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[See table of contents](#)

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# “All Cunt and No *Conscience*”: Female Sexuality and Representations of Misogyny in George Elliott Clarke’s *The Motorcyclist*

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**A**S THE LEADING LITERARY FIGURE in African Nova Scotia, George Elliott Clarke has dominated discussions of race relations, place, and belonging in the African Nova Scotian community. No writer has been more studied or more influential in creating discourses that represent the systemic racism that underscores “the meaning of growing up black in Atlantic Canada” (Hlongwane 292). Critics of Clarke’s work further highlight the varied nature of the racialized discourse that informs his texts, and they stress how the black experience in Nova Scotia (and Canada as a whole) is not as homogenous as stereotypical representations make it to be.<sup>1</sup> Through texts such as *Whylah Falls*, *Beatrice Chancy*, *George and Rue*, and his most recent novel, *The Motorcyclist*, Clarke plays with time to show a variety of experiences as historically situated and connected to the contemporary systems in place that perpetuate racial and social inequality.

Clarke’s work inevitably reconstructs black experiences to highlight the overt modes of oppression in a society that supports the exploitation and continued marginalization of non-white and non-male members of that society. In an interview with Ann Compton, Clarke stresses the necessity of reconceptualizing black identities and narratives: “[W]here is our voice? How do we fit in? What do we do with it? We are forced into a kind of negotiation with the master tropes, master genres, master language. In order to survive, in order to maintain some specificity for ourselves, we have no choice but to try to claim it for ourselves” (“Standing Your Ground” 4). Clarke demonstrates here the purpose behind his work, which actively identifies and interrogates the institutionalized racism routinely left out of Canadian and Atlantic Canadian narratives of place and belonging.

But are we missing something when we read Clarke’s work? The

rereading that I propose builds upon the argument notably established by Chinua Achebe in his assertive and groundbreaking essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.” Always there in Clarke’s texts, but often left out of criticism on them, is his representation of women and female sexuality. Critics continue to emphasize the racialized discourses that Clarke highlights over other blatant forms of oppression and marginalization, particularly in his depiction of his female characters.

In Clarke’s descriptions of women, their femininity or womanhood is always the first thing that readers learn about them. In critical considerations, however, their gender and the “trouble” that they experience because of it are disregarded in favour of the marginalization that they experience because of their race and/or socio-economic disenfranchisement. Clarke’s representation of women is primarily only “an image” of them. In “An Image of Africa,” Achebe effectively demonstrates how Joseph Conrad portrays an image of Africa that reflects colonial and white imperialist discourses. Echoing Achebe’s assertion that *he* read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* differently, I want to offer a rereading of Clarke’s 2016 novel *The Motorcyclist* to unsettle and problematize its representation of women. Similar to Conrad’s portrayal of the Congo and the people who inhabit that space, Clarke establishes an image of women and femininity that does not reflect the complexity or reality of women’s experiences. Instead, his portrayal of women, femininity, and female sexuality is rooted in heteronormative and misogynistic representations. His women rarely represent alternatives outside the stereotypical good/bad feminine dichotomy, and they are given few opportunities to explore their agency without suffering the consequences outlined by patriarchal governance.

Although critical discourses on Clarke’s work focus on race relations, both Donna Heiland and Maureen Moynagh offer compelling and important analyses of Beatrice in *Beatrice Chancy*. Both identify the patriarchal structures that actively work to restrict and dominate Beatrice, not unlike the structures depicted in *The Motorcyclist*. However, there is no sustained critical analysis of Clarke’s depiction of women, in part because of the groundbreaking representations of African Nova Scotians that his work provides. Yet Clarke’s female characters continue to experience marginalization because of their sex, gender, and sexuality, and to focus only on their experiences as they

relate to their race and/or socio-economic position ignores the complex realities that women face. Sexism, racism, classism, and ableism explicitly intersect to create complicated lived realities for women under patriarchy.

In framing Clarke's interpretation of female sexuality and considering the era in which the novel takes place, his narrative structure must be examined first. As readers and critics, we can attempt to come to Clarke's defence by arguing that we need to make a realistic assessment in terms of time and place and a distinction between Clarke's voice as the author and Carl Black's voice as the protagonist. Like Conrad, Clarke uses narrative techniques to make this distinction, often exploring the inside/outside dynamic of Carl's view of himself. However, the novel never actually challenges the outcome that each female character experiences, nor does it sufficiently problematize its representations of women. Achebe asserts that this kind of narrative strategy in *Heart of Darkness* "seems to [him] totally wasted because [it] neglects to hint however subtly and tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of [the] characters" (7). And Conrad seems to have "complete confidence in Marlow" (7), similar to the relationship that readers see develop between Clarke and Carl.

"Reviewing the reviews" that *The Motorcyclist* received in national newspapers provides valuable insights into popular discourses and the framing of Clarke's text that points to a lack of critical analyses of the representation of women and a narrative structure that champions its one-dimensional female characters. In *The Globe and Mail*, for example, Emily Donaldson gives only basic descriptions of the female characters and instead contextualizes the novel as a reflection of "race, class and history." Similarly, a review in *The National Post* by Ryan Patrick describes *The Motorcyclist* as "a love letter of sorts to the Maritimes" and a novel that "highlights a time where Canadians of black heritage scrapped, struggled, yet ultimately survived during an era where the nation itself was shaking out its own post-war identity." Although Patrick does assert that "white Canadian women are often objects of Black's desire," the objectification of both white and black women is persistent throughout the novel. It seems that Patrick references Clarke's misogyny only as it relates to racism, and he presents Carl's victory over white women as a "personal victory over the systemic racism he faces." To focus on the objectification of white women by a black man, over the

objectification of black women by a black man, situates racially charged objectification as more problematic than objectification rooted in sexism. This, albeit inadvertently, privileges one form of marginalization over another.

Although these perspectives are expected in reviews of and/or criticism on Clarke's work, Adam Nayman, who reviewed *The Motorcyclist* for *Quill and Quire*, takes a different approach, highlighting Carl's indiscriminate sexual behaviour and the hypocritical standards that the women are held to in terms of the "Madonna/whore binary in which [Carl] tries to locate them." Nayman situates Carl's sexism as a sign of the time in which the novel takes place: "The politically correct move would be to chastise Carl for his possessive, dismissive, and at times subjugative behaviour, but *The Motorcyclist* does something more interesting, observing it as a by-product of a particular moment while suggesting Carl's attitude is hardly unique to his time and place." This framing of Carl's behaviour within the age-old "boys will be boys" argument does not exempt the text from criticism, especially when there are ample opportunities throughout the novel to show female sexuality and femininity more positively.

Interestingly, Jim Johnstone's review of Clarke's poetry collection *Gold*, in the November 2016 issue of *Canadian Notes and Queries*, is the only piece of criticism that draws explicit attention to "Clarke's increasingly problematic portrayal of women." Johnstone notes that, "Early on in Clarke's career, his transgressions were more salacious than misogynistic," but in his more recent publications "there are several instances . . . that are palpably hateful." This criticism, though pertaining to Clarke's poetry, is certainly applicable to *The Motorcyclist*, in which readers see Carl react violently, if only through his fantasies, to the women whose agency and sexuality threaten his heteronormative values and masculinity. It is in these troubling instances that readers should expect disapproval from Clarke, but that disapproval does not materialize, and Carl's behaviour seems to be normalized.

Although reviews of *The Motorcyclist* refer to Carl's journeys on his motorcycle in a racially and class-divided 1950s Halifax, his relationships with the female characters, filtered in part through Carl, are the primary focus of the plot. I further argue that his motorcycle allows him to navigate among the various women whom he simultaneously romances, serving as a tangible representation of the agency that he

is afforded over the female characters. Readers are first introduced to Muriel Dixon, then Marina White, Laura “Blue Roses” States, Averil Beauchamps, and finally Liz Publicover, the five women who occupy Carl’s love life. Each of the women comes from a different class and racial background, and Carl uses these markers as he establishes a hierarchical categorization of them: “Possibly: Marina is for marriage, Muriel for relief, but Averil allows philandering that’s *first-class*. . . . As for ‘Blue Roses’ States, their coupling had been commendable, but she is literally a *distant* memory. Finally, Miss Publicover remains unproven” (199–200). Hopeful, Carl sees Marina as his future wife because of her superior beauty, her sexual purity, and the potential middle-class status that she might be able to offer him thanks to her nursing degree. Muriel, a maid, is “fuckable” (115), but nothing more, whereas Averil, Laura, and Liz are all women whom Carl originally covets because of their fair skin and upper-middle-class status. Their race and their socio-economic potential secure their positions ahead of Muriel but behind Marina in Carl’s derogatory and sexist system of categorization. Throughout the novel, readers see the female characters categorically objectified and held by Carl to unrealistic standards in terms of their sexuality and femininity. He categorizes them based upon their race, class, and ability (or inability) to define what he sees as desirable femininity. Readers are told that Carl “likes a hussy — a nice-size, pretty slut” (19) — and that he sees these women as valuable, and not merely as sexual objects, only if they fulfill the categories that he has outlined in terms of class status and femininity.

Muriel is the first of Carl’s lovers whom readers meet, and though she is described as a woman who “defines *Femininity*,” her status as an uneducated maid allows Carl, as he sees it, to classify her as “a scullion” (20, 21). Clarke writes that “Carl don’t want his sex odysseying to end with his being hog-tied to an unlettered maid. Though he’s a railway serf, he don’t wanna settle for a scullion. For Muriel. He’s gotta have someone — anyone — *better*” (21). Although Carl sees Muriel as less than adequate because of her occupation as a maid and thus her lower-class status, she is rendered independent and not disillusioned by both her class status and her sexuality. Her apartment, located in the (pre-gentrified) North End of Halifax, serves as one example of her independence. Carl sees her home as rat-infested, rancid squalor, but for Muriel “it is the best of places: *hers*. . . . [It is] a refuge — a

redoubt — from the posh South End mansion where she must dress as a maid, clean and cook as a maid, kowtow as a maid, bend like a maid, stoop like a maid, and be furtively pinched and fondled as a maid” (23). In this important instance, Clarke offers a promising glimpse of Muriel as someone other than a sexualized object in Carl’s repertoire of women. Her apartment, however rancid and rat infested, represents her independence and agency; it reflects how even under the racial, class, and patriarchal restrictions that oppress her she can assert herself as independent and in control of her surroundings.

Although Muriel is somewhat in control of her life, she is consistently reminded of her place in patriarchal society. When readers are first introduced to her through Carl, he recalls rescuing her from a “bungling rapist” (22), whom she was originally trying to manipulate for her own advantage. Clarke contends that “Muriel was willing to see how far she could get ahead by tumbling, sprawling, in the humungous back seat. How much could her compliance, her kisses, her strokes and squeezes, ‘Golly gees,’ wrench from a white man’s wallet?” (22). In response to her increasingly violent experience, Clarke applies the clichéd damsel-in-distress story line to Muriel and sends Carl to her rescue: “Muriel had thanked God for Carl’s chivalrous rescue, and then she had tucked her arm into his, as he’d led her, not striding, but pacing easily northward again” (20). Here Clarke reasserts Muriel as subordinate to Carl despite glimpses of her agency and independence.

Marina White is then presented in direct contrast to Muriel. As her last name suggests, Marina is defined by her purity and devotion to remaining a virgin until she completes her nursing degree: “She figures an open-legs policy mandates a closed-door future. . . . In sum, Marina believes she’ll slip out of *Peonage* and into the middle class *if* she keeps Matthew-Mark-Luke-John in mind, and models herself on The Virgin Mary, spurning Mary Magdalene” (31). Her insistence on remaining a virgin is a source of both frustration and intrigue to Carl. He remarks on several occasions how he would like to, and will, “have” her (37), insinuating that she is something to be consumed as long as he desires her.

Clarke’s clear framing of women in terms of the madonna/whore binary is maintained throughout the novel through the contrast between Muriel and Marina. For Marina, engaging with her sexuality, which she communicates as “needs” (37), means inevitable failure;

Muriel is an embodiment of that failure, and for Marina to avoid that fate she has to behave under strict guidelines that govern her body and sexuality. Her reference to her sexual desires as “needs” insinuates how the ideology<sup>2</sup> imposed on her restricts her sexual agency. Additionally, her race, class, and gender afford her a lesser degree of agency compared with many of the other female characters in the novel. Although Muriel is in control of her sexual agency, it cements her status as a member of the lower class while serving as justification for Carl and her community to continually look down on her.

Early depictions of Marina further reference what encompasses the failure embodied initially by Muriel if Marina fails to keep her sexual desires in check, “unless a gal wanna be left in the lurch, a papa-less *bambino* at her breast” (31). For Clarke, single motherhood serves as the epitome of feminine failure. Both Carl’s mother, Victoria Black, and Marina’s mother serve as early examples: “Mar gotta favour *Chastity*. Her mom was — well — too open to men. Mar’s siblings share her mama, but none her papa. Too, she’s grown up hungry; cash could bring home fire, enough for crusts and crumbs, but not enough to always stay warm or to stave off sickness” (30). In this description, Marina’s childhood poverty and her lower-class status are both directly connected to her mother’s sexual indiscretions. Although Muriel’s sexuality is seen along similar lines, unlike Marina’s mother and Victoria Black Muriel is granted more respect than a single mother, and she still has a chance at a better class standing through marriage. For Clarke’s female characters, marriage serves as the antidote to the shame associated with single motherhood referenced throughout the text. Both Carl and Marina follow similar ideals that say “marriage eliminate[s] *Disgrace* and *Bastardy*” (33). Unknown to the reader, Clarke’s focus on single motherhood foreshadows what will eventually become Marina’s fate.

The basic yet juxtaposing descriptions of Marina and Muriel further emphasize how the women in *The Motorcyclist* are granted the ability to occupy only one of two spaces: either good femininity, as represented by Marina, or bad femininity, as represented by Muriel. The filtered versions of the women and the guidelines that Carl uses to actively police their bodies and sexuality reinforce a simplistic and unrealistic definition of the female experience perpetuated by the dichotomy of good/bad femininity and are always in accordance with patriarchal values.

Although Carl’s experiences are filtered through a narrator who pre-



sents as biased, flawed, and unreliable, Clarke's overall structure lacks the necessary irony to reject Carl's limited views. Instead, readers are encouraged to view Carl with a degree of sympathy and understanding. His hypocrisy is explicit, to which the narrator gestures, but that is in response to the social and cultural oppression that Carl encounters, which pardons if not justifies his worldview.

Patriarchy is presented as just one such construct. Carl, though a product of patriarchal culture, is also a product of the racism that patriarchy, in part, reproduces. To remedy the systemic inequality that he faces, he uses white women as a means of manipulating the system that continually degrades him. Clarke writes that to Carl "the most desirable women are white and are the most satisfying once subjugated" (80). Although he clearly sees white women as the most desirable sexual objects, his objectification does not discriminate, and the ideologies that his community impresses on him "became his answer to redneck racism and blueblood classism" (80). Although it is clear that Carl has underlying motives when choosing sexual partners, the women whom he beds, both black and white, are ultimately presented as triumphs and conquests that glorify his coveted status as a Lothario.

Carl seduces several white women over the course of the novel, but Laura is the first of his white lovers that readers meet. Although she is of mixed ancestry, her "ivory legs" and skin that passes for "white cream" grant her all of the privileges afforded to white women: "[S]he asserts her superiority to most Coloured women, due to her cream complexion, her college reading, . . . her poise and elocution, and her fashion sense to garb herself so that her limp becomes a prop. . . . Her only rivals can only be *real* white girls" (95). Laura is further described as having a minor disability: one of her legs is shorter than the other, and she wears a rubber heel that "grants her the illusion of equilibrium" (90). This "illusion" references not just her physical ability but also her social status. Carl's continual references to her disability emphasize this, and it becomes clear that Carl can look past her physical challenges only because of her fair skin tone, beauty, femininity, and education. These are all things that he values in order to calculate how desirable Laura is to him, which the narrator notes but does not criticize or ask the reader to criticize, either subtly or explicitly. Instead, her disability stands in contrast to his lack of education, which works to place them on equal ground.

Carl's early interactions with Laura are initially promising. "[She]

deems *Sex* as healthy and healing” (97), and she appears to be both sexually in control and liberated. She is not readily available to Carl, however, since she resides in Truro while she is enrolled at the teachers’ college. As a result, he begins to see “vanilla ice-cream-complexion” (98) Averil Beauchamps, an American student who, like Marina, studies nursing at Dalhousie University. Despite the similar qualities between Averil and Marina, “Averil is also starkly *not* like Marina, for she need not bear the burden of symbolizing *Venus as Virgin*” (98). This indicates that, despite the similarities between them, Averil’s skin colour, like Laura’s, grants Averil a sexual agency that Marina does not possess. Averil is also intrigued by black men in the same way that Carl is intrigued by white women. Coming from Mississippi, “her yen for Coloured gents would be a death wish in the South” (98). Living on her own in Halifax gives her the opportunity to explore her sexuality, and Carl happens to be the man with whom she explores her desires. Averil is presented, in part, as a product of a deeply segregated racist society, and initially as Carl’s sexual equal, but as readers learn more about her experiences it becomes clear that she is not granted the sexual privileges that Carl experiences because of her sex.

In the early stages of *The Motorcyclist*, readers are given insight, if only slightly, into several potentially fascinating and promising examinations of female agency and sexuality. As the novel progresses, however, most of this potential is lost as each of the female characters eventually experiences a social downfall brought on by actions that threaten Carl’s masculinity. Muriel is the first to experience an uplift from her original standing in Carl’s categorization, followed immediately by a demotion that eliminates her from the ranking. Her uplift occurs when Carl learns that she has had a miscarriage. With this news, he immediately values Muriel differently because he assumes paternity, but her increase in value lasts only as long as his paternity is assumed.

Although Carl assumes the paternity of the baby, readers know that Muriel has been sexually involved with several other men. This directly reflects her sexual agency and clearly demonstrates that Carl does not occupy the centre of her social universe. He obviously dislikes her relationships with other men, though his own simultaneous involvements with several other women seem to be unproblematic. This indicates the hypocrisy that underscores his categorization of “his” women and demonstrates again how men and women experience different degrees

of sexual agency based upon patriarchal values (see Wyile). For Carl, as long as his paternity is associated with Muriel's pregnancy, Muriel remains at an elevated status.

In these instances of explicit hypocrisy, it might appear that Clarke is inviting the reader to criticize Carl's double standards. However, Clarke's refusal to give Muriel, or any of the female characters, any kind of redemption works to reinforce rather than challenge patriarchal views of female sexuality, and the difficulties that the women create for Carl are seen as just that — difficulties imposed on *his* life.

The downfall of Muriel is not characterized by her relationships with other men. Instead, it is characterized by her relationship with another woman. The true nature of her close relationship with her good friend Lola is questioned throughout the novel, and Muriel eventually comes out as a lesbian to Carl. When this happens, he is directly threatened by her sexuality and refuses to believe that she is a lesbian: "Carl's bitter disappointment borders on *Repugnance*. He'd *had* plans this night" (187). Carl planned to sleep with Muriel that night but was thwarted, and even disgusted, by her revelation. "Carl kisses Muriel hard, intensely, to remind his ex-lover that she needs a man: *himself*, who also almost likely made her a mother" (188). Muriel rejects Carl and "feels [his] tongue hard against her teeth, steely against her mouth" (188). Her refusal to give in to him, despite "his insistence on penetration" (188), further emphasizes her agency, which ultimately threatens his masculinity. Interestingly, the narrator's insistence on Carl's paternity feeds into his assumptions of superiority and demonstrates his sense of ownership of Muriel, her body, and her pregnancy — however brief it might have been.

Her failure to embody his heteronormative definition of femininity threatens his perceived masculine superiority in a patriarchal society, and Carl is unable to understand or accept her sexuality: "Carl still disbelieves that Muriel is a woman who likes to suckle on women. . . . Nor does he credit that Muriel, *once his woman*, should feel *manly* toward other women" (201). This phrasing indicates that Carl has clearly defined ideas of masculinity and femininity, and when these ideas are threatened he tries to redefine Muriel as "his" woman. She tries to enlighten him by encouraging him to read Gale Wilhelm's *We Too Are Drifting*,<sup>3</sup> but he refuses to do so: "He's amazed that Muriel — a maid — is reading; not only reading, but commanding *him* to read" (200).

This reveals that Carl is threatened not just by her sexuality but also by her intelligence. For him, her class status and third-grade education had always placed her below him in terms of social standing. Her recommendation of a book, coupled with her sexuality, threatens Carl to the point where he reclassifies Muriel as “a scullion” (220). This reclassification indicates that he is desperately trying to repair the damage done to his masculinity by her rejection, her sexual agency, and her intelligence.

The threat that the female characters pose to Carl’s masculinity becomes a major theme that highlights their perceived failures. The failure of Muriel is defined by her sexuality and her inability to embody what Carl defines as acceptable femininity. In order to reaffirm his patriarchal ideals, he seeks out Averil to remedy the challenges that Muriel’s sexuality presented. His relationship with Averil is defined primarily in terms of sex, and she serves almost exclusively as a sexual object to Carl. Although readers see her as sexually in control, he sees her as an object or something to be consumed. After learning of Muriel’s sexuality, readers watch Carl go straight to Averil, whom he “scooped . . . up like she was water to lap from his palm” (190). This suggests the consumable nature of her sexuality that he desires. Her sexual appetite, however, is what marks her failure. After Averil and Carl attend the Olympic Gardens Dance Hall together, she ends up connecting with one of his friends and Canadian National Railways co-workers, Erv “the Perv” Johnson. Clarke writes that both Erv and Carl “share tastes in ‘cutie pies’ and ‘cupcakes,’” further insinuating that the women whom they desire are items for them to consume. Although they view Averil as consumable, she reverses their gaze by treating them as items for her to devour: “Averil likes the feel of a different black-boy-body, one that’s like licorice and red wrapping paper” (206). Carl “cast[s] Averil as a classy lady” (207), but her sexual relationship with another man threatens his masculinity, and he decides that “Averil is no more his Godiva, but a *zorrra*, all cunt and no *Conscience*. . . . Mentally, Carl crosses Averil off his list of viable lovers” (208).

As soon as she exhibits sexual agency beyond his construction of her, Carl has to reclassify Averil in the same way that he reclassified Muriel in order to reaffirm his superior, masculine identity. Where Averil was once compared with “vanilla ice-cream” (98) and various types of candy, to Carl her sexual agency reclassifies her as “dog food” (209). Clarke offers insights into her position and her framing of Carl

as a “morbid jerk” because of his unwillingness to “strive to keep her — not let another Negro claim her by massaging her butt” (209). The language that Clarke uses reinforces patriarchal ideals that perpetuate false notions of masculine chivalry and the romanticization of “claiming” a woman. Although Clarke provides insights into sexual agency when Averil reverses the gaze, the outcome of her agency reinforces her status as a failure. Carl challenges Erv’s claim of Averil by manipulating Erv’s schedule at their shared workplace: “When Erv discovers his hours have been cut, he begins to beat Averil, to thrash the cash outta her. He rips open her blouse to steal whatever she might think to stash in her bra cup” (213). Averil ends up reaching out to Carl for help, “sobbing quietly about Erv’s manhandling of her,” but “Carl spits, ‘Good luck. *Ciao.*’ And hangs up” (209). Erv’s beating serves as a vindication of sorts for Carl; in treating him exactly like he treated all of the women, “Averil . . . cast Carl in the unlovely position of having been bested, and in the domain in which his mirror and his yardstick said he should dominate” (214). Although Clarke is again explicit when referencing the hypocrisy of Carl’s ideals and how Carl justifies his treatment of women, the female characters are still situated as failing in a patriarchal society, and they are rendered incapable of achieving redemption. In this way, Clarke perpetuates the stereotypical ideals that patriarchy posits as normal, and the outcome for Averil, like his redefinition of Muriel, seems to be both acceptable and justified.

Even Averil, whom Clarke presents as the female character who most embodies positive female sexuality and agency, is unable to overcome patriarchal domination. Readers learn that she is eventually forced to move back to Mississippi to escape from Erv’s aggression. When Carl’s relationship with Averil dissolves, Carl reasons that “*I still have a chance with Mar. Mustn’t blow it!*” (207). Similar to how he sought out Averil after his falling out with Muriel, Marina offers the possibility for him to repair his bruised ego and threatened masculinity. “Marina’s abrupt fall from *Grace*” (118), however, has already begun by this point in the novel. Carl pursues Marina regardless of her perceived transgressions since his relationships with Muriel and Averil have been unsuccessful, since Laura is back in Truro, and since Liz is not yet a successful conquest. The first event that marks the eventual failure of Marina takes place after a sexual encounter between the two on his birthday that leaves Carl seeing her as tainted. In this encounter, Marina is in

control, and Carl is threatened by her agency: “Carl’s climax marks *Sorrow* and *Regret*. Contradictorily, Carl deems Mar no longer 100 per cent virginal” (111). Her value to him is directly connected to her purity, and when Marina engages Carl in a sex act that he does not control, she inadvertently threatens his masculinity by placing him in a subordinate position that discredits her “pure” image. His threatened masculinity becomes apparent through his devaluing of her, and to remedy her actions he thinks that “He could right now roll atop her and grind her ass into the grass” (111). Imagining raping Marina gives Carl the false impression of power and control after a situation in which he felt vulnerable: “Mar’s manipulation of Carl — literally — leaves him feeling a waste. Her forwardness bothers him, despite his *Pleasure*” (110-11).

The entire birthday scene takes place in an Edenic setting to juxtapose Marina’s perceived purity with the agency that Carl sees as grotesque. Marina is described as “prodigiously ripe,” and when he lowers her to the ground it is “as if he’s got her down in a baptismal pool” (109, 110). After their sexual interaction, which leaves Carl feeling like a “science project,” he wonders “if the moment is Edenic, after all” (109, 111), comparing the agency of Marina with that of Eve when she is tempted by the snake to eat the apple. After their interaction, Carl takes Marina home, where they are confronted by Leicester Jenkins, a Grenadian medical student at Dalhousie University. To Carl’s further displeasure, Leicester and Marina have a date. This serves as a further indication of her agency because she is willing to treat Carl exactly how he treats her. He then seeks out Muriel since at this point in the novel she is still “his dependable, ‘bottom’ girl” (113), and while at her place he dreams of Marina:

Mar is naked and plastering her gold self with a rainbow of smears that resemble a life-size Rorschach test. . . . Carl grabs hold of her, thus slashing colours all over his clothes. He tells her, “I’m an artist.” The scene shifts. . . . Carl pushes apart her legs — bullishly — and thrusts himself to the heart — the crux — of the matter, and she is moaning as he, groaning ecstatically, awakes, pleased that he has finally asserted himself — though uselessly — in a dream. (114)

This dream, similar to his daydream of raping Marina, reflects his need for power in their relationship. Her agency poses a threat to Carl, both in real life and in his dream, in which he asserts that he, not she, is

the artist. His dominance is fully asserted when he has sex with her despite her protests (114). Although it is only a dream, the threat that female agency poses to his masculinity is explicit, and the only way for Carl to equalize the power imbalance is through forceful sex in which he can assert his dominance and superiority, though “uselessly” (114). This scene provides valuable insight into his fragile state and his hunger for power in a world where he is not always granted such power. Since readers have insights into the social constructs that have helped to create Carl, they understand and sympathize with his frustrations, which Clarke highlights by commenting that power can be achieved only through fantasy.

Throughout the novel, it is clear that Carl is taken aback by the agency of Marina, but her overall failure stems not just from her agency but also from her relationship with Leicester, whom Carl dislikes because of his superior class standing as “M.D.-to-be” (112). Carl cannot challenge Leicester in the same way that he can challenge Erv, whom he sees as his equal.<sup>4</sup> After the birthday incident that marks the beginning of her downfall, Marina and Carl see less of each other, both because of his subordination in their sexual encounter and because of her relationship with Leicester. When she tells Carl that she is expecting Leicester’s baby, Carl shames her repeatedly, and she “refuses to meet his eyes” (244), indicating that her shame is based upon the circumstances of her pregnancy. Marina discloses to Carl that Leicester refuses to marry her, and she thinks that she needs to be married in order to “be respectable” (245) and avoid the shame associated with single motherhood. Carl thinks that “the woman who personified *Virtue* is [now] unworthy of the deification” (246). Marina tries but fails to stand up for herself by challenging his sexual relationships with other women as Carl justifies his actions by arguing that he is a “natural man” (247). He is so angered by her pregnancy that he again contemplates raping her, for he feels inferior to Leicester, and he wants to assert his dominance over both of them. Carl, feeling sorry for Marina, however, formulates a plan to (aggressively) entice Leicester to marry her, and she obeys every command that he gives her. Her obedience gives him the satisfaction for which he was looking, and he “sees her as an obedient animal — if contaminated — at last” (247).

Carl’s reaction to Marina’s pregnancy emphasizes the double standard that underscores his relationships with all of the women in the

novel. Since his paternity is not associated with Marina's pregnancy as it was with Muriel's miscarriage, Carl rejects Marina, and readers further learn that Leicester and Marina never marry. "To mitigate her *Disgrace*, to — in fact — undo it substantially, [she] will complete her *Nursing* degree in Montreal. She elects to become a secular nun — a spinster — dedicating herself to her profession, to have a distinguished career" (249). Clarke's ending for Marina perpetuates the ideology that situates single motherhood as the epitome of feminine failure. For her to escape that failure, she must uproot herself, reject motherhood, and suppress her sexuality.

Carl's double standard with respect to pregnancy and single motherhood is best signalled through Laura "Blue Roses" States. Although his relationship with her is shorter than his relationships with Muriel, Averil, and Marina, Laura ends up pregnant but does not inform Carl of his paternity. During his romance with Averil, he receives a letter from Laura explaining that she is in the hospital but she does not disclose why. Carl ignores her letter and finds out about her son only when he receives a phone call from an unknown caller who informs him that "Your son is dying" (258). Carl learns that "The mother hadn't wanted to call: Carl's son was born in February, but the mother had kept her pregnancy private and Carl's paternity secret" (258-59). Readers learn that Laura is the mother of "Carl's son" and that she wants to raise him on her own, without Carl's knowledge. When her son, Royal "Roy," becomes sick at three months with pneumonia, she does not want Carl to find out. Instead, he is called by her mother: "Laur want[ed] nothing from you; we ask you nothing. I called you over Laura's objections, just because I believe your fatherhood is more important than your once-upon-a-time *friendship* with Laura" (263). Carl treats Laura's pregnancy differently from how he treats Marina's pregnancy: "To the mother's credit, she has not tried to trap Carl, but has been eager to leave him free, she gets on with her own life. Carl thinks, *She's quite the girl — obviously*" (260). Again, readers see how Carl reacts differently when his paternity is involved: instead of classifying Laura how he classifies Marina, he comments on her strength and independence.

Laura's agency becomes apparent in her pregnancy through her refusal to include Carl. When Roy becomes sick, however, her wants and needs are overstepped by her mother, who believes that Carl's fatherhood is more important than what Laura wants for both herself



and her son. Furthermore, as soon as Carl is made aware of his paternity, Roy is continually referred to as “his” son or “your” son, even though Carl has no part in his upbringing. In this way, Laura’s motherhood and agency are overlooked in favour of Carl’s paternity, which underscores how femininity, female sexuality, and agency are constructed by Clarke throughout *The Motorcyclist*.

As demonstrated, there are ample opportunities throughout the novel to depict the complex and varied nature of women’s experiences, femininity, sexuality, and agency, but these depictions never materialize. Instead, like Conrad’s depiction of the Congo in *Heart of Darkness*, Clarke presents an image of feminized women who are patriarchal caricatures unable to move outside the narrow definitions that patriarchy creates for them. Despite being explicit about Carl’s hypocrisy, Clarke does nothing to challenge it, and instead readers are encouraged to view Carl with a degree of sympathy given the oppression that he faces as a black man in 1950s Halifax divided along lines of race and class. The glimpses of female agency give hope to female readers, but any hope consistently dissolves when each of the female characters is unable to overcome her perceived failures, indicating a lack of necessary irony — which might seem to be obvious at various points throughout the text — if Clarke’s representation of women is to be effective. Instead, “his” women continually experience marginalization and oppression based upon their race, economic position, ability or disability, and gender — it is not just one or the other. However, gender causes continual trouble for Clarke’s women, and when we as readers, critics, and consumers continually ignore this trouble it becomes normalized. Clarke’s framing of the female characters and their failures does situate them as “all cunt and no *Conscience*,” and we as readers need to refuse this image.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See MacLeod for a more in-depth discussion.

<sup>2</sup> See Bay-Cheng for more information on Virgin Mary ideology and the virgin-slut continuum with which women contend.

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm’s 1935 novel features lesbian themes. Clarke writes that it is what opened Muriel’s eyes to the possibility of a lesbian relationship with Lola (200-02).

<sup>4</sup> See Millett for more on the relationship between class systems and patriarchy.

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