

2020

Specularizing myth: (de)constructing feminine identity in “The Bloody Chamber” and “Wolf-Alice” by Angela Carter

Ishana Aggarwal
Yale University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aggarwal, Ishana (2020) "Specularizing myth: (de)constructing feminine identity in “The Bloody Chamber” and “Wolf-Alice” by Angela Carter," *The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 27.
Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj/vol1/iss1/27>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact elischolar@yale.edu.

Specularizing myth: (de)constructing feminine identity in “The Bloody Chamber” and “Wolf-Alice” by Angela Carter

Ishana Aggarwal¹

¹*Yale University*

Abstract

Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” conflates sexuality and death in a feminist reworking of the Bluebeard story. This essay explores the conflation of feminine heterosexual desire and mortal danger through a Freudian lens to reveal how Carter undermines the Freudian gender binaries in order to construct an independent feminine identity that exists outside the binary. While the original Bluebeard story by Charles Perrault was fashioned as a cautionary tale to warn women against the dangers of their inherent curiosity, Carter subverts this meaning to create a protagonist with a complicated sense of morality and a nuanced understanding of her place in a marriage as both subject and object. A close analysis of Carter’s diction and imagery in the story contains important insights into how Carter deconstructs the Freudian sexual and death drives, which further deconstructs the gendered binaries of active versus passive and subject versus object.

INTRODUCTION

The *Bloody Chamber* is Angela Carter’s widely celebrated 1979 collection of short stories, which frequently subverts the traditional patriarchal ideologies embedded in myth and folklore in order to yield a more nuanced depiction of the false realities that constrain women. The titular story, “The Bloody Chamber,” intertwines the themes of sexuality and death in a feminist retelling of the Bluebeard tale to explore Carter’s feminist political paradigm in a philosophically engaged manner. A Freudian analysis of the story reveals how Carter conflates the two drives—Eros and Thanatos—in all instances of sexual desire and mortal danger. As Sigmund Freud marks a clear distinction between the two drives and their workings, Carter fuses them together to yield an important insight into heterosexual feminine desire and how that desire can provide an opportunity to a woman to reclaim her agency. While the decision of the protagonist to disobey her husband and enter the

bloody chamber appears self-destructive at first glance, it can be argued that this decision arises out of a complex interaction between her Eros and Thanatos and eventually ends up saving her. Carter’s conflation of the two Freudian drives in relation to feminine sexuality additionally performs the task of warning against the dangers of reducing and categorizing sexuality into the Freudian binaries of active versus passive, positive versus negative, subject versus object—arguing, instead, that the feminine identity can exist in a liminal place between these binaries.

In order to understand the psychoanalytic lens through which this essay examines Carter’s work, it is important to review Freud’s ideas about Eros and Thanatos. Thanatos or the death drive, according to Freud, is an individual subject’s unconscious instinct that guides the subject towards her own death; it is the subject’s inherent tendency to return to the inorganic state. Its counterpart, Eros, consists of the ego and sexual drives that aim to “combine organic substances into ever

larger unities.” Within the Eros, the ego drive represents a narcissistic unity with oneself while the sexual drive, whose ultimate aim is procreation, represents a unity with another subject. As such, the two drives do not always reach their final aims: thanatic impulses do not always result in death, and erotic ones do not result in sexual union with every external subject toward whom they are directed. Necessarily, the two drives need to be displaced, and this displacement occurs whenever the direct pathway towards attaining the aim of a drive is blocked and pent-up tensions need to be released in another manner. However, this explanation is not universal. Freud’s theories about the displacement of the aggressive death instincts are highly gendered. While men can displace their aggressive tendencies onto other subjects (an outward displacement), the “socially imposed” suppression of the women’s aggressiveness “favors the development of powerful masochistic impulses” that eroticize destructive tendencies directed inwards. In other words, Freud believed that society’s conditioning of women to suppress their aggression forbids them to displace their aggression onto other subjects; they subsume the destructive instinct inwards which leads them to derive pleasure from their own objectification

While Freud draws a clear distinction between the two drives and even genders their displacement, “The Bloody Chamber” undoes these distinctions and categories. Angela Carter conflates the two drives and their displacements, especially when discussing the protagonist’s sexuality. The indecipherability of the protagonist’s erotic and thanatic actions

first begins with her decision to marry the Marquis. While marriage as the union of two individuals to ultimately produce an offspring is an inherently erotic situation, the protagonist says that she feels “a pang of loss” as she mourns her girlhood. Here, the themes of mourning and loss as refracted by the union of man and woman to include the death of her virginity and maidenhood represents a more thanatic dismantling of unities. She explains that marriage will take her away from her “girlhood” and away from the “white, enclosed quietude” of her

mother’s apartment. In this sense, her marriage represents the death of her self-conceived girlhood and the death of her status as a daughter: it is a social death. This death or sense of loss is further magnified by the fact that she is aware of the inherent inequality and the dangers associated with her marriage: she is marrying an older man who belongs to a higher socioeconomic class, and she also knows that his previous three wives died in unfortunate accidents. This information suggests that her willingness to marry the Marquis, knowing the various potential perils of that decision, constitutes a conflation of the erotic

sexual instinct and the self-destructive thanatic instinct.

Angela Carter furthers the conflation of Eros and Thanatos on a formal level as well since she uses elaborate diction and heavy imagery associated with death and morbidity whenever she describes the protagonist’s sexual experiences. Carter introduces this association early in the story, when the Marquis first looks at the protagonist as an erotic object. He sees her in the gilded mirrors of the opera-house wearing the choker of rubies with which the Marquis gifted her. Angela Carter

“While Freud draws a clear distinction between the two drives and even genders their displacement, “The Bloody Chamber” undoes these distinctions and categories. Angela Carter conflates the two drives and their displacements, especially when discussing the protagonist’s sexuality.”

assigns a visceral violence to the choker since it is described as giving the appearance of "an extraordinarily precious slit throat" because "the flashing crimson jewels" are "bright as arterial blood." Further, the choker is associated with images of the guillotine since it belonged to Marquis's grandmother who wore it during the French Revolution as an aristocratic symbol of defiance. The graphic visual connotations of the guillotine, the slit throat and the bright blood evoke a sense of death which is deeply visceral and provocatively violent. This viscosity is set parallel to the protagonist's awareness of her body as a sexual object when she sees in her body "a potentiality for corruption" for the first time. The protagonist's newly gained sexual consciousness of her body is tinged with the violence of the ruby choker since she sees in her reflection how that cruel necklace "became" her. Through Carter's employment of violent imagery and diction, the erotic experience of the protagonist first seeing her body as an object of the sexual drive is embedded in a vicious, visceral death. In a Freudian sense, she eroticizes her objectification by merging it with her aggressive, thanatic instinct.

Thanatos, once again, plays a crucial role in the protagonist's sexual experiences when she eventually marries the Marquis. The inequality of the power dynamic between the Marquis and the protagonist trickles down to the sexual relationship between them, at first. This unequal sexual power dynamic is introduced when the Marquis undresses her and she compares the scene to an erotic sketch by Félicien Rops in which a terrified unclothed maiden feels shame as an old lecher examines her. While the sketch serves to caricature the subject-object sexual relationship between the Marquis and the protagonist, Robin Ann Sheets establishes that it also provides "a cultural foundation" for the Marquis' sadism by suggesting a relationship between art and aggression. This theme is explored again when the Marquis catches the protagonist looking at his collection of pornographic artworks in the library. He addresses her using words such as "baby" and "little nun" repeatedly and

appears to relish in her embarrassment as he laughs at her. Infantilizing his sexual partner and enjoying her shame and discomfort solidifies the objectification of the protagonist by her husband. Thus, the protagonist recognizes her role as a sexual object instead of a sexual subject which leads to a sense of loss again as she mourns the death of her agency over her own body—a thanatic death of agency. This death is then made more visceral when her husband rapes her, and Carter describes the scene as "a dozen husbands impal[ing] a dozen brides." The multiplicity of the husbands and brides is a result of the multiple mirrors in the room that reflect the act and also allude to the scene when the Marquis looks at the protagonist wearing the ruby choker in the mirror at the opera. The Marquis makes her wear the ruby choker during the consummation, and this image furthers the viscosity and violence of the death and impalement felt by the protagonist while being consistent with the aesthetic sadomasochism of the Marquis. The multiple reflections in the mirror serve to divide the protagonist into twelve different selves and render her body as a mere image on a surface. The superfluity and objectification further contribute to the thanatic loss of agency that characterizes the protagonist's first erotic experience.

While Carter seems to indicate that Thanatos accompanies the protagonist's sexual and erotic experiences, she introduces the claim that the female thanatic instinct can be directed outwards instead of inwards. Carter's decision to depict an outwards displacement, inconsistent with the inwards displacement that Freud suggests, provides a retributive opportunity to the protagonist. This claim is corroborated by Carter's treatment of the lily flowers in the story. The lily has traditionally been a symbol of feminine purity and virginity—Nancy Chick compares the white lily to "virginal femininity." The Marquis subscribes to these traditional ideals as he fills his bedroom with white lilies to symbolize the purity of his bride when he consummates his marriage. However, this symbolism is inverted by the protagonist when she compares the Marquis

to the lily as they both share the same “ominous calm of a sentient vegetable” and evoke a “funereal” feeling. In this sense, conflating the virginal femininity of the flower with an ominous, funereal quality again reflects the conflation of Eros and Thanatos. However, in this situation, ascribing the role of the virginal maiden to the Marquis constitutes the protagonist’s imaginative reclamation of agency in the power dynamics of her relationship. By displacing her thanatic instinct outwards towards the Marquis, situating him in the role of the shy, virginal object, she regains her agency and subjectivity in the relationship.

This idea is revisited by the protagonist when she is lying in bed with her husband after the consummation and clings to him, thinking that her husband is “the only one” who could “comfort” her for suffering the pain which he has inflicted upon her. This thought implies that the protagonist can only find comfort through her husband—by reversing the power dynamic and assuming the position of authority. In this sense, she transforms the Marquis from the inflictor of pain or the subject to the object of comfort in the protagonist’s mind. As objectification necessarily requires loss of agency, one can conclude that the protagonist is directing her thanatic aggressive instinct outwards by objectifying the Marquis in her mind while simultaneously being objectified by him. Further, the day after the Marquis leaves her alone in his mansion, she again thinks about how she “longed” for him yet still felt “disgusted by him.” The protagonist returns to this combination of disgust and longing when she thinks about how the Marquis and the flowers share the same “toad-like, clammy hint of moisture.” The pristinity of the virginal lilies juxtaposed with the disgust of the slimy toad highlights the protagonist’s internal conflict: the conflict between her Eros for her husband who is her newly recognized sexual object and the displaced, aggressive Thanatos for her abuser who seeks to destroy her subjectivity. Carter, in these scenes, performs an important deconstruction of the protagonist’s roles as both subject and object by deconstructing

and declassifying Eros and Thanatos. Consequently, Carter asserts that the protagonist not only alternates between the two roles but also simultaneously exists as both of them, perhaps occupying a liminal space in which she is neither pure object nor pure subject.

Similarly, the protagonist’s decision to enter the forbidden room is driven by a complicated interaction between the two Freudian drives. While her decision to deliberately disobey her husband—a man who presumably has agency over her—and create danger for herself by putting herself in a risky situation is thanatic and self-destructive, it would be an oversimplification to think of it as purely self-destructive. The interpretations of the Bluebeard tale over time constitute an important resource in understanding this claim, since at its core, “The Bloody Chamber” is a reworking of the Bluebeard story. Charles Perrault, the originator of the Bluebeard story, fashioned it as a cautionary tale to warn women against their inherent curiosity by outlining the tale’s moralité in a coda to his text. His perception of feminine morality is consistent with Freud’s reading of feminine sexuality: the woman as a passive, submissive object who should not question the active authority of the man. However, Sheets argues that late twentieth century feminists interpreted the protagonist’s decision as a “heroic search for knowledge” by citing new adaptations by Sylvia Townsend Warner and Maurice Maeterlinck that subvert Perrault’s original moral. Such an interpretation of Carter’s story, however, is deeply reductive since it neglects Carter’s deconstruction of the Freudian binaries of masculine versus feminine set parallel to active versus passive. The protagonist’s decision to disobey her husband, in Carter’s version, is neither a moral transgression by a passive object nor a heroic act by an active subject. Instead, Carter’s deconstruction of the Eros-Thanatos binary is simultaneously a deconstruction of the protagonist’s potential identification as a subject or as an object, and so her decision reflects the same.

Since it is established that her thanatic instinct is now directed outwards at her husband instead of inwards, the protagonist's decision is not self-destructive but it is not productive or heroic either. Instead, it is a means for her to displace her Thanatos on her husband by willfully disobeying him and tilting the power dynamic in her favor. Yet, at the same time, she remains within the erotic organic unity of her marriage. The protagonist echoes these emotions as she wonders if the Marquis would be waiting for her in the chamber to see if she had, indeed, "obeyed" him, suggesting that she is driven to look at the chamber by a desire to overstep the boundaries that her husband has set for her, instead of sheer curiosity. Here, Carter conflates many of the binaries that she aims to deconstruct —the protagonist is a passive subject overstepping the boundaries set by her husband. Her decision cannot be purely active if it is dependent on provoking some sort of reaction from her husband; in some ways, she is acting out the role relegated to her by the Marquis in his sick fantasies since he will eventually be able to punish his disobedient wife. However, her decision still represents her disobedience, assuming an active role that she deliberately decides for herself instead of being overpowered by her feminine instincts of curiosity as depicted by Perrault. In this sense, Carter's protagonist is a heroine in her own sense —she is nuanced with a complicated morality because she is neither completely victimized by her objectification nor purely empowered by her actions. Carter's work legitimizes the identity of women who exist in these liminal places in society: women who are more than just literary victims in cautionary tales or heroic characters in feminist reinterpretations. Carter awards the woman an identity that exists outside of these binaries.

Carter's deconstruction builds on feminist theorist Luce Irigaray's seminal work *The Speculum of the Other Woman*, which critiques Freudian theory for being exclusive of femininity due to its phallogentrism. Irigaray argues that the working of the death drive, as posited by Freud, underscores the

limitations of the binary model. She claims that Freud's assertion that man directs his death drive outwards while woman directs it inwards is an extension of the positive-negative binary without which men would "entail the risk of mortal crisis." Further, she claims that Freud's theories are based on the principle of sameness —in order for man to find value in his ego, he needs woman to be his "mirror image." If he is the endowed man, she is the castrated man; if he is active, she is passive; if his death drive is directed outwards, hers is directed inwards. The problem with this conception of the feminine identity is that it only exists as an absence of the masculine identity. Within this framework of binaries, the masculine identity can exist independently but the feminine identity cannot. Thus, the protagonist's decision to direct her death instinct outwards while still acknowledging her own objectification by her husband is not only a radical deconstruction of the Freudian Ethos-Thanatos pairing but a radical deconstruction of the binary frameworks within which much of Western thought operates; Irigaray posits an independent feminine identity in the process of critiquing Freud that is neither strictly active nor strictly passive, neither strictly positive nor strictly negative. While Irigaray subverts the Western philosophical tradition's masculine discourse on subjectivity, Carter subverts the patriarchal order that permeates the fabric of myth and fairy tales, which shape society's construction of the gender binary. In a sense, just as Irigaray's work seeks to specularize the modes of Western thought in order to yield a more authentic and independent version of the female subject, *The Bloody Chamber* acts as a speculum for the modes of gendered thought in myth and folklore in order to reclaim the position of women as complicated subjects breaking free from the restraints of the binary in order to create their own independent identities.

ENDNOTES

Carter, Angela. "The Bloody Chamber." In *The Bloody Chamber*. New York: Penguin, 2015.

Chick, Nancy. "Marita Bonner's Revolutionary Purple Flowers: Challenging the Symbol of White Womanhood." *The Langston Hughes Review* 13 (1995): 21-32.

Freud, Sigmund. "Analysis Terminable and Interminable." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 18 (1937).

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*. New York: Norton, 1989.

Irigaray, Luce. *The Speculum of the Other Woman*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Sheets, Robin Ann. "Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber.'" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1 (1991): 633-657.

Strachey, James, ed. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74.

Tatar, Maria. *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.