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## Examination of Marriage, Power, and Female Liberation in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*

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### Abstract

This article offers a critical reading of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, highlighting her portrayal of marriage in patriarchal societies as an institution rooted in control and submission. Carter illustrates that women under this oppressive institution are reduced to possessions manipulated by men. The mother who defies the stereotype of the passive woman presents a vision of liberation led by women themselves. This study explores the way Carter uses strong female figures to deconstruct and challenge the traditional narratives and aligns with feminist perspectives that advocate for women's autonomy, resilience, and self-realization.

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### Introduction

Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* is a sharp criticism for the patriarchal societies that establish marriage based on possession and slavery (Alghamdi, 2024) <sup>[1]</sup>. Those marriages according to Carter enable men to dominate and oppress women (Arikan, 2016) <sup>[3]</sup>. Under such marriages women have to obey men and abide by their rules (Makinen, 1992) <sup>[10]</sup>, as marriage is not an innocent social relationship (Krifa, 2018) <sup>[8]</sup>, but a game of power where women experience dominance and subordination (Millett, 1970). In that sense, the story presents women their husbands' hostages (Mehulić, 2018) <sup>[13]</sup>. Mostly, those marriages are like a business deal where women are bought from their families or offered an amount of money to accept the proposal.

Therefore, Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* suggests that women's liberation from oppressive marriages can only be realized by the solidarity of other women (Al-Kassasbeh, 2013) <sup>[2]</sup>, as illustrated by the young lady's mother rather than the young blind man (Macsiniuc, 2015) <sup>[9]</sup>. Furthermore, the text portrays that the young blind man is presented as an ideal partner for the young lady which asserts that Carter does not reject marriage but reject control and oppression in marriage. In this sense, Carter uses blindness as a metaphor for an ideal partner who does not seek domination over women.

### Background

The story is narrated by a 17-year-old girl who marries an old and wealthy French man. The reader learns from the story that the old man has previously got married to 3 women who died in unknown circumstances. The young wife is taken after marriage to a mysterious castle, to be left alone after an urgent business to the old husband. The husband before leaving forbids his wife to enter his den. However, being alone makes her feel more curious about her husband's things. She dares to enter the forbidden chamber to discover the bodies of his ex-wives alongside some lilies, the same lilies she has in her bedroom. She learns from the scene that her husband has a murderous tendency. Meanwhile, the wife made a friendship with a blind young man who shares her the interest in playing piano. She reveals the secret to him and just before both of them manage to flee the husband returns back and learns from the blood stain on the forbidden key that his young wife disobeyed him. Therefore, the old husband decides to murder his wife.

Being blind, the piano-tuner is unable to help her, but he refuses to leave her alone. The young lady was about to be beheaded by her husband just to be saved by her newly arrived mother at the last moment. The young lady after that went with her mother along with the piano-tuner to live in Paris.

### Methodology

This article uses feminist literary criticism to analyze Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* as a critique of oppressive marriages. Through a close reading of the story, this article examines the symbolic imagery to reveal the game of power and control from Carter's portrayal. Therefore, the article focuses on elements, such as the bloody key, and the marriage relationship dynamics between men and women to portray marriage as a site of female oppression. In addition to this, the article uses the blind piano-tuner, and the mother to emphasize that women's liberation from such dynamics must come from within the individual woman herself.

### Marriage as Captivity

Angela Carter presents a terrifying picture of marriage (AzizMohammadi, 2015) <sup>[4]</sup>, presenting it as a form of exile and captivity for women, where women lose their independence and become, under this asymmetrical relationship, the property of their husbands. The narrator describes her journey to marriage as a journey "Into marriage, into exile; I sensed it, I knew it--that, henceforth, I would always be lonely". Through this description, Carter suggests that oppressive marriage is not a refuge but a trap, where women are forced to give up their identity and self and accept a role of subordination to fulfill their husbands' desires (Sheets, 1991) <sup>[17]</sup>.

In addition, Carter shows that the situation becomes worse when the wife's relationship with her husband is characterized by an imbalance of power that reinforces the husband's dominance in the relationship, stripping the wife of her humanity and becoming an object of the husband's possession, suggesting that the wife's value is material rather than emotional, and not as an equal partner. Carter shows that marriage for the patriarchal man is like shopping, where the husband evaluates the wife as if he were purchasing a commodity: "I saw him watching me 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" (1979, p. 4). In this part of the story, Carter shows that this approach adopted by some men is inhumane, as the wife is not considered a dignified human, but rather something to be valued, owned, and disposed of. In this context, de Beauvoir illustrates that, socially, women were relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy due to their roles as females and wives: "The term 'female' is derogatory not because it emphasizes woman's animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex" (1949, p. 33).

In this context, the heroine experience as a female [in sexual context] starts when she wears the ring: "I felt a pang of loss" (1979, p. 6); the moment she put the gold bond, she enters a relationship of dominance, where she is dominated and oppressed by her patriarchal husband. Thus, According to Carter, the narrator realizes that she "had sold myself to this fate" (1979, p. 33). Therefore, Carter examines the relationship between power and money, suggesting that women lose their liberty and respect when entering marriages

that resemble business deals. In addition, Carter reveals that the heroine's fate reflects a universal destiny for all women, symbolized by the ring, which was "his own mother's ring, and his grandmother's, and her mother's" (1979, p. 9). Furthermore, Carter shows the limited power of the wife within these oppressive marriages. The husband has privacy that the wife cannot penetrate, so the "forbidden key" (1979, p. 14) becomes a symbolic barrier that reinforces his control and authority over her life: "Every man must have one secret, even if only one, from his wife," he said. "Promise me this, my whey-faced piano-player; promise me you'll use all the keys on the ring except that last little one I showed you. Play with anything you find, jewels, silver plate; make toy boats of my share certificates, if it pleases you, and send them sailing off to America after me. All is yours, everywhere is open to you--except the lock that this single key fits" (1979, p. 10). Accordingly, Carter presents a depiction of marriage as an institution based on power and ownership and emphasizes that marriage in such cases becomes a cage that strips women of their humanity and turns them into objects.

### Woman for Women

Only women can save women, this is the message conveyed by Carter in *The Bloody Chamber*. Women's liberation can only be achieved through women themselves (Dantas, 2021) <sup>[7]</sup>, not through men. This theme is clearly illustrated through the young girl's mother, as an unconventional savior and a powerful force, when other characters have failed to intervene (Marchetti, 2019) <sup>[12]</sup>. Hélène Cixous captures this powerful, unrestrained female energy, "We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back" (1975, p. 878). Reflecting this same indomitable spirit, the narrator describes her mother as she arrives on a horse like a warrior figure (Wynn, 2019) <sup>[18]</sup>, embodying the fierce, uncontainable power that Cixous celebrates:

You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father's service revolver and, behind her, the breakers of the savage, indifferent sea, like the witnesses of a furious justice. And my husband stood stock-still, as if she had been Medusa, the sword still raised over his head as in those clockwork tableaux of Bluebeard that you see in glass cases at fairs. (1979, p. 24).

Carter describes the mother as Medusa, a powerful mythological female figure, emphasizing the mother's power and ferocity. Carter's choice to portray the mother in this way is an affirmation that women must rely on their own strength and solidarity to overcome subjugation (Zhang, 2023) <sup>[19]</sup>. Hélène Cixous suggests that women's liberation cannot come from men but must arise from within, urging women "to liberate the New Woman from the Old by ... by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than her self" (1975, p. 878). Accordingly, it is a woman like the narrator who ultimately brings salvation: "she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my

husband's head," (1979, p. 48).

In addition, Carter's portrayal of the mother as a savior is a refutation of the previous prevailing idea of women's weakness and their reliance on men to rescue them (Priyanka, 2019) [16]. Therefore, this powerful portrayal of the savior woman also reinforces the idea that women cannot passively wait for their circumstances to improve or rely on men to grant them freedom. Carter emphasizes that liberation is something that women must demand and strive for (Neimneh & Shureteh, 2020) [15]. By portraying the mother as a warrior figure, Carter disrupts the traditional narrative of male heroes saving women. Instead, she establishes a new model of womanhood in which women work to demolish the old, traditional images of women that have historically been constructed by patriarchal hands and establish a new feminist image that reflects women's true identity. This aligns with Hélène Cixous's call for women to break free from restrictive, patriarchal constructs, as she writes: "A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing" (Cixous, 1975, p. 880) [6]. Cixous's vision in *The Laugh of the Medusa* is to shatter the existing social order and embrace a new vision for women—one that empowers them to embody their true identities.

To this end, the blind pianist is portrayed as kind and supportive, however, he lacks the ability to rescue the heroine. This is of course because Carter's intention was to emphasize the message that the heroine's survival is entirely dependent on self-reliance. Additionally, Carter uses this dynamic to highlight that although some men may sympathize with women's plight, they are often unable to effect real change in deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes, and thus, when it comes to social change men are presented to be weaker than women (Mansour, Mansur, Banat, & Banat, 2024) [11].

## Conclusion

In *The Bloody Chamber*, Angela Carter critiques the institution of marriage by exposing it as an institution rooted in control and submission where women are reduced to mere possessions to be manipulated by men. Carter thus breaks the traditional narrative of women by invoking the spirit of Medusa to build a new narrative that is contrary to the patriarchal narrative. Through this powerful symbolism and strong female characters, Carter presents a vision of liberation led by women themselves. Thus, the fierce savior mother embodies a vivid image of female solidarity. Carter's vision is thus in line with Cixous's on the importance of women dismantling social roles, rejecting passivity, and actively seeking independence, resilience, and self-actualization.

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