

BREAKING CODES OF SEXUALITY: ANGELA CARTER'S VAMPIRE WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the depiction of vampire women in Angela Carter's "The loves of Lady Purple" and "The lady of the house of love." Exploring the vampires' potential of abjection, this depiction subverts patriarchal ideologies about women's sexuality.

KEYWORDS

Sexuality, vampire women, abject, Angela Carter

The figure of the vampire woman has been used in literature to represent a transgressive sexuality that opposes the patriarchal ideal of femininity and women's sexual behavior, being Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's *Lucy Westenra* pivotal examples. But differently from early vampire stories that reinforce the idea of subversive femininity as unacceptable, in contemporary fiction the representation of such femininity is explored in a way to undermine patriarchal assumptions, including the very interpretation of the vampire woman as a stereotype for transgressive femininity. In this essay, I am going to develop this argument through a comparative analysis of two vampire stories by Angela Carter: "The loves of Lady Purple" and "The lady of the house of love".

The undermining of patriarchal notions related to sexuality by some contemporary literary works reflects the arguments of contemporary analyses of the term "sexuality." Such analyses indicate that this term is a socially, historically and culturally constructed convention and that the notion of sexuality is too complex to be grasped by fixed definitions. Some scholars, however, have been trying to provide a general definition of sexuality that contests the equivocated traditional ones. Lizbeth Goodman, for instance, affirms that this term "refers to the realm of sexual experience

and desire” and, sometimes, “to a person’s sexual orientation (as heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual)”.¹ This notion is distinguished from that of gender, which “refers to ways of seeing and representing people and situations based on sex differences”.² In sum, the term “sexuality” generally refers to sexual practices and interests, while “gender” refers to the division of social roles based on sex (biological) difference.

The constructed notion of sexuality determines a group of behaviors and characteristics considered culturally and socially accepted (related to heterosexuality), and at the same time, the sexual behaviors and characteristics that consist of what is unacceptable (related to homosexuality or bisexuality). Judith Butler suggests that this privileging of heterosexuality is guaranteed through the performative repetition of this sexual behavior by individuals.³ The author argues that on this notion that heterosexuality is natural and original is based the notion of sex, gender, and sexuality as consisting of binary categories and as continuous and congruent with each other.⁴ Butler contests this continuity affirming that there is no clear connection between gender presentation and sexuality.

Michel Foucault affirms that sexuality is a social apparatus applied for controlling individuals. According to him, it is determined and controlled through discourses created by social institutions throughout time to examine and explain the human sexualized body.⁵ Such discourses argue against every kind of sexual practice that does not serve the function of reproduction, dictating in this way which sexual behaviors are “proper” and which ones are transgressive.

It is possible to perceive such discourses about proper and improper sexuality in the representation of vampires in folklore and in literature. These creatures traditionally symbolize transgressive sexuality. The sucking of blood suggests images of random and lustful sexual intercourse and the vampirization of humans implies moral and biological contamination.⁶ In general, vampires have epitomized the fear of subversion of the social rules, representing in this sense patterns of behavior to be avoided. However, at

¹ GOODMAN. *Literature and gender*, p. vii.

² GOODMAN, *Literature and gender*, p. vii.

³ BUTLER. *Imitation and gender insubordination*, p. 724.

⁴ BUTLER. *Imitation and gender insubordination*, p. 728-729.

⁵ FOUCAULT. *The history of sexuality*, v. 1, p. 107.

⁶ GELDER. *Reading the vampire*, p. 48.

the same time, vampires have been raising the desire of people who intimately long for freedom (especially sexual) and immortality.

Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject can be used to explain the duality of the symbolisms of vampires. According to the author, the abject is the improper thing that must be expelled so as to guarantee a "clean and proper' body," which is the condition for the individual's constitution as a speaking subject".⁷ The abject is mainly related to body fluids (feces, urine, sweat, blood), to the corpse, and to the female (the mother's) body and sexuality. It is characterized as something positioned "in between", and as such, it hinders the subject's identification, defying his or her notion of the integrity of his or her own body. Kristeva's notion of abjection extends to people who transgress borders and laws, being in this sense also a threat to the integrity of society.

Although for these threats the abject is seen with repulsion, there is also an attractive aspect to it. Kristeva argues that the abject offers a kind of pleasure by which the individual is unconsciously attracted, but this attraction turns into repugnance when this individual fails to identify him or herself in relation to the abject.⁸ In an argument based on Freud's and Lacan's assumptions that the individualization of the subject requires a rupture with the universe of the mother and identification with the father, Kristeva explains that this attraction by the abject is related to the individual's attraction by the pleasures offered by the maternal body.⁹ Once the object of the individual's desire, the maternal body is then rendered abject, repulsive, by the threat it represents to the construction of the individual's subjectivity as separated from that of the mother. Kristeva associates the maternal body and female sexuality to abjection also because of the implications of menstruation and of the differences between the female and the male sexual apparatus, being the latter privileged by patriarchy.

The notion of the abject can be applied to the vampires to the extent that the representations of these creatures are often based on a dangerous exchange of body fluids with sexual connotations. As vampires are corpses getting new life from body fluids (blood) of dead people, they represent an improper crossing of the boundaries between death and life and between the self and the other. Immortality is a desirable effect, rendering the vampire an attractive figure, but the disrespect of natural laws it

⁷ KRISTEVA. *Powers of horror*: an essay on abjection, p. 53.

⁸ KRISTEVA. *Powers of horror*: an essay on abjection, p. 8.

⁹ KRISTEVA. *Powers of horror*: an essay on abjection, p. 12.

requires is threatening and makes the vampire also repulsive. This creature's sexuality (implied in his of her sucking and exchange of blood) can be considered abject for its transgressing of the bodily sexual zones and cycles. Such transgression is both desired, for the sexual pleasure it offers, and repelled, for the threat it posits to the individual's recognition as a member of a society that labels the kind of sexual practice represented by vampirism as improper. The vampire, in this sense, has an abject potential: as constituted by everything that is improper, this creature threatens a person's identification as a subject and as a member of society. This potential tends to be enhanced by the symbolism added to the vampire figure in relation to women's sexuality, such as the abject maternal function implied in the possibility of vampirizing humans and feeding them with vampire's blood. The abject potential of vampires is therefore even higher when these vampires are women and I argue here that this abjection is the main point that characterizes Carter's vampire women.

In Carter's "The loves of Lady Purple", the stereotype of the vampire woman that characterizes the protagonist relates to a transgressive female sexuality. As a prostitute, Lady Purple's sexuality is exacerbated, and as a dominatrix, a necrophagist, and a necrophiliac, her sexuality is transgressive of a code-oriented morality, consisting of perversion. While a puppet, she performs the transgressive role created to her by the old ventriloquist. And when the puppet comes to life, she does not become a "conventional" woman, but a vampire woman. The narrator does not use the word "vampire" in the story but it can be inferred from the description of the scene. The vampire feeding on her master is depicted as a performance, representing the stereotypical and transgressive sexual practices related to the woman-monster: "unaided, she beg[ins] her next performance with an apparent improvisation which [is], in reality, only a variation upon a theme. She s[inks] her teeth into his throat and drain[s] him".¹⁰ Such new performance, therefore, repeats old vampire stories, which represent the discourses that created the vampire-woman stereotype. Accordingly, the transgressive act represented by the vampire feeding on her own creator is also socially created and incorporated by women through compulsory repetition.

All the same, this act is not a simple repetition of the theme of female transgressive sexuality, but a "variation" upon that theme, which conveys the same idea but with different implications. Vampirism appears only at the end of the story as a new

¹⁰ CARTER. *The loves of Lady Purple*, p. 36.

element in the transformations that Lady Purple experiences throughout it, in a way that suggests new possibilities to that new being. It is through the violent act of the vampire feeding on her master that she is able to break free from the strings that keep her under the ventriloquist's control. The importance of the vampire figure in "The loves of Lady Purple" is that, through it, Carter demonstrates an alternative way to represent women's sexuality. The vampire feeding on her master symbolizes the possibility of women's acting upon her own desires as an alternative to simple repetitions of the performances that are rendered sexually transgressive by the male desires and fantasies that inform patriarchal discourses.

Similarly, the role of a vampire woman in "The lady of the house of love" implies an exacerbated and improper sexuality. The ritual of seduction and murder is an obligation, through which "the beautiful somnambulist helplessly perpetuates her ancestral crimes".¹¹ This ritual can be related to Butler's notion of compulsory performance of sexuality,¹² in that Countess Nosferatu repetitively and perpetually plays the role of the men-eater woman, a stereotype for female transgressive sexuality. Countess Nosferatu is observed by the vampire ancestors, who monitor her accomplishment of her rituals out of the old portraits on the castle's walls, in a reference to the control by society and tradition over female sexual behavior. Therefore, sexuality is discussed in this story through the characterization of a woman's sexuality that is transgressive but still imposed. The only survivor of an aristocratic family, Countess Nosferatu still suffers from the imposition of sexist social rules instead of being able to live according to her free will. There is no physical presence of her ancestors to constrain her, only the internalized notion that she is bound to perform the role she inherited from them.

Regarding the dangerous quality of Lady Nosferatu's sexuality, it can be said that her victims are drawn to her through a kind of sex appeal. The description of her rituals resembles the work of a prostitute, a real role performed similarly for every victim/client without any kind of affection. This performance is not indicative of her sexual interest or identity, in that it agrees with Butler's argument that one's sexuality is not something that can be grasped through the observation of one's performance.¹³ She

¹¹ CARTER. *The lady of the house of love*, p. 93.

¹² BUTLER. *Imitation and gender insubordination*, p. 725.

¹³ BUTLER. *Imitation and gender insubordination*, p. 725.

does not identify with the role of the vampire (metaphorically, the female exacerbated sexuality), her performance is deprived of any kind of personal involvement and self-satisfaction. An evidence for this fact is that the vampire/prostitute performs this sexual role compulsively and efficiently only until the day she falls in love with her victim, the British soldier (who corresponds both to the fairytale's prince and to the gothic hero). When she feels affectively attracted by the one she is supposed only to use and discard (as an object of physical desire), she does not know how to negotiate her personal interests and is unable to perform that compulsory ritual.

The idea of female sexuality evoked in the story is described as excessive and obscene, at the same time that it is capable of overwhelming men's senses, like the rose's intoxicating scent. The fact that these roses incarcerate the countess in her castle can be interpreted as suggesting that her exacerbated female sexuality isolates her from social life, deprives her of indulging in practices that would satisfy her personal desires. Similarly, Countess Nosferatu's mouth is rendered sexual implications, especially from the young soldier's point of view. The idea that that kind of mouth is typical of a whore attests the common sense that sees it as indicative of the woman's sexual appetite, because of the similarities between the mouth and the female genitalia. Kristeva's notion of the abject can also be associated with this idea. The potential for the satisfaction of sexual desire related to the exacerbated female sexuality (which is suggested by the image of a prominent female genitalia) is abject for being both attractive and repulsive. It is attractive because it offers excessive sexual pleasures and repulsive because it is considered improper by hegemonic social discourses, a danger to the individual's physical and moral integrity.

The end of Countess Nosferatu's tale presents a paradox in the criticism of control of women's sexual behavior by the sex/gender system: she breaks free from the fate of killing every man she seduces but dies, as if she could not live in any other way. Although the death of the victimized lady seems a sad end, it can be seen as congruent with the idea of breaking with social expectations: if Lady Nosferatu's fate is to live eternally from the blood of her victims, breaking with this fate means not killing and thus not living. Differently from Lady Purple, whose transformation into a vampire represents an alternative possibility of satisfaction of women's sexual desires, Countess Nosferatu dies because the kind of satisfaction offered by vampirism does not interest her. The sexual pleasure implicit in the vampire feeding is presented to Lady Purple as a new possibility, different from those she experienced in her performance of the other

roles she assumes (the puppet, the prostitute, the dominatrix, the necrophiliac, the necrophagist).

It can be concluded that the short stories by Carter analyzed here demonstrate a criticism on the social control of sexual options and sexual practices. This use of the vampire figure is particular of contemporary fiction, which tends to subvert binary oppositions such as those between human/monster and men/women. Carter's short stories demythologize stereotypes of women's transgressive sexuality, contesting and undermining patriarchal notions of women's sexuality through the exploration of the potential of abjection that the figure of the vampire women represents.

RESUMO

Este ensaio analisa a representação de vampiras em “The loves of Lady Purple” e em “The Lady of the house of love”, de Angela Carter. Explorando a abjeção dos vampiros, essa representação subverte ideologias patriarcais sobre a sexualidade feminina.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Sexualidade, vampiras, abjeto, Angela Carter

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