

Carter's portrayal of corruption of women in the bloody chamber

[Government](#), [Corruption](#)



In Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber and other stories' Carter looks at women protagonists and puts them in first person narratives, looking at the women's perspective in her interpretation of childhood fairy-tale stories. Carter was called 'One of Britain's most original and disturbing writers'. She presents a genre called magic realism which gives the stories a realistic feel discussing real life topics while putting it in a somewhat fantasy world. Carter uses the key theme of virginity in women and how the loss of this can lead to innocence becoming corrupted. In Carter's 'The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography' it looks at the nature of sexual freedom and how it affected women in the eighteenth century and throughout time.

This book discusses Carter's feminist views of sex and links to The Bloody Chamber's female protagonists. 'The Company of Wolves' is an adaptation of The Little Red Riding Hood. It's important to note that the beginning of the story doesn't follow the normal structure of beginning, middle and end. Instead it opens with a series of anecdotes warning the reader of the dangers of wild wolves and describing some mythology behind it. 'The wolf is carnivore incarnate and he's cunning as he is ferocious' this negative view of wolves sets us up to want to fear them for our main protagonist. This sets up the main character to be viewed as the heroine of the story. The wolves are constantly referred to as 'he' suggesting how anything strong and capable of power is associated with men. Though we know reading Wolf Alice that female wolves are common, although they are living in a 'male-centred nature of civilisation'.

The wolves represent a fear of the unknown and is why they are feared by so many. The main protagonist is made clear that she is 'not afraid' and this is due to 'her own virginity' as it acts as an 'invisible pentacle' in which she is protected as it is her innocence which keeps her safe and away from danger. The theme of virginity is focused to highlight the sexuality of the girl. 'standing within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity' this links to the cyclist in lady of the house of love as his virginity is what allows him to be protected against the countess' trick to lure men into her chamber. Very similarly it acts in the same way in this story for Red Riding Hood. Carter refers to her virginity as an 'unbroken egg' signifying its fragility and delicacy, which makes the reader wonder how something so easily broken can protect her from these 'ferocious' wolves and how can it stop the fear which the wolves evoke. When stepping into the forest the simile it 'closed on her like a pair of jaws' this suggests she is vulnerable and it emulates fear as we feel that the heroine is in danger. We then get introduced to 'a very handsome young one, in the green coat and wide-awake hat of a hunter' the man the young girl encounters is both alarmingly good-looking however also suspiciously wolf like.

Carter may have described him as 'handsome' to play on how superficial women are portrayed in media and books. Unlike Red who uses a 'knife' to protect herself her granny uses a bible, the granny is ultimately killed by the 'nightmare' wolf yet the killing is not described much as a murder more of a symbol of death as its described she was 'three quarters succumbed to the mortality the ache in her bones promises her'. Unlike her granny Red doesn't

hold a bible when confronted with the wolf instead she faces the situation rationally, she's not ignorant of what's happening as it even stated in the book she was 'endangered' of death, and her virginity and innocence to the wolf allowed her to not be frantic and irrational. She adapts the trait of 'rationality' and 'self-reliance'. 'since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid' the young girl makes a conscious decision to not play the damsel in distress and to be unafraid of the wolf, knowing 'the wolf is worst for he cannot listen to reason'. The protagonist continues to listen and be rational with the wolves due to her protection being her virginity. 'She freely gave him the kiss she owed him' suggesting the full control she had over the situation. Like in the fairy tale she comments on his teeth and his reply is 'all the better to eat you with' and she responds with laughter suggesting how humorous she found the situation. 'she ripped off his shirt' this suggests a newly awakened unfulfilled sexual awareness which places her in a unique position of being able to seduce the wolf, while simultaneously being innocent enough to sympathise with it which is ultimately what saves her. It was her innocence and sexual awakening which resulted in her saving herself and the story ends 'see! Sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf' Carter subverts expectations of the Little Red Riding Hood story as the girl is able to tame the wolf not the huntsman.

In 'The Lady of the House of Love' Carter uses the fairy-tale theme by presenting the female protagonist as a vampire adding to the magic realism. Carter presents her female characters as strong and dominant as in the lady

of the house of love she preys on helpless male victims and lures them in with sex, suggesting her dominance and control over men or the mindlessness of them. Carter combines and subverts the gothic and fairy-tale genres and questions the features in her text such as the presentation of women as weak in most literature. 'feminism has politicalised gender – by showing its constructed nature, its initial focus on the gendered representation of women in western culture.' The countess keeps a lark in a cage ' she likes to hear how it cannot escape' this suggests a twisted mind and an evilness about her which isn't how women would typically be portrayed. The singing of the bird reminds her that like herself in her vampire body the bird is also trapped in a cage. Though she kills these innocent men, Carter portrays the countess as empathetic ' the countess's cheeks will be mixed with tears' she cries after she eats her victims suggesting how she is victim to her condition and it's not her fault. Carter may be implying that the foolishness of men being lured in by the promise of sex, suggests that sex is their weakness and women have control over men. Though there is a man introduced which has ' the special quality of virginity' and the virginity of the cyclist shows the subversion of gender roles. And this virginity in him much like Red's in *The Company of Wolves* protects him from the countess and even changes the tarot cards prediction ' this time, the first time, dealt herself a hand of love and death.'

Suggesting how virginity in him acts as a protection and a new future for her. Though ' she only knows of one kind of consummation', this suggests that she is also virginal as she does not know of sex but only eating men. Possibly

implying that the countess is innocent but it's her condition which evokes this darkness and violence. This links to *The Company of Wolves* as both female protagonists presented as strong and powerful as the heroine laughed in the wolf's face 'she knew she was nobody's meat' suggesting her confidence and bravery the cyclist suggests a new awakening for the countess and this ultimately results in her tragic ending. Like *The Company of Wolves* his virginity means he lacks fear 'since he himself is immune to shadows, due to his virginity he does not know what there is to be afraid of' suggesting he is naïve and does not yet been afraid, much like the protagonist which suggests virginity alone holds this power and protection which is for both men and women. Like it says in *The Sadeian Woman* 'Our literature is full, as our lives, of men and women, but especially women who deny the reality of sexual attraction and of love because of considerations of class, religion, race and of gender itself'.

Carter's ideology presents how women are shown that we should hide and be ashamed of our sexual desires but with the vampire when she becomes human the story ends with the cyclist going to France reinforcing the true horror which is her fate as her fate was irreversible. It ends with the line 'can a bird sing only the song it knows, or can it learn a new song?' By using the metaphor of the bird she poses the rhetorical question of whether entrapment can be escaped.

The Bloody Chamber is one of Carter's short stories, it's based on the blue beard fairy tale. This short story unlike the others conveys a dominant male and a submissive female, Carter looks the roles between a young woman

and an old man in a new marriage, the first person narrative also helps the reader gain an insight on how she is feeling and what's going on in her head. The story opens up with an expedition as we find out that the protagonist is travelling away with her new husband. Carter is able to introduce the main character while simultaneously establishing suspense as is demonstrated by the opening paragraph. This is significant as we follow the journey of the protagonist and this suspense creates an underlining tension. The unnamed protagonist is made clearly out to be a virgin yet she conveys a series of erotic imagery. 'In a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement' this sexual imagery could convey the transition from innocence to corruption. Carter brings out these themes and enhances them through the use of symbolism and choices of language, she also uses magic realism through main events which take place in what is described as a fairy castle. This effect allows her to use a fantasy like world while adding real life situations. A key factor throughout is that the heroine of the story remains nameless, this suggests she's structurally disempowered.'

The unnamed first-person heroine of the bloody chamber's title story appears at first to be a Justine-like sacrificial virgin in a white dress'. This suggests that she's already set up for and inevitably tragic ending. It can also be suggested that 'by leaving the heroine nameless Carter universalises her struggle so that she represents all women'. The heroine narrates her story from her point of view which differs from the third person narrative traditionally seen in fairy tales. The mother also subverts norms as what is traditionally a male dominant role being originally the heroine's older

brothers in the Blue Beards tale. The effect of this is that we see the mother as the hero in what typically would be a 'man's job'. The mother in the story also marries for love which would have been seen as 'scandalous' yet it suggests that true love saves the day when the 'antique service revolver' he deceased husband left for her is what she uses to kill the Marquis. The Marquis is presented as a fairy tale monster and we are aware 'he was much older' than her and had also 'married three times within my own brief lifetime' this emphasises the young female characters youth against her husband's experience with life, and women. Carter uses animalistic imagery to convey the Marquis Age and presence 'there were streaks of pure silver in his dark mane', this animalistic imagery suggests a sense of corruption. His sent is also made overwhelming and extremely present when he walks in the room 'a whiff of the opulent male scent of leather that always accompanied him' Carter calls the scent 'male' as it's overwhelming and strong and this conveys the traditional stereotypical masculine qualities. As a gender role that has been culturally assigned to women is assigned to 'masculinity, with its connotations of strength, rationality, stoicism and self-reliance.' This suggests that Carter chose to do this in order to portray the social inequalities and the way women and men were presented during the time it was set.

After the wedding the Marquis fills her marital bedroom with lilies 'the lilies I always associate with him; that are white. And stain you.' The imagery of the lilies apparent purity suggest the heroine's innocence and virginity in comparison to the Marquis sexual corruption. 'Stain' suggests the bedsheets

which will be bloody after their conformation. There is an underlying link between the marriage bed and death as marriage is like the termination of women's independence as they then become an accessory to the man. When the narrator finds some of the Marquis pornographic images and is discovered, the Marquis is presented as very patronising. 'My little nun has found the prayer books' him referring to the violent and erotic fantasy, and the immolation of rape and the Sabine woman as his 'prayer books'. By the Marquis calling the porn books something religious it's as if he is showing his devotion to the pursuit of sensuous pleasure. Sex is his religion. Though he shows that he enjoys this he refers to the protagonist as 'little girl' 'have the nasty pictures scared you baby? Baby mustn't play with grown-ups toys until she's learned how to handle them' this portrays an unusual sexual fantasy and though during that time seventeen year old girl could marry a much older man, yet this line conveys an unpleasant thought of childhood abuse. The protagonist also makes it clear she 'was innocent but not naïve' the heroine is gifted 'a choker of rubies' 'bright as arterial blood', the rubies suggest a history of violence, cruelty and death and it foreshadows her attempted execution and the Marquis sexual corruption. Women in literature are often presented in a 'passive sexual role obligated of them by culture'. 'In my innocence, he sensed a rare talent for corruption' when her virginity is lost she's described as 'wounded' 'the sign of virginity so recently ruptured that still remained a wounded presence between us' which suggests that she feels she cannot fulfil his dark sexual desires. Unlike the other stories this main character though she's presented as self-aware her virginity being lost ultimately leads to corruption moreover, it could be argued that it doesn't, as

the protagonist does survive. But the permanent stain left on her head acts as a reminder of this loss. This same ending isn't as present in the other stories as the protagonist is viewed as weak compared to the Marquis who's presented as an animal using the animalistic imagery and this emphasises his dominance over her.

The Bloody Chamber contrasts with the other stories as the protagonist conforms to gender norms, she's presented as weak, compliant and submissive. However, she holds characteristics like self-awareness which men in this time didn't think women had, which could be why he targeted her. Unlike the others who convey a dominance over the men. Carter shows contrasts with the men and women in her stories, this presents women in a new light compared to other literature pieces as they mostly use women as heroine. The Bloody Chamber and other stories looks at underlying gender roles and sexuality within women and men. Women show a strong sense of self-awareness ' I could create a pentacle out of music that would keep me from harm' this quote from the bloody chamber is much like the one in the company of wolves ' protected by a pentacle of her own virginity.' These women exert in inelegance and strength and the characters understand how they can protect themselves in irrational situations. In conclusion Carter does present her female characters as strong and the loss of virginity is seen as a gain of experience however, through the different fairy-tale stories she looks at key themes.