
Dark narrative: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Subversion of Traditional Fairy Tales

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Article Received: 26/09/2025

Article Accepted: 25/10/2025

Published Online: 27/10/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.10.449

Abstract

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* redefines traditional fairy tales through a feminist and gothic perspective, transforming familiar narratives into powerful explorations of gender, sexuality, and identity. Carter subverts patriarchal norms by granting her female protagonists agency, voice, and strength—qualities often denied in conventional tales. Her reinterpretations of stories like *Bluebeard*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Little Red Riding Hood* expose societal constructs of female oppression and objectification. Through vivid symbolism, psychological depth, and rich narrative voice, Carter reclaims storytelling as a space of liberation. Her work becomes a manifesto for female empowerment, advocating transformation not just in character, but in culture and consciousness.

Keywords: Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, Feminism, Female Empowerment, Gothic Fiction

Introduction

Angela Carter's works in general and to special regard "The Bloody Chamber" is considered a revolutionary collection that reinterprets classic fairy tales through feminist and gothic lenses. The collection, that is published in 1979, introduces multiple themes of female empowerment, sexuality, and power dynamics. Her stories envisage many aspects of the patriarchal understandings of classic tales and called responsively for women agency and their independence. Carter used her writings to defend them and regain their social, legal, political and economic rights in societies. "In the 1970s and 1980s British and American feminists gradually refined and expanded their original mission to challenge sexist culture."ⁱ Carter uses her writings to celebrate female agency and go beyond social norms. This paper tackles the idea of subverting traditional fairy tales in some stories of Carter's collection "The

Bloody Chamber." This collection explores various themes in sexuality, power, and female agency through the lens of feminist literary theory.

Gothic Genre and Familiar Fairy Tales

The gothic genre is mainly characterized by its mysterious, dark atmospheres and picturesque scenery. It introduces themes of death, fear, horror and romance. Gothic stories revolve around events like a secret that is expected to be revealed during the literary work, secret deaths or haunted mansions. Oral lessons, which usually reflect societal norms, are freely introduced in fairy tales. Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," for example, contains such kinds of genres. She uses gothic elements to introduce familiar fairy tales that give heavy importance to psychoanalytic theory, the unconscious and the uncanny. She criticizes the underlying power dynamics and gender roles.

Carter based her stories majorly on rewritten famous fairy tales, but of course with willful modulations. Women writers of postmodern era exploited intertextuality for the construction of their stories to plant their pivotal themes. Their foremost purpose was to explore the sexuality and identity of modern women.ⁱⁱ Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," for example, one of her most well-known stories, is a re-written of Perrault's French folktale "Bluebeard" which speaks the story of a wealthy man who espouses women and sentences them to death before one of them survives. This story reminds us of the Eastern collection of folk tales "One Thousand and One Nights" (the Arabian Nights) with the wife Scheherazade trying to avoid death at the hands of King Shahryar who previously murdered many wives."ⁱⁱⁱ Carter's story "Snow Child" could serve as another example. This story resembles a direct variant of "Snow Child" except for slight changes in the construction of the plot. The count is the one who wishes for a child "as white as snow" and the story ends up the count raping her. In this way, she challenges old narratives with giving much attention to female heroines with a new voice, much different from those we were accustomed to read about. She obviously critiques old plots with hidden ideologies they call for. Thus, using the common narratives enables Carter to freely address her society with themes of empowerment, gender, and sexuality.

Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist Literary Criticism represents a crucial wave in the history of literary movements. In Feminist literary criticism, literary writers usually challenge the oppression of women. In other words, it is a kind of "rebellion of the female consciousness against the male images of female identity and experience."^{iv} This kind of critical tendency is not a newborn movement. It goes back to the 1830s as 'First Wave' feminism along with the abolition of slavery and the call for women's rights.^v 'The second wave' started from the period of the Two World Wars to be revived in the 1990s. This wave has been criticized by 'the third wave' for ignoring the multiple differences between men and women due to race, nationality, class and ethnicity.

vi

According to Connell, R. W., hegemonic masculinity and the action that legitimizes men's leading position in society and the marginalization of women through many practices, have forced itself into the societal belief of how life should be.^{vii} As a result, it becomes a matter of societal custom rather than real rights. In the same way, it looks at gender not from a biological perspective but as a social construct built on historical, social and cultural context.^{viii}

Feminist literary theory spots light on how the female character is portrayed in literary works. Not only this, but the authority in this theory is not only given to the female characters but to female authors, especially those who were ignored and overlooked. This literary theory will be employed to analyze Angela Carter's stories in "The Bloody Chamber". By reimagining traditional fairy tales, it could be easily seen that Carter challenges patriarchal narratives and propagandizes sexuality female agency and empowerment.

Carter's Subversion of Traditional Fairy Tales

The British writer is known for her writings that evidently support the feminist theory which often present themes related to gender, empowerment, sexuality and nationality.^{ix} Her stories are loaded with various cultural and literary references and the multiple intertextual links a thing that shapes them as postmodern.^x She is considered as a controversial writer "due to her obvious feminist agenda and very dark and sexually themed works."^{xi} Her writings represent a vivid challenge to traditional norms and gender roles through subverting traditional fairy tales. In her "Bluebeard", the reader expects to read the traditional story about a wealthy man who appears violent most of the time. He marries multiple women and kills anyone who disobeys his order in entering the forbidden room. The pervading atmosphere of the story serves as a cautionary tale about curiosity and obedience.

The atmosphere of curiosity and complete obedience in the traditional tale is missed in Carter's reimagining. In her collection, "The Bloody Chamber," Carter presents "Bluebeard" in a different way. The young bride, who is the protagonist, appears a strong woman who tries to discover her husband's dark secret. At the end of the story, she succeeds to escape his control and death with the help of another female figure, her mother.

In spite of the fact that the heroine shows a weak stance in the beginning of the story, the closing parts prove the opposite. The story opens with her declaration:

"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."^{xii}

This fragile personality disappears as the story moves on. Carter presents the reader a new version of the heroine. The tale shifts from the situation of victimization to one of empowerment. The writer introduces the protagonist in a metaphorical journey from complete resignation to self-awareness. The journey does not prove spacial change from the deadly control of her husband, but it is rather a revolutionary step towards liberation. The situation expresses feminine empowerment and strength and highlights her growing agency. Carter's stories "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride" are another example of her retelling of the traditional story of "Beauty and the Beast." The original tale of "Beauty and the Beast" circles around a young woman who is enforced to live with a beast in exchange for her father's freedom. The story ends up happily by the transformation of the beast back into a prince. This is due to the girl's attractive influence on the beast through her love and kindness.

According to Carter's reimagining, the story is presented from two different aspects. The first aspect is introduced in her story, "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" In this story Carter stays close to the original tale as it involves the transformation of the basic characters. Beauty's transformation is spiritual as her initial feelings change positively during the course of the story; whereas the beast's transformation is physical when he changes into a handsome prince.

The other aspect is presented in her story "The Tiger's Bride;" however the case finds a slight difference here. This story offers a more complex, darker version. The beast, who is a creature with a tiger's face, gains Beauty in a game of cards with her father. The beast reveals his animalistic nature clearly from the beginning and does not hide his face. After losing her to the beast, the heroine appears upset. Yet she changes her mind as she enters the Tiger's mansion. Throughout the story, the Tiger shows a kind of insistence of seeing Beauty naked; a thing which proves that the Tiger is in need for the heroine's feminine power. The description Carter uses as the Tiger asks Beauty to see her naked and she refuses speaks loud the power of her virginity. Burring his head in his arms and the tears that fall from his eyes reinforces the situation.

In this way, Beauty in this story is far more independent, assertive, and self-aware. In more than one situation, she questions her conditions, rejects being objectified and eventually gains control over her own physical transformation. More clearly her personal decision to become a tiger at the end indicates her refusal of societal expectations of the male's transformation. In addition to physical power, Carter gives her protagonists the power of narration. It becomes so natural to hear from female narrators "instead of a neutral, omniscient or masculine point of view, which were associated with traditional fairy tales."^{xiii} The female here plays an active role in taking direct actions in the course of events; quite the opposite of the inactive role seen in more traditional versions of the story.

Beauty's animalistic change is a vivid sign of her liberation from the constraints of the society that surrounds her. In other terms, this change expresses the female power and her ability to experience a kind of transformation, unlike the traditional role of the Beast's masculine power. Beauty can also embrace her primal nature. This is more vivid in her statement: "The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers."^{xiv} This image is a direct declaration of power dynamics in a beautiful metaphorical image. The weak should not always rely on the strong. He should work on himself and find power from inside to face all types of difficulties.

In the former story, Mr Lyon appears more of a sympathetic character as he is shown sick in the story. This sickness is a reflection of his longing for Beauty's return. Unlike the expected features of the lion, here the protagonist's vulnerability is a central part. The animalistic features change into humanistic ones as Beauty learns to love him. This transformation suggests a transitional phase from beastly to civilized one.

The idea of female empowerment in Carter's stories continue to her story "The Company of Wolves." This story is a classic reflection of the traditional narrative "Little Red Riding Hood." The classic story of "Little Red Riding Hood" tells the story of a beautiful young girl who wants to visit her grandmother. On her way, she encounters a wolf. The wolf is disguised as her grandmother. He attempts to eat her, but fortunately she is saved by a hunter at the end of the story.

When viewing Carter's story, we could easily notice that she twists it to one of female empowerment. This twist is planned to feed her central theme in the collection of stories. Instead of repeating the traditional plot; she adds key elements that make her story more motivating. The story begins with the descriptions of wolves and presents the folklore related to werewolves. The very beginning of the story is intended. Carter's employment of the image of wolves has a direct significance when talking about its symbol. A wolf, in most native American cultures, stands for power, strength, courage and fertility. In Arabic culture, a wolf is majorly connected with the person who is cunning and has many ways of manipulation. If we, as readers, read Carter's story with these meanings, the story takes a straight direction to the theme of female empowerment. She opens her story with the image of the wolf to connect it with the powerful female character that she is producing. The idea of 'taming the wolf' is expressive. This powerful, cunning, and masculine wolf is being tamed by a *woman*. It is not translated as taming, but as victory.

The story presents us a victorious female that "has her knife and she is afraid of nothing."^{xv} The female here is beyond of our expectations; she is fully armed, is not afraid and ready to face others. These little details add to the overall image. This image is reinforced

at the closing lines of the story: "Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered."^{xvi} The protagonist takes space in the world on her own terms.

In this way, Carter introduces us her version of the theme of empowerment. Her protagonist is an awesome combination of the traditional and modern favor. At the beginning one may feel that the writer presents the traditional female version; however as the story moves on, the protagonist proves her apparent strength and autonomy. Her conflict with the wolf and her eventual success reflect her reclaiming of power and agency.

The Impact of Female Desire and Sexuality

In Angela Carter's collection "The Bloody Chamber", the theme of sexuality is a prominent and complex. Different from the traditional purified types of fairy tales, Carter introduces again the raw, often taboo, elements of sexual desire, agency, and awakening. She tries, through her plots, to prevent reducing female characters to simple passive figures of innocence and purity. Instead, she gives them the priority to own and show their desires and sexuality. In addition, she often positions sexual awakening as a form of empowerment.

In her titular story "The Bloody Chamber," the beautiful teenage girl's growing sexual awareness is introduced in tandem with her comprehension of the Marquis's real nature. Carter decisively removes the obstacle between sexual curiosity and fear. Similarly, she reveals the threats rooted in patriarchal structures of power. The moment of the protagonist's finding of the secret chamber is not a matter of violence yet it gives us an exact metaphor for the secreted fears of unexamined desire and blind submission. Another example is handled in the corpses of previous wives that fill the bloody room. This image works as a symbol of portrayed female sexuality and the consequences of being consumed by the male gaze.

"The Tiger's Bride" sets a contrastive story to the previous one. In this story, Carter presents an image of empowerment and sexual transformation. In this story, Carter changes the original narrative where it could be easily seen that transformation comes from male redemption. Accordingly, the animalistic side is highlighted and it proves the constraints of a repressive, patriarchal identity. In this way, she embraces her own erotic power. Accordingly, her closing transformation into a tiger is not considered a loss of humanity, but an acceptance of instinctual identity. This shows that liberation sometimes could be a reclaim of one's desire and body rather than being a degradation.

In some cases, Carter presents the female image in her collection in the form of the mother figure. The image of the mother sets a crucial theme. Carter highlights the role of mothers since their traditional roles are passive and absent in fairy tales. The mother heroines she creates are strong, independent, and powerful. The mother could be easily seen as capable of saving her daughter without the need for a male hero, for instance. Moreover, Carter's stories show that the image of the male savoir (father, brother, prince,...) is lost.

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incidence of saving the daughter is not only courageous but 'wild'. The daughter describes her mother's situation when the Marquis is about to execute her: "You never saw such a wild thing as my mother... she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head."^{xvii} In this condition, the feminine power speaks loud and breaks the traditional norms. Women are no longer in need for masculine powers to save themselves and others.

In "The Courtship of Mr Lyon and The Tiger's Bride," it could be simply noticed that Carter completely removes the role of mothers. The fathers are present while maternal powers are absent. This procedural removal serves a thematic purpose. The writer wants to show how weak and irresponsible, and unable to save their daughters. She creates a sharp contrast between the presence of the strong, responsible mothers and the negligent paternal figures who are unable to save their daughters.

In "The Company of Wolves", Carter translates maternal authority in the form of the crone, wise woman. The old woman plays the role of the wise teacher. Through the course of events, she teaches the heroin the dangers of woods and places. She is the symbolic wise woman who keeps directing her relatives with generational knowledge. This frequent commentary on the maternal aspects represents a reinforcement on female power and strength. At the same time, it reassures the idea that female's role is not passive, but essential and transformative.

The Symbolism of Transformation and Identity

Symbolic transformations make up an important component in the stories of Carter and have several aspects to do with identity. The symbolic changes of the majority of her female protagonists are accompanied by the physical ones. This type of changes is a direct influence in recognition of self-government despite patriarchal structures.

In the Tiger Bride, the main character happens to change into a tiger. This type of extreme physical transformation is metaphorical in her total assent to the freedom of identity. The transformation of the body results in her re-identity. When the transformation is being performed, she tells us, she shook the tears out of her beautiful fur. This is the sentence that describes her newborn emancipation and independence. Besides the physical change, she has a psychological one. It makes her stronger within and eliminates the image of the passive female. In this sense, females are no longer dominated and guarantees the reality that true liberation is in the acceptance of their wild side.

Another transformation image is dealt with in The Courtship of Mr. Lyon. Transformation in this story is psychological and it symbolizes a gradual metamorphosis between the vanity and empathy. The return of the protagonist is more of a recognition of her emotional development and it is not even binding. This is supported in the fact that she is constantly looking at herself which symbolizes her self-absorption. Commenting, Carter remarks that

she

smiled too often at herself in mirrors, these days, which she later controlled. By doing so, the author introduces us to the emotional equilibrium in the character of the protagonist which is a direct correlation of self-awareness to the possibility of mutual love.

The concept of being on the naive and on the self-awareness and agency is reiterated in *The Bloody Chamber*. The simplistic female character displays early opulence of new life that is shrouded by the tyrant influence her husband has. As the story progresses, the turn of events would take a different twist. Her mother is the one who helps her not a man. She looks back and writes, I had a feeling of possible corruption in me that made me gasp, and she is validating her self-reclaiming and the dangers of blind involvement. Therefore, she gets an interior, intellectual transformation that results into a slow repossession of self and voice.

Language and Narrative Structure as Tools of Subversion

Carter's choices of words and narrative style are part of her subversive theme. Her style is characterized in being sensual and lush. This feature helped creating an immersive gothic atmosphere in her stories; a thing that gave her plots beauty and power. Her use of the first-person narration is intended. It helps reading the inner worlds of her female heroines. She challenges literary expectations. In this way, she handles readers a tone that differs from the moralizing one of traditional fairy tales.

In "*The Bloody Chamber*," it is evident that the protagonist recounts her own story through first-person voice. This technique allows readers hear from her directly, not about her. This thing is a direct replacement of a position where patriarchal powers used to occupy in traditional narrative texts. It is not a matter of replacement, but it is a way of giving them power, space and voice.^{xviii} As the protagonist comments, "I had been infinitely dishevelled by the loss of my virginity."^{xix} This thing represents a portrayal of sexual awakening that defies idealized purity tropes.

In addition to the first-person voice, the writer's use of complexity in plots urges readers to question surface-level interpretations. Carter uses complex imagery and symbolic layering; A thing which resists simplicity. This linguistic resistance is reflected on her characters. It reflects her protagonists' resistance. The writer employs her words to act as just her female characters do. In this way, Carter's language is just part of the overall thematic project.

Moreover, Carter invests intertextuality in weaving her stories into a broader cultural and literary dialogue. Traditional tales like "*Beauty and the Beast*" or "*Bluebeard*" are skillfully positioned in feminine waves. Carter uses the old structures to feed her fundamental thematic tendencies. In her description of Carter's texts, Tara M. Formisano comments on the intensive feminist agenda, which is "impossible to ignore"^{xx} for the reader. The frequent references to folklore, myths and psychoanalysis are used to invite critical analysis which paves the way to feminine agencies and gender politics.

Subverting the Masculine Gaze and Objectification

The subversion of the male gaze is one of the frequent targets in Carter's plots. In traditional fairy tales, females are often portrayed as weak objects. They are desired due to their beauty, submission, and purity. They represent mere objects of desire. However, by depicting the psychological effects of objectification, Carter defies the societal common thoughts and handles a stronger female version.

In "The Tiger's Bride," the female protagonist's father wagers his daughter in a game of cards. This specific act shows how females are usually treated as commodities. They lose their humanity. However, as the story goes on, she calls for her identity as female. She narrates, "I was a woman, my father said. I should have been his son,"^{xxi} a quotation that speaks deep-rooted gender expectations she confronts. Her confrontation is more revealed in the final scene as she undresses herself and embraces her transformation. This incident proves the drastic change in her personality as she refuses performing for the Beast. It is a revelation for herself with determination and control.

Correspondingly, in "The Bloody Chamber," the male gaze is no difference. The Marquis proves an oppressive and fetishizing look at the female protagonist. He deals with his bride as a seducing object, to be admired, adorned, and eventually damaged.

The writer critiques the situation as she shows us the protagonist's growing discomfort and final rebellion. The story not only shows us how gazing can be an act of control but also how power can be easily regained. "There is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer,"^{xxii} the female protagonist comments on the interference between violence and desire. The moment of peering into the chamber of horrors is a critical one; it shows how the heroine's gaze becomes powerful. This gaze is not a simple one but it is a confrontation of the truth.

One of the most challenging critiques of objectification that Carter presents is that in "The Snow Child." In this story, the girl is being conjured just to please the Count's desires. The girl suddenly appears at the time he wishes: "I wish I had a girl as white as snow."^{xxiii} Through a few paragraphs, this girl is born, used, and discarded. The shortness of the story is part of her call for female rights and how they are completely controlled by masculine fantasy. In other cases, Carter shows us her strong heroines who use their sexuality to establish their social position and explore their own personality.^{xxiv} In this way, the writer forces us as readers to face and accept rough facts about gendered power dynamics.

Conclusion: Representation of the new Female Voice

Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" is a landmark in gothic storytelling and feminist literature. It is often mentioned as a book of traditional story retellings. These retellings of traditional fairy tales presents us modern ideas about gender, sexuality, and empowerment. Her female heroines are not *others* but leading characters who speak loud their powerful situations. She presents tales become a raw material for introducing female voice, agency,

and empowerment.

In Carter's tales, female protagonists are no longer the passive objects we used to read about in old tales. She presents us a different image; different from the fragile beauties waiting for salvation. She enables them with power, voice and choice. In Carter's tales, it is natural to see women portrayed with great strength- at times we see them narrators and at other times as fierce fighters. She handles a stronger version somehow equal to the masculine one. Her heroines go beyond expectations and welcome the complexity of their identities. Commenting on her survival, the heroine of "The Bloody Chamber" says : "My mother had disposed of a man-eating tiger,"^{xxxv} it is the female solidarity and feminine strength that wins at the end. In her stories, women act differently away from the constraints of obedience and passivity. Through rewriting other stories in her way, she reclaims the power to females as if she desires to adjust what is wrong in the society. Thus, through her innovative , she succeeds to inspire others to go beyond traditional constraints and stand against the patriarchal narratives inherent in traditional fairy tales.

ⁱ https://content.ucpress.edu/title/9780520242524/9780520242524_intro.pdf. Accessed on 3\12\2023

ⁱⁱ <file:///C:/Users/LENOVO%20X140e/Downloads/00196123-684349391AA.pdf> p. 13.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/279/27964115047/html/> Accessed on 11\9\2024

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