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## **‘The Bloody Chamber’: Features of a Gothic Setting**

The short story ‘The Bloody Chamber’ by Angela Carter includes an abundance of conventions effective in establishing a Gothic setting. The tale is a tragic one, where the innate curiosity of a young girl inevitably finds 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 a strikingly Gothic setting is effectively established.

The majority of the narrative takes place at the Marquis’ castle, a place where the gothic setting of the story is particularly prominent. The location of the castle is extremely remote, it is “cut off by the tide from the land for half a day...” This creates an atmosphere of imprisonment and by including this significant detail, Carter deliberately makes explicit to the reader that the castle is away from the eyes of the outside world and is therefore difficult to escape from, which is key part of the Gothic setting that is established. The ellipsis used here encourages the reader to ponder on this detail as Carter subtly implies that it will be of importance later on in the novel. Indeed, at the end of the novel the Marquises sees he mother “galloping at a vertiginous speed along the causeway, though the waves crashed”, significant in that the reader come to the daunting realisation that had the mother’s arrival been even slightly later, the castle might have been inaccessible and the Marquises may not have survived. The tone of urgency, heightened by the use of the adjective “vertiginous”, combined with the fortuity of the situation significantly contributes to the Gothic setting through the sense of panic that resonates with both the protagonist and the reader. Furthermore, the atmosphere of confinement increasing exponentially as the Marquises’ journey to the castle progresses, until she reaches the bedroom. Here, she describes being “surrounded by so many mirrors!” which contributes to the Gothic setting through the atmosphere of suppression it establishes. The excessive decor in the bedroom implies a corruption of wealth, common of the era in which the tale is set; the 3rd Republic in France was known for its decadence, and here Carter criticises that, demonstrating that that it gave the rich (who were, at the time, almost always men) a means of enticing those inferior to them, as indeed the Marquis successfully does to the narrator. Carter not only emphasises the Marquises’ physical isolation, but her psychological isolation as well. This is made explicit through the significant change in the narrative tone as the Marquises exclaims “Enough! No; more!” clearly conflicted and insecure about the impending consummation of her marriage. This interior monologue is desperate and frantic as the narrative perspective becomes detached, heightening the sense of psychological isolation as the Marquises is unable to escape this distressing situation. Indeed, it is the overwhelming sense of isolation maintained throughout the story that so convincingly establishes a Gothic setting.

The Marquis’ chamber is a pivotal part of the tale and its allusions to hell are considerably successful in establishing a Gothic setting as the narrative reaches its pinnacle. Comparisons to hell are common in descriptions of settings in Gothic literature. This is seen, for example, in Charles Dickens’ ‘Bleak House’, where the character of Tulkinghorn’s chambers starkly resemble hell. In ‘The Bloody Chamber’, the first description made of the chamber itself is “Absolute darkness.” The absence of light being a classic Gothic convention, this powerful

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description establishes a Gothic setting whereby the Marquises is transgressing into the unknown. In Gothic literature, darkness traditionally demonstrates a lack of hope which is fitting here as the Marquises is about to discover women whose fates were hopeless, and the Gothic atmosphere is established further as both the Marquises and the reader come to the realisation that "[she], too, was one of them". The sheer horror of the chamber is made so apparent as the Marquises describes how even the walls "gleamed as if they were sweating with fright"; the contents of the chamber are so gruesome that fear even resounds in inanimate objects, demonstrating that the horror at this point in the story is incredibly overbearing. Moreover, the final description of the chamber, "like the door of hell", is effective in leaving a harrowing impression on the reader, the simile and its Gothic resonance being indicative of the full extent of the horror the Marquises has uncovered and indeed intensifying the Gothic setting of the tale.

The symbolism of the lilies is of recurring importance throughout the story in establishing Gothic setting. They are used by Carter as a clear premonition of death, foreshadowing the narrator's fate. Carter accentuates the way in which the Marquis "filled [the] bedroom with lilies until it looked like an embalming parlour" which strongly associates the themes of sex with death, whether this be the metaphorical death of female independence, as the Marquises will become corrupted by Marquis and from this point, is under his control; or whether this represents the literal death of the Marquis' wives that preceded the narrator. Through this Carter criticises the inequality of marital relationships that was widespread during the period in which her story is set, implying that women were too quick to accept their inferior position, as here the Marquises makes no attempt to remove herself from a seemingly uncomfortable situation. In addition, the underlying tone of foreboding, a common Gothic trope, which manifests here successfully establishes a Gothic setting. This symbol is used again later on in the narrative as the Marquises compares her husband to the lilies, describing them as "the lilies I always associate with him; that are white. And stain you." Here the contrasting sentence structure places emphasis on "stain you", as the narrator retrospectively realises the corrupting influence the Marquis had on her, as well as how trapped she was in her marriage by his possessive nature, Carter again making a subtle criticism of women's naivety. There are many parallels between the description of the lilies and that of the Marquis; the heavy, "waxen" appearance of the lilies appears to be linked to the "mask" like features of the Marquis, whereby the narrator struggles to uncover his true self. Similarly, his overpowering "opulent male scent" mimics the strong, suffocating odour of the lilies; this conceals the scent of death in the castle, as well as representing the concealed desires of the Marquis. The comparison between the lilies and the Marquis likens him to a typical Gothic antagonist by creating an element of mystery and corruption to his character. Indeed, the symbolism of the lilies throughout the story is a key component of the Gothic setting so firmly established by Carter.

In conclusion, there are an abundance of elements throughout the story of 'The Bloody Chamber' that ensure the foundations of this tale are deep-rooted in the Gothic style. The traditional Gothic devices and motifs are used throughout, combined with the intense, detailed description of the castle and Carter's intention of creating an undeniable sense of danger and foreboding, are extremely successful in establishing an undeniably Gothic setting.