dreaming cargo of birds" and "dewy grass [that] licked [Melanie's] feet like wet tongues of small, friendly beasts" (*MT*, 17). The sensuous nature of the imagery is quickly warped into something more menacing with the revelation that Melanie doesn't belong therein. Her knowledge at this point is gained purely from second hand sources; novels (such as the aforementioned *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) and paintings (chiefly Lautrec); but her own burgeoning sexuality is quite far removed from those portrayed in the works of art she's been studying, though perhaps not as far removed as her conception of them. The idea of the scene, Melanie's childish idolatry of her mother's wedding dress, seems somewhat at odds with the girl who attempts to imitate Lautrec's models, though we must note that her ideas of being a Parisian show girl are filtered through a film projector's lens: "[…] she made up fantasies in which she lived in his [Lautrec's] time (she had been a chorus girl or a model and fed a sparrow with crumbs from her Paris attic window)" (*MT*, 1-2), evoking images of John Huston's film of *Moulin Rouge*.[72] The romanticised notion of the garden at night time soon gives way to terror of the unknown; the dress doesn't fit, the world is dark and vast, and she is locked out of the safe haven of the house. After the initial novelty, it is revealed to be too much, too soon, but there is ultimately no heading back; her attempts to return to the sanctuary of her room result in the destruction of the dress, and the beginning of the end of Melanie's youthful romanticised (and highly conventional, pre-war) ideal of womanhood.

The focus on Melanie's former life, in the first chapter in particular, is a key difference between *The Magic Toyshop* and its Edwardian progenitors. A lot of time is spent building a concrete picture of Melanie's home and family lives before everything is uprooted, and even in the aftermath it is occasionally recalled with wistful nostalgia. This is in marked contrast to *A Little Princess*, where the heroine's life in India is scarcely mentioned, and seems largely a convenient way to have her be an outsider in her new surroundings, as well as dispose of her parents. Fellow Burnett heroine, Mary Lennox of *The Secret Garden* fares somewhat better on this front,

[72] The 1952 film, based on the 1950 novel of the same name by Pierre La Mure, is a fictionalized portrayal of Toulouse Lautrec's life. Lautrec is played by José Ferrer.

receiving a chapter setting up her move to rural Yorkshire which expounds on why she is such a listless and self-centred child:

> [Mary's] mother had been a great beauty who cared only to go to parties and amuse herself with gay people. She had not wanted a little girl at all, and when Mary was born she handed her over to the care of an Ayah, who was made to understand that if she wished to please the Memsahib she must keep the child out of sight as much as possible. […] She never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and the other native servants, and as they always obeyed her and gave her her own way in everything, because the Memsahib would be angry if she was disturbed by her crying, by the time she was six years old she was as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived.
>
> Burnett, 1911, 1-2

Compare this to Sara Crewe of *A Little Princess*, who we join upon her arrival in London and scarcely discusses her life in colonial India; it largely serves simply to have her know 'Hindustani' for a small plot point. Beyond that, this is the only real glimpse of Mary's earlier life we see, all set up within two pages before her parents and nurse are unceremoniously offed and pushed far from memory. Other novels of this type do slightly better in this regard. From a plot standpoint, perhaps most comparable to *The Magic Toyshop* in its use of the heroine's memory is Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913) which frequently mentions the eponymous character's life in the west, though generally each time with the same anecdote which serves to foreshadow that Pollyanna is going to be crippled later in the narrative.[73]

Melanie

Despite the aforementioned similarities between Melanie's and Sara Crewe's plights, their actual characters are very distinct from one another, typified by how they respond to the news of their parents' deaths. Melanie flies into hysteria; a mass of futile bargaining, impotent rage, tears and destruction, when she looks at her now-deceased parents' wedding photo:

[73] A more egregious example however might be Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880) which spends a half of the first volume building on the titular character's life in the alps and the next half reminiscing about it, although other than some brief exposition in the opening chapter, no mention is made of her life before her move to the mountains; the second volume essentially acting as an extended dénouement.

> The tears began to stream down her face. She took the photograph, carefully removed it from its frame, holding the telegram between her teeth as she did so, and then tore up the photograph and threw the snowflake fragments into the fireplace. Then she broke the frame into pieces. After that, she began to wreck the room.
>
> *MT*, 25

Note here how the scene escalates. Melanie's actions are shown initially to be very deliberate and specific, but as the paragraph moves on, her actions become simultaneously greater and more pointless, culminating in her simply "wrecking the room". In contrast, Sara Crewe of *A Little Princess* reacts in a far more traditionally dignified manner, more befitting of the role ascribed to her by the novel's title. A recurring element of Burnett's novel is Sara having to internalise, and occasionally resist, all negative emotions, at least in public. Strangely the death of her father (and the loss of her fortune) is not a scenario that seeming requires her to exercise too much restraint.

> Nobody but Sara herself ever knew what had happened in her room after she had run upstairs and locked her door. In fact, she herself scarcely remembered anything but that she walked up and down, saying over and over in a voice that did not seem her own:
>
> 'My papa is dead! My papa is dead!'
>
> Once she stopped before [her doll] Emily, who sat watching her from her chair, and cried out wildly:
>
> 'Emily! Do you hear? Do you hear – papa is dead! He is dead in India – thousands of miles away.'
>
> Burnett, 1905, 100

After this initial short, minor (and very private) outburst, she returns to her usual state of calm and poise. It seems peculiar when much is made early on about the closeness of their relationship that the actual loss is not dwelt on more. Of course, her father's death cannot inform the entirety of her actions, this is not the case in *The Magic Toyshop* either, but considering that Sara is ostensibly spoiled by her father, her behaviour and general temperament change very little when she is left alone and penniless. The ultimate extent of her growth is that she can comprehend what it is like to be poor, something she is at least aware of regardless. She starts out virtuous, and that she continues to put others before herself in spite of her situation is what earns her a happy ending.

> ‘It’s all very well to suppose things if you have everything,’ said Lavinia. ‘Could you suppose and pretend if you were a beggar and lived in a garret?’
>
> Sara stopped arranging the Last Doll’s ostrich plumes, and looked thoughtful.
>
> ‘I *believe* I could,’ she said. ‘If one was a beggar, one would have to suppose and pretend all the time. But it mightn’t be easy.’
>
> Burnett, 1905, 86

Melanie does not start out virtuous, however. She’s spoiled (while not being especially empathetic or modest, unlike Sara), self-centred and shiftless, arguably more comparable to *The Secret Garden*’s Mary, who is in some ways the antithesis of Sara Crewe, learning to be a better person with the love and support of others as opposed to having to stay so against cruel and overbearing figures. Of course, these are both extremes as far as characterisation goes; neither Mary nor Sara are terribly well rounded figures, with the former being comprised, for all intents and purposes, solely of flaws and the latter all but devoid of any. Melanie might fall closer to Mary, a character type that allows for much easier character development than the angel embodied by Sara, but she retains the latter’s morals, pride and sense of romance, virtues that can very easily become flaws.

Indeed it is this romanticism that is Melanie’s greatest flaw rather than a virtue. Her rose-tinted view leaves her unprepared for life outside of her initial bubble; the irony being that she comes in effect to live in the sort of tale she obsesses over; and unable to comprehend what it is she truly wants when it doesn’t match up to the ‘ideal’ put forth by the culture she consumes.

Mother Figures

Melanie’s apparent ideas of what the future may entail, both hopes and fears, involve a traditional dichotomy between becoming a bride and ending up a spinster, tying into her budding sexuality, but overlooking any other possibilities, despite her *fin de siècle* chorus girl fantasies. In the beginning of the novel, the two adult women, her absentee mother and Mrs Rundle, embody these two stereotypes; the former, a woman who has apparently married a wealthy man, fits comfortably into an image of traditional beauty (much being made of her reportedly shapely appearance with regards to her

wedding dress), and wanting not for jewellery, fine clothes, or perfumes by Chanel. Mrs Rundle on the other hand:

> […] was fat, old and ugly and had never, in fact, been married. She adopted the married form by deed poll on her fiftieth birthday as her present to herself. She thought 'Mrs' gave a woman a touch of personal dignity as she grew older. Besides, she had always wanted to be married. […]
>
> She had hairy moles and immense false teeth. She spoke with an old-world, never-never land stateliness, like a duchess in a Whitehall farce. She was the housekeeper. She had brought her cat with her; she was very much at home.
>
> *MT*, 3

However, despite the obvious evidence to the contrary, Melanie's mother is similarly sexless as Mrs Rundle. While Melanie is well aware that it must have occurred at some point, the very notion of her as a sexual being is, suffice to say, baffling to her (and as a result the reader); her mother is defined by her elegance and wealth, not by anything like her sexuality. Her accomplishments are her marriage and her children, there is nothing particularly defining about her herself. Her life is perfect, the one which women are supposed to aspire towards; it is also utterly non-descript.

Given what we learn later about the Flower family, we could assume that her marriage to Melanie's father is in effect her fairy-tale ending; she is Cinderella, freed from a life of servitude and misery through no real action of her own; but of course it doesn't end there, but rather life goes on. However having achieved what society informs us is the 'goal', it comes to stagnate. The perfection of the family's existence breeds the complacency that results in Melanie's tragedy; so content are they that life will be perfect forever more, that there is no consideration as to what to do should the harmony be shattered.

The lack of consideration towards this possibility is yet another tie to *A Little Princess*; Captain Crewe sees no apparent issue with investing the entirety of his money in the alleged diamond mining opportunity, despite having a young daughter in boarding school, despite his apparently failing health, despite admittedly having no head for business (Burnett, 1905, 75), and despite his apparently not having seen the friend spearheading the scheme since his schooldays (Burnett, 1905, 175).

> ‘Diamond mines spell ruin oftener than they spell wealth,’ said Mr Barrow. ‘When a man is in the hands of a very dear friend, and is not a business man himself, he had better steer clear of the dear friend’s diamond mines, or gold mines, or any other kind of mines dear friends want his money put into. […]’
>
> Burnett, 1905, 89

Neither he, nor Sara, nor her headmistress Miss Minchin and rest of the school see any possibility that this could fail, even though all their livelihoods rest on it in some way. There is no sense of the risk involved, but pride comes before the fall. In *The Magic Toyshop*, Melanie’s father neglects to save any money “because he thought he could always make more” (*MT*, 28); and the parents’ actions are ultimately responsible for their children’s later suffering.

The (adult) female character who plays the most active role in *The Magic Toyshop*, however, is Aunt Margaret, who also represents a stereotype of womanhood, distinct from Melanie’s mother and Mrs Rundle. While those two have existences that are in essence diametrically opposed, Margaret’s is a sort of worst-of-both. While married, her life is one of repression and sadness, an impression left immediately by her introduction.

> She was a red woman, redder, even than Finn or Francie. Her eyebrows were red as if thickly marked above her eyes with red ink but her face was colourless, no blood at all showing in her cheeks or narrow lips. She was painfully thin. The high, family cheek-bones stuck up gaunt and stark and her narrow shoulders jutted through the fabric of her sweater like bony wings.
>
> Like Mrs Rundle, she wore black – a shapeless sweater and draggled skirt, black stockings (one with a big potato in the heel), trodden down black shoes that slapped the floor sharply as she moved. […] Melanie wondered how old she was but there was no way of telling; she could be anywhere between twenty-five and forty.
>
> *MT*, 40-41

The immediate physical differences between Margaret and the other two women hint as to the differences of the character herself. Unlike Mrs Rundle, Margaret is typically described as being an attractive woman, or at least potentially so, but unlike Melanie’s mother, she is not described as being an elegant and material figure. Quite literally, as she is a thin, frail figure, distinct from the larger figures of the other two. The symbolism at work with Margaret gets somewhat heavy handed, with her being struck dumb on her wedding day, and her sole piece of jewellery being a tight choker picked

out by her husband. Margaret is dominated by her husband, though in a certain light she's also the only one to have a husband. Melanie's father is an even more vague figure than her mother; perhaps down to her borderline idolatry of the latter, more time is spent on her; with our knowledge pretty much boiling down to a rough area of profession (academics), his dress (tweed, complete with pipe), his aforementioned approach to finances, and that he is of Salford birth, possibly implying a shift in social status. Beyond that, all we receive is some supposition on Melanie's part.

> Daddy must have been a bit of a bohemian, in spite of his family and, besides, was living in a flat by himself. A Bloomsbury bedsitter, coffee brewing on a gas-ring, talk about free love, Lawrence, dark gods.
>
> *MT*, 13

In a certain light, it's unusual for there to be such a focus on her mother, rather than her father. An odd trait of the girls' fiction that *The Magic Toyshop* resembles is that the protagonist identifies with, or at least has a more nuanced relationship with, the parent or guardian of the opposite gender. This is also true of fairy tales where a typical set-up tends to involve a daughter and her loving father, with the mother being either dead, a twisted rival figure, or occasionally just not mentioned at all; the classic example being *Cinderella*, which between her own mother and the step-mother has at least two of those roles (whether her mother is specified as being dead or merely ignored completely depending on the version, so one could make an argument for all three).[74] While the latter two become less common, removing mothers from the equation early by ways of death remains a standard trope of children's fiction. In cases such as those of *A Little Princess* and *Pollyanna*, the heroines' mothers are offed in their infancy in order to afford them close knit relationships with their fathers (particularly notable in the case of the latter, wherein the book opens with the aunt being informed of Pollyanna's father's demise, with her mother meeting a premature end even by that standard).[75] Carter twists this by largely ignoring her heroine's father. Melanie barely thinks of him; as far as she's concerned it's her mother who is her world.

[74] Other tales that involve similar set ups include *Donkeyskin* and *Snow White*.

[75] Similarly, though not the heroine, Clara from *Heidi* enjoys a comparable family situation. A variant would be the Cuthberts in L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908); while both are beloved by Anne, her relationship with Matthew is much freer and easier than with Marilla.

Aunt Margaret could be viewed as a twist on this fairy tale set up as well. As opposed to the callous replacement female guardian of yore, Margaret is shown from the very beginning to be a kindly woman doing her utmost to make her new charges welcome. This is in direct contrast to Miss Minchin, Sara's functional guardian in *A Little Princess*, who is introduced to the reader giving a colossal display of insincerity and flattery; something she reportedly does to all the parents who enter the seminary (Burnett, 1905, 8):

> She had large, cold, fishy eyes, and a large cold fishy smile. It spread itself into a very large smile when she saw Sara and Captain Crewe. She had heard a great many desirable things of the young soldier from the lady who recommended her school to him. Among other things, she had heard that he was a rich father who was willing to spend a great deal of money on his little daughter.
>
> Burnett, 1905, 7

Quite why these sorts of traits are typically reserved only for female guardians, we can assume is supposed to enhance the impression of such characters' wickedness; the logic being that women are supposed to be loving and maternal; that these women are not maternal means that they are wicked. Let us ignore that it makes perfect sense that someone in Miss Minchin's position would flatter the parents of her charges.

The Patriarch

Philip also is a variation on the surrogate male guardian, although this stock character has fewer roots in folklore where replacement fathers are strangely uncommon compared to mothers; they are however much more common in Victorian and Edwardian children's fiction. True to that form, he is in charge and has final say as to all goings on in the house, despite the fact that he spends a not inconsiderable amount of time absent from it. Unlike, however, the kindly Mr Sesemann of *Heidi* or the misunderstood Mr Craven of *The Secret Garden*, Uncle Philip's influence over the house strikes fear into the hearts of his family who all try to keep him appeased while at the same time living their lives around him. Carter herself, in an interview with John Haffenden, likens the ending of the novel, wherein Melanie and Finn escape from the shop together while all goes to hell around them, to that of *Paradise Lost*

(though she also admits that this was based on a misinterpretation of *felix culpa*). In this scenario, Philip is the oppressive god of the toyshop:

> *So you were deliberately tackling the myth of Paradise Lost? Philip is God the Father, a ruthless and heartless man?*
> Yes, that's it: the Fortunate Fall. […] I took the Fortunate Fall as meaning it was a good thing to get out of that place. The intention was that the toyshop itself would be a secularized Eden: that's what lay behind the malign fairy tale I wrote.
>
> Haffenden, 80

Applying this logic in hindsight to father figures such as the ones mentioned earlier is interesting. Like Philip, they are also in essence gods of their domain, though it's rather glossed over that they are in a position to effectively destroy the others in the house. Gamble discusses the godlike role of the patriarch, particularly in relation to Hunt's 'The Light of the World', saying: "like God, Philip is both Father and foreman. Whereas Hunt sees an acceptance of 'God's overrule' as enlightenment, a progression from darkness to light (symbolised in his painting by the image of the lantern), Carter embraces the darkness and brings the house of God to a fiery downfall" (Gamble, 259).

Philip, as mentioned earlier, is brought up initially in the first chapter of *The Magic Toyshop*, in reference to Melanie's parents' wedding photograph and the stark contrast between himself and the remainder of the wedding party, itself otherwise consisting entirely of members of her father's side of the family. His figure, like that of his wife, is described as rather ageless; something reiterated by his actual appearance later on, when he is instantly recognisable to Melanie, right down to his clothes, which remain present if far from correct.

> Unlike the rest [of the wedding party], Uncle Philip did not smile at the camera. He might have strayed into the picture from another group, an Elks' solemn reunion or the grand funeral of a member of the ancient and honourable order of Buffaloes, or, even, from a gathering of veterans of the American Civil War. He wore a flat-topped, curly-brimmed, black hat such as Mississippi gamblers wear in Western films and a black bootlace tie in a crazy bow. His suit was black, his trousers tight, his jacket long. But the final effect was not of elegance. Under the black hat, his hair seemed to be white, or, at least, very fair. He had a walrus moustache which concealed his mouth. It was impossible to guess his age. However, he seemed old rather than young. He was tall and of a medium build. His

> hands were clasped before him on the silver knob of an ebony cane. His expression was quite blank; too blank, even, to seem bored.
>
> *MT*, 11-12

The hat, treated as the defining element of this ensemble, is described thus after the fifteen plus years that are to have passed since the photograph: "With age, it had lost most of its pile and acquired a rich patina like an old penny" (*MT*, 70). The hat, already anachronistic to begin with, is aged and worse for wear, but Philip not only persists in keeping it, and in not taking any sort of care of it, but, as Melanie notes, it is seemingly the only hat he has ever owned, which he continues to wear whenever venturing outside. His attachment to this wretched artefact is a shorthand for his values system; the hat is both old-fashioned and encrusted with a patina of filth, yet it serves him well if no one else, so too does his approach to his family. One of these, however, is more dangerous than the other.

The first line Philip delivers, compounding his tyranny in a larger than life fashion, is a diatribe directed at Finn and Melanie for being three minutes late to breakfast. A petty issue, but one that encapsulates the image of the control he exercises over the house; the breakfast scene is the first to feature the full cast of characters at once, illustrating the dynamics at work. Philip, as the villain, cannot win, much as Miss Minchin cannot win out over Sara Crewe, but the novel's ending is ambiguously pyrrhic. Unlike his analogue in *A Little Princess*, he can't simply be defeated by some cutting words and the humiliation of losing control of his charges. As a personification of something as pervasive as the patriarchy, he can't just cease to be a threat because the characters decide not to abide by his rules.

> There was a barricade of smashed, piled chairs at the foot of the stairs, on the kitchen landing. Philip Flower pulled the table through the door to add to it. The floral tablecloth still flapped disconsolately around its legs and the remains of their meal tumbled to the floor as he heaved and tugged. 'Trap them like rats and burn them out!' he shouted with insane glee. And it was glee. They were all to burn and gleefully he would watch over them. The blood showed through his eyes.
>
> *MT*, 197-198

Early in Carter's own filmic adaptation, Philip posits in his puppet show that "each man kills the thing he loves" (*CR*, 272)[76]. Having created the world of the toyshop, it falls on him to destroy it when it no longer needs him, except he himself is of that world, and by destroying it he only cements his own irrelevance.

The counterpoint to Philip's authoritarian god figure would be Francie, who also holds some vague sense of power (he is the only member of the household not dependant on Philip, as he does not work at the toyshop and appears to have a life outside of it), but acts more as an observer, seldom interfering with the affairs of the shop's inhabitants and being, while ultimately benevolent, outwardly indifferent to its goings-on. If not for his near constant presence in the house, he would be an easy analogue to the father figures seen in *The Secret Garden*'s Mr Craven or *Heidi*'s Mr Sesemann, who have a distance both figurative and literal from the domains of which they are in charge, with goings-on typically reported rather than witnessed. Francie being present, even when Philip is not, makes him ultimately complicit in reinforcing the toyshop's status quo.

If Francie is complicit in his inaction, this leaves Finn as the sole opposition to Philip's rule over the house and the family. Aside from being Melanie's somewhat vague love interest, Finn fills a variant on the role of the earthy character of the likes of *The Secret Garden*'s Dickon, the working-class character exhibiting a sense of wisdom and common sense that those of higher standing lack. Dickon teaches Mary the ways of the world in a folksy manner, and Finn does much the same with Melanie, except with the key difference that Finn gives little indication of having much in the way of common sense and only fleeting bouts of wisdom; instead exuding a passion

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[76] This is a quotation from Oscar Wilde's poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1897):

> Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
> By each let this be heard,
> Some do it with a bitter look,
> Some with a flattering word,
> The coward does it with a kiss,
> The brave man with a sword!
>
> Wilde, 257

In a bout of foreshadowing, the show in question is changed from '*Morte d'une Sylphe*, or, Death of a Wood Nymph' to a variation on the Pygmalion myth wherein the sculptor's creation spurns his advances and he proceeds to stab her to death, echoing Wilde's later lines "The kindest use a knife, because/The dead so soon grow cold" (Wilde, 257). The actual stabbing in the scene is avoided however when "*[t]he knife, which is perfectly real, perfectly sharp, […] by bizarre accident – and* FINN*'s clumsiness – cut[s] through one of the strings that uphold[s] the nymph*" (*CR*, 272).

and recklessness that puts him at odds with Philip and the toyshop. Just because he understands the world does not mean he has to like it, after all.

As this thesis will show, the later *Heroes and Villains* considers some of the same themes as *The Magic Toyshop*, albeit with a more pronounced fantasy angle. Its own heroine, Marianne, finds herself an orphan whose privileged status is lost and soon becomes embroiled in the power struggles of her new society. However the echoes of Edwardian girls' fiction are very much reduced; as I will show, Carter looks more to the nineteenth-century Gothic for inspiration, which can also be identified in her other early novels: *Shadow Dance*, *Several Perceptions* and *Love*.

7. The 'Bristol Trilogy': Home is where madness is

In Marc O'Day's essay ''Mutability is Having a Field Day': The Sixties Aura of Angela Carter's Bristol Trilogy', he introduces the idea that three of Carter's early novels; *Shadow Dance* (1966), *Several Perceptions* (1968), and *Love* (1971); are inherently linked, sharing "many formal and thematic elements" (O'Day, 44) as well as their implicit setting. The identity of the town(s) in which the novels are set is never actually specified, yet O'Day posits that the "external evidence makes the autobiographical connection clear" (O'Day, 44), referring to Carter's interviews with John Haffenden and Helen Cagney Watts, as well as her essay on the 1960s, 'Truly, It Felt Like Year One'.[77] Indeed, Carter does suggest that *Shadow Dance* at least is "about a perfectly real area of the city in which [she] lived" (Haffenden, 80) – Bristol.

This chapter will predominantly discuss the latter two novels in chronological order. Despite similarities of setting, they differ considerably in focus. Looking at *Several Perceptions*, I consider the novel with regards to one of its primary intertexts, the *Alice* stories of Lewis Carroll, in addition to considering the vampiric imagery present in the novel through its references to *Dracula* (which all relate to its discussion of mental illness). *Love* also focuses on mental illness, however it makes heavier use of Gothic imagery than either of the two preceding novels, and as such I will investigate this novel in relation to several works of Edgar Allen Poe, including 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), 'The Raven' (1845) and 'Annabel Lee' (1849). I will also examine Carter's repeated returns in *Love* to John Everett Millais' painting *Ophelia* (1852).

Shadow Dance

The novels which make up the 'Bristol trilogy' seem to occupy odd places in Carter's body of works. Her debut novel, *Shadow Dance*, originally published in 1966, is no exception, due to its bitter tone.

Contemporary reception appeared positive; the first edition features a quote on the cover from Anthony Burgess, declaring her as having "remarkable descriptive gifts, a powerful imagination and […] a capacity for looking at the mess of

[77] From *Very Heaven: Looking Back at the 1960s*, ed. Sarah Maitland. 1988. London: Virago.

contemporary life totally without flinching" (Bristow & Broughton, 3); though Carter herself claimed that few took the world the novel presents as 'real':

> The first novel I wrote, *Shadow Dance*, was about a perfectly real area of the city in which I lived [Clifton, Bristol]. It didn't give exact mimetic copies of people I knew, but it was absolutely as real as the milieu I was familiar with: it was set in provincial bohemia. But very few reviewers believed that it was real; they said I'd been reading too much Carson McCullers.
>
> Haffenden, 80

By Carter's standard, the novel is fairly straightforward and traditional in terms of plotting. She herself can be inferred as dismissive of it in her interview with Haffenden, noting that "[f]rom *The Magic Toyshop* onwards I've tried to keep an entertaining surface to the novels, so that you don't have to read them as a system of signification if you don't want to" (Haffenden, 87), implying that there is one way to 'correctly' read the novel, with no great layering present. The novel focuses on the tale of Morris, an unsuccessful artist in a stilted marriage, and the web of intrigue surrounding a woman knifed along the length of her body. It follows a standard enough arc; Ghîslaine, the woman in question, haunts Morris, both physically and otherwise, requiring him to confront his complicity in what happened to her.

Carter gives no indication that she likes these characters; they exist, they have issues, perhaps even ones we can sympathise with, but whether the characters themselves are worth sympathising with is another question entirely. Evidence would suggest not: the vast majority of the cast are weak willed to an excessive degree, it seems unlikely that we are supposed to sympathise too much with Morris and his self-absorbed take on goings-on, much less the actively wicked Honeybuzzard, and almost certainly not the array of female characters who willingly make victims of themselves for the menfolk (Carter once commented that Jean Rhys' and Edna O'Brien's "scars glorify the sex that wounded them" (*NS*, 208)). The closest we perhaps get is Emily, the city girl who follows Honey back from London, who herself fails to be viewed in an entirely sympathetic light due to her vaguely callous disinterest in the world around her. However these characters, or rather what they represent, are revisited in the latter two books of the supposed trilogy.

Several Perceptions, *Dracula*, *Alice*, and Madness

Several Perceptions is Carter's third novel. In this section, we will look at some of the book's most prominent intertexts; Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories; and consider how they are used in order to comment on 'madness' as a concept.

The novel is one of the more overlooked of Carter's works with comparably little critical material. Even Lorna Sage affords the novel only a brief page in her overview for Northcote House's 'Writers and their Work' series. For comparison with Carter's other early novels, *Shadow Dance* receives just shy of five pages, while *The Magic Toyshop*, *Heroes and Villains* and *Love* get roughly three pages each. That is not to say that there is no critical material; Sarah Gamble's overview of critique of Carter's work includes some acknowledgement of it, particularly in relation to *Shadow Dance* and *Love*, though ultimately less than of either of those novels. Marc O'Day makes some comment, in 'Mutability is Having a Field Day', on the constructed nature of the world, saying that "this is the exact moment [circa 1969] when schizophrenia became a trendy form of resistance to and rejection of oppressive families and parents" (O'Day, 62), while Linden Peach discusses the novel's use of dreams and of Gothic imagery. Aiden Day however views the novel as being ultimately about war, saying that "[w]ar is seen in *Several Perceptions* as the expression of a destructive masculinism which deprives many young people of their fathers and which, in the case of Vietnam, as we have seen, betrays other young people into acts they can only be aghast at" (Day, 35). This is the reason for the youthful disaffection in the novel, misunderstood by the characters' elders. This material however tends to be quite terse compared to Carter's other works; while they pick up on the themes present in the novel, they do not examine them in any great detail, especially compared to *Shadow Dance* and *Love*. To this end, in this section I will refer fairly frequently to Edmund Gordon's biography, *The Invention of Angela Carter* (2016), one of the few works which discusses the novel in some detail, and aim to provide a somewhat more in depth look at the novel's use of some of these themes.

The novel received fairly tepid reviews, possibly as a result of its following the widely-admired *The Magic Toyshop*. Gordon comments that reviews were "typical in viewing *Several Perceptions* as a disappointment" and that "[m]ost of the praise it did

receive was very faint indeed" (Gordon, 124). Amusingly, a notable exception was the poet Richard Church who gave the novel much praise while reviewing it for *Country Life*, a magazine very much outside of Carter's target audience. Carter reportedly "came to the conclusion that the novel was 'a complete failure because all the wrong people liked it'" (Gordon, 124). Despite this, it did receive some notable critical success; the novel was the winner of the 1969 Somerset Maugham Award,[78] but also marked a turning point in her life. The prize money, to be used for travel, was used to leave her husband; she later said that "Somerset Maugham would have been very pleased" (Clapp, 31).

Part of its lack of recent critical appreciation may be due to Carter's own feelings on it:

> [S]hortly before *The Passion of New Eve* was published in 1977, [Carter] suggested that *Several Perceptions* was the only one of her novels that she really couldn't stand: 'It does embarrass me. Because I think I was too young to do it. Suffering appears as a form of decoration in it, which I think is awful.'
>
> Gordon, 125

Sandwiched between *The Magic Toyshop* and *Heroes and Villains*, the novel is uncharacteristically jovial when compared to her other early novels, and ends on a far more optimistic note than those that precede and follow it.

At the novel's opening, the nihilistic 'hero' Joseph attempts to commit suicide following the loss of his lover, Charlotte (though it is revealed that despite his talking as if she is dead, she has in fact simply left him). He fails in his bid for a spectacular death (he blows up his flat in a gas explosion), and so has to live on. Convinced that his comparatively minor injuries mean he has broken the very concept of cause and effect, he comes to the conclusion that anything and everything is possible and proceeds to live on impulse, which in his case involves petty vandalism and dubious protest. The novel concludes with a Christmas party, where all problems evaporate and Joseph becomes "friends with time again" (*SP*, 146).

[78] Notably, while the Somerset Maugham Award is typically awarded to multiple winners in the same year, Carter was the sole winner of the 1969 award.

The significance of Joseph's name is the most often noted allusion in the novel.[79] Joseph's dreams play a major role in the text, evoking the biblical figure of the same name, but more curious is his surname 'Harker', recalling Jonathan and Mina of *Dracula* fame. In Stoker's novel, Jonathan has a mental breakdown as a result of his experiences with the vampires and must be restored to health. In *Several Perceptions*, Joseph's own mental anguish sees a notably monstrous turn; Charlotte becomes the vampire that wished to suck the life out of him.

> A picture of Charlotte was tacked over the gas fire. She was squinting into past suns. Her blond hair blew over her face which did not in the least resemble the face he remembered, since that face reincarnated in fantasy after fantasy, recreated nightly in dreams for months after she left, had become transformed in his mind to a Gothic mask, huge eyeballs hooded with lids of stone, cheekbones sharp as steel, lips of treacherous vampire redness and a wet red mouth which was a mantrap of ivory fangs. Witch woman. Incubus. [*sic*] Haunter of battlefields after the carnage in the image of a crow.
>
> *SP*, 15

There is no Mina figure to nurse Joseph back to health however. The nearest analogue has no time for his problems, so he will have to figure it out by himself. Charlotte ceases to be human, taking on instead all the trappings of predatory monster women. Like Lucy, Dracula's most prominent victim, she has become impossibly more beautiful and terrifying after her death. Except the twist is that she is not actually dead; she has just left him. Nevertheless this drives him to despair as she continues to haunt him. Though she is seldom mentioned between the opening and the climax of the novel, she is ultimately the driving force of his madness.

The nature of her as 'vampire' is a double inversion of *Dracula*. In Stoker's novel, the women are preyed upon by a malevolent male figure, whereas here the situation is the other way around (or, at least, so it seems). However Carter's novel also twists the apparent class implications; the animalistic Dracula may represent an attack on British bourgeois values, however Charlotte is, like many of Carter's early

[79] An early review by Richard Boston picked up on the biblical reference, saying "[l]ike his Biblical namesake, [Joseph] is a dreamer" (Boston). Later critics Lorna Sage (Sage, 2007a, 16) and Linden Peach (Peach, 46-47) note both the biblical figure of Joseph and 'Harker' of *Dracula* as apparent allusions.

heroines, an embodiment of the latter; a deathly serious and profoundly middle class scholar, obsessed with F.R. Leavis and Jane Austen.[80]

He is released from her supposed thrall when he realises the extent of his mistreatment of her; he had spent their relationship using her not only financially and sexually, but also emotionally. Upon this revelation, she disappears: "Joseph tried to recall Charlotte's face but it was no good, she was a blank in space. Not even a vampire any more; he no longer dreamed of her making fat meals off his heart. And had it, in fact, been the other way around?" (*SP*, 113). Charlotte is not the villain he imagines her to be, but rather the naïve victim who comes into his life in the hopes of finding "real people" (*SP*, 112) or at least what she imagines them to be ("'She used to look at me as if I had a heart of gold,' said Mrs Boulder. 'I thought, "I'll show her".'" (*SP*, 112)), only to fall prey to a man who uses her and doesn't appear to respect her.

Joseph's obliviousness to this fact however fails to render him a Dracula figure in her stead. He, as far as we can tell, does not set out to consume her any more than she does him. While ostensibly part of a sequence with *Shadow Dance*, the world of *Several Perceptions* is too morally grey for one party to be the monster and one to be the victim.

Alice

The novel's 'heroine', for lack of a better word, as well as the previously mentioned 'nearest analogue' to *Dracula*'s Mina, is Joseph's neighbour, Anne, who saves him following his botched suicide attempt. However, she has her own problems, and little patience for his maladies. Instead she acts as the logical centre of the novel; an apparently sensible figure amidst the apparent strangeness of the world Joseph inhabits.

She is almost immediately linked to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Upon her first appearance, she is said to resemble John Tenniel's illustrations of the title character, though because she looks "severe and proper, but cropped and singularly lacking in charm" (*SP*, 38). This is appropriate, as it is her not

[80] Noticeably the only Austen directly referred to in the text is *Mansfield Park* (1814), popularly viewed as the most moralistic of Austen's novels. Given as Charlotte's particular topic of interest is "Jane Austen's moral universe" (*SP*, 4), we can perhaps discern her mindset from this.

entirely altruistic act of neighbourly kindness that leads Joseph into abandoning reason in favour of the alternative; upon failing to kill himself, he declares that conventional logic has been broken and decides to live accordingly ("he had blindly stumbled upon a formula that annihilated causation and now anything was possible" (*SP*, 21)). Carroll's Alice famously finds herself in other dream-like worlds[81] where the logic to which she is accustomed does not necessarily apply. The allusion to Alice is not incidental. Anne of her own free will follows Joseph, the proverbial rabbit, into the counter-culture.

In spite of this allusion, Anne for her part is quite devoid of curiosity and has no sense of wonder. Instead she is matter-of-fact and unromantic. She shares Alice's determination to find logic in the world, but logic for her is a joyless thing.

> 'I live below and there is a custard in this dish,' she said. Her voice was flat, low and unmelodious and her accent Midlands. 'I made this custard with eggs and milk. I made it specially.'
>
> She presented the dish with a brusque, ugly gesture. The cat leapt from the mattress and ran to sniff her feet; she moved from foot to foot, trying to avoid the cat, disliking it.
>
> […]
>
> 'Custard is good for building you up.' She still had not raised her face. In her old-fashioned clothes, she could have been as old as Viv's mother but she was far less interesting to look at. There was a long pause. And this was the woman who had saved his life.
>
> *SP*, 36-37

Anne's assertions about custard are ironic in light of the sustained allusion to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, as custard is among the discernible flavours of the 'DRINK ME' potion that causes Alice to shrink (or "shut up like a telescope" (Carroll, 13)), alongside "cherry-tart , […] pine-apple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast" (Carroll, 14), and allows her to continue her adventures. Indeed the custard does not serve to bring Joseph out of his anguish, but instead represents an early step on his travails. While in the case of Alice, this "shutting up like a telescope" is quite literal, within *Several Perceptions* the characters have shut themselves down in a metaphorical sense. This is true both of Joseph and his breakdown, and of Anne, living as she does a buttoned-up existence centred on self-

[81] Both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (as well as the original *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*) end with the heroine waking up from the apparent dream worlds. *Several Perceptions* closes with Joseph waking up from "a profound sleep" (*SP*, 148).

flagellation. The latter idea is derived from *Alice* who also has an issue with self-flagellation:

> [Alice] generally gave herself very good advice (though she very seldom followed it), and sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes; and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself […]
>
> Carroll, 14

Anne's strict adherence to her conventional moral compass and associated logic is the source of her misery. Her limp, she believes, is divine punishment for "giving herself away" (*SP*, 145); prior to the events of the novel, she was pregnant out of wedlock and threw herself down a flight of stairs in an unsuccessful attempt to terminate. Her interest in Joseph is largely to assuage her guilt. Her strict adherence to logic runs counter to Joseph's disregard of it; that is, Joseph's response to trauma is to embrace chaos, whereas hers is to embrace order, even as she rather begrudgingly finds herself amongst the bohemian set. Indeed, at the end of Carter's novel, when Anne is cured of her limp, the miracle is immediately deflated when Kay informs Joseph that the problem was psychosomatic and "[a]nybody could have cured her, anybody who said to her in a firm enough voice, 'Nonsense, you don't really limp at all.'" (*SP*, 145).

Just as *Through the Looking Glass* ends with Alice waking to the purring of her kittens, Joseph wakes from his reverie to find his cat has given birth and is "purring like an aeroplane about to take off" (*SP*, 148). His travails are as if a dream. Carter would return to the theme of madness in *Love*, however rather than refer to *Alice* in its depiction, she would instead look towards a darker inspiration: the works of Edgar Allen Poe.

Love and Despair

Love (1971) is the last of the hypothesised 'Bristol trilogy'. It continues Carter's dalliance with 'realistic' fiction, containing no explicit supernatural or fantastical elements, however like its forbears it maintains a highly Gothicised style. In this section, we will look at the influence of Edgar Allen Poe's work over the novel, which features an allusion to his work at its centre with the main characters' names,

'Annabel' and 'Lee', just as names in *Several Perceptions* alluded to *Dracula* and the *Bible*.

Her fifth published novel, sandwiched between *Heroes and Villains* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, *Love* marks the end of the early stage of her literary career, with her later novels getting increasingly fantastic as opposed to realistic (as she supposedly saw it) depictions of the world she inhabited. As well as artistically, it also marks changes in her own life and her development as a person; having won the Somerset Maugham award for *Several Perceptions*, she used the prize money to leave her first husband and travel to Japan. She recalled "I wrote half of *Love* while I was still married: that's a formally flawed book, partly because I moved house halfway through it" (Haffenden, 78); we might interpret this as why it is by some margin the shortest of her novels (a little over a hundred pages) and why it is the only novel that saw textual revisions before it was later republished.

Plot and Textual Revisions

The plot concerns Lee and Annabel, a young married couple in the same 'provincial bohemia' setting as *Shadow Dance* and *Several Perceptions*. Annabel suffers from mental instability and Lee has attachment issues, and so their relationship is characterised by their attempts to dominate each other. Further complicating matters is the presence of Lee's brother, Buzz, who encourages the worst behaviour in either of them. In the end, Lee walks out, convinced of Annabel's rejection of him in favour of his brother, while Annabel, sick of her husband's constant philandering, decides to reinvent herself before committing suicide. The story leaves off with the brothers fighting over her deathbed "as to which of them was most to blame, for nothing but death is irreparable" (*Love*, 110).

The 1987 edition (the version more readily available today) most noticeably adds a rather mocking afterword, but also makes some changes to the text to make Annabel's intentions more ambiguous. Lorna Sage outlines these changes:

> [Carter] deleted several passages which in the original made Lee Annabel's victim. For example: 'since he loved her, he did not wish to believe his occasional intuitions that she was obscurely calculating and malign' (p.84); and 'She filled him with revulsion; her curiously pointed

> teeth might be those of a vampire' (p.107). In 1971, Annabel 'slavered' kisses on him in her final doomed attempt to force sex to have meaning, whereas in 1987 she 'lavished' them, and so on. The effect of these changes is to diminish the amount of subjective sympathy Lee is allowed, and so reinforce what was anyway the original implication: that 'the hero' has no power to redeem.
>
> Sage, 1992, 172-173[82]

The afterword serves to puncture the darkness of the text, and expounds on the fates of the various characters, which include a variety of clichés of women's literature that Carter was on record as hating, saying "there is something a little tasteless about taking [Annabel's] husband and brother-in-law and the lovers and doctors out of the text that is Annabel's coffin and resurrecting them. But good taste is not a significant attribute of this novel, anyway" (*Love*, 111-112). With Annabel being about the closest Carter came to having a heroine martyred due to the actions of men, the afterword thus runs with this notion of her being a "frail, tragic creature" (*Love,* 116), meanwhile the other female characters have become activists and political lesbians. Elsewhere undue focus is given to Lee's new wife, Rosie, a committed but self-righteous feminist activist and socialist, as if she were a character from the novel itself.

The novel, with its destructive relationship, repeats many themes of *Shadow Dance*. The bizarre love triangle of Lee, Annabel and Buzz mirrors the relationship of Honeybuzzard and Ghîslaine from the earlier book, with Sage going so far as to say that "in a sense, [*Love* is] a rewrite of *Shadow Dance*" (Sage, 2007a, 20), with the two sides of Honeybuzzard split between the two men.

Unlike Carter's other early novels, relatively little attention is paid to the environments the characters inhabit, though this itself is perhaps significant. Compared to the grime-laden locales of Carter's previous novels, the places that make up the setting for *Love*, as far as the reader sees, tend to be strictly and distinctly functional; Lee's room, before the arrival of Annabel, is "always extraordinarily tidy, white as a tent and just as easy to dismantle" (*Love*, 13) while Lee's philosophy tutor's house has beige walls adorned with prints of Picasso and Mondrian. The great exception is the main threesome's flat; a blank slate that forms the canvas for Annabel's artistic inclinations. Not only does it find itself increasingly filled with

[82] Note that the page references within this quotation refer to the 1971 edition.

"bulky furniture in dark woods" (*Love*, 7) and an array of peculiar knickknacks, but Annabel paints directly onto the walls. Beginning with a "flourishing and complicated tree covered in flowers and many coloured birds" (*Love*, 15), the walls become:

> Painted a very dark green and from this background emerged all the dreary paraphernalia of romanticism, landscapes of forests, jungles and ruins inhabited by gorillas, trees with breasts, winged men with pig faces and women whose heads were skulls.
>
> *Love*, 6-7

The names of *Love*'s central couple are an apparent allusion to Edgar Allen Poe's 'Annabel Lee' (1849). The poem concerns the death of a beautiful woman; a subject that Poe described as "the most poetical topic in the world" (Bronfen, 59); and in making reference to it, Carter foretells the fate that awaits the characters at the end of the novel. The eponymous Annabel Lee and the speaker of the poem have a love so strong that it is supposedly the envy of heaven itself, to such a degree that the angels arrange her demise in the form of a wind that "blew out of the cloud by night/Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee" (Poe, 42). The flat of Annabel and Lee is such that when the windows are open "the wind rushed through" (*Love*, 14), and just as Annabel Lee is "shut up in a sepulchre" (Poe, 42), Annabel seals the flat before gassing herself, rendering it a tomb. The heavens have little to do with Annabel's demise however; her final fate is squarely as a result of less supernatural influences. We can compare this to *Shadow Dance*'s Ghîslaine, a similar instance of the 'death of a beautiful woman' in Carter's early work. Ghîslaine, like Annabel, feels intense jealously, desire and obsession, although the external factors involved in her end are a lot less oblique than in Annabel's case. Ghîslaine falls foul of the 'death of a beautiful woman', but her apparent beauty has been lost by the opening of the novel; having received what should logically have been a fatal attack, she fails to die and continues, in her mangled state, to haunt the characters. Unlike Annabel however, it is well established that she has been killed by an external force: the object of her fascination, having destroyed the beauty previously, finishes the woman by choking the life from her. However while it is in death that Morris sees "[w]ith pity and tenderness, for the first time unmixed with any other feeling" (*SD*, 177) Ghîslaine as a person rather than a monster, Annabel's humanity is drained away by her death, rendering her "a painted doll" (*Love*, 109), an object.

While the obvious allusion in *Love* is to 'Annabel Lee', we can also consider the novel in light of Poe's work more generally. Certainly while the character names come from 'Annabel Lee', the work of Poe's that finds itself alluded to directly in the novel is 'The Raven' (1845) when Lee witnesses "a gaunt figure […] folded in the wings of a black cape like Poe's raven named Nevermore" (*Love*, 66). Poe's frequent discussions of the death of a young woman makes him an obvious choice to invoke in a novel that considers love and madness and, indeed, the death of a young woman, though Carter does not appear to find the topic as inherently beautiful as Poe does. While she uses the imagery, she also highlights the more unpleasant, less beautiful side of the characters' suffering.

Compare it, for instance, to 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), one of his key works. Madeline Usher's mysterious malady gives her "[a] settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character" (Poe, 97); this is recalled in Annabel's disinterest in the world and incapability of looking after herself: "[Lee] lost his first optimism as he saw she grew no closer to the common world by mingling with it; rather, she enhanced her difference from it and grew proud" (*Love*, 74). Madeline dies, or so it appears, when she relents and retires to her bed, leaving behind a corpse with "the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death" (Poe, 102-103). In her death, Annabel paints herself to resemble such a figure and places herself on the bed, the end result is not so glamorous; her body is found "bluish at the extremities" and with "[f]lies already clustered round her eyes" (*Love*, 109). Of course, that particular death of Madeline in Poe is not real; per her brother's belief, she has been buried alive, and rises briefly from the grave causing his heart to give out, but Annabel is completely and definitively dead. Unlike the eponymous House of Usher, which collapses in on itself upon the deaths of the twins, Annabel's home isn't literally broken as a result, but her husband and brother-in-law's relationship reaches breaking point.

The former of these, Lee, bears some similarities with Roderick Usher as well. This is not immediately apparent; Roderick is wan and sickly (though again somehow beautiful; the narrator describes his friend's face in loving detail, and notes how similar the siblings resemble one another: "A striking similitude between brother and sister now arrested my attention" (Poe, 102)) and the former of "sturdy build" (*Love*, 12) and fresh complexion. They do however have a common symptom in their

photophobia. That of Poe's character is tied definitively to his mental state however ("[A] mere nervous affliction […] which would undoubtedly soon pass off. It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations" (Poe, 95)), while Lee's is somewhat more ambiguous. He apparently suffered from a chronic eye infection as a child that "he did not shake off as he grew up" (*Love*, 12), and uses it to deny any display of emotions on his part. Any of the tears that frequently well up are officially due to this rather than any emotional response to goings on, but the question as to whether this is always the case is left hanging. Lee (physically) survives the end of the story, though in the afterward he perhaps becomes more Usher-like as he finds himself on "tranquilizers of such strength in such quantities that he became a virtual zombie" (*Love*, 112).

The aforementioned allusion to 'The Raven' is also telling. The poem has a requisite lost love (Lenore) whose loss inspires a despair that takes the form of a raven which takes up residence over the speaker's door, "the lamp-light o'er him streaming throw[ing] his shadow on the floor; / And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted – nevermore!" (Poe, 33). The figure that reminds Lee of Poe's raven is perhaps (he is uncertain) that of his brother, Buzz. At the end of the novel it is Buzz who perches over Annabel's corpse and announces Lee's culpability in her death. The book closes on them "squabble[ing] drearily" over the blame, reminiscent of the poem's increasingly agitated narrator and his lines toward the raven as his temper flares, and he starts "shriek[ing]" and "upstarting" (Poe, 33) upon being told that he will never see his beloved Lenore again.

The novel's final coda, "for nothing but death is irreparable" (*Love*, 110), also echoes the finality of Annabel's situation. She is dead and she will not return. Neither Lee nor Buzz will see her again; just as "nevermore" shall the poem's "soul with sorrow laden […], within the distant Aidenn […] clasp a rare and radiant maiden who the angels name Lenore" (Poe, 32). Carter is more cynical about her hero's suffering, however. In their 'dreary squabbling', we can infer that the brothers' relationship shall recover and is perhaps already on the mend[83] allowing for a return to normality, rather than the never-ending despair that punctuates Poe's work.

However we must note that Annabel, unlike Madeline, Annabel Lee or a host of other Poe heroines, is often cruel and manipulative and is apparently aware that she is

[83] This is however contradicted by the afterword, which claims that "[t]he brothers are no longer in communication" (*Love*, 115).

being so. While the revised edition tones down the suggestion that she is wilfully malign, there is never-the-less enough left to suggest that she is not entirely the "frail, tragic creature" (*Love*, 116) that she is assumed to be. More than being just a rendition of Poe's beautiful dead woman, she is the female counterpart of the obsessive (male) lover that dominates the poet's works. Of course though, the object of her affections is far from a perfect beauty but both physically abusive and an emotional wreck, a fact that she is able to use to her advantage.

This cynical view of the situation could perhaps be attributed to Carter's ailing marriage at the time, with her writing to a friend that ""LOVE" is autobiographical" (Gordon, 127, emphasis in original). The focus of the obsession in Poe's work is generally ill defined; we know that Lenore and Annabel Lee, *et al*, were beautiful, but we get little if anything of their character. They are essentially props; objects on which the narrators project their love, though ones that they also define their lives by. Annabel takes a similar view of her husband, as Carter felt hers was doing to her.

> [I]f some biographer of the far-distant future got hold of the reference to Paul [Carter] … in which I compare him to Annabel in LOVE [sic] – oh, there'd be meat there!
>
> Gordon, 127[84]

While we could assume this inversion to simply be to disguise the use of her own marriage as reference (though she appears to dispute that, writing to a friend that "I might well be Lee; I even put in clues like knocking out his front tooth, and nobody guessed!" (Gordon, 127)),[85] it feels that the use of this dynamic is more pointed than that. The imagery Carter uses is highly centred on the fact that Annabel is a woman.

For instance, a recurring image throughout the novel is that of Shakespeare's Ophelia, specifically the imagining of the character in John Everett Millais' 1852 painting. Ophelia, along with Brontë's 'madwoman in the attic' is one of the pre-eminent examples of female madness in English literature, and the character (and her

[84] Somewhat ironically, Edmund Gordon, her actual future biographer, does not dwell too much on the matter, commenting that while it may be tempting "to treat the novel as a straight-forward portrait of her marriage" and that "[a] lot of it rewards this construal", briefly outlining the similarities (such as "Annabel resent[ing] Lee's privacy"), but ultimately warning that "*Love* remains a work of the imagination, and not everything in it yields to such a simple-minded reading" (Gordon, 127).

[85] Carter lost one of her front teeth in the late 1960s, and "for several months she didn't have a denture fitted, and simply smiled with a gap" (Gordon, 103). The reason for this does not seem particularly known; Gordon supposes it to have been extracted, as opposed to anything more sinister, as "she made numerous trips to the dentist during this period" and she wrote of having had "inexpressible toothache" (Gordon, 103).

death) is emblematic of the suffering beauty that Carter references throughout the novel. In *Love*, unable to find a moonstone for Annabel, Lee instead buys her a (second-hand) print of Millais' *Ophelia* "because [she] often wore the same expression" (*Love*, 40). Ophelia is invoked again after Annabel's stay at the psychiatric ward, when we are told that "[s]ome days she did not get up at all and, if she did, she did not bother to dress or wash but lounged around all day in her nightdress, the very image of mad Ophelia, her disordered hair often caked with watercolour or gobbed with breakfast egg" (*Love*, 69), giving the impression of her being a painted figure rather than a person (though Millais' painting is in oils, rather than watercolours or egg tempera).

Following the narrative of Shakespeare's character, and anticipating the influence of the painting, Annabel commits suicide at the novel's climax, prior to which she transforms herself through cosmetics into someone "as indifferent to the obscene flowers of the flesh as drowned Ophelia" (*Love*, 100); her new self having hair the colour of "polished brass" (*Love*, 101) and "a long, plain, white dress of cotton with a square-cut neck and long, tight, sleeves" (*Love*, 100), very deliberately invoking idea of the Ophelia of Millais' painting. Noticeably her make up is referred to as 'paint' ("she got her face painted in a beauty shop" (*Love*, 100)) suggesting she herself becomes a painting. Given the oil basis of cosmetics, it appears her transformation into *Ophelia*, a work of art, is complete. She does not drown (though an argument could be made as to the relation between drowning and suffocation), but atop the bed surrounded in a room whose walls are adorned with painted plants, we can easily imagine her looking as Ophelia as portrayed by Millais, even if the reality if quite different. Ophelia's body is preserved forever in idealised form on canvas, whereas Annabel starts to attract flies the instant that her proverbial tomb is opened.

In alluding to *Ophelia* and Poe, Carter evokes the image of the suffering beauty with Annabel. Lee also finds himself on the receiving end of similar imagery, being described as looking "like Billy Budd" (*Love*, 12), the title character of Herman Melville's posthumously-published late nineteenth-century novella *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924),[86] which tells the tale of an attractive and naive young man with a stutter[87] who

[86] Written between 1888 and 1891, the manuscript was discovered by Melville's biographer twenty-eight years after the author's death. It was published five years later.

[87] Melville describes the character thusly: "the spirit lodged within Billy, and looking out from his welkin eyes as from windows, that ineffability it was which made the dimple in his dyed cheek,

is accused of conspiracy to commit mutiny by the ship's jealous master-at-arms. Billy is innocent of such a deed, but when confronted, gets flustered and strikes a blow on the master-at-arms, inadvertently killing him. He is thus hanged. Later, history vilifies Billy while praising the actions of the master-at-arms.

> "On the tenth of the last month a deplorable occurrence took place on board H.M.S. Indomitable. John Claggart, the ship's Master-at-arms, discovering that some sort of plot was incipient among an inferior section of the ship's company, and that the ringleader was one William Budd; he, Claggart, in the act of arraigning the man before the Captain was vindictively stabbed to the heart by the suddenly drawn sheath-knife of Budd. […]
>
> "The enormity of the crime and the extreme depravity of the criminal, appear the greater in view of the character of the victim, a middle-aged man respectable and discreet, belonging to that official grade, the petty-officers, upon whom, as none know better than the commissioned gentlemen, the efficiency of His Majesty's Navy so largely depends. […]"
>
> The above, appearing in a publication now long ago superannuated and forgotten, is all that hitherto has stood in human record to attest what manner of men respectively were John Claggart and Billy Budd.
>
> Melville, Chap.29

This ties into the notion that Lee was supposed to be the more sympathetic character in Carter's mind, at least at time of writing ("[I]n my terms [Lee is] a perfectly moral person, who wants to do good, who wants to help, and he can't. And that's ultimately what destroys him, that he is incapable of fulfilling his own moral expectations of himself" (Gordon, 127)). While Annabel's resemblance to Ophelia is a construct, a façade, Lee's resemblance to a character that is in essence the male equivalent of the 'suffering beauty' is innate. However he takes actions in the novel that belay the idea of him being an innocent in the course of events, even if he is ostensibly well meaning.

Love marks the end of the Bristol trilogy, as well as Carter's first marriage. The three novels are linked in their setting, but also their motifs. They all centre on a male lead who is oblivious to the suffering that he inflicts on those around him and how he must inevitably face up to this fact if he wants to continue on. This invariably seems to fail; only Joseph from *Several Perceptions* seems willing to make the effort to escape the

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suppled his joints, and dancing in his yellow curls made him preeminently the Handsome Sailor" (Melville, Chap.12).

misery in which he finds himself wallowing. While all the novels share this theme, how Carter conveys these points varies considerably. *Shadow Dance* puts great focus on its female cast and how they differ, while displaying considerable scepticism towards more traditional roles. *Several Perceptions* and *Love* meanwhile make heavy use of intertextual references and allusion to convey the madness and sufferings of their characters, though the texts of choice are quite different, with the former looking towards literary nonsense and fantasy and the latter to the patterns of mid nineteenth-century Gothic and romanticism.

Despite her future renown as a feminist writer which might lead one to assume a very female point of view in her work, Carter was known to opine that "[m]en are different to women, as far as I can see, only in their biological organisation" (Gordon, 77), placing emphasis on the similarities between the genders rather than any innate difference, as well as that men also suffer under traditional conceptions of gender: "Mrs Pankhurst is right,[88] […] [t]he men in a society which systematically degrades women also become [*sic*] degraded" (Gordon, 164). She continued to write from a male perspective; most notably *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* features a male narrator exclusively, and portions of *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus* make use of both male and female focal characters (or character in the case of the former); but her later novels abandon the ostensible realism of the 'Bristol trilogy'. This should not have come entirely as a surprise, however. Her second novel, *The Magic Toyshop*, hints at the more fantastical elements that would come more definitively into focus later in her career.

[88] In actuality, this appears to be a derivation of a quote by Mary Wollstonecraft rather than Emmeline Pankhurst (or indeed any of the Pankhursts). As this citation is from a letter written by Carter to a friend as opposed to something for publication, it perhaps wasn't requiring of checking for accuracy.

8. Mythmaking and Unmaking in Angela Carter's Early Science Fiction

While Angela Carter's earlier works are focused more on real world settings and situations that show clearly the influence of Victorian literature, her later works turn towards more fantastical settings. In this chapter, I look specifically at her science fiction works. While this might seem disconnected from the Victorian influence discussed previously, this is not as straightforward a case as one might imagine. Like a lot of science fiction, the settings and themes at work in the novels under discussion in this chapter are very much based around contemporary views and fears (in Carter's work these include cold war paranoia, the culture wars, and women's liberation), however the influence of Victorian narratives is clear, and until now has not been noted. The themes explored in this chapter include Carter's continued use of the Gothic and her subversion of its tropes. Additionally the concept of myth creation and development shall be examined, as will the concept of the masculine and feminine 'ideals'.

Heroes and Villains

Heroes and Villains (1969) is Carter's fourth novel, and marks a definite departure from her previous works, although it is not without its continuities. This is the first of her science fiction novels, and, as she herself noted, referencing a contemporary review, this change in subject meant "that she wouldn't be winning any more prizes" (Gamble, 2001, 49).

Despite this, the novel uses many of the same component parts in its narrative as her earlier *The Magic Toyshop*, including a sullen but bourgeois girl, a death in the family, a simultaneously repulsive yet fascinating young man, and a whisking away to sinister house overseen by a proverbial puppet master, as well as containing numerous intertextual references. The characters explicitly refer to *Gulliver's Travels* when discussing the behaviours of the novel's different tribes, and a copy of *Great Expectations* is conveniently found lying around the ruined mansion that acts as their base. The novel's use of the Victorian runs deeper than this however, as Carter deliberately makes use of the Gothic novel and its tropes in order to subvert or

exaggerate them. In doing so, she comments on the nature of the fantasy presented in the 'Gothic novel', and considers its relevance to the modern world.

Gothic Structures

In addition to its direct allusions to previous works, we should note that the novel has much in common with Victorian fiction, in particular the Victorian Gothic. In response to the Gothic label that had been attached by reviewers to her earlier work Carter claimed in a 1977 interview with Les Bedford for Sheffield University Television that she intended to "show them 'what a Gothic novel really was'" (Gamble, 2001, 49).

> I became, at the time, very irritated at the Gothic tag because I was, and am, a great pedant, and I knew perfectly well what a Gothic novel was. I knew it was all owls and ivy and mad passions and Byronic heroes who were probably damned, and I knew I wasn't writing them. Even though some of my heroes were quite emphatically damned, they weren't damned in the Byronic fashion, and that is why, when I set about writing my fourth novel, I very consciously chose the Gothic mode, with owls and ivy and ruins and a breathtakingly Byronic hero.
>
> Gamble, 2006, 81[89]

Carter here boils the genre down to its basic stereotyped ingredients in the precise way the 'great pedant' she professes to be would avoid; and despite her claims, her novel does not feature many of the elements she outlines, at least not in any straightforward fashion. Indeed, it is of note that Carter's first official self-declared foray into the Gothic with all the trappings she associated with it takes the form of soft science fiction.[90] The ruins are burnt-out urban areas, the owls replaced with

[89] Despite saying this however, it does not seem to have always reflected her feelings on the subject. Her biography quotes from a letter to her editor wherein she describes the work-in-progress *Magic Toyshop* as "a Gothic melodrama about a sort of South Suburban bluebeard toymaker & his household" (Gordon, 91), and alludes to her having said the same about *Shadow Dance* (Gordon, 257).

[90] 'Soft' science fiction is a term coined to distinguish the variety of science fiction concerned with the more social scientific aspects (i.e. the politics, sociology, etc.) of its world than the specifics of its engineering, physics, etc. Its counterpart, 'hard' science fiction, meanwhile is very concerned with the accuracy and detail of the conventional science at work in its world. *Brave New Worlds: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* dates the earliest use of this terminology to make this distinction comes from a 1976 essay (seemingly erroneously identified as being from 1977) by Peter Nicholls, '1975: The Year in Science Fiction, or Let's Hear It for the Decline and Fall of the Science Fiction Empire!', wherein he declares that "[t]he […] list reveals that an already established shift

more exotic predators from the zoo, and the Byronic hero a man who has grown up in the resulting hunter/gatherer society. The contrast is striking, as Carter demonstrates her skill for making the prosaic seem alien and uses it to create something that is truly out of this world. The ruined houses that permeated her earlier works were simply ruined houses; the house that the Barbarian commune inhabits in *Heroes and Villains* may have echoes of what it once was (in addition to referencing Carter's earlier houses), but the characters, and by extension the reader, have no frame of reference. The structure unquestionably exists, however the characters have only basic knowledge of what it is and can only guess at any significance involved. Said significance is thoroughly obscured by the passing of time however, with the house bearing but a passing resemblance to its presumed former glory:

> The kitchen was more a cave. There was still glass in most of the windows but this glass was now so caked with the grime of years that only the great fire crackling on the hearth and the door, open to the morning, gave any light. Joints of meat either undergoing the process of smoking or smoked already hung about everywhere from hooks and huge, lacquered bluebottles buzzed about. A few pieces of worm-eaten furniture still remained and an ancient dresser was still mysteriously filled with cracked and ancient pottery which the tribe was too superstitious to utilize. There was a large sink full of a brilliant moss which also coated the flagstones underfoot with emeraldine fur. There was a smell of earth, of rotting food and of all-pervading excrement.
>
> *HV*, 42

Like Miss Havisham's house in *Great Expectations*, the house that the Barbarians call home is a victim of extreme neglect. In a style typical of Carter's earlier work, the motifs of dark shadows and layers of dust and cobwebs are elaborated and extended. More than simply being ruined, the house is fetid, reminiscent of the memorable scene in Dickens' novel showing Miss Havisham's wedding feast "covered with dust and mould, and dropping to pieces" with her cake seeming to grow forth from the table "like a black fungus" into which there are "speckled-legged spiders with blotchy

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from hard sf (chemistry, physics, astronomy, technology) to soft sf (psychology, biology, anthropology, sociology, and even [...] linguistics) is continuing more strongly than ever" (Prucher, 191). The classic example would be Jules Verne and H.G. Wells; the former trying to have his creations strictly conform to contemporary scientific understanding, and the latter imagining fictional technologies to serve the characters and their actions. For instance, compare Verne's *De la Terre à la Lune* (1865) and *Autour de la Lune* (1870), wherein the spacecraft is launched from a huge cannon, to Wells' *The First Men in the Moon* (1900), wherein the eponymous men reach the moon via means of a material that negates gravity.

bodies running home" (Dickens, 95). Rather than the houses being alive with secrets and mystery, they are decomposing corpses.

Unlike Miss Havisham's Satis House or the lonely foreboding castles found in works such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) or 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), the house is full of people, however they are simply parasites devouring what is left of it before moving on. Jewel and Marianne, the novel's central characters, destroy its remains upon departure, leaving no trace of its existence. That said, it is a quintessentially Gothic manor; its initial appearance alludes to the "baroque stonework of the late Jacobean period" (*HV,* 31) and a "terrace built in some kind of florid English Renaissance style" (*HV,* 32), as well as its "Gothic turrets" and "Palladian pillared façades" (*HV,* 31); all in a state of decay, of course. It is here that quintessentially Gothic events take place, not least the marriage, by force, of the ingénue and her captor, Jewel – though in this instance neither seem especially keen on either the situation or their roles therein; a grotesque and parodic amalgamation of Anglican sermons and stereotypical Pagan imagery.

The Gothic Hero(ine)

We could assume that our Byronic hero, the novel's iconoclast of wildest moods and deepest passions, is Jewel, the aforementioned young man. However as with many stories of this type, excepting perhaps *Wuthering Heights* and its Heathcliff, he is not so much the central figure of the tale, but a supporting role to our focal character, Marianne. Her boredom with the society with which she is familiar results in her being abducted, partly by accident and part by design, by the barbarian, Jewel.

While Marianne shares some traits with the stereotypical Gothic heroine, in particular that she is learned but inexperienced, she is also characterised by her *lack* of innocence. She is not a pure hearted maiden in the thrall of a beast in the vein of *Dracula*'s Lucy, but instead an ill-tempered teenage girl half-heartedly in his capture. In terms of the pair's dynamic, the novel follows the pattern of *Wuthering Heights*, in particular the relationship between Heathcliff and the elder Catherine exhibited in the first volume, although who corresponds to whom in this scenario is open to debate. Catherine, like Marianne, is a vindictive young woman of good social standing in the thrall of an inscrutable man of mysterious origin. In the earlier novel however,

Heathcliff does not abduct the heroine[91] but is instead an outsider (implicitly of Irish traveller stock) brought into Catherine's bourgeois world:

> [A]ll that I could make out […] was a tale of his [Mr Earnshaw] seeing it [Heathcliff] starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb in the streets of Liverpool where he picked it up and inquired for its owner – Not a soul knew to whom it belonged, he said, and his money and time, being both limited, he thought it better to take it home with him, at once, than run into vain expenses there; because he determined he would not leave it as he found it.
>
> E. Brontë, 37

In Carter's novel, near-reversing this narrative, Marianne is taken from a 'civilised' place to a savage one. In terms of situation, hers is the mirror of Heathcliff's; she is the outsider, and her counterpart's mysterious origin is only such to her. Her captors are entirely confident in Jewel's lineage (when Marianne starts questioning, his parentage is matter-of-factly revealed; his mother's family "were travellers before the war" and that his father's line is "all dark" (*HV*, 40)). As such, she is the one who cannot relate to the world she finds herself in and is viewed with suspicion and derision by her ostensible peers, and the one who faces and lashes out against their cruelties. Indeed Marianne's bouts of cruelty are typically vengeful.

Marianne though is a woman of an enlightened society, dominated by logic and reason, and what shocks her most about events is not so much how they affect her, but that they run contrary to this reason. Both Catherine and Heathcliff are characterised by their passion above all else; the wherefores of their behaviour are something to which the narrator, Nelly (and by extension, Lockwood, the almost entirely ignorant outsider who serves as the reader's proxy and as a further layer of detachment from and filtering of the story), is generally not privy. Carter's narrative focus on Marianne allows the reader to follow her thought processes in a manner that *Wuthering Heights* does not: the reasoning for her actions is laid bare for the reader. She herself however does not always understand her own motivations ("She was full of pity for them but, more than anything, she wanted to escape, as if somewhere there was still the idea of a home. So she ran away into the wood, not much caring if the wild beasts ate her" (*HV*, 52)). The society of the 'Professors', that to which she was born, is dominated

[91] Though an argument could be made for him abducting the more conventional Isabella Linton, with whom he elopes.

by reason, while the society of the 'Barbarians' is ruled by passion and as such is beyond comprehension as far as she is concerned. It thrives on myth and legend, and its resistance to reason serves to irritate Marianne. Indeed, her capacity to get annoyed serves as the defining difference between her and the conventional swooning heroine, responding as she does to all the cruelty and hardships she faces at the hands of the Barbarians with annoyance at the lack of logic behind their actions. Her lack of sentimentality allows her a confidence in her own identity that withstands attempts to break her down; following the novel's controversial rape scene, her reaction is to immediately angrily demand answers as to the whys and wherefores involved:

> 'It's a necessary wound,' he assured her. 'It won't last long.'
>
> 'It was the very worst thing that happened to me since I came away with you,' she said. 'It hurt far worse than the snakebite, because it was intentional. Why did you do it to me?'
>
> He appeared to consider this question seriously.
>
> 'There's the matter of our traditional hatred. And, besides, I'm very frightened of you.'
>
> *HV*, 55-56

It is soon revealed that Jewel's rape of Marianne is enacted under the direction of his mentor Donally, in order to force her into marriage and degrade her in both her own eyes and those of the tribe: "Swallow you up and incorporate you, see." *(HV*, 56). It does not work. She is more horrified at the prospect of marriage, and remains combative and questioning. Declaring the scene "distinctly ideologically dodgy", Carter admitted that it was included largely for shock value and she couldn't "defend it on any other grounds except that 'H and V' is *supposed* to share a vocabulary with the fiction of oppression"[92] (Jordan, 209). At the same time Carter urged her readers to "[n]ote, however, that it doesn't make Marianne feel degraded – it makes her feel absolutely *furious*" (Jordan, 209, emphasis in original).

One of the most iconic scenes of this type in, not just Victorian literature, but English literature in general, is the one found in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). The scene in *Tess* is much more vague about the act itself –

[92] Carter in particular references *The Sheik* (1919) by E.M. Hull, wherein a young adventuress is abducted by the eponymous sheik, held captive and sexually abused. She proceeds to fall in love with him.

presumably partially on account of contemporary mores[93], but also for artistic reasons – describing Tess ambiguously as "sleeping soundly, and upon her lashes there lingered tears" (Hardy, 82), Hardy allows her to be at once aware and unaware of what is transpiring. In contrast, Carter is quite blunt with regards to the violence of Jewel's actions, and her heroine is perfectly cognizant of what is occurring: "Feeling between her legs to ascertain the entrance, he thrust his fingers into the wet hole so roughly she knew what the pain would be like" (*HV*, 55). The differing reactions it provokes are also instructive. Tess spends the novel well nigh powerless, and this is exemplified in her reactions; while she is capable of leaving d'Urberville and indeed returns home to her family, her take on events is to acceptingly lament that she was never properly forewarned of the "danger in men-folk" (Hardy, 94). She meekly accepts that this is what bad men (which d'Urberville admits to being) do to impressionable young women, and the world is not only perfectly comfortable with this 'logic,' but accepts it as self-evident enough that she should be deemed at fault for this turn of events, even if Hardy himself takes a dim view of those in the novel who hold her responsible. Such 'logic' however has no weight with Marianne who is unable to believe that the world is just so. Scenes of her childhood hinge on her demanding to know the reasons for the world around her being as it is; why would Barbarians eat her for misbehaving? Why in games are the Soldiers always the heroes and the Barbarians the villains? (*HV*, 2) Why should she love her brother? (*HV*, 4) She remains quite sceptical of her nurse's fanciful old wives' tales, which are intended to scare her straight, and of her uncle's simplistic black-and-white views of conformity.

Her adherence to reason is also the source of her power; she will not be worn down and broken, because it makes no sense to do so. Her resistance is less a philosophy however, as much as it is sheer bloody-mindedness. She stands up not for any moral virtue, but because she thinks of her opponent's actions as plainly stupid. A recurring motif is that she is unable to overpower Jewel physically, but her emotional detachment serves to make her a bizarre other within Barbarian society; a witch, and something to be feared, lest she bring down her wrath upon the tribe. Of course, her own powers are far more prosaic than that. Despite the tribespeople linking her to misfortunes that befall them, her ultimate power is simply that she can influence them, Jewel in particular, by fear. She can destroy him, and indeed she does, simply

[93] We may also wish to note however that the scene in question was not present in the novel's original serialisation, requiring major changes to the plot.

through the use of words and actions, or lack thereof. In the opening pages, a young Marianne, locked in the tower, witnesses her brother being killed by a Barbarian during a raid. The perpetrator is revealed around the novel's mid-point to have been Jewel. He remembers: "this little girl, she was around Jen's age, looking down as if it were all an entertainment laid on for her benefit. And I thought, 'If that's the way they look at death, the sooner they all go the better'" (*HV*, 80). That he killed her brother does not bother her in the slightest. Instead she is annoyed that one of her private memories is shared with someone else ("She had never invited him there" (*HV*, 80)). As Elaine Jordan comments, her disinterest in vengeance for her dead brother runs counter to everything Jewel believes: "Her indifference to her brother and to vengeance shocks his punitive but passionately affectionate familial and fraternal feelings" (Jordan, 212). Marianne's magic, so feared by the tribe, is an illusion; the world of the novel is founded on reason, despite attempts to claim the contrary, and so too is Marianne's 'magic'.

The Byronic Hero(ine)

Having discussed Marianne's temperament, unbecoming of the ingénue role typical of a Gothic heroine, we should look at her counterpart, Jewel, who should in theory be the "breathtakingly Byronic hero" that Carter deemed a requisite of the genre (Gamble, 2006, 81). The issue here is that, as a character, the Byronic hero is intended to be entirely unreadable; such is the depth of his suffering, no one can understand him. And indeed outwardly Jewel has the appearance of being inscrutable – his foster mother states "My poor boy, my poor boy's got a gift for unhappiness" (*HV*, 76) – as he fluctuates between joy and despair, cruelty and kindness, and reason and superstition. His emotional vacillation has been interpreted by many critics, including Gamble[94], Jordan[95], and Mahoney[96], as indicative of his being a literal embodiment of Marianne's own fantasies, such is his ephemeral nature, and indeed she actually refers to him as such:

[94] Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: A Literary Life*, chapter 3: 'What Were the Sixties Really Like?', pp.76-103.
[95] Elaine Jordan, 'The Dangerous Edge'; from Sage, L. (ed.), pp.201-226.
[96] Elisabeth Mahoney, ''But elsewhere?': the future of fantasy in *Heroes and Villains*'; from Bristow, J. & Broughton, T.L. (ed.), pp.73-87.

> ‘You are the most remarkable thing I saw in all my life. Not even in pictures had I seen anything like you, nor read your description in books, you with your jewels, paints, furs, knives and guns, like a phallic and diabolic version of female beauties of former periods. What I’d like best would be to keep you in preserving fluid in a huge jar on the mantelpiece of my peaceful room, where I could look at you and imagine you. And that’s the best place for you, you walking masterpiece of art, since the good Doctor educated you so far above your station you might as well be an exhibit for intellectuals to marvel at as anything else. You, you’re nothing but the furious invention of my virgin nights.’
>
> *HV*, 137

And indeed he is, but we must not forget that his character is one that we have seen many a time before in literature. The Byronic hero takes the form of a character who is a mysterious and moody loner given to strong passions; a key example within Lord Byron’s own work being the eponymous figure in ‘The Giaour’ (1813):

> Dark as to thee my deeds may seem:
> My memory now is but the tomb
> Of joys long dead; my hope, their doom:
> ‘Though better to have died with those
> Than bear a life of lingering woes
>
> Byron, 131

The allure is in his danger, and that it essentially absolves the heroine of responsibility. Even within Carter’s novel, this is merely a fantasy. Marianne understandably does not in actuality want control of her life, her sexuality or her destiny taken from her.

We have seen how the relationships in this novel echo, in some senses, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, but[97] Carter appears to be influenced by another Brontë novel, *Jane Eyre*, for the dynamic at work can also be seen as something of a warped version of Jane and Rochester. We have a man and woman of disparate classes who enjoy an understanding that they cannot find in their own kind; the woman, from the outside, inquisitive and not wholly obedient to the man’s whims; and the man himself the master, frequently cruel, often a drunk and apparently impenetrable, but whose

[97] Given the restriction of their lives, it is perhaps inevitable that the Brontë sisters would draw on similar motifs. While it is reductive to homogenize the writings of the Brontë sisters, the conflation of the three is not without precedent; their own publishers were keen to encourage confusion between the three ‘Bells’, and more recently we can find several examples of their being grouped together in critical works – the journal *Brontë Studies*, for instance, or the 2006 *Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*.

word is law to all but her. Jewel's secret, that he is essentially just a man, is more mundane than Rochester's. There is no wife hidden in the attic, proverbial or otherwise, and so there is nothing to explain his behaviour. He is not especially more traumatised than anyone else and his volatile nature is just who he is. The twist, so to speak, is the disappointing nature of the fantasy. Marianne quickly finds Jewel's outer cruelty to be unpleasant and his inner torment to be rather pathetic. Of course, much of his torment is due to his cruelty, and his cruelty due to ostensible 'necessity'. His rape of Marianne is out of 'necessity', his marriage to her too, as is his need to impregnate her: "'Donally says,' he told her when he could speak. 'Swallow you up and incorporate you, see. Dr Donally says. Social psychology. I've nailed you on necessity, you poor bitch.'" (*HV*, 56). His behaviour is (ostensibly) justified by Donally's teachings. Should he be free of Donally, he would be free from this necessity, but what he would do afterwards is the question that is left hanging; if Jewel is less of a person and more of a construct, then what of his self? As things stand, he acts on autopilot, mechanically and dispassionately following Donally's teachings and advice, regardless of his own feelings and how it might affect those around him. This gives the appearance of his not being responsible for his actions, at least in his own eyes. However this is not the case, as demonstrated in the whipping scene, wherein at Donally's behest Jewel must make an example his brother for neglecting his scouting duties. Jewel complies, detachedly going through the motions, but as we see shortly, this does not absolve him of culpability as his brother questions Jewel's claim of not being responsible:

> The whip whirred and thumped; Precious grunted at its impact, all in all a mechanical repetition of sounds. [Marianne] saw that Jewel had become mechanical.
>
> He was nothing but the idea of that power which men fear to offend; his back flexed and his arm rose and fell. The snake on his back flicked its tongue in and out with the play of muscle beneath the skin and the tattooed Adam appeared to flinch again and again from the apple which Eve again and again leaned forward to offer him until it seemed that the moving picture of an endless temptation was projecting onto Jewel's surfaces, an uncompleted series of actions with no conclusion, caught in a groove in time. And Jewel was also caught in this groove of time; frozen in the act of punishment, he was concealed within a mask which covered his entire body, a man no longer.
>
> *HV*, 113

This scene is of another 'necessity'. Jewel ceases to be Jewel for the duration, but who else can it be? He is called out on his dissonance immediately:

> 'It's not my fault,' said Jewel. 'I love you best.'
> Either from pride or spite, Precious had not yet lost consciousness.
> 'Then whose fault is it, you bastard?' he said.
>
> *HV*, 113

Jewel's reluctance to take responsibility for his actions and sheer dispassionate nature serves to undermine the attraction of the Byronic hero; his cruelty is needless and the fact that it is ritualised is representative of order, when chaos is intended to be the appeal of the fantasy. Even as it is treated as a necessity, it is a gratuitous spectacle and serves to weaken Jewel's authority instead of enforcing it, for the initially apparently bloodthirsty crowd have had enough of it almost as soon as it begins, and are unable and unwilling to indulge his behaviour. Even the matronly Mrs Green, the staunchest apologist for Jewel's behaviour, "conspicuously ignores" (*HV*, 113) him in the aftermath. Marianne might be empathetic, but she isn't particularly sympathetic to his plight: "[she] would have liked to touch him but, on the other hand, he disgusted her" (*HV*, 113). If he were little more than an animal, as she had been taught to think of the Barbarians, then she might be more forgiving of his transgressions, but having clearly learnt the errors of such an interpretation, she is unable to overlook his conduct.

To return to the Brontë comparisons, Jewel's actions, like Heathcliff's, breed resentment, but differ in that the latter does this is by design – "Treachery and violence are just a return for treachery and violence!" (E. Brontë, 176-177) – and this is how he differs from the character presented in Jewel. He is after all trying to destroy the Lintons and Earnshaws out of vengeance: "Had I been born where laws are less strict, and tastes less dainty, I should treat myself to a slow vivisection of those two, as an evening's amusement" (E. Brontë, 270). Jewel's actions also serve to destroy the 'family', but they are intended to prevent its destruction.

While Heathcliff is hiding little in his behaviour, which simply reflects his contempt for his peers, Jewel's behaviour is intended to have the opposite effect: to keep everything together rather than break it apart. This follows an arc more akin to *Jane Eyre*'s Rochester, who famously has his first wife, driven mad, locked in the attic as he woos and later attempts to marry Jane, herself suspicious but ultimately

unaware of what is hidden in the house. The male leads' horrific actions are supposed to cover over the cracks in the façade, preventing their present existence from collapsing; the outward propriety in *Jane Eyre* and the makeshift family in *Heroes and Villains*. Of course, in Brontë's novel, this inevitably fails and Thornfield is destroyed by a woman imprisoned in its attic. Jewel is similarly destroyed by the many people hurt in his bid to keep everything together, not just Marianne, though his captive bride is the one who delivers the final twist of the proverbial knife. In *Jane Eyre,* Rochester in contrast is redeemed; he survives the destruction of the house, though not unscathed. His (evidently temporary) blindness and subsequent dependency on Jane act as both his punishment and the source of his redemption. Jewel cannot be redeemed however, for if he were tamed then he would lose his mystique, and that mystique is all that Marianne finds interesting in him. The human side of Jewel bores her. While Jane Eyre falls in love with the man beneath Rochester's bluster, Marianne finds the one beneath Jewel's to be pitiable. Jewel might be the novel's Rochester, but Marianne is not his Jane, or at the very least not the one he needs to survive.

Marianne fails to fill the Jane Eyre role as well; her attitudes tie her squarely to the more selfish leads of *Wuthering Heights*. If, as established, Marianne can be seen as both Catherine and Heathcliff, the question arises then as to whom Jewel's analogue in *Wuthering Heights* is. He too fills dual roles. His similarity to Heathcliff has not gone unnoticed; Nicole Ward Jouve describes him as being "the rebellious Heathcliff-type hero" (Jouve, 159). The pair share their mysterious background of unspecified traveller stock, giving an air of exoticism and danger in the eyes of the novels' respective heroines, but both have been educated beyond what would be expected of their stations. Jewel however functions in his element rather than being transposed to another's. Indeed his heritage is part of his pride and the point is made that his mother's family are essentially Barbarian aristocracy as they "were travellers before the war" (*HV*, 40). As noted earlier, Marianne, despite being more conventionally middle class, is the outsider who wreaks havoc on the established order, making Jewel into her Catherine – a character whose cruelty to her ostensible lover comes from a conventional place of power, yet one that fails to last proving her undoing. Heathcliff has a similar background to Jewel – "[Mrs Earnshaw] did fly up – asking how [Mr Earnshaw] could fashion to bring that gipsy brat into the house, when they had their

own bairns to feed, and fend for?" (E. Brontë, 37) – but learns the ways of the mannered society in which he finds himself and eventually comes to dominate it, shattering Catherine's pride and her heart. Marianne does the same to the Barbarians in an inverse relationship.

Myth Creation, and *Pygmalion*

While the Brontës' novels are a frame upon which *Heroes and Villains* is built, they are not the only influence at work. The novel is also concerned with mythology; what it is and how it is made; and the restructuring that which already exists. Perhaps the easiest Gothic parallel is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), with the eponymous creator and his folly in tampering with the laws of nature. However Carter's treatment of the subject suggests a very different influence, George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913).[98] The Greek myth of Pygmalion, wherein the eponymous sculptor falls in love with his statue (typically named 'Galatea'), which is then brought to life by the goddess Aphrodite, saw a revived interest after the Renaissance, inspiring many works of art; the eighteenth century saw multiple stagings of the story, perhaps most notably Jean-Phillipe Rameau's opera (1748). These versions play the story straight, however nineteenth-century dramatists continued to adapt the play, often with a more critical eye to the relationship. W.S. Gilbert's version (1871), for example, features the naïve Galatea inadvertently wreaking havoc before concluding that she was happier before vivification and returning to her original state, while Franz von Suppé's operetta (1865) has her as a *femme fatale* who, in the end, Pygmalion begs Aphrodite to change her back (she does, and Pygmalion sells the statue to King Midas). In the Edwardian period, Shaw used the thematic concept of the story, though not the precise scenario, as basis for his *Pygmalion*, wherein a linguist decides to try and pass off a cockney flower girl as a member of the nobility. There is no actual creation; Eliza, the Galatea of the piece, is already a person with views and ideas, aware of and savvy to the harshness of the world at large, even if she isn't familiar

[98] There is some contention as to whether *Pygmalion* qualifies as being a 1913 or 1914 play. The first attempt at mounting a production was in 1912, however it had to be postponed when Mrs Patrick Campbell (for whom the role of Eliza was written) fell ill. It was subsequently first performed in German translation in Vienna in 1913, with the English version premiering in London, with Mrs Campbell as intended, the following year. For the sake of clarity, the year of the first performance overall is used.

with the society in which she finds herself thrust into. In the play's end, rather than be romantically linked with her (proverbial) creator or decide she was happier how she was to begin with, she leaves to be with someone else. Shaw expanded on this in a narrative essay appended to the text in 1916, positing that she is too wilful to be a good lover to the domineering Higgins, and she would use her new position to go into business.[99]

The irony of Carter's title, '*Heroes and Villains*', is that the world cannot be simply divided in such binary ways. However the closest we get to a villain, an active antagonist, is the would-be shaman, Dr Donally, who engineers many of the events of the novel. Donally is, like Marianne, an exile from the world of the Professors, and seems intent on fashioning the tribe into a new civilisation. The Barbarians may not be the noble savages the Professors think, but that does not mean Donally can't try and make them into that. His particular focus here is on Jewel, turning him into an educated savage worthy, in his estimation, of being the leader of the tribe, and perhaps then some: "I've often thought of grooming Jewel for some kind of mythopoeic role" (*HV*, 93). This is the situation of *Pygmalion*, with Donally and Jewel cast as Higgins and Eliza. In each case, the former is so concentrated on transforming the latter that he fails to consider whether he should.

> MRS HIGGINS [*unconsciously dating herself by the word*] A problem.
> PICKERING. Oh I see. The problem of how to pass her off as a lady.
> HIGGINS. I'll solve that problem. Ive half solved it already.
> MRS HIGGINS. No, you two infinitely stupid male creatures: the problem of what is to be done with her afterwards.
> HIGGINS. I dont see anything in that. She can go her own way, with all the advantages I have given her.
> MRS HIGGINS. The advantages of that poor woman who was here just now! The manners and habits that disqualify a fine lady from earning her own living without giving her a fine lady's income! Is that what you mean?
>
> Shaw, 67 (Punctuation author's own)

Shaw's character ignores the warnings and carries on regardless, but he also fails to appreciate that Eliza is a person, with her own whims, desires, thoughts, and

[99] The 1938 film, the adaptation of which is credited to Shaw, ignores this however, having Eliza seemingly return to Higgins at the very end of the film. This reportedly was a contrivance of the producer, with the denouement of Shaw's script featuring Eliza and Freddy working in their flower shop. Shaw was reportedly not informed of this change prior to the film's preview screening (Pascal, 84-85).

personality. That she might not take kindly to his further plans for her, whatever they may be, does not cross his mind, resulting in the shock to him (and the contemporary audience) when she refuses to play the Galatea role in the end, instead leaving to find her own way. She might cease to be the Cockney flower girl she once was, but that does not mean she has to conform to Higgins' whims either. She has already mastered what he has to teach, and so has little further need of her abusive mentor.

Unlike Higgins however, who is essentially doing it because he can, Donally has a desired outcome for his remoulding of Jewel: the formation of a new order. When he's finished with him, Jewel is to be the "Messiah of the Yahoos", or at the very least a King Arthur figure (*HV*, 93); except that his noble savage is an illusion that fails to appreciate the significance of the Barbarians' image. The Barbarians are not as beast-like as Marianne has been led to believe; this undermines their effect on her, and is what ultimately leads to her destruction of Jewel. As Gamble puts it: "Marianne turns out to be another middle-class girl attracted by the allure of the rough working-class boy, only to find that he has been educated into a kind of ambiguous classlessness, and thus isn't as alien as she had hoped" (Gamble, 1997, 76). As Jewel becomes more 'human' and less 'other' his power over her decreases; she never fears him as he does her, after all; and the inverse takes effect as she gains more power over him. Donally is inevitably deposed as the tribe's resident shaman, leaving Jewel the sole authority, but by this point he is too human, and therefore too fallible, to fill the Messiah role his mentor has cast him in. As it stands, he cannot fit into Barbarian culture, but nor would he be welcome in that of the Professors, as indicated by a reference to *Gulliver's Travels*: "'The Barbarians are Yahoos but the Professors are Laputans,' [Marianne] said. 'And you haven't been educated according to their requirements.'" (*HV*, 123). Jewel is what Donally projects onto him; he acts as a blank canvas for Donally's art. This is quite literal, as Donally has tattooed on Jewel's back a depiction of Eve's temptation of Adam; symbolic of the knowledge that Donally has bestowed upon him, though also foreshadowing Jewel's eventual defection of allegiance in favour of Marianne. Without him it seems inevitable that Jewel would fall apart, and yet they enjoy an uneasy relationship. Despite their mutual dependence (Donally does in essence rule the tribe vicariously through Jewel, who needs him as a mentor and confidante), there are nonetheless frequent attempts to remove one another from the equation for ambiguous reasons, indicating an ongoing struggle between the monster and its creator. The novel is focused squarely on

Marianne, who doesn't seem especially concerned with that element of the relationship, and indeed Donally's and Jewel's struggle for dominance does prove moot in the end. Higgins fails to retain Eliza, losing her to the weaker-willed Freddy, and Donally fails to retain Jewel, losing him the stronger-willed Marianne. However in the latter's parting, Donally and Jewel finally succeed in each other's destruction, and by the end of the novel, they have gone and Marianne remains, intent on asserting her dominance over the tribe (though, as in much of Carter's work, whether she succeeds or fails, or anything further is quite ambiguous).

Heroes and Villains is at its heart an examination of the relationships at the centre of Gothic romances, in particular the kind exemplified by *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. The demon lover and the Byronic hero are, as Marianne discovers, simply fantasies that do not hold up to scrutiny, and there is little glamorous about the scenario she finds herself in. Other Victorian and Edwardian literature is also evident however, and the theme of a creator shaping his 'creation' is borrowed from *Pygmalion*, forming a significant secondary narrative in *Heroes and Villains*.

While Donally's puppet master act is secondary to the central relationship of the book, that of Jewel and Marianne, the idea of the 'ideal' figure and its creation is examined further in Carter's later science fiction. While *Heroes and Villains* concerns itself with the fashioning of the male lead into a leader figure of myth and legend, the latter books look more into the feminine ideal and how women are conditioned to fit it.

Her next work of science fiction (though not her next published novel over all) is *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972). The novel is more abstract than *Heroes and Villains*, with a picaresque style and a reliance on dream logic by design. However it also makes use of Gothic and often Victorian imagery in its exploration of sexual fantasy and desire, and its fabled 'ideal'.

The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman

More than *Heroes and Villains* (and for that matter, the later *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus*), *Doctor Hoffman* revels in the disconnect between its different locales and the arbitrary nature of how they link to one another. In this

regard the most apt point of comparison may be the aforementioned *Gulliver's Travels*, with a greater focus being put on the heroes drifting between fantastical lands and sights with a satirical edge; of particular interest here is the second chapter which has a variety of Gothic trappings as well as a heroine *du jour* who alludes to a pair of Tennyson's poems: 'Mariana' and 'The Lady of Shalott'.

In *Doctor Hoffman*, our narrator and ostensible hero, Desiderio, shifts between locations, travelling companions and idealised love interests with little rhyme or reason. This is, suffice to say, the point. The eponymous doctor, the villain of the piece, has launched a war on reason, causing people's dreams and realities to merge together. Desiderio, a civil servant of lowborn stock, is chosen to save the day, on account of his seeming immunity as a result of his disaffection (as well as his being utterly expendable), and in doing so travels through many different settings with many different styles. It's perhaps inevitable that some of his exploits lead him into more Gothic and Victorian iconography.

With the second chapter's opening, Desiderio sets off on his travels and arrives at the first stop; ostensibly a "pastel-tinted" seaside town "redolent of dead fish and wet face flannels, clean as if the abrasive sea scrubbed it twice a day" (*DH*, 41). It is the kind of town evoked by John Hassall's famous 'The Jolly Fisherman' poster (1908)[100] in its many incarnations, complete with pier and sideshows. As we travel through the town, we eventually arrive at a dilapidated manor, inhabited by a young lady and the housekeeper, her all-too-suspect guardian, in the wake of her father's mysterious disappearance. The ingénue-esque Mary Anne, 'the beautiful somnambulist' (*DH*, 48) drifts about her house in a dreamy melancholy, contemplating the piano and also mortality. Named for the eponymous character of 'Mariana', Mary Anne shares her namesake's melancholy – "She sits like Mariana in the moated grange, poor girl!" (*DH*, 48) – except in her case the 'he' whom she longs for does arrive in the form of Desiderio, "the desired one" (*DH*, 54). This however proves her undoing; Desiderio quickly and accidently manages to destroy the fantasy by getting involved. The notion of her somnambulism is key; he wakes her from her reverie, except waking a sleepwalker is dangerous. Mary Anne is but the first of many women Desiderio encounters in his travels, and she, like the others, possesses a

[100] The poster, commissioned by Great Northern Railway (later London and North Eastern Railway), is perhaps better known by its tagline, "Skegness is so bracing", which is present in some form in the poster's many versions.

fantastical (sexual) quality, but as soon as Desiderio gets too close it starts to decay. Mary Anne, for her part, when woken from her slumber, leaves the mansion and finds the death she dreamt of almost instantly. The specifics are left unsaid, as she washes up on the shore like another woman from Tennyson, the eponymous 'Lady of Shalott'. The ingénue lives and dies by her virtue, and as Desiderio has compromised hers, it seems death is the only option. Mary Anne's sexuality is depicted as largely subconscious; in spite of her morbidity, she exists in a naïve childlike state. Her introduction calls to mind *The Magic Toyshop*'s Melanie, as Mary Anne arrives covered in debris from a barefoot jaunt in the garden:

> Now she was standing up, she was almost hidden in her dress and her tiny face, shaped like a locket, looked even smaller than it was because of a disordered profusion of hair streaming down as straight as if she had just been plucked from the river. I could see her hair and dress were stuck all over with twigs and petals from the garden. […] The housekeeper clucked to see the wraith-like girl's bare feet.
>
> *DH*, 53

While Melanie is wrapped in a fantasy of her burgeoning womanhood however, Mary Anne's behaviour instead serves to accentuate her childishness (she has in fact not come from the garden but has been playing the piano), as well as to foretell her inevitable doom. Her disinterest in social mores does not indicate rebellion, but reflects her immaturity and inexperience:

> 'Desiderio, the desired one, did you know you have eyes just like an Indian?'
>
> The housekeeper went 'tsk! tsk!' with annoyance for we whites were not supposed to acknowledge the Indians.
>
> *DH*, 54

Her sensual side only comes to the fore with her somnambulism, allowing her to be uncorrupted by conscious sexuality; it is only in this state that she can offer herself to Desiderio, an offer he is all too quick to accept, despite being nominally aware of her questionable consciousness. The next morning she has no recollection of events, recalling instead that she dreamt of a love suicide, '[b]ut then, I always do. Don't you think it would be very beautiful to die for love?' (*DH*, 57). This fantasy relies on a metaphorical child bride figure. However despite being couched in suspiciously youthful imagery – for example her "white calico nightgown such as convent

schoolgirls wear" (*DH*, 55) – Mary Anne apparently does not *appear* to be a minor to Desiderio, as he claims to be unaware of this fact when charged with offenses at the chapter's climax: "in fact, Mary Anne had been even younger than she looked, only fifteen years old" (*DH*, 62). It comes as little surprise that Mary Anne, with the distinct duality of her sexuality and her chastity, is literally a child for this contradiction is not that of an adult.

The idea of 'the Lady of Shalott' and her death before corruption proved a popular motif in fiction in the 1970s. John Morton notes the poem's use in novels of a similar time period such as Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, whose use of the poem as a motif was discussed in chapter three, and Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978), as well as the earlier children's classic *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) by L.M. Montgomery, as a point of fascination for their heroines in childhood. He comments that "Atwood's examination of the implications of 'The Lady of Shalott', as well as Anne of Green Gables' near-drowning, hinted at the dangers for women becoming overly besotted by the poem" (J. Morton, 191). He goes on to address the poem's prominence as a motif in literature via a quotation from David Benedictus' novel, *Floating Down to Camelot* (1985):

> Hilda Leeks, the lecturer, has little time for 'The Lady of Shalott', but still devotes a lecture to the poem, which according to her had 'been traditionally handed out to adolescent girls much as iron pills and contraceptive advice had been handed out to them – whether they needed them or not.' This offhand comment might explain why it features so prominently in accounts of female adolescence in the works of writers as diverse as [D.H.] Lawrence, Atwood, [Laura Ingalls] Wilder and Anderson.
>
> J. Morton, 189

Morton misses *Doctor Hoffman* in his study of allusions to Tennyson in novels of the 1970s and 1980s; the texts he references are only those that explicitly mention the poems, rather than those that allude to them. *Doctor Hoffman* may quote 'Mariana', but never definitively links Mary Anne to Tennyson outright. However Carter uses Tennyson, 'The Lady of Shalott' in particular, to similar ends as Atwood (and, earlier, Montgomery) does. It is an indication of a tendency towards romance, and with it an idea of purity and naivety, that in the real world proves quite problematic.

There is however a key difference between Atwood's and Carter's use of the poem. In *Lady Oracle*, the fascination with 'The Lady of Shalott' is primarily Joan's

concern, but in *Doctor Hoffman* the fantasy is not simply that of Mary Anne and her kin. They may be attempting to be Elaine, but men are also seen to be beguiled by, and thus actively complicit in, this fetishisation of female purity; fittingly, as the source poem was itself written by a man. Desiderio finds Mary Anne to be beautiful but also enigmatic, echoing Lancelot in the poem's finale. Morton notes that the latter's comment on the Lady – "She has a lovely face; / God in his mercy lend her grace." – is "a fairly trite observation, based on surface appreciation of her beauty as opposed to a genuine understanding" (J. Morton, 185); there is no actual thought given to the Lady and who she might be, she is judged purely on her attractiveness. While unaware of the truth behind the Lady, the tragedy to Lancelot it seems is purely that she died while beautiful. It is on Mary Anne's death though, that Desiderio comes to separate her waking and sleeping states: "my lips pressed to her mouth, and it came to me there was hardly any difference between what I did now and what I had done then, for her sleep had been a death." (*DH*, 61). Her sexuality evidently relies on her being unaware. She cannot 'know' and be in control of her own sexuality. The desires of a young girl can be exhibited while awake, but it is only when she is asleep, unconscious, that she can exhibit her more adult and womanly ones. Her ability to live is inhibited, and in her figurative death she is at her most beautiful. She is also however an object in death, metaphorically while sleeping, but having actually died she is, like Annabel in the earlier *Love*, described in non-humanistic terms, as a doll (*DH*, 61) or a fish (*DH*, 62) before she literally shatters into pieces. While she is beautiful in the death of sleep, having died for real, she is simply uncanny; a far cry from Poe's beautiful dead woman.

This use of Victorian literature and its tropes as potentially damaging influences on women is developed further in *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus* which will be the focus of the next chapter. In this next chapter further Victorian themes and influences will be traced. However, based on the examination of *Heroes and Villains* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, it is already clear that even in Carter's science fiction work Victorian imagery and concerns are utilised and reinvented in multiple and complex ways. The influence of the Brontës is evident, but Carter twists the framework to reveal very different facets of the character types used. The use of myth through Victorian and Edwardian lenses, seen in the use of *Pygmalion* and Tennyson's poetry, serves to highlight the far reaching and potentially destructive influence of societal expectation, as characters are forced into roles in

which they are uncomfortable (as in the case of Jewel and Marianne in *Heroes and Villains*) or that are inherently questionable (as in the case of Mary Anne in *Doctor Hoffman*).

9. Angela Carter's Later Novels and the Woman as a Performer

Carter continued to write science fiction novels with her seventh novel, *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). While *Heroes and Villains* follows very much a Victorian Gothic mode*, New Eve*, like *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, is written in a style that more evokes the picaresque, chronicling the exploits of its hero(ine) over their loosely connected adventures in a feigned autobiographical first person style. *New Eve* in particular is very interested in using this format to explore the idea of myth and how it is built. It looks at America and how it, via Hollywood, has built itself a unique identity and mythology, albeit one that does not necessarily reflect the reality. Myth plays a considerable part in *Heroes and Villains*; in addition to Donally's attempts to fashion Jewel into a mythic figure, much attention is paid to the beliefs and superstitions of its disparate societies which serve to demonise the other, despite not having much basis in reality.

The Passion of New Eve: The Many Faces of Tristessa

The Passion of New Eve is also the second of Carter's ostensible sci-fi trilogy, although there have been some questions surrounding this. While Carter "referred to *The Passion of New Eve* as the second in 'a project of three speculative novels'" (Sage, 2007b, 331), she appeared less public on what the other parts of this loose trilogy might be or indeed whether the third was ever written,[101] For our purposes, it is perhaps unimportant; however if *New Eve* forms the close, then it acts as a rather downbeat one.

With that in mind, Carter is recorded as declaring *New Eve* her favourite of her novels "because it is so ambitious, so serious and so helplessly flawed" (Jordan, 224). Despite describing it as such, the novel is a lot breezier in tone and actively humorous than its immediate predecessors, while being considerably more to the point as to

[101] Edmund Gordon sheds some light on this question in his biography of Carter: "Angela planned to write a loose trilogy of picaresque novels" (Gordon, 176). *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* acts as the first. This was to be followed by "'an allegorical novel, based on the myth of Tiresias'" (Gordon, 176), suggesting *The Passion of New Eve* (though it was reportedly planned to be set in "early Christian Rome" (Gordon, 176) rather than America). The third "was to be called *The Manifesto for Year One* – a 'Dostoyevskian novel' set in 'a Russian city … peopled by students of philosophy'" (Gordon, 176). While we could speculate about *Nights at the Circus*' Russian setting and philosophical interests, there does not seem to be any particular link between the two.

what its central theme is. The novel is an exploration of gender, with the title character discovering what it is to be a woman while traveling a *Grand Guignol* version of the United States. Stylistically, it has more in keeping with the later *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991) than her earlier work, although it lacks their optimism. In this case, it is somewhat of an outlier in her *oeuvre*, being as it is deeply and wilfully unpleasant throughout, while also maintaining a playfulness and wit, as well as a general camp sensibility. This irreverence in the face of atrocity may in fact be as a result of the potential flaw Carter identifies:

> [*New Eve* is] flawed, I guess, partly because I started off writing the novel thinking I was interested in myth with a capital M., […] and ended up realising that Myth bored me stiff which is why Mother has a nervous breakdown when the revolution starts.
>
> Jordan, 224[102]

It is also, perhaps, the Carter novel with the least obvious debt to pre-war literature, instead showing more of an interest in pulp fiction, exploitation, and, in particular, cinema. However while it does not engage directly with Victorian texts, it does concern itself with their adaptation in other media and their legacy. Mother, a character who positions herself as the would-be mother goddess of the new world ("I am the Great Parricide, I am the Castratrix of the Phallocentric Universe, I am Mama, Mama, Mama!" (*NE*, 64)) is focussed on pagan ideas of female mysticism and folklore, and so has no relevance to the world at large. Instead a very different mythological figure takes centre stage: at the heart of the novel is the mysterious faded starlet of Hollywood's golden age, Tristessa de St Ange, who made her name portraying (as her name might suggest)[103] an array of suffering women on film, but

[102] This is quoted by Elaine Jordan from her correspondence with Carter. It echoes a sentiment Carter brings up in *The Sadeian Woman*, on which she was working around the same time as *New Eve*: "[i]f women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men)" (*SW*, 5).

[103] Tristessa is derived from '*tristesse*', meaning 'sadness' in French. It is itself derived from Latin and similar words appear in other Romance languages. '*Ange*' is literally French for 'angel', though as a name it generally equates to the (male) name 'Angelo' or variants thereof. While there are numerous Angelos in the history of the Christian church, the only one that appears to have achieved sainthood during the time period in which *The Passion of New Eve* was written was Angelus of Jerusalem; a thirteenth century martyr, canonized in the mid-fifteenth century. There does not appear to be any direct connection between the saint's work and Tristessa's character, however Carter's reference would appear to be intentional; a major part of the narrative of St Angelo's life is retiring from fame as a thaumaturge to live in isolation in the desert before being called on to return to civilization (and subsequent martyrdom), echoing Tristessa's eventual appearance in the novel's narrative proper.

has since disappeared from the public eye, if not its consciousness. The ethereal Tristessa fills the role of the ideal woman for young Evelyn, but the inherent falseness of her nature is nonetheless readily apparent to him; she has been carefully manufactured to be this ideal, one that, in real life, no woman can live up to, and this itself is a crux of the problem; "I only loved her because she was not of this world and now I was disillusioned with her when I discovered she could stoop to a pretence of humanity" (*NE,* 4). The artifice at play with regards to her identity becomes stark when it is attempted to make her seem more 'real'.

> [S]he herself began to go out of fashion for, however hard they tried to force her into the mold, she had nothing whatever in common with the girl next door. There had been a baleful vogue for romanticism in the late forties; when it flickered out, health and efficiency became the motto. […] MGM's publicity department sent me this photograph to show Tristessa was only human, a girl like any other girl, since they had lost confidence in the myth they had created for her. But Tristessa could make only the most perfunctory gestures towards real life, even if her life depended on it. And, besides, nobody had ever loved her for anything as commonplace as humanity; her allure had lain in the tragic and absurd heroism with which she had denied real life.
>
> *NE*, 3 (note the Americanised spellings present in the original)

Tristessa specialises in playing the heroines of an array of (predominantly nineteenth-century) literary adaptations; generally of the variety who suffers exquisitely then dies. Her many roles include:

- Catherine Earnshaw, of *Wuthering Heights* (*NE*, 2)
- Madeline Usher, of *The Fall of the House of Usher* (*NE*, 3)
- Maguerite, of *Faust* (*NE*, 68)
- Emma Bovary, of *Madame Bovary* (*NE*, 101)
- Nastásya Philíppovna Baráshkova, of *The Idiot* (*NE*, 113)
- Marguerite Gautier, of *The Lady of the Camellias* (*NE*, 127)
- the eponymous *Carmen* (*NE*, 127)

This is in addition to some more general roles that are mentioned, such as a consumptive Broadway star (*NE*, 6) or a nun in the old west captured by American Indians (*NE*, 11). Poe's comments on "the death of a beautiful woman" being "the most poetical topic in the world" (Bronfen, 59) function essentially as her entire schtick. The absurdity of this perfect martyred woman is quite apparent to the modern audience, and in the novel's 'now' her outmoded brand of femininity is deemed more

camp than anything ("[N]o drag-artiste felt his repertoire complete without a personation of her magic and passionate sorrow" (*NE*, 2)). It is perhaps worth looking at the roles she plays.

Her most infamous, so far as Eve(lyn) is concerned, is her portrayal of Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*; and the descriptions of the film and her performance therein we are provided with suggest less the novel and more the twentieth-century cinematic adaptations of it. I noted earlier how the novel's first volume and the romance (such as it is) between Catherine and Heathcliff seem to have captured popular consciousness more than the second volume's chronicling of how Heathcliff comes to dominate; outside of some key scenes, such as the aforementioned characters' deaths, the second half of *Wuthering Heights* is often omitted from adaptations. To this end, Catherine's spikier edges often get sanded off, leaving a decidedly more milquetoast member at the centre of the love triangle than the more vindictive presence of the original; the classic example of this is the 1939 adaptation produced by Samuel Goldwyn.[104] The impression of Tristessa as a woman who is done wrong, the trope of the martyred woman, makes it hard to believe that she would be cast as such a spiteful character as the Catherine of the novel, and indeed Eve does suggest Catherine receives the standard treatment, joining such typically doomed women as Emma Bovary and the eponymous *Dame aux Camélias*.

> Tristessa had long since joined […] the queenly pantheon of women who expose their scars with pride, pointing to their emblematic despair just as a medieval saint points to the wounds of his martyrdom
>
> *NE*, 2

Her apparent weakest performances are when she's cast against type, as the girls' mother in *Little Women* and as George Sand in a biopic of Chopin. While both are still nineteenth-century women, it is difficult to fill the role of the ephemeral doomed beauty while playing the wise, knowing matriarch of Marmee Grant or the cigar chomping George Sand. The latter represents the antithesis of Tristessa; a woman in the guise of a man, a real person, and not even the one that dies in the end ("she

[104] This version, directed by William Wyler and written by Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht, stars Merle Oberon and Laurence Olivier as Catherine and Heathcliff. It places great stock in the romantic aspect of the novel, downplaying both characters' cruelty, both to themselves and others. The children are omitted entirely, with Catherine instead dying from a broken heart when Heathcliff marries Isabella.

chewed with distaste on her cigar and gazed with ill-concealed envy at Ty Power when he began to cough into his handkerchief and so usurp her suffering" (*NE*, 128-129)).

Tristessa's perfect suffering beauty however acts as a blueprint for the feminine ideal of the kind created by men for men as embodied in Poe's claim of the "death of a beautiful woman" as the keystone of poetics (Bronfen, 59), perpetuated throughout the ages, crystallising in film where the image can be portrayed physically and impermeably. It is quite divorced from the reality of women. Her oeuvre is nevertheless the foundation on which the female identities in the novel are built, including Eve's, whose 'creators' show her the entire back catalogue (she hypothesises: "now you yourself become what you've made" (*NE*, 68)). Carter claims to have been inspired by the tagline to the 1946 Rita Hayworth vehicle *Gilda*:

> In *The Passion of New Eve* the central character is a transvestite movie star, and I created this person in order to say some quite specific things about the cultural production of femininity. The promotional slogan for the film *Gilda*, starring Rita Hayworth, was 'There was never a woman like *Gilda*', and that may have been one of the reasons why I made my Hollywood star a transvestite, a man, because only a man could think of femininity in terms of that slogan.[105] Quite a number of people read *The Passion of New Eve* as a feminist tract and recoiled with suitable horror and dread, but in fact there is quite a careful and elaborate discussion of femininity as a commodity, of Hollywood producing illusions as tangible commodities – yet most of that was completely by-passed.
>
> Haffenden, 85-86

While her films are used to sell the idea of what a woman should be (ever mysterious, often dangerous, but always doomed to suffer proudly, nobly, and above all beautifully), Tristessa herself manages to escape the pit she's buried for herself through the very nature of her creation. She is who she is because she made *herself*

[105] The use of Rita Hayworth (1918-1987) in this instance is particularly interesting as Hayworth's image was heavily manufactured, having cosmetic treatments at the behest of the studio to turn 'Margarita Cansino' into the more marketable (i.e. whiter seeming) 'Rita Hayworth'. Studios having such control over their stars' images was standard for the period, often with little input from the stars themselves.

Another point of interest is that despite linking Tristessa's creation with the figure of Rita Hayworth. Most of Tristessa's vehicles mirror actual films from between the late 1920s and the early 1950s, but none of the films suggested in the novel star Rita Hayworth. Tristessa's two performances that Eve(lyn) explicitly gives appraisal of, her Catherine Earnshaw and her George Sands, were played in real life by Merle Oberon (in 1939 and 1945, respectively). This should not be taken as the films mapping onto each other exactly, thereby making Tristessa 'Merle Oberon' in the world of the novel, however. The Chopin biopic in *New Eve* features the real actor Tyrone Power as the composer; the notoriously inaccurate *A Song to Remember* stars Cornel Wilde.

that way, by her own volition, rather than being coerced into it by society; the irony becomes apparent when the studio attempts to force her into a more athletic (and ironically conventionally masculine) image, just as they use her to sell the traditional image of femininity to the world. Even after the truth of her sex is revealed, she remains at her most powerful and beautiful when being 'Tristessa' rather than her male alter ego.

This idea of confidence in following one's own identity rather than the one that one is presented with is one that she would develop further in her next novel, *Nights at the Circus*.

Critique on *Nights at the Circus*

Nights at the Circus (1984) is Angela Carter's penultimate novel. It is also perhaps her most acclaimed, winning the year's James Tait Black Memorial Prize[106], as well as 2012's 'Best of the James Tait Black' anniversary award. Despite this, contemporary reviews of the novel were somewhat mixed. Writing for the *Guardian*, Robert Nye declared it to be "without a doubt [Carter's] finest achievement so far, and a remarkable book by any standards" (Nye). He praised Carter's humour, and commented that the book is spared the misfortune of reading like a feminist tract in no small part due to the "richness and liveliness of the portrait" of the novel's "coarse, uproarious, hectic, inventive, preposterous" heroine; "Fevvers has to be the most outrageous and entertaining revelation of the White Goddess in a blue moon" (Nye). Not all critics were won over, for instance Carolyn See wrote in the *New York Times* that the novel, while "wonderful to read", outstays its welcome and likened it to "a sweet for the mind, […] after a while, it's hard not to get a little queasy" (See). She was particularly critical of the novel's last act, saying that Carter has "already made her point" and that "Mrs. Carter […] might have remembered that at the circus, or in a book, the real trick is to quit while you're ahead, to get off stage with the audience begging for more" (See).

Neither critic passes significant comment on the novel's late nineteenth-century setting, yet *Nights* is frequently cited as one of the defining works of the Neo-

[106] Jointly awarded with J.G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*. Despite this, unlike Carter's novel, Ballard's novel was not nominated for the 'Best of the James Tait Black'.

Victorian movement. While this claim is often made, there are fewer studies into the novel from a Neo-Victorian perspective than one might expect,[107] and so to this end in this section I will be looking at the novel and its use of the Victorian in further detail in order to examine what makes it explicitly a 'Neo-Victorian' novel as opposed to a historical fantasy.

The novel tells the story of 'Fevvers' (or, legally, 'Sophie'), a statuesque cockney woman with wings sprouted from her back, who works as an aerialist and who has become the toast of *fin de siècle* society, spurring an array of rumours and innuendo about her exploits and the veracity of her wings; something she is all too eager to capitalise on. As she embarks on tour, she is followed by the American journalist, Jack Walser, who has become fascinated with her and is determined to find out the truth behind Fevvers and her fantastical life story.

Marie-Luise Kohlke considers the novel's use and re-imagination of history in her essay 'Into history through the back door: the 'past historic' in *Nights at the Circus* and *Affinity*', originally published in 2004. While more of the essay is spent on the latter novel by Sarah Waters, with *Nights at the Circus* as a point of comparison, Kohlke makes note of the novel's blurring of fiction and reality, that "history begins to resemble fiction" (Kohlke, 155). Her main analysis is of the opening and closing sections of the novel. Of the opening, Kohlke comments on the journalist who while investigating the heroine becomes intrigued with her; "her crooked story requires a male author (namely himself) to explicate it, highlight her evasions and 'get it straight', replacing her illegitimate version of events with his own" (Kohlke, 156-157). Fevvers escapes this design due to her "irrepressible volubility" (Kohlke, 158), which is to say that she prevents him from writing her by virtue of both metaphorically and literally talking over him. Kohlke also notes of how characters present their histories; "[w]hile Fevvers's recounted adventures remain on a largely personal level, Colonel Kearney [the owner of the Circus in which she performs] grandly defines his enterprise to circumnavigate the globe, circus in tow, as an 'unprecedented and epoch-making historical event'" (Kohlke, 164). She goes on to

[107] Other than the essay by Marie-Luise Kohlke and book chapters by Helen Davies, both of which are referred to here, the only extended work on the novel in relation to Neo-Victorianism found, other than some university theses, was an essay by Stacey Balkan, '"Murdering the Innocents": the dystopian city and the circus as corollary in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*'. As the title suggests, it compares the novel with Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854).

note that Kearney self-identifies with Hannibal, commenting that male figures are associated with historical figures, whereas women find themselves "associated with fantasy and story-telling" (Kohlke, 164).

These points echo those of Magali Cornier Michael's 1994 essay, 'Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*: An Engaged Feminism via Subversive Postmodern Strategies'. Michael claims that "Carter pits a Marxist feminist realism against postmodern forms of tall tales or autobiographies, inverted norms, carnivalization, and fantasy" (Michael, 493); the narrative Fevvers puts forth is simultaneously her autobiography and a tall tale, and she will not relinquish control of it, instead asserting her authority over her story "and evad[ing] attempts by Walser to fix an identity upon her" (Michael, 497). The "conventional association of authorship and activeness" (Michael, 500) is inverted, as Fevvers (and Lizzie, her foster mother and near constant companion) take the role(s) of the "speaker-writer" leaving Walser that of the "passive spectator-reader" (Michael, 500). She will not be made an object by anyone but herself; while she presents herself as a spectacle, she has full control as to "how much she will allow herself to be consumed by her viewers" (Michael, 500).

Helen Davies expands on Kohlke's ideas surrounding the masculinisation of history and narrative in a chapter of 2012's *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets*, in which she comments on Walser's belief that the novel's heroine must have been created by a man, however she notes that the novel is lacking in Svengali figures; the female characters define themselves. This perhaps overlooks the novel's array of would-be Svengalis who try and fail to take away the women's agencies. Davies also notes that Walser's projected article on Fevvers promises to be more authoritative than the woman's own rendition of her tale, with "[m]asculine textual authority" being "privileged over the feminine voice" (Davies, 2012, 70), much like in Atwood's *Alias Grace*. However, also not unlike the relationship between the doctor and patient in Atwood's novel, Walser falls under Fevvers' thrall rather than her being under the control of a man: "Walser's plan to make Fevvers' story 'copy' for his editor – to take her voice and supplant it with his own – is thwarted by her oral/aural influence on him and he will ultimately learn to speak with her voice" (Davies, 2012, 74). A simple role reversal is not, she argues, what is at play in the novel:

> Fevvers does desire to ventriloquize Walser – to speak through him – but Walser-as-dummy will have a crucial role in this process. He will help the women to redress the balance of patriarchal history and include women's voices in this record. Fevvers' and Walser's double-act will offer a microcosm of neo-Victorian authorship; a multi-voiced exchange that does not privilege 'his master's voice'.
>
> Davies, 2012, 74

Indeed, the notion of men trying to define women rather than letting women define themselves is a theme quite evident throughout the novel, though Davies and Kohlke both focus quite heavily on the Fevvers and Walser dynamic, overlooking the peculiar relationships evident in other characters. While Fevvers doesn't have a Svengali of her own, there are certainly many people who wish to fill this role. Furthermore she is not the only one upon whom people try and enforce control; both Mignon and the Princess have identities bestowed upon them; nor indeed are these relationships necessarily along strict gender lines, as Madame Schreck vies for power over the women in her charge as much as, if not more than, Fevvers' male opponents.

In *The Rational Glass* (1998) meanwhile, Aidan Day argues that *Nights at the Circus* is very careful in how it builds the world in which it takes place, and that the "most important thing about the fantasy dimension of [the novel] is that, for all its flamboyant craziness, it makes sense *specifically in relation to* the historical context that is sketched in by Carter" (Day, 175, emphasis in original), and that "[f]or all the superficially 'carnival-esque' features of the work it […] is, at a deeper level, formally or generically quite traditional" (Day, 169). The characters are aware of the symbolism at play regarding the novel's heroine, but she is also an individual with her own thoughts and desires. Day continues:

> Fevvers is the New Woman because she has been constructed as the New Woman. Her slogan as the winged trapeze artist reads: 'is she fact or is she fiction?'. This is a question repeatedly asked of her by members of her audience […]. But the teasing question is misconceived, because she is both fiction *and* fact. She has been constructed and has constructed herself; she's been composed or written into being and in that sense is fictional. But that composition […] is now true and the fact. She is the new, the reconstituted woman.
>
> Day, 181, emphasis in original

Day too makes note of Fevvers' views on the reconstructed Walser helping her to write an alternative history, but goes on to apply it to the novel itself. He further

likens it to the interpretive element present in real world history: "[t]he mixture of historical realism and the extraordinary in this woman's story may be seen to parallel – in an admittedly extreme form – the processes that go on in the making of conventional history" (Day, 183).

As is clear from the above, the recurring focus of criticism on the novel is that of narrative control. Fevvers, as has been stated, is the metaphorical author of her own life and resists attempts by others to define her. This idea of controlling ones own identity is arguably one of the key elements of the novel, and ties in with the theme of performance that runs throughout.

With its turn-of-the-century setting, consideration of social issues, and wry references to historical figures and events, *Circus* certainly hits the beats that one would expect of a Neo-Victorian novel. The plights of women and the poor loom large in the backstory, providing context and motivation for the characters' actions, as they act out in manners uncharacteristic of a 'true' Victorian novel, engaging in militant Marxism and anarchy, homosexual affairs, and pagan and occult rituals. While Neo-Victorian literature is often irreverent, nonetheless *Nights at the Circus* stands out for its audacity. Fevvers has an absurdly idyllic childhood in an east end brothel under the eyes of a benevolent madam and her emancipated charges, subverting expectation of the concept, more reminiscent of scenes such as *David Copperfield*'s Micawber family's strangely jolly time in debtor's prison than the darker variants typical of Neo-Victorian fiction. Upon being thrust into the 'real' world, any scenes wherein people try and take advantage of her are played with a heightened reality, producing a more theatrical *Grand Guignol* style atmosphere. Fevvers is a showwoman, after all, and this aspect of her identity is key.

Performance and Myth

In the first part of the novel, Fevvers regales her interviewer, Walser, with detailed but unlikely tales of her life. She professes to be a foundling, stumbled upon by Lizzie, a prostitute who is devout to a fault, and raised in a brothel overseen by a one-eyed cross-dressing madam dubbed Nelson, who encourages her charges in education. Upon Nelson's death, she and Lizzie move in with the latter's family in Battersea.

However the need for money sees her join a freak show run by the sinister Madame Schreck, who cheats her charges out of their earnings and pimps them out. She later sells Fevvers to a man referred to as 'Rosencreutz', a prominent Member of Parliament whose true name she does not say aloud in her narrative. Schreck omits the full details when informing Fevvers of the job, telling her that she will receive her cut upon return. The aging Rosencreutz in actuality intends to sacrifice Fevvers as part of a ceremony which he believes will extend his life exponentially. Fevvers evades his machinations and returns to Battersea. In the interim, Madame Schreck has expired and the money appropriated from her charges returned. After these adventures, Fevvers proceeds to find work as a trapeze artist at the circus, where she becomes a sensation. In the present, Walser is sceptical, but fascinated, and proceeds to convince his editor to allow him to follow the circus' world tour undercover.

As Day noted, the tagline that is used to market Fevvers is "is she fact or is she fiction?" (*NC*, 7). The quandary of who she is looms large over the novel, but the truth about her is largely irrelevant because she is who she wants to be; she is utterly comfortable with her sense of self. For this reason, her revelation of the truth is relegated to the brief envoi:

> 'We told you no other lies nor in anyway strayed from the honest truth. Believe it or not, all that I told you as real happenings were so, in fact; and as to questions of whether I am fact or fiction, you must answer that for yourself!'
>
> *NC*, 292

Performance, or the appearance thereof, is central to Fevvers' identity. Even if, as revealed, the bulk of what she appears to be she actually is, it is this theatricality that allows her the confidence and bearing to have this identity. Of course, Fevvers is a far cry from Tristessa; while the latter's public persona is the perfect embodiment of suffering beauty, Fevvers is at once a strapping and earthy cockney lass and a graceful and pure ingénue. There is no contradiction that she can be crass and inelegant in her manner but still be capable of elegance or chastity, although the extent to which she is the latter may be the sole lie about herself that she tells Walser (or at least the sole lie she admits to); "'Fevvers, only the one question…why did you go to such lengths, once upon a time, to convince me you were the "only fully-feathered intacta in the

history of the world"?'" (*NC*, 294); her response to this line of questioning is uproarious laughter.

In an interview with Helen Cagney Watts,[108] Carter links the creation of the character to a comment by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) she found while researching *The Sadeian Woman*, regarding the heroines of the Marquis de Sade's work:

> It was no accident that the Marquis de Sade chose heroines and not heroes. Justine is woman as she has been until now, enslaved, miserable and less than human; her opposite, Juliette, represents the woman whose advent he anticipated, a figure of whom minds have as yet no conception, who is rising out of mankind, who will have wings and who will renew the world.
>
> Gamble, 1997, 158

Fevvers is the latter part of this statement taken entirely literally, though Carter had her doubts about the sincerity of Apollinaire's assessment:

> It seemed to me that people, especially male intellectuals, say this sort of thing, and think how wonderful they are in making this sort of gesture, but I can't help feeling that they're not going to like it when it happens: that they are going to be immensely pissed off when it happens.
>
> Gamble, 1997, 158

Indeed, despite recognising her accomplishment, the male intellectuals and nobles Fevvers meets seem determined not to view her as a person of flesh and blood, but to objectify her, sometimes quite literally. Not that the symbolism and value attached to Fevvers escape female attention; Nelson, the madam of the brothel that was her childhood home, dresses her up as Cupid and Nike, and Madame Schreck has her portray the 'angel of death' in *tableaux vivants*. The women link Fevvers with more classical and mythological 'angelic' imagery, whereas the men associate her with gnostic imagery and take it considerably more seriously than the former's purely symbolic representation, a fact most apparent in Rosencreutz: "he tells me [Fevvers] how he thinks that, by uniting his body with that of Azrael, the Angel of Death, on the threshold of the spring, he would cheat death itself and live forever while Flora herself will be forever free of winter's chill" (*NC*, 79).

[108] Originally published in *Bête Noir* 8 (August 1985), pp.161-176.

Refusing to be the Sacrificed Woman

A recurring theme in the novel is that of sacrifice; the closing of each part includes a scene of Fevvers in peril, confronted by a man engaged in some sort of ritual that threatens to destroy her. While this is most evident in the instance of Rosencreutz in the first part, who literally wishes to sacrifice her, as well as the amnesiac Walser of the third part, whom she interrupts in the middle of a sacrificial rite of his own, it is also seen in the second part with the Grand Duke. The Grand Duke does not have any explicit connection to the occult or ritual murder, but his seduction of Fevvers is couched in the same sort of language and imagery as the other scenes, as hinted by his referring to her as 'Sophia' apropos of nothing (at least so far as Fevvers can see) suggesting a similar sort of potentially fatal danger to the encounter. The notion of the 'death of a beautiful woman' in literature is a common one, and even appears in numerous other works of Carter's.[109] Edgar Allen Poe declared in 1846 that "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (Bronfen, 59), a statement that has caused much debate regarding its apparent misogyny; Elisabeth Bronfen comments that "[t]he equation between femininity and death is such that while in cultural narratives the feminine corpse is treated like an artwork, or the beautiful woman is killed to produce an artwork, conversely, artworks emerge only at the expense of a beautiful woman's death and are treated like corpses" (Bronfen, 72-73). The stereotyped Poe heroine is sickly however, and a far cry from the women of *Nights at the Circus*. In fact, in Carter's novel, women manage to avoid, as a rule, dying as part of a beautiful tragedy; the most notable woman's death in the novel belongs to Nelson, who aside from not fitting the image herself of a suffering beauty also dies abruptly and unglamorously by being run over by a horse and cart. As a point of comparison, the sacrificial imagery may have less to do with Poe's beautiful dead woman and more with the women of *fin de siècle* Gothic novels, such as *Dracula* or *The Beetle*, wherein female characters, as a result of some sort of hubris pertaining to modernity, fall under the thrall of men[110] who would do them harm to further their own, often occultist, agenda, thereby resulting in either death or

[109] See Ghîslaine of *Shadow Dance*, Annabel of *Love*, and Mary Anne and Albertina (amongst others) in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffmann*, as well as Tristessa's *oeuvre* in *The Passion of New Eve* and '*Morte d'une Sylphe*, or Death of a Wood Nymph' in *The Magic Toyshop*.

[110] It is suggested in the end of *The Beetle* that Marjorie's mysterious abductor is instead a woman in disguise, however for the bulk of the novel we are led to believe him/her to be male.

rescue by their (male) paramour. Fevvers, of course, is highly sexualised, opinionated and independent, and as such would traditionally be ripe for the picking by such attackers. She does however manage without a paramour to save her (indeed, the only one of these situations Walser is present for is the one where he is the assailant) and death is not an option, resulting in her having to find her own way out of the peril she finds herself in. We might note however that in popular usage of this trope, the assailant is generally foreign or somehow 'other'; this is turned on its head in Carter's novel, with Fevvers' first brush with death being at the hands of a notable British politician.

Noticeably for her own part, Fevvers rejects the angelic imagery ascribed to her in favour of viewing her origins in terms of the rather more ambiguous Leda and the swan, which would cast her instead as Helen. Indeed for all her ostensibly mystical origins, she is not in possession of any great divine powers (flight notwithstanding), instead existing by her wits and reason; things that come in useful, given how she captivates the world which would exploit her. One of her primary motivations is money and she has a fondness for earthly pleasures that would be unbecoming if she weren't ultimately a creature of the earth rather than of the heavens as people would ascribe her. While the character grows by having the more mercenary side of her nature softened, her morals and sense of justice remain intact throughout.

Challenging Victorian Constructions of Prostitution

The central concept of *Nights at the Circus* is the 'new woman' that was taking shape around the end of the nineteenth century; a more independent woman socially and financially than those of prior generations, in control of her own actions and thoughts. Fevvers is all these things, albeit in an extreme form; she is erudite, highly opinionated and very much a sexual being (though she lacks some of the more stereotypical trappings of the 'new woman' in appearance, such as in dress). While she is viewed as the showpiece however, this ignores the comparatively subtle changes in the status quo embodied by many of the other women in the novel.

The other major female characters in the novel include Lizzie, Fevvers' guardian; Mignon, the abused wife of the circus' 'ape man'; 'the Princess of Abyssinia', the circus' beast tamer; and Sybil, the Colonel's porcine partner, as well

important secondary characters such as Ma Nelson and the women of the Siberian prison colony.

Lizzie and Ma Nelson are the most prominent characters from Fevvers' youth in the brothel. Nelson is dedicated to the education and improvement of her charges, and is the first to recognise the symbolism that Fevvers embodies:

> '"To think we've entertained an angel unawares!" she says.
>
> '"Oh, my little one, I think you must be the pure child of the century that is just now waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground." And then she wept. That night, we threw away [Cupid's] bow and arrow and I posed, for the first time, as the Winged Victory[…].['] *NC*, 25

Nelson also however recognises the danger attached to this symbolism, and informs the clientele that her Nike is in actuality a hunchback whose wings are in fact affixed "with a strong adhesive" (*NC*, 32) sparing Fevvers "the indignity of curiosity" (*NC*, 32).

While Lizzie's motivations outside of being Fevvers' mother figure are partially obfuscated, they remain pretty consistent throughout. Her actions and views are typically informed by her adherence to Marxist philosophy (though early on the 'official' reason for her behaviour is given to Walser as staunch Roman Catholicism); she wishes society to reform in a more egalitarian mould, and is not passive in pursuit of her aims, using an unwitting Walser to send home "news of the struggle in Russia" (*NC*, 292). The other denizens of Ma Nelson's house do not feature as heavily, but also reveal unexpected facets when the time comes for them to go their separate ways; two had since entered into a relationship and retire to Brighton in order to run a boarding house, while another pair set up a temp agency (*NC*, 45), and one with musical talent finds herself a gig and a family on the music hall circuit (*NC*, 47). More clichéd is the final member of the group, characterised as a "the best-hearted harlot as ever trod Piccadilly" (*NC*, 45) becoming a black widow, although Carter leaves the specifics surrounding her husbands ambiguous.

A major part of the brothel is the idea of fantasy. By day, the women attend to reality where they learn skills such as typing or the flute, and by night they peddle to the fantasies of the male clientele; the truth is that "what followed after they put away their books was only poor girls earning a living" (*NC*, 39) and what they are selling is

not so much sex as the "*simulacra*" thereof (*NC*, 39), echoing Carter's comments on De Sade's *Juliette* (1797):

> The brothel is also a place of lies, of false appearances. Juliette's virginity is sold successively to fifty buyers and, for each customer, she must act out a part – that she is starving and forced to sell herself; that it was her mother who sold her to the brothel. And so on, a series of flattering charades designed to persuade the customers they are not dealing with simple businesswomen, that the weeping creatures who reluctantly bend themselves to their superior will are, in fact, so many innocent Justines.
>
> *SW*, 96

The outward appearance of the women is just for show; the men are happy to simply see what the women want them to. Linden Peach comments that the novel corresponds to and comments on "the revised ways in which prostitutes were being seen in late Victorian England" (Peach, 143). By the period in which the novel is set, perception of prostitutes had begun shift to the more sympathetic idea of women forced to do so out of necessity as opposed to enjoyment or, indeed, as a way of causing men suffering (Fevvers herself talks of the Baudelairean influence on punters, and the idea that the purpose of prostitutes is to "lure men to their dooms, as if we'd got nothing better to do" (*NC*, 38).

> [T]he emergence of a more liberal and sympathetic view of prostitutes challenged the conventional opposition of the subject and object in which prostitutes were an example of the way women were objectified by men.
>
> Peach, 143

Peach highlights the "episode" (Peach, 143) wherein Madame Schreck sells Fevvers to Rosencreutz, however the (attempted) objectification of Fevvers is a recurring theme throughout the novel.[111] Most interest in Fevvers throughout the novel is not so much as a person, but as an oddity, after all. Sometimes this objectification is entirely literal, such as the tableaux in Madame Schreck's (similarly literal) underground 'museum', others more typical, such as her encounter with the Grand Duke; there is even her encounter with Rosencreutz, which combines the two. Fevvers, of course, refuses to be objectified, unless she is doing it herself on her own terms, that is; she actively cultivates the mystery surrounding her and exploits it for personal gain. The

[111] It is also the prevailing theme of the 2006 adaptation for the stage.

merit of this is questionable: "Does it seem strange to you? That a caged bird should want to see the end of cages, sir?" (*NC*, 38); on the one hand, the symbolism that she readily embodies is present in her performance, but on the other, she plays to what her public wants.

However Peach points out that there were generally "only two options available to women in the nineteenth-century: prostitution or marriage" (Peach, 143) and the latter can also function as an exploitation of women. The implication of marriage as an escape from a life of prostitution is alluded to early on in the novel, when Walser asserts that he has "known some pretty decent whores, some damn fine women, indeed, whom any man might have been proud to marry" (*NC*, 21) only to be rebuked by Lizzie who snaps: "what is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many?" (*NC,* 21) Fevvers' signature song, the anachronistic 'a Bird in a Gilded Cage'[112], carries on this theme, with its lyrics telling of a woman in a loveless marriage to a wealthy man ("and her beauty was sold / for an old man's gold, / She's a bird in a gilded cage").

While Lizzie is a constant, there are two major women introduced in the second part who have more distinct character arcs. The second part resumes on the St Petersburg leg of the Circus' tour. Walser is working as a clown at the circus, a profession picked out for him by the ringmaster, Colonel Kearney, and his beloved pig, Sybil. He accidently becomes embroiled in a love polygon when he is accosted by the educated apes, an act that has a class of chimpanzees taught by a professor chimpanzee before proceeding to play; the chimpanzees take their lessons seriously, and use him for an anatomy lesson. At the same time, their ostensible master's abused wife, Mignon, abandons her task of observing in order to have sex with the circus' strong man. Following the escape of a tiger from the beast tamer's act however, the strong man (and the chimpanzees) flee, leaving the nude Walser to rescue Mignon and leaving them in a compromising position. Fevvers, now aware of Walser's presence, is displeased, but agrees to help with Mignon's situation. The group discover that she is a talented singer, and get her a role in the 'Princess of Abyssinia's' beast taming act, which entails tigers performing while the Princess plays the piano, wherein she sings and dances with the tigers. The St Petersburg performance however proves a disaster;

[112] 'A Bird in a Gilded Cage' (lyrics by Arthur J. Lamb, music by Harry Von Tilzer) was first published in 1900, and therefore would not be the familiar tune it is presented as in the novel.

the lead clown has a psychotic episode live in the ring, and has to be restrained and sectioned, while one of the tigers attacks Mignon and has to be shot. Meanwhile, the professor chimpanzee negotiates a new contract, apart from their supposed master, which the Colonel fails to read, resulting in the class absconding. Fevvers however finds the attentions of a Grand Duke; she is blinded by his fortune, and he attempts to use his wealth and power to take her for his own. Fevvers narrowly escapes and rejoins the circus just as the train is to depart.

Mignon is given arguably the most detailed backstory out of the entire cast apart from Fevvers. Mignon over the course of her part in the novel changes from an abused spouse and the circus' resident loose woman to a beautiful chanteuse and the Princess' lover, whose bond with her transcends language. Her early life mimics the plot of *Woyzeck*, an unfinished work from the 1830s by German playwright Georg Büchner based on an incident of 1821; the play tells the tale of a man of low standing and deteriorating mental health who kills his unfaithful lover. Most endings appended to the play feature him drowning in the pond. Mignon and her unnamed lost sister are children in this scenario, as her parents re-enact Büchner's plot.

Following this, she finds herself living with a fraudulent medium, who specialises in summoning the spirits of dear departed young women; she plays the part of the ghost as part of this confidence trick, which the novel portrays in a more sympathetic light than both many Victorian and Neo-Victorian works, such as Henry James' *The Bostonians* (1885-86) and Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999). It is turned to, much like the brothel, out of financial necessity rather than out of any desire to cause harm; the argument being that they are offering peace of mind to the bereaved (her static appearance when plying a multitude of women is excused with the logic that with a bit of make-up and wardrobe to appear as ethereal and waifish as possible, any dead girl becomes interchangeable).

Subverting Victorian Orientalism

The unnamed 'Princess of Abyssinia' deals with similar questions of the idea of performance as Fevvers. A mute for much of the novel, the identity that she portrays is a fabrication; she is neither a princess nor an Abyssinian, and we are informed that she "had never visited, even on business, the country whose royal title she usurped,

nor did she come from any other part of Africa" (*NC*, 148), instead originating from Marseilles, the product of Brazilian and Guadeloupean Native parentage. Her act is indicative of the falsehood of her persona, as she tames Indian tigers by playing European piano sonatas and waltzes rather than featuring anything quintessentially 'African'. Her false identity however is not one of her own devising. Her stage name is inherited from her father and the act itself from her mother, and her mutism is merely a technique to avoid aggravating the tigers but also stops her from passing comment on stories told about her.

> It was rumoured she was herself a tigress's foster-child, abandoned in the jungle and suckled by wild bears. But there is no jungle near Marseilles. Since she said nothing, she never denied these stories. The Colonel spread them freely.
>
> *NC*, 149

However while Fevvers' hook is the mystery "is she fact or is she fiction", the Princess' identity is never called into question. Her public is perfectly willing to buy into the concept that she is what she appears to be, despite the numerous flaws in the presentation. This is perhaps a comment by Carter on nineteenth-century Orientalism, that there is essentially nothing true about her act but it portrays an exoticism that appeals to the primarily European (and, we can infer, American) audience of the circus. Even Fevvers is taken aback by the reality when she finally speaks and comes out with "the real, rough French of Marseilles" (*NC*, 248).

Laughter and fantasy, and the New Woman

In the third and final part of the novel, the circus train derails when the line is blown up by rebels, leaving the troupe stranded in Siberia. Walser is separated from the rest of the group in the accident. Fevvers and her party are captured by the rebels, who wish her to use her supposed connections to get them assistance in their plight, only to be disappointed when they discover that no such associations exist. With it looking grim for her party, the remaining clowns distract the rebels by performing as a fierce storm picks up, which proceeds to rid them of both the rebels and the clowns. They, along with another prisoner, continue travelling and find themselves at a conservatory, helmed by a music teacher forgotten by the world, where Mignon and the Princess set themselves up on the piano.

Elsewhere, Walser is found in the wreckage by the escapees of a female prison colony, but his mind is broken. Sympathies aside, they wish to set up an all-female commune and cannot take him with them and turn him loose where he is found by a shaman, who mistakes his mostly incoherent fragments of English for something profound and takes him on as his protégé. The amnesiac Walser builds a new sense of self. However Mignon's singing attracts all the life in the area; upon seeing Fevvers in the distance, an omen is felt. While the Princess, Mignon and the strong man stay at the conservatory, and the Colonel and Sybil leave for America determined to rebuild (with the extra escapee in tow, seduced by the Colonel's American Dream), Fevvers and Lizzie proceed to try and rescue Walser, who is set to perform a ritual sacrifice as a pact with the spirit world. As the new century breaks, Fevvers spreads her wings, allowing Walser to connect the fragments of his mind and come to his senses.

The subversion of expectation and the dichotomy between surface appearance and reality are recurring sources of humour within the novel. Women like Fevvers and the Princess appear beautiful and majestic, but are underneath are more coarse and earthy than their peers. The apes are far more interested in their studies than playing, with their capering for the audience being a chore ("Walser noticed how the Professor glanced at these frolics with an air of grave melancholy while the chimps themselves seemed to take no pleasure from the sport, going through the motions with a desultory, mechanical air, longing, perhaps to be back at their studies, whatever they are, for nothing is more boring than being forced to play" (*NC*, 109)). Similarly, Ma

Nelson's brothel is a place of learning in a literal sense, with her charges learning a variety of topics such as philosophy, literature, and even typing, with their night time activities purely to pay the bills. The sexual encounters owe more to the bawdy grotesqueries of *Fanny Hill* (1748-9) than to Victorian 'fallen woman' narratives, and most of the novel's male characters, despite wielding some power in society, are impotent in some other capacity. Helen Davies highlights in *Neo-Victorian Freakery: the Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* (2015) the Colonel's rather literal impotence, referring to a scene wherein he invites Fevvers to his personal train carriage only for any potential encounter to be stopped short when he passes out from drink:

> Aside from being a satirical reflection on the impotency of the Colonel's colonising impulses – his lust for importing Yankee-style showmanship across the globe is literally derailed by an explosion in Siberia – what we witness here is a bathetic re-membering [*sic*] of a freak show manager, rather than a freak show performer.
>
> Davies, 2015, 204

Similar, though more metaphorical, ideas surround other male authority figures. Rosencreutz has not just a fear of death but a revulsion surrounding "the female part, or absence, or atrocious hole, or dreadful chasm, the Abyss, Down Below, the vortex that sucks everything dreadfully down, down, down where Terror rules" (*NC*, 77). Fevvers' casual note, after this speech, that he evidently practices "some kind of heretical possibly Manichean version of neo-Platonic Rosicrucianism" (*NC*, 77), a topic which she would not be expected to be even aware of, is a delightful subversion. Buffo the Clown is a self-indulgently philosophical drunk incapable of joy.

The style of humour on show in the novel is atypical of Neo-Victorian literature. It does little to mimic the humour of Victorian writers such as Dickens, Lear or Carroll, nor does it have the consistently wry, knowing wink of being privy to how the world has changed since the time of the novel's setting seen in works such as Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). The humour is instead very similar in style to Carter's previous novel, *The Passion of New Eve*, which is, as discussed, a far more modern tale, rich in parody and pastiche, absurdities and the grotesque. It is also however a much more optimistic and upbeat novel than *New Eve*, which is cynical and misanthropic; in fact, it is more optimistic than any of her

previous novels (even the generally cheerful *Several Perceptions* has a touch of cynicism regarding its happy ending).

While *Nights at the Circus* does consider many of the topics popular in Neo-Victorian fiction, such as gender, sexuality, and the labour movement, and how they resonate in the modern world, at the butt of the joke ultimately is the bourgeois sensibility of the late twentieth century. There is nothing uniquely Victorian about the threats that Fevvers faces; her exploitation is instead quite general. In the novel's final scene, Walser has reconstructed himself, open to new ideas and perspectives rather than the 'truths' he previous held to be self-evident. The new century rings in as Fevvers laughs an infectious laugh that rings around the world, echoing Cixous' seminal 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975):

> [I]sn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that [men] only had to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.
>
> Cixous, 885

Walser can see her anew, and even if (as he suspects) he is, or was, the butt of the joke, he can appreciate it. Fevvers is an ostensible monster; men are at once fascinated by and afraid of her. There is an idea that she will somehow cause their downfall (see Rosencreutz's identification of her as Azrael, the Abrahamic angel of death, as well as the shaman's view of her as an ominous spirit that presages Walser's overtaking of him); tying in to the Medusa myth. Of course, this is not her motive, and in revealing herself to Walser in all her monstrous glory, she does not destroy him, but revives him and gives him new insight. She is after all Sophia, the gnostic embodiment of wisdom.

10. The Past as Construct in *Wise Children*

Wise Children is Carter's final completed novel,[113] and tells the peculiar history of the Hazard family, from the viewpoint of Dora Chance, an illegitimate daughter of the patriarch, Melchior Hazard. The novel, like *Nights at the Circus*, deals directly with the past and how we relate to it. While the earlier novel is set within the past in question however, *Wise Children* has a contemporary setting with the protagonist reminiscing and editorialising about events. The novel charting about a century of the family's history furthermore allows Carter to address cultural values and how they shift (or don't) from the Victorian period to the late 1980s/early 1990s.

On the day of her father's (and that of his twin, Peregrine (Perry)) 100th birthday, which falls on the same day as her own birthday (and that of her twin, Nora), Dora takes a look back over the family history. The Hazards are a great acting family, or at least once were, and despite (or perhaps because of) her illegitimacy, Dora takes it upon herself to chart the family's decline, such as it is.

In a departure from her previous three novels, *Wise Children* does not have a strong travelling motif carried throughout or even really an ultimate goal for the characters. Dora and Nora have dreams and desires but they do not really have any particular quest to undertake, making them distinct from the protagonists of *Nights at the Circus*, *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, who all go about their journeys with an end goal in mind (even if they don't necessarily succeed in accomplishing it). This is itself reflective of the novel's general tone; amongst the ups-and-downs of life, the Chance twins ultimately remain happy-go-lucky and so the novel remains steadfastly optimistic, unimpeded by the more cautious optimism evident in *Nights at the Circus* or the vaguely cynical variety of *Several Perceptions*.

Travel does play a major role in the plot however. In the late nineteenth century, at the height of the empire, the Hazard clan travelled the world delivering Shakespeare to the masses, and Perry continues his wanderlust into the twentieth century. Having remained coy with historical figures in *Circus*, Carter is far more willing here to mention the assorted famous people the family has encountered,

[113] Discounting the posthumously published children's book *Sea-Cat and Dragon King* (2000).

though these are throwaway mentions with little to no influence on the plot.[114] Melchior and Perry's parents were famous Shakespearean actors in the latter days of Victoria, in which time a young Estella Hazard had a run in with Lewis Carroll, complete with photo shoot; Ranulph Hazard's portrayal of Richard III caught the attention of George Bernard Shaw; and the couple's New York trip was arranged by P.T. Barnum. Even Victoria herself manages to put in an appearance. Apart from Barnum, these are effectively cameos which play no real role in events, though they do help in establishing the status of the family. When they have a significant part in the plot, Carter generally uses facsimiles or obfuscated versions of people and artefacts instead.[115]

The Hazard grandparents die long before the events of the novel, during Melchior and Perry's childhoods (their father kills their mother and her lover before committing suicide, incidentally during their run of *Othello*), and so their presence in the novel is a strange one. Dora being born after their deaths, she has no first hand experience of them despite being the novel's narrator, and so their history is pieced together from public record and family stories (those of Perry in particular), and it becomes apparent that those two do not necessarily gel. Estella Hazard interestingly fills a similar part to Fevvers in that her public image is very much divorced from her actual personality. Her public adores her for her stunning performance on stage, demonstrating great skill and grace, but off stage she is scatterbrained, often unpresentable, and generally relaxed and bohemian in behaviour and temperament. This does not seem to be any great secret; one of Perry's tales of his mother revolves heavily around making a spectacle of themselves in public:

[114] The most notable from a plotting standpoint are perhaps Fred and Adele Astaire, who inspire the Chance sisters to get into the entertainment business when they are taken as children to see them perform in *Lady, Be Good*; however this, it should be noted, is not as a result of any interaction with the Astaires, even if it is accompanied by Dora mentioning that they were on "'Hi, Fred,' 'Hi, girls' terms when [they] grew up" (*WC*, 55).

Lady, Be Good incidentally played in the West End, featuring the Astaires, in 1926. The plot revolves around a pair of insolvent siblings who are eager to sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of the other.

[115] By way of example, the failed film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that the Hazard family feature in appears to be inspired by the 1935 film of the same directed by Max Reinhardt. Reinhardt's film features a 15-year-old Mickey Rooney as Puck; the novel's incarnation has an unnamed character described as "an aged child" (*WC*, 126) who is beloved by old ladies.

> We were on our way to some ladies' lunch club […]. We were late, of course, because she hadn't been able to find a clean frock but after much rummaging came up with one with only a couple of wine stains and a smear of marmalade so she pinned a bunch of frangipani over the worst of it and got her hair up, somehow. […] We came to an organ-grinder, we stopped to admire the monkey. She gave the organ-grinder sixpence and he played 'Daisy, Daisy'. She took my hand and we danced, right there, on the pavement. Her hairpins scattered everywhere. […] 'Come on!' she said to the world in general. 'Join in!' Then everybody started dancing, they all took hold of the hand of the next perfect stranger. 'I'm half crazy, all for the love of you.' She looked upon what she had accomplished and was glad. We missed soup, we missed fish, we arrived at the table at the same time as the chicken. Her hair was down her back, she'd lost her flowers, one slipper with a broken heel, her small son collarless, tieless, and I'd got a monkey on my shoulder – she'd swapped her gold watch for it. She did them Portia's speech, 'The quality of mercy…' She made them happy.
>
> *WC*, 18

The beauty she portrays on stage differs wildly from the beauty she has in real life, but this dichotomy is in practice quite different from that of Fevvers or Tristessa. The contradictions inherent in Fevvers are accentuated and part of her appeal, while Tristessa's are carefully concealed; Estella's professional and everyday personae are quite separate and distinct, however there is no real effort to hide her 'true' self. This extends to her physical appearance; she looks like a typically waifish and wan child bride (note that she is approximately thirty years younger than her husband, with her getting married at 18, assuming the dates Dora estimates are accurate). Her *joie de vivre* belies this, as does the manner of her death, as she is murdered apparently *in flagrante delicto* with another man rather than as a result of any madness or malady that typically befalls such ethereal women in literature, such as the assorted first wives of Dickens' characters. An obvious example would be the eponymous *David Copperfield*'s first wife, Dora, who exists in a state of childlike innocence before growing weak and dying. She maintains this childishness into marriage, being neglectful of housekeeping, cookery and the accounts, instead spending her days playing with her beloved dog, and has difficulty seeing why David shouldn't do the same.

> [S]he said to me, in her pretty coaxing way—as if I were a doll, I used to think:
>
> 'Now don't get up at five o'clock, you naughty boy. It's so nonsensical!'
>
> 'My love,' said I, 'I have work to do.'
>
> 'But don't do it!' returned Dora. 'Why should you?'
>
> It was impossible to say to that sweet little surprised face, otherwise than lightly and playfully, that we must work to live.
>
> 'Oh! How ridiculous!' cried Dora.
>
> 'How shall we live without, Dora?' said I.
>
> 'How? Any how!' said Dora.
>
> She seemed to think she had quite settled the question, and gave me such a triumphant little kiss, direct from her innocent heart, that I would hardly have put her out of conceit with her answer, for a fortune.
>
> Dickens, 1850, Chap. XXXVII

However exuberant Estella is however, she is not innocent in her dealings. Indeed her ethereal appearance contradicts the earthier elements of her personality, just as in the case of *Nights at the Circus*' Fevvers. She is well aware of what is expected of her as the Victorian wife and mother, she just doesn't seem to care. She is somewhat ironically compared to her son's third wife, referred to only by her derisive nickname 'My Lady Margarine', who meets her much older husband playing Cordelia to his Lear, as Estella and Ranulph had. Lady Margarine abandons her acting upon her marriage in order to "devote herself to her two wonderful sons" (*WC*, 37) and is seen advertising household goods and opening fetes, portraying herself as the epitome of middle class domesticity.

Kate Webb's contribution to *Flesh and the Mirror* (1993), a collection of essays on Carter's work published a year after her death, 'Seriously Funny: *Wise Children*' has a large section discussing the colonial implications of the novel. Ranulph's great project, the world tour, is linked to the British Empire as well as Christian missions: "[Ranulph] saw the entire world as his mission field […] for now the old man was seized with the most imperative desire, to spread and go on spreading the Word overseas. Willy-nilly, off must go his wife and children, too, to take Shakespeare where Shakespeare had never been before" (*WC*, 17); as Atwood notes with regards to the colonisation of Canada, women didn't typically get a say in such ventures. The empire is already well established by this point, with the map containing "so much pink" that "English was spoken everywhere" (*WC*, 17), allowing for the convenient exportation of Shakespeare. He functions as a symbol of cultural imperialism, if not the empire itself.

The exact timeline is vague, but we can infer from what we know that the deaths of the Hazard parents would be in a similar timeframe to Victoria, bringing a close to the era named after her. The Victorian period contained what was essentially the height of the British Empire, which fell apart over the course of the twentieth century, along with the nation's apparent importance on the world stage.

By the same token, there's the figure of Gorgeous George, a music hall comedian first seen by the twins (and Perry) on the August Bank Holiday when they're thirteen. His act consists of bawdy jokes and innuendo, followed by a rousing rendition of 'Rose of England' and some mock military drills, before stripping down to a posing pouch to reveal a map of the globe tattooed across his body, mostly filled in pink, all to the tune of 'Rule, Britannia'. The crowd goes wild, much to the twins' bemusement; "what kind of a show was this? Hadn't Grandma told us that wars were a way to get the young men out of the picture [….]?" (*WC*, 67). Webb points out the irony in George's act; he has the history of British conquest tattooed across his body, but the punchline to the joke the reader is privy to "is a withering attack on a foolishly deluded old patriarch who thinks himself the greatest stud around" (Webb, 293).

The Hazards' globe trotting enterprise is adored worldwide. In the wake of their travels, they leave a variety of gifts and honours. Theatres, streets and numerous towns are renamed after them; a dessert is even named after Estella (this is a reference to the real-life Nellie Melba, after whom the Peach Melba is named). They receive elephants from maharajahs and promises of their weight in rubies. This is all because Estella makes people 'happy'; "She had a gift for that. She made [the Maharajah] happy, then she left him. She had a gift for leaving, too" (*WC*, 19). There is an obvious sexual implication to the vagueness of the statement that Estella 'makes people happy', however consider as well that her earlier mentioned escapade in Sydney culminates in her "making [the lunch club] happy" (*WC*, 18) by reciting Portia's speech from *The Merchant of Venice*.

The bulk of the novel, of course, does not deal with Estella and Ranulph; they predate Dora's birth after all; but the lives of their descendants. In the twentieth century, the remaining portions of the Hazard clan go to Hollywood when Perry and Melchior are suckered in by the prospect of making a film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Perry purely for the adventure of it, Melchior "to take North America back for England, Shakespeare and St George" and "make his father's old dream everybody's dream" (*WC*, 133). The film is a total fiasco however, scuppering his

chances in America. The idea of Shakespeare apparently has appeal, given the hotel's 'Forest of Arden' theming and the papers' giddiness over the soil from Stratford that the Chance sisters are supposedly bringing with them for use in a meaningless ceremony at the start of the shoot.[116] Shakespeare's work itself less so, it would appear.

It is in this section that Gorgeous George makes his return; Melchior having cast him as Bottom, convinced by Perry that "all the comic roles in Shakespeare were originally intended for stand-up comedians" (*WC*, 151). It ties in further to Melchior's ideas of taking 'back' America; he is narrowly persuaded that George shouldn't strip to serve as "a little reminder […] of the essential *Englishness* of Shakespeare" (*WC*, 151, emphasis in original). While the world may like the idea of Shakespeare however, they do not like George in the slightest. He is too loud and vulgar; a far less acceptable face of British cultural imperialism. His famous tattoo and his militaristic posturing serve to paint a far uglier picture of British colonialism than the Hazard parents' cultural exports. The Empire didn't expand peacefully after all. Webb states "[u]nlike St George of old, Gorgeous George no longer wins battles and rules the waves; he merely represents the idea of conquest" (Webb, 294). He sells the idea to his adoring public, all too eager to lap up the concept of Britain and its rule, but just as the Empire fell into decline over the twentieth century, so too does George. In the novel's present, the sisters find him begging in Regent's Park.

The Past Gets Reconstructed

The empire isn't the only thing falling throughout the novel however. George's home away from home, the music hall, decreases in relevance after Victoria as well, facing competition from cinema and later television. The same is also true of the Hazards; the theatre's dominance also comes to an end with the rise of film. Neither party manages to succeed in transitioning to the silver screen, however Lady Margarine moves the family into the unglamorous world of television, where they host game shows and promote imitation butter. All of the family's weight is in its legacy; people remember them fondly, but the world has moved on and the purported glory days

[116] In actuality, they discard the soil when they discover that a cat had been using it for litter, replacing it with soil from the hotel garden. Suffice to say, nobody notices.

have passed. This is true of the family, and true of society at large. The Chance sisters embrace the new Britain that emerges over their lifetime, culminating in the novel's denouement with the elderly sisters becoming mothers to their estranged half-brother's offspring, one boy and one girl, "a new thing in [the] family" (*WC*, 227).

The past is a construct; the memory of the empire, of the theatre, of the family itself, none of it is necessarily 'real'. As Nora says of their father:

> 'I sometimes wonder if we haven't been making him up all along, […] If he isn't just a collection of our hopes and dreams and wishful thinking in the afternoons. Something to set our lives by, like the old clock in the hall, which is real enough, in itself, but which we've got to wind up to make it go.'
>
> *WC*, 230

Angela Carter used her novels to respond to the world around her and convey her ideas and concerns on a variety of topics. This is perhaps most self-evident in the Bristol books which, while not autobiographical (despite the obvious point of them being set around where she herself lived), deal in questions of madness and paranoia, reflective of her own troubled life at the time. *Several Perceptions* and *Love* both focus on the topic of mental health, with elements of plot and smaller details seemingly derived from her relationship with her then-husband and his struggles with depression; though as Gordon suggests (Gordon, 127), one should be sceptical of mapping the plots too closely to her actual life. While both deal with the matter in very different ways, the method through which they both convey Carter's ideas is through the evocation of classic literature that deals with the topics that she is considering.

The Magic Toyshop considers foundational girls' texts and questions their didacticism, as well as the enduring role of female romantic fantasy. Similarly *Heroes and Villains* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* view the notion of fantasy lovers through a specifically Gothic lens, the former in its Byronic (anti-)hero and the latter in the somnambulist woman-child. Carter's later novels serve as critiques of traditional approaches to femininity and the nature of performance. In *The Passion of New Eve*, traditional roles of women in the arts are used to condition women into what society expects of them. In *Nights at the Circus*, expectations of gender and class are inverted by the novel's simultaneously graceful and graceless heroine. Carter's last completed novel, *Wise Children*, looks back on the late

nineteenth and twentieth centuries, considering with it the roles played by women in addition to ideas of cultural imperialism and the decline of the British empire.

Conclusion

The influence of the Victorian period on literature is perhaps most evident in the enduring legacy of some of its texts, many of which have been adapted, rewritten or otherwise invoked in the years hence. Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood are no exception; as I have shown, both make extensive use of Victorian themes, narratives, and ideas in their work, even if these works themselves are often not overtly 'Victorian' in style or setting. This demonstrates the need for an expanded conception of what the 'Neo-Victorian' might be in literature. Recall the definition given by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, which stated that Neo-Victorian "texts must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" and that they should create "spaces of intellectual exchange, fundamentally concerned […] with the ontological and epistemological roots of the *now* through an historical awareness of *then*" (Heilmann & Llewellyn, 4, emphasis in original). However the Victorians have more influence on culture than what we are consciously aware of. In the cases of Carter and Atwood, many of their novels are not strictly engaged in "(re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians", and yet they do consider the latter point regarding the "ontological and epistemological roots" of the modern era via an awareness of history and Victorian cultural artefacts.

This is seen in the way in which I have outlined the pattern of allusion in the novels of both writers. For example, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* appears a particularly common reference point; its tale of destructive love and revenge, ensconced in a questionably reliable narration filtered and obfuscated through various sources, appears to foretell the interests of later women writers. Its endurance and apparent ubiquity is highlighted by Atwood who says that she "had once, briefly and madly, decided [she] would support herself by writing True Romance stories" (*OW*, 76),[117] evoking the then-future heroine of *Lady Oracle*.

[117] While not giving a specific time frame for this idea, Atwood appears to place this sometime between being sixteen (when she had "decided [she] was a writer" (*OW*, 75)) and going to university; we can thus discern that she entertained this idea in the mid-1950s.

> This seemed easy enough, as they were all basically some variation of *Wuthering Heights*, in which the girl wrongly falls for the guy with the motorcycle instead of the one with a steady job at the shoe store. But I found I couldn't do this: as with any kind of writing, you somehow have to believe in it yourself or it isn't convincing.
>
> *OW*, 76

Note here that Atwood, even in thinking about *Wuthering Heights*, updates the text to include motorcycles, and also misrepresents its plot to some extent. Catherine and Heathcliff's emotional affair is built upon the nature of societal expectation and serves not only to destroy them, but has the effect of causing the downfall of the families. The effect that societal expectation has on people, women especially, is a recurring trait throughout both Carter's and Atwood's *oeuvres*. This is not a wholly unique characteristic, as Gilbert and Gubar highlight the wealth of female characters that challenge cultural norms within the works of women writers; however *Wuthering Heights*' treatment of Catherine and Heathcliff is seemingly a bit more ambiguous than, for example, Jane and Rochester of *Jane Eyre*, wherein the madwoman is more of an obstacle for the heroine rather than a character, much less one whom the entire story revolves around.

> Even the most apparently conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all the patriarchal structures which both their authors and their authors' submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable. Of course, by projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them. What this means, however, is that the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in some sense the *author's* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. Indeed, much of the poetry and fiction written by women conjures up this mad creature so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be.
>
> Gilbert & Gubar, 77-78

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* saw publication in 1966 and proved influential in re-writing a prominent text from the perspective of the ostracised 'madwoman' figure. Later women writers, Carter and Atwood included, are similarly open in their

sympathies towards these 'monstrous' women. While *Alias Grace* is one of the more typically 'Neo-Victorian' works we have looked at, it serves as a more prominent example of how these ideas of repression, and narrative uncertainty, seen in *Wuthering Heights* can be woven into other stories that at first glance may seem unrelated. *Alias Grace* is primarily an account of an actual event, but it makes use of openly unreliable narrators, including an alleged madwoman, in its use of conflicting sources and the struggle between multiple characters to control the narrative, as Jordan attempts to define Grace and provide the definitive version of the murders, supplanting even the version that Grace gives herself. This is also seen to more comic effect in *Nights at the Circus*, as Fevvers repeatedly defies Walser's attempts to categorise her; she will control the narrative of her life story, rather than be defined purely by the history that he tries to write for her. These are almost certainly a reflection of modern concerns regarding the representation of women and how they have been defined by men, both historically and in modern times, rather than allowed to speak for themselves.

This flexibility in identity is a running theme throughout Atwood's work as well as Carter's later novels. These novels are filled with women (and sometimes men) who live various lives and play different roles, adapting and changing themselves according to who they are and who they want to be. The specifics as to whether or not this is a good thing cannot be answered definitively. Zenia in *The Robber Bride* presents a different version of herself to everyone she meets; this allows her to succeed, but at the expense of others. She wreaks havoc by leeching off others and yet gets away with it on account of apparently embodying all that her victims want her to. Tristessa in *The Passion of New Eve* by her own volition plays assorted embodiments of female suffering, both in fiction and in life, and is at her most powerful and beautiful when she does so, but her films are used to condition women as to how they should be.

Additionally, there is a need in these novels to dissect the themes of nineteenth-century texts to which they allude. The tortured 'Byronic hero' who suffers and causes suffering is a figure that is examined and found wanting, with modern heroines, such as Marianne in *Heroes and Villains* and *Lady Oracle*'s Joan, finding themselves intrigued by the romantic (and possibly Romantic) nature of the apparently beastly Gothic hero, but discovering that in reality these traits are not at all appealing. *Love* and *Several Perceptions* use very different nineteenth-century literary

portrayals of madness in their examinations of their protagonists' mental health woes. *The Magic Toyshop* and *Lady Oracle* use children's fiction to demonstrate the impact of nineteenth-century narratives told in childhood on their heroines' expectations of life. *Surfacing* and *The Robber Bride* use the tropes of horror fiction to evoke the anxiety over identity. The ever-present yet unattainable spectre of the 'ideal' woman haunts fiction, from Carter and Atwood's first novels in the 1960s through to *Wise Children* and *The Blind Assassin* thirty years later.

The above summary demonstrates the rich and varied influence of nineteenth-century literature as evidenced in the novels of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood in this thesis. While it has primarily been concerned with the novels of these two authors, there is still ultimately a lot of work to be considered regarding the influence of the Victorian and Edwardian ages on the work of modern women writers. Aside from Carter's and Atwood's novels, future work on the subject might wish to further consider their short fiction and other forms of writing, such as their screenplays and their poetry. One might also consider others writing in the period; such as Margaret Drabble, Beryl Bainbridge, and Fay Weldon, also respond to Victorian literature. Furthermore, one might wish to consider the adaptations of their works; how they translate to other media and how they change or are filtered through another layer of interpretation. One might note that *Neo-Victorian Studies* often features discussion of filmed adaptations of nineteenth-century works in addition to entirely new works about the Victorian period.[118]

In fact, one could use the existence of these adaptations as evidence of the continued relevance of these writers' work, and by extension how the modern world continues to be affected by the same literary influences. Indeed, while there have been prior adaptations of Margaret Atwood's work, interest in her writing appears to be experiencing a particular boom following the 2017 television adaptation of *The*

[118] Of particular note is issue 9:1 (2016) which is dedicated entirely to the idea of performing, and includes (amongst others) articles on stage adaptations of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Sweeney Todd*, and the 'Dickens World' attraction formerly at Chatham Dockyard. Other issues include discussions of Cary Fukunaga's 2011 adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (M. Jordan. 2014. 'Dislocated Heroines: Cary Fukunaga's Jane Eyre, Romantic Love and Bertha's Legacy'. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 7(1), pp. 79-103), Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 adaptation of *Dracula* (Cordell, S.A. 2013. 'Sex, Terror, and Bram Stoker's Dracula: Coppola's Reinvention of Film History'. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 6(1), pp. 1-21), and the BBC's 2007 adaptation of *Cranford* (Byrne, K. 2009. '"Such a fine, close weave": Gender, Community and the Body in Cranford (2007)'. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2(2), pp.43-64).

Handmaid's Tale by Hulu,[119] which has served as the first in a selection of adaptations of her work, being soon followed by television versions of *Alias Grace* (CBC/Netflix)[120] and her 2011 children's book *Wandering Wenda and Widow Wallop's Wunderground Washery* (CBC),[121] with an adaptation of the *MaddAddam* trilogy in development,[122] as well as a potential adaptation of *The Heart Goes Last*.[123]

Both Atwood and Carter appear deeply concerned with how modern attitudes towards not just women, but society in general, have been shaped by historical values. Even if the bulk of their work concerns itself with the concerns of the modern world, we must not overlook how the attitudes of the past reflect the attitudes of today (and indeed how both of these will affect the attitudes of the future). However more than that, the two novelists are concerned with identity, Atwood in particular; the crisis at the heart of who a person is and what they desire. It is not enough to give voice to those without one of their own; they also put great consideration into who these voices are and why they are important. It is not enough that the hero(ine)s of their novels are

[119] Produced by MGM for American streaming service Hulu, *The Handmaid's Tale* first aired on April 26th, 2017. Elisabeth Moss stars as Offred, and Atwood acts as a consultant, as well as appearing briefly in the first episode as one of the Aunts, a class of older women who train the Handmaids in expected behavior. At time of writing, a second series that continues the story beyond the ending of the novel is in production.

A film adaptation, produced by Cinecom, was previously released in 1990. Directed by Volker Schlöndorff and starring Natasha Richardson, the adaptation was officially credited to playwright Harold Pinter, however the final film is said to differ wildly from Pinter's script. Reportedly Atwood was among the parties involved in the rewriting. Of the screenplay, Pinter said: "I worked with [the originally attached director] Karel Reisz on it for about a year. There are big public scenes in the story and Karel wanted to do them with thousands of people. The film company wouldn't sanction that so he withdrew. At which point Volker Schlöndorff came into it as director. He wanted to work with me on the script, but I said I was absolutely exhausted. I more or less said, 'Do what you like. There's the script. Why not go back to the original author if you want to fiddle about?' He did go to the original author. And then the actors came into it. I left my name on the film because there was enough there to warrant it—just about. But it's not mine" (Gale, 318-319).

[120] The six-episode miniseries, produced by Halfire Entertainment for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Netflix, was written by Sarah Polley and directed by Mary Harron. Sarah Gadon stars as Grace Marks, with Edward Holcroft playing Dr Jordan and Anna Paquin as Nancy Montgomery; Margaret Atwood makes a cameo in the fourth episode as a disapproving churchgoer. It was broadcast on the CBC between 25 September and 30 October 2017, appearing in its entirety on Netflix in international markets on 3 November. It focuses mostly on Grace's narrative, with much of Jordan's being removed or simplified.

[121] Produced by Breakthrough Entertainment and PiP Animation Services for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *Wandering Wenda*, like the book upon which it is based, follows the highly alliterative adventures of a young girl who saves the day through wordplay. It premiered on 29 April 2017, with Atwood appearing in each episode bookending the main story.

[122] Protozoa Pictures developed the series, based on Atwood's trilogy of post-apocalyptic novels, for American premium broadcaster Home Box Office (HBO), with scripts written by Eliza Clark. HBO passed on the project in 2016, with producer Darren Aronofsky claiming the project will continue to be developed regardless. Paramount has, as of 2018, stepped in to produce.

[123] In 2016, MGM acquired the rights to produce a television adaptation of Atwood's 2015 dystopian novel, itself a revised (and completed) version of her 2012-2013 serial *Positron*.

given voice; what is most important is their struggles with preventing others from taking control of their narratives away from them, and the question of what the threat to their narrative self-control is. Ultimately, the dominant society and culture seeks to define, and this culture is itself formed by the past. In addressing the past to create "spaces of intellectual exchange, fundamentally concerned […] with the ontological and epistemological roots of the *now* through an historical awareness of *then*" (Heilmann & Llewellyn, 4, emphasis in original), Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter demonstrate the wider influence of the Victorian period even when they are not explicitly reinterpreting, rediscovering or revising it.

Post-Script: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

> I would like to thank those who have dedicated themselves so energetically to the banning of my novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. It's encouraging to know that the written word is still taken so seriously.
>
> *OW*, 243[124]

The influence of the Victorian runs broader than what can be seen here. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is arguably Margaret Atwood's best-known work, and has received numerous adaptations, including a film, a television series, and multiple stage and radio incarnations (including an opera and a ballet), with its television adaptation proving the most visible presence of Atwood in the year 2017. It has also rather infamously seen multiple campaigns aimed at (predominantly American) school boards seeking its banning from libraries and school curricula, with the American Library Association listing it amongst the hundred "most frequently challenged" books of both the 1990s (ALA, 2012a) and 2000s (ALA, 2012b).

The novel is popularly classed as a science fiction novel (though Atwood disputes this claim),[125] and is set in a vaguely defined near future. This does not discount it from commenting on issues of Victorian inheritance however. Shannon Hengen, for instance, links the novel to Atwood's abandoned PhD thesis[126] saying that "Atwood's text, grounded in a theory she proposed as a graduate student, at once recalls the historical situation of the late-19th-century and Modernist England and alters it with reference to contemporary issues" (Hengen, 154). It concerns the takeover of the United States by a radical religious faction, and follows a woman

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[124] This quote is from an open letter regarding the short-lived ban of the novel by the school board in Judson, Texas, in 2006.

[125] This was an impetus behind Atwood's 2011 non-fiction work, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. Therein she comments:

> What I mean by "science fiction" is those books that are descended from H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, which treats of an invasion by tentacled, blood-sucking Martians shot to Earth in metal canisters—things that could not possibly happen—whereas, for me, "speculative fiction" means plots that descend from Jules Verne's books about submarines and balloon travel and such—things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books. I would place my own books in the second category: no Martians.
>
> *OW*, 6

Regarding *The Handmaid's Tale*, she states that she decided when writing that she "would not put into this book anything that humankind had not already done, somewhere, sometime, or for which it did not already have the tools" (*OW*, 88).

[126] After finishing her Masters degree in 1962, Atwood briefly worked on a PhD thesis entitled 'The English Metaphysical Romance' at Harvard.

known simply as 'Offred' who lives as a 'handmaid', a woman given over to the societal elites with the idea that she bear their children. The novel mixes the present and past, and is highly reliant on the first-person perspective of the narration, as it chronicles her time at the house of the 'commander', starting with her arrival and continuing with her emotional affair with the commander (as opposed to the strictly procreative role ascribed to their physical relationship), dalliances with undercover rebel forces, pregnancy scares, and the seedier underbelly of the puritanical society, up to her being escorted away by the forces of Gilead for her apparent connections to the resistance movement. Or perhaps she is recovered by people pretending to be the military; we are never told, and the narrative ends. In a final meta-fictional twist, the novel closes with notes from a future academic conference on the period in which the novel is set, where questions are raised as to the veracity of this record, as well as speculation as to gaps in the narrative, suggesting the similar questioning of the story as presented seen in *Alias Grace* and *The Robber Bride*. However it also appears to question whether the world has really learned anything from these events.

The extended influence of the Victorian can be seen in the 2017 television adaptation, such as the mode of dress of the handmaids (dressed in long, dresses of dark red, with a formless shawl for warmth, and large white hats which suggest an updating of American Puritan styles; in flashback scenes to the society pre-Gilead, we see the characters dressed in clothes which would not look out of place in 2017, making these outfits seem all the stranger). The 2017 television adaptation's colonial American styled garb differs considerably from the novel's, wherein the outfits are suggested to be much more formless "like a surgeon's gown" (*HT*, 19) with full sleeves and flat yokes that "extend over the breasts" (*HT*, 18) and are referred to as "habits" (*HT*, 34), the ideas of puritanism and repression conveyed appear very much in keeping between the two. The costumes, especially the use of red, might remind a viewer of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) ("On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A" (Hawthorne, 40)),[127] and viewers who

[127] The liner notes to Norton's 'Critical Edition' of *The Scarlet Letter* comments on the dress restrictions of the American Puritans:

> In his *History of Boston*, Caleb Snow mentions the Puritans' regulation of fashion in the observation that the Reverend John Cotton "found it necessary to exert his influence to suppress superfluous and unnecessarily expensive fashions … Gold or

are reminded of this will doubtless also remember the novel's scathing commentary on the attitudes of Puritan-era America and how they appeared to influence contemporary society in 1850. The suffering seen in the novel is inherently linked to religion, just as it is in *The Scarlet Letter*, though Atwood denied that she was referring to any particular religion while addressing complaints about the novel:

> The remark "offensive to Christians" amazes me—why are some Christians so quick to see themselves in this mirror? Nowhere in the book is the regime identified as Christian. It puts into literal practise some passages from the Bible, but these passages are not from the New Testament. In fact, the regime is busily exterminating nuns, Baptists, Quakers, and so forth, on the same way that the Bolsheviks exterminated the Mensheviks.
>
> *OW*, 243

Admittedly, it seems easy to posit the regime as being nominally Christian; Jewish people are not welcome in Gilead (though they avoid summary execution "[b]ecause they were declared Sons of Jacob and therefore special, they were given a choice", "[t]hey could convert, or emigrate to Israel" (*HT*, 210-211), with execution being reserved for those who fail to do either) and few other Abrahamic faiths use the Bible as a major text; for instance, Islam, the Bahá'i Faith and the Druze all have other religious texts that take precedence. Furthermore, one could argue that the persecution of rival sects has been a common occurrence in the history of Christianity, resulting in events such as the Medieval Inquisitions and, in fact, the mass emigration to the Americas by the Puritans. However we should bear in mind the word 'nominally'; even if we presume the Gilead regime to promote itself as Christian (which, as Atwood points out, is technically never actually stated in the book, though a scene wherein Moira talks of her escape bid includes a section where she finds herself being hidden by Quakers, mentioning that "[i]t was before the sectarian roundups began in earnest" and "[a]s long as you were some sort of Christian and you were married, for the first time that is, they were still leaving you pretty much alone" (*HT*, 259) heavily implies such), *that* is not the same thing as abiding by the religion's teachings. Indeed,

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> silver laces, girdles, or hat-bands, embroidered caps, immoderate great veils and immoderate great sleeves incurred special disapprobation".
>
> Person, 40

Hester Prynne's ornate letter 'A' embroidered upon her tabard, supposed to mark her out and serve as punishment for her sexual impropriety, doubly serves as method of rebellion against these societal rules.

the idea of cloaking oneself behind a veneer of ostensibly traditional values is one that looms large over *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as the general hypothesis of the Neo-Victorian field.

Despite its American setting, the reader is explicitly told that the house in which Offred finds herself is "Late Victorian, […] built for a large rich family" (*HT*, 18), inherently linking the world the characters inhabit to an idea of the nineteenth century. More specifically, to an idea of the period that is largely false; as comparatively repressive as Victorian society may have been, it was also a time of scientific, artistic and political advancement and a far cry from previous 'traditionalist' values, seeing the Second and Third Reform Acts[128] and the Jews Relief Act,[129] as well as birth of the women's movement. The world of Gilead represents a view of tradition that is thus not an accurate portrayal of said 'tradition' but a corruption that serves merely to reinforce the powers of those who put such ideas forth. Atwood's novel features implications that are largely missing from the adaptation. A particular thread that is missing is the idea of 'racial purity', with the historical notes in Atwood's novel making explicit mention that one of the 'problems' at the centre of Gilead's inception as being "plummeting *Caucasian* birth rates" (*HT*, 316, emphasis added). The novel may not be typically Neo-Victorian, but it transplants nineteenth-century anxieties regarding race and gender into a modern setting. The fears of other races and religions overtaking white Christians and of women having financial and sexual autonomy are enacted upon, appealing to the supposedly traditional values that were being consciously associated with Conservative values in the 1980s. As mentioned earlier, in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative party was trying to associate their politics with Victorian values; a fact that Louisa Hadley links to the foundation of the Neo-Victorian movement in literature.[130] The word 'conservatism' inherently suggests an appeal to tradition, of preserving things as they were. However, the policies

[128] Passed in 1867, the Second Reform Act enfranchised all householders. The later 1884 act extended this to leaseholders. These reforms only applied to men however; women did not receive suffrage (albeit in limited capacity) until 1918.

[129] Passed in 1858, the Jews Relief Act allowed Jewish people to sit in Parliament.

[130] "[N]eo-Victorian fictions since the late 1980s need to be understood within the context of Margaret Thatcher's political appropriation of the Victorians. […] Many of the novels [discussed by Hadley] explicitly address Thatcher's appropriation of the Victorians, revealing the gulf between Thatcher's ideal and the realities of Victorian life. All the novels, however, engage with the wider issues of history and national heritage that underpin Thatcher's championing of the Victorians." (Hadley, 3)

implemented by Thatcher's party were generally the same in concept as those implanted by its contemporary 'conservative' governments, such as that of the United States,[131] which while they didn't explicitly label themselves as inspired by the 'Victorian', did similarly base their images in the same idea of supposed 'tradition'. Hengen in her comments goes further, stating that "American imperialism and nationalism account for the oppressive order which becomes the Republic of Gilead" (Hengen, 155) referencing a section of Atwood's thesis draft which discusses Victorian Britain's "increasing, if muddle-headed, expansion of its overseas empire, […] the social theories either outraged or generated by this expansion, and […] the problem of power and its uses thus raised" (Hengen, 155, quoting Atwood, 'English Metaphysical Romance'). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood takes these ideas of conservative values as traditional and therefore 'better' to their logical extreme, portraying a world where advances in civil rights are effectively reset to zero.

Like in much Neo-Victorian fiction however, dating back to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the façade presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* hides something quite different, as Gilead society's elite are more than willing to forsake the ideals they promote and hold others to for their own benefit. Fowles' novel discusses the apparent hypocrisy of Victorian society, perhaps typified by the narrator's claim of it being a period "[w]here it was universally maintained that women do not have orgasms; and yet every prostitute was taught to simulate them" (Fowles, 259). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Commander, a government minister and the head of the household in which Offred finds herself, has a line in contraband, and he takes Offred to an apparently government-subsidized brothel, of the kind supposedly "strictly forbidden" (*HT*, 248). William Stephenson, in discussing *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, highlights the inherent conflict between the impression of Victorian society and the reality, saying that "Charles cannot visit a prostitute and remain within the safe environment of the part-ironic, part-conventional Victorian ideology he wants to inhabit. To him, England and Englishness are symbols of this ideology: thus to pay an English woman to sleep with him is to expose the infrastructure and hypocritical evasions that allow that ideology to sustain itself" (Stephenson, 69). Prostitutes in other countries, suffice to say, do not threaten this façade. In a similar vein, the brothel in *The Handmaid's Tale* while not foreign is kept quite separate from Gilead

[131] Canada incidentally elected a Progressive Conservative majority to Parliament in the September of 1984.

society, past several checkpoints, neatly away from the moral standards that the state prides itself on.

The Handmaid's Tale is thus very concerned with the appeal of, and the dangers of appealing to, 'tradition'. While the question of the allure of fantasy and longing for an old world that never truly was appear in other Atwood works, such as *Lady Oracle*, *The Handmaid's Tale* would have been distinct among Atwood's work at time of its publication for its use of these ideas in the novel's reality. The visions of men who menace women are mostly daydreams in the former, but in the latter they very much exist in the heroine's life. This is compounded by Atwood's conscious decision that she "would not put into [*The Handmaid's Tale*] anything that humankind had not already done, somewhere, sometime, or for which it did not already have the tools" (*OW*, 88), and the framing of the entire story as a questionable history and attempted reconstruction serves to muddy the ground further (in the novel's envoi, Pieixoto claims the story to be a transcript of the contents of a series of tapes, unnumbered and arranged in no particular order; "[t]hus it was up to Professor Wade and myself to arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go; but […] all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research" (*HT*, 314)). The distant future of the novel suggests that the events are, at least up to a point, 'real', but the question is raised as to how far are people willing to go to comprehend its apparent message. Professor Pieixoto does after all offer a vague apologia for the Republic of Gilead:

> It appears that certain periods of history quickly become, both for other societies and those that follow them, the stuff of not particularly edifying legend and the occasion for a good deal of hypocritical self-congratulation. If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (*Applause*.)
>
> *HT*, 314-315

The past is naturally more complex than people might give it credit for, and appealing to an idea of tradition inevitably ignores specifics about how such things came to be in the first place. While in the 1980s, the Victorian period was often painted as an

ideal, the bastion of traditional morals and values, this does not necessarily reflect the reality, but neither necessarily do portrayals of the period as one of intense suffering.

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