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Lacan as a Reader of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*

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Abstract

In her modern classic *Bloody Chamber* Angela Carter has reworked many classic tales of western culture, covering tales from Charles Perrault to Grimm brothers. In her rewriting of these tale Carter does not merely reproduce these texts for a modern audience but she adds a political, sexual, and psychological edge to them. This article looks at three selected tales from this collection (*The Tiger's Bride*, *The Bloody Chamber*, and *The Lady of the House of Love*) through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in order to unveil their hidden psychological significance. By drawing on Lacanian key concepts such as “symbolic castration” and “dimension of ate” this paper aims to shed light on the disavowed and unconscious beliefs that constitute the psychological subtext of these narratives and regulate the actions of their characters.

Key words: Lacanian psychoanalysis; Symbolic castration; Dimension of ate; Unconscious

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INTRODUCTION

As a feminist writer of fiction and non-fiction Angela Carter has gained a massive readership among the feminist elite and has introduced herself as a leading figure of the modern wave of feminism. Her impressive body of intellectual work has opened new venues for examining the effects of the patriarchal discourse on

female subjectivity and has paved the way for deeper inquiries concerning the subjugation of women in our era. In the field of fiction short story is Carter's favorite medium as it is evidenced in her ample collections of short story: *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974), *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), *The Bridegroom* (1983), *The Company of Wolves* (1984), *Black Venus* (1985), *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993) (several of these collections are collected in the posthumously published *Burning Your Boats: The Collected Short Stories* (1995). The importance of Carter's short stories for the cannon of English short fiction has been continuously brought into attention by different critics and peers. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Short Story in English* Adrian Hunter places Carter beside the masters of short fiction in English such as Joyce and Woolf. In this book Hunter covers the birth and the progress of the tradition of short fiction in English and examines the most renowned literary figures who contributed to this genre. Carter is included in a chapter titled *postmodernist stories* and is aligned with writers such as Ian McEwan and V. S. Pritchett. Hunter appraises the literary merits of Carter's best known short story collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, against the aesthetics of modernism and postmodernism and unravels the feminist core which is embedded in Carter's reshaping of the familiar fairy tales of the western culture in this collection. For example, according to Hunter, in *The Snow Child* Carter draws out the hidden patriarchal substructure that underpinned the original tale, in particular the way that the evil queen was portrayed. In her reshaping of that fairytale, the Countess does not kill the beautiful snow child out of wickedness but she does it because she is subservient to the patriarchal authority. She kills the child in order to retain her long furs and diamond brooch and, of course, to keep the Count. Carter changes the image of female jealousy that the tale presents as something innate into an examination of female powerlessness in a patriarchal ambience. Hunter's reading of *The Bloody*

Chamber is comparable to many other scholarly works which focus on the feminist stance of the collection, such as Roxie Drayson's *A Feminist Appropriation of Misogynist and Patriarchal Texts: Angela Carter's The Sadeian Woman and The Bloody Chamber*. In this essay Roxie Drayson reads *The Bloody Chamber* alongside *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* another publication by Carter that was published in the same year that the short story collection was published. Similar to Beauvoir in *Must We Burn Sade* Carter considered the pornographic core of Sade's writings to be unique as he used it to reveal the actuality of sexual relations. Carter's assertion that Sade's fiction is directly relevant to the universe of fairy tales leads Drayson to conclude that while in her non-fictional discussion on Sade's writings Carter emphasized on its fairy tale dimensions, in her rewriting of those fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber* she actually endeavoured to weave the Sadeian pornographic representations of women into the fabric of these fairy tales—bridging between her fictional and non-fictional work. It is easy to find many other similar instances of a feminist approach to Carter's writings are available, Hunter and Drayson are only two examples of this widespread tendency to read Carter's fiction either against a general feminist background (what Hunter did) or against the background of her own feminist works (what Drayson did). What is perhaps missing here is opening the manifest feminism of Carter's texts to new critical approaches that might help the reader to engage with her feminist vision on a deeper level. One approach that can contribute to such project is the psychoanalytic approach. This study aims to enrich the appreciation of Carter's literary genius and feminist vision by reading her *The Bloody Chamber* through the lens of psychoanalysis. By drawing on Lacan's psychoanalysis, mainly through Slavoj Žižek's reading of it, this essay attempts to read the feminist manifest content of Carter's short story collection against its latent psychoanalytic subtext in order to reveal how the patriarchal discourse that the collection critiques is underpinned and sustained by psychological imperatives. For this end three stories from the collection had been selected: *The Tiger's Bride*, *The Bloody Chamber*, and *The Lady of the House of Love*.

1. BODY OF DISCUSSION

1.1 Symbolic Castration and the Beauty and the Beast

For various reasons Jacques Lacan designated a strange term for a psychoanalytic thesis that argues human subjectivity is marked by a radical psychic split. "Symbolic Castration" is the term that Lacan uses to describe the "gap between what I immediately am and the function that I exercise," that is to say "I am never complete at the level of my function" and there is a "gap between what I

immediately amend the symbolic title that confers on me a certain status and authority" (Žižek, 2006, p.34). A king is only a king in so far that he identifies with his symbolic title or mask as a king, once he starts to question this symbolic mask as the bearer of his true identity and search for his "real self" he and his kingdom are in deep crisis. That is one reason why Lacan refers to this condition as a case of castration, this gap occurs once the subject enters the symbolic order which deprives (or castrates) the subject from his true psychological identity and appoints a symbolic mask for him which determines his status in the eyes of the big Other, therefore by definition symbolic castration "occurs by the very fact of me being caught in the symbolic order, assuming a symbolic mask or title" (Ibid.). Now, there are many cinematic, literary examples in where the gap caused by the symbolic castration is reflected and concretized, such as Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) which has been the subject of several Lacanian studies. However, perhaps this gap is nowhere concretized as vividly as in Angela Carter's *The Tiger's Bride* from her short story collection *The Bloody Chamber*. In the story—which is a variation on the classic fairytale the Beauty and the Beast—the reader is confronted with a Beast who is much ashamed of his animal appearance and status and diligently attempts to appear as human as possible.

The Beast is ashamed of his animal appearance and attempts to look as human as possible. He wears a mask with a perfect man's face painted on it so only his yellow eyes are visible. He wears old-fashioned clothing, including a wig, gloves over his uncannily large hands and a scarf to cover his neck. He smells so strongly of cologne that the heroine wonders what sinister smell he is trying to conceal. His actions are awkward because he forces himself to act human; the heroine says he "has an air of self-imposed restraint, as if fighting a battle with himself to remain upright when he would far rather drop down on all fours." Furthermore, he speaks in such an incomprehensible growl that his valet must translate for him.

The Beast's masking of himself and pretention to humanity is not limited to his clothes and behavior but he even attempts to simulate the smell of humans. In spite of all measures that he takes to look human his over shadowing animalist aura under mines all of his efforts and he remains a beast in the eyes of the heroine and other characters. However, there is one characteristic that keeps him outside of the animal sphere and binds him close to the human sphere: He can speak. Even though it comes out as growls and grunts and sometimes his valet has to translate them to public the beast is capable of speaking and that means that he has entered the Lacanian symbolic order (the realm of language and the societal norms/regulations that are inscribed in it) and thus, as it was mentioned before, he had undergone symbolic castration as a rule. The very fact that he is ashamed and dissatisfied with his animalist aura is a direct result of his integration within the symbolic order. The creatures who have not acquired language are not capable of

questioning their identity and status qua, it is only as a subject of the language that he (Beast) is capable (or forced to) to measure his status in the eyes of the big Other. The big Other is another Lacanian key term and in simple terms it is an anonymous and insubstantial entity to whom the subject feels obliged to answer and excuse himself, a father-figure that keeps watch over the subject and serves as a point of reference according to whom the subject evaluates his actions and determines his decisions. According to Slavoj Žižek the big Other functions like a yardstick against which the subject measures himself,

the big Other can be personified or reified in a single agent: The “God” who watches over me from beyond, and over all real individuals, or the Cause that involves me (Freedom, Communism, Nation) and for which I am ready to give my life. (Žižek, 2006, p.9)

Žižek believes that subjects of language are completely subservient to the mandates of this agency:

The symbolic order, society’s unwritten constitution, is the second nature of every speaking being: It is here, directing and controlling my acts; it is the sea I swim in, yet it remains ultimately impenetrable—I can never put it in front of me and grasp it. It is as if we, subjects of language, talk and interact like puppets, our speech and gestures dictated by some nameless all-pervasive agency. (Ibid.)

What is important in the above quotation is Žižek’s emphasis on the link between language and the big Other. It is only as subjects of language that we are controlled by the big Other and have to surrender to its mandates. This is precisely the case of the Beast in Carter’s short story: By becoming a subject of the language the Beast opened the gate for the mediation of the big Other. Thus, when he measured himself against the yardstick of the big Other he found himself deplorable and inferior and hence tried to transform his appearance and status to what the big Other approves: A human. Herein we are confronted with an important Lacanian lesson, as Žižek explains “For Lacan, language is a gift as dangerous to humanity as the horse was to the Trojans: It offers itself to our use free of charge, but once we accept it, it colonizes us” (Ibid., p. 9). In *Ecrits. A Selection* Lacan blatantly points to this fact in a passage that implicitly targets the genesis of the big Other:

Is it with the gift of Danaoi* or with the passwords that give them their salutary non-sense that language, with the law, begins? For these gifts are already symbols, in the sense that symbol means pact and that they are first and foremost signifiers of the pact that they constitute as signified, as is plainly seen in the fact that the objects of symbolic exchange—pots made to remain empty, shields too heavy to be carried, sheaves of wheat that wither, lances stuck into the ground—all are destined to be useless, if not simply superfluous by their very abundance. Is this neutralization of the signifier the whole of the nature of language? (Lacan, 2008, p.34)

Thus, the predicament of the Beast is a side effect of colonization by the symbolic order/big Other. This brings us back to symbolic castration because as it

was mentioned before the mask that covers the true psychological identity of the subject is put on for the big Other, or to put it in Žižek’s terms “the symbolic mask or title I wear,” defines “what I am for and in the big Other” (Žižek, 2006, p.9). Now, provided that the Beast in Carter’s short story actually wears a mask we can go back to our initial thesis that the story concretizes symbolic castration in a symbolic form. The Beast’s mask represents and concretizes the symbolic mask that humans wear, the mask that yearns to be registered by the big Other as the true identity of its owner. In the story of the owner of the mask desires to be registered as a human by the big Other so he paints the perfect face of a man on his mask. This act vividly concretizes the functioning of symbolic castration, one could say we are all the beast of Carter’s story wearing a mask upon which what we desire to be known as or for is painted.¹ The gap between the Beast’s mask and his true self/identity (a savage animal) stands as a concrete embodiment of the gap that separates one’s true psychological identity from his symbolic title. Additionally, the Beast’s mask touches upon yet another crucial aspect of Lacanian theory. As it was mentioned before upon the mask the face of a perfect man was painted, this face exhibits what the Beast desires to be. In psychoanalytic terms this desired other that the subject identifies with is called the Alter ego. It is often presumed that Alter ego is a fantasmatic wish-fulfilling mirror image that the ego identifies with, but as Yannis Stavrakakis explains in *Lacan and the Political* for Lacan all egos are by definition alter egos. Ego as our ultimate point of identification is eternally dependent on an alter ego image in which we recognize ourselves:

The ego, the image in which we recognise ourselves, is always an alien *alterego*: We are “originally an inchoate collection of desires—there you have the true sense of the expression *fragmented body* [very well depicted, according to Lacan, in the art of Hieronymus Bosch]—and the initial synthesis of the ego is essentially an alter ego, it is alienated. The desiring human subject is constructed around a centre which is the other insofar as he gives the subject his unity” (III, p.39). In this regard, the Lacanian theory of the mirror stage is probably one of the first instances in which the radical ex-centricity of human subjectivity is recognised within our cultural terrain. (Stavrakakis, 2012, p.18)

From this perspective the painted face on the Beast’s mask concretizes the permanent alter egoian state of the ego, i.e. the fact that one’s ego defines one’s identity so far as that it recognizes itself in some desired image of an other. This being said, the mask on Beast’s face can be considered as his true his ego and plays the role of a site where the Beast’s ego and symbolic title converge.

In Carter’s story the Beast is contrasted with the innocent Beauty, a victim who is subjected to the odious

¹ This is also reminiscent of Jungian Persona: A key Jungian concept that refers to the Masks that we wear in our interaction with society and other people.

deal of becoming the property of the Beast. In the Beast's house Beauty is confronted with a strange request from the Beast which is voiced by his valet:

My master's sole desire is to see the pretty young lady unclothed nude without her dress and that only for the one time after which she will be returned to her father undamaged with bankers' orders for the sum which he lost to my master at cards and also a number of fine presents such as furs, jewels and horses. (Carter, 2016, p.143)

Beauty finds this request appalling and rejects it:

You may put me in a windowless room, sir, and I promise you I will pull my skirt up to my waist, ready for you. But there must be a sheet over my face, to hide it; though the sheet must be laid over me so lightly that it will not choke me. So I shall be covered completely from the waist upwards, and no lights. There you can visit me once, sir, and only the once. After that I must be driven directly to the city and deposited in the public square, in front of the church. (Ibid.)

The striking fact is Beauty prefers to have intercourse with the Beast rather than to have him see her naked. This fact highlights the importance of remaining dressed and avoiding nudity for Beauty. She is determined to not allow someone to see her naked at any cost and although the Beast's request seems much more modest and decent than the presumed sex request she prefers the latter one. This brings us to question what her clothes actually mean to her and what is their symbolic significance. A character analysis of the Beauty can be quite useful here: In the first place the fact that she succumbs to her father's will to carry out the deal and does not run away tell us a lot about her subservient character. She is so subordinated by the codes and ethics of patriarchal domesticity that she does not even think of running and obediently goes to the Beast, and when she starts to think of running or killing herself these very codes are subliminally reminded to her: "Oh, no," said the valet, fixing upon me wide and suddenly melancholy eyes. "Oh, no, you will not. You are a woman of honor." In response to Beauty's threats to run away or commit suicide the Beast's valet repeats the above quoted line several times throughout the story. The subliminal power and impact of these words are strictly connected to Beauty's subservient subjectivity. The word "honor" in the sentence "You are a woman of honor" does not as much refer to feminine decency as it connotes "subservience." The valet reminds to Beauty what she is in the eyes of the big Other each time that he reminds her she is a "woman of honor." This is to say Beauty recognizes herself in and for the big Other as an honorable woman, in the sense of being subservient to the patriarchal symbolic order and its multiple norms and demands. Each time that the valet repeats his refrain to the Beauty he confronts her with the crisis of losing her symbolic mask ("honorable woman") in the gaze of the big Other. This is precisely why these words work like a magic spell on Beauty and without the exchange of any further words she succumbs to not pursuing her wishes. The magical power of these words is

completely clear once we take note that even no thought passes through her mind after or during hearing them, they make her obey as if she is touched by a magic wand. This is a pure instance of how Freudian unconscious holds power over our actions and perceptions. Nearly a century ago Freud exposed how our patterns of action are mostly determined by the workings of our unconscious rather than the conscious mind and how we are constantly impacted by its influence. However, Žižek considers the common understanding of Freudian unconscious as a site of wild and untamed desires erroneous and believes that the Freudian unconscious in its true sense is a knowledge that does not know itself, he explains this point by reference to politics:

In March 2003, Donald Rumsfeld engaged in a brief bout of amateur philosophizing about the relationship between the known and the unknown: "There are known knowns". These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know. What he forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: The "Unknown knowns", things we don't know that we know—which is precisely the Freudian unconscious, the "knowledge that doesn't know itself, as Lacan used to say, the core of which is fantasy. [...] the "unknown knowns", the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves, but which nonetheless determine our acts and feeling. (Žižek 2008, p.52)

This description explains Beauty's condition and predicament: The unseen strings of the unconscious mind pull her to obey the valet as she unconsciously does not want to disappoint the big Other of patriarchy. In this condition she is a complete slave to the demands of her unconscious but she has no know knowledge of how her unconscious is controlling her, this is to say she "doesn't know what she knows," a perfect example of the "unknown knowns" and their detrimental effects. The fact that she does not know or guess what makes the valet's word hold power over her but she surrenders anyway brings us to Lacan's famous statement about the unconscious: "Unconscious is structured as a language." This ambiguous statement can be read in different ways, it can be read as Žižek reads it as a statement that confirms "the unconscious itself obeys its own grammar and logic: The unconscious talks and thinks" (Ibid., p.3). This reading is applicable to Beauty's condition as her unconscious works like an independent machine that follows its own logic and forces her conscious mind to follow its mandates. However, Lacan's statement can be read in a different way as well which still closely corresponds to Beauty's condition. Lacan's statement that the "unconscious is structured as a language" draws attention to the impact of the language on the unconscious and can be read as a reaffirmation of "Lacan's conception of the subject as constituted in and through language" (Homer, 2010, p.34). In Freudian psychoanalysis the role of the language in the unconscious was already quite prominent, although

Freud himself did not seem to be fully aware of that. In the techniques that he used for psychotherapy language played a very pivotal role, e.g. the central role of language in his “talking therapy” and “free association” technique is completely eminent. In free association the patient is placed behind the analyst so he cannot not see him and express whatever comes into his mind freely, something which is described as “psychobabble.” The analyst uses the patient’s psychobabble to identify his psychological disorders and mental traumas and then uses talking therapy as a method to help him overcome his psychological misgivings (Evans, 2006, p.188). In both cases the pivotal role of the language cannot be missed, in the first case language in its distorted and messy form (psychobabble) reveals what is going on in the patient’s unconscious, it takes the form of coded messages that speak of the unknown knowns of the unconscious. In the second case (talking therapy) language becomes an instrument that manipulates the unconscious and is capable of influencing its workings. These facts indicate how much the Freudian understanding of the unconscious is close to Lacanian understanding of it. The fact is Lacan extracted what was already present in Freud’s practice of psychoanalysis but Freud himself was not fully aware of it (another case of “known unknown”). As Sean Homer succinctly explains Lacan discovered in Freudian “talking cure” the role that language plays in the creation and the functioning of the unconscious:

Saussure’s “scientific”, as opposed to historical, analysis of language provided Lacan with a model to study Freud’s “talking-cure”. Saussure revealed how there was a “structure” within us that governed what we say; for Lacan that structure *is* the unconscious. The unconscious is at once produced through language and governed by the rules of language. (Homer, 2010, p.42)

Herein, we can easily see how the words of the valet have such significant impact on Beauty’s unconscious. As a subject of language her unconscious is “produced” and “governed through language” and it is through language that it can be manipulated. Similar to the way that an analyst can impact the unconscious of his patient through words, the words of valet touched the unconscious of the Beauty. With such detailed analysis of Beauty’s character it is now much easier to examine her relationship to her clothes and answer our initial question: the importance that clothes and remaining clothed has for Beauty arises from her deep unconscious attachment to the notion of being a “woman of honor” in the eyes of the big Other (here it is noteworthy to mention that the big Other is not part of the conscious self but belongs to the unconscious and creates part of its grammar). To put it in the dichotomy that entails symbolic castration her clothes make up the symbolic mask that defines her in and for the big Other, while her true self is concealed beneath them. That’s why she is only capable of removing them once the Beast removes his own: “If you will not let him see you

without your clothes—I involuntarily shook my head—you must, then, prepare yourself for the sight of my master, naked” (Carter, 2016, pp.137-138). Although she is not asked to remove her clothes and is only supposed to view the naked body of the Beast, voluntarily she strips the upper part of her body for the Beast to see it. It seems as if that symbolic mask/title was the main barrier that was standing between these two characters and was thwarting their innermost desires, once one of them consented to remove him the other one had an easy job to follow.

1.2 The Beauty and the Mask

In Carter’s *Bloody Chamber* collection Tiger’s Bride is not the only story that deals with the age old fairy tale of the Beauty and the Beast. The second story of the collection, The Courtship of Mr. Lyon, is also based on the fairy tale of the Beauty and the Beast. What differentiates it from the Tiger’s Bride is precisely the unconscious impulses that governs the characters’ pattern of action in Tiger’s Bride. However, there is another story in Carter’s collection where psychoanalytic subtext plays a pivotal role in the relationship between the sexes. In *The Bloody Chamber*, the first story of Carter’s collection, we can detect the influence of Lacanian symbolic castration on the relationship between the heroin and her mysterious husband easily. See how the heroin describes her husband:

And sometimes that face, in stillness when he listened to me playing, with the heavy eyelids folded over eyes that always disturbed me by their absolute absence of light, seemed to me like a mask, as if his real face, the face that truly reflected all the life he had led in the world before he met me, before, even, I was born, as though that face lay underneath this mask. Or else, elsewhere. (Carter, 2016, p.98)

The fact that the heroin describes the face of the husband as a mask that conceals his true face is by no means accidental. The husband truly seems to have a mask on his face that hides his true psychological identity as a psychopath murderer. In the story of the heroin finds out the true self of the husband once she enters his private chamber and discovers the corpses of his previous wives who were brutally tortured and murdered by him. Unlike the mask of the Beast in Tiger’s Bride which is an actual mask that covers a face that divulges true identity the mask of the husband is his actual face and this face conceals a true identity that as the heroin guesses in the above quotation is hidden somewhere else. That “somewhere else” turns out to be the husband’s private chamber, the place where the heroin is confronted with the unmasked truth of Marquis’s psychological identity. However, Marquis himself gave the key of the chamber to the heroin and though he warned her not to enter it because it is a deeply private place to him, this warning appeared more like an invitation as it encouraged the curiosity of the narrator for discovering the secrets of her mysterious husband. This is to some extent similar to Edenic tale of eating the apple: Warning against eating

the apple resulted in great passion for tasting it. Similarly, Marquis's request from the heroin to play with anything you like—jewels, silver plates, etc.—and enter every room but avoid this certain room parallels god's request from Adam and Eve that enjoy all the fruits and beauties of heaven but avoid that certain apple:

Entering the forbidden chamber parallels eating the forbidden apple from the tree of knowledge since entering the chamber brings great knowledge for the heroin similar to the way that eating from the tree of knowledge does for Adam and Eve. However, the important point here is that Marquis (the husband) intended her to obtain that knowledge about him. He could easily avoid giving her the key to the room or even avoid telling her about it. The fact that he gives her the key and arouses her curiosity suggests that at least subconsciously he was willing to reveal to her his true psychological identity. From this perspective Marquis and the Beast are comparable, Marquis does exactly what the Beast did: He removed his mask and revealed to his wife his true psychological identity by giving her the key to his secret chamber similar to the way that the Beast removed his mask and clothes and revealed his true beastly self to the Beauty. However, the difference is unlike the case of the Beauty and the Beast in which the removal of the symbolic mask paves the way for love and sensual contact in the case of *The Bloody Chamber's* heroin and Marquis such removal leads to catastrophe and the attempted murder of the heroin by her pervert husband. Unlike the case of the Beauty and the Beast Marquis attempts to make love to the narrator without taking off his mask but the extent to which he succeeded in this is debatable:

I was brought to my senses by the intent shrilling of the telephone. He lay beside me, felled like an oak, breathing stertorously, as if he had been fighting with me. In the course of that one-sided struggle, I had seen his deathly composure shatter like a porcelain vase flung against a wall; I had heard him shriek and blaspheme at the orgasm; I had bled. And perhaps I had seen his face without its mask; and perhaps I had not. Yet I had been infinitely dishevelled by the loss of my virginity. (Carter, 2016, p.103)

In the above quotation in which the narrator describes her first sexual intercourse with Marquis the first point that catches the eye is the fact that Marquis seemed to have battled with the heroin rather than make love to her and now is tired from that battle. More importantly, as it is described above, during the sex (which is described as a "one-sided struggle") the invincible composure of Marquis cracks a bit and it becomes difficult for him to keep his icy mask on. This leads to heroin wondering whether she caught a glimpse of the man behind the mask or not: "And perhaps I had seen his face without its mask; and perhaps I had not." This is an important lesson that we learn from these two stories in terms of the symbolic mask/title and intercourse. Marquis was deeply determined to keep on his cold mask under any circumstances throughout the story,

even when he proposes to the narrator and she accepts he shows no emotions, but during the intercourse it becomes so difficult for him that he gives in under pressure. On the other hand, the Beast and the Beauty are able to indulge in sexual intercourse at the end of *The Tyger's Bride* after forfeiting their symbolic title in the eyes of the big Other. This leads us to conclude that from a Lacanian viewpoint the stories suggest that any act of sex or sensual contact requires an unmasking of the symbolic mask. Thus, as the case of Marquis suggests, even if one is determined to hang on to his symbolic mask, in the course of the intercourse one is compelled to let go of the strings of the big Other.

2. THE UN-DEAD BEAUTY AND THE DIMENSION OF ATE

In *The Lady of the House of Love*, the third selected short story from Carter's *Bloody Chamber* collection, the reader confronts the age-old enticing figure of the vampire. The very name of the protagonist of the story, Lady Nosferatu, suggests an ancestral link to vampires. As the narrative proceeds the reader is informed that since the Lady vampire has grown old drinking the blood of animals do not satisfy her anymore and she has to feed on young men in order to retain her stunning beauty. However, her impeccable beauty has given her an inhuman aura:

She is so beautiful she is unnatural; her beauty is an abnormality, a deformity, for none of her features exhibit any of those touching imperfections that reconcile us to the imperfections of the human condition. Her beauty is a symptom of her disorder, of her soullessness. The white hands of the tenebrous belle deal the hand of destiny. Her fingernails are longer than those of the mandarins of ancient China and each is pared to a fine point. These and teeth as fine and white as spikes of spun sugar are the visible signs of the destiny she wistfully attempts to evade via the arcana; her claws and teeth have been sharpened on centuries of corpses, she is the last bud of the poison tree that sprang from the loins of Vlad the Impaler who picnicked on corpses in the forests of Transylvania. (Carter, 2016, p.136)

Her unnatural beauty is the main characteristic that differentiates Lady Vampire from humans as impeccable perfection is something that is in odds with humanity in general. That is to say, as quoted above, she lacked the "touching imperfections that reconcile us to the imperfections of the human condition." On the other hand, from a Nietzschean perspective Lady Vampire's agelessness and perfect beauty is "human, all too human." In her state of perfection Lady vampire stands as an embodiment of Nietzschean "overman" or "superman" as far as it pertains to beauty. For Nietzsche the birth of overman is the highest level that humanity can reach, as he explains in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

I teach you the overman. Man is something that is to be surpassed. What have ye done to surpass man? All beings hitherto have created something beyond themselves: And ye

want to be the ebb of that great tide, and would rather go back to the beast than surpass man? What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock, a thing of shame. And just the same shall man be to the Superman: a laughingstock, a thing of shame. Ye have made your way from the worm to man, and much within you is still worm. Once were ye apes, and even yet man is more of an ape than any of the apes. (Nietzsche, 2014, p.24)

In her inhuman state of being Lady Vampire, paradoxically, Lady Vampire culminates human perfection in terms of beauty and serves as a yardstick for measuring humanity in its most sublime level—deprived of its defects and shortcomings. There is a big paradox in this: on the one hand the Lady vampire can be regarded as an outsider and non-human figure as her impeccable beauty negates the imperfection of humans. On the other hand, her unchanging supreme beauty paints an ideal image of human beauty in its most defect-less and complete form and that makes her too human. The question is to what extent can we regard her as a human? Zizek's discussion on the difference between the term non-human and inhuman can be quite helpful here:

“He is not human” is not the same as “he is inhuman.” “He is not human” means simply that he is external to humanity, animal or divine, while “he is inhuman” means something thoroughly different, namely the fact that he is neither human nor inhuman, but marked by a terrifying excess which, although it negates what we understand as “humanity,” is inherent to being human. (Zizek, 2006, p.47)

The excess that Zizek discusses is precisely what the Lady vampire's beauty is. She is inhuman not in the sense of not being a human but in the sense of having an excess that although ‘negates what we understand as “humanity,”’ is inherent to being human. Beauty is an inherent feature to humans and humanity but an excess of it (as the case of Lady vampire suggests) can turn a figure to something beyond human or in Zizek's terminology “inhuman.” The term that describes this excess in Lacanian universe is *objet petit a*. First of all it must be noted that this term has many meanings, as Sean Homer explains

Lacan consistently reformulated the *objet petit a* from his earliest work to his final seminars in the 1970s. The *objet a* is implicated in all three of Lacan's orders. The algebraic sign *a* was first introduced by Lacan in 1955 in relation to the schema L, where it designates the little other, *autre*, as opposed to the capitalized A of the big Other. (Homer, 2010, p.87)

However, one straightforward definition that Lacan presents for this term and is complemented by Zizek is this: “That which is ‘in you more than you’ and thus makes me desire you” (Zizek, 1998, p.xviii). This definition strikes one as ambiguous, what can it be in one “which is more than” one and makes the subject desire the object. Zizek explains this ambiguity by reference to cinema: In the cinematic adaptation of Patrick Suskind's *Perfume Grenouille*, the film's miserable protagonist, lacks odor so that it is impossible for others to smell him; conversely he has an exceptional sense of smell, such that

he is capable of detecting people from far away. When Grenouille's beloved girl dies he tries to resurrect her, of course not physically. He attempts to recreate her odor by killing many beautiful young women and removing the surface of their skin to extract their odors, thus creating an extraordinary perfume. This strange perfume is the ultimate extracted “essence” of feminine charm: when the masses smell it, they suspend their restraints and embark on blissful sexual orgy. This extracted femininity is a supreme example of what Lacan called the *objet petit a* “the object-cause of desire, that which is ‘in you more than you’ and thus makes me desire you” (Zizek, 1998, p.xviii). Now, the point is while the *objet petit a* is the object cause of desire it can also function as the object cause of hate and otherization and it is precisely this aspect of *objet petit a* that is relevant to the case of the Lady vampire. In *How to Read Lacan* (2006) Zizek again uses cinema to explain this aspect of the *objet petit a*:

There is, in science fiction horror movies, a figure of the alien opposed to that of the representable and all-devouring monster of Scott's *Alien*, a figure immortalized in a who leseries of films from the 1950s whose most famous representative is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. An ordinary American is driving somewhere in the half-abandoned countryside when his car breaks down and he goes for help to the closest small town. Soon he notices that something strange is going on in the town—people are behaving in a strange way, as if they are not fully themselves. It becomes clear to him that the town has been taken over by aliens who have penetrated and colonized human bodies, controlling them from within: Although the aliens look and act exactly like humans, there is as a rule a tiny detail that betrays their true nature (a strange glint in their eyes; too much skin between their fingers or between their ears and heads). This detail is the Lacanian *objet petit a*, a tiny feature whose presence magically transubstantiates its bearer into an alien. In contrast to Scott's alien, which is totally different from humans, the difference here is minimal, barely perceptible. Are we not dealing with the same in our every day racism? Although we are ready to accept the Jewish, Arab, Oriental other, there is some detail that bothers us in the West: The way they accentuate a certain word, the way they count money, the way they laugh. This tiny feature renders them aliens, no matter how they try to behave like us. Arab, Oriental other, there is some detail that bothers us in the West: The way they accentuate a certain word, the way they count money, the way they laugh. This tiny feature renders them aliens, no matter how they try to behave like us. (Zizek, 2006, pp. 66-67)

What Zizek touches on in the above quotation is precisely the process whereby the Lacanian *objet petit a* creates the other. Does not this case apply to the Lady vampire as well? Is not her impeccable beauty the *objet petit a* that makes her an alien other? Similar to the case of the body snatchers here also the difference is minimal but this minimal difference suffices to make the Lady vampire the other. This is to say that her abnormal beauty is the *objet petit a* that makes her “inhuman.” Her inhumanity which is caused by her beauty is even reminiscent of Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert's notion of “angle woman.” In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) they proposed this

view that patriarchal discourse has constantly been trying to reduce the identity of woman to two contradictory clichés: The angle and the monster. According to Gilbert and Gubar both of these stereotypes equally undermine the status of woman as a human. In the first stereotype we are confronted with a devilish image of woman that not only lacks human traits but also embodies all the possible threats that endanger the male gender. On the other hand the latter stereotype which presents an angelic image of woman undermines the humanity of woman equally: It pictures woman as a divine and unearthly entity who is as pure and innocent as angels. From this perspective woman transcends the level of a human and by attaining an ultra-human status loses her human identity, similar to the way human status is undermined in the first cliché only in the reverse direction (Gilbert & Gubar, 2007, pp.17-22). They proceed to claim that the “angle-woman” is barely a living being since her story-less life “like the life of Goethe’s Makarie, is really a life of death, a death-in-life” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2007, p.25). In a way Lady Vampire resembles Gilbert and Gubar’s angle-woman as she transcends the level of an ordinary human and has an ultra-human status. Following the Gubar and Gilbert’s line of reasoning it can be claimed that similar to the angle woman the Lady vampire is also experiencing “a death-in-life.” This is by no means far-fetched as in the story it is said that the Lady vampire “has the mysterious solitude of ambiguous states; she hovers in a no man’s land between life and death, sleeping and waking” (Carter, 2016, p.139). Being ‘between life and death’ is a translation of death-in-life, or to put it in other words neither dead nor alive. Zizek describes this condition as being “between two deaths” and in *The Fright of Real Tears* gives a full description of it viareferring to different movies:

Previous to this ability to mourn, Julie finds herself “between two deaths”: Dead while still alive. It is Peter Weir’s underrated *Fearless* (1993) that provides the best exemplification of this notion: After miraculously surviving the plane crash, the hero (Jeff Bridges) is suspended, exempted from common mortal fate (he no longer fears death, no longer is allergic to strawberries ...). This topic of “between two deaths” also echoes in Bruce Beresford’s *Double Jeopardy* (1999), a structural inversion of Billy Wilder’s noir classic *Double Indemnity* (1944): A wife (Ashley Judd) is imprisoned for allegedly killing her husband; when, in prison, she by chance discovers that her husband is alive, she learns about so-called “double jeopardy”—you cannot be tried two times for the same crime, which means that she is now free to kill her husband with impunity. This situation displays the fantastic situation of finding oneself in an empty space in which an act becomes possible for which the subject bears no symbolic responsibility. The film repeatedly refers to this space “between two deaths”: When her husband gets hold of her, he locks her in a coffin in a New Orleans cemetery, so that now *she* finds herself in the position of the living dead. (Zizek, 2001, p.167)

Zizek could easily add *The Lady of the House of Love* to his examples (if he decided to add literary examples) as the protagonist hovers between death and life and is

experiencing a metaphoric death-in-life that supplements her already living-dead status as a vampire. To put it in precise Lacanian terms her condition is what Lacan calls the dimension of *ate*. Zizek explains this Lacanian concept in this way:

As we all know, Event Horizon is the region of space that surrounds a Black Hole: It’s an invisible (but *real*) threshold—once you cross it, there is no wayback, you are sucked into the Black Hole. If we conceive of the Lacanian Thing as the psychic equivalent of the Black Hole, then its Event Horizon is what Lacan, in his reading of *Antigone*, defines as the dimension of *ate*, of the horrifying space between two deaths. (Zizek, 2001, p.167)

The dimension of *ate* fully describes and touches upon the core of Lady vampire’s predicament. At this point, we can supplement our previous discussion on her paradoxical status as super human/non-human with a new evaluation. We concluded that the antagonism that we see in her status as super human and non-human can be fully reconciled once we introduce a third category—the inhuman—that can account for the excess of humanity that makes her non-human. Similarly in the case of her paradoxical dead-while-still-alive condition we need to introduce a third category which while including death and life goes beyond both and can fully account for her condition. We can find this category in Zizek’s notion of the “un-dead.” Exactly as the term inhuman opens up a third domain that encompasses and surpasses the antagonism between non-human and super human the term “un-dead” opens up a third domain that defies and incorporates death and life simultaneously: “The difference is exactly the same as the one, known to every reader of Stephen King, between “he is not dead” and “he is un-dead.” The indefinite judgment opens up a third domain which undermines the underlying distinction: the “undead” are neither alive nor dead, they are precisely the monstrous ‘living dead’” (Zizek, 2006, p.21). Here, we can discover the true importance of the climactic intercourse between the Lady vampire and the unfortunate soldier. Melinda G. Fowl in her article *Angela Carter’s Bloody Chamber Revisited* explains that in Carter’s the *Lady of the House of Love* “three figures unite in the protagonist: the Sleeping Beauty of the fairy tales, the Vampire and the Wanderer of gothic legendary” (Fowl, 1991, p.76). She adds that “like the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood waiting for the Prince’s kiss, the beautiful Countess sits in her antique bridal gown waiting”. (Ibid.) The comparison that Fowl draws between the Sleeping Beauty and the Lady vampire is quite meaningful here, of course from a completely different perspective. To follow our previous line of reasoning the Sleeping Beauty also belongs to the Lacanian dimension of *ate*: She is the “un-dead.” She is neither alive nor dead as she is trapped in a coma-like sleep that negates the distinction between them. She is dangling in a space between life and death and it is only through the kiss of the prince that she escapes the predicament of the un-dead. This aspect of Sleeping

Beauty is precisely what Carter revives in her remaking of it. The reason that the protagonist is a vampire and is described as hovering between death and life and has an unearthly beauty (aside from corresponding to the beauty of the Sleeping Beauty) that likens her to ethereal beings is to recreate the living-dead status of the Sleeping Beauty in a new artistic form and shape. Lady Vampire stands as a distorted and defamiliarized remaking of Sleeping Beauty. At the first glance nobody would suspect such connection but a deeper examination fully exposes the dimension of *ate* that connects these two characters. Following this line of argument similar to the tale of the Sleeping Beauty where the kiss of the prince returns the Sleeping Beauty from being un-dead to being alive, in *The Lady of the House of Love* the love-making of the British soldier with the Lady vampire takes her out of un-dead status, as it turns her into a mortal aging human being who finally passes away.

CONCLUSION

In this article I drew upon the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek to extract the latent psychoanalytic subtext that governs the universe of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. I concluded that "symbolic castration" troubles the relationship between the couples in *The Tiger's Bride* and *The Bloody Chamber* as they are torn between their true psychological identity and symbolic mask. Additionally, I concluded Beauty's subjectivity was subjected to a psycho-linguistic subliminal manipulation which is rooted in Lacan's

thesis that unconscious is structure by and as language. Furthermore, I applied the Lacanian "dimension of *ate*" to the predicament of Lady Vampire in *The Lady of the House of Love* and explained how this concept links Lady Vampire to Snow-white.

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