The Bloody Chamber Study Guide

The Bloody Chamber by Angela Carter

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Contents

Introduction

Published in 1979, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories,* which received the Cheltenham Festival Literary Prize, retells classic fairy tales. Angela Carter revises Puss-in-Boots and Sleeping Beauty, for example, from an adult, twentieth-century perspective. Her renditions are intended to disturb and titillate her audience, instead of lulling it to sleep. The title story recasts the legend of Bluebeard, the mysterious French nobleman who murders his many wives. The legend, as recorded by the seventeenth-century author Charles Perrault, begins with the marriage of a girl to an eccentric, wealthy man. Called away on business, the newlywed husband leaves his wife the keys to every room and cabinet in the house. This keyring includes one key that she must not use: the one to the "room at the end of the great gallery." Of course, she eventually enters the room forbidden to her. In it she finds the corpses of her husband's previous wives, all with their throats cut. Startled, the girl drops the key, which is enchanted and permanently stained by the blood on the floor. From this stain, Bluebeard discovers her disobedience. He raises his scimitar, but just in time, her brothers arrive to slay the murderer.

Though it follows the original tale in basic structure, "The Bloody Chamber" adds details of character and setting that raise issues of sexual awakening and sexual depravity, of the will to live, and of life in hell. In having the young bride be the one to tell her story and in having her courageous mother come to the rescue, moreover, Carter revisits an age-old tale with her feminist viewpoint.

Author Biography

When Angela Carter died of cancer on February 16, 1992, she was only 51 years old. In her relatively short lifetime, she wrote nine novels, dozens of short stories, a volume of poetry, and numerous essays on cultural and literary themes. Her work is known for its lush, imagistic prose, gothic themes, violence, and an undercurrent of eroticism. Critics have considered her a female Edgar Allan Poe and compared her to the English decadent artist Aubrey Beardsley.

She was born Angela Olive Stalker in London, England, on May 7, 1940. In 1960 she married Paul Carter (the couple divorced in 1972). In 1962, she began her studies in medieval English literature at Bristol University in England, where she also developed an interest in anthropology and French literature. In 1966 her first novel, *Shadow Dance,* was published. Set in an antiques shop, it concerned a pathological love triangle and exhibited elements of the fantastic that bloomed fully in her later novels. Her next two novels, *The Magic Toyshop* and *Several Perceptions,* experimented with elements of science fiction and magic realism. They were well-received by critics and were awarded the John Llewllyn Rhys Memorial Prize and the Somerset Maugham Award, respectively.

In 1979, Carter published *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography,* a nonfiction work in which she took a feminist view of the Marquis de Sade, an eighteenth-century French nobleman and author known for his sexually explicit novels. She argued that in his female characters, either passionate sex objects or dominant tyrants, the Marquis de Sade was "claiming rights of free sexuality for women." *The Bloody Chamber,* published the same year, combined Carter's interests in feminism, fairy tales, pornography, and anthropology (the study of human beings and their environment) into adaptations of cultural legends. Reworkings of fairy tales became one of Carter's dominant themes in the next two decades. Two of Carter's last published works were scholarly collections of fairy tales: *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book* (1990) and *Strange Things Sometimes Still Happen* (1992).

Plot Summary

"The Bloody Chamber" begins with the narrator on her wedding night, traveling by train from Paris to her new home. Her husband is asleep near her, and she, a young pianist, lies sleepless, not knowing what to expect of her married life. She recounts their speedy courtship. Her husband, a marquis who is much older than she and much richer than she, had three wives before her— an opera diva, an artist's model, and a countess— all of whom died under mysterious circumstances.

The couple disembarks the train at dawn and are taken to the Marquis's castle, which is on an island. However, the husband must attend to some business before they can commence their honeymoon. While he is gone, she discovers an out-of-tune piano in the conservatory and a library that includes many volumes of pornography. Her husband returns to find her perusing these volumes and brings her back to the "maternal bed." He puts his grandmother's ruby choker around her neck and they consummate the marriage.

Later, they are awakened by the telephone, and her husband is called away to New York on urgent business. Against her protests, he prepares to depart. He leaves her the keys to every cabinet and room in the castle. He tells her of the treasures that await her viewing, but also informs her that there is one small key that she must not use. "Every man must have one secret," he explains and makes her promise not to enter the room "at the foot of the west tower."

After he leaves, the narrator has a restless night alone. She spends the next day practicing the piano and wandering through various rooms. An hour before dinner, she realizes that she has nothing to do all evening. She calls her mother and but is unable to articulate her misery and breaks into tears. In order to distract herself, she decides to open the doors to all the rooms and starts with the Marquis's office. She searches through his business files and desk drawers, searching for clues to his character. In a secret compartment, she discovers a file marked "Personal." In this file are three love notes from his past wives. In these short notes, the Marquis's fourth wife catches a glimpse of the personalities of these women and some "traces of the heart" of their husband. She decides to go to the forbidden room, where she hopes to find out about his soul.

There she finds her husband's first three wives, all murdered. The opera singer has been strangled, and the model is hanging from a wall. The most recent wife, the countess, has been penetrated by the spikes of the Iron Maiden. Startled, the narrator drops the key to the torture chamber, and it falls into a pool of blood. She quickly picks it up and flees the gruesome scene.

In her bedroom, she tries to think of a way to escape the castle. She tries to call her mother, but the phone is dead. She tries to comfort herself by turning to her music. Suddenly, she hears a thump in the hallway. It is Jean-Yves, the blind piano-tuner, who

has been listening outside the door. She tells him everything. In turn, he tells her that local legends have hinted at these horrors.

At dawn, they hear a car approaching. It is the Marquis. They try to wash the blood from the key, but it is enchanted and permanently stained. Jean-Yves submits to her entreaties to be left alone to face her husband. After exposing her futile attempt to hide the key, the Marquis seizes it and presses the key to her forehead, leaving a mark indicating that she will be sacrificed.

Having dismissed the servants, he intends to behead her. He calls her down to the courtyard. She stalls because, in the distance, she can hear a horse approaching. Its rider, she later finds out, is her courageous mother whose instincts had told her that her daughter was in danger. Just as the Marquis raises his sword, the mother shoots him dead. "The Bloody Chamber" ends with the mother, daughter, and piano tuner living happily ever after. They convert the castle into a school for the blind, and the narrator runs a music school. She is forever thankful that her companion, the piano tuner, cannot see the mark left on her forehead because she views it as a mark of shame.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

An impoverished 17-year-old Frenchwoman, a professional pianist, is betrothed to a much older man. The much older man is an extremely wealthy Marquis, whose home is a castle in Brittany, located on the ocean. The Marquis has been married three times to women of some renown, all of whom have died. His most recent wife died only three months before he became engagement to the Frenchwoman. The engagement ring is set with a fire opal the size of a pigeon's egg, which had been; his mother's, his grandmother's, and his great grandmother's. The ring had once been a gift to his family from Catherine de Medici. All of his previous brides have worn the ring. The Marquis's wedding gift to the French woman is his grandmother's two-inch wide choker of rubies which was created after the French Revolution, as a gesture of defiance, to signify that she had escaped the guillotine.

The bride mother was the daughter of a rich tea planter in Indochina but her husband had died in the war and left her impoverished. The Bride's mother was a very brave woman who had, "outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, [and] shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand," all before she was 17 years old. She had sold all her jewels, including her wedding ring, to bring her daughter up and to pay for her daughter's musical education.

Following the wedding, husband and wife embark by train for the castle in Brittany. The newlyweds sleep separately as they wish to postpone the consummation of the marriage until they are in their matrimonial bed. Because the Marquis has business to attend to, he again postpones the moment of consummation. He does; however, undresses her in the their bedroom, which is lined with mirrors, before he leaves her alone. After he finishes his business in his study, he takes her to the bedroom and requires that she wear the ruby while they have intercourse. She bleeds, the first of his wives to come to him a virgin, he tells her. She realizes that it is her innocence and lack of experience that has attracted him to her.

Her husband is called away to the United States on business and must be gone for six weeks. He gives her a ring of keys to all the rooms in the castle, including rooms containing costly artwork, silver, and other valuables, and he tells her that she may go into any room in the castle. The Marquis gives her one final key which opens a room in the basement where he asks her not to go because it is his private place. He has provided a piano for her and, at her request; he has hired a blind piano tuner. The piano tuner is a blacksmith's son from the village who had been trained by the priest so that he might have a livelihood.

Once he has departs, she is bored because she has nothing to do and she calls her mother. She bursts into tears for no reason as they speak. She goes into his study and looks through his papers and books. The French woman finally yields to the temptation

so she descends to the basement to visit her husband's private room. There is no electricity in this section of the castle so she carries matches and candles. In the room, she finds a torture chamber and the bodies of the three previous wives, one of whom is embalmed and laid out on a catafalque surrounded by candles. Another body's skull is suspended like a Christmas tree ornament from the ceiling and his third wife is in an iron maiden and was so recently impaled that the blood runs out when she opens the door. She realizes that the Marquis' third wife was alive all the time he was been courting her. The French woman is so shocked by this horror that she drops the key in the pool of blood. She picks it, wraps it in a handkerchief, and rushes from the chamber.

She knows she needs help but she is afraid to turn to the servants because they may be in league with him. She tries to call her mother, but the phone lines have been cut. She knows that her husband has departed for New York so she feels that she has some time and so she plays the piano. The piano tuner stumbles over the ring of keys, that she dropped outside the study, and he brings them to her. She faints and when he comforts her, she pours out the story of the visit to the chamber. He tells her that there have always been stories in the area about the castle and that the old name for it was the Castle of Murder.

Then she sees, out the window, the approach of her husband's big black car. The piano tuner and her decide to put the key to the chamber back on the ring, but it is covered with blood. She tries to wash it, but she can not get it clean. She sends the piano tuner to his room, disrobes, climbs into bed, and pretends to have been asleep when her husband comes into the room. He demands the keys. The blood on the key to the chamber has assumed the shape of a heart. He presses the key to her forehead and the image of the heart is permanently transferred from the key to her skin, leaving the key shining clean again. He tells her that her martyrdom will be by decapitation.

He has sent all the servants away, so they are alone in the castle except for the piano tuner, who waits with her in the music room for her husband to call her. At that moment, the sight of a horse and rider is seen out the window; her mother. The French woman goes to the courtyard to meet her husband, despairing that her mother will arrive in time. Her husband holds the sword that, "his great-grandfather had presented to the little corporal, in token of surrender to the Republic, before he shot himself." He takes the opal ring off of her finger saying that, "It will serve me for a dozen more fiancées."

He lifts her long hair from her neck with one hand and twists it into a rope while wielding the sword with his other hand. Just as the sword is about to fall, there is a pounding at the gate. The French woman runs to her mother, accompanied by the piano tuner. They are chased by the wild man with a sword. Her mother shoots him in the head with her dead husband's service revolver and it is all over in an instant.

The French woman gives her enormous inherited wealth away to charities and she turns the castle into a school for the blind. She marries the piano tuner and they run a little music school on the outskirts of Paris. Her mother had come to rescue because, she said, she had never heard her daughter cry before. Her mother had taken the same

train that the bride and groom had taken after their wedding and had borrowed the horse from a farmer.

Nothing can mask the mark on her forehead but the French woman takes comfort from the fact that her husband can not see it.

Analysis

This story is a retelling of Bluebeard, a fairy tale published in a collection by Charles Perrault in 1697. It is believed that the original tale was based on the legend of Gilles de Rais, a Marshal of France who served under Joan of Arc. He was a wealthy man who lived in a castle in Brittany. Gilles de Rais was burned alive and hanged after the remains of 50 boys were dug up in his castle. He confessed to 140 killings at his trial, the quintessential serial killer!

In Perrault's story, Bluebeard was not attractive to women because of his blue beard and because he was rumored to have had many wives that had disappeared. Because he was very wealthy, he was able often to entertain guests with parties and entertainment. One young woman eventually decided that he was not so bad and agreed to marry him.

In The Bloody Chamber, little is said of the bridegroom's lack of attractiveness other than that he is much older than the bride. However, he does entertain the woman who is to become his bride. The bridegroom buys her clothes and gives her expensive jewelry. The ruby choker clearly foreshadows the final scene in the story where the bridegroom attempts to decapitate his wife. Carter creates quite a different bride in this story by giving her a more interesting background. This time, the wife-to-be is a young professional pianist who has a mother with a colorful past.

Once Bluebeard and the young woman are married, he announces that he must go away for at least six weeks on business and that she should divert herself while he is gone, sending for friends and acquaintances if she so desires. Before he leaves, he gives her the keys to all his possessions. He tells her there is a little key to a closet at the end of the great gallery on the ground floor, but he forbids her to go into it. If she does so, he tells her, he will be very angry. She promises to do as he orders, so he embraces her and sets off on his journey.

Carter's story follows the original very closely at this point. The husband declares that he must go away on business, this time to New York City and he gives her the keys to the castle and all that is in it before he leaves. He too tells his new wife of a little key to a forbidden room and he embraces her before he sets off on his journey.

The friends of Bluebeard's bride hurry to come and admire all the wonderful furniture, tapestries, and full-length mirrors once he is gone. They envy the happiness of the bride and praise the wonderful life she has with her new husband. The bride; however, is only impatient to satisfy her curiosity about the forbidden closet and races to open it.

In Carter's story, the only friend the bride has is the piano tuner, and he is not interested in the opulence of the castle. The bride's curiosity is similar, and she disobeys her husband to satisfy her curiosity, just as the one in the original story did.

Bluebeard's bride stops to consider her husband's orders and the unhappiness that satisfying her curiosity might bring, but the temptation is too strong, so she takes the little key and opens it. At first, the room is so dark that she can't see anything, but then she perceives that the floor is covered with clotted blood and that the bodies of several dead women are arranged along the walls. She immediately realizes that these are the wives who preceded her and she drops the key into the blood. She picks up the key, locks the door and goes back upstairs to recover herself. She tries to wash the key, but the blood will not come off.

Again, Carter's story follows the original story, albeit with some embellishments. The forbidden room is not a torture chamber as it is in The Bloody Chamber. Carter describes the horrors of the chamber in some detail, which is not part of the original story. The dropping of the key in the blood matches the original story, as does the unsuccessful attempt to wash the blood away.

Bluebeard returns from his journey that evening, saying that his business trip has been cut short and his wife does everything that she can to make him believe that she is extremely glad to see him. The next morning he asks for the keys and she trembles so in giving them to him that he guesses what has transpired in his absence. The key to the forbidden room is missing, and he demands that she bring it to him. When he has it in his hand, he asks why there is blood on it. She responds that she does not know. He is very angry and tells her that since she has disobeyed him, she will take her place among the other ladies in the closet.

The bride in The Bloody Chamber also pretends that nothing has happened and that she is glad to see her husband. It's the blood on the key that betrays her as well. Carter invents the magical qualities of the blood on the key, which leaves a permanent mark on the bride's forehead. This is not in the original story.

You must die, Bluebeard tells his wife, and she begs for time to say her prayers. Once alone, she asks her sister, who also lives in the castle, to go to the tower and look out for her brothers, who have promised to come to see her that day.

In Carter's story, the bride and the piano tuner look out the window and spot a lone rider, in this case the mother of the bride. Her appearance was not expected, as the brothers were in the original story.

Meanwhile, Bluebeard, holding a great saber in his hand, calls for her to come down immediately. The sister does not see anyone coming and Bluebeard continues to yell for his wife to come down until, at last, two horsemen come into view, but they are a great way off. Then Bluebeard yells so loudly that she goes down to him and throws herself at his feet, in tears, with her hair about her shoulders. He takes her hair in one hand and prepares to take her head off with the other.

Again creating and embellishing, Carter gives the bridegroom in The Bloody Chamber a special sword, and he is summons the bride by telephone rather than by yelling. Nevertheless, Carter reproduces the lifting of the hair with one hand and the raising of the sword with the other as in the original story.

At this very moment there is a loud knocking at the gate, which causes Bluebeard to pause. The brothers are soldiers and are armed with swords, which they run through the killer's body.

The most obvious twist in the rewrite of the story is that the rescuer is a strong and brave woman. Carter has become known not only for her renderings of fairy tales but also for her feminist stories, so she is combining both of those interests in this story. The update here, of course, is that the instrument of death is a gun instead of a sword.

The wife becomes mistress of all of Bluebeard's estate, which she uses to marry her sister to a young gentleman, to buy captains' commissions for her brothers, and to marry herself to a very worthy gentleman.

This is the dénouement of the original story, the unwinding or the finishing out, and it is matched very closely in Carter's rewrite. The bride inherits great wealth but gives away most of it and marries a good man, who hopefully will not kill her.

An important difference in Carter's story is point of view. The original story is purely objective in its telling; we are not in the minds of any of the characters. In the rewritten story, the point of view is first-person omniscient, which carries the reader along, terrifying detail by terrifying detail, from start to finish. We are able to participate in the heroine's uncertainties about her feelings for her suitor and husband, her horror when she finds the bloody chamber, and her terror when she knows she is about to be killed.

The characters in the rewritten story are much deeper and more fleshed out. The mother is a real person with a full life; the bride is more than a cipher waiting for a bridegroom to come along and make her happy ever after.

The conflicts in the Bluebeard story and in the retelling by Carter are standard for a thriller, the innocent victim versus the experienced killer. The action is rising, the victim becomes more and more aware of the danger she is in, and the killer displays his expertise in achieving his evil objectives. The climax is the attempted decapitation and although the killer has been victorious with his previous wives, this time, it's the victim who wins out with the help of her brothers in the Bluebeard case and the help of her mother in Carter's story.

Characters

Bluebeard

See Marquis

Bride

See Narrator

Heroine

See Narrator

Jean-Yves

Jean-Yves, the blind piano tuner, befriends the narrator when she first marries the Marquis and learns the fate of his previous wives. Through him, readers learn of the long history in the area of the Marquis's family and their violent nature. After her mother kills the Marquis, the narrator establishes a music school and is "busily engaged in setting up house" with the piano tuner, who loves her for who she is and cannot see the mark of shame that brands her forehead. His role as the man with whom the protagonist lives happily ever after is a subversion of the typical fairy-tale ending, in which the woman falls in love with a handsome prince or other dashing hero.

Marquis

Modeled after the legendary figure of Bluebeard, the wife-murderer of legend and lore, much of the Marquis's character remains a mystery. He is "much older" than his seventeen-year-old bride, but his exact age is not given. He is as "rich as Croesus," the ancient Lydian king, and lives in a forbidding castle surrounded by a moat. A Marquis, he comes from a long line of French aristocrats, but seems to have no family. This large, leonine man has been married three times, but each of his wives has died mysteriously, though he shows no grief. Because the Marquis is such an enigma, his new bride is overwhelmed with curiosity and seeks to discover something about him as she rifles through his personal belongings while he disappears mysteriously on business during their honeymoon. She discovers a few clues to his character: evidence that he is a "connoisseur" of pornography and is involved in an opium-dealing ring in Laos. All these discoveries, including a cryptic love note from his third wife, the countess, leads her to disobey his ultimatum—that she not enter the locked room in the west wing— where she discovers his true nature as a murderer. Her broken promise is all the reason he

needs to murder her as well, proving that he puts his love for violence and his need for the complete obedience and submission of women above all else.

Mother

The mother, who saves her daughter at the end of the story, has a history of adventure and sacrifice. The daughter of a wealthy tea planter who spent her girlhood in Indo-China, she married a soldier of modest means, and when he dies, she is left with nothing. She has sold all her jewelry, "even her wedding ring," so that her daughter could attend a music conservatory. The close connection she has to her daughter explains her instinct in knowing something is wrong when her daughter calls from the castle on her honeymoon, even though the daughter herself cannot even explain what is wrong. But it is the warrior in her— that part of her that fought tigers and pirates as a girl— who kills the Marquis just as he is preparing to kill her daughter. The mother, then, becomes the hero of the story, instead of the girl's brothers, as in the original version of Bluebeard. This turnabout gives Carter's adaptation of the legend a feminist meaning.

Narrator

The narrator of "The Bloody Chamber" is a young pianist who has grown up in Paris with her mother and nanny. Her father died in battle when she was young, but her fondest memory of him is attending the opera *Tristan and Isolde;* these strong memories helped form her love for music, upon which she relies when isolated in the Marquis's castle. She is seventeen when she meets the Marquis, and she is still slender, delicate, and sexually naive. She is a child who does not know how to answer her mother truthfully when she is asked if she loves the Marquis, and who orders avocado, shrimp, and ice cream for dinner. All she knows is that the Marquis stirs her in some way, but she is unfamiliar with what these feelings mean. When confronted with the horrors of her husband's past, she gains maturity: "Until that moment, this spoiled child did not know that she had inherited nerves and a will from the mother who had defied the yellow outlaws of Indo-China. My mother's spirit drove me on." Facing disaster, she calls on her mother for help and strength. In the end, she finds true love in a blind piano tuner, who does not undress her with his gaze as does the Marquis, but who instead appreciates her for her music. Still, she is scarred with the imprint of the bloody key, a mark she equates with shame, an inevitable result of her maturation that began when she was seduced in a room full of white lilies and mirrors.

Narrator's Husband

See Marquis

Themes

Coming of Age

From the beginning, the seventeen-year-old protagonist describes in her own words the story's movement from her mother's hearth to her husband's castle. The train ride at the beginning of the story may be viewed as a symbol of this transition. Throughout the narrative, the narrator refers to herself as a child. As evidence of the child in her, for her first formal dinner at the castle, she orders avocado, shrimp, and ice cream. Though she is a child in many ways, her situation is that of an adult.

Moral Corruption

The mark she bears on her forehead at the end of the story signifies her moral corruption, which was initiated in the consummation of her marriage. The loss of her virginity, symbolized by the bloodstained sheets, along with the scar on her forehead, indicate the corrupting knowledge— sexual and moral— that the Marquis offers her. He has chosen her because he saw in her "thin white face . . . [a] promise of debauchery only a connoisseur could detect." In recognition of this fact, the narrator blushes "to think he might have chosen me, because, in my innocence, he sensed a rare talent for corruption." However, her corruption is largely brought about by her own curiosity. Having been warned not to enter the tower in which she found the dead wives, her decision to do so indicates that she needed no help from her husband to initiate her fall from grace. Upon the return of the Marquis, she is faced with the possibility of her own death. At this point, she realizes that she "must pay the price for her new knowledge."

Sex

The narrator's descent into moral corruption parallels her sexual initiation. After the consummation of her marriage on her first night at the castle, which she uses the word "impale" to describe, she finds a "dark newborn curiosity" stirring in her. This curiosity is fueled by the pornographic books she finds in the library, the contents of which "make her gasp." This curiosity also leads her to

the torture chamber, where the connection between sex and death is made explicit, for the third wife has been killed by being impaled by the sharp spikes of the Iron Maiden.

Victim and Victimization

In the social world of "The Bloody Chamber," women are born into the position of passive victim and men are the aggressive victimizers. The marquis impales; his wives are impaled. The marquis chooses the narrator because of her vulnerability, her poverty, and fragility. For him, she resembles the martyr St. Cecilia, and she is to be martyred by

him. But the Marquis does not count on the warrior-mother, who breaks the cycle of victimization perpetuated within the castle.

Sex Roles

Carter confronts the paradigm of the male aggressor and the female victim through her feminist re-telling of the Bluebeard myth. She subverts the original tale's traditional sex roles when she substitutes the mother for the brothers of the bride as the rescuer. This switch calls to attention the stereotypes of the traditional fairy tale's male-as-savior and female-as-victim roles. A woman is the hero this time instead of a white knight. And instead of relying on the evil mother/stepmother motif common to fairy tales, the bride's mother wants only what is best for her daughter. In addition, Carter adds the unusual character of Jean-Ives, a man who comforts and empathizes with the female protagonist, but does not save her.

Flesh/Animal vs. Spirit/Divine

The husband's moral corruption is indicated by imagery that compares him to an animal. He is described as heavy, "fleshy," his features "leonine," and his hair a "mane." When "the beast waver[s] in his stroke" and is shot in the end, he becomes another version of the tiger slain by the mother in her girlhood. The Marquis is also figured as the godhead of his enclosed world because he determines the destiny of its inhabitants. Upon her discovery by the Marquis, the narrator says: "I had played a game in which every move was governed by a destiny as oppressive and omnipotent as himself, since that destiny was himself." The mother's intervention, "like a miracle," delivers a deadly blow to this "man as god," as well as to the figure of "man as beast."

Style

Point of View

One of the most striking changes Carter makes to her version of Bluebeard is the point of view. Whereas the traditional fairy tale has an omniscient, detached narrator, Carter's first-person narrator lends more psychological suspense to the story, since readers learn of her fear through her own thoughts, something that would not be possible with an impartial, third-person narrator. Though the events in "The Bloody Chamber" are similar to those in Bluebeard, that they are witnessed through the eyes of the female narrator gives the story a more feminist sensibility. Furthermore, the story is told in the past tense, hinting that the narrator has survived her ordeal. The tension, then, stems from wondering how she survives, rather than if she will or not.

Setting

The traditional legend of Bluebeard is set, as are most fairy tales, in the indistinct era of "long, long ago." In contrast, "The Bloody Chamber" is set in a modern era, though the story retains much of a traditional fairy tale setting. Trains, telephones, guns, and automobiles figure prominently in the story. Though no specific year is given, it can be assumed that the story takes place sometime in the twentieth century in France. Still, the familiar trappings of fairy tales are present: an evil Marquis, an opulent castle with a moat, a dungeon-like torture chamber, and a blind piano-tuner who speaks of "strange tales up and down the coast." This mix of contemporary life with the timeless conventions of fairy tales provides a unique setting. Carter updates a classic story, illustrating how traditional themes are still relevant and pervasive to modern life and literature.

Symbolism

Carter embellishes the fairy-tale plot with symbols. One of the most obvious symbols is the white lilies that surround the marriage bed. In Christian iconography, the white lily represents virgin purity and innocence. But they remind the young bride of a funeral, especially when they begin decay. Another symbol is the mark left on the narrator's forehead by the bloody key, a scar the narrator equates with "the caste mark of a Brahmin woman. Or the mark of Cain." "The mark of Cain"

is a Biblical reference to the brandishment of the first murderer as an outcast. The mark is also thematically linked to the stain on the sheets when she loses her virginity; the narrator considers both unremovable emblems of shame.

Folklore

Based on the legend of Bluebeard, "The Bloody Chamber" not only retells the tale, it also comments on it. By basing her story on such a well-known fairy tale, Carter acknowledges the power of such tales and provides modern touches that underscore the themes she is most concerned with. The original story is mostly a frightening tale about a murderous man. Though "The Bloody Chamber" still contains the same acts of violence, Carter tells her version from the bride's perspective, adding a female viewpoint. And though the damsel is still saved in the end, she is rescued by her mother, not her brothers. This plot twist underscores Carter's intention to highlight the strong bonds between mothers and daughters, a bond that rarely exists in traditional fairy tales, in which most saviors are male.

Gothicism

Gothicism is a literary genre characterized by elements of horror, supernatural occurrences, gloom, and violence. An isolated castle, a feeling of terror created by a mysterious and vengeful husband, and the discovery of the narrator's three butchered predecessors are all emblematic of a gothic story. Much of Carter's writing is cast in this vein, in which the protagonist's dread is an essential element. The author's detailed, flowery descriptions of the castle and its mysterious rooms and the psychological terror instilled in the young bride, an innocent trapped in a situation she cannot control, also contribute to the gothic mode of the story.

Historical Context

The year 1979 marked the end of a decade known as the feminist movement's "second wave." The phrase, coined by the Australian writer Germaine Greer in her book *The Female Eunuch,* referred to the resurgence of feminist activity in the decades after the suffragist movement had succeeded in most of the Western world. The 1970s brought about big changes with regard to women's political, economic, and social power.

Several works published in the early 1970s have become landmarks in the history of feminist thought. Greer's work discussed the "eunuch-like" condition of the socially constructed "ideal woman," a being without sex drives whose "sexual organs are shrouded in mystery." Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* examined the male domination promulgated in most literature written by men. Meanwhile in France, Luce Irigaray was struggling with the inability of women to achieve their own voice in a language that reflected gendered power structures. These works asked why, with the proper legislation in place, women still held few positions of command in the world and controlled little of the world's resources.

Along with these works of nonfiction came similarly minded works of fiction. Though first published in 1963, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,* an account of a young woman's battle with mental illness, which resulted in part from the lack of support for her creative talents, became popular as women sought more integration in their lives between their roles as students, employees, mothers, and wives. Other writers who gained popularity during the 1970s for their probings of the female psyche were Marge Piercy, Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, and Erica Jong.

The changes in these social roles were driven in part by the availability of the birth control pill, which was legalized in the United States in the 1970s. In 1973, the Supreme Court ruling in Roe vs. Wade meant that women had more choices when faced with an unwanted pregnancy. Women now had more control than ever over when and if to have children. This freedom affected many aspects of women's lives, from their career opportunities, to their marital status, to their economic power. From the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1973, a volume devoted to empowering women by explaining how to take control of their own health, rather than entrusting their well-being to the male-dominated medical profession, to Shere Hite's 1976 report on female sexuality, the discussion of the female body became an integral part of the women's movement, and issues were brought to the forefront that had once been shrouded in mystery, tradition, and repression. The politics between men and women, which had previously been contained within the home, were now matters of public debate.

Critical Overview

Carter's short story collection *The Bloody Chamber* was published in 1979, at the height of the women's movement, an era in which women sought greater political and social equity than they had been afforded in previous decades. In the realm of literature, many authors were concerned with creating strong female characters in their work, and Carter was on the forefront of this trend. Her adaptations of traditional fairy tales sought to subvert the patriarchal leanings of the stories by inserting strong women in the roles of Little Red Riding Hood and Sleeping Beauty, among others. Ellen Cronan Rose celebrates the "strong bond between mother and daughter " depicted in "The Bloody Chamber" as an example of what can happen when "a female fiction writer" takes on "male cultural myths." Indeed, the image of the mother, who knows by instinct that her daughter is in danger, riding in on horseback to slay the serial killer, seems unequivocally feminist. However, some reviewers felt that her characterizations of the brutal, murderous husband and the vulnerable, fragile heroine who *almost* becomes a passive victim, seem to follow the traditional paradigm of victim and victimizer. Some feminists questioned whether Carter's revision of the ending is enough to overcome this paradigm.

Critics such as Avis Lewallan, agreeing with Patricia Duncker, Robert Clark, and others, take issue with Carter's feminism, stating that this revision is *not* enough. The opposition of passive and aggressive found in sadomasochism still dominates Carter's fictional and polemical world, even if some of her female characters take on the role of aggressor. To these critics, the revisionist ending seems backhanded in view of Carter's polemic. Carter's prose is simply too seductive, as is the Marquis's castle, and too aligned with pornography, as is the narrator's position as sexually-awakened potential victim, for the stories to be considered stalwartly feminist. Throughout the late 1980s, Carter's detractors seemed to be winning the debate.

The 1990s have seen a re-emergence of Carter's defenders, or, at the very least, a recognition that the debate demonstrates the complexities of Carter's work. Hers is not an easy feminism, as Elaine Jordan argues, nor a feminism that can be generalized or quickly summarized. Mary Kaiser recognizes this complexity when she argues that Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* is anti-universalist, in that each story presents a different context for male-female relations. For example, the context of the title story is "fin-de-siecle" French decadence, a context that necessarily raises sadomasochistic specters. Novelist Margaret Atwood, in her analysis of the tiger and lamb imagery in Carter's fiction, reads *The Bloody Chamber* as "'writing against' de Sade . . . as an exploration of the possibilities for the kind of synthesis de Sade himself could never find." One can see how this kind of criticism uses the short story as something other than evidence in a debate; it looks to it as a work of art commenting upon a wider cultural moment.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Laroche has taught literature and writing at Bates College, Albertus Magnus College, and Yale University. In the following essay, she discusses how Carter's story interweaves elements of three literary genres.

In "The Bloody Chamber," Angela Carter incorporates the elements of three genres, or categories, of literature in her writing, creating a distinct style that could be called "Carterian." This long story subtly links the fairy tale, Gothic literature, and pornographic literature. The thread that connects these three kinds of writing is the theme of curiosity, the human impulse that motivates an individual to uncover what is hidden or unknown.

Fairy tales not only entertain the children to whom they are told, but they also teach them the behavior a particular culture considers proper. The teller of the tales, usually a maternal figure, presents these stories to children as examples of how to act or how not to act. Many such stories end with morals, adages to live by, such as "Slow and steady wins the race," "Don't talk to strangers," or "Curiosity killed the cat." The last of these could feasibly be the moral attached to the fairy tale "Bluebeard," recorded by the seventeenth-century Frenchman Charles Perrault and adapted by Angela Carter in "The Bloody Chamber." Perrault ends his story with the rhyme: "Curiosity has its lure / But all the same / It's a paltry kind of pleasure / And a risky game. / The thrill of peeping is soon over / And then the cost is to discover." Certainly, this adage seems inadequate for Carter's version of the story of a serial killer. Furthermore, it does not ring entirely true. The reader has no evidence that the other wives had died because of their curiosity, or that if the current wife had not opened the forbidden door, she and her wealthy husband would have lived happily ever after. What, then, is this story's moral?

In her compilations of fairy tales from around the world, Carter has contributed to our understanding of fairy tales and their function. Like many compilers before her, she recognized the existence of an oral tradition that predates the Brothers Grimm in Germany and Charles Perrault in France. Carter revived the term "old wives' tales" in order to emphasize that many of these storytellers were women (even though those who achieved literary fame were men). This fact tells us something about the function of the fairy tales: the stories are meant, among other things, to tell boys and girls about their respective places in the world. With this function in mind, Perrault's admonition against curiosity in the Bluebeard legend can be seen as warning against the specific curiosity young women may have about the world of men. The gender of the protagonist is no accident.

Carter places her own story in line with these "old wives' tales." After he has heard of the horrors seen by the narrator, the blind piano-tuner, Jean-Ives, tells her of "all manner of strange tales" told "up and down the coast" about a Marquis who lived before the current one and hunted young girls "as though they were foxes." "Oh madame," he cries, "I thought these were old wives' tales." And later, the narrator is afraid that if she were to tell her story to the inhabitants of "this distant coast," "who . . . would believe . . . a shuddering tale of blood, of fear, of the ogre murmuring in the shadows." In calling her

husband "an ogre," the narrator signals that her story would not be believed because of its fairy tale nature. In positioning the Marquis as a descendant of the evil characters in an "old wives's tales," Carter creates a literary genealogy for her own work. That is, her Marquis belongs to a latter-day generation of Bluebeard's progeny.

In addition to including references to the oral fairy-tale tradition within her story, Carter embeds another type of fiction within her text, that of the Gothic novel. Gothic novels, which typically include remote castles and damsels in distress, were the popular literature of the nineteenth-century. The narrator goes into the Marquis's library looking for an escape, wanting "to curl up on the rug before the blazing fire, lose myself in a cheap novel, munch on sticky liqueur chocolates." But instead of reading such a novel, she finds herself living a version of it.

Consider for a moment the stylistic and structural similarities between Carter's story, which is set in turn-of-the-century France, and a Gothic nineteenth-century novel, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre.* This comparison will help illustrate the general characteristics of the Gothic tale and how they compare to "The Bloody Chamber." Bronte's protagonist, like Carter's, is an inexperienced, poor young virgin who finds herself alone in a remote estate house with a dark, brooding, and rich owner, Mr. Rochester. As in Carter's story, Mr. Rochester's huge house contains a room which the heroine is forbidden to enter, and which contains a secret of the owner's past. But in *Jane Eyre* the discovery is not half so grisly as that in *The Bloody Chamber:* the room houses Mr. Rochester's insane Caribbean wife. The elements of an isolated, cold house; an agitated owner; an innocent visitor; and a horrible mystery all constitute the main attributes of the Gothic novel, a form of literature that flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That the secret in *Jane Eyre* is not half so grisly perhaps proves that Bronte's novel is not half so Gothic as Carter's story. Another difference is that, although Jane Eyre is curious, she obeys Mr. Rochester's edict and never goes into the room forbidden to her. A true Gothic heroine, like Carter's, goes where she should not.

In the afterword to her first volume of short stories, *Fireworks,* Carter positions her tales in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe and E. T. A. Hoffmann, rather than with Bronte and her eighteenth-century predecessor, Ann Radcliffe, who is best known for *The Mysteries of Udolpho.* In that same afterword, Carter writes that the Gothic tale's "great themes are incest and cannibalism." *Jane Eyre* addresses neither of these themes; Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" embraces one, that of incest; Carter's story arguably has a hint of both— in the Marquis' fondness for pornography and brutality.

More than one commentator has noted, like Mario Praz, that "Radcliffe and Sade belong to the same mental climate, the climate which produced so many incarnations of the theme of the persecuted maiden." Sade is the eighteenth-century French pornographer whose name is the root of our word "sadistic" and whose fictions established the whips-and-chains practices of "sadomasochism." Indeed, Carter herself writes that "the tale has relations with the subliterary forms of pornography." The Marquis de Sade, like Bluebeard and Mr. Rochester, is a forefather of Carter's Marquis.

It is this connection between folklore, Gothic, and pornography that allows Carter, as Patricia Duncker writes, to make "the mystery sexually explicit." Duncker refers directly to the mystery at the center of the fairy tale, but it can be applied to the Gothic novel, for example, Radcliffe's *Udolpho,* as well. Both *Bluebeard* and *Jane Eyre* imply the sexual awakening of the heroines in the presence of their dark, brooding lovers. Behind locked doors, the former wives bear the marks of their violated virginity.

In making the sexuality of the tale's mystery explicit, Carter makes the curiosity explicit as well. When her narrator looks for a cheap novel in the library, she instead finds the Marquis's pornography collection. Among these volumes, she finds a detailed picture of a sadomasochistic scene entitled "Reproof of Curiosity." The Marquis's tortures and murders can be read as more extreme versions of these reproofs. Other titles in this collection, "The Key of Mysteries" and "The Secret of Pandora's Box," link the mysteries of the castle with the secrets of female sexuality. The presence of these volumes in his library add sexual innuendo to the narrator's observation that the Marquis hands her the keyring "as if he were giving a child a great, mysterious treat." And when he comes back to kill her, she says that "I must pay the price of my new knowledge. The secret of Pandora's box; but he had given me the box." As the Marquis awakens in her a "dark newborn curiosity," the desire to know more about her sexuality, he hands her the keys to his house and to the bloody chamber. The secret that the heroine discovers is the sadomasochistic paradigm, her husband's position as torturer and hers as victim, which lies behind her newly awakened sexuality.

Examining the elements of folklore, Gothicism, and pornography in Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" helps give the heroine's predicament a historical perspective. The narrator bears the weight of centuries of literary history when she describes her position, "I had played the game in which every move was governed by a destiny as oppressive and omnipotent as himself, since that destiny was himself; and I had lost." The narrator feels that her "destiny" is written in the stories told before she writes her own. But Carter's story implies that writing within predetermined genres does not mean submitting to a destiny that is already written. Perhaps Carter's answer appears to be too simple when she revises the end of the fairy tale so that the mother instead of the brothers rescue the narrator; when she creates a Gothic heroine who has an involved and rich relationship with a mother; and when she has her Sadeian heroine survive and open a music school. But Carter's fiction is predetermined. It critiques and revises the thematic similarities of three types of writing with one ingenious narrative: a truly "Carterian" feat.

Source: Rebecca Laroche, "Overview of 'The Bloody Chamber'," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Kaiser teaches English at Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham, Alabama. In the following excerpt, she examines Carter's use of intertextuality and the sexual symbolism in "The Bloody Chamber."

As Carter suggests in her introduction to *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book,* intertextuality was embedded into the history of the fairy tale when Charles Perrault, the Grimm Brothers, and other compilers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries transposed oral folk tales into fairy tales. This transfer involved what [Julia] Kristeva refers to as "a new articulation of the thetic," as the politics, economics, fashions, and prejudices of a sophisticated culture replaced the values of rural culture that form the context of oral folklore [*Revolution in Poetic Language,* 1990]. Part of this transfer, Carter argues, was the transposing of an essentially feminine form, the "old wives' tale," onto a masculine one, the published text. Referring to the tradition of "Mother Goose," Carter asserts that oral folktales record the "strategies, plots, and hard work" with which women have coped with the conditions of their lives but that in their oral form these narratives are considered "Old wives' tales — that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it" [*The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book,* 1990]. In her 1979 collection of retold fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber,* Carter shows an acute awareness of the changes that result from an oral to written transposition and calls attention to them by heightening the intertexuality of her narratives, making them into allegories that explore how sexual behavior and gender roles are not universal, but are, like other forms of social interaction, culturally determined. This theme is closely related to that of Carter's 1978 study of the writings of the Marquis de Sade, *The Sadeian Woman,* where she attacks what she calls the false universalizing of sexuality, which, tending to enforce the archetype of male aggression and female passivity, merely confuses "the main issue, that relationships between the sexes are determined by history and by the historical fact of the economic dependence of women upon men."

I wish to argue that Carter's use of intertextuality in *The Bloody Chamber* moves the tales from the mythic timelessness of the fairy tale to specific cultural moments, each of which presents a different problem in gender relations and sexuality. Although she recounts the plots of the same fairy tales— "Beauty and the Beast" twice, "Little Red Riding Hood" three times — Carter changes the cultural context from tale to tale, and, as a result, each retelling generates a different narrative. The outcomes for her protagonists can be tragic or triumphant, the tone can be serious or farcical, depending on the historic and cultural circumstances. To demonstrate the range of the collection, I will consider two tales with the same scenario, a young, powerless woman under the domination of an older, powerful male figure who is not only a threat to her virginity but a threat to her life. "The Bloody Chamber," a retelling of "Bluebeard," is set in the world of decadent turn-of-the-century French culture, among the operas of Wagner and the fashions of Paul Poiret. "The Snow Child" is set in medieval Europe, deep in a forest, and is based much more closely on its original, a version of "Snow White." "The Bloody Chamber" is a tale of feminine courage triumphant, while "The Snow Child," as its

chilling title suggests, is a stark, uncompromising tale of sexuality as a function of overwhelming male power.

The lengthiest and perhaps the paradigmatic story of the collection, "The Bloody Chamber" explores the sexual symbolism of the secret room, making explicit the Freudian interpretation given by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* that the "bloody chamber" is the womb. In addition to making the tale's latent sexual symbolism manifest, Carter also addresses in this story what she calls in *The Sadeian Woman* the "mystification" associated with the womb. The "bankrupt enchantments of the womb" led, she writes, to the segregation and punishment of women; in "The Bloody Chamber," Bluebeard, the connoisseur of women, makes his womb-like secret chamber into a museum of tortured and murdered women.

Following the tradition recorded by Iona and Peter Opie [in *The Classical Fairy Tales,* 1974], that the original of Bluebeard was a notorious Breton nobleman, Carter places her version of the tale in a castle on the coast of Brittany but makes its owner a wealthy aesthete who is as much at home at a performance of *Tristan* at the Paris Opera as he is within his ancestral hall. If the secret room containing the corpses of his dead wives is likened to a womb, Bluebeard's castle is a metaphor for his sexuality. A phallic tower, it floats upon the "amniotic salinity of the ocean," reminding Bluebeard's bride of an "anchored, castellated ocean liner," and becomes the stage for a symbolist version of the battle of the sexes. The fin de siecle time period is critical to Carter's interpretation of "Bluebeard," because she sees the bride's fate as possible only at the moment in history when images of female victimization and of female aggression converged.

Combining, like J. K. Huysmans, a taste for Catholic ritual and for sensual experimentation, Carter's Bluebeard displays an edition of Huysmans's *Labas* "bound like a missal" among an extensive collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pornography. Like Huysmans also, Bluebeard has discovered a group of symbolist painters whose imagery accords with his temperament. Among these images of young, attenuated, passive women, Carter includes some imaginary symbolist paintings, such as Moreau's "famous *Sacrificial Victim* with the imprint of the lace-like chains on her pellucid skin" and "Two or three late Gauguins, his special favourite the one of the tranced brown girl in the deserted house." A willowy young music student, living in poverty with her widowed mother, the bride becomes a vehicle for Bluebeard's attempt to realize the decadent image of the dependent, virginal child-woman, ripe for tragedy.

Avis Lewallen has commented that she finds "The Bloody Chamber" the most disturbing of the tales in the collection, because of its lush, seductive descriptions of sexual exploitation and victimization. Carter, however, uses the language of the story not to lull the reader into ignoring the dangers posed by Bluebeard but instead to heighten the reader's awareness of the threat posed by the sadomasochistic underpinnings of much of decadent culture, which created a dangerously passive and readily victimized feminine ideal. In *The Sadeian Woman,* describing the ideal presented by Sade's victimized Justine, she writes, "She is obscene to the extent to which she is beautiful. Her beauty, her submissiveness and false expectations that these qualities will do her some good are what make her obscene." The decadent sign system that surrounds this

version of Bluebeard brings the sadomasochistic subtext of the original to the foreground by giving its murderous episodes the lush refinement of Beardsley's illustrations of *Salome.*

Bluebeard, like his historical precursor the Marquis de Sade, is a producer of theatrical effects. His rooms are deliberately planned as stages for symbolic action, the bloody chamber a kind of wax museum of his previous wives, preserved in their last moments of agony, the mirrored bedroom with its "grand, hereditary, matrimonial bed" a set for "a formal disrobing of the bride." Clothing, in this theatrical context, becomes costume, in which, as in theater and religious ritual, the individual is subsumed by a role. The bride's dress (designed by Poiret, the inventor of the "hobble" skirt) and her wedding gift, "A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat," not only situate her in fin de siecle France but also reflect the image of innocence, vulnerability, and victimization that Bluebeard desires. Nakedness becomes a kind of costume as well, in the overdetermined imagery of Bluebeard's bedroom. Watching herself being disrobed by him, the bride perceives herself as a pornographic object: "He in his London tailoring; she, bare as a lamb chop. Most pornographic of all confrontations." In this scene the bride has been reduced to an unaccommodated body, while Bluebeard retains all the accoutrements of power, wealth, and taste.

However, Bluebeard has conveniently excised from his collection of fin de siecle imagery the era's complement to the woman-as-victim, the avatar of the New Woman, "She-who-must-be-obeyed." Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that these complementary images appeared almost simultaneously in the late 1880s, when the harrowing mutilations and murders of women by Jack the Ripper took place at the same time as Rider Haggard's enormously popular novel *She* introduced a heroine who, by combining virtue with authority, represented "an entirely New Woman." Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the emergence of female aggression in the suffrage movement generated a backlash of images of suffering, victimized women. Carter, in *The Sadeian Woman,* shares this interpretation when she argues that the real threat posed by the emancipation of women was the removal of "the fraudulent magic from the idea of women." If Bluebeard's murders mirror those of Jack the Ripper, who was also obsessed with the womb, then Bluebeard's murders are avenged by a figure who also seems to have stepped out of the zeitgeist of the 1880s. The bride's mother rides onto the scene just as Bluebeard is preparing to dispatch his latest wife and kills him with a single shot from her dead husband's service revolver. Like Haggard's fearsome heroine, she is woman-as-avenger on a grand scale. At the tale's opening the bride calls her mother "eagle-featured, indomitable," recalling that she "had outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I." Appropriately, she reappears at the conclusion as a complement to her daughter's masochistic passivity, just at the point when the bride herself has begun to act in her own behalf and emancipate herself from Bluebeard's pornographic scenario.

Patricia Duncker reads the ending of "The Bloody Chamber" as carrying "an uncompromisingly feminist message" [*Literature and History,* Vol. 10, 1984], while all of the other tales in the collection, she feels, merely recapitulate patriarchal patterns of

behavior. What Duncker perceives as an inconsistent application of feminist principles is, I believe, merely a reflection of Carter's project in this collection, to portray sexuality as a culturally relative phenomenon. The feminism, as well as the masochism of "The Bloody Chamber," is a feature of its turn-of-the-century setting. . . .

In *The Sadeian Woman* Carter writes, "the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick," a statement that neatly sums up her deuniversalizing of fairy tale plots in *The Bloody Chamber.* Situating her tales within carefully defined cultural moments, Carter employs a wide-ranging intertextuality to link each tale to the zeitgeist of its moment and to call attention to the literary fairy tale as a product, not of a collective unconscious but of specific cultural, political, and economic positions. In addition, focusing on the "strategies, plots, and hard work" of women allows Carter to reappropriate the "old wives' tale" as feminine narrative. In *The Bloody Chamber,* then, Carter deconstructs the underlying assumptions of the "official" fairy tale: that fairy tales are universal, timeless myths, that fairy tales are meant exclusively for an audience of children, and that fairy tales present an idealized, fantastic world unrelated to the contingencies of real life. Instead, Carter pushes Bruno Bettelheim's reading of fairy tales as Freudian fables even further and presents them as studies in the history of imagining sexuality and gender.

Source: Mary Kaiser, "Fairy Tale as Sexual Allegory: Intertextuality in Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber'," in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction,* Vol. 14, no. 3, Fall, 1994, pp. 30-6.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Lewallen offers her interpretation of Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," particularly in regard to the themes of gender roles and sexuality. Lewallen also examines Carter's use of symbolism and irony.

The Bloody Chamber is mostly a collection of fairy tales rewritten to incorporate props of the Gothic and elements of a style designated 'magic realism', in which a realistic consciousness operates within a surrealistic context. The characters are at once both abstractions and 'real'. The heroine in 'The Tiger's Bride', for example, bemused by surreal events, comments, 'what democracy of magic held this palace and fir forest in common? Or, should I be prepared to accept it as proof of the axiom my father had drummed into me: that, if you have enough money, anything is possible?' Symbolism is prevalent: white roses for sexual purity; lilies for sex and death; lions, tigers and wolves for male sexual aggression. Throughout the collection, specific attention is often drawn to the meaning of fairy tales themselves, and this has implications for the reading of Carter's stories.

In a perceptive but highly critical essay Patricia Duncker argues that the form of the fairy tale, along with all its ideological ramifications, proves intractable to attempted revision:

Carter is rewriting the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures. The characters she re-creates must, to some extent, continue to exist as abstractions. Identity continues to be defined by role, so that shifting the perspective from the impersonal voice to the inner confessional narrative, as she does in several of the tales, merely explains, amplifies and reproduces rather than alters the original, deeply, rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic. [*Literature and History*, Spring 1984]

While I agree with Duncker's overall analysis, I think she significantly overlooks the use of irony, particularly the effect produced by the 'inner confessional narrative', which both acknowledges patriarchal structure and provides a form of critique against it. The ultimate position taken up may be politically untenable, but at the same time the ironic voice does not wholeheartedly endorse the patriarchal view. . . . The question of choice, or lack of it, is echoed throughout the tales. . . . As Patricia Duncker puts it, 'we are watching . . . the ritual disrobing of the willing victim of pornography'.

This comment is particularly applicable to the tale 'The Bloody Chamber', which begins,

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 through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage.

The rhythm and language of this long sentence directly associates the movement of the train with the sexual anticipation of the adolescent heroine, with an imagination perhaps bred on Gothic horror stories. It is a tale full of Gothic motifs, and it plays with desire and danger, placing the reader, through the first-person narrative, in the heroine-victim position. This is the tale of one of Bluebeard's wives, and the heroine, seduced by wealth, power and mystery, skirts death in the quest for sexual knowledge. The narrative strategy, therefore, puts us the readers imaginatively within this ambivalent willing-victim position, and the tale attempts to illustrate not only the dangers of seduction, but also the workings of pleasure and danger seemingly implicit in sexuality for women. Again the narrative draws attention to the connection between material wealth and marriage. The heroine's mother has 'beggared herself for love' and thus tries to ensure her daughter's economic security by getting her a musical education. The heroine's corruption is threefold: material, as she is seduced by wealth; sexual, as she discovers her own sexual appetite; and moral, in the sense that 'like Eve' she disobeys her master-husband's command.

But this is a victim who is not only willing but also recognises that she has been bought:

This ring, the bloody bandage of rubies, the wardrobe of clothes from Poiret and Worth, his scent of Russian leather - all had conspired to seduce me so utterly that I could not say I felt one single twinge of regret for the world of tartines and maman that now receded from me as if drawn away on string, like a child's toy. . . .

And, when she comes to pay the price, 'I guessed it might be so - that we should have a formal disrobing of the bride, a ritual from the brothels . . . my purchaser unwrapped his bargain'. Her slow recognition of the real essence of the bargain she has struck is ironically underlined by the associations with death: 'A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat'; 'funereal lilies'; and a husband with eyes 'dark and motionless as those eyes the ancient Egyptians painted upon their sarcophagi'.

Her own sexual potential is another form of corruption. Again this is conveyed through contradictory impulses, and there is a sensual, physical detail in the writing:

The perfume of the lilies weighed on my senses; when I thought that, henceforth, I would always share these sheets with a man whose skin, as theirs did, contained that toad-like, clammy hint of moisture, I felt a vague desolation that within me, now my female wound had healed, there had awoken a certain queasy craving like the cravings of pregnant women for the taste of coal or chalk or tainted food, for the renewal of his caresses. . . . I lay in bed alone. And I longed for him. And he disgusted me.

The intermingling of disgust and desire is not so much fear of the husband as for the sexuality in herself:

I seemed reborn in his unreflective eyes, reborn in unfamiliar shapes. I hardly recognised 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 'talent for corruption' is not only a willingness to be bought but also perhaps a willingness to participate in 'the thousand, thousand baroque intersections of flesh upon flesh', amply detailed in a connoisseur's collection of sado-masochistic volumes found in the library.

Of all the tales in the volume I found 'The Bloody Chamber' most troubling in terms of female sexuality, largely because of the very seductive quality of the writing itself. As readers we are asked to place ourselves imaginatively as masochistic victims in a pornographic scenario and to sympathize in some way with the ambivalent feelings this produces. The heroine's own subsequent recognition of total manipulation does not allay my unease at being manipulated by the narrative to sympathize with masochism. The writing playfully equivocates between explanation of the victims position and condemnation of the sadistic perpetrator of atrocities.

The husband puts the heroine to the test. He ostensibly goes away on business leaving her the keys to the castle with strict instructions not to enter his private room, which of course she does. There she discovers not only the mutilated bodies of his three former wives, but also the fate that awaits her. It seems, however, that the moral of the tale - that wives should not disobey their husbands - gets lost on the way, since as this quotation shows she had no choice in the matter anyway:

The secret of Pandora's box; but he had given the box, himself, knowing I must learn the secret. I had played a game in which every move was governed by a destiny as oppressive and omnipotent as himself, since that destiny was himself; and I had lost. Lost at that charade of innocence and vice in which he had engaged me. Lost, as the victim loses to the executioner.

The husband promptly returns to claim his victim and what saves her is not the presence of the blind piano-tuner - he is merely a comfort - but her mother's prescience. Puzzled at her newly-wed daughter crying during a telephone call, she has intuitively recognized danger and flown to her rescue. Thus the *denouement* gives us female revenge against male tyranny, but the heroine must wear the mark of her 'shame' on her forehead for ever. To be branded as guilty, despite recognition of the manipulation to which she has been subject, seems somewhat unfair. This is the only tale where the mother figure plays an important and positive role. In the others, as in their fairy-tale originals, mothers are either absent, insignificant or bad . . . .

The problem with Carter's attempts to foreground the relationship between fairy tales and reality, a productive exercise, is that the action for the heroines is contained within the same ideological parameters. So the actual constructedness of reality and the ideological premises of fairy tales remain intact. The tiger's bride, like the other heroines, realizes the 'truth' of the 'nursery fears' and chooses a non-materialistic, animal sexuality, but she does not have the option of *not* choosing it. Within the framework of the tale her choice appears to be a liberating one, but in reality it is not,

despite Carter's Sadean proposition that misogyny can be undermined by women's refusal to be sexual victims and by their adoption of a more sexually aggressive role.

Although there are dangers in comparing theoretical and fictional writing, I feel it is perfectly justifiable to argue that many of the ideas in *The Bloody Chamber* rest on Carter's interpretation of Sade, even if they do not fulfill her own analysis of the mechanisms of the historical process. It is possible to say that some of the tales 'render explicit the nature of social relations' as outlined in Carter's definition of the 'moral pornographer', but explanation is not always enough. Indeed, 'The Bloody Chamber' tale, through its equivocation, borders on the reactionary. We do have to address questions of binary thinking as it affects gender and sexuality, but Carter's prescribed action for her heroines within stereotypical options is ultimately politically untenable. Her use of irony might blur the boundaries at times but it does not significantly attack deep-rooted ways of thinking or feeling.

Source: Avis Lewallen, "Wayward Girls but Wicked Women? Female Sexuality in Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber'," in *Perspectives in Pornography: Sexuality in Film and Literature,* edited by Gary Day and Clive Bloom, Macmillan Press, 1988, pp. 144-57.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Rose comments on the significance of the narrator's mother in "The Bloody Chamber."

When we turn to the fairy tales we are most familiar with, preserved and transmitted by Perrault and the Grimm brothers, what we see is that in our culture there are different developmental paradigms for boys and girls. In fairy tales, boys are clever, resourceful, and brave. They leave home to slay giants, outwit ogres, solve riddles, find fortunes. Girls, on the other hand, stay home and sweep hearths, are patient, enduring, self-sacrificing. They are picked on by wicked step-mothers, enchanted by evil fairies. If they go out, they get lost in the woods. They are rescued from their plights by kind woodsmen, good fairies, and handsome princes. They marry and live happily ever after. . . .

What Adrienne Rich calls "the great unwritten story" of the "cathexis between mother and daughter" [*Of Woman Born,* 1976] can be written many ways. . . . [A] mother is not only her daughter's first love object. She is also her first and therefore most impressive image of adult womanhood. It is this aspect of the mother/daughter relationship that Angela Carter emphasizes in her retelling of "Bluebeard," the first and title story of *The Bloody Chamber.* Here the strong bond between mother and daughter figures as a kind of "maternal telepathy" that sends not her brothers (as in the original) but her mother to the curious bride's rescue. As Bluebeard's sword ascends for the fatal blow, his young bride's mother bursts through the gate like a Valkyrie— or an Amazon— and fires "a single, irreproachable bullet" through his head.

It is significant that this fighting mother appears in the first story of *The Bloody Chamber.* "What do we mean by the nurture of daughters?" Adrienne Rich asks. Since "women growing into a world so hostile to us need a very profound kind of loving in order to learn to love ourselves," she concludes that "the most important thing one woman [a mother] can do for another [her daughter] is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities." A mother "who is a fighter" gives her daughter a sense of life's possibilities. Following her example, Bluebeard's widow and her "sisters" in the stories that follow are enabled to explore life's possibilities, to develop into adult women by learning to love themselves.

Source: Ellen Cronan Rose, "Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales," in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, edited by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, Elizabeth Langland, eds., University Press of New England, 1983, pp. 209-27.

Topics for Further Study

Critics have noted the influence of Carter's interest in anthropology in *The Bloody Chamber.* Explain.

Research Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*. How is it similar in plot and mood to "The Bloody Chamber"?

Read Charles Perrault's version of "Beauty and the Beast" and compare it to Carter's version, "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon," which appears in *The Bloody Chamber.* How do these "literary" versions of the story compare to another rendition of the tale, for example, Disney's film version of *Beauty and the Beast*? What is the significance of these differences?

Investigate the life and death of St. Cecilia. How does this saint's life resemble that of the narrator in "The Bloody Chamber"?

What Do I Read Next?

Carter's collection of folklore from different cultures, *Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book* (1990), examines the common themes of the genre and includes an introduction by the author.

The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (1976) by Austrian-born psychologist Bruno Bettelheim is a classic nonfiction account of the sociological and psychological need for fairy tales and their effect on children and culture in general.

Germaine Greer, a contemporary of Carter, demystifies female sexuality in *The Female Eunuch* (1971) and demonstrates how the socially constructed "ideal woman," a person without a discernible sexuality, needs to be undone for the benefit of women.

Published in 1697, Charles Perrault's *Fairy Tales* is a collection of stories from many cultures, including "Little Red Riding Hood," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Puss in Boots." The versions penned by this French author are the ones with which most readers are familiar.

Poet Anne Sexton published *Transformations* in 1971, a volume of poems that rewrites the tales of the Brothers Grimm.

Further Study

Atwood, Margaret. "Running with the Tigers," in *Flesh and the Mirror,* Virago Press, 1994, pp. 117-35.

Analyzes Carter's "talking back to" the Marquis de Sade in *The Bloody Chamber* by looking at images of the tiger and the lamb, the eater and the eaten.

Duncker, Patricia. "Reimagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers," *Literature and History,* Vol. 10, 1984, pp. 3-14.

This "anti-pornography " critique of Carter's collection discusses how "The Bloody Chamber" delivers a "perhaps unwitting . . . feminist message."

Jordan, Elaine, "The Dangers of Angela Carter," in *New Feminist Discourses,* edited by Isobel Armstrong, Routledge, 1992, pp. 119-32.

Defends Carter's feminism and sees "The Bloody Chamber" as a re-working of the stories of the French author Colette.

Rushdie, Salman. Introduction to *Burning Your Boats: The Collected Short Stories of Angela Carter,* Holt, 1995, pp. ix-xiv.

Carter's career as a short-story writer as communicated through a friend's testimony.

Sage, Lorna. "Angela Carter," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 14, Gale, 1983, pp. 205-12.

The critic outlines Carter's life and work.

Warner, Marina. Introduction to *Strange Things Sometimes Still Happen,* by Angela Carter, Faber, 1993, pp. ix-xvi.

A history and analysis of Carter's interest in fairy tales.

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Carter, Angela. *The Sadeian Woman.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, 154 p.

Carter, Angela. Introduction to *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1990, pp. ix-xxii.

Clark, Robert. "Angela Carter's Desire Machine," in *Women's Studies,* Vol. 14, no. 1, 1987, pp. 147- 59.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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