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## **The Bloody Chamber: A Postmodernist resignification of Perrault's Bluebeard**

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### **Abstract**

“The Bloody Chamber: A Postmodernist resignification of Perrault’s Bluebeard” addresses the question of how new meaning is made when there exists a performative relationship between two texts. From this perspective, the paper will explore the relationship between Perrault’s folk tale *Bluebeard* (1697) and Angela Carter’s novella *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) in an attempt to show the way in which intertextuality may be used in Postmodernist fiction to revise past literary production and the representation of female characters. Her Gothic novella articulates some of the concerns Second-wave Feminists made noticeable in the 1970s such as female sexuality, gender equality and domestic violence to question the legitimacy of the female role and sexuality as constructed by the patriarchal society. Carter subverts traditional representation of women as passive, innocent and naïve by foregrounding the fact that texts are constructions that shape the worldview of both characters and readers alike. This will be done following the theoretical background of authors such as Brian McHale and Gerard Genette among others.

*Keywords:* Intertextuality; feminism; sexuality; female stereotypes.

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In *Palimpsests*, Genette (1982) defines hypertextuality “as any relationship uniting a text B, hypertext, to an earlier text A, hypotext, upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (p.5). Text B thus originates from text A, but it undergoes a process of transformation. When such revision of a hypotext is done in order to present it with a critical stance, the hypertext becomes a parody. Carter’s novella, based on the 17th century fairy tale *Bluebeard*, articulates some of the concerns Second-wave feminists made noticeable in the 1970s such as female sexuality, gender equality and domestic violence, to question the legitimacy of the female role and sexuality as constructed by the patriarchal society. Carter subverts the traditional representation of women as passive, innocent and naïve by foregrounding the fact that texts are constructions that shape the worldview of readers. From this perspective, the paper will explore the relationship between Perrault’s folk tale *Bluebeard* (1697) and Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) in an attempt to show the way in which intertextuality may be used in Postmodernist fiction to revise past literary production and the representation of female characters. In order to narrow our approach, the focus of our analysis will be based on narrative discourse, sexuality and the depiction of female characters. This will be done by following the theoretical background of authors such as Gerard Genette and Merja Makinen among others.

As a means to highlight the constructed nature of the text and thus deploy a unique worldview, Carter implements a female narrator and adopts her perspective. Such a choice has a decisive effect on what Genette (1980) calls “narrative information” (p.162). In this novella, the use of a first person female narrator furnishes the reader with details into her first marriage experience directly. Therefore, her narrative becomes “testimonial” in Genette’s classification (1980, p.256), since the narrator offers an elaborate description of events, emotions and thoughts, thus creating a higher degree of involvement. This is noticeable from the beginning:

I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement (...) away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother’s apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage. (Carter, 1979, p.1)

The implementation words such as “ecstasy” and “unguessable” suggests the story the narrator is telling is not a mere narrative, but one which she has an affective relationship with. The narrator is the protagonist, thus the narrative perspective is internally focalized and

fixed into her point of view (Genette, 1980, p.189). This choice in narrator provides a unique perspective which had been completely overlooked in traditional fairy tales. Carter's appropriation of *Bluebeard* could be interpreted as a criticism of traditional female representation. Giving a voice to a woman and insight into her mind, the protagonist is developed as a character. She projects herself in a manner of innocence, but is riddled with contradictions. This may be noticed as she describes herself:

I, the poor widow's child with my mouse-coloured hair that still bore the kinks of the plaits from which it had so recently been freed, my bony hips, my nervous, pianist's fingers. (Carter, 1979, p.5).

The words "poor" and "plaits" accentuate the narrator's own perception as a simple, innocent and inexperienced girl. However, in new situations, the protagonist evolves. "What should I do now, how shall I pass the long, sea-lit hours until my husband beds me?" (Carter, 1979, p.12). No longer a little girl in plaits, she feels herself "aroused at the thought of love" and disappointed to find she would have to wait. It is through internal focalization that the reader has access to the protagonist's thoughts and feelings and that the traditional stereotype of femininity is challenged. The female narrator focalizes in the experience of a free sexuality constructed by a woman.

The way female sexuality is depicted in the novella provides a different approach which does not regard women as mere passive objects. In rewriting this fairy tale, Carter tries to "explore women's ability to negotiate sexual relations without reproducing the phallogocentric view of them as passive victims in the sexual act." (Makinen, 2001, p. 86). Her first sexual encounter was marked by passivity, a "one-sided struggle" (Carter, 1979, p.14) due to her lack of experience. Having overcome the loss of her virginity, one may see how the protagonist embarks on a journey to discover her own sexuality. Our protagonist does so, by openly stating that she "longs for him" (Carter, 1979, p.19); an aspect which was completely suppressed in *Bluebeard*. It is in this way that Carter gives voice to feminine desire, she does not act passively, she is both curious and eager to learn more about this new feeling. When the protagonist affirms: "And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away." (Carter, 1979, p.6) Our heroine is becoming aware of the contradicting emotions awakened by such intercourse. The words "innocent" and "corrupt" reflect directly to her ability to feel pleasure and what these emotions can trigger within herself. Carter's story was released in a time in which the Second-wave feminist movement was at its peak. Thus, in the light of this social context, Carter's version of *Bluebeard* was being resignified in the times in which the nature of what women desired became a serious issue and a serious threat. The reader is

thus, witnessing the main character's sexual awakening. As Makinen (2001) argued "women need the psychic strength to learn new ways of relating to men that incorporate a sense of their own power." (p.87). "Until that moment, this spoiled child did not know she had inherited nerves and a will from the mother who had defied the yellow outlaws of Indo-China." (Carter, 1979, p.26) From this quotation it could be inferred that the protagonist considers her mother as a role model of female empowerment which prompts her to take action. Astonished at her own assertiveness, she no longer passively awaits her death. Even though she fails to murder the Marquis, it is evident from the following quote that she was willing to protect herself. "If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him, then." (Carter, 1979, p.35). Hence, the key word here is "strangled" since it shows that the narrator felt capable of killing her husband with her own hands, an action that requires physical strength, determination and power. Having overcome her naivety, she thus feels in control.

Yet, Carter's reversal of traits typically associated with women does not conclude there. The ending of her novella subverts all of the reader's expectations by introducing a female heroine instead of a charming hero. As explained by Makinen (2001), in *Bluebeard*, female roles are in accordance with the 17<sup>th</sup> century belief that "civilized femininity is passive, beautiful and obedient whereas civilized masculinity is active, resourceful and brave" (p.60). It is only men who can become heroes. In Perrault's tale, female characters do not undertake any action other than waiting for the male heroes to rescue them. Thus, the portrayal of female characters corresponds to the spirit of the times. Similarly, *The Bloody Chamber* could be said to be a product of its context. Described as "indomitable" and "defiant", the narrator's mother personifies an empowered woman. "When I thought of courage, I thought of my mother." (Carter, 1979, p. 38) This thought does not conform to readerly expectations since in traditional fairy tales, courage is synonym of men. Another reversal of character depiction is evident in the fact that as Makinen (2001) describes "the older women are often active and even powerful, but this is invariably portrayed as unattractive, if not repulsive." (p.65) In *The Bloody Chamber*, the mother's empowerment is rendered positively. As the narrator awaits her rescue, she says "a crazy, magnificent horsewoman in widow's weeds" (Carter, 1979, p.38). Bold and gorgeous, the narrator admires her mother and is confident that she will save her. It could be said that Carter's revision of *Bluebeard* reveals a new 'worldview' in which women are able to be heroines.

After having explored the intertextual relationship between *Bluebeard* and *The Bloody Chamber*, it could be concluded that Angela Carter has achieved to rewrite a highly critical version of the original tale in terms of narrative discourse, sexuality and the depiction of empowered female characters. Narrated from a female perspective, *The Bloody Chamber*

tackles many of the Second-wave feminist concerns expressed in the 1970s. By challenging the traditional representation of women and giving a voice to the silenced ones, Carter has been able to deploy female characters who are active, courageous and who do not conform to the norm. In this way, the constructed nature of the text is foregrounded, thus questioning the female stereotypes being promulgated and challenging the deeply ingrained beliefs associated with femininity.

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