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'A MAD DREAM OF VICTORIANA': ANGELA CARTER AND THE (NEO) VICTORIAN

Abstract
The novels of Angela Carter provide a sharp satirical insight into the politics and culture of twentieth-century Britain. One major aspect of these areas that Carter occasionally tackles is the relationship with the Victorian heritage of Britain. The aim of this paper is to examine how Carter enters a dialogue with the Victorian past through the lens of neo-Victorian theory to see if and to what extent her works can be seen as neo-Victorian. The paper focuses on three novels, *Shadow Dance*, *Nights in the Circus*, and *Wise Children*, as they feature neo-Victorian concerns most prominently, and provides a close reading of certain passages, comparing them to the typical traits of neo-Victorian novels.

Key words: neo-Victorian, Victorian, Angela Carter, *Shadow Dance*, *Nights at the Circus*, *Wise Children*

1. Introduction

Angela Carter (1940–1992) was an English writer and journalist, known for her multi-layered novels and short stories which embraced radical feminist and socialist politics while at the same time being devoted to aesthetic and stylistic exuberance. Her works are known, and even infamous for their

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straightforward representations of gender relations, especially concerning violence against women, as well as their keen class consciousness, which is omnipresent in her works. However, her works are also characterised by historical consciousness, that is, by an awareness of how the present has been shaped by history, not just in terms of class and gender politics, but also in terms of culture and our relationship with cultural and historical heritage. Many of her works exhibit an awareness of cultural and social changes in Britain (and especially in England) during the twentieth century, with a tendency to focus on the downsides of the changes and attack them in 'in rhapsodic, grand-operatic terms' (Pitchford 2002: 110) which allow for a multiplicity of readings and interpretations. This gives Carter a very sharp critical, satirical edge and allows her to create multifaceted fictions that allow 'us to perceive for ourselves the processes that produce social structures, sociohistorical concepts and cultural artefacts' (Peach 1998: 9).

Carter's writing career started in the 1960s, a period of immense change for Britain, which had managed to enter a period of affluence and prosperity, but had also started to wane and become a second-rate imperialist force, 'not independent from the USA as much anymore' (Lacey 1995: 16). Carter herself commented that 'towards the end of the sixties, it started to feel like living on a demolition site – one felt one was living on the edge of the unimaginable' (Carter 1988: 211), which is a sentiment that particularly echoes throughout *Shadow Dance* (1966), but also throughout *Wise Children* (1991). It is no wonder then, that a huge part of her fiction examines, at least to an extent, the historical circumstances that led to such a situation as well as the view of those circumstances through a late-twentieth-century lens. Coincidentally, the same period is marked by an increased interest in the Victorian era and Victorian literature and is most commonly accepted as the start of the neo-Victorian genre due to the publishing of two seminal pieces in the genre, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) (Kohlke 2008: 3). Both novels exhibit a great interest in the Victorian era; the first one is a rewriting of *Jane Eyre*[1] from the perspective of Berta Mason and establishes a common trope in neo-Victorian literature, while the second novel is a playful metafictional subversion of Victorian realist novels. These two novels present a watershed moment, during which Carter, too, steps on the literary scene with *Shadow Dance*. While she never openly commented on

[1] Interestingly, Carter was working on a rewriting of *Jane Eyre* at the time of her death.

those (or any) returns to Victorian fiction, her first novel does share some similarities with them, which will be examined later in the paper.

This fascination with the Victorian and the subversion thereof proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s, owing largely to Thatcher's rule, which was marked by an ideological turn towards Victorian values, which were presented as a desirable, conservative alternative to the world of the late twentieth century, 'at once the inverse of her 1980s present, and its heritage' (Mitchell 50). This did not only rehabilitate the era and turn it into an acceptable ideological tool and commodity, too, moving the Victorians 'from the position of oppressive parent-figures to benign grandparents' (Hadley 2010: 1), but it also started a literary trend of critical examination of the period, mostly through the use of postmodern tools such as historiographic metafiction, in order to undermine Thatcher's ideology, create parallel histories, and in some cases, to rehabilitate some positive aspects of Victorian writing. Carter did not lag behind, but instead turned towards the era once more, publishing *Nights at the Circus* in 1984. The novel follows the story of Sophie Fevvers, a winged arealiste at the tail-end of the Victorian era and examines the Victorian ideal of progress by drawing implicit comparisons and establishing a dialogue between that age and the twentieth century. This is achieved through the use of historiographic metafiction, which combined with its themes, makes it suitable for analysis in the neo-Victorian context. Her next novel, *Wise Children*, exhibits similar ideas; as a memory narrative, it displays an unofficial history of the glorious Hazard family, from the ex-centric position of Dora Chance, an illegitimate daughter of Melchior Hazard. The novel is set at the end of the twentieth century and backtracks through different decades, starting with the Victorian era, where lie the origins of both the Hazards and the Chances. While not being fully immersed in the Victorian era, it does establish a dialogue between the past and the present, with a partial focus on the Victorian, and is thus suitable for comparison with the neo-Victorian.

This analysis will focus on the three aforementioned novels and how they relate to neo-Victoriana. After a brief general discussion of the neo-Victorian, the paper will analyse the Victorian references in the novels with the goal of situating them in the context of neo-Victoriana and examining Carter's own view of the period and the contemporary resurgence of its aesthetics and ideology. The goal of the analysis is to examine Carter's oeuvre from an angle that has been largely ignored, shedding new light

on it, while providing a small contribution to the field of neo-Victorian studies, and hopefully starting a fresh discussion about Carter's fiction.

2. Delineating the neo-Victorian

The term 'neo-Victorian' has not been an easy one to define, primarily due to several similar, contesting terms, with rather similar and sometimes overlapping meanings. Furthermore, even the term 'neo-Victorian' itself is somewhat contentious, as it is used differently by different authors. Some other similar terms that have been offered by authors are 'retro-Victorian', 'post-Victorian', and 'faux-Victorian'. This section aims to try to provide a brief overview of those terms and a brief description of the genre, with references to Carter's work, to provide a sound framework for the rest of the discussion and to establish a terminology for it.

Sarah Shuttleworth applies the term 'retro-Victorian, to describe 'novels [that] generally display an informed postmodern self-consciousness in their interrogation of the relationship between fiction and history', which 'reveal, nonetheless, an absolute non-ironic fascination with the details of the period and with our relations to it.' (Shuttleworth 1997: 253) This definition does describe well the main focus of most postmodern reworkings of Victorian fiction that will be referred to as 'neo-Victorian' here, in the sense of their commitment to investigating the tensions between history and fiction, but the statement about their absolute non-ironic fascination with the period is rather dubious. While some degree of fascination (which does not have to imply endorsement) with various elements of Victorian culture, and especially, fiction does exist at least to some degree in neo-Victorian of fiction, there is always some sense of critical distance from the period, there is always at least some kind of attempt to undermine and to subvert some aspects of the period. An example of this might be Sarah Waters' *Affinity*, which (ab)uses the Victorian realist novel to write lesbianism into Victorian history. Or, on the other hand, the Victorian period is juxtaposed with the present, such as in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, which presents the contemporary period as devoid of genuine desire and curiosity when compared to the Victorian era. Furthermore, the prefix 'retro' brings to mind a recreation of a past trend without a critical or ironic distance, but as a mere copy devoid of deeper essence, akin to Jameson's idea of pastiche, which is

> like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of a satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs (Jameson 1991: 17).

Thus, the term 'retro-Victorian' might imply mere imitation of Victorian styles instead of an attempt to critically examine both the period and the present day, which makes it rather imprecise for this kind of engagement with the Victorian past.

A similar term is 'faux-Victorian', used by Kate Mitchell to describe novels that 'revive Victorian novelistic traditions, offering themselves as stylistic imitations of Victorian fiction' (Mitchell 2010: 117) and do not point to their 'status as "fake"' (Mitchell 2010: 118). While this term may adequately describe some fictional returns to the Victorian, not just in literature, but in other media, it does not adequately describe the type of fiction this paper seeks to compare Carter to. Another common term, championed by, among others, Andrea Kirchknopf, is 'post-Victorian'. She rejects 'neo-Victorian' and 'retro-Victorian' since they 'designate the era but lack an emphasis of the postmodernist influence on these texts' (Kirchknopf 2008: 66). Instead of those terms, prefers 'post-Victorian', which she sees as 'the most suitable to denote contemporary reworkings of Victorian texts, especially in that the interdisciplinary nature of research into the post-Victorian phenomenon… appears to ask for its integrative qualities' (Kirchknopf 2008: 66). However, calling such fiction 'post-Victorian' may be imprecise because the preface 'post' usually describes a temporal dimension, something that came afterwards, and the postmodern implications might not be easily discernible. Thus, the term used here is 'neo-Victorian', introduced by Dana Shiller, who describes the neo-Victorian novel 'as at once characteristic of postmodernism and imbued with a historicity reminiscent of nineteenth-century fiction' (Shiller 1997: 538). It is used here on the one hand because it is the most widespread and recognisable term that describes this kind of fiction and is also used in much of the core critical literature here, but on the other hand, because it is the most straightforward and least contentious one. The prefix 'neo'

is rather neutral and implies a return to the Victorian that is not merely nostalgic or a pastiche, but rather, one that allows for a critical reflection on the period as well as a myriad approaches to this and various ranges of distancing, which makes it the most suitable term to describe this type of fiction.

Therefore, the central feature of neo-Victorian fiction is that it engages critically with the Victorian period, eschewing a mere perpetuation of surface-level symbols of the era to satisfy the appetite for recreations of different historical periods for the sake of nostalgic, even conservative contemplation or entertainment and aesthetic pleasure. Neo-Victorian fiction is 'markedly self-conscious and engages in the processes of adaptation and appropriation with the view to exploiting their subversive potential' (Krombholc 2013: 120). This self-consciousness and active engagement in its own process of production, coupled with its historical setting and its active role in the questioning of historiographic material and our understanding of history means that neo-Victorian fiction typically operates within the framework of historiographic metafiction, the type of fiction which is 'both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages' and is marked by 'its theoretical awareness of history and fiction as human constructs' (Hutcheon 2004: 5).

Essentially, a neo-Victorian novel is a reworking of Victorian fiction that aims to establish a connection between the present era and the Victorian one to examine and subvert literary, historical, philosophical, and ideological tenets of both eras through any narrative means, but typically through the means of metafiction and parody. Such a reworking of Victorian fiction neatly aligns with Carter's attitude towards writing, that is, her being 'all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode' (Carter 1998b: 26)

The neo-Victorian genre gained great prominence in the 1980s and the 1990s, during Margaret Thatcher's rule and its immediate aftermath. Thatcher used 'Victorian values' as one of the key ideological tenets of her conservative rule, as a way to restore the image of Britain's greatness and unify the nation under the banner of perceived progress, national greatness, and imperial power. Furthermore, the image of Victorian Britain Thatcher invoked was one of thrift and hard work and thus had a practical political purpose as a means to justify austerity. Mitchell writes that

> Thatcher used the term 'Victorian values' as a measure against which to identify the social ills of her milieu – a regulated

> economy, welfare dependency and the decline of the family – and to advocate a return to laissez faire economics, to a reliance upon individual charity and to strong family discipline. (Mitchell 2010: 48)

As Gilmour writes, 'in a period when Victorian values were being publically celebrated, it would be strange if writers did not explore them and the society which produced them' (Gilmour 2000: 198). Carter was no stranger to reactions to this sort of '(mis)interpretation of "Victorian values"' (Kirchknopf 2008: 56) and the general state of the nation, both in her fiction and non-fiction. She comments on Thatcher's 'barbarous echoes of past glories that shape her vowels and sharpen her consonants' (Carter 1998a: 135) as well as 'the artificiality of the presentation of Thatcher' (Carter 1998a: 136). These barbarous echoes are particularly present in *Wise Children* and *Nights at the Circus*. Both novels present parodic images of the (Victorian) past, presenting the greatness of the era as a performance on the stage, set up for profit, as well as displaying the eventual demise of such performances later on, parodying Britain's fading into obscurity, which establishes a dialogue between the official ideology and the reality, subverting the dominant narrative of Victorian greatness.

Another reason for the appeal of the neo-Victorian, especially when it comes to the general population is its return to traditional, more satisfying and narratively richer forms of writing. This provides a break from the typical postmodernist fiction which often tends to be dry, clinical, and overly intellectual, while the neo-Victorian typically returns to more engaging and thrilling plots which engage the use of popular genres such as the romance or the detective novel, allowing the novels to be read on a surface level, without requiring the reader to be well-versed in theory. Of course, the neo-Victorian genre still falls under the umbrella of postmodernism and uses many of its techniques, especially in terms of historiographic metafiction, but it provides a different angle and doesn't shy away from the use of some conventional realist tropes. In other words, 'it provides a return to clear-cut categories questioned in postmodern narratives and a break from postmodernist relativism in favour of earlier, more traditional narrative modes, presumably to be used as a kind of anchor in an increasingly destabilized turn-of-the-millennium world' (Krombholc 2013: 119). Carter's works are similar in this regard, as they rarely fully abandon realist representation while utilising different popular genres,

especially the Gothic, and creating intertextual webs, in which references are sometimes used unironically, but quite often are treated irreverently and parodically. This creates works which are engaging, provocative, and humorous in their irreverence, but also create layers of different meanings.

3. Victorian Leftovers: *Shadow Dance*

Shadow Dance is Carter's first novel, and as such, 'it crammed in ideas and themes and images that its author was to explore at leisure for years to come' (Sage 1995: 17). This is also true when it comes to Carter's looking back at the Victorian era. The novel specifically focuses on Morris, a failed painter and an unsuccessful shopkeeper and his partner in business and violence, Honeybuzzard, and their violent mistreatment of Ghislaine, a naïve young woman whose being sexually liberated leads her to become a victim of their violent sexual games. The novel primarily focuses on Morris, who is deeply disaffected by life and alienated from his surroundings and the people around him, while maintaining a tense friendship with Honeybuzzard, who is presented as a grotesque parody of a Gothic villain, who, despite his sometimes-comical appearance, complements the squalor and decay of the setting and its horror aspects. The novel follows Morris as he navigates his way between his 'melancholia' (Peach 1998: 33), his failing marriage with his wife, Edna, and the guilt over Honeybuzzard's assault on Ghislaine, which left her once-beautiful face permanently disfigured and drove her down a path of madness, and which had been done after a hint from Morris. However, occasionally, one can see hints at some elements of the Victorian era and Carter's future thematisation of it, that is, one can see various Victorian leftovers strewn around the novel as mementoes of an era that had passed but still lingered on, exerting an influence over the present moment and indicating that it was closer than may be thought at first. Particularly, this refers to Morris's and Edna's marriage and the historical, Victorian artefacts that Morris and Honeybuzzard sell in their junk shop.

The marriage is characterised by their differing views on it; while Edna seeks a traditional one, in line with Victorian values, Morris seeks a life which is closer to a contemporary libertine, focused on sexual pleasure instead of on raising children and establishing a traditional household with a strong, masculine patriarch on top. Edna is described thus in the novel:

> She was a Victorian Girl; a girl of the days when men were hard and top-hatted and masculine and ruthless and girls were gentle and meek and did a great deal of sewing and looked after the poor and laid their tender napes beneath a husband's booted foot, even if he brought home cabfuls of half-naked chorus girls and had them dance on the rich round mahogany dining-table' (Carter 1994: 46)

She lives in a desire to bear Morris's children, which he vehemently opposes; talking her into using contraception and not having children, because 'if he insisted hard enough, then she supposed she would be docile and obedient because that was how wives should be' (Carter 1994: 46). She refuses to contradict him because, for her, 'Husbands were a force of nature or an act of God; like an earthquake or the dreaded consumption' (Carter 1994: 45). Ironically, it is his insistence on not having children and pursuing extramarital affairs that fulfils at least one part of her masochistic desire, that of being a submissive wife firmly under her husband's foot. In other words, the novel establishes a connection between Victorian subjugation of wives and the contemporary, sexually liberated era; Morris, like men of his era generally, is not bound by strict moral codes that encumber sexual escapades, but it is precisely this that keeps his wife miserable, and paradoxically, fulfils her Victorian marital desires, apart from her desire to bear children. Their relationship can be said to represent the dialectic of sexual liberation; while the Victorian moral codes were largely stripped away, particularly for men, it was often women who had to pay for this liberation and thus, this liberation only emphasised their submissiveness. Furthermore, the novel also presents Victorian values as something that is still present, like a ghost of the past that still lingers on. In this sense, Edna can be contrasted to and compared with Ghislaine, a sexually liberated woman and the main victim of the novel. 'Although Ghislaine at first might seem to be sexually liberated, she shares with Edna a self-imposed submissiveness, which makes passive martyr-victims out of them both' (Fruchart 2006: 31). This further emphasises the connection between sexual liberation and sexual repression, as well as the connection and the dialogue between the contemporary era and the Victorian era.

Another example of Carter's commentary on Victoriana, as mentioned, is Morris's and Honeybuzzard's business of selling junk-artefacts, scavenged from abandoned houses, often to Americans, who 'Seemed to live in a

mad dream of Victoriana' (Carter 1994: 90). 'They were looking, primarily, for American-bait. In houses the size and age of this one, they looked for small, whimsical Victorian and Edwardian articles that could be polished or painted and sold as conversation pieces' (Carter 1994: 89). This establishes Victorian artefacts as commodities to be sold for a profit instead of objects of historical value, as well as hints at the increasingly marginal position of post-war Britain and its being overwhelmed by America. These topics would subsequently be explored not just by Carter, but by neo-Victorian authors in general, for example, A. S. Byatt, who in her novel *Possession*, introduces the figure of Mortimer Cropper, an American professor who obsessively collects artefacts related to British poet Randolph Ash and is presented as an intruder in the sphere of British culture. Furthermore, their business prefigures the 1980s and 1990s 'mania for collecting Victorian artefacts, fostered by the rehabilitation of Victoriana in the 1950s and 1960s' (Mitchell 2010: 54). This was, of course, not just a passion for collecting, it was primarily a business, one which turned historical artefacts into commodities that are bought and sold on the free market, just like any other commodity, which meant that 'History becomes its tangible objects, which are bought and sold to decorate homes, or to boost tourism The past becomes a possession' (Mitchell 2010: 94). Moreover, the artefacts mentioned in the novel often do not even end up decorating British homes; instead, they are taken to the USA, as a type of colonial bounty and aesthetic and historical oddities. While the novel does not go into great detail when it comes to this, it establishes a theme that Carter would later explore, particularly in *Nights at the Circus*, but also in *Wise Children*.

While being far from a neo-Victorian novel as such, *Shadow Dance* exhibits the first instances of Carter's looking back at the past, especially to the Victorian era and thus deserves some consideration in the discussion about Carter and Victoriana, as well as many other topics that are not explored here.

4. Illusions of Progress: *Nights at the Circus*

Nights at the Circus has been Carter's most critically acclaimed novel due to its complexity of allusions and a wealth of symbolism that allows one to dive deeply into its complexities and uncover possible meanings enabled by

its exuberant style. It tells the story of Fevvers, a winged circus performer, whose wings help her rise to stardom but also lead her into many situations in which she is objectified, used and abused. Her 'apprenticeship in being looked at' (Carter 2006a: 23) begins in a brothel where she was left as a baby and subsequently brought up by the prostitutes. After that, she ends up in Madame Schreck's museum of female oddities, from whence she is sold to Mr Rosencreutz, and, afterwards, she ends up in Colonel Kearny's circus, where she earns fame, but still retains her objectified position. The novel begins with her interview with Jack Walser, an American journalist who 'tries to debunk some of Fevvers' mysteries' (Lee 1997: 93). After hearing and disbelieving her life story, he joins the circus to follow her from a close distance until they reunite as lovers at the end of the novel. The novel also expands on the topic of Anglo-American relations, which Carter started to comment on in *Shadow Dance* and which she discusses in greater detail and with greater stylistic prowess in *Nights at the Circus*. This is achieved by drawing a lot of attention to the American symbols which surround colonel Kearny and to his position as an imperialistic capitalist who is trying to expand his business all over the world, while employing British performers who figure as colonial subjects here. However, this does not mean that there is some kind of longing for the British Empire in the novel; both the British and the American empire are ridiculed and profaned. Another key feature that will be discussed here is the temporal setting of the novel; not only is it situated in the Victorian era, but it is also placed in the *fin de siècle* period. This establishes a clear connection between the two eras and serves to question the (Victorian) idea of progress, thus establishing a dialogue with the contemporary period, on which it also comments. This kind of questioning treatment of history and contemporary politics and its clear Victorian setting make the novel neo-Victorian, which deserves greater attention.

A few critics have reflected on Carter's treatment of history in the novel. Kohlke acknowledges that the novel operates 'within the postmodern mode of "historiographic metafiction"' (Kohlke 2004: 155), while Magali Michael claims that 'Carter's depiction of the past is strikingly familiar, however, which suggests that the present is effectively her target and that 1899 and the 1980s are not worlds apart.' (Michael 1994: 492). Furthermore, Matthew Oliver closely examines the novel in the 1980s context of its writing, that is, of Thatcherism with its heavy emphasis on Victorian values and Britain's increasingly marginalised position. He claims

that 'she directs her gaze back at the British Empire, not nostalgically, but to transform traditionally idealized "British" identity traits through the messy, decentered, physical discourse of the grotesque, distancing British identity from empire and replacing it with a new model' (Oliver 2010: 239). However, all these characteristics are abundantly found in neo-Victorian novels and one might say that they are even typical traits of such fiction, which means that it is possible to safely situate *Nights at the Circus* among neo-Victorian novels. It was written in the period of an ideological return to Victorian values, which spawned many of the seminal works in the genre, and it engages in an active dialogue with the Victorian past and the late capitalist present of the contemporary age. While it does not explicitly conjure up many Victorian images, as it belongs to the category of neo-Victorian novels that Shiller describes as 'more overtly postmodern in tone' (Shiller 1995: 1), it is still clearly enough a reaction to the era and the contemporary (ab)use of it that can be seen as such a fiction.

The novel begins *in medias res* during the interview between Walser and Fevvers, which can be seen as an embodiment of Anglo-American relationships; the American, Walser, is represented as a critically-minded young journalist who comes to investigate and debunk the possible deception on part of the winged woman for his series entitled 'The Great Humbugs of the World'. This immediately establishes Britain as an ex-centric place, a place that has become somewhat exotic and mysterious and is to come under scrutiny from the new power on the rise, America. He is described as having 'the professional necessity to see all and believe nothing which cheerfully combined, in Walser's personality, with a characteristically American generosity towards the brazen lie' (Carter 2006a: 6), and, further: 'his habitual disengagement was involuntary; it was not the result of judgment, since judgement involves the positives and negatives of belief' (Carter 2006a: 7). Even after getting a full interview from Fevvers, Walser is still in a state of disbelief and opts to secretly join the circus to observe Fevvers up close and confirm that she indeed was a humbug and not an actual winged woman. However, this decision does not lead him down a path of rational explanations and further critical inquiry. On the contrary, he eventually fully loses himself in the madness and magic of the circus and finally loses all memory of himself, which makes him drop his disbelief and accept Fevvers as she is. He joins the circus as a clown and is immediately taken over by their performance, playing the role of the Human Chicken. The experience in the circus forces him to

suspend his disbelief, especially after the dance the clowns perform for him, which crosses the borders of reality and steps into the area of magic; one of the clowns is repeatedly castrated while the other one juggles his removed members and Buffo produces numerous transgressive items from a cauldron, just to name a couple of supernatural moments.

His trials continue and intensify after the circus train crashes in Siberia and he suffers from complete memory loss to the point where he cannot remember anything about himself and simply repeats his Human Chicken routine. He is eventually found by a shaman and adopted as an apprentice, which pushes him further away from his recollection of self and his previous realist, sceptical thinking, as 'for all the people of this region, there existed no difference between fact and fiction… Strange fate for a journalist, to find himself in a place where no facts, as such, existed!' (Carter 2006a: 208) Even though Carter's critical voice does not spare even the Siberian natives, this experience still serves as a transformative one and he starts coming to his sense only after hearing her voice calling him, 'His name, in the mouth of the winged creature' (Carter 2006a: 319). After this, he is able to accept Fevvers as she is, dropping his American incredulity and making peace with things that may not seem of this world at first, which undermines his Americanness inherently tied to his scepticism.

However, the biggest transgressive symbol of America and its imperialism is the circus itself and the figure of Colonel Kearney, a parodic embodiment of the American entrepreneurial spirit and the imperialism it birthed. The very presence of the Colonel is itself an almost grotesque exaggeration of Americana; the central piece on his attire is a 'gun-metal buckle, in the shape of a dollar sign, [which] fastened the leather belt just below his pot belly' and his suit is comprised of 'a pair of tightly tailored trousers striped in red and white and a blue waistcoat ornamented with stars' (Carter 206: 114). His patriotic exuberance is, of course, a merely economic thing; even though he is from the South, he accepts the stars and stripes as there was 'No profit margin to the bonny blue flag, these days; he was all for the stars and stripes' (Carter 206: 114), American patriotism is presented as a mere symbol of the acquisition of wealth and the American flag stands as a banner of imperialism. His entire project of going around the planet is presented as an imperialist attempt at conquering the world in the name of the USA. Talking to Walser, he comments:

> Surely I can count on a fellow Amurrican to see the glory of it! All nations united in the Great Ludic Game under the banner of liberty

> itself! D'you see the grand plan, young man? Old Glory across the tundra, crowned heads bow to the democratic extravaganza! Then, think of, tuskers to the land of the Rising Sun, young man! Hannibal's tuskers stopped short after the Alps but mine, mine shall go round the en-tire world! Never before, in the en-tire [sic!] history of thrills and laughter, has a free Amurrican circus circumnavigated the globe!' (Carter 2006a: 118)

This passage can be read as a comment on American imperialist pretensions; America was a force on the rise in 1899, when the novel is set, and it was the foremost imperialist force during the 1980s, when the novel was published, which establishes a connection between the late Victorian period and the neoliberal period, with its turn towards Victorian values. The dominance of America over Britain even prompted Tony Benn to remark that Britain was 'a colony in an American empire' (quoted in Oliver 237). Thus, American imperialism is equated with a circus, undermining its real-life power with an irreverent attitude and from a contemporary position which is trying to find the roots of the situation in the past and, albeit implicitly, establishes a neo-Victorian dialogue between the past and present moment.

However, this kind of treatment of the American empire does not imply a reactionary view, one that seeks to return to the former glory of the British empire. Carter's irreverent treatment of crucial cultural symbols is not reserved only for America; it is directed against Britain just as much, if not more. One example of such irreverence is the character of Ma Nelson, the owner of the brothel where Fevvers grew up. She shares her name with Admiral Horatio Nelson, because of which 'she always dressed in the full dress uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet' (Carter 2006a: 34). This parodies one of the greatest figures of British history and implicitly ridicules the entire British Empire by comparing it to a brothel, 'her barque of pleasure that was moored of all unlikely places, in the sluggish Thames' (Carter 2006a: 34). Carter's mockery of the Empire can also be seen as a reaction to Thatcherite nostalgia for the period, uncovering the underside of the greatness to which Thatcher referred in her ideological musings, which is in contrast to 'a nostalgic impulse which positions the Victorian era as a 'golden age' from which the present has dropped off' (Hadley 2010: 8) Furthermore, Oliver reads Fevvers' wings 'as grotesque extensions beyond the closed surface of the classical body, suggestive of how the empire itself

extended beyond the easily definable limits of national boundaries' (Oliver 2010: 242), even though she is herself part of the underclass, which points to a kind of dual symbolism; she stands for those subjugated on the basis of sex and class, but also for the grotesque expansion of Britain.

However, one key feature of Victorian that the novel engages with, and possibly one of the most important themes of the novel is its engagement with the idea of progress, which 'In the popular imagination, the Victorian era is thought to have been dominated by' (Hadley 2010: 19). Hadley further mentions the 'confident belief that the Victorian era was moving toward a better future' (Hadley 2010: 20) and offers a quote from Frederic Harrison, who says:

> We are on the threshold of a great time, even if our time is not great itself. In science, in religion, in social organisation, we all know that great things are in the air. 'We shall see it, but not now' – or rather our children and our children's children will see it. […] It is the age of great expectation and unwearied striving after better things. (quoted in Hadley 2010:2).

The temporal setting of the novel, that is, its being on the threshold of the 20th century implies a connection between the idea of progress, present in the 19th century, and the contemporary age, birthed by the 19th century. Fevvers is connected to such ideas quite explicitly, receiving a remark such as 'Oh, my little one, I think you must be the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground' (Carter 2006a: 2010). Her wings can thus be seen as a symbol of hope for freedom, freedom acquired by the march of progress that was soon to liberate women from the shackles of male domination. However, this symbolism is undercut by her frequent getting into trouble precisely because of her wings, which undercuts the whole idea of progress, presenting it as something that cannot be spawned by the present circumstances.

Even Fevvers herself seems to accept such idealistic notions at one time. At the end of the novel, right when the year 1899 was supposed to turn into 1900 and a new era, Fevvers enthusiastically exclaims:

> And once when the old world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah then! All the women will have wings, the same as I. […] The doll's house doors will open, the brothels

> will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed –' (Carter 2006a: 338-339)

Her idealistic speech is, however, quickly cut short by Lizzie, Fevvers's voice of reason, who states that 'It's going to be more complicated than that […] This old witch sees storms ahead, my girl' (Carter 2006a: 339). In this way, the naïve, idealistic notion of progress is undermined and the attention is turned towards the present day and forces the attention toward a conscious comparison of the idealistic expectations of the 19th century. Not only does Carter undermine and put under scrutiny the nostalgic, idealised notions of the Victorian era on the foundations of which Thatcherism lay, but also scrutinises some of the essential notions of the Victorian era, namely, that of progress, which establishes a two-way connection between the eras while keeping a sharp critical edge, which is a typical neo-Victorian technique, and which situates the novel firmly within the boundaries of the neo-Victorian.

5. Memory and Nostalgia: *Wise Children*

Wise Children, Carter's last novel centres around two twin sisters, Dora and Nora Chance, and their various experiences as illegitimate daughters of Melchior Hazard, a great Shakespearean celebrity actor. The novel's narrator is Dora, now a seventy-five-year-old woman, who goes back through memory and narrates their life stories starting with the very beginnings of the family in the 19th century and their grandfather Ranulph Hazard, the progenitor of the line of celebrity performers from the Hazard dynasty. Throughout the narrative, Dora recounts the humble Cockney origins of her and her sister's under the care and supervision of their grandmother, whose figure always looms in the background of the narrative, and their road to becoming professional performers and winding back in their humble Brixton home. The novel is full of juxtapositions of high and low, primarily in the occupations of the legitimate branch of the family and the illegitimate – the Hazards are (at least initially) representatives of high culture, whereas the Chances are vaudeville performers, representatives of low culture. This cultural dichotomy stands for all other dichotomies in the novel – bourgeois and proletarian, male and female, authority

and disenfranchisement, patrilineal and matrilineal families, and so on. In this context, Dora's narrative is an effort to write her and her sister's life stories into the history of the family by creating an unofficial history and undermining the official one, created by the Hazards and the public perception of theirs. As Roesner writes: 'Reflecting her life-long quest to be acknowledged by her father, Dora's memoir represents her attempt to assert her visibility by writing herself into her family history' (Roesner: 2002: 113). The motif of asserting visibility and writing a marginalised group into history is rather common in neo-Victorian fiction, which seeks to re-examine the position of women gays and lesbians, and other marginalised groups, and to reinscribe them in history. Another thing that *Wise Children* has in common with neo-Victorian fiction is its focus on what Mitchell calls 're-membering'. She comments that

> these fictions are less concerned with making sense of the Victorian past, than with offering it as a cultural memory, to be re-membered, and imaginatively re-created, not revised or understood. They remember the period not only in the usual sense, of recollecting it, but also in the sense that they re-embody, that is, re-member, or reconstruct it […] the dis(re)membered pieces of the past are reconstituted in and by the text, and also in the reader's imagination. (Mitchell 2010: 7)

It can be argued that Dora follows precisely this kind of process; she actively tries to put together pieces of memories and critically engage with them, in an attempt to (re)construct a version of her family history that includes all the illegitimate aspects of it, which are created precisely by the legitimate part. Her memoir is a memory narrative that goes beyond the mere recollection of personal matters and tries to engage critically with the past it retells, as well as the contemporary moment from which it is narrated. As Sage comments:

> *Wise Children* traces the history of the Hazard theatrical dynasty, from its nineteenth-century heyday, when its members colonised their world (or at least the colonies) bearing Shakespeare to the sticks, through to the twentieth-century upturning of that imperial theme. Which finds the bards' plays being travestied in other media, and the stage itself upstages by television. (Sage 1995: 55–56)

Thus, Dora's narrative transcends the boundaries of autobiography, it also serves to recollect the past of imperial might, contrasting it with its contemporary demise and the dismal state of Britain in the contemporary era, which can be seen as another reaction to the contemporary nostalgic Victorian impulses. The Hazard family can be said to stand for the Empire itself. Its cultural demise, the fall from Ranulphs' bringing Shakespeare to the entire world, to television and corny commercials, mirrors the fall of the British Empire from a mighty empire to a second-rate force. Of course, the novel does not refer only to the Victorian period, which means that it cannot be seen as a purely neo-Victorian novel, as its discussion of history and politics spans most of the 20th century as well, but its treatment of the Victorian and history in general makes it a worthy addition to this discussion. In this way, the novel continues with the examination of Britain's waning and the inexistence of the progress for which the Victorians had once hoped, but it also introduces some nostalgic moments, which were not present in *Shadow Dance* or *Nights at the Circus*.

Nostalgia has not been popular within critical circles and as Boym notes, the word 'is often used dismissively' (Boym 2002: xiv). Hutcheon, for example, is meticulous in claiming that 'The past is always placed critically – and not nostalgically – in relation to the present' (Hutcheon 2004: 45) when discussing *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Arguably, purely nostalgic recreations of the Victorian world, devoid of any critical inquiry, can be easily dismissed as 'period fetishism' (Krombholc: 2013: 120), however, critical re-membering of the period is not necessarily at odds with hints of nostalgia. As Mieke Bal notes, 'nostalgia can also be empowering and productive if critically tempered and historically informed' (Bal 1999: xi). It can be argued that this is the case with Dora's narrative; while she retains an irreverent attitude towards the past and tries to subvert the dominant patrilineal structure embodied by Melchior, she does not shy away from looking back nostalgically on some things that she found dear and that have disappeared due to the relentless march of time and the development of neoliberalism. These remarks comment on the cultural changes Britain underwent during Dora's lifetime and the rapidly changing face of London. She remarks 'Nowhere you can get a decent cup of tea, all they give you is Harvey Wallbangers, filthy capuccino' (Carter 2006b: 3), and later continues in a similar vein: 'no more Joe Lyonses, gone the way of all flesh' (Carter 2006b: 111). Another interesting remark is, 'This is about the time that comes in every century when they reach out for all that they

can grab of dear old London and pull it down. Then they build it up again, like London Bridge in the nursery rhyme, goodbye, hello, but it's never the same' (Carter 2006b: 3). In these remarks, Dora tracks the disappearance of some familiar, uniquely English motives and their replacement with globalised, universal aesthetics, culture, and businesses, which came about as a result of the globalising and universalising tendencies of late capitalism. Thus, her nostalgia is not just 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed' and a 'sentiment of loss and displacement' (Boym 2001: xiii), but has a clear critical purpose and can be seen as an example of 'reflective nostalgia' (Boym 2001: xviii).

However, the novel retains a critical edge that is typical for Carter and, as mentioned above, it continues exploring the theme of Britain's decline, contrasting the glory of the height of the Victorian period with the contemporary state of Britain, while going over most of the 20th century. It can be said to be a successor of *Nights at the Circus* in some way, as it explores the aftermath of Fevveers's idealistic musings at the end of the novel, showing to what extent the hopes of her and many other Victorians were not realised. Those novels, together, show how 'The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia' (Boym 2001: xiv). In this sense, Dora's memoir contrasts the beginnings of the Hazard dynasty with the cultural state of the late twentieth century. Ranulph's Shakespearean world tour is described as 'proselytising zeal' (Carter 2006b: 17) by Dora, and she describes how 'the old man was seized with the most imperative desire, to spread and go on spreading the Word overseas' (Carter 2006b: 17). His glorious tour mirrors the zenith of British imperialism and the might of the Empire; he is established as a great actor and is revered all around the world, to the extent at which several towns in America are named after him, accepting British cultural and political supremacy. The portrayal of Ranulph is not nostalgic about his era and does not glorify his persona; it is laughed at and subverted just like all embodiments of British cultural supremacy are in this novel. Ranulph also establishes the patrilineal order, which sidelines women or excludes them completely, owing to which, Melchior was able to simply impregnate the sisters' mother and leave, never to acknowledge them.

This is contrasted with Melchior Hazard, who follows his father's footsteps and becomes a great, renowned Shakespearean actor, which allows him to amass wealth and power, but as time marched on, he had to make compromises and descend into the world of show business,

alongside his entire dynasty. Whereas Ranulph symbolically conquered America on his tour, Melchior goes to America, not on a conquering tour, but to work with an American Director, Genghis Khan, on a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which ends up being a complete disaster, thus symbolically marking the end of British cultural and political supremacy, as America securely sits in the dominant position. This downfall is also seen in Melchior's turning into a marketing figure, dropping from being a great actor, an embodiment of high culture, to a mere seller of commodities. Dora comments that he 'deeply mined the rich new seam hat opened up before him – old buffers in pipe tobacco, vintage port and miniature cigar commercials' (Carter 2006b: 118), while his third wife, nicknamed My Lade Margarine by Dora, appears in other commercials, exclaiming that 'The Royal Family of the theatre gives its seal of approval' (Carter 2006b: 118) and even turns *Hamlet* into a parody for a commercial, asking 'To butter or not to butter' (Carter 2006b: 38). Furthermore, Melchior's legitimate daughters, Saskia and Imogen act in cooking shows and children's shows, while his son, Tristram, runs a TV show called 'Lashings of Lolly'. These elements further point to a decline of British culture, embodied by the decline of the Hazard family, and they also blur the differences between the high and the low, showing how nothing is too sacred to be (ab)used for a profit.

Thus, *Wise Children* also establishes a connection between the Victorian era and the contemporary one, despite not focusing solely on that era, and provides a sharp examination of the state of both eras, which situates it close to typical neo-Victorian eras.

6. Conclusion

This discussion has tried to outline a timeline of Carter's engagement with the Victorian and compare that engagement to the features of the neo-Victorian genre to situate her work around it. Her engagement with the Victorian past began with her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, which shows how Victorian artefacts were being turned into commodities, while the dominant position of Britain was waning. Carter continues this examination in *Nights at the Circus*, which can be said to be a fully neo-Victorian novel. It parodies both the British Empire and contemporary American imperialism to critically examine and subvert both, while commenting on the shifting

positions and Britain's slow waning, as well as questioning the Victorian idea of progress. Carter's final novel, *Wise Children*, continues in a similar vein, commenting on the unfulfillment of the hopes of progress from a late 20th-century perspective and with a focus on the seismic shifts in culture, brought about by late capitalism. Both novels critically engage with both the Victorian past and the contemporary era, marked by the 'Thatcherite (mis)interpretation of "Victorian values"' (Kirchknopf 2008: 56), which is a common theme in neo-Victorian fiction. *Wise Children* also engages with historical periods that fall out of the scope of the Victorian, but can still be seen as adjacent to the neo-Victorian.

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