

Carmen Maria Machado's short story "The Husband Stitch" revolves largely around notions of believing and being believed. Within the world in which this story takes place, all women are born with a ribbon tied around differing locations; the narrator's is around her neck, the nude model's is around her ankle, and another mother's is around her finger. This, then, asserts the ribbon as representing something much deeper than just a binding of body parts—it is a symbol of something intensely secret, the private knowledge known intensely by all women, as well as a deadly burden/weakness.

Within the text, the body becomes familiarized by the idea that the narrator's green ribbon is not an extension of her body, but rather a part of her body itself. The narrator states that "[her] son touches [her] ribbon, but never in a way that makes [her] afraid. He thinks of it as a part of [her], and he treats it no differently than he would an ear or finger" (Machado). The narrator's son, then, is unlike his father in that early on, he respects the privacy of his mother because he doesn't yet realize the ribbon is symbolic of anything. It is normalized because he does not know any different. In a different vein, however, is the perspective of the narrator's husband—although the narrator gave her sexuality over to him entirely, even going so far as to not hold it against him for okaying the titular "Husband Stitch" which the narrator nonconsensually receives after her birth to increase her husband's sexual pleasure, her husband still illustrates a carnal need to untie the ribbon. Here, the bodily experience during sex is reduced to less than the ultimate pleasure because, despite her consenting to every sexual request made by her husband, the narrator's sexuality isn't enough for him because he still intensely seeks the secret bound by the ribbon.

Further, the notion that all women in the canon of the text have their own ribbon can be read as a politicized symbol which designates the binaries of gender—if you have a ribbon, you're a woman, and if not, you're a man. More than this is the specific locations around which the ribbons are tied. As stated previously, we see a ribbon tied around a neck, an ankle, and a finger. When reading closely, the ribbon around these locations can be interpreted as metaphors for the continued oppression of women—the neck to suggest suffocation under the bounds of gender norms and binaries, the ankle to suggest metaphorical shackles through which women are bound to marginalization, and the finger to symbolize the patriarchal institution of marriage and ownership. This symbolism holds an even deeper significance when understood in relation to the storytelling techniques employed by Machado: her inclusion of anecdotes about stories involving other women, in particular. Although these included stories vary in exposition and subject matter, when read as a cohesive whole, they all seem to be suggestive of the aforementioned notion of that private and secret knowledge which binds women together.

To conclude, Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch" utilizes ribbons as a symbol through which political ideas about women's positions in society can be explored. Machado metaphorically asserts her opinions of the personal versus the private, and how sexuality often blurs the line between the two in terms of consent.