
Gothic Traditions in 'The Bloody Chamber'

The opening of the short story 'The Bloody Chamber' by Angela Carter includes an abundance of conventions typical of the Gothic genre. The passage sets the scene for a tragic tale, where the innate curiosity of a young girl will inevitably find her in danger. Published in the late 20th Century, at a time when Gothic writing was less prominent in literature, it could be said that the tale is fairly progressive within the genre, with its underlying criticism of patriarchal society not being a particularly common theme in Gothic writing. However, being set the 3rd Republic in France, an era known for corruption and hedonism, and the use of classic Gothic elements in this passage, ensures the foundations of this tale are deep-rooted in the Gothic style.

This passage in 'The Bloody Chamber' provides an introduction of the two main characters to the reader. The narrator gives a detailed description of her lover, and it is from this that the reader is so easily able to predict the fate of the narrator, since the Marquis displays numerous qualities of a typical Gothic antagonist. The allusion to beastly qualities made so early on in the narrative is stark, as the narrator describes the 'the leonine shape of his head' and 'his dark mane', likening the Marquis to a lion, indicative of his predatory nature. The repetition of the animalistic imagery leads the reader to question whether or not the Marquis is fully human, with the knowledge that the Gothic genre typically includes aspects of the supernatural. Human or not, Carter makes it clear that Marquis is a danger to the narrator. This is emphasised through Carter's use of floridography in comparing the Marquis to 'a lily', a funeral flower, foreshadowing that he will be the death of her. Here, Carter creates an overwhelming sense of foreboding, something that Gothic writing often depends upon to achieve one of its foremost aims: to frighten the reader.

The short story takes the form of a first person narrative, and this form introduces the reader to the other main character, this familiar pattern of Gothic narrative allowing the reader a greater insight into her character, as she undergoes a period of transition from childhood to womanhood, the catalyst being her impending marriage. Perhaps the most telling indicator of the narrator's character is her clothing: 'the white muslin' and the 'crimson jewels...bright as arterial blood'. Colour semiotics are so often used to depict characters in Gothic fiction, and here it is no different. The juxtaposing colours, the white with connotations of innocence and the red with connotations of evil and lust, demonstrate the possibility for corruption that makes the narrator so vulnerable to the Marquis. The notion that women are inherently susceptible to corruption is one that is commonly explored in the Gothic genre, which in this case of 'The Bloody Chamber', heightens the sense of foreboding and gives the reader considerable cause for concern as to the fate of the narrator. The symbolism behind the ruby choker emphasises the danger that the narrator has placed herself in, as it is reminiscent of one of the bloodiest periods of French history, again implying that the narrator's destiny is uncertain. However, this would not necessarily evoke sympathy from the reader; the story was published in the late 20th Century, a time when the second wave of feminism was fairly prominent in society and thus a women of time might struggle to understand why the narrator is seemingly setting herself up for exploitation. Indeed, the reader's response may have been of anger rather than sympathy.

Despite the narrative giving insight into the character of the narrator, her identity still carries a certain degree of ambiguity, indeed the reader is never even made aware of her name. Through

marriage, the narrator 'ceased to be her [mother's] child in becoming his wife'. Here the narrator's identity is defined by possessive pronouns, which sets up the power dynamics between the narrator and the Marquis, with the women being the more subordinate of the two. At this point in the passage, the narrative voice hints at the suppression that so often accompanies Gothic female characters. The tale of 'The Bloody Chamber' derives from some of the most notorious tales of erotic literature in the 18th Century, the period in which the story is set, and in referencing this Carter makes a poignant criticism through parodying the literature of the time, denouncing the way in which, throughout history, it has been commonplace for men to objectify women – passing them off as possessions, something to be acquired rather than respected. Later on in the extract, the narrator is objectified as a piece of art as she considers herself to have been 'invited to join this gallery of beautiful women'. From this metaphor, the reader detects ignorance in the narrator, yet another quality that is prevalent in female characters within Gothic writing, and subsequently a reaction of sympathy for the narrator is evoked in the reader, since at this point in the story she is not yet aware of the exile into which she will find herself, something that later becomes apparent to her.

The sense of foreboding that prevails throughout the passage amplifies as the narrator imagines 'that magic place, the fairy castle whose walls were made of foam, that legendary habitation' that will soon be her home. The excessively lavish description, with reference to 'magic' in the most innocent sense of the word, incites a suspicion in the reader as to whether or not the castle will live up to such a great expectation. It could be said that here, the description of the castle is a metaphor for the narrator's perception of marriage, something which is also unlikely to live up to the narrator's expectation. In the first Gothic novel, 'The Castle of Otranto', the castle itself reflects the personality of its owner. Here, Carter inverts this classic Gothic trope, whereby the 'fairy castle' is indeed an opposite reflection of its inhabitant, the Marquis, who is not the stereotypical Prince Charming the reader might expect to find in such a place. In doing this, Carter attempts to inflict a false sense of security upon the reader, something else which is often seen in Gothic writing.

In conclusion, there are an abundance of elements that a reader of Gothic literature would be familiar with in this extract from 'The Bloody Chamber'. Even though the story is relatively modern within the genre, traditional Gothic devices and motifs are used throughout, with the intention of creating an undeniable sense of danger and foreboding, which in turn provokes a response of fear from the reader, indeed one of the foremost aims of Gothic writing.