

## *Putting “New Wine in Old Bottles”: Subversion of the Symbolic*

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**Abstract.** Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop* tells the story of the claustrophobic lives of six characters who find themselves stuck in the house of Uncle Philip, who demands absolute submission from them and who isolates them from the wider world. Uncle Philip acts like the Freudian Primordial Father who feels free to act in any way he likes disregarding any restrictions. By forcing the household members to work in his toyshop all day, he creates a solipsistic universe, which is cut off from the network of the symbolic in Lacanian terms. In this world, their living practice deviates from the norms of traditional discourse as there is incest between the siblings, or as they heavily engage in pre- or extra-linguistic representation of reality such as drawing, dancing, making music and toys. Aunt Margaret becomes dumb on her wedding night, or Uncle Philip does not send the siblings to school, which, in Lacanian terms, is a codifying space of the Law. For these reasons, Uncle Philip’s house embodies the heterogeneity of the imaginary residues rather than submission to the organising principles of the symbolic. Theirs becomes an alternative site of being to the one outside. This essay aims to explore the psychodynamics of the characters’ relations to one another, the unconventional intrasubjectivity created between them in this unconventional space and the implications of imaginary residues in their living practice using Lacanian ideas as my conceptual backcloth.

**Keywords:** Angela Carter; *The Magic Toyshop*; Lacan; Primordial Father; psychoanalytical criticism

### Preamble

Carter was described as the writer of different forms, although she does not fit in any of these forms as her writing “eludes easy categorisations and unambiguous classifications” (Munford 2013: 1). “She made the categorisers uneasy by refusing to fit” (Smith 2007: 5). The fact that she is uncategorisable is not difficult to see when we look at the conflicting views of the critics about her writing: Gamble says, “the one thing she could never have been accused of was being a realist novelist” (2001: 10). Day sees Carter’s fiction as “rationalist

feminism” and “fundamentally anti-postmodern” (1998: 10). Susan Rubin Suleiman defines Carter as a “feminist postmodernist” (2007: 117). The reason for this polyphony about her writing according to Day is “the anti-realism of Carter’s dominant style” which has “generated a rash of many technical labelings” (1998: 2). Interestingly enough, as Day underlines, her “anti-rationalism” calls for a labelling in a critical discussion, although this “anti-rationalism” also makes it difficult to label her writing in such a way that this labelling exhausts the multi-layeredness by which it is characterised. At this point, Day’s labelling of Carter’s work as “materialist metaphysic” (1998: 11) drives the nail home. In this expression he seems to contain many of the above mentioned implications by referring to the fact that Carter’s themes are materialistically grounded, that is, they represent what happens in mundane reality with an awareness of what transcends that reality and what configures it. What she does, then, in Carter’s own words is the “investigation of the social fictions that regulate our lives” (1997: 38). Her statement “I am in the de-mythologizing business” makes more sense at this point. Elsewhere, she sheds more light on this “de-mythologizing business” in an interview with Anna Katsavos: “Well, I’m basically trying to find out what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for, what they mean, underneath the kind of semireligious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them” (1994: 11–12).

Likewise, her second and most read early novel (Gamble 2001: 32), *The Magic Toyshop* opens itself up to a richer understanding if we read it against the background of its multiple implications. The operative mechanisms of patriarchal discourse are revealed/demythologised, as in the case of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, a play about the origin written from a man’s vantage point. Carter does the same thing, this time from a woman’s vantage point taking the risk of making feminists angry. “She was a great believer in the kind of reverse anthropology which involves studying your own culture as if from elsewhere, cultivating the view point of an alien in order to defamiliarize the landscape of habit” (Sage 2007: 2). She demythologises the daily routine of reality, which is shaped by patriarchal discourses that totalise our truth, disregarding or oppressing other kinds of truth, such as different forms of psychic truth, and studies it “from elsewhere”. What she does is to go back to roots, demystifying, from a subversive vantage point, how the patriarchal discourse functions or articulating the fissures or loopholes of the patriarchal discourse. In other words, what she offers is not a recommendation but an X-ray representation, with a clinical detachment, of what we take for granted as ‘normal’. Therefore, the novel can be taken as a subversive thought experiment and does not deserve Munford’s accusation, who takes her writing as “male-authored, fetishistic definitions of female sexuality” (2013: 2). The material she fictionalises and de-mythologises is also integral to our psychic reality. Accordingly, Day regards the toyshop as

a "psychic world" (1998: 23). We can say that in psychological terms, the novel literalises psychodynamic metaphors and manages to speak at many different levels at once. Then we can draw a distinction between the two forms of reality in the novel and say that Carter exposes us to the inner psychodynamics of her characters, who might function as ordinary or 'normal' members of the mainstream discourse. Because of this, we suggest that along with "materialist metaphysics", as suggested by Day, in this novel, Carter has created "meta-psychological materialism", that is, what she depicts is empirically grounded but, at the same time, an objectification of the psychodynamics of the characters.

Due to its nature as "meta-psychological materialism" and due to the intersection between the imaginary and the symbolic or the pre-cultural and acculturation in it, a Lacanian reading of the novel helps decipher some of the narrative elements better than other vantage points. This reading of the text does not intend to reduce the Lacanian epistemology to simple implications to decipher certain narrative elements, or to take the novel as a testimony to the validity of the Lacanian theories, rather, it aims to initiate another alternative argumentative ground which will shed more light on the untouched narrative elements or the elements that were previously dealt with from a different perspective. The novel aims to offer a fresh look at the ruptures left untouched or understudied from other vantage points.

## Fall From Grace

*The Magic Toyshop* tells the literal and psychic journey of the siblings Melanie, Victoria and Jonathon from their previous life in "a world of common-sense realism" (Sage 2007: 15) into the uncanny world of their estranged Uncle Philip. Along with the hard facts of life, the novel gives expression to the psychodynamics of the situation and its evolution in characters, therefore a – selective – chronological account of the narrative is significant in tracing their evolution, or lack of it.

A small scene at the beginning represents a schematic pattern for the whole novel. In this scene Melanie is unable to sleep and goes into her parents' room, steals her mother's wedding dress and goes out into the night wearing it. This move from the closure and safety of the paternal space to the openness of the night, full of undefined sights and sounds, becomes an extension of her attempts to discover her body. She is in nature, the (m)Otherly<sup>1</sup> space: "Under the moon, the country spread out like a foreign and enchanted land, where the

<sup>1</sup> In Lacanian epistemology, the Other has a double nature as both discourse of the unconscious and the social substance. To avoid any conceptual confusion the first will

corn was orient and immortal wheat, neither sown nor reaped, terra incognita, untrodden by the foot of man, untouched by his hand. Virgin” (Carter 1996: 17). Melanie is fragile in the openness of the dark night, which is both foreign and enchanting. In this setting, the fact that she is in her mother’s wedding dress hints that she is ready to be identified with the role her mother plays in society. However, the scene also tells the reader that the site to be identified with the mother’s social role – symbolised by the wedding dress – is not outside but inside the house; she feels muddled by the different implications of (m) Other and mother. (The term *phallic woman* refers to “the fantasmatic image of a woman (or mother) endowed with a phallus or a phallic attribute. It also refers to the fantasy of the woman (or the mother) retaining the phallus internally after coitus”. The expression was used for the first time by Freud in 1933 in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*.)<sup>2</sup> Melanie intended to establish her identification with the position of the mother by going out to the space of the (m)Other, a mistake for which she pays a dear price. She seems to have moved from the paternal space to the (m)Other’s space, from culture – house – to nature – dark openness –, which is full of threatening resonances for her. She locks herself out by mistake and gets panicky: “she had cut her feet when she ran on the gravel path, not noticing at the time; but now she saw they were bruised and bleeding and that there were little flecks of blood, black in the moonlight, on the hem of her mother’s dress. But the worst thing was sitting outside the house and not being able to get in” (Carter 1996: 18–19). This wish to get into the house is literal now but will become a metaphorical/psychic yearning for her later in the novel. The father’s house seems to represent the symbolic where the Law reigns in Lacanian terms. The outside world represents “the deserts of vast eternity”, uncharted territory, extra- or pre-symbolic for her. She tries to get in through her window by climbing the apple tree, which can be taken as her return to the f/Father’s house, a return which is difficult and painful. She manages to get into the house, with difficulty, destroying her mother’s dress. While she was climbing the tree, she “hung in agony by her hands, strung up between earth and heaven, kicking blindly for a safe, solid thing in a world of all shifting leaves and shadows” (Carter 1996: 21–22). The situation of being “between earth and heaven”, “in agony” looking for secure ground in a world of “shifting leaves and shadows” – or flying signifiers in Lacanian terms – is one of the novel’s main themes. It might be taken as the intersection of the imaginary

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be referred to as the (m)Other and the second as the shared Other or simply as the Other.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.encyclopedia.com/psychology/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/introductory-lectures-psycho-analysis>.

and the symbolic, as in this analogy the earth represents the empirical reality and heaven might be taken as social reality/culture after the earth is incorporated into the symbolic.

The following day, the siblings receive a telegram informing them that their parents have died in a plane crash. Melanie's first reaction is to shatter the mirror with her hairbrush. Thus, in her life both her mother and the mirror disappear at the same time, which, in Lacanian terms, implies a difficult and painful near future. This is, at the same time, the shattering of her identification with the mother or loss of her mirror image. She buries the destroyed wedding dress "decently under the apple-tree" (Carter 1996: 28), showing that her attempts to grow into full sexual maturity in it were abortive. This act of burial is a kind of sad ending to her attempt to be incorporated into the culture in which she lives. If we take the apple tree as located in the (m)Otherly space, she has to struggle very hard to un-bury the wedding dress in her near future.

In the absence of any financial security, the siblings are forced to move to Uncle Philip's house in South London as he is the only relative who will accept them. Therefore, the early pages of the novel suggest "the irretrievable loss of childhood" and Melanie's "early home life is severely disrupted by trauma" (Peach 2009: 68, 69). This sense of trauma will increase because of what she encounters in Uncle Philip's house. With this move to London, "[part] of herself, she thought, was killed" (Carter 1996: 31). This is another charged statement as it indicates that her maturity will be forced and painful, and achieved in a different site of existence.

### The Intrasubjective World of the Jowles

Aunt Margaret's two younger brothers, Finn and Francie, meet them at the train station; one is about 19 and the other is slightly older. They meet their affectionate but mute Aunt Margaret and later on their bullish Uncle Philip, who is very good at making life-size puppets. Aunt Margaret tries to make them feel at home although she is terrified of her husband, who mistreats everyone. In their first meeting, Uncle Philip is far from welcoming; he does not even ask their names. In fact, he ignores Melanie at their first encounter and beats Finn for being 3 minutes late (Carter 1996: 69). He is a big and frightening figure for Melanie: "Blocking the head of the stairway on the kitchen landing was the immense, overwhelming figure of a man" (Carter 1996: 69). "He chilled the air through which he moved. His towering, blank-eyed presence at the head of the table drew the savour from the good food she cooked. He suppressed the idea of laughter" (Carter 1996: 124). He is almost always full of "irrational violence" (Carter 1996: 92). His "pale eyes held no kindness. He scowled. His eyebrows

met like an iron bar" (Carter 1996: 87). He despises them all and openly says that he is disgusted by the Jowles (Carter 1996: 70). He gave Margaret a collar as a wedding gift and it "snapped into place around her lean neck and rose up almost to her chin"; it is "crippling" and looks "ancient, pre-Christian or possibly even pre-Flood" (Carter 1996: 112). Margaret looks like "Our Lady of Famine" in it (Carter 1996: 113).

There are no books as the world of words is alien to them. Among them only Francie reads the *Irish Independent* in the lavatory. However, if Uncle Philip "found it, he would throw it out onto the landing and jump up and down on it" (Carter 1996: 90–91). In this context, Melanie clings to her books as if "they were lifebelts" (Carter 1996: 91) and reads them ferociously. The word "lifebelts" is significant as Melanie holds on to her books to maintain her connection with the world of words. The absence of a mirror is an important house-related detail as, over the course of the novel, we come to realise that although there is no literal mirror, they have mirror images: they have each other.

Melanie learns that Aunt Margaret and her brothers are Irish and came to London in their teens from an orphanage, which indicates their lack of rootedness in any culture and their premature disconnection from family life. They are fond of music, dance, rituals – including Christian rituals – and drawing, which become a site of resistance to Philip's oppression at home. Their marginality in the symbolic is also given through their problematic attitude to words, which becomes another recurring element in the novel. Aunt Margaret literally preferred to be dumb on her wedding night and the two brothers prefer silence to conversation when they are alone. In fact, this was the first detail given about them when Francie and Finn came to meet the children at the train station. Their silence seems to be a kind of resistance to the organising elements in their second symbolic in London. Aunt Margaret acts as a pseudo mother to her brothers; later on, she accepts Melanie, Victoria and Jonathon into her motherly space. The text also emphasises the amoral nature of the Irish siblings: Finn peeps through the spyhole in the wall to watch Melanie undressing and does not feel guilty, for example. He is not aware that he is doing something unethical. Theirs is a world of music, colors, puppets and a non-linguistic realm, which does not involve any moral principles. Accordingly, they celebrate Christmas their own way. In fact, none of them is Christian in the traditional sense, a case in point being when the brothers burn a wooden doll in the fireplace in a strange ritual as Melanie watches through the spyhole. This practice reminds us of the pagan practices in Ireland: "Francie spoke a strange grace./ 'Flesh to flesh. Amen'" (Carter 1996: 46). The expression "flesh to flesh" will become significant in the forthcoming pages as it implies how the brothers relate to life: theirs is a world of "flesh" in a subversive way.

These 'red people' do not need to go out of their isolation. They are fond of music, which becomes an intrasubjective space for them in which to disconnect from the outside world: "They were playing together as close as one single instrument which sounded like fiddle and flute at the same time" (Carter 1996: 49). Francie plays fiddle and Aunt Margaret flute but their sounds merge into each other so much that Melanie cannot tell them apart. "They leapt up and down the scale like mountain goats, dancing to their own pulsing rhythm. Dance music for some intricate, introspective, self-contained dancer" (Carter 1996: 49). They are "dancing to their own pulsing rhythm", which tells us that dance and music not only disconnect them from the symbolic but also transpose them into another site of being in the process, which we can locate outside the symbolic and which is not intersubjective but intrasubjective. They organise such performances in the absence of Uncle Philip, which indicates that this is their way to assert their own lives and challenge their oppression. Music and dance promise disconnection from the repressive language of Uncle Philip and allow an expression of the language of the body. It also injects unconscious pleasure to them outside the linearity and normativity of the symbolic. Their resemblance to goats challenges rationality and the workings of the mind. Music and dance promise them *jouissance*, which is "the forbidden me", "whose absence would render the universe vain" and makes the Other inconsistent (Lacan 2006: 694–95). However, *jouissance* also "threatens a disruption to the phallic organization of language and culture" (Elliott 2002: 144). *Jouissance* becomes transgressive because, as in Dylan Evans' words:

The symbolic prohibition of enjoyment in the Oedipus complex (the incest taboo) is thus, paradoxically, the prohibition of something which is already impossible; its function is therefore to sustain the neurotic illusion that enjoyment would be attainable if it were not forbidden. The very prohibition creates the desire to transgress it, and *jouissance* is therefore fundamentally transgressive. (1996: 93–94)

One of these three siblings acts as the pseudo mother / (m)Other who refuses to speak and they look identical in these performances. They grasp a sense of wholeness in their intrasubjectivity and do not need words because there was "[s]ome sort of wordless communication" between them (1996: 122). It was only Finn who talked, "Margaret could not and Francie would not" (Carter 1996: 43). When Francie speaks, his voice "creaks through lack of use" (Carter 1996: 47). Their conscious escape from language and linguistic representation deserves attention as it bears wider resonances in one's relation to the symbolic s/he lives in:

For Lacan, language is the fundamental medium in which desire is represented, and through which the subject is constituted to itself and to others. Language, he describes, as an intersubjective order of symbolization, an order embedded within patriarchal culture, and thus a force that perpetuates that which he calls the 'Law of the Father.' (Elliott 2002: 105)

They escape from the "intersubjective order of symbolisation" to intrasubjectivity through music. Only Victoria, who can barely speak, was "integrated" into their world in the beginning. Melanie feels repelled by yet attracted to the world of these "red people". She feels acutely that when she was with them she "was in limbo and would be for the rest of her life". These people look "common" to Melanie and she thinks that they live like pigs. However, there was something uncanny about them: "But in spite of all that, they were red and had substance and she, Melanie, was forever grey, a shadow [...] All this was taking place in an empty space at the end of the world" (Carter 1996: 77). In the course of the narrative, the symbolic with its reality and norms dissolves in Melanie's mind as the site she lives in now has nothing to do with "the outside world". Her only chance to witness "other lives" going on "in their placid courses" is to watch the passers-by (Carter 1996: 95). In this world of images, Melanie cannot tell the real and painted worlds apart, the line between the imaginary and the symbolic is blurred. One day, she hallucinates a chopped hand and from then on becomes part of the world of the Irish siblings. This is the point at which their treatment of Melanie changes.

From the beginning, there is a growing intimacy between Finn and Melanie, which grows into attraction. One day Finn takes her to a messy park, "the graveyard of a pleasure ground" (Carter 1996: 101), which is full of ruins of statues, among which there is a fallen statue of Queen Victoria, who represented an uncanny combination of femininity and power. This combination also tells us about what Melanie signifies to Finn. Finn kisses Melanie for the first time in this messy park but Melanie's feelings for him are ambivalent, involving both attraction and revulsion. When she thinks of Finn, she feels, "a half-frightened, half-pleasurable sensation" (Carter 1996: 61). However, she intuitively knows that they will marry one day. After Finn's kiss in the park, Melanie tears the mourning band on her raincoat, that is, she comes to terms with the loss of her parents and recovers from the trauma of disconnection from the mother (Carter 1996: 108).

Their only contact with the outside world is when Francie is invited to play fiddle in local bars or when Margaret and Melanie go shopping. However, neither of these activities is enough to enable them to establish meaningful contact with significant others outside the household. Theirs is a solipsistic world, which is also emphasised by the title of the novel. The word magic can



be taken as a reference to the magical world created by toys for children and to their enclosed world cut off from outside reality. The combination of the words magic and toyshop implies even wider resonances. As the toys provide dramatisations of ancient, pagan or pre-Christian elements – in Lacanian terms, the time before the Christian Father exerted his authority – in Uncle Philip's resorts to mythological stories and figures in his puppet shows, the word magic acquires psychodynamic resonances as these shows become a space where the Father's restrictions are replaced by other restrictions. This time the centerpiece of home is occupied by a father replica, the transgressive, eccentric and oppressive Uncle Philip, who terrorises the household with his irrational hatred for them. Therefore, we are not amazed when we read the word "Father" is written on his mug (Carter 1996: 73).

### Subversion of Philip as the Father

In Philip's second puppet performance, in which Jupiter disguised as a swan is supposed to rape Leda, he orders Melanie to take the part of Leda. Finn is supposed to teach Melanie her task, "[s]omewhere private" (Carter 1996: 152). Philip's hidden motive is to prepare the context in which Finn makes love to Melanie. Finn understands Uncle Philip's aim and doesn't fall into his trap. During the performance, the swan as the phallic bird is fought by Melanie, who cannot liken Uncle Philip's swan to the traditional "wild, phallic bird of her imaginings" (Carter 1996: 165). This swan is, on the one hand "a thing of terror to Melanie", and on the other hand "ridiculous [...]. Indeed, Melanie's first impulse upon seeing it is to laugh" (Gamble 1997: 72). The swan cannot occupy the position of "phallic bird" as "Melanie has already absorbed her cultural identity as object [...] well before she acts out Philip's script" (Wyatt 2000: 71). This alienation saves Melanie from being traumatised in the rape scene.

Finn destroys the gigantic swan because for him it represents Uncle Philip: "He put himself into it. That is why it had to go" (Carter 1996: 174). The following day, Philip is away on a business trip with Jonathon. Those who remain decide not to open the shop and celebrate what Finn did to the swan. This is a collective challenge to Uncle Philip's authority and they know that nothing will be the same again. Finn says that he "shall hit him [...]. Then we shall all walk out on him together, while he grovels on the floor. That'll fix him! It will be easy. I never thought it would be so easy" (Carter 1996: 192). Finn drinks from the cup with the word Father and throws it at the clock made by Uncle Philip. Interestingly enough, on this particular day, Melanie sees that she has found the mirror image she lost when the telegram arrived. Again "They looked at each other. Was he trying to mesmerize her? As in the pleasure gardens, she

saw herself in the black pupils of his squint [...] She sat in Finn's face; there she was, mirrored twice" (Carter 1996: 193).

In the ecstasy of their victory, Margaret and Francie start to become intimate and Melanie is shocked to see incestuous intercourse taking place between them. At this point, we realise that they have deceived Uncle Philip all these years: "He's a cuckold,' said Finn grimly. 'By his own brother-in-law, whom he never would have suspected'" (Carter 1996: 195). Finn adds: "You know our heart's core, now, the thing that makes us different from other people, Francie and Maggie and I" (Carter 1996: 195). In Lacanian terms, this difference implies the denial of the impossibility of desire, as for Lacan: "there is only the search for the Other that reflects and constructs the absences each individual feels inside and which are phantasied as fulfilling the desires that have had to be repressed" (Sarup 1992: 123). They go beyond the search for the Other and make it possible, thus, transgress the limits of the Law. Even Uncle Philip's transgressions are less than theirs as theirs is a rewriting of the legend of the Primordial Father. In their case, not the father but the son and the daughter enjoy endless pleasure. We hear the expression, "His bark is worse than his bite" from the mouth of the Irish siblings and the narrator says that Uncle Philip says a less strange grace and we get the full implications of these details only at the end of the novel.

Their intercourse is also found out by an unexpectedly returning Philip, who is enraged and who sets the house on fire in his rage. In the chaotic course of events, Margaret realises that Philip will kill Francie and herself. In her misery, she starts to speak and urges Finn and Melanie to run away so as not to be destroyed by Philip. Margaret's voice returns when Philip's authority is thrown over: "Struck dumb on her wedding day, she found her old voice again the day she was freed" from marriage (Carter 1996: 197). Finn and Melanie do what Aunt Margaret tells them and find themselves watching the house on fire. The novel is given a sad but an open ending as we have to use our imagination to guess what will happen in the aftermath of the fire, which destroys everything that belongs to Uncle Philip's imaginary microcosm. Except for Melanie and Finn, the other characters have been destroyed. On a metaphorical level, however, we can say that Margaret, Francie, Uncle Philip and Victoria remain in the imaginary register. They do not literally die but they cannot achieve a psychic rebirth in the symbolic. Finn and Melanie are the only ones who are ready to be integrated into and invaded by the symbolic as they alone among the characters have the potential to repress the disruptive power of the unconscious. That is, only they acknowledge the unattainability of desire. As stated above, burying the swan is Finn's challenge to the Primordial Father rather than to the paternal metaphor, but his future attitude to the paternal

metaphor remains a question mark in our minds. However, we also feel that due to Melanie and her former experience in the symbolic, or as "[s]he is already part of a system of representations that define her as object" (Wyatt 2000: 69), they seem to have a chance in the symbolic.

Pearson takes the fire at the end of the novel as "an apocalyptic conflagration" (2006: viii). Gamble prefers to take the ending as "the fire of patriarchy's self-inflicted destruction" (1997: 73). At this point, we depart from their interpretation and take it as a metaphorical death or disconnection from the imaginary for Melanie and Finn as they prefer to relocate themselves, which bears within it the unknown wilderness of the symbolic. As stated above, the driving force of this relocation is Melanie, who had already been exposed to the symbolic codification in her previous life and who takes Finn back to this once familiar psychic territory. Melanie goes back to her previous life, which was disrupted by Uncle Philip's toyshop. Then, for her "[d]espite appearances, the past is the nearest route to the future" (Sage 2007: 16). In such a context, we cannot say that it is Uncle Philip who castrates Finn but it is Melanie who lifts him up from the imaginary. Uncle Philip's dictations are not internalised by his 'sons'. However, at the end of the novel, he metamorphoses into the symbolic Father, at least for Finn, as Finn comes to recognise the Law after killing the Swan, a metonymic extension of Uncle Philip, as in the Freudian myth.<sup>3</sup>

With such an ending, Armitt says that Melanie runs "from the arms of one father figure into the arms of another" and "[a]ll evidence points towards Melanie's life with Finn following the same patterns as the other transactions. Finn and Philip do not just share a phonetic similarity of names, they also share a fascination with women as spectacular commodity" (2000: 206). In a similar line of thinking, the authors of *Feminist Readings/Feminist Reading* state that Melanie "accepts the role of lover, wife and mother assigned to her by society... Finn has finally 'won' her from her Uncle Philip. In Carter's version of this patriarchal nightmare world, it would appear that there is no escape" (Mills et al. 1989: 138). Likewise, Palmer takes the ending of the novel as "a symptom of the continuing power of patriarchy" (1987: 187). However, these critics seem

<sup>3</sup> Freud talks about the Primordial Father in *Moses and Monotheism* and *Totem and Taboo*. This Primordial Father – to whom Lacan sometimes refers as obscene Father enjoyment – enjoyed limitless freedom and the members of the horde obeyed his dictates either out of habit or fear. Freud founded the Oedipus myth on the myth of the murder of this Father, who kept all women to himself and who did not let his sons enjoy them. (What Lacan says about the Primordial Father might be of interest at this point: "[t]he important feature of *Totem and Taboo* is that it is a myth, and, as has been said, perhaps the only myth that the modern age was capable of. And Freud created it" (Lacan 1992: 176)).

to disregard the point that Melanie is more empowered in this “symptom”. This might be taken as Carter’s feminist statement in the novel, no one becomes subordinate to the other, they are on equal terms. In this ending, as Wyatt states, Melanie reveals “a geometry of equality” (2000: 35). In fact, Melanie can be more than equal in this relationship, being there in the symbolic earlier she has the potential to play the upper hand. By lifting Finn up, she acquires agency and is on an equal footing with him. She shatters the normative patterns of the patriarchal discourse not from the imaginary – as Lacan suggests – but from within the symbolic.

## Conclusion

Although we acknowledge the significance of Melanie’s standing at the end of the novel, we argue that the most radical subversion of patriarchy in the novel comes from Margaret. The fact that Margaret was involved in incest indicates that she refuses to submit herself to the Law, as exemplified by the taboo of incest. Likewise, for the writers of *Feminist Readings/Feminist Reading*, Margaret is Carter’s “covert authorial rage” and the real challenge to patriarchy is offered by Margaret rather than Melanie (Mills et al. 1989: 139). That is, her defiance of the Law is not different from Uncle Philip’s, who too is outside the symbolic due to his abrogation of the first taboo against incest. The Jowles’ occult rebellion is “conducted through music, images and incest” (Sage 2007: 16) with Margaret as the centerpiece of this challenge to patriarchal discourse. However, because it takes place in the imaginary, her challenge cannot be verbalised and cannot be integrated into the linguistic domain; it is therefore doomed to remain in their intrasubjectivity. Then, the ending of the novel seems to perpetuate the significance Lacan attaches to the symbolic with its Law: the imaginary can disrupt the symbolic but, in essence, cannot transform it. This detail also points to the difference between the social and the symbolic accounts of kinship and identity. These characters are in the social in London, doing business with others, but not in the symbolic, which “is precisely what sets limits to any and all utopian efforts to reconfigure and relive kinship relations at some distance from the Oedipal scene” (Butler 2000: 20). In the symbolic the paternal metaphor forestalls the subject’s incestuous desires and the subject renounces the incestuous desire and submits to the Law, which is thus “the ‘threshold’ between nature and culture according to which the individual is prohibited from having sexual relations with those ‘named’ as kin” (Lloyd 2007: 89). So the taboo against incest is the universal Law in the symbolic but it is not acknowledged by Margaret.

By way of conclusion, in the novel Carter engages in a "reverse anthropology" (Sage 2007: 2) and "allows certain cracks and fissures to become visible in patriarchal structures and roles" (Palmer 1987: 184). In her subversive repetition, what Carter says in the following quotation is actualised: "I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" (1997: 37). By shifting the angle in the Oedipal process and by enabling Melanie to subvert patriarchal norms not from the imaginary but from within the symbolic, Carter seems to put "new wine in old bottles".

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