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Woman as Alien

Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains*

This paper shows how Carter revitalizes the once-popular genre of catastrophic fiction. First I briefly characterize this genre and place *Heroes and Villains* in its context. Then I discuss decay and entropy depicted in the novel as symptomatic to the decay of pre-holocaust symbolic order. Next, I describe how the protagonist challenges the patriarchal social order based on the set of false binary oppositions and attempts to disrupt the old and to create a genuinely new feminist civilization. Similarly, Carter's novel disrupts old schemes and set formulas of disaster fiction and creates a radically new fantastic narrative of society ruled by women-aliens.

"Woman as an alien, the non-patriarchal alien in a patriarchal society, the patriarchal alien in a non-patriarchal society, the non-patriarchal alien experiencing the stress of positioning as a patriarchal subject – all are strategies used by feminist science fiction writers to deconstruct patriarchal ideology and its practice."[1] This quote taken from an essay by Anne Cranny-Francis is for me a very suitable starting point for a discussion of Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969). Written from within the counter-culture of the 1960s, this novel is Carter's excursion into the disaster story convention, a literary sub-genre which was very popular during the period of the Cold War.[2]

Heroes and Villains is a very interesting and unsettling early book, and yet, surprisingly, one that has received "far less critical attention than one might expect."[3] Apart from a few interesting essays,[4] the existing studies of the book (pri-

1. Anne Cranny-Francis, "Feminist Futures: A Generic Study," in *Alien Zone. Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 219–228, p. 223.

2. To call Carter a "feminist science fiction writer" would perhaps be an exaggeration (though the most influential science fiction lexicon, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* edited by Clute and Nicholls, does have an entry "Angela Carter"). Nonetheless, in some of her novels she purposefully uses fantastic literary conventions.

3. Elisabeth Mahoney, "'But Elsewhere?' The future of fantasy in *Heroes and Villains*," in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*, ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London and New York: Longman, 1997), 73–87, p. 73.

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marily sub-chapters of monographs devoted to Carter) focus almost exclusively on the way the novel reverses gender stereotypes and undermines cultural codings of female sexuality as passive and masochistic. My point is different: I would like to show how, by having a female protagonist (and focalizer) who revolts against cultural stereotypes, Carter revitalizes the disaster story convention that in the late sixties seemed an exhausted and repetitive sub-genre of pulp fiction.

In order to do this I am going to briefly present the British disaster story tradition, place Carter within its context, and then discuss *Heroes and Villains* as an atypical disaster story that, thanks to a woman-alien who disrupts mythical frameworks that people are confined by, points to new ways of constructing narratives. I will show how the female protagonist of the novel matures and gradually learns that her post-holocaust society is based on a set of false binary oppositions it has inherited from pre-holocaust Western patriarchal society, and that her world is slowly giving way to entropy. I will then prove that *Heroes and Villains* indulges in descriptions of chaos and decay in order to show the deterioration of once potent symbols and thus of the mythical order which they represent. Only then, once the old order disappears, can the female mythmaker create a totally new civilization, one that does not repeat old and static social paradigms, but is dynamic and mutable. Similarly, *Heroes and Villains* shows that, in order not to degenerate into pulp disaster, the story should refrain from recreating already known historical epochs (for example, a new post-holocaust Middle Ages), opting instead to create radically new societies ruled by women-aliens.

Though it is rather difficult to state exactly what disaster stories are, a fair working definition of the genre seems to be the one given in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*: “stories of vast biospheric change which drastically affect human life.”[5] According to John Clute and Peter Nicholls, the British disaster story was born at the end of the nineteenth century when the first anti-civilization sentiments were being felt, and people began to mistrust the idea of the white man’s Empire standing for reason, progress and science. In 1884 Richard Jefferies, a Victorian naturalist and journalist, published *After London*, a novel describing the ruins of the greatest city on Earth; in a post-cataclysmic future our civilization inevitably succumbs to nature, savagery and non-reason. In the following years such writers as H.G. Wells, Conan Doyle and Alun Llewellyn published numerous fantastic ac-

4. One has to mention Eva C. Karpinski, “Signifying Passion: Angela Carter’s *Heroes and Villains* as a Dystopian Romance,” *Utopian Studies* 11.2 (2000) 137–51; and Roz Kaveney, “New New World Dreams: Angela Carter and Science Fiction,” in *Flesh and the Mirror. Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago, 1994), 171–88.

5. John Clute and Peter Nicholls, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (London: Orbit, 1999), p. 338.

counts of natural- or human-provoked disasters, the retrogression of humankind, new ice ages, barbarian raids, the destruction of Europe, etc.[6]

Though dating from the nineteenth century the genre did not flourish until the 1950s and early 1960s during the Cold War, when young British writers revived the old tradition by incorporating a new influence: that of American pulp magazines. American stories of the time were very pessimistic, as the recent war left many with a feeling of despair and fear of the nuclear bomb, political systems based on unlimited power and culture's imminent doom. In England there was a strong native tradition of gloomy fiction concerning authoritarian societies (George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Burgess), and thus the young authors of disaster stories belonging to the so-called "New Wave" of British speculative fiction (J.G. Ballard, Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss and others) had examples to follow.[7] Their older colleagues Walter Miller (in the United States) and John Wyndham (in Britain) were writing their post-holocaust bestsellers at that very time.

Heroes and Villains seems to belong to the same tradition as the disaster story classics: Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibovitz* or John Wyndham's *The Chrysalides*.[8] Miller and Wyndham describe the beginnings of a new civilization; their prose demonstrates how the deadly heritage of our times (pollution, mutations, decline and chaos) serve as the basis for another better world. In *A Canticle* monks of a second Middle Ages try to gather and preserve the records of our knowledge by rewriting all kinds of texts (just like the caste of Professors). Though they no longer understand what they copy, still there is hope that one day civilization will be regained. Wyndham's post-catastrophic society, in turn, is obsessed with the idea of purity and the norm. His characters want to recreate civilization in such a way as to make it immune to self-destruction. In its fear of deviations and mutants (bringing to mind the Out People) Wyndham's society is cruel and fanatical, but his novel is, just like Miller's story, full of hope for the future. Human folly and cruelty evoke terror and pity in order to improve the reader's mind. Carter's procedure in composing *Heroes and Villains* is to allude to Wyndham and Miller's tradition. Both *Heroes and Villains* and her other post-holocaust novel *The Passion of the New Eve* show to what extant literature today is repeating already known tales. Yet disaster

6. Clute and Nicholls, pp. 337–339.

7. For details concerning the New Wave of British speculative fiction, see Judith Merril, *England Swings SF, Stories of Speculative Fiction* (New York: Ace Books, 1968). The most important disaster novels written by the New Wave writers are J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (Harmondsworth and Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1974) and J.G. Ballard *The Wind from Nowhere* (Harmondsworth and Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1974).

8. Walter Miller, *A Canticle for Leibovitz* (Philadelphia, Lippincott and London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960) and John Wyndham, *The Chrysalides* (London: Joseph, 1955).

fiction, a very commercial genre, enables Carter to reuse the stock motifs and to create her own often times shocking pieces. Her disaster novels may therefore be read as modern *Menippea:* a mixture of heterogeneous literary material. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, *Menippea* was the genre which broke the demands of realism and probability: it conflated the past, present and future, states of hallucination, dream worlds, insanity, eccentric behaviour and speech and transformation.[9]

Heroes and Villains juxtaposes overt allusions to nuclear fallout and mutations caused by the self-annihilation of technological society with counter-cultural poetics: subversion of the social order, new hippie-like aesthetics, alternate lifestyles, and concentration on entropy, decay and death. Carter is no longer interested in the bomb – she does not warn against the impending holocaust; but instead describes in detail the gradual dissolution of social, sexual and cultural groupings which follows the inevitable disaster and which makes room for a new female-governed future. Thus, she deconstructs the markedly masculine tradition of after-the-end-of-the-world fantasies which deal with the creation of a new order, strong leaders and outbursts of violence (as is the case in the above-mentioned novels by Miller and Wyndham). In stock disaster stories women are either commodities or breeders who are fought for and whose reproductive abilities are to amend r the drastic decrease of population.

In *Heroes and Villains* the Cold War motif of a post-holocaust civilization allows Carter to create an exuberant world of ruin, lush vegetation and barbarism. Three groups of people live among the crumbling ruins of a pre-nuclear explosion past: the Professors, who live in concrete fortified villages and cultivate old science and ideology; the Barbarians, who attack them and lead nomadic lives in the forests; and the Out People, radiation mutants cast out by all communities.

The Professors are the guardians of this order, and they try to uphold standards and attend to appearances such as dress and accent. Marianne, the novel's focalizer, is the daughter of a professor of history brought up to live in an ordered patriarchal society and to study old books in trying to preserve knowledge. The futility of the Professors' work – abstract research done in white concrete towers, editing what nobody would ever read – demonstrates the arbitrariness of post-apocalyptic social roles. The caste of Professors, in wanting to be different than the irrational Barbarians, must devise artificial attributes of its individuality.

Unable to cope with an existence devoted to cultivation of the past and attracted by the colourful and seemingly romantic Barbarians, Marianne helps one of them – an attractive young Barbarian leader named Jewel. He is very beautiful and

9. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, tr. by R.W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973), p. 96.

he wears an exuberant savage costume, making him look like a Hollywood film star who plays in a wilderness film. For Marianne he embodies her desire and fantasies – on one occasion she even calls him the "furious invention of my virgin nights."[10] Moreover, his name might be considered an allusion to the beautiful savage girl whom Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim made the queen of his little kingdom.[11] Marianne's name might well be read as an allusion to Jane Austen's too-romantic heroine of *Sense and Sensibility*.[12] This canonical echo is contrasted with the association with pulp fiction: Marianne, a professor's daughter lost in the wilderness, evokes the character of Jane in the *Tarzan* stories.[13] It is by such literary allusions that Carter constructs her self-conscious pastiche, thus demonstrating the whole range of possibilities offered to a female character by romance and, at the same time, she points out the exhaustion of these conventions. John Barth in his *Literature of Exhaustion* postulates that "exhausted" literature might be saved by coming back to well-known classics and by echoing their extracts in new shocking contexts.[14] In this way Carter mingles her generically heterogeneous "prior texts".

Wounded in an attack, Jewel escapes from the village and is followed by Marianne. He then takes her to his tribe and, despite her protests, proclaims her his hostage. Marianne is a total stranger among the Barbarians; they find her repulsive and unbearably alien; like a creature from outer space in a B-grade science fiction movie she provokes fear and hostility. An educated and self-assured woman in a tribe "caught in the moment of transition from the needs of sheer survival to a myth-ruled society,"[15] she is thus a woman-alien. Interestingly, as early as the 1960s Carter used a science fiction stock character to talk about women in a society that is undergoing changes: in the 1990s Donna Haraway, in her famous "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", in a similar way makes use of the science fiction concept of a cyborg.[16] Haraway follows Carter's footsteps, and indeed makes her point even stronger, as her "cy-

10. Angela Carter, *Heroes and Villains* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 137.

11. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

12. Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (Harmondsworth, New York, Ringwood and Auckland: Penguin Classics, 2007).

13. Tarzan's adventures were originally created by Edgar Rice Burroughs and published in the years 1914–1950.

14. John Barth, *The Literature of Exhaustion and the Literature of Replenishment* (Northridge: Lord John Press, 1982).

15. Karpinski, p. 138.

16. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181.

borg" comes from the social outside and is alien to traditional gender structures. As Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger explain:

> Haraway develops her "Manifesto" around the cyborg – product of both science fiction and the military-industrial complex – as an imaginative figure generated *outside* the framework of the Judeo-Christian history of fall and redemption, a history that unfolds between the twin absolutes of Edenic origin and apocalyptic Last Judgment. Like Derrida, Haraway warns that (nuclear) apocalypse might, in fact, be the all-too-possible outcome of our desire for the resolution of historical time. Haraway too is wary of cultural discourses that privilege resolution, completion, and totality.[17]

Marianne is alien to the tribe as she refuses to adopt traditional female roles. Thus, Carter uses science fiction literary conventions to talk about gender as performance much in the same manner Judith Butler will some twenty years later.[18] Elisabeth Mahoney in her above-mentioned study of *Heroes and Villains* reads the novel in the context of Butler's thesis, that "fantasy is the terrain to be privileged in any contestation of conventional configurations of identity, gender and the representation of desire."[19] This is a very good starting point and an interesting comparison but, as Elaine Jordan notices, "Carter did this sort of thing before Butler, so her work could just as well be used to explicate Butler."[20] The same is true for Haraway, Gordon, Hollinger and a number of other feminist critics often referred to nowadays in order to validate Carter's argument. But Carter turning to science fiction for her metaphors predates them.

The tribe (whose descriptions bring to mind a 1960s hippie commune) is apparently governed by Jewel and his brothers, but Marianne soon realizes that the real source of power is Donally, an escapee professor of sociology, Jewel's tutor, and the self-proclaimed shaman of the tribe. For Donally the tribe is a social laboratory

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17. Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon, ed., *Edging into the Future. Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 162.

18. Butler talks about gender in terms of ritual practices, a role one adopts thus excluding other modes of behaviour. What is excluded forms the "constitutive outside" the zone of the suppressed from which gender roles can be challenged, much in the same way Marianne challenges social norms in the tribe. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 23.

19. Mahoney, p. 75.

20. Elanie Jordan, „Afterword," in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*, ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London and New York: Longman, 1997), 216–219, p. 219.

where he tries to perform an experiment: to wit, to introduce a new mythology designed to be the founding stone of new type of post-holocaust society.[21]

> It seemed to me that the collapse of civilisation in the form that intellectuals such as ourselves understood it might be as good a time as any for crafting a new religion' he said modestly. 'Religion is a device for instituting the sense of a privileged group; many are called but few are chosen and, coaxed from incoherence, we shall leave the indecent condition of barbarism and aspire towards that of the honest savage.[22]

When Marianne meets Donally she immediately recognizes his professorial descent: "his voice was perfectly cultured, thin, high and soft . . . He had a thin, mean and cultured face. Marianne had grown up among such voices and faces."[23] Seeing in his study books which she remembered from her childhood (Teilhard de Chardin, Levi-Strauss, Weber, Durkheim) Marianne discovers Donally's attempts to rule the Barbarians according to the outdated formulas written down by pre-apocalyptic sociologists.

Disappointed by the tribe, Marianne runs away only to be recaptured by Jewel, who rapes her, brings her back, and then ceremoniously marries her according to a ritual devised by Donally. With the tribe again on the move, Donally quarrels with Jewel and has to leave. Marianne gradually learns how to manipulate Jewel, her quasi-royal power grows, especially once she becomes pregnant and is to be the mother of Jewel's heir. When Donally sends a message that he has been caught by the Professors, Jewel goes to rescue him and both are killed. In the novel's finale Marianne decides to become the new female leader of a new society.

This brief summary reveals that, in parallel with the action-adventure narrative, the novel also depicts Marianne's gradual psychological change. She learns how to articulate her own fantasies and to objectify the man she desires: Jewel. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that when her romantic illusions disappear she discovers her own deeper motivating desire in her relationship with Jewel: it is her newly awakened sexuality that counts, not the male himself. Though a tribal leader and a future patriarch, Jewel is in fact a passive object both Marianne and Donally struggle to possess. Linden Peach writes:

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21. Carter's numerous shamans, for example the character from *Nights at the Circus*, are usually totally different. They are given a role similar to that of a writer: they believe in the magic they perform, therefore what they do has the mystical quality of a true primary text. In their context the comments and analysis by Donally seem artificial and exhausted.

22. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 63.

23. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 49.

> In the relationship between Marianne and Jewel, Carter also rewrites a further traditional story, that of a demon-lover, of whom Jewel has many characteristics – he is powerful, mysterious, supernatural; and he can be cruel, vindictive and hostile. However, in her description of him, Carter challenges the male-female binarism which ascribes so-called masculine qualities to men and feminine characteristics to women. In discovering the nature of her own desire, Marianne finds that male-female attributes exist within each individual. The demon-lover is also reconfigured as part of her own eroticisation of the male other.[24]

New ways of looking at herself and others set Marianne free and empower her. Towards the end of the book she feels ready to construct a new narrative for herself and make the world around believe in it. A woman-alien dissolves the tribe's patriarchal structure and commences a new phase in its history. The old order based on binary oppositions (hero/villain, passive/active, natural/civilized) and a number of taboos that originated in pre-holocaust times are abandoned. Carter does not do what a standard disaster story author does: she does not establish a rigid binarism between the Professors and the Barbarians, i.e., the civilized and the savage. The post-holocaust narrative is for her a space where she "explores the blurring of conventional boundaries and binarisms and the way in which such artificial boundaries are maintained."[25] She re-uses existing narrative patterns of disaster fiction in order to break the "Wyndhamesque" formula and instead create a new and radical vision of the end of the world.

Moreover, these post-holocaust times are shown to be not a new version of the old order, but an unknown epoch typified not by stability but by creative chaos. Step by step, Marianne realizes that the entire distinction Professors\Barbarians is as false and naïve as the children's role-playing game called "Soldiers and Villains". As a female child growing up in a Professors' village she always had to play the part of the Barbarian, the villain, the other, while the boy she played with, the son of a professor of mathematics, always wanted to be a male civilized hero who shoots her dead. As a small girl she was brave enough to refuse to play such a game; now as a young woman she realizes that in the real world the basis of the division between the Professors and the Barbarians is a set of myths and superstitions.[26]

The stay in the Barbarians' camp proves to Marianne that there is no other difference but old wives' tales: to her surprise (and in opposition to what she was told

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24. Linden Peach, *Angela Carter* (Oxford: Macmillan, 1998), p. 96.

25. Peach, p. 87.

26. For example, according to these beliefs, the Barbarians sew up cats in the bellies of the Professors' women, while the Professors in turn bake Barbarians alive "like hedgehogs".

in the Professors' village) the Barbarians do not represent instinct, folklore and savagery alone. They do have a lot of superstitions; they do sport ridiculous tattoos, hairdos and costumes and they do believe in folk cures – but at the same time they are very far from unreflective "nature". When Marianne first sees Jewel he seems the embodiment of the wilderness: a man fighting to survive among hostile wildlife. But he immediately destroys this impression by quoting to her a relevant bit of poetry: Tennyson's poem about Darwinism.[27] Jewel is very well-educated by Donally and likes to boast of his knowledge of philosophical theories and the Latin names of beasts, which seems as irrelevant in the dirty Barbarians' camps as the Professors' lore in their concrete towers.

The Professors and the Barbarians need each other to define themselves. Both tribes work hard to impress the opponent (the Barbarians wear tattoos and face-paint, the Professors organize armies of specially-equipped soldiers to defend their villages). They also blame each other for the hardships of post-holocaust life. Marianne's father, in explaining to her the reasons of the war between the tribes, asks at one point: "if the Barbarians are destroyed who will we then be able to blame for the bad things?"[28] Aidan Day remarks:

> The Professors, failing to recognise their own repressions, have sought to hound that which is not gentle and ordered outside themselves. They have committed the crime of finding external scapegoats for realities within their own hearts and minds that they find problematical.[29]

In a world where the Barbarians discuss philosophy and shamans comment on being shamans, even the seemingly biological distinction human\inhuman is not stable and fails to structure reality. While roaming the jungle Marianne encounters mutants whose bodies and minds transgress the human norm. What is worth noting is the origin of the Out People motif: mutants and deviations often populate the worlds of post-apocalyptic stories, the above-mentioned example of Wyndham's *The Chrysalides* being the best known; but the way they are described is usually quite different. By transgressing the norm Wyndham's mutants reinforce the notion of being human, of possessing some mysterious human factor along with all the rights and duties, while Carter's Out People are just strange, speechless bodies:

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27. Alfred Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam A. H. H.," in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1992), Canto 56.

28. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 11.

29. Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 45.

> Amongst the Out People, the human form has acquired fantastic shapes. One man has furled ears like pale and delicate Arum Lilies. Another was scaled all over, with webbed hands and feet. Few had the conventional complement of limbs and features.[30]

Their appearance shows that overwhelming entropy is not external scenery the human race has to live in, but that it touches and alters the very essence of humanness: what humans are and what humans create is falling apart. Carter is re-writing an iconic disaster story motif (that of humans genetically altered by radiation), but she gives it a new ideological meaning. In classic male post-holocaust narratives mutants are disfigured humans who suffer for the sins of the fathers: civilization should start anew, albeit preserving its essential features (humanism, liberalism, traditional family values and consequently, patriarchy). Carter's Marianne, in watching the Out People, does not believe in re-establishing the old social order with its norms and values. *Heroes and Villains* is not about the rebirth of humankind, but about apocalypse itself.

In this chaotic world – where there are no more essential differences between phenomena, and the randomness of things does not allow for any conventional divisions – race, species, gender and even time cease to exist objectively. David Punter comments:

> The conflict . . . is a multivalent parody: of class relations, of relations between the sexes, of the battle between rational control and desire. . . . There are, obviously, no heroes and no villains; only a set of silly games which men play.[31]

Each entity possesses its own characteristic features; but on their basis no classification can be made as, gradually, all the points of reference are destroyed. Such a process is particularly striking as far as temporality is concerned – in the world of the novel there is no objective measure of time; everybody lives in the temporal dimension of his biological rhythm without calendars or chronometers. In *Heroes and Villains* the flow of time is stopped forever, as shown by the beautiful though useless chronometers that for Marianne are merely souvenirs from the past, elements of pure decoration. The book starts with a description of her father's favourite heirloom:

> [A] clock which he wound every morning and kept in the family dining-room upon a sideboard full of heirlooms . . . . She concluded the clock must

30. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 110.
31. David Punter, *The Literature of Terror – A History of Gothic Fiction from 1795 to the Present Day* vol. II *The Modern Gothic* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 140.

> be immortal but this did not impress her . . . she watched dispassionately as the hands of the clock went round but she never felt the time was passing, for time was frozen around her in this secluded place.[32]

Time itself has become an heirloom, a peculiar reminder of bygone days. For Marianne the ticking of the clock has no relation to the rhythm of life. Its ticking proved to be the sound of her childhood and her father's old age. She left it behind without regret as it had never served for her any purpose. The next chronometers she saw (dead watches worn by the Barbarian women for decoration) were signs of an even greater degree of timelessness as nobody remembered their initial function. The last clock in the book, a gigantic and dead apparatus, welcomes Marianne in the ruins of the old city:[33]

> Prominent among the minarets, spires and helmets of wrought iron which protruded from the waters was an enormous clock whose hands stood still at the hour of ten, though it was, of course, no longer possible to tell whether this signified ten in the morning or ten at night.[34]

The gigantic size of this clock and its absolute deadness create the image of the total arbitrariness of any measure of time. Exhaustion and entropy know no time but the vague "now" which for a fraction of a second can at best turn into "a totally durationless present, a moment of time sharply dividing past from future and utterly distinct from both."[35] The post-holocaust landscape of ruined cities near the seaside adorned with dead clocks brings to mind a visual intertext: Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*.[36] In this surreal painting, influenced by psychoanalysis, gigantic dead clocks are melting down, showing that clock time is no longer valid. Dali and Carter (who adored the Surrealists and often wrote about them in both her fiction and non-fiction) are both trying to recreate inner landscapes: their critique of the contemporary world takes forms of fantastic neverlands.

Carter's great admiration for the Surrealist movement results from the fact that, as she holds, theirs was the art of celebration and recreation. Their techniques haphazard and idiosyncratic, the Surrealists attempted to create combinations of

32. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 1.

33. The city is probably London and the clock Big Ben; the tribe is traveling south to spend the winter at the seaside and finally reach the gigantic ruin. Descriptions of London after various cataclysms are very common in disaster stories; examples are: Jefferies' *After London*, J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* and *The Wind from Nowhere* and Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffid.* Once again Carter rewrites a canonical disaster fiction motif in a new way.

34. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 138.

35. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 148.

36. Painting by Salvador Dali, *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931.

words and images which by analogy and inspiration were supposed to evoke amazement; such art was based on a strong belief in humankind's ability to recreate itself. The world shown in their works is "déjà vue", as in a nightmare we recognize separate elements which we have already seen as they date back to diverse moments of the past. It is a world deprived of time experienced in the mind. In surrealist art: "It is this world, there is no other but a world transformed by imagination and desire. You could say it is a dream made flesh."[37] In *Heroes and Villains* Carter attempts to use a similar technique to depict the post-apocalyptic world in which past, present and future intermingle.

For Carter's characters the future offers no escape: they are doomed to inhabit the ruins and repeat social scenarios from the past. Living in such a world has the haunting quality of a nightmare: the self-conscious characters feel oppressed by the same surroundings, similar activities and repeated words. What is the worst is the fact that there is no escape in space either, as there cannot be anywhere to go: "There's nowhere to go, dear,' said the Doctor. 'If there was I would have found it".[38]

Madness, drunkenness and paranoia seem to be the only ways out of the grotesque post-apocalyptic wilderness where everything is falling apart; indeed, the wild world Marianne enters (and finally renews) is entropy-ridden. The story's characters can hide only inside their troubled egos, as the outside reality is nothing but an everlasting nightmare. A stifling atmosphere of exhaustion and oppression is created by numerous images of overgrown vegetation, desolate ruins, half-destroyed houses full of fungi and rotting furniture, detailed descriptions of dirt and disease – all in the atmosphere of sexual fantasy and paranoid visions. These images are too vivid and drastic to be mere scenery; it is the power of death and the different faces of decay that constitute Carter's style.

Carter treats bits and pieces of old discourses (the above-mentioned allusions to Conrad and Austen, as well as to Edgar Rice Burroughs and John Wyndham) in the way the Barbarians use old garments and broken down pieces of machinery found in the ruins: apparently to adorn but, at the same time, to take delight in dissolution, destruction and death. Metatextually, *Heroes and Villains* depicts the de-composition of traditional modes of writing; Carter follows the example of such New Wave authors as Pamela Zoline[39] for whom the key narrative term is entropy. In the short story "The heat death of the universe" Zoline defines the entropy of a

37. Angela Carter, "The Alchemy of the Word," in *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), p. 70.

38. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 95.

39. Pamela Zoline, "The heat death of the universe," in *England Swings SF, Stories of Speculative Fiction* , ed. Judith Merril (New York: Ace Books, 1968), 313–328.

system as "a measure of its degree of disorder."[40] The "system" is post-capitalist affluent society, and in order to capture the experience of living within the contemporary mediascape she both depicts the chaos of her character's life and introduces chaos to her narrative.

Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe" ends with the scene when the protagonist methodically smashes all pieces of equipment in her kitchen, thereby creating an irreversible mess of destruction; all forms give way to chaos. Carter's novel has a totally different post-apocalyptic setting, yet chaos and entropy are equally important. The narration of *Heroes and Villains* describes decay almost with pleasure and most certainly with great precision. The text changes into a study in decomposition, the anatomy of both our civilization and the disaster story genre: they both are killed in order to be examined. "For I am every dead thing";[41] this quotation from John Donne would best summarize the world of the novel, which does not allow for any hope. The only emotion left is curiosity: Marianne the focalizer takes some pleasure in scientific observations of decay.

Among the ruins and scattered heirlooms of the past a prominent place is given to old symbols, which at the moment of the world's death, change in significance. Deprived of their contextual power the symbols die, creating ephemeral constellations and gaining for a moment a certain new meaning. The anatomy of signification becomes a favourite pastime of Donally and, later, Marianne; but the way the two of them interpret signs differs. Donally seeks to maintain patriarchal mythical frameworks: the sharp unequal antagonism between male and female; civilized and uncivilized; reasonable and wild. Marianne tries to dismantle these oppositions: for her signs are reduced to aesthetics and the old signifying system dies. The moment she starts to observe signs for their own sake marks her growing understanding of the world around: she lives surrounded by the debris of a bygone civilization which one may study – but only for scientific purposes. New myths are yet to be created. The last conversation between her and Jewel best shows the difference between them. Jewel is still naïve enough to believe in symbols, while Marianne analyzes them:

> But when he was near enough for her to see the blurred colours of his face, she also saw he was making the gesture against the Evil Eye. Suddenly she recognised it.
>
> "They used to call that the sign of the Cross,' she said. 'It must be handed down among the Old Believers."

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40. Zoline, p. 316.

41. John Donne, "A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day, Being the shortest day," in *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London and Melbourne: Dent, 1985), p. 90.

"Did you call me back just to give me this piece of useless information?"[42]

The anatomy of symbolic meanings and their changes is best seen in the example of clothes. Both the dress and decoration worn by the Barbarians come either from the ruins (and thus from the past) or are stolen from the Professors' villages. Worn in new and shocking combinations, old garments gain new meanings. A similar process was described in one of Carter's fashion essays from the *Nothing Sacred* collection. The essay entitled "Notes for a Theory of the Sixties Style" analyzes the nature of apparel. According to Carter clothes are the best example of the decadent fashion of the sixties, as in those years they "become arbitrary and bizarre . . . reveal a kind of logic of whizzing entropy. Mutability is having a field day."[43]

The term mutability is the key notion for this essay, one written two years before the publication of *Heroes and Villains*. In this text Carter defines style as the presentation of the self as a three-dimensional object. Wearing eclectic fragments of different vestments "robbed of their symbolic content"[44] is a way of creating a new whole whose items are not in any imposed harmony. The theory formulated in the essay seems to be the key to understanding the symbolic meaning of clothes in *Heroes and Villains*, where mutability is not a matter of individual choice, but the condition of the whole dying civilization.

In broader terms, symbols have meaning only in reference to the mythical structures behind them – and clothes are a perfect example of this process. In a patriarchal society, where the law of inheritance makes men value female chastity and pre-nuptial virginity, the wedding ritual has a deep mythical sense and the white wedding dress becomes a potent symbol. Donally makes Marianne wear an old deteriorating white robe during her marriage ceremony in a vain attempt to re-establish patriarchy in the tribe. For Marianne the dress is just an ugly relic of bygone epochs. Lost in the exhausted reality of dead symbols she feels she has to create their own future: first to escape the old symbolic order and then to devise a new mythology herself.

Thus, paradoxically, the novel combines the symbols of entropy and mutability; it shows the world in the moment of its disintegration, and yet the disintegrating elements are constantly being re-used to create changeable structures. In one moment we read a "Wyndhamesque" end-of-the-world-fantasy, in another Carter deconstructs this tradition. Roz Kaveney writes:

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42. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 148.

43. Angela Carter, "Notes for a Theory of the Sixties Style," in *Nothing Sacred* (London: Virago, 1988), 85–89, p. 86.

44. Carter, "Notes for a Theory of the Sixties Style," p. 86.

> The formalist aspects of Carter's work – the extent to which she combined stock motifs and made of them a collage that was entirely her own – was bound to appeal; sections of the SF readership discovered in the course of the 1970s and 1980s that they had been talking postmodernism all their lives and not noticing it, and Carter was part of that moment.[45]

Kaveney reads *Heroes and Villains* in the context of the science fiction readership in the late 20th century, and discovers how Carter makes use of SF conventions. Eva Karpinski in her essay "Signifying Passion: Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* as a Dystopian Romance" refers in her reading of the book to the utopian tradition:

The dystopian romance proves to be a suitable vehicle for Carter's didactic allegory of the relationship between the sexes, an allegory, one might add, that uses the utopian ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in order to re-write the myth of the Fall as it structures Western representations of the social and sexual difference.[46]

Other critics, for example Elaine Jordan,[47] use the label "speculative fiction,"[48] and Carter herself in the famous interview given to John Haffenden calls her fiction "magic mannerism."[49] Thus, one can think of diverse generic formulas to describe the novel, although none of the labels is final, as the narrative itself is unstable and mutable.

The novel also celebrates new feminist myths in order to playfully laugh at them on the next page. Having got rid of Donally and having won her mental struggle with Jewel, Marianne decides on a scenario that suits her best. She has found her identity and now wants to take control over the tribe and to become a post-apocalyptic leader, which she declares by paraphrasing the Bible: "I will be the tiger-lady and I will rule them with a rod of iron."[50] In this sentence she alludes to Donally's attempt to tattoo one of the tribe's children into a tiger-girl, something which ended tragically, as the baby died in the process. But the idea of the artificial

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45. Kaveney, 175.

46. Karpinsky, 137.

47. Elaine Jordan, "Enthrallment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions," in *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*, ed. Linda Anderson (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), 19–40.

48. "A kind of sociological SF which concentrates on social change without necessarily any great emphasis on science or technology" (Clute and Nicholls, p. 1144).

49. John Haffenden, "Angela Carter," in *Novelists in Interview,* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 80.

50. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 150. This is uttered in a conversation when Marianne describes her plans for the future of the tribe: " 'they'll do every single thing I say.' 'What, will you be Queen?' 'I'll be the tiger-lady and rule them with a rod of iron.' "

creation of a "natural" tiger-human had some appeal to the Barbarians and thus Jewel wanted to get the tiger tattoo himself.

When Jewel learned that at his age it was impossible, he planned to tattoo his and Marianne's baby. And now it is Marianne who is going to symbolically possess the tiger's strength and beauty: not by getting a tattoo, but by ruling "with a rod of iron" over the tribe. Her "rod" is probably going to be her knowledge and education, the love of reason her father taught her, combined with her ability to reconcile binary oppositions and blend nature with nurture, reason with instinct, the Barbarians and the Professors. Only a woman-alien can do this by creating a third, reconciliatory way between the two patriarchal societies. Marianne is aware that she is not yet living in the post-apocalyptic order, but still within the Apocalypse itself, that is, amidst the bits and pieces of the old world which is falling apart. Thus her declaration "I will rule them with a rod of iron" echoes Saint John's *Revelation*:

> and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.
>
> And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.
>
> And the woman fled into the wilderness.[51]

Marianne misquotes St John for a purpose: she aims to give old patriarchal texts a new meaning for new times. At the end of the book Marianne is, physically speaking, "ready to deliver", as her baby is to be born very soon. But here the similarities with St John end: who can be identified with the devouring dragon? Perhaps patriarchal attempts to remodel the child so that it serves a purpose? After all, Donally and Jewel wanted him tattooed and ruling the tribe according to the old pattern of power. Moreover, Marianne (in contrast to Donally and Jewel) is not so sure the baby is going to be "a man child", and so she plans the future regardless of its sex. Finally, her flight into the wilderness is in fact an act of usurping political power herself: it is she who is going to become a tiger-lady and to rule the new "wilderness", the world outside the villages of the Professors and the camps of the Barbarians.

"People kept wild beasts such as lions and tigers in cages and looked at them for information. Who would have thought they would take to our climate so kindly, when the fire came and let them out?"[52] which is how Marianne's father once explained to her why the exotic beasts roam the countryside devouring smaller creatures. After the apocalypse carnivorous cats once again become the king of beasts;

51. *St. John's Revelation* 12:4–6 in *The Holy Bible: Old and New Testament in the King James Version* (Hazelwood: World Aflame Press, 1973).

52. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 9.

they are the only ones that gained power instead of losing it. Predators could survive and rule. As this is true of tigers, perhaps it can also be true of people?

Tigers and lions are very prominent in the novel; we very soon learn that Jewel is attracted to wild cats, which is perhaps the effect of his own weakness. One of his most vivid memories is the scene when, as a teenager, he met a lion face to face and survived only because the beast ignored him. This story (which he told to Marianne) anticipates the end of the novel: when Jewel gives up and goes to seek his death he encounters another lion and again fails to attract its attention. Marianne sees the animal and cannot but admire its fearsome beauty:

> She had never seen a lion before. It looked exactly like pictures of itself; though darkness washed its colours off, she saw its mane and tasseled tail which flicked about as it moved out of the edge of shadow on to the dune.[53]

Marianne is not disappointed; the lion looks "like pictures of itself": the thing and its representation for once go together. The mythical meaning of wild cats is going to survive the end of civilization and shall remain a handy metaphor. Marianne decides to rule over the tribe as its tiger-lady not in an act of imitating a queen of the wilderness fairytale motif, but in an attempt to start a new epoch with its new myths.[54] As Margaret Atwood puts it in her essay on Carter's stories "Running with the Tigers", as the tiger will never lie down with the lamb, it is the lamb – the powerless female – which should learn the tigers' ways.[55] By the same token, Marianne wants to create a new definition for a power system in which the oppositions male/female, intellect/desire or civilized/wild are of no importance.[56]

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53. Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 140.

54. Sarah Gamble suggests that the moment Marianne becomes a tiger-lady symbolically "implies that Marianne has now broken free of the stereotyped roles – daughter, victim, wife and whore – in which she has been complicit from the text's beginning." Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 79.

55. Margaret Atwood, "Running with the Tigers," in *Flesh and the Mirror*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago, 1994), 117–136, p. 358.

56. A. Day elaborates upon Marianne's future reign: "But while, as tiger-lady, she is going to draw on primordial Barbarian energy, Marianne, it must be noted, does not give up her purchase on reason. It is this emphasis on maintaining reason that separates her from the Donally-inspired Barbarian cult of the irrational. At the same time as Marianne stops being a stranger to her own id during her sojourn amongst the Barbarians, reason emerges as a cardinal feature of her discovery of herself. . . . In Marianne's case reason may order, like an iron rod, the inchoate energies of the id, while the energies of the id – the energies of the tiger-lady – may enrich reason. This synthetic model is identified as specifically feminine, in contrast with the masculine insistence on self-definition through opposition to an other" (Day, pp. 51–53).

When Marianne gets to the Barbarian camp for the first time she finds herself imprisoned by the patriarchal myth of a new Creation. Both Donally and Jewel want her to act out a new Eve role in order to secure a re-enactment of history which would result in a repetition of the old social and political order. Jewel advises her at the time of her trouble in adapting to the tribe to pretend to be Eve at the end of the world. The original patriarchal myth of Eden is re-enforced by a tattoo Jewel has on his back whereby Eve offers Adam an apple, and by a number of metaphors and allusions. This myth is thus very prominent in the novel and suggests the strength of patriarchal ideology – parallel to the strength of the tribe's male leaders (and also of the Professors' village: both societies are exclusively male-governed). The rival mythical intertext – the *Revelation of Saint John* – appears not until the end of *Heroes and Villains* and marks the beginning of a genuinely new epoch when Marianne, a woman-alien, takes power.

A woman-alien sets out to create a genuinely new social order and the question is whether she is going to recreate the hegemonic power-relations of patriarchal order in both the Professors' villages and the Barbarians' camps. In science fiction narratives aliens often perceive human civilization in a new way, one that enables us to see "normal" social order in a defamiliarized manner; Marianne is a stranger to her own world, she is not interested in the reversal of binaries, but in their liquidation. Carter does not celebrate her political victory as a birth of a genuinely feminist paradise: the very concept of "tiger-lady" cannot be taken too seriously. Marianne the Queen is demythologized from the very start of a reign which is going to prefer mutability to stiff order.

Marianne the tiger-lady has a long road to power behind her. *Heroes and Villains* tells a story of her maturation in a world full of bits and pieces of old symbols and power structures. Marianne learns to see that these binding discourses are giving way to entropy, and that in her world of total chaos new myths have to be created – and that a new, post-patriarchal epoch is yet to be commenced. Moreover, a similar procedure might well be applied to the old literary genre *Heroes and Villains* pertains to: the British disaster story. By having an atypical protagonist, a female-alien strong enough to destroy patriarchal social structure, Carter manages to revive the exhausted convention and to create a genuinely new story.