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Leda or Living Doll? Women as Dolls in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*. by Donna Mitchell

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Leda or Living Doll? Women as Dolls in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*

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ABSTRACT

This article will use the figure of the doll to consider female identity and performativity in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967). It will build upon recent Gothic criticism from Andrew Hock Soon Ng's *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject* (2015), which defines the domestic space in this novel as a theatre box that reduces its occupants to actors that must execute the correct gender performativity at all times. Specifically, it will use a doll motif to explore the effect of this demand on the Gothic heroine who is demoted to the status of a silent and submissive doll-like entity. Firstly, it will discuss the complex formation of female identity and the various elements that influence the process. Secondly, it will analyze the female subject's struggle for control of her identity and autonomy against a villainous patriarch, which is a common theme in many classic and contemporary Gothic narratives. Finally, it will evaluate how the doll and heroine analogy epitomizes the many components of female identity and performativity as well as the repression of the Gothic heroine by outside forces through its discussion of the relentless conflict between Melanie and Uncle Philip.

KEYWORDS:

Dolls, female identity, mirrors, gothic feminism, gender studies, Angela Carter.

Female identity and performativity in Gothic narratives is often strictly governed and monitored by entities, human and otherwise, that are closest to the female subject. Domestic space is one such factor as it is a site that usually contains mirrors and/or a male gaze that influences and reminds the Gothic heroine that she is under constant surveillance. In *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject* (2015), Andrew Hock Soon Ng argues that the domestic interior of Angela Carter's fiction can be read as an "abode in which to live and a theatre box through which to perform" (35). In other words, the family home can be regarded as a theatre box that turns its occupants into actors who must execute the correct performativity for their gender at all times. This article will build upon Ng's theory by exploring the influence of this theatre box on the specific topic of female identity and performativity. A doll motif, by means of relevant analyses and Gothic feminism, will be applied to Carter's heroines in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) in order to examine how this repressive environment reduces the Gothic female to the status of a doll-like being. Uncle Philip's house will represent how domestic space is often established as "a patriarchal institution writ in miniature" in many Gothic narratives, and Uncle Philip himself will be central to the analysis as he undertakes the villainous role of antagonist to

the Gothic heroine (Ng 26). The toymaker's subjugation of his female subjects in particular will be discussed as he demands their compliance with his every "hegemonic, masculine whim ... so much so that their expressions must accord to his desires and determination, or be unpermitted" (Ng 26). The doll is therefore a fitting model for the female figure in this discussion because it is defined by its manmade and perfect physicality that also underlies the unattainable version of female identity that is presented to women on a daily basis through various mediums that reduce them to the sum of their body parts. The doll in this text represents the repetitive image of "deathly femininity" that can be found in much of Carter's fiction, which is rich in female characters who often exist in a dreamlike state of limbo where they are "neither fully dead nor fully alive" (Munford 16, Carter 597). By this logic, "the signifier Woman" becomes intrinsically connected to non-human entities as "women in [Carter's] text[s] appear in transmogrified forms, as puppets, dolls and phantoms" (Munford 47). The doll motif in this article will therefore illustrate how the Gothic heroine personifies how women are conditioned to objectify and dehumanize themselves in an effort to epitomize the social perception of beauty and feminine performativity. Finally, this article will determine how the ominous power of the mirror and the male gaze within the theatre box subsequently encourages

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the female character to engage in an incessant performance as exemplified by Melanie and her puppet double, Leda. These factors are indicative of an exclusively female experience that is discussed in many Gothic narratives. They emphasize the genre's ability to vocalize disregarded issues of womanhood and demonstrate why "women often look to literary texts for a female history which is left out of history books" (Wallace 135).

When Melanie is first introduced to the reader she is on the delicate brink of adulthood which sees her maturing physical and mental states evolve towards the creation of a new sexual identity. She embodies the "childlike innocence of the heroine" that is a core feature of so many Gothic narratives and used to accentuate the sinister nature of the impending villain (Georgieva 3). Her bedroom becomes a crucial component of the theatre box of her family home and acts as a personal site of observation and government when she uses her mirror to privately observe her sexual maturation through a series of provocative poses. This practice illustrates how mirrors are inextricably linked to the "male gaze" and the construction of female identity. Melanie's obsession with her reflected self represents the universal struggle that occurs during the young girl's formative years when her identity becomes defined by the sexualized physicality of her newfound status as the object of male desire. Her identity becomes fragmented when she presents different versions of herself to the mirror in a range of disguises that express the uncertain nature of adolescent sexuality. She demonstrates the female figure's attempt to become comfortable and familiar with this new version of herself by embarking on a journey of self-discovery in front of the mirror, which sees her realize that she was "made of flesh and blood" (Carter 1). This simple observation can be read as a satirical commentary on her current state and her near-transition into a doll-like woman in Uncle Philip's house. As the mirrors of Angela Carter's fiction are often feminine spaces that monitor significant changes in her heroines' identities, they can illustrate the influence that social definitions of gender performativity have on the development of female sexual identity. Examples of this feature can be seen in *The Passion of New Eve* when Leilah uses the mirror for a daily beauty ritual that creates a more sexualized version of herself. Later in the same novel, Eve uses the mirror to become familiar with her post-transformative self. Similarly, the anonymous narrator of "The Bloody Chamber" watches herself lose her virginity in a sea of mirrors that surrounds her marriage bed.

As a Gothic element, the mirror can be read as potentially threatening as an ego is "liable of losing itself in [its] other space [only to] become replaced by an *image* of

self instead" (Ng 31, original emphasis). This interpretation presents the mirror as yet another threat to Melanie's identity as her self-image becomes trapped within it when she engages in her narcissist displays:

For hours she stared at herself, naked, in the mirror of her wardrobe; she would follow with her finger the elegant structure of her rib-cage, where the heart fluttered under the flesh like a bird under a blanket, and she would draw down the long line from breast-bone to navel (which was a mysterious cavern or grotto), and she would rasp her palms against her bud-wing shoulder blades. And then she would writhe about, clapping herself, laughing, sometimes doing cartwheels and handstands out of sheer exhilaration at the supple surprise of herself now that she was no longer a little girl. (Carter 1)

Her understanding that "she was no longer a little girl" is confirmed by her naked adolescent form which marks the start of her transition from childhood to young adulthood. The mirror is instrumental to the reader's understanding of how her psyche matches her evolving physicality when she quickly accepts her femininity and plays up to the version of herself that will be seen through masculine eyes and objectified by the masculine onlooker. This suggests that in order for the young girl to accept her new identity she must first objectify herself and position herself as an object of the male gaze. In other words, she must define her beauty solely in terms of the masculine concept of feminine beauty. Her attempt to personify this version of femininity that is defined by its appeal to a masculine audience raises the notion of Diane Long Hoeveler's discussion of Irigaray's notion of the "feminine feminine" and "masculine feminine" woman in Gothic narratives. In *Gothic Feminism*, Hoeveler asserts that women will only be able to formulate their own determined version of identity when they "undo the effects of phallogocentric discourse" that currently govern it (11-12). She stresses the fact that this can only be achieved by acting out and hyperbolizing the strict patriarchal codes that manage female identity. A defining element of this code is the performative requirements of the woman under the male gaze, which requires a removal of certain natural elements that effectively dehumanize her and demote her to the status of an idol or the inanimate object of the doll that is admired only for her youthful beauty and silence. Melanie's hyperbolic and over-sexualized playacting with her mirror image can therefore be read as a private act of transgression with the mirror as her only witness. She will reminisce about this rebellious practice and its inherent freedom many times

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afterwards when she finds herself entrapped in Uncle Philip's house where there are no mirrors. Her fixation on her reflected self is most evident when she is still within the safety of her original home and can use her bedroom mirror to shape herself through male art: Pre-Raphaelite, she combed out her long, black hair to stream straight down from a centre parting and thoughtfully regarded herself as she held a tiger-lily from the garden under her chin, her knees pressed close together. A la Toulouse Lautrec, she dragged her hair sluttishly across her face and sat down in a chair with her legs apart and a bowl of water and a towel at her feet. (1-2)

It is important to note that the subverted depictions of Melanie created during this presentation remain specifically masculine. They are portraits of femininity inscribed by male authors, painters and from women's magazines proving that the boundaries of her adolescent imaginings are thus "marked by thoughts of her future roles as lover, wife and mother" (Gamble 36). These versions of Melanie therefore demonstrate how patriarchal ideology prevails her bold attempt at transgressive behavior.

Her desire to experience the male gaze through the execution of these roles means that she spends much time during her performance conjuring up a phantom groom who can appreciate her developing beauty. She becomes obsessed with the sexual rite of passage that comes with the experiences of love and marriage, which causes her to try on her mother's wedding dress and in doing so, becomes her replacement. This development is indicative of many Gothic novels that demonstrate the child-bride's ability to replace the mother. Laura Mulvey discusses Melanie's behavior and claims that her "over-involvement with her image is her fault and her downfall [as] it is her fascination with her mirror-image that seduces her into wearing her mother's wedding dress" (245). She does this in an effort to envisage herself as a bride and as a sexually active woman, because, despite her belief that "virtue is fragile," she still prayed: "please God, let me get married. Or, let me have sex" (Carter 13, 8). The dress, which is "white satin [with] scooping sleeves, wide as the wings of swans," and is accompanied by "a wreath of artificial roses [for] her forehead," foreshadows her later costume as Leda in Uncle Philip's puppet show (11). Once again, Melanie performs in front of the mirror as she imagines a bridal version of herself seen through the male gaze and checks her reflection to confirm that "she was beautiful ... A bride" (16). Her possession of beauty is inextricably linked to her exemplification of youthful femininity and so is simply taken for granted, as according to Marie Mulvey Roberts, beautiful women are presupposed creatures because

"ugliness is incompatible with the feminine" in Gothic texts (86). But this attempt to imitate her mother's sexual rite of passage prematurely results in her being "bruised and filthy ... [bleeding] from a hundred little cuts [with] the dress ... in ribbons ... filthy, streaked with green from the tree and her own red blood" (22). Melanie believes this transgressive act to be the catalyst that sets off drastic changes in her world, causing both her parents' death and her subsequent entrapment within the theatre box of Uncle Philip's house and adjoining toyshop. As she is the Gothic child of this tale, Melanie is also "the carrier of the story," and so the domestic setting of the novel changes when her surroundings become Uncle Philip's house, which can be read as a sinister "parody of the notion of home itself" (Georgieva 45, Ng 35). It is this extreme change in circumstance that challenges her newfound identity and allows her to experience the full extent of male gaze as the oppression she encounters from Uncle Philip threatens to transform her further into a doll-like version of herself who personifies all of the objectifying traits of socially-constructed femininity.

Melanie recognizes the enormity of this relocation and considers the act of leaving the family home to be a final farewell to her childhood identity, imagining that a "part of herself ... was killed, a tender, budding part; the daisy-crowned young girl who would stay behind to haunt the old house, to appear in mirrors" (31). This apparition signifies her youth and innocence and so represents the childish part of her identity that cannot accompany her to the toy-maker/ Uncle Philip's house where she will gain firsthand experience of the omnipresent male gaze. Upon entering her new home, her loss of autonomy becomes immediately apparent. This is emphasized by her dismay at the lack of mirrors in the house as, up until this point, she has relied on them for the formation of her identity as well as validation of her beauty and worth. Their absence ensures that her ego will now have "no recourse to establishing a definition" because "her subjectivity will [now] be reduced to a thing whose function is to satisfy her uncle's perverse and sometimes violent desires" (Ng 35). She vocalizes her feelings of entrapment and recognizes her change in circumstance and identity when she "feels herself to be like one of her uncle's puppets [as] her feelings of powerlessness intensify [because] she has no mirror in which to see herself Control of her identity is [now] taken over by [others and] she begins to see herself as she is seen by others" (Gamble 36). In other words, the mirror has been replaced with the dual male gaze of Uncle Philip and Aunt Margaret's brother, Finn. Her frustration at the inability to continue carefully tracking any changes in her

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identity is portrayed in her wish “for a mirror to see herself ... [to see] if she was looking older, if she had changed at all,” and she wonders constantly if “I still look the same? Oh God, could I still recognize myself?” (125, 103). She relies on tracking the fleeting glimpses of herself in “the black pupils of [Finn’s] subaqueous eyes” to see if “[s]he still looked the same” (105). The absence of mirrors also highlights the lack of control that she has on her emerging identity from this point as it is now being monitored and carefully molded by the toy-maker within his theatre box. Furthermore, the toyshop is filled with numerous different puppets that become a presence in her everyday life, and subsequently mirror the doll’s function of encouraging self-objectification in young girls.

It is not uncommon in Gothic texts for the heroine to recognize displaced versions of herself in other characters. Melanie engages in this practice by not only identifying with the various puppets in the toyshop but also with her Aunt Margaret. Her presumed fate initially appears to match that of her uncle’s wife because both women are “reduced to an automaton” when they move into his house (Day 25). Aunt Margaret acts as Melanie’s alter ego who lives obediently under Uncle Philip’s absolute power and whose silent existence mimics that of his inanimate dolls and puppets. Finn explains the unusual basis of Aunt Margaret’s condition to Melanie by telling her how she is simply “dumb Not a word can she speak. It is a terrible affliction; it came on her on her wedding day, like a curse. Her silence” (37). The nature of her illness suggests that her silence is symptomatic of her hopelessness as well as the imbalance of power within their marriage. Melanie is especially sympathetic towards her, as she views her aunt as a proleptic version of herself if she were to continue living in the toyshop. Furthermore, Aunt Margaret’s character is based solely on Melanie’s interpretation of her, and as such, she is initially described as being a mere “shadow in her mind, a wispy appendage of the toy making uncle” (37). Early observations of her aunt’s doll-like similitude support the vision in this memory as she describes how on the first night there:

She kissed Melanie goodnight on the cheek, taking her in a stiff, Dutch-doll embrace; her arms were two hinged sticks, her mouth cool, dry and papery, her kiss inhibited, tight-lipped but somehow desperate, making an anguished plea for affection. (48-49)

The various doll-like terms that Melanie uses to describe Aunt Margaret in this passage depict her as a personification of perfect femininity within the theatre box of the domestic sphere simply because she is both submissive and maternal.

She personifies the “archetypal Gothic heroine [that is] both locked away and physically silent, [trapped] in [a] helpless, dependent, childlike position” (Saunders 155). The genuine kindness that she displays to Melanie and her siblings further emphasizes the disparity between the good and evil natures of “poor Aunt Margaret, who was so gentle” and her husband, thus portraying a very different image of marriage to that of Melanie’s romantic vision (77).

The hopelessness of Aunt Margaret’s situation is further emphasized by Melanie’s thoughts that she “slept (probably) in the same bed as he, for they were married and [yet] she trembled when he raised his leonine voice” (77-78). This passive attitude illustrates her utter compliance with his ruling of the house, and confirms her status as the docile doll-like figure with whom she is associated in Melanie’s various accounts. Ultimately, she represents how life in Uncle Philip’s house makes many unusual demands of its female residents; Melanie is quickly informed of his prohibition of trousers for women, which Finn describes as being “one of his ways [as] he simply can’t abide a woman in trousers. He won’t have a woman in the shop if she’s got trousers on and he sees her. He shouts her out into the street for a harlot” (62). Additionally, she is advised to wear “no make-up And only speak when you’re spoken to. He likes, you know, silent women” (63). Finn’s description of the toy-maker’s rules for the women of his house emphasizes his wish to be surrounded only by inanimate, passive women who resemble his self-made dolls and puppets as well as his implementation of gender performativity within the theatre box. Melanie recognizes his complete management of Aunt Margaret’s appearance and behavior, and is wary that he does not repeat the process with her. However, she soon begins to describe herself in the doll-like terms that she previously used only for Aunt Margaret, which shows that her struggle to retain any residual autonomy is a difficult one. This notion is supported by her self-image as “a wind-up putting-away doll, clicking through its programmed movements” (76). Aunt Margaret’s main function as Melanie’s silent alter ego is therefore to represent her possible demise under Uncle Philip’s control if she is not strong enough to retain her autonomy. Melanie reveals that he “never talked to his wife except to bark brusque commands” and objectifies her as if she were one of his puppets (124). His ill-treatment of her is ominously signified by his wedding present, which “he made ... himself. To his own design” and by his wife’s distress while wearing it (114):

Aunt Margaret had one single piece of jewellery, besides her fat gold wedding ring ... a curious necklace

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which she wore on Sunday afternoons ... The necklace was a collar of dull silver, two hinged silver pieces knobbed with moonstones which snapped into place around her lean neck and rose up almost to her chin so that she could hardly move her head. It was heavy, crippling and precious and looked as though it may be very ancient ... Aunt Margaret had to carry her head high and haughty as the Queen of Assyria, but above it her eyes were anxious and sad and not proud at all ... she ate only with the utmost difficulty. (111-113)

Uncle Philip celebrates her misery by taking “a certain pleasure from her discomfort ... finding that the sight of it improved his appetite [as] it was the regal and hampering collar which made Aunt Margaret beautiful” (113). Because this ornamentation controls her limited movements, it merges her identity even further with that of his dolls and puppets, and confirms his position of power as puppet-master. It also emphasizes, albeit in an exaggerated fashion, the suffocating and restrictive burden of femininity that women must possess and epitomize through their gender performativity. And as the gift-bearer, Uncle Philip confirms his roles as both patriarchal enforcer and villain of Carter’s text.

The aforementioned absence of mirrors in Uncle Philip’s house is frequently highlighted by Melanie, who notes that their nonexistence creates an even more foreboding and unfamiliar environment within her new abode. She can no longer rely on her reflection for self-assurance and so she seeks out any indication that she is still herself by looking through the one small broken mirror in the bathroom for any “glimpses ... of her face as she cleaned her teeth” (29). These limited and grotesque “glimpses ... of her face” confirm a revised fragmentation of her identity as she tries to maintain control of herself without the aid of mirrors. The difficulty of this struggle is more apparent when considered in terms of how the mirror has been replaced with Philip’s domineering and ubiquitous gaze, which acts as a literal portrayal of how female identity is monitored and shaped by male influences. In addition to his constant surveillance and due to the lack of mirrors in the house, Melanie has only the dolls and puppets with which to identify and relate. She is uncomfortably aware of their omnipresence around the house as they remind her of the chains that bind her identity. They remind her of potential fate of being “thingified” by Uncle Philip in order to become yet another fragmented prop in his puppet theatre (Munford 53):

The walls were hung with ... partially assembled puppets of all sizes, some almost as tall as Melanie herself; blind-eyed puppets, some armless, some legless, some naked, some clothed, all with a strange liveliness as they dangled unfinished from their hooks. (67)

She is initially intrigued by the possibility of embracing different identities and even admits to being “repelled, yet attracted by the ferocious masks, she finally tried on one or two, but there was no mirror where she could see herself” (84). Her hesitation in fully engaging with the various costumes suggests an underlying awareness of the threat to her identity which Uncle Philip quickly senses. He resents Melanie’s unwillingness to surrender to her new role within the theatre box of his toyshop and tries to subordinate her character to a doll-like status by forcing her to partake in his puppet show as the character of Leda. Mulvey highlights this aspect of Melanie’s journey as being an example of how Carter uses her female characters to subvert Freud’s uncanniness of “the beautiful inanimate woman with whom men fall hopelessly in love” by diverting the reader’s attention to Melanie’s resistance to her fate (Mulvey 246). She visibly rejects her position as the “fetishized object of spectacle [and] part of a performance in which she is reduced to the status of a wooden marionette” (246). This factor is crucial to the overall function of Melanie’s character in relation to the discourse of female identity and performativity within the story:

Carter ... makes the puppet central. She treats the relations between puppet-master and puppet as symbolic of the control exerted by a patriarchal culture on women, and the roles available to them. The roles, to which Melanie is introduced in her uncle’s toy theatre or in other episodes of the novel, include wood nymph, bride or victim of rape. In representing them, Carter pinpoints the ambiguities in woman’s position. She foregrounds the contradiction between the romantic images of femininity reproduced in culture and art, and the facts of sexual violence. (Gamble 34)

Uncle Philip’s efforts to compel Melanie into taking part in the rape scene of his puppet show is an act akin to sexualizing the child and so can be regarded as incestuous in nature. This act also embodies Gothic critic Lawrence Rickels’s idea that within the Gothic family “every body is made infinitely available to everybody else” (342). This concept undermines the rigid structure of the traditional family unit and changes the dynamic of familial relations within it. Additionally, it

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illustrates Melanie's function as an object of exchange between Uncle Philip and Finn who are the principal male characters of the story. However, as Melanie's character develops, and becomes more complex, she learns to challenge this simplistic role. The progression and maturation of her character is revealed by her reaction to the discovery of Finn's two peepholes in her bedroom wall, which can be read as yet another layer of the omnipresent male gaze with the theatre box of the toyshop:

Someone had made the spy-hole. Why? Presumably to watch her. So she was not only watching but being watched when she thought she was by herself, when she was taking her clothes off and putting them on and so on. All the time, someone had been watching her. All the time she had been in the house. They had not even let her keep her own loneliness but had intruded on it.... She guessed it was Finn ... who was Peeping Tom ... she pulled a chair in front of the hole and hung her coat over the back, so that the hole was blocked up. (109-110)

The two peepholes, which represent the male gaze and its observation of the female subject, reveal two things about the design of the Gothic house. Firstly, they exemplify how the "walls are often unreliable as boundaries" and, secondly, how they can encompass a revised function as a mirror that contains a host to observe the spectator (Ng 35). These subverted purposes remind the reader of how the female subject's identity and performativity is constantly monitored within the Gothic house. Even more important is Melanie's response to them, which can be read as an active rejection of her submissive position as recipient of the gaze. To further explain, her reaction to the situation is to take control and reverse the peepholes/male gaze so that she can observe Finn instead. By doing this, she takes on the traditionally male role of the spectator, which suggests her possession of an empowered female agency that challenges the fixed gender roles within this concept, as discussed by Paulina Palmer:

The power exerted by the "male gaze" is a practical means for men to impose control upon women, as well as a symbol of sexual domination.... On peering in [Melanie] catches sight of [Finn] walking on his hands She represents the norm while he, in his odd position, represents the freak and the spectacle [Suggesting that] the roles adopted by men and women ... are open to change. (Palmer, cited in Day 30-31)

Her subversion of this voyeuristic act draws attention to the power of the male gaze so "[s]he becomes the observer and he the observed" (Gamble 35). Her active revision of gender roles in this situation challenges the strict regulations of performativity within the theatre box and can be read as an example of how the house enables female subjectivity. Her appropriation of the peephole gives her the opportunity to spy on Finn within the patriarchal institution of the domestic sphere and therefore demonstrates how the house can play an active part in female resistance. But despite being offended by his actions, Melanie also revels in the knowledge that Finn made the peephole to watch her "because [she is] so beautiful" (Carter 123). He envisions a romanticized version of her as illustrated in his portrait, which tells her of "how he sees you. White chiffon and flowers in your hair. A very young girl" (141). His painted version of her reflects that of her younger, innocent self from the mirror at the beginning of the story and can be described as her idealized self. It is important for two reasons: firstly, it represents the purity of Finn's love for her, and, secondly, it gives the promise of a future version of Melanie that has escaped the darkness of her current circumstances.

Uncle Philip's effort to transform Melanie into a doll-like version of herself is foreshadowed in the first puppet show that he puts on for her. She recounts how one of the puppets in particular bore an uncanny resemblance to her, and reminds her of her earlier performances in front of her old bedroom mirror. As these displays were the last time she felt beautiful and connected to her true self, they emphasize the temptation to return to this state of being by sacrificing her autonomy and becoming a doll-like version of herself:

Lying face-downwards in a tangle of strings was a puppet fully five feet high, a *sylphide* in a fountain of white tulle, fallen flat as if someone had gotten tired of her [...] She had long, black hair down to the waist of her tight satin bodice [...] She was in the night again and the doll was herself. (67-68, original emphasis)

The blurring of the real-life and doll-like versions of Melanie in this passage raises the notion of the "girl-doll" whose body is "(re)written as a site of violent confusion ... [that is] sentenced ... to a series of sinister and violent assaults by the male artist" (Munford 126). Unaware of this inevitability and simultaneously intrigued by and cautious of the life-size dolls, Melanie is later forced to partake in one of the puppet shows. Her humiliation is ensured when she is cast as Leda in the staged rape scene of Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan". Her puppet status at this point contrasts greatly with her earlier epiphany of being

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“made of flesh and blood” and emphasizes how Melanie accepts that “she must keep her place as Leda to Uncle Philip’s Swan in the mythology of awakening in which women blossom into shuddering subordination” because Carter’s heroine’s deliberately “sign themselves up for display” (Carter 1, Roe 86). In other words, she must submit to her dictated role within Uncle Philip’s theatre box. Her encompassment of a doll-like identity represents Carter’s fascination with puppet-works and the “idea of simulacra of invented people, of imitation human beings ... [because] how do we know we’re not imitation human beings?” (Carter, cited in Smith 9). The figure of the doll then raises the notion of fixed and blurred female identity and questions our understanding of what influences govern its formation, especially in terms of gender performativity.

Melanie’s desire to be seen eventually overshadows her uncertainty as she is nostalgic for her old self and is excited to temporarily emulate this past identity and to become “a nymph crowned with daisies once again” (141). The puppet show is a dramatization of the mythological scene where Jove/Zeus rapes a mortal woman called Leda in the form of a swan. But Uncle Philip reveals his unhappiness that Melanie’s adolescent form may hinder his specific vision of Leda, and complains that she is too “well built for fifteen Do you have your periods? ... I wanted my Leda to be a little girl ... I suppose you’ll have to do. And you’ve got quite nice hair. And pretty legs ... But he was resenting her because she was not a puppet” (143-144). His irritation with her menstrual development illustrates his resentment of her maturity because it confirms her inability to fully execute his desired role for her as the inanimate doll, which is defined by its beauty, youth, and absence of genitals. Melanie’s encounter with the foreboding swan puppet is equally unpleasant, as she initially thinks that it is silly and “nothing like the wild, phallic bird of her imaginings” (165). But her actual interaction with it is more sinister because it ends up being one of physical and sexual entrapment that changes her opinion so much that she feels a dangerous need to remove herself from the situation. She does this in order to cope with the objectification of an experience that leaves the feeling that she was no longer “herself” (166). The swan incident makes her recognize the ominous nature of the puppet show’s subject matter, and she confesses that “I don’t think ... I want to be Leda anymore” (141). This admission represents her desire to return to a pre-adolescent time of simplicity and innocence when her identity did not have to be governed so strictly. Furthermore, she exemplifies the helplessness of the rape victim in the play by being “denied her own sexuality. She must take on the role of angel – passive and virginal” (Mills, cited in Gamble 36). Her anxious performance of Leda is defined by

wooden movements and frozen gestures that mimic her earlier rehearsals in front of the mirror and emphasize her proximity to a doll-like existence. Once again the male gaze dominates the situation with Uncle Philip overseeing her performance and then condemning it, telling her that she “overacted You were melodramatic. Puppets don’t overact. You spoiled the poetry” (167). His wish for her to repress her emotions in the piece further emphasizes his attempts to reduce her to an inanimate and doll-like status.

In the end, Finn releases Melanie from her doll-like entrapment as his rebellion against Uncle Philip and the toyshop eventually result in their escape from his control. His simultaneous destruction of both Philip and the toyshop illustrates their coexisting nature as entities that govern and repress Melanie’s identity and her subsequent freedom once they have been abolished. Despite his inability to fulfil the romantic image of her idealized and physically perfect phantom bridegroom from the beginning of the novel, she overlooks his physical shortcomings and adverse social status to acknowledge his kindness and selfless love for her. The development of their relationship encompasses two examples of the typical characteristics that can be found in Carter’s Gothic: Firstly, that she deliberately avoids stating that the female subject is in love. This is because the rescuers fall in love with these heroines because of their beauty, which symbolizes their goodness and inherent femininity. Secondly, that Finn’s reward for his good behavior is Melanie’s ability to see him from a new perspective. The non-rape scene of *The Magic Toyshop* is the best example of both Uncle Philip’s mistreatment of Melanie and Finn’s love for her. It comes about when Uncle Philip wants Melanie to practice Leda’s rape scene with Finn in private, so that he can have an opportunity to force her into having sex with him. His management of this situation and his corresponding disregard for Melanie’s desire to actively participate in this act demotes her to the status of a sex-doll, thus humiliating her further. Finn reveals the magnitude of Uncle Philip’s sinister request, which is another example of his desire to force her into inanimate subjugation:

He wanted me to fuck you He’s pulled our strings as if we were his puppets, and there I was, all ready to touch you up. He told me to rehearse Leda and the swan with you. Somewhere private. Like in your room, he said. Go up and rehearse a rape with Melanie in your bedroom. Christ. He wanted me to do you and he set the scene. Ah, he’s evil! (152)

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Uncle Philip's exploitation of Melanie convinces Finn to destroy the swan puppet that violated and "covered you. It rode you. I did it partly for your sake, because it rode you.... Besides, Philip Flower loved it so" (174). Its annihilation causes Uncle Philip to start a fire that destroys the house and presumably kills him. In doing so, the unconventional family unit is broken up and the theatre box environment is ruined, thus proving that female salvation lies within the house's destruction.

The aftermath of this incident marks the start of Finn and Melanie's life together. Their imagined future is one that is both pragmatic and ordinary as Melanie realizes her love for him and disregards her earlier judgment of his lower social status. This demonstrates Carter's re-visioning of fairy tales by reversing the usual dichotomy and rejecting the notion of a bourgeois romance in which a maiden is rescued by a handsome prince of a higher status. She defines it as being an alternative to the traditional fairy tale's happy ending because in her story when "the house is burnt down ... adult life begins" (Carter, cited in Sage 25). As Melanie's alter ego, Aunt Margaret also benefits from the house's ruin as she is no longer under Uncle Philip's control. Her newfound autonomy is signified by the return of her voice which can be read as a resonant metaphor for the vocalization of female resistance to this particularly restrictive mode of patriarchy. The reader is told of how "struck dumb on her wedding day, she found her old voice again the day she was freed" as she was suddenly no longer one of Uncle Philip's silent and inanimate dolls (193). The ability of the characters to move forward without the overbearing presence of Uncle Philip and his management of their identity confirms their victory against him. It secures their status as real people who are once again "made of flesh and blood" and can experience real adult life and freedom outside of the theatre box's stifling environment and their concurrent existence within it as silent and submissive doll-like entities (Carter 1). Melanie's role as the Gothic heroine and her fate at the end of this story is especially significant because it shows that the only way that she can finally escape Leda and gain freedom from Uncle Philip is to leave the toyshop, which acts as the theatre box of the text's social and domestic worlds. Her embodiment of the various changes that occur during adolescence, as well as her corresponding mentality, demonstrate the power of mirrors and the male gaze on female identity. However, her subsequent conflict with Uncle Philip can be read as a challenge of the social restrictions on female identity and performativity. The house's attempt to enable female subjectivity and Uncle Philip's later destruction of it suggests, albeit in very simple terms, that female autonomy and patriarchy cannot co-exist peacefully.

Finally, the alternative portrait of female identity that Carter creates in this novel illustrates how Gothic narratives can challenge fixed definitions and offer hyperbolic versions of the collective concept of femininity.

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