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## Guillotine Rubies and Weighted Tortoise Shells: An Exploration of Uncanny and Grotesque Aesthetics

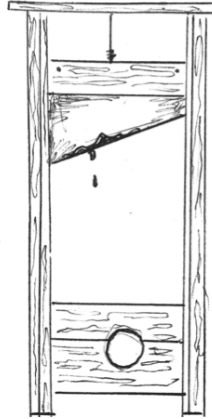
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Guillotine Rubies and Weighted Tortoise Shells:  
An Exploration of Uncanny and Grotesques Aesthetics

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College  
by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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Dedicated to:

Joel Bernstein

Thank you for inspiring me  
to look towards what makes me uncomfortable.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
<i>A Rebours</i> and the Destructive Nature of Decadence .....	6
An Introduction to Des Esseintes .....	6
An Aesthetic Paradise .....	10
Correspondences .....	15
<i>The Bloody Chamber</i> and the Rise of The Aesthetic Serial Killer.....	25
The Bluebeard Tradition .....	25
Intersections of Appearance and Taste .....	34
A Gruesome Game .....	39
The Aesthetic Serial Killer .....	52
Conclusion .....	54
Works Cited .....	57





## Introduction

When I took on this haunting project, I had no idea how insidious it would be. I've reverted to some fears that I haven't experienced in years. I listen to podcasts about murder almost daily, and I ask anyone who'll entertain the subject if they've had any paranormal experiences. I myself haven't, unless I count one suspicious incident involving a fan on my bedside table. These subjects absolutely terrify me, yet I'm able to go on with my day to day life despite their influence on me. This project, however, seemed to push me a bit over the edge. I've been having difficulty going to sleep, and I often resolve this issue by doing work until I am too tired to keep my eyes open. When my boyfriend doesn't sleep over, I put on meditation tapes to go to bed, not because I practice meditation, but simply to hear a soothing voice. After I turn off the lights (If I do, because apparently I've acquired a fear of the dark), I make sure to keep my eyes shut, so that if there is a ghost or an intruder in my bedroom, I won't see them. Somehow, I believe that means they cannot do anything to me. I've reverted to the faulty logic of my childhood that kept the monsters away. Clearly, this topic has triggered some neurosis inside of me. Even so, my roommates and I keep our front door unlocked almost always, and I've done nothing about this despite vividly imagining intruders entering many times

over. Perhaps, some part of me still thinks the worst thing that could happen is getting locked out—a part which seems farther away lately.

I recently had a strangely relevant nightmare about a creative serial killer who owned a bed and breakfast. He turned his victim selection into a perverse game of chance, slipping sedatives in certain dishes that he served and leaving others untouched. Those who ate enough lasagna on a particular night wouldn't make it to the next morning. His M.O. was to bring his sedated victims to his basement, where he would sew them into intricate cocoons and leave them to die. My role in this dream was a journalist, completely aware of his practices. The most terrifying part of the dream was the initial feeling of the drowsiness encroaching, realizing that when I'd next awake I'd be trapped in a claustrophobic encasement, and imagining the sensations so vividly. Even afterwards, I find myself fixating on the grotesque cocoon. It was made of a thick partly sheer film, maybe even skin. It was webbed and moist, alternating between shades of pale yellow and pink, with red stitches throughout. The cocoon itself was kind of humid and slightly tacky to the touch, but it's clear the basement was cold—I could see my breath. I couldn't help but be fascinated by the artistry of this serial killer I dreamt up.

This dream echoed a question I had been asking myself for a while: Why am I so interested in the aesthetics of something so gruesome? It's not a question I've been able to answer, but it has brought me down a specific train of thought. Michelle McNamara's recently (posthumously) published memoir on her search for the Golden State Killer, *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, begins with an introduction from the author of the thriller *Gone*

*Girl*, Gillian Flynn.<sup>1</sup> She expressed a sentiment I find very relevant to this project: “I love reading true crime, but I’ve always been aware that, as a reader, I am actively choosing to be a consumer of someone else’s tragedy. So like any responsible consumer, I try to be careful in the choices I make. I read only the best: writers who are dogged, insightful, and humane” (Gillian Flynn XIII). This project is not about responsible readership, but it is about the difference between appreciation of crime, and an interest that keeps in mind the lives that were taken for such compelling stories to exist. It is a question of empathy. I am fortunate enough to live in a time where it is no longer taboo to express interest in such a subject. This acceptance of what I believe to be a very natural, human interest in the horrible things humans do to one another, lends well to the person I am today. I have a ‘satanic objects’ collection in my bedroom. A friend bought me a book titled *Sex and The Occult* for my twenty-second birthday. In fact, nearly all of my birthday presents this year reside in the satanic object

collection; they’re undeniably witchy. I know that If I were alive in Salem in the year 1692, I wouldn’t be by the end of 1693, just based off of what I own.

Although I appreciate and enjoy the aesthetics of these objects, I do not believe in what they stand for.




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<sup>1</sup> Just months after this book was published, Joseph James DeAngelo was arrested as the alleged Golden State Killer on April 25th, 2018, over 30 years after his decade-long crime spree ended.



I find devil worship interesting, but it's not something I plan on practicing. This project is also about the collection and accumulation of objects. To an extent, I have been trying to justify my attraction to despicable things, and my means of trying to do this, is through characters who like similar things in a similarly contentless way, but act in despicable ways that seem reflective to their interests and belongings.

In this process, the two characters I have been exploring have made their way under my skin. I've always had a wild imagination, and occasionally, impossible things get mixed up with the quotidian. I sometimes have to ask people if they've said something to me in real life, or if I'd just imagined it. The unempathetic nature of these characters and their relationship to objects—a relationship I can easily identify with—made me uncomfortable. There was a chance, in writing this, I could find out that my relationship to objects is harmful in some way. I didn't think this was the case, but the fear was there. This, mixed with the imaginatively grotesque descriptions of these characters' belongings, permeated my nightmares. Their way of seeing the world is frightening and unwelcoming. I've noticed my own interest in the grotesque and uncanny has a specific limit. I like to view it from a distance—I can hear about an atrocious serial killer and their strange methods of killing, but I don't want detailed descriptions or photographs of the mangled bodies they leave behind. The witchy objects I own are clean-cut—they're more symbolic than disturbing. When I read a grotesque description, it is usually in isolation. I don't barrage myself with them. This project is different. To write about these characters, I had to think about how they think—what they enjoy, how far they take their interests—and try forget about my own limitations. Admittedly, these characters go much further than I am willing to—not only in their lack of empathy, but in

their ability and decision to live in an environment that is far from comforting. It's strange, I didn't have to see or read anything that I didn't want to, or that I thought was "too much." What I feel comes more from the realization that to understand them, I had to delve into their worlds, which are much more immersed in horror and disturbance than my own.

Through the lenses of the decadent hermit, Des Esseintes, of J.K Huysmans' *A Rebours*, and the 'aesthetic serial killer' Marquis in Angela Carter's retelling of the infamous "Bluebeard" story, "The Bloody Chamber," I am attempting to make a distinction between responsible contentless enjoyment of criminal, 'evil', or sacrilegious objects and art, irresponsible, harmful enjoyment of these objects and art, and an enjoyment of them under the guise of contentless enjoyment, that truly savors, and even participates in the content. This distinction lies solely in one's ability to empathize.



## Chapter 1: *A Rebours* And the Destructive Nature of Decadence

### **An Introduction to Des Esseintes**

There is a notice in the beginning of *A Rebours* detailing Des Esseintes' early life and ancestry, essentially explaining what got him to the bizarre, decadent place he is at in the beginning of the novel. It explains, through a series of portraits, that he was born into an aristocratic family, at the very end of its line. "No doubt the gradual degeneration of this ancient house had followed a regular and unbroken course; the progressive effemination of the men had gone on continuously from bad to worse. Moreover, to complete the deteriorating effect of the time, the Des Esseintes had for centuries been in the habit of intermarrying among themselves, thus wasting the small remains of their original vigour and energy" (Huysmans 1). Des Esseintes is born into the end of a decline that has been sustained for generations. He is weak and sallow because of his interbred

ancestors. This is the perfect environment for decadence, which itself is derived from the concept of inevitable decay of everything from people to societies. In fact, *A Rebours* in itself is often considered a sort of field guide to the decadence movement, and Des Esseintes, the ultimate embodiment of its ideals. “*A Rebours*... furnished readers and writers with a checklist of the decadent sensibility. It is one thing to work within an emerging aesthetic of decadence, and something else to announce, articulate, and develop that aesthetic” (Weir 82). This checklist would include the aforementioned interest in death and decay, which despite its presence in Des Esseintes’ life due to his failing health and lack of family, interests him as something external and separate from his own body and life. The checklist would also include exuberant aestheticism, the interest in form over content, and a passionate penchant for artificiality. Decadence, unburdened with moralistic ideals, creates room for materialistic tendencies. The focus on the eventual decay of everything in nature makes the artificial more appealing as nature loses its inherent value. It becomes a choice between nature the artificial, and in decadence, the artificial takes precedent. This is *le style de decadence*—the style of elaborate ornamentation and artifice, the aesthetic aspect of decadence. Within this style, physical objects become subjects of worship.

Beyond the environment of decadence established by his ancestry, his parents, who died before he turned 17, shirked affection. This probably had a great deal with his lifelong inability to make solid human connections, further leading him to isolation. Education became his life, and those he did associate with—people “whose indulgences struck him as paltry and commonplace, carried out without discrimination, without excitement, without any real stirring of blood or stimulation of the nerves”—seemed to

lead boring lives (Huysmans 5). Des Esseintes, as the stereotypical decadent, thinks and lives referentially, exploring the world only through what has been created by others.

He obsesses over his own version of indulgence, and pushes away interpersonal relations. For a little while, lavish parties were a part of his decadent fantasies, including a hell-evoking funeral-themed party celebrating his oncoming impotence. Ultimately he had no interest in pleasing anyone but himself, and set his sights on doing just that. Due to his nearing impotence, his interests were not sexual, so his version of pleasure relied on no one. His aestheticised sensory pleasures replace sexual pleasure almost entirely. They become his only genuine source of excitement, if not arousal. Other men's pleasures outside of sex strike him as boring, because they fail to dedicate their lives to them. Presumably, these men diffuse their desire between sex and material objects, resulting in a balance of pleasures, rather than obsession. Des Esseintes tries to be sexual, but he needs extra sensory aspects to sustain him. The only actual account we have of him reaching orgasm involves a ventriloquist partner using her skills to feign the presence of an angry lover on the opposite side of the door. It is unclear whether her talent or the idea of conflict that aroused him. Generally the idea of pleasure and aesthetics are inextricably linked for him.

Des Esseintes actually has a red boudoir in his house, draped in red, and filled with images of almost unimaginable religious torture—a series called *Religious Persecutions* by a German engraver named Jan Luyken. In his book about the color red, Michel Pastoureau points out that “red has long been the color of lust and prostitution” (“Red” 138). With this in mind, the room evokes the dungeon of a sexual sadist. The red drapery resembles a brothel, and juxtaposed with the grotesque imagery of the

engravings, Des Esseintes, seemingly unintentionally, suggests a link between the two, indicating an interest of the intersection of pleasure and pain. In actuality, Des Esseintes is interested in combining pleasure and pain, just not in terms of sexual pleasure. For example, the way he looks at these images that he chose to decorate a room of his home with: He looks at them both with horror of the acts depicted, and admiration of the incredible artistry. This is a perfect marriage between the grotesque and decadence—less interested in content than form, but also appreciative of and interested in the gruesome images some artists have the ability to conjure. His interests, although not explicitly sexual, are incredibly sensual in the intense enjoyment he derives from them. Ultimately, his pleasure is derived from that which is manmade, as he is unable to reach pleasure naturally. He finds more beauty in the artificial (and is intrigued by the work put into creating something nature cannot) than he does with what nature provides. It seems that because he cannot begin to fathom the beauty of nature because he doesn't know how it is created or formed. He can only delight in whatever imitation of nature humans create. His interest in the artificial becomes obsessive; it is his singular source of joy.

His aristocratic family gives him the ability to support his whims financially, and he is able to isolate himself and indulge in these fantasies of artificiality. He decides to live his life mostly at night, further removing himself from the world. Living nocturnally goes along with his proclivity for the artificial, because it forces him to use artificial lighting in place of the sun. He has all the walls painted colors that only look good in artificial lighting, as he sleeps through the days and wakes while everyone else is asleep.

His world is entirely solipsistic. Des Esseintes is what Geoffrey Harpham would consider a grotesque character, who “seems to expend a perpetual energy which points

to... an impersonal, mechanical driving force behind them” (465). Grotesque characters are driven in a way that seems almost robotic, or at least entirely narcissistic. Whatever drive or obsession the grotesque character has (in Des Esseintes’ case, artificiality), is completely separate from the rest of the world, as if their desire is the only one that needs to be fulfilled, and there is no good reason why it wouldn’t be, because aren’t they everyone’s top priority? Any desire outside of their own is unnecessary. It makes a lot of sense that the majority of Des Esseintes’ narrative takes place in his home, the only place he has complete control over. His isolation is a way for him to keep other people’s desires out of his environment. It is easier not to deal with anyone at all than to have control over how others think or act, which he does try at one point by attempting to change the course of a young boy’s life for the worse. The way he carries out his fantasies reflect his selfish tendencies, which at best, benefit no one, and at their worst, harm others. He ultimately prefers interacting with objects, onto which he can project whatever he wants.

### **An Aesthetic Paradise**

Des Esseintes creates imaginary environments for himself—romanticized versions of real-life experiences—in order to experience the pleasures others derive from the outside world. He cannot appreciate what he doesn’t have control over, so he prefers to enjoy things through a filter of art. While he has no interest on taking a real journey on a ship, he delights in recreating the effects of one in his house. He would never notice the tints in the water, but takes the time to recreate them as well as he can, and enjoys them behind closed doors. He constructs his experience “by these means he could procure himself, without ever stirring from his home, all the sensations of a long voyage; the

pleasure of moving from place to place a pleasure which indeed hardly exists save as a matter of recollection, almost never as a present enjoyment at the moment of the actual journey, this he could savour to the full at his ease, without fatigue or worry” (Huysmans 20). His keen self-consciousness allows him to realize that he has difficulty enjoying a present moment, specifically if it is an in-between moment, like a journey on a ship—especially if there are any stressors involved. With his weakness, these stressors would be particularly debilitating. Instead of attempting to see the beauty in these overlooked moments, he decides to recreate them in a way that negates any possible annoyances. He can enjoy all of the more favorable aspects of being on a journey without having to deal with any of the unpleasantness that come with it. Minor discomforts would stop him from enjoying the present moment, so he eliminates them completely by staying at home. Ironically, the whole point of a journey, moving from place to place, is completely removed, and he chooses not to follow these reveries with ones of traveling to a place—reveries that he indulges in separately. He seems to think the irritations of travel negate its beauty, and that he needs to isolate the beauty completely—and recreate it—to recognize it. This is his way of enjoying the world: reframed as an art piece. At another point, he makes himself giddy by imitating the scents of lilacs with artificial scents, yet he has no particular interest in the smell of lilacs in nature. It is less about the content of what he is recreating and more about the feeling he gets from convincingly recreating something.

Being in control of everything in his environment is intensely important to him. He is unable to enjoy a moment unless it is entirely of his own creation. When he is home, he can do this fairly easily by decorating rooms and creating displays—he



separates his library into four parts, each with a different style, so he can read in the environment that most suits the novel. His home is designed to fit his fancies. He rarely leaves it, and customizes it so that he can enjoy whatever experience he desires without the reality of the world, because it the world doesn't completely reflect his taste. He cannot handle not being in control of his environment. Healthwise, he can't deal with minor disturbances that plague everyday life. What he consumes is everything to him, so he is constantly consuming as much pleasurable stimuli as he can handle, and occasionally more than he can handle. Sensory pleasure is the only form of pleasure for him, so he refuses to let anything beyond his taste for the artificial and grotesque enter his solipsistic atmosphere. Because of this major self-imposed restriction, Des Esseintes' house in Fontenay becomes his sanctuary, gallery, and ultimately his world.

Nature is unable to satisfy him (or he is unable to let nature satisfy him), and his imagined versions of places give him more pleasure than the places themselves. After falling ill from his experiments with perfume, Des Esseintes decides to take a trip to see Holland and London, both of which he has romanticized preconceptions of. He ends up deciding that he'd rather imagine places than visit them. "After all, I have felt and seen what I wanted to feel and see. I have been steeped in English life ever since I left home; it would be a fools trick to go and lose these imperishable impressions by a clumsy change of locality" (Huysmans 130). Des Esseintes calls traveling "a fool's trick," in the sense that going to an actual place would replace his romanticized, imagined version of a place with (what he considers) its bleak reality. This puts his imaginary, one-dimensional versions of places on a pedestal, while the nuances that the actual places and cultures completely evade him. Real places aren't worth ruining his flawless fantasies,

supplemented by all the books he's read. He reverses the definition of illusion to suit his shabby argument for avoiding travel. The fantasy itself is an illusion because it is a simplification—a façade hanging in front of what is truly there. Des Esseintes creates his own visions that cover entire countries. These countries are filled with people, all affected by society, culture, and years of history, leading individual lives. Everything's more cohesive if it's a product of his imagination, though. His inability to enjoy an actual culture because of his romanticized image of it further isolation from the world, because he has no interest in connecting with other people or places, only his own reveries.

Paradoxically, considering his relationship to nature, nearly all of Des Esseintes' pleasures involve at least one sensory aspect. Des Esseintes' breed of aestheticism involves activating the senses, or even tricking them, often by recreating natural experiences through unnatural means. He also enjoys pairing senses synesthetically—he has a collection of liquors corresponding to musical notes, turning the process of imbibing into a symphony. His sensory experiments are likely inspired by a Baudelaire poem called *Correspondences*:

Nature is a temple in which living pillars  
 Sometimes give voice to confused words;  
 Man passes there through forests of symbols  
 Which look at him with understanding eyes.

Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance  
 In a deep and tenebrous unity,  
 Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day,  
 Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.

There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children,  
 Sweet as oboes, green as meadows  
 — And others are corrupt, and rich, triumphant,

With power to expand into infinity,  
 Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin,

That sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses.<sup>2</sup>

The language Baudelaire uses in this poem is a synesthetic mixing of senses, an attempt at describing a sense that we don't have the language for besides through a mixture the senses we already know. This poem speaks to how Des Esseintes views art and literature, although its subject is nature. He is unable to truly see or feel a beautiful scene unless it is reframed as an art piece. He wants to see how people respond to it. He has no interest in exploring it on his own, only experiencing it secondhand through a particular point of view. Once it is reframed, he can finally see the rich interactions between sensory stimuli. He would rather read this poem and imagine or recreate the sensory aspects than try to see the world in this way. Oscar Wilde once famously called a sunset "a second rate Turner," referring to the colorful paintings of J.M.W Turner (*The Decay of Lying*). Similarly, Des Esseintes dismisses nature as repetitive and monotonous (Huysmans 22), and would much prefer to view the painting than ruin his impression of the Turner with a real sunset. His inability to enjoy what is already there not only limits him, but physically damages him.

His sensory pleasures of his do not take into account his intense sensitivities. In fact, he vehemently attempts to use these sensory pleasures to distract himself from his sensitivities. He is intensely hypersensitive, and doctors encourage him to "abandon these practices that were draining his vitality" (Huysmans 7). When he tries to do this, his cravings for intensity increase. "Like young girls who, under the stress of poverty, crave after highly spiced or even repulsive foods, he began to ponder and presently to practise abnormal indulgences, unnatural pleasures" (Huysmans 7). Unlike young girls "under the stress of poverty," he has complete access to the unhealthy indulgences he desires. His

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<sup>2</sup> William Aggeler, *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954)

sensitivity is morbid; his pleasures only become more and more depleting as time goes on. He is constantly straining his weak senses with his ‘unusual indulgences,’ making himself more unable to handle that which he gives himself.

### Correspondences

Des Esseintes has a strange way of trying to make his thoughts fit into categories they don’t quite fit into. This breed of apophenia is common with obsession—especially an obsession with an idea—one tries to shove everything into a certain box, even if it barely applies. Des Esseintes does this with the dichotomy he’s created between nature and the artificial. His struggle to categorize objects that aren’t as easily discernible becomes apparent when he ends up ignoring the complexities of the relationship between nature and man-made objects in order to fit something into his flawed dichotomy. This is particularly apparent when he decides to buy real flowers that look artificial. He has a lot of difficulty reconciling that the flowers are completely a product of nature. He struggles to explain how he enjoys the flowers even though he shirks all things natural. He claims that mother nature took inspiration from man. Des Esseintes describes the flowers as resembling ‘cloth, paper, porcelain,’ all of which come from natural materials. After this he switches his comparison to one of the only parts of nature he can delight in: decay and disease—specifically grotesque, fleshy human disease. “Yes, his object was attained; not one of them looked real; cloth, paper, porcelain, metal seemed to have been lent by



man to Nature to enable her to create these monstrosities. When she had found herself incapable of copying human workmanship, she had been reduced to mimic the membranes of animals' insides, to borrow the vivid tints of their rotting flesh, the superb horrors of their gangrened skin" (Huysmans 88). Although these flowers are natural, Des Esseintes insists that they are at least in part imitations from what man has created, and a distortion of what has already existed. He originally wanted real flowers that look artificial, which they do, but he also believes that his choices evoke diseases of human flesh.

Des Esseintes' believes in nature imitating art, rather than the typical vice-versa. He is unable to enjoy the flowers he buys for what they are. What he can enjoy is what they remind him of, and what he wants them to be—referential and interesting seem to be almost synonymous to Des Esseintes. The grotesque descriptions of his flowers don't necessarily have anything to do with how the flowers are generally perceived.

Anthuriums and Orchids are quite popular now, and while they are strange looking, they don't necessarily incite thoughts of diseases. Des Esseintes delights in the resemblance of the flowers to syphilis, which he reflects upon the history of fondly, like an old memory. He separates the idea of syphilis from the reality of it—his removal is far enough for him to be fascinated without any empathy for those devastated by it. For him, it is form without content.

While this kind of aesthetic pleases him, the grotesque thoughts the flowers conjure in him become overwhelming. The grotesque is beyond control by nature—it is insidious in the way the images it creates go beyond description, they get into the psyche.

The gruesome reveries the flowers awaken in him seem to be a manifestation of his inability to control everything around him—he attempted to get flowers that look fake, but their colors and spots resemble fleshy ailments of human skin that remind him of death and disease that he is escaping from in his constant search for artifice. He even tries to control the grotesque by accepting its presence and adapting it into part of his vision, but that doesn't mean he can contain it. His forced perception of them backfires when he begins to feel “stifled” by the plants and has recurring nightmares about them. This is a manifestation of his fight against nature in favor of decadence. He is interested in things that separate him from humanity—artificiality, diseases other people are overcome by—but his mortality comes through when he cannot handle all of the artifice he surrounds himself with. Similarly to when he overwhelms his senses with perfumes, he is physically unable to handle that which he is partial to.

Amidst everything the flowers cause for him, he completely neglects to realize that the flowers are living. Des Esseintes does not put in the work to care for them, letting them die. Similarly, Des Esseintes originally brought the turtle to walk around his carpet to “accentuate” the colors and patterns. Despite my lack of knowledge on the habits of turtles, I'm fairly certain that an oriental rug is not its ideal environment. The Turtle ends up not enhancing the rug properly, so Des Esseintes decides to have its shell covered in gold, and when that is not enough, has it encrusted with jewels. These ornaments ultimately kill the turtle. Nowhere in the process of getting or decorating this turtle did the turtle's wellbeing factor into Des Esseintes' decisions about its life. He doesn't really acknowledge that it has a life until it dies.

Des Esseintes' harm is not contained to animals and plants, however. He acts out a much more directly detrimental experiment on a young boy he meets on the street. This part of the book is most jarring—it's the most intentionally harmful action he takes in the novel. It seems to come out of nowhere, and it seems to have nothing to do with aesthetics. This experience is Des Esseintes' attempt to turn someone's life into a disturbing game as an experiment. It is not completely thought out or actionable, just a plan that he hopes will lead to specific actions that this child may or may not desire to take. Even so, the plan itself is despicable and easily detrimental to the young boy's life. Up until this point, he has only shown himself to be apathetic in a sort of passive way—he's shown a lack of understanding of life outside of himself, but he has not specifically set out to ruin anyone or anything's life up until this point. If all goes to his plan, the boy will be spoiled into depravity, and eventually murder to get what he wants—so Des Esseintes essentially desires to ruin one life (Auguste Languois) and end another. He reflects afterwards not on the harm he intended to cause, but on the similarity between his worship of objects and artificiality and the church's worship of religious ideals. He is jarred by this similarity between him and something he feels so opposite to. Ironically, this haunts him, and he has no remorse for the intentions he enacted on Auguste Languois. Languois isn't a casualty like the flowers or the turtle. Instead, he becomes a sacrifice to an experiment, or more accurately, a pawn. It is an experiment that Des Esseintes doesn't care to follow up on. Des Esseintes only has the desire to put the plan in motion. Because it takes place in the world outside of his home, it is outside of the realm of control he keeps a hold on. He prefers to imagine what will follow the single action he took than see if it actually plays out the way he hopes, let alone manipulate it to end up

that way. It is similar to his view of travel, in the sense that the actual outcome is likely to disappoint him, so he favors his imagination. He chooses to keep his ideal version of his plan rather than dealing with all the moving parts of reality. Des Esseintes' game and his decision to not see it carried through rob Languois of his personhood—in Des Esseintes' imagination, there's only one way this game can play out, and Languois, the key player, has no agency in this version. Animalistic turns formalistic when you can't experience empathy—this carnal act of murder, which he is not really enacting, but trying to employ second or third-hand, isn't about the lives, but the 'art' of it. Des Esseintes seems to have no actual interest in murder itself; if he did, he would want to see it happen, or even commit it himself. Murder is a stand-in for him—simply a vehicle to exert control and design a situation. Either way, his intentions are entirely destructive. He turns someone's life into a nightmarish, deadly game.

Focus on mortality, especially in the removed way Des Esseintes practices, can foster a sort of cynical attitude that releases moral responsibility, giving those within it permission to essentially do whatever they want and go against religious ideology. In a 1917 article called "Art for Art's Sake" that condemns decadence and the Kantian ideal of beauty, the unnamed, moralistic author claims that a decadent period in art conversely means a decadent period of life (99), which gives rise to the idea of decadent artists—artists who favor form over content—having depraved sensibilities. These sensibilities would be enacted by viewing life from a contentless perspective as well as art, and finding the artistry in the aesthetics of evil itself. The author condemns this way of thinking, elevating it to having the power of fostering evil acts itself. In her essay "Of Criminals, Degenerates, and Literary Offenders," Marina Van Zuylen muses on the



aesthetic interests in evil and crime that come with the Kantian notion of beauty, which favors form over content. She notes that for critics of aesthetic explorations of evil and criminality, especially Max Nordau, who's book *Degeneration* attacked what he considered to be degenerate art, "what worried (and tantalized) [Lombroso and Nordau] was that once evil had ensconced itself into literature, it would be increasingly difficult to disentangle fact from fiction, "real" disease from intellectual dissolution. Falling between the cracks of language, aesthetic investigations of evil immediately took on a threatening, god-like dimension; what cannot be measured represents a dangerous rapture that would lead us to be repulsed and bored by our lot." Van Zuylen gets at the fear that comes from a lack of precise boundaries for those who are most comforted by them. It is this fear that became insidious for critics of the decadent movement. Decadence crosses a line of morality without truly stepping beyond it—It examines and appreciates what falls beyond that line without actual participation ("Art for Art's Sake"). What these critics fail to differentiate is the difference between fascination and acceptance. A book can have a depraved protagonist without the author, or the reader, becoming depraved themselves.

A large aspect of this difference is the existence of priorities outside of art. It seems that Des Esseintes is so immersed in his world of aesthetics that he himself would rather be a piece of art than a human, enshrining himself in a gallery of objects and overstimulating his senses. Of course *A Rebours* begins with a series of portraits of Des Esseintes' family members, long dead aristocrats whose lives are now reduced to pieces of art. He turns his life into a performance art piece just for himself, curating the world around him, which is almost completely limited to his home. Des Esseintes' singular agenda is creating and consuming what he believes to be beautiful, and if he could turn

himself into a piece of art, it's all the better. Beyond himself, he has an impulse for turning the living into the dead, and to inject life into inanimate objects. Interacting with humans, and even being a human, doesn't serve his fancies well.

Des Esseintes is unable to cope with his own shortcomings in life, so he attempts to escape and ignore his own mortality. "The excesses of his bachelorhood, the abnormal strains put upon his brain had extraordinarily aggravated his original nervous weakness, still further impoverished the exhausted blood of his race" (Huysmans 81). He attempts to escape his intense sensitivity to "inexplicable repulsions" to particular sensory stimuli, such as seeing someone wring out laundry, or to feel a piece of chalk, by introducing intense stimuli of his own volition, which seem to do nothing but harm him further. When completely necessary, he listens to his doctors, but usually he uses escapism to distract himself from his health. Heidegger, Schopenhauer, and Pascal, among various other philosophers, more than a few of whom Des Esseintes read, wrote about how the satiation of desire leads one to an extraordinarily uncomfortable state. This is a state in which one realizes that receiving their desired outcome does not solve all of their problems. If there is no new desire to immediately strive after the initial satiation, this disillusionment can easily lead to a disconcerting period of idleness, which these philosophers argue cause discomfort because it forces one to confront their mortality. Pascal discusses the way most try to solve this: distraction. It is not necessarily healthy or even addressing the issue, but it is a coping mechanism. This distraction can ultimately be a new desire. Heidegger encourages constant contemplation of death (profound boredom) in order to transcend hedonism and objects of desire. He urges people to distance themselves from distractions in order to fully take charge of their own life. "Heidegger

then goes on to claim that the experience of profound boredom, understood in its full existential depth, makes manifest that a human being is the free and responsible creator of whatever meaning there is in one's life. Not only that, profound boredom moreover amounts to a *call* to actively take charge of one's existence so as *to endow* it with meaning, and thereby effect a fundamental change in existential temporality." (Slaby 3)

Being intelligent and able to think critically is not enough to urge someone to delve into the uncomfortable. There has to be a certain amount of willpower to do so, and the ability to look inside of one's own condition. Des Esseintes is quite far from this. While he contemplates death and decay pretty consistently, as a decadent is wont to do, the death and decay he is interested in is entirely outside of his own body. He seems to use death as a distraction in itself—he is unable to see himself as a part of nature, as human, and all contemplation of death on his part is completely detached from his sense of self, as well as his sense of anyone outside himself. This contemplation is hedonistic, materialistic, and almost contentless. He has no interest in focusing on the demons that plague quotidian life, and prefers to create grotesque ideas of what their decline could look like. It is a lack of empathy that allows him to separate himself so distinctly from a situation that absolutely applies to him as well. Huysmans himself, when writing *A Rebours* "pictured to [himself] a Monsieur Folantin, more cultured, more refined, more wealthy and who has discovered in artificiality a relief from the disgust inspired by the worries of life and the American habits of his time" (Huysmans xxxvi) This separation he creates between himself and society ends up bringing him farther from 'profound boredom,' because he is unable to deal with the real discomfort that plagues society. Discomfort that he, in fact, is a part of. His endless aesthetic ventures act as an way to keep himself from

getting to a place of such discomfort. There is something finite about diversion that creates order, it compartmentalizes time in a comfortable way. A diversion tends to have a linear path—it is a task or activity that requires attention until it is completed and the desired outcome is reached. With nothing else to do, and no desire to confront his own condition, Des Esseintes goes through a laundry list of decadent projects.

In order for his distractions to continue working, he has a constant need for his aesthetic ventures to escalate—everything he collects needs to be more shocking, more potent, more extravagant. This is how desire works, in order to avoid satiation. As soon as one whim is fulfilled, another must replace it. What he ends up desiring is not necessarily healthy for him physically. Early on this desire is established in him, in reaction to the boring lifestyle that would benefit his health.

Because of his lack of control over his body, Des Esseintes feels the need to micromanage his environment. All stimuli has an intense effect on him, and he is unable to deal with anything he finds displeasing. “he had reached such a pitch of nervous irritability that the mere sight of an unpleasant object or disagreeable person was deeply graven on his brain and several days were needed to efface the impress even to a slight degree, of the human form that had formed one of his most agonizing torments when passed casually in the street” (Huysmans 24). Mere annoyances that most people would forget about moments later plague him for days. This magnification of feeling blocks out all that is around him—everything becomes about its effect on him rather than his he cannot empathize with anyone. His own feelings drown out everything outside of him. This distance he puts between himself and everyone else reduces everyone else into caricatures. He is sensitive to being bothered by others, and reducing them to unfeeling

stereotypes allows him to abandon society guiltlessly. It seems strange that someone who is so incredibly well read, someone who has fully immersed himself in the lives of others, is unable to empathize with others. In life, however, he was rarely able to connect with people on the level that he got to know the characters in his books. In the mind of someone lacking empathy, the connection between understanding the feelings of characters in books and in real life wouldn't be made.

This lack of empathy turns his formalistic interests into a question of morality, when, usually the two are completely unrelated. contentless art isn't an issue unless it is directly affecting a living being, which means it passes the point of being completely unrelated to morality into the realm of ignoring it when it is a factor. The 'art for art's sake' critics mistake is that they think morality is a factor when it isn't—they see enjoying art about depravity as a gateway drug to depravity itself.



## Chapter 2: *The Bloody Chamber* and the Rise of The Aesthetic Serial Killer

### **The Bluebeard Tradition**

“The Bloody Chamber” is the titular story in Angela Carter’s collection of re-imagined fairy tales. This gruesome story is based off of Charles Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” about a man with a blue beard who won the heart of a young woman who, enchanted by his riches, no longer thought his beard to be all that blue.<sup>3</sup> Soon after their wedding, he leaves her with the keys to the castle, with instructions to go into any room except for one. Her curiosity overcomes her, and she opens the door to the chamber, revealing the murdered bodies of her husband’s former wives.<sup>4</sup> While fairly barebones, the story of Bluebeard created an intriguing link between murder and aesthetics.

Winfried Menninghaus’ *In Praise of Nonsense: Kant and Bluebeard* focuses mostly on retellings of Bluebeard that I won’t touch upon here, but it contains some of

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<sup>3</sup> The story of Bluebeard existed orally long before Perrault committed it to paper

<sup>4</sup> See Angela Carter’s translation of Charles Perrault’s fairy tales, *Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and Other Classic Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, for the full story.

his distinctive insights on the Perrault version as well.<sup>5</sup> I was particularly struck by his belief that Bluebeard's beard is not meant to be taken symbolically. Menninghaus makes the argument that because Bluebeard acquired his titular blue beard *par malheur*, that is, by misfortune, it should not be analyzed as an extension of his personality.<sup>6</sup> This separates the blueness into two parts, the first being an unattractive attribute that repels women. Menninghaus argues that it has nothing to do with his character; it is purely an external deformity. It doesn't make him evil; if anything, it makes him overcompensate for his unattractiveness with his wealth and charm. The second ramification of the blueness would be that he is a murderer. Because the blue beard is a strange feature, and it is already attached to fear because of its uncanny appearance, it makes the reader eager to assume that the blueness of the beard is a metaphor for his murderous tendencies. Menninghaus argues that this would be a mistake—Perrault's use of *par malheur* indicates that the blue beard is a random attribute that Bluebeard possesses for no particular reason, and therefore should not be read into. Menninghaus calls this separation a “double metonymic relation: the relation to its owner and the relation to the murder. As the point of intersection between these two metonymies, the blue beard is prone to a metaphorical short circuit” (Menninghaus 55). Bluebeard, the person's relationship to the beard (unjustly scrutinized) is separated from Bluebeard's murders' relationship to the beard (symbolic). This, to Menninghaus, makes the blue beard symbol “superfluous” (Menninghaus 56). David Lodge defines Metonymy as “the figure which names an

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<sup>5</sup> He spends a great deal of the book focusing on the arabesque details in both the opera version of Bluebeard and a retelling by Ludwig Tieck

<sup>6</sup> See Menninghaus for a more in depth explanation of the double-metonymic relation of the blue beard. (55-56)

attribute, adjunct, cause or effect of the thing meant instead of the thing itself” (483). It is metonymic to say that there is a displacement of fear of bluebeard and his actions onto the blueness of his beard. Does Perrault’s *par malheur* divide this metonymy into two parts, and furthermore, create a “metaphorical short circuit?” (Menninghaus 55) The unnecessary attenuation of this connection is what weakens it.

While I agree that Perrault’s use of *par malheur* is curious, and he never directly equates the blue beard with Bluebeard’s depravity itself, the connection is strongly implied in the following sentence: “Everything went so well that the youngest daughter began to think that the beard of the master of the house was not so very blue, after all; that he was, all in all, a very fine fellow” (Perrault 5). Angela Carter’s translation of Bluebeard uses a semicolon to show the close relationship between the two ideas presented. Both the translation Menninghaus refers to and Christopher Bett’s translation use a comma followed by ‘and.’ Either way, the contiguous use of these two statements in a single sentence creates a correlation between the blueness of Bluebeard’s beard and how threatening he comes off to the beholder.

The youngest daughter is originally repulsed by her suitor’s strangely colored beard, but as he seduces her with his wealth and charm, the blueness, and her perception of any threat, fade away—or at least become obscured in a cloud of poor judgment. The bride’s acyanobepsia seems to work like a gradation, slowly slipping into imperception.<sup>7</sup> Seduction works by changing the subject’s perception of the seducer, and in this case it erases the primary warning that something about Bluebeard was off. If his wealth did not appeal to her, it wouldn’t overshadow the uneasiness the blueness of his beard induced in

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<sup>7</sup> Acyanoblepsia is an inability to see blue—a form of colorblindness (Nelson 14).



her. It seems that, *par malheur*, Bluebeard possesses this beard that acts as a warning to women of his murderous tendencies. When the benefits of marriage tip the scale, the blue—the youngest daughter’s disquietude—is conveniently forgotten.

A separate character is born of the youngest daughter’s materialistic colorblindness: Bluebeard without the blue. This alternate version of Bluebeard is his charming façade, a moderate man unfairly judged, and for what? His beard isn’t even blue. It is as if Bluebeard wears two masks on top of one another: first the blue beard, which when removed reveals the moderate man, which is then removed to reveal a murderer. Within the text, the reader doesn’t get to see Bluebeard except for his outermost shell and his innermost secret. The moderate person that lies in between does not exist—it only appears to those who feel they misjudged him. The real Bluebeard’s beard is firmly attached to his face, and is the telltale sign of what is lurking deep within him. The only mask is that of the moderate man, and the blue beard of the murderer cannot help but peek through. The issue with separating the symbolism of the blue beard into a double metonymy is that it separates Bluebeard the person from Bluebeard the murderer, when the two are one in the same.

It is easy to fall into the habit of applying our own modern interpretations of color symbolism onto historical objects (“Blue: The History of a Color” 9). *Bluebeard*, as an ancient fable, becomes a historical object in of itself. Modern ideas of color meanings are so ingrained into society that it is easy to forget that a blue that can conjure images of a meditative sea in our collective unconscious once brought up feelings of dread and discomfort. Color meanings easily collect and congeal over one another as time passes, projecting a slough of unintended meanings onto pieces made long ago. With this in

mind, it is difficult to determine what the symbolism of the blue beard was originally intended to be. To figure this out, we must contextualize the beard in the convoluted timeline of the history of color. There have been countless interpretations of bright or ‘pure’ colors as sacrilegious. Alexander Theroux believes that pure versions of color are unnatural and “almost hideous” (43). Blue especially was once seen as a tacky, barbaric color. At one point, Germans were rumored to have dyed their bodies blue as a scare tactic, and Pliny claimed that blue was a ‘distrustful’ color after hearing that Breton women painting themselves blue before orgies. People with blue eyes were seen almost as deformed in Rome, so one can only imagine how a blue beard would be regarded there (“Blue: The History of a Color” 26).

By the 17th Century, blue went from unnamed, to a barbaric color, to the color of the aristocracy. The term blue-blood is rumored to have come from the appearance of veins on the wealthiest, because they did not have to go work in the sun. There are various interpretations of *Bluebeard* that keep this time period in mind. Maria Tatar claims that the aristocratic connotation is congruent with the zeitgeist of Perrault’s time, which works with the story, considering Bluebeard’s wealth. However, Perrault may have committed *Bluebeard* to paper in the end of the 17th century, but it had been circulated long before then. Tatar places more symbolism on the bearded aspect of the blue beard, backing up Marina Warner’s interpretation of the beard signifying “the male in a priapic mode.” Tatar also notes that, to Warner, the name Bluebeard “Stirs associations with sex, virility, male readiness and desire”(Tatar 19), but does not explain this idea beyond the loaded statement, which in itself exhibits how elusive the symbolism of the beard can be.

I personally believe the primary meaning of the blue beard to be representative of the unnatural.

German early Romantic Novalis' physical manifestation of desire, 'the blue flower,' was chosen because of how extraordinary it would be to find in nature (Fitzgerald 112). Novalis lived a century after Perrault wrote *Bluebeard*, so the concept of blue as unnatural couldn't have been outdated in Perrault's time. This is far past the time when hunter-gatherers avoided blue colored food, as it signified the inedible. This instinct to distrust blue remained within us in one way or another, although as the artificial becomes more and more a part of our daily lives, it becomes more prevalent and its shock value subsides. Goethe, whom Novalis actually met, once wrote that blue "may be said to disturb rather than enliven"(Nelson 14). He also describes it as "powerful, but it is on the negative side, and in its highest purity is, as it were, stimulating negation. Its appearance, then, is a kind of contradiction between excitement and repose," (Goethe 170), which is a bafflingly contradictory statement that well captures the confusion he feels in response to the color. The words he uses to describe blue create a cautionary distance from it, as if blue could incite an uncontrollable response in him. It is in this sense that I think he uses the word excitement, rather than the usual positive connotation that would seem incongruous with the other adjectives. It seems especially incongruous when juxtaposed with the former quote. While he has a strong response to blue, he acknowledges the sleepy quality some shades have. Even at its brightest, blue is not a 'bright color.' This prevents it from being completely disturbing or stimulating, balancing out the negation into a strange neutral. This perception of the color seems to encompass some of the contradictions of its historical connotations, especially in its brightest,

‘purest’ form. Heavenly or hellish, blue was once seen as a color that demands attention. Before it became the color to grace the Virgin Mary’s robes, it was considered the color of the antichrist, and indigo was even given the appellation “devil’s dye,”(Nelson 59) and in a particular fresco, the devil was actually portrayed with a blue beard (Warner 242).

Before his iconoclastic reduction of the significance of the blue beard, Winfried Menninghaus goes through a few historical portrayals of the color blue, juxtaposing blue representations of gods and devil-figures as well as a variety of traits, including the “purity and infinite longing” of “the blue flower”, contrasting with the plague—“Blaue Flamme”, meaning blue flame (53). It is worth noting that in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Gaston Bachelard ends his chapter on Novalis and the connection of fire and desire, with the words “But go down into the depths of the unconscious, find there with the poet the primitive dream and you will clearly see the truth: The little blue flower is red!” (Bachelard 41). This revelation in part negates the concept of the unnatural as desire, something you can reach for but never truly arrive at. Even so, fire is dangerous to the touch so it creates a similar, yet more intense effect—arrive at the pinnacle of desire and you will get burned. By exploring this connection, Bachelard is playing with the idea of blue, in its symbolism, as a less intense, more mysterious red.

The original symbolism of the blue beard might even predate Perrault’s version, making the views on the color from the 17th century an afterthought. Modern interpretations of the color—modern here meaning any time after the story’s conception—aren’t completely irrelevant, however, and often create unique insights in seemingly stale topics. For example, Perrault probably was not thinking of the “blue of distances” that Rebecca Solnit beautifully muses on in her collection of essays, *A Field Guide to*

*Getting Lost*, when writing about Bluebeard's bride cumulative acyanoblepsia as she gets closer to him and his wealth, but it is curious to keep in mind how the "blue of distances" disappears when we approach them, like cupping clear water in your hands out of a blue ocean. Then again, long before Rebecca Solnit, yet still about a century after Perrault published his collection of fairytales, Goethe wrote "As the upper sky and distant mountains appear blue, so a blue surface seems to retire from us"(Goethe 170). Here he reverses the idea of far away blueness by focusing on a blue surface. He claims a blue surface can retain that distance that the far-away blue does, making it retracting backward into space, becoming untouchable despite its inherent solidity. Through Goethe's perspective, Bluebeard through his beard becomes impenetrable, internally retreating from his bride no matter how close she gets to him.

A character with a blue beard would not bear the same significance now as it did in the 17th Century. The color's connection to the unnatural was generally acknowledged, which added to the unsettling nature of the blue beard. In present time, blue hair dye is commonplace, however it is easy for the modern reader to imagine a time where that was not the case. This does not mean we can easily access the original intention behind the coloring. Blue now often connotes depth and tranquility, detaching us from any implied sinister meaning that would have been easily conjured in the minds of a more timely audience.<sup>8</sup> This detachment lessens the intended shock value. Angela Carter seems to recognize this; in her retelling, she removes the dated color symbolism and covers the already bloody tale with a thick coat of red. Red has, throughout time, remained the exemplar bold color—in fact, the words for colored, *coloratus*, and red,

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<sup>8</sup> While blue is often associated with relaxation in the present, there are innumerable interpretations of the symbolism of blue.

*ruber*, were synonymous for the Romans (“Blue” 15). In *Red: The History of a Color*, Pastoureau notes that this connection is prevalent in many languages, making the concept of the “color red” redundant, only after naming red the “archetypical color” (7). In this way, using red retains the boldness intended by the blue. However, it is arguably the most enduringly natural color, with its symbolism firmly rooted in fire and blood—“two natural elements that are almost immediately associated with red and encountered in almost all societies in every period of their history... of course other colors have one or many powerful referents in nature, but they seem less universal and immutable” (“Red” 22). This ancient attraction to blood endures as it remains coursing through our veins. The emphasis in *The Bloody Chamber*, is, as the title suggests, on blood. So how can the archetypical natural color function in place of the color of the unnatural? The answer might lie in how much of the color is present. The blue is shocking because of the strong dissonance it creates—only one man has the blue beard. Redness, or more specifically, blood, is already a part of the Bride’s life as a menstruating young woman. Because of its prevalence in a natural context, there needs to be an overabundance of it in order to invoke the uncanny. It is important to realize that the abundance of red in “The Bloody Chamber” isn’t only the author’s choice, but the Marquis’ choice. While Bluebeard cannot control that his beard is blue, the Marquis’ use of red is completely of his own volition.

## **Intersections of Appearance and Taste**

It is important to establish the distinction that the blue beard does, in fact, bear significance, because the entire connection between Bluebeard's inner and outer world relies on it. If there is nothing disconcerting about Bluebeard, then he isn't uncanny—just a sociopath. The moralistic connection between appearance and action creates the fairytale world this story exists in—one where beauty, or ugliness, is connected to one's psyche. This connection in itself has nothing to do with a character's appreciation of specific aesthetics. Angela Carter's retelling, however, bridges this gap by making a connection not only between the Marquis' actions and appearance, but his choices and interests in relation to both. He cannot have complete control over his looks, so what they reveal are not necessarily what he wants to reveal. When it comes to his belongings and interests, he has autonomy, and what they reveal is his responsibility. It is no wonder that Bluebeard's aesthetic interests begin to reflect his deadly inner world. "In fact, it is the interpenetration of death with such richly positive facets of life—wealth, beauty, youth, and sexuality—that gives the symbolism of this novella its grotesque and uncanny power" (Lokke 10). There is a great deal of symbolism and connection between his inner world and his outer expressions of taste through color and images. At some points, his appearance and interests even seem to meld together.

The serial killer Ed Gein, known for atrocities of this nature, peeled the skin off the faces of some of his victims and wore them as masks. It is difficult for me not to think of this when varying descriptions of the "heavy, fleshy" mask of the Marquis, a serial killer in his own right, are repeated over and over, like a chorus ("The Bloody Chamber" 4). The Marquis' mask is quite similar to the one Bluebeard dons, except it reveals itself

in a different way. Instead of a colorful beard peeking through, the Marquis' face reveals itself to be disingenuous by its "deathly composure" ("The Bloody Chamber 15). Funeral parlor imagery weaves its way throughout *The Bloody Chamber*. This "strange, heavy, almost waxen face" associates his image with that of a corpse (3). In *Bluebeard and the Bloody Chamber: The Grotesque of Self-Parody and Self-Assertion*, Kari E. Lokke goes so far as to use the mask as an example that the Marquis is a symbol of death itself.

Charles Dickens reflected on how his toys, and especially a mask he had, disturbed him as a child, retrospectively linking them to ideas of mortality. "When did that dreadful Mask first look at me? Who put it on, and why was I so frightened that the sight of it is an era in my life? It is not a hideous visage in itself; it is even meant to be droll; why then were its stolid features so intolerable?... Was it the immovability of the Mask? Perhaps that fixed and set change coming over a real face, infused into my quickened heart some remote suggestion and dread of the universal change that is to come on every face and make it still?" (Harpham 466) Masks are inherently uncanny, because they represent a face as well as hide a face. Dickens first focuses on the mask as a face on its own, looking at him, as if it were animate. If it can do nothing else, the possibility of the mask being able to watch is enough to evoke severe discomfort. It is a face, usually missing eyes, and missing a range of expressions. Faces are mobile, and one that isn't is difficult to look at, because it seems unnatural. As an adult Dickens wonders whether the static nature of the mask reminded him of death. Even without the image of a corpse in mind, encountering a frozen face is disarming.

The mask conceals a face, making whatever is behind it unknowable. Still, it is rare that a mask is realistic enough to trick someone into thinking it is a real face, so the



method of concealment reveals itself, which is a function of the uncanny. In J.E. Cirlot's *The Dictionary of Symbols*, he points out that behind a mask a transformation is taking place- "Secrecy tends towards transfiguration: it helps what-one-is to become what-one-would-like-to-be; and this is what constitutes its magic character." (205) It seems that the Marquis' mask-face reveals through its stoicism that something different, and possibly something terrible, is happening behind it.

The young bride is well aware of her husband's veneer. In addition to the uncanny signifying disturbingly unfamiliar within the familiar, Freud believes the uncanny to involve a secret unintentionally revealed (132). The Marquis' face acts both as the disguise and as the break within it. It is clear that there is a long, dark past within him, but instead of it expressing itself as a weariness, it seems smoothed over "like a stone on a beach whose fissures have been eroded by successive tides" (The Bloody Chamber 3). This smoothness indicates a false sense of innocence and inexperience, but his age creates an uncanny dissonance that reads even more disturbing than a well-functioning disguise. Maybe it is because the bride can place that something is off, but cannot think of a good enough reason to trust that instinct until it is too late.

The Marquis' disturbing mask functions as a physical representation of both the uncanny, and of the other external methods of deceit he attempts. The mask is a symptom of the incredible amount of falsehood he carries through life. It is not the only clue the Marquis' bride receives that something is amiss, but it is one of the most physical, inescapable manifestations of this feeling. He doesn't seem to have any control over the uncanny smoothness of his features, but he actively takes great pains to cover up the evil

he has planned. The mask gives the uncanny impression of hidden secrets, giving the bride and the reader reason to look deeper into his more purposeful actions.

When getting into specific instances of the uncanny, Freud begins with the example of “waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata,” citing E. Jenstch’s musings on a particular aspect of the uncanny: “doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate.”(135) The uncanniness of the Marquis’ face is of this breed. His face is described as a mask, and as resembling a wax figure, as well as a corpse. This brings the uncanniness in a third direction—it seems that it could be animate, inanimate, or dead. Freud gets into the idea that it is within the uncertainty that the effect of the uncanny lies, and can be diffused via further investigation that brings eventual certainty in one way or another. I don’t completely agree, because we can know that a mask or a doll is unreal and still feel equally as unsettled. Despite the external knowledge, there is some internal, primal uncertainty that keeps us vigilant.

Capitalizing on this fear, there is a horror movie made in 2005 called *House of Wax*, based off of a film made in 1933 called *The Mystery of the Wax Museum*. I remember finding the premise particularly unsettling, as well as feeling surprised that Paris Hilton had a role in a horror film along with Rory Gilmore’s first boyfriend. Ultimately, the keepers of the wax museum create their lifelike wax figures by covering live people in wax and leaving them to die. One of the antagonists also happens to wear a wax mask to cover his disfigured face. Since seeing this movie, I’ve lost all desire to visit Madame Tussaud’s.

Beyond the uncanny stillness of the Marquis waxen face lies another disturbing comparison—A particularly pointed exhibit of the Marquis’ taste intersecting with his appearance is the “embalming parlour” lilies, with which the Marquis fills the bedroom. Before the bride even sees the room, she compares her husband to the flower. Lokke writes “In the Marquis’ lily-like presence, death and phallic sexuality are one”(10), responding to Carter’s passage that describes the lily in conjunction with the Marquis, highlighting its funereal and fleshy constitution. Both characteristics are mentioned nearly every time the lilies are. At one point, the bride compares the flowers in vases as drowning dismembered arms. In their abundance, the lilies become overwhelming and grotesque in smell, sight, and touch. They are “lubriciously scented”, with “heavy” and “pampered flesh” that feels like treated animal skin (“The Bloody Chamber” 4,15, 29). The pungency of lilies are used in funerals to cover the stench of death, but instead it makes something more sickening—a mixture of sweet and decay, similar to the way the marquis tries to cover the air of death that follows him with aesthetics and material riches. These flowers resemble death in various ways, whether it be the funeral parlour or the bodies within them. One description of the “somnolent” lilies immediately proceeds with the brides notice of hat stands and shoe-shapers mocking her with their false vivacity, making a further contrast between her marriage as a form of death and her previous life outside the castle. They act as contrast of liveliness to the slowly decaying flowers. Their uncanniness lies in their ability to seem as if they are mocking, resembling life more so than the live flowers filling the room. Their



animation opposed with the deathly, live flowers emphasizes that life will not flourish there.

Freud notes that severed limbs can be particularly uncanny, especially if they can move on their own. Separated from the body, limbs become unfamiliar. We have an idea of how limbs should act, and we know that once they are severed they should no longer have mobility. The change of seeing a limb out of context is disarming to the psyche, making us almost expect to see the limb move—yet, we would find that occurrence to be even more uncanny. Like Des Esseintes' flowers, the lilies are grotesque through their resemblance to damaged flesh. Cut flowers are dying, severed from their plant, unable to survive on its own for a sustained amount of time. More so than entire plants, which require care and have the ability to thrive and grow, cut flowers are purely for aesthetic enjoyment. The Marquis' flowers are of this sort, and their funereal connotation enhances the fleeting effect of their short lifespan.

### **A Gruesome Game**

The Marquis' curated belongings work in part like an inside joke. He collects grotesque artwork, and his interests are not questioned because he is a connoisseur—essentially, he poses as a decadent. People would assume his disturbing taste focuses on form rather than content. In reality, their content speaks directly to his impulses. While he may be interested in the artistry, he is also intrigued by the horrific themes these artworks represent. From a guillotine choker to the violent pornographic etchings in his library, his belongings reflect his innermost desires. These art pieces punctate the Marquis' own, larger piece of art: his aesthetically charged murder game. To create this game, Angela Carter magnifies and attenuates what the tale already contains: material wealth, sex, and

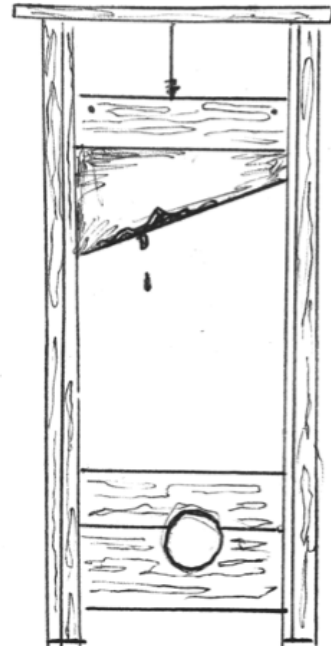
retribution, each getting subsequently closer to a bloody core. Carter explores the three stages that Bluebeard goes through to commit his murders to achieve this. Bluebeard draws his bride in with his wealth, takes her virginity, and attempts to penalize her for opening the door to his secret room. The Marquis' version of Bluebeard's game includes a great deal of priming to get his wife in the position he wants her. These priming tools reveal the Marquis' grotesque nature long before the bride opens the door to the bloody chamber, just as the beard does in the original tale. The blueness fades from Bluebeard's bride's perception along with the intuition that makes her weary of her husband-to-be. The loss of color perception along with intuition suggests, at the very least, a correlation. Carter's magnification of the process of the stages, and the items and ideas used to create them, work similarly as warnings of the violence to come by containing more literal references to murder than the blueness provided. The emphasis on these items and ideas in *The Bloody Chamber*, and the Marquis' exuberant interest in them build up to a point of debauchery. In addition to his strangely revealing face, his taste acts as a replacement the telltale sign of the bluebeard that warns the bride of his dangerous nature, up until it is too late.

Carter taps into the unsettling nature of overindulgence to create a sense of the uncanny—defined by Freud as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud 124). The familiar, in this case, is what was once pleasurable, which is then corrupted by immoderation. The Marquis' choice of material belongings are a tangible, surface-level manifestation of this. Many of his belongings act almost as a reflection of his deadly presence, either in violent imagery or funereal connotations. Even without the violent imagery weaved throughout, the items

of luxury the Marquis provides quickly turn sour in their extravagance and abundance, switching seamlessly from compelling to repulsive. The Marquis takes something that we know to be pleasurable and buries us in it. The material indulgences serve as the most superficial layer, and from there the uncanny indulgences only get darker as the previous layer is peeled back, like skin.

Carter portrays the Marquis' extreme level of opulence, directly linking him to ideals of the decadent period through overindulgence, and beyond that, the grotesque. "Left to itself, taste engages 'the freedom of imagination rather to the point of approaching the grotesque'" (Menninghaus 22). Overindulgence has a sinful connotation. Aesthetic pleasure is far beyond basic need, so someone who acutely focuses on it may be considered immoral. The Marquis' emphasis on style suggests a displacement of priorities. His life is so wrapped up in his aesthetics and taste, that his taste begins to mirror the grotesque nature within him. Kari Lokke describes this phenomenon: "Perhaps most intriguing is the manner in which this aesthete's paradise, this world of over exquisite taste, through its amorality, intensity, and excess, borders on the hellish and the hideous. The grotesque often reveals that the seemingly ugly can be aesthetically fascinating, but Carter's perverse craft shows that the beautiful can in fact be extraordinarily ugly"(10). RESPOND From what information the reader is given, the Marquis only owns objects that contribute to his agenda of murder—riches to draw her in and keep her there, books and art to teach her, etc.He gets as close as he possibly can to revealing his intentions through these objects, meaning that the objects reflect the intention he has behind them.

The most overtly symbolic example of this is the jewelry the young bride receives from her husband, which exhibit violent themes. Her wedding ring, passed down through generations from Catherine de Medici, is huge and mesmerizing, but it has an overtly dark side to it. It is a fire opal, which the bride's nurse mentions is bad luck ("The Bloody Chamber" 4). Superstition aside, each of the Marquis' former wives wore that ring, meaning he pried it many times over from cold, dead fingers. In fact, his previous wife's body was supposedly never found, so its presence after her death acts as a clue to her uninvestigated murder. If she accidentally drowned, it would not make sense for the Marquis to retain the ring from her finger. If the bad luck of the fire opal had no foundation, the three dead women who wore it grant it one.



The other piece of jewelry the Marquis gifts his wife is a strikingly heavy handed symbol: a ruby choker, often cited as resembling an "extraordinarily precious slit throat" ("the Bloody Chamber" 6). There is no subtlety to this foreshadowing. He gives it to her along with the story of its origin: his grandmother had it made to resemble the red ribbon that those who escaped the guillotine would wear in place of their almost slit necks.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the symbolism works on two levels, only one of which the Marquis intends: the first being his intention to later slit her throat, and

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<sup>9</sup> I am also attracted to this sentiment, and unfortunately haven't found any evidence of survivors of the guillotine wearing ribbons. However, there is an account of ancestors of those who were victims of the guillotine wearing red ribbons as chokers. This is not as congruent with the bride's fate as Carter's version (Newell-Hanson).

the second that she manages to escape from under his sword. The Marquis has her wear it constantly, and it grows uncomfortable, as one would expect a necklace signifying decapitation might. He even asks her to keep it on when he deflowers her, as a reference to Baudelaire—“of her apparel she retains/ only her sonorous jewelry” (“The Bloody Chamber” 14), but even more so it creates a tie between death and sex. For the Marquis, there is little to no separation between the two.

The Marquis oversexualizes his young bride and her girlishness to a point where she becomes aware that her youth and virginity originally attracted him. From the opening sentence of the bloody chamber, a link is made between innocence and corruption, girlhood and marriage, and white and red: “I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother’s apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage” (“The Bloody Chamber” 1). Her former life is identified as white, indicating a sense of purity and comfort, and if the contrast of her “burning cheek” on linen acts as any indication of the oncoming color palate, the “unguessable country of marriage” is red. The Marquis uses this to his advantage, thrusting his bride into a stereotypical role in order to make her loss of virginity something larger—a loss of innocence.

In his essay on the color red, Theroux distinguishes a "certain fraternity" between white and red before launching into an Emily Dickinson quote: "...by power/ Of opposite—to balance odd—/If White—a Red—must be!"(Theroux 181-182). Calling the relationship between the two colors “fraternal” seems too civil. Emily Dickinson writes



about the two colors balancing and opposing one another. Red and white don't exist together in companionship; many Indo-European cultures considered red a second and equal opposite to white as black (“Blue” 15). If, simplified to a point of reduction, white is the color of purity, and black is of mourning, then it seems fitting that red, the color of blood, death, and sensuality, creates just as stark a contrast as black does to white. Their convergence brings to mind an image of blood staining white linen.

The Marquis never married a virgin before, and he makes sure his new bride is well aware of this. “We do not hang the bloody sheets out of the window to prove to the whole of Brittany you are a virgin, not in these civilized times. But I should tell you it would have been the first time in all my married lives I could have shown my interested tenants such a flag” (“The Bloody Chamber” 16), he confides in her. This is part of his power play—he uses this statement to remind her that he is sexually experienced, that he has been married many times over, and that his former wives were sexually experienced as well. This reminder enhances the power he holds over her by taking her virginity. The Marquis doesn't talk much in the story, and when he does, it is heavily scripted and goal-oriented. He uses this information to intimidate her. This makes the situation particularly titillating for him, as he is able to exert an additional amount of control over her that he could not with his former wives, all women comfortable wielding their sexual power before he came into each of their lives, and subsequently ended them. . While sex and murder are routine for the Marquis, innocence and virginity are new to him. He is intent on lavishing in the novelty and creates a game out of his corruption of her, which needs to take place for his desired outcome to manifest.

The first sexual encounter between the Marquis and his young wife is particularly perverse; the bride refers to it as the “most pornographic of confrontations” (12). In their ostentatiously decorated bedroom, the Marquis has his wife undress in order to inspect her body, hours before he intends to consummate the marriage. This interaction emphasizes the Marquis’ fixation with aesthetic beauty as well as his inclination to dominate. Intent on creating a tableau, he does not touch her. Before having her, he has her with his eyes. Robin Ann Sheets notes, “from courtship through consummation, he uses art to aid in seduction. Thus Carter situates the story in the tradition of ‘aesthetic sadomasochism’: works that center on the ‘education of one person in the sexual fantasy of another through complex role playing cued to works of art and imagination.’ As the bride is being undressed, she realizes that her husband has arranged their encounter to resemble an etching” (Sheets 645). This live tableau within Carter’s writing is an example of the Marquis’ equation of women and art, and beyond that, the murder of women as art. The female body (and life) is his medium. Like his former wife, who modeled for posed nude for Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, whose “face is common property” (“The Bloody Chamber” 5), the bride is opening herself to the male gaze and objectification, whether or not she wants it. The Marquis uses her meekness to take control over the situation. He turns their marriage into a sort of play—there are scenes that he creates to prepare her for the chamber, building up her role as a woman who would open the door. Through her husband’s imagined perspective, the narrator compares herself to meat, to a purchase, and to an art piece. “And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain” (12). She is aware that he is a consumer of her. The sexual gratification in it is purely his, and he thrives on her discomfort. The Marquis possesses

all the power as the clothed person in this interaction, especially considering how significant nakedness feels to the virgin bride. She is completely exposed—reduced to her “scarlet palpitating core” (“The Bloody Chamber” 11). Her heart might as well be laid bare on a surgeon’s table. This gives the impression of her equating giving her body with her being, as one might, having never been exposed before. When the Marquis displays her naked body for his own inspection, She has no secrets she can hide from him. In another display of artful control, he postpones her deflowering in order to increase anticipation. Not only is he able to stop time to make her an art piece, he is able to suspend it. Just as an author, or Carter, controls the flow of time in a story, The Marquis delays it, controlling his own narrative, and exerting further control over his bride. He declares suspense a part of the indulgence, but it reads more as an anxiety-producing tactic (12).

In between the Marquis’ inspection of his wife and the actual act, the bride goes to his library and discovers a book of pornographic drawings—a timely lesson in ‘aesthetic sadomasochism.’ The library, filled with leather bound books and covered in rugs in the colors of “deep, pulsing blues of heaven and the red of the heart’s dearest blood,” contains a selection of eerily apposite literature as well as curated pornography (“the Bloody Chamber” 13). Every book that the bride notices seems to be carefully chosen for her to discover. Even the non-pornographic books in his library serve as instructions to his perverse game: Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *Là-Bas*—which happens to be about Gilles de Rais, the murderer whom Bluebeard is said to be based on (Tatar 116)—along with a selection of titles aptly named *The Initiation*, *The Key of Mysteries*, and *The Secret of Pandora’s Box* (“The Bloody Chamber” 13). In *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela

Carter notes that one function of pornography is to “serve as an instruction manual for the inexperienced”(12). The Marquis uses his library as a way to show his bride what he wants from her, or at least, what he wants to do to her. “In this story, male sexuality is death-oriented the male murders with his eye, his penis, his sword. Pornography becomes a display of male power, expression and cause of men's aggression against women. The pornography represented in the story does not offer the woman a way to be a sexual rebel; instead, it subjects her to harm” (Sheets 642). The pornographic drawings the Marquis owns work as instructions of violence as well as sex, titled ‘reproof of curiosity’, and to the shock of the young bride, ‘Immolation of the Wives of the Sultan’, officially introducing his interest in the tie between sexuality and death—an orgasm is called *le petit mort* in French, after all.

When the Marquis and his wife finally consummate the marriage, he doesn’t just penetrate her—he “impales” her (“The Bloody Chamber” 15). Although the reader isn’t told much about the act itself, the language used to describe it is unusually violent, communicating a violent act. His intentions are partially revealed, as he cannot keep his violent nature out of the bedroom, making it clear he has little regard for her wellbeing. The bride believes she may finally be seeing her husband’s true self—the man behind the mask (15). While this could be seen as a naive attempt to empathize with the Marquis, it holds some truth considering his violent nature comes out in conjunction with sexual pleasure. “There is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer’ opined my husband's favorite poet; I had learned something of the nature of that similarity on my marriage bed” (“The Bloody Chamber” 28).<sup>10</sup> Her deflowering

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<sup>10</sup> This favorite Poet is Baudelaire—a favorite he shares with Des Esseintes

becomes a sacrifice. She cries in his arms afterwards, realizing in a stockholm-like state that the only person that can comfort her is the man who inflicted the pain (15).

Both the Marquis' examination of his wife and her deflowering take place in the dramatic, sinister setting of their bedroom full of the 'undertaker' lilies and mirrors, multiplying their image around the room, distorting the scene around them into a disorienting, endless expanse of artifice. The mirrors create a sense of distortion that adds to the dissociation the bride feels from the pain and trauma the Marquis inflicts. Their sex, and more importantly, her transformation, is aggrandized. This magnification, both literally through the mirrors and symbolically through the extravagant display made of the event, creates a defined line between her virgin self and the corrupt woman that lies beyond that line. This situates the 'unguessable country of marriage' in the world of Mary Magdalene, the original woman in red.

Although this hedonism belongs entirely to the Marquis, it begins to bleed onto the bride. She muses self-consciously on his depictions of her: "No, I was not afraid of him; but of myself. I seemed reborn in his unreflective eyes, reborn in unfamiliar shapes. I hardly recognized myself from his descriptions of me and yet, and yet—might there not be a grain of beastly truth in them? And, in the red firelight, I blushed again, unnoticed, to think he might have chosen me because, in my innocence, he sensed a rare talent for corruption" ("The Bloody Chamber" 18). She internalizes his descriptions of her to a point where they become true. As an authority figure, he grooms her to be the character he needs her to be to manipulate the situation. It works, due in part to her formative age, which fosters an eagerness to cling onto whatever shred of identity one is assigned. If he truly senses a 'rare talent for corruption' in her, then he knows that she will disobey him,

which is what he wants. If he doesn't, he is at least making her believe it is there. His grooming is a slow opening of her—a ritualistic excarnation, a release of what may or may not have already existed within her.

The process of corruption the Marquis creates leads his bride to the position he wants her in—that of a woman who needs to be punished. The Marquis has no real interest in justice. He is preoccupied with finding an excuse to execute violence, and retribution provides that opportunity. The way he elaborately sets his bride up is proof of this—he creates a rule for her to break to have a reason to punish her. the Marquis refers to his eagerness to kill her as an ‘appetite’, a word largely used to describe lust when not referring to food. When it is used to describe violent acts, it creates an amalgamation of the two. This is commonly known as sadism, which the Marquis de Sade was the eponymous master of, as well as the source of our Marquis’ appellation in *The Bloody Chamber* (Sheets 647). “Carter's Voyeuristic Marquis is indeed a sadist—in terms of his sexual practices and in terms of his control of the narrative: he has arranged the setting, written the script, and set the plot in motion” (Sheets 647)<sup>11</sup> His meticulous plan becomes the safeguard for his true intentions: He warns his bride that her transgression will be punished before she commits it. The punishment appears almost warranted, because he made sure she knew beforehand that opening the door was forbidden. In the Grimm’s version of the Bluebeard story, called “Fitcher’s Bird,” the wife subverts punishment by putting down an egg she is supposed to carry everywhere before opening the door to the Chamber. All of the former wives dropped the egg in the pool of blood, staining it and revealing their transgression. Her clever trick subverts the game, saving her from an

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Tatar notes that “Carter’s bloodthirsty husband is constructed as a figure who is more a collection of cultural citations than a man of flesh and blood” (116) noting similarities between Carter’s Marquis, Gilles de Rais, and Cunmar the cursed along with the Marquis de Sade.

untimely death. There are a few other versions of “Bluebeard” that end in a similar happily-ever-after ending, suggesting that the Bluebeard character would not murder if his wives played by the rules he laid out. While some interpret this as proof that Bluebeard is a fair man, I believe it reveals nothing other than his desire to play by his own rules, and he works hard to make sure it plays out in his favor. In his carefully executed narrative, everything he orchestrates is a series of veils over the violence. Retribution is the thinnest, as it contains and excuses the violence within itself.

Underneath it all, the violence is at the core, the deepest red. To an evocative phrase in Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*— “a cool red rose and a pink cut pink,”—Maggie Nelson responds “as if a color could be further revealed by slitting”(Nelson 40), an appropriate way to reach this red. The idea of a cut color revealing a deeper color proposes the idea of a ‘truer’ more concentrated color beneath a lighter one—the deeper the color, the closer to the core—the truth—we are. High pigmentation becomes a sort of reveal, as if weaker concentrations are guarding a bright, more ‘real’ core. While the Marquis slices away at his own layers of deception with the help of his unsuspecting bride, the only pain experienced is hers. Rather than leaving him vulnerable, his reveal allows him to inflict pain without having to feign remorse. It comes as a relief; he waited so long to cut himself out of his stifling mask. He inflicts the pain that comes with the reveal onto his bride. In his *Remarks on Color*, Wittgenstein claims to “treat color concepts like the concept of sensations” (71). Pain, which Wittgenstein often compares with color, is an internal sensation, a response to harmful stimuli. Blood, too, lets us know when we are hurt. Although color exists externally, we experience it internally and subjectively, like pain. In his article *Goethe, Wittgenstein, and the Essence of Color*,

Zeno Vendler claims that pains do not have the variety that colors do, but the synesthetic subject of the article “Colored Pain” by Berit Brogaard for “Psychology Today” is an idyllic example of the intricacies of pain— she experiences different types of pain as different colors, in a palate that remains consistent (Vendler 394). In *The Bloody Chamber*, the Marquis inflicts the pain and the palate, with complete control over the sensory input his bride receives.

The Marquis provided a palate of pain for each of his former wives’ “accidental” deaths as well. The first death remains mysterious, possibly nodding towards the question that many have posed about *Bluebeard*—what did the first wife do to ‘deserve’ her fate, when there were not yet any women in the chamber? Despite this, we do know that she was an opera singer, and burned so “white-hot” that her life was bound to be extinguished early on, indicating a fiery, white death. We eventually learn the Marquis strangled her. The second bride’s death was attributed to the hand of the green fairy, absinthe. Her skull resides in the bloody chamber, and her true cause of death is not revealed. The third cover-up the Marquis orchestrated was for his Romanian countess, who is better suited for a red death considering the vampire jokes aimed at her, is said to have died a blue death, at sea. In the chamber, the current bride opens an Iron Maiden to find the countess, pierced by hundreds of spikes, still bleeding (“The Bloody Chamber” 5). The Marquis plans his wives’ murders exhaustively, and completes them enthusiastically. Part of his *modus operandi* is to keep his murders contained to his horrific chamber. He is what investigators would call an organized serial killer, and what I would classify as an ‘aesthetic serial killer.’



### The Aesthetic Serial Killer

The ‘Aesthetic Serial Killer’ is essentially a sociopathic artist, whose medium is the human body—other people’s human bodies. There is some creativity and strategy either in the way they lure their victims in, torture them, kill them, or set up the body post mortem. The Aesthetic Serial Killer shows their true nature through their art by revealing how little human life is of value to them and their ability and desire to easily take it away. In Maria Tatar’s book on Bluebeard, *Secrets Beyond the Door*, she has a chapter titled “The Art of Murder: Bluebeard as Artist and Aesthete.” She Begins this chapter with a quote from Kurt Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard*, in which the ‘Bluebeard’ of the story, Rabo Karabekian, compares the folkloric murderer to Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Truman Capote, and other famous artists, lamenting how younger people didn’t know who they were. The quote finishes with his declaration “So much for achieving immortality via the arts and letters,” (Tatar 152) essentially labelling Bluebeard’s creative murders a form of art. Karabekian is not a murderer himself—he’s an artist that keeps his works locked up in a secret room. Tatar goes through a whole list of Bluebeard-inspired stories and films that focus on the artistry of the Bluebeard character, but only a handful actual include murder. Tatar mentions Henri de Régnier’s “Bluebeard’s Sixth Marriage,” and Patrick Süskind’s “Perfume” briefly, both of which “hark back to the Romantic cult of morbid beauty in [their] presentation of Bluebeard as an evil genius who creates art with his murders”(153). These are Aesthetic Serial Killers. Régnier’s Bluebeard creates chambers for each of his former wives’ wedding dresses, with musical and perfume accompaniment. In “Perfume,” Grenouille, the story’s bluebeard character, “distills [olfactory] essences from his dead wives”(153). While Grenouille’s killings are in part a

means to an end, both characters consider killing a part of their art form. Angela Carter's *Bluebeard*, *The Marquis*, turns the entire process of courting and killing wives into an elaborate piece of performance art.

The Marquis' curated life can be interpreted as an art piece, down to his collection of dead bodies. His cyclical game becomes the plot of his life. "Linked to a regime of death, art, and sexual corruption, the Marquis is figured as a 'connoisseur' who uses his wealth and power to collect women and/as works of art. Laboring under a repetition compulsion, he constantly acquires new additions to his 'gallery'" (Tatar 117). Like Yayoi Kusama, who compulsively painted dots over and over in order to combat mental illness, the repetitive nature of the Marquis' art is satisfying to him. His castle works as an immersive gallery, similarly to *Des Esseintes'*. Each room has a distinct purpose, from the library, to the bedroom, to the horrific chamber. In tandem with his heavily symbolic belongings, he uses these rooms to lead the viewer, an unknowing, unwilling participant of his larger art piece, through a process of preparation, and a series of initiating actions, towards the grand finale.



## Conclusion

Throughout this project, I've found myself less interested in Des Esseintes, who views horrific art separate from content, and more interested in the Marquis, who views mutilation and manipulation of human life as an artistic medium in itself. Des Esseintes is by no means uninteresting—I find his ever-escalating experiments endlessly fascinating—and his viewpoint, although distanced from compassion and completely polarized, is closer to my own than the Marquis' disturbing enjoyment in others' pain. This isn't entirely surprising to me; I'm interested in the Marquis because his way of life is so far from my own. I don't find killing in itself interesting at all, but the disconnect the Marquis has between living things and objects (similar to Des Esseintes, but ultimately with horrific, actionable results) is fascinating; he uses humans just as an artist would use materials, or a child would use toys. The interesting part is how their corrupt view of the world allows them to play in disturbing ways that others never would dream of. Separate from content, as Des Esseintes or Rabo Karabekian would view the Marquis' 'work,' the human life and body is incredibly interesting as a medium, ironically, mostly for reasons someone without empathy wouldn't be able to see. The Complexity of humans makes the idea of playing a game with lives so intricate and difficult to control. Of course, this is not the part a serial killer would focus on—it's about the body, or it's about control. I

find motives boring. The body itself is a difficult medium to work with—there are so many parts, It's just about the farthest thing from a blank piece of paper. There are organs, muscle, bones, and tissue to deal with. One needs a surgeon's precision to be able to create something from what is already there. This is how these characters think; compassion is not relevant.

I am a bit uncomfortable calling these two characters sociopathic, as I have no authority to diagnose, but what I can say with confidence is that they both completely lack any sense of empathy. I would be interested in looking further into what makes one unempathetic character more or less terrible than another, and if that can be said at all. Is it simply a matter of their actions and how those actions affect others? Do we measure this by how punishable their actions would be in society? I don't know whether it is fair to say that Des Esseintes is less awful than the Marquis because of his lack of interest in killing. It seems true to an extent, but his disinterest in murder doesn't make him care any more about human lives than the Marquis does, he just prefers to spend his time recreating and subverting nature instead of actively taking lives.

It is difficult to compare these characters and their ways of life for many reasons, but one I really felt the effects of in writing this project was the way that they are written: Des Esseintes' narrative is told almost entirely through his thought processes, while nothing in "the Bloody Chamber" offers the Marquis' perspective. It is told through the wife's perspective, and the information the reader receives about the Marquis is through her lens. However, his interests and belongings seem to be as much a part of him as they are for Des Esseintes, so it feels like I know him almost as well. Because these are both "grotesque characters," there isn't as much to know about them as there is for a real

person, or even a more rounded character. They are contained to their accumulated belongings, interests, and their all-consuming goals. These act as a direct reflection of their personalities, especially considering how external and motive-based interpersonal relationships are to them.

When it comes to my own relationship to objects, I believe there is a lot left for me to explore. I think it is worth looking into my fears and attractions, and the way those two are strangely, yet predictably, intertwined. I cannot help but think of the path Michelle McNamara lead herself down—a path that involved boxes of evidence taking up space in her child’s playroom—that eventually resulted in her death. When interest becomes obsession, and especially a dark obsession there is an overt danger. I love that there is a part of me that is willing to embrace darkness so openly, but I’m more than prepared to balance it with comforting and uplifting subjects. I am fascinated by my own limitations, but unlike Des Esseintes, I will not ignore them and push myself too far. My collection of satanic objects will always have its place in my bedroom, but ultimately it is a place of warmth and life.





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