

Abstractionism in the bloody chamber and the erl-king



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Angela Carter's work in the short story collection "The Bloody Chamber," makes frequent use of concrete objects as expressions of abstract concepts, among them freedom, bondage, and death in multiple forms, not only physical.

In the short story "The Bloody Chamber," the world the protagonist lives in is archaic. Although timeless in technicality, the reader gets the idea that it is set in the Victorian era or a little after. This idea is reinforced by the dress of the characters, the behavior of the majority of the women, and the use of wagons and horses as transportation, with the "motorcar" as a luxury item. The reader is shocked by the presence of the telephone, first revealed while the protagonist and her new husband are having sex for the first time, "A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides while the mewling gulls swung on invisible trapezes in the empty air outside. I was brought to my senses by the insistent shrilling of the telephone" (TBC 17). Carter's use of anachronism highlights the significance of the telephone in the story. In this instance, the telephone seems to symbolize safety or freedom. It is with the telephone that she is able to call her mother. That maternal bond between mother and daughter, via the telephone wire, ends up being stronger than her bond to her husband in marriage.

Carter's use of concrete objects in place of abstract concepts is not limited to anachronisms. "The Bloody Chamber" and "O Belo Adormecido" use intertextuality as an effective strategy to subvert conventions. Ana Raquel Fernandes argues that Carter hinges "The Bloody Chamber" on multiple objects, relevant to the setting, which escalate in meaning throughout the story. Among them are the lilies in the bedchamber and the ruby choker. The <https://assignbuster.com/abstractionism-in-the-bloody-chamber-and-the-erl-king/>

lilies, she says, are an illusion to death. She also makes note of the association the protagonist makes between the lilies and her husband: " In this first part of the story, the first person narrator, the young girl who tells her story retrospectively, describes the Marquis focusing on the stillness of his face and comparing him with a lily" (Fernandes 3). The section of text Fernandes refers to is the protagonist's initial description of her lover.

" He was older than I... And sometimes that face, in stillness when he listened to me playing, with the heavy eyelids folded over eyes that always disturbed me by their absolute absence of light, seemed to me like a mask... Even when he asked me to marry him, and I said: ' Yes,' still he did not lose that heavy, fleshy composure of his. I know it must seem a curious analogy, a man with a flower, but sometimes he seemed to me like a lily" (TBC 8-9).

The Marquis himself, then, by this comparison to a lily, becomes an object in the story representing death. Fernandes goes on to explain the recurrence of the lilies throughout the story as foreshadowing impending death on multiple levels: " The lilies appear again in the description of the matrimonial chamber ...although the lilies are white, they stain the narrator, their perfume confuses her senses and later in the short story, the stems become: ' dismembered arms, drifting drowned in greenish water' (TBC 22), an explicit reference to death. Indeed, from its first description, the bedroom is a death chamber" (Fernandes 4).

The choker carries potent symbolism of both death and the bondage of marriage. As a symbol of death, it references both the impending physical beheading of the protagonist and the death of self when the protagonist

enters into marriage. Bondage, then, is death. This symbolism is alluded to when the choker is described: " A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat" (TBC 11). The symbolism of death is further exemplified in the detailing of the tradition the choker comes from: " After the Terror, in the early days of the Directory, the aristos who'd escaped the guillotine had an ironic fad of tying a red ribbon round their necks at just the point where the blade would have sliced it through...That night at the opera comes back to me even now... the white dress; the frail child within it; and the flashing crimson jewels round her throat, bright as arterial blood" (TBC 11).

In " The Erl-King," Carter uses the bird's cages to overtly symbolize bondage and the broken fiddle to symbolize the absence of freedom. While the Erl-King has possession of the maidens, transformed by magic into birds, his music is their cries of sorrow. When the protagonist kills the Erl-King at the end and frees the birds, she strings the fiddle with the Erl-King's hair, thereby restoring freedom as a concept and the fiddle's song replaces the song of the birds. The fiddle's less than joyous music brings our awareness to an uncanny message. " Then it (the fiddle) will play discordant music without a hand touching it. The bow will dance over the new strings of its own accord and they will cry out ' Mother, mother, you have murdered me!'" This notes the responsibility and sacrifice that comes with freedom of any kind.

The symbols of freedom in " The Bloody Chamber" are less overt and exist more in terms of negative argument than on its own. In other words,

freedom is exhibited through the death of death (the Marquis) instead of
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being given its own object to live through. This is fitting since “ The Bloody Chamber” seems to speak more about marriage as death and submission as bondage. The Erl-King, on the other hand, seems to speak more about feminism, and the dilemmas of sexuality and equality.

Carter’s use of concrete objects as abstractions is central to postmodernism. In the past, many works have used items to symbolize abstractions but in Carter’s work, the items are not props but actual characters in the work. The telephone, for example, is central in the plot of “ The Bloody Chamber.” The choker becomes more of a character than some of the real people, for example, the piano teacher. The fiddle in “ The Erl-King” even has lines of dialogue at the end of the piece, which puts it on full level with living characters. In this way, Carter makes abstractions like bondage, death, and freedom more than simple morals or behind-the-scenes concepts in her work. They take on lives of their own through the objects they inhabit and become central characters, speaking louder than the human characters with which they coexist.

Works Cited

Carter, Angela (1995), *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. London: Vintage [1979].

Fernandes, Ana Raquel (2010), “ The Bloody Chamber” and “ O Belo Adormecido”: intertextuality as an effective strategy to subvert conventions. Lisbon. The Sixth Congress of the National Portuguese Association of Comparative Literature.

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