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## **CONTEMPORARY FAIRY TALES: ANGELA CARTER'S *THE WEREWOLF***

### **Introduction**

Rewritings of classical fairy tales are a relatively common practice and by no means a contemporary phenomenon. The number of versions traditional stories have indicates that they are treated as a set of models to experiment with, writing and rewriting them all over again. By the classics we usually mean the fairy tales written by the brothers Grimm or earlier stories by Charles Perrault, but we tend to forget that their stories were in fact versions, too; they originated in the oral tradition, were transmitted by generations of tellers and only much later written down. Thus, it seems that in the case of fairy tales we deal with a well-established practice of revising and constant changing – the process which is taking place also nowadays when we can observe a proliferation of rewritings done by different authors and for different purposes. The notorious James Finn Garner (1995) and his *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* show how the traditional tales are used and, one may say, abused; but more subtle rewritings were also done, and among these we can include Angela Carter's 1979 collection of stories entitled *The Bloody Chamber. The Werewolf*, a version of one of the most popular fairy tales, the story of Little Red Riding Hood, was also included in Carter's collection.

Equally numerous are the interpretations and critical explanations of the tales which over the years tried to elucidate their meanings and significance. In the case of *Little Red Riding Hood* the model of its criticism was established by Erich Fromm's (1994) *The Forgotten Language*, and later on by the famous study of Bruno Bettelheim (1985). Both of them, as well as the subsequent critics, interpret this tale psychoanalytically as a story of sexual initiation, of the rising consciousness of one's sexuality, in this case female sexuality, and the dangers connected with this realisation. The characters and objects presented in the tale are the symbolic representations of deeply hidden desires and

subconscious drives, and the critical analysis is directed towards deciphering their real meaning and demonstrating their universal character.

Other approaches, however, are still possible. Analysing the tale's structure and observing the process of *semiosis*, i.e. generation of signs on different levels, we may arrive at the model of the fairy tale constructed by the author, and then compare it to the already existing models of classical fairy tales as defined by different critics. We may observe how the classical tale's structure is preserved or changed (see the modifications and differences introduced by the author). This approach is useful in the case of Carter's *The Werewolf* – the tale which is baffling and puzzling, and which escapes easy classifications.

## Textual analysis

The close reading of the text starts, obviously enough, with the title. The word *werewolf* refers us immediately to the myth, to the duality of human nature, to the animal element in us, the dark side we are not aware of, unknown and potentially dangerous. Thus, one of the main ideas of the tale – the concept of the basic split in the human being – is signalled already there. It also introduces the notion of the change taking us to the lands of vampires and witches where such transformations occur.

This feeling is reinforced in the first four paragraphs of the tale: they constitute a lengthy description, without introducing any kind of action (the tale falls into two parts: the descriptive one and the one in which the 'proper' action occurs). In these four paragraphs the dark and strange atmosphere is evoked on the level of setting and characters: the basic signs are generated and defined here. In the very first sentence we learn that *it is a northern country*, i.e. about the setting, next we get to know that this is a country where no flowers grow, with harsh climate, tempests and wild beasts. We are also informed about the characters: *they have cold hearts*. The paragraphs tell us about their customs and lives: *harsh, brief, poor lives*, of their frequent visits to the graveyards, bringing food to the dead, of their beliefs and superstitions, the mixture of Catholic religion and the pagan beliefs (as visible in the description of a house: *There will be a crude icon of the virgin behind a guttering candle, the leg of a pig hung up to cure, a string of drying mushrooms*). We also learn about the characters' religion, of their strong belief in the Devil (*To these upland woodsmen, the Devil is as real as you or I*), in the vampires and the best cure for them – garlic; also of their belief in the presence of witches and the regular practice of witch-hunt.

In this way the basic signs are generated and filled: the setting, the presented world, the characters; but except for them, also a more complex sign is generated precisely here: with this description we enter the level of convention, a sign which is composed of these 'smaller' signs. The description presented in

these four opening paragraphs evidently evokes here is the gothic convention. Combined together, the title, the characters and the setting, and finally the convention, create Izer's (1974:278) *horizon of expectations* – they prepare the reader for a gothic story.

But the story which follows is hardly gothic. The second part of the tale introduces us into the next level of the semiotic hierarchy where the complex sign of *situation* is created. And here the events, and consequently the plot, resemble the well-known story of a little girl (interestingly, there is no mention of a red cap, all she wears is only *a scabby coat of sheepskin to keep out the cold*, which already constitutes a considerable departure from the classical tale). The girl is sent to her grandmother with a basket, which except for food is also equipped with a hunting-knife. As is to be expected, soon the wolf appears as well, but the rest of the plot moves from the familiar pattern even further. Thus, another convention is introduced and at the same time already subverted here: the convention of a fairy tale. In Carter's version it is the child who, although attacked by the wolf, does eventually harm to it, admittedly in self-defence, but no doubt it is the wolf which seems to be the victim here. Moreover, the child behaves somewhat like a professional murderer, masking all the traces of the 'murder':

*The child wiped the blade of her knife clean on her apron, wrapped up the wolf's paw in the cloth in which her mother had packed the oatcakes and went on towards her grandmother's house. Soon it came on to snow so thickly that the path and any footsteps, track or spoor that might have been upon it were obscured.*

It is immediately noticeable that this description is almost grotesque when applied to a small girl attacked in the woods by a starving wolf; obviously no question of probability should be asked here. It is clear that Carter's tale ironically reverses here the basic pattern of its classical version: the division between the bad and the good characters. Thus, it violates the horizon of expectations based on the convention: the reader quite rightly can expect to have no problem with distinguishing the victim from the villain; in the case of this tale it is not so obvious.

In the course of the story we notice even more numerous departures from the pattern: the visit to the grandmother's house is one of them. In the house it is discovered that the wolf which attacked the girl on the path in the woods was in fact the grandmother herself who assumed its shape and thus turned out to be a werewolf. She is immediately identified as a witch by the neighbours called in for help by the girl, and then she is beaten and stoned to death. Thus, the neutral and quite pleasant character of the grandmother is portrayed here as an evil werewolf – but at the same time as a victim. Strangely enough, the sympathy and pity of the reader is directed towards this character rather than towards the little girl; the girl's descriptions are devoid of emotions whereas the description of the grandmother's death is clearly moving:

*They knew the wart on the hand at once for a witch's nipple, they drove the old woman, in her shift as she was, out into the snow with sticks, beating her old carcass as far as the edge of the forest, and pelted her with stones until she fell down dead.*

Thus, the question may arise who is the real victim here, and who is the villain; the dubious status of the little girl, already signalled in the scene with the cleaning of the knife, is confirmed also on the level of language: after all it is she who contributed to her grandmother's misery.

Yet the most striking and baffling is the tale's last sentence: *Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered.* Whatever sympathy we might have left for the character up to this moment will probably evaporate since the child seems to be obviously thriving on her grandmother's disaster. In classical fairy tales the last sentence is usually read as a moral. (Obviously, we should always be careful with the morals: Greimas (1985:350) has pointed out that [...] *nine times out of ten we see that that deep moral [...] does not correspond to the signification offered to us*). Yet it seems to be an integral part of the text, and we may rightly wonder who the real werewolf was. Was it really the grandmother only? She definitely was, changing physically into the wolf and hunting for children in the woods. But the child who prospers due to her grandmother's death is almost a ruthless murderer, thus exhibiting her 'dark' animal side as well. Worse even, she is not punished at all – she prospers. So perhaps the 'moral' of the tale is that the good are not necessarily rewarded and the bad not immediately punished, and that everybody may be a werewolf, not only these who assume the wolf's shape. The last sentence indicates cyclicity: now the girl lives in her grandmother's house, she took her place and became a werewolf herself, until one day her granddaughter will come and take her place, and then her granddaughter, and so on, till the end of time. Again, the elements of grotesque are visible here: the pattern of the fairy tale is exaggerated and blown out of proportion, but it is nevertheless possible to distinguish its main elements.

### **The model of the tale**

Observing Carter's tale and her use of two conventions (the gothic and the fairy tale), we notice that the fairy tale presented here is rather a grotesque version of the pattern. It would be useful to compare it to the model of Andre Jolles (1929), the classic of fairy tale criticism. In his *Einfache Formen* Jolles describes three major features the fairy tales possess: first, they combine two seemingly contradictory, and yet complementary desires of every human being: on the one hand the love of truth and realism, and on the other the dream of the marvellous and fantastic. The second feature is the tales' universality, their general character. And thirdly, their morality, not only in the sense that they end with a moral, but rather that the vision of the world presented in them is moral:

it is the world where justice is done and where everything, finally, is fair. These three components constitute the basic structure of every fairy tale, they are the simple form which is later on adopted and transformed according to the specific author's wishes.

Comparing Carter's *The Werewolf* to this pattern we can easily observe that this fairy tale preserves the first two conditions while violating the third one. It does mix the realistic with the fantastic, realistically describing the witches and werewolves. It is also universal in character; it does not describe particular, historical events that happened to real people, but rather points out to the general features of human character, to its basic duality. When it comes to the moral, however, it seems that the world depicted in it is hardly moral at all. We cannot distinguish black or white characters, the division between them is blurred: both the grandmother, the child and the wolf might be viewed as victims or as villains. There is also no morality in the sense of justice being done, either: the bad deeds are not punished, and the good ones – not rewarded, and thus it presents a profoundly immoral world. Finally, no moral is expressed in the form of an epigram, warning or instruction – even in such a straightforward way the tale withdraws from presenting any moral directions.

This violation seems to be a more general feature of modern fairy tales. They refrain from passing final judgements suggesting that in modern times the idealistic notion of 'justice' is ironically reversed or at least problematic, that it does not have to win any more. They seem to indicate that human nature is more complex and less angelic that we might want to believe. Thus these tales offer an ironic comment both on reality, and on the convention itself demonstrating that in the contemporary world and in the contemporary fairy tale everybody may turn out to be a werewolf.

## References

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