

The Bloody Chamber: An Informal Analysis

Angela Carter is a wickedly masterful postmodern writer, and her book *The Bloody Chamber* is nothing short of a magnificent read. Her words, her turn of phrase, usage of metaphor, everything - is sensual, delightfully dark and luxurious. The stories themselves are revisions and reflective duplications of traditional Western fairy tales, such as: Beauty and the Beast, Bluebeard, Puss in Boots, Sleeping Beauty, etc. However, Carter warps them whilst emphasizing the sexual nature of each tale; she includes monstrously heavy topics such as economical rape, bestiality, sadomasochism, vampirism and female trafficking. After all of that, it is difficult to even consider the idea that these stories are even remotely feminist when apparently so much damage afflicts the female mind and body. Yet, thematically, the feminine is consistently elevated, ranging from direct victories over the masculine, to the subtle protection of psychological/symbolic femininity in the face of male dominance or some other abstracted patriarchal force.

As is the namesake of the book, *The Bloody Chamber* is Carter's first tale listed; it is a rendition of the classic Bluebeard story: a wealthy, charismatic blue-bearded man sweeping off a series of young brides only to have them mysteriously perish, one by one. Once a girl dies, he marries again, and the cycle repeats. Always, he has the same condition: for each new bride to be in charge of all his house keys but one. They are each instructed to never unlock one particular door in his castle, or else their life is forfeit. This innocuous little room harbors his secret sadistic obsession: to torture and murder the wives who had disregarded his warning and opened the door out of curiosity. Primarily a band of sisters is featured in the original story, each of whom marry Bluebeard and die in quick succession through this exact process. However, it is typically the last sister who breaks the morbid pattern, either by warning her brothers, or having some other dashing male hero save her from her evil husband in the nick of time.

Although the recent rendition written by Carter offers the same Gothic romance as the traditional tale - namely that of a young, pure bride whisked away to an opulent, frightening, isolated location and contrasted with a dark, complex, mysterious maleness - our writer now provides us with a radical twist to the fairy legend: **a feminist to end the madness.**

"I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in 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." So begins Carter's version. Needless to say, the sexual imagery is subtle, but rampant: the usage of words like 'ecstasy,' 'excitement,' 'burning,' 'pounding,' 'pistons,' 'thrusting,' etc. However, it is tastefully

and thoughtfully scribed; the purpose is to titillate the reader's senses, to induce within them the same quietly agitated, anticipatory state in which the narrator finds herself to be. As a result, the unconscious empathy developed draws in the audience.

Extracted from maternal protection, the narrator is seated in a compartment of a moving train. She is quite literally at a transitional stage of her life. Her journey is that of the girl leaving the comforts of home to venture into the entirely new womanly world of marriage, thus described in the passage above. Having no idea what to expect, she possesses a strong excitement for independence, but it is not without some reservation: *"I felt a pang of loss as if, when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife."* She is not quite sure what she feels for her husband, only that she wants to marry him - plainly and honestly - for his wealth. Her mother's abode was enough, but the two women were low on funds, and whilst she was not urged or pressured to do so, the narrator was inclined to improve their situation by accepting her suitor's wealthy hand. The story itself describes at length the anecdotal wooing process the Marquis performs for the narrator [for whom we are never given a name] as blatantly generous; he showers her with gifts of satins and silken dresses, beautiful diamond necklaces, decadent exotic meals, and invitations to grand operas. Playfulness is even part of his supposed Casanova-esque charm: *"he had loved to surprise me in my abstracted solitude at the piano. He would tell them [the servants] not to announce him, then soundlessly open the door and softly creep up behind me with his bouquet of hot-house flowers or his box of marrons glacés, lay his offering upon the keys and clasp his hands over my eyes as I was lost in a Debussy prelude."*

A fire-opal is the narrator's engagement ring, and a ruby necklace her wedding gift: *"a choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat."* The narrator even goes on to describe what she knows of the Marquis's family history, which revealed a disturbing tendency towards violence present in his ancestors that he himself may share: *"After the Terror, in the early days of the Directory, the aristos who'd escaped the guillotine had an ironic fad of lying a red ribbon round their necks at just the point where the blade would have sliced it through, a red ribbon like the memory of a wound. And his grandmother, taken with the notion, had her ribbon made up in rubies...bright as arterial blood."*

Our narrator necessitates her marriage with the Marquis because of his ability to provide her with material security rather than love. In fact, she distinguishes between herself and her rather fearless mother in this regard. *"For my mother herself had gladly, scandalously, defiantly beggared herself for love; and, one fine day, her gallant soldier never returned from the wars."* The mother, who 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,"* all before she was her daughter's present age - had been eventually brought low by her love for the father. Perhaps not

at first, however, considering that he was a soldier; the narrator's father seems to have been an ideal match for her mother. Both parents' dispositions may safely assume a generous amount of bravery, boldness and an almost Bohemian liberty in their unorthodox approach to life. The narrator's mother definitely seems to be one-of-a-kind, even for our twenty-first century standards. She is stereotypically both a good mother and a bad mother: she is maternal and loving, but also exceedingly ruthless and adventurous. She is a woman who kills as easily as she nurtures. But upon the father's death, apparently their family's income died too, so both mother and daughter were left to themselves, financially destitute.

However, our narrator is, nonetheless, the product of these two extraordinary people, and therefore may inherit a similar nature. She is a romantic individual with a corruptible disposition and displays herself as such by way of her personal retelling. She is both shrewd and naïve, innocent and salacious, beautiful and plain. Indeed, her whole character represents the concept of a literary **grotesque**, or a meshing together of two or more oppositional/unlike themes or characteristics. Both a child and a woman, she is situated within the suspended stage of female growth - her thoughts reflect this state as well. Once she sees the Marquis's vast estate, she conceives it to be akin to a "*fairy castle whose walls were made of foam*." Yet, just after this fantastical declaration, she naturally entertains the prospect of bearing an heir to that entail - a thought of an adult - one of a woman who either is prepared to embrace her fate and all its unpleasantness, or is preparing herself of the wifely duties she would be expected to fulfill in the future.

Duality in literature, especially when blended, creates confusion. Questions. It engulfs within it the element of mystery - the unknown - which seduces its audience to strive for answers. *The Bloody Chamber* is continually bombarded with such dichotomies, all sewn together with a compelling, lurid sweetness. The Marquis's castle is a model in oppositional forces; it is in itself a grotesque as well. It is a building both modern and of yore at the same time; its grandeur can afford the installation of electricity and plumbing, and yet at the same time it manifests the romance of the ancient world; of what once was. Human culture and beastliness are fused as one. To entertain this concept in another direction, women themselves in this genre are continually depicted as dualities: personified contradictions. For example, the ideal bride is a beauty, a virgin, an innocent. Yet, she is supposed to be sexual at the same time. A demure, sexual creature. Is that not a polarity? It is certainly possible; humans are nothing if not complicated beings. But nonetheless, the two characteristics are rather disparate to each other.

Relating to our story, this notion begs the question, 'why did the Marquis desire the narrator - a young, modest, shy, plain, quiet creature - when all his previous spouses were older, sophisticated women of extraordinary talents, with beauty as bold as their personalities, and who had enough worldly lasciviousness to bring any man they wanted to his knees?' This itself is a

conundrum. The Marquis has broken his pattern in his choice to pursue the main character. Angela Carter has led us through the tale so far, has whetted our own curiosity about the Marquis and his motives. We are essentially in the same situation as all his wives had been. The author has built our anticipation by toying with subtle, literary cues for conventional suspense and reverse psychology, *right under our noses*. She has done to us what the Marquis has done to his women: the answer, or in this case, the key is all the sweeter just because it is forbidden to us. However, it has not been set up in a way that dismisses its importance, or makes us disinterested enough to resist the temptation of gleaning knowledge. The key is vital, and the Marquis sets up the narrator in a likewise fashion. He seduces her to risk her life in order to gain crucial knowledge about him - which is the *exact* thing she desires from him and what he *knows* she desires from him.

Mirrors also play a large role in Carter's writings and are wonderfully symbolic in literature. Mirrors are devices that consistently distort reality, yet we repeatedly rely on them to reveal truths about our lives and ourselves. Inside the bedchamber of the Marquis's castle, the two characters engage themselves on their wedding night, surrounded by an overwhelming array of "undertaker's lilies" so that the room smelt of an "embalming parlor." Also present in the room are, interestingly, numerous mirrors: "*and surrounded by so many mirrors! Mirrors on all the walls, in stately frames of contorted gold, that reflected more white lilies than I'd ever seen in my life before....When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away.*" Mirrors enable the narrator to enter the head of her husband, for instance, in a brief, simple way. She is able to see herself as he sees her, as she has described. Her reflection, through his eyes, had propelled her towards the realization about her character. The narrator recognizes that she is now on a precipice - another 'in-between' stage. She can feel herself lured towards 'sin,' because 'sin' is all temptation and seduction; a practice in which her husband is a connoisseur and master.

"*He made me put on my choker, the family heirloom of one woman who had escaped the blade...It was as cold as ice and chilled me. He twined my hair into a rope and lifted it...And he kissed those blazing rubies, too. He kissed them before he kissed my mouth.*" The Marquis seems obsessed with violence; in this moment the imagery is too suggestive of this. What the necklace represents is chilling to the narrator - literally and figuratively. His love is given first to the metaphorically slit throat and then secondly to her. Her hair is no longer hair in his hands. He turns the styled locks into a rope, as if to hang her. She is an object - a potential victim - for him to 'play' with later, if she does not *behave*.

A "*potentiality for corruption*," as the narrator calls it, exists within herself as well. She is curious about her exposure to the darker side of life; her body is violated on her wedding night, but she is afterwards interested in salaciousness and welcomes it. She seeks it out in pornographic books from the castle's immense library, for which her companion mocks her: "*Have the nasty pictures scared Baby? Baby mustn't play with grownups' toys until she's learned how to handle them, mustn't she?*" Her innocence is not so innocent. It is in a little time following that the Marquis gives her the keys to the house, warning her never to use one, to never open one door, for it leads to a room where he goes "*to savour the rare pleasure of imagining himself wifeless*."

Once the narrator becomes accustomed to her new, sumptuous lifestyle, she runs the household according to her whims, and pays no heed to how she would appear to the servants as Lady of the House. She reverts back to her long-repressed childishness and adopts no adult airs during her husband's many absences. While he is away, she becomes intensely listless and desolate with all of her time alone. She uses a newly installed telephone to call her mother, and the sound of the other woman's voice brings her to tears:

"No, nothing was the matter. Mother, I have gold bath taps. I said, gold bath taps! No; I suppose that's nothing to cry about, Mother."

Alone, bored quite literally to tears, and in the despairing realization that she longs for her mother more than she ever thought she would, the narrator begins to explore her extensive home with a renewed fervor. She distracts herself from loneliness by ogling the glorious tapestries, furniture, lavish art pieces and silvers, gold and precious other exotics that fill the house. In doing so, she meets the piano-tuner, whom she begins to like - a kind-hearted, young blind man, son of the blacksmith - whilst playing the grand piano. But then, once she has exhausted every other activity, she happens upon the forbidden door...

She finds a dimly-lit chamber colored with crimsons - red velvets, painted Chinese ceramics, blood oozing from wheels, racks and iron maidens. *The Bloody Chamber*. Its name could even signify a metaphorical womb, filled with menstrual blood - the type of blood that is inherently and only female. Inside this room of the castle, the body of one of her husband's previous wives, an accomplished opera singer, lies embalmed underneath a fine linen sheet; the woman still had traces of blue strangler's bruises on her throat.

"One false step, oh, my poor, dear girl, next in the fated sisterhood of his wives; one false step and into the abyss of the dark you stumbled."

Our narrator was doomed from that moment of unlocking that forbidden door. In her fright, she drops the little key in the pool of the wives' blood, permanently staining it. No matter how she attempts to cover her tracks - even with the help of Jean-Yves, the blind piano-tuner - the Marquis inevitably discovers her treachery, and threatens her with a most grisly death: decapitation. Jean-Yves provides her with as much comfort as he can, but the circumstances are such that neither he nor she can do anything but wait. He is labeled as her lover in her last moments, as the narrator realizes that in the short time she has known him, his love is purer and truer than any her richly adorned spouse could ever impart to her.

She is told to come out to the courtyard, where her fate awaits her.
But then...

"My lover kissed me, he took my hand. He would come with me if I would lead him. Courage. When I thought of courage, I thought of my mother. Then I saw a muscle in my lover's face quiver.

'Hoofbeats!' he said.

I cast one last, desperate glance from the window and, like a miracle, I saw a horse and rider galloping at a vertiginous speed along the causeway, though the waves crashed, now, high as the horse's fetlocks. A rider, her black skirts tucked up around her waist so she could ride hard and fast, a crazy, magnificent horsewoman in widow's weeds."

The narrator is led down, outside, desperate, trying to delay so as to allow her mother enough time to save her. And just when she thinks all is lost - when her head is bent over the chopping block and the Marquis raised his ceremonial sword in the air...

"You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father's service revolver....And my husband stood stock-still, as if she had been Medusa, the sword still raised over his head as in those clock-work tableaux of Bluebeard that you see in glass cases at fairs....On her eighteenth birthday, my mother had disposed of a man-eating tiger that had ravaged the villages in the hills north of Hanoi. Now, without a moment's hesitation, she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head."

There we have our excellent postmodern twist! Bluebeard has been vanquished and the young widow inherits all the money, all due to a mother's intuition, love, and bravery. Such an outcome is the heart of our cultural agenda that we take as ideal truth - the desecration of evil and having the good prevail in the end. Angela Carter brings us all through the luxurious fantasy and then

brings everyone back to where they were before - for the narrator, her new lover, and her mother do not keep the generous inheritance - but for their newfound faith in love. The point of it all is that love trumps money. Love endures where materiality cannot, and all of the latter cannot ever compensate for the lack of the former.

Perhaps that is what the monster, Bluebeard, wanted as well. Within the story, there is a brief moment after he had realized her betrayal, that the narrator had surreptitiously caught a glimpse of him in their bedroom, sitting on the bed and clutching at his head - a picture of regret and despair. Perhaps he wished his marriage to her had lasted longer; he might have wished to find the perfect, most obedient wife - someone he could trust implicitly and completely. He wanted the supposed Eve before the apple, so to speak, and in his search, ruins all her after-images by channeling his own sadistic urges towards their extermination.

But there is one thing to remember: even though the monster is able to love, that does not dispel the fact that he remains a monster.