

The bloody chamber,  
frankenstein, and  
doctor faustus: three  
way the  
transgression...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

A key feature of the Gothic genre in 'The Bloody Chamber,' 'Frankenstein and Dr Faustus' is Transgression. Transgression, put simply is the violation of a particular societal, moral or natural law. It is breaking boundaries, or breaking rules of society, which is reflected in all three works of literature.

Frankenstein's hubristic pursuit of creation and his thirst for knowledge lead him to subvert the laws of religion and nature and create artificial life.

Faustus' is also a hubristic character who, like Frankenstein has a thirst for knowledge that compels him to transgress religious boundaries in an act of blasphemy that would have shocked Elizabethan audiences. While Frankenstein's transgression is emotional and passionate, Faustus' is a cognitive choice, decided by reason and deliberated again and again (arguably making Frankenstein a more sympathetic character).

Transgression in 'The Bloody Chamber' however is presented differently.

While Frankenstein and Faustus are punished for their transgressions (and the reader is given a lesson in morality) the female protagonists in 'The Bloody Chamber' collection often subvert societal norms and 'transgress' in a way that liberates and should be celebrated. Patriarchy and male dominance is punished and Carter herself 'transgresses' against the fairy tale genre by subverting and challenging the stereotypes presented.

Both the Renaissance setting of Faustus and the 19th Century setting of 'Frankenstein' are societies that are at times of change. The Renaissance was divided between a return to humanistic values of balance, order and the study of classical works and the fiery debate over religion that characterised this period. England was divided over Catholic and Protestant loyalties and this provides a perfect backdrop for a protagonist with a divided soul to

transgress. Frankenstein is also a protagonist who falls in between divided societal disciplines. The boundaries between Science, philosophy and religion were becoming more ambiguous in the 19th Century and society's moral ambiguity allows his flawed character enough space to make his fatal mistakes. The context of both of these texts provides a societal rift in which the protagonists display transgressive behaviour which allows us to question traditional societal norms. 'The Bloody Chamber' on the other hand is a 20th century novel, written at a time of feminist uprising in the Western world. As a writer, she transcends (and could be said to transgress) against patriarchal societal norms (as do her female protagonists). Carter herself says that she is the 'product of an advanced, industrialised, post imperialist country in decline' and that that gives her 'the sense of limitless freedom' (Wandor, 1983)<sup>1</sup> highlighting the freedoms that individuals in the 20th century enjoy. Comparing this context to that of the other texts prompts a new reading of Frankenstein and Faustus, one in which modern audiences could possibly praise them for their transgressive spirit, rather than condemn them as their own readers did.

Victor's thirst for power that science offers is sparked by a lightning storm in which a 'stream of fire' leave a 'beautiful oak' ruined. This 'dazzling light' symbolises an epiphany to Frankenstein who watches with 'curiosity and delight'. Electricity is seen as a force that can both illuminate and 'utterly destroy,' and the dual forces of this paradoxical power are reflected in human nature and other dualities in the novel. The 'stream of fire' alludes to Prometheus (which is referenced in the novel's subtitle 'The Modern Prometheus') who mistakenly gave fire to mankind and was punished by

Zeus. This Classical allusion foreshadows Frankenstein's own transgression against nature. He is further driven by his university lecturer's rhetoric that new philosophers will 'penetrate the recesses of nature' and 'show how she works in her hiding places.' A feminist reading would see the lexical choice of 'penetration' as symbolic to an act of 'rape' of nature. Nature is often personified as a feminine aspect and Frankenstein tries not only to harness the natural world, but to subvert the role of women all together by usurping their role as the creators of life. Developments in 18th and 19th century science were beginning to question the nature of life and how science and humans could take on the role of reanimating life. This posed conflicts for what had once been a religious society and Victor's hubristic pursuit could be seen by readers as blasphemous. Victor is overcome with his need to pursue this and the compulsion to do so, and to transgress against nature and God seem overwhelming. He talks about his 'soul grabbling with a palpable enemy' and 'feelings which bore me onwards like a hurricane'. In a psychoanalytic reading, the subconscious force driving Victor forward is the uncontrollable 'id' the pleasure principle and primal aspect of the human psyche. A hurricane is a natural and uncontrollable, violent force that causes destruction and so this metaphor serves to foreshadow the later destruction. Ironically, a hurricane can be described as an 'act of God' and so the very thing compelling Frankenstein could be said to be the thing he tries to usurp. Frankenstein's hubris is highlighted by his delusions of grandeur and his blasphemous pursuit of omnipotence. He talks of pouring 'a torrent of light in to this dark world' with his creation, an image which reminds us of God's creation of earth and how 'a new species would bless me as its creator'. His

grandiose speculations are clearly so full of hyperbole that readers of the time would condemn his blasphemy.

In the same way as Frankenstein, the transgressive nature of Dr Faustus allows us to question traditional societal norms as he commits the ultimate sin, a rejection of God to pursue power as well as pleasure. The chorus – which is evocative of a Greek tragedy – foreshadows Faustus' fate; ' his waxen wings did mount above his reach,' this allusion to Icarus, who went against the advice of his father flew too close to the sun, melting his wings of wax. In this case for Faustus it foreshadows his arrogance, pride and greed which leads to his downfall. Wilhelm Wagner (1969)<sup>2</sup> argues that ' the devil and our lives on earth can give us no greater satisfaction than God,' however, Faustus believes that to ' live in all voluptuousness' is worth more than the rewards he will gain in heaven if he follows a moral path. The opening soliloquy of ' Marlow's Dr. Faustus' reveals many different characteristics of the protagonist. As well as establishing Faustus' character, the soliloquy is a reflection of the Renaissance world, by presenting Faustus as a man of his time since the character is influenced by changes in society, encountered in the Renaissance era. However, Faustus rejects the learning of his time, rejecting first the great philosopher Aristotle's ' Analytics' and logic by questioning its purpose:

“ is to dispute well logic's chiefest end?

The read no more, thou hast attained the end

A greater subject fitteth Faustus' wit”

The fricative and tongue twisted last phrase is difficult to say and a renaissance audience with highly tuned ears would notice this and hear the warning in his hubristic statement. He moves on to the study of medicine, rejecting the 'gold' it can offer and bragging that he has already 'attained that end'. Instead of worldly learning, he chooses the 'necromantic books' which he paradoxically believes are 'heavenly'. Frankenstein also rejects conventional religion and science by obsessing on the works of Cornelius Agrippa, a sorcerer and necromancer. His father's disapproval that his works are all 'sad trash' further shows us that both society and his close family disapprove of his studies but that this is not enough to stop him. In grandiose assertions that are similar to Frankenstein, Faustus believes they will lead to 'power, honour and omnipotence' and in the same way that Frankenstein wishes a new species to 'bless' him as its creator, Faustus wants 'all things that move beyond the quiet poles to be at (his) command'. The difference between Frankenstein and Faustus is that while Frankenstein is motivated by a subconscious, uncontrollable force that is tipped over the edge by grief of the death of his mother, Faustus' pursuit of divine power and delight is far more deliberate and conscious and Marlowe's use of the soliloquy here helps us to see the deliberate and conscious decisions he is making. This makes his transgression more sinful. Renaissance, religious audiences would view this transgression as sacrilegious and blasphemous but modern audiences may side with Faustus and see him as a revolutionary antihero and a true Renaissance Man.

Transgression is seen differently in the 20th Century text, 'The Bloody Chamber'. In the title story, the Marquis breaks the moral and societal

<https://assignbuster.com/the-bloody-chamber-frankenstein-and-doctor-faustus-three-way-the-transgression-is-portrayed/>

boundaries by fusing erotic love with death. His Bloody Chamber, a 'room designed for dissection' hides the corpses of his previous lovers. By murdering people, he breaks a significant boundary; by combining a sexual element with death he expands his transgressive behaviour and nature to tackle several taboos. Carter says, "My intention was not to do 'versions' or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, 'adult' fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories." (Helen Simpson 1979)<sup>3</sup>. Carter's reworking of fairy tales to expose their 'latent content' which is inherently violent and sexual. The male protagonists act as pornographers: The Marquis in 'The Bloody Chamber' undresses the protagonist while he remains dressed, and examines her 'limb by limb', the lexical choice here highlights his intentions to defile and then murder her shows how patriarchy objectifies and silences women, expecting them to be 'docie bodies'. The ultimate passivity is death and that is what the Marquis will do. The Marquis is a connoisseur of sadism and his chamber is a shrine to his work. The items of torture, 'Wheel, rack and Iron Maiden' are set alongside a 'catafalque' 'funerary urns' and 'bowls of incense' and these ornaments of death show his obsession with the theatre of sadism and death. The narrator (and perhaps the reader) is shocked when they realise how the 'dead lips smiled' demonstrating how the victim was complicit and derived pleasure in the sadism that led to her death. Carter seems to be implying that women are just as capable as men of sexual depravity and sadomasochistic tendencies. Even the narrator revels in the depravity of her husband's deviant fantasy. It is her virginity and 'innocence which he lusted after' that especially excites him and the thought of defiling an innocent. Disturbingly, the narrator is also excited by <https://assignbuster.com/the-bloody-chamber-frankenstein-and-doctor-faustus-three-way-the-transgression-is-portrayed/>

his objectification of her: “ and, as at the opera, when I had first seen my flesh in his eyes, I found myself stirring”. She feels a ‘ strange impersonal arousal’ and a mixture of ‘ love’ and ‘ repugnance’ at their first sexual encounter. This paradox and unwanted feelings of arousal at someone who disgusts you could be Carter’s appreciation of the role of the Freudian ‘ Id’ in driving behaviour. Below consciousness, she is drawn to the deviance in his practices and they represent the painful experiences of womanhood. This is similar to Frankenstein who is also compelled by an ‘ Id’ below his conscious control. Ozum (n. d)<sup>4</sup> suggests that “ Carter’s tales fabricate new cultural and literary realities in which sexuality and free will in women replace the patriarchal traits of innocence and morality in traditional fairy tales,’ Carter subverts traditional gender stereotypes by giving female characters the freedom to dominate their own sexuality and reveal the narrator’s perverse pleasure at her objectification. Gothic texts often try to shock, and certainly the other two texts contain ideas that were shocking to readers and audiences of the time and Carter’s Bloody Chamber does the same. Even modern readers, in a media age where little shocks are inclined may be shocked at not just the socially transgressive behaviour of the Marquis, but also the Freudian revelations that desire and disgust are closely linked within the female psyche. Carter is revealing the empowerment of women through sexuality. Although the institution of marriage serves to disempower the protagonist, (Carter herself said ‘ what is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many’)<sup>5</sup> and she highlights the commodification and objectification of the wife through the protagonist: ‘ my purchaser unwrapped his bargain’. The narrator (who is empowered by the ability to tell her own story, a subversion from the fairy tale tradition) is aware of her

<https://assignbuster.com/the-bloody-chamber-frankenstein-and-doctor-faustus-three-way-the-transgression-is-portrayed/>



objectification and how her husband had 'conspired to seduce her'. It may be this that empowers her as she knows that it is her 'innocence that captivated him' but also that he, as the connoisseur of sexual deviancy sensed in her 'a rare talent for corruption'. Carter illustrates the paradoxical nature of desire in the oxymoronic phrase 'And I longed for him. And he disgusted me' showing how revulsion and desire are not the mutually exclusive concepts that the reader could have thought they were. Gothic literature is powerful and exciting because readers and audiences can vicariously experience the thrill of transgression and project desires of the Freudian Id on to harmless characters when they are unable to express them themselves because of societal boundaries. Carter, like Shelley and Marlowe shocks readers by exposing the darkest of human nature and desire.

The fact that the protagonist understands her own objectification empowers her to embrace this and use her own sexuality to transgress and gain power. Carter's use of the motif of mirrors shows the Bloody Chamber's protagonist's emerging sense of subjectivity. Her heroine's ability to stand outside herself allows Carter to strip away conventional moral fabric, at the same time signalling the fictive construction of her characters: the muscles that resemble 'thin wire' allude to the marionette motif that runs through many of the narratives in 'The Bloody Chamber.' Carter uses the objectification of women as a disruptive literary device to challenge social perceptions. Puppets and mirrors are common instruments of magic and Carter employs both these as motifs of deconstruction; in the mirrored bedroom of the ghastly Marquis the new bride becomes a series of multiple reflections of the male gaze. Mirrors are another important recurring motif

throughout the book. The heroine is able to see herself reflected many times and see what an object she has become. The 'funereal' lilies reflect the Marquis' mask-like face. The 'pornographic confrontation,' where the woman is naked and the man is clothed, is another important image of power and objectification. Count in *The Snow Child* completely orchestrates a paedophilic fantasy in which the 'child of his desire' appears and disappears at his command. The Snow Child is made from the Countess physical desire for her, thus Carter places the Count in the position of the writer, he is able to control what she says and does. The Snow Child is a masculine fantasy, she is a helpless figure and it is the Count who has control of her destiny. The Countess is revealed to be a strong woman whilst the Count is trying desperately to live his dying fantasies, the Count 'watched him narrowly' as she reigns in her 'stamping mare,' Carter portrays her as a strong woman who is in control of her sexuality whilst the Count is controlled by his sexual desires. Frankenstein, in contrast, is not in control of his own destiny, he is disempowered and ultimately ruined by his transgression and although Faustus is more aware of his, he still is ultimately powerless to resist his fate. The differences here may lie in context: the 20th century is a more liberal society than both the Renaissance or the Enlightenment and so the absolute lines of morality are not so clearly defined and the readers are prepared to have heroes and heroines who break societal boundaries to empower themselves.

Moreover, in 'The Bloody Chamber', it is the narrator's transgression to disobey her husband which liberates her. Although forbidden, she takes the keys to enter the room convinced it holds her husband's identity. The

instruments of torture she finds and the chamber itself are a metaphor for the pain of womanhood and the rite of passage that a girl must go through in order to become a woman. The fact that she is rescued by her mother, rather than a man is a celebration of sisterhood and the unbreakable nature of female bonds. The protagonist marries a blind man who cannot objectify her with 'the male gaze' and rejects the transaction of marriage in which the Marquis offers her material wealth in return for her subjugation and ultimate death by marrying a man with no money and living a simple life. Similarly, in 'The company of the wolves,' the heroine is free and liberated due to her own sexual awareness. Carter uses mystical imagery such as referring to it as a 'pentacle' and a 'magic space' to show the special power it has that can be harnessed by the owner rather than exploited by the taker. Her virginity that could have been a weakness becomes strength. When she embraces it, she seems to take on a role that is stronger than the wolf. Carter notes how seeing her makes the wolf 'slaver', and she also actively undresses the wolf as well as herself.

All three texts covering different time periods show that protagonists of different genders and epochs are compelled to transgress. However, the male protagonists transgress because of a hubristic desire for power and knowledge and are punished. The female protagonists in 'The Bloody Chamber' are liberated by their transgression as theirs is not for a (arguably) masculine egotistical desire for omnipotent power, but for emancipation from gender inequalities that have subjugated and oppressed women since the beginning of time. It could be because of this that they are liberated instead of punished but it could also be because of a more liberal context in which

readers are not so absolute in their religious or societal boundaries. It does seem though that transgression is a part of human nature. Since the Bible, we know that humans are compelled to sin and this is why Gothic Literature focusses heavily on this aspect of humanity to engage readers. Readers and audiences over time experience the vicarious thrill of transgression through the characters.