

Stine Aadde Nordgård

# **The Subversion of Character Types in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"**

A Comparison of Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"  
and Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard"

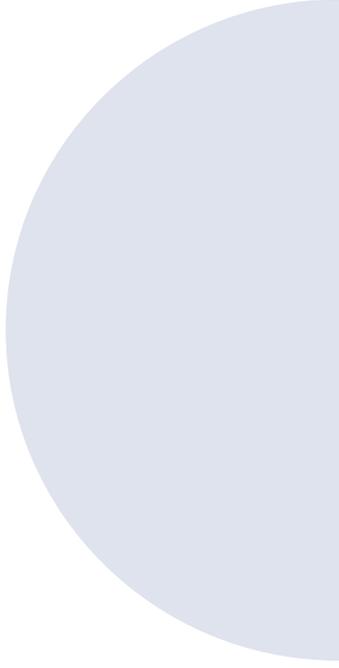
**June 2022**

**NTNU**

Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Humanities  
Department of Language and Literature

**Bachelor's thesis**

**2022**





Stine Aadde Nordgård

# **The Subversion of Character Types in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"**

A Comparison of Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"  
and Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard"

Bachelor's thesis  
June 2022

**NTNU**  
Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Humanities  
Department of Language and Literature



Norwegian University of  
Science and Technology



# The subversion of character types in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"

A Comparison of Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" and Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard"

Stine Aadde Nordgård

NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Spring 2022

01.06.22

**Word count:** 3871

In 1977, Angela Carter translated several of Charles Perrault's fairy tales from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and in 1979 she published her own collection of re-written fairy tales, called *The Bloody Chamber*. (Makinen, 1992, p. 3) The first story in this collection, and the story that gave the name to the story collection, is "The Bloody Chamber", and is a re-writing of Charles Perrault's "Blue-Beard". In this analysis, I will compare these two stories, looking at the changes Carter made to the story from Perrault's version and to explore how Carter plays with the fairy tale genre and the second wave feminist opinions that were present when the story was published. My focus will be mainly on plot and how the change in plot affects the story. I will begin by looking at the character of the mother before moving on to the character of the Marquis. I will then look at the agency of the narrator and the other female characters in the story, and I will end my discussion with a brief look at the ending of the story and the changes Carter did to her ending.

The mother in Charles Perrault's version of "Blue-Beard" is only mentioned twice. The first time when we are introduced to her as Blue-Beard's neighbor with two daughters, and the second time when these two daughters are invited to Blue-Beard's mansion with their mother and friends. Both times she is only mentioned in passing, and she does not play a major role in the story that follows. In Carter's story however, the mother is mentioned several times. We are introduced to her already in the second paragraph, when the narrator is describing how her mother will walk through her old bedroom and remember her when she has left to marry the Marquis. Later, when the narrator is alone in her husband's castle, she calls her mother and breaks down crying without really knowing why, and when she finds the chamber with the corpses of her husband's old wives, her mother is the first person she thinks of when trying to get help. These are only some of the instances where the mother is mentioned. Perhaps one of the more notable differences between Perrault's version of the story and Carter's, is the ending, where in Perrault's story, the girl is saved by her brothers, while in Carter's story, she is saved by her mother.

Having the mother in the story play such an active role, is not just something that differs from Perrault's story, but from the fairy tale genre in general. Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber write in their article "Good and Bad Beyond Belief: Teaching Gender Lessons Through Fairy Tales and Feminist Theory" about how the character of the mother is normally portrayed in fairy tales. They write that the "good mother" is rarely present for the whole story, maybe mentioned in the beginning, but is later replaced by the "bad mother", like the evil stepmom. The girl is supposed to free herself from the "bad mother" and start fulfilling her role in a patriarchal society, marrying a man, just like her "good mother" before her.

(Fisher & Silber, 2000) There is no “bad mother” figure in Perrault’s story, but the girl still follows this narrative, the story ending with her marrying “a very worthy man”. (Perrault, 2014, p. 59) Carter’s nods to this trope in the beginning of her story, where the narrator explains that she “in some way, ceased to be her (mother’s) child in becoming his (the Marquis’) wife”. (Carter, 2006, p. 1) However, the narrator never really stopped being her mother’s child. Her mother is always present in her mind, driving her as the story progresses. After her mother has saved her from the Marquis, she marries Jean-Yves, the blind servant, and the two of them live with her mother. Carter’s protagonist still ends up marrying a man, seemingly following the rules set by the fairy tale genre, but she also breaks with this, as the protagonist is allowed to become the wife of a man she loves while still being the daughter of her mother.

Fisher and Silber describe how the “bad mother” is portrayed in fairy tales, some of the characteristics being that she is ever present in the story, acting as “the girl’s tenacious adversary”. (Fisher & Silber, 2000, p. 123) The “bad mother” is an active figure that the girl is supposed to leave behind in the favor of her “good mothers” passive demeanor. (Fisher & Silber, 2000, p. 124) Carter’s portrayal of the narrator’s mother is in this way more similar to the “bad mother” figure. She may not always be physically present, but she is always on her daughter’s mind. As mentioned, the narrator thinks of her mother as she enters the bloody chamber, and earlier in the story, the narrator also explains how her mother had taught “what lovers did”. (Carter, 2006, p. 13) This way, her mother still acts as an adversary, guiding her through the story by the way she raised her daughter. The mother is also not a passive figure as the “good mother” would be. She is described as having gone against the societal norms and married out of love, (Carter, 2006, p. 2) and she also literally plays an active role in saving her daughter from the Marquis. Carter gives the narrator’s mother these traits, showing that a mother does not need to be a passive figure abiding by the norms of society to be considered a good mother. Fisher and Silber explain that one possible reason for fairy tales having a “bad mother” figure, is that “according to classical psychoanalytic theory a girl does not favorably identify with her mother”, and these stories gives girl an outlet for their supposed hatred for their mothers. (Fisher & Silber, 2000, p. 124) Again Carter subverts this, by having a mother that by fairy tale standards might be considered “bad”, and letting the narrator take pride in identifying with her. When the narrator finds the bloody chamber, she “did not know she had inherited nerves and a will” from her mother, allowing her to continue into the room. (Carter, 2006, p. 26) When the narrator is about to be killed by the Marquis, she associates courage with her mother. (Carter, 2006, p. 38) The narrator is not distancing

herself from her mother, but rather keeps her close, both in her mind during the story, and literally after the story is over.

Pilar Rodriguez Martinez discusses in her article “Feminism and Violence: The Hegemonic Second Wave’s Encounter with Rape and Domestic Abuse in USA (1970-1985)” (2011) how many second wave feminists argued that men had a bigger potential for violence, either if it was because of men’s superior strength or if it was because of the differences in socialization of men and women. Martinez writes that even though some feminists were more radical than others, it was common for second wave feminists to think that “all men are potentially violent and that all women are submissive”. (Martinez, 2011, p. 150) Once again, Carter uses the mother figure in her story to challenge this mindset. In the beginning of the story when we first are introduced to the mother, we are told about her accomplishments throughout her life. The narrator tells us that before her mother was her own age, she had “outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague (and) shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand” (Carter, 2006, p. 2) The mother in the story is given both feminine and masculine attributes, allowing her to be both loving and violent, and the narrator takes great pride in all of these sides of her mother.

The next thing I am going to look at, is the difference in the depiction of Blue Beard and the Marquis. In her article “Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality”, Merja Mäkinen discusses how the feminine sexuality is described in Angela Carter’s works. Her main focus is on the narrator of “The Bloody Chamber”, but she also brings up the Marquis at one point, arguing that he himself seems to be “captured within the construction of masculinity”. (Mäkinen, 1992, p. 13) When the narrator comes to the Marquis after he returns home to give him his keys, she sees a man “in despair”. (Carter, 2006, p. 35) She admits that she is afraid of him and what she knows he will do to her when he finds out about the key, but “when he (the Marquis) raised his head and stared at me (the narrator) with his blind, shuttered eyes as though he did not recognize me, I felt a terrified pity for him (...) The atrocious loneliness of that monster!” (Carter, 2006, p. 35) As already mentioned, some second wave feminists had a somewhat binary view on gender, viewing men as the aggressor and women as the victims. Through this lens, every man is seen as a possible abuser, and masculinity itself becomes the enemy. When the Marquis comes home early from his trip, the narrator tells us that she “played a game in which every move was governed by a destiny as oppressive and omnipotent as himself (the Marquis), since that destiny was himself; and I had lost. (...) Lost, as the victim loses to the executioner”. (Carter, 2006, p. 34) What is interesting here, is the simile Carter chooses to use

to describe the narrator's situation. The narrator points out that she has fallen victim to destiny, implying that she never had a choice in how her story would end, but as the victim, she loses to the executioner. An executioner has a distinct role they play in society, and their killing people is simply a part of their job. By comparing the Marquis to an executioner, Carter introduces the idea that the Marquis is only doing what is expected of him by society, and in doing so he is destined to a life of violence and loneliness, seeing that the Marquis will never find a love he cannot kill. This way, the Marquis is not simply the villain of the story, but he could also be seen as a symbol of the villainization of masculinity that has come with many of the second wave feminists' ideas on gender.

Comparing Angela Carter's Marquis with Blue Beard in Perrault's "Blue-Beard", Perrault shows a much more one-dimensional character. In Perrault's story, when the girl is found out by Blue Beard, she begs him not to kill her, and "her beauty and affliction might have melted a rock, but Blue Beard had a heart harder than a rock". (Perrault, 2014, p. 41) Perrault ends his story with a poem telling the reader that this story takes place in the past, and that "no husband now is so terrific". (Perrault, 2014, p. 60) This way, Blue Beard is simply a cold and emotionless character, and he does not reflect society in any way. Carter, however, gives more depth to the character. Without justifying his actions, the narrator is allowed to see the Marquis and pity him as he seems to be just as stuck in societal norms as she is.

Martinez also discusses in her article how abusive men are doing what society expects of them, and the way she approaches this issue, is by looking at the social acceptability of domestic abuse. (Martinez, 2011, p. 156-159) Carter brings this issue to light with the character Jean-Yves, the blind servant. When the narrator in "The Bloody Chamber" is getting ready to be executed by the Marquis, she talks to Jean-Yves, and he tells her that even though she does not deserve to be killed, disobeying her husband is "sufficient reason for him to punish you (the narrator)". (Carter, 2006, p. 38) Jean-Yves can see that the Marquis is brutal, but at the same time he knows that this is the way in marriage. Again we can see how the Marquis is simply a product of the expectations put on him by society.

Jean-Yves is not just a character that shows the social accept of domestic abuse, he is also a character that stands as a contrast to the Marquis. Jean-Yves is a servant to the Marquis, he is blind, and he is described as kind and a friend of the narrator. When the Marquis comes home early from his trip, Jean-Yves wants to stay with the narrator after learning what the Marquis has done to his previous wives after finding the murder chamber. Robin Ann Sheets mentions this as one of the four most important changes Carter does to the story, alongside

the change of point of view, the role of the mother, and the Marquis being a man of the arts, saying that Carter “develops the character of the second husband so that he stands as an alternative to the type of masculinity represented by the Marquis”. (Sheets, 1991, p. 644). The narrator also finds herself somewhat relying on Jean-Yves, stating that by holding him she “felt a great strength flow into (her) from his touch”. (Carter, 2006, p. 32) This way, Jean-Yves becomes a symbol of how masculinity is not only violence and abuse but can also be gentle and kind. By allowing the narrator to find strength in Jean-Yves, the idea that men and masculinity are not the enemy is enforced, and again we see Carter divert from the radical second wave feminists and their view on masculinity.

In my discussion so far, I have pointed out the different ways that Angela Carter diverts from the second wave feminists’ thoughts at the time, but this is not to say that she does not agree with some of the things they discuss. One of these things is the relevance that domestic violence has in society today. This brings me to the next change that Angela Carter has done to her story, which is the change in the time it is set. Perrault writes a story that is set in the past, and Carter writes a story that is set in the present. As mentioned earlier, Perrault ends his story with a poem, and this poem tells us that the story “bears evidence of being one of bygone-days”, and continues to say that today, men would not act in such ways in a relationship, and that women and men are more equal. (Perrault, 2014, p. 60) This puts distance between the problem discussed in the story and the problems in today’s society. Carter, however, takes the story and puts it in a contemporary setting. Domestic abuse was something widely discussed by second wave feminists, and by changing the setting, Carter shows how the story is still relevant and that this is not a problem of the past. (Martinez, 2011) In line with many other second wave feminists, Carter points out that domestic abuse is a problem that is very much present in the present.

One of the major changes that Angela Carter did in her story “The Bloody Chamber”, is the change from the third-person point of view to the first-person point of view. Perrault’s “Blue-Beard” is a story that is told to the reader from an outside perspective, made even clearer by the ending of the story with the poem mentioned earlier. The story in many ways follows the “cautionary tale” we often see in fairy tales with a naïve girl falling prey to a dangerous man. By adding the poem in the end, however, it becomes less of a cautionary tale and more of a story of the past that seems to be no longer relevant, a point already made in the discussion on domestic abuse. In “The Bloody Chamber” however, the story is told to the reader by the girl herself. The story begins with the narrator recalling the night she leaves her mother for the Marquis, and she even directly addresses the reader several times throughout

the story. When she steps out of the train on the ride to the Marquis' castle, she wraps her new furs around her and says: "I swear to you, I had never been vain until I met him". (Carter, 2006, p. 8) When she realizes that it might be her naivety that attracted the Marquis to her, she tells the reader to keep her discomfort in the castle with such wealth in mind before judging her. (Carter, 2006, p. 16) Robin Ann Sheets discusses the change in point of view in Carter's story, and when doing so, she quotes Roland Barthes, saying that "the master is he who speaks, who disposes of the entirety of language; the object is he who is silent." (Sheets, 1991, p. 649) This way, the change in point of view and narrative voice becomes a change in power. The narrator sits with the power in this story, with complete control over her own narrative. Kari E. Lokke comes to the same conclusion in her comparison of "The Bloody Chamber" and "Blue-Beard" in her article "'Bluebeard' and 'The Bloody Chamber': The Grotesque of Self-Parody and Self-Assertion". A consequence of the change in point of view, is that "The Bloody Chamber" becomes a story where the reader knows that the protagonist is going to survive, and Lokke mentions this as one of the major changes that Carter does to the story. (Lokke, 1988, p. 8) Carter's story is not simply a cautionary tale, but rather a story of a survivor and how she overcame her troubles.

Another change that Carter does to her story that provides more agency to the female characters, is that she gives a name and a story to the Marquis' previous wives. Perrault mentions the previous wives briefly in the beginning as a reason for why the girls did not want to marry him, then again when the girl finds the chamber where they were killed, and she quickly runs away. In Carter's story, we are first introduced to the Marquis' previous wives in the very beginning, where the narrator describes how the Marquis used to be married to "a Romanian countess", "The Evening Star Walking on the Rim of the Night", and "the Opera Singer". (Carter, 2006, p. 4-5) She talks about the impact these women had on the world around them, how the Romanian countess was on the cover of several magazines, how the evening star was the inspiration of many painters, and how the opera singer was singing in the first opera the narrator had ever been to and how beautiful she thought she sang. The women are again mentioned when the narrator finds the chamber, when the narrator finds and recognizes the women one by one. In Perrault's story, the previous wives are merely objects for the girl to find and make her realize who Blue Beard really is. Carter, however, gives the wives background, and in doing so makes them more three dimensional. This personification of his previous wives amplifies the brutality of the Marquis, showing that his previous wives were people too, not just objects to help the narrator progress in the story.

Carter also chose to change the ending of the story. As already mentioned, in Perrault's version, the girl finds another husband and lives happily ever after, while the narrator in Carter's story, ends up living with both her husband and her mother. The other thing that changed is what they do with the inheritance after their husbands. In Perrault's story, the girl gets her inheritance and keeps all the money and uses it to get herself and her sister a husband, and to get captain commissions for her brothers. The narrator in Carter's story, however, chooses to donate most of the money to charities, and she rebuilds the Marquis' castle as a school for blind children. In Lokke's comparison of "Blue-Beard" and "The Bloody Chamber", she argues that the Marquis wealth is a symbol of his corruption, since it is "based upon centuries of exploitation and enslavement and his pleasure upon the torture and slaughter of the three women now entombed in his cellar". (Lokke, 1988, p. 10) Using the Marquis' money for charities is then a way for the narrator to rid herself of the corruption that came with his money, the corruption she witnessed herself falling under.

As mentioned earlier, the narrator recognizes that she became vain in marrying the Marquis, and later, when the Marquis leaves her alone in the castle, the narrator feels lonely, her only companion being her "dark newborn curiosity". (Carter, 2006, p. 19) Merja Mäkinen points out that up until the narrator finds the bloody chamber, she has been very aware of her desires for both the Marquis and his wealth. (Mäkinen, 1992, p. 13) Carter gives the narrator the opportunity to learn from her mistakes rather than be defined by them, and even though the narrator feels shame over what she has done, she still gets her happy ending. Lokke comes to same conclusion in her comparison, writing that the narrator's "acknowledgement of shame and guilt seems a healthy coming to terms with herself, and acceptance of responsibility rather than destructive self-deprecation". (Lokke, 1988, p. 12) The narrator is allowed to make mistakes, and she is not a worse person for it. Tying this into the change Carter made to the ending of the story, the act of getting rid of the Marquis' wealth is also a way for the narrator to get rid of not only the Marquis' corruption, but also her own. By rebuilding the castle that used to be symbol of the Marquis' wealth, the narrator turns his entire legacy around in an attempt to have his corruption die with him.

To summarize, Angela Carter made some rather big changes in her version of the fairy tale "Blue-Beard". In contrast to Perrault's story, Carter gives the narrator's mother an important role, both as inspiration and as the savior as she saves the narrator from the Marquis in the end. This contradicts your typical fairy tale, where the mother is rarely present at all. Carter also brings depth to the character of Blue Beard, represented by the Marquis. He becomes a symbol of the antagonization of masculinity made by many radical second wave

feminists, making him a man destined for violence. Jean-Yves plays as a counterpart, being a kind, loving man, but still reinforcing the message that not all men are the enemy. The narrator herself is given more agency by Carter than by Perrault. Perrault's first-person point of view makes it a story simply about a girl, but Carter gives this girl the power to tell her own story. This is a story that includes corruption, mistakes, and shame, but the narrator learns from all of this and in the end, she rids herself of this corruption by donating the Marquis' wealth. Carter subverts the characters of both the girl, the mother, and the villain, both in terms of the fairy tale genre and second wave feminism, and in doing so she creates a story that acts as a harsh commentary on society when it was written and that continues to be relevant today.

### Works cited

- Carter, A. (2006) *The Bloody Chamber*. Vintage Books London
- Fisher, J. & Silber, E. S. (2000) Good and Bad Beyond Belief: Teaching Gender Lessons through Fairy Tales and Feminist Theory. *The Feminist Press at the City University of New York*, Vol. 28, No. 3/4, 121-136
- Lokke, K. E. (1988) "Bluebeard" and "The Bloody Chamber": The Grotesque of Self-Parody and Self-Assertion. *University of Nebraska Press*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 7-12
- Makinen, M. (1992) Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality. *Sage Publications, Ltd.* No. 42, 2-15
- Martinez, P. R. (2011). Feminism and violence: The hegemonic second wave's encounter with rape and domestic abuse in USA (1970-1985). *Cultural Dynamics*, 23(3), 147–172.
- Perrault, C. (2014) *The Story of Blue-Beard, illustrated by Joseph E. Southhall*. Pook Press
- Sheets, R. A. (1991) Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber". *University of Texas Press*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 633-657