



Unfortunate Fertility: An Analysis of the Fertility in Pan's Labyrinth

Jiaqi Wu^{1,2}

¹Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing 215000, Jiangsu, China

²Salem State University, Salem, MA 01970, United States

Abstract: *This analysis explores how fertility emerges as a complex and troubling theme, intertwining life, death, and patriarchal oppression in Pan's Labyrinth (2006), directed by Guillermo del Toro through qualitative analysis of the experiences of Carmen, Captain Vidal, and Ofelia, revealing the dire consequences it imposes. Carmen's pregnancy debilitates her health and restricts her freedom, ultimately leading to her death during childbirth. Vidal, embodying patriarchal tyranny, views Carmen merely as a vessel for producing a male heir, disregarding her life and agency. His obsession with his lineage and the continuation of patriarchal power exacerbates the suffering caused by fertility. Ofelia, observing her mother's demise and experiencing her own tragic fate, becomes a witness to the cycle of life and death, further underscored by recurring womb-like imagery throughout the film. The narrative underscores that fertility, while vital for life, is deeply intertwined with pain, sacrifice, and the perpetuation of patriarchal norms. Ultimately, the film portrays fertility not as a life-affirming force, but as a mechanism of control and suffering, leading to the tragic downfall of its characters.*

Keywords: Feminist Analysis; Patriarchy; Pan's Labyrinth; Symbolism; Tragedy.

Cited as: Wang, J. (2024). Unfortunate Fertility: An Analysis of the Fertility in Pan's Labyrinth. *Journal of Theory and Practice in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(3), 38–40. Retrieved from <https://woodyinternational.com/index.php/jtphss/article/view/45>

In *Pan's Labyrinth* directed by Guillermo del Toro in 2006, the protagonist Ofelia inadvertently contacts the underworld and enters the labyrinth, and then she completes three tasks under the guidance of the master of the labyrinth, faun. During the process, Ofelia's mother dies in childbirth, and Ofelia's stepfather shoots her first and is later shot by republican rebels. Ofelia finally passes the test of humanity and returns to the underworld. Fertility is great and worthy of respect, yet in this film, fertility comes with death, hurt, and sin. This paper will analyze from the perspectives of Carmen, Captain Vidal, and Ofelia how fertility brings misfortune to women in *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Carmen is a great mother, having Ofelia and then a son, but fertility has undoubtedly brought her misfortune. This misfortune manifests itself in two aspects, health and freedom. First, Carmen's fertility has harmed her physically. From the moment she comes on, she looks very weak. While in the army car, she is unwell, and then she gets out of the car and vomits. Because of the physiological effects of her pregnancy, she suffers from insomnia and relies on a potion from Doctor Ferreiro to get to sleep. Second, Carmen's freedom has been restricted. She is physically unwell during her pregnancy but remains able-bodied. When Vidal asks her to sit in a wheelchair during her first appearance, Carmen's subconscious resistance fails. Vidal seems to be trying to persuade her to have more rest, but in fact, he is very tough and limits her freedom.

As a mother, Carmen is able to give life to her child, but her own life is disdained, and she dies in order to give birth to her son. When Ofelia places mandrake root under Carmen's bed, her fever improves. But when Dr. Ferreiro tells Vidal that Carmen's temperature has dropped, Vidal is not pleased about it. He stares at the doctor, not a trace of emotion in his eyes, and says "Listen to me. If you have to choose, save the baby. That boy will bear my name and my father's name, too" (Toro). Vidal has no regard for the safety of Carmen's life but just takes Carmen as a fertility machine to him. Everything he does is for his son.

When Vidal finds Ofelia hiding under the bed with mandrake root, he lambasts Ofelia mercilessly, and drags out the mandrake root from under the bed, ripping it off the milk plate. His displeasure with mandrake root causes Carmen to bleed out. Carmen eventually sacrifices her life to give birth to her son. After that, Vidal never mentions

Carmen again, just as she never appears - because his goal has been achieved. Carmen is undoubtedly great as a mother, but her life is belittled.

Vidal is the dominant figure that causes fertility to bring misfortune to women. Vidal seems tough and strong in both work and life without weaknesses. Lindsay describes him as “The embodiment of cold, fascist masculinity is Ofelia’s stepfather, himself a kind of monster – a ruthless military man of unspeakable cruelty who tortures and shoots victims at whim” (10). However, he is trapped in the yoke of patriarchy, which is shown by his expectation for his son and his respect for his father. This patriarchal yoke is perpetuated by fertility, repeating the tragedy, and bringing misfortune to women.

First, Vidal, as a man in charge of a certain power, clearly does not respect women and treats his wife as a fertility tool. When he meets Carmen for the first time, he does not hug or kiss his wife but only touches her belly. Carmen is like a vessel and Vidal does not care about the mood or state of his wife. What he really cares about is the child in Carmen’s womb. Second, Vidal clearly prefers sons to daughters. He repeatedly states in the film that he believes the new baby will be a boy. As he says in the film, “Well, a boy should be born wherever his father is” (Toro). It is based on his belief that only boys could carry on the family name and his career.

In contrast to his attitude towards his unborn son, Vidal’s attitude towards Ofelia in the film is extremely bad, initially ignoring her existence and then reprimanding her when she does something wrong. After Carmen dies, Vidal locks Ofelia in her room. Although Ofelia is not his biological daughter, this bad attitude is enough to show his bias. Vidal acts out an image of a vicious stepfather, which hurts Ofelia.

At the same time, he cites his expectations for his son as the reason for his participation in the war. At a well-attended dinner, Vidal’s guests include local dignitaries and priests, all complicit in the elimination of republican rebels. When a guest says, “We know you are not here by choice” (Toro), Vidal says he came voluntarily, “I choose to be here because I want my son to be born in a clean, new Spain” (Toro). Fertility is actually a biological act, but Vidal adds too much artificial meaning to it, making him more eager to have a son. However, there is something behind Vidal’s behavior and beliefs. His extreme regard for his son may have come from his respect for his father as well as his fear. Vidal’s father passes everything on to Vidal, and Vidal is eager to pass everything on to his son, this carrying on from generation to generation is based on female fertility. But this patriarchal chain of procreation not only hurts women but also causes Vidal great pain.

For Vidal, this pain stems from his inability to escape patriarchal thinking. Orme thinks “Pan’s Labyrinth produces critiques of patriarchal forms of political rule of family and the nation” (223). In the film, Vidal repeatedly touches his father’s belongings, a broken pocket watch. The watch is deliberately broken by Vidal’s father before his death, in order to tell Vidal, the exact time of his death. It warns his son that he should become a warrior who died on the battlefield too. Vidal, on the one hand, carries the heavy expectations of his father, and on the other, has the same expectations of his son.

He is obsessed with his father’s military exploits and often takes out his pocket watch to motivate himself. He hesitates as he goes up the hill to decide whether to fight the republican rebels to the death. Then he looks at his pocket watch. Perhaps he is afraid at that time, but his father’s valor is like a great burden upon him, and he cannot escape it.

Nevertheless, he still wants to follow the pattern of his father’s inheritance of the pocket watch and implement it on his son. Vidal and his son appear together at the end of the film when Ofelia takes the infant to the labyrinth under the guidance of Pan. Vidal shoots Ofelia, and then walks out of the labyrinth and only to find himself surrounded by republican rebels. He gives the baby to Mercedes, pulls the cracked pocket watch from his pocket one last time, and asks Mercedes to tell his son when his father dies, but Mercedes refuses, saying “He won’t even know your name” (Toro). The despair of having no descendant hit Vidal the hardest. In this way, the patriarchal chain carried by birth is broken. Orme describes it as “preventing him from passing on the paternal story cycle that began with his father and that he intended to be repeated, with its political and ideological implications unchanged, into next generation” (231). But too many people have paid the death price, including Carmen, Vidal, and Ofelia. Ofelia is a product of fertility in the film. Step by step, she witnesses how her mother Carmen is damaged by her fertility, and how Carmen gives her life to give her brother’s new life. In the film, a pattern resembling a womb is repeated, suggesting fertility.

When Ofelia secretly reads the wordless book given to her by faun in the bathroom, a pattern that looks like a bloody womb appears on the book. Ofelia immediately realizes something is wrong and rushes out to see Carmen bleeding. Laura Hubner believes that in this scene, “Fears of childbirth are also striking. The female body is linked with death, magic and witchcraft” (57). These scenes are unfolded from Ofelia’s first perspective, reflecting that in Ofelia’s eyes, fertility and bleeding are directly related.

The womb-like pattern also appears in Ofelia’s first challenge. She follows the guide of the wordless book to the fig tree, whose trunk is shaped like a womb. In this challenge, the toad continues to feed on the nutrients of the tree to survive, just as a baby survives inside its mother. Mapped into Ofelia’s life, the younger brother is like the toad, constantly sucking up Carmen’s nutrients and causing her pain. As shown in a scene in the film, Ofelia leans on her mother’s belly and prays for her brother not to hurt her mother, saying “I’m asking you for one thing, just one: don’t hurt her” (Toro). The pain of fertility doesn’t just hurt Carmen; it worries Ofelia even more.

The statue in faun’s labyrinth shows faun holding the child and a baby, hinting at the final scene of the film, in which Ofelia brings her brother to the Labyrinth to find faun. In this scene, the faun, the oldest in the film, Ofelia, and her brother, the youngest in the film, appear together, and we can see the continuation and renewal of life. In the real world, however, Ofelia bleeds to death. The ending of the film links life, fertility, and bloodshed, suggesting an unbreakable law of life and death. “As much as a woman is capable of giving life, she is on the border of life and nonlife” (Lindsay 6). Fertility is an important part of life and death, because without fertility there is no new life, but new life is often faced with the threat of death and a painful life.

In Guillermo del Toro’s film, *Pan’s Labyrinth*, fertility brings pain and life danger to the mother and is used as a tool to perpetuate patriarchy. The real-life deaths of Carmen, Vidal, and Ofelia are all related to this to a certain degree. Fertility, as a great new life-related ability, ends up causing so much misery in this world in *Pan’s Labyrinth*.

References

- [1] Hubner, Laura. “Pan’s Labyrinth, Fear and the Fairy Tale.” *Fear Itself*. Brill, 2010. 43-62.
- [2] Lindsay, Richard. “Menstruation as heroine’s journey in Pan’s Labyrinth.” *The Supernatural Cinema of Guillermo del Toro: Critical Essays* (2015): 182.
- [3] Orme, Jennifer. “Narrative Desire and Disobedience in” *Pan’s Labyrinth*.” *Marvels & Tales* (2010): 219-234.
- [4] Toro, Guillermo del, et al. *El Laberinto Del Fauno: Pan’s Labyrinth*. [Madrid]: Burbank, CA, Telecinco, 2006.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Woody International Publish Limited and/or the editor(s). Woody International Publish Limited and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.