
By David S. Hogsette, Ph.D.

Introduction

In “The Lady of the House of Love” Angela Carter presents readers with a charmingly disturbing story about a disillusioned female vampire who, despite descending from the ancient and noble Nosferatu family, no longer wishes to be what she is supernaturally designed and textually destined to be—a blood-sucking, undead creature of the night. Rather, this vampire Countess longs for true love and to be merely human. The unanticipated arrival of the innocent soldier works contrary to Gothic femme fatale narrative expectations and ironically gives the Countess the gift of spiritual life through physical death. Curiously, the soldier’s virginity is his power. His virginal innocence enables him to see past her bordello-of-blood persona and to view her not as a sexual object but as a sick girl who needs love, kindness, and nurturing. She is indeed dis-eased (physically and emotionally) and in need of curative nurture and transformative love. She knows she is not well, that she is not right or natural as she is, and she longs for transcendent change.

Cornelia Macsiniuc observes that by creatively revising Gothic narratives and traditional fairytales, Carter “may turn the traditional [female] victims of these tales, into empowered creatures, who welcome a transgressive experience, and she may also reveal masculinity as, potentially, equally vulnerable. Or she may deconstruct the figure of the empowered woman as dreamed of by feminist militants” (80). Thus in “The Lady of the House of Love,” we have woman as duplicitous dangerous vamp and helpless girl, and we see man as the masculinist sexual predator (embodied in the young village men) and the virginal innocent boy (the
unexpected soldier). However, even in these duplicitous revisions of gender roles and ambiguous social positioning, the cultural dualities are reaffirmed, and there is no escape from the battle-of-the-sexes narrative. The characters are forever making war with each other, not love. A nuanced and classical understanding of the divine interplay of what C. S. Lewis calls Need-love and Gift-love, I will argue, provides a theoretical framework with which to move beyond postmodern notions of overdetermined gender duality and to find freedom in a complementarian view of sexual communion between man and woman.

**Diverse Responses to Carter’s Feminist Project**

“The Lady of the House of Love” is a postmodern, revisionist Gothic tale that intertextually invokes Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and incorporates traditional fairytale metanarratives, published alongside other revisionist fairytale stories in the collection titled *The Bloody Chamber*. Despite Carter’s overt feminist agenda, feminist critics and readers in general are often perplexed by her work, and they are deeply divided as to the nature and efficacy of her feminist messaging. Macsiniuc argues that Carter’s postmodern appropriation, inversion, and re-casting of classical fairytales and Gothic myths transform what feminist critics consider to be irredeemable cultural texts of patriarchal oppression and strict gender-role affirmations into modern fairytales that problematize normative gender categories while simultaneously questioning the feasibility of revising these categories (Macsiniuc 79-80).

Even though Carter considered herself a radical feminist, Linden Peach observes many feminist scholars have a love-hate relationship with Carter’s work. For example, critics have accused her of creating female characters that appropriate masculinist qualities, of encouraging self-alienation that feeds patriarchal power, and of writing as a woman ventriloquizing the male
voice, thus replicating misogynistic perspectives (Peach 6-7). Similarly, Eliza Filimon notes that many critics struggle with apparent internal contradictions in her characters that undermine their female subjectivity and keep them under male domination (80-81). Writing specifically about “The Lady of the House of Love,” Kimberly Lau suggests Carter expresses an ambiguous feminist message in which female sexual autonomy is simultaneously liberated from and subject to patriarchal culture (107).

Carter is indeed a curious and challenging writer of contemporary revisionist fairytales, and her precise feminism is nearly impossible to label neatly within the myriad of critical feminist perspectives filling the scholarly landscape. That is precisely as Carter would have it. Whether one totally agrees with all her specific views, her concerns address all of humanity without necessarily privileging one sex over the other, though at times her reconstructed female characters certainly dominate her revised male figures. At least in “The Lady of the House of Love,” and most other stories in The Bloody Chamber, Carter’s ultimate concern is of building, correcting, and reshaping relationships between men and women in which both are more fully humanized in relation to each other, irrespective of surrounding cultural pressures.

**A Postmodern Narrative of Textually Determined Subjectivity**

One of the many literary wonders and artistic marvels of Carter’s postmodern vampire tale is her clever appropriation of intertextual allusions. As Katie Harse notes, this narrative is “even more obviously a literary construct, a self-conscious pastiche of other texts, from fairy tales to Bram Stoker” (252). Carter’s postmodern intertextual riffing underscores her political message: Men in a patriarchal society culturally define gender roles and thus control women’s identities and social function, and, tragically, the only escape from this societal
overdetermination is death. For example, after the Countess has killed and consumed a local oversexed male victim, the arrival of the young soldier is framed by the Jack and the Beanstalk narrative:

Fee fie fo fum

I smell the blood of an Englishman

.................................

Be he alive or be he dead

I’ll grind his bones to make my bread (Carter 96, 97).

Gender roles in this classic tale are inverted and transformed, such that the Countess becomes the terrifying giant who thinks she will kill and eat this English soldier. Ironically, the prescribed fairytale metanarrative does follow the script in that as the giant is killed so too is the Countess, but the thematic outcome is subverted and transformed. The young soldier is the Jack figure, yet he doesn’t kill the Countess out of fear and malice; instead, he nurtures and cares for her. Although she physically dies in the end, the soldier’s inversion of the metanarrative allows the Countess to escape her Gothic script—she dies to her material vampiric self and is reborn in spirit as a true human (Carter 107).

In a complex postmodern turn, Carter also inverts the Sleeping Beauty fairytale, only to reinscribe the Countess within the Lady of Shallot legend. The Countess experiences sleep in the sense that she is death-in-life, and even though she is not passively unconscious as is Sleeping Beauty, she is trapped within a death-like existence which she abhors. The narrator notes, “A single kiss woke up the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood” (Carter 97), and clearly the Countess wonders if maybe this soldier will be the loving prince who wakes her from her vampiric state—after all, she has finally drawn the Lovers Tarot card (Carter 97). Yet, she simultaneously expects
to sexually consume him just as she has all the other male suiters. Though not exactly a knight in shining armor, the young man is a soldier who rides up on a bicycle for his steed. Just as Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger and becomes vulnerable in slumber, the Countess drops and breaks her red eyeglasses as she fumbles through her normal vampire seduction ritual, pricking her finger on the broken shards of glass, and becoming vulnerable to an unexpected sequence of events. The normal vampiric plot is broken, and she is unnervingly unscripted. The soldier’s loving kiss of the wound, in which he consumes her blood instead of her consuming his, wakes her from her vampire existence and frees her from her Gothic inscribed identity, yet puts her to sleep in death (Carter 105-107). Even as Carter inverts these Sleeping Beauty textual elements to initiate the Countess’s spiritual freedom, she re-inscribes the Countess within the Lady of Shallot legend. Both are trapped in an ancestral castle or tower; both are limited by their respective curses which determine their identity and destiny; both long for freedom and for genuine love to release them from their curse; and both die for the sake of love. The Countess is freed from her scripted vampiric identity and fate, yet she is re-inscribed by another cultural narrative in which the woman dies for love.

However, some critics do see the Countess as a transformative feminist figure. For instance, Sarah Gamble argues that the Countess represents another example of Carter creating a strong female character who rejects the consolatory role of victim and who, on the other hand, relishes in satisfying a de Sadeian desire for destructive sexual power (159-60). Similarly, Lau locates the Countess within the feminist notion of female vampire as social revolutionary and cultural transformer: “The female vampire . . . awakens desires that threaten the very foundations of patriarchal order. Whether femme fatale or lesbian lover, she challenges heteronormativity, the boundaries of gender, and male control over the circulation of women” (100). Yet, Carter’s
vampire Countess seeks the patriarchal norms of traditional fairytales, particularly what some would consider the trite and unrealistic happily-ever-after love narrative of Sleeping Beauty that metanarratively circumscribes this character. She succumbs to the paternal love of the soldier and then dies, leaving the patriarchal heteronormative structures very much intact.

**An Ambiguous Ending and the Power of Masculine Virginity**

The ending to “The Lady of the House of Love” is indeed ambiguous, even troubling for most feminist perspectives seeking female empowerment and inversion of traditional gender roles. However, the key to redeeming this ending can be found in the oft-overlooked and misunderstood quality of the soldier—his virginity: “He has the special quality of virginity, most and least ambiguous of states: ignorance, yet at the same time, power in potential, and, furthermore, unknowingness, which is not the same as ignorance. He is more than he knows” (Carter 97). In yet another gender-role inversion, instead of outlining the virtues of feminine virginity, Carter describes the unexpected power, beauty, and nobility of the culturally undervalued quality of male virginity. He is not like the sex-craved village men who seek from the Countess perverse sex and pornographic erotica and who reduce her to mere sexual object and banal beastly sexuality. Rather, he possesses the one quality that allows him to see her truly for who and what she is, not a sexual object, but a unique female subject who, though made unlovely and unlovable by her cannibalistic sexual practices, is worthy of loving care as a precious beloved. Ironically, as critics seek female sexual autonomy and power in this text, Carter presents readers with a complex narrative in which virginity and sexual purity provide the necessary perspective to escape the emotionally bankrupt and spiritually damning consequences of unchecked sexual autonomy.
Most critics disagree with this interpretation of the soldier’s virginity. For example, Lau interprets the soldier as a flawed hero whose innocence is a limitation (120). Similarly, Filimon diminishes and delimits the soldier by claiming his Enlightenment disbelief strips the Countess of her performative power as seductive vamp and thus debilitates her female agency (89). However, these readings miss a deeper resonance to this character—his virginity and his innocence are his strengths, not his limitations. He doesn’t know the perverse, pornographic, unnatural, selfish erotic desire that the village men hungrily seek and the Countess seductively offers. Carter not only demythologizes the woman as sexual victim, but she also debunks the myth of masculine sexual power, presenting readers instead with the nurturing and liberating power of the chaste, virginal male. This male character contrasts the oft-used feminist trope of the crippled and thus emasculated male (which Carter invokes in the blind piano tuner character in “The Bloody Chamber”); rather, he is a young, vibrant, and self-confident soldier who, due to his virginity, can see through the Countess’s hyper-sexualized veil and thus see her true need of love and her desire to be human.

C. S. Lewis’s Divine Dynamic of Gift-love and Need-love as Complementarian Resolution

I contend that C. S. Lewis’s explanation of human and divine love provides an interpretive framework that resolves the ambiguities of Carter’s seemingly problematic ending. First, Lewis’s formulation of Eros, as distinct from the love of Venus, helps us examine and understand the complex sexual practices spiritually haunting the Countess. Mere sexual desire, according to Lewis, simply wants sex itself (what he calls Venus) devoid of any care or concern for the sexual partner. Eros, on the other hand, wants the beloved. Eros does not want just any other but, rather, wants a specific other, the beloved, and no other will do (94). Lewis explains
that “[w]ithout Eros sexual desire, like every other desire, is a fact about ourselves. Within Eros it is rather about the Beloved” (95).

The Countess as seductress manipulates the wild Venus or mere sexual desire in the young men and extends the promise of sexual experience as fulfilment itself, only to transform the sexual event into a cannibalistic orgy of blood in which she satisfies her carnal desires and vampiric need of nourishment—human flesh and blood. As a non-human vampire existing at the level of mere beast, the Countess has only experienced sexual desire in the absence of Eros. Yet, she knows deep inside—literally to her bones—that this lust is devoid of any emotional significance, and the absence of Eros, or a desire for a specific beloved, leaves her spiritually bankrupt.

Above Eros is what Lewis calls Gift-love, the very loving nature of God, growing out of his eternal fullness. There is nothing God lacks and therefore nothing He needs, and as such, His love is necessarily a Gift-love (Lewis 126). Gift-love in humans, according to Lewis, is thus an expression of the divine (Lewis 127). Need-love, though built into the very design of human creatureliness, does not resemble the loving nature of God, for in His divine wholeness and unity He cannot lack or need anything. The Countess’s desire for cannibalistic sexuality is devoid of Eros (love of a specific beloved) and is illustrative of mere Need-love. Yet, she has another, higher form of Need-love, the desire for true humanity in which she can both experience Need-love and extend Gift-love. This is what she longs for when she longs to be human.

Yet Lewis notes there is a difference between natural Gift-love built into the framework of humanity and Divine Gift-love. Human Gift-love, though rooted in a desire to give of self for the good of the beloved, is still contingent upon a degree of selfishness or bias in terms of the particular gifts the individual is equipped to give to the beloved. However, Lewis explains,
“Divine Gift-love—Love Himself working in a man—is wholly disinterested and desires what is simply best for the beloved. . . . Divine Gift-love in the man enables him to love what is not naturally lovable” (128).

Carter’s soldier is a human being bestowed with this form of Divine Gift-love. The sickly Countess is not naturally lovable, for she is a monstrous carnivore who literally consumes her sexual lovers, even as they think they are the sexual predator in the erotic encounters. She is both physically unlovely and emotionally unlovable. Yet, due to the soldier’s emotional innocence and sexual purity, he sees the Countess for what she truly is: a disturbingly emaciated waif with the blood-stained red mouth of a common whore (Carter 101). Yet still he has an inexplicable affection for her. He loves her with a nurturing desire expressed as Divine Gift-love. The soldier perceives her Need-love and freely bestows his Gift-love for what he understands to be her ultimate good. Where the other men seek to satisfy their own selfish erotic fantasies, the soldier seeks to give of himself for her physical, emotional, and spiritual good.

This dynamic of love between true lovers is precisely what many feminist critics fail to recognize is at work in the story. Those who see the soldier’s love as condescending and patriarchal, re-inscribing the Countess within confining masculine affection instead of openly and freely loving the vampire for who she is in her abject state of vampiric sexual predatory power, seek to limit, even re-imprison, the Countess within the incompleteness of natural, fallen Need-love that wants to be loved for its own supposed merits. Carter gives readers a man who extends Divine Gift-love upon an unlovable creature and thereby humanizes her, quite literally transforming her from vampire whore to human woman.
Conclusion

Herein lies the sad irony: This radical writer lacked a redemptive and transformative vision. Carter’s narrative of textual imprisonment and narrative overdetermination re-inscribes the female character within a narrative of victimization with no hope of liberation, beyond death, which in materialistic terms is no liberation at all. The only literary objective is to make a harsh critique of male-dominated society. This ideological commitment creates yet another limiting narrative that further traps the Countess. What would be the result if the narrative presented a visionary alternative to war between the sexes? What if there were redemptive resolution through a complementarian re-vision of sexual relations and gender roles? Thankfully, Lewis in *The Four Loves* provides the theoretical framework to think through Carter’s own ideological limitations and to free ourselves from the circumscribing ideological narrative explicit in her text.
Works Cited


