Evolving Feminism: Angela Carter and “Glam Rock” Feminism

Feminism is a concept that is not easily defined. Feminism is a complex ideology that encompasses many different subcategories that are all uniquely different from one another. One of the most radical and stylish fiction authors of the 20th century, Angela Carter, expresses her views of feminism through her various novels, fairy tales, and re-writes of fairy tales. In Anna Katasavos’s interview with Carter, she describes how Carter believes that women are represented in a very negative light with less than ideal roles that neither please nor glorify them (4). Through Carter’s fairy tales, Carter is looking to encourage women to do something about this degrading representation by rising up and fighting against the oppression and fighting for equality.

The majority of Angela Carter’s works revolve around a specific type of feminism, radical-libertarian feminism, and her critiques of the patriarchal roles that have been placed on women throughout time. Her female protagonists often take on empowered roles where they rise up against oppression and fight for both sexual and political equality. The actions of these women are direct reflections of the feminist movement that took place in the 1970’s. Although Carter is British, her pieces heavily depict what women from the U.S feminist movement were fighting for. Specifically, her earliest pieces, “Miss Z, the Dark Young Lady” and “The Donkey Prince” as well as her later piece, The Bloody Chamber, heavily reflect concepts from within this movement relating specifically to the ideologies of radical-libertarian feminists. There is a debate, however, regarding the extent to which she promotes feminism due to her eccentric style, referred to as “glam rock” feminism.
While it cannot be denied that Carter is most definitely a “glam rock” feminist, using colorful imagery, sensuous prose, and her outrageous imagination to portray her message, the controversial aspect is whether this style is successful. Using her female protagonists to enact her feminist beliefs, critics such as Patricia Dunker and Avis Lewallen, argue that she takes her feminist activism too far in the sense that her stories become too fantastic to serve as an effective tool to promote feminism. Dunker and Lewallen also argue that Carter does not urge women to reclaim their sexuality, but instead succumb to the sexual desires of men instead of fighting for her own sexual wants. Anyone who reads Carter’s fairy tales will agree that they are baroque, but they will also agree that they most certainly understood Carter’s feminist messages. Although classified as “glam rock,” Carter is still a highly effective feminist author because she uses her intense, extravagant style to literally shove feminist ideals into the face of the audience. By doing so, she makes it impossible to ignore her feminist message. The way critics understand Carter’s sexual message is also flawed. The sexual desires of Carter’s male antagonist, often in some beastly form, are symbolic of the females’ sexual desires. Therefore, when the women engage in these sexual actions, she is claiming her own desires. Thus, in her earliest pieces, “Miss Z, the Dark Young Lady” and “The Donkey Prince” through her progressively more radical, The Bloody Chamber, Angela Carter can be seen as a devoted radical-libertarian feminist who promotes her beliefs about empowering women to escape male oppressive forces, reclaiming sexual identity, and deconstructing patriarchal roles by acknowledging female curiosity.

Today, Angela Carter is best remembered for her extravagant writings in which she provides a feminist critique of Western culture by exploring themes of power distribution, sexuality, and patriarchal roles. This style helped make her a highly regarded radical
feminist writer of what one critic called “unique and imaginative nonfiction and sharply political and insightful feminist nonfiction” (“Carter” 1). Angela Carter’s upbringing served as the foundation for her radical style and career as a feminist author.

Born in London England on May 7, 1940, Carter was surrounded by writing and radicalism. Her father was a journalist and her grandmother was a working-class suffragist and radical (“Carter” 2). During the Second World War, Carter was evacuated by her grandmother to a village called Wall-upon-Deare. It is believed that Carter’s grandmother had a heavy influence on Carter’s upbringing and therefore served as her role model from whom Carter developed her radical persona (“Carter” 2). Carter attended the University of Bristol from 1962 to 1965 where she studied psychology, anthropology, science fiction and horror comics (“Carter” 2). After graduating from college, she wrote for the two British journals, *New Society* and *Guardian*. Carter went out and observed and studied British culture and then wrote critiques on what she observed for the journals. This wasn’t the last time Carter used her feminist influence in Britain. In 1989, “Onlywomen Press,” a women’s publication in Britain, tried to rally people against a bill, Section 28, which banned the government funding to presses that publish any works that promote homosexuality (Anderson 1). Angela Carter was one of this press’ greatest supporters (Anderson 1). A year after graduation, in 1969, Carter traveled to Japan where she lived for two years (“Carter” 2). Carter claims that this marked a significant turning point in her life, both professionally and personally because she was heavily influenced by the way the Japanese lived their lives free from distinction between existence and essence (Sage 4). The Japanese influence helped her find her identity and voice as a woman and social radical.
Carter began experimenting with writing fairy tales in 1970, which coincided with the period of second-wave feminism in the United States. The 1970’s was the era of the women’s liberations when second-wave feminists fought for rights and opportunities that were equal to men as well as freedom of choice (Tong 50). Second-wave feminists drew inspiration from the civil rights movement (Tong 50). This type of feminism was composed mostly of middle-class women who engaged whole-heatedly in the spirit of rebellion. Most of these women also belonged to the women’s rights groups, “National Organization for Women,” or “NOW” (Tong 48). The formation of NOW was a result of the renewed activism among professional women in the post-war era (Evans 63). The goal of this group was to improve women’s status by applying legal and social pressures on companies and institutions ranging from phone companies to the major political parties (Tong 24). Second-wave feminists dominated the women’s movement in Western culture during the 1970’s.

Emerging from second-wave feminism was a subcategory of feminist women dubbed radical-libertarian feminists. These women united under the idea that what is personal is political, meaning that if women do not do something about the current patriarchal conditions plaguing them in society, then the fate of all women is the same (Tong 49). All women will continue to be suppressed by men regardless of the situation. Therefore, these feminists promoted the idea that women need to become “androgynous persons,” or women who possess both good masculine traits and good feminine traits (Tong 50). Radical-libertarian feminists stressed that just because a woman’s anatomy deems her female, that does not necessarily means she can only possess the usual characteristics of beauty, ignorance, charm, serenity, and peaceful. They argue that patriarchal society uses rigid gender roles to keep women passive and men active. Society uses these patriarchal guidelines to ensure that
women stay affectionate, obedient, responsive to sympathy and approval, cheerful, kind, and friendly and men stay tenacious, aggressive, curious, ambitious, responsible, and competitive. They rallied that women needed to mix and match masculine and feminine traits. The way to do this, they declared was for women to dispel men’s wrongful power over women by having both sexes recognize that women are no more destined to be passive then men are to be active (Tong 50). Thus, by developing a combination of masculine and feminine traits that best suits one’s personality will enable this recognition (Tong 50).

Another main goal of radical-libertarian feminists was to get women to reclaim their sexuality. They claimed that as feminists, they needed to promote the idea that women need to reclaim control over female sexuality by demanding the right to practice whatever gives them pleasure and satisfaction (Tong 49). Female sexual liberation was among radical-libertarian’s biggest messages. Radical-libertarian feminists wanted there to no longer be restraints on women’s right to choose. Angela Carter revolved her tales around these radical-libertarian goals.

In Angela Carter’s pieces, the female characters take on the roles of women who eventually embody male characteristics and engage in acts that are by no means feminine thus serve as an example of an “androgynous person.” Carter’s tales demonstrate women as being powerful and capable figures that can take charge of a situation and lead it to success. Miss Z from “Miss Z, the Dark Young Lady” and Daisy from “The Donkey Prince” are two of Carter’s female protagonists who take control of the situations they are in without the assistance of man. In “Miss Z, the Dark Young Lady,” Miss Z must restore peace and serenity on the Parrot Farm, her home, after the parrots cast a magic spell on their home when the father chased them off the land (Zipes 1). Due to the immense chaos that was
plaguing Miss Z’s home, she went to a wise woman to try to figure out a way to restore peace (Zipes 1). She was informed, however, that the parrots traveled to the land of green lions where they were going to return with the lions and force Miss Z and her father to return to Human Town (Zipes 1). Miss Z knows that the only way to solve this problem is to go to the country of green lions and speak to the Lion Prince to make the parrots return to Parrot Jungle. While her father is sick, Miss Z willingly makes this journey on her own (Zipes 1). Miss Z takes matters into her own hands and ventures to the land of green lions by herself and successfully restores peace to Parrot Jungle without any help from a male figure.

In “The Donkey Prince,” Daisy takes on a similar role. Daisy aides and guides the male character in the form of a donkey, Bruno, on his journey to try find the magic apple so that his mother with regain her health (Zipes 2). In order to do so, Daisy guides Bruno through Savage Mountain where she uses her wits to get the apple back from the antagonist, Terror (Zipes 2). Daisy acts very resourcefully and cleverly as she uses her intelligence and charm to impress Terror and get the apple back (Zipes 2). She succeeds without any male influence and everyone is rewarded. In both stories, Carter portrays the female heroine as resourceful, clever, and persistent young woman, characteristics that were foreign to women at the time under patriarchal roles, who are able to succeed without any assistance from a male figure. Both women were able to actively control their future as well as the future of the others around them in a positive manner (Zipes 2). In the end of both stories, everyone is rewarded. In “Miss Z”, happiness and order are restored in Parrot Jungle all because of Miss Z’s bravery and courage (Zipes 1). In “Donkey Prince,” Daisy gets married and falls in love and the Brown Men are transformed to male forms (Zipes 2). All of these rewards are
brought on because of the actions of the women. Carter uses Miss Z and Daisy to serve as an example of women who are empowered and capable and as a result are rewarded.

Carter’s earlier tales anticipated the tales in *The Bloody Chamber*, because although they were more down to earth, they encompass a radical feminist viewpoint that Carter built upon in *The Bloody Chamber*. Jack Zipes makes the connection that the plot and characters from “Miss Z” and “Donkey” were simply developed upon and make more radical in Carter’s later “The Bloody Chamber” (Zipes 1). Her radical-libertarian beliefs flourish in *The Bloody Chamber* from their origin in her earliest pieces. Miss Z and Daisy are both cunning young women who take charge and succeed, Miss Z by confronting the Parrot King and Daisy by venturing through Savage Mountain (Zipes 1-2). This idea of empowered, capable women is built upon in *The Bloody Chamber* as seen in Carter’s re-write of the story of Blue Bear, “The Bloody Chamber.” In “The Bloody Chamber” it is the mother in the end who storms through the doors and saves her daughter from being slaughtered by Blue Beard (Carter 39). In Carter’s re-write, her radical-libertarian message about empowering women is enhanced when the victimization of women is overturned by Blue Beard falling victim to the mother and daughter instead of the other way around, which was usually the scenario because of males supposedly dominant status over women (Makenen 6). As Carter describes in this tale, Blue Beard saw his “dolls,” women, break free from their “strings” and live their lives for themselves (Carter 39). Here, Carter is promoting the radical-libertarian idea that women need to break free from male oppression and become empowered. Only after they are empowered will they be able to live for themselves or live their own life.

Carter continues to promote her radical-libertarian beliefs specifically in *The Bloody Chamber*, where Carter’s female protagonists are pursuing their sexual desires and redefining
their sexual identity as well as fighting for sexual equality with men, which was the biggest goal for radical-libertarian feminists during the feminist movement. Carter promotes sexuality by not letting the male sexual desires take dominance. Instead, Carter pays particular attention to reinforce the equality of the sexual transactions between her male and female characters. This equal transaction is seen in “The Tiger’s Bride” between “Beauty” and the tiger. In the scene when Beauty and the tiger go down to the river, the tiger strips naked for her and in return she strips naked for him revealing to him the “fleshly nature of women” (Carter 65). The tiger does not declare that “Beauty” get naked for him and get nothing in return. Instead, by both of them stripping naked, Carter is asserting an equal transaction (Makinen 6). Merja Makinen notes that the beast figure, the lion, is symbolic of a sensuality that women have traditionally been taught harms them (6). When they embrace this sensuality, however, it empowers them and gives them a new strength and awareness regarding their own self and their other, in this case the lion (Makinen 6). Another example of equal transaction between men and women is seen in “The Company of Wolves,” when Little Red Riding Hood tears off the wolf’s clothing and throws them in the fire because his are also gone (Carter 118). From the scene, Carter puts women on an equal plane with men; Little Red Riding Hood returns the feeling of violation that the wolf, man, inflicting upon her (Manning 4). The equality that evolves from the equal sexual transactions between man and woman, as Carter depicts in “The Tiger’s Bride” and “The Company of Wolves” is significant and important in women’s fight for freedom from patriarchal roles and sexual oppression.

Another common theme in majority of Carter’s re-writes in the assertion of female sexual desires where the female protagonist actively asserts her sexual cravings and is
therefore reappropriating her female libido. Reclaiming female sexual identity was a widely enforced theme among radical-libertarian feminists and Carter used stories in *The Bloody Chamber* such as “The Tiger’s Bride” and “The Company of Wolves” to spread this message by giving women examples of how to reclaim their sexual identity through her female heroines. Critics like Makinen argue that in “The Tiger’s Bride”, the beast, in this case the tiger, is a direct representation of female sexual desires (7). The beast represents the sexual cravings of women. In “The Tiger’s Bride” when the tiger licks off each successive layer of skin until the woman is transformed into a tiger herself (Carter 67). The protagonist acknowledges and accepts her autonomous sexual desires (Makinen 6). By accepting her sexual wants, she is making them part of her being, which is seen by her becoming a tiger, a beast, since the beast is symbolic of female sexual desires (6). The assertion of sexual desire is also apparent in “The Company of Wolves” when Little Red Riding Hood asserts her own sexual appetite when she willingly gets into bed with the wolf (Carter 118). In “The Company of Wolves,” not only do we see equal transactions between the woman and the male character, as seen by Little Red Riding Hood wanting to be in bed with the wolf just as much as he wants her to be in bed with him, but from this scene we also see a woman asserting her sexual desires (Manning 4). Little Red Riding Hood wanted to share a sexual experience with the wolf and she asserts that autonomous desire by willingly getting into bed with him. These female heroines serve as prime examples of women reclaiming their feminine libido.

Carter continues to promote radical-libertarian feminism with the deconstruction of patriarchal roles, again another major focus of radical-libertarian feminism, by two means: having her heroine engage her curiosity and through gender roles reversal. In “The
Courtship of Mr Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride,” Carter’s heroines acknowledge their personal curiosity by exploring and engaging in what is dangerous and exhilarating. As opposed to a patriarchal standpoint, which would have looked down upon women engaging in the “dangerous” and therefore punish them for doing so, Carter rewards the protagonist by having her live a healthy lifestyle in the end, even after partaking in dangerous actions. In “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” what is dangerous is “Beauty” choosing to marry the beast when she tells the beast to take her if he’ll have her (Carter 51). After committing to what patriarchal society would view as a dangerous act, she is rewarded when the Beast turns into her “prince charming,” which Carter describes as “the handsomest of all the beast” (Carter 51). This theme is also seen in “The Tiger’s Bride,” when the female protagonist also chooses to return to the beast, the tiger, and live with him in harmony also as a tiger, which Carter described when the tiger licks off her skin and she morphs into a tiger (Carter 67). After the protagonist returns to the tiger, she is rewarded for engaging in this particular dangerous act by turning into a tiger and living peacefully with him and escaping her oppressed life as a woman. In both stories, the protagonist chooses to explore what is dangerous and engage in an exhilarating change that comes from choosing to abandon their patriarchal lifestyles and instead be with the beast (Makinen 6). By having her female protagonists partake in “dangerous” activities, she is deconstructing patriarchal roles because it is deemed in patriarchal society for women to veer away from their traditional, domestic roles. Carter’s heroines serve as example for other women to escape those oppressed roles.

Through gender role reversal, in other words women taking on male roles and characteristics, Carter is further able to deconstruct patriarchal roles. In Carter’s revision of “Blue Beard,” “The Bloody Chamber,” Blue Beard falls victim to his bride and her mother in
the end of the story when his bride escape and Blue Beard is killed by her mother (Carter 39). In this scenario, Blue Beard falls victim to the female instead of the other way around in which the woman, particularly brides, fall victim to the male figure or their husband. Man being dominant and active and woman being weak and passive are the traditional gender roles that society had set up for women. Through “The Bloody Chamber,” Carter reverses these roles by making the protagonist’s mother active and dominant over Blue Beard. (Makinen 6). The “hero” is also traditionally a male role. In “The Bloody Chamber,” it is the opposite as the mother takes on the role as “the hero” when she bursts into the room right as Blue Beard is about to decapitate her daughter (Carter 40). The mother heroically “saves the day” instead of man (Makinen 6).

Carter further deconstructs patriarchal roles in “The Company of Wolves” when she empowers the female protagonist by giving her courage and self-assurance, two masculine traits. (Manning 4). In “The Company of Wolves,” when she converses with the wolf in her grandma’s house about his teeth, she bursts out laughing in his face. Carter describes that “she knew she was nobody’s meat” (Carter 118). By laughing in his face, Carter shows that Little Red Riding Hood has courage and she is not afraid of him and self-assurance when Carter describes how “she knew she was nobody’s meat” (Manning 4). Courage and self-assurance are typically male characteristics; however, by Carter having Little Red Riding Hood encompass such traits, she is setting up a role reversal. She depicts Little Red Riding Hood as an “androgynous person”; someone who encompasses both good masculine and good feminine traits. Carter depicts women outside of the traditional domestic, passive ways women are usually described in patriarchal society and thus deconstructs patriarchal roles.
It is obvious that the author of “Angela Carter: Glam rock feminist,” along with some other non-feminist critics discussed in “Carter, Angela-Introduction” may disagree with me, because they argue that Carter’s exuberant style, also referred to as her “glam rock” style, serves as her major fault as a feminist author. They believe that the way she promotes the empowerment of women and the resistance to male oppression in her works is so overly extravagant that they become unrealistic (Roberts 2). This means that they focus on the fantastic means that Carter uses to promote feminist beliefs and criticize that is has made her pieces lose their appeal because they have become so dream-like that they have become incomprehensible, confusing and ineffective. After all, many believe that effective sources of encouragement are ones that the people it addresses can relate to. Critics argue that the way her female heroines go about fighting for equality and resisting oppression is so “magical” it isn’t realistic and women can’t relate. Indeed, my own argument that Carter’s “glam rock” style of writing makes her such a profound and accomplished author seems to ignore the fact that it also makes her pieces difficult to follow and highly fictitious.

Moreover, some critics such as Patricia Duncker and Avis Lewallen, discussed in Makinen’s article, as well as the critics mentioned in “Carter, Angela-Introduction” would probably object to my claim that Carter’s re-writes of fairy tales urge women to reclaim control over their sexual identity by acting upon their autonomous sexual desires, because Dunker and Lewallen claim that Carter fails to show women as having autonomous desires. They claim that Carter re-wrote her fairy tales in The Bloody Chamber within their traditional, original framework preventing her from being able to represent women with autonomous desires (Makinen 2). Therefore, instead of providing her female characters with a real sense of choice in the sexual acts they participate in, her heroines simply succumb to
and embrace the sexual desires of men because they know that men will inevitably always have power over women, so instead of resisting this power, they embrace it (Makinen 7 and “Carter” 3). The heroines don’t fight the sexual cravings of men; they embrace it because they feel there is no point in resisting in.

Although I grant that Carter’s writings are very baroque and fantastic, I still maintain that Carter is a highly effective feminist author. On the one hand, I agree with the author of “Angela Carter: Glam rock feminist” and the critics mentioned in “Carter, Angela-Introduction” that her pieces are very fictional and encompass a “magical” persona making them difficult to follow. But on the other hand, I still insist that when compared to the original versions of the tales, that possess details of passive femininity, Carter’s re-writes of the fairy tales in The Bloody Chamber, although heavily tainted with extravagant features and plots, are so boldly feminist because she uses her eccentric style of writing to shove examples of empowered women in the audiences face. Carter also refutes this argument by admitting that she does write outside the realistic realm, but only because she doesn’t want her stories to be like “etiquette manuals,” which she calls realist novels (Makinen 3).

Additionally, although I grant that the sexual conflicts in Carter’s pieces can be seen as women not embracing their sexual desires, but rather succumbing to man’s sexual desires, I still maintain that Carter’s re-writes do not promote women re-enacting male pornography, but instead women searching for and regaining possession over their libido (Makinen 7). On the one hand, I agree with Dunker when she reads Carter’s tales as examples of men always being the “beast” to women. But on the other hand, I insist that her analysis of Carter’s sexual relations between her heroines and man is too simplistic. Instead, the beast and his sexual desires serves as the feminine libido, making it the female’s autonomous desire, which
is precisely the reason why she agrees to engage in the sexual act (Makinen 7). She engages in the sexual acts not because she is not giving up fighting men, but because the sexual desires of the “beast” is suppose to be symbolic of feminine libido.

Carter applied the main beliefs and goals of radical-libertarian feminism to her earliest works and from there further expanded her work upon the same feminist ideals. The only difference that can be noted is that while the ideas of empowering women, rising against oppression and the other radical-libertarian feminist views uphold, Carter became more radical is promoting these feminist ideas, as seen in the extremely radical and “in your face” revisions in The Bloody Chamber. Her “glam rock” style helped her become such an effective feminist activist because it was unlike anything the people had ever read. She exposed the “dirty truths” that everyone knew but never spoke about. She was blunt, forceful, dramatic, and horrific in the tales, but they did the job; they helped empower women. Through her heroines in her tales and their experiences, she gave women examples to follow to help lead them through their journey to equality with man.

Works Cited


http://www.independent.co.uk/arts/entertainment/books/features/Angela-carter-glam-rock>.

