

The Bloody Chamber: Part 1

(to '...before he kissed me and left me and died.')

"I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon – lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow..."

The unnamed narrator of *The Bloody Chamber* travels to the residence of her new husband, a fabulously rich Marquis of Breton, a region of northern France. She's excited and, despite her mother's reservations about her swift marriage, eager to consummate her new relationship. Although he's a much older man who's been married several times before, the narrator puts aside any doubts about his eccentric quirks and dreams of making love to her new husband for the first time. As a train speeds them both through the night towards their destination, she recounts their first meeting, his seduction of her, and their quick marriage and sudden leave-taking from her family home.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. From which city are the newlywed couple departing?

- (a) Nice
- (b) Paris
- (c) Marseille
- (d) Changshu

2. Where did the narrator's mother adventure when she was young?

- (a) Asia-Pacific
- (b) South America
- (c) Indo-China
- (d) Eastern Europe

3. What did her father NOT leave her mother after he died?

- (a) A cigar box
- (b) His fortune
- (c) Medals
- (d) An antique service revolver

4. Which of these is an adventure her mother did NOT have?

- (a) Outfaced a boat of Chinese pirates
- (b) Nursed a village through the plague
- (c) Shot a man-eating tiger
- (d) Swam a crocodile-infested lake

5. Of what flower does the narrator's new husband remind her?

- (a) Rose
- (b) Lily
- (c) Violet
- (d) Petunia

6. What ancestral item does the Marquis ask his new bride to always wear?

- (a) A gold-inlaid torc
- (b) A fire-opal ring
- (c) A diamond-studded tiara
- (d) A sapphire phoenix brooch

7. What does her old nurse say about this gift?

- (a) It's too expensive
- (b) It's cursed
- (c) It's bad luck
- (d) She doesn't say anything

8. What was the Marquis' wedding gift to his new bride?

- (a) A Bechstein piano
- (b) A silver looking glass
- (c) A pet parakeet
- (d) A ruby-embedded choker

9. What opera did the Marquis take his bride and mother to see the night before the wedding?

- (a) Tristan
- (b) Isolde
- (c) Romeo Y Julieta
- (d) Carmen

10. How old is the narrator?

- (a) Fourteen
- (b) Seventeen
- (c) Twenty-one
- (d) Twenty-six

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What do you discover about the narrator's previous life and family from the details she recounts in the opening section of the story?
2. Comment on the husband's seduction of his new wife. How did he win her affections?
3. What sense are you getting of the narrator's new husband? What details from the girl's descriptions of him are giving you this sense?
4. What do we learn about the Marquis' previous wives? Who were they? What happened to them? Was there anything similar about them?
5. In what ways does Angela Carter convey a sense of the girl's eagerness to begin her new life?

Literary Study: *liminal space*

"The train bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment..."



The word 'liminal' comes from the Latin word for 'threshold'. Being in the liminal zone is to be in a transitional or a transformative stage. In many coming-of-age stories, characters move from childhood to adulthood. **Liminality** is the space between those two states: separated from the childhood world, but not yet incorporated into the adult world, the character is neither-here-nor-there, which is the essential definition of liminality. It's a dangerous space, stripped of the protections of childhood, empty of knowledge – you don't know what's coming – but at the same time, it's full of possibility.

The Bloody Chamber opens with the narrator on a train taking her from her mother's home to her new husband's residence. In this situation, the train is a liminal space: the narrator has been separated from her childhood state (1) by her new husband. She is married, but the two have yet to consummate their relationship, representing that she is not yet fully a woman (state 2). She has left her childhood home, and the protection of her mother and her nurse, behind her – but has not yet arrived at her destination. In the collection as a whole, Angela Carter often positions her characters in a liminal zone between two states: girl and woman, known and unknown, human and animal – even between life and death.

Activity

Work in pairs to discuss what are the features of **liminality** in *The Bloody Chamber*? Look for descriptions of the train, the surrounding landscape, the narrator, and the world she is navigating. How does Carter create a sense of the narrator's vulnerability? In what ways is she 'neither-here-nor-there' in terms of her physical journey, and also in terms of her coming-of-age? Note your ideas and observations here, along with key quotations that you might find:

Important Symbolism: *the ruby necklace*



The choker given to the narrator by her new husband is one of the most vivid and memorable **symbols** of the story, if not the whole collection. The girl recalls that the red necklace originates as a French historical tradition: '*the aristos who'd escaped the guillotine had an ironic fad of tying a red ribbon around their necks at just the place where the blade would have sliced...*' Undoubtedly, The Marquis is aware of this association too – but he gives her the necklace not to symbolize her escape from death, but to **foreshadow** it instead!

As the name suggests ('*choker*') the necklace is also a **symbol** of the husband's control over his new wife, particularly through the institution of marriage. Admittedly, she seems somewhat aware of the idea of marriage as an economic exchange, in which a woman surrenders ownership of herself for the benefits of wealth and security. When her mother asks, '*Are you sure you love him?*' she pointedly replies, '*I'm sure I want to marry him,*' suggesting she knows something of the choice she is making. Nevertheless, she initially displays the necklace proudly, revealing how easily an innocent young girl might fall into the control of an older and wealthier man. Later, the restrictive nature of the necklace becomes apparent to the narrator and she admits that '*he would not let me take off my ruby choker, although it was growing very uncomfortable.*' In this way the choker implies how, once a girl surrenders her autonomy, it can be difficult to escape her fate.

Finally, the effect of the ruby necklace on the narrator is part of her transformation; indeed, it seems like the necklace partly catalyzes her coming-of-age. She calls the necklace '*cruel*' yet is captivated by the sense of her own beauty when wearing it. At one point she feels her '*innocent and confined life*' coming to an end and senses a new '*potentiality for corruption that took my breath away.*' This is a pivotal moment in her life; '*corruption*', despite the negative connotations of the word, suggests her exploration of a previously unknown side of herself. This experience is alluring and exciting – but at the same time dangerous for someone so young and unprotected.

20-minute writing practice

Write an analytical paragraph about the husband's control over his new wife. Choose an area of focus such as: how the Marquis seduces her; the Marquis' presence and physicality; the importance of 'looking and attention'; her innocence versus his experience; the symbolism of clothing; the effect created by reading from the wife's perspective, or any other idea you choose to focus on.
