

CHAPTER FOUR: THE “RITUAL LOVE-DEATH” AND THE TRANSFIGURATION

During the course of the first three chapters I have attempted to show how different intersecting elements in Carter’s short fiction help disrupt binaries through a certain ritualistic element within the tales. Some of these binaries have already been set out in *The Sadeian Woman* which I have introduced in Chapter One. Here, Carter talks about the “either-or” mentality evident not just in the works of the Marquis de Sade, but also in many different manifestations of culture.

Many of Carter’s tales disrupt the safe limits of this dialectic. Her heroines are not necessarily helpless victims nor are the males either heroes or villains. For example, I am of the opinion that both the male virgin and the aggressor in “The Lady of the House of Love” are mutual victim-aggressors, with perhaps the clueless leonine boy coming off the better thanks to his innocence. The location for the Lady’s annihilation is her parody of a marriage bed, again reinstating the idea of a Ritual Love-Death in which her death and return to (the state of) being human is aided by the virgin-bridegroom’s kiss.

Into this vile and murderous room, the handsome bicyclist brings the innocent remedies of the nursery; in himself, by his presence, he is an exorcism. He gently takes her hand away from her and dabs the blood with his own handkerchief, but still it spurts out. And so he puts his mouth to the wound. He will kiss it better for her, as her mother, had she lived, would have done.

All the silver tears fall down from the wall with a flimsy tinkle. Her painted ancestors turn away their eyes and grind their fangs.

How can she bear the pain of being human?

The end of exile is the end of being. (106)

Love and humanity, therefore, seem to be an antithesis to the vampiric state of being.

Humanity, in this case, is represented by the “innocent remedies of the nursery” (106) which quicken the final transformation. This alien factor within the tale has also been seen in “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Tiger’s Bride”, both part of Carter’s revision of the fairytale “Reluctant Bride” motifs, as both contain reference to a nurse. As such, the innocent bicyclist joins Carter’s elite circle of wise children (121), though he is male.

Now, as discussed in Chapter Three, the vampiric state of being is a metaphor for the Lady’s enslavement to a very patriarchal legacy. Therefore it may seem rather odd that her release comes in the shape of a male. However, because of the hybrid quality of both characters, the field is levelled. For instance, more than one role may be identified with the lonely Lady and her “inverted marriage bed” (105). She is a victim, aggressor, predator, and sacrifice. She is both Sleeping Beauty as well as the ensorcelled Beast trapped in his castle. She is also the feminine counterpart of Bluebeard who must always cannibalize her mates. And unlike an ordinary predator, she longs for love. She perceives love as being her salvation even though it leads to her eventual annihilation (103). This leads us to the idea of the “Ritual Love-Death” which I have talked about in the introduction to this dissertation.

In the first and last volumes of *The Masks of God* (*Primitive Mythology* and *Creative Mythology* respectively), Joseph Campbell unearths the pattern of the Ritual Love-Death in order to discuss the recurrence of the patterns in both primitive mythic rituals as well as medieval alchemy. In *Primitive Mythology*, he explained this seemingly bizarre connection between sex/love and death thus:

We may say, then, that the interdependence of death and sex, their import as the complementary aspects of a single state of being, and the necessity of killing – killing and eating – for the continuance of this state of being, which is that of man on earth and of all things on earth, the animals, birds, and fish, as well as man – this deeply moving, emotionally disturbing glimpse of death as the life of the living is the fundamental motivation supporting the rites around which the social structure of the early planting villages was composed. (177)

This necessity for killing in order to eat and the connection between the annihilatory states of both sex and death is evident in most of Carter's stories, even the almost religious terror/longing with relation to love. In *The Sadeian Woman*, she muses on this perverse pleasure-pain dialectic:

The annihilation of the self and the resurrection of the body, to die in pain and to painfully return from death, is the sacred drama of the Sadeian orgasm.

In this drama, flesh is used instrumentally, to provoke these spasmodic visitations of dreadful pleasure. In this flesh, nothing human remains; it aspires to the condition of the sacramental meal. It is never the instrument of love.

In his diabolic solitude, only the possibility of love could awake the libertine to perfect, immaculate terror. It is in this holy terror of love that we find, in both men and women themselves, the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women. (150)

It is noteworthy that Carter is aware of the ritualistic and sacramental motif behind this dialectical connection between sex and death, in as much as one is the flesh and the other something other than the flesh. She also acknowledges that this dialectic can be neutralized by love/humanity, even annihilated by it. Margaret Atwood gives an incisive and rather apropos interpretation of Carter's message:

You see – she appears to be saying to the Marquis, or to both of them, the Bluebeard of her own first story and de Sade himself – you didn't have to confine yourself to those mechanistic stage sets, those mechanical rituals. It wasn't just eat or be eaten. You could have been human! 'Human', however, does not necessarily mean 'wonderful'. In Carter's world it is always, even at best, a little ambiguous. (132)

This stepping away from the binaries of not just gender stereotypes but the roles of passivity-aggression marks Carter's text. Even though the ritual is played out again and again throughout her narrative, the conclusions are rarely traditional. Carter sets up the dialectic only to smash through it.

The Love-Death dialectic may be seen as the key towards the transformation motif in more than one fairytale or fable, in my opinion, even though it has been reshaped and deftly hybridized by Carter. For instance, Psyche seems to have almost mortally wounded Cupid, or Amor in her reckless curiosity. She had to be brought to the brink of death in her tasks before she was forgiven by and reconciled with her husband. In "Beauty and the Beast", it is only when the Beast is dying that Beauty realizes and declares her love for him. These are the traditional transformations.

In Carter's hand, something markedly more complicated occurs beyond the binaries of "Love" or "Death". In her tales, the issue of identity comes to the fore. For instance, the heroine in the "Tiger's Bride" makes her way out of the ritual's maze by choosing her own ending, not for fear of death or guilt (65). She has paid the price, and will pick her own destiny, not what had been agreed by either her father or the Tiger-groom (65).

Likewise, Red Riding Hood in "The Company of Wolves" comes to the realization that she is "nobody's meat" (118) and gives in to the dictates of her desire. Wendy Swyt, in "Wolfings": Angela Carter's Becoming Narrative" shows that through the multilayered narrative we

become aware that the bare bones of the “Red Riding Hood” fairytale is not exactly what is going on within the text. Instead,

the promiscuous narrative eye/I whirls around the room so that it is unclear who – lecherous old wife or innocent granny exclaims, “his genitals, huge. Ah! Huge.” The naked man, stained sheets; desire is everywhere. (par. 16)

In other words, Carter injects the desire of the crone/narrator and the girl’s intrinsic right to self-determination into a narrative which Perrault and his contemporaries turned into a morality tale of retribution³³ for the naughty little girl who will not behave.

Marina Warner comments that some feminists have a problem with Carter because she was unafraid to detail the fact that women would be attracted “to the Beast in the very midst of repulsion”(308) as that is a kind of “waywardness” (307). In this case, Red Riding Hood and even her grandmother (and the narrator)’s desire for the wolf/man is not masked. And thus, the granny’s bed which had been the scene of a certain kind of “death” also becomes the girl’s unholy marriage bed, complete with the rituals of a “savage marriage ceremony”(118).

In “Ashputtle *or* the Mother’s Ghost”, the connection between marriage and death occurs more than once. In the Grimm fairytale edition of this tale, the two stepsisters had squeezed their way into her shoe, one by cramming her foot in, and the other by hacking out a toe. Carter adds a new dimension to this aspect of the fairytale in her description of Ashputtle trying on the shoe:

So now Ashputtle must put her foot into the hideous receptacle, this open wound, still slick and warm as it is, for nothing in any of the many texts of this tale suggests the prince washed the shoe out between the fittings. It was an ordeal in itself to put a naked foot into the bloody shoe, but her mother, the turtle dove, urged her to do so in a soft, cooing croon that could not be denied.

If she does not plunge without revulsion into this open wound, she won't be fit to marry. That is the song of the turtle dove, while the other mad mother stood impotently by.

(Burning Your Boats 394)

This open wound is made of the blood of her other less successful sisters, underscoring the dialectic that in a patriarchal universe women often have to annihilate other women or their own self-identity in order to survive. As in “The Lady of the House of Love” and “Wolf-Alice”, there is a stunning juxtaposition of the marriage bed or the condition of marriage with both the tomb and the womb (as suggestively connoted by a bloody, “open wound”) (394). The last variation within “Ashputtle” is even more noteworthy. In that version, the male has disappeared entirely from the narrative. There is only the girl, the abusive stepmother, and the dead mother:

When the dead woman kissed her, the scar vanished. The girl woke up. The dead woman gave her a red dress.

‘I had it when I was your age.’

The girl put the red dress on. The dead woman took worms from her eyesockets; they turned into jewels. The girl put on a diamond ring.

‘I had it when I was your age.’

They went together to the grave.

‘Step into my coffin.’

‘No,’ said the girl. She shuddered.

‘I stepped into *my* mother’s coffin when I was your age.’

The girl stepped into the coffin although she thought it would be the death of her. It turned into a coach and horses. The horses stamped, eager to be gone.

‘Go and seek your fortune, darling’. (*Burning Your Boats* 396)

Apart from reiterating the message of the earlier variation, this particular excerpt is noteworthy because there is no mention of marriage anywhere³⁴. Rather, for this burnt child it seems to herald a kind of threshold that she thinks will lead to her undoing. It could be interpreted as the threshold into adulthood/responsibility, or of taking on the weight of the female ancestors as evidenced by her mother’s retort, “I stepped into *my* mother’s coffin” (396) or as a *status quo* enforced by victims upon other victims. The open-endedness of the tale allows the reader to contemplate these possibilities.

This threshold across the boundaries of fear into transformation stands for death (fear) and love (or a warped variation of maternal love). The courage and faith to step across this threshold

allows this third Ashputtle to ride her way out of the maze of this three-tales-in-one framework. And this is not the only instance of a frightening threshold which needs to be crossed.

In “The Lady of the House of Love”, the Lady follows her heart’s longing, and this weakness leads to her eventual doom – humanity, then obliteration:

Embraces, kisses: your golden head, of a lion, although I have never seen a lion, only imagined one, of the sun, even if I’ve only seen the structure of the sun on the Tarot card, your golden head of the lover whom I dreamed would one day free me, this head will fall back, its eyes roll upwards in a spasm you will mistake for that of love and not of death. (105)

Here, the Lady is within a trap of the binary dialectic: either he dies, or she loves him, spares him then dies. She knows no other way of being. For her, love leads to death, and his death must follow a grotesque parody of the act of love. It is a dilemma a Sadeian would appreciate. It also mimics what Freud talks about in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a “compulsion to repeat” which

recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed. (21)

This is an impulse that leads one to follow patterns which do not bring pleasure to oneself and can be seen in the Lady's serial, almost ritual marriage-bed routine. It can also be linked to the repetitive impulse within "Ashputtle", which shows how multiple variations of a single story resolve in different, yet strangely similar ways.

In "The Lady in the House of Love", the culmination of the plot (in which her final prey turns innocent predator) is part of this dialectic, although the male protagonist does seem to be stopping the repetitious cycle. Much of the confrontations within the tales by Carter studied in this dissertation seem therefore to be about stopping the cycle. For instance, the heroine of "The Erl King" slays the Erl King in order to be released from the cycle of abuse/loss of identity symbolized by the birds trapped in cages. Unfortunately, in doing so she is also subscribing to the "kill or be killed" dialectic.

Also noteworthy is the feline motif running throughout the narrative. While the Lady sees in the bicyclist's leonine head her own salvation, she herself has been shown as a domesticated, yet dangerous feline. It is inevitable that she falls for this feral version of herself and is thus destroyed by her own desire which shakes her hands and breaks the dark glasses that would have saved her eyes from the sunlight (105-106). This act punctures the silence and changes the resolution of this ritual:

There is no room in her drama for improvisation: and this unexpected, mundane noise of breaking glass breaks the wicked spell in the room,

entirely. She gapes blindly down at the splinters and ineffectively smears the tears across her face with her fist. What is she to do now? (106)

The resulting blood-letting is therefore her own mark of realization and humanity. She does not even try to fight it. And so it is that when the young man awakens he finds that the room is covered in sunlight and no longer sealed (106). Presumably this is her doing, for the realization of her humanity, in her either-or dialectical state of being, can only lead to her annihilation.

In the chapter entitled "The Love-Death" in *Creative Mythology*, Joseph Campbell talks about

the experience of love as a refining, sublimating, mystagogic force, of itself opening the pierced heart to the sad, sweet, bittersweet, poignant melody of being, through love's own anguish and love's joy. (178)

Campbell looks at the experience of Love, or *Amor*, as seen within the context of mortality and earthly life, using Gottfried's medieval narrative of Tristan and Isolt³⁵ to outline his point.

He notes that in surrendering to their earthly, forbidden love Tristan and Isolt were courting a kind of annihilation (178). This is the love-death theme seen in courtly medieval eyes: a kind of love that encapsulates a "boundless readiness for the suffering of love" (248), which brings the reader towards the absolute annihilation of the immortal soul "in Hell" (248)³⁶. Campbell also notes that the theme of love-death in Tristan and Isolt refers "to the sacrament of the altar in its dual sense of love and death" (245)³⁷,

The idea of sacrificing the self to annihilation can be seen in the almost futile (in)action of "The Lady of the House of Love," in which the Lady is the tortured, feminine version of the Marquis of "The Bloody Chamber", trapped between the modes of killed and be killed, until Amor, or "Les Amoureux" warps the dialectic.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the Lady draws the "Les Amoureux" card instead of the usual cards relating to death and dissolution (97). It is significant here that "Les Amoureux" turns her bed into an actual place of rest³⁸ when she turns to dust as a result of her own unconscious refusal to annihilate yet another victim. This plays into the "killed or be killed" dialectic, but with a unique twist to it which seems to echo the Love-Death ethos that Campbell has talked about in excellent and comprehensive detail in *Creative Mythology*.

In "The Bloody Chamber", love shatters this dialectic of "killed or be killed". This time the love that saves the ingénue from the brink of death is her mother's, even when she is stymied by inaction.

I can only bless the – what shall I call it? – the *maternal telepathy* that sent my mother running headlong from the telephone to the station after I had called her, that night. I never heard you cry before, she said, by way of explanation. Not when you were happy. And who ever cried because of gold bath taps? (40)

Hence, the victim of his own sacrifice turns out to be the Marquis, annihilated by Love. Another nobleman, in “Wolf-Alice”, receives the tender ministrations of the wolf-girl/servant. In doing so, she inadvertently transforms the Duke, as his image finally shows in the mirror (*Bloody Chamber* 125). He has been humanized by her tender care, and therefore his inhuman half is annihilated like the libertine in Carter’s quote (*The Sadeian Woman* 150).

As I have shown in Chapter Two, the variables of this dialectic are modified in each tale in order to suit the cultural conditions within each framework. Thus, the resolutions may be different but the message interwoven within the texts make for a very powerful intertextual reading. In Chapter Three, I have outlined the importance of the enclosures within Carter’s text because it plays a role in the rituals of transformation, as well as the narrative disruption of fairytale plots. All these lead to the arena of hybridity which defines as well as transforms.

One of the ways in which the element of hybridity transforms the rituals these tales hinges on the theriomorphic tropes contained within. It is one thing to attach libido to the idea of animals, but Carter does not leave the theriomorphic tendencies only in her male characters, as Other. Instead, she embeds these qualities in both male and female protagonists found throughout the tales studied. In more than one tale, the wise-half-animal girl does some humanizing of her own, even though she is bestial.

This can be seen in “Wolf-Alice” as well as in “Peter and the Wolf”. And it is also interesting to remember that this trait also stands for libido and desire. It is this message that makes

Carter's tales so powerful, and perhaps not so palatable for more rigid feminists to swallow. It is a message of hybridity and the imperfect human condition as well as the choices we make.