

UDC 821.111

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32342/3041-217X-2025-1-29-4>

Nadiya POLISHCHUK

PhD in Philology, Associate Professor,
Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (Ukraine)
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6161-1955>

IN SEARCH OF ONE'S OWN IDENTITY: ANGELA CARTER'S SHORT STORY COLLECTION *FIREWORKS*

Стаття присвячена дослідженню ключової для творчого доробку Анджели Картер концепції жіночої ідентичності. *Об'єктом дослідження* є шість оповідань письменниці, що належать до малодослідженої і в західному, і українському літературознавстві ранньої збірки малої прози письменниці "Феєрверки" ("Fireworks", 1974): "Усмішка зими" ("The Smile of Winter"), "Японський сувенір" ("A Souvenir of Japan"), "Тіло і дзеркало" ("Flesh and the Mirror"), "Господар" ("Master"), "Любощі Багряної Пані" ("The Loves of Lady Purple") і "Віддзеркалення" ("Reflections"). *Мета статті* полягає в розкритті механізмів функціонування ідентичності персонажів, зокрема процесів її творення і руйнації, що формуються на перетині персонажного і читацького досвіду їх сприйняття. Новизну наукового дослідження становить обрана перспектива аналізу ідентичності, а саме сфера тілесності, у вимірі якої відбувається протиставлення позитивного і негативного сексуального досвіду чоловічих і жіночих персонажів у порівняльній площині художніх текстів. Обраний ракурс аналізу передбачає застосування відповідної *методології дослідження*, яка ґрунтується на засадах феміністичної критики і деконструктивізму.

У результаті дослідження вибраної малої прози А. Картер було виявлено два аспекти функціонування ідентичності: 1) *творення*, показаного в дискурсі автобіографічної рефлексії безіменної протагоністки-нараторки ("Усмішка зими", "Японський сувенір", "Тіло і дзеркало"); 2) *руйнації*, відтвореного в дискурсі сексуального насильства ("Господар", "Любощі Багряної Пані", "Віддзеркалення"). Особливістю художнього світу авторки є те, що пошуки власної ідентичності, перенесені у площину *тілесності*, здійснюються крізь призму *жіночої суб'єктивності*, позначеної внутрішньою суперечливістю, плинністю і мінливістю її автентичності. Множинність і різноманітність індивідуального "я" протагоністок / протагоністів творів виражені двома наскрізними для поетики авторки тропами – маріонетки і дзеркала.

Образ *ляльки* відіграє центральну роль у розкритті сутності персонажів, підважуючи цілісність здебільшого жіночої, меншою мірою чоловічої особистості, відтак закладаючи сумніви щодо справжності й правдивості їхнього ества. Цей образ розширює межі інтелектуальної дискусії, переносячи її з художнього виміру в простір свідомості потенційного читача п'ятьох із шести аналізованих творів: "Японський сувенір", "Тіло і дзеркало", "Усмішка зими", "Любощі Багряної Пані" і "Віддзеркалення".

Своєю чергою, *дзеркало* як вихідний принцип ідентифікаційного процесу в прозі А. Картер, чия подвійна природа виявляє одночасну тотожність і відмінність відображення, із концептуального поняття поетики авторки трансформується в структуротворчий чинник її письма, реалізуючи внутрішню засаду дзеркальної асиметрії на різних рівнях текстуальної структури. В автобіографічному дискурсі жіночої ідентичності, властивому, зокрема, оповіданням "Японський сувенір" і "Тіло і дзеркало", пошуки власної сутності протагоністок подані крізь призму їхніх взаємин з Іншими – чоловіками й мегаполісом, які протиставляються між собою за принципом *наративної присутності / відсутності* кохання ("Тіло і дзеркало" / "Японський сувенір") та *об'єктності / суб'єктності* міста ("Японський сувенір" / "Тіло і дзеркало"). Натомість в оповіданнях "Господар", "Любощі Багряної Пані" та "Віддзеркалення" дискурс сексуального насильства розкриває процес руйнації (жіночої / чоловічої) ідентичності у парадигмі персонажних стосунків "володар"–"раба" // "кат"–"жертва", дзеркальну асиметрію котрих визначають

гендерні відмінності: чоловіча агресія домінує у текстах “Господар” і “Любощі Багряної Пані”; жіноча – у творах “Любощі Багряної Пані” і “Віддзеркаленні”.

Ключові слова: дискурс ідентичності, жіноча суб’єктивність, тілесність, сексуальність, марionетка, дзеркало.

For citation: Polishchuk, N. (2025). In Search of One’s Own Identity: Angela Carter’s Short Story Collection “Fireworks”. *Alfred Nobel University Journal of Philology*, vol. 1, issue 29, pp. 61-77, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32342/3041-217X-2025-1-29-4>

Angela Carter is a renowned figure in late 20th-century British literature whose contributions to the literary process are of seminal importance, particularly within the context of contemporary women’s writings. The aesthetic palette of the author’s works is characterized by a depth and complexity that surpasses the conventional limits of imaginative expression. In the case of A. Carter, whose prose undoubtedly belongs to postmodern literature, is about “the politics of ambidexterity”, according to which “...postmodernist artistic practices both use and abuse history, tradition, representation, humanist ideology, and so on. Through parody, the texts of postmodernism *inscribe* in order to *subvert* the master narratives of Western culture...” [Robinson, 1991, p. 103]¹. Therefore, numerous literary studies devoted to the British writer’s heritage seem naturally multidimensional in the research areas. Among many of them, special attention should be paid to those that analyze the poetic features of her writings in the field of literary Gothic, surrealism, magical realism, postmodernism, particularly intertextuality [Kendrick, 1993; Munford, 2006; Pearson, 2006; Sage, 2007; Tonkin, 2012] with the approach of intermediality, namely theater and cinema arts [Crofts, 2022; Maio, 2020; Mitchell, 2016; Sauvage, 2008; Snaith, 2018], or the intellectual discourse at the intersection of poststructuralism by R. Barthes, M. Foucault, J. Lacan, J. Derrida’s deconstruction, and feminist criticism by L. Irigaray and H. Cixous [Alban, 2017; Crofts, 2006; Özüm, 2010; Robinson, 1991; Robinson, 2005; Sage, 1994; Tonkin, 2012]. These studies emphasize key concepts such as identity, corporeality, sexuality, the multiplicity of meanings, “death of the author,” and “women’s writing” for the literary studies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries [Cavallaro, 2011; Jordan, 2012; Juschka, 2009; Sage, 1994].

Remarkably, the vast majority of research is focused on the writer’s novels, such as *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), *Nights at the Circus* (1984); concerning short fiction her acclaimed collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) is primarily the subject of analysis.

In contrast to the extensive critical attention given to Carter’s novels and literary fairy tales, her first collection of short stories, *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974), has received comparatively little scholarly analysis. The most comprehensive studies, in my view, are those by E. Benson [2001], Ch. Crofts [2006, 2022], Ch. Crofts, I. Mulvey-Roberts [2022], I. Ermida [2004], M. Murai [2007], A. Pasolini [2012], O. Derikoz [2013], M. Ryan-Sautour [2007, 2014, 2018], H. Snaith [2018]. Thus, the relative neglect of this collection in both Western and Ukrainian literary criticism allows us to assert the relevance of the present paper.

Amongst the central problems of Carter’s early short fiction, researchers have identified the issues of Otherness, alienation, loneliness, female sensuality, and the blurred boundaries between the real and the unreal. Even so, in the context of her undeniably multifaceted and diverse creative heritage, including novels and short stories, identity has become one of the fundamental principles of a writer’s artistic universe. Presented through the prism of female subjectivity, it is based on three notions cross-cutting in her works – the category of corporeality and two dominant tropes of poetics: the images of a mirror and a puppet. They fully reveal the complexity, variability, internal contradictions, and multiplicity of the essence of the female self, which is in tune with the constants of the worldview of postmodern aesthetics: “The days when a looking-glass reflected just one wicked witch, one absolute image of otherness, are gone.

¹ On the internal contradictions of the British author’s writing, follow: [Jordan, 2012, p. 123; Kendrick, 1993, p. 67].

Now we have cinema, television, radio and video splintering the world ‘in a gallery of mirrors’, a glasshouse of perpetual reproduction” [Sage, 1994, p. 291].

Nearly all scholars emphasize the pervasiveness of those notions in A. Carter’s prose. In particular, the image of the marionette and, more broadly, the theatricality of the author’s writing, which echoes the traditions of puppet theater, whether European or Japanese, are the subject of analysis in the studies of Ch. Crofts [2022], C.D. Maio [2020], D. Mitchell [2016], J. Sauvage [2008], and H. Snaith [2018]; different aspects of corporeality were pointed out by D. Oramus [2023, p. 56], A. Pasolini [2016, pp. 50, 62, 65], L. Peach [2009, p. 167]; the dominant role of the mirror, functioning as the key device of the identity discourse in her prose, was noted, in particular by Ch. Crofts [2022], I. Ermida [2004], M. Murai [2007], J. Mydla [2008], A. Pasolini [2012]. It is worth noting that the image of the mirror functions not only as a fundamental criterion of the artist’s outlook; it often appears as a structural element underlying the composite organization of the prose [Murai, 2007]. It also determines the textual interactions of the collection’s stories characterized both by holistic reflection on independent storylines or characters and by fragmentary manifestation of the individual motifs or episodes.

The object of this study comprises six stories from *Fireworks* that center on the concept of identity: *The Smile of Winter*, *A Souvenir of Japan*, *Flesh and the Mirror*, *Master*, *The Loves of Lady Purple*, and *Reflections*. My scientific interest is the literary analysis of the discourse of female identity. It significantly expands the boundaries of A. Carter’s studies focused mainly on the problems of the autobiographical Japanese cycle of her short prose [Crofts, 2022; Ermida, 2004; Murai, 2007; Oramus, 2007; Pasolini, 2012; Ryan-Sautour, 2007], to a lesser extent on the puppet figure in the story “The Loves of Lady Purple” [Maio, 2020; Mitchell, 2016; Snaith, 2018] and on the artistic world of the “Reflections” [Ermida, 2004].

Rooted in the achievements of Western literary critics, this study offers a close reading of the texts *aiming* to reveal the mechanisms of the protagonists’ identity functioning, in particular, the processes of creation and destruction as the primary forms of its realization, which arise at the intersection of the character’s and the reader’s perception experience. The perspective of analysis determines the novelty of the research, that is, the sphere of corporeality, where the positive and negative sexual experiences of male and female characters are contrasted in the comparative plane of literary texts. This, in turn, implies an appropriate *literary methodology* grounded in the principles of feminist criticism and deconstructionism.

The mirroring principle of the structure of A. Carter’s *Fireworks* collection, chosen as the basis of the literary analysis of the present paper, allows us to distinguish two aspects of the functioning of the concept of female identity: at the level of creation and destruction, its affirmation and negation. A number of the writer’s works are grouped around these two aspects: 1) the formation of female identity and slipping out of its boundaries is realized in the form of an analytical reflection of autobiographical discourse; it combines the stories *The Smile of Winter*, *A Souvenir of Japan*, and *Flesh and the Mirror*; 2) the destruction of female identity is observed in the discourse of sexual violence inherent in the works *Master*, *The Loves of Lady Purple*, and *Reflections*. The singularity of each group of the stories is that their internal textual interaction draws up a kind of triangle. Asymmetrically mirroring one another, the texts conditionally construct the base of the geometric figure (*A Souvenir of Japan* / *Flesh and the Mirror* :: *Master* / *The Loves of Lady Purple*) and are opposed to the text that forms its apex (*The Smile of Winter* :: *Reflections*)².

Three invisibly linked short stories – *A Souvenir of Japan*, *Flesh and the Mirror*, and *The Smile of Winter* – reveal one of the most striking examples of mutual intra-textual mirroring, through which the concept of female identity is realized. These stories form a quasi-triptych of autobiographical writing, as several literary critics have and at the same time have not rightly argued [Crofts, 2006; Ryan-Sautour, 2007, 2014, 2020; Sage, 2007; Snaith, 2018]. These scholars are justified insofar as the stories reflect Carter’s lived experience during her time in Japan. And

² The three other stories of the collection – *The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter*, *Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest*, and *Elegy for a Freelancer* – seem natural to drop out of the paradigm of identity discourse as a subject of literary analysis and are not included in the scope of scientific research, although the first two of them are closely related to each other by the principle of intra-textual reflection: both works feature the same pair of characters – a father and his twin children; an isolated area is reproduced (the city in its ugliness / the forest in its beauty); the theme of incest is raised.

they have been not correct since we are looking at a fictional text that repeatedly emphasizes its fictitiousness at the initiative of the very writer, who constantly points out the fragility of the boundaries between literature and reality, between fiction and actuality, in the dimensions of which the narrative “self” balances, expanding the parameters of textual relations to the text/reader paradigm.

A distinctive feature of these works is that the discourse of female identity is presented in self-reflection by an unnamed protagonist narrator, with the only difference: in the story *The Smile of Winter*, the cognition of a woman’s essence is carried out alone with herself against the background of nature descriptions; in two other stories, *A Souvenir of Japan* and *Flesh and the Mirror*, it is displayed through her relationship with the Other.

The confessional and lyrical tone, as well as profoundly analytical introspection into the deepness of a female personality that appears in the story *The Smile of Winter*, acquires the features of a concise and capacious, insightful story of the narrative “self” in search of her essence.

The female protagonist, having voluntarily chosen self-isolation and solitude, finds herself at the intersection of two axes of the conventional coordinate plane of the nature she is surrounded with: *the vertical* one with the vast expanse of sky and the ocean, which either merge sometimes into a single whole: “*the ocean has turned into the sky*” [Carter, 2017, p. 48], or reflect each other: “*an excess of sky bears down with an intolerable weight <...> intensified by the perpetual abrasive clamor of the sea*” [Ibid., p. 42], and *horizontal* – with the immensity time of the night: “*The winter moon is surrounded by an extraordinary darkness <...> in this darkness, the dogs in every household howl together at the sight of a star, as if the stars were unnatural things*” [Ibid.]. By creating a spatio-temporal continuum of *sea* and *night*: “*... the sea, which is just as mysterious as the night, even, and also its perfect image, for the sea, is an inversion of the known and occupies half, or more, of the world, just as night does*” [Carter, 2017, p. 48] (my emphasis), they capture the emotional states of the narrator, which she experiences in their fullness and acuity.

The unbearably painful feelings of despair and loneliness of the female “self” are marked by a tinge of tragic worldview. The leitmotif expression: “*The winter moon pierces my heart. I weep*” [Ibid., p. 45], having been syntactically modified at least three times in the text whenever breaking into the self-sufficient, complete, and enclosed world of the grandeur and beauty of the eternal nature, considerably contrasts with it. The inner world of the female character, overwhelmed with sadness, loneliness, longing, and emptiness, is opposed to the world of nature – a uniquely beautiful, incomprehensible, and mysterious area whose inaccessibility and enigma reveal the smallness, fragility and, ultimately, the vulnerability of human being, affected by feelings of hollowness and solitude. The senses of alienation and abandonment experienced by a foreign European woman while temporarily staying in a Japanese village are in tune with the oppressive atmosphere of the settlement with its signs of desertion and fading life: lonely, closed old huts embodying the grief of their inhabitants; rusty water pumps; wilted chrysanthemums in the yards; abandoned and doomed to rot fishing boats [Carter, 2017, p. 45]; everything is marked with traces of oblivion.

Moreover, observations of nature’s shallowness, its boundlessness and multiplicity, and the constant fluidity of its elements, which pass smoothly into each other every time, are associated with various forms of classical and avant-garde art.³ Whether it takes the shape of the strings of the Aeolian harp: “*But the storms themselves are a raucous music and turn my house into an Aeolian xylophone*” [Ibid., p. 48]; or the sculptures of Jean Arp: “*The waves leave behind them glinting striations of salt and forcibly mould the foreshore into the curvilinear abstractions of cliffs, bays, inlets, curvilinear tumuli like the sculpture of Arp*” [Ibid., p. 48]; or the elegant glass in the Art Nouveau style: “*When the sun is low in the west, the beams <...> seem to penetrate to the very hearts of the incoming waves which look, then, as if they were lit from within. Before they topple forward, they bulge outward in the swollen shapes and artfully flawed incandescence of Art Nouveau glass, as if the translucent bodies of the images they contain within them were*

³ M. Ryan-Sautour considers the protagonist’s reflections on art, which are closely intertwined with reflections on life, as a basis for undermining the authenticity of identity [Ryan-Sautour, 2007, p. 3]; more precisely, it is said further in the article.

trying to erupt..." [Ibid., p. 49], she gradually realizes that her estrangement, getting lost, and solitude define the constants of her substance. They constitute the existential essence of her female being, which is as mysterious, complex, and unknowable as nature itself.

Unlike *The Smile of Winter*, two further stories – *A Souvenir of Japan* and *Flesh and the Mirror* – as though reflecting on each other, manifest the crystallization of the female identity through self-discovery mediated by the Other. It takes place in the plane of personages' intercourse between the nameless narrator, her partner (her lover), and the city: the last two represent the individual and socio-cultural aspects of a woman's essence.

The female protagonist's intimate and sensual sphere, full of passionate and concurrently dramatic relationships with her partners, is the starting point for the search for her identity. The narrator's reflections on her unusual relationship with a Japanese boy named Taro, marked by mutual feelings of love and suffering that determine the couple's cultural and gender differences, are at the center of the story *A Souvenir of Japan*. Taro treats the girl as an object of his passion, dependent and subordinate to his masculinity. He frequently abandons her without explanation, dooming her to heartache and loneliness, thus asserting his mannish superiority and causing her to feel subjected to his presence. It fits into the cultural code of the Japanese patriarchal tradition, such as the dependent status of a woman deprived of any right to equality in relations with a man. The cultural code of the European narrator denotes the traits of a strong, independent woman who breaks established stereotypes, contradicts them, and, therefore, makes her feel like an outsider and an exile among the Japanese. In the story *Flesh and the Mirror*, the protagonist's complex, ambiguous progress of her essence cognition is also based on her intimate experience of relationships with men. Her memories of a past romance – with a lover who left her despite his promise – are superimposed on a description of a love affair with a random passerby, which becomes a substitute for passionate love between a man and a woman.

The concurrent similarity and distinction, cognition, and coordination of two inextricably interconnected components, the "self" and the "other" of oneself, are prerequisites for fulfilling the identification process of individuality. A. Carter transfers the action of identification, or rather self-identification, of the female protagonist to the plane of corporeality. She reveals it through the prism of sexuality – the intimacy between the female narrator and the male Other – the beloved or the lover (*A Souvenir of Japan* and *Flesh and the Mirror*); there, her female self has been crystallized. However, the peculiarity of the identification process is that the cognition and thus the perception of the Other, immersed in the dimension of her consciousness, takes place from the position of her subjectivized vision of the Other, like somebody who has been seen by herself.

The dominance of the female projection onto the male Other is emphasized by a peculiar dynamic of the lovers' "presence" / "absence" in the female protagonist's experience. It is built on the principle of mirror asymmetry. In the story *A Souvenir of Japan*, Taro appears *physically absent*. On the other hand, he is still constantly present in the narrator's discursive reflections on their relationship. However, her perspective is characterized by the features of overt feminization of the male partner. It is evident in the description of his appearance: "*his elegant body which had such curious, androgynous grace with its svelte, elongated spine, wide shoulders and unusually well developed pectorals, almost like the breasts of a girl approaching puberty*" [Carter, 2017, p. 6], as well as in the act of their intimacy: "*He was so delicately put together that I thought his skeleton must have the airy elegance of a bird's and I was sometimes afraid that I might smash him. He told me that when he was in bed with me, he felt like a small boat upon a wide, stormy sea*" [Ibid., p. 8], or in his character endowed with distinct masochistic attributes, which, according to the protagonist, are a distinctive female trait. On the contrary, in the story *Flesh and the Mirror*, despite his short-lived yet real *physical presence*, the nameless male personage disappears unnoticed from the female narrator's long and voluminous self-reflexive discourse of self-identification, which utterly absorbs the narrative space of the text.

Such an unstable and uncertain way of existence of the male "Other"⁴ eliminates the protagonist's need to recognize his distinction from her own self. Still, instead, it leads to a com-

⁴ According to M. Ryan-Sotur, the "absence" of the male character (the story *A Souvenir of Japan*) indicates the elusiveness of his identity [Ryan-Sautour, 2007, p. 14].

plete identification with herself in the Other. In both texts, the female narrator discovers and thus accepts her partners only as a continuation, or rather as a refinding of herself, intrinsically relating to the Other. At the same time, she was consciously rejecting everything being new and unknown in men, alien to her feminine perception, which, after all, represented the essence of a male – a singularity, self-sufficiency, and independence from a female. The entire identification of the protagonist's female self with a recognizable part of herself in the Other appears as a reflection of her own nature⁵. It is evident in the utterance of the female narrator: the fictional character of her male partners turns out to be just the embodiment of her dreams, a figment of imagination, where the creative and life-giving elements of her feminine essence are intertwined. Her beloved, named "Taro", appears in her imagination by analogy with the peach boy Momotaro from a famous Japanese fairy tale (*A Souvenir of Japan*). At the same time, an unexpected passerby on the street gets the position of the nameless lover (*Flesh and the Mirror*). The visions of male hypostases being nurtured in the protagonist's thoughts become a reflection of herself, her own emotions, and feelings experienced in a painful but happy (*A Souvenir of Japan*) and, on the contrary, tragic (*Flesh and the Mirror*) relationships with her loved ones. That is why Taro, despite the suffering he caused, is endowed with features of harmonious, perfect beauty; instead, the face of the nameless lover shows the outlines of the protagonist's mangled, destroyed entity, as out of a disaster or shipwreck, which led her to the awareness of the beloved's loss: "I was astonished to find the situation I wanted was disaster, shipwreck. I saw his face as though it were in ruins <...> It had seemed, in some way, to correspond to my idea of my own face. It had seemed a face long known and well remembered, a face that had always been imminent in my consciousness as an idea that now found its first visual expression" [Carter, 2017, p. 74]⁶.

Thus, sexual intimacy, which was intended to give an idea of the integrity of the protagonist's female self and its alteration dependent on her various male lovers, reveals the differences that occur in her self-identification process. In the story *A Souvenir of Japan*, refusing to plunge into the world of the unknowable, unknown, and different substance of the male self but, on the contrary, remaining on the surface of penetrating her female entity, she stops halfway, leaving the progress of identity comprehension incomplete and unfinished. It is fixed in Taro's gaze (as a substitute for a mirror), in the reflection of a young man and a girl being in love with each other were searching for and finding themselves altogether: "But the most moving of these images were the intangible reflections of ourselves we saw in one another's eyes, reflections of nothing but appearances..." [Carter, 2017, p. 13].

In the story *Flesh and the Mirror*, the female protagonist continues searching for an authentic self, penetrating the depths of her being. The key image that reveals the narrator's complex identification action is a mirror. The reflection in the mirror of an accidental stranger's body, when the protagonist finds herself in his loving embrace despite lasting but futile search for her lover in the bustling streets of Tokyo, destroys her vision of herself, bringing to light a hitherto unknown but inherent essence. Overwhelmed by pain and despair because of the unexpected loss of her beloved, she plunges into a whirlpool of sexual pleasure with a stranger whom she accidentally crossed paths with on the street. Surprising comprehension of the truth – the revelation of herself as the Other, paves the way to the entire awareness of her identity. It emerges at the intersection of conflicting emotions that rage in the protagonist's heart – both those that are natural and expected: mixed feelings of sadness, loneliness, loss, and pain, as well as those that turn out to be startling ones: feelings of passion, pleasure, betrayal, guilt, which she discovers and accepts as the true nature of herself.

The fragment of a close examination of one's own reflection in a hotel room with an unnamed lover, followed by an act of internal self-knowledge of the narrator, might be read as a

⁵ In the aspect of self-knowledge, A. Carter organically fits into the tradition of women's literature with the reproduction of a female perspective of life, where, according to Gillian M.E. Alban, "Women shown through a female lens are not objectified, nor do they seek a male ideal ego. Rather, a female ego is the goal of a woman's quest for a positive sense of her own identity" [Alban, 2017, p. 24].

⁶ Due to the narrator's vision of lovers, we may compare the different forms of male corporeality reception in the texts. The image of a glass coffin allows the beauty of the Taro's body to be preserved intact (*A Souvenir of Japan*), and the doll image disassembled into parts is a reflection of the Japanese youth's deformed body (*Flesh and the Mirror*).

transparent allusion to the well-known conception of identity by J. Lacan, metaphorically defined as the “mirror stage.” A. Carter refutes the French scientist’s claim, denying the impossibility of absolutely knowing one’s self⁷. Destroying the original method of identity perception, according to J. Lacan, based on the principle of *contemplation* by the individual of his/her mirror image, the British author postulates the identification process through the reflection of the *action* (my emphasis), mainly, the act of the narrator’s character, which reveals her genuine substance: “*The magic mirror presented me with a hitherto unconsidered notion of myself as I. Without any intention of mine, I had been defined by the action reflected in the mirror. I beset me. I was the subject of the sentence written on the mirror. I was not watching it. There was nothing whatsoever beyond the surface of the glass. Nothing kept me from the fact, the act; I had been precipitated into knowledge of the real conditions of living*” [Carter, 2017, p. 71].

The progress of self-awareness becomes a painful personal experience for the protagonist, as it exposes her true self, hidden behind her female self’s outer shell. The question constantly bubbling in the narrator’s mind was when *exactly* she was herself. And then, realizing the betrayal of her lover and, at the same time, the deception of her own sense of love, the second question was: when *truly* did she feel guilty before or after having her sexual pleasure with a stranger? Parallel to uncovering the feminine protagonist’s true nature, A. Carter manifests the existential essence of the worldview, equally painful and cruel for the heroine. That is why she was trying to avoid it at all costs, playing for a long time a social role chosen voluntarily that conformed to the demands of the outer world. The deceptive posture consciously adopted by the girl to be able to coexist in the complex system of the outside world served as a defense practice, as a saving behavior in preserving her vulnerable self of the discrepancy between the cruel life and her idea of it. The world filled with pain, suffering, injustice, and inevitable bitterness of disappointment, behind which the fear of life’s brutal, ruthless truth has loomed, always frightened her: “*I always used to suffer a great deal if I let myself get too close to reality since the definitive world of the everyday with its hard edges and harsh light did not have enough resonance to echo the demands I made upon experience*” [Ibid., p. 69].

The city is another character emphasizing the substantial difference in the protagonist’s self-identification process⁸. Its appearance as a figure of the Other is available in both stories. Endowed with the function of a metaphorical mirror, at which the protagonist constantly has been gazing, trying to recognize her actual self, it reflects two views directed at herself: a) *outer*, represented in the story *A Souvenir of Japan* and b) *inner*, shown in the text of *Flesh and the Mirror*. In the story *A Souvenir of Japan*, the city comes out a simulacrum of truth, masking the reality behind a deceptive shell of a visible sense of happiness, a false illusion of widespread joy and pleasure: “*...they seemed to have made the entire city into a cold hall of mirrors which continually proliferated whole galleries of constantly changing appearances, all marvellous but none tangible*” [Carter, 2017, p. 10]. Accusing the city of superficiality, pretense, and, to some extent, insincerity, the female protagonist denounces its deceitfulness and inauthenticity and thus consciously dissociates herself from it and seems to master a situation in which the incompleteness of her own identity is justified. Moreover, she feels superior in an environment full of hypocrisy and lies because she remains frank. On the contrary, in the story *Flesh and the Mirror*, she chooses a different strategy of “conquering” the city. Trying to adapt to its false shell, “*I was always rummaging in the dressing-up box of the heart for suitable appearances to adopt in the city*” [Ibid., p. 69], the female narrator, unnoticed for herself, falls into a trap and is defeated. The appearance of a stranger on one of the city’s streets, with whom she experiences a passionate outburst of love while suffering from an attack of longing and pain for her loss of a lover, is a challenge thrown by the city at her established role has been exposing the deceitfulness of her essence. Thus, the image of the city embodies a dual nature of mirror reflection, according to the poetics of A. Carter’s

⁷ Ch. Crofts quotes S. Dimovits, who has made a similar observation about comprehending oneself as the Other, which creates a new space of possibilities, as opposed to Lacan’s vision of the mirror as an illusion [Crofts, 2022, p. 16].

⁸ Let’s take a look at H. Snaith’s statement in this context: “Carter’s experiments with the image of the metropolis is a conscious rejection of realism, allowing her to explore the binaries between passion (a literary representation of Japan) and reason (civilization and the West)” [Snaith, 2018, p. 54].

fiction in general. It has been transformed from a background character in the story *A Souvenir of Japan* to a full-fledged player in *Flesh and the Mirror*. Even more, being on equal terms with the self-reflective intellectual discourse of the female narrator, the city “enters the game” of determining the essence of a woman’s personality, changing itself from an object into the subject of feminine self-identification.

On the other hand, the notion of the role the protagonist reflects on in her life finds its artistic expression in another metaphor pervasive in A. Carter’s works – that of a puppet⁹: “*But all the time I was pulling the strings of my own puppet; it was this puppet who was moving about on the other side of the glass. And I eyed the most marvellous adventures with the bored eye of the agent with the cigar watching another audition. I tapped out the ash and asked of events: ‘What else can you do?’*” [Carter, 2017, p. 69]. It deepens the theme of female identity, transposing it into the space between textual and extra-textual reality, the sphere of the reader’s consciousness, providing its significance with much more complexity.

Over a long time, A. Carter creates an identity discourse that encompasses all three stories: *The Smile of Winter*, *A Souvenir of Japan*, and *Flesh and the Mirror*. Being in constant dialogue with the readers via her characters, the British writer actively involves the readers in tracking the complex progress of establishing and developing the protagonists’ female selves. Thus, she indirectly invites them to co-creation¹⁰. The split of the narrators’ consciousness into two hypostases, separated by the narrative “I” / “she,” allows them to exist in two planes simultaneously: the textual one, in which they continue to function as a personage: “*There I was, walking up and down, eating meals, having conversations, in love, indifferent, and so on*” [Ibid., p. 69], and the extra-textual one, where they identify themselves with the readers, observing their personality all together: “*And I moved through these expressionist perspectives in my black dress as though I was the creator of all and of myself, too, in a black dress, in love, crying, walking through the city in the third person singular, my own heroine...*” [Ibid., p. 68].

Notably, the linguistic stratification used by A. Carter, embodied in the characters’ separation into the narrative “I” / “she”, is built on the same rules of mirroring that underlie the concept of her holistic artistic world. It helps to create a double, and therefore expanded perspective of seeing the female identity: external and internal, superficial and deep, direct and inverse, expressed straight in the text: “*Mirrors are ambiguous things <...> Women and mirrors are in complicity with one another to evade the action I/she performs that she/I cannot watch, the action with which I break out of the mirror, with which I assume my appearance*” [Ibid., p. 71]¹¹ (my emphasis).

The narrator’s relationship with the reader is highly individual and diverse in each story. For instance, in *Flesh and the Mirror*, the internal distancing of the female self is revealed when both the collapse of the imaginary is acknowledged and the protagonist’s true identity begins to emerge, as reflected in her encounter with a street lover. It evokes the character’s association with a performance director whose script went wrong: “*And was I in character when I felt guilty or in character when I did not? I was perplexed. I no longer understood the logic of my own performance. My script had been scrambled behind my back. The cameraman was drunk. The director had a crise de nerfs and been taken away to a sanatorium...*” [Ibid., p. 75] (the author’s emphasis). In the story *A Souvenir of Japan*, the trustful relationship between the text and the readers is based on their mutual parity, provided that the readers accept the rules of the game presented by the author/narrator. It is achieved due to their *status quo* in a conditionally concluded “pact” on accepting the female identity incompleteness, which has been set as a cursory and vague reflection of the narrator’s self in the looking glass: “*But I do not want to paint our circum-*

⁹ Among others, C.D. Maio and K. Mitchell mentioned the doll’s ubiquity in Carter’s fiction [Maio, 2020; Mitchell, 2016].

¹⁰ P. Munford quotes the writer’s words about the purpose of her work: “When I write fiction, I try to present a series of propositions, diverse in their different manifestations, and leave readers to create for themselves their fiction from the elements of my fiction (Reading is as much a creative activity as writing, and much of intellectual development depends on re-reading old books...)” [Munford, 2006, p. 12].

¹¹ Mirroring as a key notion of A. Carter’s writing that multiplies otherness was acknowledged by M. Murai: “The self-reflexive and fractured narrative structure is correlated with the themes of reflection, looking and reversal, so that a doubled mirror effect multiplies the otherness” [Murai, 2007, p. 5].

stantial portraits so that we both emerge with enough well-rounded, spuriously detailed actuality that you are forced to believe in us. I do not want to practise such sleight of hand. You must be content only with glimpses of our outlines, as if you had caught sight of our reflections in the looking-glass of somebody else's house as you passed by the window" [Ibid., p. 10]. Instead, in the story *The Smile of Winter*, the female protagonist directly emphasizes the creation of her personality substance as a conscious artistic act: "Do not think I do not realize what I am doing. I am making a composition using the following elements: the winter beach; the winter moon; the ocean; the women; the pine trees; the riders; the driftwood; the shells; the shapes of darkness and the shapes of water; and the refuse <...> Out of these pieces of inimical indifference, I intend to represent the desolate smile of winter which, as you must have gathered, is the smile I wear" [Carter, 2017, p. 50].

Regardless of the forms of dialogue with the readers the writer chooses, her primary goal is to undermine or even to destroy the certainty in the cognition of female essence, to sow doubt about the unambiguity, definiteness of truth or falsity of her inner self, thus leaving the readers by themselves with the questions of their own existence. The depiction of fragility, uncertainty, and fluidity of the boundaries between text and reality, fiction and imagination raise questions of what the essence of the human personality is, how authentic it is, where the line between who we are and are not is drawn, where the border between the rejected real and the acceptable imaginary of our self is, and the last one: is it ever possible to discover the truth?¹²

In parallel with the construction of female identity in the autobiographical discourse of the stories *The Smile of Winter*, *A Souvenir of Japan*, and *Flesh and the Mirror*, A. Carter continues to resort to the destruction of identity. This is manifested through the discourse of sexual violence and aggression – the "violent sexual parabolas" [Oramus, p. 59] – that characterizes three other stories: *Master*, *The Loves of Lady Purple*, and *Reflections*. Together, the earlier and later stories form a textual triangle grounded on the principle of looking-glass reflection: *Master* and *The Loves of Lady Purple* form its base while the *Reflections* compose its apex. However, the sophisticated themes of the stories and profound symbolism of the author's writing, expanding the semantic connotations of key characters and plot twists, reveal a far deeper complexity and ambiguity of their intra-textual connections. Shifted to the subconscious, they are shown in the context of the confrontation between the male and female primordial elements, the essential principles of life and death, which overcome each other reciprocally.

A. Carter's short story *Master* is a horrifying vision of absolute denial, or rather abnegation of female identity, embodied in the image of an innocent girl who has been acquired by the male protagonist from a local Indian tribe as his property. The Master's sadistic instinct, traceable to his early crimes against school peers and girls during puberty, evolves into increasingly brutal acts of violence, culminating in the slaughter of wildlife during his adult hunting expeditions in the African savannah and the Amazon rainforest. His unrestrained desire for destruction, filled with fierce rage and hatred of life: "...he was death itself <...> death had glorified itself to become the principle of his life" [Carter, 2017, p. 82], as well as the unbridled sexual licentiousness, intensifies as he becomes increasingly immersed in the impenetrable, mysterious realm of nature: "in the middle of a metaphor for desolation, the place where time runs back on itself... an invariable terrain of architectonic vegetation... no motion nor sound did more than ripple the surface of the profound, inhuman introspection of the place" [Ibid., 2017, p. 80]. Imbued with animal instincts of both power and fear, he reveals the wild, willful nature of his essence, thirsty for absolutized lust for total submission and domination. It reaches its paroxysmal brutality in the protagonist's sexual assault with a young Indian woman, a mute, powerless victim of the ruthless, im-

¹² The opposition between reality and fiction as a peculiar feature of the *Fireworks* was highlighted by E. Benson and M. Murai [Benson, 2001; Murai, 2007]. The theme of the authenticity of human existence, mainly the internal contradiction of identity or even the elusiveness of its nature, has been the subject of analysis in many literary studies, including Carter's novels. While S. Crofts underlined the deconstruction, the destruction of the modernist notion of identity [Crofts, 2022, p. 5], S. Andermahr, E. Gordan, F. Forcatho and M. Ryan-Sautour questioned the very essence of the authentic self in general [Andermahr, 2014, p. 18; Forcatho, 2019, p. 84; Gordan, 2016, p. xiii; Ryan-Sautour, 2018].

moral master. His sexual intimacy with Friday,¹³ a name the man assigns the girl to mark the day of her purchase, causes terrible pain and suffering, resulting in brutal violence against her virgin flesh: "...he mounted her in a frenzy, forcing apart her genital lips so roughly the crimson skin on the inside bruised and festered while the bites on her throat and shoulders oozed diseased pearls of pus that brought the blowflies buzzing about her in a cloud" [Ibid., p. 86].

Brutally raped, the girl's mutilated body, like the beauty of nature, desecrated in its pristine and untouched state, symbolizes the dependent, defenseless prey of the total and unrestrained power of a man, leaving only emptiness and death in its wake. At the same time, the girl's feminine essence uncovers an inseparable, organic part of nature, with which she perceives herself as one: "*The beliefs of her tribe had taught her to regard herself as a sentient abstraction, an intermediary between the ghosts and the fauna... her cosmogony admitted no essential difference between herself and the beasts and the spirits, it was so sophisticated*" [Ibid., pp. 81–82]. Drawing her strength and energy from there, she is endowed with an irresistible thirst for life, which results in justifiable revenge on her perpetrator. Merging with the spirits of the ancestral totems of her tribe, she undergoes a phantasmagoric transformation into a jaguar and, paradoxically, due to the greatest but unattainable goal of the master's hunt for the jaguar, kills her oppressor with cruelty and condemns his dead, torn body to miserable isolation, loneliness, and rotting among flies.

In contrast to the dominant sphere of sexuality and the subconscious of the male self in *Master*, the action of destroying the female substance in the story *The Loves of Lady Purple* is transferred to the intellectually refined plane of theater, where a marionette in a puppet theater of an old Japanese master becomes a symbol of the subordinate, enslaved feminine identity. The reader is exposed to a discourse of perverse violence with filigree, skillfully and playfully ambiguous elaboration. On one hand, it is presented from a female perspective. It unfolds in the way of a stage play by a puppet named Lady Purple, a beautiful, seductive, cruel, and powerful whore possessed with brutality and aggressiveness, prone to perverse forms of sadism towards men who fall into the trap of her sexual or psycho-emotional violence: "...a monstrous goddess, at once preposterous and magnificent..."; "...the petrification of a universal whore and had once been a woman in whom too much life had negated life itself, whose kisses had withered like acids and whose embrace blasted like lightning" [Ibid., pp. 28, 30]. On the other hand, it is shown from the perspective of a man as a vision of a beautiful and, at the same time, a sexually seductive female prostitute created by himself, designed as a figment of his subconscious morbid erotic imagination, and symbolized with the darkness constantly accompanying the puppeteer: "*Inside the pink-striped booth of the Asiatic Professor only the marvellous existed and there was no such thing as daylight. The puppet-master is always dusted with a little darkness*" [Ibid., p. 24]. In his distorted imagination, she appears as a symbol of female lust, destructive passion, and sinful essence, embodied in the images of the Queen of the Night, the shameless Venus of the East – Lady Purple: "...the nameless essence of the idea of woman, a metaphysical abstraction of the female which could [on payment of a specific fee], be instantly translated into an oblivion either sweet or terrible, depending on the nature of her talents" [Ibid., p. 32].

The discourse of the enslavement of the female personality is not just limited to the life story of the puppeteer's idealized, favorite, and imprisoned victim-doll, who is forced to play it continuously according to the rules arbitrarily established by himself. Japanese master's complete and explicit dominance over the marionette is manifested primarily in his total control over the Lady Purple's body, including the appearance he endows on her: ferocious teeth, bloody lips with a permanent smile, a heavy wig of hair, clothes of deep, dark colors, profound pinks, crimson, or purple – the color of the blood in a love suicide, or jewelry that he carefully selected. The puppet's dependence on the old puppeteer's whims is also evident in the forms of love imposed on her. These are revealed through his manner of behavior, reminiscent of a devoted lover: his pas-

¹³ The girl's name evokes a transparent allusion to the novel D. Defoe, where Robinson Crusoe's friend, <Friday>, shares with the protagonist his ordeal after a shipwreck on a desert island. The horrific scenes of savage destruction and devastation of the tribe's life reproduced in Carter's story of the late twentieth century undermine the civilizing mission of Europeans toward native people, which has been inscribed to the Enlightenment discourse by D. Defoe.

sionate heart-to-heart conversations alone with the puppet, ritual kisses before going to bed, falling asleep only if she is present, as well as the leading role he assigned her in his theater. The limitlessness of the Japanese master's power over a woman also lies in the fact that Lady Purple is deprived of any influence from the outside on the course or changes in her life story, manifested in the silence, or rather the stillness of his assistants: the deafness of the young nephew and the dumbness of the girl foundling.

Finally, the definition of the male protagonist as the Japanese 'master puppeteer' evokes an unambiguous intratextual allusion to a master hunter in Carter's story *Master*, who likewise imperiously owns his prey, the Indian girl, 'Friday.' The ending of the two works is also related. Like the hunter's victim in the story *Master*, the Japanese master's favorite puppet is phantasmagorically freed from the shackles of her wooden body, and eager for revenge, she kills the puppet maker¹⁴. Then, releasing from a painful smile, she presses her lips together, removes her artificially styled hair, makes her body come to life, and breaks and pulls out the threads that have been imprisoning her for a long time on stage. Hence, by reclaiming her *appearance*, her *body*, and her *will*, Lady Purple, however briefly, still creates a discourse of selfhood: "... she might perform the forms of life not so much by the skill of another as by her desire <...> she was now manifestly a woman, young and extravagantly beautiful..." [Carter, 2017, p. 40]. Yet, as usual in the case of the British writer, A. Carter mocks both the literary text and the reader's expectations. Against the logic of releasing the role of a whore imposed on her by the puppeteer, the woman... paradoxically returns to the city's central brothel, once again leaving her devoted readers open to the question of the true nature of her protagonist's being: "...had the marionette all the time parodied the living or was she, now living, to parody her own performance as a marionette" [Ibid., p. 40]. In that way, she seems to be trapped in the vicious circle of authenticity and fiction, outlined by its creator, the old Japanese puppeteer, at the very beginning of the story: "*The puppeteer speculates in a no-man's-land between the real and that which, although we know very well it is not, nevertheless seems to be real*" [Ibid., p. 24].

In comparison to the two-dimensional male/female discourse inherent in *The Loves of Lady Purple*, and in contrast to the dominant male discourse in *Master*, the reproduction of identity destruction through the discourse of violence in the *Reflections* is characterized by gender asymmetry in which the roles of the abuser and the victim are replaced. The act of aggression and subjugation is performed by a female character (in this aspect, the story is identical to the female form of the discourse of violence in *The Loves of Lady Purple*), while the loss of identity threatens a man. At the same time, the scope of the discourse is changed by itself. It overcomes both the dimensions of art (*The Loves of Lady Purple*) and of nature (*Master*), entering the area of profound mythopoetic existence, where the categories of life and death, eternity and temporariness, the real and the unreal worlds acquire the characteristics of philosophical universals.

In the story *Reflections*, A. Carter creates an original vision of the universe, a sacred space where the feminine principle dominates. Endowed with an ancient life-giving force, it absorbs the primordial sexual energy, unbridled nature, and creative impulse, symbolically represented by Anna, the world of the looking-glass, the Sea of Fertility, and the androgyne. The unique world of nature as an exclusively female space of existence¹⁵, separated from the familiar, real world by a symbolic boundary of transition, a mirror¹⁶: "...the symbolic matrix of this and that, hither and thither, outside and inside" [Carter, 2017, p. 101], differs radically in its structure, laws, the transformation of the organs of perception and sensation. There, the sky becomes the black color of

¹⁴ Linked by the discourse of violence, both female protagonists of the mentioned stories, in my opinion, are artistic representations of the A. Carter's concept of de Sade's woman. The British writer analyzes de Sade's images of sisters who embody extreme stereotypes of women's sexual behavior: the virgin Justine and the wicked whore Juliette – more details in [Rubinson, 2005, pp. 160–161]. Thus, the Indian girl of the *Master* is the embodiment of Justine's archetype of male violence, and the puppet in *The Loves of Lady Purple* is the embodiment of Juliet's prostitute archetype. Although A. Carter herself refuted and rejected the features of femininity attributed to women by the culture.

¹⁵ The Sea of Fertility is associated with the image of a woman [Ermida, 2004, p. 97].

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that the mirror's image once again undermines the truth of the perception of the visible and invisible: "I could not, for the life of me, make up my mind which world was which" [Carter, 2017, p. 107].

the earth, time and motion flow in the opposite direction; space becomes impenetrable, objects freeze, sounds are perceived by sight, and smells are perceived by the ear. The strange, unusual structure of the country/nature of the Sea of Fertility, which makes it impossible to characterize or describe it in any way according to the laws of logic, systematics, and order, can serve as a metaphor for the peculiarly female language as a means of expressing female subjectivity, consonant with the literary concepts of J. Kristeva [2008] and L. Irigaray [1985].

The universe of the female wonderland is based on the rule of absolute symmetry, the balance of opposites, and synthesis. Its representative, and at the same time, its creator is a hermaphrodite, a deeply symbolic, to some extent, iconic figure for A. Carter's text. In their dual nature, characterized by a combination of equally beautiful male and female profiles, opposite genitals, and contrary concepts of strength and exhaustion, movement and paralysis, the beginning and the end, one can read the archetypal image of the androgyne, has been symbolizing the initial integrity, completeness, an ideal sublimity of the primordial being, embodying the concept of the eternal principle of *coincidentia oppositorum* – “a paradoxical state in which opposites coexist but do not fight, and in which multiplicities become aspects of a mysterious wholeness” [Eliade, 1965, p. 122]¹⁷. In *Reflections*, the image of the androgynous hermaphrodite functions as a bridge between the visible and invisible, the outer and inner worlds, the reality and the supernatural.

At the same time, he/she exemplifies the creative essence of the female self, which is evident in a transparent allusion to Arachne. The image is directly associated with the androgyne, whose continuous history of verbal (textual) weaving reproduces the history of the female world. The geometric patterns of the cobwebs abundantly enveloping the interior of the androgyne's house are naturally intertwined in the openwork lace of the scarf, constantly knitted by the dualistic creature, without any interruptions of his work. The ambivalent nature of Arachne, whose story serves as a “parabola of women's writing” [Miller, 1988, p. 94], echoes in the figure of the androgyne. Consequently, it reveals the internal connection between the work and its creator¹⁸ and, simultaneously, between the text and a body, creating the text and herself at once [Świerkosz, 2017, pp. 9–10]: “...she had put on a female garment, a loose *négligé* of spider-coloured lace, unless she, like the spiders, spun and wove her own thread and so had become clothed, for her shadowy hair was also the colour of the stuff she knitted and so evanescent in texture it seemed to move of its own accord on the air around her” [Carter, 2017, pp. 95–96].

The androgyne's niece, Anna, embodying the sexual essence, the sexual nature of the female entity, is the guardian of the otherworldly mirror realm and upholds its inviolable order. She is a powerful, strong-willed, brave girl, lovely and mysteriously enigmatic, granted absolute body symmetry; she is also a warrior full of fervor and threat: “...she looked as beautiful as a Roman soldier plundering a North African city, with her rapist's eyes and her perfume of murder” [Ibid., p. 100].

The autonomous and self-contained realm of female domination, filled with sacred and mysterious knowledge, remains inaccessible and hostile to any strangers who dare to approach or penetrate its enclosed space, exposing themselves to irreversible danger. Therefore, a nameless male protagonist-narrator, who inadvertently or accidentally has touched the sacred world, by stumbling upon a fragment of it—a seashell—while walking through the forest, becomes a captive of the woman and turns out into her hostage. The hidden knowledge of the universe's substance encoded in the shell's bizarre curls¹⁹ fascinates the man with its weird, exotic beau-

¹⁷ As an integral part of the human drama, according to M. Eliade, the mystery of wholeness manifests itself in various forms and at all levels of cultural life—in mystical theology and philosophy, in world mythologies and folklore, in the dreams and fantasies of modern people and artistic works [Eliade, 1965, p. 122].

¹⁸ A. Carter, once again, in the context of the analyzed short fiction, resorts to creating a holistic concept of the female nature in its heterogeneity, expressed by identifying the protagonists with the narrators, with the female component emphasized this time.

¹⁹ The shell is inherently endowed with deep symbolism because it is a contradiction where “inside and outside seem to revolve on a single axis” [Kuberski, 2022, p. 79]; it is a space where the present and the past, appearance and disappearance, death and discovery, revealing intersect; “an empty tomb <...> and a sign of a life”, “the memory of natural world, both the great waters of the first and the last deluge” [Kuberski, 2022, p. 84]; “...is both a departure and a return to its own nature...” [Kuberski, 2022, p. 88].

ty and, at the same time, fills him with mortal dread, which is fraught with threat. Becoming an unbearable burden in the hands of an ignorant disciple²⁰: "...it was so very, very heavy <...> it seemed to me it might contain all the distilled heaviness of gravity itself within it" [Ibid., p. 89], it is at risk of being profaned. This, in turn, imperils the integrity of the universe since, acclaimed by the mythopoetic laws, the violation of the unity's sacred inviolability leads to the disintegration of the whole structure. Thus, man's indirect touch to the world of female sacrum, making him involved in it unwittingly, is transformed into a fatal trap for the protagonist and becomes its life-long captivity that threatens him with identity loss.

The disintegration of male identity occurs within the realm of corporeality, already familiar to the author and proper to her female characters; it is distorted in the act of sexual violence. Anna, leading her captive through the marvelous land of the Sea of Fertility, empowered by her absolute dominance, she rapes him: "*Her rape, her violation of me, caused me atrocious physical and mental pain. My being leaked away from me under the visitation of her aggressive flesh. My self grew less in agony under the piston thrust of her slender loins, as if she were a hammer and were forging me into some other substance than flesh and spirit*" [Ibid., p. 108]. The paroxysmal frenzy of Anna's female nature, on the one hand, and the devastating desolation of the protagonist's male nature, on the other one, mirror the brutal, thoroughly aggressive sexual assault of the hunter and, hence, the shocking pain and suffering of an Indian girl from the *Master* story, though with mirror asymmetry of gender roles of the rapist and the victim; and, as a result, the final denouement of the text, the murdering of the perpetrator. Experiencing the dissolution like a mortal danger that threatens his life, the man kills Anna and abandons the female space of existence, alien to him.

The intrusion of death into the expanse of the Sea of Fertility, disrupting the established system, provokes the destruction of the integral female microcosm. It culminates in the protagonist's clash with the androgyne, who tries in vain to save the rest of the world. Its chaotic fall apart is symbolically reproduced in the out-of-control skipped stitches of his continuous lace weaving. We may trace a straight similarity to the single violation of the universe at the very beginning of the story when the shell fell out of the Sea of Fertility and landed in the forest; simultaneously, the androgyne skipped one stitch. The apocalyptic vision of the demise of the solid, balanced, and coherent world order of the looking-glass sphere marks the protagonist's final release from the snare of female power. He is left alone with the fragmented, split, multifaceted "self" of his masculine nature, reflected in the mirror of the androgyne's ruined house: "*Proud as a man, I once again advanced to meet my image in the mirror. Full of self-confidence, I held out my hands to embrace my self, my anti-self, my self not-self, my assassin, my death, the world's death*" [Carter, 2017, p. 112].

Based on the literary analysis of the six short stories from A. Carter's collection *Fireworks*, such as *The Smile of Winter*, *A Souvenir of Japan*, *Flesh and the Mirror*, *Master*, *The Loves of Lady Purple*, and *Reflections*, the paper examines one of the key issues of the author's *conception of identity*. It comprises the fundamental principle of the writer's complex, holistic, and interconnected artistic world of fiction, centered on her understanding of the essence of the female "self." *The notion of corporeality*, viewed from the perspective of *female subjectivity* with its characteristic features of ambivalence, variability, and fluidity of her authenticity, was chosen as the study angle of the protagonist's individuality.

Through detailed textual analysis of the character's search for identity, the mechanisms of its functioning were identified and revealed in two distinct processes: a) of *creation* and b) of *destruction*; each of them is separately displayed in two distinguished discourses of the author's writing. Notably, *the process of creating the identity* was demonstrated in *the discourse of autobiographical reflections* provided by the nameless female narrator and presented in the stories *The Smile of Winter*, *A Souvenir of Japan*, and *Flesh and the Mirror*. In contrast, *the process of destruction* was shown in *the discourse of sexual violence* manifested in the stories *Master*, *The Loves of Lady Purple*, and *Reflections*.

A distinctive feature of the British author's identity writing is the multiple and diverse nature of the individual self of her female/male protagonists, being thoroughly analyzed in the context of two tropes central to Carter's poetics: *the images of the puppet and the mirror*.

²⁰ Unlike the protagonist, Anna quickly picked up the shell, which only confirms her natural, holistic connection with the Sea of Fertility.

The *marionette's* role as a central figure in *The Loves of Lady Purple* and its resonance in the hypostases of nameless characters in the other stories undermines the integrity of the seemingly female/male personality of the protagonists, causing doubts about the authenticity of their nature. It allowed us to expand the boundaries of intellectual discussion, transferring it from the dimension of the literary text to the space of hypothetical readers' consciousness available in five of the six analyzed texts: *A Souvenir of Japan*, *Flesh and the Mirror*, *The Smile of Winter*, *The Loves of Lady Purple*, and *Reflections*.

In turn, given the dual nature of *the mirror*, which reveals the simultaneous sameness and difference of the reflection, the looking-glass image is considered the initial principle of the identification process in A. Carter's prose. Its transformation from a conceptual notion of the author's poetics into a structuring factor of her writing enabled us to trace the realization of the mirror asymmetry formula at different levels of textual structure. Thus, in the autobiographical discourse of female identity inherent in the stories *A Souvenir of Japan* and *Flesh and the Mirror*, the protagonists' search for their own essence is mirrored in the context of their relationships with the Others – male lovers and the metropolis. They are contrasted owing to the narrative *presence/absence* of a lover (*Flesh and the Mirror* / *A Souvenir of Japan*) and the *objectivity/subjectivity* of the city (*A Souvenir of Japan* / *Flesh and the Mirror*). Instead, in the stories *Master*, *The Loves of Lady Purple*, and *Reflections*, the mirror asymmetry determines the gender differences in the discourse of sexual violence represented in the paradigm of characters relationships of "master" – "slave" // "perpetrator" – "prey": the male aggression dominates in the *Master* and *The Loves of Lady Purple*; the female aggression prevails in *The Loves of Lady Purple* and *Reflections*. Finally, the mirroring concept characterizes the plot structure of two other stories of the writer's collection, *The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter* and *Penetrating the Heart of the Forest*, which might become the subject of new promising research.

References

- Alban, G.M.E. (2017). *The Meduza Gaze in Contemporary Women's Fiction: Petrifying, Maternal and Redemptive*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Andermahr, S. (2014). Contemporary Women's Writing: Angela Carter's Literary Legacy. In S. Andermahr, L. Phillips (Eds.), *Angela Carter: New Critical Readings* (pp. 11-23). New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Benson, E. (2001). Angela (Olive) Carter. In E. Fallon, R.C. Feddersen, J. Kurtzleben, M.A. Lee, S. Rochette-Crawley (Eds.), *A Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English*. New York: Routledge.
- Carter, A. (2017). *Fireworks*. London: Vintage.
- Cavallaro, D. (2011). *The World of Angela Carter: A Critical Investigation*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co. Publishers.
- Crofts, Ch. (2006). 'The Other of the Other': Angela Carter's New-Fangled' Orientalism. In R. Munford (Ed.), *Re-Visiting Angela Carter: Texts, Contexts, Intertexts* (pp. 87-109). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230595873_5
- Crofts, Ch. (2022). Through the "Magic Mirror": Adapting Angela Carter's Japanese Writings for the Silver Screen. *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 16 (2), 263-282. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpad001>.
- Crofts, Ch., Mulvey-Roberts, M. (Eds.). (2022). *Angela Carter's Pyrotechnics: A Union of Contraries*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Derykoz, O.B. (2013). *Suchasni anhlijs'ki versii short story u konteksti feministychnoi idei: novelistyka A. Carter, P. Fitzgerald, A. Byatt, D. Lessing*. Avtoref. dys. kand. filol. nauk [Modern English Versions of a Short Story in the Context of the Feminine Idea: Short Stories by A. Carter, P. Fitzgerald, A. Byatt, D. Lessing. PhD thesis]. Chernivtsi: Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University (in Ukrainian).
- Eliade, M. (1965). *Mephistofeles and the Androgyne* (M. Cohen transl.). New York: Sheed and Ward.
- Ermida, I. (2004). Style, language and gender in Angela Carter's "Fireworks": a metaphorical (de)construction of female identity. *Stylistyka*, 13, 81-96.

Forcatho, F. (2019). *Postmodern Politics: Feminism, Identity, and Gender in Angela Carter's The Magic Toyshop, Nights at the Circus, and Other Selected Works*. (PhD Thesis). Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte.

Gordan, E. (2016). *The Invention of Angela Carter*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Irigaray, L. (1985). *This Sex Which Is Not One* (C. Porter, C. Burke transl.). Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Jordan, E. (2012). The dangers of Angela Carter. In I. Armstrong (Ed.), *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts* (pp. 119-133). Hoboken: Taylor and Francis. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203120569>

Juschka, D.M. (2009). *Political Bodies / Body Politics: The Semiotic of Gender*. Oakville, CT: Equinox Pub.

Kendrick, W. (1993). The Real Magic of Angela Carter. In R.E. Hosmer (Ed.), *Contemporary British Women Writers. Texts and Strategies* (pp. 66-85). Basingstoke: Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-22565-1_4

Kristeva, Ju. (2008). *Polylogue*. Paris: Seuil.

Kuberski, Ph. (2022). *The Persistence of Memory: Organism, Myth, Text*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Maio, C.D. (2020). Playing the Female Fool: Metamorphoses of the Fool from Fireworks to The Bloody Chamber. *Altre Modernità*, 24, 346-361. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13130/2035-7680/14519>.

Miller, N.K. (1988). *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mitchell, D. (2016). Leda or Living Doll? Women as Dolls in Angela Carter's The Magic Toyshop. *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, 5 (2), 4-12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2016.10104>.

Munford, R. (2006). Angela Carter and the Politics of Intertextuality. In R. Munford (Ed.), *Re-Visiting Angela Carter: Texts, Contexts, Intertexts* (pp. 1-21). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230595873_1

Murai, M. (2007). Passion and the Mirror: Angela Carter's Souvenir of Japan. *Studies in Humanities*, 161, 1-19, 神奈川大学.

Mydla, J. (2008). Narcissus Patient: Yukio Mishima, Self-Shaping and its Discontents. In H.W. Kalaga, M. Kubisz (Eds.), *Multicultural Dilemma: Identity, Difference, Otherness* (pp. 59-69). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH.

Oramus, D. (2007). How to Describe Japan? Angela Carter Looks at the Far East in her Fiction and Non-Fiction. *Acta Philologica*, 33(33), 179-187.

Oramus, D. (2023). "Ours is an Orgiastic, Not an Ecstatic Culture." Angela Carter Discusses Cultural Expressions of Sexuality in her Non-Fiction. *Atlantis (Salamanca, Spain)*, 45(1), 56-73. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2023-45.1.04>.

Özü, A. (2010). Deconstructed Masculine Evil in Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber Stories. In N. Billias (Ed.), *Promoting and Producing Evil* (pp. 109-119). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Pasolini, A. (2012). "The Mysterious Other": Carter's Japanese Reflections. *Altre Modernità*, (8), 131-148. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13130/2035-7680/2558>.

Pasolini, A. (2016). *Bodies That Bleed. Metamorphosis in Angela Carter's Fairy Tales*. Milano: Ledizioni. DOI: [10.4000/books.ledizioni.7790](https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ledizioni.7790)

Peach, L. (2009). *Angela Carter*. Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pearson, J. (2006). Foreword. In R. Munford (Ed.), *Re-Visiting Angela Carter: Texts, Contexts, Intertexts* (pp. vii-xii). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230595873>

Robinson, S. (1991). *Engendering the subject: gender and self-representation in contemporary women's fiction*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Rubinson, G.J. (2005). *The Fiction of Rushdie, Barnes, Winterson, and Carter: Breaking Cultural and Literary Boundaries in the Work of Four Postmodernists*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland.

Ryan-Sautour, M. (2007). Autobiographical Estrangement in Angela Carter's 'A Souvenir of Japan,' 'The Smile of Winter' and 'Flesh and the Mirror'. *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 32, 1-26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.9512>

Ryan-Sautour, M. (2014). Affect and Authorial Performance in Angela Carter's "Feminist" Fiction. In A.M. Sánchez-Arce (Ed.), *Identity and Form in Contemporary Literature*. London: Routledge, New York.

Ryan-Sautour, M. (2018). The Legacy of Angela Carter: Ethics and Authorial Performance in Contemporary Short Fiction by Women. In J. Sacido-Romero, L.M. Lojo-Rodríguez (Eds.), *Gender and Short Fiction: Women's Tales in Contemporary Britain*. New York; London: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315106489-3>

Sage, L. (2007). *Angela Carter*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Sage, L. (Ed.). (1994). *Flesh and the mirror: essays on the art of Angela Carter*. London: Virago Press.

Sauvage, J. (2008). "This Tableau Vivant... Might be Better Termed a Nature Morte": Theatricality in Angela Carter's Fireworks. *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 51. Available at: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/918> (Accessed 05 May 2025).

Snaith, H. (2018). 'Fictions written in a certain city': Representations of Japan in Angela Carter's work. (PhD Thesis). Swansea: Swansea University.

Świerkosz, M. (2017). Arachne and Athena: Towards a Different Poetics of Women's Writing. *Teksty Drugie*, 2, 8-26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2017.en.2.2>.

Tonkin, M. (2012). *Angela Carter and Decadence: Critical Fiction / Fictional Critiques*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

IN SEARCH OF ONE'S OWN IDENTITY: ANGELA CARTER'S SHORT STORY COLLECTION FIREWORKS

Nadiya Yu. Polishchuk, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (Ukraine)

e-mail: nadiya.poli2020@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32342/3041-217X-2025-1-29-4>

Key words: identity discourse, female subjectivity, corporeality, sexuality, puppet, mirror.

The article examines the first collection of short stories by the esteemed British literary figure Angela Carter, titled *Fireworks* (1974), which has received limited attention in Western and Ukrainian literary studies. The focus of the study is the literary analysis of six stories by A. Carter: *The Smile of Winter*, *A Souvenir of Japan*, *Flesh and the Mirror*, *Master*, *The Loves of Lady Purple*, and *Reflections*.

The topic of the study is the concept of feminine identity, which is crucial in the writer's worldview. The paper aims to explore the mechanisms of functioning the characters' identity, in particular, two distinct processes of its representation within the prose collection: a) the creation and b) the destruction. Both have been revealed at the intersection of the essence of the characters and their perception in the reader's consciousness. The novelty of the research is determined by the sphere of corporeality, in the dimension of which the positive and negative sexual experience of male and female characters is contrasted in the literary texts. The chosen perspective of identity analysis incorporates an appropriate methodology grounded in feminist criticism and deconstruction.

Through the literary analysis of Carter's selected short prose, two aspects of the identity concept were identified: creation and destruction. The first one is realized in the discourse of the nameless protagonist-narrator's autobiographical reflection (*The Smile of Winter*, *A Souvenir of Japan*, *Flesh and the Mirror*); meantime, the second one is reproduced in the discourse of sexual violence (*Master*, *The Loves of Lady Purple*, and *Reflections*). The characters' identity transferred into the plane of corporeality is displayed from the vantage point of female subjectivity and is characterized by internal contradiction, fluidity, and the variability of authenticity. The multiplicity and diversity of the protagonists' selves in the works are conveyed through two overarching tropes in Carter's poetics – puppets and mirrors.

The motif of puppets plays a pivotal role in revealing the essence of literary characters by undermining the integrity of the female/male personality and casting doubt on their authenticity, thereby extending the boundaries of the artistic text into the realm of the reader's consciousness. This characteristic is present in five of the six narratives under analysis: *A Souvenir of Japan*, *Flesh and the Mirror*, *The Smile of Winter*, *The Loves of Purple Lady*, and *Reflections*.

Conversely, the mirror, with its dual nature revealing simultaneous sameness and difference of reflection, evolves into a structurally formative element in Carter's writing, embodying the internal principle of mirror asymmetry across various levels of textual structure. In the autobiographical discourse

of feminine identity, namely, in *A Souvenir of Japan* and *Flesh and the Mirror*, the essence of the female protagonist is presented in the context of her relationship with the Others – a male lover and the metropolis – which are opposed to each other according to the principle of narrative presence / absence of a lover (*Flesh and the Mirror* / *A Souvenir of Japan*) and objectivity / subjectivity of the city (*A Souvenir of Japan* / *Flesh and the Mirror*). Instead, in *Master*, *The Loves of Purple Lady*, and *Reflections*, where the discourse of sexual violence shows the character relations through the paradigm of the *master :: slave* or *executioner :: victim*, the mirror asymmetry is determined by gender differences: male aggression dominates in the texts of *Master* and *The Loves of Lady Purple*, and female – in the stories *The Loves of Lady Purple* and *Reflections*.