

DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN CARTER'S THE BLOODY CHAMBER AND ELLIS'S AMERICAN PSYCHO

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Abstract

Women have always been an important part of literature, no matter how were they presented. They are key characters in the development of the plots in works of all literary periods and literary movements. They are presented as victims, villains, weak, strong, intelligent, and sacrificing. This paper will bring a comparative outlook how women are presented in *Bloody Chamber* and *American Psycho*. Both Carter in *Bloody Chamber* and Ellis in *American Psycho* have women as main protagonists, and no matter these works belong to the postmodernist period, the images of women have a lot of traces from the earliest times. It means, we see women as victims of patriarchal society and families, we see them as sexually submissive and undervalued gender.

They try to point out if these women are able to do something to change the way their actions and behavior are judged and how the society views them. This paper gives a comparative outline of these famous literary works, presenting a part of English and American Literature. This is what is presented in this paper, hoping that it will give a glimpse of not only women, their role and position in the society, but the whole society as well, presented in British and American literature.

Keywords: Women, *Bloody Chamber*, *American Psycho*, Literature.

Introduction

This paper will give an outlook of how women are presented in two very famous literary works, Angela Carter's collection of short stories, named *The Bloody Chamber*, and Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho*. Through the inherent correlation between violence and sexuality, both Carter and Ellis depict women as victims of the patriarchy. However, Carter also conveys women as transgressive towards their societal roles, as they subvert patriarchal conventions, whereas Ellis portrays society as a whole and women as victims with no sense of identity, as men must also conform to the male gaze in a superficial environment. Overall, these authors convey women as inevitable victims of patriarchy, as they cannot overcome the fact that their behaviors and punishments are always judged based on a patriarchal society.

Women as victims

We see it clearly in their works. For example, In Carter's reinterpretation of *Bluebird*, a young girl falls victim to a powerful man, ultimately leading to her near death. We have the image of "His wedding gift, clasped round my throat [...] slit throat", symbolizing how prevalent his male dominance is as he owns her. From the very beginning of the story the Heroine's fate is foreshadowed, as the graphic imagery of "slit throat" is mentioned, which juxtaposes with the idea of weddings which should signify marriage, love and harmony, thus making her a victim.

Critic Kari E Lokke claims that "The grotesque in *The Bloody Chamber* functions as an unsettling vehicle for exposing the brutality of traditional patriarchal attitudes towards women" (Lokke, K.E., 1988). This image of a slit throat, is also a reference to the title, *Bloody Chamber*. The Heroine does cognize her husband's sexual aggressiveness, as "there is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer, [...] similarity on my marriage bed."

The Heroine compares his "acts of love" to "torture" in the "marriage bed", suggesting that when he took her virginity and innocence from her he did it in an unpleasable way. This echoes with Lokke's criticism of *The Bloody Chamber*, as despite it being fictional, it still exposes the brutality women receive from the patriarchal society. Similar to this, women are terrorized severely in *American Psycho*, being punished due to their roles in the patriarchal society. Ellis uses small details to portray a bigger picture of objectification of women. Price points out that he "can't help noticing that one knee is bigger than the other one".

She possesses a minor imperfection that causes Bateman to lose interest in her. They also refer to women as "hard-bodies". Mulvey argues that patriarchy regards the audience as men, and women are therefore obliged to adopt a masculine perspective when looking at images that represent women as objects for male satisfaction (Mulvey, L., 2013). "Elizabeth, naked, running from the bedroom, blood already on her, is moving with difficulty as she screams out something garbled." - Mulvey's ideology is applied here as Elizabeth was a subject of Bateman's desire, which leads to her objectification and demise.

Sexual desire is viewed as an emasculating weakness that should only be gratified if it results in the ego-boosting assertion of male power after a sexual encounter. Significantly, the repeated nature of sex and violence indicates that the perpetrator is also a hysteric. He "wonders if Evelyn would ever sleep with another woman [...] But what if I forced her at *gunpoint*? Threatened to cut them both up if they didn't comply?" It is evident that Bateman is a dominant man as he can 'force' women to do something they do not want to. He is used to the benefits of the patriarchal society, such as women almost always being compliant and conforming to his sexual fantasies and desires.

The image of him holding them at 'gunpoint' portrays his violent masculinity and how he uses it against them. He has fantasies of him 'cutting up' his girlfriend for not complying, which proclaims the idea of women existing only to pleasure men, making them victims towards this society. In a feministic view, *American Psycho* depicts misogynistic violence towards women in a pornographic way. Similarly in *The Bloody Chamber*, the Marquis punishes the Heroine by almost murdering her for not complying with his orders. Angela Carter further enforces the idea that violence and sexuality are interrelated in a patriarchal society in 'The Snow Child'.

As they must adhere to the Count, in this narrative, two women are victimized by patriarchy. The Count wishes for "a girl as red as blood". The Count's use of the simile and term "blood" could be linked with Carter's gothic motif of the "bloody" chamber as a whole in the book. However, because the girl who emerges is young, the blood might foreshadow her tragic fate, which would occur as a result of sexual assault. "Blood" could also be a metaphor for a loss of innocence, virginity.

The girl appears and is described with “white skin, red mouth, black hair and stark naked”. Her being “stark naked” highlights her as vulnerable, whilst also adding eroticism. This description contrasts the girl with the Countess, who is described as fully clothed. The repetition of the color red adds to the entire motif of the book which is the bloody womb. For Carter, denigration and celebration of Woman as Other are both masculine strategies within patriarchal cultures, whereby Man secures his hegemony over the places of enunciation (Robinson, S); the girl’s description is built on gothic terms such as “snow”, “blood” and “raven”, which are similes of the Count’s desires with a mixture of coldness and bloodthirstiness, and also describe this girl as the Other, conforming with Robinson’s criticism.

The raven foreshadows how the Count’s desires will lead to the girl’s demise, thus sexuality and violence being undoubtedly linked in Carter’s book. These are all symbols of gothic literature, which according to Carter, is a radical genre and that all art is political. However the victimization of women is continuously prevalent in gothic literature. Similarly in *American Psycho*, majority of the novel is built off violence and linked to gothic connotations of murder and blood, especially towards women. Carter uses forms other than murder and death in order to demonstrate how violence and desire are allied, such as necrophilia, pedophilia and sexual assault.

To stress my previous points, ‘Snow Child’ is a prime example of this occurrence. The Countess is introduced wearing “pelts of black foxes”, offering an anthropomorphic image of the Countesses sly and cunning sexuality, which is still not enough for her husband, as he desires someone else. Clothing is a significant symbol in this story as it represents civilization, contrasting the naked girl that appears in the forest. The girl becomes “furred and booted”, this demonstrates to the reader the typical, patriarchal transfer of affection from an older to a younger woman.

This links with the idea of the Count’s pedophilia, as the girl is described as young with “white skin” and “stark nakedness”, showing her vulnerability and innocence. This conforms to Lokke’s ideas of the patriarchy, as the unsettling vehicles of pedophilia and necrophilia are used to expose the brutal patriarchy. This leads to a woman putting another woman down as the Countess asks for a rose, “so the girl picks a rose; pricks her finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls”. This exemplifies the stepmother’s and the evil crone’s characteristic duplicity in the original *Snow White* tale, when a deed of generosity conceals a homicidal motive.

The connotation of the rose merges the perfection of the natural world’s beauty with the thorn’s emblem of love’s inescapable suffering. The semicolons list the girl’s events and make her death seem cold, underscoring the fact that she has no freedom and is only the Count’s object of desire. Similarly, in *American Psycho*, Bateman does not see the prostitutes as real people, rather he views them as objects for his desires. Ellis further emphasizes women as victims of the patriarchy through the punishment of Bethany’s character, “a girl Patrick dated at Harvard and who he was subsequently dumped by”. Along with laughing at Patrick’s upside-down Onica artwork and displaying a platinum American Express card that is exactly like his, she rejects the woman’s supportive role in patriarchal man’s repression of his own impenitence.

Not only was she the one who ended their relationship, but Bethany belittled Patrick by expressing worry for his mental health. For this, he tortures her to death or, at the very least, fantasizes about it in the most gruesome circumstances. Bateman’s desensitization is illustrated when he claims that “I can already tell that it’s going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death, but then I’m used to the horror. It seems distilled, even now it fails to upset or bother me.” When Patrick pursues his bloodlust to the point of feeling nothing at all, he experiences a mental collapse and cannibalizes one of his victims. This is similar to a drug addict who must gradually consume more to make up for their tolerance. Patrick’s cannibalism serves as a metaphor for his excessive desires for material goods and his seemingly unquenchable desire to rule over others, especially women.

In a perverse way, Patrick's horrifying devouring of the bodies of his victims represents an effort on his part to, as he puts it, "get to know these girls." Given the numerous times Patrick has bit women during sex, his cannibalistic desires have also been compared to vampires. Ellis writes the satirical novel in gothic literature, which took a rise in the 18th century, thus vampire semanticist being noticeable throughout the story. In a broader sense, Patrick's cannibalism also shows how wealthy, rich "yuppies" take advantage of the predicament of the poor and homeless and callously disregard their welfare. The narrative occurs in the later 1980s. During this time, women objectified as materialism is a key factor in society, thus prostitution is skyrocketing. Bateman sees them as worthless and murders them, henceforth the incoherent link between violence and sexuality making these women victims to the patriarchal society. Similarly in *The Bloody Chamber*, the Count sees his wives as worthless and murders them.

Transgressive women

On the other hand, Carter also highlights women as transgressive¹ and disobedient towards their societal roles. In *The Bloody Chamber* this is conveyed through the Heroine's violation towards the Marquis' orders and privacy, despite him offering her a pretentious marriage - "All is yours, everywhere is open to you-except the lock that this single key fits." Despite being offered everything, and even promising she will not, as he states "you must promise me, if you love me, to leave it well alone", the Heroine disobeys her husband's one rule, which highlights her transgressiveness in the marriage.

This could be linked with biblical connotations such as Eve's temptation in the Garden of Eden, as the Marquis and his high status could represent God, who offers the Heroine, representing Eve, a paradise. Another example of how patriarchal norms are subverted is the Heroine's mother, as "she had disposed of a tiger", informing the reader that she is a strong woman, and also foreshadowing how she saves her daughter and murders the 'animal' she has married. She uses her "father's gun", further enforcing her masculine traits by using something that belongs to a man. She is subverting gender roles, thus being considered transgressive.

Carter changes the end of Bluebird's story where the Heroine is saved by her brothers, to a woman saving a woman. She can be compared to an Amazon, a strong woman who possesses the gendered behaviors often expected from men. In Greek mythology, the Amazons were a tribe of warrior women said to live without men. A sense of transgression is also implied in American Psycho, as the prostitutes exploit themselves for desire and money, fuelling the idea that women are objects, which again, conforms to Mulvey and the male gaze. Ellis depicts Patrick Bateman as a satirical epitome of how society has been shaped to conform to yuppie culture, thus men and women are victims of a capitalist system rather than women being victims of patriarchy.

He conforms towards hyper capitalist ideas of his masculinity, hence his obsession with his appearance. According to Althusser's theory of interpellation, individual identity is produced by dominant ideologies in society. The first line of the text, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here," is a quote from Dante's Divine Comedy, which translates "Proceed with caution; do not enter", foreshadowing how Bateman should not enter Wall Street, as his identity will disappear.

This is critical since it subtly instructs Bateman to stop trying to regain his manhood after being constrained by hyper capitalist values. Ellis creates a set of comparable businessmen who are all seeking to obtain a financial edge since this is how hyper capitalism has socialized them to act as men, conforming Althusser's theory. At the "Yale Club," where members exchange business cards to claim the position of alpha male, this is augmented.

¹ violating or challenging socially accepted standards of behavior, belief, morality, or taste

The fact that they must assert their dominance amongst each other, and not only towards women, portrays how they are also victims of society and the male gaze they have created. His obsession with appearance is prevalent throughout the entire text, as Bateman revealed his strenuous exercise in the chapter titled "Health Club," in which he alternates "six sets of fifteen" on the "stomach crunch" with "five sets of ten repetitions" for the "back". This intense routine is his conformity towards masculinity and how an elitist yuppie should look after himself, however, it is slightly subverted in his feminine morning routine, which contrasts this intensity with delicateness, where he eats "Japanese pears" and uses a "honey-almond body scrub". This femininity contrasts the Heroine's mother in *The Bloody Chamber* through her abundance of masculine traits, where she is not really a victim to the patriarchy.

Patrick fights to control his "disordered ego," which gives the reader the impression that he has several personalities and is therefore alienated from 1980s society. However, since it destroys the façade of perfection that he so desperately strives to preserve, his identification as a psychopath is the closest to what may be deemed distinct identity. This conforms Althusser's theory on individual identity and how these men are also victims of the hyper capitalist society they are living in. Carter further emphasizes transgression from women in the story of 'The Lady of the House of Love', where the woman lures men in and murders them.

Critic Merja Makinen argues that the tale comments on male sexual objectification and denigration of women but the male violator is also portrayed as captured within the construction of masculinity (just as the female vampire is trapped within hers). Identity is a major factor in this story, as even though the Countess does not identify as a predatory, evil vampire, Carter's choice of location in this novel shapes her identity into that of a vampire. This has parallels with American Psycho and Bateman's identity is based on his location, meaning the patriarchy is not necessarily the cause of victimization, but perhaps location, which leads to the Countess' transgressive and violent behavior towards men.

This is alluded to by the fact that she was descended from, "Vlad the Impaler", a prince who massacred tens of thousands of people, many of whom were impaled, hence his title. She obtains masculine qualities as her description of the boy parallels the description of the Heroine in 'The Bloody Chamber' - "He has the special quality of virginity". This is alarming as the woman is describing the man like this, contrasting the norm of men describing women like this. This narrative presents an alternate image of virginity and gender and is the inverse of Carter's titular story. Carter alludes to Cervantes' work *Don Quixote* (1605–1615), in which the protagonist embarks on a series of insane adventures after being inspired by his reading of literature only to become demoralized by the disparity between his ideal world and reality.

Don Quixote's incapacity to see loss or defeat makes him comparable to Carter's character, thus the woman not being a patriarchal victim. The paradox is that Carter had previously predicted her soldier's demise while acknowledging the "unique glamour" of those who are spared old age due to combat. Her violent nature is further enforced as she states that she will "grind his bones to make my bread", also linking to the English fairytale of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Similarly, in *American Psycho*, Bateman's psychotic fantasies include him grinding flesh and bones, highlighting how the Carter's Countess and Bateman both have violent similarities. This similarity confirms her behavior as violent and transgressive, thus her not being a victim of the patriarchy.

Conclusion

To conclude, Carter and Ellis portray women as inevitable victims of patriarchy as they are incapable of altering the way that society consistently judges their actions and metes out penalties. They are also victims of sexual violence, as considered objects to satisfy men's passions only, and thus linking sexuality to violence, and in this way expressing men's dominance.

This way, it is clear that women are victims of the patriarchal society, the system and the male dominance, so not being able to stand all this, they disobey the societal rules, lose their femininity traits, become violent and murderers.

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