



# An Analysis of the Images in Angela Carter's Short Stories from the Perspective of Female Gothic

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**Abstract.** Interpreting literature from a gender perspective has profound implications for feminist development. The collision of contemporary Gothic studies with feminist waves has produced the introduction of the concept of the Female Gothic. It triggered a large number of scholars to reread and reinterpret the classic texts, but only a relatively small number of studies have focused on the deeper meanings of the various imagery in the texts. This paper will take two of Angela Carter's short stories as examples to analyse in depth the Gothic fiction imagery in them and the rich symbolism behind it. Analysing three representative images from Carter's novel, which includes castle, darkness, and flower, and comparing them with the use of imagery in previous Gothic novels and Female Gothic novels written before her work completes Carter's inheritance of and transcendence of the genre and the concept of the Female Gothic novel, resulting in a distinctive style that is uniquely her own.

**Keywords:** Gothic; Female Gothic; imagery; feminism; genre

## 1 Introduction

Gothic novels appeared in the 18th century in Britain, and the first one is Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, which has profound and complex historical and social reasons behind the emergence of the genre. In short, the Gothic novel is a rebellion against the extreme rationalism and Neoclassicism of Europe. Therefore, it is a marginal, challenging and subversive genre from the very beginning, and as a kind of "sub-literature", it has always kept a certain distance from the mainstream literature.

In her groundbreaking *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers introduced the term 'Female Gothic' to describe how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women novelists employ certain coded expressions to describe anxieties over domestic entrapment and female sexuality<sup>[1]</sup>. Although the concept of Female Gothic was not explicitly named until the 20th century, and then gradually refined, feminists who devoted themselves to this study were actually engaged in a process of "rediscovery". When studying the texts of 18th- and 19th-century women writers, feminist scholars of the second wave of feminism discovered that, in addition to the classic elements of the Gothic novel, in the Female Gothic novel, the source of fear did not come from the supernatural, but rather

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from women's anxiety about their own gender identities in a patriarchal social system. In the Gothic novel, one of the main means of reflecting the character's fear is through the description of the environment, and imagery is the most frequently used technique, and even in a sense is a part of the environment, therefore, imagery and its deeper meanings are undoubtedly important in the Gothic novel.

In the studies on Carter's works in recent years, Yaxuan Wang has focused on the unnatural narrative features in Carter's works. One of her main view is that Angela Carter's unnatural narratives are guided by multiculturalism, which is also associated with feminism in her works, reaching a unity between the narrative content of the text and the author's philosophical concepts<sup>[2]</sup>. Tianqi Yu analyses the theme of female growth in Carter's short stories. She argued that traditionally, women grow up introspective, with their ideals and destinations in life resting on marriage and family and often succumbing to socially moulded and commonly expected images, yet Carter's female characters go to great lengths to establish themselves through killing<sup>[3]</sup>.

However, at this stage, there are only a few studies analysing the imagery appeared in the genre of Female Gothic novels, and since the definition of Female Gothic began with the study of the works of earlier female writers, and the works of contemporary female writers may be different from those of their predecessors, this paper chooses to categorise and analyse the imagery in a few of Angela Carter's more representative short stories.

## 2 Imagery in Angela Carter's short novels

### 2.1 Castle

As one of the most iconic images of Gothic fiction, the old castle or mansion has almost become the setting that identifies this genre of fiction. Beginning with *The Castle of Otranto*, generations of Gothic novelists have attempted to work with blood, murder, curses, and ghosts in isolated castles, over time making the iconic imagery of the castle "represent patriarchy's ancient power and hide the fatal secrets that prophesy its fall"<sup>[4]</sup>.

In traditional Gothic novels, the castle space is set less as a stage and more as a symbol - a symbol of aristocratic status - that reveals the identity of the protagonist, and provides room for the predestination as well as the development of a family curse or secret. The supernatural element is also more easily represented in the castle - generations of the family have lived in a common place, and it only makes sense that their dead souls would haunt it; in combination with the appearance and construction of the castle itself, the intense darkness in the stories has a source, adding even more horror to the story.

However, unlike traditional Gothic narratives, female Gothic authors choose the spatial imagery of the ancient castle mainly out of the authors' own conscious or unconscious repression and anxiety, which stems from the "otherness" of women who are intentionally marginalised in the patriarchal society, because women "Literally confined to the house, figuratively confined to a single 'place'"<sup>[5]</sup>. Overall, this type of

imagery of enclosed spaces symbolise the patriarchal society that confines the female self<sup>[6]</sup>.

*The Bloody Chamber* opens with the end of the heroine's train journey - a castle in the sea, the home of her new husband. The main difference between this castle and the previous ones in Gothic novels is that it is located in the middle of the sea, which means that it serves as an image of an enclosed space that is more isolated and more difficult to escape from. The imagery of the castle in the sea adds to the logic of the story, as the heroine almost accepts that she will be decapitated because the castle is "cut off by the tide from land for half a day"<sup>[7]</sup>, and she cannot save herself. What's more, there is a reasonable guess that the previous wives who were killed were also unable to escape because of the location of the castle's natural isolation. The imagery itself symbolises the authority of the husband, the authority of the patriarchal society itself. The castle is "he" and "he" is the castle, and in this enclosed space "he" is almost God, because everyone acts according to his will. The heroine has no subjectivity at all. He lures her into the chamber to spy on his secrets, and he decides whether she lives or dies, and even how she dies. In the end, the heroine's mother rides into the castle on horseback, not only to save the heroine's life, but also as a symbol of female power, subverting the authority represented by the castle in the sea, and breaking the deadlock with her own strength, tearing open a gap in the patriarchal society.

In Carter's novels, women break the mould of being either trapped in the castle or a ghost in the castle, and become the real subjects of the story, the subjects in control of their own destinies. This is what distinguishes Carter's Female Gothic novels from her predecessors: the female protagonists determine the direction of the story.

It is also worth mentioning that the imagery of closed spaces such as castles also contributes to another classic imagery of Gothic novel, especially Female Gothic novels - entrapment and escape, both of which naturally refer to a patriarchal society. However, due to space constraints, the author will not analyse them in detail for the time being.

## 2.2 Darkness

This imagery is almost always linked to the imagery of the castle analysed in the previous subsection. Ancient castles themselves were not very light-permeable due to their architectural design, so where there were no windows there was only darkness if candles were not lit, and it was also because of the gloom and dampness that conditions were created for the formation of chambers and cellars.

The Gothic novel itself has been labelled by critics as "dark romanticism", and traditional Gothic novels often use darkness as an imagery, along with several other classic elements such as ghosts, spirits and other paranormal phenomena, with the main purpose of creating a macabre atmosphere, evoking fear within the reader, and immersing him or her in the experiences of the book's protagonist.

In these stories, the imagery of darkness is only part of the external environment, and can even be described as one of the supernatural elements - the curtain of darkness is drawn back so that wandering ghosts and ancient vampires with green-

ish-white skin can make their appearance. It is only when a person's eyesight isn't so good that they can't see what's hidden in the darkness that fear has room to develop further in the mind of the audience

Carter's novel gives new meaning to the imagery of darkness.

In *The Bloody Chamber*, the heroine walks down a dark corridor with a taper in her hand, travelling alone to a hidden and unknown chamber to see the bodies of her previous wives, who were killed by her husband in the darkness of the chamber. The dark imagery here naturally serves its traditional purpose of setting the mood, but more than that, it symbolises the unknown dark side of the husband's heart, as the darkness and horror of the chamber is brought about by him. As mentioned earlier, the castle is him, and the chamber is hidden in the castle, just as his secret dark side is hidden beneath the elegant exterior. This is one of the differences between the Female Gothic novel and the traditional Gothic novel: more attention is paid to the story of what happens within the family rather than choosing supernatural themes to express the fear triggered by external influences, i.e., "trying to rationalise excessive imagery"<sup>[6]</sup> and not pursuing sensual stimulation intentionally. The later description of the darkness outside the window after the heroine leaves the chamber also confirms that the darkness is a symbol of her husband, "Every lamp in my room burned, to keep the dark outside, yet it seemed still to encroach on me,"<sup>[7]</sup>. As long as she is in this closed castle, the light will not dispel the darkness, and she will not be able to escape his will.

While in *The Lady of the House of Love*, the dark castle where the female vampire lives for so long, has a very different symbolic meaning. The heroine of the story is in dense darkness from the very beginning, because of her vampiric habits, she has to keep the doors and windows closed, not to let in any light, and to follow her destiny - to lure men to feed on her, but she is already tired of and secretly rebellious against everything in her life, "In her dream, she would like to be human"<sup>[7]</sup>. The darkness is clearly symbolic of the fixed path of her successive ancestors, who lived as vampires, and of the established destiny that she wants to subvert. As she falls in love with the officer, her spirit of defiance breaks the ring of her destiny, and with it, "The shutters, the curtains, even the long-sealed windows of the horrid bedroom were all opened up and light and air streamed in"<sup>[7]</sup>, and the darkness ceased to exist. She chooses to defy her fate of dull darkness at the cost of her life, and ultimately wins the fatal but unprecedented light in her life. Here, the heroine's death is by her own choice, rather than being influenced or dictated by the any "man" in the book, reflecting a true sense of feminism.

In these two Female Gothic novels, the imagery of darkness is symbolised in different ways, but not as much as in traditional Gothic novels, where the external horror of the environment causes the character's inner fear, but mainly serves the storyline, with more far-reaching symbolic meanings.

### 2.3 Flowers

The way flower imagery appears in Gothic novels is mostly related to the deaths and funerals of female characters and is used to symbolise female chastity. However, in Carter's novel, the meaning of floral imagery changes dramatically.

The lily has long been a symbol of holiness and therefore appears in many portraits of the Virgin Mary. This imagery is recurring in *The Bloody Chamber* and is parallel to the development of the storyline in the text. From the outset the lily seems to be an unsettling symbol, and the heroine, remembering the scene of her new husband's proposal, invokes the funeral lilies, a analogy seemingly unrelated to jubilation, to describe him, "he seemed to me like a lily"<sup>[7]</sup>. The husband likewise chooses this flower to celebrate their wedding by filling her bedroom with white lilies, but the heroine feels that the bedroom "looked like an embalming parlour"<sup>[7]</sup>. In fact, she has had a premonition, "in my heart, I'd always known its lord would be the death of me"<sup>[7]</sup>. Up to this point, the lily almost always appears at the same time as the word funeral, making clear its symbolic meaning - death. When her husband leaves the castle, the scene that the heroine sees "the thick glass distorted their fat stems so they looked like arms, dismembered arms"<sup>[7]</sup> clearly hinting at her subsequent discovery of the bodies of his previous wives in the bloody chamber. Besides, the same lilies are in the vase next to the corpse's casket in the chamber. Finally, when "there emanate from him ... a stench of absolute despair"<sup>[7]</sup>, it seems that the lilies around him "all at once began to fester"<sup>[7]</sup>, which, like the description at the beginning, suggests that the lilies represent him. The lilies were prepared for me, not for my wedding, but for my funeral; they were also a symbol of the husband, who had planned my death from the beginning. However, it is Carter's feminist rewriting of the story of Bluebeard, in which the mother shoots and kills her husband, that finally reveals that lily actually foreshadows his death, not hers.

The story of *The Lady of the House of Love* itself seems to be drenched in a strong scent of roses. In the end, when Vampire dies, she leaves the army officer with a rose on her bed. This rose is the symbol of vampire. Though her life is lost, her love are transformed into a rose to keep him company. At the same time, the red rose, which was later soaked in water and bloomed again, also "signify the bloodshed of the First World War"<sup>[8]</sup>.

To sum up, the flower imagery in Carter's Female Gothic novels no longer has a single meaning, contributing to the beautiful and strange atmosphere of her novels.

## 3 Conclusion

This thesis analyses in detail the imagery in Angela Carter's short stories from the perspective of Female Gothicism, and discovers the differences between Angela Carter's use of imagery and that of traditional Gothic novels and even previous Female Gothic novels, so as to make clear the transcendence and breakthrough of Carter's writing to the this genre.

In *The Bloody Chamber*, the imagery of the castle in the sea is intruded by the mother, symbolising the destruction of the husband and the cracks in the patriarchal

society; the imagery of darkness symbolises the darkness of the husband's heart, not mainly to evoke the fear of the character; and the imagery of the lilies connects the storyline from the beginning to the end, corresponding to the funeral and the death, except that it is not the husband's intention to be the heroine's death, but the end of his own life.

The great darkness of the old castle in *The Lady of the House of Love* is a symbol of the heroine's destiny - to live as a vampire, drinking human blood and avoiding the light, but she chooses to break with the routines of her ancestor's life so that the curtains are opened wide to let the light in, even though it means death; and the red roses are a symbol of herself and her love for the officer, Death takes her, but does not let her disappear completely, she becomes a rose accompanied by her lover, but at the same time this heavy red is also the colour of blood, suggesting that the lover will go to the battle of blood and cruelty.

All in all, very different from the traditional Gothic novels, Carter gives different meanings to the strange and beautiful imagery in her writing, constructing very fantastical and gorgeous Gothic novels, coupled with feminist colours in the fairy tale adaptation, and ultimately forming a unique style, which is her greatest transcendence to the Gothic novels and even Female Gothic novels.

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