



*The Bloody Chamber*: AQA (B)  
Literature; Edexcel Language and  
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Angela Carter: AQA (A) Literature

Angela Carter,  
**Gothic terrorist**  
*The Bloody Chamber*

Lydia Onyett explores the ways in which *The Bloody Chamber* is interwoven with political terror from the French Revolution to the 1970s

‘All art, of any kind, is part of politics — it either expresses or criticizes an ideology’, wrote Angela Carter in her ‘Notes on the Gothic Mode’ (1975). When her collection of Gothic fairy tales *The Bloody Chamber* was published four years later, the genre seemed antiquated and kitsch — more likely to be found in low-budget Hammer horror movies and Anne Rice novels than in ‘literary’ fiction. Yet Carter’s statement of intent suggests she was serious about engaging with politics within the text, even if it may be a challenge to decipher her message.

## Gothic and the French Revolution

*The Bloody Chamber's* title story opens with a striking and perplexing passage alluding to the French Revolution, the sociopolitical phenomenon that many literary critics suggest gave rise to the Gothic mode (Miles 2002, p. 43). A young bride ponders her new husband's strange wedding present, '[a] choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat':

After the Terror, in the early days of the Directory, the aristos who'd escaped the guillotine had an ironic fad of tying a red ribbon round their necks at just the point where the blade would have sliced it through, a red ribbon like the memory of a wound. And his grandmother, taken with the notion, had her ribbon made up in rubies; such a gesture of luxurious defiance! That night at the opera comes back to me even now...the white dress; the frail child within it; and the flashing crimson jewels round her throat, bright as arterial blood.

(p. 6)

The motif stems from accounts of the *bals des victimes* in which the relatives of those guillotined during Robespierre's Reign of Terror (1793–4) held exclusive, luxuriant social gatherings in honour of their dead. At first, then, the ruby necklace seems to represent the heroine's morbid predestination, but as the plot unfolds we learn that the necklace actually symbolises her *escape* from death. Despite her sadistic husband's plans to immure her in his 'bloody chamber' — a dungeon in the bowels of his castle filled with the corpses of previous wives — the girl's mother arrives just in time to shoot the Marquis before he beheads the new bride.

In thus undercutting our expectations of the genre in the first story of the collection, Carter signals that *her* Gothic is not just the reanimation of an old, tired corpse, but is rather of enduring contemporary cultural and political relevance. In weaving the French Revolution into her fiction, linking political instability and Gothic terror, Carter was drawing subtle parallels between the 1790s — a time period that epitomised radical political change — and her own politically volatile and violent time.



The execution of Marie Antoinette (1793)

## Terror across time

Nearly two centuries after the Terror in revolutionary France, 'terrorism' was reincarnated in the global revolutionary climate of the late 1960s, when the word 'terrorist' began to denote revolutionary, often paramilitary, groups violently opposing the political status quo (Houen 2002, pp. 19–20). By the 1970s, a widespread fear of politicised violence was heavily present within the public discourse and consciousness of the Western world, and Carter draws unexpected parallels between these two historical contexts.

The ruby necklace comes from a time 'after the Terror' — that is, after a Gothic climax. The necklace's transition from the harbinger of the protagonist's execution to a symbol of her avoidance of death suggests a Gothic mode which ebbs and flows. In resurrecting the Gothic in the 1970s, Carter reanimated a literary genre based on terror in her modern Cold War context, dealing as much with her contemporaries' fearful anticipation of terror as with actual terror itself.

In 'The Lady of the House of Love', a young soldier unwittingly defeats a murderous vampire, ignorant of the First World War looming on the horizon. At first, Countess Nosferatu, 'the beautiful queen of the vampires', 'sits all alone in her dark, high house under the eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors, each one of whom, through her, projects a baleful posthumous existence' (p. 107).

The 'posthumous existence' of the Countess's rich Gothic heritage may suggest that, by engaging in a genre with a strong history and enduring cultural presence, Carter's retrospective short stories metaphorically raise the dead. On the other hand, the story's simple final sentence ends the tale with the promise of a new and shocking beginning: 'Next day, his regiment embarked for France' (p. 125). Like 'The Bloody Chamber', this story is haunted by allusions to another period of historical terror: the First World War.

## Mechanising terror

Read together, 'The Lady of the House of Love' and 'The Bloody Chamber' chart the development of terror from its beginnings in the eighteenth-century unease surrounding the French Revolution as far as the fears engendered by the First World War and then beyond. The bloody nightmare of the trenches anticipates the mechanised violence and warfare that provoked such fear during the Cold War politics of Carter's own time. Countess Nosferatu's whispered refrain 'now you are at the place of annihilation' highlights not only the very real threat of total destruction present throughout the 1970s and 1980s from specific small-scale terrorist groups, but also illuminates the wider context of the nuclear arms race.

One reason for the decline in the popularity of the Gothic genre might be that its power to terrify was significantly diminished after the First World War offered bloody proof of the power of technology and mechanisation. Yet Carter's decision to work within the genre suggests that the Gothic's capacity to shock remains; as in Victor Frankenstein's experiment, turn-of-the-century scientific innovation led to unprecedented violence, suffering and chaos. When the soldier takes a rose from the vampire's garden and places it, 'not [...] quite dead' (p. 124), in a glass of water on arrival at his barracks, it begins

to flower. Displaced from a far-off corner of Eastern Europe, the Gothic rose thrives as the soldier approaches the battlefields of France:

When he returned from the mess that evening, the heavy fragrance of Count Nosferatu's roses drifted down the stone corridor of the barracks to greet him, and his spartan quarters brimmed with the reeling odour of a glowing, velvet, monstrous flower whose petals had regained all their former bloom and elasticity, their corrupt, brilliant, baleful splendour.

(pp. 124–5)

The heady beauty and grotesque monstrosity of the revived flowers symbolise a Gothic in some ways stronger than it has ever been.

## A consequence of the times

Writing on the Gothic after the French Revolution, the Marquis de Sade described it 'as a consequence of the times: "the novel became as hard to write as monotonous to read; there was no-one who had not experienced in four or five years more misfortunes than the most famous novelist could depict in a century"' (Showalter 2005, p. 236). From this perspective, the Gothic does not become *less* frightening after the unimaginable real-life horrors of the First World War, but instead becomes the most appropriate mode of creative expression after such a harrowing historical event.

For this reason, Carter found that simultaneously working within and disrupting the Gothic genre allowed her to explore aspects of her unstable and 'terrorised' contemporary cultural and political milieu. With her weakened, photophobic vampire, her Red Riding Hood jumping into bed with a fearsome wolf and her Beauty transforming into a Beast, Carter challenges and subverts the genre's expectations: her Gothic is at once traditional and revolutionary. Since her contemporary political milieu was both unprecedented and conventional, Carter fashions her fiction in accordance with her closing sentence in 'Notes on the Gothic Mode': 'Contradictions are the only things that make any sense' (Carter 1975, p. 134).

## Gothic re-vision

In 1971, Adrienne Rich proposed literary critical 're-vision'; 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction —[it] is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival' (Rich 1980, p. 35). Though Rich here writes from a feminist perspective, her idea of 'survival' is particularly potent in a political climate that threatens death at any moment; Rich's 'old text' becomes Carter's 'old genre' entered 'from a new critical direction'.

Carter's re-vision is seen most clearly in the two retellings of the 'Beauty and the Beast' fairy tale set side by side in *The Bloody Chamber*: 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' and 'The Tiger's Bride'. The first of these stories seems to demonstrate the traditional, older order, as the tale ends on the vision of the transformed Beast as lord of the manor married to his Beauty: 'Mr and Mrs Lyon walk in the garden; the old spaniel drowns on the grass, in a drift of fallen petals' (p. 55). In contrast, 'The Tiger's Bride' is a 're-visionary' text, as the second Beauty becomes truly 'beautiful' in her new, animal form:

## References and further reading



- Carter, A. (1975) 'Notes on the Gothic Mode', *The Iowa Review*, No. 6, pp. 132–4.
- Carter, A. (1979) *The Bloody Chamber*, Gollancz.
- Houen, A. (2002) *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, Oxford University Press.
- Miles, R. (2002) 'The 1790s: the effulgence of Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, J. E. Hogle (ed.), Cambridge University Press, pp. 41–60.
- Rich, A. (1980) 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence, Selected Prose 1966–1978*, Norton.
- Showalter, E. (2005) 'Prose fiction: France' in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Eighteenth Century*, H. B. Nisbet and C. Rawson (eds), Cambridge University Press, pp. 210–38.

while Carter represents the process of change as terrifying and painful, here the final sentence suggests a tentatively hopeful new beginning.

### Terror of stasis and change

The idea of change is explored in several stories within *The Bloody Chamber*. In the title story, paradoxically, it is the status quo that is terrifying, while change connotes rescue when the despotic rule of the Marquis is overthrown. Then again, 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' depicts a return to the status quo, and the final image of a sleeping domestic animal forms a marked contrast to the awakened, powerful tiger at the end of 'The Tiger's Bride'. The change from human to animal symbolises revolution in its purest form, the casting out of the old and its replacement by the new. If Beauty's transformation is seen to

correspond to political change, then the collapse of the old orders is encouraging: the development from 'a nascent patina of shining hairs' to 'beautiful fur' alludes to future growth, enrichment and, perhaps, discovery. In this way, Carter uses the nightmarish Gothic to envision a better world: through the Gothic, we may see hopeful visions of what might stem from a time of trouble — the period after an outbreak of terror is 're-visited' as a time of peace.

### Unanswered questions

Angela Carter's fiction never provides definitive answers, of course, while critics have offered a multiplicity of answers to the questions she raises. We may see how Carter's work allows for a questioning of traditional political and social orders; the re-vision of 'The Tiger's Bride', for instance, invites us to imagine what might

come *after* a period of revolution, rather than focusing on the hysterical terror experienced during such a period. Dictatorships quash their people into submission by suppressing independent thought — the burning of books, targeting of the intelligentsia and limiting of free speech are political tactics calculated to inhibit revolutionary ideas and prevent revolutionary action.

By provoking critical debate, then, Carter's fiction mimics the revolutionary political spirit she saw in her own time and throughout modern history, and encourages her readers to question whether the preservation of a society of dozing lapdogs is preferable to an as yet unexplored landscape populated by tigers.



Illustration from *Beauty and the Beast*, by Walter Crane (1874)

The reverberations of his purring rocked the foundations of the house, the walls began to dance. I thought: 'It will all fall, everything will disintegrate!'

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.

(p. 75)

Whereas 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' depicts a scene of quiet, peaceful domesticity after the Beast becomes human, the moment of transformation is the striking final image of 'The Tiger's Bride' and thus the tale becomes a metaphor for change. The Beast's crumbling house is a microcosm of an old, traditional order, and Beauty's fears that it will be utterly destroyed during her transformation evoke contemporary fears of terrorist revolution or nuclear annihilation. Interestingly,

### Online archive



Davison, S. (2008) 'Family romance in *Wise Children*', Vol. 18, No. 4

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