

The wound in the face angela carter essay sample

[Art & Culture](#), [Symbolism](#)



After reading “ Wound in the Face” by Angela Carter I will never apply lipstick or lip gloss to my lips, without considering the deeper issues that Carter raises in what appears, at first, to be an essay which merely comments on the changing styles of women’s cosmetics (and specifically lipstick) in the decades of the twentieth century. She starts her essay by examining the faces of models in adverts taken from magazines of the 1970s and has a strong response to the vogue in cosmetics: “ It scares me” (Carter, 142) - and the rest of the essay explores the reasons for her fear. Quite apart from Carter’s witty style and her down-to-earth descriptions of the changing fashions in lipstick, what emerges from her essay is a strong sense that the cosmetic industry exists to exploit women, that the use of cosmetics is part of a wider exploitation of woman and that the title of the essay - “ The Wound in the Face” - has profound symbolic undertones - which is why I’ll always now think twice about applying lip stick to my lips.

Carter cites Theodore Adorno early in her essay and with obvious approval: “ The feminine character, and the idea on which it is modelled, are products of masculine society” (Carter, 143). In other words, women wear lipstick not for themselves, but for men, in order, as she asserts later, to “ make a woman beautiful. Or, as the advertisers say, more beautiful” (Carter, 144). Carter is especially interested in what happened to cosmetics in the 1960s and the revival in the 1970s of red lipstick. The 60s, she implies, was a return to innocence, a time when it was deemed acceptable for women to wear hardly any make up at all, but to appear natural. Even this fashion, though, she claims was based on artifice: it was, she claims, a reaction to the 1950s when even nice girls wore lipstick, and although it adopted “ naturalism” it

was still “ an ingenuous form of artifice” - “ it was a mask” (Carter, 144). Nonetheless, she seems to approve of the ‘ naturalness’ of the 1960s and sees the revival of a fashion for red lipstick in the 70s as a sign that “ women’s sense of security was transient” (Carter, 146). As it was, given the fashion trends of the 1970s, Carter observes that “ Designers are trying to make us cripple our feet again with high-heeled shoes and make us trail long skirts in dogshit” (Carter, 142). The choice of the word “ dogshit” to end that sentence makes clear Carter’s views of the fashion industry - an industry dedicated to making women feel inadequate about how they look and determined to make money from that feeling of inadequacy.

Carter explores the moment at the end of the 1960s when there was a trend to wear red eye-shadow and black lip-stick. She approves of this, it appears (“ I enjoyed it very, very much” Carter, 144), because for her it represented a rebellion against socially acceptable ideas of beauty and the female need or desire to appear attractive to men. But it was just a passing phase, despite the promise that it seemed to hold for all women: “ Might it be possible to use cosmetics to free women from the burden of having to look beautiful altogether?” (Carter, 144). But as she admits, “ We went too far that time. Scrub it all off and start again” (Carter, 145). The use of the word “ burden” here suggests that women do what they are socially conditioned to do in order to attract men: they use cosmetics.

What is most instructive is the language Carter uses to describe both red eye shadow and red lip stick. She writes of doing up your eyes “ so that they look like self-inflicted wounds” and “ the evidence of the violence your

environment inflicts on you” (Carter, 145). This “ violence” is the exploitation, inequalities and limitations that are put on women in a patriarchal society. The wound is deeply symbolic too: Carter (145) writes that “ We are so used to the bright red mouth we now loner see it as the wound it mimics” - that is to say, the female vagina, itself “ the sign of their symbolic castration” (Carter, 145). That symbolic castration, Carter suggests, is why the world we live in is so exploitative of women.

So if I ever have a daughter, and she plays at being like mom by putting lipstick on, I won't lecture her about patriarchy and castration, but I will suggest she does some painting instead. And I will try to be a little more independent in the cosmetics I use, knowing that the images I see in the glossy magazines are male fantasies of what I should look like and not the real me.

References

Carter, Angela. “ The Wound in the Face” pages 141 - 146 in *Expletives Deleted*. 1993. Virago Classics: London. Print.