

## Justification for Angela Carter: Unreliable Narration in The Passion of New Eve

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### Abstract

Angela Carter (1940-1992) is one of the most original British feminist writers in the 20th century. Most of her works are dedicated to gender relationships, deconstructing gender stereotypes and striking a balance between these gender relationships. Published in 1977, *The Passion of New Eve* is regarded as one of the most subversive works of Angela Carter. It is characterized by bold imagination of gender relationship, intensively revolving around these factors of sexual transformation, feminist utopia and drag. In *The Passion of New Eve*, the protagonist narrates the events from dual perspectives of “character-narrator”, containing a complicated narrative communication. However, the narrative mode and communication have failed to receive enough attention from critics. Under the theory framework of rhetorical theory of narrative proposed by James Phelan, the thesis analyzes Evelyn’s gender identifications accordingly and explores the unreliable narration adopted by the “character-narrator” in the progression. As such, the thesis will go further in figuring out how Angela Carter implicitly but effectively delivers her gender view to the implied readers and elevates readers’ ethical judgements. In turn, as an indispensable part of narrative communication, readers are also required to engage actively in exploring the theme of “passion” in the title, which generates disparate meanings at different stages of gender transformation.

### Keywords

The Passion of New Eve; Rhetorical Theory of Narrative; Gender View; Ethical Judgements.

### 1. Introduction

James Wood once wrote dismissively of the plots in *The Passion of New Eve*. “It is not difficult not to laugh [...] perhaps this is the intention” [1]. All these suspicious comments attest to the critical pressure that Angela Carter had to resist after the publication of *The Passion of New Eve*. In addition, for long, *The Passion of New Eve* has seen a bad reputation for its pornographic plots. Needless to say, *The Passion of New Eve* has become one of the most controversial works for Angela Carter.

Though the book has been slashed for its controversial and revolutionary themes in the past, it is now highly regarded for its bold insights on gender identity. Jean Wyatt praises the book for “a bold specification of male desires” [2]. Sarah Gamble laments the hypocritical ignorance of the book if simply for widely publicized notoriety [3]. Both acclaims and criticisms for *The Passion of New Eve* point to Carter’s most subversive attempts to maintain the highly risky deconstruction of gender construction ever. However, there has been a profound tradition of misunderstanding in terms of gender ethics in *The Passion of New Eve*.

As Angela Carter’s darkly satirical novel, the story is simple yet bold, centering on Evelyn, a man who undergoes a forced sex-change operation and re-evaluates everything he once took for granted about power, gender, and sexual identity. The protagonist Evelyn is a narcissistic and misogynistic professor who thinks less of women. After accepting a teaching post at a university

in New York, he is surprised at the chaos made by radical feminists and ran away from the miscarriage tragedy he caused to Leilah, a hooker Evelyn met in New York. On his trip to California desert, he is captured by an extreme feminist group, presided by Mother, an enormous many-breasted matriarch. Evelyn is performed a biological surgery and turned into a woman, Eve. Before Eve being impregnated with his sperms as planned, she is on exile again but arrested by a patriarch equivalent, Zero. When Zero rapes Eve, she finally stops seeing herself as a man trapped in a woman's body. Zero is in passion to capture Tristessa, a Hollywood superstar, in hopes to regain his virility. To more surprise, on a raid to search for Tristessa, Zero finds that Tristessa is a man and forces a tie knot between Tristessa and Eve. In the end, Tristessa is shot dead accidentally, Mother goes mad and Leilah turns out to be a camouflage of Lilith. Desperate and frustrated, Eve sails to the unknown place.

Just as the physical sex of Evelyn in *The Passion of New Eve* is undergoing a transformation, the character-narrator also experiences a shift of narration in correspondence. With the analysis of the transformation of gender as a nodal point, this thesis intends to re-read rhetorical devices of the narrative which drives behind gender identification and explores the possible ways to better take in the input of gender ethics in rhetorical communication. It is quite significant to figure out Angela Carter's narrative mechanism behind and offer new insights into our own understanding of what the sexual ethics means in the context of western culture under the framework of rhetorical theory of narrative.

## 2. Evelyn's Estranging Unreliable Narration and Endorsement of Gender Role

### 2.1. Evelyn the Character: Misreporting

Mis-reporting belongs to six types of unreliability, "at least on the axis of characters, facts and events" [4]. The act of mis-reporting often results from the narrator's lack of knowledge or mistaken values. In a multi-layered narrative, misreporting is not hard to find. In *The Passion of New Eve*, the implied author combines elements of dual focalization of Evelyn the character and Eve the narrator in the narration. Therefore, from Part One to Part Two, in terms of the events before gender transformation, there has remained a cognitive gap between the story of Evelyn the character and the story of Eve the narrator. It is the cognitive gap that creates a misreporting.

The first startling scene in the part reveals itself when Evelyn decided to abandon the unnamed girl who he just had sex for fun in movie theatre. At the moment, Evelyn was obsessed with profound thought with a sense of guilt, "Crying, perhaps, to lose me, was she? How cruel I felt, when I thought that" [5]. Indeed, for a man being used to a philander, Evelyn seems to have no reason to feel sorry, no less than guilty for his misconduct. Then, if he really had felt the same, he would have maintained the relationship with the girl and have treated her well instead. The literal meaning of Evelyn's feeling is a total contrast to his true response later.

Similarly, Evelyn had the audacity to call Tristessa as a pure love, "But I myself had loved Tristessa out of pure innocence when I was a little boy and the sculptural flare of her nostrils haunted my pubescent dreams. The wall of my cubicle at school had been plated with her photographs" [5]. In fact, Evelyn has already shifted his attention to other interests during his puberty.

Evelyn the character bears neither the remorse for the loss he incurred to the girlfriend he abandoned before, nor a pure admiration for Tristessa as he said. In both cases, Eve the narrator conceals Evelyn's ill attention for women by misreporting. For the women subject to his power, Evelyn seems formidable while for those out of his control, his weakness is nowhere to hide. "Nothing in my experience had prepared me for the city. American friends, colleagues, had tried to scare me with tales of muggings and mayhem but I had not believed them, not for a moment"

[5]. If truly as he disclosed, when encountered with faceless mobs and unidentified risks, Evelyn was supposed to march up on the sidewalk. In contrast, he would have been too frightened to go outside for cigarettes, if not for the company of his neighbor.

From hypocritical attitudes towards women and fictitious bravery for dangers, Eve the narrator reported the scene primarily from the perspective of Evelyn the character so as to stay in the comfort zone at the sacrifice of women and bury cowardice with a mask.

There are several evidences clarifying that Eve the narrator is reporting, with the memory of stepping on the evil land as an innocent lamb. Or, the narrator complains that all the encounter with Leilah turns out to be a trap set by Leilah. These lamentations are reminders of the fact that the narrator must be conscious of what happened throughout and what was being narrated at the moment. However, the perspective of the narrator and the character are essentially intertwined, which makes it hard to distinguish.

The narrator stays loyal to how Evelyn the character manipulates the women for his pleasure and satisfies his desires so that misreporting has contributed to the purpose of exonerating Evelyn the character from his evils. In turn, by doing so, the implied author has commanded the implied readers to read the scene by assuming the stance of Evelyn's perspective with formidable powers. As a result, Eve the narrator's insistence on Evelyn the character's innocence and his pleasure in power mechanism of gender performance exacerbates the implied reader's judgments on ethical deficiencies of Evelyn's poor treatment of women and his cowardice.

## 2.2. Eve the Narrator: Misreading and Misregarding

Except for misreporting, events are misread and misregarded so that truths are further obscured and complicated. "Misreading and mis-regarding may occur either by themselves or in combination with other kinds of unreliability" [4].

That the city had become nothing but a gigantic metaphor for death kept me, in my innocence, all agog in my ring-side seat. The movie ran towards its last reel. What excitement. [5]

This quote is quite typical for demonstrating the complicity of both the narrator and character. From a clear demonstration of New York city's threats and rhetorical interpretation as gigantic metaphor, the implied readers can refer that Eve the narrator is sick of New York but the response of "excitement" is an obvious violation of true feelings.

According to what Phelan has argued in *Living to Tell About It*, unreliable narration, especially character-narrator narration more generally, is a mode of indirect communication [4]. As such, unreliable narration encompasses a series of complex interactions, requiring readers' participation to muse on profound motivations of narrator and author. "If the implied reader would recognize that adopting the narrator's perspective would mean moving far away from the implied author's, in that sense, the adoption would be a net loss for the author-audience relationship. That is called estranging narrator" [6].

Indeed, the narration of Eve the narrator falls into the category of estranging narrator. Eve the narrator has misinterpreted the one-night stand with Leilah as Leilah's seduction. Eve believed that "all these were the palpable manifestations of seduction" [5]. Evelyn's irresponsible escape dictates a glaring denouncement. "So, hypocrites that we were, we spared ourselves the final hypocrisy of love. Or, I saved myself from that most brutal of all assaults, the siege of the other" [5]. At first glance, these explanations make sense as an undisguised confession of Evelyn's hypocrisy. Yet, Eve the narrator vindicates his escape by twisting the definition of love. Evelyn

the character's innocent claims are relevant to his desires. Through these details, the implied author clearly communicates to the implied reader misreading and misregarding of Evelyn.

For one thing, to present the misreporting does invite the implied readers to share perspectives closely. For another thing, the same signals of misreading and misregarding require readers' participation in the perverse perspective, suggesting that readers should adopt an estranging distance further. Due to the effect of estranging narrator, implied readers' ethical judgements in the part or put in a bigger context, can be further intensified.

Overall, the ethical dynamic can be concluded as follows. The implied author, through Eve's narration, gives voices to the perspective of Evelyn the character and guides implied readers to participate in the inner-mind of sexual fantasy with bold pleadings for blaming external factors rather than Evelyn himself. Implied readers could feel the strong appeal for participating in the inner-mind of Evelyn the character but misreading and misregarding demand them to also share with the perverted worldviews altogether. In particular, in the blaming for Leilah's seduction and defending excuses of Evelyn's escape, the implied readers will feel the effect of estranging unreliability.

It is the contradictory dual focalization that muddles the progression and amplifies readers' ethical judgement. As such, it requires active participation of readerly dynamic in ethical judgement. However, if the real readers failed to pick up the hint of estranging unreliability, they would find the narration totally unreadable. Therefore, there is no wonder that most readers in the 1970s disowned the book, possibly because of its lively description of sex for the conservatives or passionate "defense" of traditional gender role for the progressives.

### **3. Eve/lyn's Bonding Unreliable Narration: Unconscious Reflection over Misogyny**

In spite of being restricted to the description of facts, characters and events at the stage of living in Beulah, Eve/lyn still reflects over the past, more telling to reveal his/her personal resistance to the feminist utopia and the issue of misogyny further. In his/her reflection, there is more unreliability disclosed rather than restriction.

"How the authentic Messiah would be born of a man, had they not told me so in school? But in my minor public school, they had not" [5]. At first glance, the statement of not being taught that Messiah was born of a man, sounds ridiculous for Evelyn. As an erudite English professor, Eve/lyn must have mastered related knowledge of Messiah as a man. There are two kinds of hypotheses. Firstly, Eve/lyn misreports so as to blame school for the lack of information. Therefore, it can be inferred that school and other educational institutions in fact take charge of instilling stereotyped gender views through myth. Secondly, if these words are reliable restricted narration out of Eve/lyn, in reality, nobody imparts to the idea that Messiah is a man. Therefore, in this way, Eve/lyn's reflection echoes with the hypothesis of his taking granted for men's power in biblical stories without formal education in class. These two hypotheses point to the fact that there has been established gender stereotypes in myth. In correspondence, public unconsciousness has recognized the existence of gender myth and continued to consolidate the fixed conception.

Yet, from Eve/lyn's rhetorical question for responding to Sophia's preaching on Eve/lyn's luck to have a simple surgery, it can be inferred that Eve/lyn has already acknowledged women's misery but he chose to ignore. "(had I known how prevalent a custom it was and how it was achieved by the excision of the clitoris?)" [5]. Eve/lyn is reluctant to confess that his/her power is well constituted at the sacrifice of women, therefore under-reporting these facts to hide his unconscious misogyny.

There is no conflict between a man being a narcissist or delusional and his being a misogynist, that is, someone who powerfully and consistently channels misogynist social forces. For misogyny is narcissistic and delusional by its very nature. [7]

Unconscious neglect of men's domination in ideology and awareness of women's torment in history serve as a form of underestimating misogynist social influence and overestimating the command of misogynist knowledge. Rather, the under-reporting of women's sufferings highlights the very nature of misogynist. Consequently, the recording of the interaction between Eve/lyn and Sophia through Eve/lyn's recounting, guides the implied readers to the depth of pretentious empathy for women.

More evidently, Eve/lyn's self-suspicion soliloquy "But, then, why should I have thought it was a punishment to be transformed into a woman? Sophia may have been sorry to see my pain but she never pitied me because she knew I felt that I was being punished" [5]. To associate woman with punishment underlines outrageous misogyny tradition reflected in his/her mind. In addition, the rhetorical question further heightens Eve/lyn's deliberation and profound confusion over hostility towards being a woman.

It has been argued that "In bonding unreliability, the discrepancies between the narrator's reports, interpretations, or evaluations and the inferences of the authorial audience have the paradoxical result of reducing the interpretive, affective, or ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience" [6]. While the implied author guides the implied reader to these inferences about Eve/lyn's under-reporting of women's misery and his/her awareness of established gender order, implied readers are also be guided to recognize that Evelyn nevertheless captures some underlying truths about the misogyny.

As Manne asserted that "despite the waning of many obviously patriarchal social structures, we can see how male dominance may persist in" [7]. In the 1970s, the phenomenon of misogyny was still prevailing. The unconscious remarks backing misogyny suggest that Eve/lyn is full conscious of its existence. As an agonized person who is still reluctant to let his male identity go, Eve/lyn intends to maximize the trauma he/she suffers in Beulah and minimize his conscientious contemplation of misogyny. More generally, the abnormal denial arises from a conflict of consciousness for ever being a man and conscientiousness for now being a woman.

As such, the bonding unreliability also endorses a jumble of ideas from Eve/lyn. On one hand, the implied reader still finds these hidden misogynist comments distasteful. On the other hand, the implied reader is also drawn closer to the struggle of Eve/lyn as a bold misogynist ever. It would be quite a challenge to refresh his/her ideas. Thus, the implied readers will be more inclined to embrace a combination of distaste and sympathy, which in turn draws close the relationship between the implied author and readers. At the moment, the passion of Eve/lyn has witnessed a hesitation for embracing desires as a man and suffering for being a woman.

#### 4. Conclusion

*The Passion of New Eve* was created in the peak of feminist movement in the 1970s. Indisputably, at that time, feminists registered a comparatively remarkable achievement while the campaign also suffered a stigmatization. In the meantime, several extreme behaviour such as burning underwear evokes public aversion. Therefore, the dilemma of the feminist movement is reflected in Angela Carter's works.

"The past not only has a 'decorative, ornamental' function but it is also a vast repository of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be a la mode and find the old lies on which new lies have been based". It is through the narrative that the history-ridden web of gender representation for the old lies of patriarchal society has been debunked. Also, on the



basis of the outmoded lies and the deconstruction of misogynist have come into existence. Thus, it can be anticipated that Carter still strongly believes that individuals are able to discover social representations of genders and deconstruct these sources of gender myth and launch an individual pursuit as the heroine did. Only in this way can anyone in reality have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of his own identity rather than passively and blindly accept gender identifications.

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