

“In the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* Carter is excessively interested in violent instincts.”

How far do you agree with this?

Carter’s collection “*The Bloody Chamber*” perhaps restore what Coleridge described as ‘motiveless malignancy’ into fairytales. The collection is full of treachery, sexual violation and violence, evident from the visceral description of the mutilated bodies in the Marquis’ chamber to the knife wielding child in “*Wolf Alice*”. Although there is a strong interest in violence, it could be argued that Carter is not specifically interested in violence or violent instincts, but in violence as a means of power instead.

Carter links the ‘funeral lilies’ to sex by describing them as a being ‘cobra headed’ and ‘tensely yielding to the touch as vellum’. There are clear sexual undertones made here as the word ‘headed’ does present the lilies as a phallic object, but there are also clear violent and predatory connotations associated with the word ‘cobra’. In the bedroom ‘there are more lilies than [she] has ever seen in her life’, which presents the young prey lured into the cave of a violent predator. The relationship between the Marquis and the heroine is immediately labelled as dangerous by Carter and solidified when the heroine states, that ‘there is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer’. The heroine sees herself as the victim in a violent and aggressive world and simply accepts her role.

Furthermore, the heroine is a victim of the Marquis’ violent carnal desires. The heroine reveals that the sexual encounter between the Marquis was a violent power struggle. The heroine describes their consummation as ‘a dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides’ the word impales has clear violent connotations and devalues what should be a passionate encounter. The violence is then accentuated when the heroine suggests that the intercourse was a ‘one sided struggle’. The power dynamics of the spousal relationship is then relayed using violent imagery as she finally reveals that the sexual encounter was so aggressive that it was as if he “had been fighting with [her].” The violent and visceral description of the chamber is also quite frightening. The chamber is described as being full of ‘instruments of mutilation’ the clear definitions strikes fear and horror in the hearts of the reader as they will be fully aware of the sole purpose of those instruments. Carter continues to revel in the bloody scene as she allows her heroine to uncover the dead corpses.

Some critics may argue that to suggest that Carter is solely interested in violent instincts would devalue her work. Perhaps, Carter uses the gothic genre to explore what it is to be woman. “*The Bloody Chamber*” stories as, E.C. Rose argues is “a critique of the idea of adult womanhood sanctioned by patriarchy”. Thus the violence used in her tales are symbol of power and rebellion against the traditional patriarchal force in society that the second wave of feminism stood against. Carter reflects this in “*The Bloody Chamber*”, as it is the mother who saves her daughter by putting ‘a single irreproachable bullet through [her] husband’s head’. The gender inversion at the end of the tale breaks away from the conventional fairy tale ending as Carter may be exposing the ideology that patriarchy has instilled in our society. By allowing the mother to murder the Marquis with the ‘father’s gun’, a phallic symbol of power, Carter reveals that in order for women to change they must empower themselves.

The idea of violence being used as a tool of empowerment is dealt with in the “Snow Child” the violence that the countess evokes on the young child may also be interpreted a power between women. The countess passes the girl the rose and the girls ‘bleeds, screams, falls’. The description of the girl’s demise both physically violent as she bleed but the fall which could represent a physical fall could also be mental fall or breakdown. Perhaps, this explains the rather ambiguous end, in revealing the pain ‘it bites’ she perhaps refuses to accept the pains of subordination.

In conclusion, Carter is interested in violent instincts but as tool of power women can use in order to empower themselves in the male domain. The transgressive violence in the collection is there to prove that women must find the power within themselves to change and become ‘nobody’s meat’.

AQALITB