
The Symbolism of the Bloody Chamber

Liminality pervades Angela Carter's short story collection, entitled *The Bloody Chamber*, in her characters, physical settings and even her narrative voice. The bloody chamber, as a physical 'chamber' can refer to a room where violence and enlightenment occur simultaneously. It is a space of transformation for the heroine that changes her irrevocably. Bloody chambers are often connected with not only the blood of violence, but also with the bloodshed when a woman loses her virginity and when she menstruates. The concept "bloody chamber" can also refer to the vagina or womb, and Carter uses this fact to underscore the connection between women's sexuality and the violence they experience. Carter creates an atmosphere that possesses elements of the 'bloody chamber', both power and torment simultaneously, particularly in 'The Erl King', a story in which all aspects exist liminally. The narrator in the Erl-King describes the sensation of liminality as "vertigo." When the Erl-King, a liminal creature who is half-human, half-woods, draws her into his "gravity" of in-betweenness, she is unpleasantly disoriented. This disorient translates to the ambiguity of the King's identity and the narrator's intentions.

In literature, liminal spaces traditionally give the occupant both power and torment. By existing in two states or being two things simultaneously, the occupant has qualities of both. At the same time, he or she is condemned to never live in either state. The two halves of the liminal being's experience do not seem to make a satisfying whole. Her more radical statement, however, is that all women are forced to live life as a liminal experience. Carter's liminal experience in the text works to deconstruct and reposition female sexuality in a male-dominated space. The narrator, a female, lives subconsciously on the threshold of the 'virgin' and the 'sexual being', unable to identify fully with either; Carter is suggesting that women who use their sexuality as empowerment are isolated from society and those who neglect it are oppressed by patriarchal figures, particularly, the Erl King.

Carter begins the text in a relatively conventional way; her narrative voice is easily accessible. However, at first mention of the forest and the King, who are eventually revealed to be the same being, Carter manipulates the reality planes in the story, indicating the effects that the forest has physically and mentally; "The woods enclose and then enclose again, like a system of Chinese boxes opening one into another...it is easy to lose yourself in these woods."(Carter 85) The narrator is aware of the demystifying effects of her surroundings, but seeks out the dangers anyway, representing the naivety in young women. She discloses in her winding sentences that the woods and the object of her desire, the Erl King, are the same being; he exists in the state of forest and man simultaneously; "When he combs his hair that is the color of dead leaves, dead leaves fall out of it; they rustle and drift to the ground as though he were a tree and he can stand as still as a tree..."(Carter 87) She makes mention of his physical body as well; "...because

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his flesh is of the same substance as those leaves that are slowly turning into earth.”(Carter 88) The Erl King is neither man nor woods, and his seducing tendencies prove successful upon the ‘virginal/highly sexual’ female narrator. The narrator must not be portrayed as a victim; instead, Carter is propping her up as an independent, sexual being. She confesses that it is only the ‘imprisoning’ effect that the King possesses that inspires fear in her: “I am not afraid of him; only, afraid of vertigo, of the vertigo with which he seizes me. Afraid of falling down.”(Carter 87) Vertigo is a type of dizziness, where there is a feeling of motion when one is stationary. The narrator is experiencing the King ‘liminally’ in a physical sense, and in a mental state, as well as in a sexually liberating way and entrapping way.

The relationship between the King and the narrator is highly romanticized by the latter. The erotic language and artful images of nature are characteristic of the Romantic Era, one that Carter is utilizing in a contemporary way. However, while the Romantics looked to nature as a source of spiritual enlightenment and life, in *The Erl-King*, it is a source of confinement and death. The narrator's initial description of the woods already foreshadows her entrapment; she depicts the light filtering through the trees as "these vertical bars of a brass-coloured distillation of light coming down from sulphur-yellow interstices in a sky hunkered with grey clouds."(Carter 86) Since the narrator is complicit in her imprisoning, she knows that she is "caged" or trapped from the moment she enters the woods. She is subject to their power; because everything in the woods "is exactly as it seems,"(Carter 86) any person who steps into them imprints her own desires on them. On one level, the narrator desires to be caught, and the cage-like patterns of light are reflections of this desire. She admits her knowledge by stating, "this light admits of no ambiguities."(Carter 87) The narrator even details her impending punishment before she comes into contact with the King, "The two notes of the song of a bird rose on the still air, as if my girlish and delicious loneliness had made me into a sound."(Carter 85) Carter characterizes the song of birds as “girlish and delicious”, commenting on the vulnerability of women in sexual situations. However, the narrator matures quickly in response to the ‘marriage-like’ proposal that the King has in store for her.

The narrator herself begins to convey liminal elements, as she falls subject to her virginal side as well as her sexually independent nature. This is characterized when he explains the King's effect on her; “ Your touch both consoles and devastates me.”(Carter 89) She encourages the Erl-King's domination because she is caught in the "vertigo" between her erotic desire for the Erl-King and her desire to be independent. Summarizing her dilemma in two words, she calls him a "tender butcher"; she knows that he is both her lover and destroyer. Carter cleverly manipulates setting as character, as the narrator becomes an active figure within the thematic ‘bloody chamber’. The King is her source of pleasure and punishment, as he strips her of her virginity and of her sexual appetite; her identity is highly ambiguous. She believes that the Erl-King can enlighten her by consuming her; she wishes, "I should like to grow enormously small, so that you could swallow me ... Then I could lodge inside your body and you would bear me."(Carter

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89)

In the end, the narrator's extreme solution is to kill the Erl-King and supplant male domination with female domination. While other heroines in Carter's stories find happiness in relationships with men, the narrator of *The Erl-King* rejects them entirely. She must kill the male figure in order to substitute him as creator. The narrator admits she was conscious of the dangers of 'subjugation' all along, and confesses, "...I loved him with all my heart and yet I had no wish to join the whistling congregation he kept in his cages although he looked after them very affectionately..."(Carter 90) Carter is ultimately commenting on the 'imprisoning' effects of marriage. The narrator equates a marital bond with that of a 'caged' bird and its owner, she rejects surrender by liberating herself through sexual violence.

The narrator and Erl King both exhibit liminal tendencies; the King exist in a physical realm of the liminal experience, living in a state of man and forest simultaneously, meanwhile, the narrator exists mentally on the threshold between vulnerable virgin and independent sexual body. There is a connection to the liminal space in Carter's thematic symbol of the 'bloody chamber', in which the narrator is stripped of her virginity but commits violence as well, in order to expel herself from the forest's abusing grasp. Carter romanticizes the concepts of sado-masochism and erotic violence in order to artfully convey the oppression women experience in their surrender to marriage. The narrator, a female, lives subconsciously on the threshold of the 'virgin' and the 'sexual being', unable to identify fully with either; Carter is suggesting that women who use their sexuality as empowerment are isolated from society and those who neglect it are oppressed by patriarchal figures, particularly the Erl King.

Works Cited

Charter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber: And Other Stories*. Harmondsworth [u.a.: Penguin, 1986. Print.]

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