Reading *The Bloody Chamber* as a Retelling?

So Sum Chow  |  ssc517@york.ac.uk
*BA English in Education*

**Abstract**

This study explores and analyses the intersection and neutralisation of genre setting, characters, plots and themes of two texts, *Bluebeard* and *The Bloody Chamber*. The latter text has always been misunderstood as a retelling of the former text; however, in fact, *The Bloody Chamber* is created as a new independent story with some borrowing elements based on the story of *Bluebeard*. *The Bloody Chamber* is a work of her readers’ response of *Bluebeard*. She rearranged and resigned the potential details and themes based on the story of *Bluebeard* with her own thoughts and understandings of social issues, such as gender roles and sexuality. Although these two texts have intertextuality, Angela Carter’s thoughts and themes represented in *The Bloody Chamber* are separate from those that *Bluebeard* presents.

**Keywords:** *The Bloody Chamber*; *Bluebeard*; retelling; reader response; intertextuality

**Introduction**

Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* has been assumed by some literary critics (e.g. Kaiser [1984] and Farnell [2014]) to be a retelling of Perrault’s *Bluebeard* (2014), whereas in fact, *The Bloody Chamber* is a new story. Despite some elements being borrowed from *Bluebeard*, *The Bloody Chamber* has its own, distinct, plots and themes. Perrault presents a story in *Bluebeard* about a girl who is rescued by her brothers from the ugly, old rich man with a blue beard, after she finds out the secret of the little room that she is forbidden from entering. Meanwhile, Carter presents a story in *The Bloody Chamber* about a girl who is rescued by her mother after she marries an old, rich, man she thinks she loves only to find out the contents of a secret chamber, which, similarly to *Bluebeard*, she is forbidden from entering. These two books both indicate the consequence of curiosity, and present specific, traditional, Western gender roles. However, *The Bloody Chamber* reflects two more themes, which are that of the heroine’s mental development and of human sexuality, while presenting deeper on the idea of gender roles. Gender roles, in this case, refer to the equality and inequality of the status of male and female in this society. Carter demonstrates her ideas on feminism and gender equality.
The intersection and neutralisation of genre setting, main characters, plots and themes of these two texts will be presented and compared in the following essay, in terms of the genres, characters, plots settings, and the themes. This piece will discuss whether the similarities are large enough to read *The Bloody Chamber* as a retelling of *Bluebeard*, in which the retelling of a text should be considered as ‘the same story’ with same information as the original text (Kristeva et al., 1981; Stephens & McCallum, 2013).

**Genre Setting**

*The Bloody Chamber* and *Bluebeard* vary on genre setting, separating their functions and themes. The former is a short story, its themes are complex and subtle at its underlying message; while the latter is a fairy-tale, it aims for bluntly didactic meanings (Wheeler, 2013). As Carter mentions in the afterword of one of her other stories, *Firework* (2016), ‘the tale [fair-tale] does not log everyday experience, as the short story does’ (p.133), *The Bloody Chamber* is reflecting and delivering a deeper meaning of gender roles and human sexuality through her short stories, while the fairy-tales, like *Bluebeard*, are imbued with much morality and didacticism for children.

**Character Setting**

Carter redesigns the character setting from *Bluebeard* for her own story, *The Bloody Chamber*. Apart from the girl and the husband, Carter creates a strong and independent mother and Jean-Yves, eliminating the girl’s sibling and neighbours from *Bluebeard*. As to the heroines from these two texts, they both marry an older man, and enter the little secret room based on their curiosity. However, *The Bloody Chamber* reveals the girl’s complexity of idealism and realism throughout the whole story (Maunder, 2007). In *The Bloody Chamber*, the girl’s idealism builds from her parents’ love and the Conservatoire where she learnt about the fascinating music world. She always beautifies her life; for example, the girl keeps telling herself that the Marquis loves her, as presenting in her monologue, even if she notices that ‘not one muscle in his face stirred’ when the girl agrees to marry him (p. 4). The complexity of this character reveals every time she mentions her realistic thoughts that the marriage is relating to her experience of having a poor childhood, her unconscious desire to ‘banish the spectre of poverty’ (Carter, 2012, p. 2; Maunder, 2007).

When it comes to the husbands, the main feature of the husband from *Bluebeard* is his blue beard; whilst the only noticeable feature of the husband, the Marquis, from *The Bloody Chamber* is his smell of the ‘perfume of spiced leather’ (Carter, 2012, p. 3). According to the girl, it is a ‘hint’ that reveals the Marquis’s presence (p. 3). However,
perfumes were used for covering their body odour in modern France (Frankel, 2006); therefore, perfumes also symbolise a kind of concealment. In this way, the Marquis’s perfume, which Carter emphasises, is his ‘cover-up’ of the little chamber and the hidden bodies of his past three wives.

As to the girl’s mothers, unlike the powerless woman in Bluebeard, the one in The Bloody Chamber presents as a strong woman, taking a more active role and at the end it is she whom rescues the heroine with her ‘maternal telepathy’ (p. 41). This woman also presents her wit and bravery when she notices something wrong with her daughter’s situation through the phone call, and kills a man for her daughter’s safety (Renfroe, 1998).

Plot Setting

The Bloody Chamber and Bluebeard have a similar plot structure: they get married, the husbands give the keys to the heroines, the heroines enter the room and the heroines get rescued in the end when the husbands try to kill the heroines. Nevertheless, all the details and motivations behind the main structure are separating these two texts. The reason why the heroine in Bluebeard marries the man is because after his request for marrying one of the girls, the heroine starts thinking it might be a fine option; while the motivation of the heroine in The Bloody Chamber to get married is based on her desire to be rich and her idealised love for the Marquis (Roemer & Bacchilega, 1998). The ‘ruby choker’, which is mentioned several times in The Bloody Chamber, symbolises the heroine’s desire (Sivyer, 2013).

The scenes of the husbands handing the keys to the heroines is presented in a similar way but through different attitudes. Both husbands give the heroines the keys that can access every room, including the secret room. When they first introduce the little room to the girl, the husband in Bluebeard clearly expresses his anger and resentment if the girl gets into the little closet that he forbids her, as he mentions ‘I forbid you’ twice in a threatening manner. However, in The Bloody Chamber, the Marquis prefers to ask the girl gentlemanly to understand him by saying that ‘every man must have one secret’ (p. 18). According McCallum and Stephens (2013), a retelling cannot ‘reproduce the discoursal mode’ of the previous texts (p. 4). Thus, Carter is not creating a retelling version of Bluebeard, but a brand-new story which she has endowed with her own thoughts and meanings.

Furthermore, within these two texts, the motivation of the heroines to enter the secret room is similar, but different at the same time. As for the resemblance, both heroines enter the little room due to their curiosity. In Bluebeard, the husband’s speech arouses the girl’s curiosity to detect the secret inside that room, curiosity is the only
factor that drives the girl toward the secret room (Le Juez, 2016); however, the heroine in The Bloody Chamber is mainly based on her strong thirst for knowing more and deeper of her husband, it is because of her love to him (Rochère & Heidmann, 2009). Therefore, the girl’s love for her husband in The Bloody Chamber differs from the reason of the heroine entering the room from Bluebeard.

In addition, Carter adds some modern elements to her story, such as telephones, music, and trains making variations from the original tale to a different and modern story (Carroll, 2007). First of all, telephones symbolise the girl’s hope, since the telephone is the only tool she can use to connect with her mother from the isolated castle she lives in. In fact, the phone calls also act as a plot device, as it helps the mother notice that something is wrong with her daughter. Secondly, music is the girl’s oasis of peace and her power. In the story, the girl practices the piano every time she struggles; she believes her music could ‘give her the power to free herself from him [Marquis]’ (Carter, 2012, p. 30). As to the trains, it symbolises the girl’s mental development from a daughter to a wife. In the end of this train tour, she has adapted well to the fact that she is the Marquis’s wife and is ready to start a new life as a wife (Arikan, 2016).

Themes

Carter aims to present three main themes in The Bloody Chamber, the heroine’s development, gender roles and human sexuality. Firstly, Carter wants to show the mental variation from the narrator’s (the girl’s) experience, from a daughter becoming a wife, then how she emerges from this miserable experience (McLaughlin, 1995). After being tempted by her desire, she discovers more and grows up mentally to become an independent woman, as witnessed at the end (McLaughlin, 1995).

Furthermore, gender roles, which is also a main theme in Bluebeard, is shown in an entirely different way in The Bloody Chamber. Carter emphasises the character’s psychological details, shaping female characters while most male characters are less descriptive and normally presented with no effort (Bruhl & Gamer, 1998). Carter wants to arouse people’s attention to feminism and the equality between the genders. Females in this democratic society turns up with an equal status to males, however, there are several contradictions under this ‘democratic society’. For example, when her husband needs to leave for his business trip she could only obey and ‘satisfy’ with his plan; moreover, Carter highlights the weeds wearing of the girl’s mother, which she still needs to be wearing for all those years after her husband dies, as a sign of widow. These two contradictions are the remaining culture from the patriarchal society, which means this ‘democratic society’ is not fully democratic yet (Makinen, 1992).
Last but not the least, Carter opens up a dangerous and animalistic world of human sexuality, demonstrating the ‘prayerbooks’ on Marquis’s bookcase which emerge from the world of sadomasochism. Carter thus boldly exposes human desire of sex through the arts (Lappas, 1996).

There is also a close correlation of the story with the three hidden meanings of the title, The Bloody Chamber. The first one is the literal meaning, the forbidden chamber, full of ‘blood’ and darkness; moreover, the chamber, in a way, symbolises the Marquis’s bloody, cruel heart; as to the last symbolisation, this chamber represents a seminary of vice and crime, as Jean-Yves indicates of the ‘Castle of Murder’ (Roemer, 1998).

Discussion

According to McLaughlin and Stephens (2013), if The Bloody Chamber is a retelling of Bluebeard, the narrative Carter uses needs to be the same as the original story, due to the reason that it will create ‘a new textual and ideological configuration’ (p. 4). Every presupposition that Carter adds in makes this story a new story, as it violates the original purposes of Bluebeard. In addition, as Kristeva (1981) mentions, the elements of new texts are compiled from pre-existent texts, and it constitutes a complicated relationship of ‘intertextuality’ (p. 36). In this case, Carter forms her own story with intersection and neutralisation of the text, Bluebeard.

Angela Carter creates strange, bizarre and magnificent worlds with her strong imagination and powerful language in her stories, presenting a brand-new picture from the original story, Bluebeard. Carter intents to ‘extract the latent content from the traditional stories’ (Carter, 2012, pp. vii-viii). The Bloody Chamber has presented her readers’ response of Bluebeard on potential details and themes. Although Carter utilises the elements from Bluebeard, this new text holds her own thinking and writing style, which makes The Bloody Chamber a separate text, instead of a retelling that aims to present the same information that Bluebeard is trying to present (Bakhtin, 1986).

Conclusion

In general, The Bloody Chamber consciously distinguishes itself from Perrault’s Bluebeard from the four aspects discussed above: genre, characters, plot, and themes. Carter use the short story, a genre that can log everyday experience, to present a relatively modern story of marriage, secrets and rescue, with Carter’s different understandings on heroine’s development, gender roles and human sexuality. The Bloody Chamber contains many of
Angela Carter’s individual elements and thoughts, which differ from *Bluebeard*. These two texts do have their intertextuality; however, *The Bloody Chamber* is an entirely new story rather than a retelling of Perrault’s *Bluebeard*. 
References


