

THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE INFLUENCE OF GRIMM'S TALES ON ANGELA CARTER'S *THE BLOODY CHAMBER* COLLECTION AND MURIEL SPARK'S SELECTED FICTION

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Abstract

Dame Muriel Spark (1918–2006) and Angela Carter (1940–1992), two influential women writers, ranked eighth and tenth respectively in The Times list of “The 50 greatest British writers since 1945.” However, they share much more than recognition of their works. Both authors’ oeuvres are characterised by a skilfully play with literary conventions, breaking the rules of verisimilitude and a predilection for the use of magic realism. In the following paper Spark and Carter’s use of supernatural elements as well as echoes of Grimm’s tales visible in their works are scrutinised not only to present authors’ dexterous use of the chosen features, but also to highlight the creative potential that lies behind the incorporation of the preternatural motif and plasticity of fairy tales, which are a source of endless inspiration.

Even a brief study of the history of fairy tales shows clearly that they were not primarily aimed at the youngest audience (Zipes 66-74). Grimm’s collection, *Children’s and Household Tales*, first published in 1812, underwent numerous editions which expunged many sexual references (Zipes 66-74). It is still, though, relatively cruel and it includes echoes of the original versions of stories filled with violence and terror. Further reworkings and changes, especially for the television and movie industry commercial purposes, added to the shift in attitude towards the well-known tales. They started being perceived as typically meant for children and, consequently, they were often simplified. Nevertheless, numerous authors, among them Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) and Edith Nesbit (1858–1924), realized the potential of folk tales and started experimenting with the literary fairy stories, changing their perspectives, but still highlighting problems regarding identity, maturity and belonging. Altering pivotal aspects of the stories, breaking the rules of verisimilitude, ironic and obscured portrayals of characters, experimenting with different styles and conventions are among some exemplifications of changes that have been applied to the stories. One of numerous examples of such changes is Kenneth Grahame’s (1859–1932) children story “The Reluctant Dragon” (1898) in which the dragon is a peaceful, lazy, poetry-loving beast that strives to be a part of the society.

The common feature for both the original versions of the stories, as well as their reworkings, regardless whether they are aimed at younger or adult recipients, is the incorporation of the supernatural component – visible in virtually every aspect of the fictional world. It is worth noting that the preternatural motif has always been present not only in fairy tales, but also in literature as such. It used to be neglected or even treated as harmful, which may be exemplified by the publisher Rudolph Ackermann’s attempt to contest the spreading interest in supernatural fiction by publishing, in 1823, a series of didactic short stories under the title *Ghost Stories: Collected with Particular View to Counteract the Vulgar Belief in Ghosts and Apparitions, and to Promote a Rational Estimate of the Nature of Phenomena*

Commonly Considered as Supernatural. However, such undertakings proved futile since the supernatural has always managed to find its place in literature, shifting from peripheries to the centre and, consequently, permanently inhabiting the canon. Various scholars wanted to trace the source of the popularity of preternatural elements among readers. For Dorothy Scarborough it lies in human enjoyment of and interest in the concepts of power and infinity (1). H. P. Lovecraft locates the roots of the supernatural in man's primal emotion – the fear of the unknown (12). All such elements are included in works incorporating the supernatural, especially in Gothic narratives, which extensively exercised various instances of employment of preternatural motifs. Hence, while incorporating a number of supernatural elements, both Spark and Carter, correspondingly include conventions typically found in literary Gothic.

Angela Carter's collection, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), uses fairy tales as a reference point, altering them to such an extent that they can no longer be read to children. Her work is heavily influenced by Bettelheim's discussion regarding the psychological aspects of fairy tales (which she contested), her translations of Perrault fairy tales and extensive research conducted by the author while writing *The Sadeian Woman: And the Ideology of Pornography* (1978). The collection challenges the patriarchal world as presented in the fairy tales, focusing on women and frequently putting them in the driver's seat. Carter does not try to present females as perfect, strong women and men as useless, flawed beings. Women are beautiful and smart, but at the same time they are cunning, cruel and calculating. They use their sexuality for personal gain and they are perfectly aware of their powers. Carter's collection makes us question the stories we know, it makes us reread them and look for signs and hints that made the author transform them in such a significant way. The reader also traces the use of symbolism so eagerly included by Carter, but often obscured. Little Red-Riding Hood's seemingly innocent outfit, transforms into an emblem of her (sexual) maturity, so vibrant that almost aggressive in the case of Carter's tale. The stories are bloody, cruel, filled with the supernatural which often highlights the nature of men and their primal instincts. Special emphasis is placed on liminal beings – vampires and werewolves. They, being on the verge of two worlds and not belonging entirely to either, are embodiments of a thin line existing in every man separating our humanity from our savage nature. The reader experiences the human side of monstrous creatures – they, misunderstood, strive for love, companionship or compassion; they want someone to share their lives with. As there is a beastly side of humans, it is always balanced by a human side of a beast, and the reader does not know which one is more disturbing.

Carter's use of the fairy tale and Gothic conventions is visible not only in the usage of half-beings, interest in the motifs of transformation and being eaten up by an animal, but also in the choice of surroundings and the overall atmosphere. Characters often roam the woods, castles, mansions, there is ubiquitous darkness and feeling of uneasiness. Carter's stories often use fairy tales as a starting point, changing them and their narratives. However, in accordance with the original versions, they lack specific time, location and names. Carter combines different stories, different versions and different characters into one, for example in "The Company of Wolves" she merges Grimm's and Perrault's versions as well as the characters of the hunter and the wolf– they become one, a werewolf; similarly in "The Werewolf" the grandmother and the wolf are merged into a werewolf. On the one hand, Carter mocks the superstitious nature of men, an example being when a character attempts to kill a werewolf solely with the help of her Bible. On the other hand, however, she discusses various superstitions, animalistic elements in human characters and human elements in animals, rooting them in actual beliefs. In Carter's stories there is always a great difficulty in naming the antagonist, the fictional realities are not black and white, nothing is clear-cut and nothing is what it seems to be.

Carter uses female protagonists giving the reader a unique insight into the minds of her creations. She deals with themes of female desires, sexuality, objectification, gender roles and different places women occupy within a society and possibilities they have as well as abilities they have or can have to change and shape their fate. By giving her heroines a distinctive voice, she empowers them and, at the same time, she breaks the traditional fairy tale convention of impartial third person narration. The stories often have a happy ending, though entirely different to the ones from the well-known tales and to the one the reader may have in mind while reading the story. The characters' fate is not predestined, they take it in their own hands, they transform it, they are trying to find their own definitions of happiness, their own place and fulfillment of their desires. Thus, they depart more and more from their fairy tale equivalents. As Madelena Gonzalez summarizes it:

even on the level of form and structure, it is rapidly clear that Carter is not only refusing to follow fairy-tale conventions, but she is also subverting them. The borders between different tales become blurred, and endings are left open instead of providing comforting finality, or provide an ironic comment on the concept of the happy ending, thus upsetting reader expectations. (508)

An original, frequently unexpected ending is also given by Spark to her protagonists. Spark's use of the fairy tale conventions is much less obvious, though still present. While reading her fiction, the most striking feature is the original employment of the supernatural. The preternatural is used in a way resembling magical realism, which may further compare Spark's narratives to Carter's. As Carter reverts the stories, giving them a happy ending on their own, Spark often devoid her characters a happy fairy-tale like resolution. Annabel, the protagonist of *The Public Image* (1968) finally finds happiness, but along the way her husband kills himself trying to destroy her and she has to completely alter her life, rejecting all that used to give her comfort. At the same time, she finds strength and stops being a dependant, superficial woman. Daphne, a heroine of the short story "The Go-Away Bird" (1958), in her pursuit to find happiness changes her place of stay three times (a truly fairy tale number). Unlike Annabel, in the end she fails to find a place for herself which she strived for, she finds death instead. Lisa from *The Driver's Seat* (1970), has a very peculiar desire – she wishes to be killed and has a meticulous plan regarding her final moments. Nevertheless, her last breath is far from what she planned for and hoped it to be. Here again a woman's dream is crushed by a male character.

The supernatural penetrates the lives of Spark's fictional characters, often leading them to their doom. The Gothic convention is frequently used, sometimes also ridiculed, as in *Not to Disturb* (1971). Here, a typically Gothic setting mixed with irony and grotesque, makes us frequently laugh, but as it turns out the reader laughs at the decaying state of society for which there is no hope left. Among numerous intertextual remarks, one may find references to T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922). In "Not to Disturb," however, humanity is lost and all is left is despair. Spark also includes numerous colonial elements and embeds experience she gained while living in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. These are captured most vividly in the African cycle of short stories. Three of them, "The Go-Away Bird" (1958), "Bang-bang You're Dead" (1981) and "The Curtain Blown by the Breeze" (1961) discuss the position and role of women in Empire. However, they fail to empower the protagonists in a similar way as Carter's empowers her heroines. Spark describes the world as she saw and experienced it and thus women in her fiction do not share the same freedom as Carter's creations. Very often, even when they seem to be free and independent, some external force orchestrates their lives, such as Elsa from *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973) which turns out to be long dead.

In *The Hothouse by the East River*, a very peculiar novel, among other elements found in fairy tales and Gothic narratives, Spark also uses the motif of transformation. It is mostly visible in the character of psychiatrist who changes into a butler. Patrick Seton from *The Bachelors* (1960) possesses the ability to communicate with the dead. As Carter makes use of the liminal beings, Spark is frequently interested in the motifs of duality and split personality, which echoes works belonging to the Gothic genre. In *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965) there is not only a split in the protagonist's identity, but also Jerusalem is a split city, not to mention the Mandelbaum Gate which used to separate Jordan and Israel. Jean Brodie, the protagonist of one of the most famous Spark's novels *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), is characterized by a divided self; similarly to Annabel, the Tiger-Lady, the protagonist of *The Public Image* (1968). Adam Sumera observes that "In *Memento Mori*, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and *The Bachelors*, Muriel Spark used a supernatural element to destroy the everyday placidity and make the characters face a new challenge in which they would show their true selves" (54-55). The protagonists, however, are not always so deeply rooted in reality; Miss Brodie's greatest talent seems to be the transformation of reality and giving ordinary stories a fairy-tale like twist. Also Emma Parker believes that in *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) Spark hovers between realism and a fairy tale. In two of Spark's short stories, namely "The Portobello Road" (1956) and "The Girl I Left Behind Me" (1957), the female protagonists are ghosts killed by male characters. Spark, however, empowers them with a voice to narrate their stories.

Spark's protagonists are usually women and, although, most of her male characters are weak, even if they are murderers, her intention was not to undermine the position of men, but rather to explore the possibilities of a woman character and, at times, detach females from restricted social norms and literary constraints. In her works, Spark deals with a wide spectrum of themes connected with psyche. In her witty, ironic, excruciatingly insightful way she also discusses various aspects of human interactions. As Carter, in her collection, treats love as complicating force which often brings more harm than good or is entirely misplaced; also in Spark's fiction love is rarely viewed as a liberating feeling which empowers the fictional characters. The sense of freedom and fulfillment is often lost, together with the true self, and the outcomes of love are frequently destructive. Quite unlike in fairy tales. This idealised love is one of the fundamental elements which characterise fairy tales and in which adults tend not to believe, thus there is no place for it in the narratives and even when characters are in love, the feeling is not to be gained easily.

Lisa M. Fiander discusses Spark's novel, *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988), in which the author

addresses the question of whom fairy tales are meant for. In the novel, Mrs. Hawkins, a secretary at a publishing house, is surprised to learn that her much younger lover, William, does not know any nursery rhymes or fairy tales. Born to the 'sub-poor' in London, William escaped that world through scholarships and bursaries. But although he is now 'a cultivated man' who can quote Schopenhauer, read Sophocles in Greek and analyse the music of Bartok, William's lack of familiarity with the stories that Mrs. Hawkins associates with childhood makes his origins clear. Mrs. Hawkins considers, "I had never before realized how the very poor people of the cities had inevitably been deprived of their own simple folklore of childhood." (31)

Mrs Hawkins, during romantic encounters, tells her lover fairy tales to make up for his lost childhood. It becomes a vital part of their love affair. Thus, it is shown that fairy tales are not only important for one's development, but also may bring comfort and guidance in the adult life.

Although seemingly different, Grimm's tales, Carter's collection and Spark's works, they share certain characteristics. They all use the supernatural which is often employed to act as a catalyst for presenting human character and it often plays an important part in the moral of the story. Spark, similarly to Carter, changes elements included in fairy tales to fit her own artistic needs. The works are no longer fairy tales, but being rooted in them, they underline the characters' development, choices and free will. By knowing the convention, the fictional character can rebel against it and shape their own fate. The world is not so clearly divided, but it allows greater diversity and, although often it is difficult and complicated, it is more real.

Grimm's tales are still an important source of inspiration for contemporary writers. By including them in the narratives, authors reintroduce them to the adult audience shaping the stories accordingly, but they also remind the readers of their universal aspects. The supernatural included in the stories, on the one hand, makes the reader believe that only a divine intervention can really solve our problems, but, on the other, it enables us to exercise our imagination and enforces positive values – the importance of friendship, self-worth and the empowerment of the weak. By changing the well-known tales the authors show that each character is responsible for their fate and that one cannot rely on established modules, but should strive to create their own.

Both Carter and Spark are recognised authors with distinctive oeuvres, who, embedded into their works the supernatural, usually in the manner typical for magical realism. Spark drew heavily on numerous genres, such as border ballads, the Gothic convention and the graveyard poetry, interweaving her fictional stories with autobiographical elements. Carter's original way of using elements found in classical fairy tales and changing them into gruesome stories – frequently fighting with patriarchal world of tales, led to creation of a unique, original work, which leaves the reader with a valuable, though often sarcastic moral. Both authors, by using features of Grimm's stories, not only exercise their literary abilities and creativity, but also show that the stories are still valid, they are still a valuable source of self-knowledge and regardless of our age we can still learn something, both from original versions as well as their reworkings.

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