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From Modernist Disillusionment to Postmodern Subversion: Fitzgerald and Carter in Context

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Abstract

This article traces the transition from Modernist to Postmodernist aesthetics through a comparative reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gats*by and Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*, *Heroes and Villains*, and *Wise Children*. Fitzgerald's novel captures the modernist sense of fragmentation, disillusionment, and the collapse of the American Dream, while Carter's fiction turns to parody, intertextuality, and the reimagining of patriarchal narratives as postmodern strategies of resistance. By examining narrative technique, character construction, and the treatment of time and space, the study highlights the ways in which both writers mirror the crises of their cultural moments. The discussion ultimately suggests that Fitzgerald's lament for lost values and Carter's playful subversion of authority together mark two stages in the ongoing effort of twentieth-century literature to respond to disorder, uncertainty, and change.

Keywords: Angela Carter, American Dream, Fragmentation, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Intertextuality, Modernism, Postmodernism

I. Introduction

Although critics believe that Modernity began almost more than two hundred years ago with the Enlightenment, Newton, Descartes and Kant, the term Modernism as regards a literary movement refers to the radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities evident in the art and literature of the post World War One period. The ordered, stable and inherently meaningful world view of the nineteenth century could not accord with "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot, 1975, p. 177). Thus, Modernism was a break with Victorianism, condemning its optimism and picturing a pessimistic sense of world. While the major movements and events of modernity are democracy, capitalism, industrialization, science and urbanization, its rallying flags are freedom and the individual.

However, "there is no unified theory of postmodernity" (Hutchens & Suggs, 1997, p. 17). Some scholars date its birth with the riots in Paris in May 1968, when "students, with the support of prominent scholars, demanded radical changes in a rigid, closed, and elitist European university system" (17). Postmodernism, as the "post" denotes, is a movement that has come after the modern, with a shift in how we see and know the world. "It implies the end of modernity and the beginning of something new" (Castle, 2007, p. 145). As a result, postmodernism does not merely chronologically follow modernism; it reacts against modernism, and might better be called anti-modernism.

The tension between these two movements is vividly illustrated in the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Angela Carter. Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby distills the disillusionment of the Jazz Age into a modernist exploration of loss, broken ideals, and the collapse of the American Dream. Carter, on the other hand, deploys postmodern strategies such as intertextuality, parody, and the subversion of patriarchal narratives to expose the arbitrariness of cultural authority. Examining these authors side by side offers not only a contrast in style and theme but also a window into the shifting literary responses to uncertainty and change across the twentieth century.

II. Tracing the Boundaries of Modernism and Postmodernism

Malcom Bradbury, in his *The Modern British Novel*, claims the significance of the "war" concept in appearance of Modernist fiction:

From the 1890s onward, it is true, fiction had been filling with prophecies of future wars, often linked with belief in (or fear of) the limitless powers of science and speculation about the social or racial future of the planet. There were Wellsian Wars of the Worlds, imaginary battles of or invasions by European powers, wars between machines and men. (2001, p. 151)

However, world war was very far from the reality of the previous wars. When it came, it proved more terrible, more dehumanizing and more violently destructive than any imagined war. The writers recorded all this, and so Modernism emerged.

Michael H. Whitworth in his *Modernism* (2007, p. 11-15), refers to Marjorie Perloff's list of fourteen main features of modernism, a number of which are as follows:

1) Modernist literature depicts modern life, especially urban life, and shows ambivalence towards it. In depicting modern life, modernist literature appears to be addressing the fundamental problem of the justification of art in the modern world: It is attempting to demonstrate that it is equal to the conditions around it, and is not retreating into pastoral.
2) It is difficult: it makes use of a wide and sometimes unexpected range of reference (literary, cultural, and linguistic); it removes many of the devices that would conventionally have helped the reader to make sense of the text; it is verbally ambiguous and paradoxical. A part of this difficulty refers to the frequent use of allusion. Writers allude to the literature of the past to question the relation of the present to the past in regard with values.
3) It contrasts an orderly past with a chaotic present. This contrast emerges not only in direct depictions of the past, but also in allusions to its literature.
4) Modernist literature displays an awareness of the complexity of the mind and the self. It is aware of the 'fluidity of consciousness', of the force of the unconscious, and of a division between the social and the personal self. Stream of consciousness is a prevalent technique of this literature.
5) The contrast between the individual and the 'herd' or 'mass' is commonly a feature of modernist literature Modernist writers reappraised the idea of the self, in relation both to the artist and to the idea of character in fiction and drama. The rational and self-determining subject of humanism seemed inadequate to the conditions of modernity. However, this profound self needs to be understood in relation to a fragmented subjectivity.

Although the Modernist literature pictured a dark world which had experienced two destructive wars, it still believed in values: lost values. There was s lamentation for the faith that was once the ordering principle of the universe. However, by the 1960s the question was over the results of reason, science with their cold technology, pollution and weapons of mass destruction. The optimism of the modernist worldview had been shattered by the World Wars, the Holocaust and Vietnam. Two centuries of reason had blown away any foundation for morals. A revival of Nietzsche's death of God caused the inevitable to occur: The absence of any truth. With all the chaos and psychological wanderings, how could an individual ever state with any certainty what "reality" really is? Postmodernism appeared in such a context.

In literary theory, postmodernism typically embraces "a set of practices, strategies, and techniques that either repudiate Modernist tendencies (i.e., expressive form, mythic structures, stream of consciousness) or develop those tendencies in extreme forms" (Castle, 2007, p. 145). Postmodernist thought is characterized by a principled skepticism about language, truth, causality, history, and subjectivity. This skepticism extends to method as well, which means that "postmodernism rejects the kind of methodological coherence that we find in the New Criticism, Deconstruction, Critical Theory, and Psychoanalysis – fields in which a common terminology and shared strategies of analysis and interpretation link otherwise disparate critical practices" (145).

The postmodern world is unstable and indeterminate. There is no stable basis for truth, law, ethics, language, and perception. It rejects universals and illustrates the unpredictable particulars. In general, Postmodernism seeks to discover entirely new ways of thinking about communication and expression. In regard with fiction, postmodern authors show strong attraction to intertexuality. Hassan, in *Dismemberment of Orpheus* defined Postmodernism as a rejection of the commitment to realism behind Modernist experimentation in favor of a literature of self-reference, a metadiscourse that uses old -fashioned plot lines and character developments in favor of a self-conscious attitude towards writing.

Geogory Castle refers to Lyotard to define postmodernism, when he says that "postmodern movement is caught up in the presentation of the unpresentable" (146). By "unpresentable" he might mean what is ignored, forbidden, or repressed. The escape from mimetic representation of the reality brings about another feature of a postmodern text: Parody. Parody and other modes of citation usually serve the aim of advancing an argument. But, as Castle asserts, the story is different in Postmodern texts in which "citation is a strategy of repetition and appropriation: texts cite each other not with the intent of invoking an authority or showing indebtedness but with the desire to create new expressive connection, new opportunities for enunciation and articulation, new models of cultural production and social action" (146).

III. Angela Carter's Postmodern Strategies: Plot, Space, and Subversion

In a world where meaning has been deconstructed and reconstructed, where centers have lost their hegemony and notions

such as truth or history have been considered as relative by the skeptic eyes of the postmodernists, Carter's fiction engages in rewriting some of the crucial discourses through which patriarchy has imposed its authority.

Plot is the essential component of any narrative. It is "the very organizing line, the thread of design that makes narrative possible because finite and comprehensible" (Brooks, 1992, p. 10). Angela Carter's novels possess different models of plotting, but all serve towards one aim: to question the legitimized patriarchal discourse.

The Magic Toyshop (1967), a very early novel by Carter, has a linear plot without any intricacy. One might claim that this one of those stories to be read and forgotten after that. But in fact, Carter's artfulness lies in this choice of simple plot for her desired effect. By putting forward linear plots that require no further effort of decoding and deciphering, Carter actually pushes the reader toward the story itself, the relationship between characters, and the huge differences between the males and females of the story. To this aim, minimal number of characters is employed, which allows readers to notice for instance that female characters tend to be silent, that the great amount of violence is directed towards women and that women's discourse is very simple and whisper-like.

However, the plots of Carter's later novels are more similar to that of a postmodern work. According to Peter Brooks, the postmodern novel introduces a difference at the level of plot as well, challenging the traditional definition of plot as the meaningful and plausible selection of events that makes events into a story. The postmodern enquiry into the authenticity of totalizing and authoritative concepts and discourses translates at the level of narrative plot "as a greater explicitness in the abandonment of mimetic claims, a more overt staging of the narratives arbitrariness and lack of authority, a more open playfulness about fictionality" (317).

After experimenting the use of simple linear plots to tackle the issues of patriarchal legitimacy and authority, Carter takes a step further in deconstructing the principles of the Western traditional line of thought and starts experimenting with the plot. *Wise Children* abandons the realm of the fantastic and of impossible worlds and enters the world of theatrical illusion: The story represents the first person narrative of a musical actress Dora Chance, who on the eve of her 70th birthday, looks back and recollects not only her life story, but also those of her twin sister and of her father. Dora is a highly unreliable narrator, as she perpetually questions her capacity of remembering things and as she also enters foreign territories which do not belong to her and to which she does not have direct access.

Dora holds together a maze of stories which she retells in the first person, although some are not her own even and has happened long before her birth. In this way, Carter performs the subversion of those patriarchal discourses written in the first person singular, such as autobiographies, which raise claim to authenticity and authority even if they are in the same position as Dora's narrative.

The plot expands over a period of 100 years, being the miniature history of a numerous theatrical family whose members engage in various minor subplots whose only connection to the main plot itself is Dora's narrative voice, which in corporate them into her narrative. These subplots do actually reinforce Carter's subversive operation of exposing the impossibility of any discourse and of history in particular to have direct access to indirectly experienced events. All discourses are thus exposed as very private narratives which share equal claims to authority and authenticity since eventually they are all fictions. (Botescu, 2010, p. 100)

This is how Carter's plots challenge the central stance of patriarchal discourse. This is the nature of Postmodernism.

Plot is not the only way by which Carter questions the long-established truths. Her female characters serve the same job, some with their silence and whispering nature and others with their rebellious characteristics. From the silenced female protagonist of *The Magic Toyshop* to Dora of *Wise Children* (1995), her female characters violate authority in its various forms, such as history, literature, religion, gender difference; Carter shows how all these are inadequate norms and patterns.

Time and space are also tools in Carter's hand to fit the ideological statement of her novels. Both the temporal and the spatial dimensions undergo a process of defamiliarization that extracts them from the commonsense experience. "Through her novels, Carter creates fantastic topologies and indeterminate time in order to undermine all claims to rational, logical chronology and to human mastery over space that traditional western though made" (118).

Carter initiates the subversion of common sense space in her novel *Heroes and Villains* (1981) which unfolds in a post-catastrophic world, opposing the steel and concrete villages of the professors to the savage jungle of the Barbarians. For Carter, space signifies both politically and ideologically, as the space she creates mirrors the binary division between rational (professors) and irrational (Barbarian) thought. Marianne, the female protagonist of the novel is between these two extremes, as she is a professor's daughter and becomes a Barbarian's woman.

Carter's spatial construction interrogates the binaries of self/other, body/mind, male/female, nature/culture, passion/reason, or civilized/barbarian, binaries informing patriarchal institutions and representations that serve to justify exploitation and domination of one group by another. (Krpinski, qtd. in Botescu, 2010, p. 119)

Intertextnality is a part of the postmodern phenomenon. Lind Hutcheon refers to intertextuality as a "reader-text relationship" (120). Characteristic to postmodern fiction, which has come to replace the previous author-text relationship. Postmodern fiction feeds on other texts to an extent where connections are recognizable, and so becomes a means of re-creation and subversion of older narratives, a technique which allows for a polemic dialogue with the past. In Angela Carter's case, one can see that her fiction feeds on what is traditionally considered the

popular European culture in order to create monstrous mirrors of postmodern society, of what we have become lately.

The focus of *Wise Children* is a theatrical family by a lot of reference to Shakespeare's comedies. *Wise Children* replicates the structure of Shakespeare's comedies and ends with an unexpected and even unbelievable reconciliation of fathers and children, brothers and sisters through which, as Botescu quotes from Beth Bohem, "the comic world is made timeless by the spirit of love and reconciliation evident in its ending and the ending of *Wise Children* is Carter at he finest" (134).

The writer cunningly deconstructs the very core of high culture represented by Shakespeare's patriarchal figure echoed by that of Melchoir Hazard, reconstructing a world where low culture becomes central, where music halls takes over as Shakespearean theatrical companies tour Africa, where illegitimacy is at its best and all is well that ends well.

IV. Modernist Disillusionment in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Of the Modernism in America, one can say that "the modern was no obscure artistic affair, but a condition of life to be reported" (Bradbury, 2001, p. 151). It was an age when "life became fragile, love became brittle, art became amusing, style became manner, when everything was an 'experiment'" (152). Being modern meant being close to the sharpest tastes of the age – the flappers and the car rides, the night clubs and parties, the yawning bedrooms and weary affairs, the orgies and cynicisms, because immersion in the present, giving oneself to the intensifying if senseless pace of history, was one way of dealing with post-war things, "of telling by the clock of history what the time was" (152). *Great Gatsby* (1989) is a Modernist narration of the Modernism in America of the Jazz Age.

First of all, the choice of Nick as narrator is a Modern. It is a first person narrator whose narration has a quality of fragmentation. Critics believe that "Vision and viewpoint became an essential aspect of the modernist novel. The way the story was told became as important as the story itself." (VanSpanckeren, 2003, p. 109). Moreover, the narrator is not really reliable. He fails to remember some parts of the story, because he was too drunk to remember. "I have been drunk just twice in my life and the second time was that afternoon, so everything that happened has a dim hazy cast over it although until after eight o'clock the apartment was full of cheerful sun" (33). At the end of Chapter two he wakes up beside Mr. McKee, who is in his underwear, looking at pictures, and wondering what just happened. His narration isn't complete, because he remembers only parts of that night. Furthermore, because Nick is the narrator of the story, we only know what he lets us know about Gatsby and when he wants to tell us. Because of that, the story is told in fragments, there is not really a chronological order.

What also makes the novel a modernist novel is the iconoclastic symbol of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg eyes and what it represents. It is known that in modernism God is dead and people are looking for something else to replace Him. In the novel, "Dr. T. J. Eckleburg is actually a billboard that represents God. Times were changing and God was not, people's main concern in life anymore."(Orme, 1999, p. 67). Dr. Eckleburg's billboard is clearly paralleled to God revealing Fitzgerald's belief that America had a lack of morals and faith in God in the 1920s.

The Great Gatsby is also a modernist novel because of its major theme; loss of American dream. Modernism was characterized by a loss of everything people believed in. "Fitzgerald work is haunted by loss, a sense that something is lacking in most modern American lives."(Annenberg media). The original James Gatz fallows his American dream to be an upper-class boy from a wealthy background. He has invented a new him, but also thrived in his self-made success. He was both financially and sociably successful. However, he realizes soon that his dream turns into ashes when Daisy picks Tom over him. It is a story of a great loss, loss of a dream, of love, of illusions.

Secondly, Fitzgerald was living during the Jazz Age. He was an avid participant in the stereotypical "roaring twenties lifestyle of wild partying and bootleg liquor" (Gladysz, 2001, p. 54). This is believed that "Both his stories and his novels record - and partly served to create - the period." (54). However, the main characteristic of the Jazz Age is the famous flappers. First, Daisy represents a young, innocent girl and she lets perceive the sexual liberation that flappers were, when she is willing to meet with Gatsby. When Nick decides to invites Daisy over to his house to meet Gatsby, he warns her not to bring Tom. And Daisy replies, "Who is 'Tom'?" (Fitzgerald, 1989, p. 88). This shows that she's aware of the potential nature of the meeting. It could be adulterous. Jordan on the other hand is a flapper but more in the way of representing the independent women of the Jazz Age. She represented freedom and power, because of her golf player status. A flapper would wear short skirt that would shock the more conservative citizen, had the guts to cut their hair, and dared to take a job outside the home.

The music is also a great sign of the Jazz Age. The music was criticized because it was said to influence the action and of people and caused people to dance intimately. At Gatsby's parties, music was played by a wide range orchestra. And when the music started, people danced freely, "holding each other tortuously, fashionably and keeping in the corners-- and a great number of single girls dancing individualistically..." (51). It is mostly in Chapter 3 that we sense the Jazz Age flavours; it is filled with Jazz music, the neglect of Prohibition and the party life that the youngster were living in the twenties. "There was music from my neighbour's house through the summer nights. In this blue garden men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars" (41).

Finally, Surrealism as we know it today is closely related to some forms of abstract art. Writers would "wrote whatever words came into their conscious mind and regarded these words as inviolable. They did not alter what they wrote, as that would constitute an interference with the pure act of creation. The authors felt that this

free flow of thought would establish a rapport with the subconscious mind of their readers." (Bradbury, 2001, p. 56). The surrealist movement started in the early Twenties; it was mostly used by French writers. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald used some surrealist description. The most surreal description in the novel is by far the kiss. "He knew that when he kissed the girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would ever romp again like the mind of God. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete" (Fitzgerald, 1989, p. 106).

Fitzgerald is a modernist; he is part of "the lost generation", and a Jazz Age participant. It is because of all of that, that *The Great Gatsby* is the most renowned modernist novel.

V. From Lost Values to Subverted Truths: Concluding Reflections

The contrast between Fitzgerald and Carter brings into focus the extent of the literary shift from Modernism to Postmodernism. The Great Gatsby records a world haunted by loss, where the promise of the American Dream collapses into fragments of memory and regret. Carter's fiction, by contrast, thrives on questioning authority, weaving parody and intertextual play into narratives that dismantle the certainties of tradition, history, and gender. Read together, the two writers chart the passage from a literature still searching for order in the wake of devastation to one that embraces multiplicity and doubt as conditions of meaning. The concerns that shaped their work have not disappeared; they remain visible in today's cultural climate, where questions of truth, authority, and identity continue to unsettle literary expression and critical thought.

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