

The Bloody Chamber: Part 3 (to the end)

"My virgin of the arpeggios, prepare yourself for martyrdom."

Having uncovered her husband's true nature, the narrator is appalled to hear his motor car returning over the causeway back to the castle. While he tells her that his business deal has fallen through, she knows that this was all part of his game. Feigning ignorance, he asks her to return his keys, and she is betrayed by the blood clinging to the key to his dungeon. From here on, he insists she play out the role of sacrifice, as he draws out her murder into a ritual. But, against all hope, as she prepares for her decapitation, she suddenly hears hoofbeats racing closer. Her mother, alerted by some maternal telepathy, has travelled as fast as she can to her daughter's rescue.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What does the narrator think to do immediately after emerging from the bloody chamber?

- (a) Find refuge in the village
- (b) Call her mother
- (c) Escape by train
- (d) All of the above

2. Playing what piece of music helps calm the narrator?

- (a) The Well Tempered Clavier by Bach
- (b) Fur Elise by Beethoven
- (c) Nocturne by Chopin
- (d) Clair de Lune by Debussy

3. What is the true name of the castle?

- (a) Castle of Death
- (b) Castle of Pain
- (c) Castle of Murder
- (d) Castle of the Damned

4. What does the Marquis demand his wife fetch for him?

- (a) A glass of whiskey
- (b) A bedtime story
- (c) His keys
- (d) A ham sandwich

5. On what part of her body is the narrator marked by the bloodstained key?

- (a) Her forehead
- (b) Her cheek
- (c) Her hand
- (d) Her back

6. What ancestral item will the Marquis use to kill his latest wife?

- (a) The Iron Maiden
- (b) His great-grandfather's sword
- (c) His father's service revolver
- (d) A poisoned chalice

7. Now that she's lost her innocence, the narrator has also lost her appeal for the Marquis, so he insults her with what word?

- (a) Slut
- (b) Bitch
- (c) Whore
- (d) Wench

8. Which allusion describes the narrator's mother when she bursts into the castle?

- (a) Medusa
- (b) Cleopatra
- (c) Helen of Troy
- (d) Saint Cecilia

9. What is the name of the horse the narrator's mother borrowed from a bemused farmer?

- (a) Cobbles
- (b) Dobbin
- (c) Romeo
- (d) Terrence

10. How does the narrator's mother kill the Marquis?

- (a) Shoots him in the head
- (b) Pushes him into the sea
- (c) Tramples him with her horse
- (d) Stabs him in the back

Understanding and Interpretation

1. After the narrator emerges from the bloody chamber, all illusions have been stripped away. How does she describe herself and her husband now? How is the power imbalance between them suggested by descriptions in the story?
2. How does the motif of music become more important towards the end of the story?
3. Do any moments in the story allow a glimpse of the Marquis' human side, or is he portrayed as irredeemably monstrous? Does the narrator experience any moments of empathy or tenderness at all?
4. How does Carter increase the tension as the story builds to its climax?
5. The story ends with a 'coda' told from the present day. What things do we find out that make this such an apt end for the story? How has Carter both fulfilled and subverted our expectations?

Important Character: Jean-Yves

"I had been infinitely dishevelled by the loss of my virginity."

The importance of Jean-Yves character is signaled by the fact that he is the only character in the story to be assigned his own name. When he first appears in the story, we might fall for a little bit of misdirection and assume that Jean-Yves is an archetypal ‘heroic rescuer’ come to save the damsel in distress from the terrible beast. But, in Carter’s version of a fairy tale, while he empathizes with the narrator’s plight, he doesn’t actually perform any rescuing. This role is instead given to the narrator’s mother. In this way, Jean-Yves becomes another way in which Carter flips traditional fairy tale perspectives and roles.

What Jean-Yves does do is to fall in love with the protagonist’s piano playing – her talent – and not with her appearance, youth, innocence, or any of the other things that attracted the Marquis’ desire. One of the overriding concerns of *The Bloody Chamber* is to examine the way men look at women. As part of his seduction of her, the Marquis took his young bride to see Tristan where, dressed in the finest dress his money can buy, she could feel *‘all eyes were upon me.’* The Marquis’ own gaze is constantly upon her, amplified by his monocle and the mirrors he surrounds her with. She can feel *‘the sheer carnal avarice’* of his eyes, *‘magnified by the monocle lodged in his left eye.’* When she wears the ruby choker, under the Marquis’ relentless gaze she even changes the way she looks at herself: *‘I saw how much that cruel necklace became me’* suggests that the narrator allows herself to be moulded into shapes that are more pleasing to his eye. That she comes to enjoy being looked at in this way reveals the corrupting power of men’s attention.

Jean-Yves, as a blind man, is incapable of looking at her in this way, something Carter highlights when the two first meet and the narrator mentions how his *‘grey eyes fixed upon me although they could not see me.’* His blindness, innocence, delicacy, and kindness he offers to the protagonist establish him as the Marquis **foil** (two characters who are juxtaposed in order to draw out their differences). He cannot objectify her in the way the Marquis does, and instead responds to her music.

Activity

In what ways can Jean-Yves be seen as the Marquis’ **foil**? Note down all the ways you can think of as to how the characters contrast and oppose each other:

The Marquis

Jean-Yves

Important Theme: **women's agency**

"She raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head."

In the original Bluebeard story, the heroine is saved by her brothers – but Carter twists this scene and has her mother ride to the rescue instead. This small tweak calls attention to the issue of **women's agency**. The character of Jean-Yves would traditionally have been the hero saving the damsel in distress, but he is portrayed as quite helpless (although he does help unbar the gates of the castle). Up until this moment, everything has gone according to the Marquis' plan. However, the mother interrupts the murder scene: the Marquis is a 'beast' and, having already had experience of killing a man-eating tiger, she easily dispatches this creature as well. The mother's strength, daring, and protective power makes her the strongest person in the story, and gives agency to a female character. This simple decision prompts us to think about the roles women normally play in more traditional fairy stories and in narratives across time.

Another, more subtle, example is when the narrator relates her sorry tale to Jean-Yves and he tells her old legends of a long line of Marquis who used to hunt girls for sport. She realizes that, although she could not have known the extent of his evil, nevertheless she had always felt that '*he would be the death of me.*' She acknowledges that, to a small degree, she was complicit. She may not have known the depths of his depravity, but she sensed he was corrupting her and she willfully embraced the excitement of her desires. In this way, Carter gives her her own agency; she is not just a victim who harm is inflicted upon, but a participant in her own downfall. Furthermore, on hearing her tale, Jean-Yves compares her to Eve: the heroine of this story, like Eve, committed the sin of seeking forbidden knowledge, another small act of agency that is disproportionately punished by her male antagonist.

Activity

Research female archetypes, or the roles and characteristics given to women, in stories and fairy tales. Decide whether these archetypes/ character traits permit women to have agency or deny them any agency in the stories. You can begin by reading the articles posted on the class blog (you'll find them in The Bloody Chamber Part 3). Keep track of your reading by making brief notes of your key findings. Suggested articles that you can easily find include, but are not limited to:

- Tell Me A Story: How the Patriarchy Influences Fairytales by Maison Rauer
- Fairy Tales and the Fear of Female Sexuality by Jess McWilliam
- Female Stereotypes in Fairy Tales by Michaella Henry

20-minute writing practice

Write an analytical paragraph about the theme of women's agency in The Bloody Chamber. How does Carter give her female characters more agency? What aspects of the narrator's early character hint at this theme? How does she participate in her own corruption? Do any minor characters illustrate this theme? Choose a focus for your paragraph, support your idea with a well-chosen reference or two, and provide some explanation and analysis.