

A Structuralist Appreciation of Angela Carter's "The Snow Child" Glimpsed through a Feminist Awareness

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Abstract

Structuralism can be defined as a literary critical theory aiming at the exploration, excavation and/or establishment of structural networks in a way as to relate the individual literary work or elements in a literary work to the assumably 'engulfing' system or state of existence which that particular literary work is considered to emanate from. Originating in prominent Swiss linguist Saussure's studies, structuralism tends to treat a literary text as language and endeavours to uncover the whole 'system' or at least available elements of the system embedded in that work. Accordingly, the following article handles the deciphering of structuralist streaks in Angela Carter's short story "The Snow Child" which can be deemed as a defiance of sexist attitude infusing fairy tale genre. In this respect, in order to come up with a thoroughly structuralist evaluation of "The Snow Child"; similarities, binary oppositions, symbols as well as conventional codes of expectations displayed in the story bear great significance since their being exposed to an analytical eye enables the elucidation of underlying structure the story both embodies and at the same time challenges.

Keywords: Structuralism, System, Saussure, Angela Carter, Fairy Tale, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

Predicated on Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's principal assertion residing in the assumption that there exists a relationship between *la langue*, which literally means language and can be maintained to correspond to linguistic system in a wider sense, and *la parole*, which means individual word, structuralists contend that "codes, signs, and rules govern all human social and cultural practices, including communication whether that communication is the language of fashion, sports, education, friendships, or literature" (Bressler 109). In a way as to confirm and emphasize the essential, distinctive characteristic of structuralism which is postulated to be a consistent connection between language as a prevailing linguistic structure and single words or expressions by Bressler in *Literary Criticism*, in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* the word *relationship* is posited as a most appropriate expression to encapsulate the primary principle which structuralism consists in: "Reducing the highly complex idea to a phrase, we would say that structuralism is the study of relationships" (Guerin 282).

The indispensable system of relationship mentioned in the paragraph above that is presumed to govern the interaction between language and individual words - which can be adjudged to assume the role of a social institution particularly considered with respect to its pertinent discursive and rhetorical consequences extending to the dimension of exerting influence on the framing of social relationships outlining civic life, politics, and codes of law - can accordingly be projected on the practice of literary criticism primarily with a view to exploring the existent relationship between a system of literature and individual works of literature. Grounded on the assumption that there exists a prevalent network of conventions undetachably entrenched in this substantial structure of literature that presides over the reader's perception and interpretation of a literary work in an arguably coercive manner, structuralists contend that the reader who is closely acquainted with this system of conventions is hence necessarily conditioned to elaborate on the assessment of literary works by tracing to figure out indications and meanings manifested or communicated through this set of conventions. As can be deduced from this assertion underscoring the system and justifying the accuracy of a critical scrutiny regarding a literary text in relation to its consistency with that almost rigid set of conventions, structuralism aims to mould literary criticism into a strict pattern that exhibits a steadfast, restrictive commitment to review a literary work with respect to the degree of its comparability with the system in a way as to disregard peculiar characteristics of a literary work and thus trample on its uniqueness. Namely, structuralists mainly equate the structure of literature with that of linguistics and thereby incorporate a poignant flavour of objective, scientific discipline into literary criticism that

adduces to prioritize objectivity over subjectivity as well as the system over an individual work:

Since an individual work can express only those values and beliefs of the system of which it is a part, structuralists emphasize the system (langue) whereby texts relate to each other, not an examination of an isolated text (parole). They believe that a study of the system of rules that govern literary interpretation becomes the critic's primary task.

(Bressler 109)

Likewise, in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, where Robert Scholes's explication of structuralism in his book *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* is referenced, structuralism's 'ossified' commitment to the austere forged system of conventions is emphasized: "In such a system, 'Every literary unit from the individual sentence to the whole order of words can be seen in relation to the concept of system,' and the study of works, genres, and the whole of literature can be made in this structural and relational way" (Guerin 286).

As to the practical application of structuralism to literary criticism, structuralists aim to attain a sharply-chiselled categorization of characters and events highlighted by certain conventions. In pursuit of meanings implied and/or communicated in a literary work, structuralists conduct a close reading of the text so as to enable them to concentrate their attention on the 'excavation' for bringing into light discernible similar elements and stark binary oppositions that await to be grubbed out. Besides, structuralists focus on the disclosure of accustomed symbolic ciphers as well as conventional codes of expectations which are supposed to enable the critic to construct a firm relationship between an individual work and the commanding, engulfing system of language.

"THE SNOW CHILD": THE 'PATRO'-STRUCTURALIST ONTOLOGY OF THE STORY

Angela Carter's short story "The Snow Child", which can be reckoned as a reversal of and challenge to the fairy tale genre mainly on account of its frustrating conclusion marked by a revolting incident of corpse rape, provides a suitable example for the application of structuralist approach as it features a considerable number of parallelisms, binary oppositions, symbols, and conventional codes of expectations that allow the critic or reader to carry out a structuralist examination of the text.

To commence with the exploration of similarities unfolded in "The Snow Child"; of the three major characters depicted in the story involving the Count, the Countess, and the Snow Child; parallelisms between the Countess and the

Snow Child as well as the Countess and the Count can be drawn. As to the similarities between the Countess and the Snow Child, the chief common striking feature shared by them is their gender: Both are female. Relatedly, in congruity with accustomed gender role patterns imposed by patriarchal social codes, both the Countess and the Snow Child are delineated in a submissive position to the Count in their relationship with him who represents oppressive patriarchal authority in the story. No matter how subservient a position the Snow Child is portrayed in in her relation with the Countess - who can be argued to stand for terrible mother archetype -, the compliant attitude of the Countess and the Snow Child in their conduct with the Count is undeniable. Another striking similarity which can be detected by an attentive eye and is indicative and further confirmative of patriarchal domination permeating the story consists in that they become naked and then get dressed up in the course of plot - particularly should the Snow Child be taken into consideration as she comes into existence stark-naked, whereas, the Countess's clothes slip away from her body gradually - in a way as to serve to the pleasure of piercing-penetrating heterosexual male gaze. As to the main likeness worth mentioning between the Count and the Countess, it can firmly be asserted that they are depicted in a domineering position to the obsequious Snow Child - as most evidently illustrated at the close of the story when the Count gruesomely rapes the Snow Child's corpse -, accompanied by a pungent notion of superciliousness as clearly exemplified in scornful commands imposed by the Countess on the Snow Child throughout the story which eventually lead up to her miserable, heartrending death.

Binary oppositions broached in the story are even easier traceable than similarities discussed in the paragraph above since they are predicated on a strictly drawn, boldly etched hierarchical-patriarchal order topped by the Count and vertically downwards followed by the Countess and the Snow Child respectively. The Count who can be identified with ruthless, austere, oppressive father image; the Countess who can be associated with infertile, covetous, terrible mother figure belligerently envious of the attractive, young girl as epitomized in the depiction of Snow White's stepmother; and the Snow Child who can be postulated to roughly correspond to the pitiable, enviable, procreant young-girl-type shimmering with exquisite beauty and stereotypically doomed to be marred by her merciless stepmother despite the physical contradiction engendered by her vampirella-like appearance as outlined through her chalk-white complexion, cherry-red lips, and raven-black hair; can be pitted against one another based on sexual, dispositional, and hierarchically irreconcilable discrepancies. To begin with the comparison of the Count to the Countess, the Count as an austere, domineering husband figure is endowed with callous, masculine 'potence' since he is privileged with the exertion of his unquestionable authority over the Countess as demonstrated in

the Count's refusal of sinisterly-schemed, tricky tasks the Countess demands the Snow Child to carry out in order to discard her. In her relation to the Count, the Countess is portrayed to have internalized the assumption of a passive, submissive role as enforced by patriarchal society on the female. As to their attitudes towards the Snow Child, the Count and the Countess differ from each other absolutely. The Count displays a possessive, rather than protective, attitude towards the Snow Child. Namely, his ostentatiously protective attitude observable in his resolute objection to the tasks imposed on the Snow Child by his wife indeed pinpoints his domineering, unfavourably possessive conduct towards the Snow Child rather than being a reliable manifestation of his sensitivity and affirmative protectiveness that should not exceed to the excess of exerting domination. As can be deduced from this assertion, the Count treats the Snow Child as an object or disposable, governable commodity at his disposal. In this respect, one can contend that binary opposition highlighting the relationship between the Count and the Snow Child is self-evident since their relationship is characterized by active domination on the part of the Count and the passive submission on the part of the Snow Child. On the other hand, the Countess assumes rather a hostile attitude towards the Snow Child since she considers her a rival who is gifted with the capability of alluring the Count. In this respect, the Countess fiercely envies her and endeavours to eliminate her by devising sinister schemes which eventually lead to the Snow Child's death. She gives oppressive orders to the Snow Child and expects her to execute them servilely. Once again, it can be maintained that the binary opposition between the Countess and the Snow Child is accentuated through the display of active dominance-passive submission balance(!) on the part of the Countess and the Snow Child respectively as previously mentioned to highlight the essence of relationship between the Count and the Snow Child.

In "The Snow Child" the elaboration of symbolism mainly revolves around colour symbolism since white, black, and red assert themselves as highly considerable symbols imbued with convincing meanings and evocations. In the story the white colour can most appropriately be identified with the Snow Child both in physical and spiritual terms since white is the colour of the Snow Child's complexion which is indicative of her purity and innocence. Nonetheless, considered with reference to its unfavourable connotations, white can also be adjudged to stand for death as it adumbrates the Snow Child's death at the end of the story. Apart from this, white is illustrated as the most preponderant colour of the setting - i.e. engulfing winter atmosphere and snow-coating dying the environment in sheer white - which is indicative of spiritual sterility and desert-like barrenness. This sense of emptiness or hollowness can a little far-fetchedly be associated with lack of fertility on the part of the Countess and portending death on the part of the Snow Child, as well. The black colour, the stark opposite of white, customarily

stands for evil, affliction, misfortune, destruction, and death. Just as white can persuasively be identified with the Snow Child, black can readily be associated with the Countess due to the fact that her furcoat, boots, and horse are made conspicuous through their dazzlingly foreboding blackness which can be assessed as an evident manifestation of the Countess's malevolence. The Snow Child's hair, another blatantly black-dyed object deployed in the story, can be reckoned as a token of lurking affliction awaiting her. Besides, the raven which is an innately coal-black animal can be deemed as a grim harbinger of misfortune, destruction, and death awaiting the Snow Child. In a way as to confirm this interpretation regarding the symbolical connotation of the raven, it is worth mentioning that at the end of the story one of the three remnants of the Snow Child's rapidly vanishing corpse which puzzlingly wanes into a state of utter physical annihilation is a raven feather in addition to a red rose and a bloodstain coagulated on the snowy ground. In this respect, raven's feather can be treated as an ominous token of fatal ill-luck that has eventually doomed her to death as subtly foreshadowed through her black hair identical to the raven's feather. Red looms as another noticeable colour in the story as it appears in the Snow Child's lips as well as the clotted bloodstain and the rose which are the remnants of the Snow Child's faded existence. The Snow Child's red lips which are an incarnation of the Count's one of three wishes about the physical qualities of the Snow Child who miraculously comes into existence out of nowhere, can be considered an obvious representation of passion and lechery on the part of the Count as well as enticing female beauty on the part of the Snow Child. Congealed bloodstain as a remnant of the Snow Child's corpse that dumbfoundingly dissolves into a state of non-existence swiftly after being exposed to the Count's heinous rape following her death can be regarded as an indication of violence exerted on her as well as chastity violated through rape. As to the red rose which is another remnant of the deplorable girl, one can comment that it marks out her naivety and particularly fragility that is predestined to wither away upon blossoming in such a 'snowy' landscape just like the freshly budding roses striving to pop up their heads in the snow-coated bush which turns out to be the girl's deathbed. Besides, it would be conjecturable to regard the rose as a broken-heart-type of unreturned affection, impudently infringed dignity, persistent innocence, and solemn grief.

As to the codes of expectations, another topic that should be taken into consideration while conducting a structuralist analysis of a literary text, a reversal of conventions peculiar to the fairy tale genre can distinctly be observed in "The Snow Child". To begin with the title, Carter's choice of "The Snow Child" as the title of her story can be reckoned as an obvious attempt to make a reference to "The Snow White", which counts among the foremost canonical examples of the fairy tale genre. Thus, from a structuralist point of view, a connection is established

between the individual work that stands for *la parole* and the encompassing heritage of literary works that represents *la langue*, i.e. the system, which is the primary concern of structuralist criticism. The story commences with a well-worn pattern of making three wishes as the Count concisely summarizes the main physical qualities of his desired daughter/girl in the three wishes he articulates in a manner appertaining to fairy tales. Another convention employed by Carter is the emphasis placed on the blatant dichotomy between the *innocent girl* and *femme fatale* archetypes through the characterization of the Snow Child and the Countess respectively as discussed earlier in relation to binary oppositions. However, from this point onwards, Carter assumes a perceptibly dissident tone as the story begins to resonate with a praiseworthy feminist sensitivity divulging the inherently sexist frame of mind on which fairy tales rest indeed through the depiction of the Count as a peculiar representative of abusive, oppressive, possessive patriarchal stance armed with a menacing phallus. Carter accentuates the overwhelming, 'suffocating' authority exerted by patriarchally-conditioned, 'brawling' man on the patriarchally-conditioned, submissive, 'mewing' woman who is expected to internalize subservience to men by delineating desire, potency, and possession as the basic governing instincts with respect to relations between men and women. Thereby, she shakes the attentive reader back to reality and demystifies the ostensibly idealized gender relationships in fairy tales at the end of which all distressing conflicts appear to be reconciled and villains seem to be inflicted with due punishment in a pleasing manner which indeed amounts to nothing except a gaudy display of sheer superficiality in a way as to underscore the culpability of fairy tales. In "The Snow White" the process of demystification is attained through the reversal of certain, crucial conventions peculiar to fairy tales among which poetic justice can be acknowledged as by far the most significant one. The story is concluded with an exceedingly, though necessarily, exacerbated dreary ending - in order to underline the righteously feminist concern of the author - in which not even a single trace of poetic justice is traceable as the Count is portrayed to rape the Snow Child's corpse in a way as to shed light on the boundless brutality and perplexing perversity of male heterosexuality which can be decreed as the most palpably rotten, brazenly phallic envoy of the male's oppression of the female in a reactionary, sexist society conditioned by patriarchy. Besides, the Countess, who conventionally corresponds to the terrible mother figure - depicted as a stock character in almost each and every fairy tale in a way as to evidence the incorrigibly gender-biased notion enveloping fairy tales -, manages to shun punishment which again illustrates the complete lack of poetic justice in the story. Bitter cruelty and pungent indifference that mark the ending of the story 'bite' the reader just like the rose that pricks the Snow Child and triggers off her abrupt death. In addition to this mainstream of reasoning basically concentrating on the portrayal

of callous sexist attitudes and the lack of poetic justice imparting a poignant sense of injustice around which the reversal of conventions - namely, conventions which artificially mystify and sanctify fairy tales with a hardly penetrable, tawdry shield of innocence - are gathered, deficiency of a happy marriage solidly resting on mutual sensitivity and understanding neither at the beginning nor at the end of the story can be noted as an auxiliary manifestation pinpointing the reversal of fairy tale conventions in "The Snow Child". To put in a nutshell, in the story codes of expectations appertaining to fairy tales, particularly considered with respect to poetic justice's absence and overwhelming display of preponderant violence, are shattered into splinters in order to achieve demystification and hence illuminate the innately and irreversibly sexist stance covertly communicated by dint of ostensibly 'innocent'(!) aura fairy tales are 'supposed' to be suffused with.

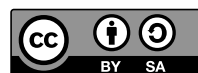
CONCLUSION

Concludingly, as is intended to be discussed and illustrated in this article through a structuralist scrutiny of Angela Carter's laudably nonconforming short story "The Snow Child" presenting a righteously strong criticism of sexism indoctrinated through coaxed conventions of 'innocent' fairy tale genre - following a theoretical introduction regarding structuralism -, in order to be able to render a satisfying application of structuralism to literary criticism, the critic or reader needs to focus on and diligently grub out for similarities and binary oppositions embedded in a text that await to be disclosed. Moreover, other crucial subjects that the structuralist critic needs to focus on can concisely be summarized as symbolism, i.e. the handling of symbols, and the treatment of codes of expectations which assume an indispensably essential role in the revelation of relationship between an individual literary work and the encompassing system or structure of literature as epitomized in the relationship between *la parole*, which means an individual word or expression, and *la langue*, which corresponds to the inclusive linguistic system in which single words and expressions find their meanings.

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Strukturalistična interpretacija kratke zgodbe "Snežni otrok" Angele Carter z vidika feminizma

Strukturalizem lahko definiramo kot literarno kritiško teorijo, ki je usmerjena v raziskavo strukturnih povezav na način, ki bi posamezno literarno delo ali njegove elemente povezal s sistemom ali stanje iz katerega naj bi le-ta izviral. Kratka zgodba Angele Carter je obravnavana v omenjenem smislu.

Ključne besede: strukturalizem, sistem, Saussure, Angela Carter, pravljica, patriarhalnost