

The Bloody Chamber commentary

Carter tells the first story through the first person female narrator, who recounts her experience of *The Bloody Chamber* in seven episodes. Each episode is marked by a break in the text, indicating a pause in the narrative flow and marking the passage of time. The first two episodes establish the young bride's arrival in the matrimonial home, her relationship with her husband, and the contrast between her former life in the French capital and the opulence of her new circumstances in a remote Gothic location. It becomes clear that the story takes place around the end of the 19th century. The first short tale in the collection is associated with the French folktale of Bluebeard, originally written by Perrault as a moral tale instructing children not to be overcurious.

The third and fourth episodes develop the young wife's boredom and curiosity into a dilemma that threatens her new relationship with her husband: should she play the role of the obedient wife or follow her desire to discover more about him? The fifth episode shows her dilemma of curiosity transforming into a crisis of mortal danger. The sixth and seventh episodes show the crisis moving towards its climax, where she faces the consequences of her actions, and is ultimately rescued by her mother. This resolution leaves the wife widowed with rich rewards: wealth, love and happiness. The denouement of the narrative restores the character of the young woman through love and personal fulfilment.

Carter begins by purposely parodying the linguistic style of erotic literature that presents the 'sexual awakening' of young women as a spectacle for voyeuristic entertainment. There is a feverish tone within the first paragraph, as the narrator recalls the "delicious ecstasy" of a young seventeen-year-old woman, anticipating her wedding night, with her "burning cheek" and "pounding ... heart" linked to the mockery of clichéd mechanical phallic imagery: the train's "great pistons ceaselessly thrusting". There is a detached narrative perspective that serves to position the reader at a distance while implying that the narrator sees her younger self as an entirely different person. There is a suggestion that the narrator has been changed by the events of the story, though it is not made clear how much older she has become.

The first part of the story is set up as a journey, a metaphor for the emotional and physical journey the young girl is experiencing as she leaves the security of her childhood home and enters the adult world for the first time. Her view of her destination, "the unguessable country of marriage" is reminiscent of Hamlet's "undiscovered country" as Shakespeare has his prince contemplate the journey from life to death, "from whose bourne / No traveller returns". Carter seems to be suggesting at the start of this journey with this intertextual echo, that there is a connection between sex, marriage and death.

Marriage is represented in the symbol of the wedding ring, and Carter's narrator introduces this symbol while acknowledging a "pang of loss" for her youth and freedom. The "gold band" symbolises the ownership of the woman and the price agreed between the mother and the Marquis for the exchange. Putting on the ring essentially marks the end of childhood, a severing of the link with her mother, and prepares her for the process of becoming a wife and mother herself. The theme of maturation and an exploration of what it means for a girl to become a woman are embedded in this story. Carter, without being overly didactic, positions the reader to question the gender stereotypes present in the typical 'rites of passage'. By working within the conventions of a narrative form devised by men to depict women in limited ways, Carter is simultaneously adopting and subverting the genre of erotic literature.