

REFLECTION IS HAVING A BLAST: THE PARAMETERS OF REPRESENTATION IN ANGELA CARTER'S *LOVE*



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Abstract: To say that there is one way of looking at things in a mirror is moot. The ambivalent position of the viewer, who is paradoxically also the viewed, as s/he watches himself/herself in the mirror, as merely confrontational, standing in front of the mirror, no angles, no nuances involved is what begets ambiguity in terms of reflection and rendition in literature or in the visual arts. This paper looks at that very ambiguity.

Key words: reflection, representation, mirroring, glimpses, inklings, vistas.

They do it with mirrors

It is one of Angela Carter's m.o.'s to muster tropes of ambivalence and ambiguity in tackling her recurring, obsessive theme, that of the putative impossibility of genuine, all-encompassing reflection of the real in literature or, more often than not, what is perceived as the real. Or, in other words, debunking the age-old cliché of literature, or the arts at large mirroring reality. Indeed, hers is an authorial stance of ambivalence, her contrivance yielding myriad fathomable interpretations. It is within this feast of interpretative excess that her novel titled *Love* (1971) unravels. Whether it's truncated reality or distorted mirroring of acts and faces, Carter's rendering of reality adroitly circumvents precision and instead bestows the uncanny, the improbable onto its readers.

Literature, and all of the arts, (among which the theatre, the

art of the circus - to say nothing of the distorting mirrors in a fun fair - stand out in this respect), brandish smoke-screening, evasiveness and artifice at the unsuspecting spectator, who is there to see – as the very etymology of the word spectator yields, *i.e.* the Latin *speculum* – but do they really? What is there to be seen, to be watched is a matter of infinite speculation. Is it the author's vision and hence take on events, or is it intrinsically that which unfolds before our very eyes as spectators? What is then the role of convention in the arts? To what extent are the arcane meanings thereof accessible to us as readers, as spectators? Can we unfold ...ample interpretation thereof, the esoteric quality of the arts notwithstanding?

As Carter intriguingly states,

“The world unshelled itself or she unshelled the world and she found, beneath the crust of spiked armour, a kernel of plasticine limply begging to be rendered into forms. As she grew more confident this was so, she drew a final picture of Lee as a unicorn whose horn had been amputated. Her imagery was by no means inscrutable. Then her sketchbooks were put away for good ...”
(Carter 1971: 77)

Apart from the ideological strip-tease, as it were (“the world unshelled itself”) that the reflection of – tangible – reality might connote, there is also a two-fold twist at work here: the wishful thinking of seeing, indeed of encountering a unicorn-like person, with all the sublime overtones of human personality (albeit the sublime being only likely in Nature, not in mankind, but that is yet another whirlpool of ambiguity that Carter sends us spinning into, as the unicorn straddles the categories of animal, be it fantastic and of human aspiration), and subsequently contriving an amputation of the horn when the ‘unicorn’ fails to be a genuine one, as encounters in life are at times riddled with the thwarted imagery of uniqueness only to later lapse into disenchantment. It is the latter stance that Carter's character, Annabel chooses to obscure. Hence the putative unicorn IS a unicorn, in her view, and it is only, she contrives, that his horn has been amputated.

This is clinically accurate not solely, as Carter would have it, of the absence of the horn, but broadly speaking of the inability of humanity at large to recognize a unicorn when they see it. In