A Free Woman in an Unfree Society


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Abstract

With the use of gender criticism, this essay analyses the myths about women and how they and men use their sexuality to gain power in Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves” and “The Bloody Chamber”.

Accordingly, this essay incorporates the theoretical frameworks of Simone de Beauvoir’s “Must We Burn Sade” and The Second Sex as well as Angela Carter’s The Sadeian Woman. The primary myths that are included in this essay are the “good girl” and the “bad woman” myths which are introduced by de Beauvoir. By understanding the role of these myths and consequently how they affect both men and women’s perceptions of themselves and one another, this essay provides insight on Angela Carter’s complex characters. The essay concludes that the characters are associated with contrasting, and occasionally combined, myths which in turn affect how they gain power.

Key words

Sexuality, power, myths, sadism, gender criticism, literature
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1 Introduction

Angela Carter is known for her novels that embrace magical realism with a feminist approach. She incorporates the myths of gender, which prominently include the “good girl” and the “bad woman”, with a feminist perspective that gives characters invigorating and unexpected attributes. Charles Perrault’s 17th-century fairy tales “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Blue Beard” depict an imaginary world where men possess power over the female characters. Interestingly, in Angela Carter’s modern renditions of Perrault’s stories, “The Company of Wolves” (1979) and “The Bloody Chamber” (1979) give alternate endings to these classic fairy tales due to Carter breaking traditional gender myths. The power dynamic between the two sexes is charged by their mutual ability to use their sexuality. Ergo, this paper will aim to analyze how Angela Carter juxtaposes the myths about men and women’s sexualities and how their sexualities can be utilized to gain power in “The Company of Wolves” and “The Bloody Chamber”.

While Carter’s stories are ambiguous, she indisputably does give female characters attributes that are not conventional according to the stereotypical “good girl” and “bad woman” myths. By allowing her female characters to use seduction, to engage in sexual behaviour shamelessly, and thus allowing them to completely break from expectations set upon them by patriarchal standards, Carter does succeed to break gender myths that are placed upon to women. Thus, gender criticism is the chosen theoretical background used in this essay to analyze Carter’s stories.

Peter Barry suggests in his book Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory that gender criticism is the revolt against gender inequalities in society that was sparked due to the unjust depictions of women in literature (123). Gender inequalities are noticeable throughout Carter’s stories; however, she incorporates them purposefully in order
to show understanding of society’s perceptions of gender. Nonetheless, Carter’s progressive interpretations of gender are crucial, as they confront discriminatory stereotypes that persist in today’s society. Simone de Beauvoir’s classic study on feminist theory, *The Second Sex*, challenges gender inequality by bringing to light women’s history and thus providing awareness about their discrimination. She also includes a relevant analysis of the myths regarding women in history and literature. It is important to identify which characteristics are associated with men and women while studying the different characters. The characters in Carter’s stories challenge the stereotypical behavioural patterns for personal gain in their effort to gain power. Thus, this essay must explain the historical and cultural background regarding the sexes and power in order to analyze how it is developed through Carter’s stories. Sexuality is portrayed in Carter’s stories in various forms including sexual suggestive language between male and female characters, the sexualized depiction of the characters’ appearances and dominant sexual acts.

Previous research acknowledges myths regarding sexuality and power; however, they do not necessarily directly apply de Beauvoir’s particular myths to specific characters and analyze how it affects their individual power dynamic. For example, Sarah M. Henstra discusses in her study “The Pressure of New Wine: Performative Reading in Angela Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman*” how Carter utilizes de Sade’s pornographic mythology in Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman* and how it has effected Carter’s writing (97). Other research has critiqued whether Carter’s stories are feminist or not. For example, Robin Ann Sheets’ study “Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter’s ‘The Bloody Chamber’” analyses “the relevant issues in the feminist pornography debates” (634). While these texts, among the others used in this essay, have helped to understand and develop the theoretical framework, none have applied these theories and ideas to specific characters in “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Company of Wolves”. Whereas, this study will use concrete examples from these
short stories and apply the myths to specific characters in order to analyse their use of sexuality as a means of achieving power. This will be executed with the use of gender criticism which will primarily be based on the works of de Beauvoir and Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman*. The theoretical framework will focus on the social construct of gender and subsequently the myths regarding gender. A clear analysis between both sexes is needed to identify and contrast how power is distributed in the story through different forms of sexuality.

Besides the theoretical section of the essay, the analysis will be divided into two main sections. The first section will focus on “The Bloody Chamber”. The second section will focus on “The Company of Wolves”. Both these sections will include an analysis and concrete examples of how both sexes use their sexuality as a means of achieving power. There will be a comparison between how men assert their power by using sexuality, and how women overcome it. The conclusion will sum up the findings in the analysis. The theoretical sources will apply to both sections of the analysis.

Finally, the motive in studying the dynamics of power with the focus on sexuality is driven by the inequality still noticeable in today’s society. In terms of focusing on women, it is still taboo for them to be comfortable with their sexuality and to be assertive in vulnerable situations. “The Company of Wolves” depicts a woman who gains power in an insecure situation by using her sexuality. In “The Bloody Chamber”, we see a man who uses his sexuality to imprison women in order to empower himself, which is also still evident in our society especially now with the emergence of the Me Too movement.
2 Theoretical Section

2.1 Gender Criticism

But the relationship between feminism and sex is complex. Because sexuality is a nexus of relationships between genders, much of the oppression of women is borne by, mediated through, and constituted within, sexuality (Rubin, Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality, 165).

In order to analyze how men and women obtain power by using their sexuality in Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Company of Wolves”, it is relevant to utilize gender criticism as a theoretical tool. Before becoming gender criticism, this was labelled feminist criticism as it focused on the inequalities based from representations of women. According to Barry, it was the 1960s ‘women’s movement’ that began a revolt against old and traditional thoughts concerning feminism (123). The movement was prompted by unjust images of women in literature (Barry 123). Feminists deemed these projections of women as important due to the influence they have on society. Barry explains, “[l]iterature provided role models for women and men and what was acceptable versions of the ‘feminine’ and their goals and aspirations” (124). Traditional stereotypes represented in older literature comprise images where women do not work, and their sole purpose is to find a fit love interest and to marry. The woman represented lacked any responsibility for her successful future. Her success was based upon her marriage partner’s social position and he would determine her “happiness and fulfilment in life, or her lack of these” (Barry 124). Interestingly, Carter’s The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories was published in the late 1970s which is shortly after the 1960s women’s feminist movement. According to Barry,
during the 1970s, feminists aimed their attention at “the mechanisms of the patriarchy” which Barry explains as “the cultural mind-set in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality” (124). Feminist theory had breakthroughs during the 1980s where it began to focus on new aspects. Feminist theory began to align itself with different theories including psychoanalysis and Marxism. In addition, it began to shed more light on the lost stories of women compared to centring on male perspectives regarding women. Lastly, Barry concludes that more focus was put on “rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence” (124). Since the 1980s, a more modern take on feminist criticism acknowledges the social entrapment and unrealistic expectations of men which is how the theory has become to be known as gender criticism. Both sexes are expected to act in a specific way and these representations often come forth in literature. Carter’s short stories undoubtedly consider stereotypical gender characteristics. She transforms these traditional characters and their attributes to develop more transgressive characters which ultimately provide an unexpected conclusion to her stories. In order to analyze both male and female characters in Carter’s works, it is important to understand the history on how genders have been perceived and represented. By doing so, an understanding of the patriarchal society that is evident in her stories can be better comprehended.

In her book *What is a Woman?*, Toril Moi presents Simone de Beauvoir’s theory on gender. De Beauvoir claims that the female body is a “situation” and hence based on social construct (Moi 67). This is understood as a contrast to the belief of biological determinism. One’s attributes are not determined by their biology and their genes, but rather by their environment. To make clear, Moi writes “the body encompasses both the objective and subjective aspects of experience” (68). A human’s biology does not have any value without society’s judgments and expectations. The patriarchal society cannot be understood purely on
biological features. Therefore, the oppression and liberation of women cannot either be assumed by biology. De Beauvoir argues that it is not the biology that creates the woman, but rather it is society and culture that determines whether one is a woman, feminine or not. In addition to this, de Beauvoir claims that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (The Second Sex 281). The title of a woman comes along with society’s construction of what being a woman entails. The female sex does not have the instinct of becoming a woman and the passivity and oppression that comes along with it. Rather, this is due to the influence of others in our civilization (282).

As Gayle Rubin states in her study “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality”, “[c]ontemporary conflicts over sexual values and erotic conduct have much in common with the religious disputes of earlier centuries” (143). In Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, de Beauvoir introduces the myths of women that come from religious perspectives. To clarify, she explains how the myths of the beginning of man and woman, from a religious standpoint, reflect today’s perspectives of men and women (149).

From the start, women were viewed as a complement to the man (149). Adam was created as the first man and the first woman, Eve, was created by parts from him. Thus, she was not created as an individual being as Adam was. Her purpose was to rescue Adam from loneliness, and she was born being naturally submissive (149). Furthermore, it is stated that a man hopes to fulfil himself by possessing the submissive woman and achieves his own freedom by dominating another free being (149). According to Beauvoir, a woman’s role is to contrast the man and her identity is in direct relation to the man:

History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely
According to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, when a man seeks power he automatically turns to the Other, most often women, in order to assert himself (147). However, if a woman is to deny him then he will become someone other than himself in order to affirm his power. This becomes an internal struggle for men (147). The man will begin to shape the Other into the person they want them to be. Either the woman will completely deny this and become an obstacle, or she will conform to be the person men desire. If a woman is to reject the man’s attempts to overpower them, men will attempt to take control by “consuming her - that is, through destroying her” (147).

2.2 The Myths of Women

In concrete reality, women manifest themselves in many different ways; but each of the myths built around the woman tries to summarize her as a whole; each is supposed to be unique; the consequence of this is a multiplicity of incompatible myths, and men are perplexed… (*The Second Sex*, 268)

According to de Beauvoir, there are two distinct myths that women are categorized as. The patriarchal society often judges women as either “the angelic girl” or “[the] bad wom[a]n” (268). There is rarely any acceptance for a woman who does not conform to one of these categories. If a woman were to step outside one of these boxes, she would leave the man who desires her to become perplexed. The described “bad woman” is one who would use her sexuality to lure the family man (268). A woman who would dare to seduce a man, especially if that would mean committing adultery, would be viewed as a sinful being. These women use their sexuality not only to lure men but to gain personal gratification. Her motives
for luring a man are connected with her need for security (268). The opposite of the sinful woman would be the angelic woman, or “the good woman”. She is often perceived as a “guardian angel” (268) because she provides both protection for her children and a sense of sanctity for her patriarch. The “good woman” is innocent, angelic and often pictured as a virgin (268). Within these two classifications, women are further pigeonholed into an additional coinciding category. There is always the possibility that the saintly woman has an evil side to her. For example, the angelic woman could very well be perverse known as “the perverse virgin”, and the holy mother could also be the cruel stepmother (268).

The compartmentalization of women causes them to become puzzled over their own identities as they adopt the myth given to them and do not have the opportunity to evolve into anything other than those myths without jeopardizing their own security (272). The myth adopted by women is rooted in altruism: “to identify woman with altruism is to guarantee to man absolute rights in her devotion, it is to impose on women a categorical imperative” (269). Hence, altruistic women show their devotion to men by adhering to their given myth. Thus, the woman is always devoted to the man and to be beneficial to his desires (269). The “good woman” would be beneficial to the man as she is usually vulnerable and devoted which are traits often associated with a young girl or mother. The “bad woman” is more likely to be useful for satisfying men’s sexual desires (268).

As previously mentioned, women are seen as a complement to the man (149). She was created to fill the void of the man’s loneliness, according to religious narratives. Therefore, a woman can be either motherly and protective and create security for the man or she can suppress his loneliness with the use of sex, even if that were to be considered sinful. Considering both myths about women, the “bad woman” is arguably the most devoted to the man due to their obligation of being submissive. There are men who dream of an escape from the responsibilities they are expected to uphold. By using their power and sexuality they can
find an escape through sex. According to de Beauvoir, due to the marginalization of women, they can be given the burden of male revolt (205).

A notable man who has taken submission to an extreme is the Marquis de Sade. This man wrote many works that included sexual fantasies combining submissive women with acts of violence. Thus, the term sadism originates from Marquis de Sade’s name. Sadomasochism is associated with there being both a slave and a master. Essentially, sadism is based upon power. To make clear, a powerful person seizing control from a powerless person. Hence, the Marquis de Sade uses his position of power and combines it with sexuality to overpower the submissive woman, who ultimately has no control.

Simone de Beauvoir explains in “Must We Burn Sade”, that it was with only prostitutes that de Sade could release his sexual desires (8). Interestingly, he could not do so with his wife who would fit the myth of the “angelic woman”. It is through the myth of the “bad woman” that he has found it acceptable to achieve power by using his sexuality. This is likely due to “bad women” being the most submissive women of all. De Sade is described as frequenting brothels suggesting that these “bad women” are prostitutes. Prostitution is a job that exists to purely satisfy the needs of men and these “bad women” could not be in a more objectified or suppressed position.

As previously mentioned, men also feel oppression from society. With this in mind, de Beauvoir writes that de Sade “talked so much about his strength of soul, it was not because he really possessed it, but because he longed for it” (9). Hence, when a man feels that he has no power over anything, he constructs a façade. He uses this façade on the most powerless people in society in order to accomplish the ultimate goal which is to achieve power. The struggle for power is evident in both “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Company of Wolves”. However, Carter does not limit the ability of achieving power by using sexuality to only men.
2.3 The Marquis de Sade & The Sadeian Woman

Carter has been recognized for pushing the envelope in her essays as her perspective on complex subjects such as sexuality, feminism and pornography has resulted in much criticism. Hera Cook discusses in her study “Angela Carter's ‘The Sadeian Woman’ and Female Desire in England 1960–1975” that it was rare for women to talk about sexuality during her time due to it being a male dominated subject (939). Angela Carter’s non-fictional text *The Sadeian Woman* explores the original works of the Marquis de Sade and adds a feminist perspective. Cook explains that de Sade’s works has “enabled Carter to produce emotional intensity while positioning herself outside the dynamic of victim and oppressor” (950). She provides an insight to the connection of his works with gender stereotypes and myths.

Carter starts off her long essay with a general overview of pornography, stating that it “involves an abstraction of human intercourse in which the self is reduced to its formal elements” (*The Sadeian Woman* 4). She depicts it as a “universal pictorial language of lust – or, rather, a language we accept as universal because, since it has always been so, we conclude that it must always remain so” (4). She uses the symbolism of the biological anatomy of the male and female to depict the myth about pornography. Carter compares the erect penis to the alertness and assertiveness of men as “it points upwards”, “the male is positive” (4). However, the female is open, “like a mouth”, and Carter furtherly states that “between the legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing” (4). With that said, Carter means that while the woman’s vagina is a sign for nothing and the male’s penis is a sign for affirmation, the woman “only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning” (4). Carter’s comparison of the vagina and mouth continues as she states: “my vagina might indeed be patronisingly regarded as a speaking mouth, but never one that issues the voice of reason” (5). She connects this with the patriarchal fantasy. According to Carter,
if women allow men to see them as incoherent and just as a fantasy, then they have
succumbed to the male patriarchy and are therefore, submissive (5).

Carter acknowledges that the representations of women have been divided into myths.
If women believe these myths, then they obscure the authentic reality. Carter explains that
myths “deal[] in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances” (5). Carter
continues to explore these myths and subsequently connects them to pornography.
Pornography is constructed of gender myths and realistic versions of men and women are
non-existent. The pornography is not an accurate representation of men and women but a
fantasy.

Carter explains that when a man meets a woman, the most important factor in their
copulation is their gender (7). Both sexes are automatically placed into a category from the
moment they meet. The meeting itself is usually predetermined from a fantasy as a woman
rarely approaches a man but the other way around (7). This is evident in “The Bloody
Chamber” and “The Company of Wolves” as it is the man in both stories that approach the
woman first. Carter continues, “she is most immediately and dramatically a woman when she
lies beneath a man, and her submission is the apex of his malehood” (7).

Carter writes, “Flesh comes to us out of history; the repression and taboo that governs
our experience of flesh” (11). Hence, the myth of the female body has been shaped and
altered by historical influences. Carter continues to explain how sex is determined by the
history of social structure. Many believe that sex is natural and inevitable, but Carter argues
that perhaps, it is not. There is an option to sex and reproduction, one can choose to abstain
(12). Women themselves also view fertility differently depending on their social status. She
compares this with two opposites – the rich woman and the poor woman (12). A rich woman
can afford healthcare and comfort while a poor woman cannot – therefore their views on sex,
fertility and childbirth vary. The importance of this is that sexuality cannot be compartmentalized, and that sexuality is in fact, not universal, but personal and individual.

The universality of sexuality embedded in society is also prevalent in pornography. According to *Oxford Reference*, the male gaze is a theory that objectifies women. It is rooted in patriarchal society as male spectators “oscillates between two forms of looking at the female image: voyeuristic looking involves a controlling gaze, fetishistic [*sic*] looking involves an obsessive focus on some erotic detail” (*Oxford Reference*). In literature, mirrors can serve as a symbol for the male gaze. Rosemary Jackson explains the symbol of mirrors in her book *Fantasy* as “…employed as a motif or device to introduce a double, or Doppelganger effect: the reflection in the glass is the subject’s other…” (45). The mirror can be used to observe oneself or another person which can be linked to the male gaze. This is evident in “The Bloody Chamber”.

Carter acknowledges that pornography is mainly produced by men for male viewers (*The Sadeian Woman* 15). Even the male characters endure the categorization regarding masculine stereotypes. Moreover, a consumer of pornography reflects the social dominance “…which affords him the opportunity to purchase the flesh of other people as if it were meat” (14). The production and consumption of pornography evidently “reinforces the false universals of sexual archetypes” (16). Carter explains that pornography has an expected outcome and it conforms to historical ideologies while simultaneously excluding the social context of the sexual activity, “the abstraction of the flesh involves the mystification of the flesh” (16). Hence, pornography is a reflection of historical gender myths. If one creates and consumes this myth, the myth will continue to live without room for altering. Once men and women can realize that sexuality and gender myths are reinforced by pornography, then one can “reassess his relation to his own sexuality” and not be a victim of sexual repression (17).
According to Carter, “[t]he moral pornographer” (*The Sadeian Woman* 19) would be one who “critiques current relations between sexes” and acknowledges the “acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual license for all genders” (19). Hence, the moral pornographer would be someone who breaks the boundaries regarding gender myths and focuses on the contemporary social contexts. It would be someone who focuses on pure pleasure compared to reinforcing stereotypes. The pornographer would need to “desex” the genders (20). With that said, Marquis de Sade would fit Carter’s representation of the moral pornographer as he does not connect sexuality with the myth of reproduction and fertility – but for purely pleasure. Sarah Henstra expands on Carter’s term “the moral pornographer” in her study. Henstra states that the term is an oxymoron that allows Carter to implicate irony in order to “recite both sides of the story at once” (113). This has allowed for Carter to exemplify de Sade as the moral pornographer.

When analysing de Sade, Carter explains that libertines maintain two separate lives. They are able to separate “society external to them” while maintaining their perversions in solitude (*The Sadeian Woman* 25). De Sade cites the axiom “I fuck therefore I am”. Carter’s interpretation concludes that this axiom reflects repression in society. She explains that “sexuality itself [is] a permanent negation” as it turns “all eroticism into violence” due to the repressive society (26). Carter clarifies this by explaining that de Sade connects political and physical oppression to tyranny, and this results in an active and passive sexuality (26).

Simone de Beauvoir’s “Must We Burn Sade” claims that this tyranny is what one refers to as sadistic (22). The men in de Sade’s stories exercise sexual perversions which enforce annihilation. However, it is the women in de Sade’s stories that are seen as even more cruel as once they get the rare opportunity to exercise power, they begin to use this power to seek retaliation over the submissiveness they were forced to endure in society (*The Sadeian Woman* 27). Carter bluntly concludes that “a free woman in an unfree society will be a
monster” (27). Due to women being oppressed for so long, when they get the opportunity, they can retaliate in the most extreme ways (27).

According to Henstra, this has resulted in critique by other feminists including Andrea Dworkin, who have concluded that The Sadeian Woman displays a “complete disregard for the actual suffering endured by Sade’s – and pornography’s – victims” (113). Carter chooses to focus more on how women had an outlet to retaliate that de Sade had openly introduced. While some of his women suffered, some of his women indeed inflicted the pain. Hence, Carter rationalizes de Sade’s work by saying “pornography [is] in the service of women, or, perhaps, allowed it to be invaded by an ideology not inimical to women” (The Sadeian Woman 37). Accordingly, Hera Cook summarizes the impact on de Sade’s works perfectly by stating that his novels Justine and Juliette has revealed social relations of power which gave readers alternative perspectives of feminine sexuality (952). Thus, his works have continued to shape femininity and feminism in Western society from the 1970s and continues on today (953).
3 Analysis

3.1 “The Bloody Chamber”

Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” is a feminist re-telling of Perrault’s “Blue Beard”. “The Bloody Chamber” is told in a retrospective narrative told through the eyes of the protagonist, a young girl who is in the midst of her sexual awakening who begins to feel imprisoned by her sadistic husband.

The opening paragraph depicts a girl who is in a “tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement” to be leaving her old life behind, “away from girlhood” as she is about to get married (“The Bloody Chamber” 7). The girl imagines her mother looking at the girl’s wedding photo, and then the girl reminisces the feelings she had when she was getting married: “…in the midst of my bridal triumph, I felt a pang of loss as if, when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife” (7). The girl remembers her mother questioning her daughter’s love for her soon-to-be husband as her mother had chosen to marry for love: “my mother had gladly, scandalously defiantly beggared herself for love” rather than due to economic reasons (7). The daughter does not answer with yes or no, but instead replies “I’m sure I want to marry him” (7). The avoidance of the question implies that the girl does not love him. The girl does not feel that love is important in this matter, but perhaps the financial security he is able to support her with. The girl mentions that she had lived in a “narrow bedroom”, the gold band and the mother’s dress being a gift that consisted of the finest silk she had worn in a while (7). The focus on materialistic things suggests the economic security that the man can provide. The girl’s reply disappoints her mother. The mother is depicted as a woman who is free from patriarchal oppression as she is “indomitable” (7). She is able to protect herself, as she “shot a man-
eating tiger with her own hand” while maintaining her maternal role and “nursed a village through a visitation of the plague” (7).

As the girl continues on her travel, she describes the satin nightdress she has slipped over her “pointed breasts” (8). Similarly to “The Company of Wolves”, Carter emphasizes the young girl’s sexuality by describing her looks. The budding breasts are used as a symbol here as well as “The Company of Wolves”. They symbolize puberty and sexual maturation. She still wears plaits in her hair, which symbolizes her innocence and emphasizes her young age. The girl begins to imagine her wedding night. She envisions that it will happen in “…that magic place, the fairy castle whose walls were made of foam…” (8). Her fantasy is an unrealistic illusion and shows the naivety that she experiences before losing her virginity. The girl acknowledges her naivety: “I was seventeen and knew nothing of the world…” (9). At this point in the story, the girl lives up to the innocent virgin myth. The girl proceeds to think, “To which, one day, I might bear an heir. Our destination, my destiny” (8). She believes that her purpose is to reproduce. It is something both her and the man take part of (“our destination”), but it is the girl’s fate, hence the use of “my destiny” rather than “our destiny”. This can be connected to the myth that society believes that women should have sex for reproductive purposes as mentioned in Carter’s The Sadeian Woman.

The girl emphasizes the man’s appearance. He is much older than the girl, old enough to have lived a whole life before her REF pg9. Interestingly, the girl fixates on the man’s face. She describes how his eyes are dark and mask-like: “always disturbed me by their absolute absence of light, seemed to me like a mask…” (9). She explains how the man’s real face, that is underneath this mask, shows what the man had endured before he had met her, before she was even born (9). This description foreshadows the two sides to this man. The mask implies that he is hiding something. The life he had endured before has resulted in this man changing, changing into something that he felt he had to conceal from society. This
duality within the Marquis can be connected to Carter’s analysis that libertines often lived two lives, one which was socially acceptable and the other secretive where they hid their perversions.

While the girl and the Marquis are at the opera, she wears her wedding gift that she has received from the Marquis, “his wedding gift, clasped round my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat” (11). The girl reflects that the ruby choker originates from when “aristos” would wear a red ribbon around their neck after escaping the guillotine (11). The choker is paired with her white dress, the colour of purity and innocence. The contrasting colours represent the two contrasting myths between the innocent virgin and the sexually aware “perverse virgin”. The choker symbolizes her imprisonment:

I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away (11)

As previously mentioned, Carter believes that by women knowingly succumbing to the male fantasy then they are submissive as they have accepted the patriarchal standard. The Marquis demands that she does not remove the choker (19). The girl obeys his orders and at this point does not remove the choker. Hence, she has accepted the submissive role. With that said, accepting the submission does not mean that she does not object to it: “And, as at the opera, when I had first seen my flesh in his eyes, I was aghast to feel myself stirring” (15). While looking at her reflection in the mirror, the girl begins to see herself in a sexual manner as she
notes how the Marquis sees her. The girl exclaims that the choker becomes her, and she seems excited about that thought. Hence, she is anticipating the submissive role. She also acknowledges her position in accordance to the Marquis when she mentions “my purchaser unwrapped his bargain” (15). She is objectifying herself and is aware of her role. Moreover, the choker also symbolizes the man’s power as he controls when she can use and remove it. The Marquis kisses the girl’s choker before kissing her on the lips (17). This indicates that he is more in in love with her awaiting death rather than the actual girl. He has sexualized the thought of her death. With the history of the choker and it being depicted crimson red and as a slit throat, the Marquis gains pleasure fantasizing the girl’s death. This foreshadows the girl’s doom as he probably anticipates it as he has previously murdered his three ex-wives. When the girl disobeys the Marquis and enters the bloody chamber, she begins to become afraid of her position. It is only when she is forced to accept her martyrdom after the Marquis finds out she has entered the forbidden chamber that she removes her choker.

Like the choker, the recurring symbol of the mirror also symbolizes power. The first time the girl notices the Marquis watching her through a mirror, she becomes uneasy (11). She looks away from him to look up and see herself. Hence, her intuition tells her something is not right. She also realizes in that moment how the Marquis sees her, as an object of sexuality. Their bed is completely surrounded by mirrors. As mentioned previously, the male gaze can be executed through mirrors. The mirrors in the Marquis’ bedroom can be applied to Carter’s statement that the libertine upheld two different sides to himself. In connection to Jackson, the mirrors around the bed specifically represent his “other” being his perverse sexual persona. Moreover, Jackson states “by presenting images of the self in another space (both familiar and unfamiliar) the mirror provides versions of self-transformed into another, become something or someone else” (87). This is relevant to the Marquis’ sexual persona but also for how the girl views herself. While in the bedroom, the girl once again observes herself
in the mirror, “the young bride, who had become that multitude of girls I saw in the mirrors” (“The Bloody Chamber” 14). As the girl is becoming more aware of her sexual side, she is beginning to transform from the innocent virgin myth during her sexual awakening. The mirror reflects the two coinciding myths within the girl. As she begins to mature as she nears the loss of her virginity, the girl claims that she was “innocent but not naïve” (17). This represents how her innocence, her virginity, is still prominent but she is no longer naïve which suggests her new “perverse virgin” myth which is the reflection she sees in the mirror.

This quote also challenges the myth of the “angelic woman” as she is not as innocent as she is expected to be. Finally, mirrors also simply symbolize the male gaze.

As previously stated, the male gaze is a form of power used by men to view women from their perspective and objectifies women for their satisfaction and is deeply rooted in patriarchal society. During their ride, the girl notices the man watching her. The man’s eyes are dark and motionless when he looks at her which causes her to feel uncomfortable: “I felt a certain tension in the pit of my stomach, to be so watched, in such silence” (12). The girl is always being watched while the man is present, he exerts his power through the male gaze.

This is also applicable to the mirror symbolism. The girl is objectified sexually as he watches her reflection in the mirrors surrounding their bed. Robin Anne Sheets’ study mentions that the male gaze encourages sadomasochism as the male becomes the sadist and the passive masochist is assigned to the female (637). The Marquis’ gaze positions him as the sadist and the girl becomes the objectified subject of his gaze. Sheets quotes Kaplan in her essay, “Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act on it” (Kaplan qtd in Sheets 646). Hence, this can explain why the girl feels uncomfortable by his gaze and looks away.

The Marquis’ power is also revealed through his sadistic character. As stated, he holds power through his gaze. However, he also carries power through his words and his physicality. When the Marquis speaks, he is to be listened to. The Marquis demands the girl
to keep her choker on and she does so until he decides he wants to kill her. He demands her to “Kneel!” and she follows his orders ("The Bloody Chamber" 36). The physical power is demonstrated through the sex and also when it is revealed that he had tortured and murdered his ex-wives. When the girl receives the Marquis’ gaze after she retrieves the keys for him, she begins to feel sympathetic towards him. The girl puts her worries aside and thinks, “I felt a terrified pity for him” and “the atrocious loneliness of that monster!” (35). Similar to “The Company of Wolves”, the girl feels sorry for the transgressive male. As previously noted, men too feel imprisoned by society. Merja Makinen writes in her essay “Angela Carter’s The Bloody Chamber and the Decolonisation of Feminine Sexuality” that the Marquis, similar to the wolf, is “trapped within the construction of masculinity” (33). Makinen’s statement coincides with the theory that men do not adhere to the dominant male myth.

In Perrault’s “Blue Beard”, the girl’s brothers save her. In “The Bloody Chamber”, the girl does not save herself either. However, her rescuer is not male, but is her mother. When the Marquis announces that the girl will be decapitated as punishment for her disobedience, the girl glances out the window to see her mother racing towards the castle on her horse. The “wild” mother used her husband’s gun to shoot a bullet through the Marquis’ head (“The Bloody Chamber” 39). The mother breaks the female myths as she carries masculine traits. She carries a gun, shoots of a tiger and fights off pirates (7); these are actions we often see male characters performing. At the same time, she is loving, protective and possesses maternal telepathy (40). She is not a set myth, but a combination of many which grants her the ultimate power, as she breaks the boundaries between gender.

Additionally, Carter depicts both sides to the sadomasochistic relationship between the Marquis and the girl. She does not undermine the girl’s feelings for the sadomasochistic relationship. She incorporates the girl’s acceptance and excitement towards it but also the disgust: “I felt both a strange, impersonal arousal at the thought of love and at the same time
a repugnance (…)” (15). Undoubtedly, the Marquis enjoys the sadomasochistic relationship. Arguably, the depiction of differing attitudes towards sadomasochism and breaking the mother’s gender myth would make Carter the moral pornographer. As Carter breaks the boundaries regarding the female gender myth and “desexes” the mother, Carter complies to her own definition of the moral pornographer as she has described this term in *The Sadeian Woman*.

3.2 “The Company of Wolves”

“The Company of Wolves” is one of Carter’s three feminist rewritings of “Little Red Riding Hood” in *The Bloody Chamber & Other Stories*. Though the girl in “The Company of Wolves” shares similarities with Little Red Riding Hood, she is not called Little Red Riding Hood but instead “the girl” or “the granddaughter”. De Beauvoir’s insight on the myths of women will contribute a deeper understanding of the girl and her attempt at achieving power with the use of her sexuality. According to de Beauvoir, women have been categorized into myths and are expected to adhere to them (*The Second Sex* 269). These myths were placed on to women by society which were evidently rooted in patriarchy. The myths include how women use their sexuality. In “The Company of Wolves”, Carter uses sexuality, primarily in the form of seduction, to portray both male and female characters.

Before the girl is introduced in the story, Carter includes a prelude. The prelude is a lengthy description of the wolves. Initially, the wolves are described as being scary as they are portrayed as “grey members of a congregation of nightmare” (110), and “unkind as the plague” (111). It is made clear the villagers fear the wolves: “there is no winter’s night the cottager does not fear to see a lean, grey, famished snout questing under the door…” (111). However, it is implied that the wolves are more than just wolves, as they are only human: “And then no wolf at all lay in front of the hunter but the bloody trunk of a man, headless, footless, dying, dead” (111). In an interview with Carter, she was asked what “wolfness”
means for her in the story. One of Carter’s replies is that the wolves’ beastliness is a projection of what we have put on them, “especially with the idea of the werewolf, the man who is not responsible for his humanity or for his wolfishness” (Carter “Interview”). The wolves are werewolves showing the dynamic between the human and the beast. They show the dynamic between the patriarch’s expectation of man and the transgressive male. While the wolves are illustrated as scary beasts, they are also melancholic: “There is a vast melancholy in the canticles of the wolves, melancholy infinite as the forest” (112). Perhaps these werewolves, who are half men, feel trapped in the expectations that are forced upon them. They are trapped, tormented beings that cannot break free, “as if the beasts would love to be less beastly if only they knew how and never cease to mourn their own condition…” (112). This implies that men cannot help their situation and feel trapped by society. These male characters have both built up a façade, which relates to de Beauvoir’s theory where a façade is built to exemplify a strength that is not evident but longed for. It is through this façade that is built around their sexuality that they try to gain power.

In the middle of the story the reader is introduced to a young girl who is merely going to visit her ailing grandmother. If compared to de Beauvoir’s myth, she is initially assigned the myth of the “good woman”. The depiction of the girl’s appearance suggests that she is virginal: “she stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity” (113). Carter foreshadows that something cruel will happen to the young girl as she writes “[c]hildren do not stay young for long in this savage country” (113). Children in the town are told to avert from treacherous places. An instance of this is the forest where the vicious wolves reside. They are taught to carry knives with them to protect themselves. On her quest to self-discovery during this pivotal time, the girl ignores her mother’s advice and goes into the woods: “her father might forbid her, if he were home, but he is away in the forest, gathering wood, and her mother cannot deny her” (114). Though she is brave, she carries a
knife in her “practised hand” (114) with her for protection from the ferocious wolves who instinctively pounce on the vulnerable. Her “practised hand” suggests that she is taught how to conform to a societal standard as the good woman.

The girl, amid her sexual awakening, is becoming more of a seductress than an innocent virgin. Now alone in the forest, the girl meets a huntsman along the way to her grandmother’s house. The man offers her a race to grandmother’s home. The huntsman bets the girl that if she strays from the path, she will get to her destination quicker. The huntsman makes the race into a bet. The girl asks “disingenuously” what he wants as a prize already assuming that he would win (115). Her disingenuous demeanour implies that she is not as innocent as she seems. Following this, the huntsman replies that the prize would be a kiss.

There are two distinct connections between this proposal and de Beauvoir’s theory. Firstly, this is where the girl first challenges the stereotype she was characterized as. The sweet virgin is becoming more in touch with her sexual side as she agrees to his exciting proposition. The narrator mentions that “she wanted to dawdle on her way to make sure the handsome gentleman would win his wager” (115). While still rather innocent, the kiss foreshadows the girl’s transformation from “good girl” to the “perverse virgin” as this is when the girl’s true sexual intention is instituted. Secondly, whichever stereotype the girl is categorized as does not exclude the fact she is altruistic towards the male. The male proposes a challenge and the girl accepts; the male suggests a prize and the girl accepts. Her current devotion is exclusive to this man as he challenges his own dominance over the girl. The girl begins to break away from her “good girl” myth and accepts his attempt at dominance as she complies to his proposal. With that said, she remains altruistic despite breaking away from one myth. She begins to adopt another myth but is still under the influence of the patriarchy.

The physical changes in the girl are also described in the short story as “her breasts have just begun to swell” and “she has just started her woman’s bleeding” (113). Her
experience with menarche and puberty trigger her sexual desires: “…the clock inside her will strike, henceforward, once a month. She stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity” (113). De Beauvoir connects a female’s first sexual awakening with the heterosexual inevitability by stating that it is untrue that virgins are unacquainted with their sexual desire before meeting a man. Hence, the girl’s sexual desires are rooted in nature: “it is likewise perfectly true that woman – like man – is a being rooted in nature” (The Second Sex 269). The huntsman attempts dominance by introducing his proposition. Though the man is not exclusively responsible for the girl’s sexual awakening, her longing for sexual desire is only a natural response to what he initially proposes. He is aware of her vulnerability and acts on it to uphold his position. This represents how Carter challenges the myths in the story, particularly the myth of the innocent virgin.

When the girl races through the frightening forest and enters the door to her grandmother’s home, she is surprised to see a wolf in place of her grandmother. The huntsman has now turned into a beast. His aggression is represented by how he kills the grandmother and also how the wolf proceeds to hurry to the door to prevent her from escaping. In this action alone, the male is expressing another attempt at dominance. The girl’s first instinct is to observe her surroundings and reach for her knife. She wants to reach for the knife but feels intimidated by the wolf’s gaze and becomes uneasy: “She wanted the knife from her basket but she did not dare reach for it because his eyes were fixed upon her…” (“The Company of Wolves” 117). The male gaze causes the girl to become paralyzed and uneasy, similarly to the way the girl in “The Bloody Chamber” becomes paralyzed when she feels the Marquis’ gaze when he notices the key (“The Bloody Chamber” 34).

Carter creates a dialogue between the characters with the use of Perrault’s original fairy-tale, quoting the famous lines “what big eyes you have” (“The Company of Wolves” 117). Here, the girl becomes aware of her surroundings. She realizes that her grandmother
has been killed. She begins to hear the howling of wolves outside. Interestingly, when she looks outside to see the other wolves, she becomes sympathetic: “it’s very cold, those poor things…no wonder they howl so” (117). She hears the wolves are singing a “threnody”. The threnody is a funeral song and could represent the death of the girl’s girlhood. While listening to the threnody, she begins to feel sympathy for the transgressive men (the wolves): “it’s very cold, those poor things, she said; no wonder they howl so” (117). After hearing the threnody, she decides to no longer be fearful and to let go of the fear, “…since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid” (117).

When she hears their song, she proceeds to take off her red shawl which was initially tied tight around her for protection. Carter describes the shawl as “the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of menses” (117). Poppies symbolize death as they are used to commemorate fallen soldiers and are often present at war gravesites. With that in mind, as the girl takes off the shawl, Carter implies that this is the death of her innocence. The colour of sacrifice suggests the women’s position in contrast to men, and the girl will sacrifice herself for his desires. Moreover, Carter depicts the shawl as “the colour of her menses” representing her virginity and her sexuality (117). As she lets go of her shawl, she lets go of her girlhood as she prepares to enter womanhood by having sex with the wolf. She asks the wolf what to do with her shawl. He replies that she should throw it in the fire. Being altruistic, the girl complies. She throws the shawl into the fire because that is what the wolf wants her to do. The action of her burning her shawl with the sound of the threnody represents her throwing away her innocence and the continuation of her sexual awakening. She proceeds to removing her blouse, and once again she asks the wolf what she should do. He replies, “into the fire with it, too, my pet” (117). Once again, she obeys the wolf. She proceeds to remove all her clothes and throw it all into the fire and “were gone for good” (118). As she stands naked in
front of the wolf, she has finally stripped away her girlhood. She walks up to the wolf and begins to unclot

Suddenly, the wolves begin to sing a prothalamion, which is a wedding song, which suggests the unity between the wolf and the girl. Thereafter, the girl “freely gave the kiss she owed him” (118). Initially, the “freely” given kiss suggests that she felt no pressure in giving him the kiss she owed him from the bet. However, she did indeed owe him the kiss. While the kiss can be due to coercion from the man, her “disingenuous” demeanour implies that she was aware of the situation. Ironically, the kiss she “freely” gives becomes a paradox since it is ultimately an obligation and not a free choice.

One last time, the girl says, “what big teeth you have!” (118). Instead of succumbing to his manipulative answers, the girl laughs in the wolf’s face when he answers, “she laughed at him full in the face…” (118). In Perrault’s version of “Little Red Riding Hood”, the girl would have become frightened and would have been completely dominated due to the wolf consuming her whole. However, in an interesting turn of events, the girl mocks him. By taunting the wolf, his attempt at dominance becomes depowered. His power is dwindling. Male power is depicted as being aggressive, assertive and fearless which is comparable to Carter and De Beauvoir’s depictions of the Marquis de Sade. The girl has now adopted those traits which can be seen when she strips his clothes off and when she mocks him. As the girl begins to break from her “good woman” myth, the wolf becomes frightened “she will lay his fearful head on her lap…” (118). To end the tale, Carter writes, “See! Sweet and sound she sleeps in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf” (118). Carter uses irony to depict the complex struggle for power between the girl and the wolf. The wolf has become calmer and tamer; however, he still has his paws around her. Here, Carter toys with the idea if the girl is the victor or the victim. While the girl has had an influence on the wolf’s demeanour and has adopted anassertive role towards the end of the story, in the end, she is
still entrapped in a patriarchal sphere despite her efforts. The girl adopted “the perverse virgin” myth to obtain power in an otherwise defenceless situation. The stereotypes between “good” and “bad” women have been intertwined as the woman has converted from an innocent virgin to an assertive woman in the midst of her sexual awakening. However, the myths of women are always apparent in the story as she transforms from one myth into another.

Angela Carter portrays the stereotypical gender roles of both women and men similarly as how to de Beauvoir does. The story includes a “good girl” who becomes ‘the perverse virgin’ as she uses her sexuality to her own benefit – she is the “good girl” when she is introduced in the story, the “perverse virgin” as she seduces the wolf and takes control of her sexuality. Furthermore, we have the dominant male who becomes perplexed over a woman who dares to break the patriarchal stereotype she was expected to adhere to. Interestingly, Carter challenges these stereotypes as both characters use unforeseen characteristics to give them a progressive identity. This proves to benefit them both in their struggle for power with the use of their own sexualities. The male is no longer aggressive and in the desperation of dominance. The girl has found her unexpected voice by using her sexuality by utilizing seduction. By standing up for herself with the help of her newly found sexuality, she has gained respect from the male, where she would have historically been demeaned for her “bad” behaviour.
4 Conclusion

This essay aimed to analyze how power is achieved by men and women in “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Company of Wolves” with the use of their sexuality. It utilized the myths of gender according to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. These myths included the “good woman” and “the bad woman” and the myths deriving from these categories, like “the perverse virgin”. It also incorporated Carter’s study *The Sadeian Woman* which integrated a sadistic perspective while analyzing the characters in the short stories.

To sum up, “The Bloody Chamber” has three distinct characters – the girl, her mother and the Marquis. The Marquis uses a sadistic form of power where he attempts to sexually, physically and verbally control the girl, and his previous wives. He is transgressive as he crosses boundaries not morally acceptable in his society. The women in “The Bloody Chamber”, however, adhere to different myths. The girl is initially categorized as the “angelic virgin”. She is young, innocent and compliant with the Marquis. She is altruistic towards him and obeys his commands. However, as the story continues with the girl’s sexual awakening, one can see her progression from the myth of the angelic virgin towards the perverse virgin. Differing from “Blue Beard” where the girl is saved by her brothers, the mother saves her child in “The Bloody Chamber”. She is described with male attributes which does not comply with traditional womanly myths. While she does conform to “the guardian angel”, she is not completely feminine. Again, Carter challenges this by describing her with characteristics much beyond a protective mother.

Similar to “The Bloody Chamber”, “The Company of Wolves” includes characters that challenge myths. Like the Marquis, the wolves are transgressive male figures. In a way, they are powerful as they are able to intimidate and kill. However, unlike the Marquis, they
are tamable. The girl is depicted as virginal, but she always had a sense of bravery that transcended the innocent virgin myth. She becomes the “perverse virgin” when she meets the huntsman and agrees to his proposal. It is debatable if the girl gains power as she complies with what the huntsman/wolf asks of her. She takes control of her own sexuality but due to the pressure put upon her by the wolf. However, the girl escapes being killed by the wolf unlike others in the story. This is due to her challenging the wolf and taking control of the situation. She felt powerful by feeling she was in control of her sexuality. Once again, Carter places another myth onto the same character as the girl becomes the motherly “guardian angel” towards the end as she picks the lice out of the wolf’s fur. Carter’s ironic ending of the girl sleeping between the paws of the wolf implies that either she is still trapped in a patriarchal world, or, that the two have reached equality as she is finally safe and liberated, together with the wolf.

Carter has successfully challenged the myths of women and granted women more power in an otherwise male dominated fairytale. She gives more complex sides to her characters which shows that people and their sexualities cannot be simply categorized. By placing different myths onto one character, Carter challenges the actuality of myths. A woman cannot adhere to one category, as a woman progresses into her own being which is exemplified by both the girl and her mother. This would make Carter the moral pornographer as she manages to give her female characters’ sexuality more than reproductive purposes. She shows the understanding of myths but does not reinforce the stereotypes.

While discussing myths and stereotypes regarding gender, one can consider the major change in gender criticism in the past few decades. With there being more focus on the unjust expectations of men and minorities including the LGBTQ+ community, one can wonder if and how these gender myths would apply to them. Additionally, has the emergence of the Me Too movement demolished or created any new myths regarding gender and sexuality?
5 Works Cited


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