

Gothic conventions of women in the bloody chamber



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The corruption of innocence and the gaining of experience are common aspects of Carter's stories in 'The Bloody Chamber', which are applied to many themes such as sexuality in *The Tiger's Bride* and *The Bloody Chamber*, self-awareness in *Wolf-Alice* and horror in the collection's namesake. This loss of innocence aids in the development of the protagonist, since new experiences allow them to reclaim their freedom from the shackles of the patriarchy. This idea links to Carter's desire to subvert the Gothic conventions of women in literature, who are often given the passive role of the victim, with the intent of transforming them into powerful figures who are in control of their own identities.

Innocence and experience is a key theme in the first story, *The Bloody Chamber*. From the beginning, it is evident that the heroine is not entirely innocent: "I'm sure I want to marry him", I said'. This shows that despite knowing that the Marquis is dangerous, the heroine is intrigued and excited by the danger, which presents a female character who controls her own fate. This decisiveness opposes classic Gothic literature, where many women are forced to do as male characters say, with Carter already beginning to introduce feminist ideas at the beginning of the story. Furthermore, her mother does not stop her daughter from marrying the Marquis; it is unclear whether the mother is initially aware of the dangerous nature of the Marquis, but her decision to remain quiet shows that the heroine is being given the freedom to do as she pleases. Carter also questions the traditional perceptions of corruption: 'I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away'. Traditionally, women are taught to be afraid of corruption, which is subverted by Carter who creates a female character who

is unafraid of the consequences of her desires. If anything, this excites and arouses the heroine, which implies that some women take pleasure in submitting to the desires of men. This reveals the complexity of the female psyche, because the heroine's independent and decisive nature is juxtaposed with a desire to be corrupted. However, by the end of the story, the heroine's experience with the Marquis has clearly scarred her: ' I am glad he cannot see [the red mark] ...because it spares my shame'. This is a permanent reminder for the heroine that desire and temptation can terrorize her as much as it can empower her, showing that not all experiences are pleasant. In this context, the heroine is not empowered by her loss of innocence, suggesting that she feels unfulfilled because she did not complete the final act of consummation, which was to be ' penetrated' by the Marquis' sword. Despite her character being considered unusual compared with women in Gothic literature, her desire to sacrifice herself for the Marquis suggests that she is not as independent as she is initially thought to be. It is clear that she will be unable to fulfill this desire in her life with the piano-tuner, which implies that she will feel incomplete due to the lack of excitement in her later life.

The idea of becoming experienced is also explored in *The Tiger's Bride*. At the start of the story, the relationship between the heroine and La Bestia is transactional, since her father lost her to him in a card game: ' You must not think my father valued me at less than a king's ransom; but at no more than a king's ransom'. This presents the reader with a heroine who is instantly being objectified at the start of the story, but a heroine who is also incredibly perceptive of the actions of male characters. This shows that the heroine's

innocence is being overestimated by the male characters and changes the reader's perception of her, since women are typically depicted as being coy and naïve in Gothic literature. As the heroine spends more time with La Bestia, her intrigue for him grows: ' I felt my breast ripped apart as if I suffered a marvellous wound'. In the context of the story, this highlights the heroine's observant nature, since she is suspicious of La Bestia's unnatural beauty. It is evident that La Bestia is not all that he seems and the oxymoron, ' marvellous wound', shows that while the heroine feels betrayed, she is also aroused by his true nature. This also shows that sex and violence are inextricably linked and fetishizes the idea of inflicting pain or being subject to pain, again revealing the complexity of female sexuality and suggesting that sadomasochism is not shameful. At the end of the story, the relationship between the heroine and La Bestia becomes consensual, with the heroine revealing herself to be a tiger: ' I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur'. This shows that the heroine has gained experience by sexually freeing herself. In the story, sexuality is embodied by the tiger and so the heroine has achieved freedom by embracing her animalistic side; in freeing herself, it causes her to become the ' Sadeian Woman' because she is now in control of her own sexuality. The transition from a transactional to a consensual relationship shows that there is now equality between the heroine and La Bestia, because she has been encouraged to embrace her true nature and live, metaphorically and literally, like a tiger.

The loss of innocence is also a major aspect of Wolf-Alice, but for different reasons. Wolf-Alice is described as a feral child who ' grew up with wild beasts', which captures her innocence because she does not see the danger

in these wild animals that others would be able to. This animalistic nature is all that Wolf-Alice has ever known because she has not yet been introduced to humanity. As a result, she finds comfort in wild animals as opposed to humans, because she has only been able to learn from them and is therefore unaware of what human nature is, despite being a human. Wolf-Alice begins to lose her innocence once she starts menstruating: ' Her first blood bewildered her'. This shows that her journey to self-awareness is focalized through puberty, because menstruation indicates that she is now becoming more feminine and is now able to be corrupted by male desire. Puberty also teaches Wolf-Alice about the concept of time: ' The moon vanished; but, little by little, reappeared'. The discovery of time enables Wolf-Alice to become more self-aware, because she now realizes that she has lived in the past and will live in the future, as opposed to just occupying the present. The moon is also symbolic of femininity, again showing how puberty aids in her character development. The lunar cycle also teaches Wolf-Alice to prepare for menstruation instead of being repulsed or confused by it. As a result of this, Wolf-Alice is made more humane by the fact that she is learning more about herself and her surroundings. Mirrors also serve to educate Wolf-Alice and allow her to become more self-aware: ' She saw with irritation, then amusement, how it mimicked every gesture of hers'. It is clear that Wolf-Alice is still very innocent when she first examines the mirror, because she does not realize that the reflection is of her. Wolf-Alice's reaction to her reflection is similar to that of wild animals, who are very defensive towards others, but her amusement emphasizes her naivety and shows that she has not yet discovered herself. Mirrors also have connotations of vanity and since Wolf-Alice is not yet aware that the reflection is of her, it can be argued that

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she is unknowingly objectifying herself. This links to the idea that as she becomes more human, she also becomes more narcissistic, implying that human culture revolves around materialism. The objectification of her reflection creates sexual vanity and suggests that it is humanity's obsession with beauty that has corrupted Wolf-Alice.

In conclusion, Carter's stories prove that women do not need to rely on men to sexually liberate themselves and become more self-aware. The implication of the stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, is that no-one - except Wolf-Alice, who is atypical in her behavior as a human - is completely innocent, showing that women have the potential to free themselves from oppression and take control of their fate, which would not be considered achievable without questioning the conventions of traditional Gothic literature.