Spring 5-18-2022

All The Better To See You: An Analysis of the Fairy Tales by Angela Carter

Jack Olson
jolson1@skidmore.edu

Skidmore College | Senior Capstone

All The Better To See You:

An Analysis of the Fairy Tales

by Angela Carter

Jack Olson

Professor Wientzen

What Was Postmodernism? - EN 375

30 April 2022

Take the time to stop and think,
And to ponder this grim little story.
You surely know that this tale
Took place many years ago.
No longer are husbands so terrible,
Demanding the impossible,
Acting unhappy and jealous.
They toe the line with their wives.
And no matter what color their beards,
It's not hard to tell who is in charge.
- Charles Perrault, 1697

The Truths of Fairy Tales

"And they lived happily ever after," the fairy tale typically states at its conclusion. Indeed, characters may live happily, and it may not be hard to tell who, in essence, is truly in charge in these tales, as renowned French fairy tale author Charles Perrault signals in his moral message. Fairy tales posit morals and lessons for readers, which are often regarded as absolute truths. Many well-known fairy tales seek to convey how human interaction influences the world. Nevertheless, fairy tales also "possess a multifarious richness and depth that far transcend what even the most thorough discursive examination can extract from them," allowing the otherworldly component to absorb the reader and dictate a fantastical influence over them (Bettelheim 19). The morals and lessons are reminders to follow established orders, and many of these orders are suggestive of patriarchal ideologies.

Introduction: Angela Carter, Her Fairy Tales, and Postmodernism

Angela Carter is an English author who sought to defy traditional paternalistic modes of writing. She produced works of fiction up until her death in 1992, many of which are a commentary on the patriarchy, identity, and gender. Her most famous collection of writing is a compilation of reimagined fairy tales called *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. The collection was published in 1979 during the height of the second-wave feminist movement when

representations of women's agency and sexuality became much more prevalent. Carter called her collection 'a book of stories about fairy tales,' but it is evident that the inspiration for some of the stories comes from European folklore or the fairy tales by Charles Perrault and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (qtd. in Makinen 5). With the skeleton of the original stories in tow, she actively deconstructs elements in the stories that the original male authors employed, such as patriarchal rule, gender roles, and female identity and desire, to encourage women to take action against the oppression they face. There are seemingly many similarities to the original stories. However, Carter makes it clear that her stories are new: they are robustly self-conscious and contribute to a dialogue about women's identity that was unknown at the moment in this genre of literature.

Carter writes from a novel, more robustly feminist and female perspective, which critiques the outdated third-person omniscient male narration and focalization of the original fairy tales. Carter's stories profoundly introduce first-person female narration, which concerns her writing and stylistics with female consciousness (Andermahr 12). Scholar Sonya Andermahr notes that Carter's fairy tales are a "linguistic experiment and questioning of selfhood" (19). She employs subversive stylistic choices that allow the use of a woman's "otherness" to reaffirm an understanding of themselves in a magical world. She navigates the genre by establishing a feminist discourse that opposes the traditional patriarchal frameworks and reestablishes what it means to be a woman. In a fantastical setting, a female character's mind can work alongside Carter's feminist views to critique aspects of social reality, identity and gender representation, and the "impossibility of defining a self" (Andermahr 16).

In effect, Carter employs postmodernist techniques that aid in her ability to comment on necessary advancements in feminist discourses. As a literary period, postmodernism is "overwhelmingly skeptical, particularly of anything that presents itself as an absolute truth or

certainty," notes scholar Alison Lee, and it is an informative era of suggesting how "attitudes, beliefs, and myths have come to be regarded as truths" (Lee 12). Carter "critiques the old" perspectives in fairy tales (Makinen 24). She implements female protagonists and narration to uncover the truths about identity, gender, and the patriarchy that she wishes to criticize—a seemingly paradoxical understanding of postmodern conventions, offering new ways of imagining the fairy tales. Fairy tales present "the 'uncanny,'" where the beasts who live within them frequently represent "projected desires" and "the drive for pleasure of women" (Makinen 9). Carter critiques these desires in *The Bloody Chamber*, and she presents a new awareness of her female characters through theirs and the male character's sensualities.

Not all scholars agree that Carter's fairy tales evoke total feminist sentiments. For example, feminist scholar Patricia Duncker argues that the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* fail to elicit profound feminist ideologies as Carter rewrote "'the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures,'" in other words, not departing enough from the stories' original patriarchal form (qtd. in Makinen 23). Other scholars argue that Carter's stories are too fantastical to promote feminism. However, her stories do "inscribe a new set of assumptions" about female identity that rework the original rigid structures of the fairy tale genre (Makinen 5).

Indeed, there exists a logical connection between patriarchal influence in Carter's fairy tales, especially in "The Bloody Chamber," "The Company of Wolves," and "The Erl-King." Carter "attempts to decolonize our habits of thought" surrounding topics of female agency, gender, sexuality, and power through narrational voice and perspective (5). Carter deconstructs the logic of the original fairy tales and the roles of women as victims passively following rules set up for them by men. In the three stories, she implements first-person narration that suggests the dismantling of the patriarchal rule that the female narrators live under, which proposes that

they might, unlike in original fairy tales, be granted agency and voice. Nevertheless, while Carter imagines total liberation of patriarchal rule for her female characters, her stories do still withhold the complete independence that the rejection of patriarchy might promise.

"The Bloody Chamber" Analysis

Angela Carter's story "The Bloody Chamber" is a retelling of the "Bluebeard" tale by Charles Perrault. The original story regards a murderous husband who kills and keeps the corpses of his wives and follows the prospects of his newest wife in defying the ultimate death that she faces. Perrault's "Bluebeard" suggests the dangers of marriage and female curiosity, one significant moral being that husbands do not allow their wives growth. Carter's version is similar: a young and innocent wife marries the Marquis, moves into his estate, and finds herself on a journey of self-discovery as a married woman. The first deconstruction she imposes on the story is that she narrates from a first-person female perspective, unlike the original folktale, which is narrated from an omniscient masculine perspective. Carter also uses motifs, such as the motif of mirrors, which allow self-actualization by committing the story to unfold through the eyes of the girl in recognizing who she is and what she does or does not want. The female protagonist seeks to realize curiosity, desire, and cunning. However, their consummation for her is complex: it is clear throughout that the girl is a flawed character; she is confused about her identity because of her husband's influence. In these ways, while Carter grants agency to the female protagonist by letting her narrate the story, her character is still on a journey of finding herself through a multitude of marital constraints. In deploying the motif of mirrors, Carter diagnoses the effects of the male gaze on female subjects and simultaneously imagines a way to escape it. Mirrors function as magical objects that allow the girl to see herself in the ways that others view her which further allows her to better understand herself.

Carter uses mirrors to suggest that husbands are possessive and materialistic by not allowing the Marquis to see the girl through the mirrors as anything but an impermeable object. The girl saw him watching her in the "gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab," but there was a "sheer carnal avarice" to his viewing of her (Carter 11). The Marquis seems to be taking advantage of her through her reflection in the mirror, as the girl suggests he reduces her to meat and flesh. Her reflection appears to him, allowing there to be somewhat of a separation between them—indeed, he is looking at her, not in person, but through an impermeable object. Carter suggests that he cannot see her as a real person. But then the girl sees her own reflection in the mirrors, too; she narrates that "I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away" (11). The necklace, one made of red rubies the Marquis gave to her as a wedding gift, sinks into her skin—this is him penetrating her with materiality, leaving a physical mark. She becomes breathless at the sense of the "corruption" she faces. It looms over her after she is wed the next day, which suggests that she is cognizant of the potential dangers that she may face. It is only through this viewing of herself in the mirrors, though, that this foresight of her future, who she is, begins to erode: she is a young girl, small and innocent, a girl who at seventeen is not ready to be married—yet she is already marked by his rubies that are "clasped around her throat" (11).

Further, Carter allows The Marquis' mirrors to envelop the girl in his bedroom, making the girl simply become an obsolete object inside of the mirrors while the Marquis' reflection becomes more menacing to her. Inside "stately frames of contorted gold," the mirrors reflect the

"multitude of girls," the Marquis' previous wives, who came before her (14). The contortion of the mirror frames suggests imperfection—that what the girl sees in her husband's view of her can never reach any sort of sublimity. This sublimity, or perfection, that may be expected in marriage is shrewd with the images of the Marquis' prior brides: they are stuck looking back at the girl, and the girl sees herself now as one of them, just another bride in the reflection of the mirrors. The Marquis even makes notes of all those women, saying, "'I have acquired a whole harem for myself,'" which left the girl "trembling" (14). Then, after the Marquis orders the girl to undress for him so he can take her virginity, she sees herself in the mirrors as a Rops etching, one that shows a "child with her sticklike limbs" (14). She is disillusioned with the thought of losing her virginity to the Marquis. Perhaps she feels threatened by the "harem" of girls who have shared her husband with her previously, as they are reaffirming that he has previously owned all of them. The girl seems to wish that they could save her as they know what lies ahead of her in that bedroom—she is trembling and "cannot meet [her husband's] eye," and in this way, the women in the mirrors signal to her an overwhelming amount of solace: they are so close, just out of reach in the reflection, but alas they can do nothing to protect her from the Marquis (14).

The mirrors continually function as disorienting objects for the girl which causes confusion in her identity and her devotion to the Marquis. Once the girl is alone in the bedroom when the Marquis is off on business, she notes how she "longed for him" underneath his mirrors (22). She further describes that a "daybreak discoloured the dozen mirrors that were iridescent with the reflections of the sea" (22). Even while she is alone, away from the menacing Marquis, the mirrors do not offer her any protection as they are still "discoloured." This discoloration indicates entrapment: the sea is surrounding her. Even though its "iridescence" might be consoling in its pearly coloration, it still blocks her from seeing herself clearly. However, maybe

this luminous reflection that continues to change before her in the mirrors gradually suggests how there is a change coming for the girl: this is the first moment in the story where the mirrors do not depict an abundance of trepidation for her in her narration as she is simply noticing the reflection of the sea.

This idea continues further along in the story, where the girl becomes cognizant of how the mirrors function as a foreboding memory of her husband. After she discovers the bloody chamber, the room the Marquis forbade her from entering during his absence, where he keeps the dead corpses of his previous wives, the girl cannot, for her sanity, be reminded of him. She narrates that "she cannot take refuge in [her] bedroom, for that retained the memory of his presence trapped in the fathomless silvering of his mirrors" (30). Here, the mirrors become her husband. They are a constant reminder of him and what he can do to her. The memory of him in the mirrors resembles the male gaze: the girl is now cognizant that he looks at her as a sexual object and that the mirrors only capture his menacing qualities. Further, the thought of the Marquis surrounding her repulses her since the mirrors are stained with and embody him. Now, she is aware that he would "always… be the death of [her]," a phrase that may not have been realized until she noticed more about him, and about herself, without the company of the mirrors (33).

Carter suggests that the mirrors serve as an eternal capsule of the Marquis' presence at the end of the story as the girl sees her reflection more clearly. Before her imminent death by decapitation due to breaking her husband's rule of not entering his secret chamber, the girl sees his previous wives once more in the reflection. The women comb out their hair as she prepares herself for death: they are watching her, mimicking her, telling her how she should have been aware of this fate from the moment that she first saw their reflections in the mirrors. But even

before she sees the wives, the girl takes one last look at herself in the mirrors. She sees a "heart-shaped stain" from the bloody key she used to enter the forbidden room transfer itself to her forehead (36). Now, in the reflection, the girl sees the everlasting mark of her dismal curiosity. In his mirrors, she becomes reminded of how she is like his previous wives: she disobeyed his orders, and now she must die. His presence will now taint her reflection forever.

The girl may have never been able to fully realize who she is by constantly looking at herself in the mirrors because the Marquis owns them—they are his mirrors, objects which he uses to overwhelm and consume her. Through his power and gaze, the mirrors distort her perception of herself entirely. The impressions of her husband are ones that she could have never escaped in the reflection of the mirrors. Not only does she bear a physical remembrance of him, but a mental one, as well. This is the male gaze internalized: his impression of her is now ingrained in her entire being. It becomes clear that mirrors function as objects in which the Marquis imprisons the lives of his previous wives: the frames around the mirror suggest that they are portraits of other women who forever continue to endure his perceptions of them. The women suggest to the girl that they are always there to function only as his triumphs and prizes.

In another way, the mirrors are objects that allow some formative growth for the girl. It must not be disregarded that she is still an utterly young girl who "knew nothing of the world" and came into this marriage as a pure and innocent virgin (9). She does not yet know herself, and perhaps that is precisely why, throughout the story, there are many moments of others viewing her in the mirror rather than the girl simply seeing herself clearly. How the other wives see her is formative for the girl: they remind her that her husband only sees her as an object that will be eventually carved into the mirrors as they have been. Moreover, this might be Carter's critique in using mirrors in the story: for the girl's husband, women are objects, prizes, and beings that he

kills and conquers, and he keeps their remains for his satisfaction and as a reminder of his dominance. Perhaps Carter is alluding to how marriage symbolizes the ownership of women. Then, mirrors function as a constant reminder of male ownership: one can never see themself truly clearly, in mirrors or not, by surrendering to a man.

"The Bloody Chamber," indeed a story of male dominance, is also a story of self-reflection. Through her marriage to the Marquis, the girl begins to understand the complexities of matrimony. She worries about the ways that the other former brides see her. Further, when her mother saves her from being beheaded by shooting the Marquis, the girl worries about how her mother now sees her and how she must continue to live with the inexplicable shame of a failed and disastrous marriage. Carter suggests, whether it be through mirrors or otherwise, that self-reflection is impossible without experiencing how others see you first. But further, when the male gaze is disregarded, it is only then the constitution of self becomes absolutely clear. Scholar Maria Tatar notes about the original story of "Bluebeard," but remains relevant to Carter's version, too, that "Bluebeard's wife is constructed as both agent of sexual betrayal and resourceful investigator, but in projects that often remain confined by the domestic sphere" (Tatar 172). Matrimony traps the girl until the end, and Carter does not allow the girl ever to forget the turmoil that a man has caused her.

"The Company of Wolves" Analysis

"The Company of Wolves" is Carter's reimagined fairy tale which originates from the famous story "Little Red Riding Hood." There is no "Little Red" in the story, but rather just "the girl," the narrator who sees and lives in a world of wolves. The original version of "Little Red Riding Hood" was first published by author Charles Perrault in 1697. In Carter's version, the girl gets into bed with the wolf, not just eaten at the end. Carter creates a world in which her female

protagonist is enamored with the huntsman-then-turned-wolf. Ultimately, this fact aids the girl by allowing her to embrace her newfound confidence and sexuality but also further deters the girl from achieving complete success, independence, or liberation from a man or wolf.

Carter's prologue of the story serves as a warning as she alludes to the horrors that wolves, or men, can create in the woods. She opens with visceral and imaginative lines that set the tone of what the dangerous beasts, or wolves, can bring about. She begins by saying that "One beast and only one howls in the woods by night" (Carter 108). On its own, the statement is chilling and provocative. However, Carter chooses to further follow the statement with "the wolf is carnivore incarnate… once he's had a taste of flesh then nothing else will do," allowing readers to acknowledge that the wolves are not just cunning but sexually subversive and threatening as the tasting of the flesh is a much more sensual way to put the eating of humans (108). Here, Carter notes how the wolves are the creatures in charge not only territorially but sexually too.

When the girl's journey begins in the story, she immediately becomes an emblem of female empowerment and sexual awakening through Carter's fruitful descriptions. Carter describes the girl by saying that "her breasts have just begun to swell… and she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforth, once a month" (113). The girl is beginning to enter womanhood, which perhaps makes her an object of desire. Nevertheless, she is brave in these formative moments: she always carries her knife with her for protection, and when alarmed, her "practiced hand sprang to the handle of the knife" when she sees a stranger lurking along her path (114). She is cautious and ready for a surprise; her "practiced hand" suggests that she must be ready, as a woman, at all times, to protect herself. She meets the handsome huntsman on the way to her grandmother's house. After he bets her that he

will make it to her grandmother's house before her, she "disingenuously" asks what he would like in return if he won the bet, alluding that she is aware that his response might be sexually charged (115). Indeed, she is correct, as he asks for a kiss. The girl then "lowered her eyes and blushed" (115). By lowering her eyes and blushing, the girl indicates to the huntsman that she is not rejecting his proposed reward but rather allowing herself to relish in the nervousness an intimate action induces, suggestive of her coming of age and newfound sexuality.

Carter suggests through descriptions of the girl's physical actions that she can be seduced by the huntsman. After the aforementioned interaction with the huntsman, she is no longer timid and becomes intrigued: she begins to "waddle" on her way to ensure the beast would arrive at her grandmother's house before her. The action of sauntering to guarantee that the wolf arrives before her suggests that she is cognizant of and is deliberately choosing to let him win: this is a decision that is made not just to please him but also to please herself. On the contrary, though, while making her own decisions, she is still under the huntsman's patriarchal spell. The huntsman does seduce and captivate her with his words and presence. The girl does little to challenge him and his proposals, an action that goes directly against what she has been taught about the "danger[s] in the forest" (111).

The girl's sexuality does become fully realized when she enters her grandmother's house, but Carter still suggests a noticeable hesitation regarding the girl's willingness to be confident in her sexuality. Carter writes that she brought in "with her a flurry of snow" from the blizzard but that the snow "melted in tears on the tiles" (116). Here, Carter associates the girl with the color white; it also appears at other times throughout the story: "her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white," and "her small breasts gleamed as if the snow invaded the room (113, 117). The color white is a straightforward representation of purity, vitality, innocence, and chastity. In this

way, it makes sense that Carter uses the color to surround the girl: she is an “unbroken egg” and a “closed system,” a virgin girl not yet disturbed by a man (114). The melting snow and blizzard are emblematic of perhaps something looking to disturb the girl's innocence as the white snow begins to melt away inside the house. A blizzard is chaotic, but a storm represents that something new will begin after it ceases. The girl, like the snow, as Carter implies, melts as she becomes entranced by and closer to the wolf in the house—something is about to change for her.

Carter creates the sense that the girl is unafraid of the wolf by now casting her as a figure of sexual prominence directly in front of him. She is immediately aware that her grandmother is dead, but when in front of the huntsman in his new form as a wolf, she does “not reach for [her knife] because his eyes were fixed upon her,” which allows the beast to recognize that any fear within the girl is subsiding (117). It is significant to note that the male gaze has a specific power over her: the wolf is eyeing the girl, and she arguably freezes at this moment under his gaze. Here, the girl rejects some of her agency and power because the wolf looking at her does affect her actions of wanting to reach for her knife—he is a menacing and large creature. As the two exchange dialogue, more wolves surround grandmother’s house, and the girl begins to feel empathy for them outside in the blizzard: “it is very cold,” she says, “poor things… no wonder they howl so” (117). She begins to undress in the warm house, throwing her shall in the fire, noting that “her fear did her no good,” so “she ceased to be afraid” (117). She follows the beast's order to undress; she appears naked in front of him. Here, Carter implies that the stripping of clothes is similar to shedding a shell—she is no longer an unbroken egg, as she appears before the wolf in her true womanhood—a woman embracing her sexual prowess.

In the final encounter between the girl and the wolf, Carter establishes that the girl is not passive in a sexual encounter but instead has the agency to control not only her own sexuality but

the wolf's, too. In all her remaining purity, she begins to "unbutton the collar of his shirt" and, in keeping true to her word, "freely gave him the kiss that she owed him" (118). She kisses him only after the wolf howls a "prothalamion," or a wedding song, indicating that she knows a wedding song may suggest a partnership. The girl now removes his clothing—she is in charge. No longer does the wolf tell her what to do; she now acts of her own will. Here, the girl's agency returns as she mirrors the wolf's actions by engaging with her own sexuality to establish that he is not the only figure who can influence this situation. The girl's power and agency become fully realized after the wolf says, "all the better to eat you with" because she "burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed at him full in the face, ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing" (118). Carter alludes that by laughing in the wolf's face that the girl is subjecting him to someone who is inferior to her. He is a fool now; she takes away his agency at this moment by laughing in "full" face, clearly in his sight—she is daring and unafraid.

Finally, Carter casts the girl as a husbandly figure at the end of the story, which creates a dynamic that subjects the wolf beneath her power. The girl rests his "fearful head on her lap" and picks out the lice in his hair and eats them, as she would do in a "savage wedding ceremony" (118). Here, the role reversal becomes utterly clear: the beast welcomes the girl's tender care. She cleans up his dirtiness, allowing readers to understand that she is the caregiver. The wolf becomes a creature of neediness, a characteristically female trait in fairy tales, and especially in the original telling of "Little Red Riding Hood." The girl sleeps "sweet and sound… between the paws of the tender wolf" (118). She changes him from a terrible, ghastly wolf to one that is now reliant on her. The reiteration of marriage in these lines creates a union unknown to the original story: Carter evokes this sense of alliance between the two characters to portray how a male

figure can only become submissive under the tender care of a woman. But a closer reading of the lines suggests that the girl's emergence into womanhood and the embracing of her sexual prowess led her to have an equal counterpart to the wolf in the story, rather than her defying him completely.

This is precisely the modern twist that Carter wishes to employ in her version of the fairy tale: the modernization and first-person female narration allow readers to take the stereotypically represented gender roles that are present in the original tales and essentially reverse them entirely. In this way, the female narrator's sexuality empowers and allows her to defy the power of the devious wolf. In essence, the wolf is thought to symbolize not just the patriarchy but the dangerous sexual possessiveness that men have over women. Carter casts her Riding Hood as a girl-turned-woman who, at first unbeknownst to her, ultimately uses her sexuality and womanhood as a defense: her confidence, boldness, and courage create a change within the wolf. He becomes a creature in which the prowess stemming from the girl is a facet of a girl or woman that he has yet to experience. The wolf may be intrigued to see what this fact can mean for him, but ultimately, he still never submits himself to the girl's newfound power entirely. At the end of the story, though, the wolf is no longer representative of the night and the dreaded forest; the girl invokes her "moonlight" and "snowlight" at their communion, creating a sense of color, a sense of modern pureness in the beast, which lets some of his darkness and his horror fade away under her vigor, but not all (118).

Typically, as in the original telling of "Little Red Riding Hood," not only is the narration of the story inevitably from an omniscient masculine perspective, but further, the girl in the story is a complacent and submissive creature, as her fear marks her ultimate demise and death. Scholar Merja Makinen writes of Carter's retelling of the tale that the "curiosity of wom[en] is

rewarded (rather than punished) and their sexuality is active (rather than passive or suppressed)" (Makinen 4). Indeed, this is true in "The Company of Wolves": if the girl did not challenge her own fears and not embrace her sexuality, she would not have survived. Thus, the girl in Carter's story abandons the ways in which she was formally taught to defend herself so that she is able to, at long last, survive. There is significance in mentioning if the girl has "become more wolf-like or [the wolf] has become more human," because Carter still, in her feminist tale, leaves room for interpretations on whether or not they become one or their ability to still be different creatures functioning as pair for each of their own benefits (Atwood 146). In this way, the girl does not fully liberate herself from the wolf either: they lie together at the end, maybe as equals, and Carter illustrates that the girl's agency is not freed from the comfort of the wolf or a man, but rather that she is content enough with her power in being with him, and not just against him.

"The Erl-King" Analysis

"The Erl-King" is another tale of Carter's in which she takes the original ballad written by Goethe and expands on his poem and ideas. In rewriting Goethe's version, Carter includes a reversal of gender roles which sometimes provides her female protagonist with more significant influence throughout the story. Similar to "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Company of Wolves," her story entertains how a male-oriented creature, the Erl-King, lures and harms girls who venture into his forest. Unlike the original ballad, where a boy is killed by the Erl-King in the arms of his father, Carter's iteration features a girl who makes a conscious decision to venture into the forest, and she falls in love with the Erl-King. Carter complicates who has more agency and power in the story: she suggests that the female protagonist cannot distinguish if she loves or despises the Erl-King because of his seemingly feminine qualities. By using different

narrative styles, fragmentation and switching of pronouns, and reversing gender roles, Carter gives, but also takes away the female protagonist's voice, and in turn, her agency.

Carter uses menacing descriptions of the forest and the Erl-King at the beginning of the story to suggest that he is the character with power while narrating from an omniscient-female perspective. Carter makes it clear that girls will be "trapped in [their] own illusion[s]" and that it is "easy to lose yourself" in the woods (Carter 85). The woods are not only unsafe but disorienting: there cannot be clarity in the claustrophobia it causes due to its highly suffocating qualities. Carter explicitly states that the Erl-King "will do you grievous harm," a message that alludes to how her protagonist should not be venturing inwards in any regard (85). Carter characterizes harm as "grievous," which suggests how a masculine figure is capable of more than just killing his victim but allowing her to further suffer in a spellbound state. Here, Carter grants agency to the Erl-King. The girl hears birds singing around her, those birds being previously other girls who the Erl-King has trapped, and she narrates that the songs the birds sang sounded like "[her] girlish and delicious loneliness" (85). The girl becomes aware of herself here: she knows that she should not be wandering into the woods as she is still "girlish." However, the phrase "delicious loneliness" that Carter uses to characterize the girl allows her to be taken advantage of: she is lonely, and something about that is appetizing to her. A man might satisfy her desire for companionship—and this allows her to go deeper into the woods.

Carter's stylistic choice of switching between the first- and third-person narration adds to the confusion and disarray the woods cause as the paragraphs become fragmented. Carter writes:

> The trees threaded a cat's cradle of half-stripped branches over me so that I felt I was in a house of nets and though the cold wind that always heralds your presence, had I but known it then, blew gently around me, I thought that nobody was in the wood but me.

> Erl-King will do you grievous harm.
>
> Piercingly, now, there came again the call of the bird, as desolate as if it came from the throat of the last bird left alive. That call, with all the melancholy of the failing year in it, went directly to my heart. (85)

The intertwining of these narrational changes in the lines creates a sense of bewilderment. The first section presents the repetition of "I" from the girl's perspective, which solidifies the girl's agency: she knows where she is and is entirely aware of what her surroundings are doing to her. Then, Carter reminds readers that the girl has simply no idea of what is to come for her as she interrupts the thoughts of the girl with the fact of danger the Erl-King will inevitably cause. But then, the first-person narration continues, and through it, the girl is more disillusioned than before: the repetition of "I" ceases, and it is replaced with simply only one use of the pronoun "my." The interjection and mentioning of the Erl-King, while brief, functions as a taking away of the girl's agency in the sense that she loses herself in the songs of his birds—he is entrancing her now. The quick fragmentation allows readers to forget about the girl's experience for a moment, replacing the thought of her with a brief reminder that she might not be allowed to have control of this narrative entirely.

In the forthcoming paragraphs, Carter allows the Erl-King to completely control the girl because she takes away the "I" pronoun and replaces it with "he," suggesting an invasion of the Erl-King's power into the girl's narration. The Erl-King envelops the girl's mind to the point where she loses the ability to say anything but what his effect is on her. The narration repeatedly states that "He knows," "He makes," "He told me," "He said," "He showed," "He hangs up," and finally, "He came alive from the desire of the woods" (86-87). By repeating "he," Carter emphasizes that there will be a struggle for freedom the girl must face from the Erl-King as she

is now in his domain—his world, the woods—in which she is now captivated by all of his actions. Not only is she mentally captivated, but physically, as well: “I always go to the Erl-King and he lays me down on his bed of rustling leaves where I lie at the mercy of his huge hands” (87). Now, the “I” pronoun returns, but still at the “mercy” of the Erl-King’s power. For a moment, the girl regains a sense of awareness as she is conscious of herself during their entanglement. She notes that she “always go[es]” to the Erl-King instead of him physically forcing her to come to him. Here, the actions of the girl are tainted by the Erl-King’s magic, so it is not entirely fair to say that her agency returns quite yet.

Amid the pronoun reversals, Carter switches gender roles in the story by characterizing the Erl-King as a domestic creature, a typically feminine characteristic that is seen in fairy tales. The girl’s experience of living with the Erl-King may have been thought to be that she would take on the stereotypical housewife role under his orders, but the Erl-King is the one who seems to relish these duties. The descriptions from the girl’s perspective are highly desirable: she says that he is “an excellent housewife,” “his rustic home is spick and span,” and that he gathers his “natural treasures” and “handles them as delicately as he does pigeons’ eggs” (86-87). Here, the girl is in a fantasy: the Erl-King creates a world of relief for her. He is delicate in his homely ways—there is thought and care behind the ways in which he creates his home. Gender roles start to take shape in this section: the girl is presented as the masculine figure, whereas she admires the feminine traits of the Erl-King, and he serves as the housewife. Nevertheless, there are still clues, masquerading as warnings to the girl, which she does indeed notice, that note he is not the perfect domestic figure that he may seem: the narration states that “you cannot get a tune out of the old fiddle hanging on the wall beside the birds because all its strings are broke” (87). Here, the ‘perfect’ mold that the Erl-King fits becomes broken. His instrument does not work, an

odd occurrence for a creature whose pride lies in the music that surrounds him. The gender role reversal capsizes: the Erl-King's care and caution are only a facade.

Carter, through sexual descriptions, allows the Erl-King to only be capable of perfection in his domestic duties, and he is significantly more abrasive sexually, deterring the girl from his luster, aiding her power. The girl feels his "sharp teeth" in his kiss, and he "sinks [his] teeth into [her] throat and makes [her] scream" (88). Here, his gentle domestic demeanor wilts away—she cannot forget, now, because of his sharp teeth, that he is ultimately a beast. He causes her harm, too, physically making the girl experience pain, which alludes to the fact that her fate is similar to the other birds already in his cages. But one of the more compelling details of the girl's sexual experience with the Erl-King is that it is almost as if she cannot get enough of the pain as she narrates that "he drew me towards him on his lasso of inhuman music… he strips me to my last nakedness, that underskin of mauve pearlized skin, like a skinned rabbit; then he dresses me again in an embrace so lucid and encompassing it might be made of water" (89). Although his music is so "inhuman," the pull of it is still so strong over the girl. It is also clear that the Erl-King is predatory—he skins the girl's clothes off her like a rabbit, suggesting his love for her may only be for his sexual benefit as he treats her like an animal. His embrace, though, is overwhelmingly luminous, she deems him as a godly creature—his being has a presence that has such liquidity that she begins to drown in him. His attractiveness and luster become complicated when he is extremely rough with the girl—perhaps in some ways, she likes it, or perhaps it is his magic making her assume that she does. Either way, a role reversal within the Erl-King himself becomes apparent: he is indeed the tender housewife, but once any sexual involvement with the girl comes to fruition, he becomes his true deviously masculine self.

At the end of the story, Carter implies the girls' liberation from the Erl-King, but in using the future tense, she deems full liberation impossible. The girl begins to dream of being free of the Erl- King's enchantments: her mesmerization with the Erl-King's "green" eyes and the songs of the birds comes to an end. She recognizes again that the old fiddle is broken, deeming it unusable; his spell over her is failing. But after being trapped within the glares of his eyes the entire story, here, the girl's agency returns: she narrates, "lay your head on my knee so I can't see the greenish inward-turning suns of your eyes anymore" (91). Green represents the desires and temptations of the girl, which makes her drawn to his eyes. His eyes also represent nature. It is interesting to note, though, that the narration states he has "Eyes green as apples. Green as dead sea fruit" (89). While tempting and captivating, the green in his eyes is "dead," making it impossible for him to be the sole curator of all the nature that is surrounding them both. He is losing his power; the color of his eyes is having more negligible effects on the girl, and she does not even want to look at them anymore. To defy the Erl-King, the girl cannot look into his eyes, as they are representative of the male gaze and power. He cannot be looking at her in order for her to kill him. But now, the narration switches to the first-person future tense: the girl narrates that she "shall strangle him" but never really does (91). Then, the narration switches to third-person future tense, where Carter writes that "she will open all the cages and let the birds free" and that "she will carve off [the Erl-King's] great mane with the knife he uses to skin the rabbits" (91). Carter alludes to how a change might start to take place but never actually happens. In this sense, the girls' power does not come to full fruition, even though it is clear that she envisions it happening eventually.

There is a naturalistic relation between gender in "The Erl King": how gender encompasses masculinity and femininity, the dominant and the submissive, and the protector and

the timid, are all related. Further, Carter suggests that confusions with gender hinder her female protagonist's power: the changing of narrative focalization, the lack of or abundance of one specific pronoun over the other, and how the girl is either in love with or loathes the Erl-King aids her confusions regarding the ways in which she may ultimately defy him. Carter signals through the contradictory descriptions of the Erl-King that gender is more of an allusion than it may seem. The deconstruction of gender is at just the surface of the terrible logic present in the tale—that logic being that systems are created for men to think that they can possess and own women. All may be well in that regard if just simply an ounce of "femininity" can be embodied within who they are. Regardless of this deconstruction, the control and manipulation of women are still present in who the Erl-King is despite his domestic and feminine qualities: those qualities become irrelevant to the girl; she knows that she must eventually defy the love he gives her in order not to become just another former and trapped lover. The writing of this story in fairy tale format allows readers to better understand that it is easy to fall under a spell or enchantment by a mythical creature with willfully seductive feminine powers, and this further contributes to how Carter does not allow the girl entirely full liberation from the Erl-King.

Conclusions

According to Carter, fairy tales are meant to be reimagined. Carter asserts that challenging traditionally taught morals and beliefs is essential in literature. The female narrators and protagonists in "The Bloody Chamber," "The Company of Wolves," and "The Erl-King" exist to deconstruct the cultural norms of gender, sex, desire, lust, and agency. Their experiences allow readers to imagine how subverting conventional truths and rules may allow them liberation from patriarchal structures. The female narrators do evidently seek to dismantle aspects of the patriarchal rule that they exist in, but Carter subtly suggests the complications in doing so. In all

three stories, there is evidence of a “spell,” “trance,” or an absolute dominance stemming from the male counterpart, which taunts and bewilders the female protagonist. Carter then implies that full agency is not and might not ever be entirely possible for her female narrators.

The female characters are women who are still learning to demand entire ownership over their experiences. At the end of “The Bloody Chamber,” the girl moves on with her life, but she is forever marked by her totalitarian husband, which causes her extreme turmoil. In “The Company of Wolves,” the story ends with the girl in bed with the wolf, and although she does not die, Carter suggests that a girl can make a lover out of a beastly and dangerous manly creature. Finally, at the end of “The Erl-King,” Carter uses the future tense to suggest the girl's liberation from the Erl-King, but it never actually happens in the story. In every case, the idea of liberation exists for the female protagonist, but they remain at least partially stuck under the afflictions that their male counterparts impose upon them.

Carter reimagines truths in fairy tales. She suggests through her stories that the original fairy tales are simply not enough on their own in dictating an absolute “truth”: the “truths” written in them do not go far enough to encompass the intricacies and inequalities of identity, gender, and sexuality. For Carter, these stories had to convey the modern world. This is precisely why the female protagonists in her stories still face hardships, and Carter clarifies that is why they do not have complete agency and power over their male counterparts. This is the problematic “truth” that Carter wishes to communicate in her fairy tales: the patriarchy will never fully vanish and will continue to cause turmoil and disadvantages for women. Still, the tales signal that change is possible and necessary by Carter rewriting them in the first place.

The Bloody Chamber is a collection of stories of women who are still in progress. However, what Carter does do is put the women in her stories in charge of the narrative. She

gives her narrators a voice, but she also recognizes how patriarchal structures silence them. It is not difficult to tell that the women are telling the story, though—they are, at long last, finally given the predominant voice in this genre. Women are no longer passive subjects in this literature. In essence, as Perrault stated, it is not hard to tell who is in charge of telling the story: Carter proves that regardless of complete liberation, the women do reclaim the narratives in which they previously lived in silence or without being in charge or having a voice, which forever changes the lessons, messages, and morals that are and will be taken from them.

Works Cited

Andernahr, Sonya. "Contemporary Women's Writing: Carter's Literary Legacy." *Angela Carter New Critical Readings*, Edited by Sonya Andernahr and Lawrence Phillips, Continuum International Publishing Company, 2012, pp. 11-22.

Atwood, Margaret. "Running with the Tigers." *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays On The Art Of Angela Carter*, Edited by Lorna Sage, Virago Press, 1994, pp. 133-150.

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1975.

Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. Penguin Group, 1979.

Lee, Alison. *Angela Carter*. Twayne Publishers, 1997.

Makinen, Merja. "Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber' and the Decolonisation of Feminine Sexuality." *Angela Carter Contemporary Critical Essays*, Edited by Alison Easton, St. Martin's Press, Inc., 2000, pp. 20-36.

Tatar, Maria. *Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

Works Consulted

Cixous, Hélène, et al. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Signs, vol. 1, no. 4, University of Chicago Press, 1976, pp. 875-893, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239.

D'Haen, Theo L. "Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 191-208.

Faris, Wendy B. "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 163-190.

——. "Women and Women and Women: A Feminine Element in Magical Realism." *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Vanderbilt University Press, 2004, pp. 170-219.

Henitiuk, Valerie. "Step into my parlour: Magic realism and the creation of a feminist space." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2003, pp. 410-427, https://roam.macewan.ca/islandora/object/gm:1115.

Jowett, Lorna. "Between the Paws of the Tender Wolf: Authorship, Adaptation and Audience." *Angela Carter New Critical Readings*, Edited by Sonya Andernahr and Lawrence Phillips, Continuum International Publishing Company, 2012, pp. 33-43.

Linkin, Harriet Kramer. "Isn't It Romantic?: Angela Carter's Bloody Revision of the Romantic Aesthetic in 'The Erl-King.'" *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, Edited by Lindsey Tucker, G.K. Hall & Co., 1998, pp. 119-133.

Michael, Magali Cornier. "Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus: An Engaged Feminism via Subversive Postmodern Strategies." *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, Edited by Lindsey Tucker, G.K. Hall & Co., 1998, pp. 206-227.

Mulvey, Laura. "Cinema Magic and the Old Monsters." *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays On The Art Of Angela Carter*, Edited by Lorna Sage, Virago Press, 1994, pp. 241-252.

Punter, David. "Angela Carter's Magic Realism." *The Contemporary British Novel*, edited by James Acheson and Sarah C. E. Ross, Edinburgh University Press, 2005, pp. 48-58, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0b58m.8.

——. "Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine." *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, Edited by Lindsey Tucker, G.K. Hall & Co., 1998, pp. 46-59.

Robinson, Sally. "The Anti-hero as Oedipus: Gender and the Postmodern Narrative in the 'Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman.'" *Angela Carter Contemporary Critical Essays*, Edited by Alison Easton, St. Martin's Press, Inc., 2000, pp. 107-126.

Sheets, Robin Ann. "Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber.'" *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, Edited by Lindsey Tucker, G.K. Hall & Co., 1998, pp. 96-118.

Tatar, Maria. *Off With Their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood*. Princeton University Press, 1992.