



Angela Carter

(1940-1992)

Life and works

Angela Carter was born at Eastbourne, Sussex, in 1940. She **worked as a journalist** from the age of eighteen and took a degree in English at the University of Bristol. In 1972 she **went to Japan** where she lived for two years. She was a **fellow in Creative Writing at Sheffield University** from 1976 to 1978 and **in the USA** in the early Eighties. She published several novels including *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), which she described as 'a malign fairy-tale'; *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972); *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), which she conceived as 'a feminist tract about the social creation of femininity'; *Nights at the Circus* (1984), the picaresque and allegorical story of a female acrobat who is known as 'Fevvers', that is 'feathers', because she has wings. She also wrote two collections of short stories, *Fireworks* (1974) and *The Bloody Chamber* (1979); two works of non-fiction, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979) and *Nothing Sacred* (1982), a collection of her journalism. She died of cancer in 1992.

Themes

Committed to **feminism**, Carter **makes use of folklore, literature and classical myths, and also of the modern mythologies of Freud and Jung** (→ 6.3), in order to explore issues that affect women today. In this respect,

her production can be divided into two periods. The first coincides with her formation through the experiences of the 1960s and her questioning of a reality organised around male power and institutions. As she developed through the 1970s into the 1980s, she was more radical in emphasising **female power** and women's actual possibilities for change in their personal and social lives. She took ideas and images from every kind of source and carried on what she called '**the demythologising business**': 'All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsense; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth anyway.'

Style

Carter adopted the medium of the **fairy tale re-written**, giving her own version of classical fairy stories. Retaining the essential facts of the tales, she modified details, changed perspectives or introduced a different mood. She gave **prominence to the female point of view**, turning the female roles from passive into active. She exploited the possibilities of the interaction between animal and human worlds in her remarkably original re-writing of the *Little Red Riding Hood* story, in which the girl, instead of being eaten by the wolf, is confronted by a werewolf figure.

Key idea

Contemporary Gothic

The term 'magic realism' (→ Across Cultures) is usually applied to Angela Carter's works, since her fiction slides easily between the illusion of everyday reality and the marvellous, and it employs dreams or metaphors to say something about social, historical and psychological realities. Her novels have some of the restless, questioning

impulse that characterises much of 'Gothic novel' (→ 4.6): within this tradition, she explores the dark aspects of sexuality as well as disturbing manifestations of violence or she analyses the feelings of attraction and repulsion exerted by demonic figures; she creates the recurring image of a dark, falling house that is the allegory of Great Britain.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the texts about Angela Carter and answer the following questions.

- 1 How do the two periods of Carter's career differ?
- 2 How did she revisit the fairy tale genre?
- 3 Whose point of view did she mainly adopt?
- 4 Why is the term 'magic realism' applied to her works?
- 5 How did the Gothic tradition influence her novels?



The Werewolf¹

Published in the collection The Bloody Chamber in 1979, the following story is Angela Carter's peculiar version of the Little Red Riding Hood story.

Angela Carter
The Bloody Chamber
(1979)

It is a northern country; they have cold weather, they have cold hearts.

Cold; tempest; wild beasts in the forest. It is a hard life. Their houses are built of logs, dark and smoky within. There will be a **crude** icon of the virgin behind a guttering² candle, the leg of a pig hung up to cure³, a string of drying mushrooms. A bed, a stool⁴,
5 a table. Harsh, brief, poor lives.

To these upland woodsmen⁵, the Devil is as real as you or I. More so; they have not seen us nor even know that we exist, but the Devil they glimpse⁶ often in the graveyards, those **bleak** and touching townships of the dead where the graves are marked with portraits of the deceased⁷ in the naïf style and there are no flowers to put
10 in front of them, no flowers grow there, so they put out small, votive offerings, little loaves, sometimes a cake that the bears come lumbering⁸ from the margins of the forest to snatch away⁹. At midnight, especially on Walpurgisnacht¹⁰, the Devil holds picnics in the graveyards and invites the witches; then they dig up fresh corpses, and eat them. Anyone will tell you that.

Wreaths of garlic¹¹ on the doors keep out the vampires. A blue-eyed child born feet first on the night of St John's Eve will have second sight¹². When they discover a witch – some old woman whose cheeses ripen¹³ when her neighbours' do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh, sinister! follows her about all the time, they strip the crone¹⁴, search for her marks, for the supernumerary nipple¹⁵ her familiar¹⁶ sucks. They
20 soon find it. Then they stone her to death.

Winter and cold weather.

Go and visit grandmother, who has been sick. Take her the oatcakes I've baked¹⁷ for her on the hearthstone¹⁸ and a little pot of butter.

The good child does as her mother bids¹⁹ – five miles' trudge²⁰ through the forest; do
25 not leave the path because of the bears, the wild boar²¹, the starving wolves. Here, take your father's hunting knife; you know how to use it.

The child had a **scabby** coat of sheepskin to keep out the cold, she knew the forest too well to fear it but she must always be on her guard. When she heard that freezing howl of a wolf, she dropped her gifts, seized her knife and turned on the beast.

It was a huge one, with red eyes and running, grizzled chops²²; any but a mountaineer's child would have died of fright at the sight of it. It went for her throat, as
30 wolves do, but she made a great swipe²³ at it with her father's knife and slashed off²⁴ its right forepaw²⁵.

The wolf let out a gulp²⁶, almost a sob²⁷, when it saw what had happened to it; wolves
35 are less brave than they seem. It went lolloping²⁸ off disconsolately between the trees as well as it could on three legs, leaving a trail of blood behind it. The child wiped the blade²⁹ of her knife clean on her apron³⁰, wrapped up³¹ the wolf's paw in the cloth in which her mother had packed the oatcakes and went on towards her grandmother's house. Soon it came on to snow so thickly that the path and any footsteps, track or
40 spoor³² that might have been upon it were obscured.

She found her grandmother was so sick she had taken to her bed and fallen into a **fretful** sleep, moaning³³ and shaking so that the child guessed she had a fever. She felt the forehead, it burned. She shook out the cloth from her basket, to use it to make the old woman a cold compress³⁴, and the wolf's paw fell to the floor. But it was no longer
45 a wolf's paw. It was a hand, chopped off at the wrist³⁵, a hand **toughened** with work and **freckled** with old age. There was a wedding ring on the third finger and a wart³⁶ on the index finger. By the wart, she knew it for her grandmother's hand.

She pulled back the sheet but the old woman woke up, at that, and began to struggle, squawking and shrieking³⁷ like a thing possessed. But the child was strong, and armed

- 1 Werewolf. Lupo mannaro, licantropo.
- 2 guttering. Che cola.
- 3 to cure. A stagionare.
- 4 stool. Sgabello.
- 5 upland woodsmen. Montanari abitanti dei boschi.
- 6 they glimpse. Intravedono.
- 7 the deceased. I defunti.
- 8 lumbering. Muovendosi goffamente.
- 9 to snatch away. Per rubare.
- 10 Walpurgisnacht. Notte di Valpurga (tra il 30 aprile e il 1° maggio quando, secondo la tradizione, si riunivano le streghe).
- 11 Wreaths of garlic. Ghirlande di aglio.
- 12 second sight. Prescienza, capacità di prevedere il futuro.
- 13 ripen. Maturano, stagionano.
- 14 they strip the crone. Spogliano la vecchia strega.
- 15 nipple. Capezzolo.
- 16 familiar. Familiare; *qui*: il diavolo.
- 17 the oatcakes I've baked. Le focaccine d'avena che ho cotto.
- 18 hearthstone. Camino.
- 19 bids. Ordina.
- 20 trudge. Scarpinata.
- 21 wild boar. Cinghiale.
- 22 running, grizzled chops. Fauci grigie e bavose.
- 23 she made a great swipe. Sferro' un colpo violento.
- 24 slashed off. Tagliò via.
- 25 forepaw. Zampa anteriore.
- 26 gulp. Singulto.
- 27 sob. Singhiozzo.
- 28 lolloping. Zoppicando.
- 29 blade. Lama.
- 30 apron. Grembiule.
- 31 wrapped up. Avvolse.
- 32 spoor. Orma.
- 33 moaning. Gemendo, lamentandosi.
- 34 compress. Impacco.
- 35 chopped off at the wrist. Tagliata di netto all'altezza del polso.
- 36 wart. Verruca.
- 37 squawking and shrieking. Emettendo suoni rauchi e strillando.



50 with her father's hunting knife; she managed to hold her grandmother down long enough to see the cause of her fever. There was a bloody stump³⁸ where her right hand should have been, festering³⁹ already.

The child crossed herself and cried out so loud the neighbours heard her and came rushing in. They knew the wart on the hand at once for a witch's nipple; they drove 55 the old woman, in her shift⁴⁰ as she was, out into the snow with sticks, beating her old carcass as far as the edge of the forest, and pelted⁴¹ her with stones until she fell down dead.

Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered.

- 38 **stump.** Moncone.
- 39 **festering.** In suppurazione.
- 40 **shift.** Sottoveste, camicia da notte.
- 41 **pelted.** Colpirono ripetutamente.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted adjectives and participles with their meaning.

- 1 hardened
- 2 not quiet
- 3 rudimentary
- 4 rough
- 5 covered with dark spots of the skin
- 6 bare and cold

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ lines 1-20 again and do the following activities.

- 1 Note down the elements conveying the description of the setting.
- 2 Say what or who the following pronouns refer to.
 - 'they' (line 1);
 - 'you' (line 6);
 - 'I' (line 6);
 - 'them' (line 10);
 - 'they' (line 13).
- 3 Describe the kind of life the inhabitants of this country lead.
- 4 List the superstitious practices carried out by these people.

3 READ the story to the end again and write down the characters involved. Then complete the following sentences to summarise the plot.

- 1 Mother asked
- 2 She warned and gave her
- 3 The child felt because she
- 4 When she met, she instead of
- 5 She cut off with and in a cloth.
- 6 The child finally reached and found
- 7 When she took out from to make her grandmother, a fell to the floor.
- 8 She recognised it to be
- 9 Though her grandmother, the child managed and realised the cause of the fever was
- 10 The child cried for and the rushed in.
- 11 They the old woman until she



> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

4 SAY what the dominant narrative mode is. Tick as appropriate and answer the questions below.

- Dialogue.
- Description.
- Narration.

Is the narrator a voice outside the story or a character in the story? Underline the lines where the narrator makes general comments.

5 FOCUS on the use of tenses in the story and say what their function is.

- Present tense:
- Imperative:
- Past tense:

6 CONSIDER the way Carter retells *Little Red Riding Hood*.

- 1 Does she retain the essential facts or does she change them?
- 2 What details does she change?
- 3 Does she create a different mood? If so, what kind?

7 FOCUS on the meeting between the child and the wolf. Complete the table with the verbs and phrases referring to their actions, then answer the questions below.

The child	The wolf

- 1 How would you define these two figures? Write down two short paragraphs.
- 2 How does Carter modify the traditional roles?

8 POINT out the elements of magic realism in the text.

- Realism:
- Magic:

9 IDENTIFY the figure in the story which joins the animal and human worlds. What connection does this figure establish between the beginning and the end of the text?

10 POINT out the latent content in the traditional story of *Little Red Riding Hood* and in Carter's version.

- Traditional version:
- Carter's version:

> COMPETENCE: LINKING THE TEXT TO THE CONTEXT OF THE AGE

11 DISCUSS. Carter's story places emphasis on female power and the possibility for change. How is this approach related to the position of women in the second half of the 20th century?



> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

12 TRACE the elements of Gothic tradition (→ 4.6) you are familiar with in this story.

13 DISCUSS. Draw a comparison between Carter's approach to reality and that adopted by the Italian writer Italo Calvino (1923-1985) in his trilogy *Il visconte dimezzato* (1952), *Il barone rampante* (1957), *Il cavaliere inesistente* (1959).

> COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

14 DISCUSS. What fairy tales were you told in your childhood? Can you remember how you responded to them? Do you agree with the assumption that fairy tales are consoling?