

# *Style, Language and Gender in Angela Carter's «Fireworks»: A Metaphorical (De)Construction of Female Identity*

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More than ten years after Angela Carter's untimely death, her standing as a feminist icon has not faded, nor has the significance of her literary project or the daring exuberance of her writing, to which this paper pays tribute. *Fireworks* (a collection of short stories published in 1974 and revised in 1987) focuses on the (de)construction<sup>1</sup> of female identity in a male-centred society. The fictional approach to this nuclear theme shows three stages, which accounts for the division of this paper into three sections.

First, at an exposition stage, Carter elaborates on the patriarchal view of woman as the 'other' of man, which means, as a being deprived of subjectivity and reduced to the defective quality of *object*. By drawing on typically feminist lines (cf. Showalter 1986:138), she presents a voice of resentment and suffering against the male order and gives a sociological portrait of the *status quo* as a relation "victim (woman) – 'victimiser' (man)" (Palmer 1989:14).

Secondly, at a resolution stage, Carter puts forward alternative modes of female experience. By making use of specific stylistic media, she lays the literary foundations of a new female order, one in which her women characters overcome the han-

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1 I use the dichotomy construction/deconstruction to call attention to the fact that the building of female identity is always set against a standard of previous such constructions, namely by the male order. Building implies, therefore, destroying.

dicapping status of *otherness* and achieve a metaphorical domain of autonomous *subjectivity*.

Finally, at what I propose to call a liberation stage, Carter goes beyond the fetters of gender difference to allow a wider and freer reality to take shape: one in which sexual polarity is annulled.

These three stages, which are non-chronologically organized, assume linguistic form through the use of symbols and recurrent stylistic choices. In fact, I want to argue that language and style play a fundamental role in the thematic construction of the stories. As Sara Mills (1995: 14) significantly claims, “analysis of language can tell us a great deal about the production of the self or subject”. Here, one might say, it tells us a great deal about the fictional rendering of this production. In this sense, several metaphors, whose recurrence makes them rise to the status of symbols, function as the linguistic anchoring of ideological effects on the surface of the text, while the choice of certain nouns and verbs, together with the use of antithetical word-pairs – like “subject” vs. “object” or, quite significantly, “self” vs. “other” – pervades the pages of *Fireworks*.

### 1. Woman as the ‘Other’

I had never been so absolutely the mysterious other<sup>2</sup>.

Before discussing Carter’s stylistic treatment of the first thematic core of her book, let me briefly introduce the contours of the problematic under focus.

In *The Sadeian Woman: an Exercise in Cultural History*, Carter (1979: 6) theorises on the distinction between the innate condition of anatomy and the sociocultural acquisition of sexual models of behaviour:

There is the unarguable fact of sexual differentiation; but separate from it, are the behavioural modes of masculine and feminine, which are culturally defined variables, translated in the language of common usage to the status of universals<sup>3</sup>.

The notion of how phallocratic culture rigidly moulds women’s identity and their social conduct is clearly expressed in *Fireworks*. Here, in a fictional form, Carter

2 See Angela Carter, *Fireworks*, London: Virago Press, 1992, p.7. All forthcoming page numbers refer to this edition.

3 As to the difference between ‘femaleness’, a matter of biology, and ‘femininity’, a set of culturally defined characteristics, see also Toril Moi (1986) and Shân Wareing (1999), who uses an interesting example to illustrate the dichotomy: bicycle design.

shows once again to be well aware of the subordinate role assigned to women in a male-dominated economic and political reality. Further, she shows that this is true in both Western and Eastern cultures, for the history of women's repression is certainly universal. In *A Souvenir of Japan*, she says:

Japan is a man's country. When I first came to Tokyo, cloth carps fluttered from poles in the gardens of the families fortunate enough to have borne boy children [...] (p. 6).

Misogyny, as well as its medieval European form of witch-burning, stems from centuries of prejudice against women who are seen as less profitable economic bets. Carter's irony lies in the fact that 20<sup>th</sup> century patriarchal discourse still refuses to acknowledge (out of a further strategy of domination) that women are also economically productive. After mentioning that "the word for wife, *okusan*, means the person who occupies the inner room and rarely, if ever, comes out of it" (p. 3), she remarks:

Once I was at home, [...] it was as if I occupied the inner room and he did not expect me to go out of it, although *it was me who paid the rent*. [Emphasis added].

The idea of women's confinement to domestic limits also meets with considerable male approval in Western society, and it runs parallel to the values of family and motherhood. Indeed, lonesome or childless women have often been suspiciously looked down on, and, as Carter points out, they are supposed to suffer and exhibit their suffering:

[...] They think a woman who lives by herself should accentuate her melancholy with surroundings of sentimental dilapidation (p.41).

The equation of female condition with suffering is further realised by Carter when she refers to "the repressed masochism which, in my country, is usually confined to women" (p.5). But the best expression of femininity is doubtless fertility. In *The Smile of Winter*, native working women intimidate the narrator with their muscled ways, and cause her to comment:

They make me feel either I or they are deficient in femininity and I suppose it must be I since most of them hump about an organic lump of baby on their backs (p.44).

Carter's sociological description of the feminine ideals can be understood better if taken in opposition to the view of masculinity. In the story significantly entitled *Master*, she shows how asymmetrical the dichotomy male/female is. Set in the primitive environment of the Amazonian, the narrator tells of a brutal hunter who manages to literally enslave an Indian girl. Such a plot bears obvious resemblance to

the prototypical strategy of male power: obedience, a feminine asset, is enforced through the masculine attributes of (physical) strength and power.

But the image of woman as 'victim' and of man as 'aggressor', which perfectly fits the feminist discourse of protest<sup>4</sup>, is better illustrated at a purely sexual level. And it is also at this level – a central level – that style and language come to play an important role in the text construction. In *Fireworks* Carter uses a particularly bitter sexual imagery. Her approach to sex is, indeed, very often related to warlike images. The metaphorical<sup>5</sup> association of the penis with a "weapon", or a "gun", for instance, is recurrent in the stories<sup>6</sup>, and so is a language that strongly suggests violence. In *Master*, again, Friday's extreme physical abuse is described through a significant vocabulary: see, for example, the verbs "thrust", "force", "extort" and "destroy" and the nouns "wounds", "bites", "screams", and "massacres" (pp. 75-78). The conception of male virility as actual aggression is also curiously hinted at in *Elegy for a Freelance*: "Your kisses along my arms were like tracer bullets" (p.108). But if *The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter* provides a clearly resentful view of sexuality through a disgusting tale of incest, it is in *The Loves of Lady Purple* that Carter best shows the intersection between sexuality (in this case, of a specifically deviated form of it) and disgust:

In the pleasure quarters, [...] that inverted, sinister, abominable world [...] functioned only to gratify the whims of the senses (p. 29).

The obviously negative light shed on most of the sex scenes seems to be, however, Carter's strategy to draw the reader's attention to a key-idea in the patriarchal conception of woman: her reduction to the status of 'object'. A central passage in *Fireworks* is the one in which the narrator quotes a sentence taken from a Japanese textbook:

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- 4 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1986: 42,45) interestingly analyses how nineteenth-century American middle-class women viewed sex as a "source of pleasure" to man, but of "misery and desolation to the young woman", who was turned into mere "merchandise". Also curious is her remark that "animal", "wild beast" and "serpent's coil" were usual epithets given to men at those turbulent times of feminist awakening.
  - 5 On the theoretical concept of metaphor, its origins, historical evolution and definition, see for instance Sharma (1990: 103-118), who characterises it as a set of the following characteristics: equivalence, similarity, interaction and tension.
  - 6 See Carter's significant statement on p. 91: "The gun and the phallus are similar in their connection with life - that is, one gives it; and the other takes it away, so that both, in essence, are similar in that the negation freshly states the affirmed opposition."

In a society where men dominate, they value women only as the *object* of men's passions. (p.7) [Emphasis added]

Also significant, despite its slightly different implications, is the description of Lady Purple as "the object on which men prostituted themselves" (p. 31). Though it is interesting to spot some ambiguity in this rendering of men as prostitutes, one cannot help noticing the noun *object* being applied to women. Now, the feminist discourse takes the turning of women into objects to be a male tactic of control of power: by losing their 'subjectivity', women also lose their ability to 'act' or 'be active'. Teresa de Lauretis claims that the word *subject* should be understood "in the active sense of maker as well as user of culture, intent on self-definition and self-determination" (1986: 10). If women regard themselves (owing to skilful patriarchal mechanisms of coercion) as passive objects, they will more easily be denied any claim to the dominant speech, and hence to autonomy and freedom.

This question, omnipresent in the feminist debate, is often treated under the heading of *silence*. The prevention of women's *acting* should actually be understood as a repression of their *speaking* and, ultimately, of their *thinking*, as Carter also realises: "In this country you [women] do not need to think, but only to look" (p. 41). Deborah Cameron (1990: 4-5) defines the "silence of women" as an "absence of female voices and concerns from higher culture", and adds that women are "explicitly prevented from speaking either by social taboos and restrictions or by the more genteel tyrannies of custom and practice"<sup>7</sup>. In Carter's stories, the best way to silence females, to handicap them in the concrete making of history, is shown to be to conceive of them as 'abstract' entities – as essences, immaterial ideas that do not play a part in this practical world. In *The Loves of Lady Purple*, this is quite explicitly verbalised when the narrator refers to the protagonist as a "figure of rhetoric", as a

nameless essence of the idea of woman, a metaphysical abstraction of the female which could, on payment of a specific fee, be instantly translated into oblivion (p. 30).

*Master* also illustrates this point:

The beliefs of her [the Indian girl's] tribe had taught her to regard herself as a sentient abstraction (p. 74).

7 Cora Kaplan (1990: 58, 67) also focuses on cultural speech as a male privilege, and she quotes Sophocles to explain that female silence is rooted in ancient definitions of ideal femininity: 'Silence gives the proper grace to women'.

Once again, Carter makes specific stylistic choices, like the recurrent use of the nouns *essence* and *abstraction*, to aim at the thematic nucleus of 'otherness'. In this way, she portrays both Lady Purple and the Indian girl as being metaphorically denied 'physical' reality, which implies that their culture also denies them political and socioeconomic significance. Lauretis (1987: 9) explains the turning of female individuals into abstract notions of Woman by giving the examples of "Nature, Mother, Mystery, Evil Incarnate, Object of Desire" as traditional representations of the female essence. If one focuses, for instance, on the first element on this list, one will recall Carter's references to the "fructifying" Amazon river as being a "savage woman" (p. 72) and to London as bearing some female connotations (p. 105).

These considerations lead us to the conclusion that the process of attribution of sexual roles (the process of *engenderment*) is always made with reference to the male model. Man is the central principle from which every other definition grows. Women's identity in the social tissue is belittled to the status of 'other', of mere Adam's rib: males are *selves*, with socially legitimised *subjectivity*; females are deprived of subjectivity and therefore relegated to the obscure realm of *otherness*.

Carter's characters are often aware of this debilitating condition. The Western lover in Tokyo, for instance, regards herself as being "absolutely the mysterious other, [...] a kind of phoenix, a fabulous beast" (p. 7). Lady Purple, similarly, knows that "she herself was utterly other", which implies her deprivation of "humanity" (p. 33). These two examples also constitute a case of parallelism, a stylistic technique which, as seen in previous examples, Carter often makes use of. But the idea of being "other" instead of "self" can assume other metaphorical extensions: in *Elegy for a Freelance*, for instance, the narrator's self-awareness takes the following shape:

I am lost. I flow. Your flesh defines me. I become your creation. I am your fleshly reflection. (p.108)

This curious perception of herself as a "reflection" of her male lover has a lot to do with D.Cameron's notion of "sexual polarity" (1985: 57)<sup>8</sup>: according to her, "femininity is masculinity inverted": "if man is active, woman is passive; if he has the

8 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1986:40) also focuses on the idea that women are the opposite, and even the reflection of men: "The Cult of True Womanhood (...) decreed that the True Woman (...) constituted the mirror image of the Common Man". I will come back to the idea of the mirror later on.

phallus, she simply lacks it". Sexual dichotomies derive, precisely, from the fact that "women in patriarchy are constructed as the Other – as whatever men are not".

This obliteration of women behind the sun-like dominance of men is realised in the passage quoted above as an ontological dependence ("I become your creation"). But an important point to stress is that 'dependence' means, rather, sexual submission: her loss is an experience of the flesh. Carter's definition of women's *otherness* is, actually, closely connected with the sexual experience of physical subjugation (which she paradoxically calls "dreadful pleasure of abandonment" – p.98) Sex, then, is the ultimate threat to female subjectivity, as the story of Friday, the abused Indian girl, subtly suggests:

When she had wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand, she was herself again. (p. 76)

## 2. Woman as 'Self'

*Fireworks* is not, however, restricted to an almost documentary description of the patriarchal image of woman. As Carter so significantly remarks, "I don't want to paint [...] circumstantial portraits" (p. 8). Her short stories indeed go beyond a feminist cry against sociological injustice. Rather, she engages in a more active redefinition of the female identity, by devising – through the use of symbolism and metaphor – a purely literary realm of discursive possibilities. The importance of a metaphorical imagery in Carter's narratives contributes to create what Elena Semino (1997: 197) might call "schema refreshment": to challenge and potentially restore the readers' existing sets of beliefs and assumptions results in an unconventional and novel text world. It is therefore through style that Carter manages to craft this alternative ideological dimension.

Carter's symbols – 'shipwreck', 'fire', 'mirror' – are the means her female characters use to break the limitations of phallogentrism. The image of 'shipwreck', to begin with, occurs in contexts that suggest a female intention of destruction. Consider, for example, the following passage:

I was astonished to find that the situation I wanted was disaster, shipwreck. I saw his face as though it were in ruins. (p. 67)

Here, the dominance of an active female subject ('I') is targeted at a helpless object which, surprisingly, is masculine ('his'). The 'ruined' image of a male metonymically implies the ruin of the order he stands for – patriarchy. If male order 'shi-

pwrecks', so will its 'marvellous freight' (p. 96): read, centuries of prejudice against women. But women, naturally, will survive. In this fantasy, they are "the lone survivors of a shipwreck" (p. 37). Hence the possibilities of their absolute domination.

The connotations of destruction that the image of 'shipwreck' brings about have a parallel in the symbol of 'fire', which, as the title of the collection suggests, is recurrent in Carter's stories. The occurrence of images related to fire is, similarly, connected with a female wish for power:

I felt I myself lit the fuses and caused [...] displays of pyrotechnics. Then I would feel almost omnipotent. (p. 105)

If fire provides women with omnipotence, it will also allow them to destroy their immemorial enemy. The "funeral pyre" to which Carter refers on page 97 is symbolically aimed at "burning" male oppression. Therefore, the "ashes, desolation and silence" that ensue from fire performances (p. 32) are not connected with the female condition any longer, but with the desired annihilation of men.

Be that as it may, the 'mirror' is the richest element in a symbolical analysis of Carter's book, and its omnipresence accounts for various metaphorical possibilities. Let us recall here Cora Kaplan's (1990: 59) significant words regarding this very symbol, which she approaches from a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective:

The perception of the image in the mirror as both self and other, as the same and different, the projection of an ideal form of the self through a spatial relation acts as the basis for the acquisition of subjectivity, and is, as well, the crude form, self and other for all intersubjective relations.

In Carter, to begin with, the mirror is the alternative dimension she devises to avoid being locked in "circumstantial" reality. She conceives the "world of the mirror" - usually regarded as an illusionary inversion of reality - as being "really real" (p. 93), which implies a legitimisation of the symbolical solution it provides. Carter's "fusion of fantasy and realism", to which Merja Makinem refers (1992: 3), is then likely to be provided by the "looking glasses", for they make it "hard to tell what is real and what is not" (p. 9). This parallel reality, this "simulacrum" of life (p. 25), is the only unadulterated space for a symbolic female order to exist, as Carter suggests:

Women and mirrors are in complicity with one another [...] (p. 65).

Such complicity gives the female narrator the strength to "pull the strings of my *self* and so take control of the situation" (p. 67) [Emphasis added.] This remarkable

statement explains the shift in her conception of ‘man’ that occurs in the story which is significantly called *Flesh and the Mirror*:

[...] he was plainly an *object* created in the mode of fantasy [...]. I created him solely in relation to myself, like a work of romantic art, an *object* corresponding to the ghost inside me (p. 67) [Emphasis added].

What better evidence of a new female identity could one get? The woman is now a powerful subject who handles man as if he were a simple *object* (note: the word is used twice). Besides, she is now the one who has the ontological power to “create” him and to do so according to her own image. Like a typically egocentric “romantic” subject, she reduces him to the status of ‘Eve’s rib’. *Woman* is now the model, the frame of reference:

[...] I knew him as intimately as I knew my own image in a mirror. In other words, I knew him only in relation to myself.

Again, it is the mirror that supplies her with a leading role in the game of images: she is the centre “in relation to” which everything else is to be seen and represented.

The revengeful turning of men into objects is also clearly seen in *The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter*. There, the executioner wears a “close-fitting leather mask”. However, this mask – which can be understood as the symbolic mask of power men put on – has surprising consequences:

[...] the hood of office renders the executioner an object. He has become an object who punishes. He is an object of fear (p. 15).

Therefore, men are seen as mere puppets that carry out fear and repression, as if they themselves were ‘victims’ of tradition and custom. However, the mirror (an “accomplice” of women, the only true victims) is able to demystify men’s power, by frightening them with their own ugliness:

Yet the executioner dare not take off the mask in case, in a random looking-glass or, accidentally mirrored in a pool of standing water, he surprised his own authentic face. For then he would die of fright (p. 15).

But if the mirror can render men ‘powerless’ – and, conversely, can make women become ‘powerful’ subjects –, it can also provide the latter with a metaphorical space for their own expression. Given that historical reality has prevented a female language<sup>9</sup> from existing, Carter puts forward a symbolical alternative. In *Flesh and the Mirror*, the female protagonist realises:

I was the *subject* of the sentence written on the mirror. (p. 65) [Emphasis added]

If the mirror allows females to exist as *subjects*, it also allows them to express themselves in a language of their own. Hence the mirror's symbolical capacity to become a dimension of exclusiveness where female expression can actually take shape. By denouncing the limitations of (patriarchal) language, she implicitly rejects it as unsatisfactory. Therefore, there is the need for another language, a "language beyond language" (p. 25) where all the parallel and obscure realities could be expressed – where the female reality could be represented through a clean and unprejudiced code. When the protagonist of "Reflections" goes to the other side of the mirror, the reader is shown a strange and exotic 'negative' world, where the flowers 'distil' –

(...) colours whose names only exist in an inverted language you could never understand if I were to speak it (p. 96).

This "inverted language" – the language in the mirror – can be interpreted as being female. Actually, the reality 'inside' the mirror is identified with "the Sea of Fertility" (p.97), a name that is obviously linked to the image of woman. Besides, this linguistic 'inversion' again reminds one of sexual polarities: women are also seen as the 'inverted' – the 'negative' – version of men. Monique Wittig (1986: 66) remarks that "language gives everyone the same power of becoming an absolute subject through its exercise". If Carter gives symbolical existence to a female language, she, then, also asserts women's subjectivity, not only as users, but as actual authors of that language.

By providing women with a further linguistic autonomy, Carter reaches a stage at which she can present alternative behavioural modes. In *Penetrating to the Heart of Forest*, for instance, adolescent Madeline finds out that her physical "difference" from her twin brother is not a drawback. Instead, it is the "key to some order of knowledge to which he might not [...] aspire" (p. 56). The discovery of her 'advantageous' female identity is parallel to her "new-born wish to make him do as she wanted, against his own wishes" (p. 57). This anti-patriarchal image of Madeline as a domineering and self-determined subject can be compared to Lady Purple's aggressive autonomy. The latter not only makes men "sprawl on the floorboards, [...] empty, useless and bereft of meaning" (p. 36), but she also "performs the forms of life not so much by the skill of another as by her own desire" (p. 37).

To some extent, however, Carter's presentation of women as the opposite of patriarchal models – though successfully destroying backward absolutes – runs a risk: it may fall into what one could call 'counter-prejudice'. In fact, if women take

on men's characteristics, they will create a female order that will also be oppressive and unjust, therefore reproachable.

### 3. Towards genderlessness: A criticism of polarity

Insofar as Carter presents alternative modes of femininity – no matter how subversive of the dominant phallographic code –, she is still trapped within the notion of sexual difference which is a clear patriarchal construct. Despite being aware of the devious strategies of male domination, she fails at this stage to really break free from them: instead, she persists in using a theoretical tool – the notion of male-female opposition – that has been politically devised to maintain the order she wants to subvert. As Teresa de Lauretis (1987: 3) argues, gender is “the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviours, and social relations” as a result of – and she quotes from Foucault – a “complex political technology”. The feminist discourse, similarly, regards gender as a political device used by the dominant male order to create not only social asymmetry and situations of domination/dependence, but also a straitjacket to women's thought and behaviour – and, as in Carter's paradoxical case, to their writing. Therefore, gender is not a natural anatomical identity but an identity that is culturally imposed – through a process similar to Althusser's ‘interpellation’<sup>10</sup> – so as to make the dominant ideology succeed.

Even though Carter devises a metaphorical female order in which women invert the models of gender, she is still working on a polarised basis that is also male-made<sup>11</sup>. Actually, she is still being influenced by an erroneous (patriarchal!) conception of the sexes as being inevitably opposite. When she seems to break loose from the fetters of phallogracy by presenting an innovative order, she is still, however, reworking a model that is not hers, which results in an equally defective alternative model<sup>12</sup>. Her female characters may have gained the disruptive status of ‘subjects’

10 Teresa de Lauretis (1987: 12) explains that Althusser's ‘interpellation’ is “the process whereby a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as her (or his) own representation, and so becomes, for that individual, real, even though it is in fact imaginary”.

11 This also reminds one of Dale Spender's (1980: 107) words, when she states: “New names systematically subscribe to old beliefs, they are locked into principles that already exist, and there seems to be no way out of this even if those principles are inadequate or false”.

12 Patricia Duncker (1984) makes a somewhat similar claim in relation to Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979): according to her, Carter's attempt at rewriting fairy-tales is compromised by their original structures which “straitjacket” her, and make her reproduce a sexist ideology and eroticism.

and all the respective attributes (power, autonomy and self-determination). But this has been done by means of a converse attribution of the condition of 'objects' to men, who now assume feminine features (passivity, dependence, fragility). If previously the oppressors, they are now the oppressed group. What, at first sight, seems to be Carter's successful denial of the male code turns out to be a special kind of *imitation*<sup>13</sup>, an articulation of the same speech but from a different perspective of gender. Derrida remarkably explains this phenomenon: "One cannot enunciate any destructive proposition which has not already slipped under the form, the logic and the implicit postulations of the one it wanted to go against"<sup>14</sup>.

What is to be done is, therefore, a total *deconstruction* of the patriarchal speech – this, of course, does not mean to protest against it while keeping it as a frame of reference, but to substitute it altogether. Once Carter's characters have laboriously 'constructed' alternative models of subjectivity and femininity which have proved inefficient, they now have to 'deconstruct' (a second phase) the whole foundation on which the building of their identity is grounded. Carter accomplishes this purpose through the denial of sexual difference, that is, through the dismissal of the very male/female opposition. Paulina Palmer (1989:14) remarks that "the elimination of gender difference" was a common feminist strategy in the seventies (when *Fireworks* was published), and Evelyn F. Keller (1986: 68) claims that "the ambiguity of gender can itself be functional and can be read as a map of another kind of structure". This structure – which corresponds, in my analysis here, to a third stage I propose to call 'liberation' – is indeed of another kind: it is flexible, indeterminate and allows no rules or fixed standards of either physical form or thought, or behaviour for that matter.

In Carter's stories, one can detect this option in "Reflections", which is the best example of a genderless literary reality. When the narrator – whose sex is as ambivalent as everything else in the story – 'enters' the mirror, (s)he meets an "indefinable being who acknowledged no gender" (p. 87). This being, half man half woman, has got a niece, Anna, who, like the letters in her name, "can go both ways" (p. 89). Carter puts this more clearly when she says:

It is a defect in our language there is no term of reference for those indeterminate and indefinable beings (...). (p. 87)

13 As Elaine Showalter (1986:138-9) argues, this is still a reworking of the 'imitation-protest' model.

14 This is my own translation of Derrida (1967: 412).

This clear reference to indeterminacy carries gender connotations: these “indefinable beings” that inhabit the mirror are so gender-wise. Here is indeed a mixture of hermaphroditism and bisexuality which, together with the almost enchanting way in which it is presented, is a clear response not only to the morals of a hypocritical male-dominated society, but especially to the need Carter’s female characters show to devise alternative identities. Further, the fact that the figure of the narrator also follows the model of androgyny is the best piece of evidence of such a reverse process of ‘*ungenderment*’: Anna, who holds the frighteningly mysterious shell in one of her hands, addresses Carter, who is narrating the story in the first person singular, through a masculine pronoun:

*‘He found it!’ She gestured towards me with her gun. (p. 88)*

In this passage, the emphasis put on the pronoun<sup>15</sup> (note the use of italics) shows the nuclear importance which the reversal of gender identities plays. Also note how a linguistic detail assumes a central role in displaying and exploiting thematic content. And the narrator, bewildered at this contagious transmutation of sex, is surprised to find out that there were indeed masculine differences to her(him)self: “My voice sounded coarse and rough to me.” (p. 89).

If the “inverted language” of the mirror sometimes takes on a polarised/female outlook, at other times Carter emphasises this suggestion of indeterminacy, as when she says: “Mirrors are ambiguous things” (p. 65). This ambiguity is obviously reflected on the characters themselves, who undergo a curious experience of ‘desexualization’. In fact, “the mirror annihilated time, place and person” (p. 64), which implies that each person’s identity and gendered self-images are also destroyed. Consequently, “we were not ourselves but the ghosts of ourselves” (p. 64). Once again, it is through language that this fundamental step is signalled. Indeed, the use of the pronoun *we* is significant of a new identification man/woman and, especially, of an interchange of roles between them. Hence their common attempt to “possess the essence of each other’s otherness” (p. 11), that is, to exchange characters, to mix up identities and, ultimately, to annul any kind of difference.

15 As Monique Wittig (1986: 65) points out, the third person singular pronoun is the only one in the English language that clearly “marks the opposition of gender”, although, she adds, non-grammatically speaking “as soon as there is a locutor in discourse, gender manifests itself.” On the distinction between grammatical, natural and common gender, see Deborah Cameron (1985: 64-71).

This stage, to which one could apply Foucault's notion of "non-difference"<sup>16</sup>, is the ultimate victory of Carter's female characters. Much more than having become 'selves', they have now access to a rather more enlarged dimension of their subjectivity – which Carter calls their *anti-subjectivity*. Since there are no differences, there are no limits, no restrictions, no incapacities. Neither is there resentment, revenge, or suffering. There is only freedom:

Full of self-confidence, I held out my hands to embrace my self, my anti-self, my self not-self (p. 101).

## Conclusion

The textual analysis of *Fireworks* just presented has intended to discuss Angela Carter's ideological approach to a nuclear theme – the (de)construction of female identity in a male-centred society. I have analysed Carter's female characters along a three-step process, the fulfilment of which means freedom both from patriarchal domination and from polarised notions of gender. This process, which is not chronologically rendered in the stories, is nevertheless recoverable from a transverse reading. My first purpose has therefore been to assess the ideology underlying the narrative, or, the politics underlying fiction.

In this sense, I discussed, in section one, Carter's sociological elaboration on woman as a patriarchal construct, as a being deprived of the status of *subject* and reduced to the substandard quality of *object*. In section two, I examined the way in which Carter creates – though specific symbolic devices – a new female dimension. This revolutionary reconstruction of female identity inverts the established social order, so as to assign women a metaphorical domain of autonomous subjectivity and reduce men to the crippled status of otherness. Finally, in section three, I critically questioned this unsatisfactory solution and considered Carter's eventual option for a non-polarised stance – one in which genderlessness and androgyny seem to present the only way out of the trap of patriarchal thought.

But the second purpose guiding this paper has been to show that these three stages are linguistically determined. In fact, I have tried to argue that language and

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16 Note that Foucault's notion of 'différence' is not directly related to gender: "Pour l'histoire des idées, la différence [...] est un piège; au lieu de se laisser arrêter par elle, la sagacité de l'analyse doit chercher à la dénouer [...] jusqu'à la limite idéale qui serait la non-différence de la parfaite continuité." (1969: 223).

style play a very important role in the thematic construction of the stories, as well as in the ideological argument underlying them. So, I set out to analyse the ways in which *form* shapes *content*<sup>17</sup>. Specific linguistic choices, such as the use of certain pronouns (*he, she, we*), the presence of certain nouns and verbs, and the recurrence of lexical dichotomies (*subject/object, self/other*) all show a linguistic awareness that contributes to achieve thematic and ideological effects. Similarly, specific stylistic devices, like metaphor and parallelism, pervade the stories and prove that Carter's answer to the femaleness riddle is to be aesthetically sought.

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17 On the dichotomy form/content in feminist stylistics, see Sara Mills (1995: 14-17).

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### *Styl, język i płęć w «Fireworks» Angeli Carter. Metaforyczna (de)konstrukcja tożsamości kobiecej*

Autorka artykułu, stosując narzędzia krytyki feministycznej, analizuje zbiór opowiadań Angeli Carter *Fireworks* [fajerwerki]. Celem analiz jest odszyfrowanie ideologicznych założeń leżących u podstaw omawianego tekstu. Przyglądając się kobiecym postaciom występującym w poszczególnych opowiadaniach, autorka pokazuje, w jaki sposób za pomocą środków językowych Carter (de)konstruuje kobiecą tożsamość swoich bohaterów. Najpierw pozbawia je podmiotowości, by następnie przypisać im jej nowy wymiar. Analiza obejmuje m.in. przyglądanie się roli często używanych zaimków (*on, ona, my*), czasowników (*zaufać, niszczyć*) i rzeczowników (*broń, rana*). Ponadto autorka bada funkcje występujących w opowiadaniach dychotomii (podmiot/przedmiot, ja/inny) oraz symboli (wrak statku, ogień, lustro).