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This White Rose

**This White Rose:
Virginity in *The Bloody Chamber***

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Angela Carter's book, *The Bloody Chamber* is one of the most interesting takes on fairy tales that there is. Upon first hearing about this book, some people may think that she has re-written some fairy tales or that she has made more "adult" versions of them. However, Carter insists that this is not the case. "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" (Simpson 1). Carter was always fond of a Gothic mode of story telling and in this collection, she has combined that mode with the beloved fairy tales of yore which makes for an entirely new genre that is appealing to much broader audiences than her previous works. One of the most groundbreaking and interesting things about Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* is that it tells of the sexual awakening of heterosexual female characters (with the exception of a few) and is told from those heterosexual females' points of view. There are some people who were angry for Carter not, "busting more taboos than she did ("She could never imagine Cinderella in bed with the Fairy God-mother," wrote Patricia Duncker, for example)" (Simpson 1). But Carter's work is powerful enough and caused enough shock and uproar at the time of its publication that it silences those critiques of it. One of the most interesting things about this book is the portrayal it has of young women, especially virgins. Carter gave the virgins in her stories characteristics that other people never had and made them seem much deeper than just the "innocent and sweet" virgins that we think of today. There are three virgins in particular that are important to focus on; the young bride in "The Bloody Chamber,"

the young boy from "The Lady of the House of Love" and the Red-Riding hood character in, "The Company of Wolves." These three have qualities that make them their own characters and much less static than we usually see in fairy tales. Carter's depiction of virgins and her tendency to foil them with non-virginal characters also says a lot about the society of America in the 1970's and even our society today and how much we value virginity and what we think of virgins ourselves.

Looking at the setting Carter places her fairy tales in we see a lot of hints about what she wants us to think of these characters. Carter used the Indo-European tradition for telling her stories, which meant using grand descriptions of the landscape and the places her characters were going and lived. She differed from this style in one, major way; instead of these places being entirely made up and being broadly described as "in a land far, far away," Carter set some of the stories in real places like, 19th Century France in "The Bloody Chamber" and 19th century London for "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon." Some of the stories still had ambiguous settings, but going back and forth made them more realistic to us. Part of the reason that fairy tales are so hard to believe and are mainly used to entertain children is because they are so simple and sometimes, the places they occur in are so far beyond what we think a place could look like that we can't even begin to fathom such a place existing. When Carter rewrites these stories and chooses some real-life locations to set them in, she is making these fairy tales more believable, more real and easier for adults to believe and want to read. She uses that same technique when describing her virgin characters. Our first virgin is the young bride of the story entitled, "The Bloody Chamber." We don't get a lot of description of her looks because she herself is the narrator of the story, but we see a lot of her using her brain and mental facilities to logic things out instead of being led around by her heart and her feelings, which is different for a virginal fairy tale character. The first time we see this is when she first researches her new husband's past wives and finds out exactly how they died. In most versions of Bluebeard, the new bride doesn't give a second thought to those former wives and is instead so ecstatic to serve her

new husband that she jumps head first into this disaster. This young girl looks at the former wives and reads up on their deaths, assuring the audience and herself that they died of accidental and natural causes and that she has nothing to fear of this man. One of the colors that Carter uses in this story a lot is the color red; the bride's wedding present from her husband is "A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinary precious slit throat (Carter 11)." This present startled me (and the young bride) for several reasons; it seemed like it was foreshadowing for how this girl was going to die, it seemed like he had given this necklace to one of his wives before and when she put it on, it made the Bluebeard character seem to think that he now owned his young bride and could do with her as he wished. The bride finds it particularly disturbing because of its similarity to the red ribbon tied around the neck of people who had narrowly missed having their head chopped off by a guillotine in the French revolution.

The rubies are a clear representation of blood and the darkness of an undesirable death. Generally, a piece of jewelry, especially of this size, would immediately be seen as a prized possession, Yet, Carter further alters the traditional symbolic view of jewelry, when she writes of the narrator preparing for her death by putting on the ruby choker (Leuner). The bride's view on this choker is one of her first uses of her brain and makes her seem like so much more than just a young, vapid, virgin to us. There is a big difference in this story of how the husband treats his bride shortly after he de-flowers her. He still thinks that he can treat her like a child who knows nothing of the world even after he has married her and taken her to bed, but the girl quickly shows that she is a woman now and will not be ignored. For this, Carter had no real guidelines to follow; we rarely see what happens to a princess after she and her prince have their wedding night and the girls Bluebeard captures usually do not make it past their first couple of nights in his palace before they discover his dismembered wives. Carter's virgin character here is no longer a virgin and is now a fully-grown woman who is capable of her own thoughts. When her husband announces that he will be leaving her for a business trip, she protests and insists upon him staying and sharing

a meal with her. This shows how now that she is a woman, she is no longer scared of showing her intelligence and other people are more inclined to listen to her now. Her husband respects her more (partially because she wasn't lying about her virgin status as the sheets proved) and consents to her wishes. When the bride is left to her own devices in the house, she quickly grows bored with the lavish gifts her husband has given her and decides to explore, which leads her to his murderous secret and her discovery of what a monster he really is. It's very interesting that Carter saves the discovery of the chamber for after the girl loses her virginity; it's almost like he took her innocence in one manner and then inadvertently took it in another. It felt like he didn't plan on killing her like he had his previous wives because of her virginity (maybe the other wives lied to him and that was the cause of his murderous rage?) he seemed like he was genuinely fond of her and wanted to keep her around because he was so proud that he had finally bedded a virgin and was going to keep on bedding her. He didn't see a need to murder her until she discovered his secret, then she was no longer his inferior wife, she had the high ground and he had to eliminate her. Luckily, the phone call with her mother saved her life and the young bride was able to live off of his riches for the rest of her life.

One of the most interesting and infuriating double standards that exists in our society today is the importance that is placed on a woman's virginity over a man's virginity. As Emily Maguire said in her recent article:

Boys are rarely told that their virginity is a gift, or indeed that their sexuality is about "giving" something to another person – lightly or not. Boys "get laid", "get lucky", "get some". They "take a girl's virginity", "take advantage"; if they're thoughtful, they "take their time". Boys are not taught to think of themselves or their virginity as something to be offered up, unwrapped and enjoyed.

Recently, an Australian filmmaker named Justin Sisely approached a young man and young woman and asked them to auction off their virginity for the sake of a documentary he's working on.

The young woman, a Brazilian model named Catarina Migliorini received \$780,000 for hers and the young man, Alex Stepanov received a mere \$3,000 for his. Not only is this proving just how alive and well this double standard is, the fact that “Migliorini will also undergo an examination to prove she is as pure as the driven snow -- before the actual driving commences (Moye).” is infuriating. People aren’t trusting Migliorini’s word that she is a virgin and further more, are calling her a prostitute while the male auctioning off his virginity is getting no such accusations or press attention. This is a double standard that Carter does not buy into with her book *The Bloody Chamber*; when she does have a character who is a male virgin, as she does in the story, “The Lady of the House of Love” he is exactly the same as the previous female virgin characters we’ve seen in the book. “He has the special quality of virginity, most and least ambiguous of states: ignorance, yet at the same time, power in potential, and, furthermore, unknowingness, which is not the same as ignorance (Carter 97).” This description of the male virgin very similar to other descriptions we receive of other female virgin characters in the book. They’re not entirely stupid, but they have a sense of ignorance about them because they know so little of the world.

It’s very interesting that in this story, the roles of virgin and non-virgin are completely reversed with the evil queen character being a vampiric Countess who lures boys into her castle to devour them so that she can survive. Carter does not make the young man seem like more of a treasure because he is a virgin, nor does she make him seem like his virginity is because of being a social pariah; it’s just how he is and he is no better and no worse than Carter’s female virgins. The young man in this story represents the humanity to the Countess and, “humanity, or more particularly, the human body, is perceived as offering the potential for love, something that cannot be realized within the vampiric form (Miller).” His pure, virginal form is what sets the countess free from her miserable existence and makes her human again, but it is also what kills her. In the previously mentioned story, “The Bloody Chamber” the curiosity of the virgin character is what brings her to discover the hidden chamber and is ultimately the downfall of

the Bluebeard character. In this story, the young man’s curiosity leads him to follow the Countess’s keeper up to her castle but it is his kindness (kissing her finger when she pricks it on the glass) and her desire to be human that is her downfall. The Countess in this story can be compared to the Bluebeard character in the first story; both are older characters who live in extravagant palaces and lure young seemingly innocent and naïve people there to dispose of them, yet, the Bluebeard characters seems to delight in doing it, even proudly displaying his corpse collection and all of the townspeople know that something strange is going on at his castle, but they all turn a blind eye (and so do his servants) to it, while the Countess hates herself for what she must do and the entire village where her castle is has suffered basically died because of her. The two are direct foils of each other and very interesting when it’s examined closely. It’s almost as if Carter is saying that men when they are older are happy in finding young women to have sex with and are even very proud of it and society doesn’t even think twice about it, but when a woman does the same thing, she is hated and ridiculed. It’s also interesting how after the young man’s encounter with the countess, he goes on his way and lives his life as if nothing ever happened and isn’t really changed by the experience (he also maintains his virginity) whereas the young bride, after defeating Bluebeard, inherits his riches and becomes so much better off because of all the suffering she endured. Carter seems to be suggesting that women can take abuse and torment much better than men can and that women will be better people for it in the end.

The last set of stories in Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* is a trilogy of stories sometimes referred to as “The Wolf Trilogy.” Carter had many variations on the story of Little Red Riding Hood and by having so many versions; she kept the tradition of one story, many ways to tell it alive. As Donald Haase says in his book, *The Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*;

Carter’s cluster of retellings shows transformation between variants, and it enacts transformation between the oral folklore of yore and contemporary concerns...even the briefest examination of the cluster of short stories.... brings

out thematic transformations concerning initiation, werewolf metamorphosis and blood symbolism. (984)

That is to say, there are recurring themes in these stories that tie all of them together and the most prominent one is the character of the virgin. Carter's Red Riding Hood character takes on a much different role in these stories than she does in other tellings of "Little Red Riding Hood" and one this essay will focus on is the virgin character in "The Company of Wolves." This virginal character shows the most female faculty and intelligence of any of the virgins we've encountered so far. The fact that "She has her knife and is afraid of nothing" (Carter 114), is a very interesting phallic symbol for this character and suggests that whatever father figure there is in her life is unable to protect her from the dangers of the forest, so she relies on this knife (possibly given to her by her father) to protect her and long ago learned to rely only on herself. The description of her virginity is a direct contrast to the description of the Countess's non-virginal status in "The Lady of the House of Love." The virgin's description reads: "she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver" (Carter 114). The Countess's description reads: "And she is herself a cave of echoes, she is a system of repetitions, she is a closed circuit" (Carter 93). These descriptions suggest that there is something a virgin has (a hymen as indicated by the word, "membrane") that a non-virgin doesn't and this makes a huge difference in how the character is perceived; either young and beautiful or old and haggish.

Further along in the story, the Red Riding Hood character sets out to her Grandmother's house and meets a boy in the woods. He challenges her to see who can get to her Grandmother's house first and if he wins she will give him a kiss and Red, "wanted to dawdle on her way to make sure the handsome gentleman would win his wager" (Carter 115). This is the first time we've seen a virginal character take charge of some facet of her sexuality and actually come close to admitting that she wants to kiss the young man she met in the woods. Of course, the reader finds out that the young man is really a werewolf and only out for the flesh and

blood of Red and her Grandmother and upon arriving at the Grandmother's house, he eats her up and then waits, dressed as the Grandmother, for Red to come to the house. When she gets there, the girl almost instantly sees that it is not her Grandmother, another example of female faculty not usually seen by the Red Riding Hood character, and instead of running screaming and giving the wolf what he wants (a chase he'll surely win and a nice meal afterwards) she takes charge of her situation. She slowly begins to undress herself, to submit to the wolf sexually and to attempt to bring back the wolf's humanity by awakening his sexual desire. "The girl burst out laugh; she knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the firey wake of her own discarded clothing" (Carter 118). By burning his clothing, as we learned earlier in the story, she makes the man forever a wolf and never able to change back to human form; why would she do this? Some choose to interpret this as the girl further controlling the situation and punishing the wolf for what he's done to her Grandmother. There are also a couple of interpretations of the girl submitting to the wolf sexually; the first is that of the girl realizing her own sexual side and in undressing and giving in to the desires of the wolf (and even herself as she discovered earlier when she admitted to her desire for his kiss) she herself becomes a whole, sexual being. Another way to interpret this scene is that the girl saw no other way out and gave in to the wolf's desires rather than be eaten. Once she had him at a vulnerable moment (and herself too, because she was naked at this point) she took his clothes and burned them, forever making him a wolf, punishing him. But if the second interpretation is true, then why did she stay with him instead of using the knife to kill him? The sexual awakening of the girl herself is the more believable interpretation and fits in better with the collection of stories and this paper as a whole.

In this character of Little Red Riding Hood, we get an entirely new interpretation and a young woman who is in control of her destiny and who shows more faculty than any virgin we've seen in *The Bloody Chamber*. All of the stories discussed in this paper show the different interpretations Carter used for her virginal

characters in this book. After reading this book and doing the research for this paper, one has to wonder, has the way society views virgins changed or are the virgins themselves changing and becoming smarter?

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