Critical Fictions/Fictional Critiques:
Angela Carter and Decadent Iconographies of Woman

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Abstract

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This thesis examines conflicting claims made about the fiction of British feminist writer Angela Carter. The first claim, made by critics such as Britzolahis, Clark, Kappeler and Dworkin, is that Carter's intertextual allusions to canonical male-authored texts constitute a form of literary fetishism that is antithetical to her professed feminism. The second claim, made by Carter herself, is that her fiction is a form of literary criticism. In order to evaluate the validity of each of these claims, the thesis examines Carter's intertextual allusions to that strand of the European, male-authored canon commonly termed the Decadence, which stretches from Hoffmann through to Proust, and which is characterised by a heavily fetishized representation of Woman. The thesis performs a series of readings in which Carter's fictions are juxtaposed with the canonical texts to which she alludes, and which also situate her fictional critique within the history of the critical traditions and debates surrounding these texts. The thesis examines her intertextual allusion to texts by Hoffmann, Proust, Poe, Baudelaire and Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, with sections on the representation of Woman as doll, Muse and femme fatale. I conclude that Carter's deployment of aspects of the decadent iconography of Woman is an ironic, highly self-conscious feminist strategy, which can best be understood as an instance of Walter Benjamin's dialectical image.