The Bloody Chamber

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANGELA CARTER

Carter was born in England during WWII, and she was evacuated from her home as a child to live with her grandmother in Yorkshire. She struggled with anorexia throughout her teenage years. After high school Carter began working as a journalist, and then studied English literature at the University of Bristol. She won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1969 and used the proceeds to leave her husband (Paul Carter) and move to Tokyo. There she developed her more radical feminist ideas and gathered material for her books. She wrote many novels, short story collections, and essays during her career, but is best known for *The Bloody Chamber* and her essay *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*. In 1977 Carter married Mark Pearce and they had one son together. She died of lung cancer at age fifty-one, and is still considered one of the most influential British novelists of the century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The stories of *The Bloody Chamber* take place in a vague, mythical past, but at the same time some are linked to concrete historical events of the 20th century and all have a "modern" tone. "The Lady of the House of Love" references World War I, and takes place in a more "innocent" Europe before the war begins. Carter's writings have been seen as part of the feminist movement in Britain, as she subverts the ancient fairy tales to give her female protagonists more agency and sympathy. Her acceptance of the works of the Marquis de Sade was more radical than most feminist thinkers of her time, however.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Carter was heavily influenced by Charles Perrault, whose collection of fairy tales *Histoires ou Contes du Temps passé* was published in 1697. Her themes were also influenced by the sexually violent writings of the Marquis de Sade, especially his book *Justine*. Isak Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales* is a precursor of Carter's writing style and story format, and "The Lady of the House of Love" was influenced by Anne Rice's vampire novels, including *The Vampire Chronicles*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*
- **When Written:** 1976-1978
- **Where Written:** Sheffield, England
- **When Published:** 1979
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary British Literature, Feminist Fiction
- **Genre:** Gothic fiction, magical realism, short story sequence
- **Setting:** Fairy-tale version of Europe
- **Climax:** The heroine's mother kills the Marquis in "The Bloody Chamber"
- **Point of View:** First, second, and third person varied throughout the stories

EXTRA CREDIT

Vampirella. The story "The Lady of the House of Love" was originally written as a BBC radio play and called *Vampirella*.

The Company of Wolves. "The Company of Wolves" has become the best-known story in the collection, and it was later made into a full-length feature film. Carter helped write the screenplay.

PLOT SUMMARY

In "The Bloody Chamber" the heroine, a young pianist, marries a rich Marquis who had three earlier wives. The heroine moves to the Marquis' castle, where she loses her virginity and finds a collection of sadistic pornography. The Marquis then gets a business call and leaves, entrusting his keys to the heroine and only forbidding her from one room. He leaves and the heroine uses the forbidden key, which leads to a **torture chamber** containing the bodies of the Marquis' three previous wives.

The heroine tells a young piano tuner what she saw and then the Marquis returns. The Marquis learns what the heroine did and prepares to behead her. Just as he swings his sword the heroine's mother appears and shoots the Marquis. The heroine inherits the Marquis' fortune and she, her mother, and the piano tuner live happily together.

In "The Courtship of Mr Lyon," Beauty's father seeks refuge from a snowstorm at an empty mansion. On his way out he takes a white **rose** and then the lion-like Beast appears. The Beast makes Beauty come to dinner, where the Beast asks her to stay with him, promising that her father's fortunes will be restored. Beauty agrees, and she spends the days alone and the nights talking with the Beast. When her father grows rich she leaves, promising to return before winter ends. Beauty forgets her promise and only returns when the Beast is dying. She finds him in his bed and kisses his hands, and he turns into a man.

In "The Tiger's Bride" a Russian man gambles away his daughter to a mysterious nobleman called The Beast. The Beast's valet

takes the heroine to a mansion, where The Beast wants to see her naked. The heroine refuses and is put in a room with an automaton maid. The Beast then takes the heroine on a horse ride, where he disrobes and reveals himself as a tiger. The heroine takes off her own clothes in response. Later the heroine goes to the tiger's room, where he licks her and her skin comes off as she transforms into a tiger.

In "Puss-in-Boots," Figaro is a clever cat whose young, promiscuous master falls in love. His desire is the young, closely-guarded wife of Signor Panteleone. Figaro cleverly unites the two lovers and he himself falls for the woman's tabby cat. Eventually the tabby trips Panteleone so he falls to his death, and Figaro's master and the young woman have sex next to Panteleone's body and then get married.

In "The Erl-King," the heroine wanders into the woods and is seduced by the Erl-King, a mysterious figure who lives in harmony with nature and has many birds in cages. The heroine learns that the caged birds were once girls, and she strangles the Erl-King and sets the birds free.

In "The Snow Child," a Count creates a girl out of his wishes, but she pricks herself on a rose thorn and dies. He then has sex with her body, melting it.

In "The Lady of the House of Love," a young soldier is lured into the mansion of the Countess, a beautiful girl vampire. The Countess cuts herself on some glass as she prepares to seduce and kill the young man, and he kisses her wound, making her become mortal and die. He takes a rose from her and goes off to war.

In "The Werewolf" a child travels through the forest to visit her grandmother. She is attacked by a wolf and cuts off its hand. When she reaches her grandmother's house she finds that her grandmother is missing a hand, so the neighbors kill the grandmother.

In "The Company of Wolves" a child goes to visit her grandmother and meets a handsome huntsman on the way. The huntsman gets to the grandmother's house first, transforms into a wolf, and eats the grandmother. The child arrives and seduces the wolf before he can eat her.

"Wolf-Alice" is a girl raised by wolves. Some nuns take her in but then give her to a werewolf Duke. The Duke is wounded by a bullet and then Wolf-Alice licks his wound, transforming him into a full human.

CHARACTERS

Heroine (The Bloody Chamber) – A young, virginal pianist who lives with her mother and then marries the sadistic Marquis. After she discover the Marquis' **torture chamber** he threatens to behead her, but she is saved by her mother. Later she marries Jean-Yves.

The Marquis – The "richest man in France," a huge, bearded nobleman who collects sadistic pornography and murders his wives in the bloody chamber of his seaside castle. He is killed by the heroine's mother.

Jean-Yves – A young, blind piano tuner who befriends the heroine and tries to protect her from the Marquis. Later the heroine marries him.

Heroine's Mother – A fierce, independent woman who had fought pirates and killed a tiger in her youth, and married a poor soldier. She saves the heroine at the story's climax.

Housekeeper – An old woman who tends to the Marquis' castle with a strict routine, and was the Marquis' foster mother growing up.

The Model – The Marquis' second wife, the model for an engraving by Odilon Redon called *The Evening Star Walking on the Rim of Night*. Her skull hangs suspended in the **bloody chamber**.

The Opera Singer – The Marquis' first wife. The heroine saw her singing the part of Isolde in the opera *Tristan*.

The Romanian Countess – The Marquis' third wife, a clever, beautiful woman who he kills with the Iron Maiden.

The Beast (The Courtship of Mr. Lyon) – A lion-like creature who lives in a mansion and is attended to by the spaniel. He falls in love with Beauty and is transformed into a man, "Mr Lyon," by her kiss.

Beauty – A brave, beautiful girl who falls in love with the Beast but then is distracted by her father's newfound wealth.

Beauty's Father – A man who lost his fortune and so lives in poverty. He finds the Beast's mansion during a snowstorm and is the beneficiary of the Beast's hospitality.

The Spaniel – The Beast's attendant, an intelligent dog with a diamond-studded collar.

The Beast (The Tiger's Bride) – A tiger who disguises himself as a man with a mask and cloak. He lives in an isolated mansion and plays cards with everyone who passes through his town.

Heroine (The Tiger's Bride) – A beautiful, virginal girl whose father gambles her away to The Beast. At first she refuses The Beast and threatens to kill herself, but then she undresses before him and is transformed into a tiger by his "kiss."

Heroine's Father – A wasteful, foolish man who gambles away his fortunes and his daughter and tries to tearfully apologize.

Valet – A monkey disguised as a man who attends to The Beast.

Maid – An automaton that looks exactly like the heroine and attends to her in her bedroom.

Figaro – A clever, roguish cat who wears boots and helps his master cheat people out of money and seduce women. Later he settles down with the tabby.

Master – Figaro's companion, a clever, promiscuous young man

who falls in love with Signor Panteleone's wife and later marries her.

Young Woman – Signor Panteleone's young wife, a virgin because her husband is impotent. She is seduced by Figaro's master and marries him immediately after Signor Panteleone dies.

Hag – A mean old woman who guards the young woman and is allergic to cats.

Signor Panteleone – A rich old miser who guards his young wife as a "prize possession." He trips over the tabby, falls down the stairs, and dies.

Tabby – Signor Panteleone's cat, a clever schemer who helps unite the master and the young woman. Figaro falls in love with her.

The Erl-King – A mysterious green-eyed figure who lives in the forest and communes with the animals. He lures girls in with his pipe and seduces them, and then turns them into birds and puts them in cages.

Heroine (The Erl-King) – A young woman who wanders into the forest and is seduced by the Erl-King. She strangles him with his own hair.

The Count – He creates a girl out of his own desires and then has sex with her corpse when she dies.

The Countess (The Snow Child) – The Count's wife who is jealous of the girl.

Girl – A magical girl created from blood, snow, and a raven's feather. She gets pricked by a **rose** and dies.

The Countess (The Lady of the House of Love) – The "queen of vampires," a beautiful young girl who lives in a mansion in Romania and feeds on rabbits and passing travelers. She constantly lays out Tarot cards.

Governess – A mute old woman who attends to the Countess and leads unsuspecting travelers to her room.

Young Man (The Lady of the House of Love) – A young, virginal British soldier traveling through Romania on his bicycle. He inadvertently kills the Countess with his kiss, and afterward is called off to fight in WWI.

Child (The Werewolf) –A brave young girl who cuts off a wolf's hand when it attacks her, and then helps kill her grandmother when the grandmother revealed as a werewolf.

Grandmother – A werewolf who is discovered by her granddaughter and stoned to death.

Child (The Company of Wolves) – A sheltered, virginal girl who goes to visit her grandmother. She encounters a huntsman werewolf and seduces him before he can eat her.

Huntsman – A werewolf who appears first as a handsome huntsman. He eats the child's grandmother and is seduced by the child.

Grandmother – A pious old woman who is eaten by the wolf.

Wolf-Alice – A feral girl who was raised by wolves. She is taken in by some nuns who try to "civilize" her, but then given up to the Duke.

The Duke – An old, monstrous werewolf who feeds on humans and doesn't appear in mirrors.

Young Man (Wolf-Alice) – A bridegroom whose bride was killed by the Duke. He shoots the Duke with a silver bullet.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SEXUALITY AND VIOLENCE

Angela Carter was influenced by the writings of the Marquis de Sade (the source of the word "sadism") in the writing of *The Bloody Chamber*, and she especially illustrates his idea that sex is often inextricably linked with violence. The most potent example of this is in the title story, "The Bloody Chamber," where the Marquis (a reference to de Sade) has a collection of violent pornography and a **chamber** where he tortures his wives. The virginal heroine allows herself to be corrupted by the Marquis and loses her sexual innocence, demonstrating one of Carter's more controversial ideas – that women can take part in the sexual violence that oppresses them – and in the bloody chamber the heroine gains the knowledge that her new sexual freedom will lead to her violent death.

All the other stories also involve some link between sex and violence, like Figaro's master having sex with the young woman next to Signor Panteleone's body, or the wolf trying to eat Little Red Riding Hood but being seduced by her instead (next to her grandmother's body). Other than this juxtaposition of images (people having sex next to a dead body), the violence Carter associates with sex and sexual awakening often leads to objectification and manipulation as well. Even in a "happy" ending like that of "The Company of Wolves" or "The Tiger's Bride," sexual freedom only comes at the price of some kind of pain. This recurring theme results in the very gothic, sensual tone of the stories as they show how fairy tales portray the darker side of human desire.

VIRGINITY

Related to the principle theme of sexuality is the idea of virginity, and many of the heroines (and one hero) of the stories are virgins. In the world of *The*

Bloody Chamber, virginity is both an invitation for corruption and a kind of strength or shield. In the stories that focus on sexual violence and manipulation (like "The Bloody Chamber" or "The Tiger's Bride") the virginity of the heroines is their most attractive quality to the bestial men who desire them. To the Marquis, for example, the heroine's virginity is an innocence that can be corrupted and destroyed.

Though virginity inherently means a kind of innocence, in Carter's stories it has a unique strength as well. Twice she describes a character's virginity as like a "pentacle" protecting them from harm, and she illustrates the power of virginity as the power of potential, like a stone about to fall. In several stories, when the heroine loses her virginity this act also releases a kind of transformative power that is more than sexual – often a kind of metamorphosis. Throughout the book virginity is like the blank slate, the potential for sexual violence, a metamorphosis of the self, or both.

METAMORPHOSIS

Many of the characters of *The Bloody Chamber* are creatures who are half-human and half-beast, or else undergo some change from beast to human or vice versa. These creatures, like The Beast, the Erl-King, and the huntsman werewolf, exist in an in-between space in the world, neither fully human nor fully non-human. They are the traditional creatures of the ancient fairy tales, but Carter also links their kind of "life on the threshold" with the sexual awakening and loss of virginity that most of the stories' heroines experience. So Mr Lyon is transformed from beast to human by the heroine's love, while the heroine of "The Tiger's Bride" is transformed into a tiger. These fantastic metamorphoses as part of sexuality and virginity then lead to Carter's more subtle point – that even the women who experience no magic metamorphosis (like the young woman of "Puss-in-Boots") still live on a kind of threshold, treated as both humans and objects (of sexual desire, usually). It is only through some kind of extreme action – like the young woman colluding in Signor Panteleone's death to escape him – that the heroines can cross the threshold and become fully human.

POWER AND OBJECTIFICATION

The book's sexual violence and Carter's feminist worldview create a theme of manipulative power and the objectification of women. This is part of the "latent content" that Carter tried to expose in the old fairy tales. In most of the original stories there is already a divide between a poor, virginal heroine and a wealthy, powerful man/monster, but in Carter's versions this divide also leads to sexual oppression. In "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" the heroines are indebted to bestial men for lifting them out of poverty, and so they must endure their desires.

These archetypes of victim and victimizer lead many of the stories to the stark objectification of a woman, usually through a scene where the woman is naked and the man/beast is clothed. So in "The Tiger's Bride" The Beast wants to see the heroine naked, and the Erl-King strips the heroine like "skinning a rabbit." This pornographic image, like the sadistic pictures the Marquis collects in "The Bloody Chamber," is the ultimate example of the woman as object and the man as powerful manipulator. In a similar vein to the pornographic image is the Erl-King's hypnotic whistle and Signor Panteleone (of "Puss-in-Boots") viewing his young wife as another possession to hoard.

While in these situations (and throughout the old versions of the fairy tales) the women seem totally objectified and powerless, in Carter's stories they can also gain an agency of their own, like the heroine killing the Erl-King and escaping his power. Instead of rejecting the old fairy tales for their objectification of women and sexual violence, Carter retells them from a female point of view, giving the stories' heroines greater agency in their fates.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BLOODY CHAMBERS

Each of the book's ten tales contains some kind of "bloody chamber," though the most obvious is the torture room of the titular story. The bloody chamber is a place of both violence and enlightenment, as the first heroine discovers the true nature of her husband's desires and her own inevitable fate in this room. Other "bloody chambers" include the Beast's room in "The Tiger's Bride," the blood-filled hole in "The Snow Child," and the grandmother's house in "The Werewolf" and "The Company of Wolves." The combination of violence and enlightenment in these places usually takes a sexual form, as in the first bloody chamber the torture is part of the Marquis' sadistic desires. Because of this, the "bloody chambers" of the book act as symbols of a woman's vagina or womb, and the blood is associated with menstruation or the loss of virginity. Throughout the stories Carter associates sexual awakening with violence, but also with a kind of enlightenment or transformation, as in the chamber of "The Company of Wolves," where the girl changes from victim to devourer through seducing the wolf. Thus the "bloody chamber" of a woman's body becomes the site of both oppression and metamorphosis.

ROSES

Roses appear in most of the stories of *The Bloody*

Chamber, and they generally symbolize the female heroine of each tale. The rose is a traditional romantic image, a symbol of female purity and the vagina, and the repetitive use of the rose image reflects the book's gothic tone and archetypal characters. The rose as a symbol of femininity becomes more complex in Carter's stories, however, as it initially acts as a sign of virginity and purity – Beauty's father picks a white rose for her in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" – but the very act of "symbolizing" then becomes a symbol of objectification. When the women of the book are objectified by male power and sexual oppression, they have no more agency than a beautiful but powerless rose. In "The Tiger's Bride" and "The Snow Child," however, the thorns of the rose prick the heroine's finger. This shows the suffering brought about by being objectified (usually through sexual violence), but it also implies some agency in the heroines themselves. They are symbolized by the pure, beautiful rose, but they also have thorns and can "bite."

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *The Bloody Chamber* published in 1990.

The Bloody Chamber Quotes

His wedding gift, clasped round my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Bloody Chamber) (speaker), The Marquis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the mysterious Marquis offers the story's Heroine a wedding present: a ruby choker (a tight necklace). The Heroine notes that the choker makes her seem to have a slit throat, and to be bleeding from the neck--a grisly reference to the French Revolution, during which noblemen like the Marquis were beheaded at the guillotine. The Heroine notes that such ironic references to the bloody past are now in vogue among the nobility.

In general, the ruby choker symbolizes the Marquis sadistic tendencies: he clearly desires the Heroine, channeling his feelings into violence and bloodshed. This image of a combination of innocent female beauty, wealthy extravagance, corrupt sexuality, and brutal violence also introduces the general tone and imagery of the story collection.

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. I'd never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before... When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror... I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Bloody Chamber) (speaker), The Marquis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Marquis stares at the Heroine, regarding her as a mere object for his sexual gratification: a toy to be played with. The Marquis stares at the Heroine, even when she's not staring back--the very definition of the "male gaze." Furthermore, the mirrors of the opera house (the setting of this scene) make it seem that the Marquis surrounds the Heroine on all sides, symbolizing his power and total domination.

And yet the passage also suggests that the Heroine herself is somewhat complicit in her own objectification. Unlike many feminist writers of the era, Carter isn't afraid to suggest that a woman can *enjoy* being sexualized or objectified, and here, the Heroine seems to be getting subtle pleasure out of the way the Marquis treats her. Indeed, she thinks of the Marquis as uncovering her secret, corrupt side--the latent potential of her present innocence and virginity. Things aren't black and white in Carter's stories--they are often undeniably about male oppression and female attempts at liberation, but they also toy with sadism and masochism, and the idea that some kinds of objectification can be sexually attractive.

He stripped me, gourmand that he was, as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke... And when nothing but my scarlet, palpitating core remained, I saw, in the mirror, the living image of an etching by Rops... He in his London tailoring; she, bare as a lamb chop. Most pornographic of all confrontations. And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain. And, as at the opera, when I had first seen my flesh in his eyes, I was aghast to feel myself stirring.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Bloody Chamber) (speaker), The Marquis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Here the Marquis has taken the Heroine, his new wife, back to his home. There, he undresses her and prepares to have sex with her for the first time. The Heroine notes that the Marquis "owns" her completely--it's implied that she has no rights, no ways of fighting back against the Marquis. As in the previous passage, she watches herself in the many mirrors on the walls, and again sees herself as an object--here presented as food to be inspected and consumed, an "artichoke" or a "lamb chop."

The passage emphasizes many of the themes of the story collection. The heroine undergoes a "metamorphosis" (as many of the later characters also will) in being stripped of her outer layers to reveal the "palpitating core" within her. Her virginity is also again portrayed as a kind of power and potential, here an opportunity for both violence and pleasure. Finally, the Heroine witnesses her own disempowerment and objectification, but can't help feeling sexually "stirred" by the sight of herself as a "pornographic" image (the man clothed and the woman naked--the ultimate symbol of female objectification and male power). Violence and sexuality are intimately tied together in Carter's stories, but to slip too far in the direction of violence and dehumanization is to risk entering a state of horror and fear.

I stammered foolishly: We've not taken luncheon yet; and, besides, it is broad daylight...
All the better to see you.
He made me put on my choker, the family heirloom of one woman who had escaped the blade... Rapt, he intoned: "Of her apparel she retains/Only her sonorous jewellery."
A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides while the mewing gulls swung on invisible trapezes in the empty air outside.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Bloody Chamber), The Marquis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Marquis prepares to have sex with the Heroine. He's aroused by the fact that she's a virgin, and can't wait to take her virginity. The Marquis seems to think of the Heroine as a passive part of his own pleasure: he undresses her, and then makes her put on the choker, as if she's a mannequin being arranged on a stage.

The passage uses rich imagery, and even fairy-tale imagery ("The better to see you" comes straight out of "Little Red Riding Hood," often interpreted, including by Carter herself, as a story about sexual seduction) to convey the Heroine's experience. She's surrounded by mirrors, so that she's dominated by the Marquis's presence in all directions (hence the dozen husbands). Furthermore, the Heroine describes the Marquis as "impaling her," conveying the violent nature of his desire for. It's impossible to separate sex and violence in Carter's story: she can't have one without the other.

No. I was not afraid of him; but of myself. I seemed reborn in his unreflective eyes, reborn in unfamiliar shapes. I hardly recognized myself from his descriptions of me and yet, and yet – might there not be a grain of beastly truth in them? And, in the red firelight, I blushed again, unnoticed, to think he might have chosen me because, in my innocence, he sensed a rare talent for corruption.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Bloody Chamber) (speaker), The Marquis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after losing her virginity to the Marquis, the Heroine feels that she's been "reborn." She describes looking at herself in the "mirror" of her husband's eyes and not knowing herself: it's as if the Marquis has unleashed an inner wildness and corruption in the previously virginal and innocent Heroine, which she's now forced to confront.

The passage suggests the possibility that the Heroine

somewhat *enjoys* being abused and objectified by her husband--a possibility that shocked many feminists of the day. Although the Marquis seems to treat the Heroine as an object, she has also internalized a similar view--she sees herself as passive and virginal, and only now that she is "corrupted" she seems reborn into a new state of sexuality and violence.

"There is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer," opined my husband's favourite poet; I had learned something of the nature of that similarity on my marriage bed. And now my taper showed me the outlines of a rack. There was also a great wheel... And – just one glimpse of it before my little flame caved in and I was left in absolute darkness – a metal figure, hinged at the side, which I knew to be spiked on the inside and to have the name: the Iron Maiden.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Bloody Chamber) (speaker), The Marquis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27-28

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Heroine has snuck into the secret lair of the Marquis's house: the "Bloody Chamber" of the title. There, she realizes the truth about her husband. The Marquis is not just a sexually experienced, powerful man who objectifies women and collects violent pornography--he is also a literal sadist and murderer, who has tortured and killed all his previous wives. (This scene more exactly echoes the legend of Bluebeard, which this story is based upon.) The quote from the Marquis' "favourite poet" (Charles Baudelaire, though he is unnamed here--a French poet known for his subjects of decadence, sexuality, ennui, and morbidity) makes clear the connection between violence and sexuality, a theme that will be explored in all the stories of the collection. This "bloody chamber," then, is the place where the two ideas come together most literally.

But because it's here that the Heroine learns the truth about her husband, the bloody chamber is not just a place of horror but also one of enlightenment--symbolized, perhaps, by the Heroine's tiny, pathetic flame. In the past, the Heroine has felt a strange connection with the Marquis, as if her own strains of masochism and the Marquis's sadism brings them together. And yet here, she comes to realize that the Marquis's sadism always destroys his wives in the end: the Heroine can't stay with the Marquis any longer and hope to live.

On her eighteenth birthday, my mother had disposed of a man-eating tiger that ravaged the villages in the hills north of Hanoi. Now, without a moment's hesitation, she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Bloody Chamber) (speaker), Heroine's Mother, The Marquis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

In the climax of the short story, the Heroine's mother emerges from the background to protect her daughter from the threats of the Marquis. The Marquis is about to execute the Heroine, but at that moment the Mother arrives and shoots the Marquis in the head.

Carter here changes the traditional story of Bluebeard to make her version more unabashedly feminist and inspiring. In the original tale, the Heroine would have been rescued by her brothers, but in this ending the "hero" rescuing the "damsel in distress" is another woman--and furthermore, a woman with experience killing "beasts" (like the tiger, and like other Beasts in later stories of the collection) and asserting herself powerfully. The mother appears only briefly, but she is an inspiring figure, like one of Carter's young heroines all grown up.

The Courtship of Mr Lyon Quotes

How strange he was. She found his bewildering difference from herself almost intolerable; its presence choked her. There seemed a heavy, soundless pressure upon her in his house, as if it lay under water, and when she saw the great paws lying on the arm of his chair, she thought: they are the death of any tender herbivore. And such a one she felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial.

Related Characters: Beauty, The Beast (The Courtship of Mr. Lyon)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

This next story is one of two based on the fairy-tale "Beauty and the Beast." Here Beauty has come to live with the titular Beast. The Beast, later Mr. Lyon, is an intimidating, wild-looking creature, frightening to any "herbivores" (which the virginal, harmless heroine considers herself to be, no matter what she might actually eat). In this passage, Beauty has taken her father's place in the Beast's home, as punishment for her father's decision to steal a rose from the Beast. Beauty feels that she's a helpless object, a sacrificial lamb to be consumed by the Beast: she's sacrificed herself to free her father, after all.

> The Beast sunk his great head on to his paws. You will come back to me? It will be lonely here, without you.

She was moved almost to tears that he should care for her so. It was in her heart to drop a kiss upon his shaggy mane but, though she stretched out her hand towards him, she could not bring herself to touch him of her own free will, he was so different from herself. But, yes, she said; I will come back. Soon, before the winter is over.

Related Characters: The Beast (The Courtship of Mr. Lyon), Beauty (speaker), Beauty, The Beast (The Courtship of Mr. Lyon)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Beauty plans to leave the Beast to visit her father, whose legal troubles are over. The Beast is devastated that Beauty wants to leave: he's lonely in his home, and wants her as a companion. Beauty promises to return to the Beast at some point in the future, as they've now forged a strong bond in their time together. She seems sympathetic to the Beast's loneliness, and yet she can't entirely force herself to show her physical compassion for him. The Beast is so ugly and frightening-looking that she doesn't want to kiss him.

The passage shows Beauty in a halfway point in her relationship with the Beast. By the end of the story, she'll have conquered her own aversions and kissed him--but this connection will require a metamorphosis of some kind. For now, however, Beauty seems somehow insensitive and selfish for leaving the Beast so readily (and when she reunites with her father, she doesn't return to the Beast for a long time).

> She flung herself upon him, so that the iron bedstead groaned, and covered his poor paws with her kisses. "Don't die, Beast! If you'll have me, I'll never leave you." When her lips touched the meat-hook claws, they drew back into their pads and she saw how he had always kept his fists clenched but now, painfully, tentatively, at last began to stretch his fingers. Her tears fell on his face like snow and, under their soft transformation, the bones showed through the pelt, the flesh through the wide, tawny brow. And then it was no longer a lion in her arms but a man...

Related Characters: Beauty (speaker), The Beast (The Courtship of Mr. Lyon), Beauty

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50-51

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, a sly subversion of the "Beauty and the Beast" story, Beauty returns to the Beast and finds herself full of sympathy and love for her old companion. The Beast seems to be dying of loneliness, and Beauty promises to love the Beast forever. She kisses his paws, only to notice that they've transformed into hands--the Beast has been transformed into a human being, thanks to the power of Beauty's love. (The image of his claws and paws as just being "clenched fists" that are now finally opening is also a lovely one, blending the animal and human as Carter often does.)

The Tiger's Bride Quotes

> And The Beast gave me the rose from his own impeccable if outmoded buttonhole when he arrived, the valet brushing the snow off his black cloak. This white rose, unnatural, out of season, that now my nervous fingers ripped, petal by petal, apart as my father magnificently concluded the career he had made of catastrophe.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Tiger's Bride) (speaker), The Beast (The Tiger's Bride)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52-53

Explanation and Analysis

In this story, a kind of inversion of the previous one (but another re-interpretation of Beauty and the Beast), the Heroine watches as her father gambles away all his money to the Beast. The Beast gives the Heroine a white rose, which the Heroine nervously rips apart, reflecting her father's plummeting fortunes (and also calls back to the first story, where the Marquis stripped away the Heroine's clothes like the leaves of an artichoke). Soon, we sense, the father will be forced to gamble away the Heroine herself.

Now that we're at the third story, it's clear that certain images, characters, and motifs will reappear in different manifestations throughout the book: roses, beasts, virgins, etc. Carter changes the significance of such objects and characters, however: here, it's not that the Heroine sacrifices herself for her father, as in the previous story; rather, the father selfishly gives up his own child to please the Beast. The Heroine's frantic ripping might symbolize the loss of her innocence and virginity: as we'll see, her time with the Beast will bring out her inner wildness.

> The valet held out his master's cloak to screen him from me as he removed the mask. The horses stirred.
> The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers.
> A great, feline, tawny shape whose pelt was barred with a savage geometry of bars the colour of burned wood. His domed, heavy head, so terrible he must hide... I felt my breast ripped apart as if I suffered a marvelous wound.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Tiger's Bride) (speaker), Valet, The Beast (The Tiger's Bride)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

The Beast, now the "owner" of the Heroine, has repeatedly asked to see the Heroine naked--but she has refused. Here, the Beast responds by saying that the Heroine must then see the *Beast* naked. He thenstrips off his own clothes, revealing his true nature. Carter builds the suspense by describing the way the valet (also seemingly an animal in disguise) hides the Beast, and noting that the horses are stirring. When the Beast has removed his clothes, it's clear that he's really a tiger. The Heroine, metaphorically, is a sweet, virginal lamb--a creature that simply doesn't get along with tigers.

Can tigers and lambs get along? Carter gives us the sense that the Beast's wildness and savage beauty is inspiring the Heroine to be wild, too--to cast aside her lamb-like demeanor and reveal herself as a new being. The final lines suggest that the Heroine, too, is "stirring," as Carter again equates sexuality and violence in a single phrase.

> He dragged himself closer and closer to me, until I felt the harsh velvet of his head against my hand, then a tongue, abrasive as sandpaper. "He will lick the skin off me!"
> And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Tiger's Bride) (speaker), The Beast (The Tiger's Bride)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In this lyrical, dreamlike passage, the Beast turns the Heroine into a tiger, just like himself--an inversion of the previous story and of the legend of Beauty and the Beast (both of which involve the Beast becoming a man, rather than the Beauty becoming a Beast). Here the Beast licks the Heroine's skin--an unmistakably sexual act--until it tears off, revealing the tiger that was "hidden" within the Heroine all along. It's important to note that the Beast hasn't really changed the Heroine at all; he's just unlocked her potential.

At the beginning of the story, the Heroine seemed quiet and shy--now, the Beast seems to have saved her from her own repression, teaching her how to be powerful and independent. He's violent with her, and yet his violence might be justified by the end result. The Beast, a man, is still very much the actor in the story: the Heroine, a woman, is more passive, waiting to be transformed into something better. We also have the usual elements of Carter's stories

in this scene--a transformation, layers being stripped away, and a conflation of sexuality, violence, and liberation.

"Let's get him to a softer bed," says Master.
He ups the corpse, carries it aloft to the room we know full well, bumps Pantaloon down, twitches an eyelid, taps a kneecap, feels a pulse.
"Dead as a doornail," he pronounces. "It's not a doctor you want, it's an undertaker."
Missus has a handkerchief very dutifully and correctly to her eyes.
"You just run along and get one," she says to hag. "And then I'll read the will. Because don't think he's forgotten you..."
So off goes hag; you never saw a woman of her accumulated Christmases sprint so fast. As soon as they are left alone, no trifling, this time; they're at it, hammer and tongs, down on the carpet since the bed is occupé.

Related Characters: Master, Young Woman, Figaro (speaker), Signor Panteleone, Hag

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

In this story, the tone changes drastically, though the themes remain generally the same. By now, Puss's Master has finally gotten what he wants: his lover's husband, Signor Panteleone, has tripped and fallen to his death, leaving the lover free to marry the Master. The Master and his lover quickly get everyone out of the house, save for Signor Panteleone himself, who's lying dead in bed. Then, the two lovers proceed to have sex on the carpet (since the bed is "occupé," or occupied, albeit by a corpse).

The short story comes to an end with the indelible image of two people making love next to the body of one of the lovers' dead husband. Though this story is in a very different tone than most of the others, this scene still intimately connects sex with violence, and love with death.

The Erl-King Quotes

In the evenings when the cold darkness settles down, I always go to the Erl-King and he lays me down on his bed of rustling straw where I lie at the mercy of his huge hands.
He is the tender butcher who showed me how the price of flesh is love; skin the rabbit, he says! Off come all my clothes.

Related Characters: The Erl-King, Heroine (The Erl-King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

In this story, the Heroine has become the live-in lover of the Erl-King, a powerful elfish figure who lives in the forest. Like so may of the women in Carter's short story collection, the Heroine seems simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the Erl-King: she enjoys the feeling of domination (being treated like a "piece of meat"), and yet also finds his brutality and objectification repellent. Carter sums up the Heroine's attitude toward the Erl-King with one oxymoronic phrase: "tender butcher."

As in several other stories involving "metamorphoses," the Erl-King seems to be singularly fixated on removing "layers"--an act that's both liberating and violent. He gets pleasure from stripping away clothes skin, fur, etc. The Heroine likewise seems to enjoy the Erl-King's actions, and yet also recognizes how dangerous they can be.

When I realized what the Erl-King meant to do to me, I was shaken with a terrible fear and did not know what to do for I loved him with all my heart and yet I had no wish to join the whistling congregation he kept in his cages... His embraces were his enticements and yet, oh yet! they were the branches of which the trap itself was woven. But in his innocence he never knew he might be the death of me, although I knew from the first moment I saw him how Erl-King would do me grievous harm.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Erl-King) (speaker), The Erl-King

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Heroine becomes aware that the birds the Erl-King keeps in cages are actually past lovers of his: if the Heroine stays with the Erl-King for any longer he'll surely transform her into an animal. And Carter's choice ofanimal is no coincidence: birds in cages are traditional symbols of women being stifled and kept under a man's control.

The Heroine is conflicted in her feelings toward the Erl-King: she really does love him, and yet she values her freedom more highly than her love. She seems to find something inevitable about her falling-out with the Erl-King: indeed, she claims to have recognized that he was trouble from the very beginning. It's worth noticing that in this story, the Heroine is more active than in many of the previous stories: she's a character with agency, journeying to and from the forest and fighting against the allure of domesticity and male domination (i.e., being a bird in a cage).

❝ I shall take two huge handfuls of his rustling hair as he lies half dreaming, half waking, and wind them into ropes, very softly, so he will not wake up, and, softly, with hands as gentle as rain, I shall strangle him with them.
Then she will open all the cages and let the birds free; they will change back into young girls, every one, each with the crimson imprint of his love-bite on their throats.

Related Characters: Heroine (The Erl-King) (speaker), The Erl-King

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're told how the Heroine strangles the Erl-King with his own hair--an allusion, perhaps, to the Biblical story of Samson, another tale about a man's downfall caused by hair (and a woman). The Heroine's act of murder is both brutal and tender; it's as if she's making love to him one last time, rather than choosing to spend the rest of her days in a cage.

The passage is surprising in that it transitions back and forth between the present and future tenses, and between the first and second persons. It's as if the ferocity of the Heroine's feelings about the Erl-King are shattering her own consciousness, causing a kind of out-of-body experience--or else that Carter is delving deeper into the singsong, fairy-tale world of her stories. Furthermore, the disjointedness of the passage makes us wonder if the Heroine ever actually kills the Erl-King, or if she's only *imagining* a murder, from the security of a birdcage. Even in this passage, when the Heroine is dominating the Erl-King, the conditional syntax suggests the Heroine's weakness and hesitation (echoing the freed women, who still retain the Erl-King's "love-bite"), making us wonder how complete her rebellion is.

The Lady of the House of Love Quotes

❝ He has the special quality of virginity, most and least ambiguous of states: ignorance, yet at the same time, power in potentia, and, furthermore, unknowingness, which is not the same as ignorance. He is more than he knows – and has about him, besides, the special glamour of that generation for whom history has already prepared a special, exemplary fate in the trenches of France. This being, rooted in change and time, is about to collide with the timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires, for whom all is as it has always been and will be, whose cards always fall in the same pattern.

Related Characters: The Countess (The Lady of the House of Love), Young Man (The Lady of the House of Love)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Here the vampirish Countess's future victim, a Young Man, enters the story. The Man is virginal, historical rather than fantastical (he will later die in World War I), and intensely rational. And yet the Young Man, in encountering the Countess, is about to be sucked back into the past, into Carter's fairy-tale world of sex, magic, and violence, in which time is an illusion.

There are a few things worth noting here. First, Carter alludes to real historical events (WWI) and purposefully has them collide with the timeless fairy tales she has been reinventing. Second, the roles of men and women are somewhat reversed in this story, as the Young Man is the innocent, virginal "hero" about to encounter the sexual and violent "Beast" (the vampiric Lady). Third, Carter here reiterates the power of virginity as a concept--rather than just being a kind of blankness or ignorance, virginity has its own power in its potential, in its innocence and purity.

❝ Owls shriek; the impedimenta of her condition squeak and gibber all around us. Now you are at the place of annihilation, now you are at the place of annihilation. She turns her head away from the blue beams of his eyes; she knows no other consummation than the only one she can offer him. She has not eaten for three days. It is dinner-time. It is bedtime.

Related Characters: The Countess (The Lady of the House of Love), Young Man (The Lady of the House of Love)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Countess feels the anticipation of the moment: soon, she's going to seduce and kill the Young Man, as she has always done. Carter associates the Countess's seduction with nothingness itself: she's going to annihilate the Young Man (and the sudden change of tense to second-person makes this encounter especially poignant and powerful). It's important to distinguish the Countess's seduction from some of the others in the book: unlike the Beast who shows the Heroine how to be a tiger, the Countess won't be adding anything to or revealing anything within her virginal victim; she'll just be annihilating him. The final lines of the passage also make clear once again how sex and violence, love and death are intricately intertwined. To the Lady, they are exactly the same--dinnertime is bedtime.

She is not sleeping.
In death, she looked far older, less beautiful and so, for the first time, fully human.
I will vanish in the morning light; I was only an invention of darkness. And I leave you as a souvenir the dark, fanged rose I plucked from between my thighs, like a flower laid on a grave.
On a grave.

Related Characters: The Countess (The Lady of the House of Love) (speaker), The Countess (The Lady of the House of Love)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Here the Young Man discovers that the Countess has been transformed into a mortal woman, and has died. The night before, she had her own blood sucked, reversing her vampirish identity and giving her the ambiguous "gift" of mortality. There is then another lyrical change of tense, as the narrator assumes the voice of the dead Countess, speaking once more in the second-person from beyond the grave (but with a universal, poetic voice that could come from many of the characters in the story sequence.) In the final lines the Countess doesn't seem angry with the Young Man for bringing death to her; on the contrary, she leaves him a strange memento of their time together--"a dark, fanged rose I plucked from between my thighs." In this brief image Carter condenses many of her themes and motifs: beauty, death, sex, virginity, violence, and roses.

The Company of Wolves Quotes

She stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing.

Related Characters: Child (The Company of Wolves)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Here, we're introduced to the heroine of this short story, the child. The child, like most of Carter's heroines, is a virgin; furthermore, she thinks of her youth and virginity as sources of power, rather than weaknesses. Virginity, its own kind of "chamber," as described here, will protect the child--or so she thinks--during her journey through the dark, dangerous forest. (This also echoes Carter's description of the Young Man's virginity in "The Lady of the House of Love.")

The passage is interesting in the way that it subverts various stereotypes of femininity and weakness. The child is a virgin, and yet she seems empowered by her own virginity; she's an innocent girl, and yet she carries a phallic, violent knife. In short, the child is at once mature and immature, a mess of contradictions and ambiguities--like most of the book's heroines.

Every wolf in the world now howled a prothalamion outside the window as she freely gave the kiss she owed him.
What big teeth you have!...
All the better to eat you with.
The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing...
Carnivore incarnate, only immaculate flesh appeases him.

Related Characters: Huntsman, Child (The Company of Wolves) (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, the child (a version of Little Red Riding-Hood) arrives at her grandmother's house and finds the wolf, waiting in bed, disguised as her own grandmother, as other wolves howl a "prothalamion" (a celebration of a marriage) outside. In this retelling, the child isn't fooled or frightened in the slightest: she recognizes the wolf for what he is. And yet the child seems to play along with the wolf's charade: she praises the wolf, and freely offers the kiss he asks for. And when it's time for the wolf to "eat" her, the child instead seduces the wolf, using her confidence and sexuality to conquer him. Unlike the heroines of other previous stories, who are described in terms of food or meat, the child knows she is "nobody's meat."

The passage shows the child using her sexuality and femininity as weapons--asserting her own agency and independence. With sexuality, the child saves her own life; furthermore, she seems to be genuinely enjoying herself, savoring the danger of having sex with a carnivorous wolf. As in some of the other stories in the book, the child emerges victorious by undergoing a metamorphosis into a "wolf" herself; i.e., by transforming from a virgin into a sexualized, "man-eating" beast.

❝ It is Christmas Day, the werewolves' birthday, the door of the solstice stands wide open; let them all sink through. See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf.

Related Characters: Huntsman, Child (The Company of Wolves)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

The story ends on Christmas Day, with the child and the wolf sitting in bed together. In yet another kind of transformation, the wolf has become a calm, domesticated creature, with "paws" instead of claws, and a "tender" demeanor (recalling the earlier description of the Erl-King as a "tender butcher). By the same token, the child has changed from a shy, virginal girl to a wolfish, sexualized young woman who knows how to assert herself confidently.

The passage suggests that the child and the wolf have reached a kind of pact, meeting each other halfway. The strongest relationship, Carter suggests, is always a "meeting halfway"--as in the book's other stories, the beast might become a human, but the human must also become something of the beast. Furthermore, the passage reiterates some of the images of "Puss in Boots" by showing the characters making love in a dead woman's bed--the thrill of death seems to make the characters' lust more intense.

Wolf-Alice Quotes

❝ The wolves had tended her because they knew she was an imperfect wolf; we secluded her in animal privacy out of fear of her imperfection because it showed us what we might have been, and so time passed, although she scarcely knew it. Then she began to bleed.

Related Characters: Wolf-Alice

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we meet "Wolf-Alice" after she has already been raised by wolves, and then "rescued" by humans. The nuns who find her seek to raise her, but then she begins to "bleed" (menstruate), and they decide to give her up to the Duke, a werewolf.

As in most of the stories in the book, a kind of metamorphosis is a central aspect of "Wolf-Alice." At this point, Alice is in a transition state--not a wolf, but not a true human either. This is then connected to her menstruation as another transition state, one involving both sex and violence (blood); she is becoming a woman, and virginity is giving way to sexuality. It's especially notable that Alice is staying with nuns--who embrace virginity and chastity and fear sexuality--and they only give her up once she begins to "bleed."

❝ Poor, wounded thing... locked half and half between such strange states, an aborted transformation, an incomplete mystery, now he lies writhing on his black bed like a Mycenaean tomb, howls like a wolf with his foot in a trap or a woman in labour, and bleeds.

Related Characters: Wolf-Alice, The Duke

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story (the last in the book), the Duke, a werewolf, has been shot. He lies in bed, wounded, caught halfway between wolf and man. Carter notes the feminized aspects of his character: he looks like a woman giving birth, and he "bleeds" like a menstruating woman (as Alice was described earlier in the story).To be caught halfway between wolf and man, then, is also to be caught halfway between man and woman.

Like many of the characters in the book, the Duke is an androgynous character: even at his most hyper-masculine, Carter portrays him using feminizing language. Because of Wolf-Alice, the Duke will eventually transform toward the human, masculine side of his being, and yet here, he's caught halfway--man and woman, human and wolf.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE BLOODY CHAMBER

The heroine remembers the train ride as she left Paris with her new husband. She thinks of leaving her mother, a strong, independent woman who had fought pirates and killed a tiger in her youth. The mother asks if the heroine loves her husband, and the heroine admits that she does not, but she is still determined to marry him. The mother accepts that the marriage will lift their family from poverty, as the heroine's husband is very rich and a Marquis. The mother herself had been "beggared" by love, marrying a poor soldier who died at war.

This first story introduces many of the motifs Carter finds in the fairy tales and emphasizes – here there is a poor, virginal heroine being "rescued" by a wealthy, experienced man. Though many of the stories deal with the objectification of women, Carter also gives her heroines a more sympathetic voice and more agency in their fates. Here she also introduces a strong female character in the heroine's mother.

The heroine sits on the train and remembers her husband's raspy beard as he kissed her. She is on the way to a famously luxurious French castle, surrounded by the sea – her new home. The heroine muses on certain things about her husband. He is a very big man, but he moves quietly and used to sneak up on her as she was playing the piano. She could only tell he was coming because of his constant scent of spiced Russian leather.

"The Bloody Chamber" is based on the story of Bluebeard – a rich, ugly man with a blue beard who entrusts his keys to his wife. The wife then discovers a room full of the bodies of Bluebeard's previous wives. Bluebeard returns and threatens to behead the wife, but her brothers save her and kill Bluebeard.

The Marquis is much older than the heroine, but his face is unlined and seems almost like a mask. The heroine compares his face to an arum lily, pale, unmoving, and "funereal." He had given her a ring with a fiery opal in it, and the heroine's old nurse had complained about it, saying that opals were bad luck. The nurse also mentioned the Marquis' previous three wives, and the last who had recently died.

Carter will repeat the image of a mask-like face in describing the powerful, bestial men of her stories. This helps create the image of the Marquis as a kind of monster, half sophisticated aristocrat, half sadistic murderer (as we will see).

The heroine is only seventeen years old and an inexperienced virgin, and she wonders why the Marquis has chosen her as his fourth wife. Before her he was married to a Romanian countess, who drowned three months before the Marquis met the heroine. Before that the Marquis was married to a famous model who drank herself to death, and his first wife was an opera singer. The heroine had once seen her singing the part of Isolde in the opera *Tristan*.

Carter emphasizes virginity as an important theme, as most of her heroines are virgins. She will show that virginity has a kind of power "in potential," despite its inherent innocence. For the heroine here, it is her virginity that lured the Marquis to marry her. "Tristan" is a tale of doomed lovers, associating sexuality with violence.

The heroine describes the Marquis as "rich as Croesus." The night before their wedding he had taken her (coincidentally) to see *Tristan*, and everyone in the crowd admired the heroine for being with him. On that night she was wearing a delicate white dress and the Marquis' wedding gift, a ruby choker, around her neck. It was supposed to look like a slit throat, and was a kind of necklace that came into fashion after the French Revolution was over.

From the start of their relationship, the Marquis is in a position of total power over the heroine – he is rich, she is poor; he is experienced, she is innocent; he is older, she is young. In the French Revolution many aristocrats were beheaded, so the ruby choker mocks this past. It also shows the Marquis' penchant for violence and beauty, and prefigures the heroine's eventual fate.

At the opera the heroine saw herself in the mirror and saw the Marquis looking at her with "carnal avarice." The heroine saw how innocent she herself appeared, and her own "potentiality for corruption." The next day she had married the Marquis.

Carter introduces a feminist angle to old stories by drawing out their "latent" sexual oppression and objectification of women. She was more radical than most feminists of her time, however, for implying that women can also support and collude in their own objectification – like the heroine being aroused by the Marquis' cruel lust.

In the present the train stops as the heroine arrives at the Marquis' castle. He emerges from the train next to her and lights a huge cigar. She feels suddenly apprehensive and afraid, but the Marquis hands her down to a chauffeur. The chauffeur looks at the heroine and she imagines he is contrasting her with the Marquis' other wives. They get into a car and drive towards the castle as the dawn breaks colorfully around them.

The chauffeur (or valet) of the rich man is another motif Carter will repeat throughout the book. The heroine feels herself objectified, but she is still enthralled enough by the Marquis that she wants to be a worthy object for him – as good as his earlier wives.

The heroine approaches the castle, which is beautiful but lonely, and totally cut off from the mainland at high tide. The Marquis kisses the heroine's hand and leads her inside. Every room is huge, luxurious, and full of the sounds of the surrounding ocean. The heroine interviews the housekeeper (who was the Marquis' foster mother) and feels small and silly, remembering her recent poverty. But then she looks around at all the grandeur that is now hers and she imagines herself "Queen of the Sea."

Carter builds the tension and sets the scene of the heroine's fate – the castle is just isolated enough to trap her when the time comes. The extreme wealth of the male/monstrous characters adds to the baroque and gothic tone of the stories. The heroine is constantly reminded of her own innocence and powerlessness when facing all this luxury.

The Marquis leads the heroine into the bedroom. The bed is surrounded by many mirrors and white lilies, and the heroine sees herself reflected twelve times over. She watches as her husband approaches and starts to undress her. The heroine feels ashamed and "vulgar," and soon she stands there naked except for her ruby choker, and her husband is still fully clothed. The Marquis then smiles and leaves. The heroine feels herself aroused but also frightened by her own arousal and her husband's lily-like face.

Mirrors are another important recurring motif throughout the book. The heroine is able to see herself reflected many times and see what an object she has become. The "funereal" lilies reflect the Marquis' mask-like face. The "pornographic confrontation," where the woman is naked and the man is clothed, is another important image of power and objectification.

The heroine wraps a robe around herself and goes to find the piano in the house. She plays a little but it is out of tune because of the constant sea breezes. She is already bored and dreading the hours until the wedding night, so she explores the Marquis' library. The heroine examines the ornate books and then finds a collection of ancient, sadistic pornography.

Carter had studied and written about the Marquis de Sade, the source of the word "sadism" and the connection between violence and sexual arousal. In Carter's version of the story, Bluebeard is not only a murderer but is sexually aroused by inflicting pain.

The Marquis appears behind the heroine, calling her his "little nun" and "Baby," and mocking her innocence. Then he kisses her lustfully and pins her choker back around her neck. He leads her back into the bedroom, and the heroine complains that it is still daylight, but the Marquis says "All the better to see you." Then they have sex, which the heroine thinks of as being "impaled," and she watches the act replicated a dozen times in the mirrors around the bed.

The Marquis is clearly aroused by the heroine's virginity and her "potential for corruption." "All the better to see you" is a reference to the Little Red Riding Hood stories Carter will deal with later. Part of the "latent content" she draws out of the fairy tales is their similarities in theme and image. The connections between sexuality and violence grow more explicit as the heroine loses her virginity by being "impaled."

Afterwards the Marquis falls asleep and the heroine thinks about her lost virginity. Then the phone rings and the Marquis answers. He says he must go to New York on urgent business for several weeks. The heroine complains that it is their honeymoon, but the Marquis says a huge amount of money depends on this trip. The heroine feels like a silly girl of no importance, and she realizes that the Marquis has had too many honeymoons to think of them as special occasions anymore. He promises that they will have dinner together before he leaves.

Images of "bloody chambers" reappear throughout the book, and though the principle bloody chamber of this story will be revealed soon, Carter also connects this place of violence to the female anatomy – as the heroine losing her virginity causes her to bleed, and is a kind of "impalement." The Marquis shows his total power over her by abandoning her on their wedding night.

Soon afterward the heroine joins the Marquis for some wine and coffee, and the Marquis makes her change into the white dress she wore to the opera, and he won't let her take off her ruby choker. The Marquis references their bloody bedsheets and says that this is the first time his wife has been a virgin. The heroine realizes that it is her innocence and virginity that allured the Marquis to marry her.

The Marquis enjoys the image of the heroine as both innocent (her white dress) and corrupted (the ruby choker suggesting both opulence and violence). The heroine is still supporting her own objectification, and feels that the Marquis' love for her will protect her from his more sadistic tendencies.

The Marquis then takes out a ring of many heavy iron keys. He gives them to the heroine and says he is entrusting the house to her while he is away. He shows her his picture gallery, where there are portraits like *The Sacrificial Victim* and The *Foolish Virgins*. The Marquis then gazes at the heroine's face and says she is innocent but with a "promise of debauchery." The heroine blushes, but again feels her own potential for corruption.

The Marquis explicitly states his objectification and lust, showing just how much power he has over the heroine in this situation. Again the heroine is slightly aroused by this – she still has a little agency, but chooses to collude in her own fate.

The Marquis gives her the keys to his office and to his safes full of jewels and share certificates. He lingers over one last key until the heroine has to ask about it. The Marquis says it is the only key forbidden to her, as it leads to a "dull little room" that he likes to keep secret and private, where he can go at times and pretend he is still a bachelor. The Marquis then tells the heroine that he has requested a piano-tuner to join the full-time staff, and then he leaves, driving away towards the mainland.

This is the traditional scene from the Bluebeard story, but part of the treasure the Marquis entrusts to his wife is his collection of pornographic art. The story is also modernized by historical details and the fact that the Marquis drives a car. The piano tuner (and the heroine as a pianist) is another added detail, one that gives the heroine more of her own character, other than victim.

That night the heroine tosses and turns, both longing for her husband and repulsed by him. She wonders if all her new riches are worth his "mastery" over her. She allows herself a moment of jealousy, imagining he is off to visit a mistress, but then she finally falls asleep. As she dreams she imagines the lilies around the bed are like "dismembered arms."

The rose is usually the symbolic flower in this book, but in the first story the white lily takes its place as the symbol of both beauty and horror. The heroine begins to question if her objectification is worth it – indicating that she has more agency than just a stereotype.

The heroine wakes up late and is given a luxurious breakfast in bed. Then she goes to the newly-tuned piano and plays for three hours. She calls in the piano-tuner, who is young and blind and comes from the town on the mainland. He asks to hear the heroine play sometimes, as he loves music, and she agrees.

The piano tuner is the opposite of the Marquis – blind, poor, powerless, and kind – yet he is the one the heroine is drawn to more naturally. The piano tuner is one of Carter's few examples of men that are not bestial and oppressive.

The heroine upsets the routine of the house by refusing her "five o'clock," and the housekeeper grows annoyed. The heroine then orders an outrageous dinner, delighting in her newfound liberty and wealth, but then she finds herself bored again. She takes a bath and then calls her mother. The heroine starts crying involuntarily as soon as she hears her mother's voice, but she assures her mother that everything is fine.

The mother replaces the brothers of the original Bluebeard story. Carter changes the story from the typical "damsel-in-distress" situation to also include a strong mother-daughter relationship. The main example of the mother's strength and independence is that she once killed a tiger – a reference to later stories.

The heroine then decides to explore her new domain, and she uses the keys to go through all the rooms, turning on all the lights. She then decides to discover her husband's "true nature." She goes to his office and examines the jewels in his safe. The maid says her dinner is ready, but the heroine refuses it and dismisses the servants. The heroine then searches through the Marquis' desk, but she finds nothing personal at all except for some possible references to criminal activities in foreign lands. She feels he must have many secrets if he conceals them so well.

The heroine is still intrigued by her husband's mystery and vague aura of danger. She feels safe because he seems smitten with her, even though it is obvious that he has all the power in their relationship. Like Eve in the Garden of Eden, or the story of Pandora's Box, Bluebeard is another story where a woman is punished for being too curious.

Finally the heroine finds a file marked "Personal," and inside is a letter from one of the Marquis' earlier wives, the Romanian countess. The heroine feels intimidated by her wit and sophistication. As she closes the office door the key ring opens and all the keys clatter to the floor. The heroine happens to pick up the forbidden key first among the pile, and she impulsively decides to explore her husband's secret room. She is momentarily afraid, but comforted by how much the Marquis seems to like her.

The Romanian countess is another nod to later stories in the book. The heroine decides to visit her husband's secret room to gain knowledge about him – much like Eve eating the apple or Pandora opening the box. Carter is reimagining these archetypal tales by removing the brunt of the blame from the heroine.

The heroine goes down beneath the west tower and passes through a hallway draped in tapestries depicting some gruesome Medieval rape. There is no electricity in the hall, so the heroine gets some matches and tapers and continues. She comes to a door and unlocks it with the forbidden key.

The heroine seems to go back in time as she approaches the chamber, returning to the setting of the mythical original tale. Every object in the castle seems to contain references to both sex and violence.

In the darkness the heroine starts to see outlines of torture instruments, and she thinks of a quote from Baudelaire, the Marquis' favorite poet, about the resemblance between "the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer." The heroine sees a rack, a wheel, and an Iron Maiden, and then her match goes out. She then realizes she has inherited her mother's courage, as she becomes suddenly determined to discover the full truth.

The "bloody chamber," like the female body it symbolizes, is a place of both violence and enlightenment. It is here that the heroine learns the truth about her husband, but also where he tortures and kills his wives. The connection between sexuality and violence is made unbearably explicit.

The heroine lights another match and approaches a huge, ornate coffin at the center of the **torture chamber**. Inside she sees the embalmed body of the opera singer, the Marquis' first wife. The heroine then sees the skull of his second wife, the model, hanging disembodied in the air. Wondering about the Romanian countess, the heroine opens the Iron Maiden. Inside is the dead woman, pierced by spikes and still bloody, and the shocked heroine accidentally drops the key into her pooling blood. She wonders how recently the countess was killed, and whether she was still being tortured while the Marquis courted the heroine herself.

This is the enlightenment that brings about a kind of metamorphosis in the heroine. No longer can she be enthralled by her husband's wealth, power, and experience. In the chamber she discovers both the depths of his sadism and her own courage and seemingly inevitable fate. Like the Erl-King in a later story, the Marquis lures in women and traps them, making them into pure objects – in his case, objects of lust, torture, and macabre display.

The heroine then closes the Iron Maiden and starts to weep, realizing that she is doomed to die just like these other women. She picks up the key and flees the **bloody chamber**. She runs through the house, afraid to return to the bedroom and not trusting any of the servants or even the townspeople on the mainland, as the Marquis and his family had ruled this area for centuries. The heroine tries to call her mother for help, but the telephone line is dead.

Like many of the other virginal heroines in Carter's stories, the heroine here feels herself as a sacrificial lamb, innocent and doomed to be slaughtered by a monstrous man. The Marquis' wealth means his power extends even beyond his castle, and so it becomes symbolic of the oppressive patriarchy in general.

The heroine tries to comfort herself with the thought that the Marquis is leaving the country for a while, so she will surely have time to escape. She sits down at the piano and plays, hoping to create a "pentacle out of music" to protect herself. Then she hears a crash and fears the Marquis has returned, but it is only Jean-Yves, the blind piano-tuner, who was listening outside the door. He bashfully praises her talent, and she praises the perfect tuning of the piano.

Carter repeats the image of a protecting pentacle several times, but usually it is associated with a character's virginity. Here the heroine has her own source of power in her music, now that her virginity has been taken. Again the kind piano tuner is contrasted with the Marquis.

The heroine is suddenly overcome by her revelation in the "**bloody chamber**" and Jean-Yves' innocent humanity, and she faints. When she awakes Jean-Yves tends to her, and the heroine tells him everything she has learned about the Marquis. She takes out the forbidden key to show him, and Jean-Yves embraces her, describing old legends of an earlier Marquis who had hunted girls for sport. The heroine realizes that though she did not know the extent of the Marquis' evil, she had always known that he "would be the death of" her.

The heroine acknowledges that she has taken part in her predicament, that she was intrigued by the Marquis' dark and mysterious desires. She did not know the extent of his evil, but she is still not totally blameless. Ironically, this is another way Carter gives the heroine agency – she is not just a victim, but also contributes in a small way to the sexual violence of the story. The Marquis' descendants have always abused their power over women.

Suddenly the heroine sees the Marquis' car approaching the castle. She tries to wipe the blood off of the key, but it remains in the mark of a heart and doesn't come off even with water. Jean-Yves offers to stay and protect her, but the heroine sends him away. She takes off her clothes and gets into bed and then the Marquis appears, kissing her tenderly and saying that his business deal fell through.

The story takes on a more magical-realist element here as the bloody mark seals itself to the key. This is another reflection of the bloody sheets of the heroine's lost virginity and other emblems of sex and violence that will appear in the book. Instead of saving the "damsel," the male hero is powerless and she sends him away.

The heroine realizes he is lying, and that all of this has been part of his plan the whole time. She is like Pandora, destined to open the fatal box. The Marquis starts to undress and then pretends to have misplaced his keys. He exaggeratedly reminds himself that his wife has them, and he asks for them. The heroine tries to distract him, but the Marquis grows suddenly serious and determined.

This has all been a part of the Marquis' sport – he married the heroine for her innocence, predicting the pleasure he could take in corrupting that innocence. He may have gone through this charade with all of his wives but the first one.

The heroine goes to get the keys from the music room and when she returns the Marquis is sitting with his head in his hands. He seems to emanate despair suddenly, and his sent of Russian leather reverts "to the elements of flayed hide and excrement" that it is made of. The heroine feels a sudden pity for her lonely, monstrous husband, and then she gives him the keys.

Carter deconstructs the Marquis' smell – a masculine, enticing aroma of Russian leather – to show how his dark glamour is more horrible than romantic. The heroine's pity for the monster will reoccur in other stories with literal monsters in them. In this way Carter adds empathy even to her bestial antagonist.

The Marquis sees the red mark, and the heroine cannot help sobbing. The Marquis seems almost sad for a moment, but then he orders his wife to kneel. He presses the key to her forehead and the mark transfers itself to her skin. He then says to "prepare yourself for martyrdom," and announces that he will behead her. He orders the heroine to put on her white dress and ruby choker, and he says he will go sharpen his ancestor's sword. The heroine asks about the servants, but the Marquis say he has already dismissed them.

The Marquis has a ritual for his murder, and it is clear that the heroine's outfit he likes most – the white dress of innocence and the ruby choker of violence – was foreshadowing the whole time, and he knew from the start how he would kill the heroine. She was an innocent "lamb" that the bestial Marquis has been readying for slaughter.

The heroine looks out the window and sees the exodus of servants leaving for the mainland, but she does not see Jean-Yves among them. The Marquis sends her to bathe herself and wait for him in the music room, warning her that the phone only works inside the castle, not for calls outside of it. The heroine leaves to bathe, and though she scrubs at it the red mark won't come off of her forehead. She gets dressed and watches herself in the twelve mirrors.

The red mark acts like a "scarlet letter" of shame, a blemish on the heroine's innocence, as the sheets were bloodied when she lost her virginity. The Marquis is so confident in his power over her that he assumes she will come when he calls and kneel before his sword.

The heroine then descends to the music room and finds Jean-Yves there. They look out at the ocean and Jean-Yves says that though the heroine disobeyed the Marquis, she was only doing what the Marquis knew she would – like Eve disobeying God in Eden. The phone rings and the Marquis summons the heroine to the courtyard. Jean-Yves, who the heroine now calls her "lover," kisses her and offers to come with her.

The heroine, like Eve, committed a small sin – the "sin" of seeking forbidden knowledge – but is being inordinately punished. With this comparison Carter also disturbs the archetypal character of Eve, making us sympathize with her as we do with the heroine.

They suddenly hear hoofbeats, and the heroine looks out the window and sees her mother riding madly towards the castle. The Marquis calls again, impatient, and then a third time as the heroine delays. Finally she goes down to the courtyard, leading Jean-Yves behind her. The Marquis is waiting with a sword, and he mocks Jean-Yves, saying that the heroine knew what she was getting into when she married him.

In the original Bluebeard story the heroine is saved by her brothers, but Carter makes her mother the rescuer instead. This adds an element of female agency to the story and combines with Carter's added character of Jean-Yves, who should be a traditional hero saving the damsel, but instead is totally helpless and unable to protect the heroine.

The Marquis calls the heroine "whore" and demands his opal ring back from her, saying it will serve for "a dozen more fiancées." He promises to kill Jean-Yves afterwards, in a less noble manner. The Marquis makes the heroine kneel and lay her head against a stone, though she keeps trying to delay. He comments on her pretty neck and kisses it, and then he cuts off her dress.

Now that the heroine has lost her virginity and innocence, her appeal for the Marquis is gone and she is just another object for him to use and discard. The Marquis disrobes the heroine as he prepares to kill her, creating the ultimate pornographic and sadistic situation where she is totally powerless.

The Marquis lifts his sword but at that moment the heroine's mother arrives at the gate. The Marquis hesitates and the heroine jumps up to open the gate with Jean-Yves. The Marquis stands transfixed in shock, watching his puppets "start to live for themselves," and the heroine's mother comes in looking fierce and wild, carrying her husband's revolver. The Marquis recovers and charges the three with his sword, but the mother, who had once killed a tiger in China, shoots the Marquis in the head.

Everything before this has all gone according the Marquis' plan, as the heroine acted as he expected she would. The mother interrupts his manipulations with her agency and independence. The Marquis is a "Beast" (like the Beasts of the later stories), and the mother already has experience killing a tiger – she is like one of Carter's young heroines grown up.

The story jumps to the future, where the heroine has inherited all the Marquis' wealth but gave most of it to charity. The castle is now a school for the blind, and the **bloody chamber** has been sealed and buried. The heroine has started a music school outside Paris, and she lives with her mother and Jean-Yves.

Many of the stories end with the heroine inheriting wealth and basically living "happily ever after." The heroine has given up all the power and manipulation inherent in the Marquis' world.

The heroine still doesn't know how her mother knew to come to the castle, except that it was some kind of "maternal telepathy." Her mother had rushed out immediately after the heroine's first phone call, despite the indignant warnings of the old nurse. The nurse had died soon afterward, after the heroine came home. The red mark still remains on the heroine's forehead, and she is glad Jean-Yves can't see it, as she is still ashamed.

The mother's protective instincts add a surprising element to the old story, and this is one of the few successful parent-child relationships in the book. The heroine is perhaps ashamed that she ever became involved with the Marquis, and went along with her own objectification and manipulation.

THE COURTSHIP OF MR LYON

Beauty, the heroine of this story, waits at home for her father to return. There is a snowstorm going on outside, and she fears for his safety. He promised to be home by nightfall but it is now dark out. Meanwhile her father's car is stuck in the snow. He had been in town meeting with lawyers and trying to "restore his fortunes," but with no success. He doesn't even have enough money to pay for gas or to buy a white **rose** for Beauty, the one gift she had requested.

This story is based on "Beauty and the Beast." The book is not a short story collection but a sequence, as Carter arranges each story in a purposeful order. The monstrosity of the Marquis will become more literal in "the Beast," and again the heroine is young and virginal. The symbol of the rose first appears, here representing Beauty's purity.

The father abandons his car and goes to look for help. He comes to the gate of a beautiful mansion, and he hears the roaring of an animal somewhere far away. The knocker on the door is made of gold and in the shape of a lion's head. Before he can knock, the door swings open by itself, and the father sees a huge, empty hall luxuriously decorated. A little spaniel dog with a diamond collar greets him and shows him into a study, where there is a fire in the fireplace and some whiskey and sandwiches.

The vast and mythical wealth of the Marquis returns here, but there is more of a magical element as this story is more of a "fairy tale." The spaniel acts as the archetypal valet. Again the heroine's family is poor, and the father is basically at the mercy of the Beast, though for now the Beast is hospitable and kind.

Still no one appears except the dog, but the father assumes that this strange hospitality is just the eccentricity of a very rich man. In the same room he finds a phone and a number for a rescue service, and the employee tells him that his host will pay the bill as is his custom. The father tries to call Beauty but the lines are down, and then the spaniel leads him out of the room, implying the "magical hospitality" is over.

Part of the "magical realist" style involves mixing fantastic elements into an everyday setting, and the characters accepting them as part of reality. Carter associates the Beast's strangeness and magic with the strangeness of the very wealthy, those who might also have more sinister whims like the Marquis.

As he walks out of the house to the gate, the father sees some snow fall from a rosebush and reveal a single perfect white rose. After a moment's hesitation the father picks the rose for Beauty, "because he loved his daughter." Suddenly all the lights go on in the mansion and the mysterious host appears. He is huge lion-like creature, and he angrily shakes Beauty's father and throws him to the ground, roaring that he is "the Beast" and that the father is a thief.

The Beast is the first of several "metamorphic" creatures Carter introduces, all of them living on a kind of threshold between worlds, in this case half-lion, half-man. Where the Marquis seemed to have a lily-like mask for a face, the Beast actually takes on the appearance of a lion.

The father begs the Beast's forgiveness, saying the **rose** was for his daughter, and he shows the Beast a picture of Beauty. Observing Beauty's beauty, the Beast allows the father to bring her the rose, but only if he will then bring Beauty back to have dinner with the Beast. The father agrees.

Part of the sacrificial aspect of virginity in this book involves the poor heroines giving themselves up to save their families from poverty or punishment. Beauty is a white rose now, but she is in danger of the corruption the heroine of the last story experienced.

Beauty returns to the Beast's house with her father, and though she is afraid she also pities the Beast for his wildness and sorrow. The Beast presides without eating over a fabulous feast, but Beauty finds the Beast's presence oppressive and feels herself as a sacrificial lamb. After dinner the Beast suggests that Beauty remain with him and her father resume his legal battles. Beauty realizes that this is inevitable, and that she will be the "price of her father's good fortune." She decides to remain for her father's sake.

This motif of the sacrificial lamb becomes almost literal, as the Beast is a lion, a hunter of herbivores. Beauty also has a good relationship with her father, as she is willing to sacrifice herself for his well-being. The Beast has a terrifying outward appearance, but a lonely and sympathetic soul – the opposite of the handsome, monstrous Marquis.

The next morning her father leaves, and Beauty moves into an opulent bedroom. She lives in comfort but has only the spaniel for company, as she never sees the Beast except in his study after dinner. There they sit and talk together. At first Beauty is afraid of him, but soon she grows comfortable and they spend hours talking. Just before they are about to separate and go to bed, the Beast flings himself at Beauty and kisses (licks) her hands.

Beauty lives in the kind of extravagance that the heroine of "The Bloody Chamber" did, but the Beast is nothing like the Marquis except in wealth and "beastliness." He seems just as virginal and shy as Beauty. They begin to connect but are from different worlds – he a lion and she a human.

The next day Beauty hears roaring in the hills and wonders if the Beast is hunting. She soon gets into a routine of whiling away the hours in comfort and silence and then talking with the Beast every night, and every night he kisses her hands just before they part. One day Beauty gets a phone call from her father, asking her to come to London, as he has regained his fortune. The Beast appears distressed and asks Beauty to return to him soon. Beauty promises to come back before winter ends. She wants to kiss him but still feels he is so "different from herself" and so she cannot. She takes a taxi off to London.

Beauty and the Beast begin to connect and fall in love, but their differences require a metamorphosis of some kind. The magical aspects of this are pulled straight from the fairy tale, but Carter also brings out their other qualities. She associates the act of love in the female body – menstruating and losing virginity – with a kind of magical transformation, one that brings both pain and enlightenment.

Beauty and her father live extravagantly in London, and though they talk often of the Beast his home starts to seem like a magical place in another life. Beauty sometimes sends him white **roses**, but because the seasons never seem to change in London she doesn't notice that winter is almost over. One night she comes back from the theatre late and looks at herself in the mirror, admiring her own prettiness.

Beauty has much more agency in this story, as the Beast does not abuse his power over her and is in fact more lovestruck than she is. Carter gives her heroines greater freedom, but with it come more flaws, as Beauty is seduced by the wealth and luxury that was part of the Marquis' draw for the first heroine.

Suddenly Beauty hears the sound of claws at the door and realizes that winter is over and she has broken her promise to the Beast. She opens the door and the spaniel enters, looking dirty and underfed. Beauty immediately takes a train out of London, fearing the Beast is dying. She reaches his estate and sees everything in decay and disrepair. The house is dark and full of mold and cobwebs.

Carter brings back the image of rotted and decaying opulence as much as she does that of extreme wealth. Though the Beast initially had all the power in the relationship, he has given it up out of love, sacrificing himself like a lamb instead of a lion.

Beauty lights a candle and makes her way to the Beast's small, humble bedroom. He is lying on the bed, looking small and ill. He tells Beauty he is dying, as he has lost the will to hunt and eat after she left him, but he will die happily now that she is there. Beauty flings herself at him and kisses the Beast's paws, promising never to leave him again.

The metamorphoses Carter describes often have physical, mental, and sexual qualities. The Beast has become less lion-like in his inability to hunt and kill, and also in his love of Beauty, so he is ready to be transformed from Beast to man.

As she kisses the Beast, Beauty notices his paws transforming into clenched fists, and he stretches his fingers out and transforms into a man – "Mr Lyon." Mr Lyon says he could eat something today, and then he and Beauty – Mr and Mrs Lyon – live happily ever after, walking with the spaniel through the garden.

Carter describes the metamorphosis in a beautiful, lyrical way, implying that the Beast could have been a man the whole time, just one with "clenched fists." This bedroom is a more poetic "bloody chamber," but still a place where love and sexuality cause enlightenment and transformation.

THE TIGER'S BRIDE

The heroine and her father have traveled from Russia to a city in the south, where the madness of warmth and luxury comes over the father, even though it is still winter. Everyone who stays in this city must play cards with a mysterious "Milord," who is also called "The Beast." The father has a gambling addiction, and he gleefully loses everything to The Beast as the heroine watches, angry and frightened.

This is another version of "Beauty and the Beast," one where Carter takes more liberties with her interpretation. In this case the father loses Beauty not out of love (taking a rose for her) but out of his own weakness. Perhaps because of this poor relationship with her father, the heroine here has more pride and anger than Beauty.

The heroine describes her past – she was born on Christmas day, and her nurse called her "Christmas **rose**." Her mother died when she was young, exhausted of her husband's gambling and womanizing. Back in the present, the heroine rips the petals off of a white rose as her father keeps losing more of his possessions to The Beast. The Beast is huge and bathed in perfume, with yellow eyes and a face like a beautifully painted-on mask. He wears kid gloves over his clumsy hands.

This heroine is also immediately associated with a rose. As she strips away the petals of the flower, it symbolizes her stripping away the outer layers of attachment and personality to find her true core. This image reflects the recurring motif of nakedness, and foreshadows the metamorphosis at the story's end. The Beast has a mask-like face like the Marquis.

Finally the father has lost everything except the heroine herself, and so he gambles her. He loses, and then stares silently at the cards as The Beast's valet makes arrangements to pick up the heroine the next morning. The father grows tearful and remorseful, but The Beast roars and the valet translates for him, saying that the father should have guarded his "treasures" better.

Like the other female protagonists, this heroine is initially treated as an object to be manipulated and gambled away. The Beast in this version is associated with a tiger, a reminder of the heroine's mother in "The Bloody Chamber." He also lives on a threshold between the worlds of wild animals and humans.

The next day a carriage comes for the heroine, and she looks longingly at the horses, wishing she could flee with them to "the kingdom of horses." Her father cries and asks for a **rose** to show that she has forgiven him. The heroine gives him a rose, but she pricks her finger on it and smears it with blood. The valet helps her into the carriage, and he, like The Beast, also seems like an animal in human disguise.

The heroine's longing for the wild innocence of horses prefigures her later transformation. The symbol of the rose begins to grow more complex here. It is not just a symbol of the heroine's purity and virginity, as it also has thorns – showing the pain of her objectification, but also her own fierceness and pride.

As she rides, the heroine wonders about the nature of The Beast's "beastliness," and she remembers her old nurse frightening her with tales of the "tiger-man," who would come aided by the Erl-King and gobble up the young heroine if she wasn't good. She remembers other tales of half-men, half-beasts that had terrified and intrigued her in her youth.

The Erl-King will return in a later story as another "metamorphic" figure who controls the wind and captures young women. Carter muses on the nature of her "beasts," how there is a horror in living life on the threshold, but also that there is a kind of beastliness that is internal as well as external.

The carriage leaves the city and travels through a bleak, wintry landscape. Finally the heroine and the valet arrive at The Beast's lonely mansion. The heroine enters and sees that the horses eat in the dining room, all the furniture is covered and dusty, and the pictures are taken down from the walls. The valet leads the heroine to The Beast's room on an upper floor, where there is a fire in the grate and The Beast is wearing a loose robe.

This is another picture of decaying luxury, but the state of The Beast's mansion implies that he has let his wild animal nature take over, and he has little care for keeping up the appearances of a nobleman. Carter never fully describes her "beasts," allowing them to inhabit a fantastic world where a tiger could really disguise himself as a human.

The valet speaks for the silent Beast, saying that his master's only wish is to see the heroine naked. In exchange The Beast will return all her father's losses. The heroine laughs and says angrily that she will allow The Beast to "visit" her only once, but she must have a sheet over her face and be in complete darkness. She desires no money unless The Beast pays her what he would a prostitute. The Beast is clearly struck by this outburst, and a tear falls from his eye.

As the heroine picked the petals off her rose, so The Beast wants the heroine to expose her true self to him. This is another kind of power Carter finds in virginity – that of a nakedness (of both body and soul) that has never been seen or corrupted by anyone before. The Beast has a "bestial" desire, but he does not abuse his power.

The valet leads the heroine away to her bedroom, and she threatens to hang herself with her bedsheets. The valet urges her not to, as she is a "woman of honour." He then introduces a maid, who is actually a complex automaton made up to look exactly like the heroine. The valet says that "nothing human lives here." The maid shows the heroine a mirror, in which the heroine sees her father drunk and crying. The valet then takes the mirror away and locks the heroine in her bedroom. The automaton maid slows down and "falls asleep," and soon the heroine does so as well.

The valet is another metamorphic character, an animal disguised as a human. This story explores many aspects of civilization and wildness, as the maid is like the heroine if she truly became an object devoid of soul and agency. She is the ultimate "civilized figure," but at the same time just as inhuman as the tiger. The true humanity and life exists on the threshold between wildness and civilization.

The next morning the valet brings the heroine breakfast and a single diamond earring. The heroine throws it aside and the valet leads her to The Beast again. He is in exactly the same position as the night before, surrounded by incense. The valet requests again that the heroine disrobe, as her skin is special because "no man has seen" it before. The heroine again refuses, and again The Beast cries a single tear. He buries his head in his arms and the heroine sees that his hands are tiger claws.

The Beast's incense recalls the Marquis' aroma of Russian leather. Many of the elements Carter repeats do not have a special significance except that they are repeated, thus drawing the disparate fairy tales into an organic sequence, where all the heroines seem aspects of a single character. The Beast understands the power of the heroine's virginity, and he seems just as afraid of her as she is of him.

A few hours later the valet brings the heroine another diamond earring of "the finest water." The heroine throws it aside like the other, and then the valet says The Beast has requested to go riding with the heroine. The automaton maid comes to life and retrieves a riding habit, which is exactly the same as the one the heroine used to wear back in Russia. The valet leads the heroine out to the hall where the horses wait.

The description of the diamonds as like water foreshadows the transformation at the end, when the heroine will become a "beast" and even her jewelry will revert to wildness. More magical elements are introduced, showing The Beast's power.

The heroine mounts a black horse and then is joined by The Beast, who is wrapped in a thick cloak. They ride out into a heavy wind that seems to follow The Beast as if he can control it. The heroine starts to realize that The Beast and his valet are wild animals, not "as other men," and she is frightened by this, but she also muses that she is just as much a creature and object as the horses or the clockwork maid.

Many of Carter's bestial men seem to have power over the wind, notably the Erl-King. The heroine starts to understand the situation Carter has created in this mansion – everyone is somewhere on the spectrum between wild animal and clockwork automaton.

The trio come to a river and dismount, and the valet says that if the heroine will not let The Beast see her naked, then she must see The Beast naked. The heroine grows suddenly terrified, but she nods. The valet covers The Beast with his cloak as he removes his "mask." The heroine muses that "the lamb must learn to run with the tigers," instead of lying down together. The Beast emerges as a huge, beautiful tiger.

The Beast makes himself vulnerable in revealing his true self, as he requested the heroine to do. In "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" the Beast become more human by giving up hunting, but in "The Tiger's Bride" the heroine grows more wild – a lamb learning to run with tigers.

The valet then moves to cover The Beast back up, but the heroine stops him, and she undresses herself. After a few moments the valet rides off on his horse with the tiger running ahead. The heroine returns to the horses and sees The Beast wearing his cloak again. They return to the house and the valet brings the heroine to an ornately decorated room. The automaton maid is there, and she brings the heroine the magic mirror.

This is a moment of true communion between the two characters, even though one is an animal and one is a human. Now they are ready for some kind of metamorphosis, so they can be closer to each other. The heroine now understands that she too is a kind of "beast," half-object (of desire), half-human.

The heroine looks in the mirror and sees her father looking clean and well-dressed and counting out stacks of money. The valet then knocks on the heroine's door and says that she can leave the palace whenever she likes and rejoin her father. The heroine looks at her own face in the mirror and then sends the valet away. She puts the diamond earrings in her ears. Then she takes off all her clothes, thinking about how unnatural it feels for humans to go around naked.

As in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon", the heroine has basically sacrificed herself for her father's good fortune. But the heroine here does not love her father like Beauty did, and she has more wildness in her – she has begun to feel closer to The Beast than to her human father. Taking off her clothes is already a kind of metamorphosis.

The heroine finds her way to The Beast's **room** and knocks on his door. There is no answer, but the valet appears, naked himself and revealed to be a monkey. He shows the heroine into the room and she sees The Beast's mask and clothes discarded on the floor and the incense pot broken in pieces. The tiger is pacing back and forth among "gnawed and bloody bones."

This room is the "bloody chamber" of this story, where the heroine undergoes her metamorphosis of both pain and enlightenment. As the heroine prepares to embrace her own wildness the whole household has removed its "mask."

The heroine has a moment of her old fear of the "tiger-man" and the ancient terror of being devoured. But she goes forward, offering herself, and it seems The Beast is more frightened than she is. The heroine stretches out her hand and The Beast approaches and starts to purr. At his thunderous purr the windows break and the house starts to fall apart around them. The Beast licks the heroine's hands, and she fears his rough tongue will rip off her skin – and it does. Layer after layer of skin disappears, finally revealing fur, and the heroine's earrings turn to water, and the heroine herself becomes a tiger.

This bloody chamber is a place of violence, where the tiger eats his prey and licks off the heroine's skin, but it is also a place of love as she transforms to connect with The Beast and her own wildness. In this story and "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" before it, Carter offers two interpretations of "Beauty and the Beast," and though both involve transformations one deals with an acceptance of gentleness and another with an acceptance of animality. The heroine's pain and metamorphosis is also symbolic of losing her virginity.

PUSS-IN-BOOTS

Figaro introduces himself as a clever, sophisticated "cat of the world." One evening a young man throws two boots out the window and Figaro puts them on. The young man notices this and summons "Puss" up to his window. Figaro performs some acrobatics on his way up to the windowsill, and the young man offers him a sandwich and some brandy. The young man is poor but handsome, and Figaro takes a liking to him. He becomes the man's "valet," helping him in schemes of moneymaking and love.

After the solemn previous stories, "Puss-in-Boots" is the first to take a lighthearted, comedic tone, though it still deals with many of the same themes as the rest of the book. The fairy tale of Puss-in-Boots involves a clever, boot-wearing cat who helps his master gain fortune.

Figaro and the young man (now his master) are both clever daredevils, and they work together to cheat at dice and seduce women. Then one day the master falls in love and seems suddenly struck dumb. The object of his desire is a young woman who is closely guarded by her rich old husband (Signor Panteleone) and a "hag" who is her keeper. The young woman is only allowed to look out the window for one hour a day, and when she goes out to Mass she has to wear a veil.

Figaro is like the "valet" of the earlier stories (though his master is not wealthy and powerful), now given his own voice and story. As a sentient, human-like cat he is also another metamorphic, fantastical creature. The young woman is like the virginal heroines of the other stories, though not given her own voice – beautiful, innocent, and treated as an object.

The master had fallen in love at only a glimpse of the young woman's face, and Figaro describes how it happened. One Saturday night the cat and his master stayed up so late that they were coming home as people were going to church, and "Puss" rubbed up against the young woman's leg. She briefly petted him and lifted her veil, and at the sight of her smile the master fell in love. The "hag" sneezed at Figaro's presence, however, and quickly bustled the young woman away.

The young woman must wear a veil and only go about with her "keeper," as she is just another possession for her husband to hoard. Once again the male figure (the master) is much more sexually experienced, but the master does not have the wealth, power, or abusive nature of some of the fairy-tale men.

Figaro describes the many women his master has slept with, but the master has never said "love" until now. The master now seems sick and lives only for Sunday mornings, when he can have a glimpse of his veiled beloved at church. Figaro is bored by this sudden change, and he resolves to help his master seduce the young woman, hoping that after they've slept together the master will snap out of his trance.

The master has undergone a kind of "metamorphosis" in changing his libertine nature for the sake of love. Figaro could be compared to the Beast's spaniel in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon", wishing his master would turn back into a lion.

Figaro finds Signor Panteleone's cat, a female tabby, who informs him that Panteleone is miserly and impotent, and guards his kind young wife like he does his fortune. He leaves the house one day a week to go cheat the poor out of their rent, but the "hag" is always at home, and allergic to cats. The tabby promises to deliver a letter to her mistress, though, if Figaro's master will write one.

We learn the details of just how objectified the young woman is. Even though she is married she is still a virgin, as her husband is impotent, so she has both the special power and innocence of virginity, like the other heroines.

The master spends three hours laboring over a perfect love letter (ten pages long), and the tabby delivers it, informing Figaro that her mistress wept over it and promised to love its writer unless he was old or "ugly as sin." The woman sends a return letter asking to meet and "discuss his passion further." The master kisses her letter ecstatically and decides to serenade her that night when she looks out the window.

Figaro's lighthearted voice mocks the brief and dramatic "courtship" of many of the stories, where two characters can fall in love after a single conversation (or even being kidnapped, like the heroine and The Beast). While Figaro mocks his master's love, he himself is falling for the tabby.

Figaro and his master go off to the piazza with a guitar and the master plays under the young woman's window, but she doesn't notice. The master sends Figaro up to get her attention. Figaro notices that the tabby is watching him, and he performs some difficult acrobatics on his way up and then tells the young woman to look below. On his way back down Figaro lands "the death-defying triple somersault," impressing the tabby.

The tabby is also a talking cat – though this is one of the more comedic and less fantastical stories, it still has magical elements that are accepted as part of reality.

The master starts to sing a heartfelt song and the young woman looks down. She smiles for just a moment, but then the hag slams the window shut. That night Figaro and his master have little to eat, but the master is overjoyed at his success. After he falls asleep Figaro sneaks off to meet with the tabby, who comes up with a plan to unite the two young lovers. The tabby will catch some rats and scatter them about the house, and the master and Figaro will wait outside posing as rat-catchers. The hag hates rats, so when she sees them she will go out into the street and immediately hire the duo and bring them inside.

The relationship of the master and the young woman is hilariously superficial at first, but the young woman is clearly desperate to be seen as anything other than an object to be hoarded. Even though Puss-in-Boots is supposed to be the clever cat hero, it is actually the tabby who comes up with most of the good plans to unite the master and the young woman. Again Carter subverts the tale with greater female agency.

The master is excited by this plan and agrees to it. He puts on a fake moustache and makes a sign as "Signor Furioso, the living death of rats." He has to turn away several attempted customers before the hag appears, screaming. She immediately ushers the two inside, sneezing at Figaro and saying the rats are in her mistress's room. They all go into the young woman's **room** and the master pretends there is a big hole in the floor under the bed. The young woman sends the terrified hag away, promising to guard her possessions.

The young woman's bedroom is the "bloody chamber" of this story, as the site of both violence and sexual transformation. At first the violence is just the dead and dying rats, and the transformation the first meeting of the master and young woman, where she loses her virginity and discovers love for the first time.

As soon as the hag leaves, the young woman locks the door and the master removes his moustache. They approach each other shyly at first but then start having sex, and Figaro yowls to cover up the noise. The suspicious hag comes in just after they are finished, and to explain the rumpled bed and virginal blood the young woman says "Puss" killed a big rat in the bed. The woman then asks the fee for the master's "services," and Figaro says a hundred ducats. The hag complains about this, but the young woman tells her to pay with the money she's "skimmed off the housekeeping."

Though the young woman's excuse for the bloody sheets is a comic device, it also deftly relates the themes of sexuality and violence. The loss of virginity is a kind of violence, just like Figaro killing a giant rat. The bedroom will become a more sinister "bloody chamber" later, but even in this first meeting it is the place where sex is juxtaposed with violence (Figaro attacking and killing the rats).

Figaro and his master leave with their pockets full, but at dinner the master is still dissatisfied, as he wants the young woman to be his forever. Figaro sees that his plan hasn't worked – the master hasn't gotten over his love by having sex – and he grows bored at the master's dramatics, but resolves to help him with his cunning. Figaro goes out to meet the tabby, who he is rapidly falling in love with himself, and asks her about the details of Signor Panteleone's routine.

Figaro is still wanting his old "wild" life back (the animal half of his metamorphic nature), though he himself is becoming "domesticated" by his love of the tabby. The master wants to totally change his life for the sake of the young woman.

The tabby says that Signor Panteleone spends his days counting his money and cheating the poor, and his nights guarding with his "prize possession" of a wife, though he is impotent. He is rich as "Croesus," and the two cats come up with a plan to take his fortune and wife – the tabby will trip him so that he falls and dies. Figaro returns home and tells his master to purchase a doctor's outfit and make another sign. The master asks about the plan but Figaro doesn't reveal the details.

The phrase "rich as Croesus" recalls the Marquis, and Signor Panteleone is another kind of womanizer, though a less brutal one. He still views his wife as an object, just an object to be hoarded, not tortured. The tabby takes the leadership role in the scheming. The master keeps undergoing "transformations" into different characters for the sake of his love.

The next morning the two go out in the street, and again the master has to turn away customers as he waits. Soon the hag comes bursting out the door, telling the "doctor" that her master has taken a fall. They go inside and see Signor Panteleone dead at the foot of the stairs. The master confirms his death and they carry Panteleone up to the young woman's room and put him on the bed. The young woman then sends the hag away, promising her some money from Panteleone's will.

Though Figaro's tone remains comedic and frivolous, the story actually takes a more sinister turn now as they all scheme to murder Panteleone. This is part of the violence in the theme of sexual violence that appears in even this lighthearted story. In another poignant image, the corpse occupies the bed where the woman lost her virginity.

The hag rushes off excitedly and immediately the young lovers are "at it, hammer and tongs," having sex on the carpet while the dead Panteleone is still on the bed. Meanwhile Figaro opens all the windows and then the tabby comes in, looking pregnant. Figaro decides then to give up his "rambling days" and settle down with the tabby.

This is the potent image of this story's bloody chamber, as the two lovers have sex on the floor while Panteleone's body is in the bed. Their love story also involves assisting in murder. Figaro undergoes his own metamorphosis in becoming "domesticated."

The hag returns with an undertaker as the master and the young woman are still "occupied." The hag shrieks in rage but the young woman sends her away, promising her some gold and informing her that the master will be her new husband. When the hag learns she will indeed inherit some money she immediately goes off quietly. The master and the young woman then inherit the rest of Panteleone's fortune and get married, and the tabby and Figaro have a litter of kittens. Figaro – "Puss-in-Boots" – then wishes the reader good fortune and bids farewell.

As in many of the stories, "Puss-in-Boots" ends with the heroine receiving a fortune from her dead husband. She now has all the power she was denied before, and uses it to banish her objectifying "keeper." Both the master and Figaro have been "tamed," transforming their natures for the sake of love.

THE ERL-KING

It is October in the forest, and the heroine (sometimes addressed in the second person, as "you," but usually in the first person as "I") enters the woods and admires the beauty of nature. She is trapped already, though she does not know it. She hears two notes of bird song and is drawn irresistibly forward, and she comes to the house of the Erl-King.

The heroine here is again young, innocent, and trapped by a male fantastical creature. Carter begins to shift the scene of her stories into a woodland setting. An "Erl-King" is a king of fairies in old German folklore. He is sometimes a force of evil, but other times merely mischief and magic.

The Erl-King is in his garden, surrounded by wild animals and playing his pipe, which was what lured the heroine in. His eyes are green and "can eat you." The heroine describes the Erl-King: he lives alone in the woods, foraging for food and at one with the plants and animals. In his house he has many birds in cages, which the heroine thinks is cruel. He keeps his house very clean.

The Erl-King is another metamorphic creature living between the worlds of wildness and humanity. He is not associated with a specific beast, but more with the forest itself. The caged birds are first presented as symbols of the objectification of free souls (like the book's heroines).

The heroine moves in with the Erl-King and they become lovers, though she is "at the mercy of his huge hands" and naked while he is clothed. The Erl-King plays songs on his pipe and lures in birds and animals. The heroine thinks about the Erl-King controlling the winds and capturing the birds. She notices that there is an old fiddle hanging on the wall, but all its strings are broken.

The heroine is seduced by the Erl-King, and again the motifs of the pornographic encounter and sex as a kind of violence return. But as with the heroine of "The Bloody Chamber," here the heroine initially accepts her objectification and succumbs to the Erl-King.

The heroine describes more of her "embracements" with the Erl-King, and how he undresses her "like a skinned rabbit." She feels like she is drowning in him when they sleep together. Winter approaches and the forest grows colder. The heroine muses on the Erl-King's eyes – "what big eyes you have" – which seem to have captured her. She fears that she is trapped and the Erl-King will soon put her in a cage with his other birds.

Just like the heroine of "The Tiger's Bride" peeling the petals off a rose or having her skin licked away, the heroine here is "peeled" and must reveal her true self to the Erl-King, who holds all the power in the relationship. "What big eyes you have" is another reference to Little Red Riding Hood, which will come later. Already the separate stories begin to blend together and reference each other.

The heroine realizes that the Erl-King's caged birds were once women like her, and she grows terrified though she still loves him. One day the Erl-King lets the heroine comb out his long hair, and she strangles him with his own hair. Then she sets all the birds free and they turn back into girls. She strings the old fiddle with the Erl-King's hair and plays music on it.

Unlike in "The Tiger's Bride", the heroine here refuses to transform for the Erl-King – as his is not a transformation to be equals and lovers, but so that she can be even further objectified. The Erl-King's cabin then become the bloody chamber, where the heroine has sex, murders the Erl-King, and then gains enlightenment about the nature of her relationship and herself.

THE SNOW CHILD

It is winter, and a Count and Countess go riding through the snowy wilderness. The Count admires the snow and wishes for a "girl as white as snow." Then they come to a **hole in the snow filled with blood**, and the Count wishes for a "girl as red as blood." Then the Count sees a raven, and wishes for "a girl as black as that bird's feather."

This story is based on a short tale about a wife telling her absent husband that she was impregnated by a snowflake, and then the husband later killing the child and saying that it "melted." The bloody hole in the snow is a literal "bloody chamber" in this short story. The stark imagery heightens the Gothic tone.

As soon as the Count finishes speaking, a naked girl appears with white skin, a red mouth, and black hair. The Count lifts her onto his horse and the Countess is jealous. She drops her glove into the snow and tells the girl to get it, intending to ride off and leave her, but the Count says he will buy her new gloves instead. At that the Countess's furs leave her body and wrap around the naked girl.

This naked, virginal snow child is the ultimate object of desire, literally created by the Count's wishes. The Countess is jealous of the affection the girl receives, but she doesn't understand the pain of such objectification yet.

The Countess then throws her brooch into a frozen pond and tells the girl to get it, but again the Count stops her and this time the Countess's boots leap onto the girl's feet. Now the Countess is naked and the girl clothed. They come to a rosebush and the Countess tells the girl to pick her a **rose**, and the Count agrees. The girl picks a rose, it pricks her finger, and she falls down dead.

Along with the hole in the snow, the girl's body is the other "bloody chamber" of this story. She is never given a voice or character, but is solely the object of desire and sexual violence. The rose here symbolizes the girl's purity, but also the suffering involved in the objectification of women.

The Count dismounts, crying, and has sex with the girl's corpse. When he is done she melts and returns to a bloodstain, a raven's feather, and the **rose**. The clothes return to the Countess. The Count hands the rose to the Countess, but it pricks her finger too and she says "it bites!"

This short, disturbing tale is a potent condensation of Carter's themes. The girl's body becomes the site of sexual violence and then enlightenment for the Countess, as she too is pricked by the rose and understands the "bite" of supporting such violence and oppression.

THE LADY OF THE HOUSE OF LOVE

In an abandoned village in Transylvania, Romania, is an old chateau, and in it lives a Countess, the "beautiful queen of vampires." She is a young girl in an old wedding dress, and she cannot help her bloodthirsty desires, though she hates them. She spends her hours laying out Tarot cards and reading her own inevitable fate, or else strumming the bars of her pet lark's cage. The house is dark, overgrown, and haunted by ghosts.

The scene now turns to Romania (first referenced by the "Romanian Countess" the Marquis had married in "The Bloody Chamber") and a kind of "bestiality" that involves a more traditional monster – a vampire. This time it is the heroine who is the monster. She is still young and virginal, but not innocent, as she must murder to live.

The Countess is inhumanly beautiful, with long sharp fingernails and teeth. She is a descendant of Vlad the Impaler of Transylvania. Every night she lays out the Tarot cards, wishing she was human, but her fate is always otherwise. She is attended to by a mute old governess who keeps her away from the sun and mirrors, and lets her out at night to feed on creatures in the garden. If a traveler ever comes through the village square and stops at the fountain to drink, the governess kindly invites him in.

This story is based on many old legends of vampires in Transylvania, Romania, and Vlad the Impaler, a famously cruel ruler in ancient times. The "House of Love" of the title is a reference to the Tarot cards. For all her long life, the Countess has only lived out her inescapable fate of death and murder – she is "the beast," longing to become human.

The Countess wishes she could keep the rabbits from the garden as pets, but her hunger always overcomes her. In the same way she cannot resist killing the boys the governess brings her, after she serves them coffee and leads them to her bedroom. The governess then buries the remains in the garden.

Carter reverses the gender roles as the heroine is now the one with all the power – men are objects for her, literally food for her desires. Sexuality is again associated with violence as the Countess kills the young men in her bedroom, the "bloody chamber" where they think they are going to have sex.

One summer a young British soldier decides to travel through Romania on his bicycle, thinking humorously of "the land of vampires." He has "the special quality of virginity," and he is very much a historical person – part of the generation that will later die in World War I – but he is about to meet the "timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires." He is supremely rational, as shown by his choice of a bicycle, which seems like a machine totally opposed to superstition.

The virginal hero is a man in this case. Carter moves from a vague, fairy-tale Europe to a literal time and place, dealing with the confrontation between modernity and ancient superstition. This is in a way a reference to her own project of finding both the myth in modern subjects and the modernity in ancient fairy tales.

Meanwhile the Countess lays out her Tarot cards, and for the first time ever she gets a fate involving love. The young soldier comes to the ominously abandoned village and drinks from the fountain. Then the governess appears, dressed neatly and smiling. She beckons the young man to follow her. As he leaves the village he is overcome by the strong scent of **roses**. They are everywhere, and "obscene in their excess."

The Countess gets the "House of Love" for the first time and fears what kind of "metamorphosis" this means for her, as the only kind of consummation she knows is murder. The roses here become a symbol of that gothic, superstitious world and the corrupted sexuality of the Countess's bloody bedroom.

The governess leads the young man to the mansion. He is momentarily frightened by its dramatic and foreboding appearance, but he follows the governess inside. She takes away his bicycle and he feels his "symbol of rationality" is gone. He steps into the castle of evil, but he is unknowingly protected by the "pentacle of his virginity." The governess leads him to a room where a meal is set for one person only, and he bemusedly eats and drinks.

Carter describes virginity as a "pentacle," a kind of magic sign that protects the young man and gives him a special power – the power of potential. He feels himself being drawn from the "real," historical world and into the gothic, fairy-tale world of the Countess and most of Carter's monsters.

After dinner the governess leads the young man to another room, and he assumes he is about to meet the house's wealthy owner for coffee. They pass through some crumbling, dilapidated rooms with frightening family portraits in them and then come to a door. The governess knocks and then sends the young man in. The room is very dark, but eventually his eyes adjust and he sees the Countess, a pale young girl wearing an old-fashioned wedding dress. He is struck by her extreme beauty and unhealthy appearance.

This is another picture of a decaying, extravagant mansion. By now the many mansions of the many "beasts" begin to blend together, so that the beasts and their wealth all seem different incarnations of a single character. The Countess is also a virgin, dressed in white like an innocent bride, but she is a corruption of that innocence – half-virgin, half-monster.

The governess raises a light to the young man's face, and at the sight of him the Countess cries out, knocking her Tarot cards to the floor. The governess gives her a pair of dark glasses to put on. The young man picks the cards up off the rotting carpet, noting how morbid they are for such a young girl. The Countess seems to recover when he touches her hand, and she makes some coffee for the young man. The governess leaves the room.

Just like in the Beauty and the Beast tales of "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride", the Countess and the young man inhabit two different worlds (she a world of magic and murder, he of rationality and humanity), and their encounter, which is associated with love and sexuality as usual, requires some sort of metamorphosis.

The young man notices that the bestial portraits on the walls resemble the young girl. The Countess serves him the coffee and tells him how lonely she is in her chateau, and that it is so dark because she has an "affliction of the eyes." She seems like a doll or an "ingenious piece of clockwork" to the man as she speaks. The Countess has an inner dialogue where she thinks of the young man as her long-awaited bridegroom, and prepares to drink his blood, but externally she keeps chattering in French.

The Countess is here associated with the automaton maid of "The Tiger's Bride." The Countess, though powerful and immortal, is still an object helpless against her inner "clockwork" – her fate to murder and drink blood. The Countess wants to become a human, but she is helpless against her "bestial" desires, like a Marquis made more sympathetic.

Meanwhile the young man begins to realize the truth about this horrible castle, but he is still protected by his virginity and "lack of imagination." Later he will be afraid during the war, but he is not afraid now. The Countess wants "consummation" but the only kind she knows is death, and she grows hungry. She imagines what will happen next: she will lead the soldier to her bedroom and he will bleed on her "inverted marriage bed." Then he will be buried under her **roses**, feeding their rich color and scent.

Carter steps back and references the horrors of war, which are in a way more terrible than the horrors of vampires because they come from the "beast" within every person. The bedroom is the bloody chamber now, where the "bridegrooms" bleed as they lose their "virginity." The Countess would like to actually have sex, but the only kind of "consummation" she knows is murder.

The Countess leads the young man to her bedroom, and at its morbid appearance he thinks of a story he heard about a necrophiliac brothel. The Countess starts to shake and cry, upsetting her usual ritual of disrobing and murdering. She drops her dark glasses and they break, and when she tries to pick up the splinters she cuts her thumb. It is the first time she has seen her own blood.

This story follows "The Snow Child" in its suggestions of necrophilia, the ultimate combination of sex and violence. The motif of a pricked finger returns, and like the snow child it will mean the Countess's death. The Countess has her usual "ritual" of taking off her clothes – revealing her true identity – and then killing.

The young man goes to her and kisses her bleeding finger, and then he falls asleep or into a trance as the Countess feels the "pain of becoming human." When the young man wakes up it is morning, and all the curtains are open and the caged lark is free and sitting on the windowsill. The Countess seems to have disappeared, leaving only a dress spotted with blood and a rose. The young man tosses the lark from the window and watches it fly away.

The metamorphosis in this story again comes about because of a kiss, but part of the Countess becoming a human means being able to die. The caged lark being freed recalls "The Erl-King," and suggests that the Countess is at last freed from her fate as a murderous automaton. The spot of blood on the white dress recalls menstruation or the loss of virginity.

The young man goes back to the room where he had his coffee, planning on taking the Countess to a doctor, but then he sees her sitting dead at her table, slumped over the Tarot cards. She is holding a last **rose** for him, and he takes it. The governess then appears and sends the young man away, and he finds his bicycle and rides to Bucharest.

The rose is all that remains of the Countess's world of bloody magic. Her gift of the rose suggests that she gave up her purity for the hero, as if he took her virginity. Again a (violent) metamorphosis of self is associated with sexuality.

The young man gets a call to join his regiment and he leaves Romania. Later he discovers he still has the Countess's **rose** in his jacket, and that it isn't dead yet. Remembering the girl's "unexpected and pathetic" death, he puts the rose into some water. When he returns to his room later, the rose has grown huge and red again, giving off a potent odor. The next day the soldier's regiment marches off to war.

The hero now returns to his world, where the monsters are all humans. Yet the gothic and mythical lives on even in the world of bombs and trenches – as these ancient tales are still relevant and potent in Carter's hands.

THE WEREWOLF

The narrator describes a harsh Northern country, where the people living near the forest fear both wild beasts and monsters like vampires or the Devil. They are very suspicious, and stone an old woman for being followed too closely by her black cat. In this land lives a child, and her mother asks her to take some oatcakes to her grandmother, who has been sick. The grandmother lives five miles away through the forest, and the mother gives the child a knife and warns her not to leave the path. The child sets off.

Carter now moves to fairy tales of Northern Europe, where the climate is harsher and the people more solemn. She introduces this new environment by telling tales of wolves. The wolf will be the "beast" of the final three tales, as Carter focuses on wolves that are "hairy on the inside" and live, like her other monsters, on a threshold between wildness and humanity.

The child is a mountaineer's daughter, and is experienced with the wild beasts and harsh country. When she hears a wolf howling she takes out her knife. The huge, red-eyed wolf attacks her but the child cuts off its hand and it runs off, whimpering. The child wraps the wolf's paw in a cloth and keeps walking, and soon reaches her grandmother's house.

This story is based on "Little Red Riding Hood." In this first version the child is still a virgin but has an independence and beast-fighting ability reminiscent of the heroine's mother in "The Bloody Chamber." She is no object, but has her own agency.

The child finds that her grandmother is sick in bed, and then she notices that the wolf's paw has turned into a human hand. The hand has a familiar wart on it, so the child pulls back her grandmother's sheets and sees that the grandmother's hand has been recently cut off. The child calls for the neighbors, and together they drive the grandmother out into the woods and stone her. The child then lives in the grandmother's house and "prospers."

The grandmother is the "beast" here, and her bedroom the "bloody chamber." Though the child shows great agency and inherits the fortune as usual, the story also has a harsh, brutal tone as the child ruthlessly turns on her own grandmother. We never see the grandmother's point of view, and whether she was helpless against her bestial desires.

THE COMPANY OF WOLVES

The narrator describes a wintry Northern country and the nature of the wolves there, who have terrifying eyes, ghostly howls, and a love of flesh. Anyone who goes into the forest is in danger of the starving wolves, so the people of the villages always carry knives with them. Some of the wolves are werewolves, though, and sneak into human homes.

This is the most famous story of the collection and another interpretation of "Little Red Riding Hood." Carter muses more on the nature of "beastliness" in the wolves of the North. The nature of the wolf is rapacious hunger, and so there can also be a wolf within a human.

The narrator describes a tale of a man who caught a wolf in a pit and cut its throat, but as it died the wolf transformed into a man. Another story describes a jealous witch who turned a wedding party into wolves. In another story, a young woman gets married and her bridegroom disappears mysteriously on their wedding night. She waits for him but then hears the howling of wolves outside, howling with "melancholy infinite as the forest."

Instead of the sentient, talking wolf of the original tale, Carter is more interested in werewolves as another example of metamorphic creatures torn both internally and externally between beastliness and humanity. In this first mini-story, the transformation from man to wolf is associated with the wedding night – another connection between the loss of virginity and metamorphosis.

Soon the young woman gives up finding her husband and she marries another man. They have children and live together, but one day the woman's first husband returns, dirty and lice-ridden. When he sees the second husband he is enraged and transforms back into a wolf, and he rips off one of the children's feet before they kill him with a hatchet. In death he transforms back into the man he was on that first wedding night, so that the woman weeps and her second husband beats her.

The first husband's violent and jealous nature shows that his "wolfness" was on the inside as well as the outside. It seems the woman is not much better off with her second husband either, as he too is "wolflike" in beating her. Carter changes her tone slightly in describing these Northern tales, using harsher and more economic language.

The narrator lists a few more superstitions about wolves and then begins the story of a child who decides to travel through the woods and bring oatcakes to her grandmother. The child is inexperienced but strong-willed, so she scorns the danger of wolves and brings a long knife in her basket. Unlike most children of this country, the child has led a sheltered life. She is just on the threshold of womanhood and has begun to menstruate for the first time. She feels protected by the "invisible pentacle of her own virginity," and she enters the forest unafraid.

The central story now begins. In this version the child is not experienced like in "The Werewolf," but she does have a confidence and fierceness that implies she understands the power of her own virginity and sexual awakening. The red cloak of Little Red Riding Hood is explicitly connected to the blood of menstruation and the loss of virginity, as the heroine is on the threshold between child and woman.

The child hears wolves howling, and then a handsome young huntsman appears. He talks with her and they start walking together. She gives him her basket to carry, even though her knife is in it, as the huntsman has a rifle. He shows the child a compass, which she has never seen before, and he tells her he knows a shortcut to her grandmother's house if she will leave the path. The child challenges him, and the huntsman bets that he can reach her grandmother's house before she does. If he does, the child has to kiss him.

The huntsman is the lustful "beast" of this story, and as in "The Tiger's Bride" the heroine is not afraid of him, but confident in her own sexuality. The metamorphoses of wolf to man and child to woman are associated with the heroine's budding sexuality and courtship with the huntsman.

The huntsman goes off and takes the child's basket with him. The child tries to walk slowly, even though it has started snowing, as she wants the huntsman to win the contest and kiss her. Meanwhile the huntsman reaches the grandmother's **house**. She is in bed with her Bible when he knocks and she invites him in. The huntsman comes in and the grandmother throws her Bible at him, but in vain. The huntsman strips naked, transforms into a wolf with "huge genitals," and eats the grandmother.

The huntsman takes the child's weapon, seeming to rob her of her power in the situation. Nakedness is emphasized again, as the werewolf must strip off his clothes to transform, and Carter mentions his genitals just before he kills the grandmother, again associating sex with violence.

The wolf burns the grandmother's hair and hides her bones under the bed. Then he puts on the grandmother's clothes and gets in the bed. The child arrives and the wolf invites her into the **room**. At first she is disappointed that the huntsman didn't get their first, but then she notices the hair in the fireplace and "what big eyes" her "grandmother" has. Then a company of wolves starts howling just outside the house. The wolf calls them his "brothers," and the child looks out the window at them.

The grandmother's bedroom is the bloody chamber of this story, where a scene similar to that in "Puss-in-Boots" takes place – sex next to a dead body. Red Riding Hood's traditional phrases ("what big eyes you have") have been hinted at throughout the book, but now they come to fruition. The wolf is a beast because of his hunger, but the child has her own wildness too.

The child realizes that her fear is not helpful, so she discards it. She takes off her red shawl – "the colour of her menses" – along with the rest of her clothes, and throws them into the fire. She stands there naked for a moment and then goes to the wolf. He is drooling with hunger but she embraces him and kisses him, laughing, as "she knew she was nobody's meat." She takes off the wolf's clothing and seduces him. Afterward the blizzard dies down, and the child and the wolf lie peacefully together in the grandmother's bed.

This scene is a culmination of Carter's themes and a powerful illustration of the psychological and sexual truths she brings out of the old fairy tales. The motifs of the bloody chamber, nakedness, the blood of menstruation and lost virginity, and transformation return, as the child turns into her own kind of "wolf" by becoming a sexual being and robbing the wolf of his power, essentially "taming" him.

WOLF-ALICE

Wolf-Alice is a girl who was raised by wolves. She cannot speak, she runs on all fours and howls, and the only thing human about her is "that she is *not* a wolf." Some nuns find her in a wolf's den, next to her "foster mother," who has been shot. They take her back to their monastery and try to teach her to act like a "civilized" human, but she remains wild and untameable.

This story is not based on a specific fairy tale but on many disparate legends of feral children raised by wolves. In this way Wolf-Alice is another kind of "beast" or metamorphic creature, part human and part wolf. The nuns are closer to the "clockwork maid" on the spectrum of wildness and civilization, and so they fear Wolf-Alice.

After nine days the nuns give up and hand Wolf-Alice over to the Duke, an old werewolf who lives in a nearby mansion. He is a monster who does not appear in mirrors and cannot die, and every night he wakes up filled with ravenous hunger. He wanders around in the moonlight, hunting humans, or if everyone's doors are locked he digs up graves and eats the bodies.

The Duke is another kind of half-wolf, half-human, but otherwise he and Wolf-Alice are almost opposites. Wolf-Alice's wolfness is the innocence of a wild animal, while the Duke has an especially human brutality about him, even though he is the one with actual fur.

Wolf-Alice moves into the Duke's mansion and sleeps in the ashes of the fireplace instead of a bed. She learns to sweep up the remains of the Duke's victims when he is away. She is more truly wolf-like than the Duke, for he eats his own kind and would be scorned by the pack. Wolf-Alice grows older in this horrible environment, and one day she gets her first menstrual blood.

The Duke is another bestial man-monster exploiting his power. Alice also exists on that metamorphic threshold, but she begins to develop her humanity on her own, in the "bloody chamber" of the Duke's mansion and the "bloody chamber" of her body, as she becomes a woman.

Wolf-Alice is confused by this, and she searches the house for sheets to clean herself with. Then she comes across a mirror, which intrigues her, as she thinks there is another pale "not-wolf" trapped inside of it, mimicking her. Time passes, and a month later Wolf-Alice menstruates again. She begins to develop a sense of time from these cycles, as she and the Duke inhabit "separate solitudes" in the house.

The mirror returns as an important image – the Duke does not appear because of his monstrous nature, but Wolf-Alice is able to see herself in it as something distinctly not-wolf. Carter associates Wolf-Alice's menstruation with the development of her humanity – a time of both blood and enlightenment.

Wolf-Alice finds an old ball dress and enjoys wrapping herself in it and looking in the mirror. She starts to realize that the mirror is a reflection of herself, like the shadows she and "the rest of the litter" used to play with. She washes the dress and then figures out how to put it on. She wanders out of the house, finally feeling different from a wolf.

Unlike many of the other characters, Alice undergoes her metamorphosis without the aid or encouragement of another. She discovers her sexuality and humanity not for the sake of another's love, but on her own.

Meanwhile a young man from town has been plotting to kill the Duke, who murdered his bride. The young man and some other townspeople are gathered in a church with an arsenal of silver bullets and holy water. Wolf-Alice hears them and approaches the church, and then she smells the Duke nearby. The young man comes out of the church and shoots the Duke in the shoulder, knocking off part of his wolf-pelt, and the Duke limps away. Wolf-Alice follows, frightened of the bullets. The church people think she is a ghost taking vengeance on the Duke.

The young man is another peripheral character, as the heroines of the earlier stories had been already married before being kidnapped by beasts. The Duke is shot mid-transformation, so he is truly trapped on the threshold between man and monster now, unable to shift between masks. Alice puts on an old white dress like the first heroine or the vampire Countess.

Back in his **room** the Duke lies on his bed, writhing in pain and caught mid-transformation, neither wholly human nor wholly beast. Wolf-Alice watches him, and then she approaches and licks his bloody face. The mirror across the bed at first shows only Wolf-Alice, but as she licks him the face of the Duke begins to appear there too.

Wolf-Alice now takes on the role of the tiger or the British soldier, transforming another through a kiss (or lick). The Duke becomes human (appears in the mirror) through the human compassion of Wolf-Alice, but this compassion means that Wolf-Alice is becoming a human too. Carter ends the book with another lyrical transformation, this one not emphasizing dark sexuality but only hope in a place of despair.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Cosby, Matt. "*The Bloody Chamber.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 11 May 2014. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Cosby, Matt. "*The Bloody Chamber.*" LitCharts LLC, May 11, 2014. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-bloody-chamber.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Bloody Chamber* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Carter, Angela. The Bloody Chamber. Penguin Books. 1990.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Carter, Angela. The Bloody Chamber. New York: Penguin Books. 1990.