Puppets in The Garden: Artifice and Nature in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*

> *There is something in the puppet that ties its dramatic life more to the shapes of dreams and fantasy, the poetry of the unconscious, than to any realistic drama of human life. That is part of it's uncanniness...it creates an audience tied together by childish if not childlike things.*
>
> — Kenneth Gross, *Puppets: An Essay on Uncanny Life.*

Puppets and toys are everywhere in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*. They fill Uncle Phillip's workshop, bearing strange resemblances to other inhabitants of the house. The puppets either charm Melanie with their cleverness or frighten her with their uncanniness; they are either clumsy or violent, depending on their puppeteer. Throughout the novel, Carter plays with the uncanny nature of puppets to add an aspect of surrealism to her work. She repeatedly insinuates that Melanie is not just mimicked by the puppets her uncle makes, but that she is in fact like a puppet herself, treading the line between alive and not-alive that puppets, as Kenneth Gross theorizes, inhabit. The blurring of life and objects that one experiences while observing or interacting with puppets is an experience of the uncanny, in which the puppet body is both familiar—we recognize the emotions and gestures of a 'living' thing—and unfamiliar in it's artificiality. By ascribing physical puppet qualities to Melanie, such as a detachment from her physical body or 'wooden' features,[1] Carter also associates Melanie with the childishness and human ambiguity that characterises puppets themselves. She becomes a sort of imitation of adolescence, and the world around her starts to seem theatrical and constructed. The childlike nature of puppets compounds Melanie's sexual immaturity, pointing to the fact that the novel is not so much a 'sexual awakening' as a 'sexual struggle' between Melanie's desire to perform adulthood and her lack of readiness. At the same time, artificial objects replicate the natural world,

[1] Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* (London: Virago Press, 1981), 21, 26.

creating further ambiguity between what is 'real' and what is constructed or imagined begin to blur. The blurring of natural and artificial, too, reflects Carter's exploration of gender construction and adolescent experience.

The opening scene of *The Magic Toyshop* immediately highlights Melanie's performativity regarding gender. She spends the first chapter imitating models in famous paintings and imagining herself as a bride using her mother's wedding dress. Such imitations are intertwined with descriptions of Melanie's body as a living puppet body, recently alive and yet static in time. This is the summer Melanie "discovered she was flesh and blood", phrasing which invokes the image of Pinnochio, a living puppet boy who miraculously became human.[2] The word "discover" seems to imply that there was a point in which Melanie was *not* flesh and blood—at the very least, it draws Melanie's physical make-up to attention. The image of Pinnochio appears again a few scenes later, when Melanie is caught in the apple tree. She fears that she will remain caught in the tree forever, "stranded in childhood", afraid of the eternal youth that Pinnochio embodies during his puppet life.

Panicking in the tree, Melanie imagines worst case scenarios. "She would mesh in the branches unable to move up or down. They would have to bring men with ladders and ropes from the farm to free her in the morning, dead or alive. Don't be silly. Alive".[3] The image of Melanie 'meshed' into the tree because of her mother's tangled and torn dress, "unable to move up or down"', invokes the image of a puppet tangled up in its own strings and unable to move. Actual tangled puppets appear later in the novel, when Finn fumbles during Uncle Phillip's puppet show and the two puppets become "hopelessly entangled" with one another.[4] Like Melanie stuck in the tree and afraid of falling out, Finn

[2] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 1.
[3] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 20.
[4] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 130.

is up in the theatre rafters, except he does fall and, significantly, "[breaks] like the toy…all his lovely movement shattered".[5] Although in different settings, the two scenes parallel each other with images of heights, of becoming tangled, and of "breaking" as a toy would. Melanie's worry that she will be found "dead or alive" and her immediate correction, imply that like Finn or an automated toy the loss of movement is a sort of death. A puppet's 'life', and Melanie's life in this moment, is characterised by the act of animation, and inactivity conveys death. Furthermore, Melanie's immediate correction suggests that she was temporarily confused about whether or not she is actually *alive*, invoking the ambiguous in-between 'life' that Gross attributes to puppets.

Puppets occupy a middle ground between living thing and inanimate object, Gross theorizes in his *Puppet: an essay on uncanny life.* In fact a 'living thing' is perhaps the best way to describe them, as man-made, artificial 'thing' that conveys the semblance of life. Throughout the essay Gross explores the personality of puppets, as objects that are literally designed to be personified and identified with. All objects have a theatrical potential for life, Gross suggests. The items of a kitchen table can be protagonists, villains, dreamers and armies with some imagination, and the animated life of a thing is shaped by its object qualities. A shoe brush has its own "mask-like force", a pendulum exists in constant movement, the various tools of the kitchen make up a hierarchical "tribe" of potato peelers, cheese graters and rolling pins.[6] Thing life exists in a separate, but distinct and somewhat familiar realm to human beings. Within this realm of thing life, the puppet plays a specific role as

> an ambassador or pilgrim to human beings from the world of things. The puppet is the material thing that has got an education, that has learned to act…who comes to talk to us. the puppet reminds us…of our human tendency to turn ourselves, our thoughts, our memories, and our words into fixed, frozen, inanimate, or mechanical things.[7]

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[5] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 132.
[6] Kenneth Gross, *Puppet: an essay on uncanny life,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 30-2.
[7] Gross, *Puppet: an essay on uncanny life,* 33.

Acting is central to the puppet's role as an ambassador between human beings and thing life, because it is through performing human thought, action and emotion that the puppet's life becomes understandable to us. As Gross says, the "education" of the puppet in acting gives it the ability to "talk to us" in our own language. Designed specifically for this communication between thing theatre and the human world, one of the object qualities of the puppet is the fact that it embodies the potential for animated life at all times, more so than other objects might. One looks at a puppet (or toy, or doll) and pictures it alive; one does not always feel the same way about teacups. All objects, as stated earlier, possess a thing life that can be invoked, but the puppet's unique quality is that our awareness of it's thing life is almost always present.

The puppet, too, is a reflection of ourselves. It can reflect "our thoughts, our tendencies, and our words" in an artificial form, and it is this reflection which gives puppets their 'uncanny' nature. Freud defines the uncanny as "the class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar ".[8] The unfamiliar, although it might be frightening, does not on it's own describe the uncanny. Rather, the uncanny must be a combination of the familiar and unfamiliar, something that has an element of recognizability within it. Olimpia, the automaton from E.T.A Hoffmann's short story 'The Sandman', is uncanny because she convincingly resembles humanity enough that Nathanael falls in love with her, only to discover she is made of clockwork. Olimpa, once known, is revealed as unknown and inhuman. What makes the story more uncanny is the fact that the reader can intuit Olimpia's inhumanity before Nathanael himself can, and this ignorance itself takes on an uncanny tone. Nathanael experiences the very human nightmare of being unable to distinguish reality from artifice — this fear, too, is familiar and uncanny in its familiarity. We think that we perceive the

[8] Sigmund Freud, *"The Uncanny"* (1919), published online, 1-2.

world around us clearly, and the idea that our perceptions could be flawed and that we might be missing something that is even obvious to others, is a disturbing one to say the least.

Puppets are uncanny because they mimic animal life, often although not always human life, and yet they are not animal. They are not 'living' in an organic sense, and yet they reflect the experiences and motions of the organic world. Like Hoffmann's Olimpia, observing an unfamiliar body behave in familiar, even relatable ways, is an uncanny experience. Even the act of creating and animating a puppet is a somewhat uncanny action, hinting at a human instinct "long known to us", the instinct to see ourselves projected onto inanimate beings. Referring to a 1980 novel by Russell Hoban called *Riddley Walker,* Gross writes that puppet shows are "an art more fantastic and archaic, at once young and old....the puppet's life, its pathos and power, has something to do with survival, with an earliness that is wrapped up with a sense of violence suffered".[9] There is indeed something primitive and archaic about puppets, embedded as they are with a sense of tradition. Puppet theatre is an old art form. Even the body of the puppet mixes old and young together, since puppets are both toyish objects, associated with children and make-believe, and yet unchanging. If a puppet breaks, it can be mended and given a renewed life (and even a broken or forgotten project is capable of creating the uncanny).

The uncanniness surrounding the puppets in *The Magic Toyshop* is amplified by their resemblance to the human characters of the novel, namely Melanie and the Jowles. Finn shows Melanie some of the toys Uncle Philip has made, including two toy monkey imitations of Aunt Margerat and Francie. One of the monkeys plays the fiddle while the other plays the flute, a "clear parody" of the Irish music Melanie has heard the night before.[10] More chillingly, Melanie sees a puppet

[9] Gross, *Puppet: an essay on uncanny life,* 122.
[10] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 65.

version of herself in the workshop, recreating the transformative night in the garden. The puppet has Melanie's characteristic black hair and wears white tulle, "lying face-downward in a tangle of strings.... fallen flat down as if some had got tired of her in the middle of playing with her" (Carter, 68).[11] The puppet's outfit, reminiscent of the white wedding dress, and its collapsed position implies that Phillip played some hand in Melanie's disastrous night. It suggests that Melanie is the puppet and Phillip, the only character who would be "playing" with any of his creations, the puppetmaster. The night scene becomes retrospectively transformed into a puppet theatre—the night sky which so terrified Melanie becomes miniaturized, no longer nature but a theatrical backdrop. Just as Melanie was tangled and caught in the apple tree trying to climb back to her room, the strings of her puppet twin are tangled around her.

Overwhelmed by the puppet which looks so much like her, Melanie feels herself "thrust" back into the night she fears. The world "[whirls] around her, men and women dwarfed by toys and puppets, where even the birds were mechanical and the few human figures went masked and played musical instruments in the small and terrible hours of the night...She was in the night again, and the doll herself".[12] This passage, as well, reinforces the image of the night as a puppet theatre, a "crazy world" in which the relative proportions of humans and toys become skewed. In this uncanny, partially hallucinatory world, the natural blends with the theatrical and artificial. "Even the birds [are] mechanical", Melanie thinks to herself. Once again, what is seemingly natural is revealed to be a man-made creation. The "bird" she is recalling is a cuckoo bird in Uncle Phillip's clock, a real dead bird that replaces the typical mechanical bird. What was once natural has been altered into a mechanical state. The image of "mechanical birds" recalls Olimpia's uncanniness, the sensation of realizing

[11] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 68.
[12] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 68.

someone who was supposed to be a real woman is nothing more than highly advanced clockwork. As Melanie explores the puppet theatre, the line between 'real and not-real' (or rather, between alive and not-alive) is repeatedly crossed until Melanie no longer recognizes her surroundings as natural and familiar, but bizarre and frightening. In some ways, the fear Melanie experiences in the puppet theatre and in the garden is the same as a fear of the dark, since both are characterized essentially by a familiar world transforming into something unfamiliar and unseen. Darkness signifies transformation, and it signifies ignorance. By recalling not the garden, or the apple tree, but "the night" itself, Carter is deliberately invoking darkness and the associations that come with it.

The clockwork cuckoo bird reverses the common practise of artificially imitating nature. By design, a cuckoo clock mimics the sound and shape of a cuckoo through a mechanical noise and fake bird. The perversity of Uncle Phillip's clock stems from the fact that what is *supposed* to be artificial is not so, and the expected line between fake and real has been broken. There are other, albeit less disturbing, moments in which artifice simulates nature throughout the novel. The wreath that accompanies Melanie's mother's wedding dress, for instance, is made of plastic flowers and has pearls scattered around to "simulate dew".[13] When Melanie first wakes up in her new room, she confuses the roses and thorns wallpaper pattern with a "thick hedge of crimson roses" planted in green foliage.[14] It is Uncle Phillip, specifically, who seems intent on reversing the tradition of artifice imitating natural life; he wants nature to imitate objects. The cuckoo bird is the first instance of this desire, and later in the novel Phillip tries to get Melanie herself to become a puppet in his reenactment of 'Leda and the Swan'. At first, Melanie is unintimidated by the swan and finds the crudeness of the puppet theatre

[13] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 15.
[14] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 53.

childish, "like a school play."[15] As she acts out the role of Leda, however, she begins to disassociate. Listening to the swan's approach, Melanie imagines the swan opening up to reveal "an armed host of pigmy Uncle Phillips, all clockwork". She feels "not herself, wrenched from her own personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place...even that swan, that mocked up swan, might assume reality itself."[16]

Melanie's sense of reality begins to bend, and as it does she envisions clockwork versions of Uncle Phillip and pictures the swan, obviously a puppet, transforming into a real bird. The lines between actual and artificial blur, as they did before when Melanie saw the doll version of herself. Except in this scenario Melanie *is* the doll. Her identity begins to crumble; he is "wrenched from her own personality", no longer Melanie but an observer. The fantasy enactment of Leda's rape overwhelms Melanie so that she actually fears being raped, by the puppet or by the imagined "clockwork Uncle Phillips" coming to "savage" her.[17] Fantasy overtakes reality—the puppet world and the human world become confused. It is only once the terrible scene is over that Melanie is able to recover her sense of self and "puts Melanie back on like a coat, slowly."[18] Both the dissociation Melanie experiences and Carter's description of her recovery reinforces Melanie's tendency to adopt different roles. At the beginning of the novel, she role-played famous paintings and adulthood. During the puppet show, she loses herself in the role of Leda. Such acts of role-play, both deliberate and uncontrolled, emphasise Melanie's puppet qualities. Like a puppet, Melanie's physical form remains constant, but her identity shifts depending on the theatrical surroundings created around her. When she is imitating the paintings, Melanie surrounds herself with the relevant props, and during the

[15] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 167.
[16] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 166.
[17] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 166.
[18] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 167.

puppet show it is the performance of the swan which disturbs and frightens her. The idea that Melanie becomes no longer herself during the puppet show suggests that, like the swan, she has crossed the line between real and artificial. The swan threatens to become an actual bird, while Melanie loses her sense of self and becomes an object, a puppet girl about to be raped. Carter's description of Melanie as "like a coat" only serves to reinforce this sense of thing-ness and artificial construction; like Leda, the painting models, and the bride in the garden, 'Melanie' is another role to be played.

On its surface, *The Magic Toyshop* is a coming-of-age novel, following Melanie as she leaves the sheltered home of her parents and introduced to new sexual roles. She develops a conflicting attraction towards Finn, alternately attracted to and repulsed by him, occasionally becoming indifferent. Melanie's feelings towards Finn, positive and negative, are tied up in her perception of what love and romance should look like. When Finn first kisses her, Melanie "[wonders] why he was doing this, putting his own mouth on her own undesiring one…what was the need?" One sentence later, she reflects that "they must look very striking, like a shot from a British new-wave film…she wished that someone was watching them, to appreciate them…then it would seem romantic".[19] Melanie's understanding of desire does not come from her own sense of self, but from what she has seen depicted through art, through movies and literature. She is indifferent to Finn's kiss, and disgusted when he tries to put his tongue in her mouth, a sexual and intimate action she does not appreciate. Yet she is also aware of how the scene might look 'romantic' to an outside observer, and how she herself might appear to such an observer.

Melanie wants to be an object of romantic affection, a bride or a lover, and she wants to have the adult womanhood that comes with those roles. She mimics adulthood in her mother's wedding

[19] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 105-106.

dress and in imagining herself as the distant romantic girl in "a new-wave film". Yet she is not prepared for nor wants the sexual implications of such adulthood. The closest Melanie comes to losing her virginity is when she and Finn are rehearsing for Leda and the Swan, and even then Melanie is conscious of role-playing. "'You are too young,'" Finn tells her, "'you must have read it in a woman's magazine'".[20] Finn sees what Melanie does not; that she is performing a sexualized role of femininity, taught to her by media and cultural perceptions, and that she is not in fact ready for a sexual rite of passage. "You see," Finn says to Melanie, "'he wanted me to fuck you...he's pulling our strings as if we were his puppets.'"[21] The scene between them did not occur organically, but rather it was the result of numerous outside influences, from Uncle Phillip playing puppeteer to Melanie's cultural perception of who she is and who she is to become. Melanie plays the sexual role that is expected of her without understanding it; her reaction to the idea of being 'fucked' highlights how, even in the moment, she didn't understand the full significance of acting out the scene together. Melanie had "never connected the word with herself; her phantom bridegroom would never have fucked her."[22] Melanie is still in a stage of idolizing romance without understanding sexuality, and her shock at realizing the sex with Finn would not resemble the love-making she associates with her imaginary bridegroom highlights her naiviety. She is in a middle ground of sexuality, old enough to daydream about a future womanhood but not old enough to face the reality of such daydreams.

By associating Melanie with puppets and exploring Melanie as a puppet, Carter is examining the extent to which Melanie's sexuality and self-perception is constructed and controlled by the world around her. Melanie struggles with identity throughout the novel, aspiring for womanhood one

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[20] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 151.
[21] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 151-152.
[22] Carter, *The Magic Toyshop,* 152.

moment and returning to childhood habits of climbing a tree in the next. There are moments in the novel where Melanie's sense of identity disappears completely and she becomes an unknown, an object or puppet acting as somebody else. Part of the uncanniness created by puppets stems from the confusion around the relationship between the puppet and the puppeteer. When a puppet is seen as just an object, being manipulated by a puppeteer, then the actions are clearly the actions of the person holding the strings. But when puppet theatre is working—that is, when the puppets are *not* seen as extensions of the puppeteer's body but as separate personalities—then the cause-and-effect relationship of person to object seems less applicable. This ambiguity allows puppets to be a vehicle for "archaic appetites", their theatre a space in which thoughts and impulses "otherwise invisible" can take shape.[23] However, it also carries the fear of the uncanny, a fear of acting without being in control without knowing it, or a fear of expressing those desires which cannot or should not be expressed.

Melanie is like a puppet — she pretends to be that which she is not, and her actions are shaped by the figure of Uncle Phillip and the roles she thinks she should play. The blurring of reality and artificial life that is implicit within puppets calls into question other instances in which nature and object blur, the struggle between understanding what is real and what is constructed. How much of Melanie's desires, sexual or otherwise, are true to her and how much is performance? This question is one that Melanie, the reader, and probably Carter herself all struggled with. Compounding Melanie's struggle to understand her sexual self are the childlike associations with puppets, and the uncanniness of the 'known unfamiliar', something that we recognize without being able to name. It is easy to recognize Melanie's role playing, and to understand her sexual naivety, but it is difficult to point to the psychic source of tension between childhood and adulthood. Since Melanie is a puppet, the world

[23] Gross, *Puppet: an essay on uncanny life,* 141.

around her becomes a puppet theatre. Like puppets in puppet theatres, the novel is embedded with a sense of performed identity, and yet within that performance is an actual identity, one consciousness of the performance.

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