

SUBVERSIVE BODIES:

Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson

*Introduction to the Course:
Texts, Contexts and Themes*



*"Is not this whole world an illusion?
And yet it fools everybody."*

Angela Carter

ANGELA CARTER

London/"Bristol" Novels

- 1966, *Shadow Dance*
- 1967, *The Magic Toyshop*
- 1968, *Several Perceptions*
- 1971, *Love*

Surrealist/Experimental Works

- **1969, *Heroes & Villains***
- 1972, *The Infernal Desire
Machines of Doctor Hoffman*
- **1977, *The Passion of New Eve***
- 1979, *The Bloody Chamber*
- 1979, *The Sadeian Woman*

Comic Novels

- **1984, *Nights at the Circus***
- **1992, *Wise Children***

- 1940 (May 7), born Angela Stalker in Eastbourne, Sussex
 - Spent early childhood (during WWII) in South Yorkshire, grew up and lived in London for majority of life
- 1958 (age 18), hired as a journalist but was "hampered by a demonic inaccuracy as regards fact."
- 1960, married Paul Carter (div. 1970)
- 1965, earned a degree in English (Medieval Literature) at Bristol University
- 1966 (age 26), first novel published
- 1969-1972, lived in Japan on proceeds of Somerset Maugham Award for 3rd novel (*Several Perceptions*)
- 1977, married again and had one child, a son
- 1992 (Feb 16), died of lung cancer (posthumous fame)

JEANETTE WINTERSON



- 1959 (August 27), born in Manchester to single mother
 - Adopted at 6 weeks old by childless, working-class, Pentecostal couple and raised to be a missionary
 - Grew up in Accrington, Lancashire (north of Manchester)
- 1976 (age 16), identified as lesbian and was kicked out of church and home
- 1978-1981, read English at St. Catherine's College, Oxford
- Moved to London, where she has primarily resided
- 1985 (age 26), first novel published (immediate fame)
- 2006, awarded Order of the British Empire (OBE) for "services to literature"
- Four major romantic relationships, cited as inspiration for several novels:
 - Pat Kavanagh, literary agent
 - Peggy Reynolds, BBC radio broadcaster and academic
 - Deborah Warner, theatre director
 - Susie Orbach, psychotherapist, writer and social critic

Selected Bibliography (Novels)

- 1985, *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*
- **1987, *The Passion***
- **1989, *Sexing the Cherry***
- 1992, *Written on the Body*
- 1994, *Art & Lies*
- 1997, *G.U.T. Symmetries*
- 2000, *The PowerBook*
- 2004, *Lighthousekeeping*
- 2005, *Weight*
- **2007, *The Stone Gods***
- 2012, *The Daylight Gate*
- **2015, *The Gap of Time***



AUTHOR COMPARISONS



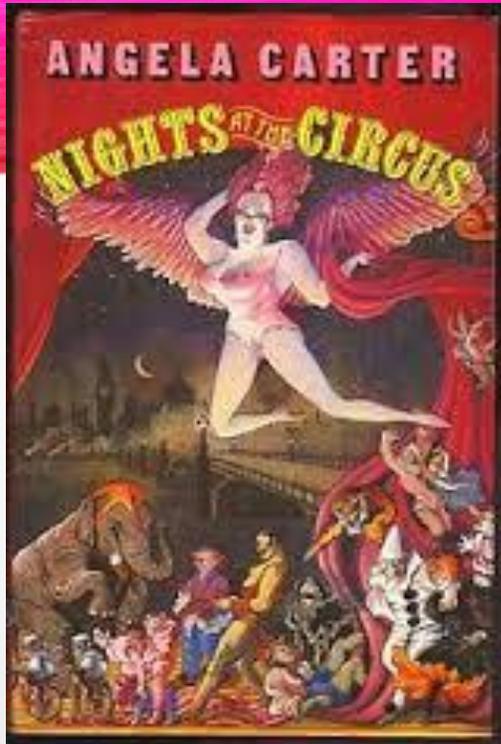
- Post/Modernist Influences: avant-garde art and film; psychoanalysis & poststructuralism
- Emphasizes realm of ideas and that literature should instruct & divert
- Experiments with multiple literary genres, sources, and modes
 - Romance, spies, crime, pornography, gothic, fantasy, folklore, myth, fairy tale, science fiction, magical realism
- Mixes High and Low culture without privileging either of these
- Storytelling a product of material culture with potential for both oppressing “others” and transforming our social realities
- Debunks myths of gender and sexuality to deconstruct oppression of women

- Post/Modernist Influences: T.S. Eliot & Virginia Woolf; Jeanette Winterson
- Emphasizes realm of emotions and that art and literature are transformative
- Experiments with fictional forms, narrative structures and voices
 - Temporal dislocations, self-reflexivity, reality & identity as unstable, self & world in constant flux
- Privileges High Art over pop culture with almost quasi-religious view of art
- Love & imagination as transcendent forms; storytelling and art asserted as absolutes of human expression
- Debunks myths of gender and sexuality to empower women and free readers from gendered categories/restrictions

CONTEXTS: CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FICTION AND POSTMODERNISM

- Carter & Winterson are both noted for their highly stylized prose, the tensions between realism and fantasy in their fiction, and their insistence on challenging systems of power, socio-political institutions, and consensual social beliefs.
- Both came of age and were writing during the social, economic, and political upheavals of the 1960s, 70s and 80s in the U.K. (End of Empire, Welfare State, Student Protests, Race Riots, Irish Troubles, Thatcherism, Falklands War).
- However, like many of their contemporaries, they avoid overt political and social realism in favor of parody, pastiche, metafiction, and (re)writing history.
- As postmodern stylists, they present identity and selfhood as fictions and question the limits of realist aesthetics, rejecting realism for exploration of language through invented pasts and fantasy worlds.
- Both work to subvert liberal humanist grand narratives of Knowledge, Truth, Meaning and History (Lyotard 1984).

HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION



- According to Linda Hutcheon (1989), a text that might be categorized as historiographic metafiction performs an ironic rewriting of history in which “its world is both resolutely fictive and yet undeniably historical, and that what both realms share is their constitution in and as discourse.” (See handout in Pilot)



- In other words, history is just another form of storytelling, and like any fiction it is arbitrary and constructed.
- The play with fantasy modes (of history) can be read as an indirect response to oppressiveness of social and political realities.
- Fabulation becomes a form of protest and fantasy functions as “a literature of subversion” (Rosemary Jackson 1981); it offers alternatives to repressive regimes and material constraints, particularly of gender, sexuality and class.
- Dominant motif for Carter and Winterson is that of “flight” – both literally and figuratively – which allows for transgression of boundaries and freedom from constraints.
- Winterson: “the only boundaries are the boundaries of the imagination” (*Art Objects* 116)





WINTERSON & CARTER ON STORYTELLING

- **Winterson:** “People have an enormous need to separate history, which is fact, from storytelling, which is not fact...and the whole push of my work has been to say, you cannot know which is which.”

-- Interview with Radio 4, 1990

- “My work is full of Cover Versions. I like to take stories we think we know and record them differently. In the re-telling comes a new emphasis or bias, and the new arrangement of key elements demands that fresh material be injected into the existing text.”

--- from Preface to *Weight*, 2005

- **Carter:** “I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the bottle explode.”

---“Notes from the Front Line,” 1981

- “One of the functions of fiction is to try to present a set of ideas in fictional prose, but at the same time, fiction should be open-ended; you bring your own history to it and read it on your own terms.”

-- Interview in *Bête Noir*, August 1985

CARTER & FEMINISM



Primarily interested in the “social fiction” of femininity as constructed and historically outside women’s control, sold to them as “real”; works to deconstruct and disrupt hegemonic discourses concerning gender and sexuality.



- However, many feminist readers find her work troubling:
 - She provides a serious critique of the Marquis de Sade (as positive contribution to debunking myths surrounding women’s sexuality)
 - Refuses to conform to any kind of “political correctness”
 - Often places female characters in situations of sexual violence and violation
 - Often writes about men (not just women) and from male perspectives with an equal interest in “describing men as objects of desire”
- Central tension: deconstructing power structures vs. perpetuating them through dominant modes of representation
- According to Elaine Jordan: “Whether reading Carter stimulates delight or revulsion (as sometimes it must do), it is always an intellectual activity.” (Bristow & Broughton)

CARTER DEFINES HER POSITION

*...imagery derived from
subterranean areas behind
everyday experience.*

Angela Carter 1974 from
'Fireworks'

- In response to some feminist readers defining her as a New Age role model or earth mother: "I'm a socialist, damn it! How can you expect me to be interested in fairies?" (Interview with *The Guardian*, 25 September 1984)
- Instead, Carter claims her work and politics are "the product of an absolute and committed materialism – i.e., that *this* world is all that there is, and in order to question the nature of reality one must move from a strongly grounded base in what constitutes material reality. Therefore I become mildly irritated (I'm sorry!) when people, as they sometimes do, ask me about the 'mythic' quality of work I've written lately. Because I believe that myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business." ("Notes from the Front Line," 1981)
- As Sarah Gamble (2001) reminds us: "This description of herself as a 'demythologiser' is key to the conception of her role as a writer, for she creates stories in order to shatter the fictions that regulate our everyday existences. Put more simply, she writes to make us think" (10)

WINTERSON & FEMINISM

Primarily interested in deconstructing binaries in favor of symmetries and writing a history of difference through exploring and expanding sexual categories: “Gender is a template, a beginning, a set of possibilities, it’s not a rigid structure and should never be a prison. I’m interested in gender play not gender roles.” (*Guardian online*, 2000)

Reading Winterson w/ Queer Theory

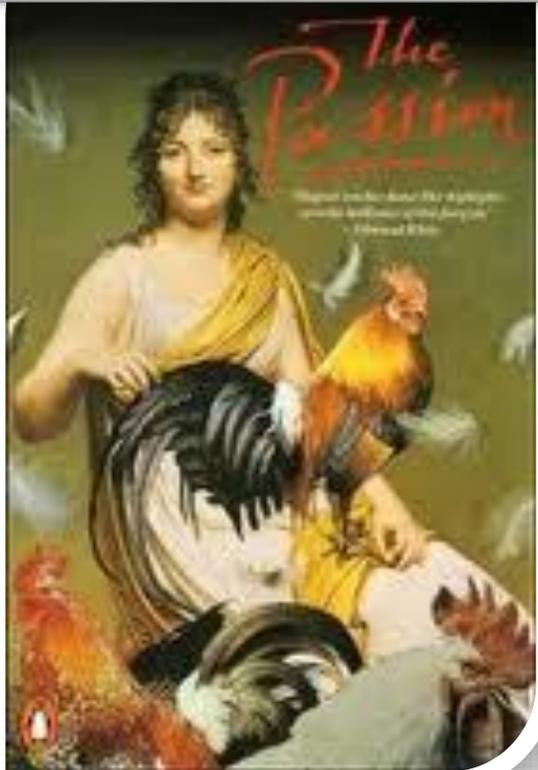
- Critiques heterosexual & male privilege;
- Fiercely anti-marriage as an institution that cages and kills love
- Explores proliferating sexualities
- Gender as masquerade & performance
- Challenges and denaturalizes heterosexuality as the norm

Winterson writes about *desire*, usually grounded in lesbian experience, but merely as a starting point to reach beyond specific bodies, selves, and actions in favor of exploring universal (non-essentialist) expressions of (lesbian) desire and sexual love. However, many feminist and lesbian critics are not happy with this move away from gender and the specificity of women’s voices, lives, relationships, and experiences. Winterson’s response: she does not repudiate lesbianism but “lesbian” as a restrictive category of her identity (as an author and individual).



THE TEXT AS SUBVERSIVE BODY

- Carter & Winterson blend both the real and the imagined to create hybrid texts and bodies, often represented by gender & species hybrids, such as:
 - The Tiger's Bride, Eve/lyn, Fevvers (Carter)
 - The Dog Woman, Villanelle, Spike (Winterson)
- Within feminist theory, aligns with **écriture féminine** (Cixous), which asserts poetical and political writing as an alternative to and critique of the phallogocentric symbolic order.
- Through privileging a 'feminine' imaginary that makes connections between (women's) bodies, voices and texts, the text itself becomes a sexed body:
 - Reading & writing are figured as desiring acts, represented by bodily passion and sexual love
 - Reading requires the commitment of an attentive lover
 - Desire impels narrative with the power to subvert, transform and transport us (to alternative imaginary or social order)



COURSE STRUCTURE

Weeks 3-7: Rewriting Fantasy and Desire

- Tradition/Transgression

Weeks 9-11: Rewriting Future Histories

- Utopia/Dystopia

Weeks Five/Six: Rewriting Shakespeare

- Comedy/Romance

COURSE THEMES

- Discourse, representation and the literary canon
- Myth, gender and sexuality; bodies and desire
- The grotesque/animalistic; female “others/otherness”
- Fluidity, plurality, multiplicity, ambiguity
- Fantasy, reality, and storytelling;
- Time, memory, and (dis)location
- Narrative fragmentation/experimentation

