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Reconstructing the buried truth of Andrew Borden's little girl in Angela Carter's "The Fall River Axe Murders" (1985)

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Abstract

The Fall River Axe Murders is Angela Carter' re-construction of Andrew Borden's little girl Lizzie involved in the murder mystery. This mysterious tale of double murders is not a "nursery story," but a study in suppression related under the darkness of the pending foreknowledge both reader and author share which attempts to restore historical specificity to the familiar narrative. In this manner, Carter rescues and liberates Lizzie's act from the realm of salaciously horrific and recreates it more sensitively, as the release of oppression too great to be contained. In the process she revisits Lizzie's past to represent her version with intent to represent Lizzie more than an axe and the murder version.

Lizzie Borden with an axe
Gave her father forty whacks
When she saw what she had done
She gave her mother forty one.
(Children's rhyme "The Fall River Axe Murders" 101)

It is with this nursery-rhyme like epigraph that Carter opens her short story "The Fall River Axe Murders" (hereafter referred to as "The Fall") thus drawing attention to Borden's "quasi-folkloric status" (Gamble 159). Perhaps, via this "popular skipping-rope rhyme" Carter puts forth her unique version of a sensational murder case which was a "*cause célèbre*" throughout the United States, for in it instead of focusing on the guilt-innocence debate that center's on Lizzie Borden, she presents alternate versions of this bitter reality and

makes space for readers to dwell on the circumstances that led to this double murder so as to recreate their own versions of it ("Lizzie" Wikipedia).

"The Fall" is Carter's delicate rendition of a "skillfully-constructed narrative" whose story everyone knows. "The Fall" is Carter's twentieth century interpretation of a nineteenth century murder convict's past; a story in which her task as a self conscious writer is concerned with revealing the unfamiliar portion of it that is, "what the commonly accepted version of history keeps hidden" (Gamble 159).

However, what Carter has re-constructed in Lizzie's tale is not a "nursery story," but a study in suppression related under the gloom of the imminent "foreknowledge both reader and author share which attempts to restore historical specificity to the familiar narrative." In this manner, Carter rescues and liberates Lizzie's act from the realm of "salaciously horrific" and recreates it more sensitively, "as the release of a repression too great to be contained" (Gamble 159).

Perhaps, via the tool of re-writing, Carter's goal is to fill her reader's imagination with the unsaid in the history of the time. By revising Lizzie's story, she intends to represent Lizzie more than an axe and the murder version, and thereby reframes the murder mystery, irrespective of its historical accuracy into a cautionary tale to hint at the ominous presence of Bluebeard like patriarchs spread everywhere in the real world since "repression [of self] leads to madness, and madness leads to murder." For the cause of the Borden murder is debatable but the Victorian society in which Lizzie lives in the title of the story attracts sufficient interest to the Fall River's involvement in the patricide and matricide (Waite 37).

Coincidentally, in Carter's tale the residents of Fall River are in for burning summer heat; the high temperature also adds to the anxiety and lethargy of the residents who do nothing to comfort their present hapless state. The author writes: "Early in the morning of the fourth of August, 1892 in Fall River, Massachusetts. Hot, hot, hot . . . very early in the morning, before the factory whistle, but, even at this hour, everything shimmers and quivers under the attack of white, furious sun already high in the still air" ("The Fall" 103). The fact that historically, fourth of August was a scorching day in this area of the New England town accounts for an impressive "realistic" portrayal of Carter's "metafictive" short story that might prompt some reader's to accuse her of "paraphrasing somewhat too closely the casebook studies that document the famous event. Historical accuracy per se appears uppermost" (Langlois 194; McClenagan 46). However, the sizzling heat outside coupled with the fuming emotions of the people in the town who are victims of these oppressive conditions anchors the story in social realism along with the mundane reality "of workers' bodies sweltering in the heat of New England mills, of mill owners' bodies (and those of their wives, daughters and servants) sweltering in Victorian cultural codes . . . at the nexus of social,

political and historical forces but in league with the devil" (Langlois 194). This intolerable hot environment that forces the residents to hibernate behind the blinds and closed metal bars of their respective homes intensifies the boredom and agony of Lizzie, the heroine, in the Borden house even more.

To such suffocating and dehumanized conditions, Carter brings back Bluebeard and his Gothic castle from her short story "The Bloody Chamber" right from the annals of history and the real world through her short story "The Fall." The Borden castle is controlled by Lizzie's oppressive father Mr. Borden, who is depressed "gaunt," "self-made man" whose vocation is "capital accumulation and his hobby is "grinding the faces of the poor." He is a man for whom "[f]oreclosures and evictions are meat and drink . . . He loves nothing [but] usury" ("The Fall" 110-11). In the story, he is described as a melancholic "self-sufficient Sadeian spirit" whose "iron-willed repression extends [not only] to himself [but] to others" as well and "to every area of his domestic and professional life" (Gamble 160). Along with exercising his control on the material objects around, Carter asserts that this disinterested, old miser who "save[s] kerosene" and sits in "lampless dark" and even waters the pear trees with his urine, is a true patriarch as he proclaims to even own "all the women [around] by either marriage, birth or contract" ("The Fall" 111,104). Waite states that in matter of asserting the ownership, Borden resembles the "Marquis in 'Chamber' except [he] does not lavish his prisoners with dizzying luxury" (39). In view of the Fathers' rule, Mr. Borden owns Lizzie, her sister Emma, her stepmother by birth and marriage and therefore has natural right to access their personal, psychological and financial space respectively. So, as long as Mr. Borden is alive, Lizzie (in her thirties) and her sister Emma (in her forties) "remain in a fictive, protracted childhood" and shall never have access to "anything to look forward to, nothing" ("The Fall" 108,118).

The Borden mansion in which the five member family of the Bordens live (Andrew Jackson Borden, Lizzie's father; Abby Durfee Borden, her stepmother; Emma Borden, her sister; John Vinnicum Morse, her deceased mother's brother on a visit; and Bridget Sullivan, their Irish housekeeper and cook) is a "narrow . . . coffin" like structure that resembles a Gothic castle with "cramped, comfortless, small and mean" confining interiors ("The Fall" 104-05; Langlois 195). It is a peculiar house: "A house full of locked doors that open only into other rooms with other locked doors, for, upstairs and downstairs, all the rooms lead in and out of one another like a maze in a bad dream. It is a house without passages . . . It is a house of privacies sealed as close as if they had been sealed with wax on a legal document" ("The Fall" 107). Indeed, Mr. Borden's Bluebeard's castle of which he is the "architect" with its labyrinthine structure is Carter's Gothic puzzle for her reader's to decipher all that she "is *not* disclosing" (Zappel 11-12; Waite 39). Like Atwood in *Bodily Harm,* Carter too in this

short story leaves clues for her reader to re-create the life-story of Lizzie Borden, and with this strategy thoughtful of its "historiographic metafictional genre, Carter acknowledges that she cannot know the *entire* story and, thus, recognizes herself as a creative author, not an objective biographer" adds Zappel (12).

But the old Borden, the conservative society and the old house are not the only reasons that instigate Lizzie, for behind these reasons lies a "whole culture" which condemns her as a middle-class "New England spinster at the end of the nineteenth century, to a pitifully circumscribed form of existence" (Gamble 160). Lizzie, at thirty is still referred to as a girl, who lives under her father's tutelage and in this light "she is [an] innocent Gothic maiden, with a sick twist" (Waite 39). Not only Lizzie is imprisoned in her father's cage, but her "oppressive garments" of the Victorian past portrays her in Carter's formulation as a "prisoner of Victorian values, of Victorian material culture and of a particular Victorian patriarch, her father" ("The Fall" 104; Schofield 95). Like the old Gothic heroine, Lizzie is like a prisoner, fighting her own battle all by herself.

Unable to grow economically, emotionally, socially and sexually, Lizzie has no freedom at all. She cannot even choose the clothes with which she may clothe her body. Bereft of choices, she constantly suffers under her layered oppressive feminine garments of frocks, petticoats, drawers, stocking, and a chemise of course, a corset since the Fall River society in which she lives believes it is too good to be clothed in pain (Zappel 11). In these garments of the past, she performs almost daily her unending domestic chores with the donning of "a whalebone corset that took her viscera in a stern hand and squeezed them very tightly," and the very day she decides to act out her hidden forbidden desire, her body is oozing out menstrual blood. The uncontrollable outflow of unwanted blood that her body is expelling is hard time for Lizzie, and Carter highlights this natural process as an important evidence which was deliberately not discussed during the trial of Lizzie Borden but unlike "the jury in the trial, [the author's] repetition demands the reader's engagement with the [female] body and all of its messiness" ("The Fall" 103; Zappell 10).

The fact that Lizzie lives in the Borden's Bluebeard Castle with Andrew and Abby Borden (stepmother) in the "privacy of her [mean house] bedroom," in which for her own delight she puts "on a rich girl's pretty nightdress . . . because she is a rich girl too" is an evidence that she harbors a desire within her private self to live a sufficient life, and the "dislike" she had for her father with regard to the financial friction and an unwanted stepmother were open secrets for the society around ("The Fall" 113). A day after Lizzie's death, on June 2, 1927, the newspapers, McClenagan writes, claimed: "[Lizzie's] life had not been so serene under the surface as it had seemed in the public view--for her wealthy father had kept his home in the old business section of the city, in a house without conveniences,

not even a bathtub." Ironically, Kent says "Lizzie 'had ambitions for more attractive living conditions'" and hence, was extremely unhappy in her present situation (qtd. in McClenagan 47).

Another predominant reason that drives the devil out of Lizzie is her stepmother, the essential monstrous mother in this contemporary female Gothic script, Mrs. Borden whom nobody loves and her presence oppresses her younger step daughter like a "spell" ("The Fall" 118). All these details of Lizzie's life just before the murder that Carter piles up for the reader's are as suppressive and as fuming as the autumnal day and the house that houses these characters is a "mute testimony to the family's dysfunction." In this context, Langlois observes: "The story is plotless because it stops *before* it can build to narrative." Factually, it is a "Mise-en-Scene for a Parricide," the title under which the story was first published in 1981 (195). In lieu of these details, it appears that Lizzie's (supposed) murderous act is "no act of meaningless insanity, but a striking out at a system which cancels out her own will and desires and forces [her] to conform to the pattern of another's" (Gamble 161).

Also when Carter's version of Lizzie's story is near conclusion, an incident takes place, an acid test that becomes an "immediate cause for Lizzie's flailing out against her parents" (Langlois 201). Lizzie, Carter writes is particularly attached to her winged companions, her pigeons. Sadly, the bad Gothic stepmother, serves Lizzie's pigeons on the table, thus pushing her (Gothic) daughter further into delirium for these innocent creatures were her only comfort amongst the cruel strangers around. The shadow-male of Carter's story, the Gothic villain, Mr. Borden just to whet the appetite of his wife, killed Lizzie's pigeons; this incident is a fit testimony for his younger daughter to remain and behave within the limits of locked doors of his castle that apprise her of her Victorian responsibilities. Mr. Borden and Mrs. Borden, the burning sun, claustrophobic interiors of the castle/prison like home, the dependence, the spinsterhood and plain denial of a human being's emotions are some of the reasons that at once provoke, summon and ignite violence in Lizzie, but her future is left to the reader to decide for themselves (Schofield 95).

Another reason for Lizzie to release her pent up emotions is the fact that her sister Emma Lenora, unluckily, was away on the morning of the ill-fated day. Though according to Carter, Emma, the elder daughter of Mr. Borden is "more mysterious" than Lizzie, she is like "a blank space," a white canvas that has "no life" and no colours of her own ("The Fall" 108). Like a typical Gothic script, the heroine's mother in Carter's story is dead and in her absence it is Emma who becomes Lizzie's surrogate mother because it is she who "lavish[es] the pent-up treasures of a New England spinster's heart upon the little thing?" Perhaps, Lizzie the "motherless child, orphaned at two years old, poor thing" craves for her mother whose memory "remains an abiding source of grief" for her ("The Fall" 114). Possibly, the yearning

for her dead mother's "unknown love" and the brief absence of her proxy mother Emma, goad Lizzie to use the same hatchet, "the instrument of destruction" (with which the father had killed her birds) to act and strike at Mr. and Mrs. Borden together ("The Fall" 114,121).

On the morning of the double murder, Carter informs her readers, because of a "heavy linen napkin" which Lizzie had strapped between her legs on account of menses, did not let her sleep "and this last, stifling night [she] has been [in trouble] . . . by vague nausea and the gripes of her female pain; her room is harsh with the metallic smell of menstrual blood." Hence, Lizzie admits that her sleeping time in this uncanny Borden castle was her only me-time and in this private hour she enjoyed the much desired freedom from constrictions ("The Fall" 103, 114).

Besides the sweltering heat and Lizzie's repression, there is another incident which furthers the plot. It is the burglary incident in which an intruder penetrates into the Borden House, particularly in the absence of the master and the mistress. This incident utterly "disconcerted" Mr. Borden. It "violated" him; he felt he was "a man raped." Aptly, Langlois observes that the omniscient narrator in discussing the locked in and locked out theory pertaining to the intrusion of an outsider into the Borden's castle makes the burglary "a prelude" to "the double murders." Since the burglar aimed primarily at Mrs. Borden jewels, and defecated on the masters' bed, this seemed a reason enough for the old Borden to dissuade the police from probing in, thus locking inside the secret that Lizzie might be the suspect because she was a kleptomaniac and might have had a hysteric spell just like her natural mother during her period of menstruation (Langlois 198). After the unexpected break-in, Carter writes: "Lizzie stared with vague surprise at the parlor window; she heard the soft bang of the open screen door, swinging idly, although there was no breeze. What was she doing, standing clad only in her corset in the middle of the sitting-room? How had she got there? Had she crept down when she heard the screen door rattle? She did not know? She could not remember" ("The Fall" 108-09). Indeed, it is Emma, the big sister who comforts her baby sister in her trance. But Lizzie's failure to recall such incidents at once links her to her natural (absent) mother, "the first Mrs. Borden," who too suffered "fits of sudden, wild, inexplicable rage" ("The Fall" 114). Such "an ancestral connection" links the good but dead mother and natural daughter in their spontaneous hallucinations and further casts doubt on Lizzie's "proclaimed innocence"— thereby, offering another personal cause for the double murders in the Borden home (McClenagan 61).

Besides the physical, emotional, financial and supernatural causes that have a fair share of contribution in Lizzie's violent act, Carter in particular dismisses what does not fit in her-story's framework of apt causation. On the day of the murder another man was present in the Borden's house, but Carter plainly wipes him out of her script quite early in the story:

> The other old man is some kind of kin of Borden's. He doesn't belong here; he is visiting, passing through, he is a chance bystander, he is irrelevant.
> Write him out of the script.
> ……
> ….
> Write John Vinnicum Morse out of the script. ("The Fall" 105)

In simple words, John Vinnicum Morse is in no way relevant to Carter's script of the domestic annihilation of Lizzie's tale. Just like a traditional historian who easily might do away with an element or two that may not fit into his/her scheme of things, Carter expels unwanted information from her plot "to demonstrate what historians--and others such as herself--may be more inadvertently misrepresenting or misunderstanding about the past." McClenagan continues his explanation: "Fictionalist or historian: each makes choices shaping his or her narrative" (62). Finally, towards the end, Lizzie's story returns once again to where it had begun, as Carter states: "Their day, the Bordens' fatal day, trembles on the brink of beginning" ("The Fall" 121). For the tension in the story is never resolved; in other words, Carter's story never ends and the Borden family is never murdered and Lizzie never faces a trial. Instead, the author's version of Lizzie's tale is all about the "causes" and "precursors" to the event. Time is in a state of inertia in this version of Lizzie's history, representing how history and literature can recognize and use "the past from some knowledgeable date subsequent to the historical event," thereby, colouring the end in either black or white, the end of a historical figure. In the story, the Bridget clock "leaps and shudders on its chair, about to sound its own alarm" that is, Lizzie's alarm which is Carter's alarm of the twentieth century interpretation of Lizzie's tale in which an unhappy end is not the only result of the historical violent act. Since Carter in her version focuses only on the cause, she liberates her heroine by opening the possibility of a happy ending. In the process, she rescues Lizzie by portraying her standing on the brink of a new beginning ("The Fall" 121; McClenagan 63-65).

After the trial, to begin afresh, Lizzie changed her name to Lizabeth; thereafter both the sisters with their father's inheritance bought the Fall River mansion which they re-named as Maplecroft (Schofield 99). This Maplecroft serves as an emblem of Carter's postscript to *The Sadeian Woman*, writes Langlois: "History tells us that every oppressed class gained true liberation from its masters through its own efforts. It is necessary that women learn that lesson .." Indeed, Carter's heroine learnt that lesson the hard-violent way by murdering her father and the stepmother. In this respect, Rushdie suggests that Lizzie Borden has become "one of the dark ladies [with] unappeasable appetites to whom Angela Carter is so partial"

(qtd. in Langlois 207). Therefore, by determining multiple reasons behind Lizzie's violent act, Carter depicts the fact that as and when a culture opens itself to possible "alternative realities," its past, present and future become more receptive to change. What Carter serves for her readers is not the received truth of Lizzie Borden's life. Rather she focuses on the events of the day the murders took place. She represents Lizzie's lived repressive reality, and "enables readers to consider and possibly even absolve, Borden's actions" (McClenagan 63; Zappel 13). Fittingly, Atwood argues that Carter's female characters in order to escape victimization must "divest themselves of the trappings of conventional womanhood [so] they have to *denature* themselves" (qtd. in Zappel 17). This means that women must celebrate their femininenes irrespective of the demands of the outside world. Hence, it is imperative for them to be active and speak out their side of the story in order to avoid being at the receiving end. In this sense, Lizzie by letting the heat out from within acts out her desire which is more frightening than the claim in the past records of her madness. Moreover, Lizzie is Carter's Bertha Rochester who had to do it because she is not "a travelling heroine of the Gothic" like "Jane Eyre on her quest for a home." Just like Bertha's act of annihilation that Bronte never explained similarly, Carter throughout her story neither clarifies nor justifies the "act" of Lizzie Borden. Confined in the chambers of horror of Daddy Borden, where she is rendered mute and passive she "cannot have action and she makes it, as she cannot find it." This is why, she simply acts out her hidden forbidden desire and in doing so the author transforms Lizzie, the convict into a heroine by giving back to her "a psychic drama" coupled with "an inner narrative of necessity and pain" (Duncker 64, 63). Thus, in her revisionist account of Lizzie Borden, Carter reminds the reader that besides the hearsay about such women, they are first and foremost human beings (Zappel 20). It may be said then Lizzie "is a mythic-every woman, the tortured and delirious Gothic soul." By reclaiming Lizzie from a children's nursery rhyme, Carter openly makes her a symbol of "'domestic apocalypse,' the essence of Gothic and of the Bluebeard tale." Throughout the story Waite observes: "Carter does not resolve this dislike of and use of history and myth," leaving the reader incoherently striving to fix their meanings on the story (41).

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