

# I Love You so Much I Have to Kill You: Eros and Thanatos in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*

## Te iubesc atât de mult încât trebuie să teucid: Eros și Thanatos în volumul *Odaia însângerată și alte povestiri* al Angelei Carter

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### Abstract

*The paper aims at discussing the two overarching topics of Carter's short story collection: love and death. The primary focus is on the language and the imagery in the texts, and the metaphors and symbols employed. Special attention will be given to the images of food and eating habits as they are contrasted with or mirror the images of the body and the sexual act, the carnal aspect of both the characters and the situations being emphasized. In connection to this, something will be said about how the author uses recurrent symbols such as smells, colors and flowers.*

### Rezumat

*Această lucrare are în centru două subiecte principale ale colecției de nuvele ale scriitoarei Angela Carter: dragostea și moartea. Focusul principal este plasat pe limbajul și imaginile artistice ale textelor, precum și pe metaforele și simbolurile utilizate. O atenție specială va fi acordată imaginilor înfățișând alimente și obiceiuri alimentare, și felul în care acestea oglindesc sau contrastează cu imagini ale corpului și actului sexual, evidențiindu-se aspectul carnal atât al personajelor, cât și al situațiilor. În privința acestora, vom spune câteva lucruri despre modul în care autoarea utilizează simboluri recurente precum mirosurile, culorile și florile.*

**Key words:** *love, death, blood, virginity, fairy-tale*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *dragoste, moarte, sânge, virginitate, basm*

### 1. Introduction

Angela Carter (1940-1992) was a journalist, poet and writer of novels, short fiction and screenplays who published extensively during her life. Carter's prominent postmodern novels (*The Magic Toyshop*, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman*, *Nights at the Circus* etc.), as well as her short stories, are brought up in talks of magic realism, the gothic and the Female Gothic, science fiction. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) is a collection of short stories that plays not only with the traditional Western fairy-tale – *Bluebeard*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Sleeping Beauty* – but also with the traditional gothic tale – there are werewolves, vampires, cannibals – and legend.

*The Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature* places Carter under the *neo-Gothic* heading [1], but she is also mentioned in the entries *contes cruels* [2] and *Female Gothic* [3]. The stories qualify as *contes cruels* because of an overarching anticipation of death; furthermore, in such stories as "The Bloody Chamber," "The Erl-King" and "The Snow Child," there are vivid images of physical torture, rape and mutilation. On the other hand, *The Encyclopedia* defines the Female Gothic as literature "that expresses sympathy for a female protagonist who is oppressed by a villain or patriarchal authority figure through stalking, abusive relationships, or outright persecution" [4],

which is certainly the case in at least several of the stories in the collection. For instance, in “The Bloody Chamber,” “The Tiger’s Bride” and “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” the heroine is sacrificed into an unwanted marriage for the sake of the family, in a society where a rich marriage is a woman’s only way to prosper.

This paper aims at looking at the dynamics between the two overarching topics of love and death in the collection. The stories shall not be analyzed consecutively, but, rather, the themes and symbols that have been identified and selected shall be analyzed as they appear in the stories. Also, attention should be drawn to the fact that, due to the difference in their length, some stories shall be given more space, e.g. “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Lady of the House of Love,” than others.

It seems significant enough to speak and write of the themes and motifs of love and death in Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, if we were only to note that six out of the ten short stories in the collection end in some kind of loving or marital bond being formed between the characters (“The Bloody Chamber,” “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” “The Tiger’s Bride,” “Puss-in Boots,” “The Company of Wolves” and “Wolf-Alice”), as unorthodox as that bond or the characters involved in them might be. Moreover, as Salman Rushdie writes in his inspired preface to the *Collected Stories* of Angela Carter, “blood and love, always proximate, underlie and unify” all the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* collection [5].

There is a possibility of regarding this collection of ten short stories as forming three major sections, if we take as criteria the plot and overall atmosphere of the stories [6]: the first section includes “The Bloody Chamber,” “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride,” all of which contain elements of the Beauty and the Beast plotline. The second section would encompass stories “The Erl-King,” “The Snow Child” and “The Lady of the House of Love,” unified by expressed brutality and lack of catharsis. The third group of stories are the last three in the collection, “The Werewolf,” “The Company of Wolves” and “Wolf-Alice,” all three wolf-stories. “Puss-in-Boots,” the story that comes fourth in the collection, does not seem to fit into neither of the groups, and it serves, we could say, as a kind of comic relief, being the only story with an overtly comical tone, and turning away from the gothic atmosphere of all the other stories.

Also, the entire collection might be regarded, as Rushdie suggests, as stories that re-invent the Beauty and the Beast model, and take the sexual dynamics between the two traditional characters in order to show the changing structures of power in any sexual liaison, something that is certainly significant under the present topic. In Rushdie’s words, as we advance through the book, “Now it is the Beauty who is the stronger, now the Beast” [7].

## 2. Re-thinking Tradition: Connection with Vladimir Propp

In his *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, the Russian structuralist theoretician Vladimir Propp defines the thirty-one functions that mould the narrative structures in the Russian folk tale. According to Propp’s theory, there are certain clearly identifiable functions that the plotline of folktales unmistakably fulfills: for example, the departure of the hero to fulfill a task, the villainies that stand in his way, the overcoming of obstacles followed by the rewarding of a previously promised prize, and the happy ending. The functions that Propp offers are applicable to the folk tales of many other traditions apart from the Russian, but also to contemporary stories, movie plots etc. Angela Carter’s collection is, among other things, interesting to look at from the point of view of playing with Propp’s functions and challenging the traditional roles and narrative sequences of the fairy-tale.

Taking *Snow White* as a prototype, here are, roughly, some of Propp’s functions we can identify in it:

- 1) Absentation: Snow White leaves the home environment
- 2) Interdiction: Snow White is warned against letting anyone into the seven dwarves’ house while they are out working
- 3) Violation of interdiction: Snow White lets the Queen disguised as an old woman into the house

- 4) Villainy: The Queen poisons Snow White and Snow White is taken for dead
- 5) Resolution: Snow White is revived by the Prince
- 6) Wedding: Snow White marries the Prince

Now taking one of Carter's stories, such as "The Bloody Chamber" (a variation of sorts of the *Bluebeard* fairy-tale), we can see how she plays with these functions:

- 1) Absentation: the girl leaves the home of her mother to marry an older French man
- 2) Interdiction: she is warned against going into one specific room of his castle
- 3) Violation of interdiction: she goes into the room and finds her husband's dead ex-wives
- 4) Villainy: her husband discovers it and tries to kill her
- 5) Resolution: her mother, instead of a Prince, comes to the rescue and kills the husband
- 6) Wedding: the girl marries not a Prince, but a blind piano-tuner; she does not enjoy her inherited wealth, but rather gives the money to charity.

As it can be seen, Carter's stories often start at the well-known pace: Little Red Riding Hood goes into the woods, Beauty's father loses his fortune and finds shelter in the Beast's house. Carter's heroines, the female characters, whom she empowers during the course of the story, at the beginning are usually the kind of colorless, typified characters that we know from traditional fairy-tales: obedient daughters who are to become obedient wives. For example, in "The Bloody Chamber" the heroine simply switches from being dependant on her mother to dependency on her new husband: "when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife" [8]. She is a trophy, an expensive acquisition of her new husband. But, it is in the course of the story, and especially by changing Prince Charming for the mother as savior, that Carter steps out of the traditional framework. The force of salvation comes not from a dominant male figure, but from motherly, feminine instinct. Another peculiarity of this story is the piano-tuner, a would-be Prince Charming, who, alas! is blind and poor, and who has not the power needed to rescue the Princess from harm. As will be shown below, all of Carter's stories have unorthodox endings, which often empower the female characters: the heroine either *becomes* the knight himself, or she uses her sexuality to fight the villain, or the heroine and the villain are reconciled in the strangest of situations.

What is also interesting is Carter's combinations of several texts in a single story: for instance, in "The Lady of the House of Love," the primary subtext is the well-known vampire story, with all the traditional gothic elements at hand (the solitary castle, the catafalque, the Transylvanian woods); on the other hand, the heroine, a vampire, is at the same time a Sleeping Beauty, and even explicitly named so [9]. She awaits her prince in shining armor, to liberate her from a destiny of cannibalism she has been condemned to (for she is not a proud heiress of the Count Vlad the Impaler's family tradition). Sometimes, the clues lie in a single line: in "The Erl-King," the story of a creature of the forests developed from Germanic mythology, Carter introduces a line from *Little Red Riding Hood*: "What big eyes you have" [10]. In this way, a connection is made between a legend and the wolf from a traditional fairy-tale.

The end to which this comparison between the traditional roles and sequences of events and those presented in Carter's story, is directed, is showing that, while in folk-tales the themes of love and death are usually presented in such a way as to annihilate one another – i.e. Bluebeard's young wife, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty are saved from death by love – in Carter, the imagery and the symbolism of love and death are often intermingled. Love no longer rescues from death: it can lead to death. Secondly, Carter pushes the envelope of the theme of love by using *sexual* imagery; as she claims, what she did was to take the latent content of fairy-tales and explore it to its extremes, "and the latent content is violently sexual" [11].

### 3. The Deadly Love and the Lovely Death

There is a long tradition of writers along the path Angela Carter is treading: writers who have dealt with beauty, death, love, pain – in all their possible combinations. Edgar Allan Poe famously considered that there is not a more poetic subject than the death of a beautiful woman, and

put his theory into practice in “Annabel Lee,” “Lenore” and “The Raven.” Also in American tradition, we come across Nathaniel Hawthorne’s famous short story “The Birthmark,” where a woman falls victim to her husband’s obsession with the perfection of her beauty. The birthmark that Georgiana wears on her cheek (in the form of a tiny human hand, no less) is a constant reminder of her (human) imperfection. Her husband, in an attempt to create pure perfection, performs an operation: the birthmark perishes, but so does Georgiana.

Carter explores the latent *violently sexual* content of fairy-tales through images of death, sadism, cannibalism, rape, torture. This is not the only work in which Carter’s interest in similar topics surface: her famous reading of Marquis de Sade in *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*, published a year before *The Bloody Chamber*, is still a highly controversial work.

An example is Carter’s variation on the *Snow White* story, in the form of the short yet very sharp and vivid “The Snow Child.” In Carter, the girl of “white skin, red mouth [and] black hair” [12] is created out of the father’s rather than the mother’s wish. However, when she appears, she is innocent and beautiful, but she is stark naked. The sight of her young body provokes jealousy in the stepmother, who then sends her to pick a fresh rose, on which the Snow Child pricks her finger and falls down screaming. At that moment, we understand that the father’s wish was not a longing for fatherhood, but rather a sexual desire, for no sooner does the girl fall down than he “unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl” [13]. This wish of his, we understand, is a mixture of incest and necrophilia. The macabre pact is between him and his wife: he makes his sexual fantasy come true, she kills her apparent rival and then he rapes her. Symbolically, there is nothing left after the girl has melted but the original elements out of which she was created: white snow, red blood and the feather of a raven. In this way, in Carter’s variation of the story, the Snow Child is created not out of love but out of twisted sexual fantasy, and she just as easily disintegrates.

Twisted love can lead to death, as in “The Snow Child” and “The Bloody Chamber.” But, sometimes a hopeless scenario leads to unforeseen twists. In “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride,” the two stories immediately following “The Bloody Chamber,” the Beauties find a way to love their Beasts, and both stories have a happy ending, as unorthodox as Carter’s solutions seem. We could go as far as saying that the first and the second story in the collection (“The Bloody Chamber” and “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon”) were intended as some kind of antidote to one another: whereas love in “The Bloody Chamber” kills, in the second story, the *absence* of it kills, and the return of Beauty to Mr. Lyon heals and revives him.

“The Tiger’s Bride” is an especially intriguing example, and Angela Carter’s imagination and playfulness, we might say, is at its best here. Although the story opens similarly to the previous two – beautiful and innocent maiden forcibly locked inside a beast’s castle – this time the beast, a Tiger hiding his hideousness under a human-like mask and attire, asks only to see the maiden without her clothes on; one glance at her white and innocent body and she is free. Insulted by the suggestion, Beauty refuses. However, after she is given to see the Tiger naked instead, she takes off parts of her clothes: and the Tiger is embarrassed. She soon understands that she does not want to leave the Tiger’s side and runs to his chamber; they finally face each other as they are: she stark naked and he a real Tiger, on all fours, pacing around a room that reeks of urine. As he starts to caress her, the last lines of the story describe a metamorphosis: but not in the Tiger. It is Beauty that is transformed - into a beautiful tigress. The idea that it is Beauty who changes, who makes *the beast inside her* surface rather than making the Beast’s *human side* appear is a refreshing reading of the traditional plot. Moreover, it is with style and in beautiful language that Carter transforms peril into love, devouring into caresses, brutality into beauty. A similar process ends the collection, in the story “Wolf-Alice,” where two unlikely mates – a vampire and a girl raised as a wolf – will find love in each other’s arms.

In “The Erl-King,” this deadly creature of the woods is the lover, but at the same time the threat, the one who could make the female narrator disappear, devour her, make her melt inside his gaze. That he will do her “grievous harm” is something the narrator soon understands: “His embraces were his enticements and yet, oh yet! they were the branches of which the trap itself was

woven” [14]. And, just like in “The Bloody Chamber,” in this story love leads to death, it does not save from it.

#### 4. Death and the Maiden

Often, the loss of virginity is described in similar terms as the loss of life. Certainly that the symbol linking the two – blood – is a repeated symbol in the collection, and it is represented through several situations that will help show the dynamics between Eros and Thanatos in these stories.

Taking the first and the longest story in the collection as an example, the heroine, an unnamed young woman, is, like the heroines of the following “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride,” wrapped in expensive clothes and given a beautiful house to live in, but she is also expected to obediently act on all of her purchaser’s wishes. In this sense, perhaps the most telling scene in “The Bloody Chamber” is the scene of defloration on the wedding night. Quoting Baudelaire’s poem “The Jewels” (itself a poem about the sexual act), the bridegroom seizes his new bride, and, kissing her blood-red necklace before he even kisses her, and twining her hair into a rope, he “impales” her [15].

This blood-red necklace, a wedding gift, is: “a choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat” [16]. The choker stands for several things, as they might be interpreted under the theme of love and death: it is, first and foremost, a symbol of her belonging to her husband, a choker one might bestow on a faithful dog (as indeed Mr. Lyon does for his spaniel in the next story, as if to offer a possible retrospective interpretation of the symbol). It is also a reminder of a very specific point in our civilization’s history of violence: during the Reign of Terror after the French Revolution, the ones who managed to save themselves from the guillotine wore a red ribbon around their necks, “like the memory of a wound” [17], to remind them of how close they got to losing their heads to the Revolution. The choker of rubies was made as a more luxurious variant of this red ribbon, and then passed down generations of women. In this way, the heroine is introduced into yet another circle of violence, spreading, this one, over several centuries, and on several levels: the historical, the family and the personal level.

The choker of rubies is a peculiar sort of fetish for the bridegroom, who makes his wife leave it on as the only attire during the act of defloration. Its color is blood red, the blood announcing her loss of innocence and the loss of life that he has planned for her. In the husband’s mind, the choker stands in place of the red wound that he intends to make around her neck.

There is an interesting sequence of events, from the moment the young wife discovers her husband’s stash of pornography in the library, and up to the scene of the decapitation of the young bride in the backyard. The one specific picture book that draws the bride’s attention is entitled “Reproof of curiosity,” and it foreshadows, in a macabre way, two of the events that are to take place: the loss of virginity and the loss of life. What she sees in the picture is a girl, naked and with tears on her cheeks, and a man with a black mask, fingering “with his free hand his prick, that curved upwards like a scimitar he held” [18]. What she sees is herself – young crying girl – and him – man in a black mask - in the much-anticipated and announced first sexual act. But, for her husband, her looking at the picture is a *curiosity* that must be *reproved*. As Becky McLaughlin notes in an essay about fetishism and perversity in “The Bloody Chamber,” the curiosity that the young bride shows for pornography, the “curiosity that lures her into innocent prurience” [19] is reason enough for her husband to want to punish her, or, more precisely, use her discovery as an excuse to perform the punishment, and in this case punishment means defloration. Through a macabre allusion, it is again curiosity that will later on bring the young bride to disobey her husband, walk in on his collection of dead young ex-wives, and it will again be for this curiosity that she will have to be punished, this time – by death, by decapitation. In this way, the “scimitar,” a sword, mentioned in relation to the sexual act, this way becomes synonymous to the phallus, and the act of defloration synonymous to the act of decapitation.

Furthermore, the keys once dropped in the pool of blood forming at the foot of the Iron Maiden where lay the last wife of Bluebeard, are also a possible allusion to the lost innocence of the narrator. No matter how hard she scrubs the keys, the blood does not come off – just like the blood spilt on her matrimonial bed, and just like the massacre she has witnessed in the forbidden room. In this way, neither the knowledge of the flesh nor the knowledge of her husband's crimes can be taken back. Symbolically – and coming back to the mention of Hawthorne earlier in this essay – the imprint of the bloody key that Bluebeard will leave on her forehead will be a constant reminder, both of her imperfection and of what she has lived through. She will carry it both as a stain on her beauty, as Georgiana does in “The Birthmark,” and as a scarlet letter of lost innocence.

### 5. Food and Sex

There is a very carefully mapped out imagery of the carnal, sexual aspect of the heroines of Carter's stories. In most of them, the flesh of women, most often girls with awakening sexuality, maidens, is described in terms of food. Their flesh, that is, is at the same time the object of sexual desire, and the flesh of prey.

The narrator of *The Erl-King* feels like a “skinned rabbit” in her nakedness in front of the Erl-King, and wishes she could become small so she could be swallowed by him [20], while Little Red Riding Hood in “*The Werewolf*” is covered in sheepskin. The wolf in “*The Company of Wolves*” also prefers virgins: “only immaculate flesh appeases him” [21]. In “*The Tiger's Bride*” the Beast wants a peep at “a young lady's skin that no man has seen before” [22].

The Erl-King, a creature of the woods that entraps beautiful young women in cages, suggests a connection between sex and eating; this is how the narrator describes it: “He is the tender butcher who showed me how the price of flesh is love; skin the rabbit, he says! Off come all my clothes” [23]. The narrator lies “at the mercy of his huge hands” [24]. His eyes are dangerous, because “there are some eyes can eat you” [25]. The sexual intimacy between the Erl-King and the narrator is an echo of the intimacies between the characters in other stories, for, as Helen Simpson notes, some of the symbols and images truly open up like a system of Chinese boxes into one another [26]. The Erl-King's love is painful: he performs the sexual act as a ritual of devouring, thus echoing Bluebeard in “*The Bloody Chamber*” who kisses the choker of blood-red rubies before he is able to perform, and echoing the vampire Lady from “*The Lady of the House of Love*,” echoing, too, the repeated images of blood and sexual acts in the last three stories of the collection, variations on the plot of Little Red Riding Hood and the vampire story.

In “*The Bloody Chamber*,” the narrator's inexperience in sex is paralleled with her inexperience in the matters of fine dining. She has an imagination of a schoolgirl on both these topics. Her husband is a real representative of the high classes of France, that land of cuisine and love, the type of man who orders a “Mexican dish of pheasant with hazelnuts” and “a sorbet of muscat grapes” [27]. His bride, on the other hand, scandalizes the house-keeper by asking for such things as “avocado and shrimp” [28] and “sandwiches and a flask of coffee” [29] and declines to dress for dinner, which is what would be appropriate. The ineptitude of the young bride in matters of manners is met with “a moue of disdain” [30] from the house-keeper and is analogous to her scarce knowledge of the ways of the flesh in the bedroom.

In her own rendering of the Beauty and the Beast story in “*The Courtship of Mr. Lyon*,” the love that the Beast expresses for his captive every night is described in vivid terms, terms that invoke primarily the images of eating: “she felt his hot breath on her fingers, the stiff bristles of his muzzle grazing her skin, the rough lapping of his tongue, and then, with a flood of compassion understood: all he is doing is kissing my hands” [31]. In other words, the initial horror, the impression that he is gnawing, nibbling on her fingers, is replaced by compassion: all he wants is a little love, not food. Love and the expression of it is here, as well as in “*The Bloody Chamber*,” associated with an attack, a “struggle” [32].

Little Red Riding Hood's first sight of the hunter-turned-wolf in “*The Company of Wolves*” is with carcasses of birds he has shot. These carcasses are a premonition of the girl herself soon to

become prey, but while the wolf speaks and acts in terms of sexual seduction, what he really has in mind is to devour her. Walking to granny's house, the hunter has "a faint trace of blood on his chin," for having been "snacking on his catch" [33]. In anticipation, we feel, of the main course that will arrive at granny's house presently. As the story progresses, the two areas – food and sex – become intermingled, so that what is first reported as huge are not his eyes or his mouth as in the Little Red Riding Hood we know, but "his genitals huge" [34]. After he devours the grandmother and neatly puts away the bones into a folded napkin, and does away with the hair, he welcomes Little Red Riding Hood, and from then on, the climax of the story is told in ambiguous terms. Aware that she is in mortal danger, the girl proceeds to unbutton the wolf's shirt, give him a kiss and then undress herself in front of him. Like an echo of "The Tiger's Bride," Little Red Riding Hood tames the wolf by getting into bed with him, laying his big head in her lap and eating the lice from his pelt, as "in a savage marriage ceremony" [35]. The story ends with the two lovers peacefully asleep in the murdered granny's bed. In this way, Carter transforms the character of Little Red Riding Hood by depicting her as a young woman who uses her sexuality in order to save her life, who gives up her innocence in order to survive. As for the wolf, he accepts the appeasement of one appetite instead of another. In this case, Little Red Riding Hood is one of the empowered characters of Carter, who uses her sexuality when she is cornered. Significantly, her father's hunting knife, arguably the phallic symbol, is easily taken away from her by the wolf, and thus made useless: it is only with her female *weapons* that she is able to tame the Beast.

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The best example of Carter's playing with associations to make a connection between two bodily cravings – food and sex - is found in "The Lady of the House of Love." As the title implies, the solitary castle in the enchanted woods of Transylvania might as well be taken for a brothel, and the mistress of the house for a madam of a brothel. A detail in the description points to two possible interpretations of this character: her mouth, red, full, is to be interpreted both in terms of sexual desire, sexual appeal, and in terms of her cannibalism:

...he was disturbed, almost repelled, by her extraordinarily fleshy mouth, a mouth with wide, full, prominent lips of a vibrant purplish-crimson, a morbid mouth. Even [...] a whore's mouth. [36]

The parallel is clear: in order to cajole her victims into trusting her, Lady, dressed in her mother's wedding dress, beckons them to her bedroom, and the poor young village boys, naïve and fresh off the fields, cannot believe their luck. For they believe they are bargaining for a different kind of carnal desire [37]. They think of sex, while she thinks of food, for "she only knows of one kind of consummation" [38]. Lady is a budding young woman, who, in her childhood, contented herself with rabbits and mice, but who has, as of late, started to yearn for young men: "now she is a woman, she must have men" [39]. The linguistic implications are deliberately left ambiguous: indeed, as a woman, she would have changed her dolls for romantic walks in the moonlight, and her school girlfriends for young boys. But it is a different *having* that Carter is implying here: the *having* of men for meals, the *having* of dinner. She desires their flesh primarily in the form of food, but it is with this kind of linguistic devices that Carter plays with associations. Trying to cajole the young English soldier to Lady's castle, the servant "rubbed her stomach, pointed to her mouth, rubbed her stomach again, clearly miming an invitation to supper" [40]. This is indeed, so, but the hero is the victim of tragic irony, for he indeed goes to supper, but, as it were, not where he will eat, but where he will be eaten. The blood left on the sheets of the marital bed is thus a remnant of a different kind of feast: "The bridegroom bleeds on my inverted marriage bed" [41]. It is still blood, but not a bride's blood, there is still something lost, but it is not virginity, it is life itself.

With the appearance of the Englishman, Lady's Tarot cards fall, for the first time, in a different pattern – a sign that the situation is about to change, and also a sign of the strength that Lady lacks and that the Englishman brings with him, the strength to change things and make Lady's ancestors, looking at her at all times from their portraits, reminding her that she should follow family tradition, turn away their gaze so that Lady can save herself from a destiny she despises.

## 6. Signs and Symbols

Like in traditional fairy-tales, the beauty of Carter's stories lies in her vivid language and colorful and plastic descriptions: in bright red lips, green forests, white lilies, black horses, velvet curtains, shining gold, spittle hanging to a wolf's teeth. There is movement, light and texture. Carter, as it were, retraces the steps that any good story-teller in a children's book might make, with the difference that her steps take her to much darker and more hidden places of the imagination.

There are many signs and symbols to indicate an impending disaster. The bridegroom in "The Bloody Chamber" is "a big man" with a "leonine shape" and a "dark mane" [42]. The Beasts have heavy, almost suffocating smells that somehow always announce their intimidating presence: "the perfume of spiced leather always betrayed him" [43]. In "The Tiger's Bride" this smell finally betrays the physical aspect of the monster. Through a single image, Carter very vividly portrays the state that the Beast is in: when Beauty stumbles into his room unannounced, "[t]here was a reek of fur and piss; the incense pot lay broken in pieces on the floor" [44]. The great care given to hide the Beast's appearance during the captivity of his bride, the human-like mask, the gloves to hide his paws, the ventriloquist valet to interpret the "growling impediment in his speech" [45] – are now all discarded, he abandons "the empty house of his appearance" [46] in his solitude, and it is thus that his bride finds and eventually accepts him, in all of his ghastliness, beastliness, that is transformed into beauty.

The places of captivity are intimidating as well: they have either a "spiked gate" [47] or are described as a "vast man-trap" [48]; the rooms where these damsels in distress are held are "cell[s], windowless, airless, lightless" [49]; to run from these places of doom, they feel "freedom" [50]. The house of the Tiger in "The Tiger's Bride" suggests something by being made of "sheer red brick," as if announcing some kind of still inexperienced but felt violence, some wound. It is interesting that in "The Bloody Chamber," the Castle of Bluebeard is partly in water and partly on land, but on neither all of the time, always in between, like a macabre Mont St. Michel. Its seclusion from the rest of the world gives it an eerie sensation; moreover, the incoming tide is a constant threat, like the threat of a sword over one's head, like the threat of secure death that one has but little time to evade, which makes it a perfect gothic setting.

A repeated symbol in the collection are flowers, most notably lilies and roses. The lilies in a jar beside the marital bed in "The Bloody Chamber" look like "dismembered arms" [51], aside from being flowers used at burials. The enormous marital bed that these lilies surround thus acquires the look of a catafalque. Despite their white color, they do not suggest innocence; rather, these "undertaker lilies" have the power to "stain you" [52]. Roses are used repetitively, in several stories, and always originate from gloominess: the too-heavy scent of the too-red roses in *The House of Love*; the white rose that is out of season and that the Tiger gives Beauty in "The Tiger's Bride;" the rose that provokes the Beast's rage and sets the love story in motion in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon;" the red rose in "The Snow Child" that pricks her on the finger and kills her. The beauty of the flowers is thus overshadowed by their ability to cause harm.

The use of colors is suggestive and left as a trail of breadcrumbs for the reader to follow: the trails or traces of red blood left in the snow are signs of death in "The Snow Child" and "The Werewolf." Black is the Beast's carriage and horse in "The Tiger's Bride," and Bluebeard's car in "The Bloody Chamber" looks like a hearse and the servants following it resemble a burial procession. The teeth of villains are white and spittle gleams on them, as if their mouths are watering, in "The Erl-King" and "The Company of Wolves."



An interesting case of *Chinese boxes* opening from one story into another are wedding gowns: normally symbols of innocence, but in Carter the exact ironic inversion of it. The heroines of “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Lady of the House of Love” wear white dresses that come to be stained by blood, and Wolf-Alice uses the dresses torn off corpses by her vampire-roommate to stop her menstrual bleeding. At the end of “Wolf-Alice,” the wolf-girl saves the vampire Duke from a deadly shot by running to the cemetery dressed in the wedding dress of his latest victim: like in a gothic parody of a wedding ceremony, their love is sealed on a cemetery in the middle of the night, while the bride is wearing a dead girl’s wedding dress covered in blood.

Significantly, the garments of the heroine in “The Bloody Chamber” change as her marriage nears and advances: at the opera (interestingly, *Tristan and Isolde*, another tale of dead lovers), after the engagement, she is in a white dress with “a silk string under the breasts” [53]. The choker, however, implies her already belonging to her future husband, as just another ordinary household pet that, if found, please see collar and return to owner. Once in his possession, she is expected to shed her “costume of a student” [54] and put on a see-through negligee of lace - a gown, married woman’s outfit. The provocative white lace garment pleases her husband, as it is more showing of her budding sexuality, and also a sign of transition from girl to woman, from innocence to experience, a sign that she has now been *made* a woman *by him*.

The color red has heretofore been discussed as the color of blood, shed in death or during the act of defloration; another important mention is of the blood-red menstrual flow. Bearing two distinct stories in mind, “The Company of Wolves” and “Wolf-Alice,” the red menstrual blood is an obvious symbol of initiation and passage into the adult world.

The girl raised by wolves in “Wolf-Alice” is stunned and fascinated by her menstrual flow. It is precisely her menses that introduces her into the logic of the human kind: her mind and concepts change. Once she comes to understand that she bleeds at certain intervals of time, she starts to grasp the concept of time as such, and by the end of the story she is no longer the wolf-girl who “inhabits only the present tense” [55].

This first role that blood symbolically plays in the story is later on connected to a second one. Wolf-Alice lives in the house of a vampire, the Duke, who leaves his bed every night for the cemetery, where he feeds on fresh corpses. After he is shot by one of the villagers for devouring a young dead bride, Wolf-Alice licks his wound: “his wound that does not smell like her wound” [56]. In other words, it is the difference in smell of the Duke’s wound from her own menstrual blood that brings her the knowledge of a difference between them – the knowledge of their different sexes, an important realization in a child’s developing psychology. More importantly, when she starts looking after him, when she starts “to lick, without hesitation, without disgust, with a quick, tender gravity, the blood and dirt from his cheek and forehead” [57], a bond is formed. The girl suckled by wolves and the vampire, both of them outside man’s law, comfort and nourish each other. Her act of licking the Duke’s wound is a sign of love, and it is this sign of love that finally gives birth to the Duke’s reflection in the mirror. Because he was a vampire, no mirror reflected him, but now, like in the story of the Princess and the frog, her love is what transforms him so that he becomes human: “as if brought into being by her soft, moist, gentle tongue, finally, the face of the Duke” appears in a mirror [58]. As in “The Tiger’s Bride,” where Beauty is transformed into a tiger herself by the Tiger licking off her skin and uncovering the fur, liberating the animal inside her, here the human inside the Duke is released through this physical contact.

### 7. “Miss Christina”

It seems interesting here to draw a parallel between the short stories of Angela Carter and the 1936 novella of Romanian writer Mircea Eliade, entitled “Miss Christina” (“Domnișoara Christina”). Although Eliade is mostly famous for his works in the fields of orientalism, philosophy and history of religion, he was a prolific writer of fiction as well. “Miss Christina” was first published in 1936, after Eliade had returned from his stay in India and before he was to set out for a life-long exile from Romania, which began in London in 1940. Although most of his fiction dealt

with the fantastic rather than with the gothic, this one novella stands out, drawing primarily from Romanian folklore, but announcing, too, one of the major topics of Eliade's fiction: the collision of different dimensions, different spheres of existence.

Carter's collection and Eliade's novella are worth looking at side by side for two distinct reasons: firstly, they both draw from the folk-tale, and, secondly, they share several symbols pertaining to the topic of this essay. "Miss Christina" draws its topic from centuries-old Romanian folk-tales about *strigoi*, the troubled souls of the dead that come back to haunt the living. Such is the soul of Miss Christina, who, hungry for love, comes back to find it, but in that process destroys others.

There is a typically gothic setting: on a large property owned by the once wealthy Moscu family, appears the spirit of a dead relative, the young Miss Christina. She communicates with Mrs. Moscu and her two daughters, walks in the woods surrounding the house, and spreads her scent of violets through the empty rooms and between the creaky floorboards of the house. The local legend renders Miss Christina as a young sensual woman who died in her prime. Lady's sucking of the blood of young village boys in "The Lady of the House of Love" matches the cruelty and the perversity surrounding the legend around Miss Christina's life and death: "Can you believe that this noble-born girl would make the steward whip the villagers in front of her, whip them till the blood ran? And she would strip their shirts off... and other things..." [59]. Finally, the legend says that Miss Christina is killed by this same steward, her lover, out of jealousy, after she willingly has intercourse with the men of the village: "[s]he let them rape her, all of them. She herself encouraged them. She received them naked, sprawled on the carpet, two by two. Until the steward came and shot her" [60].

The plot is set during several summer days, when the Moscus have guests over from Bucharest. Miss Christina starts appearing in the bedroom of one of them: that of the young student Egor, whom she falls in love with. At the same time, Egor is there because he is in love with the older daughter of the Moscus, Sanda. Egor will be faced with a choice between the angelic Sanda and the demonic Miss Christina. After Miss Christina starts coming to him, expressing her love and her desire that they be together, he feels a strange mixture of desire and repulsion towards the dead girl. After several encounters, she finally takes control over him, but at the last moment, the sexual act cannot be performed, and the love is not consummated.

Significantly, the two cannot consummate this love, because they belong to two different worlds; one is night and the other daylight, one the past and the other the future, the girl is dead and the man is alive. A similar situation exists between the Lady of the House of Love and the young Englishman: although he liberates her by the end, and she dies, finally free of the vampire life she hated living, the two are never together precisely because they belong in different spheres. In the same way that the Englishman saves Lady by sucking her blood, Egor will 'save' Miss Christina, and save the world from her, by sticking a metallic bar into her heart and thus putting her soul finally to rest. However, at the same time, Miss Christina will have already slowly destroyed her rival, Sanda, who will die at the same time that Egor sticks the bar into Miss Christina's heart. Thus, Miss Christina disappears but takes Sanda with her. Egor remains standing as the hero who saved the world from a demonic force, but this world, for him, is a world without love. Egor's bitter victory, in a way, mirrors the Englishman's salvation from the House of Love – escaping one death, he walks off towards the trenches of World War One.

In Eliade, like in Carter's stories, there are several symbols to announce the blood that will be spilt. There are, for instance, dense swarms of mosquitoes coming through the windows of the mansion every nightfall. There is a smell of blood mixed with Miss Christina's violet scent. There is a slaughtered dog that falls dead at Egor's feet; there are dead fowl on the property, standing for the infertility of Miss Christina. On the other hand, there is a heavy smell of ram meat served for dinner on the first evening, which announces, perhaps, both the sacrifices to be made, and the sexual games that are to be played out.

More significantly, in terms of analogy between Carter's short story and Eliade's novella, there is the implication of the sexuality of the two female characters, a bodily yearning that never comes to be fulfilled. Miss Christina's sexuality has a demonic, eerie quality about it, as if she is trying to make up for the unfulfilled desires of her young body, which was snatched from earthly delights too early. Both female characters crave the young blood of the men they have chosen, and, symbolically, the result is the exact opposite: it is the men who draw their blood by the end. In a sense, the virginal blood (metaphorically, for Miss Christina is not a virgin) is spilt, but it also means the disappearance into another world, it means annihilation.

### 8. Conclusion

Angela Carter's collection remains one of the most widely taught books at the undergraduate and postgraduate level in universities around the world; justifiably so, since this collection still proves to be fruitful ground for scholarly work, despite the fact that it was published more than thirty years ago. There are many ways in which these stories have been defined; indeed, as Helen Simpson aptly puts it, this "exotic new hybrid" [61] that Carter molded, this mixture of the gothic, the erotic, the fairy-tale was a new kind of expression that still interests readers. For the touch of love, for the smell of death – or for both.

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