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Symbolism in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*: A Feminist Reimagining of Fairy Tales and
Exploration of Patriarchy and Female Sexuality

Angela Carter's collection of short retellings in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* has been widely celebrated for its portrayal of feminist themes through the reimagining of famous myths and fairy tales. Carter's writing uses grotesque and disturbing imagery to expose the brutality of patriarchal power structures through the perspectives of female narrators. Although the different stories are not necessarily related to each other in plot, there are many symbols within the collection that work congruently to contribute to the advancement of the feminist themes Carter explores. Through her use of symbols such as mirrors, birds, and roses, Carter highlights the objectification and oppression of women by powerful men, and the struggle for female agency and empowerment in a patriarchal power structure.

To gain a more thorough understanding of symbols and their aid in Carter's discussion of feminist themes in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, it is crucial to understand Carter's perspective on her reimagining of traditionally misogynistic fairytales. Her stories are not meant to glorify violence against women, but rather to critique it in a way that is *meant* to make readers feel uneasy. Certain feminist critics contend that Carter's works are ingrained in the traditional sexist attitudes present in the old stories they were derived from, therefore perpetuating misogynistic beliefs. Carter herself acknowledges these critiques, saying "I am all for putting wine in new bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode."

By presenting images in a way that is both graphic and poetic, she is able to draw attention to the inherent beauty and tragedy of the human condition. This engages readers on a deeper level emotionally, encouraging them to empathize with the experiences of women in the stories and recognize the injustices that have been perpetuated against them. Carter does not simply ‘rewrite’ fairy tales, says British feminist writer, Merja Makinen, instead, her stories rewrite the originals, “by playing with and upon (if not preying upon) the earlier misogynistic version.”

The narratives within *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* carry many feminist symbols and undertones that work towards the exposure of the patriarchy’s domination and objectification of women. In Carter’s writing, there is a recurring theme of reflections and mirrors, symbolic of the way the female characters perceive themselves— often through the gaze of the men in their lives. Mirrors are used as a tool to view women as objects. This concept can be most prominently observed in the novel’s title story, “The Bloody Chamber”. The narrator explicitly acknowledges this early in her engagement to the Marquis, saying, “I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors, with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh...” (Carter, 6) The man regards her as nothing more than a possession, and she is beginning to see herself in the same light, as simply another trophy for her new fiancé. For the narrator, her reflection is also a source of revelation. She catches sight of herself in the mirror and says, “I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me...”, more significantly, she sees herself with “a potentiality for corruption that took [her] breath away.” (Carter, 6) This also foreshadows the horrific secrets that await her in the Marquis’ castle.

As the story progresses, the narrator discovers that her bedroom walls are covered in mirrors. She watches as he undresses her, seeing in her naked reflection that she has “become the multitude of girls [she] saw in the mirrors... identical...” (Carter, 10) This can be interpreted as a

symbol of the Marquis' control and authority over her, but it is also speaking to the idea that she is just one of many women that he has mistreated in the same way. This becomes more apparent towards the end of the story, when it is revealed that the Marquis has murdered all of his previous wives. In this way, Carter is subtly drawing attention to a more systemic issue: the objectification and mistreatment of women at large. The use of the word "unwrapping" as he undresses her suggests a kind of vulnerability and furthers her position as an object, reducing her to nothing but a cut of meat.

Although there are no literal mirrors present in "The Erl-King" the narrator sees her own reflection in the Erl-King's eyes. If the connection between mirrors, reflections and objectification in Carter's stories was not apparent before, it certainly is now. The narrator is gazing upon herself through a man's eyes both figuratively and literally. She says, "The gelid green of your eyes fixes my reflective face... I am afraid I will be trapped in it forever." (Carter, 103) Like the narrator from "The Bloody Chamber", she is being held in a particular image— as a 'thing'; both women struggle to escape the gazes of the powerful men that they have fallen victim to.

Physical and metaphorical cages can be found scattered throughout Carter's stories, representative of the confining nature of the patriarchy. The narrator of "The Bloody Chamber" is brought to a remote castle that is surrounded by the sea. Similarly, in "The Tiger's Bride", the narrator is taken to a remote palazzo and placed in a cell. In other instances, Carter directly compares the female heroines to birds, specifically caged birds. In "The Erl-King", the caged birds are women that the Erl-King has seduced and captured. Much of the story is defined by a feeling of being held captive and trapped, and the woods themselves are characterized as having "vertical bars of brass-coloured distillation of light", and trees that "enclose" you (Carter, 96)- all

imagery that is reminiscent of a prison. The narrator acknowledges this confinement, saying “it is easy to lose yourself in these woods” (Carter, 97). By portraying the forest itself as a cage, Carter is noting the pervasive nature of the patriarchy and how difficult it is for women to assert themselves within it. Aware of this, the narrator feels trapped and suffocated by the expectations placed upon her, but she is expected to conform under the power of a dangerous male figure, the Erl-King. Ultimately, the narrator’s freeing of the birds – or rather the women – represents her rejection of the limitations placed upon her and her assertion of her own freedom and agency. It is a symbol of female empowerment.

In “The Lady of the House of Love”, the narrator, a reluctant vampire Countess, has a pet lark that she keeps in a cage beside her bed. She sometimes strums the bars of the cage, because she “likes to hear it announce how it cannot escape.” (Carter, 108) This comforts the Countess, as it makes her feel less alone in her fate. She cannot escape her vampirism, and so her destiny is predetermined. It seems she cannot break free from the patriarchal traditions of her bloodline- as represented by her inevitable tarot cards and the portraits of her ancestors that stare down at her in disapproval from the walls, silently demanding her to preserve their vampiric legacy. The Countess’ appearance and movement are both described as being birdlike, for instance, the British soldier describes her nails as “birdlike, predatory claws.” (Carter, 120) She also refers to herself as a bird explicitly when she asks, “Can a bird sing only the song it knows, or can it learn a new song?” (Carter, 119) In this way, she is like her pet lark: she is announcing how she believes she cannot escape. When the Countess is freed from her vampirism the end of the story, she frees the lark from its cage; furthering the symbolism of the lark as a reflection of herself.

In the novel, roses frequently appear as symbols of female purity, sexuality, and virginity across most of the narratives. When the women in the stories are sexually oppressed and

objectified by men, they have no more agency than that of a rose; beautiful yet powerless. Roses, however, also have thorns- a notion that Carter focuses on in "The Lady of the House of Love". The rose is a symbol of powerful female sexuality, and the violence of the Countess' vampirism reverses the traditional gender roles that are explored in other stories of the collection. Her late mother planted roses that "have grown up into a huge, spiked wall that incarcerates her in the castle of her inheritance." (Carter, 110) This demonstrates that the Countess' predestined role as a murderess has been passed down through generations of women. The image of the rose also represents the Countess' vampiric sexuality; the scent of roses around the castle is overpowering, like her sexuality that seduces unsuspecting men and leads them to their deaths. The rose is also all that remains after her death. Once again, it symbolizes both sexuality and purity- specifically the violation of purity. The giving of the rose, "plucked from between [her] thighs" (Carter, 124) is symbolic of her giving of herself to the young soldier in an act of sexual surrender.

The rose in "The Snow Child" is a symbol of the innocent girl's purity. She "bleeds; screams; [and] falls" (Carter, 106) as she is pricked by the rose, a metaphor for menstruation. She is now sexually mature, yet she is denied autonomy as the Count takes advantage of her horrifically. The Countess witnesses the entire thing, and though she may be a villain, she too is trapped within a social system that affords her little agency. She and the snow child are both victims as long as they remain under its control. The confinement of women in a patriarchal world is explored symbolically in this story, and the female characters are treated as possessions to be used by the Count. A recurring theme in Carter's reimagining of fairy tales is that consent is not important to men who wield power. The rose is also a symbol of the suffering brought on by this objectification of women. At the end of the story, the Countess is pricked by the rose and realizes the "bite" of such violence and oppression.

Angela Carter's unconventional retellings *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* uses symbols such as mirrors, birds, and roses to critique the patriarchal power structures present in traditional fairy tales and myths. In the stories, the female protagonists are trapped within their roles in society and must navigate the power dynamics that exist between men and women. Carter portrays her heroines as complex, multifaceted beings who are not defined solely by their sexuality but instead by their full range of desires and motivations. The symbols of mirrors, reflections, birds, and cages are used to represent the confining nature of the patriarchy, while roses symbolize the loss of female innocence and sexual awakening. In all, the collection of stories is a celebrated work of feminist literature for its critique, deconstruction, and subversion of the misogynistic undertones present in traditional myths and fairy tales.

Works Cited

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