Theoretical Application Paper

In Viktor Shklovsky’s essay “Art as Technique,” Shklovsky explains the technique of defamiliarization. Defamiliarization is the act of taking what is familiar and making it seem new again through art. He writes, “art exists that one may recover the sensation of life” (18). The reason art is needed to defamiliarize people is because “as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic” (17). What Shklovsky means by this is that after doing something enough times, one does the act without thinking, without even perceiving it anymore. Shklovsky then goes on to explain how this lack of perception is like seeing an object in a sack. The object can be identified by its shape, but any defining qualities are unseen. Therefore, the object is not being fully perceived. Art defamiliarizes what has become habitual, making the “stone stony,” as Shklovsky puts it (18). Shklovsky often quotes Leo Tolstoy for examples of defamiliarization, saying, “Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object” (18). One example Shklovsky sites from Tolstoy is a description of flogging that details the act itself. This technique of describing the details of something that had become habitualized to people of Tolstoy’s time removes the sack from the object, forcing people to identify it based on its details rather than its vague outline.

The technique of defamiliarization which Shklovsky explained has a strong influence in the writings of Angela Carter. For example, in Carter’s “The Company of Wolves,” the reader gets an extremely defamiliarized telling of the well-known fairy tale, “Little Red Riding Hood.”
Carter uses techniques to defamiliarize the fairy tale and make it more realistic. Carter does this through her choice of tenses, intense descriptions of characters, and highly detailed scenes.

“The Company of Wolves” opens with general warnings against the dangers of wolves and a few stories about wolves turned human and vice versa. Then, Carter finally gets to her version of “Little Red Riding Hood.” What is at first unfamiliar to the reader is the style of narrative, omniscient third person, but constantly jumping back and forth between the present and past tense. The use of present tense at all is somewhat uncomfortable in a fairy tale, which readers are more familiar with being in the past tense. The present tense is especially disconcerting since it forces the reader to feel in the moment, and to experience everything as it happens. Lines like, “There is a faint trace of blood on his chin; he has been snacking on his catch,” bring the reader uncomfortably close to the story, defamiliarizing the reader by making him or her experience the story more intimately than one experiences a fairy tale (115).

Carter takes her time describing her protagonist, giving the reader background about how she was raised and detailing her youth and virginity with a multitude of metaphors. For example, in describing the girl’s hair and face, Carter writes, “her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white . . .” (113). Carter then goes on to dedicate an entire paragraph to the girl’s virginity, with metaphors like “she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane . . .” (114). These are not the kind of descriptions readers are used to in fairy tales. Though the young man’s description is somewhat brief in comparison with the girl’s, his description when he attacks granny is quite descriptive, writing, “his matted hair streams down his white shirt and she can see lice moving in it. . . . His skin is the colour and texture of vellum. A crisp stripe of hair runs down his belly, his nipples are ripe and dark as poison fruit but he’s so
thin you could count his ribs... she can see how hairy his legs are. His genitals, huge” (116).

The first thing unfamiliar about what the reader expects to be familiar is that the antagonist is not solely a wolf, but seems to be some mix between man and wolf. There is not even an indication that he becomes a wolf. So far as Carter reveals, he stays mostly man as he eats granny.

The most defamiliarizing components of Carter’s story are the highly detailed scenes. One scene in particular really sticks out as strange, something the reader would not normally think of. After the young man/wolf eats granny, Carter describes how he burns the hair—which he could not eat—in the fireplace, wraps up the bones and hides them in a chest under the bed, replaces the sheets on the bed and puts the bloody ones in the laundry basket, plumps the pillows, shakes out the quilt, and places the Bible—which granny had thrown to protect herself—on the table. These are the kinds of details that fairy tales do not supply. The logic in the man/wolf’s actions feel out of place in what was meant to be a fantastical tale. Carter defamiliarizes the fairy tale by making it feel more real and unnervingly logical.

Through the technique of defamiliarization, Carter takes a well-known tale of “Little Red Riding Hood” and makes it uncomfortably alive for the reader. A shifting tense, between present and past; intense, sexual descriptions of characters; and extremely detailed scenes all contribute to the generally strange feeling throughout “The Company of Wolves.” Carter uses defamiliarization to make the story new to readers who have heard it thousands of times.
Works Cited
