

Angela carter – the bloody chamber essay



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Traditionally, women would marry a man chosen for them or for money, security or convenience. In such patriarchal societies, women were inferior to men and marriages lacked equality, with women having no power or rights. Alongside this came the repression of female sexuality; women were apparently incapable of experiencing sexual desire and the stereotype of them as passive objects for men's sexual fulfilment was readily accepted. Even today, women are far from equal to man in terms of societies acceptance of their sexuality.

One way Angela Carter continuously challenges conventional notions of love and desire, is by questioning the importance and power of female sexuality. The Bloody Chamber is an ongoing dialogue between feminism and psychoanalysis, in which she asks: are women erotic or inert? The notions of love and desire are explored throughout the collection but there is a particular focus in 'The Bloody Chamber', 'The Tiger's Bride', and 'The Erl King'. In these stories, the victimisation of young girls in fairytales is reversed, with the females being empowered by their discovery of their own sexuality.

In 'The Bloody Chamber' the traditional conflict between love and marriage is clearly conveyed; when asked "Are you sure you love him?" the girl replies that she is sure she wants to marry him. This shows the acceptance of marrying without love, although she "thought [she] must truly love him" when he took her to the opera. It appears that she really marries the marquis because he is "as rich as Croesus" or possibly for a protective father figure having grown up with just a mother.

In the narrative, Carter continues to use the girl as a tool to convey her opinion, when she compares marriage to “ exile” and communicates her feeling that “ henceforth, [she] would always be lonely. In ‘ The Tiger’s Bride’, a different approach to love and desire is taken. As in ‘ The Bloody Chamber’, the girl is at first a possession, “ lost to the beast in a game of cards”, and similarly it is her discovery of her own desire that empowers her. However, in ‘ The Tiger’s Bride, instead of defying the man, the girl chooses to be with him. Angela Carter uses the beast throughout the collection to symbolise desire.

In ‘ The Tiger’s Bride’, when the girl makes her decision to live with the beast, “ skin after successive skin” is removed leaving only the “ beautiful fur” of her internal beast. While in stories such as ‘ The Bloody Chamber’ and ‘ The Erl King’ the girl escapes the beast, here she chooses desire. Through this story, Carter presents the power of female sexuality and the importance for women to discover and experience desire. The traditional passivity assumed of women is confronted when showing “ the fleshy nature of women” to the beast makes the girl feel “ liberty for the first time in [her] life”.

The idea of women as objects of male desire is portrayed with Carter’s frequent reference to the male gaze, cinematic technique. In ‘ The Bloody Chamber’ the girl’s “ excited senses tell her that the marquis is “ gazing at” while in ‘ The Erl King’ the girl is “ drawn [...] inwards” by the “ black vortex of his eye [...] that exerts such a tremendous pressure”. There is strong symbolism in the eye of a man of consumption and entrapment; the male gaze has the power to consume and possess a woman.

In 'The Erl King', Carter conveys that "there are some eyes that can eat you", and uses the well known line from 'Red Riding Hood': "what big eyes you have". In drawing on this source, Carter reminds the reader that her stories are extensions of the traditional fairytale genre, but that she subverts the original messages. The conventional ideas of romantic love are challenged with Carter's exploration of the links between love and death. She frequently juxtaposes love with death imagery, to defy the norm of love being associated with happiness and tenderness.

In 'The Bloody Chamber', the wedding is preceded by images of death with images of "the aristos who escaped the guillotine" and the "cuts on the slab". Carter uses flowers, which are conventionally related to love and romance, but she defies the conventions by her use of lilies, which symbolise death. Similarly, sex is inseparable from violence, as the title of the collection implies; the word "bloody" indicates violence while the word "chamber" usually refers to a bedroom, which introduces sex.

In 'The Bloody Chamber', for example, the girl has to wear only the "choker of rubies [... like an extraordinary precious slit throat" when the marquis wishes to have sex with her and afterwards, he breathes "stertuously, as if he had been fighting". This inseparable nature of sex and violence is demonstrated explicitly when the girl quotes her husband's favourite poet – "There is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer." In addition, in 'The Erl King' violent images are paired with sexual acts; when he strips her to her "last nakedness", she is compared to a "skinned rabbit". The oxymoronic nature of the Erl King continues to be shown with the description of him as a "tender butcher".

In 'The Erl King', there is obvious conflict between what the girl desires and what she should do, in psychoanalytical terms, there is unconscious conflict between her id and her ego. By entering the forest, she has chosen to explore her unconscious desires and she is well aware that it is "easy to lose yourself in these woods." The female character in this story experiences a mixture of desire and repulsion towards the Erl king, who is an embodiment of male sexuality – "His touch both consoles and devastates me." Similarly, in 'The Tiger's Bride' and 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' the females experience this unsettling combination of emotions.

Throughout 'The Bloody Chamber', Angela Carter challenges the conventionally notion of women as passive in relation to desire. However, the empowerment each female character experiences leads to different endings, from the murder of the male embodiment of sexuality in 'The Erl King' to the conscious decision to become a beast, and embody female desire. My reading of The Bloody Chamber strongly supports the view that 'Angela Carter challenges conventional notions of love and desire' as she rejects the traditional view of women as sexually inert and highlights the ambiguities of desire, citing violence as an integral part of sex.